

The Work of Cultural Memory:
Imagining Atlantic Passages in
Literature of the Black Diaspora



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THE WORK OF CULTURAL MEMORY: IMAGINING ATLANTIC PASSAGES IN LITERATURE OF THE BLACK DIASPORA

This paper considers the emergence of the slave Middle Passage between Africa and the Americas as a pervasive topic and motif in late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century black diasporic writing. Drawing on theories of 'cultural memory,' it explores an oceanic imaginary in the field of modern African American and Caribbean literature, but also poses broader questions about the formation and mutation of group identity in relation to understandings and constructions of a shared past. Three textual examples, taken from the work of David Dabydeen, John Edgar Wideman and Toni Morrison, are examined to illustrate the suggestiveness and variety of the many figurations of Atlantic crossings in writing of the diaspora. Addressing concerns with memorialisation, the recovery of histories of suffering, and counter, shifting and contextual narratives of the past, cultural memory and cultural production are seen to perform several kinds of 'work.' Finally, in an outward turn, the paper briefly speculates on the possibilities and pitfalls of setting different traumatic collective memories, and their distinct expressive traditions, in relation.



The background to this paper is a convergence of two interests: research into literature of the black diaspora, in particular, representations of and engagements with the history of racial slavery, and the rise or renewal of scholarship in the area of memory studies. As I hope will become clear, this convergence is helpful in terms of opening out my work in the field of African American and Caribbean literary studies to pose broader questions surrounding the formation, the functions and the multiple meanings of 'culture' in relation to understandings of who we all are. Equally, to look at it the other way around, the relationship serves a purpose in illuminating the specificities of an imaginary of the slave Middle Passage via movement from 'big' theories of how group identities are forged and sustained to a distinctive example of work done by cultural memory. After outlining some contexts in terms of theoretical models and literary history, I move on to offer three 'snapshot' analyses examining a selection of textual representations to try to explore the suggestiveness and variety of the many figurations of Atlantic crossings in black diaspora writing.

Memory Studies

I employ 'cultural memory' in my title because the general backdrop to the questions I attempt to raise is the growth of interdisciplinary memory studies and renewed interest in notions of collective/social/cultural memory since the late 1980s (as well as an identity politics frame of more self-conscious recovery of minority pasts). The term, although used variously, suggests a sense of memory as connected to socio-cultural contexts and my focus is on the order of cultural memory which sees social groups constructing a shared past via media, institutions and practices, this in turn contributing to the shaping of communities.¹ A specific theoretical point of reference might be Pierre Nora's concept of *lieux de mémoire* (or sites of memory) articulated during the 1980s and early 1990s. Informed by understanding

of shifting relations to the French national past, Nora delineates a flexible definition of such 'sites' (material, functional and symbolic) as marked by the contemporary desire to access them: 'there must be a will to remember' (Nora, 1989, p. 19). Perhaps more instructive here, though, is Jan Assmann's distinction between communicative and cultural memory drawn out from his work on ancient societies in the 1980.² Assmann identifies everyday, local, passing 'communicative' memory and long-term, institutionalised 'cultural' memory which is connected to collective self-image (an awareness of unity and specificity), common consciousness of the past and the reproduction and stabilisation of identity. Cultural memory entails both enduring resources or 'figures of memory' and shifting contextual relations: 'In cultural formation, a collective experience crystallizes, whose meaning, when touched upon, may suddenly become accessible again across millennia;' 'Cultural memory works by reconstructing, that is, it always relates its knowledge to an actual and contemporary situation. True, it is fixed in immovable figures of memory and stores of knowledge, but every contemporary context relates to these differently, sometimes by appropriation, sometimes by criticism, sometimes by preservation or by transformation' (Assmann, 1995, pp. 129–30). Assmann's sense of cultural memory allows for the crystallisation, and the dormancy and reimagining of the experience and site of the Middle Passage.

