The Undertow of Reason;

Redefining the Sublime Through the Middle Passage

by

Nicholas Powers

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Abstract

THE UNDERTOW OF REASON

REDEFINING THE SUBLIME THROUGH THE MIDDLE PASSAGE

by

Nicholas Powers

Adviser: Prof. Barbara Webb

The sublime is a pivotal concept in Western literature. First defined by the ancient critic Longinus, it has been a touchstone of theorists for centuries. It is returned to again and again because at its core is an acceptance of the need and reality of transport beyond the self toward a larger reality. Artists-philosophers of early modernity used the sublime to give the emergent West a substitute for the religious sense of rapture that could not fit within its new secular ethos.

Slave-narrators like Olaudah Equiano and Ottobah Cugoano used the sublime to give meaning to their forced transport of the Middle Passage. My thesis seeks to answer the question of how does a slave redefine the sublime? My dissertation answers urgent questions in the field of literary criticism; first among them being in post-modernity how does one define transcendence? If grand-narratives have collapsed and there is nothing beyond the text to reach for, what is left us? The European sublime is based on an anthropology that isolates the human within language. In contrast the slave sublime begins with, as Du Bois said, “two warring ideals in one dark body” that tear open to reveal the body electric.

Secondly, my thesis continues the excavation of survival strategies of survivors of the slave trade. In particular, how they resurrected a self in a colonial language and found freedom within the sublime. It has the added bonus of employing an overlooked trope of cannibalism in the early Black Atlantic texts. It offers a method of reading where language is seen as food for the self in the body.

Methodology

The theoretical grid I use is Hegelian-Lacanian psychoanalysis. The major concepts that underwrite my dissertation are Lacanian ones. The first is the *Other*, the locus in the symbolic order in which the subject is constituted. It guarantees the meaning of speech and the relations mediated by it. The *Other* is a position of faith, of an imagined pureness. The next is *desire* the stage in which the subject comes into being. It begins when infantile need is articulated through words, that worded demand takes on a double function of providing for needs but also a proof of love. Words will forever arc over need and call for the *Other's* presence, as a proof of love that can never be satisfied. *Desire* is born and drives a subject to endless quest to be what the *Other* wants. The last major concept of my thesis is *Oral Sadism*. It was defined by Freud as one of the early stages of psycho-sexual development in which the proto-subject seeks to incorporate the *Other* by destroying it and introjecting it. The Black Atlantic slave narrators display an aggressive morality that destroys white supremacist ideology while introjecting it into their psyches. The spiral of aggression and identification continues through out Diaspora culture in general and literature in particular. In this vortex is the slave sublime.

In Memory of

Eusabia Castro

Dona Lola

and

Shirley Chude-Sokei

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Introduction

On my desk is a guidebook titled *The Underground Railroad*. Its pages are bent back and held by candles. I study an early 20th Century photo of a slave. He is dead now and in a sense, dead when this photo was taken. He was an object for sale, bound to labor in exchange for life but only life not his consciousness of it. The photo of this anonymous man is a tombstone. It lingers in history after his disappearance and holds for us his mute plea for help.

His face demands the question of how did his living death become possible? The term living death seems a contradiction but it accurately describes the arc many survivors made as they *lived through death*. Such a photo, forces me to ask how did enslaved people survive? The beginning of the answer is found in their narratives. A repeating trope in the texts is the need to be a witness for others and in the midst of loss a brief but tangible escape of rapture. As seen in Holocaust memoirs such as *Man's Search for Meaning* by Viktor Frankl and *Survival in Auschwitz* by Primo Levi, during genocide one's survival is based in the hope being a witness for those who perished. The witness lives through silencing trauma to speak for the disappeared and in doing so, resurrects a self from a body fragmented by violence. Of course, the definition invites questions. How can one speak for the disappeared without erasing them a second time in the inevitable mistranslation of trauma into speech? How can a multitude be spoken for by one person? Do they find new life in that single voice or is the voice fertilized with the rich soil of absence? The fusion of memory and voice, trauma and desire has led to debates about the accuracy of testimonial literature and the politicized definition of truth itself. Does the force of trauma create a truth that is not measurable by words?

The theoretical investigations into the position of witness emerged from the seemingly impossible task of conceptualizing the Holocaust. Critics needed a map for writers who testified to unspoken and unspeaking trauma, a literary duty that gained urgency as genocide continued through the 20th Century and survivors emerged numb from the fresh killing. Against the backdrop of Rwanda, Congo and now Darfur the figure of the witness fills an urgent political need while opening questions of authenticity. Does beauty transcend death or do we betray those who died by transforming their murder into a cathartic event for the living? The most concise and famous formulization of this doubt was Theodore Adorno's statement that "writing poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric" which although historically myopic attempts to resist the commodification of death. If allowed, the trade would produce a consumer-consciousness that draws a sign over the wound of trauma. Even so, Holocaust survivors consistently remind the reader that at moments of bleak anguish a feeling of transporting awe carried them through despair. They experienced the sublime. It is in this sense, Adorno not withstanding, that I study the role of the awe, terror and beauty in the narratives of slaves of the Black Atlantic.

Jacques Derrida and Giorgio Agamben both locate their investigations of survivor testimony in the Holocaust, in particular with the poetry of Paul Celan and the figure of the Musselman (The Muslim) of the camps. Derrida searched the uncertain voice of the witness who cannot speak without betraying the experience itself in order to testify to those who were not there and persist, even in failure until the failure is its own proof. Agamben follows him in reading survivor testimony but goes further across the line to those who did not live and stays there and from that impossible silence of the Musselman

questions the line itself. Recently, Ian Baucom's *Specters of the Atlantic* restaged those theoretical investigations against the historical backdrop of the Atlantic Slave Trade. His intervention allows us to surface the origins of the universal philosophy of history in which Derrida and Agamben locate the origins of the witness. A figure defined by the spectatorship of horror elevated to history rather than experienced as a singular trauma. The witness is a descendant of the Enlightenment; an abstract citizen of the state who could gaze at the spectacle of royalty burned alive and can hear the canon thunder of war with sublime disinterestedness. Against this Baucom holds to a older sublime that began with Longinus and re-routes it through Adam Smith to Alain Badiou's Truth-Event. The difference being that he turns from the abstraction of sensual experience, of a spectator awed by the dissonance between a prior categories and the chaos of raw experience. In its place Baucom asserts the famous sublime transport comes when we fully identify with the other and through that passionate attachment are lifted out of ourselves.

Using the concept of the Truth-Event, Baucom focuses on the Atlantic Slave Trade as "the shadow of the Enlightenment" and its genocidal reduction of humans to profit that is the truth repressed by the discourse of race. In the midst of Enlightenment rhetoric of equality and liberty a biological hierarchy was raised to replace the medieval hierarchy of royalty and peasant. Humanity was re-ordered along the axis of race as the wealth from the slave trade created social mobility for peasants that moved from sullied industrial proletariat to a final bourgeois whiteness. The distance between the races was maintained by a practice of violence and voyeurism, in which the "whitened" subject "blackened" slaves with their shadow.

The example Baucom cites is the 1781 Zong massacre. It was unique not in action but in scope, in so much that 132 slaves were drowned to collect insurance. The peculiar horror is acknowledged to be the catalyst of the Abolitionist movement. In the trial, the epistemology of universal history is challenged. How can a citizen witness the sublime horror of slavery with disinterestedness? Baucom asks if this epistemology defines us today; in the act of witness do we use the suffering Other in rituals of mourning to create a surplus of desire extracted from his or her silence? Is the true point of the act of witness to watch ourselves shine in moral glory? Baucom argues that we must refuse the lure of abstraction by returning to a prior definition of the sublime where we place ourselves in the Other's death and become fragmented by a "suicidal vulnerability". We do this in order embody the crime that was committed. His goal is to continue the work of Derrida and Agamben, who struggled to free the observer from the abstracted, impartial gaze condoned by the Hegelian legacy of universal history. He goes further in demanding we commit to this singular event and this person and be transported through them.

I deeply respect the goals of his book and yet part ways with its beginning point of reference. Instead of the Zong massacre I start with the Amistad rebellion. Instead of the impartial Abolitionist witness I begin with survivors who resurrected a self from a body fragmented by violence. I choose this angle in response to the second image on my desk. Next to the National Park Service Handbook is a photo of a bloated corpse in the flooded streets of New Orleans. His name, I would find out later, was Eddie. I saw him in September 2005, while going house to house getting people too stubborn to leave and who were trapped in their homes. The body spun slowly in the wake of the boat. Earlier that week the Coast-Guard tied it to a street sign for later pick up. When the water

subsided, many more were found. Corpses were brought out of attics, nursing homes and untied from gates they had been stuck on. As photos came out in the media he seemed to float from New Orleans through the page into me and with him came the weariness and panic and hopelessness of my trip.

I felt resignation. Death was the truth of the event. It was real and imminent. We could do nothing for him but could reach those at the edge of life and pull them back to safety. Despite our defenses, we were overwhelmed by shock and sadness. We left New Orleans depressed, anxious and angry. The question for me is not the one Baucom urges us to re-think. He asks us to subvert the stance of the impartial witness by following the sublime transport into the Other. He calls this strategy melancholy-sentiment and yet if we do hold on to melancholy, to the refusal to mourn and substitute the lost object with another, if we hold to this event in all its tactile and singular immanence how does someone *survive* that act of witnessing?

The goal of the survivor-witness is to live. Yet that goal seems at odds with Baucom's concept of melancholy-sentiment that refuses mourning as a "selling-out" to the epistemology of equivalency. The sublime is the pivot of his theory. Instead of Kant's sublime spectacle for the uncommitted gaze he returns to Longinus for sublime transport through the Other. His sublime demands the risk of identification. The danger I detect in his admirable call to commitment is that it ends in our exile in the death of the Other. The survival of the witness becomes impossible. We are locked into an endless fragmentation of the self, a spiral into the body-in-pieces that has no return to the recognition necessary for human existence. It is precisely *the return to the self* that defines what I call the slave sublime. In Derrida's poetics we find integrity defined as a failed encounter. Agamben's

poetics is silence as critique of facile truth. Baucom celebrates fidelity to a specific loss. I intervene with *the poetics of retrieval* in the belief that it serves as a necessary corrective to the ethos of non-commitment of the first, the foreclosure of efficacy in the second and the fetishizing of fragmentation of the third.

The slave sublime transcends the tactical silences in which social death is created and continued by returning the slave to the symbolic. It does this with substitution not in spite of it. Yet it is a substitution that refuses Derrida's formula where the failure of the sign is the prerequisite for the triumph of force. It counters Agamben's image of language eclipsed by silence with an undertow pulled by the body's gravity back to the symbolic. My slave sublime sees in Baucom's suicidal vulnerability to the Other a birth of a new human. The Amistad is my starting point because it is a scene where slaves retrieved their humanity from traders in an act of transcendent violence, in which they hacked the racial discourse down with machetes. I claim for the Amistad the status of Truth-Event because it exposes the repressed aggression of morality that has driven the descendants of slaves into the trajectory of integration. The Amistad rebellion allows us to begin in the place beyond speech that Derrida, Agamben and Baucom sift through but instead of a final impossibility we find a speech that is the sublime transport of the slave.

I develop this thesis through readings of texts by Thomas Jefferson and Frederick Douglass, Equaino and Amira Baraka, Toni Morrison and Paul Celan. What will be demonstrated is that *the slave sublime retrieves from the silence of the Other a deferred recognition that transports both beyond the very discourse that was supposed to be the destination.* It is a method of witnessing that resurrects a self from the body torn asunder by trauma and finds for it a temporary address in the symbolic order. Such movement is

never more obvious or possible than in times of crisis. No wonder then that we find it repeated in the Civil War, the Great Migration and the Civil Rights Movement.

The work you will read begins in the Middle Passage in order to define the concept of the slave sublime and its relation to the "blackening of the body". We continue to readings of early auto-biographies of the Black Atlantic, contemporary literature and film in order to analyze both the origin of blackness and the many representations of that origin. Finally we use our concept as a prism to look at history, in order to re-learn it, to re-evaluate the connection between aesthetics and politics. The scenes of mass transport such as the Civil War, Great Migration and the Civil Rights Movement gain new sheen as examples of the slave sublime. In them we see the emergence of a force that speaks the silence into history and moving it inward to the body center. On that precipice we see through our transparent humanity to the terrifying beauty within.

I end this work with the Middle Passage Ceremony on the Coney Island beach. Every year, Santeria and Vodun followers gather at the beach with drums, fruit and candles to give homage to those who were thrown or threw themselves into the ocean. No money is allowed and vendors are kept to the edges in order to free the people from acts of exchange. The ceremony is the closest I have come to feeling beauty that belonged to those who were disappeared and in feeling it for them and giving to those who today, like them, are vanishing into our shadow.

CHAPTER ONE

The Amistad vs. the Zong

"Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing wonder and awe, the oftener and the more steadily we reflect on them: the starry heavens above me, and the moral law within me."
- Immanuel Kant

In 1781, Luke Collingwood, the captain and surgeon of the Zong ordered 132 slaves to be thrown overboard to collect the insurance. In that same year, Immanuel Kant published *The Critique of Pure Reason*. We have two seemingly unrelated events. The first is the casual mass-murder in the name of profit and the second the innocuous release of a book of philosophy. What links the numbers of the ship log-book to the logic of transcendental idealism is *the act of abstraction*. In the former, the captain wrote down the tally of loss as slave after slave was thrown to the sea, each disappeared in the waves and reappeared as a number on a page in order to claim insurance. In the latter, the philosopher wrote of the loss of ontological certainty as experience and causality were rejected and reappeared on the page as transcendental idealism. The slaves were thrown into nature because they were defined as animals incapable of reason, in contrast to Kant's modern subject who was exiled from nature by the very a priori categories the mind used to organize sense perception. The separation from the noumenal world was the context of Kant's sublime. Only someone, closed a priori to raw experience, could be ravished by its overwhelming power. Yet the rapture of the modern subject was based on a freedom from nature that foreclosed humanity to slaves chained to the very nature the modern subject denied. They who were numbers, stranded between life and death survived on the other side of his sublime.

The ideas of the philosopher and the labor of the slaver converged in the act of abstracting the life of slaves into the insurance policy that transformed mass murder into profit. The Zong was insured for 15,700 pounds by London creditors. Value in the case of credit existed before the any exchange took place. Baucom situates this practice of lending as the new social practice of modernity demanded by the expanse of the ocean between metropolis and colony. He writes,

> The time it took to complete the vast triangular circuit of the trade dictated that merchants must conduct much of their business on credit. But for such a system of credit to operate both a theory of knowledge and a form of value which would secure the credibility of the system itself had to be in place. Central to that theory was a mutual and systems-side determination to credit the existence of imaginary values. Central to that form of value was a reversal of the protocols of value creation proper to commodity capital. For, here, *value does not follow but precedes exchange*. (Page 17) (Italics Mine)

In order for value to precede exchange it must be an already established principle by which lenders and creditors agreed on. The new scale of measurement was *trust in the character of the debtor and in non-human character of the slave*. Traders shipped across the ocean humans transformed not only into commodities but into "the reserve deposits of a loosely organized, de-centered, but vast trans-Atlantic banking system." (Page 61) The system of credit demanded a new regime of reading character to determine who would obey the modern social contract between individuals that replaced the former inherited hierarchy of the medieval era. What was real in the other that could be counted on to insure they would return from the New World with profit?

The real core of character was not found so much as fabricated through the concept of sentiment. Baucom shows how the rise of the novel was part of a process of reification of the psychic interior. It was a process that codified the romantic exile of the modern subject cut loose from the medieval hierarchy and who was as Kant theorized, divided from nature by the very a priori categories the mind uses to process sense into meaning. We moderns are spectators stranded outside of the real world. In the 18th Century, the aesthetic acknowledgment of that exile became Romanticism. Sentiment was the measure of reality for a subject denied access to noumenal truth. Baucom cites John Locke and G.W. Hegel as developers of the notion of "sentiment" and "will" as the act that creates property. One owns what he or she has "mixed their labor with" because of the sentiment they invested into it. Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* succinctly defines it

> A person has as his substantive end the right of putting his will into any and every thing and thereby making it his, because it has no such end in itself and derives its destiny and soul from his will. This is the absolute right of appropriation which man has over all things. (Page 41)

If the noumenal world is beyond us then it is our creation of one through labor that inaugurates a reality whose only ontological guarantee is our invested time and effort. The world reflects us. It is our mirror. We lift the elements of the earth into our hands and sculpt them into the world we inhabit. The cities surrounding us are museums of labor. The Lock-Hegelian formula goes beyond the investment through labor that creates the world but also the site of an agreement between economic actors, a new sympathetic contract between modern subjects to guarantee value. The guarantee allows debt and credit to flow across the Atlantic.

In the case of the Zong massacre we see the contradiction of the system become exposed. The *investment of sentiment in labor* to create property and *the sympathetic reading of character* required to establish a contract between individuals is set against each other in the trial. The captain was trusted by the insurers to be honest in his dealings. Instead he used the insurance policy to create profit, lying about the health of the slaves in order to thrown them overboard and collect the claim. He betrayed the sympathetic contract that subsidized the legal one.

What is unique in this case is the Abolitionists argued for his prosecution not simply because he defrauded on his contract to the insurers but because he had no sympathy for the slaves and in doing so sabotaged the very "cords of affection" that bound humanity. If the slaves were objects of property then he had to have invested some measure of sympathy. The Abolitionists took the well-known concept of sympathy and extended it to those who were objects traded within the terms of the contract thereby re-routing the discourse and drawing the slaves in as subjects. The logical consequence of this rhetorical maneuver would be to annul contracts that did not acquire the consent of these enslaved subjects. When the captain threw the slaves into the ocean, he violated the contract of sympathy that defined the very humanity of the modern subject.

Which idea would win in the trial? Is it the sympathy invested in the slaves that would elevate their status to victims and from victims to symbols of an aggrieved humanity? Or is the speculative capital that raised or lowered their monetary value the lasting truth? It is this rare collision of ideas in so graphic a manner that allows Baucom to define the Zong as a Truth-Event. The drowning of 132 people to collect insurance

money was not an anomaly but an example of the ultimate logic of the system, the final horrific consequence of the contradictions within it. Baucom writes,

> The Zong trials constituted an event in the history of capital not because they treat slaves as commodities but because they treat slaves as commodities that have become the subject of insurance, treat them, in Zizek's terms, not as objects to be exchanged but as the "empty bearers" of an abstract, theoretical, but entirely real quantum of value, teat them as little more than promissory notes, bills-of-exchange…whose value is not to their continued, embodied material existence but to their speculative, recuperable loss value. (Page 139)

The slaves were worth more dead than alive. The insurance money the captain got was more than the bid on the auction block. In the speculative financial world of the Atlantic Slave Trade, abstract value survived the destruction of its material bearer. Sympathy, the necessary investment of feeling that defined labor and the rights of ownership were cast in a profane light by the ultimate truth of its logic. If slaves were the object of labor did not the sympathetic investment in them bind slaver to slave in a relation that was the very basis of humanity's elevation from the animal world?

