TRANSAMERICAN GHOSTS

THE FACE, THE ABYSS, AND THE DEAD OF NEW WORLD POST-COLONIALITY

by

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Abstract

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This study entitled *Transamerican Ghosts: the Face, the Abyss, and the Dead of New World Post-Coloniality*, examines the philosophical, historical, and psychic forces embodied by the specter in the Transamerican imaginary. I will argue that a critical sensitivity to the ghost offers uncanny entries into the American post-colonial subject, revealing the different ways it is shaped by capitalism, colonial histories, and social marginalization. The specter is a residual manifestation of socially unconscious forces that imaginatively draws Transamerican writers into complex explorations of identity. Significantly, the etymological connotation of *haunt* is to bring or return home. It is via the imagination that the repressed content the ghost brings/returns emerges into legibility. Thus, the writers in this study turn to spectrality in order to decipher traumatic traces and symbols that have been veiled from social and historical view. Identity, as the writers of this study demonstrate, is only partially located on the material surfaces of the body. The post-colonial subject of the Americas is both the corporeal remainder of a colonized past and a body haunted by a symbolic stranger that exists outside, within, and beyond the

borders of the body or the real. The post-colonial subject in the Americas, then, is haunted doubly: historically, by an inscrutable past that it must learn to read through the hints and fragments that remain; and socially, through its own ontological location in the real where s/he is rendered ghostly by numerous violent exclusions. What is at stake, according to this analysis, is a *fictional* response by writers in the Americas, to a series of thematic threads that emerge as a result of contacts with colonial ghosts and social states of spectrality. In four chapters I work through these threads. Chapter One examines an ethics of the face as a paradoxical and magical practice of defacement in Piri Thomas' *Down These Mean Streets*. Chapter Two traces the curse of difference in Junot Diaz's collection of short stories *Drown* and his novel *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. The third and four chapters explore a revelatory relationship between the wound, the abyss, and the archive in Derek Walcott's epic poem *Omeros* and Toni Morrison *Beloved*. What emerges in these readings is a more acute understanding of the role of spectrality in the history and social construction of the Americas.

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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

SPECTRAL ENCOUNTERS IN TRANSAMERICAN LITERATURE

Ghosts, Spirits and Othered identites

This study entitled *Transamerican Ghosts: the Face, the Abyss, and the Dead of New World Post-Coloniality*, is impelled by a desire to explore the hidden philosophical, historical, and psychic forces that constitute the post-colonial subject in the Americas. The primary writers examined in this dissertation - Piri Thomas' *Down These Mean Streets* (ch.1), Junot Díaz's *Drown* (ch.2), Derek Walcott's *Omeros* (ch.3), Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (ch.4) – fictionally stage a spectral meeting for us, exhorting the reader to recognize "that the ghost is not simply a dead or a missing person, but a social figure, and investigating it can lead to that dense site where history and subjectivity make social life."[1] A critical sensitivity to the ghost, I argue, offers uncanny entries into the layered recesses of the American post-colonial subject, compulsively concealed under systems of power: capitalism, colonial histories, and social marginalization. If in its most general sense the specter is a residual manifestation, horrific and seductive, of socially unconscious forces, it is the mandate of fiction and New World art to conjure these invisible presences and translate them into a "live" narrative form. In the New World then, fiction (and art in general) becomes a body or receptacle possessed, in an Afro-Religious sense, by the ghostly content of race, class, and gender. Hidden stories and erased memories emerge in the imagination of post-colonial writers in the Americas like

[1] Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 8.

a "flash of the spirit,"[2] to use Robert Farris Thompson's phrase, imposing their narratives on those initiated writers and readers, creating, in these spectral encounters, what Margarite Fernández Olmos calls "spirited identities."[3] Implied here is a very particular reading and writing process that taps into an initiated hermeneutics sifting through the density of experience to recall History-histories-stories.[4] An attunement to spectrality, as this study shows, requires a very particular sensibility, an openness to, as Toni Morrison puts it, "invisible things" that are "not necessarily 'not-there.'"[5] Thus, fiction, New World writers teach us, is where the voice of the ghost emerges, develops, and speaks.

Significantly, the etymological connotation of *haunt* is to bring or return home. In this sense, the writers analyzed in this study turn to the specter as a native informant who helps them decipher the traumatic traces and symbols that have been veiled from social and historical view. The post-colonial writer in the Americas accesses this alternative ontology through a hermeneutic and phenomenological sixth sense that experiences itself in a hallucinatory, dissociated, and out of body manner. It is what Toni Morrison will call, for example, "playing in the dark": that is, imaginative forays into "the corners of consciousness" where unexpected presences provide "a way of contemplating chaos and civilization, desire and fear, and a mechanism for testing the

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[2] Robert Farris Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit*, xiii-xvii. For a provocative discussion of possession and creativity see also Maya Deren's *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti*, 247-262.

[3] Margarite Fernandez Olmos, "Spirited Identities: Creole Religions, Creole/U.S. Latina Literature and the Initiated Reader," in *Contemporary U.S. Latino/a Literary Criticism.* As Olmos puts it: "For the initiated or privileged reader" the spectral elements of the story stand out and become clues to "another – spiritual – reality."

[4] Edouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, 61-95.

[5] Toni Morrison, "Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature," 136.

problems and blessings of freedom."[6] This socially symbolic dimension is an imaginative response to brutal social and historical marginalization, eliciting spectralized levels of subjectivity. The post-colonial subject in the Americas, then, is haunted doubly: historically, by an inscrutable past that it must learn to read through the hints and fragments that remain; and socially, through its own ontological location in the Real where s/he is rendered ghostly by violent and systemic exclusions.

Zizek's paradoxical description of the Real is important to my concept of spectrality. He argues, "The Real is therefore simultaneously both the hard, impenetrable kernel resisting symbolization *and* a pure chimerical entity which has in itself no ontological consistency."[7] The dual identity of the Real suggests a spectral substance that sits at the heart of social formations and identities: it is the hard kernel of history and social symbolization and, on the other hand, a disruptive "chimerical entity" whose ontological inconsistency is the "embodiment of a certain void, lack, radical negativity."[8] If the first part of the Real, its positivity, functions as a support of the social/historical, it also acts as the site from which Othered, negative presences intrude and haunt the symbolic process. The language and form of this embodied, "radical negativity" is found in fiction. In this sense New World fiction is the imaginative representation of the Real where the ontological consistency of the ghost is housed and portrayed. What emerges, according to this analysis then, is a *fictional* response articulating a series of thematic threads prompted by contacts with the Real of colonial ghosts and social states of

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[6] Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark*, 6-7.

[7] Slavoj Zizek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, 169.

[8] Ibid, 170.

spectrality. The first thread: an ethics of the face as a paradoxical and revelatory practice of defacement; and second, an imaginative exposure to the wound, the abyss, and the archive calling attention to a history and politics of social death in the Americas. That is to say, the New World specter embodies an antinomy that sits at the heart of social and historical constructions: it is at once present and absent, immediate and distant, historical and quotidian, an intimate stranger.

An Intimate Stranger: Living with the Dead

Perhaps in no Transamerican text is this sense of the Real, the strange and the familiar, more dramatically fictionalized than in Juan Rulfo's 1955 novel *Pedro Páramo*. For Rulfo, who described himself as a naturalist writer, death becomes a magical part of the everyday. Death in the Mexican imaginary is actively intertwined with the social, historic, and economic fabric of the nation. Indeed, death in the Mexican imaginary functions, as Zizek's Real, to suture contradictory elements. As Claudio Lomnitz argues, "The reconciliation between opposed factions in death is also, to a degree, the acknowledgement of the viability of a social pact based on what might be called 'negative reciprocity': the unity and solidarity between Mexicans emerge despite the nation's origin in the rape and pillage of the conquest and its cyclical repetitions throughout modern history, culminating in the Mexican Revolution itself."[9] Thus, in death, the social and historical confront each other in a "negative reciprocity" creating the ground for an intimacy that merges discordant times, beings, and ideologies. Yet, as Rulfo's text suggests, it is the very separation, imbrications, and tension between life and death that creates a vertiginous sense of reailty. As Kathleen Brogan states: "Centrally

[9] Claudio Lomnitz, *Death and the Idea of Mexico*, 50.

concerned with the issues of communal memory, cultural transmission, and group inheritance, stories of cultural haunting share the plot device and master metaphor of the ghost as go-between, an enigmatic transitional figure moving between past and present, death and life, on culture and another."[10] Life exists in the presence of death. The ghost finds its voice in the magical pages of Transamerican fiction.

Juan Preciado's search for his father, Pedro Páramo, makes this uncanny fact powerfully evident. Juan's journey to Comala, his father's home town, takes him to a ghost town where murmurs replace voices and where bodies disintegrate before his eyes. The real is so utterly distorted in Rulfo and, on the other hand, the language so straightforward and naturalist, that the contrast creates an uncanny disjunction merging the familiar and the strange. This narrative divergence between everyday language and the ghostly bodies it uncannily represents, acts as an echo, a repetition, a divulged secret of Juan Preciado's social and historical origins. The moment of horror and confusion comes when Preciado realizes that the entire town is not only inhabited by ghosts, but made up of the children and wives of Pedro Paramo. Here the social and historical come spectrally together. For Pedro Paramo is a *cacique*, a modern day feudal lord who holds the town together by the violent force of his masculine will, while acting as the organizer of local production, connecting the old, rural world with the modernizing forces of capitalism. In *Pedro Paramo* the traditional and the new inform each other resulting in exploitation and social death.[11] We like Juan are unhinged by a promise of return, of clarity and are instead presented with a spectral landscape of misused bodies. This is

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[10] Kathleen Brogan, *Cultural Haunting*, 6.

[11] For an interesting explication of the cacique see Patrick Dove, "Reflections on the Origin: Transculturation and Tragedy in Pedro Paramo," 97-98.

why for Rulfo the modern, post-colonial subject of the Americas must be imagined in ghostly terms, because the knowledge of the Real is the recognition that social death is the pervasive ingredient of history and New World communal formations. Rulfo then, elides the fleshy body altogether immersing the reader in a community of ghosts, in a phenomenological experience of spectrality that confounds perception, identity, and history. Rulfo injects the everyday or the familiar with an omnipresence of death in order to reveal the relationship between inheritance (memory, filiations), the perversion of social organization and history, and the spectral voice of the New World subaltern.

The disorientation that the characters and readers alike feel is due to the fact that we, from the very outset of the novel, are aware that a series of secrets exist even though we don't know what those secrets are. Juan Rulfo described his novel privileging the structuring force of silence: "The practice of writing the short stories disciplined me and made me see the need to disappear and to leave my characters the freedom to talk at will, which provoked, it would seem, a lack of structure. Yes, there is a structure in *Pedro Páramo*, but it is a structure made of silences, of hanging threads, of cut scenes, where everything occurs in a simultaneous time which is a no-time."[12] Isn't this "no-time" the secret time of spectrality? Pedro Páramo is represented as a public figure known most intensely by the weighty secrets and "silences" he carries. The text begins with a traumatic event, the death of Juan's mother, which submerges the Juan and the reader into a sphere where the gap between life and death are untranslatable, increasing the levels of anxiety, fear, and frustration. This however is only the beginning of what Rulfo calls "a lack of structure." The quest of the novel does not bring us to a finding, a clarity, an epiphany, but to greater states of confusion and disarray. It is as if the more he

[12] Juan Rulfo, Foreword to *Pedro Paramo*, viii. The foreword written by Susan Sontag.

searches for his father and the origins he represents, the more his identity disappears and disintegrates leaving him with "hanging threads" and "cut scenes" of reality. The crisis lies in the relational disjunction between a transparent language of the living and the opaque narratives of a stranger, a dictatorial father, and the haunting death through which we must come to know them. For Rulfo the search for the intimate stranger, his father is omnipresent and impossible to access, unwittingly leading to a complex post-colonial understanding, a "contradictory omen" to use Kamau Braithwaite's phrase, of our own ghostly state, rendering life an after-life of itself. This "no-time" is the time of a hemisphere haunted by a lack of domesticity and the presence of the foreigner. Derrida argues, "First suggestion: haunting is historical, to be sure, but it is not *dated*, it is never docilely given a date in the chain of presents, day after day, according to the instituted order of a calendar. Untimely, it does not come to, it does not happen to, it does not befall, one day": the Americas "had begun to suffer from a certain evil, to let itself be inhabited in its inside, that is, haunted by a foreign guest…The ghostly would displace itself like the movement of this history. Haunting would mark the very existence…" of the New World.

This sense of the ghost or death as an intimate "social figure"[13] as Avery Gordon puts it, of history and the everyday, of the presence of a dead stranger, is also evident in M. Night Shyamalan's popular movie *The Sixth Sense*. The film, like *Pedro Paramo*, begins with a hermeneutic crisis, a dissolving of the hard kernel of institutional knowledge in favor of a less obvious yet omnipresent spectrality. Interestingly, the opening shot starts in a dimly lit basement and the camera moves towards the light bulb, stopping there before gently proceeding upstairs where a couple, Malcom Crowe and his wife Anna,

[13] Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 3-28.

celebrate an award Malcolm has won for psychologist of the year. The division between basement and upstairs, between death and institutional knowledge, collapse when the couple move up to their bedroom and find a naked man standing in the bathroom. The man, a former patient of Malcolm's, accuses the psychologist of failing him. After a futile exchange the man shoots Malcolm dead. What is important here is nothing in this scene, as in *Pedro Paramo*, suggests this murderous outcome. Moreover, neither Malcolm nor the viewer realizes he is dead until the end of the movie. The uncanny surprise for the viewer is that we follow this spectral figure throughout the film, assuming a relationship to him as a live protagonist. The hermeneutic failure Malcolm experiences to begin the movie, the view experiences at the end, for we realize that our ability to recognize life and death is compromised. Death intrudes on the pretensions of canonical knowledge.

Malcolm, with the help of a little boy (Cole), also haunted by the dead, spends the rest of the film trying to understand his relationship to the specters that surround them, the city, and, in a historical sense, the country. Significantly, the movie set in Philadelphia, merges the promises of freedom, and the violent Real of history, symbolized from the very beginning by the levels of knowledge and experience in Malcolm's house – the hidden and underground presences of his basement; the hyper-visible life of the main floor; and its manifestation in the Real of his bedroom. History is located through the personal and social, through the traumatic connection that Cole has to his community who treat him like a "freak" and his broken family (he is the child of a single parent). Ultimately, what Malcom and Cole discover together is that the dead live, that they speak, and their injunction on the living is that we listen. The demand of

the dead is that a sixth sense, an extra-visionary capacity, be opened to the wounds of history, and a spectral voice that thus emerges. As Cathy Caruth's analysis of Tasso's romantic epic *Gerusalemme Liberata* argues, "For what seems to me particularly striking in the example of Tasso is not just the unconscious acto of the infliction of the injury and its inadvertent and unwished-for repetition, but the moving and sorrowful voice that cries out, a voice that is paradoxically released through the wound. Tancred does not only repeat his act but, in repeating it, he for the first time hears a voice that cries out to him to see what he has done. The voice of his beloved addresses him and, in his address, bears witness to the past he has unwittingly repeated. Tancred's story thus represents traumatic experience not only as the enigma of a human agent's repeated and unknowing acts but also as the enigma of the otherness of a human voice that cries out from the wound, a voice that witnesses a truth that Tancred himself cannot fully know."[14] The spectral voice emerging from the wounds of race and history, I want to argue, articulate themselves in New World fiction.

I want to suggest here that for Transamerican artists, fiction becomes the site where we go to listen and commune with ghosts, extracting unfathomable understandings of our personal, social, and historical identities. This dissertation examines the specter as the exemplary figure the post-colonial subject must confront, imagine, and become intimate with. The specter emerges from the ashes and scars of forgetting, which an obscured memory, guided by the imagination, reconfigures into an identity of the future. The writers I will examine in this dissertation work through the traumas of these forgotten memories in order to establish an Othered knowledge, a difficult process of reconstituting

[14] Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, 2-3.

the presence of difference. What results is a revelatory relationality between individual stories, historical fragments, and collective futures.

Reading the Disfigured Face

The first Chapter of this dissertation will analyze the spectral dimensions of the face in *Down These Mean Streets*. What does it mean to read a face? Moreover, what does a living, breathing face have to do with spectrality? By examining the exteriority of the face as a trope of spectrality, I move the ghost from the unknown outside to the most immediate bodily signifier: the face of the racialized/street other. Interestingly, the spectral quality of Thomas' fiction is rarely discussed in the many critical assessments of his work. The emphasis on the text's realism, rather than the spectral dimensions of the racialized Real, overlooks the abstracted and phantasmatic quality Piri's face takes on. As Freud argues in "The Uncanny" the other may be "novel" but this does not guarantee that he will have an uncanny effect. He explains: "Something must be added to the novel and unfamiliar if it is to become uncanny."[15] The something "added" I argue is race and the strangely familiar quality of blackness Piri encounters in the United States.

A post-colonial subject emerges, ethically and imaginatively, I argue from the spectral effects of poverty and race. My reading of Thomas begins with the ethical responsibility demanded by the face of the other. What is fascinating about Thomas' use of the face is it becomes, the more the novel looks at it, a feature that changes shapes, dissolves, and spills out in uncontrollable ways, losing its corporeal integrity. The form of the body is obliterated with every racial confrontation it experiences and the agonizing fact of its blackness gives it its spectral dimension. For Thomas, Blackness becomes an

[15] Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny," 125.

embodied ghostliness: a being symbolically obliterated by the violent effects of deliberate social exclusions. It is in this process of socialization that the Black face/body becomes spectral, losing, as Fanon puts it, its "ontological resistance."(110). Ultimately, however, Thomas' text negotiates this racial pressure through a principle of *defacement* as a more "just" and dynamic conception of racial being. For Michael Taussig, defacement is revelatory, releasing "surplus flows of energy" in a "labor of the negative", oscillating between destruction, appearance, and knowledge.(1) *Down These Mean Streets* enacts a willful exteriorization which radically explodes the social logic of race threatening to ontologically confine Piri. Blackness, the spectral element of the text, returns to suggest a negative labor whose presence exhibits itself in the form of a novel.

The second chapter explores the emergence of a spectral presence in rage and disfigurement in Junot Díaz's acclaimed book of short stories, *Drown* and Pulitzer Prize winning novel *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. In *Drown* the field of appearance also centers on the notion of a New World curse. For Díaz the subject is embroiled in the hemispheric damage that reflects their own psychic, social, and economic states. In his short story "Ysrael" Diaz attempts to translate the hauntological scars of the face into a language of identity. Jacques Derrida argues in *Specters of Marx* the ghost not only haunts us, but we also hunt it in search of a "singularity of a place of speech, of a place of experience, and of a link of filiation, places and links from which alone one may address oneself to the ghost."[16] Part of what Díaz's fiction hunts is a ghostliness, a spectral curse, which reveals a state of colonial deformation. In this sense the ghost is a figure with whom an encounter will provide profane insights and allow, through fiction, a counter-curse, or zafa, to be established.

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[16] Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 12.

Interestingly, one of Walter Benjamin's exemplary "types of illuminati" is the loiterer, in Díaz a street kid abandoned by his father, and as his economic status shows, by society, leaving him aimlessly walking around the country sides of the Dominican Republic and the east coast urban areas of New York and New Jersey. Yet the loiterers/hunters in Díaz are not scholars but children of working class migrants attempting to adjust to the traumatic circumstances of capital they find themselves in, looking for identificatory and systemic answers in the disfigured face of a neighborhood child; or in Beli and Oscar Wao's case, in the transcendent properties of rage and love. The disfigured identities of Diaz's characters, in *Drown* and *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, bind the community in an abject embrace. In *Drown* the traumatically historical specter of this curse pervades all of his enraged characters, forcing the reader into an uncomfortable identificatory relation with the post-colonial subject as demon and ghost. Taussig explains that defacement, like the specter, "catches us unawares and can only be known unexpectedly, complicit with the violence of daily life."(57). In *Drown* and *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, a Calibanian voice is forged from this exposure to daily violence learning to curse and deface the different forms of colonial society through a narrative fire of aggressive realism. Defacement becomes the creative process that breaks through the symbolic surfaces in order to generate spectral encounters with unexpected and subjugated knowledges.

The Abyss, the Archive, and the Wounds of History

My third and fourth Chapters consist of an examination of two canonical New World texts: Derek Walcott's epic poem *Omeros*; and Toni Morrison's Pultizer Prize winning

novel *Beloved*. Each work takes a different textual route to arrive at a fictional analysis of the slave and his/her aftermath. For Walcott, the Homeric epic is an oceanic genre that allows for a poetic and historical portrayal of the impossible memories of the Black Atlantic. The slave past is conjured through an extra-visionary poetics, an imaginative submersion into what Glissant has called the abyss. Glissant's "dimensionless" notion of the abyss is integral to my reading of Walcott for it describes the process of Transatlantic enslavement and the aesthetic necessity that was born "inside and outside" that experience. As Glissant puts it, as if describing Walcott's epic project: "You still preserve on your crests the silent boat of our births, your chasms are our own unconscious, furrowed with fugitive memories. Then you lay out these new shores, where we hook our tar-stretched wounds, our reddened mouths and stifled outcries."[17] "Peoples of the sea", to use Antonio Benitez-Rojo's rhythmic phrase, is the imaginary starting point for Walcott: mnemonic crests that mark the birth of a wounded and creolized community. Philoctete's suppurating wound is the bodily manifestation of an unfathomable history preserved and explored by a poetic imagination. A wondrous woundedness, as I will call it, emerges from a fraught relationship with the abyss, begetting a creative speakability that historically howls from the barely audible depths of "reddened mouths and stifled outcries." From this abyss and its poetic outcry comes an alternative philosophy of the archive, a radiant recognition that the sea, as Walcott puts it, is history.

From Walcott's epic I move to Morrison's novel *Beloved* (ch.4) which was inspired, in contrast, by a quotidian newspaper article narrating a runaway slave mother's murder of her daughter before their capture and return into slavery. It is the story of a decision -

[17] Edouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 7.

simple, exemplary, and momentous - regarding the maternal ethics of a slave and her relationship to history and memory. My chapter examines the ways in which Morrison presents a haunted notion of the body, the home, and history, through a spectral logic whose alternative presence is a feverish contamination of the official accounts of (Plantation) History. Sethe's haunted house functions as a "spiteful" redoubling of the houses of culture – plantation house, white house, court house – while also acting as the setting for a future beyond slavery. Derrida reminds us in *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, that the archive is etymologically linked to the house (*arkhieon*), the law, and guardian (archon).[18] In *Beloved* a fictional memory and history is created in order to revise an insufficient account of slavery recorded in court documents, white newspapers, and historical archives. The imagination, for Morrison, makes visible hidden narratives instituting a new historical vocabulary and shifting our historical focus to fiction as the meeting place for ghosts. Sethe's disfigured back, a scar so elaborate it is reminiscent of a tree, suggests a traumatic genealogy whose content can only be deciphered imaginatively. The body, for Morrison, stands in as a testimonial artifact, a corrective to history. In the end, I show how her well known idea of literary imag(in)ing, "unspeakable things unspoken," suggests a haunted mode of recuperating the past. It is in imaginative darkness that we are most receptive to ghosts and the harrowing stories they bring. This chapter attempts to answer the following questions: How does *Beloved* link the wound, imaginative memory, and the New World archive? What are the philosophical, historical and psychic consequences of such a fictional move?

In the end, the specter forces the recognition of a hidden and unarticulated presence that pressures us into unorthodox understanding of reality. New World fiction uses a

[18] Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 1-3.

language of spectral transmission, making visible and audible, those identities expulsed from the archives in order to justify the boundaries of power. As Avery Gordon puts it: "What's distinctive about haunting is that it is an animated state in which a repressed or unresolved social violence is making itself known, sometimes very directly, sometimes obliquely. I used the term *haunting* to describe those singular yet repetitive instances when home becomes unfamiliar, when your bearings on the world lose direction, when the over-and-done-with comes alive, when what's been in your blind spot comes into view."[19] What does the ghost teach us? It exhorts us to look out for strangers in our midst, for that social figure who disrupts your "bearings on the world" and thus precipitates an ontological change or epistemological loss of "direction." For the stranger suggests not only distance, but an intimacy with death and the past we are reluctant to recognize. However, the logic of haunting does not function through structure or invitation, but through an "animated state," signaling something, an "unresolved" violence of some kind that makes "itself known" throwing into flux our sense of ourselves, our history, and the future to come.

[19] *Avery Gordon, Ghostly Matters, xvi.*

CHAPTER ONE

SPECTRAL DIMENSIONS OF THE FACE IN PIRI THOMAS' *DOWN THESE MEAN STREETS*

The Emerging U.S. Latino "I"

In U.S. Latino street literature[20] the face serves as the fleshy threshold of identity exposing extreme limits of form and being. For the U.S. Latino/a writer the simultaneous surface and depth of the face places opposing social realities into a relational interplay, allowing, through narrative, access to strange secrets of identity. The narrative desire is not only for a representation of a face, a complete form, unequivocally present, as is often the case with traditional quest narratives that attempt to establish a clearly identifiable subject. Instead, the U.S. Latino/a writer explores the complexities of the subject via a transgressive act of defacement, the breaking, broken face that reveals in its fissures flashes of inassimilable difference. For the simple contours of the face, the U.S. Latino/a writer recognizes, are charged with elaborate undercurrents, forming a thematic depth bursting with a "built-in" desire, as Taussig argues, to be paradoxically "violated, without which they are gapingly incomplete."[21] This act of defacement then is a creative violation of social forms and constructs unleashing animate forces, filling the atmosphere with new aesthetic configurations and social possibilities. Defacement, I contend, is the overriding impulse in U.S. Latino/a literature. *Down These Mean Streets*, the subject of this essay,

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[20] This essay will examine Piri Thomas' *Down These Mean Streets* (New York: Vintage Books [Random House], 1997, 1967). Hereafter all quotations of this text will be directly followed by its page number.

[21] Michael Taussig, *Defacement*, 43. This is the paradox of a logic of form. The face or form is incomplete according to Taussig until it has been broken, allowing incased meanings to emerge.

unabashedly explores the negative intricacy of these currents or traces imaginatively moving through their entangled routes and breaking facades of established or stereotyped identities. The result is to plumb, through auto/fiction, the racial unconscious of Piri's social experience.

If, as I will argue, the project of U.S. Latino street literature is to recompose a shattered face or, in Anzaldua's sense, make faces,[22] then this process of inscription must begin by taking into account a productive relation to the face of the other. The "I" of a narrative emerges in relation to a real and symbolic other that haunts U.S. Latinos throughout their texts. In Thomas that other is a whiteness whose familial and societal potency forces Piri into a creative reevaluation of his face/race/being. His hermeneutic crisis is not just, as Lisa Sánchez González has it, a trouble of "articulation."[23] For as Michelle Cliff reminds us in "A Journey into Speech:" to speak fluently is not equivalent to a deeper capacity to "reveal."[24] This revelatory capacity, I will argue, suggests a subtle attunement to spectrality. Piri's crisis then goes beyond articulation, to an ineffable ontological negotiation regarding the social and psychic difference indelibly marked by his Blackness.

For Thomas defacement becomes more than just an act of violence or self-destruction, it is a revisionary tactic, impelled by the trauma of exclusion and the visceral need to find in the rubble of the ghetto, signs of the self. For Toni Morrison, as we will

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[22] Gloria Anzaldua, editor. *Making Face, Making Soul Haciendo Caras*, xv-xxviii.

[23] Lisa Sanchez Gonzalez, *Boricua Literature*, 107-119. Articulation is one component in Thomas' fictional project that is preoccupied, in a larger sense, with Afro-Latino being. While the face is concerned with speech it also takes into account a series of differing internal/external aspects of identity.

[24] Michelle Cliff, "A Journey into Speech," 57.

see in Chapter 4, this exploratory process is archeological. In Thomas, conversely, narrative defacement explodes social surfaces that effectively hide and naturalize the abject conditions of race. Provoked by the antinomies of otherness, defacement discharges traumatic intensities that have accumulated in/on the body. Through rage, for instance, it expresses a desire to be recognized. This is established in the novel's prologue: "Hey, World – here I am. Hallo, World – this is Piri…I got a feeling of aloneness and a bitterness that's growing and growing day by day into some kind of hate without *un nombre*."(ix-x). This greeting, "Hallo, World" screamed at night from a "rooftop" "to anybody" who could hear him and to no one in particular, takes on a hallucinatory feeling, as if to highlight the fantasmatic character of the disregarded other. The marginalized Thomas is reminiscent of the similarly alienated protagonist of Ralph Ellison's *Inivisible Man,* written twenty years before, 1947,[25] whose novel begins in an amply lit basement. However, while the basement in the *Invisible Man* stands for a symbolic entombment, a solitary space of social death; in Thomas the roof signifies an active need to be recognized, its location both hiding and exposing Piri. The disillusioned Invisible Man relocates to the basement in order to cut off all communication with the outside world. Thomas' "Hallo," conversely, is a demand to be recognized, stemming from what Derrida has called an "anxiety of interruption", a fear of "the silence or disappearance, the 'without-response,' of the other, to whom he called out and held on with an 'allo, allo'…"[26] This "infinite interruption where the face appears"[27] is for Thomas an intolerable separation eliciting, by its violent neglect, a hatred in return.

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[25] Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*.

The negating "hate without *un nombre*" is the spectral precursor to Thomas' aesthetics/ethics of defacement. Piri understands that finding or exteriorizing a name for hate opens alternative pathways to self-understanding. Defacement is the result of this socially activated hate. Its energy does not serve to erase the street subject, rather it breaks the prohibitions arbitrarily placed on it by narratives of race. Defacement then, as a relational strategy, as a process of revelation, forces contact that, as Homi Bhabha puts it, menaces the coherence of the symbolic subject. For Bhabha the colonial and racial subject is rendered partial, incomplete, and virtual. Missing its mimetic mark blackness inexorably falls short, "almost the same but not quite" which, as Piri comes to understand, is code for "almost the same but not white." Piri's narrative illustrates the contestatory engagement provoked by the presence of the "'inappropriate' colonial subject" since his "partial presence" enacts a "doubling" which "articulates those disturbances of cultural, racial and historical difference that menace the narcissistic demand of colonial authority."[28] This menace is carried out, in Thomas' text, through an act of defacement wherein a new version of an "I" emerges. The question becomes what kind of story is possible when the "I" is un-welcomed by the other? Is hospitality a precondition to this telling?

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[26] Jacques Derrida, *Adieu: To Emmanuel Levinas*, 9. Derrida is referring here to a conversation he had with Levinas on the telephone and he notes Levinas' "fear of being cut off." This anxiety is clearly part of the struggle for recognition found in Thomas' narrative.

[27] Ibid, 9.

[28] Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 88. For a more in depth discussion of mimesis in U.S. Latino/a Literature see Lyn DiIorio Sandin's *Killing Spanish: Literary Essays on Ambivalent U.S. Latino/a Identity* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).

The U.S. Latino "I" constructs its story from a series of social injuries. In U.S. Latino street literature, the first person narrator blurs the narrative distinction between an external realism that describes a story as it "happened," and a spectral interiority which attempts to make sense, however awkwardly, of the injurious conditions of those exterior experiences. The result is a tension, damaging and dynamic, as the "I" finds itself unable to translate a logic of identity imposed from the external world. The initial reaction to injury is to move inwards: "Yee-ah! I feel like part of the shadows that make company for me in this warm *amigo* darkness."(ix). Interiority allows the "I" to hide from an aggressively rejecting reality; this painful withdrawal into the safety of its alienated body creates a distance from which the "I" is able to contemplate the implications of these violent encounters. Consequently, the first person narrator shuttles in and out, from a hostile exterior to a safe and analytical inside, attempting to make sense of his place in the social. "And I begin to listen to the sounds inside me. *Get angry, get hating angry, and you won't be scared. What have you got now? Nothing. What will you ever have? Nothing...unless you cop for yourself!*"(x).

It is in this violent exchange between self and other, outside and inside, that the "I" reworks a story of itself. What is important here is how the "I" comes to develop and respond as a result of the questioning presence of the other. As Judith Butler explains: "If I give an account of myself in response to such a query, I am implicated in a relation to the other before whom and to whom I speak. Thus, I come into being as a reflexive subject in the context of establishing a narrative account of myself when I am spoken to by someone and prompted to address myself to the one who addresses me."[29] Integral to

[29] Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 15.

Butler's understanding of the beginning of self-narration is a catalytic relationship to another. U.S Latino/a narrative, following Butler's logic, can be characterized as the story of these estranging and familiarizing face to faces that elicit an imaginative rejoinder -- a full blown exteriorization in the form of fiction -- to a disturbing set of social interactions.

