ARGONAUTS OF THE BLACK ATLANTIC: 
REPRESENTING SLAVERY, MODERNITY, 
AND THE COLONISING MOMENT

by

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A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES

(Comparative Literature)

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

February 2006

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation is a comparative analysis of the uses of tropes of marginality in American, Caribbean, British, and African fiction that engages with the aftermaths of the trans-Atlantic slave trade and slavery. This study begins by exploring the utility of the frame of Paul Gilroy’s concept of the “black Atlantic” as a heuristic model for understanding encounters with slavery and the slave trade as phases of an emerging capitalist modernity. I suggest that, within this heuristic framework, marginality is always variable, contingent and changing. Several positions of marginality might even emerge in conflict with each other, since the ideological deployments of slavery in the U.S., the Caribbean, and in African countries are not always in concert. In fact, it is through the study of conflicts and tensions between such seemingly unified marginalities that their differences become discernible. As a result, the common theme in the texts I examine is the need to create communities of listeners who can discern the transformations of the colonising moment in the disparate sites of the diaspora. The practice of listening is a step in apprehending the forms of marginalisation and occlusions of the violence of colonisation that continue at different sites.

In the five chapters of this dissertation, I read stories by Edgar Allan Poe and Herman Melville, and novels by Richard Wright, Toni Morrison, Caryl Phillips, Maryse Condé, Joseph Conrad, Ayi Kwei Armah, Amos Tutuola, Yaw Boateng, and Syl Cheney-Coker. I focus, particularly, on the use of animals, spatial boundaries, literacy, orality, and tropes of listening in the selected texts. I show that these authors use the opposition of visual and aural metaphors to draw attention to the limits of their characters’ knowledge in order to highlight the situatedness of each character in processes of
marginalisation that continue to unfold. Further, as much as these narratives excavate the afterlives of slavery, they are also engaged in the task of differentiating them in order to identify the necessary site-specific tasks of reparation or repair.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE OF CONTENTS</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table of Contents</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of Maps</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preface</td>
<td>vi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dedication</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 1</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 2</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 3</td>
<td>129</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 4</td>
<td>178</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 5</td>
<td>220</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coda</td>
<td>283</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of Works Cited</td>
<td>292</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
LIST OF MAPS

Fig. 1 "Central West Africa circa 1800." 246
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This dissertation has been a long time in the making; I must express my appreciation to a number of people who have been influential along the way.

First of all, I acknowledge the support of the members of my committee: Derek Gregory, Gloria Onyeoziri, Michael Zeitlin, and Steven Taubeneck. Meeting and having Derek Gregory as a professor and supervisor has been an intense and extremely rewarding process. I have valued his ability to listen, his shared insights, his creativity, and his curiosity. I must express my appreciation of Derek’s patience in dealing with the many facets of my excursions—the projects I began and abandoned, the discoveries I made only to put them aside. It has been an extremely time and energy consuming experience to move through universities in Nigeria, Germany, and Canada. Above all, I am thankful that Derek—and the Program in Comparative Literature—allowed me the time to land on my feet. Derek has also provided a research assistantship when I needed it urgently.

Gloria has been a gem of a committee member. The work in Chapter Four began in Gloria’s seminar (African and Caribbean Women Writers) that I attended in 1999. I appreciate the opportunity to discover Maryse Condé and explore my interest in Caribbean literatures with Gloria. I must also express my thankfulness for the much-needed financial support, in the form of a research fellowship, in the summer of 1999. During the course of writing this dissertation, Gloria has constantly turned around the chapters within very fast times. I want to acknowledge Robert Miller’s dedication and steadfast support during my stay at UBC. Gloria could not have completed all the tasks
of reading and commenting on the emerging chapters under such pressure without Robert's assistance. Such dedication is more than impressive; it is heart-warming.

The first two chapters evolved out of work in the seminar "William Faulkner and Toni Morrison" that I took with Michael Zeitlin in winter 1999. If my Ph. D. process has been a volatile one, Mike's professionalism has been especially welcome. His gift at close reading and his attention to detail have been very useful. In fact, the dissertation would be much stronger and elegant if I had been able to follow all of Mike's suggestions—over the years—about paying attention to language and detail.

I thank Steven Taubeneck for our many warm debates. His reading of my final draft was vigorous and illuminating. I also want to acknowledge him in his function as chair of Comparative Literature. I thank him and the program, in particular, for the financial support that allowed me to attend "Versions and Subversions" conference on African literatures at the Alexander Humboldt University, Berlin in May 2002. The work from the paper for that conference became the foundation for Chapter Five of this dissertation.

This committee has, in some ways, had a fifth member: Eva-Marie Kröller. I have always appreciated her forthrightness, her support, and her willingness to play the role of the powerful interlocutor that I often need. I say the same of Geoffrey Winthrop-Young. I never took a class with him, but I remember two pithy conversations with him that led to important decisions for my stay in graduate school. Joel Martineau and Laura Moss have been very helpful in making the transition from being a teaching assistant to becoming a sessional instructor in the English department. I am also indebted to Laura Moss for her numerous tips and acts of assistance during the job search process. Richard
Cavell has been a mentor and a source of practical counsel. Marlene Briggs, Margery Fee, Bill New, Mary Chapman, and Thomas Kemple have served as excellent interlocutors more than once. There is much of Lacan wafting through this dissertation in spirit—if not in quotations. I discovered Lacan and psychoanalytically-inflected critique in the seminar "Jacques Lacan" I took in the fall of 1998 with Nancy Frelick. I appreciate her support during her tenure as chair of Comparative Literature and remember especially the research assistantship I received in the spring of 1999. My whole doctoral program was supported by a number of awards: the Gertrude Langridge Graduate Scholarship in Humanities, the Izaak Walton Killam Predoctoral Fellowship, as well as a UBC Graduate Fellowship.

There are several people outside the university who have also enabled this dissertation. I must thank Tobias Engel, Patrick Pubben, Antje Heuer, Dorothea and Theodor Fröhlich for their invaluable financial and emotional support. Other friends from my "Germany days" have been equally supportive: Nathalie Butscher, Michael Scherf, Andreas Hermannsphan, Kivik Kuvik, Oliver Mattheis, and Olugbemiga Ogboru-Cole.

In Vancouver, a number of people have been virtually indispensable at various stages of the Ph. D. process. Edward, Ulf and Cecilia von Dehn and Sandee Rothwell were generous hosts when I arrived in Vancouver. Their hospitality and generosity were critical in that winter of my encounter with Vancouver’s relentless rain. Trina Ojo, Pius Adesanmi, Veronika Klapotocz, Donna Dykeman, Paul Johnson, Eddy Kent, Kai Behrend, Ian Nye, Kathy March, Michelle LaFlamme, Bruce Baum, Travis Mason, Daniel Christianson, Terri Tomski, the members of staff at the office of UBC’s St. John’s
College, and Garth Kroeker have been generous with their time and attention. Hugh Alexander Leschot cooked many a meal while he listened to my musings on the initial ideas about a dissertation. My thanks to the many librarians at the UBC Koerner Library checkout counter: they indulged my idiosyncrasies and smiled when I forgot my library card at home.

I have enjoyed rewarding exchanges with Bill and Diana Brydon, and Helene Strauss (University of Western Ontario) in the last year. They have been great mentors and their interest in my work has been a constant source of motivation.

Finally, some members of my family have taken great interest in my slow walk towards completing the program: Taiwo Ibironke Osinubi, Kehinde Osinubi, Bankole Osinubi, Olarenwaju Osinubi, Funmi and Olu Sangonuga have all been enormous sources of inspiration.
DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to the friendship I share with Tobias Engel, Trina Ojo, Veronika Klaptosz, and Donna Dykeman. These friends supported me unflinchingly through many agonising moments as I completed this degree.
INTRODUCTION

In a Gramscian spirit, effective political strategy begins where people *are*, rather than where one wishes they were. For better *and* worse, claims to identity—articulations of ethnic, cultural, gender, and sexual distinction—have emerged as things people, across the globe and the social spectrum, care about. It is surely fruitless to blame this development on postmodern false consciousness or to wish it would all go away so the left can return to enlightenment universalism, or to an idealized “progressive” past (a past that saw its share of xenophobia). (Clifford “Discrepant” 369)

The strident, moral voice of the former slave recounting, exposing, appealing, apostrophising, and above all *remembering* his ordeal in bondage is the single most impressive feature of a slave narrative. This voice is striking because of what it relates, but even more so because the slave’s acquisition of that voice is quite possibly his only permanent achievement once he escapes and casts himself upon a new and larger landscape. (Stepto 3)
In the Wake of Gilroy

Since its publication, Paul Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993) has become a sign for an “area of study” as well as a standard reference for job announcements and calls for papers. In his book, Gilroy argues that the trans-Atlantic slave trade and plantation slavery are constituent parts of European and American modernity. He charts the efforts of mainly American black political activists to respond to their estrangements from European and American capitalist modernity. This estrangement led to different projects for emancipation or searches for spaces outside of the nation-state that institutionalised oppression of black populations. Some of these searches have been for physical spaces to establish nation-states, while others have been spiritual or conducted in the guise of artistic endeavours. Although Gilroy offers intriguing analyses of efforts to escape racialised oppression, he focuses on the travels of male, African American figures. Consequently, Gilroy has been criticised for his omissions of actors in Africa and the Caribbean, as well as for a lack of attention to the significance of gender in writing an account of the encounters of African-derived populations with New World slavery.

Some of the debates between Gilroy and his critics became explicable when I saw what I take to be the original title of the book, on amazon.com: *Promised Lands: Modernity, Utopia and Emancipation in the Black Atlantic*. The use of the plural in that title and the apposition of the subtitle indicate that there are several searches for different “promised lands” in the wake of plantation slavery and formal colonisation or segregation. The use of “Utopia” and “Emancipation” in the subtitle also makes much more explicit the objectives of figures such as Martin Delany, W.E.B. Du Bois, and Richard Wright who feature so prominently in Gilroy’s study as dialectical movements between projected horizons and practical possibilities. As
Gilroy—and other scholars—have shown these men were engaged in endeavours to confront the contemporaneity and the afterlives of slavery; they sought to counter the legacy of discrimination and exclusion that accompanied or survived the abolition of slavery in the New World.

The plural in the alternative title also underlines the ways in which Gilroy seems to anticipate some of the numerous critiques of his study that have appeared in the decade or so since the book’s publication. The interventions of McAlister (2001), Dayan (1996), Edwards (2001), Gikandi (1996), Korang (2003), Echeruo (1999), Williams (1995), Lipsitz (1995), Lott (1995), and Clifford (1997) summarise some of the most crucial observations. I cannot rehearse these evaluations in their complexity but, taken as a whole, they are concerned with the collapse of the space between literal topographies and cultural spaces; the reductiveness of the black Atlantic in juxtaposition to the “African” or “black” diaspora; the insufficient attention to the vastly divergent socio-economic everyday realities of black peoples in locations in the respective countries of the “Black Atlantic”; a scepticism in face of any catch-all conceptualisation of diasporan subjectivity; and, finally, Gilroy’s silence on similar projects that studied the havoc of the conquest of the Americas through other racial, class, or gender-based perspectives.

An African American positioning in modernity is paramount in Gilroy’s account. Consequently, notwithstanding his critique of essentialisms and his insistence on the hybridity and the fluidity of constantly evolving identities, critics fault Gilroy’s deployment of the double consciousness trope—following its previous deployment by W. E. B. Du Bois—for attributing specifically African American-inflected split subjectivities to diasporan subjects as they are constantly both within and outside of Western narratives of modernity (Echeruo 5). Korang, especially, makes the compelling argument that double consciousness, “that fracture in black ontology produced by Western imperialism, is not the exclusive property of the diasporic branch
of the black Atlantic: it is to be seen both here, in the Old World, and there, in the New” (285). Because Gilroy’s selected figures are all African Americans struggling against the limits of their nation-state double consciousness, in his study, he implies a race-based exclusion from full citizenship. Thus, black Atlantic subjects must be minorities in countries such as the United States, Canada and Great Britain. The employment of the double consciousness trope attracts two immediate objections: first, identification based on binary opposition reifies in turn the oppositional parts; second, if forms of double consciousness are effortlessly captured or connotated with the designations “Black British,” “African-American” or “African-Canadian,” such designations are also difficult to deploy in African and Caribbean countries where binary identifications can be less readily mobilised. Similarly, the creation of a singular signifier of “African” in hyphenated Africanisations in the Western Hemisphere may not include formations of more recent African-inflected diasporic affiliations, migrations and identities. And, especially with regards to the nation-state, if the inauguration of nation-states as projects of modernity is central to exclusions from the promises of modernity, double consciousness captures particular forms of exclusions from specific nation-states.

The problems with double consciousness result in part from the fact that the Middle Passage—the forced transportation of Africans to New World slavery—functions as a master signifier in Gilroy’s study. To recall the Middle Passage is to revisit the implications of the putative loss of languages and cultures in the formation of black slave communities. Nahum Chandler excavates some conceptual consequences of the fixation on any putative moment of displacement that marks the point of subjection. In her analysis of formulations of African American subjecthood predicated upon the binary of inclusion and exclusion—such as in Du Bois’s use of the term in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), Chandler submits that originary
displacement is predicated not only upon the putative unifying property of the Middle Passage but also upon the notion of a stable and replete Euro-American subject that precedes the subsequently excluded African-inflected subject. There is, consequently, a double displacement at work: the displacement from an origin is coupled to a displacement from a replete subjecehood.

The Middle Passage has two functions in the minority invocation of double consciousness. It marks the entry into the position of subordination—maintained, first, through the machinery of slavery, and later through regimes of racialised exclusion—and the name for the originary displacement from complete subjecehood. The practices and machinery of slavery institutionalise the difference of the African American subject in opposition to the presupposed Euro-American subject that precedes the African American in the constitution of the United States. To summarise Chandler’s elaborate argument, the African American is fashioned upon the grounds of an existent complete (white) American subject:

Typically, the procedure is something like this: The system in which the subordination occurs, because it exists, is analytically presupposed, and then subjects are inserted into this preestablished matrix to engage in their functional articulation of the permutations prescribed therein. The general (and salutary) concern has been to formulate, in the most balanced and sustainable manner, an account of the simultaneous production of the position of the subordinated subject as nonoriginary and displaced, and as resistant to subordination and creative in practice. Yet in producing such an account, the constitution of the general system or structure in which, and by which, that (subaltern or African American) subject is gathered or constructed has remained analytically presupposed or unthought, if
not simply assumed. In this traditional schema, a certain preconstituted or nonconstituted subject is placed at the origin, as the origin, of the system in question. It is as if, then, we were simply trying to recognize a certain form of predetermination. It is only then, more or less, and the discourse seldom exceeds this circuit, a question of calculating and plotting the functional distribution of the operations of this system. (Chandler 261-62)

Chandler’s arguments are important because part of Gilroy’s purpose in his book is precisely to critique ethnocentrism, essentialisms, and notions of origins. Yet the weight of double consciousness and the Middle Passage blunts some of Gilroy’s fine points. Although Gilroy emphasises hybridity and syncretism, his focus on figures such as Martin Delany, Richard Wright, and Du Bois foregrounds the theme of alienation. These figures certainly allow Gilroy to argue against ethnic absolutism since their ideas are shaped as much by experiences within the United States. But these men were also well-travelled cosmopolitan figures who straddled multiple boundaries in ways that may not be typical of the majority of black peoples. Consequently, the insights such peripatetic figures provide can only be useful when combined with the politics of those majorities that remain within the nation-state.

My aim here is not to provide an exegesis of Paul Gilroy’s oversights. His attention to slavery beckons to a specific debate or to disputes about the legacy of slavery in broader discourses of diasporas, globalisation, and transnational mobilities. From the ongoing discussion it becomes obvious that different forms of double consciousness must emerge from the multiple sites of the diaspora. These estrangements are vested in various comprehending subjects. And more specifically, Du Bois’s ideas in The Souls of Black Folk need to be made useful as a
manner of reading engagements with the legacies of slavery across sites in the diaspora without occluding the specificities of those sites.

Gilroy seems to offer a useful tactic for such pluralisations in his last chapter, “‘Not a Story to Pass On’: Living Memory and the Slave Sublime,” by proposing the “advantages of marginality as a hermeneutic standpoint” (213). If we follow this suggestion, marginality is always a shifting position occupied by a different subject under constellations of variable factors. One “shortcoming” of Gilroy’s study is that although he acknowledges multiple intersections of race, class, gender, and sexuality, he focuses on male figures. The discrepancy is surprising since Gilroy persistently questions the idea of common black identities:

The themes of nationality, exile, and cultural affiliation accentuate the inescapable fragmentation and differentiation of the black subject. This fragmentation has recently been compounded further by the questions of gender, sexuality, and male domination which have been made unavoidable by the struggles of black woman and the voices of black gay men and lesbians. [...] As indices of differentiation, they are especially important because the intracommunal antagonisms which appear between the local and immediate levels of our struggles and their hemispheric and global dynamics can only grow. (35)

The last sentence of this passage reveals the plural and shifting natures of Gilroy’s concerns. The differentiation of symbolic and political from material and economic liberation gestures towards the divisions within the diaspora. This differentiation also reveals that the positions Gilroy enumerates are too numerous to be covered in any single study. Hence, he announces emphatically that there is “nothing definitive” in his book (xi). Indeed, he states that his concerns are “heuristic,” the conclusions “provisional,” and the study has “its many obvious
omissions” (xi). Gilroy’s use of “diaspora” and his interpretation of black intellectual history is one of several interpretations. James Clifford summarises the complex reactions to Gilroy by stating that “Gilroy’s specific map is open to amendment and critique” (266). The black Atlantic “as a counterhistory of modernity is crucially defined by the still-open wound of slavery and racial subordination” (268). Thus, it is not fruitful to frame Gilroy’s study and critical responses to it in antagonistic terms. The vigorous engagements with Gilroy are themselves symptomatic of dialogic processes of enunciating the disparate encounters with slavery, the Enlightenment, and modernity within the diaspora.

This conceptualisation of the black Atlantic as a set of ongoing and shifting conversations is particularly important since the black Atlantic has become an established phrase in the academy—notwithstanding Gilroy’s declarations of the heuristic nature of his concept. Hence, some critics have detailed the kind of restrictions that framework creates. Critiquing Gilroy’s paradigm as a restrictive geographic and disciplinary frame, Edwards and McAlister demand the rationale behind the use of the geography of the Atlantic basin in charting affiliations and exchanges within the African diaspora. Edwards asserts the “black Atlantic” does not allow the broader interventions the concept of “diaspora” permits (61-64). Edwards examines, in particular, the restrictedness of Gilroy’s use of the term “diaspora” as part of a need to define the locatedness of Black British populations following the rise of British populist nationalism (60-61). As Edwards goes on to explain, although the subsequent espousal of the “black Atlantic” within the U.S. academy has opened up a space “for a wide range of intellectual work in the academy,” the term “often usurps the space that might otherwise be reserved for diaspora” (61). I must point out that Edwards is especially concerned with the “politics of nominalization” and its dangers for the disciplinary work done within the framework of “diaspora” (46).
situates Gilroy within several mobilisations of the concept of "diaspora" in relation to the study of cultural phenomena related to black populations in diverse locations. Edwards highlights, especially, George Shepperson's initial broad-based usage of the term. For Edwards, the flexibility of the diaspora concept allows extensive disciplinary work and cultural interventions that would include Gilroy's concept.

In her examination of the limits of the oceanic frame, McAlister provides a telling illustration of the limits of an Atlantic frame by showing that the cultural exchanges between black Muslims in the United States and Muslims in the Middle East exceed the geography of the Atlantic Ocean. The implied "reductiveness" of the Atlantic oceanic frame leads McAlister to observe that Gilroy refuses to see "black identifications with the Arab world as anything other than a failure to identify sufficiently with Jewish history [and this limitation is linked in part] to the lack of attention to Islam" (122). McAlister's consideration of cultures of exchange and political activism based on Islam is one of many transnational flows. Similar claims could be made by analysing transnational feminisms or the rise of environmental politics. The existence of such flows that surpass the frame of the Atlantic basin is that whereas the Atlantic might readily capture the positioning of African-derived populations in the phase of capitalist modernity in which the slave trade was pivotal, that same geographical structure cannot capture the different positions of black peoples in the flows accompanying late capitalist modernity.

To summarise these discussions of Edwards and McAlister, I would state that the central objection to the Atlantic paradigm is that it neglects other pockets of the African Diaspora. Further, its focus on slavery inscribes, inversely, a notion of originary displacement that is in fact at odds with Gilroy's diasporic philosophy; although Gilroy disavows searches for origins, slavery and the Middle Passage appear to be the overriding criteria in his framework. It is this
contradiction that is useful for my project. My position is that the “black Atlantic” is one nexus of over-determined relations that are irremediably tied to a specific period within the African diaspora. The key concepts of the Enlightenment, modernity, and slavery that are central in that paradigm are complex processes that encompass disparate time frames in different parts of Europe, Africa, and the Americas. The question that arises for me, then, concerns the use values of the over-determined signifiers of slavery, modernity, and the heuristic framework Gilroy provides. A point of departure for framing my invocation of Gilroy’s heuristic frame is John Cullen Gruesser’s recent book, Confluences: Postcolonialism, African American Literary Studies, and the Black Atlantic (2005), in which he argues that Gilroy’s work provides a confluence for African American and postcolonial literary studies (4-12). Gruesser identifies some of those spaces of disciplinary work that Gilroy’s concept allows:

The black Atlantic model is valuable for four major reasons. First, Gilroy’s brave attempt to rewrite the history of modernity to include slavery and its attendant racist ideology raises important questions that theorists and historians of the modern era have long needed to address. Second, the black Atlantic accounts for and underscores the many cross-cultural interactions among black American, black British, black West Indian and to a lesser extent African philosophy, music, literature, and political discourse that a sizeable portion of postcolonial theorists have chosen not to emphasize. Third, Gilroy convincingly argues that transatlantic (particularly European) travel profoundly influenced the political stances of key African American figures. Finally, he effectively employs postcolonial theoretical concepts in his often brilliant readings of the texts of these black Americans. (17)
Gruesser writes as a scholar of African American literary studies. Thus, the black Atlantic allows him to make connections between Caribbean and African migrant intellectuals. But while the “black Atlantic” opens the possibilities Gruesser identifies, the forms of exclusion, excision, or silencing that Edwards and McAlister enumerate cannot be forgotten. The crucial point, as I see it, is that whereas the term opens up these spaces and makes visible the work of certain scholars, it should not displace the detailed and necessary site-specific work of scholars operating within the frames of “African diaspora,” “black studies,” or “African American studies.” For my purpose, the “black Atlantic” represents an arena in which to momentarily illuminate connections between African, African American, Caribbean, and Black British writers, and their joint relationships to the legacies of slavery. I emphasise the evanescent nature of that illumination because those relationships are also invariably moulded by the definite exigencies of several nation-states. The issue is: how does the transnational conversation on slavery and modernity within the framework of the black Atlantic inflect the debate on these terms within respective national sites? Framed thus, the black Atlantic is a confluence of margins—it is a provisional foothold from which to assess plural local debates on the legacy of the trade and to assess the possibilities and constraints of different positions. The “black Atlantic” is a conceptual space in which to evaluate the disjunctures between diverse narratives of what “modernity,” “colonisation,” and “slavery” means. Within this confluence of margins, no single margin should gain ascendancy. Such primacy would not only relegate other so-called margins to subordinate positions, it would impose one set of terms and analytic categories on all partners.
Margins in Counterpoint

Some of Gilroy’s other respondents start precisely at the point of his distance from the site-specific problems of the locations of his framework. For example, although concerned with slavery, Gilroy does not analyse the material effects of slavery in his book. Attention to such effects is only visible when Gilroy discusses contemporary African American novels about slavery. Hence, in her critique of *The Black Atlantic*, Joan Dayan denounces what she interprets as Gilroy’s amalgamation of diverse experiences of black peoples from highly dissimilar contexts into a “cartography of celebratory journeys” of cosmopolitan figures:

In Gilroy’s story, the slave ship, the Middle Passage, and finally slavery itself become frozen, things that can be referred to and looked back upon, but always wrenched out of an historically specific continuum. What is missing is the continuity of the Middle Passage in today’s world of less obvious, but no less pernicious enslavement. (Dayan, “Gilroy” 7)

Dayan’s claim of continued enslavement needs to be examined carefully since it does not necessarily identify specific continuities between the transatlantic slave trade, the different sites of plantation slavery, and contemporary problems of the descendants of slaves. However, her insistence that migrations and dispersals be historicised and their specificities highlighted is a vital one. George Lipsitz and Brackette Williams present accounts of such localised investigations in their reviews of *The Black Atlantic*. Williams enumerates Gilroy’s many failures to situate his work in dialogue with other scholars as a way of grounding his claims (181). In fact, Williams denounces Gilroy for “silencing” generations of scholars “whose work speaks to the range of issues [he] raises” but who focus on specific sites (188):
Gilroy's call to rethink the meaning of the nation-state as a political, economic, and cultural unit fails on these points in part because he positions the opposing forces of darkness (i.e. ethnic absolutisms and essentialisms of varying sorts) without so much as an analytic nod to the complex ideological productions taking place on the field of nationalist subordination underlying the concepts of ethnicity, race, and culture or to the structuring of their utility in hegemonic struggles for power in putatively homogenous, but continually fracturing, hyphenated, nation-states. (183-84)

The charge that Gilroy does not pay enough attention to the weight of the nation-state recurs in reviews. George Lipsitz, in particular, documents other ways in which Gilroy does not engage with the work of “the leading theorists of anti-essentialism in the U.S.” who “demonstrate the necessity of connecting intellectual critique to the lived experiences of everyday life among ordinary people” (195). But, for Lipsitz and myself, even more important than the enumeration of the omissions of other theorists of anti-essentialism is Gilroy’s general tendency to examine situations from an “all-seeing” standpoint located far from all sites. Thus, as Lipsitz points out, Gilroy’s call for “an alliance between Jews and blacks” fails to consider the actual antagonisms between Jews and blacks in the United States (198-99).

Perhaps one way to make sense of the contradictions between Gilroy’s work and the divergent critical responses it has attracted is to scrutinise spatial concepts structuring the work of these critics in order to pin down their specific sites of enunciation as well the tensions between those sites and Gilroy’s transnational Atlantic framework. A common theme to these critiques is the lack of attention to local issues—even as these critics concede the brilliance of Gilroy’s study. I find it striking that Lipsitz employs the interchange between seeing,
communicating, hearing, and learning in the concluding pages of his essay as he moves from detailed critiques of Gilroy’s oversights to embrace his insights. The juxtaposition of sight and sound indicate processes of contracting and expanding distance. First, Lipsitz lauds Gilroy’s choice to assess modernity by “seeing it from the perspective of slaves” (194). In fact, he finds that the strength of the study lies in “his ability to see beyond one national context” (195). Yet that ability to see is compromised by Gilroy’s inability to fuse things he sees from afar with what that which he observes up close. Observe the emphasis on the procedural in the following passage from Lipsitz’s essay:

There are truths to be seen from both close up and far away, but the best analysis comes from fusion of the two, from seeing things from both close up and far away. Luddites and Afro-centrists are easy to dismiss at a distance, but dealing with them up close is a different matter. They succeed because they provide concrete solutions to immediate problems, because they make sense to people embattled against superior power. If there is a greater truth that these people need to see, it will not be communicated to them through disdain or neglect, but rather, through common, collective, and reciprocal action and dialogue. (198, my emphasis)

This passage is one of several in which Lipsitz’s choice of words, in characterising Gilroy, reveals the effort to overcome boundaries that separate different site-specific insights. The accent on the procedure and cooperative effort to define and devise politics means that no terms should be imposed from above. This juxtaposition of positions encapsulates the line of inquiry I pursue in my readings in subsequent chapters. All writers I examine utilise the interchange between seeing and hearing as well as distance and proximity to reveal the entangled nature of
the legacies of slavery. In a sense, what Lipsitz circumscribes as the “fusion” of seeing things from up close and from far away is commensurate with the preponderance of the trope of conversations in the novels I examine. These writers communicate their insight about such legacies by staging dialogues between characters.

To return to Lipsitz, he communicates Gilroy’s failures as the latter’s inability to follow up his insight into complex cross-cultural connections from afar with the ability of “stepping forward to get a better look at what people have learned through experience and struggle from close up at the grass roots” (200). Thus, Gilroy does “not examine,” “does not investigate,” and “ignores,” for example, relations between blacks and Jews in the United States (198). Such inability to accommodate diverse points of view means, then, that people might ignore farsighted intellectuals and “trust what they see and hear from close-up” (200). Lipsitz finishes his essay by summarising the impasse between Gilroy and his critics as an aporia: “The challenge posed to us by Gilroy’s exciting and provocative book is to combine local and global knowledge, to learn how to see things from close up as well as from far away” (200). What I take from Lipsitz’s exhaustive analysis and his attentiveness to words is that critics need to complement what they see from their locations with insights from other standpoints. In other words, proximity and distance create different kinds of knowledge that need to be brought into dialogue.

The demands made by Dayan, Williams, and Lipsitz can be satisfied in part by placing Gilroy beside Avtar Brah, who argues for a concept of “diaspora space”:

The concepts of diaspora, border, and politics of location are immanent, and together they mark conceptual connections for historicised analyses of contemporary trans/national movements of people, information, cultures, commodities and capital. This site of immanence inaugurates a new concept,
namely diaspora space. This concept [. . . ] is ‘inhabited’ not only by diasporic subjects but equally by those who are constructed and represented as ‘indigenous’. As such, the concept of diaspora space foregrounds the entanglements of genealogies of dispersion with those of ‘staying put’. (16)

As Brah goes on to argue, all diasporas are composite formations of multiple journeys and plural modalities of race, gender, religion, generation and class. This multiplicity of journeys and positions “configures into one” through a “confluence of narratives.” In other words, “the identity of the diasporic imagined community is [. . .] constituted within the crucible of the materiality of everyday life; in the everyday stories we tell ourselves individually and collectively” (183). The differentiations Brah demands are indispensable in assessing the legacies of the conjunctions of slavery and capitalist modernity across different sites of local adaptation. This conjunction is the location of one confluence of plural narratives circulating in the “diaspora space” encompassing the Americas, Africa, and other spaces in which African-derived populations are in exchanges about the legacies of slavery. In this arena, there are several versions of the legacies of slavery in motion. David Scott frames the question thus:

What are the varying ways in which Africa and slavery are employed by New World peoples of African descent in the narrative construction of relations among pasts, presents, and futures? What, in each case, are the salient features with which these figures are inscribed? What is the rhetorical, or, if you like, ideological, work that they are made [or forced] to perform in the varied instances and occasions in which they are brought into play? (Scott 278)

The valuable addition to Brah’s demand for differentiation in this passage is Scott’s attention to the mobilisation/deployment of slavery to perform ideological work. Again, slavery here
becomes the thematic glue between disparate social processes. To adapt Scott for my own purposes, which functions and values do authors ascribe to slavery and why? Further, which hindrances to the articulations of these legacies do authors enumerate? The Reconstruction, its failure, and the rise of Jim Crow laws followed the formal end of slavery in the United States. Consequently, Ron Eyerman has argued that generations of African Americans have interpreted and engaged with the legacies of slavery differently at various times (1-2). What remains constant in those interpretations is a need to gain forms of recognition from a white majority. The “emergent collective memory” of slavery and “its representation through speech and art works,” was made to work in enunciating an “emergent collective identity” (1-2). Consequently, if “slavery was traumatic for [any] generation of intellectuals, it was so in retrospect, mediated through recollection and reflection, and, for some, tinged with some strategic, practical, and political interest” (2). Reading Scott and Eyerman together, what emerges is that the interpretations of the afterlives of slavery may change over time and from one location to another. Further, the diverse interpretations of those afterlives are made by mediating groups: In this [. . .] process “carrier groups” are central in articulating the claims, and representing the interests and desires, of the affected to a wider public. In this case, intellectuals, in the term’s widest sense (Eyerman 1994), play a significant role. Intellectual here will refer to a socially constructed, historically conditioned role rather than to a structurally determined position or a personality type. Although bound up with particular individuals, the notion will refer more to what they do than to who they are. Generally speaking, intellectuals mediate between the cultural and political spheres that characterize modern societies, not so much representing and giving voice to their own ideas and interests, but rather
articulating ideas to and for others. Intellectuals are mediators and translators between spheres of activity and differently situated social groups, including the situatedness in time and space. Intellectuals in this sense can be film directors and singers of songs, as well as college professors. In addition, social movements produce "movement intellectuals" who may lack the formal education usually associated with the term intellectual, but whose role in articulating the aims and values of a movement allow one to call them by that name. (3-4)

Within the comparative framework of this dissertation, I want to extend Eyerman’s explanations to Caribbean and African contexts. Slavery, thus, has its own meanings that have changed over time in Caribbean and African countries. For example, the debate on slavery is very different in Haiti, with its legacy of a successful slave revolt and independence from France, than it is in the islands of Martinique and Guadeloupe that have remained overseas departments of France. Similarly, slavery takes on radically different meanings in African countries where the impact of formal colonisation after the abolition of the slave trade has been much more at the forefront of political discussions. But apart from the work of mediation within discrete national boundaries, there are also interpretations of the legacy of slavery between mediators linking national spaces. For example, the competing meanings attached to slave castles in West Africa by Africans and African-derived populations in the diaspora is one site in which to observe divergent claims. Edward Brunner, Jennifer Hasty, and Paulla A. Ebron have documented the contradictory implications of what Saidaya Hartman calls “roots tourism” to Elmina Castle in Ghana (757). To simplify their complex arguments, what these scholars show is that while Africans are interested in the economic benefits of tourism, people from the diaspora come on a “pilgrimage” (Davis 156) or “in a quest for their roots” (Bruner 291). As Bruner points out, while African Americans
consider the castle “sacred ground not to be desecrated” (291), the meanings for Ghanaians are different:

Most Ghanaians [..] are not particularly concerned with slavery. Although there was domestic slavery in Africa, that experience was different from the one undergone by those who were transported to the New World and suffered the indignities of the black diaspora. For Ghanaians, Elmina Castle represents a part of Ghanaian history, from the Portuguese who built Elmina in 1482 primarily to facilitate trade on the Gold Coast, to the Dutch who captured the castle in 1637, to the British who gained control of Elmina in 1872, through to Ghanaian independence in 1957. After independence, Elmina served various functions: it was the home of the Edinaman Day Secondary School, the office of the Ghana Education Service, the District Assembly, and a police training academy before it became a tourist attraction. (292)

Bruner raises several important issues. Most importantly, while the castle is a site of mourning for people from the diaspora, Ghanaians look back at a long history of arrivals and departures involving the Portuguese, the Dutch, the British, and, finally, the Ghanaian nation-state. As Bruner points out, the castle has circulated in different spheres of function and meaning from “trading post to slave dungeon to prison, school, and office” (292). One could surmise that the function as a tourist site has now returned to its initial realm of economic transactions. This chequered history and plural meanings could be read as indicators of the many processes bound up in what “modernity” means in Ghana. Slavery is, thus, one facet of a complex process. Yet it is precisely that one facet that connects African Americans to the castle. Further, the different dates and the two forms of trade—colonial exchange and tourism—that bookend Bruner’s list
indicate successive stages in complex processes from initial exploration, to colonial conquest, independence, and what is now called globalisation. The irony is that while one form of trade created the separation that formed parts of the diaspora, tourism—another form of commercial transaction—now contracts the distance under specific circumstances. To come close to stating what the castle as representative of slavery and the slave trade means we would have to investigate its different functions across the ages.

The two epigraphs at the top of this chapter can serve as bookends to the complexities arising from the varying and even contradictory rhetorical and ideological deployments of slavery. Both are concerned with the articulation and dissemination of experiences in pursuit of a politics of redress. Clifford states, cogently, “effective political strategy begins where people are, rather than where one wishes they were” (Clifford “Discrepant” 369). Stepto asserts the particularity of a localised experience that must be voiced and placed in circulation in a larger context:

The strident, moral voice of the former slave recounting, exposing, appealing, apostrophising, and above all remembering his ordeal in bondage is the single most impressive feature of a slave narrative. This voice is striking because of what it relates, but even more so because the slave’s acquisition of that voice is quite possibly his only permanent achievement once he escapes and casts himself upon a new and larger landscape. (3)

Specifically, Stepto addresses the slave narrative, while Clifford addresses the work of cosmopolitan figures that move across boundaries. In a sense, the former slave also moves across boundaries to create and disseminate his/her narrative. Yet, as Stepto argues, the slave narrative is often a composite work and the slave must work, speak, or indeed, write through
several other figures that also shape the narrative (3). I want to suggest that W. E. B. Du Bois could be called upon as one bridge between Stepto and Clifford as his work demonstrates the fusion of ideological and rhetorical functions that results from the need to yoke the privileges of cosmopolitanism to the work of enunciating a site-specific voice.

The slippage arising here is simple; the privilege of mobility that allows the view of the legacies of slavery—and capitalist modernity—as a hemispheric—or indeed, global—phenomenon cannot be the same framework from which to launch a critique in the interest of multiple sites. Consequently, the ideological purposes must be matched with rhetorical figures that reveal the limits of epistemological frameworks of the position to be critiqued. Any of the male figures Gilroy selected for his study—Delany, Du Bois, Wright—could be used for my subsequent analysis; however, Du Bois stands out as a figure bridging the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and whose life and writings demonstrate a complex evolution from a concern for specificities of oppression within the U.S. nation-state, as evinced in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), to the later global perspectives presented in *Darkwater: Voices from Within the Veil* (1920). In other words, juxtaposing these two books sets Du Bois in counterpoint.

Du Bois’s work exceeds the boundaries of the bookends I set up with *The Souls* and *Darkwater*. However, several critics employ these works as points of orientation in elaborating Du Bois’s development in ways that are instructive to postulating what a “hermeneutics of marginality” might entail. As Stepto suggests in his reading of *The Souls of Black Folks*, Du Bois’s journey to the American South is a reversal of the seminal African American post-bellum journey north that was an “assertion of mobility after the assault of bondage” (67). In this journey, Du Bois casts himself in the manner of a “hero-narrator” who confronts a restrictive “social structure”: “What interests me is the fact [ . . . ] that the confining social structure
(slavery) is not a fixed geographic or symbolic space; [...] but, in its various dimensions and symbolic meanings, many states and regions” (67-68). Du Bois’s ritual passage through the South is an exercise in documenting and revealing site-specific legacies of slavery in the American South. Double consciousness is, in my view, also realised as a prolepsis in which the world of justice is already at hand as an ideal. It is the absence of insight into the possibility of the world that is attainable but which remains hidden that creates the dilemma of double consciousness.

In this conjuncture of double consciousness and marginality, Du Bois’s excavations of life beyond the veil are best described as exercises in the detection of the conditions that allow domination and hinder the emergence of alternative social realities. Du Bois textualises his discovery of alternative realities in a narrative in which the music bars interspersed in the chapters represent fragments of those realities that remain elusive to readers who may otherwise very well understand the written words. The music remains largely opaque to the reader who does not know it already. It is thus one level of textuality, integral to the text, which resists ready comprehension. The function of the music bars as epigraphs and as content in *The Souls of Black Folks* has been the subject of much critical attention. Kevin Miles addresses the salient points about the uses of music in *The Souls*:

These bars of music without words, like epigraphs, should give us pause. The all too common response to “read” over or past them is telling. That is, perhaps the music tells of a certain inability to know and understand what concerns Du Bois most in the *Souls*. Perhaps the music is unrecognisable, perhaps it is musically recognizably but is unfamiliar, perhaps it is both recognizable and familiar but believed better forgotten so that whatever residual
pain and scarring remains from the legacy is given every opportunity to heal.

Readers who do pause to contemplate these musical passages confront a Promethean limit; […] To what are we exposed when we expose ourselves to this music? And on what do we expend ourselves once we are exposed to its comprehensibility?

[...] How does the epistemological value of this music come to light by virtue of the fact that in it we come to an impasse that is better suited to working on us than we on it? Moreover, it is equally important to wonder if this music, as it is placed in a textual setting, is able to work on us. Might it be that Du Bois has the right idea but the wrong medium in which to pull it off? (201-02)

What Miles claims is that music functions as a sign of epistemological limits for readers. Thus, although the music is present, readers may overlook its significance and still claim to have an overview of the text. The slippages between “overlooking,” “looking over,” and “overview” indicates some of the disjunctures between seeing and comprehending that Miles underlines. As he shows, the music must be recognised as an entity in need of transcription—indeed translation—before it can be “read” along with the text: “The unrecognized music and the lyrics that are not transcribed achieve their epistemological value by resisting transcription. It is in this sense that I refer to them as a Promethean limit, because as such they become the site at which one form of knowing confronts another and finds no passage for itself beyond the site of that confrontation” (206). The modus operandi Miles identifies shows itself most clearly in Du Bois’s last chapter entitled “The Sorrow Songs”: 
What are these songs, and what do they mean? [ . . . ] I know that these songs are the articulate message of the slave to the world. They tell us in these eager days that life was joyous to the black slave, careless and happy. I can easily believe this of some, of many. But not all the past South, though it rose from the dead, can gainsay the heart-touching witness of these songs. They are the music of an unhappy people, of the children of disappointment; they tell of death and suffering and unvoiced longing toward a truer world, of misty wanderings and hidden ways. (157-58, my emphasis)

In this passage, the songs do not simply speak about a counterculture to the dominant society; they speak the slave’s desire to overcome that domination. Du Bois describes a system of inheritance of the meaning of these songs that he now explains to the world. He is, in other words, a bearer of insight. Du Bois’s double consciousness allows him to reveal the “hidden” legacies of slavery within his own system. But he was at the same time privileged in comparison to the “black folks” he describes in the South. Thus, his own form of double consciousness can only stand when not challenged by other versions launched by those very black “peasants” he wants to help. This precarious position, in which the carrier of insight is also compromised, characterises the positions of marginality that I examine in this dissertation. Because the slave trade and slavery were such complex practices, to reveal their effects and legacies demands that authors and their critics pay attention to both overarching narratives that connects various locales (as well as) to localised site-specific operations. The bearers of insight, then, are rhetorical figures whose messages exceed the dominant epistemological frames in which their critique emerges. Du Bois is a crucial example that illustrates the juxtaposition of sight and sound that
recurs, in the narratives I examine, as indicators of a process of sounding out the limits of the respective frames in place at different sites.

**Revisiting Slavery as a Task of Decolonisation**

While *The Souls* explores the ascent and immiseration in the U. S. and is dominated by the trope of double consciousness, *Darkwater* explores what Amy Kaplan describes as “multiple forms of consciousness” in her study of Du Bois’s “postcolonial” critique of imperialism (184). Kaplan’s discussions of *Darkwater*’s imperial cartographies and Du Bois’s early essays allow her to reframe *The Souls of Black Folk* as a further development of the earlier articulations of the complexities of American and European imperialisms that he had observed in the U. S. and in Europe. *Darkwater* shows a turn to the domestic scene that is always connected to global histories in hidden ways:

In *Darkwater* Du Bois appropriates and transforms the cartographic power he found concentrated in the hands of the imperial nations. In contrast to the centralised perspective of the imperial gaze, *Darkwater* maps the world from multiple decentered vantage points; not just Paris, London, and Washington, but Congo, Port-au-Prince, and East St. Louis. Cartography does not just reflect established boundaries between fixed geographical units, but discursively produces new aggregates of social space that can be policed, contested, and transformed. *Darkwater* focuses on movement around the globe that destabilizes fixed borderlines; cartography is an activity where fantasy and power meet. (178-180)

The issue for me, here, is that the cartographic impulse Kaplan identifies in Du Bois needs to be read alongside the rhetorical strategies with which the observations are enunciated. If the author
turns to music to indicate the underside of American social reality in The Souls, in Darkwater, Du Bois characterises himself as a clairvoyant:

High in the tower, where I sit above the loud complaining of the human sea, I know many souls that toss and whirl and pass, but none there are that intrigue me more than the Souls of White Folk.

Of them I am singularly clairvoyant. I see in and through them. I view them from unusual points of vantage. Not as a foreigner do I come, for I am native, not foreign, bone of their thought and flesh of their language. Mine is not the knowledge of the traveler or the colonial composite of dear memories, words and wonder. [...] Rather I see these souls undressed and from the back and side. I see the working of their entrails. I know their thoughts and they know that I know. [...] My word is to them mere bitterness and my soul, pessimism. And yet as they preach and strut and shout and threaten, crouching as they clutch at rags of facts and fancies to hide their nakedness, they go twisting, flying by my tired eyes and I see them ever stripped,—ugly, human. (Darkwater 21)

There are three crucial aspects to this passage. Du Bois dramatises the problem of seeing but being unable to speak or effect changes: “My words to them are mere bitterness and my soul, pessimism.” As the eyes of the clairvoyant grow tired, he must find ways of undermining the privilege of those who can afford to dismiss him. In other words, why should the powerful listen to the weak? Further, he acknowledges the site-bound nature of his knowledge as that of the insider and not that of the outsider. Finally, his allusion to the fall from the Garden of Eden indicates one of the principal tropes in the narratives I examine. Together, these three details
demonstrate the quandary of the bearer of insight/intellectual. In her remarkable reading of this passage, Kaplan points out that Du Bois appropriates colonial discourse to dismantle the hierarchy that renders the colonizer as the knowing and all-seeing subject and the colonized as a corporeal object devoid of reflection. [..] In his appropriation of colonial discourse, Du Bois turns the act of seeing into a power struggle that takes place in spaces of intimate proximity and also expands across the globe. (191)

I want to add to Kaplan’s observations that Du Bois yokes the act of seeing to the capability of projecting the voice to denounce the persistence of pernicious forms of colonisation in the aftermath of enslavement. And it is in this crucial conjuncture of seeing and voicing that the forms of representing the advent of capitalist modernity as a colonising moment become important. The slave trades in Africa, the entry into plantation economies in the New World, and the different projects that succeeded slavery connect disparate sites, but also structure them differently. The task of decolonisation that is needed in these locations may thus be radically different from each other.

Feierman teases out some of the complexities of the slave trades and the need for a “multilayered interpretation” when he states: “The slave trade was a set of actions that articulated with one another on an enormous scale, reaching across several continents” (53). In this “spatial system” that stretched across continents, even the meaning of “slave” needs to be redefined carefully at each site:

Within an imagined system [..] there were many [..] boundaries: local and subsystem boundaries. Each local area had its own patterns of custom and of language, its own characteristic forms of social interaction. People spoke to one
another in local languages; they consulted local oracles or spirit mediums. Yet they also participated in a coordinated metasystem of meaning and action reaching from the interior of Africa to the Americas and to Europe.

The problem of interpretation, in this palimpsest of social forms, is evident from the many meanings of the word “slave.” A man who was sold to traders in Central Africa and who ultimately crossed the Atlantic to work on a plantation in Jamaica was clearly a slave. But it is doubtful that his original owner in Africa knew the English word “slave,” and doubly also that the local term defining the person’s form of dependency was the precise equivalent of “slave.” (53)

As my project is a reading of narratives about slavery and modernity written by American, Caribbean, European, and African writers across two centuries, I must extend Feierman’s qualifications about the “slave” to slavery. With this restriction, I “duplicate” the tactic of questioning epistemologies that obstruct the “voicing” of the legacies of slavery that recurring in the examined narratives—as pointed out in Lipsitz. Any narrative will reveal the limitations of perception by working with the representation of what is seen and what is heard, as Du Bois demonstrates above. These juxtapositions work towards examinations of the grounds upon which social realities are predicated. The result, in these narratives, is a series of contrapuntal mappings. In the same manner as the different interpretations of the meaning of the slave castle work in counterpoint to each, the juxtaposition of what is seen to what is heard in these novels exposes the limits of one single epistemological framework. The revelation of such limits foregrounds the need for revisions of contemporary arrangements and a refashioning of the way forward. As Iain Chambers writes:
In the dispersal of a single History, whose omniscient word legislates the world, I begin to hear composite voices crossing and disturbing the path and patterns of the once seemingly ineluctable onrush of ‘progress’. In the movement from concentrated sight to dispersed sound, from the ‘neutral gaze’ to the interference of hearing, from the discriminating eye to the incidental ear, I abandon a fixed (ad)vantage for a mobile and exposed politics of listening—for a ‘truth’ that is always becoming. (51)

This passage is from the evocatively titled essay “Signs of Silence, Lines of Listening” in which Chambers examines the uses of silence as strategies for excavating the meanings of the postcolonial. The juxtaposition of sight and sound is similar to Lipsitz’s counsel to share insight. In another essay, Chambers focuses on music and considers the manners in which it is sound that encourages but also resists comprehension: “if music is a language its semantics are particularly ambiguous; it is the truth of the ambiguity, the ambiguity of truth, that encourages me to pursue a line of thinking attentive to sounds in the belief that they announce more than merely a musical or instrumental logic” (Modernities 72). But attentiveness to sounds does not necessarily imply comprehension of sounds because the “journey of the sound and the sobering thought of the inconclusive betrays all pretensions to grasp and reduce our surroundings to a common measure, a transparent economic and cultural logic” (Modernities 74). The use of sound, in other words, is important for the ways in which it avoids superficial comprehension and foregrounds the wrestling with comprehension. The objective in the juxtaposition of sound to sight is not simply to offer another sense with which to comprehend the world. Rather, reading these two essays together, what emerges is the manner in which the inconclusiveness or irreducible nature of music/sound could be a first step to listening for “truth” for the hearing subject that is “hailed”
by the representation of that which he or she can grasp. Althusser uses the concept of hailing to explain the interpellation of individuals and their transformation into “subjects” placed and functioning within ideologies (301). In the ensuing chapters, permutations of sound reveal the relative placements of characters within conflicting ideologies and unfolding processes since characters begin to grapple with the task of deciphering signifying processes. For those characters that are in positions of exploitation, sounds function as points of departure for solidarity and political action.4

An Outline

This dissertation examines the uses of marginality in the representation of slavery and its legacies in the African diaspora. I argue that marginality is always variable, contingent and changing. Several positions of marginality might even emerge in “competition” with each other within Brah’s concept of diaspora space, since the ideological deployments of slavery at different sites are not always in concert. In fact, it is through the competitions of such seemingly unified marginalities that their differences are being constantly redefined at each site of encounter. Thus, the authors invariably draw attention to the limits of their characters’ knowledge in order to highlight the situatedness of each character in processes that continue to unfold. I have selected texts that fulfil two criteria. First, the narratives I examine present plots that involve what I could read, literarily or figuratively, as depictions of the violence and aftermaths of slavery and enslavement. Second, these narratives also depict attempts to conceal the effects of the violence inherent in captivity or marginalisation, or they foreground the battle to reveal the existence of forms of violence in the lives of marginalised characters.

Of these five chapters in the dissertation, chapter one examines two short stories by Melville and Poe—“Benito Cereno” (1855) and “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” (1841). I use
my readings of these two texts to establish the framework for all subsequent chapters; I argue that the uses of detection in Melville and Poe inform the strategies in subsequent chapters. Melville and Poe are not sites of origin, nor do their tropes translate across the work of all writers I examine; both writers illustrate strikingly the operations of silencing that the other writers I examine reveal. The analysis of these two texts allows me to show the oppositional deployment of the trope of detection in silencing slave figures. As I will show, the act of seeing and voicing identified in Du Bois is a practice of detection. Du Bois, as “detective,” however, does not have the power position that is usually associated with a detective figure. Hence, he can see and criticise, but his words remain nothing but “bitterness.” Melville and Poe illustrate the uses of powerful detective figures. In chapter two, I read Richard Wright’s *Native Son* and Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, and argue that these two novels could be read as responses to the discursive forms of detection addressed in Poe and Melville. These first two chapters concentrate on American texts to show how, for American authors, the concerns with slavery could be closely bound up the U. S. nation-state. I have also chosen these four authors because of the explicit intertextual and the less explicit discursive links between them. Although the spaces of the diaspora appear in these texts, they only do so in ways that illuminate the conversion of “diasporic” concerns into explicitly national themes. Reading these texts together also reveals the ways in which the meanings of modernity, the Enlightenment, and slavery in American literature cannot necessarily be applied to other literatures that engage with the same themes.

The next three chapters are focussed on Caribbean, British, and African writers. Chapter three examines the fiction of Black British writer Caryl Phillips. I argue that he reveals the discursive practices of enslavement in locations across Africa, the Caribbean and Europe. His fiction complicates very usefully the representations of the American authors who are concerned
with the United States. The novels of Maryse Condé, in my fourth chapter, take us into the French Caribbean. Condé’s novels offer other complex views of the legacy of slavery. More importantly, Condé shows how disparate sites of the diaspora bear different meaning for other locations. These new meanings are also being redeployed in pursuit of other forms of hermeneutics. Finally, I look at the work of four African novelists in Chapter Five: Ayi Kwei Armah, Amos Tutuola, Yaw Boateng, and Syl Cheney-Coker. This chapter responds to charges that African writers do not address the problem of slavery.

The similarities of these novels lie in the repeated use of certain tropes that I discuss. For example, Poe and Melville, in the first chapter, introduce the trope of bestiality and the species boundary. Thus, I trace the use of animals in all novels to show the use of tropes of bestiality and the species boundary as well as the limits of such tropes. More than anything else, it is those moments of intranslatability that inflect the similarities between these novels. In spite of all differences, what is constant through all the narratives I examine is the need, for different carrier figures, to pass on some insight from the position of the marginalised.

In reading representations of slavery across linguistic and “national” boundaries, I am less concerned with the actual depiction of the abuses of slavery, as such, as with the representation of debates about cultural transactions that accompany slavery. The importance of slavery is not simply the enslavement—there was after all another slave trade across the Sahara and different forms of “enslavement” in African societies—but the encounter with particular phases of European and American projects of modernity and Enlightenment that came hand in hand with oppression. Thus, the literary engagements with trade are, in effect, engagements with various colonising moments as these unfold over time and space.
The successful citizen of the American Revolution continues to be in debt to the African slave, whose rightlessness, written on his or her very body, reassured white Americans at every moment that their revolutionary righteousness would not immediately expose them to the vulnerability that comes with natural innocence. For it was not simply the possibility that they might be England’s slaves that had the potential to discomfit Americans. More importantly, African slaves helped Americans to manage the disturbing suggestion, crucial to revolutionary ideology, that political decisions made by one body for another always had the capacity to turn the object of those decisions into a slave. (Downes 479)
I

Introduction

Edgar Allan Poe is often acknowledged as the creator of detective fiction with his trilogy of stories about the detective Dupin. Two stories in particular, “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” and “The Purloined Letter,” have become sites of an industry, of sorts, of reading and interpretation. In his study of Poe’s detective stories, Peter Thoms points out that Poe invariably highlights the importance of reading: Dupin reads newspapers extensively in “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” and he relies on his eyes in “The Purloined Letter” (134). These stories also dramatise the invention of narratives. Dupin is very conscious of his efforts to procure a “rounded narrative” and the criminal is the antagonist as he “obstructs” the formation of such narratives (135). Together, both stories dramatise epistemological searches which draw the reader into the construction of the story:

Chronicling a search for explanation and solution, [detective] fiction typically unfolds as a kind of puzzle or game, a place of play and pleasure for both detective and reader. The popularity of the stories of Poe and his successors partly derives from this intense engagement with the text where, in the scrutinizing of evidence and the interpreting of clues, the reader becomes a detective and the detective a reader. Moreover, a detective like Dupin also becomes an author, who figuratively writes the hidden story of the crime. As a story that dramatizes the construction of a story, replacing the intelligibility of mystery with explanation, detective fiction emphasizes the potential comforts of narrative: the apparent provision of an order, of meaning, of a metaphoric map in time (with beginning, middle, and end) that seems to tell us where we are. (133)
These features of detective fiction Thoms identifies above are cornerstones of plots of detection in general. Delany is certainly not a detective in the manner of Poe’s Dupin. He serves, however, as a figure of detection since he reads and interprets clues on the ship. These forms identifiable in Poe are also observable in Melville’s story of a suppressed slave mutiny. By reading these stories in concert, I want to show how the use of detection provides a paradigm for reading fictional representations of slavery and the trans-Atlantic slave trade. The emphasis on a crisis of epistemology inherent in detective fiction provides a framework for interrogating forms of complicity in the multiple aspects and stages of enslavement. In these two stories by Melville and Poe, detection is duplicitous since both narratives provide readers the opportunity to undermine the heroic detective figures. But, whereas Melville foregrounds his subversion of the “detective figure,” Poe’s story only shows the suppression of alternative narratives. This fundamental difference between the two stories motivates the following contrapuntal reading: Melville’s achievement, setting up a detective figure whom he then subverts in order to question radically the work of narratives and closure, becomes much more comprehensible beside Poe’s straightforward tale.