Turning from Assmann's conception of 'fateful events of the past' retaining significances which may be accessed again (p. 129), we find in Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic* (1993) a more localised study which nonetheless shares similar concerns. Gilroy's proposition of a fractal, transcultural formation made up of various circulations and encounters initiated by the Atlantic slave trade has proved widely influential in the arts and humanities and the social sciences. Most pertinent here is his work in relation to the 'imaginative proximity to terror' felt by slaves and their descendants and the evolving response to this in black expressive cultures (Gilroy, 1993, p. 222). For example, Gilroy discusses 'the narratives of loss, exile, and journeying which [...] serve a mnemonic function: directing the consciousness of the group back to significant, nodal points in its common history and its social memory' (p. 198).³ He poses a series of questions that helpfully, if loosely, frame my efforts in this paper:

How do black expressive cultures practice remembrance? How is their remembering socially organised? [...] asking what part the memory of the terrors and bondage that have been left behind plays in securing the unity of the communities of sentiment and interpretation which black culture helps to reproduce. How do changes in the ways that these terrors are summoned up illuminate the shifting, restless character of black political culture? (p. 212).

Literary Representations of the Slave Middle Passage

Although treated in a few eighteenth-century autobiographical texts by ex-slaves (for example Olaudah Equiano's), the voyage made by Africans across the Atlantic to slavery in the Americas only fully emerged as an important reference point, a haunting experience to be imaginatively reinhabited, for creative writing in the late twentieth century. In fiction, drama and poetry by black diaspora artists during this period, the terrible conditions and suffering of the crossing, its disjunction as an irruption into bondage and racialised oppression, and/or its marking of entry into a new identity, into cultural mutation in the so-called New World, figure large. Early examples of its depiction are provided in the 1940s by African American Robert Hayden's poetry and in the 1950s in fiction by Barbadian George Lamming. Still, in the 1980s, considering her own US context, Toni Morrison identified a silence with regards to this

particular element of the slave past. Later commentary reflecting on her oblique inclusion of a Middle Passage experience in her novel *Beloved* (1987) typifies this assessment:

It's like the history of the middle passage. All those people who threw themselves into the sea had been violently ignored; no one praised them, nobody knows their names, nobody can remember them, not in the United States nor in Africa. Millions of people disappeared without a trace, and there is not one monument anywhere to pay homage to them, because they never arrived safely on shore. So it's like a whole nation that is under the sea (Morrison, 1994, pp. 38–9).

Revealed here is a compulsion to remember and honour those who have been discounted and forgotten and to offer up a monument or memorial of sorts in the novel itself. The Middle Passage clearly assumes significance as a site tied into group identity as well as loss. Engagements by writers Derek Walcott, Amiri Baraka and Paule Marshall predate *Beloved*, but Morrison's 1987 novel marks a turning point with many more representations following in its wake (e.g. work by Charles Johnson, Michelle Cliff, Caryl Phillips and Fred D'Aguiar, to name but a few). Although frequently defined as unrecorded, a gap in knowledge, by the turn of this century there was a rich array of depictions in diaspora art. Critical work excavating the haunting presence of the Middle Passage in earlier canonical American literature such as Herman Melville's *Benito Cereno* has also grown. For writers seeking to reimagine the transatlantic crossing, the white authored archive in terms of ships' logs and memoirs by slave traders sometimes offers a departure point, usually with an emphasis on presenting slave perspectives (for example, Robert Hayden's poem 'Middle Passage' collages and revoices the documentation of the Amistad case). Additionally, in the 1980s and 90s, the Middle Passage becomes an important element in the thinking of such theorists as Paul Gilroy, Édouard Glissant, Wilson Harris and Hortense Spillers.