Piri Thomas' *Down These Mean Streets* is the imaginative rejoinder that this chapter centers on. Imperative to his work is a fictional sensitivity to the face, from which this "I" symbolically materializes, that allows Thomas to access an alternative or triple consciousness,[30] to use Juan Flores's provocative phrase, a language of identity that pierces through arbitrary social norms. The intensely marginalized presence of the characters in this fiction calls attention to an ethical and ontological crisis that becomes, paradoxically, an enabling dimension, opening up creative options for the exterior/interior growth of the U.S. Latino "I." As Levinas puts it: "The face resists possession, resists my powers. In its epiphany, in expression, the sensible, still graspable, turns into total resistance to the grasp. This mutation can occur only by the opening of a new dimension."[31] U.S. Latino literature is epiphanic precisely because it adumbrates a mutating, cracked face that resists the other's possession. Starting with a reading of Piri Thomas, this essay examines the fictional use of the face -- its recompostion -- as a site of ontological negotiation wherein an "I" willfully presents itself. This willful act of exteriorization, as Thomas' text shows, is a process fraught with social and psychic

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[30] Juan Flores' "Triple-Consciousness? Afro-Latinos on the Color Line" was a talk given at the Opening Roundtable of "100 Years of W.E.B. Dubois' The Souls of Black Folk," held at Michigan State University, April 2, 2003.

[31] Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 197.

struggles. *Down These Mean Streets* maps through the face, splintered, broken and remade, the assorted conflicts Piri must confront in order to be born as a social subject. The novel, in its most powerful sense, stands in narrative testimony to the persistence of Afro-Latino self-creation.

Exteriorizing Blackness

Down these Mean Streets begins with what seems to be an innocuous scene: a "tired and sleepy"(3) father, who works nights and sleeps during the day, beats his restless son for knocking over a jar of coffee and a toaster in the kitchen, waking him up. The quotidian nature of this opening scene inaugurates a deeper problem regarding race and its externalization. I want, before moving forward, to make a theoretical distinction between appearance, which Fanon maintains, over-determines blackness from without,[32] rendering it a fixed surface, a monstrous object; and *exteriorization*, as fictionally portrayed in Thomas, an active, combative, and expressive manifestation of a racial self. My reading of Thomas will focus on the latter as a process of defacement. Defacement in *Down These Mean Streets* goes beyond Fanon's racial deadlock of a fixed surface, not by moving away from these charged surfaces, frozen into social stereotypes, but by emphasizing an active externality whose complex potential is tapped, deformed, and released in moments of contact. Piri makes clear in the prologue of the novel that his explicit intention is to announce his presence -- "I wanna tell ya I'm here" -- and to assert his place as a subject -- "I want recognition."(xi). This scene between father and son is

[32] Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 116.

the first, and most primal, of a series of symbolic roadblocks prohibiting Piri's desire to openly assert himself as an Afro-Latino subject.

It is interesting to think of Slajov Zizek's suggestion in *The Plague of Fantasies*: "The Unconscious is outside, not hidden in any unfathomable depths or, to quote the X files motto: 'The truth is out there.'"[33] For Zizek a hermeneutic emphasis on "material externality" reveals "the inherent antagonisms of an ideological edifice."[34] How does this familial scene between father and son instigate such a reading? Are the objects in Piri's kitchen charged with unconscious and ideological meanings? Thomas describes the emotional episode:

> I could feel my mouth making the motions of wanting to say something in my defense. Of how it wasn't my fault that Jose had almost knocked the toaster off the table, and how I had tried to save it from falling, and in trying had finished knocking it to the floor along with a large jar of black coffee. But I just couldn't get the words out. Poppa just stood there, eyes swollen and hurting from too much work, looking at a river of black coffee. He didn't give me a chance. Even before the first burning slap of his belt awakened tears of pain, I was still trying to get words out that would make everything all right again. The second whap of the belt brought words of pain to my lips, and my blind running retreat was a mixture of tears and "I hate you."(3-4).

The accident described is sparked by Jose, Piri's white brother, who in knocking over a toaster, precipitates Piri's futile attempt to "save it from falling," and instead knocks over a "large jar of black coffee" that spreads over the kitchen floor like a "river." While Piri's father's immediate response is due to his fatigue and the "racket"(3) that interrupts his sleep, the more complex antagonisms involve an unconscious reaction to the noise or

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[33] Slavoj Zizek, *Plague of Fantasies*, 3.

[34] Ibid, 3.

co-motion[35] of blackness. The "material externality," a toaster, which darkens bread and a jar that contains black coffee, symbolically reinforce the omnipresent character of blackness, as well as its controlled placement on the kitchen "table," in the family, and in the culture at large. Significantly, the crisis is caused by the literal spilling out of a concealed blackness (coffee) that covers the kitchen floor expressing an undeniable racial presence struggling to display itself. The excess of blackness disturbs the father out of his own racialized sleep. He beats Piri, therefore, in order to reestablish a racial edict: blackness is to stay politely jarred. It is important to a logic of race that the darker skinned Piri, not his white brother who is neither beaten nor reprimanded, absorb the unspoken lesson. Consequently, the novel's opening must be understood as a primal scene, much the way the beating of Aunt Hester in Fredrick Douglass' autobiography inaugurates him to the violence of slavery. Thomas' kitchen scene is a modernized version with the white master being exchanged for the black father as the arbiter of racial conduct. Unlike the beating of Aunt Hester, in Thomas the beating takes on a quotidian feel: yet, both scenes dramatize the origin of the New World subject by illustrating, through violence, that blackness is socially mandated to conceal itself.[36]

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[35] Lisa Sanchez Gonzalez, *Boricua Literature,* 13. Gonzalez refers to the co-motion of Latino music as an epi-phenomenal diasporic sensibility.

[36] Saidya Hartman, *Scences of Subjection*, 3. Hartman begins her provocative text with a reading of Douglass that echoes the way I am thinking of Thomas' kitchen scene. The difference is the scene in Thomas is, at first glance, a mundane occurrence. However, as we read, it becomes clear this scene is pregnant with deeper ontological undercurrents. Hartman's reading of Douglass sheds light on the primal quality of the kitchen scene in Thomas. She writes, "The 'terrible spectacle' that introduced Fredrick Douglass to slavery was the beating of his Aunt Hester. It is one of the most well-known scenes of torture in the literature of slavery, perhaps second only to Uncle Tom's murder at the hand of Simon Legree. By locating this 'horrible exhibition' in the first chapter of his 1845 *Narrative of the Life of Fredrick Douglass*, Douglass establishes the centrality of violence to the making of the slave and identifies it as an original generative act equivalent to the statement 'I was born.' The passage through the blood-stained gate is an

The absence of his white mother from the scene further highlights the authority of whiteness. The power of her whiteness is evident by the feminine location of the dispute, making her absence all the more pronounced. Blackness, emblematized by father and son, is brought face to face, marking a race in conflict with itself. According to the beating then, blackness is disciplined into social confinement, literally beat in. The result, as the title of the chapter suggests, is a blackness that is cut out, castrated, and, as insinuated by the motherless kitchen, feminized.[37] The repressive punishment pays instant dividends: Piri is unable to compose an explanation, to "get the words out that would make everything all right" or white "again." Piri is left with a "hate" "awakened" by the "burning slap" eliciting a different liquid response, "tears of pain." As Aristotle argues in *Ethics*, this rage can be thought of as a response aroused by "apparent injustice,"[38] while keeping in mind the "ideological edifice" that Piri will spend the rest of the novel trying to translate and creatively move against. How is this rage in search of justice, an anger that must be, at least to begin with, directed against the father?

Freud's 1909 case study on a patient he referred to as the "Rat Man" serves as a provocative analogy to Thomas's father and son conflict. The case describes a father who beats his son for an indiscretion. The angry son, unable to curse because "he had no bad language," responds nonetheless by calling his father "all the names of common

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inaugural moment in the formation of the enslaved. In this regard, it is a primal scene. By this I mean that the terrible spectacle dramatizes the origin of the subject and demonstrates that to be a slave is to be under the brutal power and authority of another; this is confirmed by the event's placement in the opening chapter on genealogy."

[37] For an excellent discussion on the feminization of race see Daniel Boyarin's "What Does a Jew Want?; or, The Political Meaning of the Phallus."

[38] Aristotle, *The Nichomachean Ethics*, 127.

objects he could think of," such as: "You lamp, you towel, you plate!"[39] Among other long-term effects, Freud notes that the Rat Man subsequently became fearful of any expression of rage, so important, as we have seen in Aristotle, to the recognition and response of injustice. Patricia Gherovici suggests that such a naming of his father transmogrifies him into "inanimate objects."[40]

The parallels to Piri's scene (the Black Man) are striking. The inanimate objects in Piri's kitchen are the toaster, coffee jar and table that contain the restricted blackness. For Fanon the fact or face of blackness is caught in this process of objectification: "I came into the world imbued with the will to find a meaning in things, my spirit filled with the desire to attain to the source of the world, and then I found that I was an object in the midst of other objects."[41] Racial translation, Fanon observes, is from human to object. Piri's father has internalized this practice, standing guard against the tipping over of a racial identity that has been, if you will, neatly objectified and organized in his wife's kitchen. Piri, who like the Rat Man is outraged by his beating, has yet to learn how to curse and can only utter an inaudible "I hate you." The predicament Piri faces is to develop the ontological language that will allow him to recognize and combat the racially hidden transcripts lodged in these scenes of objectification.

Piri then attempts to punish and recover his father by leaving the apartment and roaming the streets, hoping his father will suffer because of his absence. It is interesting to remember that hysteria, the subject of Gherovici's analysis, has been called by

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[39] Sigmund Freud, "Note upon a Case of Obsessional Neurosis (The 'Ratman')", Standard Edition, 1909, 10:205-206.

[40] Patricia Gherovici, *The Puerto Rican Syndrome*, 97.

[41] Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 109.

psychoanalysts the wandering womb. Perhaps, in this vein, the hysteria and rage of blackness can be characterized as a wandering face in search of justice, in search of its own affirmation, and hungry, as the kitchen indicates, for social acceptance. Indeed, Michael Taussig, following Freud, speaks of the inextricable connection between the domestic, the genitalia, and the face, arguing that this strange interconnection is "an ineffable fusion of surges so conflicting and contradictory that they overburden language...."[42] Piri's muteness in this grounding scene is, in part, attributable to his youthful inability to understand the symbolic relation of the three, that is, the rules of racial recognition. This is why Piri poignantly asks himself: "Pops, how come me and you is always on the outs? Is it something we don't know nothing about?"(1). Clearly, Piri's question suggests an ontological overburdening and confusion, a disjunction between a surface reasoning, a father who beats his son for waking him, and a deeper, unspoken knowledge hidden in the symbolic objects cited for the conflict. Is this question of concealed knowledge precisely why Piri's mother is absent from this opening scene? Does she represent the figure whose whiteness adds to the face value of her husband, a black skin jarred in white masks? The political submerged under a sign of cultural coupling?

In Antonio Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks*, he warns against "political questions which are disguised as cultural ones."[43] Similarly, in Thomas, the domestic, which is metonymic of the cultural, veils the political dimensions of race. Is there an outside market force or political unconscious that drives this scene? This disciplinary episode between father and

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[42] *Michael Taussig, Defacement, 50.*

[43] *Antonio Gramsci, Selections from the Prison Notebooks, 149.*

son is clearly a repetition of what the father faces at work everyday. For Thomas, class and race are tightly intertwined. Notably, the father in this scene, and throughout the text, is overworked to the point of exhaustion: "I work my ass off and can't even sleep when I get home."(3). Work and sleep combine as an anesthetic to racial consciousness, numbing the trauma of Black labor's marginality. As Fred Moten put it, "The individual, enslaved laborer is characterized as use-value that, in the field of capitalist production, is equivalent to no-value, which is to say operative outside of exchange."[44] This beating then is triggered by and repeats the daily abuse Piri's Afro-Latino father suffers in his jobs, in U.S. society, and throughout the Americas. To use Juan Flores' powerful phrase, he is socially diminished ("operative outside exchange") into a lowercase person.[45]

Clearly, Piri's father marries a white Latina not just because of their cultural affinities, but because of the value inscribed in their racial difference. The ideological sway of difference is crucial for the father, since it is in difference that one becomes painfully aware of the distance between the social ideal and our own real and abject positions. Her whiteness draws him symbolically closer to this racial/class ideal. As Zizek argues: "The lesson is therefore clear: an ideological identification exerts a true hold on us precisely when we maintain an awareness that we are not fully identical to it…."[46] What is important here is to recognize how blackness, in Thomas' text, is ideologically enmeshed with psychic, social, and economic value. Interestingly, Gherovici points out that the Rat Man's father married a woman who was considerably wealthier than he. She explains: "According to the family romance of the Rat Man's

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[44] *Fred Moten, In the Break, 17.*

[45] *Juan Flores, From Bomba to Hip Hop, 180-188.*

[46] *Slavoj Zizek, Plague of Fantasies, 21.*

lineage, the father had married for money and not love; he had sold on his desire and was unworthy of her love. Because of the mother's deprecation of his father's desire…, the Rat Man found that this father had nothing worth appropriating."[47] The father's strength and "worth" are made proper by the social power of his mother. For the Rat Man then, his father is not a model "worth appropriating" since his value is strategically supplemented by his mother's wealth. The curses the Rat Man hurls at his father describe his commodification.

Black objectification is relieved, in Piri's father's eyes, by its relationship to whiteness. Whiteness here functions psychoanalytically as the outward manifestation of the symbolic, and in a Marxist sense as a signifier of the highest value. Thus, whiteness itself exudes the mysterious power of the commodity, while, conversely, the commodity aspires to whiteness as the ideal of itself. This is why Fanon argues that blackness is "sealed" into objecthood.[48] He recognizes that the power of an object is located in its psychic relationship to economic value, but only as an oblique reference to the value already established in human value. The object or commodity then must, in order to have value, be tied, in an overdetermined way to whiteness. Herein lies the traumatic mystery of the object or commodity. For in its shimmering thingness, in its socially inscribed impact on the senses, in its unanticipated connection to traumatic identity, the commodity metonymically reflects the ideological ideal of whiteness.[49] The object, racially coded,

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[47] *Patricia Gherovici, The Puerto Rican Syndrome, 100.*

[48] *Frantz Fanon, Black Skin, White Masks, 109.*

[49] Is this, in part, why so many men of color who acquire wealth disproportionately marry white women? After attaining the objects of wealth – money, houses, cars – a (objectified) white woman is required as the final and ultimate ingredient of validation. Which is to say, whiteness itself, sits at the ontological core of all commodities. Fanon, in his chapter entitled "The Man of

stands, in a spectral way, for the human. As Marx puts it, "It is nothing but the definite social relation between men themselves which assumes here, for them, the fantastic form of a relation between things."[50] And I would add too, between races. Piri's white mother, who spends much of the novel trying to get Piri to "act like people," to be passive, polite, and non-threatening, clearly is, for Piri and his father, the parent-laden with value, for she possesses the "fantastic form" of whiteness.(18-19).

The father's model of self-abnegation, however, becomes an impossible position for the young Piri to occupy. If to appropriate whiteness means to make proper or clean, or to make one's own (property), then Piri rejects his father's terms of racial adaptation. He refuses to swallow or internalize his own blackness understanding the toxic consequences, for coffee in this scene is literally **dirty water**, an ontology stained and blackened by racial difference. Rather, he assertively develops and exteriorizes his Afro-Latino identity. *Down These Mean Streets* is the imaginative staging of these identificatory antagonisms, a fiction as defacement that enables the exteriorization of unspoken social secrets. As Taussig puts it, "truth is not a matter of exposure which destroys the secret, but a revelation which does justice to it."[51] The broken jar is Piri's

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Color and the White Woman," describes this fetishizing rationale: "By loving me she proves that I am worthy of white love. I am loved like a white man…I marry white culture, white beauty, white whiteness." Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 63. Malcolm X, moreover, dramatically sums up this logic of value when he rhetorically asks: you know what they call a black man with a Ph.D? His answer delves directly to the traumatic kernel of race: "a nigger!" In a different way comedian Chris Rock comes to the same conclusion of value and race when he jokes that even the poorest white man in the audience would not trade places with him despite the fact he is "rich!" This suggests that Rock recognizes his "wealth" is still superseded, in a racial economy and imaginary, by whiteness. Defacing such a logic consists, as Malcolm X, Chris Rock and Piri Thomas demonstrate, in calling it out, bringing it to the sur-face in order to shatter its artificial image and equilibrium.

[50] Karl Marx, *Capital Volume I*, 165.
[51] Michael Taussig*, Defacement,* 2.

first act of defacement in the novel. Yet he acts, we must remember, with a certain ambivalence: his initial response is to save the jar and toaster from falling. What the young Piri comes away with, however, is the uncanny knowledge that the externalization of blackness (through defacement) is a revelation, which will lead him to a deeper understanding of himself, allowing him to set the terms of his own value in society.

Dirty Waters: Dead Faces

In *Down These Mean Streets* dirty water is the symbolic substance of identity that pervades the text, and in no scene is the toxic consequences of its forced internalization more evident than in the chapter entitled "Playing It Smooth." The chapter begins with an upbeat description of the vibrant streets of Spanish Harlem during the summer. "People are all over the place. Stoops are occupied like bleacher sections at a game, and beer flows like there's nothing else to drink. The block musicians pound out gone beats on tin cans and conga drums and bongos. And kids are playing all over the place – on fire escapes, under cars, over cars, in alleys, back yards, hallways." (14). This description has two functions: first it expresses an excessive pleasure and sense of community that pervades Spanish Harlem in the face of a debilitating poverty. The community musters the spiritual energy to enjoy, resisting their marginalized social placement in culturally specific ways ("conga drums and bongos"). The human volume is indicative of an ontological desire for open and public acknowledgment. If they are treated like strangers in New York, to each other there exists an affirming familiarity.

This scene however has another function emphasizing less its obvious communal quality and focusing, in a belated, secondary way, on Piri's more personal crisis. Similar

to a cinematic shot that moves from a wide-ranging view of a community to a more specified close-up, zeroing in on its intended subject: Thomas' narrative progresses from the general of Spanish Harlem to the particulars of his own life within it. Thomas does not immediately present the reader with the fictional problem he wants to address, the text instead inserts a detour, a tropological delay, so that the narrative starting point, a block party, belies and covers the underlying traumas Piri struggles with. The outer celebratory mood of the community in summer is juxtaposed to Piri's internal state. This sense of the belated is a disjunctive sur-face that momentarily distances the reader from a traumatic kernel embedded in its social/racial body. Almost casually, however, Thomas introduces the death of his friend Dopey. The dead body emerges as a shock, throwing this celebratory surface into flux and, in the Lacanian sense, bringing us back to the monstrous dimensions of the Real. Why does the novel insert this strange death?

"The gutter," where Piri and his friends spend much of their time playing marbles, is more "dangerous than we knew."(14). The children played there "oblivious" to the abject "islands of dog filth, people filth, and street filth that lined the gutter."(14). The danger here lies not in the children's proximity to filth, for the filth has a creative aspect, but in the possibility of uncritically ingesting its poisonous contents. As with the jarred coffee, a domestic version of dirty water, the "dirty gutter water" becomes ontologically lethal when internalized. The gutter is the inverse of the clean kitchen allowing Piri the flexibility to "stretch to the limit skinny fingers with dirty gutter water caked between them…"(14). Where dirt and spills are prohibited in his home, in the streets they are commonplace, part of its "all over" logic and constitution. Julia Kristeva remarks in *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, "…the danger of filth represents for the

subject the risk to which the very symbolic order is permanently exposed, to the extent that it is a device of discriminations, of differences."[52] Dirt in this scene must then be read as a marker of the presence of otherness, and more specifically of blackness. For it is blackness, in *Down These Mean Streets* that stands in as the estranged feature, which intensely haunts and threatens to deface white social order. The "risk" is in the subject's relation to otherness or abjection. The question becomes how is Dopey's death connected to Piri's exploration of race and identity? In what ways are death and Black masculinity linked here?

Interestingly, "Playing it Smooth," as the chapter's title indicates, promises to explicate the "science" of the street wherein Piri will illustrate the process of "becoming hombre." Dopey, a "lopsided-looking" kid" whose passivity is evinced by a constant "drooling at the mouth" is dared by a friend to "drink dirty street water."(15). He subsequently gets "sick" and is taken away by an ambulance. The "next time" Piri sees him is "in a coffin box in his house."(15). Dopey dies, Piri concludes, because he does "anything you'd tell him" and racial codes, as I have argued, require the internalization of his own abjection or blackness. Isn't this precisely what Piri's father asks of him? To keep his blackness hidden? Suddenly, however, Dopey, in death, "didn't look dopey at all" but undeniably familiar – "he looked like any of us" (15). When confronted with Dopey's dead body Piri recognizes him as his double and thus an uncanny reminder that race, masculinity and poverty, combine to signal a spectral existence.

This question of the uncanny is important here on several levels. At first glance Thomas' hyperrealist novel does not seem to suggest an uncanny interpretation; yet it is

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[52] Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 69.

precisely its "dirty" realism that makes an uncanny reading necessary. This is especially evident if we read its realism as a narrative strategy that calls for and enacts its own defacement. In Freud's 1919 essay "The Uncanny," Freud recognizes the double as part of an oscillating dynamic between self and other. For Freud the double alternately represents a "harbinger of death," an "insurance against the extinction of the self," and a "spontaneous transmission" of the "other's knowledge."[53] What is the knowledge Piri acquires from the dead reflection Dopey provides? First, the subversive recognition that one who acts uncritically at another's behest is doomed to swallow parts of themselves, which in exteriorization give life, and when internalized act as a poison. The "other's knowledge" is in this sense ontological, a secret of racial being. This secret is all the more powerful because the element it attempts to hide, the humanity of blackness, is continually exposed, outside, on view. Thus, blackness, Piri is taught, is to exist in social silence: an unquestioning corpse, whose body exists in a "coffin" within the "house" of society. Yet Dopey's death, as the uncanny suggests, also insures against Piri's extinction by creating an awareness and sensitivity to the hidden dimensions of his identity, his blackness. The uncanny, then, marks the failure of the secret. Its attempt to stay hidden is overwhelmed by a negating "compulsion to repeat."[54] Consequently, a "demonic character"[55] emerges, born from social repression, fear of difference, and a thirst for recognition. The demonic, as its etymology suggests, refers to an "unclean

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[53] Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny*, 142.

[54] Ibid, 145.

[55] Ibid, 145.

spirit" and a "divine principle or inward oracle."[56] In its purest sense Thomas' defacement combines the "unclean" with the oracular, the trauma of race and the poetic.

In a kind of exorcism, Piri acts out his own death promising "never" to "die."(15). Interestingly, to act out serves as a kinesthetic resistance to the passive death, which befalls Dopey. Piri understands, almost viscerally, that Dopey's death is symptomatic of a social self-abnegation, an ontological unresponsiveness, whose only possible embodiment is a corpse. "Stone dead" Dopey is literally a body without symptoms, expression, or subjectivity. Isn't this the ultimate manifestation of human as object? That is to say a body with a petrified sur-face as opposed to a subject marked by the desire and singularity of the face? A body reified into objecthood? It is important to remember that for Lacan it was Marx who invented the symptom.[57] The Marxist symptom is correlative to Freud's notion of the uncanny for both recognize a negative undercurrent which throw everyday relations into an ominous imbalance. For Marx, however, this fissure or asymmetry manifested by the symptom, signals "a point of breakdown heterogeneous to a given ideological field" while paradoxically acting as the necessary element "for that field to achieve its closure, its accomplished form."[58] Dopey is the symptomatic embodiment of this paradox: a dead black body which on the one hand threatens to disturb the ideological equilibrium of society; and, conversely, the abjected element without which an ideology of race and a system of capital could not

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[56] Online Etymology Dictionary, www.etymonline.com.

[57] Slavoj Zizek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, 11-53.

[58] Slavoj Zizek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, 21.

form itself.[59] In this sense Dopey stands in contradistinction to the sparkling fetishism of the commodity/whiteness whose logic aims to displace or distract the oppression (in Freud repression) of race and labor. His dead body is the symptom, the uncanny "internal negation" that "subverts the ideological appearance of equality, freedom, and so on."[60] The challenge for Piri is to learn how to read beyond the reified appearances of race, and to develop a hermeneutics of form that enables him to recognize and deface what Michael Taussig has called the "archeology of the implict."[61]

Piri, then, turns to stickball as a response to his traumatic witnessing of Dopey's death. Stickball is an explicit way to combat the "implicit" structures of race. If the uncanny, as Freud suggests, is related to a castration complex, a fear of losing an element of strength, expression, and life, then Piri's turn to stickball is an attempt to regain a phallic power in the aftermath of his friend's death. Is not sports the one social space, par excellence, where blackness has been reluctantly allowed to exist on its own terms and merits? Where Piri can, if you will, feel at home? And, moreover, where he can freely express a certain power and aggression like *un hombre*? Piri describes his at bat with a sense of pride and purpose:

> I stood at the side of the **sewer that made home plate** in the middle of the of the street, waiting impatiently for the Spalding ball to be bounced my way, my broomstick bat swinging back and forth.
>
> "Come on, man, pitch the ball!" I shouted.
>
> "Take it easy, buddy," the pitcher said.

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[59] Race and its ineluctable connection to labor and social organization complicates Marx's notion of the proletariat. Unfortunately, Marx rarely refers to race in his work. *Down These Mean Streets* serves as a fictional update, culturally translating class into a racially imbued, New World context.

[60] Slavoj Zizek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, 23, 26.

[61] Michael Taussig, *The Nervous System*, 83-108.

> I was burning, making all kinds of promises to send that rubber ball **smashing into his teeth** whenever he decided to let it go.
>
> "Come on, Piri, loose that ball – smack it clear over to Lexington Avenue."
>
> "Yeah, yeah, watch me."
>
> The ball finally left that hoarder's hand. It came in one bounce, like it was supposed to, and slightly breaking into a curve. It was all mine.
>
> "Waste it, *panin*," shouted my boy Waneko.
>
> I gritted my teeth and ran in to meet the ball. I felt the broomstick bat make connection and the ball climb and climb like it was never coming back. It had "homerun" all over it. One runner came in and I went right behind him. My boys pushed out their hands to congratulate me. We had twelve bolos (dollars) on the game. I slapped skin with them, playing it cool all the way. **Man, that was the way to be**. (16). (Emphasis mine).

The sewer that is responsible for Dopey's death is here transformed into a "home plate" where Piri stands in tense and creative anticipation. His aggression burns through his body as he yearns to send the ball "smashing" into the "teeth" of his opponent. The stickball game stages Piri's subversive response to what is pitched to him. Unlike Dopey, who did whatever people told him to do, Piri responds with a desire to deface whatever the other throws at him. The exuberant spectacle of his "homerun" is symbolic of an active and transgressive "way to be," momentarily going beyond the social codes of race. Thus, Piri presents a vigorous black masculinity that contrasts with Dopey's deadly passivity and introversion. In Fred Moten's terms, Piri exemplifies the "resistance of the object" expressing "a radical breakdown" and expansion of human value via the performance of black subjectivity.[62] This is where the spectral exchange between Marx's theory of value and Freud's uncanny meet: between an attempt to invest in ones humanity, a bet ("We had twelve bolos (dollars) on the game."); and an epiphanic expression shattering, in the performative moment, social impediments implied in

[62] Fred Moten, *In the Break*, 7-11.

blackness and achievement, a homerun ("I felt the broomstick bat make connection and the ball climb and climb like it was never coming back."). Yet this triumphant moment is shortlived as Piri moves from the improvisational home plate of the sewer, to his actual home. In one of the more prolonged discussions with his mother depicted in the text, the symbolic significance of his homerun is undermined by his subsequent arrival to his apartment.

It is interesting to remember that Freud emphasizes the home and unhomely as a theoretical grounding for his notion of the uncanny. He explains: "In second place, if this really is the secret of the uncanny, we can understand why German usage allows the familiar (*das Heimliche*, 'homely') to switch to its opposite, the uncanny (*das unheimliche*, the 'unhomely'), for this uncanny element is nothing new or strange, but something that was long familiar to the psyche and was estranged from it only through being repressed."[63] The uncanny quality of *Down These Mean Streets* lies in this unsettling oscillation between a defined sense of home and an unsecure "element", race, which creates an effect of danger or the unhomely. While this chapter begins by situating Dopey in an unhomely coffin in his house, it then swings to Piri's phallic positioning at home plate, and concludes with Piri entering his apartment where he is immediately told to bath because he is "*un negrito* and ugly."(19) The narrative switching from the familiar to the strange finds its uncanny idiom in a series of homes as its expressive locations. What disturbs in his return home is his mother's caring response, for it has a paradoxically estranging effect: its unstated aim is to repress the familiarity of Piri's blackness.

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[63] Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny*, 148.

Piri enters his apartment with a "blast" boldly pushing open the door and slamming it shut behind him. His mother immediately reprimands him forcing him to go out and "come in again like people."(18). His mother stares at him with "a very serious look on her face" and Piri, in a "gentle" attempt to win her approval looks back with "my face all screwed up."(18). He turns and walks in "again" quietly, repressing the assertiveness he acquired during his stickball game. Yet his screwed up face is a comedic gesture that not only contrasts her seriousness, but also, subtly questions her claim that he conduct himself submissively "like people." His distorted face, momentarily, "joined" them in laughter. Pleased by his mother's affirmation Piri goes to his room "feeling her full-of-love words floating after me."(19). It is at this point that the two faces, familiar and strange, white and black, subject and object, reveal a disturbing disjunction that underlies their exchange.

As Piri moves towards the "sweet-smelling pot" in the kitchen, signifying his physical and ontological hunger, he is abruptly turned away by his mother. The discussion that follows takes unexpected turns as Piri attempts to get his mother to express her love for him, while she communicates, to the reader's surprise, her repulsion.

> "Get away, you smell bad, all full of sweat. Go, get in that bathtub and let the water and soap make you soft so the dirt has a chance come off."
> "Aw, moms, you love me any way I am, clean or dirty, white or black, pretty or ugly."
> "*Si*, you're right, and my son, I have to love you because only your mother could love you, *un negrito* and ugly. And to make it badder, you're dirty and smelly from your sweat!"
> "Aw, look at her." I made a look of disbelief. "Trying to make like I'm not your big love. Ain't I your first born, the oldest, the biggest, the strongest?"
> "*Si, si*," Momma came back at me, "and the baddest. *Vete*, soak for a long time or no dinner." (19).

What is most striking in this exchange is the matter-of-factness of her tone, at once trying to hide and naturalize her racially laden views. For Piri's mother his blackness marks him with a dirt that must be cleaned and socially conditioned.[64] The more Piri attempts to get her to assert her love for him, giving her all the reasons she should love him ("Ain't I your first born, the oldest, the biggest, the strongest?"), the more she resists admitting only an obligatory affection ("…I have to love you, because only your mother could love you *un negrito* and ugly."). This is precisely the logic of the uncanny: when an element is switched to its traumatic "opposite" without warning. The denial of love uncovers a racial façade. Piri is rendered object/abject through the homely language of maternal care and white prohibition ("Go, get in that bathtub and let the water and soap make you soft so the dirt has a chance come off."). The soap's function is, in the Foucaultian sense, to produce a docile body, "soft" and racially disciplined. Moreover, Kristeva argues that this dynamic transforms the body, in Thomas the black body, into a colonized territory. "Through frustrations and prohibitions, this authority shapes the body into a territory having areas, orifices, points and lines, surfaces and hollows, where the archaic power of mastery and neglect, of the differentiation of proper-clean and improper-dirty, possible and impossible, is impressed and exerted."[65] The bathtub and sewer echo one another in an uncanny relationship of rotating opposites: one a site of improvisational possibility, the other a location of "frustrations and prohibitions." His lesson, however, is learned with Dopey's death whose dead body serves as an unconscious remainder and reminder of the ghetto's necropolitics. He will, with rage and

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[64] Clearly, Piri's mother's comments are a veiled attempt to produce racial shame. For a brilliant analysis of shame and Puerto Rican identity see, Frances Negrón-Muntaner *Boricua Pop: Puerto Ricans and the Latinization of American Culture*, 2004.

