“Force. Spirit. Feeling”: Rewriting the Slave Ship in Contemporary African American Literature

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Abstract of Dissertation

"Force. Spirit. Feeling": Rewriting the Slave Ship in Contemporary African American Literature

My dissertation examines the trope of the slave ship in late twentieth-century African American literature. My project asserts that while the slave ship is a site of historical trauma, the ship space has been repurposed to signify not just loss, but freedom in black American writing. Contemporary writers utilize figurative depictions of the slave ship to probe temporality and ongoing experiences of loss and displacement in twentieth-century America. Writers such as Amiri Baraka, Alice Walker, Paule Marshall, August Wilson, Octavia Butler, and Saidiya Hartman turn to the ship space as a figurative vehicle in order to clarify questions of collective identity, cultural memory, and revolutionary consciousness. My project contributes to current conversations in the field of African American literary studies surrounding literary tradition, critical and conceptual genealogies, embodiment, and memory. Through close readings of figurative language I identify four metaphorical spheres associated with the slave ship: the hold as the foremost site of terror, the psychological effects of enclosure and captivity, the black woman as most vulnerable victim, and the bodily as well as psychic effects of possession. I argue that there exists a slave ship dialectic in contemporary black American fiction and drama between representations of the material conditions experienced by the enslaved during the Middle Passage and an abstraction of the slave ship that posits the ship as a frame through which to examine alienation and displacement in the context of U.S. nationality and citizenship. My scholarship is in conversation with historical studies of the slave ship and the Transatlantic Slave Trade such as those of Marcus Rediker, Stephanie Smallwood, W. Jeffrey Bolster, and Ian Baucom that place the ship and the sailor at the

center of modernity rather than its periphery. I claim that the haunting specter of the slave ship is an artistic symbol that pushes against liberal humanism to theorize a form of collectivity based upon remembrance and counternarratives to U.S. imperialism.

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Introduction:

Ships Crossing: The Conceptual Transformation of the Slave Ship in Contemporary African American Literature

Shuttles in the rocking loom of history,
the dark ships move, the dark ships move,
their bright ironical names
like jests of kindness on a murderer's mouth;
plough through thrashing glister toward
fata morgana's lucent melting shore,
weave toward New World littorals that are
mirage and myth and actual shore.

Voyage through death,
voyage whose chartings are unlove. --Robert Hayden, "Middle Passage"[1]

There is a loneliness that can be rocked. Arms crossed, knees drawn up; holding on, this motion, unlike a ship's, smooths and contains the rocker. It's an inside kind—wrapped tight like skin. Then there is a loneliness that roams. No rocking can hold it down. It is alive, on its own. A dry and spreading thing that makes the sound of one's own feet going seem to come from a far-off place. --Toni Morrison, *Beloved*[2]

Exploring "the wat'ry reign" of Phillis Wheatley's "Ocean"

According to a note on the surviving manuscript, Phillis Wheatley wrote the poem "Ocean" in 1773.[3] The same note specifies that Wheatley wrote "Ocean" while she was at sea. Although the poem was not published in her lifetime, scholars know from surviving proposals she wrote to attract subscribers for a second volume of poetry that she intended to include this poem in that book. "Ocean" is a melancholy and ominous prospect poem that looks out over the vast sea with awe, and not a little skepticism, in order to allegorize the speaker's mental and emotional state through classical allusions. In many ways, "Ocean" allows scholars to rethink how the sea operates as a vehicle of

[1] Hayden *Collected Poems of Robert Hayden* 51.
[2] Morrison *Beloved* 275.
[3] For a full explanation of the poem's provenance and the note that is included on the manuscript, see Julian Mason "'Ocean': A New Poem by Phillis Wheatley," 78-83.

meaning throughout Wheatley's single volume of published poems, *Poems on Various Subjects Religious and Moral*. The poem holds particular significance for me not only because of the evocative treatment of the sea as an imaginative site, but because it allows us to consider how the ship conditions the poem's composition.

"Ocean" also provides scholars with a deeper understanding of the way memory becomes sublimated to a larger project of poetic and imaginative ambition. The poem begins with supplication and the fear of abandonment as the speaker encounters a masculine realm where her muse is silent:

> Now muse divine, thy heav'nly aid impart,
> The feast of Genius, and the play of Art.
> From high Parnassus' radiant top repair,
> Celestial Nine! Propitious to my pray'r.
> In vain my Eyes explore the wat'ry reign,
> By you unaided with the flowing strain. (1-6)

For Wheatley, the ocean, like poetry, is a masculine realm where women are subject to powerful men's whims. The second verse paragraph concludes with a reference to Zeus's rape of Europa. In the poem, Europa is vulnerable because she is too close to and distracted by the water. This distraction echoes the painful way the poem begins as the speaker finds herself abandoned by her "muse divine" whose "heav'nly aid" is missing as the speaker looks out over the "wat'ry reign" so that the lines of poetry, "the flowing strain," are not forthcoming.

"Ocean," then, is at once a creation story and a forbidding reverie on writer's block. What makes this poem so special in literary history, I would argue, is that if read

against her double voiced lexicon, this poem can be interpreted through the lens of Wheatley's complicated relationship to race and mobility through the figure of the ship and her personal history as a survivor of the Middle Passage, a subject of the Atlantic slave trade, *and* an American patriot. According to Julian Mason, signs of the context of the poem's composition mark the manuscript. He asserts, "from evidence found in the manuscript" that Wheatley composed "Ocean" while she was at sea, sailing on merchant John Wheatley's ship, the *London Packet*, on the return voyage from England to Boston (Mason 80). Thus, the manuscript represents a remarkable archival find not just for the reason that it expands Wheatley's corpus, but because it is a document authored by an African American woman during her time on a ship. How might we consider the ways this time marked the poem?

The slave ship forever marks our memory of Phillis Wheatley since John and Susanna Wheatley named her after the slave ship that "brought" her to Boston. The third stanza of "Ocean" begins with the line, "Again with recent wonder I survey / The finny sov'reign bask in hideous play" (35-36). The words Wheatley uses to orient her reader in time, "again" and "recent," are haunting. In this poem, the ocean is a realm of forbidding repetition. Waves roll on and on, and winds fill ships' sails at the bidding of Neptune, yet the brave eagle that attempts flight ultimately finds only "Oblivion's sable shore" (68) Death is figured here in racial terminology since "sable" is the word Wheatley most often associates with the complexion of Africans in her poetry. Thus, mobility, while an aesthetic conceit and rhetorical trope for intellectual and spiritual freedom throughout her volume of poems, is ultimately limited or even doomed here. Writing at sea, the ship is no longer the decorated vehicle it is in her naval poems where she writes with

exuberance, "Strange to relate! with canvas wings they speed / To distant worlds; or distant worlds the dread" and "Wond'ring to see two chiefs of matchless grace, / Of generous bosom, and ingenuous face, / From ocean sprung, like ocean foes to rest, / The thirst of glory burns each youthful breast."[4] There ships are spectacular symbols of glory, aspiration, and ambition, but for the poet of "Ocean," who characterizes only the indifference of Neptune to the young eagle's fate as he is hunted and shot by the captain, the ship is stifling and inexorably bound to the circumstances of the shore to which it sails.

"Ocean" is a literary site of importance for this project because it indicates the tension in African American letters in which the ship represents both an ideal of freedom and the traumatic memory of the Middle Passage. Wheatley's "Ocean," her naval poems, and most famously "On Being Brought from Africa to America" model the ways the trope of the ship operates as an image of critical freedom and individual transformation through mobility in the twentieth century texts I examine. As a vessel of mobility in this context, the ship is overdetermined by captivity, yet in the complicated history of slavery in the Atlantic World, the ship could also present several routes to freedom for slaves, black sailors, and for this female "Negro servant" poet. Moreover, the ship exists in the symbolic terrain for Wheatley, in which travel can be a sign of the soul's salvation while it is impugned as the method by which she was so cruelly "snatch'd" from her father as a child.[5]

Contemporary Literature of the Slave Ship

[4] Wheatley, "[To a Gentleman of the Navy]," 84, lines 23-24 and 27-30.

[5] Wheatley, "To the Right Honourable William, Earl of Dartmouth, His Majesty's Principal Secretary of State for North-America, &c." 39-40, ln. 25.

It is entirely unacceptable that I should have no voice in the political affairs of my own country, for I am not a ward of America; I am one of the first Americans to arrive on these shores. --James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*[6]

Force. Spirit. Feeling examines the trope of the slave ship in Black Arts and contemporary black American literature. I assert that while the slave ship is a site of historical trauma, black writers, artists, and musicians have repurposed the ship space to signify not just loss, but freedom as well. This project is an attempt to understand the proliferation of representations of the slave ship and Middle Passage in the decades following the Civil Rights Movement. I argue that the slave ship in contemporary black literature comments on the current and ongoing political and individual conditions of blackness in the United States. Representations of the slave ship require a rich, imaginative treatment of space that respond to the policing of black bodies within built public spaces, including vehicles of transportation like the train or the bus, and the national sphere. Furthermore, the slave ship punctuates the present in a way that theorizes temporality differently from the teleology of progress for both the individual and the nation. Literary representations of the slave ship suggest that the slave trade and the violence of the Middle Passage, including deracination and displacement, haunt the present. Black literature of the slave ship, then, raises important philosophical questions about the relationship of literature to the past, present, and future self, or the writing self and the reading self.

The Middle Passage is often articulated as the experience that defines being black in the United States in the post-World War II and Cold War periods. Despite the United States' position in the global theater as a progressive and moral nation, it continuously

[6] James Baldwin "The Fire Next Time" 342.

fails to concentrate on ameliorating racial injustice and conditions of economic disparity for black Americans. For many scholars, the return of black troops to the United States after their deployment in Europe where, as James Baldwin finds, race is not as crushing a definitional category, marks the beginning of the long Civil Rights Movement. While the Black Left and later Black Nationalists formulate small presses, participate in conventions, and challenge national hegemony through specific policies, black writers increasingly turn to history and historical events as symbolic sites through which to comment on the inescapable *repetition* of patterns in racial and labor violence in U.S. history. Though the United States positions progress in race relations as a sign of its moral authority on the world stage, at home black Americans know through increasing failed promises and the rise of police and other forms of violence that this is a glaring case of hypocrisy.[7] In order to comment on these failures of democracy alongside the fight for full and equal citizenship, writers and visual artists retain the slave ship as a potent image of historical injustice.

If Black Nationalists use the figure of the slave ship to critique dominant narratives of the founding of the nation as well as its continued investment in colonial and imperial power, why couldn't the slave ship also be used as a *reason* for the creation of a Black nation?[8] Namely for Black Arts writers, the slave ship is a metaphorical

[7] Two studies that detail the post-WWII period that have been very valuable for my understanding of this history are Penny M. Von Eschen's *Satchmo Blows Up the World: Jazz Ambassadors Play the Cold War* (2006) and Nikhil Pal Singh's *Black Is a Country: Race and the Unfinished Struggle for Democracy* (2004).

[8] The slave ship used to critique American national hypocrisy is not new to the 1960s. William Wells Brown inserts a comparative analysis of the Pilgrims' ships that land in Plymouth to the first slave ship to sail to Jamestown in his bricolage novel *Clotel; Or the President's Daughter*. At the heart of this novel lay the open secret that Thomas Jefferson had a sexual relationship with his property, Sally Hemings. To heighten his critique of U.S. moral hypocrisy and degradation, Brown juxtaposed parallel stories of the American nation's origins, one noble, and the other despicable. The first ship, "one little solitary tempest-tost [sic] and weather-beaten" "May-flower brought the seed-wheat of states and empire" (180). Of this

vehicle through which to comment on dominant Civil Rights arguments for integration.[9] Malcolm X emphatically questioned the logic of integration as a revolutionary strategy. He argued, "The word 'integration' was invented by a Northern liberal. The word has no real meaning. . . . The truth is that 'integration' is an *image*, it's a foxy Northern liberal's smokescreen that confused the true wants of the American black man" (*Autobiography* 277).[10] His position on the false promise integration offered African Americans was transformative for politically active black artists. His assassination was even more so.

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ship the narrator writes with reverent praise: "Here in this ship are great and good men. Justice, mercy, humanity, respect for the rights of all; each man honoured, as he was useful to himself and others; labour respected, law-abiding men, constitution-making and respecting men; men, whom no tyrant could conquer, or hardship overcome, with the high commission sealed by a Spirit divine, to establish religious and political liberty for all. This ship had the embryo elements of all that is useful, great, and grand in Northern institutions; it was the type of goodness and wisdom, illustrated in two and a quarter centuries gone by; it was the good genius of America" (180). To strengthen the metaphorical significance of the ship as a sign of the nation's future, Brown writes that another ship arrived on the same day in 1620 in the Jamestown colony in Virginia. This ship inspires devastation and doom rather than enlightenment and pride. He writes, "a low rakish ship hastening from the tropics, solitary and alone" (180). This vessel is "freighted with the elements of unmixed evil. Hark! hear those rattling chains, hear that cry of despair and wail of anguish, as they die away in the unpitying distance. Listen to those shocking oaths, the crack of that flesh-cutting whip. Ah! it is the first cargo of slaves on their way to" the colony. This vessel is "the mother of slavery, idleness, lynch-law, ignorance, unpaid labour, poverty, and duelling [sic], despotism, the ceaseless swing of the whip, and the peculiar institutions of the South" (181). Published in 1853, at the height of increased traffic in the illegal slave trade as W.E.B. Du Bois explains in his doctoral thesis, *The Suppression of the African Slave Trade*, the ship here symbolizes the disparity in the national platform: a nation built upon aspirations of individual freedom, while at the same time a nation built upon the foundation of exploitation of natural resources and as a space for personal increase through property, mercantilism, industry, and unchecked growth. To clarify, the narrator asserts, "These ships are the representation of good and evil in the New World, even to our day." (181). Brown excoriates a single memory of the nation's founding, providing instead a more nuanced truth. This bifurcated vision is a strategic history lesson intended to allow readers a vision of what the nation can be instead of what it is.

[9] See Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor* and Karla F.C. Holloway, *Moorings & Metaphors: Figures of Culture and Gender in Black Women's Literature*. My understanding of figurative language and definition of "metaphor" as a transposition or carrying over of meaning in which one word or image substitutes for, or more nearly interacts with, a larger concept comes from Paul Ricoeur and black feminist theorists (59-73 and 74-75). In distinguishing types of figurative language or metaphor, Ricoeur explains, "To present an idea under the sign of another implies that the two ideas differ not only as to the species of the objects involved, but also in the vivacity and familiarity of the ideas" (69). This clarification speaks to the ways the ship is an iconic image, if not an object, for audiences and it can therefore with some urgency and clarity suggest an argument through implication of multiple ideas at once. The title of Holloway's 1992 study is suggestive in that she is using the ship's moor or anchor as a sign to account for her own cultural orientation as a literary scholar and critic (1).

[10] In his 1963 speech, "Message to the Grass Roots," delivered in Detroit, Malcolm X further criticizes Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Civil Rights establishment for countering the national theater of prevarication with the spectacle of integration and the March on Washington. He theorizes black revolution in this speech, arguing that it is not visible through these legitimate channels.

The history of slavery for him was not distant or the past but he saw repeated daily in the spectacular state violence used against black people in the post-war period. For example, X models a typical speech pattern for Alex Haley in which he addresses the transatlantic slave trade in a graphic, pointed manner to clarify the violence of slavery as a national "crime." He rehearses the following, "I wish it was possible for me to show you the sea bottom in those days—the black bodies, the blood, the bones broken by boots and clubs! The pregnant black women who were thrown overboard to the sharks that had learned that following these slave ships was the way to grow fat!" (216). I cautiously include this excerpt not to titillate the reader with a gruesome thrill, but to demonstrate how Malcolm drew upon the slave trade as a structuring metaphor of exploitation. He asserts that the "dramatization of slavery never failed" to create a reaction among black audiences (217). His development of a nationalist iconography that made the history of slavery an argument against integration into a failing, corrupt nation, provided potent material for writers. Malcolm X's way of perceiving U.S. national history and cultural investments reverberated throughout black radical thought. Moreover, for X and freedom fighters in the 1960s, 70s, and yes, the 80s, who risked their lives and well-being in the black liberation struggle to speak out against U.S. policy, the horrors of the slave ship became an analogy through which to understand the invisibility of black suffering to the rest of the nation.

I begin my study in the late 1960s with Amiri Baraka's cultural nationalism because I understand the 1960s and the expressive project of the Black Aesthetic to

represent a literary activism with a visionary impulse.[11] Baldwin understood history, and the individual's history of experiences, to counteract the ahistorical ethos of the United States. In many ways, Baldwin is the writer who most triangulates the social critique in black fiction of the nineteenth, early twentieth, and modern periods to what is commonly understood as the postmodern black existential and experimental forms of the late twentieth century. Baldwin asserted time and again the impact of the slave trade and the difference in immigration histories—one is forgotten while the other is championed—on the psychological lives of twentieth century black Americans. Baraka also came to understand the Middle Passage as a defining characteristic in his understanding of blackness and black American history as he reveals in a recent introduction to his 1963 work of cultural and music criticism, *Blues People*. For Baraka the slave trade defined the condition of being black in the new nation: "So that moving from the middle passage forward (and backward) . . . one traced the very path and life and development, tragedy, and triumph of Black people" (1999; x). His play *Slave Ship* asserts the Middle Passage as the common inheritance of all black Americans. It does so by positing the Middle Passage as the primary event in a chain of historical periods that lead to the present moment in 1967 for black Americans in which, yet again, the nation has spectacularly failed to live up to its own aspirational founding ideals and American Creed.[12] The slave

[11] James Baldwin, though positioned outside of the Black Arts Movement, is an important figure through which to understand this distinction. His prophetic and critical voice that championed the experiences of "blues people" is more similar to Baraka's than often recognized.

[12] Nikhil Pal Singh, *Black Is a Country* 38-39. The American Creed is a doctrine from the study, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* (1944), ostensibly authored by Gunnar Myrdal. Singh locates the origins of "modern racial liberalism" in this work commissioned by the Carnegie Foundation. According to Singh, Myrdal argued that the U.S. could overcome racial discrimination and inequity through its commitment to Enlightenment ideals of liberty, freedom, and equality. While these ideals may not be implemented in common, everyday practice, *de jure* racism would ultimately decline in favor of racial justice due to the nation's common commitment to these ideals. Singh argues that the "American Creed" has dominated the narrative of race history in the United States

ship emerges as an important site for the literary imagination because it concentrates a counternarrative to an American national myth and memory project. Thus, the ship space is used to formulate modes of nationalism, black identity, and collective experience.

I argue that following the historical recovery work of Black Studies departments established in the 1960s, and set off by Black Nationalism and Black Aesthetic philosophies about art, black writers imaginatively recovered the unimaginable conditions and experiences that transpired during the Middle Passage. The work of Black Arts poets, essayists, theater critics, and playwrights was central to the creation of experimental forms that often drew on theories of jazz and black music, which Baraka argues *is* black history in *Blues People*. These experimental forms were dialogic in nature, written for and with a black audience in mind, and this understanding of art, I suggest, transcended the Black Arts debates and circles to inform the African American novel, particularly in the work of Toni Morrison. Many postmodern black writers reinvigorated nineteenth century black narrative and novelistic forms in the post-Civil Rights context. This orientation toward literary form as social text, though, often navigated the spiritual realm of the sacred and the profane realm of the mundane. In black literary activism the ship space is used to theorize political and social revolution. Moreover, the trope of the slave ship reveals a sustained meditation and artistic dialogue on the possibilities and nature of revolution in late-capitalism and in a country in which

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throughout which difference is homogenized under racial and ethnic categories in favor of cultural and national assimilation. For Singh, the optics of race, in particular the dominant visual metaphor of the late twentieth century, "colorblindness," are one of the primary features of modern racial liberalism (40). He contends, "Race. . . remains a code for histories of color: legacies of conquest, enslavement, and non-national status that disturb the national peace, whose narratives must thus be silenced within public culture, or hived off from the national story into a separate world of their own (41-42). I argue that a major constituent of Baraka's project is to resist the silencing of history that integration with the nation requires. Furthermore, *Slave Ship* is a form of revolutionary theater that dramatizes this resistance through the most painful reminder of white capitalism and race-based slavery, the Middle Passage.

the police are invested with so much power over the lives of ordinary people. I argue that the slave ship represents a site of resistance and revolution as well as a site of cultural memory and collectivity in this period. Literary representations of the slave ship sustain a tension between the lack of freedom, survival, and political as well as personal transformation

The relationship between literary activism and black postmodern experimental literary forms has informed my archive, which is constructed around the various approaches to the creation and history of revolutionary consciousness through modes of historical remembrance. In the following pages, I will focus on two playwrights, several novelists, one musician, and two academics, including Amiri Baraka, August Wilson, Alice Walker, Paule Marshall, Gayl Jones, Octavia Butler, Sun Ra, and Saidiya Hartman. Each offers different modes of writing the slave ship and Middle Passage through the lens of personal, subjective experience. Their works instantiate acts of *revision* in an intertextual relationship with eighteenth- and nineteenth-century African American writers such as Wheatley, Frederick Douglass, Martin R. Delany, and W.E.B. Du Bois.[13] The chapters are organized by period, thematic concern, literary form, and genre. Several themes emerge from the use of the slave ship in these periods that become central to the argument I develop.

Through close readings of figurative language I identify four themes associated with the slave ship: the hold as the foremost site of terror; the psychological effects of enclosure and captivity; the black woman as most vulnerable victim; and the bodily as

[13] Du Bois is particularly important to this project, and though space does not allow for it here, an examination of his doctoral thesis, *The Suppression of the African Slave Trade to the United States: 1638-1870*, as well as his 1920 book, *Darkwater: Voices From Within the Veil*, a detailed account of his Pan-Africanist political philosophy would be discussed in detail for the groundwork each text lays in the development of a slave ship literary canon.

well as psychic effects of possession. I situate representations of the slave ship alongside contemporary debates around citizenship, self-determination, collectivity, and bodily sanctity. I chose texts through which to explore the application of the slave ship metaphor to the history of enslavement as a material experience as well as its transformational psychological effects. Following Édouard Glissant, these works do not use the slave ship as a means to argue for wholeness through reunion. Rather, they represent variations on his theory of *detour*, or the ambiguity of cultural imbrication and collectivity born out of a history of forced migration. Chapter one examines space through the lens of theatrical space and its effects on audiences' psyches and their bodies. Chapter two examines individual transformation and the creation of community. Each of these chapters probes the playwrights' choice of the sacred space of the black church and community center as well as the black home alongside the theater to argue that following Malcolm X a major aspect of the Black Nationalism is the development of livable and viable real estate for black people. The slave ship as the site of psychic and bodily violence is thus counterpoised against calls for spaces in the United States where African Americans can produce art and where self-determined community building is allowed to flourish. In these two chapters, I lay the groundwork for terms that will become increasingly important throughout my readings. These are "ship space," "bodily sublime," and "oceanic imaginary." Chapter three focuses on the ship as the site where sexual and medical exploitation of black women's bodies in slavery was sanctioned and first actualized. The novels examined in this chapter each focus on the woman's body as the topos to work through this past as well as the mind's effects on embodiment—particularly in the ways grief necessitates a process of remembering. Chapter four builds

on the woman's body as a metaphorical site for healing to explore touch and the act of cross-cultural encounter with alien beings. Here, the cross-cultural crew is allegorized through the alien invasion and space ship in Butler's work, while Sun Ra imagines the Black Ark as a site of world-building for an all-black crew. These artists look toward the future to imagine what blackness might mean in the new worlds imagined through black speculative forms. Though I argue each of the texts explored contribute to the literature of the slave ship, my archive is by no means meant to be prescriptive or to limit the scope of contemporary literature of the slave ship. For example, this project does not often contend with poetry or a slave ship poetics because I became interested in the ability of narrative forms to combine realism with the metaphysical in order to honor the dead.[14] Instead, I would like to offer or generate multiple reading practices and pedagogical tools for thinking across black literary history.

To analyze the conceptual proliferation of the ship, I emphasize literature and writing as political responses to twentieth-century conditions of inequality and discrimination through the intersectional analysis of gender, race, and sexuality. Literature has the ability to transform readers' minds by navigating multiple audiences at once and, perhaps most importantly, allowing a reader to arrive at her own conclusions through independent evaluation and judgment. Thus, the slave ship itself is a conceptual space through which this affective and intellectual work can be triangulated. Through mimesis and abstraction, literature provides fertile territory for constructing narratives

[14] The sparse attention to poetry in this project is not intended as an oversight either. Poetry is the genre of metaphor and figurative language *par excellence*, and as such certain poems have been highly informative in constructing this archive and the attendant argument. In particular, Robert Hayden's "Middle Passage" is a foundational poem in the architecture of contemporary literature of the slave ship. Hayden's poem is cited as an epigraph and language from it is borrowed, revised, and inspirational to many of the writers included here, such as Paule Marshall, Charles Johnson, John Edgar Wideman, and more recently, Kevin Young. Another project might historicize Hayden's poem in relation to the depictions of the *Amistad* mutiny and its leader by black American writers.

about the past, present, and future that confront readers' anxieties, disrupt their expectations, and flesh out timeliness. Each text also makes an argument about time and space. For Wilson, this temporality is excavated through the "City of Bones," a conceptual site for grief. For Walker and Marshall, time acts upon and through the body. It is even trapped there. For Baraka, time is exploded through the sonic experience of the world. Jazz and theater are modes to shape the moment and to draw upon a historical continuum of black creativity and resistance. For Butler and Ra, the future is a critical apparatus through which to explore the present. I refer to this collective effort to rethink time and the way it is experienced as an oceanic temporality. If the ocean is the medium through which the ship navigates and sails between spaces of national interpellation, the ocean is also a space without time, a space where time stands still. Memories can collect there. Looking out across the sea, one is able to experience the sublime feeling of approaching the past, of encountering the spirits that are submerged in its depths.

While historical and theoretical studies of the Atlantic Slave Trade have proliferated in recent years, a sustained reading of the many ways the slave ship emerges as a potent vehicle of signification in the post- Civil Rights and Black Power period has yet to be undertaken. There is a relationship between the literary and the sacred in contemporary black literature and conversely commentary on the sacred through postmodern forms that I find compelling and argue representations of the slave ship probe. The nineteen-nineties and two thousands mark a generational shift among writers and publishers. I am referring to the growing canon of Post-Soul arts and cultural

criticism.[15] One characteristic of Post-Soul writing is the freedom to critique and *signify* upon, or to use a Derridean term, *play* with the icons of the Civil Rights period. Though not given as much space in the chapters that follow, I explore the relationship between sacred history and desacralizing history in chapter two through the juxtaposition of August Wilson's plays with Charles Johnson's novel, *Middle Passage* and George C. Wolfe's play, *The Colored Museum*. If, following the Black Arts Movement, the Middle Passage is a dominant sign for the social construction of race and blackness, how might this sign itself be deconstructed through irreverent cultural expression? For example, in Johnson's novel, Rutherford Calhoun, an ex-slave and unreformed gambler, is forced aboard a slaver as a crewmember. The novel refers to the often forgotten history of enslaved and free black men finding work either constructing or as sailors on slave ships. Johnson's provocative novel uses this history as a vehicle for critiquing identity politics and Calhoun's individual transformation alongside the captivity of those of his own "race" but not his nation. The idea that the Middle Passage is the historical, even familial or ancestral, inheritance of all black Americans is one that coalesces in the 1960s during the intersecting projects of the Black Arts Movement and Black Nationalism, but this association in no way remains static in black cultural productions throughout this period. I argue that representations of the Middle Passage and the slave ship instantiate a vibrant critique of the national interest in assimilation and integration that in the 1980s and 1990s increasingly operated under the monikers of colorblind policy and multiculturalism as well as the false pretense of multiculturalism, which resulted in a discursive set of practices as an attempt to of placate the vital dissent of people of color.

[15] For a definition of the periodic terminology, "post-soul," see Nelson George and for "post-black" see Thelma Golden and Glen Ligon, Copeland "Post/Black/Atlantic: A Conversation with Thelma Golden and Glenn Ligon."

How then might we begin to understand the ways this trope operates through figurative language and as an aesthetic practice in black literature? I suggest that a key terrain or vessel upon which this metaphor often focuses is the human body. Writers often use metaphors of the body to describe the slave ship. For example, the hold is most often a "belly" or a womb.[16] Perhaps the two aspects of embodiment most associated with shame that appear again and again in the works I examine in relation to the Middle Passage are nausea and excrement. These are symptoms and realities of the ship, of *flux*, of migration. Yet in literature nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea become signs of an existential crisis of the human who meets the bonds of captivity and the psychological and physical chains it imposes.[17] For instance, in John Edgar Wideman's 1998 novel, *The Cattle Killing*, this psychosomatic crisis is referred to as "homesickness, Ebo melancholy" by the white plantation owners and traders who observe the depressed states of African survivors of the sea voyage (103). Though homesickness does not generally come with a prescriptive set of symptoms, in this instance, melancholy is explicitly connected to the process of forced migration and subsequent period of "seasoning" in the New World. In the novel's telling, physical depression is deadly.

I extend this metaphorical language to develop the term "mourning sickness" to suggest that depictions of nausea and sickness in the literature of the slave ship are not just used to provoke readers or to place them at the scene of trauma, but they are actually

[16] For example, see Charles Johnson's novel *Middle Passage* (1990): Ebenezer Falcon, the fictional captain of the slave ship, *Republic*, in Johnson's novel is, "a 'tight-packer,' having learned ten years ago from a one-handed French slaver named Captain Ledoux that if you arranged the Africans into two parallel rows, their backs against the lining of the ship's belly, this left a free space at their rust feet, and *that*, given the flexibility of bone and skin, could be squeezed with even more slaves if you made them squat at ninety-degree angles to one another. Flesh could conform to anything" (120).

[17] By examining representations of sickness, I do not mean to pathologize pain or rely too heavily on the spectacle of the suffering body as a rhetorical device. Rather, I would suggest that these are under examined and under theorized thematic concerns and I seek to understand the purpose they serve in art and cultural productions.

moments of theory and political responses to grief. [18] Mourning sickness will automatically be associated with the phase of pregnancy during which a woman is overcome by uncontrollable nausea, a nausea that is constant and is also provoked by physical reactions to stimuli that are completely out of her control. However, I contend that in the place of the slave ship a state of continued mourning sickness is induced in the captive through the perpetual experience of loss, terror, and exposure to the many illnesses brought about during the Middle Passage.[19] Only women, then, do not experience mourning sickness, but it is shaped by the rubric of gender. Physical disorientation or disequilibrium can bring about vomiting. Vomiting also renders the individual vulnerable and subject to total embodiment. When we vomit it feels as if the body is punishing us for a crime we have committed against its well-being. This punitive emotional response of shame and guilt combined with vulnerability and the disgust we feel towards the rupture of the body's inside/outside barrier results in abjection. However, this relationship between nausea and shame is not a natural one. It is culturally imposed and constructed. Thus, through the term mourning sickness, I hope to suggest that literary depictions of nausea theorize a political and affective grounding for empathy through a rejection of the racialized and hierarchical discourse used to distinguish between human and chattel on the slave ship.

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[18] I owe a debt of gratitude to Jennifer C. James who helped me develop this terminology. I was interested in delineating a term that spoke to the ship as a *natural* place for the human body to become disoriented and to express this disorientation through sickness, commonly referred to as seasickness. However, I wanted to link this idea to grief as well. She suggested mourning sickness, which I have found incredibly evocative and illuminating.

[19] Olaudah Equiano's *The Interesting Narrative* serves as an excellent archival resource for this theory of mourning sickness. Equiano's profound terror at sighting the slave ship is made completely debilitating once he is taken down to the hold and faints upon experiencing its "stench" (55). Fortunately, because he is a child, he is kept above the hold for the remainder of the journey to Barbados in order to preserve his life. However, in his memory, and at the level of the text, this physical response is directly related to his limited ability to communicate with others and with the still fresh brutal separation from his sister.

In *Black Skin, White Masks*, nausea is an expressive sign of the failure of language to express the violence of racialization on Frantz Fanon's psyche. At the moment when Fanon is made to feel himself a frightening spectacle by the white French child, his response is one of startling immersion within a particular history of trauma, racialization, and a physical sensation of rejection. Feeling himself "fixed" by the Othering gaze, Fanon's awareness of his body as a sign not of himself results in not just a sensation of shock but a physical expression (109). He writes:

> I could no longer laugh, because I already knew that there were legends, stories, history, and above all *historicity*, which I had learned about from Jaspers. Then, assailed at various points, the corporeal schema crumbled, its place taken by a racial epidermal schema. In the train it was no longer a question of being aware of my body in the third person but in a triple person. In the train I was given not one but two, three places. I had already stopped being amused. It was not that I was finding febrile coordinates in the world. I existed triply: I occupied space. I moved toward the other . . . and the evanescent other, hostile but not opaque, transparent, not there, disappeared. Nausea. . . .
>
> I was responsible at the same time for my body, for my race, for my ancestors. I subjected myself to an objective examination, I discovered my blackness, my ethnic characteristics; and I was battered down by tom-toms, cannibalism, intellectual definiciency, fetchism, racial defects, slave-ships, and above all else, above all: 'Sho' good eatin.'" (112)

The child's call interpellates Fanon as a frightening "Negro," and an object of fear and derision, which in turn causes him to feel "completely dislocated" (112). In her reading of this scene, Sara Ahmed argues that colonialism makes the world "white" and available to certain kinds of bodies while others are objectified. She suggests, "Bodies remember such histories, even when we forget them" (111).[20] The ellipsis following the nauseated response is Fanon's own, and I read it as an indication not only of the difficulty of writing about being nauseated, but that nausea is a sublime sensation, too terrible and abject to fathom through more than a descriptive name. The slave ship's hold as a sphere of death, darkness, and despair becomes the iconic symbol of chattel slavery as an anathema. Sea-sickness on board these vessels is a different kind of illness than the body coping with a new experience. Nausea is a sign that the body is moving in the wrong direction; the body resists the ship's movement and being transported.[21]

As Fanon's reflection reveals, memories and traumatic events can also nauseate. In this way, nausea can function as an affirmation of one's self in relation to painful or revolting experiences. As a physical response that registers disorientation, it reminds the individual of her wholeness and through this response can constitute a form of rejection. Nausea, therefore, in or as a *reaction to* the literature of the slave ship is a way to reject

[20] Sara Ahmed reads this passage in Fanon's text to grapple with his distinction between the "corporeal schema," where the "corporeal schema is the "'body at home'" and the "racial epidermal schema." In reading the phenomenological orientation to both space and the effect of the body in space, Ahmed argues, "the racial and historical dimensions are beneath the surface of the body described by phenomenology, which becomes, by virtue of its own orientation, a way of thinking the body that has surface appeal." She continues, "racism 'interrupts' the corporeal schema. Or we could say that the 'corporeal schema' is already racialized; in other words, race does not just interrupt such a schema but structures its mode of operation." See also Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," 587. Fanon's conclusion with ingestion suggests Freudian melancholia in which the ego desires to incorporate the cathected lost object through ingestion.

[21] I am grateful here for a recent discussion I had with a fellow panelist, Frances Henderson, and other conference participants at the 2013 College Language Association meeting held in Lexington, Kentucky. After giving a paper, I was asked to think more about the relationship I proposed between nausea and community building.

an imposed social condition or interpellation, for both black and white audiences. Becoming nauseated by a text, just as one might experience a flush of nausea at the news of a dear one's death or at the sight of a horrific catastrophe, allows for the individual to distance herself from that root cause and to fundamentally reject the conditions upon which it is based.[22] Nausea can be symptomatic of the individual's relationship to trauma and collective identity, but it can also build an affective community among audiences.

Fanon's account is an example of what I call the bodily sublime. Nausea is a sign for how the bodily sublime functions in the literature of the slave ship to focus the reader's attention on the ways the violence of the slave trade persists as a haunting in contemporary fiction. Furthermore, the bodily sublime registers that which can never be understood and lies outside an existing vocabulary to name or describe.[23] Yet the body

[22] "Disidentification" might also be a useful term for thinking through the ways nausea and melancholia are connected to the subject's experience of collective identification. See José Esteban Muñoz *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*. My work is informed by Muñoz s theory of disidentification, particularly in its application to processes of identity construction and mourning in the national sphere. Drawing on Chela Sandoval's "differential consciousness" and the theorization of difference as *identities-in-crisis* by women of color, Chicana, and Third World feminists, he explains that identification is always complicated by multiple affective and structural elements that constitute subjective responses and degrees of personal participation in the social (7). Drawing on Eve Sedgwick, for example, he argues, "Identifying with an object, person, lifestyle, history, political ideology, religious orientation, and so on, means also simultaneously and partially counteridentifying, as well as only partially identifying, with different aspects of the social and psychic world" (8). Whereas, disidentification can be understood as a manner of the self responding to dominant ideology as "is a strategy that works on and against dominant ideology" (11). He explains: "Instead of buckling under the pressures of dominant ideology (identification, assimilation) or attempting to break free of its inescapable sphere (counteridentification, utopianism), this 'working on and against' is a strategy that tries to transform a cultural logic from within, always laboring to enact permanent structural change while at the same time valuing the importance of local or everyday struggles of resistance" (11-12). Representations of nausea *and* the image of the slave ship are aesthetic forms of disidentification. Moreover, I argue that they are methods of mimesis or verisimilitude to simultaneously symbolically transgress dominant paradigms of History, while critiquing exclusionary models of national belonging, citizenship, and narrow representations of collective being.

[23] Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain*. Scarry argues for bodily pain as an epistemology, although a central tenet of her argument is that pain is inexpressible. Her discussion of the materiality of the body informs my understanding of literary function of depictions of the body in pain *as well as* nausea as an affective response to literature. She writes, "the sheer material factualness of the human body will be borrowed to lend that cultural construct the aura of 'realness' and 'certainty'" (14). Elsewhere she explains that the act of naming pain or symptoms that evoke a common experience of pain "entails an immediate mental somersault out of the body into the external social circumstances that can be pictured as having caused the hurt" (16).

functions in the text as a tactile site upon which the reader can hone her attention and create claims for empathy while the author can retain an insistence upon the differences of lived embodiment. The generative potential of the bodily sublime for writers and readers exists in its ability to retain a sacred meaning for the body and bodily pain. Any violation of the body's sanctity becomes a politicized problem, a state to which characters within the text *and* audience members must respond, must rectify in order to sustain a humanistic vision of oneself as benevolent, sympathetic, and just.

Unlike similar recent studies on memory in African American literature and on representations of the Middle Passage in particular, I argue for a slave ship dialectic that has been overlooked or under examined. There is a dialectical relationship in contemporary black fiction between detailing the material conditions aboard the slave ship by focusing on the body within its confines as well as the spiritual and revolutionary forms of resistance that historically took place and an abstraction of the ship to a structuring, but often unnamed, presence. I explore a textual relationship between the material space of the ship and the ship as an abstract concept, which is sublimated through figurative language and metaphor, in order to demonstrate the dialogic relationship that exists among texts. In some texts, the slave ship is only apparent through allusion or metaphor, while in others writers take care to delineate decks and approximate the tangible nature of the vessel. The chapters are organized to foreground this dialectic and place it in conversation with a primary representational strategy used by the writers I examine, the use of the body as a site through which history flows. The ship itself is a sublime vehicle; it is aesthetically stunning and arresting, while its interior is a site of

terror inassimilable to contemporary consciousness.[24] The texts I chose to examine navigate this paradoxical impossibility through a bodily sublime. I argue that this heuristic offers a powerful critique of the euphemistic language that characterizes the American narrative of progress through the uses of (white) history as well as victorious images of a liberal teleology of national exceptionalism. In the case of the latter usage of the slave ship, I argue that writers create an imaginative transhistorical realm in which a subject, or a narrating "I" can cross temporal boundaries. This suggests that the slave ship continues to be a space of haunting and a haunting space.

The Field

The slaver is a ghost ship sailing on the edges of modern consciousness. --Marcus Rediker, *The Slave Ship: A Human History*[25]

This project contributes to the body of scholarship on contemporary black literature examined through a transnational and historical critical inquiry. In particular, my dissertation is in conversation with the growing body of scholarship and literary analysis conceptualized under Paul Gilroy's Black Atlantic paradigm. The literature of the slave ship, however, raises questions about translating radical black discourses to aesthetic strategies and publishable texts, often with wider audiences. In *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, Paul Gilroy proposes the ship as a "chronotope" for the study of black cultural expression and counter philosophical discourses. This term is originally theorized and applied to the analysis of the novel by

[24] Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation* 5-9. Moreover, Glissant draws the distinction in *Poetics of Relation* between the open boat and the closed boat to argue that for captives who had been marched from the interior to the coast had never seen the shore, let alone a closed sailing vessel. The closed vessel represents the unknown, but more than that, it represents stifled knowledge and bodily disintegration for Glissant. It is the womb on the abyss through which *Relation* is birthed.

[25] Rediker 13

M.M. Bakhtin, who defines "chronotope" in *The Dialogic Imagination*, which translates to "time space," as "the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature" (84). Chronotope "expresses the inseparability of space and time." Furthermore, "In the literary artistic chronotope, spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out concrete whole" (84). The ship, as Gilroy argues, is a suggestive chronotope that appears throughout the black cultural canon. Gilroy explains his choice as follows:

> I have settled on the image of ships in motion across the spaces between Europe, America, Africa, and the Caribbean as a central organising symbol for this enterprise and as my starting point. The image of the ship—a living, micro-cultural, micro-political system in motion—is especially important for historical and theoretical reasons. . . . Ships immediately focus attention on the middle passage, on the various projects for redemptive return to an African homeland, on the circulation of ideas and activists as well as the movement of key cultural and political artefacts: tracts, books, gramophone records, and choirs. (4)

The slave ship transports the reader through a network of temporal and spatial associations since it serves as a referential marker, not just as a metaphorical or literal vehicle within a narrative, a play, or a poem. Playing on its very function as a vehicle of transportation and trade, these associations might include the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the West Coast of Africa, national shores, the Americas. Thus, the ship gives the reader the ability to navigate historical terrain as well as conceptual terrain. The spatial associations would include the darkness and claustrophobia of the ship's hold; its

smell and nauseating effects; the forecastle as a space of crew camaraderie and the decks that offer access to the cleansing air as well as the sight of either the melancholic expanse of the Atlantic ocean, or the distant sight of a shore receding as well as a shore approaching.[26] I have attempted to heed several illuminating and instructive calls Gilroy makes to his readers and future scholars to generate a new vocabulary for understanding the political and cultural work of Back Atlantic literatures. His proposition that "we reread and rethink this expressive counterculture not simply as a succession of literary tropes and genres but as a philosophical discourse which refuses the modern, occidental separation of ethics and aesthetics, culture and politics" has been most productive for me (38-39).

As recent histories have demonstrated, while the existing archives might have functioned to erase the slave's personhood, we can interpret the historical documents of the slave trade texts to locate traces of resistance and revolution. Yet I suggest that this

[26] This chronotope, however, fundamentally situates these imaginative associations within the context of captivity and incarceration. The slave ship is a prison as well as a factory remaking the individual with all of her personal history and attributes that make her a whole person into chattel. For the comparison of a slave ship to a prison, see Rediker and Bolster. See also Wideman, *Brothers and Keepers*. In Wideman's memoir about his brother's incarceration, the jail is compared to a slave ship and Wideman suggests an analogy between the relationships of the ship's crew to the slaves and the prison guards to the prisoners. In both of these cases, the sailor and prison guard are participants in a system that also holds them captive. Like the ship, the prison is a sphere of constant violation, where the incarcerated are subject to the supervisory gaze at any time. Wideman is sensitive to the ways this supervision constitutes a violation (47). See also George Jackson, *Soledad Brother*. In *Soledad Brother*, George Jackson, a radicalized intellectual in Soledad prison in California, who spent much of his imprisonment in solitary confinement, wrote about a connection he felt to past lives and distant historical experiences. This connection is expressed as a series of memories that he feels both psychologically and physically. In one of his letters, Jackson writes about a series of impossible recollections. However, the force of these recollections is no less impactful on Jackson or the reader because of their impossibility. From a prison cell, Jackson describes of a series of memories that are connected to what he terms the "black condition": "My recall is nearly perfect, time has faded nothing. I recall the very first kidnap. I've lived through the passage, died on the passage, lain in the unmarked, shallow graves of the millions who fertilized the Amerikan soil with their corpses; cotton and corn growing out of my chest, 'unto the third and fourth generation,' the tenth, the hundredth. My mind ranges back and forth through the uncounted generations, and I feel all that they ever felt, but double" (234). Jackson uses his experience of incarceration to bridge the temporal and generational divide.

historical apparatus operates in several directions, with contemporary literature providing an interpretation of history production or historiography to in turn *produce history*. Thus, contemporary literature of the slave ship participates in Black Atlantic philosophies through the creation of subjective narratives in the midst of the perils of the slave ship and Middle Passage. These artistic renderings actualize what Glissant theorizes as the process of *creolization* following the slave trade to which a *detour* contributes in its return of the subject to the "point of entanglement" (*Caribbean Discourse* 14 and 26).[27] If the slave trade and Middle Passage constitute "ruptures" according to Glissant, the literature of the slave ship helps us understand, as Glissant urges, that the notion of a single History is a violent form of knowledge that places the outcome of the slave trade, which is "dislocation," and its surviving communities outside of history, or "nonhistory" (62, 93). He argues, "The struggle against a single History for the cross-fertilization of histories means repossessing both a true sense of one's time and identity: proposing in an unprecedented way a revaluation of power" (93).

Nathan Irvin Huggins's *Black Odyssey* (1977) contends that the slave trade constituted a "rupture in the social tissue" of African captives (26) and refers to the transatlantic crossing on the slave ship as the "voyage into empty space" (24). Huggins explains that two principles guide his historical and conceptual work: "Focusing on their ordeal of oppression and enslavement, I have wanted to touch wherever possible the emotional and spiritual essence of their experiences" (xii). He clarifies that his project differs from traditional histories because of his desire to "bring the reader closer to the minds and hearts of a people who had to endure and make choices under conditions and

[27] In J. Michael Dash's translation, the terms used for retour and detour are "reversion" and the "practice of diversion." See 16-18.

circumstances which are outside our experience to know." Like *Black Odyssey,* Saidiya Hartman's *Lose Your Mother* (2007) negotiates the border dividing he scholar's investment in historical excavation and the individual's quest for spiritual truth. *Lose Your Mother* and her first book, *Scenes of Subjection*, provide many of the critical analytics, including subjectivity, performance, and literature as a form of redress, that activate this project. These scholars enable my inquiry into the slave ship as a conceptual heuristic in late twentieth century black American fiction and drama.

Several scholars have written on depictions of the Middle Passage as a trope in contemporary black fiction and poetry or have found the Middle Passage a suggestive history through which to illuminate the ways literature may function as a form through which artists can examine latent trauma. The essay collection, *Black Imagination and the Middle Passage* (1999), edited by Maria Diedrich, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and Carl Pedersen is one example of a gathering of such scholarship. In their introduction to the volume, the editors argue for a "Middle Passage sensibility" as well as an "African American concept of space" that "had its beginnings in the holds of slave ships during the Middle Passage and appears in different settings" (8). I extend their argument to think about the transformative sphere of cultural expression and its creation.

Recent theoretical works argue that the slave trade continues to haunt the market logic of the twentieth century. Most notably, in *Specters of the Atlantic*, Ian Baucom offers readers an illuminating reading of Glissant's critique of History to argue that temporality accumulates rather than recedes. He explains that for Glissant the Middle Passage represents a passage into modernity (313). Thus the slave ship, with all its overtones of illness and bodily corruption, is originary. It is at once the site of *errancy*

and *relationality* (314-318). Though he concludes with this reading of Glissant, the definition of temporality and its "poetics of duration" responds to the historical inspiration for Baucom's study, the *Zong* incident during which African captives were discarded from the ship as it foundered in a storm. The ship's captain hoped to claim insurance money for their capital rather than be held at fault by the ship's owners. Baucom reads the long eighteenth century, the period of sympathy and sentiment among Anglo-European men, and the history of insurance in the Atlantic Slave Trade for its residue in the twentieth century.

Stephen Dillon's recent essay, "Possessed by Death: The Neoliberal-Carceral State, Black Feminism and the Afterlife of Slavery" (2012) published in *Radical History Review* similarly claims that the economic policies commonly understood under the rubric of neoliberalism have their roots in the marketplace of the slave trade. Influenced by Hartman's *Lose Your Mother*, Dillon suggests a historical relationship between the slave trade and mass incarceration in the time of the prison industrial complex. Following Hartman and Dillon, we can map a spatial trajectory from the coffle, the slave castle, the ship's hold, the auction block, plantation cabin, to the tenement and finally the prison cell.[28] He claims, "By centering racial terror in a genealogy of the prison, scholars have come to understand the barracoons, coffles, slave holds, and the plantations of the Middle Passage as spatial, discursive, ontological, and economic analogues of modern punishment that have haunted their way into the present" (114). I posit that a literary dialectic between the unimaginable effects of forced migration and the spiritual transformation of resistance expands upon notions of the fugitive captive body and

[28] This spatial map is also drawn in Assata Shakur's "Women in Prison: How We Are" (Dillon 113) and her autobiography *Assata: An Autobiography*.

maroonage the literature of the slave ship offers narratives. These narratives and other recent studies counteract one of the major "legacies of slavery's regimes of epistemological, corporeal, and psychological violence," which is "the absence of memory" (Dillon 120). Subsequently the literature of the slave ship and slave trade historiography often function to recover memory and to identify recorded traces of the captive individual whose life may be recognized in the present.

My study of this literary trope also hopes to complement the recent histories of the slave ship as well as enslaved persons' contributions to maritime culture that have given us a more complex view of the Atlantic world and the growing "Atlantic capitalist economy" of which the slave trade was a major part (*Slave Ship* 308). W. Jeffrey Bolster's unequaled *Black Jacks: African American Seamen in the Age of Sail* (1997), explores the history of black men, enslaved and free, who found professions as crew members and sailors. Bolster suggests the necessity to remake the image of the African body in the slave ship and later various types of sailing vessels, where black American and black Caribbean sailors were commonly part of the history of maritime culture and exchange (2). Bolster explores the complicated forms of racism and racialization that proliferated in the spaces of the sailing vessel, while suggesting that the ship also provided a means to escape these oppressions that existed on the shore. Bolster explains that the ship was an entity with a set of localized codes and rules that formalized conduct among crewmembers and even codified the compartments of the ship (74-75). Survival on board demanded collective work so that "the way of the ship" implemented a different hierarchy not necessarily based in race. Furthermore, the ship, then, existed as a floating entity where space was inscribed with specific rules, norms, and behaviors and where

labor was valued alongside collective interdependence.[29] In addition to Bolster's study, two essential histories provide new accounts of the slave ship using archival materials to complicate our view of the relationships and spatial politics aboard the slave ship. These are Marcus Rediker's groundbreaking *The Slave Ship: A Human History* and Stephanie Smallwood's equally paradigm-shifting *Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa to American Diaspora*, both published in 2007. Their research proceeds from a different point of view, of discovering African agency and personality among the oppressive silence in the matter-of-fact accounts of the slave ship's captains, insurers, and other forms of documentation that provide the institutional, economic, and philosophical architecture for the dehumanization of African peoples. Rediker's book provides a kind of map of the slave ship, both in terms of its routes and its architecture and spatial codes. Rediker foregrounds the continuing politics of the forms of resistance and solidarity—including the divisions and bonds between captives and crewmembers—that emerged from the ship's multiple spaces of labor, cooperation, separation, and death in order to tell this history from below.

Rediker places considerable emphasis on the category "shipmate," which connotes the particular solidarity achieved by the survival of the slave ship's transatlantic journey. The transformation of Africans from disparate ethnic groups and regions to "shipmate" constitutes one of the "human dramas" that organize Rediker's narrative of the slave ship. This category becomes an experiential and political collective in the port

[29] Charles Johnson, *Middle Passage*. Johnson's novel depicts Rutherford Calhoun, a black American man who is forced on a slave ship to escape a debt, describes the "way of the ship" as an outsider. His race remarkably allows him a somewhat privileged position as a person of value to Captain Falcon since he can use him as a go between gathering information about the ship's potentially mutinous crew and captive population. Through Calhoun, Johnson details the day-to-day life of the crew, their positions in the hierarchy of sailors, and their duties aboard the slave ship for his readers.

cities of the Atlantic World. Describing the various methods African captives used to communicate across language and other differences, Rediker argues, "Amid the brutal imprisonment, terror, and premature death, they managed a creative, life-affirming response: they fashioned new languages, new cultural practices, new bonds, and a nascent community among themselves aboard the ship" (8). Rediker claims, "In producing workers for the plantation, the ship-factory also produced 'race'" (10). Thus, the transformations that occurred on board the slave ship were not limited to those undergone at the individual level, but were discursive as well—the human became commodity and text, entered into a system of usage, exchange and fungibility. Shipmate" might be compared with Glissant's terms *creolité and Relation*; however, instead of retaining the fluidity and constantly transitioning *mestizaje* of Glissant's understanding of the identificatory and political processes of diaspora, Rediker silences the possibilities of these differences in favor of a "fictive" wholeness and singular collectivity.

Saltwater Slavery locates the human narratives, the information suppressed by the accounts of the slave trade that exist in logs, documents, and figures. At the outset of her introduction, Smallwood states, "*Saltwater Slavery* brings the people aboard slave ships to life as subjects in American social history" (3). Smallwood's incisive readings of the trade's documents reveal a new understanding of diaspora and the constitutive unidirectional divide created by the trade's routes. She argues the term "saltwater," which was used by the descendants of Africans in the New World to distinguish between themselves and new arrivals, "gave a name to the interchange between the new African migrants continually arriving to take their place alongside the survivors and the American-born children who were putting down tentative roots in the new communities,

between the ongoing experience of forced migration and its collective memory" (7). Furthermore, "saltwater" "defines the Atlantic in historical time and place. . . . It places emphasis not on the African 'background' of American slavery, on migration (focusing on captive Africans as 'migrants' instead of 'slaves'), or on the 'middle passage' as a metaphor for all that was wrong with New World slavery. Instead the concept of saltwater slavery illuminates what *forced* migration entailed" (8). Smallwood emphasizes that the diaspora, both the physical and psychological journey, had no clear definitional nodes or end points. Rather, "The migration of the black captives was an unforgiving journey into the Atlantic market that never drew to full closure." She locates sites of resistance to this system in order to provide a methodological practice of uncovering and identifying personhood. Smallwood's methodology is a revealing praxis with applications that expand upon the literary and cultural function of the slave ship as a chronotope with origins in Western (abolitionist, Enlightenment) discourses. The slave ship can be repurposed to become a figure for the analysis of the nexus of culture, trauma, kinship, genealogy, and loss, all prominent themes in contemporary African American literature. In my analysis of the trope of the slave ship in twentieth century black American literature, I argue for the ways writers analyze the linkage of the slave ship with the social construction of race and with blackness while at the same time seeking to retain the slave ship as a potent image of historical injustice.

The ship, moreover, references the multiple sites of captivity and enclosure, both material and psychic throughout the Americas. Yet ships were "modern machines that were themselves micro-systems of linguistic and political hybridity" (Gilroy 12).[30] Thus,

[30] See also Linebaugh and Rediker *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (2000).

throughout black Atlantic literature, representations of ships in general as well as slave ships participate in this revolutionary aspect of mobility through maritime culture, through the access of black dock workers, ship builders, sailors, and slaves working as sailors who spread the word of freedom by their proximity to the movement of information. Twentieth-century writers give text, voice, and style to these "spaces-of-flows."[31]

In the early twentieth century, among several writers commonly associated with the New Negro movement or the Harlem Renaissance and later the Black Internationalist and Black Left, the ship served as a vehicle through which to conceptualize nation, national space, Pan-Africanisms, and even comparative blackness. Claude McKay sets his 1929 novel *Banjo* in the port city of Marseilles, France, and populates it with black sailors and dockworkers. Through the perspectives of these seamen and maritime culture, McKay examines the connections and divisions among black diasporic subjects. In *The Big Sea*, Langston Hughes's first autobiography, Hughes uses the ships on which he finds work as a sailor after he drops out of Columbia University to examine masculinity and race as performed, social constructions contingent upon national context. In each of these prose works, the ship is a commercial vehicle, but it operates as symbol for the conditions of racism, imperialism, and their relationship with the nation.[32]

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[31] Ian Baucom, *Specters of the Atlantic* 35-36. Discussing the "capitals of a long Atlantic twentieth century,," Baucom identifies the nodes of capital in the Atlantic world through the parameters of shipping and the slave trade. He names several cities: Liverpool, Boston, London, New Orleans (vis a vis Joseph Roach and the circum-Atlantic), Charleston, and Kingston. Also, the slave factories on the West Coast of Africa, he argues, "functioned as industrial peripheries of these cities." "What all these places have in common is not only that they are Atlantic port cities but, in the phrase Arrighi borrows from John Ruggie, that they have all functioned as 'spaces-of-flows' for an Atlantic cycle of accumulation, as the commodity entrepôts and finance zones of this long twentieth century's oscillating regimes of accumulation."

[32] For a brilliant reading of each of these literary works, see Brent Hayes Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora*.

The foremost early-twentieth-century historian of the slave trade is W.E.B. Du Bois whose doctoral thesis *The Suppression of the African Slave Trade to the United States of America, 1638-1870* offers a detailed analysis of the history of legislation surrounding the regulation and abolition of the slave trade in the United States. He demonstrates the ways the Atlantic trade resisted long after the Slave Trade Act of 1807, which he argues "came very near being a dead letter" (109). Du Bois first theorizes the differences in conditions and claims to national recognition between white European immigrants and African captives, revealing the ways that African immigrants represented both a perceptual and moral crisis for the nation (100). Du Bois critiques the United States as a moral "city on the hill" with a Manifest Destiny, arguing instead that it is a nation founded in principals of empire and profit. The legislative battles and failures of enforcement are yardsticks for the nation's ability to contend with moral questions. He avers, for example, "No American can study the connection of slavery with United States history, and not devoutly pray that his country may never have a similar social problem to solve, until it shows more capacity for such work than it has shown in the past" (197).

In her excellent book *Black Empire: The Masculine Global Imaginary of Caribbean Intellectuals in the United States, 1914-1962* (2005), Michelle Ann Stephens argues that Caribbean intellectuals, including Marcus Garvey, Claude McKay, and C.L.R. James, attempted to locate and create models for black self-determination and national sovereignty that were not based in Western colonialism or imperialism (3). She argues that "the black ship of state," a concept she takes from the "Negro Ship of State" Cyril V. Briggs, editor of the magazine, *Crusader*, formed on behalf of his organization, the African Blood Brotherhood in 1921, emerged as a symbol of a mobile black politics (1).