The Middle Passage has been variously envisaged as dislocation, starting point, end point, loss, unspeakable or repressed traumatic memory, contact zone, transformation, commonality and a site of potential mythic or historical recuperation. A crude attempt to categorise the *mechanisms* by which the Middle Passage is depicted in just the novel genre might outline four approaches: (i) historical fiction set during the time of the slave trade; (ii) an incorporation of memories or even dreams of the earlier Middle Passage in a more recent narrative present; (iii) a dialogic relation to the Middle Passage in representations of other journeys in the diaspora (for example, the slave ship being remembered via a voyage 'back' to Africa or between the US and the Caribbean or the Caribbean and Europe); and finally (iv) more fantastical, mythical or futuristic invocations of the experience. A spectrum of identity politics can be read into these twentieth- and twenty-first-century representations: some emphasise the Middle Passage as a loss of the African homeland; some delineate the initiation of a specifically American experience; and others map webs of connection rather than displacement in the subsequent diaspora. At times we can also identify a 'writing back' to familiar narratives of the New World, of European fantasy, migration and settlement.

David Dabydeen, 'The Old Map' (1988)

The poetry of Guyanese British writer David Dabydeen is preoccupied by the history of colonialism and slavery in the Americas, inhabitation of the landscapes of the Caribbean region and migrant experience. In such works as his long poem 'Turner,' inspired by J. M. W. Turner's painting 'Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying' (first exhibited in 1840), however, he also offers an engagement with the experience, and the memorialisation and erasure, of the Middle Passage. A kind of postcolonial 'desire for transfiguration' is evoked but, too, the nets of traumatic memory, history and deterministic representational frames

(Dabydeen, 1994, p. x). To sample Dabydeen's handling of the Middle Passage to the New World, I will here turn to a shorter work, his irregular sonnet 'The Old Map,' first published in 1988. In this text a vivid poetic 'map' of the Caribbean and its waters offers a distilled historical account of colonialism and, at the same time, conveys the exclusion of the region from, the denial to its peoples of, History.⁴

'The Old Map' begins with imagery of a mythic seafaring world, the first line summoning a realm of pirates and plundered 'treasure chests' (p. 41). This scene, drawn from the place of the Caribbean in the British popular imagination, is swiftly undercut, however, by lines two and three: 'And jettisoned slaves washed / Into an arc from Jamaica to Guiana.' The span of a sweeping, fractal Caribbean archipelago is hence traced, recalling Derek Walcott's pronouncement 'Antillean art is this restoration of our shattered histories, our shards of vocabulary, our archipelago becoming a synonym for pieces broken off from the original continent' (Walcott, 1998, p. 69). Whilst both authors share an evocation of 'fragments,' an impression of the islands as deformed bits (in Dabydeen's case 'Haiti is a crab with broken claw,' Walcott referring to 'pieces broken off'), the restorative vision present in Walcott's essay is lacking in Dabydeen's poem. Rather 'The Old Map' offers a stark sense of the 'jettison[ing]' of enslaved Africans, 'dumped' like the 'Empty treasure chests' as trash, whether as corpses or ailing and therefore expendable stock. This horror is further intensified as the sonnet develops, apparently shifting its focus to the land masses themselves: 'Islands aborted from the belly of the sea / Forever unborn in rock and swamp.' The violent use of 'aborted' continues the association of this geography with death, but the lines also begin to suggest the marginalisation of the region in terms of dominant discourses of history, Caribbean society and its cultures being designated 'Forever unborn,' denied a coming into existence and a movement towards maturity in Western narratives of civilisation and progress. Indeed, an impression of the subject of the map of the poem's title being somehow left behind or left to decompose is anticipated by the earlier 'departed ships' and later reinforced through imagery of detritus abandoned to 'rot in the sun,' along with references to both seamen's 'gangrene' and, introducing the history of the genocide of peoples native to the Caribbean, the 'dead Amerindian.' The alliteration of a repeated 'c' sound ('cane chewed and spat / From coolie mouth') adds an impression of colonial contempt in the lines which treat those who came to the islands as indentured workers from Asia, joining slave and indigenous populations.