[65] Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 72.

antagonism, examine the uncanny embedded in his black face. This is where the face/race becomes spectral. For the uncanny suggests the destabilizing of the contours of identity, a pervertibility. As Derrida puts it, "The spectral 'possibility'" of the face lies in the "*impossibility* of controlling, deciding or determining a limit, the *impossibility* of situating, by means of criteria, norms, or rules, a tenable threshold separating pervertibility from perversion."[66]

Interestingly, the chapter ends with the father's return home from work. His mother, in charge of keeping blackness clean, of interpolating it into a racial logic and economy, asks: "'Piri, have you finished yet?' Momma called. 'Your padre's home and he has to take a bath.'"(22). However, his father's appearance sends Piri into a melancholic "reverie."(22). A series of internalized questions delve into the discrepant ways Piri, the darkest son, is treated: "How come it sounds different when you holler at me? Why does it sound harder and meaner?" "How come when we all play with you, I can't really enjoy it like the rest?"(22). Piri's conclusion suggests a reluctant certainty, as if a part of him is holding out for the possibility of a different answer. Yet he can only think of one reason: "Or maybe it's cause I'm the darkest in this family."(22). The familiar is estranged; the estranged is familiar. The secret of his alienation, blackness, traumatically covers his body and herein lies its uncanny affect: the shocking realization that what haunts him in the eyes of his parents is the irrevocable fact of his black skin. What is not irrevocable, however, is the development of a critical consciousness that refuses to allow this logic to be the last word on his identity. Piri's questions are exploratory and defiant interrogating his father's behavior. His response runs counter to

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[66] Jacques Derrida, *Adieu: To Emmanuel Levinas*, 35.

Dopey, the mute object, and his father, the laborer who must be subdued, as Piri's mother suggests, by taking a bath. This mute condition is precisely the mystery of the commodity, the thing whose relational capacity replaces human inter-change, with the ex-change of things. The voice of the (black) worker is substituted and subsumed into a reified thing.[67] As Fred Moten puts it, "What remains secret in Marx could be thought as or in terms of race or sex or gender, of the differences these terms mark, form and reify. But we can also say that the unrevealed secret is a recrudescence of an already existing notion of the private (or, more properly, of the proper) that operates within the constellation of self-possession, capacity, subjectivity, and speech."[68] Similarly, the uncanny recognizes in the inanimate object, in the symbolically lifeless (Dopey, Father) the return of something that has "an excessive likeness to the living." Significantly, as Freud points out, the subversive wish of the (black) child, is for the inanimate object to speak and come to life.[69] This is the heart of Thomas' project: to bring the socially

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[67] Fred Moten, *In the Break*, 7-14. The speaking/muted commodity, according to Moten, has within it encrypted messages of race. Moten argues: "We move within a series of phonographic anticipations, encrypted messages, sent and sending on frequencies Marx tunes to accidentally, for effect, without the necessary preparation. However, this absence of preparation or foresight in Marx – an anticipatory refusal to anticipate, an obversive or anti- and anteimprovisation – is condition of possibility of a richly augmented encounter with the chain of messages the (re)sounding speech of the commodity cuts and carries…Moving, then, in the critical remixing of nonconvergent tracks, modes of preparation, traditions, we can think how the commodity who speaks, in speaking, in the sound – the inspirited materiality – of that speech, constitutes a kind of temporal warp that disrupts and augments not only Marx but the mode of subjectivity that the ultimate object of his critique, capital, both allows and disallows…What remains secret in Marx could be thought as or in terms of race or sex or gender, of the differences these terms mark, form and reify. But we can also say that the unrevealed secret is a recrudescence of an already existing notion of the private (or, more properly, of the proper) that operates within the constellation of self-possession, capacity, subjectivity, and speech." (11-12).

[68] Ibid., 12.

[69] Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny*, 141.

objectified to life by summoning a silenced voice from the psychic wounds effaced by cultural, political, and economic processes.

The Antagonistic Black Face

This antagonistic Black face that grounds and propels the narrative in *Down These Mean Streets* is forcefully dramatized in the chapter entitled "Brothers Under the Skin" in which Piri declares to his brother that he is black. It is the first time that Piri tries to speak openly to his family about race. The chapter begins with Piri "daydreaming" in the tub (masturbating), and his reverie is "splintered" into reality by Jose's banging on the door.(142). He spitefully keeps the door closed until Jose's "face has a pained look on it" and he urinates "all over"(142) his pants. Interestingly, Piri has transformed the bathtub from a place to wash off and symbolically manage his blackness, what Fanon describes as the condition of a "dirty nigger,"[70] to a closeted space where he secretly dreams, desires, and reflects. Jose's attempted entrance reminds Piri of the whiteness that stands outside, already ontologically cleaned, the splitting image of each other. Piri is pulled out of his desirous dream and back into the fact of his racial circumscription. Even though Piri tries to hurt and humiliate his brother here, to show him, if only for a moment, how it feels to hold something in, he can't reproduce for José the woundedness that pervades his racial being.

José's exclusion from the bathroom is an obstruction that causes, at best, a provisional discomfort. Is there, however, a way in which Piri is not only to trying to aggravate José, to transfer his pain, but in a more profound gesture, force insides out?

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[70] Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 109.

Get something, once again, to spill? Extract an internal knowledge or truth? From José's face Piri's glance moves onto his penis noticing its phallic whiteness and sensing the uncanny relationship between face and penis, sacred and perverse. This sets off in Piri a need to discuss race: a yearning for release in conversation. Fanon describes this need for another's attention: "Sealed into that crushing objecthood, I turned beseechingly to others. Their attention was a liberation, running over my body suddenly abraded into nonbeing, endowing me once more with an agility that I had thought lost, and by taking me out of the world, restoring me to it."[71] However, the discussion Piri yearns for is short-lived, as José finds the suggestion he is black intolerable. Their discussion turns from talk into an impassioned argument; and from argument into a physical and figurative confrontation.

For José, like their mother, the family identity is fixed firmly in relation to a denial of blackness. When Piri tells his brother that he plans to go down South to "see what a moyeto's worth and the paddy's weight on him" because he is a "Negro," José, becomes outraged, understanding that, as Piri says, this means he too, at least in part, is black.(143). As Piri presents incontrovertible evidence of their blackness using himself and their father as powerful exhibits, José becomes filled with anxiety and then a patronizing anger. The evidence mounts and their argument progresses to a violent pitch: "I ain't black, damn you! ... My motherfuckin lips are not like a baboon's ass. My skin is white. White Godddamit!"(144). José's exclamatory anger, becomes a futile, if volatile, attempt to push away the Afro-Latino reflection that stands indisputably before him. Piri's fragmenting presence functions as a racial defacement, in Michael Taussigs sense,

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[71] Ibid, 109.

a desecration of a sacred white mask that feverishly conceals its own diversity. The uncooperative ambiguity or splitting of Piri's Afro-Latino image demands an acknowledgement of the racial complexity represented within their family. For as Taussig explains: "It is the cut of de/facement that releases this surplus, the cut into wholeness as holiness that, in surrendering, reveals as with a film montage, not only another view via another frame, but released flows of energy."[72]

The transgressive energy unfastened by Piri's assertive blackness forces his brother's whiteness outside of its idealized existence, confronted by "another frame" or face. Blackness represents the figurative difference or cut breaking the solidified form of the white face and externalizing insides that bring Jose in close proximity to his humanity. It is no accident that this scene and discussion take place in the bathroom, where internal excesses are released into view. However, José rigidly holds, despite the truth that stands before him, onto his sacred identification. His language reduces blackness to a state of irretrievable abjection. The irony being that as he fervently defends his whiteness, its beauty, its social rank and value he does so having urinated all over himself. "You can bow and kiss ass and clean shit bowls. But – I – am – white!"(145).

Interestingly, José's exclamatory refusals are reminiscent of the child who is startled by the fact/face of Fanon's blackness. "Look, a Negro! ... Mama, see the Negro! I'm frightened."[73] For Fanon the child's response is a psychic and social "thematization" that obliterates his corporeal integrity: "What else could it be for me but an amputation, an

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[72] Michael Taussig, *Defacement*, 3.

[73] Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 112.

excision, a hemorrhage that splattered my whole body with black blood?"[74] The generality of his blood, its humanity, is transmogrified into a confining "black blood," an unalterable "fact" that allows the child to make a purely reductive -- "Negro!" -- identification of him. The profoundly violent imagery: "amputation," "excision" and "hemorrhage," recalling the brutal ghosts of slavery, describes the symbolic damage done by a racially infused assignation. The socially constructed gaze of the child performs an ontological tearing of identities into impossibly unpolluted beings. This exchange establishes a pure and negatively charged blackness, and, by extension, a pure positively charged whiteness. The child's comprehensive recognition of, not Fanon the (hu)man, but of the "Negro!" renders him a bloody abstraction, "dark and unarguable,"[75] diminishing him to an arbitrary physical characteristic, a "whole body" whose blackness becomes his only, over-determined, mode of classification. However, Fanon goes on to conclude that while the "Negro" is a societal demand, a need of whiteness to define itself absolutely against, the Negro must, as Piri does, "make myself known."[76] An active and imaginary rejoinder, for Fanon and Thomas, changes the ontological terms of engagement. Piri's dispute with Jose directly addresses the "dark and unarguable" themes that survive precisely because they go uncontested. A fight ensues: the "blurred confusion"(146) of violence is the only endpoint.

Jose finally admits the shame his brother's blackness has produced in him and, after the figurative blow, decides to walk away from the discussion with his whiteness in-tact.

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[74] Ibid, 112.

[75] Ibid, 117.

[76] Ibid, 115.

By contrast, Piri suffers a kind of short-circuit unable to absorb his brother's contempt: "Lights began to jump into my head and tears blurred out that this was my brother before me."(146). Piri beats his brother until his sacred white mask becomes a "blood-smeared face."(146). The violence here, the cut on Jose's de/faced face, his smashed skin, "beat beat beat"(146) like an African drum, draws out the blood that obfuscates the "wholeness as holiness" as whiteness. Jose's whiteness is displaced by a humanity that lies "under the skin."

If Fanon's symbolic blood hemorrhages to color him, irreversibly -- a blackness that envelops his body, his psyche, his history -- here José's despoiled blood collapses into a universal sign of humanity, a fluid face where black and white identities move in and out of each other, creating something new of something old each time they touch. Similar to the coffee that spills all over the kitchen to open the novel, Piri and José, also crash through the "bathroom door" overflowing into the living room. The private has become public; a living blackness, unabashed and unapologetic, exteriorizes itself. The coffee symbolism gives way to real bodies, injured and externalized, in a struggle for recognition. Piri emerges naked, from the dirty water of his bathtub, and is reborn into the *living* room for all to see. He has, as Fanon advised, made himself known.

Cara Palo, Cannibal Desires: Wolves Digging a Stone Lamb

For Piri, conflict would continue to follow him until, finally, he finds himself in a shootout with a cop after an attempted robbery -- the act of shooting itself a form of rage-full exteriorization. He is subsequently shipped to prison, now openly and legally

objectified. Feeling threatened and resentful Piri decides to try to play it cool. For Piri playing it cool or smooth is linked to an illegible outward appearance wherein his face becomes a "*cara palo*:" part poker face, part death mask. On the one hand, *cara palo* aims to project strength and *corazón*, communicating to his street rivals a masculinity poised to defend its reputation at the slightest provocation, and on the other hand, a repressive mask covering his vulnerabilities beneath an unresponsive face. As Lyn Di Iorio Sandin argues: "*Cara palo* helps Piri mask both his anguish at having his humanity (his memory) taken from him, as well as take pleasure in the power (the hurt) he inflicts on others."[77] What *cara palo* does then, is mark a mode of relation invested in dominance and violence: at once fearing its consequences and seeking validation. It is, moreover, a logic with which Piri has learned how to mis/read his environment and himself. Yet in prison this carefully constructed face loses its hardened balance, giving way to a desperate aggression. As he puts it, prison makes him feel "like Dracula returning to his coffin."(239).

For Piri prison marks the relationship between cannibalism and the uncanny. If the uncanny is about a portentous secret whose force threatens to break through the defenses of repression; in its most primal sense, I want to suggest, this return is of a yearning for

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[77] Lyn Di Iorio Sandin, *Killing Spanish*, 114. Sandin understands that the stoic street strength represented by *cara palo* ultimately weighs the subject down. The mask Piri produces unwittingly congeals into a stereotype. She explains: "The mask, always representing pain, aggressiveness, uprootedness, hypersexuality, racial and class marginalization for Latinas and Latinos, then is also a stereotype. Homi K. Bhabha says: 'The stereotype is not a simplification because it is a false representation of a given reality. It is a simplification because it is an **arrested, fixated** form of representation.' The mask, worn by Latinos and Latinas on the street as a form of resistance weighs heavily on the Latino/a psyche in its symbolic immobility. To relieve this burden the street, perceived as a way of escaping the damaged family, becomes a palette onto which Latinos and Latinas project the psychic unrest veiled by the mask." (emphasis mine, 101).

and fear of cannibalism. While Freud argues that the uncanny signals a fear of castration it is significant to remember that castration, in the Freudian narrative, is a result of an originary patricide that included the literal and symbolic consumption of the father in order to paradoxically diminish his power and further identify with him.[78] The repression that precedes and sets off the uncanny is the active potential of cannibalism. The uncanny then, at least to some extent, signals the possible return of that introjected figure that threatens to devour or appropriate the other.[79] Thus, the uncanny at its base is not just a fear of castration, but in a more primitive and primal sense, a fear of being eaten. In this sense, castration is the "civilized" form of cannibalism, since it shifts the desire for cannibalism from the literal consumption of the body to a more socially symbolic version.

This tension of being consumed by the other is especially evident in Piri's time in prison. The prison itself is described as a devouring force, the institution whose function is to consume black bodies, as Levi-Strauss has argued, "ejecting dangerous individuals from the social body": a custom "similar in nature" to "cannibalism."[80] Indeed, Piri

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[78] Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, 174-181.

[79] For interesting accounts of cannibalism as cultural appropriation see: bell hooks, "Eating the Other" in *Black Looks: Race and Representation,* 21-40; and Coco Fusco, "Who's Doin' The Twist? Notes Toward a Politics of Appropriation" in *English is Broken Here: Notes on Cultural Fusion in the Americas.* Also for an extensive reading of ethnicity, haunting, and cannibalism see: Kathleen Brogan, *Cultural Haunting: Ghosts and Ethnicity in Recent American Literature.*

[80] Claude Levi-Strauss discusses the multiple social forms cannibalism takes in differing societies. In the West, according to Levi-Strauss, the legal and prison systems are cannibalistic institutions, "ejecting dangerous individuals from the social body." He argues: "But above all, we should realize that certain of our own customs might appear, to an observer belonging to a different society, to be similar in nature to cannibalism, although cannibalism strikes us as being foreign to the idea of civilization. I am thinking, for instance, of our legal and prison systems. If we studied societies outside, it would be tempting to distinguish two contrasting types: those which practise cannibalism – that is, which regard the absorption of certain individuals possessing dangerous powers as the only means of neutralizing those powers and even of turning them to an

enters through what seems to him a "big-mouthed door"(249) and must resist being "eaten up by pressure."(250). Piri is immediately assigned to the "jobbing shop" whose "specialty was making green-painted coffins for newly burnt electric-chair graduates."(251). As with Dopey, Piri is once again given the implicit option of social death, of allowing himself to be swallowed and reshaped by the system. The deceptive "green-painted coffins" combines the promise of social fertility through the death of racial difference. A future Piri refuses by articulating his insistent desire for speech, pleasure, and contact. "…Why is everybody so damn quiet? We're only in jail, not dead…Wish I had company – a bottle of soda, a cigarette, a smell of Trina, a nickel for the jukebox, a taste of smoking, curling pot…One good thing, the pain's eased off…I'm getting a little stronger now. They ain't gonna break me. These maricones ain't seen heart yet. I wonder, man, how long is fifteen years? Break it up into little pieces, by months, weeks, days."(250). Defacing the devouring logic of prison time (15 years) he recognizes that he must break the temporal bulk into manageable increments in order to stave off the generalizing force, the weight of time, from blunting the particularity of his identity. In the logic of Sing Sing he became an abstraction, simply prisoner number 109-699. For Piri however, the particularity of his temporal experiences, he understood, allowed him to stay in control of the symbolic contours of his subjectivity. This need for symbolic control is dramatically apparent in the fact that *Down These Mean Streets* itself

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advantage – and those which, like our own society, adopt what might be called the practice of *anthropemy* (from the Greek *émein*, to vomit); faced with the same problem, the latter type of society has chosen the opposite solution, which consists in ejecting dangerous individuals from the social body and keeping them temporarily in isolation, away from all contact with their fellows, in establishments specially intended for this purpose. Most of the societies we call primitive would regard this custom with profound horror; it would make us in their eyes, guilty of that same barbarity of which we are inclined to accuse them because of their symmetrically opposity behaviour." Claude Levi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques*, 387-388.

was written while Piri Thomas, in actuality, served time in jail. Novel writing, thus, becomes his way of breaking up the devouring potential of time by giving his being a willed narrative structure.

Yet despite working at "keeping my mind from being eaten up by the pressure"(250) of possible conflict with other inmates, he concludes that the violence of prison must be met with a countering and excessive machismo. Soon after his arrival in prison, Piri sits "on top of a food locker in the recreation hall" when he is approached by three Afro-American inmates. Tense, analytical, and expressionless, he begins to interpret the intentions of the three strangers, assured they are going to test him. "I dug their look. It was the *carcel* look of wolves digging a stone lamb."(251). What ensues is an unusual request from the inmates: "Hey mac can you draw?"(251). Piri's paranoia seems to run counter to the enigmatic yet placid request by the inmates to be drawn creating a hermeneutic disjunction. He nonchalantly agrees to draw the face of one the inmates, setting the stage for what he sees as a self-asserting and self-protective confrontation. After looking "at the cat, from side to side," Piri, inexplicably, hands Rocky, the inmate, a drawing of a "black cannibal, complete with a big bone through his nose."(252). The racial violation of the scene is exacerbated when Piri responds to Rocky's protest: "You're right *moreno* … you'll get a stiff dick up your ass."(252). Paradoxically, the drawing captures Rocky in the same racial language Piri has struggled against throughout the novel. Here, the racial roles are reversed. Is Piri distancing himself from his own blackness? Has he internalized the racial language and logic which has continually punished him? What do we make of his seemingly unprovoked threat of rape? Piri later

imagines how he is going to mutilate Rocky's face. "I'm gonna mess his shitty face up nice and easy, cut it *asi y asi*."(253).

Piri, like his father, strikes out against an image of himself. He repeats the process of racial objectification he has experienced: fixing Rocky in a drawing; threatening him with rape/castration; and fantasizing his facial disfigurement. If exteriorizing blackness is the central struggle of this novel, then in prison Piri finds his blackness brutally turned back on itself. The prison is the logic of racism brought to its externalized end point. The self-internment Piri would not teach himself in order to exist as an Afro-Latino in society, symbolized in the novel by the objects, the coffee jar, the enclosed bathroom and bathtub, and the dirty water; is writ large in prison, the monstrous "ideological edifice" of social death. Here he is an *in*-mate trapped in rage and self-hatred. His drawing of Rocky a mirror image of himself conveying a desire to destroy and exorcize the blackness that lies arbitrarily on his skin. A need for violent release speaks of the toxic pressure of internalization, which ineluctably leads, to use a futile contemporary phrase, to Piri's "Black-on-Black" crime. Ultimately, the food locker Piri sits on to begin this scene represents a spiritual hunger that turns blackness into a social cannibal, eating away at itself in order to survive.

Yet does this sadistic scene suggest another analytical layer found in its sadism and anal erotics? The queer element that stands before our eyes and yet is hidden and resisted by an excessive machismo? In Robert Reid-Pharr's essay "Tearing the Goat's Flesh" he argues "that the pathology that the homosexual must negotiate is precisely the specter of Black boundarylessness, the idea that there is no normal Blackness to which the Black

subject, American, or otherwise, might refer."[81] Thus, Reid-Pharr's argument goes, it is at those moments of intense social and identificatory ambiguity that Piri invokes the homosexual, as that pathological figure emblematic of an outside which functions to stabilize him in his heterosexual Black masculinity. It seems, however, Reid-Pharr moves too quickly beyond the relation between Piri's "adoration for his father" and his sense of "Black boundrylessness."[82] Is it possible that Piri's slippage between the homosocial and homosexual is not just an attempt to reassert a Black masculinity against a scapegoated homosexuality, though this, I concede, is clearly at work in the novel, but also a productive and destructive return or desire for his father?

Freud's analysis of the "Wolfman," perhaps his most compelling study on cannibalism, anal eroticism, and the desire for the father, further illuminates Piri's enigmatic confrontation. Freud's case study tells the story of a man who is disturbed by a dream. The dream consists quite simply of a boy who is woken by the sound of his window opening. The window is located at the foot of his bed, a symbolic opening analogous to the "big-mouthed door" which Piri passes through into prison. When the Wolfman looks outside the window he sees seven white wolves with bushy tales sitting on separate branches of a tree staring menacingly at him. Interestingly, the patient decides to draw the tree and wolves (Fig. 1) and admits that despite his terror the wolves in fact sat statically without any movements or threatening gestures. For the Wolfman, nevertheless, these white wolves provoked a fear he might be eaten. This dream, like Piri's prison scene where he felt "the *carcel* look of wolves digging a stone lamb" as he

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[81] Robert Reid-Pharr, "Tearing the Goat's Flesh: Homosexuality, Abjection, and the Production of a Late Twentieth-Century Black Masculinity," 603, 609.

[82] Ibid., 609.

sat, not on a bed but "on top of a food locker in the recreation hall"(251), suggest a state of vulnerability that plays itself out in sadistic fantasies of cannibalism. For the Wolfman, Freud argues, cannibalism points to a homoerotic desire for the father, which oscillates between a masochistic desire to be appropriated and a sadistic impulse to dominate the other. It is here that we find the connection between the uncanny and cannibalism. What Freud's analysis of the Wolfman and Piri's prison scene document is not just that the other may eat you but more importantly that someone familiar, the father, will. The un/familiar of the uncanny here is the spectral figure of the father whose symbolic presence threatens to consume the estranged son. In this prison scene the other (Black men in jail) stand in, like the white wolves, for someone familiar (namely, the father). Piri strikes out against Rocky as a continuation of his fight against his father and the self-abnegating blackness he represents.

The food locker on which Piri sits is reminiscent of the novel's opening scene in the Kitchen, further suggesting the indirect presence of the father. This lashing out against Rocky then emerges from a desire to diminish his father's influence. This is accomplished through social substitution or displacement, as Reid-Pharr argues; that is, by rendering Rocky as a primitive cannibal and as someone susceptible to homosexual violation. Piri is striking out, as I have already argued, against a theory of (human) value, racial objectification, and submissive social prescriptions but doing so by finding a vulnerable target, rather than confront the more symbolically powerful father. This is precisely the function of the homophobia in this scene: it works, in a surface sense to solidify his masculinity and in a hidden way, to aggressively act out against the racist values of his home. Homophobia, as Gloria Anzaldua has brilliantly suggested, is not

just a fear of homosexuality as such, but a more profound "fear of going home."[83] Piri, ultimately, is searching for a way home, for a way to create an affirming connection with his white mother and black father. Anzaldua explains the power of this affirmation:

> And I thought, how apt. Fear of going home. And of not being taken in. We're afraid of being abandoned by the mother, the culture, la Raza, for being unacceptable, faulty, damaged. Most of us unconsciously believe that if we reveal this unacceptable aspect of the self our mother/culture/race will totally reject us. To avoid rejection, some of us conform to the values of the culture, push the unacceptable parts into the shadows. Which leaves only one fear – that we will be found out and that the Shadow-Beast will break out of its cage. Some of us take another route. We try to make ourselves conscious of the Shadow-Beast, stare at the sexual lust and lust for power and destruction we see on its face, discern among its features the undershadow that the reigning order of heterosexual males project on our Beast. Yet still others of us take it another step: we try to waken the Shadow-Beast inside us. Not many jump at the chance to confront the Shadow-Beast in the mirror without flinching at her lidless serpent eyes, her cold clammy moist hand dragging us underground, fangs bared and hissing. How does one put feathers on this particular serpent? But a few of us have been lucky – on the face of the Shadow-Beast we have seen not lust but tenderness, on its face we have uncovered the lie.[84]

The Shadow-Beast of race, in *Down These Mean Streets*, emerges to show its face despite familial and social rejection. A haunting "lust for," a defacing "power and destruction" builds into a propensity for fracturing the racial protocols deeply embedded in the "American" family. If, as Piri puts it, prison's "first business" was social "purification"(249) violently eliminating the antagonistic qualities of difference, then for Piri "recreation" as hunger, play, and the capacity to remake oneself, are crucial to the survival and elaboration of the Afro-Latino subject, awakening "the Shadow-Beast inside us." Fortunately, Piri is transferred from the prison avoiding any additional violence. Yet Piri's consciousness of race and identity continue to deepen. As he is shipped to the

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[83] Gloria Anzaldua, *Borderlands*, 41-42.

[84] Ibid., 42.

next prison he acknowledges: "The world was getting tighter and tighter to wear. It was like I was outgrowing it. My God, the only thing I could do that the hacks couldn't stop was think."(254). Once released from the claustrophobic contours of prison, Piri would need to return home again to see his family and his old neighborhood. Only through this return would he be able reevaluate himself and his future.

The Shattered, Shattering Face

Piri, released from prison, reconfigures his face breaking through the accumulated tension formed by his carapalo, his hardened masculinity, into new dimensions of Black subjectivity. "I grabbed my face with both hands and squeezed hard, pushing it all out of shape; I pulled my lips out and face down."(322). Lisa Sanchez Gonzalez argues that in the conclusion of the novel Piri's religious conversion is to a white father figure, which "forecloses the quest to constitute an omniscient, self-authorizing narrative voice" taking "symbolic revenge on his father by rejecting him for an archetypal father figure who is as unquestionably white as his actual father wanted to be but never really could be."[85] On the other hand, Lyn Di Iorio Sandin concedes that while "he has acquired … a new mask of obedience," he also cannot simply let go of those "aspects" of the street that have constituted his life.[86] Perhaps his exit from prison, symbolic of his most extreme introjection in the novel, goes beyond the narcissistic need to self-authorize as Lisa

[85] Lisa Sanchez Gonzalez, *Boricua Literature*, 118.

[86] Lyn Di Iorio Sandin, *Killing Spanish*, 114-116.

Sanchez Gonzalez suggests, or the suspended state that Di Iorio presents. Instead, the end of *Down These Mean Streets* forces Thomas to come to terms with an opacity of being that "cannot be reduced, which is the most perennial guarantee of participation and confluence."[87] Thomas becomes aware of a relational poetics and complexity of being that ruptures a racial existence, which oscillateds between subdued conformity, violent outbreaks, and other self-destructive patterns. His novel testifies to a non-violent insertion of a face, of an Afro-Latino being, dynamically opening out onto a future. He describes a trans-figurative moment: the most dramatic example of exteriorization I have so far described:

> The first rule I broke was the one about not fucking broads who weren't your wife. I shacked up with one of the homeliest broads I ever had seen, but she looked great after my long fast. Having broken one rule, I found it easier to break another, and soon I was drinking again. Then I started smoking pot. This went on for some weeks; then, one morning, after a wild, all night pot party, I crept into *Tia's* apartment and dug myself in the mirror. What I saw shook me up. My eyes were red from smoke and my face was strained from the effort of trying to be cool. I saw myself as I had been six years ago, hustling, whoring, and hating, heading toward the same long years and the hard bit. I didn't want to go that route; I didn't want to go dig that past scene again.
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> I pulled away from the mirror and sat on the edge of my bed. My head was still full of pot, and I felt scared. I couldn't stop trembling inside. I felt as though I had found a hole in my face and out were pouring all the different masks that my *cara-palo* face had fought so hard to keep hidden. I thought, *I ain't going back to what I was*. (321).

What Piri recognizes in the mirror is the Black boundarylessness Robert Reid-Pharr described earlier, an amorphous constitution without control of its identificatory contours, "heading towards" an ineluctable social and actual death: "Having broken one rule, I found it easier to break another, and soon I was drinking again." As he creeps into his

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[87] Edouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 191.

Aunt's apartment, possessed by the "wild" life of "hustling, whoring, and hating" he is confronted by a distorted, even monstrous, image of himself, marked by traces of abjection and self-dissolution – "My eyes were red from smoke and my face was strained from the effort of trying to be cool." The mirror translates his body image into a spectral copy allowing Piri the distance to discern, in the details of his red stained eyes and strained proportions of his face, futile efforts for social power. He is shaken not by an image he is unaccustomed to seeing, but by its repetition ("I saw myself as I had been six years ago…") which has a paradoxical effect creating a jarring discomfort, a spectral portrait combining a past and future self. This temporal conjunction between past and future self set off a disruptive intensification, a short circuit. The mirror image is a ghostly repetition, a return to the startling excesses of his identity that stand before him as a confirmation or terrifying moment of truth. He has, the image reveals, assumed his father's passivity, Dopey's toxic internalization (drinking, smoking pot), and a future destined for "the same long years and the hard bit" of prison. However, for Piri this image does not act as a verification as much as rupture, an ontological and ideological departure, wherein he dismantles the abject coordinates of his racialized identity. What changes for him in this moment is a heightened understanding of the endpoint such a virtual image and lifestyle prefigures, an ontological trajectory of submission, deterioration, and death. Here Piri's face opens in a seismic resfusal "pouring" out the strategic and violent identities he accumulated. He does not renounce his past, but "*what I was,*" a reductive ontology of race that made him choose between a passive self-abnegation and a self-destructive street life. When confronted with the Real of himself Piri's response creates a defaced "hole in my face" that stands in contradistinction to the

cara-palo that had served as a hardened defense, keeping "hidden" and repressed a more expansive sense of his humanity. Thus, Piri, as he has in different ways throughout the book, ontologically erupts shattering the contours of his socially inscribed identity no longer able to tolerate the racialized options of passive domestication or imprisonment. But perhaps the most radical aspect of this scene is the recognition that even his modes of escape (getting high) and self-protection (*cara-palo*) must be transformed. What he sees in the mirror, "head still full of pot," are precisely the limits, the dead-end, if you will, of his purportedly "rebellious" positions. Thus, his "trembling inside" sets off a desire to remake himself beyond the prescriptions of race outlined by his family, his U.S. culture, and market forces. But how do we read this hole that emerges to shatter and displace his *cara-palo*? Has Thomas moved to a multidimensional understanding of his being, to what Anzaldua calls an interface or Deleuze describes as faciality? For Deleuze facialization is a systematic relationship between black holes and white walls, orifices and surfaces, humanity and inhumanity.

> Facialization operates not by resemblance but by an order of reasons. It is a much more unconscious and machinic operation that draws the entire body across the holey surface, and in which the role of the face in not as a model or image, but as an overcoding of all of the decoded parts…*It is precisely because the face depends on an abstract machine that it is not content to cover the head*, but touches all other parts of the body, and even, if necessary, other objects without resemblance. *The question then becomes what circumstances trigger the machine* that produces the face and facialization. Although the head, even the human head, is not necessarily a face, the face is produced in humanity. But it is produced by a necessity that does not apply to human beings "in general." The face is not animal, but neither is it human in general; there is even something absolutely inhuman about the face. It would be an error to proceed as though the face became inhuman only beyond a certain threshold: close-up, extreme magnification, recondite expression, etc. The inhuman in human beings: that is what the face is from the start. It is by nature a close-up, with its inanimate white surfaces, its shining black holes, its emptiness and boredom. Bunker-face. To the point that if human beings have a destiny, it is rather to escape the face, to dismantle the face and facializations, to become imperceptible, to become

> clandestine, not by returning to animality, nor even by returning to the head, but by quite spiritual and special becomings-animal, by strange true becomings that get past the wall and get out of the black holes, that make *faciality traits* themselves finally elude the organization of the face…Yes, the face has a great future, but only if it is destroyed, dismantled.[88]

Piri recognizes an alternate future depends on the dismantling of the face in order to "elude the organization" of race and its inhuman logic. Faciality is a state of becomings that "draws the entire body" not into a stereotyped "model or image, but as an overcoding of all its decoded parts." What pours forth from the "hole" in Piri's face is an identity socially "produced" and internalized, embodied in a virtual image of "emptiness and boredom." His "destiny" is to "escape" the trappings of the face "by strange true becomings" that expresses the layered dimensions of his being. For Deleuze, art and writing are the most effective ways to dismantle the horror of the face - built by social machines and institutions to meet the requirements of power - since the creative process activates "lines of flight." In Anzaldua's concept of the interface, these "lines of flight" are possible precisely because the strategically sutured face, molded by "self-hatred and other internalized oppressions," leave gaps between "the masks that provides the space from which we can thrust out and crack the masks."[89] This is the aesthetics and ethics of defacement *Down These Mean Streets* dramatizes, emerging from the uncovered fissures of the face to shatter the precepts of race imposed on him throughout the novel. Through art Thomas blazes deterritorialized life-lines of self-knowledge.

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[88] Giles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, 170-171.

[89] Gloria Anzaldua, *Making Face, Making Soul: Haciendo Caras*, xv-xvi.