This figure gestures toward a transatlantic history and "black peoples of the African diaspora in America in a state of political limbo, as a floating colony perpetually drifting somewhere between slavery and freedom, yet bound together" (2). In this project, the ship and the black seaman "serve as key sites in which a blended Caribbean and African American vision of a global black masculinity could emerge" (6). Moreover, the "black ship of state" is a "powerful metaphor," her book argues, that Caribbean intellectuals used to "[create] a global vision of race that drew on transatlantic histories of movement, the movements of fugitive slaves and imperial civilizations, the colonized and the colonizers, and black colonial subjects and the agents of empire" (8). Like Stephens, I attend to the ways that national space, particularly the often totalizing national space of the United States, is used as a referent against which diasporic identities are theorized in literary texts that use representations of the slave ship to theorize the specificity of embodied, racialized experience in the lived day to day. I argue the ship is a spatially defined theoretical site through which to create a nationalism that celebrates blackness and black identity by acknowledging the powerful forms of black culture that resonate, persist, and grew out of forced migration.[33]

The focus of this project presents the dangerous and violent possibility of further focus on the black body in pain as a seductive and powerful historical performance and the threatening allure of solipsism and catharsis to evacuate for some readers political

[33] In line with the models offered by these foundational texts, I have strived to employ interdisciplinary reading practices and methods in the tradition of African American Studies as an interdisciplinary field. Though inspired by an already existing robust field of scholarship, I hope that what follows will suggest the possibility of even more work to come from other scholars in multiple fields. Though my dissertation focuses primarily on literature due to the massive task of articulating an archive, I have left out many artists and intellectual modes that would be usefully examined here to broaden the context with which the slave ship has been manipulated in black arts. For example, artist Kara Walker, who employs many media, embarked on a project following Hurricane Katrina that used the slave trade, art, and the intersection of art, commerce, and race to examine the national.

meaning or responsibility.[34] I am wary of replicating for consumption the "spectacular character of black suffering" which Hartman cautions against in *Scenes of Subjection* (3). This wariness connects to the ways that critics are skeptical of the literary strategies used by writers to compel and convince readers. In the following chapters, I closely consider these strategies as they are related specifically to representations of the slave ship as a vehicle of terror, history, resistance, loss, bodily pain, and national consciousness. Although many of the texts I read do contain scenes of pain and torture, they are framed by questions of authorship, and the subjective is repeatedly activated as a form of redress. One of the most powerful critiques Hartman makes is to analyze the complexities bound up in empathy. She poses incisive questions that can be applied to the study of literature and its reliance on empathic bonds between reader and the subject or object of her imagination. She asks, "What does it mean that the violence of slavery or the pained existence of the enslaved, if discernable, is only so in the most heinous and grotesque examples and not in the quotidian routines of slavery? As well, is not the difficulty of empathy related to both the devaluation and the valuation of black life?" (21).

Differences were erased on board the slave ship for the purpose of fitting human bodies into limited space in order to maximize profit at the other end of the journey. Hortense Spillers cites this erasure during the Middle Passage in her essay "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book" to address the necessity of retaining gender and race as interdisciplinary analytical categories to upset the continued silencing of black women's voices by white feminism. She argues for a distinction between "body" and "flesh" and "impose[s] that distinction as the central one between captive and

[34] See also Karen Sánchez-Eppler, "Bodily Bonds: The Intersecting Rhetorics of Feminism and Abolition," *Representations* 24 (1988): 28-59.

liberated subject-positions" (67). Her essay is an incomparable model of the kind of work I hope for this project. Here Spillers historicizes the necessity of a scrupulous attention to *language* and *vocabulary* in an urgent call for scholars to be mindful of the ways gender categories have been created through processes of dehumanization and economic investment. In providing a history behind the naming or marking of racialized gender, Spillers argues that the silence around what it meant to be female, or pregnant, or even a child in Middle Passage "constitutes a portion of the disquieting lacunae that feminist investigation seeks to fill" (73). I deploy a gender analysis throughout this project to draw attention to the ways the history of women has often been silenced through the privileging of the male revolutionary on board the slave ship. I argue that too often black women's bodies are conflated with the ship through the aural and linguistic slippage of vassal, vehicle, and vessel, so that this body becomes inscribed with the violent history of enslavement and exploitation of her labor and reproductive capabilities, so that she cannot escape this history in American literary and popular discourses. However, several of the black feminist works I examine here directly protest this discursive violence and the apotheosis of the black woman, often elderly, as the bearer of cultural memory even as her body is attacked and burdened by physical pain or dis-ease. Alice Walker's *Meridian* walks a narrow line in navigating and falling complicit through her depiction of the violent history of sexual exploitation of Southern black women's bodies. Whereas both Paule Marshall and Octavia Butler in their works use bodily metaphors so that the black woman's body becomes a site for recuperative physical touch, the body pulsates with the ability to negotiate and release her from these discourses. This gender analysis questions the ways that black women are often deployed as silent victims of Atlantic

history so that in the twentieth century black women characters emerge as symbolic vessels of traumatic memory.

Black feminism, then, instructs the questions this study poses about the development of epistemologies based in lived, embodied experience throughout Black Arts drama and poetics as well as contemporary black women's fiction. As stated above, I explore representations of the bodily sublime, primarily through a focus on nausea and the stomach or womb as the organs that filter and feel traumatic memories. This reading is influenced by Lisa Woolfork's significant contributions to the fields of trauma theory and contemporary representations of slavery in film, television, literature and living history in her book, *Embodying Slavery in Contemporary Culture*. Woolfork investigates speculative fiction as well as cultural practices that include "a specific form of reenactment, one that uses a present-day body to interrogate the conditions of the past" (8). To do so, she develops the term, "bodily epistemology," a "representational strategy" in literature and film as well as a "mode of slavery remembrance" that "challenges the prevailing trauma theory by proposing a way to consider the corporeal dimensions of traumatic experience" (2 and 9). Furthermore, this representational strategy "uses the body of a present-day protagonist to register the traumatic slave past" (2). She argues, "embodied representation promotes mourning and encourages recognition of slavery's trauma in an effort to resolve and address its legacy in contemporary black life" (10). While literature cannot transport the reader to the past, nor would the reader want it to, literature provides an experience rooted in the body's sensations. Although I do not focus here on historical fiction, I focus on literature that itself reads history as translated through the body's orientation to the ship to reveal how these historical contingencies

might shape a relationship with radicalism in the present. I take up Woolfork's claim that speculative and neo-slave bodily epistemologies suggest the "dangers of not referencing the past" for their characters, problematically charging their female characters with the responsibility for bearing painful and even shameful memories (4). Following Woolfork's methodology, we can see that Meridian Hill, Avey Johnson, and Ursa Corregidora's physical pain is a sign of trauma that critiques the mind/body dichotomy to reveal that the body communicates through pains that can be analyzed and assessed as mode forward through depression and through loss (Woolfork 6-8).

A significant sub-field of literary studies has grown out of black feminists' formative research of seemingly lost narratives by black women including Deborah McDowell and Nellie Y. McKay.[35] Their scholarship offers us multiple languages for considering textual memory and the primacy of men's narratives in the construction of the African American canon. I have found that positioning this sub-field alongside that of the neo-slave narrative or study of black historical fiction enables me to think critically about how the slave ship opens up questions of bodily inscription.[36] For example,

[35] See Nellie McKay's application of Pierre Nora's theory *les lieux de mémoire*, or "sites of memory" to black women's journaling as a form of history writing in her essay," The Journals of Charlotte L. Forten-Grimké: *Les Lieux de Mémoire* in African-American Women's Autobiography," in *History and Memory in African-American Culture* (New York: Oxford UP, 1994). McKay reads Nora's term alongside Toni Morrison's temporal and spatial metaphor for remembrance, "rememory," in her novel *Beloved*, a discussion of which will follow below. McKay argues that due to their exclusion from national history for almost two hundred years, "the descendants of Africans brought to this country in chains were forced to find other ways to construct and identity and preserve the memory of their lives and sufferings on this continent, and to recall who they were before slavery" (262).

[36] A study that has been highly instructive to my own is Ashraf Rushdy's *Neo-slave Narratives: Studies in the Social Logic of a Literary Form*. Rushdy's book has proven central to my own thinking about periodization and the "work" literary artists do in generating responses to the historical and social conditions of their own times. In exploring the "social logic" of the literary form, the "neo-slave narrative," whose starting point he links to Margaret Walker's 1966 novel, *Jubilee*, Rushdy argues that historical novels written in the late-1960s, 1970s, and 1980s by black writers that take up the historical themes, setting, and period of American slavery, return to the first-person narrative of antebellum slave narratives (3). Thus, these novels might function to bridge the intervening years and national events that define the failures of progress in the U.S. nation as concerns black citizenship and equality, particularly through the lens of a character's individual experience. Arguing that these novels exist in an intertextual relationship

McDowell's essay, "Negotiating between Tenses: Witnessing Slavery After Freedom—*Dessa Rose*," asks important questions about the cultural work done by "contemporary writers [who] can 'witness' slavery from the 'safe' vantage point of distance" (144). She notes that "the majority of contemporary novels about slavery have been written by black women," and argues, "these novels posit a female-gendered subjectivity, more complex in dimension, that dramatizes not what was *done* to slave women, but what they *did* with what was done to them" (146). In a compelling assertion about the function of narrative, McDowell has shaped my own thinking fundamentally: "Narratives by and about slave women that shift the points of stress from sexual victimization to creative resistance effect an alteration of what can be called a sacred text" (146). Reading this assertion alongside Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and its function as a textual space of subjective recovery helps to reveal the intersection of the sacred with literature and its consumption.

Mapping the Metaphor

How'd I get here on my back in the dark with the wind and the water blowing through my ears? How'd I get in the dark?. . . .At the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean there's a railroad made of human bones/ Black ivory/Black ivory. --Amiri Baraka, Excerpt from "PRE-HERE/ISTIC Sequence" for "Why's/Wise"[37]

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with both antebellum slave narratives *and* with the 1960s as a period of formative upheaval, neo-slave narratives "are able to comment on the cultural politics in America, especially the politics of canonization and the issue of appropriation in American cultural history" (6). Rushdy develops a theory of intertextuality that "redefines[s]" the concept, "so that it does not mean only the relationship between one text and another, a relationship in which a later text parodies, supplements, or subverts an earlier text, but also, and, more important, the ways texts mediate the social conditions of their formal production" (14). He continues to clarify the process of reading intertexually, which "is to discern how a given text creatively alludes to and possibly rewrites a predecessor text, evokes the political dynamic in the field of cultural production, and inscribes into that dialogue its concerns with the social relations in the field of power." Moreover, following Hortense Spillers, Rushdy's rethinking of intertextuality relies upon the concept of discontinuity and the "complex dialogic negotiation" among texts that discontinuity involves (17). For Spillers and Rushdy, a "matrix of literary discontinuities" belies the existence of a coherent and overdetermined literary tradition.

[37] A reading of this poem along with accompaniment is available on *YouTube.* http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mKfQNO66GPk

Morrison's *Beloved* serves as this project's version of an original critical site or an intellectual and creative foundation, a cornerstone, for *Force. Spirit. Feeling*. I use this architectural metaphor to describe the novel's importance to my dissertation and research because it echoes the metaphor Morrison uses to characterize the novel, a metaphor that has subsequently been invested with a great deal of celebratory and affective potential. *Beloved* is a critique of 1980s social, legal, and economic policies through the examination of enslavement and motherhood. Morrison uses the genre of historical fiction as well as an archival trace to construct a textual monument to the subjective experience of pausing to remember the past and contemplate the unthinkable. In an essay and interview published in *The World* in 1989 she explains that for her the novel is a monument, specifically a "bench" (4).[38] She writes, "It's almost as though the novel substitutes for something, that it exists instead of something else." She uses the space of the essay to meditate on what "drove" her to write it. The novel fulfills a "hunger"; she says that in writing it she was responding to a call that was pleading to be answered, giving the novel some autonomy. *Beloved*'s final refrain is an arresting statement; "This is not a story to pass on," that with each reading transforms in meaning and effect. The novel has to be because it represents some of those stories that have been passed on in the construction of these spatialized national memories that are grounded in exclusion.

Morrison begins her description of the novel with the assertion that there is "no place you or I can go, to think about or not think about, to summon the presences of, or recollect the absences of slaves; nothing that reminds us of the ones who made the journey and of those who did not make it" (4). "No place" immediately reminds the

[38] *The World*: *Journal of the Unitarian Universalist Association*. Jan/Feb 1989, 4, 37-41. It is with gratitude that I acknowledge that I first studied this essay under the mentorship of Lisa Woolfork in her 2005 graduate seminar, "Trauma Theory and African American Literature."

reader of the classic definition of utopia, but it also speaks to the absence of official memory or any sort of sanctioned and sanctified space for memory. This passage also reveals that the Middle Passage informs the novel as a history without record, a history in flux that like the Atlantic's waves beats a pounding echo on the novel's surface but resists legibility. Furthermore, the material history of the slave ship by 1988 has literally been wiped clean as no ship survives to bear witness to the lives lost and transformed to anonymity on its decks.[39] She continues to catalog the absences the novel might fill: "There is no suitable memorial or plaque or wreath or wall or park or skyscraper lobby. There's no 300-foot tower. There's no small bench by the road. There is not even a tree scored, an initial I can visit or you can visit in Charleston or Savannah or New York or Providence or, better still, on the banks of the Mississippi" (4). It is at this point that the novel about slavery and freedom becomes a space to remember and grieve for slavery. "Because such a place doesn't exist . . . the book had to." Morrison concludes the interview with an anecdote about a man who leads tours of the monuments in Washington, D.C. who remarks upon the absence of a monument for the black people who take his tours. Morrison explains that he is African American and his complaint has left an impression on her. She concludes, "I don't have any model in mind, or any person, or even any art form. I just have the hunger for a permanent place. It doesn't have to be a huge, monumental face cut into a mountain. It can be small, some place where you can go put your feet up. It can be a tree. It doesn't have to be a statue or liberty" (41). This confession is a fascinating critique of the intersection of spectacular national memory with a counterproject of memory construction. The National Mall in Washington, D.C. is

[39] James Miller recently informed me of his experience working on a replica of the "Freedom Schooner *Amistad,*" which was built in the 1990s in partnership with the Mystic Seaport Museum. This project imagined a historical impossibility as the replica sailed with a black captain at the helm.

a built public space that provides the spatial script for national belonging, for pride, and even for mourning the sacrifices made in the journey toward the nation. Morrison implicitly critiques the failures of inclusion in this project as well as its performative nature.

Morrison's spatial metaphor, the novel as a bench, which is a contemplative space where the sitter can internalize his or her surroundings through a process of reflection, makes practical and tangible the affective and empathic processes attendant in reading. This metaphor also builds upon the concept "rememory" she theorizes in its pages. She suggests that this space is not so much about memory, then, as a re-collection, a gathering in of history, of ancestors' subjective experiences, in order to place one's own life, experiences, and self in relation to these. Sethe defines "rememory" for her inquisitive daughter, Denver, in language that gives memory texture and heft. She says,

> I was talking about time. It's so hard for me to believe in it. Some things go. Pass on. Some things just stay. I used to think it was my rememory. You know. Some things you forget. Other things you never do. But it's not. Places, places are still there. If a house burns down, it's gone, but the place—the picture of it—stays, and not just in my rememory, but out there, in the world. What I remember is a picture floating around out there outside my head. I mean, even if I don't think it, even if I die, the picture of what I did, or knew, or saw is still out there. Right in the place where it happened. (35-36)[40]

[40] See Caroline Rody, *The Daughter's Return*, 28. Rody: "the novel's preoccupation with the problematics of recovering the past." "Complicating personal identity and consciousness, "rememory" as a trope postulates the interconnection of minds, past and present." " 'Rememory' thus functions in Morrison's 'history' as a trope for the reimagination of one's history."

Minds and imaginations leave imprints upon spaces and spaces, even if forgotten or erased, leave impressions. Sethe argues for a cross-historical connection based in space and time. Moreover, her memory can inhabit that space where it was formed and take up residence in someone else who passes through. "A thought picture. . . . It's when you bump into a rememory that belongs to somebody else. Where I was before I came here, that place is real. . . . The picture is still there and what's more, if you go there—you who never was there—if you go there and stand in the place where it was, it will happen again; it will be there for you, waiting for you. So, Denver, you can't never go there. . . . Because even though it's all over—over and done with—it's going to always be there waiting for you" (36). Sethe warns Denver against memory, thereby complicating this sticky time and eschewing any definition of memory that suggests its tidiness, that memory compliments the self rather than perpetuating soul-destroying effects. *Beloved* represents the Middle Passage through the dissolution of language. The Middle Passage is everywhere and nowhere in the novel, thereby modeling at the level of the text its intangible yet lasting traumatic latency.

My first chapter examines one of Toni Morrison's Black Arts contemporaries. Here I read Amiri Baraka's 1967 one-act play *Slave Ship* as a text that models the relationship between institutional space and nationalism that Baraka explores first with the Black Arts Repertory Theater School, and which he then makes more concrete with Spirit House. I further connect this play to Baraka's work in reshaping the position of the African American body in the Newark cityscape through his proposed apartment community, Kawaida Towers. Kawaida Towers suggested a visionary approach to the housing problem and urban blight following the departure from Newark of manufacturing

business in the wake of the 1967 uprising. With these two "texts," Baraka materializes his arguments that embodied, lived experience in the world produces epistemologies that critique U.S. imperialism and forms of neo-colonial, capitalist labor exploitation. Furthermore, this chapter proposes a new pedagogy of the Black Arts Movement modeled upon Baraka's spare script for *Slave Ship* that allows for multiple forms of audience collaboration and interpretation.

The second chapter extends my arguments about the use of theater as a national space to further investigate the nexus between memory, cultural identity, and race. There I examine August Wilson's 2004 play, *Gem of the Ocean*, which represents the fullest treatment of Aunt Esther in his century cycle. Drawing on a critical genealogy of Wilson scholarship as well as Wilson's relationship to contemporary literary representations of the Middle Passage, I read Wilson's characters' performances of imaginative visions of the Middle Passage as moments that rethink African American nationalism in the late twentieth century as one that is allegorized through a transatlantic memorialization of loss. Nationalism is modeled after an oceanic flux, whereby African American collective identity both participates in the U.S. national sphere and retains fluid attachments to the possibility of another world. Chapters one and two explore the intersection of black spaces of social activism, intellectual debate, artistic creation, and black life. Each chapter questions the possibilities of what can happen when the theater and the ship merge through the collaborative and commemorative space of the staged play. I also examine the intersection of the home, real estate, and two periods of debate about what constitute black theater: the 1960s and the 1990s.[41]

[41] In the 1960s Black Arts participants established self-determined theaters in cities across the country, with the hopes of upholding the Black Aesthetic and surviving independently through sponsorship

My third chapter turns the focus of the dissertation back to the 1970s and 1980s to examine the ways that African American women novelists portray history as a wound that is located in the body, more specifically in the womb and stomach. Moreover, I argue that Alice Walker, Paule Marshall, and Gayl Jones create characters that find themselves participating in forced acts of embodied commemoration. However, these acts are not chosen and involve a great deal of pain, illness, and expurgation. The term "mourning sickness" provides the methodological apparatus for this chapter, which examines the ways that illness, pain, and especially stomach maladies are linked to a process of memory recovery. I situate *Meridian*, *Praisesong for the Widow*, and *Corregidora* alongside contemporary references by Third World and black feminists to the history of medical exploitation and forced sterilization of black women in the United States. I assert that Jones, Marshall, and Walker each locate the history of gendered medical exploitation within the slave ship and its transformation of the female body into commodity.

My fourth chapter responds to the body of conversations on Afrofuturism to posit that in Black Atlantic texts, time was always seen as malleable, and the ship is a symbol for the manipulation of time. I examine Octavia Butler's uncanny rewriting of the slave ship in *Wild Seed* (1980) and in *Dawn* (1987), the first novel of her *Xenogenesis* series. Butler uses space travel, whether it is through oceanic or outer space, alongside her

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and funding from all black financing. In the 1990s, spearheaded by August Wilson, a similar debate surrounding the nature of black theater ensues at the exact moment that multiculturalism and colorblindness are established as dominant social and economic doctrine, specifically around the idea of color blind casting, what constitutes the themes of black theater, and the sparse existence of independent black theaters, as well as the dedication of few roles to support black actors. Baraka and Wilson's works participated in debates about black property, the property of blackness ongoing in the twentieth century. Baraka arguing that the Middle Passage is a property of blackness, while August Wilson's plays explore property ownership in different forms as a misplaced value, an attempt at assimilation, and the production of fertile new ground for African Americans. This sense of the parlor as the center of the home extends to the theater as a central home for black creativity.

work's investment in queer or various gendered possibilities as methods for empathic connection and ultimately the political possibilities of worlds built upon touch. This chapter reads Butler's sustained investment in queer touch, and the crossing of physical boundaries through eroticized symbiotic connection, as an ethics of touch. Furthermore, my argument builds upon Audre Lorde's reflection on the embodied life in her cancer journals in order to demonstrate the construction of erotic touch as out-of-time. For Sun Ra, an increasingly popular figure for scholars, the space ship is a vehicle to a world where the affirmative and cosmic properties of blackness are made manifest.

In the conclusion, I turn to forms that pose of the question of how the individual might return to an African homeland through distinctively twenty-first century modes of bodily travel. I position two recent texts in conversation with each other to explore the project of *retour* undertaken by two African American scholars. In 2007, Saidiya Hartman published *Lose Your Mother*, a book that chronicles her journey to Ghana in order to research the Atlantic slave trade route. The book is a history of the slave trade, a personal experience of alienation, a meditation on loss, and ultimately an argument against *retour*. In 2006 and 2008, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. began work in partnership with PBS and the Human Genome Project to test genetic samples provided by famous black Americans to identify where in Africa their descendants originated. The conclusion to my dissertation pushes against the ideas of tradition, genealogy, and kinship that the ship space puts into sharp focus as a vehicle of *relation*.

My dissertation's title comes from Amiri Baraka's essay, "The Revolutionary Theatre." I take "Force. Spirit. Feeling" to be an encapsulation of the critical and creative

energies that drive this project. “Force” provides two primary rubrics: the forced migration of the slave trade, whether the Atlantic Slave Trade or the domestic trade with equally devastating effects on black families; force also indicates the forceful nature of revolutionary art forms. In this essay, Baraka asserts, “Art is method” (238). I find this claim quite generative in considering writing as a forceful method to counter the silencing of historical narratives that do not jive with hegemony or Empire. For me, “Spirit” provides a way to think through the forms of national consciousness I study alongside the slave ship. Moreover, spirit refers to haunting and to the deceased. It indicates how the Atlantic becomes a burial site in the lexicon of post-Civil Rights era black writers. The Atlantic is not just a Glissantian abyss, but it is the sacred place where the dead and lost reside. Spirits and a communal spirit can be commemorated through ritual practices or through art. I explore the latter in the pages that follow. Finally “Feeling” is a word that I find indispensable for considerations of Baraka’s impact as a poet, playwright, and national theorist on American and African American literary thought. I explore the centrality of emotional responses to literary works as well as the exploration of a collective politics based in affect. Moreover, “Force. Spirit. Feeling” signals the sublime because it is itself an aesthetic prophecy of the inassimilable, terror, and beauty of the Black Aesthetic that for Baraka will when realized create “consciousness epic[s]” (238). Rewriting the slave ship in the twentieth century requires that both the writer and the reader contend with betrayal, with trauma, with an unspeakable, better-left-unsaid history for a sustained and prolonged period.

The methodology for this project, though primarily that of literary criticism, models an interdisciplinary approach combining performance studies, literary studies,

and archival research. This methodology contributes to current directions in literary studies that combine formal analysis with historicism, yet I am able to argue that literature produces history in order to complicate what we mean when we say "history" and "memory." Theater and reading produce memories for the individual that are far from isolating. Although most of the writers I study here are by now canonical, my approach places renewed focus on the development of a black literary canon through an attempt to decenter the national framework. However, I use the theories of black nationalisms to motivate this decentering. If black nationalists call for a continual critique of the power structures that give a nation sovereignty, whether it is political or cultural, how do we continue to put pressure on these very terms?

An analysis of artistic renderings of the slave ship refocuses considerations of the contemplative space of history through the subjective realm of literary empathy in an era whose geopolitics increasingly looks outward rather than inward. The propensity toward historical amnesia in U.S. hegemony reinforces a social blindness to the presence of economic disparity, and yes, enslavement in the present moment. My project seeks to demonstrate the ways black American literature offers methods to recognize this cultural preoccupation with moving forward rather than looking backward. What is the United States' position as a global power, how might it exercise its military, discursive, and popular culture strengths to maintain this power? What role does race, specifically, the proliferation of racial identities play within the changing national sphere? Racism and racist violence are getting worse, and insidious forms of systemic and structural racism are often masked by neoliberalism's "useful" rhetoric of post-race and colorblindness. Slavery persists and is neither hidden nor secret. There exists an active disavowal and

intentional blindness by most Americans because our dollars actually sustain human trafficking. Americans know that the slave trade persists both domestically with the maintenance of strict immigration laws, attacks that erase the humanity of foreign nationals by deeming their personages "illegal" and thus their claims to the social goods and services, citizenship, of U.S. national belonging illegitimate. Moreover, slavery continues domestically with mass incarceration and the school to prison pipeline.

The critical position I occupy is that of an observer of the first decade and a half of the twenty-first century in which racial violence is constant and constantly filtered through ever more mediating spheres of social media. I recognize an increasing need for the radical black imagination that developed in the decades following World War II in response to Jim Crow segregation laws, Northern segregation and housing laws, and later, Reaganomics. I also discover an increasing urgency to refuse to live in this world. The coordinates of "this" world might be defined in a myriad, and subjective, ways, but this world is characterized by spectacular violence that is inflicted upon queer, black, and/or adolescent bodies by forces of power and hatred that are increasingly emboldened. I want to ask what it means to refuse to live in this world. What does a world built upon empathy and the shared experience of pain look like? What does it demand from us? How can it be imagined? This refusal does not seek to ignore or hide from the world as it actually is, but rather to activate obstinacy in favor of change in the face of the world's realities.

Chapter 1:

From Black Arts Image to Staging a Revolution: Dramatizing the Ship Space in Amiri Baraka's *Slave Ship*

The Revolutionary Theatre is shaped by the world, and moves to reshape the world, using as its force the natural force and perpetual vibrations of the mind in the world. We are history and desire, what we are, and what any experience can make us. --Amiri Baraka, "The Revolutionary Theatre"[42]

Theater critic Clayton Riley called Amiri Baraka's (then LeRoi Jones) play, *Slave Ship*, a "theater of unavoidable realities, theater of heart and conscience," and "Theater of personal discovery," urging readers, "go and find yourself" (*Liberator* 19). Writing in 1969, Riley views the play as a primary example of the kind of theater necessary for the period. Writing for another readership in his review for the *New York Times*, "Art Is What Moves You," Riley considers the play to be a critique of the nation and a call to arms for its audience members to cohere around a contextualized, historical identity that uses the memory of enslavement to articulate a way forward through dissenting, revolutionary politics. Each of his reviews provides us with a sense of how Baraka's play punctures the sanctity of the bourgeois theater:

> *Slave Ship* speaks in the direction of a new public experience—no intermission with orange drinks and filter tips—a drama to exist outside the framework legislated by theatrical commandants who stipulate regulations in text terms, in terms of the last century or beyond, in terms intended to take us back to history instead of bringing it to us. So a new thing. Theater of reflection, theater not afraid of what emerges, who feels what as long as *who* feels. (19)

[42] LeRoi Jones *Home: Social Essays* 238.

This production is theater as confrontation, or for Baraka, "Revolutionary Theatre" which requires "assault" and the invocation of dangerous rather than safe categories in order to demand the theater goer question her own relation to the categories of nation, freedom, and history. As Riley emphasizes, the presence of the slave ship in the theater knocks the audience member into and out of history by its sheer proximity to her body: "And the ship. Elaborated before us in our laps" ("Art is What Moves You" D3). This proximity tipped the balance of the performance to refuse any feelings of safety in spectatorship. Rather, as Riley asserts, the slave ship "puncture[es] any complacent citizen's bag of comfort or indifference, implicates all individuals. The confinement expressed in this experience extends to us like a cloak come to life, come to greet us as a vender of Black Magic." Through a close reading of reviews such as Riley's, I examine the ways that Baraka reconfigures the theater into a space of revolutionary potential by inserting audience members into the traumatic and dynamic ship space.

Moreover, through this play, I explore the implications of Baraka's Revolutionary Theatre for a more complex understanding of how theater operates alongside other forms of activism in the 1960s. I focus on Baraka's use of the history of enslavement in America and its relation to performance. In his work, the theater can become a radically new sphere of cultural production and participation for black audiences as its history of minstrelsy is negotiated and mastered.[43] I will contextualize the circumstances surrounding the composition of *Slave Ship* in order to demonstrate the ways this play is

[43] Mike Sell argues for the ways Black Arts forms transformed American theatricality as well as closed conceptualizations of the "text." Sell argues that central to the revolutionary nature of Black Arts theater was a new role for the critic, who could no longer be separated or ancillary to the community he served. Furthermore, Black Arts linked liberation and aesthetics to make plain the theatrical nature of race in American society. Of *Slave Ship* specifically, he argues, "*Slave Ship* is a counterspectacle that attempts to create representational strategies to fundamentally challenge the conceptual, aesthetic, and ethical boundaries of Euro-American political drama." Sell 63-71.

inextricably linked to Baraka's interest in creating spaces of community. Kimberly Benston deems *Slave Ship* Baraka's formal masterpiece for its dramatization of his musically-informed vision of black national philosophies. Through synaesthetic experimentation and collaboration with jazz musical forms, Baraka relies and builds upon the metaphorical vehicle of the ship space to translate his vision of history, collective experience and identity to his audiences. For Baraka, the slave ship is a primary site of Black revolution, and by placing this site in the theater where artistic production and commerce create a public, he dramatizes the ways memory is community property, yet provokes us to consider just how memory is often tied to the service of the nation.

"History as challenge and response": *Slave Ship* in Performance[44]

Slaves are being sold every night at an auction in Brooklyn. There are only three rows of rough-hewn seats around the platform where they bring them out, so even if you get there late for the auction, you can see the 'specimens' fine, sir.[45]

Slave Ship was first performed and produced by the Spirit House Movers in Newark, New Jersey in 1967. The play-text was published in the 1967 theater issue of the periodical, *Negro Digest*.[46] The performance of record for scholars is that directed by

[44] Quoted material taken from Clayton Riley's review of the play for *Liberator* magazine, December 1969, 19.

[45] Sylvia Carter, "'Slave Ship'-Soul & Despair Gal Reporter Finds Play Touches Heart." Moorland Spingarn Research Library, Howard University, Baraka files, Box 39, "Slave Ship." April 22, 2011. This quotation reveals as much about Carter as it does about the play since it opens the review without any contextualizing framework. I replicate the quotation here to demonstrate the differences and contradictions in how the play was perceived in the public sphere.

[46] Although the play's origins are apparent, fewer details are available to provide a detailed performance history of the play's productions in the years between 1967 and 1970. In my discussion of Baraka's play, I will conduct a reading of the play-text as well as the "play" as it is constituted in various textual materials including contemporary reviews, newspaper articles, and literary criticism. Most of the information, both in the form of personal recollection and archival materials, refers to a specific run of *Slave Ship*, the production directed by Gilbert Moses and staged at the Theatre-in-the-Church at the Washington Square Methodist Church by the Chelsea Theatre Center in New York City after a six-week run at another theater in Brooklyn. The version of the play-text I will rely upon is that printed, published and disseminated through Baraka's own Newark-based Jihad Publications, with a copyright for 1969. (A

Gilbert Moses and staged at the Theatre in the Church at the Washington Square Methodist Church by the Chelsea Theatre Center in New York City. Composer and saxophonist Archie Shepp provided a soundscape for the play. The significance of this setting should not be overlooked. In a January 24, 1970 article in the *New York Times*, "Cast of '*Slave Ship*' Quits Stage After Protest about Conditions," the author reports, "The actors perform in the chancel of the church, which has been converted to resemble a slave ship. Sunday services at the church are performed on the set."[47] Staging the play in a church heightens the dramatization of historical memory by adding a layer of spiritual and authoritative sanctity. Furthermore, the church has historically been an important space for African American community building, intellectual debate, and collective political action. Baraka's particular political project uses memory to organize a public and create a collectivity that is based upon affective alliances and the construction of shared memories.

Slave Ship, a one-act play, subtitled, "A Historical Pageant" was composed in 1967 as Baraka's nationalist platform and national public persona were emerging following his significant success with *Dutchman*. It appears that the play was written after the West Coast tour he took to help establish the Black Studies department at San Francisco State University where he met and subsequently became a follower of Maulana

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well-used actor's copy of the script is also available through the manuscript division of the Moorland Spingarn Research Center at Howard University.) Through reviews printed in local newspapers, which were mailed to and saved by Baraka, we can see the ways black theater companies might have translated the play for their audiences. This is the production reviewed by Walter Kerr, the staff theater critic the *New York Times* at the time, and also reviewed by Clayton Riley for the *Times* and other publications.

[47] Author unknown. *The New York Times*. Jan 24, 1970. *Proquest Historical Newspapers*. Accessed February, 2009.

Ron Karenga's US Organization and Kawaida principles.[48] At the height of Baraka's nationalist period he composed several experimental plays including *Black Mass*, a play that is heavily informed by Elijah Muhammad's teachings and Nation of Islam doctrine to which Baraka turned, briefly, after Malcolm X was assassinated. It is necessary to interrogate what the physical and atmospheric rendering of the ship space offered Baraka as a vehicle for crafting nationalist affinities, what it offered directors as a mode of theatrical expression, and the very meaning of the ship space for theater goers. Why use the horrific Middle Passage in a totalizing way to think about what it means to be black in America in the 1960s and 1970s? I explore how the play serves as a model for the Black Arts project to create, constitute, and proliferate a black historical consciousness through artistic production. Baraka uses playwriting and poetry to theorize his audience members' memories of experienced racism, prejudice, and dejection as a subject of American madness.

The Theatre in the Church run of *Slave Ship* was not free of problems and experienced complications related to its staging. In the article referenced briefly above, we learn, "The cast of LeRoi Jones's 'Slave Ship' walked off the stage last night after complaining to the audience that conditions at the theater were too similar to a real slave ship." The actors' protest suggests the proximity to the constructed ship space is overwhelming. There seems to be an inability to contain the play's use of traumatic history or to safely perform this history—the play's production of imaginative connections to the past too much like an actor's own memories. According to the article,

[48] Karenga's influence on Baraka's thinking has been well documented, but it might be interesting to juxtapose the composition of *Slave Ship* alongside the establishment of Spirit House in Newark where Baraka attempted to put into everyday practice Karenga's teachings.

the actors' spokesman declares, "They're not taking our wishes into consideration and subjecting us to deplorable conditions," and "It's like a slave ship in reality." While the "slave ship" as it is deployed here operates as a metaphor for unfair labor conditions, it conflates the imaginative with the actual experience of the theatrical space by those who work to produce the historical narrative Baraka suggests is both a temporal sphere of the past and the present. Harry J. Elam, Jr. records an audience reaction to a 1970 performance by the Free Southern Theater in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, in which "an aroused audience bolstered by the militant participatory action of the production stood at the end of the performance ready to riot" ("Social Urgency" 13). As these accounts of the reactions the play generated suggest, this form of what Elam calls "social protest performance" was all too effective. Furthermore, the association with the slave ship was not readily containable (14).

A summary of *Slave Ship*, whether it is of the play-text or a production is difficult because within the white space mentioned above lies a director's and performer's interpretation that is only suggested by those aspects of production that are most important to Baraka—sound and creating an environment or atmosphere that replicates a ship. Moreover, given these artistic values, the play is dependent upon situation in space, one's body present in the theater transformed into a ship. In order to more accurately understand what actually occurred in the theaters during *Slave Ship*, twenty-first century readers would have to hear, smell, feel the action rather than simply seeing the ecstatic shape of the author's vision on the page. However, it is also my contention that the power of the play lies in these very acts of interpretation of the conceptual space of the ship, and hence, the possibility of future interpretive acts that utilize the imagined, whether it is that

cramped yet vast unknowable world within the ship's hold or that limitless sphere of possibility that the theater itself enables. Though the play suggests the constant reenactment of those person-destroying, self-rending voyages across the Atlantic, it also hints at the unending possibilities of the emergence from the dark sphere of the transatlantic journey.

The play begins with scenes from transatlantic passage during which we hear the voices of women and children crying and men calling out the names of African gods in supplication. On the ship a woman commits suicide, there is an attempted rape, and fighting breaks out between the captive Africans, but mostly Baraka conveys the stifling oppression of so many humans closed in together. The play quickly proceeds to a plantation where an "Uncle Tom" betrays his fellow slaves who have formed a plot to rebel which is hatched by a "Reverend Turner." (Reverend Turner's refrain is "We gon cut his friggin' throat" (8).) The play then jumps forward in time again and audience and actors sing together, after which a black preacher and a white man are both assassinated and the slave ship returns to the fore through the use of sound. Finally, the preacher's head is thrown into the center of the stage, and there is dancing. The play is not organized into acts and scenes, rather epochs of time characterized by resistance mark its progress. For example, from the ship, the play transitions to a plantation where Reverend Turner is planning a revolt. Following the plantation scenes, the play transitions to a more contemporary period in which a Black preacher battles a disembodied voice, while other performers plan to kill the preacher as a rejection of his assimilation. Kimberly Benston summarizes the moves of the play well when he writes that the "black passengers' historical journey is from first enslavement to contemporary revolution, and whose

mythical journey is from African civilization through enslavement to spiritual reascendancy" (243).

In many ways, the tableaux of action are shaped by the performance of sound combined with the use of other sensory effects rather than scene breaks, curtain closures, or climatic shifts in dialog. That environment is a priority in crafting a production based upon the play-text is underscored by both the play's subtitle, "A Historical Pageant" and the cast page. The "cast" includes, "African Slave-voices of African Slaves": "1st Man," "2nd Man," 3rd Man, and "1st Woman," "Dancers," "Musicians," "Children," "Plus voices and bodies in the slave ship," "Old Tom Slave," "New Tom (Preacher);" and under a second heading of "White men-voices of white men," is listed, "Captain," "Sailor," and "Plantation Owner-'Eternal Oppressor.'" As is immediately apparent, the roles do not rely upon personality, rather the figures will be largely anonymous, thus underscoring the play's formal structure as a pageant. Stefan Brecht explains, "The acting style is idealizing naturalism—more or less the same as 'socialist realism'" (214). I would like to emphasize that what is even more important in the play-text than character or personality, seemingly, are voices. Towards the end, Baraka specifies the use of a disembodied voice, but voice is a key component of the dramaturgy here. The performers' voices will not only portray emotion, they will shape the theater into an atmospheric environment that is not contained by the limits of the stage. Following the cast page is a short list specifying which "Props" are to be used by the director and set designer including "Smell effects," "Heavy chains," musical instruments, particularly different types of drums and percussive instruments, "Ship noise," "Ship bells," "Rocking and splashing of Sea," "Guns and cartridges," "Whips/whip sounds" (1).

In the first half of the play, which attempts to recreate the experience of being in Middle Passage, stage directions specify ways the ordeal of the journey should be performed by the players. The script leaves much of what this might actually look like up to the actors and director, but is very specific in the ways it hopes for emotions and agony to be captured. For example, "Drums down low, like tapping, turns to beating floor, walls, rattling, dragging chains, percussive sounds people make in the hold of a ship. The moans and pushed-together agony" (4). A subsequent stage direction is perhaps more evocative of Baraka's project with this play. I will include the full direction in order to convey a sense of how the script operates to produce a play interested in replicating imagined experiences:

> Laughter is drowned in the drums. Then the chant-moan of the women. . .then silence. Then the drums, softer, then the humming, on and on, in a maddening, building death-patience, broken by the screams, and the babies and the body sounds, and the babies crying for light, and young wives crying for their men. Old people calling for God. Warriors calling for freedom. Some crying out against the white men. (5)

Here transgenerational and communal agony is part of the drama. Though the play-text does not map out through realist conventions, rather relies upon a poetic and surrealist style to suggest the ways these experiences may be conveyed. This provides performers with a great degree of subjective or personal investment in making their own interpretations.

The definition of history that operates throughout the play makes use of several tenants of the growing Black Arts Movement, but also has compelling implications for

future representations of historical memory in African American literature. Neal, writing about *Slave Ship* in "The Black Arts Movement," refers to the play as "a more immediate confrontation with history" (36). He continues, "The episodes of this 'pageant' do not appear as strict interpretations of history. Rather, what we are digging is ritualized history. That is, history that allows emotional and religious participation on the part of the audience" (qtd. in Smethurst 78). The pageant-like progression of history presents to audiences a framing that disallows an apathetic reception of historical data, or a stance towards the past as simply artistic fodder as it is rendered here. For as Neal states elsewhere, Baraka is concerned with "a theatre of the Spirit," and *Slave Ship* suggests that memory is a link to the African Spirit that has been crushed by American history ("The Black Arts Movement" 33). What is treated as historical is in many ways also treated as the genetic material of black audience members who witness the pageantry made sacred by the church setting. The play begins in Middle Passage—and while the scene of action changes, the play circles back through sound and set design to that horrific time—suggesting that the Middle Passage is the touchstone of black identities. The working definition of "history" that emerges from this production—its multiple, reciprocal inceptions—relies upon collective memory that has not been served by textbooks nor mined for its value.

Slave Ship dramatizes the ways memory is community property, yet provokes us to consider just how memory is often tied to the service of the nation. In *Slave Ship* Baraka enlists his audience members' bodies in the political message of the performance. He manipulates theatrical conventions and audience expectation in ways that enable him to play on the quotidian emotional effects of racial discrimination, economic disparity,

and oppression. The play impresses audience members' bodies into the ship space and grafts the ship space onto their bodies. In his review for the *Liberator*, Riley offers a powerful synopsis of the play's ability to put forth this idea: "This ship is one beginning—not the first—is an arrival of those gone before, those responsible for what is now. Black is. Black is this beginning. Black lies below decks. . . ." (19). Baraka not only offers the theater space as a space not of memory, but of (re)knowing, but he also conflates the suffering of historical, remembered bodies, with those of present, living people in effect imbuing spectators with the power of acting as sites of knowing the past.

The vehicle for this incorporation is the ship's hold, that very specific site of both bodily suffering and black revolution, with sharply defined material consequences for the shape of the body around matter and in the world. Baraka and Moses rely upon not just the suggestion of the slave ship through actions but attempt to create a sensorium of the ship space. According to an account Elam located, in some productions, the set even rocked back and forth (14). How might the theater and the ship space confront or meet each other? How might the ship space shape how actors perform or the choices they make? How might it circumscribe or free audience reactions? I argue that the ship space emerges as an artistic category in black drama and poetry at this time in a manner that generates and concentrates energies. The ship space always already implies movement, transition, departure, and enclosure. As W. Jeffrey Bolster demonstrates, the order of the ship relied upon a strict hierarchy of duties and their fulfillment in order for the voyage to be successful. Moreover, for most people the ship itself is associated with a degree of fear and danger due to the power of the ocean. Security is not easily attainable because the ship is so isolating despite the physical proximity of passengers. Like an illness, each

individual will respond to the ship in a different and idiosyncratic manner. Thus, in a theater, the ship space will automatically provoke divisions or attachments among audience members depending upon their own subjective responses to the imaginative space. The ship space is revealed to construct a radical ethos through transhistorical positioning of the body in proximity to traumatic experience.

In my research I identify the emergence of two metaphorical concepts in black American writing that require further theorization. These are the ship space and the oceanic imaginary. Though I argue here for the slave ship as a heuristic, so that the chronotope of the ship always already references the Atlantic Slave Trade, I would also argue that black writers have used the constituent parts and the mobile universe of ships as a symbolic territory that does not necessarily reference trauma. Black modernists such as Claude McKay, Chester Himes, Langston Hughes, Nella Larsen, Zora Neale Hurston, and James Baldwin incorporate literal ships and uses ship travel as metaphors for national consciousness and the orientation of an individual's body to the dialectic relationship between the freedom of travel and the territorial embodiment of race. By imagining the individual within or working on the ship, the writer is often able to consider issues of immigration, the possibility of social mobility, and individual freedom. Baraka and Moses translate the ship space from a black modernist metaphorical vehicle to the actual, tangible form of a sphere for theater.

The play's focus on the body's active position in a theatrical ship space provides an alternative narrative of the black body in American history and at the same time offers audiences a compensatory politics that acknowledges the specificity of embodied experience. Baraka's emergent political ideology in 1967 is an identity-based politics that

calls for self-determination for black Americans and African peoples. In "The Black Arts Movement," Larry Neal claims, "The Black Arts theatre, the theatre of LeRoi Jones, is a radical alternative to the sterility of the American theatre. It is primarily a theatre of the Spirit, confronting the Black man in his interaction with his brothers and with the white thing" (31). For Baraka and Neal, replacing the "white thing," or a world-shattering dominant paradigm that preaches the accumulation of wealth, imperialism, and through colonialism impresses on people of color self-hatred, with an epistemology shaped by the subjective and based in Spirit, will necessitate assault. It will also require inflicting danger upon a spectator's consciousness. *Slave Ship* is an example of what a dangerous theater of assault might look like.

Baraka utilizes Brechtian theatricality to produce a sense of alienation that affects both black and white audience members. In accordance with Bertolt Brecht's epic theatre, no section of the theater is safe during *Slave Ship*. Brecht famously called for the removal of the fourth wall to enhance an acting style he termed the "alienation-effect" in epic theatre in order to demystify the realm of production which installs layers of mediating distance between actor, director, stage manager, set designer, and spectator. Brecht states, "The first condition for the achievement of the A-effect is that the actor must invest what he has to show with a definite gest of showing. It is of course necessary to drop the assumption that there is a fourth wall cutting the audience off from the stage and consequent illusion that the stage action is taking place in reality and without an audience" (Brecht 136). Daphne Brooks argues that "alienation" represents a specific strategy in Black Atlantic performances (4). Her term "Afro-alienation" is instructive for considering the ways Baraka's theater of assault might be read through a history of black

performance in America in which the body is always already coded discursively but through gesture is able to redefine or unsettle those racialized and racist categorizations. Brooks argues Afro-alienation "manifests the counter-normative tactics used by the marginalized to turn the horrific historical memory of moving through oceanic space while 'suspended in time' not only to a kind of 'second sight,' as Du Bois would have termed it, but also into a critical form of dissonantly enlightened performance" (5). She continues, "Calling attention to the hypervisibility and cultural constructions of blackness in transatlantic culture, the historical agents" she studies "rehearsed ways to render racial and gender categories 'strange' and to thus 'disturb' cultural perceptions of identity formation" (5). With *Slave Ship*, the theater as a space of danger, accusation that concretizes his claims for revolutionary theatre in which he calls for a "theatre of assault" ("Revolutionary Theatre" 241). Baraka interprets Antonin Artaud's "theater of cruelty," which "means a theater difficult and cruel for myself first of all" (79). Artaud argues against Western theatrical conventions in which a proscenium clearly defines the stage thereby creating divisions of spectacle and spectator; the audience is also seated in auditorium style seating (81). The purpose of this reorganization of the spectacle is to awaken the audience from what are for Artaud psychological theater's dream-like qualities (86). He explains, "It is in order to attack the spectator's sensibility on all sides that we advocate a revolving spectacle which, instead of making the stage and auditorium two closed worlds, without possible communication, spreads its visual and sonorous outbursts over the entire mass of the spectators" (86). *Slave Ship* implements Artaud's arguments to create a space of critical danger that commands the audience's involvement in a way that resists resolution or the comfort of safety away from what happens to the

actors. Mike Sell argues that Baraka also incorporates aspects of Guy Debord's "society of the spectacle" to create a "critical metaphysics" (56; 57) For Sell, *Slave Ship* "does not supplicate. It deconstructs, satirizes, and destroys" (71). Like theater of cruelty, Baraka's theater of assault draws on a "visual language of objects, movements, attitudes, and gestures" so that simultaneously the audience is inserted into a symbolic realm while the slave ship is released from the symbolic safety of the past (Artaud 90).

Jerry Tallmer's review in the *New York Post* (Nov 21, 1969) provides several other details about the production that clarify its more ideologically dangerous implications. He opens the review by simply replicating his notes: "Top platform is upper deck. Lower, at audience eye level, and we are very close to it." He continues, "All chained together now, and nailed down. White voice: 'Okay let's go, we have the cargo, a full cargo'…and over it all, turning, turning, never stopping, a blue police light, your eye drops from it now and then and always and forever returns." Tallmer refers to the play as "an intense hour-and-a-half exploration of the lost Africa, the betrayed manhood, the Auschwitz…of the whole experience of slavery." Tallmer invokes what for 1969 readers would be a painful connection to the Holocaust—a connection as previously noted Baraka was himself interested in establishing in order to provoke white audiences.

In *Slave Ship*, the theater is a space of assault whereby the sense that what an audience member views, smells, hears, feels (both tactically and emotionally) are taking place in "reality" through a spatio-temporal simulacrum of the slave ship and Middle Passage. In a *Newsweek* article, authored by "J.K.," titled "Dark Voyage," the author writes, "The theater has been turned into a half-realistic, half-expressionistic space

centered by a structure that represents the deck and hold of a ship carrying African slaves to America." The author continues,

> The horrors of this *inconceivable historical* abomination are laid on very hard to the up-close audience, and on opening night screaming slaves reached out clawing for help from *The New York Times*'s Clive Barnes, a nausea-racked slave retched realistically in the lap of Norman Nadel of the Scripps-Howard papers, and during a slave auction a little black boy was 'sold' to the New Yorker's Edith Oliver. (*Newsweek* December 1, 1969 Moorland Spingarn Research Center Howard University, Baraka collections, Box "Slave Ship" file emphasis mine)

These details are remarkable because the author identifies the erasure of class-position and status in the theater. The seating dispenses with the notions of safety that might attend the theater that draw from theater in the round seating and attempts to create discomfort. Those expecting to be kept safe by racial or class distance are directly interpolated into the performance. Furthermore, despite the author's assessment that what occurred aboard slave ships cannot be conceived of by an individual of the twentieth century, Baraka demands both that one conceives these experiences *and*, as both Kimberly Benston and Stefan Brecht note, they are not historical processes, but should be part of the modern consciousness of what it means to be of African descent in America.

Foster Hirsch's review of Moses's Theater-in-the-Church production provides invaluable details about set design, in particular the ways it implicates and incorporates the bodies of all present, either willingly or not. He writes,

> The use of the stage space is as extraordinary as the acting. The whole theater has been converted into a slave ship. The audience sits on benches surrounding the stage, which is double-levelled. The top level slightly above the heads of the audience, is used for the deck of the ship and for the slave market; the bottom level, divided into four cell-like cubicles, represents the ship's hold. The whole structure rocks to convey the motion of the ship. The actors also use small stages in the corners of the theatre, and the area in which the audience sits: no section of the theater is out of bounds. All of the walls are covered with wood panelling to resemble the wood of the ship itself. (103)

Baraka and Moses transform the physicality of the theater. Hirsch's description of the theater tells us that the audience is seated so that they are incorporated into the drama, but more than that, as witness-participants, they encase the action. Furthermore, the ascetic placement of the audience's bodies organizes them in direct relation to the discomfiture and bodily proximity imagined as part of the suffering of the Middle Passage. Stefan Brecht provides another interesting detail about seating and set design, "the slaves are brought aboard one by one. In the hold (which is under the stage, we have to bend to see), they are segregated by sex" (215). This parenthetical is suggestive of the nature of the audience's positioning. They are witnesses, but also doubly inside and outside of the action. The play depends upon what the audience member can see, which part of the spectacle she can receive. By requiring her to change the position of her body in order to see *more*, she is placed in the odd and troubling conceptual space of actually *wanting to see more*, thus sharing in the violent power of captors. The placement of the audience's

bodies in relation to the actors is influential in establishing an empathetic bond between performer and viewer. The sweat on actors' bodies is visible, and the proximity is conducive to identification with the performance of pain. Baraka intends this effect as is evident when he writes, "We get the feeling of jmany [sic] people jammed together. . .aching in the darkness." The "terror" performed by these participants in the Middle Passage is projected throughout the theater and onto the bodies of the audience so that shock, squeamishness, and possibly anger might be the most pressing emotions.

The performances that *Slave Ship* has occasioned offer us a new way to think about the use of history and memory in collaborative art. Nothing about the play is static. Instead it is ever shifting and changing depending upon the stage, audience, performer, director, and the spare style of the script allows for this dynamism. This fluidity underlies the importance of the mobility of conceptual memories. Stefan Brecht writes of *Slave Ship*, "The theatrical evocation of a still actual history turn outs to be an act of (political-artistic) participation in a communal life comprising the theatre & [sic] the audience" (215). The spare script, the reliance upon actor and audience participation in the interpretation of the play-text, as well as the interpellation of these participants in the revolutionary and literary tradition of rewriting the ship's violent signification each represent acts of political engagement. In this regard, Brecht makes another interesting observation in his review of *Slave Ship*. In discussing the performance of Africans transitioning from freedom to enslavement aboard the ship, he details the formation of a new community. Brecht explains, "The community is shown as integral, especially in the hold: many spontaneous gestures of concern for & succor of others; a perennial unreasoned orientation toward collective suffering & collective revolt" (216).

In order to acculturate the audience members to the temporal and spatial realities of the ship space, the play draws on several establishing features including lighting and sound effects. In the opening stage direction, Baraka writes, "Keep the people in the dark, and gradually the odors of the sea, and the sounds of the sea, and sounds of the ship, creep up. Burn incense, but make a significant, almost stifling, smell come up. Urine. Excrement. Death. Life processes going on anyway. Eating. These smells and cries, the slash and tear of the lash, in a *total atmos-feeling*, *gotten some way*" (1, emphasis added). Baraka portrays the trauma of the Middle Passage—through his reassessment of the historical inheritance of all Black Americans—as entirely personal. Not only then are audience members placed into the troubling space of sensory overload, but they are also pressed into the position of witnessing traumatic history inscribed as their own so that the bodies onstage do not simply dramatize the play's action but they *perform memories*. Stefan Brecht argues that Baraka's historical continuum of Middle Passage, slavery, slave rebellion, and final victory over the "Tom" character reveals that the foregrounding of slavery at the center of the production affirms Baraka's belief that the audience's condition is still that of "slavery" (215). Furthermore, by placing his audience members in the midst of an "atmos" that overwhelms the senses—smell, sight, hearing, and one can imagine touch—he desires the experience, not just that of the performance itself, but of the entire event, to be a simulacra for real experiential connection to what he imagines as the most important historical events to develop an embodied ontology in which the past is housed in the African American audience members' bodies. Brecht posits, "The theatrical evocation of a still actual history turns out to be an act of (political-artistic) participation in a communal life comprising the theatre & [sic] the audience" (215). But

how does the play form this black collectivity? Baraka imagines the collectivity building performance by performance. We can recognize how this collectivity is formulated by turning to the powerful machinations of the play to manipulate the sensations and (it assumes) melancholia.

The first stage direction begins, "Whole theater in darkness. Dark. For a long time. Just dark. Occasional sound, like groaning, squeaking, rocking. Sea smells" (1). Rather than raise the lights just prior to action, the audience members begin to hear performers and the sound effects of the set before they are able to see their surroundings. One can imagine the disorienting effect this might have on spectators who may have previously been accustomed to the conventions of Realist Theater, but at any rate might find the relative safety of the theater space dissolving alarmingly around them. However, it strikes me that the sound effects at least begin with harrowing specificity with the unmistakable sounds of a ship and smell of salt air. Whether the ship's hold is physically suggested by the set or simply conceptually suggested by the enclosing darkness, Baraka suggests a synaesthetic experience that transforms the theater into the enveloping space of the ship at sea.

A ship's hold carrying bodies is further suggested by the following: "In the dark. Keep the people in the dark, and gradually the odors of the ship, creep up. . .Urine. Excrement. Death. Life Processes going on anyway. Eating." While the theater is still in darkness, the audience hears drums and chanting in Yoruba. The stage direction continues: "Rocking of the slave ship, in darkness, without sound. But smells. Then sound. Now slowly, out of the blackness with smells and drum staccato the hideous screams. All the women together scream." The sound of chains dragging across the

boards mingles with songs and still more "moans of pushed-together agony." I linger over the details of the script's first few pages to give you a sense of the kind of environment Baraka envisions and the particular bodily experiences he wishes to represent. Words like "agony," "misery," "lash," "violated," and "afraid" proliferate throughout the stage directions. The "Props" called for at the very beginning of the script include "Smell effects. . .incense. . .dirt/filth/ smells/ bodies" (1). These sounds: "Heavy chains," "Ship noises/Ship bells/ Rocking and Splashing of Sea," and later, "Whips/ whip sounds" (1). The "stifling" atmosphere is as integral a part of the performance as the actors' bodies on the stage, the singing, and the drumbeats.

Baraka provides enough information through stage directions about the effects that can be utilized by directors, vocalizations which stem from the avant-garde jazz tradition of Sun Ra, Archie Shepp, and Pharoah Sanders so we may comprehend the ways the play requires the reproduction of a charged atmosphere for affective potential. "Chains, the lash, and people moaning" are specifically associated in the text with real bodies as the script calls for the audience to "Listen to the sounds come up out of the actors." Actors must try to simulate the physical and emotional brutality of slavery, thereby transforming the theater. The human voice in pain is an important tool in the play. For instance, in two different stage directions he requires singing (which is rendered: "hmmmmmmmmmmmmm") "like old black women humming for three centuries in the slow misery of slavery." Long screams punctuate the play frequently, and are rendered on the page as sounds ("AAAAIIEEEE"), to give you some idea of the idiosyncrasies of the text as well as the centrality of the voice. Moreover, screams, moans, and humming are often gendered female. While we must question whether the

play seeks to aestheticize traumatic pain, the power of the play depends upon an emotional currency that draws on shared fears and experiences of racial violence. For example, the script references the 1963 Church bombing in Birmingham, Alabama. The aesthetization of pained feelings, of loss, in the theater, its renewed centrality to the success of *Slave Ship*, represents a material focus and incitement of active political compensation not available to African Americans in hegemonic print discourse, court rooms, or made invisible by the inefficacy of voting booths.

When one pages through *Slave Ship*, one might immediately be struck by the ways the text is punctuated by what looks like gashes of letters, long strings of onomatopoeic spellings which indicate how long and how loudly an actor should perform a vocalization. These look like, "Uhh, Uhhh, Uhhh, Uhhh, OOOOOOOOOOOOOOO" (4). Or, "AAAIIIIEEEEEEE" (4). The vocal gashes in the play-text reveal to us the importance of voice in the production. The human voice is utilized in multiple ways throughout the play alongside the performance of Archie Shepp's musical design. Baraka's use of the female scream in particular was heavily influenced and inspired by Abbey Lincoln's performance on *WE INSIST! Max Roach's FREEDOM NOW SUITE*, released in 1960.[49] Lincoln collaborated with drummer Max Roach on the composition, "Triptych: Prayer / Protest / Peace." Lincoln's voice follows a stunning trajectory that encompasses a range of dangerous emotions. For several minutes she screams out right, and in her voice we hear pain and defiance. Fred Moten describes the performance in this way: "Lincoln hums and then screams over Roach's increasingly and insistently

[49] I must attribute this information to James Miller who informed me of the connection between Baraka's textual construction of the female captive's voice as influenced by Lincoln's performance and the possible intersections between *WE INSIST!* and Archie Shepp's soundscape. I have not been able to locate much information about Shepp's musical compositions for the production.

intense percussion, moving inexorably in a trajectory and toward a location that is remote from—if not in excess of or inaccessible to—words" (22). That Lincoln's voice is able to convey an emotional experience, and in particular a stance of protest, that is impossible in language clarifies the ways the enslaved woman's voice functions as a kind of primal form of accusation in the play.[50] The female voice is a charge against audience members, and one might imagine, a very difficult aspect of the production to witness. For Moten, the scream is a sign of black radical protest that repossesses the subject from objectivity. The scream is an "invagination" that "challenges the reducibility of phonic matter to verbal meaning or conventional musical form" (6). As an exemplary form of the black radical tradition, *Slave Ship* elucidates the relationship between "despair and mourning" that Moten questions when he suggests "the tragic in Baraka is political despair" (93). Furthermore, in thinking through the ways vocalizations shape the arch of the play's movement through time, I find Moten's term "ensemble" particularly effective for thinking through the shape of the play-text and screams as a way to punctuate time-space within the context of the ship space (96). If ensemble, which refers most often to a musical group, can also refer to the motility of meanings, affects, and the shipmate relationship, how does the voice stand out or act to coalesce the constituent players? The combination of screams, cries, moans, laughter, with Shepp's score reiterate a black American sonic history.