Lines nine and ten take the poem to a new phase, adding Haiti and Cuba to the collection of named places first specified with Jamaica and Guiana, and conveying spatial location in terms of the rest of the continent as well as a relationship of subjugation to the powerhouse of mainland North America: 'drips in fear at the foot of America.' The poem concludes with a quatrain organised around a palette of colours employed to encapsulate the racialised history of which Dabydeen offers a poetic charting: 'Blue' for the 'deep' sea and 'European eye;' a 'Green' both naïve and morally corrupt for 'seamen's hopes and gangrene;' 'Yellow,' returning us to the 'treasure chests' and material greed of the opening, for the futile 'palm of dead Amerindian / Unyielding gold.' The hues of the old map are thus turned to a three part list, the vivid symbolism of which is reinforced by an iterative pattern, disrupted only by the short 'Unyielding' last line.

One of the concerns of Dabydeen's verse is the negotiation of existing modes of representation of the Americas, whether in the form of the cartography and maritime navigational methods integral to Europe's colonial ventures or mythic narratives of piracy, castaways and treasure. A key function of the Middle Passage here is as a jarring intervention in or disruption of prevalent accounts, repositioning a past of 'jettisoned slaves washed / Into an arc' as a central part of this picture. As mentioned earlier, like Walcott, Dabydeen interrogates hegemonic

interpretations of the region as being on the periphery or outside of history as defined by the 'European eye.' The predominant imagery of the poem is of fragmentation, abortion and corruption, and yet perhaps in this revisionary mapping something potentially alive is birthed from 'the belly of the sea.' The Middle Passage is recovered, alongside other histories, but this recovery is also an instrumental figuration as part of the operation of cultural memory. It, rather than say a story of discovery by Columbus, becomes the starting point for 'modern' Caribbean identity.

John Edgar Wideman, Philadelphia Fire (1990)

US writer John Edgar Wideman's fiction exemplifies the invocation of the horrors of the Middle Passage within a more recent narrative setting. In *Philadelphia Fire* (1990) brief references to the slave ships are incorporated within the central story of urban African American life in the second half of the twentieth century. The text is largely focused on the tragic 'holocaust' of the state assault on and burning out of a so-called cult community in Philadelphia in 1985 (Wideman, 1990, p. 7). Yet what the development of Wideman's narrative reveals, compiled from protagonist Cudjoe's multiple shifting memories and to some extent including other focal views, is the fluid, entangled nature of the past: the fact that, far from being isolated or fixed, accounts intermingle and change across retellings. Whilst *Philadelphia Fire* begins with the premise of a 'story of a fire and a lost boy that brought him home,' Cudjoe being drawn back to the US from Europe, the looping progression of the novel explores the interrelatedness of various places and past experiences, the complex overlaying of memory that constitutes individual and sometimes collective senses of history (p. 7).

The 'layered,' shifting texture of the past explored by Wideman feeds into his handling of the history of slavery as well as more recent recollections. The most explicit engagement with the Middle Passage in *Philadelphia Fire* comes as Cudjoe remembers an island visit to his, now dead, friend and editor Sam, when the two men took 'plastic sacks of garbage' for disposal:

[O]ne split, scattering eggshells, coffee grounds, lemon peels, an empty vodka bottle in the clear space at the foot of a mound of garbage bags [...] Gulls floated over the dump. Gull cries, the lazy circling of gulls. Gulls [...] had followed the ferry across the sound. A second wake in the air. Gray and white like the plowed sea. Gulls hovering in the squat-bottomed boat's slipstream, patiently sailing, scanning the water for bilge. He'd read that sharks trailed the stench of slave ships all the way across the Atlantic, feasting on corpses thrown overboard. Gulls screech and glide above the refuse of the islanders (pp. 59–61).