As Levinas reminds us then, "the epiphany of the face is ethical."[90] For Thomas justice is located in an unabashed widening of experience; an exteriorization that makes us tremble inside and is embodied in the act of writing. Moreover writing enacts an aesthetics/ethics of hospitality through defacement wherein one opens to the stranger in oneself and thus to the world before us. What we are moved by in *Down These Mean Streets* is this struggle with dislocation, with a yearning for hospitality that finds its most vulnerable and resilient expression of humanity in the imperfect and homeless pieces of the face. As Derrida eloquently puts it: "Perhaps only the one who endures the experience of being deprived of a home can offer hospitality."[91] Thomas' novel is precisely this homeless offer.

U.S. Latino/a Aesthetics: Defacement and an Ethics of Hospitality

In *Down These Mean Streets* an urban aesthetics emerges at an identificatory breaking point, not in an attempt to describe a harmonized beauty, in the Kantian sense, but in a willful "act of presencing" that animates, through narrative defacement, entrapped energies of race and subjectivity. Aesthetics cajoles us into a narrative relationship to Thomas' imaginary life, provoked by an underlying social crisis. In this sense, a U.S. Latino/a aesthetics diverges from a Kantian notion of beauty precisely because the aim of a U.S. Latino/a writer is to chronicle marginalized experiences, to underscore negative currents or intensities which push against the racial order of the Americas. These negative accumulations or spectralities, are negotiated for Thomas on

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[90] Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 199.

[91] Anne Dufourmantelle and Jacques Derrida, *Of Hospitality*, 56.

the inscrutable impressions of the face. For Deleuze art is an instrument for creating new life lines and shapes but not, as we see in Kant, a universalized end in itself. Deleuze explains: "But art is never an end in itself; it is only a tool for blazing life lines, in other words, all of those real becomings that are not produced only *in* art, and all of those active escapes that do not consist in fleeing *into* art, taking refuge in art, and all of those positive deterritorializations that never reterritorialize on art, but instead sweep it away with them toward the realms of asignifying, asubjective, and faceless."[92]

Aren't these "realms of asignifying, asubjective, and faceless" a hospitable gesture toward the specter? U.S. Latino/a art and narrative insists on this opening up to, as Juan Flores articulates it, "broken English memories." The broken face is constituted through the spectral traces of multiple geographies, languages, beings. For Flores a "dual vision" of languages "bifurcate and recombine" into a "mixed-code" where "English breaks into Spanish" or in Piri where Black breaks into White, undermining the "privilege typically accorded either of the sundered fragments" and instead emphasizing "the living relation between them, as evidenced in the rupture itself."[93] But what does this aesthetic act rupture into? How does an aesthetics come into being from this "mixed-code" situated beyond Black and White where "we are all bleeding, rubbed raw behind our masks"[94]? Anzaldua's metaphor of "making faces" is relevant here: she argues for a transgressive "uncovering" not in order to find a hidden, True face, but to reveal a "multiple-surfaced"

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[92] Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 187.

[93] Juan Flores, *From Bomba to Hip Hop*, 52-53. Also see Coco Fusco's *English is Broken Here: Notes on Cultural Fusion in the Americas*; and Doris Sommner's *Bilingual Aesthetics: A New Sentimental Education*.

[94] Gloria Anzaldua, *Making Face, Making Soul: Haciendo Caras*, xv.

field of "inter-faces" that allow us to print "our own words on the surfaces, the plates, our bodies."[95]

As Flores and Anzaldua understand the imaginary process of the U.S. Latino/a writer mediates diasporic distance and identificatory immediacy, geographic change and faces marked by difference, subjectivity and objectification. The trauma of race and class, of a Father sealed into his blackness and, in a Marxist sense, alienated by the very work that sustains him, sets the ground for a sensibility, an artistic materiality, and a voice. Aesthetic re/creation emerges out of the phantasmatic perspective of the foreigner coming from marginalized mean streets with a vocabulary frayed at its experiential edges. The life of the mind becomes for Thomas and U.S. Latino/a writers an incremental escape into the future. Piri realizes at the end of the novel "I was a kid yesterday and my whole world was yesterday. I ain't got nothing but today and a whole lot of tomorrows."(330). Reid-Pharr describes this dependence on the mind: "It is as if the literal loss of control over the self returns the narrators to the primal scene of Black subjectification, the moment when the Black, particularly the Black man, enmeshed within a system defined by the policing of Black bodies, turns for 'escape' to the life of the mind, much as Douglass turns to literature and literacy in his struggle to construct himself as 'free.'"[96] U.S. Latino/a aesthetics then "got nothing," that is, it begins from the elements, fragments, and forces of the negative and builds a form upon which a tomorrow will emerge. Defacement is the process of this breakthrough, dangerous and inviting, pulling us to a side that exists beyond ourselves. The art form exhorts us to be

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[95] Ibid., xvi.

[96] Robert Reid-Pharr, "Tearing the Goats Flesh," 608.

shattered by the other as a mode of escape into "a whole lot of tomorrows." The U.S. Latino/a subject depends on this aesthetic "mixed-code," on this "inter-face," that folds into the U.S. Latino/a mind and projects itself, through narration, into a future.

CHAPTER TWO

THE DOMINICAN FUKÚ: CURSING DIFFERENCE IN JUNOT DÍAZ *DROWN* AND *THE BRIEF WONDROUS LIFE OF OSCAR WAO*

An Ethics of Rage

In Junot Díaz's fiction, his 1996 book of short stories *Drown* and 2007 novel *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*[97], the author explores questions of identity and justice through an aesthetics of rage. Rage in U.S. Latino/a literature functions philosophically, as an ethical response to social norms and laws. It is the emotional impetus that drives a search for justice. As Díaz's fiction shows a Latino/a aesthetics forms itself from an estranged ontological and historical sensibility, a negative and restless[98] energy that impels his narratives towards a symbolic confrontation with the unknown. For Díaz the tropes of social drowning and a historical curse signal the ineffable conditions from which the New World Latino/a must emerge or perish. In Díaz's fiction these problems are considered through an ethics and aesthetics of rage. To return to Aristotle once again, "acts proceeding from anger are rightly judged to be done of malice aforethought; for it is not the man who acts in anger but he who enraged him that starts the mischief. Again, the matter in dispute is not whether the thing happened or not, but it is justice; for it is apparent injustice that occasions rage." Rage in this sense is not pathological, but incites

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[97] Hereafter any quotation of *Drown* or *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* will be followed by its page number.

[98] For a provocative reading of this restless and creative dimension of negativity see Jean-Luc Nancy, *Hegel: The Restlessness of the Negative*, 3-13. Nancy argues: "The subject is what it does, it is its act, and its doing is the experience of the consciousness of the negativity of substance, as the concrete experience and consciousness of the modern history of the world – that is, also, of the passage of the world through its own negativity: the loss of references and of the ordering of a becoming-world in a new sense." (5).

an ethical analysis. The combining of the emotional, or as Latina literary critic Lisa Sánchez Gonzalez puts it co-motion[99], with a concern for ethics is where rage becomes, in Latino/a literature, an aesthetics. That is to say, the co-motion or emotion of rage in Latino/a literature has an uncanny effect, unleashing a wondrous energy that taps into extra-visionary capacities, putting notions of unity and masculine laws at risk.

Perhaps we can think of Latino aesthetics by using the idea of creation in quantum physics.[100] How do things emerge in quantum physics? The narrative of quantum physics roughly postulates that the universe is a positively charged void and particular things appear when the balance in the void is disturbed. What quantum physics calls creation then is in fact the result of a cosmic imbalance or catastrophe. So that imbalance or co-motion are the catalytic ingredients from which the new emerges. Part of what I want to suggest here is that Latino/a aesthetics emerges and develops from a conflictual process, between a culturally specific notion of imbalance and a universalizing, colonial drive exemplified in Díaz by the Dominican dictator Trujillo. In this sense, Trujillo becomes the positive and ruthless embodiment of a universal law, a machismo held together by a perverse violence. Díaz's fiction disturbs through an ethical rage, and reexamines via a negative aesthetics, the drowning and cursed ontological condition of Dominicans on the island and the United States. My reading of Díaz will begin with his

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[99] Lisa Sánchez Gonzalez, *Boricua Literature*, 13. While Gonzalez rightly identifies co-motion as a musical expression within the diaspora, "reflecting the dynamic interplay between 'Latinoamerican' communities and bi/trilingual/-cultural communities of color in socio-rhythmic expression" I want to extend this trope of co-motion and suggest that it is a principle of Latino/a aesthetics as such. For a remarkable discussion of chaos in Latino/a culture, specifically in the Caribbean, see Antonio Benitez-Rojo's, *The Repeating Island: The Caribbean and the Postmodern Perspective*.

[100] My discussion of quantum physics here echoes Slavoj Zizek's discussion in the 2004 documentary film by Ben Wright entitled *Slavoj Zizek: The Reality of the Virtual*.

short stories in *Drown*, before moving to his novel *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* showing how Díaz, through the cosmic imbalance of his fiction, reformulates Latino/a identity, inserting a newness into the world, something foreign, located in a spectral future.

The Disfigured Stranger

This notion of hospitality and the other's face as the staging of the ethical is an overriding concern in Junot Díaz's book of short stories *Drown*. *Drown*, like *Down These Mean Streets*, is driven by poverty and a fraught relationship to a father. While Piri's father is emotionally detached, presenting an unviable example of blackness for his son, Yunior's father exists in painful absentia. Rafa and Yunior, throughout the stories, finds themselves dealing with the material and psychic affects of their father's abandonment. The subject of this essay focuses on the first story of *Drown* entitled "Ysrael," in which two brothers become obsessed with seeing a boy whose face was eaten by a pig. Their fascination with Ysrael's face becomes a curious and passionate quest indicative of a series of lacks and scars which constitute their own psychic lives. Several questions shape my reading of the story. What is it in Ysrael's mutilated face they need to see? What are the possibilities and conditions of hospitality in such a forced encounter? And how does the father's absent presence figure in the children's restless need to see Ysrael?

"Ysrael" begins with a quotidian "errand" to the "colmado" to buy a "beer" for their uncle.(3). The beer, loud music, and "drunken voices" exhibit a community engaged in the festive interaction elicited by the summer.(3). Established, both as part of

the community and in isolated contradistinction, are the young narrator Yunior, nine, and his twelve year old brother Rafa. Yunior serves as the ambivalent participant and witness to his brother's rageful musings. This communal sense of the *colmado* stands in the background to Rafa's solemn withdrawal, "as if listening to a message I couldn't hear,"(3) distracted by an internal preoccupation that is yet unclear but has, from the very beginning, an ominous feel. What is this inaudible message, seemingly "beamed in from afar"(3) that Yunior intuits, but can't translate? The errand to the *colmado*, filled with Latino men, with the trace of Rafa's absent father, ignites a desire in Rafa to make a symbolic trip to "pay that kid a visit."(3). As Yunior tells us, it was Rafa who "wanted to see Ysrael."(3). Interestingly, to see, hear, and touch are important conduits of knowledge that the story becomes increasingly aware of.

In many ways, Yunior and Rafa are orphaned in the story. Not only has their father been in the United States for most of their lives, but their mother works inordinate hours at a "chocolate factory"(3) making it impossible for her to take care of them during the summer. They are sent to the campo every summer, bereft of parental affection, as their mother makes sweets for other children. Rafa's angry behavior is symptomatic of this parental distance: precipitated by the aftereffects of a Caribbean economy brutalized by postcolonial relations wherein life's sweets are unevenly distributed to others. This is Marxist notion of alienation at its purest: not only is the worker ontologically subsumed into the product by their interminable labor, but in his and her minimal existence the worker is even cut off from their most primal life interests, including, as we see from Rafa's and Yunior's perspective, their families.[101] Therefore when Rafa looks out at the

[101] Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscipts of 1844*, 67-83. For Marx "labour is external to the worker, i.e., it does not belong to his essential being; that in his work, therefore, he

beautiful country landscape, "the mountains, at the mists that gathered like water, at the brucal trees that blazed like fires on the mountain"(4), his response, as if resisting the seduction of its distracting beauty, is to say this is all shit. He goes on to change the image of a peaceful landscape into an aggressive yearning to "go crazy" and "chinga all my girls" and "everyone else's" and to "dance four or five days straight."(4). It is easy to attribute his response to the boredom of a young boy who needs more activity and stimulation. However, the manic quality of his response suggests a hostile energy, an unspoken and unspeakable aggression masked as masculinity that crosses over the border of mere fun for a twelve year old boy. Moreover, the manic feel to his desire exposes a disturbingly disconnected affect. His energy is not an attempt to make human contact, but has a deeper symbolic purpose.

In Robert Karen's gripping analysis in *Becoming Attached: First Relationships and How They Shape Our Capacity to Love*, Karen explains that a boy often separated from his parents "act[s] out his aggression in symbolic ways, like theft, which may simultaneously enact his wish for love."[102] Rafa's rejection of the *campo* landscape, unable to conjure the feelings of pleasure or respect that such a sight normally elicits, bespeaks the discomforts he feels with positive sensations. His subsequent desire to *chinga* any anonymous girl is an attempt to actively dissociate from a landscape that

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does not affirm himself but denies himself, does not feel content but unhappy, does not develop freely his physical and mental energy but mortifies his body and ruins his mind. The worker therefore only feels himself outside his work, and in his work feels outside himself. He is at home when he is not working, and when he is working he is not home. His labour is therefore not voluntary but coerced; it is *forced labor*. It is therefore not the satisfaction of a need; it is merely a *means* to satisfy needs external to it."(72). Throughout Díaz's fiction labor has a deleterious affect not only on the laborers (mother/father) themselves, but poisons their capacity to sustain familial bonds.

[102] Robert Karen, *Becoming Attached: First Relationships and How They Shape Our Capacity to Love*, 49.

instead of making him feel connected to his surroundings, reminds him of the parental neglect that pervades his life. To *chinga* here, or to write *chocha* and *toto* on the wall, is to make sure that his activity secures a safe and antagonistic distance, while also enacting "his wish for love." It is, moreover, the expression of a sadistic impulse that repeats his father's violence of abandonment. As Deleuze points out not only does the "sadistic fantasy ultimately rests on the theme of the father destroying his own family" but more specifically, "sadism is in every sense an act of negation of the mother and an exaltation of the father who is beyond all laws."[103] The words *choca* and *toto* publicly inscribe this erotic negation of the maternal.

This sense of antagonistic distance and wishful connection is clearer in his perverse longing to see Ysrael's face. Again, his longing is not to make a friend, but to see, first hand, Ysrael's gory disfigurement. Rafa's most in-depth conversation with Yunior, part speculation, part fantasy, is regarding the condition Ysrael's face might be in. "I wonder how much of Ysrael's face is gone"(8). Rafa asks, not really looking for an answer, but the chance to detail the damage. The fact that Ysrael has his eyes is surprising, Rafa explains, because eyes "are soft" and "salty,"(8) a good target for a hungry pig.(8). He continues, almost like a serial killer planning a murder, "maybe his ears" or "his nose" since it "sticks out."(8-9). His obsession with Ysrael's facial dismemberment is further emphasized by his uncle's concomitant discussion taking place right outside their bedroom window. Their uncle had just won "big" in a cock fight and was reporting the day's events. Interestingly, the cock fight prefigures the confrontation Rafa will have with Ysrael at the climax of the story.

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[103] Giles Deleuze, *Masochism*, 59-60.

While Yunior is clearly drawn to their uncle's voice outside, splitting his attention between Tio and Rafa, Rafa makes no gesture toward the celebratory noise, immersed completely on the negative potential of Ysrael's face. To cite Karen again, "Unable to tolerate his hateful wishes toward his parent, he may displace these feelings unto a sibling or a pet and torment them with sadistic behavior."[104] Rafa, following this logic, displaces his rage for his parents, especially his father, onto Ysrael's brutal scars. His scars function as a release of Rafa's angry tension. Unlike Piri, who spends much of the novel trying to find a way out, trying to carve a space for communication and contact, Rafa's "sadistic behavior" allows him to stay lodged inside, while projecting his pain onto an apparent unrelated party. Even the cock fight could not symbolically compete with Ysrael's wounds. The face in Díaz is not linked to the genitals the way it is in Thomas, but to a psychic state hiding or reflecting a deeper internal damage. It is not about power, as his machismo suggests, but failed attachment – an attachment severed by the consequences of colonization and Capital. "My brother kept pinching my face during the night, like I was a mango. The cheeks, he said. And the Chin. But the forehead would be a lot harder."(9). The textures of the face signify for Rafa the corporeal site of identification where hidden pockets hold traumatic secrets. His urge is not merely to witness the scars but participate in their creation and thus find a displaced outlet. It is at night that demonic obsessions are lived and spoken,[105] for at night we are left alone with ourselves.

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[104] Robert Karen, *Becoming Attached*, 49.

[105] Jacques Derrida, *Of Hospitality*, 50.

The next day Rafa and Yunior go off to find the elusive Ysrael. In order to get on the bus that will take them to Barbacoa, Rafa helps people in an attempt to distract the driver. The bus here a symbol of the mutilated laborers that it houses and transports, and the homeless populations left over, either too young or too old to work. Rafa and Yunior are consequently forced to become tricksters in order to make up for their material and Parental lack. Yet in their peregrinations they are vulnerable to a hungry and cruel world. While Rafa feverishly attempts to distract the driver then, Yunior furtively moves to the back and sitting near an older man. A *pastelito* that Yunior had put in his pants starts to "stain" his pocket and the strange man next to him offers his "help." The food stain, clearly, a sign of Yunior's social exposure and susceptibility. "He spit in his fingers and started to rub at the stain but then he was pinching at the tip of my *pinga* through the fabric of my shorts. He was smiling."(12). What for Thomas are excessive spills, in Díaz are calculated spits. Spitting comes at the moment when speech or desire can no longer be withheld.

What is interesting here is Rafa's response, which addresses his own feelings rather than Yuniors, and make manifest the reason for this journey. Should not Rafa have acted as his brother's keeper? Or have the extreme social conditions broken such ties and responsibilities? After they get off the bus and Rafa notices that Yunior is crying, he "spits" and inexplicably yells at him: "You have to get tougher. Crying all the time. Do you think our papi is crying?"(14). Out of nowhere, the father, the spectral presence of the narrative who has not been mentioned once in the story, emerges in this moment of crisis. If the man spits on his finger as a precursor and suggestion of his strange desire, Rafa spits as if to let something out, a congested unconscious of repressed feelings, that

have been building beyond his power to hold them in. Without even asking Yunior what happened, he assumes that his little brother's pain is the same as his. Clearly, then Rafa's quest for Ysrael is tied to his father's abandonment and the psychic and social mirroring Ysrael's disfigurement promises.

When they finally reach Ysrael, what stands out, paradoxically, are his optimism symbolized by his love for kites and wrestling; his new clothes that come from the United States; and his voice "full of spit," an excess of "saliva that trickled down his neck."(15). While Rafa measures every word, rigidly closed, cautious, and ungenerous, Ysrael, on the other hand, talks and relates freely with the confidence of a child secure in his expression. Ironically, the spit that oozes from his cheek is a sign, as it is in Thomas, of extroversion. It stands in opposition to the stain that marks Yunior's shorts and Rafa's personality, precisely because a stain is a dried residue that soils and discolors. Is not spit here symbolic of a spiritual generosity, an emblem of hospitality itself? Is Rafa's failure to be hospitable to the landscape, his brother, and Ysrael, symptomatic of a condition of alienation to himself, to his father? Is the stain a sign of his inability or unwillingness to share himself and be vulnerable once again?

After an extended discussion in which Ysrael confesses to his belief that American doctors will reconfigure his face, Rafa, smashes a bottle over his head. The blow comes abruptly and unexpected to the reader, to Yunior, and to Ysrael. His violent anger has materialized, the blow reverberating with the stains and scars of his own life. We are struck by his rage that has deadened all sense of consequence or responsibility to the other. Yet his rage is impelled and directed at his absent father, whose shadowy presence leaves Rafa psychically mutilated. What is shocking about this scene is that

Rafa's violence, which has lain dormant throughout the story, looking for an outlet, reveals itself without forewarning or provocation. We are shocked precisely because Rafa now exposes the impulsive violence that lies within. Interestingly, his sadistic pleasure is expressed in this volatile unpredictability. Ysrael unconscious on the ground allows Rafa to take off his mask. The result is horrific:

> His left ear was a nub and you could see the thick veined slab of his tongue through a hole in his cheek. He had no lips. His head was tipped back and his eyes had gone white and the cords were out on his neck. He'd been an infant when the pig had come into the house. The damage looked old but I still jumped back and said, Please Rafa, let's go! Rafa crouched and using only two of his fingers, turned Ysrael's head from side to side.(18-19).

The elaborate scars of Ysrael's face represent the internal damage that Rafa carries from his father's abandonment. His father (and the Capitalism that detains him) is the ruthless pig, a cannibal, leaving his children to meet the world alone. Like Ysrael, Rafa's senses – ears, nose, lips, cheeks – have been dulled. What is extraordinary here is the patience with which Rafa moves Ysrael's head "from side to side" to examine and absorb the wounds as if finally seeing himself for the first time. Rafa is confronted with a vision of his interiority and monstrousness. Ysrael's disfigured face gives him a second sight, the ability to see beyond the visible, to look at the foreigner within. As Zizek puts it: "The subject is the nonsubstance; he exists only as a nonsubstantial self-relating subject that maintains its distance toward inner-worldly objects. Only in monsters does this subject encounter the Thing that is his impossible equivalent -- *the monster is the subject himself, conceived as Thing*."[106]

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[106] Slavoj Zizek, "Grimaces of the Real, or When the Phallus Appears," *October* vol. 58 (Autumn, 1991), 66.

The story ends, with the two brothers entering an "autobus" the representation of their homelessness, "heading for Ocoa, not for home."(20). Their life itself a series of painful detours. Interestingly, their final discussion does not reflect a new self-knowledge, an epiphanic moment, but a reassertion of their negative knowledge and condition.

> Ysrael will be OK, I said.
> Don't bet on it.
> They're going to fix him.
> A muscle fluttered between his jawbone and his ear. Yunior, he said tiredly. They aren't going to do shit to him.
> How do you know?
> I know, he said.(19).

What makes Rafa so sure that Ysrael will not be fixed? That all the promises emanating from the United States of doctors, wealth, and love are nothing more than fantasy? His evidence lies indubitably before him: a country decimated by economic need, a community immersed in violence represented by the ubiquitous presence of cockfights, and a family stripped of the emotional connections leaving in its stead debilitating psychic wounds. This sense of fatality is brought home by the old woman who sits in front of the children on the autobus, looking back at them with a "milky" eye, suggesting either tears, or a disease, glaucoma perhaps, a blindness brought on by stress and suffering, her vision drowned in its own optical liquids, unable to see or imagine a future. Yet Yunior's (and Ysrael's) voice refuse to give in to Rafa's violent prognoses. The younger brother, throughout the story, imagines a fix of somekind, the possibility of an alteration through hope, will, and a risking of oneself in the face of the other. As Judith Butler argues, "Perhaps most importantly, we must recognize that ethics requires us to risk ourselves precisely at moments of unknowingness, when what forms us diverges

from what lies before us, when our willingness to become undone in relation to others constitutes our chance of becoming human."[107] For Yunior, as his question to Rafa suggests ("How do you know?"), the future is unknown and therefore open. In some intuitive way Yunior senses that in this alien moment of "unknowingness" lies his "chance of becoming human."

Hospitality then, begins, as we saw with Thomas, with the other of the home, namely a Father's child, and with an internalized relationship to one's own strangeness. Hospitality, the foundation of the ethical, transmogrifies into hostility for Rafa because attachment turned into abandonment. Abandoned, Rafa looks for himself in the scars of a face, understanding that the mask he wears can only be removed in relation to the face of another. The epiphany of the face reveals that beneath the mask lies – individual, familial, and colonial - mutilations, identities deformed by the fodder of negativity. If abandonment causes inexorable psychic scars, it also, unwittingly, creates a voice, a narrative, a story, which emerges in response to its abject conditions. It is in this aesthetic act of telling that being is alleviated and expanded.

The Transgression of the Curse

In Junot Díaz's new novel *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* the Afro-American (in the hemispheric sense) fukú, "carried" as Diaz puts it, "in the screams of the enslaved" (1) becomes the structuring trope of the text. This curse functions, my essay will argue, as an uncanny bridge linking the Americas in a rhizomatic and transnational network of races, generations, and diasporic locations. However, the links

[107] Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 136.

this curse produces and procures is an entropic one, ensuring, in its fragmented memory of violence and exploitation, a "doom" that sits at the heart of (Latin) American existence. The question becomes how does this fukú act to punish and inform, poison and rejuvenate, Dominican communities of New York and the Dominican Republic? Moreover, is this fukú the element of resistance and history that allow for the interactions, transformations, and, to use Joan Dayan's phrase "miraculous identity shifts"[108] between Afro-Latino/a diasporas? This essay then will trace the Dominican curse as Díaz imagines it, from the Dominican Republic to New York/New Jersey and back: a spiraling motion of exchange that alters, haunts, and reconstitutes Afro-Latino/a identity. For Díaz this curse is the symbolic starting point of Latino/a identity suturing and separating a history that begins in the Black Atlantic and grounds itself, among other places, in the Latin American Plantation, in subsequent Twentieth Century Dictatorships (Trujillo), and contemporary diasporic afterlives.

These diasporic afterlives, as I call them, are pulled by economic necessity to the United States, but, as Díaz's novel brilliantly shows, they come with a curse in hand that infects the social fabric, forcing U.S. society to see itself in more improvisational (and co-motional) terms or suffer the consequences. The curse signals an imbalance, both singular and cosmic, like the curve of a convex mirror, a protruding Latino/a face whose historic distortions expand and contract with an unexplained life force threatening to burst from its assigned place. The Dominican curse then is a layered threat of difference, a creolized aesthetics and ethics that promises to remake itself and its surroundings, through an utterance in search of memory and justice beyond borders (Aristotle, we

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[108] Joan Dayan, *Haiti, History, and the Gods*, 22.

should remember, argues rage is a symptom of injustice). The fukú brings us to the limit, to the edge between New Worlds. We are faced, as Glissant argues, with an "abyss" that draws us into a wondrous history and future. We must be careful to recognize that the future Díaz's novel narrates is not predicated on a mythological guarantee (of freedom, wealth, democracy); rather it sits precariously on ambivalent historic coordinates, a relationship to the fukú that assesses our capacity to either avoid its destructive properties or respond directly to its enigmatic queries, lessons, and injunctions. Ultimately, the reading/writing process explicates this curse, giving it form and bringing it from inside the shadows, thus enacting, through fiction, an Latino counterspell.

This is why the novel begins by invoking the curse and its constitutive place in the workings of Modern American life, because it must be faced and acknowledged as a force, a death drive, that runs through the social and political unconscious of the New World. The novel begins with a detailed description of what we can call the long Latino Century:

> They say it came from Africa, carried in the screams of the enslaved; that it was the death bane of the Tainos, uttered just as one world perished and another began; that it was a demon drawn into Creation through the nightmare door that was cracked open in the Antilles. *Fukú americanus*, or colloquially, fukú – generally a curse or a doom of some kind; specifically the Curse and the Doom of the New World. Also called the fukú of the Admiral because the Admiral was both its midwife and one of its great European victims; despite "discovering" the New World the Admiral died miserable and syphilitic, hearing (dique) divine voices. In Santo Domingo, the Land He Loved Best (what Oscar, at the end, would call the Ground Zero of the New World), the Admiral's very name has become synonymous with both kinds of fukú, little and large; to say his name aloud or even to hear it is to incite calamity on the heads of you and yours. (1).

The curse manifests itself as an indecipherable rumor - "they say" – where language fails to describe or track its devastating power. It is born of the enslavement and death of the peoples drawn here (or "discovered"), by a rapacious drive for new lands, labor, and wealth and underwritten in the discourses (religion, philosophy, science, history) of the West. The curse is the result of this gluttony. This "demon," prefigured in Goya's *Caprichos* and picked up in the demonic renderings of the Puerto Rican painter Arnaldo Roche; in the echoes of the African drum and the ecstatic movements of a vodoun ceremony; and in the "Admiral" who was both "its midwife and one of its great European victims" beginning with Columbus, "miserable and syphilitic", and transmogrified, centuries later, into Trujillo. For Díaz the fukú in question is embodied, in all its power and violence, by Dominican dictator Rafael Leónidas Trujillo Molina - or as he is called by Latin Americans, with an almost perverse familiarity, Trujillo. The novel starts and ends here, in the seething presence of the fukú (as/is Trujillo), enraged and waiting for "his name" to be said "aloud" in order to "incite calamity on the heads of you and yours." Why then does Diaz call it forward, identify it, claim it as an organizing logic of the New World? Is it possible that not only death, but life itself is located in the mystery and persistence of the curse? Does the fukú have a life-giving dimension, a secret stored in its being from which a future can be expressed and constructed?

The fukú seen in its reverse becomes not just a curse but marks the possibility for transgression, in the Foucaultian sense, where blackness in the New World "… permits a profanation without object, a profanation that is empty and turned inward upon itself and whose instruments are brought to bear on nothing but each other."(Foucault, 30). The "instrument brought to bear" on the fukú, as Diaz explains, is the zafa, a counterspell

(and counter-memory), which would "prevent disaster from coiling around you."(7). Interestingly, Diaz points out that zafa "was a word", calling attention to the power of language as the most effective counter to the traumatic potential of the fukú. Zafa crosses territorial and temporal boundaries, "popular" in "Macondo" and in the Bronx, and is used persistently so as to not allow "bad luck to cohere." But in its most profound sense zafa is Diaz's novel itself, a fictional confrontation that takes place in the outer limits of the imagination. He admits at the conclusion of his prologue, "even now as I write these words I wonder if this book ain't a zafa of sorts. My very own counterspell."(7). It is in the limit or fissure between death and life, cruelty and rapture, nation and diapsora, where the fukú resides, awaiting like a predator, its next victim, but also creating the site for its transgression. As Foucault reminds us, "transgression is an action which involves a limit, that narrow zone of a line where it displays the flash of its passage, but perhaps also its entire trajectory, even its origin; it is likely that transgression has its entire space in the line it crosses."(F, 33-34). Transgression then is the act of writing, which imagines or "displays" the diasporic flashes of its passage, the trajectory of Afro-Latino populations from the inception of the New World to its creolized present. *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* is at once the story of a family, a nation, and a hemispheric history, for in crossing one limit, it brings to the fore an "entire trajectory, even its origin." This is precisely why Diaz must address the fukú, despite the risks, because in grounding his text in the fukú he is able to transgress "the entire space" of the (Afro)Americas, "in the line" he fictionally "crosses."

Beli and the Curse of Love

For Diaz, the fukú not only infiltrates peoples' lives, infecting them slowly like a disease or killing them with the suddenness of a car accident, but perhaps its most insidious aspect is its effect on love. I refer to love here in all its range, from a basic everyday necessity structuring the family, to its binding role in a community, to its larger political sense pushing the limits of history. In this sense love has a transformative and revolutionary potential (exemplified in the 20th century by figures such as Gandhi or Martin Luther King who stand in contradistinction to Trujillo's explicit cruelty). Arundhati Roy, in her celebrated novel *The God of Small Things*, describes love as a quotidian, social, and historically pervasive force: "That it really began in the days when the Love Laws were made. The laws that lay down who should be loved, and how. And how much."[109] *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* then, is a love story, individual, communal, hemispheric, where love fails to take root in any of its characters, their emotional lives rendered barren by the traumatic histories to which they are born. In no character is this failure more aggressively played out than in the life of Hypatía Belicia Cabral, the orphaned and exiled daughter of a doctor and nurse, and, subsequently, mother of the novel's other cursed figure Oscar Wao. For Beli, as she is called in the novel, the fukú, like the cancer she will eventually die from - symbolic of a rage that has taken over her body - begins to work on her life indirectly, even before she is born, in the demonic form of Trujillo. Her rage and search for love combine as a mode of resistance to an adulterated masculinity characterized by rapacious excess, a hunger singular and historical, which seeks to establish and express itself in predatory forms. While Beli's anger at this predatory masculinity acts ultimately as a poison to herself and to those in her life, it also functions as a response, cursing the fukú that curses her. A rage, if you

[109] Arundhati Roy, *The God of Small Things*, 33.

will, with a counter-message inscribed in its psychic traces. If the fukú denies her love, it cannot deny her the possibility of exile, of a diasporic relocation that, if nothing else, alters the Afro-Dominican viewpoint of the past and thus, in increments, rewrites the possibility of a future through distance and return.

