Mnemopoetics

Memory and Slavery in African American Drama

P.I.E. Peter Lang

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INTRODUCTION

Mnemopoetics

> Graves at my command
> Have wak'd their sleepers, op'd, and let 'em forth,
> By my so potent art.
>
> Shakespeare, *The Tempest* V, i, 48-50

> She crosses to the piano. She begins to play. The song is found piece by piece.
> It is an old urge to song that is both a commandment and a plea.
> With each repetition it gains in strength.
> It is intended as an exorcism and a dressing for battle.
> A rustle of wind blowing across two continents.
>
> August Wilson, *The Piano Lesson* 106

Prospero's conjuring up presences from the past through his "potent art" has the double function of making the past present as well as relevant, i.e. translated into meaningful actualities that have a bearing upon contemporary consciousness. Art, more specifically drama in Prospero's own self-reflexive soliloquy, has the power to "command" the past, i.e. to summon and control it through imagination and, as the second meaning of the term implies, to generate a wide scope of vision of the past. Drama, like Prospero's conjuring gesture, has the metaphorical capacity to awaken the dead, bring them centre stage, re-create their history in and through present consciousness thus endowing them with "a prophetic vision of the past" (Glissant, *Monsieur Toussaint* 9). Artistic "command" and intuitive vision are the two creative dimensions of the small corpus of contemporary African American plays whose imaginative re-creation of slavery I have chosen to explore. The juxtaposition of the two epigraphs suggests that Prospero's "command" of the past turns into the artistic "commandment" of black ancestral memory, a shift from his Promethean will to create to a mystical "urge" to creatively recall slavery. Indeed, the *mnemopoetics* (poetics of memory) centred on the dramatic recollection of the slave past verges on a *mnemomystic* of reconfigured cultural genesis. Theatre thus appears as a threshold of cultural recovery through a ritual revision of the past akin to a mystic

experience of spiritual revelation and rebirth. This particular *mnemopoetics* of African American drama is a poetics that "exorcises," questions and re-creates the memory of the slave past in and through "battl[ing]" consciousness. The re-activation of the memory of slavery represents a return to the moment of dislocation and dehumanisation, but also to the beginnings, as Paul Gilroy puts it, of the "black Atlantic" culture (Gilroy, *Black Atlantic*). Such a conception of a *mnemotheatre* climaxes in the Black Arts Movement's plays in which remembering slavery subtly shifts to a nationalistic anamnesis[1] recalling the martyrdom of the slaves and calling for revolution "in remembrance" of the unwilling sacrifice of a race.

Before nuancing these interpretative considerations on memory and theatre, it is necessary to ponder on the theoretical endeavour of this study. The term *mnemopoetics* was coined by Mererid Davies in an unpublished paper entitled "Mnemopoetics: Ingeborg Bachmann and *Märchen*" which she gave at the University of Wales in Swansea in 1997:

> I used the term to describe some ways in which Bachmann produced a poetics which was intended to represent memory (in the double sense of both the process of recalling past events, and of the narrative of those events itself). This poetics […] aimed to represent (possibly traumatic) memory in that double sense in non-mimetic ways, that is, to encode rather than merely to narrate it. (Davies, e-mail message to Valérie Bada)

I wish to broaden the scope of Davies's Freudian definition and I use the term *mnemopoetics* to describe the long-established practice which consists in linking cultural productions to the protean manifestation, transformation, creation and use of memory. Mnemopoetics thus implies a self-reflexive involvement in the creation and analysis of an "art of memory" which, according to the French historian Jacques Le Goff, has existed since the earliest Antiquity (Le Goff, *Histoire et mémoire* 115-116). His study of the complex evolution of the interactions between *Histoire et mémoire* fleshes out Frances A. Yates's groundbreaking *The Art of Memory*, an erudite analysis of the development of an "art of memory" from the Antiquity to the Renaissance. Yates concludes by stating that:

> the history of the organisation of memory touches at vital points on the history of religion and ethics, of philosophy and psychology, of art and literature, of scientific method […]. When we reflect on these profound affiliations of our theme it begins to seem after all not so surprising that the

[1] Anamnesis: 1. a recalling to mind, reminiscence […] 3. the eucharistic prayer recalling the sacrifice of Christ and ending with the words "Do this in remembrance of me" (Webster's Third International Dictionary).

> pursuit of it should have opened up new views of some of the greatest manifestations of our culture. (Yates, *Art of Memory* 374)

Indeed, if we dare leap beyond Yates's eurocentric perspective, African American playwrights have insistently and persistently "pursued" their history to the confines of their own imagination in order to recreate and reflect upon the mechanisms of a collective memory which would redeem and redress the humiliations of the past. Their "battle to represent a redemptive critique of the present in the light of the vital memories of the slave past" (Gilroy, *Black Atlantic* 71) reveals the specific role of drama in the shaping of a communal expression that would reconsider American history from the perspective of its emancipatory potentialities for African America. In other words, the African American mnemotheatre of slavery defines a poetic space where ethics and aesthetics, performance and politics converge in a cultural project of identity re-formation.

What I call dramatic *mnemopoetics* refers to both the actual plays and drama criticism, i.e. to the playwrights' cultural reconfiguration of the slave experience on stage and to the critical analysis of the textual as well as dramaturgical strategies used in representing literally or symbolically, directly or indirectly, the ruptures and continuities of the past. Indeed, I define the concept *and* practice of *mnemopoetics* as the making of memory through imagination as well as the critical approaches that decipher and interpret cultural productions of memory. In my sense, mnemopoetics is both the literature of memory and its "*littérarité*," the distinctive features that define this particular literature as such (Todorov, *Poétique* 20). Dramatic mnemopoetics is thus both mnemotheatre and the study of its theatricality. This suggests a kind of reading in which every play reveals, with various degrees of self-reflexiveness, its own conscious attempt to grapple with the mechanics of memory and how it dovetails into the complex fabric of fictional representation. Mnemopoetics does not derive from a poetics in the structuralist sense that Todorov has circumscribed, but goes beyond the analysis of the varied literary discourses underpinning the theatrical representation of the past to encompass the study of cultural theory and practice. The mnemopoetics of African American drama, then, also entails the scrutinising of the intricate network of "Signifyin(g)" revisions upon the black vernacular and literary traditions, i.e. a self-reflexive criticism inscribed within the African American vernacular repertoire, and which "allow[s] the black tradition to speak for itself about its nature and various functions" (Gates, *Signifying Monkey* XIX). And more generally, as a nexus of influences and confluences, this particular mnemopoetics probes the "latent cross-culturalities" (Harris, "Quetzalcoatl" 40) which link differ-

ent cultures, thus disentangling the net of interconnections and inter/subtexts between history, memory and fiction.

Such a theoretical approach, recognising and reflecting upon the multi-layered nature of cultural and, more precisely, "rememoried" (Morrison, *Beloved* 189) signifiers, is particularly relevant to the analysis of African American drama. The experience of enslavement, degradation, powerlessness and marginalisation common to the "Afro-Atlantic" (Gilroy, *Black Atlantic* 73) world has engendered a theatrical reconfiguration of the past that attempts to reconnect its disparate shards across the wounds of history. Corresponding to the fragmented history of the New World, there is a spliced multiplicity of theatrical practices which remake the past while performing as well as theorising a dialectics of disconnection and continuity. Indeed, the mnemopoetic probing of slavery excavates and then transforms residual images of the past (Morrison's "rememories") into a dramatic vision which restores to the imagined slave ancestors the individuality and historicity (their particular place in history) they were denied as chattel. The human *person* is thus reconstituted through the agency of the *persona*. The conflation of memory and self-reflexive creation in the mnemopoetics of slavery relates to an African American ontology, based on survival, which relies on the creative power of memory to shape an individual as well as a collective being under constant threat of cultural and social erasure. Moreover, this process of re-humanisation reconnects a past humanity to its contemporary descendants whose present (and presence) is still marred by the economic, social, cultural and psychological divisions created by the "peculiar institution."

Indeed, continuous social inequalities despite the benefits of affirmative action have pushed and continue to relegate a quarter of the African American population to the margins of American society. According to the 2003 Census Bureau, the worsening economic conditions in America fall heaviest on African Americans who are suffering the worst increases in poverty after several years of economic progress in the 1990s. The poverty rate among African Americans rose to 24.1% in 2002-2003 from 22.7% a year earlier (the national poverty rate being 12%). These figures contradict William Julius Wilson's view on the "declining significance of race" in 1978 and his assertion that "the problems of subordination for certain segments of the black population […] are more directly associated with economic class" (Wilson, *Declining Significance* 144). Indeed, it seems that the social and existential conditions confronting one African American out of four today still reflect the fundamental role of race in the construction of chattel slavery and the caste, instead of colour blind class system which has survived into the new millennium.

Even though slavery was abolished in the US 140 years ago, it still haunts American culture and politics. Remembering the "peculiar institution" still creates a pervasive malaise which was clearly perceptible at the UN-sponsored world conference against racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and intolerance in Durban in 2001 when the US chose to walk out allegedly in solidarity with Israel. The pretext thus found probably suited Washington that seemed reluctant to re-examine its historical implication in the slave trade and African slavery by fear of opening the way to financial reparations. And in the absence of a final report on the Durban conference, the High Commission for Human Rights in Geneva presented the draft of a declaration acknowledging for the very first time that the slave trade and slavery "constitute a crime against humanity." But, as an additional sign of American political embarrassment, the UN General Assembly in New York did not ratify the document thereby refusing to give slavery a legal determination.

Slavery may be distant, but it is not remote, not in the consciousness of many African Americans who still see it as the proximate cause of present inequities. Racialised slavery and its inherent hierarchy of racist compartimentalisation meant that "blacks [were] forced to identify collectively, whether or not they formed a real, rather than an imagined community and whether they wanted it or not" (Eyerman, *Cultural Trauma* 56). If chattel slavery indeed deprived African Americans of their individuality, their diverse experiences and historical developments according to class, ideology, religion, gender, etc, have spliced their enforced homogeneity into distinctive communities. But, as Eyerman argues, "the representation of slavery [functions as] a primal scene in the process of collective identity formation, as it was renegotiated in the changing historical conditions of black Americans" (*Ibid*. 221). The memory of slavery is then perceived as a necessary act of historical retrieval and collective re-articulation at a moment of socio-cultural crisis. "To articulate the past historically," Walter Benjamin argues, "does not mean to recognise it the way it really was. It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger" (Benjamin, *Illuminations* 255). This "moment of danger" draws history into the present, which allows historical insight and thereby the creation of a redemptive memory.

In the American cultural, social and political order in which race still figures in paradoxical and morally profound ways, the probing of the depth and complexity of African American historical pain has always been as much an ethical duty as an existential and cultural necessity. Slavery appears as the point of origin of a "cultural trauma" the effects of which can still be felt in the present. As Eyerman argues in his semi-

nal book *Cultural Trauma. Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity*,

> Cultural trauma articulates a membership group as it identifies an event or an experience, a primal scene, that solidifies individual/collective identity. This event, now identified with the formation of the group, must be recollected by later generations who have no experience of the 'original' event, yet continue to be identified by it and to identify themselves through it […] each succeeding generation reinterprets and represents the collective memory around that event according to its needs and means. (Eyerman, *Cultural Trauma* 15)

By probing the depth and complexity of the antebellum period and how and why its historical as well as subjective memories still affect the present, the mnemopoetics of slavery raises an existential, social and political responsibility for the development of a national consciousness. The mnemopoetics of slavery thus involves a subterranean ethics of memory tied to a redemptive imagination which, by re-inventing the past through individualised representations of survival, taps the thick bark of history to apply its curative sap against the injustices continuing in the present.

The theatrical reconfiguration of history as healing "rememories" reveals a conception of memory as both moral consciousness and racial politics. In other words, the mnemopoetics of slavery functions as an ethical and aesthetic strategy for re-placing the virtues of memory centre stage and re-claiming historical agency through the "demand for, the need for, justice" (Fox, *Conscientious Sorcerers* 8) in the present. If the proliferating literature on slavery (whether it is fictional, critical or historical[2]) testifies to the growing awareness of the breadth and depth of slavery's impact on the creation and development of American society and mentality, its exponential importance in the corpus of African American literature reflects the cultural and existential urge to imaginatively probe communal origins, however painful and degrading they may have been. As a cluster of fictional, multifaceted testimonies on historical pain and survival, it also participates in the political project of insisting on past victimisation in order to claim redress (and, for some

[2] A vast and growing number of studies on the history, cultural and economic interconnections, as well as statistics of the transatlantic slave trade have been published in the last ten years. The most impressive achievement in this field is the Du Bois slave trade database (published by Cambridge University Press in 1998 as a CD-ROM with interactive data and 22 maps) that traces 27,233 Atlantic slave trade voyages according to 160 data variables, which represent more than two thirds of all Atlantic slave voyages.

militant associations, social and economic compensations) in the present:

> Victimes incontestables de l'esclavage et de ses séquelles, comme de la discrimination raciale, désireux de sortir de cette position, [les Noirs américains] ne souhaitent en revanche nullement abandonner le rôle de victime qui leur assure un privilège moral et politique durable. (Todorov, *Abus de la mémoire* 57)

If Todorov rightly stresses the African Americans' insistence upon their status of victims of history and its effects in the present, I do not agree with him that their re-creation of a collective memory is used and "abused" to consolidate some dubious political "privileges." I would be more cautious in the use of such ideologically loaded terms as "abuse" and "privilege." I would rather argue that, if indeed African Americans derive a feeling of moral superiority due to their historical position as survivors, their use of re-imagined, healing memories brings their evanescent historical being back to a sense of enduring and formative consciousness. Subsequently, their claim to equality and justice in a society in which they have had an essential creative part, is perfectly legitimate and even crucial.

It is not my critical intention to constrict the concept and the practice of mnemopoetics into a fixed and fixing definition. I rather envision them as open, ongoing and fluctuating processes through which may be filtered both a particular cultural ethos and the critical procedure used to decipher it. These two critical implications of mnemopoetics call for a particular hermeneutics: the stage becomes the locus of reflexive variations on the very conditions of cultural emergence, and drama theory represents an interpretative scrutinising of the diverse forms of theatricality which reflect the fractured and at the same time composite history of African America.

Slavery and its problematic, protean remembrance lie at the heart of the African American theatrical tradition and involve the transformation of history into memory, i.e. the complex deployment of history in the constitution of contemporary identity. As Pierre Nora[3] argues in his seminal work on the "*Lieux de Mémoire*":

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[3] Pierre Nora's seven-volume *Lieux de Mémoire* rests on his obsessive and desperate attempt to rescue the memory of France from a self-induced oblivion partly caused by French historians' long-lasting endeavour to reduce French history to a critical contextualism in which no living memory can survive. He thus collected essays on all the "sites" (ranging from the Eiffel Tower to Joan of Arc or the Tour de France) which, he feels, incarnate and memorialise the history of France in a fading collective consciousness. His yearning to re-define historiography in such ways that history and memory can creatively interact, prompted the French theatre critic Geneviève Fabre

> memory is life […]. It remains in permanent evolution, open to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting, unconscious of its successive deformations, vulnerable to manipulation and appropriation, susceptible to being long dormant and periodically revived […]. Memory is a perpetually actual phenomenon, a bond tying us to the eternal present […]. Memory, insofar as it is affective and magical, only accommodated those facts that suit it […]. Memory installs remembrance within the sacred. (Nora, "Between Memory and History" 285-286)

The relation of memory to the past is conceived as a subjective (though mostly vicarious) and selective experience verging on a mystical embrace, that is, as suggested, spiritual, intuitive and emotional rather than rational and critical. In this light, the concept of mnemotheatre almost appears as a tautology, a contiguous alignment of two originally "sacred" cultural phenomena subjected to and informed by similar subjective transformations. Remembrance and performance merge in a living mnemopoetics which excavates as well as recreates a past that lies "dormant" in a collective consciousness by telescoping its representations with the sensibilities of the present. This creative process calls for a "total psychologization of contemporary memory [which] entails a completely new economy of the identity of the self, the mechanics of memory, and the relevance of the past" (*Ibid*. 292). This "psychologization of memory" certainly corresponds to the theatrical mnemopoetics of slavery whereby traumatic moments of African American history are reimagined, incarnated and re-presented in a ritualised mneme (i.e. the persistent or recurrent effect of past experience of the individual or of the race) poised between past catastrophe and its ongoing effects in the present. Mnemopoetics can then be seen as a palimpsest of mnestic traces recognised by intuition, re-activated by imagination, reshaped through various and mutating poetic mechanisms and re-interpreted according to changing actualities (i.e. "the identity of the self" and "the relevance of the past" to the present).

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to organise a series of seminars at the W.E.B. Du Bois Institute for Afro-American Research at Harvard, a collaboration which led to the publication of an important collection of essays on *History and Memory in African American Culture* edited by Fabre and O'Meally. The essays identify African American *lieux de mémoire* in the field of history, cultural history, folklore, anthropology, sociology, art history and literary theory: dances, paintings, buildings, historical sites, journals, oral forms of expression, novels, poems, slave narratives are explored as repositories of individual and collective memory. While performance is included in the articles "African American Commemorative Celebrations in the Nineteenth Century" (Geneviève Fabre) and "Performing the Memory of Difference in Afro-Caribbean Dance: Katherine Dunham's Choreography, 1938-1987" (VéVé Clark), African American drama is once more conspicuously left out of the field of critical investigation.

Thus, the processes and modes of remembering slavery also have a distinctive history. As Richard Terdiman argues in his study on *Modernity and the Memory Crisis*, "every memory has a history […] but how a culture performs and sustains this recollection is distinctive and diagnostic" (Terdiman, *Modernity* 3). In this connection it is worth pointing out that the representation of slavery is ubiquitous in the very first plays of the African American repertoire. It has been transformed and is still changing with the evolution of theatrical practices and historiography. If slavery has always been remembered and represented, it is the way in which it is performed and recreated that evolves. The African American mnemotheatre of slavery becomes increasingly self-reflexive as both dramaturgy and historical perspective develop. From the distorting imitation of plantation stereotypes in the early plays, through the collagistic vision of a black history reconfigured in nationalistic terms in the Black Arts Movement, to the exploded, traumatic manifestation of "rememories" in the latest plays, African American theatre has moved toward a ritual drama whose thematic and dramaturgical concerns lie in the disentangling of the mechanics of memory as it re-experiences and re-appropriates the slave past. In their assertion of a cultural tradition through its performative development on stage, African American playwrights have mainly endeavoured to construct a new, empowered identity (especially out of the dehumanising slave past) and, at the same time, to "keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one's aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain, and to transcend it" (Ellison, *Shadow and Act* 78). This dialectical movement of preservation and creation, the memorialization and the transgression of historical stasis, has fashioned a distinctive black drama whose dynamic mnemopoetics of slavery has taken dramaturgical forms that stress the crucial role of theatricality in raising historical consciousness.

Although a very rich and abundant secondary literature[4] on the relationship between the African American novel of slavery and history

[4] A bibliographical survey of such a critical corpus exceeds the scope of the present study. I wish to concentrate on the theatrical text and performance as the privileged, collective, mutating spaces for the excavation of history and the creation of memory. The collection of essays *Slavery and the Literary Imagination,* edited by McDowell and Rampersad, examines how "the topic of slavery [has had a] profound impact on the national literature" (McDowell and Rampersad, "Introduction" VII), and focuses on the analysis of the white abolitionist and African American novels of slavery from Frederick Douglass's *Narrative* to Shirley Ann Williams's *Dessa Rose. The Discourse of Slavery: Aphra Behn to Toni Morrison,* edited by Plasa and Ring, expands the critical scope to include English authors such as William Blake, Charlotte Brontë or Elizabeth Gaskell. The German critic and founder of CAAR (Collegium for African American Research), Maria Diedrich, has edited several

has emerged since the publication of Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), a comprehensive comparative study on the functions and mechanics of memory in the African American plays on slavery has, to my knowledge, never been undertaken. Isolated reflections on the theatrical representation of slavery in specific plays are mostly grafted onto general studies about African American theatre such as Samuel A. Hay's *African American Theatre*, Geneviève Fabre's *Drumbeats, Masks, and Metaphor*, Leslie Catherine Sanders's *Development of Black Theatrein America* or *African American Performance and Theater History* (edited by Harry J. Elam, Jr., and David Krasner). Jeanette R. Malkin's *Memory-Theater and Postmodern Drama* is the only comprehensive study[5] that approaches contemporary dramatic representations of memory as "paradigms for the [postmodern] world [in which] we find a no longer grounded past; a past that floats within the collective consciousness – as a place of (fragmented) collective identity" (Malkin, *Memory-Theater* 4). Her book focuses on Samuel Beckett, Heiner Müller, Sam Shepard, Thomas Bernhard and Suzan-Lori Parks, and dissects the various ways in which these playwrights tackle "questions of memory, both in terms of their *thematic* attention to remembered (or repressed) pasts, and in terms of the plays' 'memoried' *structures*:

books of essays on the complex interweaving of history and African American literature; but unfortunately drama has always been left out of the critical perspective; see *Mapping African America. History, Narrative Formation, and the Production of Knowledge* (edited by Diedrich, Pedersen and Tally), *The Black Columbiad. Defining Moments in African American Literature and Culture* (edited by Diedrich and Sollors), *Black Imagination and the Middle Passage* (edited by Diedrich, Gates, Jr., and Pedersen). For various critical views on the role of memory in the construction of American, ethnic identities (African American, Asian-American, Chicano or Jewish) see the collection of essays *Memory and Cultural Politics* (edited by Singh, Skerret and Hogan). Sandra G. Shannon's "The Role of Memory in August Wilson's Four-Hundred-Year Autobiography" is particularly interesting on the aesthetics of the blues as a gateway to and for voices of the past.

5 Patricia R. Schroeder analyses the complex interaction between past and present in the realist tradition of American drama in her book *The Presence of the Past in Modern American Drama*. Her study focuses on Eugene O'Neill, Thornton Wilder, Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams, thus on the canonical corpus of American theatre. The relationship between history and memory in the creation of a contemporary identity through the aesthetic search for new dramatic forms is radically different when perceived from the centre or the margins of American history and society. Her contention that "it takes only a modest creative leap to imagine a drama in which […] the memories of the characters, reliable or not, are permitted to determine the spectators' understanding of what has happened in the past" (Schroeder, *The Presence of the Past* 20) hardly applies to the important and painful "creative leap" African American playwrights have had to take in order to re-appropriate a history of dehumanisation and transform it into a creative basis for the development of present consciousness.

structures of repetition, conflation, regression, echoing, overlap, and simultaneity" (*Ibid*. 1). The chapter she devotes to Suzan-Lori Parks has influenced my own reflections on the mnemopoetic specificities of the latest African American slavery plays. According to Malkin, Parks's drama invents a "new theatrical language of memory" through the representation of "hallucinatory pasts released from oblivion through their performance in the present" (*Ibid*. 217). Parks's mnemopoetics is therefore "a form of political intervention" as much as a new "African American diction of memory" (*Ibid*.). Politics and aesthetics thus converge in the creation of "a 'tradition' dedicated to sustaining her racial and historical memory" (*Ibid*.).

If the dramatic representation of memory has hardly been investigated in the field of African American theatre, the relationship between performance and history/memory has been probed in the collection of essays *Exceptional Spaces. Essays in Performance and History*, edited by Della Pollock. This work presents a very original array of critical views centred on the theatrical strategies deployed in various representations of history; its scope ranges from slave spectacles in Antebellum New Orleans to the theatricality inherent in the guided tours on Southern plantations. The visions, performances and/or manipulations of history displayed in such varied cultural productions as slave spectacles, guided tours, museums, photographs or novels are described as "sites of creative practice and imaginative play. They are slippery, liminal phases, fertile with the possibility of both reviewing and revising history" (Pollock, "Introduction: Making History Go" 5). Joseph Roach's essay on "Slave Spectacles and Tragic Octoroons" has been particularly relevant to the development of a mnemopoetics of slavery conceived as a corporeal recreation, transmission and dissemination of African American "rememories" through the performers' entranced body.

In his seminal book *Cities of the Dead*, Roach expands his field of critical investigation to a range of "circum-Atlantic performances" set in "the behavioural vortices" (Roach, *Cities of the Dead* 28) of New Orleans and early 18th-century London. He takes up on Gilroy's notion of the "black Atlantic" connecting Europe, Africa and the Americas in a transatlantic network of cultural practices and memories but his concept of a "circum-Atlantic world […] insists on the centrality of the diasporic and genocidal histories of Africa and the Americas, North and South, in the creation of the culture of modernity" (*Ibid*. 4). Slavery is one aspect of the foundational violence which initiated the "cocreations of an oceanic interculture [which] may be discerned most vividly by means of the performances, performance traditions, and the representations of performance that it engendered" (*Ibid*. 5). Roach's study focuses on non-written performance forms such as carnival, parades, funerals, legal

proceedings, markets, etc., and compares various ritual traditions to "understand how circum-Atlantic societies […] have invented themselves by performing their pasts in the presence of others" (*Ibid*.). The centrality of diaspora and genocide, i.e. displacement, violence and partial erasure in the circum-Atlantic dynamics of invention requires a critical approach which also emphasises the dialectics of motion and destruction, creation and annihilation.[6] Roach's idea of interweaving "memory, performance and substitution" in his critical approach to ritualistic "orature," allows him to define "surrogation" as the crucial, performative process of substitution which occurs when "survivors attempt to fit satisfactory alternates […] into the cavities created by loss through death or other forms of departure" *(Ibid*. 2). Thus, performance is seen as an art of cultural and existential compensation which testifies to the "stubborn eloquence of the intersecting diasporic memories" (*Ibid*. 286) when "vacancies occur in the network of relations that constitutes the social fabric" (*Ibid*. 2). Amnesia and silence represent such "vacancies" in the New World historical "fabric" which can be filled by the intuitive power of imagination and the communal power of performance. By foregrounding the "pleasures and torments of incomplete forgetting" (*Ibid*. 7), Roach tackles the same complex processes of cultural self-definition and re-invention as those defining the mnemopoetics of slavery in African American drama.

As a short introduction to the development of the theatrical mnemopoetics and its multiple avatars across the history of African American drama, it is necessary to sketch a brief survey of the main African American plays grappling directly with the representation of slavery. As early as 1822, the African Grove Theatre (located in Greenwich Village) hosted a production of the African Company, *The Drama of King Shotaway, or The Insurrection of the Caribs*. This lost play was probably written by William A. Brown and depicted the second Carib War on the West Indian island of St Vincent in 1795-1796 (see Johnson, *Black Manhattan* 78-80; Fabre, *Drumbeats* 31; Thompson, Jr., *A Documentary History of the African Theatre* 28-29; White, *Stories of Freedom in Black New York* 86-88). One wonders how the African slaves and their living conditions were portrayed in this lost play since, according to British historical records, they sided with the British against the rebelling Caribs (Thompson, Jr., *A Documentary History of the African Theatre* 28). William Wells Brown's *Escape; Or a Leap for Freedom*

[6] In *Scenes of Subjection. Terror, Slavery and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America,* Saidiya V. Hartman expands on the dialectics of recognition and denial of the humanity of the African American in the 19th century through the prism of slave dancing, minstrelsy, slave law, and slave narrative.

(1858), Pauline E. Hopkins's *Peculiar Sam or The Underground Railroad* (1880) and Willis Richardson's *Flight of the Natives* (1927) represent the earliest attempts to forge a specific African American drama centred on the representation of slavery at a period when images of black people in popular American culture were still shaped by notions of primitivism, exoticism, and minstrelsy. The three plays use the broad black comic types of the "irrepressible 'plantation darky'" (Lott, "Black Face" 3) which derive from the offensive stereotypes of minstrel shows and the plantation tradition of American literature. The interplay between three linguistic codes – a parodic transcription of Southern black dialect, a genuine search for an "authentic" rendering of the richness of black idioms, and "proper English" – reflects the playwrights' ambiguous and fluctuating creative attitude. The contrived representation of black folk-life, based on minstrel caricature and constructed for a white audience, is undermined by the use of laughter as a tool for surreptitiously conveying a subversive carnivalesque vision of social upheaval. The integration of spiritual chants mixed with entertaining songs derived from the Broadway tradition of musicals shows the creative tension that underlies the origins of African American theatre, wavering as it did between a culture from outside the bounds of an official tradition and the imitation of the semantic codes of white American culture. This ambivalent aesthetics is caught between two worlds of representation, a performative slave culture in constant search of a firm identity grounding, and the mimetic world of the master which fosters a distorted image of black culture.

The Harlem Renaissance in the 1910s and 20s saw the emergence and the consecration of the pageant, a theatrical genre borrowed from the English Elizabethan tradition, which consists of a lavish reconstitution of historical events in richly decorated *tableaux vivants* sustained by few dialogues. Many pageants were staged in segregated black schools and churches to spur the community's sense of national pride by showing the daily heroism of slaves on plantations or a romantic celebratory vision of life in Africa. Examples of this form include Katherine Davis Chapman Tillman's *Heirs of Slavery* (1901) and *The Spirit of Allen. A Pageant of African Methodism* (1922), W.E.B. Du Bois's *The Star of Ethiopia* (1913), Edward J. McCoo's *Ethiopia at the Bar of Justice* (1924), Frances Gunner's *The Light of Women* (1924), Dorothy C. Guinn's *Out of the Dark* (1925) and Julia R. Davis's *Dawn. A Historical Pageant* (undated draft), all of which retrace the origins of African America and attest to the vigour of the tradition. The genre in its primary form quickly died out because of the plays' excessive symbolism, their non-dialogic structure and the dramaturgical difficulty of producing such huge shows which sometimes involved hundreds of

people on stage. But the pageant's celebration of historical reconstruction in *tableaux vivants* has been adapted and its influence acknowledged later by playwrights such as Owen Dodson, Langston Hughes and Amiri Baraka.

The stern naturalism and concentrated action of Randolph Edmonds's *The Breeders* (1934) contrast with the lavishness of the pageants or the satirical character of the popular entertainment shows. His depiction of the slaves' forced coupling as a kind of eugenics and the sacrifice of a slave woman to preserve her love for the sick slave she chooses to be faithful to, though she must surrender to a stronger "breeder," dares to probe the taboo of sexual exploitation and offers a radical vision of moral survival, escape and redemption through death akin to Shirley Graham's *It's Mornin'* (1940). Langston Hughes's *Colonel Tom's Cabin* (1938) and *The Master and the Slave* (undated draft) break free from the minstrel tradition by violently exploding its clichés. Both one-act plays are rough drafts that were never polished into complete plays. *Colonel Tom's Cabin* satirises Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and ridicules its condescending benevolence. The closing of the play accommodates a political gesture of violent self-assertion when Uncle Tom abruptly develops from a cringing servant into an assertive voter: "No! No! I may chop your cotton and cut your cane, but when I votes, I votes for Roosevelt!" He demands to be called "Mister Thomas" and violently slaps Little Eva's face. The anachronistic leap into 1930s political references signals the cumulative frustration and anger of the African American community in the segregation era.

The need to have heroic role models and to read history as a narrative of survival necessary to function in the present has led to the development of two didactic subgenres, a particular form of historical play and the biographical play. Langston Hughes's *Don't You Want to Be Free* (1937), *Jubilee. A Cavalcade of the Negro Theater* (written in collaboration with Arna Bontemps in 1940) and *For This We Fight* (1943) offer a sweeping perspective on history in short vignettes that dramatise episodes of African American life from the African origins through the Middle Passage and slavery to the present. Accompanied by gospel songs, music and dance, the plays individualise the abstract texture of the pageant by introducing short, dialogic scenes with few actors, and, like the pageant, offer an empowering, didactic vision of history. The biography plays focus on the survival and/or heroic deeds of famous historical figures. The collection of plays *Negro History in 13 Plays* (edited by May Miller and Willis Richardson in 1935) includes Georgia D. Johnson's *Frederick Douglass* and *William and Ellen Craft*, May Miller's *Harriet Tubman* and *Sojourner Truth*, and Randolph Edmonds's *Nat Turner*. Clifford Mason's *Gabriel* (1968) represents an

interesting attempt to link the historical slave insurrection led by Gabriel Prosser in Virginia in 1800 with the contemporary revolutionary spirit. William Branch's *In Splendid Error*, Ossie Davis's *Escape to Freedom* (1976) and Bill Harris's *He Who Endures* concentrate on Frederick Douglass and offer contrasted visions of his life, ranging from a Hamlet figure who fails to recognise the importance of John Brown's revolutionary project and refuses to give him his support, to the didactic dramatisation of his *Narrative*.

In the second half of the 20th century, with the beginning of contemporary theatre around World War II, one notices a greater diversification of textual strategies and dramaturgical forms through which the memory of slavery is processed and inscribed into the African American theatrical imagination. I have selected a sample of eight plays that I intend to read closely from a comparative perspective. Four chapters of close readings will illustrate the different modes of mnemopoetic variations at work in the African American theatrical tradition from 1939 until 1996. I make no claim to comprehensiveness in the selection of the plays that were chosen primarily for the range of different epistemologies and dramaturgies of remembrance which they demonstrate, in keeping with the theoretical impulse of this book. The scarcity of criticism concerning most of them as well as the mnemopoetic centrality of slavery, which gives them their dramatic coherence, make them particularly appropriate as objects of my own theoretical investigation.

Langston Hughes's musical play *The Sun Do Move* (1942) along with Owen Dodson's unpublished pageant *Amistad* (1939) will constitute my first field of close mnemopoetic exploration. I chose these two seminal and yet neglected texts as starting points for my definition of mnemopoetics because they evince an emergent self-reflexive dimension that explores and evaluates its own capacity to invoke the slave past and inscribe it into a chaotic present. The second chapter will then focus on Shirley Graham's *It's Mornin'* (1940) and Rita Dove's *The Darker Face of the Earth* (1996) whose mnemopoetics is poised between an ambiguous epigonism looking back to Greek tragedy and an underlying cross-cultural dialogue capable of generating an original dramatic vision. LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka's *Slave Ship* (1967) and Val Ferdinand/Kalamu ya Salaam's *Blk Love Song #1* (1969) illustrate the Black Aesthetic's nationalist will to create a stage poetics and a theatrical language particular to African American drama. The Black Arts Movement's mnemopolitics combines a radical nationalism that insists on past and contemporary victimisations to serve a revolutionary purpose in the present. Its highly stylised dramaturgy based on ritual can be further observed in the last plays under scrutiny, Daniel W. Owens's *The Box* (1989) and Robbie McCauley's *Sally's Rape* (1989). Mnemopoetics in

these plays is conceived as a ritual of exorcism, with a shamanistic relation to history, where the painful process of remembering the slave past is experienced as a traumatising mental and physical possession. The stage represents a liminal space of transition which is slowly infiltrated with voices and presences that spring from memory, thus catalysing an intimate, intuitive knowledge of the past as reconfigured by the imagination. I have selected these two plays in the repertoire of recent African American drama mainly for the high degree of self-reflexiveness they both evince. Whereas Owens's *The Box* can be seen as a post-modern allegory of the disappearance of the African American subject who is annihilated by the historical amnesia she/he refuses to overcome, McCauley's *Sally's Rape* deconstructs the ideological cultural and linguistic structures which underlie the dialogue between a black woman and a white woman through a ritual mnemopoetics of both verbalisation and incarnation of the historical rape of slave women. The ritualistic plunge into the violence of a resurrected past functions as a play within the play which emphasises the theatricality of the performance. The retroactive ritual mechanism of the two plays reveals the memory of the slave past as a trauma that does not belong to the contemporary characters' own experience and yet re-emerges as an intimate knowledge that inhabits and possesses them.

The latent presence of slavery within the contemporary African American psyche also infiltrates George C. Wolfe's *The Colored Museum* (1988), August Wilson's *The Piano Lesson* (1990) as well as Suzan-Lori Parks's *Imperceptible Mutabilities in the Third Kingdom* (1986), *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World* (1989) and *The America Play* (1990). The complex mnemopoetic vision of these recent plays has been recognised, celebrated and dissected in numerous essays, but the importance they grant to the textual and visual representation of slavery is limited to allusions and discrete traces which testify to history's "pregnant" silence. Therefore, I prefer to concentrate on two less-discussed plays whose ritualistic pattern and mnemopoetic structure revolve around the visual, verbal and corporeal re-emergence of the past.

The process of mental and imaginative re-appropriation of slavery in performance fuels a quest for historical meaning through a particular mnemopoetics conceived as ritualised fiction. By analysing the African American theatrical tradition as it has developed from the second part of the 20th century until today, I wish to show how two apparently antinomic perceptions of history (through an affective, intuitive imagination and/or through rational, factual scrutinising) creatively interact and fuse imaginative recollection with an acute historical consciousness. The

playwrights are thus revealed as historians and seers[7] whose subjective visions of the past conjure up "the ineffable terrors of slavery […] residual traces [which] contribute to the historical memories inscribed and incorporated into the volatile core of Afro-Atlantic cultural creation" (Gilroy, *Black Atlantic* 73), thereby transforming the radical negativity of the origins of African American history into a creative force.

My analysis of the selected plays mainly rests on the interpretation of texts rather than on a study of particular productions. Whereas literature is a solitary art, theatre is an exhibitionist form of expression *par excellence*. The playwright does not merely write a text but uses it as a framework or "pre-text" to be transformed into performance. It is through production that the "pre-text" can be born into its "natural" stage world. The integrity of the play thus depends on an act of performance that is never fixed, never unique, always plural and defined by the numerous subjectivities that, in the same movement, feed and transform it. My own critique can be seen as an attempt to read beyond the "pre-text" and to capture its theatrical essence, with due respect for the performative potentialities which give it protean meanings. My reading practice therefore includes a "performative interpretation" of the written text and of its visual potential. As an interpretation, it is pushed to the border of imaginative re-invention, which is quite apt when reading a genre (drama) that can be conceived as an "open work of art" perpetually "in motion" (Eco, *Oeuvre ouverte* 34). Trying to depart from what I fear would be a myopic deciphering of the written text as mere narrative, I read with my eyes peeled and my imagination wide awake, guided by my intuition but also by a wish to link details to the overall dramatic structures and cultural contexts. In this sense I, too, adopt a mnemopoetic approach which takes the risk of crossing the boundaries of the written words to leap into the "possible worlds" (Eco, *Lector in Fabula* 157 and *passim*) they might engender on stage.

[7] A conception of the playwright akin to the African griot: both a guardian of ancestral memory and a creator of new histories.

TOPOMNESIA

Siting the Past

Topomnesia, the "memory of place," is only one of the multiple epistemologies of remembrance which make up the general mnemopoetics of the plays under scrutiny. Topomnesia explores the memoried potential of referential sites branded with the violence of African American slavery. An imaginary Africa, the slave ship, the barracoon, the auction block, the cotton field and the mansion are a few topoi inhabiting and inhabited by African American history. Their meanings for the creation of an African American cultural memory are both denotative, in that they refer to precise historical situations, and connotative, for they generate an emotive language of affective reactions to history and its violence. These symbolic sites "where memory secretes itself" (Nora, "Between Memory and History" 284) embody in striking visual metaphors the latent continuity (however convulsive) of a history whose imaginary reconstruction suggests a ceaseless quest for historical, cultural and psychical wholeness. The introduction of such *lieux de mémoire* as semantic landmarks in the plays evinces a peculiar cartography, a dramatic topomnesia, which charts the sites and symbols codifying and anchoring national memory. This imaginary mapping reveals the stage as a cluster of places where memory converges, condenses, and ultimately redefines the relationships between past, present and future. The memorialization of African American history through the theatrical revisiting of its re-constructed symbolic spaces "sites" and "cites" the past in a creative movement of imaginary re-location and re-locution.

Owen Dodson and Langston Hughes re-invest the symbolic loci of African American history and use them as both liminal spaces and stations to a liberation projected as a matter of some contemporary urgency. Indeed, the African American intelligentsia's focus in the 1920s and 1930s on drama as the privileged site for creating a new cultural ethos and a national identity seems both understandable and problematic given the central role of theatre in American culture along with its racist and segregationist constraints. Two different but ultimately fusing critical and creative conceptions of black drama developed in response to the essential question whether the alienating cultural history of African America makes it possible to create an alternative

"authentic" black theatre: Alain Locke's description of a "folk drama" rooted in African American lore on the one hand, and W.E.B. Du Bois's vision of a high-brow theatre which would provide moral uplift to African American audiences on the other.

By the late 1920s, Locke had developed a theory of ancestral and folk tradition, particularly insisting on its relevance for the visual and literary artist. The African American "instinctive and quite matchless folk-art" (Locke, "Negro Youth Speaks" 47) should be the ferment of "a new aesthetic and a new philosophy" (*Ibid*. 49) released from "self consciousness, rhetoric, bombast, and the hampering habit of setting artistic values with primary regard for moral effect – all those pathetic over-compensations of a group inferiority complex" (*Ibid*.). "Intimate, native and racial [themes]" (Locke, "Steps Toward the Negro Theatre" 270) whose "ease and simplicity in serious expression" ("Negro Youth Speaks" 48) where "even ordinary living has epic depth and lyric intensity" (*Ibid*. 47) must permeate black drama since it is through the achievement of "an inner mastery of mood and spirit [that drama] carrie[s] the folk-gift to the altitudes of art" (*Ibid*. 48). The "spiritual Coming of Age" (Locke, "The New Negro" 16) spurts from the evocation of the "black expressive culture as a reservoir from which a quintessentially Afro-American spirit flow[s]" (Baker, *Afro-American Poetics* 5) and offers "through art an emancipatory vision to America" (Locke, "Negro Youth Speaks" 53) "moulding a new American attitude" (Locke, "The New Negro" 10). African American culture thus nurtures and expands American civilisation by the dual process of celebrating its sensibility and history and at the same time re-inscribing them in American culture, thereby fully asserting "the belief […] in race co-operation" (Locke, "The New Negro" 11) and recognising and enriching the multifaceted dimension of African America. Such a conception of culture, addressing as it does the question of American identity, eschews the celebration of a static racial and national history and rather envisions the creation of new, hybrid cultural roles and types to be developed and propagated through theatre. With its fusion of comedy and tragedy, its celebratory use of spirituals and its modernist exploration of history which stresses the mechanics of memory, Langston Hughes's *The Sun Do Move* does offer such a vision of a drama that bypasses the distinction between popular and classical and blurs the hierarchy between high and low culture.

Insisting on elite rather than popular allegiances, W.E.B. Du Bois called for the development of an elevated, serious drama whose aesthetics would "begin this great work of the creation of Beauty, of the preservation of Beauty, of the realisation of Beauty" (Du Bois, "Criteria of Negro Art" 448) in the "wonderfully rich field to exploit in [African

America's] terrible history of experience" (Du Bois, "Can the Negro Serve the Drama?" 212). The literary models he suggested for the development of an African American literature show his insistence on the importance of maintaining high cultural standards: "the somber pen of some black Ibsen, the religious fervor of some Negro Tolstoi, or the light sarcasm of a black Molière have here a marvellous chance to develop" (*Ibid*.). His view of the theatre as the most powerful medium to "show the condition of the colored people throughout the United States" (Du Bois, *Speeches and Addresses* 227) is embodied in his pageant project *The Star of Ethiopia* which he staged in New York in 1913 for the 50th anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation, in Washington in 1915, in Philadelphia in 1916 and in Los Angeles in 1924. In tune with his conception of an elevated didactic theatre, Du Bois thought that "pageantry among colored people is not only possible, but in many ways of unsurpassed beauty and can be made a means of uplift and education and the beginning of a folk drama" (Du Bois, "The Drama Among Black Folk" 173).

The comparison of Hughes's folk play *The Sun Do Move* with Dodson's pageant *Amistad* testifies to the continuing relevance of the Du Bois/Locke controversy over the future of African American literature in the 1920s. Whereas Langston Hughes recuperates the comedy and musical dimension of the "hackneyed 'stage successes'" (Locke, "Steps Toward the Negro Theatre" 270) and incorporates the "epic intensity and […] tragic profundity of [African American] emotional experience" (Locke, "Negro Youth Speaks" 201), Owen Dodson mixes the traditional form of the celebratory pageant with a choral drama suffused with elevated poetry and songs. Hughes fuses the colloquial with the tragic, the "crude vehicle" of low comedy with the "classic expression of the religious emotion" (*Ibid*.) embodied in the spirituals, whereas Dodson's pageant remains confined in a static representation of the Amistad mutiny woven in a highly symbolic imagery and poetically contrived rhetoric.

Ambivalent Mnemopoetics

Choral Drama, Epic and Pageantry in Owen Dodson's *Amistad* (1939)

Amistad was written for the 100th anniversary of the Amistad mutiny and premiered at Talladega College, Alabama, on April 15, 1940, in a production directed by Lillian Voorhees. The initial cast of 68 characters had been reduced to 50 and the chapel organ was introduced along drums and singers (Hatch, *Sorrow* 60-61). The *Amistad* production coincided with the unveiling of Hale Aspacio Woodruff's "Amistad Murals" at the Savery Library at Talledega College. Pageantry and frescoes were thus the centrepieces of an elaborate civic celebration that functioned as a public ritual chronicling the African American version of a particular national history. Pictorial and dramatic images of a reconfigured past provide a fictional cluster of creative memory within which to interpret contemporary situations and experiences at the turn of the years 1939-1940. The meaning of the 1839 Amistad episode, which confronts the mercantilism of the slave trade controlled by international treaties with the emerging sense of an American identity that admits the supremacy of human rights over property rights, is re-actualised as it stretches to incorporate 20th-century colonisation in Africa. The Amistad affair confronted the United States with its racial inequities where the successive District, Circuit and ultimately Supreme Courts served as national forums in which social injustice was tried and condemned, and justice finally won. The rhetorical and dramatic strategies[1] deployed during the trial are part of the national mythos the case has become: "it demonstrated not only black resistance to slavery but also those interracial attempts to achieve the blacks' freedom" (Jones, *Mutiny* 12).

The Amistad affair had enough dramatic substance and thematic appeal to be transposed into a patriotic and moralistic play mobilising whites and blacks for racial equality in 1939-1940. The 1930s saw the rise of African Americans' frustration about their worsening social and economic conditions as well as their feelings of political helplessness. The Great Depression, increasing segregation and political impotence

[1] These strategies of defence interwove the Africans' voices translated in famous letters to John Quincy Adams and the attorneys' defence speeches characterised by a strong evangelical tone.

fuelled the fires of a revolt which peaked with the Harlem Riots in 1935, then in 1943. The 1931 Scottsboro Case[2] attracted the world's attention as the incarnation of the violent racism and injustice of the Jim Crow South. Up to 1950, the International Labor Defense League (ILD, a Communist legal organisation), then a broader defense committee including the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)[3] won a series of appeals which finally led to the defendants' release. The Scottsboro case concentrated national attention for most of the 1930s thus offering a contemporary equivalent to the Amistad affair: both cases involve group violence (alleged rape/ murderous mutiny), racist prejudices supported by legal apparatuses (slavery/segregation) as well as manipulation of white fears (Black sexuality/rebelliousness). Both *causes célèbres* also envision the law as a vehicle for redress rather than an instrument of oppression and white supremacy. Indeed, both cases offer examples of justice won in Courts, and particularly the US Supreme Court, thereby exemplifying the gradual, legal transition of the African/African American from the status of slave to the status of free man/first-class American citizen. Owen Dodson's historical pageant thus places a reconstructed, "usable past" (Zamora, *The Usable Past*) in a future oriented reform context, thereby functioning as a ritual of collective social transformation.

Dodson kept the framework of the historical incident and inserted it in an elaborate five-scene choral play that spans two years from 1839 to 1841 and ends on an overarching critical commentary on contemporary colonial politics in Africa. The mutiny on the Spanish slaver Amistad occurred in July 1839 as the vessel moved from Havana along the Northern coast of Cuba. The previous April, most of the African captives aboard had been seized in Sierra Leone and, contrary to international law forbidding the slave trade but not yet slavery, put on a Portu-

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2 9 young African American men were wrongly accused of raping 2 white women on a train in Alabama and all were sentenced to death, except 14-year-old Leroy Wright who was given a life sentence.

3 The Scottsboro Case heightened tensions between Blacks and Whites, but it also revealed conflicting political visions within the African American community. The NAACP first hesitated to support the 9 defendants (on the grounds that their innocence was uncertain), but offered financial assistance once the case had reached international proportions and become a crucial, symbolic fight for justice and equality. The opposition between the political caution of the NAACP and the enthusiastic, effective, mass-rallying militancy of the ILD (accused of manipulating the case for their own propaganda) evinced conflicting views on political activism. Still using the rhetoric of polite protest and elite attitude of Du Bois's Talented Tenth, the NAACP failed to appeal to an African American population already tense with frustration about their dire social and economic conditions (see Eyerman, *Cultural Trauma* 139, 166).

guese slaver for Cuba. At a barracoon in Havana, José Ruiz and Pedro Montes bought fifty-three of the slaves to take to Puerto Principe on board the Amistad. Two days later, Joseph Cinque led the revolt, killing the captain and the cook and forcing Ruiz and Montes to steer the ship to Sierra Leone. But the two Spaniards deceived the rebellious slaves by making deliberately slow progress eastward during the day, and by sailing westward under cover of night. After more than six weeks of zigzagging in the Caribbean then up the North American coast in hopes of staying within the range of patrolling British cruisers, the Amistad reached Culloden Point less than a mile from Long Island where Lieutenant Thomas R. Gedney of the USS Washington seized her as salvage. Lewis Tappan, Roger S. Baldwin, Joshua Leavitt, Simeon Jocelyn, and other abolitionists used the Amistad affair as a means of publicising the evils of African slavery. They established the Amistad Committee to raise money for the thirty-nine African survivors' defence in courts and in prison. Both the District and Circuit Courts ruled that the Africans had been kidnapped in Africa and enslaved illegally in Cuba, in violation of laws against the slave trade (in 1817 Spain and Britain had signed a treaty abolishing the slave trade). The freed Africans were then delivered to the president of the United States, who was supposed to return them to Sierra Leone. In order to keep some privileged relations with Spain, the newly elected president Martin Van Buren sought to deliver them to the Spanish minister instead. Finally, the mutiny became the subject of a trial before the US Supreme Court that pitted former president John Quincy Adams against the federal government. In March 1841, Associate Justice Joseph Story confirmed all the lower courts' decisions except that he declared the Africans free on the basis of "eternal principles of Justice." The Amistad Committee arranged to send the thirty-five Africans back to Sierra Leone in December 1841, accompanied by two African American missionaries who established there the first mission of the American Missionary Association in Africa.

The Amistad affair possesses an epic substance which Dodson enhances and develops in his pageant through an oral and poetic style and the presentation of an epic hero, Cinque, as the exceptional representative of a race estranged from the outside world, then integrated into the complexities of the American nation-in-progress. *Amistad* is structured around five scenes successively set in a barracoon on a Cuban beach, in the hold then on the deck of the slave ship Amistad, in prison and finally in Court. These *tableaux vivants* are activated by a distant, contemporary narrator who introduces and closes each scene with long narrative poems emphasising the Africans' nobility and sufferings through hyperbolic repetitions articulated as epic refrains. This narrative technique stresses the communal and political function of such a performance: the

celebratory creation of a tradition forming the cultural core of a nation in search of empowering models. The epic texture of the play is thus both thematic (the dramatisation of a nation's ideals centring around the achievement of an exceptional individual as the representative of a community) and formal (a long dramatic poem suffused with flights of oratory lyricism).

But if Dodson's *Amistad* displays the wilful grandeur W.E.B. Du Bois advocated for the creation of a "real dramatic art [inspired by the] wonderfully rich field [of African American] terrible history of experience" (Du Bois, "Can the Negro Serve the Drama?" 212), the dark, final vision of a destroyed Africa robs the epic of its optimistic teleological substance. The temporary liberation of the hero and his community seems to create a new societal wholeness based on "eternal principles of Justice," but ultimately chaos prevails in the form of a recurrent entanglement in sheer brutal exploitation. If the epic Amistad heroes break out of their prison and enslavement and, in desperate struggle, attain their freedom and their home, the epic, even mythopoeic dimension of their tale seems almost irretrievable when "the evil is spread [in colonial Africa] like nets that have […] become the land itself" (105). Such a totality of "evil" seems to foreclose the creative (even creationary) essence of the epic but the symbolic ambiguity of the final verse "the smoke is rising…\rising…" (*Ibid*.) may also reflect man's capacity to counter destruction and "rise" above historical contingencies.