Here the memory of his crossing to the island off the US coast and the scene at the dump prompt a startling association for Cudjoe of 'sharks trail[ing] the stench of slave ships [...] across the Atlantic.' The scale and smell of waste at the dump, but also the birds looking to feed on the refuse, present a grotesque analogy for the disposal of the corpses created by the trade in human flesh (thus, too, conjuring up the terrible ordeal of the sea voyage for the enslaved). Yet the protagonist does not here inhabit the experience of the Middle Passage; the interior narrative does not adopt a witnessing position. Cudjoe has 'read that sharks trailed the stench of the slave ships' (my emphasis), establishing a degree of mediation and self-consciousness about how and whether we can access or know the past.

The scene develops further, however, to introduce another frame of reference:

Cudjoe tried not to breathe as he helped unpack a week's trash from the trunk and backseat of Sam's blue Dodge Dart. Sun was a bitch [...] You could only hold your breath so long, then you had to inhale stink [...] The mounds grow tall as a house, a pine

tree. Body bags stacked a mile high rotting in the sun. Bad meat. Dead boys coming home from Vietnam were Cudjoe's age, Cudjoe's color, his high-school classmates. You couldn't see color through the thick, green bags. You could smell corpses, but all of them – red white black brown yellow – stink the same [...] Cudjoe is guilty. Others crossed an ocean and died for him. Guilty he didn't fight, didn't die (p. 61).

Here the garbage sacks, already suggestive of the Middle Passage, become correlatives for 'Body bags,' for the devastation of life in the twentieth-century military conflict involving America and Vietnam. The dump's accumulation of rotting material becomes an horrific heaped-up figure for the 'Dead meat' of human remains, for the decomposing residue of the fallen soldiers shipped back to the US. Through this episode of trash disposal then, Wideman links the atrocity of the transportation and suffering of slaves to the costly killing fields of the Vietnam War. Although the narrative observes that whether 'red white black brown yellow' all corpses smell the same, this wastage, like the Middle Passage, is bound to a racialised matrix of power, in terms of US foreign policy but also as the returned American bodies are disproportionately 'Cudjoe's color.' In this memory the slave sea crossing is invoked as part of a potent history of racial oppression, at least to some extent, in order to inform a critique of carnage in the 1960s and 70s and in Cudjoe's own contemporary milieu a decade later. It is in the recollection of the more recent past that the character personally bears witness, experiencing survivor guilt and mourning the loss of peers and friends. The more distant history of the Middle Passage operates here as a provocative cross reference or resonant temporal layer, a politicised haunting if not a living memory.

Toni Morrison, A Mercy (2008)

In her most recent novel, *A Mercy* (2008), Toni Morrison revisits representation of the Middle Passage, an event obliquely remembered via the anachronistic recollections of the titular character in *Beloved* and referenced through local legend in *Tar Baby* (1981). In this new historical fiction, set over the period 1682–1690, Morrison shows the slave trade and its part in the tobacco, rum and sugar industries as increasingly important to the economies and ideologies of Europe, colonial North America and the Caribbean. For example, very early in the novel, the Portuguese Maryland planter and importer of slaves, D'Ortega, blames his financial insecurity on the loss of human goods in transit to disease and then maritime mishap:

D'Ortega's ship had been anchored a nautical mile from shore for a month waiting for a vessel, due any day, to replenish what he had lost. A third of his cargo had died of ship fever. Fined five thousand pounds of tobacco by the Lord Proprietary's magistrate for throwing their bodies too close to the bay; forced to scoop up the corpses – those they could find (they used pikes and nets, D'Ortega said, a purchase which itself cost two pounds, six) – and ordered to burn or bury them. He'd had to pile them in two drays (six shillings), cart them out to low land where saltweed and alligators would finish the work.

Does he cut his losses and let his ship sail on to Barbados? No [...] he waits in port for another month for a phantom ship from Lisbon carrying enough cargo to replenish the hands he has lost. While waiting to fill his ship's hold to capacity, it sinks and he has lost not only the vessel, not only the original third, but all, except the crew who were unchained, of course, and four unsalable Angolans red-eyed with anger (Morrison, 2008, pp. 16–17).