Her relationship to love is predetermined by Trujillo's ruthless imprisonment, torture, and murder of her father for not making one of his daughters sexually available to him. Beli, still in her mother's womb as these events unfold, is consequently born homeless and orphaned. As Díaz describes it: "…Hypatía Belicia Cabral, who was only two months old when her mother died, who never met her father, who was held by her sisters only a few times before they too disappeared, who spent no time inside Casa Hatüey, who was the literal Child of the Apocalypse?"(251). The effects of political perversion here infiltrate not just the public, social sphere, but move into the home threatening to obliterate the last line of defense, the space of privacy and individuality found in the domestic. This is precisely the monstrous logic of the fukú: it begins at a (historic, phenomenological, and ontological) distance and inexorably closes the gap. The characters in Díaz's novel are both always aware of its presence and never sure when and from which direction it will arrive. In this sense the fukú always functions through an uncanny paradox: it combines surprise and inevitability. What is interesting is Beli, child of the apocalypse, represents a supplemental element, like the ruble after a storm, which contains the curse's form of survival, that is Beli's life will carry out the curse anew, and the possibility of its subversion. This subversive trace is found in the part of her name, Hypatía, deemphasized by the patriarchal community and tradition (Beli, of course, meaning beautiful). As is well known Hypatía was a Greek mathematician,

philosopher, and astronomer, who was murdered by a group of Christians (is this the beginning of the modern fukú that moved through Europe and into the New World?) for her openly pagan views. It is this Hypatían trace that La Inca instills in Beli urging her to – "Remember your father was a doctor, a *doctor*, and your mother was a nurse, a *nurse*."(81).

Yet the abandonment that inaugurates her early life gives way to a pattern of violence - personal, social, historical - which leaves indelible marks from which she cannot, like her country, quite recover. As Díaz explains, she was not an easy orphan to place because, "…she was born bakiní – underweight, sickly. She had problems crying, problems nursing, and no one outside the family wanted the darkchild to live."(252). Ultimately, she is sold to a family of "complete strangers"(253) in Azua. Her role in her new family is as a *criada*, a child laborer who spends her day doing household chores. Beli, an "immensely stubborn" girl, is unable to accept her new lot, this social death, and begins to skip work in order to "attend classes"(255) understanding education as her mode of escape. She is, as a result, brutally disciplined by her adopted father who splashes hot oil on her back "nearly killing her": her exposed back here symbolic of a vulnerability that conditions her existence. Indeed, the scene echoes the violence that has linked labor and race since slavery, the scars on her back an almost intertextual reference to Toni Morrison's Sethe, and her near death evidence of the lack of value her (bare) life has in the community, in the country, and in the hemisphere. Indeed, Beli's subjectivity is structured in relation to a violence and vulnerability that haunts her throughout her life. Judith Butler describes this condition in her text *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. She argues: "…there is the fact as well that women and

minorities, including sexual minorities, are, as a community, subjected to violence, exposed to its possibility, if not its realization. This means that each of us is constituted politically in part by virtue of the social vulnerability of our bodies – as a site of desire and physical vulnerability, as a site of a publicity at once assertive and exposed. Loss and vulnerability seem to follow from our being socially constituted bodies, attached to others, at risk of losing those attachments, exposed to others, at risk of violence by virtue of that exposure."(20). However, Beli's Hypatían trace pushes the limits of this socially inscribed violence, not only forcing the violence to actualize itself, but in this negating encounter, producing the possibility for an oppositional being. The extremity of the burning is so intense that it spreads, via gossip, throughout the community until it finally reaches La Inca, Beli's grandmother. As the violence plays itself out it publicly exposes the madness of its logic. This is the paradox of power. It fails as soon as it follows through on its promised violence, as soon as it asserts itself too much. What is leftover in its seismic aftermath is a public recognition of its arbitrary and illegitimate position in society. Isn't this why the violence is necessary, because questions are asked threatening its moral and ethical standing? Ultimately, her outraged grandmother takes her in, reestablishing Beli as a Cabral and providing what Díaz calls a "sanctuary." Yet her burns forge a rage that will persist, poison, and propel Beli for the rest of her life.

Her hope and ambition none-the-less get expressed in her search for love. Two relationships in particular stand out for their intensity and impact on her life – namely, with Jack Pujols and later a lover known simply as the Gangster. For Beli Jack Pujols, light-skinned and the son of Trujillo's colonel, represents social power at its purest and most perverse. He is treated preferentially by all sectors of the society: by his teachers in

school, for instance, and even the law itself shies away from him. As Diaz rhetorically asks, "Legally, he was too young to drive, but do you think anybody in Santo Domingo stopped a colonel's son for anything? Especially the son of a colonel who was said to be one of Ramifis Trujillo's confidants?"(98-99). Jack Puljos, in this sense occupies an extra-legal position where the law looses its potency and functionality. Beli, on the other hand, is exceedingly aware of the law's overt masculinity. In an essay she writes for school, Beli's desire for social power is expressed directly when she predicts: "I will be married to a handsome wealthy man. I will also be a doctor with my own hospital that I will name after Trujillo."(97). The difference between Jack and Beli lie in their proximity or distance from the curse, manifested in the behaviors of the law. In this sense the law has its own laws - unwritten or underwritten - that function on socially symbolic levels. The law avoids Jack (male, white, and wealthy) and polices Beli (female, black, and orphaned). Isn't this the perverse fodder on which the curse grows, strengthens, and forms? In this perennial unevenness that defigures all of its subjects?

The relationship between Beli and Jack is short-lived, more a projection of social fantasy and physical lust. They begin meeting secretly, having sex in the school's "broom closet"(100) and are eventually caught by school officials. Díaz contexualizes the encounters detailing the discrepancies socially inherent in their pairing: "Remember the time and the place: Baní in the late fifties. Factor in that Jack Puljos was the number-one son of the blessed B---í clan, one of Baní's most venerable (and filthy rich) families. Factor in that he'd been caught not with one of his own class (though that might have also been a problem) but with the scholarship girl, una prieta to boot."(100). What is interesting here is even though Pujols blames the expendable Beli "for everything,"

telling the rector "how she had seduced him," and even though this incident becomes a scandal that reverberates throughout the community (Jack would be shipped off to military school), Beli, Díaz tells us, was not "embarrassed" and refused, despite being "shaken down by the rector and the nun and the janitor" to "profess her guilt." Beli just shook her head "as stubborn as the Laws of the Universe themselves – No No No No No No No No No…"(101-102). Díaz repeats this "No" sixty-six times filling a third of a page so as to highlight Beli's unyielding investment in this negative affirmation. Implicit in this negative affirmation is a refusal to acknowledge the institutional logic, which expresses its rules against what it perceives to be the socially weak; and the unjust contradiction of Pujols' manipulative use of love in order to gain her sexually. For Beli it is Pujols who has more egregiously broken the laws of the institution and of love. Her rage, acts as a protective rigidity against the institutional onslaught. On the one hand, "No" signals a dogged belief in the rightness of love: on the other hand, a paradoxical awareness of love as a manipulative slogan allowing men to indeterminately use it, while women are socially bound by love as a sign of family and faith. This is precisely why she refuses to admit guilt: because according to her she was "in love" and sex here was a JUST expression of that affect. Love, as Beli's understands it here, is not merely an adolescent act of romance, but has an ethical dimension, therefore, she refuses to apologize for the way she uses her body. Interestingly, the transgressive element of this scene can be found in the closet itself. Isn't the broom closet here symbolic of more than just a hiding place? In this inquisitional scene Beli is La Bruja or the witch, suggested, of course, by the broom, which serves as a female phallus, and brings with it an alternative power and logic to the masculine law. No wonder then she says NO with so much

confidence, she is functioning according another female centered logic, which may be closeted but is still, magically, pervasive.

This sense of a magical real power is also evident in Beli's relationship to the Gangster, a hitman for Trullio. Again their relationship develops along the same patriarchal lines: he represents prestige and power and the necessary link for her social ascension. And again this relationship is carried out in the margins, most of their meetings taking place surreptitiously in Hotels. The Ganster's constant promises, like Jack Pujols, of love and marriage act, in Beli's mind, as the confirmation that give their meetings meaning. Marriage here is the legalized expression of their love. Beli's social authorization, becoming a doctor, opening a hospital, she understands is dependent on such a marriage. But the gangster is already married to none other than Trujillo's sister! When she finds out that Beli is having an affair with her husband, she has Beli arrested and brutally beaten, as Diaz put it, "like she was a slave. Like she was a dog." She is left in the middle of a canefield to die. But she is revived, literally, by her rage. To quote Diaz once again, "Like Superman in Dark Knight Returns, who drained from an entire jungle the photonic energy he needed to survive Coldbringer, so did our Beli resolve out of her anger her own survival. In other words, her coraje saved her. Like a white light in her. Like a sun. She came to in the ferocious moonlight. A broken girl, atop broken stalks of cane. Pain everywhere but alive. Alive."(148).

This is precisely the logic of Latino Literary creation. Somehow, in the face of stereotypes, borders, and legal violence; feeding on the negative, productive possibility of pain; and strengthened by the ethical dimension of rage, an aesthetics emerges. While the pain of being human, foreign, and new is "everywhere," that pain is mediated in a

conflictual process of the social that produces something creolized and alive. Not a victim but an intensified humanity whose presence puts into question and enlarges the contours of identity, community, and nation. Remarkably, Beli uses this horrific episode to find alternative outlets of strength, somehow resolving, "out of her anger her own survival." While the traumatic pain leaves her "a broken girl, atop broken stalks of cane" it serves, also, to spark an almost cosmic aliveness and vision, an acute sense of her place in the world. Isn't this acute sense of the world what Glissant has called a "poetics of depth" where pain creates a "vertiginous extension, not out into the world but toward the abysses man carries within himself"[110]? What we have in this scene is a melding of the sublime and its boundarylessness, its terror embodied in Trujillo, who Diaz called "almost supernatural"(3); the intense sense of pain and understanding in the beautiful represented in the novel by the edenic island itself; and the uncanny (the canefield) as an experience of the unhomely, this paradoxical field that brings together suggestions of sugar, violence, and the other. That is, U.S. Latino/a aesthetics grows out of an experience of transnational "disidentification," to use José Muñoz's phrase[111], combining different aesthetic phenomenon simultaneously, in order to express a condition of marginality and cultural hybridity. Beli, in what Díaz calls, "the strangest part of our tale" is led from the canefield by a sonorous voice, the uncanny, beautiful, sublime singing of a mongoose. I quote the scene at some length:

> …Dominicans are Caribbean and therefore have an extraordinary tolerance for extreme phenomena. How else could we have survived what

[110] Edouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 24.

[111] José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 5. Muñoz's concept is important here. He argues, "The disidentificatory performances that are documented and discussed here circulate in subcultural circuits and strive to envision and activate new social relations. These new social relations would be the blueprint for minoritarian counterpublic spheres."

> we have survived? So as Beli was flitting in and out of life, there appeared at her side a creature that would have been an amiable mongoose if not for its golden lion eyes and the absolute black of its pelt. This one was quite large for its species and placed its intelligent little paws on her chest and stared down at her.
>
> *You have to rise.*
>
> My baby, Beli wept. Mi hijo precioso.
>
> *Hypatia, your baby is dead.*
>
> No, no, no, no, no.
>
> It pulled at her unbroken arm. *You have to rise now or you'll never have the son or the daughter.*
>
> What son? she wailed. What daughter?
>
> *The ones who await.*
>
> It was dark and her legs trembled beneath her like smoke.
>
> *You have to follow.*" (149).

The mongoose, like the broom in the closet, is an even more dramatic manifestation, of what I want to call the Latina phallus. As I have already intimated, the curse Díaz fictionalizes has a violent machismo at its core, a masculinity carefully sown by years of economic exploitation, racial inequalities, and gender abuse. Yet this abuse rather than simply destroying, unwittingly creates an "extraordinary tolerance" and endurance "for extreme phenomena," which, as Glissant recognizes "in the end becomes" a "knowledge" of an "unknown that does not terrify."[112] Thus, Beli on the brink of death "flitting in and out of life" is revived by a spectral creature, "quite large for its species," who exhorts her to "rise" for future generations "who await." The mongoose embodies a prehistoric animus, a figure of feminine magic that never dies, emerging to impel women beyond the matrix of violence of patriarchal orders. In a footnote Díaz points out the mongoose's transnational history: "The Mongoose, one of the great unstable particles of the Universe and also one of its greatest travelers. Accompanied humanity out of Africa and after a long furlough in India jumped ship to the other India, a.k.a. the Caribbean." Díaz concludes his description of the Mongoose by highlighting its capacity for

[112] Edouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 8-9.

subversion: "…the Mongoose has proven itself to be an enemy of kingly chariots, chains, and hierarchies." (151). The voice of the mongoose leads Beli through the maze of the canefield and into a "promised future" that includes children and diasporic relocation. The mongoose, killer of snakes, "enemy of kingly chariots, chains, and hierarchies" symbolizes an indomitable female strength fuelled by "hope," "hate," and an "invincible heart."(150). The promise of children is the promise of survival: one more generation born into the curse, thus extending its life, but also, another generation who represents the possibility of a zafa that might change the course of the curse's power and thus history itself.

It is interesting to compare Díaz's use of the mongoose as a magical trope of female rage to Alfred Hitchcock's movie *The Birds* (1963). Unlike the canefield scene with Beli where the mongoose emerges in response to a crisis, the birds' aggression in Hitchcock's film do not seem to be set off by anything in particular. Until, that is, one starts to think of the Birds' aggression in relation to the women in the film. The film begins in a pet store in San Francisco where a woman stands in front of a birdcage and is recognized by a lawyer who saw her in a court appearance for breaking a window. From the very beginning of the film a relationship between the law, caged birds, transgression, and love are established. As the relationship between the woman and lawyer becomes romantic, and his widowed mother increasingly jealous, the birds, throughout the town, become violent. For Robin Wood, the aggression of the birds suggests a disjunction between a peaceful social surface and an underlying terror or trauma that threatens to erupt into a violent chaos.[113] Slajov Zizek, however, suggests a more interesting reading. He argues that the "terrifying figure of the birds is actually the

[113] Robin Wood, *Hitchcock's Films*, 116.

'naturalization,' the real embodiment of a discord, an unresolved tension in intersubjective relations. In the film, the birds are like the plague in Oedipus' Thebes: they are the incarnation of a fundamental disorder in family relationships" a paternal vacuum "filled by 'irrational' maternal superego…"[114] Thus, this enraged maternal superego acts outside the symbolic narrative of the social, instead becoming-animal, to use Deleuze's phrase, and expressing itself via the destructive attacks of the birds. In a specific sense the birds enact the possessive mother's rage, and more generally, the rage of women, who throughout society are caged by the legal and traditional mandates of masculinity. The mongoose and birds both function as extra-human responses to a symbolic order, a plague or curse, within which there is little possibility for expressions of female power. The mongoose emerges from the abyss of history to lead "Hypatia" to her new destiny, the United States, propelled and strengthened by her rage. A rage that will help her negotiate "what she doesn't yet know: the cold, the backbreaking drudgery of the factorías, the loneliness of Diaspora, that she will never live in Santo Domingo, her own heart…and she will never love again."(164). In the diasporic future a new set of curses and ghosts await.

Oscar and the Curse of Difference

If for Beli the violence of a (white) patriarchal order prevents her from establishing a rooted and "legitimized" presence on the island, Oscar, the "Ghettonerd," is alienated by his very constitution, tastes, being. Díaz links his nerdiness to a lack of paternal model or care: "It wasn't just that he didn't have no kind of father to show him

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[114] Slajov Zizek, "Hitchcock," 105.

the masculine ropes, he simply lacked all aggressive and marital tendencies."(15). In this sense, the nerdy Oscar lacks the predatory street skills, the hypermasculinity, that would garner him respect from his peers, male and female. The consequence of Oscar's grotesque identity is a complete social rejection, depicted comically in the novel as his failure to find a woman to love him, but indicative of larger historical exclusions. Unlike his mother (Beli) who was a powerful object of desire in the Dominican Republic, Oscar has no traits that are deemed desirable in the working poor areas of New Jersey. His difference both from a larger majority culture (son of an Afro-Latina and first generation immigrant) and from his own community creates a doubled alienation. For Oscar the intensity of his difference forces him to overdevelop his imagination in the face of a cursed existence. His "wondrous life" refers to his understanding that beyond the laws and normative structures of a culture lie alternative spaces for fantasy. If he is cursed by his difference he is also blessed by an unrelenting imaginary that side steps and is trapped by Latino masculine conventions.

We first encounter Oscar as a relatively "normal" seven-year-old boy in New Jersey. Notably, Oscar has two girlfriends – Maritza and Olga – who function as symbolic support for his masculine identity. Their presence suggesting a miniature man "Look at that little macho, his mother's friends said. Que hombre."(14). Yet, as the novel points out, his power is dependent on their presence, flanking his fragile masculinity for only one week. When Olga leaves and Maritza dumps him, eliminating the feminine cover and support his masculinity is dependent on, it marks the beginning of his transmogrification from potential Latino stud to abject nerd. Díaz describes the collapse of his Latino masculinity:

> It seemed to Oscar that from the moment Maritza dumped him – Shazam! - his life started going down the tubes. Over the next couple of years he grew fatter and fatter. Early adolescence hit him especially hard, scrambling his face into nothing you could call cute, splotching his skin with zits, making him self-conscious; and his interest – in Genres! – which nobody had said boo about before, suddenly became synonymous with being a loser with a capital L. Couldn't make friends for the life of him, too dorky, too shy, and (if the kids from his neighborhood are to be believed) to *weird* (had a habit of using big words he had memorized only the day before). He no longer went anywhere near the girls because at best they ignored him, at worst they shrieked and called him gordo asqueroso! He forgot the perrito, forgot the pride he felt when the women in the family had called him hombre. Did not kiss another girl for a long *long* time. As though almost everything he had in the girl department had burned up that one fucking week.(16-17).

What is important here is not the awkward stage of early adolescence, which scrambles his face, make him grow "fatter and fatter" and become increasingly "self-conscious," but his "weird" turn to literature and the imagination. His loss of physical control, over the contours of his body, corresponds to an increasing interest in "Genres!" How do we read this deinvestment in his body and his overemphasis on his mind? The novel suggests a comical answer, a one to one connection between Oscar's early adolescent deterioration and his breakup with Maritza, a trauma whose effects his masculinity purportedly could not withstand. "As though almost everything he had in the girl department had burned up that one fucking week." What I want to argue instead, is that what his break up with Maritza makes clear to Oscar is that he, in fact, could not sustain his romanticized Latino masculinity without a modicum of violence. When he begins to cry after the breakup his mother throws him to the floor and exclaims: "Dale un galletazo, she panted, then see if the little puta respects you."(14). For his mother and the community, his masculinity entitles him to give his girlfriend "un galletazo," a disciplinary slap, that would rein her into the symbolic circle of his masculine respect. It is this violence, so prevalent to Beli's

sense of love and relationships, which for Oscar becomes impossible. Isn't a nerd precisely a masculine identity emptied of violence? Oscar is the antithetical figure to Latino masculinity and history whose identity, stereotypically, is grounded in pride, rage, and aggression.

Oscar, the nerdy subject, stands in contradistinction to a machista sensibility. He is an anti-hero whose body absorbs the violence of his culture and history. In this sense Oscar functions as a mirror or scapegoat, much like Ysrael or Piri, presenting his community with a critique of itself in his reflection.[115] Interestingly, Oscar's turns to a negative aesthetics: "…moving hungrily from book to book, author to author, age to age…You couldn't have torn him away from any movie or TV show or cartoon where there were monsters or spaceships or mutants or doomsday devices or destinies or magic or evil villains."(21). Later the narrator would go on detailing Oscar's "growing obsession with the End of the World." This turn signals Oscar's spectral image of himself, taking form in an apocalyptic sensibility, where negativity becomes fertile ground for alternative imaginings. Is he not the negative likeness of a positive masculine persona, a spectral embodiment, at once monstrous, excessive, awkward and socially invisible? His apocalyptic desires are a search for transformative possibilities. For Oscar aesthetics, at least in a virtual way, speaks to the potential of a rupture that promises to transform the hardened forms of Latino identity. The virtuality and power of the image is juxtaposed to actual violence of machismo.

In Jacques Derrida's classic essay "Différance" he argues for the negative valence underlying his concept. "First consequence: *différance* is not. It is not a present thing,

[115] For a provocative reading on the scapegoat and Díaz's fiction see Lyn Di Iorio Sandín's essay "The Latino Scapegoat: Knowledge through Death in Short Stories by Joyce Carol Oates and Junot Díaz" in *Contemporary U.S. Latino/a Literary Criticism*, 15-34.

however excellent, unique, principal, or transcendent. It governs nothing, reigns over nothing, and nowhere exercises any authority. Not only is there no kingdom of *différance,* but *différance* instigates the subversion of every kingdom. Which makes it obviously threatening and infallibly dreaded by everything within us that desires a kingdom, the past or future presence of a kingdom."[116] This is precisely the logic used by Yunior and his friends when they change Oscar's name to Oscar Wao echoing "that fat homo Oscar Wilde."(180). They accuse him of being to strange to be Dominican. Wao, here, like Derrida's insertion of the a is a marker of difference, signifying a "not," or negative identification that "instigates subversion." Yunior, one of the cool kids in school who decides to "fix Oscar's life", most subtly embodies this positive machismo.(175). Significantly, Yunior's decision comes after he has been caught cheating by his girlfriend who "went absolutely *nuts*."(175). Yunior, clearly, shifts his focus to Oscar so as not to analyze his own behavior, his own hypermasculinity, a psychosis, which covers other social and historical lacks. He admits, "Instead of focusing on something hard and useful like, my own shit, I focused on something easy and redemptive."(175). This is precisely the function of the scapegoat as a negative identity. It acts as an absolute Otherness that serves as an ontological distraction, hiding more immediate psychic, economic, and philosophic questions. This is why Yunior gives Oscar the name Wao (or Wilde) because Oscar becomes the substitute for Awilda's wildness, her open rage at his infidelity socially humiliating Yunior. Difference, as Derrida puts it, "threatens everything in us that desires a Kingdom," or in Yunior's sense the conflation of machismo with Dominican identity.

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[116] Jacques Derrida, "Différance" in *Margins of Philosophy*, 21-22.

The failure to rehabilitate Oscar drives him, in a Conradian and Cesairian, gesture south to the Dominican Republic, to the heart of the cursed native land, for what seems an innocent summer trip, but turns out to be a doomed love affair. Oscar falls in love with Ybón, his grandmother's next door neighbor and community prostitute. If the nerd is a figure who has emptied himself of an identificatory violence, thus becoming its communal receptacle, then the prostitute is the woman who has blocked love, using her body instead for financial subsistence. What they have in common, of course, is their positions of absolute difference in the community, the scapegoat upon which traditional identities can parasitically live. Beli and La Inca object to his purported new love: "Do you know that woman's a Puta?"(282). Yet for Oscar, Ybón stood for more than just a relationship, she was someone who looked beyond his flaws and made him feel, like a man. In his mind she became his last hope, a projection so powerful that only death could ensue from its impossibility. As the narrator points out: "Ybón, he was sure, was the Higher Power's last-ditch attempt to put him back on the proper path to Dominican male-itude."(283).

As I pointed out earlier, for Oscar alienation was doubled: he was black and poor; awkward and smart; loveless and foreign. His trip to the Dominican Republic confirms his doubled alienation for there too his lack of power, of machismo makes even a rudimentary love something beyond his reach. For Oscar his positive love turns into a negative death-drive, a search for identity in a heroic death. Oscar's pursuit of Ybón ignores and is drawn to the fact that she is dating a Captain of the police force, the figure of machismo brought to its endpoint – his violent potential legitimized by law itself. Oscar is taken to the canefield not only echoing his mother's experience, but he returns

there twice. The first time as a brutal warning, "All I know is, it was the beating to end all beatings."(298). The second time to die for love. The first time he is a terrorized victim: "…Oscar thought about escaping, thought about jumping out of the car and running down the street, screaming, but he couldn't do it. Fear is the mind killer, he chanted in his head, but he couldn't force himself to act." The second time actively resistant: "He told them that what they were doing was wrong, that they were taking a great love out of the world…He told them that it was only because of her love that he'd been able to do the thing that he had done, the thing they could no longer stop, told them if they killed him they would probably feel nothing and their children would probably feel nothing either, not until they were old and weak or about to be struck by a car and then they would sense him waiting for them on the other side and over there he wouldn't be no fatboy or dork or kid no girl ever loved; over there he'd be a hero, an avenger."(321). This doubling effect is the expression of difference, its perverse elaboration: for as Derrida argues, difference differs and defers.[117] Oscar's promise to be "waiting for them on the other side" is a promise to haunt, a deferral of justice, a left over being which infects and menaces the curse of colonization. The wildness of the canefields have embedded in them the traces of a story, a zafa that has "no face,"(325) no sound, and no form, only the wondrous contours of negative beings. As Derrida puts it: The a of *différance,* thus, is not heard; it remains silent, secret discreet as a tomb: *oikesis*. And thereby let us anticipate the delineation of a site, the familial residence and tomb of the proper in which is produced, by *différance*, the *economy of death*. This stone –

[117] Ibid, 18.

provided that one knows how to decipher its inscription – is not far from announcing the death of the tyrant."[118]

Cursing Difference: An Aesthetics of the Negative

What then, is a U.S. Latino/a aesthetics? It is a negative aesthetics that combines and breaks existing forms. As Slajov Zizek argues, "Ultimately, imagination stands for the capacity of our mind to dismember what immediate perception puts together."[119] In this imaginative act of dismembering, Junot Díaz finds a narrative language for justice. The potential of something new is to be found in these scattered pieces, broken by rage, and sustained by a commitment to co-motion and imbalance. The fukú metamorphoses in Díaz's fiction into a Calibanian "fuck you"(304), difference cursing back in rageful response, defacing bodies of power. Caliban, in an Antillean imaginary, is the very embodiment of a transgressive negativity, the beginning, if you will, of a Caribbean zafa. As Silvio Torres-Saillant has pointed out Caliban "remains unrivaled as a signifier of the tensions existing at the core of the human experience in the Caribbean."[120] Caliban's lure in the Americas, I want to suggest, stems from his example as an alternate aesthetics, since cursing for him comes from learning languages, and the exchange of power from

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[118] Ibid, 4.

[119] Slavoj Zizek, *The Ticklish Subject*, 30. Zizek, analyzing a passage from Hegel, comments, "What better description could one offer of the power of imagination in its negative, disruptive, decomposing aspect, as the power that disperses continuous reality into a confused multitude of 'partial objects', spectral apparitions of what in reality is effective only as part of a larger organism? Ultimately, imagination stands for the capacity of our mind to dismember what immediate perception puts together, to 'abstract' not a common notion but a certain feature from other features. To 'imagine' means to imagine a partial object without its body, a colour without shape, a shape without…"

[120] Silvio Torres-Saillant, *An Intellectual History of the Caribbean*, 200.

stealing and reformulating the oppressors books. Díaz's fiction is an extension of this cursing, of this stealing, of this negative embodiment that, in relation to itself, attempts to find, through work and artisitic form, traces of freedom. Through a negative aesthetics Díaz opens up the everyday to the historical, surface realities to the abyss, and thus allows for an infinite exposure to difference. This is an ethics of love.

CHAPTER THREE

WONDROUS WOUNDEDNESS: ARCHIVAL CREOLIZATIONS IN DEREK WALCOTT'S *OMEROS*

Restorative Identities: Creole Poetics

In *Omeros* by Derek Walcott, the complex question of creoleness, its sinuous and violent crossings, its unsettling historical emergences, its epistemological alterations, is closely explored through an Epic poem and narrated by several interweaving voices unfurling a nuanced historicity of the haunting opacities[121] of Caribbean identity. In interesting ways, for Walcott, like Toni Morrison, the act of literary reconstruction is linked to an archeological process wherein a writer imaginatively examines both the slight hints and traces that remain, as well as the harder artifacts, exhuming untold stories out of mnemonic fragments.[122] Or as Derek Walcott put it in his 1992 Nobel Prize Lecture, "The Antilles: Fragments of Epic Memory": "Antillean art is this restoration of our shattered histories, our shards of vocabulary, our archipelago becoming a synonym for pieces broken off from the original continent."[123] Epic memory for Walcott is inextricably linked to an impossible "synonym," an unceasing archeological mode of "restoration" and remembrance. In this sense, Walcott's poetry is a productive attempt to

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[121] I am referring here to Glissant's notion of opacity. He argues in *Poetics of Relation*: "This means returning to the opacities, which produce every exception, are propelled by every divergence, and live through becoming involved not with projects but with the reflected density of existences."(195).

[122] Toni Morisson, 1990. "The Site of Memory." In *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*, 299-305.

[123] Derek Walcott. 1998. *What the Twilight Says*, 69.

account for these proliferating "shards" of the Black Atlantic, to translate mnemonic clues from which the Caribbean poet must restate the stories of a murmuring, invisible past. To further extend this trope of archeology, let me suggest that Walcott's process of writing, his site of memory if you will, is similar to the restorative process of anastylosis. The principle of anastylosis takes surviving objects found in archeological digs and attempts to reconstitute them through a series of "minimal interventions" such as the "visible filling of gaps" or through the "integration of segments added for purposes of stability and security."[124] In short, the missing fragments from the unearthed object, whether avase or a cup, are added in order to give the object a sense of fullness and illustrate its possible functions. This filling in process combines imaginative, mnemonic, and first hand knowledge. Walcott's writing then can be productively described as a linguistic act of anastylosis, a dynamic procedure of historical and narrative reconstruction that takes "pieces broken off" by years of cross cultural exchange and creatively fills in the disjunctive gaps, re-integrating segments into a heterogeneous whole.

Walcott's younger contemporary Patrick Chamoiseau, in his impactful novel *Texaco*, also sees the writing process in terms of a recovery of "shards": "Confounded before the responsibility of such treasures, I numbered them, notebook by notebook, page by page, I taped the torn pages together, sewed back the loose sheets, and wrapped each one in a plastic cover."[125] These hermeneutic processes for Walcott are "echoes" of word and landscape. "Turn the page. Blank Winter. The obliteration/ of nouns fading into echoes,

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[124] Anne Ramsden, "Anastylosis." In *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical H*umanities 7,1 April 2002.

[125] Patrick Chamoiseau , *Texaco*, 387.

the alphabet/ of scribbling branches."(218).[126] In Walcott's work, like Chamoiseau's, an imaginary anastylosis is the re-composition of the word, page and Caribbean landscape. The result is not a monument of transcendence or transparency, but instead an epic text chronicling creolized languages, customs, and modes of being. Thus, Walcott employs the epic, as Susan Stewart points out, to overturn conventions[127] by moving the focus of his narrative from traditional concerns with war, "heroic destiny, originary myth, and national identity,"[128] to the distortions of history, symbolized by the wild oscillations of creolization. In *Omeros* language and culture are creolized, bearing witness to a "confounded" *differance* within, an exhilarating and painful composite, poignantly put together by years of brutal communication, contact and resistance. Similar to his metaphorical vase, the word in *Omeros* is cracked by various continental influences, accents, tongues, world views, religions, regions, migrations and historical moments. *Omeros* chronicles a culturally disjointed story, each word poetically scratching the other, re-furbished by the authorial artist/archeologist into symbiotic "shards of vocabulary."

Creole language and culture then, is at the foreground of Walcott's imaginative project, both as a linguistic form of Caribbean interaction (as Raphael Confiant states: "We write *spoken* words"[129] or as Chamoiseau, Confiant, and Bernabe argue "Creoleness

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[126] Derek Walcott, *Omero*s, 218. All *Omeros* quotations hereafter will be followed by the page number only.

[127] Susan Stewart, *Poetry and the Fate of the Senses*, 315.

[128] Ibid., 309.

[129] Lucien Taylor, "Creolite Bites: A Conversation with Patrick Chamoiseau, Raphael Confiant and Jean Bernabe." *Transition*, issue 74

is" an "*interactional* or *transactional aggregate*…"[130]); and as a supersyncretic logic, a philosophical repositioning linked not to a congealed, empirical rationalism where close observation forces the world to falsely yield eternal secrets, untangling and ordering its ambiguity, but to a misty, deeply paradoxical sensibility of the sea. Antonio Benitez-Rojo eloquently describes this logic: "But the culture of the Caribbean, at least in its most distinctive aspect, is not terrestial but aquatic, a sinuous culture where time unfolds irregularly and resists being captured by the cycles of clock and calendar. The Caribbean is the natural and indispensable realm of marine currents, of waves, of folds and double-folds, of fluidity and sinuosity. It is, in the final analysis, a culture of the meta-archipelago: a chaos that returns, a detour without a purpose, a continual flow of paradoxes; it is a feed-back machine with asymmetrical workings, like the sea, the wind, the clouds, the uncanny novel, the food chain, the music of Malaya, Godel's theorem and fractal mathematics."[131] It is the sea as actual and symbolic conduit of varying identificatory elements, a fluid sensory space where the rigid ambitions of colonial organizers unwittingly melt and meld into a "newfound diversity."[132] Within such a logic the certainties of power, Whiteness, Christianity, and Capital - in *Omeros* called the "afterglow of an empire"(227) - are metamorphosed into a destabilized and vertiginous "question to be lived."[133] The sea gives way to an "alluvial Creoleness",[134] marking not

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[130] Jean Bernabe, Patrick Chamoiseau, and Raphael Confiant. "In Praise of Creolness," 891.