This paradigm of suppression versus permission of alternative narratives of crimes and of social reality—staged so dramatically in Poe and Melville—runs through all subsequent chapters. The interchange of detection, contestation and subversion is a useful strategy because it dramatises not only the oppression of the “slave” but, more importantly, also the strategies with which this figure is kept silent. “Benito Cereno” and “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” show a series of transactions through which the “slave” is confined to spaces of occlusion. They show the ideological work of narratives that are put into circulation to render the existence of the “slave” a normal feature of social life.
In *Slavery and Social Death*, Patterson uses the concept of “social death” to characterise the existence of a slave within a society and the slave’s simultaneous removal from the society’s rights and privileges. Slaves, Patterson argues, literally have physical death transubstantiated into a form of living death in which their lives are forfeit to their masters. Most slaveholding societies have ritual processes through which slaves are separated from their kinship ties and incorporated into the new society in the contradictory position of “marginality and integration” (46). The slave subsequently lives “as a socially dead person” (38). I am using the term incorporation, then, as an index of this contradictory relation that is thus made coherent. Patterson’s term needs a further complication for my purposes. The incorporation of the slave cannot function simply as a form of inclusion. The extensive nature of exclusion that incorporation signals to the slave needs to be acknowledged through the slave’s experience of excorporation.

II

**Indeterminacy in “Benito Cereno”**

Melville’s “Benito Cereno” is based on the account of Captain Amasa Delano’s intervention in a slave insurrection that he records in his *Narrative of Voyages and Travels in the Northern and Southern Hemisphere* (1817). Melville’s short story is a tragedy of reinterpreting and fashioning reality. Captain Delano goes on board a ship in distress off the coast of Chile to offer assistance. The captain does not know that he arrives after a slave mutiny (during which many members of the white crew have been killed) and that the liberated slaves control the ship. The crucial element in the story is the ensuing performance of a master-slave relation in which the blacks force the ship’s captain and crew to act out conventional life on a slave ship.
Once Delano discovers the concealed reality on the ship, his mission to help humanity is transformed into a mission to restore dignity to the slaveship captain; Delano subordinates the right to liberty to the right to property in order to help the Spanish masters regain control of the San Dominick. Melville establishes the narrative tension and the tonality of an inquiry into American racial oppression through his choice of liberal-minded northern American Delano as his narrator. The rapid change in Delano’s disposition upon discovery of the insurrection reveals the bigotry of a liberal-minded nineteenth-century American who accepts the humanity of slaves as long as they remain subordinate.

The dichotomy of disclosure and suppression in “Benito Cereno” is part of a network of doubleness and duplicity that is most apparent in the story’s spatial demarcations. Every aspect of the story is rendered in binary spatial oppositions juxtaposed to an in-between space that contradicts simple binaries. The story discloses the struggle of the revolting black subject, in part, as the struggle for territory. The action of Melville’s tale takes place close to an uninhabited island on a lawless part of the sea (142). To describe the slave mutiny as lawless is to ignore the fact that the slaves seek through the revolt to achieve a form of social order. The conflict between the slaves and their Spanish masters creates a zone of indeterminacy that is further complicated by Delano’s intervention turned “intervasion.” It is an intervention that restores the dominant view of social reality by suppressing emerging racial emancipation. The text does not, however, allow direct pronouncements. The speciousness of Delano’s acts evades readers—until the end of the narrative—since they experience the intervasion through his eyes. Melville simply creates a zone of indeterminacy in which the nature of perception and comprehension of social reality are in question:
The morning was one peculiar to that coast. Everything was mute and calm; everything gray. The sea, though undulated into long roods of swells, seemed fixed, and sleeked at the surface like waved lead that has cooled and set in the smelter’s mould. The sky seemed a gray surtout. Flights of troubled gray fowl, kith and kin with flights of troubled gray vapors among which they were mixed, skinned low and fitfully over waters, as swallows over meadows before storms. Shadows present, foreshadowing deeper shadows to come. (141-42)

The predominance of grey marks the ambiguity between the strict binaries of white and black. Delano perceives the ship as a stranger from the first instance and his assertion of the ship’s strangeness imposes, for Delano, coherence upon the unsettling qualities of the zone of indeterminacy.

Delano’s perambulations on the San Dominick disclose the importance of spatial partitions in the short story. The ship represents a spatialised social order. Its front quarters resemble slave quarters and Melville’s narrator describes this space as “their ghetto” (170). The San Dominick is also a symbol of decaying Spanish imperial authority that is becoming inferior to American power:

The San Dominick was in the condition of a transatlantic emigrant ship, among whose multitude of living freight are some individuals, doubtless, as little troublesome as crates and bales, but the friendly remonstrances of such with their ruder companions are not of so much avail as the unfriendly arm of the mate. What the San Dominick wanted was, what the emigrant ship has, stern superior officers. But on these decks not so much as a fourth mate was to be seen. (151)
The perspectives in Melville’s narrative exceed his narrator’s vision. The author’s narrative strategy is to create gaps between his narrator’s perception and the narrative details that readers perceive. Hence, Delano apprehends the extraordinary aspects of the vessel, reads all clues about the nature of reality on the ship rightly, but proceeds summarily to dismiss them as wrong because they contradict his expectation of the putative order of things. Melville captures the central irony about his character by asserting that Delano’s reactions to the ailing ship “might have deepened into some uneasiness had he not been a person of a singularly undistrustful good nature, not liable to indulge in personal alarms any way involving the imputation of malign evil in any man” (142). Kavanagh captures succinctly the use of the disjuncture between Delano’s mind and the narrative:

[A]t stake is how a man like Delano, neither a decadent aristocrat nor even a Southern slaveholding American, but precisely a ‘Northerner’ from the most radical and abolitionist of states (Massachusetts) can think of himself as liberal, progressive and charitable while staring in the face of his own racism, paranoia and authoritarianism. At stake in ‘Benito Cereno’ is how, for a man immersed in Delano’s ideology, a belief in one’s own ‘goodness’ and ‘moral simplicity’ is not just ‘naiveté,’ but a necessary condition for the violent, sometimes vicious, defence of privilege, power, and self-image. (133-37)

I would argue that the coexistence of benign naiveté with the violent suppression of dissent that Kavanagh identifies is the principal terror for the slaves in Melville’s text: subjugation is coterminous with a culture of congeniality. Consequently, the terror these oppressors produce will never come into view unless slaves breach the system that undergirds the congeniality of terror.
The Spanish captain, Don Benito, experiences the terror as a form of double consciousness when he is sealed into the space of black insurrection. He suffers the inversion of his social order and lives through Delano’s misinterpretations, in which Don Benito’s inefficacy makes him—and not the unruly slaves—the threat to order. For Delano, the inability to command renders Don Benito effete and ineffective; his general despondency matches the decay of his ship:

This splenetic disrelish of his place was evinced in almost every function pertaining to it. Proud as he was moody, he condescended to no personal mandate. What special orders were necessary, their delivery was relegated to his body servant, who in turn transferred them to their ultimate destination, through runners, alert Spanish boys or slave boys, like pages or pilot fish within easy call continually hovering around Don Benito. So that to have beheld this undemonstrative invalid gliding about, apathetic and mute, no landsman could have dreamed that in him was lodged a dictatorship beyond which, while at sea, there was no earthly appeal. (149-50)

The incomprehensible failure of sovereignty, even an autocratic one, signifies the overriding feature of Don Benito and constitutes his subjectivity for Captain Delano. Don Benito’s inability to use the “slender sword” (154, my emphasis) on his person is juxtaposed to the Africans’ use of the hatchets and Babo’s (later) use of the razor. The reader’s gradual perception of the complex and layered meanings of the sword develops in tandem with the unfolding mystery. First, the slenderness of the sword raises suspicions about Cerenos’s choice of arms and his ability to lead. Second, Delano perceives the failure to use the sword as part of Cerenos’s overall
ineffectuality. It is not until the end of the narrative that the reader is informed the scabbard is empty.

As Delano discovers, Benito is no more than a puppet forced by the rebellious slaves into performing a parody of white authority:

The dress, so precise and costly, worn by him on the day whose events are narrated, had not willingly been put on. And that silver-mounted sword, apparent symbol of despotic command, was not, indeed, a sword, but the ghost of one. The scabbard, artificially stiffened, was empty. (222)

This differentiation is subtle but important. Delano ascribes a failure to act to Don Benito wrongly since the premise—the presence of a sword, even if a slender one—upon which Delano interprets the world, does not exist in the first place. Both Don Benito and Captain Delano are rendered ineffectual figures in order to show that the real authority resides offshore. The discrepancy between the empty scabbard and Delano’s interpretation of Don Benito’s power is one of the ways in which Melville demonstrates the discursive nature of Delano’s ideological apparatus. The misapprehension undermines Delano’s authority: while Delano does not apprehend his own fallacy, the reader realises that the American’s consolidation of his sense of self upon the effeteness of the Spanish captain is based on a falsehood.

Delano’s muddled understanding of black characters demonstrates his ideological misrepresentation of social reality. Melville draws attention to the imbrications of representation and power through the use of speech. Delano’s deployment of animals in describing the slaves discloses his prejudices. He transforms, for example, the master-slave relationship into a master-servant affiliation in which the Negro takes his place as a benign and dutiful servant: “As master and man stood before him, the black upholding the white, Captain Delano could not but bethink
him of the beauty of that relationship which could present such a spectacle of fidelity on the one hand and confidence on the other” (154). The main black character, Babo, is “like a shepherd’s dog” in whose “rude face” “sorrow and affection are equally blended” (147). This pet-like slave performs his duties with an “affectionate zeal” that has “gained for the Negro the repute of making the most pleasing body servant in the world” (148). The extensive pet imagery characterises the domesticated elements of Africans’ nature. Thus, “Captain Delano [takes] to Negroes, not philanthropically, but genially, just as other men to Newfoundland dogs” (185). The recurrent pet imagery couches a rhetoric of civilisation that surfaces as a development from nature to culture. The African slaves are children of nature being brought into culture. Nature is presented through several allusions as wild, deceitful, or benign. Placing Africans in any of these registers creates the relationship between the Africans and other characters. Atufal, a strong slave, is compared to a working “bull of the Nile” (179) and Babo is later compared to a snake (202). The ideas behind animal imagery dispersed through the narrative are articulated most directly in the following extended meditation on nature and the constitution of races:

His attention had been drawn to a slumbering Negress, partly disclosed through the lacework of some rigging, lying, with youthful limbs carelessly disposed, under the lee of the bulwarks, like a doe in the shade of a woodland rock. Sprawling at her lapped breasts was her wide-awake fawn, stark naked, its black little body half lifted from the deck, crosswise with its dam’s; its hands, like two paws, clambering upon her; its mouth and nose ineffectually rooting to get at the mark; and meantime giving a vexatious half-grunt, blending with the composed snore of the Negress.

[...]
There's naked nature, now, pure tenderness and love, thought Captain Delano, well pleased.

This incident prompted him to remark the other Negresses more particularly than before. He was gratified with their manners: like most uncivilized women, they seemed at once tender of heart and tough of constitution, equally ready to die for their infants or fight for them. Unsophisticated as leopardesses, loving as doves. Ah! thought Captain Delano, these, perhaps, are some of the very women whom Ledyard saw in Africa, and gave such a noble account of. (171-73)

“These natural sights,” as Delano calls the scene, prove valuable to the captain because they “somehow insensibly deepened his confidence and ease” (173). The spectacle of the slaves as animals folded into “naked nature” affirms the social distance between Delano and the Africans and thereby reinforces Delano’s view of himself and his benign companionship with the slaves. If the slaves are not part of “naked nature,” they are presented as domesticated nature in the form of pets, or wild creatures such as wolves or snakes. The reference to the tough “constitution” in Delano’s meditations introduces a latent discourse of the evolution of species. When Delano inquires “how it was that scurvy and fever should have committed such wholesale havoc upon the whites, while destroying less than half the blacks,” Benito makes “random reference to the different constitutions of races, enabling one to offer more resistance to certain maladies than another. The thought was new to [Delano]” (192). Whereas Delano uses the “constitution” of Africans to fold them into “naked nature,” Benito uses the same term to explain the fact many whites “succumbed” to the incident of “scurvy” on the ship, while most Africans survived. “Constitution” functions thus in two registers—one scientific and the other social—as
a term from evolutionary science of which Delano “knows” nothing. Instead, Delano employs the term in a seemingly benign way devoid of its troubled history. The ironic juxtaposition of the two uses reveals Delano’s ignorance and Melville’s textual strategy. The permutations of words are deployed to reveal the power operations different linguistic tropes enable. But Melville also discloses how those cannot be separated from the power of the articulating subjects. Thus, for example, right after Delano sees the “doe” “clambering upon” her mother, he too “clambered his way into the starboard quarter-gallery” (173).

Melville’s attention to sound, speech, languages and the qualities of the speaking voice constantly subvert Delano’s narrative—in much the same manner as the permutation of words tells a story that surpasses Delano’s point of view. Since the sight and the spectacle of blacks in reassuring postures are essential to Delano’s perception of the world, the sounds, silences and qualities of speech that escape Delano’s comprehension allude to the untold stories on the ship. The opposition between sight and sound is established very early in the narrative. Since everything “was mute and calm,” what stands out in the first twelve paragraphs of the story are the efforts to comprehend the ship through sight. The first or second sentence in each of those paragraphs registers attempts at comprehension through the words “viewed,” “seeing,” “watched,” and “appearance” (142-44). These repetitions of sight give way to auditory impressions once Delano boards the ship. Whereas he assumes that he comprehends the sights, he is not aware does not understand the sounds:

Climbing over the side, the visitor was at once surrounded by a clamorous throng of whites and blacks, but the latter outnumbering the former more than could have been expected, Negro transportation ship as the stranger in the port was. But, in one language, and as with one voice, all poured out a common tale of
suffering; in which the Negresses, of whom there were few, exceeded the others in their dolorous vehemence. (145)

The unity of voice and language registered upon Delano’s arrival resides in the common experience of thirst and hunger. This unified conversation dissipates into divisions between the slaves and crew, and into a series of conversations in which Delano attempts to find out the truth about the ship. Instead of a straightforward explanation, the American is faced with Benito Cereno’s faltering voice (151), or whispering slaves (161-62), or the spoken “unknown syllable” that “ran from man to man among the perched oakum-pickers [. . .] as between the responsive posts of a syllable” (180). Babo orchestrates appearances on the ship to match Delano’s expectations. While the general disorder on the ship is incomprehensible to Delano, the appearance of labouring black slaves allays his disquiet (156-57). The oakum pickers and hatchet-scourers are the real locus of power on the ship; they only make themselves heard to the initiated on the ship by the “barbarous din” they make regularly when they clash their hatchets together (146). The clashing hatchets announce the slave power on the ship to all but Delano. The recurrence of sounds that the latter ignores shows that he operates within an ocular realm, while the slaves function within an aural realm.

The shaving scene in “Benito Cereno” serves as the nexus of uses of sound, spectacle, discernment and the threat of slave rebellion on the San Dominick (186-89). Upon Delano’s request that the Spaniard recount the events on his ship, Babo insists on shaving his master while the latter recounts his tale:

Setting down his basin, the Negro searched among the razors, as for the sharpest, and, having found it, gave it an additional edge by expertly stropping it on the firm, smooth, oily skin of his open palm; he then made a gesture as if to begin, but
midway stood suspended for an instant, one hand elevating the razor, the other professionally dabbling among the bubbling suds on the Spaniard’s lank neck. Not unaffected by the close sight of the gleaming steel, Don Benito nervously shuddered; his usual ghastliness was heightened by the lather, which later, again was intensified in its hue by the contrasting sootiness of the Negro’s body. Altogether the scene was somewhat peculiar, at least to Captain Delano, nor, as he saw the two thus postured, could he resist the vagary that in the black he saw a headsman, and in the white a man at the block. (186)

Benito Cereno’s speech emerges under the threat of Babo’s razor. The shaving scene marks Babo’s transformation from pet and loyal “body servant” to a symbol of black agency and desire for freedom/vengeance. The scene evokes the repressed possibility of revenge. The white lather, itself enhanced by projection against Babo’s body, marks the fields on which the struggle for different visions of the social order is fought. Babo’s incision into his master’s skin is a direct assault on the slaveholding Spanish authority; it echoes the motifs of the closed castle in a “blood red field” on the Spanish flag (186). The force of the scene lies in the symbolic rendition of several inversions. Above all, by controlling Benito’s speech, Babo ascertains that what Delano hears in this pivotal scene confirms what he sees. In other words, Babo does not simply control his master’s speech; he restricts Delano’s access to the aural realm.

The Uses of Silence

Captain Delano’s misapprehensions result in large part from the incomprehensibility of the sounds that assail him or from the falseness of the speech that reassures him. In other words, speech, the only sound that is comprehensible to Delano, relays false information, while the telegraphic sounds of the hatchets remain opaque. The final and most important inversion occurs
when this separation of speech and sight is suspended. The key sets of events pivot upon Benito Cereno’s unexpectedly erratic behaviour that causes Delano and his officers to debate the meaning of the suddenly threatening “clattering hubbub in the ship, above which rang the tocsin of the hatchet-polishers,” and ensuing actions on the ship (201). In subsequent passages, the verbs that emphasise sight are paired to verbs of interrogation—the “dismayed” Captain “eagerly asked” and Delano “answered,” and later “wildly added” more information (201):

But here the officer of the boat, who had at last succeeded in beating off the towing sailors, and was now, with face turned aft, assisting the bowsman at his oar, suddenly called to Captain Delano to see what the black was about, while a Portuguese oarsman shouted to him to give heed to what the Spaniard was saying.

Glancing down at his feet, Captain Delano saw the free hand of the servant aiming with a second dagger—a small one, before concealed in his wool—with this he was snakishly writhing up from the boat’s bottom at the heart of his master, his countenance lividly vindictive, expressing the centered purpose of his soul; while the Spaniard, half-choked, was vainly shrinking away, with husky words, incoherent to all but the Portuguese.

[. . .]

Both the black’s hands were held, as, glancing up towards the San Dominick, Captain Delano, now with scales dropped from his eyes, saw the Negroes, not in misrule, not in tumult, not as if frantically concerned for Don Benito, but, with mask torn away, flourishing hatchets and knives in ferocious piratical revolt. (202-03, my emphasis)
The “restoration” of Delano’s sight now allows him to comprehend the use of the hatchets which he had previously heard but not understood. As if to underline the singularity of the passages, the narrator announces: “All this, with what preceded and what followed, occurred with such involutions of rapidity that past, present, and future seemed one” (201). But this singular moment of suspension heralds Delano’s attempts to establish his version of the future social order to reign on the ship; the flash of revelation in which Delano appraises the moment marks the conversion of the humanitarian intervention to an intervasion and of the obsequious slave into a “fugitive.” Since the moment also wipes out that which preceded, it inaugurates Delano’s subsequent effort to write “History” and preserve the memory of the events not as that of the suppression of the slaves, but as the rescue and restoration of sovereignty. Consequently, Babo and all other slaves become “fugitives” who must be pursued (204). Subsequently, the defeat of the insurgent slave through Captain Delano’s “superior muscular strength” marks the passage from concrete social contest into the realm of myth-making. The ship returns to shore to the established structures enforcing the ideologies violated in the indeterminate space of this sea:

As for the black—whose brain, not body, had schemed and led the revolt, with the plot—his slight frame, inadequate to that which it held, had at once yielded to the superior muscular strength of his captor, in the boat. Seeing it was all over, he uttered no sound, and would not be forced to. His aspect seemed to say: since I cannot do deeds, I will not speak words.

[.. .]

Some months after, dragged to the gibbet at the tail of a mule, the black met his voiceless end. The body was burnt to ashes; but for many days, the head,
that hive of subtlety, fixed on a pole in the plaza, met unabashed the gaze of the whites [ . . . ]. (223)

The display of Babo’s severed head signifies the restoration of Spanish sovereign force and the defeat of rebellious black agency. Babo’s refusal to speak is, however, equivalent to a refusal of the subaltern figure to accept speech under the conditions of dominance that predetermine the forms of recognition to be accorded his speech. In other words, Melville defers Babo’s voice rather than inventing a speaking subject that confirms the “slave” even as it articulates its oppression. After taking the reader through the interchange of sight and sound, Melville again defers sound. Babo’s silence draws attention to Delano’s failure to convert that silence into a master narrative of the events. This failure begins in the following scene:

“But the past is passed; why moralize upon it? Forget it. See, yon bright sun has forgotten it all, and the blue sea, and the blue sky; these have turned over new leaves.”

“Because they have no memory,” he [Benito Ceren] dejectedly replied; “because they are not human.”

[. . .]

“You are saved,” cried Captain Delano, more and more astonished and pained; “you are saved: what has cast such a shadow upon you?”

“The Negro.”

There was silence, while the moody man sat, slowly and unconsciously gathering his mantle about him, as if it were a pall.

There was no more conversation that day. (222)
Cereno’s refusal of salvation gravely undermines Delano’s effort to fashion history—as it were—and to create a restricted memory out of the suspension of time. Indeed, Cereno’s rebuff questions Delano’s role in whichever narrative he might construct. The nuances of Melville’s intervention become perceptible when the story is read alongside Rey Chow’s words on efforts to find a voice for the “native” that is often only preserved as a negative image in colonialist discourse:

As we challenge a dominant discourse by “resurrecting” the victimized voice/self of the native [slave] with our readings [. . .] we step, far too quickly, into the otherwise silent and invisible place of the native [slave] and turn ourselves into living agents/witnesses for her. This process, in which we become visible, also neutralizes the untranslatability of the native’s [slave’s] experience and the history of that untranslatability. The hasty supply of original “contexts” and “specificities” easily becomes complicitous with the dominant discourse, which achieves hegemony precisely by its capacity to convert, recode, make transparent, and thus represent even those experiences that resist it with a stubborn opacity.

(37-38)

Chow writes in the twentieth century of colonial encounters that are different from Melville’s. I have, however, inserted the word “slave” beside Chow’s “native” to signal how this passage might help contextualise Melville’s position as a white writer “wanting” to speak for “the slave” in an age where slaves were also penning slave narratives. In fact, we may also replace Chow’s “untranslatability” with “silencing”—since some of the slaves did after all speak English.

Melville’s tightrope walk between “showing” and “speaking for” can also be read alongside Spivak’s excavations of the complexity of subaltern groups, which are useful in
considering the interchanges between the ideological representations of speech and silence, flight and capture that inhere in Melville, Poe, Wright and Morrison (Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak”). Spivak’s injunction (following Marx) against the conflation of aesthetic and political representation—i.e., *darstellen* and *vertreten*—is particularly useful in comprehending the apparent tendency toward the exhibition—or better, spectacularization—of the revolting subject. In the end, the text foregrounds three accounts of events on the ship—Delano’s, Benito Cereno’s legal deposition, and Babo’s suppressed account. However, the reader becomes aware that the women, the children, and the other sailors have other accounts of the incidents. The emphasis on showing, in Melville, reveals the gap between the act of the subject and the ways that act is always already usurped and spoken for in representation.

The juxtapositions of speech and imposed silence in Melville’s story underline the overall importance of language and communication in achieving political aims under severe constraints. Maurice Lee argues, in consequence, that “Benito Cereno” is “about” the “failure of political speech,” and reads the story as an exercise in “subversive politics” in which language must be manipulated to speak to “a friendly listener in an hostile political world” (496):

> Here *subversive* implies not only opposition to prevailing ideologies but also a cunning use of narrative and tone that defies the public spirit of politics. In this sense, the more subversive a text, the less political it becomes, until at some degree of difficulty covert radicalism quietly slides into solipsistic despair. We should locate the politics of “Benito Cereno” upon this slippery slope—somewhere between the *San Dominick*’s allegory and the tale’s unknowing silences, between Melville’s penetrating social criticism and his desire to puncture the political. (496)
Lee presents an exhaustive analysis of Melville’s engagement with multiple facets of antebellum America’s political discourse on slavery, to conclude that “the failings of political discourse pervade all human speech” (511). More important than these “universal” conclusions are the specific implications and difficulties that Lee identifies, of speaking for the oppressed slave. In refusing dialogue, Babo signals his rejection of a matrix that can only appropriate his speech. Melville’s tactic is thus to make visible the process through which the actions of a rebelling slave are rendered intelligible. This tactic relies heavily on ambiguity and doublings to make the story “for minds on both sides of the veil [and] for scholars who feel—as if by revelation—that the past, present, and future are one ” (512). The most important achievement of the story is to reveal the operations of silencing, the existence of the veil, and the implication of each generation of readers in compositions of otherness. In other words, Melville reveals the need for a politics of revelation/detection that follows changing positions of various subjects. Toni Morrison sums up Melville’s tactic correctly: “Melville, releasing and withholding, massaging and sabotaging, rationalizing and raising doubt, hiding and exposing, tells the story of an innocent white captain while simultaneously critiquing the racist foundations of that innocence” (“Dead Man” x). Melville scrutinizes the bigoted foundations of “innocence” by revealing the evolution of Delano from a saviour to a racist. The opposition of sound and sight charts the encounter between Delano’s racist ideology and the slaves’ desire for liberty. Delano maintains his veneer of innocence as long as he remains oblivious to the aural realm on the ship. The same innocence vanishes once he enters the aural realm. In refusing dialogue with Delano, Babo and Cereno withdraw participation from an aural realm that is subsequently controlled by Delano.
III

Poe's Simian Economies

Melville's politics are better understood when the work of silence, voice and voicelessness in his story is studied beside Poe's "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" (1841). The silence of the subaltern figure who only appears at the end of Melville's story occupies a prominent place in Poe; whereas Babo, Benito Cereno and Delano are all subverted, Poe's masterful subject retains all power of speech. At the core of "Murders in the Rue Morgue" is the violent imagery of two murdered women and the psychic horror the murders unleash. The plot is a sequence of transgression, censure, flight, violence, capture and restoration of order. A sailor returns home to Paris with an orangutan as a pet. The ape's attempt at emulating the sailor's shaving elicits a prohibition and the threat of punishment from the master. The impending discipline precipitates the pet's flight and a chase through the streets of Paris during which the ape escapes into an apartment, where it kills Madame L'Espanaye and her daughter while the sailor watches from the window. The discovery of the murders generates a public panic reflected in the frantic newspaper reports as well as in the conflicting reports of witnesses who hear the ape's cries during the murders:

EXTRAORDINARY MURDERS.—This morning, about three o'clock, the inhabitants of the Quartier St. Roch were aroused from sleep by a succession of terrific shrieks, issuing, apparently, from the fourth story of a house in the Rue Morgue, known to be in the sole occupancy of one Madame L'Espanaye, and her daughter [. . .]. After some delay, occasioned by a fruitless attempt to procure admission in the usual manner, the gateway was broken in with a crowbar, and eight or ten of the neighbors entered, accompanied by two gendarmes. By this
time the cries had ceased; but, as the party rushed up the first flight of stairs, two or more rough voices, in angry contention, were distinguished, and seemed to proceed from the upper part of the house. As the second landing was reached, these sounds, also, had ceased, and everything remained perfectly quiet. (139)

This passage establishes the intelligibility—or "untranslatability"—of the revolting subject through its "conversion" into an animal. The conversion, in turn, introduces the division between sight and sound that is similar to Melville's strategy in "Benito Cereno." The newspaper accounts essentially replay a scene of deferred sight. The aural witnesses are not eyewitnesses; indeed, there would be no mystery if the sailor, the only eyewitness, had remained at the scene of the crime. The detective Dupin, who arrives to solve the murder mystery, is an archetype that is similar to Melville's humanitarian Captain Delano. Whereas Delano arrives in ignorance of the "crime," ignores sounds and reads each scene without much probing, Dupin is summoned by the cries to scrutinise the scene and reconstruct the deferred sight. He must then fashion an acceptable narrative. Dupin is, thus, able to identify and locate the culprit, determine his mode of ingress, and punish the ineffectual master. If Melville's detective—in all but name—misreads all signs, Dupin reads all signs rightly and restores order. This crucial difference underscores the point that Melville's intent is a critique of the idea of racist innocence—while "rationalizing it." In effect, both stories present very similar transactions: a figure of authority intervenes in a space of overturned social conditions to restore a previous order to the detriment of a rebellious figure. Third-party intruders put down the uprisings of Melville's Babo and Poe's ape.

Both texts manage the complex procedures of excorporation through calibrations of space, social relations and the mobilisation of tropes of dehumanisation. Poe's narrative begins
with newspaper accounts of the mutilated bodies found in a locked room. The locked room in Poe's story can be read both as a secured space for protection and as an inescapable space of incarceration. The obverse relationship between the two spaces—the ship and the locked room—reflects the forms of consciousness of the protagonists in the two narratives. Delano and Dupin secure their respective social orders while keeping the racialised other subordinated. The violation of this balance provokes ensuing concerns about the culprit's mode of egress.

As John Irwin points out, a locked-room mystery has a lot in common with games of appearances:

A locked room mystery confronts us with an enclosure that appears, from both inside and outside, to be unopened, indeed unopenable, without there being left some physical trace of its having been opened, such as a broken lock from the police's forced entry or an unfastened window from the murderer's escape. The solution generally involves showing that the room's appearance of being unopened is only an appearance, an outward illusion that does not represent an inner reality. (143)

The contention about the locked room in Poe's story is analogous to Delano's struggle with his perception. The appearance on the ship is simply an illusion that does not represent the ship's reality. The locked room mystery could be read as Poe's shorthand for social reality.

**Aural Witnesses and Deferred Sight**

Poe's text utilises other dichotomies of perception—that are also present in "Benito Cereno"—through the use of interconnected parallel spatialisations. The detective first comes in contact with the murders through newspaper accounts. In the absence of eyewitnesses, the accounts only report the disagreements of the witnesses about what they heard. Dupin must then
proceed to make sense of the veritable tower of Babel, unlike Delano who encounters a group with one unified voice that then gradually breaks down. There is, however, an important unity amongst the witnesses: they are all European. Since there are no “Africans” and “Asiatics” in Paris, Dupin proceeds to place the culprit as nonhuman:

Now, how strangely unusual must that voice have really been, about which such testimony as this could have been elicited!—in whose tones, even, denizens of the five great divisions of Europe could recognise nothing familiar! You will say that it might have been the voice of an Asiatic—or an African. Neither Asiatics nor Africans abound in Paris; but, without denying the inference, I will now merely call your attention to three points. The voice is termed by one witness ‘harsh rather than shrill.’ It is represented by two others to have been ‘quick and unequal.’ No words—no sounds resembling words—were by any witness mentioned as distinguishable. (147)

The issue of foreignness is tied closely to linguistic markers, such as the inclusion of foreign languages, which appear in both texts but which have greater prominence in Poe’s text. The identity of the culprit in “Murders in the Rue Morgue” is unknown except that the culprit must be a foreigner since “his” language could not be identified with any degree of certainty. Once Dupin apprehends the culprit the consequence is that the latter cannot speak. Hence, the rationale behind the ape’s actions cannot be explained.

The ape, captured during “an excursion of pleasure” in the “interior” of Borneo (156), is brought to civilisation. The master produces the pet as the pacified subject produced through civilising terror: “He [the master] had been accustomed, however, to quiet the creature, even in its fiercest moods, by the use of a whip, and to this he now resorted” (156). The pet is kept
locked away in a space from which it escapes. The actions of the orangutan demonstrate an aspiration to personhood through the rituals of manhood. Hence, as Liliane Weissberg writes, the murders are not initially meant to be gruesome acts of violence. They constitute an effort to imitate man; the victims of the ape were shaved to death (250). To paraphrase Weissberg, the violence is a male act since the victims are female and the ape’s act could only have been successful had it attempted to shave its master. Displacing the shaving act onto the female figure saves the master the humiliation of Benito Cereno, who is shaved by his slave. Compared with Poe’s displacement of the shaving onto a woman, Melville’s text posits a suppressed shaving scene in which the attendant violence is played out in Cereno’s mind. The comparison reveals, too, that, in Poe’s text, women stand in as the field upon which the anxieties of slaveholding societies are played out.

The difference in the choice of the rebellious subject as human or animal sheds further light on the use of boundaries. The shift from a black man with a razor to an orangutan with a razor could be read as a materialisation of the latent pet/beast dichotomy in Melville’s text. Poe’s text resembles, in part, an allegory of the beast in the boudoir. The orangutan, for all its characterisation as a ferocious beast, occupies a human position. Moreover, as Leland Person observes, the story turns on “the paradox that, to solve the crime, the detective, the narrator, and the reader must identify with and thus humanize even the most ‘excessively outré’ act of butchery” (214). The transformation from man to beast is part of what Joan Dayan terms the process of “radical dehumanization” in Poe’s literary output:

[Perhaps all of Poe’s work is about radical dehumanization: one can dematerialize—idealize—by turning humans into animals or by turning them into angels. As Poe proves throughout Eureka and in his angelic colloquies, matter
and not-matter are convertible. Further, both processes, etherealization and brutalization (turning into angel or brute), involve displacement of the human element. We are dealing with a process of sublimation, either up or down.

Animality, after all, emerges for most nineteenth-century phrenologists, theologians, and anthropologists in those beings who are at once man and beast: lunatics, women, primates, black men, and children. What remains, unmentioned, and unencoded, is the manhood at the center of these operations. It is this powerfully absent construction that Poe intentionally probes. ("Amorous Bondage" 184)

Dayan identifies here the operations of exclusion at work in Poe and Melville. The articulation of manhood stands in for the formulation of the sovereign subject. The exercise of manhood appears as tangential in these stories because it is subsumed by the trope of animality. In Melville's text, Delano's "eyes" offer the reader the ideological constructs of the Negro as animal. Viewed as if in his subservient state, Babo is likened to a dog devoted to his master. This meek pet mutates into the furious beast when he attempts to kill his master (202). The borderline between pet and man lies therefore in the pet's subservience/belligerence.

In Poe's text, too, the shaving scene is the nexus of the conflict in the story. The pet breaks out of its secure confinement and occupies his master's bedroom; the beast leaves its place of subordination to slip into its master's position:

Razor in hand, and fully lathered, it was sitting before a looking-glass, attempting the operation of shaving, in which it had no doubt previously watched its master through the key-hole of the closet. Terrified at the sight of so dangerous a weapon in the possession of an animal so ferocious, and so well able to use it, the
man, for some moments, was at a loss what to do. He had been accustomed, however, to quiet the creature, even in its fiercest moods, by the use of a whip, and to this he now resorted. Upon sight of it, the Ourang-Outang sprang at once through the door of the chamber, down the stairs, and thence, through a window, unfortunately open, into the street. (156)

This scene, and the consequent walk through the labyrinthine streets of Paris, is a further exploration of the connotative field of the razor image. The ape moves by evocation of the razor into the fears of Poe’s slaveholding society. The sequence represents an exploration of the master’s fears: “The Frenchman followed in despair; the ape, razor still in hand, occasionally stopping to look back and gesticulate at its pursuer, until the latter had come up with it. It then made off again. In this manner the chase continued for a long time” (156). 8

The murder scene is replete with concrete spatial demarcations that accentuate the impression of visual display. The ape leads its master to the window to peer from a window into the L’Esplanaye residence. Poe signals the vulnerability of the two female characters by having them “habited in their night clothes,” their backs to the window:

As the sailor looked in, the gigantic animal seized Madame L’Esplanaye by the hair, (which was loose, as she had been combing it,) and it was flourishing the razor about her face, in imitation of the motions of a barber. The daughter lay prostrate and motionless; she had swooned. The screams and struggles of the old lady (during which the hair was torn from her head) had the effect of changing the probably pacific purposes of the Ourang-Outang into those of wrath. With one determined sweep of its muscular arm it nearly severed her head from her body. The sight of blood inflamed its anger into phrenzy. Gnashing its teeth, and
flashing fire from its eyes, it flew upon the body of the girl, and embedded its fearful talons in her throat, retaining its grasp until she expired. Its wandering and wild glances fell at this moment upon the head of the bed, over which the face of its master, rigid with horror, was just discernible. The fury of the beast, who no doubt bore still in mind the dreaded whip, was instantly converted into fear. Conscious of having deserved punishment, it seemed desirous of concealing its bloody deeds, and skipped about the chamber in an agony of nervous agitation; throwing down and breaking the furniture as it moved, and dragging the bed from the bedstead. (157)

The master, watching the scene in stupefaction, suffers a mock decapitation through the suggested separation of his head from the rest of his body. This head-body separation echoes Babo's "execution" of his master in Melville. Unlike the ape that in fact severs Madame L'Esplanaye's neck, Babo only displays or hints at his power by making a cut on his master's neck. Thus, Melville's text, unlike Poe's, seems to restrain the overt violence of the razor and hints at the latent horror.

Primate Divisions

The connections between shaving and animality in Poe's story and "Benito Cereno" need to be examined in light of racial ideologies of Poe's era and the function of nonhuman primates in cultural discourses. The ape introduces, in a less obvious manner than in Melville, the discourse of species boundaries and the constitution of humanity (153). The hair Dupin finds in the hand of one victim is "most unusual—this no human hair" (152). It would be simplistic to read the ape directly as an allegorical figure for a black slave. As several critics point out, Poe's use of animals is complex as they partake of several discourses. Thus, the ape functions in
several registers that are related to the exploitation and enslavement of Africans. In an obvious
sense, the ape is stolen from its world during “an excursion of pleasure” and is meant to be sold
for profit once it has recovered from injuries sustained during the voyage (156). Further, once
the ape escapes, it becomes a “fugitive” (156) in much the same manner as Delano’s subservient
slave is transformed into a “fugitive” after the captain’s epiphany. These contiguities with
practices from enslavement and the slave trade evoke associations with slaves.

The ape, and the discourse of species it introduces, stands at the centre of imperial
associations. Donna Haraway points out, in the introduction to Primate Visions, that the traffic
“is a traffic in meanings” (1). Nonhuman primates serve in the production of ways of knowing
and projecting a social comprehension of the world. Stories about primates help negotiate
boundaries by ordering differences and the grey zones between “dominance,” “resistance,”
“complicity,” “equality” and “nurture.” The representation of nonhuman primates occurs
within entanglements of the material and the symbolic, and these primates surface in the “border
zones” between the “mythic poles” of “nature” and “culture” (Haraway 1-15).

Although Haraway is primarily concerned with twentieth-century “scientific traffic” in
nonhuman primates, other critics have reviewed the cultural semantics attached to apes in Poe’s
time. Lemire documents, for example, correlations between Poe’s use of the ape and other
nineteenth-century iconographic instrumentalisations of apes. The salient point is that barbering
was a favoured profession for free black men who aspired to enterpreneurial classes. Such black
men were viewed, on the one hand, as a threat because of their desire for social mobility and, on
the other, as objects of jest and parody since they aspired to become what nature clearly did not
intend them to be.10 Lemire points to the display of “stuffed monkeys dressed and arranged so as
to depict the life of a barbershop” in Philadelphia’s Peale’s Museum (183). Thus, Melville and Poe utilise a common feature of antebellum America.

The configuration of the black barber/ape icon performed specialised cultural work in the management of race and labour relations. Melville’s Delano simply affirms conventions—readily recognisable to nineteenth-century readers—when he remains unperturbed by the sight of Babo’s razor. Poe’s sailor affirms the same convention; he fears the ape’s desire for social mobility. In fact, Poe’s ape hints at various fears of forms of transgression prevalent in the author’s society. The fear of the beast in the boudoir was also based on and linked to longer-standing ideologies of race and human evolution that maintained the ape’s affinity for women. The fear of interracial marriage is thus intermingled with the fear of black social mobility—both fears found, as Lemire reports, in paintings and prints (198). Lemire concludes by asserting that Dupin absolves all parties in the story, since the ape is to blame (199).

Lemire’s reading suppresses the fact that Poe’s—and Melville’s—stories are set outside of the United States and both play at the intersections of American discourses with configurations of race and power in international contexts. Melville’s story gestures towards wider contexts of imperial powers, practices and traffic in peoples through its Spanish presence and the reference to the San Dominick as an “emigrant ship” (151). Also, Melville identifies the associations between Delano’s racist thinking and the reports of John Ledyard from his travels in Africa (173). Both stories “move to” the Old World as they deliberate upon the racial relations in the New World. If race is disavowed in “The Murders in the Rue Morgue,” Poe raises comparisons through the analogies between his ape and black barbers. In fact, as Lemire writes suggestively, Poe returns the ape to the realm of natural history by having the sailor sell him at the Jardin des Plantes, “where it is less easily allowed to function in a fully allegorical manner”
Lemire’s suggestion needs a little modification in that Poe does not so much return the ape to the realm of natural history as use that return to make obvious the sailor’s folly in attempting to domesticate the untameable, since the ape is not a human being or an animal suitable for domestication—it is only suitable for display. The essential argument here is that the ape functions doubly: it performs both as an ape and as a symbol. The metaphoric associations that accompany the symbol evoke the black slave as that which is brought to America from abroad to be domesticated yet excluded from belonging. The ape evokes race without naming it—in other words, it implicates a racial presence—and since it returns to an abode of animals at the end of the story, it is almost impossible to label it merely a trope that functions entirely on the level of allegory.

The appearance of primates in both stories by Melville and Poe could also be read in light of Anne McClintock’s elucidation of the conjunction between soap-making and the mobilisation of racist discourses in the policing of social groups in imperial Britain. The prevalence of the monkey as a major icon in a series of nineteenth-century advertising images leads McClintock to suggest that soap doubled as commodity and symbol to become a “technology of social purification, inextricably entwined with the semiotics of imperial racism and class denigration” (212). This “simian imperialism” was essentially “concerned with the problem of representing social change” and “primatology” emerged as “a theatre for negotiating the perilous boundaries between the family (as natural and female) and power (as political and male)” (216). In this scenario, monkeys “were deployed to legitimize social boundaries as edicts of nature” (216). If, as McClintock observes, advertising presents the “image space as a repository of the forbidden” (216), the exhibition of blacks and shaving incites viewers and readers to a recognition of potential threat. The nonhuman primate barber represents a paradox, since his “primitiveness”
simultaneously undoes the civilising work of shaving and challenges operations of racial and social stratification. This presence of contradictory impulses provides the unsettling impetus in Poe and Melville. Although McClintock’s account focuses on the British Empire, her assertions and the tendencies she observes suggest useful analogies to the narrative operations I have been discussing in Poe and Melville. In a very direct sense, symbols of domesticity such as washing and shaving are yoked to the threat of black revolt through the mediating figures of nonhuman primates and the slave.

But there are other less obvious, yet nevertheless equally vital connections between Poe, Melville and the imperial practices McClintock identifies. John Carlos Rowe states precisely such connections between British imperial operations and Poe’s own Southern world, in his revealing reading of the representations of frontiers and racial hierarchies in Poe’s fiction. Rowe argues the author’s uses of non-European peoples should [...] be interpreted in relation to late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century imperialism and the discursive practices employed by the imperial powers to rationalize their subjugation and, in many cases, destruction of native peoples. (75)

What Rowe reveals in his analysis are the ways in which imperial practices are folded into American geographies—and importantly, how these practices are disguised and become unrecognisable for the colonial practices that they are. In other words, Rowe puts geography into Poe and highlights the connections and tensions between site-specific readings of Poe and the kind of comparative reading that I undertake. Thus, Rowe draws expansive affinities between Africa, the Caribbean, and the United States that are present—yet powerfully silenced—in Poe:
We must never forget that slavery is an instance of the fundamental violence of colonialism: the conscious effort to take from others their very means of survival. Southern slavery and westward expansion in the United States have often been treated differently from the colonial institutions of other nations because the former are assumed to be acts of "internal colonization." Yet the slave trade in the United States caused political, social, and economic instabilities in Africa and the Caribbean that should be understood as "colonial," and the domination of African Americans in the antebellum South was accomplished with the familiar colonial instruments of economic, political, legal, and psychological control. (75-76)

These "encoded" connections between the United States, the Caribbean, and Africa that only surface in Poe under pressure become important in the work of Richard Wright and Toni Morrison. The task of these writers is, in a sense, that of detection as they unearth the associations with other colonial adventures. These disguised connections Rowe names so artfully are condensed and prefigured in American texts in what Toni Morrison describes as "Africanist presence" that is mobilised in social transactions of power and subjugation:

Explicit or implicit, the Africanist presence informs in compelling and inescapable ways the texture of American literature. It is a dark and abiding presence, there for the literary imagination as both a visible and an invisible mediating force. Even, and especially, when American texts are not "about" Africanist presences or characters or narrative or idiom, *the shadow hovers in implication, in sign, in line of demarcation*. It is no accident and no mistake that
immigrant populations (and much immigrant literature) understood their
“Americanness” as an opposition to the resident black population.

[...]

The need to establish difference stemmed not only from the Old World but
from a difference in the New. What was distinctive in the New was, first of all,
its claim to freedom and, second, the presence of the unfree within the heart of the
democratic experiment—the critical absence of democracy, its echo, shadow, and
silent force in the political and intellectual activity of some not-Americans. The
distinguishing features of the not-Americans were their slave status, their social
status—and their color. (Playing 46-48, my emphasis)

Morrison’s explanations are instructive for the way she reframes pressures from the “Old World”
within the grammar of American “New World” social transactions. She effectively draws
attention to the outer-national parameters of the experiences of African Americans in a
hemispheric theatre of Western modernity. Note the association of echo, shadow and silence in
defining Americanness. The animal imagery is part of a larger discourse from beyond the
boundaries of the Unites States that exposes the contradictions in the promises of the New
World. These contradictions delineate a paradoxical marriage of freedom and unfreedom. The
echo indicates the presence of Old World peonage in the United States, the shadow stands for the
masking of social reality, and silence marks enforced subjugation.

Poe and Melville reveal the significance of this triad in the last exchanges between the
intervening saviours and the incompetent masters. Benito Cereno never recovers from his
muteness, and dies. The sailor in Poe’s tale suffers a momentary “loss” of language when he
appears to claim his pet: “The sailor’s face flushed up as if he were struggling with suffocation.
He started to his feet and grasped his cudgel; but the next moment he fell back into his seat, trembling violently, and with the countenance of death itself. He spoke not a word. I pitied him from the bottom of my heart” (155). The loss or lack of control over speech signifies subordination in Poe’s Dupin trilogy. Finally, in the confrontation between Dupin and the police chief who is unable to solve the crime, the latter stammers as the detective berates him for being an ineffective master. The officer’s loss of control and Dupin’s control of his speech contextualise his trembling body as a body in defeat:

“Let him talk,” said Dupin, who had not thought it necessary to reply. [...] “I am satisfied with having defeated him in his own castle. [...] In his wisdom is no stamen. It is all head and no body, like the pictures of the Goddess Laverna,—or, at best, all head and shoulders like a codfish. But he is a good creature after all. I like him especially for one master stroke of cant, by which he has attained his reputation for ingenuity. I mean the way he has ‘de nier ce qui est, et d’expliquer ce qui n’est pas.’” (157-58)

These scenes of acute stammering and loss of speech are best described as sites of subjection—they are scenes in which the stammerers give up their right to opposition and accept their place in Dupin’s reconstruction of social order. This use of subjection becomes important when juxtaposed to the failure of conversation at the end of “Benito Cereno.” Cereno’s refusal to accept Delano’s offer of salvation and his account of events is a failure of subjection into forgetting/congenial innocence. Babo’s silence is, thus, similar to Cereno’s; Babo cannot, however, be subjected into innocence but the acceptance of his subservient status. Poe offers a telling twist to Melville’s tale by presenting two scenes of subjection. Whereas his rival, the
police prefect, is subjected to a loss of voice but not innocence, Dupin confers innocence on the sailor:

“My friend,” said Dupin, in a kind tone, “you are alarming yourself unnecessarily—you are indeed. [. . .] I know perfectly well that you are innocent of the atrocities in the Rue Morgue. It will not do, however, to deny that you are in some measure implicated in them. [. . .] You have done nothing which you could have avoided—nothing, certainly, which renders you culpable. [. . .] You have nothing to conceal. You have no reason for concealment. On the other hand, you are bound by every principle of honor to confess all you know. An innocent man is now imprisoned, charged with that crime of which you can now point out the perpetrator.”

The sailor had recovered his presence of mind, in a great measure, while Dupin uttered these words; but his original boldness of bearing was all gone.

“So help me God,” he said, after a brief pause, “I will tell you all I know about this affair;—but I do not expect you to believe one half I say—I would be a fool indeed if I did. Still I am innocent, and I will make a clean breast if I die for it.” (155)

I quote these three passages to draw attention to the stages of subjection. The sailor practically exchanges his confession for exculpation. Dupin relieves the sailor of the task of concealment in the first paragraph and the shock of realisation robs the sailor of his “original boldness.” The proclamation of innocence, here, stands in sharp contrast to Delano’s final exchange with Benito Cereno. In other words, the theft of and traffic in the ape, and the murder of two women are
declared non-crimes; the sailor may depart in innocence. And if the police chief must suffer violence, he cannot protest since he polices the same social order.

**Excorporation’s Exculpatory Strategies**

The two stories by Melville and Poe expose how ideologies structure social order through the manipulation of language and narrative. In terms of what follows in the next chapter, the relationship between the two stories is a curious one. Whereas Morrison and Wright have concrete intertextual links with Poe, their interventions are much more similar to Melville’s. As Paul Downes observes, one of Melville’s achievements in the story is to “disable all efforts to comfortably identify a position of narrative authority or culpability with any one individual” (481). Downes’s assessment is instructive. The deployment of silence and silencing—of the ape, Babo, the sailor, Don Benito and Poe’s screaming women—in both narratives indicates a series of deferrals impeding the articulation of the subject in revolt. Morrison and Wright return to these sites of silence to unearth the effects of benign innocence. They employ narrative techniques such as Melville’s to reveal the manners in which the pernicious legacies of slavery are not simply silenced but how efforts to articulate the aftermath of enslavement are impeded by newer forms of innocence. Specifically, Wright and Morrison deploy the strategies of inversion, at work in “Benito Cereno,” to lead their readers into the territories of African Americans caught in the afterlives of slavery. Both writers show the process of fashioning narratives that structure social reality. Finally, like Melville, their novels end up by illustrating how alternative stories, that remain at large, could transform accepted social norms.
That U. S. slavery has both officially ended, yet continues in many complex forms—most notably institutionalized racism and the cultural denigration of blackness—makes its representation particularly burdensome in the United States. Slavery here is a ghost, both the past and a living presence; and the problem of historical representation is how to represent that ghost, something that is and yet is not. (Trouillot 146-47)
I

Introduction

The tensions around the cultural work of detection, revelation and concealment that run through the short stories of Melville and Poe establish the contexts for my readings of Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987) and Richard Wright’s *Native Son* (1940). As stated at the end of the last chapter, *Beloved* and *Native Son* contain intertextual references to Poe’s story. The most obvious link between the two previous texts and the two I analyse in this chapter lies in the recurrence of the severed heads. These specific references are, however, not badges of legitimacy. The tropes deployed in Poe and Melville form part of a wide-ranging set of discursive practices that surpass the parameters of these four texts.

*Beloved* and *Native Son* are set in post-bellum America but the injury of enslavement and its afterlives undergird both narratives. The task is to define a tactics of revelation that counters the “ideological scales” veiling the forms of pervasive and invasive terror that make Patterson’s “social death” so visceral. Both African American writers undertake radical destabilisations of the semantics of concealment by reworking the tropes of silence, detection, fugitivity, failed conversations and bestiality. As I showed in the previous chapter, these tropes work together to make the slave figure a silent presence. In Melville’s and Poe’s narratives, the slave’s voice is lost and not heard—or it is incomprehensible—through a set of discursive structures that have concrete effects.

Wright and Morrison deploy similar tactics in the unsettling of ideological underpinnings of American society. Both writers exploit the crucial semantics of flight, present also in Melville and Poe, in deconstructing the binary of exclusion and inclusion. “Benito Cereno,” “The Murders in the Rue Morgue,” *Native Son* and *Beloved* could be read as permutations of fugitive
narratives. All four plots pivot on the element of flight during which social conventions are challenged, suspended or rendered indeterminate. It is impossible to read these, in 2005, without hearing the resonance of the particular relationships between fugitive speech and silence that operated in ante-bellum America and found particular expression in the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850:

As liminal figures, fugitive slaves occupied an especially complicated position within [a] paradoxical framework of speech and silence. Fugitives who had eluded capture in the North were ex-slaves, experientially, but still slaves by law; they could speak out against the system they had left behind, but doing so increased the risks of discovery and forced return. Those [...] who were captured and dragged before federal slave commissioners in the North confronted a legal system that had incorporated the governing principle of Southern slave discourse: the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 barred fugitives from testifying on their behalf, treating them, presumptively, as property. Yet a captured fugitive might gain access to lawyers who contested those principles and even to reporters, pamphleteers, and political activists capable of disseminating information about the case. In these moments of legal conflict and national publicity, white abolitionists saw a need and an opportunity to give slaves a voice. (Reinhardt 82-83)

Reinhardt’s elaborations of practices of ventriloquism on behalf of the fugitive slave are helpful but the focus on the Fugitive Slave Act needs to be complicated and expanded with Barnor Hesse’s attention to the contemporary uses of the spaces and speech of the fugitive in American culture. Starting with an analysis of the film Amistad, Hesse shows that the persistent image of
the “convicted but innocent man or men on the run from the law” has its antecedents in the “runaway or fugitive,” a “prominently contested iconic commodity in pro- and anti-slavery discourses,” that “provided a highly creative if unstable ambiguity in the West’s nineteenth-century dialogics of representation and counter-representation. In the United States the fugitive slave began to signify a morality struggle in national identity” between the South and the North (148).