Baraka draws on a plethora of cultural references throughout, so that the play relies on a form of vernacular expressionism that is a characteristic of his style. Baraka's vernacular expressionism is constituted through not just non-standard spelling and

[50] Abbey Lincoln confessed later that her performance was so realistic, "We had to go to court; somebody thought Roach was killing me in the studio." She then reflects, "My instrument is deepening and widening; it's because I'm possessed of the spirit." See Moten 23.

punctuation, but through the reliance upon a set of popular tropes in order to create an audience of those in the know. James Smethurst reminds us that this use of popular references in those literary forms and venues considered to be "high culture" where the popular references are easily accessed and recognizable by a common "folk" is a common trait among nationalist literatures and arts movements ("'Pat your foot and turn the corner'" 262). Smethurst argues that the stance towards art as a tool for social change through its ability to speak to "the people" or "the community" and encourage consciousness-raising, stems from the popular front in America beginning in the 1930's and following World War II. He claims, "the Popular Front's most important aspect is the approach to mass culture it generally promoted: Instead of being a form of thought control, popular culture was a field of contestation in which 'progressive' artists could battle fascism" (263). Similarly, in Baraka's work, theater and poetry, which make use of a register that intimates a working-class audience rather than alienates this audience is positioned as "revolutionary."

The play's prolonged attention to the pain and vulnerability of the female body in the ship emphasizes the need for a communal response to the events as the male actors' voices arise in protest. This use of the female body as a site for political affiliation is not a new tool, nor does it redefine the female body in relation to the Middle Passage (as *Beloved* will), but aids the play's argument that a lack of proper response by black men makes them complicit with the current socio-economic stratification between black and white Americans. In many ways, Baraka employs the female body as a tropological site of suffering, employing strategies similar to sentimental novelists like Harriet Beecher Stowe, Harriet Jacobs, or Lydia Maria Child. Baraka intends for the actresses to portray

their bodies as always vulnerable to the threat of rape by white sailors. The threat of sexual violence is a common element as Karen Sánchez-Eppler explains in feminist abolition fiction: "The particular horror and appeal of the slave woman lay in the magnitude of her sexual vulnerability" (32). Baraka wants there to be "Young girls afraid they may be violated" (4). Yet any identification with these bodies that takes place is not one of erasure but commemoration. Although Baraka does intend in the play for bodies and actors to be interchangeable, one standing in for another, as revealed by the lack of character names in the script, it is not to alleviate or soothe the pressure of physical life for audiences through cathartic, escapist scenes of violence. Instead audiences are told about a suffering mother and child. We learn of their deaths through the voices of "Man 1" and "Woman 1" who wail: "Man 1 – God, she's killed herself and the chi child. Oh, God. Oh, God. (Moans. Moans. . . . ;" and, "Woman 1 – She strangled herself with the chain. Choked the child. Oh, Shango! Help us, Lord. Oh, please" (5). To witness these events implicates the audience in an undesirable state of powerlessness to prevent a suicide, a rape, or even a betrayal, by extension commenting on persistent twentieth-century social immobility. Here the hackneyed trope of suffering mother and child becomes a political statement of collective belonging.

Though it is difficult to assess what the range of audience reaction to this moment in the script would entail, Baraka's direction to the actor to continue moaning, and the use of "Help *us*" renders the audience as present victims or perpetrators in this historical continuum of self-erasure and survival from psychological trauma through suicide. Though this articulation of the collectivity through these experiences problematically essentializes individual experience into an universal ontology of loss, in a daring way,

Baraka draws on the discursive positioning of the black body by the public sphere as always embodied, always laboring, and always exposed to the public gaze to reinstate a kind of sanctified public privacy of mourning in which African Americans can have the freedom to be safely embodied in the shelter of the performative space (which in the case of *Slave Ship* most often happens to be a community center or church). Lauren Berlant points out, "Enlightenment constitutionality, and . . .specifically white male privilege has been veiled by the rhetoric of the bodiless citizen, the generic 'person; whose political identity is a priori precisely because it is, in theory, noncorporeal" (*Female Complaint* 176). The presence of loss requires embodiment and a responsive feeling to the dramatization to form a collective of mourners that then lends the publicity of the event a radical authenticity by forming an insurgent, progressive public. Participation in this public actualizes a history that for Baraka has been stifled and stolen from African Americans in the heavily supervisory, policed public sphere of the American state.

As the play nears its end, Baraka stages a dialectic between insurgency and acquiescence through the use of two historically mythologized figures, Nat Turner and Uncle Tom. It is significant to note that each of these figures is the creation of print discourse in the public sphere orchestrated to strengthen national ties between white readers. After Turner led the revolt in Southampton County, Virginia, he became the subject of wide-ranging debate in newspapers throughout Virginia and other Southern states. Furthermore, his "confession" is the product of Thomas Gray whose fortunes had escaped him and so desired to make money by trading on what would surely be the public's appetite for Turner's story (Greenberg 8). Alternatively, in African American memorial traditions, Turner has been represented in oral culture as a hero and a righteous

leader. While the "Tom" figure, or the "Kneegrow," to use the play's neologism, has represented a black man who yearns for the acceptance of white people in power and in doing so remains docile and submissive to their will (12). The Tom figure is of course the cultural reverberation of Uncle Tom in Stowe's novel which imaginatively brought into being a nation of sympathetic white readers in order to abolish slavery "based upon the novelistic format" through which readers imagine a shared community of similar values (Anderson 33). This juxtaposition of the two imagined representatives of opposite ideology—W.E.B. Du Bois versus Booker T. Washington or Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. versus Malcolm X—requires that audience members in this imagined community choose one mode of resistance over the other.

In order to solidify audience cohesion after scenes of repellant violence and behavior, the play must perform a rejuvenating ritual. It does so through a song beginning, "Rise, Rise, Rise/ Cut these ties, Black Man Rise/ We gon' be the thing we are. . ." which is to be sung by actors and audience members (13). The song stages a moment of powerful bodily unification, and when we recall that the play was performed in several theaters, its repetition instantiates pockets of dramatically embodied public activity. Each time the song is performed a repetition of the time before but with new players, an assembly engages in a new form of discursive critique and self-organization that is profoundly manifested through the performative.[51] The lyrics further dramatize Baraka's poetics of becoming. The lyrics demonstrate hope in dynamic progress which is firmly rooted in centuries of historical experience. Baraka writes, "I mean, when we gonna lift our heads and voices/Show the world who we really are/Warriors-Gods, and

[51] Stefan Brecht 216. Brecht recalls, "This audience, having enjoyed the play, joins in, walks out dancing."

lovers, the first Men to walk this star/. . .How far, how long will it be/When the world belongs to you and me" (13). The song asks its singers to internalize a radical sense of unification and belonging to a politically active, self-determined public that is unhappy with the current economic and social privileges enforced through national legislation and capitalist hierarchies of property ownership. By physically drawing the audience members into the performance, making their bodies enact the plan of the script, Baraka establishes a level of complicity which is exacerbated by emotional manipulation. Though a collectivity of voices generates a counter-argument to normative ideology, Baraka engages in an essentialism that problematically elides all Black bodies into one universal representation of an experience of political and social oppression. . Stefan Brecht argues that Baraka's historical continuum of the play reveals Baraka's belief that the audience's condition is still that of "slavery" (215). However, he recognizes the availability of social change through performance and reconciles his audiences to that availability. His challenge effectively relies on the belief in and respect for their individual voices. Yet the circular narrative arc of the performance figures an inextricable relationship between cultural progression and historical memory. The ship's particular power to act as a vehicle for memorialization serves to link audiences to a culture of revolution.

A Black Arts Image: *Slave Ship*'s Precedents and Black Nationalist Theater

'Slave Ship' is a mood, established by ritual concept; reflections of the state of all heart beats in the Republic. The auction block and 'BID 'EM IN.' What can America know if it refuses to know this? –Clayton Riley, "Art Is What Moves You"[52]

[52] Clayton Riley, "Art Is What Moves You," *The New York Times*. Sunday, November 23, 1969.

Aimé Césaire's *Cahier d'un Retour au Pays Natal*, or *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land* (1947) seemingly provides a suggestive literary precedent to *Slave Ship*, both in its surrealist form and approach to the physical structure of the ship as a literal and figurative, though diseased, form of ancestral transport.[53] Césaire's narrative poem prefigures a common motif amongst much of the poetry written during the Black Arts period—that is the idea of the search for one's origins which have been ruptured through the process of colonialism or forced migration. Often the desire to regain a connection or to talk of the idea of this rendering is represented in language of the body, most typically of the female reproductive organs the uterus or womb. It is Césaire's description of ships through the language of the body, often diseased, and bodily processes that most interests me in the poem's influence on Baraka. In Césaire's *Notebook* the "slave ship cracks everywhere . . .Its belly convulses and resounds . . .The ghastly tapeworm of its cargo gnaws the fetid guts of the strange suckling of the sea!" (47). The ship here is a body infected and infecting where its perverse course of trade, the transaction in human lives, transforms the very seas that carry the vehicle between destinations. The poet imagines the ship as both a terrible womb and as the digestive, gastrointestinal organs, so that readers are left with a concrete feeling of the sickening potential of such transportation.

Though Baraka may not have encountered Césaire's poem until after he had written *Slave Ship*, the *Notebook* produces a particular understanding of the slave ship as an originary vessel of violent expulsion that in many ways stands between the narrator's shifting understanding of his homeland and his ability to navigate the vexed terrain that separates him psychologically from a joyous return (*Autobiography* 247). Césaire's use

[53] I will refer to the poem by its shortened English title, *Notebook*, because I read the read the poem in translation, not in the original French.

of the present tense and multiple types of sailing vehicles throughout the poem mark the ways that the ship space itself is of interest here, not just as the overbearing figure, the mark of origins. Furthermore, the poem uses the ship as a figure for a kind of collective expulsion and arrival that are characterized by abjection. Césaire writes, almost emphatically, "We the vomit of slave ships" (28). This line conflates the physical reaction of seasickness with that which the slave ship produces. The comparison of the un-making work of a slave ship to that of ingestion and the subsequent community of transplants in the Caribbean as the result of this ingestion and regurgitation is violent, but fits with the poem's interest in cataloguing the forms of physical violence implemented by the French colonial regime. Moreover, the island is not a place of idyllic tropical nostalgia, but one of the proliferation of tropical diseases. Vomit, then, is not just what the suffering body, male or female, adult or child, produces while aboard the ship, or trapped below its decks in confined agony, but vomit emerges here as more than a common trope of the ship, but as a way to narrate the coming into being to which the speaker at once identifies but must certainly reject. This comparison follows a fascinating moment in the poem in which the narrator also rejects a kind of Afrocentric memory-making of placing oneself in a historic trajectory of heroes as a mode of recovering one's lost ancestral heritage. The narrator explains, "No, we've never been Amazons of the king of Dahomey, nor princes of Ghana with eight hundred camels. . . .We don't feel under our armpit the itch of those who in the old days carried a lance" (27). Though this statement has the doubling effect of chiding Du Boisian Ethiopianism or Pan-African narratives of ascent, it reinforces claims to a past.

How then to reinscribe the historical violence of the transatlantic trading vessel? The next stanza appears as follows, "I hear coming up from the hold the enchained curses, the gasps of the dying, the noise of someone thrown into the sea . . . the baying of a woman in labor . . . the scrape of fingernails seeking throats . . . the flouts of the whip . . . the seething of vermin amid the weariness . . ." (28). This stanza is a formal holler to *Slave Ship's* performed echo in 1967. Baraka's stage directions and spare, improvisational, call and response script echo these lines held together by the glue of ellipses which allow the reader to interpose her own questions, her own mind's eye of what it means to be one of the enchained. Césaire's narrator gains mastery over the sea while the ship remains an abjected specter of the liminal, the between national spaces, the sign of a colonial power's resignification of earthly territory as a "department." The *Notebook*'s surrealist prose poetry serves as a suggestive precedent for Baraka's play, which imagines the theatrical realm situated upon oceanic terrain whose fluidity offers the promise of revolutionary transformation. Brent Hayes Edwards argues that Césaire's use of anaphora as a framing and unifying technique through *Notebook of the Return to the Native Land* can be extended to understand the translation of conceits throughout the African Diaspora across language and national barriers. Edwards claims, "I am suggesting that what travels in diaspora is difference, a changing core of resiliency and singularity. What is translated, then, in the above instances, from French to English, or from Africa to the Caribbean, is a poetic mode (anaphora) of articulating difference through determinate negation—that is, a means of transfiguring that 'pebble' from an emblem of deprivation into a principle of resistance" ("Aimé Césaire and the Syntax of Influence" 11). I would extend Edwards' use of the anaphoric as a way of understanding

translation and influence across and throughout a diasporic literary tradition, to think of the slave ship as a figure of repetition that connects a body of work where these texts enter and their individual representations of the slave ship operate to extend our understandings of nationalism and orientation to history.

Césaire's imagistic poem is instrumental in understanding the relationship between artistic iconography, surrealism, and the avant-garde usage of images by Black Arts poets and playwrights. The April 1967 issue of the periodical *Negro Digest* is the second annual theater special issue. Several of the essays published there seek to define what it means to write and perform Black Theater. In his piece, "Towards Our Theater: a Definitive Act," South African poet K. William Kgositsile stresses the ways that Black Theater should convey a sense of "reality," or lived experience, through stylized elements that evoke what it means to be in the world rather than strive towards the realism that dominated the New York stage in the 1960s. He writes, "The language is necessarily complementary to the action, to clarify some aspects of the experience, psychic or physical. So there will be very little dialogue because speech or words will come in only when other sounds or the action cannot clearly supply the necessary image" (*Negro Digest* Apr 1967 15). He emphasizes both action and *image* as dramaturgical elements that should dominate the stage, rather than language—the element of drama that typically takes precedent. An image without or alongside language allows for a greater deal of audience interpretation, so that the audience member may be responsible for some of the play's interpretation along with the actors performing the script. Representation should serve a purpose that is not solely related to aesthetics:

> The images and symbols will be national, put up for clarification and illustration by the sharp-edged sensibility of the artist, whose impulse throbs with the nation's desire and pulse. The desired and desirable will be seen through elegant image and symbol abstracted from life. The undesirable, the corrupting, the destructive will be portrayed in a grotesque manner, its sinister qualities driving us to the mercy killing of the villain. (15)

The artist is both responsible for articulating the intellectual, communal, and political desires *of* his or her audience, and he or she is the artistic conduit or intelligence behind the production of art works which can focus the audience's pulses. He clarifies that it is the artist's ability to interpret experience into "abstract" or expressive aesthetic forms that will in turn achieve or promote a knowledge for the nation and through which the nation can express both its subversive and critical social commentary. Kgositsile maintains for theatrical images the ability to both draw on previous knowledge as well as unsettle the audience or consumer of that aesthetic object, performed act or scene, or played note.[54]

A politics of subjective interpretation also lies at the heart of Carolyn Fowler Gerald's, Black Aesthetic theorist and critic, understanding of representation in Black

[54] Kgositsile's description also could be directly addressing an original play that appears in this issue of *Negro Digest*. In fact he seems to be writing with Amiri Baraka's *Slave Ship* in mind. The script as it appears in *Negro Digest* and in its subsequent publication as a single work does assault the reader with language that appears violent on the page as Baraka strives to render vocalizations and the sonic soundscape of the pageant on the page alongside spare dialog. The play both presents and relies upon images that are imagined and perceived to be those of historical experience and collective memory. In the essay, "A Dark Bag," composed and published in 1963, Baraka writes, "The most powerful way to deal with an image is to make sure it goes deeper than literature. That it is actually 'out there'" (151). *Slave* Ship takes much of its success as a piece of revolutionary theater from the ways it utilizes and exploits historical events, narratives, and the symbolic or psychologically envisioned artifacts of cultural memory. As a dramatist, Baraka's tools for achieving the sonically and conceptually success of the play's performances are those events, emotional responses, and actual happenings that circulate "out there" as the real historical processes of African American life in the United States.

Arts. Gerald made significant contributions to the conception of the image, as metaphor, vision, and icon in black art through her contributions to *Negro Digest* and an essay delivered at the 1968 Black Power Conference.[55] Gerald asserts that the relationship between art symbol and white hegemony must be countered through the creation of black symbols. For her, image "has the meaning of self-concept," and the artist and writer as progenitors of images have the ability to offer new systems of representation and self-knowledge (1). She claims, "What is new, I believe, is the deliberate desecration and smashing of idols, the turning inside out of symbols, to which black writers are now proceeding with a vengeance" (4). The slave ship is an example of how an image may be depicted and given new meaning as its old meaning is destroyed. For Gerald, an individual's response to an artistic image is "intuitive," and in that image she might see a reflection of herself or her own tendencies and anxieties. ("The Black Writer" 43). Representational strategies that seek to remake symbols overly determined with histories of trauma or logics of racialized violence, Gerald argues, must be remade. Her essays, the earlier draft and the published version, are compelling because they clarify the relationship between aesthetics, politics, and the recuperation of the slave ship as a symbol of domination that can be reconfigured by Black Aesthetic representational strategies for subjective purposes.

The evocation of "image" as central to Black Theater—which is intended for nationalizing purposes—that Kgositsile discusses is also explored by Amiri Baraka in his most cogent directive to working and future Black American playwrights, "The Revolutionary Theatre." Baraka, too, emphasizes the reliance upon revolutionary theatre

[55] I read this essay in Box 20, File, "Cultural Workshop – 68 Black Power Conf " in the Baraka collection held by the Moorland Spingarn Research Center.

on a collaborative relationship between dramatist and audience, whereby a mutually informed conversation about experience can take place through the production of art that will in turn produce theatrical performances that spark unified action. He writes, "What is called the imagination (from image, magi, magic, magician, etc.) is a practical vector from the soul" (*Home* 239). Baraka continues, "The imagination is the projection of ourselves past our sense of ourselves as 'thing.' Imagination (Image) is all possibility, because from the image, the initial circumscribed energy, any use (idea) is possible. And so begins the image's use in the world. Possibility is what moves us" (239). For Baraka, the theater is the ultimate sphere where "nation becoming" can be activated. The theatrical space activates (the) *soul*. Baraka understands theatre's true magic lies in its ability for *Spirit* to express itself in the collective body of audience and performers.

In many ways the trope of the slave ship is inextricably linked to Baraka's thinking of America as a as a nation and state, an interruption, and even of America as a foreign space for people of African descent throughout his work. One need only think of his now most canonical work, *Dutchman*, to consider the primacy of the connection of Black Americans and the figuration of black existential struggles through the slave ship. By the time Baraka composed *Slave Ship*, he was more interested in the strategic incorporation of iconography into a Black Aesthetic as well as the production of history as a series of iconographic events that might register a certain way emotionally for his audiences. As James Smethurst demonstrates, this use of iconography was a strategy of the avant-garde aesthetics employed by crafters of the Black Arts who relied upon popular topes and figures. However, in *Dutchman*, the slave ship is present by suggestion

only as it is suggested by the title and the reliance upon the feeling of Clay's captivity in the subway car.

Dutchman builds upon a connection between embodied experience and the trope of the slave ship as well as the Atlantic crossing already established in Baraka's early poetry, most specifically the poems in *The Dead Lecturer*. The poems published in this collection are strikingly self-conscious. The poet's "self" is invented, destroyed, reinvented, and studied throughout while depictions of the body puncture the existential studies of being and interiority. If one simply peruses the poems, the word "flesh" appears frequently. For example, in the poem "*An Agony. As Now*," Baraka writes, "This is the enclosure (flesh,/ where the innocence is a weapom. An / abstraction. Touch" (15 ln 12-14). Here the parenthetical underscores the act of enclosing, but also mimics the very tactility of the body. It is a fleshly reminder of the poet's written expression, a sign of the living poet. A little later we read, "It can be pain. (As now, as all his / flesh hurts me.)" (19-20). The poem marks a split between the poet's past self and the self writing that which we read, the self of the poem. The split is embodied, evoking a Cartesian model of existence, but Baraka is interested in this poem in the ways "flesh" shapes consciousness. In a later stanza he writes, "Cold air blown through narrow blind eyes. Flesh, / white hot metal. Glows as the day with its sun. / It is a human love, I live inside. A bony skeleton / you recognize as words or simple feeling" (16 ln. 36-39). Here the body is torture, but the poem and the skeleton are superimposed, they are the articulated architecture of the poet writing.

In many of *The Dead Lecturer* poems, the body becomes an important site for crafting poetic meaning and bridging the chasm between the individual poet's struggle

through the chaotic and changing terrain of his own consciousness, while situating this journey in the concrete experience of embodied life. Kimberly Benston characterizes modern literature as a "'quest' literature" that is "inward and demonic," and that the American modern poet is compelled into "the inner spaces of lonely self-examination" (5 and 7). Benston's unparalleled study of Baraka accounts for the many transformations of the poet playwright whose work demonstrates his philosophical "transitions." Benston reminds us that Baraka's modernist poetry is so invested in the invention and exploration of a "self," and that this exploration is heavily informed by an historical consciousness where "Memory works to keep the painful details of experience alive in the hero's changing consciousness; but also memory is a vehicle of revelation" (17). Benston's claims elucidate the ways the ship motif operates throughout Baraka's oeuvre to inform this historical consciousness of embodied experience shaping the lives of not just the individual but millions of individuals. Such that in Baraka's work, "The impulse is that of the self fully engaged in the act of creating a structure which makes for the possibility of further creation: an infinite series of poetic spaces," where these poetic spaces motivate the recreation of readers' personal spaces of investiture in their own historical consciousness (Benston 39). *The Dead Lecturer* poems enact another transformation that is often considered to take place most dramatically for Baraka following Malcolm X's violent, too-soon death. This transformation is a shift in the poet's project from looking inward to looking outward, and is marked by a sense of responsibility to a community that is only solidified most cogently in the essays Baraka wrote following Malcolm's assassination. He moves from the prison of his own mind, and as these poems suggest,

his physical being, to thinking about the social body and the formation of a social and political collective.

This understanding of the way history shapes our everyday selves is most dramatically realized in the "flying underbelly" of *Dutchman*. In order to construct the response of shock and potential for awkward, dangerous revolutionary theatre that will be more fully enacted in *Slave Ship*, *Dutchman* relies upon an understanding of the space in which the play's action takes place. It also relies upon a body of shared expectations of what it means to encounter another person in the subway car, social codes, the myriad taboo behaviors, and even how one must hold one's body while riding the train. "The subway heaped in modern myth" will have particular spatial and social associations for most of *Dutchman*'s audience. Baraka deftly uses these associations in service of creating and building upon the dramatic tension that exists throughout Clay and Lula's charged dialog. The action is initiated by taboo looking—not the sexualized inter-racial gaze—the looking of passengers through the subway car window that successfully makes eye contact. This eye contact bridges the rigid social norms set by public transportation in a large city where each passenger is meant to keep her eyes to herself. The stage direction reads,

> The man looks idly up, until he sees a woman's face staring at him through the window; when it realizes that the man has noticed the face, it begins very premeditatedly to smile. The man smiles too, for a moment, without a trace of self-consciousness. Almost an instinctive though undesirable response. Then a kind of awkwardness or embarrassment sets

> in, and the man makes to look away, is further embarrassed. (*Dutchman* 77)

Clay's uninhibited acknowledgment of the mutual gaze through a smile is what seems to both encourage Lula to board his car, but also to bring about his death. This response is "undesirable," because it breaks social norms, but it also reveals Clay's naiveté. This moment of unguarded facial expression is when he breaks free from the confines of these norms, something he will continue to do throughout the play.

"Embarrassment" is also interesting here as the affect is mimicked in audience responses to Lula's sexual advances and Clay's inability to free himself from her firm grasp. Moreover, we have all felt embarrassment or perhaps shame at times taking public transportation when something outré occurs and we in turn feel trapped by conditioning not to say something or do something in turn. Baraka harnesses these shared experiences of urban spaces and public vehicles of transport to build upon a long tradition of depicting moments of racialization on the train and on the ship in African American letters. *Dutchman*, then, is in many ways a precedent to the historically embedded dramatic modes Baraka will invoke and explore in *Slave Ship*. *Dutchman* establishes the connection between how different bodies carry different meanings in shared public spaces, particularly in the United States where behavior is monitored by the constant application of respectability politics for some and privileged movement for others. The manipulation of embarrassment juxtaposed with the voyeurism that the production entails, the play critiques the audience's gaze. It amplifies the questions of spectacle and theatricality that are inherent in American constructions of race in order to unsettle viewers.

Dutchman is as much about the ways the cast relate to their surroundings as Clay and Lula relate to each other. In her book, *Queer Phenomenology*, Sara Ahmed argues for the ways our bodies shape built spaces while these spaces and the objects within them also shape our bodies. She writes, "the orientations we have toward others shape the contours of space by affecting relations of proximity and distance between bodies" (3). Interestingly, this statement both applies to the fictional world of the action on stage in *Dutchman* and to the audience member's experience in the theater, in her chair, sitting next to her date, her friend, or a stranger. Furthermore, recall the way Baraka includes an audience internal to the action—Clay's fellow passengers, who by turns, either ignore or participate in his interactions with Lula. The subway car becomes either a space of conviviality, revulsion, or threatening intimidation. Ahmed's understanding of the relationship between the social and the spaces the social inhabits is informative. She claims, "The social also has its skin as a border that feels and that is shaped by the 'impressions' left by others" (9). As passengers come into the view of play, the context for the verbal exchange shifts. The subway's apparatus also enters the play, Clay shifts in his seat, the seats become too small, too close together. A stage direction notes, "More people come into the train. They come closer to the couple, some of them not sitting, but swinging drearily on the straps, staring at the two with uncertain interest" (93). The staged car comes alive, shifting with the changing emotions, subtle nuances of Clay's reactions to Lula. Baraka's play suggests the ways our bodies are interpellated by the very sites through which we move. Moreover, the play also suggests through its myriad references to the history of the slave trade, to the arrival of the first African captives in Jamestown, Virginia, to the ways even vehicles and buildings constructed in modern

America are never free from our social and colonial pasts of racialized difference and violence.

Dutchman is a critique of American individualist ideology that anticipates an analysis made throughout Baraka's later work, but also thoroughly explored in his early essays. In *Blues People*, however, there emerges an ambiguous understanding of what it means to be black in America, and the ways the "American" aspects of this experience are imbued with a sense of something special or unique for Baraka, much like W.E.B. Du Bois argues in the first chapter of *The Souls of Black Folk*, for embracing the spirit of duality present in an African American's psychological and quotidian worldview. *Blues People* and the later essay "'Black' Is a Country" speak most closely in tandem in Baraka's work, pushing against this ambiguous understanding of the exceptionalist promise of "America."

Blues People is as much an explanation of how the multitude of ethnically and nationally different African captives transformed through forced migration to the American colonies to Americans slaves and finally, through cultural influence and sharing, into Black Americans (or Blues People). Baraka explores the possibility of musical expression as a vehicle towards a more fully experienced sense of America. He writes, "The jazz player could come from any part of that socio-cultural spectrum, but if he were to play a really moving kind of jazz, he had to reflect almost all of the musical spectrum, or at least combine sufficiently the older autonomous blues tradition with the musical traditions of the Creoles or the ragtime orchestras of the North" (140). He further contends,

> Jazz, as it emerged and as it developed, was based on this new widening of Afro-American culture. In the best of jazz the *freedom-citizen* conflict is most nearly resolved, because it makes use of that middle ground, the space that exists as the result of any cleavage, where both emotional penchants can exist as *ideas* of perhaps undetermined validity, and not necessarily as 'ways of life.' (140)

For Baraka, jazz grew out of the struggle of being foreign, of migration and movement, in America. It offers the musician and the listener the momentary possibility of both achieving personal freedom and achieving the impossibility of citizenship in America.

This terminology, the "freedom-citizen conflict" is highly productive for thinking through the parameters of Baraka's nationalism. What does it mean to fight for recognition of one's contributions to an often-despised nation, while also pursuing the goal of self-determination? However, this statement is formulated at a period in which the Civil Rights Movement has won several successes. Would it be possible for Baraka to put forth following the assassinations of Malcolm X or Martin Luther King, Jr.? Baraka concludes his study with his own question. He wonders, "What is it that they [young black Americans] are being asked to save? It is a good question, and America had better come up with an answer" (236). Baraka ultimately falls on the side of the debate of progress towards a united Black Nation that exists within and through U.S. electoral politics, but as far as what should be saved in this country, he is more interested in how African American ideals and culture might expel or convert a government establishment characterized predominantly by war as well as domestic and international terror in the 1960s.

Through this short reading of *Blues People*, I hope to suggest the philosophical underpinnings for the tension that arises in Baraka's revolutionary theater between danger and positive revolution. *Slave Ship* is Baraka's attempt to formalize aesthetically, as other black artists are doing in the 1960s through poetry, music, and theater, his understanding of the condensation of historical forces behind the everyday artistic expressions of black Americans. Benston claims, "Baraka's energetic reevaluation of history does more than prophesy liberation; it teaches the audience that no complete dissolution of the black will has resulted from the inherited burdens of slavery" (247). Thus, the historical functions in this play as a source of communal power, not just a source of pain, but the message of black power draws upon affective responses—heart sickness or actual sickness—in order to assault audience members with what yet needs to be done or what is to come. *Slave Ship* expands upon Baraka's exploration of what constitutes the "American" aspects of black musical or verbal expression that preoccupy him throughout much of *Blues People*. Really, it is American history that concerns Baraka as he chooses the tragedies that constitute the play's trajectory, for this angle allows for a more profound critique of the most deadly aspects of life in the United States.

In the *Autobiography*, Baraka recalls his rationale for choosing to create an arts institution centered upon fostering theater:

> I wanted some kind of action literature, and the most pretentious of all literary forms is drama, because there one has to imitate life, to put characters upon a stage and pretend to actual life. I read a few years ago in some analysis of poetry that drama is a form that proliferates during

> periods of social upsurge, for those very same reasons. *It is an action form, plus it is a much more popular form than poetry.* (275 emphasis mine)

This explanation reflects a Brechtian understanding of the ability of theater to underscore and bring into focus the social exigencies, which the dramatic arts, unlike poetry, can present to a viewer whose body and emotional reactions are put into service of the art much more so than a listening ear to a poetry reading. Baraka's understanding of the efficacy of promoting works that might be popular, or entertaining and accessible to audiences who previously were not theater goers, hints at the ways his work pushes against the ideal of the solitary artist simultaneously critiquing and producing culture, to place a community's needs alongside the primacy of ideas. Yet African American artists, critics, and intellectuals, through their debates on black theater, discuss the ways the dramaturgy produced during the 1960s and early 1970s represents a distinctly new form, a possible "post-American" literary form.

"Post-America" carries with it implications for the ways Black Nationalism through its cultural arm redefines the concept of nationalism itself for a more accessible use as well as through a wider range of quotidian connotations of how to be *involved*. Baraka has emphatically claimed, "In America, black *is* a country" (*Home* 104). This association of racial identity and affinity with territory is useful for understanding how experience shapes claims to nationality. What Addison Gayle, Jr. in his introduction to *The Black Aesthetic* anthology calls a "process of de-Americanization," or a transformative shift in thought, philosophy, and habit away from an American mindset towards a more natural and less corrupt way of living in the world for people of African

descent (xxii).[56] Elsewhere, Gayle seriously considers the histories of violence and ethnic extermination that for him deny any moral or sensible ground for integration under the U.S.'s terms. Instead, writing about the rise of the Black Power movement, he saw Black Power as "a political instrument for the future" ("Black Power" 34). "For the first time," he writes, "Blacks are demanding real change, not the semblance of change, real power, not the illusion of power, and are attempting to construct real, viable alternatives to the programs of the past" (34). Gayle recognized a powerful collaborative effort being built through Black Power politics and cultural nationalism. For Gayle and other cultural nationalists, the path towards this transformation lay in the production and proliferation of the Black Aesthetic in all forms of literary, visual, and musical arts. BARTS existed to inculcate understandings of what it means to be a nation of black Americans through its arts programs.

The Black Arts Repertory Theater School (BARTS), long seen by many to be the progenitor of the black revolutionary theater movement, opened in Harlem in 1965, though short-lived. Funded by the Harlem Youth Unlimited (HARYOU), a federal funding program whose purpose was to counteract poverty, BARTS powerfully negotiated the gap between theory, artistic solitude and intellectual elitism with a presence based in the community. [57] Baraka's Spirit House and the Spirit House Movers

[56] Following a brief reading of Du Bois's "double consciousness," Gayle suggests that the psychological costs of the process of Americanization in Du Bois's duality have been far too great for black Americans (though there is a strong gendered focus on black men). He states, "the price for becoming an American was too high" (xxii). He further argues for an even more serious outcome to the process of integration: "To be an American is to be opposed to humankind, against the dignity of the individual, and against the striving in man for compassion and tenderness: to be an American is to lose one's humanity."

[57] The Black Arts Movement is often given the temporal framework of 1964 to 1974. In this chapter, I try to resist that framework, particularly as it applies to Baraka because these dates delimit a project, rather than suggest the ongoing artistic and intellectual debates that migrate from New York throughout the country. Though, this chapter does acknowledge a proliferation of intellectual activity, particularly in canonizing a Black Aesthetic between 1967 and 1972.

company, established in 1967 upon his return to Newark from what he felt was his overwhelming failure in Harlem and a stay in California, followed this model and was much more successful in creating a lasting and active cultural arts center. Around the proliferation of these arts institutions grew an active debate about what defined Black Theater and a Black Arts institution. These cultural centers and community theaters were committed to producing Black Art, or in Baraka's terminology, in becoming Black, and creating centers of nationalism. BART/S and Spirit House were founded as institutions that could build Black Arts programs for the Black Nation as models for similar organizations across the United States. Barbara Ann Teer founded the National Black Theater in Harlem in 1968. She argued, "We must begin building cultural centers where we can enjoy being free, open and black" (*New York Times* Obit). There was an urgent call for the development of autonomous Black Theatre. These theaters were regarded as necessary spaces for the development and prosperity—both intellectually and nationally—of "the community." Woodie King, Jr. elaborates this relationship in an April 1970 *Negro Digest* article titled "The Dilemma of Black Theater." There he writes, "In schools, YMCA's, churches—across the country, from Los Angeles' Watts to New York's Harlem—plays tried to communicate to those nearest, those next door. This was done out of necessity, out of a need to survive" (11). Of this period, Baraka has remarked, "The people themselves were in motion, the artists just reflected it!" (*Autobiography* 298). Community theater was perceived as a vehicle for political activism and organization that carried on the antiracist and citizenship work of Black Power, particularly following Malcolm X's work as a community organizer in Harlem.

Baraka used the theater as a staging ground for political activity, a space from which he could theorize the multiple forms of political action, and as a site where an African American collective could explore representations of its history and experiences as a national body. Other spaces of theory and community building become important throughout his career. These are the podium and the cultural arts center. Each of these can be performance spaces as well. Black Arts members' perceptive understanding of politics as a kind of performance is apparent in one of Baraka's submissions to the 1968 special issue of *The Drama Review: TDR* on Black Theatre guest edited by Ed Bullins. "Communications Project" outlines a plan that was developed in 1967 by the Black Students Union of San Francisco State College (57). It serves the purposes of demonstrating best practices for the dissemination of culture and information. For example, a free newsletter of local news for specific blocks; a newspaper; a leaflet; comic books; and posters all might provide a neighborhood with tactile objects through which to learn about Black cultural, political, and "social-economic" issues or events. Street theater was another method that for Bullins might become the most effective way to further "Communication with Black crowds" and "Communication with diverse classes of people, the Black working class, or with special groups . . . who would not ordinarily come or be drawn into the theatre" (93). These brief manifestoes generate ideas about how to make art matter in the everyday based in an understanding of theatricality as a powerful organizing tool.

Throughout the continued historical moment of black American organization during the 1960s, what Baraka terms a "black emerging" or nation "becoming," but was also characteristic of the Civil Rights movement and the rise of revolutionary nationalism

in the form of the Black Panther Party, BARTS linked nationalism to community building through both spontaneous street theater and staged productions (*Autobiography* 278). In *The Autobiography of LeRoi Jones*, Baraka recalls the methods used to construct an audience in Harlem. He writes, "We picked up a lot of people in those few months. It was a socially and intellectually seismically significant development, the leaving of some of us. . .from downtown and the implied and actual cutting of certain ties, and the attempt to build a black arts institution, and that in the heart of the past capital of African American people in the United States, Harlem. The reality set many fresh and needed ideas in motion. The idea set even more ideas in motion and more concrete realities" (297). He continues, "Black intellectuals drawn to a common spot out of the larger commonality of their national experience." Street theater was a popular mode, and its efficacy in attracting crowds whose minds may be swayed was undeniable according to Baraka. He explains, "We brought drama out in the street. . . .We set up our improvised stages and with a little fanfare we quickly got a crowd" (307). BART/S members also "performed in projects, parks, the streets, alleys, playgrounds. Each night a different location, five nights, sometimes six, a week" (307).

The public nature of theater or any performance necessitates a conceptualization of the way space is altered to host these performances. For Baraka, during a period of vast organizing amongst African American and leftist radicals, the principle of organization alters the shape of a space, whether it is built, a bus, a business, a street corner, or the street where a parade progresses, this space will transform to promote political consciousness and reorientation from private to public participation. BARTS was neither the most successful nor a very long lasting independent black theater in New

York during its time. The New Lafayette Theatre, founded in 1967, and also in Harlem, was home to Ed Bullins, who alongside Baraka produced some of the period's most important theory of black drama as well as being a playwright himself (Smethurst 103). Woodie King, Jr. established the New Federal Theatre on the Lower East Side of New York City; a director, he was also an advocate for self-determined and independently financed black theater (Smethurst 105). Moreover, according to James Smethurst, King modeled the New Federal after other regional theaters, like Detroit's Concept East, whose intention was to bring theater to "working people in their own languages and accents" (106).[58] In his contribution to the 1968 special issue of *The Drama Review: TDR* on "Black Theatre" edited by Bullins, "Black Theatre: Present Condition," there is a remarkable footnote in which King recalls the night the facility that held the New Lafayette Theatre was destroyed by fire. He recalls that three days prior to the building's destruction, a book party was hosted in the space for Harold Cruse's *The Crisis of the*

[58] The Detroit Black Arts theater company Concept East staged a production of *Slave Ship* in 1973. In his review of the production, "Concept East's 'Slaveship' Half Poetry, half propaganda," Jay Carr writes, "'Slaveship' [sic] calls for a large cast and an environment rather than a set, and director Earl D. A. Smith has called forth not just a remarkable ensemble effort, but a remarkable community effort." Carr offers a clear description of the way Smith and the cast shape the theater in order to stage Baraka's "Hisorical Pageant":

> Smith and his forces have utilized space with bollness [sic] and imagination. The evening starts in the Concept's small theater, with a ritual dance in Africa. It is interrupted by an invasion of slavers. Then the lights go out and everybody moves to the large theater. . . . . The entire space has been redesigned to represent the hold of a slave ship into which the slaves are stuffed. There are no rows of seats. The members of the audience are seated in clusters underneath and around the platforms and posts hung with ropes and chains. And slaves. After "Slaveship" nobody can claim ignorance of the despair, terror, and humiliation undergone by slaves.
>
> The slaves are clubbed, kicked, raped, and sometimes shot in our laps.

Carr's description is rich with details about the staging of a script that is surprisingly spare given the historical arc Baraka sought to convey to audiences. For this production, the director decided to stage the play in two separate theatrical spaces, having the performers as well as the audience move in order to translate history for the present. This description demonstrates the centrality of reimagining the relationship between audience and performer that contributes to the play's revolutionary potential.

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Negro Intellectual. The party was also host to a panel of intellectuals who were to discuss the impact of Cruse's work. King writes,

> This panel attracted both militant and middle-class blacks to the theater. The New Lafayette took on a new identity in Harlem; it became a necessity. The fact that it was a theatre became secondary. The community showed that it needed first a cultural center, a meeting place, to discuss its art, its politics, and its economics. Because of the importance of New Lafayette's new direction, many blacks in the Harlem community are questioning whether the fire was accidental. (119)

King's footnote indicates his awareness of the power such a space of dialog, debate, and congress can provide to those who have access to it. His suggestion that the mere existence of such an arena represented a threat to the status quo, coupled with his insistence upon the community's recognition of its "necessity," evokes its power in motivating and inculcating collective unity, ideals, and aspirations.

Woodie King, Jr. places emphasis on the urgent necessity for black theater, rather than the fostering of black performances and playwrights in theaters outside of black inhabited spaces, due to the fact that in 1968, radical change is needed (122). This idea of organizing independent black spaces is in some ways a development of the post-Civil Rights social context across U.S. cities of what Edward W. Soja calls a "revolutionary spatial consciousness" (*Postmodern Geographies* 92). In accordance with the theoretical praxis Soja offers, King "demystifies" the power dynamic behind the production of artistic spaces. However, this demystification also comes at the moment when America is reeling from a decade of demoralizing brutality and severe losses in the form of

assassinations, violent urban resistance, police oppression, and destructive foreign and domestic policy. Thus, these cultural centers become not just places for vibrant debate and cultural renewal but also spheres for the formation of a counterpublic and political discourse. *Slave Ship*'s emergence out of Baraka's Spirit House in Newark represents a spirited response to a spatialized determination, which accounts for how the meanings of constructed space on for those who inhabit and encounter them influence and shape consciousness. However, if an individual reorients that space through artistic production, radical consciousness, or even love, the systemic power structures that operate on and through built and discursive spaces are made more visible. This transformation can occur in everyday life, through the way one walks down the street, through using a space differently than it was intended, through joy, or it can be hastened through art's potential to evoke change.

Spirit House and Kawaida Towers: Toward a Politics of Space

I walked quickly and always alone/ watching the cheap city like I thought it would swell/ and explode, and only my crooked breath could put it together/ again. --Amiri Baraka, "Letter to E. Franklin Frazier"[59]

Slave Ship, it might be said, represents Baraka's new sense of himself as a cultural and even spiritual leader, as Komozi Woodard has suggested of the writer's role for members of the Committee for a Unified Newark (CFUN) and Spirit House.[60] When Maulana Ron Karenga renamed LeRoi Jones *Imamu* Amiri Baraka, the poet, playwright was designated a *spiritual leader* in the Kawaida movement (Woodard 165). Moreover, Baraka's interest as well as his participation in conversations about Black

[59] Included in Ed. Dudley Randall, *The Black Poets* 217.

[60] Baraka is often the first to admit that his creative work reflects expressions of his shifting philosophical and intellectual beliefs.

Internationalism and building upon political connections across the Diaspora frames the composition of *Slave Ship*. Many of these intellectual conversations were happening in the pages of *Negro Digest*, later *Black World*, a popular magazine, as well as other publications of the Black Left, such as *Freedomways*, especially under the editorial direction of John Henrik Clarke. For Karenga and Baraka a key component of developing a Pan-African arm of Black (American) Nationalist philosophy is a theory of Spirit, which might variously be described as world or African Spirit—the spirit in artistic work by people of color. Baraka composed his play during the period in which this spiritualism, which might be characterized as spirituality based in a communal value system.

The critical question that motivates the conclusion of this chapter is what happens for Baraka when he moves from a theater of assault to the creation of livable spaces? While his early poetry, short stories, and his revolutionary places are often concerned with the individual's coming to being in an oppressive culture, so that resistance through literature, politics, and danger are necessary, in the 1970s and 1980s, Baraka transforms the Spirit House to a thriving cultural center dedicated to promoting black cultural growth and energy. Cultural centers, and the collectivities or communities they instantiate, alter urban space. What makes the performances and gatherings—musical, theatrical, educational, nutritional—political rather than aesthetic or pragmatic? Baraka's turn to drama in the late-1960s (though an "elite" expression) paired with his commitment to urban neighborhoods defined by both their spatial relation to the city and the demographics of inhabitants is informed by an epistemology of embodied experience. Baraka's organizational work seeks to rejuvenate oppressed communities through utopic

interpretations of housing that draws on the concept of Karenga's principle of *Ujamaa*, or African Communalism/Cooperative Economics. Woodie King, Jr., director, intellectual, founder of New Federal Theater, explains in an April 1970 *Negro Digest* article, "In schools, YMCA's, churches—across the country, from Los Angeles' Watts to New York's Harlem—plays tried to communicate to those nearest, those next door. This was done out of necessity, out of a need to survive" (*ND* 11). Though Baraka's most famous articulation of Black National spirit is "Nation Time," he became increasingly interested in communal gathering spaces, using public or federal funds, as well as Public Access television and radio platforms to implement his New Ark vision for the Central Ward.

The dissolution of BARTS in 1965 was a potentially devastating disappointment for Baraka, but as he notes in his *Autobiography,* "something had happened that was good. The idea of the Black Arts, the concept of the black revolutionary artist organizing arts institutions, particularly theaters, in the black community, caught on" (331). Several theaters and cultural centers modeled after BARTS sprung up in cities across the country, including Detroit's Concept East and Pittsburgh's Black Horizon Theater. Baraka claims, "Word of the concept of Black Arts far exceeded what we had actually done" and "the concept itself was important" (332). (Black) America is reeling from a decade of demoralizing brutality and severe losses in the form of assassinations, violent urban resistance, police oppression, and destructive foreign and domestic policy. Thus, these cultural centers become not just places for vibrant debate and cultural renewal but spheres for the formation of a counter public and political discourse.

Spirit House, located at 33 Stirling Street in Newark's Central Ward, was not only a cultural and arts center, but an educational one as well, housing the African Free

School. (Baraka, Amina, and their children lived in an apartment above the theater.) After the 1967 Newark resistance and the 1970 National Black Political Convention in Gary, Indiana, Baraka's sense of the function of space to foster black community changes. He grows increasingly interested in social or "safe" spaces that encourage habitation, education, and communal health. According to Jerry Gaffio Watts Spirit House "was born" when, upon his return to Newark, Baraka "rented a large but inexpensive house in central Newark" and "created a theater on the first floor" (291). Of the building's appellation, Baraka explains, "I had named the building the Spirit House, trying to raise up to another level the idea of what soul was to black people. The Spirit House was a place to raise the soul, to raise the consciousness" (*Autobiography* 342). Komozi Woodard explains that the Spirit House, home to the Spirit House Movers and Players, "established not only a theater and cultural center but also the African Free School where children learned reading, history, math, and science" ("Message from the Grassroots" 78). Renovating the dilapidated house into a working institution proves transformational. Baraka writes, "Putting that building together gave me more of a sense of purpose than I'd had in a long time. It was possible to do work in Newark. I was not an exile from New York. I could do work in the city of my birth. And that positive idea began to grow" (336). Through this labor, he is newly invested in a quotidian form of social reformation that is connected to objects, dwelling, transforming the meaning of a built space to house the intellectual and creative labor of multiple bodies in a location discursively one of impoverishment rather than creation.

The implementation of Spirit House, then, indicates a revolutionary everyday practice. Similar to the transformation of the theater into a ship under the rubric of theater

of assault or Artaud's theater of cruelty, Baraka imagines new ways for space to not just host or house the subject, but to foster expanding consciousness as well. For Michel De Certeau, "everyday" "spatial practices" both disrupt ideologies, particularly those of the city, and "structure the determining conditions of social life" (96). De Certeau identifies practices that "elude discipline without being outside the field in which it is exercised, and which should lead us to a theory of everyday practices, of lived space, of the disquieting familiarity of the city" (96). Through the tactic of construction, of consuming space differently, is akin to the implementation of a reading process, in which the urban space transitions to a metaphorical city that "slips into the clear text of the planned and readable city" (93). Spirit House, the New Ark vision, and the Kawaida Towers project as a concept that intervenes in public housing, each represent spatial practices that revise the city to reorder space around the body such that it no longer disciplines in the Foucauldian sense. Using the everyday practice of walking, de Certeau demonstrates how such pedestrian movements or *migration* allow the individual through "the very relationship between spatial practices and the constructed order. The surface of this order is everywhere punched and torn open by ellipses, drifts, and leaks of meaning" (107).

Baraka has spent much of his life and career as a public intellectual both in and outside of the historical framework of the Black Arts period reforming Newark under a vision that places cultural productions at the center of urban geography and civic life. Woodard explains that a housing crisis in Newark city limits needed urgent attention. Rather than relinquish control to the city council, Baraka lobbied for some input to work with an architect and development firm to produce plans for a housing community. For Baraka, "Housing is one focus for analyzing the entire condition of this country, and

certainly of Black People's status within American Society" (MS archive notes). De Certeau distinguishes between "place" and "space" whereby space is the practiced experience of or mediation of place. He argues:

> Places are fragmentary and inward-turning histories, pasts that others are not allowed to read, accumulated times that can be unfolded but like stories held in reserve, remaining in an enigmatic state, symbolizations encysted in the pain or pleasure of the body. "I feel good here": the well-being under-expressed in the language it appears in like a fleeting glimmer is a spatial practice. (108)

De Certeau elucidates the ways that not only feeling good in one's orientation to place is an essential practice of resisting disciplinary, subjecting discourses, but that places contain narratives. Through the tactic of reorienting oneself to these places, the individual not only challenges the histories invoked by place, but create metaphorical spaces of subversion or comfort. Woodard explains, "The sixteen-story housing development represented one hopeful possibility: that if black people gained political power and used that power for social and economic development the U.S. might avoid protracted racial strife in America's city trenches" (*Nation* 230).

To be located at 133-141 Lincoln Avenue in the North Ward, Kawaida Towers was an attempt to rethink and intervene in the federal approach to drafting and implementing housing policy. The Kawaida Towers proposal was an arm in cooperation with the Committee for a Unified Newark (CFUN) of Baraka's umbrella organization, New Ark, which Woodard describes as "an urban vision for a liberated zone, a *New Ark*" (*Groundwork* 94). The Kawaida Towers housing development plans included provisions

for a community lounge and workshop, a day-care center, audio-visual room, tenants' hobby shop, library, exhibition and display room, as well as a room for arts and crafts with storage space (November 8, 1972). This proposal for an urban community, rather than government controlled public housing, in some ways is modeled after the success of a cultural center. The plans require space for intellectual and creative labor. "Kawaida towers will be a community, and those living there will feel like a community rather than 'tenants.' Kawaida Towers will definitely be a positive contribution to the North Ward and the city of NewArk" (Baraka files, MS). The family housing would offer some housing abatement and as the designs indicate, allow for on site training and educational programs through the construction of a game Room, Multi-Purpose Room, a Clinic, a Library, areas for childcare, job training, an "Art Room," and even a "Counseling Room(s)" (Box 16, Folder "R-32 P.A.. (1970- Feb. '71)").

For Baraka, though, the Kawaida Towers project represented more than just a positive change for Newark. The housing issue became a way to analyze the "entire condition of this country, and certainly of Black People's status within American Society" (Box 26, Folder "SUNRA INTRO"). Property and land development were key strategies for achieving political capital through the access of federal monies and representation. It is clear from an examination of his papers that Baraka was highly motivated to invest in the education of black tradespeople including contractors, radio and TV producers and technicians, as well as the creation of black service employee unions. Kawaida Towers could be one method of not only employing people, but of creating an industry of specialization. He insists, "Kawaida Towersis [sic] important because it represents an attempt by a Pan African nationalist organization to build

housing to provide the goods and services needed not only by black people but the total newark [sic] community" (4, Folder "SUNRA INTRO"). Addison Gayle argued Black Power was an existential philosophy that countered integration in a dramatically new manner (33).[61] He argued, "We can build our communities and transform them into working, livable units. The only requirement is a complete break with the philosophy of the welfare state" (34). This position is critical of Baraka's stance to create housing initiatives in partnership with HUD and to use architectural firms who would be paid with tax revenue and federal support.[62] However, Gayle saw the value in the development of a skilled labor force among black Americans: "We need not rhetoricians, but architects, planners and builders; not fire and brimstone orators, but teachers, entrepreneurs, historians and all that vast paraphernalia essential to the realistic operation and control of a community" (34).

In his detailed account of the history of Kawaida Towers and the upset, even violent reactions it caused among different ethnic communities in Newark at the time, whose leaders in a continual bid for power over the city's political offices, Woodard demonstrates that the project represented a dangerous idea. In 1975, after years of legal battles and city council conflicts, funding for Kawaida Towers was withdrawn (255). Woodard establishes a clear relationship between what he calls the "ghetto revolts" of the

[61] The Kawaida Towers project was highly controversial. Many in the Italian community, including elected officials, opposed the project because it was felt that it could be used as a platform for Baraka to gain increasing power. See Calvin Trillin, "U.S. Journal: Newark Kawaida," 62-65. Trillin clarifies that much of the disputes over the property were centered around competing interests in the North Ward, which was largely made up of rental properties rather than homeowners already. However, the North Ward was not the Central Ward, which was then home to the primarily black and Puerto Rican urban population of Newark. The Italian political leaders, Trillin explains, viewed the very aspects of the project that I see as promising and full of potential—the theater and the community rooms—as spaces Baraka could use as a platform for propaganda.

[62] According to Cynthia Young, U.S. Third World Leftists, including Baraka, "privileged urban over rural communities" such as New York and Newark. *Soul Power: Culture, Radicalism, and the Making of a U.S. Third World Left*, 4-5.

1960s and the urgent proposals by black leaders to repurpose urban land that the nation was insistent upon forgetting through repeated refusals to invest capital and energy in these neighborhoods. The New Ark vision that incorporated mass communications, education, and housing development represents a dramatization of literature as social argument, a translation of the literary impulse through the pragmatic fostering of black institutions. The biblical image is one of shelter and protection from a vast and unstoppable ocean of destruction. The Ark represents salvation. While the slave ship and Middle Passage continue to be sites of theorization for Baraka, particularly in his important 1995 collection of poems, *Wise, Why's, Y's*" the New Ark rethinks the ship space as one of construction rather than that of captivity and resistance. Though "New Ark" is of course a riff on the city's name, through a study of Baraka's papers, we can learn the ways that this poetic, aural, and typographic revision signify the metaphorical dimensions of the ship space. However, here the constructed metaphorical ship is livable rather than horrific. In August Wilson's 2004 play, *Gem of the Ocean*, the metaphorical ship and imagined Middle Passage will become signs of survival, individual strength, and community solidarity for Citizen Barlow.

Chapter 2:

Voicing the "Private Ocean" and "the Law of the Sea": Commemoration and Cultural Nationalism in August Wilson's *Gem of the Ocean*

New world water make the tide rise high
Come inland and make your house go "Bye" (My house!)
Fools done upset the Old Man River
Made him carry slave ships and fed him dead nigga
Now his belly full and he about to flood something
So Imma throw a rope that ain't tied to nothin
. . . .
Cause it's all about getting that cash (Money!) --Mos Def, "New World Water" [63]

People can be slave-ships in shoes. --Zora Neale Hurston, *Dust Tracks on a Road*[64]

The next abyss was the depths of the sea. Whenever a fleet of ships gave chase to slave ships, it was easiest just to lighten the boat by throwing cargo overboard, weighing it down with balls and chains. These underwater signposts mark the course between the Gold Coast and the Leeward Islands. Navigating the green splendor of the sea—whether in **melancholic transatlantic** crossings or glorious regattas or traditional races of *yoles* and *gommiers*—still brings to mind, coming to light like seaweed, these lowest depths, these deeps, with their punctuation of scarely corroded balls and chains. In actual fact the abyss is a tautology: the entire ocean, the entire sea gently collapsing in the end into the pleasures of sand, make one vast beginning, but a beginning whose time is marked by these balls and chains gone green. --Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation* [65]

I try to remember out loud. I keep my memories alive. --Aunt Ester, *Gem of the Ocean*[66]

"Walls turn into water in the second act," so readers are informed by Ben Brantley's review of August Wilson's play *Gem of the Ocean*, "Sailing into Collective Memory" (E1).[67] This intriguing image suggests that the theater itself is a space of oceanic metamorphosis. Brantley explains, "It is instead the sound of human voices, remembering other voices of men and women long dead, that transforms a very solid-

[63] Yasiin Bey (Mos Def). "New World Water," *Black on Both Sides*. 1999.
[64] Zora Neale Hurston, *Dust Tracks on a Road* 87.
[65] Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 6. Emphasis added.
[66] Wilson, A. 2006. *Gem of the Ocean,* New York: Theatre Communications Group, 43.
[67] Brantley, B. 2004. "Sailing Into Collective Memory," *New York Times*, 7 Dec. 2004. Microform. *ProQuest*. The 2004 Broadway production of *Gem of the Ocean* was directed by Kenny Leon and staged at the Walter Kerr Theatre in Manhattan.

looking parlor in a home in Pittsburgh into an ocean on which a slave ship floats." Brantley's review evokes a major concern of Wilson's play—transformation. Individual transformation takes place in a home, a private, domestic space that becomes the staging ground for a communal act of cleansing through embodied, transhistorical, and otherworldly contact. Staging the performance of memories in a parlor dramatizes a history of secret, fluid memory that is located not in the public domain, or veiled by the vernacular of the blues tropes of crossing rivers, but in private spaces that though they exist behind the protection of closed doors, inculcate collective belonging. In *Gem of the Ocean*, the private space of memory is connected to oceanic crossings; it is tied to water's potential for death in drowning.

Many of August Wilson's plays explore familial and historical themes as they depict African American lives in the twentieth century. Following the success of *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* in 1984, Wilson determined to write a play set in each decade of the twentieth century (Lahr 29-30). Although Wilson wrote *Gem of the Ocean* at the turn of the twenty-first century, the play is set in 1904 and constitutes the "beginning" of his century cycle.[68] Throughout this cycle, Wilson builds on Black Arts era uses of the theater space as a nationalizing realm, and develops his own conceptualization of African American cultural nationalism in which memory performance has a role for late-twentieth and twenty-first century American audiences.[69] Wilson's critical acclaim and popularity with diverse audiences, as well as the financial success of his plays on

[68] For a discussion of temporality in relation to this play and its place in relation to origins, see Nadel "Beginning Again." Alan Nadel states that *Gem* "provides the cycle's alternative beginning." He views *Gem* as "our initiation into the forces that produced the world from which Wilson initiated his historical cycle" (19).

[69] The term 'African American' possessed a particular significance for Wilson who held that black Americans were culturally African. He also had a deep and residing belief in the "American Theater" of which he has said, "I believe in its power to inform about the human condition. I believe in its power to heal." See "The Ground on Which I Stand," 503.

Broadway, make the transformative politics of an African American nationalism available to all of his viewers. Yet *Gem of the Ocean* rejuvenates for a new generation the relationship between memory, the Middle Passage, nationalism, and theater that Amiri Baraka established in the 1960s.[70] Wilson's plays follow Baraka's directive in "The Revolutionary Theatre" to expose the political in the everyday lived spaces of black American lives when he claims that revolutionary theatre "is a social theatre, but all theatre is social theatre. We will change the drawing rooms into places where real things can be said about a real world, or into smoky rooms where the destruction of Washington can be plotted" (238). In *Gem*, the slave ship is constituted through vocal performances, cues, and gestures that enact a reverse Middle Passage as an act of choice or commemoration, so that the play reimagines the ship space as a site of collective survival, and ultimately, life.[71] Wilson utilizes the Middle Passage as a terrain of meaning, a submerged yet locatable site of loss. The conceptual slave ship is connected to a watery counter-history, an alternative epistemology, in which the ship is a vehicle of self-reckoning towards a radicalized identity for the protagonist Citizen Barlow. I explore this relationship as it bears out in Wilson's play through the imagined site at the bottom of the Atlantic, the "City of Bones."