The scenography of Dodson's pageant visualises in a strikingly symbolic spatial geometry the chronology of the events leading to the freed "Amistads'" return to Africa: the stage is dominated by the "thick, ominous […] base of the main mast" (27) elevated on a platform "about six feet high" (unpaginated introduction to the play's "general scene") separated from the lower level by two flights of steps on each side of the stage. "The top of the level is generally used as the deck, the court; under deck is the space under the level: generally used as the slaves' place, the prison" (*Ibid*.). The ascending and descending motion of the slaves on stage with alternating light and darkness spatialises in a poetics of collective body movement their journey from death and despair as an anonymous cargo to a freedom gained in the highest public forum of the United States. They first wait confined in the darkness of the barracoon, then their journey along the Cuban coast starts in the same darkness under deck before reaching the open deck as victorious rebels to be thrown back into the darkness of the state prison under stage and see the light again in the last scene set in the Supreme Court on the higher platform with the "ominous mast" turned into the American flag pole. The stage appears as a protean interlocking space of confined places with the lower level entirely bound to the Africans' incarceration in the

ship hold or in prison and the upper level as the intersection of blacks and whites which evinces a set of convertible symbolic images[4]: the proscenium is dominated by the Spanish word Amistad "printed in big letters" ("general scene") under the "ominous mast" of the slave ship which turns into the patriotic emblem of the American flag carrying the literal meaning of a reconfigured and ephemeral "amistad" (friendship) between Africa and America through the triumph of justice and equality in the Supreme Court.

The stage symbolism of a utopian friendship between both continents is undermined by the narrator's introductory and closing poetic addresses to the audience which reflect a continuity of destruction and exploitation:

> From those shores they have come
> Where anguish spilled over the sand,
> Where the sea was a hum of cries
> When the life hand took leave of the death hand.
> (unpaginated introductory address)

The narrator's voice bridges Africa and the Americas through the metaphorical power of the sea as the tidal memory of ancestral but ceaseless and unhealed "anguish" and "cries":

> The sick chained days are over
> But nothing has healed these days
> The scars are in the spirit
> Not the love
> […]
> And the evil is spread over the dark land now
> Like nets that have tangled with the forests
> And become the land itself
> The fire is lit
> The smoke is rising…
> rising… (104-105)

By virtue of its cyclical poetic mobility, the narrator's voice reaches across the sea and history, expands the confines of the stage and opens up its visual symbolism to incorporate the invisible African locus in the historical continuity of a violated past, a destructive present and a threatening future.

Circumscribed by "the sick chained days" of slavery and the "evil" days of colonisation, the Amistad incident appears as a utopian paren-

[4] Wilson Harris uses the expression "convertible imageries" (Harris, "A Note on the Genesis of *The Guyana Quartet"* 10) to refer to the protean nature of his symbolism that integrates antinomic correspondences.

thesis in history where Africans, in collaboration with white abolitionists who appealed to morality and evangelical principles of equality, had fought for and achieved justice. The narrator introduces and closes the pageant with visions of chaos and fear but, for this hovering poetic voice, the rhetorical task is to find celebratory praise where only lamentations seem possible: for the poet, the theatrical quest is for an expression that dispels past and present chaos, for a restorative *poiesis* that reasserts culture as a vector of transformative redress. Poetic remembering becomes dramatic re-collection: the recovery of a hopeful vision of transracial "amistad" depends upon a re-sanctification of history achieved here through ritualistic pageantry. The drama of the Amistad is literally "dis-embodied" from the "body poetic" of the narratorial presence and placed in an aesthetic realm of utopian African agency. The upper stage dominated by the oversized inscription "Amistad" literally represents a "utopia," a place of progress in interracial understanding and solidarity, a *topos* of "perfect commonwealth," laws, government and social conditions based on "eternal principles of justice." It is a *eutopia*, a "good place," but also an *outopia*, a "no place," a structural absence that can only exist in the realm of fiction or visionary imagination.

Even though Dodson's pageant is based on an important event in American history, its celebration of the Amistad affair exceeds its historical significance. If a legal victory is won, it only represents an isolated, if indeed very symbolic, case of gaining freedom. It will take another 26 years before slavery is abolished and segregation in the United States as well as the colonisation of Africa cast a shadow over such a theatrical praise of "eternal justice." If Dodson very consciously utopianizes the Amistad event for the purpose of celebrating its centenary, he does not pretend to be an institutionalised utopian and injects a final anti-utopian comment that has a prophetic resonance on the brink of World War II. In so doing, he underlines the aporetic nature of such a commemorative theatre production: the celebration of the Amistad mutiny is presented both as a necessary excavation of a historical model and as an inherently impossible projection into the present, an impossibly ideal scheme of social perfectibility which could not endure and only left "scars in the spirit/ Not the love" (103, 104). As Marc Delrez points out about the slippery notion of utopianism in Janet Frame's novels, "any sense of utopia must remain in the domain of deferred possibility, lest it lose its effectiveness as a corrective to reality" (Delrez, *Manifold Utopia* 93). But Dodson's utopianism is anchored in the metatheatrical dimension of the pageant, a poetic construct highly aware of its celebratory character that offers an artificial picture of the past to contrast it with contemporary misery. The contrapuntal narrative struc-

ture which alternates the narrator's pessimistic addresses and the dramatic dialogising dominated by Cinque's insistence upon resistance and hope suggests a faint possibility of transcending the aporia of historical reconstruction through the dialectics of fatalism and corrective action, catastrophe and regeneration.

The dialectical interchange between the narrator and the dramatic actualisation of the epic narration can be perceived as a call-and-response pattern through which the teller interacts with the tale in a rhythmic counterpoint of recurring images and emotive language which become both song and epic soliloquy:

> They are bound together: waiting,
> Not knowing what fear sits in the night,
> Like death's companion, watching.
> Their eyes look to darkness for hope.
> There is only the sea before them
> And this new land crouching behind.
> The jungle stars were shining in their eyes
> But they are dimming, dying.
> […]
> They see with the eyes of fear
> Who brings the hope of death,
> Graves, graves in this new land
> Far from Mendi.
> […]
> Far from the twisted forests
> With panthers running
> And lions running: their long moves on the wind;
> Far from the farms
> With orange trees hung with gold;
> From the green hills rising out of mist at dawn.
> The corn, the cotton, the fig trees.
> They are chained together hoping for graves now-
> Far from the children who woke to find them gone,
> The wives who did not feel the warmth of their men
> When the sun came to their beds;
> The husbands who tend the children alone now.
> Away from the tribal wars,
> That had no terror
> Like this terror;
> Away from the drums,
> The complicated chants.
> They are bound together: waiting.
> […]
> The jungle stars were shining in their eyes,
> But they are dimming.

[…]
They only wait and whisper
Looking at fear with the jungle stars
Almost gone from their eyes. (1-3)

Repetitive metaphors and recurrent words inserted in variations of poetic expressions translating terror and death create an incantatory elegy, a gravely descriptive and meditative chant on dislocation and the erasure of being. The narrator's nostalgic description of "Mendi" villages, landscape and life appears as a romanticized reconstruction filled with the exotic imagery of "panthers and lions running in the wind," misty mountains and green hills. Africa appears as a lost Garden of Eden pictured with "the corn, the cotton, the fig trees" and "orange trees hung with gold," a poetic reminiscence of a "Golden Age" which is not presented as a nostalgia for a mythologized society based on peace and continuity but as a chaotic history of "tribal wars." Whereas the internal politics of "tribal wars" is inserted within a historical continuity, the transatlantic slave trade is presented as a violent disruption of the continuum of African history, be it economic (corn, cotton, fruit), social (disruption of the family unit) or cultural (silencing of the drums and "complicated chants"). The narrator's poetic reconstruction of a "tribal" memory contrasts the pastoral reminiscence of the Mendi village with the radical negativity engendered by the "terror" of the Middle Passage. If there is hope, it is "hope for death" (1, 2), "hoping for graves" (2) or "some hope to walk with death/ Some do not hope at all" (3). The naive exoticism of "running panthers and lions" is contrasted with the threatening noises (4, 5) of the "new land *crouching* behind [the sea]" (1). The substantival insistence on "fear," "dark(ness)," "night" and the dimming "jungle stars" reflected in the captives' "eyes" points to the existential "black out" such a dislocation implies. At the metapoetic level, it may also reflect the referential "black out" which the narrator (and the playwright in this case) is confronted with while trying to de-scribe and inscribe the Middle Passage experience.

The recurring metaphor of "jungle stars" as the Africans' inner life force derived from their connection to their land and culture was first used by Owen Dodson in a collection of eight sonnets on the black experience, from slavery to Harlem, which he wrote during his senior years at Bates College, Maine, and which were published in 1936 under the title *Jungle Stars* (Hatch, *Sorrow* 28). The narrator's insistence on the collective gaze of the slaves sitting in the dark in a situation of existential "black out" clashes with the dramaturgical setting of indistinguishable bodies, and pierces the "blackness" of representation. The shift in emphasis from aural creative mediation to visual traces of the

scene in performance announces the progressive transition throughout the play from human invisibility and loss to a newly envisioned individuality.

The pageant opens with the blurred vision of "innumerable slaves" (1) chained together in a barracoon in the dark: "light catches an arm here, a chained leg there" (1). The slaves appear as a collective body with undifferentiated voices or bodies. Their multiple voices erupting out of the dark also appear split and shared within one collective text. The words of the narrator "step[ping] out of darkness" (1) pierce its opacity and describe its invisible density. The narrative voice has both the impulse to summon a presence through proffering a story of the past and the power to shape the performative, indeed "fictional," characters through verbalisation. The darkness of the barracoon becomes the metaphorical "blackness" of primordial violence, a splitting from original wholeness through the Middle Passage. Fragments of sentences and questions fuse from the dark under stage:

> From the slaves: How long since we left Lomboko?
> Does it matter how long?
> […]
> Water.
> Water.
> Water.
> (as if discovering it for the first time)
> There is no one to serve us.
> They gave me sea water this morning.
> I could not drink it.
> […]
> I dreamt that the sun fell into the sea and there was no more sun. (3-4)

The undifferentiated voices of the invisible slaves seem disincarnated, floating in the barracoon's hyphenated space between Africa and America. Time has collapsed into the void of dislocation, the "sun fell into the sea when [they] left [Africa]" (4, 12) leaving a primeval darkness where the "sea sound" (4), indistinguishable "sound[s] out of darkness" (5) and the dimming "jungle stars" in the captives' eyes create a peculiar cosmology of pain. The syncopated cadence of fragmented speech reflects the slaves' "terror of discontinuity" (Hartman, *Wordsworth's Poetry* 274, qtd. in Bowen, "Untroubled Voice" 188) which is only alleviated when Cinque's voice rises above the collective humming and re-creates continuity by articulating a shared history.

The first individualised voice to emerge is thus Cinque's comforting his companions and giving them hope. He appears as a figure of great magnetism who enacts the assurance of freedom and continuity despite

despair and dislocation. In a pun, he is introduced by the slaver as a "real prize […] a Prince in Mendi" (24). His royal affiliation singles him out as a leader and reinforces his individual, exceptional status, which is dramaturgically presented in the first scene and emphasised throughout the pageant. Cinque's voice appropriates the narrator's lyrical tone in an echoing urge for survival through collective memory:

> Keep the jungle stars then
> Keep the jungle stars in your eyes,
> Keep the long white shore,
> And keep the songs we sang,
> And our drum music beating
> In your hearts. (12)

The dichotomy between the epic distance of the narrator's voice and the performed experience of the slaves is thus conflated in the "ch/orality" of these two purely aural presentations responding to one another through repetitions. The choric dimension of the scene is also obvious in the plurality of the slaves' voices echoing one another in rhythmic counterpoints: the barracoon scene evolves as a choral exchange between Cinque and the undifferentiated slaves' voices trying to make sense of their situation and surroundings in darkness. As they start verbalising their anxiety and grasping the threatening sounds of the "ominous" sea, a drunken, singing sailor or a looming animal, the slaves acquire the "flesh and blood" quality of individuals, leaving their state of collective mass to become distinguishable names: Gilabrau the hunter, old Karga, Kimbo, wounded Tua, Bahoo, young Kinna. These individualized oices alternate in a call-and-response pattern with uncharacterized ones, which utter pain and loss in a haunting succession of repetitive words and sounds. The ceaseless weeping of terrified children, the interfering and comforting singing voice, repetitive expressions such as "my wound is bleeding" (7, 21); "my leg is bleeding from the chain" (6), and "we are slaves… slaves… slaves…" (8) as well as the echoing "water," "sea water" and "bitter water" constantly fuse into the choral exchanges of unveiling individualities in the dark and punctuate the first scene like a stammering litany. The dark stage is filled with raw sounds, a confused soundscape which create an "audio-history" erupting out of a submerged past. Sounds and words seem to spurt out of a single subterranean voice which flares up randomly, almost irrationally, speaking the recurrent words: "slaves," "bleeding" and "sea water." The dramatic phonomnesia of the first scene "sounds" the past both by giving it a rhythmic resonance and by fathoming the depths of memory in a polyphony of undifferentiated voices and noises which recreate the beginnings of African American history.

Clusters of disparate words and sounds represent a striking linguistic correspondence to the invisible clusters of scattered slaves of various origins lying in the dark. Their enforced physical immobility in the barracoon stands in juxtaposition with their psychic dynamism of survival just as their invisible presence on stage contrasts with the immediacy of their verbalised experience. The polyphonic, repetitive use of words and sounds creates the sense of a collective trance experience defined by terror and disorientation. The narrator's epic mediation, then the stage darkness, first appear as alienation effects that induce a dissociation from the audience. It is then revealed as the symbolic dramatisation of the African American experience that comes out of the darkness of history and overcomes social invisibility (even erasure) through the ceaseless production of words, sounds and songs: "Karga please sing" (11) "keep the songs we sang" (12), "speak to us, Cinque" (24), "Shuma pray to the gods for us. Pray for all of us. Even for the dead" (21). The constant exhortation to speak, sing and pray reflects the slaves' anxiety of erasure and their will to survive spiritually in the midst of annihilating conditions. Continuity and survival are ensured by the power of words to "sing" ancestral songs, "pray" for the living and the dead, and "speak" the past, present and future. Thus aural memory makes up for the absence of visual traces: the darkness of the ship hold represents the locus of purely aural mnemonics performed as mental acts of survival. The dramatic primacy of "sight" is here replaced by the symbolic potency of "site," a "*lieu de mémoire*" pregnant with echoes from the past.

The ship appears as a liminal space of transition from the stability of a "home" remembered in elemental terms to the "evil" of the "naked land" whose recurrent "darkness" signals both an inscrutability of design (the slaves are "lost in an evil country" 32, 35, 39) and unreadability of meaning (they cannot make sense of their surroundings, neither on land nor at sea). On the metatheatrical level, the stage stands for a theatre of memory moving inward into the innermost reaches of African American history. Dramatic topomnesia and phonomnesia fashion a psychic drama articulated by archetypal sounds (sea surf, songs and cries), metaphors (bitter water, jungle stars), and memoried places (barracoon, ship, sea). These spaces and "sounds bespeak nativity" (as Houston Baker describes Du Bois's incantatory style in *The Souls of Black Folk*, *Modernism* 61), a poetic retrieval that forms the core of the African American epic genesis, "one of the great epics of modern times" (Huggins, *Black Odyssey* 4).

The slaves' poetic outbursts reflect their yearning to return to some native, original landscape of "fig and orange trees," "misty mountains" and "green hills" in which they will be repatriated, yet their passage (in the dark) to the New World is associated with a primordial sea- and

soundscape so elemental and generic that it is itself presented as the ground of beginnings, an Adamic "naked land" (21). *Amistad* thus shows a double use of dramatic topomnesia. First, the pageant stages the static re-creation of slave experiences as *tableaux vivants* which are intricately integrated in history-laden sites (barracoon, slave ship, Court) and invested with the symbolic aura of original places. At the same time, the play is engaged in a dynamic process of symbolic de- and re-formation which converts stultified site images into visions of transforming spaces (convertible symbolism of the ship as a vessel of death and freedom, of the upper stage as a place of captivity and liberation). The Ur-topoi of Afro-Atlantic history are dramaturgically turned into Utopian sites through the spectacle of recovered identity.

If the topomnesia reconfigured in Dodson's pageant is a fundamental symbolic and dramaturgical component, memory is also represented as the repository of ancestral chants that sing the cultural, social and existential continuity of the slave community and keep it alive. Significantly, singing is mainly associated with the slave children who, as epitomes of the "future of the race" (Gates and West, *Future of the Race*), are constantly referred to as a vulnerable species of forsaken humanity to be protected: Cinque exhorts old Karga, the embodiment of the ancient memory of the community, to sing and soothe the children's fear. Since she "forgot all the happy songs," she "improvises" (12) a chant of sorrow and loss, a spiritual that, in its anachronistic intrusion, marks out the transition from African ancestral continuity to African American cultural survival:

> Oh! Oh! What a lonesome day,
> What a lonesome day,
> Our shore is gone away.
> Oh! Oh!
> No more laughing,
> No more laughing.
> Oh! Oh! What a lonesome day. (12)

Disorientation, loneliness and despair are turned into a new "improvised" threnody which represents both loss and creativity, a new sound, a "soft, stirring melody in an ill-harmonized and unmelodious land" (Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk* 386) which functions as a device of "spiritual" survival: "I feel better but I am sad still" (12) answers a slave. The radical negativity of the song is thus contradicted by its very emergence. The memory of songs becomes a potent symbol for cultural continuity, while forgetting them would make "the sun fall into the sea" (12) and throw the community into cultural and existential nothingness:

There is nothing. Nothing for us again.
[…]
Bahoo: What will the children keep-
They will not remember,
They will not know
The mist in the mountains like clouds,
The bright colors of the birds.
They will not remember the long grass
[…]
They will not remember their mothers,
Or the songs their mothers sang.
In a little time they will remember only the chains. (13)

Bahoo's words echo like a prophecy of doom when the little girls are taken by Ruiz as "breeders [who are] almost old enough" (19). Cultural disruption and forced biological reproduction, the forgetting of the "mother" country, the disappearance of "mothers' songs" as well as the desacralisation of motherhood through chain breeding are juxtaposed in a single, obsessive litany:

Bahoo: They will not remember the green hills.
They have nothing to hold in the night
But chains.
They will forget the songs their mothers sang. (19)

The iterative imagery conflating landscape and memory, the loss of the "mother" country and the forgetting of "mother songs" converts the slaves' physical confinement and cultural dislocation into expressive insurgency by creating a musical pattern of poetic recurrences akin to the "sorrow songs" (Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk* 377).

Significantly, "Karga was not taken" aboard the Amistad since "she was too old" (28), so that the ancestral, spiritual voice is left behind to die in the darkness of the barracoon of the first scene to allow the second scene to unfold songless and in utter hopelessness on the deck of the ship. Set in the middle deck of the schooner the Amistad "just before dawn" (27), scene 2 represents an intermediary space between the moment of dislocation in the Middle Passage and the moment of temporary liberation when the slaves rebel and seize the ship. Darkness still prevails but "light from a lantern spreads over half of [the chained slaves], light from the moon over the others" (27). The dimness of the light, body shapes, and remembrance of Africa metaphorically merges with the "dimming jungle stars" in the captives' eyes. The lantern and the moonlight seem to reflect the "ominous" character of the setting but the narrator's descriptive insistence on the dimness of the light, which

works in their favour during the insurrection, makes them appear as propitiatory signs of liberation rather than dark omens.

Shrouded in an atmosphere of pending death, the second scene embodies the "momentum" of the journey, i.e. the force of its motion as a result of the continuance of the ship's circumnavigation, a kind of passive, useless energy that prefigures the failed steering back to Africa. The stage configuration enhances the medial, junctural quality of the scene: "the solid railing along the back [of the ship] like a low wall" (27) delineates the slaves' space which is centred around "the base of the main mast: thick, ominous. A rope ladder extends upward from the railing and disappears. Two doors on a stairway leading to the lower part of the schooner" (27). The stage shows a religious symbolism which figures hell "in the blackness of the under deck" (43) and the bliss of freedom on the invisible upper deck, significantly connected as it is to the "limbo" space where the slaves stand by a seemingly endless ladder. "Lost in an evil place" (33, 35, 39) where they "can't wander, can't walk" (35), the captives are "stuck" in a state of inert uniformity where the difference between life and death becomes blurred:

> Death is not the one lying there,
> Death is here between these boards
> […]
> Death is the slavery of hands and hearts. (36)

This absence of differentiation further enhances the entropy of the situation, the general trend toward physical and moral degradation inherent in the slave trade. The recurrent image of the dead slave chained to another living one strikingly visualises the "living death" (3) of slavery:

> I thought he was sleeping chained to me.
> He was dead chained to me. (18)
> […]
> He was chained to me dead.
> I thought he was sleeping. (30)

Death and sleep can hardly be distinguished as both bring about peace and relief: "It is better to die than live" (29), "the dead can't feel the chains" (18) and "it is better to sleep/ Dream of our country" (28). The utter hopelessness of the scene is undermined by Cinque's words "Never forget never" (25), which recurrently re-instate the vital importance of memory of both past and present, of the "golden life" in Africa as well as the "iron chains" (44) in the New World. The image of the two slaves chained together, one dead and the other alive, embodies the dual aspect of historical experience as physical and spiritual annihilation (the "dead" weight of the past) and at the same time as a projection of

beings and "things" past into the complex construction of present consciousness (the dead and the "iron […] as a shadow/ In the sun and in the moon," 39).

The dialogic insistence upon death is enhanced by the iterative imagery of blood, staring, mutilated corpses as well as by the transformation of the Christian transubstantiation ritual into a double cannibalistic profanation. The recurrent linguistic and visual insistence upon the "wounded," bleeding" body of the slave in chains reaches a climax of bodily atrocity in the second scene. The obsessive slave voice opens the scene with the repetitive litany "my wound bleeds" (27), which echoes the narrator's poetic insistence in the presentation of the first scene: "Vinegar for their wounds,/Salt for their wounds,/Gunpowder rubbed in their wounds" (2). The wounded body of the slave becomes emblematic, carrying as it does two unhealable wounds: the bleeding body and the crushed soul whose "scars are in the spirit/ Not the love" (103). The emphasis on the wounded, bleeding slave dramaturgically outlines how history and its violence are mapped across the theatrical subject through "scar-scripts" on the performing body:

> The slaves crouched low in their place underdeck,
> The rotten fish and the rice smell steamed,
> The rotten smell was in their skin,
> The skin broke and blood came.
> Another slave was thrown to the shark. (42)

Thus, scarred body and spirit are the ever-present memoried signs of the history and pain of their violation.

The symbolizing function of the body in pain crystallises in the horrific vision of the dead slave "covered with blood": his "blood is dripping in the pail [of] rotten food" (31), contaminating the substance of survival ("It is better to live. Eat the rotten food for strength" 31) in a twisted reversal of Christian transubstantiation: the "body" and blood of the sacrificed victim are literally integrated into the food as death components instead of substances of regeneration:

> The food is red.
> Blood.
> The dead man's blood.
> Blood in the food.
> The dead man is covered with blood. (31)

The institutionalized sacredness of blood and body metaphorically consumed in a process of spiritual integration is here made dreadfully literal. The "burial" of the dead slave also represents a perverted rite: the corpse is tossed overboard to the sharks, "his arm is floating/ His arm,

unwanted, floating. (39). The slaves improvise a brief ceremony with "wailing" (37) and evocation of the dead man's life in Africa. The desacralization of the ritual during which "they [the slavers] didn't cover his face [nor] close his eyes" (37) is contrasted with the burial ceremony "when men die in Mawkoba in Mendi" (35):

> They die for us only,
> We touch the hard flesh that will not move,
> Look into the eyes, the eyes are still.
> We bury them deep, way under.
> But they live.
> Where, we can't tell:
> They move in air,
> Hide in forest,
> Hide in water.
> Where, we can't tell. (*Ibid*.)

The elemental connection with the land and the ancestors is broken and replaced by another elemental absorption into an alien landscape. The dead are also buried "deep, way under" but absorbed by the sea and not protected by the earth. They do not "live" on but disappear in another "consumption" ceremony of "sharks pull[ing] under" (39), a murderous vision of the ocean reminiscent of Melville's conception of "the universal cannibalism of the sea" (Melville, *Moby Dick* 381). The ritual of looking into the dead's still eyes is here transformed into the obsessive fear of the dead man's open eyes "staring" (33), "staring at one star only/ Jungle star" (36, 37), "the eyes […] still open staring…/ At one dead star" (39). The ritualistic touching of the dead person's flesh is transferred to the unwilling chaining of a living man together with a corpse, a contact that generates anguish and disgust rather than ritual integration.

The deliberate profanation of ritualistic practices and religious images as well as the dramatic process of "metaphors made literal" are also illustrated in the parody of cannibalism acted out by the cook:

> (Celestino pantomimes eating one of the little girls [and] begins laughing.)
> From the slaves: […] He tried to eat her.
> That's what he wanted to show us.
> They're going to eat us. (32-33)

Echoing the common fear[5] among the slaves of being eaten by the white men, this parodic passage alleviates the tragic, unbearable image

[5] The Africans' fear of the sailors' cannibalism during the Middle Passage was recorded by Equiano in his autobiography: "We thought […] we should be eaten by these ugly men" (Equiano, *Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano* 31).

of the bleeding dead slave and at the same time insists upon the picture of the slave body as a commodified object, especially in the light of the preceding scene where the "little girl" was sold as a "breeder." Fake cannibalism, desacralised transubstantiation, food consumption and sexual consummation are thus brought together in a stage language that combines atrocity and parody, through which memory is "viscerally" passed on.

If death is tied to the mutilation and decay of the "slave body" and flesh represents the "blood" site where the memory of "iron chains" is inscribed, death is also configured in metaphorical, even mythological terms, which blend cultural remembrance and metaphysical terror:

> In my land there was a dead river:
> The water was black and long snakes
> Ran in the water. An evil smell came
> Out of the dead river and men sometimes died
> When they crossed it. Why. We never knew.
> I wish I was there
> In that terror of my land.
> It was better than this. (35)

The "evil" and ominous character of the African swamp, which is associated with mysterious, chthonic energies, contrasts with the "evil" place of the slave ship where, for the slaves, the lack of understanding about their situation brings about an ineffable "terror" of the unknown which cannot be compared with the terrifying yet integrated mystery of superstitious fears. The symbolism of the "dead river" as a death "crossing" belongs to the metaphysical domain of the African captives' integrated cosmology, while the crossing of the Atlantic as the dark passage to an "evil," "naked land" stands beyond rational and irrational configurations: "Slavery, then, was to him [the transplanted African] the dark triumph of Evil over him. All the hateful powers of the Underworld were striving against him, and a spirit of revolt and revenge filled his heart" (Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk* 343). The dead slave's eyes "staring at one dead star" (39) epitomises this existential "black hole" of intensely dense anguish which exists outside any representational logic and translates "an experience beyond imagination" (Huggins, *Black Odyssey* 19). Terror and death on the slave ship are thus presented as parts of a radical entropy, a violent push toward metaphysical chaos and inconceivable existential disorder expressed in a cosmic paradox: "The sun is coming up/ We are going to darkness" (40). And, as Du Bois suggests in the passage quoted above, the "transplanted African's" instinctive reaction against the paralyzing entropy of slavery is not passivity but rebellion.

The dramatic entropy of the second scene represents the structural "moment of inertia" of the journey where the Amistad rotates around the axis of Cuba before being misled to Connecticut in a motion of wasted dynamism, a "rotational inertia" which, in an anachronic leap, is further reflected in the cycle of destruction re-activated by the "hands of the world" in contemporary Africa. Significantly, scene 2 ends with day-break and the threat of a sea storm announcing the outbreak of the revolt and the successful "storming" of the ship by the rebellious slaves.

While the second scene is marked by hopelessness and death, the third scene relates the slave rebellion in an alternation of epic poetry, signalled by the re-appearance of the narrator, and instances of per-formed materialisation of the tale. The shift from despair to regained hope is reflected in the imagistic and linguistic development. The aes-thetics of bodily violence and defilement is turned into a messianic healing at the end of the scene: the Amistads "listen to Cinque, [they] want the wounds healed" (51), "follow [him] in the dark [and] hold his hand" (54, 102) to a new, "first day" (66) at dawn when Cinque urges the freed slaves to "wash the blood off the deck" (67) so that "all the bitter water [be] washed away,/ […] The wounds of the sick will heal without the chains" (66).

Stylistic changes are sustained by the alternating zooming on the "slaves' place" (56) under deck and the crew on the upper deck which is signalled by the lighting fading out and focussing. The conversion of hopelessness into temporarily regained freedom is mirrored in the poetic revelation of "convertible imageries" (Harris, "A Note on the Genesis of *The Guyana Quartet*" 10) and symbols. The at first terrifying "blackness of the underdeck" (43) is revealed as the protective space for insurrec-tion plans where "gleaming freedom" (43) can be secretly conceived. The "smoking lantern" (repeated twice 58) on the "ominous mast" and the "vaguely shining moon" (57) "mov[ing] through more clouds […] layers of clouds" (58) function as symbolic projections of the conspiracy of the slaves who take the opportunity, under cover of the "foggy, gray moonlight" (58), to "crawl quietly" (58) and "stealthily" (57) on deck, and, to the song "softly" sung by blind Kimbo, "follow [Cinque] in the dark" (54, 102) and seize the "ominously swift" (43) schooner. The sombre, murky seascape pregnant with "ominous" signs is symbolically converted into a hopeful "mindscape" of eager expectancy. Visual gloom and darkness mirror their obverse metaphorical reflections: "the jungle stars are burning, burning" (58, 59) and "freedom is gleaming" (43).

This symbolical irony blending images and their opposite metaphori-cal meaning is also reflected in the "convertible imageries" associated

with the bird and the sun. First introduced as a symbol of cultural continuity, "birds [singing] like women all day long" (25, 36) epitomise the memoried cultural and elemental connection to Africa, the "mother" country, and mostly its loss and the subsequent amnesia:

> There was a bird I had.
> The morning they took me away
> It sang the same song over and over.
> I can't remember the song now. (13)

The narrator introduces a multi-levelled symbolic dimension by comparing the sails of the Amistad with "flying […] white birds/ Spreading their wings" (42), an image of the bird's migration from one continent to another which suggests a literal and metaphorical drifting movement merging such opposites as recurrence and change, dislocation and connection. The association of slave liberation with "flying birds" also has a deeper cultural resonance, for it prefigures the pending slave rebellion with a mythological allusion to the "Flying Africans" who were said to mysteriously disappear from slave ships and plantations to fly back to Africa. The African connection is reinforced by the repetition of this comparison as the revolt is fomented in "darkness/ With the wind blowing out the sails like dark wings arched" (43). The positive symbolism of "blackness" associated with liberation is reiterated in the metaphor of the slaves under deck as "night-time shadows,/ Shadows still on her [the Amistad's] sides" (42) as well as in the narrator's vision of the ship The Gentlemen repatriating the freed Amistads to Sierra Leone with "black freedom mov[ing] in its sides" (103). The final positive association of the bird with the Africans' "soul [which] is escaped as a bird out of the snare of the fowlers" (102) is undermined by the metaphorical and metonymic correspondence with the African continent entangled like a bird in the "nets" of "evil" and destruction. Birds are thus used as both symbols of fading memory and cultural disconnection and at the same time as emblems of freedom.

The sun undergoes the same process of metaphorical mutations: it represents hope and liberation and directs the boat back to Africa, but at the same time it acquires their opposite associations, despair and disorientation. If "the sun fell into the sea" (4, 12) during the Middle Passage, it "will come tomorrow" (12) but when " the sun is coming up" (repeated twice 40), it is "not with fire./ Not with the color of hope./ Another gray day" as the slaves "are going to darkness" (40):

> I will not love the sun again.
> It shines on misery,
> Shines on broken hopes. (40)

The "gray sun" (42) blends with the "gray light" of the moon (43), the "gray moonlight" (58) which, in another iterative symbolic imagery, blurs the distinction between opposite metaphorical meanings and conflates the dull, unrelieved sameness of the ship journey with the prefiguration of transition. The sun image reverts to positive virtue with the liberation dance "on the deck/ In the sun" (52) and the sun dawning for the "first day" (66) on the freed slave ship. Significantly, the freed slaves count the days in "suns" ("We have been at sea almost sixty-one suns," 70) whereas they counted them in "moons" as captives during the Middle Passage ("How many moons were we on the ship," 7). The dual imagery of the sun as the symbol of hope and the reflection of "misery" is implied in the failed return to Africa: the schooner is to be "steer[ed] back, by the sun, to [the African] shore,/ To freedom" (51) but "the sun [is] against [them]" (95) and, in another corresponding reversal of symbolism, the slaves are betrayed by the "stars" and the schooner is re-oriented by night toward the American coast.

The constellation sun/star/escape has a striking correspondence in the slave narratives' topography of freedom which leads the runaway slave from the South to the North by following the North Star at night: "I travelled all that day off from the road through the wild forest without any knowledge of the country whatever for I had nothing to travel by but the sun by day and the moon and stars by night" (Bibb, *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb* 146). This archetypal geographical motion of the "leap for freedom" (Brown, *Leap for Freedom*), as expressed here by Henry Bibb, is linked to cosmic signs whose correct interpretation leads to a reconfiguration of the social order in a territory rid of slavery. The sea journey of the Amistad thus shows the same topographical marks and "tropological" recurrence as the fugitive's escape in the slave narratives. The trope of "the vertical 'ascent' from South to North [which] recurs with surprising frequency in the Afro-American literary tradition" (Gates, *Signifying Monkey* XXV) is transposed to the ship's "horizontal" drifting from South (Cuba) to North (Connecticut) in a differed, complex movement toward liberation. The North Star's guiding power shifts to the ambivalent symbolism of the stars as internal guiding energies as well as mysterious configurations whose obscurity literally loses the slaves.

The "convertible imagery" of the sun and the stars as vital, enduring forces as well as symbols of geographic and existential disorientation contrasts with the one-dimensional symbolism of the sea as a death-space, an imprisoning immensity and unredeemable source of misery: the slaves "can't be free in the ocean" (44) and "the sea [takes] no pity on the black men" (43). The sea is introduced as "a hum of cries" (unpaginated epigraph), which absorbed the sun, only left fear and dark-

ness, and threatens with annihilation as well as cultural and spiritual amnesia. It is the "bitter water" (11, 14, 17) that the slaves are forced to swallow to survive. It epitomises despair when "hope go[es] to the sea" (25), and the bitterness of a victimised, "scarred" and perpetually repeated history. The symbolism connecting sea and salt recurs three times as the slaves are tortured with "salt for their wounds" (2), unwillingly drink "salt water" (11), and finally drink "water/ Water at last/ Not the bitter salt/ Clean water" (63) after the revolt. "The bitter salt" they are forced to ingest is poetically connected with the "flying sails/birds," a semantic closeness which echoes once again the myth of the enslaved Africans who tried to fly back to Africa like their ancestors but "had eaten salt and made themselves too heavy to fly" (Lovelace, *Salt* 3). Salt thus represents enforced stasis, the incapacity to reconnect with one's roots. Associated with pain and degradation, sea water and salt are contrasted with the "clean rivers, […] wells [and] streams/ Without salt, without seaweed" (27), a lost purity which can only be re-envisioned when the slaves "let [their] rivers run speaking to oceans" (39) in a healing incorporation of "clean water" with "bitter" memories. The "clear laughter after chains" (67) bursting at the end of the scene contrasts and at the same time linguistically echoes the preceding "they will remember only the chains" (13) and Karga's sorrow song "No more laughing." The anaphoric effect of such poetic variations points to the ultimate fusing of suffering and regeneration, lament and celebration, wilful forgetting and selective memory embodied in the social and cultural function of the pageant.

"We can't be free on the ocean" (44) also encapsulates the socio-economic implications of the slave trade and its forced "migrations" which are paradigmatic of the "dark" face of the emerging American democracy. If liberal democracy rests upon the principle of free circulation of marketable goods and persons, slavery represents its perverted vision of "marketable persons," a paradox which allows selling and buying slaves bound as persons. Moving slaves and circulating waters paradoxically create a social inertia and a moral stagnation, which are reflected, in the pointless journey of the Amistad and more generally in the "inertia of place and identity upon which the institution of slavery had thrived" (Dixon, *Ride Out the Wilderness* 14). Significantly, the sea is pictured as a murky, cannibalistic world full of "seaweed," troubled, dangerous waters, which reflect the turbid confluence of institutionalised enslavement and the construction of American democracy. The slaves appear as "night-time shadows" (42) lurking in the "dark" waters of democratic America: "They are swimming, the four bronzed men/ Are swimming to America from the schooner called Amistad" (84).

If the "convertible imageries" and the analysis of the sea/death metaphor reveal an underlying pessimism which nuances the celebratory character of the pageant, the fourth scene collapses the militant vision of the "moral superiority of the victims" in an unexpected reversal of the "noble African" image to a vengeful and bloodthirsty "savage." The musical transition is made by young Kinna who leads the chorus of freed slaves while playing the drum. The ancestral voice of wisdom and cultural continuity that is embodied in old Karga, blind Kimbo and old Schule who "sees outside of what we see" (70), is replaced by a young, impulsive voice devoid of vision. They all sing a hybrid work song that mixes the theme of a Monkey tale confronting a hunter and a trickster/lion with the repetitive call-and-response pattern of the typical prisoner song:

> (The Drum Slave begins playing. The narration beat for the song is long and Kinna [the young boy] chants it. In the chorus the beat is quick and rushing.)
> Kinna: When I was hunting.
> All: Oh! Oh! With a long spear.
> Kinna: I met a lion dancing.
> All: Oh! Oh! With a long spear.
> Kinna: He said for me to follow after.
> All: Oh! Oh! With a long spear.
> Kinna: He gave me figs and bid me stay.
> All: Oh! Oh! With a long spear.
> Kinna: If I would throw my spear away. (68-69)

This variation on the black vernacular "toasts"[6] of the Signifying Monkey presents a very peculiar reversal of the typical role of the Monkey as the trickster and the lion as the tricked figure of authority. The Signifying Monkey as the reversed figure of the racist stereotype of the black as ape-like is conspicuously absent from the song and replaced by the cunning lion tricking the African hunter. Dodson offers here a creative version of the "Ur-" Signifying Monkey toast which has not yet undergone the cultural change into the African American figure of rhetorical strategies of double meanings: The African hunter is the one who is "Signified upon" here, in a reversal of the trickster's role which reflects and prefigures the Spaniards' "ability to cajole and lie." The

[6] A toast is a vernacular, rhymed verbal ritual in the black community. The toasts include among their types the Signifying Monkey tales. "Signifying […] refers to the trickster's ability to talk with great innuendo, to carp, cajole, needle, and lie" (Abrahams, *Deep Down in the Jungle* 51-52, qtd. in Gates *Signifying Monkey* 54). At a metalinguistic level, "Signifyin(g) epitomizes all of the rhetorical play in the black vernacular […] the Signifying Monkey is the figure of a black rhetoric in the Afro-American speech community […]. He is the principle of self-consciousness in the black vernacular, the meta-figure itself" (Gates, *Signifying Monkey* 53).

original black trickster is "Signified upon" by the double language/steering of the two figures of oppression. The cultural dis/relocation of the African American trope and the issuing interpretative confusion corresponds to the actual disorientation of the Africans in a natural and linguistic environment whose system of meanings they do not grasp.

Whereas the preceding scenes used music and the singing voice as a way of denoting the spiritual and cultural connection between Africa and America in the form of spirituals, the music in scene 4 revolves around the different beats of the drum introduced as an echo from, and a guiding sound toward, "home": "we could find the way back by the sound of the drum" (69). In a dubious association of the drum with primitive savagery, the drumbeats epitomize and sustain the shift from compassionate humanity to violent revenge and murder. The discovery that the Spaniards treacherously steer the ship toward the American coast at night lets loose the Africans' rage: "Beat the drum/ Make the beat deep," "Kill!" and "Death!" are the war cries and the death sentence that punctuate the mock trial, then the sacrificial dance on the deck of the schooner. As soon as "Kinna has started to beat his drum" (78), the betrayed slaves grab cane knives and, fired by Cinque's incantatory exhortation to murder, start a "solemn dance […] slow and symbolic" (80) around Montez, Ruiz and the mulatto cook Antonio:

> Cinque: (to slaves)
> We killed not for anything but to be free,
> Now we kill for vengence [*sic*].
> […]
> (Kinna's drum begins to become louder with a deep, insistent revenge motif) (78)

The "revenge motif" expressed in the drumbeats is subtly echoed in the symbolic, visual correspondence of the Africans' costumes, reminiscent as they are of other richly dressed rebellious slaves. The scene opens with a sweeping perspective of the freed slaves on deck who wear "pieces of finery […]: beads, bright cloth wrapped about them, some of them instead of their loin cloths have on tight-fitting Empire trousers" (68). This introductory vision evokes the usual iconography of Haitian leaders after the successful revolution, a prefigurative association that blends freedom won and the horror of massacres and destruction perpetrated to gain it. It may be no coincidence that the iconography of the San Domingo slave rebellion should infiltrate Dodson's pageant as the Depression decade saw the publication of two important books on slave revolts: C.L.R. James's *The Black Jacobins* (1938) and Herbert Aptheker's *Negro Slave Revolts* (1939). The urgency of historical

redress and social change spurred the literary reclaiming of a revolutionary black tradition which would re-appropriate its own historical models. Dodson's *Amistad* thus belongs to the corpus of "recreations of the past [which] are directly engaged with other cultural representations of history" (Carby, "Ideologies of Black Folk" 139), i.e. with the urge to grapple with contemporary issues of agency and identity. The rhetorical power expressed in the "Empire" costume thus defines it (and the body wearing it) as a site of political rather than aesthetic contention. Such sartorial encoding functions to establish a newly configured identity defined by resistance and rebellion.

The connotative aspect of clothing is further emphasised in the latent textuality of fabric, another "convertible" cloth imagery illustrated by the *tableau vivant* of the freed slaves "sewing a large piece of canvas, part of a sail" (68). The white/black sail as a Janus-symbol of liberation and disorientation acquires here the foreboding "texture" of a shroud which will be used later to wrap the body of Tua, the wounded slave and recurrent voice of lament who dies without seeing the African shore again (72-73). The extinction of the wounded voice as the ultimate consequence of bodily desecration signals the turning point in the Africans' "tolerance" of injury and humiliation.

The language of atrocity and the iterative imagery of bodily pain and defilement function as aural and visual preparation as well as justification of the Amistads' violence that is unleashed in scene 4. The insistence upon the aversive image and discourse of the wounded body/spirit may suggest an exploitatively sensationalistic poetics/politics, put in the service of an ideology of shock. The blending of the Amistad revolt with the Haitian insurrection suggested in the clothing details could also be seen as marking a continuity of successful black revolution, a stimulus and a justification for contemporary revolution or war. The revolutionary impetus behind the celebration of the past would break the radical pessimism of the narrator's last monologue, and align contemporary, colonial Africa with a tradition of righteous black revolution. Cinque recurrently verbalises the ambiguity of a revolution that remains poised between liberation and destruction, surviving and killing. His outbursts of moral suasion insist upon the necessity of killing for freedom and the need to preserve a sense of humanity: "We have killed to be free and we are free […]. We cannot kill now for blood" (64). The thematic and rhetorical similarity with Frederick Douglass's *The Heroic Slave*, which also expounds the legitimacy of violence in rebellion, is here particularly striking. As the slave Madison Washington takes over the slave ship Creole and steers it to the slavery-free Bahamas in 1841, he says: "God is my witness that LIBERTY, not *malice*, is the motive for this night's work […]. We have struck for our freedom" (66). Both charac-

ters, Washington and Cinque, show the same conflation of messianic aura, moral diffidence and heightened rhetorical justification, which characterizes the trope of revolutionary struggle. Douglass's Madison Washington thus appears as the submerged signifier upon which Dodson fashions his own "heroic slave," Cinque. Both historical characters are re-created as eloquent leaders, "masterwordsmith[s] [and] liberator[s] through language" (Andrews, "Introduction" to *Three Classic African American Novels* 14). Indeed, Andrews' critical comment upon Douglass's novel can also apply to Dodson's Cinque: "It seems clear that Douglass wanted not only to place Washington on the stage of history, but to give him an extensive speaking part so that he could articulate himself in a fashion befitting true nobility of mind and spirit" (*Ibid*. 13).

But the fourth scene of *Amistad* collapses the moral edifice painstakingly constructed upon the slaves' "*devoir de violence*" (Ouologuem, *Le devoir de violence*). As "the sun is dying" (72) and the stars have betrayed them, the slaves' "jungle stars" are extinct and, in a cosmological void reflecting a metaphysical and moral collapse, they chant:

> Death and the sharks
> After death.
> Death and the eyes
> Still open.
> Death and the hands still pleading.
> Death. (80)

In a reversal of sadistic roles, the freed slaves become the torturers. In a reversal of metaphysical representations, the betrayed men proclaim their divine right to human sacrifice: "This time we are the Gods" (78). The introduction of a tragic *hubris* translating the human will to power and its collapse leads the scene to a mystic finale:

> They move closer [to the three Spaniards]. As they are lifting their swords high in the air to plunge them, the lantern light making the steel flash, as the drum is more insistent, the swaying at a pitch, the pounding on the deck at a pitch, a big light flashes suddenly on deck. They stop frozen. The noise stops. (81)

In a timely "apparition," "the big light" of the lighthouse at Montauk Point "freezes" the scene at the height of its sacrificial tension, prevents the vengeful killing and propels the Amistad toward the American coast: "The light came like the moon/ We are in an evil country" (83). The "ocean light like the moon" (84) flashing in the dark represents the peak of the Amistads' spiritual and geographic disorientation. Their return to the "evil," ominous place appears as a tragic *nemesis*. The structural organisation of the scene suggests a fateful, retributive punishment for the Africans' lapse into "savagery" and self-indulgent insolence toward

"the Gods," despite Cinque's insistence upon the necessity of killing to achieve freedom. The tragic sense of retribution inherent in this episode isolates scene 4 from the rest of the play. Human failure is here contrasted with the successful struggle to overcome the injustice of a pre-existing social order as it will be represented in the next scene: poetic justice is replaced by human, civil justice won against all odds. The ontological structure that underlies the fourth scene and confines the Africans into the essential inexorability of the Greek tragedy mutates into a theoretical model of revolution expressed in legal terms.

The ambivalent transfiguration of the victims into "devils" (77) in scene 4 suggests a subterranean intertextual conjunction of interpretative opacity, which links Dodson's *Amistad* to Melville's *Benito Cereno*. Both texts arouse a critical anxiety which arises from the blurred, shifting picture of blackness as a sign of either savagery or noble humanity. The unredeemed brutality of the play's fourth scene and its ritualistic display of sacrificial "solemn dance" (80) are reminiscent of Benito Cereno's final declaration that "in the various acts of murder, they [the slave rebels] sang songs and danced – not gaily but solemnly" (Melville, *Benito Cereno* 264). The verbally similar incitation to "follow the leader" reflects opposite impulses. On the one hand, "Follow Cinque" (repeated thrice 53) and "follow in the dark" (54, 102) are hopeful exhortations to survive. On the other hand, "follow your leader" (Melville, *Benito Cereno* 26, 222, 248, 279) "rudely painted or chalked" (*Ibid*. 26) in Spanish below the draped skeleton of the slaver "substituted for the ship's proper figure-head" (*Ibid*. 248) functions as a constant and terrifying visual death threat. The adjectival insistence on the "greyness" of the seascape reflects its deadly blend of gloomy calm and brewing storm: the "gray sun" (42) and the "gray light of the moon" (43) mirror the slaves' "misery" (42) just as "the sky [,] a gray surtout [,] and the flights of troubled gray fowl, kith and kin with flights of troubled gray vapors" (Melville, *Benito Cereno* 16) announce the opaque, sombre atmosphere hovering above the ship San Dominick. "Ominously swift the schooner [the Amistad] r[ides] the sea" (43) with sails "flying like white birds" (42) just as the San Dominick, "with enchanted sails, drift[s] with increasing rapidity seaward" (Melville, *Benito Cereno* 98). In both texts, the slave ship appears as an uncontrollable, portentous entity, "a shadowy tableau just emerged from the deep" (*Ibid*. 30), an "unreal" vessel with "shadows […] on her side" (42), "shadows present, foreshadowing deeper shadows to come" (Melville, *Benito Cereno* 16). The "shadowy" nature of both human nature and American democracy is exposed in an ambivalent allegory of insulated "blackness." Whereas Melville represents the "Negro" (Melville, *Benito Cereno* 276) as a "voiceless" (*Ibid*. 280) "shadow […] cast upon" (*Ibid*.

276) the white man, Dodson endows him with a poetic hyperfluency which verbalises the moral dilemma inherent in the necessity of revolutionary violence. Although we can speculate on the importance of the narrative voices and the diverse shifting, biased perspectives in *Benito Cereno*, Melville's slave characters hardly appear as righteous rebels but more often as demonic creatures full of cunning and deceit. Even though it is presented as a nemesis articulation between a barbaric hubris and a civilised juridical fight, the Amistads' lapse into unrestrained savagery is justified by the sufferings they endured. The lingering textual traces of *Benito Cereno* reveal a parasitic, ambivalent identification with its thematic opacity as well as its metaphorical complexity. The evocation of the "blackness" of savagery in the isolated context of the fourth scene creates a liminal space between the dichotomic representations of Africanness as barbaric primitivism or nostalgic grandeur. It opens up "a f(r)ictional textual and political space" (Bongie, *Islands and Exiles* 427) where Manichean representations of savagery and exotic nobility are bypassed to reach another level of interracial dialogue and mutual enrichment in the last scene. After the violence unleashed on the ship, the "jungle stars" are re-ignited in the highest institution of American "civilization," the Supreme Court of Justice, the play's "transcultural realm of the contact zone" (*Ibid*. 197) where an alternative (to) history and a reality of transracial communication can be achieved.

The sketchy draft of the last scene appears as a collage of voices that hardly interact but rather soliloquise with alternating lighting focussing on each party and character in turn. The plaintiffs speak as a single voice, uttering their claims "in unison" (96, 97), a repetitive litany punctuated by the rapping of the judge's gavel: Ruiz, Montez and the Spanish Government "demand that these slaves be delivered […] as our lawful slaves" (96). Gedney, Green and Mead "claim salvage on the schooner, Amistad, her cargo, including the slaves" (97). The District Attorney "asks for indictment of the blacks for piracy and murder" (97). The "indifferent chorus" of the Amistad crew "watching the slaves" (40) has turned into a hysterical chorus of greed "claiming the slaves." Their "voices become higher and higher" (98) in an empty court room, repeating "their lines […] faster and faster" (98) in an obsessive piling up of claiming words which turn into incantatory cries:

> Gedney: Salvage
> Mead: Reward
> Ruiz: Our slaves
> Montez: Our cargo back
> Green: Salvage
> Mead: Salvage
> Ruiz: Slaves

Montez: Our cargo
Gedney: Salvage
Ruiz: Slaves (98)

The conflation of the last two words "salvage slaves" "echo back" (98) as the chorus of justice comes in. The narrator's voice erupts into the obsessive litany of claims and "declaims" the national "salvage" of the slaves "for the honor of America and democracy" (98). The narrative voice articulates the transition from plaintiff to defendant: Roger Baldwin "claims […] humanity and justice" (101) for the African rebels according to "the great principles of the Revolution, as proclaimed in the declaration of Ind. [*sic*]" (99). The implied identification of the Amistad insurrection with the US Revolution initiates the sliding motion from African liberation to American national identity formation: the case "involves considerations deeply affecting our [the American] national character in the eyes of the whole civilized world" (99). The Amistads appear as a "proto-national group" (Gilroy, *Small Acts* 124) directly involved in the making of modern American democracy. Baldwin's claim to "eternal principles of justice" transforms the "pirates" into "patriots […] of a newly configured nation, one that reject[s] rather than support[s] racialized slavery" (Sale, *Slumbering Volcano* 107). Linking the African slaves to the "forefathers" of the American Revolution creates a transcultural, transracial connection that displays, however, its limited effect. Although the slave revolt is inserted into the legacy of the American Revolution, its relevance for contemporary racial segregation within the US is not even alluded to. If the trope of revolutionary struggle applies in a contemporary situation, it is the African continent that sees "smoke rising… rising" (105). Considered as a righteous rebellion against an unjust oppressor, the Amistad affair possesses the revolutionary impetus to spark a political identification projected across American borders onto Africa.