Here we arrive at the concept of the Truth-Event. It originated in the work of French-Marxist philosopher Alan Bodiou and entered our discourse through Slavoj Zizek's use of it in *Tarrying with the Negative* and his magnum opus *The Ticklish Subject*. Many readers will find the concept familiar as its ancestor is the classic Freudian symptom. Zizek writes, "The Event is the Truth of the situation that makes visible what the 'official situation had to 'repress', but it is also always localized –the Truth is always the Truth of a specific situation." (Page 130) Since a symbolic community is not based on

essential organic truths it is always already in contest with itself. Contradictions internal to it will manifest. When it does only those faithful to this repressed truth and bear witness to it will be transformed.

Badiou defines the Truth-Event as not accessible to any outside audience. He argues against Kant's framing of the French Revolution as a sublime event, a transportive act of spectatorship where a disinterested witness eyes terror. Baucom extends Badiou in that the act of spectatorship, in which one is transported through the image of the Other is not a true transport since it *allows the spectator to remain the same*. If transport means movement, *the subject must be moved* to another place, to a new narrative of him or her self. Badiou argues and through him Zizek and now Baucom, that the sublime is experienced in a true and authentic way only by the participants themselves are engaged in action. They must remain faithful to the repressed truth at the core of the symbolic order and risk their lives in its recognition.

The concept of the subject as a being who composes reality by a transcendental synthesis of perception into meaning is now unanchored. In its place is a subject created through the *fidelity to the truth*. If the Truth-Event is the repressed element within the social, it can be termed an excremental excess that is concealed by naturalist ideology that solders innate contradictions with power, defensive formations and violence. New subjects are created in the Truth-Event. When it passes to the social surface it reshapes the field of discourse. Baucom showed how the Zong trial was a unique example of Badiou's formula, in that the sympathetic reading of character which was a required and intrinsic supplement to the legal contracts that bound the economy of the West across the Atlantic could also collapse it.

Amistad as Truth-Event

Fifty-eight years after the Zong Massacre, in 1839, a related Truth-Event occurred when the slaves of the Amistad picked the locks that bound them, freed themselves and rushed the crew. They killed many and tried to sail home but were found drifting off the coast of North America. In the subsequent trials the logic of the Amistad paralleled the Zong trial. The crisis is again between the legal contract and the contract of sympathy. In John Quincy Adam's defense he uses the language of sentiment and sympathy that first appeared in the Zong trial.

> They were found in this distressing and perilous situation by officers of the United States, who, *moved towards them by sympathetic feeling* which subsequently became, as it were national, immediately rescued them from personal danger, restored them to freedom, secured their oppressors that they might abide the consequences of the acts of violence perpetrated upon them, and placed under the safeguard of the laws all the property which they claimed as their own, to remain in safety until the competent authority could examine their title to it, and pronounce upon the quest lion of ownership agreeably to the provisions of the 9th article of the treaty of 1795. (Page 3) (Italics Mine)

We have condensed in this single paragraph both dimensions of the modern contract. The distance between races was crossed by a "sympathetic feeling" that bound officers to the lost slaves. Yet the needs of legal clarification of right and property suspended action by any party until who owns who can be sorted out. In the end the Supreme Court, like the English court of the Zong case, made a ruling based on legal contract. The official ruling

was decided on technical property rights but few doubted the freed slaves of the Amistad won their freedom by the massive public sentiment.

In a sense they were free of the slave-traders but they were now owned by the Abolitionist public. The lawyers inherited the logic of the earlier Zong case. Sympathy and speculative value, secret sharers of Locke-Hegelian theory of labor, an epistemology of "will" and "sentiment" invested into objects that became human reality, were again opposed to each other. The captain of the Amistad argued like the captain of the Zong before him the necessity to maintain abstract profit on objects of speculative value. The abolitionists argued the necessary sympathy in objects, which in this case were humans, is the same contract that bound humanity. In breaking it the slavers broke the social contract of civilization.

The Abolitionists made the slaves the recipients of sympathy. The national audience invested moral sentiment in them and a certain profit had to be made. It came in their literacy. Mr. Booth, an Abolitionist taught the captured slaves rudimentary English and found a translator for their testimony. Later on they were shown as an example of an investment made good, of Africans who debunked through their learning the racist doctrines of mental inferiority. We read of a meeting in the May 22nd issue of *The Colored American*.

> The Africans next read twice round from the New Testament, by which they showed the success with which they had mastered our language, as well as the proficiency they had made in learning to read. While some had done better than others, they had all succeeded beyond all human expectation. (Page 2)

In the Enlightenment, literacy was the hallmark of humanity. It signified reason and evidence of evolution. Many slaves fought to become literate as it helped in practical ways such as forging passes, earning money for freedom and preventing fraud. Literacy also disapproved the justifications for slavery. Yet when the Africans of the Amistad read aloud it was to return to the Abolitionist a sympathetic investment with interest that came in the form of proof of humanity. The meaning used here is less evidence than resistance against doubt. The Africans of the Amistad returned the sympathetic investment in the form of imitative literacy designed not to develop but as linguistic camouflage.

The modern subject, as theorized by Kant, was a being independent from nature. Such independence meant they could create reality rather than be subject to the whims of elemental forces. Only a modern subject could analyze the distance between thought and noumenal reality. The Amistad Africans who read from the Bible were camouflaged within literacy. They were enclosed in a prayer and Bible verse so they could not be sold without also selling God. They were taught to read to demonstrate their ability to enter the conversation of alienated subjects enclosed within the a priori categories of the mind and share in the sentiment available to those also in exile. If heard, the slaves could claim the experience of sentiment and the dignity of will which according to Locke and Hegel, when ‘mixed’ with raw material created the right of property and the basis of legal and sympathetic contract. A similar scene has been analyzed by Henry Louis Gates; in his book *The Signifying Monkey* he drew attention to the trope of the Talking Book in the early slave narratives. The reoccurring image is of the author watching his master read and going to the book and listening to it, expecting to hear the same voice that seemed to speak to others.

Gates cites this in his analysis, “This desire for recognition in the text of Western letters motivates Gronniosaw’s creation of a text, in both literal and figurative ways. Literally, this trope of the (non-) talking Book becomes the central scene of instruction against which this black African’s entire autobiography must be read.” (Page 8) Of course, he is right. The slaves went from talking to a book *to talking through it* to other humans who lived within the Word and would then recognize them as eligible members of humanity in general and civil society in particular. In this context, Gate’s reading of the Talking Book trope adds to the statue of the Amistad case.

I agree with his initial formula and the importance of the Talking Book trope for literary history but there is another less known trope. One that opens a new reading of the Amistad as a Truth-Event whose trajectory leads us away from sympathy versus contract, away from the spectator sublime versus the engaged subject. It is a minor trope lodged in the cracks of the Black Atlantic slave narratives. In it stands exposed the origin of the two branches of the African-American canon; the Afro-centric tradition that celebrates purity and the academic tradition that criticizes it. Now we must turn from Baucom’s liberal cosmopolitan drama of authentic commitment and to a slave sublime defined by silence and starvation, anxiety and desire. Slaves did not simply learn English they consumed it. They lived with the daily terror of being killed so for them literacy was an investment, a way to increase the value of their lives. The slave-authors of the Black Atlantic consumed language and in turn were consumed by it. They offer us the orality of morality, an appetite for the desire of the Other to secure them in the symbolic. The truth of the Amistad uprising is washed to the sea. We are left with a morality that is less as a code of ideal behavior than the cleansing abjection of the self and the dietetics of identity.

The Joy of Cooking

The terror of cannibalism exists in the reporting of the Amistad case and the Black Atlantic slave narratives. It is a smaller and less defined but appears in the transcripts of the court case, once in *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil Traffic of Slavery* by Ottabah Cugoano and three times in *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano*. The trope of cannibalism allows a glimpse into the other side of the Romantic anthropology implicit in the Abolitionist use of sympathetic investment.

The front side of this anthropology is the Lockean-Hegelian poetics of "will" mixed with material, of labor that lifts the undifferentiated noumenal world into a human reality. It is predicted on a modern consciousness that negates and transforms the raw world even as the subject is cast out of it by the a priori categories of the mind and the transcendent synthesis that generates the self. The Abolitionists used that anthropology against the slave-traders, citing the uniquely human necessity to invest sentiment into a thing. The men of the Zong and later the Amistad would have mixed sentiment with those of their captives and could not have avoided the recognition of a common humanity. When they threw them overboard they betrayed civilization itself.

The other side of this Romantic anthropology is if one must, through labor, evidence self-consciousness through the creation of things then one is defined by the things one creates. The representation of the subject by objects exchanged for other objects is a further abstraction. In this schema, the 'will' infused into an object is also contained within it. The negation of the thing-in-itself subtracts the full reach of the senses and contracts within a sign the pressure of a thwarted consciousness. The human becomes a vessel to carry abstract value *not in spite of but for the sake of* civilization.

On the Zong and later the Amistad, slavers negated the being-in-itself of the enslaved and compressed their recognition into signs of servitude and profit. The greater the violence the more calloused they became forcing the sign of servitude into slaves disbelieving eyes. The poet Octavio Paz wrote in *An Erotic Beyond Sade* of the impossibility of total servitude, "No matter how complete our dominion over another is, there is always an impassable zone, an inaccessible particle. The others are unreachable, not because they are impenetrable but because they are infinite. Each person hides an infinity." (Page 52) The human negated to a thing was pushed into that impassable zone and had nothing to offer in symbolic exchange. It was only labor or death. Slaves had nothing to offer the slave trader that could be recognized. They were faced with a seeming inexhaustible hunger for their death. It was this constant scene of the Middle Passage that created the trope of being cannibalized.

Initially, we see in the Zong case the concealed antagonism between sympathy and speculation surface in the mass murder. In the Amistad case the angle of the truth-event is shifted. Instead of the sublime transporting melancholy of identifying with the death of the Other, *we have sublime terror of being engulfed by the Other*. Baucom re-routed the sublime away from Kant's *Critique of Judgment* and through Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* and back to Longinus. He defined a sublime based on the risk of identification with the Other. In my reading, it is *identifying the Other as a risk and the sublime transport of return*, of retrieving one's self from them. The ground for my reformulation of the sublime is found in the report of the African's testimony in the *New York Journal of Commerce.* In it we read of a peculiar fear that ignited the revolt.

> Their allowance of food was very scant, and of water still more so. They were very hungry, and suffered much in the hot days and nights from thirst. In addition to this there was much whipping, and the cook told them that when they reached land they would all be eaten. This "made their hearts burn." *To avoid being eaten,* and to escape the bad treatment they experienced, they rose upon the crew with the design of returning to Africa. (Page 1) (Italics Mine)

The whipping and near starvation was not enough but it was the terror of being eaten that drove them to attack the crew. How are we to understand this motivation? They reacted not only to the threat of death but the manner of it. When one dies with the certainty of being remembered by others the physical death is surpassed by the living memory. The language in which one creates a narrative of life is inherited by descendants and kept alive. We are eternal in the symbolic order.[1] In it, the experience and meaning of our lives can live beyond our bodies. In these scenes, the enslaved were told they will be totally consumed by the other, no trace will be left and no memory retained in the mute digestion.

The slaves were trapped in the Other with no return. Murdering the crew was an *act of retrieval from the insatiable hunger of the Other*. They were to be engulfed and consumed absolutely. No gift or trade could provide a sign the Other would want. No symbolic economy existed through which the present and future could be imagined or negotiated. What is striking is the fear the Africans of the 1839 Amistad case had of being eaten was not unique to their case but was written about half a century before in

[1] "Lacan takes from Levi-Strauss the idea that the social world is structured by certain laws which regulate kinship relations the exchange of gifts. The concept of the gift, and that of a circuit of exchange are thus fundamental to Lacan's concept of the symbolic. Since the most basic form of exchange is communication itself, and since the concepts of Law and of Structure are unthinkable without language, the symbolic is essentially a linguistic dimension." (Evans, page 201)

Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil Traffic of Slavery, published in 1787. Cugoano gives us the first image of the terror of cannibalism. They could not have possibly read Cugoano's autobiography yet in it we read of eerily similar fear.

> Next day we traveled on, and in the evening came to a town, where I saw several white people, which made me afraid that they would eat me, according to our notion as children in the inland of the country. This made me rest uneasy all the night. (Page 94)

In the following scenes, the terror of being eaten is connected to the impossibility of eating at all. The slave's need to eat is also desire for recognition denied by the traders. Slaves beg for sustenance and are answered with vicious brutality. The possibility of their survival is alienated in others who they cannot talk to without risk of pain. He gives us a vivid description.

> Being in this dreadful captivity and horrible slavery, *without any hope of deliverance*, for about eight or nine months, beholding the most dreadful scenes of misery and cruelty, and seeing my miserable companions often cruelly lashed, and as it were cut to pieces, *for the most trifling faults*; this made me often tremble and weep, but I escaped better than many of them. For eating a piece of sugarcane, some were cruelly lashed or struck over the face to knock their teeth out. …Some told me they had their teeth pulled out to deter others, and to prevent them from eating any cane in future. (Page 95) (Italics Mine)

We find here the key features of this synthesis between terror and cannibalism. It begins with him telling of living with no hope of escape, his life locked into the cycle of pain out of which the victim cannot emerge but retreats into numb terror. He witnesses cruelty

without reason and internalizes silence, evaporating his voice. In the disquiet is the weight of beheld violence that he must carry alone. What he carries is the disappearance of those he was shackled with in the cargo holds of the Middle Passage. They mirrored him, lifted his pain to witnessed reality and when they died he was left with emptiness to reflect him. Cugoana would have also died had he not learned the colonial language that increased his value to the point that he could buy himself out of slavery. He owned a self and could objectify his former identity as seen in the construction of the paragraph.

The paragraph doubles on itself, two sentences cut the present tense of the narrative to give a retrospective. The first example "for about eight or nine months" and the second "but I escaped better than many of them" offer an escape from the lyrical descent into death. He dodges obliteration through the very language he now speaks, indeed the very language that Cugoana has become. The "I"[2] that escaped speaks from the position outside of eternal present-tense of trauma and rides the rhythmic palpitation between past and present. The "I" being an act of retrieval into the present-moment, a place to record the distance between it and the death that nearly destroyed it in a past that is an active force and is really not past at all. The phrase "eight or nine months" is an insertion of temporal measurement to separate the author from this vacuum of non-time. The silent non-time, a gravity pulling him to an unnamed place and through naming gives it to the audience of history. In this paragraph, time is this knot of speech and silence weaving ahistorical trauma into a subject.

[2] "The term 'shifter' was introduced into linguistics by Otto Jespersen in 1923 to refer to those elements in language whose general meaning cannot be defined without reference to the message. For example the pronouns 'I' and 'you', as well as words like 'here' and 'now', and the tenses can only be understood by reference to the context in which they are uttered. Lacan uses the term 'shifter' to the problematic and undecidable nature of the 'I'. (Ibid, page 182)

He began to “tremble and weep” at the excessive punishments meted out for “trifling faults” to his “miserable companions”. How are we to understand this mirroring between self and others that he describes? In the wet nightmare of the cargo holds, they were whipped, crowded and starved into an undifferentiated mass. Trauma broke them into a body-in-pieces.[3] Standing back, we can see from the vantage point of history how the interchangeable slave was the reverse of the interchangeable modern subject. A universal citizen cut loose from the inherited social position of the medieval world of peasant, nobility or church official to re-create a self in the empty places of the new global bureaucracy. It was a bureaucracy that rose to keep track of capital accumulated from the forced labor of slaves blackened into anonymity. The beatings that broke Africans into bodies-in-pieces were done to reassemble them into a numbers of profit.

The slave was terrified of the random violence used to keep their consciousness buried in their bodies. They were punished with a knocking out of teeth. The mouth is of course not only a practical organ for consumption but a body part highly charged with symbolism. We speak through the mouth. When the teeth are broken it means the slave must never ask for recognition or risk torture. In the terror between slave and trader, the Other becomes the unreflective mirror, a wall enclosing the self in a building pressure of silence and rage. As Cugoano writes of living, “without hope of deliverance” it leads us to see the trader, the slave-owner as a figure in whom transport back to the self is stalled and in which one’s freedom is locked and consumed.

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[3] “In the Mirror-Stage the infant sees its reflection in the mirror as a whole/synthesis, and this perception causes by contrast, the perception of its own body (which lacks motor coordination) as divided and fragmented. The anxiety provoked by this feeling of fragmentation fuels the identification with the specular image by which the ego is formed. However, the anticipation of a synthetic ego is henceforth constantly threatened by the memory of this sense of fragmentation. (Ibid, page 67)

In *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equinao* we read three times of the terror or being eaten as both a formal revision of Ottabah Cugoano's imagery and the last two show a formal revision within Equinao's own text. The first time he writes,

> I was persuaded that I had gotten into a world of bad spirits and that they were going to kill me…I asked if we were not to be eaten by those white men, with horrible looks and red faces and long hair. (Page 33)

Equiano situates his terror in the limbo between land and sea, the known and mystery, life and death. The "world of bad spirits" is a memory staged in the blurred realm between human and non-human where Europeans are cast demonic beings working in one of Dante's levels of Hell. It is an ironic reversal of the graduation of evolution used to legitimatize the slave trade. The reversal like much of his writing, hints at an acidic irony concealed by the rhetoric of gratitude to his reader's compassionate and attentive nature. He writes from memory and from this re-collected state of horrified innocence the author can through the voice of himself as a child critique the Eurocentric standards of humanity by casting the traders as demons. Writing from the memory of youth, Equiano inoculates his narrative from criticism since it is seemingly the pure un-manipulated recollections of a child. The rhetorical strategy creates the figure of innocence betrayed by the hunger for profit of the traders. His skillful execution should alert us to the tactical use Equiano makes of history. In writing to a possibly indifferent or hostile audience, who will read him as stained by color and servitude, he must conceal his life in the guise of moral cleanliness to be recognized by them.

> We thought we should be eaten by these ugly men, as they appeared to us; and when soon after we were all put down under the deck again, bitter cries to be

> heard all the night from these apprehensions, insomuch that at last the white people got some old slaves from the land to pacify us. They told us we were not to be eaten, but to work, and were soon to go on land, where we should see many of our country people. (Page 37)

Again Equiano repeats this trope of cannibalism and will add more to it with each repetition. Equiano's individuality becomes merged with the collective anguish of the other captives. He writes of "the bitter cries to be heard all through the night" searching for someone to save them from being eaten, from the double death that is both physical and spiritual in order to return to symbolic life. The slave trader, the silent other in which one's life is alienated becomes the figure of consumption whose appetite is so vicious and random and total that we find Equiano identifying with the meals they eat. In the next repetition of the trope of cannibalism finds Equiano equating himself with the sailor's meal of caught fish that is both literal and figurative.