[70] Eldridge Cleaver will also pose the slave ship as a metaphor for twentieth-century American apartheid, as does George Jackson. See *Soul on Ice* and *Soledad Brother*.

[71] In her chapter "Rituals of repair," Soyica Diggs Colbert examines *Slave Ship* and Wilson's *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*. She uses the term "collaboration," and more specifically "collaborative confrontations" to discuss the ways these plays stage reparations while they seek to redress the historical traumas of the Middle Passage (195). My term commemoration evokes a similar sense of the collective nature inherent in Baraka's and Wilson's plays. However, I find 'commemoration' more applicable to *Gem of the Ocean*, which seeks to bring twenty-first century readers into a ceremonial and ongoing process of *not* forgetting. Commemoration also speaks to the affective, collective, and promiscuous universe of the slave ship by acknowledging the specifics of place and the inter-personal relationships created by African captives and/or the ship's crewmembers.

As Wilson's frequent dramatizations of individual self-actualization reveal, questions about identity formation are by no means settled. A discussion of identity formation in the late-twentieth century must be reinvigorated given the current political and legal climate that seeks to abrogate critical conversations about inequalities experienced by U.S. citizens or foreign nationals living in the country, which are based upon race, nationality, and gender. August Wilson's century cycle as well as his public discussions of race in America, are fecund sites for exploring questions of when, where, and how discursive constructions of identities form, particularly in the public sphere. These speeches demonstrate that Wilson proffered characteristics of black identity in a strategic manner. However, often the attributes of black identity his plays celebrate, though strategic, are often defined along gendered lines of familial and labor roles. Though the composition of his century cycle spans the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s, their thematic concerns reflect a sustained critique of neoliberal and conservative policies enacted during the Reagan, Bush, and Clinton administrations, during which dominant ideologies of U.S. whiteness in turn actively (re)homogenized black identities for popular consumption. This chapter is as much an attempt to understand the impact of the 1980s through the trope of the Middle Passage as it is an attempt to locate *Gem of the Ocean* within a critical genealogy of the Middle Passage in black American literature of the period.

This vision of history reinscribes the Middle Passage for an artistic and ontological lineage in which this network might be seen as constituting not only a historical, familial, and traumatic rupture, but initiating a generative social fabric that produced the rich cultural productions and sphere of African life in the New World.

Wilson locates his philosophical and political roots firmly in the Black Arts Movement, and the metaphorical uses his plays make in reference to the Middle Passage are those of contestation of and commentary on Western philosophies and particularly to the myth of American Progress. At a time in which conversations about the reliability and veracity of memory, as well as how to write history constituted a large part of the popular and intellectual zeitgeist in the United States, Wilson's plays themselves constitute historical negotiations. In particular during the late 1980s and 1990s, African American writers explored the relationship between memory, cultural identity, and the Middle Passage in order to counter prevailing hegemonic attitudes about progress in race relations and economic equality in the United States. Due to the rigid conservative economic policies and at times oppressive police state conditions, expressions of historical traumas as memories connected with the permutations of black identity, and not just revolutionary identity, emerged as literary strategies for articulating psychological conditions, or the effects of ongoing traumas, that may be less visible to and silenced by the institutions and neoliberal policies in the late-twentieth century. Contextualizing present circumstances as part of a historical continuum that can be acknowledged through the practice of active memory enables forms of redress for these twentieth century readers and revolutionaries.[72] While I will focus on the work of August Wilson, and particularly his incorporation of a felt transhistorical affinity through the figure of Aunt Ester and visionary irruptions of the Middle Passage into the twentieth-century parlors of his characters' domiciles, I suggest that literary representations of the Middle Passage, particularly through the combination of realism and supernatural depictions of the past's

[72]On the topic of redress see Hartman and Woolfork. See also Soyica Diggs Colbert's chapter "Rituals of Repair."

interruption of the present might be a reading practice to engage works by African American writers who seek to offer textual sites of, albeit literary, memory as possible ways to gain ownership over painful histories.

August Wilson's plays utilize both a Black Arts approach to the possibilities of literature to provide contemplative spaces for historical consciousness, the creation of memories that sustain a connection to ancestral experiences, and sustaining strategies for redeeming oneself through an understanding of U.S. history through the critical lenses of diaspora and forced migration. Marita Sturken clarifies that "Memory is crucial to the understanding of a culture precisely because it indicates collective desires, needs, and self-definitions" (2). I would add that through the production of literary memory, which might be understood as a textual consciousness that exists in addition to forms of living memory that are not codified through textual means, African American writers produce alternative visions of how these desires might be enacted as well as providing the shape to an otherwise existing structure of feeling.[73] Sturken reminds us, "We need to ask not whether a memory is true but rather what its telling reveals about how the past affects the present" (2). She also argues that memory can be a "form of interpretation" (7). This claim is highly suggestive to me, as it connotes the ways late-twentieth century African

[73] See Allison Landsberg, 19-21. For Allison Landsberg, *Beloved* is one of several texts in the twentieth century age of mass culture that provide "prosthetic memories" for their audiences. Landsberg contends, "Prosthetic memories originate outside a person's lived experience and yet are taken on and worn by that person through mass cultural technologies of memory. The idea of prosthetic memory, then, rejects the notion that all memories—and, by extension, the identities that those memories sustain—are necessarily and substantively shaped by lived social context." One purpose of prosthetic memories for Landsberg argues is "to produce empathy and social responsibility as well as political alliances that transcend race, class, and gender." Moreover, "A sensuous engagement with the past, this book contends, is the foundation for more that individual subjectivity; it becomes the basis for mediated collective identification and the production of potentially counterhegemonic public spheres." Although, I agree that a text can serve as a technology of memory that becomes a part of an individual's identity, I take issue with Landsberg's metaphor of the prosthesis. Through the juxtaposition of impairment or disability with an analysis of mass culture and the arts as a popular (commercial) enterprise that provides access to a wide audience, this metaphor relies on a conceptualization of access that trades on the spectacle of an absent limb. Moreover, it suggests a politics of repair, not only reparations, that make me uneasy.

American writers of neo-slave narratives, historical fiction, or other forms of realist literature so heavily allude to acts of remembrance in their work as ways to interpret not just history but present forms of inequality and oppression.[74]

In *Gem of the Ocean*, the slave ship is more of a suggestion, a concept connected to a watery counterhistory, an alternative epistemology than a constructed, physical ship.[75] I explore this relationship as it bears out in Wilson's play through the imagined site at the bottom of the Atlantic, the "City of Bones," as well as through his use of water as an epistemological vehicle that is a pathway towards a historical consciousness that builds an empathic reconnection with the unknown experiences of deceased Africans.[76] In *Gem of the Ocean* and the earlier play, *August Turner's Come and Gone*, the "City of Bones," constitutes a metaphysics of the slave ship, specifically a gestural metaphysics because the metaphor of the slave ship is transformed to a series of bodily and vocal gestures.

The "law of the sea" might best be examined through the theoretical work of Édouard Glissant in *Poetics of Relation* who understands this Atlantic graveyard as the "Experience of the abyss" (7). Ian Baucom utilizes Glissant's term to apprehend the ongoing discursive violence of modernity and in turn posits, "specters of the Atlantic," which implies that the slave trade continues to haunt modernity (Glissant 7; Baucom

[74] Sturken explains that enforcing a kind of cultural amnesia, or forgetting, has also been a strategy for control used by states in oppressive regimes. She asserts, "'organized forgetting' propagated for instance, by an occupying state, cultures can also participate in a 'strategic' forgetting of painful events that may be too dangerous to keep in active memory" (7).

[75] Though this distinction would be highly mobile in the collaborative nature of the theater. If Leon's production suggests the slave ship through walls turning into water, other productions might use the theater in the round to gather audiences around the action and to place Barlow at the center of an enclosure. Directors may translate the play and how to depict the ship as they envision it.

[76] The "City of Bones" is not a concept/imagined space new to Wilson. See Baraka's *Wise, Why's, Y's: The Griot's Song Djeli Ya*.

309–333).[77] According to Baucom, Glissant understands time as an accumulation. Baucom argues for a long twentieth-century, which begins with the evolution of eighteenth-century finance capital built upon the slave trade. He contends that we continue to live in "the long modernity of the Atlantic" and are still trapped in the economic ideologies and structures that made the Atlantic Slave Trade possible (333). Glissant, Wilson, and Baucom each argue for a "philosophy of history," or historical consciousness, that does not progress past the lost through the interstices of interceding time. This counterhistory refuses the silencing of the enslaved to propose memory as both a haunting and a critique of oppressive structures. If the theater can function as a dynamic, reciprocal site of memory, then "memory" is less useful a term for thinking about the spatio-temporal logics involved in a process of building empathic affinities than commemoration.[78]

Soyica Diggs Colbert also foregrounds the difficult and "arduous" nature of what she sees as "reparative work" in the theatrical occasions Wilson's plays make possible. She highlights the *relationality* inherent in theatrical performances and productions by using the term "collaborative confrontations" to "[specify] the nature of repair staged in

[77] For an excellent reading of Glissant's term "abyss" and theory of creole relation, see Baucom's chapter, "'The Sea is History': On Temporal Accumulation." Baucom's discussion of Glissant and his understanding of time as accumulating vis-à-vis Walter Benjamin in *Specters of the Atlantic* is extremely informative for this reading of *Gem of the Ocean*. Baucom argues for a long twentieth-century beginning with the evolution of 18th century finance capital built upon the slave trade. Thus, he contends that we continue to live in "the long modernity of the Atlantic" and are still trapped in the economic ideologies and structures which made the Atlantic Slave Trade possible.

[78] Pierre Nora "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire," 7-24. "Site of Memory" is a translation of Nora's term "lieu de mémoire." My understanding of Nora's term in its usefulness for thinking about contemporary African American literature is best elucidated by Nellie Y. McKay in her essay, "The Journals of Charlotte L. Forten-Grimké: *Les Lieux de Mémoire* in African-American Women's Autobiography," *History and Memory in African-American Culture*, Ed. Geneviève Fabre (New York: Oxford UP, 1994) 262. McKay reads Nora's argument through the lens of Toni Morrison's concept "rememory" which she develops in *Beloved*. McKay defines "rememory" as a "deliberate act of remembering." My use of "commemoration" identifies Wilson's extension of memory through the dynamic process theatrical spectatorship which in turn shapes art so that memory is produced by artist and audience.

Joe Turner's Come and Gone" (194). In my own efforts towards collaboration, I also want to argue that for Wilson, as for Baraka, the theater represents a communal sphere, even a sphere where the sacred is present. Thus, in thinking about *Gem of the Ocean*, I find the term commemoration resonates with the communal ritual of bodily remembrance the play stages. Commemoration even has visual resonances with the nature of collaborative efforts as it is easy to see the word as co-memory. In the *Oxford English Dictionary*, "commemoration" is defined first as, "The action of calling to the remembrance of a hearer or reader; recital, mention." The second definition expands upon the first: "A calling to remembrance, or preserving in memory, by some solemn observance, public celebration, etc.; 'solemnization of the memory of anything.'" These definitions reveal the importance of audience in the act of memory. Commemorations sustain performers, participants, and witnesses. A commemoration of an event relies upon both the act of performance and its reception—commemoration necessitates a witness for its completion, success, and to give the performance its meaning. Furthermore, in claiming that the reciprocal nature of Citizen's visceral vision guided by the voices of Aunt Ester and the other characters is commemorative underscores the play's serious, genuine, and sacred rendering of the "City of Bones" within the creating realm of the theater space.

"In the blue savannas of memory or imagination"[79]: Recalling the "Bones People"

Call me utopian, but I inherited my mother's belief that the map to a new world is in the imagination, in what we see in our third eyes rather than in the desolation that surrounds us. --Robin D. G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams*[80]

[79] Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 7.

[80] Robin D. G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2002: 2-3.

Gem of the Ocean begins with Citizen Barlow's "insistent" knocking on the front door of Ester Tyler's home at 1839 Wylie Avenue in Pittsburgh's Hill district (*Gem* 7). This house is connected to a history of resistance. For example, as Constance Kathryn Zaytoun observes, 1839 was the year of the *Amistad* revolt (716). Citizen Barlow works for a mill, which underpays its primarily black workers. Citizen has come to see Aunt Ester, the "two hundred and eighty-five" year old "spiritual leader" and culture-bearer for her community in the hopes that she will wash him of his guilt after he let co-worker Garret Brown take the blame for his own rebellious act of theft (5).[81] Since Citizen does not confess, Brown is erroneously blamed and, in an act of defiance, commits suicide by drowning in the river. As the play progresses unrest grows in response to Brown's drowning and mill workers strike against unfair labor practices. 1839 Wylie Avenue is also inhabited by Black Mary and Eli who assist Aunt Ester in the maintenance of her home. Black Mary is also Aunt Ester's protégée. Black Mary and her brother, Caesar Wilks, each represent a side of the dilemma for black Americans at the turn of the century towards paths of leadership. Caesar is the constable, a business owner, and slumlord who rents rooms to the migrant black population, while policing their conduct and disciplining workers.

Much of the conflict of the play involves the parallel story lines of Citizen's quest for redemption and salvation as well as Solly's proposed journey "back down there" to

[81]The description of Aunt Ester in the "Characters" list included in the playtext states that she is "a very old, yet vital spiritual advisor for the community" ("Gem" 5). Aunt Ester's significance to Wilson's theatrical project is elsewhere clarified. In "Preface" to *King Hedley II*, he identifies Ester Tyler as "the most significant persona of the cycle."

the deep South to lead his sister to Pittsburgh (*Gem* 19).[82] Solly receives a letter from his sister telling him of her suffering in the still existing enslavement of sharecropping Alabama. He decides to travel to save her, risking his own health, but before his departure he sets fire to the mill. *Gem of the Ocean* establishes a dialectical definition of freedom, where freedom exists in here, like the domestic space of the sheltering home, not "down there." Freedom, the play suggests, existed before the rupture of the Middle Passage and can be achieved in the present through an ongoing process of struggle, a process reflected in Wilson's incorporation of blues tropes, speechifying, and musical performances throughout the century cycle. *Gem* is haunted by a deep time and space of "back," but in the course of the play, this before—a personal history, a place of origin, a familial past—is often unreachable. The impossibility of going back is dramatized most concretely through Solly's murder. *Gem of the Ocean* complicates the recuperative notion of return to a physical or spiritual homeland at a time of crisis in American national identity in the years following the attacks of September 11, 2001. During the years since, the nation has constricted culturally, becoming more conservative, while progressive or Leftist voices of dissent were policed in the national media. By staging a conceptual revolution through Citizen's transformation in which he must refuse assimilation to Caesar's brand of self-sufficiency and economic gain in favor of a communal ethos, Wilson's play critiques the national desire for narratives which reify unifying wholeness, offering instead flux, affiliation, and the process of commemorating loss as modes of conscious belonging.

[82] For a discussion of the haunting presence of the South in Wilson's plays and the term "down there" in particular, see Patricia Gantt.

In *Gem of the Ocean* a parlor provides the actual setting for the action, but a watery terrain constitutes the off-stage action, and speech conjures a parallel setting, which marks the play's narrative toward acts of self-salvation and martyrdom. *Gem of the Ocean* constitutes a cultural exploration of what the editors of the volume *Black Imagination and the Middle Passage* term "a space in-between" or a "Middle Passage sensibility" (Diedrich et al. 9). According to Colbert, "the space in-between" "enables multiplicity" and is particularly useful as a philosophy that "emerges in the aftermath of utopian formulations of community built on consensus," such as the theatrical community built by participants in the Black Arts era (199, 211). An illustrative example from *Gem* is when Garret Brown jumps into the river in an attempt to escape arrest for an act he didn't commit. In protest, he resolves to remain in the river until his innocence is determined. The audience learns of these details through their narration, but Brown's escape into the river alludes to the trope of water in Black American spirituals as a symbol of salvation, thereby doubling the power and significance of oral expression that drive the play. The river conjures Christian baptism, and thus the assurance that one is saved from sin and destined for an eternal life in heaven. Rivers are also associated with routes to freedom, both eternal and worldly. Furthermore, Garrett Brown's leap into the river is an allusion to the history of enslaved Africans choosing suicide by jumping from the decks of slave ships to seek their deaths in the ocean rather than remain captive.[83] Brown's death is a form of protest that retains a sense of bodily integrity, and a utopian

[83] Stephanie Smallwood provides a groundbreaking reading of archived accounts of African captives' deaths during the voyage between the West Coast of Africa and New World destinations. Her scholarship is remarkably informative for an understanding of Wilson's imagined "City of Bones," since she argues that without the fulfillment of "traditional mortuary ritual," "death threatened to have far-reaching consequences" because it was believed without burial in the earth, ancestors were no longer connected to the living through the consecrated ground (140).

hope for freedom. The narration of his resistance creates a history of salvation through death by drowning that is instructive.

The ocean and a paper boat constitute the other enclosed spheres where legal and economic oppressive conditions on the self are most clearly and dramatically resisted. Aunt Ester evokes her respect for Solly's past as a liberator when she tells him, "I dreamed you had a ship full of men and you was coming across the water. Had that stick and you was standing up in this boat full of men" (18). Ester places Solly at the helm of a ship, in possible mutiny in her dream, rather than leading fugitive slaves North along terrestrial paths as a conductor of the Underground Railroad. Here, revolution is gendered masculine, yet Ester's dream might be considered its instigator. Cynthia Caywood and Carlton Floyd posit, "the most interesting question about Aunt Ester may be why Wilson chose a female character to embody African American history and culture, which he consistently links to any possibility of black power?" (77).

Gem represents a compelling shift in the ways Black Nationalist revolutionary consciousness is gendered. As it is in Aunt Ester's dream, the ship is primarily a masculine revolutionary space in African American and Afro-Caribbean thought throughout the twentieth-century (Stephens 8 and 18). However, Ester is the author of a revolutionary vision ultimately brought to life by Citizen Barlow. Despite Ester Tyler's much discussed significance to Wilson's oeuvre, women's lives are often not the primary locus of transformation in his plays. Rather, his female characters often represent the moral center of the play as well as the desired objects of male fantasy and ambition. As wives, sisters, girlfriends, or blues singers, women's voices speak with moral and spiritual resonance, but their voices are often ground very firmly in place or to objects.

With the exception of Berniece in *The Piano Lesson*, Aunt Ester represents Wilson's most fully realized female characters. Elam claims Aunt Ester to be "Wilson's most feminist construction," due to her centrality in "express[ing] voice and power" ("Gem" 77). For Elam, "She empowers the other characters, including Citizen Barlow … to find the force of god within themselves." While invoking the most profound image of Solly as captaining a ship "full of men," Ester clarifies Solly's ability to unmake the structures of economic and legal power that undergird acts of enslavement (18).

Ester Tyler embodies cultural memory, a role fulfilled by a succession of women who give up their own identities to become "Aunt Ester." Ester is mentioned in several of Wilson's plays as characters seek her guidance or mourn her loss, but only appears on stage in *Gem*. As one of the foremost scholars of Wilson's work, Sandra Shannon, asserts, "Aunt Ester exists both as a symbol of the African American past and as a most formidable enabler in the present" ("Turn Your Lamp Down Low!" 124). Gendering either the African homeland or an Afrocentric consciousness female is not unique to Wilson. Moreover, Aunt Ester, whether she appears on stage or is a voiced iteration of the legend and spiritual advisor, always represents the past. Thus, begging the question as to why and how Wilson uses this woman to understand the present, and why the past might also be gendered female? Furthermore, what does she have to say or teach his characters and audiences about black identity in the twentieth century? Aunt Ester draws on a line of revolutionary consciousness embodied in the black female figure as first utilized by Lorraine Hansberry in her play *Les Blancs* (Wilkerson 52). Aunt Ester, like Hansberry's African warrior woman, "pushes the boundaries of realism" (Wilkerson 52). Harry Elam, Jr. asserts, "Aunt Ester is the actual site of the African American legacy;

history and memory co-mix in her body" (Elam 2007: 76). He argues that her name is a riff on "ancestor," signifying "the inherent interconnectedness of black people and black lives" (Elam 2007: 76). Barbara Lewis argues that Aunt Ester is a representative of "female water divinities of Africa" (149). Lewis's contention embeds this character in spiritual cosmologies. Citizen has been informed that she will "wash people's souls" (*Gem* 20).

Ester's dream not only reveals her intimate relationship with Solly, but it also indicates how the ocean continues to be a psychic space that must be navigated and controlled, especially since her dream foreshadows Solly's death. She envisions Solly "coming across the water," and she and Solly going "back across the ocean" (18). Her dream takes an ominous turn, though, as she recalls, "You come on back and all your men had drowned and the boat was sinking. You said you was going to get another boat and some more men. Said you would come back and smote the water." Here, Ester's dream interestingly disrupts the notion of "going back" that resounds throughout the play. Although his crew is vulnerable, Solly's leadership accrues "more men," suggesting the formation of a collective based upon mobility and resistance. Ester views water as a powerful force that must be negotiated while a ship is the vehicle that can engage the power of the ocean. The imaginative and symbolic power of the sea represents a reclamation of the destructive potential of the oceanic, or the "haunting trans-generational trauma[s]" of Black migration throughout modernity (Grant 97). Audiences begin to understand the navigation of a watery terrain as a form of active, thoughtful engagement with historical structures of power.

Representations in texts by black Americans of ships, and the slave ship in particular, have historically functioned to critique U.S. imperialism and nationalism. Both nineteenth- and twentieth-century black American writers found the ship an evocative site for expressing critiques of U.S. power structures and as a way to protest enslavement or legalized inequality. In 1829 David Walker counted on the routes of inter-coastal shipping lines to circulate his *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World*, which he gave to sailors traveling between Boston and southern port cities (Wilentz xiv–xv). Wilson's depiction of a fantastical and chosen reverse Middle Passage as a process of transformation that ultimately culminates in Citizen's commitment to a Black community is very much a literary descendant of Martin R. Delany's 1859-1861 novel, *Blake; or, The Huts of America*. The protagonist travels from Cuba to Africa on a slave trading vessel and mission and returns ultimately with new recruits for his project to fulminate revolt throughout the Caribbean and Americas. Swerving slightly from Gilroy's resistance to nationalist philosophies in favor of the Black Atlantic paradigm, I suggest that Wilson's play offers audiences a metaphorical approach to the slave ship that draws upon the historical significance of the ship space in Black thought to further explore questions of national belonging as well as racial identity. Wilson has also stated publicly that he is a "race man" in the tradition of Marcus Garvey whose infamous Black Star Line sought to actualize his "Back to Africa" nationalist philosophy ("Ground" 494).

After Baraka's *Slave Ship*, two traditions of representing the Middle Passage in literature and the arts began to emerge. One, which linked the Atlantic Slave Trade and the forced migration of African peoples to colonies in the New World as an exploitable labor source, graphically depicted details of the Middle Passage as the origin of a Black

Holocaust. Several examples of this historiographical and literary tradition are S.E. Anderson's introductory multi-generic book, *The Black Holocaust for Beginners*, Alex Haley's autobiographical novel, *Roots*, and Tom Feelings's illustrated *The Middle Passage*. Whereas another tradition developed at the same time in which the Middle Passage is represented in much more abstract terms as either a poetic conceit or through the combination of multiple narrative styles, languages, typographic techniques, as well as expressions of hybridity, *creolization*, and avant-garde expression. These strategies are often understood as features of postmodern literature. Perhaps the most famous example of the later tradition is Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, but Kamau Braithwaite's book of poetry, *Middle Passages*, and John Edgar Wideman's *The Cattle Killing* (which is more a spatial and temporal rendering of the "time of the slave ship" to riff on Saidiya Hartman, than a depiction of the Middle Passage), are two other examples. Of course this dichotomy, when probed a little further, does not represent all works of this period. Charles Johnson's picaresque, *Middle Passage*, rivals any text in its graphic depiction of the conditions aboard slave ships as experienced from the perspective of crewmembers, including a black stowaway. On the other hand, the novel also treats the Middle Passage as a conceit for individual transformation and collective identity. Wilson's two plays that deal most directly with the Middle Passage, *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* and *Gem of the Ocean*, belong in the second lineage; however, in many ways these works rely on a familiarity with the work of recovery and imagined description of the former.

Wilson's oeuvre defines African American collectivity around ideas of shared culture that most certainly were inherited from Black cultural nationalism and especially Amiri Baraka, but he also expands upon these art forms. In a 1991 interview with

Christopher Bigsby, Wilson places himself on the "spectrum" of Black Nationalism saying, "I called myself a cultural nationalist and I still do" (205). Wilson is bound to a community and to the Black nationalist's artistic responsibility of raising historical consciousness. Mark William Rocha finds that, "Wilson transported three quintessentially Barakan elements to his own plays," one of which being "the motion of history as the emergence of the African 'Geist' out of the bones of the Middle Passage" (7–8). The African "geist" might also be termed "Spirit" which is a key concept that emerges out of Baraka's nationalist essays. "Spirit" for Baraka denotes a non-Western belief system and practice that in its execution, specifically in the social art of theater, can critique the structures of oppression inherent in Western societies. The strength inherent in what Baraka calls "revolutionary theatre" is its ability to enact change via "Spirit." He writes, "This should be a theatre of World Spirit. Where the spirit can be shown to be the most competent force in the world. Force. Spirit. Feeling" (237). Wilson's work explores Baraka's theory of Spirit in the context of realistic dramaturgy. His contention with Baraka's utilization of the mystical is particularly evident in characters like Aunt Ester or Bynum in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* who offer alternative worldviews that respect and memorialize the ancestral, thereby formulating diasporic consciousness.

Although Wilson achieved his greatest success many years after the perceived conclusion of the Black Arts Movement, his roots are located firmly in the regional and independently financed Black Theater movement of the 1960s. Along with Rob Penny, Wilson established the Black Horizon Theater in Pittsburgh in 1968. Black Horizon Theater grew out of a group of poets working in Pittsburgh, the Centre Avenue Poets' Theater Workshop, but Baraka's BARTS and Spirit House also inspired its founding

(Conner 167). According to Lynne Conner, "Rob Penny and August Wilson . . . intended to follow Baraka's model by merging political action with theatrical practice in their commitment to Black Nationalism and politicizing the Hill District community" (169). With Wilson acting as principal director and Rob Penny the company playwright, Black Horizon also staged Black Arts era plays by Penny, Baraka, Ed Bullins, Sonia Sanchez, and Douglass Turner Ward (Conner 169). Wilson left Pittsburgh in 1978, but Rob Penny remained writing and producing plays, with the Kuntu Repertory Theatre, which Wilson co-founded and in which he participated before his departure (Conner 172). Coming of age as a poet in Pittsburgh, Wilson immersed himself in the local club scene, often transcribing conversations and stories among black patrons he overheard (Bogumil 53-54). This deep sense of place informed his investment in community during his time with Black Horizon, and later, translated to the location of all of his century plays, with the exception of *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* (which is set in Chicago), in the Hill District, the primarily black neighborhood in Pittsburgh. The Hill District was elevated to mythic sphere in his plays, translating black experience through the local but in turn also translating the local to a kind of universal narrative of the black American condition in the twentieth century.

In the 1990s, following his early success as an established playwright with several titles on Broadway to his name, Wilson used his success to champion the cause of local, independently financed regional black theater. He was also outspoken against colorblind casting, an argument that took center stage in a debate with Robert Brustein and moderated by Anna Deveare Smith that took place on January 27, 1997 at New York City's Town Hall (Bogumil 58). Mary L. Bogumil explains that Wilson viewed

colorblind casting as gesture lacking substance, but "was simply another way to erase colour masquerading as a liberal gesture of inclusiveness" (58). This resulted in a shift away from resources distributed to or reaching black theaters, ultimately resulting in "black theaters [being] starved of funds and forced out of existence" (Bogumil 58). In a speech delivered at the 11th biennial conference of the Theater Communications Group titled "The Ground on Which I Stand," Wilson criticizes the move to universalize theater groups to enforce color blind casting and thereby do away with "all black" theaters and organizations. He notes that in the League of Resident Theaters (LORT), "it is that of the 66 LORT theaters there is only one that can be considered black" (495). He continues, "From this it could be falsely assumed that there aren't sufficient numbers of blacks working in the American theater to sustain and support more numbers." He argues that this is not the case, but rather than the propensity to underfund black theaters and the trend for colorblind casting ultimately does not promote the employment of black actors, directors, crew members, or the production of plays authored by black playwrights.[84]

Thus, a tension between dedication to development of black artistic projects at the local level alongside the goal to gain the most public platform for his own work, the Broadway stage, marks Wilson's career as America's most famous black playwright. Wilson developed as a playwright and gained the most success in terms of critical acclaim and the reach of his plays to large audiences only after he was no longer known as a Black Nationalist playwright. Furthermore, his plays developed a substantial (read lengthy) cohesive narrative style that Black Arts plays resisted for many years. While Ed

[84] See Lauren Berlant, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City*. Of the Reagan era, "intimate public sphere" in the U.S. in which the "present tense renders citizenship as a condition of social membership produced by personal acts and values, especially acts originating in or directed toward the family sphere," Berlant argues that colorblind rhetoric functioned "as an alibi to make cases of egregious inequality seem like exceptions to a national standard, rather than a structural condition" (5 and 9).

Bullins also attempted a twentieth century cycle, his plays never garnered the audiences and name recognition that Wilson's command. It was not until Wilson was accepted to the Eugene O'Neill Theatre Centre's National Playwrights Conference in 1982 with the play *Jitney* as well as his subsequent formative relationship with director Lloyd Richards, that Wilson became a professional playwright (Bogumil 55).[85] Richards's collaboration with Wilson, which spanned over a decade of their respective artistic careers, both fostered the playwright's sensibility and allowed him access to several ready-made audiences for whom he could hone his craft. Richards in many ways represented the theatrical establishment in the 1980s and 1990s, and his guidance, as suggested by Sandra G. Shannon and John Lahr, pushed Wilson's dramaturgy in more palatable directions for the largely middle to upper-middle class (white) theater going audiences.

Lloyd Richards held the position of Master Teacher of Acting at New York University's School of the Arts from 1967 to 1971. He was also Dean of the Yale School of Drama from 1979 to 1991, and Artistic Director of the Yale Repertory Theater where many of Wilson's plays were premiered. Finally, he was also Artistic Director of the National Playwrights Conference at the Eugene O'Neill Theater Center in Waterford, Connecticut from 1968 to 1999 (Raymond 9). According to participants in a recent panel held by The Greene Space in New York, which staged readings of each play of Wilson's American Century Cycle from August 26 to September 13 of 2013 under the artistic direction of Ruben Santiago-Hudson, Wilson and Richards's collaboration allowed them to develop a new artistic and financial model for black theater. Moreover, the panelists suggested that this model freed Wilson from some of the pressure to produce quickly so

[85] Lloyd Richards's career as a director was storied and accomplished. He directed the 1959 Broadway production of *A Raisin in the Sun*, the first play by an African American woman to be produced for Broadway.

that a different kind of black individual could be presented and performed on stage (The Greene Space at WNYC & WQXR, "The Lloyd Richards Effect"). Furthermore, Santiago-Hudson argued that Richards's role was to protect and insulate Wilson's genius from the stifling effects of commercial and corporate theater.[86] When the panelists were asked, however, whether the goal was ultimately to bring each play to Broadway, the answer was yes, but that this desire came from Richards.[87] This discussion is not only a revealing glimpse into canon construction, but it underscores how the Wilson-Richards collaboration brought black nationalist ideas and black identity to a mainstream American audience. While Richards's private concerns, such that we can know them, were often concentrated on honing Wilson's craft, particularly in terms of each play's length, narrative progression, and satisfying resolution, it also appears that Richards's mentorship made Wilson's narrative and exegetical style more palatable for commercial viewership (Shannon 151).

Wilson's investment in race as an affirming category of identification in the late-twentieth century is worth pausing over because it sheds light on how personal memories shape a character's social philosophy. Although historically definitions of race based upon biological and deterministic grounds enabled processes of segregation, Othering, and violence, Wilson argues that Black identity can itself be a form of redress for historical crimes against humanity.[88] He states, "The term black or African American not only denotes race; it denotes condition and carries with it the vestige of slavery and the

[86] See also Shannon, *The Dramatic Vision of August Wilson*, 69.

[87] This assertion contradicts Richards's own statements about his involvement with Wilson's dramaturgy. In an interview with Sandra Shannon, he states, "Broadway is never the goal; it never has been. The first audience that sits in the theater right here at Yale—that's who I create for" (73).

[88] Soyica Diggs Colbert argues, "Wilson's assertion that race serves as the 'organizing principle around which cultures are formed' places him in a slippery position that at least four decades of black feminist thought has sought to address" (197).

social segregation and abuse of opportunity so vivid in our memory" ("Ground" 495). "Blood's memory" is Wilson's form of politicized, racial memory, which appears in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone (Joe Turner's Come and* Gone 87). Wilson's term might be usefully illustrated by Michael Hanchard who posits "black memory" is "often at odds with state memory" (46). His claim is particularly useful for recognizing the ways the chronotope of the slave ship operates in *Gem of the Ocean* to develop a language for national belonging that is predicated upon a politics of subjectivity (46). Hanchard argues,

> Afro-Modern political actors and their constituents … have deployed symbols and rituals of national and transnational black imaginaries in the absence of state sanction and support. The tensions between state and popular memory in the discourses of transnational black politics also help underscore the role of forgetting in national-state projects that seek to emphasize national unity, and the dogged projection of memory by nonstate actors seeking to keep alive the histories and peoples repressed or denied by the state. (46)

He further clarifies: "If we consider black memory as the phenomena of a collectivity rather than the practice of an isolated and disparate array of individuals, then an ensemble of themes … provide the broad parameters of black memory" (47). Hanchard identifies several of these "constitutive themes" as "Racism, slavery, reparations, nationalism and anticolonial struggle, and migration" (47). However, these specific memories are tied to generations, as well as the historical genealogy of inherited traumas, or to use Sinikka Grant's terminology the "portrayal of trans-generational trauma" (112). "Black memory"

then represents a form of dissent, but also a process for seeking cultural reparations as Soyica Diggs Colbert argues when she explains that the theater can offer an effective space for working through issues of cultural reparations (195). In *Gem*, the ship is an imaginative construction, a mechanism invented by Aunt Ester to reveal the possibilities of inner space, but the effects of Citizen's journey to the City of Bones produces real, material consequences; he feels the journey throughout his body; his act of commemoration is the result of an embodied psychological enactment.

Wilson often publicly proclaimed that the origins of African American culture can be located in the hold of a slave ship. In the provocative 1996 speech to the Theatre Communications Group, "The Ground on Which I Stand," Wilson offers a "testimony" to his understanding of cultural memory, race, and theatrical arts in the late twentieth century lives of Americans (Wilson 1997a: 493).[89] In this speech he explains that "ground" signifies both a history of artistic influence, cultural heritage, as well as "something to which to dedicate my life, that I discovered in the Black Power movement of the 1960's" (494). According to Wilson, then, his artistic labor is in the service of a commitment to continuing the work of a black cultural nationalism that holds at its center a belief in ongoing remembrance. He continues:

> I felt it a duty and an honor to participate in that historic moment, as the people who had arrived in America chained and malnourished in the hold of a 350-foot Portuguese, Dutch, or English sailing ship were now seeking ways to alter their relationship to the society in which they lived, and

[89] The title of his speech references Amiri Baraka's earliest extended philosophy on the importance of self-determined space or territory for the Black Nation, "The Legacy of Malcolm X, and the Coming of the Black Nation." See, Jones, L. 2009. *Home: Social Essays*, (New York: AkashiClassics) 272.

> perhaps more important, searching for ways to alter the shared expectations of themselves as a community of people. (494)

The "historic moment" Wilson feels called to "participate" in might refer both to the Black Power movements and to the period of the trans-Atlantic Slave Trade. The use of the verb "participate" also underscores Wilson's understanding of history as ongoing and as his present craft as deeply informed by and connected to historical events. In his "Preface" to *King Hedley II*, Wilson explains his plays' characters, "were brought across an ocean, chained in the hulls of 350-ton vessels" (ix). In his speech to the National Black Theater Festival in 1997 he reiterates, "From the hull of a ship to a culturally robust and self-determining people…that is the journey we are making" (Wilson 1997b: 490). These claims reveal that the slave ship is a central metaphorical vehicle for Wilson's textual production of an African American ontology that entails the process of emergence from a mobile, transforming sphere.[90] Furthermore, the focus on migration in the twentieth-century cycle is complicated by the fact that migration continues to circulate beyond the historical patterns of either forced or chosen migration in the U.S. context.

In his influential essay, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," Stuart Hall argues that identity arises out of actions, performances, practices, and "enunciations." Pace Fanon, he wonders if identity, which is produced, is not "grounded in the archaeology, but in the *re-telling* of the past?" (224). "Cultural identity, in this second sense, is a matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being'. It belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture" (225). Hall asserts that our identities are the "names" used to position ourselves within "the

[90] Wilson, A. 2005, vii. Wilson admits to his great interest in ontological questions when he claims, "It is *being* in all facets, its many definitions, that endows the artist with an immutable sense of himself."

narratives of the past" (225). "Diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference" (235). The literary contentions with history that I analyze here are not simply commemorative they are also transformative. Although commemoration may be a suggested path put forward for characters, commemoration becomes a more complicated process for readers, given the complicated nature of affiliations made with fictional characters. Wilson's statement about black cultural identity: "From the hull of a ship to a culturally robust and self-determining people...that is the journey we are making," for example, universalizes a historical trajectory of progress that certainly may not feel applicable for many audience participants.[91] He insists upon retaining for himself an ancestral and kinship link with lost African ancestors when he clarifies, "Before I am anything, a man or a playwright, I am an African American."[92] Making this history of forced migration available to black audience members through narrative and gestural forms, suggests cultural identity his plays put forth, that of still emerging strength and progress related to struggle.

How might what Sandra G. Shannon terms, "a metaphysical journey to the bottom of the ocean" comment on the social conditions existing in twenty-first century America?[93] The "ride" that Citizen takes on this boat is a journey to determine his own self-worth. Through Citizen's quest for redemption, for which he relies upon Aunt Ester's abilities to "wash his soul," Wilson offers a powerful critique in order to proffer self-value, or the soul's freedom from the oppressive discursive shackles instantiated through

[91] August Wilson, "National Black Theater Festival, 1997," pg. 490, 1997.

[92] "Preface" to *King Hedley II*

[93] Shannon, S. 2009. "Framing African American Cultural Identity: The Bookends Plays in August Wilson's 10-Play Cycle," *College Literature* 36.2: 30.

chattel slavery and perpetuated in U.S. capitalist driven democracy under which certain individuals are always kept at a distance from full enfranchisement via poverty. Though, Citizen must undergo the ordeal of a reverse Middle Passage in the front parlor of 1839 Wyle avenue, he does so in front of the witnessing eyes of audience members. When Aunt Ester tells Citizen, "We gonna go to the City of Bones tonight but first you got to go get ready," her declaration is not only a mechanism to build anticipation, but in a way she is also talking directly to audiences (54). Aunt Ester's "we" here is also Wilson's, which makes room for the audience in that parlor.

Mastering the tyranny of the ship's spatial logics upon the body is nowhere more fundamentally enacted than with Aunt Ester's "Bill of Sale," which is folded and transformed into a paper "boat" by Ester herself and given to Citizen to hold throughout his journey to the City of Bones (Wilson 53). A stage direction tells readers, "*Aunt Ester has made a small boat from her document of a Bill of Sale*" (53). This astonishing detail should remind us of the monetary ways black bodies have been valued historically in the United States. Wilson establishes a connection between self-value and other, economic systems of valuation and capital. Here the Bill of Sale, a perverse contract that legalizes a monetary transaction in which money is either exchanged for freedom, or money is exchanged between a seller and purchaser to ensure continued captivity, is claimed by its owner, transformed into a new vehicle of meaning and transferred to another human. As she passes on her "gem of the ocean" to Citizen, she notes that this "piece of paper" is "not what you call your ordinary boat" but a "magic boat" that possesses "power."[94]

[94] On the bill of sale as a perverse document, Harriet Jacobs writes, "'The bill of sale!' Those words struck me like a blow. So I was *sold* at last! A human being *sold* in the free city of New York! The bill of sale is on record, and future generations will learn from it that women were articles of traffic in New York, late in the nineteenth century of the Christian religion. It may hereafter prove a useful document to

However, in the act of renaming her Bill of Sale, she alters the power it possesses. No longer the sign of her freedom or worth, the Bill of Sale contains another form of capital as Citizen grasps it throughout his journey to the City of Bones. Wilson's title directly references a slave ship, which Ester reveals in the second act, but it also refers to Ester's Bill of Sale.[95] "Gem" suggests value attributed to rare and unmatchable qualities. Ester's Bill of Sale, however, stripped her of her person, making her an anonymous "'Negro slave girl,'" whose price of "'$607'" ensures her to be "'sound and healthy'" (78). When she denies the legal and discursive power of this "piece of paper's worth," Ester proves that the document is a physical memento of the perverted construction of black bodies as valued objects and the abrogation of self-value for enslaved individuals whose personhood is erased. Thus the "gem of the ocean" refers both to an imagined ship that participates in a reverse Middle Passage so that Citizen may empathize with ancestral loss and the freedom bodily integrity offers, *and* to the destructive legal documentation of chattel status. At the same, the value is resignified and consigned to the freedom from self-hatred Citizen achieves.

In a brilliant move, Wilson has Caesar, the black capitalist, read Aunt Ester's Bill of Sale out loud in the parlor and for the audience. After Black Mary hands her brother the paper boat, he reads aloud the legal document that sanctions the transfer of Aunt Ester's person from one master, "William J. Ogburn of the County of Guilford . . . State of North Carolina" to "Isaac Thatcher" (78). When he is done reading, Ester affirms that the "Negro slave girl" it records is her: "That's a Bill of Sale for Ester Tyler. That's me,"

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antiquaries, who are seeking to measure the progress of civilization in the United States." *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Ed. Jean Fagan Yellin, 200.

[95] According to Elam, the play's title is also "a signifying revision" on a play Baraka wrote in 1973 entitled *Columbia, the Gem of the Ocean*. See "Gem" 80.

but she turns the appraisal of both the document and her person over to Caesar, demanding, "Now you tell me how much it's worth, Mr. Caesar." His response demonstrates his failure to understand the import of this trial: "I wouldn't give you ten cents for it," he says. Still misrecognizing that the application of monetary amounts to human life is fundamentally a corruption of that life and that the system that gave birth to this paper boat continues to perpetuate this false logic, Caesar demonstrates that as a "custodian of the law," he fails to understand the ways the past continue to structure the present (78). As the scene continues, Ester defends her home against Caesar's false god in upholding Pennsylvania law, urging him to see that 1839 Wylie Avenue is a "house of sanctuary" and therefore a sacred place (79). However, Caesar's "Bible" is the Pennsylvania Penal Code, which he proceeds to read from as his protection and justification to arrest Solly for arson and Ester Tyler for "interfering with the administration of justice and aiding and abetting" the fugitive (79-80).

In this final scene, private law clashes with public or state law. *Gem of the Ocean* presents a powerful reading of the intersection of blackness and value in the twenty-first century read through the struggles over property and its protection in the Great Migration. I interpret this climactic dialog in which Ester bears her most intimate history for Caesar as an intervention in contemporary discourses of domestic economic policy and the worth of black life under neoliberalism. The remedy that Aunt Ester offers, historical consciousness, needs further interrogation as it is dispersed and suggested in this play through her own body as a vessel for memory and investment. Yet Wilson's play proffers the history of black folk and the history of slavery as a contestatory methodology that shows up neoliberalism's dehumanizing organization of citizens into vectors of labor and

profit even as it functions as an ideology to obscure this outcome which is made a reality through the global and political domination of multi-national corporate interests (Duggan XII). According to Lisa Duggan, neoliberal policies grew directly out of conservative attacks on a "*downward redistribution*" of resources fought for and espoused by Civil Rights, Black Power, Third World, and feminist revolutionaries of the 1960s in favor a "movement intent on building a *culture of upward (re)distribution*" (XVII). Thus the gains achieved through social dissent to reengineer the social contract in favor of a state that decenters profit from its national project were short lived and failed in favor of economic and social policies that twinned free market capitalism with the very function of U.S. democracy.[96]

Caesar Wilks repeatedly applies criminality as a false label to those characters who are most heroic. Moreover, the rhetoric Wilks employs to defend his rationale, such as protecting investments or the mill's as well as the state's interests, echoes the public discourses used by the right, and later the Clinton administration, to implement the War on Drugs and limit social services under the rubric of Welfare policy. These discourses misapplied culpability and criminality predominantly to black men and women, so that blackness could be both publically homogenized and demonstrated to be invaluable to the

[96] In *Yo' Mama's Disfunktional!* Robin D.G. Kelley also explains that during the 1980s and 1990s, opportunities for wage labor diminished with significant consequences for men of color at the same time that public spaces began to be increasingly policed, for example in New York City, so that there arose a decline in public leisure spaces which were substituted with the establishment of private spaces of leisure, though these often required economic means to access. These shifts in attitudes toward public and private leisure as well as to the structure of work time in a hierarchical relationship with leisure time, led to the widespread perception that black youth in particular were wasting time even as employment opportunities disintegrated. He states in clear terms the nature of these consequences: "The growth of these privatized spaces has reinforced a class-segregated play world and created yet another opportunity for investors to profit from the general fear of crime and violence" (51). Moreover, "The simultaneous decline in employment opportunities; public leisure spaces for young people; and overly crowded, poorly funded public schools and youth programs simply expanded an urban landscape in which black teenagers—the throwaways of a new, mobile capitalism—became an even larger, more permanent…presence in parks and on street corners" (53). Kelley advances a new reading of "play" that reads the body as a zone of creation and creativity (65).

public good while individuals who did not fit the conservative ethos of industrial, exceptional citizen were perceived to be outliers to the national order. Wilson's plays, on the other hand, champion the blues and the men and women who create it as spaces of resistance and as producers of exactly those values that ultimately undermine this violent rhetoric.[97] In *Blackness and Value*, Lindon Barrett demonstrates the ways that value has been discursively attributed to whiteness and blackness in U.S. culture. He argues that in African American musical forms, an investment in the singing voice as a vehicle of expression "authors competing formations of value to those of the dominant U.S. culture, which understands itself as 'white'" (5). Ester's Bill of Sale translates the human into monetary value and simultaneously that monetary value into cultural value, or a representation of cultural values. By transferring the value of the legal document to a spiritual object for Citizen, Ester negates that valuation and the system of values developed through the monetization of black bodies. Barrett explains, "If the material economic transaction produces racial blackness as a phenotypical and commodifiable essence, the related transaction aims at producing blackness as a negative discursive, cultural, and psychological essence" (56). Furthermore, "The 'singing' voice challenges the primacy and exclusivity of literacy, the indominable [sic] point of concern for Western bourgeois value whether civic, legal, or individual" (5).[98] As a directive vehicle and a mode of counter ontological significance, Aunt Ester's voice denotes value in the play, as it reverses the history of transaction and trade.

[97] See Hazel Carby, Angela Davis, and Roderick Ferguson for detailed discussions of the relationship between the blues and capitalism's creation of "surplus" populations.

[98] Barrett juxtaposes the street and the academy as two zones in which value is produced and lost or limited so that in the U.S. racial logic depends upon an implicit valuation of whiteness over blackness (8).

In his speech 1997 at the National Black Theater Festival, Wilson comments on the historical connection he makes between the devaluation of black life and black art. There he asserts, "I had to go the whole way and speak to the historical condition that occasioned our art to be placed in the hands of someone else as custodians and to affirm the cultural battle that had been taking place since the early 17th century when we came to this country in chains and were perceived as being without language, art, culture and other trappings of civilization, to be without worth or value other than as chattel and as part of a labor system" (486). This excerpt reveals how Wilson understands the affinity that creates Black collectivity—black Americans are part of this history which has organized people in terms of racial categories and membership but that categorization links us to a particular experience of how our lives, our creativity, our labor, our worth is perceived and ranked in a Western hierarchy of value. He emphatically rejects any comparative apparatus that defines black American cultural expression over against Anglo-European or Western artistic standards, stating, "The idea that we are trying to escape from the ghetto of black culture is insulting. It is insulting to us, our parents, and their forebears who have fought to defend and preserve their manners and ways of life. This kind of freedom comes with chains that shackle the mind. It is a freedom that we vehemently reject" (486). In detailing the ways that white hegemony and white privilege function to obscure the daily operations of its violence, Wilson fundamentally rejects colorblind practices as a vehicle for white privilege that promotes the false ideals of assimilation through the integration of black actors into white plays and white productions to the sacrifice of promoting more black theater. He proclaims, "We cannot

talk about renting our bodies to celebrate European culture as some kind of ideal toward which we all must strive and to which homage is due" (490).

The slave ship as both a literal and textual construction in *Gem of the Ocean* and an imaginative terrain represents an otherworldly disruption of an otherwise realist production. The ship as a mobile site of meaning negotiates a politics of memory that both reinvigorates questions of critical nationality and identity formation, as well as functions to belie a U.S. progress narrative of racial integration and conciliation. Colbert explains, "The movement of a ship and the geographical ambiguity associated with trans-Atlantic slavery … introduces perpetual movement as a mechanism to address the loss of the nation state that enslaved Africans suffered" (200). Aunt Ester's oceanic imagination decenters the project of national exceptionalism because it suggests flux and transition. It also seeks to understand the identities forged in the nebulous spaces between national borders.

Gem of the Ocean establishes a dialectical definition of freedom, where freedom exists in here, like the domestic space of the sheltering home, not "down there," but also exists before the rupture of the Middle Passage and can be achieved in the present through an ongoing process of struggle. *Gem* is haunted by the idea of a "back," but in the course of the play, this before, a personal history, a place of origin, a familial past, is often unreachable. The impossibility of going back is dramatized most concretely through Solly's death. In *States of Injury*, Wendy Brown argues that "postmodernity would seem to signify a pervasive condition and experience of 'being after'" (31).

Spectators negotiate several conceptual mediating frameworks whenever viewing an August Wilson American century play, but particularly with this one.[99] These frameworks function to elucidate two identificatory processes that are part of Wilson's project to define and enact African American culture on stage. An audience typically must negotiate between two time periods when watching or reading a Wilson play—the present and the year in which the play's action takes place. John Timpane notes, "an audience's sense of the 'pastness' and 'presentness' of a dramatic situation involves manipulated memories, manufactured expectations, artificial conditioning. . . .an audience constantly triangulates its present situation with the past, present, and likely future" (68). In many ways time is inextricable from the nature of the theater, the realm of drama, but time also has a place in Wilson's plays both as an overarching concern and in the ways it is associated with particular geographical or civic, interiors, to define locations of what can be termed fulfilled national membership. Time and space, then, not only exist as markers of duration and orientation, but time also comes to constitute a spatial schema of a grounded "we-ness." Like Baraka, Wilson's theatrical form demands audience members' awareness of their positions in relation both to the moral and ethical dilemmas of his characters, but by extending the meaning of reality in realist theater, he places audiences within the realm of history.

Gem of the Ocean proposes a conscientious stitching together of time and place. This process is symbolized most clearly through Wilson's deployment of the trope of the

[99] While parsing the entangled temporal and spatial references of a Wilson play is necessary, in particular reference to *Gem of the Ocean*, for understanding Wilson's manipulation of condensed contexts, it is not the intention or purpose of this project to generalize or extrapolate upon theories of spectatorship, particularly black American spectatorship. My readings of audience possibility are based upon formal analyses of how the text is constructed and subsequent suggestions about the effects of the meanings produced by and through these formal elements.

quilt. In Act two, Scene 1, Aunt Ester begins to teach Citizen an alternative understanding of geography. She asks Black Mary to bring a "map" for Citizen to examine. The "map" is actually an image on a quilt. The map presents an alternative epistemology of the geography of black American experience as diasporic. The quilted map displays "a city," "only a half mile by a half mile" (52). The city is "made of bones. Pearly white bones. All the buildings and everything is made of bones" (52). Ester reveals that she has been to this city, and that family members still "live down there in that city made of bones." She continues to reconfirm the new configuration of an oceanic topos, stating, "That's the center of the world. In time it will come to light. The people made a kingdom out of nothing. They were the people that didn't make it across the water." Ester Tyler reveals her worldview as she narrates the existence of a living space at the center of her world—a space where time has not erased those ancestors whose mourned for deaths might have foundered in anonymity.

This worldview argues for the centrality of loss, but Ester is also claiming for herself a fabric of loved ones she never knew. The mapped City of Bones connects Ester through a construct of familial bonds to a heritage that might also be severed. Elam eloquently asserts that Wilson "through Aunt Ester, plunges down into the water, recovering, reclaiming and reconnecting the bodies discarded there, constructing this luminal site as the 'center of the world'" ("Gem of the Ocean" 81). The quilt, then, does not just illustrate a worldview, but it is a memorial to an alternative epistemology that exists through cultural negotiations like the quilt or a dramatic performance. Colbert, too, argues, "Aunt Ester informs Citizen of the centrality of the city, reorienting his

geographical perspective at the same time as she imposes an epistemological lesson" (217). This epistemology is later revealed as the "law of the sea."

The City of Bones is a key metaphor in the Wilsonian imaginary. As Elam argues, it is a submerged space of loss and memorialization. This space is introduced to Wilson's audiences in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, which, set in 1911, follows *Gem* in the century cycle. Wilson dramatizes Herald Loomis's vision of the City of Bones as a visionary response to what Sinikka Grant identifies as a history of trauma that entails "forms of separation" and "the impossibility of mourning" (101). Wilson himself clarified this symbolic terrain: "'What we're doing in the play is we're marking it'"; "'There are hundreds of millions of bones of slaves in chains, entangled in ships. The city is part of all of our history, our experience.'"[100] In his reading of the play, Elam, explains,

> the City of Bones functions not simply as memorial to the Middle Passage but as embodiment, a vibrant place, a destination that Citizen Barlow, the other characters and we, as spectators, can visit. The Middle Passage has traditionally been conceived as a fixed moment in time, as a significant event in the collective memory of African Americans that marks the difficult transition from free peoples to captive Africans in America, but not as a place. In *Gem of the Ocean*, however, the City of Bones is a locality. (80)

Wilson's work expands upon Baraka's theatrical accomplishments by suggesting that the place or topos for memory can be the theater, can also be the body, and the theatrical creates time(s) of memory. Theatrical time, as a component of realist dramaturgy, avails

[100] Maureen Dezell, "A 10-Play Odyssey Continues with *Gem of the Ocean*," 255. *Conversations with August Wilson*. Ed. Jackson R. Byer and Mary C. Hartig 2006. University Press of Mississippi.

audiences of an empathic relationship to ongoing processes of social mourning that Grant interrogates when she asserts the necessity of considering "more carefully the *structure* of trauma, both in terms of subject and in relation to time" (97).

This spatialized conceptualization of an oceanic realm is part of a sublime vision experienced by Harold Loomis on his search for wholeness. He tells those in the boardinghouse, "Loomis done seen some things he ain't got words to tell you" (53). His vision cannot be rendered in language; it is unarticulatable and inassimable to practical or rational thinking. Loomis sees "bones rise up out the water. Rise and walk across the water." The "place" he approaches in his mind's eye as he pronounces his recollections to Bynum and the others gathered around him, is frighteningly real, almost as if it is in front of him, or in the theater with him. He claims, "I come to this place . . .to this water that was bigger than the whole world" (53). In this dramatic enactment of haunting oceanic sphere of influence and animation after death, Wilson draws on the aesthetic tradition of the sublime, the terrifying spectacular over against which mundane consciousness is formed. As the skeletal figures emerge from the water, Loomis notes frequently that he is astonished to see them "Walking on top of the water" (53). With this information in mind, one cannot help but think of the iconic Christian story of Jesus walking on water. Thus, we might associate salvation and the sacred with these visions and these bodies rising from a watery oblivion. As the scene and Loomis's memory progresses, his tale becomes even more astonishing when he shares the detail that as the figures emerge from the water and meet the shore, their bodies are transformed and take on flesh. Loomis recalls this transformation with Bynum's solicitous aid, claiming, "They black. Just like you and me. Ain't no difference." (54). The bodies turn into people, all male, and proceed

to walk down a road past Loomis. Recalling his experience at water's edge causes Loomis' legs to give way under him. He is immobilized by the terrible memory of this inexplicable vision.

Exploring the meaning of dislocation and the historic rupture of the Transatlantic Slave Trade, Glissant argues, "You still preserve on your crests the silent boat of our births, your chasms are our own unconscious, furrowed with fugitive memories" (7). He continues to describe the haunting abyss figured by the Atlantic ocean,

> Experience of the abyss lies inside and outside the abyss. The torment of those who never escaped it: straight from the belly of the slave ship into the violet belly of the ocean depths they went. But their ordeal did not die; it quickened into this continuous/discontinuous thing: the panic of the new land, the haunting of the former land, finally the alliance with the imposed land, suffered and redeemed. The unconscious memory of the abyss served as the alluvium for these metamorphoses. (7)

Wilson's dramatic invention seems to illustrate Glissant's theorization of diasporic relation. This play explores the shape and texture of memory as well as how to name and articulate traumatic memories so that they can be witnessed.[101] Acts of commemoration transform a fixed spatio-temporal sphere, dissolving divisions to create a porous relationship to how the body experiences space and time. Both *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* and *Gem of the Ocean* are haunted by a porous temporality, so that earthly life can be disrupted by the watery sphere of the dead.

[101] See Sinikka Grant. "'Their baggage a long line of separation and dispersement': Haunting and Trans-generational Trauma in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone"* for a thorough discussion of traumatic memory in Wilson's play.

Gem is just as concerned with the lives and conditions of contemporary African American viewers as it is with those who made the transition from the terrifying South to the oppressive North. Wilson uses the lens of an alternative time period, and the "historical juncture" of the early stages of the Great Migration to consider the lives of late-twentieth and early twenty-first century African descendants in America (Elam, "*Gem of the Ocean* and the Redemptive Power of History," 75). This play in particular is deeply concerned with debates about legality—national law versus communal law or mundane versus sacred law—which in turn mirror many of the debates surrounding legal discrimination and the failures of the judicial system to protect Black Americans from unfair sentencing. The discussions about when and how to uphold the nation's laws while surviving within the oppressive conditions of industrial occupations, is directly linked to the "battle" fought for freedom both before, during, following the Civil War, and still ongoing. As Eli and Solly share with Citizen their memories of the War, they remind him, "It's a war and you always on the battlefield" (58). The battles for freedom Eli and Solly speak of are part of an ongoing war against the "rough" conditions of life in America for the working classes, especially Black men who in the context of the play are always already seen as possessions of a capitalist labor system. In Wilson's play, the slave ship as the site of revolutionary transformation recedes, whereas an interest in understanding the latent and lasting psychological, physiological, and emotional effects of historical traumas through an exploration of what might have happened aboard the ship, what it means to survive when so many didn't, as well as the creation of an alternate dimension where those losses, those deaths, those remains can be attributed sacred value takes its place. For Wilson and Morrison, an interest in the individual, the subjective

experience of both trauma and memory take precedence within the sphere of the imaginary as they create spaces of memory in their texts.