The imaginary and ambivalent ties to Africa implied in the recurrent nostalgia for the "motherland" and its exotic reconfiguration as a lost Eden stylistically and thematically link Dodson's pageant to one of the most controversial poems of the Harlem Renaissance, Countee Cullen's "Heritage." Striking symbolic, linguistic and thematic similarities suggest some textual infiltrations, which may "identify […] levels of meaning and expression […] buried beneath the surface" (Gates, *Signifying Monkey* XX). Cullen's poem opens with a rhetorical question:

What is Africa to me:
Copper sun or scarlet sea,
Jungle star or jungle track,
Strong bronzed men, or regal black

Women from whose loins I sprang when the birds of Eden sang?
One three centuries removed
From the scenes his fathers loved,
Spicy grove, cinnamon tree,
What is Africa to me? (Cullen, "Heritage" 83)

Beyond linguistic resemblance, the symbolic constellation "sun-sea/jungle star-jungle track" as imaginary evocations of Africa and its cosmological system uniting "above" with "here below" is strongly reminiscent of Dodson's "convertible imageries" reconnecting opposites. The reconfigured elemental connection to the land, its "grove" and "tree," echoes the Amistads' poetic outbursts of nostalgia imaginatively replacing the hateful seascape with a familiar landscape. The "birds of Eden" followed in the next stanza by "the song sung by wild barbaric birds" are associated with the creative/life-giving dimension of the women. Dodson similarly blends the bird imagery with the symbolic dimension of women as child/tradition-bearers. The "bronzed men" echo the depiction of the Amistads swimming to the unknown America in a "hyphenating" movement expressed in the poem's italicised lines, which are introduced as an intimate refrain repeated twice in the poem. The I-persona expresses his "anxiety of distance" which prevents him from intuitively re-connecting with the place of origins. This ambivalent, imaginative construction of cultural and spiritual "hyphenation" is at the heart of the poem's and the pageant's mnemopoetics:

Africa? A book one thumbs
Listlessly, till slumber comes.
Unremembered are her bats
Circling through the night, her cats
Crouching in the river reeds […] (*Ibid.* 84)

The "unremembered bats" and the "crouching cats" represent a lost "night" memory of the land couched in exotic terms, which the Amistad slaves repeatedly enunciate in darkness to prevent the children from "not remembering." The distant, artificial re-appropriation of Africa through "listless" "slumbering" reading contrasts with the intimate, subconscious experiencing of "great drums throbbing" in the "somber flesh and skin/ With the dark blood dammed within" (*Ibid*. 83). The religious connection to Africa is re-established through the I-persona's confession "Lord, I fashion dark goods too" (*Ibid*. 86) despite his former rejection of "quaint, outlandish heathen gods" (*Ibid*. 85):

My conversion came high-priced;
I belong to Jesus Christ,
Preacher of humility,
Heathen gods are naught to me. (*Ibid*.)

The tension between "pagan impulses" (Baker, *Afro-American Poetics* 68) and Christianity acquired with the "high-priced" enslavement in the New World is also implied in Dodson's confrontational juxtaposition of the Africans' invocation of "heathen gods" and Cinque's fascination with incantatory biblical language. Poised between an "undue enthusiasm recurrent in the passages on Africa" (*Ibid*.) and a complex mnemopoetics negotiating between the imaginatively reconstructed past and the concerns of the present, both "Heritage" and *Amistad* show a capacity for fashioning stylistic "jungle tracks" amidst their contradictions, ambiguities and weaknesses, and, in so doing, open ways to deep-seated and far-reaching layers of meanings. Whether they envision the past as a lost Eden, an engulfing darkness or/and as an empowering model, both texts are rooted in and torn between mnemopoetic mechanisms which revolve around the dialectical tension between remembrance as individual and collective "reconstruction," and oblivion lest the past and its humiliations "deconstruct" contemporary agency and identity.

Amistad reveals intricacies of voices, metaphors and remembering modes, which confront the celebration of the past and the depredations of history. The dialogic articulation of confronting perspectives operates on a double level: as fictional components within the text but also in the latent intertextualities and "tropological revisions" (Gates, *Signifying Monkey* XXV) of the play. The "convertible imageries" discussed earlier, the "black and white" voices clashing in a void of communication, and the ambivalent function of the pageant, forge a poetics of merging contradictions which can also be deciphered in the textual and tropological eruptions from other literary sources. *Benito Cereno* and *The Heroic Slave* are the "sea-scripts" ebbing and flowing through Dodson's highly self-reflexive text. By blending canonical white and black "infratexts," Dodson creates a "double-voiced" web of literary connections, which positions the pageant within a contradictory discourse of liberation and failure. The text is constantly torn between the recovery of Blacks' agency in American history and their voiceless powerlessness. This interracial dialogue within the American literary tradition produces a "mulatto text" "with a two-toned heritage" (Gates, *Signifying Monkey* XXIII), a meta-fictional, self-reflexive configuration embodied in the blending of Cinque's and Baldwin's personalities through the love and power of words as instruments of liberation.

This triumph of interracial dialogue is visualised in the chorus of liberated slaves gathered around the two "leaders" who, in an effect of mirror reflection, appear as the two sides of the same entity, a symbolic merging of visions and discourses imbued with the same ideal of justice and equality:

(They all crowd about Cinque and Baldwin. They begin to sing.)
Oh! Oh! Follow in the dark,
Oh! Oh! Hold his hand.
Remember the land
Where we lived
A golden life
Oh! Oh! Follow in the dark.
(The curtain falls when the song is most exultant) (102)

Karga's "sorrow song" has turned into an exultant celebration of solidarity and joyful recovery of the "Golden Age" after the "dark" passage to the New World. Poetic utterance and return to the land are once again conflated but in a spirit of liberation. As the freed slaves disappear and their names fade away, the historical terms of individual existence are subsumed into the mythical/national constructs of collective memory/history. If the epic quality of the pageant blends the language of heroism with the formation of national identity and consciousness, the last scene makes clear the Christian dimension of the play, which was already hinted at by the hovering of the organ sound over the entire musical production. Baldwin's defence speech alternates with Cinque's reading aloud excerpts from the Bible as a white missionary teaches him English in prison. The sound of biblical language, its powerful metaphorical rhetoric as well as the liberation of Israel as the elect people seem to weave a web of cross-cultural resonances that reverberate across the stylistic and thematic texture of the play:

(Cinque standing, reading [behind bars]. He savors the words, speaks slowly, deeply.)
Cinque: If it had not been the Lord who was on
Our side, now may Israel say;
If it had not been the Lord who was on
Our side, when men rose up against us:
Then they had swallowed us up quick
When their wrath was kindled against us.
[Baldwin's speech in the court room]
Then the waters had overwhelmed us,
The streams had gone over our soul.
Then the proud waters had gone over our soul.
Blessed be the Lord who hath not
given us as a prey to their teeth.
Our soul is escaped as a bird out of the
snare of the fowlers: the snare is
broken and we are escaped. (101-102)

Thus, legal liberation and religious conversion merge in a confluence of gushing rhetorical modes. Human justice re-establishes an order

already configured in the realm of divine justice. The Africans' "watching Gods" (87) blur with "the Lord on [their] side," the enemies' "swallowing wrath" echoes the manifold cannibalism discussed earlier, the water as well as the bird imagery carries along multiple literal and symbolic connotations flowing through the play.

As Cinque's aesthetic delectation suggests, the Bible mirrors and "sounds" his passage to the New World when it "proclaim[s] the freedom and inviolability of the human soul" (Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll* 167) in symbolic images that strike the cord/core of his own experience. As Houston Baker observes about slave religion in the Antebellum South, "the slaves' identification with the Israelites led them to a type of messanism – a feeling that they were the chosen people whom God would deliver from the cruel oppressors" (Baker, *Long Black Song* 45). Cinque's discovery of "Christianity as pre-eminently a religion of slaves" (Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll* 162), one that could be used to forge a language and a spirituality of liberation, does not imply, as Nietzsche claimed, "the sacrifice of all freedom, all pride, all self-confidence of spirit" (Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, qtd. in Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll* 163). To the missionary's question, "if you had to do it again, now that you've learned of our Christ, wouldn't you rather pray for them than murder them," he ironically answers: "I would kill them first and pray for them after" (102). Matching the Judeo-Christian conception of the vengeful God of the Old Testament, Cinque re-affirms his credo in a just struggle for freedom "by any means necessary" (Malcolm X). The historical connection between the Amistad affair and the matter of conversion to Christianity also has to do with the arrival of the first African American missionaries in Sierra Leone "to teach the heathens in the hunters' land" (103). Irony is hardly perceptible in this passage that echoes Booker T. Washington's vision of African Americans as "a people who had spent generations in slavery, and before that generations in the darkest heathenism" (Washington, *Up From Slavery* 71). But, as "the hands of the world have lit a fire over Africa" and "evil is spread" (103), Christianity cannot soothe the anguish nor heal the wounds of the past: it can only "catch the Prayers in the mountain mist" and, in a reversal of the redeeming character of Christ crucified, "pick the flesh/ Till the soul is revealed/ And its light put out" (103). Indeed, "the scars are in the spirit, not the love," and in a situation of utter chaos Christianity is unfit to impose a social and moral order based on forgiveness and love:

> Nothing will heal these days
> No churches built,
> No cross unveiled,
> No martyrs gone. (103)

So, the salvific capacity of history for generating democratic upheaval and empowering models is contradicted by the narrator's apocalyptic vision of a devastated Africa: the brotherly "hold[ing] hand[s]" has turned into "the hands of the world have lit a fire over Africa" (103), just as the redeeming character of some exceptional individuals' struggle for justice is eclipsed by the global compulsion to exploit and destroy. The *Amistad* performance shows a dioramic space of conflicting moods and perspectives: the pageant offers a bright, eulogistic display of men, institution, nation, religion, tragedy, hopes, expectations and victory that combine to form a poetic instantiation of democratic triumph which is immediately undermined. The Amistad slaves appear as vicarious instruments that attest to the dynamism of the American democratic construction, but their poetic resurrection in the context of the centennial celebration seems artificial and dubious as miniature figures in a theatrical diorama: they decorate the stage but their role remains static in the larger frame of the entire production. Their story is indeed "bitter water" in the light of a history that denies progress and humanity: in the language of the play, "the sun fell into the sea" which allowed "evil to spread over the dark land" (103) and the "chains" of slavery have turned into "nets that tangled with the land itself" (103). The play's vision of a historical movement toward greater freedom and equality is finally disrupted. The teleological path toward progress appears as a "jungle track" in "darkness" which could be recovered through a violent breach in history similar to the American Revolution, the Haitian insurrection, the Amistad violent as well as legal struggle, and the American Civil War with the subsequent abolition of slavery. As it happens, war as liberation and impulse to assure the nation's ideals of justice and equality across the "color line" forms the thematic core of Langston Hughes's musical play *The Sun Do Move*.

Spiritual Mnemopoetics

Music as Articulation in Langston Hughes's *The Sun Do Move* (1942)

The Sun Do Move conjures up African American lore and spirituals to fashion a historical "folk drama" which expresses, through the "philosophy of the folk-bards […] choosing to laugh to keep from crying" (Johnson, *Black Manhattan* 272), the social aspirations and aesthetic ambitions of the black artist in the troubled period of World War II. The theatre was then seen as a privileged space for revisiting history and reshaping the relationship between white and black America, either by celebrating the cross-cultural quality of African American culture or by advocating a radically separate black culture. American commercial theatre had defined and confined African Americans to the cultural roles of caricatured Sambos. Largely excluded from the American theatre as playwrights, directors, and designers, African Americans had been represented on-stage by white actors in blackface before the Civil War and then by white and black actors in blackface after Emancipation in minstrel shows. In minstrelsy and then in vaudeville and musicals in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the songs, music and dances identified as "black" provided some of the most popular kinds of American entertainment. Could then a new black theatre, searching self-definition in the exploration of its past, develop apart from the popular and racist theatrical history, or could this form of degrading popular entertainment be reconfigured and incorporated into the "movement toward the Negro Theatre" (Locke, "Steps Toward The Negro Theatre" 268)? According to Langston Hughes, it is precisely because black entertainment was so deeply embedded in American culture and at the same time tainted by racism that African American artists and intellectuals had to explore it as a place of potentially great transformative power. By using a theatrical mode derived from the minstrel comedy in *The Sun Do Move*, Hughes adapts a form contaminated by racist stereotyping and transforms it into a new cultural awareness and a potential source of creativity.

The Sun Do Move is Langston Hughes's first full-length musical drama (apart from *The Organizer. A Blues Opera in One Act* written in 1938). It is the expanded version of a draft called *Sold Away* which Hughes had once promised to write for the Gilpin Players at Karamu

House in Cleveland. It was written in Chicago under a Rosenwald Fund scholarship. He had a room at the Good Shepherd Community Center, "the World's Largest Negro Settlement House," as it was proud to advertise, and he soon founded a new theatre in the neighbourhood, the Skyloft Players, which staged the first production of *The Sun Do Move* on April 24, 1942 (Rampersad, *Life of Langston Hughes* 42-43; McLaren, *Langston Hughes* 148-149). The play was written in the aftermath of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour and the destruction of part of the US fleet in the Pacific. When the United States entered the war, Hughes understood that sending recruits to the front would exert enormous pressure against segregation, "with consequences for the entire national structure of Jim Crow" (Rampersad, *Life of Langston Hughes* 35). He understood that this was a unique opportunity for connecting the American commitment to democracy in the Pacific and later in Europe with the long fight of African Americans for equality and justice within American society.

This interweaving of the struggle for freedom and for justice abroad as well as at home is made clear in *The Sun Do Move* and set in the context of the American Civil War. The title of the play alludes to one of the most famous sermons delivered by the Baptist slave preacher John Jasper of Virginia. The "De Sun Do Move an' de Earth Am Square" sermon was first delivered in 1878 and reputedly given on several hundred occasions all around the country (Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll* 269-270; Miller, *Dictionary of Afro-American Slavery* 374). It is presented as a reply to the "heretics" who were spreading the theory that the earth moved around a stationary sun. Jasper drew crowds of fashionable whites and poor slaves alike who, for divergent reasons, flocked to hear his sermon. Many whites came to mock his reactionary view and interpreted it very literally as a delayed ecclesiastical challenge to Galileo, but black slaves heard a different sermon altogether and understood the liberating power of a "spellbinding" rhetoric based on double meanings and allusions:

> Joshuar tell de sun ter stand' still he could finish whippin' de enemy an' de sun was travellin' long dar thew de sky when it stopt for Joshuar. It stopt fer business an' it went on when it got threw. (Qtd. in Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll* 270)

The sermon was not so much a discourse on astronomy as it was a disguised exhortation for the former slaves to use a newly gained freedom to take their own fate into their hands in the troubled post-Civil War era. Just as the Jews led by Joshua in the Old Testament took over their "land of freedom" and through sheer power of will and faith, made the sun stop, the newly freed slaves could shape their own destiny in a

new and free country relying on the strength of the community. And just as the sun resumed its course and shone again on Israel, American history "does move" after the Civil War to open up a new era of justice and equality, "a gradual process of social rectification" (McLaren, *Langston Hughes* 149). This message of self-empowerment in a difficult period of transition also forms the thematic core of Langston Hughes's *The Sun Do Move*[1].

Set in the Deep South between 1830 and 1860, Hughes's musical play chronicles the story of a slave family over three generations from their African past through their capture and the Middle Passage to a plantation in Tennessee on the brink of the Civil War. The play opens in Africa with the capture of King Ebewe, Queen Melanthie and their people by the European slave traders, and their arrival in New Orleans where they are sold on the slave market. About fifty years later, Rock (the royal couple's grand-son) and Mary are about to have their first child when Rock is sold away "down de Mississippi river" to work on a sugarcane plantation "in the Delta." The play then alternates between Rock's and his friend Frog's flight from the Louisiana plantation through the swamp and Mary's rearing of their child Little Rock in Tennessee. The failed attempt to escape through the bayou and Frog's death are paralleled with Little Rock being sold away to Kentucky as a Christmas gift, to the point when he commits suicide by suffocating himself with a pillow in 1858. As a punishment for running away, Rock is sent to work in a chain gang in a stone quarry from which he manages to escape with the help of a slave couple. When he arrives in Memphis, he finds Mary and, with the help of a white Quaker couple, they reach Illinois on the Underground Railroad. They take the train to Boston, the centre of the abolitionist movement, and Rock joins the 54th Black Regiment of the Union army. The play closes with Mary describing the future in an idealistic vision of interracial solidarity in the emerging American democracy.

The play opens with a Prologue that introduces the two "narrators" or rather the masters of a ritual of imaginary re-enactment of a distant past. The "Sweeper" Jack, "a young man in a porter's cap" (Act I, 1) and Joe represent liminal characters "sweeping" dust on the threshold of

[1] The manuscript I use here is an early version of the play located at Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University. Hughes's *The Sun Do Move* was published in 2002 as part of the publication of his collected works in 15 volumes. The text the editors chose to publish is that of "a mimeograph published by the Publication Department of the International Workers Orders and located in the Slichter Industrial Relations Collection at Littauer Library of the Social Sciences Program, Harvard College Library, Harvard University" (Sanders and Johnston, *Collected Works of Langston Hughes*, Vol. 5, 591).

history as keepers of the gateway into submerged memories that can be re-activated by a "sweeping" movement of consciousness. Their recurrent presence and poetic comments throughout the play signal a continuity of vision and voice which allows the unfolding of events to be construed as subjective re-creations of individual and collective history. The introductory dialogue between Jack and Joe has a metaphorical quality that introduces the play as an imaginative experience, intimating as it does the subjective and intuitive character of the inner journey. It thus emphasises the symbolic dimension of the following historical reconstruction.

> Joe: What you doing, Jack?
> Sweeper: I'm sweeping away Monday.
> Joe: I don't dig you.
> Sweeper: Sweeping away Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday.
> Joe: Saturday, too?
> Sweeper: Yep! Even much Sunday.
> […]
> Joe: Just listen at that cat! Labor Day, too?
> Sweeper: Sure! All of September! Sweeping away October, November…
> Joe: Then there won't be nothing left?
> Sweeper: Nothing but yesterday. (Act I, 1)

In a formal simplicity drawn from colloquial speech, the Prologue presents the play as an allegory of remembering, i.e. a poetic vision of memory lying beneath the surface of the literal plot development ("sweeping away" the present and the future to recover the past). This subterranean structure of hidden meaning is already hinted at in the very title of the play: the reference to John Jasper's sermon signals the presence of a system of double meanings to be found in the symbolic dimension of the dialogues and images. The metaphorical texture of the Prologue is an expression of both the impossibility to forget the past (yesterday cannot be "swept away," which refutes the play's final monologue), however dirty/dusty it may be, and the necessity to immerse oneself into the multiple layers of history to gain a more acute awareness of one's identity. So, the play's mnemopoetics shows a two-dimensional quality. Thematically, it revolves around the creation of a "drama of living consciousness" (Harris, *Tradition* 34) enacted in the mind of two stock-characters whose only dramaturgical function is to catalyse a process of imaginative remembering of the slave past. Metatheatrically, it uses the stage as an arena of conflicting visions of a past blending melodrama and comedy, fatalism and optimism, to serve as a model of national empowerment[2] during World War II.

[2] The nationalistic aspect of the play is discussed at the end of this chapter.

The stage is "bare," "without scenery," a lack of decor that reflects the mental process of immersing oneself into painful memories that slowly unfold and fill the outer and inner space with recovered voices and presences across time and continents. The dislocation of chronology and space shows a healing re-location and re-locution of a fractured identity that serves as a corrective to a uniform social stasis. From Africa to the plantation, from the site of the original dismemberment of tribes to their forced re-assembly in a new world that they also had to create, the shifting geography of the play parallels the dynamic reconfiguration of cultural memory. Dressed in "loincloths of African weave" (Prologue 2), the Sweeper and Joe "reassume their identity as Africans" (Turner, "Langston Hughes" 143) and become remote figures in an exoticised African setting "a hundred years ago." In a time warp signalled by "a distant tom-tom begin[ning] to beat" and "sunset dim[ming] to an eerie darkness" (Prologue 2), ancestral imagination is re-activated, and in a "sweeping" movement of spatial and chronological dislocation, the Middle Passage is retraced in reverse.

The African setting is presented as a place of exotic mystery echoing the colourful depictions of African life in colonial literature.

> Into the scene, hidden by great painted shields, float hooded DANCERS in the straw masks of an African ceremony. The WOMEN, who are not masked, are dark and beautiful as the Congo dusk. An Ashanti war song is sung. Enter the KING. (Prologue 2)

The floating "hooded dancers in the straw mask of a ceremony" appear in a dreamlike sequence of transition from the contemporary setting to the African scene. Dance and music fulfil their ritualistic function of conjuring up presences from the past. "Hooded," "hidden" and "masked," the dancers materialise in "floating" gestures the slowly unfolding world of ancestral memory. Dance, war song and masks are also the signs of an exoticised perception of Africa whose splendour is epitomised in the figures of the King, "Ebewe of Ashanti," "rock of the forest," and the Queen Melanthie, "rulers of Ashanti […] worshipped by [their] people" (Prologue 3) and celebrated by a Chorus of African voices. This evocation of a mythical Africa betrays a deep need to probe into distant origins and to re-create a sense of ancestry in order to place the African American community within a historical nexus of transatlantic continuity which will allow a re-definition of identity in positive terms. The glamorised nature of this imaginary Africa is also made clear in the depiction of the women as "dark and beautiful as the Congo dusk." Reminiscent of Conrad's "wild and gorgeous apparition of a woman" (Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* 77) in *Heart of Darkness* as well as of Cullen's "regal black women" in "Heritage," this "exotic" com-

parison is a kind of chiasmus. Indeed, it represents a semantic cross-over that interweaves meanings according to the different combination of words: if women are equated with Africa, "dark" and "dusk" is a contrasting but ultimately fusing image of this source of spiritual and cultural regeneration found in a submerged imagination, "dark" and "Congo" echo the unfathomable nature of "the Other" and the lurking colonialist gaze epitomised in *Heart of Darkness*, "dark" "beautiful" and "Congo" reflect the seduction of an identity-reconstruction based on the nostalgic premises of a return to African roots. These multiple meanings juxtapose the search for a lost authenticity and the danger of exoticisation. In so doing, they reveal the ambivalence inherent in the literary process that imaginatively reconfigures the experience of slavery. Indeed, such a fictional re-creation entails the risk of mythologizing collective memory in order to serve a nationalistic ideology.

But despite the romanticised evocation of origins found in the grandeur of an African kingdom, Hughes rejects the simplification of a nostalgic Black nationalism. The articulation of his music-play, which is achieved through spirituals and gospel songs, implies a subtler probing into the creative transformations of an African consciousness and aesthetics in the physical and psychological context of slavery. Situated at the crucial historical turning point of the creation of an American identity, it also offers a parable of American solidarity across racial boundaries through a dramatisation of the disruption and reconstruction of a slave family over three generations before the Civil War. Although Africa is recreated in celebratory and romantic images, the actual process of recalling and piecing together a transforming transatlantic experience is subtly dramatised as a metaphorical re-enactment, a re-appropriation and ultimately a conceptualisation of an African American identity that would be fully aware of the richness of its hyphenation, rather than being nostalgic of the original African experience.

The original historical fracture is symbolically re-enacted in a "stylised ballet" (Prologue 4) through the capture of the king and queen by the slave traders.[3] As the king exhorts his warriors to fight with spears, a "voice" answers "we have no guns. So they steal us, and enchain us, and enslave us… because we have no guns" (*Ibid.*). In a simplistic historical twist equating the transatlantic slave trade with the conquest of the New World, the African inferiority in weapon technology is considered as the sole cause of the subjugation of Africans. Oblivious of the complex mercantile exchanges (which, among other commercial deals, the slave trade belonged to) that governed African-European relations in the

[3] The slave traders are identified as Portuguese, English, Spanish and Dutch, one collective force showing the composite legacy of European incursions into Africa.

18th and 19th centuries, Hughes presents a Manichean interpretation of history where Africans are the powerless victims of European imperialism. King Ebewe is captured with "a rope that is like a chain" extending "on and on into the darkness with many NEGROES in the toils" (*Ibid*.). In a striking visual metaphor, the Middle Passage is evoked as an original "darkness" that signifies both the enchained slaves' abrupt departure from the African homeland and the creation of a new bond uniting them in an emerging sense of community within the experience of the "void." It also offers a picture of heroic resistance to enslavement as the king "is chained to the mast" of the slave ship and "stands defiant against [it] singing an Ashanti war song" (*Ibid*.). Like a Ulysses figure, the king personifies the spirit of forced exile and endless wandering across the seas that characterise the beginnings of African American culture. Ebewe/Ulysses/Nobody also epitomises the very nature of the institution of slavery that transported "nobodies," the anonymous chain of "Negroes in the toils," to a "nowhere" across the ocean where their individuality and culture were reduced to "nothing." But the king's "war song" reflects spiritual survival and resistance to annihilation through the assertion of a "voice" which is "almost drowned in the roar of wind and sea" (*Ibid*.). The subterranean but steady continuation of the African voice throughout African American history is symbolically emphasised at the king's death: shot by a slaver, the king dies as a royal martyr and "*sinks* slowly to the deck" but the queen "*standing* above him […] takes up the theme of the song and carries it on, joined by the chorus of WOMEN'S VOICES above the roar of wind and sea" (Prologue 4A, italics mine). The theme of the Ashanti war song is perpetuated by a chorus of women rising above the contingencies of history and upholding the legacy of African resistance and survival. It is this spiritual legacy, visible throughout the play in the spirituals sung "between the scenes serving as *transition* music" (Introductory Notes), that the "two [contemporary] young Negroes" (*Ibid*.), Joe and Jack, must recover and revive in order to acquire a constructive vision of themselves.

They both reappear "dressed in a cast-off clothing of the style of 1800" (*Ibid*.) to close the Prologue with a slave auction scene set in New Orleans:

> Joe: Boy, what are you doing?
> Sweeper: Sweeping, Joe.
> Joe: You raising a mighty lot of dust, that's all.
> Sweeper: I reckon you can't see. Tain't just dust I'm raising. I'm sweeping away blood and tears.
> Joe: You think maybe you might find a gold piece somewhere in that dust?
> Sweeper: Sure I maybe might. (Prologue 5)

In a poetic repetition of the Prologue opening, the Sweeper reiterates through his words and symbolic reappearance the metaphorical dimension of the play. He signals another temporal leap by "sweeping away" the "blood and tears" shed during the Middle Passage significantly left in the "darkness" offstage, a suggestive "blackout" (Prologue 4A) implying an "unspeakable" event beyond dramaturgical representation. This unrepresentability of the terrors of the Middle Passage is also metaphorically implied in the "blood and tears" that the "questioning" character Joe is unable to perceive in the mist of dust raised by the Sweeper. Like an African griot,[4] the visionary Sweeper conjures up a confusion of repressed memories, the "ineffable terrors of slavery" and the "residual traces of their necessarily painful expression [which] still contribute to the historical memories inscribed and incorporated into the volatile core of Afro-Atlantic cultural creation" (Gilroy, *Black Atlantic* 73). The Sweeper is thus the historian and seer who catalyses vital memories of the slave past to uncover "gold piece[s]" in the midst of paralysing victimisation and transform the radical negativity of the origins of African American history into a creative basis for the "Afro-Atlantic" culture.

The Prologue closes on a slave market where Melanthie, the "Flying Queen from Africa" (Prologue 6), is sold on the auction block among the mocking cries of the crowd, and she "exits driven by the slaver" as the stage "brightens into a cotton [field]" (Prologue 7). The "bare stage" opening the Prologue as a blank mental space has turned into symbolic *lieux de mémoire* crucial for the imaginative re-appropriation of cultural spaces: Africa, the slave ship, the auction block, then the cotton field conceptualise in spatial references the origins of African American history and culture and represent a topomnesia which unfolds and expands as the play progresses.

Act I opens with the vision of a cotton "field in full boll" and "the porch of a plantation mansion" (Act I, 1), two referential sites that are "invest[ed] with a symbolic aura" (Nora, "Between Memory and History" 295): the cotton field represents a vast white space throbbing with the life and song[5] of countless slaves picking cotton, which contrasts with the "empty" front porch "with chairs out of doors" visually suggesting a significant emptiness and immobility, i.e. a structural "void" reflecting an absence of meaning at the core of Southern society. This

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4 I borrow this comparison between the Sweeper and the African griot/historian from McLaren, *Langston Hughes* 50.

5 The spiritual refrain "Dis cotton needs pickin' so bad!," sung by individual characters and a Chorus, punctuates the beginning of the first act set in the field.

existential absurdity inherent in the slavery system is expressed in the following dialogue:

> Rock: […] this here's gonna be my baby when it comes, just like it's Mary's.
> Clara: You made it -and Mary gwine bear it. But it gwine be Old Master's chile, not your'n. We's slaves.
> Josh: Don't even belong to ourselves.
> […]
> Mammy: […] we always been slaves out here in this cotton field in the hot sun, like now. But any bird knows it's good to be free.
> Reverend: Even much any varmint knows that. (Act I, 2)

Human beings "don't even belong to [themselves]," don't "have" children but merely breed them for the masters, and their "natural" instinctive knowledge of freedom is forbidden. Their status is therefore inferior to that of a "bird" or a "varmint," but the very realisation of that alienating determinism creates the need for change and "sometimes slaves run away -and get free" (*Ibid*.). In such a dehumanizing social system, the very perversion and absurdity of which place the "varmint" above the human being, the intrusion of sentimentalism is perceived as an oddly disruptive element. The clash between harsh actualities and their transcendence through creative imagination is reflected in the stylistic syncopated alternation between the violent realism of the master and the slave trader's language and the sentimental and poetic texture of Rock's language:

> Rock: I'm gonna break these slavery chains from my legs, wherever I be. I don't care how many overseers they got with guns, nor how many dogs, Mary, I'm gonna run away, come back and find you, and take you and this baby with me. (Act I, 14)

The sentimental quality of Rock's speech reflects the preservation of an internalized set of values and view of self in the teeth of an environment that denies them.

Indeed, from the semantic and thematic field of sentimentalism, the perspective shifts to the strictly economic logic of the plantation, with a zooming of the spotlight onto the front porch of the mansion where another constellation of characters is presented: the "Master," the "Slaver" and the house "slave in livery." Through the use of an alternating stage lighting, the humanity of the field slaves who resist dehumanization through reasoning, sentiments and songs, is juxtaposed with the calculating and decadent world of the mansion where the Master separates and sells away slaves to pay off his gambling debts, and where the Slaver is presented as a demon coming from "down the river – where the slaves think hell is located" to buy "strong black bucks" (Act I, 4).

The overwhelming religious atmosphere of the cotton field created through the ceaseless spiritual tune sung by a Chorus, the biblical echoes found in the names (Mary, Josh) and in the philosophical view of slavery expressed in biblical terms, contrasts with the decadence of the Master and the devilish nature the Slaver as a messenger from "hell […] down the river where the sun is hot [and slaves] die off quick" (*Ibid.*).

The symbolic antitheses of space represented by the "white" cotton field filled with light and life, and by the enclosed, shady porch of the mansion as the place of Evil, are connected by the ambivalent figure of the house slave, Pompey, who, as an intermediary existing in a frail balance between the field and the mansion worlds, alternates between the language of the Master and that of the field slaves:

> Rock: Massa want me now?
> Pompey: Yeh, he want you -now.
> (Softening) Son, the slave trader done come.
> BLACKOUT. Softly the CHORUS begins, "Oh, Mary doncha weep, doncha moan" as the light shifts to the porch of the mansion house again where the MASTER sits talking to the TRADER). (Act I, 6)

The ominous atmosphere created by the shifting lighting and the whispering Chorus prefigures two tragedies, the sale of Rock while Mary is giving birth to their child, Little Rock, then the suicide of the latter when he is sold away as a Christmas gift years later. The sudden blackout marks an abrupt rupture in the plot as Rock and Mary are separated, then the slow re-appearance of light focusing on the mansion while the spiritual song softly instils an atmosphere of tragedy hovering above the plantation. The birth of the child is thus placed in a nexus of doom and death rather than conceived as a symbol of life, regeneration and continuity, as the child's name, Little Rock, would suggest at first glance. The simultaneity of two images, the birth of the son and the shackling of the father who "stumbl[es] toward the field" (Act I, 8) in leg irons, reflects the fated character of their existence that remains "chained" to a dehumanising system. "Stumbling," shackled, "standing up there like a statue" (Act I, 1) and "transfixed" (Act I, 12) are terms which describe Rock's powerlessness to prevent the tragedy from unfolding. He represents the tragic hero whose fate seems to be inscribed in a tradition of crushed defiance, symbolised by the perpetuation of his name "Rock" and embodied in Ebewe's song which is silenced by a gunshot then in his own son's (i.e. Rock's father's) involvement and killing in Nat Turner's rebellion (Act II, 3). The congealed picture of the chained slave unable to escape from his condition broadens to the general stasis of the "slave quarters at night where slaves sit dejected in doorways or squat on the ground" (*Ibid.*). This almost

"frozen" tableau reflects the overwhelming sense of futility and powerlessness fostered by the system of slavery, an inevitability of fate analogous to the ontological structure underlying Greek tragedy.

The conflation of life and separation, of birth and hopelessness ominously foreshadows the child's suicide at Christmas, and is musically transposed in the juxtaposition of two spirituals, "Go Tell it on the Mountain […] A Little Chile is Born" and "Away from My Chillun! Away from My Mother." Significantly, it is the plantation matriarch Lanthie, the old African "Flying Queen," who starts singing the first song, and in so doing signals the creative mutation of her voice from the Ashanti war song to the African American spiritual celebrating a new birth. "Go tell it on de mountain,/ Over the hills and everywhere" (*Ibid.*) sings of reaching out beyond the plantation that confines the slave community in order to announce a new birth, a celebration that hints at the possibility of rebirth in a free world. It seems to transmit a hopeful vision of the future, which appears as an implicit negation of the present situation. But the voice of hope is contradicted by a chorus of slaves "in the darkness […] whispering a frightful message […]. Away from my chillun […]. Away from my mother" (*Ibid.*). The flight to freedom implied in "Go Tell it on de Mountain" is being transformed into the fear of forced displacement to another plantation.

The positive dynamics contained in the impulse to break free and regain some sense of individuality is contradicted by the fear of dislocation. "Go" and "away" thus reflect a motion towards the external world, which contrasts and conflates the notions of freedom and alienation. This contrapuntal movement, the duality of actual confinement and wishful transcendence, underlies the thematic structure of *The Sun Do Move* and corresponds to the essential nature of the spirituals. In Lawrence Levine's definition, "the spirituals are the record of a people who found the status, the harmony, the values, the order they needed to survive by internally creating an expanding universe, by literally willing themselves reborn" (Levine, *Black Culture* 33). The frustration of unrealised lives is alleviated through the creative act of singing experiences of freedom. The spirituals as mutating African retentions also bridge America and Africa, the past and the future in a common memory of pain and survival. As Eyerman argues,

> in these songs and the cultural heritage represented, the memory of slavery could be carried and passed on. It was here that one could uncover the basis for a community amongst blacks, a community unified through a common memory, one that joins Africa and America. This community could be remembered through songs "in which the soul of the black slave spoke to men" [Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk* 177]. (Eyerman, *Cultural Trauma* 69)

The thematic core of the play allying an optimism projected towards an improbable future and a sense of tragic determinism, is thus sustained and nurtured by its musical form. The spiritual closing the first act, "Oh, Mary, don't you weep,/ Don't you moan./ Pharaoh's army got drowned," expresses hope and faith in the future despite humiliation and subjugation, yet Rock's last words wrongly prophesying "this here's our first son […] he gonna be free" (Act I, 4) strikes a note of bitter optimism which recurrently resonates at the thematic and stylistic heart of the play. This tension between hope and achievement, faith and failure creates a dramatic irony that runs throughout the play as a constant reminder of the partiality of dream fulfilment. As an echo of Rock's wishful prediction at his son's birth, Lanthie's words before dying contain the same ironical duality of meaning:

> Lanthie: Just nurse that chile and take care of it so it be a big strong boy – *and able to travel* – when Rock comes back to get you […] But don't worry, Mary, wait for Rock, and care for that baby so he'll be a big strong man to help fight for the new day.
> Mary: You mean freedom? You think it'll ever come?
> Lanthie: I know it'll come, chile, sure as the sun do move. (Act II, 7; italics mine)

The allusion to travelling signals a plurality of contrasting meanings which illustrate the constant tension between optimistic vision and its obverse, ominous presage. The repetition of Jasper's subversive, coded expression "sure as the sun do move," juxtaposed with the subjective certainty of freedom to come, makes the hidden significance of the sermon explicit and symbolically conflates the movement of the sun, of history and of the fleeing slave family, in a single vision. If, at first glance, "travel" euphemistically refers to escape and freedom, it also means and is indeed actualized as a terrifying dislocation to another plantation leading to the child's suicide. The child "travels" the way the African "flying Queen" Lanthie "ha[s] to steal away" (Act II, 16) to "see them what was with her in her homeland in Africa […] where the gods had other names" (Act II, 15). "Travel" thus expresses an antinomic *double-entendre* that fuses in one word freedom and hopelessness, escape and desperate enslavement, imagined flight and the ultimate journey.

The second act maintains the structural ambivalence between hope and fatalism and adds a comic dimension that constantly clashes with the tragic development of the plot. The first scene shows Rock and Frog chained together as they rest on a log by the roadside, forging a new bond of solidarity in the confession of the same dream of freedom. Frog is presented as Rock's comical alter ego whose subversive character lies

in the refusal to work and his tendency to "jest jokes and lies by the hour" (Act II, 20). He is introduced as the "tall-tale-tellingest Negro […]" (Act II, 20), the "no-workingest slave alive" whose back "looks like a checker board" (Act II, 2) from the countless whippings. His body is seen as a cluster of traces telling its own violation. Whipped, starved, and denied later at the end of Act II when "the slaver gives a final kick to Frog's [dead] body as he leaves" (Act II, 33) the swamp, it becomes emblematic of the memorialised experience of pain.

Frog is first pictured symbolically "chained" to Rock, so that the parodic character is intimately linked to the tragic hero in a way that suggests both a dual, complementary partnership and the theatrical strategy of comic relief in a tragic plot. The syncopated alternation between comedy and tragedy characterises the second act as it clearly appears in the evocation of the two characters' respective fathers:

> Frog: I lost track o' my family so long ago, no use talking. Brother sold here, sister sold there. And I never did see my father.
> Rock: How come?
> Frog: He was sold away from my mother two years before I was born.
> Rock: My father run away. Died with Nat Turner. (Act II, 3)

Frog's utterances constitute a temporary displacement of tragedy to the comic mode of representation, which ranges from the vaudeville to the absurd. The shifting of genres does not so much involve a suspension of the tragic as it signals an ironic accentuation of some senselessness at the core of the social system being depicted. Frog's rootlessness and separation from his family epitomise in the parodic mode the slaves' alienated condition. Indeed, the sheer absurdity of the tale of his father being sold away two years before his own birth can be interpreted as the extreme translation of the collapse of meaning in the antebellum plantation system. Absurdity runs unnoticed in the dialogue and is verbally mingled without further questioning with the serious evocation of the death of Rock's father and his involvement in Nat Turner's failed rebellion. The juxtaposition of meaninglessness, dreams of freedom, failure and death reflects in a nutshell the semantic heart of the play whose pessimism is partially alleviated by comic devices and an optimistic ending projected toward an idealised future.

The ambivalence between fatalism and subterranean active resistance is also foregrounded in the seduction scene involving Frog, Rock and Belinda on the new plantation in the Delta. The comic tone used in a scene depicting the dehumanising "breeding" of slaves creates a lingering malaise hardly alleviated by the jesting quality of Frog's language. Rock is given Belinda to "breed" with, and as he refuses to submit to her tempting manoeuvres, Frog seduces her in a vaudeville scene fraught

with sexual innuendos. Belinda appears as the erotic "anti-Mary" caricature who has internalised the breeding system to such a degree that she is presented as a woman who is only governed by her sexual appetite. This instinct/reflection antinomy is stressed by Rock's insistence on "get[ting] [his] *mind* together" (Act II, 8, 9; italics mine) and "see[ing] his family in his *mind*'s eye" (Act II, 13; italics mine). Belinda's integration of the plantation rules betrays her deep fatalism and she states that "being's as we're slaves, we got to look out for now" (Act II, 9), even though Frog seduces her in a way that asserts the slave's free choice in a system denying it. The Belinda-Frog couple thus appears as the comic counterpoint to Mary and Rock, and under the surface of a misplaced vaudeville lies a reversal of the de-individualising system of slave breeding to a freely consented union.

The contrapuntal yet parallel characterisation of the two couples is visually and textually clear later in Act II:

> (simultaneously at left Mary approaches her doorway calling within to a child, as Belinda approaches her doorway at right)
> MARY: Little Rock, Little Rock, if you don't stop scampering all over that floor and get back in bed! It's long ago time for all little chilluns to be in bed.
> […]
> (At opposite side in the Delta, Belinda)
> BELINDA: Frog, you Little Frog, stop that crawling all under that bed and everywhere. Dog-gone if you ain't might nigh bad as your father. Massa gwine sell you if you keep on being so previous. (Act II, 19, 20)

The correspondence of voices and stories creates a sense of coincidence and overlap, of commonality of experience, of shared and split identities. The difference in language register signals the mirror effect of the two scenes, reflecting as they do a similar experience in opposite yet merging genres, the comic and naturalistic modes. Belinda's strongly dialectal speech and the comic effect of her colloquial expressions clash with her scaring her child with the threat of "Massa" selling him away, an ominous allusion to the fate in store for Little Rock since he will be given away in the next act. The allusion is completed when she threatens Frog to "peel [his] head with a stone" (Act II, 20) if he does not come back home, which echoes in the comic mode Little Rock's earlier request to his mother to "tell [him] about King David" (Act II, 19) and his later suicide after realising he "can't find no stones to kill all them giants" (Act III, 5). The correspondence of situations, dialogues, songs, images and metaphors in the comic and tragic/naturalistic modes represents an important structural device of the text. Such repetitions create a bathetic effect that underpins the textual as well as the scenic dimension of the play.

The alternating duality of genres revealing an irreducible plurality of both historical experience and cultural influence within and behind the text can also be perceived in the intertextual/interperformative reference to the traditional representation of African Americans in blackface minstrel shows. The racist stereotype of the lazy, funny, over-sexualised happy-go-lucky slave propagated in minstrel shows is here integrated in the comic persona of Frog and subverted by his spirit of first passive then active resistance. Being constantly sold away from one plantation to another grants him the nickname of "Traveler," a parodic embodiment of the African American condition of forced displacement. It also alludes to his caricatured sexual lust which reveals him as a "travelin' nigger" or "stockman" (Laws, *Native American Balladry* 97), terms used by the slaves to refer to the system of forced "slave breeding" on plantations. The character of the "traveling slave" (Act II, 2) thus functions as a double-edged parody both on the thematic level, since he emerges as Rock's contrasting, complementary doppelganger, and on the metatheatrical level, for he is a kind of twisted minstrel figure. This ambiguous mixture of the caricatured features of the minstrel show "stage Negro" and a resisting spirit as well as a will to be free (which will lead to the character's death) reveals the intrinsic Du Boisan "double-voicedness" of the play. Indeed, *The Sun Do Move* is continuous with a performance tradition that ridiculed African American folk culture, and, at the same time, at variance with the dominant codes that governed the representations of African Americans since it shows the premises of a Black liberation in a time of institutionalised segregation. This paradoxical digestion/rejection of Black stereotypes situates the play within an American theatrical discourse that debased African American culture, while transforming such degrading characterisation into a frame of creative, positive and complex representation.

It is precisely this kind of "seriously ironic parody" (Hutcheon, *Poetics of Postmodernism* 124), containing as it does a contradictory "double-voicedness," that informs the creation and development of an African American theatrical tradition which will be constantly poised between absorption and radical transgression. In this sense, the process of African American cultural empowerment in the historical post-Civil War segregationist context shows some affinities with the ontological contradiction contained in the "post" of "postmodernism" as interpreted by Linda Hutcheon: "there is always a paradox at the heart of that 'post': irony does indeed mark the difference from the past, but the intertextual echoing simultaneously works to affirm – textually and hermeneutically – the connection with the past" (*Ibid.* 125). The intertextual reference to the representation of African Americans in minstrelsy reminds one of the inevitable presence of the past, but this is a

past whose humiliations and deformations can be transformed into sources of creative energy. As a subjective ritual of fictional recreation of history, the play thus appears as a self-conscious parody of traditional racist stereotypes, and in this sense it is an act of creative re-appropriation, which records both the historical experiences, and the literary representations of American society as well as the marginal voice of transforming vision.

While the Prologue shows a graphic representation of the liberating power of the imagination by projecting a contemporary consciousness to the furthest outreach of cultural memory, the second act reflects the failure of a liberation project conceived as a newly forged solidarity. Frog and Rock confess their longing to escape and their language translates the emergence of a friendship arising from the same dream of freedom:

> Frog: Man, wouldn't it be fun to be free?
> […]
> Rock: I got the idea … and I mean to carry it out.
> […]
> Frog: Rock, you and me gonna be pals.
> Rock: We gonna be partners, Frog.
> Frog: We gonna be more than that, we gonna be brothers.
> Rock: And stick together.
> Frog: Till we get to be free.
> Rock: That's our secret. You swear to keep it?
> Frog: I swears to keep it.
> Rock: Then you and me… and freedom… is friends. (Act II, 3, 4, 5; italics mine)

In this deceptively simple exchange, the characters enunciate the birth of a new community at the very moment of separation and dislocation. This newly conceived brotherhood, visually rendered by the chain linking the two characters, reverses the stern symbolism of the immobilised shackled slaves into the vision of a liberation nurtured in secret. Community, brotherhood and secrecy form the basis for the development of a culture whose expression finds its most complex and original impulses in the cryptic nature of hidden meanings. The conversation between the slaver, Frog and Rock reveals, on the level of parody, the kind of double language already hinted at in the very title of the play:

> Frog: Mister Clay, did you bring us a little water?
> Slaver: […] Water? There'll be a trough full for you at the slave pen tonight..
> Frog: It sure would be fun… to have a little water!
> Rock: It sure would be fun…
> Frog: To have a biscuit. (Act II, 6)

This new coded system of semantic reference, the key to which understanding lies outside the "norms" of communication, nevertheless uses its structures in a way that parallels the condition of emergence and development of the slave culture. "It sure would be fun" echoes, like a refrain, Frog's earlier rhetorical question "wouldn't it be fun to be free?" and "water" and "biscuit" become the parodic screen words for freedom. They also imply the essential necessity of liberation: freedom, like eating and drinking, ensures the vital development of man. Deprived of them, he barely survives, as epitomised by Little Rock's refusal to breathe and his consequent death.

It is this implicit association of freedom with the vital force, and of deprivation with death, that articulates the transition from the Delta first scene to the Tennessee setting where Mary sings a foreboding lullaby to Little Rock "in the deepening sunset" (Act II, 7):

> Go to sleep,
> Baby-chile,
> […]
> Hush-a-bye,
> Don't you cry,
> Got to sleep, my lit'le baby-bye! (Act II, 6)

The lyrics of the lullaby foreshadow the child's suicide by suffocation in the third act. As he cries and cannot find sleep, because he feels lost in a new environment, the child is psychically connected to his mother by the very same lullaby that she will again intone when he later wraps himself in sacks and refuses to breathe (Act III, 5-6). The ominous atmosphere of pending catastrophe created through the dramatic irony of these foreboding echoes is sustained by the exclusively mournful nature of the spirituals throughout the second act. The musical articulation of the scenes reflects the thematic longing for reunion, be it a family reconstruction or the recovery of an African "home" in death. The echoing of singing voices creates an underlying call-and-response pattern that connects the characters either with each other, regardless of the distance that separates them, or with the transcendental voices of a chorus. Mary's lullaby, inserted between the first and the third comic scenes set in the Delta, frames the dialogues between Lanthie and Mary as they both evoke freedom to come "as sure as the sun do move" (Act II, 7). As already stated before, the lullaby prefigures both the child's suicide and Lanthie's death. As she confesses that she "can't stand these aches and pains much longer, leastwise not these aches that [*sic*] in [her] heart" (*Ibid.*), she fatefully "hobbles into her cabin as, in the deepening sunset, Mary resumes her lullaby" (*Ibid.*). The lullaby appears as a soothing as well as an ominous refrain, which articulates a plurality of

dramaturgical links. As a psychic connection between the separated couple, it bridges the two settings, the left and the right sides of the stage: "Miles away on another doorstep Mary sings to their child. In his soul he [Rock] hears her voice" (Act II, 9). As a framing device isolating the foreboding scene in Tennessee from the next vaudeville *Ménage à trois* in the Delta, it creates a sharp contrast between the tragic and the comic mode. As a prefiguration of death, it forsakes its initial quieting function as its musical texture merges with the mournful character of the following spirituals.

As structural device, the spirituals articulate the scenes: the interplay between the characters and the chorus joins the episodes together and assembles them into a related whole. As cultural accretions, these "wild songs […] reveal […] at once the highest joy and the deepest sadness" (Douglass, *Narrative* 57), thus pointing to the radical ambivalence and hidden meanings which they contain. They represent the overarching mnemopoetic structure whose "music gives resonance to memory" (Ellison, *Shadow and Act* 203). As musical and spiritual "soundmarks" of African American history, they both embody and activate collective and individual "rememory" (Morrison, *Beloved* 189), "a texture of fragments, repetitive [and] not fully formed" (Ellison, *Shadow and Act* 203). The play weaves together spirituals "stitches" in a sweeping rhapsody of epic scope, allegorical substance and folk quality: both religious songs and secular maps of the route to freedom, spirituals sing the "roots 'n routes" (Gilroy, *Black Atlantic* 87) of African American history.

The first spiritual song is introduced late into the second act when Lanthie passes away, significantly lying on a cot under a tree, "cut […] in two [by] pain" (Act II, 14) and surrounded by the slave community, the same conditions in which Mary gave birth to her son. Again, death and birth are associated through a spatial symbolism that creates a bond of reciprocity between life and its ultimate end. The four spirituals sung in this short scene condense the meaning of the ceremony in call-and-response variations between individual characters like Lanthie, Mammy and the Reverend, and a chorus of women that extends the song's significance to a pressing urge for general liberation. The antiphonal songs performed by solo and choral voices throughout the entire scene distil a sense of an all-encompassing communal voice that finds in art the appropriate field of expression which blends the sacred and secular dimensions into a single space of survival through continuous creativity. The scene thus appears as a ritual act of individual liberation from the "aches and pains" of the body and "the heart" on the one hand, and as the foundational continuum of communal identity and empowerment through the transforming quality of a plurality of voices on the other.

Lanthie's solo voice opens the scene:
(The old woman stands, as if hearing a voice. She sings at first as though to herself supported by the hum of the chorus)
Lanthie: Hush, Oh, hush, somebody's callin' me.
[…]
Oh, ma Lord, Oh, ma Lord, what shall I do?
I think, I think, de angels callin' me. (Act II, 14)

This intensely personal spiritual song stresses the deep connection between this world and the other world in slave consciousness, between death as a release from the injustice of slavery and spiritual rebirth in an Eden imagined as the obverse reflection of Southern reality: "a kingdom where the only river flowing is the Jerden, and the only master reigning is Jesus" (Act II, 15). The interweaving of religious invocation and secular concerns runs through all the spirituals that punctuate the scene as an ambivalent threnody reflecting the individual liberating passage from life to death on the one hand and the communal impulse to move from the "social death" (Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*) of slavery to freedom on the other. "The hum and moan of the assembled slaves" (Act II, 15), which is sounded throughout the scene, circumscribes the polyphonic space of mourning and creates a kind of resonance chamber where echoes of threnodic ritual and covert signals of rebellion criss-cross in an underlying duality of meanings: "I want yuh march *up* in the kingdom easy,/ An' bring my *servan' home*" (Act II, 15; italics mine) signals the ascending movement of liberation from the South to the Northern abolitionist territories and decentres the notion of servitude to replace it in a religious context. The coded "Steal away, steal away *home/* I ain't got long to stay here" (Act II, 16; italics mine) and "Gwine to try my wings when the first trumpet sound/ When it sound so loud till it wake up de dead,/ Where shall I be when it sound?" depart from their religious context and spatialise the double movement of liberation through passing *away* and the "African Queen" "flying" back to her homeland as well as the collective project of "stealing" freedom away and spreading their "wings" far from the South.