> I began to hope that death would soon put an end to my miseries. Often did I think many of the inhabitants of the deep more happy than myself; I envied them the freedom they enjoyed, and wished I could change my condition for theirs. Every circumstance I met with served only to render my state more painful, and heighten my apprehension and my opinion of the cruelty of the whites. One day they had taken a number of fishes; and when they had killed and satisfied themselves with as many as they though fit, to our astonishment who were on deck, rather than five any of them to eat, as we expected, they tossed the remaining fish into the sea again, although we begged and prayed for some as well as we could but in vain; and some of my countrymen, being pressed by hunger took the opportunity to,

> when they thought no one saw them, of trying to get a little privately; but were discovered and the attempt procured them some very severe floggings. (Page 36)

In this passage we read two scenes connected to each other, the first becomes a source of metaphor for the next. Equiano is exhausted and fantasizes of death. He projects himself into the ocean as a fish swimming freely. It is an act of imaginative exchange where he can substitute another for himself, thereby experiencing the freedom of transference and projection. In lieu of an Other who can mirror him, witness his pain and lift the weight of trauma from him through recognition, he gives himself the image of a fish swimming in the depths of the sea.

In the context of that fantasy the following scene acquires its pathos. The sailors caught fish and ate them without giving any to the slaves. Equiano watched them eat not only the fish he and others begged for but the fish he had dreamed of being. The sailors consumed the very image of his escape. His connection of these scenes suggests more than happenstance but a purposeful use of metaphor to arrive at multiple meanings one both literal and figurative. If the fish were the symbol of the freedom of death only to have them consumed and tossed away by the sailors then Equiano is telling us that *even one's death was not owned.* It connects to my prior definition of the slave sublime as a final engulfment by the Other. Here again is Equiano with the last scene of the terror of cannibalism.

> The ship has a very long passage; and on that account we had very short allowance of provisions; having towards the last only one pound an a half of bread per week, and about the same quantity of meat, and one quart of water a-day. We spoke with only one vessel during the voyage, and but once caught a few

> fishes. In our extremity the captain and people told me in jest they would kill me and eat me, but I thought them in earnest, was depressed beyond measure, expecting every moment to be my last. While I was in this situation one evening they caught a shark, and it got on board. This rejoiced my heart exceedingly, as I thought it would serve the people to eat instead of their eating me; but very soon, to my astonishment, they cut off a small part of the tail, and tossed the rest over the side. This increased my consternation; and I did not know what to think of these white people, though I very much feared that they intended to kill and eat me. (Page 41)

Again, Equiano gives us the trope of cannibalism. In this scene we read a subtle difference from the last. He is explicitly told he will be eaten and when a fish is caught it is not cut and cooked but thrown back. Equiano is left as the only object to be gobbled up by the crew in lieu of anything else. He feels anxiety[4] which in psychoanalytic terms is a crisis for the human who is inaugurated into language through primal loss whose absence is mastered with substitutive signs. If no clear sign for what the Other wants exists, the subject is left in the primal void it emerged from. Equiano's trope of cannibalism seems to fit that description of anxiety but with a slight alteration. Instead of not knowing what the Other wants *he is what the Other wants*. He is to be consumed and there is no object

[4] "Freud developed two theories of anxiety…from 1884 to 1925 he argued that neurotic anxiety is simply a transformation of sexual libido that has not been transformed adequately. In 1926, however, he abandoned this theory and argued instead that anxiety was a reaction to a – traumatic situation – an experience of Helplessness in the face of an accumulation of excitation that cannot be discharged. Traumatic situations are precipitated by 'situations of danger' such as birth, loss of the mother as object, loss of the object's love and above all, castration. Lacan relates anxiety primarily to the threat of fragmentation with which the subject is confronted in the Mirror-Stage. He also links anxiety to the fear of being engulfed by the devouring mother. This theme remains an important aspect of Lacan's account of anxiety thereafter, and marks an apparent difference between Lacan and Freud. Whereas Freud posits that one of the causes of anxiety is separation from the mother, Lacan argues that it is precisely a lack of such separation which induces anxiety." (Ibid, page 11)

inside him, no identity, and no intrinsic *value that must be preserved*. The slave is in a constant state of anxiety. The trope of cannibalism is Equiano's self-conscious use of memory and metaphor to give the reader the terror of being consumed by the Other.

In *Specters of the Atlantic*, Baucom cites Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiment*, digging out the radical notion of the sublime in which the "sympathetic spectator takes a melancholy, affective property in the passions of another not, as every standard account of melancholy has it, by encrypting that other within itself *but by encrypting itself within the other*." (Page 257) It is a useful critique of the cosmopolitan witness, who can enjoy solidarity without the risk. The sentimental witness internalizes the image of the fractured Other and glues it into a reflective surface to mirror him or her. Baucom demands the witness project the self into the Other.

His theory rearticulates the first part of Lacan's Mirror Stage, in which the proto-subject acquires a self by investing its chaotic body into the unified image of the Other. His revision has political significance. One must do this because the violence that shatters the Other's unity is often the consequence of our own power and privilege. In contrast, I cite the trope of being eaten by the survivor-witnesses of the Black Atlantic to reverse the formula. The sublime for the slave is not identification with the Other but the retrieval of the self from of the Other. In the Amistad case, this terror of cannibalism led to a revolt that used violence to break open the body of the slave trader and free the alienated subject to reunify with him or herself. Frantz Fanon aptly described this in *A Dying Colonialism*, "For the native, life can only spring up out of the rotting corpse of the settler…at the level of individuals violence is a cleansing force. It frees the native from his inferiority complex and from his inaction and despair." (Page 93)

The Black Atlantic authors cite a terror of being eaten by the Other and either kill them as in the Amistad uprising or consume their language and becoming an object that the Other wants to preserve. Instead of killing the slaver the survivor-witness reflects them and delivered back to themselves in translation that would seem to set the Black Atlantic narrator into endless alienation. Yet in this act of reflective camouflage the slave turned survivor-witness is anchored by silenced trauma to pain that pulses like a buoy in the darkness where their freedom died.

In this act we see the subjective arc from anxiety to desire, from a terror of being devoured by the Other to the to the regulated desire of being-in-language. In this sense, education allows them to survive as highly skilled and valuable slaves and as nominally free subjects. The dialectic of recognition turns and they are allowed to inch towards humanity again, they are transported from death to life and this is the core experience of the slave sublime. It is different from the Baucom's definition of the sublime in which the indifferent, uncommitted cosmopolitan witness must identify with the death of the Other and cease to substitute it within an abstracting logic. The slave sublime swivels on the same pivot of Romantic Anthropology but as the necessary reverse of commitment to the Other in that it returns to the self. Yet the return can never arrive at an origin but creates a cycle of tragic alienation. The nostalgia of origin has defined the collective unconscious of the African Diaspora. In becoming what the Other wants or is the slave gains freedom but at the price of an ever building aggression to the image one is trapped in again.

When the early Black Atlantic authors consumed the colonial language and were delivered to themselves they return through the filter of that foreign language and are no longer who they once were. The past they lost can not be replaced and the words stream

from them to fill in the trauma but cannot fill it. They try to fill the loss with a meaning that could make it bearable, to create a well of memory to stare in and see their innocence reflected. What they see is not who was or what happened but the words they borrowed. In order to be saved they must fit into a Western definition of the human and become an object the Other desires. In doing so they must be cleaned of the "blackness" they were chained to and morality becomes for the ex-slave and generations afterwards a fraught territory of ambition and self-abjection.

CHAPTER TWO

The Orality of Morality

"Those who make peaceful revolution impossible will make violent revolution inevitable"
Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

If as Fanon theorizes the native or in our case the slave, finds life in the "rotting corpse of the settler" our task is to define this relationship between violence and resurrection. We do not need to argue the inevitably of it, history does that for us. What we can sift for is the connection between the revolt on the Amistad, sparked by the terror of being eaten and the prior repetition of that trope in earlier Black Atlantic narratives. How does the violence of the Amistad relate to early slave-narratives? I propose that both mutineer and author begin trapped in a state of anxiety and escape it by retrieving themselves from the Other. It is a transportive act that I define as the slave sublime and see as the constitutive experience of the Diaspora.

In the quote above, King used the word "revolution" twice. One of his favorite philosophers was Hegel and the scene of Lordship and Bondage in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* was of particular significance. I read his use of the word "revolution" in the light of Alexandre Kojeve's famous lectures on Hegel in France, which influenced a generation of intellectuals from Derrida to Foucault to Lacan. According to Kojeve, in between us oscillates a continual dialectic of self and Other that *revolves* around the pivot of the symbolic. The self can only survive with the desire of the Other. When deadlocked *a hunger for return to the self builds* and violence or aggressive morality is inevitable. In the last chapter, I defined the terror of being consumed as the first part of the slave sublime now we view the return to the self.

One of Kojeve's metaphors is apt for my thesis, "Man 'feeds' on Desires as an animal feeds on real things. And the human 'I' is realized by the active satisfaction of its desire…it is as much a function of its 'food' as the body of an animal is of its food." (Page 6) The thematic imagery of this quote proves useful in our reconstitution of the sublime in the Middle Passage. Starvation of the slaves was physical and psychological as they hungered for both food and recognition. On the Amistad, each was satisfied when they rose against the crew and cut them down, thereby releasing the possibility of life from the slave-traders back to themselves.

In the Black Atlantic slave narratives, the authors learned the colonial language and cut the silence between slave and trader to transport them selves from death to life. What connects the act of morality and violence is they are answers to the same state of Helplessness. In the psycho-analytic tradition, Helplessness has a specific definition linked to the primal origins of human life. It means the stage of "being entirely dependent on other people for the satisfaction of needs (hunger, thirst). For the adult, the state of helplessness is the prototype of the traumatic situation which is responsible for the generation of anxiety." (Laplanche, page 189) The slave authors and Amistad rebels were traumatized and dependent on hostile traders for the satisfaction of their needs. Hence their seeming disparate responses are rooted in the same helpless anxiety. The shared origin shapes the author's language into aggressive morality structured by oral-sadism and the rebel's silence into a violent physical Acting-Out. Both the author's writing and rebel's killing relieve anxiety by having need answered in the symbolic that structures desire. In order to survive the social death of slavery, author and mutineer create an *arc from anxiety to desire*.

Acting-Out Anxiety

Let's take a brief detour through the history of anxiety to better map its relation to the slave sublime. Anxiety was first defined by Freud as an "accumulation of excitement that could not be discharged". It comes with the separation from the mother figure. As the distance becomes greater the subject is thrown into a state of helplessness. It is charged to the brim with excitation that it cannot channel. In the 20th Century, Lacan re-defined anxiety, so instead of separation from the mother as the cause he says it is not enough separation and the subsequent terror of being engulfed by her. The distinct angle of Lacan's definition comes from his translation of Freud through Ferdinand Saussure, in which the human emerges from the animal body to the extent that it articulates its needs within language.

With each act of call and response, the child *becomes the words* it uses. A self is made within the language it uses to master the absence left by castration[5]. In the final divide from the mother it begins a precarious balance. Just enough distance to keep the self circling its origin and just enough fantasy to conceal that origin with a dream. When the subject gets too close, anxiety rises. In Seminar Eight Lacan formulates, "Anxiety is…the subject suspended between a moment where he no longer knows where he is and a future where he will never again be able to re-find himself." (Page 11) The Lacanian

[5] "Lacan argues that the castration complex is the pivot on which the whole Oedipus Complex turns…it denotes the final moment of the complex. The child perceives that the mother desires something beyond the child himself – namely the Imaginary Phallus – and then tries to be the phallus for the mother. In the second time, the Imaginary father intervenes to deprive the mother of her object by promulgating the incest taboo; properly speaking this is not castration but privation. Castration is only realized when the real father intervenes by showing he really does possess the phallus in such a way that the child is forced to abandon his attempts to be the phallus. The castration of the subject in the third time of the Oedipus Complex negates the verb 'to be' (the subject must renounce the attempts 'to be' the phallus for the mother). In renouncing his attempts to be the object of his mother's desire, the subject gives up a certain jouissance which is never regained despite all attempts to do so. Castration means that jouissance must be refused so that it can be reached on the inverted ladder of the Law of Desire." (Ibid, 22)

angst is not a replacement for Freud's but its reverse side, it exists in a post-desire state, possible after consciousness is focused by the symbolic and propelled through signs into an enclosing tornado. The consequence of these two definitions for reading the slave-narratives is they can be read as stages of enslavement.

Instead of choosing one version of anxiety over the other, we can say the slave sublime is the experience of both. The survivor-witness of the Black Atlantic narratives begins with a traumatic separation from family, a re-fragmentation of the body through beatings and arcs to a terror of being consumed by slave traders. We can go to Equiano's words for confirmation,

> My cries had no other affect than to make them tie me up faster and stop my mouth…they also stopped my sister's mouth…the only comfort we had was in being in one another's arms and bathing each other with tears. But alas! we were soon deprived of even the small comfort of weeping with each together. The next day…she was torn from me, and immediately carried away from me, while I was left in a state of distraction not to be described. I cried and grieved continually; and for several days did not eat anything but was forced into my mouth. (Page 26)

Again we read of the mouth. The voice is swallowed and the beloved it calls to vanishes, leaving an emptiness to eat away the desire to live. Equaino gives us a memory of his sister and he sponging each other's tears with their bodies, soaking each other's anxiety. The loss of her leaves him wordless and worldless. It fits the first definition of anxiety as traumatic loss of a loved object. Unable to link his sorrow through language to a witness he eats the silence that is the echo of his sister.

Not long after we encounter the second, Lacanian definition of anxiety. Equiano is terrified of being consumed by the Other. He was told by the ship's cook that they were running out of food and he was to be the next meal for the crew. Unable to know what he could become that would preserve his life he lingered in terror. When they caught a shark he was relieved that it would substitute for him as a meal but the sailors cut its fin and tossed it back to the ocean, leaving Equiano trembling in anxiety. He writes, "I did not know what to think of these white people, though I very much feared that they intended to kill and eat me." (Page 41) The question he implicitly poses is *what I am for the Other* who threatens to consume him.

Now we turn to the Amistad mutineers. Again, the two definitions of anxiety compliment each other. In the court papers they spoke of the terror of being consumed, "the cook told them that when they reached land they would all be eaten. This 'made their hearts burn.' *And to avoid being eaten,* to escape the bad treatment they rose upon the crew with the design of returning to Africa." (Page 1, Italics Mine) In this terror, in this echoing silence, where one's calls go unheard amid the screams, the body speaks in a violent Acting Out. The mutineers lunged from anxiety in an act that spoke through the body. If recognition is repressed it shows up as symptoms on the body. It becomes a charge of excitement jolting limbs as if in a primal Morse code hammering at the silence. Violence is an attempt to turn the stalled dialectic between self and Other. It breaks the solidness of the trader, in order to transport one from the liminal space of the slave, from the void of social death to symbolic life again. When communication is not possible then an Acting-Out occurs, a symbolic message that has been denied entrance into language becomes a mute but legible message that breaks through it.

Symptoms, in the classic Freudian sense, are a blocked word that surfaces through the body. In Bodiou's Truth-Event the formula of the symptom is applied to History as the Acting-Out of socially repressed truth. In Baucom's reading the integrity of the cosmopolitan subject is based on his or her fidelity to this truth. In my reading, the slave in the cargo holds becomes a subject again by remaining loyal to this truth and surging toward action. The anxious terror of death becomes the drive to consume desire. As we will see, it is the same aggressive and stubborn will to live that drives the oral-sadism of the slave-author.

Eating English

Man shall not live on bread alone but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God – Matthew 4.4

I now turn the focus to the effect the arc from *anxiety to desire* has on the language of the survivor-witness. In order to understand the relation between starvation, violence and speech we must have a clear guiding principle. My thesis is simply that when speaking we consume desire and it is desire that sustains the self in the body. It is exactly this "self-in-the-body" that was in peril for Black Atlantic authors. They lived at the edge of social death, a condition Orlando Patterson defined as,

> Involving several transitional phases. The slave is violently uprooted from his milieu. He is desocialized and depersonalized…The next phase involves the slave being introduced into the community of his master, but it involves the paradox of him being introduced as a non-being…marked by indelible defect that weighs on his destiny. The slave will remain forever an unborn being. (Page 5)

The social death meant the slave had no right to recognition outside of the relation of domination between them and the master. Unable to speak with power, they live in a constant state of hunger for a proper human existence. The slave cannot eat the words of the social contract. They starve. They hurt. They search with their ears for what is loved to enter it and be protected.

Following Equiano's narrative, we can map the degrees of alienation from his natal language as a descent into danger. The further away from his village he was taken the more exposed he was to violence. Days after his capture he is taken in by a family whose resemblance to his own alleviated the terror of enslavement.

> At length, after many days traveling, during which I had often changed masters I got into the hands of a chieftain in a pleasant country. This man had two wives and some children, and they all used me extremely well, and they did all they could do to comfort me; particularly the first wife who was something like my mother. Although I was a great many days journey from my father's house, yet these people spoke exactly the same language as us. (Page 26)

After a death in the master's family he was be sold and once again the closeness of language and culture gave him some measure of safety. Equiano was bought by a wealthy widow who adopted him. They were similar to his family and he, in eerie resemblance to the Stockholm syndrome, identifies with his captors. It's not until once again he is sold and is marched to the shore that the linguistic difference becomes a wall preventing any identification and he becomes for the first time a commodity.

> All the nations and people I hitherto passed through resembled our own in manners, custom and language: but at length I came to a country, the inhabitants

> of which differed from us in all these particulars…I came among people who did not circumcise, and who ate without washing their hands. They cooked their provisions also in iron pots, and had European cutlasses and crossbows, which were unknown to us; and fought with their fists among themselves. Their women were not so modest as ours, for they ate and drank and slept with their men. But, above all, I was amazed to see no sacrifices or offerings among them. (Page 32)

It is a descent into what Equiano would call "a world of bad spirits" that could possible be a sly versioning on Dante's Inferno and at very least is a purposeful inverse of the world of his village. If these men were not circumcised, they lacked the mark of the law on their bodies and hence it explained their wildness. If they fought each other with their fists it was due the absence of social hierarchy held together by the sagacity of judges such as Equiano's father. If their women were not chaste it was because the line between the genders was stepped into dust by drunken men. He subtly links this to the influence of Europeans, as if the "cutlasses and crossbows" were weapons used not only on each other but on the very traditions and laws that kept African society intact. A quiet reversal of the accusation of savagery, the farther away he got from Africa the more civilization became a memory.