A diasporic consciousness shapes the way Wilson imagines identity formation in this play. However, this consciousness is marked by two historical movements—the forced migration from Africa to New World colonies as well as the chosen migration from Southern to Northern states which in itself carries the traumas of loss, separation, and uprootedness. In the prefatory remarks, "The Play," he writes of the subjects in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, "Foreigners in a strange land, they carry as part and parcel of their baggage a long line of separation and dispersement which informs their sensibilities and marks their conduct as they search for ways to reconnect, to reassemble, to give clear and luminous meaning to the song which is both a wall and a whelp of joy." A sense of established community is immediately present as the drama begins; a community that is forged both in and outside the temporal space of the drama. This concept of a community forged, a community made against the historical scene of loss illuminates the political power of diasporic consciousness. Note here Wilson's use of the words, "reconnect" and "reassemble," which should inform a reading of the City of Bones in his plays. Bynum, the spiritual leader in the play, in fact takes as his personal song, "the Binding Song" after he experiences a vision of a place in the ocean of which he has "no words to tell you" (10). Of his Binding Song, he states, "I choose that song because that's what I seen most when I was traveling . . . people walking away and leaving one another. So I take's the power of my song and binds them together." Thus, as we will see with Loomis, Bynum has the ability to bring separated individuals back together along life's journey. Wilson's use of the assembly and connection highlight shared sympathies, empathic bonds, and the

constant work of maintaining a functioning collective, whether it is civic, neighborly or political. “Assemble” and “forged” are of course suggestive of labor, of the factories which drew working class and poor Southerners to Pittsburgh. The language of labor and industry is suggestive of the transformation that has to be struggled through as Bynum leads Harold Loomis through his vision of the City of Bones which is both terrifying and recuperative.

Joe Turner’s Come and Gone explores the shape and texture of memory as well as how to name and articulate memories so that they can be witnessed. For example, Bynum who is as much a guardian of memory as a rootworker, states in a conversation with Loomis, “I looked long back in memory and gathered up pieces and snatches of things to make that song. I was making it up out of myself” (71). The manner Bynum uses to describe memory is as if it is not only stolen, but is an active process, it is safely guarded. Memory is also fragmentary or fragmented by the intervening time of living one’s life. Thus, it is as if memory is woven into cloth like wholeness, or as lyrics in a song, connected by melody or through a songwriter’s act of composing music. Earlier, Bynum has claimed that his former female lovers exist in “memory time” which “lasts longer than any of them ever stayed with me” (47). Memory exists outside of a fixed temporal sphere. However, like the count of a beat or a rhythm, it has its own time. “Memory time” is sustaining, it is comforting, but as Loomis shows, it can also be traumatic. This dual sense of memory inflects the play, giving it a sense of a sacred temporality, but also the possibility that the spirit world crosses over into this life. The play is haunted by a porous temporality, so that earthly life can be disrupted by the watery sphere of the dead.

Acts of commemoration transform a fixed spatio-temporal sphere, dissolving divisions to create a porous relationship to how the body experiences space and time. Both *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* and *Gem of the Ocean* are haunted by a porous temporality, so that the watery sphere of the dead can disrupt earthly life. The explanatory preface in the Plume edition of *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* titled "The Play" (which provides invaluable information about both the temporal and spatial matrices at work), informs readers, "From the deep and the near South the sons and daughters of newly freed African slaves wander into the city." The positioning of the past here as both "deep" and "near" offers a mode for considering Wilson's use of a temporal matrix, audiences are separated from the past by years of distance and this past was one of myriad potentialities but it is also close. By way of a performance studies critical apparatus, Elam asserts that Wilson employs ritual in order to perform the layering in cultural mediation of time. Elam claims,

> Wilson (w)rights history through performative rites that pull the action out of time or even ritualize time in order to change the power and potentialities of the now. This process of (w)righting history necessarily critiques how history is constituted and what history means. It reinterprets how history operates in relation to race and space, time and memory. (*Past as Present* 3)

For Elam, time collapses as "we enter the theater and submit ourselves to a place in which time stops for the time period of the play" (6). The layering of private and internal spaces—the parlor, the imagination, the ship's hull—within the public sphere of the

theater, alongside accumulated temporalities, then, suggests that commemoration calls into being historical particulars on stage.

The play's most compelling argument about memory is spoken by Aunt Ester, who reveals her pointed choice to remember a difficult history over the comfort of forgetting. In *Gem* it is unclear as to whether this history is a lived one, or rather that Aunt Ester professes to have experienced the Middle Passage, because these memories become her own when they are her responsibility to share. She tells Citizen, "I got a strong memory. I got a long memory. People say you crazy to remember. But I ain't afraid to remember. I try to remember out loud. I keep my memories alive. I feed them. I got to feed them otherwise they'd eat me up. I got memories go way back. I'm carrying them for a lot of folk" (43). Ester recognizes that memory can be dangerous and it is often safer, and more conducive to continued psychological health *not* to remember. Aunt Ester possesses an oceanic consciousness such that her understanding of the world is shaped by knowledge of "both sides" of the water (52). Of course these memories which she alludes to, but does not specify, are of traumas that have impressed themselves as much upon her psyche as the ship's violence might leave marks on the body. Yet it is Ester's responsibility to nourish the storehouse of memory in her consciousness. Aunt Ester relays an emotional account of what it was like to experience the losses brought about by the slave trade. She also relays the disorienting experience of sailing on a slave ship to a new place, saying, "What it was driving me to I didn't know. That's what made it so hard. And I didn't have my mother to tell me. That made it harder" (Wilson 53). This confession is particularly poignant given Ester's own status a childless mother. Here and elsewhere Wilson suggests that Ester Tyler is the embodiment of a mother's loss. She

confesses, “I cried a ocean of tears.” Ester cannot achieve the reunion she longs for most of all, with her son Junebug, who was killed in an act of racial violence in the U.S. Thus, her body is wracked with memories which are violent and painful. As a griot, memories are passed to her; her body, like a ship, is a vessel for the lives, thoughts, and knowledge of others. She not only keeps these memories alive but she speaks them.

In the play-text descriptions of the material conditions that defined the actual ordeal of being transported from Africa to the New World in a ship’s hold are by and large absent. However, for the Middle Passage and slave ship to operate simply as metaphors in the play, audience members’ knowledge of these historical, actual conditions reside in a conscious place akin to memory. Like memories, Wilson’s reference to the Middle Passage, his suggestion that a document—a physical record of manumission—draws upon meanings that are accrued through the layering of signs. Furthermore, these signs are interpreted and constructed in a process similar to the way we experience memory—as part of an entirely subjective process of image and sensory construction. When we do receive descriptions of Citizen’s “ride,” they relate to the particulars of *feeling* the environmental conditions of being at sea on the surface of the body. Ester narrates these conditions for Citizen, telling him, “The wind catch up in them sails and you be off across the ocean. The wind will take you every which way. You need a strong arm to steer that boat” (64). She continues, “Don’t you feel it, Mr. Citizen? Don’t you feel that boat rocking? Just a rocking and a rocking. The wind blowing.” However, a description of the ship’s hold is left out of the play. Ester refers to this section of the ship as “the bottom,” telling Citizen, “I been down in the bottom” (65). “The bottom” is not very descriptive, but it evokes the unknowable as well as the limits of

progress. As Citizen struggles to maintain his balance, Solly sings "I got a home in the graveyard," while Eli and Black Mary intone, "Remember Me," speaking for the deceased and forgotten by textual historical archives (65). This communal singing guides Citizen to the City of Bones, a graveyard at the bottom of the Atlantic. While Eli and Black Mary perform the voices of the deceased, they share with Citizen in a process of uncovering that which Aunt Ester refers to as "the law of the sea" where "Life is above all" (68).

Upon my viewing of a staged reading at the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C., Citizen Barlow's transformational imaginative experience of a slave ship in sail, backed by the rest of the cast, represented the most emotionally tense and fraught scene of the play. The performance of a Middle Passage in reverse, one that is *chosen*, opens up multiple questions for audience members. Does Citizen need help? What will happen to him? Why does he *have* to pursue this route to personal salvation? Zaytoun notes that Citizen's "journey" to the City of the Bones is an addition to the play after its premier at The Goodman Theater on April 28, 2003 in Chicago. Commenting upon the nature of John Earl Jelks's rendition of Citizen's journey, Zaytoun writes, "Jelks, sobbing by the end, seemed to viscerally experience every moment of the journey, and we too experience the abhorrence of reliving man's cruelty to man" (717). Jelks contorted his body as he spoke the lines, "I see the people. They chained to the boat," and "They all look like me. They all got my face" (66). Jelks performed Citizen's suffering through open, but tense movements of his body the instant he realizes the Gatekeeper to the City of the Bones is Garret Brown, and as he imagines feeling chains and whip lashes strike his skin.

An effective performance of this scene reveals through gesture, facial expression, and a ballet of contortions that the time and space of the ship at sea affect Citizen's body in the now of 1904 and 2004. It is as if Wilson proposes that in order for Citizen, the "everyman" figure in the play to progress in his life, he is required to undergo the tortures of the slave ship. Of course, this imaginative journey is not entirely cruel; it is also a process of rebirth through a vision of salvation. After all, upon resurfacing and regaining control over the present, a stage direction lets us know that Citizen is "*now reborn as a man of the people*" (69-70). Furthermore, the mark of this spiritual rejuvenation is solidified not just by a vision recognizing the beauty present in the City of Bones, but by the fact that as he is reborn, Citizen starts to "*sing an African lullaby to himself, a song his mother taught him*" (67). This note in the play-text reveals that Citizen's rebirth is tied to the recovery of familial sustenance.

The rendering of a reverse Middle Passage, one that Citizen is "ready" for and chooses to pursue becomes a communal activity that suggests an activism of a different kind and the emergence of a new mode of theatricality in the twenty-first century. Ester states to those gathered in the parlor of 1839 Wylie Avenue, "You can't never have enough help on the boat. Whatever happen you hold on to that boat. You hold on to that boat and everything will be all right" (63). While it seems to me that throughout *Gem of the Ocean*, Wilson is less concerned with embodied experience than he is with *ideas*, like personal freedom and individual ethics in the face of oppressive laws, the play becomes much more interested in expressing sensation and feelings as responses to what Citizen imagines. The focus of the play's attention settles on Citizen's body performing a vision and feeling that vision throughout his body—limbs, torso, face. This attention on the

body takes place as Eli and Black Mary sing "Remember Me" over Aunt Ester's instructions to Citizen. Furthermore, we are reminded that Citizen is traveling to and through a "graveyard" by Solly. Here remembrance has an explicit connection with the body's experience of pain and punishment associated with being in "the bottom of the boat" (65). Thus, the play continues to make concrete connections between the physical and psychological traumatic experiences of individuals who have been buried by history and personal salvation.

Rocking the Boat: Satirizing Collective Identity in George C. Wolfe's *The Colored Museum* and Charles Johnson's *Middle Passage*

In his 1997 article "The Chitlin' Circuit," Henry Louis Gates, Jr. poses the question, if Wilson promotes self-determined cultural production and separate, independent artistic spheres for black playwrights and actors, why then are the heavily-endowed and endorsed theaters of Broadway and academia host to his plays rather than the smaller, independently owned clubs, nonprofit or regional theaters, auditoriums, or even churches, all much more often frequented by primarily black audiences across the country? He wonders what it matters that Wilson's plays attract largely white audiences in 1997 (writing this in 2012 and 2013, I think this question may no longer be representative). However, Gates poses these questions through the implementation of a high/low division. He ultimately settles on a term that might consider the state of black theater in the late twentieth century to create a "populist postmodernism" (148). The cultural nationalism, or "sentimental separatism," developed by Wilson's plays as of 1997, "represents" for Gates, "a romantic attempt to retrieve an imaginary community in the wake of what seems to be a disintegration of the real one" (135). Yet he lauds

Wilson's formal achievements and adeptness with a "luxuriance of language" and poetics, deeming his plays "a tribute to a hybrid vigor, an amalgam of black vernacular, American naturalism, and high modernist influences" (136, 147). Gates finds fault with Wilson's polemics, averring, "One of the functions of literature is to bring back the dead, the absent, the train gone by; you might say that cultural nationalism is what happens when the genre of the elegy devolves into ideology" (135).[102] I would suggest Wilson's plays, rather than operating in the elegiac mode, are works that combat the lament of neoconservatism in the 1980s and its elevation of the white family as a singular unit of national identity and for whom narratives of American consciousness are representative through their exclusions and the ways these narratives function in order to ease national forgetting.[103]

Although, as Gates declares, Wilson's plays are "serious" literature, many of his postmodern contemporaries use humor, satire, and *irreverence* to explore the discursive connection between black identity and the remembrance of the slave trade. Readers of postmodern literary forms are more accustomed to satire, parody, and irony than to spirituality in literature, which can often be misread as sentimentality or melodrama without the understanding of context. Yet black writers also critiqued the claim of the Middle Passage as the right of passage for all black Americans, the cultural inheritance

[102] Gates admits that his own critique is an act of "brutal reductionism," but its presence in a publication, the *New Yorker*, not known for its diversity in hires or published content, is nonetheless questionable and easily overlooked.

[103] See Berlant, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City*, 4 and 11. There she argues, "the dominant idea marketed by patriotic traditionalists is of a core nation whose survival depends on personal acts and identities performed in the intimate domains of the quotidian." She clarifies the representative processes by which the public sphere is replaced by an intimate sphere through the articulation of only a small percentage of experiences: "The official public-sphere campaign to demonize radical justice movements and to make only particular kinds of national life iconic has deployed the very strategies of linking happiness to desire that advertising uses, so that politicians can say that all who hold a certain sustaining set of wishes hold the same intimate feelings about how they should be reflected in national life."

and origin point, through satire. These satirical treatments studied the move to associate individual identity so closely with determining cultural or collective memory and the burden it places on the individual. How, then, might satire shift the grounds of the conversation as it were? To consider this question, I turn to George C. Wolfe's 1986 play *The Colored Museum*, and Charles Johnson's 1990 novel *Middle Passage*. Each of these texts likewise explores the individual through male characters who interact with women. Wolfe, in particular, critiques the mammy trope throughout his play as well as other popular representations of black women. Wolfe's use of humor and Johnson's strategic profanity each satirize conceptions of the value of blackness—cultural and economic.

Wolfe's play throws into sharp relief the notion of race memory to question cultural motivations and individual factors that contribute to racial identity. The play places stereotypes and the cultural distillation of tropes of blackness center stage to reveal the ways that race is tied with performance in U.S. culture and history. To foreground the constructed narratives surrounding black femininity and masculinity and collective identity, each different scene of *The Colored Museum* constitutes an "exhibit," and the first exhibit, that which I'll concentrate on here, is titled "Git on Board." The use of museum or curatorial terminology comments on the ethnographic uses to which black bodies have been put in the museum context. Thus, Wolfe satirizes performance studies' ethnographic roots as well as theater's ability to depict culture or the experience of race with any degree of universality.

Instead of a slave ship named after a saint, religious figure, or with some other mellifluous name, *The Colored Museum* opens as passengers board the brash "Celebrity Slaveship." "Passengers" here is the correct, if surprising term, because in Wolfe's play,

the slave ship is staged as the most modern form of transatlantic travel, the jet or passenger airplane. The ship's port of departure is the Gold Coast. Miss Pat, "black, pert, and cute" facilitates this transatlantic, transhistorical voyage (1). As the attendant, she escorts passengers across the Atlantic and through a "time warp" (4). Christina Knight suggests that this opening scene poses the following question: "To what degree *can* audiences imagine themselves in relation to slaves, particularly when our understandings of their experiences have always been mediated through historical texts and images?" (359). Her question cuts to the heart of why Wolfe's satire operates so well as compelling critique of dominant modes of artistic recovery that enforce a strategy of commemoration, particularly through what Colbert calls a "model of bodily materialization through performance" of which Citizen's recuperative and ecstatic gesturally imagined journey to the City of Bones is an example (7). Through "Git on Board," Wolfe questions claims about authentic experience or authentic ties to historical consciousness. Moreover, discursively linking the body to the past may generate its own violence. Yet the concluding image of the scene will operate to puncture laughter as a distancing mechanism from the play's content.

Nelson George includes *The Colored Museum*, which opened at the Public Theater in 1986, as a significant event in his chronology of "Post-Soul Black Culture" (28).[104] Applying the post-soul periodic and critical definition to the play acknowledges the ways it is a response to popular culture stereotypes about blackness and even the codification of black identity around perceived responsibilities passed between generations in the post-Civil Rights era through the dominance of a single narrative about

[104] See *Buppies, B-Boys, Baps, & Bohos: Notes on Post-Soul Black Culture*. This chronology was originally published in the March 17,1992 issue of the *Village Voice* where George was a columnist in the 1980s and 1990s.

the freedom struggle. *The Colored Museum* disputes the seeming essentialism in Bynum's phrase "blood's memory." This is a phrase that picks up on strands of nationalist thought as well as contemporary notions of genetic memory.

The play parodies value and class divisions through the transposition of the slave ship and the passenger jet. The airplane is organized by class, we learn after Miss Pat repeats her order that there should be no drum playing aboard. Drums are forbidden because they, like call-and-response singing, incite rebellion (2). She muses, "It must bet someone in Coach. But we here in Cabin A are not going to respond to those drums. As a matter of fact, we don't even hear them" (3). Individual value is also translated into cultural cachet After their "shackles" are unfastened, Miss Pat begins to single out passengers for the contributions they will make to American survival in the historical trajectory that reaches from the Middle Passage to the twentieth century appropriation of black cultural forms.

> Why the songs *you* are going to sing in the cotton fields, under the burning heat and stinging lash, will metamorphose and give birth to the likes of James Brown and the Fabulous Flames. And you, yes *you*, are going to come up with some of the best dances. The best dances! The Watusi! The Funky Chicken! And just think of what *you* are going to mean to William Faulkner.
>
> All right, so you're gonna have to suffer for a few hundred years, but from your pain will come a culture so complex. *And*, with this little item here . . . (*She removes a basketball from the overhead compartment*.) . . . you'll become millionaires! (3)

The comedic tone of this scene parodies Black Arts narratives, specifically Baraka's, of the development of the blues and jazz from suffering, rage, and oppression, so that the blues becomes the dominant mode of black being in the U.S.As travel progresses, the vessel encounters turbulence after the captain warms Miss Pat that they are entering a "time warp." Knight argues, "turbulence becomes an apt metaphor for how the past irrupts into the present" (359).

Moreover, figuring the slave ship as a technology of the present and removing it from the logics of property ownership, the transnational, corporate airplane is a postmodern technology that does not retain the same relationship to the human body as either the house or the ship. Yet even the pairing of ostensibly chosen travel that is also, on the surface, free of class and racial divisions (though we know that this is not the case in practice), the plane makes the history of the Middle Passage available to a wider audience. Commemoration is not an available strategy within the logic of the parody because commemoration as a ritual of social recovery and sustenance is itself fodder for skepticism. Furthermore, "Git on Board" opens with the display of a series of images, "*Images we've all seen before, of African slaves being captured, loaded onto ships, tortured. The images flash, flash, flash*" (1). This juxtaposition of painful history, artistic representations, with comedy creates a disjointed effect, an inability to locate oneself on terra firma. As passengers depart the flight, having landed in Savannah, we are made more aware of the precarious nature of their status once interpellated through the slave ship by the presence of three "slaves," two men and a woman, also rotating on the baggage carousel, "*complete with luggage and I.D. tags around their necks*" (5).

Charles Johnson's novel, *Middle* Passage also explores law at sea as it relates to the individual's relationship to several structuring organizations and institutions. For Johnson, the law of the sea primarily concerns survival and learning how to depend upon one's "yokefellows" and the motley crew constituting a nation through affinity rather than birth or heritage (136). The ship in this novel, the *Republic*, is not conducive to survival. In fact, its instability and diseased state is constantly a threat to human life aboard. The *Republic* amplifies the oblivion of the Atlantic rather than sustaining its passengers and captives. The ship represents the incontrovertible problem of blackness in an individualistic nation, and blackness offers an irresolvable tension as the ship's hold is the space of blackness, yet the captives cannot be contained there and Rutherford is able to navigate the disparate spaces of belonging on the ship. His body is a mobile interruption of the hierarchical divisions of the ship's spatial logic. Following the only partially successful Allmuseri mutiny, Rutherford characterizes the ship's fate in the following manner: "That figured, in a way, I mean that the blacks would not take the helm of the *Republic* until the ship was damned near damaged beyond repair, a shadow of her former self, her days of greatness gone—in other words, a vessel you couldn't give away, even if you tossed in a thousand-league guarantee" (155). In this heavy-handed metaphor, Johnson considers the fate of the nation as it is bound too firmly to rigid perceptions of identity and a system of governance imbricated with capitalist commodification. At the end of the novel, the *Republic* no longer exists, it has been destroyed and its timbers have sunk, leaving only a few survivors to remember the horrors that took place on its decks, including Rutherford, who managed to salvage the written text of the novel from the abyss.

While August Wilson's plays reference the Middle Passage through poetically oblique language and lyrical monologues, *Middle Passage* is graphic. In his novel, the slave ship is a tomb and a toilet. Johnson's novel is irreverent in its treatment of history. *Middle Passage* is a palimpsest as it rewrites the literary genres of the picaresque novel, the slave narrative, and revises Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* and *Benito Cereno* through the perspective of a black stowaway—as opposed to a sailor by choice or a fugitive from slavery. Thus, Johnson's novel is less concerned with historical consciousness than it is with exploring the uses to which history is put in twentieth-century historical fiction as a vehicle to explore discourses that connect race and identity through depictions of the slave trade.[105] Rutherford Calhoun does seek freedom at sea, but it is a freedom from debt and dependence. *Middle Passage* is the story of an individual's transformation from solitary ex-slave with a gambling problem to a socially conscious and conscientious caretaker. Johnson draws upon his vast knowledge of Western philosophy to shape his protagonist, Rutherford Calhoun, a literate man who is well-versed in Western philosophical traditions and their flaws. Yet this knowledge, for most of the novel, makes him an outsider among black men and among the crewmembers aboard the *Republic*, the slaver that is traveling from New Orleans to Senegambia and back for slaves. Written in the vein of a popular yarn with tendencies toward noir or crime tales, the slave ship is a space of adventure, rebellion, mystery, and above all decay. The ship is in a permanent

[105] See Samira Kawash, "Haunted Houses, Sinking Ships: "Race, Architecture, and Identity in *Beloved* and *Middle Passage*," 77. Kawash claims, "Both Morrison and Johnson seek to write the silenced experience of slavery into history, to imagine and convey the unspeakable, and by mobilizing the resources of experimental narrative forms, to expose the complicity of literary conventions of realism with the historical position of the Master." Although I agree with a portion of Kawash's argument here, in particular Johnson seems to relish providing the more gory descriptions of conditions on board the slave ship; however, these do not seem to operate in pursuit of history, but in understanding how literature can aestheticize capitalist decrepitude and the excesses of capitalism's cruelty as they pertain to the body's abjection. For a reading of *Middle Passage* as a sustained critique of late capitalism in the 1980s, see Rushdy.

state of disrepair, its wooden boards constantly reassembling themselves at sea so that the ship is a vessel representing flux. As its suggestive name might indicate, the *Republic* is also a satirical microcosm of power where no one has a vote or a voice excepting the greedy, tyrannical, and, we are informed, perverse captain Falcon.[106]

If the "law of the sea" resonates as a form of diasporic consciousness, underscoring the fluidity of affiliation for Wilson, in *Middle Passage*, the law of the sea is survival at all costs in a realm of oblivion. Of the *Republic*, Rutherford declares, "This was not a ship; it was a coffin" (105). At the moment the ship finally founders, Rutherford describes the sea as a "chaosmos of roily water and fire, formless mist and men" (183). Constructing a neologism of chaos and cosmos, Johnson's Atlantic is characterized by a terrifying sublimity. "Flux," specifically "the flux," does not just refer to a state of transition, flow, transmutation, or the radiation of energy across a field, it is also an outmoded term for diarrhea or dysentery. This conflation of the slave ship and the captive's body corresponds with the national allegory. The ship's lack of stasis maps onto the captive's body and Rutherford's, only the Allmuseri resist its tyranny, while Rutherford continually strives to navigate his insider/outsider status.

Perhaps the most disturbing aspect of the novel is its juxtaposition of an irreverent tone and generic markers with the detailed descriptions of nausea, sickness, and vomiting that seem to shape so much of the experience of blackness on board the *Republic*. Indeed, the sphere of blackness is the ship's hold, which is not a sphere for the inculcation of

[106] There is much to critique in Johnson's representation of Captain Falcon who is rendered as impaired and sexually perverse throughout the novel. His physical disabilities are meant to symbolize his moral turpitude and to enhance an overall air of disgust that surrounds his physical person in order to make the captain of a slave ship monstrous. This conflation of physical unsightliness or abnormality with low moral character and greed draws upon novelistic tropes but is also complicit with depictions of disability as freakish.

revolution but of death. Rutherford observes, for example, "the slaves still lay in a foot of salt water in a hold blacker than the belly of Jonah's whale, forced below by the boatswain's cat-o'-nine-tails. Some rested on the laps of others, down there in scummy darkness foul with defecation, slithering with water snakes" (74). Moreover, the African captive's body can be molded to the ship's boards in a maneuver to maximize profit. It is difficult for Rutherford to conceptualize where the ship ends and the captive body begins in his excessive detailing of the body's explosive reaction to transportation. "Black Vomit" is one of the illnesses that spread throughout the *Republic* following the Allmuseri mutiny. Is this an infection or a reaction? Is it symptomatic of the universe of the ship or a response to the loss of perceived order, which Rutherford struggles to rectify for the remainder of his time at sea?

Rutherford concludes of his experience in the Middle Passage,

> Nay, the States were hardly the sort of place a Negro would pine for, but pine for them I did. Even for *that* I was ready now after months at sea, for the strangeness and mystery of black life, even for the endless round of social obstacles and challenges and trials colored men faced every blessed day of their lives, for there were indeed triumphs, I remembered, that balanced the suffering on shore, small yet enduring things, very deep . . ." (179)

The reader is not sure whether to applaud his resilience and newfound commitment to a cause—racial solidarity and family with Isadora—or to laugh at his naïveté as a survivor, not bound to the abyss. We wonder exactly what he has learned, and even why his story needs a moral resolution at all? What realization can possibly resolve the questions left

unanswered by the desolation of the *Republic* and most of those who set out from Africa to New Orleans? What exactly was brought back from Africa? A visitation in the form of his deceased father, taken on by the captured sublime Allmuseri god, leaves Rutherford reeling with nausea and unburdened by an alliance to the perceived ship order. Instead, what he brings back to shore with him from the "asceticism of the Middle Passage" to be "made" into a "cultural mongrel" (187). Johnson's novel and his protagonist call into question the terms I have used to create a critical genealogy of the literature of the slave ship in post-Civil Rights black literature.

Conclusion

Theater generates complicated questions for examining how fictional texts rely upon and produce memory, whether it is cultural, experiential, or created on the stage. Though plays do not have the same drawing power as film or television, theatrical performances certainly offer audiences a level of interaction in the artistic project that adds texture to the ways memories are produced by and through these productions. Playwright Suzan-Lori Parks has theorized the ways that theatrical productions themselves constitute history-making events. In "Possession," Parks argues, "A play is a blueprint of an event: a way of creating and rewriting history through the medium of literature" ("Possession" 4). Parks suggests that theatrical events can construct history through an architectural act of artistic design that involves many actors. She continues,

> Since history is a recorded or remembered event, theatre, for me, is the perfect place to 'make' history—that is, because so much of African-American history has been unrecorded, dismembered, washed out, one of

> my tasks as playwright is to—through literature and the special strange relationship between theatre and real-life—locate the ancestral burial ground, dig for bones, find bones, hear the bones sing, write it down (Parks 4).

For Parks theater offers the ability "to create 'new' historical events" as she states. The playwright, then, might be a medium facilitating historical actualization and its reception. Her reliance on the images of interment, of those places where we go to acknowledge our dead, and on the physical residue of human life echoes Wilson's own "City of Bones," the conceptual but internalized space of Atlantic and oceanic memory commemorated by Citizen Barlow, Aunt Ester, Solly Two Kings, Black Mary, and Eli on stage.

Parks's title draws readers' attention to the spiritual or supernatural connotations of "possession," that one's body can be taken possession of by the spirit or soul of a deceased individual. Theatrical performances might also rely upon a kind of empathic possession of an audience member by an actor or performative representation of a character. In an examination of Wilson's terminology, "blood memory," which appears in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, Harry Elam, Jr. discusses the "ritualized, collective embodiment" of blood memory as a moment of possession (*Past as Present* 203). Commemoration, likewise, necessitates embodied responses, whether in the form of vocal response, tears, claps, nodding the head, listening, and so on, in order to create a bodily record of the commemorated. In *Gem* Barlow is possessed by an act of commemoration in the process of cleansing, self-renewal on the path to responsible and engaged leadership. He is possessed by empathy as he experiences the imagined lashes of whips and the chafing burden of chains placed on him by the Gem's white crew. Like

Parks, Wilson demonstrates that remembrance is active and participatory. Elam further explores the convergence of the sacred and mundane through ritual with a discussion of the Yoruban possession dance. He explains, "the moment of possession itself is part of a performance tradition in which the agent, the person possessed, shares his/her spiritual consciousness with the gathered community" (204). For Elam, time collapses as "we enter the theater and submit ourselves to a *place* in time stops for the time *period* of the play" (6 emphasis mine). Elam argues that the "ritualized junctures," like Citizen's ride on the *Gem* constitute episodes of return in Wilson's play. Referring to Herarld Loomis's testimony in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, he explains these junctures "return us to originating moments of rupture within African American history—particularly the Middle Passage and slavery. Such scenes work to refigure the forgetting, the amnesia, the losses of history and the history of loss; they are signal moments in which Wilson ritualizes time, memory, and history" (23).

The active role of the audience member-participant in *Gem of the Ocean* can be thought of not just in Wilson's creation of moments of commemoration, but as part of a process of witnessing new formulations of nationalist recovery. Mary L. Bogumil quotes an interview published in the *Paris Review* in which Wilson claims, "'I was, and remain, fascinated by the idea of an audience as a community of people who gather willingly to bear witness'" (55). Through a combination of realist dramaturgy combined with the potential for, even expectation of, spiritual transformation, his plays develop a politics of subjectivity that incorporates the ethic of witnessing to forge empathic and cognitive bridges to the experiences of others. The three writers' works juxtaposed here contend with the irresolvable conservative backlash and counterrevolution to the black, feminist,

and Third World decolonization revolutionary movements of the preceding two decades that took place during the 1980s. A late-twentieth-century Wilsonian cultural nationalism critiques neoliberal national policies that erase individuality to rely upon monolithic visions of community and American experience to in turn argue for the ways real histories of struggle must be commemorated in order to speak the existence of cultural values over structures of inequality.

Chapter 3:

Embodying the "Time of Slavery": Mourning Sickness in Three Black Feminist Novels

I believe in living.
I believe in birth.
I believe in the sweat of love
And in the fire of truth.

And i believe that a lost ship,
steered by tired, seasick sailors,
can still be guided home
to port. --Assata Shakur, *Assata: An Autobiography*[107]

In this chapter I will examine three novels, Alice Walker's *Meridian*, Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow*, and Gayl Jones's *Corregidora*. Each of these novels includes detailed representations of an African American woman's body, and each author situates her protagonist's present body explicitly within a history of enslavement and of the transatlantic slave trade. These novels disrupt fixed notions of temporality to demonstrate the ways the body means differently across periods. By marking the black woman's body as a vessel of meaning through an elastic relationship between the past and the present moment, Walker, Marshall, and Jones question the ongoing effects of the "time of slavery." My analysis focuses on descriptions of embodied experience, particularly the body in pain, which these authors use as strategies to explore how and what this history means. These novels also take up the problematic issue of generations and the generational transmission of racial identity through the figure of the female

[107] Assata Shakur, "Affirmation," *Assata: An Autobiography*. Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1987, 1.

ancestor.[108] Walker, Marshall, and Jones specifically engage histories of medical experimentation, forced sterilization, and sexual exploitation faced by uncountable and uncounted women of African and indigenous descent in the New World. Generations in these novels disrupt patriarchy because they challenge patriarchal dominance through the homosociality of women. Women's lives are entangled; women challenge and burden each other. My readings will expand upon the themes of commemoration, tradition, and kinship that were explored in the works of Amiri Baraka and August Wilson.

Black American novelists of the late-twentieth century give narrative flesh to what Saidiya Hartman terms the "time of slavery." By this Hartman means, "the relation between the past and the present, the horizon of loss, the extant legacy of slavery, the antinomies of redemption (a salvational principle that will help us overcome the injury of slavery and the long history of defeat) and irreparability" ("Time of Slavery" 759). In Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, the eponymous spirit of both the "*Sixty Million and more*" anonymous humans lost to the slave trade and Sethe's daughter, recalls the following

[108] For a brilliant exploration of the role of the ancestor in black women's fiction, see Karla Holloway, *Moorings & Metaphors*. Here Holloway focuses on the specific metaphor of the ancestor in black women's fiction. She attends to the function of spirituality in the texts she examines to argue, "the recovered metaphor that articulates the relationship between soul and gender is the metaphor of the goddess/ancestor. I focus on this subjective metaphor to illustrate the importance of cultural, spiritual, and metaphysical places in both African and African-American women's writing" (2). She introduces three frameworks for her analysis: "revision, (re)membrance, and recursion" (12-13). These terms are particularly instructive as I focus on the metaphor of the body to understand the incorporation of narrative strategies of what I call mourning sickness and the bodily sublime because Holloway foregrounds the body and demonstrates how patterns come to establish principles of recovery in literature. See also, Caroline Rody, *The Daughter's Return*. Here Rody argues that black American and Caribbean women writers "foreground the mother-daughter relationship as the site of transhistorical contact" in their fiction as a way to "recast the conventions of historical fiction as well as received narratives" about what she calls the "founding trauma, New World slavery" (1). She argues that the mother-daughter trope demonstrates writers' claims on the past as a "female realm" (7). Rody examines the "anti-realist narrative modes" employed by black women writers in bringing about the daughter's return in their fiction. Theorizing the role of the ancestor in black women's fiction, Rody argues … I situate my work in this scholarly tradition by examining novels about twentieth-century women, whether they are immersed in the post-Civil Rights period as survivors of the movement, or navigating the complicated relationship between labor and the history of sexual exploitation. These characters, however, are for the most part forced by the narrative to understand present-day traumas through physical experiences that become emblematic of the sexual exploitation of women in slavery as well as the diaspora of their ancestors throughout the New World.

about the fundamental way her captivity and transport in the hold of a slave ship reoriented her understanding of how time functions in the world: "All of it is now it is always now there will never be a time when I am not crouching and watching others who are crouching too" (248). The unending "time" of the Middle Passage is located in the body and as a psychic wound or scar that haunts the present in the embodied form of Beloved.

Since this chapter focuses on the period in which Black and Third World Feminisms proliferated as antiracist pedagogical and consciousness-raising programs, I apply intersectional feminist analyses in order to better understand literary representations of the Othered female body as a site upon which state power can assert itself. However, the dialogic and intertextual nature of these texts should not be overlooked; they respond to and challenge each other in profound ways. Each of these novels explores ontological questions and the phenomenological orientation of bodies in particular spaces—the revolutionary's home or place of worship, the ship, the blues club, as well as the mind within the universe of the body itself—through the lenses of indigenous philosophy in combination with the international political projects of black feminists who constructed transnational narratives, particularly of Afro-Caribbean and African American women's experiences.[109] Thus, I draw upon Cherríe Moraga's "theory in the flesh" as a way to understand detailed and visceral literary representations of women's bodies, which have historically been fixed discursively and aesthetically

[109] Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*. See chapter 3, "The Orient and Other Others." Ahmed's reading of Fanon's "bodily schema" is highly instructive for developing a theory of bodily mimesis in the written word and as text. How to account for the reader's gaze following the racial history of legibility whereby physical bodies become texts upon which race must be discerned in the U.S. context. See Robyn Wiegman, *American Anatomies*, Duke UP, 1995. If as Ahmed shows, objects orient certain bodies within space, then the ship becomes a metaphor for how black bodies are oriented within modernity and domestic capitalism. Furthermore, Ahmed proposes the body's surface in a particular manner such that the surface of the body operates in the social in certain ways and that the social and history operate upon the body (111).

through the lens of racist and sexist Western discourses.[110] In *This Bridge Called My Back*, Moraga exemplifies a theory based upon narration when she writes, "We do this bridging by naming our selves and by telling our stories in our own words" (23). As Moraga and other women of color feminists argue, narration provides a structured language and initiates a new vocabulary by and for women to name these experiences as a mode of consciousness. In my reading of Walker, Marshall, and Jones, I suggest that languages of the body including particular sensations, illness, dis-ease, and empowering bodily productions, enact multiple critiques of state orders including capitalism, imperialism, and the colonization of the mind through ideology. However, I question the work that physical suffering does in these texts as well as how certain bodies become the repositories for memory and cultural sanctity.

I turn first to Walker's novel to explore her representation of female revolutionary embodiment. This reading will explore the physical ordeal the protagonist endures in order to be cleansed of her shame and quietism in the face of U.S. imperialism and during the black liberation struggle. Finally, I propose that Gayl Jones's novel queers memory. [111] Each of these readings pursues the question as to why the twentieth-century black woman's body becomes the site for memory, and memory transmission. Moreover, I suggest that each novel seeks to understand deep and personal grief, grief that is an

[110] See *This Bridge Called My Back* 23. The anthology defines this theory from the voices of multiple contributors: "A theory in the flesh means one where the physical realities of our lives—our skin color, the land or concrete we grew up on, our sexual longings—all fuse to create a politic born out of necessity." And: "This is how our theory develops. We are interested in pursuing a society that uses flesh and blood experiences to concretize a vision that can begin to heal our 'wounded knee.'"

[111] I have had to make several choices as to which novels and writers to include in this chapter. For example, because my heuristic is the slave ship as a mode of historical orientation and critique of the nation, I chose not to write about Sherley Anne Williams's very good and very moving *Dessa Rose*, a neo-slave narrative which seeks to reclaim the abused and neglected enslaved woman's body as a site of power and as experiencing pleasure.

affective and psychological state related to the African diaspora.[112] Memory, identity, and the question of the female revolutionary interact throughout these texts to produce an affective state I will refer to as mourning sickness.[113] However, in order to understand the authors' proposals of what Roderick Ferguson has termed "something else to be" in *Aberrations in Black*, I identify a specific set of parameters for embodied experience that relate to the slave trade, displacement, vulnerability, and the womb as a wound (110). The figure of the African mutineer and sailor ultimately suggest freedom, agency, and chosen mobility. However, no such figure exists for black women writers to draw upon. Thus, these protagonists are provided a role as negotiators of the past and present, and as such given power and agency over historical trajectories through narratives of bodily healing and release. The mutineer, gendered male and exemplified by Cinque, the leader of the *Amistad* revolt, can only be seen as an American hero whose desire for freedom is a sign of his humanity. What happens when a woman leads a "murderous" revolt? What kinds of revolutionary activities can be made legible if the voices of the female participants in Nat Turner's uprising achieved historical tenor? What role do women play in revolution? How do women implement revolutionary consciousness in the public sphere? As the excerpt from the "Affirmation" which opens Assata Shakur's memoir attests, when the ship is the dominant metaphor for the nation state, then its success depends upon the strengths, abilities, and vision of its sailors to steer it safely to port. This figure, moreover, clarifies the U.S., as well as hemispheric, forms of revolutionary

[112] See Carole Boyce Davies, *Black Women Writing and Identity: Migrations of the Subject.*

[113] I am grateful to Jennifer James for suggesting this term to me in a conversation about this work. This terminology is entirely hers and stems from my interest in naming a specific form of grief that I felt was being explored by black feminists and writers in the 1970s. This term is by no means meant to pathologize such responses to historical traumas, but rather to provide a name for a variety of artistic and literary representational strategies, metaphors, and a field of emotional terrain enacted by the novel.

consciousness that arise within the paradoxical framework of American freedom and historical revolution.

Beloved haunts this chapter and its analysis but remains always on the periphery, pushing back against conceptions of stasis, formal memory, and strategic forgetting. In *Ghostly Matters*, Avery Gordon argues, "The ghost is not simply a dead or a missing person, but a social figure, and investigating it can lead to that dense site where history and subjectivity make social life" (8). *Beloved* demonstrates the multiple valences of haunting and ghosts on the social texture of the late-twentieth-century United States for "post-slavery subjects" white and black. The Middle Passage is central to Morrison's novel in a way that I see as a model for this chapter. The Middle Passage is the haunting, come to life in the figure of Beloved, a spectral figure who, as stated above, embodies several pasts.[114] Morrison recognizes the complicated haunting that her novel relies upon--national subconscious--and invokes--supernatural and historical. In her "Foreword" to the 2004 edition of the novel, she writes of its inception, "To invite readers (and myself) into the repellant landscape (hidden, but not completely; deliberately buried, but not forgotten) was to pitch a tent in a cemetery inhabited by highly vocal ghosts" (xvii). And if the Middle Passage is the haunting, then Baby Suggs's voice in the clearing provides the impetus to take up the questions of embodiment and re-membering. Suggs demands of her congregants, "'Here,' she said, 'in this place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard. . . . Love your hands! Love them. Raise them up and kiss them. Touch others with them, pat them together, stroke

[114] A reading of the novel that proposes to historicize her artistic intervention will place the novel in conversation with the policies and legislation of the 1980s that worked to reverse Civil Rights victories and resulted in the production of economic hardships and rigid class, race, and gender distinctions.

them on your face 'cause they don't love that either. *You* got to love it, *you!*'" (103-104). The novels examined in this chapter make historical traumas legible through bodily pain and its signs and symptoms in order to explore forms of therapeutic language and consciousness as well as instantiate women's resistance within gendered and patriarchal spaces. They ask: What if 'the site of memory' is actually the body, not external to it?[115]

In *Beloved*, Morrison "returns" her readers to a problematized (and problematic) view of the mother, but she also brings the visceral to the fore in a novel that focuses on the experiences and conditions of bodies in movement.[116] Mourning sickness describes a prolonged affect experienced by each of the three protagonists in the novels explored in this chapter. I want to propose mourning sickness as a way to speak about the confluence of political challenges to the dominant culture made by black feminists in the 1970s. Mourning explicitly changes to an act of refusal, an act of politicizing the personal, when it moves from private spaces to the public sphere. My reading of Meridian Hill's physical responses to her interior struggles with memory, the role of a revolutionary, and the guilt she feels for her mother's sacrifices will demonstrate that for Walker, grief is a very

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[115] Toni Morrison. "The Site of Memory." *What Moves at the Margin*. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2008). Pierre Nora, "les lieux des memoire"

[116] Though it may not be entirely possible here, the political economy of the proliferation of these stories of mourning, published by small feminist presses and powerful publishing houses alike, is territory requiring detailed scholarly attention. Toni Morrison's role in bringing these stories to reader's attention, and possession, as an editor at Random House should not be overlooked. During her tenure for the company, she published Angela Davis's *Autobiography*, novels by Toni Cade Bambara, and Gayl Jones. She also researched, edited, and published *The Black Book* for which she first located and read the story of fugitive slave Margaret Garner. How might her work as an editor be understood as an act informed by a Black Arts politics and a Black Aesthetic? See Boris Kachka. "Who is the Author of Toni Morrison." *New York* Magazine. April 29, 2012. Web. "Morrison the editor had an agenda, as she freely admits. 'In my mind, there's all these people out here marching, talking, writing, or being shot,' she says. 'I thought that I was contributing powerfully to the so-called record.' The problem was that the institutions that were elevating her books were still ghettoizing them. A Random House salesman told her he couldn't sell her books 'on both sides of the street.' She learned never to publish three 'black' books in a season, because they would all get reviewed together, no matter how different they were" (3). See also, Madhu Dubey. *Black Women Novelists and the Nationalist Aesthetic*. Dubey argues that *Sula* and *Corregidora* share remarkable continuities. However, she reads *Corregidora* as a challenge to "the reading codes of the Black Aesthetic ideology" (72). Dubey notes, "When *Corregidora* was first published, black reviewers castigated its 'politically incorrect' presentation of 'sexual warfare' in the black community" (73).

powerful and motivating emotion in the Black Liberation Struggle. *Meridian* is a testament to the power of grief to move individuals to action. It reveals that grief, both individual and collective, can be a tool for political action and expediency. Meridian and Truman Held's encounter with Miss Margaret Treasure at the end of the novel underscores the potential for transformation that occurs when others share in and acknowledge your own solitary grief. These novels explore the relationship between motherhood and memory. In the United States, the history of black motherhood has a long history of being defined legally as lacking personhood, existing outside the realm of citizenship, and as explicitly harmful to the social good in the words of *The Negro Family: A Case for National Action* (the "Moynihan Report"). Mourning sickness suggests a grief that is internal, but not yet wholly "unhealthy." I also use it here to name a relationship between mother and daughter that is one of expulsion.

In each of these novels the epiphanies of freedom and the cohesion of revolutionary consciousness reside in the radical and revelatory nature of song. Like writing, songs are the result of bodily actions; these two communicative acts necessitate audience and bring the body's will into being in visible and meaningful ways that subvert discourse. Women's musical performances or listening habits might be thought of as moments of contestation. Music of course has a temporal structure of rhythm and beat that impact the body in felt ways. Music in each of these novels soothes, shapes, or holds memory. In *Praisesong for the Widow*, Marshall uses lyrics from popular songs, poetry, and references to jazz records as a way to narrate Avey's transformation and her husband's vexed integration. Meridian discovers in gospel, folk songs, and the blues a record of memory that she learns to live for; she discovers in black musical forms the real

weight of her choice to be a revolutionary outsider. Finally, Ursa sings in order to heal her traumatized mind and body. Ursa's blues are oral performances of mourning sickness that instantiate treatment as they simultaneous represent an affective subversion of racial and patriarchal violence.

"Blue Spells": Narrating the Bodily Sublime in Alice Walker's *Meridian*

> Revolutionaries are the smashers of myths and the destroyers of illusions. They have always died and lived again to build new myths. They dare to dream of a utopia, a new time of equilibrium and synthesis. --Pat Robinson and Group, "A Historical and Critical Essay for Black Women in the Cities, June 1969" [117]

> We must begin to understand that a revolution entails not only the willingness to lay our lives on the firing line and get killed. In some ways, this is an easy commitment to make. To die for the revolution is a one-shot deal; to live for the revolution means taking on the more difficult commitment of changing our day-to-day life patterns. --Frances Beal, "Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female" [118]

"'God,'" exclaims Truman Held upon seeing Meridian Hill stand down a tank in a small Southern town, "'How can you not love somebody like that!'" (7). This is our introduction to Meridian, an activist and solitary woman, who in this incident is protesting for the admittance of black children to a rip off of a sideshow spectacle of a dead white woman. "As she drew nearer the tank, it seemed to grow larger and whiter than ever and she seemed smaller and blacker than ever." The tank is a symbol of white power, while Meridian's frail body stands in protest. In just the space of a moment, though, we learn that Truman's estimation of her strength has little relation to reality. The description of her physical condition suggests she is either very ill or dead. Her hand is "bony, ice-cold" when Truman Held, her sometime lover and comrade, grasps it. Her

[117] Pat Robinson and Group, "A Historical and Critical Essay for Black Women in the Cities, June 1969." *The Black Woman: An Anthology* 267.

[118] Frances Beal, "Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female" 121.

face is "alarm[ing]," "wasted and rough, the skin a sallow, unearthly brown, with pimples across her forehead and on her chin" (10). Her pallor is underscored by the way in which she has been transported to her home. "Four men had brought her home, hoisted across their shoulders exactly as they would carry a coffin, her eyes closed, barely breathing, arms folded across her chest, legs straight" (10). Truman is "alarmed" by Meridian's physical state, particularly her visage: "Her eyes were glassy and yellow and did not seem to focus at once. Her breath, like her clothes, was sour" (10). This description of Meridian, rendered such as it is near death, or as McDowell asserts, she and we experience a "mystical 'dying-into-life'" (174), does not paint a confident portrait of a subversive whose radicalism provides spiritual sustenance or physical robustness. Truman's shock at the state of her body translates for the reader into spectacle. Meridian's body is in decline, and in many ways it represents an affront to Truman and a physical reminder of her own martyrdom.[119] Her illness is shocking because it has disrupted Truman's image of her as a strong black woman.

This image of Meridian's body as compact or "folded" constructs a moment of imagistic allusiveness. Meridian's body here is meant to suggest that of a captive on board a slave ship. As the men carry her home, she is not just paralyzed, but she seems to be taking up little space or is compressed and constrained by necessity. Moreover, her body has been rearticulated so that it is rendered in transportation. This introductory

[119] Deborah McDowell, "The Self in Bloom: Walker's *Meridian*." McDowell notes the "richly symbolic" nature of the novel's first chapter in which she suggests Meridian must confront "the god of tradition." She continues to argue that Walker presents Meridian in "stark contradistinction to the images presented of the mummy woman." McDowell finds the original description of Meridian's body to "resemble a male's." While McDowell argues that Walker's description of Meridian's body critiques normative gender roles to show that Meridian is doing away with traditional societal restrictions across the board, I would like to understand the ways that Meridian's body is depicted as ill and exceptional. See Dubey 127. Dubey reads Meridian's comatose state following her confrontation with the tank in the first chapter as mimicking the "paralysis" of Marilene O'Shay, and that her bodily disintegration, i.e. her stuttering, headaches, and "theatrical paralysis," is a "bodily revolt against the repressive Saxon regime."

image of the protagonist informs how readers are to perceive Meridian's body as often without gendering attributes and as asexual. *Meridian*'s narrative structure and content are deeply informed by photography and the significance of photography to the success of the Civil Rights Movement. The photographic qualities of this series of introductory images are similar to the post-card like rendering of the grotesque body of Marilene O'Shay, an embodied representation of lies and hypocrisy. These two women's bodies are revealed to be commodified vessels of meaning, Meridian's is a puncture in the temporal frame of the novel, referring the reader back to the slave ship while the actual person resists her body as a sign of women's labor power or lack thereof in the 1970s.

Meridian and its protagonist explore themes and figures that are central throughout Walker's body of work. In particular, the importance of a history, artistry, and critical power that Walker relegates as unique properties of African American women, specifically African American women of the South. The African American woman's body as a vessel, which both contains and exhibits history is a strong thread throughout Walker's work. In the essay "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens," originally published in 1974, Walker questions what purpose the "Saintly" image of the Black Grandmother serves and opposes this trope with the female ancestor as a thwarted artist (233). The older black woman as a culture bearer, whether by choice, necessity, or artistic invention within the diegesis of the text, will emerge as a dominant trope throughout late twentieth century literature both by and about African Americans. This image functions to counteract the vulnerability to the threat of rape women face and the misogyny that treated women as sources of pleasure and self-pride. In *Meridian*, Walker pushes against the social logic of this cultural trope by figuring the body itself as a physical site of

memory and spiritualism. This ambiguous move presents readers with a critical paradox. Though there are multiple sites of memory, including the Sojourner and the Sacred Serpent, each of which is both a burial site and reminder of the nation's crimes against its populations, the human body becomes the primary teller of memories, yet speaking these memories, especially those of sexual violence, does not always offer resolution or recovery. The novel suggests that recovery can be achieved through communal ritual, but these rituals are most often associated with the death of a loved one or national hero, not a coming together to release a woman from the shame of sexual victimization or even early motherhood.

In this essay, gardens serve as the metaphor for thwarted artistry as practiced in everyday life as well as the stewardship born out of a spiritualism and richness of personal spirit. The connection between the land, creativity and the produce of the female body's labor are generatively explored in *Meridian*. Meridian's mental and physical health bear witness to the terrible consequences this responsibility has for the subject. However, as Lisa Woolfork urges, we must attend to the ways that Walker imagines the possibility of how "the traumatic slave past can be referenced in the body after the event itself" *(*45). A reading of this novel as bespeaking a bodily epistemology elucidates the overlapping significance of earthly shrines and the ecstatic as well as painful experiences of her body that shape Meridian's politics and her faith in salvation rather than the many modes of desecration she encounters.

After years of sacrifice and service in the South, Meridian has come to live the life of a transient ascetic. According to the narrative's circular history of the protagonist, her asceticism, which begins in practice in her years at Saxon college, is inspired by her

father's embrace of a philosophy of a shared earth. Meridian's father, whose memory she cherishes, demonstrates and practices respect for the natural world.[120] Meridian's mother also tends a garden, for which she has significant talent, but unlike her husband, she does so out of a feeling of pleasure and self-fulfillment, rather than a regard for planting cycles and return of use. An understanding of personal sacrifice as well as a sense of communion with the life forces of the earth informs Meridian's asceticism. She also becomes a martyr to the responsibility of bearing the painful past in her body for her community. In her figuration of Meridian's martyrdom, Walker conflates wound with womb so that while Meridian's womb is literally a site for physical and mental pain after her abortion, Meridian's womb also serves as the primary locus for the wound of history that plays across her weak body.

Walker's incorporation of pain into Meridian's growing subjectivity, and her representative subjectivity as a vessel for memory, is troubling to say the least. While the novel contains many celebratory moments and elements through its attempt to explore and acknowledge a kind of women's history, Meridian's martyrdom seems also to abnegate the very emergence of this subjectivity. If she will not be incorporated into the future, as Anne-Marion and her final revelation make clear, then how does she serve as a subject for Walker's 1976 readers? Moreover, the novel does not seem to completely resolve the ways that memory is tied to the development of disabilities that manifest as signs of Meridian's absence of self and commitment to a just cause. Walker asserts that historical memory is necessary though it be shrouded with shame. The novel's ambiguous ending is telling in this regard. As Meridian passes the torch to Truman, these

[120] See page 48-49. Her father hands over to Longknife his deed to the land he inherited from his father who received it after the Civil War.

tensions are meant to remain unresolved and very alive in the minds of *Meridian*'s readers while they encounter their own orientations to the novel as both a contention with the legacies of the Civil Rights Movement and with the irresolvable problem of Meridian's solitary revolutionary consciousness.

Though the novel follows the experiences of Truman and Lynne as well as Meridian, its focus on Meridian's radical evolution is what most interests me because around this figure, Walker activates several modes of radical critique and praxis at once. These include an interest in indigenous ecology as a mode to critique capitalism in the United States; the bodily sublime and the heightened experiences of pain as form of release only *after* the novel details Meridian's many encounters with sexual violence and abuse at the hands of men she trusts; the psychosomatic responses to shame, guilt, and terror experienced by female revolutionaries. Dreams and reveries link these concerns through the repeating motif of Meridian's guilt about her own mother. This guilt is exorcised most clearly in a dream she first experiences at Saxon in which she imagines her mother threatening to cast her overboard, ignoring Meridian's pleas for forgiveness and recognition.

Black women novelists of the 1970s and 1980s engaged the possibilities of the female revolutionary, but sought to do so often through the lens of material contingencies and historical realities—such as through the specificities of the local, through the realities of motherhood, the woman's body, socialization and femininity, and mobility. Their novels found multiple audiences, including an audience with readers alienated by the avant-garde, and blunt, forms of the Black Arts movement, despite the fact that these women writers, especially Toni Morrison, were politically and often thematically a part

of the Black Arts. The slave ship was a potent sign for Black Arts and Black Power discourses. Black feminist novelists transform this sign in their work to resist masculinist depictions of female inactivity in resistance movements, or mutinies. However, the physical and symbolic nature of the ship complicates the discursive nature of gender paradigms. While slave ships themselves were named or marked by various monikers, the ship is typically gendered female, its hold a womb. If, following Glissant, the ship space can be regarded as operating metaphorically as a womb in literature and as philosophical, conceptual maneuver, then African American women writers of the late-twentieth century, write against a history of sterilization, rape, bodily exploitation, and use the ship space, its hold in particular, as a way to explore gendered experience in the United States, and to critique U.S. heteropatriarchy within a transnational frame.

In *Meridian*, Southern soil is fecund with the crimes of the past, yet Walker juxtaposes allusions to the earth's fertility with Meridian's womb, it seems, in order to rescue Meridian's progeny from the depths of the soil. Meridian curses her own fertility since each of her unwanted pregnancies stands in the way of a burgeoning sense of purpose and pleasure in work as it did for her mother. Meridian "was so disgusted with the fecundity of her body that got pregnant on less screwing than anybody's she had ever heard of. It seemed doubly unfair that after all her sexual 'experience' and after one baby and one abortion she had not once been completely fulfilled by sex" (119). Meridian's sexual experiences are most often determined by male pleasure. As she increasingly takes the role of a martyr, her illnesses are not the marks of this sexual degradation, but the signs of a mental freedom and commitment to a cause of which she is not yet completely conscious. Meridian must become more involved and in control of her own body as the

novel progresses. Whereas the earth and Meridian are fecund, she learns to live in her body rather than through her children.

Walker juxtaposes a narrative of the movement—told primarily through Meridian's point of view—with a failed love affair and Meridian's multiple struggles with her sexuality, role as a mother, and with her reactions to her physical sensations. Madhu Dubey asserts, "The novel's rather nostalgic recovery of the Southern Civil Rights movement supports its sustained feminist critique of the nationalist movements of the North" (126). Walker deconstructs dominant paradigms of motherhood through her depiction of Mrs. Hill as a mordantly and thoroughly disappointed and dissatisfied mother next to her daughter, Meridian, a failed mother who values her own freedom over a lifetime of impoverished motherhood. Dubey suggests that Meridian, though a committed voter rights advocate and equal rights activist, is a "political outcast because she questions among other things, the definition of black femininity in nationalist discourse" (127). After all, as Dubey reminds readers, the dominant relationship that shapes Meridian's life besides that with her mother, is with "Truman Held," or True Man, the archetypal figure of the Marxist cosmopolitan Black Nationalist. Though at the end of the novel Walker recuperates Truman, the novel is highly critical of his obsession with Meridian's body and her blackness as the perfect analogues to his own. When he asks Meridian to "*Have* my beautiful black babies" shortly after she has aborted their fetus, we despise his "nationalist fantasy" for its cruelty and bad timing (127). Dubey and others have made clear the ways Meridian eschews the typical heterosexual romantic paradigm, and *Meridian* critiques the nationalist, masculinist mythmaking. However, through the lens of her faltering love for Truman, the novel claims for itself and its protagonist

considerations of a more distant and continually destructive history that inhabits Meridian's body.

As Meridian becomes increasingly involved in the movement with Truman's organization, she learns to contextualize their activism in relation to the past so that their efforts become part of "a place in History that forced the trivial to fall away" (81). Moreover, as part of the organization she finds herself identifying more with traditional forms of African American resistance that utilize corporeal productions such as singing and verbal play. While she marches, for example, the presence of women's voices elicits a particular response from Meridian: "Freedom songs, several old women testifying (mainly about conditions inside the black section of jail, which caused Meridian's body to twitch with dread)" (80). This dread is perhaps linked to an awareness of her own vulnerability at the hands of white police officers, but it also alludes to a sense of melancholic memory that has instilled in her body an expectation of violent punishment at the hands of white men each time her black female companions raise their voices in song.