This call-and-response pattern entangling diverse spirituals of liberation creates a cluster of metaphors of movement emotionally, symbolically, and actually *moving* a people towards freedom. The chorus appears as a lyrical and disembodied voice from which emerges a singular longing for liberation. It represents a transcendent and ultimately racial self that extends from the figure of the dying "African Queen" to the collective body of the rising slaves, and sings the urging need for freedom. The spirituals' subtext of liberation can also be deciphered in the slaves' prayer "Now she's ready to go home […] Oh-ooo-oo-o! Lord! Friend Lanthie's ready now to say Gabriel, Gabriel, Gabriel…"

(Act II, 15) which, under the guise of a religious threnody calling for the archangel to lead her to a peaceful death, might refer to Gabriel Prosser's rebellion that was fomented during a wake in Richmond, Virginia, in 1800. Similarly, Lanthie's confession, "I had to steal away," encapsulates the dual spatial movement of liberation through death and rebellion as it is also reflected in her hyphenated *African American* identity with "[its] East roots in the rising sun and [its] West roots in the morning star" (*Ibid.*). Her last words reveal a symmetrical movement of consciousness linking her spiritual reunion with "her homeland in Africa […] where the gods had other names" (*Ibid.*) to the collective impulse to "get […] to de freedom" (Act II, 16) which is symbolised in the "morning star" guiding runaway slaves to the Northern American and Canadian territories.

This recognition of comm*unity* as the founding principle of liberation articulates the transition with the next scene, in the rice field of the Delta, where Frog and Rock design a scheme to escape and hide on an "island in the Big Swamp" (Act II, 18). The link between individual consciousness and the communal urge for liberation is here further emphasised through the allusion to the maroons, independent communities of fugitive slaves who hid in the swampy, unexplored hinterland of the Southern states and created secret societies on the margins of the plantation slavery system. The communal place of mourning and secret conspiracy under the tree in the preceding scene is here transformed into the communal space of marooning and hidden freedom in the bayou, which spreads in "the aisle of auditorium" (Act II, 23), thereby blurring theatrical borders through the superimposition of the spaces of representation and reception. Landscape and escape blend in a metaphorical association which branches into some metatheatrical device fusing stage and public. The fateful character of the fugitives' escape is suggested by the darkness shrouding the entire scene and contrasting with the title *The Sun Do Move.* The island in the swamp is surrounded by an "ominous darkness" (Act II, 21) and "water, full of cold things, roots, and slimy reeds like…" (Act II, 23). The implied word (snakes) that announces Frog's death reinforces the ominous atmosphere of failure which is also sustained by a spiritual sung "softly, persistently" (*Ibid.*) by an invisible chorus: "Freedom! Freedom!/ Freedom over me!/ Before I'd be a slave…" (*Ibid.*). The missing end of the refrain, "I'd be buried in my grave," has the same ominous implication and points to a more general structural device which foregrounds ellipsis and double entendre as rhetorical means to identify levels of meaning buried under the surface of speech or beyond the moment of utterance.

The bare and dark setting of the swamp scene where the two characters "creep […] down the aisle of auditorium […] hunted, panting, tired"

(*Ibid.*) represents a kind of horizontal spread of confused images, more suggested than displayed, which partakes of the elliptical nature of the dialogues as well as of the chronological leap signalled by:

> roll of thunder. Lightning. Sound of heavy rain and darkness. Running water. When the lights come up, it is many days late. (Act II, 27)

The stage representation of the swamp spreads into the public in a metatheatrical movement, thereby creating a claustrophobic openness that reinserts the marooning *lieu de mémoire* into the spectatorial present. The island represents both a refuge outside the strictures of time as well as slavery and a place of doom infiltrated by poisonous snakes and the master's hounds. Just as an invisible moccasin hidden under a stone bites and kills Frog, the "baying of hounds" (Act II, 24) can only be heard from afar and hovers as a dark omen over the entire scene. The "swampscape" thus represents an ominous crossroads of invisible forces where a destructive nature and a dehumanising culture intersect. The public space where the two marooning slaves are "creeping and panting" becomes a *lieu de mort* as well as a *lieu de mémoire*, a place of failure where the boundaries of representation and fiction overlap, which is partly why it forces its way into the audience's consciousness.

Frog's poetic death vision of "big old dark wings closing down, closing down on [him], closing down […] beating, beating […] chariot's wings" (Act II, 32), and his feeling of "freedom […] freedom over [him] like ice, like fire, like a mighty wind, like the lightning, like a cyclone storm" (*Ibid.*) are reminiscent of the "flying African Queen's" ritual death that reconnects her to a lost humanity. Lanthie's ultimate existential urge to "steal away" is echoed in Frog's last words: "I'm gonna be a man, partner, not a cattle no more […]. It's freedom, partner! Freedom" (*Ibid.*). The spiritual song "Freedom over me/ Before I'd be a slave/ I'd be buried in my grave," which is hummed by the individual voices of Frog and Rock, then sung by the chorus, ritually marks the transition from life to death on the one hand, and, on the other, suggests a continuity of will and voice from the dying slave to the voice(s) of freedom beyond failure and death. Frog's singing while passing away re-enacts the birth of the spiritual song. Joy and sorrow, faith and failure fuse in a call-and-response improvisational pattern which alternates Frog's and Rock's voices. Then, the re-entry of the chorus as a collective voice fits the individual expression and experience into a communal consciousness.

As Frog dies in the swamp, the "voices" of the slavers gradually cover the voices of the chorus and, "amid the triumphant shouts of the crowd in the boats […] a wave of exultant sound" (Act II, 33), Rock is shot and "flung violently back into the scene" (*Ibid.*). The physical

intrusion of plantation violence into the marooning "trap" space of hope and death re-installs the initial hierarchy of power and the slave is seen "panting, bleeding and *bound*" (*Ibid.*, italics mine). The stage recovers its initial boundaries of performance as the slave is violently thrown back within the confines of the scene. The metatheatrical blurring of present consciousness and dramatic representation of the past, of actual and fictional space, leaps into the next scene through a cluster of merging and contrasting sounds, as well as lighting and alienation effects:

> Light fades to a single glow of Frog's face… Blackout… Suddenly, the gay tinkle of Christmas bells are heard. Happy voice shouting greetings. Music boxes play. A blaze of light reveals a huge life-like calendar. A slave boy struts past and tears away the leaf marked "November." The remaining sheet is "December 1858." The boy exits dancing. (Act II, 34)

The final image/visage of death and defeat fades into a visual as well as temporal "blackout" which signals a leap into the future several years after. The spiritual "Freedom Over Me," softly sung by the chorus, covers the "sound of oars" made by the slavers' boats and "ris[es] to a crescendo" (Act II, 33), marking the musical transition and sustaining the recurrent ambiguity of hope and failure. The "happy voice" shouting Christmas greetings contrasts with the receding voices of the slavers, the "gay tinkle of Christmas bells" supersedes the ominous rhythmic "sound of oars" and the music boxes answer the fading spiritual song. The semantically contrasting sound effects seem at first to create an opposition between the dwelling space of silent stagnation and death and the joyful place of the plantation mansion in Memphis. But just as the lullaby creates an ominous tension at the beginning of Act II, so Christmas is revealed as another moment of inhumane separation, despair and ultimately death when Little Rock is sold away as a Christmas gift. The Christian symbol of divine birth and hope for mankind becomes the climax of horror when the child, unable to bear the injustice of his world, refuses to breathe and dies.

The dramatisation of time is metonymically materialised in an oversized calendar. It dominates the stage in a pool of light and functions as a striking visual reminder of the poetics of the play that enacts a metaphorical passage through multiple layers of history: the tearing away of the calendar leaf parallels the sweeping away of days, months, years and centuries in the Prologue. The "sweeping" metaphor is repeated later in the scene when Mary's "Mistress furiously shout[s]" to Little Rock:

> Yes, you little brat, I'm giving you away! There's dust on my slippers, Mary. (Mary stoops down and wipes the dust from her Mistress' shoes) (Act II, 37)

The image of dust on the Mistress' shoes echoes the "mighty lot of dust" (Prologue 5) raised by the Sweeper:

> SWEEPER: Tain't just dust I'm raising. I'm sweeping away blood and tears.
> […]
> JOE: […] the fine ladies might get blood…
> SWEEPER: And tears…
> JOE: On they slippers. (Prologue 5-6)

The metaphor of "dust" as the volatile and painful remains of the past to be collected and "swept away" is here made visible and literal. The "blood and tears" swept away on the market place in New Orleans after Lanthie's sale remain on the "Belle's" slippers as traces of a suffering to be re-enacted two generations later in the act of giving the child away. The echoing metaphors throughout the play create a sense of simultaneity and overlap of experience, of fateful repetition and deterministic vision.

Another recurrent metaphor of stultified yet changeable social configuration is the image of the stone/rock that also articulates the transition to Act III. As Little Rock is "wrapped" with a ribbon to be sent to Kentucky as a Christmas gift, Mary tells him "Be a man, son! You remember what I told you about Little David, the giant killer? […]. Tell yourself that story sometimes and think of your mama" (Act II, 38). The allegory of courage and will in the face of a more powerful, seemingly invincible authority runs through the play as a pivotal articulation of the double discourse of fatalism and hope. The identification of slavery and plantocracy with Goliath, the Biblical giant of the Philistines slain by David with a stone, appears as an archetype of protest for liberation synthesizing sacred and secular meaning, i.e. an expression of the experience of surmounted powerlessness measured against a wider system of theological and historical meaning. The Old Testament's story of David and Goliath represents "a narrative core around which they [the slaves] could develop an heroic epic" (Roberts, *From Trickster to Badman* 149). Mary's exhortation to remember "Little David" functions as a way of projecting the slaves' dreams and fantasies about freedom expressively. Just like her lullaby and spiritual songs, it serves both as a form of social criticism of, and psychological release from, their everyday reality, by offering a heroic model akin to the African "trickster" figure (Levine, *Black Culture* 385). The hero of the Scriptures is thus turned into a folk hero whose cunning and cleverness defeat the powerful opponent and are evoked with immediacy and intimacy.

The symbol of the stone as the weapon of the oppressed is first evoked in a comic context in Act II when Belinda threatens Frog to

"peel [his] head with a stone" (Act II, 20). In a semantic call-and-response, the two scenes/stage sides in the Delta and in Memphis alternate and Belinda's use of the word "stone" echoes in Little Rock's request to his mother to hear the story of King David. In a comic sliding of meaning and context, David's gesture is displaced to an anti-chauvinistic comment, a sort of feminist sexual claim *avant la lettre* where man is portrayed as the "giant" to be subdued. Frog is indeed defeated with a stone, a "boulder [that would] kill a giant sure" (Act II, 30) under which hides a deadly snake. Ironically, Rock exhorts Frog to gather stones and sticks to defend themselves in the swamp by saying that "David killed Goliath with a stone" (*Ibid.*). Repeating David's gesture, Rock "rises and lifts the stone to throw it [when] another shot strikes his wrist [and] the stone falls from his useless arm" (Act II, 33). In a tragic reversal of the biblical tale, the "trickster" Frog chooses the wrong stone and Rock is vanquished as "he crouches, runs, at bay" (*Ibid.*). The negative parallelism with the Old Testament's tale of victory of the weak over the invincible amplifies the sense of failure and hopelessness, which climaxes with Little Rock's suicide.

Act II ends with Mary's subversive exhortation to her leaving son to remember "Little David […] who played on his harp" in the midst of a desperate situation. The connection of the symbol of the stone with music as weapons of resistance signals the transition to Act III, that begins with the picture of "men slaves naked to the waist […] breaking rock" (Act III, 1) in a stone quarry and singing a folk song:

> I been hammerin --- huh!
> In dis Mountain --- huh!
> Four long years --- huh!
> Four long years!
> Dese ole rocks in --- huh!
> Dis yere mountain --- huh!
> Hurts ma side --- huh!
> Hurts ma side! (Act III, 1)

This work song belongs to the corpus of blues and ballads, which were sung in road gangs and prison camps in the Southern States and "compounded out of bitterness, humor, hopelessness and the desire to survive" (Courlander, *Treasury of Afro-American Folklore* 405). It is reminiscent of the prisoners gang song "Don't you hear my hammer ringing/I'm going to tell you 'bout my hammer/ Well, 'bout a-killing me, hammer" (*Ibid.* 405-406) as well as of "John Henry's"[6] song, the

[6] The John Henry legend tells the story of a railroad labourer who is convinced that no new technology such as a steam drill can ever replace a hard-working man in the building of a railroad, and who dies of over-exertion in the duel with the machine. It

most famous railroad gang epic of the African American musical tradition. The three gang songs stress the harassing struggle of man against an overwhelming task, to break a mountain for a railroad tunnel or to "break rock" in a quarry, and his ultimate victory, be it in death or by escaping. The allusion to John Henry going "down 'tween-a them mountains […] goin' to hammer just like a man […] hammered his fool to death" (qtd. in Courlander, *Treasury of Afro-American Folklore* 388-389) echoes "Little David's" exploit and marks the transition between Act II and Act III: both heroes are placed in the position of contesting the authority by defeating superior rivals (the steam driller and the giant) and both do so directly and publicly. In the process they are forced to undergo a superhuman test and to face their ordeal with complete faith. The implicit reference to the John Henry epic thus fleshes out, at the secular level, the Old Testament allegory of courage and the victory of the lowly over the powerful. Significantly, the secular work song almost imperceptibly turns into a coded spiritual song when Rock expresses his desire to escape:

> ROCK: I been thinkin… (sings)
> Take ma hammer… huh!
> Give it to Jonah… huh!
> Say I'm gone… huh!
> Say I'm gone!
> (Men look around apprehensively. Another answers)
> He jest foolin'… huh!
> He jest foolin'… huh!
> That's a lie… huh!
> Tha's a lie!
> (But Rock replies)
> Did you ever… huh!
> Stand on mountain… huh!
> In a cloud… huh!
> In a cloud!
> (Full chorus comes up strong)
> Did you ever… huh!
> Stand on mountain… huh!
> In a cloud… huh!
> In a cloud! (Act III, 2-3)

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is however the glory of his victory over the machine and not the tragedy of his demise that dominates the blues-ballad. It celebrates the strength and will of the common man in contest with the authority of a dehumanising modern civilisation and with "the very mountains that cast their daily shadows across the world in which common men live" (Courlander, *Treasury of Afro-American Folklore* 384). For a more complete analysis of the John Henry legend, see Levine, *Black Culture* 420-427.

From expressing the inhuman conditions under which the slaves must work, the song turns into the expression of an individual's will for liberation couched in biblical and mystical terms. Freedom is contemplated "in a cloud," an imaginary space literally off stage and transcending the present situation. The re-appearance of the chorus reinforces the wish for both transcendence and collective liberation, and reinserts the quarry scene in the Gospel aesthetics. The coded song thus provides more than a rhythm to hammer, it gives a model of hope, action and emulation among slaves.

The symbolism of the stone in the third Act is double-edged. The quarry functions as a spatial metaphor denoting slavery, an invincible, apparently immemorial power which crushes "the tough slaves […] they [the slaveholders] can't break in no other way" (Act III, 1). It is also by "breaking rock" into pieces that Rock sees the quarry as "full of nothing but stones [and] David killed the giant with just a stone" (Act III, 6), which echoes his failed attempt to defeat the slavers in the bayou with "sticks and stones." In a visual correspondence to the swamp episode, Rock "begins to creep toward the door" (*Ibid.*). Then, in a second repetition of David's gesture, "he picks up a stone [and] brings it down full on the guard's head, takes the pistol from the prone figure's holster and looks at it triumphantly" (*Ibid.*). The escape scene functions as a positive mirror reflection and a situational redress of two pivotal moments: the raid on Ebewe's kingdom and the swamp disaster. Rock's utterance, "They's always guns. Guns! A gun! A man needs a gun" (*Ibid.*), echoes the Africans' desperate cry: "We have no guns. So they steal us, and enchain us, and enslave us… because we have no guns" (Prologue 4). In a reversal of both his ancestors' powerlessness and his first failed attempt to escape, Rock defiantly whispers, "this time they won't catch me" (Act III, 6), and hums the spiritual which hovers over the entire swamp scene: "Oh Freedom!/ Freedom over me!"

However, the optimism of the escape scene is tempered by alternating flashes of Mary's loneliness and Little Rock's desperation. Both Rock and Mary are restless as they intuitively feel that their child needs them: Mary feels "Trouble. Worry in my mind. My child needs me" (Act III, 4) and Rock feels "troubled in mind […] a stone around my neck" (Act III, 3, 4). The alternating lighting of the three stage areas reflects a psychic connection that represents a "topography of the mind" ranging from existential acting, through fatalism to ultimate desperation. The three interconnected voices echo one another in hope and despair, creating a modulated pattern of responses to slavery. Little Rock gives up all hope as he remembers his mother's words about David:

> CHILD: My mama told me, in the Bible, says they were a little boy like me, named David, took hisself a great big rock… went and kilt a giant.
> BIG BOY: Go kill yourself one then… and shut up!
> […]
> CHILD: I can't find the giant, Rufus! Can't find the right giant […]. They's all giants! They's too many of 'em… all around, everywhere… every plantation they's so many of 'em. I can't find no stones to kill all them giants. (Pause) 'Sides I ain't brave like David was. I's scared, Rufus [..]. There ain't no stones nowhere 'round big enough to kill all those old giants. I reckon I ain't David! I wish I was but I ain't no David. I gonna wrap myself up tight, tight, tight, in these dirty old sacks and I ain't gonna breath no more. I ain't gonna breath no more." (Act III, 5)

Centre stage, Mary escapes in a dream world as "she takes a piece of her ironing in her arms as if it were a child" (Act III, 6), sings the ominous lullaby and instinctively "know[s] that chile wish he were here with his mama so's she could tell him about King David" (*Ibid.*).

As a dialogical counterpoint, Rock simultaneously defies the slavers' order and throws the stone that kills the guard/giant. Rock's humming "Freedom Over Me" (Act III, 7) fades into the chorus' voice, continuing the spiritual to its ominous stanza "Before I'd be a slave/ I'd be buried in my grave," sustaining the foreboding atmosphere climaxing in the discovery of Little Rock's body. The chorus punctuates the scene with snapshots of the same spiritual song and appears as a chorus of mourners commenting upon and at the same time partaking in the collective grief. The scene ending mirrors the final image of the swamp episode: "a ray of sunshine falls through the door on Little Rock. The chorus comes up strong 'Freedom! Freedom!'" (Act III, 8). The alternating visual, musical and situational correspondences as well as echoes throughout the play endow it with a spiral quality that stresses its circularity, which is foregrounded through repetitions and variations.

The re-entry of Rock "running and panting […] in the darkness" (*Ibid.*) echoes the picture of the hunted fugitive in the bayou but the man is "like a ghost […] disappearing into trees, into ground, into air" (Act III, 9); he has become a true maroon, an ungraspable abstraction akin to myths and legends. The story here takes a more obvious allegorical dimension as it swiftly moves from one place to the other, connecting stations on the Underground Railroad and re-connecting people, slaves and freedmen, blacks and whites in the same struggle for freedom, until Rock and Mary "make it to Canaan" (Act III, 11). The Chorus hovers over the scene by "humming" the spirituals "Deep river, Lord!/ My home is over Jordan" (Act III, 23) and "Thank God-A-Mighty!/ I'm free at last" (Act III, 27) which stress the archetypal, teleological dimension of the escape from bondage to freedom.

The play ends with the beginning of the Civil War's "fight for freedom" (Act III, 31) as Rock joins the 54th Black Regiment under Colonel Shaw. In a didactic outburst of newly found nationalistic pride, Mary predicts that "there won't be no more slavery time sorrow nowhere when you come back […]. I'll keep the doorstep clean, I'll sweep away yesterday" (*Ibid.*). The metatheatrical movement of the Prologue "sweeping away" the "dust" of history to un/re-cover the past is reversed in a symbolic gesture of "cleaning up" the humiliations of "yesterday" to focus on the creation of the present. Optimism and faith in a set of values anchored in tolerance and religion close the play as Rock utters the new ethos of the nation:

> ROCK: […] I see my race blossoming […] the sun do move! I see you you… black and white together, standing with me, working with me, singing with me.
> […]
> CHORUS: Glory! Glory! Halleluiah!
> His truth goes marching on.
> As he died to make men holy
> Let us die to make men free…
> While His truth goes marching on! (Act III, 32)

The textual frame spans the African American "journey from slave ship to citizenship" (Gilroy, *Small Acts* 122) but the metatheatrical "sweeping" movement across history stays incomplete as the play avoids being circumscribed in the temporal circularity enacted in the Prologue and conflating present and past in a single consciousness. The trans-historical quality displayed in the Prologue is only implicitly re-inserted in the thematic, didactic dimension of the closing apotheosis. The visionary theatre poetics introduced at the beginning, which rejects linearity and rationality in favour of a spatially open view of time and process, does not "wrap up" the dramaturgy of the play's ending: the finale remains within the constraints of a mimetic and unmediated representation of the past. The initial "sweeping" flashback is only implicitly re-integrated into the political matrix of the play's contemporary concerns in the 1940s. Indeed, the assertion of a cultural national ethos based on interracial solidarity informs a present consciousness troubled by World War II and confronted with its own racial segregation.

The final vision of Rock "proudly bearing the American flag […] while in silhouette in the background, the Union Army marches to the roll of drums and the call of bugles" (Act III, 32) signals the leap to contemporary militancy. The play was indeed produced in 1942, the same year as the US Army commissioned its first black pilots, accepted the first black women for the Women's Army Corps and the US Marine

Corps admitted African Americans for the first time in its 144-year history (Appiah and Gates, *Africana* 2029). Under the pressure of the NAACP, the National Urban League and labor leader Asa Philip Randolph, President Franklin D. Roosevelt issued an Executive Order banning discrimination in war industries and armed services (June 1941). The war thus provided new opportunities to fight inequalities in the segregated American society and encouraged civil rights activists to secure full citizenship privileges. Hughes's "slavery play" thus functions as a metatheatrical mirror of the present which reflects the optimistic confidence in a historical breach against the "new slavery," the Jim Crow laws, and offers a model of nationalistic militancy embodied in the vision of America as a fully integrated country. The "vertical 'ascent' from South to North" (Gates, *Signifying Monkey* XXV) symbolised in the fugitives' geographical movement to freedom is repeated in the 1940s through the massive black migration away from the South. To the topographical motion corresponds the African American impulse toward social upheaval caused by World War II. Langston Hughes's optimistic vision of black integration will, however, be tempered one year later when, at the peak of racial hostilities in the summer of 1943[7], violence spread in American cities and, in Detroit, left 25 blacks and 9 whites dead:

> Looky here, America
> What you done done -
> Let things drift
> Until the riots come -
> Yet you say we're fightin
> For democracy.
> Then why dont' democracy
> Include me?
> I ask you this question
> Cause I want to know
> How long I got to fight
> BOTH HITLER -AND JIM CROW? ("Jim Crow's Last Stand," 1943, qtd. in Appiah and Gates, *Africana* 2029)

Langston Hughes's and Owen Dodson's plays envision America as an integrated, unified society where African Americans "have actively woven [them]selves with the very warp of this nation" (Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk* 387). But unlike *Amistad*'s "bitter" ending, the celebratory tone of *The Sun Do Move*'s final scene reflects an unquestioned opti-

[7] 1943 marked the peak of wartime racial violence in the US with more than 250 racial conflicts in 47 American cities. Housing shortage due to African American massive migration to the North resulted in overt hostility from white residents.

mism about the possibility of political and social progress toward complete freedom.

The mnemopoetics of *The Sun Do Move* thus revolves around the double axis of a re-appropriation of an empowering past, and the transformation of that model to fit the contemporary struggles in the 1940s. The emphasis is on resistance, solidarity and interracial reciprocity. The topomnesic configuration of the play as a cluster of archetypal places and stations to freedom "c/sites" the past within present concerns, and acts in the service of redress and progress rather than as a theatrical inventory of memoried places. Spirituals as original black folk creations and African American pageantry are structural frames which reflect the two playwrights' will to remain entrenched in the African American oral and dramatic tradition. To the thematic mnemopolitics excavating the past to serve the present corresponds a formal, theatrical mnemopoetics which "Signifies" upon the African American performance tradition to create an art that is both "within the archive" (Foucault, *Language, Counter-Memory* 92, qtd. in Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism* 125) and reaching out for transcultural/transracial dialogue. As we are going to see next, Shirley Graham and Rita Dove's mnemopoetic project displays a Du Boisan ambition in its exploration of African American history as an "ambiguous" mythopoetics, i.e a claim to "universality" which entails a revisionary harping on the formal structure, archetypal patterns and teleology of the Greek tragedy to reveal and carry on a subterranean cross-cultural dialogue. In tune with Du Bois' grandiose vision of African American history as "a tragedy that beggared the Greek" (Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction* 727), the two playwrights use the thematic and structural Greek model in an "allomnesic" gesture of appropriation which claims and adapts the memory of an "other" culture and mythic history to reflect upon their own.

DISPLACED POETICS

Ambiguous Ancestors

Shirley Graham's *It's Mornin'* and Rita Dove's *The Darker Face of the Earth* offer a particular penetration into the history of African American slavery through the double prism of black folk culture and Greek tragedy. This process of mental re-appropriation and imaginative reconfiguration of both the slave past and Greek myths is inscribed into a complex, revisionary mnemopoetics which connects different traditions, cultures and sensibilities. The multi-layered semantic structure of Graham's and Dove's plays reflects the interpenetration of cultures which characterises America as a historical entity. The African American memory merges with the memory of the Old Worlds (Africa and Europe) in an ambivalent "allomnesia," the memory of an "other" textual and mythical fabric which, like a palimpsest, constitutes the structural frame beneath the theatrical fictionalisation of the slave past. This hybrid poetics, partly displaced to another site of cultural references, does not so much betray a need for classical validation or legitimisation as it reveals a comparative scrutinising of archetypal as well as dramatic patterns in order to disclose "latent cross-culturalities" (Harris, "Quetzalcoatl" 40), i.e. a subterranean, cross-cultural polyphonic structure. Cross-culturalism,[1] as it has been coined and defined by the British writer of Guyanese origin Wilson Harris, implies the existence of "an unbroken thread that runs throughout humanity" (Harris, "Judgement and Dream" 26). This fundamentally essentialist conception of human creativeity, closer to philosophy than theory, seems to lie at the heart of the two plays under scrutiny and allows a glimpse of latent bridges between cultures through the intuitive discovery of metaphorical similarities. A mnemopoetic reading of the two plays thus reveals several layers of interpretation: it stitches fictional, individual stories in the wide fabric of slavery "rememory," it evinces an undercurrent reconfiguration of the Afro-American imagination by crossing Greek archetypes with historical insights, and, meta-theatrically, it allows a textual deciphering of the plays as poetic sites of mutating conceptions of the tragedy redefined in both mythical and historical terms.

[1] Harris's concept of a latent, cross-cultural universality undermines the Eurocentric conceit that places Western culture at the centre of cultural reference and excellence.

Tragedy in both plays traces the classical downfall of individuals crushed by a system (not a metaphysical but a social one in this case) they cannot influence. Their defiance of the slavery system that oppresses them brings about a downfall that shows both the capacities and limitations of the individual will:

> there was little chance of changing the course of one's life if one were a slave. Rarely in our history has there been a system that fostered such a sense of futility – a futility analogous, in many ways, to the Greek concept of fate. (Dove, qtd. in Howard, "*Mother Love*" 349)

The inexorability of fate permeates Graham's and Dove's plays but their ambivalent mnemopoetics, poised between fatalism and violent liberation, undermines the ontological structure of the Greek model. In the collection of essays *Theatre of the Oppressed*, the Brazilian playwright and theoretician Augusto Boal offers a theoretical model of revolutionary theatre and rejects Greek tragedy as a poetic system sustaining a coercive order. He asserts that the very essence of Greek tragedy is "to restrain man, to force him to adapt himself to a pre-existing order" (Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed* 122) which he is not morally entitled to change. If a playwright wants to present an alternative to contemporary society, if she or he wants to arouse some revolutionary feeling in a given community, then another poetics, another literary tradition must be sought. Yet, instead of taking the fixity of the Greek tragedy[2] for granted, Graham and Dove explore its semantic flexibility and, by injecting African American aesthetic and historical referents into the core of the Greek model, disclose a subterranean cross-cultural structure of poetic and mythic recurrences. In other words, the re-activating and creative mutation of Greek tragedy in the African American literary context reveals the playwrights as both users *and* creators of myths: their imagination is rooted in the soil of European founding myths as well as in African American culture, and is at the same time engaged in a mythopoeic dynamics of cultural cross-fertilisation. They thus return to Greek tragedy to "inscribe a new discourse that empowers and critiques all cultures, even as it identifies the colonizer's power and the colonized's powerlessness" (Wetmore, Jr., *Black Dionysus* 44). According to Wetmore's taxonomy of Greek adap-

[2] Rush Rehm argues that because of its "bracing otherness" free from the reproductive commodification of post-modern narratives, Greek tragedy can be seen as a potential site of ideological resistance. Moreover, Rehm insists on the ambiguous interplay between "human freedom and constraint" (Rehm, *Radical Theatre: Greek Tragedy and the Modern World* 19), i.e. "the paradox of free choice and coercion (*Ibid.* 67), thereby suggesting that "human choice is part and parcel of the workings of fate" (*Ibid.* 19), a notion which is also developed in both plays under scrutiny.

tations, both plays illustrate the "Black Dionysus paradigm" (*Ibid.* 44), i.e. "a creative and constructive system of complex intertextuality" (*Ibid.* 15) which offers a model of renewal through the erosion of ideological and cultural strictures.

Both plays retain an essential component of the Greek tragedy: the centrality of the (failed or achieved) sacrifice of an exceptional individual, which represents the ultimate destructiveness of the slavery system and at the same time its imminent collapse. The two playwrights' harping on the sacrificial teleology suggests both an acknowledgement of a cross-cultural flux of symbolic and mythic patterns as well as the ambivalence and destructive function inherent in the very notion of sacrifice. Shirley Graham's variation on the myths of Medea and Iphigenia centres on the useless sacrifice of the innocent virgin by her own mother to escape from the slaver's lust on the eve of Emancipation. Dove's rewriting of Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* revolves around the sacrifice of the "dark skinned" child, his survival and his subsequent matricidal revenge under the guise of the necessary sacrifice of the plantation owners for the sake of a doomed slave insurrection. This ritualistic dramaturgy provides a cohesive dramatic structure and relies on an ambivalent mnemopoetics centred on the envisioning of a (historical and literary) continuum that contains within itself both change (as liberating impulses; as theatrical variations) and recurrence (of destructiveness; of structuring themes, genre and metaphors). The two plays' thematic and dramaturgical negotiation of the Greek tragedy and of the sacrificial ritual is thus confrontational and transformative rather than reverential and mimetic. This "allomnesic" digestion of disparate inspirational materials translates onto the stage the ceaseless mapping of a cultural memory rooted in a community's sense of historical consciousness. Graham and Dove inflict a distortion upon traditions by incorporating the ancient Canon into black vernacular sources, thereby engendering renewed creative forces capable of energising ancient meanings into new socio-cultural configurations.

Place, Time and Action

Fundamental Disunities in Shirley Graham's *It's Mornin'* (1940)

Shirley Graham wrote *It's Mornin'* while she was at Yale on a Rosenwald Fellowship in creative writing. The play was produced in 1940 at the Yale Repertory Theatre and directed by Otto Preminger, then studying there (Hamalian and Hatch, *Roots of African American Drama* 233-234). There are two different versions of the play in print, but only Kathy A. Perkins gives the location of the manuscript she chose, probably an early draft entitled *It's Morning. A One-Act Play in Two Scenes*, which is kept in the Special Collections at Fisk University library (Perkins, *Black Female Playwrights* 282). I have chosen to use the version published in the anthology of plays by African American women compiled and edited by Elizabeth Brown-Guillory for it evinces a greater dramaturgical compactness and efficiency: it is reduced to a single, densely written scene taking place during the night of New Year's revelry, the tragic mother's family is reduced to the single sacrificed daughter, and the introduction of the "lonely mistress of the plantation" bridges the master-slave divide through the two women's common experience of powerlessness and compassion.

It's Mornin' displays a conception of African American memory as a tragedy, a (scape-) "goat song" as the etymology of the term suggests, entangled in the complexities of historical contingencies and individual choices. Tightly written within the Aristotelian rules of the three unities, the play is confined to a slave cabin in the Deep South, spans the New Year's Eve night of 1862 and revolves around Cissie's decision to kill her 14-year-old daughter, Millie, to avoid her being sold away at dawn and raped by her new master. Cissie's infanticide is presented as an ultimate gesture of love and mercy to spare her daughter the humiliations and violence she was herself subjected to, a "pain dat breaks an' keep on breakin' till dey ain't nothin' left" (92) and "choke huh song" (95). The dramatic frame is thus a single scene of ritualised waiting for the end of the night, an anguished expectation of catastrophe, the anticipation of sacrifice. As the night progresses, the tension rises in a dialectical movement of laughter, dance, while Millie sings spirituals, and terror as morning approaches and Cissie "tests [the sharpness of] the blade" (92). "The sound of a galloping horse" (94) at dawn signals the

imminence of the sacrifice, Cissie "disappears" into Millie's bedroom, the young face of a soldier "break[ing] with smiles" (94) appears at the door, and he announces that Lincoln has freed the slaves. Cissie comes into the room "holding in her arms the limp body of MILLIE" (94) and invites the soldier to "dip [his] han's in [her] warm an' pure blood" (95). The play ends with Cissie's words "Hit's mawnin'" (95) and her "cry of anguish [coming] from her throat as she falls to her knees" (95).

The unity of place, time and action is the most obvious structural element "writing back" to the Greek tragedy, but its formal conciseness hides deeper, fundamental disunities within the textual as well as silenced spaces of the play. Even if the thematic and dramaturgical structure is determined by "place," the *Ur-topos* of the slave cabin on a Deep South plantation, the topomnesia of the play expands beyond the limits of its setting and offers a glimpse of connection with Africa. Cissie's sacrificial gesture appears as the continuation of an ancestral act of love remembered and re-activated in the present by Grannie Lou, "the oldest slave on the plantation, considered a little crazy" (84):

> GRANNIE LOU: (*in a high, sing-song voice*) Da ribbah's high, da rain dat fall las' week make all da ma'shes t'ick wid mud an' deep […]. Ah ain't so ole dat Ah don' membah! […]. Ain't Ah nebbah tole you bout dat 'oman long time gone? Day say she straight from jungles in da far off Af'ica. She nevah say […]. She ustah sing out in da fields […]. when Ah war young. (*Her voice dies away in a mumble of reminiscence. She turns back to her pots, forgetting her audience, lost in the memories of her youth*) […]. she hab t'ree sons, dey black an' tall lak she. An' one day come dat dey sole des sons down ribbah.. dey bring good price. She say dey nebbah go. Da white folk laf, but niggahs dassent laf.. dey see huh face. She don' say not'in' mo', but go away. An' early in da mawnin' call she boys, an' when dey come, she tell 'em to stan' close an' watch da sun come up out ob da hill. Dey sort ob smile at huh an' look, an' den dat 'oman lift huh big came [*sic*] knife, she cry out sompin' in a wild strange voice, an' wid one sweep she cut off all dey heads- dey roll down at she feet. All t'ree ob dem! […]. (*leaning toward CISSIE*) She- don'- hab- tuh- go! (90)

Told in a "high, sing-song" voice, Grannie Lou's horrific story sounds as an act of oral, ancestral bonding through love and violence, a "song of experience" running through African American history like a haunting, "wild" and "heathen" (90) threnody. The African woman, Grannie Lou, Cissie and Millie "sing" the same "breakin' pain" (92), a song of "strange beauty" (93) which resonates across time as the peculiar musical as well as visceral memory which Toni Morrison calls "emotional memory – what the nerves and the skin remember as well as how it appeared […]. All water has a perfect memory and is forever trying to get back to where it was" (Morrison, "Site of Memory" 199).

In a similar mnemopoetic metaphor of subterranean historical recurrence, Grannie Lou observes that "da ribbah's high [and] all da ma'shes t'ick wid mud an' deep" (90). The cyclical, flooding movement of dynamic "rememorying" carries along debris of the past which erupt from the bottom of a "deep" and "muddy" history. The African woman's story represents a mnestic trace, a terrifying engrammic[1] echo which accounts for the persistence of individual and collective memory. Grannie Lou's excavation of an old tale of violence and love to catalyse action in the present generates a collective ecphoria, i.e. the rousing of a memory from a latent to an active state through the repetition of the original stimulus. The mnestic excitation induced by Grannie Lou's "rememorying" gives Cissie the meaning and impulse she needs to act. What appeared as an act of individual "reminiscence" is thus revealed as a call for action. In her essay "The Site of Memory," Toni Morrison suggests that the blending of imagistic "remains" (192) and subsequently re-invented "memories" form the core of the creative imagination:

> It's a kind of literary archaeology […]. Zora Neale Hurston said, 'Like the dead-seeming cold rocks, I have memories within that came out of the material that went to make me.' These 'memories within' are the subsoil of my work. (Morrison, "Site of Memory" 192)

Grannie Lou's tale functions as an oral "archaeology" that excavates "memories within," a set of archives of actions, images and metaphors which serve as a palimpsestic fabric upon which the present is reinscribed. As Grannie Lou sinks deeper and deeper into her "reminiscences" and her voice "dies away in a mumble," her tale shifts from past to present tense, a rhetorical strategy that signals the historical iterancy of the play's action. Continuity is found through her-story and history, individual action and the socio-cultural system that prompts it. The play and its ancestral voice of "memories within" tell a tale of counter-violence which, as a gesture of protection and liberation, undermines the economic system of slavery.

This mnemopoetic *mise en abyme*, that layers the same, recurring story through performance and narration within the play, ultimately appears as a historical as well as dramaturgical chiasmus repeating and, most of all, reversing the very meaning of the mother's protective act. The play seems at first to be embedded in a continuous present performed and re-played until the collapse of the system that sustains its destructiveness, the "mawnin'" of Emancipation. The ambiguity of the dialectal form reflects the blending of opposite meanings and meta-

[1] An engram (or engramme) is a memory trace.

phors: the "morning" of the "New Day" of freedom is also the "mourning" for the sacrificed victim, the ultimate "scapegoat" whose spiritual "song" (as the etymology of "tragedy" suggests) and its final "chok[ing]" form the play's tragic substance. The dialectal[2] form thus represents an unsettling of, and at the same time a proliferation of, language's representational capacities – an ambiguity that allows the simultaneous co-existence of opposite meanings: "morning" becomes "mourning." This process of semantic unsettling permeates the play and makes possible the elaboration of conflicting interpretations.

The uniformisation of time as a perpetually repeated present as well as the unity of violent action found within historical continuity are disrupted by the dissolving meaning of Cissie's infanticide that is emptied of its salvific substance. With Emancipation, the place of bondage becomes the land of freedom, the cyclical time of destruction breaks into future moments of individual choices, the slave woman's recurrent action of protective sacrifice turns into an unspeakable murder. Cissie's infanticide coincides with the date of Emancipation, and thus undermines the significance of the historical event by introducing the notion of continuing violence. Millie's death appears as an ultimate act of destruction committed by, and at the same time, upon the slave, a ritualised, unspeakably painful self-sacrifice which, seemingly outside any causative nexus, is followed by a new social configuration at daybreak.

The murder of Millie indeed appears as Cissie's self-sacrifice, her refusal of a historical determinism branded with rape and continuous humiliation. The cross-corporeality of mother and daughter who are entangled in a nexus of defilement and subjugation, is emphasised by the blurring of their personalities in the old "crazy" woman's reminiscences. As Millie sings and dances, Grannie Lou reveals that "Cissie useter sing lak dat… Jes' lak huh gal" (87). As the "rememorying" voice, she speaks the rupture of Cissie's past, leaving a narrative blank, a silence that translates its "unspeakability":

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[2] Graham's use of dialect throughout *It's Mornin'* partakes of her general mnemopoetic project that excavates and re-creates, through a performance in the original language, the lost histories and memories of African America. The transcription of black idioms, speech rhythms and sounds delineates linguistic and semantic routes leading to the historical roots of the community. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., argues that black vernacular is "the repository that contains the language that is the source –and the reflection –of black difference" (Gates, *Signifying Monkey* XXIII). Dialect is thus used as the medium through and in which African American cultural specificities can be found, and a collective memory re-articulated. As a living "repository" that encodes the mutations and permanencies of expression and representation, black vernacular reveals its own mnemopoetic nature: it contains, exhumes, describes, reshapes and inscribes African American history in memorial idioms.

> GRANNIE LOU: […] She war beautiful! Black as a berry an' lovely as da night. Slender an' swift as a young colt. She nevah walk, jes' prance an' run about da place. Ah seen da buckra eyein' huh, an' she jes' laf. Den come a day when she war very still, Ah donno why, til one night seen huh slippin' t'rough shadows lak a hounded coon crawls tuh his hole to lick his bleedin' wounds.
> ROSE: Ah heard dat she war proud, an' dat da ovahseer swear he break huh will.
> GRANNIE: (*bitterly*) He did! An' when he'd come along da row, she tremble lak a leaf, an' once she fall down cryin' at his feet. He laf an' kick huh wid his foot, not hard, but lak you kick a bitch what's big wid puppy out o' yo' path. (86)

The old woman's narrative flow is fractured in the middle by the rhetorical formula "Ah dunno why" which filters and retains the evocation of the "unspeakable" violation out of "rememory's" reach. Cissie's rape and subsequent pregnancy belong to "the secrets of slavery [that] are concealed like those of the Inquisition" (Jacobs, *Incidents* 55). The reluctance to directly name and describe the sexual exploitation of the slaves echoes another narrative of sexual abuse, Harriet Jacobs's (Linda Brent's) *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. The editor of Jacobs's autobiography, the abolitionist Lydia Maria Child, stresses in her 1861 introduction the difficulty of representing, i.e. putting into "palatable" words, the experience of the sexually abused slave woman:

> the experiences of this intelligent, much-injured woman belong to a class which some call delicate subjects, and others indelicate. This peculiar phase of Slavery has generally been kept veiled; but the public ought to be made acquainted with its monstrous features, and I willingly take the responsibility of presenting them with the veil withdrawn. (Child, "Introduction" 8)

Harriet Jacobs's slave narrative runs through the play as a submerged thread of reference, a "veiled" "Signifyin(g)" upon one of the "canonical" (Patton, *Women in Chains* 57) African American slave narratives, which reveals yet another palimpsestic layer. Graham's play intriguingly exemplifies the first chapter of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, "The Slaves' New Year's Day":

> But to the slave mother New Year's day comes laden with peculiar sorrows. She sits on her cold cabin floor, watching the children who may all be torn from her the next morning; and often does she wish that she and they might die before day dawns. (Jacobs, *Incidents* 28)

Indeed, "New Year's Day was the most dreaded of the year, for it marked the auction of slaves to the highest bidders […]. The custom was officially replaced by Emancipation Day, beginning January 1, 1863" (Starling, *The Slave Narrative* XXII). *It's Mornin'* thus articulates

both the transition between the "most dreaded day of the year" and the anniversary of Emancipation, as well as the shift from Jacobs's general description to its exemplification through dreadful actualities.

The rhetoric of Grannie Lou's remembering of Cissie's rape signals the existence of this invisible literary link in the chain of the slave woman's abuse. The comparison of the slave with a puppy echoes a famous passage from *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, the confrontation between Linda and her master, Dr. Flint, when she asks him to marry the "free Negro" she loves:

> After a slight pause, he added, 'I supposed you thought more of yourself; that you felt above the insults of such puppies.' 'I replied, 'If he is a puppy I am a puppy, for we are both of the negro race. (Jacobs, *Incidents* 61)

But Graham's use of the puppy comparison also implies the silenced story of Cissie's rape by the overseer and her subsequent pregnancy that resulted, we may infer, in Millie's birth. Animal comparisons thus translate Cissie's brutal dehumanisation. Grannie Lou describes in animal terms Cissie's transformation from a radiant, proud, singing young woman to a silent "shadow" "walking very slowly, the life gone out of her movements" (87). She is a "hounded coon" licking her "bleeding wounds" and a pregnant "bitch" kicked aside by the white abuser. Both similes function in two different linguistic registers: the old black slave's compassionate description and the obverse, racist and chauvinistic labels defiling/defining her first as a black "coon" then as a female "bitch."

Cissie's and Millie's beauty "prove[s] [their] greatest curse" (Jacobs, *Incidents* 46), a feature that, in the perspective of tragic inexorability, appears as a "fatal flaw" and the sign of doom. Grannie Lou's narrative blank structurally corresponds to Cissie's painful recollection of her daughter's confrontation with her new master: "*(She speaks as if from a distance, with difficulty, still looking with horror upon a picture etched on her brain.)* […] Ah seed his han's.. dey touch huh golden breas'" (89). The problematic verbalisation of the "horror" translates the "humiliation […] many slaves feel […] acutely, and shrink from the memory of it" (Jacobs, *Incidents* 46). Beauty "only hastens the degradation of the female slave" (*Ibid.*), a "strange beauty" (93) which can only be recovered in Cissie's "black, gaunt face" (*Ibid.*) once she has envisioned her daughter's preserved "purity" in death. Cissie's "strange beauty" then blurs with the African infanticide's "strange voice" in a similarity of linguistic and interpretative confusion. Both faces fade in a single determined expression recognised by the community: "niggahs dassent laf.. dey see huh face" (90) is echoed in the chorus of women's "Ah see hit I huh face. She gotta min' to" (92).

The "pregnant silence" of Grannie Lou's remembering (her suddenly still narrative flow) not only expresses the difficulty in apprehending Cissie's rape linguistically, it also comes to represent something essential about the experience itself, and beyond, about the nature of the "peculiar institution." The radical negativity of slavery (rape is only one aspect of the institutionalised dehumanisation of the slave) ruptures the fabric of ancestral memory. Just as African American history originated in utter dislocation (another "unspeakable" experience the African woman of Grannie Lou's youth "nevah say," 90), narrative blanks, Grannie Lou's "wild laughter" and Cissie's final "cry of anguish" reflect a constant movement of displacement of language. A dialectical tension between the silence, laugh and cry which utter the unspeakable "horror" and the narrative and dramatic forms which attempt to represent and bridge it, lies at the heart of the play.

Grannie Lou's reminiscing of Cissie's rape reveals a complex interplay between the spoken and the unspoken: her meaningful silence and veiled allusion articulate the breaking of the slave woman's body and spirit, the silent "choking of her song." But just as the "monstrous" violation of Cissie's body turns into her own rebirth in "the golden brown body" (85) and the singing voice of her daughter, the sacrifice of the virgin Millie not only represents Cissie's second death but also coincides with the "morning" of the "New Day." These two desecrations of the female body conflate, in a very ambiguous ethical configuration, its destruction and its regenerating potential. This interpretation forces the text and its silences beyond the gate of moral security and into a sphere of contradictions and ambivalences which account for the highly disturbing texture of the play.

Thus, Grannie Lou's memory makes visible the perpetuation of the slave woman's annihilating experiences, thereby stressing the palimpsestic texture of "her-stories" and their "rememorying." The individual stories of the African woman, Harriet Jacobs, Cissie and Millie weave the multi-layered, intertextual tapestry of the play and form a continuity of exploitation and resistance of women under slavery. Moreover, the fusion of infanticide, slavery and Greek tragedy "Signifies" upon yet another "mythical" figure in American history, Margaret Garner. As she was fleeing to Ohio in the winter of 1856, Margaret Garner was caught by her former master and decapitated her two-year-old daughter rather than see her returned to slavery. Her case gave rise to one of the fiercest abolitionist battles and she "took on mythic status" (Weisenburger, *Modern Medea* 7). Her child-murder led to the longest, most famous fugitive-slave trial in American history, was crucial in the development of the national debate over slavery and inspired numerous poets and artists. Among the artistic traces of the period, Thomas Noble's 1867

painting "The Modern Medea" (*Ibid.* 9) pictures Margaret Garner as "a heroic, defiant mother" (*Ibid.* 7). William Lloyd Garrison's abolitionist paper *The Liberator* published numerous accounts and poems on her case and "claimed for Margaret's deed a transcending, sacrificial passion with enough symbolic power to transform American society" (*Ibid.* 246). Garner's child-murder was thus interpreted as "a healing horror" (*Ibid.* 247) that at the same time signifies "everything unnatural and unholy about 'the peculiar institution'" (*Ibid.*). Because it is both murder and sacrifice, and embodies both slavery's perversion and the resistance against it, the slave woman's infanticide generates an entanglement of contradictions and ambiguities which attempt to make sense. Weisenburger's study of the Garner case leads him to assert that "Margaret Garner's translation into myth marked the beginning of a long amnesia. After Reconstruction and until 1987 [publication of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*] she all but vanished from American cultural memory […]. The Garner infanticide is […] a historical instance that will always frustrate our need for unambiguous, finalised meanings" (*Ibid.* 8, 11). Even though Weisenburger's book gathers a substantial sum of historical and cultural data, it forgets Graham's play as the precursor of Morrison's novel. The tense and ambivalent blend of history, memory, myth, intertextuality and ethical instability which Weisenburger underlines in his careful inquiry lies at the core of *It's Mornin'*. If, as Lydia Maria Child suggests, "a veil" has been drawn upon the "delicate" intricacy of slavery, sexuality, violence and their representation, Graham's play "rip[s] that veil drawn over 'proceedings too terrible to relate'" (Morrison, "Site of Memory" 191) and fissures the latent cultural amnesia. It offers a multi-dimensional tragedy of confronting, unstable, elusive, partial meanings and ethics and the filigree representation of multiple, historical and mythical female figures endow it with a fractal depth and scope of vision. The mnemopoetics of the play thus evinces a thickness of referential layers, "ma'shes t'ick wid mud an' deep" (90), which generates an opacity and a density of meanings left unclear(ed) at the end.

This web of ethical contradictions and ambiguities, which shuns any judgmental presentation of characters and actions, seems to illustrate Harriet Jacobs's claim that "the slave woman ought not to be judged by the same standards as others" (Jacobs, *Incidents* 86), since such moral frames are inadequate to filter the realities and consequences of the slave's degrading experiences: "the condition of a slave confuses all principles of morality, and, in fact, renders the practice of them impossible" (*Ibid.* 85). The impossibility of applying conventional Christian ethics to the slaves' transgressing actions is directly addressed by Frederick Douglass:

> The morality of *free* society can have no application to *slave* society. Slaveholders have made it almost impossible for the slave to commit any crime, known either to the laws of God or to the laws of man." (Douglass, *My Bondage* 248)

If neither "the laws of man" nor the Christian doctrine can supply the necessary moral frame to address the Afro-Atlantic experience, then another referential ethics must be sought.

The Aristotelian organisation of the play as well as the centrality of a chorus of women led by a coryphaeus clearly attest that the Greek model of the tragedy frames the play and inscribes it in the tradition of a theatre where myths and history continuously interact. The mythic and ontological structure of the Greek tragedy provides the adequate, condensed constellation of pluralities and contradictions which can account for the tensions and dilemmas faced by Cissie. Moreover, the absorbency of Greek archetypal figures such as Medea and Iphigenia allows an exploration of their Protean adaptability. This return to "pagan" structural ethics outside of and anterior to the Christian world view is further emphasised in the identification model provided by the African infanticide, "some cane-choppin' heathen what kin sing" (90) "in a wild, strange voice" (91). The infanticide committed by the mythical as well as Euripidean Medea figure illustrates the tension embodied in the maternal act of love and destruction. I am not suggesting that Graham's characterisation of Cissie is a direct rewriting of the mythical infanticide. But the juxtaposition of their stories offers partial glimpses of the subterranean poetic and mythic recurrences that characterise Wilson Harris's interpretation of cross-culturality. Graham's geographical reconfiguration of the tragic spirit unites the Mediterranean world, Africa and the Atlantic world through the undercurrent circulation of story, structure and symbol. The fateful triangle of the slave trade is turned into an implicit geometry/geography of the creative imagination reconnecting myths and individual stories across time and space.

As a literary analogical site, Euripides' *Medea* offers the compassionate vision of a woman pushed to the ultimate sacrifice of her children by humiliation: the fiercely proud Medea kills her own children to deprive her unfaithful husband of what he loves most. Just as Euripides presents Medea's motives for killing her children in a poetic entanglement of ambiguities and contradictions, Graham refuses to fashion her play as an act of either accusation or justification, but rather opposes a confrontational drama of unresolvable partialities of vision. And just as the chorus of women cannot fathom Medea's murderous scheme, the slave women function as a contrapuntal chorus of dissonant voices

governed by fatalism and unable to see the compassionate nature of Cissie's extreme act.