The scene stands in stark contrast to the beginning of his narrative, in which he gives us an image of paradise lost, of an Eden where law and act fused into an organic whole. Gender roles are clear and the division of labor final. Equiano offers his readers a pure land with simple people whose appetite does not exceed the law. In the case of sex the appetite is pruned with the threat of death for adultery.

In the case of food, it is a chaste palate that protects against perversion, an abuse of sustenance by sensuality linked as always to limitless desire.

> Our manner of living is entirely plain; for as yet the natives are unacquainted with those refinements in cookery which debauch the taste…The head of the family usually eats alone; his wives and slaves also have their separate tables. Before we taste food we always wash our hands: indeed our cleanliness on all occasions is extreme; but on this it is an indispensable ceremony. After washing, libation is made, by pouring out a small portion of the drink on the floor, and by tossing a small quantity of the food in a certain place, for the spirits of departed relations, which the natives suppose to preside over their conduct, and to guard them from evil. (Page 15)

The scene clearly places eating as both a physical act of nourishment and a psychic act of commitment to social mores. In cooking plain food, one holds close the law of utility. Food has a *natural* use to further the body to work rather than the body itself being a mine of sensual experience. It was a tactical description; one Equiano employs to create the image of a lost utopia for his readers. The separation at dinner of the father from the family is to re-establish the hierarchy. Cleaning beforehand reminds the reader of the care of the self, innate to his culture, obscured by the Western transformation of skin-color into metaphors of evil and dirt. Food is offered to ancestral spirits. It is a symbolic token to collective memory. If food is a symbolic act then it can only be from a prior existing cultural network that it is drawn. Equiano, the self in the newly 'blackened' body finds the nourishment he needs to keep his "self" alive.

If we bring back Ferdinand Saussure's division between of language as a general system of signs the human is born into and speech as the individual use of it then a new image becomes available to us. *The speaker devours language by speaking it*; consumes its meanings to continue symbolic life. Social death is being starved of meaning. It is being muzzled and swallowing your voice until it vanishes in the silence. It is speaking into a vacuum. A voice reflected into echoes by the closed eyelids of others.

In this light, I propose a new reading of the famous trope the Talking Book. Gate's cites it as the "ur-trope of the Anglo-African tradition…making the white text speak with a black voice is the initial mode of inscription of the metaphor of the double-voiced…the curious tension between the black vernacular and literary white text…has been represented in black letters at least since slaves and ex-slaves met the challenge of the Enlightenment to their humanity." (Page 131) It is part of Gate's larger intellectual effort to re-affirm the aesthetic sophistication of an African-American canon that often is seen solely through the prism of political efficacy. In bringing to focus the double-voiced meanings and metaphoric tropes, he alerts the modern reader to the tactics used by slaves and ex-slaves to manipulate the word. Such tactics, from the Talking Book to later Signifyin' to the Dozens to modern Rap, multiply meaning and layer the utterance with associative ore. It is in effect the poetry of necessity. One that allows psychic-energy flows to come through and breathe a colonial language intended to be their death certificate. As Equiano wrote,

> I had often seen my master and Dick employed in reading; and I had a great curiosity to talk to the books, as I thought they did; and so to learn how all things had a beginning: for that purpose I have often taken up a book, and have talked to

> it, and then put my ears to it, when alone, in hopes it would answer me; and I have been very much concerned when I found it remained silent. (Page 68)

Of course, as Gate's points out, we should not miss the obvious irony. Equiano retells this story of naïve illiteracy in a book *he has written* and in a trope he has revised. So the famously unreflective surface of Western white letters cracks and his voice enters the shattered language to shape a self from the shards. The construction of a self with such sharp edges did mean cutting himself. In one particular scene he reads his face through this new language,

> This mate had a little daughter aged about five or six years, with whom I used to be much delighted. I had often observed, that when her mother washed her face it looked very rosy; but when she washed mine it did not look so; I therefore tried oftentimes myself if I could not by washing make my face of the same color as my little playmate (Mary), but it was all in vain; and I now began to be mortified in the difference of our complexion. (Page 69)

More examples can be cited but one should be sufficient to show that Equaino was both physically violated by slavery and psychologically mangled by its ideology. The racism in English cast a shadow on his face. It first "blackened" his body with the collective unconscious of the West and then buried him in the cargo holds of a slave ship. He climbed out of the cargo hold to a mascot than sailor and finally full legal freedom but in doing so he climbed inside a language that "blackened" him. He had to find a vein of transcendent language, a light to illuminate his darkened features, to resurrect a self and he found it in religion.

My reading aligns with Gate's in once again asserting the life-giving function of poetic writing. As evidence by Equiano's use of metaphor and re-visioning, not only in the trope of the Talking Book but also of cannibalism the goal was for recognition to relieve silenced pain with witnessed speech. Where I part with Gates is rather than only map tropes, I focus instead on the consumption of desire by the author. Equaino's famous scene of listening to the book for voices is not only a continuation of a trope but the sight of a man looking for a meal. The book is a loaf of bread.

It is not difficult to see this link. He began his account with childhood memories of giving food offerings to the spirits of the dead. He again searches for spirits haunting the pages of a book. It is why Equiano linked reading to religion. The Bible for him was the word of the Spirit and he measured his acts by its commandments. Indeed, *his body was the food he offered up to God* and Equiano purified himself in much the same as he washed before eating in his childhood. Equaino's declared attempts to be a holy vessel could also be read as a way to insert his fragile body, exposed as it was to social death, into a vessel of holiness so others would not break him.

> I could no speak English tolerably well, and I perfectly understood everything that was said…I no longer looked upon them as spirits, but as men superior to us; and therefore I had the stronger desire to resemble them; imbibe their spirit, and imitate their manners; I therefore embraced every occasion of improvement…I had long wished to be able to read and write; and for this purpose I took every opportunity to gain instruction …servants told me I could not go to heaven unless I was baptized. This made me very uneasy; for I had no some faint idea of my future state. (Page 78)

If we hold to this image of the consumption of language as way to survive social death then to bring it into sharper focus, let's turn to established definitions. The link we sift for is between appetite and morality. The Oral Stage is defined as "the first stage of libidinal development…bound predominantly to that excitation of the oral cavity and lips which accompanies feeding. The activity of nutrition is the source of the particular meanings through which the object-relationship is expressed and organized; the love-relationship to the mother, for example, is marked by the meanings of eating and being eaten." (Page 287) The next term is the Oral-Sadistic Stage,[6] in which the subject attempts to destroy the object to incorporate it within the self. What connects these definitions to the Black Atlantic authors is aggression is the motivating force.

In the slave-narratives, the first tactic of survival is the consuming of colonial language. The writer enters the Oral-Stage to send the traumatized self, the being-in-pain of the slave from anxiety to desire, from social death to life. In the next stage an oral-sadistic acting-out of aggression becomes legible in the writing. The survivor-witness who has created a "self-in-the-body" from white supremacist ideology is now trapped within its deforming reflection. The authors must examine its veneer; study its solidness for hair-line cracks that lead to deeper contradictions. When they are found, the authors wedge it open. The wall of racial division is broken by spiritual unity.

Enslaved people began life as adults with identities. What happens in capture and torture is *a re-fragmentation of the body*. The person is broken. The image within which the subject finds his or her coherency is eroded by fatigue, shattered by beatings. They are unable to be reunited through identification with others or hope for a return to

[6] "The second phase of the Oral Stage. It is distinguished by the appearance of teeth and the activity of biting. At this point incorporation has the meaning of a destruction of the object, implying ambivalence has come into play." (Language of Psycho-Analysis, Laplanche and Pontalis, page 288)

symbolic life. Wet and terrified, the slave sees his or her life alienated in the figure of the trader and then afterward the subsequent owners. Inside this figure the slave is exiled and such exile from the body is a traditional concern of Diaspora writing. Slave-narratives note the utter obedience to the traders that creates a sense of being watched from every angle and heard by every object that represents the owner. In Equiano we read of this condition,

> While he was fast asleep I indulged myself a great deal in looking about the room, which to me appeared very fine and curious. The first object that engaged my attention was a watch which hung on the chimney, and was going. I was afraid it would tell the gentlemen anything I might do amiss: and when I immediately after observed a picture hanging in the room, which appeared constantly to look at me. (Page 224)

It is an extreme double-consciousness. He views himself so much through the Other's gaze that even commodities become eyes. W. E. B. Du Bois formalized a description of this experience in *The Souls of Black Folk*,

> It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness, - an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled striving; two warring ideals in one dark body. (Page 694)

Yet it must be repeated this is a traditional concern articulated over again, it is, in Amiri Baraka's terms a "changing same." We read it again in Frederick Douglass's *Narrative of*

the Life of Frederick Douglass. The tragic and agonizing self-sabotage of double-consciousness is shown in the behavior of ambitious slaves.

> The home plantation of Colonel Lloyd wore the appearance of a country village. All the mechanical operations for the farms were performed here… It was called by the slaves the Great House Farm. Few privileges were esteemed higher, by the slaves of the out-farms than that of being selected to do errands at the Great House Farm. It was associated in their minds with greatness…They regarded it as evidence of confidence reposed in them by their overseers; and it was on this account, as well as a constant desire to be out of the field from under the driver's lash, that they esteemed it a high privilege, *one worth careful living for*. (Page 400) (Italics Mine)

The careful living, a daily practice of double-consciousness is in the end a dynamic of exteriorization. One that leads to the drama of aggressivity where the tension increases between the body and the specular image it is locked within. The self is trapped in the Other. The more the slave imitates the master the farther away he or she is from their body, authentic emotions and self-consciousness. In slavery the self is traumatized into Helplessness and reduced to the early Oral stage of incorporating the Other. It becomes Oral-Sadism when he or she is stranded in the Other. Lacan noted this in his analysis of aggression,

> In the Mirror Stage, the infant sees its reflection in the mirror as wholeness in contrast with the uncoordination in the real body; this contrast is experienced as an aggressive tension between the specular image and the real body, since the wholeness of the image seems to threaten the body with disintegration and

> fragmentation. The consequent identification with the specular image thus implies an ambivalent relation with the counterpart, *involving both eroticism and aggression. This erotic aggression continues as a fundamental ambivalence underlying all future forms of identification*. (Page 6) (Italics Mine)

If we remember how Equiano longed for baptism because he had "some faint idea of my future state" it becomes clear his Christian identity is formed to preserve him. He tries to insure his survival beyond the present moment, a concern whose relevance can only come from having nearly died. So the language of holiness, the theological camouflage of the slave becomes an "armor of an alienating identity." In this case, the Biblical word covers the skin like metal plates that numb pain with anger even as the body within must substitute one darkness for another.

The Use of Pain

In *The Use of Pleasure*, Foucault analyzes morality as not simply a code of prohibition but a means of self-objectification and a personal teleology. He writes

> Of course all moral action involves a relationship with reality in which it is carried out, and a relationship with the self…a process in which the individual delimits that part of himself what will form the object of his moral practice, defines his position relative to the precept he will follow, and decides on a certain mode of being that will serve his moral goal. (Page 28)

The end goal is the unified moral subject as an ethical self formed by practices of censorship, monitoring of passions and abjection. For slave-narrators, this translates into regret over a pagan past, repulsion over one's physical appearance and the mark of divine grace that justifies their triumph. Such are the consequences of the double-consciousness of the enslaved. We read it in James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw's slave narrative, in which his difference from other Africans resides in his innate Christianity, is detectable in his religious curiosity.

> I had, from my infancy, a curious turn of mind…it being strongly impressed on my mind that there was some great man of power which resided above the sun, moon and stars, the objects of our worship…I often raise my hand to heave, and asked her who lived there? (Page 35)

He goes furthers and lightens his sister, "I had one sister…she was quite white, and fair, with fine light hair though my father and mother were black." (Page 37) Such double-consciousness is a response to trauma and the timelessness that is initiating signal of anxiety. If so, no wonder the words sublime and sublet are semantic neighbors. The

former means to transform animal instinct into culture while the latter has the sense of a tenant leasing to another tenant property owned by an absent figure. In the nebulous space between is the plight of Black Atlantic writers. Stranded in terror they moved from terror-anxiety into symbolic-desire, from instinct to language and claim a space in colonial culture even if it meant mutilating the past.

Equaino give us a vivid scene of the final part of the slave sublime in which he sublets a space within civil society. His narrative is a constant quest to return to the self and own his life through the mutual recognition with the Other. Yet to do this he must become an object the Other will not destroy, so he ingest the signs of value in order to be preserved. It is a tactic that for Equinao succeeds and becomes a template for integration. We can read in the scene of his emancipation the final part of our slave sublime.

> My master then said, he would not be the worse than his promise; and, taking the money, told me to go to the Secretary at the Register Office, and get my manumission drawn up. These words of my master were like a voice from heaven to me: in an instant all my trepidation was turned into unutterable bliss…unable to express my feelings, but by the overflowing of my eyes, and a heart replete with thanks to God…As soon as the first transports of my joy were over…I rose with a heart full of affection and reverence and left the room. (Page 100)

So here we reach the last part of the slave sublime but it does not complete a circle that returns to an origin but begins a spiral that leads further away from it. In both his and Gronniosaw's narrative the power of the slave economy is reinforced by their return to the new selves. Both eat English and are eaten by it. Both of their bodies are dissected along a map of biological racism so only the transcendent language of theology can unify

them into a subjective whole. In the end, my thesis is the orality of morality is the consumption of language to become an object for the Other's in order to prevent being destroyed. It is a desperate tactic to become a self, to translate trauma into language that links personal pain to the witnessed world. Finally it is the strategy to nourish the "self-in-the-body" that is perilously close to starvation in the social death of slavery.

If as Kojeve wrote, "Man 'feeds' on Desires as an animal feeds on real things. And the human I is realized by the active satisfaction of its human Desires" then slaves hunger for words that can secure them. The survivor-witness must go from speaking words to embodying them in order to create a self that is recognized. It creates an Oral-Sadism in which the slave-narrator destroys white supremacist ideology to be returned to his or her body.

Against the Kantian sublime of disinterestedness or the Baucom sublime of transport into the Other, I set the slave sublime as a deliverance from the Other. Neither the Amistad mutineers or the Black Atlantic authors could return to themselves but had to be translated by colonial language into beings worthy of preservation. Yet the return to the body came through an ideology that condemned it. The language that guaranteed their survival also caused a separation that could never close. At the end of the slave sublime began the pain of double-consciousness that was the price of a sublet in the West. It is this cycle of mirroring, entrapment and erotic aggression that defines blackness. In both the Amistad case and in Black Atlantic slave narratives, neither mutineer nor author returned home. When the Amistad survivors sail for Africa they do as missionaries on the "Mendi Mission" to proselytize. When Black Atlantic authors write, they do so as Christians bathed clean by the word of God. The image befitting this is not a return as a

complete circle but an outward spiral. We are faced with the Derridean dilemma of impossible purity. A dilemma that philosopher captured succinctly in his book *Of Grammatology*, "We are disposed of the longed-for presence in the gesture of language by which we attempt to seize it." (Page 141) It is a tragic scene whose pathos gains power from an implicit psychoanalytic background, in which to be a human is to sacrifice communion for endless substitution.

So the slave-sublime returns the slave to him or herself but never fully, the ends of the circle never connect but miss and spiral. It is a dilemma that has shaped the two major traditions in the Diaspora. Mirroring each other are integrationist tradition of return to the self through the Other and the Afrocentric tradition of return to an original purity. Both traditions seek to witness the unity of a self and both traditions censor, as George Lamming would say "the pleasures of exile". We can see this in the critical cross-fire between W.E.B. Du Bois, Claude McKay and Marcus Garvey over McKay's first novel *Home to Harlem*. The young Jamaican poet-novelist was the bard of difference, celebrating the profane and highlighting the national divisions within the international black metropolis of Harlem. His text pulled the veil of double-consciousness off to reveal a Diaspora torn between the master/slave dialectic and a fractured field of ethnicities and nationalisms. The shouts of panic, lust and rage steamed through the cracks. Du Boise said he needed to "take a bath" after reading it and Garvey called it "damned libel". We have the staunch integrationist and Pan-African separatist united against the novel of exile.

Such theorizing calls into question my thesis of the slave sublime. Is it a false transport? The Kantian sublime has a tactical indifference that creates an aesthetic

moment of elevation beyond signs. If it doesn't totally free the subject from categorical thought, it at least does not send them into a trajectory of reflecting others, an exile in which one loses everything except the rage of loss itself. I will hold the elaboration of the question and formalization of the answer for next chapter. Suffice to say, the slave sublime does bring us home but not to a final image or a transcendent sign. It brings us back to *the Real of the body*.

The first stage of the slave sublime is the breaking of the Other, whether through the sharp edge of a mutineer's machete or aggressive imitation of a slave narrator. The second stage, a return to the self is a seeming impossible goal as the very means of return make the arrival end at an alien self resurrected from the soil of colonial language. The terrible tension created the traditional motif of double-consciousness seen from Equiano to Frederick Douglass and beyond. My final point on the slave sublime, it is not found at the end of integration or separation but when the subject is stretched by historical forces between the two and collapses into the navel of language.

The captured subject experiences the flash of full speech that makes visible the erotic aggression of imitation, the intrinsic humanity that makes tragic the separation necessary to become subjects of power. The slave sublime is the concept through which I make the last theoretical intervention of defining *the difference between a human and a subject*. The former is loyal to the spectrum of experience beyond the symbolic and the latter adheres to the symbolic so as to not jeopardize the privilege that secures its identity. The slave sublime begins in frustration, climaxes in violence or aggressive morality and ends in a transport beyond history. The final destination is a body that owes nothing to the absent landlord from whom we sublet a social address.

The Middle Passage in Literature

What is the consequence of the slave sublime to our reading of literature? It shifts reading from symbolic interpretation to one of self-formation. The author has long been deconstructed as an illusionary figure woven from an invisible web of power. Foucault mapped the change from sovereign power to a distributive model that produces truth rather than prohibiting it. The human body became a text, where the effects of history were touchable. Derrida followed him with a technique of reading that allowed for self-deconstruction, a magnifying of tensions within a text that paralleled the conflict within the mind of the author. Instead of celebrating the author's conscious intentions he showed us how to read the signs of self-sabotage and deceit and link them to larger societal crisis. Although both were liberating critical gestures, they inevitably led to the collapse of the "grand narratives." Ideas no longer had the Platonic guarantee of being reflections of an essential reality. The sky above was empty and the earth below silent. No final truth could be found or created. It would always dissolve into the next truth, the next word that broke into breathing that gave us life but not its meaning.

My goal is to find a meaning not outside of words but within them. The zeitgeist of our time is a hunger for "something outside of the text." The hunger is for what Tristan Tzara wrote in his epic poem *The Approximate Man*, "the warmth from which all words are woven and at its very core and nucleus this dream called us." The slave-sublime, excavated from the rubble of Enlightenment grand-narratives, from the crevices of slave testimony gives proof of an ecstatic communion before the endless spiral of difference of consciousness seeking its origin.