In the chapter titled, "Battle Fatigue," Walker describes the attachment Meridian has developed for Truman Held, the "Civil Rights worker" Meridian briefly falls in love with as she becomes a member of the activist group. The chapter title refers to both the physical exhaustion experienced by movement activists, but it also refers to Meridian's relationship with her mother. It begins by describing the physical and psychological toll marching has taken on Meridian. The weight of the traumatic experiences of bearing and witnessing the beatings of her fellow activists in Georgia manifests itself through tears, the signs of uncontrollable physical expressions of sorrow, fear, and even gratitude for

support. In one vivid description of the ways these traumas have become imprinted upon Meridian's psyche and body, Walker relates the following about her protagonist's incapacitating fear for Truman's safety:

> Later that summer, after another demonstration, she saw him going down a street that did not lead back to the black part of town. His eyes were swollen and red, his body trembling, and he did not recognize her or even see her. She knew his blankness was battle fatigue. They all had it. She was as weary as anyone, so that she spent a good part of her time in tears. At first she had burst into tears whenever something went wrong or someone spoke unkindly or even sometimes if they spoke, period. But now she was always in a state of constant tears, so that she could do whatever she was doing—canvassing, talking at rallies, tying her sneakers, laughing—while tears rolled slowly and ceaselessly down her cheeks. This might go on for days, or even weeks. Then, suddenly, it would stop ad some other symptom would appear. *Or the way she would sometimes be sure she'd heard a shot and feel the impact of the bullet against her back; the she stood absolutely still, waiting to feel herself fall*. (82 emphasis added)

This passage details the effects Meridian's involvement has on her physical orientation to the world. She expresses grief, fatigue, joy, and gratitude through uncontrollable tears. Tears are signs of the body's attempts to cope with that which the mind cannot make sense of. Tears also express her vulnerability, which is apparent in the ways that her body feels open to penetration and threat that she cannot ward against. Meridian feels a

gunshot wound when there is none in reality, but this moment represents the psychic scar of multiple beatings. Her mind prepares itself for future harm by expressing the pain as a shadow or mark of the future. This felt wound is also a sign of her desire to protect Truman from physical trauma. Walker suggests the presence of unexplained or unwilled somatic responses that seemingly overwhelm Meridian and are the evidence of social conditioning. Meridian's demonstrates symptoms of racial melancholy that will increase after an abortion's mental and physical destruction.

Meridian's relationship with her mother undergoes strain over her political actions as well. Mrs. Hill objects to her daughter's involvement, maintaining that segregation is natural. Meridian has also had an offer to go to college on a scholarship, which her mother does not support as Meridian is pregnant. Meridian has to weigh the responsibilities of motherhood against her future and against her own guilt at asking for Mrs. Hill's support. Meridian feels tremendous guilt at the thought of giving up her child for adoption, thinking,

> If her mother had had children in slavery she would not, automatically, have been allowed to keep them, because they would not have belonged to her but to the white person who 'owned' them all. Meridian knew that enslaved women had been made miserable by the sale of their children, that the daughters of these enslaved women had thought their greatest blessing from 'Freedom' was that it meant they could keep their own children. And what had Meridian Hill gone and done with *her* precious child? She had given him away. She thought of her mother as being worthy of this maternal history, and of herself as belonging to an

> unworthy minority, for which there was no precedent and of which she was, as far as she knew, the only member. (90)

Following this thought process, Meridian suffers severe depression once she gets to Saxon College, feeling tremendous self-loathing and hearing voices which urge her to commit suicide. This reaction to her choice not to keep her son leads ultimately to a "spiritual degeneration" that will exhibit itself as debilitating ailments (90). Meridian "began to have headaches that were so severe they caused her to stutter when she spoke" (94). She also dreams "of such horrible things she would wake up shaking." These somatic responses are signs of her "primeval guilt" that worsens during her time at Saxon where her feelings about her mother remain unresolved (96). How does memory feel? Does shame manifest itself across the body, choosing sites to erupt in a panic-filled pain? Does it choose a place for eruption—maybe in the form of a headache? A stomach-ache? Can memory break bones or tense muscles and set organs on fire from the inside? These ailments are specifically tied to the guilt she feels as a black woman who has inherited the pressures placed on black motherhood by the fact that until recently black mothers were unable to legally claim their children, and could not prohibit their children from being sold or traded by their owners.

Though her years at Saxon should have been a freeing time for Meridian during which she is free from her mother's critical gaze, they are instead a period of great torment and suffering. At the height of her nervous breakdown, "Meridian felt as if her body, growing frailer every day under the stress of her daily life, stood in the way of a reconciliation between her mother and that part of her own soul her mother could, perhaps, love" (97). Interestingly, she learns to see her body as a burden, "She valued her

body less, attended to it less, because she hated its obstruction," as it must be the outward sign of her failure to live in accordance with her mother's principles. Participation in marches, sit-ins, and rallies offers the kind of distraction from her growing weakness that she relishes. We learn, for example, "While other students dreaded confrontation with police she welcomed it, and was capable of an inner gaiety, a sense of freedom, as she saw the clubs slashing down on her from above" (97). Moreover, "Only once was she beaten into unconsciousness, and it was not the damage done to her body that she remembered when she woke up, but her feeling of yearning, of heartsick longing for forgiveness, as she saw the bright lights explode behind the red blood that curtained her face." Meridian associates this beating with her mother and with her constant feeling of guilt. This yearning for her mother's forgiveness or even recognition of her is in contradistinction to a sense of shame brought about by the physical beating. *Meridian* often seems to be a study of trying to represent pain, physical and emotional, and here is a moment in the text where Meridian's physical pain soothes or even masks an emotional wound that is gaping, so much so that her thick hair begins to fall out and her "vision sometimes blurred" (98). In his work on uses of pain in religious practices, Ariel Glucklich explains, "pain can be the solution to suffering, a psychological analgesic that removes anxiety, guilt, and even depression" (11). Even though Meridian clearly suffers from unutterable pain--pain so fierce she sees red—she uses this pain to sublimate her psychological trauma.

Perhaps the most graphic and poignant examples of pain the novel are the descriptions of the abortion and the suffering it subsequently causes. Elaine Scarry posits that pain is language destroying, or that it cannot be represented through language, only

its attributes (15-17). She claims that in order to express the pain one is suffering, "on must *both* objectify its felt-characteristics *and* hold steadily visible the referent for those characteristics" (17). This relationship between the verbal and the inassimilable experience renders a "deeply problematic character of this language, its inherent instability, arises precisely because it permits a break in the identification of the referent and thus a mis-identification of the thing to which the attributes belong" (17). Furthermore, "While the advantage of the sign is its proximity to the body, its disadvantage is the ease with which it can then be spatially separated from the body." The abortion is politicized, and the pain Walker attempts to represent does illuminate a particular kind of female experience thus making it visible. Walker describes the medical procedure as follows: "His elbow somehow rested heavily on her navel and a whirling hot pain shot from her uterus to her toes. She felt sure she'd never walk again. She looked at him until his hard face began to blur" (119). The abortion further solidifies the guilt Meridian has been feeling about the abandonment of her son, and her inability to accept the sacrifices of motherhood, even if it was unexpected and premature motherhood.

Following the procedure, Meridian experiences a "blue spell" in which she forgets to eat and continues to intermittently lose her sight (122-123). Walker writes, "She felt as if a small landslide had begun behind her brows, as if things there had started to slip. It was a physical feeling and she paid it no mind" (121). It is also at this point in the novel and in her life that Meridian begins to experience ecstasy in connection with or produced by her bodily pain: "to her complete surprise and astonished joy, she began to experience ecstasy (124). Meridian is not a stranger to feelings of euphoria or ecstasy from a spiritual communion with the land and sites of memory, she finds that her pain

and disability that has rendered her immobile brings about a kind of ecstatic relief. *Meridian* abounds with allusions to religious practices; thus, it can be inferred that as Meridian grows to accept herself in relation to her maternal history and to her painful, disintegrating body, the pain is a sign of her soul's transcendence. Not only is a it a sign of her escape from capitalist paradigms, but it is in this chapter as she realizes she will not follow the typical woman's trajectory of marriage and children, that she learns to sublimate her pain into the struggle for revolution outside of the parameters of Truman's or Anne-Marion's organization. Yet her pain is still in the service of a community since it is inextricable from her "mother's history" (128). Thus, here and elsewhere in the novel Meridian's paralysis and illness are examples of what Glucklich would call "shared pain," or pain suffered "on behalf of others" in the model of a Christian martyr (29). As she experiences ecstasy "lying on her bed, not hungry, not cold, not worried. . .she felt as if a warm, strong light bore her up and that she was a beloved part of the universe," Meridian's bodily pain resolves itself into a process of forgiveness for her mother and a model for communal sacrifice to which she is increasingly attached as the novel progresses (124).

Rosemarie Garland Thomson would assert that through Walker's portrayal of Meridian's illness and the disability it causes, she is creating an "extraordinary body." Furthermore, Garland Thomson might suggest that Walker is recuperating the black woman's disability as a space for recasting this body alongside a particular history. She claims that black female writers Toni Morrison and Audre Lorde rely on society's perceptions of disability and employ disabled black women in their novels in strategic ways: "By flaunting rather than obscuring these figures' physical difference, the authors

establish the extraordinary body as a site of historical inscription rather than physical deviance, and they simultaneously repudiate such cultural master narratives as normalcy, wholeness, and the feminine ideal" (105). This reading of disability can be extended to think about how Walker depicts Meridian's body from the outset in order to signal the ways Meridian's body exists in the South where she represents black feminine strength, but also its historical oppression.

During her final year at Saxon, Meridian dreams about her mother and her foremothers often in relation to her own present condition. As she dreams about the past, Anne-Marion leaves her realizing Meridian "might never be ready for the future" (130). This realization accounts for the ways history and sites of memory aid Meridian's becoming, for while she is on the precipice of the future in her last year of college, she is relying on memories of her female ancestors in order to parse her own bodily reality. As Meridian enters her most disorienting "blue spell," surrounded by a community of women at Saxon college, she feels herself the most alone. As she reaches "the calm plateau in her illness," she has a dream that clarifies her unconscious feelings about her mother. "When she slept she dreamed she was on a ship with her mother, and her mother was holding her over the railing about to drop her into the sea. Danger was all around her and her mother refused to let her go" (130). Meridian calls out, "'Mama, I *love* you. Let me go,' she whispered, licking the salt from her mother's black arms" (131). As the verb tense indicates, this is the "recurring" dream to which the chapter's title alludes. It is the dream that represents for Meridian her overwhelming guilt at being born. It is a dream that we are told concentrates on Meridian's feeling that her "existence presented an insoluble problem" (121). Meridian Hill is often perceived as a confrontation by the other

characters in the novel. Yet she longs for forgiveness herself and for a sense of freedom in the bodily sublime of release. Her commitment to a political ideology will wane but her commitment to activism and black freedom remains steadfast even as it becomes increasingly untethered from the hold her gendered history has on her as a young woman.

Meridian in many ways testifies repressed histories, reveals forgotten crimes, and refuses to quiet multiple forms of exploitation. Even at times with the briefest of revelations, Walker refers readers to terrifying histories of abuse. Black feminists publicly proclaimed agency over their own bodies, particularly in relation to abortion, birth control, and childbirth. *The Black Woman*, a groundbreaking anthology edited by Toni Cade Bambara includes essays by women who made very clear the costs, losses, and struggles over control of their own bodies, the intersection of child care and professional opportunities. In Abbey Lincoln's powerful submission, "To Whom Will She Cry Rape?" rape is a figure of historical oppression, marking periods of colonialism, captivity, and forced movement in the African Diaspora. She claims,

> We are the women who were kidnapped and brought to this continent as slaves. We are the women who were raped, are still being raped, and our bastard children snatched from our breasts and scattered to the winds to be lynched, castrated, de-egoed, robbed, burned and deceived. . . . We are the women whose bodies are sacrificed, as living cadavers to experimental surgery in the white man's hospitals for the sake of white medicine. (99-100)

Lincoln writes in the present tense in order to reveal that these acts of violence against black women are part and parcel of an existing system of dominance and oppression in

the United States. Moreover, Lincoln insists on a solidarity with the repetition of the collective pronoun, "we," grouping women of color, specifically women of African descent into a singular group in order to politicize crimes against the body, against the person(al), and in order to create visibility for a political collective. Through her autobiographical story, "Advancing Luna—and Ida B. Wells," readers come to understand Walker's rage at the identification by Eldridge Cleaver and LeRoi Jones of rape as a tool to regain power (91-92) Set in 1965, the essay tells the story of Walker's friend Luna, who we learn is the inspiration for the white woman, Lynne, in *Meridan*. In the novel, Lynne's black friend, Tommy Odds, rapes her. In the essay, Walker reveals her own guilt and shame at having included this story in her novel, so much so that she prays to Ida B. Wells, "*Please forgive me. I am a writer*" (93). The crux of this story lies in Luna's understanding that she must not scream and Walker's subsequent appraisal of her decision as the correct one despite Walker's own rage at both the unvoiced frequency with which black women are the victims of sexual violence and the fact that she feels betrayed by Freddie Pye for raping a white woman, not her friend, but a "white woman."

The slave ship is itself a body in excess of bodies, consuming and rejecting lives, functioning as both a prison and a factory as Rediker explains.[121] How is it possible to survive this vessel, to not be marked by its multiple horrors and violence? What are the relational and kinship practices that exist among individual captives in these conditions? How might love, friendship, kindness and comfort surpass feelings of terror and physical

[121] Rediker, *The Slave Ship*, 44-45. "It was also a factory and a prison, and in this combination lay its genius and its horror." "The ship was a factory in the original meaning of the term, but it was also a factory in the modern sense. The eighteenth-century deep-sea sailing ship was a historic workplace, where merchant capitalists assembled. . ." "The slave ship was also a mobile, seagoing prison at a time when the modern prison had not yet been established on land. . . .Stanfield called it a 'floating dungeon,' while an anonymous defender of the slave trade aptly called it a 'portable prison.'"

pain? What are the relationships between male and female, female and female, male and male, adult and child? What takes place in artistic representation when fiction considers these questions?[122] "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book" is a critique of the construction of the black family in the "Moynihan Report" (1965). Hortense Spillers explicates and historicizes the lexicon that is used to denote black femininity and kinship relations in the United States. She asserts, "If . . . 'femininity loses its sacredness in slavery[,'] then so does 'motherhood' as female blood-rite/right. To that extent, the captive female body locates precisely a moment of converging political and social vectors that mark the flesh as a prime commodity of exchange" (75). Spillers argues that attention to the very ways female gender has been constructed through a relationship of the body to a matrix of social, economic, and political determinants, such as the enslaved woman's reproductive value to her master requires a renewed attention to gender as an analytic. Although feminists have troubled the biological essentialism attributed to femininity and motherhood, for Spillers it is necessary to unpack the sign of black motherhood further since the condition or status of "mother" was historically denied many black women while the black woman was simultaneously imagined as thoroughly embodied for he maintenance of white comfort. In the academy, this historical specificity is often overlooked by white feminists who sought to distance femininity from motherhood. She argues,

> In the historic formation to which I point, however, motherhood and female gendering/ungendering appear so intimately aligned that they seem to speak the same language. At least it is plausible to say that motherhood,

[122] Archival and historical silence about the condition/experience of women on ships. Rediker's "human history" despite his imaginative introduction is markedly about men. Future work on this question is essential.

> while it does not exhaust the problematics of female gender, offers one prominent line of approach to it. I would go farther: Because African-American women experienced uncertainty regarding their infants' lives in the historic situation, gendering, in its coeval reference to African-American women, insinuates an implicit and unresolved puzzle both within current feminist discourse and within those discursive communities that investigate the entire problematics of culture. (78)

Because these linguistic and legal codes have marked or named the black woman in relation to the problem of production or lack thereof, by focusing on her body, into a discursive order that renders the flesh, the construction and application of gendered divisions and norms inflicts a renewed ideological violence. Spillers concludes, "only the female stands *in the flesh*, both mother and mother-dispossessed. This problematizing of gender places her, in my view, *out* of the traditional symbolics of female gender, and it is our task to make a place for this different social subject. In doing so, we are less interested in joining the ranks of gendered femaleness than gaining the *insurgent* ground as female social subject" (80).Walker's attention to motherhood, then, as a role that Meridian realizes is conditioned by a history of denial and obsolescence offers a bodily epistemology that changes the category's "*representational* potentialities" (Spillers 80). I want to argue that Meridian's recurring dream in which her mother holds her over the side of a ship whereby release signals abandonment and rejection from the symbolic order of motherhood, allows the novel to locate this history of complicated and painful mothering as beginning in the slave ship's hold where the female body was transfigured by the profit motive outside of humanity. Thus, both the medicalization of the body and

disability in the story of Meridian Hill can be read as metaphorical vehicles or figures for historical compassion.

Meridian achieves resolution in the social sphere of a church after her heart and lungs seem to rupture and thus break the constriction of guilt upon her chest. This final moment of pain in the novel occurs as Meridian realizes the ways that collective memory has been incorporated into Christian services, where "Baptist, Methodist, or whatnot, but rather communal spirit, togetherness, righteous convergence" is solidifying in musical (and rapturous) forms. "In comprehending this, there was in Meridian's chest a breaking as if a tight string binding her lungs had given way, allowing her to breathe freely" (219). Walker continues to write, "Her heart was beating as if it would burst, sweat poured down her skin" (220). This somatic response erupts as she sits in the church "surrounded by the righteous guardians of the people's memories," as she realizes that her own body is an instrument of memory. She comes to understand that the question of whether or not she will murder for the cause is irrelevant because *she* is a sign of a communal past. Meridian now understands,

> I am to be left, listening to the old music, beside the highway. But then, she thought, perhaps it will be my part to walk behind the real revolutionaries—those who know they must spill blood in order to help the poor and the black and therefore go right ahead—and when they stop to wash off the blood and find their throats too choked with the smell of murdered flesh to sing, I will come forward and sing from memory songs they will need once more to hear. (221)

Mourning Sickness and Transatlantic Melancholia in *Praisesong for the Widow*

And this being-with specters would also be, not only but also, a *politics* of memory, of inheritance, and of generations. --Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx*[123]

Carriacou which was not listed in the index of the *Goode's School Atlas* nor the *Junior Americana World Gazette* nor appeared on any map that I could find, and so when I hunted for the magic place during geography lessons or in free library time, I never found it, and came to believe my mother's geography was a fantasy or crazy or at least too old-fashioned, and in reality maybe she was talking about the place other people called Curaçao, a Dutch possession on the other side of the Antilles. . . . I was twenty-six years old before I found Carriacou upon a map. --Audre Lorde, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*[124]

Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow* explores the tension between revolutionary action and quietism or complicity with a system of oppression, disenfranchisement, economic exclusion, and outright violence. Grief is also central to *Praisesong for the Widow* in which the protagonist, Avey Johnson, violently and belatedly mourns the death of her husband, Jerome "Jay" Johnson, who she believes lost his own individuality to the costs of economic and social assimilation. Travel to the Caribbean initiates a process of guilt and shame for Avey in which she is made to recall her own childhood initiation to a history of revolution, or a radical leaving, in South Carolina. This is a historical consciousness that she has repressed. It returns to her in an urgent crisis of self that manifests as stomach pain and nightmares. The novel is fiercely critical of its protagonist, a tourist who is charged with blindness to her own participation in United States imperialism and geopolitical position of power in relation to the Caribbean nations she is touring. Avey is punished for this blindness throughout the novel, and it is not until she boards another, smaller vessel where she is haunted by prior

[123] Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*. New York: Routledge, 1993. From "Exordium," xviii.

[124] Audre Lorde, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name-A Biomythography*. New York: Crossing Press, 1982. 14.

sea crossings that she can be forgiven by the reader. (Though, to a certain extent, every reader is also implicated in the novel's charges if and when she identifies with Avey.) *Praisesong* seeks to position its protagonist along multiple shores across the bodies of water that make up the New World, the Atlantic and the Caribbean. The void of the sea, the vast oceanic realm between the New World and the missed world of the Old, matches the void of history, of ancestral connection and heritage severed, the void of not knowing what it was like for those who came before you to come here, before you. Avey's experience of mourning sickness is tied specifically to the ship in motion, to movement, to dispersal or diasporic identity. Her widowed state, then, harbors significance through the critique of marriage as a bourgeois institution that will follow. Yet this identifier in many ways comes to claim her gender and age as ways to position her in a symbolic relationship as a widow of the historic slave trade.

The ship in this novel magnifies embodiment, attaching to the nation and memory in very specific ways, and as Carole Boyce Davies articulates, make homesickness a literal sickness. More than the nausea caused by disorientation, Avey's body is the site of something of which she must rid herself. She is already a mother to daughters, yet in this novel she gives birth to a sociopolitical consciousness, to the understanding of herself as part of an "adopted" nation, and kinship. Unlike her youngest daughter Marion, who participates in the Poor People's March in Washington, Avey is not a radical freedom fighter (140). Avey's acts of survival have her deflecting these larger social responsibilities in favor of motherhood, and spousal relations. Yet Marshall suggests that Avey can never exist outside of the politics of black womanhood despite her comfort and class privilege later in life. Avey's stomach is the locus of embodied memory, and

stomach or bowel pains are mimetic expressions of the contingent, material, and spatialized effects of mourning sickness. The stomach, bowels, uterus, are all organs which exhibit responses throughout the novel to latent psychological stress and grief that has not been worked through consciously.

The novel frames Avey's stomach distress aboard the cruise ship and in Grenada—the island to which she flees, and finally on the *Emanuel C*, the sloop which carries her to the Beg Pardon dance in Carriacou—as obvious psychosomatic symptoms that display a "deeper trouble." Her proximity to the retained Africanisms in the Caribbean, which is both a revolutionary and working-class space for people of African descent, serves a psychological trigger. However, Avey doesn't explicitly make the connection—or only slightly does when she has a haunting experience in which she is transported to a slave ship and feels the presence of captives' bodies alongside her own. I interrogate the purpose of Avey's physical ordeal as a strategy for producing meaning and creating specific affinities between (female) readers and Avey.

Avey's symptoms progress through several stages. On board the cruise ship, the *Bianca Pride*, Avey feels constipated, believing that the rich food has left her stuffed and that she is suffering from indigestion. Once she leaves the cruise ship and as she belatedly mourns the death of her husband in solitude, her stomach tightens and again she feels as if there is a mass there. When she agrees to travel with Lebert Joseph, whom she meets in Grenada, to Carriacou for the excursion and festivities, she boards a small sloop that carries her from Grenada to the smaller island. It is aboard this small boat that she experiences a more violent mourning sickness demonstrated to readers through violent

nausea and diarrhea.[125] This release is followed by a period of soothing cultural reconnection through dance only after she witnesses the spectral multitude of suffering bodies around her on the *Emmanuel C*. It is of course hard to dismiss the ways Marshall criticizes Avey's lack of engagement with both the ship and the Caribbean as historical sites of trauma, enslavement, and a space for continued geopolitical conflict as the United States strives to keep a stronghold over its investments in hemispheric domination.

Avey's mysterious stomach pain begins aboard the cruise ship following an off-ship day in Martinique. The novel confronts Avey's crime of complicity in ignoring her politicized ties to what Glissant, born in Martinique, would term, *créolité*. Martinique is the birthplace of Glissant, Aimé Césaire, and the philosopher of revolution Frantz Fanon, and as such, a birthplace to black radical consciousness. Though, the novel is concerned primarily with intra-racial and familial affairs, we are made aware early on that Avey's journey will be one that is tied to the development of a racial, diasporic consciousness, or as Stuart Hall would claim, the production of a cultural identity, one "grounded" in "the re-telling of the past" (224). Here Avey is forced to retell her own past of refusal, disavowal, and maternal failures. Boyce Davies argues, "The Caribbean Sea is therefore a site of dissemination of a variety of socio-cultural processes, a site of continuous change and the ongoing questioning of self, origin, direction" (13).

Avey's stomach pain is described as feeling like "a mass of undigested food stalled not only in her stomach but across the entire middle of her stomach" (51). Avey's

[125] In 1983, the year of the novel's publication, the United States invaded Grenada under President Reagan's administration to crush the New JEWEL (Joint Endeavor for Welfare, Education and Liberation) Movement, a Marxist-Leninist oppositional party led by Maurice Bishop which took power in 1979. Though the scope of this chapter does not allow for it here, a fuller reading of this novel's response to the hegemony of the United States in the Caribbean through the lens of a hemispheric analysis that historicizes the JEWEL movement and the possibility of Leftist movements within the gaze of the United States for Marshall would elucidate the novel's politics and contemporary valences as fiction of the 1980s.

constipation—eased at last on the *Emmanuel C.*—is the sign of a psychic and emotional blockage. Though at first, "there was no nausea or pain, nothing to suggest seasickness or—the terrifying thought that had instantly crossed her mind—the first signs of a heart attack." The pain and nausea do come later. Or her discomfort is described as a "mysterious clogged feeling which differed in intensity and came and went at will" (52). Elsewhere she feels as if she has a tumor in her stomach. These descriptions of what Avey feels physically, of feeling burdened, clogged, pressure, a mass of foreign matter, foreground the conditions of Avey's internal being. They emphasize her physicality and a state of feeling—of not feeling well. Avey's symptoms seem to be reactions, whether literally to something she ingested, or to the ship's movements, or reactions to an unease and rejection of her place aboard the Bianca Pride. She does not belong there, and as her mind rebels in nightmare, her body reacts through the figure of indigestion and obstruction.

Based on historical accounts of the overwhelming trail of stench that both followed the slave ship across the Atlantic and preceded it into port, the bodily metaphor most apt for this particular vessel is its association with the bowels and excrement. Upon first entering the slave ship as a child, Olaudah Equiano tells readers he was so overwhelmed by the smell of human waste and putrefaction that he thought it would kill him (56).[126] Reflecting on her experience touring the Cape Coast Castle, in *Lose Your Mother*, Saidiya Hartman claims, "Excrement was the material residue of this politics of

[126] Equiano writes: "I was not long suffered to indulge my grief; I was soon put down under the decks, and there I received such a salutation in my nostrils as I had never experienced in my life; so that with the loathsomeness of the stench, and crying together, I became so sick and low that I was not able to eat, nor had I least desire to taste any thing. I now wished for the last friend, Death, to relieve me; but soon, to my grief, two of the white men offered me eatables; and, on my refusing to eat, one of them held me fast by the hands, and laid me across, I think, the windlass, and tied my feet, while the other flogged me severely. I had never experienced any thing of this kind before . . ." (56).

the belly" (114). She elaborates: "Waste is the interface of life and death. It incarnates all that has been rendered invisible, peripheral, or expendable to history writ large, that is, history as the tale of great men, empire and nation. . . . The only part of my past that I could put my hands on was the filth from which I recoiled, layers of organic material pressed hard against a stone floor" (115). Each tour she takes of Cape Coast Castle feels "painfully incomplete;" she admits to herself, "I had come too late for it to make any difference at all, but I kept coming back" (118). Hartman describes a panic attack, set in this particular dungeon that sweeps across her body:

> My chest grew congested and my palms started sweating and I got light-headed. My skin became tight and prickly, as if there was too little of it and too much of everything else. The hollow inside my chest expanded. I could feel my torso bulge and distend like a corpse swelling with gasses. The emptiness was a huge balloon expanding inside me and pressing against my organs, until I could not longer breathe and was about to explode. (118)

Her mourning sickness is brought about by her inability to discover signs of those who passed before her and who suffered in the dungeon; those whose bodies were forever entombed in this underground space. Even if a captive escaped this tomb for the belly of the ship, she left traces of her body behind. Hartman confesses, "What I wanted was to reach through time and touch the prisoners" (119). Mourning sickness, then, accounts for this sense of belatedness. Diarrhea and nausea are symptomatic of the body's rejection of its circumstances but might also express the confusion of time within the body. Hartman imagines a solution to her pain and her body's shock would be a cross-historical touch, a

way to construct an imaginative link between her consoling self and those trapped in the suffering of familial separation and the bodily pain brought about by the conditions of captivity. Marshall leads her protagonist through the experience of finding oneself in flux. In the climatic battle Avey faces in which she is transported through time to the hold of the slave ship where she finds herself surrounded by the ghosts of her past, Marshall turns the conditions of the slave ship around on Avey as an indication of the necessary psychic transformation and alliance with her ancestral nations that will take place in the celebratory dance where Avey's body comes alive at the end of the novel.

In *Praisesong* the ship has its own time. This time is of course separate from the quotidian world of work, labor, the domestic, but as Avey's experience suggests, it does not exist outside of the geopolitical framework that conditions bodies in motion. Moreover, the time of the cruise ship is burst in upon by the time of the slave ship. The time of the sloop is bound continuously with the time of transatlantic and inter-coastal travel—a time in which Caribbean slavery was devastating. The ship in the novel is tied to a nostalgia for Avey's childhood, but her experiences of being on board ships in the novel are each punctuated by other times of suffering. "Time" is of course a repetitive utterance that exists in poetic temporality. Heather Love's concept, "cross-historical touch" might help elucidate the encounters Avey has with the past while she is aboard both the cruise ship and the *Emmanuel C.* where she experiences a ghostly encounter with the spectral presence of African captives. In order to heal, Avey must first experience the transhistorical imagination that the novel offers as a trope to comment on diasporic consciousness. Through a reading of Michel Foucault on the encounter within the archive, which she characterizes as a "cross-historical touch," Love claims, "I want to

suggest that the sensation—the cross-historical touch—that Foucault feels in the archive may be as much a mauling as a caress" (48-49). Though Love is referring to the constitution of a melancholic queer archive, her argument may also apply to examining archives or records of the slave trade and slavery in the New World. Her term also clarifies the novelization, or fleshing out, of such history. She continues, "What happens in the archive is an encounter with historical violence, which includes both physical injury and the violence of obscurity, or annihilation from memory" (49). "Touch" can have so many connotations such as the feeling of a book's page in your hand as you turn it to proceed; a caress; a slap; to be touched in the vernacular is to be either gifted or impaired; to be touched by is to be affected and moved.

So much of *Praisesong* is about the internal and takes place in Avey's interiority. Narration moves from exposition on Avey to Avey's own thoughts through a stylized use of italics as well as lines from songs and poetry that punctuate Avey's consciousness and recollections. These formal strategies register the significance of therapeutic processes of recovery. Sarah Clarke Kaplan argues for the existence of "diasporic melancholy," terminology that is particularly useful for contextualizing the "flare ups" of Avey's psychosomatic suffering in response to her travel on the Bianca Pride. Kaplan claims, "As a political practice diasporic melancholia can thus be understood as the refusal to declare slavery and continuing systems of black unfreedom over and done, or to perceive them as anything less than a constitutive element of modernity and post-modernity" (515). Avey's recollections of her own multiple pregnancies are conflated or brought about by her present condition of dis-ease. Mourning sickness finally highlights the problematic gendering of the process of transformation represented in the novel. One

wonders why Marshall chooses Avey. What is the work being done through the depiction of a woman's stomach distress? What does the text gain from its gendered depiction of embodied memory and grief?

Marshall revises Sigmund Freud's characterization of melancholia as a form of narcissism and the melancholic's relationship to oral fixations and ingestion of the catchected lost love object in order to focus on the body in the process of evacuation. What is the connection between Avey's melancholy and Marshall's suggestion that it is both not fully digested, but must be digested and expelled in order for her protagonist to completely understand diasporic consciousness, or the creation of a black home free from the stifling ahistoricism of American assimilation? For Freud, the connection of grief for the lost loved one transforms from mourning to melancholia when the subject exercises self-reproach. She sees the loss or death as the result of her will ("Mourning and Melancholia" 587-588). Time for Freud was necessary to the treatment and recovery from both mourning and melancholia, but only melancholia's symptoms can be marked by delay, belatedness, or the prolongation of this time of recovery (589). Avey's constipation symbolizes this belatedness. If nausea and vomiting indicate symptomatic immediacy, then her constipation and bloated feelings aboard the cruise ship indicate the onset of overdue mourning. This belatedness is a comment on Avey's distraction by the comforts of a bourgeois lifestyle, a lifestyle her recollections tell us she resisted and was never satisfied by but followed through marriage.[127]

[127] Freud argued that constipation was a symptom associated with neurotics with an obsession with money. He offers several examples of a cultural association of defecation with monetary accumulation, or shit with gold, including such common phrases as "filthy rich." See Freud "Character and Anal Erotism" 296-297.

Both survivors and their children seeking solace can return to the physical sites where traumas took place. David L. Eng explores this possibility in *The Feeling of Kinship* as it relates to "racial melancholia."[128] Eng examines melancholia in the transnational adopted daughter who experiences "fundamental notions of splitting and idealization, depression and guilt, reinstatement and reparation" (140). These feelings are focused on the "good-enough mother" figure, of whom she has two in her life. I extend Eng's usage of "racial melancholia" to Avey Johnson to explicate the ways that as a racialized mother, she perceives her own failures around the question of "good enough" as it is attached to each of her daughters and to her role as a wife. The mother daughter relationship, as Eng finds, is an appropriate one for the exploration of unresolved and irresolvable grief, or melancholia whose source is unknown and perhaps even unidentifiable (167). Since she is traveling abroad, Avey finds herself distinctly separated from each of her daughters and the domestic past that moors her to any sense of identity and equilibrium. As she grieves in the Grenada hotel room, she hears her daughters' voices admonishing her faults. As Toni Morrison has so plainly stated, there are no such places to visit in order to mourn the slave trade. Thus, for Marshall, Avey's unhealed grief becomes a continuous mourning without roots and this has consequences for her bodily stasis. Avey's stomach pain is symptomatic of belated or recovered attachment to what she will call in the novel, "a huge wide confraternity" of similarly directed and

[128] See also Anne Cheng, *The Melancholy of Race: Assimilation, Psychoanalysis, and Hidden Grief* (2000). Anne Cheng examines the ways that subjectivity has been shaped through learned racial preference and self-hatred in American society, and she calls critics to think in more complicated terms about the ways that "racial grief" is "the result of (and as an agent in shaping) a complex interaction between sociality and psychodynamics" (24). The concept of racial grief foregrounds the ways that the particularly raced bodies of individuals lead to the experience of specific and unique material histories. Though we are reading and writing in the aftermath of poststructuralism's decentering of the author and deconstruction of the coherent subject, she explains that minority communities in America, for example African Americans, "remain invested in maintaining such categories [gender and race or racialized gender], even when such identities prove to be prohibitive or debilitating" (7).

embodied individuals in America, the Caribbean and globally (191). Avey's discovered attachment to a collective unity is figured in the form of "hundreds of slender threads streaming out from her navel and from the place where her heart was to enter those around her" (190). Avey has forgotten this feeling of attachment she experienced as a child, whereby she believes "The moment she began to founder those on shore would simply pull on the silken threads and haul her in."

In his discussion of Benjamin's conceptualization of melancholia, which "is not a problem to be cured; loss is not something to get over and leave behind" (64), Johnathan Flatley suggests the ways that an affect of melancholia, of continued attachment and cathexis of the lost object, can produce these political attachments. He writes, "What emerges [from Benjamin] is the picture of a politicizing, splenetic melancholy, where clinging to things from the past *enables* interest and action in the present world and is indeed the very mechanism for that interest" (65). The process of mourning Marshall creates in her novel, which is initiated both by a bad dream and by "an unpleasant sensation in her stomach that had plagued her off and on" for two days, is a psychological process marked by embodied signs; a route Avey must take to a re-engaged, newly culturally conscious subject position and orientation in the world (25). This route will of course raise questions about the complicated and problematic nature of the necessity of Avey's physical symptoms alongside a belated mourning for what it means socially, politically, and personally to be black in the United States and as a condition of traumatic history and original rupture of the Transatlantic Slave Trade.

The novel is concerned with negotiating the borders between knowable or discernable thoughts in Avey's consciousness and those unknowable or inassimilable

haunting memories and ideas that populate her unconscious and subconscious. A recurring trope in the novel is the exact relationality or spatial difference between the mind and the body. For example, as Avey packs her suitcase to leave the Bianca Pride, "Her mind in a way wasn't even in her body, or for that matter, in the room" (10). Susan Rogers claims, "Avey's body communicates to her what she has taught her conscious mind to ignore: her disconnection from her own sense of herself and from the African-American and Caribbean heritage which is a crucial part of that self" (77). Rogers also argues that the novel portrays "memory as located in the body and accessed through physical change. Avey's memories of other times and other place are embodied memories, bound inextricably with her physicality" (79). Both Avey's alarming stomach pain and the horrific, disorienting visions she experiences aboard the Bianca Pride begin after she has a disturbing dream that produces a visceral reaction. The dream is both notable and odd in the first place because Avey stopped dreaming in the 1960s around the time four little girls were murdered in their Sunday school classroom. We learn, "As a rule [Avey] seldom dreamed. Or if she did, whatever occurred in her sleep was always conveniently forgotten by the time she awoke. It had been like this ever since the mid-sixties. Before then, she had found herself taking all the nightmare images from the evening news into her sleep with her" (31). She only "ceased dreaming" following a nightmare image of discovering the bodies of her own daughters in the wreckage of that Birmingham church. However, following her visit to Martinique, Avey dreams of her great aunt Cuney. Avey's unconscious dream life establishes the connection the novel feels she should experience in Martinique to the first person in her life who taught her about a yearning for a lost homeland in Africa so strong that newly arrived enslaved Ibo

people who arrived on the shores of South Carolina step back into the sea to make their return.

Marshall, like Walker, utilizes the sublime to characterize her protagonist's experience of psychological transformation. However, unlike Meridian's spiritual awakening at the sacred serpent, Avey does not experience pleasure. Aboard the cruise ship she becomes trapped inside and by her body, by horrific visions of other passengers, and a general feeling that the ship is floundering. Before she makes the decision to depart the cruise she experiences scenes of terror on the decks after which she retreats to the, always empty, library where "she almost seemed herself again, except for her eyes, which retained the look of someone in the grip of a powerful hallucinogen—something that had dramatically expanded her vision, offering her a glimpse of things that were beyond her comprehension, and therefore frightening" (59). As she wanders the decks feeling alienated from the tourists who surround her entertaining themselves with shipboard games, their sporting instruments transform to deadly weapons. Avey recalls a time when she and Jay witnessed a police officer beating a man on the street as they looked down from their apartment window. The intrusive member is rendered in italics in the text asking the reader to move between cognitive spaces with Avey as she recalls,

> *the pale meaty hand repeatedly bring the nightstick down on the man's shoulders and back, and on the head he sought to shield with his raised arms. . . . Under the rain of blows the man finally sank screaming to his knees, his blood a lurid red against his blackness in the light of the streetlamp overhead. . . . Unable either of them to go back to sleep*

afterwards, she and Jay had sat up the rest of the night till dawn, like two people holding a wake. (56)

As Avey leaves the *Bianca Pride* she has an almost apocalyptic vision of the cruise liner burst into flames with her two friends still on board. "Conscience-stricken suddenly, she turned around in her seat inside the cabin of the launch as though to call an apology back over the water to them. She turned only to have her eyes assaulted by what looked like a huge flash fire of megaton intensity and heat, as the tropical sunlight striking the liner's bow and sweeping over the hull appeared to have set it ablaze. She could almost feel over the distance the heat from the fires on the decks" (63). As she does a double take, the cruise ship returns to its normal state, "serene and intact," yet "the retina of her eye held on to both images for a long moment, and one seemed as real as the other."

It is aboard the *Emanuel C*, the small sloop, which carries Avey from Grenada to Carriacou with the out-islanders as they make the excursion home, that her stomach troubles finally come to resolution in a mortifying period of sea-sickness. There, "She vomited in long loud agonizing gushes" (204). Women on the small boat support Avey throughout her violent illness. Women hold her purse and gather around to shield Avey's wretchedness from fellow travelers. Her vomiting grows increasingly spectacular and beyond her control as her body is overcome. Marshall writes, "as her stomach heaved up she would drop forward and the old women holding her would have to tighten their grip as the force of the vomiting sent her straining out over the railing, dangerously close to the water" (205). "The paroxysms repeated themselves with almost no time in between for her to breathe. Hanging limp. . . .And then she would be hawking, crying, collapsing

as her stomach convulsed and the half-digested food came gushing from her with such violence she might have fallen overboard were it not for the old women" (205). Avey is buffeted and soothed by elderly women, fellow passengers, and out-islanders who have made this voyage countless times before.

They whisper, "Bon" in her ears as they support her weight and calm her, seemingly aware that Avey's vomiting is the result of more than just motion sickness, but has been brought on by the "something deeper" than that Avey's friend Thomasina believes lies behind Avey's desertion of her friends from their planned cruise at the beginning of the novel. Yet Avey's senses are preoccupied by her distress: "In her dimming consciousness she was only aware of the continuing upheaval inside her which had grown worse with the empty retching. Not only were the contractions more wrenching now that there was nothing left, they had reaching below her stomach to the place where up to this morning in the rum shop she had felt the strange oppressive fullness" (207). As Avey's violent sickness only worsens, her pain and bouts of nausea are likened to labor. In a gruesome way, the novel suggests that Avey's shipboard sickness is also a kind of birth. However, the contractions change, and Avey's pain finally end in a horrific, mortifying expulsion of her bowels, as "like an alien organ beneath her heart and needed to be expelled, all of her body's fury was suddenly concentrated there." "Down past her navel. Down through the maze of her intestines. Down into her bowel." The reader must feel embarrassed at Avey's anguish, as she has been a woman so guarded and concerned about the propriety of both her appearances and containing her body throughout the novel, we must also ask why this suffering is necessary.

As Avey's retching subsides, the women carry her to an enclosed section of the boat that had "the airlessness of a hold" (208). It is in this small space that Avey experiences a spectral encounter and her suffering is given a kind of historical context—though its relationship to her own newfound self-possession remains difficult to discern. As the boat nears port, "the pall over Avey Johnson's mind lifted momentarily and she became dimly conscious" (209). Thus, as strangely as Avey's seasickness was brought on, it recedes after her stomach is rid of its contents. As she recuperates, though, she becomes aware of the fact that she is not alone, but she can sense "other bodies" near her. The section of the novel concludes with this sensation: "A multitude it felt like lay packed around her in the filth and stench of themselves, just as she was. Their moans, rising and falling with each rise and plunge of the schooner, enlarged upon the one filling her head. Their suffering—the depth of it, the weight of it in the cramped space—made hers of no consequence" (209).

What is Marshall asking of both her protagonist and her reader in these detailed and particular descriptions of Avey's physical sickness? Susan Rogers suggests, "Avey's profoundly disturbing illness conveys the extent of the damage resulting from cultural dislocation created by the forced transition of Africans to America" (86). As Avey finds herself on board these ships, disorienting vehicles of mobility, her body repulses and rejects her self-positioning in a way that causes the reader to pause over Marshall's plan for her character. If you'll pardon the pun, it is hard to digest the device of Avey's ordeal. However, one cannot overlook the connection drawn between the belly of the ship and Avey's physical responses. The ship itself has often been anthropomorphized, its hold like a stomach or a terrifying womb. In *Poetic Relations* Édouard Glissant writes of the

slave ship, "First, the time you fell into the belly of the boat. For, in your poetic vision, a boat has no belly; a boat does not swallow up, does not devour; a boat is steered by open skies. Yet, the belly of this boat dissolves you, precipitates you into a nonworld from which you cry out. This boat is a womb, a womb abyss. It generates the clamor of your protests; it also produces all the coming unanimity. Although you are alone in this suffering, you share in the unknown with others whom you have yet to know. This boat is your womb, a matrix, and yet it expels you. This boat: pregnant with as many dead as living under sentence of death" (6). Yet Marshall's title belies humiliation and suggests a sense of recovered wholeness. In Carriacou, as the novel's title indicates, Avey discovers her personal praise song, and this musical emblem becomes the impetus for her return to South Carolina to build a new home that looks back to the sea.

Queering Generational Memory in Gayl Jones's *Corregidora*

The slave ship is everywhere and nowhere in Gayl Jones's 1975 novel, *Corregidora*. The years-past familial and human crimes of a Portuguese sailor and slave trader, "Old Man Corregidora," haunt his great-great granddaughter. So much so that she is burdened with the responsibility to account for, continually recall, and change their effects on her life and body. The novel's title, as an eponym, refers either to the current generation of the Corregidora line of women descended from his acts of theft, Ursa, or the long-dead man himself. Like the names of slave ships that survive in their records of account, "Corregidora" is all that remains in the twentieth-century besides the oral histories repeated and dispersed by his daughters and granddaughters.

Yet the ship is the vehicle of gain that directs the generational flow of familial inheritance among the Corregidora women, spurning them to produce female bonds in

order to subvert the power structure of bodily exploitation. Through a series of linguistic recoveries, Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley claims new territory for the historical and cultural significances of queer and female *creolité*, or the bonds among women that might arise from the process of captive migration. She writes, "I was studying relationships between women in Suriname and delved into the etymology of the word *mati*. This is the word Creole women use for their female lovers: figuratively *mi mati* is 'my girl,' but literally it means *mate*, as in *shipmate*—she who survived the Middle Passage with me" (192). She continues, "During the Middle Passage, as colonial chronicles, oral tradition, and anthropological studies tell us, captive African women created erotic bonds with other women in the sex-segregated holds, and captive African men created bonds with other men. In so doing, they resisted the commodification of their bought and sold bodies by *feeling* and *feeling for* their co-occupants on these ships" (192). As Tinsley's scholarship illuminates, the erotic, but here specifically giving and receiving pleasure in the face of bodily suffering and horrific losses, is a mode of making community and repairing those injuries.

Read against *Praisesong for the Widow*, Gayl Jones's short, dialogic novel *Corregidora* throws into crisis notions of the possibility of a whole self through the narrator's fragmented being as it relates to her inability to move beyond a transhistorical "I" that is too closely connected with the traumas of her maternal ancestors. Ursa is unable to separate her present conditions from their repeated narratives of trauma. Thus, as a melancholic subject, she continues to mourn *their* traumatic memories as they shape her own experience of sexual violence and lost love at the hands of her husband. Jones, more so than Walker or Marshall, is critical of the Black Arts trope of the Middle Passage

as the inheritance of all black Americans. Ursa rejects this matrilineal line of descent from sexual violence aboard the slave ship to domestic violence, and likewise the novel exorcises the time of the slave ship from her own. Ultimately, Ursa releases herself from melancholia through the self-positioning of her body as an empowered vehicle that subverts a melancholic inheritance. Jones's novel enacts a womanist politics of narration whereby Ursa's interior speech and the black vernacular are used as strategies to express a changing and healing consciousness. Ursa's voice, Jones's narrator, is a profound intervention in the literary depiction of black femininity, and the poetic power of this voice is captivating and alluring even while it may be discomfiting for some. Although Jones was criticized for the seeming disconnection of her novels from contemporary politics, I read the novel as employing Black Aesthetic devices and Ursa's narrating voice as theorizing a dilation of time through memory and recovery (Dubey 145).

Jones queers memory. Ursa is able to achieve a redemptive self-confidence and sustaining form of therapeutic artistry through singing. Her body heals her self, and in doing so, goes a long way to providing nourishing self-healing of a traumatic inheritance that is located in memory and in the biological ability to "bear witness." Ursa's voice, and interestingly her fist emerge as sites of pleasure, power, and even violence. So that Jones's novel reimagines the potent image of the raised black fist in the 1970s in its nexus of fear and desire. *Corregidora* also interrogates the compulsion to generate and *think* about traumatic experiences in the past.[129] The novel questions the pleasure to be had from memory, to be found in mentally grasping for the traumatic when Ursa questions her grandmothers' compulsions and desires, while suggesting that her mother

[129] Madhu Dubey, "Gayl Jones and the Matrilineal Metaphor of Tradition," *Signs* 20.2 (1995: 245-267).

and she found the ability to deviate from these desires and saw the command to produce generations who can remember as both tyrannical and perverse.

Gayl Jones' novel *Corregidora* asks these questions through its explorations of the ways a traumatic history resides in memory for twentieth-century post-slavery, postcolonial, and post-Civil Rights movement subjects.[130] Published in 1975, this novel is concerned with the way the protagonist, Ursa Corregidora, comes to know her self in relation to an inherited history of sexual abuse and exploitation in Brazilian plantation slavery. At the center of the novel is Ursa's relationship to a matrilineal line of descent in which each woman is conditioned to motherhood in order to "make generations" so that the memory of slavery and of Old Man Corregidora's exploitation of his female property, Ursa's ancestors, will persist through oral tradition rather than dissolving through the passage of time. Ursa is unable to parse her sexuality from either this compulsion to have a daughter or from a familial demand to remember. Therefore, the novel links memory with heterosexuality. Yet desire refuses to be so heavily arbitrated, and the novel's explicit descriptions of sex, themselves constitute non-normative sexual discourse. Besides the overtly homosocial bonds between the Corregidora women, the novel is punctuated by lesbians and by queer, or nonheteronormative, sexual behavior. While the novel seems so deeply imbued with heterosexual desire, orientation, and reproductive

[130] Christina Sharpe, *Monstrous Intimacies*. "From those Africans forced to step over the threshold of the door of no return into the Middle Passage, to their dispersal in the diaspora and entry though the bloodstained gate, new forms of subjectivity are created not only for people of African descent in the diaspora but also for Africans, Europeans, and others. Extraordinary sites of domination and intimacy, slavery and the Middle Passage were ruptures with and a suspension of the known world that initiated enormous and ongoing psychic, temporal, and bodily breaches" (3-4). This books in Sharpe's "attempt to account for the long psychic and material reach of those passages, their acknowledge and disavowed effects, their projection onto and erasure from particular bodies, and the reformulation, reproduction, and recirculation of their intimate spaces of trauma, violence, pleasure, shame, and containment."

sex, the lesbian characters offer not only an alternative orientation, but emphasize how disparate sexualities came to be pathologized in postwar America.

This reading is only possible following Roderick Ferguson's book *Aberrations in Black*, and indicates another possible direction for his "queer of color" critical project. Jones queers memory through a process of denaturalizing middle-class, reproductive sex by linking Ursa's relation to sexual desire, awakening, and inability to give birth to overbearing memories of slavery. Published in 1975, this fictional linkage emerges after the "Moynihan Report," which locates the failures of the African American middle-class family in an adherence to matriarchy that has emerged out of the ways slavery conditioned the African American family and black men. While Jones's novel seems to suggest that the latent traumatic effects of slavery have fundamentally shaped sexual relations between black American men and women in heterosexual, patriarchal couplings, by examining the ways Ursa fails to overcome an anxious repulsion towards lesbian relationships while continuing to suffer the aftereffects of abusive marriages, we can come to understand that Jones offers a critique of the damaging narratives of normative female sexuality. Though in the end *Corregidora* recuperates embodied memory, it does so only by offering the model of a blues woman whose fiscal independence maintains her status outside of the family structure.

It may seem like a stretch to attempt to attend to the ways *Corregidora* thematizes memory and queer sexuality; however, I suggest that the novel's treatment of Ursa's anxieties about Cat and Jeffy mirrors her anxieties housing Great Gram and Gram's memories. Both lesbian desire and memories of slavery are contained in the body and require female embodiment in particular. Furthermore, as Madhu Dubey claims, the

novel's treatment of matrilineal orality at first seems to shore up heteronormativity in the cultural context of Black Nationalism's embrace of the "Moynihan Report's" identification of the African American man's emasculation by slavery and strong, black women. She states, "The matriarchs. . .embody the force of past oppression, as their ideology remains locked within the framework of slavery" (73). Dubey reveals the ways the novel undermines a "black nationalist discourse on slavery" (73). Dubey's exploration of homosexuality is part of her larger aim to reveal the ways *Corregidora* is a critique of the misogyny in black cultural nationalism that "incorporated elements of the contemporary government discourse on the black family, especially as propagated by the notorious Moynihan Report" (17). She explains that according to the nationalist logic of the late sixties, early seventies, black women were valued as mothers of revolutionaries and intellectuals; their sphere of influence was to remain the domestic. While there exists a body of scholarship on the lesbian sexuality and queer impulses by "straight" women in *Corregidora*, to which Madhu Dubey is no small contributor, the queer aspects of the book have remained as liminal as the women themselves who mark the borders of the possible. I read the presence of these women as representing an internal critique in the novel of systemic corruption, abuse, and oppressive normativity. Furthermore, while Cat and Jeffy are presented to us through the lens of Ursa's repulsion for the ways they express homosexual desire, it is also possible that Ursa Corregidora is not the most reliable of narrators. When read closely, the novel undermines a mythology of black matriarchy by examining its damaging effects in a white supremacist society that seeks to ghettoize African American women to shore up national interests (Ferguson 137).

The novel begins in 1947 in Kentucky, and Ursa has just been shoved down a set of stairs by her husband, Mutt. We only learn his motivations for the altercation that results in her fall near the end of the novel; he has been drunkenly monitoring Ursa as she performs at a club called "Happy's" because he is uncomfortable with the attention she attracts from male audience members. When Ursa is released from the hospital she stays at first with Tadpole, her employer and the owner of Happy's. Ursa and Tad get married, but because he is not sexually fulfilled, so he claims, he cheats on her with a young woman he has hired to replace Ursa when she starts singing at another club. The end of their relationship pushes Ursa to try to understand her sexual failings in the context of her family's past. She returns to Bracktown, her hometown, where Mama tells Ursa about her very brief marriage to her father. We learn that Mama only slept with him once in order to birth a daughter so that the record of slavery and the Corregidora women's forced prostitution would not vanish completely into the recesses of history. After Ursa learns of her mother's past and her origins, in a long series of memories we learn about her childhood friend May Alice whose young pregnancy tore them apart. The last two chapters take place in 1969, when Ursa is forty-seven and still performing. Ursa and Mutt reunite at the Spider where she works, and Ursa fellates Mutt. This compressed plot synopsis has elided much of the content of the book, which takes place in dialog or memory as stream of consciousness reverie within Ursa's own imagination. It also elides much of the "surplus" figures in the novel. In order to prevent these elisions, which in fact are where my interests lie, I want to emphasize here the ways memory *and* queerness punctuate the heterosexual plotlines. They in fact forestall it.

It is important to clarify my usage of "queer" in this project, as well as the generative political possibilities I attribute to queerness. Though I will identify the deep anxieties about lesbian sexuality in the novel, it is important to state fully that I will ultimately retain an understanding of the ways Jones's novel can be thought of as queering hegemonic textual discursivity through graphic depictions of sexuality and alternatives to heteronomativity. I draw upon theoretical assumptions that conceive of queerness as those behaviors and fluid modes of being which detach from the social order to denaturalize heteronormativity. For as we will see in the novel, the homosexual heterosexual binary does not remain rigidly articulated, but queer practices seep through the permeable borders of heterosexual desire. Cathy Cohen claims, "In queer politics sexual expression is something that always entails the possibility of change, movement, redefinition, and subversive performance—from year to year, from partner to partner, from day to day, and even from act to act" (23). Moreover, "In addition to highlighting the instability of sexual categories and sexual subjects, queer activists also directly challenge the multiple practices and vehicles of power that render them invisible and at risk." In *Corregidora*, it is also true that Cat, Jeffy, May Alice, and Great Gram's mistress, are "sexual subject[s]" that are "understood to be constructed and contained by multiple practices of categorization and regulation that systematically marginalize and oppress those subjects thereby defined as deviant and 'other'" (23). Ursa seeks to contain these women in rigid stance toward the social order, and her psyche also suffers the consequences of seeing no other way than heterosexual stance to which she has oriented herself through her labor and familial responsibility to remember (and to labor with child). A "queer of color critique" thus, makes evident the deeply ambivalent stance

towards postcolonial sexualities the novel takes, leaving us to understand that a new kind of pleasure leads her back into Mutt's lap in the scene of fellatio that concludes the novel. The relationship between memory and desire or memory and Ursa's sexuality here is complicated by her own refusal of a maternal drive. After all, as a blues singer, Ursa performs her sexuality on a daily basis by singing for a mostly-male audience. It is important to understand the ways Jones participates in a black (lesbian) feminist tradition that can be traced back to the blues singers of the New Negro Renaissance. Such a contextualization demonstrates how Jones's novel corresponds with "black lesbian feminist practices of negation" (Ferguson 127). Hazel Carby argues that during the process of urbanization following the Great Migration "the behavior of black female migrants was characterized as sexually degenerate, and therefore, socially dangerous" ("Policing the Black Woman's Body in an Urban Context" 739). Carby also claims that in order for a black middle class, or urban elite, to maintain sexual and behavioral hegemony, certain figures needed to be contained, regulated, or expelled (751). According to Carby, the clearest target for sociologists, magazine writers, and the authors of conduct manuals for newly arrived migrants were the cabarets and dance halls where the blues singer found employment outside of domestic service. However, the success and persisting attraction of dance halls, cabarets, and the blues women in them effectively demonstrates "the failure of the black bourgeosie to achieve cultural hegemony and become a dominant force" (754). Carby rescues "blues women" from bourgeois vilification to argue for their agency in choosing not to be just several more domestic laborers, or the ultimate abject figure, prostitutes. Instead these "surplus women" put the increasing commercialization of black cultural productions, and music in particular, to

their financial gain. We can now think of Ursa's blues performances as critiques of intra-racial and inter-racial social stratification as well as a politics of respectability.

Yet throughout the novel she struggles with this status. This struggle is demonstrated through the ways memory punctuates her consciousness. These memories are of the ways she has been instructed since birth to "make generations" (10). Ursa's memories tie her bodily production to the presence of a womb that is required to birth daughters so that the oral record will remain unbroken to re-member the lost evidence of Old Man Corregidora's incestuous rape and the unrecorded traumas of slavery. In a meditative memory of Great Gram's speeches we learn why Ursa must give birth: "*Because they didn't want to leave no evidence of what they done—so it couldn't be held against them. And I'm leaving evidence. And you got to leave evidence too. And your children got to leave evidence*" (14). Interestingly, this lecture is motivated by a moment of doubt voiced by young Ursa after she is not sure she believes one of her great-grandmother's strange memories about her mistress. Great Gram recalls, ". . .*His wife was a skinny stuck-up little woman he got from over in Lisbon and had her brought over here. He wouldn't sleep with her, so she made me sleep with her, so for five years I was sleeping with her* and *him. That was when I was from about thirteen to eighteen*" (13). This detail from Great Gram's memory not only initiates the first moment of doubt from Ursa of the veracity of her claims, but it also instigates a diatribe about the necessity of reproduction over against the usage of Great Gram's body by a female in power. To say that this is an odd conjunction of narrative details is not sufficient; this is a queer memory that produces a strong reaction from Great Gram when Ursa doubts her. This memory is reiterated later in another long memory flashback to Ursa's childhood, this time to a

memory of Gram, who explains, "*And you know sometimes the mistresses was doing it too so they could have a little pocket money that their husbands didn't know about," that is they also prostituted their slaves to earn money* (23). However, Corregidora's wife "*didn't do that. She sleep with your herself*." This memory precedes a conversation between Ursa and Cat in which Cat expresses doubts about a relationship with Tad, and invites Ursa to stay at her house during her recovery. Thus, we begin to recognize a formal structuring or pattern in the novel in which lesbian desire is put forth as a possible site of critique, but also overburdened by traumatic memory.[131] Such a reading posits a strange reordering of temporality in which memory is embodied in the present so that present time is not only informed by an absence that is made present through the body, but that is reconfigured by homosexuality. Though Ursa must counteridentify so strongly with queer desire, Cat's dissenting voice represents an alternate conception of the future, one that is not bound to marriage. Elizabeth Freeman asks "might homosexuality (let's call it queerness) itself be a form of future-making, of re-creating the social, though perversely enough, not in the name of the future" (188)? This future is one that Ursa does not allow herself to imagine because it would push her outside of the parameters of her conditioned subjectivity.[132]

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[131] Elizabeth Swanson Goldberg, "Living the Legacy: Pain, Desire, and Narrative Time in Gayl Jones' *Corregidora*," *Callaloo* 26 (2003): 465. Goldberg seeks to attend more closely to Cat than previous critics have, but her argument fails to fully contend with the ways lesbian desire haunts both the past and the present. She finds Cat "more broadly represents the possibility of sex apart from male penetration, as well as the possibility of witness to Ursa's desire, if not her pain. Ursa's rejection of Cat on both counts is less a function of homophobia, anger, or outrage than it is her inability to imagine pleasure or desire outside of the pain of the violent heterosexual contract as she has experienced it."