Hesse’s demarcation between the North and South works to some extent in Beloved and Native Son. But the differentiation is even more vital. Both narratives recalibrate the geography of the U.S. through the memories, embedded in the fugitive leitmotif, to reveal aporetic situations similar to those in Poe and Melville. If the central feature of the fugitive genre, as Hesse asserts, is that “the truth will out” (148), the silence of the slave/fugitive figures in Poe and Melville demonstrate the abolition of truth. The morality struggle in Beloved and Native Son is over the denial of the whole conglomerate of ante- and post-bellum practices that impede the realisation of the promises of emancipation. This denial is particularly important in light of Hesse’s assertion that the nineteenth-century discursive formation of the fugitive slave survives in popular culture, where it performs a task of concealment by celebrating the abolition of slavery as the narrative of slavery while effacing the complex ways in which the afterlives of slavery affect American culture:

The main problem with this memorialization of slavery is its overwhelming erasure of any racialized sense of historical formation or degrading social process. Erased is the expansive, repetitive nature of enslavement, including the plantation work systems across the Americas and the centuries-long development of highly organized and systematic economic and racialized forms of governmentality. In
the absence of these social encrustations being made explicit or explained, we are positioned to remember slavery as pathological ephemera, as if historically it was a minor crimogenic deviation from a progressive modernizing project. [...] In other words, the memory of slavery is established as the memory of its heroic and inevitable abolition. (149-50)

This passage delineates the crucial point of the ensuing analysis of *Beloved* and *Native Son*. Both narratives rupture silence and effacement; they explain “social encrustations” based on structures of enslavement.

This chapter is divided into two sections. In the first part, I read Wright’s novel as a direct engagement with the practices of excorporation discussed in chapter one. The novel is, in particular, the protagonist’s long journey to voice. Unfortunately, Wright might give a voice to Poe’s transmogrified figure, but he does so at the expense of two other murdered women. In my reading of *Beloved* in the second part of this chapter, I argue that the novel’s use of decapitation could be read alongside Poe, Melville and Wright.

I

Richard Wright’s *Native Son*

Spatial Economies

*Native Son’s* social realism depicts the plight of African Americans in the 1930s. The novel’s protagonist is a poor black boy who is given a “chance” to make it out of his ill-fated life in Chicago’s South Side. Consequently, Bigger goes to work for the Daltons but ends up inadvertently killing Mary, his employer’s daughter, in the presence of her blind mother. The descriptions of the murder and the subsequent dismemberment of the body recall Poe’s Rue Morgue murders. Simian allusions also tap into the racial discourses. Wright transforms the
tropes of "intervention," "razor-wielding black man" and "silence," at work in Melville and Poe, in a manner best described as "transgressive troping." The author utilises tropes in a manner that does not confirm, but actually exhausts their potential for meaning through constant iteration or a drastic change in expected narrative patterns. This procedure is most noticeable in the recurrence of weapons, the treatment of sex and sexuality, the treatment of space, the prolonged passages describing Bigger's flight and the drawn-out trial scenes. Whereas Melville and Poe reveal the use of simple binaries—white/black, determined/indeterminate, master/slave, human animal—Wright, and Morrison too, insert an excess of contiguous elements between binaries in order to challenge social grammars of signification.

Wright decodes Poe’s simian prose by reversal of its key operations. Thus, he inserts a human figure into the position of Poe’s ape, making the ape a discursive feature that only appears in the utterances of the lynch mob, and again, juxtaposes the immaterial ape to a rat. If Poe’s ape returns to the zoo, "escapes" trial and the status of criminal, and his plight is never spoken, Wright’s character goes to trial and the trial scene allows for the narration of the injustices visited upon the character before he is sentenced to death. In effect, Wright uses Bigger Thomas’s life and summary execution to speak the excess control and devaluation of black life under American regimes of racialisation. Wright complicates his representation by working out the conjunctures between the material practices that regulate actual human life and the work of racist ideology in enforcing extralegal codes.

*Native Son* is structured into three elemental segments—fear, flight and fate—that depict the defining facets of Bigger’s life. The American society portrayed in *Native Son* is racially divided; the separation is bridged by characters modelled as agents of social repair (49). At the heart of Richard Wright’s *Native Son* lies the consequence of a “humanitarian intervention.”
liberal-minded white millionaire and NAACP sympathiser—Mr. Dalton—seeks to improve the lot of African Americans in Chicago's black belt and employs Bigger Thomas (53). The employment is to help in the transformation of this character from petty thief to upright citizen. All members of the Dalton family represent positions in Wright's schematic outline of white liberal progressive values that address individual plights but not the fundamental inequality structuring social relations. The recurring reference to Bigger's journey into whiteness as his "chance" reveals it to be no more than a script of behaviour. These reiterations of a "chance" by Bigger's mother, Mr. Dalton, and the mob of pursuers, respectively, illustrate one instance of Wright's ironic technique of reformulating tropes (101, 162, 267). The inference is that the black community colludes, through its blindness, with the white establishment to fashion strictly defined and limited paths for black youth. These directions, far from paths to social progress, are measures of social confinement.

Wright's characterisations are shot through with irony that reveals his liberal-minded white characters are modern versions of Delano. They want the advancement of "coloured people" but they do not see how their actions help create and maintain the structures that produce "coloured people" as a problem. Dalton's philanthropy caters to Bigger's needs, as a specific individual, but it does not address the basic systemic repression of African Americans. Hence, the blind Mrs. Dalton loves coloured people (47); the Dalton daughter and heiress, Mary, is a Communist sympathiser (52) who also wants to meet and help Negroes (76-77). Wright's black characters, too, act in accordance with what they assume to be the white world's expectations. These characterisations are paradigmatic representations of elements of white American life. The key issue is the pervasive blindness that prevents the true recognition of the disenfranchisement of black people in the world of Native Son.
The detailed excavations of the stratifications of American life include the effects of economic conditions on social relations between working-class and affluent whites. The Dalton’s Irish housekeeper, Peggy, counts herself part of the Dalton family and refers to workers of colour as separate from herself (55). She also, however, asserts an affinity with African Americans because of the historical oppression of the Irish by Great Britain. African Americans are a colonised people within the U. S. just as the Irish are in Great Britain (57). The juxtaposition of Ireland and black America sets up a comparative paradigm for colonisation. The comparison brings black America into view as a colony within the American polity. Peggy’s character hints at the deracialisation and assimilation of Irish immigrants into prevailing notions ofAmericanness and the failure of a total immersion of blacks into the American body.

This brief examination of Peggy underlines Wright’s use of schematic characters in delineating his geographies. The spatial semantics play as crucial a role in Native Son. The histories that played in the American South and Ireland subtend the narrative set in Chicago. Invariably, these histories are not past but imprint themselves upon the reality of Wright’s Chicago. Thus, the ghost of the South is ever present: Bigger’s father, for example, dies in a riot in the South (74). The son’s plight in the North gives the lie to the narrative of a passage to a better life in the North. In place of the South’s harsh segregation, Wright depicts a system of economic barriers that perform similar functions. Consequently, Chicago’s poverty-ridden black belt functions as the modern version of the Negro quarters of the deck in “Benito Cereno.”

Wright relays the segregation in Chicago through the depiction of geographic divisions in the city as well through the recurring opposition of light/dark, black/white. In a very simple sense, Bigger’s entry into the labour force at the Dalton home is a progress into a figural whiteness. Bigger functions properly within the figural whiteness as long as all actors conform
to the unspoken script of racialised behaviour. The departure from the script creates indeterminacy. Such a situation arises once Bigger meets Mary Dalton and Jan Erlone:

What would people passing along the street think? He was very conscious of his black skin and there was in him a prodding conviction that Jan and men like him had made it so that he would be conscious of that black skin. Did not white people despise a black skin? Then why was Jan doing this? Why was Mary standing there so eagerly, with shining eyes? What could they get out of this? Maybe they did not despise him? But they made him feel his black skin by just standing there looking at him, one holding his hand and the other smiling. He felt he had no physical existence at all right then; he was something he hated, the badge of shame which he knew was attached to a black skin. It was a shadowy region, a No Man’s Land, the ground that separated the white world from the black that he stood upon. He felt naked, transparent; he felt that this white man, having helped to put him down, having helped to deform him, held him up now to put him down and be amused. (67)

Bigger’s problem, as demonstrated in this passage, is his inability to keep whites in the expected performance of what he has learnt should be their roles. Hence Mary Dalton and Jan Erlone precipitate his disaster once they depart from the script. In fact, the novel could be read as a set of transgressions and ensuing penalties. Bigger literally uses his gun to enforce a boundary between Jan Erlone and himself in a scene that can be read as a materialisation and spatialisation of double consciousness. The purpose is to translate abstract ideological processes into concrete material realities:

“Bigger!”
He stopped, whirled, his hand reaching inside of his shirt for his gun. He saw Jan standing in the doorway of a store. As Jan came forward Bigger backed away. Jan stopped.

“For Chrissakes! Don’t be afraid of me. I’m not going to hurt you.”

In the pale yellow sheen of the street they faced each other; huge wet flakes of snow floated down slowly, forming a delicate screen between them. Bigger had his hand inside of his shirt, on his gun. Jan stood staring, his mouth open. (171)

Several narrative strands and tensions in the novel cohere in this confrontation between Jan and Bigger. The “screen” of falling snow demarcates the racial divide between both characters. The snow plays a role in yoking the discursive spatial semantics to the materiality of the protagonist’s life. Bigger’s subsequent flight is projected against the backdrop of Chicago’s white cityscape. Once Bigger flees the scene of the crime, his flight through the snow becomes a journey into whiteness. The snow becomes, thus, an actor in the text—it highlights the overwhelming presence of whiteness during Bigger’s flight.

His flight—paralleling the ape’s flight through the labyrinths of Paris in Poe—affords Wright an opportunity to reveal the conditions of black characters in Chicago’s black belt. While Bigger traces a trajectory through the black belt, the newspaper accounts of the hunt draw maps in which the areas of the black belt that are yet to be searched are described as pockets of white space:

He looked at the paper and saw a black-and-white map of the South Side, around the borders of which was a shaded portion an inch deep. Under the map ran a line of small print:
Shaded portion shows area already covered by police and vigilantes in search for Negro rapist and murderer. White portion shows area yet to be searched. (245)

This zone of whiteness becomes a space of incarceration that contracts in tandem with the advancing search party. Wright uses the updated newspaper reports Bigger reads to accentuate the experience of an encroaching, overwhelming whiteness in the black belt. The next time Bigger reads the paper:

the shaded area had deepened from both the north and south, leaving a small square of white in the middle of the oblong Black Belt. He stood looking at that tiny square of white as though gazing down into the barrel of a gun. He was there on that map, in that white spot, standing in a room waiting for them to come.

(256)

The implication in these lines is that the lives of Wright's black characters are created through a calibration of the spaces they occupy. In fact, Bigger swaps an ideological No Man's Land for spaces that shrink infinitely until he lands in jail. Bigger's reality in his hideout is created by its representation as a target on the printed map. Subsequently, Bigger interprets his position relative to the newspaper descriptions: "Dead-set, his eyes stared above the top of the newspaper. There was nothing left for him but to shoot it out" (256). The finite regress of Bigger's space is a quasi-invasion that highlights the spatial semantics Wright applies to the Black Belt as a reservoir of black life. The hunt for Bigger is the culmination of Wright's emergent colonial geography. The successive allusions to Ireland and Great Britain, Irish immigration to the U.S., Southern plantation slavery and Jim Crow segregation, and finally, to Northern inner city regulation specify forms of coercive regulation.
Bigger's recourse to the gun repositions the overdetermined razor acts in Poe and Melville as responses to a "state of siege." The gun is also part of a surfeit of weapons which deconstruct the workings of the "reservoir of cultural imaginaries" that make the revolting subject appear irrational. Bigger smothers Mary Dalton and uses a razor and a hatchet to dismember her (92); he threatens Jan with a gun (172) and shoots at his pursuers (267); he also employs a butcher knife when writing his kidnap note (175). Bigger adds another weapon to this list when he bludgeons Bessie to death with a brick (237). His recourse to these weapons has none of the overtones of social determinism to be found in Poe and Melville. Instead, the weapons are shown as tools that cannot function as essentialising or dehumanising markers. Similarly, Bigger does not prevaricate or agonise over his acts: his murders are born out of unfortunate contingencies. After the initial unplanned murder, he kills his black girlfriend precisely because he feels he has to (235).

Wright dismisses, largely, the games and deliberations over the nature of appearances. Similar to "The Murders in Rue Morgue" and "Benito Cereno," Native Son has its triad of black killer, knowledgeable detective and ineffectual white master: Bigger Thomas and the white detective Britten, for example, demonstrate their knowledge of the script of racial comportment; Mr. Dalton is the ineffectual white master who is at once capitalist and liberal-minded—he donates money to help residents of the South Side but also overcharges them for uninhabitable tenements. Wright's novel shifts emphasis from the workings of ideological apparatuses—as in Poe and Melville—to the material operations and effects of ideological formations. Wright summons the racial drama in Poe and Melville to shift attention to the actions of the characters.
How Wright’s Animal Works

Bigger’s two murders offer important distinctions from Poe’s simian murders, by emptying the murder scene of the metaphysical content projected into the ape’s strength and into the violation of the white women. Wright separates the female victims into one white and one black character. While the ape strangles the daughter and severs the head of the mother, Bigger Thomas performs both acts on the body of Mary Dalton. But Bigger rapes and then kills the black girl, Bessie Mears. In her reading of the rape imagery in Wright’s novel, Sabine Silke suggests that the body of the white Dalton embodies a border. The “rape and murder” thus represent a transgression that grants Bigger recognition and entry into white society as a particular kind of subject (104-05). But a similar argument could be made about Bessie’s death. Bessie’s murder is in line with Wright’s strategy of extinguishing black life to demonstrate the disrespect for it. Since Poe’s animal already lies outside the bounds of humanity, it only needs to kill a woman to incur public wrath. However, while the Dalton murder removes Bigger from the human community as defined by whites, it takes the senseless murder of the black girl to remove Bigger from the second community to which he still belongs. It is this second murder that isolates Bigger Thomas.

Wright pays particular attention to the illusion of the ape’s brute strength by rewriting the decapitation and accentuating Bigger’s difficulties in carrying the corpse and in severing Mary’s head. The slow record of Bigger’s actions demystifies the presentation of the ape’s extraordinary feat in the Poe story. Wright’s revision removes the overdetermined features of Poe’s ape murders. Consider the similarities between the following passage from Poe, followed by Bigger’s dismemberment of Mary Dalton’s body:
After a thorough investigation of every portion of the house, without further discovery, the party made its way into a small paved yard in the rear of the building, where lay the corpse of the old woman, with her throat so entirely cut that, upon an attempt to raise her, the head fell off. (Poe 140)

He got his knife from his pocket and opened it and stood by the furnace, looking at Mary’s white throat. […] He looked round with a haunted pleading look in his eyes. He saw a pile of old newspapers stacked carefully in a corner. He got a thick wad of them and held them under the head. He touched the sharp blade to the throat, just touched it, as if expecting the knife to cut the white flesh of itself, as if he did not have to put pressure behind it […] Yes, he had to. Gently, he sawed the blade into the flesh and struck a bone. He gritted his teeth and cut harder […]. Sweat crawled down his back […]. (Wright 91-92)

He paused, hysterical. He wanted to run from the basement and go as far as possible from the sight of this bloody throat. But he could not. He had to burn this girl. With eyes glazed, with nerves tingling with excitement, he looked about the basement. He saw a hatchet. Yes! That would do it. He spread a neat layer of newspapers beneath the head, so that the blood would not drip on the floor. He got the hatchet, held the head at a slanting angle with his left hand and, after pausing in an attitude of prayer, sent the blade of the hatchet into the bone of the throat with all the strength of his body. The head rolled off. (Wright 92)
Wright presents not only the murder, but also Bigger's procedure in disposing of the body, as segments of a causal chain. Poe's incomprehensible simian act is scrutinised and the reader is forced to participate in the process of rationalisation.

Wright's revisions are also apparent in the treatment of the severed head. There are repeated references to it, and Bigger experiences nightmares in which he finds his own head wrapped in newspapers (105, 132, 140, 165). The recurrence of newspaper references has at least two functions. They echo the importance of newspaper reports in Poe's text—Dupin reads about the murders in the newspapers and the reports provide vital clues that help Dupin identify the murderer. Wright's novel highlights, though, the effect of newspaper reports on producing and systematising social reality. If the newspaper accounts in Poe help Dupin identify a culprit, the newspaper accounts in *Native Son* fan the hysteria that produces mob culture and transforms a culprit into a larger-than-life object of hatred. The newspapers, literally, call for Bigger's head.

In order to empty the overburdened signifier of the severed head, and shift attention to the ideological apparatus that produces the horror the severed head evokes, Wright locates similar operations of domination and coercion between two black characters—Bigger and Bessie—along gender divides. Bigger thinks of Bessie in terms of a body-head separation (140). Bessie's body is an object of desire to be had at will, while the head disrupts Bigger's access to the body through its questions. Bigger's desire to control her body and eliminate her head puts into relief the will to control the body of the subjected and abolish his/her thoughts. In a different but related configuration, Max—Bigger's communist lawyer—first appears as a "white and strange" bodiless apparition (290). Max's apparition echoes Mrs. Dalton's sudden ghostly appearance—in Mary's bedroom—which precipitates the murder as Bigger tries to keep the girl quiet. Both appearances, in turn, recall the sailor's head watching the murder in the Poe story. In all three
scenes, the head marks an infraction against the law and the spectacularisation of impending censure.

The other significant part of Wright's demystifications lies in his reworking of animal imagery. *Native Son* offers a vital differentiation in the operations of dehumanisation in Poe and Melville, by disrupting the binary poles of beast and pet through the introduction of vermin—i.e., a triangulation of the pet-beast binary with pests. The opening pages of the novel, in which Bigger kills a rat, foreshadow and even parallel the capture and inquest scenes. Bigger embodies both positions of rat and white society. The cornered rat performs the same roles of "fear," "flight" and "fate" that Bigger performs in the novel (4-7). The sister's swooning at the sight of the dead rat foreshadows Bigger's subsequent loss of consciousness at the sight of Mary's bones (279). The portrayal of the rat fluctuates between personification and thingification; the rat oscillates between "he" for Bigger and his brother, and a "thing" for the sister (4). If the ape is readily consumable as the codified image of savagery, rats, represent abject uncleanliness that is created through specific operations of white society. The appearance of vermin in domestic space denotes not only the continued cohabitation with expelled parts of the community but also the intimate traffic whites have with vermin but which they seek to deny. In other words, Wright subverts the "beast in the boudoir" trope in Melville and Poe: the rat is neither beast nor pet and its appearance in the middle of this binary construction exposes and refutes the narrative of civilisation couched as domestication.

The juxtaposition of the rat with Bigger resists the kinds of assimilation that the supposed resemblances between apes and black people inspire. Wright's feat is to expose with the trope of vermin the manners in which violence against black people is made to appear not only natural but expected. The rat does not simply represent a life that can be terminated without
deliberation; it represents life that invites obliteration if discovered in domestic space. Wright’s rat trope speaks to the subaltern and the representation of subalternity. Transforming black characters into pets or beasts involves the production of speechlessness; the existence as pet or beast “speaks” in the form of commensurability between the behavior of the animals and the reaction such beings invite or incite. Put simply, if pets invite affection and beasts incite terror, the focus of attention in representations of encounters between humans and animals remains the human being. The significance of the rat in the opening pages of Native Son is that the reaction it invites/incites is not commensurable with its appearance:

Bigger took a shoe and pounded the rat’s head, crushing it, cursing hysterically:

“You sonofabitch!”

The woman on the bed sank to her knees and buried her face in the quilts and sobbed:

“Lord, Lord, have mercy. . . .”

“Aw, Mama,” Vera whimpered, bending to her. “Don’t cry. It’s dead now.”

The two brothers stood over the dead rat and spoke in tones of awed admiration.

“Gee, but he’s a big bastard.”

“That sonofabitch could cut your throat.”

“He’s over a foot long.”

“How in hell do they get so big?”

“Eating garbage and anything else they can get.” (6-7)
The rat is the locus of a series of interconnected transactions in this scene. The extermination of the rat triggers a series of evocative and symbolic exchanges in which themes of sex, sexuality, religion and social oppression coalesce. This scene begs to be read twice; it is symbolic of the life of blacks in a predominantly white society and it is a miniature representation of Bigger’s particular life. The reader could practically replace the rat with a black man and the black boys with white men in the lines above. The insinuation that the rat might “bite” Bigger’s sister is a veiled sexual innuendo of the myth of the black rapist that cycles through “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” (Wright 4). The sexual imagery extends through the repeated emphasis on the rat’s length, its size and the “awed admiration” of Bigger and his brother. In Bigger’s hands, the inert cadaver dangling “like a pendulum” sends the sister into a fainting spell (7). But if the rat signifies a phallic symbol that sends Vera into a swoon, it also signifies the emasculation of Bigger when his mother proclaims: “We wouldn’t have to live in this garbage dump if you had any manhood in you” (8). This scene has a very complex set of relations that are evoked through the characters’ interaction with the rat as it oscillates between several frames. This alternation summons several tropes that pit white against black, male against female, the individual against society, and that emphasise the difference between passivity and aggression. On the one hand, Bigger and his brother act out the role of whites while the female characters represent the black community. But, on the other and, the rat also invokes a black man being subjected to white terror.

Joan Dayan’s elaborations on the connections between white manhood and exclusion in Poe’s practice of “radical dehumanisation” (see Chapter One) become relevant to an analysis of the passage above. One immediate implication of the mother’s utterance is that Bigger and his family are a ratpack. The other is that the dead rat’s power emerges from at least three possible
sources: the violence which it invites to itself, the violence it acts out, and the manner in which its presence exposes the suppressed actuality of terror in the life of Bigger’s family. Vera becomes a conduit for the terror in the domestic space:

“Vera!” the woman screamed. “Get up here on the bed! Don’t let that thing bite you!”

Frantically, Vera climbed upon the bed and the woman caught hold of her. With their arms entwined around each other, the black mother and the brown daughter gazed open-mouthed at the trunk in the corner. (4)

Vera occupies a crucial position in the melodramatic rat scene. If her name is read as a hint to *veracity*, her actions may be read as pointing, if not to the truth, to hidden layers of signification in this scene. Vera’s collapse in the face of the destroyed vermin expresses the violence the rat is subjected to. Vera herself could be read as a product of subjugation since she is the *brown daughter* of a *black mother*. The insinuation of miscegenation in the passage above marks Vera as site and product of the ingestion of whiteness into the family’s intimate sphere symbolised by the mother’s accentuated blackness. By the same operation through which the ingestion on the mother is only displayed on the daughter, Vera also stands in the disguised pervasiveness of whiteness. These operations based on the sexual infractions on black female bodies are part of what Hortense Spillers labels an “American grammar” of social relations at the confluence of sex, race and subjugation. If Wright’s rat scene is read in the light of Spillers’s elaborations, Vera’s body is captive to a specific set of readings that is foregrounded in her increased visibility as the brown daughter:

The captive body [...] brings into focus a gathering of social realities as well as a metaphor for value so thoroughly interwoven in their literal and figurative
emphases that distinctions between them are virtually useless. Even though the captive flesh/body has been “liberated,” and no one need pretend that even the quotation marks do not matter, dominant symbolic activity, the ruling episteme that releases the dynamics of naming and valuation, remains grounded in the originating metaphors of captivity and mutilation so that it is as if neither time nor history, nor historiography and its topics, show movement, as the human subject is “murdered” over and over again by the passions of a bloodless and anonymous archaism, showing itself in endless disguise. (68)

Vera’s body functions as a site of disguise—that is juxtaposed to that of the other black girl, Bessie Mears. Spillers’s useful submission is that erasure of the black woman identifies an attendant but unarticulated marking of the black man: “[E]nslavement removed the African-American male not so much from sight as from mimetic view as a partner in the prevailing social fiction of the Father’s name, the Father’s law” (80). The intrusion of whiteness through Vera marks the absence—or lack of equality—of the black father and the pervasiveness of a dominant social grammar based on a “dual fatherhood [. . .] comprised of the African father’s banished name and body and the captor father’s mocking presence” (80).

The rat performs a similar absence/presence of mimetic and symbolic function. Bigger essentially comes into the rat’s position once he emerges into the street and dumps the dead rat in a garbage can. Wright’s rat oscillates between the image space and mundane iteration in a manner similar to Poe’s use of the ape. The ape is sold to a zoo at the end of “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” and the rat is thrown into a garbage can. While the rat is put out of view, the ape proceeds to a site of spectacle much as Bigger does in Native Son. Each animal is practically discarded and returned to its “rightful” place, but the commotion each provokes reveals the
ideologies that subtend social life in each narrative. The ape’s actions in Poe’s story cannot be dismissed: two characters die, the sailor loses his property, and, for a while, the city is full of disquiet. Thus, the ape and the rat are both simply an ape and a rat as well as allegorical figures coalescing ideological values that seep out of these encounters. The animal imagery is repeated in references designed to place Bigger in the position of the rat during his capture (270) and right after his own fainting spell:

“He looks exactly like an ape!” exclaimed a terrified young white girl who watched the black slayer being loaded onto a stretcher after he had fainted.

Though the Negro killer’s body does not seem compactly built, he gives the impression of possessing abnormal physical strength. He is about five feet, nine inches tall and his skin is exceedingly black. His lower jaw protrudes obnoxiously, reminding one of a jungle beast.

His arms are long in a dangling fashion to his knees. It is easy to imagine how this man, in the grip of a brain-numbing sex passion, overpowered little Mary Dalton, raped her, murdered her, beheaded her, then stuffed her body into a roaring furnace to destroy evidence of his crime. (279)

This excerpt from a newspaper report voices the popular discourse shaping Bigger’s reality.

This article echoes the newspaper reports in Poe’s short story. The references to Bigger as an animal are articulated unmistakably; Bigger literally emerges from his “fear,” “flight” and capture into a cage where he becomes—like Babo—silent (273).

The Law, the Zoo, and His Voice

The last chapter of *Native Son* is essentially a specularisation of censure for the infraction against the laws of racial oppression. Wright details corollaries between legal and extralegal
justice. Thus, while Bigger is saved from lynching (303), he is sentenced to death (373). In fact, Bigger’s capture is little more than a transfer from the realm of extralegal to legal racial terror. Like the rat Bigger kills at the beginning of the novel, Bigger is also nothing more than life that is to be sacrificed. The execution makes the latent politics of incorporation visible. In Max’s words, the state attorney is simply racing to “kill” Bigger “before the April elections” (292). Bigger’s final execution is merely the confirmation of the extreme form of excorporation in which his regular sacrificial status is converted from possible to enforcable. Thus, after the elemental states of fear and flight, Bigger moves from spatial semantics stressing surveillance, control, transgression and flux to the static form of incarceration. If Poe’s ape returns to the Jardin des Plantes to be exhibited, Bigger is also put on display as the condemned in the courthouse and in his cell. Wright insinuates animal imagery into his descriptions of Bigger’s interaction with the police—see, for example, the manner in which “one morning a group of men came and caught [Bigger] by the wrists,” when he is to be transported to the Cook County Morgue (275). Similar imagery recurs when another morning the police “woke him, fed him, and took him back to court” (379). However, while the ape’s punishment ends with incarceration and display, Bigger’s execution confirms his difference from the ape as human. The conversations in the cell are efforts to come to terms with Bigger’s impending death in what is best described as a theatre of leave-taking (292-302).

Bigger’s sojourn in the cell is the most significant part of his trajectory. He oscillates between a status as a singular subject and a subject caught in a matrix best identifiable as a regime of racialisation. Wright’s character moves between forlorn despair and clarity; he refuses nourishment (273) and is moved to fits of sobbing (310). Similarly, he vacillates between silence (273) and startling eloquence (309, 338). These vacillations disclose Bigger’s
movements as seen from both sides of the veil. His arrival in the cell is practically described as a
birth into the definite reality of his society:

Having been thrown by an accidental murder into a position where he sensed a
possible order and meaning in his relations with people about him; having
accepted the moral guilt and responsibility for that murder because it had made
him feel free for the first time in his life; having felt in his heart some obscure
need to be at home with people and having demanded ransom money to enable
him to do it—having done all this and failed, he chose not to struggle anymore.

*With a supreme act of will springing from the essence of his being, he turned
away from his life* and the long train of disastrous consequences that had flowed
from it and *looked wistfully upon the dark face of ancient waters upon which he
had first been made in the image of a man* with a man’s obscure need and urge;
feeling that he wanted to sink into those waters and rest eternally. (274, my
emphasis).

This passage reveals Wright’s character to be a performative instance. His actions throughout
the novel call him into being from behind the curtain. Thus, Max the lawyer will argue that they
were acts of “creation” (400). Bigger Thomas acts out the excorporation of blacks which Wright
seeks to reveal, by virtually accepting his non-humanity. The thorny paradox resulting here is
that Wright appears to confirm racist ideologies by having a character that doesn’t believe in his
humanity demand to be recognised as human.

James Baldwin makes, most famously, such an assertion in his essay “Everybody’s
Protest Novel.” Baldwin condemns Bigger Thomas as a purely sociological construct created
separately of human qualities:
All of Bigger's life is controlled, defined by his hatred and his fear. And later, his fear drives him to murder and his hatred to rape; he dies, having come, through this violence, we are told, for the first time, to a kind of life, having for the first time redeemed his manhood. Below the surface of this novel there lies, as it seems to me, a continuation, a complement of that monstrous legend that it was written to destroy. [. . .] For Bigger's tragedy is not that he is cold or black or hungry, not even that he is American, black; but that he has accepted a theology that denies him life, that he admits the possibility of his being sub-human and feels constrained, therefore, to battle for his humanity according to those brutal criteria bequeathed him at his birth. [. . .] The failure of the protest novel lies in its rejection of life, the human being, the denial of his beauty, dread, power, in its insistence that it is his categorization alone which is real and which cannot be transcended. (18, my emphasis)

The vigour of Baldwin's convictions is admirable but the very point of Wright's novel is to uncover the persistent and systematic degradation of black life and not simply the brutalisation of one black character. Wright is concerned with a wide-ranging system and not a single instance. Consequently, what is important is the visibility of the system that Bigger's struggle makes possible. Wright was engaged in the redefinition of the place of blacks in America. The novel is part of an overall project—to reveal the ideological operations that maintain specific forms of the exclusion of African Americans from full assimilation into the national fabric.

The issue at stake can be best explained as a differentiation between a conceptualisation of African American subalterinity versus the articulation of any one specific subaltern subject. Commentators on Baldwin's well-known essay summarize this central issue. Jean Baptiste
Popeau, for example, declares Baldwin’s assessment misplaced and concludes that “the very abstractness of Bigger’s fate makes for his invisibility and the absence of a centre for the novel” (190). Popeau situates Richard Wright’s task as the disclosure of the continuities between the dispossession of slavery and twentieth-century African American experience.\textsuperscript{12}

Richard Wright’s “negations” of black humanity are based on his observations in Chicago and the American South where the author claims to have seen several rebellious archetypes for his character. The revolutionary impulse in the Bigger Thomases lies in “a sense of feeling and understanding so much, and yet living on a plane of social reality where the look of the world which one did not make or own struck one with a blinding objectivity and tangibility” (443-44). Wright explains the choices open to African Americans as passive obedience, collaboration or rebellion, and enumerates a number of rebellious Bigger Thomases who understood violence as a means of seeking redress or release from their existence in injury. These Biggers become insane, and commit a crime of social infringement for which they are imprisoned or killed. In Wright words, they “were shot, hanged, maimed, lynched, and generally hounded until they were either dead or their spirits broken” (437).

It is obvious that Bigger would be condemned to death. The author is, however, less interested in a forced ending in which the American legal system grants Bigger clemency. Bigger is Wright’s sacrificial lamb; he dies to show the American reading public the irony of contemporary racial injustice. The everyday terror that has become routine and invisible to liberal white Americans may breed the kind of criminal acts that lead to the “justified” execution of a character such as Bigger. Wright seeks justice by carrying Bigger’s narrative out of the zone of indeterminacy or exception into the courtroom. Hence, there is an emphasis on telling, listening and the use of voice through the novel. It is at this stage that the use of voice and
silence for detection, deception and denial in Poe and Melville needs to be recalled alongside the ventriloquism that Reinhardt addresses in his essay on Margaret Garner. In “Benito Cereno,” the slave usurps the master’s voice as resistance. After his capture, his refusal to speak means a repudiation of a language system in which his voice can only emerge in its usurped state in a script he does not determine. In Poe’s story, the ape’s voice remains unintelligible to the European listeners. Melville leaves Babo silent at the end of the text to identify the absence of his speech that can only be read through his actions.

At the heart of Poe’s and Melville’s preoccupations with the voice are, basically, aporetic situations in which the speaker may speak, but listeners dare not or do not want to apprehend that utterance if the social order in which the speech emerges is not to be disrupted. Thus, there is a convergence of linguistic, political and legal representation in the sense of darstellen and vertreten—as Spivak puts it—in Native Son. Wright has Max speak for Bigger to show the difference between darstellen and vertreten and to show how Bigger’s silence comes from the exclusion from one form of language. In an illuminating study of the use of voice in Native Son, James Miller argues that the novel stages Bigger Thomas’s search “for voice and audience” (502-03). As Miller points out, Bigger is never inarticulate with black characters (502). Rather, his quest for “voice and audience is essentially Other-directed, defined by his need to struggle with externally determined definitions of the self” (503). Bigger’s problems with white characters occur, says Miller, because they represent “authoritative discourse” within which Bigger “must struggle to discover his voice and, presumably, an audience which will give assent to his testimony” (503). Miller’s attention to testimony points to the prevalence of stories of disenfranchised black characters in Native Son. Bigger is simply the only character who
commits the transgression through which he comes into the fugitive space that makes his plight public.

Bigger's lawyer Max is Wright's heuristic device to bridge the distance between Bigger and white society—in much the same way as Dupin and Delano act as mediators between the scenes of the crime and their societies. As a go-between he articulates the connections between the complex geographies of the South, North and Old World social hierarchies that Wright lays out in previous chapters. As Max explains, African Americans are "ghosts" in American civilization because of an unjust historical injury and contemporary injustices that need redress (388-400). These "wailing ghosts" are at once spectres and people; their ghostly status bespeaks a state of injury (390, 399). The oppression of African Americans constitutes living death (456). Consequently, Bigger's lawyer can only ask for the legal system to give him life by imprisoning him for life:

To send [Bigger] to prison would be more than an act of mercy. You would be for the first time conferring life upon him. He would be brought for the first time within the orbit of our civilization. He would have an identity, even though it be but a number. He would have for the first time an openly designated relationship with the world.

[...] You cannot kill this man, Your Honor, for we have made it plain that we do not recognise that he lives! So I say, 'Give him life!' (404)

The lawyer's words in this passage are an injunction for the legal system to move to a new use of performative language by rendering visible the excorporation of black life from the social fabric. The conversion of one case of excorporation, from the realm of invisibility behind the veil to a
distinguishable status of excorporation within the legal system, would in turn acknowledge the continued excorporation of others. Bigger’s death sentence becomes synonymous with a legal pronouncement of continued exclusion and the demise of the revolting subject that in fact confirms Bigger’s exclusion.

The crucial issue in Wright’s use of Max is, however, that Max fails to understand Bigger as one individual suspended within the binaries of black and white. Thus, Max can identify long-standing historical trajectories, explain the disenfranchisement of African Americans in the language of the “authoritative discourse” and speak to the plight of a stereotypical black subject, but he cannot understand Bigger’s individual consciousness:

“Mr. Max, you go home. I’m all right. . . . Sounds funny, Mr. Max, but when you think about what you say I kind of feel what I wanted. It makes me feel I was kind of right. . . .” Max opened his mouth to say something and Bigger drowned out his voice. “I ain’t trying to forgive nobody and I ain’t asking for nobody to forgive me. I ain’t going to cry. They wouldn’t let me live and I killed [ . . . ].”

Bigger saw Max back away from him with compressed lips. But he felt he had to make Max understand how he saw things now.

“I didn’t want to kill!” Bigger shouted. “But what I killed for, I am! It must’ve felt pretty deep in me to make me kill! I must have felt it awful hard to murder. . . .”

[ . . . ]

Max’s eyes were full of terror. Several times his body moved nervously, as though he were about to go to Bigger; but he stood still. (428-29)
This exchange with Max can be read productively alongside the incomprehensible voice of Poe’s ape and the absent voice of Melville’s Cereno. Max ceases in this final encounter to represent Bigger in the sense of darstellen or speaking for, but he can still act as a lawyer. Max’s inability to accommodate Bigger’s testimony dramatises the very way in which the latter is always displaced because it appears in modulation outside of the language that Max masters so well. Thus, Miller writes so effectively, “we are left with the final image of Bigger Thomas facing his impending death in proud and lonely isolation, a soloist listening to the sound of his own song” (506). But Bigger is not alone: Max’s failure as a bridging heuristic device and his departure create a vacuum in which each future reader/listener surfaces.

II

BELOVED INCORPORATED GHOSTS
Listening to Complexity

Beloved, Toni Morrison’s novel about Margaret Turner’s 1856 infanticide, is a very complex novel that demystifies cultural operations that undergirded the enslavement of Africans in the United States. As Mark Reinhardt explains, the Garner incident was a rallying point for both abolitionists and apologists of slavery (Reinhardt 83). Paul Gilroy encapsulates the importance of the Garner story in his often-cited conversation with Toni Morrison:

The Garner story illustrates more than the indomitable power of slaves to assert their humanity in restricted circumstances. It encapsulates the confrontation between two opposed philosophical and ideological systems and their attendant conceptions of reason, history, property, and kinship. One is the product of Africa, the other is an expression of Western modernity. Morrison sees the intensity of the slave experience as something that marks out blacks as the first
truly modern people, handling in the nineteenth century dilemmas and difficulties which have become the substance of everyday life in our own time. ("Living Memory" 177-78)

Gilroy's attention to kinship, property, reason and history is vital in my following reading of Morrison. But I am much more circumspect about his presumed opposition of Africa and Western modernity in this passage. Ascertaining the provenance of the opposition to American—or Western, for Gilroy—ideologies could be a tricky and even reductive exercise. It matters little whether the strategies the slaves employed to cope with the excesses of enslavement came from Africa. I accept, instead, Morrison's assertion that under the intensity of slavery black people developed practices with which to cope with the forms of "loss" and "dissolution" induced by racial terror. Beloved is, as Gilroy notes, an engagement with the numerous "pathologies" of slavery ("Living Memory" 178). In fact, what is ideology to one camp is pathology to the other. Through the opposition of ideology to "pathology," Morrison and Wright reveal the manners in which certain social transactions are experienced as "pathological" symptoms of slavery and related forms of exclusion.

The central elements of the novel revolve around the narration of individual experiences of enslavement and its aftermath. Rather than face capture and a return to slavery, the fugitive Sethe severs her daughter's throat to "save" her from slavery. The black community condemns and excludes Sethe for assuming power of life and death. This infanticide isolates Sethe from the black community and she lives with her surviving daughter in her house—124—haunted by the ghost of the murdered baby. The novel starts, eighteen years after the infanticide, with Sethe and Denver, her other daughter, living in the haunted house. The key conflict is structured as a series of intrusions—or interventions/incursions—into the house. While the arrival of slave
catchers prompts Sethe to kill her daughter, the ghost resides in the house until Paul D, an ex-slave from Sethe’s past, arrives in the house and “beats off” the ghost. The absence of the ghost allows a temporary semblance of a family order and Sethe’s incipient reintegration into the black community. Beloved’s subsequent materialisation prevents this uncomplicated passage to normalcy. She forces Paul D out of the home by seducing him and proceeds to tyrannize Sethe. In the end, the black community must unite to repel Beloved in what is the third intervention. The ultimate wound for the novel’s characters is not simply slavery, but that to stop slavery, Sethe must become a monster or nonhuman herself and act outside of “reason.” Hence, one of the characters refers to the infanticide as the “Misery,” as it becomes the overriding signifier for interactions between characters in the novel (217).

Perhaps the best way to connect Morrison’s own intervention to those in previous texts is through the common themes of detection, comprehension and the missing speech of the slave figure. Morrison expands tremendously this turn to the politics of speech by juxtaposing different forms of discourse as repositories of ideologies in Beloved. The novel is a configuration of plural and sometimes conflictual testimonies in which the pathologies of slavery appear as results of processes reaching from the Middle Passage to 1873. In effect, the novel addresses the enslavement of Africans as part of the conquest of the American continent. Consequently, there is a plethora of voices in Beloved recalling experiences lived as individuals but also as subjects placed within wider historical events: Sethe, Baby Suggs, Paul D, Denver, Stamp Paid and Ella take turns illuminating the infanticide. In the narrative time of the novel, 1873, the horrors of slavery have only given way to the failure of the Reconstruction and disenfranchisement.
The fluctuations between the individual and the collective knowledge, as well as between the knowledge of the termination of actual enslavement and the present of continued conquest, make slavery appear at once very corporeal and also elusive because the experiences are so diverse that they cannot not be represented exhaustively. Hence, there is an emphasis on the multiplicity of the effects of slavery as it affects poor indentured whites (40-42), blacks, and indigenous Americans (137). Thus, unlike Wright’s novel in which “only” Bigger’s narrative emerges, Morrison’s novel stages the emergence of a series of conversations in which some voices are louder than others.

As all characters condemn Sethe’s infanticide, the persistent returns by characters to unravel the implications of her act double as an interrogation of the ideologies underpinning slavery and its successive developments. The reaction of Baby Suggs, Sethe’s mother-in-law, shows this displaced interrogation. As Michele Bonnet writes, Baby Suggs refuses to condemn but rather understands the complexities of Sethe’s choice. Bonnet argues that Baby Suggs’s persistent interrogation is typical of the narrative, in which “it is repeatedly suggested that the ultimate culprit is not the individual who committed the infanticide, but the system that created the conditions for it” (41). But Baby Suggs is the exception that proves the rule, which otherwise is to avoid inquiries about personal histories:

He was about to ask who her people were but thought better of it. A young woman drifting was drifting from ruin. [. . .] The War had been over four or five years then, but nobody white or black seemed to know it. Odd clusters of Negroes wandered the back roads and cowpaths from Schenectady to Jackson. [. . .] Some of them were running from dead crops, dead kin, life threats, and took-over land. Boys younger than Buglar and Howard; configurations and
blends of families of women and children, while elsewhere, solitary, hunted and hunting for were, men, men, men. Forbidden public transportation, chased by debt and filthy “talking sheets,” they followed secondary routes, scanned the horizon for signs and counted heavily on each other. Silent, except for social courtesies, when they met one another they neither described nor asked about the sorrow that drove them one place to another. The whites didn’t even bear speaking on. Everybody knew. (65)

This passage, in which Paul D almost asks the newly appeared Beloved about her provenance, recalls Sethe’s own encounter arrival in Ohio: “Ella wrapped a cloth strip tight around the baby’s navel as she listened for the holes—the things the fugitives did not say; the questions they did not ask. Listened too for the unnamed, unmentioned people left behind” (112). The persistent listening without asking discloses the manners in which Morrison’s characters understand themselves as subjects within processes that do not “bear speaking on” and are simply known.

Yet the narrative undermines both instances of silence coupled to searching and listening. The discovery that a “whitegirl” helped Sethe with her birth during her flight provokes Ella’s distrust (113). Similarly, the passage above troubles the constitution of that knowledge through the critical reference to the disjuncture between the supposed cessation of hostilities and the realities of people’s lives. Sethe’s infanticide, and the Beloved’s return, prompt therefore the critical conversations between participants that allow an awareness of their experience and their place within unfolding brutal historical events. The characters examine not only their coping strategies, they re-examine the practices that allowed and maintained slavery. Morrison’s characters discover, in other words, that “the whites” do bear “speaking on” and everybody does not simply know. This questioning of ideologies through the comparative examinations of
essentially incomparable horrors is the modus operandi in Beloved. Invariably, it is impossible for most characters to narrate their experiences through speech alone. Their voices and narratives falter. Their accounts emerge in the gaps the author opens through juxtapositions revealing the impossibility of perfect harmonies between different narratives. Thus, at the end of the novel Paul is not struggling to understand Sethe’s act as he does all through the novel. He simply “wants to put his story next to hers” (335).

Starting from this irresolvable conundrum, all efforts to understand the events during enslavement become unfinished quests. In fact, characters circumvent their narratives with detours or by modulating their speech into other forms of communication. The actual significance of narrated incidents in these characters’ lives is only imparted surreptitiously through a network of associations between objects plotted within different semantic registers. This actual communication through association and evocation is all the more curious because characters are constantly begging each other to recount episodes in their lives or listening to each other’s stories. In fact, the novel begins with Sethe’s plea to the ghost to come out for a conversation:

Perhaps a conversation, they thought, an exchange of views or something would help. So they held hands and said, “Come on. Come on. You may as well just come.”

The sideboard took a step forward but nothing else did.

“Grandma Baby Suggs must be stopping it,” Denver said.

She was ten and still mad at Baby Suggs for dying.

Sethe opened her eyes. “I doubt that,” she said.

“Then why don’t it come?”

103
“You forgetting how little it is,” said the mother. “She wasn’t even two years old when she died. Too little to understand. Too little to talk much even.”

“Maybe she don’t want to understand,” said Denver.

“Maybe. But if she’d only come, I could make it clear to her.” Sethe released her daughter’s hand and together they pushed the sideboard back against the wall. [. . .]

“For a baby she throws a powerful spell,” said Denver.

“No more powerful than the way I loved her,” Sethe answered [. . .]. (4-5)

The long passage reveals crucial details about the novel. The quest to offer an explanation for Sethe’s act is only shown to be irresolvable at the end of the novel. The proportionality between Sethe’s maternal love and Beloved’s powerful spell points to Morrison’s use of an antithetical structure in which characters cannot resolve their conflicts through conversation. In spite of her intentions in the lines quoted above, Sethe cannot make anything clear to her murdered daughter:

Sethe was trying to make up for the handsaw; Beloved was making her pay for it.

But there would never be an end to that, and seeing her mother diminished shamed and infuriated her. Yet she [Denver] knew Sethe’s greatest fear was [. . .] that Beloved might leave. That before Sethe could make her understand what it meant—which it took to drag the teeth of that saw under the little chin; to feel the baby blood pump like oil in her hands; to squeeze her so she could absorb, still, the death spasms that shot through that adored body, plump and sweet with life—Beloved might leave.

[. . .]
This and much more Denver heard her say from her corner chair, trying to persuade Beloved, the one and only person she felt she had to convince, that what she had done was right because it came from true love.

Beloved, her fat new feet propped on the seat of a chair in front of the one she sat in, her unlined hands resting on her stomach, looked at her. Uncomprehending everything except that Sethe was the woman who took her face away, leaving her crouching in a dark, dark place, forgetting to smile. (308-09)

The failure of conversation or comprehension between Sethe and Beloved is typical of the aporetic situations that constantly appear in Beloved. The reiterations of listening or the need to listen are never borne out since characters almost never comprehend each others’ actions. This same situation returns forcefully in Paul D’s inability to bear Sethe’s incapacity to offer a clear account of her infanticide (197-201).

In the face of such continuing failures, the role of the reader as one who can intervene to complete the gaps in the narrative becomes essential. In his reading of Beloved, Clifton Spargo addresses the discrepancy between the characters’ words and their lives. This discrepancy is, for the reader, an incommensurability between the characters’ and the “novel’s historical consciousness”:

By making her characters participate in structures of rhetorical excess that give their words and actions meaning beyond the immediate moment of their emplotted lives, Morrison develops a structure of reading in which our imaginative acts of identification are limited by the allegorical significance of excess and in which characters who stand for history stand at the same time for
the limits of the realistic tradition of fiction with its rational account of history.

(122)

The operation Spargo identifies points to similarities among Morrison, Poe, Melville and Wright. All three previous texts end with a contest between narrative agents about the particular narrative, truth or explanation of events that is to be put into circulation—Dupin and the Parisian police chief, Delano and Benito Cereno, Bigger and Max. These operations point also to the ethics of reading: readers must question their desire to compensate for the gaps between characters’ consciousness and the novel’s historical consciousness. It may be worthwhile to recall the following passage from Melville:

“But the past is passed; why moralize upon it? Forget it. See, yon bright sun has forgotten it all, and the blue sea, and the blue sky; these have turned over new leaves.”

“But because they have no memory,” he [Benito Cereno] dejectedly replied; “because they are not human.”

[...]

“You are saved,” cried Captain Delano, more and more astonished and pained; “you are saved: what has cast such a shadow upon you?”

“The Negro.”

There was silence, while the moody man sat, slowly and unconsciously gathering his mantle about him, as if it were a pall.

There was no more conversation that day. (222)

Here Melville employs a similar “rhetorical excess” that Spargo finds in Morrison. In fact, Melville’s excess is much more direct: the rhetorical question is not directed at the melancholy
Benito Cereno but at the reader. Delano, Melville’s humanitarian figure, banishes the preceding harrowing events and creates a memory of Cereno’s ordeal as a memory of salvation by appealing to the environment as the eternal silent witness. If Benito refutes this gesture by drawing attention, emphatically, to the inhumanity of natural elements such as the sun, the sea and the winds, he also indirectly raises questions about the humanity of the Africans—now consigned to slavery—and about the function of nature/the environment in naturalising ideologies. These questions are never answered. Delano does not even reflect upon them: his excessive and incomprehensible pain effaces them.

It is important to recall this scene because Morrison deploys the very elements Delano enumerates to plot or hint at alternative narratives beyond the purview of her failed conversationalists. Throughout *Beloved*, Morrison draws attention to the connections between enslavement, the displacement of Native Americans, and the plight of indentured whites, and the treatment of the environment as part of a project of a capitalist colonial modernity. This complex project of conquest is supported by Judeo-Christian and racist scientific discourses that rationalise the exploitation of particular people. Morrison subjects the work of these discourses to scrutiny by reworking the tropes of nature. The trees, animals, human beings and spaces in the novel appear in different constellations and in differing registers—much in the same manner as Poe’s ape and Melville’s natural elements. Scientific discourse, African American folklore, Christian values and Native American worldviews are put side by side, in order that the reader observe the ideologies at work in the construction of the space of encounter between human beings. The reader also sees how, in the subsequent production of nature, certain human groups are folded into nature and exploited as part of it. In other words, the contest between ideologies (and pathologies) that Gilroy detects in *Beloved* is substantially played out in the different
renditions of nature. Whereas Wright simply inserts a rat between Bigger Thomas and Poe's ape, Morrison introduces a wide range of animals to tell an accompanying story between the gaps and silences of the novel's faltering conversations.

Morrison's use of animals is far too complex to be fully discussed here. I will only use a few examples and will focus on the connections between animals and racism. Although I concentrate on the use of animals, a similar examination could be made of the use of trees in Beloved. The most prominent "tree" in the novel is the lump of scars on Sethe's back (18). This "tree" is connected, through Morrison's familiar use of repetitions, to actual trees in Sweet Home, to the blossoming trees that help Paul D escape to the North, to the brutality of slavery in the form of Sethe's flagellation and the hanging of slaves on trees, as well as to the exploitation of natural resources. Sethe's employer also bears the name "Sawyer". The itinerary of trees, in other words, plots another narrative parallel to that of animal tropes. This highly complex concatenation cannot be explored adequately in this dissertation. Michele Bonnet offers a starting point for such an exploration in her essay on what she calls "the law of the tree in Beloved." Bonnet concentrates, in particular, on the function of trees as sites for succor and support for slaves and Native Americans. While Bonnet offers many insights, she appears to imbue the trees with an immanent meaning of spirituality. I suggest that it would be much more useful to examine the use of trees as a trope for the conjunctures between nature, humans and capitalist modernity. In other words, Morrison employs the trees to stage another contest of ideologies.

**Naturalised Hierarchies: Human, Animal, Nature**

At the heart of Morrison's emphatic and complex inscriptions of nature as site of power and domination is the effort to draw attention to naturalised epistemologies that sustain
ontologies of the slave’s metaphysical difference. To elaborate upon Morrison’s strategy, I draw on the work of Derek Gregory, Bruce Braun and Joel Wainwright on the production of “nature” through discursive practices, and the work of Moore, Pandian and Kosek on the “conjunctural” terrain of race and nature as sites of cultural politics. Although Braun and Wainwright write about the production and management of the “forest” in British Columbia, their suggestion that nature is produced at “epistemological/ontological junctures where concepts, actions, and matter get mixed together” is vital to my reading of Beloved.15 Braun and Wainwright argue that what is called “nature” is produced as an effect of power and is not “self-present to knowledge” (42). Debates over nature, then, are not debates about a given preestablished entity. They are contests over ways of knowing and producing the world, legitimising material practices and pursing specific politics and policies.

Derek Gregory follows the thrust of Braun and Wainright’s argument, in “(Post)Colonialism and the Production of Nature,” to investigate the associations between colonisation and productions of nature. Moving beyond the poststructuralist concerns of Braun and Wainright, Gregory places greater emphasis on the intercalations of imaginative geographies into productions of colonial appropriations of nature as a site of differentiation between peoples. As Gregory shows, specific topologies can be projected onto specific topographies and the peoples that inhabit them, but the topographies were not “featureless planes” either (87). Rather, “the possibility” that “organisms and physical systems also have the capacity to make a difference [. . . ] assumes a special force in colonial discourse in which other natures are frequently endowed with the gigantesque or monstrous powers that threaten to overwhelm colonial cultures and to exceed the space available for their representations” (87). Beloved is not about colonial spaces outside of a metropolitan centre as is the case in Gregory’s examples.
Thus, there is no geographic distance at play, but a cultural distance that is figured through race. In this American context, the actual topographies of excess are assumed to have been left behind in Africa. Conversely, the spaces of excess that preceded the conquest of America are assumed to have been tamed through the “civilising project” of white settlers. This process of conversion is accomplished through the project of modernity, and it is in the conjunction of “culture, nature, and colonial modernity” that Gregory really becomes relevant for Morrison:

From the sixteenth century the triumph of European modernity came to be represented as in some substantial sense the triumph of ‘culture’ over ‘nature.’ [. . . ] There were voices that dissented from the discourse of domination, to be sure, but in general ‘culture’ and ‘nature’ were prised apart within the modern European imaginary and the advance of European culture was usually measured by the distance it was supposed to have travelled from its own nature.

It was widely assumed that European nature has been forced to yield its secrets to the intimate probings of a new experimental European science—especially physical science and natural history—and to release its energies through the inventions of a new mechanical European technology. Other sciences and other technologies were by no means as inferior as these assumptions made out, but the achievements of the ‘Scientific Revolution’ and the ‘Industrial Revolution’ helped to create and calibrate an imaginative distance between a self-consciously modern Europe and the rest of the world. (87-88)

Although Gregory addresses European practices above, such distinctions do not exclude Morrison’s work as she has taken pains to address the conjuncture between Europe and the idea of America. For Morrison, the world of trans-Atlantic slavery surpasses national boundaries.
Thus, the U.S. bears imprints of the “Age of the Enlightenment” and the “Age of Scientific Racism.” Morrison places Thomas Jefferson alongside Hegel, Hume and Kant, in a now relatively familiar assemblage of justifications of the inferiority of Africans (“Site of Memory” 301). To extrapolate from Morrison’s interview with Paul Gilroy, understanding slavery implies “unforgetting” past connections and networks since the United States is “a land where the past is always erased and America is the innocent future in which immigrants can come and start over, where the slate is clean” (Gilroy, “Living Memory” 179). But if the past is erased, as Delano demonstrates in Melville, the skin/the body remains as an index of ongoing discursive operations linked to otherwise effaced past operations.