In subletting a space within the colonial language, the Black Atlantic slave narrators had to find a home in alien language, whose words silenced them as much as they gave voice. The need for a home gave rise to a traditional split in African-American literature and criticism. On one side is a romantic and reactionary Afrocentrism that offers a reverse double-consciousness, which sees itself through the eyes of a pure blackness. On the other side is the academic tradition of secular criticism accused of leading to neurotic solitude. In my thesis of the slave sublime I show how both traditions share a common need to feed the "self-in-the-body".

How does this feeding happen and what are the consequences of a shift from symbolic interpretation to self-formation? The question pivots around the author, to even begin to answer we must ask then is who or what is an author? Older romantic models had it as a privileged site of transcendent genius. The author reshapes language from a place beyond it. Such a figure was cast as a rebel, a dangerous mind challenging the mass conformity of the bourgeoisie. Later critics, like Foucault and Barthes showed the author to be a bankrupt concept that can not claim a privileged consciousness. Instead the author is a function, a role created within the West, who does not offer protest to bourgeois consciousness but whose very individualization is an effect of it.

My concept of the author is based on reading the Black Atlantic slave narratives and being forced to redefine the sublime in the context of slavery. If the slave-sublime holds as a rapturous transport from the Other back the self, as a hunger to return from social death to life then the prism through which we see the 'author' changes. The authorial role becomes *a means of consuming desire*. So we must reverse Foucault and Barthes, who interpret the 'author' as a "the ideological figure by which one marks the

manner in which we fear the proliferation of meaning." In a classic analytic move, they lifted this figure to expose its connections to a disguised system of power. The author's claim on his or her text reflected the principle of private property, of a discourse of ownership and individuality. In its place Barthes and Foucault gave the image of a being that disappeared in language, of codes that created truth through power and concealed their origin with false presence. It was a needed critique but the material they worked from limited their analysis. In reading the shadow-side of the Enlightenment, we see in the slave-narratives another relationship to language. The author function was a way of self-ownership, yes but it was also a means of nourishment, of securing investment in a self that shielded a blackened body. So we can replace Foucault and Barthes image of a false transcendence through language with the image of the body eating words to sustain a self.

If the author function, in context of the slave sublime was a means of consuming desire then how was desire incited, stimulated and savored? As stated before, two linked yet opposing traditions exist. The first is the camouflaging oneself with the desire of the Other, to be encased within an object they love. It accounts for the extreme declarations of religious devotion many Black Atlantic writers made. The price of this camouflage was the older self was obscured. The trauma was near but unapproachable. The other tradition is a returning to the origins of the self before it was split by hunger and silence. It has as an Ur-trope, the lyrical journey to heal the split caused by resurrection in the discursive soil of white supremacy.

The Weight Holding Back the Void

The Middle Passage is the scene of separation from the natal land. It is the unforgivable wound, a severance from tradition too sharp for the tongue. Although we have narratives of survivors each generation since has returned to confront what could not be said in order to live. African-American authors have returned time and again to the dark cargo holds to face what the enslaved had to close their eyes to. In doing so, they have created a trope that functions as a Primal Scene.

A Primal Scene is defined as "traumatic infantile experiences which are organized into scenarios or scenes". Freud theorized that a child is traumatized by seeing his or her parents engage in sexual intercourse which is read as an act of violence by the father. At first, he believed a real empirical event to be the root of the Primal Scene. During his debates with Carl Jung, Freud shifted to reading it as a necessary myth, a backward projection that lit the inner wall between consciousness and the unconscious that created the subject. In the 20th Century, Lacan rewrote Freud and reset that first division in the Mirror Stage where a chaotic body discovers an outside image that becomes the locus of the self. Next is the mastery of absence and presence through the symbolic which sends the newly coherent self into the currents of language. The subject can never untie this self, never abolish this inner division. It destruction would end the very consciousness in which that destruction could be read either as freedom or death. Alienation is permanent and exile never ending. The original division is the interior wall upon which projection of a Primal Scene of separation will flicker. Inevitably, the voice of authority figures in the present is layered over the first break with the maternal bond and chaotic body that is the unconscious in each of us.

In the case of the Diaspora in general and African-America in particular, the authority figures of today are in an ideological lineage with the slave traders of yesterday. Different European ethnic groups migrated here and were "refined" white, inheriting the position of power established by the men holding whips on the Middle Passage. African-American writers have returned to that Primal Scene of the Middle Passage to excavate the silences, to sift for evidence, to map the causes of the pain that choke us. Yet, lest we indulge in romanticism it must be stated again that these "returns" do not discover history but *produce* it. The regime of power and knowledge, the ideological constellation is the same yet the era in which the *writer "returns" from* is not. Different questions and new needs arrive in the past that is almost always used to reflect the present rather than expose its emptiness. History creates new silences for every one it gives voice to. Theorist Michel De Certeau focused on this conundrum in his book *The Writing of History*.

> The word "history" vacillates between two poles: the story which is recounted and what is produced. This truism still has the value of designating, between these two meaning, the area of a labor and a change. For historians always begin with the first meaning and the aim toward the second… In this fashion they generate history. In the pieces of imagination their society has organized beforehand, they effect displacements, add other parts, set up intervals and comparisons among them, discern the trace of something other in these signs; they refer thus to a construct that has vanished. In other words, historians create absences. From these documents they produce a past that is taken up by but never reduced to their new discourse. Their labor is thus also an event. (Page 288)

The “return” to the Primal Scene of the Middle Passage cannot be achieved, it is an impossible return yet that impossibility does not negate the artistic achievement of the authors we will analyze. Indeed, it is the very condition of their success. If we recall the central point of the slave sublime is the return to the self, a flight caused by being locked in the Other and starving for desire. The slave-narrator was searching for a future in what seemed certain death.

We are now placed properly to move further into our reading. If the writers of the African-American canon were caught in the cycle of the slave sublime the past, the origin of *blackness* itself would of necessity be a site of return. In order to acquire the desired recognition for legal-social equality, a future state of being, they would have to negate the present inequality structured on white supremacy. In doing so, writers caught in the current of the slave sublime of a return to the self must first abolish the history on which the white supremacist present rests in parallel equilibrium. In terms of power, the present and the past are in the same temporal moment, one balancing on the other. The work of Black writers is to make the past “past’ and create a new history. They must create a new Middle Passage. It is an act summarized succinctly by Lacan,

> I identify myself in Language, but only by losing myself in it like an object. What is realized in my history is not the past definite of what was, since it is no more, or even the present perfect of what was, since it is no more, or even the present perfect of what has been in what I am, but the future anterior of what I shall have been for what I am in the process of becoming. (Page 63)

In this new history is produced the reason for protest. Instead of kindly Christian men converting pagans to save souls; we see slave traders whipping skin off. In place of

adventuresome sailors shipping dangerous animals; we see slaves risking life for freedom by rebelling. To say the Middle Passage is produced it is not a claim of relativism. It is not just one narrative among others. It is does not share a single plane of equivalence. Instead we can say its primacy is that is carries the truth of trauma. The new Middle Passage is the repressed screams left off the accounting books of the traders, the silence of the dead in the holds. It is also, the trauma of the present political struggle speaking through the past and thereby using it as a mirror to reflect itself. What we will see in the following readings of both textual and cinematic versions of the Middle Passage is that distorting reflection of the future on the past.

One of the earliest attempts at the historical recuperation *and reformation* of that voyage was Robert Hayden's 1945 poem *Middle Passage*. Hayden began as a student of Harlem Renaissance poetics but after a meeting W. H. Auden, whose sharp critical eye cut that tether rope, he experimented with his voice. T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound the ethos of modernism influenced Hayden who used techniques of fractured narrative, historical ventriloquism and collage. The *Middle Passage*, his most famous poem, was for some early Black Aesthetic critics too modernist. In a 1966 Black Writer's Conference at Fisk University, Hayden was critiqued as being too academic and too influenced by European models. After the tide of nationalism receded his reputation was honored. What is telling in the debate is what cannot be told. Both Hayden and the Black Nationalist poets were caught in the currents of the slave sublime. Both he and they tried to reach an origin but ironically, it was Hayden who came closest.

As we read before, the urge to return is a sign of the slave sublime, of being locked in a silent Other outside of the self. When Hayden wrote the Middle Passage, he

assembled historical dialogues around that silence. The nationalists returned with bombast to a utopia Africa, a paradise not seen since Equiano created it. Even in Equiano's hands it was a false Eden created to induce guilt in whites for trampling it. Tragically, what unites Hayden and the Nationalists is they both share the goal of producing a history to name the future. Where they differ is the respect given to the trauma at the core that is impossible to translate.

Hayden said of the *Middle Passage* "At times [the poet's] voice seems to merge with voices from the past, voices not intended to be clearly identified. There are the voices of the traders, of the hymn-singers, and perhaps even of the dead. Yes, I would say that--the voices of the dead." (Page 171) In creating an opening to history, he is "ridden" by the spirits of the past. How can we theorize this "opening" without recourse to vague spiritualist rhetoric? In re-opening the past he must negate the present history of it. A line of division is drawn, not only between now and then but this version of the past and his own.

Following our model, the negation of the present is done when desire is faced with absence. The subject, in anticipation of the future, creates space for it in the present by erasing the present. A clear distinction must be maintained for this formula to work. The present reality, in this case white supremacy, is on the same temporal plane as the history that supports it. The official past that Hayden uses by juxtaposing voices of slave traders around the silence of his ancestors *is also the present*. In negating one he negates the other. Thereby in deconstructing the official history of the slave trade in his poem *Middle Passage*, he negates the present it supports to satisfy a delayed desire for recognition. It is a desire that feeds the "self-in-the-body", a body starving inside the

black shadow of the West. So the "voices" Hayden heard could not, obviously been physically heard but felt. They were the voice of the dead desire within him channeled through the dead to speak to life his freedom.

Hayden begins with the names of the ships "Jesus, Estrella (star), Esperanza (hope), Mercy" Each name a blasphemy riding the blood filled darkness. Each name a word in the language the survivors will learn to ask for food and in which their children will demand freedom. Robert Hayden, a descendant is returning to those words to search for the fulfillment of their promise. Like Equiano and Wheatley, he stokes desire by stretching the claim of Christian universal compassion over blackened bodies.

Sails flashing to the wind like weapons
sharks following the moans the fever and the dying;
horror the corposant and compass rose (Page 1520)

The first line is telling, man-made cloth, woven to capture the wind "flashing…like weapons." It suggests a battle between humans and nature but not the outside weather but against inner passions. The next images are sparse like shards of a broken mirror with the reflection buried in the glass. Pieces are missing. Edges don't fit. Voices are juxtaposed against each other. He shows us "sharks following the moans the fever and the dying; horror the corposant and compass rose." If we refuse the easy reading of this as historical speculation and hold to the concept of the slave sublime, a new angle of analysis emerges. If Hayden composes this "past" to consume desire is the image of the "shark following the moans" a metaphor for his own consciousness? Is he not searching the murky waters of the Atlantic for the scent of blood to lead him home?

He becomes the "inhabitants of the deep" that Equiano saw in his mind when he wrote, "Often did I think of the inhabitants of the deep much more happy than myself; I envied them the freedom they enjoyed, and as often wished I could change my condition for theirs." (Page 58) As a literary descendant of Equiano, Hayden moved in the currents of English that Equiano first churned to return the slave back to his or her stolen body. Hayden must also make his way through the same maze of racist ideology and veils of double-consciousness as Equinao did, albeit to a less dangerous degree, to find the light within his blackened body. And so Hayden, more free and happy than Equaino could ever be, swims in that man's English searching the Atlantic for the blood of slaves in order to "change my condition for theirs." The closer Hayden gets the brighter the language, a truth reflected in his choice of imagery. He writes of the "corposant" a fiery flash that dazzles ship decks during electrical storms. It is followed by the "compass rose" the circle illustration on a map that shows direction. Both images, in my reading of desire and self-formation are his moments, not history, in which Hayden's consciousness glimpses the "home" he is returning to.

The Middle Passage was criticized for its disjointedness. It may be an unfair critique for even though the modernist structure is a collage one clear narrative can be traced. The poem moves is threaded by the metaphoric imagery of blindness to forced sight. In the sequence of monologues we read of a plaque.

…Which one of us
has killed an albatross? A plague among
our blacks – Opthalmia: blindness - & we
have jettisoned the blind to no avail.

It spreads, the terrifying sickness spreads.

Its claws have scratched sight from the Capt.'s eyes

& there is blindness in the fo'c'sle

& we must sail 3 weeks before come

to port.

What port awaits us, Davy Jones'

or home? I've heard of slavers drifting, drifting,

playthings of wind and storm and chance, their crews

gone blind, the jungle hatred

crawling up on deck. (Page 1521)

As we move into the narrative-monologue of the poem, the sailor tells of a loss of sight. Hayden did research for the poem and Opthalmia did occur. Yet we must resist the easy read of historical reconstruction and ask how the writing is an act of self-formation. Hayden is a historical ventriloquist speaking of and through the slaver's blindness. As an African-American who must endure some degree of Double-Consciousness, is this act of "voicing" not only an exercise in research but also a performance of his alienation? If the sailor and the captain are the ancestral masters, to speak from their voice but in fear of darkness generates the eager anxiety of one's return from the Other. It is staged home-coming. Hayden can see his origin approaching through the fear of the mastered voice of the master within him. So he creates a narrative from blindness to forced sight.

But, oh, the living look at you

with human eyes whose suffering accuses you,

whose hatred reaches for you through the swill of dark

to strike you like a leper's claw.

You cannot stare that hatred down

or chain the fear that stalks the watches

and breathes on you its fetid scorching breath;

cannot kill the deep immortal human wish

the timeless will. (Page 1523)

Now he reverses the direction of his speech. While not speaking from the slave's mouth he accuses the traders from their descendant-narrator. One who can, in this produced history, see his origin. He is not within the dark but shapes its menacing movement into speech. His prose teeters, is unbalanced between sources but is held in focused hatred.

Hayden does not speak from the *blackened* body but of it, around it and to it. He voices the sailors on the ship and traders on the shore but never the slaves themselves. The tactic is to create a collage of voices around silence. He generates desire, not by a total erasure of the slave traders recorded accounts but by their arrangement. In doing so he recreates the past with its own "official voice". It is a tactic that would be superseded by later authors, in particular Toni Morrison, who would not take the puzzle-pieces of the past and produce history but channel the voices from the sea's bottom.

Born in the Water

The other scene of the Middle Passage is in Toni Morrison's 1988 novel *Beloved.* Like Hayden, she grounds her fiction in history. The work is based on the 1856 case of Margaret Garner, who killed her children rather than let them be enslaved. It was released to unanimous praise save for, small wonder, Stanley Crouch who called it a "holocaust

novel in blackface." Of course it is. *Beloved* achieves the same goal as Holocaust memoir in violating the image of the past *to expose the violence within it*. Indeed, violence passed in silence from survivors to their children. The silence is what every oppressed people must breathe into language to break its cycle. So Morrison insists on putting front page a dedication to those who died during the Middle Passage, "Sixty Million and more."

The novel centers around Sethe, a fugitive slave who lived free in her step-mother's house for a full moon cycle when she saw her master coming on horseback to bring her back. In a blind panic, Sethe grabs her children, hauls them into a shack and kills them. The first two, she inadvertently knocks out. The third, her new born girl, still un-named has her neck cut through with a saw. She is jailed but set free due to mental illness. No one talks to her and she lives in proud isolation. Years later a young woman, the same age as her daughter would have been had she lived, appears on her porch. It is her dead daughter returned. It is Beloved.

In the novel, the world of men, women and spirits flow into one another. In sharp contrast to Hayden, Morrison speaks from the within the blackened body. Even more, she positions her voice in the misty area between lives, the transport of a soul through the netherworld to the new body of Beloved. Her initial grammatical gesture is the removal of punctuation or anchoring points[7]. History is unhinged. Meaning is in abeyance. The lines between then and now, life and death are blurred. We read the unformed thought-feelings of a girl growing in her mother's womb.

[7] "The point de caption is thus the point in the signifying chain at which 'the signifier stops the otherwise endless movement of the signification and produces the necessary illusion of fixed meaning. The fact that communication is always a retroactive effect of punctuation. It is only when the sentence is completed that the sense of the first words is determined retroactively." (Page 149)

> I AM BELOVED and she is mine. I see her take the flowers away from leaves she puts them in a round basket the leaves are not for her she fills the basket she opens the grass I would help her but the clouds are in the way how can I say things that are pictures I am not separate from her there is no place where I stop her face is my own and I want to be there in the place where her face is and to be looking at it too a hot thing (Page 210)

The girl is not love, for love assumes a distance to be crossed. She surges toward and within the mother. Life, un-named and un-naming is asking for the mother's shape. The spirit-unborn child can be read as a symbol of regeneration pulsing from conception. She is Life searching for shape in a woman who in the next page is enslaved, chained in the slave ship and drowned. In accordance with the fluid, non-punctured prose, water becomes the image of generations connected by spirit moving stealthily through the silence of trauma. The thoughts of the unborn child show us the inside of the cargo hold from the inside of her mother's womb. Morrison experiments with language, allowing images to float into a narrative that imitates the time outside of time through which she channels her characters.

"Men without skin" give urine for drinking water. Slaves tremble and thrash in the dark. She can survive this but not distance from the face she is becoming or the body she surges within. The "clouds in the way" are feelings held in thought-shapes like water is condensed in the sky, or the dark fog cast by her mother's thoughts. The clouds that divide them, that image of condensed water in the sky become water of the ocean.

> They are not crouching now we are they are floating on the water they break up the little hill and push it through I cannot find my pretty teeth I see the dark

> face that is going to smile at me it is my dark face that is going to smile at me the iron circle is around our neck she does not have sharp earrings in her ears or a round basket she goes in the water with my face. (Page 212)

No "I" exists but a hunger to be. It is almost achieved when the body, stitching itself together from the blood of her mother, is drowned. The "dark face that is going to smile at me" is lost in the ocean where the water-metaphor will carry it through time to Sethe. In this spiritual ventriloquism Morrison can, unlike Hayden, set the angle of her authorial voice as coming from the blackened body. In speaking through a spirit-unborn child, she celebrates a unity with the dead that Hayden would not attempt in his production of history. She generates desire through Imaginary identification with an unborn- born black woman who becomes a metaphor of Life.