> PHOEBE: *(rocking her body)* Mussy, Jesus! He'p us, Lawd!
> (The prayer is interrupted by GRANNIE LOU dropping a spoon on the hearth with a loud clatter […] [She] breaks into a high pitched, crazy laughter.)
> […]
> ROSE: What's da mattah, Grannie? Why you all laf?
> GRANNIE LOU: *(mocking)* Mussy Jesus! Mussy Jesus! *(She snickers while the women gasp.)* She don' hab tuh go, Ah tells you, she don' hab tuh go!
> FIRST WOMAN: She'll be a murdress!
> SECOND WOMAN: She'll bu'n in hell!
> JAKE: Yes, Cissie will be lonely- now- an' maybe foh a t'ousand yeahs tuh come.
> (They turn at the unexpected sound of CISSIE's voice. It's low and vibrant.)
> CISSIE: But w'en da saints ob God go marchin' home mah gal will sing! Wid all da pure bright stars, togedder wid da mawnin' stars… She'll sing!
> (CISSIE's head is lifted and for a moment a strange beauty illumines her black, gaunt face. A soft chord sounds from the banjo, gentle as wings brushing across the strings.)
> UNCLE DAVE: *(sternly)* We be forgettin' God!
> WOMEN: Yes, mah Lawd! Save us Jesus! (They begin to rock back and forth, singing softly.)
> WOMAN: (humming accompaniment)
> Ah wan' Jesus tuh walk wid me,
> […]
> UNCLE DAVE: Kain't you trus' de Lawd, daughtah? Hit's wid Him. You kain't stain yo' han's wid da blood o' yo' own chile. (89, 92-94)

The women of the slave community appear as a discordant chorus whose discourse and spiritual song emphasise Christian fatalism and the fear of transgressing the Biblical commandment. Surprisingly, a duet of male voices expresses an understanding of Cissie's motivation: Fess "fiercely" answers the chorus of outraged women by acknowledging "Why not? Po' Millie's dancin' days am gone" (92) and the banjo player Cripple Jake recognises that "dyin' will bring huh joy" (93). The play's progression is punctuated by a call-and-response pattern of outcry and agreement, a feud of diverging voices that form a cacophonic, confrontational choir. Uncle Dave speaks as the leader of the chorus of women whose rhetorical sermon condemns Cissie's murderous intention just as *Medea*'s coryphaeus expresses both compassion and horror for Medea's gesture. Uncle Dave appears as Grannie Lou's obverse and at the same time strangely similar reflection: his "white hair, forming a halo about a gentle, wrinkled face" (92) mirrors her "black, wrinkled face" (85); her "voodoo" (89) association and visionary "madness"

frighten the community and force its respect while Uncle Dave's sermons of Christian "wisdom" feed the community's need for spiritual support. So, whereas the old preacher represents a passive attitude of expectant submission, the old "voodoo" woman appears as an integral part of the play's cross-cultural texture by engrafting her "black arts of witchcraft" onto the "Modern Medea" (Weisenburger, *Modern Medea*) in a fusion of features recalling the ancient mythical figure. Both religious characters represent antinomic spiritualities leading to opposite attitudes toward subjugation. The moral and dramaturgical tension of the play revolves around the two choices and ethics respectively embodied in the patriarchal figure and the ancestral matriarch. Uncle Dave's urging prayer "Oh Lawd! […] Lean down ovah da ramparts of Hebbin dis mawnin' an' see us 'umble sinners kneelin' hyar" (94) functions as the dramatic articulation of his divided stance, hope and despair. Its intensity is interrupted by the ambivalent "sound of a galloping horse," which both prefigures an apocalyptic chaos for Cissie and Millie, and represents an almost miraculous answer to the prayer, the unexpected Emancipation. But a Manichean interpretation which would categorise Uncle Dave as a "gentle" figure "haloed" with wisdom and Grannie Lou as the "evil eye" (93) of the community, would be myopic. Cissie's immolation of her daughter rises above moral contingencies and is inscribed in an ancestral lineage of murderous acts of love and compassion forced upon the sacrificial and sacrificed mother by oppressive conditions she could not change.

As a Medea without pride, Cissie is also presented as a victim of political tensions. Indeed, the Civil War is raging, all the men are fighting and the "lonely mistress of the plantation" (84) has no other choice but to sell Millie to survive. Both women, mistress and slave, are depicted as being trapped in the same condition of powerlessness and loneliness. Millie is first "sacrificed" (sold away) for the survival of the plantation, then literally sacrificed for the survival of her purity and spiritual song. But as the structure of the play suggests, her death corresponds to the institution of a just social and political order. Her sacrifice thus reveals a hidden, political dimension that is akin to the sacrifice of Iphigenia. Another Euripidean figure, Iphigenia is the archetype of the virgin daughter sacrificed to ensure the favours of Artemis and the victory of Greece over Troy. Euripides' *Iphigenia at Aulis* revolves around the tensions between love and religious, political duty, individual emotions and collective interests. There is no direct sign of intertextuality with Euripides' play in *It's Mornin'* but the similar use of the chorus and coryphaeus as the powerless voices of moral outcry against the pending murder as well as the centrality of politics in the sacrificial decision

reveal intriguing similarities and partake of the general "allomnesic" appropriation and re-inscription of Greek tragedy.

It's Mornin' thus presents a kaleidoscopic vision of a blurred and changing historical, mythical, symbolic and ethical constellation of figures and forms, a fractal mnemopoetics which reverberates characters, themes and structures across canons and cultures. Its subterranean lineage of violent resistance as well as its multi-layered, undercurrent intertextuality reveal the presence of "ambiguous ancestors": at the fictional level, the African infanticide and Grannie Lou represent an ambivalent ancestry, both destructive and symbols of cultural continuity, and at the structural level, the Greek tragedy and its mythic archetypal figures suggest an ontological fatalism undermined, and at the same time confirmed, by the ambiguity of the play's final "cry and anguish" "in the bright sunshine"(95) of a New Day.[3]

In a similar but acknowledged dramatic "allomnesia," we shall see that Rita Dove re-appropriates the ontological and thematic structure of Greek tragedy and deciphers, in the interstices of the Oedipus myth, the "incestuous" struggle for recognition and autonomy which characterises the American "problem of the color-line" (Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk* 221). *It's Mornin'* mainly focuses on the interaction and division within the black community, a psychic and expressive line separating the tellable from the unspeakable and unspoken. But whereas Graham's play attempts to "withdraw the veil" (Lydia Maria Child) hiding the repressed humiliation of violation in "veiled" but significant allusions, Dove's play of incestuous, interracial love rips another symbolic "veil," the "Veil of Race" (Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk* 265) or "Veil of Color" (*Ibid.* 346), Du Bois's metaphor for the division between blacks and whites in American society.

[3] Graham wrote *It's Mornin'* in 1939-1940, a period of black political militancy against segregation in the military and defense industries. The ambivalence of the last scene may reflect her deep skepticism about a second war to make the world safe for democracy while the US, by virtue of its domestic policies, had not yet assured all of its citizens equal protection under the Constitution. It may also suggest that in the struggle against injustice, liberation requires such sacrifices that the final victory is forever bound to memories of loss and suffering.

Ambivalent Tragedy

Cross-Cultural Poetics in Rita Dove's *The Darker Face of the Earth* (1994-1996)

In his lecture "Poetry and Drama" delivered at Harvard in 1950, T.S. Eliot suggests that "if we are to have a poetic drama, it is more likely to come from poets learning how to write plays, than from skilful prose dramatists learning to write poetry [because only poets could envision this] mirage of the perfection of verse drama, which would be a design of human action and of words, such as to present at once the two aspects of dramatic and musical order" (Eliot, "Poetry and Drama" 43). The African American poet Rita Dove's first play, *The Darker Face of the Earth*, reflects in many ways Eliot's conception of a "perfect verse play," and at the same time reaches beyond the function Eliot ascribes to art of "imposing a credible order upon ordinary reality" (*Ibid.*). Indeed, Dove's poetic imagination fluctuates between a desire to uphold the ontological structure underlying Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, i.e. the inevitability of fate and man's powerlessness to change its course, and a readiness to subvert the essential inexorability of the Greek model. Instead of "imposing a credible order upon ordinary reality," Dove collapses the cultural and racial categories embedded within the American reality of slavery, introducing, through style and plot, a transformative chaos which remains creatively open and unresolved at the end of the play.

Like Shirley Graham's *It's Mornin'*, Dove's play uses the structural and archetypal frame of the Greek tragedy and, by injecting African American aesthetic and historical referents, discloses underlying "structures of feeling." According to Raymond Williams, "a structure of feeling" reflects "the continuity of experience from a particular work, through its particular form, to its recognition as a general form, and then the relation of this general form to a period [and ultimately] a formation of [new responses, interests and perceptions] into a new way of seeing ourselves in our world" (Williams, *Drama from Ibsen to Brecht* 17). Dove's "undigested 'idea' or philosophy, the idea-emotion, is to be found in a poetic drama […] which [is a] conscientious attempt […] to adapt a true structure, Athenian [in this case], to contemporary feeling" (Eliot, "Possibility of a Poetic Drama" 67). By focusing on the play's stylistic and thematic fields of poetic variations, I wish to unravel some

of the mnemopoetic strategies Rita Dove uses to transform her Greek model into an African American tragedy of origins which can be said to contribute to the definition of a cultural ethos that relies on the re-creative power of imagination to offer a "prophetic vision of the past" (Glissant, *Monsieur Toussaint* 9).

For the sake of clarity, I have used the completely revised edition of *The Darker Face of the Earth* published by Storyline Press in 1996. The first edition of *The Darker Face of the Earth* was published in 1994 as "a verse play in fourteen scenes" illustrated by Mark Wooley. In November 1995, Derek Walcott directed a dramatic reading of the play at the 92nd Street "Y" theatre in NYC, which considerably influenced Rita Dove's final revisions. The initial fourteen scenes of the play were recast into a prologue followed by two acts, each divided into eight scenes. She suppressed the long narrative monologues and reduced the cast. She gave the main white female character, Amalia, a more humane dimension. She transformed the pessimistic ending into a fleeting vision of hope and introduced a slave woman/narrator (in reminiscence of the Greek chorus) whose poetic visions in verse close most of the scenes. She incorporated more spirituals and African rhythms so that each scene echoes with different chants. She added a dream sequence opening the second act, in which the constellation of characters appear as silhouettes prophesying the final catastrophe in a heightened and condensed poetic litany. Walcott's subtle influence can, I believe, be felt in these changes, which give the play a lighter and more lyrical texture while at the same time relieving it of long poetic but inherently undramatic outbursts which mar the original version. The introduction of an inconclusive vision of hope at the end and the insistence on a quest for cultural identity based on syncretic formulations are also intriguingly reminiscent of Walcott's own drama.

The Darker Face of the Earth follows the archetypal pattern but not the story line of *Oedipus Rex*. Sophocles' tragedy begins with the vision of an enlightened monarch, Oedipus, who is a "stranger" to the city he rules, Thebes, but who has been granted the widow of the former king in marriage as a reward for unravelling the riddle of the murderous Sphinx some decades earlier. It opens with a vision of harmony and order disrupted by a plague which ravages the city and reveals that the events prefigured in the omen have in fact taken place: Oedipus has killed his father and has married his mother. Dove's play begins with the birth of the Oedipus figure, Augustus, son of an African slave, Hector, and of his master's daughter Amalia Jennings. The prologue opens with the gathering of the slaves in front of the "Big House" waiting to hear the new-born's first cry. "Nothing but trouble, I tell you/ Nothing but trouble" (15) the slave Alexander foresees, followed by the slave Scylla,

the Tiresias figure, who in a spontaneous revelation of conjure power, feels Amalia's birth pains, and has a vision of

> horses snorting as they galloped
> through slave cabin and pillared mansion,
> horses whinnying as they trampled
> everything in their path.
> Like a thin black net, the curse settled over the land. (36)

Scylla somatises the "curse," her back becomes stooped and her language turns into a series of riddles, which transforms her into both a seer and a Sphinx figure. Amalia is forced to cut all ties with her new-born dark-skinned son. She abandons him in a sewing basket into which her husband, Louis LaFarge, has slipped spurs intended to kill the baby who is secretly brought to Charleston, and news of his death is spread throughout the plantation. Hector goes mad over the loss of his son, retreats into the surrounding swamps where "he lives alone and catches snakes" (38). There "he appears more African" (52) and speaks in Yoruba. While Amalia suppresses all her feelings and becomes the ruthless ruler of the plantation, her husband turns his back on humanity and devotes himself to astronomy and his obsessive ambition to discover a new star.

Dove recreates the dramaturgical structure of Greek drama by introducing the coryphaeus, a "woman/narrator" who comments on and prefigures the progression of the play accompanied by a chorus of "humming" slaves (31), which is "detached and omnipresent" (10). The prologue presents the origin of the curse that will destroy the existing order: the attempted murder of the symbolic child who is not the consequence of a rape but the fruit of forbidden love. The archetypal significance of the story is reflected in Louis LaFarge's scrutinising of the sky as he searches for something to restore meaning to his existence and justify his belief that "the stars can tell you everything –/ war and pestilence. Love and betrayal" (147). In the emptiness of his life, he searches for a hidden dimension of understanding, and his discovery that "what once was a void/ fills with feverish matter" (121) reflects the contraction of time and space embodied in the still invisible but inexorably unfolding "curse."

After the prologue, time moves twenty years forward to the play's present in 1840, when Augustus Newcastle, having survived the attempted infanticide, returns to the Jennings plantation as a new slave with the reputation of being "an educated nigger" with "twenty-two acts of aggression and rebellion" (43). Fascinated by the beauty and the subversive spirit of her new slave, Amalia seduces him in an obverse figuration of the trope of "the tragic mulatta," "an old story" (59): the

"tall, handsome young man with caramel-toned skin" (46) embodies the wild sexuality attributed to African men ("What's the only thing/ white folk think/ a nigger buck's good for?/ It wouldn't be the first time" 108) and his ambivalent lineage confuses racial categories:

AUGUSTUS Shadows are kind to niggers.
AMALIA You're not a nigger!
AUGUSTUS (catching her hand by the wrist)
Yes I am, Amalia.
Best not forget that. (126)

But his education and mixed blood induce no desire in him to assimilate within white culture – if his blood is "tainted," it is the white taint that causes him trouble. Amalia's love allows her to regain some humanity and even to defy once again the existing order:

AUGUSTUS And I'm your slave.
Nothing has changed that.
AMALIA (putting her hand to his mouth; AUGUSTUS withdraws but only slightly)
Shh! If this is all the world they've left us,
then it's ours to make over. (127)

The dialogue between master and slave is also a dialogue between lovers and a hidden mother/child exchange. It condemns and rejects the violence of the slavery system but the "socio-political love story" (St Hill, "Curtain Call" 32) between Amalia and Augustus represents at the same time a secret affirmation of the intimate bonds created precisely by and against that violence. It reveals an inherent tension that is only resolved through a repetition of sacrifice at the end.

Augustus becomes involved in a conspiracy between slaves and freedmen, and he spreads a spirit of revolt among the slaves of the plantation and encounters resistance from the conjure woman Scylla who claims that there is "something […] foul in his blood […] that nigger's headed for destruction,/ and you're all headed there with him" (111). His involvement with the conspirators is discovered by Hector who fears for Amalia's life. Seated on "a gigantic tree trunk […] festoon[ed] with moss" (112), an elemental throne for a "king" (117), he threatens to expose the conspiracy. In a moment of panic, Augustus strangles him in "a fierce struggle" as Hector has "a vision from his childhood in Africa" (119): "The huts… the boats…/ blood in the water" (119). The swamp and his imminent death bring back the repressed memories of the dismembering moment in Africa, a violent hurling back to his roots and the original dislocation. Significantly, it is "under a clump of moss and exposed roots" (119) that the son buries his murdered father.

The slave insurrection follows its course and Augustus is forced by his fellow conspirators to kill the planters. He storms into Louis's study and confronts him, believing he is his father. He stabs him and rushes to Amalia's bedroom where the truth about his origins is disclosed:

AMALIA So you want to know who your mother is?
You think, if I tell you,
the sad tale of your life
will find its story book ending?
Well then, this will be my last story –
and when I have finished,
you will wish you have never
stroked my hair or kissed my mouth.
You will wish you had no eyes to see
or ears to hear. You will wish
you had never been born. (155)

Torn between love and a newly gained freedom, Augustus is unable to prevent Amalia from stabbing herself. The curse has gone full circle and Augustus utters his dead father's own anguished cry in Yoruba "Eshu Elewa ogo gbogbo" (160), an incantatory formula to the god Eshu Elegba, the liminal divinity of transition between the world of the living and the realm of the dead. At this very moment, the slaves storm into the room, credit him with the murder of Amalia and raise him as a hero. The play ends with the image of Scylla setting the house on fire in a final act of purification "as she slowly straightens up to her full height" (162). The year is 1840, we know the rebellion will fail, but the final vision is one of fleeting hope and freedom, which reflects the author's "bitter optimism":

> What should one think about – a brilliant defeat? Augustus has become a role model, but he is also dead. I think of Medgar Evers and Emmet Till, and Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr. – throughout history, heroes get destroyed. (Dove, qtd. in Steffen, "*The Darker Face of the Earth*. A Conversation" 116)

At the meta-textual level, the cyclical repetition of doomed heroism is reflected in the inexorable circularity of the Jennings curse: "Stepped on a pin, the pin bent,/ and that's the way the story went" (13, 157). The inherent sterility of cyclical destruction is embodied in the two African characters' transformation: Scylla's "womb dried up" (37) and Hector "ate dirt like a worm" when he learnt of his baby's supposed death – an abortive remedy among female slaves, which is re-appropriated in a symbolic gesture of castration and further emphasised by his endeavour to kill all the snakes in the swamp. Augustus' return like "a worm crawling into its hole" (158) reiterates the sexual literal and metaphori-

cal association between sterility and reconciling union, destruction and the fleeting creation of a new social order.

To the archetypal, Oedipal killing of the father and possession of the mother correspond another deconstruction and appropriation of archetypal founding texts and metaphors. The ambivalent mechanism of the destruction and at the same time "embracing" of the father's (sexual) authority to gain individual freedom can be perceived in the destructive and creative literary process that sustains Dove's revisionary project. As Wilson Harris puts it, "the crucial problem for the modern poet […] is to visualise a structure which is, at one and the same time, a structure of freedom and a structure of authority" (Harris, "Place of the Poet" 5). The interpretative absorbency of Greek myths and their theatrical inscription in the tragedy allow the "modern poet" to explore poetic sites and repositories of ambiguous meanings particularly open to revision. The elusive, multifaceted and shifting quality of myths is symbolised by Louis LaFarge's cosmic obsession: "Scientists calculate that the twelve houses of the zodiac have shifted so radically since ancient times, their relation to each other may now signify completely different portents" (95). Beyond the "authoritarianism" of borrowed archetypal and structural frames lies a turmoil of mutating references, "feverish matter," the articulation of which in the multi-layered African American historical and cultural fabric generates a visionary "freedom" of re-creation. Instead of looking for cosmological order and continuity, LaFarge discovers recurrent discontinuities within cosmic order. Similarly, Dove injects disjunctive elements into the ontological order of the Greek structure and infiltrates it with cultural discontinuities which fuse, integrate and enrich it with new meanings.

Thus, Dove's play merges the original Greek lines with Yoruba incantatory words and African percussion, African American dialectal idioms and gospel songs, blank and rhyming verse, dumb shows and *tableaux vivants*, the Afro-Atlantic legend of the Flying African and the fairy tale of a dying princess, the Afro-Atlantic "passing" ceremony of burial with voodoo incantations. This juxtaposition of a variety of cultural forms collapses fixed categories and weaves a web of connections across scattered sensibilities:

SLAVES They have bowed our heads,
they have bent our backs.
Mercy, mercy,
Lord above, mercy.
[…]
Sometimes I feel like a motherless child,
[…]

SCYLLA There's a curse on the land.
The net draws closer.
[…]
HECTOR Eshu Elewa ogo gbogbo. (94-96)

This passage exemplifies the tension between African, European and African American utterances. Its juxtaposed semantic layers re-enact the conflicting interpenetration of cultures that mark the New World as a historical entity. However, Rita Dove eschews the artificiality of a mere collage of culturally diverse expressions, arranging her elements into a polyphonic call-and-response pattern which discloses their intrinsic connections: the Yoruba invocation of Eshu blurs with a Christian spiritual song echoing the suffering of the "motherless child" afflicted by a curse prophesied by a slave conjure woman in the words of the Greek text.

Augustus' archetypal nature also reveals cross-cultural connections. He is "the Savior" (110), the blessed child found in a basket, a New World Moses leading his people to the Promised Land of freedom but only glimpsing it from afar, leaving the following generations to continue the struggle. He is also an exile and sea wanderer, like Ulysses. He was raised by a sea-captain; he witnessed the Haitian Revolution and was educated and introduced to "Milton. The Bible./ And the Tales of the Greeks" (83). His condition as a slave, who survives cruelly prolonged flagellations, also brands him as a Promethean figure. He is also associated with the devil (107), perhaps in the Miltonian sense of a rebellious son suffering in his exile from Paradise. He could also be associated with the African trickster figure who manages to survive through cunning and deceit and represents in Afro-Atlantic folklore the spiritual connection with Africa.

As the child of an interracial couple in the Deep South, he is also inscribed in the literary tradition of the "Tragic Mulatto" which, according to Werner Sollors (Sollors, *Neither Black nor White* 239) appeared early in the 19th century and was theorised for the first time as a literary stereotype by Sterling A. Brown in 1933 in the article "Negro Characters as Seen by White Authors." Brown analyses the perverse racialism inherent in the construction of the "Tragic Mulatto":

> The mulatto is a victim of a divided inheritance; from his white blood come his intellectual strivings, his unwillingness to be a slave; from his Negro blood come his baser emotional urges, his indolence, his savagery […] He is a man 'without a race' worshipping the whites and despised by them, despising and despised by Negroes, perplexed by his struggle to unite a white intellect with black sensuousness. (Brown "Negro Characters" 160, 161, qtd. In Sollors, *Neither Black nor White* 224)

Augustus evinces the stereotypical rebelliousness of the "Tragic Mulatto," from his intellectual allegiance to his former master and captain come his "intellectual strivings" and sense of superiority, his "sensuousness" causes his incestuous downfall. A superficial interpretation of Augustus as a "Tragic Mulatto"[1] would suggest that he is dependent upon his white ancestry for positive traits and his African heritage for negative ones. A closer analysis rather suggests that his "sensuous" attraction to Amalia is not construed as a dubious sexual fantasy partaking of the power struggle between master and slave. Indeed, their intimacy catalyses not only tragedy but also a hopeful vision of love unfettered by racial hierarchies.

His outspoken identification as a black man, his sophisticated education and his rebelliousness also link him to Robert Norwood/Lewis, the "Tragic Mulatto" figure in Langston Hughes's *Mulatto*. Robert's and Augustus' learning experience away from the plantation world endows them with a self-consciousness which leads them to claim their rightful place in a society that scorns and oppresses them. Parricide is seen by both as the ultimate gesture of revenge which proves fateful and misguided. Robert shoots himself to avoid being lynched by a white mob, whereas a dumbstruck Augustus is victoriously carried by a crowd of freed slaves like a sacrificed scapegoat after Amalia has committed suicide. But Augustus' cross-cultural ancestries and his incarnation as a potential site of transracial reconciliation give him a much richer texture than Hughes's "Tragic Mulatto." Furthermore, Augustus' intellectual heritage proves destructive but his appropriation of Hector's Yoruba incantation as an intuitive identity formula reveals a subterranean continuity of cultural recognition.

His inscription in an undercurrent, dialogic intertextuality is strikingly visualised in the following scene:

> AMALIA (thrusting the book she's been reading at him)
> See the blue ribbon sticking out?
> You may start there.
>
> (AUGUSTUS turns the book over to read the title, then looks at her for a moment before returning it. She snatches the book.)
>
> AMALIA Too difficult? No doubt you'd do better with the Greek original –
> […]
>
> AUGUSTUS No pretense [*sic*]. I've read that one already.
> In my opinion, the Greeks were a bit too predictable. (83-84)

[1] The tradition of the "Tragic Mulatto" in African American drama includes Myrtle Smith Livingston's *For Unborn Children* (1926), Langston Hughes's *Mulatto* (1935), Alice Childress's *Wedding Band* (1966) and Adrienne Kennedy's *Funnyhouse of a Negro* (1964) and *The Owl Answers* (1965).

Oedipus' blindness is transferred to Augustus' refusal to read aloud his own story in what is probably a *mise en abyme* of the play reading itself in an English translation of Sophocles' text. The book reproducing itself in a "translation" across two languages and cultures or the "Book of Redemption" holding the names of the rebellious and doomed slaves reveal a significant insistence on the symbolic dimension of the written word echoing across space and time. *The Darker Face of the Earth* is indeed inscribed in a continuity of written traditions, from "Milton [to] the tales of the Greeks," but the Afro-Atlantic tragedy it envisions is also written onto the slaves' bodies, Scylla's hunched back and Augustus' scarred body.

The double curse, slavery and the attempted infanticide, is inscribed onto Augustus' lashed back which "is like a book/ no one can bear to read to the end" (129) while his side shows "magical markings" (129), "scars [left by the spurs] […] like crowns…/ or exploding suns" (154). The stooped conjure woman Scylla reads his "body" and in a metonymic twist prophesies "you can't escape./ You are in your skin wherever you go" (135). These somatic expressions of doom associated with a book, a crown, and the sun clearly point to the meta-theatrical dimension of the text, which is inscribed in a literary continuity that it seeks to recognise and "explode" at the same time. The Theban king in exile becomes the wandering slave with "the name of a king" (47), while the symbolic significance of Oedipus' pierced feet is transposed into the socio-historical meaning of the slave's scarred torso, and the image of the sun associated with Phoebe's dark omen at Delphi is transformed into a metaphor of freedom in a dark age. This reversal of symbolic meaning reflects Dove's attempt to subvert the Greek model by offering inverted metaphorical correspondences.

Whereas the Greek tragedy revolves around a curse arbitrarily set upon a household by supernatural forces and then unleashed by Oedipus' "tragic flaw," his hubris, Dove interprets the power of the divine scheme as the perversion of a social order which turns love and reconciliation into an "unnatural" (17) act of miscegenation. It might be argued that Dove remains faithful to the ontological structure of the Greek tragedy (i.e. the belief in the inevitability of fate as well as the vision of man as unfree and subjected to uncontrollable forces – external, supernatural or social power and/or internal, tragic flaw) which she acknowledges when she states that "rarely in our history has there been a system that fostered such a sense of futility–a futility analogous, in many ways, to the Greek concept of fate" (Dove, qtd. in Howard, "*Mother Love*" 349). Like Oedipus, Augustus and Amalia are doomed for reasons that predate their own existence, the intrinsically evil nature of the "peculiar institution," "the curse of the land" (Faulkner, "The

Bear" 312, 330); but it is the "tragic flaws" of their characters, their pride and the destructive power of their bitterness, which allow the curse to come true. This reading, however, does not seem entirely satisfactory, even if it seems to be confirmed by the author herself, and I would like to suggest another perspective which implicates the text in a much deeper process of cross-cultural dialogue on the very notion of tragedy.

It is the attempted murder of the child of reconciliation, the outrage inflicted upon a sacred being which precipitates disaster. The African Hector and the American Amalia symbolise the birth of a new society embodied in their child, a "cultural mulatto" (Pereira, "'When the pear blossoms'" 198), the African American offspring richly endowed with a double heritage. They embody the utopian resolution of the incestuous American conflict of race as they willingly join in their separateness to produce an uneasy alliance "cursed" by the system that deems it "unnatural." Recurrent images of the Garden of Eden and visions of harmony punctuate Amalia's recollections of her happy childhood with Hector. They represent the utopian first encounter between two worlds, which turned into a catastrophe that could be reversed through a new and incestuous union. The curse which hovers over them could be seen as an inevitable outburst of both love and violence which would purge a corrupt society and open the way to regeneration. The initial doom is transfigured into the necessary sacrifice of individuals through which a community can be raised to another level of consciousness. The unfolding of the curse which brings death and destruction also leads to a new awareness of freedom to be achieved beyond the temporal limits of the play. Against the Greek notion of a destructive curse befalling individuals with a moral weakness, Dove seems to propose a creative and constructive conception of a redemptive curse which strikes certain blessed individuals capable of understanding how an existing order may be transformed without reverting to former conditions. In opposition to the idea of a curse which must be expiated through the tragic hero's suffering, Dove offers the notion of a curse which includes its own redemption: the incestuous couple destroy and redeem its decaying world. Significantly, the unfolding of the curse parallels the preparation of the "Day of Redemption" (159), the general slave insurrection. Augustus must sign his name in "the Book of Redemption" (72) held by the conspirators, a double inscription that places him both at the centre of the liberation process and in the line of the "fires of Redemption" (74) which will reveal his origin and kill his mother.

Both Amalia and Augustus betray their ideals at some point: Amalia reverts to the role of the cruel plantation owner out of despair; Augustus collaborates with the slave trade when he works as a sailor for a master he loves and admires. Both show this moral ambiguity which character-

ises the weakness of tragic heroes, but they also embody the ultimate vision of reconciliation. The ambivalence of the doomed union (combining as it does love and defiance) is reflected in the incestuous couple's function in the play as agents of destruction who, at the same time, catalyse a new liberating consciousness. So, unlike Oedipus whose sacrifice cleanses the city and maintains the political order, Augustus personifies Wole Soyinka's vision of tragedy as a recurrent cycle of destruction and creation, which lies at the heart of Yoruba metaphysics. Though we do not have any explicit acknowledgement of Soyinka's influence on Dove's revision of Greek tragedy, her conception of a tragic hero blending archetypal ancestries and embodying the essential creative/destructive principle is strikingly reminiscent of the "Dionysian-Apollonian-Promethean essence of Ogun" (Soyinka, "Fourth Stage" 158-159), the Yoruba god of iron whom Soyinka considers as the embodiment of the Yoruba tragic spirit. It is very tempting to view Dove's play as the site of literary debate between two conceptions of tragedy, the Greek notion of the powerlessness of man within a firmly established order and Soyinka's perspective that recognises the existence of free will within a system of merging contradictions and perpetual change.

Rita Dove's syncretic treatment of Sophocles' tragedy creates an overarching discursive setting in which the Greek text is imaginatively stretched and ultimately transformed by the "black Atlantic" world. As she explains, "the ancient Greek tradition and the ancient African traditions are not that far apart, you find a lot of cross-fertilisation" (Dove, qtd. in St Hill, "Curtain Call" 32). *The Darker Face of the Earth* expands Sophocles' geographical topoi to Africa and the New World and inserts in the interstices of the original text the Yoruba metaphysical conception of time and human existence based on the "principles of continuity inherent in myths of origin, secular or cosmic" (Soyinka, "Morality and Aesthetics" 11), i.e. the fluid movement of transition between "the various realms of existence […] ancestor, living and unborn" (*Ibid.* 4). Three passages translate Dove's harping on Yoruba retention in the Afro-Atlantic culture, which partakes of her poetic articulation of imaginative continuity and cross-currents running like "an unbroken thread […] throughout humanity" (Harris, "Judgement and Dream" 26). The first one is the voodoo ceremony Scylla performs to "purge" Phoebe of her rebellious spirit. In a precise and detailed description of ritualistic dramaturgy, the scene evinces a theatricality and a self-reflexive pattern of riddled formula which also translate the dynamic of cultural repetitions and creative variations across space and time: "The body moves through the world […]. The mind rests in the body […]. You have tried to snatch words back form the air" (53, 55).

The ceremony is interspersed with mysterious incantations in Yoruba, ritual calls to the ancestral spirits to understand the present. The permanence of the "mind" within a dynamic movement of dislocation and relocation reflects the fluidity of the imagination ceaselessly enriching and remaking itself through, and despite, cultural ruptures. Dove's revision of Greek tragedy "snatches words back from the air" in an assimilatory process of cultural re-figuration. Hector's burial ceremony also blends multiple layers of cultural influences: the " ritual of passing," i.e. "the youngest child of the deceased is passed under and over the coffin to signify the continuity of life" (132), is accompanied by spiritual songs and Yoruba incantations to Eshu, the god of transition. Hector's spirit "fl[ies] on the wind" (135) revived by the mourners, a "poor people [that has] lost [its] wings" (136). The legend of the Flying African going back to Africa and leaving his dislocated kin behind in the New World is actualised in a mixture of Afro-Atlantic and Yoruba references, a repetitive variation and at the same time a "mournful" fading away of "the old words […] scattered by the wind" (136). The last allusion to Yoruba metaphysics is veiled and perhaps even accidental. Louis LaFarge's cosmological obsession indeed translates the intimate connection between the cosmic order and his life's disorder, of which he desperately tries to make sense. The intrusion of cosmic correspondences in the mythical texture of Dove's play is strongly reminiscent of Soyinka's perception of men, gods, spirits, and nature as existing within a "cosmic totality" where man "possess[es] a consciousness in which his own earth being, his gravity bound apprehension of self [is] inseparable from the entire cosmic phenomenon" (Soyinka, "Morality and Aesthetics" 3). The vision of a cosmic totality encompassing opposite essences and ontologies includes the envisioning of the discrete, individual elements of this totality as intimately linked to one another. The mythic blurs with the historical, the divine with the mortal, the archetypal with the individual, fate with human will, destruction with creation. This conflation of opposites in rhythmic variations of cultural blends lies a the heart of Dove's revisionary project.

With its kaleidoscope of shifting images, symbols, archetypes and styles, *The Darker Face of the Earth* suggests T.S. Eliot's "historical sense, which is a sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal and of the timeless and of the temporal together" (Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent" 49). The play articulates "a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence" (*Ibid.*) as well as its multiple fractures and correspondences. If we expand Eliot's definition of tradition across cultures and continents, we can say that Rita Dove is a "traditional" writer since the "historical sense compels [her] to write not merely with [her] own generation in [her] bones, but with a feeling that

the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of [her] own country [and the whole of the Black diasporic culture, oral and written] has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order" (*Ibid.*). If "order" means subterranean currents of cultural accretions and transformations, if it reflects an underlying structure of connections across cultural boundaries, then Rita Dove's poetics, just like Louis LaFarge's perception of the cosmos, achieves "order" within the turmoil of its shifting references. These references form the "particular medium […] in which impressions and experiences combine in peculiar and unexpected ways" (*Ibid.* 56). The development of this "poétique du divers" (Glissant, *Introduction à une poétique du divers*) might then be seen not as "a continual extinction of personality, […] a continual surrender [of the poet] as he[she] is at the moment [of enriching the tradition]" (Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent" 52-53) but as a process of self-definition which expands on the page. Dove's "sense of tradition" is thus bound to a process of subjective "re-personalization" through the fusion of scattered cultural fragments which ultimately shape the "substantial unity of the [African American] soul" (*Ibid.* 58).

The topomnesia of Graham's and Dove's plays centres on the plantation as a web of conflicting cultural and historical relations, which is woven into a specific spatial configuration. The plantation is thus seen as the site of destructive master-slave relationships as well as the matrix of ambivalent, intimate bonds across hierarchical and racial categories. The figure of the woman, slave or mistress, is representative of the cultural subtexts and silences to be retrieved and confronted to gain a new consciousness of creative potentialities within a destructive order. Unspeakability (Cissie's rape) and concealment (hidden child) are revealed as variations on the same trope of historical silence. Their resort to archetypal patterns of multiple, ambiguous meanings enables both playwrights to reinvent a "peculiar" and particular history(ies) through an exploration of myth and its variations on Greek tragedy. The Afro-Atlantic history of exile and slavery is figured in its mythical dimensions in a double act of mnemopoetic re-writing and re-visioning the original violence glossed over by the myths of Medea, Iphigenia and Oedipus. The two playwrights "as artist[s] choose [their] ancestors" (Ellison, *Shadow and Act* 140) beyond and through fixed notions of cultural belonging. They find a special kinship of history and metaphors in traditions generally conceived as separate: European classical Antiquity, Africa, Afro-America. They thus juxtapose strata of "ancestral" influences in a mnemopoetic gesture of appropriation and integration which cuts across cultural/genealogical (blood)lines. The "antagonistic co-operation" (*Ibid.* 143) between disparate traditions embraces both the

timelessness and archetypal qualities of mythical discourse and the inevitable historicity of slavery and the discrete, personal dimension of its stories. The two plays' variations on Greek tragedy and its particular use of myths include the crucial and highly ambiguous act of (self-)sacrifice. The sacrificial ritual becomes a reverberated rupture that creates or coincides with an opening through which history can be glimpsed in all its chaotic and contradictory complexity. It is precisely this artistic acknowledgement of "ambivalent ancestry" and historical contradictions that is evacuated in the Black Arts Aesthetics, which resorts to a nationalistic poetics of restored "purity." Kalamu ya Salaam's *Blk Love Song #1* and Amiri Baraka's *Slave Ship* similarly bring into play ritualistic elements and an incantatory rhetoric, but their artistic project centres on the creation of an Afrocentric "Revolutionary Theatre" purified of "white" culture, American or European.

RITUAL MNEMOPOLITICS

Black Arts Aesthetics

LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka and Val Ferdinand/Kalamu ya Salaam are representatives of the cultural nationalism which characterizes the Black Arts Movement (or Black Art) in the 1960s and 1970s. As "the aesthetic and spiritual sister" (Neal, "Black Arts" 257) of the Black Power Movement, it advocates an artistic, social and political militancy that concentrates on African American liberation from the alienating, degrading conditions enforced by the American economic and political system:

> The purpose of the black arts movement was to serve as the cultural arm of the new black power energies of the black American masses. The idea behind the black arts movement was to change all sounds, definitions, and codes of "art" as traditionally conceived in order to produce a "revolutionary" art of "the people." (Baker, *Long Black Song* XIV)

Represented by a wide range of political (and religious) beliefs ranging from revolutionary Marxism to the Nation of Islam, Black Power focuses on the right of African Americans to social, political and cultural self-determination. Its impulse derives from a collective, inner sense of the oneness of the Black people, and from the will to shake off the racist hegemony that has oppressed them for more than three centuries. From "Negro" objects of racist oppression, they cast themselves as Black subjects empowered by a new sense of social, political, cultural and existential agency.

"The serious black artist of today is at war with the American society" (Gayle, "Introduction" to *Black Aesthetic* XVII). The Black Aesthetic's credo of violence rests on a belief in the direct relation between revolution and art[1], action and word, "the pen which directs itself at the entire social matrix of upheaval" (Soyinka, "Drama and the Revolutionary Ideal" 75): "We want 'poems that kill.'/ Assassin poems, Poems that

[1] The artist's social and political commitment to a revolutionary cause by using art as a weapon echoes Artaud's call for "war" as the only possible stance for European intellectuals in the 1930s:
Nous ne sommes pas pour que dans un monde désorganisé les intellectuels se livrent à la spéculation pure. Et la tour d'ivoire nous ne savons plus ce que c'est. Nous sommes pour que les intellectuels entrent eux aussi dans leur époque; mais nous ne pensons pas qu'ils y puissent entrer autrement qu'en lui faisant la guerre. La guerre pour avoir la paix (Artaud, *Messages révolutionnaires* 39).

shoot/guns" (Baraka, "Black Art" 219). The ethnic radicalism and the verbal as well as physical violence of the Black Arts Movement relates to the revolutionary line of the Black Power Movement whose aggressive rhetoric is a response to the stagnating social conditions and the pervasive, violent racism of American society:

> It is important to emphasize this because of the very frequent accusations which are made against black American theater as being somewhat too strident, accusations which, as I say, are sometimes quite justified but which should always be judged within the depicted social context. (Soyinka, "Drama and the Revolutionary Ideal" 75)

African American resistance in the 1950s is a civil rights struggle which was mainly concentrated in the South and was led by non-violent leaders like Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). It emerged as an assertive and pacifist quest to broaden African American constitutional rights: sit-ins, marches, court cases and protest demonstrations were adopted as the main militant strategies. Faced with rising racist violence and repression, "blacks moved away from the Christian humility and Gandhian forbearance that marked the strategy of Martin Luther King" (Baker, *Journey Back* 80). Stokely Carmichael (now Kwame Toure), the President of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), created a potent slogan by coining the term Black Power as a "rally cry […] getting people together to represent their needs and to stop that oppression" (Carmichael, qtd. in Kaiser and Plosky, *Negro Almanach* 88). 1963 was the turning point of the Civil Rights Movement: Medgar Evers's assassination and the bombing of Birmingham's 16th Street Baptist Church, which killed four young girls, acted as violent counter-discursive recurrences undermining the peaceful, utopian stance of King's "I Have a Dream" speech. Another "major point of change for us came with John Kennedy's assassination. Kennedy for many of us, even unconsciously, represented something positive. The Kennedys *were* liberals" (Baraka, *Autobiography* 272). In the aftermath of this, in 1964, the Harlem Riot broke out after the shooting of a 15-year-old African American by an off-duty patrolman. In 1965, Malcolm X was shot in New York and the Watts Riot in Los Angeles killed 35 people including 28 African Americans. In 1967, murderous riots swept over the nation's black urban ghettos, especially in Newark and Detroit, and 66 people were killed, thousands arrested. In 1968, President Johnson's National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorder issued a report on the causes of the ghetto riots that disrupted the country the preceding year. The commission identified the major cause of the rioting as

> the existence of two separate societies in America, "one black, one white, separate and unequal." It charges that white racism, more than anything else,

> was the chief catalyst in the already explosive mixture of discrimination, poverty and frustration that ignited so many urban ghettos in the tragic summer of 1967. It reminds white America how deeply it is implicated in the existence of the ghetto. "White institutions created it, white institutions maintain it, and white society condones it." (Kaiser and Ploski, *Negro Almanach* 57)
>
> The assassinations of Luther King, Jr., in Memphis (April 4) and of Robert Kennedy in Los Angeles (June 5), the riots in Louisville, Cleveland and Miami, the growing opposition to the massive draft of African Americans (64% of eligible blacks against 31% of whites in 1967) for the Vietnam War, the rising importance of the Black Panther Party for Self-Defence and the trials of its leaders, marked 1968 as a peak of racial violence. The election of Richard Nixon and the victory of the conservative political forces with the rallying cry "Law and Order" brought about a slowdown in virtually all areas of civil rights enforcement and a wave of government-sanctioned repression eliminated most radical groups of black resistance.

The Black Power nationalist ideology generated a need to create structuring symbols and literary models which would establish new aesthetic standards, based on African American values and history, in opposition to white American and European cultural traditions: "The problem of the de-Americanization of black people lies at the heart of the Black Aesthetic [that] is a corrective – a means of helping black people out of the polluted mainstream of Americanism" (Gayle, "Introduction" to *The Black Aesthetic* XXI-XXII). The empowering effect of the Black Aesthetic arises out of a binary reversal of cultural representations, allied with a radical anti-white sensibility. An African American cultural ethos had thus to be made more than to be found: the Black Aesthetic is a conscious cultural and political construct mainly achieved through a fierce and heightened antagonism with white American society. By setting aesthetic criteria such as social uplift, cultural pride and political commitment, the Black Arts Movement fuses the powers of identity, representation and discourse into a single Black Aesthetic conceived as a weapon for general liberation. Since "it is impossible to construct anything meaningful within [the] decaying structure [of the Western aesthetic] […], the Black Arts Movement proposes a separate symbolism, mythology, critique, and iconology" (Neal, "Black Arts" 257):

> The Black artist must create new forms and new values, sing new songs (or purify old ones); and along with other Black authorities, he must create a new history, new symbols, myths and legends (and purify old ones by fire). (Knight, qtd. in Neal, "Black Arts" 258)

Black cultural nationalism generates a highly self-reflexive artistic attitude which blends imaginative creation and critical attention in a self-conscious attempt to re-define all traditional codes, forms and

concepts of art. Since literature and self-critique, fiction and self-definition converge to engender a Black artistic revolution, a mnemopoetic reading of Black Art's dramatic (re)presentations of history entails a double perspective that focuses on both the actual plays and the Black Aesthetic theories that underlie and feed them. By looking at selected Black Theatre productions through the lens of major Black Aestheticians' theoretical writings (such as Larry Neal, Amiri Baraka or Addison Gayle), patterns of fiction emerge and reveal dynamic regularities of concerns and stylistic explorations.

The revolutionary ethos of the Black Arts Movement lies in its articulation of "blackness" as the source of all creative inspiration. In this regard and to some limited extent, it owes its cultural nationalism to *Négritude*. In reaction against the "idea of European identity as a superior one in comparison with all the non-European peoples and cultures" (Said, *Orientalism* 7), the *Négritude* movement in the 1930s offered a counter-discursive, hyperbolic foregrounding of the virtues of blackness. The negritudinist essentialisation of blackness derives from a nostalgia for the idea of an original, superior African culture, which was disrupted by the destructive encounter with Europe. *Négritude* is thus ambiguously poised between a nostalgia for a prelapsarian purity which has a strong metaphysical resonance, and an acute, active consciousness entrenched in the diasporic history of black peoples. It is the latter dimension of *Négritude* which prevails in the Black Arts Movement as a poetics/politics of immediate action viewing itself as grounded in the socio-historical context of American history:

> history for the Negro, before America, must remain an emotional abstraction. The cultural memory of Africa informs the Negro's life in America, but it is impossible to separate it from its American transformation […]. At this point when the whole of Western society might go up in flames, the Negro remains an integral part of that society, but continually outside it. (Baraka, "Myth of a Negro Literature" 111, 114)

Baraka sees the marginality of African Americans both as a protection device that assures the more and more prominent superiority of the race, and as a survival strategy in the midst of white American "dying culture" (Neal, "Black Arts" 259): "If the Black Man cannot identify himself as separate, and understand what this means, he will perish along with Western Culture and the white man" (Baraka, "Legacy of Malcolm X" 247). The nationalist separatism of the Black Arts Movement derives from a sense of the urgency of cultural survival and revival, which yields an apocalyptic vision of a crumbling world and the socio-mystical envisioning of a Black Power held by the Black Elect: "I am a prophet of America's doom and I think all Black artists are those

prophets" (Baraka, qtd. in "Talking of Black Arts" 28). "Political integration in America will not work because the Black Man is played on by special forces […]. We are different *species*. A species that is evolving to world power and philosophical domination of the world" (Baraka, "Legacy of Malcolm X" 246). The Black Arts Movement rushes into the discursive space opened by *Négritude*, in which Black nationalism offers a counter – but equally hegemonic ideology expressed through a radical mnemopoetics of essentialised identity. The Black Aesthetic thus represents a hybrid mixture of Marxist-inspired revolutionary art, fuelled by social, economic, political and historical conditions, with a messianic vision of cultural redemption sustained by "new myths," experimental forms and rituals. The prophetic, ritualistic character of the Black Arts Movement is best exemplified in Baraka's concept of the Revolutionary Theatre:

> The Revolutionary Theatre should force change; it should be change. (All their faces turned into the lights and you work on them black nigger magic, and cleanse them at having seen ugliness. And if the beautiful see themselves, they will love themselves) […]. White men will cower before this theatre because it hates them […]. The Revolutionary Theatre must hate them for hating […]. The Revolutionary Theatre must teach them their deaths […]. It must Accuse and Attack because it is a theatre of Victims. (Baraka, "Revolutionary Theatre" 210-211)

Drama represents the cathartic tribunal where "whiteness" is exorcised with "black nigger magic," hate is used as a catalyst for self-love, oppressors are tried, found guilty and executed, and re(p-g)ressive historical stasis is exploded by the violence of theatrical expression. The Revolutionary Theatre "is a social theatre [and] a theatre of World Spirit" (*Ibid.* 212). It is a space of national and spiritual transformation where degeneration is exposed and regeneration proposed. Theatre is the communal arena where a collective black identity is perceived as a cluster of systemic relations determined by specific notions concerning race, class and the nation-state, and more importantly, where it can be reconstructed in its own terms. It is "a theatre of assault [calling for] actual explosions and actual brutality: AN EPIC IS CRUMBLING" (*Ibid.* 214). It also functions as a "Black Mass" (Baraka, *Black Mass*) where black "witch doctors and assassins […] call down the actual wrath of world spirit" (Baraka, "Revolutionary Theatre" 215). The Revolutionary Theatre is thus grounded in a secular will for social change as well as in a spiritual quest for cultural and existential assertion. Destruction is ritualised and cleansing sacrifice is made literal in a dialectical movement of actuality and metaphoricity.

As a catalyst of social change and a symbolic ritual of transition, the Revolutionary Theatre is situated at the juncture point between Brecht's

epic theatre and Artaud's *théâtre de la cruauté*. Augusto Boal defines the essence of Brecht's revolutionary poetics as a raising of social and political consciousness "preparing" the audience for action in "real life":

> La poétique de Brecht est celle des avant-gardes éclairées: on y montre un monde transformable et la transformation commence au théâtre même. Le spectateur ne délègue pas ses pouvoirs pour qu'on pense à sa place, même s'il continue à les déléguer pour qu'on joue à sa place. L'expérience est révélatrice au niveau de la conscience mais pas globalement au niveau de l'action. L'action dramatique éclaire l'action réelle. Le spectacle prépare à agir. (Boal, *Théâtre de l'opprimé* 48)

But if Brecht's epic theatre shows some similarities with the didactic, consciousness-raising goal of Baraka's Revolutionary Theatre, it also reacts against the expressionist drama's focus on emotion and abstract, anti-mimetic stage poetics, and appeals to the spectator's "reason" and logic to reflect upon the performance and its bearings on society. The Brechtian *V-Effekt* (alienation effect) collapses all psychological ties between performance and audience to induce a detached, critical perspective necessary for raising a social awareness of the world outside the theatre. Inhibiting dramaturgical devices such as songs, direct addresses to the public, slogans and "defamiliarising" decor are designed to break the "spell" of identification with the performance. Baraka's Revolutionary Theatre uses opposite dramaturgical means to strike its audience's consciousness. A total identification with the performance and the appeal to the imagination through ritual dramaturgy are required to reveal the essence of both soul and experience, the "Blackness" of a community unveiled through "black nigger magic" (Baraka, "Revolutionary Theatre" 210). Baraka's dramaturgy allies didacticism and ritualism, Brecht's revolutionary stance and an expressionistic emphasis on experimental, visual modes of representation devoid of the constraints of mimesis. In this sense, the Black Art's dramaturgical poetics is close to Artaud's conception of the *théâtre de la cruauté*.

As an extreme artistic reaction against the loss of spirituality in the Western world ("le point d'usure où notre sensibilité est parvenue," Artaud, *Théâtre et son double* 131) the *théâtre de la cruauté* goes back to Balinese or Mexican culture to rediscover an intuitive, metaphysical and ritualistic connection between art and life, "une liaison magique, atroce avec la réalité et le danger" (*Ibid.* 137). Drama represents a "dangerous" threshold of universal forces which both the performers and the audience must pass to achieve spiritual regeneration: "[le théâtre] entre fer en main dans le monde de la conscience, et pour que la révolution se fasse, d'abord, dans ce monde-là" (Artaud, *Messages révolutionnaires* 143). Similarly, Black Art is a "threshold" of change and potentialities,

a battle-field where "the first violence" for spiritual liberation from "useless, dead ideas" (Neal, "And Shine Swam On" 655) takes place:

> the first violence will be internal – the destruction of a weak spiritual self. But it will be a necessary violence. It is the only thing that will destroy the double-consciousness – the tension that is in the souls of black folk. (*Ibid.* 656)

"Consciousness" as the antechamber of revolution and "spirit [as] the most competent force in the world" (Baraka, "Revolutionary Theatre" 212) crystallise the artistic impulses of both the *théâtre de la cruauté* and the Revolutionary Theatre in a similar "sens de la vie renouvelé par le théâtre, et où l'homme impavidement se rend maître de ce qui n'est pas encore, et le fait naître" (Artaud, *Théâtre et son double* 19). To translate the "life" energies into a dramatic form, to represent "the holiness of life [as] the constant possibility of widening the consciousness" (Baraka, "Revolutionary Theatre" 211), the *théâtre de la cruauté* and the Black Theatre create "new and more exciting cosmologies, new ways of thinking about physical space, sound, light, and movement. Another vision" (Neal, "Toward a Relevant Black Theatre" 14). Both theatrical concepts "exige[nt] *l'expression dans l'espace*, la seule réelle en fait, [qui] permet aux moyens magiques de l'art et de la parole de s'exercer organiquement et dans leur entier, comme des exorcismes renouvelés" (Artaud, *Théâtre et son double* 137).