[131] Antonio Benitez-Rojo, *The Repeating Island: The Caribbean and the Postmodern Perspecitve,* 11.

[132] Lucien Taylor, "Creole Bites," 136.

[133] Patrick Chamoiseau, et al., "In Priase of Creoleness," 892.

only this in-between historic meeting place of world races (in the most tragic of circumstances), but it is also a figure of distance that re-moves populations away from the massive History of continents - Europe, Africa, Asia. Creoleness is the perpetually unfinished result, the "kaleidoscopic totality"[135] of this aquatic logic, an endlessly churning mode of identification whose fluidity makes it a concept, which eternally questions and remakes itself. In *Omeros* life and langauge feed on themseves: "…where coral died/ it feeds on its death, the bones branch into more coral, / and contradiction begins." (297). *Omeros* recounts, what Gayatri Spivak has called "a history of the vanishing present"[136] where the present is in a vanishing state of transmutation, a war (Trojan) and writer (Homer) that were, are repeated creatively condensing worldly allusions into an alluvial, Caribbean imaginary.

The circularity of Chamoiseau's notion of identity as a "question to be lived" is crucial here. For if Creoleness is imagined as a question, or a series of questions that incessantly haunt human knowledge and perception, then living itself is conceived as a narrative process whose most productive creative possibilities lie in its "numinous disorder,"[137] forcing ceaseless social and self-analysis. The forward momentum of a more teleological conception of time, space, and Being is, in Creoleness, sent into

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[134] Ibid, 899.

[135] Ibid, 892.

[136] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing*.

[137] Wilson Harris, *The Unfinished Genesis of the Imagination: Selected Essays of Wilson Harris*, 238.

improvisational detours. Creoleness, in *Omeros*, is caught within a revisionary, reversionary, and revolutionary tension. As Walcott notes:

> It was an epic where every line was erased
>
> yet freshly written in sheets of exploding surf
> in that blind violence with which one crest replaced
> another with a trench and that heart-heaving sough
>
> begun in Guinea to fountain exhaustion here,
> however one read it not as our defeat or
> our victory; it drenched every survivor
>
> with blessing.(296).

Creoleness forges a relationship between historic, economic and psychic surplus disfigured in the "exploding surf" of multiple traditions. Benitez-Rojo rightly relates the white foam of the sea to a "suppurating, always suppurating"[138] traumatic mode of being from which a "drenched" poetic process of reading and writing emerges. The exertion here is hermeneutic in nature. It is a reading whose interpretative force of "freshly written" memories, perceptions, and wounds fails make up for temporal and geographic gaps. Yet "epic" is written as a narrative of necessity, frantically elicited by the "heart-heaving" energy of "every survivor." What is at stake is the re-**covery** of an "erased" presence. I use re-covery to suggest a double movement integral to the language of poetics of recuperation and concealment. The question becomes how does one read and narrate the blurry presence of such an erasure? To return to Walcott's archeological image of the broken vase: each fragment of the container poses a question of its potential places, languages, and histories. The broken vase Creole identity then is a container that always already fails in its promise of epistemological containment, of metaphysical ideal.

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[138] Benitez-Rojo, *The Repeating Island,* 5.

If in Western philosophy an object – a vase or poem for instance - can only exist perfectly in Platonic form, that is, in the realm of the ideal, in Creoleness the vase is imagined, conversely, within a sensuous "vocabulary" of "shards", a formation whose pieces resist faithful legibility and archeological placement. In the Caribbean the metaphoricity of an object exists in a hermeneutic constellation of what Wilson Harris calls "*involuntary associations*." For Harris the mixing of people, languages and forms counters the refusal of power to see itself in relation to those "outcast." Herein lies the distinction between Plato and Harris, between the desire for an ideal form in the West devoid of difference and an aesthetic philosophy of creolization in the Americas whose form consists precisely of differential associations. Thus, the idea(l) of Creole is formed of exilic fragments, formative disjunctions, and productive chasms becoming the location of possibility for "new insights"[139] transfiguring the teleological urge of the ideal into a logic of the cross-cultural. The imagination in *Omeros* is structured as webbed confabulations, a "hollow moan exhaled from a vase"(15), "clouded impulses"(123) and lowered Caribbean voices "that match its muttering waves."(123). These Omeric voices emerge from ghostly gaps of miscegenation. In Wilson Harris' thought, the chasm is a space in-between where contrasting energies swirl into currents of creative potential. The chasm in this sense is a receptacle, Walcott's metaphoric vase, or as it is called in *Omeros* a "conch-shell"(14) that carries both within its inner space and in its outer formation, the questions and "invocation(s)"(14) that poetically drive the reader toward the living/dead. It is a generous and terrorizing sensibility of depth. As Harris argues, "I am saying that such luminosity, such incandescence, exacts a price. The simultaneity of densities and

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[139] Wilson Harris, *Unfinished Genesis*, 239.

transparencies is a 'depth phenomenon' of the language of fiction which throws up, brings up, in ways we scarcely understand and tend to overlook, continuities between cultures: continuities that open diverse content (once deemed opaque) into unsuspected capacities for the renewal of an inner dynamic of universal civilization."[140]

The "depth phenomenon" that Harris refers to is interestingly embedded in the meanings of the word Creole itself. As Judith Raiskin points out, Creole's own etymology is deeply ambiguous, its root going back to the Spanish words criado (one bred or reared); criar (to breed); and to the Latin root creare (to create).[141] In Kamau Braithwaite's extraordinary study of Creole society *Contradictory Omens: Cultural Diversity and Integration in the Caribbean*, he also links to criar (to create, to imagine, to establish, to found, to settle) and, moreover, to colon (a colonist, a founder, a settler).[142] Creole's connotations split into a rhizomatic field of historical, filial and imaginative ("involuntary") associations. The word (with)holds contradictory promises that scrape against each other in a cacophony of supple suggestions, hints, and amplifications whose "unsuspected capacities" create an "inner dynamic" or as Chamoiseau argues, an "interior vision"[143] where meanings do not necessarily act in conjunction, do not bring the word together into a sealed, messianic singular entity, but instead **relate** through a tension filled, underlying principle of errantry. Errantry as Glissant articulates it is "the tale of

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[140] Ibid, 242.

[141] Judith L. Raiskin, *Snow on the Cane Fields: Women's Writing and Creole Subjectivity*, 14.

[142] Kamau Braithwaite, *Contradictory Omens: Cultural Diversity and Integration in the Caribbean*, 10.

[143] Patrick Chamoiseau et al., "In Praise of Creoleness," 896.

relation"[144] always already "spoken multilingually."[145] Creole then, like Walcott's vase, **ex**-presses a range of contradictory meanings starting with the colonial desire and act of founding (even as it founders, collapses, falls, fails, which is also clandestinely implied here, for the secret of the founder is in his impossible obsession with foundation, a fixation that, in the end, proves to be **con**-founding). Moreover, etymology of Creole suggests a parental or paternalistic impulse to breed and rear**,** which bears the intolerant colonial injunction or mark of the master (the mark of imposed monolanguage, culture, religion and the whip, scars of Western Law and a need to re-create the Other, the person of color into a docile, if imperfect European reflection, whose purpose was to serve as an infinite supply of labor). However, breed and rear contain other errant possibilities: if, for instance, we understand them as modes of dissemination bith in language as the spreading of signs that, as deconstruction has taught us, cannot be neatly controlled, placed, or predicted; and the irrepressible movement of human desire that often operates through extra-societal and extra-legal (rape) modes, ineluctably mixing of its own primal accord. What is clear is the tropological multiplicity entrenched in the very word Creole broadens into an ontological immensity, a sublime that can only be poetically rendered. *Omeros*, in this sublime spirit of the Creole, is the poetic study of a "heaven whose cosmology had been erased" and imaginatively reconstituted as a traumatic, economic and aesthetic "crossing,"(113) a palimpsest too difficult to read and too haunting to ignore. Thus, the etymology of the word Creole extends into the cultural substrates of

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[144] Edouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation,* 18.

[145] Ibid, 19.

the Americas, pulling us back into a history of the Black Atlantic and pushing us forward into new dimensions of identity.

The unconscious drive of Creoleness lies in its improvisational proclivity to absorb and expulse: a double movement leading to a vertiginous "simultaneity of densities and transparencies." For Chamoiseau, the unfathomable recesses of Creole can only be accessed through a "deep intuition or poetic knowledge" and thus must be "approached as a question to be lived, to be lived obstinately in each light, in each shadow of our mind."[146] Creole is not a mark of origin or mastery, an unequivocal root, but as Jacques Derrida has argued in another context a **remark**. Creole, in this sense, is a re-marking and re-mark-able concept, for it constitutes a language, culture, and history in ceaseless "renewal," in a state of unremitting interrelation, accretion, and loss. The mark of Creole then, exists not as a definitive onto-linguistic element, but as the mark of a question, a creative **question-mark** if you will, superimposed upon identity, creased, fractured, and scarred by the brutal Western insistence of a "universal necessity."[147] As Derrida argues, "…Rather, it would be the exemplarity – remarkable and remarking – that allows one to read in a more dazzling, intense, or even *traumatic* manner the truth of a universal necessity. The structure appears in the experience of terror. It is a traumatic event because at stake here are blows and injuries, scars, often murders, and sometimes collective assassinations. It is really itself, the scope of any *ferance*, of any reference as *differance*."[148] Creoleness is an exemplar, the remnant of remnants of a traumatic past.

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[146] Patrick Chamoiseau et al., "In Praise of Creoleness," 892.

[147] Jacques Derrida, *Monolingualism of the Other or The Prosthesis of Origin*, 26.

[148] Ibid., 26.

In absorbing "any reference as *differance"* within its symbolic parameters, Creoleness inscribes worldly languages and cultures into a human particularity. The cultural outcomes are indeed "dazzling": from the urgent and sensual movements of a salsa dance; to the Asiatic aromas of curry; to the extraordinarily complex pantheon of Vodou deities; to the polyrhythmic inflections of the African drum; to the imaginary genius of writers like Derek Walcott, whose creative powers of description, vision and restoration, plumb the disquieting depths of a Caribbean unconscious retrieving in his narratives what he has described as a "vast epiphany" of the creoliztions of the New World.

Rhizomatic Opacities in O-mer-os

To conceive of Creoleness is to be in touch with a sensuous energy - profane, contaminated, disruptive - whose dynamic pulsations obliterate, disperse, and at the same time doggedly hold on to previous cultural forms and traditions. Omeros' very name gets transformed in the Caribbean's perverse hermeneutic predilection for distortion and incorporation, renaming the poet in its own fragmenting image.

> and *O* was the conch-shell's invocation, *mer* was
> both mother and sea in our Antillean patois,
> *os*, a grey bone, and the white surf as it crashes
>
> and spreads its sibilant collar on a lace shore.
> Omeros was the crunch of dry leaves, and the washes
> that echoed from a cave-mouth when the tide was ebbed.(14).

O-mer-os, like Walcott's vase, is expressed metonymically, broken by its syllabic emphasis into "echoed" (per)forms, each piece suggesting a different associative possibility. I highlight "per" to call attention to a splintering intensity (per meaning, according to the *American Heritage College Dictionary*, "thoroughly, completely,

intensely") with which Creoleness enacts cultural translation. Form, which means to furnish in Latin, is in the Caribbean iteration of Omeros cracked into a series of interlocking intensities (or dissenting per-forms/versions/verses) that "crashes and spreads." The name is expressed through a jagged tongue, a primal "cave-mouth", awkwardly accented by cultural *differance*. Enunciation here is a negotiation of times, spaces, and histories, condensed and diluted into a "conch-shell's invocation" uttered by the sea as unconscious. The "O" is a point zero, a vanishing point, a trace of the invisible that emerges – in the "sibilant" sounds of a voice, the uncanny vibrations of a drum, the mnemonic "washes" of the sea - even as it disappears. As Derrida argues, "Since the trace is not a presence but the simulacrum of a presence that dislocates itself, refers itself, it properly has no site – erasure belongs to its structure. And not only the erasure which must always be able to overtake it…but also the erasure which constitutes it from the outset as a trace, makes it emerge from itself in its production."[149] O-mer-os is summoned by Walcott, not as a monument, or an unadulterated presence/authority, but as a "simulacrum", as "lace(d)" images and memories to be racially forged in a New World "Antillean patois." It is this "Antillean" intonation of *mer* where primal names "mother and sea" pour forth as traumatic reminders of what is lost (Africa/slavery/history) and what is dynamically engendered. The *os* echoes and erases the beginning of the name, as the *O* that initially stood alone is pluralized *os* by a newfangled diversity, a contemporary "shore" whose currents ebb and expand, into the weave of Creoleness. O-mer-os is metamorphosed through contact with Creole. The poet and poetry are restaged: O-mer-os is/as Cre-ole-ness. O-mer-os splits into a subjectivity of variance, a performance of a

[149] Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, 24.

condensed tongue. As Fred Moten argues in his text *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*, "While subjectivity is defined by the subject's possession of itself and its objects, it is troubled by a dispossessive force objects exert such that the subject seems to be possessed – infused, deformed – by the object its possess."[150] Omeros is a possession both in the Capitalist sense of poem/poet as marketable object, and in the Afro-religious notion, an ancestral figure that takes possession of our senses through invocation, flooding our perceptive consciousness, our feeling of the immediate, and connecting us to the "dispossessive forces" – worlds, times, and spaces – which Creole subjectivity consists of.

Achilles describes his world as an irrevocable and unstable interrelation "the interlacing branches of their river-rooted lives/ as intricately as the mangrove roots."(140). The "proper place" for him "lay in unsettlement"(140), in a "joined babble"(136) where names, languages, customs emerge and are forgotten. Giles Delueze and Felix Guattari describe the rhizome's labyrinthine propensities:

> A rhizome ceaselessly establishes connections between semiotic chains, organizations of power, and circumstances relative to the arts, sciences, social struggles. A semiotic chain is like a tuber agglomerating very diverse acts, not only linguistic, but also perceptive, mimetic, gestural, and cognitive: there is no language in itself, nor are there any linguistic universals, only a throng of dialects, patois, slangs, and specialized languages. There is no ideal speaker-listener, any more than there is a homogenous linguistic community. Language is, in Weinreich's words, "an essentially heterogeneous reality." There is no mother tongue, only a power takeover by a dominant language within a political multiplicity. Language stabilizes around a parish, a bishopric, a capital. It forms a bulb. It evolves by subterranean stems and flows, along river valleys or train tracks; it spreads like a patch of oil.[151]

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[150] Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition,* 1.

The rhizome as Delueze and Guattari express it defies genealogy. It is language without beginnings. Or put another way, it is an entity without a proper name, singular origin or exact memory. What is established – and here again the foundering foundation suggested in Creoleness becomes apparent – is a system or logic of "connection" that combines entropic repetition[152] and shifting energies, that erode and renew identificatory properties. Conversely, an unconscious or memory is established – political, historical, economic, linguistic – whose unrelenting grasp of traditions is always already part of its reconstitution. This tension between appropriating old forms even as they are corrupted, is part of a Caribbean polyrhythmic process, a network that "evolves by subterranean stems and flows", transforming Western ontological investments from the "fact" of identity or "blackness", as Fanon puts it, into an ARTi-fact of "multiplicity." As Achilles reflects on the land the depth of language and history begin to reveal themselves, "one of those Saturdays that contain centuries,/ when the strata of history layered underheel,/ which earth sometimes flashes with its mineral signs,/ can lie in a quartz." ARTi-fact in this sense demands imaginative reconstructions of (slave) (hi)stories violently buried in a land and language throbbing with "subterranean" scars, marking incorrigible existences. Human layers are carefully veiled by anxious coats of colonial power/knowledge, which in *Omeros*, are disrupted by the earth and word, poetically exhuming a spatial and temporal rhizome "contain(ing) centuries" in uncanny "flashes." In *Omeros* the fact of art is an "agglomerating" movement toward opacity. "Signs" of the dead are densely

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[151] Giles Delueze and Feliz Guattri, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, 7.

[152] Antonio Benitez-Rojo, *Repeating Island*, 3.

"layered underheel", tapping into a "dispossessive force" to return to Fred Moten's phrase, of ancestral energies seeping through bodies as rem(a)inders of subjects, times, and geographies in ceaseless relation.

> …….Gradually, Achille
> found History that morning. Near the hedge, the tines
> of the rake in the dead leaves grated on some stone,
> so he crouched to uproot the obstruction. He saw
>
> deep marks in the rock that froze his fingers to bone.
> The features incised there glared back at his horror
> from its disturbed grave. A face that a child will draw:
>
> blank circles for eyes, a straight line down for the nose,
> a slit for a mouth, but the expression angrier
> as Achille's palm brushed of centuries of repose.
>
> A thousand archeologists started screaming
> as Achille wrenched out the totem, then hurled it far
> over the oleander hedge. It lay dreaming
>
> on one cheek in the spear-grass, but that act of fear
> multiplied the lances on his scalp. Stone faced souls
> peered with their lizard eyes through the pomme-Arac tree,
>
> then turned from their bonfire. Instantly, like moles,
> or mole crickets in the shadow of History,
> the artifacts burrowed deeper into their holes. (163-164).

Achilles "gradually" uncovers H/history strewn in the crevices of a landscape pregnant with unexpected vestiges of the past. The gradual pace speaks of the dream or nightmare state necessary for such a recovery. History is "found"(ed)(ers) "near" the rhizomatic entanglement of a "hedge" obscured further by "dead leaves" - simultaneous signs of demise and regeneration. The momentary connection with H/history reveals the face of other as death, a traumatic confrontation wherein language gives way to a charged

and threatening "glare." Histories locate themselves in the very texture of the soil, infusing and obstructing processes of identification. Achilles' attempt to uproot serves instead to bring him in contact with totemic ghosts, a primal face adumbrated by "centuries of" suffering and "repose." The history of cruelty is exposed in the unyielding anger of its "expression", at its untimely exteriorization. "Horror" becomes the only viable response precisely because what lies in the marks of the face "blank circles for eyes, a straight line for the nose,/ a slit for a mouth" are the traces of a memory and amnesia, a story of Africa, the Transatlantic slave ship, and New World subjugation - what Glissant calls the "abyss"[153] and Toni Morrison describes as a story that can't be passed on.[154] For Glissant this notion of the abyss in the New World is inexorably tied to the slave ship and sea as receptacles of death and living rem(a)inders: "Experience of the abyss lies inside and outside the abyss. The torment of those who never escaped it: straight from the belly of the slave ship into the violent belly of the ocean depths they went. But their ordeal did not die; it quickened into this continuous/discontinuous thing: the panic of the new land, the haunting of the former land, finally the alliance with the imposed land, suffered and redeemed. The unconscious memory of the abyss served as the alluvium for these metamorphoses."[155] For Achilles this totem resurfaces a historic "continuous/discontinuous thing", a death in life rendering the psychic and historic recovery, (that is, both its recuperation and another covering, a "haunting", a creolization) – the enormity paradoxically represented in the simply incised features, too difficult to

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[153] Edouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 5-9.

[154] Toni Morrison, *Beloved*, 270.

[155] Edouard Glissant. *Poetics of Relation*. p. 7.

bear. His response is not heroic, but full of "fear"; his reaching fingers "froze" "to bone" as the force of histories' "unconscious memory of the abyss" encumbered with "centuries", imposes itself on the fragility of his Black being.

Yet Achille's affective response – fear - is mixed with an underlying defiance, disgust, and denial. While this scene narrates the uncanny, the moment that Achilles stares into the face of death and history, an abyssal instant that threatens to paralyze him and us, his reaction to that confrontation "metamorphoses" from frozen terror to a defacing "act" of aggression. His violence is sudden and sacrilegious as he "wrenched out the totem, then hurled it far/ over the oleander hedge." He has come face to face with the intolerable and the impossible. The question of face as the exterior, metonymic representation of what lies beyond (abyss) and beneath (secret) is crucial here. Michael Taussig describes the face as both outer surface and symbolic mask. He argues: the face is "the figure of *appearance*, the appearance of appearance, the figure of figuration, the ur-appearance, if you will, of secrecy itself as the primordial act of presencing. For the face itself is a contingency, at magical crossroads of mask and window to the soul, one of the better-kept public secrets essential to everyday life."[156] Indeed *Omeros* is a poem about faciality and how that faciality (re)(de)historicizes: it is the faces (Helen, Maud, Hector) of race, gender, and desire brutally embroiled, sutured by the undertow of secrets whose invisible "appearance" insist on poetic recognition. Achilles' reaction however, not only recognizes this totemic or "primordial" face of history, its "deep marks", the scars whose power "multiplied the lances on his scalp", but also refuses to be locked in its totalizing "shadow of History." If the totem lay hidden or repressed in the land and in

[156] Michael Taussig, *Defacement: Public Secrecy and the Labor of the Negative,* 3.

our unconscious, then Achilles hurls it in order to de/face its singular power of representation, to reconfigure its borders and it relationship to the land/history, and, as Walter Benjamin points out, to achieve in desecration "its most brilliant degree of illumination."[157] This scene, in a larger sense, echoes Walcott's post-colonial impulse to reinscribe Homer, History, and Western Literature through a process of defacement, a reconfiguring of disparate imaginary legacies into a creolized "bonfire" of worldly crossings. The disruptive intensity of this defacement forces "stone faced souls" to peer from "primordial" "lizard eyes" paradoxically witnessing the "public" secrecy of being in a poetic "act of presencing." Faciality reveals and conceals a historic vulnerability that must "instantly" bury "the artifacts burrowed deeper into their holes" what it has seen into a trembling unconscious, tenuously protected by a cracked mask of identity, only to be resummoned from their traumatic and historic depths by daring creole poets.

Nonhistory of Wounds; Magic of Abjection

In Freud's text *Totem and Taboo*, the totem is symbolic of a paternal shadow whose fragility has to be buttressed by a series of sacred taboos. For Freud two taboos, murder and incest, in particular drive the rigid (one might even say, though Freud did not, hysterical "a thousand archeologists started screaming") hierarchization of paternal power/knowledge. Achilles, by throwing the totem symbolically reenacts a paternal murder, a momentary murder of the law, which inexorably lead to a found(er)ing law against patriarchal murder, and prohibitions against paternal objects (mother). Is *Omeros* not a murderous poem fascinated with fathers to be poetically cannibalized, deformed

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[157] Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 31.

and killed? Murdered in their monumentality? Totems unearthed, thrown, and resituated? I am moving here towards abjection as a constitutive element of *Omeros*, of creoleness embodied - because abjection is always about bodies, the remapping of excesses – in Ma Kilman and Philoctete. I want to think of Philoctete and Ma Kilman as those open figures of abjection, murderers of law, enjoyers of incest, characters who carry and face, without fear or hesitation, the wounds handed down to them by the cruel hysteria, manifested in social prohibitions, and assertions of paternal/European history. In Julia Kristeva's *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, Kristeva argues: "The abject is perverse because it neither gives up nor assumes a prohibition, a rule, or a law; but turns them aside, misleads, corrupts; uses them, takes advantage of them, the better to deny them. It kills in the name of life…"[158] What does it mean to be a mother, a Ma that kills, that kills laws and men, a Kilman? Or as Kristeva puts it, one who "kills in the name of life"? In what sense is killing related to life? Is the magic of naming itself part of a killing and living process? And what does it mean to be wounded, irrevocably, in the act(ion) of living/dying? A son/lover/father that neither "gives up or assumes a prohibition" but instead lives with a corrupt, creolized body? What is the creative potential of this corruption, of this wound? Creole questions swirl and expand emanating from a wounded body. The body becomes the site which the symbolic order must carefully circumscribe, legally write around, control, move away from, and never take their eye off. Yet the panoptic eye ambivalently slips in policing; yearning from its place of order for abject contact. Contact leads to a series of circular responses wherein the rigid separation of law and abjection, black and white, male and female, Europe and the

[158] Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, 15.

World, unwittingly loosens, the contours of their borders seeping into each other. The abject seduces. The law punishes. The abject is magic. The abject is law. The law is abject. The enjoyment and suffering of the abject body, its emotive and phenomenological intensity, - a traumatic scream, a blissfull moan, a poetic voice – entwines difference. The maternal - not as origin but as excess, fusion, and assemblage - is the location of this knowing. Glissant and Chamoiseau fail (even as they radically succeed) in their elision of the feminine as Creole. I am not speaking here of a simple gender reduction, but a symbolic one located in the power or hysteria of the phallus. The feminine in this sense is not necessarily female, it points, instead, to a certain human sensibility: traumatic, volatile, and relational. I am thinking of a New World fatherlessness or homelessness that can only be expressed through improvisation, art forms searching through hemispheric scars, opening imaginary structures that leak into the unforeseen.

In Walcott's terms the epistemological and aesthetic trajectory is not Enlightenment, but twilight where Caribbean artists fumble inside a barely lit darkness "making creative use of his schizophrenia, an electric fusion of the old and the new."[159] As Susan Stewart argues, the origin of poesis is in boundarlessness of darkness, "The task of aesthetic production and reception in general is to make visible, tangible, and audible the figures of persons, whether such persons are expressing the particulars of sense impressions or the abstractions of reason or the many ways such particulars and abstractions enter into relations with one another. As metered language, language that retains and projects the force of individual sense experience and yet reaches toward

[159] Derek Walcott, *What the Twilight Says*, 16.

intersubjective meaning, poetry sustains and transforms between individual and social existence. Poetic making is an anthropomorphic project; the poet undertakes the task of recognition in time – the unending tragic Orphic task of drawing the figure of the other – the figure of the beloved who reciprocally can recognize one's own figure – out of darkness. To make something where and when before there was nothing."[160] A Creole poetics accents this darkness in a more dramatic way, emerging from a history of expulsion, legalized labor, and enforced illiteracy. The social, material, and historic deprivations necessitate a poetics in the dark that speaks to a wondrous woundedness, where the "force of individual sense experience" draws "out of darkness" a spectral history "when and where before there was nothing."

Walcott recognizes these "intersubjective" connections where the twilight allows for enough obscurity to connect to a wounded past. The darkness is the wound as abyss from which Walcott reconstitutes a poetic history and archeology.

> She bathed him in the brew of the root. The basin
> was one of those cauldrons from the old sugar-mill,
> with its charred pillars, rock pasture, and one grazing
>
> horse, looking like helmets that have tumbled downhill
> from an infantry charge. Children rang them with stones.
> Wildflowers sprung in them when the dirt found a seam.
>
> She had one in her back yard, close to the crotons,
> agape in its crusted, agonized O: the scream
> of centuries. She scraped its rusted scabs, she scoured
>
> the mouth of the cauldron, then fed a crackling pyre
> with palms and banana-trash. In the scream she poured
> tin after kerosene tin, its base black from fire,

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[160] Susan Stewart, *Poetry and the Fate of the Senses*, 2.

> of seawater and sulphur. Into this she then fed
> the bubbling root and leaves. She led Philoctete
> to the gurgling lava. Trembling, he entered
>
> his bath like a boy. The lime leaves leeched to his wet
> knuckled spine like islands that cling to the basin
> of the rusted Caribbean. An icy sweat
>
> glazed his scalp, but he could feel the putrescent shin
> drain in the seethe like sucked marrow, he felt it drag
> the slime from his shame. She rammed him back to his place
>
> as he tired climbing out with: "Not yet!" With a rag
> sogged in a basin of ice she rubbed his squezzed face
> the way boys enjoy their mother's ritual rage,
>
> and as he surrendered to her, the foul flower
> on his shin whitened and puckered, the corolla
> closed its thorns like the sea-egg. What else did it cure? (246-247).

As Philoctete sits for his therapeutic session, his immersion into mnemonic waters brings him back both to a primal boyhood and a Transatlantic history symbolized by the "old sugar-mill" cauldron within which "trembling, he entered." These cauldrons have etched on their exterior friezes of "charred pillars, rock pasture, and one grazing horse, looking like helmets that have tumbled downhill from an infrantry charge" an ambivalent remnant of empire, whose "charred" imagery suggest its colonial failures – decapitated, castrated - as well as its phallic violence to the land/body. Indeed, this cauldron brings us back, metonymically, to the notion of the cracked vase I began with (and Maud's quilt): broken forms incongruently put together by historic collisions; a desired unity contaminated by unexpected intrusions, altering, or creolizing, the composition of its body and being - "wildflowers that sprung in them when the dirt found a seam." The cauldron, this cross-breeding figure of heat, mixture and memory, whose wet fever or "gurgling lava" magically melds discordant properties into something new, into something Caribbean, is

here also a double of Philoctete's body. Similar to Philoctete, Ma Kilman's cauldron sits abandoned outside with "rusted scabs" and a mouth "crusted" and petrified into an "agonized O" mutely uttering – because there is something mute, inexpressible, ineffable, about such a traumatic expression - "the scream/ of centuries." Ma Kilman cleans them in a "mother's ritual rage": "she scoured the mouth of the cauldron" and "rubbed" Philoctete's "squeezed face" but this cleaning does not, cannot, purify or heal colonialism's indelible marks (Philoctete's "putrescent shin"), rather she, through the syncretic magic of Afro-Caribbean religious practices, reintegrates their bodies into an imagined, creolized community. The cauldron, an artifact brought in from the fields, and Philoctete's body, emerging from the dynamic "brew" of "bubbling root and leaves", are symbolically and psychically re-born, acclimating themselves to the rich, disjunctive possibilities offered by a post-colonial Caribbean. Western law, in all its singular, paternal, and monumental pretensions, in its fixing desire of interpellation, is murdered in the seething and poetic waters of Ma Kilman's concoction. Her power, ultimately, is to extract from Philoctete's shin, psyche, history "the slime from his shame" allowing for the unbridled "assimilation of the features of every ancestor."[161] The over determined Western investments of God, Man, and Whiteness are sliced into partial presences, killed in their singularity, and ontologically commingled into a Caribbean stew. Ma Kilman introduces us to a promiscuous, anamorphic rather than anthropomorphic, New World notion of God(s) and naming. As Walcott argues: "Because the Old World concept of God is anthropomorphic, the New World slave was forced to remake himself in His image, despite such phrases as 'God is light, and in him is no darkness,' and at this point

[161] Derek Walcott, *What the Twilight Says*, 36.

of intersecting faiths the enslaved poet and enslaved priest surrendered their power. But the tribe in bondage learned to fortify itself by cunning assimilation of the religion of old. What seemed the loss of tradition was its renewal. What seemed the death of faith was its rebirth**.**"[162] Abjection is the "cunning" or magical cross-cultural site of the possible that opens out, through "loss" into renewal. However, this renewal must take into account the wound as a sign of the abyssal. But the question remains how does the abyss emerge as subject? What is the flesh of the abyssal figure? Let me compare Philoctete as the embodiment of what, following Glissant, I am calling the abyss and Ian Baucom's description.

Ian Baucom's essay "Hydrographies" provides a provocative reading of this figure. For Baucom post-modern criticism has been wrongly obsessed with the dead and dying subject foreclosing the possibility of the subject that emerges from the sea, a diasporic subject not dead, but changed. Baucom is interested in providing "an allegorical sense of what 'identity' might look like in a diasporic context and to map the place of the diasporic subject in the shifting waters of the Black Atlantic world."[163] Ariel's celebrated obituary hymn and Giuseppe Acrimboldo's *Water* (1566) are Baucom's starting point:

> Full fathom five thy father lies;
> Of his bones are coral made;
> Those are pearls that were his eyes;
> Nothing of him that doth fade
> But doth suffer a sea-change
> Into something rich and strange.
> (*Tempest* I, 2)

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[162] Ibid., 43.
[163] Ian Baucom, 1999. "Hydrographies" *The Geograpical Review* 89 (2): p. 303.

The newness of this emergent image gives us something "rich and strange" surfacing with bones made of "coral" and eyes of "pearl." There is in this "sea-change" a hint of suffering, but overall this change is not threatening "nothing of him that doth fade." Acrimboldo's image (fig. 3) visually supplements Ariel's quotation with a disturbing portrait of a man whose face and torso is covered with different sea creatures – crabs, pearls, fish, eels. Both Acrimboldo's image and Ariel's quotation rely on the attachment of pieces of the sea onto the body creating a covering effect, a new skin transmogrified by its contact with oceanic difference. New grotesque bodies, symbolized by residues of the sea, show the hydrographic marks of voyages across times, spaces, and cultures. As Baucom argues: "What Ariel has found drowned is not something deceased but something liminal. This mutating subject merges with its new oceanic space of inhabitation. As its boundaries collapse, it liquefies, becoming a catalog of the things that wash over it."[164] Baucom's reading of the Black Atlantic subject through Ariel and Acrimboldo, signal a certain caution, it seems to me, for in both images the perturbation of difference is tempered by a fascination, even optimism, with the new. In both images newness is applied without violence. The overriding response – Ariel models our response for us - is surprise, excitement, and awe. We are not to fret for the possibility of dissolution, because the (European) subject has not faded but morphed into "something rich, and strange" or something strangely rich. The question becomes: Does this coraled and pearled image translate for the African subject? What has the African subject changed into? How has the voyage across the Atlantic shaped his/her bodily image? What would he look like when surfacing on the shores of the New World?