> I see her face which is mine it is the face that was going to smile at me in the place where we were crouching now she is going to her face comes through the water a hot thing her face is mine she is not smiling…Sethe's is the face that left me Sethe sees me see her and I see the smile her smiling face is the place for me it is the face I lost she is my face smiling at me doing it at last a hot thing now we can join a hot thing. (Page 213)

The lost spirit finds her host. The voice of the author finds its center. In the act of return a dangerous, consuming, borderless obsession begins. The spirit unborn woman consumes Sethe as the emotional energy released through this "channeling" overwhelms Morrison's voice. The prose of Beloved is driven by an unyielding lyricism. It beautifies every nook and crevice with a divine light cast from the netherworld Morrison writes from and within. Each line is washed by that holy water uniting her and her characters in a timeless

revelation. It forces me to ask, does Morrison indulge in consuming desire so much that she also consumes her characters in its single lyrical frequency. Are we that beautiful? Finally it is time to focus on two of the most widely seen interpretations of the Middle Passage. The first is the beginning episodes of *Roots*, the classic TV mini-series and the second is the movie *Amistad*.

Origins

In the mini-series *Roots* we have a return to the origins of blackness, specifically the scenes of capture and the transport of the Middle Passage. The cultural importance of the series is unquestionable. What can be asked about is the ideological inheritance that was passed through *Roots* to our generation. Although it challenged the degrading stereotypes prevalent in the media, the series did not abolish them so much as replace them with an older set of images drawn from the Abolitionist tradition. The main purpose was to prove, as Du Bois asserted in the title of his classic book that black folks have souls.

Roots gave the world audience, not so much history as a paradise lost. Michael Blayney wrote in his essay *Roots and the Noble Savage*, "Just as popular treatment of the legendary noble red man fails to address the contemporary situation of Native Americans, so Kunta Kinte was palatable to white audiences precisely because of his failure to remind whites of the plight of contemporary blacks." Yet, if we follow our earlier model set before, Roots was not intended to remind white audiences of contemporary blacks but to remind contemporary blacks who we could become. It sought to remake the image of black history to replace contented slaves and happy mammies which were the residual myth from the antebellum period. In its place, a new past would be created where women

and men live in harmonious heterosexuality, where we speak King James English and everyone is natural. No weaves or conks but a soft afro that is eternal. The ideological roots of *Roots* run into Equiano's paradise village where an organic society existed before slave traders spoiled it.

The Loin Cloth

Watching *Roots*, a question comes. Why are they wearing diapers? Loin-cloths were among the signs of tradition, an artifact that anchors the narrative into the past and allows the crucial suspension of disbelief. Since no one on the cast spoke any African language signs of reference had to be constructed. Since *Roots* takes place before the corruption of slavery, diaper loin-clothes are appropriately enough the sign of natural innocence. If such lost innocence is what the series strains to recover, the diaper loin-cloth can rightly be called a fetish. A fetish is of course an object in which one's sexual drives are locked. It has such power because it is seen as the artifact the mother desires. If the children are estranged from the Motherland then the diaper loin-cloth becomes the erotically charged symbol of that lost Eden. No wonder in *Roots* sexuality is playful, clean and powerless. Sex is held in place by ritual and tradition. No perversions allowed. The diaper loin-cloth signals the cleanliness of an impenetrable dignity. It is a chastity-belt that although never existed was nevertheless found in the re-making of history.

The Stars

The famous scene in *Roots* is when Kunta Kente's father Omora, played by Thalmus Rasula, holds him up to the night sky glittering with stars. It is the beginning of his rite of passage into man-hood. He is named in front of the Universal Spirit in the Sky.

The tropes of masculine rites of passage build through the first two episodes of the series. The boys are taken away and taught the martial arts of hunting and wrestling. They are initiated into secret knowledge and emerge men. Kunta returns home and the warmth between him and his mother are gone, replaced by a cool respect.

In the 1997 movie *Amistad* the political background was vastly different. In the interceding decades between *Roots* and *Amistad*, the discourse of Black Nationalism had dwindled to nostalgia. Feminism had made a significant impact on historical research and cultural production. The generational shifts in aesthetic were visible in the scenes of the cargo hold. We do not hear the masculine rhetoric of war, "Be strong Kunta, be strong to kill the white man!" or see male rites of passage. Instead we hear screams instead of rhetoric, see women and men slipping over each other and a baby held above their thrashing. In *Amistad*, Cinque unlocks the shackles, frees others and rushes the deck. He stabs the Spanish traders and grabs the ship's wheel, turning it desperately as the stars spin above him.

The image is a revision of the scene in *Roots* when Omora held his son up to the star-lit night sky and blessed him saying, "Behold Kunta, the one thing greater than yourself!" The older Kunta first played by LeVar Burton is enslaved and renamed Toby and later in the series Kunta/Toby is played by James Amos of *Good Times* fame. After a failed escape attempt the master cuts off half of Kunta/Toby's foot. Even as he learns to live as a slave, he does not forget his father's ritual and takes his newborn child to an empty field and holds him up to the star-lit night sky.

In *Amistad*, the imagery of stars repeats but instead of lights guiding the character home, we see Cinque lost and panicked. He has cut down the Spanish sailors. The wind

plays like a broken flute around him as he turns the ship's wheel. As he grapples with it, the stars above him are not a map but a dizzy swirl of light. The revision of this image of stars, once a celestial blessing to a confusing blur could be read as the loss of referent. The romantic nostalgia of Black Nationalism had dwindled. No map existed for African-America. The way home led to another dead end. The stars which once symbolized direction were in *Amistad* a nauseous spiral that left a people lost.

The Body

In *Roots*, Africans had clothes. Even in the Middle Passage, rushed around the deck by traders, they kept their loin-cloths. Of course, the loin-cloths were a needed artifact, an aesthetic quilting point to pin together the floating ideas of nature and nobility to their bodies. Yet in *Roots* the exposure of such dire human degradation also demanded as a limit beyond which the camera could not go. If the images went too far it would no longer be an observer of historical pain but a voyeuristic eye taking sadistic pleasure in peeling layer after layer of humanity off. The loin-cloth was a shield protecting the audience from its aggressive visual dissection of the black body. It was of course prime time TV. *Roots* came on at family hour and the censors would not allow naked bodies to be seen during dinner. Or would they?

The first time I remember full frontal nudity on TV was a special commercial free showing of *Schindler's List*. American bourgeois decorum was outweighed by the gravity of the horror. Nothing sexual could be found in naked scared people squished together in the gas chambers. Yet something sexual could be in the black bodies in slave ships. One could point to the cultural change, the more open free sexuality and concurrent familiarity with bodies on TV. Against this I hold the asexuality of the bodies in Schindler's list and

the protection against possible sadistic voyeurism of *Roots* are linked to the different positions each body has in American culture. The former body although European, is white. The scene of the crime is not here but there, across the ocean. We can see it as part of a relatively uncontested history of genocide. The latter body is black and the scene of the crime is here in our past, in our prisons and in our streets. Hence the erotic aggression innate to power could be channeled once again at the sight of its greatest triumph.

The Un-Arrived

What runs parallel in both text and cinematic representations of the Middle Passage is they survive. In Hayden's epic-modernist poem we read an author creating his mythos of regeneration, framing the slave rebel's will to live between the "official" voices of history. In Morrison's *Beloved*, we read an author creating her myth of regeneration through spiritual ventriloquism. In *Roots* and *Amistad* we see characters fight and fail and survive their enslavement. All of the narratives give us death as a spectacle, in order to show the fragility of life, the danger to the main characters we are invested in. What cannot be shown is the narrative of death. We will not read the story that ends in the deep swallow of the sea. We need to be resurrected in language and so we return to the shore and face the Atlantic. We listen to the awesome silence of so many who did not arrive and turn away from it, back to our voice, to our stories of survival and triumph. Walking from the shore, to others who wait for us to let go of the dead and imagine instead those who survived who made it here, who had children who became us. We forget that the violence our ancestors barely survived continues around us and the only way to stop it is to not forget but turn to the screams of today and *listen*.

CHAPTER THREE

The Singing in the Fields

"For Beauty is nothing but the beginning of terror, which we still are just able to endure, and we are so awed because it serenely disdains to destroy us."
-Rainer Maria Rilke

"Beauty, no doubt, does not make revolutions. But a day will come when revolutions will have need of beauty."
-**Albert Camus**

Thomas Jefferson stood on his porch and listened to slaves in the field, swinging tools in rhythm to break the earth open. It troubled him to hear the melodies, the call and response between the lead and the chorus, rising in wave after wave of work. The sun arced the sky as they sang from dawn to dusk. At night they walked to their cabins humming until it became the breathing of sleep. In theory, Jefferson "knew" blacks were simple animals and that simplicity saved them from feeling the full pain of slavery. Still he heard their songs and against his will wondered if the poly-rhythms, the counter melody, the bodies moving on beat as they hit the ground with hoe and shovel; if all this orchestration was a sign of sentient beings. In his *Notes on Virginia*, Jefferson wrote, "In music they are generally more gifted than the whites with accurate ears for tune and time, and have been found capable of imagining a small catch. Whether they will be equal to the composition of complicated harmony, is yet to be proved." (Page 222)

We must not take the Founding Father at his word. Jefferson does not wait for proof. When he is confronted with the art-work of slaves or freed blacks, say Phyllis Wheatley's poetry or Ignatius Sacho's prose, instead of measuring it against other poetry or prose he measures it against the distance between the races in nature. It is a distance he believes is reflected in the social order. So even though he poses as an impartial judge

waiting for evidence of equality, his social position is defined by its absence. In order to maintain it, he must continually produce absence through erasure. Yet as Jefferson degraded efforts by slaves to prove equality he left the *black voice* in ambivalence. The singing of slaves was closest example of creativity he could partially accept. Still he divides it from civilized art by contrasting with Native-American culture. He writes,

> The Indians...astonish you with strokes of the *most sublime oratory*; such as prove their reason and sentiment strong, their imagination glowing and elevated. But never yet could I find a black had uttered thought above the level of plain narration...in music they are more generally gifted than the whites. (Page 233)

Jefferson uses the sublime in its early definition as an experience of emotional transport that moves an audience. The definition came into English as early as 1654 in John Hall's translation of *Peri Hupsous* or *On the Sublime* by Longinus, a Greek critic of antiquity. It wasn't until Nicolas Boileau-Despreaux's 1674 translation that it became the famous concept of original genius, awe and terror. The sublime became the rite of passage for European elite whose aesthetic sensitivity to art emerging from the rift between reason and chaos that guaranteed humanity. The human was and still is a being exiled from nature into thought. The sublime teeters at the limit of the thinkable and the categories through which a self is formed are surpassed. It is this Enlightenment tradition that Jefferson assumes when he uses the sublime to divide "Indian ...sublime oratory" from the *black voice* since black slaves, it is assumed, do not remember or think and therefore do not have a self to surpass.

The Voice at the End of the Tunnel

In Jefferson's era, it was believed that slaves brought from the chaos of primitive life to the order of civilization were still locked within nature. The singing of slaves was silent to history, it added nothing human to time. It was a grunt set to melody, a cry from the animal world that did not have the depths of sentiment available to a self-reflective mind. It was on this silence that the material grandeur of the West was built. Yet it was, despite the rhetoric of evolution, a silence enforced by whips and iron mask. It was in the end unsustainable because slaves survived, read and wrote. The first act of many was to demand witness for their wounds, to unbuckle their chains. The most glittering of them was the Great Chain of Being, an ideological anchor dropped into the depths of a nature that did not exist. Africans stolen and sold into the Atlantic slave trade were "blackened" by a new darkness at the heart of the West, an abyss of "nature" emptying out the Classical episteme with a modern dimension. It was a transformation Foucault detailed in his book *The Order of Things* in which he uses the image of a table to describe the formal order that once bound knowledge. He writes,

> When we establish a considered classification, when we say a that a cat and a dog resemble each other less than two greyhounds do, even if both are tame or embalmed, even if both are frenzied, even if both have just broken the water pitcher, what is the ground on which we are able to establish the validity of this classification with complete certainty? On what 'table', according to what grid of identities, similutudes, analogies, have we become accustomed to sort out so many different and similiar things? (Page 29)

In his analysis the Classical table was held together by four principles; convenientia, aemulatio, analagy and sympathy. *Convenientia* is the resemblance of things in proximity to each other, of seepage through the pores of the surface. The soul acquires the material weight of the body it is encased within as the body is tossed about by its tidal passions. The linkage creates resemblances through which a constellation of reflections shine into each other. *Aemulatio* is the same principle amplified by distance, now resemblances are freed from rules of contact and exist "from one end of the universe to the other." It frees knowledge from physical contact by allowing resemblances to mirror without an original source. The Classical episteme became fluid yet contained within a formal structure of signs bounded by similarity. *Analogy* superimposes both prior principles into one, the inter-locking communication of the former with the abstracted power of the latter. Finally *sympathy* is the principle of energy which does wait for contact to establish resemblance but attracts objects in nature by their hidden similarities. It is this table that bound Western knowledge Foucault says, until the 16th Century broke the surface of that table *and made it a tunnel* leading to a primal Being that is the source of language yet irreducible to it. The Classical episteme shattered and opened an interior emptiness,

> Withdrawn into their own essence, taking up their place at last within the force that animates them, within the organic structure that maintains them, things, in their fundamental truth, have now escaped from the space of the table; instead of being no more than the constancy that distributes their representations always in accordance with the same forms, they turn in upon themselves, posit their own volumes, and define for themselves an *internal* space which, to our representation, is on the *exterior*. (Page 239)

The table has now become a tunnel in which recedes a darkness that obscures the origin of things. In this depth, one must search for truth by tracing its limits because truth is defined as resistance to our limits. Origin is pure potential, an ore pressed into the human world through the labor of language. When we finally have the object it is no longer what it was but is a reflection of ourselves. The knowing subject and the object of knowledge are united in the projection of language on the noumenal world. Language is no longer a map of the innate resemblances between objects but an envelope folded by the mind around an overwhelming infinite. The Modern episteme searches the dark for a truth whose place outside of the light of language guarantees its value. The search produces a transcendental subject, who Foucault argues, sees "the visible order, with its permanent grid of distinctions, is now only a superficial glitter above an abyss." The shadow at the bottom of the abyss or in my imagery, at the end of the tunnel is but a new vast interior formed by the modern episteme. Inside this darkness is the body or bare life itself which modernity searches for with science, a development that led to the politicization of the antinomy, of bio-politics,

> What might be called a society's 'threshold of modernity' has been reached when *the life of the species is wagered on its own political strategies*. For millennia, man remained what he was for Aristotle: a living being with the additional capacity for a political existence; modern man is an animal whose politics places his existence as a living being in question." (Page 143)

Truth is no longer found inside words, where once a tangle of roots could be dug up from the soil of universal meaning. If words did not draw nourishment from reality they were mist and mirror, foggy reflections of life withdrawn inside its self. Enlightenment science

turned over the religious world of the monarchy and provided the rising bourgeoisie confidence in its power. No longer did it teeter on the ambiguous morality of might. Now it was guaranteed by economics, biology and philosophy. Yet Foucault's conception of this transformation from the classical table to the modern tunnel has not been left in abeyance. In his book *Homer Sacer*, philosopher Giorgio Agamben pushed back the opposition to the Classical era, arguing that one can read of this opposition between language and life in Aristotle's *Politics*. It is useful then to cite Aristotle's definition of life versus the good life and how the former develops into the latter through the voice.

> Nature, as we often say, makes nothing in vain, and man is the only animal whom she has endowed with the gift of speech. And whereas mere voice is but an indication of pleasure or pain, and is therefore found in other animals (for their nature attains to the perception of pleasure and pain and the intimation of them to one another, and no further), the power of speech is intended to set forth the expedient and inexpedient, and therefore likewise the just and the unjust. And it is a characteristic of man that he alone has any sense of good and evil, of just and unjust, and the like, and the association of living beings who have this sense makes a family and a state. (Page 11)

In Aristotle's teleological reasoning, the voice is a gift of nature. The semantic undertow of the phrase must not go unmeasured. He begins with a feminine nature defined by "her" lack of vanity, focused on production of a future whose final goal is man. He is then the recipient of a "gift of speech", a gift having the multiple meanings of a thing given with no expectation of payment, a talent, a supplemental token of love and also the transfer of ownership of a thing from one to another. It is this final meaning that offers us a bridge.

The "transfer of ownership" in *Politics* is a rhetorical gesture to *transfer the ownership of nature itself to man*. Where the "voice is but an indication of pleasure and pain…found in other animals, the power of speech is intended to set the expedient and inexpedient." So the voice is locked within sensual world of physical experience. Speech divides from the voice by separation but only in degree, for it turns to reclaim the voice by defining its purpose. In doing so, *speech defines the purpose of nature itself* out of which the voice emerges from but cannot escape. Aristotle's rhetorical move is what Agamben elaborates in *Homo Sacer*.

> The question "In what way does the living being have language?" corresponds exactly to the question "In what way does bare life dwell in the polis?" The living being has logos by taking away and conserving its own voice in it, even as it dwells in the polis by letting its own bare life be excluded, as an exception, within it. Politics therefore appears as the truly fundamental structure of Western metaphysics insofar as it occupies the threshold on which the relation between the living being and the logos is realized. In the "politicization" of bare life – the humanity of living man is decided…There is politics because man is the living being who, in language, separates and opposes himself to his own bare life and, at the same time, maintain himself in relation to that bare life in an inclusive exclusion. (Page 8)

We see this epistemology in *Notes on Virginia* in which the body of the slave is that "included exclusion", the being that can not separate him or herself from nature by the voice. Hence Jefferson "hears" the singing in the fields, the poetry of Phyllis Wheatley and talk between slaves as failed attempts to reach history.

> But never yet could I find that a black had uttered a thought above the level of plain narration…misery is often the parent of the most affecting touches in poetry. Among the blacks is misery enough, God knows, but no poetry. Love is the peculiar oestrum of the poet. Their love is ardent, but it kindles the senses only, not the imagination. Religion indeed has produced a Phyllis Wheatley but it could not produce a poet. The compositions published under her name are below the dignity of criticism. (Page 237)

The body of a slave was assumed to be ontological bedrock, the bare life within each human which in their case could not translate itself into history. Of course, if the slave was silent it was to the whip in the overseer's hand, the iron-muzzle and gouged out tongue. Such manufactured silence was made into the metaphor of that distance between animal and man. A slave's testimony could shake the West because like the Walls of Jericho the studied deafness of the master was fragile. It needed the shield of violence. The class of slave owners had to develop a deafness to sanctify the denial of the slave's voice, blackened by exile into the new interior of the Modern episteme. Inside this dark interior millions were chained to death. The slave sublime is the desperate lunge to return to the self from the Other. In order for a full concept to be developed we must know how the dialectic of recognition became dead-locked. So let us turn to Jefferson to map the defense mechanisms that allow him to deny the singing in the fields.