Artaud's vision of a stage of poetic, magic, mythical powers is not, however, confined to the aesthetic realm of theatrical revolution, it spurs "cette action immédiate et violente […] qui nous réveille: nerfs et coeur […]. C'est sur cette idée d'action poussée à bout [la cruauté], et extrême que le théâtre doit se renouveler" (*Ibid.* 131-132). In the Black Art's and Artaud's vision, theatre is conceived both as an "action immédiate et violente" that "moves to reshape the world" (Baraka, "Revolutionary Theatre" 212) and as a "black lab […] of the heart" (Baraka, "State/ meant" 252) where "nerfs et coeur" are awakened by "witch doctors" and "true scientists to expand […] consciousness" (Baraka, "Revolutionary Theatre" 215). "The Revolutionary Theatre must take dreams and give them reality" (Baraka, "Revolutionary Theatre" 211) just as Artaud considers the "liberté magique du songe" as a prelude and condition to its actualisation in consciousness and then as action:

> Nous voulons faire du théâtre une réalité à laquelle on puisse croire […] De même que nos rêves agissent sur nous et que la réalité agit sur nos rêves, nous pensons que nous pouvons identifier les images de la poésie à un rêve, qui sera efficace dans la mesure où il sera jeté avec la violence qu'il faut. (Artaud, *Théâtre et son double* 133)

Artaud's *théâtre de la cruauté* diagnoses the confusion of the 1930s as the symptom of a deadly materialist civilisation in a state of advanced degeneration. It envisions a return to the "primitive" and complex powers of rituals and myths to expose the conflicts and contradictions of the human mind and act upon them as healing "exorcisms." It is also deeply political since it grapples with clashing ideologies and searches for new spiritual and societal modes, as Artaud's *Messages révolutionnaires*, written in 1936 in Mexico,[2] attest. Stylistically and dramaturgically, his theoretical writings greatly influenced the Black Arts Movement and his vision of "un théâtre de masses […], plus qu'un théâtre social, un théâtre de l'angoisse humaine en réaction contre le destin" (Artaud, *Messages révolutionnaires* 70) prefigures Baraka's conception of a Revolutionary Theatre which collapses the historical determinism that maintained the African Americans in a state of prolonged social and psychological slavery:

> C'est le théâtre de la révolte humaine qui n'accepte pas la loi du destin, c'est un théâtre rempli de cris qui ne sont pas de peur mais de rage, et encore plus que de rage, du sentiment de la valeur de la vie. (*Ibid.*)

The Black Arts Movement's insistence upon Western decadence, "a dying creature, totally bereft of spirituality" (Neal, "And Shine Swam On" 648), and the need to eradicate it echoes Artaud's vision of

> la décomposition universelle d'un monde qui vit sur les fausses idées de la vie, que la Renaissance lui a laissées […]. Pour moi, la culture de l'Europe a fait faillite […]. Les Etats-Unis n'ont rien fait d'autre que de multiplier à l'infini la décadence et les vices de l'Europe […]. J'ajoute donc: il n'y a pas de révolution sans une révolution contre la culture de l'Europe, contre toutes les formes de l'esprit blanc, et je ne sépare pas l'esprit blanc des formes de civilisation blanche. (Artaud, *Messages révolutionnaires* 38, 72, 105, 145)

Baraka recognises the influence of Artaud's conception of a revolutionary theatre:

> Even as Artaud designed *The Conquest of Mexico*, so we must design *The Conquest of the White Eye*, and show the missionaries and wiggly Liberals dying under blasts of concrete […]. The Revolutionary Theatre must take dreams and give them a reality. It must isolate the ritual and historical cycles of reality. (Baraka, "Revolutionary Theatre" 211)

Artaud's adaptation of William H. Prescott's *The Conquest of Mexico* was intended to be the first production of the newly founded Théâtre de la Cruauté. It was presented in 1936 as a stage reading and, in a visionary perception of political and cultural tensions and their theatrical

[2] Mexico, at the time under a new Marxist rule, is described as "un chaos où les forces nouvelles d'un monde sont en ébullition" (Artaud, *Messages révolutionnaires* 82).

representation, prefigures the Black Arts Movement's understanding of revolution, "the conquest of the White Eye," as a collective necessity in the colonial world, including Black America:

> En posant la question terriblement actuelle de la colonisation et du droit qu'un continent croit avoir d'en asservir un autre, [*La Conquête du Mexique*] pose la question de la supériorité, réelle celle-là, de certaines races sur d'autres et montre la filiation interne qui relie le génie d'une race à des formes précises de civilisation. Elle oppose la tyrannique anarchie des colonisateurs à la profonde harmonie morale des futurs colonisés […]. De ce heurt du désordre moral et de l'anarchie catholique avec l'ordre païen, elle peut faire jaillir des conflagrations inouïes de forces et d'images, semées de-ci de-là de dialogues brutaux. Et ceci par des luttes d'homme à homme portant en eux comme des stigmates les idées les plus opposées. (Artaud, *Théâtre et son double* 196-197)

The violent rejection of European imperialism and the assertion of the moral superiority of the "future colonised'" in dramaturgical "conflagrations of forces and images" and "brutal dialogues" have obvious ideological and dramaturgical affinities with Baraka's Revolutionary Theatre.

The Manichaeism opposing the colonisers' "anarchy" and the colonised' harmonious, ethical supremacy has a strong resonance in the Black Arts Movement. Just as the Black Aesthetic can be seen as a nationalist radicalisation of *Négritude*, Black Power is a liberation movement grafted on the global decolonising thrust where nationalism functions as a general force of resistance:

> it is no longer a question of civil rights for Negroes; but rather, it is a question of national liberation for black America. That means that we see ourselves as a "colonized" people instead of as disenfranchised American citizens. That means that our struggle is one with the struggles of oppressed people everywhere, and we alone must decide what our stance will be toward those nations struggling to liberate themselves from colonial and neocolonial domination. (Neal, "Black Power" 137)

The conjunction of the resistance against imperialism in the United States and that in (post-)colonial societies shows "the Negro's struggle in America [as] only a microcosm of the struggle of the new countries all over the world" (Baraka, "'Black' Is a Country" 85), which echoes Harold Cruse's assertion that "from the beginning, the American Negro has existed as a colonial being" (Cruse, "Revolutionary Nationalism" 41). By locating itself among a constellation of resistance movements across the colonial world, Black Power disarticulates its essential signifier, "Blackness," out of the American code of racial discourse and rearticulates it as a sign of alliance with the peoples sharing a history sim-

ilarly branded by imperialism and racism. In this global context of resistance against "colonial and neocolonial domination," culture appears as an ongoing process of conflict and struggle over a people's existence and their positioning within and against their history of oppression: "Culture and the arts can be used to help bring the people to revolutionary positions" (Baraka, *Autobiography* 359). *Négritude*, the Black Arts Movement and the numerous artistic forms of resistance grouped under the umbrella term "post-colonial" translate, with various degrees of nationalist stridency, the simultaneous cultural and political struggle to create enduring identities at a moment of emerging self-determination.

"Nation," as a focus for resistance against imperial power in colonial societies, is transposed into the separatist concept of a black "*nation* within the belly of white America" (Neal, "Black Arts" 273), felt to be antagonistic and superior in vitality:

> Black People are a race, a culture, a Nation […]. If we are a separate Nation, we must take that separateness where we are. There are Black cities all over this white nation. Nations within nations. (Baraka, "Legacy of Malcolm X" 248)

Baraka sees his birthplace, Newark (which he renamed New Ark), as "*a colony*. A bankrupt, ugly colony, in the classic term, where white people make their money to take away with them" (Baraka, "Newark" 65, qtd. in Baker, *Journey Back* 102). This "strategic identification" (Baker, *Journey Back* 87) with the decolonising world opens a rhetorical space where revolutionary actions can be called for in the name of national "*independence*" (Baraka, "'Black' is a Country" 84), i.e. for the right to insure "*Lebensraum* ('living room') literally space in which to exist and develop" (Baraka, "Legacy of Malcolm X" 248). Since the concept of a "Black country" "purified" of the "white element" is a mental and demographic, but not a social nor a political, reality in the circumscribed space of the urban ghettos, Baraka calls for the taking over of

> these cities: Newark, Gary, Washington, Detroit, Richmond, Harlem, Oakland, East St Louis, Bedford-Stuyvesant, etc. any large concentration of Black People […] almost always disunified, but these are our kingdoms, and this is where we must first rule […]. The cities must be Black ruled or they will not be ruled at all! (Baraka, "Newark" 65, qtd. in Baker, *Journey Back* 65)

> Independence would then mean the existence of autonomous "Black ruled" enclaves within the United States, a separatism effective at the local level, but only envisioned at the national level in the utopian realm of "Black ideals." (Baraka, "Legacy of Malcolm X" 244)

Baraka's idea of nationhood rests on the empowerment of scattered Black communities. The Black nation is conceived as a cluster of autonomous communities controlled by "a Black politics, an ordering of the world that is beneficial to his [the Black man's] culture, to his interiorization and judgement of the world" (*Ibid.*). The discrepancy between Baraka's rhetorical and literary power and the vagueness of his political vision is striking. In the field of political rhetoric, exhorting as he does change and Black empowerment, Baraka appears as an ambiguous "calibanic Prospero": a superior "black magician […]" performing "black art/s […] in black labs of the heart" (Baraka, "State/meant" 252) and calling forth "the world of spirit." He is inspired as much by the Word as by the historical degradation and humiliation of his kin in a way that is ultimately lacking in political credibility. Even when he presents Malcolm X as the political and spiritual leader of the new Black Nation, his rhetoric remains confined to the abstract glorification of the "interior" "consciousness" or "spirit" of the Black community:

> Malcolm, then, wanted to give the National Consciousness its political embodiment, and send it out to influence the newly forming third world, in which this consciousness was to be included. The concept of Blackness, the concept of the National Consciousness, the proposal of a political (and diplomatic) form for this aggregate of Black spirit, these are the things given to us by Garvey, through Elijah Muhammad and finally given motion into still another area of Black response by Malcolm X […]. The Black Man is possessed by the energies of historic necessity and the bursting into flower of a National Black Cultural Consciousness, and with that, in a living future, the shouldering to Power of Black culture and, finally, Black Men and then Black ideals, which are different descriptions of a God. A righteous sanctity, out of which worlds are built. (Baraka, "Legacy of Malcolm X" 243-244)

Nation, culture and Blackness blend in a totality of existence, "the togetherness, the nation, the nationhood, the Being, the realization, the recognition of Self" (Macbeth, qtd. in "Black Ritual Theatre" 24), a "way of life as a whole" which holds the promise of communal self-realisation in interrelated processes of social, economic, political and aesthetic development:

> The essence (today we would say the essentialism) of the project [Black Art] resided in the assumed referential actuality of some thing (some essence) called BLACKNESS. Held to be a discoverable, analytical, and empirical reality, BLACKNESS came to signify a historical, experiential, and artistic reality that provided a unique cachet for black people's art and culture. (Baker, *Long Black Song* XIV)

But if "reality is directly involved, […] it is sublimated" (Fabre, *Drumbeats* 101) through a language of abstractions ("spirit," "energies," "consciousness," "ideals," "sanctity"…), indeed a paradoxical meta-

physics of action "sounding" the revolution more than expressing its programmatic strategies. Houston Baker, Jr., considers that Baraka's "ultimate goal is a new black humanism" (Baker, *Afro-American Poetics* 131). Baraka does indeed offer a vision of the "Black man" as a responsible subject in charge of his destiny and essential dignity, who sets forth to achieve "Black Consciousness," i.e. the consciousness of the worth of Black history and being, and self-realisation through the use of "reason." But "reason" here is devoid of the rationalism attached to traditional humanism. It is not posited as the highest faculty of the mind used to frame general conceptions or to apprehend universals. "Reason" as a mode of perception is equated with "Black spirit" and, as such, claims its subjective, intuitive and emotional components:

> [The Revolutionary Theatre] thus creates dialectical relationships between what it destroys and what it creates. On one side is the West, kingdom of rationality and technology. On the other side is the spirit, called soul or blackness, which breaks away from reason in order to save the world. (Fabre, *Drumbeats* 25)

To the "white" imperial hegemony, the Black Arts Movement opposes the supremacy of Blackness and claims its superiority over "Euro-American, Judeo-Christian […] decadism" (Baraka, qtd. in "Talking of Black Arts" 32). It exists only and fully through the obsessive rejection of "white" values and cultures. The Black Aesthetic is indeed an excrescence of European humanism in the sense that it constructs itself in opposition to an "Other" conceived as inferior and decadent, but with the major difference that, whereas European humanism was a consolidation of power in an expanding world, the Black Aesthetic represents a cultural redress whose radicalism functions as a counter-discursive reaction to a history of violent denial and exploitation.

So, even though politics, "ethics and aesthetics are one" (Baraka, "Revolutionary Theatre" 212), the Black Arts Movement definitely centres on the creation and development of a Black subjectivity and cultural agency, an "imagined community" (Anderson, *Imagined Communities* 15) that is unified and made visible through the power of:

> imagination (Image) [that] is all possibility, because from the image, the initial circumscribed energy, any use (idea) is possible. And so begins that image's use in the world. Possibility is what moves us. (Baraka, "Revolutionary Theatre" 213)

Poised between the simplistic rhetoric of nationalist claims and the creative power to summon "new images and myths that will liberate them [black people]" (Fuller, "New Black Literature" 327), Black Art evinces the self-proclaimed revolutionary art's tension between functionality and creativity, political commitment and aesthetic exploration.

Primarily destined to invent an empowered self-image that would relieve Black America from its social and moral misery, the Black Arts Movement provides the necessary "imagination (from image, magi, magic, magician etc.) […] a practical vector for the soul [which] stores all data, and can be called on to solve our 'problems'" (Baraka, "Revolutionary Theatre" 213): "The Black artist […] is desperately needed to change the images his people identify with by asserting Black feeling, Black mind, Black judgement" (Baraka, "Legacy of Malcolm X" 248). The "Black nation" is thus an imaginary construct whose existence and development depend on a "storage" of images, metaphors and fictions provided by the Black artist/"warrior" (*Ibid.* 247).

The Manichean tendencies of the Black Arts Movement, its connection to armed urban guerrilla and its subsequent branding as an "art of hatred" have obscured the artistic achievements that arose out of its fierce antagonisms. Its rhetoric "sounds" the ritualistic depth of the Black Consciousness in a flow of apocalyptic images, visions of redemption and reclaimed spirituality. It "articulate[s] strategies for advancing a national *sound* and *sounding* of New World experience" (Baker, "Our Lady" 179). It foregrounds "the pervasiveness of Black sound" (Neal, "Toward a Relevant Black Theatre" 14) and offers "another vision" (*Ibid.*). However, beyond the simplistic stridency of nationalist slogans lies a true exploration of the links connecting imaginary resources to the continuities and discontinuities of a social and political reality, and of those connecting the artist/prophet to his/her community in search of structuring symbols, rhetoric and (self-)images. To deprive Black Art of that ritualistic, mythopoeic and experimental dimension for the sole purpose of distilling from it the obvious essence of the movement's political and ideological commitments, would be myopic. Even if it can be "crude, [it] reflect[s] the uncertainty, the searching quality of its movement. But, though troubled and seeking, it is very, very vital" (Fuller, "New Black Literature" 327): "It was like Black America discovering its muscles and stretching them" (Wilson, "National Black Theater Festival, 1997" 484).

Amiri Baraka's *Slave Ship* (1967) and Kalamu ya Salaam's *Blk Love Song #1* (1969) were written in this context of radical racial polarisation, where the black population had been politically so aroused and explosive that it was ready to leap into open racial warfare. The essentialist logic of identity politics was transferred to a theatrical aesthetics which uses ritualistic violence to destroy "the white thing […] white ideas […] white ways of looking at the world" (Neal, "Black Arts" 258) and to exorcise the conflicts within "Black Consciousness." Both plays depend on a ritualistic mnemopoetics centred on the representation of the Middle Passage and slavery as the crucial moments of African "dis-articula-

tion," i.e. dislocation and rupture of self-representation. The ritual of "rememory" juxtaposes historical layers, from the "seed of Africa" (Salaam, *Blk Love Song #1* 436) to the contemporary moment of performance, in a growing acknowledgement of the intimate linking of past degradation, present stagnation and the necessity of revolution to create a viable future. Baraka's and Salaam's mnemopoetics blends a ritual representation of the violence of the slave past and the exhortation to revolution in the present through performed sacrificial killing or call for murder, thereby breaking down the cognitive and emotional barriers that keep historical victimisation safely in the past and theatrical performance safely on stage: "the theatre defines with symbols what in social rites is realized through concrete action" (Fabre, *Drumbeats* 101). In tune with the principles of the Revolutionary Theatre, Baraka's and Salaam's dramaturgy suggests an organic, intimate relation between the symbols and rites they exhume and their signification and concrete actualisation. The performed murder of the "Voice of the Eternal Oppressor" (Baraka, *Slave Ship* 368) calls for "violence, a literal murdering of the American socio-political stance" (Baraka, "What Does Nonviolence Mean?" 151). The Blk Man's urge to recognise the "sickness […] in ourselves and extract" it (Salaam, *Blk Love Song #1* 443) represents the play's exorcising ritual and at the same time a plea directed towards the audience. Through a dramaturgy of human sacrifice and exorcism, the mnemopoetics perceptible in both plays points to a ritual of re-creation through the return to the genesis of the Afro-Atlantic world, thereby suggesting to the Black community a new beginning in a reconfigured relation to its history. The Revolutionary Theatre stages history as a subterranean force (of inertia or as a dynamic cycle of recurrences violently re-directed to new configurations by a revolutionary impulse) materialised on stage by the artists' and the audience's "imagination." It offers a communal, ritualistic space of transition which is thought to be capable of creating "new relationships," new self-images, "new [artistic] constructs […] a surging new sound" (Neal, "And Shine Swam On" 653), as well as laying the foundations for a new and unique "Nation." Baraka's and Salaam's dramatic mnemopoetics of slavery thus expresses a nationalist mnemopolitics re-integrating the humiliations of the past in a violent, existential and social urge for redress in the present.

Phonomnesia

LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka's *Slave Ship* (1967)

Slave Ship was first produced in 1967, which is also the date of the text's publication (Jihad), at Baraka's theatre The Spirit House Movers in Newark. In 1978, Baraka inserted the play in his collection of plays *The Motion of History* which reflects his ideological shift from Black Power nationalism to "Marxism-Leninism-Mao Tse-tung Thought" (Baraka, "Introduction" to *Motion of History* 14). Baraka explains his choice of including a play of his earlier Black Art period by evoking the revolutionary spirit that pervades it:

> *Slave Ship* was written just before the Newark rebellion [1967 riot], and its impending explosion is the heat you feel. It is flatly nationalist and antiwhite […]. *Slave Ship* is a pageant, like my grandmother had in Bethany Baptist Church, with the old ladies dressed up in white sheets, telling the stories of Bible times. But this pageant is more a scenario, a hot note of rage to be expanded, so that the bitterness becomes an environment in which we can all learn to be ourselves, now […]. If we can bring back on ourselves, the absolute pain our people must have felt when they came to this shore, we are more ourselves again, and begin to put history back in our menu, and forget the propaganda of devils that they are not devils. (Baraka, "Introduction" to *Motion of History* 11-12)

Even though *Slave Ship* still belongs to the ideological trend that Baraka brands as the "petty bourgeois radicalism, nationalism" (*Ibid.* 13), it represents "one of the greatest breakthroughs in the use of emotional energy" (Neal, "Toward a Relevant Black Theatre" 14) and is possessed by a "rage" for form. It vibrates with an urge(ncy) to reclaim and re-present a history of suffering and endurance, survival and "impending rebellion." This is achieved through an experimental dramaturgy that fuses ritualistic patterns, such as exorcism and human sacrifice, with a literal representation of "blackness" (or a "blackness" of representation) which translates the Afro-Atlantic "passage" from darkness to the "heat" and light of liberating revolution. As a "historical pageant," the play consists in four main *tableaux vivants* which represent the original dislocation, then forced and degrading integration, failed rebellion and, finally, separation as liberation. It gravitates around the re-creation of the Middle Passage, a historical and dramaturgical axis spliced into

various images of degrading continuity: the "raggedy […] shuffling" (370) Uncle Tom, his betrayal of a slave rebellion led by Reverend Turner for a pork chop, his last incarnation as a Martin Luther King figure, a "preacher in modern business suit" (371) who soliloquises about "Kneegrows […] ready to integrate" (*Ibid.*). The final apocalypse dramatises the collective, sacrificial murder of the Tomish figure and the choking of the "Voice of the Eternal Oppressor," a destruction of the white world and its black mimics, and represents a revelation (in a pool of light "com[ing] up abruptly") of a new communal "Black spirit" in a collective "party" of "dance" and "loose improvisation" with the black audience (372). As Harry J. Elam, Jr., notices, "the sparse plot of *Slave Ship* flowed from slavery to civil rights, omitting any record of emancipation [which] implied that oppressive conditions for blacks had been continuous and were in need of immediate redress" (Elam, "Social Urgency" 23). Baraka thus emphasises the epic sweep of the racial memory activated by the "historical pageant," thereby trying to find a "Home" (Baraka, *Home*) amidst the fragments of a past branded by dislocation, slavery and a history of continued race and class inequities.

The definition of the play as a "historical pageant" suggests the performative enactment of a "nation in progress," a combination of the traditional ritual of official glorification of a nation's history and its unification through communal participation. *Slave Ship* functions as a dramatisation of Black nationhood that purports to summon a newly imagined nation through the restoration, even the revision of the past. Historical time is thus fragmented and recombined through a new association of images and stereotypes, as a way of underlining the continuity of racial oppression. The play reproduces residual practices of resistance, from the African warrior or the infanticide slave woman to the rebellious field slave, in order to induce a regained contestatory behaviour. As a pageant, it not only restores the past in a symbolic and reflexive (hence theatrical) performance, it also offers a transformative vision of the past in the configuration of models of resistance that provide the basis for the new national construct. The Middle Passage, New World slavery and the violence of segregation are marked as breaches in the development of the African American community. It is through the liminal character of the pageant that these breaches become bridges that reconnect the fragments of history to re-assemble the "Black Nation". Baraka's re-appropriation of the pageant also "Signifies" upon an ingrained tradition of didactic church and school pageants, which has been prominent in the African American theatre from Du Bois's *The Star of Ethiopia* (1913) to Dodson's *Amistad* (1939). Balanced between tradition and "revolution," between the iterative and the experimental, *Slave Ship* recapitulates and at the same time inaugurates

the advent of an essential(ised) Black identity, which has been obscured thus far by the legacy of oppression and denigration. As such, the pageant evinces a teleology of performance centred on a "subjunctive" awareness of Black nationhood, in that it aims to make possible a performative "rehearsal" of empowering potentialities. Following Jack David Eller's definition, African Americans

> are a nation *if* they can acquire the characteristics – and even more, the *consciousness* of nationhood […] nationhood is not only achieved but *subjective*, it is a "state of mind" (if you pardon the pun, which is a suggestive one), a will and a consciousness. It is, as Benedict Anderson phrases it, an *imagination*, not in the sense of falseness but of psychological creativity. In other words, if the "group" embraces a common myth and memory (whether or not it is "true" in the perfectly objective sense) and begins to act on the basis of shared rights, norms, and interests, then it becomes, it *is*, a nation. (Eller, "Ethnicity" 564)

The "historical pageant" reconstructs, interprets and "imagines" African American history from its "terrifying" birth to the "subjective" and subjunctive "birth of a nation." The development of such a "state of mind" is identified as the result of an act of "imagination" that will call forth new brands of symbolism, mythology, language, consciousness and ideology which *ought to* prevail if the "ethnic group" is willing to turn into an "active ethnopolitical community, a 'subject of history'" (*Ibid.* 568).

The first part of the "historical pageant" recreates the terror of the Middle Passage in a sensorial performance that blends the "odors of the sea," "stifling smell [of] incense […]. Pee. Shit. Death" with the "sounds of the ship […] African drums like the worship of some Orisha […] hideous screams," rattling chains and "the slash and tear of the lash" (368). The slave ship represents "the hold of racism's epitomous metaphor" (Sell, "Black Arts Movement" 70), "the dominant iconographic symbol […] a critical, historical site of black degradation and collective social memory [as well as] of unconscionable racial violence" (Elam, *Taking it to the Streets* 77). The genesis of the Afro-Atlantic world is recreated as a violent birth issuing from the "womb" of the ship, a traumatic experience envisioned as a chaos of Black bodies "mashed together in common terror […] aching in the darkness," and surrounded by "death" even though some "life processes [are] going on anyway" (368). The "whole theatre [is] in darkness. Dark. For a long time" (*Ibid.*). Darkness translates "the pain [,] the terror" and the existential "black out" of the slaves during the Middle Passage, all of which had hardly ever been recorded and documented before. If stage(d) darkness represents a dramaturgical reflection of an Afro-Atlantic experience made "invisible" by a history of racist denial, then the ab-

sence of visual signs also articulates the existential negativity of the Middle Passage. A radical breach in the perception and understanding of humanity is thus reflected by a rupture of representation. "Black darkness" is redolent of "stifling smell" (368) and various "sounds." It forms the stylistic and semantic density of the historical and performed experience: what is at stake is a retrieval of submerged images and impossible narratives, of absent stories and "sounds" made present by a "radical imagination" (Riach and Williams, *Radical Imagination*).

The apparent redundancy of the phrase "Black darkness" implies the corresponding metaphor of "Black light," which authorizes a mental journey from the absence of self-representation and the ignorance of Black consciousness to the realisation that "the light is black (now get that!) as are most of the meaningful tendencies in the world" (Neal, "And Shine Swam On" 652). The traditional theatrical commun(icat)ion through the sense of sight is here replaced by an aural mnemopoetics meant to bring about a resurgence of history through scattered sounds. This dramaturgical *phonomnesia*, sounding as it does the depths of the Afro-Atlantic memory, is central to the "historical pageant" that one experiences as "a continuous rush of sound, groans, screams, and souls wailing for freedom and relief from suffering" (Neal "Black Arts" 269). The ritual space of the performance is saturated with a varied soundscape[1] that layers sea sounds, "ship noises, ship bells," "cries […] scream," "voices and bodies in the slave ship, voices of white men, whip sounds, drums, rattle and tambourines, banjo music" (368), "high hard sound of saxophone" (372), the "maddening […] patient humming" (370, 371) of the slave women, the "crazy laughter of the sailors" (371), religious incantations to Yoruba gods and spiritual songs. The dramaturgical rejection of narrativity,[2] "the antinarratival bias of Baraka's play" (Sell, "Black Arts Movement" 71), emphasises the irrational, apocalyptic, indeed the destructive but revelatory dimension of the pageant.

Slave Ship's mnemopoetics of slavery is thus revealed as an exorcistic ritual that brings into the play a pervasive phonomnesia, i.e. a memory of original sounds recaptured in their "absolute pain" and visceral "terror." The phonomnesic excavation of history overcomes the repre-

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1 Similarly, Artaud envisions the stage as "[un] espace […] gorgé de sons" (Artaud, *Théâtre et son double* 135) and "un lieu physique et concret" the language of which "s'adresse d'abord aux sens au lieu de s'adresser d'abord à l'esprit comme le langage de la parole" (Ibid. 55-56).

2 Phonomnesia as an essential mode of theatrical expression as well as exploration of the past "rompt enfin l'asujettissement intellectuel au langage, en donnant le sens d'une intellectualité nouvelle et plus profonde, qui se cache sous les gestes et sous les signes élevés à la dignité d'exorcismes particuliers" (Artaud, *Théâtre et son double* 140).

sentational limits of the word by sounding the tragic essence of the experience of slavery. The ritual of communal "rememory" rests on that peculiar phonism, a cluster of synaesthetic sensations erupting from "Black darkness with smells" (368) as they would out of a collective unconscious. The proliferation of conflicting sounds and smells induces unconscious, pre-verbal associations and emotions that precede the rational, reasoning and logical linear discourse of militant propaganda.

As Kimberly Benston argues about the importance of music in the Black Arts Movement, "if sound is the world's substance, then the particular organization of sound into music is the world in process […]. Baraka elevates music to the dual position of central metaphor and primary theatrical vehicle" (Benston, "Vision and Form" 181). Music in *Slave Ship* sounds a gradual transformation from "chain rattle," "percussive sounds people make in the hold of a ship" (369), African drums, humming voices, spiritual songs, "screaming saxophone" (371), to the final "Boogalyotuba, fingerpop" (372) party rhythms. It traces historical and spiritual "sound-tracks" from African rhythms to their African American mutations: "Music is thus strength, memory, power, triumph, affirmation – the entire historical and mythical process of Afro-American being" (Benston, "Vision and Form" 183). The intrusion of the "high hard sound of saxophone" (371) disrupts the black preacher's unintelligible speech – a parody of King's "I Have a Dream" speech, which is now turned into "I have a trauma that the gold sewers won't integrate […] I have an enema" (371). "A surging new sound"[3] (Neal, "And Shine Swam On" 653) silences the integrationist voice in a "scream," a "total articulation" (Baraka, "Changing Same" 200) which heralds "'radical' changes and re-evaluations of social and emotional attitudes toward the general environment" (Baraka, *Blues People* 235). Paul Carter Harrison notices about Moses's production of *Slave Ship* that music and its ritualistic "rhythm […] amplify the horrors of the slaveship at its most sensate/spiritual level of experience [and] focus […] our historical outrage, while heightening our unrelieved acuity of oppression […] orchestrated in a manner that allows time/space the fluidity which gives the past the immediacy of the present" (Harrison, "Introduction" to *Kuntu Drama* 25, 26). The overwhelming importance of music and sounds exceeds the traditional dialogic development of a play. Phonomnesia, in its variations, "texture of fragments, repetitive, nervous, not fully formed […], gives resonance to memory" (Ellison, *Shadow and Act* 203), articulates and recharts African American history with a "sensibilité […] mise en état de perception plus approfondie

[3] This "new sound" was played by Free Jazz sax player Archie Shepp in the Brooklyn Academy production of *Slave Ship*, which was directed by Gilbert Moses in 1969.

et plus fine, et c'est là l'objet de la magie et des rites, dont le théâtre n'est qu'un reflet" (Artaud, *Théâtre et son double* 141).

This "total atmos-feeling" (368) supplies a synaesthetic environment that is re-enforced by the movement of the "actors of Black People" (368) going "around the theatre to touch and shake hands with members of the black audience and leav[ing] out the white" (Soyinka, "Drama and the Revolutionary Ideal" 80). The deliberate indifference toward the white public in contrast with the bodily contact with the black one disrupts the totality of the audience united through the performing ritual, and re-asserts the social segregation in a reversal of exclusion: the whites are left "out of touch" while the blacks are included in the ritual of collective "rememory" which should "touch off" an acute consciousness of their "beautiful, Black" humanity and strength: "we are more ourselves again." The reaction of a white critic, recalled by Wole Soyinka, reveals the opposite yet complementary effects of *Slave Ship* on the two audiences, the re-integration of a triumphant Black humanity and the exposure of the irredeemable lack of a white humanity:

> after seeing the play itself, watching the catalogue of dehumanization of the black man, and empathizing with it on a level that he had never before suspected, it was a shock to him to find literally that the play, and his ordeal, was not over, that he had to experience yet another level of his unsuspected rejection. He, in spite of his feelings of identification which had been fed into him from the universality of suffering, found that his emotive identification existed only for him and was not necessarily reciprocal in itself with the essential truths of the evening. The suffering humanity not only rejected him but by so doing questioned and raised doubts in his mind that he was a member of the human race at all, this not alone by the actual business of the handshakes afterwards but by its finality, the fact that it was a culminating metaphor of that emotive temperature which had been aroused. It was not, wrote the critic, simply a question of guilt. The charge that was lodged in his mind was that he was not a member of the human race, that this doubt had been achieved by the theatrical contraction of the entire human race as the summation of anguish and courage which was presented upon that stage. The world outside of it was wiped out in that microcosmic totality of ritual. (Soyinka, "Drama and the Revolutionary Ideal" 80)

Whereas the black audience is absorbed into the performance, "suck[ed] […] into a unique and very precise universe" (Neal, "Black Arts" 269), and becomes an integral part of the "ritualized history" (*Ibid.*) and its "microcosmic totality," the white audience is relegated to the margins of the reconstituted humanity and left in an ontological void reflecting its own dehumanised "non-being." The "contraction of the entire human race" into the ritualised space of performance functions both as a jural process of exposure and exclusion of white degeneration

(ultimately leading to the negation of "the white thing," Neal, "Black Arts" 258), and as a "Black Mass" (Baraka, *Black Mass*) of spiritual regeneration and social restoration through "emotional and religious participation" (Neal, "Black Arts" 269). The pageant's mnemopoetics can be seen as a testimony against white oppression, a presentation of the case in accusatory *tableaux vivants* at the start of the trial before the death sentence is passed. The very notion of trial implies a ritual repetition of events that have already taken place, as well as their confrontation with the law of a community, which is enacted in a collective sacrifice of "whiteness" that involves performers and audience in a ritual *danse macabre* around "the preacher's head throw[n] into center of floor" (372).

The demonisation of the white race as "white beasts," "devils" and "soulless shit eater" (370) excludes it from the human community, bearing as it does the stigma of what is evil and markedly inhuman. Scapegoating becomes then inescapable as a way of exorcising the "white devils." The sacrificial ritual, which is the violent climax of the performance, emerges as an illustration of a redemptive aesthetics creating new soteriological possibilities in the cleansed "land of the beasts" (Neal, "Toward a Relevant Black Theater" 14). The ritualistic sacrifice of the Black preacher and of the "Eternal Oppressor" appears as the necessary purgation that will lead to the institution of a new aesthetic, social and political order of the sort that might obtain in the nation of "Black people […] defin[ing] the world in their own terms" (Neal, "Black Arts" 257).

According to René Girard, "si le sacrifice apparaît comme violence criminelle, il n'y a guère de violence en retour qui ne puisse se décrire en termes de sacrifice" (Girard, *La violence et le sacré* 10). The blurred distinction between sacrifice and revenge becomes a clear dichotomy in their respective consequence on a community: "le sacrifice polarise sur la victime des germes de dissension partout répandus et il les dissipe en leur proposant un assouvissement partiel […]. C'est l'harmonie de la communauté qu'il restaure, c'est l'unité sociale qu'il renforce" (*Ibid.* 18, 19). Sacrifice is interpreted as the necessary catalyst of social harmony through the destruction or surrender of something/someone for the sake of something else. This motion of substitution is, according to Girard, the "essence of sacrifice" (*Ibid.* 13) and acts as a prelude to both social stability and cultural continuity. Ritualised violence and the maintenance of its sacrificial atonement thus represent the very foundation of a community, the origin and the structuring factor in any social and cultural construct. As a collective release of violent impulses, the catharsis embedded in sacrifice offers a possibility of spiritual, sociological and historical regeneration. The missing element in Girard's theory is

the metaphorical and aesthetic interpretation of the values of communal reciprocity and renewal embodied in sacrificial rites, and how the re-fashioning of such values and the exploration of their dramaturgical potential can become sources of creative inspiration for a community in search of self-definition. In Baraka's Revolutionary Theatre, the sacrifice of the "white beast" and its black avatars on stage prefigures "actual explosions and actual brutality" (Baraka, "Revolutionary Theatre" 214) and represents the necessary cleansing ceremony before the initiation of a new, total order: "We will scream and cry, murder, run through the streets in agony, if it means some soul will be moved, moved to actual life understanding of what the world is, and what it ought to be" (*Ibid.* 213). The theatrical metaphor of immolation is thus pushed to the provocative limits of literalness and the impact[4] on the black audience is intended to blur the distinction between art and life and to encourage militant action through the use of ritual. The final, communal dance abolishes the artificial barriers between art and life, performers and spectators, the past and the present thereby re-unifying the audience with its lost memory, the living with the dead: "the entelechy of the black spirit is communality" (Benston, "Vision and Form" 178).

Slave Ship is a "social drama" (Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre* 9 and *passim*) in the anthropological sense, enacting as it does a ritual whose "redressive phase frames an endeavor to re-articulate a social group" (*Ibid.* 87) previously broken by a violent history and its perpetuation. As such, it has "the task of *poiesis*, that is, of remaking cultural sense" (*Ibid.*). Black drama's mnemo*poiesis* thus redresses the modern drama of African American life and

> participate[s] in the Resurrection [through] a ritual in which the spirits of the fathers are encouraged, in which spells are cast, in which new vibrations are created that never existed before. The rituals will break the barriers that language and a lot of other things, dress, clothes, education, a lot of those western things that we get entrapped by, that keep our people separated, one from another; they will break through those barriers. (Macbeth, qtd. in "Black Ritual Theatre" 24)

It is then possibly no surprise if Harry J. Elam, Jr., uses anthropological ritual theories (mainly Turner's and the Comaroff's theories) in his comparative opus on Chicano and Black "social protest theater" to "reimagin[e] the relationship between ritual and social theater performance" (Elam, *Taking it to the Streets* 11):

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[4] As a politically radicalised excrescence of the *théâtre de la cruauté*, *Slave Ship* establishes "une communication directe […] entre le spectateur et le spectacle, entre l'acteur et le spectateur, du fait que le spectateur placé au milieu de l'action est enveloppé et sillonné par elle" (Artaud, *Théâtre et son double* 148).

> As both symbolic mediation and signifying practice, ritual intends to affect the flow of history and the allocation of power in the universe […] ritual is capable of imagining new social orders. Ritual can transform human consciousness and social behavior and even induce revolutionary action. (*Ibid.* 12-13)

Focusing on the productions of Valdez' El Teatro Campesino and Baraka's Black Repertory Theater, Elam underlines "the ability of these social protest performances to function 'ritualistically'" (*Ibid.* 13), i.e. their capacity to transform "spectators into active participants, and their participatory activity inside the theater was an indicator of or a precursor to revolutionary activity outside of the theater" (*Ibid.* 11). As such, these performances "replicate the power and spirit of ritual enactments" (*Ibid.* 14). By blending spiritual revival and political claims, they both "construct strategic political positions that challenged the political status quo and previous representations of blacks and Chicanos" (*Ibid.* 29) and refashion empowering self-images through "symbolic reformulations" (*Ibid.* 130).

Baraka's *Slave Ship* thus operates "ritualistically to reaffirm cultural pride, inform social consciousness, and induce audience participation" (*Ibid.* 73). Its spiritual dimension is twofold: the play is an act of anamnesis, i.e. a dynamic reminiscence which, on the one hand, catalyses redressing and redemptive action in the present of the performance in remembrance of the sufferings of the past, and on the other re-articulates the original religion, the Yoruba pantheon of gods (and its metaphysical system blending destruction and creation in a cosmic dialectic of being) as a direct link to the spirits and "lives of our ancestors" (Neal, "Black Arts" 269). The rhythmic, "ritualistic energy" (*Ibid.*) of the play is sustained by "African drums like the worship of some Orisha. Obatala. Mbwanga rattles of the priests" (368). Yoruba is inserted as the language of origins which gives access to a spiritual world that was disrupted by the Middle Passage but is re-activated through ritual:

> Shango, Obatala, make your lightning, beat the inside bright with paths for our people […]. Fukwididila! Fuck you, Orisha! God! Where you be? Where you now, Black God? […]. *Drums low, like tapping, turns to beating floor, walls, rattling, dragging chains, percussive sounds people make in the hold of a ship* […]. Devils! White beasts! Shit eaters! Beasts! […]. Obatala. Save us. Lord. Shango. Lord of the forests. Give us back our strength […]. Ogun. Give me weapons. Give me iron. My spear. My bone and muscle make them tight with tension of combat. Ogun, give me fire and death to give these beasts. Sarava! […]. *Drums of fire and blood briefly loud and smashing against the dark* […]. Ogun. Give me spear and iron. Let me kill. (368-371)

The slaves' recurrent incantations to Obatala, Shango and Ogun and the intrusion of Yoruba words and sentences (translated in a glossary of Yoruba terms in the publication of *Slave Ship* in *The Motion of History*) convey the artistic and social will to cement the residues of the past in a new awareness of historical and cultural continuum. Whether it is approached as an excavation of African retentions or as an artificially reconstructed authenticity, Baraka's harping on Yoruba expressions and cosmogony fleshes out his epistemology of remembrance, which is centred on a re-creative envisioning of continuity containing within itself both factors of change and recurrence. The simultaneous invocation to Yoruba gods and the "Lord," just as the singing of spirituals alongside the proffering of insults to the "white devils and beasts" (reminiscent as this is of the Manichean rhetoric of the Nation of Islam), juxtapose the religious transformations across Afro-American history with the spiritual endurance and cultural survival amidst annihilating conditions: "historical degradation is overshadowed by spiritual transference" (Benston, "Vision and Form" 177). "The play acts to extend memory" (Neal, "Black Arts" 269) to the confines of imaginative recreation, and by so doing provides the necessary re-articulation of the "historical realities that have shaped our [Black people's] lives and the lives of our ancestors" (*Ibid.*).

The obsessive invoking of Obatala, Shango and Ogun punctuates the performance like voodoo incantations awakening the audience to the "World Spirit" (Baraka, "Revolutionary Theatre" 212) through the power of ritual. Ogun, "Him of the Seven Paths," (Soyinka, *Ogun Abibiman* 6) is the god of iron and creative imagination. He embodies the "combative will within the cosmic embrace of the transitional gulf" (Soyinka, "Fourth Stage 150), whereas the "arch divinity" (Baraka, *Motion of History* 149) Obatala symbolises the "essence of quietude and harmony" (Soyinka, "Morality" 13). The tension between stasis and disruption, as epitomised in the divine pair Obatala/Ogun, is implied in the slaves' vain invocation to Obatala when they are looking for comfort, as opposed to their prayer to Ogun to "give them steel" and "let [them] kill." According to Soyinka, the mythic "society" of the Yoruba gods "manifests the familiar Hegelian tension […] the apparent stasis as symbolised in Obatala's serenity, contradicted and acted upon when events demand by the revolutionary Ogun" (Soyinka, "Who's Afraid of Elesin Oba?" 73). The Obatala/Ogun symbolic dialectic is at the heart of Baraka's concerns about the revolutionary potential of art:

> Is the Act as legitimate as the Word? (A question that could only be asked in a bourgeois society, it is so absurd.) Now we know the act is *more* legitimate, it is principal! (Baraka, "Introduction" to *Motion of History* 12)

The scarcity of dialogue, the rejection of a coherent dialogic structure as a source of meaning, as well as the dramaturgical recourse to a non-verbal phonomnesia along with collective, choreographically suggested actions reflect Baraka's conception of the Revolutionary Theatre as actual event, a "weapon" (Baraka, "Revolutionary Theatre" 212) as real as "a gun a gun should appear on the poster, on the stage, in the film, or in your hands" (Bullins, qtd. in "Talking of Black Art" 24). "*Slave Ship* simultaneously confronts, exploits and explodes the relations of visibility, race and theatricality [thereby] challeng[ing] the relationship between the 'seen' and the 'scene'" (Sell, "Black Arts Movement" 70, 72). Ritual performance is "intended, through stylised incantations, to will into reality an actual revolution" (Williams, *Black Theatre* 117), thus being "the proper finale of experience" (Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre* 13), both a completion and a call for its continuation outside the theatre. Thus, *Slave Ship* gropes its way toward a poetics of the oppressed (as it is defined by the Brazilian theoretician and stage director Boal) which is also a militant mnemopoetics of liberation:

> le spectateur ne délègue aucun pouvoir pour qu'on agisse ou pense à sa place. Il se libère, agit et pense par lui-même. Le théâtre est action. Ce théâtre n'est peut-être pas révolutionnaire, mais rassurez-vous: c'est une répétition de la révolution. (Boal, *Théâtre de l'opprimé* 48)

Similarly, *Slave Ship* exhorts "action" through "an act of symbolic rebellion" (Elam, "Social Urgency" 32). Kalamu ya Salaam recalls that, "when *Slaveship* [*sic*] was performed in Greenville, Mississippi during the summer of 69 [it] literally sent the people out into the streets" (Salaam, Introduction to *Blk Love Song #1* 433). Its revolutionary potential, and the fear its production aroused among the white authorities, account for the fact that:

> the theatre where [it] played [in New York] mysteriously caught fire and the fire department declared it unsafe for a theatrical production. Three weeks later the department declared it safe for a white production. (King, *Black Theatre* 36)

This particular turn of events vindicates Baraka's prevision:

Americans will hate the Revolutionary Theatre because it will be out to destroy them and whatever they believe is real. American cops will try to close the theatres where such nakedness of the human spirit is paraded. (Baraka, "Revolutionary Theatre" 214).

The revolutionary impulse of the play and its recorded effects on the audience undermines Harold Cruse's 1967 perception of Baraka's manifesto, "The Revolutionary Theatre," which he presented as a damp squib unable to bring the "black masses" to *immediate* action. But the

demise of the Black Arts Movement in the mid-1970s and its inability to renew its own creative energies and sustain the long-term struggle it fiercely calls for, nonetheless validate Cruse's vision:

> For a while now, Mr. Jones has been plying the thesis of the revolutionary theater, but his analysis of such theater is roughly as effective as describing on paper what an atomic machine can accomplish, without telling how the machine is to be manufactured, mounted, and activated […]. Mr. Jones, when he discusses the content of revolutionary theater, thinks this content alone has the power to change society. But nothing is further from the truth. The contents of plays determine *their* form but not *social* forms, although social forms are influenced in shaping both the form and content of plays. In our society, however, there is no such thing as revolutionary theater […]. However, there can be a cultural method of revolutionizing the society in which the theater functions as an institution. (Cruse, *Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* 530-531)

Cruse's suggestion implies that a revolutionary theatre can be defined in terms of its relation to an institutionalised cultural politics, which punctures the very notion of revolution as a popular impulse surging outside of, and against, established institutions. Maybe it is precisely the revolutionary impulse of the Black Arts Movement that condemned it to an early death through an unwilling integration into a tradition of protest felt to be devoid of any efficient, long-lasting social implication:

> Like the fetish divorced from ritual – a continual concern of Black Arts critics – the texts of the Black Arts Movement are ruins. Their subtext is a community destroyed by economic backlash, provoked infighting, and a vanguard sensibility incapable of escaping the tradition of the avant-garde itself. (Sell, "Black Arts Movement" 74)

But in the short-lived and nonetheless intensely creative and influential Black Arts Movement's era from the mid-1960s until the mid-1970s, the performed rehearsal of revolution on stage acted as a corrective to an inherently damaging history, and as an exhortation to further action after the performance. The mnemopoetics of *Slave Ship* resists corrective idealising by presenting an internally divided African American community torn between the attempt to integrate ("Old Toms" and "New Toms") and the will to violently separate, as well as by alluding to the self-inflicted violence generated by oppressive conditions:

> M-1: What you doing? Get away from that woman […]. You turn into a beast too.
> Scuffle of two men turning in the darkness trying to kill each other. Lights show white men laughing silently, dangling their whips, in pantomime, still pointing. (369)

The rape of a slave woman in the ship hold and the ensuing murderous fight between two male slaves are shown as the perpetuation of the violence inflicted upon them by watchful, silent slavers with "dangling whips." In "The Shadow of the Whip," a study on gender relations in the Caribbean, Merle Hodge defines "the legacy of violence and disruption" (Hodge, "Shadow of the Whip" 111) in the Afro-Atlantic society that was "born out of brutality, destructiveness, rape; the destruction of the Amerindian peoples, the assault on Africa, the forced uprooting and enslavement of the African; the gun, the whip, the authority of force" (*Ibid.*). The rape of the slave woman in the slave ship hold is the initiating moment of the dehumanisation of interracial gender relations when "physical violence, is only a visible manifestation of a wider disruption, a basic breakdown of respect" (*Ibid.* 113). Recalling a production of *Slave Ship* in Detroit, Kimberly Benston describes the gradual physical and moral degradation of "the [slaves'] community […] fractured into an anarchy of individual wills; their isolated cries, rapes, songs, and moans define a moving, tortured existence" (Benston, "Vision and Form" 176). The ritual mnemopoetics developed in the Revolutionary Theatre allows a reflexive vision of history, a "re-membering [that] is not merely the restoration of some past intact, but setting it in living relationship to the present" (Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre* 86). Contemporary misery and violence within the African American community are set in direct relation to the historical terrors of slavery:

> For black people, to forget the realities posed by *Slave Ship* is to fall prey to historical paralysis. History, like the blues, demands that we witness the painful events of our prior lives; and that we either confront these painful events or be destroyed by them. (Neal, "Black Arts" 269)

The chiasmus between the obsessive theme of historical paralysis (overcome by communal, healing re-membering) and an experimental dramaturgy (sustained by imaginative resources derived from traditional concepts of ritual) contains, in its paradoxical but ultimately fusing nature, the creative tension sha(p-k)ing the Black consciousness. The playwright's "magical" re-forming of history as well as its equally emotional reception by the black audience are highly subjective and subjunctive: both processes appeal to the imagination, the "practical vector for the soul" (Baraka, "Revolutionary Theatre" 213), to envision what used to be, still is and ultimately ought to be. It is precisely in the liminal, interstitial position between the "has been" and "should be," the revolutionary space of the "freedom now" pregnant with all possibilities, that Baraka's and Salaam's ritual drama is played out.

Ontological Journey from Darkness to Blk-ness

Val Ferdinand/Kalamu ya Salaam's *Blk Love Song #1* (1969)

The subjunctive mnemopoetics of *Blk Love Song #1* consists in the allegorical confrontation of historically and socially determined African American stereotypes (slaves, Black Power militant, integrationist businessman, blond-wigged prostitute, flashy pimp) and essentialised embodiments of perfect "Blk-ness" ("Blk Man" and "Blk Woman"), or of the "Negro" (443, 444) degradation and the Black harmony and pride that should be restored. The play revolves around didactic dialogues between five characters who are trapped in a cycle of oppression and (self-)destruction, and the "Blk" couple who act as the agents of a Black consciousness. The "Blk Man and Woman" are summoned "to shed light on the miasma of oppressed people" (Harrison, "Introduction" to *Kuntu Drama* 8) and urge the characters "to wake up and shake the sun" (446, 447):

> *Blk Woman*: We're only spirit. The world requires flesh and spirit. We're history. You are now. We're out of time. You are in time.
> […]
> *Blk Man*: Come on, Black man. You are drugged.
> Not listening to yourself, to inside yourself,
> To all the selves that died striving to go beyond
> the circumstances of our birth.
> You speak and act as if you are in a stupor
> or an impotent dream. Wake up. Wake up and
> sh…
> *Jethro*: Shake the sun. (446)

The Blk spirit's oxymoric location in history and, at the same time, "out of time" reveals the fracture between historical pro(gr-c)ess and its continuity and effect in the present as if time had stopped, leaving history behind in the abstract realm of spirit. The Blk Woman and Man's exhortation to wake up from an "impotent dream" alludes to and contradicts the pacifist vision of Martin Luther King's "I have a Dream" speech of liberation through African American integration in the American dream: "I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia, sons of former slaves and sons of former slave-owners will be able to sit

down together at the table of brotherhood" (King, "I Have a Dream" 219). In Salaam's Black nationalist perspective, integration is an "impotent" stance: "americanism is a dumb, flat kind of consciousness that ain't connected to nuthing much except money, god, the president, and phoney history" (Salaam, "Introduction" to *Blk Love Song #1* 436). *Blk Love Song #1* represents "a song. meditation. on possible movement [out of America's] phoney history" (*Ibid.*) and toward the reconciliation of all the selves that would then form a complete Black consciousness represented by the spiritual presence of the Blk Woman and the Blk Man. Both are dressed in "blk wrap" and "blk dashiki suit" and wear a "liberation flag" (436) as textile signs of identification with "the strong ancestral base (Africa, the potent ancestor) […] the force for statehood, independence, freedom, and all else that truly reflects the African spirit wherever it is located" (Jackson, "Preface" to *Kuntu Drama* IX). The rejection of America as the Black man's "death notice" (444) leads to the embracing of Africa as the "denied […] mother" (439) whose nurturing force must be re-acknowledged: "home is the East/ Way east, way across water" (437).

The violence of African American history is inscribed on and internalised by the violated Black body which is shown as whipped, raped, lynched and objectified before its rebirth within a spiritual dimension where body and soul merge in an instinctive "feel" (447) of recovered harmony, an intuitive "epiphan[y] of a certain spirit force" (Harrison, "Introduction" to *Kuntu Drama* 15). The violation of the black body represents the literal and metaphorical axis around which the recreated African American history revolves in a possible movement of progress, from the image of downtrodden "freak projection" to the revelation of "Black suns" (444) shining on "the vast sweeping plains of humanity" (441).