[132] My understanding of subjectivity here relies heavily on Judith Butler's work in *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1997) 99. Though Butler's Foucauldian reading of subjectivity as subjection is too complicated to completely rehearse here, I will cite the ways she understands subjectivity as conditioned through quotidian orientations (more on this later) that corresponds with how I understand the impact of memories on Ursa's sexuality. Butler argues, "a subject only remains a subject through reiteration or rearticulation of itself as a subject, and this dependency of the subject on repetition for coherence may constitute that subject's incoherence, its incomplete character. This repetition

Ursa's blues performances are rendered deviant and nonsensical in this logic, as we learn when she recalls her mother's lecture of the subject of Ursa's profession. Ursa's mother believes, "'*Songs are devils. It's your own destruction you're singing. The voice is a devil"*' (53). Ursa feels compelled to witness the memories of her family members through the medium of the blues song. She imagines responding to her mother's chastising claim: "*But still I'll sing as you talked it, your voice humming, sing about the Portuguese who fingered your genitals. His pussy. 'The Portuguese who bought slaves paid attention only to genitals.' Slapped you across the cunt till it was bluer than black. Concubine daughter*" (54). The memories of slavery inform all of Ursa's bodily productions and her labor. In turn these memories cannot be severed from the possibility of their denial through alternate modes of being, or the "something else to be" Ferguson reads in Toni Morrison's novel *Sula*.[133] However, in *Corregidora*, these memories also remain in a sphere in which homosexuality is pathologized by the survivalist logic the Corregidora women have created in the face of traumatizing sexual subjugation. The narrative's emphasis on memory is tied to the familial and communal structures that demand heterosexual visibility, marriage, and motherhood.

Ursa comes to differentiate between two types of memory when she returns to Bracktown to ask Mama about her father, she is in search of Mama's "private memory" (104). Ursa tells us, "I couldn't be satisfied until I had seen Mama, talked to her, until I had discovered her private memory." These private memories are those that are not

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or, better, iterability thus becomes the non-place of subversion, the possibility of a re-embodying of the subjecting norm that can redirect its normativity."

[133] Claudia Tate, "An Interview with Gayl Jones," *Black American Literature Forum* 13 (1979) 142. On an interesting anecdotal note, in this interview Jones tells Tate that Toni Morrison was her editor for this project. It is even more fascinating to consider the ways their working relationship shaped this novel. Jones reveals, "my editor, Toni Morrison, asked the unanswered question: What about Ursa's past? This question required that I clarify the relationships between Ursa and Mutt and Ursa and her mother."

shared, but are also those that characterize the ways Mama has dealt with the Corregidora mythology. Mama's private memories are distinguished from the shared memories that circulate in dialogic form between Great Gram, Gram, Mama, and Ursa. Though the novel does not name them as such, these memories are implicitly deemed the public memories of the family; memories that mark their lives in specific ways and delineate a shared history that is just as damaging to the psyche as the single memory of his grandfather and American chattel slavery that Mutt shares with Ursa. The primary difference is that the Corregidora women's memories determine their sexual choices and codify their bodies in certain ways. Furthermore, the family's memories take their authoritative power from speech in order to hail Mama and Ursa to the task of "making generations" remember.[134] In fact, Great Gram and Gram's speeches are conveyed in terms that simulate penetration. In the long meditation that directly precedes Ursa's return home she realizes, "*They squeezed Corregidora into me, and I sung back in return. I would have rather sung her memory if I'd had to sing any. What about my own*" (103). Ursa fights this overbearing internally imposed categorization throughout, mainly choosing to distinguish herself through a different kind of bodily production. Yet the question of desire still remains a vexing one for Ursa as she yearns to understand her mother's personal desire apart from the directives of the older women whose own desires

[134] Ann duCille, "Phallus(ies) of Interpretation: Toward Engendering the Black Critical 'I,'" *Callaloo* 16 (1993): 567. DuCille articulates the ways speech operates in these family lectures to argue for an active engagement with a tramatic past. She writes, "Despite the unspeakable nature of Corregidora's crims and the destruction of all record of those crimes, precisely the task with which Ursa, like her mother, grandmother, and great grandmother before her, as been entrusted to *speak* Corregidora's evil: to 'make generations' that bear witness to his cruelty and his abuses." Interestingly, duCille places the novel in a literary tradition that she terms "dearly beloved blues" that constitutes "a particular variety of prose, poetry, and song that focuses (often as a lament) on the problems of married life." Though I do not want to argue that the novel's queer structures are privileged or emphasized over the marriage plot(s), I do think it is interesting that critics have failed to notice the ways in which queerness punctuates every stage of Ursa's life other than her life, even her reunion with Mutt, shortly before which she has a disturbing encounter with Jeffy. This novel is not simply a novel about trauma and heteropatriarchal oppression in the bedroom, while it does not deal with gay men, the novel is overwhelmed by lesbian possibilties.

are so thoroughly fueled by violent hatred that borders on love and hate (102).[135] The possibilities offered by the women in Ursa's contemporary life are not pushed to the edges of the narrative. Though the queer women—Cat, Jeffy, Sal, May Alice, Mama—may be marginal; they hold a central place in the relatively short novel which does not waste words on superfluous tangents.

Though, I do not read Ursa as resisting heterosexuality, but resisting homosexual desire that would constitute deviance from the Corregidora women's requirements, this comparison foreshadows the ways "surplus' women deviate from convention. When Tad and Ursa get married, Cat acts as their legal witness, in effect "giving" Ursa away as a father substitute. Ursa and Cat are markedly uncomfortable around each other, causing Tad to comment twice, "'Y'all women sho act funny at wedding time" referring to both Cat and Ursa (68). Yet despite Cat's confession about the experiences from her past that led her to hold lesbian relationships with younger women—where the power differential is in her favor—Ursa deems Cat's sexual identity "hysteria" (66). She pathologizes Cat's yearning to "come back home to my own bed and not be made a fool of," as a neurotic response. While Cat trembles before her after relating a history of racialized subjection, Ursa is saying good-bye in order to contain her own memories of feeling foolish at Mutt's hands.

[135] The novel is often read as burdened with desire in terms of Ursa's need to achieve satisfaction through penile penetration that fills up her "hole" making her whole. Ann duCille complicates this critical stance to explore the ways the novel cannot resist what she elsewhere has called the "coupling convention," when she discusses the ways Ursa's "survival has depended upon her voice" (568). DuCille is highly critical of the novel's final scene in which Ursa performs oral sex on Mutt, which can be read in duCille's terms as a kind of willed or chosen self-penetration—filling not her vaginal "hole" but her oral cavity in a gesture to seek intimate knowledge of the abjection experienced by Great Gram. DuCille writes, "I wonder also about the ideology of empowerment at work here. It troubles me that so many of our crtical discussions about *Corregidora* define reconciliation and what [Melvin] Dixon calls 'successful coupling' in terms of empowerment—who has power over whom sexually" (569). For her, when "Mutt cums, Ursa succumbs" (569).

This scene constitutes another moment of silence in the novel during which Ursa cannot respond to Cat's questions or her needs. She will not answer because an answer would enact a speech act that would reorient her towards communion with Cat.[136] According to Ferguson's reading of Barbara Smith's groundbreaking essay, "Towards a Black Feminist Criticism," my reading of these latent impulses points to a lesbian set of "critiques of heterosexuality and patriarchy" as well as racist exploitation (Ferguson 127). Furthermore, like *Sula* which inspired coalitions and political alliances among African American lesbians, *Corregidora* can be read as part of a conversation of "heterogeneous. . .black lesbian feminism" that "inspired a politics of difference that could critique the nationalist underpinnings of identity and challenge the racial regulation and gender and sexual normativity that composed the second [liberal] apotheosis" (129). Yet the "polarization," to use Ferguson's language, between Ursa/Cat and Ursa/Jeffy keeps reformulating itself throughout the text, instead of being resolved.[137] In other words, queerness disrupts and haunts Ursa's conception of her gender at work. Ursa irrevocably labels Cat as an outsider, a deviant surplus woman, when she labels her an hysteric. In turn, Cat leaves town, and as we learn later from Jeffy, gives up her business to take up a factory job where in an accident on the line she is scalped. Through this violent symbolic

[136] I continue to use this vague language when discussing Ursa's repression, because the novel so rigidly contains lesbian desire to the past and to the pejorative, recall the sins of the mistress. I on the other hand do not want to duplicate the ways the novel enacts Ursa's anxieties at the level of its silences, but instead continue to explore the possibilities of generative queerness that explode in these silences.

[137] My use of the term "polarization" here condenses a great deal of historical contextualization into one term. Ferguson is referring to a "polarization of social structures" that took place during the second apotheosis of liberalism (130). This polarization was not unique to the United States, but "part of a general global trend reached as the economies of highly industrialized countries shifted toward service." In turn he argues a shift in the African American social structure coincided with global economic trends, so that the African American community "inherited the normative ideologies of civil rights, canonical sociology, and national liberation," which resulted in the "simultaneous" production of "the single black mother and the black lesbian as the female-outsider" (131).

act, the novel completes her marginalization by removing the sign of her previous fiscal independence to "make her own hours" (30).

Jeffy, "or sometimes Jeff," appears again as a critical voice that calls out Ursa's rejection of Cat (174). Shortly before the novel ends and Ursa reunites with Mutt, Ursa recounts the events that let to their reunion, and one is the day she runs into Jeffy while shopping. Ursa would have simply passed by her had not Jeffy called out: "Just walk on by. . . .That's right. Just walk on by," in an accusatory manner, stopping Ursa in her tracks (174). Toying with her, Jeffy asks Ursa, "'Cat got your tongue?' She grinned. 'She always used to wish she had it'"(175). Ursa tries to ignore Jeffy, and works hard not to meet her touch. During their encounter, Jeffy punishes Ursa by telling her about Cat's work-related accident and disfigurement. She also comes on to Ursa in bold language that mimics the frequent sexual advances Ursa receives from men throughout the book, saying, "I wouldn't mind you giving me some" (178). The dialog that follows bears repeating in full to understand the ways that Jones combines silence with full disclosure to produce an awkward encounter between the two women that ends with Ursa's complete rejection of Jeffy's existence from her worldview. Jeffy begins,

> "I knew there wasn't nothing between y'all," she said. "I knew if even if you didn't."/ I played like I didn't know who she meant. And then, I was thinking, maybe I didn't./ "I don't have to listen to you," I said quietly./ "Who do you listen to?"/ I said nothing./ "Do you have anybody."/ "I wouldn't answer."/ "You know I got something for you when you ready for it."/ "I don't want no shit from you, Jeffy."/ "Woman like you got to get something ain't she?"/ I turned and walked

away from her. She said it softly, but I still heard. "You *know* it felt good that time." (178)

Jeffy's boldness unhinges Ursa because she is met not only with the unmitigated facts of desire, but a suggestion that Jeffy has observed Ursa's own woman-identified longing. Though it seems odd to claim this for a narrative that is told from first person perspective, by this point in the text I was cheering Jeffy on, and rooting for her to jolt Ursa out of a forced denial of Cat that is so insistently coupled with memories of male abuse, a feeling of lack in terms of her own sexual knowledge and bodily esteem. Here Ursa refuses to be penetrated by Jeffy's words. She refuses to hear her feelings about Cat giving any other meaning than what she has attributed to them. In the end she forgets Cat, and silences Jeffy to tell us, "And after that day, whenever I saw Jeffrene, I'd cross the street" (178).

However, it is worth considering further what Jeffy means when she declares, "Woman like you got to get something." In the final scene of the novel, as Ursa performs oral sex, she realizes the threat that Great Gram represented for Corregidora. She used her teeth in moments of near castration. Ursa briefly considers repaying Mutt by stating, "I could kill you" (184). She means, of course, that she possesses the power in this scene; she is in control of both "pleasure and excruciating pain at the same time." In this moment, the temporal division between past and present dissolves, so that Ursa feels herself in the position of her great grandmother. After Mutt climaxes, he states and repeats, "I don't want a kind of woman that hurt you" (185). To which Ursa responds, "Then you don't want me." Through a sexual revolution, Ursa is able to challenge her positioning within the patriarchal order she inherited from the time of the slave ship. She finds the power to resist subjugation by taking pleasure in her own body.

Conclusion: Healing Narratives of the Body

In *The Black Woman* anthology, contributors take up the question of female revolution in a myriad of ways. In her submission, "Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female," Frances Beale theorizes intersectional identity in order to critique conditions produced under capitalism that subject black women to disparities in employment opportunities and visibility. She contends that a "strong nation" condemns the submission of women and patriarchal orders of the family. She refers to a history of "surgical genocide" committed against women of color in the United States, stating, "…perhaps the most outlandish act of oppression in modern times is the current campaign to promote sterilization of non-white women in an attempt to maintain the population and power imbalance between the white haves and the non-white have-nots" (116). As the essay turns to a call for action and rejection, state proclaims, "We condemn this use of the Black woman as a medical testing ground for the white middle class" (118). As the essay turns to a utopic call for revolution, Beale places the female body at the center of urgent revolutionary concern, suggesting that the social must be remade to prohibit the continued mastery of the woman as a tool for wealth and national economic progress.

Toni Cade Bambara's *The Salt Eaters* (1980) reads as if you are in the midst of a dream. While reading this polyvocal novel, the reader finds herself navigating the terrain of so many minds, most of whom are survivors of the Black Freedom Struggle in the 1960s and 1970s, or continue to be agitators for black and Third World causes as the precipice of the end of the twentieth century. Bambara's novel allows us to register a dominate mode in black women's writing of the 1970s and 1980s, which is the

explication and representation of consciousness through circular narratives, polyvocality or multiple perspectives, and the enumeration of dreams. Moreover, *The Salt Eaters* poses several questions that are central to the novels I examine. These include, what does it mean to be a survivor of the liberation struggle? How does one continue to live with a revolutionary consciousness? What does it mean to be a veteran?[138] Each novel explores these questions through the combination of dreams, conscious meditations, interior monologues and dialogues, as well as depictions of ecstasy and the bodily sublime. The interiority, especially dreams, they assert can haunt an individual, but they can also heal.

The Salt Eaters opens with a healing, and the novel concludes with the resolution of this same healing. Bambara ties Ancestral Spirit to the everyday through Minnie Ransom's gift as a healer in the small community of Claybourne, Georgia. The reader meets both Minnie and Velma Henry as they sit at the center of a circle of witnesses in the Southwest Community Infirmary, a clinic and healing center that was built as part of the Civil Rights era activities in the South. The Infirmary is itself a revolutionary site as it fundamentally continues the work of the liberation struggle. Minnie uses the space to harness the energy of Old Wife, her ancestral guide. One exchange between Minnie and Old Wife is particularly telling of how the novel situates veteran survival within a longer

[138] I use "veteran" here to signal to the multiple experiences of war in the 1960s and 1970s, the war at home against statist segregation and racial violence as well as the war abroad in Vietnam against which so many black freedom fighters agitated and in doing so put their own lives, livelihood, and well-being on the line as black dissent in the public sphere, even more so that white anti-Vietnam protesting, put the individual's health at severe danger. Martin Luther King, Jr. is perhaps most famous for speaking out against the Vietnam war as an immoral and unjust war that relied too heavily on black and poor troops to further U.S. imperialism. In the speech, "A Time to Break the Silence," delivered at Riverside Church in New York City and published in the Spring 1967 issue of *Freedomways* magazine, King connects his role as leader of the Civil Rights struggle with the necessity of speaking out against America's involvement in Vietnam as a civil rights issue that most directly stands in the way of anti-poverty policies and action. He saw the war as having devastating effects on poor Americans. In its role as an imperial power, the United States' involvement in Southeast Asia, according to King, had devastating effects and even reinforced poverty and violence abroad. He demonstrates that the nation does not stand on firm moral ground of global protector in the Cold War.

history. Reflecting on the driving force behind her desire to help Velma, Old Wife insists it is because of love, and Minnie responds: "Oh, you've seen'm. Out there in deep waters, showing off, forgetting everything they ever knew about sharks and the undertow" (61). Minnie's response distills the argument that there are always those willing to predate on vulnerability or cut down resistance. Old Wife mockingly suggests:

> Why then you rip them fancy clothes off, Min, and thrash out into them waters, churn up all them bones we dropped from the old ships, churn up all that brine from the salty deep where our tears sank, and you grab them chirren by the neck and bop'm a good one and drag'm on back to shore and fling'm down and jump to it, pumping and cussing, fussing and cracking they ribs if ya have to to let'm live, Min. Cause love won't let you let'm go. (61)

Old Wife dispels Minnie's desire to judge and reminds her only of the healing properties of love.

A central concern of the novel is how to regain wholeness, when to relinquish despair, anger, or the traumatic aftereffects of violence. For Velma, "sickness" is a sign of her commitment to radicalism *and* her suffering spirit (107). She continues to agitate on behalf of black industrial and technology workers, specifically in the areas of healthcare and employee safety. She is both an inspiration and an annoyance to her community. However, we find her at the Infirmary because she has experienced an emotional and psychological collapse and perhaps attempted suicide. In this novel, women carry the load of activism, and the survivors feel the toll of this physical and

mental labor.[139] In a novel heavily laden with black revolutionary forms, from references to Lowndes County, Malcolm X, Dr. King, Pharaoh Saunders, Sun Ra, Charlie Parker, and the mud women, Velma positions herself within this tradition but takes on the burden of action informed by memory. Though, it is a long passage, it is worth quoting in full her revelation about the mistake of this self-positioning:

> Thought she knew how to build resistance, make the journey to the center of the circle, stay poised and centered in the work and not fly off, stay centered in the best of her people's traditions and not be available to madness, not become intoxicated by the heady brew of degrees and career and congratulations for nothing done, not become anesthetized by dazzling performances with somebody else's aesthetic, not go under. Thought the workers of the sixties had pulled the Family safely out of range of the serpent's fangs so the workers of the seventies could drain the poisons, repair damaged tissues, retrain the heartworks, realign the spine. Thought the vaccine offered by all the theorists and activists and clear thinkers and doers of the warrior clan would take. But amnesia had set in anyhow. Heart/brain/gut/muscles atrophied anyhow. Time was running out anyhow. And the folks didn't even have a party, a consistent domestic and foreign policy much less a way to govern. Something crucial had been missing from the political/economic / social / cultural / aesthetic / military

[139] The novel also includes an account of Velma menstruating during a boycott march. The relation of this memory is a powerful intervention. Velma recalls the effort needed to find a clean restroom that would be open to her as she endeavored to stay upright on her already swollen and exhausted feet: "And rounding a bend, the dulcet tones of the speaker soaring out overhead, she'd spotted the Gulf sign and knew beforehand that the rest room would be nasty, that just getting past the attendant would call for a nastiness she wasn't sure she could muster but would have to" (35).

> / psychosocial / psychosexual mix. And what could it be? And what should she do? (258-259)

Velma discovers that the "vaccine" of revolutionary thinking does not persist. Revolutionary consciousness can lag with time and wane through lack of stimulus or fatigue. However, the novel ends with the image of Velma rising from the stool in the Infirmary, shedding the shroud that covers her shoulders and releasing herself to a new path for action, only Bambara leaves specific details out of her novel—she lets the reader ponder Velma's recovery instead.

Not only has Velma, like Meridian, hit a wall of sheer exhaustion, her realization considers the limits of militancy. Walker's novel is highly critical of the militant masculine posturing that it sees as an attitude within Black Power and Civil Rights circles. As the 1960s wear on, militancy becomes a preferred mode as it approaches Malcolm X's public image. However, through her depictions of Truman and Anne-Marion, Walker rejects this strategy. This rejection is most evident through Meridian's embrace of music as a force for raising social consciousness and the use of testimony instead of the by 1976 iconic displays of defiant strength through arms and military apparel. For Bambara and Walker, the physical body is a revolutionary text and reading it closely for signs of duress, opposition, joy, freedom, and subversion offers a political stance, a practice of healing that can be translated to the public sphere. Although amnesia and forced forgetting are strategies of recovery, they are strategies that do not keep the dialectical struggle against all forms of oppression alive. The protagonists in Marshall and Jones's novels heal their bodies through the space and time to think, yet their recoveries are in many ways made public sites through novelization. The textual

repetition of traumatic dreams and its subsequent release through the healing touch of self-possession might also illuminate the therapeutic work of fiction to provide us narratives of "something else to be."

Chapter 4:

Black Arkestration: Possession and the Spaceship in the Fiction of Octavia Butler and Sun Ra's "Astro Black" Mythocracy

Sometimes, I have dared to dream to myself that one day, history may even say that my voice—which disturbed the white man's smugness, and his arrogance, and his complacency—that my voice helped to save America from a grave, possibly even a fatal catastrophe. --Malcolm X, *Autobiography of Malcolm X*[140]

It is never a matter of forgetting what it took so long to remember. Rather, the vigilance that is necessary to indict imperial modernity must be extended into the field of the future. --Kodwo Eshun, "Further Considerations on Afrofuturism" [141]

Trading Space: From the Sea to the Stars

Speculative art forms, especially Science Fiction, insert their audiences into an unknown or unknowable period of time, most often the future, thereby unsettling expectations and perceptions about culture. Scholar Jayna Brown argues, "Science fiction is a literature of possibility, that sometimes contains recognizable figurations of such categories, sometimes features them reinscribed, or no longer carrying the same valence, and sometimes is free of familiar concepts . . . entirely" (n.p.) Cultural critic Greg Tate describes science fiction by black writers in an early conversation on the then recently developed term, Afrofuturism, as follows: "I see science fiction as continuing a vein of philosophical inquiry and technological speculation that begins with the Egyptians and their incredibly detailed meditations on life after death" (Dery 766). Brown and Tate indicate how Science Fiction can present the alien dimensions of seemingly known or apparent histories, cultural values, or preoccupations. Tate elaborates on the development

[140] Malcolm X, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (385)

[141] Kodwo Eshun. "Further Considerations on Afrofuturism." CR: The New Centennial Review. 3:2 (2003): 288.

of Afrofuturism, or ways in which black writers work within the genre to explore questions of ontology and critique ontological categories:

> SF represents a kind of rationalist, positivist, scientific codification of that impulse, but it's still coming from a basic human desire to know the unknowable, and for a lot of black writers, that desire to know the unknowable directs itself toward self-knowledge. Knowing yourself as a black person—historically, spiritually, and culturally—is not something that's given to you, institutionally; it's an arduous journey that must be undertaken by the individual. (766)

Perhaps the most well-known and prolific black science fiction writer, Samuel Delany, famously averred in a speech at the Studio Museum of Harlem, "'We need images of tomorrow, and our people need them more than most'" (Dery 767). Because it is marked by specific generic conventions, and often sold under the narrow purview of trade fiction, Science Fiction is rarely read as political or involved in radical politics. However, in many ways there can be nothing more radical in both the context of narrowly prescribed cultural productions or in the context of the American twentieth-century for black writers to imagine a darker future. With the theorization of Afrofuturism as an aesthetic, a philosophy, and an evolving canon, readers, critics, and scholars now have a rich methodology to approach the intersection of blackness, technology, future-oriented temporality, alien bodies, and digital culture.[142]

[142] Two significant contributions to the emergence of the field include Mark Dery's "Black to the Future: Interview with Samuel R. Delany, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose," published in a special issue of *SAQ: The South Atlantic Quarterly* in 1993 (volume 92, issue 4), titled "Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture." In 2002, the journal *Social Text* published a special issue on Afrofuturism edited by Alondra Nelson (volume 20, number 2). Nelson was also the administrator of an influential and vibrant message board on the topic of Afrofuturism (Rambsy, SIUE Black Studies Blog). Nelson has a post on her personal

In 1992 law professor, Critical Race theorist, and legal activist Derrick Bell wrote a short story that insisted racial hierarchies would continue to matter in the new millennium. Though a work of short fiction, "The Space Traders" uses a hybrid narrative form: part-fiction, part-brief, and part-historical analysis of legal precedents that would support the transfer of black Americans to alien possession. It imagines a traumatic scene of national rupture, set in the year 2000, on the very cusp of the future. Aliens arrive along the shores of New Jersey to a troubled nation suffering the negative effects of environmental, economic, and social ills brought about by unchecked industrial growth, corporate greed, and neoliberal policies demonstrating the corrupt nature of the U.S. government. The aliens possess technologies that will solve many of America's, and by extension, the world's catastrophic problems. However, these technologies will come with a cost. The alien beings propose a trade, the technology in exchange for all African Americans who must be delivered to their ships with no idea or explanation as to their fates once they are handed over by their country. This story thematizes an aspect of Bell's theory of the "interest convergence dilemma" in which he argues that civil rights legislation, specifically *Brown v. Board of Education*, only passes when it benefits the dominant (white) power structure.[143] Bell's story argues that black Americans have not held equal status with white Americans as citizens; instead, Bell suggests, "sanctuary remains the more accurate description of black citizenship" (335). In "The Space Traders," Bell continues the work of laying bare the seductive fiction of "equality" in the

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blog that references the history of the message board, which was active in the late 1990s (http://alondranelson.wordpress.com/2011/06/16/afrofuturism-archive/).

[143] Bell, Derrick. "*Brown v. Board of Education* and the Interest Convergence Dilemma," 20-28. In this essay, Bell argues that the historical Supreme Court decision that ended de jure segregation in the United States came about due to a variety of socio- and geopolitical factors that contributed to the decision, which is an argument that contends with the exceptionalist claims about the decision as a sign of national progress and good.

United States. Throughout the story we see that the decision is not a difficult one for the president to make or the American people to support, and thus, the satire is almost unbearably caustic.

Bell frames the deportation of African American citizens on an alien spaceship to an unknown fate in devastating terms, and when read through the slave ship as a vehicle of trade rather than transportation, the story's resolution feels like a foregone conclusion. The alien beings have given the administration and the American people until the Martin Luther King, Jr. holiday to make their decision, and as expected by the historical and legal precedents Bell lays bare, the U.S. agrees to the terms of the trade. The story concludes, then, with the scene immediately prior to departure, as black Americans are about to board the spaceships. The scene is framed as a chilling repeat of the thousands of such departures from the west coast of Africa over the centuries of the Transatlantic Slave Trade. Bell writes,

> The last Martin Luther King holiday the nation would ever observe dawned on an extraordinary sight. . . . Crowded on the beaches were the inductees, some twenty million silent black men, women, and children, including babes in arms. As the sun rose, the Space Traders directed them, first, to strip off all but a single undergarment; then, to line up; and finally, to enter those holds which yawned in the morning light like Milton's 'darkness visible.' The inductees looked fearfully behind them. But, on the dunes above the beaches, guns at the ready, stood U.S. guards. There was no escape, no alternative. Heads bowed, arms now linked by slender

chains, black people left the New World as their forebears had arrived. (354)

"The Space Traders" posits as an initiating process into the twenty-first century for the U.S. a profitable trade in black bodies. This conclusion also suggests that Bell believed if the United States could close the book on the problem of the color line, it would. Bell clarifies a political affect that is one of deep disappointment, alienation, and an informed fatalism at the self-interest that largely drives the body politic as well as corporate driven and sponsored legislation that shrinks forms of social support for people of color and the poor in the United States. Bell's story reminds readers of U.S. legal history in which black humanity was often constitutionally undermined for the protection and valuation of whiteness. The reference to Book 1 of *Paradise Lost*, moreover, seems to serve as a way to link skin color to the hold of the ship. This description refers to Satan's banishment from heaven for the sin of ambition in which he questions the "monarchy" of God. Satan and his demons are sentenced to "A dungeon horrible, on all sides round / As one great furnace flamed, yet from those flames / No light, but rather darkness visible / Served only to discover sights of woe" (Milton 63-64, ln.61-64). Milton seems to presage descriptions of the belly of the slave ship. The two Afrofuturists I will examine here are less certain about the darkness of the spaceship. Rather, Sun Ra and Octavia Butler envision ship spaces that are spheres of productive blackness.

The short story is a response to the 1980s and the Reagan administration. The "visitors" that descend from "the bow of the leading ship" even speak in "the familiar comforting tones of former President Reagan" (327). Reactions to the visitors are split along racial lines. Whereas white Americans largely find the Space Traders

unthreatening: "They were not human, obviously, but resembled the superhuman, good-guy characters in comic books; indeed, they seemed to be practical, no-nonsense folks like regular Americans," black Americans, on the other hand, see the visitors as "distinctly unpleasant, even menacing in appearance" (328).[144] The visitors provide no rationale for their terms, nor do they explain the fate of the black Americans they collect into their possession (327). While the U.S. government and its white citizens must "freely" agree to the terms of the trade, African American individuals will not be made aware of their future with the visitors whose ominous voices portend their spectacular state power and conservative ideology. "The Space Traders" imagines a truly, worst-case scenario for U.S. representative politics in which elected leaders regard the trade as a deal in terms of what the black American constituency has offered the country, and their own political careers, rather than regarding black Americans as individual citizens and humans.

The alien spaceship functions in Bell's story as a solution to the irresolvable tension in America between the narrative of equality and the actual conditions of unequal citizenship by making a genocidal trade that figuratively cleanses the nation of its ongoing trouble. "The Space Traders" is an example of the reinterpretation of the ship in a Black Atlantic and Black Fantastic mode. The ship is a sign of the loss of freedom for the twenty-first century. Bell writes of a Middle Passage for the space age. This figuration builds upon literary representations of the slave ship such as Baraka's which argue that the time of slavery continues into the present and future until black humanity

[144] "The Space Traders" makes several references to World War II, including the invasion at Normandy of American troops, and post-WWII culture. Bell might be reminding readers of various forms of African American service to the United States in the form of military enlistment and fighting in order to deepen the satire as well as the narrative of the U.S. deeply disappointing treatment of and rejection of black patriotism.

and black radical consciousness is given more credence at the level of state institutions, legal practice, and daily life in this country. However, another formulation of the spaceship has emerged in black speculative thought that imagines the ship as a technology hospitable to black life, a vehicle to other worlds. This articulation of the ship is nothing new, of course. Marcus Garvey's Black Star Line was inspired and motivated by a Pan-Africanism and Black Nationalism that sought the constitution of a black state. The ship was a potent symbol of this state's instantiation through both naval pomp and the performance of suturing the past to the future since in this case "Back to Africa" is both a future-oriented profit venture as well as an appeal to cultural recovery in the aftermath of diaspora.[145]

The spaceship as a sign of the cosmos was implemented in the musical performances of both Sun Ra's Arkestra and George Clinton's Parliament Funkadelic in spectacular forms that echoed the nationalistic fervor of Garveyite parades through black neighborhoods in the 1910s and 1920s. Ra's film "Space is the Place" and Parliament Funkadelic's 1975 album and subsequent tour, "Mothership Connection" demonstrated the black ship (as nation) to be accessible through participation in black expressive forms. In the late 1960s and 1970s representations of the slave ship resist the monolithic Western ideal of the individual, emphasizing instead the collective actions of African mutineers. Music critic and scholar, John Corbett, finds it a striking phenomenon that three different musicians working in three different musical genres, Sun Ra in jazz, Lee

[145] See Michelle Ann Stephens, 110. Stephens examines Garvey's self-positioning as a "Black Emperor" and the Black Star Line as a strategy in a larger program of black capitalism. The Black Star Line was form of imperialism and an arm of the black state. However, a reading that recuperates the selection of a ship and the employment of black sailors reveals, as she argues, "Garvey's boldness lay in his attempt to materialize the right to mobility by placing ownership of production, ships, in the hands of black subjects themselves."

"Scratch" Perry in reggae, and George Clinton in funk, each used spaceships to subvert narratives about black people.[146] Like Corbett, I am interested in how the spaceship becomes an important trope for black musicians and writers in the 1960s and 1970s. However, I also identify a kind of cultural and literary moment in which the spaceship achieves critical and popular prominence as a source of imaginative investment. This prominence allows black artists to draw upon a cultural capital and fascination that comes out of reactions to modernity in the space age as well as the site of space as a territory for the uncanny possibility of alien invasion and alien Otherness. Black artists, however, use the ship as a vehicle to imagine the this conceptual field of darkness as fertile for the production of black worlds and black meanings.

These speculative translations of the slave ship may also be considered examples of what Richard Iton terms the "Black Fantastic." Iton reads popular culture as a form of cultural politics that is very much a "response to the perceived inadequacies of the American state" (6). As Iton explains, Black Atlantic cultural productions are a necessary vehicle through which political transformation is brought about during the post-war period and through black liberation struggles of the later part of the twentieth century (6). "Black" in Iton's formulation represents a critical intervention through culture in the post-Civil Rights United States. He explains, "The *black* in black fantastic, in this context, signifies both a generic category of underdeveloped possibilities and the particular 'always there' interpretations of these agonistic, postracial, and post-colonial visions and practices by subaltern populations" (16). Iton's term is useful for considering the ways Sun Ra and Octavia Butler intervene in the narratives about black people in the

[146] See John Akomfrah, "The Last Angel of History." See also, John Corbett, *Extended Play*. The spaceship for Sun Ra and George Clinton provides access to space as freedom. Travel on the spaceship as an "Afronaut," or as a listener, is a trip toward autonomy and prosperous conditions.

United States and the conditions under which black life approaches an impossibly circumscribed future. The implied fantasy here relinquishes derogatory affiliations with escape and unproductive time, and is instead invested with radical revision of the relationship between the past and the future. Iton argues, "The fantastic in this context would entail unsettling these governmentalities and the conventional notions of the political, the public sphere, and civil society that depend on the exclusion of blacks and other nonwhites from meaningful participation and their ongoing reconstitution as raw material for the naturalization of modern arrangements" (17). Throughout *In Search of the Black Fantastic*, Iton explores the relationship of blackness to modernity and questions the totalizing singularity of modernity as a condition or ethos of temporality, progress, technology, and the state; he suggests we should remain skeptical of narratives of "modernity, coloniality, race, and diaspora" in which "Africa" is detemporalized (200). In the book's conclusion, he writes, "We are merely conscripts of modernity, striving to be black and modern, and perhaps, in our better moments, capable of Afro-modernisms" (288). While "blackness" represents the unknowable void of the space voyage away from earth, blackness also marks those who the larger populace can deem expendable and tradable for their own personal good. Afrofuturism represents a postmodern form of Black Nationalism in which the "nation" is a disparate set of theories about the body as well as sonic and cybernetic future orientations.[147] Conceptual mobility, or travel, becomes a mode of multiple collectivity. Bell's story reveals

[147] I see this notion of a kind of reinterpreted cultural nationalism, Afrocentric philosophy of music and history. Szwed cites Ra thinking about the importance of "reterritorialization," to use Szwed's term, by comparing Israel as a nation, but "American Black people" are not perceived as a sovereign entity (Szwed 140). Szwed: "Here, as elsewhere with Sonny, space was both a metaphor of exclusion and of reterritorialization, of claiming the 'outside' as one's own, of tying a revised and corrected past to a claimed future. Space was also a metaphor which transvalues the dominant terms so that they become aberrant, a minority position, while the terms of the outside, the beyond, the margins become the standard" (140). See also, George Clinton's profoundly generative term "Afronauts."

blackness to be an embodied condition of socioeconomic conditions and active forms of daily disenfranchisement.[148]

Another compelling theme that emerges in "The Space Traders," and the reason I use it to open this chapter, is that the story anticipates possession for the new millennium and the space age. For Ra and Butler the future is as precarious for black Americans as the past was; the specter of bodily theft and the power of the colonizer to alter an individual's consciousness is an area of concern throughout their work. I will explore what it means for music to possess an individual and for sound waves to transport a listener, much like ocean waves. Sound waves are the medium for and of the spaceship. The film, "The Last Angel of History, produced by the Black Audio Film Collective and directed by John Akomfrah, proposes two black musical forms, drums and the blues, are languages of science fiction as well as technologies of memory. According to Kodwo Eshun, "Through the persona of a time-traveling nomadic figure known as the Data Thief, *The Last Angel of History*, created a network of links between music, space, futurology, and diaspora" ("Future Considerations" 295). The Data Thief understands that these musical technologies are forms of communication that allow the performer and listener to *repossess* time, the body, and the future.

This chapter retains the historical investigative methodology of previous chapters to think about how the spaceship and the future for black Americans were imagined by two artists: Ra driven by a hope in the celestial; Butler often driven by a realistic disappointment in the present. This chapter examines the ways that space, outer, oceanic,

[148] This satire, then, might be reminiscent of George Schuyler's novel *Black No More* in which a white scientist discovers the "cure" to dark pigmentation, which subsequently unleashes a mass panic among Americans for whom whiteness is no longer a sign of privilege, full citizenship, or humanity.

and ship, figured the imagination and imaginative. A major preoccupation for both artists, it seems to me, is empathy, or an understanding of what it means to feel and be in the world. For both Ra and Butler, empathy is rooted in the body. For Ra, empathy can be achieved through collective travel along sound waves. For Butler, empathy is primarily experienced through touch, whether it is erotic or destructive and world shattering.

The key term that animates my analysis of Afrofuturists Octavia Butler and Sun Ra is *possession*. I question how cultural productions possess their audiences. I am most interested, too, in how this form of artistic production may generate empathic connections through the specific metaphors for sensation, touch and feeling. What might it mean for an audience member to imagine being possessed by an alien life form, by a musical performance, or for her body to repossess the dimensions of the ship?[149] Possession can connote property ownership; consensual erotic or romantic possession; captivity, bodily

[149] In the Afrofuturist canon, alien abduction came to be a metaphor for the Middle Passage and transport of African captives to the New World, particularly in Sun Ra's cosmos and in Kodwo Eshun's theoretical work. For example, at the conclusion of his genre-breaking book *More Brilliant than the Sun: Adventures in Sonic Fiction*, Eshun draws on Greg Tate's writing about black music and culture to postulate "the idea of slavery as an alien abduction which means that we've all been living in an alien-nation since the 18th century" (A[192]). Eshun, moreover, suggests that the slave trade mutated African male and female captives, so that humans were designated outside the categories "human," "man," "woman." Eshun argues that the "African-American alien musician" reveals "the human being as being a really pointless and treacherous category" (A[193]). Eshun's argument that black musical experimentation reconstitutes the body as a technology of belonging and temporality as fluid. See also Janice Cheddie, "From Slaveship to Mothership and Beyond: Thoughts on a Digital Diaspora," 163-174. Similarly in Mark Sinker's 2002 essay, "Loving the Alien: Black Science Fiction," published in *The Wire* magazine (a publication supportive of Ra's significance to jazz), Sinker cites the Middle Passage and the arrival of slave ships to the New World as a history of alien abduction. The metaphor of extraterrestriality operates twofold, then, white European colonizers abduct Africans using a vessel that is otherworldly, while black African captives and survivors of the Middle Passage are alienated and survive as aliens in the New World colonies. Corbett examines this trope through the lens of sanity and madness, explaining that the metaphor "may indicate the *insanity* of its maker" or "the fundamental *unreality* of existence for people imported into New World servitude and then disenfranchised into poverty" (8). For Corbett, the extraterrestrial metaphor employed by Lee "Scratch" Perry, Sun Ra, and George Clinton ultimately operates to question the sanity of a false world order. "The ships landed long ago: they already laid waste whole societies, abducted and genetically altered swathes of citizenry, imposed without surcease their values. African and America—and so by extension Europe and Asia—are already in their various ways Alien Nation. No return is possible: what 'normal' is there to return to? Part of the story of black music (the affirmative, soul-gospel aspect) has always been this—that losing everything except basic dignity and decency is potentially a survivable disaster."

or psychic; illegal possession, as in the prosecutable offense of possession of illegal narcotics; demonic or satanic possession; possession by the Holy Spirit; and so on. Under certain conditions, possession may also strongly connote incarceration. Stephen Dillon's article, "Possessed by Death: The Neoliberal-Carceral State, Black Feminism, and the Afterlife of Slavery" argues that neoliberalism is an economic doctrine that relies upon reducing the mobility of sections of the population through mass incarceration (114). He makes a connection between the Atlantic Slave Trade and twentieth and twenty-first century imprisonment by attending to a shared spatial dimension of captivity. He asserts, "By centering racial terror in a genealogy of the prison, scholars have come to understand the barracoons, coffles, slave holds, and plantations of the Middle Passage, as spatial, discursive, ontological, and economic analogues of modern punishment that have haunted their way into the present" (114). Moreover, Dillon argues that possession is a form of haunting; it is the ghost that animates the market, which is structured by antiblackness. Thus, the present is inhabited by the ghost of slavery and the carceral becomes a structuring principal of disavowal and repression, of suppressing the haunting (115). Moreover, "Possession names the ways that the operations of corporate, state, individual, and institutional bodies are sometimes beyond the self-possessed will of the living."

Speculative narrative forms at times seek to depict a protagonist striving to *repossess* herself in dystopic settings of captivity or estrangement. What does it mean in black cultural productions to repossess oneself? For Sun Ra, music becomes a vehicle for transcendence of earthly conditions. Music, like a spaceship, can possess the individual while offering a route to another world or cosmos, a route to possible freedom. Thus, possession harkens the complicated and muddied notion of future possibilities while at

the same time informed by bondage in the past. Touch and sound: each has the ability to transport the individual. Each relies upon a reciprocal relationship or experience. Moreover, each introduces different aspects of the Middle Passage. For example, the sounds of screams that Sun Ra's Arkestral arrangements allude to, particularly Marshall Allen's playing.[150] Touch also underscores the intimacy of enclosure and the close quarters of the hold that invade and corrupt the sanctity of human wholeness. The spaceship, like the seafaring vessel, suggests possession that can take two forms, captivity, or chosen possession by the vehicle. The vehicle itself has agency that is essential to the narrative of travel it tells. The spaceship suggests possession for the intention of using the body in a grand scheme of experimentation and conquering the human race by an alien invader. Or it suggests a human crew voyaging, à la *Star Trek*, to seek out possibilities for earthly and human survival elsewhere. Either way the ship possesses the body for an unknown quantity of time.

The "Use of the Erotic" in Octavia Butler's Fiction

The aim of each thing which we do is to make our lives and the lives of our children richer and more possible. Within the celebration of the erotic in all our endeavors, my

[150] Sionne R. Neely, "Something's Got a Hold on Me: 'Lingering Whispers' of the Atlantic Slave Trade in Ghana." http://soundstudiesblog.com/?s=slave+castle Access: March 2013. Neely's account of touring the Cape Coast Castle is highly suggestive in terms of theorizing the ways both spaces and sounds can possess an individual through a form of historical orientation. She writes, "This cell in which I stand is one of many at the Twin Castles, the gargantuan fortresses that after five hundred years continue to hold fast to the southern coast of Ghana. The intersecting trails of fine cracks rupture the once-pristine white paint on the walls. . .possibly one for every person stolen out of the dungeons. The hull is transfixing, the hold captivating. For some reason, I am suddenly reminded of Rev. James Cleveland's gospel song, 'Something's Got A Hold On Me" where he proclaims, "Something hit me/Up over my head/And run right to my feet.'" "Hold" has multiple valences here: it can refer to the cell Neely is standing in; it can refer to being held in either a loving or violent way; it can refer to suppression; and it can refer to feeling oneself held back.

work becomes a conscious decision—a longed-for bed which I enter gratefully and from which I rise up empowered. --Audre Lorde, "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power" [151]

Novelist Octavia Butler explores the link between shared physical pain and the resulting transformation in worldview that comes about when an individual is able to bond empathically over physical suffering. Butler immerses her readers in fictional worlds of a not-so-distant future in order to unsettle their experiences of the present. A common theme among her works is the experience of empathy, or the lack thereof, as a quality of the human experience that activates an ethical orientation to encounters with the other and difference. For example, in her 1993 novel, *Parable of the Sower*, Butler represents bio-empthy through the character Lauren Olamina who refers to her condition, "hyperempathy syndrome" as a birth defect inherited from her mother's use of a new drug during pregnancy (10-11). However, she also understands hyperempathy syndrome as her "biological conscience," one that protects her from the degradation of character that goes along with survival in a terrible world (102). Memories of pain cause Lauren to avoid physical injury or witnessing the injury of others. Butler excavates a complicated relationship between empathy and memory in *Parable of the Sower*, but it is also a powerful theme throughout many of her novels and short fiction.

Butler's thematic exploration of empathy corresponds with a body-centered ethos in her oeuvre. Much of this ethos may be linked to her interest in the intersection of genetics and personality, behavior, sexuality, and human interaction. However, I would argue that Butler's development of the theme of touch, pleasurable or painful, is a literary method to subvert the false values or basis for the exercise of power in the later decades

[151] Audre Lorde. "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power." *Sister Outsider*. (Berkeley: The Crossing Press, 1984) 53-59. Speech originally delivered in 1978 at the Fourth Berkshire Conference on the History of Women at Mount Holyoke College.

of the twentieth-century, decades dominated in the U.S. by war, corporate greed, the incestuous relationship between multinational corporations and U.S. governing bodies, alongside the devaluation of the local, or the individual human experience.[152] Butler's depiction of characters', most often black women's, physical sensations focuses the reader's attention on a micro experience of the world. In her post-apocalyptic novels in particular, the presence of a nebulous powerful entity, too big for collective human defeat, represents the affective state of the individual alienated from the process of U.S. governance and the experience of the separation of human interest from the nation-state's priorities for the future. The character Anyanwu in *Wild Seed* is a healer whose unique genetic "talents" allow herself to identify injury and pathogens within her own body and within the bodies of others through touch. Her captor, Doro, finds her talent incredibly valuable and he uses her offspring to transform his communities of extraordinary humans through reproduction and through her healing touch. Butler's sensual narratives of the body under threat reflect the conditions of a nation-state inhospitable to life that resists its singular demands.

A critical study of the implications of juxtaposition of the slave ship and the fantastic in Butler's fiction has yet to be undertaken. Although several scholars, including most famously Donna Haraway, have argued that Butler's depiction of the spaceship signifies the Middle Passage as well as the ways that her work is an allegory for slavery, Butler resisted a pat interpretation of her work as allegories of slavery and colonialism.[153] Butler complicates the slave ship because she depicts it as a sphere of mutual

[152] Howard Zinn, *A People's History of the United States*. During her appearance in *The Last Angel of History*, Butler states that the *Xenogenesis* trilogy, of which *Dawn* is the first novel, grew out of a reaction to a constituency taking Reagan seriously. She sensed that intelligence was put at the service of hierarchical behavior.

[153] See her "Afterword" to "Bloodchild" in *Bloodchild and Other Stories* 2005.

interdependency, offering necessary biological support, and sometimes, even kindness. The interplay of the slave ship, sentient or inanimate vehicle, with healing or erotic touch carries readers into murky conceptual waters that disrupt expected narratives of captivity on board and the distinctions between captive and captor, good and evil. *Wild Seed* is enmeshed with the history of the Atlantic Slave Trade and the Middle Passage—explicitly. *Dawn*, the first novel in her *Xenogenesis* trilogy, may be understood as a rewriting of the slave ship. The novel begins in orbit above a healing, post-apocalyptic Earth, on board an Oankali alien craft that has nurtured human survivors and transformed people into specimens for the benefit of future genetic trade with the Oankali. Placing these novels in conversation instantiates a dialectic of the ship, and a thematic expansion through considerations of the relationship between touch and empathy.

Audre Lorde's theory of the erotic, an individual repository for strength and feeling excellence within a woman, she uses the metaphor of a "kernel," is an example of black feminist world-building. For Lorde, the erotic is a resource for queer women and women of color. Her theorization of the role of the erotic in the lives of women is particularly illuminating for thinking about Butler's fictional representations of pleasurable or symbiotic touch. In "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power," Lorde argues against the dismissal of women's bodies as a function of patriarchal power in the everyday. Women have often suppressed the erotic "as a considered source of power and information within our lives" (*Sister Outsider* 53). The erotic is about much more than sexual desire or physical and mental stimulation. Rather if accessed, the erotic sustains an individual in the face of conditions that seek to eradicate the self and the pleasure-giving, pleasure-taking facets of life. In Lorde's figuration, "the erotic offers a well of

replenishing and provocative force to the woman who does not fear its revelation, nor succumb to the belief that sensation is enough" (54) Moreover, the erotic is an "internal requirement toward excellence" that women pursue (54).

The erotic resists commodification of the body and the body's exploitation as a vehicle for particular forms of service to the state. The erotic resists the prioritizing of women's bodies and time in terms of how much profit can be extracted from their abilities (55). Instead, it provides a focus on forms of work that are fulfilling and inspiring. The erotic disrupts the solitary pursuit of individual worth under capitalism. Instead it flourishes "from sharing deeply any pursuit with another person" (56). This latter point speaks directly to the ways that Butler often imagines the richest forms of community in her novels as existing between two individuals. For example, Butler creates powerful couplings between characters that result in the sharing of spectacularly embodied abilities and pleasure, such as Anyanwu and Isaac, or Anyanwu and Doro in *Wild Seed*, and Lilith and Nikanj, or Lilith and Joseph in *Dawn*.[154] Women are more open to sexual and erotic experimentation. Thus, her female characters are often the first to approach or learn from difference. Feeling deeply, not just feeling, is a potent source of strength and possibility for Lorde. Butler literalizes this theoretical mode in her novels through the depiction of "deep touch" which has the potential to heal, stimulate, and transform the body's abilities (*Imago* 535). With access to and promotion of the individual erotic, Lorde explains, "not only do we touch our most profoundly creative source, but we do that which is female and self-affirming in the face of a racist,

[154] While there are certainly queer possibilities throughout Butler's canon, the pairings in her early novels remain statically heterosexual, if you exclude the congress between humans an the third sex ooloi in the *Xenogenesis* trilogy. However, in her later fiction, *Parable of the Talents*, and especially in her last novel, *Fledgling*, she imagines several queer couplings, most often among women.

patriarchal, and anti-erotic society" (59). Reliance upon the erotic, or what can be learned from the body's feeling in the world, is a generative source of imagined and world-changing possibilities for Lorde; so that the body becomes a site not just of pleasure or pain but of a politics based in nurturing and healing as well as refusal.

Her novels argue for forms of empathy based in touch, sound, and sensations other than sight in order to insert the reader more fully into the actual world. In an article posted to the *Scientific American* website, "How You Feel What Another Body Feels," Jakub Limanowski describes recent discoveries in neurological science that help explain the physiological root of empathy, the psychological and emotional experience of sharing in a feeling or feelings of another person. He explains that neuroscientists discovered that just "seeing other people being touched activates primary sensory areas of your brain, much like experiencing the same touch yourself would do."[155] He elaborates on the consequences of a shared perception of pain: "We are automatically affected by other people's feelings, even without explicit communication. Our involvement is sometimes so powerful that we have to flee it, turning our heads away when we see someone get hurt in a movie." Limanowski explains that the neurological root of empathy was present early in human evolution, only recently have psychologists, at least in the Western medical tradition, developed the terminology, empathy, "a combination of the Greek 'in' *(em)* and 'feeling' (*pathos)*—was coined by the British psychologist E. B. Titchener during his endeavor to translate the German *Einfühlungsvermögen* ('the ability to feel into')." The research reveals that humans possess "mirror neurons" that allow you to "feel with" others when their pain is recognizable through an effect called "sensory

[155] Jakub Limanowski, "How You Feel What Another Body Feels." June 26, 2012. http://www.scientificamerican.com/article.cfm?id=how-you-feel-what-another-body-feels

mirroring" discovered in primate test subjects. How does the brain move from the perception of pain to the body, or traumatic touch, to the emotional condition of *being touched*? Limanowski explains, "These data suggest that the brain's mirroring responses are in fact associated with personal empathic ability. How much you empathize with other people seems to reflect how strongly your brain—your primary somatosensory cortex—"feels with" them when you see them being touched."

Often a significant component of the project of representing the slave ship in the novel is to inculcate empathic bonds between the present reader and the subject in the past. The sentient slave ship corresponds to Butler's decentering of vision as the primary way in which individuals know the world. Any ship responds to the touch of living beings that guide its trajectory. However, a sentient ship has the ability to respond to human engagement in a manner that resists the totalizing control of a captain or crew. An attribute of Butler's brilliance as a writer is to inform readers what it feels like to be alienated, to be severed from all that you know and all that grounds you, to understand slavery and enslavement, colonization, and being colonized in a myriad of fresh ways. Whereas the ship in Butler's oeuvre suggests another form of space that is entangled with the human body. The sentient ship is a trope that develops through Butler's novels, particularly in the *Patternist* and *Xenogenesis* trilogies. In Butler's 1978 novel, *Survivor*, surviving humans colonize a planet that is already inhabited, and in order to survive there, the humans cannibalize their ship.[156] The survivors build their colony using the

[156] Butler did not like her third novel, *Survivor*. In fact, it is currently out of print and difficult to locate a copy. In an interview excerpted and posted by Jo Walton to www.Tor.com on July 11, 2011, Butler reveals that she thought the novel was too in line with science fiction genre conventions in which an alien race "were always less in some way" (http://www.tor.com/blogs/2009/02/qmy-star-trek-novelq-octavia-butlers-survivor). Butler states that she felt it was her "*Star Trek* novel." The novel was recommended to me at the College Language Association conference.

ship's structure, recycling the shell, for example, to serve as their church (18). The ship, once alive, had transported its occupants to a "habitable new world" where it would "become nothing more than a carcass to be cannibalized" (32). The ships dies as soon as it touches down and its human occupants are safe in their destination (36). The ship's technology remains a mystery to its passengers, even as they continue to shelter themselves with its remains.

A sentient machine is a science fiction convention across film and literature. The ship is a technology that often feels alive as it transports its crew and passengers safely across space and through time. A common convention for the transport of human through outer space, and from Earth to distant reaches of the universe is that the ship sustains human life as humans are nourished while they are kept in an induced state of sleep for many years, or suspended animation. The living, speaking ship is so conventional in science fiction and fantasy that it is unavoidable in the genre. Like the haunted house, a ship that responds to human activity, human touch, human thought, human speech explores an anxiety that the spaces we live in and engage with can interact or respond to us; they are not empty vessels that are blind to our secrets, our sins, our pasts, and our abuses. A thinking, living ship can betray its passengers and crew; it can kill them. Rogue spaceships in science fiction commonly kill their crew based upon a fear of technology usurping human power and control. When technology runs amuck, or discovers an autonomous whim, it is most often deadly for humans. In Butler's fiction, though, the ship is a space that can be and is consumed by the humans that depend upon it. A ship's successful voyage relies upon collaboration and that all crew members work as a collective.

We meet the protagonist of *Wild Seed*, Anyanwu, in her small village in Africa as she is being encountered by the powerful Doro searching for people with spectacular abilities to bring into his growing villages. The novel begins in the year 1690, ends in 1840, and is partially set in a town called Wheatley. Both chronology and setting reference the Atlantic Slave Trade in African lives and labor. The period of the novel is the time of the Middle Passage. Anyanwu is a shapeshifter and a healer several generations old whose children have spread across the region and reside in many villages. We learn immediately that she has the ability to sharpen her senses and improve the condition of her body in many ways including ridding it of disease or impairment. Doro convinces Anyanwu to join him after a sexual encounter. She is oddly attracted to him though she understands that he is deadly. Doro is over four hundred years old and in order to survive, he kills and inhabits the body of a new human after short periods of time. Throughout the novel his victims are many. While Anyanwu is repulsed by his deadly violence and use of humans, she is also seduced by his dedication to her extraordinary, latent abilities to transform her body and the bodies of others.

Butler destabilizes the trope of the slave ship as well as the category "human." During the passage from Africa to Doro's colony in America, Anyanwu experiences is able to transform her body into that of a dolphin for the first time, an experience which allows her to escape the ship and the overbearing authority of her captor-lover (Doro). For example, she will return to the body/life of a dolphin over a hundred years later in order to escape his pursuit. The ship becomes a site of multiple possibilities for transforming and even sustaining the body. In *Wild Seed*, the Middle Passage is an experience full of personal growth and new experiences for Anwanyu, not just horror.

Sandra Govan discusses the textured ways in which *Wild Seed* provides a moving depiction of the slave trade and African Diaspora (302-303). Govan suggests that Butler's depiction of African captives' pain, humiliation, and suffering at the site of trade builds empathy for contemporary readers. Yet throughout the novel as Anyanwu grows in strength to defy Doro's tyranny over his seed villages, readers encounter a figure who challenges the psychological, bodily, and emotional possession of this tyrant. The novel's title alone alludes to diaspora. "Diaspora" might refer to dispersal, exile, but in the image of seeds of regrowth and fertility, of generations and cultivation. In *Wild Seed*, the spectacular and otherworldly events that take place aboard the slave ship do so specifically in the context of cross-cultural or cross-bodily congress. The ship is steered telepathically by Isaac, Doro's favorite son who will eventually marry Anyanwu. This slave ship is a site of possibility as it crosses the Atlantic. So that here the novel creates an imaginative and speculative overlap in the frame of genre fiction between interior, or mental, space, oceanic space, and the unknowable outer space of other worlds. The oceanic space is both terrifying as a signifier of Anyanwu's isolation, but it also offers her a space to explore cross-species congress. Doro's ship, the *Mary Magdalene,* is the site of extraordinary revelations for Anyanwu who has chosen to join Doro in his quest to build communities of descendants with more-than-human capabilities.

Touch defies enclosures that limit an occupant's view of the world. Rather, touch, whether it results in pleasure or pain, opens the cell, cavity, or hold up to another dimension. The ship space throws into sharp recognition the trouble with touch. The rigid divides between human crew and objectified captives, commodities for sale at the best price, make touch across any spatial or discursive distinctions, even among captives

themselves, taboo or impossible, unless the touch brings about punishing pain. The slave ship's crew's touch is one of violation. However, when pleasurable touch does occur, it destroys these discursive barriers between human and object. Hierarchies become erased through the experience of this form of physical expression. The gesture of a hand, even in the act of striking a face or flexing the whip, creates a moment of recognition that can result in a myriad of outcomes. Lisa Woolfork examines Butler's use of the time travel trope as an antirealist strategy in her novel *Kindred* that questions how a person may come to know the traumatic past. Woolfork's reading of *Kindred* illuminates the suggestive potential of touching the past and being touched by the past. She underscores that the novel shows how historical knowledge is acquired through books, yet Dana is forced to experience more tangible evidence. Woolfork explains, "This representation of Dana touching her scars is also a metonym for the importance of accessing traumatic knowledge using both symbolic gestures and physical evidence" (33). In *Kindred* being touched by the past leaves very real scars on the protagonist's body. In her final return to her present life from the nineteenth century, Dana finds that a part of her body has been rendered from her as a kind of toll for both interdimensional travel and her survival of slavery. Touch, then, in Butler's fiction is complicated by costs and personal sacrifice that attend different modalities of contact and intimacy. Anwanyu's immortality protects her from physical harm, but her healing touch is unable to completely resolve the physical and psychic effects of the ship.

As Anyanwu and her distant descendent Okoye try to become accustomed to the ship's unsteady motion, she learns that the oceanic space and the ship are producing effects of illness. Okoye uses his humanity, "I should not be here. I am only a man" to

underscore that he does not belong in the trade of which he is a captive (58). As his illness increases, they both retreat to the open air of the deck. Accustomed to being able to suppress the typical somatic response to illness, Anyanwu finds herself overwhelmed by the feeling she shares with Okoye:

> But even there, the gentle rocking of the ship seemed to bother him—and began to bother her. She began to feel ill. She seized on the feeling at once, examining it. There was drowsiness, dizziness, and a sudden cold sweat. She closed her eyes and while Okoye vomited into the water, she went over her body carefully. She discovered that there was a wrongess, a kind of imbalance, but she knew her body well enough to notice the slightest change. (59)

As she scrutinizes her physical state, Butler provides us with the steps of her healing process: "She focused on her inner ears and remembered perfection there, remembered organs and fluids and pressures in balance, their wrongness righted. Remembering and correcting were one gesture; balance was restored." The repetition of remembering here as Anyanwu learns how to treat her nausea so that she may also treat Okoye's, I suggest is a powerful moment of literary mastery over the site of the slave ship. Moreover, shared nausea acts as an impetus to solidifying community.