This incident first introduces the topic of slavery but also the practice of shipping Africans to the Americas in the terrible manner indicated by mention of 'ship fever' and the dumping of corpses overboard. The narrative captures D'Ortega's disregard for the devastation to the live

'cargo' except in terms of his own material misfortune. Such a self-interested, supremacist view, however, is subtly framed by the perspective of Anglo-Dutch protagonist Jacob Vaark who receives the tale with distaste for both his debtor's ineptitude and the trade in human flesh. It is Jacob's sarcasm about D'Ortega's foolishness and greed that we hear in lines like 'Does he cut his losses and let his ship sail on to Barbados? No,' Morrison employing narrative means to privilege Jacob's understanding over and against that of the Portuguese slaveholder. Yet the most powerful impression is made by the measures D'Ortega was compelled to take after jettisoning his spoilt imports too close to the shore: 'forced to scoop up the corpses [...] (they used pikes and nets [...] a purchase which itself cost two pounds, six) [...] He'd had to pile them in two drays (six shillings), cart them out to low land where saltweed and alligators would finish the work' (p. 16). The grim realities of this itemised and costed process, meant to safeguard public health, obviously contrast with and sharply undercut the Edenic idealisations set up elsewhere in *A Mercy*. Indeed, this early episode establishes a sense of New World waters and littorals, the conduits of the Middle Passage, as polluted both physically and ethically.

Yet Morrison's novel presents a multifaceted maritime world that, in addition, encompasses a different recuperation of slave experience. For example, seafaring is also prominent in the story of the strange orphan Sorrow. Her discovery half drowned in a river and her apparent prior life on a ship captained by her father give her background an aura of unconventionality and mystery.⁵ Indeed, her own explanation of 'being dragged ashore by whales' establishes a sense of miracle and myth in connection with Sorrow (p. 51). Belying communal consensus about her mental deficiencies, the narrative details the character's rich interior life which includes scenes of the ocean, 'of fish girls with pearls for eyes,' furthering both a link to the dreamlike and the author's positioning of the Atlantic as central to a late seventeenth-century imaginary (p. 127). One tale in particular illustrates the slave trade's part in this sea-dominated milieu:

Sorrow slept and woke, slept and woke, lulled continuously by Twin's voice describing the thousandfold men walking the waves, singing wordlessly. How their teeth glittered more than the whitecaps under their feet. How, as the sky darkened and the moon rose, the edges of their night-black skin silvered. How the smell of land, ripe and loamy, brightened the eyes of the crew but made the sea walkers cry (p. 122).

Here, in this story of 'night-black [...] sea walkers,' *A Mercy* conjures a mythology of the Middle Passage, of a ghostly population that traverses the Atlantic waves and is saddened by indication of land, presumably as this signals arrival at slavery. Perhaps representative of those lost during the crossing, the sea walkers also recall the legend of the Ibo Landing in Paule Marshall's novel *Praisesong for the Widow* (1983) in which, on reaching the Americas and foreseeing the suffering to come there, a cargo of enslaved Ibos turn around and walk off across the water, rejecting bondage and ship and shore. Although only a small fragment, Sorrow's sea tale contributes to the fiction's wider vision of voyages and trade routes, summoning up the singing, glittering presences of the disremembered and unaccounted for. It represents a counterpoint to D'Ortega's objectified Angolans and troublesome corpses and exemplifies the turn to myth or fantasy in some present day cultural responses to and recoveries of the Middle Passage.⁶