Morrison pays great attention to what Gregory calls the achievements of “Scientific Revolution” and the “Industrial Revolution.” What is important is how black peoples—emphasis on the plural—enter those revolutions through the transformation from labour-intensive plantation economies that necessitated slave labour, to technology-based operations that also encouraged the growth of urban centres. Morrison plots these distinctions through the opposition of the slaughterhouse in Ohio and the slave farm in Kentucky. While in slavery, all of Morrison’s characters work and live at Sweet Home. But these characters move to Ohio, their livelihoods of her characters are tied to the slaughterhouse (51) where the men find work, and women “worked its yard” as “Saturday girls” (226). The slaughterhouse stands as a symbol with multiple meanings. Consider, for example, the following conversation between Baby Suggs and another character:

“Maybe your people know of somebody looking for help.”

“I be sure to ask, but I know they take women at the slaughterhouse.”

“Doing what?”
“I don’t know.”

“Something men won’t do, I reckon.”

“My cousin say you get all the meat you want, plus twenty-five cents the hour. She make summer sausage.”

Baby Suggs lifted her hand to the top of her head. Money? Money? They would pay her money every single day? Money? (177-78)

This conversation establishes gender differences at the same time that it implicates women in the traffic of and from the slaughterhouse. The transformation from unpaid to paid labour is noted along with the difference between “meat” and “sausage.” These details may seem trivial upon a cursory glance but such inscription of transformation is one of the ways Morrison creates the rhetoric of excess. The abundance of references to industrialised animal production raises the spectres of husbandry as well as industrial progress that mark modernisation and the promise of America. In the face of such abundance in meaning, characters and readers must settle for compromised closures. In other words, characters and readers also act out and become complicit in the forms of epistemic violence the text enumerates:

Pigs were crying in the chute. All day Paul D, Stamp Paid and twenty more had pushed and prodded them from canal to shore to chute to slaughterhouse. Although, as grain farmers moved west, St. Louis and Chicago now ate up a lot of the business, Cincinnati was still the pig port in the minds of the Ohioans. Its main job was to receive, slaughter and ship up the river the hogs that Northerners did not want to live without.

[...]
Usually [Paul D] left his boots in the shed and put his walking shoes on along with his day clothes in the corner before he went home. A route that took him smack through the middle of a cemetery as old as sky, rife with the agitation of dead Miami no longer content to rest in the mounds that covered them. Paul D heard them but stayed on because all in all it wasn’t a bad job, especially in winter when Cincinnati reassumed its status of slaughterhouse and riverboat capital.

(189-90, my emphasis)

The juxtaposition of the irretrievable testimonies of the “crying pigs” and the dead people of the Native American Miami—who were moved from the Ohio Valley to reservations in Kansas and Oklahoma—evokes the common refrain of listening as excavation of knowledge. Similarly, the present slaughter of pigs evokes the past slaughter of the Miami. If Paul D can hear the dead Miami but chooses to remain at the slaughterhouse for economic reasons, the reader must wonder if he “hears” the pigs. I do not want to create a facile analogy between slaughtered pigs and mass death of Native Americans; but invariably, Morrison points to the limits of comprehension through this contrast—as well as through the analogy of treating people as animals. The text evokes the possibility that other undiscovered horrors inhere in the present, in which the reader might be implicated by degrees of removal. Consider the manner in which commercial transactions create networks in the following passage:

The craving for pork was growing into a mania in every city in the country. Pig farmers were cashing in, provided they could raise enough and get them sold farther and farther away. And the Germans who flooded southern Ohio brought and developed swine cooking to its highest form. Pig boats jammed the Ohio River, and their captains’ hollering at one another over the grunts of the stock was
as common a water sound as that of the ducks flying over their heads. Sheep, cows and fowls too floated up and down that river, and all a Negro had to do was show up and there was work: poking, killing, cutting, skinning, case packing and saving offal. (190, my emphasis)

The surfeit of animals, sounds, and verbs of motion in this passage exemplifies Morrison’s tactic of placing humans and animals in an ecology in which readers need to discern the consequences of a character’s place in that system. The words associated with the animals and peoples literally place them in hierarchies. The human beings “hollering” may displace the animal “grunts,” but the ducks “fly” over the humans. Both humans and animals cohabit in the system of water sounds. Apart from the words “pig,” “hog” and “swine” in this passage, the words “sausage” and “hog” form a part of the iterations documenting the movement of pigs through different systems of consumption. This iteration becomes especially important in identifying how people have also been placed in forms of economic and scientific classifications, or are cycled through symbolic registers that enable material actions. It is the discovery of the implications of her presence in Schoolteacher’s accounting of his husbandry that becomes Sethe’s traumatic event. The shock is so great that Sethe cannot articulate but must narrate—to her daughter—as an interior monologue:

This is the first time I’m telling it and I’m telling it to you because it might explain something to you although I know you don’t need me to do it. To tell it or even think it over. You don’t have to listen either, if you don’t want to. But I couldn’t help listening to what I heard that day. He was talking to his pupils and I heard him say, “Which one are you doing?” And one of the boys said, “Sethe.”

That's when I stopped because I heard my name, and then I took a few steps to where I could see what they were doing. (237, my emphasis)

These lines delineate Sethe's discovery of her insertion into slavery's accounting system through tropes of bestiality and scientific racism. Morrison’s use of these tropes is very similar to Melville’s and different from Poe’s. Like Melville and Wright, she shows that the boundary between human and non-human animals is a socially constructed apparatus that is also used in the subjugation of slaves. Melville's differentiation of the ocular and aural appears in Beloved as the opposition of sound to sight, what is written in the ledger versus what Schoolteacher reads out loud, calls attention to Sethe’s inability to read/write and hence, her inability to access written discourses about herself. The inability to read, thus, keeps the slave from participating in and contesting his or her representation in written records. What Sethe hears next becomes of great importance for the course of the novel:

Schoolteacher was standing over one of them with one hand behind his back. He licked a forefinger a couple of times and turned a few pages. Slow. I was about to turn around and keep on my way to where the muslin was, when I heard him say, “No, no. That’s not the way. I told you to put her human characteristics on the left; her animal ones on the right. And don’t forget to line them up.” I commenced to walk backward, didn’t even look behind me to find out where I was headed. I just kept lifting my feet and pushing back. When I bumped up against a tree my scalp was prickly. One of the dogs was licking out a pan in the yard. I got to the grape arbor fast enough, but I didn’t have the muslin. Flies settled all over your face, rubbing their hands. My head itched like the devil. Like someone was sticking fine needles in my scalp. (237-38, my emphasis)
Reading this scene, Erik Dussere explains: “By having Schoolteacher delineate Sethe’s supposed human and animal attributes, Morrison renders explicit the ability of accounting to assert equivalencies between human slave and animal livestock” (344). Dussere’s examination of the economics of slavery explains the connections between slavery in capitalist modernity and the later entry of former slaves into wage labour that weaves through Morrison’s novel.16

The use of animals in the passage also exceeds the critique of the accounting system. The scene establishes reference to sensations in Sethe’s head that recur each times she revisits her infanticide. In both later repetitions, hummingbirds appear to stick needles into her hair (200, 322) as she rushes to the act. Sethe’s actions are a critique of scientific racism and the discourse of speciesism: Sethe only overhears Schoolteacher’s conversation because she needs the “muslin” to protect her baby from “bugs and things” (237). But whereas her maternal love and intellect separate her from those very “bugs,” Schoolteacher folds her into the same category with animals. The “flies” and the “dog” perform the function of isolating the ideological functions of Schoolteacher’s speech. If Sethe, the “flies” and the “dog” exist as organisms, it is Schoolteacher’s words that align them through his inventory. There is some excess in meaning created through the associations between the words lick and licking, hand and hands. These associations not only align Schoolteacher with the dog and the flies. Sethe’s positioning between these juxtapositions, as the observer, also undoes the classification Schoolteacher seeks to impose upon her.

In their introduction to Race, Nature, and the Politics of Difference, Moore, Pandian and Kosek elaborate upon the contestations of nature coupled to race in the pursuit of politics of differentiation and exclusion:
Nature is not merely the material environment, nor is race merely a problem of social relations. Race and nature are both material and symbolic. They reach across this imagined divide, acting at once through bodies and metaphors. Natural character is written into discourse and expression but is also worked into flesh and landscape. Racialized discourses mark both living beings and geographical territories with the force of their distinctions. We take both race and nature as historical artifacts: assemblages of material, discourse, and practice irreducible to a universal essence. Imagined as an ontological foundation, nature has served as the generative terrain from which assertions of essence emerge. Nature appears to precede history, even as it wipes away the historical traces of its own fashioning. Race provides a critical medium through which ideas of nature operate, even as racialized forces rework the ground of nature itself. Working together, race and nature legitimate particular forms of political representation, reproduce social hierarchies, and authorize violent exclusions—often transforming contingent relations into eternal necessities. (2-3)

Moore and his collaborators anchor, in this passage, the crucial operations that take place at the conjuncture of race and nature that I have been examining in Melville, Poe, Wright and Morrison. Morrison investigates the connections of race and nature especially in terms of economic relations that survive slavery. In order to reveal the pernicious reworkings of these interrelations of race and nature, Morrison stages contests of race and nature in different registers or by plotting contests of meaning production, as in the passage below in which Paul D compares his life under the benign slavery of his first master, Garner, to the rigours and racism of the second master, Schoolteacher:
He [Paul D] grew up thinking that, of all the Blacks in Kentucky, only five of them were men. Allowed, encouraged to correct Garner, even defy him. To invent ways of doing things; to see what was needed and attack it without permission. To buy a mother [out of slavery], choose a horse or a wife, handle guns, even learn reading if they wanted to—but they didn’t want to since nothing important to them could be put down on paper.

[...] He [Garner] thought they had merit, and what they said he felt was serious. Deferring to his slaves’ opinions did not deprive him of authority or power. It was Schoolteacher who taught them otherwise. A truth that waved like a scarecrow in rye: they were only Sweet Home men at Sweet Home [the farm]. One step off that ground and they were trespassers among the human race. Watchdogs without teeth; steer bulls without horns; gelded workhorses whose neigh and whinny could not be translated into a language responsible humans spoke. (154-55)

The difference between the benign master, Garner, and the wicked, Schoolteacher, is that the former accords the slaves humanity by listening to them and heeding their advice (154), whereas Schoolteacher dismisses the slave’s speech. In other words, the “benign” slave master practises a culture of benevolence—like the humanitarian Delano—by according a degree of humanity to the slave. The “malevolent” master dispenses with such benevolence in a form of dismissal—of speech—that translates the slave’s speech into the unintelligible “neigh and whinny” of animals. This relationship to the slave’s speech can be read as a sign of proximity to the aural realm. Melville’s Delano embodies and demonstrates the polarities of empathy and distance—or
benevolence and malevolence—through his transformation from his arrival to his departure. In the texts by Poe and Wright, these positions are split between characters. For Poe, Dupin and the sailor embody the polarities. In *Native Son*, Wright offers an even more complex schema. A plethora of characters, such as the Daltons, Jan Erlone, Max the lawyer, and the black minister fulfil the functions of benevolence. The “malevolence” resides, then, in restrictive economic and political structures and not in one single character. In spite of the simple opposition between Garner and Schoolteacher, Morrison reveals complex structures in a manner similar to Wright’s. Garner’s benevolence is similar to Delano’s humanitarianism since it does “not deprive him of authority or power” on the farm (154). In fact, the benevolence only exists in a specifically determined space that is “outside” Kentucky’s racial codes. The slave farm Sweet Home could be read in analogy to Melville’s zone of indeterminacy; Schoolteacher’s arrival “realigns” Sweet Home with the prevailing order in Kentucky.

Schoolteacher’s reordering of life on Sweet Home occurs principally through the assertion of a new division between sight and sound. The concatenation of sight, speech, literacy, masculinity, spatial boundaries and forms of recognition, in lines quoted above, make this passage one of the most important in *Beloved*. The masculinity of Garner’s slaves rests on the fact that he “joins” their aural realm by listening to them. Within that specific realm, the slaves are allowed to “see what was needed and [to] attack it without [asking for Garner’s] permission” (154, my emphasis). In other words, Garner’s slaves are allowed to see because he has given permission. But as the subsequent paragraph reveals, those slaves do not see the very apparent “truth” beyond their defined space—even thought that “truth [. . . ] waved like a scarecrow in rye” (154). The slaves, like Delano, do not see that which Garner’s benevolence occludes. In the first paragraph, the slave’s insistence that “nothing important to them could be
put down on paper” is an ironic statement documenting their ignorance since Schoolteacher does subsequently put everything that is important about them down on paper (237). Schoolteacher’s name does simply underline his function as the character who teaches Garner’s slaves the proper order of things. The appellation highlights the relationship between literacy and knowledge of that same proper order of things. This crucial relationship between literary and knowledge installs written knowledge as the knowledge of the dominant hierarchy. Orality and illiteracy remain, thus, symptomatic of a subdued position in the aural realm. The last lines of the quote show precisely the limited participation of Garner’s slaves in the aural realm. The “unintelligibility” of their speech aligns them with nonhuman animals whose sole importance lies in their functions as beasts of burden, labour, and reproduction.

**Gender and the Speech of the Severed Head**

Like *Native Son*, *Beloved* includes a search for a space outside of the human-animal dichotomy by juxtaposing the metaphoric associations attached to animals and the forms of action respective connections allow. Morrison undertakes a much more exhaustive dismantling of the binary “human versus beast” than Wright. The rat surfaces in *Beloved*, too, to map out the spaces of incarceration Sethe inhabits after her infanticide (52, 225). In those scenes of captivity, as in Wright’s novel, the incarcerated inhabits both the material space of the prison as well as the symbolic space of social exclusion through the association with vermin. Morrison does not simply insert one animal into the discursive frames of scientific racism and other generic tropes of bestiality. She makes the work of those tropes visible by drawing attention to their multiple registers. In its most obvious application, Sethe’s infanticide establishes her difference from animals. Even more importantly, Morrison extends imagery to whites: “Slavery [. . .] made them crazy. You can’t do something like that for hundreds of years and it not take a toll. They had to
dehumanize, not just the slaves but themselves. They had to reconstruct everything in order to make that system appear true” (“Living Memory” 178). The implication is that the implementation of regimes of racialisation or the dehumanisation of others makes the controlling subjects animals too:

White people believed that whatever the manners, under every dark skin was a jungle. Swift navigable waters, swinging screaming baboons, sleeping snakes, red gums ready for their sweet white blood. [...] The more coloured people spent their strength trying to convince them how gentle they were, how clever and loving, how human, the more they used themselves up to persuade whites of something Negroes believed could not be questioned, the deeper and more entangled the jungle grew inside. But it wasn’t the jungle blacks brought with them to this place from the other (liveable) place. It was the jungle white folks planted in them. And it grew. It spread. In, through and after life, it spread, until it invaded the whites who had made it. Touched them every one. [...] The screaming baboon lived under their own white skin; the red gums were their own.

This passage voices the ideological work of bestiality and tropes of nature in marking the black skin as a site of aberration; it also reverses the trope to characterise the actions of whites while demystifying the black skin. The persecution of slaves and ex-slaves consequently becomes visible as inhuman. Morrison extends this critique particularly to isolate the ways in which former slaves are placed in the same categories as prey, or as part of nature’s food chain, during their flight from the South: “Nobody could make it alone. Not only because trappers picked
them off like buzzards or netted them like rabbits, but also because you couldn’t run if you didn’t know how to go” (166).

But the most important critiques of bestiality occur by offsetting the dominant patterns of signification with counter-discursive tropes. The most significant of these critiques appears as Morrison’s gendering of the relationship to nonhuman animals. Thus, if white and black male characters interact with animals in agricultural terms (as beasts of burden) or in commercial terms (as property), the Sethe exhibits a sense of continuity between the human and nonhuman. In particular, she exhibits a caution and attention towards animals—outside of industrial animal processing—who often act as carriers of perceptions that escape humans. Sethe’s vigilance in her use of nonhuman animals could be a result of the words she overhears from schoolteacher. Sethe’s alertness is noticeable, for example, in the interaction with the dogs behind her workplace:

Paul D blew warm breath into the hollow of his cupped hands. The wind raced down the alley so fast it sleeked the fur of four kitchen dogs waiting for scraps. He looked at the dogs. The dogs looked at him. Finally the back door opened and Sethe stepped through holding a scrap pan in the crook of her arm.

[...]

“Man, you make me feel like a girl, coming by to pick me up after work. Nobody ever did that before. You better watch out, I might start looking forward to it.” She tossed the largest bones into the dirt rapidly so the dogs would know there was enough and not fight each other. Then she dumped the skins of some things,
heads of other things and the insides of still more things—what the restaurant could not use and she would not—into a smoking pile near the animals’ feet. [...]
The dogs ate without sound and Paul D thought they at least got what they came for, and if she had enough for them— (156-57, my emphasis)

In this passage, Paul D actually occupies the symbolic space of the dogs: the wind that makes him cold sleeks the dogs’ fur. When Sethe dumps the discards on the “smoking pile,” the switch from “dogs” to “animals” introduces an ambiguity that includes Paul D in the ensuing symbolic space. Once the dogs start to eat, Paul D dismisses them from the symbolic space “since they at least” get what they want. If the soundless dogs are made to speak Paul D’s plight, they are also made to carry his anguish and their task reveals carrying—the task of mediating—as a site of ventriloquism, a painful task. The actual dogs remain but the carrion, discarded at their feet, indicate in concrete terms Paul D’s symbolic state that is ventriloquised through the dogs. What we have, in other words, is a cohabitation of the symbolic and material presence of animals. This union of carriers, carrying and carrion captures the essence of the function of animals in *Beloved*—they reveal the embeddedness of the symbolic in material social transactions. The absence of “sound” from the dogs accentuates the function of sound for human characters in the novel.

The conjunction of the symbolic and the material that occurs in the alley scene with the dogs is valuable in understanding the meanings of Sethe’s infanticide. For the black community, Sethe’s pursuit of emancipatory politics through the destruction of black life amounts to denigration of black life. This usurpation of power over life and the preparedness to embrace tyranny to overcome tyranny removes Sethe from the black community. She becomes an
embodiment of the terror of oppression because she exercises the prerogative of the oppressor. Stamp Paid, one of the novel’s prominent characters, summarises the crucial issues: “She ain’t crazy. She love those children. She was trying to outhurt the hurter” (288). But Stamp Paid is a solitary voice in the novel’s black community. Other characters interpret Sethe’s act as an exhibition of degeneracy. Paul D introduces this latter concern in reaction to Sethe’s infanticide: “You’ve got two feet, Sethe, not four” (202). Paul D, however, does grasp the larger nature of the infanticide:

This here Sethe was new. The ghost in her house didn’t bother her for the very same reason a room-and-board witch with new shoes [Beloved] was welcome. This here Sethe talked about love like any other woman; talked about baby clothes like any other woman, but what she meant could cleave the bone. This here Sethe talked about safety with a handsaw. This here Sethe didn’t know where the world stopped and she began. (201-202)

Paul D echoes, in this passage, a similar statement made by a white character when Sethe’s infanticide is discovered (184). In both statements, Sethe becomes a superhuman instance through her act. Sethe’s love marks her extraordinary status in the novel.

Whereas Bigger is captured and incarcerated, Sethe’s flight turns into a withdrawal into a secluded space where she performs the act to “stop slavery” in its tracks: “By the time she faced him, looked him dead in the eye, she had something in her arms that stopped him in his tracks. He took a backward step with each jump of the baby heart until finally there were none” (201). The act can be read as an instance of monstration—the showing forth of an entity beyond human comprehension. The sight of Sethe and the bleeding children is, in effect, an occurrence that the white men (Schoolteacher, his nephew and the slave catcher) cannot comprehend or articulate
because it lies outside the realm of responses they expect. This is, in effect, a scene of subjection for Schoolteacher and his men. The backward gait of the men recalls Sethe’s similar retreat from the scene with Schoolteacher:

Schoolteacher beat his hat against his thigh and spit before leaving the woodshed. Nephew and the catcher backed out with him. They didn’t look at the woman in the pepper plants with the flower in her hat. [...] Enough nigger eyes for now.

Little nigger-boy eyes open in sawdust; little nigger-girl eyes staring between the wet fingers that held her face so her head wouldn’t fall off: little nigger-baby eyes crinkling up to cry in the arms of the old nigger whose own eyes were nothing but slivers looking down at her feet. But the worst ones were those of the nigger woman who looked like she didn’t have any. Since the whites in them had disappeared and since they were as black as her skin, she looked blind. (185, my emphasis)

The concern to keep the severed head from falling off is one difference between this description and the scenes in Poe and Wright. However, like Wright, Morrison provides a surfeit of cutting objects that include “a shovel,” an “ax” and the “saw” Sethe uses on her children, in the shed (194). There are other similarities: Schoolteacher’s speechlessness and his nephew’s incoherent stammering and repetition, “What she go and do that for?” (185). Morrison invokes here the figure of Medusa. Beloved’s severed head becomes the object that “petrifies” Schoolteacher and pushes him back. The text is replete with allusions to Medusa, the gorgons and beheadings, particularly whenever reference is made to the hair of the women of 124. The most apparent evocation occurs when Sethe recognises her returned daughter:
It was then, when Beloved finished humming, that Sethe recalled the click—the settling of pieces into places designed and made especially for them. [...] She simply turned her head and looked at Beloved’s profile: the chin, mouth, nose, forehead, copied and exaggerated in the huge shadow the fire threw on the wall behind her. Her hair, which Denver had braided into twenty or thirty plaits, curved toward her shoulders like arms. (215)

The myth of the Gorgons is one of female power, since mortals could not contemplate their countenances without turning to stone. Susan Bowers suggests that the mythological figure of Medusa is a feature of the contemporary grotesque, which challenges patriarchal symbols through its incorporation of horror. Horror “momentarily enforces the dissipation of all meaning—in the face of horror, the subject confronts Nothingness itself—it enables the construction of new meaning. Empowered by fear, the individual can imagine new realities when the existing symbolic world proves insufficient” (21). Reading the isolation of the three women of 124 as an account of the three Gorgons provides a symbolic backdrop that lends a wider scope to Morrison’s writing of the severed head. The reiteration of the decapitated head with braided hair imbues it with psychic power that Wright drains from his account. Doreen Fowler points out that Morrison invokes the Medusa myth, and contends that the arrival of the hummingbirds is the textual representation of the Medusa image (146). Thus, Morrison counters one mythical account with another, and perhaps more effectively, the Medusa myth writes a story of ascendancy for the slave.

The final significant aspect of Beloved is the black community’s uprising against the physical materialisation of Beloved. While the allusions to the gorgons demonstrate a female solidarity and Sethe’s special epistemological position, the arrival of the black community to
repel the physical ghost constitutes an exercise of communal juridical power to tame the excess of horror: "As long as the ghost showed out from its ghostly place—shaking stuff, crying and smashing and such—Ella respected it. But if it took flesh and came into her world, well, the shoe was on the other foot. She didn’t mind a little communication between the two worlds, but this was an invasion" (314). The coincidental arrival of the black women with former abolitionist Edward Bodwin—Denver’s new employer—restages the arrival of the slave catchers that prompts Sethe’s infanticide. In this second encounter, Sethe directs her rage at the white man and is saved from committing a second murder by the black women. Notice the difference between the following passages. The first describes Sethe’s actions as the slave catchers arrive. The second describes Sethe’s reaction to the perceived threat against her daughter after Beloved returns:

She was squatting in the garden and when she saw them coming and recognized Schoolteacher’s hat, she heard wings. Little hummingbirds stuck their needle beaks right through her headcloth into her hair and beat their wings. And if she thought anything, it was No. No. Nono. Nonono. Simple she just flew. Collected every bit of life she had made, all the parts of her that were precious and fine and beautiful, and carried, pushed, dragged them through the veil, out, away, over there where no one could hurt them. Over there. Outside this place, where they would be safe. (200)

It is when she lowers her eyes to look again at the loving faces that she sees him. Guiding the mare, slowing down, his black hat wide-brimmed enough to hide his face but not his purpose. He is coming into her yard and he is coming for her best thing. She hears wings. Little hummingbirds stick needle beaks right through her
headcloth into her hair and beat their wings. And if she thinks anything, it is no.

No no. Nonono. She flies. The ice pick is not in her hand; it is her hand. (322)

The striking difference is Sethe's ability to make herself into a weapon. Notice also that both sides of the unspoken conflict move. Sethe redirects her rage and relinquishes her extra-judicial undertaking. The black women move to control her actions. This recognition of both institutionalised white terror and the terror of Sethe's action is a resolution that revises the sequences of pacifications and executions in Poe, Melville and Wright. In Poe and Melville, the ape and Babo fail at two endeavours: they attempt, but fail, to "do deeds" and also are not able to voice their grounds for revolt. Bigger and Sethe succeed in doing both with serious consequences for their respective communities.

In the end, the most important aspect of Beloved is not the ex-slave's journey to voice. Rather, Beloved stages the ways in which the ex-slave is now very much part of the order that oppresses her. Melville's Babo passes into silence and death, Poe's ape passes into the zoo, and Wright's Bigger passes into the prison system on his way to his execution. Morrison stresses the former slave's paradoxical loss of "innocence" through the passage from unwaged labourer to waged labourer. The wage earner becomes complicit in the same capitalist modernity the slave decries—hence the importance of the slaughterhouse. The nonhuman animals remain, consequently, the only "participants" trapped in their status. The importance of the passage into waged labour is also apparent in Sethe's repeated attack. Whereas the slave catchers come to enforce unwaged labour, the community's intervention prevents another murder and enables Denver's passage into employment. This passage complicates the emergence of any single story in Beloved.
When I think about prose, I find myself always looking somehow to redress historical events, or re-address historical facts, as well as trying to create characters who can communicate with the audience. This comes from an awareness of the debased, undervalued and misunderstood historical position from which we have all emerged. People don’t understand. I want to look back at historical events and, at the same time, entertain people and make them think. I want to make them realize that the history of what happened on the west coast of Africa in the eighteenth century is at least as interesting and vibrant as the history of what was happening on the east coast of the United States or in England at the same time, although only the white history has been written up to any extent.

(Caryl Phillips, qtd. in Birbalsingh 193-94)
Introduction

Sound, Geography & the Order of Things

Whereas there are many allusions to imperial geographies that include Africa and Europe in Poe, Melville, Wright and Morrison, the actual topographies of these continents are virtually absent. Those absent topographies are only present as transmuted figural forms that accompany the fashioning of social exclusions during slavery in the aftermath of emancipation. Slavery, the failure of Reconstruction, and the plight of African Americans in the Northern U.S. appear in the works of those authors as operations of colonisation predicated upon racial difference. This difference is connected surreptitiously to Africa and other overseas exploits but the continent itself remains absent. Thus, the representations of “colonising moments” that appear in those narratives explain American facets of the encounter with capitalist modernity. In this chapter, I want to read three novels by Caryl Phillips alongside those American authors to show how the forms of exclusion and “colonisation” discussed in the previous chapters are part of larger processes.

West Africa represents, in Phillips’s novels, a critical scene for the investigation into what he terms the “debased, undervalued and misunderstood historical position” from which people of the African Diaspora have emerged (qtd. in Birbalsingh 193). Phillips’s exploration is manifest in three successive novels, Higher Ground (1989), Cambridge (1991) and Crossing the River (1993). Events in West Africa, in these novels, are facets of a far-flung European enterprise in which Africans play a losing hand. Phillips’s narrative strategy is best understood, following Edward Said, as mapping contrapuntal geographies. Not only are incidents in West Africa juxtaposed with others in Europe and the Americas, but the novels are also written as a series of contrasting novellas. The plots of these narratives, however, appear to succeed one
another in the sense that they could be read as continuations of the same story in a different place and at a different time.

The novella “Heartland” (Higher Ground) challenges notions of an originary African idyll by depicting the passage of an African from differing degrees of freedom to slavery in the West; the narrative of Cambridge (Cambridge) describes an African character’s efforts to obtain the promises of the Enlightenment; and “The Pagan Coast” (Crossing the River) asserts that, for hyphenated Africans, a journey to West Africa is not a return in any form—the continent is simply another theatre of migration and Africans are not relatives of hyphenated Africans. The prologue to Crossing the River features an ageless African who looks back from African contemporaneity to condemn his part in the sale and enslavement of his children:

There are no paths in water. No signposts. There is no return. To a land trampled by the muddy boots of others. To a people encouraged to war among themselves. To a father consumed with guilt. You are beyond. Broken-off, like limbs from a tree. But not lost, for you carry within your bodies the seeds of new trees. Sinking your hopeful roots into difficult soil. And I, who spurned you, can only blame myself for my present misery. For two hundred and fifty years I have waited patiently for the wind to rise on the far bank of the river. For the drum to pound across the water. For the chorus to swell. Only then, if I listen closely, can I discover my lost children. A brief, painful communion. A desperate foolishness. The crops failed. I sold my children. (1-2)

In this passage, the sea is a zone of indeterminate relations between parts of the diaspora. This notion of indeterminacy runs through Phillips’s explorations of the legacies of the transatlantic slave trade. The Atlantic is a naming device for these complex relations that are refracted
through histories of different local sites. These associations with the ocean are most observable in the book-length travel essay, *The Atlantic Sound* (2000), where he documents—and, in part, orchestrates—dialogues between parts of the diaspora. The sea connotes diverse memories of the diaspora and Phillips charts the disjunctures as well as the convergences in those memories. In fact, in *The Atlantic Sound*, Phillips shows how the Atlantic is not only a space of the black diaspora but also a space of transnational capital and larger exchanges. In a sense, the three novels—*Higher Ground*, *Cambridge*, and *Crossing the River*—anticipate the explicit turn to sound in the title of the travel-essay. The African father announces that the only relations between Africa and the children exist in an aural imaginary that is created through conversations and the practice of listening. To use Chambers’s term, these conversations form “lines of listening” in the diaspora. The turn to sound does not negate the existence of concrete lines of exchange. Rather, it points to the simultaneity of concrete connections and non-material economies that nevertheless structure diasporan lives. Phillips’s use of sound could therefore be read productively alongside Poe, Melville, Wright and Morrison. The capacity to apprehend and decipher the diaspora’s sounds forms the basis for solidarity and humanitarian action in Phillips’s fiction.

The simultaneity of the non-material and the concrete is used to effect in the African father’s monologue. Although he announces the absence of paths in water, he does not address the ships that do cross the water. This “silence” is not a repudiation of concrete ties as much as it is an affirmation of “Africa’s” specific material concerns. The continent appears as the “land trampled by the muddy boots of others,” land inhabited by “a people encouraged to war among themselves” (1). These references to the continent’s encounters with colonial powers and its subsequent decolonisation struggles separate it from other spheres of the diaspora. But at the
same time, the ability to hear the sounds—if read in tandem with the use of sound on Melville’s
ship and in Beloved—allows the strategic mobilisation of common political action. The absence
of ships—that figure in the work of previous authors—from the African father’s monologue
indicates, then, that the ship is only important for the diasporan characters who enter their
present place through that vessel.

But the use of sound is not only juxtaposed to concrete material practices. Sound is also
used in counterpoint to writing. The opposition of orality and literacy already flickers in Poe and
Melville and is made explicit in Morrison and Wright. This opposition becomes much more
important in Phillips’s explicitly colonial settings where writing is made to stand synecdochically
for the coloniser’s fashioning of “history.” To be absent from writing, or to be simply the object
of the coloniser’s writing, is also to enter “history” from a “debased” position (Birbalsingh 193).
The sounds are thus lodes of alternative histories that are only intelligible to those cued into
those alternate paths or linguistic systems. Phillips stresses this persistent conjoint nature of
writing/orality as the pervasiveness of power/oppression by setting his fiction upon the previous
texts concerned with the imbrications of literacy, literary production and the work of empire. He
reterritorialises the characters in J. M. Coetzee’s Waiting for the Barbarians and Joseph
Conrad’s Heart of Darkness, who are caught in the Manichean economies of colonial ventures.

As Bénédicte Ledent points out, a wide range of implicit and explicit intertextual
references enriches Phillips’s fiction (6-16). The fact that Ledent devotes the first chapter of her
monograph on this writer to his “contexts and intertexts” indicates his wide-ranging influences
and references (1-16). Phillips’s novels abound with intertextual references but Conrad and
Coetzee are particularly vital as they underline important thematic and formal concerns in
Phillips’s novels. The protagonists of Conrad and Coetzee are compromised figures who journey
to the limits of empire and return with narratives. Both allegories of colonial adventures draw attention to the literary legacy and discursive practices of imperialism. In particular, they demonstrate manners in which representing is praxis, by foregrounding what Derek Gregory identifies as the “acutely physical ways” in which “power, knowledge and geography are drawn together” (“Imaginative Geographies” 452). Colonial agents in both intertexts produce and maintain distinctions between themselves and the colonised through the abstraction of space into complex grids of power and domination. Above all, they consign the (African) “native” to a space at the end of a journey and posit a metaphysical difference of natives that legitimates their subsequent oppression.

Phillips’s choice of Conrad also articulates the pivotal argument that colonialism in Africa was the other and later face of the European modernity that spawned the trans-Atlantic slave trade. The Africans in these novels encounter a different face of the Enlightenment. Phillips’s words in his introduction to a recent edition of Heart of Darkness can be read as the program notes for his fictions of West Africa. Here, Phillips emphasises the three separate journeys that unfold in Conrad’s novella, the circularity of the narrative that turns upon itself because of its complexity, and the forms of silence that exist in the narrative (xvi-vii). Above all, Phillips insists “Conrad’s writing prepares us for a new world in which modern man has had to endure the psychic and physical pain of displacement, and all the concomitant confusion of watching imagined concrete standards become mutable” (xvi). This mutability is an abiding feature of Phillips’s novels. And its significance is that in the face of such all-encompassing instability, it becomes impossible to ignore how the security of certain characters is only consolidated upon the exploitation of other characters. Further, in the midst of such instability,
the value of constructs such as race, class, gender and all other forms of difference are thrown into relief—as they function to align characters into courses of relative stability or instability.

In what follows, I examine how Phillips weaves narratives of diasporan mobilities into the subtexts of Coetzee and Conrad in order to replace binaries that sustain the colonial encounter, with a range of subject positions. In a sense, the figure of the unknowable other figured as slave or animal in the previous chapters becomes further complicated in these “African” narratives by the figure of the “native” as that which precedes the slave. But whereas Africa—in its physicality and as a concrete space of encounter—remains absent and is only prefigured through race in the American authors, the topography and physicality of the continent are vitally present in Phillips. The discourses of race, nature, and subjugation that Phillips portrays are irremediably yoked to the space. The appearance of the “native” and the production of competing spaces of encounter are the two essential and circuitously related components of the West African geographies in all three narratives. “Heartland” has no rooted natives but there is a surfeit of radically unhinged characters. Cambridge’s testimonial and “The Pagan Coast” are devoted to the differentiation of Western black identities from the abnegated blackness of African characters in colonialist representations. The central black characters in the narratives, both Christianised and manumitted slaves, employ the discourse of difference to distinguish themselves from Africans who become “natives.”

**Translating “Heartland”**

*Waiting for the Barbarians* revolves around encounters between colonisers and the colonised in an anonymous frontier. The title recalls most directly Constantin Cavafy’s poem “Waiting for the Barbarians.” Judie Newman points out that the novel is also closely modelled on Dino Buzzatti’s *Il Deserto Dei Tartari (The Tartar Steppe)*, published in 1945 (Newman 85).
The crucial aspect of the poem and the novel that relates to Coetzee's narrative is that the empire manufactures its others through terror. Like *Heart of Darkness*, Coetzee's novel features a protracted journey to (and return from) the limits of empire. It is these journeys in particular that display the space of the colonised as a world "at the boundaries of 'civilization,'" a world that has not (yet) been domesticated by European signification or codified in detail by its ideology or even by its spatial demarcation. That world is therefore perceived as uncontrollable, chaotic, unattainable, and ultimately evil" (JanMohamed 64). A magistrate in this isolated border post of an empire witnesses the horrors perpetrated upon "the barbarians," and he is moved to compassion for a tortured girl. His subsequent actions bring him into conflict with the empire. The novel's last page has the magistrate writing a history of the outpost and voicing a desire that the barbarians will "transculturate" into subjects of the empire, once they come in contact with its commodities, technologies and superior means of production (*Waiting* 155).

The significance of Coetzee's novel as an intertext lies in his remarkable demonstration of the production and subjugation of the other through brutal force. The violence of the colonising moment can be distinguished, as it is, from the production of cultural rationales for that violence. In Coetzee's novel—as in Cavafy's poem of the same title—the Empire must have its other and, in the absence of ready enemies, the other must be produced to justify the task of defending the Empire. This singular exemplification of the process of othering is so compellingly demonstrated that Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin place Coetzee's novel under the entry for "othering" in their book *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts*:

In *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980), South African novelist J. M. Coetzee demonstrates the ways in which imperial discourse constructs its others in order to confirm its own reality. In this novel, the magistrate who tells the story is situated
at the edge of the "empire" conducting the humdrum business of the outpost in relative tranquillity, until Colonel Joll, a functionary of the "Third Bureau", the secret police arrives to extract, by torture, any information about the "barbarians" that can be gathered from a ragtag collection of old men, women and children who are "captured" on a prisoner-gathering foray. The fact that the whole enterprise is absurd because there is no threat from the barbarians, a nomadic people who come to town from time to time to trade, and there was no "border troubles" before the arrival of the "Third Bureau" ... does not deter Colonel Joll. For the Colonel is in the business of creating the enemy, of delineating that opposition that must exist, in order that the empire might define itself by its geographical and racial othering. ... The Colonel is engaged in a process by which the empire can define itself against those it colonizes, excludes and marginalizes. It locates its "others" by this process in the pursuit of that power within which its own subjectivity is established. (173)

But it is not the "border troubles" that are manufactured. The "border" itself is a product of the demarcation of the topography, the presence of an outpost, and a governing apparatus. The important point in these details about Coetzee's novel is the coexistence of concrete and figurative practices in othering. Or, to put my point differently, I underline the connection between subjugation and subjection. Phillips's rewriting of Waiting for the Barbarians repeats the processes of othering and subjugation through brutal force, the romantic tryst and the journey motif of its intertext. But the crucial and very momentous difference between Coetzee and Phillips's fiction is that the othering is not simply a statement of difference for Phillips, but a practice "necessary" for the slave trade. This reworking sheds light on my readings in the
previous chapters; the operations in Phillips's novels can be read as precursory stages to the acts of concealment in Poe and Melville. Since these operations are, in part, spatial practices, Phillips—like Morrison and Wright—subjects movements across space to intense scrutiny. West Africa is a borderland—a space in which subjectivities are interwoven with practices of (horizontal and hierarchical) mobility as well as politics of difference and presence. Geraldine Pratt captures these complexly interrelated themes:

Borderlands seem to me the most provocative [metaphor] for thinking through politics of difference and presence, perhaps because the focus is shifted from the individual to a socially constructed place in which difference and conflict is constructed and lived. Borders are saturated with inequality, domination, forced exclusion . . . ; they are social and political constructions that are used to construct differences. But they are also relational places where individuals live and construct themselves in relation to each other. (171)

I want to underline Pratt’s emphasis on the location of subjects in geography and the relational nature of places. This geography of shifting and conflicting boundaries moves beyond the limitations of exile or margin to show how difference is compounded with commonality. Not only do multiple axes of power and domination interpolate all characters— OPPRESSORS AS WELL AS OPPRESSED—these characters are also displaced because the European presence on the coast radically changes existing African and European hegemonies and practices. These complex cultural conflicts are displayed in spatial terms on the coast. While the African village and the European slave fort map out end points in this territorialisation of upheaval, a no-man’s land between the stations marks a grey zone that is under constant negotiation. This triad creates the space of in-betweenness that is absent from Phillips’s colonialist intertexts.
The existence of such a fractured geography does not, however, rebut the persistence of the metaphysical space of the Other. What is interesting is that the text draws attention to the quality of this space as a discursive structure articulated by the fort governor who claims to know the narrator’s people “in their feral state” (51). In the spatial economy of “Heartland” this condition is not consigned to any specific location but remains purely discursive, as the abstract position of “abject barbarity” from which the abilities to read and write distance the narrator (52). The fort governor introduces the key elements of European civilization that are used as instruments to write Africans as outside of culture and as part of nature. In explaining the “feral state” of Africans, he explains that “their near state of perfect nakedness, their baseness of tongue, and the ignorance of Christianity makes it reasonably obvious that they can never be happy until they have digested some of the basic lessons of [European] civilization” (51).

West Africa is produced through these discourses as a place with “hellish climate . . . at the edge of the world,” where the rules of “fine society” are suspended (31). Instead, a Darwinian natural order supersedes social order (31). To return again to my previous chapters, I want to suggest that Phillips’s explorations of the use of evolutionary theories in the colonial encounter complement the work of Richard Wright and Toni Morrison; Phillips shows the workings of such theories in the tropical scenes in Africa to which Morrison and Wright only allude in their reworking of bestiality. West Africa could also be compared to the spaces of indeterminacy in the American texts. While Delano and Dupin suppress indeterminacy and Bigger and Sethe seek to reveal it, Phillips plots zones of indeterminacy and zones of established social orders side by side. What becomes important are the changes that occur in the lives of characters crossing into these zones. In West Africa, indeterminacy and the inversion of social conventions are permanent and necessary states of crisis that support the brutal practices on the
coast. Both the village and the fort possess and maintain respective internal ecologies of power and domination. The complex structures within them are revealed as a succession of mise-en-abîmes. The no-man’s land is both boundary and passageway between the cultures and hegemonies of the village and the fort.

The trajectories of two African characters contest the governor’s statement of an abject metaphysical difference, and reveal his hypothesis of a “feral state” to be part of a discourse that naturalises “particular ways of being in [producing] and acting in the World” (Gregory, “Nature” 86). The ferality of the Africans characterises them as wild, untamed animals/plants, or even as uncultivated ground. In his worldview, the governor thus folds Africans into nature. This European view is, of course, contested by the view from the African village. The plight of the chief’s daughter—who is sexually abused by the officer, Price, then is returned to her village but cast out by the community—demonstrates the point that characters are never reintegrated into the village’s social fabric once they have been in the Fort (45-46). The narrator has suffered a similar fate as a social outcast. Thus, after the European officer has her returned to the village, the narrator rescues her and initiates their romantic union. Together, their journeys between the fort and the village disclose how discursive formations construct Africans as part of nature and not culture.

The references to the environment in Phillips’s novels rework crude eighteenth- and nineteenth-century discourses of environmental determinism, one of the cultural underpinnings with which Europeans legitimised the abuse of Africans. In The Problem of Nature, David Arnold explains the imbrications of different productions of “nature” with European expansion and European determinations of what culture is. Arnold is concerned with environmental history and the historical significance of changes in the ways the environment is invoked in the course of
"growing European economic, political and environmental dominance over the rest of the world." (8). Like Moore and his collaborators, Arnold examines the production of nature. But he focuses on its production at the actual frontiers of European expansion, so that the physicality of the spaces of encounter is brought into his account. In Arnold’s study, nature is actively produced within various forms of the “environmental paradigm” (10). This paradigm, as Arnold explains it, encompasses “a wide range of interpretative options” (11). In its narrowest sense, it states that the environment in form of climate and topography, but sometimes also of disease or other “natural” hazards, dictates the physical and mental characteristics of a society, its modes of subsistence, its cultural life and political institutions. It even determines whether a society is able to scale the heights of civilization or is confined to the depths of savagery and barbarism. (10)

This sense of environmental influence on societies is invoked to create and maintain forms of alterity. In this sense, the topography and climate of a place are summoned to explain differences between peoples as “explanatory mechanism[s] in times of rapidly widening geographical horizons or intensified inter-ethnic contact resulting from trade, migration, conquest and colonization” (12). At the core of this set of relationships between geography and human contact—a dynamic that often plays out as the battle between nature and culture—are processes of subordination and exploitation:

The environmentalist paradigm has thus served to articulate not only the kind of historically and culturally constructed relationship between humankind and nature that has been the subject of so much environmental history but also a relationship of actual or incipient power and authority between one set of human
beings and another. If one reason why environmental ideas have been repeatedly invoked has been the attempt to find a coherent pattern in the course of human history—to give it an underlying structure and to see it as more than a random sequence of events—another has been to find an appropriate basis for comparison between cultural forms and historical evolution of one society and another. What is it, historically, that societies divided in time and space share? What is it, environmentally speaking, that keeps them apart and drives them along such different paths? (Arnold 13)

Underlying the need for comparison that Arnold identifies is the assumption of a developmental path from nature to culture that is then folded into history as an evolutionary process *toute court*. The insistence on a "coherent pattern" has as its underside the imposition not only of a common teleology, but also of a hierarchy of paths to the destination.

The concerns with nature, culture, and societal evolution that surface in Phillips's novels are latent surfacings of themes latent in the novels examined in previous chapters. Poe's simian allegory and Melville's narrative of black insurrection in the age of revolution deal with nothing less than the place of blacks in the "family of man." Wright and Morrison in their novels expose the transformations of facets of environmental and biological determinism into an American setting. Phillips explores similar paradigms in West Africa and the Caribbean. But, to reformulate Arnold's last question in the passage above, these four writers do not ask what drives societies apart. They investigate how societies invoke permutations of environmental determinism, or manufacture environments that allow specific peoples to be treated in particular ways. What appears as nature in these constructs are, following Arnold, "sets of determining forces—environment, class, race, divine will, gender . . . that have all, in their various ways,
been used in attempts to mediate between nature and culture, between the physical (whether represented by climate, soil or human biology) and the cultural aspects of human existence” (Arnold 13).

In all novels I examine in this dissertation, the “set[s] of determining forces” Arnold enumerates appear in various orders of supersession as mediating instances between nature and culture. Phillips subverts the nature/culture divide and exposes the use of environmental determinism as a colonising trope by yoking it to the semantics of an all-encompassing ecology based on precisely those determining forces. The turn to ecology dissolves differences between all humans—and not just Africans—and animals. In the context of such dissolution, the differences Phillips’s characters establish and maintain within themselves are cast under scrutiny.

**Inarticulate Shrieks and Mute Animals**

The particular significance of Coetzee’s novel emerges through Phillips’s redeployment of the extensive animal imagery in Coetzee’s novel. In *Waiting for the Barbarians*, the treatment of animals as pets or prey runs as a parallel story to the treatment of “the barbarians.” The narrative of animal exploitation runs as an ironic commentary on the narrator’s prise de conscience. The Magistrate and narrator is also a hunter who savours the joys of the sport. By juxtaposing the narrator’s treatment of different animals to his nascent compassion for a “barbarian” girl, Coetzee presents an unveiling of innocence similar to the unveiling Melville does with Delano. In a sense, the Magistrate apprehends singular cases of injustice but does not readily grasp the connections between the hunt and the raid on “barbarians.” This ironic juxtaposition is obvious in the very first encounter between Colonel Joll and the Magistrate:

> We sit in the best room of the inn with a flask between a bowl of nuts. We do not discuss the reason for his being here. He is here under the emergency
powers, that is enough. Instead we talk about hunting. He tells me about the last great drive he rode in, when thousands of deer, pigs, bears were slain, so many that a mountain of carcases had to be left to rot ('Which was a pity'). I tell him about the great flocks of geese and ducks that descend on the lake every year in their migrations and about native ways of trapping them. I suggest that I take him out fishing by night in a native boat. 'That is an experience not to be missed,' I say; 'the fishermen carry flaming torches and beat drums over the water to drive the fish towards the nets they have laid.' He nods. He tells me about a certain visit he paid elsewhere on the frontier where people eat certain snakes as a delicacy, and about a huge antelope he shot. (1)

The salient point in this passage is the production of the subject of the "native." In his revision, Phillips shows how the native becomes the slave. The use of animals is, thus, not simply the establishment of analogies between hunting and the raids on barbarians and slaves, but the creation of categories of life forms. Phillips's use of animals, devoid of any special valuations, disrupts the transformation of the same animals into tropes with which to denigrate black characters. Observe, as an example, the ways in which the supposed bestiality of Africans is dismantled in the following passage:

Our two horses amble across the vast open tract. They remain close, as though they are yoked together... Occasionally Price stops to relieve himself. He makes no attempt at discretion. He no doubt feels that somebody of my assumed bestiality will not be shocked by his animalistic behaviour, but I turn my head. Each time we resume our journey a silence clouds the atmosphere... The sun is high. The plains stretch for miles and give no clue of human or animal life. I
look for birds, but there are none. . . . As the years pass by the nearest village moves further inland. I look from right to left and survey the horizon. Then again Price begins to talk. He asks me how many soldiers there are stationed at the Fort. . . . I guess. “Perhaps fifty, maybe more?” “Thirty-seven,” he says and laughs. “We need seventy, eighty at least.” “Disease?” I suggest. Price looks straight ahead and laughs. He clearly has no intention of discussing this subject with me. We ride on in silence until the evanescent sun begins to set. (22)

Although Price assumes the African to be “bestial,” the mutual susceptibility to environmental forces recalibrates divisions between all human beings on the coast. The reference to the ravages of disease on the Europeans can be linked to Benito Cereno’s comment about the differential constitutions of races. The reference identifies the vulnerability of humans and their entry into the ecological network. The distinguishing factors between the human characters are the power they possess and the influence they wield over others, in opposition to their ability to achieve a non-exploitative “peaceful coexistence” with all beings (28). The weak and powerless are, like the ubiquitous animals (28, 36, 38, 42, 51, 58-60), either impassive bystanders oblivious to the historical events, or are themselves subjugated like animals that cannot speak their immiseration.

Although it only appears in this novella, Phillips’s animal imagery is plotted in a layered system similar to Morrison’s. The references to animals draw attention to the materiality of language itself and the praxis of representations. For example, when Price is described as eating the “lion’s share” of the food during the excursion (28), the idiomatic expression does not simply describe that single instance. It captures the essentially predatory relation between the characters as part of a food chain. Other uses of animal images devalue subordinate characters (36), but the text also “presents” animals devoid of negative or positive values. Or the reference to animals
captures simple relations in life systems in which animals and humans coexist in biological systems. Such a description occurs during the narrator’s second journey into the interior. In the course of that journey he does not have the arms and human company with which to distance himself from the animals:

The first night is difficult, for the moon is not full and the howling of hyenas plays on my nerves. And then the sun comes up and I am tired, and the heat saps what little strength I have left in my body. I begin to slow until I finally collapse beneath an avocado tree. I open my gourd of water. Cows stand and look on. There are few farmers left. Wandering alone with their animals they are easy prey. The day is still and begins to spin. (38)

Passages like this one in which animals are onlookers, or are companions to their owners with whom they become prey to another human group, underline the vulnerability of Phillips’s characters in spaces largely free of human control. In the lines above, the narrator seeks protection under the tree and the cows—free of the owners—move to the position of gazing upon him. This equality between human and animals disappears when humans are brought in relation to an animal such as the horse that functions ordinarily as a beast of burden. But that benign function is transformed when Africans are compared to horses: “Imagine being able to pay a king or a chief in alcohol to round up his own people and reduce them to little more than horses tied to posts” (51). It is such juxtapositions of humans and animals that reveal not only the exploitation of animals but also the naturalisation of the bestialisation of human beings. The irony in the governor’s words is that since only Europeans possess horses—in the novella—this categorisation is itself a form of linguistic imperialism. The governor’s superior position allows him to classify the relationships on the coast.
Whereas the animals are silent and succumb to simple force, the human beings must be not only subdued but also subjected through language. The plights of the nameless girl and the narrator exemplify this connection. Together, they illustrate the uses of different permutations of sound. The narrator, in his function as linguist and factor at the slave fort, practises "linguistic duplicity" to "form a bridge of communication" between heterogeneous captured and enslaved Africans (57). In effect, he speaks the plight of Africans in differing positions of subjection as he moves between the Fort, the African village, and finally the slaveship. In each of these positions, diverse forms of speech, languages or sounds emerge. Each of these sounds is only intelligible to characters occupying similar positions. These transactions around sound are demonstrated most remarkably through the experience of the girl who is taken from the African village, tortured by Price, and then returned to the village. This sequence of removal, confinement, torture and expulsion is based on similar dynamics in Coetzee's novel. But it also recalls the uses of the shrieks in Poe's story as well as the sounds that Melville's humanitarian Delano does not heed. Phillips deliberately underlines his use of the girl's "shrieks" to occlude comprehension. Notice the interchange between the shrieks and silence in this passage:

The rude shriek cuts through the night. [...] Again the scream. Will nobody go to her aid? I slump to the ground, my back propped up against the cold stone wall, and wait as though half-expecting my name to come singing out, a signal for me to charge into action. But I am not summoned. I am merely tormented by the endless cries of pain. The sun rises in the east. (32)

There is of course an irony in this passage in that the girl's cries do summon every character but no one acts. The narrator understands that to insist the subject in pain speak in regularly intelligible language is not simply an excuse; it is, in reality, to condemn and to confine that
subject to that space of incarceration and torture. It is, in other words, to withhold recognition.
The unintelligibility of the girl is reversed when the narrator repeats the journey into the village
to fetch her for himself. Upon this gesture of solidarity, she reveals precisely the contents of the
cries (46). But this ultimate act of “translation” by the linguist narrator, that involves not
speaking for but the extension of recognition and intervention to provide the conditions for
speaking, is also an act of sedition that costs the narrator his coveted place in the fort.

**Dismissals from History**

Because the narrator’s grasp of language and the ability to give a different account of the
colonial encounter distinguish him from all other nameless Africans in “Heartland,” the change
in his status is demonstrated by the radical invalidation of this ability. This ultimate dismissal
from the sequence of events on the coast occurs as the final displacement:

> Then Lewis appears. He carries with him a piece of paper which he hands to me.
> It is folded double so I cannot read it. “This is for you,” he says. Then he runs his
> hand across the top of the girl’s head. “I miss her, but I’ve got some duties to take
> care of. Maybe later.” He turns on his heels and leaves. I open the letter but there
> is nothing on the paper. I put down the letter—if a letter is what it constitutes—
> regarding it as a stupid deceit. It is the first letter I have ever received but there are
> no words. I accept it as Lewis’s excuse to reappear with some guise of purpose in
> order that he might see the girl. For such as I, who only acquired the skills of
> writing and reading in their language by the application of much effort, it is a
> cruel joke. (55)

Bénédicte Ledent calls this scene an “allegorical re-enactment of one aspect of colonisation,”
revealing the use of literacy in the colonial system “as a means of exploiting, deceiving and
dominating others, not as a way of bridging the cultural gap” (Ledent 72). I would like to complicated Ledent’s comment in several ways. This blank page also refers to the formulation of Africa as a blank space on the map in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (66-67). But it is not simply the topography of Africa that is to be written over; this African narrator is a subject also being formed. This scene reveals that the blankness—read silence—is only produced and maintained through the exclusion of Africans from the scene and the act of writing. The absence (of writing) that constitutes *language* introduces in “Heartland” the meditation on the use of language to capture experience that is a classic feature of Phillips’s migrant characters. The reference to language in this novella implies most directly that the narrator does not have possession of the power of language.