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[164] Ibid., p. 303.

While Baucom's New World subject emerges from the depths having appropriated its surroundings, wearing them like a new colonial outfit, the African subject must emerge in/differently. The African body, like Philoctete, would be mutilated with the scars of his/her capture, imprisonment, and enforced placement in the brutal bowels of the slave ship. A body not just suffering a "sea-change" induced by travels and crossings into uncharted territories, but covered with the fesses and fragments of dead and dying bodies, becoming irreversibly part of its vertiginous new world identity. This is why I began this essay with an emphasis on the archaeological as a tropological entry into Creole identity, because implicit in archaeology's etymology is beginning (arkhe), and dead (arkhaios). This suggests an ontological reversal, one Baucom avoids, and Glissant embraces, that the New World (African) subject is born from the dead (shifting Heidegger's famous formulation from being towards death to the creolizing injunction of death toward being) and lives, creates, negotiates its being according to the intimacy of that abyssal relationship. If the European subject emerges in the New World richly altered (both ontologically and economically) then the New World African subject crawls out of the water, propelled by the intensity of his corporeal pain, weary from his grief, and determined by a transformative rage. A colonial and Capitalist logic of accumulation, as Acrimboldo's painting in part demonstrates, enthralls, drives and constitutes the European New World subject. Baucom's provocative essay connects too easily and carelessly the two New World bodies, not taking into account the traumatic space of the abyss, the productive relation to death and abjection that engendered the New World African subject.

Indeed, *Omeros* makes it clear that its own bodily and textual trans/position comes from a wounded "quarrel with history," that must be enacted, narrated, and ultimately subsumed under a larger, more ghostly "History-histories-Stories" – for Creoleness is constituted "in the context of shock, contraction, painful negation, and explosive forces" summoning the relentless return of ancestral ghosts. Indeed, *Omeros*, speaks from the Glissantian position of "nonhistory" delving into the depths of the Creole word and wound unfolding a past whose existence persists in cultural fragmentation and scarred memories. For Glissant nonhistory is a history in negation that emerges through a sensibility of the spectral: "The French Caribbean is the site of a history characterized by ruptures and that began with a brutal dislocation, the slave trade. Our historical consciousness could not be deposited gradually and continuously like sediment, as it were, as happened with those peoples who have frequently produced a totalitarian philosophy of history, for instance European peoples, but came together in the context of shock, contraction, painful negation, and explosive forces. This dislocation of the continuum, the inability of the collective consciousness to absorb all, characterize what I call nonhistory."[165] Nonhistory is the negative underside and foundation of historical discourse and archival gathering. These were bodies brought here by "explosive" force, denied the written word, and left to extract from the abyssal dimensions of this negativity a wondrous response. The absorption of this "shock, contraction, and painful negation" is the fodder for a poetics of the subject and an anti-archival history. This is why Creolization is a language and process of spectrality, because its brings together, through supersyncretic means, a nonhistorical history whose primary tool is the imagination; its

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[165] Edouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 61-95.

form poetry and fiction; and its subject the wound. Baucom's optimism of the new, then, is displaced in *Omeros* by the wounded body of nonhistory, the creolized subject, animated and inspired by a despair whose dynamic explorations force us to face, rather than turn from, the ineffable, to find in words a "collective consciousness" to our New World identities.

Scarred Conclusions: Poetics of the Wound and the Voice

I want to conclude with some reflections on the voice that emerges from the wounded body and history. Perhaps we must begin from the question that the narrator of *Omeros* asks after Ma Kilman washes Philoctete's wound: "what else did it cure?" It is important to think of "cure" as a recovery not in the Western fantasy of erasure or elimination of the wound, a purifying of the body, but as an altered relation to it. Philoctete's wound is cured by being put through a complex chemical, spiritual, and poetic process recognizing the wondrous and illuminating properties,an integral and viable part of its expressive, ontological economy. What is invariably suggested here is also a psychoanalytic process, a curing through imaginative retrieval, through an impossible return to origins, repeated in Philoctete's immersion into the cauldron/ and covered, cleaned, hybridized by the awkward intertwining of memory and language. This cure gives birth, or a rebirth to a life broken up by the spectral pressures of the past: he becomes an Adamic subject: "So she threw Adam a towel. /And the yard was Eden. And its light the first day's."(248). This New World Adam is inescapably a poet, analyzing and resituating his sacred associations, his distorting dreams, and the wondrous language(s) in which he will narrate and rename a Caribbean reality. The hermeneutic

urge implied in the question of the cure serves, in part, as the symbolic bridge insisting on a methodological mobility, coercing us to take into account the interpretive intensity connecting religion, psychoanalysis and poetry. To poetically cure, and poetry *Omeros* teaches us is the only cure, poisonous as it is, and perhaps here is where the anwer lies, in the poison of the cure, is an interdisciplinary and indeterminate mode of expression, paradoxically emptying and filling, a trauma from which a voice "is released *through the wound*."[166]

But the question of "what else did it cure" leaves open a series of problems and possibilities. "What else" is cured or released? "What else" is repeated? "What else" is left over? "What else" is killed? "What else" is reborn? "What else" must be named and narrated? "What else" is the Caribbean? The wound by the end of *Omeros* is a "language I'd no wish to remove."(271). Ghosts, which are avoided and denied, become the very absent presences that poetic language must search for and summon. Cathy Caruth explains: "The story of trauma, then, as the narrative of a belated experience, far from telling of an escape from reality – the escape from a death, or from its referential force – rather attests to is endless impact on a life."[167] The phrase "What else" brilliantly understands the insatiable poetic desire that compulsively repeats and describes, precisely because the "referential force" of the wound calls attention to itself in unconscious attempts to find a cure, but produces instead a (Creole) story. Desire, in *Omeros*, is for an "interchangeable"(266) relationship to memory, a simultaneous release and recovery

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[166] Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History,* 2.

[167] Ibid., p. 7.

of phantom remnants, daringly reconfiguring the language and culture of a Transatlantic people.

> Join, interchangeable phantoms, expected pain
> Moves me towards ghosts, through this pages scrim,
> And the ghosts I will make of you with my scratching pen,
>
> like a needle piercing the ring's embroidery
> with a swift's beak, or where, like a nib from the rim
> of an inkwell, a martin flickers a wing dry.(266).

In the end Walcott generates an island universe, an alter island, that burns, wound-like, as a charge within canonical English. "Pain" in this Creole sensiblility is "expected" as a sensate and mnemonic precursor of movement "towards ghosts." It is on "pages" that poetry materializes a shadowy presence, "like a needle piercing the ring's embroidery" imaginatively adumbrating the contours of human identity. Associations, involuntary and self-determining, exude from a "starching pen" giving voice to the unspeakable, yet aware of the startling gap, the abyss that separates Caribbean writers and their histories. A nonhistory must be renamed and reconstituted pieced together at its edges like a vase, stitched together like a wound, incorporating worlds, remembering futures.

CHAPTER FOUR

ALTERNATIVE ARCHIVES, SPECTRAL ONTOLOGIES: INSCRIBING HISTORY IN TONI MORRISON'S *BELOVED*

Imaginary Archives

Toni Morrison's 1987 novel *Beloved*, narrates the story of a family broken and reconstituted by a slave past. This slave past becomes an intolerable burden too terrible to be documented in the annals of history, yet a narrative that must be conjured for the possibility of a black future. The urgent problem for Morrison becomes how to write a fictional account of a past that has proved a misfit in the production of historical discourse. What becomes clear to her is fiction is the more hospitable discursive location for such an impossible narrative. She explains: "With hindsight, I think what's important about it is the process by which we construct and deconstruct reality in order to be able to function in it. I'm trying to explore how a people – in this case one individual or a small group of individuals – absorbs and rejects information on a very personal level about something (slavery) that is undigestible and unabsorbable, completely."[168] For Morrison there must be an imaginary intervention, extending and expanding the language of history and, in a conceptual sense, the archive. This chapter traces Morrison's reformulation of history and the archive positing that the imagination allows for that "something" in our American past, "undigestible and unabsorbable," to emerge in the negative capacities of fiction. In fiction the intolerable specters of history are given shape and existence, revealing themselves in apparitional fragments. As Hegel puts it:

> The human being is this night, this empty nothing, that contains

[168] Interview with Toni Morrison by Elsie B. Washington in *Essence*, 1987. Republished in *Conversations with Toni Morrison*, edited by Danille Taylor-Guthrie, 235.

> everything in its simplicity – an unending wealth of many representations, images, of which none belongs to him – or which are not present. This night, the interior of nature, that exists here – pure self – in phantasmagorical representations, is night all around it, in which here shoots a bloody head – there another white ghastly apparition, suddenly here before it, and just so disappears. One catches sight of this night when one looks human beings in the eye – into a night that becomes aweful.[169]

What Hegel refers to here as night is for Morrison the imagination itself: a negative force which plumbs the historical depths and emerges with "phantasmagorical representations" normally hidden by the heroic and mythological desires of archival narratives. The imagination conjures the secrets embedded in the interstitial parts of the archive, transmogrifying them into a fiction where unbearable "images" shoot up before the reader – "a bloody head" or a "white ghastly apparition" – revealing what in humans is "aweful." This is the function of post-colonial fiction: to "construct and deconstruct reality" or to catch "sight of this night" that the luminosity of history has obscured. This "night" in Morrison's work is slavery, rendered in American History as a parenthetical moment, a "something" that should not be named directly or described in any detail, less it taint the principles, Democracy and Freedom, that artificially buttress the nation. How does Morrison write about these "unspeakable" and "unspoken" events and the lives they consumed?

In October 1988 Morrison delivered a talk at the University of Michigan, outlining what constituted a "black" work. Her discussion comes in response to many of the canon arguments taking place in the late 1980's. Interestingly, Morrison's focus moves from literature and its place in the academy, to a spectral conception of history and

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[169] G.W.F. Hegel, "Jenaer Realphilosophie," in *Fruhe Politische Systeme*, Franfurt: Ullstein 1974, p. 204. Translation quoted from Slavoj Zizek's *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology*, 29-30.

storytelling in general. This shift is evident in her title choice for the talk, which she claims was initially "Canon Fodder" and ultimately became "Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature." For Morrison the phrase "Canon Fodder" is suggestive of a violent undertone that connects the neutral debates on aesthetics to historical phenomena. First, the phrase "Canon Fodder" "reminded" her of "young men – black or 'ethnics' or poor or working class – who left high school for the war in Vietnam and were considered by war resisters as 'fodder.'" In this sense literary fodder also echoes a political "something," the war, dead bodies, and protestors hidden in the ideological language of the state. The instrumentality of the word "fodder" allows the state to play out a necropolitics, as Mbembe has put it, for "the ultimate expression of sovereignty resides, to a large degree, in the power and capacity to dictate who may live and who must die."[170] This sense of power, Morrison continues, is found in the etymology of the phrase "Canon Fodder," which means "tube, cane, or cane-like, reed" and "body of law, body of rules, measuring rod": the image reflecting the "boom of power announcing" the "'officially recognized set of texts.'" And I want to add that this "boom of power" also has a historical dimension, announcing what and how archives should be approached and read. What is officially "recognized" is not just a "set of texts" but also a set of specified memories, narratives, and hermeneutics. In the archive death, "who must die," and the power to interpret (or what Said called the "permission to narrate") ideologically combine to elide "undigestible" events recuperated, in Morrison, by the imaginative power of fiction.

[170] Achille Mbembe, "Necropolitics," 11.

Lastly, she points out a phenomenological aspect, as the word "fodder" sounds to her like "father" and father canon, she senses, is symbolic of "father food." She asks "what does this father eat? Readily available people/texts of little value."[171] Interestingly, Morrison contextualizes the title she doesn't use, Canon Fodder, in order to highlight the interpretive dangers that lurk within a language of naming, labeling, and order. For hidden within this phrase, and others like it, is a logic and history of race that renders invisible the brutal realities of "people/texts of little value." Fodder here is material to consume, suggesting an aggression and appetite for the Other. In this violent exchange the racial other is rendered spectral, socially dead. Eating the other creates a surplus human value. In Marx's notion of alienation, for instance, the laborer is ontologically devoured by the forces of production while the Capitalist, in his access to the commodity, becomes an inflated subject of society. The history of Capital suggests a double consumption, the first is unspeakable, the laborer's energy, spirit, and life enveloped into the production of an object, the material social manifestation of value, and an annihilated identity that underlies it. The second is of the consumer itself, attaching value to themselves in their access to the commodity and thus establishing a symbolic distance from the laborer. For Marx revolution, namely, the social overturning of a Capitalist culture by the exploited classes, is based on violent conflict and reterritorialization. It is what precedes the violent conflict of revolution that I'm interested in here, in the making of a consciousness through an engagement with the imagination that changes the coordinates of social and historical realities. What is missing in the Marxist consciousness, however, is the imagination's role in this social

[171] Toni Morrison, "Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature," 123.

and historical shift. What is the imagination's relationship to freedom? Hegel brings us closer to the privileging of the imagination we see in Morrison's work in his discussion of the master/slave dialectic. For Hegel the master is, paradoxically, dependent on the slave for his identity and thus must use the slave as fodder for his propped up self-consciousness. However there is a significant snag, as Hegel points out, regarding a leftover and active negativity unrecognized by the master. The master attempts to supersede the other in order to suppress the ambiguity of himself, his own thinghood, his own relation to death. While the master exists for himself, the slave exists in active negativity, in relation to death and thus the very substance of life. The work of the bondsman according to Hegel becomes, in its negativity, a "formative activity" and "the bondsman realizes that it is precisely in his work wherein he seemed to have only an alienated existence that he acquires a mind of his own."[172] For Morrison, a fiction of his/her own, a consciousness of death and the revolutionary potential of the word. If the phrase "Canon Fodder" marks a difference in racial language from an older, more explicit "nigger" to manicured social language that has about it a conceptual naturalness, Canon Fodder, concealing within it eaten histories, knowledges, and populations. Then the negative work and labor of fiction disrupts the master's discourse presenting other social and historical narratives buried within the field of social and historical identity. This is why her title must change from Canon Fodder to a negative phrasing "Unspeakable Things Unspoken." The unspeakable and unspoken is fictionalized in *Beloved* as an imaginary intervention into this old and new language of race, narrating an unspeakable ontology and an unspoken history through the figure of the specter. Her novel presents

[172] G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 118-119.

the reader with the specter of Transatlantic history, forcing us to confront, differently, the archive, the past, and the future.

Morrison's essay, thus, points out the protean nature of racial discourse: while "black Americans" insistently argued that race was not a "useful" mode of analyzing human potential; "for three hundred years," conversely, white Americans held fast to an open and pervasive acknowledgement of race, which included institutions ranging from "theology, history and natural sciences." However, as black Americans began to define themselves, aesthetically, culturally, and politically, through their racial difference, white Americans "suddenly" changed their stance, arguing "there is no such thing as 'race'…that genuinely intellectual exchange can accommodate."[173] These shifting viewpoints on race combine evasion and amnesia in order to keep racial privilege intact. On some level, they become impossible to argue with directly, requiring instead a hermeneutic delay that allows people of color to compare their realities with the ones presented to them. Thus, as Morrison argues, "Canon building" is inextricably linked to "national defense" and "empire building" which in turn connects back, in an enclosing circularity, to issues "of criticism, of history, of the history of knowledge, of the definition of language, the universality of aesthetic principles, the sociology of art, the humanistic imagination."[174] At the heart of such an enormous productivity, which functions like an ordered tornado discursively turning the post-colonial subject with such force and speed he is left in a state of confusion, is an unspeakable and unspoken presence. A historical presence not necessarily chronicled, but leftover to be interpreted

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[173] Ibid, 126.

[174] Ibid, 132.

and imagined by an "Afro-American artistic" endeavor and "serious scholarship." Where must such an effort begin? Where is its "point of entry?" "What intellectual feats" have to be performed by the author and critic to extrapolate this seething historical and social presence? It begins, according to Morrison, in a language of spectrality that sifts through the archives of a nation finding clues, remnants, and residues of communities who impacted its everyday existence. The search lies in a bewildering paradox of the omnipresence of a black population on the one hand, and the extraordinary feat of American racism to keep this population outside of its institutional purview. Indeed the institutions themselves were constituted and preserved by this outside presence. For Morrison it is the absent presence of the "ghost that drives the machine." She argues:

> We can agree, I think, that invisible things are not necessarily "not-there"; that a void may be empty but not be a vacuum. In addition certain absences are so stressed, so ornate, so planned, they call attention to themselves; arrest us with intentionality and purpose, like neighborhoods that are defined by the population held away from them. Looking at the scope of American literature, I can't help thinking that the question should never have been "Why am I, an Afro-American, absent from it?" It is not a particularly interesting query anyway. The spectacularly interesting question is "What intellectual feats had to be performed by the author or critic to erase me from a society seething with my presence, and what effect has that performance had on the work?" What are the strategies of escape from knowledge? Of willful oblivion?...The exploration I am suggesting is, how does one sit in the audience observing, watching the performance of Young America, say, in the nineteenth century, say, and reconstruct the play, its director, its plot, and its cast in such a manner that its very point never surfaces? Not why. How?[175]

Beloved, written in 1987, one year before Morrison's talk at the University of Michigan, combines an attention to ontology, or what Derrida calls hauntology – the study of a presence "not necessarily 'not-there'" - and the archive. The "point" of race

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[175] Ibid, 136-137.

that "never surfaces" (and is therefore omnipresent, always insinuated, felt) is, I want to argue, ontological and archival in nature. The "oblivion" of race is willfully enacted in the United States' very historical portrayal of itself, in its national and social tenets (Freedom, Democracy) that place whiteness as the symbolic expression of these ideals. Whiteness, in this sense, is the universal marker of a Being whose enlightened constitution lies in itself – an impossible conflation of ideals and flesh, knowledge and morality, ontology and archive. Interestingly, for Morrison, America is Young not because, as Emerson argues, we live in the influential shadows of European culture, but because it marginalizes the racialized segments of its own culture. Emerson's ambivalent obsession with Europe is juxtaposed to his active turning away from Africa. The result is a surplus presence of Whiteness that must be described in the same language Morrison uses to describe black absence: whiteness is "so stressed, so ornate, so planned" that its presence aims to "arrest us with intentionality and purpose." It attempts to "escape" the contamination of knowledge by presenting itself as the exemplary embodiment of the human. Enter, in this "performance" of race the specter – not of Hamlet's father, as Derrida has it, not of Europe as Emerson fears, but of blackness.[176] Enter, moreover, another conceptual understanding and location where archival events happen and storytelling functions as an imaginative corrective of history.[177] In Young America the

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[176] In Samira Kawash's essay "Haunted Houses, Sinking Ships: Race, Architecture, and Identity in Beloved and the Middle Passage" she provocatively argues: "In most considerations of the color line, the governing metaphor is blood: the color line is understood to figure racial distinction in terms of some biological vision of heritage and ancestry. But the metaphor of the color line itself is not biological, but spatial." And I want to add that the idea of the color line is instituted and intertwined with the idea of the archive, to the extent that the archive merges territory and historical narrative.

"void" of history is populated with "invisible things," "unspeakable" events, and "unspoken" stories. Perhaps the very point of an archive is to accumulate a narrative of power to evade certain pressure points, pushing them to invisible social depths so as to keep them from surfacing. These spectral pressure points (or dis/joints) are those locations on the national body that give, bend, and contort the veiled poses of authority. The "how" (rather than "why") Morrison's lecture exhorts us to reflect on is answered, in part, in Derrida's *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* where the very conceptual architecture of the archive is deconstructed: and in the execution of *Beloved* itself which emerges from, according to Morrison, an archival finding. The questions become why does Morrison change the fundamental outcome of Margaret Garner's life? How does this fictional revision address a spectral dimension that exists in the archive? Is the very notion of the archive, in a traditional sense, altered by Morrison's intervention?

For Derrida the archive's etymology breaks in two directions with enormous consequences. *Arkhe*, first of all, refers to a "commencement" and "commandment."[178] It contains these two principles, which suggest a place, a "*there* where things commence – physical, historical or ontological" and, moreover, a location of commandment, a law "where authority, social order are exercised."[179] In the archive these two concepts – commencement/commandment – combine, as building blocks, establishing a logic that seals it as first a physical and ontological territory, an origin, and second a location of

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[177] My argument here echoes Barbara Webb's assertion that Carribean writers turn to Myth as a creative counter to New World History. See *Myth and History in Caribbean Fiction: Alejo Carpentier, Wilson Harris and Edouard Glissant*, 3-9. In my chapter fiction, more generally, challenges the authority of history to represent the past.

[178] Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 1.

[179] Ibid, 1.

authority, where orders, violent and hermeneutic, are conferred. This hermeneutic element becomes clearer, as Derrida demonstrates, when we continue to look at the linguistic history of the term archive. In Greek, the meaning of archive comes from *arkeion*, which means "a house, a domicile, an address" not just of any citizen, but of the archons, namely, "those who commanded."[180] Because the archons were the authorities recognized by the public, it was at their house that social documents where filed, kept, guarded. The archons, then, were guardians of the archive and this implies that they were also its readers and interpreters. Thus the archons not only guarded the house, deciding who should be allowed to view the documents, and who should be left out, but also, in their interpretive jurisdiction, were the ones who publicly and unilaterally articulated the law. In this sense, a traditional notion of the archive depended on a site of domestication, a house, and a legal guardian.

The archive then is a house where signs are gathered and classified. (It is interesting to think of the symbolic importance of the house in the United States, from the White House to the House of Representatives; the Court House to Jail House; the Plantation House to the American Dream House). For Derrida, consignation, the brining together of signs, "aims to coordinate a single corpus, in a system or synchrony in which all the elements articulate the unity of an ideal configuration. In an archive, there should not be any absolute dissociation, any heterogeneity or *secret* which could separate (*secernere*), or partition, in an absolute manner."[181] Yet, as Morrison points out, the very enactment of authority buttresses itself on an invisible other, a seething presence that

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[180] Ibid, 2.

[181] Ibid, 3.

allows for traditional knowledge to be constituted, formed, and escaped. This void or kernal, Lacan will call it the Real, is the hole that sits in the phenomenal center of New World experience. While the archive presents itself in the guise of a "single corpus" and through the violence of "an ideal configuration": the secret that threatens to "separate" it, in a New World context, is race. Not race in a contemporary context, but race as a historical trauma, an elided past that threatens to deform the very authority (democratic and free) the archive uses to keep itself intact.

Here the imagination senses, identifies, and translates an ineffable fever sitting at the edges of the archive's memory. What is this destructive fever and spectral impression Derrida describes as embedded within the logic and constitution of the archive? For Derrida the archive is founded on the violence of the law, which carries within it a "radical perversion."[182] It is "eco-nomic" because "it keeps, it puts in reserve, it saves, but in an unnatural fashion, that is to say in making law (*nomos*) or in making people respect the law…It has the force of law, of a law which is the law of the house (*oikos*), of the house as place, domicile, family, lineage, or institution."[183] Thus the attempt to establish memory in "unnatural" terms that preserve according to laws and houses has, in its violent foundation, a leftover element, an othered population that serves as fodder for the formation of the archive. The archive then is an attempt to strategically remember and idealize the history of power and forget those on the margins. It is the alchemy of this violent discrepancy between the privileged and the socially dead, the institutionally housed and the nomadic other that creates in the archive what Derrida will call a "fever."

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[182] Ibid, 9.

[183] Ibid, 7.

A spectral malady or death drive that pushes the archive towards its own destruction, "effacing its own 'proper' traces"[184] and leaves in its wake "memories of death."[185] In this sense, the archive for Derrida and Morrison is not a concept but a notion, "an insistent impression through the unstable feeling of a shifting figure, of a schema, or of an in-finite or indefinite process."[186] Isn't this process responsive to the impressions of a "shifting figure" what Toni Morrison will call rememory? And how does one access these unarchived and "insistent" rememories? Through the conjuring power of the imagination, which gives form and voice to an "unstable feeling" in the Americas, a seething presence of a slave past, whose contours display themselves in all their social and historical dimensions.

Morrison's *Beloved* is precisely the story of this fever that incites the imagination to read beyond the narratives of the archive, rendering the archive an insufficient, deliberately coded, and distorted representation of history. Here is Toni Morrison's description of Margaret Garner and how the novelist was possessed by her story, in almost Afro-religious sense – the dead housing itself in and speaking through her imagination in an "in-finite" and "indefinite process." She explains:

> I had an idea that I didn't know was a book idea, but I do remember being obsessed by two or three little fragments of stories that I heard from different places. One was a newspaper clipping about a woman named Margaret Garner in 1851. It said that the Abolitionists made a great deal out of her case because she had escaped from Kentucky, I think, with her four children. She lived in a little neighborhood just outside of Cincinnati and she had killed her children. She succeeded in killing one; she tried to kill two others. She hit them in the head with a shovel and they were

[184] Ibid, 10.

[185] Ibid, 11.

[186] Ibid, 29.

> wounded but they didn't die…So I imagined the life of a dead girl which was the girl that Margaret Garner killed, the baby girl that she killed.[187]

Interestingly, this woman, brought to Morrison's attention in her archival research, became more than just a story, rather it became an obsession that began to haunt Morrison, until it grew into a "book idea." The book idea giving fantastic form to a narrative inadequately told by the archive itself. In real life Margaret Garner was sent to prison on the absurd charge of destruction of property and ultimately, sent back to slavery. As Christopher Peterson argues, "Morrison's significant revision of Margaret Garner's story imagines a triumph over the Fugitive Slave Law that should caution readers against the almost unanimous characterization of *Beloved* as a novel of historical recovery rather than of historical invention."[188] Morrison's act of "historical invention" or intervention marks a shift from history proper to the imagination's responsibility to depict and present an alternative notion of history. Morrison imagines and reformulates the story of "a dead girl," emphasizing the dead as a living force, an entity that drives us into new archival forms. This is why Derrida insists that at the heart of the archive lies first an "impression" then a death drive, a "mute" fever, that "works to destroy the archive."[189] The emphasis on fiction shifts from an archival principle or law to what Derrida calls an archiviolithic specter.[190] That is to say, the archive carries within the

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[187] Gloria Naylor, "A Conversation: Gloria Naylor and Toni Morrison," in *Conversations with Toni Morrison*, p. 206-208.

[188] Christopher Peterson, "Beloved's Claim", 553.

[189] Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 10.

[190] Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 10-12. Derrida reminds us: "The death drive is not a principle. It even threatens every principality, every archontic primacy, every archival desire. It is what we will call, later on, *le mal d'archive*, 'archive fever.'"(12).

discontinuities of its narrative and concept "an unknowable weight" of spectral "figures of suppression and repression"[191] that the imagination accesses, brings forth, and transforms. As a result this archival tension sparks a creative process played out in Morrison: from archival finding, to a fever or obsession, to the need to revise the archival story via fiction. It is not just a book idea as a retelling, but a transformation of its original narrative elements into a story of return, a ghost story. In this sense, Morrison recognizes that the living are an extension of the dead, and her novel attempts to rehouse a history rendered homeless by its exclusion from the official archival annals. Therefore for Morrison, death, house, and narrative come together in a feverish merging, a spectral impression articulated through fiction, and reconstituting a future. Thus, slavery, Morrison's work suggests, "effectively left archives, documents, symptoms" in the Transamerican memory. "Only the texts of this archive are not readable according to the paths of 'ordinary history' and this is the very relevance"[192] of fiction here: to document the "unspeakable things unspoken."

House of the Dead

The novel[193] begins with a specific address not only to locate the reader in place, but in its affective economy: "124 was spiteful. Full of a baby's venom. The women in the house knew it and so did the children. For years each put up with the spite in his own way, but by 1873 Sethe and her daughter Denver were its only victims."(3). The novel

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[191] Ibid, 29.

[192] Ibid, 65.

[193] Each quote from *Beloved* will be followed by its page number.

immediately establishes a fraught relationship between the inhabitants of this new house and a rageful spirit that possesses it. The spirit, signified early in the novel by a searing "red and undulating light"(8) is the return of Sethe's murdered child Beloved. "She wasn't even two years old when she died. Too little to understand. Too little to talk much even."(4). Of course, the horrific fact, which traps Sethe in an unending state of "Negro's grief,"(5) is Beloved was murdered by her own mother. Herein lies the spite: a body, memory, house burdened by the trauma of history at its very foundation. The novel in this sense functions as a grave marker[194] or "headstone"(5) and therefore as the marking of (temporal, spatial) territory, as historical presence, and as a past opening the possibility to the future. As Robert Pogue Harrison argues in *The Dominion of the Dead* "A grave marks the mortality of is creators even more distinctly than it marks the resting place of the dead. It is not for nothing that the Greek word for 'sign,' *sema*, is also the word for 'grave.' For the Greeks the grave marker was not just one sign among others. It was a sign that signified the source of signification itself, since it 'stood for' what it 'stood in' – the ground of burial as such. In its pointing to itself, or to its own mark in the ground, the *sema* effectively opens up the place of the 'here,' giving it that human foundation without which there would be no places in nature. For the *sema* points to something present only in and through its sign. Prior to gaining an outward reference, its 'here' refers to a place of a disappearance. It is that disappearance – death as such – that opens the horizon of reference in the first place. The grave marker's reference is first and foremost a self-reference."[195] This is how Morrison has translated and altered the story

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[194] Robert Pogue Harrison, *The Dominion of the Dead*, 20.

[195] Ibid, 20.

of Margaret Garner linking the headstone and the house, the dead and the living. In this sense the grave marker is the beginning not only of the sign of human presence but of the archive itself. Thus Morrison's novel is a house of signs that references the dead of history through a logic of haunting. As Mark Wigley has argued, "Haunting is always the haunting of a house. And it is not just that some houses are haunted. A house is only a house inasmuch as it is haunted."[196] It is this extra-archival haunting, however, that makes a future possible for it points towards the dead upon which a house must be built, the present must be sustained, and it is what the projection of the unborn is predicated on.

The house , 124, "the gray and white house on Bluestone Road" then is a history house[197] where the layers of life – past, present, future – coexist. This is Morrison's radical intervention for unlike Margaret Garner who is imprisoned and sent back into slavery, a historical homelessness, Sethe is housed giving her a location from which she can effectively relate to the ghosts of her past and establish the grounds for a future. The house in *Beloved* is foundational not only because it marks a present, but because that present, that place is infused with the dead. This is what it means to live historically; to live with one's dead. Harrison explicates this commingling of the dead in our world. He

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[196] Mark Wigley, *The Architecture of Deconstruction*,

[197] I borrow this phrase from Arundhati Roy's novel *The God of Small Things*. Here is Chacko's powerful description: "He explained to them that history was like an old house at night…'To understand history,' Chacko said, 'we have to go inside and listen to what they're saying. And look at the books and the pictures on the wall. And smell the smells.'" He goes on to say: "'But we can't go in…because we've been locked out. And when we try and listen, all we hear is a whispering. And we cannot understand the whispering, because our minds have been invaded by a war. A war that we have won and lost. The very worst sort of war. A war that captures dreams and re-dreams them. A war that has made us adore our conquerors and despise ourselves." Chacko concludes: "We're Prisoners of War…Our dreams have been doctored. We belong nowhere. We sail unanchored on troubled seas. We may never be allowed ashore. Our sorrows will never be sad enough. Our joys never happy enough. Our dreams never big enough. Our lives never important enough. To matter."(51-52).

argues, "The awareness of death that defines human nature is inseparable from – indeed, it arises from – our awareness that we are not self-authored, that we follow in the footsteps of the dead. Everywhere one looks across the spectrum of human cultures one finds the foundational authority of the predecessor."[198] The recognition at the heart of *Beloved* is that the authorship of a self, community, history begins with a specified and even ritualistic attention to the dead. Morrison invocation of the dead is reminiscent of Afro-religious processes, wherein New World African subjects created a syncretic religion in order to hold on to their dead – the gods, significantly, are made up of dead ancestors. What is possession in Vodoun for example: it is an ancestral spirit entering the body, mounting a subject, and using that body to merge the dead and the living, but also to give the living instruction for the future. Possession then is a ritual that taps into the fever of the archive. *Beloved*, I want to argue functions through a similar logic, where the ghost of a dead slave conditions traumatic memory creating history outside of the hegemonic constraints of the archive. The very word human, as Vico has argued, means to bury. Thus, Morrison narrates the process of humanization from death to burial to house to haunting.