This scene of mastery is repeated several times as the ship crosses the Atlantic. Anyanwu must reassert her bodily integrity and compete with Doro for self-possession. As Govan claims, the most poignant instance is when she contemplates suicide, an act that fundamentally goes against all that we know about Anyanwu's abilities for self-preservation and equilibrium. Butler writes: "She would leap into the sea. Its waters

would take her home, or they would swallow her. Either way, she would find peace. Her loneliness hurt her like some sickness of the body, some pain that her special ability could not find and heal. The sea . . .” (66). The passage ends with an ellipsis, Anyanwu’s thoughts are too private, too harrowing, too unspeakable to relate. Or Butler provides space for the reader to approach the protagonist’s despair just before Isaac calls her back to herself. In this moment, Anyanwu forgets both her gift and her calling to be a healer, suggesting that the ship has the tendency to isolate the individual within her own pain and dislocating feelings. However, oddly the body’s reactions to the ship recall her from death, so that nausea becomes an affective condition to bind Anyanwu to the work of healing Doro’s other captives. What she learns to do within herself, she transfers through touch to the bodies of others.

Butler’s representation of a slave ship in 1690 is full of startling paradoxes. While many of the African captives experience agony, there is also love and even a wedding aboard. Butler even describes the “benign atmosphere of the ship” (73). The Mary Magdalene is a space of recovery for the captives (73). There is even “kindness on the ship” (74). “There were no chains. There were blankets to warm them and the sea air on deck to cool them. There were no whips, no guns.” The ship is also where Anyanwu meets Isaac who will be her most significant love and companion. These paradoxes complicate twentieth century textual understandings of the slave ship as a space of history and human interaction, allowing Butler to question how the trope has been used by other contemporary writers and the symbolic work that it does. As we will see in *Dawn*, this revision of the slave ship as a space of mutual survival or symbiosis not only extends the possible meanings attributed to the ship, but it confronts the reader with the

ethical dilemmas that attend mutual interdependency of "shipmates" as an allegory for coloniality.

Butler's novels often question the viability of the category human, suggesting it is both limited and limiting. Readers are forced to consider definitions of the human realm as it increasingly slides into the sphere of the extraordinary. Whereas the ship implies an experience of incarceration and monstrous limitation, for Anyanwu it is a vehicle to her own experience of sharing the conditions of multiple beings, as well as forming companionship outside of the barrier of human skin. This usage of the ship represents an instance of the black radical imagination, for as Erin Ranft argues, "Butler signifies and re-imagines the Middle Passage for Anyanwu and creates a narrative in which suicide and murder by drowning for enslaved African individuals transforms into a liberating and powerful experience for this African woman" (SIUE Black Studies Blog 11 Feb 2013). Literary representations of the slave ship necessarily bring considerations of embodied experience, the sanctity of the body, and even the autonomy or boundaries of individual bodies to the forefront of intellectual and imaginative projects. In *Wild Seed* the ship's confines contribute to the rapid progression of Anyanwu's shape-shifting abilities and provide her for the first time the heightened necessity to test her abilities for the sole purpose of surviving the loneliness of leaving her home country and escaping Doro's invasive authority over her body's fecund potential to birth future spectacularly able children.

Butler concentrates on Anyanwu's growing relationship with Doro and Isaac during her time aboard Doro's ship, readers are not privy to her interactions with much of the crew or many of the captives, in *Dawn*, Butler explores in great deal the messy,

intimate relationship between crew and captive, sailor to shipmate, and sailor to enslaved individual. Furthermore, in this novel, the ship is alive so that it works as a mediator between members of the crew and passengers. Haraway succinctly describes the Oankali's use of living organisms to create organic technologies as follows: the Oankali "are completely webbed into a universe of living machines, all of which are partners in their apparatus of bodily production, including the ship on which the action. . . takes place" (228). Though the ship is a constellation of living organisms working in concert, orbiting around earth, Lilith's awakening on board the Oankali vessel, solitary and secluded, only encountering her captors with no access to another human, immediately brings to mind the process of isolating the individual in the Middle Passage through the use of psychological and physical torture and the separation of individuals who shared a language or ethnic heritage. Haraway explains, "But the deracinated captive fragments of humanity packed into the body of the aliens' ship inescapably evoke the terrible Middle Passage of the Atlantic slave trade that brought Lilith's ancestors to a 'New World'" (228).

Dawn is set in the future, approximately two hundred and fifty years following nuclear destruction of earth, or "humanicide." Surviving humans have been transplanted from earth to a living spaceship by an alien species. The Oankali trade in genetic material to bioengineer new species and perpetuate their own multiple existences. Cathy Peppers reads this narrative through the lens of sexual exploitation of African captives in chattel slavery as miscegenation. She contends Lilith's "'awakening' to discover that she has been taken from Earth to be kept captive on an alien ship orbiting beyond the moon reconstructs the African slave's Middle Passage. Like the African slaves in America, she

is (at first) denied access to reading or writing materials, those things 'humans need... to help us remember'" (51). Their refusal to provide Lilith with writing implements, the way humans remember as she insists, is a form of manipulation and ultimately this coercion results in the turning point in the novel at which Lilith agrees to the genetic experimentation which results in an eidetic memory. This mutation transforms Lilith's ability to seamlessly communicate with her captor and to retain her knowledge of her prior life including her deceased husband and child.

As Lilith is ushered by her Oankali host out of her "cage," or enclosure, she is introduced to the vessel that has contained her, a structure, or being, that has hitherto been referred to simply as a ship. However, upon her guarded release, she observes that the structure is not a static, built object after all, but a living, shifting, responsive being. A being that has kept her alive for two hundred and fifty years through periods of forced sleep. The ship itself is alive, a mutated creature from a long ago genetic experiment and cross-fertilization of the Oankali. The ship is organic and might be said to experience emotions. Upon Lilith's monitored release, Butler stages an illuminating reaction as she provides for her readers a glimpse into what it might be like to be transported away from all familiarity into a new world. Lilith, who has so urgently and desperately wanted to escape her captive cage encounters the unfamiliarity around her and finds herself longing for the enclosure. "She took a step backward, away from all the alien vastness. The isolation room that she had hated for so long suddenly seemed safe and comforting" (30). She wonders if it is intelligent. "It can be. That part of it is dormant now. But even so, the ship can be chemically induced to perform more functions than you would have the patience to listen to. It does a great deal on its own without monitoring" (35). The

Oankali explains, “The human doctor used to say it loved us. There is an affinity, but it’s biological—a strong, symbiotic relationship. We serve the ship’s needs and it serves ours. It would die without us and we would be planetbound without it. For us, that would eventually mean death” (35).

Moreover, the Oankali have grown the ship. It is a living, sentient construct that in a way conforms to the body’s needs as it registers them. This passage contains a great deal to consider as Butler has reimagined the slave ship in a galactic context of interplanetary colonization and extraction of living resources. “We’ll take the knowledge of shipgrowing with us so that our descendants will be able to leave when the time comes. We couldn’t survive as a people if we were always confined to one ship or one world” (35). The ship responds to Oankali chemical imprints and different sections of the ship are uniquely engineered to recognize the genetic material of specific Oankali family units and their individual members. Their secretions produce signals that allow the ship to shift its shape and provide sustenance for their individual needs. For example, a hand placed on a blank wall creates a passageway (one that for Lilith looks and smells like a sphincter. The world changes around Lilith as she learns, through touch, which communicates or corresponds through chemical stimuli and stimulation (56).

The ship has been engineered through a history of genetic “trade” to respond to Oankali bodies and their needs or desires. The surviving humans will provide the genetic material for a similar trade and the production of a future race of Oankali-human hybrid beings. The ship will serves as a mobile Oankali home world. Its organic structure appears to Lilith in the form of trees that are a part of the ship. “They support its shape, provide necessities” such as “food, oxygen, waste disposal, transport conduits, storage

and living space, work areas, many things" (37).[157] However, the Oankali ship is a site of extreme terror for human survivors who awaken to an alien sphere, but humans are also able to corrupt the ship, which can suffer illness and injury by the alien captives because it is a living organism. As Lilith leaves her cell, or cage as she calls it, she inadvertently poisons a section of the ship that has not been readied for her presence by feeding it discarded food scraps. Haraway's reading of the immune system as a postmodern metaphor clarifies this form of sentience: "Pre-eminently a twentieth-century object, the immune system is a map drawn to guide recognition and misrecognition of self and other in the dialectics of Western biopolitics" (204). Furthermore, "Immunity can also be conceived in terms of shared specificities; of the semi-permeable self able to engage with others (human and non-human, inner and outer), but always with finite consequences; of situated possibilities and impossibilities of individuation and identification" (Haraway 225). Lilith watches as the ship suffers her unknowing carelessness. Butler writes,

> The orange mass had grown to be about three feet across and almost perfectly circular. It had touched one of the fleshy, tentacle pseudoplants and the pseudoplant darkened and lashed about as though in agony. Seeing its violent twisting Lilith forgot that it was not an individual organism. She

[157] Rediker 53. The translation of this structure through the visual metaphorics of trees provides a proximal allusion to the pre-twentieth century sailing vessels used by the British in the Atlantic Slave Trade, which were constructed largely of timber harvested from the eastern American colonies. "Increasingly, the ships that went into the African trade were, as English merchants described them, 'plantation-built.' They were constructed in New England, especially in Rhode Island and Massachusetts; in the upper South, Maryland and Virginia; and, after the 1760s, in the lower South, primarily South Carolina. Especially popular among slave-ship merchants was the Bermuda sloop, built with native red cedar that was light, strong, and rot-resistant. As the oak forests of northeastern America were slowly depleted over the course of the eighteenth century and the cost of bringing timber to the coast increased, a preferred source became southern pine, which meant that much of the wood for the slavers was hewn by slaves, many of whom had crossed the Atlantic on slave ships. . . . This suggests one of the ways in which the slave trade helped to reproduce itself on an international scale. The ships brought the laborers and the laborers cut the wood to make more ships."

focused on the fact that it was alive and she had probably caused it pain. She had not merely caused an interesting effect, she had caused harm. (68)

Complicated physical responses and genetic mutations characterize the Oankali-human encounter throughout the series, often these are damaging to the humans' sense of bodily integrity and perceived human wholeness. While they were sleeping, the Oankali have sterilized humans so that they are unable to reproduce with each other. It will be necessary for human men and women to mate with Oankali in order to continue to have children in their lives. This (false) choice will prove incredibly divisive for the surviving humans as the "resisters" will choose to remain childless rather than be intimate with the Oankali. Yet sharing a physical bond with the Oankali offers humans incredible pleasure through the manipulation of the nerve system.

The bond that develops between Lilith and Nikanj, as well as that triangulated by an Oankali with two humans (almost always of different sex), profoundly disrupts limited human experience by opening new avenues of pleasure. In the final novel this physical sensation is referred to as "deep touch," a term which might be compared to Lorde's "deep feeling" ("Uses of the Erotic" 58). There, Jodahs, the first human-Oankali construct ooloi, progeny of Lilith and narrator of *Imago* explains, "The deep touch of the sensory hand was air after a long, blundering swim underwater" (535). The Oankali have mastery over genetic manipulation including immune systems with perfect memory of prior infection. Thus, they are fascinated by Lilith's inherited predisposition for cancer because cancer, to them the perfect synecdoche for the human being, is both destructive and generative.

Sight is decentered as privileged sense in this novel so that touch, especially a the haptic orientation, becomes the primary sense for orienting the self in an alien, unknowable, and in many ways imperceptible or unseeable world that is shifting and whose terrain is also alive. Haptic connections that are attended to and nourished, then, become ways of recognizing multiple forms of life. Haraway's cyborg theory sheds light on the ways Butler transforms the boundaires and perceived integrity of the human body to alert readers to other possibilities. Haraway argues, "Bodies have become cyborgs—cybernetic organisms—compounds of hybrid techno-organic embodiment and textuality. The cyborg is text, machine, body, and metaphor—all theorized and engaged in practice in terms of communications" (Haraway 212). Sensory tentacles in Butler's novels are a form of multiple communication, unspoken, unheard, but felt. Donna Haraway arrives at her question in the *Cyborg Manifesto* "Why should our bodies end at the skin" through a close reading of feminist science fiction and Butler in particular (178). In Butler's novels, desire for another transgresses gender categories. Furthermore, by expanding the physical boundary of the individual's body, Butler demonstrates that another life is possible. Thus, personal fulfillment becomes a vehicle for social world building through the intimate experience of touch, physical erotic intimacy and the transformative experience of living through another's skin.

Interestingly in this novel, transformation through haptic perception is not one-sided. Rather, Butler explores Lilith's evolving symbiotic relationship with a "child" Oankali whereby their intimacy challenges the being's received knowledge of humans. Through his intimate bond with Lilith, Nikanj comes to empathize with human solidarity and need for autonomous survival from their extraterrestrial savior-abductors. What,

then, is Butler suggesting about networks of power through these novels? Can desire or pleasure betray an individual in the machinations of power? If genetics or biology predispose an individual to particular behaviors and even affinities, in what ways for Butler can touch cross the boundaries of these predispositions? The conditions of alienation and forced migration are themes that continue throughout each novel of the *Xenogenesis* trilogy.

The symbiotic relationships in Butler's novels push the very boundaries of selfhood. In the *Xenogenesis* trilogy, "Bloodchild" and finally, *Fledgling*, the individual is paltry compared to the pleasure that can be experienced in loyal, growing kinship bonds built around sharing through touch. Thus, her work engages posthumanism in many sophisticated ways, by decentering the individual, and by interrogating the species categorization that exists behind a hierarchy of beings whereby "white man" is the privileged category of being. Butler was a "posthumanist" following Sylvia Wynter, Foucault, and Haraway, but her characters fight to retain "human" categorical identity. Pramod Nayar's definition of posthumanism in Butler's final novel, *Fledgling* is quite convincing:

> 'Posthumanism' here is a politico-philisophical discourse where the human/animal, human/nonhuman, able-bodied/disabled body binaries—with their resultant structures of legitimized domination, oppression, and animal genocides—is rejected. Posthumanism sees the human abilities, qualities, consciousness, and features as evolving in conjunction with other life forms, technology, and ecosystems. As a result, posthumanism does not see the human as the center of all things: it sees the human as an

> instantiation of connections, linkages, and crossings in a context where species are seen as coevolving, and competition is rejected in favour [sic] of cooperation between life forms. (796)

Haraway reads Butler's novels as arguing for a "cyborg identity" which is an assemblage; a cyborg is constructed, an anti-essentialist figure for theorizing the effects of labor, gender, race, nationality, ability/able-bodiness/disability.

The category of human and posthuman is highly contested throughout the *Xenogenesis* trilogy. Butler clearly understands the category of human, as Sylvia Wynter argues, to rely upon a false and violent stability in its exclusion of difference and reliance upon what Audre Lorde refers to as the "*mythical norm*," a subject position only available to a privileged few: "In america, this norm is usually defined as white, thin, male, young, heterosexual, christian, and financially secure" (*Sister Outsider* 116). Anyanwu's and Lilith's expanding experiences of kinship and Anyanwu's spectacular ability as Catherine Ramírez claims, "defy the notion of a stable and closed subject" (385). Yet in the 1980s as Butler is writing these novels, economic and social policies in the United States continue to narrow the application and access to full citizenship and ultimately personhood as qualified by political capital, representation and social legibility or visibility. Cathy Peppers writes "the narrative of XENOGENESIS relentlessly keeps the discourses of slavery and sociobiology in continuous dialogue" (52). My examination of Butler's transformation of the slave ship as a critical category puts pressure on the changing identity and political categories of blackness as well as Otherness in order to approach the new millennium with an invigorated critical apparatus. Moreover, the slave ship is a very real sign for her of the ways dispossession continues to be entrenched in the

United States in the period of increasing technological implementation of state power and an obsession with progress that turns a blind eye to the actual bodies this progress relies upon for its survival. Her novels not only express an anxiety about the conditions of women, gender anxiety, and in *Dawn*, the fear of monstrous birth. These anxieties, though mapped onto the future, retain a critical dialogue with the past. When juxtaposed alongside themes that demonstrate her suspicions of hierarchy, the apocalyptic affects of centralized authority, and the uses to which race and "humanity" as categories can be put by nations, modern states, and global corporations, we can see that Butler's assemblage communities, her maroon colonies of members bound together through touch and interdependency offer multiple ways to rethink life and how ideologies structure it in the late-twentieth century.

Possessing the Spirit: Black Arkestration and a Sonic Cosmos

> It's us in outer-space, sitting down, tired, with Universe charts, not clear where we are but sure of getting there. It's pyramid-building, world-construction, Universe revision. But all these names are small, because it gets beyond barb-wire frontiers, ghettos, bloated categories, things like that. It's outer space. Comes outside the stage. Into you. These gemini players. Players. Space-players. Spacers. Space-makers. For us: What we never had for so long, space, outer space. Or no space at all. Squeezes so tight. From the slaveship to the shack to the tenement. --Joe Gonçalves[158]

> When the world was in darkness/Darkness was ignorance/Along came Ra. --June Tyson, "Mystery, Mister Ra"

In "The Changing Same" Amiri Baraka theorizes the ways that sound waves, musical notes and vibrations riding on air waves, shift the meaning of the space in which they are heard.[159] For Baraka, black music is a mode of spirituality or spiritualism; music

[158] Qtd. in John Szwed, *Space is the Place*, 140.

[159] Robin Kelley. *Freedom Dreams* 11. Kelley sites this essay as a momentous argument for the potential of black music to "usher in a new future based on love."

is a sacred form that involves mundane expressions of the body so that the body itself is oriented to the possibility of an outer realm or an imagined space. Ra likewise claims that music transforms space for both the musician and the listener. In *A Joyful Noise* Ra claims that "space waves" are a medium for intergalactic and extraterrestrial travel. As a member of the "angel race," he travels space waves in order to reach the people of earth. Baraka argues that black music has the effect of redefining a space in which it is played and heard, creating an environment (212). Baraka uses both the category of the sonic "image" as well as the extraterrestrial metaphor to describe the world-shifting potential of musical performance. James Brown's music, as an example of soul and black power, provides a meaningful case: "I mean there is a world powered by that image. The world James Brown's images power is the lowest placement (the most alien) in the white American social order. Therefore, it is the Blackest and potentially the strongest" (212). He continues to describe the effects of Brown's music:

> If you play James Brown (say, 'Money Won't Change You . . . but time will take you out') in a bank, the total environment is changed. Not only the sardonic comment of the lyrics, but the total emotional placement of the rhythm, instrumentation and sound. An energy is released in the bank, a summoning of images that take the bank, and everybody in it, on a trip. That is, they visit another place. A place where Black People live. (213)

Musical and literary time create pockets of subversive space. Musician, poet, composer, conductor Sun Ra develops these spaces of subversion through his work. Like Baraka, Ra actively builds community through the intersection of a living space and a practice space for his Arkestra in New York and Philadelphia. Ra's work instantiates a particular form

of audience engagement with historical narratives and future-oriented urgency—the space is out there, but the space is also here, and it needs to be reimagined for your, our survival.

The Ark is a central iconic image and musical vessel in Ra's work. The Ark implies salvation, genealogy of the human species, and delivery to a new life in a new world habitable for all earthly living beings. Although the name of his band changed throughout their career, "Arkestra" was the term used most often and the longest.[160] In the 1950s, Ra settled on the name Arkestra, which according to John Szwed, "alluded both to the Egyptian god Ra's ark, his solar boat, and to the ark—literally a box—which held the covenant" (94). The word held special meaning for Ra, who appreciated sonic echoes and repetition in his word equations, because "'Ra can be written as "Ar" or "Ra," and on both ends of the word it is an equation: the first and the last are equal . . . .That's phonetic balance'" (Szwed 94). Finally, the term is a nod to black vernacular pronunciation, as Ra claims, "'that's the way black people say "orchestra"'" (Szwed 94). The Ark, then, becomes a sign of Ra himself, he is a vessel for diasporic consciousness and his music is the mediator between this consciousness and black audiences. As in *Space is the Place* when Ra visits a black youth center in Los Angeles to speak of future possibilities beyond earth, Ra's music is an ark, a vessel of promise, but also a sacred covenant.

According to John Corbett, for Ra, sound was the transformative element that shifted the meaning of the ship in his mythology. In an interview he told Corbett, "a musician actually feels about space, outer space—he can really take people out there—

[160] For a full list of band names, see Szwed, 94-95. In a nod to Ra's influence and inspiration, Greg Tate formed Burnt Sugar, The Arkestra Chamber.

because he expresses that feeling, and the vibrations of it will just put them over in the sound and the sound becomes like a spaceship and lift 'em on out there" (309). Later, Ra avers, "Strange sounds can make people turn another way" (312). Arkestration, then, results in the construction of movement and a national mobility based in sound. Music awakens consciousness at the scene of the stage, venue, hall, or street—as when Ra performed for the opening of BARTS in Harlem in 1965—thereby creating a mode of imaginative travel. For Ra, intergalactic travel is very real, signified by the spaceship, outer space, and sound waves, the galaxies encountered can also be internal. The gesture toward the long history of trade across space in human bodies disrupts the traumatic after effects of oceanic waves.

The transformative potential of this retooling of the ship can also be seen in a poem by Ra published in the 1968 *Black Fire* anthology edited by Amiri Baraka and Larry Neal." Several of Ra's poems appear in the anthology, most of which explore themes of the future, history, and contain a central speaking voice. As is the tone of the volume, the poems celebrate blackness. For example in "The Visitation," Ra writes, "My image of paradise is chromatic-black. / And chromatic-black again" (*Black Fire* 213). "The Image Reach" proposes a state of being in the cosmos, a "state beyond the image-reach," implying a realm for black Americans that cannot be touched, or impeded upon, by white supremacist ideology. The poem begins, "To/The territory of the non-memory/The realm of the moving potential/of that which is not—" (218). This poem crystallizes much of Ra's philosophy about the use of space and avant-garde jazz combined to move beyond the dominance of representation or "image" in the creation of black cultural nationalism. The "state" the poem proposes is one separated from the

production of memory, collective or painful. Rather, it is one of "The magic life of myth/ And fantasy" (ln. 6-7). The speaker is quoting himself in the poem to an unknown, or perhaps, rhetorical interlocutor, representative of the ability to prevent the speaker from imaginative mobility. The poem concludes with the lines, "'Take These,/As you have taken all else from me, / For I have one foot upon / The threshold of other realms/ And wings" (218). Speaking of earthly happiness, and possibly stability rooted in a conscious construction of historical memory as archive for individual identity, the speaker rejects these forms of personal validating, choosing instead to leap into the unknown.

Ra and his musicians model possession by music in the ways that players and June Tyson gesture toward outer worlds for the audiences. Through original approaches to drawing sound from instruments, Ra and his performers developed ways of interacting with their instruments to elicit radically new sounds that transformed the landscape of jazz and each performance space. For example, Ra developed an idiosyncratic playing style in his later years in which he pressed his whole body on the keyboard as he stood playing. Simultaneously conducting the Arkestra and playing the piano, Ra would slide each arm across the keys, turn around and play with his back to the audience, arms pressed against the keys. In these moments he does not appear to be in a trance, a state of being between two realms in which the individual is not in control of his or her body; however, these performances are an erotic expression of unification with his instrument. Music, for Ra, is a mode of spiritual practice, and music is spiritual sound. He feels the piano completely, producing sound almost from, not to be too coy, an envelopment, an embrace of the instrument, the technology. Ra is not possessed by the music, but

possesses the ability to produce a sonic bridge, a route through sound waves to the cosmos, the black future.

Arkestra member, Marshall Allen, who primarily played the alto saxophone, but played many other instruments as needed, developed an ecstatic playing style in line with Ra's envelopment of the piano. In solos Allen will jab at the saxophone so that the instrument emits a powerful scream, a sound that rends the air. The saxophone appears not so much to be an extension of his body, but a prosthetic that must be manipulated, cajoled into sound. A fine example of his ecstatic performance style can be seen in *A Joyful Noise*.[161] In this performance, Allen's style is percussive. He almost hits the saxophone's keys, so that the sound starts and stops. The instrument responds to his touch and his breath with a kind of complaint, a clamor, or a lament. John Gilmore, lead saxophonist and director of the reed section in the Arkestra, similarly evolved a playing style that was highly respected as a form of advanced music.[162] John Corbett writes of Gilmore, "he possessed a beautiful tone, played stunning ballads, but was also one of the most thorough investigators of saxophonic extremes, from slap-toungue to overblowing and harmonics. Neither all *out* nor all *in*, Gilmore exemplified the maintenance of tradition at the core of innovation."[163] Allen and Gilmore's playing can be difficult listening because they punctuate the time of hearing. Yet their playing reaches a place that equates to the total environment Baraka suggests in "The Changing Same." Listening is visceral and it should transport the listener to a new realm, but the realm Allen and

[161] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UINN_bQzCPE

[162] Apocryphal story about Coltrane is that Coltrane heard Gilmore play at the moment Gilmore decided to go against the percussionists. The story goes that Coltrane told Gilmore he had "got the concept," which meant playing rhythmically and melodically at the same time. See *New York Times* obituary for Gilmore. See also John Corbett for *Downbeat* magazine.

[163] John Corbett. Excerpt from a piece in *Downbeat* http://hardbop.tripod.com/gilmore.html).

Gilmore's playing produces is one that suggests the conflicts of the present. This realm is informed and shaped by these conflicts, so that sound works against temporality, or even what might be considered freedom, even as sound is freeing.

Discipline allowed Ra to structure time around musical and sonic innovation. His vision was guided not just by a spirituality rooted in ancient texts such as the Bible and the Book of the Dead, but his vision was also rooted in a sense of ordering the world through music, through what he would call "equations."[164] These equations consisted of a form of sound and language proof. This disciplined system of understanding the work of a bandleader, of communal living, of rehearsal and band practice might be seen as an earthly enactment, a bid to participate in the "vast arkestry of the cosmos" from within the confines of the U.S. For Baraka, Blues music is "the deepest expression of memory. Experience re/feeling. It is the racial memory," yet Ra resists memory and history in his music and philosophy in favor of providing new languages for black Americans to enable a release from the discursively overdetermined shape of black being in America (209). Baraka, through Ra, theorizes the ways that black music builds worlds out of the stuff of sound and space, or for Baraka, form and content, or "place and direction" (211), "But dig, not only is it a place where Black People live, it is a place, in the spiritual precincts of its emotional telling, where Black People move in almost absolute openness and strength" (213). In "Further Considerations of Afrofuturism," Kodwo Eshun clarifies that the theoretical and artistic field does not "deny the tradition of countermemory," but memory and Diaspora are central concepts in Afrofuturism (289). Yet in creating sonic and literary possibilities that combine technology with representations of blackness or

[164] As the epigraph above from *A Joyful Noise* suggests, Ra viewed his music and compositions within the framework of a long historical narrative of black achievement, extending back to Egyptian civilization in order to produce a working system of hieroglyphics, what he would call a "mythocracy."

ancient Africa, Afrofuturism creates new spaces for consciousness to inhabit: "Afrofuturism's specificity lies in assembling conceptual approaches and countermemorial mediated practices in order to access triple consciousness, quadruple consciounsness, previously inaccessible alienations (298). Ra's work is a primary example of the creation of countermemorial practices. In interviews, Ra resists memory, arguing that he is not of this world, and thus his music is outside of history. The narrative he constructs, both of his celestial (his term) origins, of an angel race, and of Ancient Egypt as a cultural property for black Americans actively contests memorialization of the past while drawing from its rich resources an iconography for future "Astro Black" planet.

Outer space is a black frontier. Blackness is a positive attribute of the universe, its destructive potential and the medium or territory through which the ship moves.[165] Space gives a new meaning to the project of Nation of Islam and revolutionary leftists striving to identify a landed territory that can become a black nation. "Astro Black" is the name of a track by Ra, but it is also a term that appears throughout his compositions. The lyrics of the 1972 recording, "Astro Black," which June Tyson sings atop pounding drums and

[165] Sheree R. Thomas, editor of the crucial *Dark Matter: A Century of Speculative Fiction from the African Diaspora*, published in 2000, chose "dark matter" as a metaphor for black speculative and science fiction (x). She provides NASA's definition of "dark matter" as follows: "nonluminous form of matter which has not been directly observed but whose existence has been deduced by its gravitational effects" (x). This definition recalls the "Prologue" to Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* in which the unnamed narrator's body possesses its own kind of gravitational pull that characterizes the way he lives his skin color, black subjects are invisible yet alluring and dangerous vessels for white American desire. Thomas suggests that the ending of Ellison's novel "in which the alienated, invisible narrator sits alone in the basement is classic sf [science fiction]" (xii). *Dark Matter* anthologizes black speculative fiction of the twentieth century from Du Bois's short story, "The Comet," first published in *Dark Water*. Thomas's title perhaps also alludes to Du Bois's, signalling the connections between outer and oceanic space. *Dark Water* is a multi-generic work, which includes Pan-Africanist critique of the partition of African territories to Allied European countries following World War I. While "dark matter" may refer specifically to the constitutive material of the Universe as well as the growing canon of literature by black science fiction writers, it also refers to the interstitial spaces that link nations and transport bodies. "Dark matter" also refers to the Othering of Africans in the history of Western discourse (xiii).

Marshall Allen and John Gilmore's saxophones producing sound like alien voices in dialogue or the travel of a large vehicle through space, are evocative of Ra's development of a spatialized, celestial theory of blackness. The recording opens with what might be the sound of a "blast off" or the sound of engines powering a spaceship through the atmosphere. Drums become increasingly more fervent as the horns are introduced, suggesting the command center that captain's the ship. Tyson's voice is calm, steady, and clear over the frantic music that develops behind it. The lyrics are brief declarations. They are calls and assertions: "Astro timeless immortality;" "Astro Black American;" "the Universe is in my voice;" "rhythm multiplicity;" "melody horizon;" and "Astro Black mythology." "Astro Black" is a state of being in blackness and an imagined realm in the stars.

Utopia, as a critical concept, a theoretical paradigm, and preoccupation of the artist's imagination, has become fecund territory for literature and cultural scholars in recent years. It is rich territory to mine as we increasingly find ourselves mired in an information age in which no space is ever "safe" from the critical gesture, from invasion, or from history. This dissertation project is overwhelmingly concerned with theorizing space and how spaces remember history and the historicized space's relationship with the human body, the African American body. I have shown that black American writers resist the overdetermination of the body within spaces; that their work subverts hegemonic narratives of bodily coercion, exploitation, and domination through depictions of the slave ship as a space of transformation, resistance, and through a politics of refusal symbolized most potently by nausea and vomiting. In this final chapter, I too want to

look at imagined spaces of possibility, and at the artistic creation of utopias and dystopias as reflections of the dystopic U.S. late twentieth century.

José Esteban Muñoz's *Cruising Utopia* is one recent study that demonstrates that the imaginative terrain is a space of world-changing possibility. By queering the Western philosophical concept, "utopia," Muñoz demonstrates that "utopia" is not aspirational, but it is a form of critique. Moreover, his work, through the theorist Ernst Bloch, elucidates how black American speculative and science fictional forms formulate, not possibilities to come, but the queer ways that black life in America already embodies alienation and resists forms of oppression that render or speak about the spaces of black life ugly, poor, without opportunity for mobility, lacking inventiveness, and unworthy of attention. When, in the opening scene of *A Joyful Noise*, as he looks up, Sun Ra says that planet Earth is not sufficient by itself, that all it "produces is the dead bodies of humanity," he questions the conditions of life. Instead, Ra argues that everything else comes from outer space. He turns the gaze around to reveal the death-dealing psychological and physical violence of white America. Muñoz argues that "queerness" is a "structuring and educated mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present" (1). "Queerness" is a category that illuminates the work of Afrofuturist Sun Ra and black speculative fiction writer Octavia Butler because, as Muñoz defines it, "Queerness is a longing that propels us onward, beyond romances of the negative and toiling in the present. Queerness is that thing that lets us feel that this world is not enough, that indeed something is missing" (1). Queer touch enables alternative figurations of the horizon. Queer touch provides new ways of perceiving and

being within space by critically uncovering and doing away with normalizing restrictions on the body.

Utopia in the context of African American literary history is bound to thematic concerns with mobility and migration.[166] In Sun Ra's cosmic imagination, the spaceship offers a route to a more livable life since earth is not conducive to justice or even supporting black life. Vehicular forms of travel are bound with memories and actualities of restrictions, limitations, denial of access, segregation, and physical violence, discursive violence. The spaceship, however, proposes a form of travel autonomous from white control, U.S. legal restrictions and social mores, as well as normalized, and thus spectacularly invisible, forms of violence against black individuals. Graham Lock develops the term "Blutopia," taken from the title of a Duke Ellington composition, to examine the "utopian impulse" in African American music, jazz in particular. He explains, "the utopian [is] associated with space, the future, the sacred, and the spirituals, the remembering with time, the past, the secular and the blues" (2). For Lock the utopian impulse cannot be separated from another impulse that corresponds with an understanding of the past, with a revisionist system of form and content. There exists a creative "crossroads" "where visions of the future and revisions of the past become part of the same process, a 'politics of transfiguration,' in which accepted notions of language, history, the real, and the possible are thrown open to question and found wanting" (2). In

[166] As Isabel Wilkerson reveals in her masterful study of the Great Migration, *The Warmth of Other Suns*, even car travel, the quintessential American form of travel which makes legible masculinity, desire for manifest destiny, and individual wealth legible at all once, was vexed for black drivers seeking freedom in the twentieth century. Long road trips required lodging that was often barred to black guests. Motels were heavily segregated, even in California and throughout Northern states. Black Americans relied upon "The Green Book" throughout the first two-thirds of the century, until Jim Crow was less of a practiced form of control, in order to locate safe spaces to rest, stay the night, eat, or even use the facilities. Race is often made most visible and identifiable at the moment of travel. Langston Hughes clarifies this last point in his first autobiography, *The Big Sea*.

Ra's celestial and utopian imagination space can be the vast frontier for a future black world reachable by an exodus of space travel. Moreover, as Lock suggests, Ra's compositions, like spirituals, reference travel as a form of salvation, heavenward. Lock unpacks the layers of sacred and secular. The sacred, or the Spirit, in Ra's music speaks to Baraka's understanding of the operation of Spirit in black cultural productions as an antidote to sterile, self-interestedness of white or Western art.

Lock applies religious and cultural frameworks as well as the African American literary tradition narratives of travel and escape from enslavement to understand Ra's mythmaking project. In other words, he reads Ra's music, poetry, and responses to interviewers as texts against an African American literary and critical canon. For Lock, Ra's "Astro Black Mythology" refers to the axis of the Ra cosmology, the creation of an alternative mythic future and mythic past for African Americans (14). Thus, as Lock argues, Ra uses the stage itself as a kind of spaceship. Gayle Wald clarifies the stage as a space of sacred temporality and world-building for Ra: "Particularly in live musical performance—in the 'sacred arena of the concert space—vibrations had the power to produce new possibilities of social attunement and new modes of living" (674). Ra consciously resists dominant narratives about blackness in the 1960s and 70s in order to release black audiences from the limitations and oppressions of history on the consciousness. Thus, the angel or celestial race does not exist within the narrow purview of black possibility in the U.S. because black people are not bound to those earthly laws.

It is difficult to overstate Ra's centrality in the shift from the slave ship to the spaceship, and in the directions that his thought might take black theory. Ra's "mythocracy" instantiates a critical methodology, and his rejection of America, of being a

part of America at a performative level is fascinating because through his mythocracy he signals a politics of refusal. The 1980 film, part documentary and part musical epic, *Sun Ra: A Joyful Noise*, opens as the camera pans in on an ancient, Egyptian statue of a sphinx-like being in a darkened, cavernous museum hall. The camera focuses on Ra walking slowly up to the statue to explain, "All planet Earth produces is [sic] the dead bodies of humanity. That's its only creation. Everything else comes from outer space. From unknown regions. Humanity's life depends upon the unknown. Knowledge is laughable when attributed to a human being" (Ra "A Joyful Noise"). As he speaks the camera zooms in on his face, looking up, then down to his hand on the lower pedestal, covered in hieroglyphics. As the last line lingers in the audience's mind, music begins and the scene cuts to the Arkestra playing on the roof of a building on a bright, sunny day. June Tyson sings the lyrics of "Astro Black,": "Astro Black mythology;" "Astro thought in mystic sound;" "Astro reach beyond the stars;" "the Universe is in my voice;" "find your place among the stars / get in tune with outer worlds;" "multiciplicity, equationality;" "Astro Black and cosmo dawn." By juxtaposing these two lyrical studies, the director Robert Mugge, evokes the promise of music as a vehicle to other, more livable and more promising dimensions. Ra celebrates musical experimentation as a form of knowledge making that is out of this world. If earth is not viable for the production of life, then how can it be made so? "Astro Black" represents a visionary form of consciousness that acknowledges the generative expansion of the perceptible world through music and the staged space of its performance.

Sun Ra: A Joyful Noise is revealing because it allows viewers intimate access to not just Ra's philosophy but to the Arkestra's rehearsal and playing habits. The intimacy

of the film also highlights the Arkestra House in Philadelphia. Situated at 5626 Morton Street, the Arkestra house, similar to an earlier practice space and shelter for Ra's rotating band in New York City, instantiates a black cosmos in a U.S. city. For example, several of the band members open a convenience store in the same neighborhood to serve its black residents. Furthermore, the house is a sanctuary for artistic production. The band's communal living transforms the domestic sphere into an Astro Black utopia for the work of art. Ra crafted and relied upon a space for black msucial expression in his Arkestra houses. Like Baraka's Spirit House in Newark, Ra's houses fostered art and community in opposition to the economic and popular whiteness that fled urban areas where black Americans lived, either by choice or by de facto segregation. What is so captivating about Ra's "Astro Black" "mythocracy" is the way his sonic experimentation and Arkestral performances of collective cosmic encounters through dance and sound are consistently "far out" and demonstrate a refusal to be bound by the meanings of blackness in the United States. Thus, Ra is not interested in a musical time of memorialization in which the ship signifies enslavement, but a musical time of futurity in which the ship signifies blackness as encounter with the cosmos, as a universe of possibilities.

Music for Ra offers access to a both a structured and a more malleable time. At its most ecstatic, his playing involves gestures that make visible the cyborg relationship to his instrument. The piano or keyboard is an extension of his body as he slides his whole hands, back and palm, across the keys, turning around and using his arms to produce sounds that startle and transform the theater or club into a sphere of jarring electrical

release.[167] Drawing on Lorde, Ra's ecstatic playing and style of conducting the Arkestra, moving amongst musicians, arms raised, face turned upwards, evokes a posthuman, cyborg erotic spiritualism. This flouts practices of limited black expression and creativity in the daily world where Ra witnesses a vacuum of spirituality and regular obstacles to survival. Riding the "space waves" of Ra's music can be erotic receptivity. Lorde provides an illuminated example of how she experiences the erotic in the simple act of dancing:

> Another important way in which the erotic connection functions is the open and fearless underlining of my capacity for joy. In the way my body stretches to music and opens into response, hearkening to its deepest rhythms, so every level upon which I sense also opens to the erotically satisfying experience, whether it is dancing, building a bookcase, writing a poem, examining an idea. ("Uses of the Erotic" 56-57)

As Lorde reveals, dance alters time and space as the body becomes a site of exhilaration and joyful pleasure. Dance is also an erotic act of communion between two or more individuals and a way to move through a moment. Lorde's explanation of this experience of erotic is connected to artistic and intellectual production, and here she offers us a way to understand the erotic moves the body toward a critical freedom. Combined with prophetic warnings made in the tradition of black liberation theology, Ra's musical arrangements and their performances enact a recuperative bodily sublime and inspire critical joy for late twentieth century.

[167] The example of this style of playing shown in *A Joyful Noise* sounds strikingly similar to the score of a spaceship's mechanical pinging as heard in a typical science fiction flick from the seventies or early eighties.

If possession suggests captivity in which the body is enthralled to some power outside of its control, it also implies release. In Octavia Butler's fiction, release is never a wholly positive good for the individual. The experience of release often occurs simultaneously with the loss of a loved one, with bodily injury or suffering, suggesting that possession and release as a structuring binary is not an accurate formulation. When considered through the lens of musical expression, release implies a freedom of the body, a decoupling of the body from inhibitions and categorical definitions, from the business of everyday life. Yet, as their artistic productions show, possession is complicated even more by the fact that it is often desired and desirable, whether for the individual subject or the dominant cultural hegemony. Butler and Sun Ra's works question the ways we are possessed by our conditions, whether they are socioeconomic, geopolitical, or disaffection from politics, and determined by factors out of our control. Ra's "mythocracy," I want to suggest, is an incisive term that demonstrates the ways art generates new critical terminology. Through a combination of myth and the suffix that indicates a power or rule, a riff on democracy possibly, Ra even critiques the ways people are brought together by an order, national or symbolic.

Conclusion:

Citizens of the Past: The Public Project of Recovery

Abandoning the search, I began filling in the lacuna Sam Burke represented with other, adopted 'kinfolk': with, for example, 'the incorrigibles' in Barbados long ago who had somehow withstood the whipping post and the pillory. I claimed them among my progenitors. Also, 'the twenty-and-odd negroes' at Point Comfort, Jamestown, Virginia, who had been exchanged for so many sacks of meal and salted meat before being led off to centuries of John Henry work. Next: little Olaudah Equiano, the captured eleven-year-old boy-child from Yoruba Land who had arrived traumatized in Barbados in 1756, only to be transshipped to Point Comfort also. Years later, Equiano, the man, would write a best-selling narrative of his travails once he managed to purchase his freedom.

Then there were the 132 sick and ailing chattel cargo in the hold of the *Zong*, a British three-master bound for the Caribbean in 1781. The entire lot had been disposed of at sea, the ship owners calculating that the insurance money from the loss would be far greater than the sale of the chattel in their condition.

On reading of the Zong Massacre, as it was called, I promptly added all 132 of the drowned to my gene pool. --Paule Marshall, *Triangular Road*[168]

The history of the slave trade continues to confound writing. Indeed Hortense Spillers claimed in 1987, "The conditions of "Middle Passage" are among the most incredible narratives available to the student, as it remains not easily imaginable" (71-72). Contemporary literature of the slave ship develops an intellectual and affective field to speculate on the unknowable and unquantifiable aspects of that transatlantic journey. Through literary and intellectual explication the time and space of the ship continue to engender questions rather than offer resolutions. The history of the slave ship at sea will not be written, despite ship's manifests, captain's logs, and the few memories that survive. The ocean's expanse creates a time-space relationship with the ship's movement across a vast, unmarkable, stateless space coursed by winds and the stars. How does the nation emerge out of this fluid expanse? Its shores are traced by arrivals and departures,

[168] Paule Marshall, *Triangular Road: A Memoir* 90-91.

but the nation remains an entity to which one can hardly ever depart completely and from which so many are barred arrival.

Thus far, I have confined my study to explore the implications of a historically defined literary and artistic symbol: the slave ship used as a metaphor through which characters lament or speak out against the twentieth century experiences of the political conditions of race and blackness in the United States of America. I have explored the ways literary theorists have read this trope thus far. In this conclusion, however, I turn to two works of historical production that straddle the popular and academic divide and that each reject the *metaphorical* nature of the slave trade to insist upon its ongoing meaning in the "lives" of African Americans in the twenty-first century. These texts explore the relationship between citizenship, memory, and race through the search for tangible evidence. If an ocean of history stands between the individual and understanding the traumas of the slave trade through familial heritage, how might citizenship, or membership in the national family be possible when these traumas are irresolvable and ongoing? Furthermore, how do narratives function to transition between the private space of personal reflection and the public sphere of citizenship and national identification when posing the possibility of historical recovery?

In the series Henry Louis Gates, Jr. developed in cooperation with the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS), *African American Lives,* the key to an unknown ethnic past lies foremost in the identification of ancestral heritage through genetic mapping. Gates suggests that the Atlantic abyss is navigable through scientific and technological advances that offer novel approaches to historical detection. However, throughout the series, these approaches return to the bodily trace. Through a structuring rhetorical

impulse, Gates wonders whether "travel through time across the Atlantic ocean [to] find where our ancestors came from in Africa" is possible given the new technologies that make genetic sequencing available to ordinary people. He asserts, "Now, thanks to miraculous breakthroughs in genealogy and genetics, we can begin to do just that" (*African American Lives* 2006). [169] In her hybrid book, part memoir, part archival historical resarch, *Lose Your Mother*, Saidiya Hartman traces the routes of the Atlantic Slave Trade in an attempt to understand survival and birth under conditions of anonymity and enslavement. As she traces the slave trade routes, telling readers of her research trip to Ghana, she describes this journey as an attempt to map experience as well as travel. Most pressing for her, though, is the project to chart the lives, the conditions, and the untold subjective experiences of those made invisible by the trade. Though her narrative opens in Ghana, her journey actually begins as her title suggests, within the feeling of loss in the United States. In his or her own method, each of these scholars takes the literary figure of the slave ship, the Black Atlantic chronotope, and uses it to understand the conditions of national identity as well as understand the bridge from collectivity to citizenship in the twenty-first century.

"The Middle Passage robbed us of our people of this heritage. DNA can begin to reverse the Middle Passage. Isn't that something?"

Gates introduces the opening scenes of the first installment of *African American Lives* from a dais overlooking the intake hall at Ellis Island. He draws a sharp distinction between the dominant narrative of America as a land of promise and opportunity for

[169] Though it is difficult to claim authorship for Gates in such a collaborative endeavor as a documentary television series, for simplicity and clarity, I will refer to Gates as the author because he positions himself throughout *African American Lives* I and II as not just the lead historian, but as a guide for both viewer and the interview subjects, providing connections between the present and the past.

European immigrants and the unrecorded experiences of his ancestors who were forced to the New World as slaves. Gates expresses the thrill that some current U.S. citizens can access a computerized record of their relatives as they passed through the inspection station and entered the gateway to citizenship. For his relatives, though, another port of entry led directly to an auction block, but because ship's records and plantation books of sale did not record the African names of captives, theirs were lost to posterity.

Recently, however, scholars like David Eltis of Emory University have digitized the slave ship's routes and their records in order to create databases of the travel and sale of human beings. These technologies reinforce an image of the slave trade as a network. The *Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database* (www.slavevoyages.org) is an open-access, searchable collection of digitized archives that allows users to research individual ships' routes and their human cargo. It enables users to generate new research questions and experiment with data collection. This technology also provides users with a glimpse of the names, and hence the lives, of these captives. Eltis's project and others like it are transforming how we understand the realities of the slave trade, and Gates makes use of these mapping technologies combined with genetic testing in *African American Lives*, parts I and II, to provide the black celebrities who offer up their family histories and genetic material with a way to interpret their present lives.

In the second installment of the series, which aired in February of 2008, the slave ship is deferred until the final episode, and although we are told in the first that the final route to be traced will be the ship's sailing with captives aboard from Africa to the colonies, the slave ship provides the unspoken ordering module of the first three episodes. Gates introduces the grounding in the study of genetics as well as archival

research in the following manner: "I conceived of these series as roots in a test-tube. Roots for the twenty-first century. And as a way to explore ever more deeply what our ancestors achieved in this country and what they were forced to endure." The show's archivists work their way back in time from the present "until our ancestor's paper trail runs out," Gates informs viewers. "Then, using the latest breakthroughs in DNA analysis, we're going to attempt to reverse the Middle Passage to discover our roots deep in Africa from which our family ties were severed so very long ago" ("Road Home"). The possibility of reversal is foreground through the series temporal structuring of individual's lives. "Working backward" as a model further enmeshes the individual in a series of discoveries and fulfills the desire for increasingly more knowledge.

Thus, we begin to see that the series makes use of several structuring binaries that sustain a tension for viewers between the past and the present and the national or nationalizing spheres of citizenship in the United States, which is conveyed as a struggle filled with violence, hatred, and the pain of familial betrayals, and lost national unity. The foregone conclusion of Africa's stasis as a place for the imagination of wholeness through a *genetic* connection not a political one is actually a rhetorical gesture that distances the internationalist promise and efficacy of Pan-Africanism as a political system built upon the shared conditions of disenfranchisement and economic disparity among people of color and the descendants of the African Diaspora around the world. *African American Lives* unilaterally constructs Africa as a single unifying location, where the recovery of the past is possible, it is often suggested through travel. For instance, when Gates reveals to Don Cheadle that he can place his ancestry to a specific location in

present-day Cameroon, Gates suggests that if he were in Cheadle's shoes, he would purchase a plane ticket immediately.

The series relies upon a very specific formulation of black participation in a public. Even though the private histories, family memories, and emotional responses are laid bare before the viewer's eyes, creating a sense of intimacy with Gates's interviewees, the series only documents the family histories and produces DNA matches for black American celebrities and exceptional professionals. For example, the first installment is most famous for its interviews with Oprah Winfrey and her father, but it also includes Quincy Jones, Bishop T.D. Jakes, Ben Carson, and Chris Tucker. The second installment includes Tina Turner, Maya Angelou, Morgan Freeman, Don Cheadle, and Linda Johnson Rice, Peter Gomes, Jackie Joyner-Kersee, Chris Rock, and of course Gates himself whose own quest for his roots contributes scholarly gravitas to both installments.[170] But who does this public actually represent? The series extends a mode of citizenship and national consciousness through the use of celebrity and exceptionalism for black audiences who might identify through these figures with a form of national participation. Kinship or relation is encoded through the intimacy of emotional identification.

Oral memories and family histories are essential to the constitution of a broader matrix of African American relation in the twenty-first century because, it seems, given the many successes of the series subjects, black Americans are no longer a "folk" but

[170] Angelou's contribution to the series is astonishing for several reasons, not the least of which is her proclivity to employ language to both read and transform the situation in which Gates has placed her as the writer most apt to translate his project into spiritual work. While she understands this to be her role, she conveys a sense of gravity and even critical confoundment at the questions Gates's assertion of identity might continue to raise.

have achieved broader normalization into U.S. society through assimilation and wealth accumulation. However, the series indicates in many ways that this has resulted in a lamentable cultural impasse, one that for Gates might be solved by the genealogical search and the creation of unique familial archives that tell the story of the twenty-first century individual through the experiences of his or her family members. Despite the repeated findings of mixture and multiplicity in the genetic make-up of individuals, since Gates reveals to the interviewees how much of their DNA comes from African ancestry and how much from European or Native American, the series focuses on what it means to be black in the United States through the lens of the Middle Passage, slavery, migration, and Jim Crow segregation. The show understands *relation* not as multiplicity or through *difference* as Glissant's poetics of *Relation* grapples with but as singularity. Glissant's rhizomatic theory seeks to sustain and imagine the complicated mixture of historical, present, and future possibility through differences (*Afro Modern* 63). *African American Lives* resists the entanglement Glissant argues is the result of surviving and living with the abyss in the aftermath of the slave ship.

Over the past two decades in American culture, there has been a renewed interest in uncovering hereditary traits to understand in the minutest of detail what makes us who we are. This interest in the ways our genetic make-up predisposes us to health conditions such as alcoholism or obesity, affects our personalities, and is traceable through family lineage is often distilled in the metaphor of blood. "Blood is thicker than water" is a telling cliché in this regard in that the kinship sign extends back to origins not through experience. However, as the epigraph from Paule Marshall's recent memoir, *Triangular Road*, reveals, when an ocean of history stands between her and a sense of an heritable

narrative, she constructs her own "gene pool" that is wide and deep enough to contain a multitude, and in doing so to revive that multitude through her writing, her memories, and the course of her life. The DNA sequence can be a way of thinking or speaking about bodily memory.

"If the past is another country, then I am its citizen."

This assertion has always struck me as the crux of Hartman's important, *Lose Your Mother*. I find the brief claim to theorize the work of citizenship in complicated ways. Moreover, it suggests how the history of slavery continues to disrupt declarations by those who suggest that integration into the American project is either possible or desirable. Moreover, it asserts that the experience of nation time is subjective. Drawing upon her temporal theorization of the continuity of slavery rather than its resolution, Hartman explains for readers, "I, too, live in the time of slavery, by which I mean I am living in the future created by it. It is the ongoing crisis of citizenship" (133). Furthermore, "If the ghost of slavery still haunts our present, it is because we are still looking for an exit from the prison" (133). These claims clarify some of the complicated personal and scholarly reasons Hartman embarks on her journey, only to be disrupted by confounded expectations to find emotional resolution. She writes, "Neither blood nor belonging accounted for my presence in Ghana, only the path of strangers impelled toward the sea. There were no survivors of my lineage or far-flung relatives of whom I had come in search, no places and people before slavery that I could trace" (7). Thus, hers is not a journey defined by *solely* personal discovery, but an attempt to understand what it means to become expendable, to live a life not worth grieving for or remembering. Hartman argues that to seek closure or resolution, as it were, for the slave

trade might even blind one to the conditions that perpetuate forms of enslavement in the present.

"Alien," "stranger" "obruni," are the terms with which Saidiya Hartman begins her autobiographical history. Hartman finds that the United States in turn is inescapable even in Ghana's sacred sites. American economic freedom, and wealth offer a different kind of mobility that local Ghanaians do not have access to. She feels herself scrutinized under a different gaze that is also exclusionary and Othering, one that assigns her to a national category she herself does not or cannot claim. Hartman develops an apprehension about the direction of the journey back that is marked by privilege not available to the Africans with whom Americans seeks to develop a familial relationship.

Though written in the early years of the twenty-first century, Hartman explores the emotional impact of statelessness brought about by the Atlantic slave trade and Middle Passage. Her work seeks to trace these historical roots to their effects on twentieth and twenty-first subjects. In a statement that echoes the generic opening of African American autobiographical writing beginning with the slave narrative, Hartman explains, "I was born in another country, where I also felt like an alien and which in part determined why I had come to Ghana. I had grown weary of being stateless. Secretly I wanted to belong somewhere or, at least, I wanted a convenient explanation of why I felt like a stranger" (4). The feeling of statelessness in the US sends her on a quest to identify a "country" of belonging.

Whereas for Gates, the archive represents innumerable possibilities for tracing and making contact, for Hartman, the textual and physical archives she visits are gravesites (17). In the figures and texts, she locates only death. Furthermore, Hartman

travels to actual memorials of the slave trade, only to find that these sites of memory cannot answer all of her questions or resolve her feelings of disconnection, displacement, and loss. She explains, "Monuments, like graves, are intended to preserve the dead and to suspend the past. But everything I could see refuted this. I still thought of the castle as a tomb, but if it were, then where were the mourners? Didn't a gravesite require the company of the bereaved?" (70). Hartman's is not a comfortable journey. Instead, migraines and nausea mark her time in Ghana. Belatedness characterizes her arrival in Ghana and in the slave dungeons in particular, where her physical reactions explode the grieving process. Standing in the dungeon she realizes that sites where torture and horrific brutality took place do not necessary constitute sacred spaces. Her body rejects the knowledge that these dungeons continue to be marked by the remnants of the bodies kept there. Her impossible desire in this space, "to reach through time and touch the prisoners," is met only with headaches, nausea, and the feeling that her body can no longer contain her or protect her from the accumulated filth of the dungeon.

How then does her book fill a historical need or sustain the historical gap of *décalage*? Hartman insists upon the accumulation of knowledge about the slave trade. She insists that it is necessary to continue to face the unfaceable but to do so on the grounds that are offered. To meet the historical terms that exist rather than those that are desired. Yet in reflecting on her time in Ghana, she explains that she will continue to lay claim to those accounts of resistance she uncovered in her research. She writes, "If after a year in Ghana I could still call myself an African American, it was because my Africa had its source in the commons created by fugitives and rebels, in the courage of suicidal girls aboard slave ships, and in the efforts, thwarted and realized" (234). The "legacy"

she claims is the "fugitive's legacy" (234). Rereading the slave ship as a site of the fugitive signifies bodily repossession and offers an argument for the slave ship as a space that entails its own practice of reading and one that provides a new epistemological approach to the impulse to violently name and categorize difference in order to contain rather than sustain its disruptive potential.

When I began this project, I imagined it as an interdisciplinary cultural study of representations of the slave ship across artistic media. However, as I continued to research and write, I became so consumed by the literature, that there was no room (in my mind) for sustained attention to other art forms. Expanding the contemporary literature of the slave ship to the contemporary art of the slave ship, for example, would include the work of artists Kara Walker and Carrie Mae Weems. Walker and Weems offer critical approaches to and their work questions notions of encounter and recovery: Walker through the highly sentimentalized form of the cut paper silhouette—black on white walls striking a chord so deep in the breasts of Western audiences that she has become a major force in the art world. Weems uses photography and text to grapple with discourses of the body and history; her photographs bring the memorial and monument to the museum whereby the viewer can pause before a section of history. An interdisciplinary study would also include a chapter on the slave ship as a musical or sonic metaphor in Jazz, Soul, Funk, and its reappropriation in Hip Hop. If this dissertation were to include a soundtrack, it would of course include Sun Ra and George Clinton, but it would also feature the spiritual and metaphysical investigations by John Coltrane, Pharoah Sanders, and Albert Ayler's experimental sound; the O'Jays' 1973

album *Ship Ahoy*; Mos Def's post-Katrina work, and Kanye West's frequent use of the slave ship to comment on consumer culture. Another absence is an exploration of the proliferation of popular works and literature for youth that address the Middle Passage. These include Tom Feelings's astounding illustrated book, *Middle Passage*, S.E. Anderson's *The Black Holocaust for Beginners*, and the illustrated children's book, *Never Forgotten*, by Patricia C. MicKissack.

With the luxury of more time, I would include a fifth chapter that examines the robust body of artistic and critical work on the *Amistad* mutiny. This chapter would examine the ways Robert Hayden and Kevin Young have positioned Cinque(z) as a black romantic hero. Hayden's "Middle Passage," as heavily informed by archival research as it is, reflects the mythic nature of Cinquez's sacred position in black literary history. In his masterful recent book on the *Amistad* rebellion, literacy, and freedom, *Ardency*, Young creates a literary time that merges nineteenth century experiences and coming-to-knowledge through literacy with twentieth century modes of knowing through the register of individual speech in twentieth century vernacular. *Ardency* is a text that combines many of the intertextual and reflexive literary strategies that this dissertation investigates. This chapter would also historicize the literary history of the *Amistad* in order to better understand how the ship is transformed into a tangible site for American recovery by both the Mystic Seaport museum and Steven Spielberg's 1997 film, which is a sentimental argument for American triumph.

There is more work to be done. Many texts did not make their way into the following study. The most glaring absence by my account is poetry. A fuller treatment of contemporary literature of the slave ship would include Kamau Braithwaite's *Middle*

Passages and Lucille Clifton's poem "slaveships," reprinted in the collection, *Blessing of the Boats*. Given the rubric I have offered, a sustained study of the work of Sonia Sanchez is necessary as well. Sanchez has a great deal to tell twenty-first century Americans about the consequences brought about by the lack of an official national apology for slavery. Reading her poem, "Middle Passage" in 2008, Sonia Sanchez introduces it by explaining that it studies the problem of humanity in the twenty-first century.[171] Her performance is arresting, and the poem is heard as a cry. Indeed, in the midst of repeating the phrase "every nine months," Sanchez does cry for this imprisoning form of enslaved women's labor. Yet "Middle Passage" is a revelatory expression of release and a challenge for the new century. Sanchez's performance is an invocation of Spirit. She calls forth for herself and for her audience not just the spirit to recuperate from this history but to learn from it for the present and future.

[171] Sonia Sanchez, "Middle Passage." You can view a performance of the poem accompanied by guitarist Gerry Del Mol on *YouTube*. (hhttp://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P98JZhWUijY)

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