Phillips’s feat in “Heartland” lies in yoking power, knowledge and geography dramatically to an inquiry into the politics of writing. What emerges in this letter scene is the transformation of the suspension of African speech into a metaphorical elimination from history. Displacement becomes doubly elusive as a time-space displacement that cannot be recuperated through language. This is perhaps the most important declaration in “Heartland.” The subsequent enslavement of the narrator inserts him into a transformed order in which the otherwise complex and fractured geography of West Africa is reduced to binary structures of slave and non-slave. What is lost in this new order are the positions of indeterminacy symbolised in the topography by the grey zone, that in turn capture the tormented consciousness of a character such as the narrator. In more direct terms, the narrator’s dismissal from writing also signals his insertion into the Manichean economy that is and can only be produced through the silencing of the other. In subsequent narratives, characters such as Cambridge and Nash Williams return to positions of writing, to puncture such simple race-based binaries by
narrativising their liminal positions (or recreating grey zones) in letters. The new-fangled grey zone is, however, that of the diasporan black and excludes the African “native.”

This letter scene is perhaps the inaugural setting of Phillips’s persistent return to the function of writing as a site of subject formation for his diasporan characters. Lewis, in the passage, is a displaced character whose only power results from his position above the narrator. The delivery of the letter is a social transaction in which different forms of subjection are put into play. Each letter scene in Phillips’s fiction features characters desiring an object that would increase their social position. The letter scene in “Heartland” paves the way for what I call letter scenes in “The Pagan Coast” and for Cambridge’s turn to writing. But the transactional nature of the letter scene is best captured in Phillips’s rewriting of Othello in his novel The Nature of Blood. In the passage below, Othello seeks out a Jewish scholar in the Venetian ghetto to decipher Desdemona’s tight script:

I offered the letter up to the Jew and he immediately understood what I expected of him. While he scanned the letter, he gestured to me that I should sit. Then, having examined it, he looked up at me. He did not betray any emotion, but simply began to recite to me the contents of the letter. As he began, I almost asked him to stop in order that I might press upon him the knowledge that I could read, and inform him that it was only this dense and unclear script that had defeated me. But it was too late. Once he had begun, I was intoxicated. The lady stopped short of professing a love for me, but her desire to see me again, and as soon as possible, was clearly articulated. (Nature of Blood 142)

Othello’s Jew subsequently composes the reply to Desdemona. During Othello’s forays into the ghetto, he is oblivious to Venice’s history of discrimination and he acts towards the Jews with
incomprehension. The difference between Othello and the Jew is that Othello is on a path of upward mobility into the heart of Venetian society, while the Jew remains in the ghetto. Surfacing here is what Pius Adesanmi has called the “territorial integrity of oppression,” the manner in which oppressed parties might only see their own localised oppressions and may need to occlude other claims to injury in order to articulate their pain (Adesanmi 36-37). The other point to be made here is that the receipt of the letter is always decisive for the positioning of Phillips’s characters. The crucial difference between Othello and the narrator of “Heartland” is that Jew deciphers the visual cue, the letters, into sound that Othello can hear. In the case of narrator, the letter scene amounts to dismissal. The symbolic deferral demonstrated by the receipt of the letter is promptly followed by a betrayal, as a consequence of which the narrator comes to experience the Middle Passage and reveal insights into the subjectivity of departure and arrival.

I listen to the endless sighing of dying surf while mosquitoes feed on the open sores around my neck and ankles. It is too dark to see the faces of those next to me: I hear their voices, recognize various dialects, brush rats from my body onto theirs, and fight with them for my share of yam and coarse bananas... I think of my village life... of talking drums that echo through muddy creeks, of voices raised in a death wail, of the girl. In this dungeon the musicians and holy men begin to sing, to feed the spirit with songs of hope. Here is darkness, sickness, waiting, men, dying, and song; but I have long since forgotten the words to their songs. (59)

This passage is crucial in Higher Ground. Once the narrator is “dismissed” from the scene of writing, he takes refuge in orality as he departs with other slaves for the New World. At the end
of his African existence, the narrator is infused with the capacity to listen. Although he cannot
decipher the words yet, he commences a pattern of enforced listening (57-58) that recurs in
Phillips’s novels in lieu of written communication amongst black subjects in the diaspora. The
pattern of exchange between orality and literacy, speech and writing, sound and sight in
Phillips’s fiction follow a pattern similar to those in Poe, Melville, Wright, and Morrison. In the
works of these authors, that I have examined so far, exclusion from literacy and writing amounts
to removal from positions of power.

The departure scene below introduces the overarching theme of music as a metacode of
black cultures, which runs through the next novella of Higher Ground and the epilogue in
Crossing the River. In his last act as interpreter on African soil, the narrator reveals the
allegorising role of song as language, and as a paradigm for incorporating change and imparting
experience:

Under my breath I begin to mutter. Other lips move independently, and without
organization we swell into a choir. I realize that this is the same choral chant that I
would listen to when I was the man next to Price, the same hitherto baffling
rebellious music that now makes a common sense for we are all saying the same
thing; we are all promising to one day return, irrespective of what might happen
to us in whatever land or lands we eventually travel to; we are promising
ourselves that we will return to our people and reclaim the lives that are being
snatched away from us. (59)

The narrator’s “fall” takes on a fundamental significance in this passage, as it becomes the
allegory of all who suffer a similar fate.
The song of return unites the deportees in a collective endeavour to grapple with changes on the coast. The scene of departure is the only one in which the narrator employs the first person plural pronoun. It is also the only instance in which Africans express a common identity. It is precisely this radical moment of objectification and othering that joins the otherwise heterogeneous Africans temporarily as a “unified” choir. The recourse to song is a performance of an aural imaginary. Binding these characters is the abrupt separation (that they face together) as well as the beginning of a new, particular difference that installs itself between the captives and those who remain to continue in alternative historical trajectories. It is this instance of a short-lived vision of unity that puts the permanent gap of rupture into stark relief. That vision also becomes the ground for theorising the new identities of the African diaspora:

In the history of the modern world, there are few more traumatic ruptures to match these enforced separations from Africa—already figured, in the European imaginary as the “Dark Continent”. But the slaves also were from different countries, tribal communities, villages, languages and gods. . . . The paradox is that it was the uprooting of slavery and transportation and the insertion into the plantation economy (as well as the symbolic economy) of the Western world that “unified” these peoples across their differences, in the same moment as it cut them off from direct access to their past. (Hall, “Identity and Diaspora” 227)

Hall’s “paradox” is not an empirical statement of the unification of black people in the West but a heuristic concept for understanding statements of affiliation between peoples of the black diaspora. In Phillips’s departure scene, the song, as the anthem of an imaginary nation, underlines the very absence of a cohesive identity and of the agency to make any successful intervention in the course of events. The song of unity can be read, in fact, in analogy to the
fleeting unity that exists amongst the characters on board the *San Dominick* as they beg Delano for food and water. For the narrator of “Heartland,” the arrival in the New World signals the entry into a new order. Hence he announces the dissolution of communal pacts and the impossibility of any single collective representation: “I stand on the platform and look down. I am an old man. The yoking together is over. My present has finally fractured; the past has fled over the horizon and out of sight” (60).

The breach of the provisional community, articulated so forcefully through the narrator, becomes the foundation for New World identities. The song recedes to become an echo for the rupture. This fleeting presence of non-existent commonality also names what Africa represents for the diaspora. In explaining the formation of New World identities, Hall writes that it “is the presence/absence of Africa, in this form, which has made it the privileged signifier” with which black people in the diaspora must reckon:

> Everyone in the Caribbean, of whatever ethnic background, must sooner or later come to terms with this African presence. Black, brown, mulatto, white—all must look *Présence Africaine* in the face, speak its name. But whether it is, in this sense, an origin of our identities, unchanged by four hundred years of displacement, dismemberment, transportation, to which we could in any final or literal sense return, is more open to doubt. The original “Africa” is no longer there. It too has been transformed. History is, in that sense, irreversible. We must not collude with the West which, precisely, normalises and appropriates Africa by freezing it into some timeless zone of the primitive, unchanging past. Africa must at least be reckoned with by Caribbean people, but it cannot be in any simple sense by [sic] recovered. (“Negotiating” 231)
This extensive passage from Hall reiterates some of Gilroy’s concerns, cited in the introduction, about the divergences between the multiple sites of the diaspora. Hall goes on to explain that some of the site-specific economic and political imperatives Gilroy hints at generates different problems for Africans. More immediately, Hall’s distinctions between literal and symbolic returns and between “recovering” in opposition to “reckoning with” Africa can be read fruitfully alongside Phillips’s complex texts. To extrapolate from Hall, if the production of “imaginative geographies” of Africa is common to the “West” and its “victims” in the diaspora, the latter must produce such geographies carefully: such inventions should not occlude the realities of the continent.Phillip’s fiction could, in fact, be read as fictional corollaries of Hall’s work. Precisely because the continent and peoples have moved on and many new identities have emerged, the aural imaginary becomes, for Phillips, the space of symbolic returns to Africa. The aural imaginary does not produce the colonising relationship that spectacle, involved in the ocular encounter, allows.

**Cambridge’s Unheard Voice**

Although the narrator of ‘Heartland’ and the girl enter the aural imaginary and express solidarity for each other, Phillips demonstrates in the novel *Cambridge* that the entry into this sphere is not based on notions of any originary identity. The novel also demonstrates the contest over the control and the circulation of voice of the oppressed. The testimonial of Cambridge—a manumitted slave and Christianised former African—is a sustained commentary on the production and circulation of African-derived identities in the diaspora. Cambridge’s narrative is structured as a confession after he kills an overseer in what I read as a staging of a master-slave struggle. Whereas the narrative is modelled as a slave narrative, it does not document the character’s passage from slavery to freedom. Instead, it demonstrates the precarious positions of
the messenger with a voice but without the power to enforce acceptance. Alternatively, the narrative could be read as a different version of the journey to voice that runs through *Native Son* and *Beloved*. Unlike Sethe and Bigger, Cambridge puts his voice to the service of other former slaves or their descendants. His failure resides, thus, in his espousal of the “wrong” trajectory.

Transported from America to a private household in London where he receives instruction and becomes a minister employed in the abolitionist cause, Cambridge’s peregrinations stress most of all this character’s efforts to acculturate and assimilate into England. In fact, Cambridge fulfils in part the future the fort governor foresees for the narrator of “Heartland”:

> You see, it is only now that I have witnessed the abject barbarity of your savage people that I can fully appreciate the distance—the somewhat remarkable distance you have travelled along the path of civilization. That you can read and write places you in a position of superiority over many people in this Fort. Do you realize what your achievements are, what they could mean for your people? I am astonished that it has not been suggested to you that you return to my country with one of the trading ships, for your presence there would go some way towards silencing the anti-trading lobby. If only they could see the evidence of the Christian work in the shape of your person then I believe that some of the present difficulties would be eradicated. (52)

The fort governor’s appraisal anticipates Cambridge’s plight. Whereas the “heartland” ends with the narrator’s departure, Cambridge’s narrative details a futile journey into Europe through Christianity. What surfaces therefore is a Janus-like figure much in the fashion of the narrator.
Cambridge travels a distance from an historical "old Africa" (144) but cannot arrive in and
become of the West:

It was determined that I should tour England as a servant of the Blackheath
mission, and in the company of my wife. Upon our return to the capital we would
travel to Africa in the office of missionaries and preach the Gospel in the hope of
spiritually reforming my former countrymen and persuading them to embrace the
faith of Jesus Christ. My exhilaration, on being presented with the solution to the
ills that had plagued my life since the departure of my master, was doubled on
learning that my stay in Guinea would be brief. Truly I was now an Englishman,
albeit a little smudgy of complexion! Africa spoke to me only of a history I had
cast aside. (147)

Cambridge’s problem is precisely that Africa is expunged from his mind but it remains in the
form of a “smudgy . . . complexion.” West Africa appears not as an actual topography in this
narrative but as the intrusive spectre of the aberrations and abjection that accompany encounters
between Africans and Europeans. For diasporan blacks in the West the continent is a floating
signifier for the elusive past that continuously fractures the present. Through metonymic
displacement the black skin indexes the debased historical position of these black characters
captured in a cycle of racialised identities. One way of destabilising the pattern of the seemingly
fixed significations of the black skin and Africa is to stage returns to Africa and provoke re-
evaluations of the signifiers of Africa and the black skin. These “returning” characters learn, so
to speak, the lessons of post-structuralism; there is no transcendental fixity of the signifier and
the signified.
The overriding threat of “epidermal” atavism is rendered through Cambridge’s abortive return to West Africa. The black minister who is sent by abolitionists to proselytise the ideals of Christianity in his “native land” is captured and resold into slavery off the coast of West Africa. It is in the hold of a slaving ship that he meets his atavistic “countrymen.” Two details are important in the following passage: the distance Cambridge constructs between Africans and himself and the differentiations of subject position through language.

I heard their voices, shrill in their different native tongues, and then they were upon me and bemoaning the circumstances which had led to their illegal captivity. That I could still make a little sense of my own native language among the many spoken gave me some comfort, but the treachery of these white men, even towards one such as I who esteemed their values, tore at my heart with great passion. That I, a virtual Englishman, was to be treated as base African cargo, caused me such hurtful pain as I was barely able to endure. (156)

Cambridge’s encounter recalls the narrator’s passage to an aural phase in *Higher Ground* as well as Captain Delano’s arrival on board the *San Dominick*. The encounter with the Africans in this scene functions as a materialisation of Cambridge’s distant African past. The African languages stand in for different memories that are inaccessible to the diasporan character. The cyclical pattern of slavery identifies the black body as the object of regimes of racialisation that transform “racial difference into moral and even metaphysical difference” (JanMohamed 61). To pun the title of JanMohamed’s essay on the Manichean machinery of colonialist literature, Cambridge is caught in the dilemma of racial sameness. If the Africans, in “Heartland,” claim the forced departure as a common experience, or are “unified” as feral primitives from the governor’s perspective, it is the Africans who claim affinity with Cambridge. In other words, the fresh
shock of racialisation moves the Africans to racial identification. Cambridge, however, is engaged in a project of faith-based subject constitution.

The figure and writings of the Martinican psychiatrist Frantz Fanon are vital to my readings of Caryl Phillips—and of Maryse Conde in the next chapter of this dissertation. Fanon’s own wanderings and positioning within multiple planes of anti-colonial discourses is useful in thinking through the overlapping and even conflictual terrains of Phillips’s fiction. In his well-known essay “Critical Fanonism,” Henry Louis Gates explains, “Fanon’s current fascination for us has something to do with the convergence of the problematic of colonialism with that of subject-formation” (458). Since Fanon functions as “totem and text,” the readings his writings elicit are “of unfailing symptomatic interest: Frantz Fanon, not to put too fine a point on it, is a Rorschach blot with legs” (457-458). The pertinent point Gates raises is that in using Fanon’s writings to educe the “situatedness” of all discourses, critics represent Fanon as a “global theorist in vacuo” (459). What arises is a kind of epistemic violence in which the contradictions of Fanon are elided to articulate localised formations of colonial conquest and subjection. But such articulations may themselves be read as denying the colonised agency:

You can empower discursively the native, and open yourself to charges of downplaying the epistemic (and literal) violence of colonialism; or play up the absolute nature of colonial domination, and be open to charges of negating the subjectivity and agency of the colonized, thus textually replicating the repressive operations of colonialisms. In agency, so it seems, begins responsibility. (Gates 462)

Indeed, agency is a large part of what is at stake in the uses of Fanon. Phillips moves between the discursivity of the native as agent and the discursive nature of colonial domination.
One might assert that Fanon becomes an Archimedean lever of sorts for different critics and writers in pursuing agency. But because these critics do not occupy unsituated Archimedean positions, their readings are open to contestation by other parties who will in turn use the critics’ (mis)reading of Fanon as their own Archimedean lever. In other words, Fanon becomes distinctively useful as a site at which to unsettle the conflations within the signifiers of the coloniser and the colonised across different sites.

With regards to Black Skin, White Masks, Gates reminds us that Fanon’s writing is fraught with the contradictions of his own upbringing in Martinique and the shock of discovering his racialised identity in France. And (pointing to Albert Memmi’s readings of Fanon) Gates also reminds us that Fanon does not fit into any single territory. Although he is celebrated in the West as an agent of Algerian decolonisation, Fanon for Algerians “is a [European] interloper without the patience or interest to acquaint himself with the local specificities of culture” (468). With these entanglements the following frequently quoted excerpt from Fanon appears in a different light:

The Negro is not. Any more than the white man.

Both must turn their backs on the inhuman voices which were those of their respective ancestors in order that authentic communication be possible.

Before it can adopt a positive voice, freedom requires an effort at disalienation . . .

Superiority? Inferiority?

Why not the quite simple attempt to touch the other, to feel the other, to explain the other to myself?
My final prayer:

O my body, make of me always a man who questions! (231-32)

With regards to Phillips, the plight of Cambridge can be read in light of those last paragraphs of Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks* and Gates’s injunction to a “critical Fanonism” in which “our own theoretical reflections must be as provisional, reactive, and local as the texts we reflect upon” (470). This character’s plight encapsulates in part Frantz Fanon’s hypotheses on the formation and circulation of black identities under colonial dominance. I do not wish to collapse Fanon’s articulations of twentieth-century Antillean reality into Phillips’s fictionalisations of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century worlds of plantation economies. However, I do want to suggest that the category of racial difference at work in Cambridge’s testimonial can be read as contiguous with the Fanonian formulation of “black,” a category—for the objectification of the black skin as a site of difference—into which the black man is sealed (Fanon, *Black Skin* 8).

Cambridge’s degrees of separation from his “kinsmen” are effaced by the sameness that makes him an object of racialisation, as he and all other African slaves are “addressed by one common word . . . nigger” (137). Cambridge, invariably, realises the cost of Fanon’s prayer. The multiple readings and misreadings of Cambridge’s body become narratives from which he cannot extricate himself.

Phillips’s characters are discursive creations that reveal the local limits of each site of oppression in the black diaspora. One of the strong points of Cambridge’s narrative is that Phillips resists an easy allocation of agency to the slave. Cambridge’s final act of resistance evokes the master-slave struggle, which Frederick Douglass most distinctively elaborated in the fight with the slave-breaker Covey in his slave narrative (Douglass 297-98). But the death of Cambridge’s master simply leads to the execution of the slave. The fate of this slave follows of
the model of the narrator in “Heartland.” Both are characters in the vortex of events, where appeals to agency or to recover the voice of the subjugated are facile resolutions:

He struck me once with his crop, and I took it from him, and in the resultant struggle the life left his body. I then fell on my knees and prayed to my God to forgive me for my wretched condition. I, Olumide, who had become black Tom, then David Henderson, and now Cambridge, had broken one of God’s commandments. On this Christian day, and for the first time since my second unChristian passage, I was truly afraid, truly frightened of my actions and the fearful consequences of my heathen behaviour. (167)

Long did his whitened bones glisten in the moonbeams; and as the wind shook the chains which held the body, many a little Negro who has strayed that way in search of guavas, fled from the spot, for fear of the “dead man’s jumby.” (174)

These two passages describe Cambridge’s last days. The first passage is the penultimate paragraph of his confession, in which he seeks to convey “the truth” as he understands it (167). The second passage is from a report on the slave’s death. Together, both passages underline Phillips’s use of counterpoint. Whereas with Melville, Benito Cereno’s voice is lost, Cambridge’s voice is antinomical. Cambridge, above all, remains slave to the indoctrinations of Christianity. Hence, he cannot critique the system in which he is placed with the language imposed upon him by that same system. Cambridge’s narrative is best described, with Phillips’s succinct characterisation of Conrad’s novel, as a narrative that “explores the multiple ambiguities of civilization, his restless narrative circles back on itself as though trapped in the complexity of the situation” (“Introduction” xvi). Yet, as with Babo and Bigger Thomas, it is especially through his demise that the reader perceives his constraints. The last narrative in Phillips’s
African trilogy stages a return to Africa to present an alternative to Cambridge’s journey to a “false” voice. The achievement in the next narrative is that another manumitted character renounces Christianity and its accompanying distortion of the former slave’s voice. Further, this last ex-slave’s journey to voice prompts the discovery of the “native.” But the African “native” does not speak here either. One could say that Phillips leaves the project of recapturing the voice of the “native” produced in African encounters with European colonialism to other writers.

“The Pagan Coast” and the Emergence of the Native

“The Pagan Coast,” the first narrative of Crossing the River, is a demystification of return journeys to Africa for diasporan blacks. The narrative also indicts the paradigm of Christianity and othering discourses of environmental determinism. The intertext of Heart of Darkness needs to be read as a shorthand statement of the new conditions in place in Africa—the new grounds of encounter between Africans and white men. To reveal fully the valences of the Conradian intertext, I suggest that “The Pagan Coast” should be read alongside Cambridge’s testimonial and as an extension to the second novella in Phillips’s Higher Ground. In that second narrative, “The Cargo Rap,” Rudy Williams—an incarcerated African American—yearns for a glorious return to Africa. The repatriation of Nash Williams (the common last names put them in relation) to nineteenth-century Liberia is thus an ironic commentary on what one observer calls “counter-narrative[s] of uplift as uprooting, of severance, escape, and redemption from an America which is the House of Bondage” (Newton 20). If Nash is a possible ancestor to Rudy, then he is heir to Cambridge. Unlike the latter, this second former slave arrives in Africa and attempts to fulfil the mission of Christianising pagans.

The similarities between Heart of Darkness and “The Pagan Coast” hinge upon Phillips’s schematic use of two Conradian motifs; the journey into otherness along with its assured
narrative of return to the metropolis; as well as the corollary motif that Rob Nixon calls the trope of “Conradian atavism”—in which a journey through space doubles as a journey into past primitive times and back (Nixon). These Conradian motifs serve as backdrop to the conversion of the function of racial difference into a dialectics of racial sameness. Phillips’s three narratives set on the coast of West Africa break the journey cycles in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, in which a European sails out to Africa and returns to the metropolis with a narrative confirming the otherness of Africans. The narratives in Phillips’s novels together present alternative, non-circular journeys: one African character departs into the New World from the fractured geography in “Heartland,” a black character is trapped in the cyclical drama and dilemma of an inescapable racialized identity in Cambridge’s narrative, and in the final narrative, “The Pagan Coast,” three manumitted characters return to West Africa from the United States. One black character goes native, one remains shackled in “mental slavery,” and a third emancipates himself fully to depart from a scene of encounter between Africans and a white man.

But the use of the circular journeys has some other, deeper significance in Phillips’s fiction. The three principal characters in these narratives are all “purveyors of truth” of a particular sort. The truth they carry is not simply a fact or an identifiable knowledge. Rather, it is performed in the futility of their travels and travails. In fact, this truth even evades the carrier: Cambridge’s truth is not his narrative, but the fact that he does not realise how the doctrine of Christianity imprisons him. In other words, the atavisms in *Heart of Darkness* rely upon a formula of encounter with difference that is produced through the very conditions of the encounter. Phillips’s characters in the path of other white characters and come to realise that they cannot travel into difference since they themselves are made to embody difference. The “truth,” then, is the production of difference and signification. For these characters, the
geographical demarcations of an area of darkness then cease to exist because the darkness can be produced at any time and projected onto any topography. These characters are made to embody darkness/difference even—and especially—in the heart of Empire. The task in this narrative is to make the reader discern the competitions for “truth.”

“The Pagan Coast” recounts the experience of the former American slave Nash Williams, who is manumitted to the new colony of Liberia and “goes native.” The subsequent disappearance of the former slave into the African hinterland initiates the journey of the erstwhile owner and master, Edward Williams, from the United States to Liberia in search of Nash. Once in Liberia, Edward relies upon two other repatriated former slaves. Charles, a servile figure forever seeking the master’s pleasure, is characterised as a willing servant (48) and a buffoon (52), who is forlorn without the master’s seal of approval (57). Madison, on the other hand, is an independent figure. Whereas race functions as the constitutive category of difference between whites and blacks in Phillips’s depiction of the New World, it becomes one of several such categories in West Africa. Inserting black characters into the position of white travellers in Africa dissolves colonialist binaries based solely on skin colour. The plural contestations and appropriations in this narrative revolve around the constitutive value of blackness in patterns of identification; the African-Americans struggle to maintain their culture (in contradistinction to “native” African culture) in a frontier society where African-American returnees become embroiled in settler politics, and subject African populations to measures otherwise associated with European settlers.19

The characters’ relationship to Africa and Africans is fraught with ambivalence. The colony is, on the one hand, the space of freedom from American racism. But, on the other hand, the returnees cannot identify with Africans. African American returnees sell Africans into
slavery (31) and there are exchanges of hostilities: “At times like this, it is strange to think that these people of Africa are called our ancestors, for with some of them you may do all you can but they still will be your enemy” (32). Phillips’s black characters come to disavow assumptions of a common genealogy between Africans and themselves. The value of blackness undergoes a radical transformation since the constitutive marker of identity is the relationship to land (32). Hence, the contention and appropriations in this narrative are also ultimately explored in terms of competitive discursive configurations of the West African topography.

“The Pagan Coast” is very similar to “Heartland” in reinterpreting geography as territory and in coupling these two issues to an inquiry into the politics of representation as praxis. The juxtaposition of Nash’s letters with the unfolding narrative of events in the United States and West Africa, creates another territory of conflict within the two scenes of writing: the West Africa Nash describes is constantly at odds with the West Africa the reader perceives in the larger narrative. These letters represent a return to the space of writing from which the narrator of “Heartland” is summarily dismissed. While the narrator in “Heartland” reads the Bible and understands the words (but “the power of [the] words elude” him [51]), Nash Williams can expose the power of the Bible as an identity-constituting project. But he gradually forsakes the Bible, just as he assumes his father has forsaken him. He turns to learning African languages as a step towards integration with Africans: “I am striving to do all the good I can amongst these natives, who form a dominant majority. To this end I am even speaking a little of their crude dialect, which is hard to learn” (23). Like transplanted life forms, the returnee ultimately returns to a state that the African coast and culture can sustain once he rejects the Christian paradigm:

These days I am happy simply to raise my crops. The land is rich and produces the familiar American garden stuff, cabbage, peas, beans, onions, tomatoes, etc.,
as well as the native produce, which it does in abundance. The school is no more, and shall never again occupy a position of authority in any settlement of which I am a part. This missionary work, this process of persuasion, is futile amongst these people, for they never truly pray to the Christian God, they merely pray to their own gods in Christian guise, for the American God does not even resemble them in that most fundamental of features. The truth is, our religion, in its purest and least diluted form, can never take root in this country. Its young shoots will wither and die, leaving the sensible man with the conclusive evidence that he must reap what grows naturally. It has taken my dark mind many years to absorb this knowledge. (62)

The literal world of the coast and the figurative world of Nash’s tortured consciousness fold into each other in these lines to present an alternative production of West Africa. The pastoral imagery—especially the mix of American and African produce—announces most immediately Nash’s newfound equilibrium with his environment. The larger mission of modernity and modernisation, of which Christianisation is only part, is endlessly deferred. In an extended sense the imagery ushers in a contention between opposing images of Africa.

The use of letters is much more extensive in “The Pagan Coast” than in the other narratives. It is in this novella that the significance of the exchange of letters as a paradigm of power relations in Phillips’s fiction becomes most obvious. Nash’s story is also one of unrequited love. Although he writes frequently to his master, the master’s wife, jealous of the homosexual affair between master and slave, intercepts and keeps the letters from the master. Nash only reads letters sent after the wife’s suicide. “The Pagan Coast” is thus also a narrative of purloined letters:
That she took it upon herself to sabotage her husband’s friendship with Nash by destroying the colored man’s letters was a painful discovery for Edward, but had he not found it in his heart to forgive her? Her accusation that in the wake of Nash’s departure he was making a fool of himself by lavishing an excess of affection upon a new retainer, was this not again met with forgiveness? A half-dressed Edward reached for his Bible, and clumsily fingered the pages until he reached the relevant verse. Thereafter, his wretched body burning with faith, he began to recite out loud. (56)

Edward’s recourse to forgiveness in this passage is symptomatic of his larger refusal—or inability—to see and acknowledge ways in which his cultural paradigm helps determine his power and interactions with others. Forgiveness is tied to the Bible, to reveal another transaction of power that is naturalised through the mediation of Christianity.

By destroying the letters, the dead wife becomes instrumental in the awakening of Edward and Nash. The deferral of Nash’s cries for help enforces his isolation on the African coast and instigates his brutal awakening. The letters in “The Pagan Coast” are set in counterpoint to Edward Williams’s discovery of his wife’s deception, his travel to West Africa and his final realisation of his own failures and complicity. Nash’s letters trace, in anteriority, the trajectory of his master to his own epiphany. In a sense, then, the wife becomes the master since her action leads to the receipt of the letters in a manner that would be significant in constituting the subjects of both master and slave. The following passage presents the scene in which Edward receives Nash’s last letter. The position of command passes to the ex-slave Madison who hands out the letter:
And then Madison reached into his pocket and pulled clear a letter. He informed Edward that this letter had been placed in his hands by Nash on the understanding that Madison would personally give it to his former master, and to him alone, even though it was understood that this would mean crossing the sea and returning to America. Edward looked more intently now. "Did Nash know I was coming?" Madison narrowed his eyes. "You choose not to write to him."

Madison paused. "And by the time I discovered him he was merely a few hours this side of death." Edward dropped his gaze. Then he whispered, "I want to go where Nash lived." Madison said nothing. He held out the letter.

In that letter Nash disavows all links with his "father" and urges him to remain in his "own country" (63). The dénouement to this contest occurs when Edward Williams arrives at Nash Williams's last place of abode to witness the fruits of the latter's return to Africa. The final, and definitive, "letter" Edward Williams receives is the spectacle of failed "Christian" paradigms rendered as a view of West African topography; thus, topographical spaces constantly fold into textual spaces and vice versa:

There, spread before him, he could now see the litter of brown cones that constituted the final Nash Williams settlement. Madison took the lead and ushered Edward forward and into the unkempt filth of the place. Everywhere he turned, Edward's eyes were assaulted by natives who squatted idly, their bodies resting awkwardly on their foundations, like their infantile shacks. Edward attempted to paint his face with a thinly benevolent smile, but he realised that he was ill-equipped to disguise his true feelings of disgust in the midst of this spectre of peopled desolation. A seemingly undisturbed Madison shepherded Edward
through the dried and drying mud, until they stood outside of the house of Nash Williams. Madison pointed at the straw grass hovel, encouraging his former master to enter, but Edward stepped back in revulsion. (68-69)

While the primary issue at stake in the passage is the narrative Edward Williams will be able to take home, the scene also demonstrates how different parties produce and subsequently write different geographies of West Africa. Various motifs running through “Heartland” and “The Pagan Coast” converge in these lines to make Edward Williams’s arrival as crucial a scene as the letter scene in “Heartland.” The transformation of Nash’s paradise into Edward’s panorama of filth and chaos dramatises sharply the contentious interpretations of human relations to the environment that undergird cultural encounters in Phillips’s portrayal of West Africa:

One person’s wilderness might be another person’s Eden. For some people, forests have been home, supplying their every need and comfort; for others, they have been places of darkness and barbarism, fit only to be cut down in the cause of progress, prosperity and good order. The environment has been not just a place, but also an arena in which conflicting ideologies and cultures might be locked in bitter contention. (Arnold 3)

It is this bitter contention that is evoked in this second “letter” scene. Geography (geo = Earth, graphy = writing) is interpreted literally here as Nash writes (on) the earth to pitch one last battle against eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European discourse of environmental determinism, which produced and then assigned deleterious qualities to the nature of tropical areas in the world. “The Pagan Coast” makes a more developed commentary than “Heartland” on the colonial productions of nature and the correlative effects of this process. The former puts in place two contrary discursive productions (by a white and a black character) of West Africa,
whereas the latter simply stages topographically the irrevocable transformations wrought by European incursion. In the middle of the confrontation between the emancipated former slave and the former master emerges the African native who is only produced as such because he is silent.

The Ends of Filiations

What is ultimately at stake in the opposing productions of West African space by white and black characters is a differentiation of diasporan identities. Nash’s rehabilitative geography announces his emancipation from the disabling Christian paradigms he was saddled with. His eventual disappearance (into the land) eliminates the diasporan black character from the position of other to the former slave master, in the Manichean master-slave opposition. Edward Williams’s failure to articulate his hymn at the sight of Nash’s final abode signals the resultant collapse of his symbolic register. The simple evocative act of singing is a defence mechanism with which the character attempts to reconfigure and assimilate the scene—just as the departing slaves use song to configure their new symbolic order. As much as this dissolution occurs in West Africa, it is not simply about West Africa or Africans. Instead, this conclusion serves to emancipate Madison while it seals Edward and the Africans into schematic positions of the impending colonial encounter from which Madison—the diasporan black—departs.

In the last passage cited from “The Pagan Coast” Edwards and the Africans constitute, through mutual othering, an affective relationship in which Edward is conflated into the “white man” just as Africans become “natives.” The only “free” character in this scene of respective othering is Madison. To state such emancipation is not to ignore Madison’s location in West Africa, but to acknowledge it explicitly in Hall’s interpretation of the return to Africa as defining the relationship of New World black cultures to modernity. The single most important
difference between Madison and all other black characters in the novella is that Madison is not caught in any structures of filiation with the white master. Notice in the following passage Edward’s loss of voice, Madison’s transformation from “former slave” to “man”—i.e. the “family of man”—and the emergence of the African native:

Edward looked across at his former slave, and hoped that this man might usher him toward some understanding of the disorder that lay hereabouts. But Madison had about his person an air of nonchalance. And then it struck Edward with a terrible force. He was alone. He had been abandoned. Madison would not even meet his eyes. He decided that he would sing a hymn, in order that he might calm his beleaguered mind. The natives stared at him, and watched as the white man’s lips formed the words, but no sound was heard. Still, Edward continued to sing his hymn. The natives looked on and wondered what evil spirits had populated this poor man’s soul and dragged him down to such a level of abasement. Their hearts began to swell with the pity that one feels for a fellow being who has lost both his way and his sense of purpose. This strange old white man. Madison turned away. (69-70)

Cambridge, Nash and the narrator of “Heartland” exhibit in varying degrees a detrimental belief in the teleology of Christianity as a paradigm for the regeneration of Africa and the redemption of Africans. These characters’ blind faith is represented in terms of their relationship to Christianity and, in particular, to three white characters standing in as father figures—the fort governor in “Heartland,” Cambridge’s master in London and Edward in “The Pagan Coast.” The reiteration of a motif such as the sun in “Heartland” (11, 21, 22) and “The Pagan Coast” (54, 69) highlights the parallels between the Fort governor and Edward Williams. Both characters are, in...
turn, modelled on the ruthless Colonel Joll of Coetzee’s *Waiting for the Barbarians*. Notice the similarities in the arrival of the fort governor and Colonel Joll:

His hand creates an imaginary visor to complement his imaginary hat. He continues to squint. The sun pours her golden misery on to the stubbed head of this confused man. Why speak with me out here in the courtyard? Does he not fear the loose clattering of tongues in the narrow mouths of his people? We walk a few paces and I try to steer him towards the cool, darkly shadowed cloisters, but he resists with a perversity peculiar only to those freshly arrived on the coast . . .

(*Higher Ground* 11)

I have never seen anything like it: two little discs of glass suspended in front of his eyes in loops of wire. Is he blind? I could understand it if he wanted to hide blind eyes. But he is not blind. The discs are dark, they look opaque from the outside, but he can see through them. He tells me they are a new invention. “They protect one’s eyes against the glare of the sun,” he says. “You’ll find them useful out here in the desert. They save one from squinting all the time. . . .”

(*Waiting* 1)

Whereas Coetzee’s ruthless torturer arrives prepared for the sun, Phillips reveals the naivety and vulnerability of Edward and the governor through their ignorance of the environment. Both characters are thus “incompetent” paternal figures in filial relationships in which the narrator and Nash Williams are the sons. Unlike Colonel Joll who covers his eyes in order to see even better, these figures are literally blind to their involvement in the task of creating otherness. The blindness of fort governor and Edward is similar to that of Delano. With these three characters, blindness is synonymous with ignorance and benign innocence.
While the relationship remains largely insignificant in “Heartland,” it is taken to its extreme consequences in “The Pagan Coast” where the sexual exploitation of a child is described as “unconditional love” by the “father” (55). The sexual relationship between Nash and Edward is Phillips’s twist on the examinations of the conjunctions of power and sexual exploitation that run through all chapters of this dissertation. Whereas such discussions focus on male-female dominance in Morrison and Wright, Phillips—and Condé too—collapse the binary of gender difference to isolate power relations. All of Nash Williams’s letters to his “father” are cast in the petulant mode of anger rooted in fear of abandonment; but they are also accusations. Madison’s rebuttal of Edward’s sexual advances (68) and desertion of his former master (70) are assertions of his independence and acceptance of his place and prospects in Phillips’s vision of modernity. It is perhaps necessary to point out that Madison survives in West Africa without going native or turning to his American “father.” As the epilogue to Crossing the River announces, the ability to survive is the mark of the diasporan character (236). The very end of “The Pagan Coast” stages impending colonial encounters.

In the respective narratives I have examined, Cambridge, Nash Williams and the narrator of “Heartland” are bridges over the gap between Africans and a character such as Madison. It is the absence of the bridge that institutes the differentiation: the Africans and Madison are both joined and separated by a missing link. “The Pagan Coast” closes with an opposition of Edward and the natives (69). There is no bridge into the ensuing territory between Africans and the white man. The fate of the natives is left undetermined, and in spite of an authorial ellipsis that makes them return the gaze, their hearts “swell with pity” as they enter into an affective relationship that the diasporan character has disavowed at such great cost. Madison sees the natives’ folly and he turns away. The “natives” certainly return the gaze and even imagine
Edward to be at a “level of abasement” (70). They remain nevertheless “natives” and it is precisely their materialisation that allows Madison to turn away.

In the end, “The Pagan Coast” is long on Madison’s strong will and short on what he will or might eventually become. This ambiguity is exactly the point: Madison is the one character who defines and accepts his place in the constellation of contingencies that characterise Phillips’s vision of modernity. Although Madison is also in West Africa, he does not occupy the same conceptual space as the African “natives.” But the author presents a statement on the relationship between parts of the diaspora by reinstating the aural imaginary in the epilogue to Crossing the River:

> For two hundred and fifty years I have listened. I have listened to the voice that cried: I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia, the sons of former slaves and sons of former slave-owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood. I have listened to the sounds of an African carnival in Trinidad. In Rio. In New Orleans. On the far bank of the river, a drum continues to be beaten. A many-tongued chorus begins to swell. And I hope that amongst these survivors’ voices I might occasionally hear those of my children. . . . A guilty father. Always listening. There are no paths in water. No signposts. There is no return. A desperate foolishness. The crops failed. I sold my children.

(236-37)

In these lines, the paternal guilt leads to eternal listening. The words “swell,” “listen,” and “chorus” are part of a network through Phillips’s fiction. The word “swell” appears in the departure scene in “Heartland,” the encounter between Edward Williams and the Africans, as well as the epilogue and prologue to Crossing the River. The recurrence of the drum in the
prologue and epilogue and in “Heartland” (59)—and the overall insistence on listening—could be read back into Conrad’s novel. In her analysis of the “moment and the afterlife” of _Heart of Darkness_, Benita Parry reminds us that Marlow’s venture into Africa was an advance into a space “whose signs he sees but cannot read” (49). Marlow—and Edward—are anti-detective figures:

In invoking the “overwhelming realities” of an Africa that is represented as both a physical space and a metaphysical realm, _Heart of Darkness_ alludes to another semantic universe than its own semantic universe that its own discourse cannot decipher. To his audience, _Marlow confesses that he had been unable to tell what the roll of drums might signify_ . . . , if the piece of cloth round a black man’s neck is “a badge, an ornament, a propitiatory charm,” and if indeed it was connected to “any idea all . . .; or whether the “prehistoric man was cursing us, praying to us, welcoming us” . . . Such nescience informs his attempts to represent the “mysterious life” of the immense expanse he looks on but cannot fathom. (49, my emphasis)

Although Parry comments on the signs Marlow sees in this passage, the sounds he hears are actually much more important: _Heart of Darkness_ is replete with sounds from people and animals, machinery, and the river that the protagonist is constantly trying to decipher. In fact, Marlow is practically navigating a soundscape with his “sounding-pole” (109). The roll of drums is a persistent feature of that soundscape and Marlow comes closest to deciphering it when he writes that “the tremor of far-off drums, sinking, swelling, a tremor vast, faint; a sound weird, appealing, suggestive, and wild—[is] perhaps [imbued] with as profound a meaning as the sound of bells in a Christian country” (81). The indecipherable nature of the _roll of drums_ that
Marlow admits to his audience becomes the puzzle Phillips’s readers must decipher. The roll of drums, along with swell, chorus and listen, indicate the aural spheres into which respective characters are inducted. Belonging to any of these spheres places characters within certain power structures. The recourse to such economies leads me to four appraisals: 1) The shift to the aural imaginary, similar to what Hall has called a “vernacular modernity,” calls for acts of solidarity in listening. Thus, Phillips’s characters end their narratives with a plea to their interlocutors for their particular version of the “truth” to be heard. This shift to indirect requests for solidarity eschews the easy solution of speaking for the other, or creating subaltern characters imbued with a voice that speaks their emancipation. 2) Black identities are performed in Phillips’s fiction sometimes in concord and sometimes in conflict with each other. While slavery appears in these novels, it sometimes emerges as a thoroughly pluralizing event, and its violence is refracted through multiple local incidents. 3) Phillips creates slave characters but he resists the impulse simply to let the subaltern slave figures speak; these figures all speak but their speech is constantly subverted because they are not in a position to impose/enforce their versions of the “truth.” Consequently, Phillips ends by displacing the human voice into another medium. His chorus and roll of drum return us to the linguistic and auditory chaos that ensues in final scenes on board the San Dominick and in the aftermath of the Simian murders in Poe’s story. Phillips’s characters emerge out of such auditory worlds carrying interpretations of events in quests to launch their voices upon political landscapes in search of solidarity. On a basic level, the pursuits of these characters are similar to those of Wright’s Bigger and Morrison’s Sethe. But unlike those two, Phillips’s characters die carrying their messages. It is left to the reader to discern permutations of speech that lie in the wake of the perished slaves. At the same time, the text does reveal the discursive structures that create the silence.
Sometimes we have the tendency to see ourselves all the time as victims and to dwell on the memory of the suffering of our ancestors. [...] You like to think about that, to see how much the race you belonged to suffered. And it seems to me that it’s wrong because, after all, it is the past. The past is the past. [...] We know that it happened. We have, we should have, the memory of it somewhere. [...] I’m afraid that while we’re thinking of slavery where everything is black and white (without un jeu de mots) that maybe we forget what is going on in the world today, in the country we are living in today, and maybe it is a kind of easy—not easy, but often said, often described—way out. (Condé qtd. in Kadish 220-21)
Introduction

The epigraph to this chapter captures the spirit of Maryse Condé’s literary investigations of the trans-Atlantic slave trade on the African diaspora. Slavery and its legacies are often linked to Condé’s exploration of the lives of black characters in the author’s fiction. The theme of the afterlives of slavery appears so frequently in her fiction that one critic asserts the novels could [accordingly] be read “primarily as psychological, social, or historical documents, which, however, would leave aside one of their major merits: their literariness” (Smith 381). In other words, Condé’s novels move within a semantic field originating, in Smith’s words, from “existential and historical elements,” and the themes appear in the novels in “oblique and less readily recognizable” manners (382). Condé almost always uses recognisable historical incidents and identifiable historical figures from the Atlantic world, significant authors and books from the African diaspora, the iconography of the house/home, exile/homecoming, speech/writing, land/water, and metacritical inquiries into the function, possibilities and limits of representation in capturing violence that inheres in sites of historical conquests.

Critics divide Condé’s novels, schematically, into her African and Antillean periods (Nyatetu-Waigwa 558, Moudileno 141-44). I am following this division in choosing two important novels that “inaugurate” these periods: Hérémakhonon and Crossing the Mangrove. The tension between the concentration on slavery and the need to engage in contemporary crisis, evident in the epigraph, runs through Hérémakhonon and Crossing the Mangrove in the form of an antithetical opposition between her characters. The archetypal protagonists in these two novels are either working through their attachments to idealised images of Africa or resolving conflicts of identity in the New World. Both protagonists are alienated figures engrossed with a quest—or legacy—that pits them against others.
These similar themes and icons appear in the works of authors discussed in the first three chapters of this dissertation. The diverse mobilisations of “exile” and “alienation” within divergent frames underscore the transitory unity of these authors. The significance of turning to Maryse Condé lies in her attention to the francophone parts of the diaspora, as well as her commitment to twentieth-century dialogues between Africa and the diaspora. Condé’s novels point to alternate geographies of effacement outside of the Anglophone America that haunts Poe, Melville, Wright and Morrison.

It is constructive to read Phillips’s novels alongside Condé’s writing of postcolonial African contemporaneity. To do so is to translate his eighteenth- and nineteenth-century concerns into twentieth-century idioms. The setting of Phillips’s novels in an era before formal colonisation and reorganisation of Caribbean and African polities allows that author to delineate (in a sense) the beginning of a set of interrelated relations between Africa, the Americas and Europe. Condé presents a bridge to African literary representations of the slave trade—that come in chapter five. Whereas the Africans in Phillips’s narratives are being enslaved or stand at the beginning of colonial projects, the protagonists in Hérémakhonon and Crossing the Mangrove realise the delusion of believing in a singular colonising moment. These protagonists visit Africa as part of their projects of redemption only to realize that Africa is a scene of different but connected quests for revolution.

**Hérémakhonon: The Fallibility of the Signifier**

Maryse Condé’s novel Hérémakhonon narrates the travels of Véronica Mercier. She is born in Guadeloupe, spends some decisive years of her life in Paris, and travels to an unnamed African country to teach as part of the French expatriate corps. Véronica’s journey as a technical assistant (coopérant), teaching European philosophy, doubles as her voyage to the ancestral
homeland in search of what she calls her “nigger with ancestors” (175). The anonymity of the country makes it a referent for a metonymic Africa undifferentiated for the diasporic subject. The themes of migration from the Caribbean to Africa via France make the novel a narrative of the impossibility of a “return” from the diaspora to the homeland. Conde’s narrative technique complicates any reading of the novel. The protagonist’s interior monologue, direct utterances, and the reported speech from conversations in her mind are undifferentiated, while the comments of all her immediate interlocutors appear in quotation marks. The consequent silencing of characters creates tensions between Véronica’s personal experience and that of other characters. Conde reworking of the motif of sound that runs through the previous chapters of this dissertation indicates the particularities of her contribution to the articulation of professions of solidarity between peoples of the diaspora. In the following passage, the “contest” over the connotations of drums is part of Conde’s strategy of differentiating the meanings attached to music across the diaspora:

A sudden din startles me. The bean pole smiles:

“It’s Saturday.”

African drums. Who has not heard of them? They say the white missionaries used to listen, panting and making the sign of the cross under their mosquito nets: Satan’s worshippers. How naive [sic] can you be! For me, there’s nothing very extraordinary about drums. These are hardly any different from our own massa kon at carnival time. Hardly any different from the gros ka at village fairs with which the blacks express their lust for life with the same guts they use for living. Put them in irons, brand them with red hot tongs, cart them off to the cotton and sugar cane fields and what do you get? Jazz with the beguine and
calypso thrown in as a bonus. These are the drums who make American tourists shiver to the chicken blood splattering a voodoo ceremony. . . . (7)

What surfaces in this passage are contrapuntal readings of sounds that reveal different associations with the drums, their variations across sites in the diaspora, and positions of power in which subjects are—and have been—placed through their relation to the sounds. The sound of drums moves within specific aural spheres that indicate affiliations with forms of religion, travel, and trade. Africans and their descendants move within these spheres as objects or participants in varying socio-economic situations. It is typical of Condé’s protagonist that she reveals these complex associations and the kinds of subject formations that arise at the scenes of production and consumption of these sounds without ascribing any particular importance to them.

The tactic of revelation without affiliation that inheres in the discussion of music in the diaspora extends to the complicated conversations that unfold in the novel. As the protagonist’s memory unfolds, in her recollections of her Antillean island and Paris, she recounts the disadvantages of racialisation but exposes how she is also differentially located as a member of the black bourgeoisie. Her mobility is yoked to the immobility and silence of the family’s black maid, whose presence/absence constantly unsettles the critique of her childhood. In Paris, Véronica’s marginalisation as a black citizen from the overseas département is juxtaposed to the marginalisation of African proletarian immigrants sweeping the streets. In Africa, Véronica’s interpretation of Africa and Africans clash with the interpretations of her actions by African characters and with the latter’s readings of their local realities:

“Could Mademoiselle say which country she comes from?”
“What a strange country which has no Mandingo, no Fulani, no Toucouleur, no Serer, no Wolof, no Toma, no Guerze, no Fang, no Fon, no Bété, no Fanti, no Baoulé, no Ewe, no Dagbani, no Yoruba, no Mina, no Ibo. And yet the inhabitants are black.”

[...]

“Could Mademoiselle tell us about Paris?”

[...]

Paris? What can I say about Paris? Anyway my Paris wouldn’t be yours. Yours is the tall, dark plastic dustbins and the short, phosphorescent jackets in the dawn. Yours is the weekends, playing pinball in the cafés, whose owners are fed up. All these niggers and their other customers have fled. (24-25)

This passage demonstrates Conde’s narrative technique. The interior monologue is often both interior monologue and response. This interchange literally puts Véronica’s African interlocutors on a stage for the reader: only the Africans are heard. Yet Véronica evaluates and comments ironically on the interlocutors. A paradoxical form of silencing permeates the whole novel. The alternation of interior monologue and direct dialogue simultaneously allows the Africans to speak but also interprets their speech. In other words, the speech of African characters is always already intercepted and interpreted by Véronica.

The protagonist interrogates the meaning of origins and of Paris throughout the novel. Paris is both interface and passageway for colonial and postcolonial relations that carry diverse meanings in Paris, in the Caribbean, and in Africa. The city displaces Nantes, the French port and centre for the slave trade and stands as metonymic device for projects of colonisation in the Caribbean and Africa. It also stands for the point of convergence for political activists from the
colonised world during decolonisation struggles. These epochal political struggles, however, appear overshadowed by realities of everyday encounters between “ordinary people.” As Spivak points out in her reading of Hérémakhonon, French is both medium of communication and a reminder of colonisation (Spivak “Staging Time” 89). One might extrapolate from her observation that French preserves a particular memory and only allows a set of conversations with the registers it possesses. If, as Spivak also writes, the multiplicity of the enumerated African languages is absent in the New World, that same multiplicity points to alternative conduits for African experiences of history and the lost dimensions of African colonising moments. The text is thus open in ways that elude the reader:

We are [...] obliged to forget that these shifting pre-colonial demographic frontiers and names of languages/peoples with sedimented history complicate ideas of ‘race’ and ‘Africa’. These languages/peoples go across modern frontiers such as Guinea, Mali and Nigeria. They carry a different kind of history. In order to ‘read’ this staging of history actively, we must unclench our memory from ‘Africa’ as a singular lost object. [...] It is not that Africa should be forgotten, but that, if the monoculture of continent-think becomes all in all, then the historically diversified subalterns cannot speak. (89-90)

Spivak’s attention to the silences in the novel is insightful. However, it is possible that the issue is not so much that “diversified subalterns” cannot speak. Rather, they speak but cannot be heard since the dominance of French enforces a louder conversation. To converse with Africans and not create them as subaltern, Véronica simply has to learn the African languages. Yehogul, another foreigner who is later expelled for his subversive activities, does precisely this: “He had achieved a miracle. A foreigner like me, he speaks the country’s five
main languages” (87). There are, in effect, several theatres of encounters in place—“Thus, the novel can perhaps be described as staging a timing which is in conflict with a time that belongs to the mental theatre of the protagonist” (Spivak 88). Spivak’s use of theatre is significant: although she concludes that the novel stages different times—i.e., historical temporalities—Spivak’s time is better read as theatre since these times cohere in the performances that unfold in the novel.