Conclusions, Questions and Speculations

We can identify the Middle Passage as a pervasive topic and motif in modern black literature, a site or experience imaginatively reconstructed, often in an attempt at memorialisation. Although this ocean crossing holds different meanings for different authors, it is one of the

key elements shared by writing emergent from such diverse locations as the US, the Caribbean and Europe and therefore reveals convergences of cultural memory across the diaspora. It can be invoked as part of an attempt to 'write back' to previous literary representations or discourses of history. It often offers a troubling encounter with death, terror and trauma, figured as a haunting presence or recollection. At times the creative engagements show self-awareness about the mediated and/or instrumental nature of this tapping into the past. Additionally, in the case of some of the literature and visual art, we find the forging of a kind of mythology, offering an alternative vision to one of suffering. Even in my limited sample of poetry and fiction by Dabydeen, Wideman and Morrison the Middle Passage features in various ways and can be seen to perform several types of 'work.'

If nothing else, this paper's reconnaissance prompts a series of questions:

As a prominent example of a 'memory' that has been imaginatively reconstructed, a group experience beyond living memory, can the slave Middle Passage and its representation tell us something more broadly about social/collective/cultural memory? Or about the functions and permutations of cultural production?

How might we explain and interpret the emergence of the Middle Passage as a pervasive topic and motif in late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century black diasporic writing? Why then/now?

Thinking comparatively (if this is possible?), does cultural memory of the Middle Passage differ to that of other traumatic and dislocating past events and experiences? How? Is the Middle Passage in some ways more 'available' for imaginative re-invention than some other atrocities that have shaped group identity, the twentieth-century Jewish Holocaust perhaps being the most conspicuous reference point? If so, why?

To take up, in a speculative fashion, some of the issues raised by the first two points, might the prevalence of the subject of the Middle Passage in contemporary literature be itself reflective of and responsive to the turn towards the concept of 'diaspora' as a means of understanding black identity in the West? Does the crossing assume greater significance with the ascendancy of models of transition and anti-essentialism over notions of Africentrism or even nationalism in scholarly and popular discourses? To moot other possibilities, could this emergence be located in relation to the rise of trauma studies and/or memory studies in the late twentieth century or, alternatively, a postcolonial or decolonising context in which voicings of so-called 'minority' counternarratives and recoveries of the past are more openly and broadly valued? If adopting Assmann's theory of enduring 'figures of memory' to which groups relate back 'sometimes by appropriation, sometimes by criticism, sometimes by preservation or by transformation' (Assmann, 1995, p. 130), how has the socio-political situation, and corresponding sensibilities, now and in the recent past shaped the cultural pattern I have been trying to describe?

Finally, in posing questions about the work of cultural memory and representations of *different* histories of suffering, the complex debates within memory studies on such issues require at least brief mention. Resistance to comparative approaches is often strong because of arguments about specificity and uniqueness and wariness of an effect of 'weighing up' atrocities.⁷ Addressing possible pitfalls but also potentially illuminating cross references in an exploration of the concept of diaspora that might probe both Jewish and black pasts, Gilroy offers a starting point: 'The issues of *tradition* and *memory* provide a key to bringing them together in ways that do not invite a pointless and utterly immoral wrangle over which

communities have experienced the most ineffable forms of degradation' (my emphasis) (Gilroy, 1993, p. 212). Additionally, the recent work of Michael Rothberg is founded on 'unusual conjunctions [...] uncovering a countertradition in which remembrance of the Holocaust intersects with the legacies of colonialism and slavery and ongoing processes of decolonization' as he seeks to move discussion beyond 'competitive' memory towards the notion of 'multidirectional memory' (Rothberg, 2009, p. xiii). Whilst the focus of my paper has not been in this sense 'the interactions that take place among collective memories' (p. 7), these debates highlight further the politicised role of 'memory' and the centrality of the deployment of narrative in present understandings of the past.



Notes

¹ In a recent handbook that exemplifies the scholarly turn, *Cultural Memory Studies*, Astrid Erll explains, “Memory,” here, is used metaphorically. Societies do not remember literally; but much of what is done to reconstruct a shared past bears some resemblance to the processes of individual memory, such as the selectivity and perspectivity inherent in the creation of versions of the past according to present knowledge and needs’ (Erll, 2008, p. 5).