Thomas Jefferson in Therapy

In *Notes on Virginia*, Jefferson dissects the "black" body and pins its severed parts with ideological quilting points[8]. Each visual detail is an anchor embedded in fixed biological difference. The first image we read of is the lack of hair with a hint of disgust at the exposure of nature in the "black" slave. It is along this thematic that each detail is arranged. He says "they secrete less through the kidneys and more through the glands of the skin". We read of a fragmented black body, secreting on the surface what whitened bodies keep in. It is a body out of which nature flows uncontrollably. He continues about slaves not needing sleep and who's adventuresome is not bravery but stupidity. Such recklessness is a sign of a "want of foresight", of the temporal illiteracy that traps the slave in the present, unable to draw a map of the past or the future but bumbling around in accidental carelessness. Love is reduced to lust it being "more of an eager desire than a tender delicate mixture of sentiment and sensation". Pain cannot become memory as it is "less felt and sooner forgotten with them. In general their existence seems to participate more of sensation than reflection."

Hair, smell and behavior collect on an unseen epistemological table that unites beauty and truth. It is a truth that endures time, which can only be reached by the rational mind that sees through the appetite and the senses. Beyond the hunger of the body and its decay are laws and forms that govern us. The ephemeral shadows of empirical matter fade and the eternal forms shine and guide the hand of man to create civilization. It is within this epistemology that Jefferson writes,

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[8] "Ideological space is made of 'floating signifiers, whose very identity is 'open', over determined by their articulation in a chain with other elements – their 'literal' signification depends on their metaphorical surplus-signification. The 'quilting' performs the totalization by means of which this free floating of ideological elements is halted, fixed –by of which they become parts of the structured network of meaning" (Zizek, The Sublime Object of Ideology, page 88)

> To justify a general conclusion, requires many observations, even where the subject may be submitted to the anatomical knife, to optical classes, to analysis by fire, or by solvents. How much more then where it is a faculty, not a substance, we are examining; where it eludes the research of all the senses...where our conclusion would degrade a whole race of men from the rank in the scale of beings which their Creator may perhaps have given them. To our reproach it must be said, that though for a century and a half we have had under our eyes the races of black and red men, they have never yet been viewed by us as subjects of natural history...blacks, whether originally a distinct race, or made distinct by time and circumstances, are inferior to the whites in the endowments both of body and mind. (Page 237)

His language sifts through the senses, it carves flesh and it burns impurities for eternal forms. Jefferson, like many Enlightenment figures, believed we alone could transcend nature to become more. The Jeffersonian *we* had borders defined as a vertical relation to men who were not men but artifacts of evolution. The Jeffersonian *we* manufactured the distance humanity had to transcend to accomplish its anthropological destiny. In this field between evolved-man and animal-man, “race” doubles as an image of intra-species contest, a chasing after Plato’s forms. Each race competed against the erosion of time to embody truths that could secure a civilization from death. In this race, lines of descent were lost to history.

We can see now the epistemological table on which the “black” body is dissected. Hair, odor and behavior are for Jefferson quilting points that form a network of ideology. They become artifacts in a museum catalogue. They function as evidence of the waste

produced by nature as it develops toward the man he sees in the mirror. I name these racial quilting points *Signs Taken for Waste*, an inverse of Homi Bhabha's essay title *Signs Taken for Wonder*. Bhaba introduced his theme with the scene of a subaltern discovering an English book. His chosen theme, a classic one in post-colonial studies, is the corruptive power of repetition or in Freudian terms the return of the repressed. Native culture merges with the colonial in submissive identification and subversive mirroring which makes the purity desired by the master impossible. The disavowed elements return and for the colonial gaze become, in my terms, *Signs of Waste* that anchor the field of difference. Jefferson searches for this evidence of human decay into nature when he dissects the blackened body. The search for those signs causes textual unravel. The need to uncover proof, the desperate dissection of the body exposes Jefferson's anxiety. Oddly, it comes not of from the possibility of recognition but from impossibility of it. In his famous *Lectures on the Phenomenology of Spirit*, Alexander Kojeve wrote,

> The Master is not the only one to consider himself master. The Slave, also, considers him as such. Hence, he is recognized in his human reality and dignity. But this recognition is one-sided, for he does not recognize in turn the Slave's humanity and dignity. Hence, he is recognized by someone whom he does not recognize. And this is what is insufficient and tragic in his situation. The Master has fought and risked his life for recognition without value for him. (Page 19)

If the master-slave dialectic is defined by its impossibility, then the master's self sinks into the abyss of the other that returns no image, no witness to his consciousness. It is a dangerous monologue. The master's voice descends into a void that swallows it and the speaker that sent it forth. Such danger abounds in Jefferson's *Notes on Virginia* but we

need only two for our point. The first contradiction comes when Jefferson sabotages himself in the beginning of his text. He argues that incorporating blacks into the state will cause the extermination of either blacks or whites. Yet how can the co-existence of two races threaten a social hierarchy based on natural division? If racial differences are rooted in nature then no convulsions could destroy society since the social order is a reflection of a natural one. The slip in logic is an over-lap, a doubling of language that places a defense against a fear whose existence *the defense denies in the first place*. What then is the source of this fear if not an intimate connection that is constantly re-established, that seeps through and ties slave and master together. A second more telling contradiction is when the defenses against dialogue between master and slave turn the master into a slave. In a telling repetition Jefferson writes,

> There must be doubtless be an unhappy influence on the manners of our people produced by the existence of slavery among us. The whole commerce between master and slave is a perpetual exercise of the most boisterous passions, the most unremitting despotism on the one part and degrading submission on the other. (Page 18)

In a telling phrase, the "commerce between master and slave" locates slavery within an economic experience that creates not only profit but personality. Not only is labor done and profit transferred but social positions established not through differences fixed in nature but by a "perpetual exercise" of difference, of a continual passing of force to make permanent the separation. The "peculiar institution" establishes inequality by constant violence. In a tragic twist, it is only the shared consciousness between master and slave that allows for communication of inequality. As whips strikes flesh silent they are united

in that act of separation which is in essence an act of communication. The undesired unity between slave and master re-defines the economy not as a mathematical table of neutral accounting but as the site of contest. The insight is not new but a traditional motif of the Left. Marx would write nearly sixty years after *Jefferson's Notes on Virginia*,

> A Negro is a Negro. He only becomes a slave in certain relationships. In production, men not only act on nature but also on one another. In order to produce, they enter into definite connection and relations with one another and only within these relations does their action on nature, does production, take place. (Page 207)

Of course I go further in countering Marx that a "Negro" is not a Negro but a human blackened by commodification of his or her body. What is important is not that within social relations the production of commodities takes place but that *social relations are reproduced in the process of production* as if the true aim of economic production is the very field of social relations itself. Profit and wages are alibis to the primary goal of maintaining the social hierarchy.

Jefferson warns of "boisterous passions, the most unremitting despotism on the one part and degrading submission on the other." He describes a force of absolute power that seeks to erode the other from a subject to an object, a force that reflects the master's power directed to an impossible goal. Such continual force is evidence of an unrealizable finality. In our last passage from *Notes on Virginia*, we see Jefferson again locating the economic as the "education of the soul" and slavery in particular as a miss-education.

> Our children see this and learn to imitate it; for man is an imitative animal. This quality is the germ of all education in him. From his cradle to his grave he is

> learning to do what he sees others do. If a parent could find no other motive either in his philanthropy or his self love, for restraining the intemperance of passion toward his slave, it should always be a sufficient one that his child is present. But generally it is not sufficient. The parent storms, the child looks on, catches the lineaments of wrath, puts on the same airs in the circle of smaller slaves, gives loose to the worst of passions, and thus nursed, educated, and daily exercised in tyranny, cannot but be stamped by *the odious pecularities*. (Page 237)

The repetition that invites scrutiny is how the monologue with nothingness endangers the master and his children. Subjectivity unravels. Passions flow like a flood breaking the shell of the civilized self and exposing the very nature the slave is presumed locked within. If we recall earlier, Jefferson wrote of secretion "through the glands of the skin, which gives them a very strong and disagreeable odor." It was a detail, a quilting point meant to prove how porous the black body was to nature and how incompatible it was to a civilization. Yet the master who does not dialogue with slave is trapped in a monologue with nothingness. He falls into the void and joins the slave in nature. The master's excess is mirrored in the child and led both to behave as "odious" as the slave body itself.

Resistance to Treatment

Even as he critiques slavery, Jefferson's language shows signs of resistance[9] typical in therapy. He leaves the site of domesticity where his emotions were briefly exposed; toward the abstracted horizon of other citizens, future revolutions and divine

[9] "The resistances always have their seat in the ego…when you are shown a new perspective, in a manner which is decenterd in relation to your experience, there's always a shift, whereby you try to recover your balance, the habitual centre of your point of view – a sign of resistance." (Seminar Two, Lacan, page 41)

vengeance. The sending forward of the question in lieu of answering it in the present is a defensive formation against action. History is the denial of truth in the present, a deferred promise or using imagery familiar to Jefferson, an exile from Eden. History begins when man is cast out of paradise. Such a utopia is defined by the transparency of the soul to God before sin cast a shadow between them. God who Jefferson writes sees and hates hypocrisy,

> And can the liberties of a nation be thought secure when we have removed their only firm basis, a conviction in the minds of the people that liberties are of the gift of God? That they are not to be violated but with his wrath? Indeed I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just: that his justice cannot sleep forever. (Page 239)

God's slumber protects us. His closed eyes create a permanent night where we can play in the dark. Hidden in the shade of profane time we sin. Jefferson believes that if God's eyes open they will blast the veils obscuring our vision. The crime of false hierarchy will collapse. It's not enough to read this as guilt. We must bring in an old term to explain Jefferson's resistance. In a reversal, could we not say that Jefferson suffers from double-consciousness? He sees his actions through the abstracted image of God, a figure who gazes through his transparent soul and measures it along values he cannot live within. "God" attempts to transport Jefferson not through the limits between him and heaven but between him and his slave. Jefferson suffers from inverted self-consciousness which Du Bois defined as double-consciousness a condition intrinsic to the slave. It seems the master is also a slave.

When the Body Speaks

In earlier chapters we saw the slave sublime take shape after re-reading the Black Atlantic narratives. It began with a being locked in the Other who through violence or imitation broke the dead-lock and returned a self to the body. Of course, the return was impossible as one no one could reach their origins.

In the reading of Jefferson's *Notes on Virginia*, we saw the master exiled in the slave. After dissecting the "blackened" body, he pinned each part to an epistemological table of decay. Each detail was evidence of nature overwhelming the body of the slave. It was a reading that allowed the master to whip, muzzle and brand slaves as it was only being pressed on an animal. We have two figures, the master and slave stranded inside each other and trying to return but failing. In between them lay a field of silence. It's not surprising that in the modern episteme, healing is theorized as a return to the symbolic self. The "self-in-the-body" is the recourse since nature is the very site of entrapment that must be escaped. Recognition between master and slave is in Marxism and psycho-analysis rooted in dialectic and dialogue. Revolution or revelation must be found within a language that searches blindly for transparency.

Earlier in this chapter, I outlined Foucault's *The Order of Things*, in which he described the shift in the Western table of knowledge from the relay of resemblances of the classical episteme to the ontological interior of modernity.

> The object of the human sciences is not language (though it is spoken by men alone); it is that being which, from the interior of language by which he is surrounded, represents to himself, by speaking, the sense of the words or

> propositions he utters, and finally provides himself with the representations of language itself." (page 353)

This modern human, a being within language must continually translate existence. As Agamben pointed out, the division between self and body was evident in Aristotle's *Politics*. Aristotle wrote of "man is the only animal whom she (Nature) has endowed with the gift of speech. Whereas mere voice is but an indication of pleasure or pain and is therefore found in other animals… speech is intended to set forth the expedient and inexpedient." Within language is a being that must form imagery out of sensation, then crate a map from those images and read from it a final destiny. Liberation is defined as emancipation from the body to a truth only thought can perceive. So it is within language that the humanized being finds its freedom. It is a shift which created the new ontological fictions of Nature and Need which were the ideological guarantee on which Marx would erect use-value, Ferdinand de Saussure would install the sign and Lacan would find the need beneath desire.

Since it is Lacan's theory I use it is his theory that must be examined. In particular is his triad of need, demand and desire where the hunger of the body is distilled through language. It follows a tripartite tradition in the social sciences. First Freud analyzed the dream as a form in which a latent wish is translated into manifest symbolism to create the necessary illusion of a dream. Marx followed on this tripartite tradition in his analysis of the commodity as a form in which use-value is translated into exchange-value to create the necessary illusion of profit. Saussure mapped the movement of the signifiers that translate a signified to create the necessary illusion of a referent.

A changing same exists from Freud, Marx and Saussure to Lacan. A triad is repeated. It is not the first or second term but their mutual balancing on a third that appears between them. The form becomes a mode of production of meaning. In Lacan's re-articulation of this tripartite tradition, need is the base instinct articulated by a demand that reaches beyond physical satisfaction toward a psychological desire. It is a force that that propels speech through language and turns the wheels of history. The reproduction of desire reproduces the "self-in-the-body". What began as supplemental act of articulation in the analclitic[10] pleasure of the Other's presence becomes the very origin of the self.

Marxism, Semiotics and Lacanian theory are *based in a nature* that as shown earlier was an interior space created in the modern episteme when the classic table of resemblances collapsed into the tunnel of being. Bio-politics emerged. Power dissected the body according to an anatomical map in order to read its anthropological destiny. Agamben pushed back this contest over the body to antiquity, in particular Aristotle's *Politics* where the body was the inner limit to the properly political, that limit being the source of tension that gave the human its definition.

The use of nature as a guarantee for the tripartite tradition was critiqued by Jean Baudrillard and Jacques Derrida in *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* and *Seminar on the Purloined Letter* respectively. Baudrillard positions the commodity form and the form of the sign as parallel operations, as methods of abstraction that create the false alibi of need to prop up the field of exchange and equivalence. He writes,

[10] "Term introduced by Freud to designate the early relationship of the sexual instincts to the self-preservative ones: the sexual instincts, which become autonomous only secondarily, depend at first on those vital functions which furnish them with an organic source, an orientation and an object." (Ibid, Page 29)

> Needs are not the actuating and original expression of a subject, but the functional reduction of the subject by the system of use-value in solidarity with that of exchange-value. Similarly, the referent does not constitute an autonomous concrete reality at all; it is only the extrapolation of the excision established by the logic of the sign onto the world of things...it is the world seen and interpreted through the sign...it has already been designated, abstracted and rationalized by the separation which establishes it in this equivalence to itself. The referent has no other value that that of the signified, of which it wants to be the substantial reference in *vivo*, and which it only succeeds in extending in *abstacto*. (page 155)

If we take this critique and apply it to Lacanian theory, does 'need' become a bio-logical alibi in the same way that use-value is for the Marxist critique of the commodity? Is it created by the concept of desire as its conceptual anchor so desire can be the source of subjectivity as it spirals around a lack indefinitely? The lack is the basis for the division between biological essentialism of the animal world and the empty interior that causes the existential freedom of humanity. What is the importance of untangling this tripartite tradition for our reading of the sublime and its relation to slavery? We remember Jefferson's resistance to a *blackened voice* as one colored by the depths of a nature it cannot escape. He wrote,

> But never yet could I find that a black had uttered a thought above the level of plain narration…misery is often the parent of the most affecting touches in poetry. Among the blacks is misery enough, God knows, but no poetry. Love is the

> peculiar oestrum of the poet. Their love is ardent, but it kindles the senses only, not the imagination. (Page 237)

The black voice circles within nature endlessly, unable to detach from the senses and create a reason for being. It returns no image, no reflection of the forces that are the origin of the nature it is locked within. Such a blackened voice shares with Marxian Use-Value and Lacanian Need the consolidation of aim and goal, hunger and satisfaction into a scene of completion. Marx theorized an object produced by labor to satisfy a need after which its circulation ends. He wrote that Use-Value "satisfies a particular want. Its existence is the result of a special sort of productive activity, the nature of which is determined by its aim, mode of production, subject, means, and result...use-value is not exchanged for another." (Page 308) Lacan theorized bodily hungers that if fed complete the cycle of need. He wrote of Need as "an intermittent tension which arises for purely organic reasons and which is discharged entirely by the specific action corresponding to the particular need in question." (Page 122) Both are based on a closed circuit, a naturalist principle of constant return *that eludes waste*. What unites them is a moral completeness that is corrupted when each is respectively translated into exchange-value and desire. Redemption sought by each theory in a return to the origin. They differ in expectation only, Marx believing the end of history was possible and Lacan disavowing it but yet defining health by one's closeness to Being.

The mythos giving each theory resonance is the Fall from Grace. What was once self-enclosed, a full positive Being is cut from itself and exiled. No return is possible. No origin viable because Use-Value and Need are divided from themselves by dependency on the Other. Division mistranslates essence, abstracts from the origin an anonymous

force and sends it into exile as capital or subjectivity. Use-value becomes exchange-value in the early Marxist schema when "the magnitudes of different things can be compared quantitatively, only when those magnitudes are expressed in terms of the same unit." (Page 315) The human labor that creates objects for use is concealed when they become commodities measured in money. The naturalist principle of constant return is broken, the inter-locking of aim and goal is severed and human labor is lost in the limitless horizon of capital. As Marx wrote,

> The simple circulation of commodities – selling in order to buy – is a means of carrying out a purpose unconnected with circulation, namely, the appropriation of use-values, the satisfaction of wants. The circulation of money as capital is, on the contrary, an end in itself, for the expansion of value takes place only within this constantly renewed movement. The circulation of capital has therefore no limits. (Page 333)

The fear here is of dissolution, of a humanity falling away from the source of its origin in creative labor. Lacan joins Marx here. In his psycho-analytic drama we see a repeating scene of a fallen world, of a pure being, a full ontological realm of the Real cut by the symbolic, by language with its oppositions of presence and absence that flicker and fade within eternity. He writes in Seminar Two, "the session is...a cut in a false discourse, or rather, to the extent that the discourse succeeds in emptying itself out as speech... this cut in the signifying chain alone verifies the structure of the of the subject as a discontinuity in the Real." (Page 299) The Real[11] is pure being. It is a Heideggarian trope inherited by

[11] "The real is no longer simply opposed to the imaginary but is also located beyond the symbolic. Whereas the symbolic is a set of differentiated, discrete elements called signifiers, the real is, in itself undifferentiated; 'the real is absolutely without fissure' (S2, 97) It is the symbolic which introduces a 'cut into the real' in the process of signification." (Ibid, Page 159)

Lacan in the post-World War Two era. He uses it to base a therapeutic strategy in which the patient is seen as imprisoned within a discursive defense against the Real. The critical event in therapy is the crisis when the circuit between self and Other in which the defensive discourse circulates is cut and the subject unravels.