The sense of incompatible encounters that pervades the novel confounds critics. Françoise Lionnet writes, for example, that the novel is a “representation of barrenness” and “a failure on the part of political agency on the individual and collective levels for the colonized subjects of history whose lives are lived on the periphery of events beyond their control” (187):

Maryse Condé gives us a glimpse into the mind of an Antillean woman whose lack of commitment, dedication, and direction is symptomatic of a broader cultural problem, one which may not be solved for quite some time, since its resolution would imply the adoption and successful implementation of a different political economy in the French West Indies. After showing the abortive process of revolution in Africa, Héremakhonon ends on a pessimistic note; it has become even harder for Véronica to envisage new structures of meaning which would empower her to adopt a discourse directed toward the future, to imagine new and purposive forms of political self-invention. (187)

Again, this otherwise insightful reading needs to be modified. Lionnet correctly identifies a larger problem—the cultural estrangement of Antilleans of African descent—that requires extensive changes in Antillean “political economy.” Héremakhonon does not, however, end on a “pessimistic note.” The novel needs to be read as a critique of the assumption that the protagonist should assign an originary status to Africa as the site of her colonising moment.
What *Hérémakhonon* reveals through Véronica’s consciousness is a set of encounters between successive ideologies that structure relations between parts of the African diaspora. This novel too maps out contrapuntal geographies. Whereas Phillips concentrates on forms of racialisation, environmental determinism, and the spatialisation of subjugation in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Condé concentrates on the imbrications of diasporic yearnings with the legacies of French colonialism and the neo-colonialism of Cold War politics. Topography is of little significance in Condé’s novels. Instead, characters lend physicality to conflicts through embodiment. The times of slavery, colonisation, decolonisation and neocolonisation unfold as subjectivities in conflict with each other. Christopher Miller writes accordingly that *Hérémakhonon* employs a form of enunciation based on negation:

There is indeed a barrier between the inside (Véronica’s consciousness) and the outside (Africa and its politics); it is true that Véronica never breaks out of her ironic shell to commit herself to the outside world. But *Hérémakhonon* is hardly the “book on nothing” of which Flaubert dreamed: just as Véronica “speaks” without being quoted, the novel sends positive signals between its lines. *Hérémakhonon* does not attempt to resolve the identity problems associated with the African diaspora, but it stakes out a firm position on the question of Return. *Enunciation does not fail in this novel; it is ideology that fails.* The peculiar way in which Véronica’s direct speech is excluded from the text is not the cause or consequence of her “failure.” The myth of return is to blame, and *Hérémakhonon* reads like a novelized indictment of false identification with Africa. The figure of Africa is demystified with some brutality, and *Hérémakhonon* becomes the antidote to negritude and its vision of Africa as One. The narrator’s
consciousness, meanwhile—confused, blind, and sarcastic—nonetheless gropes
for other solutions. (178)

The significance of Conde’s novel lies in the insinuations of a “book of nothing” and the
necessity to read between “its lines.” If Verónica negates Africa and Africans, she exposes the
limits of any notions of transcendental signifier of blackness or African unity. And perhaps
Conde’s purpose and her contribution to this dissertation are best exemplified by her revision of
négritude’s animal trope from Léopold Sédar Senghor’s idealisation of “the African woman” in
the poem “Femme Noire” as the “gazelle aux attaches célestes” [the gazelle with heavenly
limbs] (Senghor 151). When Verónica meets Saliou’s wife, she identifies Ouma Hawa, through
reference to Leopold Senghor’s poetry, as the “black gazelle extolled by the poet” (5). Conde’s
solitary reference to animals points to African cultural nationalist reaction to European tropes of
bestialisation. In other words, Conde’s cursory reference unsettles both European and African
tropes and puts their discursive formations in dialogue. The “conflicts” between Verónica and
her African counterparts do not, therefore, simply “negate” the script of negritude because it
“fails” to accommodate Verónica’s contemporary realities. The protagonist’s so-called
“negativity” does not engender “nothingness” but a new meaning in the fissures between pre-
existing script and actual encounter. Miller’s notion of the “book of nothing” thus refers readers
to the acts of reading and interpretation that are taking place within the novel and outside it. In
having to decipher Verónica’s interior monologue, her indirect speech, her ironic commentary,
the multiple times in the novel, and her negation of diasporic unity, readers are forced to read
literally and figuratively between the lines.
Speaking through Embattled Figures

Véronica’s experience in the unnamed African country is mediated by her childhood in her Antillean home that she has not visited in nine years, her sojourn in metropolitan Paris during that time, her present relations in Africa, and her paradigm of a contemporary Africa constantly refracted through a monolithic conception of an African past. Each of these locations has its individual set of relations in which the meanings of colonialism, marginalisation and contemporary politics must be redefined. Véronica’s problem is her quest to create a singular geography out of these disparate sites in her personal experiences. (This insistence—on the singularity or interchangeability of the colonising moment—leads to her inability to pursue any kind of politics in any single site; the manifestations of the colonising moments in Guadeloupe, Africa and Paris may need site-specific remedies.) Worse, other characters construe Véronica’s actions across these locations as collaboration, rebellion and complicity. The search for identity is a search for politics.

The most important set of conflicts develops within a web of sexual liaisons with male characters. In Guadeloupe, Véronica recalls her upwardly mobile black family who are pitted against the island’s mulatto population. Thus, her relationship with light-skinned men could be read as desire for an individual or as a sign of complicity and desire for “racial upliftment.” In France, Véronica appears to continue on a path of “racial upliftment” by her choice of a white French partner. Finally, during Véronica’s African sojourn, that is the novel’s “present,” she chooses Ibrahima Sory, the “Minister of Defence” in the repressive African regime, as her lover. The minister, called the “nigger with ancestors,” connects her to a primordial past preceding her Antillean and French realities. And precisely because Sory functions as a conduit to replete
subjecthood—through a vicarious experience of the past—the interactions between both characters function on a different plane.

It matters little to Véronica that this minister is also juxtaposed to two radical Marxist male characters: Saliou and Birame III are director and student at the Institute where Véronica teaches European philosophy. A profound irony results from the contrariness between the conditions that enable and sustain Véronica’s physical journey and the personal search. In a sense, as a teacher of European philosophy, her utterances emerge in a context in which they are always shot through with ambiguity. As political activists, Saliou and Birame III represent possibilities for a pragmatic relationship with “Africa.” Unlike the minister who drives Mercedes Benz cars, Saliou drives the East European Skoda. Birame III offers Véronica the possibility of nurturing a protégé. Birame III is so called because he is one of three students named Birame that come from the same village.

The juxtaposition of Birame III and Ibrahima Sory stages the movement from filiation to affiliation. Saliou and Birame III serve as “a conscience” and the voices of contemporary social realities:

They count [the president’s] Mercedes and vent their anger against [his] wives’ jewels. They say an oligarchy of greed has taken over from Europe. Instead of the Koran they recite Fanon. Yesterday they wanted to drag me into a discussion of The Wretched of the Earth that I haven’t read. Mea culpa! Mea maxima culpa!

\[
\ldots
\]

I’ve already realized that giving alms means giving away one’s salary. I have even learned to thrust aside with a strong hand beggars who are too
enterprising. It's Birame III who taught me, learnedly explaining that individual charity is useless and that it is no answer to poverty. My coins are a drop in the ocean. Their only purpose is to give me a good conscience. We need a revolution, dixit Birame III. After his idol comes Saliou. What a pair the two of them make! (33)

This passage reveals the antithetical structure of filiation and affiliation undergirding this novel. The references to wives and oligarchy identify the pattern of rule and corruption through families. The propagation of future generations is presented through polygamy and the representation of supplicant wives that provide children. Hints at Véronica's barrenness separate her from the African women and suggest the end of her line. The juxtaposition of Fanon's book and the Koran are part of a network of intertextual references that is even broader than that which Phillips employs in his novels. The striking feature about Condé's intertextual references is that, in comparison to Phillips's novels, these references do not provide the frames for Condé's plot. Instead, these references become a sort of meta-commentary that runs parallel to the novel. The intertextual references fulfil at least two functions. They point to the larger discourses in which Condé's novel is situated and the manners in which other conversations might inform the reader's interpretations.

Although Véronica claims an ignorance of The Wretched of the Earth—the Fanon work that is important to Saliou and Birame III—she discloses her knowledge of Fanon's elaborations on the black woman's desire for the white man in Black Skin, White Masks. She refers specifically to Fanon's discussion of Mayotte Capécia's Je suis Martiniquaise, and she denies that she seeks the sexual companionship of men of lighter skin colour out of a sense of inferiority.
and desire for "racial upliftment." The opposition of these two books by Fanon is part of what Susan Andrade calls Condé’s "dialogization" of Fanon:

According to Fanonian logic, Ibrahima Sory, as the darkest and most African of Véronica’s sexual partners, is the most appropriate for her. The fact that he imprisons and ultimately is responsible for the deaths of her two friends along with untold others, however, undermines Fanon’s injunction. Ibrahima Sory’s royal pedigree serves only to justify his repressive power. This dialogization of Fanon by Condé upholds one of the Martinican’s fundamental tenets that politics are not determined by race or biology as much as by choice; and it points out how in Fanon’s model choice is utterly denied the woman of color. The latter point especially constitutes a feminist challenge to the transcendental black phallus.

(222)

The passage is from an essay in which Susan Andrade analyzes “the sexualised image of black women in the Caribbean” (215). She focuses on the ways in which gender appears as a blindspot in “phallocentric” discourses of the African diaspora, in which the phallus functions as a “master trope” (216). Andrade’s comments can be further complicated. The notable point in Condé’s turn to Fanon is not simply a critique of the latter’s gender blindness, but that the black woman functions as a cipher in Fanon’s articulation of the psychological alienation of the black man from their “blackness”—read oppression. In what is considered a site of his misogyny, Fanon ascribes to black women “a bilateral process” that is “an attempt to acquire—by internalizing them—assets that were originally prohibited. It is because the Negress feels inferior that she aspires to win the admittance into the white world” (Black Skin 59-60).
The reference to Fanon’s reading of Capécia’s autobiographical novel puts Condé’s novel in dialogue not only with Fanon, but also with the critical debates on Fanon’s alleged misogyny. Simon Gikandi reads this use of the black woman’s inferiority suggestively by placing it within the larger discussion of the imbrications of postcolonial discourse with poststructuralism and, particularly, in the context of Sartrean “radical humanism” on anti-colonialism. Fanon functions as the conduit for Sartrean philosophy into postcolonial discourse. Most important in Gikandi’s explanations are the three fundamental tenets of “radical humanism.” I would summarise Gikandi’s multifaceted arguments as follows: In the attempt to understand modernity, history is often understood as a “process” in which the human subject “would come to conquer nature and discover the essential truth” (102). The belief in the processual conception of history as a movement towards truth privileged a subject that is constituted within the “lived world” of “social drama.” “Consciousness,” as Gikandi writes, was “unthinkable without a knowing subject.” The question is, then, who is this subject that enunciates the “truth”? The third component in “this discourse of history and consciousness was the question of the [function of the] other” in the realisation and enunciation of “truth.” Sartre became useful for “colonized intellectuals seeking to develop an anticolonial history as a first step to what they considered to be a decolonized truth” (“Poststructuralism” 102-03). To extrapolate from Gikandi, Condé is not so much concerned with “the transcendental black phallus” as with the fallibility of “the phallus” as a signifier. Condé shows through her critique of Fanon that there can be no transcendental framework of emancipation for all forms of oppression of the peoples of the black diaspora on the basis of race. Condé’s attempt to show the transitory nature of any “truth” is observable in her invocation of a series of “others” and her treatment of sexual relationships.
The first part of her endeavour relies on a narrative strategy subtended by extensive use of intertextual associations. Like Wright, Morrison and Phillips, Condé’s fiction provokes reflections on the work and possibilities of practices of representation in sustaining power structures that abet different forms of cultural encounters. What is distinct about Condé—in these two novels—is the emphasis on twentieth-century international formations such as Négritude, Marxism, and even the advent of the European Union. The title of Andrade’s essay, “The Nigger of the Narcissist,” hints at a correlation between Joseph Conrad’s *The Nigger of the Narcissus* (1897) and Condé’s *Hérémakhonon*. Andrade does not comment on Conrad’s novel, but the title becomes a subtext for Andrade’s analyses of the “metaphysical gestures utilized to transmogrify African women (and men) from subjects to objects in history” (215-16).

Conrad’s novel is a tale of complex social relations and the role of the English aristocracy in an era of industrialisation. Published a year before Conrad began writing *Heart of Darkness*, *The Nigger of the ‘Narcissus’*, which Cesare Casarino has rightly described as a “sea narrative” (19), could be read as a precursor to *Heart of Darkness*. Several themes of *Heart of Darkness* are discernible in this novel, which portrays the relations between the seamen as they go through various attitudes in response to the external forces of the sea as the mercantile ship sails from Bombay to England. The motif of journey and colonial modernity form the background to the characters’ lives as their ship journeys through parts of the British Empire. The characters are set in counterpoint to one another in such ways that they act in various positions of antagonism or collaboration.

There is a range of differences at work distinguishing Conrad’s characters from one another. But all of these are superseded by race, which protrudes here in a period of transition from slavery to an order which Conrad will name and portray in more exacting manner one year
later in *Heart of Darkness*. During the perilous sea journey, James Wait, a dying black sailor with a “sublime privilege” (57), serves as a *memento mori* for white sailors on the *Narcissus*. The pervading sense of horror of racial exploitation in the project of capitalist modernity is discernible in the accounts of Belfast, who “tended” the ailing Wait—“as sentimentally careful of his nigger as a model slave-owner” (175). Singleton is the one character that “was old enough to remember slavers”; he has seen black men “die like flies” and the narrative prefigures *Heart of Darkness*, when he hints at his possible recollections of “gruesome things, details of horrors, hecatombs of niggers” (161-62). In a forward to the novel, Conrad describes the dying black man as “nothing.” He “is merely the centre of the ship’s collective psychology and the pivot of action” (v). But if Wait is “nothing” his presence and demise nonetheless cannot be ignored. He serves as a point of reference for all sailors as he arouses their sympathy; he is also an important catalyst for their insights:

Jimmy’s death, after all, came as a tremendous surprise. We did not know till then how much faith we had put in his delusions. We had taken his chances of life so much at his own valuation that his death, like the death of an old belief, shook the foundations of our society. A common bond was gone; the strong, effective, and respectable bond of a sentimental lie. All day we mooned at our work, with suspicious looks and a disabused air. [. . .] In going he took away with himself the gloomy and solemn shadow in which our folly had posed, with humane satisfaction, as a tender arbiter of fate. And now we saw it was no such thing. (194-95)

It is never clear if Waits is indeed “something or nothing” (161) but his presence forms the “bond of the sentimental lie” that binds the men and appears as a refrain in the novel (13, 29, 30,
Perhaps, in analogy to Conrad's "nigger," one could argue the existence of an ambulatory position of "nigger" that is transformed from site to site. One could also argue the presence of unarticulated or concealed memories.

For my reading of Conde, this ambulatory othered "nigger"—who emerges via Conrad—needs to be juxtaposed with the embattled figure of the intellectuals/bearers of insight that arise in mobilisations of Fanon. Coupling Conrad and Fanon is an especially useful tactic in reading Conde and Phillips. In a simple sense, Conrad is often mobilised to map the entanglements of Europe, empire, imperialism and colonialism, while Fanon is used to map decolonisation struggles. The appearance of these two authors in Phillips and Conde presents the illusion of an opposition. Conrad and Fanon are two migrants with different voyages into to Europe. Each "voyage in" engendered its associated subject positions, conundrums and insights into European imperial projects and colonial modernities. The inspirations the men present are also separated by time, geography and the genres in which they write. Perhaps one way to articulate the link between Conrad and Fanon is that the latter is often used to theorise decolonisation and the embattled position of the revolutionary subject, whereas the former’s canonised text is used to exemplify the quandary of the "inarticulate" witness to colonial oppression as well as the complicity of the literary production in projects of colonialism. But the temporal disjuncture between Conrad and Fanon also reveals the manifestation of entangled pasts, presents and endeavours for the future in which the characters in Conde and Phillips are differentially embedded. In effect, whereas the Condradian subjects, in Heart of Darkness and The Nigger of the Narcissist, are complicit witnesses to projects of colonisation, slavery, and exploitation, the Fanonian subject endorses revolution, decolonisation, and independence. The presence of
Conrad and Fanon in the fiction of Condé—and Phillips—accentuates ongoing struggles between ever-changing forms of exploitation and new forms of resistance.

On board the *Narcissus*, Belfast and Singleton act at opposite poles of consuming empathy and an indifference borne of knowledge. Singleton, “untouched by human emotions” (50), observes events and calmly urges Waits to get on with the task of dying (51); Belfast is consumed with grief (197) and curtly individuates Waits when the sail maker makes him one of many nameless unknown “niggers” (198). There are just enough hints in the text to allow the conclusion that the indifference of Singleton and the sail maker comes from their memories of countless horrible deaths. Belfast’s disproportionate grief results, then, because he lacks the latter’s parameters of comparison. The “nigger” functions thus as a racialised figure that evokes the death of slaves, as well as a non-racialized figure that evokes those who die labouring in the larger context of mercantile enterprise. The crucial point here is to stress the multiple functions of the nigger: he indexes the already demised enterprise of the slave trade as well as ongoing capitalist ventures—in which he may again be particularly situated. But Conrad’s “nigger” also functions as a cultural object born out of specific historical practices. It is thus hardly surprising that the novel ends with a hitherto non-existent proleptic first person narrator who states the passage of time in which “steamers” supersede the sailing ship such as the *Narcissus* (216).

To recall and to read Conrad alongside Condé is not simply to pursue an exercise into practises of othering. Rather, in a larger sense, I want to underline the multiple and differing manners in which these literary works emerge from the faultlines of projects of capitalist colonial modernity at dissimilar times and places. “Nigger,” as one of the multiple formations of blackness in the aftermath of the slave trade and its successor projects, links and separates the diverse texts in which it appears in many incarnations. While the word might seem the same in
its orthography, meanings and objectives, the contestations and resistances each enunciation provokes may very well be conflictual and utterly incompatible. The wandering signifier functions differently in Condé’s novel. In Paris, the African street cleaner serves as Véronica’s “nigger;” Ibrahima serves as “nigger” in Africa. Véronica’s “niggers” may not be transmogrified, but they fulfil—or better, perform—a similar function as Conrad’s. The other, and more important, correlations between Condé’s novel and Conrad’s novel lie in the unconventional narrative techniques, the concern with collective solidarity and socialism that Richardson identifies as the salient features of Conrad’s text:

Conrad’s *The Nigger of the “Narcissus,”* the author’s tribute to his fellow seamen, remains one of the most impressive portraits of proletarian lives in a period in which workmen, if they appeared at all, were usually presented in the most stereotypical and demeaning postures. It also creates an original—in fact, virtually unprecedented—narrative form for representing a collective consciousness. Partly because of its radical departure from conventional representational practice, this form remains largely unrecognised. The text is further haunted by a spectre—the spectre of socialism and other radical social movements that purported to represent (in both senses of the term) working-class consciousness unconfined by national boundaries. (213, my emphasis)

The highlighted terms are vital to any reading of Condé’s novel. The refusal of her protagonist to embrace any collective consciousness, socialism or transnational solidarity subverts the key features of the Conradian novella. She refuses to recognise the attempts of Africans at a socialist revolution and insists on her individual right to happiness. Reading the Conradian subtext points us to the submerged competing narrative of Marxist politics as another transnational moment that
seeks to override racial or ancestral paradigms. What emerges for Véronica is the absurdity of Marxist politics in a country with no industry or working class. The absence of a working class does not imply the absence of a class structure. Indeed, the critique of Marxist politics is only a springboard to the identification of other local class formations through sexual relations and transnational class structures that arises in cultures of tourism.

The treatment of sex holds the tensile relations between metaphysical difference, conflicted subjectivities and actual oppressions. Sex in the novel functions as a commodity, and sexual traffic contracts social distance as characters embody variable subject positions through their sexual relations—i.e., their relation to the commodity. In her analysis, Andrade argues that fallacious “substitution of the phallus” for “the whole of sexuality” is a part of a metonymic displacement through which Véronica’s desire for replete subjecthood is displaced on to Sory:

I [. . .] assert that Hérémakhonon’s metonymic displacement is not stubbornly single, but is comprised of constantly shifting signifiers. That is to say, through a locus of desire always in motion, the novel illustrates this metonymic displacement. The object of the black Caribbean woman’s desire is constantly displaced: from her lack of a sense of self to an obsession with an (unrecoverable) Caribbean History; from the archival void to the African continent which supplements it; from the land to one of its noble inhabitants, Ibrahima Sory; from the man to the phallus. (217)

It is not simply Caribbean woman’s desire that is under examination in Condé’s novel. Although Andrade points to the shifting locus of desire, her analysis focuses on Véronica and neglects other sexual relations in the novel. The point is not that Véronica is narcissistic, as Andrade’s title implies, but that there may well be a “nigger” in every system. What Véronica needs to
learn is to speak to the “nigger” in her immediate location in Paris. If Condé envisages *Hérémakhonon* as a response to Fanon’s misreading/silencing of the Caribbean woman, her critique is a call to historicise diasporic relations in order to pursue contemporary politics. Thus, Condé has two other sexual relationships involving French expatriates; there is the homosexual relationship between Pierre-Gilles and his African houseboy, and the relationship between Véronica’s French colleague, Jean-Lefevre, and the African woman Adama.

The sexual relations between Véronica and Ibrahima occur in the villa Hérémakhonon of which the name—translated into English as “waiting for happiness” (Lionnet 180)—provides the title of the novel. Véronica’s sexual relations determine how the reader perceives her: “The most illogical thing is that once I get to Hérémakhonon I do not know what to do with myself. [. . .] *I wait in other words.* For when I become Marilisse. All things considered, I haven’t stopped embodying a series of mishaps. Is this one the least despicable?” (149). Embodiment is the crucial word here. Véronica constantly filters her actions through written perceptions of the Antillean woman. Marilisse is a character in Haitian novelist Edriss Saint-Amand’s *Bon Dieu Rit*. Through this reference, Marilisse becomes shorthand for a “fallen woman” who turns prostitute. The juxtaposition of Véronica and Adama identifies another set of relations in counterpoint. Whereas Adama “prostitutes” herself through her relationship with the French expatriate, Véronica “prostitutes” herself through her relation with Ibrahima Sory. The African houseboy, Alfa, “prostitutes” himself in the relationship with his French homosexual master:

The end of the day is humid and torrid as I rightly or wrongly imagine the South of the United States to be. Soon the unending night will have to be rowed through. It’s almost adolescent—pent-up desires and nobody to satisfy them. In these countries where the telephone is a luxury, the quickest way of
communicating is to send your houseboy with a scribbled note. I could notify Adama who would slip on her silk dress and escort me wherever I wanted. But I shudder at the sight we would make. Two whores out hunting. That leaves Pierre-Gilles, the bachelor expatriate who comes across the street to chat and have a drink. I know he’s a homosexual and in love with a young Fula whom he has employed and is trying to keep prisoner like Albertine. Unfortunately, the young Fula is heterosexual and accepts his desires for the same sad reason:

“Unemployment, sister, unemployment.” (107)

Recasting Alfa as Albertine, the heroine imprisoned by the narrator in Marcel Proust’s *À la recherche du temps perdu*, allows Véronica to “cast” him, Pierre-Gilles and herself ironically as “victims” (109). The irony in this claim to victimhood differentiates forms of victimhood because these characters occupy different territories of oppression. Further, each is also simultaneously situated within different loci of power. The territory of this particular victimhood is an abstraction, or a metaphor, that needs to be grounded. Again, this is a task left to the reader to work out. The narrator only provides Alfa’s comments as a counter to this claim of affiliation through oppression. Alfa justifies his actions as a result of financial need. He rebuffs Véronica’s suggestion of confession as a therapy to which Pierre-Gilles readily agrees: “[Alfa] laughs. He obviously thinks we’re cracked. Besides he says so. [...] ‘The whites are crazy’” (109). Véronica’s efforts to align herself with Alfa and Pierre-Gilles fails because Alfa rebuffs her and aligns her as “white” with his master, Pierre-Gilles. Whiteness is thus not only skin colour, but French political and cultural citizenship. At the same time, in spite of the homosexual relationship, both men embody power positions, as they are both master and victim—Alfa later takes on a wife and his brother takes his place with the white master. Thus—to return to
Andrade’s assertions—if there is a “shifting locus of desire,” it is because the phallus identifies correspondingly shifting figurations of power.

In the enfolding scenario, desire speaks to forms of domination predicated upon alienation and marginalisation that are true of Véronica and gay Pierre-Gilles. Desire becomes aligned with the search for an identity and individual psychological problems. Both are in turn opposed to African, pragmatic, site-specific political exigencies. But the novel does not maintain a binary that could easily degenerate into competing marginalisations. Instead, characters are implicated in dependent situations that hinge on the semantics of loss, nostalgia, material conditions and contemporary exigencies, in ways such that neither of these factors can ever be completely isolated from the others. Invariably, the characters and events in the novel are situated within several frames of diasporic and colonial relations through references to icons—such as Mahalia Jackson, Frantz Fanon, Aimé Césaire, African kings such as Tegbessu and Agadja, and European ports vital to the slave trade such as Liverpool and Nantes—from African-American, African and Caribbean histories and cultures. The inventory of names—of people and places—as well as intertextual references direct readers to the silences of the text. Each name or book title offers another mode of telling or contesting the story. All characters in the novel are at once individual and also archetypal since they are mediated by Véronica’s web of references. Hence, their actions are open to plural interpretations. Véronica’s description of Saliou is typical of this strategy:

I could have made his acquaintance in a lecture room at the Sorbonne, at some left-wing student meeting where I had wandered in or on some railway station looking for the right track. Saliou is an African, a man from Africa, but not my
Africa and consequently does not crystallize the love I am seeking for myself through her. Am I making myself clear? No... \textit{(Hérémakhonon 146)}

Véronica's refusal of Saliou in this passage occurs precisely within the network of possible interpretations that runs through the novel. The disputation on \textit{clarity} is programmatic: it points back to the narrative strategy in the novel. Clarity only emerges through a choice of restricted lenses through which to view social reality. All other characters make their choices and coordinate their actions through such focussed lenses. The reference to "the lecture room at the Sorbonne" points to Véronica's function as a wandering intellectual who is confronted with a knowledge of historical trajectories of colonisation in the Caribbean, the stratifications of marginalized groups in Paris, and the conditions of life in a postcolonial African setting:

Strange how this town is stratified! I caught a quick glimpse of the ministerial paradise. There are also embassies and foreign missions. \textit{I have been given asylum in this kind of no-man's land of French and American technical assistants up in arms against each other and among each other}—Poles, Czechs, Russians and Chinese. Don't forget Mwalimwana [the president] is non-aligned! Provided they leave me alone. I haven't crossed the oceans to get mixed up in their quarrels. There is a small garden in front of the villa and the earth is rich and red. I could plant flowers. (29, my emphasis)

It is not only the town that is stratified in this passage. The no-man's land is similar to the no-man's land in Caryl Phillips's "Heartland," in Wright's \textit{Native Son}, and in \textit{Beloved}. The garden also occupies a similar role as in Phillips's "Pagan Coast." The attempt at gardening is comparable with Nash's use of the garden to form a rehabilitative space within contested territories. Véronica's attempt at non-aligned politics could also be read as a repudiation of
twentieth-century politics in favour of holding on to the past. The garden in the suspended No
Man’s Land parallels the absence of a space of her particular oppression at that stage in her
development. She refuses to be a figure of redemption and pursues her personal happiness. This
is the initial position until she changes due to her experiences in Africa.

The main character in Hérémakhonon unites the contradictory positions of the intellectual
and the individual. Her relations with characters are structured by this duality. Since all other
characters are only seen through Véronica’s “experience,” they embody distinct positions in the
discourses with which Véronica constructs the world. Thus, Véronica itemises the men she
courts in terms of their predetermined characteristics: “This is missing from my collection, an
illiterate lover” (112). These Africans become tropes and their politics appear condemned to
failure. Since Véronica cannot choose the grounds on which to engage with these characters,
they oscillate between several frames—in much the same way as Poe’s ape and Wright’s Bigger
Thomas do. Similarly, her relationship with Ibrahima Sory appears to her as out of a film made
by “a temperamental film director” who screams “cut” “at the same place [in a particular
sequence] each time” (108). In other words, Véronica is trapped in a particular groove in time
that she cannot move beyond. Véronica cannot recuperate the past through Ibrahima Sory.

Whereas Véronica comes to Africa in search of a “nigger with ancestors,” she realises in
the end that her mission is seriously compromised. Instead, she becomes a better reader and
learns to accept the contingency of signification: “One can lean back in time. I want that less
and less, I realize. As if the present has caught up with me. Not that I’ve won anything in
exchange. I even prefer my old ghosts. They were good company; they didn’t have blood on
their faces” (123). The “old ghosts” are not simply the memories of childhood; they are also the
metropolitan class relations she refuses to acknowledge. Véronica returns to Paris to speak to the
African street cleaner as she begins to pay attention to situatedness. Condé stages this point strikingly each time her protagonist encounters hostility based, as she presumes, on her friendship with a white man. "Contempt" in the following excerpts identifies the locus of power and the possibility of dialogue:

Sometimes they smile and greet me with kindness. Sometimes with contempt and hatred. Whereas I am always the same, I don’t change. As if they look at me through deforming prisms which take no account of my real nature. (151, my emphasis)

The soldier stares at me. Yes, it’s me he’s staring at, full of contempt. Contempt for this black woman who is turning her back on the town to go play around with a white man. Contempt from this side, contempt from the other. For radically different reasons of course. And it’s not me they despise. But the image they get of me and their interpretation. Erroneous and corny! We glare at each other. How he’d like to send me to rot in some jail. Fortunately he can’t. (149, my emphasis)

Ask your brothers. One of them sweeps the street by the rue de l’Université and looks at us every morning. Me and my white man. No contempt in his look, and that’s what I can’t get out of my mind (25, my emphasis).

[Ibrahima Sory] must help me find a cure. My hatred, my contempt. [. . .] This contempt they [French and Antillean societies] managed to engrave on me. That’s the worst of it. (51, my emphasis)

In the first three passages, "contempt" describes African gazes on the narrator. The marginalised African in Paris does not exhibit such contempt. The situatedness of Véronica and the African in
Paris offers a chance for a dialogue about the manners in which their respective forms of dominance are refracted through Paris. The last passage captures the contempt that creates Véronica’s fragmented subjectivity. She is at once the subject and object of her contempt.

In the end, Véronica leaves her “nigger with ancestors” because “it would be too easy to stay” and “nothing would change” (175). The departure scene at the airport recalls her previous departures and arrivals in Guadeloupe, France and Africa. The transitory space of airports harbours the sedimentation of Véronica’s long flight from her childhood and “her ghosts.” The recurrent symbol of “flowers” connects her departure from Guadeloupe—with which she associates “the flamingo flowers, the bougainvillea, the poinsettias, [and] the flame trees” (4—her sojourn in the No Man’s Land where she wants to “plant flowers” in her garden (29), and her final departure where characters admire (or pretend to admire) the flowers “from the national nursery at Samakon” (174, 175). The different connotations around Antillean and African flowers reveal the futility of Véronica’s quest for a garden:

That’s it! Misunderstandings all the way. Tons of them, right up to the first goodbye. They [her parents], standing behind the glass doors at the airport. Me, climbing the gangway with wobbly legs and misty eyes. Beside me, a plump woman with a burst of flamingo flowers in her arms and her soft voice saying:

“Don’t cry little one. You’ll be back for the holidays.” (4)

But of course, Véronica never goes back. The Antillean flowers become synonymous with sentimentality and the memories of youth. The mass-produced African flowers, feathers “in Mwalimwana’s cap” (174), are propaganda contrivances of the brutal regime: “He [Ibrahima Sory] comes up. He gives a little arrogant salute to Pierre-Giles, Jean Lefevre and Adama which neatly signals them to clear off. They understand perfectly well since they move away and
pretend to admire in turn the flowers of the national nursery" (175). The ensuing final conversation stages an encounter, between Véronica and Sory, that deserves particular attention:

And here I am. Face to face with myself. Trapped. For ever. For ever? All this time he is talking. What’s he saying?

“It’s Spring in Paris.”

Spring? The streetcleaner on the Rue de l’Université will have taken off his thick, blue turtleneck sweater that shows under his overalls. Will he have noticed my absence? How will he welcome me back? Yet another flight! One day I’ll have to break the silence. I’ll have to explain. What? This mistake, this tragic mistake I couldn’t help making, being what I am. My ancestors led me on. What more can I say? I looked for myself in the wrong place. . .


The subtexts of Fanon and Conrad create double meanings through Conde’s novel. The call and response harmony between Sory and Véronica directs her to what would be her true “nigger.” Sory and the street cleaner embody polar sites of filiation and affiliation. At the end of this “book of not nothing” is the possibility of a new politics. The end of Hérémakhonon anticipates a new relationship between the African street cleaner and the protagonist. Véronica’s return to Paris—and not her island—assigns a primacy to that city as the site that mediates her relations with her island and Africa. If the African cleaner represents one of the “old ghosts,” then he is a ghost oscillating between the frames of the spectrality of the past, the actuality of the former Metropolis, and his existence as an individual. The “turtleneck sweater” indicates perhaps not simply the individuality of this African, free of “contempt,” but his variability and his pre-existing overdetermined quality. This is the first time Véronica attempts to ask for another’s
personal memory. This end marks the culmination of Véronica’s movements through the enunciations of the loss compounded in her racialised and gendered identity, and the need to recognise her advantages in her contemporary society. During this journey, she alternates between privileging the registers of subject formation and formal brutal oppression. Her decision at the end is already foreshadowed when she acknowledges her penchant for “psychoanalysis” (78) but refuses to succumb to a debilitating “melancholy” (113).

Psychoanalysis, in Conde’s work, points to the imbrications of the material operations of colonialism and imperialism in “subject formation.” But whereas Phillips’s Cambridge and Nash are both objects and subjects in similar apparatuses of racialization and domination, Maryse Conde’s Hérémakhonon and Crossing the Mangrove present examinations of the relations between actual material operations of colonisation and subject formation in different sites of the African diaspora, where her characters are implicated in divergent systems of domination and subjection.

Of Disillusioned Redeemers

Crossing the Mangrove is in many ways the inverse of Hérémakhonon. Véronica is an apolitical protagonist who flees to Africa by way of Paris in search of her cure. Francis Sancher, the protagonist of this second novel, arrives in Guadeloupe after wandering the world fighting for revolutions and an end to oppression. Sancher is a character of mysterious origins who claims to be descended from slave-owners and avows a need to atone for his ancestors’ sins. He arrives in the village of Rivière au Sel to find the great house, “Saint-Calvaire,” where his ancestors are supposed to have tortured and killed many slaves. The novel begins with the discovery of Sancher’s body and proceeds in the form of successive recollections by different characters at the wake. From the allusions strewn through these reminiscences, one can surmise
that Sancher visits the United States, lives in Cuba and fights in the Cuban military intervention in Angola. The motives behind Sancher’s world-wide peregrinations elude characters who use his death to reflect upon their own lives in the isolated community.

Sancher’s journeys feature the same anti-teleological pattern of progress and regress at work in *Hérémakhonon*. Both novels stage struggles for salvation. Africa, as a scene of contemporary revolutions, functions in both novels as a cul-de-sac and a scene of disillusionment that becomes the epiphanies of both characters:

It was Operation Carlotta that won me over. I was young, I thought it was a way of making amends. Father Luandino Vieira, who held me over the baptismal font, suggested I do it. He told me: ‘Atone for your sins, turn over a new leaf. Go forth and clothe those who are naked. Heal those who are suffering.’ We arrived by way of Coral Island and if only you could have seen the joy and jubilation! All that cannon fodder cleaning their Soviet guns!

(*Crossing 74, my emphasis*)

Look at me Birame III and listen. [...] Don’t play the hero. [...] Our history is full of atrocities. It started with those they threw to the sharks, perhaps even earlier. The Oscar for imagination goes to the Americans. They roasted us, dismembered us, tarred us, stuffed us with gunpowder and exploded us in mid-air between heaven and earth. They wore white masks to remove the genitals with silver tongs. Not that Europeans were any better. They made us into cannon fodder. Don’t add to the list of atrocities. Your drop is useless in an ocean of blood. (*Hérémakhonon 47, my emphasis*)
It is interesting to note the convergence of Christian theology of salvation through sacrifice for a larger community, with the "suffering" in Sancher's explanation of his "investiture" into liberation struggles. The recourse to Christianity harmonises with the need for atonement, the recognition of past errors and the formation of a rhetoric of confession. Such rhetoric appears peripherally in *Hérémakhonon* in the guise of the performance of a talking cure—Véronica seeks to find replete subjection by confessing; at the same time she disdains such operations as simplistic. Confession can be regarded as inherently teleological since its narrative structure moves towards atonement and forgiveness as its natural end.

In the first passage, the Christian teleology is channelled into Marxist liberation struggle. Operation Carlotta, the Cuban intervention in support of the Angolan Socialists, continues the commentary on Third World Marxism as a transnational movement that runs through *Hérémakhonon*. Although Sancher is a revolutionary committed to the cause of human salvation, he arrives at a similar conclusion as Véronica who dismisses the African Marxist revolution as a farce with very real consequences. For both protagonists, black people become "cannon fodder." Véronica's cynicism, her tendency to stage herself, and to see actions of other characters as performances folding into and falling out of multiple scripts, stand out in the passage above. Her disillusionment makes her disavow the earnestness of Birame's convictions. In the first passage, Sancher describes his induction into the search for redemption and liberation. Sancher could be read as an archetypical character in Conde's novels. As one commentator writes, "Conde's stories are peopled with characters who carry the flame for the redemption of black peoples, even if their noble plan remains a mirage without a tomorrow" (Kemedjio 101-02). This pithy summation is almost entirely right for Sancher's role in *Crossing the Mangrove*. The nature of redemption is never specified and the possibility for transcendental emancipation
becomes elusive. Sancher rejects his quest in two ways: he refuses to continue his line by having children and awaits death at the hands of an unspecified angel of revenge.

As a carrier figure, Sancher is a link between historical oppressions of enslavement and colonisation, the throes of decolonisation in Africa, the Cuban revolution, and the particular situatedness of Guadeloupeans—individually and collectively—on the island and globally. The tragedy is that these larger concerns only appear on Sancher’s map. The villagers are concerned with the situatedness of their individual pain/desires. Rivière au Sel, as a village in rural Guadeloupe, is a margin on the island, a margin in terms of metropolitan relations with France, and again a margin in terms of Caribbean, Pan-American, global geographies superimposed upon it through the travels of the novel’s characters. The diverse historical and present-day migrations of characters—or their ancestors—create conflictual and mutually dependent (spatial) relations that are crucial in the novel. Consequently, each character has an acutely personal way of knowing the world. Sancher’s path bypasses Paris and offers a different map for the connections between Guadeloupe and the world. Slavery itself lurks in the background of Crossing the Mangrove. However, as much as Sancher tries to foreground his quest for atonement, the everyday concerns and social realities of the other characters push his primary concern to the background of the narrative.

The characters in Crossing the Mangrove are best understood as models of Véronica. As they search for their identities and their places in these multiple positions, these characters cannot see the marginalisation of others. Perhaps the question Conde asks is: Can the real subaltern please stand up? Francis Sancher functions as a catalyst for the villagers’ extensive deliberations on their identity: the novel begins with the discovery of his corpse and unfolds as a series of monologues—structured as confessions without an addressee—at the wake. Although
the villagers detail their recollections of Sancher, their ruminations do not dwell upon him but rather upon themselves. Thus, the death of Sancher becomes the motor for plural narratives. As Nyatetu-Waigwa writes, “one could say that, metaphorically, Francis Sancher is a reflection of the Antilles and their history” (561). The wake creates a fleeting sense of community at which all characters set aside differences in an egalitarian structure. Unlike Hérémakhonon, in which Véronica speaks for everyone, each character speaks in one chapter.24

Sancher’s sudden and inexplicable death unleashes a preternatural distress akin to that unleashed by the simian murders in Poe’s “Murders in the Rue Morgue.” The characters in Condé’s novel expend a great deal of energy ruminating upon the cause of death. The absence of the detective in Condé’s novel precludes any semblance of resolution—as is the case in Poe’s story. The protagonist is doubled; he is the corpse that necessitates the communal wake. But, alive, Francis Sancher preserves a particular mode of what I might call acute memory of the plural histories that inhere in the concept of the African diaspora. Sancher is not simply a Janus-faced figure facing two theatres of unfolding events; he is positioned in different temporal and geographical frames. The drama of conquest and revolt that is lost to insularised villagers unfolds in brutal form in other parts of the world Sancher visits. During his wanderings and quests in several continents, Sancher collates meaning unto himself. He becomes, in effect, an agent of histories. If Spivak’s reading of Hérémakhonon is extended to Crossing the Mangrove, one might say that Sancher carries knowledge of “sedimented” histories. While Hérémakhonon stages the forceful unification of “Africa” into one entity through the character of Véronica, the villagers in Crossing the Mangrove stage, through their plural misreadings of Sancher, their disavowal/ignorance of far-reaching contemporary permutations of colonising moments. The villagers are the Antillean faces of the Africans in Hérémakhonon. Both villagers and Africans
work as carriers of localised knowledge. Far from being a carrier of truth, Sancher is a Cassandra-like figure who suffers under the weight of the knowledge he carries and his inability to effect change.

Sancher tries to lay down his “flame for the redemption” by writing a book, entitled *Crossing the Mangrove*, about his quest. But he avers: “I’ll never finish this book because before I’ve even written the first line and known what I’m going to put in the way of blood, laughter, tears, fears and hope, well everything that makes a book a book and not a boring dissertation by a half-cracked individual, I’ve already the title: ‘Crossing the Mangrove’” (158). The mangrove is a recurrent metaphor in Antillean literature that occupies an important position in the formulation of créoliste philosophy. The metaphor is one of several used to connote the intermingling of cultures; it has a variety of uses historically. As Price and Price point out, it has evolved from “negative invocations, which focus on fetidness, brackishness, malodouresness, and pestilence [. . .] to its more recent adoption by the créolistes to emphasize recycling, regeneration, creation, fertility, and [. . .] the fundamentally rhizomorphic (rather than single-rooted) character of créolité” (Price and Price 23). Sancher’s choice of title is an ironic commentary on debates on the constitution of Antillean identity, the location of Martinique’s local forms of domination within global postcolonial formulations, and the role of the writer/intellectual in the deliberations on these two concerns. The character Vilma picks up the irony in Sancher’s title when she affirms: “You don’t cross a mangrove. You’d spike yourself on the roots of mangrove trees. You’d be sucked down and suffocated by the brackish mud.” And Sancher confirms exactly this point of view: “Yes, that’s it, that’s precisely it” (158). In sum, the metafictional reference to Condé’s novel has the reader deciphering the very purpose of
the novel and the reader's novel in ascribing meaning to it. The reader mimics the very manner in which characters attempt to read Francis Sancher.

At the wake, Sancher's corpse fills the position of the analyst with whom different subjects enter into the repetitive position of transference. The different strands of narrative are the desires of the characters that constitute their respective subjects. For each character, possession of Sancher fulfills a lack; for the women like Mira, Vilma and Dinah, the lack is bound with sexual desire and a fulfillment of their search for a sense of self. Each character encapsulates a specific story—from Sonny the village idiot to Léocadie Timothée, the teacher with unassuaged sexual desire. Mira constructs him as the man she has always been waiting for; for Sonny he is the one friend he has never had; Vilma sees in him the possibility for the love she never had from her mother. Léocadie Timothée: a miserable schoolteacher eaten up by her ugliness and blackness. Her body has become her prison. Rosa's story is very similar to Léocadie's—both women receive no love in their lives (140). Moïse realizes quickly that Francis Sancher was “not at all the tree under whose shade he could blossom” (23), but finds some fulfillment in caring for Sancher like “the child he would never have and sing[ing] him one of those lullabies that Shawn used to sing him in times gone by” (24). For other men such as Aristide, and his father or Sylvestre Ramasaran, their desire is to retrieve their daughters or lover from Sancher and secure a return to a previous state of fulfillment.

Most importantly, Sancher is evoked as the moving tree: he is a “heavy-built man as tall as a mahogany tree crowned with a mass of curly, graying hair” and after a while, “the mahogany tree started to move off, bumping along the tarmac a green metal trunk on wheels” (15). What Moïse intuitively perceives but cannot articulate is the preternatural quality of Sancher as the embodiment of a contradiction. Sancher connects ostensibly individual
trajectories to larger hidden narratives. The wandering tree disrupts the notion of rootedness the mangrove evokes. Sancher’s wanderings break the boundaries of island confinement and widen the extent of that community. Sancher is a figure at the interface of localised realities of Caribbean experience and histories confined elsewhere.

The trio of Jean Bernabé, Raphaël Confiant and Patrick Chamoiseau have most famously defined Martinican identity, in their *Eloge de la créolité*, by turning to the specificities of the island in contradistinction to global pressures refracted through France. But in fighting for attention to local specificities, the trio succumbs to nativisms. The villagers’ “parochialism” could be read in terms of this cultural debate. Since these characters represent a mosaic of the island’s cultural background, their deliberations individuate otherwise abstract reflections on Martinican—and implicitly also Guadeloupean—identity. Their schism from Sancher is, then, an analogy for the distance between individually located experience and intellectual theorisations.

Price and Price point to the positioning of Martinique and Guadeloupe within and outside of France and to the effects of the assimilation of the island into Europe, in situating Martinique in a wider pan-Caribbean and postcolonial context. These changes taking place in Martinique under the guise of modernisation have the effect of producing Martinique as an extension of Europe and making Martinique’s folklore a historical relic that can be marketed to tourists in the form of folk dances, spectacles and museum collections. Raphaël Confiant in particular has taken up criticisms of the créolistes’ philosophy and laid out a detailed analysis on Martinican culture and identity. Thus, in *Ecrire en pays dominé (Writing in a dominated land)*, Raphaël Confiant affirms that the problem facing writers in Martinique is not the “brutal domination” of
enslavement, “the gulag,” “the spectre of censure” or death camps, but sinister forms of silent domination: “une domination devenue silencieuse” (17-18).

Price and Price define the position of créolistes as contradictory: “For they remain at one and the same time social critics railing against French domination and beneficiaries of lucrative literary prizes from Paris, both champions of a fast-disappearing ‘traditional’ Martinique and unchallenged masters of the modern media, expertly harnessing local television, radio, and newspapers for the promotion of their literary careers” (16). Although these arguments are noteworthy, they do not discount the importance of Confiant’s thesis. The contradictions that come to the fore simply point to the complicated situation of some Antillean writers. At stake is the problem of activists struggling within and, in part, against the very authoritative system that gives them voice or in which they are implicated.

Sancher’s status as a writer, revolutionary and descendant of slave-owners could be read productively at the juncture between Price and Price and the créolistes. In attempting to write a book that he never completes, but which the readers hold in their hands, Sancher leads readers through the conundrums and competitions that unfold wherever black identities are performed. Ultimately, Sancher’s function is to expose the contradictions and disjunctures in the diaspora through the exposition of the tensions between what Confiant has called most aptly “the wound of locality” and the perceived common historical wounds (Taylor 150 qtd. in Watts 112). But even on this island the “wound of locality” must be written in the plural. The village is a space of the “uneven distribution” of the legacies of historical injuries that is also synonymous with the diaspora. The single narratives document this unevenness. Thus, Désinor the Haitian discovers that most cane cutters in the fields are Haitians: “Ah, the enslavement of the Haitian is not over yet!” (165). As an illegal immigrant, Désinor is condemned to a perpetual flight from the
authorities and an arrival in a new destination where there are always already other Haitians arriving before him (165). On the other hand, another character in Conde’s novel lauds the integration into the European Union:

The Guadeloupe of yesteryear died a natural death. Those who put blinkers over their eyes, those who still believe in sugarcane are crazy. My great-grandfather Gabriel deserves a statue. He was the first to see the light and set up these nurseries. They laughed at him. ‘You can’t eat flowers, Monsieur Lameaulnes,’ they said. And after that the nurseries were inherited by those who were thought to be no good, like my poor father, like myself, like Aristide after me. Let them say what they like! Soon there will be the Single European Market and I shall sell my flowers as far away as England. Yes, my flowers will decorate the table of the Queen of England. Her Majesty the Queen. I’ve already got my slogan: ‘The Lameaulnes nurseries: an earthly paradise for flowers.’ (78)

Here, literally, Conde’s ubiquitous flowers reappear. This time they do not hover between the semantic fields of nostalgic sentimentality and dictatorial propaganda. The flowers name the transformations of the island’s former colonial relations in tandem with new global economic alliances. The patterns of repetition of certain words and motifs in Conde’s fiction has led Arlette Smith to assert rightly that Conde’s “fictional discourse is markedly self-referential; it contains frequent instances of duplications, parallels, echos [sic], and mirror effects either in the space of a single novel or throughout other works. Characters, segments, situations, and of course metaphors are parts of this echoing process” (385). This “echoing process” subtends Conde’s novel as it sits astride the conundrums that result from the inclusion/exclusion of
Guadeloupe. This conundrum appears in the novel in the forms of estrangement Francis Sancher embodies. He must constantly demystify the villagers’ notions:

You won’t like what I’m going to tell you about Cuba! You lot only like stories round and juicy like California oranges. All you want is sugar to sweeten your dreams. All I know are sad stories to make you cry, sad stories to make you die! Everywhere I’ve been, I’ve seen men and women tired of waiting for happiness, their hands folded on their laps, tired of sowing without reaping, tired of planting and being nipped in the bud. Do you want me to tell you something? I’m glad the end is near. (149, my emphasis)

The “happiness” in this passage recalls Véronica’s voyages. But unlike Véronica, Sancher does not retreat to explore another local wound but goes into his mysterious death. His efforts to end his quest by rejecting fatherhood fail as two characters bear him children.

Crossing the Mangrove ends in similar manner as Hérémakhonon with an encounter between antithetical characters. In this second novel, Xantippe is opposed to Sancher in that he claims to embody the spirit of the maroons, whereas Sancher is descended from slave masters. His presence becomes an antithesis to Sancher’s wanderings through the Americas and Africa. Xantippe defines himself as the presence that has witnessed all events and possesses all knowledge: “I named all the trees of this island. I climbed to the top of the hill and cried their name, and they answered my call. […] The trees are our only friends. They have taken care of our bodies and souls since we lived in Africa. […] When I became a Maroon, their trunks barricaded me in” (201-02). Xantippe’s function is comparable to the ageless African father in the epilogue to Crossing the River who, while speaking as an agent with knowledge of the history of oppression, declares a new form of relationship between Africa and the diaspora. In
Phillips's epilogue, the African father accepts his guilt but declares the impossibility of recompense. There is analogous calculation in Xantippe's words:

Rivière au Sel I named this place.

I know its entire history. It was on the buttress roots of its manjack trees that the pool of my blood dried. For a crime was committed here, on this very spot, a long time ago. [. . .] Nobody has pierced this secret, buried and forgotten. Not even he who runs like a crazed horse, sniffing at the wind and snorting at the air. Every time I meet him my eyes burn into his, and he lowers his head, for this is his crime. His. [. . .] I won't touch him. The time for revenge is over. (204-05)

If Xantippe declares the "time for revenge" is over, he also portions blame to slave-owners. More importantly, as possessor of this secret, Xantippe understands precisely the dual nature of Sancher that haunts and fascinates villagers. All through the personal narratives of the characters at the wake, Xantippe appears as a mad man outside of any communal ties. Condé's feat, with her foundational invocation of the detective story, is to subvert that very tradition by giving a maroon the last word.

Precisely because the object of the redeemer figure resides with Xantippe, Sancher becomes demystified as the figure of redemption. Like Cambridge, his message remains unheard by his interlocutors. In between the disillusioned (or "crazed") redeemer and the modern-day maroon stand the villagers who summon their own call and response closure. The very last passage of the novel has the characters wondering: "Who in fact is this man who had chosen to die among them? Could he be an envoy, the messenger of some supernatural force?" (207). The villagers cannot answer this question, since they do not speak to the ostracized Xantippe who possesses the secret. Instead, they contain their unresolved conundrum in the
ritual closure of a wake: “Shaking off her exhaustion and seeing the wonderfully straight and unobstructed road of her life stretch out in front of her, Dinah opened the book of Psalms and everyone responded” (207). The ritual closure here recalls the end of Veronica’s quest: the ritual farewell at the airport signals her passage into another and, perhaps, more fitting conversation in Paris. The irony that emerges is that the reader sees the villagers not seeing the possibilities Xantippe presents.

The figure of the new maroon is not that of a runaway slave, but that of a character who flees the enslavement of the new forms of silent domination. Phillips’s father figure states a celebratory beginning for “his children” who arrive “on the far bank of the river” “loved”; Conde closes Crossing the Mangrove stating the folly of such simple closure that can only appear at a distance. What Conde’s two novels show are the different meanings and projects attached to the legacy of slavery in disparate sites. These novels demonstrate, too, the lonely tasks of the carrier intellectual who must forever return to old maps to point to the faultlines of past projects that shape the everyday actualities of characters. Paradoxically, new antagonisms or miscomprehensions arise between such carriers and the characters they may want to speak for. But in spite of the demise of the itinerant Sancher, Xantippe holds out the possibility of localised past memories that can still reconnect with parts of older silenced, but not discarded, geographies. This opposition of the silent Xantippe to the overburdened Sancher who cannot transform his knowledge into active politics at his chosen site of intervention is played differently by the African writers I examine in the next chapter.
CHAPTER FIVE
SORTIES INTO AFRICAN STORIES

The internal economic, social-political, cultural, and psychological realities that made possible, and sustained for centuries, the inhumanity of slavery and the slave trade are still worth pondering over even in twenty-first-century Africa. How could this crime in which virtually all societies collaborated with alacrity, and the abolition of which some resisted to the bitter end, go on for so long on a continent reputed for her humane values? What are the fundamental changes in feelings, social values, organizations, and relationships that it wrought in the African universe? Contemporary African fiction owes the exorcising narratives of these harrowing centuries to the victims of the trade and their descendants in the black diaspora, and above all to the continent. (Ogundele 137)
I

EXCURSIONS

Between Evasions and Paradoxical Silences

The tropes of silence, speech, ventriloquism, and the inquiries into the comprehension of sounds that I explored in the last four chapters become much more complex in this last chapter. If silence in previous chapters stands as an indictment of the effacement of slavery, it nevertheless appears in novels that seek to correct that erasure. In other words, those narratives denounce the silence on the legacies of slavery. With regards to African writers though, the charge is that narratives penned by African writers stage a silencing of the slave trade and slavery in Africa. My reading of Maryse Condé has shown, to some extent, that the problem is not so much a silence on the part of Africans as much as an inability to discern the diversity of African conversations on the part of interlocutors. Yet the concept of an "African silence" has become engrained in critical discussions on the roles of Africans as victims and agents in the trade.

I want to frame these debates with the interventions of four critics. There is on one hand Madeleine Borgomano and Wole Ogundele, who argue the persistence of a silence. And on the other hand, there is the scholarship of Anne Bailey and Rosalind Shaw that disputes such notions of silence and argues, instead, for the existence of African memories of the slave trade. The crucial difference between these two "camps" pivots on their understanding of "historical imagination" and their object of analysis. Whereas Bailey and Shaw conduct fieldwork and collect oral narratives, Ogundele and Borgomano are concerned with fiction. It is interesting to note that whereas the former two find memories of the slave trade in oral narratives, the latter find that the slave trade and New World slavery only appear peripherally in African fiction.
Borgomano asserts her charge of a “paradoxical silence” in her appraisal of the representations of trans-Atlantic slave trade in African fiction. The slave trade, she finds, appears only briefly in the plots before it is pushed into the background (99-101). By contrasting the abundance of novels about slavery in African-American and Caribbean literatures to the “dearth” of such writings in African fiction, Borgomano notes the staging of silence about slavery in order to speak of the pernicious effects of colonisation. Borgomano stresses that apart from the exceptions of Ayi Kwei Armah’s *Two Thousand Seasons* and Yambo Ouologuem’s *Le devoir de violence*, slavery and the slave trade only appear in the background of African novels that make any reference to the institution or the trade. Thus, in one very apt example, Borgomano points to Sembene Ousmane’s *Le Docker Noir* in which an African in France writes a novel about slavery only to have the manuscript stolen by a Frenchman. The details about the novel only appear during the trial (104). At the same time the issue of slavery itself disappears, she says, the questions about literary production and the entry of African writers into the institution of fiction writing surface. In the end, Borgomano finds, “Africa” “attend encore le grand roman qui réparerait cet oubli et briserait ce silence” (still awaits the great novel that would redress this void and break this silence) without lapsing into any of the abuses sometimes occasioned by “le culte de la mémoire” (cult of memory) (112).