> The meditation starts with a threnody on slavery as an experience that is felt to be inscribed on the martyred body of the slaves:
> And they whipped us in America
> And seized our bodies with terrible afflictions
> And they whipped us in America
> And made us do their bidding
> And we died there, we died there in America (436)

America is a land of the primordial fall, martyrdom and death, which is governed by the "conditions of oppression that emasculate black maleness in the most literal, sociogrammatic terms" (Harrison, "Introduction" to *Kuntu Drama* 6). Slavery "rememories" represent the initial mnemopoetics that sparks the exchange between slaves and modern Black man. Their confrontational call-and-response dialogues "trans-

form memory/illusion into an immediate sense of reality" (Harrison, "Introduction" to *Kuntu Drama* 14), thereby exorcising the pain and guilt of history in repetitive, rhythmic variations akin to jazz musical structure:

> *Beat*: What they do to you boy?
> *Jethro*: They whipped me, they whipped me til they was tired.
> *Beat*: What they do to you boy?
> *Jethro*: They hung me in a tree
> and made me outta forbidden fruit
> they stretched my body out
> and ripped it open
> they set me afire
> and I blazed till my guts fell
> out. And they left me
> there, to rot. They left me there
> until my burnt bones dropped.
> *Beat*: And what they do to you boy?
> *Jethro*: They stole my woman.
> […]
> *Beat*: What they do your woman boy?
> *Jethro*: They… they
> *Sarah*: They ain't did me a damn thing
> you ain't let um do.
> I remember you nigger.
> Can you look at me?
> you half a man? (437-438)

From whipping and rape to lynching, from the lashed and violated body of the slave to the mutilated, burnt body of the lynched free man, the physical debasement of the African American people is traced in corporeal images which are juxtaposed in a contrapuntal modulation of past and contemporary voices. In a "Signifyin(g)" gesture upon veiled structural and lyrical allusion to jazz, the Black man's body is seen as a "forbidden fruit […] blazed [and] left to rot […] until the bones dropped," a variation on Billie Holiday's "strange fruit […] burning flesh […] for the sun to rot, for the tree to drop" (Holiday and Allan, "Strange Fruit"). This significant echo is captured in its resonance across genres in a rhythmic linguistic variation.

Sarah, the raped Black woman, stresses the ongoing effects of the Black man's historical mutilation and powerlessness, which have developed into crippling impotence and craven passivity. Jethro's inability to verbalise Sarah's rape translates his traumatic powerlessness and the continuation of his symbolic castration in his affective life: "I so finally/ I left" (438). As Merle Hodge argues,

> the whole humiliation of slavery meant an utter devaluation of the manhood of the race; the male was powerless to carry out his traditional role of protector of the tribe, he was unable to defend either himself or his women and children from capture and transportation, from daily mishandling. (Hodge, "The Shadow of the Whip" 115)

Caught between guilt and an overcompensating misogyny, the African American man's relationship to women appears as a process of "righting" the powerlessness of the past in a transitory and vindictive patriarchy that must be negotiated before one reaches the ultimate serenity idealised by the "Blk spirits":

> *Jethro [to Blk Woman]*: A woman is not supposed to lead.
> (turning to BLK MAN)
> You're in charge here right. And after you're gone
> then me. Right? It's man time now
> *Blk Woman*: If you were Harriet Tubman and I was man slave
> you'd better believe I would follow and say
> thanks for the woman pointing the way ahead,
> If you were Nanny catching British bullets in
> your teeth and I were a warrior man I would
> follow you into the hills,
> when you get stronger in your manhood
> then it will be easier for you to deal with others,
> easier for you to understand women,
> you are weak and afraid now, but go ahead, step
> Jethro, claim your life, claim our lives (445)

A continuity of patriarchal imperative can be seen at work in the impulse and rhetoric of the Million Men March organised by the Nation of Islam in Washington, D.C., in 1995, which claimed the Black men's rightful place as leaders and thereby confined Black women to the domestic sphere. Although Salaam's sympathies for the Nation of Islam are clear, he does not sentence women to passive roles. Historical female slave and Maroon icons are evoked as counterdiscursive models to a twisted conception of gender relations, just as the verbalisation of a history of degradation and powerlessness should utter and extract the root of a perverted self-image:

> *Blk Man*: We have much sickness to
> look into ourselves and to extract. We have studying to do.
> New ways to learn. Come my brother and walk
> together with your woman alongside this new
> day. (443)

Just as misogyny is seen as a transitional step toward the Black man's reconfiguration of a harmonious self-image, Black Power rhetori-

cal stridency and violent imagery are deflated by the black woman as "cheap/ cockhound freak['s] hot air,/ broken dreams and invalid promises" (438-439):

> *Jethro*: Kill the silly dilly hunky motherfuckers
> Stick telephone poles up between the legs of his women.
> Kill them. Come on brothers.
> […]
> Who are we that we swim in this shitty cesspool?
> […]
> There is truth somewhere there is beauty and
> wine and women
> […]
> *Sarah*: You lie! You lie, man. There is only you
> and the whiteman,
> […]
> There is no beauty,
> There is no truth. No peace.
> *Jethro*: Black is beautiful.
> *Sarah*: You lie, if it is beautiful make it so.
> *Jethro*: I do not lie. It is just
> just that you are blind.
> *Sarah*: I see you! I see you, is that blindness.
> But then maybe I am blind for I do
> not see anything in you
> no man actions, no nation, no nothing
> […]
> I want only you. I want you to claim me. (439)

Sarah punctures the Black Power slogan, "Black is beautiful," considering it as an empty signifier that will remain deprived of any effective actuality as long as gender realities/identities within the black community are not reconfigured. The militant aggressivity of Jethro's so-called revolutionary outburst is mocked as mere iconoclastic bombast, and revealed as a displacement of priorities which prevents the black couple from examining the violence and silence within their own domestic sphere. The Black Power rhetoric is perceived as out of focus and unable to come to terms with the "sickness" (443) within the Black community, i.e. the gender relations that remain infected by the perversions of historical enslavement. The mnemopoetic movement, from raped slave woman to present-day objectified black woman, thus articulates the continuity of black female debasement – a condition maintained through the black man's sexist rhetoric, which is made particularly violent in its anti-white (woman) stance.

Language is seen as a potential medium to recover a "Black beauty." Obscene, violent, slang, insulting language is associated with either the degraded "Blackness" of the prostitute and the pimp or with the Black Art's iconoclastic imagery, whereas the lyrical, musical tone of the utopian Blk couple translates the language of a new spirituality to be reached: "Sing/ that lyric, feel how the words sound in your/ mouth" (445). Alienation from the world is reflected in the alienation from the word and the discursive practices this entails. As Ellison argues about the place of African Americans in American literature, "perhaps the most insidious and least understood form of segregation is that of the word" (Ellison, *Shadow and Act* 24). Chained to a historical determinism and to the sterility of mis/displaced words, the Black man sees himself "in time" (446) as a distorted "freak projection" that is stigmatised as follows: "Negro you are the worst invention of the centuries of/ man's living" (443). As mediators between the world and the word, the Blk spirits allow a glimpse of the subterranean repository of meanings latent in Black consciousness and waiting to be worded and enacted. They personify the flesh turned into word that, according to Ellison, "has the potency to revive and make us free, but it has also the power to blind, imprison and destroy" (Ellison, *Shadow and Act* 24). An agent of both redemption and destruction, the ambivalence of the word is also materialised in the convertible symbolism of the body as a site of creation and degeneration.

Sarah's raped body and its contemporary incarnation, the prostitute Peaches's "body for sale," represent, as I have already argued, a continuity of socially enforced commodification that can be disrupted by the reunion of black man and woman in peace and mutual respect. The slave woman's whipped and raped flesh represents a palimpsestic tissue upon which the contemporary prostitute's commodified flesh is inscribed. Traces of the initial violation remain in the "poisons" (441) of resentment and bitterness that infect "the antagonistic relationship between black women and men" (Gilroy, *Black Atlantic* 83), and which must be "nullif[ied]" through the recovery of a "righteous manhood being" (441):

> *Blk Woman*: Jethro, remember Sarah always.
> If you lose touch with her, you have lost yourself.
> Lose sight of Sarah and you will never see yourself. (446)

African American history is also symbolised by its biological component, from the primordial "seed of Africa" "hurled" into the "hell" of the "new world" (436) to "the ugly pale seed" of the "pale beast" raping slave women, thereby engendering a new community:

> *Sarah*: […] my own pale bastards. My own.
> Those children, our people. (438)

The genesis of Afro-America is branded by the original sin, since rape is seen as the founding moment whose violence can be redeemed through a new, harmonious encounter between the Blk Man and the Blk Woman ("time is/ now for your seed to flow into me" 439) in order to recreate "the original beginning" when "the day is dawning" (443) on the "seeds of a new Black nation" (447). Erotics and ethics merge in an aesthetic attempt to redefine the ties that form a community in the ritual microcosm of the "original" couple. Their Jewish names, Jethro and Sarah, reflect their function as "the Elect" whose suffering must redeem a derelict Black humanity (whereas whiteness is associated with "beast"-like nature) epitomised by Peaches and Slick, the prostitute and the pimp.

As "freak projection[s]" (444) and "sad twisted reflections" (441) of "the world of personal encounters," Peaches and Slick tell "the sordid history […] of sexual games and gains" (440), a "sickness" (443) that must be healed before they can reach the necessary harmony between man and woman – which will announce a new beginning. Their "foolish vulgarities" (439), expressed in slang, and the reduction of sex to a purely physical power struggle, suggest the "uses and abuses of their creative energies" (Sanders, *Development of Black Theater* 134) as they are turned into "dead junk" (441). Their unchanneled verbal and physical violence is internalised and becomes self-destructive, just as debased sex can be seen as "emblematic of self-hatred and the perversions of one's energies" (Sanders, *Development of Black Theater* 134). The obscenity of their language and the sexual explicitness of their gestures mirror the distorted humanity inherent in a history of degradation and violation. The sterile confrontational mode of their relationships petrifies them in a "perversion" (443) of Blackness which is symbolically "frozen" by the Blk Man:

> *Slick*: Bitch, I'll slap you down
> (Slick raises his hand and BLK MAN gestures and freezes SLICK in a sick motion of attempting to slap BLK WOMAN)
> […]
> (PEACHES shakes lewdly to a gutbucket music, she is grinning wildly as she dances trying to entice a frozen SLICK into a warmness of desire for her body)
> […]
> *Peaches*: Slick, Slick, Slick, come on Slick,
> these niggers, they crazy, you hit me Slick,
> you wake me up. You beat me up. Come on Slick,
> you give me money. You tell me what to do
> *Blk Man*: You turn to the frozen man now sister
> but…
> (BLK MAN gestures and PEACHES freezes to SLICK) (441, 442-443)

Both have blended, frozen into "the ice age" (446) of perverted consciousness while Jethro and Sarah embody the opposite symbols of "Black suns […] your heart is part of this fire" (443-444) ready "to shake the sun" in an aesthetic and nationalist gesture of self-regeneration:

> *Blk Woman*: Make a flag, Create and define space,
> give beauty to empty air, give the wind
> something to celebrate, something to wave, give
> the birds something brilliant to sing about (445)

The regenerated consciousness of the original couple re-connects it with elemental forces in a celebration of "dance blood, dance till day is done" (447). Sexuality and cultural nationalist spirituality thus merge in a celebration of regained vital forces, a "dance blood" cleansing the redeemed/ing couple of the infection of historical debasement. As Gilroy argues about hip hop culture, "the conflictual representation of sexuality has vied with the discourse of racial emancipation to constitute the inner core of black expressive culture" (Gilroy, *Black Atlantic* 83). Black Art interlinks problematic gender and racial identities/relations in a common quest for new emotional and rhetorical configurations that could be salvific for the Black community and individual. By extracting sexuality from the sphere of power struggle, Salaam offers a glimpse of Black harmony as an erotic metaphysic animated by a vision of unity with all things. The integration of Sarah and Jethro's recovered "Blk-ness" into the cosmic order is signalled by the high-pitched note of a saxophone in a climactic dance that is strongly reminiscent of the finale of Baraka's *Slave Ship*:

> *Blk Woman*: […] You are the sun my brother
> and we Black women, we are the earth.
> […]
> Plant seeds,
> tend fields,
> be real
> […]
> Shake the sun Black man
> And dance til day is done.
> […]
> (Now the music, flute and drums, and some real wild saxophone walking through the space) (443, 447)

The mnemopoetic articulation of the play thus consists of a symbolic, ontological journey leading from social and moral degeneration to the glimpsed possibility of a spiritual fulfilment (the *#1* of a *Blk Love Song*/history in prog(/c)ess) through the recognition of energies of

transformation still latent in Black Consciousness. The play's ritual inner journey from darkness to "Blk-ness" invokes "the spiritual imperatives of the community's moral universe which revitalizes the features of black humanity" (Harrison, "introduction" to *Kuntu Drama* 19). The heart of the African American "community's moral universe" lies in the gender relations that must be harmonised according to the utopian Blk constellation of perfection in order to survive. The play's dramatic texture remains deliberately abstract, meditative and poetic instead of programmatic or propagandist. The chorus's call for the building of a "new Black nation" (447) merges with the song "Shake the Sun," so that the political urge blends with its metaphorical reflection in a way that mirrors the dialectic of Salaam's "meditation" which is similarly poised between an aesthetic quest for distinctive dramatic forms and nationalist claims.

Baraka's *Slave Ship* and Salaam's *Blk Love Song #1* ritualise the "transition from primal darkness to Blackness, and from "chaos to cosmos" (Fabre, *Drumbeats* 143), in a complementary cultural projection back to a prelapsarian African imagination and forward into a vision of renascent Black supremacy. Theatre is used as a social and spiritual meeting place where a Black "race memory" (Harrison, "Introduction" to *Kuntu Drama* 10) can be probed and re-created. As the layers of the past are ritually peeled and reconnected to contemporary social, cultural and mental configurations, drama becomes the catalyst of an emerging self-reflexive Black consciousness that would be aware of its persisting and mutating identity within the chaos of conflicting representations: the African warrior and slave dealer, the rebelling and the submissive slave, the separatist and the integrationist, the violent and the pacifist, the prostitute and the preacher, the wise and the derelict, are all integrated into the ritual process of coming to terms with past and present Afro-Atlantic experiences in order to conceive (of) a viable "future of the race" (Gates and West, *Future of the Race*).

The blending of disparities in the Black Theatre mirrors the wide scope of experimentations carried out by the Black Arts Movement to re-invent a Black culture that will be in tune with social and political revolutionary ideals. This striving totality of cultural/political quest consists, among other areas of exploration, in some Pan-African research for cultural retentions in the Afro-American culture (the "African continuum"), in literary experiments (especially in drama and poetry as performing arts that can have direct emotional effects on the audience), and in theoretical and aesthetic writings whose influence are still important today:

> The efforts to dynamically interweave organizational development, political activism, and racially exclusive cultural production by this revolutionary separatist movement were justified by a philosophical project that aimed to create a critical metaphysics that would help redefine and revive the ontological, epistemological, and metaphysical bases of African American society. (Sell, "The Black Arts Movement" 57)

As a highly self-reflexive movement that attempts to conceptualise its aesthetic and literary creations as they emerge in the midst of the confused turn of the 1960s-1970s, the Black Arts Movement witnesses and buttresses the utopian moment of the possible reversal of social/political/cultural agencies from dominated to dominating minorities. Like any utopia, it allows partial glimpses of fulfilment, the most lasting one being the visionary convergence of drama and theory in all its contradi(re)ctions, richness and density. If Maoist Baraka stigmatises his Black Arts period as "ideologically flawed bourgeois art," he still recognises its powerful creative thrust, felt to be unprecedented and inspiring:

> There is no doubt in my mind that the Black Arts Theater will be remembered even in its brief throw against the dead. Its tiny light in shadows. The victory was in the struggle [*sic*] the unity the raising of ourselves, our history and tradition. That is simple national consciousness, where the victims focus on the requirements of their liberation. Where a people come to see themselves in contrast to their oppressors, and their lives and laws. Where they climb into the stream of history […]. The fantasies we stepped into had to do with our misunderstanding. As usual. The mixture of half-Yorubaist, Malcom's death-fascination Islam, bourgeois politics, black nationalism, insecurity, subjectivism, and bohemianism, still, dogged my steps. There were many of us across the country creating various weird structures. Out of the same confusion and metaphysics […]. The old sickness of religion […]. I was not as into open metaphysics ever until going into nationalism. I could attach names and a blatant embrace of this stuff as "blackness." The feudalism, reformism, male chauvinism, all crept in or rushed in under the fabric of nationalism. Blackness. Even the apotheosis of cultural nationalism I took on because it was the best-organized form of the abstraction "blackness" […]. Crying blackness and for all the strength and goodness of that, not understanding the normal contradictions and the specific foolishness of white-hating nationalism. The solution is not to become the enemy in blackface […]. Yet despite the downright absurdity of that trip, it was still part of a long march to better understanding. To some more objective clarity. (Baraka, *Autobiography* 458, 460-461)

"Objective clarity" and its deployment in literature could not be reached in "the weird, self-flagellating days of the 1960s" since "the air we breathed was too thick with pain for careful fiction to move center

stage […]. This control and reconstitution of images, which arises out of the noble work of counteracting cultural lies, easily slips toward dogma that ends the process of literary discovery" (Johnson, *Being and Race* 21, 22, 29). The Black Arts Movement does proclaim its Black subjectivity and its will to foster a "literature of revenge written by the descendants of the slaves" (Walcott, "Muse of History" 2), a "literature of recrimination and despair" (*Ibid.*) that, however, is not characterised by creative mediocrity or "incoherence and nostalgia" (*Ibid.*). The Black "rage for identity" (*Ibid.*) seethes with creative energies dramatised as rituals of survival strategies. The Black playwrights' mnemopolitical "rage" for re-appropriating the past and offering a communal rehearsal for eradicating its negative effects in the present prompted a stylistic quest for a theatrical form, largely inspired by Artaud's *théâtre de la cruauté*, which violently expresses, recharts and transforms the symbolic territory of the New World memory. The Black Theatre's conflation of ritual drama and historical reconfiguration as the necessary premises for individual and collective identity formation still lies at the heart of two highly self-reflexive contemporary plays, Daniel Owens's *The Box* and Robbie McCauley's *Sally's Rape*. The epistemological shift is here from a ritual of communal re-envisioning of history, through archetypal constellations of characters and dramaturgical devices, to a highly subjectified ritual of possession by the past manifested by the individual trance of the performers. The ritual mnemopoetics of communion evolves to a ritualistic "cryptomnesia" where images, emotions and sufferings erupt from the slave past and are physically experienced by the entranced characters as uncontrollable forces.

CRYPTOMNESIA

Possessed by the Past

The staging of slavery memories in Daniel W. Owens's *The Box* and Robbie McCauley's *Sally's Rape* involves a triple semantic link, a mnemopoetic mechanism revolving around the three-dimensional reflection on the representation of history, the awareness of its filtered subjectivity through the dramaturgy of body/spirit possession and the questioning of its representability. The dramatic narrative intertwines the "eclipsed" but lingering slave past and a present still darkened by its shadow, repressed historical facts and their gradual, subjective reconstruction, slavery "rememory" and its effect on the reminiscing character. Such a self-reflexive mnemopoetics generates a tension between the creative "rememorying" imagination and the "rememoried" event, the recovery of the past and its inescapable elusiveness.

This double articulation is further complicated by the problematic verbal and visual representation of the "unnameable": what we hear in both performances is the verbalisation of the "unspeakable," the violent linguistic reconstitution of the institution euphemistically referred to as "peculiar." By placing the subtexts of the "peculiar" institution (i.e. the individual terror and degradation of the slaves) centre stage, Owens and McCauley "de-euphemise" the dehumanising effect of slavery, its dismembered and dis-membering nature and, at the same time, point to the difficulty in framing the slave's experience in a discourse of representation, be it verbal or visual. This latent malaise of representational capacity is reflected in the use of possession as a way of both showing and knowing the past. Indeed, the characters' painful discovery of an intimate and repressed persona parallels the actors' immersion in difficult and grief-ridden roles. Both actor and character blur in a *mise en abyme* of mental and physical incarnation from which neither emerges unscathed. Possession as a dramaturgical device thus sets up a dialectical tension not only between the character and his/her returning slave ancestor, but also between the actor/actress and his/her double role as an acting and enacting part of the ritual experience. This blurring of levels of incarnation is particularly obvious in *Sally's Rape* since the "players" are introduced as the characters themselves: "ROBBIE, the one who plays the people in her" and "JEANNIE, the one who plays the roles she's given" (218). Theatre and possession thus converge as modes of

cognition, of perception and, ultimately, as modes of representation and expression. Both imply a transformation of personality which functions as a catalyst for recovered or re-imagined historical knowledge.

Revealed through the physical and mental experience of "possession by the past" (Caruth, "Introduction" 417), mnestic traces are voiced, embodied, violently made present, and subsequently embedded in contemporary consciousness. The stage and the characters' bodies become sites of violence and violation where history is exposed and made flesh through the materiality of the characters' possession trance. Both plays stage fragments of slavery memory erupting in gusts through the characters' physical re-enactment of historical violence. By re-living their ancestors' physical and mental abuse, the possessed characters ritually repossess the slavery past and re-inscribe it in the flesh. Sold on the auction block, castrated or raped, they transgress the cognitive limit that keeps the past safely in the past and re-assert it as an essential, even visceral component of contemporary experience. Shown on stage, signs of historical violence (a naked body on the auction block, a slave prepared for castration) become, as Wilson Harris points out with reference to Faulkner's *Intruder in the Dust*,

> images that 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. (Harris, *Womb of Space* 5)

The dramaturgy of both plays evinces a peculiar *cryptomnesia*, i.e. a latent and persisting memory of the invisible whereby the eruption in consciousness of buried, memoried images and their bodily effects are not only recognized as the sudden resurgence of distant mnestic remains, but also appears as the unexpected and reluctant immersion in an uncontrollable flux of images and sensations which are recovered through the power of imagination. The past is violently re-presented through the "protean reality of space" (Harris, *Tradition* 50) which allows motions and visions to unfold in present consciousness. The intimate but forgotten connection with "eclipsed figures" (Harris, "Judgement and Dream" 26) issuing from the unconscious (individual and collective) is akin to a particular kind of spiritualism that I would call a spiritualism of the imagination whose manifestation discloses a subterranean dialogic structure across time and space.

The mnemopoetics of both plays dwells in the liminal space between history's re-appearance and the playwrights' original creation, the unwilling but necessary re-appropriation of the past and its imaginary re-envisioning. The physical and mental pain of the New World's primordial memory erupts in "a visual echo of History" (Walcott,

"Antilles" 6) which reverberates and mutates within contemporary consciousness and body:

> We carry in our bodies unspoken sadness and anger and resentment […]. You don't get rid of it but you're able to handle it, take it with you, and to transform. (McCauley, in *Moon Marked* 213-214)

"Unspoken sadness and anger and resentment" are given both physical and verbal expression through the dramaturgical exteriorisation of the characters' (conscious and unconscious) inner life which turns the stage into an inner space where processes of mental and bodily reminiscing/recreating represent the essential mode of a dramatic action that is situated at the interstice of history and imagination. With their mind and body seized by memory, the characters become both witnesses and creators who experience the pain of slavery as immediate, unmediated and ongoing. "The cohabitation of historical and imaginative bodies" (Harris, "Fossil and Psyche" 72), as corporeal incarnations of uncontrolled reminiscences, reveals a vertical dramatic structure in which linearity and traditional chronology collapse in the density of co-existing temporal frames and voices.

Despite the central, physical embodiment of slavery "rememory," language and its defining capacity are crucial to the integration of experience "into a narrative memory that allows the story to be verbalized and communicated" (Caruth, "Introduction" 420). Language is framed, in a double ritual of communion and introspection, as both social interaction among the characters and the audience and an internal process that speaks of and to the struggling self. The verbalisation of re-experienced historical degradation in both plays lies at the core of the existential quest for the subjective reconfiguration of pain and its re-framing in a chain of coherence and continuity. Mnemonarrative, in the form of conflicting dialogues and monologues, partakes in the regenerating "vision of consciousness [that] is the peculiar reality of language" (Harris, *Tradition* 32). History is thus treated not only as a "nightmare" but more precisely as a trauma that requires release and healing through subjective re-presentation, be it verbal and/or em-body-ed.

"The structure of experience" (Caruth, "Introduction" 3) as described by Cathy Caruth in her analysis of "Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder" (PTSD) and in the two plays under scrutiny is strikingly similar: trauma and the revelation of its pathology are compared to a possession trance where "the event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated *possession* of the one who experiences it. To be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event" (*Ibid.*). Slavery thus represents the initial, traumatic, defining African American moment whose memory lingers in the collective psyche and

refuses to disappear, thereby manifesting "the power of history, the necessity of historical memory, the desire to forget the terrors of slavery and the impossibility of forgetting" (Gilroy, *Small Acts* 179). Both bodily threat and psychic fright, the characters' "rememory" trance represents an Orphic descent into the "hell" (Owens, *The Box* 196) of history's "terrors" whose "pain is full of information" (McCauley, in *Moon Marked* 216) but carries the continued imprint of deadly effects. The unveiling of "the connections that are there" (*Ibid*. 214) and which form the difficult juncture between past, present and future, has both constructive and destructive bearings, both revelatory and apocalyptic consequences. The slave's historical "terrors" return to possess his/her descendants with such an emotional and cognitive impact that they either disappear in the absorbing density of their collective hallucination (in *The Box*) or they emerge from the "rememory" experience with a transformed vision of contemporary social and race relations (in *Sally's Rape*). The recovery of the past ultimately leads either to a recovery from the past, its wreckage and aftermaths, or to an absorption by the past, a collapse into the unsuspected depths of a recovered "tribal memory from which there is no escape" (Malkin, *Memory-Theater* 152).

The ritual of "possession by the past" constitutes both a dramaturgical device that assembles scenic and mental space in a *mise en abyme* of dramatic action, and a self-reflexive aesthetic practice that is poised between the painful testimony of historical degradation and the transformation of its crippling effects through creative expression. The indeterminate, open ending of *The Box* suggests the destructive facet of the "possession by the past," i.e the disappearance of the characters who appear to be unable to make sense of their hallucinatory experience. On the other hand, *Sally's Rape* concentrates on the healing and revelatory dimension of the possession ritual and the renewed, acute self-consciousness it induces. The two female characters' physical and psychic incorporation of "eclipsed figures" reveals "a capacity for liberation, a capacity for mental and unpredictable pain which the human person endured *then* or endures now" (Harris, *Tradition* 34). Literal compassion (in its etymological sense of "suffering with"), lived in the flesh and mind, opens up unsuspected vistas of experience if the connections between possessed and possessing figures are re-modelled, whereas compassion remains undecipherable torture and unredeemed passion if the associative nexus of historical continuity is not acknowledged. If both plays evince a similar mnemopoetics where "trance-scripts" serve as rites of intensification which lead to an intuitive and organic knowledge of the slave past, their final vision differs radically. *The Box* literally seals the characters' fate in an apocalyptic repetition of past destruction, which suggests a complete annihilation of the reminiscing subject.

Sally's Rape, on the contrary, focuses on the redemptive nature of creative remembrance, thereby intensifying the salvific effect of heightened subjectivity.

Apocalyptic "Eclipsed Presences"

Daniel W. Owens's *The Box* (1989)

Set in "a dimly lit box," an "empty space" (Brook, *Empty Space*) reminiscent of *Blk Love Song*'s "bareness [,] open area [and] platforms" (436), Owens's one-act play offers an apocalyptic mnemopoetics centred on the fatal amnesia of historical connections and the failure to capture the meaning of the possession experience. Two young men (David Stoningham and Lonnie Chapman) and one young woman (Chris James) who "have practically nothing in common […] but [their] color" (197) wake in a box with a "grizzly, wiry, ancient black man" (195) who hums "in a trance" (196). In the insularity of their situation, the three contemporary characters are confronted with the obscure(d) side of their history violently materialised in three scenes of possession where they, each in turn, re-enact their ancestors' degradation from auction block sale to castration. Warned by a mysterious voice that "in a moment all of you will be dead" (199), they try to break through the enforced material and spiritual enclosure by establishing a new sense of understanding and solidarity across class and gender:

> CHRIS: Hey, it's getting darker… The lights… The lights.
> DAVID: Quick… Grab hands… Hold tight… Hurry… Hurry.
> LONNIE: We all togetha. (199)

The three characters represent diverse social types: the "intelligent, intellectual, philosophical" David "from a middle class background" (195) but whose lack of ambition alienates him from his family, Chris who "has seen both sides of life" (195) and whose only "power […] is between [her] legs" (198), and the "fiery" Lonnie who has "been on the corner most of his life" (195) and knows "how to get dumped on every day of [his] life" (198). Despite their disparate social background and their relative youth (early twenties), all three consider themselves as losers without the means or the will to get out of the social determinism they emblematise. The box represents a zone of experiential intensity where social differences fade away against the revelation of their common history. The stage is set as an "empty space" where "the invisible can appear" (Brook, *Empty Space* 42), a dangerous territory where "a word like logical doesn't exist" (206). The bare, generic scenic space is filled with phonic currents of slavery history whose return to consciousness both fissures the characters' amnesia and extends the re-activated

historical entropy to final, radical extinction. The thematic mnemopoetics of the play is matched with a dramaturgical poetics of space where text and stage suggest the same progression toward a radical bareness, a final void that absorbs characters and present into the abyss of unleashed history. The box becomes the essential "lieu de mémoire" that not only memorialises the past in what ultimately appears as a destructive repetition of history, but also catalyses memory in a primordial "womb of space" (Harris, *Womb of Space*) where the painful genesis of African America is re-experienced.

The characters' failure to connect their incomprehensible experience of possession to the history of slavery is reflected in their refusal to recognise the "humming" presence of the "Ole Man" as the obscure, spectral link to their forgotten history. At first a strangely absent presence felt only through obsessive humming, he becomes, in the first possession scene, an illuminating presence in absentia that is detached from the characters' situation but inextricably bound to their experience. As a ghostly corypheus seemingly unaware of the action he comments on, he implicitly fleshes out the possessed characters' re-memory experience with a tale of personal humiliation. The characters' re-living of their ancestors' auction block sale and castration is juxtaposed with the old slave's narrative of his own life in an iterancy of historical experience echoing "above" spatial boundaries and beyond temporal stricture:

> (The box is completely dark and still. Above on either side is a platform, on one seated on a stool – audience right – is the OLE MAN bathed in a strobe light. On the other platform is LONNIE in a loin cloth, with chains on his wrists and ankles. He is bathed in swirling multicolored light. The sounds of milling crowd and a cracking whip can be heard. Suddenly a VOICE.)
> VOICE: Alright, ladies'n gentlemen, step right up… a little closer please… that's it… that's it… we gonna begin biddin' on this here young buck […] a possible field hand… a possible stud… what's your desire […] If it's a breeder you desire, this one here is pure stud material… Look at those flanks… that chest… […]
> LONNIE: What the hell's goin' on… I ain't no slave… I ain't gonna be anyone's slave… Not now… Not ever […]
> OLE MAN: Five hundred dollars massa pay for me […]. Gave him five healthy young 'uns I did. First year I was here… Five… Then… Then somtin' happened… I could' give him no mo'… First massa thought it was da woman… so he switch me aroun'… still nothin' happen […]. Finally massa sent me out in da fields […] wif evil ole Jess Harper, da overseer […] he make me wanna run away… Make me wanna take off into da swamps… Take my chances wif dem snakes 'stead of Jess… Sure wish I coulda kept on givin' massa chillun… But den maybe betta I stop… maybe betta I stop.
> […]

> VOICE: 235… 235… 240… 245… Do I hear 250… 250… Do I hear 255… 250… 250… Goin' once… twice… Sold… for 250 dollars to Mr. Henry Chapman of Chapman Hills, Virginia. (200-201)

The stage configuration reflects the intricate reminiscing mechanism and its embedded structure: the possessed character sits in chains and faces the mysterious "Ole Man" in a two-way mirror reflection that symbolises their complementary but still unacknowledged history. The contemporary man faces his(own)story without actually seeing it, he hears the confusion of crowd noises and the "cracker voice" (202) without listening to the "Ole Man's" testimony. The horrific confusion of the senses prevents the salvific fusion of the selves in a reciprocal acknowledgement of historical commonalities. The strobe light partially discloses the old slave's presence and seems to visualise the contemporary characters' relation to their cryptomnesic experience: the erupting memory violently ricochets between eye/I and another, blurred historical self without breaking the surface of things seen, heard and felt, and penetrating into the existential significance of the "rememory" trance. Possession remains a vision emptied of meaning, a confusion engendered by the very (his-)story that is being re-enacted. Partial vision never turns into *in-sight*, the intuitive understanding of the intimate connection between the box experience and history.

The contemporary characters are engulfed in a painful, ritual phonomnesia[1] but cannot hear the slave ghost's mnemonarrative that mediates the possession experience and frames it in a larger historical and interpersonal context. The physical immediacy of the "rememorying" trance is juxtaposed with the distant, mediated slave narrative. This creates a Janus-like representation of experience which encapsulates corporeality and narrativity, the raw contemporaneity of historical pain and its representation in the narrative past. In the first possession scene, Lonnie feels the physical immediacy of historical suffering which leaves "chain marks [on] his wrists" (202). The slave character transmits his own story in the referential and reflexive preterit mode, thereby both embodying a presence from the past and uttering the pastness of history. The incoherent immediacy of the past, which is felt in the present, and the mediated mode of historical narrative are set side by side but never merge. The box represents the possible juncture point of the two experiential models, but the "Ole Man's" narrative is restricted to "humming" and the contemporary characters' only attempt to communi-

[1] The representation of historical violence in Owens's *The Box* and Baraka's *Slave Ship* abnegates the dramatic primacy of sight in favour of a pervasive phonomnesia which sounds the past, thereby pointing to the "invisibility" of historical experiences that cannot be *seen* but only re-sounded.

cate with him is when "Lonnie pulls the Ole Man up and slams him against the wall" (210). Uncommunicativeness and violence, silencing and self-destruction perpetuate the "nightmare [and] hell" of African American history until its final dissolution.

The sterility of African American history trapped in a deadly perpetuation of (self-)denial and internalised violence, is made literal in the three possession scenes through the visual and verbal insistence upon the erotics of the bodies displayed for sale and their subsequent erasure through barrenness, castration and, ultimately, death. Praised as "pure stud material" (200) or as "a magnificent animal" (204) and turned into objects of desire as much as working bodies, Lonnie and Chris become "erotic sign[s] of servitude" (Baker, *Workings of the Spirit* 13) meant to function in the social and economic logic of chain breeding that ultimately and genealogically leads to their own contemporary existence. The "Ole Man's" narrative of his own sudden sterility and David's reliving of his ancestor's "gelding" (208) represent sexual pictures of a counter-productivity respectively enacted as the male slave's organic resistance against forced breeding or the amputation of his living force to subdue his rebellious spirit. Chris's possession trance is juxtaposed with the "Ole Man's" narration of his forced separation from his woman and his son. The female slave's auction sale coincides with the male slave's recollection of his lost family. Thus, a third dimension of sterile history is added here, the "death" of the family and the eradication of affective ties. Barrenness, castration and family destruction contribute to the same sterilization of the race which, in its radical destructiveness, does not even allow the "survival of the fittest" (207), as the apocalyptic ending suggests.

The solidarity of three characters in moments of extreme fear, as darkness fills the box and sounds of explosions get closer and closer, prefigures the final revelation of the forgotten historical link that binds them. It is with the awakening of personal memory, re-activated as it is in the box and then re-enacted on a platform above it "bathed in swirling multicolored light" (200), that the buried collective history returns to public consciousness through the "voice of the slavemaster" (195):

> (Lights drop suddenly in the box. Sounds of confusion and fear. Suddenly silence. Still no lights, then the humming of the OLE MAN.)
> VOICE: The slave insurrection was broken up today ladies'n gimmin'n the ringleaders hung by the neck 'til dead. The leaders a black girl called Chris, from Council Bluffs, and two black boys, one called Lonnie, from Chapman Hills, and the other a unknown nigga called David, and all their devil-inspired like won't be a threat to us kind, peaceful folk of Virginia any longer. CURTAIN (211)

The voice of ancestral oppression reveals the inescapability of the characters' shared history and the fateful re-actualisation of such ties. Contrary to Baraka's *Slave Ship* that ends with the ritual murder of the "Voice of the Oppressor," the "slavemaster's" voice literally has the last word in a drama of erupting consciousness that is abruptly choked by the overpowering Manichean discourse of tyranny. The hallucinatory projection into a forgotten dimension of collective and individual history that the characters experience reveals hidden linkages reconnecting disparate shards of the past across time, space, gender and class. The spliced but nonetheless interconnected texture of temporality and history is presented as a shifting site of living memory where the relationships of past and present, living and dead coexist in a destructive continuity.

The connection of historical catastrophes is re-enforced by references to diverse modes of destruction. Each vertiginous plunge into the slave past is announced by a different signal: Lonnie's trance starts with "explosions […] getting closer [and] louder and louder" (200), Chris's is prefigured by "noise sound[ing] like… Machine gun fire […] get[ting] progressively louder" (203) and David's is initiated by "some kind of gas" and "all three pass out" (207). Whereas sounds of explosions clearly prefigure the final, phonic re-enactment of the slave rebellion's suppression, sounds of machine gun fire and gas belong to the contemporary referential field of mass destruction. With each trance emerges a new level of destructiveness, from repression to war and culminating in a soundless extermination that may allude to the Shoah. These traces of destructive histories converge and combust in the box which is then perceived as a storage room of criss-crossing historical references collected and collaged alongside slavery "rememories."

The ordeal of the box represents the contemporary characters' fatal confrontation with the death of their former slave selves and the inability to overcome and transcend the destructiveness of their past. The "possession by the past" spatialised as an inex(pl/tr)icable imprisonment represents an uncontrollable surfeit of memory from which the doomed characters cannot free themselves. African American history is seen as a failed attempt at liberation and Owens's mnemopoetics initiates a practice of remembrance that also fails to free itself and recover from the deadly entanglement of past dehumanisation. The epistemology of possession allows a de-temporalisation of history that fails to energise the entranced characters out of their amnesiac stagnation. The failure of the historical slave rebellion is conflated with the contemporary characters' existential failure in a final, post-modern recognition of the failure of memory to redeem history. The characters remain bereaved of their memory and are subsequently destroyed by a repetitive history. Their

failure to forge a dialogue with the humming figure of the past, which denies the possibility of positive recovery from their history.

The mnemopoetics of *The Box* is indeed loaded with post-modern formal as well as thematic characteristics. The centrality of the possession trance as both dramaturgical device and epistemology of remembrance violates all temporal, spatial and causal constraints in a post-realist aesthetics of randomness, splitting of the self and self-reflexivity akin to post-modern poetics. The display of entranced bodies that are framed in a suggestive, repetitive and insistent erotics of commodification which is proclaimed by the "master/meta-"voice of history brings into play an ambivalent fetishisation of the recuperated image of the slave body that is thus doubly trapped in emerging capitalist interests as well as, metatheatrically, in the aesthetics of the performance. As Sidiya V. Hartman argues about the diffusion of terror and violence in 19th-century slave culture, the reiterated picture of physically and mentally tortured bodies represents the characters' rite of "passage through the blood-stained gate" (Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection* 3) of African American history, a "primal scene" in the formation of historical consciousness as well as an "exhibition […] of terror and sufferance [that] reinforce[s] the spectacular character of black suffering" (*Ibid.*). The commodifying "cracker voice" inciting an imaginary public to buy "black flesh," and the final, demiurgic voice of official power addressing the "peaceful folk of Virginia" as "ladies 'n gimmin'"(211) utter and epitomise the "show" dimension of the performance in a *mise en abyme* of spectacle. As Joseph R. Roach argues in his "speculative study of the representation of slave auctions as theatrical events," "slave spectacles" clearly display the characteristics of "performance as a medium of cultural definition and transmission" (Roach, "Slave Spectacles" 49) as well as a

> violent, triangular conjunction of money, property, and flesh […] the centrality of naked flesh signifies the abundant availability of all commodities: everything can be put up for sale, and everything can be examined and handled even by those who are "just looking." In the staging of New Orleans slave auctions, there is a fiercely laminating adhesion of bodies and objects, the individual desire for pleasure and the collective desire to compete for possession […]. As theatrical spectacle, they materialize the most intense of symbolic transactions in circum-Atlantic culture: money transforms flesh into property, property transforms flesh into money, flesh transforms money into property. (*Ibid*. 57-58)

Commodification, a trademark of post-modern theoretical ventures best defined by Fredric Jameson's expression "the cultural logic of late capitalism," is at the heart of Owens's dramatic vision of historical re-enactment. The entranced, tortured bodies are shown both as manipu-

lated objects of desire which are seen through a commodifying gaze, thus replaceable "goods" in a capitalist, "société du spectacle" (Debord, qtd. in Jameson, *Postmodernism* 321-322), and as powerless, amnesiac subjects (out) of history who "jus' think 'bout survivin'" (206). They represent a history of unredeemed bankruptcy and failed survival that runs against the usual post-colonial insistence on hard-won cultural "agency" and social "empowerment" in the midst of degrading historical circumstances. To a certain extent, the disorienting effect of the box experiment can thus be seen as an illustration of

> the postmodern experience stem[ming] from a profound sense of *ontological uncertainty*. Human shock in the face of the unimaginable (pollution, holocaust, the death of the "subject") results in a loss of fixed points of reference. Neither the world nor the self any longer possesses unity, coherence, meaning. (Selden and Widdowson, *Reader's Guide* 178)

At the end of the play, the African American subject does die, or rather disappears, extinguished by the destructive recurrence of the "hell" (196) of history.

Indeed, *The Box* runs against the post-colonial grain by proposing a post-modern allegory of the dissolution of the subject whose failure to grasp his/her position in the ritual of confinement and re-enactment, metatheatrically in history, undermines the regenerative functionality of performance (and more generally culture) itself. Contrary to Wilson Harris's conception of the vodun dancer as a "dramatic agent of subconsciousness" (Harris, *Tradition* 51), Owens's vision of ritual possession is deprived of teleological substance, or rather the teleology of possession is lost in the characters' inability to understand that "in this trance of overlapping spheres of reflection, a primordial or deeper function of memory begins to exercise itself within the bloodstream of space" (*Ibid.*). Deprived of its spiritual dimension, the trance ritual becomes a pointless ceremony of remembrance, a post-modern *simulacrum* that cannot yield to revelation and integration of latent cultural forces but only reflects the Jamesonian "depthlessness" of representation where "the past as 'referent' finds itself gradually bracketed, and then effaced altogether, leaving us with nothing but texts" (Jameson, *Postmodernism* 322). *The Box* evinces such a "spatial logic of the simulacrum" (*Ibid.* 321) that privileges form over substance, imitative ritual over meaning, which leaves us with nothing but elusive, "floating signifiers." The ritualistic evocation of historical, "eclipsed figures" remains an incoherent cryptomnesia with powerfully suggestive effects, a deadly "spectacle" imposed upon "depthless" characters devoid of the "retrospective dimension indispensable to any vital reorientation of [the] collective future" (*Ibid.* 322). Cut off from their own history and unwill-

ing to rediscover its hidden threads, they become recycled "commodities" without any rooted memory, recurrently sold away then erased, thus reified in a cyclical history over which they have no control. This undercurrent nihilism verging on a cynical vision of cultural memory may also be seen as the playwright's deliberate criticism of the African Americans' unwillingness to probe their own history in search of the necessary "roots 'n routes" (Gilroy, *Black Atlantic* 87) which would lead them away from social and spiritual stagnation.

In this sense, the reality of the trance experience suggests a recuperative and salvific possibility. As a gateway to a forgotten past, it may allow the entranced characters to make the necessary connections to envision, re-enact and understand the continuity of their history. Possession suggests a representation of the subject as an irrational being who is haunted by an uncontrollable and incomprehensible inner world, and inhabited by presences whose recognition (and, ultimately, integration) are constitutive of the trance. This ontological supposition inherent in the dramatisation of the possession trance contradicts the post-modern vision of a hollowed-out subject devoid of any sort of spirituality. The existential fragmentation that the contemporary characters undergo, when "you feel your soul 'n mind shatter into a million jagged pieces" (207), is the premise of reconstruction, but their refusal to acknowledge the liminal character of the box experience leaves them in a confused, annihilating limbo: "Whether this is a game… a joke… or some fucked up experiment I don't know… But… I do know that I gotta get out of here… I gotta escape, 'n to escape I gotta survive" (207). Their habit of "worr[ying] 'bout things 'stead of tryin' to change them" (203) entraps them in a historical determinism symbolised by the confined space of the box without perceptible exit. The contemporary African American individual is thus seen as alienated from his/her own history and still relegated to the margins of American society. The dramatic representation of glimpses of the past through possession suggests the very existence of a hidden dimension of (re)creation, hence a possibility of recovery. The box thus constitutes a pregnant space in both senses, i.e. a space of cogent, compelling forces of memory as well as of gestating possibilities of redress: the process of being "stripped of everything real… human" (207) could be a prefiguration of rebirth.

The imagistic configuration of the theatrical stage as a locked box represents a minimalist space closely related, in form and content, to the conceptualisation of psychic space as a fillable void, a generative emptiness from which content and order could emerge. Stage and psyche are spaces of creation but also spaces of "de-creation," i.e. of cyclic return to the void as the final disappearance of the characters suggests. However, *The Box* does not yield irremediably to the Jamesonian "depthless"

world of proliferating simulacra. If the past is indeed "bracketed" and deliberately ignored, it is not "effaced" altogether, it lingers then unexpectedly erupts into consciousness with tremendous (a/e)ffects on the reminiscing character. Historical as well as psychic "depth" is not reduced to a self-referential surface of appearances and fragments, it is partially revealed through visionary glimpses of buried existence. But whereas Owens envisions history as a cyclical sequence of presents excluded from progressive alterity, McCauley envisages a dialectical relationship to a degrading history where "possession by the past" does not mean individual dis-integration but rather functions as a rite of salvific integration within the open capacity of the subjective imagination to leap beyond deterministic conditions.

"Ripping the Veil"

Robbie McCauley's *Sally's Rape* (1989)

Structured as a dialogue between a black woman and a white woman, "ROBBIE, the one who plays the people in her" and "JEANNIE, the one who plays the role she's given" (218), *Sally's Rape* is a fragmentary "work in progress" (220, 221) that focuses on the liberating nature of both language and performance as representational, channelling, healing processes of conscious and creative integration of the past. Characters and text are presented as emanations from "conversations over tea" between Robbie McCauley and Jeannie Hutchins and "from improvisations during [the] performances. So the actors- the parts of themselves that connected with the subjects of the piece- became the characters" (McCauley, in *Moon Marked* 218). The analogical relationship between experience and performance is thus central to the play's mnemopoetics. The deliberate blurring between the actresses' real life and reflections and their roles in the play provides an extreme illustration of the traditional, mimetic dimension of theatre: the fragmentary play repeats and imitates the actresses' speech and behaviour patterns, rhythms and thought developments as they were improvised in given frameworks during rehearsals, then as they were rewritten and polished, thus "fictionalised" by the author.

Moreover, *Sally's Rape* was usually followed by a post-play discussion between the actresses and the audience thereby fleshing out the "work-in-progress" with an improvised discussion on the ideological questions raised and left unresolved. The audience thus actively participates in the construction of the performance and is made part of the dramatic mnemopoetics as diverse and diverging voices clash and merge with the dramatic personae. Robbie McCauley is both playwright, character and performer, and as such, she expresses herself both as herself and as "the people in her," in her own name and through the nameless, anonymous "Sallies" of African American history. "Sally" historically refers to Sally Hemings, Thomas Jefferson's slave mistress who bore him several children, but it also emblematises "all women without social, economic, political or physical power, who are therefore available to be raped" (Hatch and Shine, *Black Theatre* 368).

If "Sally" expresses the commonality of women's exploitation across the black/white racial divide, the name and its historical referent also

epitomise "the deeply rooted presence of black women at the core of this [slavery] shameful history" (McCauley, in *Sourcebook of African American Performance* 246). As I have already argued in chapter 2, female slaves were doubly exploited as workers and sexual objects even if "this peculiar phase of Slavery has generally been kept veiled" (Child, "Introduction" to Jacobs, *Incidents* 8). McCauley both internalises and visualises their historical sexual exploitation by "taking the responsibility of presenting [it] with the veil withdrawn" (*Ibid.*), both verbally through recurrent mnemonarratives of rape uttered by "the people in her," and visually by exposing her naked body on an imaginary auction block in an exorcising re-enactment of slave spectacle. By incarnating and uttering the trauma of the historical, original rape of female slaves by white men, "that kind of rape [that] changed who we were as a people" (McCauley, qtd. in Patraka, "Obsessing in Public" 224), she begins "to rip that veil drawn over proceedings too terrible to relate" (Morrison, "Site of Memory" 110) and to "find a passageway in the performance through […] blind rage" (McCauley, in *Sourcebook of African American Performance* 246) to reach, through ritual re-enactment and dialogue, a state of "atonement […] an opening […] like 'if I show you mine, then you can show me yours,' and we can move together with our imperfections, with our wounds" (*Ibid*. 233). Toni Morrison's transformation of Lydia Maria Child's metaphor of the veil drawn over sexual exploitation emphasises the schizophrenic division within the black woman's psyche, a "veil" separating "spoken" experiences from "unspeakable things unspoken" (Morrison, "Unspeakable Things" 3). It is precisely in this process of "ripping the veil" of recurrent, historical pain that McCauley engages through a performance which blurs the intimate and the public, the personal and the political, the interiority of possession trance and the exteriority of narrative and visual representations.

Although she remains the demiurgic power behind the performance, the one "who tells all she wants to tell" (218), the confrontation with white Jeannie sets her in a dialogic relationship to the "other" woman where "commonality" (219) and difference are exposed, repeated, and discussed. If sexual exploitation constitutes the recurrent, historical component that brings them together, "race is still a virtually unspeakable thing" (Morrison, "Unspeakable Things" 3) that conditions "language […] comportment […] culture" (219) and draws a Du Boisan "veil of color" between them. Their personal stories of Southern women's education and rape reveal their "commonness [and] differences […] speaking the differences makes the connection happen" (McCauley in *Moon Marked* 214). "Speaking the unspeakable"

(McCauley, qtd. in Patraka, "Obsessing in Public" 220), i.e. the entanglement of sex and race, to the "other" white woman creates:

> an opening for movement […] a kind of groundwork for dialog [where] the mind and the body have to work together in order to create the movement of political theatre. When I say movement, I mean going from something blocked and unclear to something open and clearer so that we can move to change things, that's what my art is about. (McCauley, qtd. in Patraka, "Obsessing in Public" 220)

What is repressed and personal is then restored in a manifestly political drama that reproduces, develops and, in a therapeutic rehearsal, transforms the social, historical and cultural relations that constitute the fulcrum of the two women's experience. Sexual and racial politics thus merge in a mnemopoetics of "connection and continuity" (McCauley, qtd. in Patraka, "Obsessing in Public" 232) recovered through a ritual performance where "history has to be connected to the realities of the present" (*Ibid.* 222).

The basic thematic structure of the play, "the subjects of the piece," revolves around nine sections, each developed by the two actresses in a continuity and deepening of dialogues on the complex intertwining of race, gender, history, memory, religion, education and language:

Prologue: Talking About What it is About
1. Confessing About Family and Religion and Work in Progress
2. Stating the Context
3. Trying to Transform
4. Moments in the Chairs
5. Sally's Rape
6. In a Rape Crisis Center
7. Talking About Different Schools, and How to Do
8. The Language Lesson

These nine guidelines provide the main axis for "improvisational dialogue[s] [that] suggest the ease with which events between the actors, and between the actors and audience, can happen" (218). Variations on language, its historical, cultural and, more generally, ideological bearings, frame the play in a cyclical pattern. This structural circularity points to the significance of language as an ideologically loaded site where power relations are produced and reproduced, a sphere of hierarchies similar to "religion," "family," "schools" and, ultimately, "rape." It also emphasises the importance of language as an instrument of mediation which articulates the necessary "connections […] that lead to the ability to change things that are not working" (McCauley, qtd. in Patraka, "Obsessing in Public" 222). "Context," "progress" and "transform" mark the stages of the dramatic and psychological exploration of

the class and race divisions between Robbie and Jeannie, divisions that must be encountered before any real sisterhood can be established.

The play is presented as a malleable, transformational text that is re-activated with each production, a correlation between art and life, aesthetics and experience which reflects the shifting nature of "a work in *progress*, in people moving forward […] the labor of struggle that shapes the performance" (*Ibid*. 237). In its incompleteness and avowed perfectibility, the play challenges both actresses and audience to *progress* in a triple motion of "moving forward" toward aesthetic, personal, communal and political betterment: *progress* is perceived as a ritualistic journey back to the past to understand the present and act upon it, as an ongoing dramatic construction based on constant improvisation, and as a striving toward a gradual expanding of consciousness through a ritual which blurs the borders between personal experience and dramatic performance. Both experience and performance partake of the same ritual hermeneutics: a form of historical practice aware of its inescapable provisionality, its ongoing pro(c-g)ess of being transformed with varying, subjective reflections and interpretations.