It is interesting to think through Robert Harrison's question "what is a house?" He begins with the grave itself as the foundational marker. Harrison points out that a grave also means sign in Greek, thus the grave was linked to "the source of signification itself." The grave then refers to a place where humanity founds itself, a "self-reference," but only through "disappearance." As I have noted, the grave is the sign of human disappearance, the visual manifestation of death, that acts as the ground upon which a house is built. This is why a house must be haunted: because it is also, in a sense, the

[198] Harrison, *The Dominion of the Dead*, ix.

extension and enlargement of the tombstone itself. The house literally accommodates the dead, in so far that it is also a tombstone, and the living. Harrison situates the house between the dead and unborn: "The domestic interior is thus in some fundamental sense mortuary, inhabited not only by the dead but also by the unborn in their projective potentiality. It is because we are the ligature between the dead and the unborn – and not because we are vulnerable to the elements and predators – that we humans require housing. All of which corroborates the following proposition: A house is a place of insideness in the openness of nature where the dead, through the care of the living, perpetuate their afterlives and promote the interests of the unborn."[199] This sense of an insideness, where the dead is cared for by the living to "perpetuate their afterlives" and, I would add, to root the living in the dead past and unborn future, is powerfully exemplified in *Beloved* when Denver sees her Sethe praying in her bedroom with a spirit dressed in white sitting next to her. As Denver approaches the house, "regarding it, as she always did, as a person rather than a structure"(29) she notices a glow coming from one of its windows. What she sees in this "house peopled by the living activity of the dead"(29) is something, "unusual" despite the fact that she is accustomed to inordinate happenings in it. There, next to her kneeling mother, is a white dress with its sleeve around her waist, the living and the dead embracing in mutual support. "The dress and her mother together looked like two friendly grown-up women – one (the dress) helping out the other. And the magic of her birth, its miracle in fact, testified to that friendliness as did her own name."(29). Interestingly, this scene sets off in Denver the tumultuous memory of her own birth. The insideness of the house creates the hospitable atmosphere for the living and dead to "care" for each other, weaving a phenomenology of the

[199] Robert Pogue Harrison, *The Dominion of the Dead*, 40.

historical through haunting. The spectral atmosphere of the house intrudes on the senses placing the weight of history on the everyday. What Denver witnesses then is the organizing structure of the house, who like a person, is contaminated by temporal and ontological differences. And it is this merging of ghost and mother, dead and living, past and present, that elicits, in Denver, a rethinking of her own history. This is the effect of the house: not just to situate us in the now, but to make the space where histories live with us through signs or ghosts. In this sense, the house is more than a guarded and static archive but as we see, in Morrison, a consciousness. The archive, to the extent that it is guarded, is a violation of what a house is, for a house is a place of signs with no guards, or historical parameters, an unpredictable structure or person that "wept, sighed, trembled and fell into fits."(29).

Haunting, death, and life are, as Morrison's text exemplifies, the continual association between the house and the book. If in the archive the book becomes a sacred document, held captive and protected from difference or contamination, in Morrison's version of the house the book is its natural double: storytelling inspired by ghosts, a fictional housing of the dead. To cite Harrison once more, "In our houses time, in its stored or tumulous character, makes itself historical. We don't house ourselves because we speak, nor do we speak because we house ourselves; we house ourselves for the same reason that we speak – because we are a fold, a crypt, a wrinkle of insideness in the fabric of natures externality. This insideness exudes a vital heat which our houses, when they house us humanely, preserve."[200] But what happens when these houses, like the plantation, do not house us humanely? In fiction, Morrison "houses" and "stores" traumatic time retrieving in the "fold," "crypt," and "wrinkle" of the text a spectral

[200] Ibid, 44.

history of slavery, and the future that history presents us with. A book, in this sense, is a haunting or possession of a form by a story. Haunting, like possession[201], is when the unspeakable (death or a history embedded in forgetfulness) becomes unspoken. But what does Morrison mean by unspoken as a mode of historical expression? Is haunting itself an act of the unspeakable unspoken? The private house and novel is precisely where the unspeakable is unspoken because it is where death and spectrality meet and emerge. On the one hand as Samira Kawash argues, "We might say that the determinations of both 'person' and 'property' – as shaped in and by the foundational distinction between subject possessing and object possessed – converge in the structure and substance of the house."[202] Thus a capitalist notion of the house attempts to wipe away the dead and in the Hegel sense, supersede history. The house in capitalism looks forward interested in the clean efficiency of the new. The house seen through this lense is an individualized object, a symbol of success and individuality. The unspeakable history of the Americas is wrapped within a property possessed. On the other hand, Morrison's text is interested in possession by the dead, in an Afro-religious sense, in the welcoming of haunting past. The body, the novel, and the house, become receptacles or vessels of the dead that enable the living to establish themselves in history. Unspoken then is how a ghost speaks, in a Lacanian sense of the "unreal" that "by articulating itself on the real in a way eludes us,

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[201] In Joan Dayan's text *Haiti, History, and the Gods*, she makes the important point that New World Afro-religious practices were involved in social resistance and anti-archival history formation. "Gods held in the mind and embodied in ceremony reenact what historians often forget: the compulsion to serve, the potency and virtue of atrocity. The very suppressions, inarticulateness, and ruptures in ritual might say something about the ambivalences of the revolution: it was not so liberating as mythologizers or ideologues make it out to be, and the dispossessed, who continue to suffer and remember, know this." (29).

[202] Samira Kawash, "Haunted Houses, Sinking Ships," 74.

and it is precisely this that requires that its representation should be mythical…But the fact that it is unreal does not prevent an organ from embodying itself." Of course, for Morrison, the mythical is fiction and the organ is the ghost. We read and write then because the ghost that possesses our space "eludes" our complete apprehension. For traumatic understanding, Morrison teaches us, happens incrementally and through imaginative repetition.

If the body, fiction, and the house are analogous structures that contain the living and dead in a productive insideness, then memory and the image become their generated results. In Morrison no image is more disturbing and symbolically powerful than the scar on Sethe's back inscribing the traumatic predicament of race. Sethe receives her scars after a group of white men raped her and take her milk while she was pregnant for complaining about them. When she tells on them she is beaten mercilessly with "cowhide"(17) because she is pregnant the beating puts her life in jeopardy. The elaborate scars on her back are described by Paul D as a revolting clump of scars, and by Amy as a tree. Amy explains: "It's a tree, Lu. A chokecherry tree. See, here's the trunk – its red and split wide open, full of sap, and this here's the parting for the branches. You got a mighty lot of branches. Leaves, too, look like, and dern if they ain't blossoms. Tiny little cherry blossoms, just as white. Your back got a whole tree on it. In bloom."(79). Interestingly, Sethe's scars brings together the dead and the living in the image of the tree. As a scar it is a memory of death, of a raw unhoused brutality, as a tree however, it becomes, as Amy recognizes, an image of the past inscribed on her body as a fertile negativity upon which her future will form itself.

In Paul Ricoeur's ambitious text *Memory, History, Forgetting*, he argues that the representation of an absent thing is the "memory-image" or in Greek *eikon*. As he notes *eikon* is often paired in Greek with *phantasma* [203] thus establishing the link between image, imagination and spectrality. Ricoeur argues "…the problematic of the eikon is, in addition, from the outset associated with the imprint, the *tupos*, through the metaphor of the slab of wax, error being assimilated either to an erasing of marks, *semeia*, or to a mistake akin to that of someone placing his feet in the wrong footprints. We see by this how from the beginning the problem of forgetting is posed, and even twice posed, as the effacement of traces and as a defect in the adjustment of the present image to the imprint left as if by a seal in wax."[204] On Sethe's back, flesh here becomes the wax of memory and forgetfulness, of imprint and error, the ghastly image of the tree serves as a bodily suggestion wherein the imagination must intervene to supplement and correct archival suppositions. Sethe's back, in this sense, acts as a traumatic declaration, its monstrous outlines configuring an inhuman "effacement of traces" and a "defect in adjustment of the present image" of a young country defining itself in the mythological conceit of freedom and democracy. The secret of the American archive is this scar/tree blossoming into a genealogy of a nation through the official "imprint" of the archive (of its founding and white fathers) and the gruesome error of slavery. Yet this scar poses the very promise of freedom as such. For what the scar imposes, in its very presence, is a call to make democracy and freedom a working possibility, embodying the fact that "from the beginning the problem of forgetting" marred a nations development and allowed for a brutality and greed, which undermined its future. A democratic future then exists in the

[203] Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 5-55.

[204] Ibid, 8.

imaginative remembrance of these "wrong footprints" or backprints, a tree that leads us to the abyss of history.

So the image, the mark, the scar, the ghost, is how memory itself is preserved. In Morrison, this inhumane preservation, testifies to a brutal past and the impossibility of a future without this memory or image. For the slave this image is etched on the body itself, written there for posterity to witness and decode, and as a reminder that at the heart of the democratic experiment lay a kernal of violence that we cannot forget. Memory and imagination merge to make room ("the parting for the branches") for the spectral component of the archive. The bloom of the tree on Sethe's body is precisely this phatasmatic link between memory and imagination. The dead (memory) sparking a consciousness of something not yet documented but there nevertheless to be transcribed and translated by the imagination. This is why Sethe's tree is "in bloom" because the scar or image is pregnant, "full of sap" with meaning, with a story of the dead for posterity.

The imagination then gives the specter a body, it is the medium through which the ghost, its energy, desire, and form are reincarnated. Morrison describes the emergence of Beloved from the primal waters of imagination and history:

> A Fully dressed woman walked out of the water. She barely gained the dry bank of the stream before she sat down and leaned against the mulberry tree. All day and all night she sat there, her head resting on the trunk in a position abandoned enough to crack the brim in her straw hat. Everything hurt but her lungs most of all. Sopping we and breathing shallow she spent those hours trying to negotiate the weight of her eyelids. The day breeze blew her dress dry; the night wind wrinkled it. Nobody saw her emerge or came accidentally by. If they had, chances are they would have hesitated before approaching her. Not because she was wet, or dozing or had what sounded like asthma, but because amid all that she was smiling. It took the whole next morning to lift herself from the

> ground and make her way through the woods past a giant temple of boxwood to the field and then the yard of the slate-gray house. Exhausted again, she sat down on the first handy place – a stump not far from 124. (50).

This extraordinary description details the emergence, from the waters of history and imagination. The red light that caused havoc in Sethe's house now returns, incarnated, born again, not from her mothers womb, but from the mnemonic waters of the earth. In an interview Morrison describes the symbolic layering of Beloved return: "She is a spirit on one hand, literally she is what Sethe thinks she is, her child returned to her from the dead. And she must function like that in the text. She is also another kind of dead which is not spiritual but flesh, which is, a survivor for the true, factual slave ship. She speaks the language, a traumatized language, of her own experience…"[205] In this sense, Beloved's emergence takes on a double meaning: now a living being she returns as a spectral and historical embodiment not only of a Sethe's dead child, but a representative figure of the Black Atlantic as such. The imagination is able to hold within an image or trope several signifying economies. Here the archive, in its penchant for a unified narrative is an insufficient form, if one could call it that, for a history of slavery. Morrison, at once, specifies Beloved's personal history (Sethe's murdered daughter) and expands it into a consciousness of the Americas. It is important to remember that Paul Gilroy, in his seminal text the *Black Atlantic*, defines it as a modern consciousness that underlies a historical memory, an aesthetic endeavor, and a political project. "The telling and retelling of these plays a special role, organizing the consciousness of the 'racial' group socially and striking the important balance between inside and outside activity – the different practices, cognitive, habitual, and perfomative, that are required to invent,

[205] Marsha Darling, "In the Realm of Responsibility: A Conversation with Toni Morrison," 247.

maintain, and renew identity. These have constituted the black Atlantic as a non-traditional tradition, an irreducibly modern, ex-centric, unstable, and asymmetrical cultural ensemble that cannot be apprehended through the Manichean logic of binary coding."[206] This "binary coding" so important to a history of colonialism and the construction of the archive give way to a new hermeneutics of the image, "ex-centric, unstable, asymmetrical": a recognition of the spectral afterlives of the black Atlantic transformed into a non-traditional (or anti-archival) tradition. Historical identity is renewed in the imaginative processes of "telling and retelling" carving out, through a collective will, a "balance between inside and outside activity," a consciousness of a slave past, organized on the margins of traditional archives.

Post-coloniality in the New World, then, bereft of a place in the archives, rails against a history of imperialism through the imagination, first and foremost. New World Post-coloniality begins in the darkness of illiteracy, and works its way out, as the slave narrative attests, combining in a given aesthetic form, history, fiction, and autobiography. Thus, history is tapped into by invoking, through story, the image of a scar; and through memory, the ghosts that live in our midst. For Morrison, ultimately, the archive of slavery is stored, produced, and kept alive in the workings of the imagination. As Avery Gordon argues, "If the slave narrative was expected to speak for those who had no audible public voice and who had no legal access to writing or to personhood, then *Beloved* will not only retell the story of Margaret Garner, but will also imagine the life world of those with no names we remember, with no 'visible reason' for being in the archive. Morrison does not speak for them. She imagines them speaking their complex

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[206] Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 198.

personhood as it negotiates the always coercive and subtle complexities of the hands of power."[207] It is not that Morrison creates a factual history that rivals the archives in what it gathers and remembers, but opens an alternative space where the "personhood" of the slave can speak and reemerge. The house and the image become imaginative locations that invite the reader to witness the activity and negotiations of ghosts now outside "the always coercive and subtle complexities of the hands of power."

Imagining History

For Morrison imagination and the past merge into a convoluted process of rememory. Rememory begins from a fundamental disbelief in the linearity of time. Sethe describes it:

> "I was talking about time. It's so hard for me to believe in it. Some things go. Pass on. Some things just stay. I used to think it was my rememory. You know. Some things you forget. Other things you never do. But it's not. Places, places are still there. If a house burns down, it's gone, but the place – the picture of it – stays, and not just in my rememory, but out there, in the world. What I remember is a picture floating around out there outside my head. I mean, even if I don't think it, even if I die, the picture of what I did, or knew, or saw is still out there. Right in the place where it happened..."(35-36).
> "Someday you will be walking down the road and you hear something or see something going on. So clear. And you think it's you thinking it up. A thought picture. But no. It's when you bump into a rememory that belongs to someone else. Where I was before I came here, that place is real. It's never going away. Even if the whole farm – every tree and grass blade of it dies. The picture is still there and what's more, if you go there -you who was never there – if you go there and stand in the place where it was, it will happen again; it will be there for you, waiting for you…" (36).

History, image, and memory form, outside of the tenets of traditional or archival time, the presence of pictures engraved into the landscape by degrees of intensity. In this sense, a

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[207] Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 150.

rememory is an unintended integration of invisible "places" and events into an active consciousness. Morrison is not talking about an evental site, as Badiou conceives of it, where the empirical truthfulness of a historic event transforms those who come in contact with it, getting them, by its sheer force, to follow its social consequences.[208] In Beloved, the image or "thought picture" is an unconscious connection that alters or bumps the subject out of the now and intermixes it with the non-archived history of place. In this sense, history is an unanticipated intrusion, seeping into the fibers of the body and spirit. The event and place (of "something," of slavery) repeats itself touching and infiltrating the beings of those who exist in its perpetual presence. "The picture is still there and what's more, if you go there – you who never was there – if you go there and stand in the place where it was, it will happen again; it will be there waiting for you." History then is archived by the intensity of the living into the very atmosphere, like a pollutant, like a fever, contaminating the bodies it contacts. This is precisely what haunting is: when an unexpected being or event remains, waiting for those who pass it in order to make them aware that an unspeakable history "happened." Haunting is the unspoken: not a voice but a murmur, a message from a temporal distance, that exists, unwittingly in the now. "I mean, even if I don't think it, even if I die, the picture of what I did, or knew, or saw is still out there."

For Morrison then rememory is embedded in a site and the act of imagination, as we saw with Walcott, is to "reconstruct the world these remains imply."[209] What remains in this site is an image, extant and invisible, that requires an "imaginative act" "to yield up a kind of truth." Morrison is adamant in her distinction between symbol and picture.

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[208] See Alain Badiou's *Being and Event*, 173-261.

[209] Toni Morrison, "The Site of Memory," 302.

Her notion of rememory is not a symbol but a picture that has entered the mind, that has implied itself into a larger consciousness, whose impact is affective rather than abstract. As she argues "feelings" "accompany the picture" making visible and unspoken a historical nervous system, in Michael Taussig's sense, where history reveals itself not just through "thinking and discovery and selection and order and meaning" but through "awe and reverence and mystery and magic."[210] The phenomenology of the ghost, of the historical pictures that bump, without warning or pretext, into those in its midst, creates a nervous condition. For Morrison our nerves, sensitive and receptive, are given voice through the act of writing itself. Taussig describes this writing of historical nerves: "Those who have had to abandon that sort of magic are left with a different wondering; namely how to write the Nervous System that passes through us and makes us what we are – the problem being, as I see it, that everytime you give it a fix, it hallucinates, or worse, counters your system with its nervousness, your nervousness with your system. As far as I'm concerned, and I admit to going slow with these NS matters, this puts writing on a completely different plane than hitherto conceived. It calls for an understanding of the representation as contiguous with that being represented and not as suspended above and distant from the represented…that knowing is giving oneself over to a phenomenon rather than thinking about it from above." Being and knowledge of a history of slavery is not an archival supposition, but an openness to certain "phenomenon" wherein a sixth sense, a New World nervousness, signals the imminent arrival of a specter with "a story not to pass on."(275).

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[210] Ibid, 302.

Thus Morrison concludes her novel with a warning and an exhortation. "It was not a story to pass on." That is, not a story about foundations and heroes, but a traumatic story of the past, whose images reveal a "loneliness that roams" "disremembered and unaccounted for"(274) and yet a ubiquitous presence, "like a bad dream" that forces a "remembering" otherwise. As Kathleen Brogan puts it, "Nevertheless, the incomplete nature of the antiverbal exorcism, the association established between love and storytelling, and above all the example of the novel itself as an act of historical recuperation compel us to understand narrative as a crucial, if not always possible, means of confronting the consequences of the past. Beloved records the struggle toward narrative, performs the final burial, but leaves the grave open." This grave, open and unguarded, compels us to look for history outside of the archive and in the very spaces we live and die. What is required is a turn to fiction that imaginatively calls attention and brings form to the traumatic voids of history.

How do we read the "not" and "pass" in the repeated invocation: "This is not a story to pass on"? With the recognition that traumatic stories of this kind bring with them a link to the dead – "Down by the stream in back of 124 her footprints come and go, come and go." There is a negative ontology, traumatic, historical, and philosophical, housed in fiction. A negative aesthetics as I have argued throughout this dissertation, that combines "shameless"(6) beauty with the sublime terror of "boys hanging from the most beautiful sycamores in the world."(6). Herein lies the responsibility of a post-colonial aesthetics: to portray the horrors of history and the beauty of the past in order to constitute a future from dead that haunt. The imagination, ultimately, in a gesture of

recovery, in a fever to understand and reveal the past, reaches for "what is forgotten" "not only" reading the "footprints but the water too and what is down there."(275).

Thus, *Beloved* characterizes a spectral tension lodged in a New World experience of history, shifting its conception of time from a teleological past, present, future, to as Reinhart Koselleck puts it, the "futures past."[211] For Koselleck futures past can be organized into a "space of experience" (its traditional modes of social organization, its laws and archives) and a "horizon of expectation" (a "future made present," its anticipation) wherein the need to prescribe and predict the future is interrupted by "the heterogeneity of ends."[212] That is to say, the past is contaminated by a "knowledge of alien experience,"[213] unarchivable stories that cannot be passed on within the customary logic and form of history. Herein lies the interruption, for canonical past experiences are laced with unconscious and spectral presences that refuse to let the past "confirm" itself "in the future."[214] So that the traumatic substance of *Beloved*, its spectral dimensions make it a story we must simultaneously avoid and return to. What Morrison makes clear is this contact with a spectral past takes place in the haunted house of ficton. Interestingly, Koselleck is aware of the limits of historical representation: "It is evident that experiences can only be accumulated because they are – as experiences – repeatable. There must then exist long-term formal structures in history which allow the repeated accumulation of experience. But for this, the difference between experience and

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[211] Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past*, 255-275.

[212] Ibid, 261. For a Post-colonial reading of Koselleck see Ian Baucom's "Township Modernism" in *Geomodernisms: Race, Modernism, Modernity*.

[213] Ibid, 261.

[214] Ibid, 261.

expectation has to be bridged to such an extent that history might once again be regarded as exemplary. History is not only able to recognize what continually changes, and what is new, if it has access to the conventions within which lasting structures are concealed. These too must be discovered and investigated if historical experience is to be transformed into historical science."[215] Perhaps Koselleck's desire to turn history into a "historical science" is precisely what keeps it from having "access to the conventions within which lasting structures are concealed." Morrison demonstrates, ultimately, that these "concealed structures" and seething presences, are to be conjured through the work of the imagination and transcribed into fiction. The "futures past" of the New World are embodied by the murmuring ghosts of slavery and the hermeneutic detours they take us on.

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[215] Ibid, 275.

CONCLUSION

SPECTERS OF DIFFERENCE

Is The Foreigner A Phantom?

According to Derrida, "The foreigner guest appears like a ghost"[216] for his very discordant presence – his language, his legal status, his skin color - is a nagging and threatening "being-in-question" that "puts me in question."[217] He acts as a fractured mirror reflecting an impenetrable difference whose proximity and distance distort the ontological boundaries around him. He, moreover, comes with an untranslatable past, with secret traditions no longer fully usable in their new locations. In this sense, the foreigner is a migrant worker and cosmopolitan traveler, a political exile and student studying abroad, an imperialist explorer and a slave. Herein lies the identity of the Americas: not established sovereign territories, but nations reterritorialized by incongruent strangers whose cultural difference clash and meld creating a dying entropy, voracious violence, or dynamic cultural fusions. The logic of identity is inverted. The foreigner sits at the center of Transamerican histories working towards, what Gloria Anzaldua will call, "a new consciousness." For identity in the Americas begins with a series of questions to the foreigner/ghost that makes the boundaries of the self tremble: who are you? How will we co-exist? What is our future?

In what Emerson, and later Morrison, called a Young America (and I want to extend this to the Americas) at issue was an inchoate pass, a blurry mirror and reflection, which made symbolic identification impossible. Emerson's argument turns the wrong

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[216] Jacques Derrida, *Of Hospitality*, 37.

[217] Ibid, 3.

way, like a child hoping that his parent save him, toward Europe and away from the otherness that stands before him, the specters of difference that makes the transplanted European a stranger to itself. Thus the newness of the United States for Emerson is a larger, better, European nation: an extension and improvement of Europe's intellectual light and commercial traditions. Unnamed is the function of difference in this new nation, what Morrison will call a "playing in the dark," which refers, not only to a moral question as Emerson argues, but to a stranger lodged within the activity of the imagination; the constitution of identity; and a Transamerican understanding of history. This spectral foreigner is the condition of being in the New World. How does newness enter the (new) world? For Homi Bhabha newness has in it a "foreign element" or for Morrison a playful darkness, for Anzaldua a mestiza consciousness, for Glissant creolizations. Bhabha argues:

> I am more engaged with the 'foreign' element that reveals the interstitial; insists in the textile superfluidity of folds and wrinkles; and becomes the 'unstable element of linkage', the indeterminate temporality of the in-between, that has to be engaged in creating the conditions through which 'newness comes into the world'. The foreign element 'destroys the original's structures of reference and sense of communication as well' not simply by negating it but by negotiating the disjunction in which successive cultural temporalities are 'preserved in the work of history and *at the same time* cancelled…The nourishing fruit of the historically understood contains time as a precious but tasteless seed.' And through this dialectic of cultural negation-as-negotiation, this splitting of skin and fruit through the agency of foreignness…[218]

This "agency of foreignness" is a "cultural negation-as-negotiation" which both cancels and preserves original "structures of reference" establishing an "antagonistic

[218] Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 227-228.

supplement"[219] or what I want to call a specter of difference, as constitutive of Transamerican identity. Anzaldua, referring both to national and indentificatory space, calls this a "struggle for borders"[220] where Transamerican subjects "continually walk out of one culture / and into another, / because I am in all cultures at the same time."[221] Here the "foreign element" threatens to "destroy" old world singularity for an ontology of simultaneity. In the Americas "newness enters the world" via a spectral encounter with difference that continually transforms, through a "dialectic of cultural negation-as-negotiation," the subject. In this sense negativity becomes the driving creative and affective force. Why? Because the negative, as I have argued throughout this dissertation, is the current that alters the subject, embeds the question mark of his own foreignness to himself. Thus history becomes a contaminated "seed" mixed with difference, with untraceable trajectories. As Jean-Luc Nancy argues: "The *subject* is what it *does*, it is its act, and its doing is the experience of the consciousness of the negativity of substance, as the concrete experience and consciousness of the modern history of the world – that is, also, of the passage of the world through its own negativity: the loss of references and of the ordering of a 'world' in general (*cosmos, mundus*), but also, and thereby, its becoming-world in a new sense. It becomes immanent, and it becomes infinite."[222] For the writer in the Americas this "passage of the world through

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[219] Ibid, 227.

[220] Gloria Anzaldua, *Borderlands, La Frontera*, 99.

[221] Ibid, 99.

[222] Jean-Luc Nancy, *Hegel*, 5.

its own negativity" is a crossing through the imagination in an attempt to come to terms with this "foreign element," this specter of difference.

Impossible Crossings: the Necessity of Fiction

In Maryse Conde's *Crossing the Mangrove*, the foreigner, Francis Sancher, acts as a catalyst for a community not only to analyze his enigmatic placement in their lives, but tap into an imaginary side of themselves, so that, "my real life begins with his death."(193). What he presents them with is a revelation of their traumatic substance, their intersections of being, the spectral part of themselves covered by the rigid tenets of community, religion, nation. For Peter Hitchcock three forms of crossing stand out in the Caribbean: First, it is a "consciousness of a space" that "destabilizes the territory of subjection;" Second, it is a "turbulent concatenation of rhythm and dissonance" putting its emphasis not only on writing but on the "voice;" and lastly the "risk of imagination as a social practice" "interrogates the legitimacy of the Caribbean's social orders" and in this sense it is an "integer of desire for new identities."[223] I want to add to Hitchcock's list of Caribbeanness an uncanny engagement with what is Foreign. For the foreigner is the embodiment of antinomy: he elicits a strange intensity that is ideological and aesthetic, religious and worldly, social and historical. This strange intensity, as well as these forms of Caribbeanness, are explored by Conde in the figure of Francis Sancher who is found dead, thus setting off a series of oral/written reflections, objections, opinions on who this Foreigner was. What is clear is that he "was" someone different to

[223] Peter Hitchcock, *Imaginary States*, 31-32.

each person who speaks; his impact on them exposes the importance of the negative (he is found dead and face down, his being negated) in relation to the imagination.

Francis Sancher is described as both "everybody's man" and someone who spoke in "incomprehensible words."(14). What is most identifiable about Francis Sancher, however, is his trunk where he "had stowed away in the smallest of the two bedrooms and from which he drew everything. Money for meat, bread or cans of Pal for the dogs. The reams of yellow paper, all the same size, for his typewriter. Old clothes. His favorite books, all in Spanish, except for a Saint-John Perse in La Pleaide collection."(26-27). What is the role of fiction here? For Francis Sancher his trunk represents a life of travel, of the accumulation of "new identities," thus changing the narrative of history from a narrative of territory to a different "consciousness of space." Fiction functions then as alternative to historical narrative precisely because it portrays the "history of the voice"[224] of the Foreigner. The Foreigner then, and this is part of his ghostliness, is a transnational subject. The nation is anathema to any concept of the Americas for the subject is, like Frances Sancher, a homeless figure, rhizomatically rooted by "his favorite books" and "yellow paper…for his typewriter." In the Caribbean the necessity of fiction is an oral/written response to this homeless condition wherein the spectral stranger intersects with us, crossing the impossible with the future.

Cosmopolitanism: Underground Geographies

[224] Kamau Braithwaite, *History of the Voice*.

Meena Alexander's poem "Cosmopolitan" emerges in response to the other: "You want a poem on being Cosmopolitan. / Dear friend what can I say?"[225] There is a hesitancy to answer such a difficult and intrusive question. Who is speaking to Alexander? Who is this, as she politely puts it, "dear friend?" I want to argue that the injunction to write comes from an ontology of foreignness that pervades the Americas. The questioner is not a specific person but a poetic consciousness, impelling Alexander to voice a dislocation that sits at the heart of American identity. In an essay she describes the aesthetic after-affects of an exhibit on Asian-American art: "Strolling through the gallery space, moving carefully around the installation pieces, stopping, gazing at paintings and mixed media pieces hung on the walls, I was struck by how much of what I saw offered a rich, aesthetic resistance to what be thought of as the great unifying forces of America. This was art born out of dislocation, art that enshrines disjunction."[226] Aesthetics moves Alexander from exterior question to an interiority, an underground where an answer emerges outside of the courtesy and social convention of conversation. This underground space is "Where stones surrender to the hunger of exiles." The discrepancies of "Being Cosmopolitan" is mediated and explored through the imagination. For the imagination is the sensory capacity that allows one to extract from ghosts answers regarding "aesthetic resistance." In this sense, Alexander, is spoken to by a ghost exhorting her to bear witness to a dislocated ontology and history.

Compressed into the New York City subway system are histories from "wherever in the world." The very notion of "home" is, in the Americas, "unlaid" leaving scars

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[225] Meena Alexander, *Quickly Changing River*, 3-5.

[226] Meena Alexander, *The Shock of Arrival*, 152.

"unsung" and a "secret geography" internalized into an urban unconscious. What is this underground machine if not a disjuntive population "whose" muted "voice alone forces it apart" extracting visions of "mulberry skin" that transmogrify into the "blood on the hands of children." Yet this train that stores and withholds, also enacts a promise of movement into strange new worlds. Thus the sound of the train is also the echo of a bird: "I heard the bird of heaven call. / A cry huge, indigo, / Bursting the underground tunnel." The violence of Cosmopolitan migration forces, by its sheer difference, a shock. The train carries in it, like a haunted house, a "cry" elicited by the ghosts of difference. "Bursting" any sensation of home, redirecting us instead to "the underground tunnel" "where ghostly" beings "flutter." The hesitancy in the first lines: first the surprise "You want a poem on being cosmopolitan." As if the desire carried with it a blindness and madness. And then the search for spectral language: "…what can I say?" Derrida tells us, "We ought to reconstitute practically the whole context, if that were possible, and at any rate reread what follows, the sequence that links to the Foreigner's reply. It evokes at once *blindness and madness*, a strange alliance between blindness and madness."[227] Alexander's poem is the "Foreigner's reply." What is this "strange alliance between blindness and madness"?

It is, as this dissertation has posited, the link between fiction, the imagination, and the spectrality of the other. If Francis Sancher provokes and disturbs, through his Transnational identity, through his ambition to write, an encounter with a foreign element in identity and history, so too is Alexander's poem attempting to aesthetically come to terms with Cosmopolitanism by confronting "Odd questions massed in me." She creates

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[227] Jacques Derrida, *Of Hospitality*, 9.

a poetic intimacy with "blindness and madness" allowing the power of the imagination to "intercede for me." The final image, borrowed from *The Travels of Mingliaotse* link a "changed" and changing sea to a hallucinatory vision of a "mulberry field." Herein lies the imagination's power "insistent as night wind after a storm has passed" crossing images, crossing identities, crossing histories. The Foreigner then is embodied in a shifting spectral image. As Derrida puts it:

> For there is no ghost, there is never any becoming-specter of the spirit without at least an appearance of flesh, in a space of invisible visibility, like the dis-appearing of an apparition. For there to be ghost, there must be a return to the body, but to a body that is more abstract than ever. The spectro-genic process corresponds therefore corresponds to a paradoxical incorporation. Once ideas or thoughts are detached from their substratum, one engenders a ghost by giving them a body. Not by returning to the living body from which ideas and thoughts have been torn loose, but by incarnating the latter in another artificial body, a prosthetic body, a ghost of spirit.[228]

The "artificial body" Derrida refers to here is the "spectro-genic process" of fiction making. It is in fiction, as I have shown throughout this dissertation, that the "paradoxical incorporation" of the ghostly Foreigner is given voice, form, and a historical presence. The imaginative efforts of Transamerican writers "detach from their substratum," from their dislocation underground, the ghosts of strangers "giving them a body." What is revealed is that the Americas can only be imagined spectrally, for it's very population come from elsewhere. "Prosthetic" bodies in different shades, shapes, and compositions; speaking different languages; desiring differently, populate the haunted houses of the New World. In aesthetics we muster the courage to come in contact with specters of difference.

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[228] Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 125-126.

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