Instead of a “paradoxical silence,” Wole Ogundele restates Borgomano’s thesis as the existence of “devices of evasion” (125) and finds that African writers have not adequately addressed slavery. Ogundele is not only concerned with the absence of the great novel on slavery as such, he is especially concerned with the form of representation. He is sceptical about non-realist modes and states that only realist historical fiction can be the proper vehicle for such representations:
The argument here, then, is not that religious beliefs, the supernatural, magic, and myth have no place in the historical novel. Belief in them may be a locomotive force in history or an explanation for deeds done by men. To the extent that they open a window to the inner life of a people and their worldview, supernatural beliefs and myths are grist to the mill of the historical imagination. But they belong in the realm of the eternal, whereas history belongs in the ever changing world of human society. Properly understood, the historical novel is about the latter, and about the factual processes that sustain or erode the former. (Ogundele 130)

Ogundele opens inquiries about the “proper” genre that can adequately capture the legacy of slavery and colonisation that have preoccupied other scholars. Yet his rush to dismiss all genres except historical fiction strikes me as erroneous. Following Lukács’s suggestion that the French and Industrial Revolutions function as major occurrences that changed—or produced a specific form of—historical consciousness in Europe, Ogundele suggests, too, that slavery and formal colonialism forced total and radical transformations of African societies.

Between the two of them, Borgomano and Ogundele sum up critical arguments about African representations of the slave trade and slavery. Yet, their contentions are also problematic. If Borgomano awaits the great African novel on slavery, she fails to say why. Ogundele’s precisions about the form of representation are enough to be subjects of other dissertations. My explanation for his assessment of limitations to historical fiction would be that he writes against the vein of fiction by African writers who turn to “myth” and “tradition” to resurrect Edenic worlds while they ignore the manners in which Africans are implicated in the
slate trade. Whereas Ogundele’s distrust of cheap appeals to “tradition” and “myth” is laudable—and indeed productive—his elaborations come close to prescriptions:

As a combination of scholarly investigation and creative imagination, the historical novel is better suited than mythical accounts to do this, and to explore issues of basic morality. Besides, it is historical fiction that, being affective, can best give us both the historical and cultural self-knowledge that dry scholarship cannot. (137)

There is much to be appreciated in these lines, but the insinuation that historical fiction allows “scholarly investigation” is exaggerated. The question is not so much what “dry scholarship” can or cannot do, but rather what powers and purpose can be ascribed to fiction. Further, Ogundele seems to believe fiction can become a vehicle of restitution. But he begs the question: restitution of what, for whom, and by whom? There is a collapse of time in the passage above. African fiction can contribute to the creation of certain kinds of memory but not necessarily towards restitution. Although the transatlantic slave trade is constantly invoked in the singular, it was a hugely dispersed continuum with distinct temporalities and adaptations at multiple sites. Accordingly, the work of repair that needs to done may very well be site-dependent too. Thus, while African novels can be put alongside American, Caribbean, European, and Latin American fiction on the slave trade in a sort of literary metasystem, such works should not be lumped together as performing in the same realm of reception and consumption.

I must also come to the question of form. The divide Ogundele identifies between history—with actors, motivations and produced events—and myth and orality is very much a “Western” concept that evolved in tandem with what is termed “modernity.” The split could also be read as indicative of the competing scripts for representing the slave trade. The recourse to
orality in novels about slavery and the trade—in the form of the use of oral stories for incidents, in the form of the narrative techniques, or more importantly, in the form of preoccupation with storytellers, prophets, scribes and griots—is more than a simple turn to nostalgia or “traditionalism.” The preoccupation asserts the roles of the occult, myth, religion, and folklore in these transactions. The concern with these features also reveals the attempt to bridge the divide between simple performances of victimisation and the more complex performances that include African victimisation, collaboration, resistance, culpability and agency in the trade. These distinctions are important in order to engage with the fiction that is there, instead of waiting for the fiction that should come. Literary responses to slavery have known different phases and fulfilled different tasks at differing historical conjunctures. Indeed, the readings in the last four chapters show the permutations of responses arising out of the faultlines of the slave trade and its successor projects in different sites.

It is precisely when we pay attention to the multiplicity of faultlines that the works of Anne Bailey and Rosalind Shaw become important. In her aptly titled essay, “Breaking the Silence and a Break with the Past,” Bailey plays upon the assumptions of an “African silence” as a silencing in itself of non-literary African discourses and memories of the trade. Through her examination of Ewe oral traditions, Bailey essentially declares that there are African memories of the trade in registers other than fiction. She stresses the need to periodise and differentiate the diverse temporal and spatial aspects of the trade carefully (136-37).

What I take from Bailey’s essay is the possibility that memory of the trade could be preserved in the form of a site-specific paradigm of social transactions that developed between slave traders and residents of African towns and villages. Bailey discusses, in particular, the “Atokor incident” in which certain Africans were stolen by traders as compensation for unpaid
debts. This incident is revisited in storytelling performances as a “cautionary tale” about the indebtedness of towns to traders and the effects of deleterious actions on the part of “short-sighted” leaders without vision (139). The act of narrating performs a task of alerting listeners to “the dangers of participation without full and extensive knowledge of one’s involvement” (138). In other words, the performances of these “cautionary tales” teach audiences to listen carefully to the lessons of the past.

Rosalind Shaw articulates even more forcefully the notion of ritualised and performed memory that flickers in Bailey. Though Shaw acknowledges the presence of a “discursive near-silence” about the trade on the part of African polities, she asserts that “the violence of the slave trade and the moral difficulties it entailed would preclude [open conversation] being an attractive choice” (8). But, in “contrast to this discursive near-silence, however, there are elaborations of less discursive and more oblique contemporary ideas that evoke, through profoundly disturbing images, some of the terror and moral problems that trouble memories of the slave trade” (9). The terrific events of the trade could, especially, be read in rituals, rites, and narratives that surface at sites in which commerce, politics and postcolonial power are negotiated. In these stories and practices, Shaw suggests, “the slave trade is forgotten as history but remembered as spirits, as menacing landscape, as images in divination, as marriage, as witchcraft, and as postcolonial politicians” (9). Shaw’s work is particularly useful in this chapter, because she returns us to Gilroy and the debates on slavery, modernity, and the project of the Enlightenment that figure so prominently in the introduction and the subsequent chapters of this dissertation:

While Gilroy [...] argues that modernity in the Black Atlantic world was born of the experiences of the Middle Passage and of New World institutions of slavery, modernity in West Africa was instead born of globalising commercial flows of
foreign wealth, the growth of new elites based on that wealth, and various processes of enslavement through which, over the course of nearly four centuries, people were transformed into alienable commodities. In Sierra Leone, both the Atlantic slave trade and the colonising legitimate trade that followed it marked capitalist modernity as entailing the exchange of human life for wealth and power—a modernity whose very nature was, and is, witch-like [...]. Memories of the slave trade from both eras, I argue, keep open a vision of the predatory nature of modernity that resonates all too strongly with the violence of Sierra Leone's rebel war. [...] Thus while on the European and American sides of the Atlantic, the economic logic of the slave trade helped construct a modernity that was defined (for those who were white, affluent, formally educated, and male) in terms of "rationality," in this part of West African Atlantic the imperative to produce slaves helped construct a contrasting memory of a vampiric modernity through images of the very occult forces that modernity was supposed to have superseded. (17)

Shaw basically itemises the familiar plotlines of African novels that engage with the slave trade. But this same list matches the contents of the novels I have examined in previous chapters. Divination could be read as a permutation of detection; "the menacing landscape" is a kind of geographical imagination that could be read back into the preoccupations with spaces in Melville, Wright, and Phillips. "Marriage" is part of the larger trope of the family romance that includes the fantasy of the "family of Man," in Poe and Melville, as well as the romances in Beloved and Phillips. And what appears as "witchcraft" could, perhaps, be read fruitfully beside the operations through which the "Africanist presence" is fabricated and naturalised. These
terms are certainly different in their different spheres of manifestation; and witchcraft is not racialisation. But what I want to emphasise is that in spite of these crucial differences, these terms and operations might fulfil and enable similar social transactions.

In the end, it is the movement of transactions that is important. From my perspective, the arguments put forward by Ogundele and Borgomano complement the elaborations made by Bailey and Shaw. In what follows, I argue that African representations of slavery and the slave trade lie between the exigencies of writing fiction and the fact that these writers come out of specific cultural spaces that feed on extant lodes of imagination. As such, their novels need to be read with an eye to their sites of origin—they contribute to tasks of decolonisation and a recalibration of African social spheres. The issue is not whether the novels are realist or magical, but rather that the authors employ different modes to capture dissimilar forms of social transactions. How do these novels allow us to think about slavery and the slave trade? And how do certain fictional modes allow authors to create cultures of remembrance useful to their sites of articulation? Finally, what gestures do these authors make towards African-inflected communities located elsewhere and how do concerns in these texts meet with, comment upon, inform and enrich our readings of other literary representations of slavery and the transatlantic slave trade?

I focus, in subsequent readings, on African engagements with the dilemma of the aporias and concerns that have surfaced in Poe, Melville, Wright, Morrison, Phillips and Condé. I argue that these novels employ those features itemised by Shaw—marriage, witchcraft, divination, spirits, menacing landscapes, and postcolonial politicians—in their representations of the trade. Invariably, these features appear in different constellations, but they come together in the subgenre of a “cautionary tale.” And because the “cautionary tale” is inherently a metanarrative
that only achieves its desired effect by \textit{explicitly} drawing attention to its relation to reality, these novels are also metafictional. They draw attention to themselves and their mission of representation while representing. Similar destabilising devices work in Morrison, Wright, Melville, Phillips and Condé. The four African writers employ similar devices as these American, British, and Caribbean writers. However, they speak specifically to the African perspectives that are absent in the American writers and appear peripherally in Condé and Phillips.

In these African novels, the self-referentiality of the narrative is performed through prologues and epigraphs as well as through the trope of the returnee with the gift of insight—that is very similar to the itinerant characters in the fiction I examined in previous chapters. This figure runs though Yaw Boateng’s \textit{The Return} (1977), Amos Tutuola’s \textit{My Life in the Bush of Ghosts} (1954), Ayi Kwei Armah’s \textit{Fragments} (1970), and Syl Cheney-Coker’s \textit{The Last Harmattan of Alusine Dunbar} (1990). In all four novels, as in \textit{Beloved}, the return prompts a need for dialogue, as the returnee is a carrier of insight derived from a set of adventures or ordeals. These four novels dramatise the choices of African writers representing this era in the continent’s history: Armah writes from within the perspective of the new independent nation-state, Boateng’s novel is set in a recognisable historical period, preceding formal colonisation, in the ancient Asante kingdom, and Tutuola’s narrative is set in a mythic realm drawn from Yoruba cosmology. Cheney-Coker’s novel is radically different from the other three because it presents a blend of all these possibilities.

This chapter is divided into two main sections. In the first part, I read \textit{The Return, My Life in the Bush of Ghosts} and \textit{Fragments}. These first readings are cursory; they are meant to reveal the similar transactions that run through the three—marriage, the fragmented \textit{polis}, the
returnee's insight and the cautionary tale. The second segment is devoted entirely to a detailed analysis of Cheney-Coker's novel. It is the only African novel in which returnees from the New World “return” to settle in West Africa. Such figures, like Phillips's Nash, bring with them a different experience of and encounter with the project of Enlightenment and European modernity. This novel combines the features of the previous three and has the added advantage of speaking to former slaves that “return” from the New World. Besides, Cheney-Coker's novel also troubles the boundaries between realist and non-realist fiction by blending both. The other three novels, in contrast, fall clearly into one camp or the other. In choosing this division, I want to pay attention to the four critics I have discussed in my introduction. I want to show that the distinction between realist and non-realist, silence and “sound” is highly problematic in reading these novels. What is needed is a hermeneutics of contrapuntal marginalities. Indeed, the novels foreground this need for dialogue. But these novels speak to the legacy of slavery and the slave trade from African perspectives, the violence of the colonising moments they present differ from those in previous chapters.

II

NARRATIVES RETURNED

Ghosts, Televisions, and Revolutionaries

Ayi Kwei Armah's *Fragments* is a realist novel and Amos Tutuola's *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* is a non-realist text that owes much to Yoruba mythology and oral stories. In his novel set in the newly independent Ghana of the 1960s, Armah depicts the follies of an emergent elite class that ignores the lessons of colonisation in its efforts to fashion the new nation-state. The principal narrative strand concerns the travails of Baaka, the protagonist, who returns from studying in the United States to work for the national television station. It soon becomes clear
that Baaka is out of place in post-independence Ghana with his quest to engage with African complicity in the slave trade and colonisation as part of an attempt fashion the future. In a series of encounters with officials the television station and with other characters, Baaka realises that the new Ghanaian elite is much more interested in embracing the promises of easy wealth and a national narrative that is silent on the slave trade. Although he writes several manuscripts about the slave trade, he cannot secure the interest that would get them produced. When a white woman, Scalder, accepts a script, she changes it so that white participation in the trade is effaced: “the white man disappeared, to be replaced by a brutish whip-swinging African, and the whole thing became purely a free-for-all among yelling tribal savages” (132). The Ghanaians at the television authorities turn down his manuscript for a documentary on slavery: “You’re too abstract in your approach to our work. For instance, what you’ve said has nothing to do with our people’s culture—all this slavery, survival, the brand” (147).

The fact that Baako returns from studies in the United States—and not Great Britain—evokes the failure of transported slaves to return. But instead fulfilling his self-proclaimed role as a social critic, Baako finds himself cast as a ghost of a special kind. He is not the ghost of the slave trading past that he seeks to awaken; rather he is a “been-to”—a person who has gone to the West to study and is expected to provide his family with wealth upon return. Unlike slaves who never return and are dead to their communities, the been-to suffers a “beneficial death, since cargo follows upon his return. Not just cargo, but also importance, power, a radiating influence capable of touching ergo elevating all those who in the first instance have suffered the special bereavement caused by the been-to’s going away” (157). The juxtaposition of Baaka’s twentieth-century return to the silence on the trade creates a tension that subtends his encounters with his family and his superiors. Armah’s novel appears, thus, to pre-empt Shaw’s postulations
that "modernity in West Africa was instead born of globalising commercial flows of foreign wealth, the growth of new elites based on that wealth, and various processes of enslavement through which, over the course of nearly four centuries, people were transformed into alienable commodities" (17). But whereas Shaw suggests that the "predatory nature of modernity" is memorialised through metaphors of vampirism, Armah uses the metaphor of the cargo cult:

The been-to here then only fleshes out the pattern. He is the ghost in person returned to live among men, a powerful ghost understood to the extent that he behaves like a powerful ghost, cargo and all. Meets established, well-known expectations handsomely, functions like a ghost (look into Afro-American usage of the word spook, also West Indian myth-clusters around the zombie idea), accepts the ghost role and feels perfectly at home in it. (157)

In Fragments, the trade is human beings has been superseded by new forms of exchange between Ghana, Europe, and the American continent. People are not traded directly for profit, but characters returning from those destinations are expected to bring sudden wealth—that for Baako is imbued with a ghostliness that bespeaks the symbolic death of the returnee. The references to ghosts, in the passage above, are part of a network of associations plotting an alternate form of perceiving social reality. Whereas Baaka’s superiors and most members of his family inhabit the reality in which they dispense with the past, Baaka’s grandmother and his lover, Juana, a Puerto Rican doctor working in the country, are cued into Baaka’s revisionist world. Armah’s protagonist can be compared to Conde’s Sancher, in that he carries a flame of decolonisation for the newly independent state. The cultural elite is, however, more interested in a cultural nationalism in which slavery is absent.
Armah orchestrates sound effects in his novel to delineate the separation of different insights into the problems of the post-colonial state. Whereas Baaka and Juana are aligned with sight, the blind grandmother is clearly designated as the character cued into the meaning of sounds. But unlike other novels in which sight and sound come together in a moment of epiphany, *Fragments* ends without such unification. This division demonstrates the absence of a rigorous examination of the colonial past in order to fashion a future. The efforts of Baaka, the visionary intellectual, are condemned to failure since he sees the failings of the present system but cannot effect any political changes. Baaka attempts to write scripts for television production remain futile. Juana, Baaka's Puerto Rican lover, bears a resemblance to Frantz Fanon in that she is a psychiatrist. Her work makes her an observer of the tensions in the general populace. There are two striking scenes in which Juana observes the fate of dogs and reads the pain of the animals as the pain of Ghanaians (16-19, 64-65). The dogs in the novel serve as vehicles of pathetic fallacy as they express what Juana reads as unarticulated distress of citizens. Juana presents the only view of the former slave castle that inscribes a history on to the Ghanaian topography:

Over in the far distance, she could see the white form, very small at this distance, of the old slave castle which had now become the proud seat of the new rulers, the blind children of slavery themselves. She knew it was of no use asking anyone any questions about that. No one seemed to need forgiveness, and it was no use feeling sorry for oneself, for crimes borne by people with whom one identified. The real crime now was the ignorance of past crime, and that, it seemed, would be a permanent sort of ignorance in places like this and places like home. (30)
The charge of ignorance surfacing in this passage identifies the division between the visionary couple and their antagonists. Throughout the novel, Juana and Baaka function as interrogatory presences pointing to the unaccomplished task of a radical decolonisation in which the re-evaluation of the slave trade must occupy a central role. Together, they voice erasures at different sites. It is their difficult passage through Caribbean and African landscapes that reveals silenced memories. The past is forgotten by both former colonisers and the formerly colonised, who together only appear interested in fashioning self-serving politics.

But the novel’s most intriguing critical voice is that of the blind grandmother and not the visionary couple. One ambiguous aspect of Armah’s text is that the grandmother’s perspicuity is ascribed to her connections with the spirit of ancestors. This relationship with ancestors becomes problematic since the grandmother is not in position to explain the importance of the African past to the young generation that is only concerned with money and material consumption:

If I should see a thing which all around me do not see, why will I in my foolishness shout against all the strength of their unseeing eyes? The witches saw things denied to others; beyond that they talked of what it was they had seen, and were destroyed. It is a long time since I heard of any witch thrown out of her secrecy, but souls are broken all the same. If I see things unseen by those who have eyes, why should my wisest speech not be silence? (2)

Precisely because the grandmother’s silence is mentioned in the first few paragraphs of the novel, it becomes an ironic commentary on the actions of all other characters who do not see the folly of their actions. Although the grandmother remains silent towards the characters, since she deciphers sounds and ascribes particular meanings to them, she effectively reveals crucial
aspects of African history that are lost to those characters. One of the most important incidents in the novels involves a recording of African American spirituals. The repeated voices become symbolic of another return or a ghostly apparition—except that is a sound cue in the aural imaginary:

The horns and the shouting stopped outside. Inside there was the sound of songs from another of Foli’s shiny things. For a long time I listened and was lost, till I heard Foli shout to Baako and another friend, as if I were not there,

“Look at your grandmother, listening as if she can understand.”

[...]

“Who are they?” I asked.

[...]

“Their people were Africans.” It was Baako who said this. Afraid to raise more laughter against myself, I shook my head with the perfect understanding that was not in it. I had not understood the words at all, but the sounds, above all the cries of the man who sang most of the beginnings, and the women’s voices, many, many women’s voices always there around him to catch his pain and make it into something almost sweet, that was familiar to me somewhere. (10)

In these exchanges, some characters deride the grandmother for listening to the records. The irony is that she is the only character that understands the music as an expression of an experience bearing a relevance to Ghanaian contemporaneity. The use of the recording is programmatic for the use of music in the novel. Listening to songs creates communities of exchange and cultures for the circulation of ideas. This function of music as an indicator of communities of belonging is amply exemplified through the use of the radio. As Baako takes his
sister to the hospital following a near miscarriage, the songs in the cab relay the driver's opinion on the state of affairs in Ghana. Later, during a dispute at the hospital, the driver sings the refrains of one those songs as a commentary on the behaviour of the unsympathetic nurse (74-76). The juxtaposition of the different acts of listening indicates the presence of different modes of participating in the contemporary life of the post-colonial nation-state. Further, listening is coupled to distinct temporal frames. The grandmother's participation in an aural imaginary in which she listens to the pain of African Americans and also apprehends ancestors who lived through the rapacious era of the slave trade. The novel ends with the grandmother conversing with the ancestors. She explains her understanding of time as a halting progression through a series of "veils" that limit the ability to grasp the post-colonial Enlightenment as a series of beginnings, ends, and new beginnings:

I know of the screens of life you have left us: veils that rise in front of us, cutting into easy pieces eternity and the circle of the world, so that until we have grown tall enough to look behind the next veil we think the whole world and the whole of life is the little we are allowed to see, and this little we clutch at with such desperation. What a thing for you to laugh at, when we grow just tall enough and, still clutching the useless shreds of a world worn out, we peep behind the veil just passed and find in wonder a more fantastic world, making us fools in our own eyes to have believed that the old paltriness was all. But again we hold fast to the new shadows we find. We are fooled again, and once more taste the sharp unpleasantness of surprise, though we thought we had grown wise. (201)

In the end, the grandmother's silence underlines the partial understanding of Baaka and Jauna too. If the folly of the elite lies in embracing and accepting what is simply another phase of
capitalist modernity as the time of the nation-state and Ghanaian society, the error of the two visionaries lies in not acknowledging the partiality of their views.

Whereas the politics of the new African nation-state dictates the fashioning of time in *Fragments*, Tutuola’s *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* conflates several temporal, spatial, human and nonhuman distinctions through its use of mythical/animist elements drawn from Yoruba cosmology. A very important character, a “television-handed” ghostess, is over two hundred years old. And although the novel alludes to schools, prisons, police and a judiciary—modelled after those of a colonial administration—the plot is set in the era of the slave trade. The narrative is composed of episodes of flight, capture, and escape during which the protagonist acquires a wide range of experiences. Each instance of capture signifies entry into a new form of servitude. Each period of captivity presents schematically a social transaction. The trade in slaves appears as a metaphor for a passage from one social formation to another. The transatlantic trade occurs alongside the domestic slavery, but the narrative focuses on the domestic trade. Time is treated as both an extended duration and a singular event: whereas slavery and the trade are part of long time spans, the recognition of the benefits of modernity occurs in a flash. This distinction appears as a division between the filial times the protagonist shares with the brother and the social time that forms the backdrop for larger historical events:

In those days of unknown year, because I was too young to keep the number of the year in my mind till this time, so there were many kinds of African wars and some of them are as follows: general wars, tribal wars, burglary wars and slave wars which were very common in every town and village and particularly in famous markets and on main roads of big towns at any time in the day or night. These slave-wars were causing dead luck to both old and young of those old days,
because if one is captured, he or she would be sold into slavery for foreigners who would carry him or her to unknown destinations to be killed for the buyer's god or to be working for him. (18)

The sense of time established above conflates events of varying duration. The narrator presents the slave trade as part of a extended developments in this conflated time of general upheaval. In other words, the protagonist places himself in his own individualised time as well as in a conflated social-political time that overwhelms individual time. Capture and sale into slavery bring a change into a social status of social death, as “every slave buyer recognised slaves as non-living creatures” (170). This state of “non-living” is only surpassed by actual physical death. The passage into slavery marks, also, the loss of individual time and imprisonment in a constant time of upheaval.

The transformation of the protagonist’s life is presented within the framework of a family romance and the renegotiation of marriage from polygamy that was common “in those days” to an implied monogamy (17). The protagonist is the younger of two boys born to a woman whose two senior co-wives bear only daughters. As the protagonist explains, the consequence is a bitter jealousy: “the two wives who had only daughters hated my mother, brother and myself to excess as they no doubt believed that no doubt my brother and myself would be the rulers of our father’s house and also all his properties after his death” (17). During one slave raid the co-wives abandon the two boys in the town and thus begin the adventures that form the plot of the narrative, and the incidents through which the protagonist comes to “know the meaning of ‘bad’ and ‘good’” (18). This theme of the “hatred” of the co-wives is left unresolved, for the next twenty-eight chapters, until the protagonist returns to the family. The last sentence closes the frame of the cautionary tale: “This is what hatred did” (174). In other words, “hatred” names the
family feud that precipitates the passage through an ordeal at the end of which the family is reconstituted.

The two scenes that enclose this journey from one social order to another are structured with sound cues. In the first chapter, the “noises of the enemies’ guns,” announces the beginning of the adventure into the meaning of social order:

So when we could not bear it [the sound of gunfire] then we left our mother’s room for the veranda, but we met nobody there, and then we ran from there to the portico of the house, but the town was also empty except the domestic animals as sheep, pigs, goats and fowls and also some of the bush animals as monkeys, wolves, deer and lions who were driven from the bush that surrounded the town to the town by the fearful noises of the enemies’ guns. All these animals crying bitterly up and down in the town searching for their keepers. Immediately we saw that there was nobody in town again we stepped down from the door to the outside as all the while we stood at the door looking at every part of the town with fearful and doubtful mind. (18)

The progression from the thresholds of the house/home into chaos that marks the public space captures the pith of Tutuola’s narrative. To escape slave raiders, the protagonist hides under a tree he subsequently names the “FUTURE SIGN ” and then escapes into the forbidden bush of ghosts while his brother is captured: “But as these enemies had approached us closely before my brother left because of me he was captured within fifteen minutes that he left me, but he was only captured as a slave and not killed, because I heard his voice when he shouted for help” (21). The voice shouting for help becomes suspended and returns in the last scene of the narrative as a mnemonic device. The voyage ends with the protagonist’s performance of a “sorrow song” in
the last chapter. The time of the protagonist himself is much more precise and this anxiety plays through the narrative as a mark of the trails of separation from his kith and kin. The protagonist undergoes a series of adventures in this parallel reality during which he is constantly attempting to return home. He is only finally able to do so after he meets the television-handed hostess who shows him the way back into his reality in exchange for a cure for her sores (164-66).

Like other authors I have examined, Tutuola plots his protagonist's movement from the destruction of the family to the reunification scene with the integration of the senses. What is remarkable in *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* is that the moment of seeing is mediated through the technology of television. In his novel, Armah does not foreground the television itself but the tussle over the versions of post-colonial reality that is broadcast to the citizens of the newly independent nation. In Tutuola's narrative, the use of the television does not only connect sight and sound, its use emphasises the singularity of that unification as a moment of illumination that changes the protagonist's understanding of his world. The encounter with the television-handed ghostess is the first of two dilemmas that the protagonist resolves with the aid of hearing and seeing at the same time. As the ghostess says, the protagonist’s fault is his inability to perceive and discern the way home “because every earthly person gets eyes but cannot see” (162). In the first dilemma, he must find a cure for the ghostess’s sores in exchange for assistance in leaving the bush of ghosts. But as the ghostess shows him his family in her television, he see and hears his mother giving another character the cure for similar sores (165). The television presents, as a result, the incentive to resolve the dilemma as well as the means of resolution.

The episode with the ghostess is an important part of basic scheme of events that revolves around the resolution of the family division. The resolution of the initial dilemma does not restore the protagonist to his family; it simply precipitates a second dilemma by returning him to
the very position he occupies before he enters the bush of ghosts. The sojourn in the bush, framed by the aural cues of the war and the ocular moment of the television, is tantamount to an alternative experience of unfolding social processes. Back at the “FUTURE SIGN TREE,” after an absence of twenty-four years (169), the protagonist is recaptured and sold several times until he is a slave in the household of his now prosperous brother, who does not recognise his sore-ridden emaciated slave as kin. This theatre of recognition is the most important part of the narrative. Recognition confers the status of slave and non-slave and the protagonist’s new dilemma is how to elicit recognition without incurring the sanction of death:

But in those days a slave is too common to approach his master or any of his master’s family to talk or to discuss anything with him or her, so that I had no right to describe myself to my master who is my brother, that I am a native of that town and again it was hard to describe myself to the rest slaves because they were foreigners, I did not understand their language. But one day, when my mind was at rest my brother who is our master came to inspect us in the yard, as he was talking to us I listened to his voice well, and it was the same as before we left each other, again I looked at his forehead carefully which had a small scar before I left him and this scar was there as well, so through these two signs I believed that he is my brother, but still I was unable to talk to him at all, otherwise he would order the rest slaves to kill me on the same spot without hesitation. (170)

The reiteration of time that is gone yet remains in the narrator’s memory draws attention to the relationship between those past days and the reader’s present—perhaps not least because of the enduring spectres of wars that precipitated the protagonist’s plight. The passage marks, in a sense, his passage out of the servitude of those days in the encounter between siblings. What I
want to emphasise is the dilemma of speaking and death that is coupled to seeing and recognition. In her reading of this novel, Valerie Thomas calls this situation the “dilemma tale” that is usually unresolved and passed on to the reader (99). The classification of the dilemma tale certainly pertains to Armah’s *Fragments* in which the dialogue fails and the reader is left pondering the possible resolutions of the dilemma. But it does not pertain fully to Tutuola in which the breach in the family is repaired through the protagonist’s circumvention of the prohibition of his speech through recourse to a “sorrowful song” from the youth shared with the brother: “I was singing this song and mentioning his name several times” (171):

> When I [. . .] stood before him all my body was shaking and my voice was also trembling, because if a slave is selected from many slaves like this no doubt he is going to be killed for a god. Then he told me to repeat the song that I am singing in the yard so that he may hear it. His aim was to kill me on the same spot if I mention his name. But I started to sing this song and before I reached the part that his name should be mentioned he had remembered how we left ourselves on the road under the fruit tree. So at the same moment he shouted with gladness and jumped towards me. (171)

It is remarkable how the protagonist risks death but the master’s timely recognition converts the threat of execution into a passage from social death into the family fold. The journey through the threat and threshold of material death results in conversion of social status. The song is not only a mnemonic device, but also a regulatory mediating mechanism with which to court the dangers of prohibition. What the protagonist leaves behind are, however, the remaining slaves that perish in “those days [that] a slave [was] too common to approach his
master” (170). In other words, the passage stages the chaos that ensues after the slave raid as a phase of loss and destabilisation but also as a means of access into a theatre of modernity:

But one day when I remembered our dead cousin who I met in the 10th town of ghosts I told them about him that he had resettled in a town in the Bush of Ghosts. I told them that I was educated from him because he had established schools and churches there. Of course when they heard so they were very surprised. They asked me whether I feared him as he had died in our town here in my presence before I left town, so I replied that anybody enters into the Bush of Ghosts he or her would not fear for anything within a week he or she entered into it, because he or she will see “Fear” personally [. . .]. I told them further that it is in the Bush of Ghosts the “fears”, “sorrows”, “difficulties” of all kinds of the “punishments” etc. start and there they end. (174)

The conquest of fear in the final scenes of the narrative returns readers to the departure from the house threshold. The protagonist passes into the bush and then slavery, before he returns to the family with the fruits of administration. The protagonist’s enslavement does not count as much in the narrative since his mother and brother pass through the same experience before they become, themselves, slave owners. If Tutuola presents a distinction between domestic and transnational slavery, that distinction pales in significance beside the experience in the bush of ghosts. Thus, the wars and upheavals precipitating the flight and enslavement only become useful to the character propelled into an alternate reality in which the self is reinvented to conquer “fear.”

The focus in these readings of Armah and Tutuola is on the materialisations of slavery at the peripheries of narrative concerns. In Armah’s novel, African officials subsume the
remembrance of the trade to the need to fashion new narratives of national progress. In Tutuola, Yoruba cosmology surfaces between invocations of the domestic and trans-Atlantic slave trade. The conditions of the slave and slavery are never dramatised. What is dramatised is the separation from kin and the turmoil of social upheaval. Indeed, the protagonist narrates his adventures in the cosmological world of the ghosts and not his enslavement. The point I make, then, is that Armah enacts a post-colonial consciousness in which the memory of slavery is necessarily tied to the task of forming a just state. Tutuola allows us to read a possible cosmology altered by the destabilisations of the trades and the subsequent colonisation. But this picaresque novel peopled with creatures of myth only thrives with the suppression of the nation-state and its time.

The juxtaposition of Armah and Tutuola exposes the disjunctures between the mobilisation of memories of slavery and the trade within the framework of the post-colonial nation-state and precolonial political entities. In Armah’s novel, his protagonists confront opponents intent on fashioning a narrative in which slavery and the trade belong to a past that is dead. Tutuola presents a narrative of transformations into new social orders in which memory of the ravages of the trade is fundamental to the family—which serves as a trope for the narrative’s defining social unit. The importance of reading Tutuola’s narrative lies, to a large extent, in the silence about segments of the protagonist’s community excluded from the gratification of family union. In comparison to My Life in the Bush of Ghosts, Armah’s novel exposes the isolation of a few visionary figures that attempt to maintain a memory of the slave trade and slavery as events that influenced and continue to influence the contemporary moment.
Subjection into Culpability

The set of transactions present in Armah and Tutuola is refracted through a different lens in Yaw Boateng's *The Return*. If Tutuola's narrative does not engage with the nation-state and Armah is explicitly concerned with the post-independence politics, Boateng addresses precolonial African politics within the explicit framework of the nation-state. *The Return* is set in the late nineteenth century as the Asante Empire faces its decline in the face of British incursion. The novel follows the lives of fictional characters as well as the lives of Asante kings who are specific historical figures—Osei Tutu Kwame who became king in 1807 and Osei Bonsu before him. The use of precise dates documents African entry into European historical epochs. The African polities in the novel are in the grip of radical, and wide-ranging changes. The need of the Asante for slaves leads to recurrent wars that pressure the northern tributary states of Gonja, Mossi, Dangomba and the Gyaaman (98-101). These invasions and power struggles lead to intermingling and interpenetration of populations (99). These details about African political entities that precede the modern nation-state demonstrate the author's concern with the kind of memories the post-colonial nation-state might suppress. The novel fulfils, thus, some of Ogundele's prescriptions. It cannot, however, get away from the shadow of the nation-state. The historical conflicts between the different African polities enumerated in the novel are redrawn in new constellations in the modern nation-state created by European colonisers.

Despite the foregrounded interest in history before colonisation, the author complicates a chronology of a “time before” and a “time after” colonisation with the paratextual aid. The map—dated circa 1800—delineates the boundaries of the different warring African states. The boundaries of modern Ghana are superimposed on these ancient states in Figure 1. Invariably the loss, end and passage away from those times are proclaimed in advance even as the narrative
is meant to cast an investigative and sympathetic eye on those histories. More importantly, the map bears the iconography that characterised eighteenth-century European representations of West Africa. The slave castle of Elmina and figures of European sailors offloading goods of exchange crest the cartouche. Elephants, elephant tusks, African hunters, a noble savage, wild animals and exotic flora fringe the inscription: “CENTRAL WEST AFRICA circa 1800.” The cultural politics of mapping the slave trade in Ghana thirty years after formal independence from the British are always at the background of the narrative.

Fig. 1 “Central West Africa circa 1800.” Map in Boateng’s novel. N.p.

Consequently, the grand inquiry into the construction of African identities and apparatuses of governance in the nineteenth century foreshadows the fashioning of contemporary African identities within the different nation-states that are created in Berlin in 1884. The
African states drawn up on and, in some substantial sense, constituted through or called into being by the map do not fall neatly into the boundaries of contemporary states. The pan-African nationalism that reappears throughout the novel is rendered more explicitly in the last lines of the epilogue: “This then, is the story of Seku and Jakpa. But it is also the story of Maalam Fuseini, and of Africa in one of the most trying periods on human record” (118). What does it mean for Yaw Boateng to preface his representation of African characters and history with eighteenth-century European iconography? The map deserves to be read twice as both a paratactic and a catachrestic gesture that complicates what is otherwise a cautionary tale and comes close to an apologia for slavery. The map recalls the early European quest to know, trade and exploit Africa before formal colonisation. It impresses onto the text the idealising representation of the traffic in humans as a normal part of neutral commerce.

At the same time, those congenial iconographic inscriptions, along with the fifteen-odd names of African peoples, rub against the subsequent narrative in which the author portrays African characters fighting the very forces expressed in the iconography. It is never clear if the author intends the characters to dispute that cartographic moment or speak from within it. Nor is it clear if the map claims and draws the reader inside itself. In other words, does the reader invariably read the narrative from inside that map? In which case, the narrative unfolds against the background of those European topologies. The remembrance of slavery and the trade, in fiction—or this novel at least—cannot escape other existing topologies circulating in print. This possibility becomes even stronger because the epilogue resurrects that map indirectly, through allusions to the history that is recorded and that which is not. The journey from the map to the epilogue is a journey into loss. The text presents an almost seamless transition from the “circa 1800” inscribed on the map to the “1807” mentioned in the epilogue:
It is recorded history that when Osei Tutu Kwame became King of Asante in 1807, Asante policy began to come into serious conflict with that of the British and other Europeans. By this time the British had become the most important European power in a small area of coastal West Africa, and they had begun to dream of empires bigger than the Roman. They cleverly worked up strong feelings of resentment in many coastal states subject to Asante and armed them with guns and tried to build them up as a united front against Asante. In 1824, the British Governor at Cape Coast received shiploads of British soldiers, and together with Fante troops they attempted to storm Kumási. They failed, but the battle cost Asante the life of her king Osei Tutu Kwame [...].

History again shows that [the king] tried to bind Asante's northern tributaries more closely to Asante. Some of the many rebels he pardoned included five thousand Moslems of Gyaaman, which had rebelled against Asante rule during the time of his predecessor Osei Kwame. The Moslems were neither beheaded, enslaved nor stripped of their property, they were scattered in little bands all over Asante to 'learn Asante customs'. (116)

This passage shows the thrust of Boateng's narrative. The slave trade is portrayed as an evil trade through which African states, in competition with each other, procured technologies of defence. Boateng also appears to indicate that African entities were, however, firmly on the path to a reformation of their societies just before the British intervention.

The decisive chain of events in Asante history that forms the plot of the novel is recounted through the lives of two complementary principal sibling characters: Seku is a strong warrior, while Jakpa is skilled at learning the Koran and possesses all the intellect of the two.
The juxtaposition of the two brothers shows the imbrications of resistance and complicity in the system. Whereas in Tutuola, the conflict over wealth propels the antagonist’s actions, the family order is threatened by Seku’s desire for the forbidden Mbinge. After Jakpa helps the two elope, he is captured by the wronged family and sold into slavery. Jakpa’s capture is presented as a paradigmatic choice between the brother and the wife:

He had been hit! I hesitated a split second: the men were now two hundred steps away, and storming like wind. My mind was torn between two choices—who would I save, my brother or my woman? Yaw, I loved my brother, but I also loved Mbinge! A second arrow hit my brother, he fell, and I pushed the boat further into the river, running away. My brother lifted his head in disbelief—Yaw, I see his face, I see the shock, the pain, the disappointment! He was my younger brother, yet he had done so much for me. He had saved me from a lion, he had got me the woman of my heart, and I could only repay him with treachery. He called out once, “My brother Seku!” then another arrow hit his leg and he lay there. I paddled away, my eyes fixed on the scene. [. . ] I have never forgotten that day, and I never shall. It is the day of my greatest shame, and often have I wished that I had died there. (52-53)

The transfer of affiliation from genealogical lines is represented through marriage ties or through political alliances with other individuals. The transfer of allegiances lies at the heart of the novel’s central conflict. Seku Wattara’s desire for the idealized Mbinge is a metaphor for the aspirations to new patterns of social cohesion. The elopement estranges the couple from their homelands and they settle in the Asante capital, Kumási, where Seku offers his services to the army. The betrayal of the brother is thus not an accident but a decisive choice that indicates
Seku’s voice in the novel as the one who questions the validity of tribal and genealogical affiliations; he does not know himself to be Gonja, Asante or Mossi (2-3). He forges an identity above those nomenclatures, rejecting Islam and leaving his homeland to enlist in the Asante army where he rises quickly to high office.

Jakpa accepts Islam and rejects Asante ways but following the accidental discovery of his ability to write, he is manumitted and put in service of the Asante rulers as a scribe for the Asante Empire bureaucracy. Although Jakpa sees his work as passive, since he does not kill for the Asante kings, another character is quick to point out the essential value of his occupation to the empire (93). The enslaved Jakpa, saved from deportation across the ocean, returns to kill the brother, Seku, who failed to defend him during the moment of capture. The siblings thus enter into and die in the service of the Asante Empire that destroyed their homeland.

This plot of filial betrayal, revenge and intended murder of the brother, set in nineteenth-century West Africa, presents an African apology for the traffic in human beings. The enmity of the two brothers is, in a larger sense, a parable for African social changes. Both characters are sons of a Mossi warrior dedicated to the eradication of the Asante and the slave trade. The quest for Mbinge, Seku’s forbidden love, leads to the capture of Jakpa and the division of the symbolic African polis. These two characters recount portions of the narrative alternately from their respective perspectives on the other characters. The result is a set of scenes in which an audience listens to and comments on the tale of loss, grievance, absolution and reconciliation. Whereas Seku speaks the part of the apostate, Jakpa recounts the horrors of slavery on the continent as the aggrieved (67-71). He registers the separation from his people and the passage through slavery to high office as the trajectory of his individuation (71). The fate of the two brothers is thus made to speak for the fortunes of larger communities. Although Europeans are yet to subjugate
and formally occupy Asante territories, their technologies and presence on the coast are enough to set off a sequence of transformations. The relations between different neighbouring African polities are altered through European dominance relayed in “trickle down effect” from the coast into the interior. Africans emerge as victims of circumstances; Asante royalty has to sell ever increasing amounts of slaves in order to procure European arms and ensure the survival of the empire.

The simple plotline is at odds with the complexities of the events narrated. All characters are caught in cycles of struggle and loss on the African continent. Most of the action takes place in Kumási, the capital city of Asante that serves as the axis of relations in the region. There is no united polis in place, but rather a common identity must be forged. In the end, the brothers must set their differences aside as need for survival of the community overrides individual aspirations:

Seku, my brother, you who strayed from Baba’s rigid discipline, you who have shamed my father’s name among those who saved him, you who betrayed the love I had for you, to you I come to make peace. [...] You will make your peace with me, but the others you harmed, you can never see them again till your death, and it will haunt you. But we are brothers, Seku, and Allah knows that I still remember the love we felt for each other. On my part, I pledge the deepest peace, a near return to our days of mutual love. [...] We shall try as best as we can to continue Baba’s struggle, even if a bit differently from what he had originally planned. We both have some respect among our hosts, together we can help steer Asante from the cruel path of slavery, we can serve our devastated Gonja nation by striving to make Asante aware of the danger which her own fetish priest Tuda once predicted. The way for us all is unity. (115)
The final sentence of this paragraph is a declaration of pan-African unity. Although it stands within the nineteenth-century context of Boateng's plot, the exchange between parties in conflict also addresses post-independence politics. The concession to forgive for the good of a pan-African polis comes as a result of several conversations in which two elderly and revered figures disclose secrets hitherto unknown to the two brothers. The stories reveal knowledge of the terror and necessity of slavery in order that the Asante Empire might survive. The brothers realise the contingency of their identities, and their reception of the stories inculcates them in the ongoing crime. To attain sovereignty, defend the state and create an African unity between different factions, the Asante must necessarily be prepared to use force to eradicate slavery. The real front is the impending onslaught of the British, who possess superior technology. This idea of a divided African polis that is also united is intriguing. The reference to the modern Ghana in the map provokes suspicions that this preoccupation with the unification of a diversified polis may be speaking to a need to fashion a contemporary unity of Ghanaians. Since the revolution that a pair such as Seku and Jakpa plan does not materialise, the reader does not know what might have transpired in their aim for African unity. Instead, European conquest was at once colonisation, "liberation" and the encounter with a particular phase of European modernity and the project of the Enlightenment. In a sense, one of the central assertions in this novel is that the rapacious nature of any imperial modernity will exert incredible horrors.

The seventh chapter of the novel is entirely devoted to the presentation of cautionary tales in order to resolve the filial feud that itself becomes another aporetic situation once the two brothers realise that their feud is one single instance that is replayed on ever-larger scales. Although they go through different identities, the empire and its officials construct one narrative that is imposed upon those to be admitted into its fold. The first secret that is divulged concerns
the execution of the high priest, Okomfo Tuda, who desired the cessation of slavery. This priest consulted his oracle and delivered the message to the king to halt the trade: "The chiefs were aghast and felt insulted. Osei Tutu [the king] loved the man because he admired his honesty and courage, but his chiefs put extreme pressure on him, and to save the Union, he ordered Okomfo Tuda to be beheaded" (103). The death of the carrier-messenger reveals the creation of the community of elders as a god-instance. At the same time, the collective culpability marks the loss of "innocence." After all, the refusal of the narrative from the oracle is not simply the refusal to pass on that narrative; it is also the refusal to pass on into a new social order. The preservation of the current slaveholding order is thus predicated upon the abolition of a "truth"—and the murder of a messenger, as it were. Consequently, to pass on the ancient narrative is to initiate new parties into the foundational fallacy upon which the empire's identity is predicated. Hence, the repetition of the threat of death that accompanies each new scene of subjection through narrative:

Ntiamoah shook his head. '[.. .] Few people know this, and the secret is kept within tiny closed circles. If one of you here—' he looked at Akosua—'should ever want to tell anyone of this he shall have to ask me first. If I find out, it may be necessary for me to kill him, the one he informed, and myself. I know this story because one of my ancestors was Okomfo Tuda. [.. .] He told the story to his favourite nephew, who passed it on. So far as I am aware, only three members of my greater family know this secret. [.. .]' (102, my emphasis)

The insistence on secrecy upon pain of death is remarkably similar to the scenes of subjection I have shown in previous chapters. This scene of filial reconciliation and the consolidation of a new identity in The Return is, however, made more remarkable by the fact that the oral account
alone fails! Thus, the maalam—the empire’s chief scribe—must also “unconceal” a spectacular secret in the truest sense of the word:

He began to undo the knots on his white smock. The three young people looked at him in disbelief. Jakpa rushed to stop him and Akosua got up to go out. The Imam told them:

‘My son let me be. I must tell you who and what I am. Young woman, stay. You have heard great things today, it is fitting that you see something as well.’

[. . .] The old man finished his work and dropped his trousers to the floor. He called Jakpa and Akosua to look, and they turned their faces to look, and they turned their faces slowly and unwillingly. Jakpa saw that Ntiamoah had buried his face in his hands and he hesitated, but the Imam called him and he looked.

The old man had a thin body with the ribs showing. His muscles hung weak and flabby on his bones, and his knees appeared thicker than either thigh or calf. Jakpa moved his eyes slowly up the thin legs to the area of the groin, then he turned quickly away. Maalam Fuseini was an eunuch. And worse than that, his penis had been severed off near the end, leaving a short stub. (105-06, my emphasis)

This scene of revelation works in a way very similar to scenes in Beloved, “Benito Cereno,” and “The Murders in the Rue Morgue.” This scene features the synthesis of sight and sound that accompanies insight. The scene, however, has a significant difference from the recognition scene in My Life in the Bush of Ghosts. Whereas the protagonist uses the aural cues to secure recognition, by overcoming the symbolic defacement that his sores—which are
remiscent of the scars in *Beloved*—represent, the Imam reveals his concealed defacement to make his interlocutors hear properly what he has to say. The Imam is not concerned with the salvation of one slave. Instead, he inducts his audience into the operations of exclusion and inclusion that maintain the trade in human beings. Once he unclothes himself, the Imam reveals that he was himself also a slave and he had lost his penis when he was selected as a human sacrifice. The significance of this revelation is the paradox it presents; it collapses binaries of difference at the same time that it explains the need to maintain slavery for the empire. If the ex-slaves in the previous chapters pass into their respective theatres of modernity, the former slaves and opponents of slavery in *The Return* pass into the heart of empire. Notice the work of sound after the Imam’s long account:

Now there was silence in the room. Jakpa stood with bowed head, the girl and Ntiamaoh were looking at the old man. Outside the drummers were beating their message, and they had been joined by the horn blowers. Occasionally, a gun was fired off, and there were many songs of woe sung by the women of Kumasi. (107)

The whole scene of revelation is framed by the death of the Asante king. The silence in the room gives way to the hitherto obstructed sounds from outside that now draw the listeners into the community of mourners. In other words, Jakpa’s final acquiescence leads to another scene of subjection into the work of the empire. The talking drums and the horn blowers announce the death of the king. But since his death also augurs the enthronement of a new king, the listeners mourn also their incorporation into the life of empire that is vested in the position of the king. It is not the individual king that is important, but the position that is filled across time. Here, all African characters are cued into the world of the drums—it is a world in which the characters
move from innocence to a position of culpability and on to a new position combining both polarities.

III

CHENEY-COKER’S MALAGUETA

Palimpsests and Patterns of Trade

Syl Cheney-Coker’s *The Last Harmattan of Alusine Dunbar* is an epic account of the history of a fictitious African country modelled after Sierra Leone. It is the single novel in this chapter that includes the transatlantic slave trade and slavery in the Americas. In fact, the only episodes of enslavement are situated in the eighteenth-century United States. The references to both aspects of slavery are indebted to Sierra Leone’s historical ties with the Black Loyalists (the manumitted slaves) who came to West Africa from Nova Scotia and Great Britain. The connections between Sierra Leone, Canada and the United States make this novel a ready text for the examination of exchanges between Africa and the Americas. George Elliott Clarke does exactly that when he turns to Cheney-Coker’s poetry and fiction to analyse the literary legacies of Britain’s imperial adventures in its former North American colonies. For Clarke, the imperial past forms a palimpsest for contemporary relations in Sierra Leone and Nova Scotia. Clarke exploits the contradictory positions of African Canadians in Nova Scotia and descendants of Black Loyalists in Sierra Leone to articulate the tensions surrounding the interpretations of enslavement, the slave trade and its legacies:

In Sierra Leone, the ex-Black Loyalists became ‘Nova Scotians,’ while their African-American sistren and brethren who remained in Nova Scotia became ‘caste-down’ ‘Negroes’ and ‘Coloureds’: the invisible, unsung niggers of the diaspora. The Sierra Leone Nova Scotians formed eventually an élitist elite in
their new country, while, in Nova Scotia, blacks became underemployed, poorly educated wards of the state. (126)

These enunciations are oversimplified. Indeed, the author is interested in reading Cheney-Coker's "injurious" depiction of Nova Scotia as a site from which to announce the "limits of Pan-Africanism" (126). The central charge of a wrongful use of Nova Scotia is akin to the conflictual tensions in the contentions around slavery that I identify in the chapters on Caryl Phillips and Maryse Condé. Clarke essentially charges Cheney-Coker with using Nova Scotia in his pursuit of politics. Slavery, as such, disappears from Clarke's consideration of the novel as he focuses on the manners in which nationalist politics exploit and exacerbate the distinctive forms of domination within the black diaspora (126-27). The paradox Clarke identifies isolates the crucial part of Cheney-Coker's portrayal; the emphasis lies on the Black Loyalists who went to West Africa and not Nova Scotia. From the perspective of those who departed to this second "promised land"—Nova Scotia was the first—Nova Scotia can only appear as a site of broken promises. A character in the novel describes Nova Scotia as "no place for man, woman or chillum" (103).

Clarke's reading of the novel points to his own task of retrieving the history of the descendants of the Black Loyalists. The plight of this group in Sierra Leone is rightly prominent in Clarke's study. Sierra Leoneans face the repressive violence of Siaka Stevens's dictatorship, whereas black Nova Scotians face marginalisation. What are absent from Clarke's essay are Cheney-Coker's efforts to imagine the possibilities of a union between indigenous Africans and the Creoles. The characters in *The Last Harmattan* do not romanticise Africa. The following conversation ensues in response to the call to leave for Africa:
An old black man with the look of a fearless African warrior spoke for the others.

'But how we know dis ain't some kind of a trick? We free here and we ain't going back to no Africa where dey ketch us in the first place.'

'Ah knows how you feels 'bout dem brothers of yours,' said Thomas Bookerman, 'how dey done let you down before. But what you 'fraid of, what is freedom, if you ain't willin to test it, wipe away de humiliation, dem tears from your eyes? [. . .] All free men gotta go to a new place to become new people. And we gon be armed so no one gon mess with us.' (103)

This passage captures the kernel of the diasporic relations based upon common experiences of domination. The problematic issue, though, is that returnees create new pressures as they encounter Africans on the new frontier.

The paradox in Cheney-Coker’s novel is that the hard-won insight of the revolutionary figures eludes other characters who “consider” themselves single and coherent, self-contained entities, and not products of wider and contingent factors. The fashioning of the self is always in opposition to other members of the polity. Whereas the descendants of New World blacks and the hybridised city classes embody the synthesis of Europe, the Americas and Africa, other “native” groups act in contradistinction to these “foreign” elements. Class divisions revolve around the European and American versus African component in the constitution of Malagueta:

So when the general nailed his own coffin by confiding in [Colonel Lookdown Akongo], the colonel had sworn loyalty to him, but had then made the counter plans to be the man at centre stage. He was going to rewrite that terrible history that had begun in 1787 but was stamped more cruelly into his brain when all those years ago he had listened to the distant echoes of his own voice drifting on a bleak
mountain when he wanted so much to swim in the reserved swimming pool of a princely grammar school. (xv-xvi)

The ambiguity of the landfall of 1787 is the crux of political conflict between General Masimiara and Colonel Akongo. That same date of revolution for the “returning” slaves marks the beginning of tensions between the black settlers and Africans. Or rather, that landfall and the succeeding conflicts provide a justification for Akongo’s actions. The slave trade appears in at least two complex ways in the structure of Malagueta. In the first instance, Africans are taken away and the interior depopulated. The appearance of immigrants further complicates societal transactions years after the trade (xiii).

A prominent feature of Cheney-Coker’s novel is that there is precisely no radical rupture but a series of upheavals. The landfall of Black Loyalists in Malagueta is another in a series of landfalls that include African-Americans, sailors and merchants from different European nations. In fact, the Black Loyalists are the second group of former slaves to arrive on the coast. A group that arrives from London precedes them. The British colonisers arrive last. Equally important, Africans from the interior also move to and away from the coast. It becomes impossible to classify origins, traditions and newness. Malagueta functions as a site for dispersed peoples and a mixture in which dispersed peoples are always struggling for ascendancy over others. Malagueta is a frontier society in which various African groups, the Black Loyalists, and the British contest for control (158-64).

The various facets of the plural histories flowing into Malagueta are told through a selection of principal heroic characters whose lives are condensations of historical processes. Sebastian Cromantine represents the first group of former slaves that found Malagueta (13-15), Thomas Bookerman leads the Black Loyalists (100-06), and Captain Hammerstone commands
the conquering British. These characters function as individuals as well as representative agents for sections of the communities in Malagueta. Moreover, they are often paired in an antithetical struggle in which they either merge or part irrevocably. The people only become black in the face of impending British colonisation presented schematically in the confrontation between Hammerstone and Bookerman:

[Captain Hammerstone] told them he was a representative of a king who already controlled a large portion of the world between the islands of the Nordic tribes and the ancestral grounds of the aborigines of Australia, and with a vast trade in sugar, cotton, spices and gemstones. How they had pacified the warring tribes of Borneo and sent an expedition to crush a rebellion by dogeaters in China. The black men listened stonefaced and the captain, thinking he had their attention, continued: ‘This place is good for trade and we are going to build a garrison, new shops and a tannery, a distillery and other business; and what we produce we can sell to other people. You can work for us any time you want, just so you know that we intend to stay and run our business unmolested.’ (158)

You don come like a tief’ mongst us, and you gon tell us how you gon steal our land, how you gon build factories, and take our women and chillum for your bed and workshop. Ain’t never known any king be good to black people. So we come here and make dis place real nice, and we got a little happiness, and our women ain’t afraid no more people gon be taking their chillum. Now you want to live here, but why don’t you stay where you’re from? Because we ain’t going to let you do nothing to us now we’re free. (159)
Hammerstone’s landing narrative of conquest and Bookerman’s riposte sketch the dominant fronts in the battle for Malagueta. What is missing here is the perspective of indigenous groups. The struggle is represented in the form of romantic liaisons and competitions for power. These two forms of relations, antagonism or romantic affiliation, reflect dialectical struggles for revolution and counter-revolution. *The Last Harmattan* presents, at its core, a Utopic vision in which repatriated slaves and Africans could utilise the promise of the Black Loyalist. This vision implies that parties need to forget their injuries in favour of a projected aspiration.