² Like many late twentieth-century theorists of memory, Assmann is influenced by the earlier projects of Maurice Halbwachs and Aby Warburg to ‘shift the discourse concerning collective knowledge out of a biological framework into a cultural one’ (Assmann, 1995, p. 125).

³ He continues, ‘The telling and retelling of these stories plays a special role, organising the consciousness of the ‘racial’ group socially and striking the important balance between inside and outside activity – the different practices, cognitive, habitual, and performance, that are required to invent, maintain, and renew identity’ (Gilroy, p. 198).

⁴ In this concern and problematic we can identify a clear echo of the preoccupations of Derek Walcott in such work as ‘The Sea is History’ (1979).

⁵ With ‘woolly hair the color of a setting sun’ Sorrow is posed as a figure of ambiguous racial identity (p. 51).

⁶ It should be noted that the final compressed section of *A Mercy* refocuses once more the horrors of the Middle Passage, this time from the first person perspective of a slave, Florens’s mother, who recalls her capture in Angola and subsequent crossing of the Atlantic (see pp. 162–6). A visual arts parallel to the literary turn to myth or fantasy can be found in the work of Ellen Gallagher (for example, ‘Bird in Hand’ (2006)). My sense of this type of inventive engagement with and re-imagining of the Middle Passage is distinct from Gilroy’s notion of ‘jubilee,’ of markers of a liberatory rapport with death looking back to slave suicides during transportation (Gilroy, pp. 68, 198).

⁷ The issue of drawing out relations, parallels and differences, in terms of the literature of slavery and representation of the Holocaust, has not received much critical attention. However, Morrison herself provided a flash point with her dedication of *Beloved* to ‘Sixty Million and more,’ some of the responses to which I mention below, and there have also been several readings focused on shared concerns with unspeakability (Morrison, 1987). Lisa Garbus identifies a series of close parallels between Morrison’s *Beloved* and Claude Lanzmann’s film *Shoah* (1986) but does not really address the complex assumptions and decisions underlying the performance of such comparative work or the ethical dilemmas perceived by many to be involved in this (see Garbus, 1999). Walter Benn Michaels tackles several of these issues in an article on memory, cultural representation, Morrison’s *Beloved* and the Jewish Holocaust (see Michaels, 1996). Naomi Mandel offers a short account of the fraught discourses at work in debate surrounding Morrison’s dedication, going on to explore *Beloved*’s investment in a ‘rhetoric of ineffability’ also associated with accounts of the Holocaust (Mandel, 2002, p. 584). In his damning, and now infamous, review of *Beloved* Stanley Crouch asserts, ‘But sixty is ten times six, of course [...] for *Beloved*, above all else, is a blackface holocaust novel. It seems to have been written in order to enter American slavery into the big time martyr ratings contest, a contest usually

won by references to, and works about, the experiences of Jews at the hands of Nazis' (Crouch, 1987, p. 39). Problematic and disingenuous in all kinds of ways, Crouch's review nevertheless illustrates the danger of the setting of histories of suffering alongside each other being *perceived* as entering into a competitive, even gratuitous forum. A helpful response and engagement with the issues is voiced by Gilroy himself: 'What would be the consequences if the book had tried to set the Holocaust of European Jews in a provocative relationship with the modern history of racial slavery in the western hemisphere? Crouch dismisses without considering it the possibility that there might be something useful to be gained from setting these histories closer to each other not so as to compare them, but as precious resources from which we might learn something valuable about the way that modernity operates, about the scope and status of rational human conduct, about the claims of science, and perhaps most importantly about the ideologies of humanism with which those brutal histories can be shown to have been complicit' (Gilroy, 1993, p. 217). A novel which goes some way towards taking up this challenge is *The Nature of Blood* (1997) by black British writer Caryl Phillips.

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Insights

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