This shifting movement between private and public spheres is made clear at the very beginning of the play:

> Robbie and Jeannie enter with cups of tea on saucers […] in conversation between themselves, aware of Audience […]
> ROBBIE: Somebody said it was about cups.
> JEANNIE: Somebody else said it was about language.
> ROBBIE: What do you think it is about?
> JEANNIE: Well, that one person said it was about you and me. And I know it's not about me, but it's about you and I'm in it.
> ROBBIE: It's my story, and you're in it because I put you in it. (219)

The two actresses' entrance suggests a double dramatic angle: on the one hand, it presents a traditional and mimetic performance supported by carefully constructed dialogues[1], and, on the other hand, it suggests an open, transformational play that uses the actresses' improvisational talent as well as the spontaneity of public response as a ritual of collective, reciprocally expanding social consciousness. Thus, the Prologue presents a mimetic, intensely personal meditation on culture, history, gender and race which translates McCauley's autobiographical dis-

[1] In this regard, the play won an Obie Award for the best Off Broadway Play in New York in 1992:
"It was especially important and exciting that the award was for being a writer. In a sense, I still feel like a 'performer on paper.' But it's great to have the recognition from people that my work is a play or has the same stature as one" (McCauley, qtd. in Patraka, "Obsessing in Public" 241).

course and re-actualises conversations the actresses had in "real life," rehearsals and interactions with former audiences. The two women discuss, in a metatheatrical comment, the basic principles of the performance and establish the hierarchy of power in the creation in progress. The three "players" are introduced in the first lines: the two women's "awareness of audience" is expressed in their forcefully self-conscious acting as well as in dialogues by the rhetorical "somebody said," "somebody else said" or "that one person." The audience is drawn into the play as an active participant in the first "confessing" section:

> ROBBIE AND JEANNIE *(To Audience, alternating the lines between them)*: And we can't have a dialogue by ourselves. So you're in it. Don't worry I won't jump in your face or down your throat. We'll feed you. *(They pass out cookies and apples, improvising about "fish and loaves" and about how food eases tension, may help you talk)* We'll use hand signals. lead like camp directors, divide you into groups […]. Group One will be the agreeable ones. When we signal like this, *(Two fingers up)* you say "That's right!", "Yes indeed" or "I'm telling you." Any short sentence of agreement […]. Group Two will be the bass line. You just go "uh huh," "umm humm," or "yeah, yeah." […]. *(Talking fast)* Group Three is the dialogue group, people who have something to add, to disagree with, who like to talk.
> ROBBIE: Don't worry, I'm in control. Your signal is two hands out like this… Dialogue?
> JEANNIE: Let's practice with something from the context of the piece. Lights! (222-223)

The play is built as an open musical score with multiple, conflicting or harmonising voices so that the performance incorporates the improvisations the spectators and the actresses act out. It "moves forward" in a disrupted though controlled movement through the nine charted phases. But the playwright/performer remains "in control" of her creation and allows diversion and disruption to be part of its organisation. Like a shaman, she remains the main performer/creator and the master of ceremony, the entranced and at the same time controlling agent of the ritual. In tune with Wilson Harris's definition of the shaman as "a voyager of the unconscious," she carries within herself "the seed of genesis that is native to every feminine element" (Harris, "In the Name of Liberty" 213), the ancestral memory of her community's suffering that is re-enacted through possession. The ritual of *communion* between performers and audience is emphasised through the sharing of "cookies and apples," a ritual gesture presented as an essential element of the play's liturgy and which conflates literal food and cultural nurturing in a *double entendre* "we'll feed you."

This interpretation leads to the second structural aspect of the play, namely its ritualistic dimension embodied in the communal connection

between actresses and audience as well as in the intensification of experience the performance represents for the three "players." It is thus a ritual encounter between a white woman, a black woman and the community in the largest sense. It has the form of a dramatic "dialogue" (221) whose theatricality (visible awareness of audience, demiurgic self-reflexivity) is brought to the fore, not to disallow the possibility of apprehending the dramatic action as a replica of the real (as a Brechtian interpretation would suggest), but, on the contrary, to reinforce the intimate link between public performance and personal experience by making visible and emphasising the theatrical ties to the audience: "events […] between the actors and the audience can happen" (218) when the audience is considered as the third "actor," "those who are there, who witness and talk back" (*Ibid.*). Just as Baraka wanted *Slave Ship* to be participatory in the way biblical pageants function as communal plays in African American church rituals, McCauley stresses the "ritual aspect, the joining" (McCauley, qtd. in Patraka, "Obsessing in Public" 225) of her performance as the crucial element that allows the necessary re-creation of "connection and continuity" (*Ibid*. 232):

> the relationship between theatre and the church is direct in terms of community. You come and engage in a ritual and either it's very stoic and rigid, or it's very inclusive, and you either give yourself to the ritual or not. (*Ibid.* 241)

The ritual of reconnection through performance blends the spiritual and the secular in a unifying vision of both personal re-integration into his/her-story and "inclusive" communion with the audience. The metatheatrical gradual binding to the spectatorial community corresponds to the play's progressive interpenetration of Robbie's and Jeannie's experiences until it reaches a confusion of roles which transgresses the social, historical and cultural boundaries, i.e. the ideological space, that keep them divided.

As Terry Eagleton argues, "literature, in the meaning of the word we have inherited, *is* ideology It has the most intimate relations to questions of social power" (Eagleton, *Literary Theory* 22). Theatre is indeed supported, fed and moulded by the complex "matrix" of representations which encapsulates discourse, language, aesthetics, history, religion, class, gender, race or education. It is through this ideological lens that the subjects/characters experience themselves (in relation to each other or to the social structures in which they "move forward"), and the playwright/performer constructs an imaginary and privileged space (though abundantly infiltrated by "the real") where reflection, dialogue and transformation (of time, place and person) are "rehearsed" and accomplished. The play's Prologue introduces the relationship between

the performance and the wider web of cultural practices that confine and define women, black and white alike, in Southern society:

> ROBBIE: Somebody said it was about cups.
> JEANNIE: Somebody else said it was about language.
> ROBBIE: What do you think it is about? […] It *is* about cups.
> JEANNIE: It's about getting culture.
> ROBBIE: Cup says culture.
> JEANNIE: Comportment.
> ROBBIE: Commonality […]. I once went to a class in tea pouring… It was Japanese, but it was about containment… proper…deportment.
> JEANNIE: Doing the…proper…
> ROBBIE AND JEANNIE: right… thing.
> […]
> ROBBIE: I think sometimes we did this for the sake of itself. Cups and saucers. Charm school. White gloves.
> JEANNIE: But that's South, too. I mean, that's southern stuff. (219-220)

"Cup, culture, comportment, commonality and containment" represent an alliterative and metonymic concatenation whose textual and semantic proximity translates the ideological codes of "proper" representation and subjection which a Southern woman should respect in order to be integrated. The cup on a saucer Robbie and Jeannie carry throughout the play appears as the metonymic sign of both their "commonality" as well as of their will to extend the visible sign to its signified ramifications in a deepening dialogue ("language") on "culture" and its ideological underpinnings. If ideology consists in "the ways in which what we say and believe connect with the power-structure and power-relations of the society we live in" (Eagleton, *Literary Theory* 14), *Sally's Rape* not only evinces strong ideological and political concerns, but also offers a self-reflexive meditation on how female "subjects are interpellated (called into being) within ideologies," i.e. how subjects/performers become conscious of their own subjection to ideological formations through the transformative power of ritual de- and reconstruction (Althusser, qtd in Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, *Empire Writes Back* 170).

In McCauley's own words, *Sally's Rape* speaks "about the charged issue of race relations" (McCauley, in *Moon Marked* 213), "about class, but more about the complicated issue of survival for black people and how it relates to class" (McCauley, qtd. in Patraka, "Obsessing in Public" 227), and "about - rape as a part of domination" (McCauley, in *Moon Marked* 215). Race, class and gender are thus seen as social and historical constructions that have enforced unequal relations of power. Instead of celebrating a unifying woman's essence as a counterforce to male domination, McCauley's feminist approach explores the ideologi-

cal investment in class and race relations which separates her from the "other" white woman, thereby placing feminism not in a simple polarity with the patriarchal order but in a complex web of internal "commonness" and "differences" (*Ibid.* 214). Opening the improvised dialogue with Jeannie and the audience in the second section "Stating the Context," Robbie asserts "I believe white is a condition that anyone can take in. It causes one to feel superior in order to be okay" (222). "White" becomes the prime signifier of domination, an ideological construction Robbie dismantles by asserting "control" (*Ibid.*) over her performed "story" and "wav[ing] off dialogue" (with audience and Jeannie) at her own will. Refusing the kind of feminist essentialism that subsumes women into the sisterly category of "woman" without probing into the discrepancies of race, class and historical conditions, she attempts to find "connections" to, and "commonness" with, Jeannie by exploring these "differences [until] in a strange way, speaking the differences makes the connection happen" (McCauley, in *Moon Marked* 214). *Sally's Rape* then functions as a gradual "unmasking" (228) of differences and commonalities through a dialogic, even agonistic performance engaged in personal and communal identity politics. Cultural differences rather than cultural identities are probed here since identity itself is perceived as the process of recognition of these differences rather than as a pre-determined essence. By deconstructing then "re-connecting" those differences, the play exposes the subterranean workings of ideology, i.e., in Eagleton's words, "that complex structure of social perception which ensures that the situation in which one social class has power over the others is either seen by most members of the society as 'natural,' or not seen at all" (Eagleton, *Marxism* 5). The stage thus becomes an open space of contestation where asymmetries of power along ideological axes such as gender, race and class are exposed, discussed and de-formed.

The fourth section "Moments in the Chairs" is the most overtly ideological discussion between the two women who

> sit in the light, face each other [and] improvise on why they are angry with each other. The differences go deep. [Jeannie] thinks their idealism is similar. Robbie thinks admitting the differences in their histories is more important.
> […]
> JEANNIE: Your hands are like ice.
> ROBBIE: What upsets me is language. I can't win in your language.
> JEANNIE: You're going to win anyway. What upsets me is there's an underlying implication that you're gonna unmask me. That you're gonna get underneath something and pull it out. That you can see it and I can't.
> ROBBIE: What do you think it is? I mean, it's better if you say it.

> JEANNIE: Some kind of delusion, self-deception.
> ROBBIE: About what? I mean what's the content of it?
> JEANNIE: About my idealism. I have some idea of… humanism, something that we share, more important than our differences. Of greater…. Of greater value.
> ROBBIE: Let me see if I can use the language to say what I feel about your idealism. I think it covers over something in your history that makes your idealism still a whim. It angers me that even though your ancestors might have been slaves – because they did have white slaves… only made black slavery mandatory for economic reasons, so they could catch us when we ran away – that history has given you that ability to forget your shame about being oppressed by being ignorant, mean or idealistic… which makes it dangerous for me. (227-228)

Facing each other as if they were negative reflections of one another, the white woman and the black woman confront their respective relation to and vision of their own history, how it affects and infects their interaction and prevents them from meeting on equal ground. Jeannie's "self-deceptive idealism" fails to analyse its roots and ideological bearings, denies the specificity and continuity of the black woman's oppression and artificially "connects" to it in a "great" and all-encompassing "humanistic" movement. She "forgets" that her whiteness has annihilated whatever oppression and humiliation her story hides, and has rendered her "invisible," i.e. part of the norm, so that her seemingly compassionate attempt to connect to Robbie's history remains a superficial "whim." The self-delusive character of Jeannie's idealism lies in the fact that, for all her intellectual understanding of how class is socially constructed to perpetuate prerogatives (including the "ability to forget" past oppression) along racial lines, she fails to recognise her unconscious complicity in the politics of race-based privilege and covers it with a sweeping and unquestioned "humanism" of "greater value." The universalist claim of Jeannie's "humanism" derives from the ontological assumption that humanity (and particularly its feminine part) is homogeneous and unitary. This vision of a "universal" human condition crumbles once it is confronted with the cultural and social "differences" and inequalities which Robbie exposes and opposes as counter-discursive actualities. She rejects the humanist notion that there is an ahistorical essence of man (and more particularly woman) and, in a mnemopoetic countermove, she places herself at the centre of her/history. She denounces the "dangerous" effect of Jeannie's idealism as a form of pernicious domination which provides the terms and structures (i.e. the ideological constructs) by which the dominant class frames (i.e. articulates, encloses and contrives false representations against) African Americans. She

argues that such a humanism,[2] so reassuring at Jeannie's idealistic level, functions to override the historical "differences" that remain the social markers of continuing injustices. Thus, the dialogue between the two women probes at the heart of a mnemopoetics tainted with shame and guilt, an inbred pairing born out of American history and its colonial ideology:

> I am carrying shame, and many others are carrying guilt. And those are distortions of information and of the material that we are living in. When the material of our past turns into shame and guilt, we stop talking about it, and it gets bigger and bigger and more distorted. (McCauley, qtd. in Patraka, "Obsessing in Public" 221)

Robbie's "shame" at her own history of degradation is "mixed up with blame" and "rage," and the ritual of performance allows her to express, release and transform them as a new "groundwork for dialog" (*Ibid*. 220) with herself, the "other" woman and the community of spectators.

The introductory phase, "Confessing About Family and Religion and Work in Progress," foregrounds this twin aspect of the ritual of "connection and continuity," the intimate and the public commitment, the personal mnestic traces and their inscription in the nation's history:

> ROBBIE: Almost everybody in my mother's family was half-white. But that wasn't nothing but some rape. These confessions are the mourning for the lost connections.
> Robbie starts singing and Jeannie joins in.
> ROBBIE AND JEANNIE:
> "I'm going there to meet my mother
> I'm going there no more to roam
> I'm just a-going over Jordan
> I'm just a-going over home…"
> Robbie continues humming like in church. (220-221)

The communal singing of the spiritual signals the beginning of the ritual that reaches back for "the lost connections" which mark Robbie's (s)kin and make up her "story." Her search for a rooted history starts with the "spiritual" journey to "meet [the ancestral] mother" and involves the intimate recovery of "unspeakable" "confessions," a subterranean flux of memories which runs from generation to generation through matrilineal transmission:

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[2] For an insightful and detailed analysis of the different mutations of humanism from the Enlightenment to the post-colonial critique of its imperialistic stance, see the chapter devoted to "Colonialism and Humanism" in Robert Young, *White Mythologies. Writing History and the West*.

> ROBBIE: In 1964 at the library job a U.S. history major who'd graduated from Smith College said –
> JEANNIE: I never knew white men did anything with colored women on plantations.
> ROBBIE: I said, "It was rape." Her eyes turned red. She choked on her sandwich and quit the job […]. But when I'm sitting around my grandmother's breakfast table, and she's telling me something that this woman who went to Smith College didn't know, a U.S. history major –
> JEANNIE *(Overlap)*: Well, aren't you more fortunate then, that you learned so much more through your grandmother? (225)

"The telling of the untellable stories" (McCauley, qtd. in Patraka, "Obsessing in Public" 232) represents "the mourning for the lost connections," i.e. not only the act of expressing historical grief but also the ritual transmission of "stories" whose repetition binds African American women in a pact of survival through iterative testimony. The painful genesis of the African American community is passed on, from generation to generation of women, in an oral act of *re-generation* through the upholding of ancestral "connections." "Telling untellable stories" is seen as an essentially female ritual of cultural transmission, a process whereby, as Trinh Minh-ha suggests, "the words passed down from mouth to ear (one sexual part to another sexual part), womb to womb, body to body are the remembered ones" (Minh-ha, *Woman, Native, Other* 136). Such a vision of historical legacy passed on through "untellable" memories implies a mnemopoetic access to a form of *authenticity*, the preservation of a communal memory as the nurturing matrix of identity.

As Trinh T. Minh-ha lyrically argues:

> *authenticity* as a need to rely on an "undisputed origin," is prey to an obsessive *fear*: that of *losing a connection*. Everything must hold together. In my craving for a logic of being, I cannot help but loathe the threats of interruptions, disseminations, and suspensions […]. To fill, to join, to unify. The order and the links create an illusion of continuity, which I highly prize for fear of nonsense and emptiness, Thus, a clear origin will give me a connection back through time, and I shall, by all means, search for that genuine layer of myself to which I can always cling. (*Ibid*. 94)

"To fill" the gaps of official history with personal memories passed on by women from generation to generation, "to join" the present to the past in an ambiguous alliance that keeps the pain of history alive and, in the same process of preservation, soothes and heals it, and "to unify" ancestral stories with contemporary situations are also the essential principles of McCauley's mnemopoetics. Her "logic of being" revolves around the painful peeling away of historical layers contained within her

body and mind in a ritual "unveiling" and re-telling of her own "others" and (s)kin. Her "obsessive fear" of "loosing connection" is mediated by her performative "obsessing in public," an actualisation of her "obsession […] with connection and continuity" (McCauley, qtd. in Patraka, "Obsessing in Public" 232). McCauley's ontological quest thus seems to be intimately linked to an imaginative search for an "*authenticity*, an undisputed origin" which is embodied and made flesh in the historically determined, and at the same time, generic female slave "Sally." "Herstory" is passed on as both epistemology of remembrance – a communal "moving forward" through mnemopetic ritual to "change the things that are not working" (*Ibid*. 222) - and personal ontology reaching back to her innermost "logic of being." Her multi-layered identity is reconstructed as a matrix of battling subjectivities in which politicised positions such as race, class, gender, culture, religion, education or mental well-being cohere to form an elusive wholeness in progress.

The "rememory" ritual is sustained by piano playing, singing, humming as well as by a cryptic dance around the rocks dispersed on stage:

> 2. Stating the Context
> […]
> Jeannie moves among rocks.
> ROBBIE *(Walking in 6/8 time)*: It's about my great-great-grandmother Sally who was a young woman with children when official slavery ended. And she's in me. (222)

The two actresses criss-cross around the rocks in a slow waltz rhythm as Robbie tells fragments of her slave ancestor's life. The regular body and speech motion accompanies the reminiscing process like a rhythmic mnemonics, and endows it with the languor of a slow waltz. The dramaturgical simultaneity of the two women's body movement involved in the dance among rocks in 6/8 measure and in the mnemonarrative of "great-great-grandmother Sally" renders visible the process of identity formation as a female corp-or(e)ality engaged in the rhythms of the past. Reminiscences, rhythms, rocks and female bodies merge in a lyrical mnemopoetics akin to the "complex, reflexive enterprise" (Baker, *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature* 3) of African American culture epitomised in the blues musical form as it is described by Houston Baker:

> [African American cultural production] finds its proper figuration in the blues conceived as a matrix. A matrix is a womb, a network, a fossil-bearing rock, a rocky trace of a gemstone's removal […]. The matrix is a point of ceaseless input and output, a web of intersecting, crisscrossing impulses always in production transit. (*Ibid.*)

In a metonymic twist, Robbie's body "in progress" functions as a "matrix" through which the material of historical and personal experiences "transits," "criss-crosses" and transforms into communal performance. The rocks about the stage may represent obstacles as well as "fossil-bearing" stones carrying the imprint of half-forgotten elements petrified in motion and available to recognition. A fossil, like Robbie, carries "the stigmata of its ancestry" (Monod, qtd. in Petersen and Rutherford, "Fossil and Psyche" 185). Robbie and Jeannie thus rhythmically "criss-cross" around scattered "fossil identities" and it is "by entering into a fruitful dialogue with the past [that] one becomes able to revive the fossils that are buried within oneself and are part of one's ancestors" (*Ibid.*). The spiritual songs, Robbie's piano playing and the choreographic motions around "rocks lying about the space" (219) articulate the dramaturgical and metaphorical correspondences between the spiritual journey back in time "to meet [the ancestral slave] mother" and the oral transmission of "untellable stories" "from womb to womb." This dynamics of ritual singing and dancing energises the process of mnemo*poiesis* which re-makes the connections to repressed, historical experiences.

Poised between the contemporaneity of the performance and her immersion into the past, Robbie avoids the stumbling rocks that may endanger her balance and "progresses" physically and psychically in her "journey of chains" (224):

> 3. Trying to Transform
> ROBBIE *(Upset, she moves over left)* I I I become others inside me, standing at the bus stop with my socks rolled down screaming things I shouda said, "Just because people are crazy don't mean they can't think straight!" Hollering periodically at white men "YOU RAPED ME! GODDAMN MOTHERFUKA! YOU RAPED ME!" *(Reaching out, gathering air)* Sometimes I'll gather and push away the wall of vibrations that make walls between us… *(Throws air at Jeannie)* Black
> JEANNIE (Catching, molding the bunch of air): Black
> ROBBIE: Women
> JEANNIE: Women
> ROBBIE: Get
> JEANNIE: Get
> ROBBIE AND JEANNIE: Bitter. (223- 224)

Robbie's incorporation of "others," her female slave ancestors, reflects the mnemopoetic movement leading to the intimate re-appropriation of history through the resurgence of ancestral memories. The process of mnestic integration fuses old and new personalities, fuels her rage (a "sudden anger" 223) and "bitterness" at historical humiliations and their consequences, so that Robbie can at times hardly distinguish

herself from her abused ancestors. McCauley recognises the power of "rage" to spur her writing and acting: "the rage that I have embraced, that is necessary, that is healing, and I release it out of a personal need to do so" (McCauley, qtd. in Patraka, "Obsessing in Public" 241). The necessity of "rage" and the need to express and release it in "periodical" fits of hysteria blurs the temporal boundaries that separate her from her own "Sallies," a "healing" hysteria "screaming things" that erupt from and across the "womb of space" (Harris, *Womb of Space*) and time. The ancestral rape and the subsequent birth of a community in and out of violence resurface in the contemporary black woman's consciousness in a "scream" of hysteria, an etymological and metonymic proximity which suggests that New World patterns have emerged from a cultural, social and sexual "womb" or "matrix" more literal than Houston Baker envisioned.

Releasing stories and screams to the air "pushes the wall of vibrations" which separates the white and the black woman with distorted echoes from the past. Robbie "throws air to Jeannie" in a materialisation of oral transmission "throwing words" at the "other" woman who "catches and molds" them, thus interprets them, by a creative act of appropriation and incarnation, which triggers a multidirectional dialogue that "criss-crosses" around fixed notions of race and class, and reconnects disparate temporal and ideological frames:

> JEANNIE: I latched on, crawled in like a spider clinging to the walls, looking for lights in tunnels of despair. I wanted to go deeper, darker, never to remember the empty days. I wanted to be… Billie Holiday.
> ROBBIE: I wanted to be Rosa Luxemburg!
> […]
> Socialism goes way back. Way back women gathered in groups to pick. And Africa.
> […]
> *(Turning, kicking, squatting)* Dancing in half-circles. Trying to connect. She was internationalist – so far ahead of her time – we haven't begun to get there yet.
> JEANNIE *(Overlap)*: as opposed to nationalist.
> […]
> Socialism goes way back […]. Women gathered to pick and hunt.
> JEANNIE: Did they really hunt? That's unsubstantiated.
> Pause
> ROBBIE *(Stops dancing)*: Of *course* they hunted. And of course it's unsubstantiated. And Africa.
> JEANNIE: Old memories. Ancient stuff. We all come from one African woman. Dancing in circles, pushing walls. I was underneath him in the dirt too – he doesn't want to hear this, he thinks he civilized the world! I sold

> slaves when I worked at the Welfare Department. Did you put them on the ship?
> Jeannie puts her hands on Robbie's hair. Pause. Robbie lifts them off. (224-227)

Jeannie's rape and Robbie's violated history confront, "overlap," interpenetrate in a dynamic and fluid relation to time, space and experience, which is epitomised by Robbie "dancing in circles." The white woman's experience of rape connects her to the black women's "deeper, darker" history of violation and humiliation which is intensely incarnated and transcended through a jazz singer such as Billie Holiday and her "ability to sing the hard things and make them beautiful" (McCauley, in *Moon Marked* 213). Jeannie's story is silenced because it goes against the pretence of civility "he" (who remains the anonymous, generic perpetrator of violence) claims. As a subterranean link to the paradoxical (in the contemporary perspective) co-existence of slavery with the Western culture born out of the Enlightenment philosophy and its insistence on reason and progress, she points to the "unspeakable" nature of her violation (and, concomitantly, the institutionalised rape of slave women), i.e. an atrocity that cannot have been perpetrated by the purveyor of "civilization." "Clinging to the walls […] of vibrations" which confine the two women in isolation and, at the same time, unite them through "vibrant," emotional intensity, Jeannie is forced to "remember the empty days" of depression and to verbalise her trauma, just as Robbie is drawn to re-live her ancestor's rape.

The structure of the dialogue seems to be based on the iterative and revisionary technique of Be-Bop musical constructions whereby each instrument launches into solo improvisations that respond to one another in implicit and infinite variations on a common theme played once or twice together. Each "voice" thus connects to the ensemble and at the same drifts away from it in interior musical monologues seemingly disconnected from the collective sound. Suzan-Lori Parks calls such a construction "Rep & Rev":

> Repetition and Revision […] a concept integral to the jazz esthetic […] a structure which creates a drama of accumulation [and which is] not moving from A→B but rather, for example, from A→A→A→B→A. Through such movement, we refigure A. And if we wish to call the movement FORWARD PROGRESSION, which I think it is, then we refigure the concept of forward progression. (Parks, "Elements of Style" 8-9)

Parks's "forward progression" through "repetition and revision" and McCauley's "moving forward" and "trying to connect" through ritual performance converge in multiple ways: their use of textual and dramaturgical correspondences and variations which echo throughout the play;

the seemingly fractured and fragmented structure of the performance whose "connection and continuity" lie in subterranean articulations that are charted in progressive phases; their rejection of temporal and textual linearity and rationality as well as their envisioning of human (and more particularly female) subjectivity, which reaches across time and space in a ritual of imaginative "reconnection." The repeating of A, the initial (musical, historical, textual) impulse, is energised in variations ("revisions") through the transformation into B, a "work in progress" that moves in dialectical shifts forward and backward, from A to B, then back to a "revised" A. In the same "Rev & Rep" rhythm, the initial allusions to the sexual exploitation of slave women is "repeated" several times in different contexts like solo variations of the same theme, then extended to the white woman's rape, and finally played by the black woman in a ritualistic "rehearsal" of his/her-story. Similar variations on education and schools, language, socialism or an imagined Africa are scattered like the rocks about the stage but connected through repeated correspondences, a process whereby "tradition and ritual are expanding constantly. That's why I think the black classical music and/or jazz metaphor is the right one for black art" (McCauley, qtd. in Patraka, "Obsessing in Public" 237).

The "forward progression" through "Rep & Rev" of the dialogue between Jeannie and Robbie does not proceed down two parallel vocals and experiential tracks, their "stories" often meet and blur in a confusion of perspective which climaxes in the central section "Sally's Rape":

ROBBIE:
Do you think Thomas
took his Sally to European tea rooms?
[…]
And what do you think Mrs. J. thought?
[…]
(Plays piano and sings)
Grandma Sally had two children
by the master. One of 'em
was my Grandma Alice, my mother's
grandmother, where my mother got her name.
Robbie continues to play. Mrs. J. speaks, conscious of music.
JEANNIE:
In the woods…
I immediately become Harriet
in the woods.
Swamps are my memory.
ROBBIE *(Coaching)*: Shoot.
JEANNIE:
Shoot, how you gonna be scared freedom?

Some teachers don't know nothing..
ROBBIE: Once
JEANNIE:
Once somebody I almost married
said I was too scared of dogs.
I said I'm scared of slavery.
I wanted to be… darker… deeper.
These are dreams but the wounds remain
and there are no meetings of ourselves at these crossroads. (228-229)

Departing from History and the relationship between Jefferson and his slave Sally Hemings, Robbie musically drifts to her-story and matrilineage in a spiritual[3] that echoes the initial "I'm Going There to Meet My Mother" and is accompanied by the piano whose "playing is essential to the piece" (218). Robbie's playing "connects" her to her female ancestors, her bloodline flows in her song in a "continuity" of survival.[4] The questioning of History is thus interrupted by the singing of Robbie's personal history as Jeannie becomes "Mrs. J." in a co-implication of diverse voices revealed through her fragmented, multivocal and alinear monologue. The confusion of personalities and experiences reverberates across psychic and temporal levels but converges in the white woman's attempt to incarnate the sufferings and fear of the black woman. Ambivalently poised between confusing initials (Jeannie/Jefferson), she impersonates a "Mrs. J." who crosses the "color line" as she imagines herself as Harriet Tubman leading fugitive slaves through the woods and the swamps to Canada. In a criss-crossing of desire, she appropriates the legacy of resistance of her husband's mistress as her own memory. However, Robbie remains "in control" of the narrative as she seems to prompt Jeannie to continue her lines. In an associative nexus of imagery, the fugitive slave's fear of hounds and the historical angst induced by slavery lead to the veiled expression of Jeannie's own traumatic anguish, "deeper… darker," a repetitive infiltration of her story that carries the trace of its previous utterance as the psychic consequence of her rape. Her fractal impersonations are dismissed as "dreams" (as "unsubstantiated" as fantasies of Africa and as "self-deluding" as Jeannie's idealism) whose ritual enactment "at the crossroads" of imagination and history cannot lead to real compassion, the symbiosis of "wounds." But the historical pain they resurrect lingers and is made flesh again in

[3] The score of "Grandma Sally" is given at the end of the play, words and music by Robbie McCauley.

[4] The metaphor of the piano as the vessel of ancestral spirits is strongly reminiscent of August Wilson's *The Piano Lesson*. Robbie and Berniece's piano playing represents the acceptance and continuation of a legacy of survival.

Robbie's slave auction sale and rape scene that immediately follows Jeannie's monologues in a contrasting vision of incarnation.

In a self-induced "possession by the past" which represents the climax of the ritual, Robbie stands naked on an auction block as Jeannie exhorts the audience to join in by chanting "Bid 'em in" in a particular "moment of communion" (230) where the community has to identify with the white public of a slave spectacle and is thereby "made vicariously complicit in the auction system" (Whyte, "Robbie McCauley" 278). Robbie's naked body becomes a "medium of articulation" (*Ibid.* 277) through which she can utter (through words literally made flesh) the historical trauma of dehumanisation and violation:

> ROBBIE:
> On the auction block. With my socks rolled down.
> I take off my sack dress. Mistress? Come one.
> This is what they brought us here for.
> On the auction block. They put us their hands all down our bodies
> to sell you, for folks to measure you, smeltcha…
> […]
> JEANNIE: That's what they brought us here for.
> […]
> ROBBIE *(Still naked)*: Aunt Jessie said that's how they got their manhood on the plantations. They'd come down to the quarters and do it to us and the chickens.
> A TIGHTNESS BETWEEN HER THIGHS. WHEN IT LETS GO SHE SCREAMS WITH TERROR. AND THEN TIGHTENS AGAIN. WHY DOES SHE KEEP COMING TO ME IN THESE NIGHTMARES? THEY SAY SALLY WAS TOUGH. BOUGHT A HOUSE AFTER SLAVERY TIME. TAUGHT HER DAUGHTERS TO BE LADIES […] SAID SHE DID ALL THAT AND NONE OF US EVER HAD TO BE WHORES. (230)

"I," "us" and "she" criss-cross and merge in a generic personification of women's violation: the naked "I" literally fleshes out a collective history ("us") that is channelled through the mnemopoetic reconstruction of "her" (Sally's) story. Memory is thus both materialised through the re-living of Sally's rape in Robbie's flesh and mind, and maternalised in the emergence of the ancestral Sally as the initial mother who journeys from slavery to citizenship, from being owned to having "property" herself to spare her daughters the humiliations she had to endure. Robbie re-enacts the original rape of her (s)kin, the "tightness between the thighs" and the recurrent "terror," in a mnemopoetic ritual of reminiscence, repetition and working-through of the historical trauma. Her mental condition manifests some similarities with the psychoanalytical PTSD (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder), i.e. psychic

and somatic symptoms that refer to delayed responses to human catastrophe (see Caruth, "Introduction" 1). The black female body in performance thus functions as the original matrix for the configuration of the unconscious, its repressed memories and silenced histories. The naked "I" emerges as a split persona[5] even if she struggles to find wholeness in the "nightmares" of her history. The self-inflicted ritual of possession represents "the meeting of ourselves at the crossroads" of history and imagination. To Jeannie's "unsubstantiated" "dreams" correspond Robbie's incarnated "nightmares" that must be dredged from memory and re-integrated into present consciousness.

Both body and language mediate Robbie's traumatic nightmares of history in a cathartic exposure to the silences and "secrets of slavery" (Jacobs, *Incidents* 55). Sally's intimate trauma and official life are verbalised in a dramatic stream of consciousness which converges her iterative, somatised terror of rape, her story of endurance and their transmission through Robbie's obsessive nightmares. Again, public performance and intimate experience meet "at the crossroads" of ancestral and contemporary personalities, characters and performer:

> I got an impulse, I dreamed the taking off of the clothes and the feeling "Do you see this now? Now can you see me, who I really am, and this is essential to who I am?" I know that here is where the artist and the person meet. I know that it is a strong moment because I'm so vulnerable and in performance vulnerability is strength. (McCauley, qtd. in Patraka, "Obsessing in Public" 224)

The confusion between the playwright/performer and the characters she embodies climaxes in the auction-block scene that appears as a metaphor of the artist's exposure of her "vulnerability" in utter nakedness in an existential urge to express and release "who I really am." Historical terror, subsequent "nightmares, and fragments of lives (Sally's and Robbie's[6]) flow in a narrative stream of mnemopoetic experience which re-unites "I" and "she" in a common release of trauma:

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[5] The change of personality is also signalled on the page by the graphic layout that shifts forward Robbie's and Jeannie's lines when they are possessed by female spirits of the past. The "delayed" nature of their "possession by the past" is reflected in the "de-layed" textual arrangement of their lines.

[6] Robbie McCauley "connects" her own story to *Sally's Rape* and "releases" it as a personal exorcism when she confesses that "part of my struggle is around these issues of having been raped and silent about it. I know that information, I've dealt with it and I can carry it with me. But in *Sally's Rape*, I found out more information about the tightness between my thighs" (McCauley, in *Moon Marked* 216).

> (To Audience)
> I wanted to do this – stand naked in public on the auction block. I thought somehow it could help free us from *this. (Refers to her naked body)* Any old socialist knows, one can't be free till all are free.
> Lights back to auction-block blue. Robbie curls down onto block.
> In the dream I. I am Sally being *(An involuntary sound of pain)* b'ah. Bein' bein' I… I being bound down I didn't I didn't wanna be in the dream, bound down in the dream I am I am Sally being done it to I am down on the groundbeing done it to bound down didn't wanna be bound down on the ground. In the dream I am Sally down in the groundbeing done it to. In the dream I am Sally being done it to bound down on the ground. (231)

After re-connecting with the ancestral, physical "terror" of rape, Robbie verbalises the original, historical trauma in a painful, repetitive, obsessive, fragmented and scrambled litany that evinces a total identification between herself and her abused slave ancestor. The trance experience of self-dislocation is mirrored in the broken, stuttering and fragmented syntactical sequences of her speech. Her linguistic disability to dissociate words ("groundbeing") and the obsessively repetitive structure of her narrative flow reflect her inability to dissociate herself from Sally's rape experience. She physically and verbally re-integrates her disjunctive and dis-embodied history in a ritual of re-appropriation akin to the release of the PTSD syndrome:

> If PTSD must be understood as a pathological symptom, then it is not so much a symptom of the unconscious, as it is a symptom of history. The traumatized person, we might say, carries an impossible history within them, or they[*sic*] become themselves the symptoms of a history they cannot entirely possess. (Caruth, "Introduction" 4)

Sally's Rape can be seen as the dramatic expression of "a symptom of history" whose original trauma is rooted in the collective memory of the African American community separated from itself by silenced "untellable stories." bell hooks comments that in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, the emergence of collective, repressed memories in overwhelming emotional and somatic expressions translates the "psychosocial history of [slavery's] impact" (hooks, *Yearning* 209). If African America was born out of violence, it is through the violence inflicted by the ritual of "rememory" that the fragments of history are pieced together and re-actualised in their chaotic and recurrent quality.

The re-integration of America's traumatic history proceeds as a dialogic process between the black and the white woman. Language appears both as the medium of mutual understanding and as the discursive site whose constitutive differences of meanings and contradictions form

the barriers that separate the two women and their respective place in American history:

> ROBBIE: (In her own world):
> What difference it a been, it a been by the master?
> They all come down there. They all do it to you.
> And do it to the chickens too.
> What difference it s been?
> JEANNIE: What do you do about it? See, this section to me is where everything is clear. The difference in weight. I say the word "free," and what do you think of? A feather, or a butterfly. You say the word "free," it's totally different. It's light… substantial, flimsy… weighty…
> ROBBIE: Come, let's do this.
> Robbie and Jeannie get the auction block.
> JEANNIE: I thought we weren't going to do this. It's so… art.
> ROBBIE: Get up there […]. Take off your dress. *(To Audience)* Let's do it for her, please… Bid'em in. Bid'em in.
> Jeannie takes down one strap.
> (To Jeannie) Do you have something to say? (Jeannie shakes her head "no") (234)

Whether the word "free" is used by Jeannie or Robbie determines its ideological bearings. Brought to the discursive site of meanings which stands at the "crossroads" of the two interconnected racialised histories, the word "free" demonstrates the dependence of its historical relations upon its situation on either side of the racial divide. Its connotations differ according to the ideology and history underpinning the discursive voice. Language is thus exposed in all its ideological density. Its contingency (i.e. the quality of happening by chance, affected by unforeseen causes or conditions) is dismantled in favour of an approach that emphasises the contiguity of linguistic and cultural identity constructions. Just as language is deconstructed and shown as a site of conflictual meanings, performance appears as a process of re-contextualisation of experience and constant adjustment to the "differences" Robbie's and Jeannie's social/racial/historical positions imply.

Robbie's naked body on the auction block re-enacts the "slave auction performance art" (Roach, "Slave Spectacles" 56) in its "conjunction of money, property, and flesh" (*Ibid*. 57). The display of her naked flesh signifies its availability for labor as well as erotic exploitation. The bidding audience is propelled back to slavery time and confronted with its own voyeuristic impulse as well as its competitive urge to possess the commodified body/object. Contrary to Robbie's historicised, sexualised body, Jeannie's stripping cannot be performed further than "tak[ing] down one strap." The auction-block scene played by Jeannie turns out to be a simulacrum of history, an "unsubstantiated" "art" ritual devoid of

the cathartic, "substantial" quality of Robbie's re-enactment. Unable and unwilling to incarnate a "weighty" history that has left no deep trace in her own psyche, Jeannie cannot expose "who she is" in total nakedness.

The play ends with a new beginning, a "Language Lesson" which opens up historical meaning to a didactic dialogism, i.e. a relational dialectics which opens it to the "other" woman and emancipates it from its restricted access:

> ROBBIE: You wanna try the language lesson?
> JEANNIE: Okay… They was from south o' Albany way down Seminole or Decatur.
> ROBBIE: That's sort of -
> JEANNIE: Jimmy Carter.
> ROBBIE: Sort of a bad imitation of a white southerner.
> JEANNIE: I'm not trying…
> ROBBIE: As I said before, try to know, like actors do, what you're talking about.
> JEANNIE: Further south?
> ROBBIE: Where slaves were sent, couldn'e get back from, way away from their loved ones. It resonated dread. See it, know it, feel the dread when you say where that place was. *(Doing it)* They's from souf a Allbeny way down Semino o' De kaytuh.
> JEANNIE: They's from south o' Al bany way down Semino o' Decatur.
> ROBBIE: Better. (236)

Through linguistic variations, Robbie and Jeannie explore the ideological space of historical differences, the "dread" of history, and turn it into a performative space of creative and didactic practice. By playing "like actors do" on the elusive dialect variances and the human dislocation they cause to resonate, the two women excavate the subterranean experiences encoded in language, place them as the crucial data that determine both meaning and the reciprocity of their communication, and start a dialogue that can lead to true sisterhood:

> That sisterhood cannot be forged by the mere saying of words. It is the outcome of a continued growth and change. It is the goal to be reached, a process of becoming [a] capacity to bridge gaps created by racism, sexism, or classism. (hooks, *Ain't I A Woman* 157)

Language, performance and experience thus constitute the sites of ritual action, repeated and rehearsed, where "differences" are probed, and "commonness" found, through a mnemopoetics of "connections" binding conflicting stories and histories in a dynamic "movement of political theatre" (McCauley, qtd. in Patraka, "Obsessing in Public" 220).

Sally's Rape and *The Box* consider the connections between a traumatised history and how the individual, contemporary subjectivity can situate itself within its disruptive texture through a mnemopoetics based on both bodily spatiality and performance of discourse. Incarnation and verbalisation converge in a process of repetitive action which triggers either release and the premises of healing or a total disappearance of the reminiscing subject into the chaos of uncontrolled mnemopoetic forces.

CONCLUSION

Mnemotheatre

> Consciousness and conscience are burdens imposed upon us by the American experiment […]. Negroes are no longer ashamed of their slave past but see in it sources of strength.
>
> Ralph Ellison, *Shadow and Act* XXIII, 269

memory
un-remembered
dis-membered
re-member
"his bones cannot
be found"
putting the body
back together

Suzan-Lori Parks, "Possession" 5

Through the textual and contextual analysis of selected plays, I have probed the various mnemopoetic strategies used by selected African American playwrights to explore a past branded by the experience of slavery. As the Haitian anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot concludes in his much acclaimed opus *Silencing the Past. Power and the Production of History*:

> that US slavery has both officially ended, yet continues in many complex forms - most notably institutionalized racism and the cultural denigration of blackness - makes its representation particularly burdensome in the United States. Slavery here is a ghost, both the past and a living presence; and the problem of historical representation is how to represent that ghost, something that is and yet is not. (Trouillot, *Silencing the Past* 147)

The plays I have discussed are indeed haunted by the "ghost" of slavery and all testify to a double design. First, the stylistic search for a stage *poetics* allows memory to "wing […] [its] way through the vise and expulsion of history" (Morrison, "Unspeakable Things" 31). Then, the political urge for a redressive *poiesis* focuses on the production (the "making" as the etymology of the term suggests) of a "usable" knowl-

edge of the past for present identity accretion. The poetics of "rememorying" slavery thus entails the dynamics of its imaginative reconfiguration as well as the implication of (and claim to) a reversal of its negative effects in the present:

> the cost accounting of historical suffering makes sense only as a presence projected in the past. That presence ("look at me now") and its projection ("I have suffered") function together as a new exhibit for claims and gains in a changing present. (Trouillot, *Silencing the Past* 147)

The mnemopoetics of slavery inherent in the dramatic experiments under scrutiny is, with various degrees of complexity and violence, irreducibly linked to a militant mnemopolitics that struggles with the pain and compulsion of memory after a long period of wilful oblivion. Toni Morrison notices that:

> slavery wasn't in the literature at all. Part of that, I think, is because, on moving from bondage into freedom which has been our goal, we got away from slavery and also from the slaves, there's a difference. We have to reinhabit those people. (Morrison, qtd. in Gilroy, *Small Acts* 179)

Even as an insubstantial "ghost," that is invisible and yet the presence of which can be felt, slavery has always been lurking in drama from the earliest times of African American performance. What has been developing in the last fifty years is the mnemopoetic will to reflect upon the shapes (i.e. the forms of representation) which the "ghost" must take to be integrated into present consciousness. It is through an "art of memory" (Yates, *Art of Memory*) and the dramatic probing of its functioning on stage that the mnemotheatre of slavery "*put*[s] *the body* [of dis-membered history] *back together*" (Parks, "Possession" 5). Even though the ungraspable "ghost" of the past floats in a limbo between history and memory, and its "bones cannot be found," it is imaginatively re-captured and given the protean appearances that re-shape its fading silhouette.

Suzan-Lori Parks, in her discussion of the creational function of African American drama, gives an eloquent and precise description of the redeeming (i.e. compensating for a loss) process of theatrical mnemopoetics:

> A play is a blueprint of an event: a way of creating and rewriting history through the medium of literature […] because so much of African American history has been unrecorded, dismembered, washed out, one of my tasks as a playwright is to - through literature and the special strange relationship between theatre and real-life - locate the ancestral burial ground, dig for bones, hear the bones sing, write it down.
> The bones tell us what was, is, will be; and because their song is a play – something that through a production *actually happens* – I'm working theatre

> like an incubator to create "new" historical events. I'm re-membering and staging historical events which, through their happening on stage, are ripe for inclusion in the canon of history. Theatre is an incubator for the creation of historical events - and, as in the case of artificial insemination, the baby is no less human. (Parks, "Possession" 4-5)

Drama produces "historical events" no longer available to contemporary consciousness by hatching them under artistic control. Memories of an "un-remembered" and "dis-remembered" past are cultivated and given form and substance in the "incubator" of mnemotheatre. The art and act of incubating memories within the theatrical apparatus "create 'new' historical events" and inseminate them in the deepest recesses of American amnesia. This dramatic incubational process artificially and artistically gives birth to "historical events" which are nurtured by the imagination and born as living memories onto the stage.

The metaphor of theatre as the midwife of a new collective memory is particularly apt for describing the topomnesia of Hughes's *The Sun Do Move*, Dodson's *Amistad*, Baraka's *Slave Ship* as well as the cryptomnesic eruption of ancestral voices and re-incarnated sufferings in the last two plays under scrutiny. In the three earlier plays, the imaginative journey back to the "womb" of the slave ship (and the barracoon in *Amistad*) is a return to the dark place of unrepresentable, ancestral pain (Parks's "ancestral burial ground") but also of new beginnings in a New World. Their symbolic topography represents a topomnesic inscape of slavery whose darkness, filled with voices from a "*dis-membered*" past, generates memories of psychic survival (Ellison's "sources of strength") and thereby a new historical visibility and viability. Owens's *The Box* and McCauley's *Sally's Rape* also spatialise the symbolic "womb" of incubating memories, respectively inside and above a "box" saturated with violent echoes of a forgotten history, and within an African American woman's body that is obsessed and possessed by her female ancestor's pain. It is within and through the contemporary female body that the ancestral "bones" continue to "sing" a song of pain and survival, a "genesis" composed on a larger historico-mythical body which integrates old wounds into its fertile womb.

It should be pointed out that some of the plays I have dealt with are, with various degrees of poetic entanglement, representative of the interconnected cultural matrix of the "black Atlantic" (Gilroy) or "circum-Atlantic" (Roach) which, in a collective pattern of movement, transformation and relocation, encompasses the experience of slavery exploited by the former colonial powers in the Americas. The topomnesia of Dodson's *Amistad* includes the Caribbean (Cuba) and traces the Atlantic route from Africa to the New World in a criss-crossing of cultural

references ranging from the American canon (Melville) to the Haitian slave revolt. Both *Amistad* and Baraka's *Slave Ship* use the symbolism of the ship as a "microcultural […] system in motion" (Gilroy, *Black Atlantic* 4) which circulates between different traditions and interconnected histories. Dove's *The Darker Face of the Earth* brings into play an Afro-Atlantic web of cultural correspondences which links Europe, Africa, the Caribbean and America. By focusing on the redemptive quality of the "unspeakable" acts of miscegenation and incest, the play escapes the "restrictive bonds of ethnicity, national identification, and […] even 'race' itself" (*Ibid*. 19).

By contrast, the cultural and political interests of Owens's *The Box* and McCauley's *Sally's Rape* are restricted to the US historical and geographic territory of mnemopoetic exploration. They do not concentrate on "the Atlantic as one single, complex unit of analysis" (Gilroy, *Black Atlantic* 15) as well as metaphorical variations. They fail to acknowledge "the rhizomorphic, fractal structure of the transcultural, international formation" (*Ibid*. 4) of the "black Atlantic." They do not seek to incorporate the experience of slavery in charting the development of a transatlantic diasporic consciousness. Their mnemopoetic vision of the slave past does not transcend the constraints of national particularity and may therefore appear as a symptom of cultural and historical myopia unwilling to perceive America as a microcosm of Atlantic history.

Even though some of the selected plays hardly acknowledge the historical context of Afro-Atlantic interconnectedness, all of them explore the cross-cultural interweaving of influences and similarities. Parks's harping on the process of metaphorical "incubation" also evokes the religious rite among ancient Greeks and Romans: they had to sleep on a skin or on the ground in order to enter into communion with the chthonic gods through dreams. The metaphor of the theatre as an incubator, then, implies that it functions as an exemplary means of revitalising spiritual forces through the power of the imagination. The mnemopoetics of slavery is indeed tightly linked to a revelatory epistemology of remembrance which is best exemplified in the metaphor of the possession trance in Owens's and McCauley's visions of incarnated ancestral violation. But it also reflects the implicit communion with powerful literary ancestors whose visions still incubate in the contemporary imagination. Graham's and Dove's allomnesic tragedies glance backwards at Greek cultural models in order to organise their own vision of history as the unredeemed and un-redeeming sacrifice of a race. By de-centring the literary authority of the Greek model and relocating it in the context of New World slavery, they both create a

semantic displacement whereby a marginalised and silenced history yields a mythical yet "no less human" dimension.

Contrary to the post-modern tendency to deconstruct history and expose its referential "depthlessness," the gradual shift toward a radically self-reflexive African American mnemotheatre has been informed by the cultural urge to re-create a "centre" of ontological meaning based on the recuperative virtue of a history (as well as of multiple stories) of survival against all odds. So, "consciousness" (the inner perception of a past returned to critical awareness) and "conscience" (the inner moral sense) blend in a redemptive mnemopoetics, and therefore cease to be "burdens" imposed by the injustices of history, as Ellison argues, prior to becoming the instruments of cultural assertion. The mnemotheatre of slavery thus refuses postmodernism's nihilistic account of historical amnesia as well as its ontological and political erasure or cultural commodification, and rather initiates an opposite dynamics of re-construction by summoning the past, re-forming identity and re-establishing memory at its core. Even if a deconstructionist play like McCauley's *Sally's Rape* calls into question the conventional moral attitude implicit in liberal humanism, or if Owens's *The Box* dramatises the black subject's disappearance into wilful amnesia, the most radical formal endeavours of African American post-modern mnemotheatre nevertheless maintain a strong ethical basis rooted in the redemptive power of a constructive memory. Such a dramatic mnemopoetics/politics of African American agency has prompted a stylistic quest for theatrical forms that adequately express and rechart the symbolic territory of the New World memory.

Hughes's and Dodson's symbolic topomnesia as well as Graham's and Dove's creative allomnesia remain rooted in a mimetic representational mnemopoetics whereby the past is directly made *present* on stage in a linear way that introduces order and continuity into a fragmented history. Cultural references such as spiritual songs, the veiled "Signifyin(g)" upon the African American literary tradition or the appropriation of American and European classics, reveal the textual and structural mechanisms underlying their re-creation of history. Implicitly, their mnemopoetic representation of the past thus points to the various referential layers which constitute their *poiesis*, i.e. their "making" of memories "ripe for inclusion in the canon of history." Baraka's and Salaam's plays of performed and re-formed "Blk-ness" break free from the mimetic urge in representational performance and participate in a highly symbolic mnemotheatre that lays bare the ritualistic mechanics of redressive memory. Their Revolutionary Theatre develops a mnemopolitics that confronts past and present in a self-reflexive ritual of cultural revelation that endows the re-created memories of slavery with the

redemptive quality of a martyred history. The dramaturgical leap to a self-reflexive, ritualistic theatricality is even more radical in the recent plays whose structure of memoried representations revolves around an unwilling or self-inflicted possession ritual which functions both as a medium of consciousness (or as the catalyst of its extinction) and as a metatheatrical metaphor for the spontaneous proliferation (as well as absorption and then digestion in *Sally's Rape*) of memories: possession of these re-generated memories prevents one from being possessed by the past. What is shown on stage is not a reconstitution of the past but a dramatised *mise en abyme* of the very process through which history or the loss of history is ritually transmuted into an individual, and metatheatrically collective, memory. It is the formation of this memory, previously dispersed by the violence of Afro-Atlantic history that defines the peculiar mnemopoetics of slavery in African American drama.

> La mémoire, où puise l'histoire qui l'alimente à son tour, ne cherche à sauver le passé que pour servir au présent et à l'avenir. Faisons en sorte que la mémoire collective serve à la libération et non à l'asservissement des hommes. (Le Goff, *Histoire et mémoire* 177)

And theatre as a direct, synaesthetic form of cultural, emotional and political intervention, may thus be once again necessary as a social and spiritual meeting-place as well as a threshold of transformation and communion.

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