One implication of Cheney-Coker’s concern for the value of revolution is that slavery—which only appears briefly in the United States of the first chapter—is not so important in terms of its concrete practices but rather as a state of injury to the human being. The import of slavery lies in the slave’s desire for freedom. Thus, the trade and the institution only flicker in the background of the novel. They appear briefly in the first two chapters situated in the eighteenth century. The twentieth-century events of the narrative provide allusions to slavery but only in order to highlight parallel disregard for the humanity of individuals, the political excesses that mark the trade in human beings and Sierra Leone’s contemporary situation, and the loss of the revolutionary ideals of the Black Loyalists. In essence, Cheney-Coker deploys the slavery and the history of the Black Loyalists to decry the betrayal of the ideals of liberty carried over by the Black Loyalists. The provenance of these lofty ideals almost inevitably makes them problematic. The oppression of the Black Loyalists does not inure them to conflicts with indigenous Africans. Similarly, their admirable ideals may well need to be adapted to the local conditions in West Africa.

But since the novel is written from the perspective of modern Sierra Leone, it is also an attempt to capture a crucial relationship between the two poles of assessing the state of
postcolonial African polities. Consequently, critics read it as yet another critique of the post-
independence African state:

A reenactment of the Edenic plunder. The setting? Anglophone Anywhere, West
Africa. The time? Pre-colonial, colonial, and postcolonial period. The action? The
brigandage and plunder of Africa, the old yet new drama of the psychological and
political effects of duplicity, and the near-genocidal tendency inherent in the lack
of communal cohesiveness. What follows is all too familiar. (Olubunmi 755)

Pamela Olubunmi states rightly that the substance of Cheney-Coker’s plot aligns it with other
narratives of disappointment in post-independence African countries. *The Last Harmattan* does
not, however, lament a lost paradise that never existed. The novel is a critique of the folly of
characters in historical circumstance that are explored through analytical categories—the
individual, consciousness, value, action and liberation. These terms have become the key idioms
in what Helga Geyer-Ryan calls the “social and cultural semantics of modernity” (Geyer-Ryan 1).
These categories play within what Tejumola Olaniyan explains as the two basic positions,
the “pragmatist” and “foundationalist,” from which to assess the postcolony. Whereas
“pragmatists” concentrate on the present and demand that Africans accept the imperfect origins
of the postcolonial African polity, “foundationalists” dwell on painstaking historicizations and
demonstrate that troubled origins of African states contain self-destructive genes that lead to
results we see as the excesses and aberrations of the postcolony (Olaniyan 350). The failure of
Malagueta’s tyrants is that they do not rise above the situation in which their histories had placed
them. What emerges in Cheney-Coker’s novel is the view that African modernity—and the
place of slavery and the experience of the trans-Atlantic slave trade in this constellation—must
be contemplated from different points since it is a product of plural and disparate confrontations.
In spite of the drive towards multiple perspectives, Cheney-Coker’s novel is shot through with attempts to constrain those manifold viewpoints within the framework of a common goal for the collective. Hence, the novel reads as the repetitions of individual journeys to or refusals of insight. To use the idiom of the previous chapters, there are several carriers of the flame of redemption as well as refuters of a transcendental redemption across the time frame of the novel. The narrative of two army officers, General Masimiara and Colonel Akongo, serves as bookends to *The Last Harmattan*. Whereas Masimiara plans a coup to save the nation, Akongo betrays him to serve his own upward mobility. This story of betrayal is divided in the prologue and epilogue; the former recounts Masimiara’s arrest, the latter recounts his execution, and the communal revenge against Akongo and the corrupt president.

The antagonism between Akongo and Masimiara is the last of a long series of opposing conceptions of social reality. The author does not resolve oppositions between successive generations but mediates them for the reader through the presence of the immortal Alusine Dunbar. He connects the succession of colonisers and neo-colonisers in Sierra Leone. The figure is custodian of history, clairvoyant, and a prophet. The purpose of Cheney-Coker’s use of a clairvoyant narrator is not simply the inauguration of cyclical time. All the novels examined in this chapter have a kind of prophet figure. The preponderance of prophets highlights the quest for transparency, and the desire that permeates these novels—to reinterpret the past and decipher the present in order to project a future that is free of the “vampiric” consumption of human that characterises the present. The all-seeing narrator with the looking glass is a god-trick since only such a figure can expose the complexities and connections between historical trajectories that coalesce and separate in African spaces. Unlike comparable figures in the preceding chapters, Alusine Dunbar—also called Sulaiman the Nubian—does not function as a detective or a carrier.
of truth. He is comparable to Condé’s Xanthippe: his “all-seeing perspective” reveals the different sites of violence producing historical trajectories that collide in Malagueta:

*Everything has been mirrored:* first, the daughter with the eyes of a scorpion who would torment a dozen slave masters and make them impotent for ever [. . .]. Next, he had known when the people of America would come; how Isatu Martins would give one of them a son named Garbage; to whom, once Sulaiman the Nubian had changed his name to Alusine Dunbar, he would reveal himself. Nothing had escaped the glare of the looking-glass or the eyes of the testicles, because it had been predicted that Malagueta would be invaded by the Arabs [. . .] and that they would spread, thanks to that elephant great-grandmother Hediza Farouka, but that their expansion would not have been easy if they had not been helped by the docility of and greed of the indigenous people. (396)

The use of non-linear time—as evinced in this passage—impedes the ascription of any simple telos to history. The assortment of diverse peoples—Arabs, indigenous people and African Americans—raises the question of the cohesion of these groups with one another and the faultlines between them. At issue is not the opposition between white slavers or colonisers and Africans groups but the fissures between disparate African-inflected identities. Different historical moments are collapsed into one continuum in the passage that at the same time locates different efforts to grapple with new manifestations of encounters. Perhaps one disadvantage of Cheney-Coker’s mode of representation that emerges here is that elements of the fantastic and the lack of verisimilitude blur the very distinctions the author makes: the violence presented in the topographical site that is today Sierra Leone is not one single act, but rather, a series of
actions that appear interconnected through their usurpatory natures. Thus, all acts from the enslavement of Fatmatta to the coup are conjoined into an interconnected series.

Dungeon Liminality: Gender, Territory and Nature

The key to understanding *The Last Harmattan* lies in appreciating the form of the novel. The narrative vision is retrospective. The crucial events occur in the epilogue and prologue and the body of the novel is a panoramic flashback. The prologue starts with news of an aborted coup after Colonel Akongo betrays General Masimiara. The narrator presents the conflict between Masimiara and Colonel Akongo as class conflicts between the elite bourgeoisies descended from the returned slaves and the indigenous Africans. Although the coup-plotting General Masimiara is also an indigenous African, the general loses Akongo’s loyalty because he “had married into [the] class of upstarts and sometimes assumed their airs” (xvi). In the following passage, General Tamba Masimiara is imprisoned in a dungeon of a former slave castle after his failed coup against the “corrupt” government in Malagueta. As the general contemplates the state of the nation, he replaces the government with the old slave traders in his thoughts:

> When his captors had gone, he scrutinised his new home—a grim colonial dungeon, where in centuries past, the blood of his countrymen and -women had mixed with their excreta and vomit, before they were transported across the treacherous sea to die in the swampy bleakness of another world. […]

> In the cloister of his cell, the labyrinthine darkness of his age gripped the general. But he was glad of the precious minutes of thought, to see what life was all about. Like some apocalypse of God, he saw that life was an avalanche of revolt which was born out of hunger. Fuelled by that hurricane of desperate
people rising against their leaders, it had produced the sweltering rage like a wound more putrid than the open belly of a pig, and for which, among other reasons, he had moved against the government. (vii-viii)

A paradox lurks in this passage in that the slave castle is itself never visible on a landscape. The dungeon—and hence the trade—creep into the narrative as a result of the government’s act. The imprisonment becomes a repetitive gesture that installs the general in an ambivalent space between the past and the present, and between Malagueta and the sea. The dungeon is analogous to the No Man’s Land in the novels of Phillips and Wright.

The bleakness and blackness of the dungeon extend a quality of futility to the country’s political landscape in the subsequent narrative. The dungeon does not simply recall the slave trade but also subsequent conquest and colonisation. The return to the dungeon stands in, then, for a larger failure to rise above divisions for the good of the community. To deploy the dungeon as a point of enunciation is to contemplate the insight of the fleeing slaves. In the passage above, the general differentiates several time frames and does not collapse the dimensions of historical events. It is the president’s act of sending the general to the dungeon that superimposes the script of the slave trade and colonisation onto contemporary events. The “return” to the dungeon is a return of the “past” but the return of an oppressive act. It is important that Masimiara’s intent arises during an official visit to the United States where he is confronted with the president’s corruption (xi). The dungeon is thus an anachronistic space—in the sense of a site of insight for Phillips’s characters—that allows a scrutiny of Malagueta through the several layers of developing events:

He came to the only window in the place and looked at the sea. When they had brought him here, he had not noticed how small and dilapidated the room was,
and how the sea had over the centuries eaten it away—the room had not been used
since that memorable morning of expiation, when the slave traders had sent the
last slaves away, washed their names off the walls and thrown their chains into
the sea [. . .]. No doubt they had brought him to that cell to break him down bit
by bit before the rigmarole of a trial, after which he was sure they would hang
him. Because as the sea returns to the shore he was convinced they were going to
kill him. (viii-ix)

The prominence of the sea in Masimiara’s reflections emphasizes the transformation of
the dungeon into a symbol for Malagueta’s contemporary predicament. The sea in The Last
Harmattan functions as the overdetermined site of episodes that include the transatlantic slave
trade, the return of former slaves from Nova Scotia, and the arrival of the colonising British.
Although it remains in the background of the epic novel, the sea operates as the passageway for
diverse groups who set off historical forces that unfold in the course of the narrative’s wide
sweep. More importantly, from his submerged position in the dungeon, the general’s only
outlook becomes the sea and its expanse summons an absence of horizons that marks the
interlocked histories of the novel:

He had a pact with death. This certainty that life in Malagueta would go on after
his death, that they would display his body in front of the prison walls as they had
done with that revolutionary journalist who dared to oppose the president, did
little to prepare the general for the day he had to face God, held, as he was for the
moment, in the dark confinement of his cell, the second step into the cold density
of a grave. The first had been when they surrounded his house, beat up his wife
and brought him to the island to feel how their like the sea was vast and crude.
That sea which in some unexplained way had tormented him since he was a child and which, belatedly, he had come to believe held the key to the terrible wound and pain that was his country’s history. (ix)

The wound echoes an earlier use (viii) where it characterises a popular desire for rebellion in Masimiara’s Sierra Leone. The wound also recurs in reference to African American slaves in the novel’s first chapter (5). In the usage above, the wound could be read in two registers. The reiteration of the wound as both history and the desire for release from its vicissitudes is closely linked to the nature of the sea as the “key” to the wound. The sea is the passageway for traffic in commerce, peoples and ideas. The association opens allusions of unlocking and elucidating a breach in a body; the wound stands for a stage in the procession to an insight that the general already embraces. The epilogue asserts the general’s pivotal nature as an emblem of health in the first few lines: he is the “captive leopard gleaming in the semi-darkness of the night, with his polish of amber and good health” (vii). I would suggest that the wound marks the absence of the insight and potential of the general.

The wound forms a refrain through the novel, as does the word misery (x, 10). In a sense, the wound and misery seek to capture related but different states of injury that diverse parties seek to overcome. These two words function very similarly to their application in Phillips’s fiction. Whereas Phillips’s characters appear to struggle in vain, Cheney-Coker’s characters are involved in acts of sacrifice for the good of the collective. The general’s self-sacrifice is one in a series of such gestures by the plethora of characters in The Last Harmattan. The author resolves the conflict between the figures on the shoulders of female characters. Philip Whyte identifies the particularly difficult treatment of gender in the novel:
A plea for women’s rights in the context of colonial oppression, the novel, as a foundation epic, also tends to fall back on a more traditional conception of women as propagators of the family line. At the same time, the novel’s heavy reliance on magic properties, though justified in terms of the aesthetic codes specific to the epic genre, serves to underline the problematic character of the author’s to reconcile a positive image of the new nations forged by former slaves on the African coast with the stark realities of contemporary West Africa. (51)

Whyte enumerates the distinctive features of Cheney-Coker’s use of female characters in his novel. As he points out, sexual relations in the novel are determined by “power structures” (54-55). Under the plantation slavery of the United States and British colonial domination, the bodies of female characters are territories of conquest or objects of possession. The recurrent patterns of sexual affiliation demonstrate the subjection of women through sexual practices (3, 5, 63, 118, 152). For example, the reference to women’s “cow udders” (5) identifies a gender-specific form of oppression that is present in *Beloved* where Sethe is literally milked (19-20).

These portrayals of the female body and sexual relations as sites of domination, through discourses of territoriality and bestiality, also resonate with patterns present in Wright, Morrison, Phillips and Condé. But *The Last Harmattan* is also fraught with contradictions in that the female body also doubles as a site of a paradox: female characters repeatedly offer their bodies in the cause of the revolution and nation-building as nurturers and progenitors (121, 151, 365). In other words, the practices presented as the sexual subjection of women under colonial practices are suddenly “rehabilitated” as female characters sacrifice themselves in order to achieve the goals of nationalism and anti-colonial resistance.
Cheney-Coker’s idealisation of women makes them his blind spot. Two female characters are especially important carriers of the author’s idealism. Fatmatta, an African sold into slavery in Virginia, and Jeanette Mahogany, an octoroon raised in a pastor’s house away from the horrors of the enslaved, are epigrammatic for the recurring pattern of adventures to insight in the novel. Both characters are united by their almost miraculous birth. Born under extraordinary circumstances to a hitherto barren woman, Fatmatta grows up as a wilful, arrogant woman who defies all suitors, only to be duped by an impersonator. Her fall from grace is followed by her capture and sale into slavery/concubinage in the United States. Jeanette is the daughter of a slave woman who astonishingly manages to hide her pregnancy, and hide the daughter with a minister. Jeanette’s life with the minister is a sham because he “tried to hide the brutality of life from” her until she “found a way to go beyond the illusory mirrors of her time” (5). As an octoroon who is practically white in appearance, Jeanette forsakes the possibility of passing for white to affiliate herself with the black slaves who bear the true knowledge of life:

For once in her life, she was making contact with real people, whose smell was animal, whose life was brutal. The cotton fields came alive with their voices, as they praised with their parched lips, convinced that his coming was only a matter of time. The sun sometimes flickered and licked the backs of the men, which became brown and dusty with time. In the evenings, when they went home to their wives, who were only partially theirs, their hands were rough on the quivering bodies of the women.

In due course, Jeanette Mahogany came to regard the years spent in the minister’s house as a fraud, camouflaged to look like happiness. In the blood brimming in her heart, she felt she had been denied pages of real knowledge. But
whether it was the denial of the psychology of suffering or the raptures of liberation among these dusty men and women in the field, Jeanette Mahogany did not know. (6)

The idealisation of the slaves in this passage exposes a common tendency in the novel. The slaves and their descendants carry a capacity to turn suffering into radical insights. The connection between the “psychology of suffering” and the “raptures of liberation” runs through the novel. Female characters give themselves to male characters in order to assuage the latter’s pain or to further the pursuit of liberation. Jeanette, as a case in point, “began to love those men” and ends her sojourn at the pastor’s by “rejecting the possibility of the anger of the Lord [to surrender] her restless body to a big black man” (7). Fatmatta, the female character who is captured and shipped to the United States, functions as a foil for Jeannette. Fatmatta is as much a corporeal rendition of the actual enslavement of Africans as she is an embodiment of the “spirit” of survival. She is sold as a young woman and dies on board the Belmont in 1787 just off the coast of Malagueta. Fatmatta’s interment on African soil echoes the form of return in Phillips’s Crossing the River. Her return in death imbues the landfall of blacks from the New World with a historical form of continuity and underlines the ways in which the West African coast is written over with multiple layers of arrivals and departures. The coast is at once an old and a new frontier.

Although these returnees are former slaves, the death of the single figure with memories of an African childhood—and world—not only separates her from other slaves: the difference divides the group. Whereas her enslavement can be incorporated into an African memory as part of a series of upheavals, the enslavement of those born into capitalist enslavement in the United States carries a memory of that institution that is linked to with the British, American and
Canadian histories of revolution and liberation. Fatmatta is a figurative naming device for African memories carried to the New World but which never return unchanged. Her death also signifies the absence of an intermediary figure between the indigenous Africans and the new immigrants. As a consequence, the insight into Black Loyalist ideals is lost to the indigenous groups and must be sought again.

Cheney-Coker couches the pain of the sacrifice of his characters with lurid love tales strewn through the novel. Whyte characterises sexual relations in *The Last Harmattan* as the site of “sexual pathologies” that “come to symbolise the disorders introduced into people’s lives by power relationships” (55). Whyte points out that Cheney-Coker, like Caryl Phillips and Maryse Condé, is engaged in a dialogisation of Frantz Fanon: the “humiliation felt by the male slaves [. . .] translates into either sexual impotence or violence” (54). But sexual relations are not restricted to the slaves. They form an intricate map of diverse social relations. As Captain Hammerstone describes it, “lovemaking [. . .] [is] like laying out territory” (302). The many acts of copulation in the novel create the spaces in which indigenous African cultures merge with the New World cultures of the black migrants from Canada. “Lovemaking” indicates the affiliations between Africans and arriving migrants; characters act out the desire to possess and inhabit territory. The love between Gustavius Martins and Isatu Dambolla encapsulates the core connotations of the love relationship in the novel:

Gustavius did not let his inexperience thwart the fire in his heart. He stretched the woman out on the grass, and felt a storm raging in his body. When he entered her, a wild cry escaped her lips, disturbing the egrets nearby; the pain and pleasure that accompanied the flow of her warm blood raced through her legs which she wound round the waist of the man. [. . .] She clung to him
passionately, called his name in all the languages of her people, and as their bodies merged into one, they clawed each other like sea-anemones, as she surrendered to the tempestuous rhythms of his home-coming.

[...] A week later, over the furious protest of her father, who threatened to expel all settlers from Malagueta if she went ahead with her decision, she married the man who had given her a taste of happiness, standing in front of a man wearing a white collar, who intoned the words of a God she had never heard of before but was prepared to meet through her husband. (93-94)

There are several tropes of a wild and unrestrained nature evoked through the fire, the storm, the wild cry, the egrets, and the clawing anemones that are tamed by Christianity. The “lovemaking” marks the burden of change and indeterminacy that characterises situations of radical social change. Indeed, “lovemaking” indicates a passage from nature to culture. Paolo Bertinetti suggests that Isatu Dambolla embodies here “the rediscovered link with the African land” for the New World blacks (200). This suggestion also can be read differently. If the African Americans embody a “New World” in terms of the dawn of another theatre of modernity, then we have here the individual entering that modernity. The coexistence of such oppositions in intimacy reflects the precarious existence of the settlement under the eyes of a helpless African father figure who stands in as custodian of an older order.

The overdetermined nature of “lovemaking” recurs again at the end of the novel; the colonel who betrays the general and his country is forever locked in the act of copulation with his mistress. The logic behind this “punishment” is simple. The colonel’s copulation does not fulfil the consummation of matrimonial unions and the consolidation of homecomings that all
other acts of copulation represent in the novel. Even more, the sphere of "lovenaking" is the level at which individual subjectivities enter the many strands of the novel. The union between Isatu—the African—and Gustavius is rendered with a vocabulary of subjugation that the African "accepts" because the agent of change is another "African." The African American represents a refracted image of the African; the violence between them becomes a kind of connective tissue between Africans. This representation posits a form of purposeful and utilitarian forgetting that allows the forging of new African polities. But individual action for the common good is absent from Colonel Akongo's copulation with his concubine. What he seeks to forget is his treachery:

Entwined between the legs of his svelte mistress, he was just thinking about his promotion to general, when he felt the fingers of a powerful creature picking him up. He tried to come away from the woman, but felt the two of them being lifted together in an insoluble tryst, where they had been star-crossed to go on making love intact like a pair of dogs. Hungry for power he had not realised that relationships conceived on the margin of treachery and greed were doomed for ever, and that the telephone call he had been expecting was a delusion lodged in his traitor's brain, and as he had never bothered to think about the bittersweet history of Malagueta, he couldn't understand that whereas Emmanuel Cromantine and Louisa Turner had loved each other like two crabs that could come unstuck any time they wanted, he and his concubine could not hope for deliverance from lust, because they had been condemned to an eternal public disgrace in The Last Harmattan of Alusine Dunbar. (397-98, my emphasis)
The “lovemaking”—classified as lust—in this passage differs in its purpose from other scenes in the novel. The copulation assuages Akongo’s guilt and is to help him forget his treachery. The act with the mistress is a business transaction for which she receives monetary recompense.

Cheney-Coker’s novel may not be useful in working through the questions Wole Ogundele raises in the epigraph. To contemplate these questions is to move beyond fixations on the colonial encounter and to consider Africans as active participants in evolving social and political processes that may involve the wholesale victimisation of other Africans. At the end of chains of victimisation stands the speechless figure of the idealised woman. The colonel and his mistress are condemned to “eternal disgrace” in *The Last Harmattan of Alusine Dunbar* because the title names a process that is continuously replicated in the act of reading. The novel itself acts out that which it speaks. The metafictional reference to the novel itself in its last sentence indicates the reflexive nature of the narrative as a meditation on an emerging process of change. In that last sentence, the general and his mistress are “condemned to an eternal public disgrace in *The Last Harmattan of Alusine Dunbar*” (398). The self-referentiality introduced highlights *The Last Harmattan* as a continuously unfolding process on two levels.

**From Nature to a Culture of Wounds?**

The recurrence of the wound points to an associative semantics of health and ecology that return in the numerous strands of *The Last Harmattan*. Such ecological concerns start with the general’s discovery that “for the sum of twenty-five million dollars the president had agreed to have [. . .] toxic waste dumped in the waters of his country, and kill off all the children” (xi). The general’s “discovery” of the toxic waste import is part of a chain of revelations and divinations about the health of characters, communities and, later, the nation-state. This turn to the semantics of ecology is an important site in which to read the permutations of the slave trade
in Cheney-Coker's novel. The environment, in terms of the land, the vegetation, the sea, and fauna are active agents in the novel. Indeed, the sea dominates the general's reflections in the epilogue, and the storm dominates the epilogue. Specific animal imagery reappears in tandem with key plot developments. General Masimiara, for example, receives the signal for his coup when his wife dreams of lizards in a cauldron. Similarly, rats appear in his dungeon cell and upon his death “agitated fowls” bang “their wings against their coops,” while “dog-faced bats” crash into trees (394-95). The key characters in the novel are described with animal traits that represent their totems.

The imagery of flora and fauna may be read as the semantics of Cheney-Coker's mythic images or as markers of magic realism. Paolo Bertinetti has already identified the novel as a magical realist text “according to which reality can only be communicated in depth, not just superficially, through a mingling of the real and the imaginary” (197). Bertinetti is more concerned, in his detailed reading, with the political realities of the postcolony and the histories of migrations and colonialisms. Thus, his emphasis is on the actions of human figures as well as the consequent manners in which the etiquette of magic realism pressures Cheney-Coker’s novel. As Bertinetti points out, the imbrication of magic realism with post-colonial strategies of representation may lead to a suppression of the African provenance of Cheney-Coker’s aesthetics, if it is read as a modification of the widely known South American phenomenon (198). Specifically, Bertinetti reminds us that the blending of the “real and the imaginary” that marks use of the marvellous could derive “from a cultural hinterland [. . .] where what we call the marvellous is seen as an integral part of reality. In such cases, there is no question of adopting a kind of writing in which the factual and the counter-factual are co-present, as in South American
novels. Rather, there is a literary imagination that reflects a vision of the world in which the two dimensions coexist. (198)

Bertinetti’s attention to the co-existence of the “real and the imaginary” in African cultural hinterlands and its formulations in magic realism is useful in fixing the relations between African myths and magic realism. Perhaps, whereas the former could exist in oral forms and popular culture, the transition to actual written form of the novel may allow critics, more familiar with South American fiction, to “falsely” ascribe the life-worlds in Cheney-Coker’s fiction to a different source.

I do not iterate this interpretative conundrum to ascertain the cultural provenance of the author’s aesthetics. Rather, I wish to underline the plural interpretative worlds that this novel inhabits and to draw comparisons to the use of the co-existence of the real and the imaginary in the discursive frames of Poe, Melville, Morrison, Wright, Phillips and Condé in my previous chapters. The animals, ghosts, slaves and revolting/rebellious subjects in the previous chapters operate within interpretative frames that are used to justify concrete practices. Apart from Poe, all other authors delineate the simultaneity of parallel interpretative constructions in order to expose competing ideologies that structure the productions of reality.

The turns to the “unreal” in Wright, Morrison and Condé, and to the discursive formation of racialisation and environmental determinism in Phillips, are all related in that they aim to create insight into the conditions of the oppressed through depictions of alternate modes of perception. The difficulties of reading Cheney-Coker simply as magical realism or as African myth become, then, the doubling that complicates any easy demand that African accounts of slavery and the trade be written in any particular mode. The intrusion of the marvellous marks the persistence of a shadow world suppressed not only through the nation-state that represses or
sidelines African precolonial societies or, at the very least, stylises the memories of the past. The difficulty of reading the novel as magical realism also identifies the “appropriative” ways in which any literary text can be read. In this case, there are different consequences to reading the novel as magic realism or as fiction based on elements from an African cultural hinterland. The former accentuates the text’s participation in “travelling” postcolonial strategies of representation, whereas the latter accentuates the possibility of “African” modes of representing the violence of colonising moments.

I do not intend to install a rigid binary division between “postcolonial” and “African” representations. But it is necessary to maintain the distinctions between both readings and to look, instead, at the areas in which they overlap. The gesture towards toxic waste, the death of children, and the involvement of animals and land in the action of The Last Harmattan functions in several registers. It also redraws the constitution of morality and pushes all decisions between purely anthropomorphic apprehensions. It is this very extension beyond human beings into a cosmological view that imbues the closing pages of the novel with overtones of the sacred that are rendered visibly through apocalyptic metaphors. The sacralisation of the environment opens new spaces for political critique.²⁸

Cheney-Coker clearly yokes the sacred to the discussion of the postcolony, but the novel places slavery, the slave trade and the fortunes of Sierra Leone within changing systems of trade. The novel is not about modernisation but about how Africa enters or is related to projects of modernisation. In this novel, that relation is one of plunder by proxy of the president. This comparison is better understood if we understand slaves as African exports in the European and American projects of modernisation. The comparison also parallels similar lines of reasoning in Phillips’s trilogy. In Higher Ground, the narrator names children the “young exportable goods
of this trading continent" (22). The iteration of "children" in The Last Harmattan traces patterns of exploitation and the symbolic value of children for the descendants of former slaves (5, 6, 13, 103, 109, 136, 159). These repetitions employ children in different registers; their movement from property, objects of trade, and markers of the enforced breeding of slave women, to objects of affection, and the future inheritors plots also the transformations of the ex-slaves’ fortunes. If Phillips employs animal imagery and the semantics of environmental determinism to isolate the links between ecology and domination, Cheney-Coker’s animal imagery is ambivalent. It functions, on one hand, as part of a vocabulary of contemporary environmental concerns. On the other hand, since the slave trade appears in the novel as a component of capitalist modernity, in which Malagueta is implicated, it is possible to read the environmentalism as one continuous register in which to examine the cultural code of plunder of African resources. The slaves and the land are primarily resources. Even the Black Loyalists subdue and cultivate the land as they implement their projects. The utilisation of the environment becomes the one blindspot for all parties. But the animal imagery functions, on the other hand, as a mythical landscape that hints at a projected Utopic future (x). President Sanka Maru’s brutal suppression of the general’s quest unleashes vengeful forces of an apocalyptic storm.

The depiction of animals, in the background of human action, acts as a commentary upon the undertakings of the novel’s succession of characters. The animals point to a different dimension beyond the antagonistic confrontations of humans (105, 302, 310):

The sound of the evil omen of the harmattan rang through Malagueta one more time. Sanka Maru was just about to sign a decree declaring a national disaster so that once the raging storm was over they could clear the dead dogs and birds off the streets. Concentrating on the stylistic movement of his pen that had
condemned General Tamba Masimiara to death, he suddenly had a shock when he saw an old man come in, walking past the guards who did not bother him. The creature came straight at him, with the blazing light of his power growing from his testicles. Sanka Maru lowered his hand to get his revolver, not knowing that that movement had been imagined in all the decrees that he would sign, since time immemorial, when he had not even been born. It was the last thing he did. The light of the testicle glowed with a fierce brilliance, and he felt himself lifted out of the grandiloquent illusion of power, borne into space as if he were a dwarf, by a force too terrible to contemplate but which left him awed by the realisation that in the history of creation no one had told him that what had been ordained by Divine Providence could not be altered by man; not even by a presidential decree, as he came down in the middle of a street so that when the dust had cleared, his countrymen and women would not see the eyes of a dead general, but the paralysed wreck of Sanka Maru. (396-97)

The recourse to apocalyptic rhetoric in the ending of Cheney-Coker’s novel constitutes a stumbling block for critics. In his reading of *The Last Harmattan*, Clarke determines that “there is no solution but the unsatisfying, *deus ex machina* intervention of a supernatural deposing of Maru” (138). This reading returns us to the question of verisimilitude and Ogundele’s charge of “evasion.” Yes, Cheney-Coker’s ending does not provide a resolution that is readily transferable onto realities of the African postcolonial polity. But the passage above restages a cautionary tale by superimposing an apocalyptic vision on the frame of the cautionary tale. The use of animals in the passage needs to be read beside Tutuola’s cursory use of domesticated and wild animals:
So when we could not bear it [the sound of gunfire] then we left our mother’s room for the veranda, but we met nobody there, and then we ran from there to the portico of the house, but the town was also empty except the domestic animals as sheep, pigs, goats and fowls and also some of the bush animals as monkeys, wolves, deer and lions who were driven from the bush that surrounded the town to the town by the fearful noises of the enemies’ guns. All these animals crying bitterly up and down in the town searching for their keepers. Immediately we saw that there was nobody in town again we stepped down from the door to the outside as all the while we stood at the door looking at every part of the town with fearful and doubtful mind. (18)

I repeat this passage to underline the similar transactions running through Cheney-Coker and Tutuola. The animals in both passages mark the collapse of social orders. The collapse of order is prefigured in Tutuola through the “integration” of domestic and “bush” animals in the town. The “bush of ghosts” as it were falls in on the town. The collapse is prefigured in Cheney-Coker by the incursion of dead animals in the streets—thus blurring the boundaries between the order of the postcolonial nation-state and the “disorder” of the “bush” now prefigured by Alusine Dunbar. This distinction—or the alienation of the “bush”—is enforced by the president’s decrees. The apocalyptic imagery of the storm is thus shorthand for detection/divination. The real issue with the end of the novel is the collision of national crisis and natural disaster! In declaring a national disaster, Sanka Maru does not simply misrecognise the deep-seated nature of the crisis; he actively performs his own work of codifying nature to suit his purposes. Instead, Sanka Maru is himself transferred from the register of his office into the
spectacle of carrion. He is, in other words, another emblem of “eternal public disgrace” for the eyes of “his countrymen and women” (397).

**Coda: Narratives and Repetitions**

Invariably, Cheney-Coker’s metafictional reference, his multiple returnees, his animals in different registers, and his attention to the postcolonial nation-state and the “bush” combine aspects of the three other novels examined in this chapter. Such a multiplicity of concerns and diversity of modes of writing disallow an easy closure. The many layers of the novel invite plural readings. For entities such as children and animals that fluctuate, this last novel’s polyphony reminds us much more of those aspects of the postcolonial realities that cannot be rendered effortlessly in any single mode of representation. In fact the differences between the uses of children, animals, sexuality, sound, sight, and writing demonstrate the divergent tasks that are being addressed at different sites. Although these tropes appear in all novels, their divergent uses highlight the tensions between the plural local histories of the diaspora. For example, except for Cheney-Coker, the African writers do not use animals to indicate the dehumanisation of slaves because the trope of bestialisation is associated with the racialisation of African slaves.

Analysing the use of these tropes reveals much more about these novels, than an examination of their adherence to realism or historical facts would disclose. Even *The Return*, although easily classifiable as realist, stages its great scene of revelation with the registers of sight and sound. The repeated hesitation to look and the renewed verbal cue to do precisely that dramatise a faltering process to insight. The sound of the drums is doubled after Jakpa’s insight; the drums do not simply announce the death of a king. They announce the death as well of his knowledge of the function of terror in maintaining the empire. Curiously, that terror runs
through the lives of the principal characters of all these novels—Tutuola’s protagonist calls it “fear.” The characters in these novels must find a way of coexistence with their knowledge of terror. This knowledge names an awareness of the partial nature of all knowledge. The characters in four novels examined in this chapter grapple with different forms of marginality that are specific to their African communities.
CODA:
STORIES PASSED ON, STORIES AT LARGE

But sometimes we fail to hear and merely register a silence.

(Chambers 51)

How can one study colonial societies, keeping in mind—but not being paralyzed by—the fact that the tools of analysis we use emerged from the history we are trying to examine? (Cooper, Colonialism 4)
My readings in the previous five chapters show that in these narratives about the legacies of the transatlantic slave and slavery, those legacies are often radically different from site to site. Similarly, the forms of silence or effacement of the violence of the colonising moment that these authors address are very different even if they can be linked to the slave trade. What remains constant, though, is the need to draw attention to the narrative process as well as the staging of scenes in which one version of events is passed on or silenced. This pattern runs through the stories of Melville and Poe, as well as the novels by Wright, Morrison, Phillips, Condé, Conrad, Cheney-Coker, Tutuola, Boateng and Armah. Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, in particular, ends by reinforcing this strategy of passing on even as it exclaims: “This is not a story to pass on” (337). Yet the story is passed on to us. And with it, we suffer our own loss of innocence.

Although Morrison specifically underlines the passing on of stories, all other authors I examined do the same in different ways. But even in narratives—such those by Poe, Conrad, Melville, and Boateng—that end with the suppression of certain narratives, the events that precede that climax offer the reader the possibility of constructing an alternative narrative. The emphasis on passing on raises the question: what stays behind? This question is important since these writers—apart from Poe and Melville—come at different historical moments past the days of the slaveries they write about. They are, perhaps then, part of the hegemonies they critique. Here, I find Rey Chow’s words pertinent:

> While the struggle for hegemony remains necessary for many reasons—especially in cases where underprivileged groups seek equality of privilege—I remain sceptical of the validity of hegemony over time, *especially if it is a hegemony formed through intellectual power*. The question for me is not how
intellectuals can obtain hegemony (a question that positions them in an oppositional light against dominant power and neglects their share of that power through literacy, through the culture of words), but how can they resist, as Michel Foucault said, “the forms of power that transform [them] into its object and instrument in the sphere of ‘knowledge,’ ‘truth,’ ‘consciousness,’ and ‘discourse.’” Putting it another way, how do intellectuals struggle against a hegemony which already includes them and which can no longer be divided into the state and civil society in Gramsci’s terms, nor can be clearly demarcated into national and transnational spaces? (Chow 15-16)

Rey Chow does not write about slavery but her attention to the shifts in what hegemony is and the involvements of the intellectual applies in two ways to my argument. On one hand, the carrier figures that surface in these novels are variants of intellectuals. Indeed, these protagonists, from Delano to Sethe, from Véronica and Sancher to Cambridge, Nash, and Jakpa are all engaged in tasks of rationalising intellect on the one hand, but on the other hand, on a metafictional level, the writers themselves are intellectuals within their respective spheres. Hence, the constant metafictional references draw attention to the materiality of these narratives—the physical books we hold, the acts of reading, the trips to the bookstore or library, the time we devote to reading the words of these authors. Dionne Brand makes much the same point in her book on the legacies of slavery in the African diaspora when she writes: “Writing is an act of desire, as is reading. Why does someone enclose a set of apprehensions within a book? Why does someone else open that book if not because of the act of wanting to be wanted, to be understood, to be seen, to be loved?” (192).
In a sense, then, precisely because these writers are mediators, the tasks they undertake are reassessments of the legacies of slavery without speaking for the "slave." There is no "slave" waiting to be loved in these pages, since such gestures of speaking for someone do not create dialogue but extensions of empathy to figures of illusion. What emerges from these comparative readings is the need for continued dialogue about the transformation of the violence of colonisation and marginalisation into normalised hierarchies.

1 The amount of responses to Gilroy's book—and his subsequent work—is far greater than I can engage with here. Brent Hayes Edwards's place is an excellent place to start an examination of Gilroy since Hayes places him within a study of different uses of the concept of "diaspora." Hayes mentions two reviews, published in Social Identities, that I also recommend: Brackette Williams and George Lipsitz. The essays by Simon Gikandi and Joan Dayan are part of a special issue of Research in African Literatures (27.4 1996) that is devoted to Paul Gilroy's book.

2 Clifford's discussion of Gilroy is especially important because he sets Gilroy in dialogue with other theorists of diaspora outside the African diaspora. Most other reviewers of Gilroy that I discuss write explicitly about the African diaspora or about Gilroy's lack of insight into African American cultural politics. Clifford also pays attention to the imbrications of the mobilisations of diaspora. See the whole of chapter ten for Clifford's discussion (Clifford Routes 244-277).

3 For detailed examinations of the complexities surrounding the interpretation of the transatlantic slave trade, see the essays by Bruner, Davis, Ebron, Hartman and Hasty. Whereas Davis is not so critically rigorous, the other writers offer nuanced readings of the different mobilisations of the slave trade. Hasty, is particularly notable, because she examines the participation of the Ghanaian government in appropriating the abolition of slavery in the British colonies "to attract summer tourists from the African diaspora" (47).

4 Here, I must add, that my study could be read as part of an extensive literature examining the use of sound—often speech or dialogue—as a basis of seeking solidarity or understanding social processes. Such studies often carry titles that announce attempts to break the "silence" on certain issues. Two such examples focus on women's writing. In The Erotics of Talk, Carla Kaplan examines tropes of listening and talking in women's writing. And in the collection of essays edited by Elaine Hedges and Shelley Fisher Fishkin, Listening to Silences, several scholars examine not only the ways in which women's voices have been silenced, but also the textual strategies of representing silence. Ian Baucom has deployed Althusser's concept of "hailing" in reading the importance of the radio as a technology of seeking solidarity for Frantz Fanon ("Radio"). In his essay, he demonstrates how the Black Atlantic is also a community of listeners.


6 Although Poe does not allude to any specific slave revolt, his text was produced in the era of heightened anxiety about slave revolts. Pointing to the revolts in 1800, 1822 and 1831, Hesse states, "the cumulative significance of these attempted slave revolts was that by the 1830s the fear of slave rebellions and resistances was as persistent among southern plantation owners as was the anticipation of challenges to slavery among the slaves themselves" (Hesse 153).

7 Liliane Weissberg makes some interesting observations about the ape in Poe's story. She points out that the ape as a souvenir brought over from the islands could be read as an emblem of imperialism and that against the background of nineteenth-century race discourse, the ape could be an object to be idealised and constructed as representative of the primitive—a function which the Negro could no longer fulfill (238). Weissberg documents among nineteenth-century French sculptors the recurrent motif of a seemingly manlike ape "ravishing a woman." Thus, we might assume that Poe's use of the orangutan is an evasive strategy to circumscribe a thorny issue. Allowing a Negro to violate the two women would have necessitated a different outcome for his text.
The mode, sequence and consequence of physical displacement function prominently as markers of psychic displacement. The window is evoked several times in these crucial scenes. There is an opposition of two crucial leaps through windows, which in both instances are “unfortunately” open. The first window is an aperture out of the master’s bedroom, while the second is an aperture into the women’s bedroom. The labyrinthine pursuit in the streets of Paris lies between the two windows.

I point in particular to the essays in the collection Romancing the Shadow: Poe and Race. These essays cover the body of Poe’s literary output. The title of the volume is taken from Toni Morrison’s essay “Romancing the Shadow” in her monograph Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination. As the editors mention, the essays in this volume act upon Toni Morrison’s demand that the functions of “Africanist presence” in American literature be examined. Elise Lemire and Leland Person specifically examine “Murders in the Rue Morgue.” The articles by John Carlos Rowe and Betsy Erkilla also provide pertinent information on the intricate connections between race, gender, slavery, and imperialism in Poe’s writing. Elise Lemire’s essay places the simian imagery in Poe’s story within American social and cultural history and finds corollary social incidents and attitudes for the story’s key elements. Lemire situates the story within nineteenth-century interests in natural history—especially the fascination with Frederik Cuvier’s work on primates—and racial anxieties that culminated in race-related riots in Philadelphia. As Lemire notes, critics vacillate between ascribing the author’s choice of a simian murder protagonist to nineteenth-century racial ideologies and the widespread fascination with nonhuman primates. Such enthralment was expressed in the public enthusiasm that surrounded the chimpanzee brought in from Liberia and exhibited in Philadelphia’s Masonic Hall in 1839. Poe lived in that city at that time (179).

Lemire draws attention to two important sources that shed light on the iconography of the black barber. Cyprian Clamorgan claims, in The Colored Aristocracy of St. Louis, that barbering is the most prominent profession for members of the black “aristocracy” in his city and that mulattoes take naturally to barbering. If Clamorgan’s suppositions were in any way representative of widespread nineteenth-century opinion, then the appearance of a barbering/shaving black/ape in Melville and Poe is not merely coincidental. See, especially, Clamorgan’s discussion of black barbers (52). Lemire also discusses the icon in the art of Edward W. Clay, whose prints detail prevalent anxieties about black social mobility through entrepreneurial means as well as through racial intermarriage. One common theme in prints was thus the presence of a simian-like black man in a white woman’s parlour, which should otherwise be the platform from which the upper- and middle-class white woman exhibits her social eminence (Lemire, 198).

Lemire explains that “if orangutans were thought to look, act, and sound like blacks and even related to them, nothing made the two seem more similar than the type of desire they each supposedly had for women above them in the Chain of Being. The perception that orangutans sought to mate with African women originated in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries and was still going strong years later. Consider that, in 1795, the frontispiece of Linnaeus’s Genuine and Universal System of Natural History shows an orangutan snatching an African woman from her human mate.” Linnaeus’s frontispiece portrays, in a sense, the spectacle that Poe translates into nineteenth-century fears. See also Leland Person’s essay, “Poe’s Philosophy of Amalgamation: Reading Racism in the Tales,” for an overview of critical readings of Poe’s use of the ape in his story. Person makes compelling comparisons between Poe’s work and the writings of nineteenth-century figures such as Thomas Jefferson. He also traces the use of animal imagery in other Poe stories. Person shows, in particular, that the triangulation of animal-white man-white woman in “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” can also be observed in “The Black Cat.”

It is ironic that Baldwin wrote his essay in Paris—considering the link to Poe’s story—and Michelle Wright has examined Baldwin’s judgment in light of transnational, black literary politics. Michelle Wright comments on Baldwin’s charge that Wright denies Bigger Thomas his humanity: “Baldwin attacked Wright for perpetuating a tradition of African American representation in which the humanity and diversity of the ‘Negro’ is sacrificed to antislavery or antiracist discourse” (209). Wright studies the larger question of what constitutes minority experience and the “African American Subject,” but her reading of Baldwin reading Richard Wright reveals instructive details about the politics of representing subalternity. Wright frames the pertinent parts of Baldwin’s critique as a refusal to speak to an individually realised representation of the subaltern subject. “If Baldwin will not speak as subaltern, one may ask, can he speak to the subaltern?” (212). Michelle Wright’s differentiation between speaking as and speaking to is important. The insistence interrogates, on one hand, the possibility of speaking as subaltern; at the same time as it posits the subaltern as an always predetermined category of discourse that is produced through representation as one probable realization. In other words, the subaltern always emerges out of a previously determined matrix. To speak to the subaltern could mean, then, the simultaneity of the following three acts: 1) to speak about the process that creates the subaltern, 2) to speak to an individually realised representation of the subaltern emerging from this process, 3) to demonstrate the difference between the speaker—who is also supposed to be subaltern—and the represented subaltern subject. But as Wright goes on to imply, Baldwin’s transatlantic subject is always in process and cannot fully escape the resonances of ‘the African American experience’ from across the Atlantic (226-27). More importantly, the African American fleeing the American subaltern position arrives in Paris to discover the
subalternity of “the French African colonial” (228). The subject positions of black others are created in America and France through the relation of the former to Euro-American projects of modernity.

13 There is an extensive and growing body of work on Beloved. For an overview of Margaret Garner’s escape, capture and ordeal in the courts under the Fugitive Slave Law, see Mark Reinhardt’s “Slavery, Silence, and Ventriloquism” and Samuel J. May’s “Margaret Garner and Seven Others.” For views of Morrison’s use of the infanticide, see Nellie McKay’s introduction to her edited volume, Beloved: A Casebook.

14 This plurality flickers but is never fully realised in Poe, Melville and Wright: Poe’s murdered women cannot speak and his incompatible Europeans disappear; Melville concentrates on Babo’s silence; and Bigger Thomas does not only drown out Max’s voice, he murders Bessie Mears after her testimony to her own plight under twentieth-century regimes of racialization (229-30).

15 I follow Braun and Wainwright’s definitions: “An epistemology is a theory of knowledge—a set of implicit or explicit principles and practices by which one comes to know the world. All people have epistemologies, but few reflect critically upon the taken-for-granted ways they come to know the world. Epistemologies are related to ontologies. These are beliefs about what is real in the world or what exists. Again, all people possess ontologies and, as with epistemologies, these are usually unexamined and taken-for-granted” (61).

16 Dussere’s essay is a rich examination of the functions of economics in the novels of Morrison and William Faulkner. Dussere’s attention to economics is useful for my arguments about the function of the slaughterhouse. Following Dussere, it is possible to assert that the transfer from slave to wage labour inscribes a questioning presence into the meanings of labour in the novel. This lack of closure is part of the contests between ideologies: “Indeed, much of the novel seems to be focused on that very ambivalence, that insertion of uncertainty, that appearance of unfinished business at the moment of apparent liberation” (343). Consequently, although Morrison’s characters also begin to figure history in economic terms, they are never able to escape the claims of such a history because “at the moment an ex-slave believes he or she has offered the final, absolute overpayment that will settle past business, another creditor arrives at the door” (344). I would add to Dussere’s analysis that the unsuitability of this economic accounting for Morrison’s ex-slaves demonstrates precisely the limits of such a system—or indeed any one single system—in accommodating the horrors of slavery.

17 The rats appear also in Caryl Phillips’s Higher Ground and Syl Cheney-Coker’s The Last Harmattan of Alusine Dunbar—in chapters three and five respectively.

18 Medusa is the mortal one of the three Gorgon sisters of classical mythology. They are reported to have been of such frightful countenance that “those who looked upon their faces were turned to stone” (Classical Mythology 345). In her essay “The Witch’s Garden,” Susan Bowers identifies “a long tradition [of female monsters] that includes the Sirens, Medusa, the Harpies, and Circe, all of whom evidently owe their existence to the conflict between the male stereotype of women as passive mirrors of male subjectivity, and the subversive, threatening insinuations of female wild selves and female reproductive power” (23).

19 Wilson J. Moses provides an overview of the myriad and overlapping issues behind nineteenth-century nationalism, the American Colonisation Society and African-American settlement in West Africa, in his introduction to Liberian Dreams: Back-to-Africa Narratives from the 1850s. As Moses points out, different parties and individuals supported a return to Africa at different times and with widely divergent motives. Whatever the framework for return, African-Americans migrating to Liberia in the nineteenth century faced hardship in what was essentially a frontier society that many were not prepared for.

20 But of course, Caryl Phillips invites exactly such work of translation since he invariably reads his twentieth-century concerns into previous centuries. As Wole Ogundele writes, a “meditation” on the past is also a “meditation” on the present and “an anticipation of the future” (137).

21 Je suis Martiniquaise, Capécia’s autobiographical published in 1948, was highly successful in France. As Sharpley-Whiting points out, it was awarded the prestigious Grand Prix Littéraire des Antilles in 1949 by a jury “composed of thirteen Frenchmen” (36). In the novel, Mayotte Capécia, an enterprising woman of colour, has a love relationship with a Frenchman, Andrè. The relationship is a way for Mayotte to overcome her self-denigration due the devalued status of blackness. In the end, Mayotte cannot marry the white man due to social barriers. She realises that she is maritiquaise as opposed to a white French woman. Fanon reads Capécia as an embodiment of internalised racial pathology. This reading has become an Archimedean lever with which to unhang not only Fanon’s misogyny but also the silencing and misrepresentation of black women writers. Sharpley-Whiting reads Capécia in the context of Antillean colonial realities. Her insightful suggestion is that while Fanon’s reading may be brutal, the protagonist is also complicit in her sexual exploitation. The real issue becomes, says Sharpley-Whiting, the feminist blindness to Mayotte’s complicity.
Cilas Kemedjio explains the conflict between African and Antillean experiences of colonisation and decolonisation as a result of the effect of departmentalisation on Antillean culture. The incorporation of Guadeloupe and Martinique into the French Republic—and in extension the European Union—buffers the islands from some of the brutal social, economic and political ravages that face post-independence African and Caribbean countries. As Kemedjio shows, there is a current of condescension towards Africa on the part of certain Antilleans who see the incorporation into France as positive: "From that perspective, Africa is integrated less into a cultural or racial hierarchy than into a Third Worldist paradigm" (Kemedjio, 96). The integration of Africa into a Third Worldist geography marked by dictatorships, political oppression and dire economic circumstances separates Africans from Antilleans decrying the pangs of departmentalisation.

22 The references are too many to be detailed. The most striking are references to figures such as Mahalia Jackson (10), Booker T. Washington’s *Up from Slavery* (12), Christopher Columbus (13), Karl Marx and Kwame Nkrumah (20), Rousseau and Spinoza (14), and Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa’s *Shaihu Umar: A Novel* (22). All of these names are part of Veronica’s cultural heritage but they also put a pressure on her narrative. For example, as much as Veronica undertakes a reverse Middle Passage, the reference to Balewa’s novel about the longer Trans-Saharan slave trade points to other memories. The fact that Balewa’s novel is written and published in Hausa echoes Spivak’s observation about the silencing of African experiences of slavery.

In other words, if Veronica searches for a “nigger with ancestors,” Sancher is on a quest to redeem his ancestors’ crimes against “niggers.” Both characters face the difficulty of articulating their specific concerns at sites in which their interlocutors have moved on to other conversations determined by their own particular relations to the afterlives of slavery. Whereas Veronica encounters Africans, Sancher encounters Guadeloupéans who are caught up in other exigencies. And whereas the speech of Veronica’s African interlocutors are filtered through the protagonist’s reflections, Sancher’s words are filtered through the reflections of individual characters in *Crossing the Mangrove*.

23 Although Seku is one of the empire’s most skilled warriors, he refuses to defend himself, hence he faces certain death at the hands of his scholarly brother. In this chapter, two authority figures—the Imam and the head of the army—reveal secrets that radically alter the brothers’ perception of social reality and their place in their historical moments, in an effort to dissuade the wronged Jakpa. It is remarkable that the distinct linear historical emerging here begins with the destruction of the famous ancient African kingdom of Ghana in 1076 (99). This time is, thus, one imperial time—albeit an African one—that will coincide with British imperial time in the novel’s epilogue (116). The collapse of Ghana leads to huge migrations and wars that fuel the destabilisations and displacement of populations. The African interior, as it were, is radically “diasporised” and these characters are at the heart of one empire. This empire not only fabricates its own others, it must also fabricate itself and the identity of its own members.

24 Malagueta, the name for this nation, refers to the former designation of part of West Africa as the “Grain Coast.” Grain was an important commodity for early European traders, and a substitute for a more expensive kind of pepper originally procured from Asia, so that Cheney-Coker’s Malagueta is part of a system of exchange that extended both inland and beyond the Atlantic. The choice of name for the fictitious African country is a significant pointer to Cheney-Coker’s reappraisal of Sierra Leone’s history. In the aftermath of independence, African politicians named their newly independent countries after ancient African empires such as Mali, Ghana and Benin. The names of these empires preserved memories of former African polities. Cheney-Coker bases the fictive African polity on the foundations of commerce between the African interior and other parts of the world. Slavery and the slave trade are functionalised as part of traffic and exchange of people, labour and goods. Cheney-Coker is concerned with that traffic and its permutations across time as a grammar for understanding events in a part of West Africa.

25 The Black Loyalists were peoples of African descent attached to the British side during the American War of Independence. James Walker traces their origins to November 1775 when Lord Dunmore, governor of Virginia, issued a proclamation freeing all slaves of the American rebels (Walker 1). While a large number were slaves who fought on the side of the British in the hope of manumission, others were free people, and captured or seized slaves. These peoples of colour subsequently fled or were evacuated to Nova Scotia in the wake of British defeat. As Walker writes, most Black Loyalists considered the passage to Nova Scotia “not merely as an escape from slavery, but as an entry into a new world where this dignity and independence that came of equal citizenship were to be [theirs]” (19). Life with the British did not necessarily bear out the promise of freedom. The promise of land to start off individual lives did not materialise for most. Further, some of these people remained slaves or servants since slavery was maintained in Nova Scotia. Dissatisfaction with wretched conditions in Nova Scotia would lead some Black Loyalists to join immigration plans to start a colony in Sierra Leone. The first group of colonists went ashore in Sierra Leone 14 May 1787 to start the hard work of pioneer life for which they were ill prepared (Walker...
99). For a detailed account of the movements of the Black Loyalists from the American colonies to Nova Scotia and Sierra Leone, see chapters five to seven of James Walker's *The Black Loyalists*; for an account of the rise of Creole culture that sheds light on the developments in Cheney-Coker's novel, see chapter fifteen. The immigration of the Black Loyalists is only one of the reasons Sierra Leone is particularly important as a site of memory of transatlantic slavery. As Barnor Hesse points out, subsequent to the slave rebellion on board the Amistad in 1839, and the release of the illegally enslaved Africans following the U. S. Supreme Court ruling of 1841, the slaves travelled to Sierra Leone (Hesse 145). The return of the rebellion leader Joseph Cinqué to Sierra Leone has itself become another contested site of transatlantic memory as the U. S. and Sierra Leonean governments launch commemorations that are contested by contemporary Sierra Leonean writers (Christensen).

28 On this point, Aschcroft writes: "The sacred has frequently entered post-colonial debates in relation to environmental issues. [...] The destruction of the environment has been one of the most damaging aspects of Western industrialization. The fact that the scramble for modernization has enticed developing countries into the destruction of their own environments, now under the disapproving gaze of a hypocritical West, is further evidence of the continuing importance of a post-colonial analysis of global crisis" (213).
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