How then does this prepare us for a reading of the sublime in the slave narratives? First is the historical fact that for the West both Marxism and psycho-analysis have and are still the primary theories through which we interpret liberation. Yet they rely on an ontological fiction of Use-Value and Need to anchor them to archaic truth, an origin that has never existed. They are alibis. They displace truth while a crime is being committed. The crime is each lures us with a false promise. We are told, after a long journey through bourgeois development we will arrive at the last revolution or after a journey through ego disintegration we will experience full speech. Yet the very search for this origin prohibits it and these revolutionary methods are alibis for the maintaining of desire. The hoped-for transparent existence is denied by each theory in its core and method. Derrida's famous critique of this stands,

> There must (should) have been a plenitude and not lack, presence without difference. From then on the dangerous supplement…adds itself from the outside as evil and lack to happy and innocent plenitude. It would come from an outside which would be simply outside…substitution has always already begun; that imitation has always already interrupted natural plenitude, that having to be a discourse, it has always already broached presence in difference, that in Nature it is always that which supplies Nature's lack. (Page 215)

So if Nature cannot be returned to what hope is there for a final emancipation? Marxism and psychoanalysis send us astray; the very method of freedom ensnares us deeper into the logos. The search for a transparent language, in which history evaporates and our consciousness reflects without blemish this reality condemns to searching for transport through language. What hope is there for those who are the very representations of Nature itself? How can they be transported through a language that betrays them? What to the slave is the sublime?

Frederick Douglass versus Jacques Derrida

We began with Thomas Jefferson listening to the singing in the fields. Now we turn to a slave, Frederick Douglass, who wrote in his autobiography of those wildsongs. After his description of slaves singing in the woods Douglass writes, “I have sometimes thought that the mere hearing of those songs would do more to impress some minds with horrible character of slavery, than the reading of whole volumes of philosophy on the subject could do.” (Page 263) It is a disturbing moment in his text. If the past decades of theory have significance, we know that privileging voice over the written is evidence of a prejudiced mind.

Jacques Derrida established Deconstruction by critiquing exactly this degradation of the written word as a dangerous supplement to the natural presence of the voice. He exposed the belief in ontological navel of the voice is itself the greatest concealment, the fetish of fetishes. Such a transcendental sign is less a fact than an act of enclosing the social space to create an inside and outside. The importance of Derrida’s analysis is the implicit critique it makes of the West in that once inside and outside are defined in

language they become transformed into territory to kill over. The ‘changing same’ of the political order is sealing off sacred space, the vulnerable interior from the dirty outside from which the slave, the foreigner or the enemy approach us. For Douglass to use that division between voice and reading, nearly a century earlier, is to see in him an uneasy complicity with the same metaphysics of presence, the same nostalgia for origins that was the philosophical basis for his own enslavement.

Derrida confronts Douglass with the enforcement of difference, of writing and speech as sharing the same principle of perpetual deferment. Language creates meaning through the relation of differences, none of which have an ontological guarantee it. So for Douglass to contrast the affective quality of slave songs over the volumes of philosophy is to leave open the founder of African-American literature and through him the tradition of the slave-narrative itself to a critique of seeking presence through purification. In essence, Derrida would say Douglass is giving support to the strategy of cleansing the self of the Other that is the source of slavery itself.

It is a double-bind. Slaves were shackled with metal and ideology, in particular the theoretical prison of Use-Value and Nature of which they were the representation. They were enclosed within the category of a naturalist principle of return, seen as animals living in a utopian state, an Eden in which the word has not divided. Slaves represented essential, un-castrated humans. The image of them as animals is intrinsic to the system of metaphysics. Derrida critiqued that partition between ‘animal’ and ‘man’ as the ultimate idealism in the *Seminar on the Purloined Letter*,

> The essential link between metaphysics and humanism in this system is more visible, if not looked upon more highly, in the conglomeration of statements about

> ‘animality’ about the distinction between animal and human language, etc. This discourse on the animal (in general) is no doubt consistent with all the catergories and oppositions, all the bi- or tri-partitions of the system. And it condenses no less the system’s greatest obscurity. The treatment of animality, as of everything that finds itself in submission by virtue of a hierarchical opposition, has always, in the history of (humanist and phallogocentric) metaphysics, revealed obscurantist resistance. It is obviously of capital interest. (Page 483)

The tri-partite tradition finds its ultimate image in this hierarchical opposition. Animal need, with its inter-locking of aim and goal was divided from the human world of desire with its endless negation of reality. The ‘hierarchical opposition’ led to the concept of Full Speech as the signal moment in therapy, as the subject identifies fully with his or her desire. On the other extreme is Empty Speech where the subject is stranded on the far side of his or her desire, mouthing clichés that lengthen the defensive distance. Both Full and Empty Speech rest on the fulcrum of castration, of separation from the mother and acceptance of the impasse of language. Desire begins in this filtering of need through the scales of signs in which “the letter always finds its destination” because wherever the letter ends transforms the listener with its sheer presence. Derrida critiques this ideal presence of the letter, citing it as Lacan’s point of metaphysical idealism. He writes,

> It is the effect of living and present speech which in the last analysis guarantees the indestructible and unforgettable singularity of the letter, the taking-place of a signifier which never gets lost, goes astray, or is divided. The subject is very divided, but the phallus is not to be cut. Fragmentation is an accident which does not concern it. At least according to the certainty constructed by the symbolic.

> And by a discourse on the assumption of a castration which edifies an ideal philosophy against fragmentation. (Page 473)

Derrida's intervention matches Douglass. In the scene of slaves singing in the woods, Douglass writes of the wild-songs, "The thought that came up, came out – if not in the word, in the sound – as frequently as one as in the other." (Page 262) Douglass gives evidence of a fragmenting of the ideal letter that Derrida critiques. Douglass is adamant that a sublime consciousness connected the slaves to each other *through the splitting of the letter*. What breaks the cycle of desire whose circular movement is also the clock of human time, is the excess of jouissance which splits the idealism of the full and present letter. The slaves did this without sacrificing the communion that is often defined as only possible in and through the signs of desire. Since the human is divided *recognition can emerge from and encompass the experience of being divided itself.* We are more than words. We do live in the nothingness outside the text.

The Knotted Subject

So what to a slave is the sublime? If the slave sublime as I've defined it leads to an impossible return, an endless spiral of difference around the trauma of enslavement then what emancipation does it offer? The attempt to encompass this original division is seemingly futile. A subject is too knotted to unravel since the Other is the very condition of the one's existence. No one can be freed because in Lacanian parlance, a subject is Borromean knot, a topological image that shows "three rings which are linked in such a way tat if any one of them is severed, all three become separated." (Page 18) Each ring

corresponds to his three registers of the Real, the Symbolic and Imaginary.[12] In this knotted existence, the subject cannot be freed without destroying the very consciousness that would recognize it as freedom. The subject is a creation of the ideal letter that binds the orders together. It cannot be unraveled. Or can it?

Sometimes myth can give us an escape from logic. Alexander the Great was told of the unsolvable Gordian Knot. It was said that the only one who could conquer Persia was the one who unraveled it. Many tried but none succeeded. Alexander saw his destiny bound to this knot. He stood before it, pondered and swung his sword down cutting it open. The riddle was solved. I use this mythic scene as way to explain how Douglass surpasses Derrida. In that Derrida is more than eager to fragment the "ideal letter" that binds the subject into a knot but he does not offer human recognition there, only silence and deferral.

Douglass offers more. He wrote of wild slave songs, "They would sing the most pathetic sentiment in the most rapturous tone, and the most rapturous sentiment in the most pathetic tones. Into all of their songs they would manage to weave something of the Great House Farm." He describes a scene of sublime transport, one of the earliest in the African-American literary tradition. The transport could not exist without the distance between mask and man. The men singing in the woods show a non-phallic desire of recognition, in which the letter's fragmentation is necessary to release each other.

Slaves who had been careful, who played the role of contented servant were rewarded by going to The Great House Farm, a well run plantation that was "associated

[12] "The basis of the imaginary order continues to be the formation of the ego in the Mirror Stage. Since the ego is formed by identifying with the counter-part or specular image, identification is an important aspect of the imaginary order. The ego and the counter-part form the prototypical relationship and are interchangeable. This relationship whereby the ego is constituted by identification with the little other means that ego, and the imaginary order itself, are both sites of a radical alienation." (Ibid, page 83)

in their minds with greatness." Douglass gives us an earlier version of what Du Bois would formulate as Double-Consciousness. They watched themselves from the eyes of their master, forgoing true freedom.

> A representative could not be prouder of his election to a seat in the American Congress, than a slave on one of out-farms would be of his election to do errands at the Great House Farm. They regarded it as evidence of a great confidence reposed in them by their overseers; and it was on this account, as well as a constant desire to be out of the field from under the driver's lash, that they esteemed it a high privilege, one worth careful living for. (Page 262)

The crucial distinction to be made is the nature of that distance. It is a distance measured by desire for absolute freedom against the achievement of limited freedom. The men were not free from slavery but found a smaller freedom within it by wearing the mask of obedience. They erase signs of a desire for freedom. The show no eager looks beyond the plantation borders, no sullen air when serving the master. The slaves singing as they walk to the Great House Farm have earned this small freedom after deceiving their overseers with a mask of obedience, a mask that concealed and contained their desire for full recognition. The transcendent song that shakes Douglass, even in memory, is the escaped flow of feeling, a truth that transports them from their bodies as they leave the field. He writes,

> While on their way, they would make the dense old woods, for miles around, reverberate with their wildsongs, revealing at once the highest joy and the deepest sadness. They would compose and sing as they went along, consulting neither time nor tune. The though that came up, came out – if not in the word, in the

> sound; - and as frequently in the one as the other. They would sometimes sing the most rapturous sentiment in the most rapturous tone, and the most rapturous sentiment in the most pathetic tones. Into all of their songs they would manage to weave something of the Great House Farm. Especially would they do this, when leaving home. They would then sing the most exultingly the following words: - I am going away to the Great House Farm! O, yea! O, yea! O! – This they would sing, as a chorus, to *words which to many would seem unmeaning jargon, but which nevertheless, were full of meaning to themselves*. (Page 262) (Italics mine)

Such a memory of pleasure as pain and pain as pleasure, of meaning that overwhelms language. The transport from field to house, from slavery to limited freedom was at cost of the limited freedom of being locked permanently in a performance of a lie, of living within a mask of obedience. The tensions tore them as they journeyed to the Great House Farm. They split the ideality of the letter, fused sound to affect to call each other and share the joy of limited freedom and the burden of the silence they paid for it. In those woods Douglass tells us were tongues unraveled. The songs shook the forest and haunted Douglass's because they contained suffering in the sound of joy. It was the suffering a slave who earns a small freedom at the cost of a much greater confinement. As they walked to the Great House Farm, they came closer to the address of their speech and as the distance worn away by their feet and they merged their face with mask that mirrors the master. They not only transported themselves from field to home but from desire to the sublime. I introduce a parallel between the emotional, physical and bodily experience of the sublime and what in the academy is known as jouissance.

> The pleasure principle functions as a limit to enjoyment; it is a law which commands the subject to 'enjoy as little as possible'. At the same time the subject constantly attempts to transgress the prohibitions imposed on his enjoyment, to go 'beyond the pleasure principle'. However, the result of transgressing the pleasure principle is not more pleasure, but pain, since there is only a certain amount of pleasure that the subject can bear. Beyond this limit, pleasure becomes pain, and this 'painful pleasure' is what Lacan calls jouissance; jouissance is suffering. The prohibition of jouissance (the pleasure principle) is inherent in the symbolic structure of language...The subject's entry into language is conditional upon a certain initial renunciation of jouissance in the castration complex. (Page 92)

The pleasure principle is based on castration, a stage imposed by a lack in the Other one tries to embody and fails seeking instead *to have* the sign of that impossible fulfillment. Such a sign is less any one sign but the very form of the ideal letter. The question must be posed what to the slave is castration? Although theoretical, it is not a clean question for African-American literature that must return to the scene of the emasculation of black men. The tearing off testicles at lynchings, the rape of women and denial of work are acts in a single spectrum of social castration.

The classic psycho-analytic scene of castration, is the initial forming of the self through the Other and then exile to what they desire. In the contested terminology I work with the 'it' is the phallus, the symbolic, the signs of the Other's desire that split the imaginary relationship and introduced the subject, through the law and language and the restraint they require, to a universal history. It is this 'phallus function' which guarantees the real presence of desire which Derrida critiqued as cause of a false idealism, a Platonic

letter that always seems to arrive at its destination free of fracture. Desire, which is the cause of subjectivity and what sets its course through history, relies on castration, on the split that widens within the Imaginary to secure a distance it can circulate in and a lack to circulate around. Yet the slave is a socially dead person, they are not brought to life within language and are not allowed to show their desire for recognition. The power of the master is based on racial logic that says slaves cannot enter history and cannot be heard since they are assumed to be locked in the blank silence of nature. Their voices circle between aim and goal, between nature and instinct. In a pun on Freud, slavery is the royal road to the unconscious.

Yet the achievement of freedom, the emancipation papers pressed into the palm is a symbolic transformation of the subject from the status of a slave to that of a free being. They do not have freedom but *are freedom itself*, exactly the act embodiment castration prohibits as it crosses the law of separation. The total transformation of subjectivity, to owning one's body, to enter into legally enforced cycle of recognition with others is to change the self *from having freedom to being free.* In the moment of achievement the slave becomes sublime-Thing which is defined as,

> The Thing is the object of desire. It is the lost object which must be continually re-found, it is the pre-historic, unforgettable Other – the forbidden object of incestuous desire, the mother. The pleasure principle is also the law which maintains the subject at a certain distance from the Thing, making the subject circle round it without ever attaining it. The Thing is thus presented to the subject as his Sovereign Good, but if *the subject trangresses the pleasure principle and*

> *attains this Good, it is experienced as suffering/Evil, because the subject 'cannot stand the extreme good that the Thing may bring to him*. (Page 205)

In not just having freedom but becoming it in a total subjective transformation, *in being free the former slave is the Thing*. They are transported beyond the pleasure principle, beyond the orbit of desire around a lack *to embody the lack itself*. It is the weight of their flesh. Freedom is sublime. Douglass recalled, "They would compose and sing as they went along, consulting neither time nor tune. The thought that came up, came out – if not in word, in the sound; - and as frequently as one as in the other." (Page 400) The Lacanian concept of jouissance is of a pleasure that is painful and can barely be endured. Yet in Douglass recollection it is lingered in, the timelessness of it held amongst brothers in bondage as a sacred sound that lifts them.

In keeping with the Lacanian mapping, this communion is beyond the pleasure principle, the surge of sound that bursts the semantic shell of historical logic, the song that "consulted neither time nor tune" was outside the time of language with its past identifications and future ideality. The castration separating one from imaginary unity into symbolic exile was crossed. The transport through time became a transport into the void within time itself. Douglass could hear meaning in that void, "The thought that came up, came out – if not in word, in the sound...this they would sing, as a chorus, to words which to many would seem unmeaning jargon, but which, nevertheless, were full of meaning to themselves." (Page 263) Singing through the shards of a fragmented letter, the slaves knew each other and sang as a chorus the "unmeaning jargon" which was "full of meaning to themselves."

The sublime in almost every reading is an experience that can barely be endured. Is that not what Douglass describes? He testifies to its awesome rapture by casting the anchor of his tear into the past that is too present. In the woods, slaves sing and through song are transported to the sublime. The slaves singing in the woods do not receive a letter that arrives whole, they split and break it. The division castration causes in the Imaginary, that creates the subject through desire for recognition, a subject in exile within the "ideal letter" has collapsed into painful joy. The letter is eclipsed. The rejoining of the slaves occurs in a freeing sound that loses historical meaning and become the means through which the hierarchy established by the political economy of the sign is dissolved in the flow it once constricted. The letter may always find its destination but the force that drives it there can also destroy it. Deliverance is achieved here but not through the fullness of speech but in the division of it. The violence done to the slave was returned by the slave to language itself and the ideal letter used by Lacan and critiqued by Derrida is in Douglass's narrative whipped by the tongues of slaves, they way their bodies were whipped in the field.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Blackening of the Body

"I consider a tree…In all this the tree remains my object, occupies space and time, and has its nature and constitution. It can, however, also come about, if I have both will and grace, that in considering a tree I become bound up in relation to it. The tree is no longer *It*."
- Martin Buber

"Cut down the tall trees!"
- Hutu extremists

For centuries men were afraid of the "Green Sea of Darkness." The sailors of the Old World clung to rocky shores and followed the stars across the Mediterranean but not the vast ocean. Sailors drew maps but no one could guide them into the horizon with a firm promise of return. Since 1415, Prince Henry of Portugal sent trading expeditions to North Africa and brought back gold dust and slaves. Trade grew and in 1448 he built a fort and warehouse on Arguim Island.

Still, trade was confined to the small routes sailors already knew. In1484 the astronomer Abraham Zacuto compiled an almanac of solar declination tables, which was translated and published as *O Regimento do Astrolabio*, with this book sailors could follow the sun to the horizon and return home again. Slowly they discovered the Atlantic, the boats were larger and the trips longer and the fog of fear that once obscured the ocean began to clear. The exploration of the "Green Sea of Darkness" led to the fateful day in 1492, when Christopher Columbus stepped on to the sands of a world that was new for him, old to those who lived there and would be a world destroyed and rebuilt and destroyed again in cycles of violence that have yet to end.

The fear of the ocean flowed through sea and river as a single stream of movement beyond human control and became a metaphor the unconscious that cleans us of the illusions. The sea and river were, as Foucault tells us in *Madness and Civilization*, a place of purification, where the insane were sent on ships to find their fate beyond the city they troubled,

> To hand a madman over to sailors was to be permanently sure he would not be prowling beneath the city walls; it made sure that he would go far away; it made him a prisoner of his own departure. But water adds to this the dark mass of its own values; it carries off, but it does more: it purifies. Navigation delivers man to the uncertainty of fate; on water, each of us is in the hands of his own destiny; every embarkation is, potentially, the last. It is for the other world that the madman sets sail in his fool's boat; it is from the other world that he comes when he disembarks. The madman's voyage is at once a rigorous division and an absolute Passage …water and madness have long been linked in the dreams of European man. (Page 12)

Let us follow Foucault imagery but with the focus on the boat that carried the insane men and women. It carried the discontents of civilization whose passengers were the howling and drooling mad taken beyond the city border and beyond the limit between inside and outside. It was cultural practice of abreaction, a discharge of affect that has a parallel practice in the colonization of the New World under the banner of Christianity.

It was not simply an obscene technicality. The enslavement of non-Christians established a seemingly unalterable relation of master and servant. It became a difference based on access to salvation, a difference of seeming permanence which then offered the

Spanish conquerors justification for the violence and comfort of divine approval. In a 1493 Papal Bull, the Pope Alexander VI gave the Americas to the Spanish monarchy. Soldiers read aloud the "Requirement" to Amerindians. The declaration demanded they accept Christ or be enslaved and forced to conversion for their own well-being. Often it was read without translation or shouted from the ship before the soldiers landed with swords flashing. The Requirement was more than just a trivial excuse it was the culmination of a discourse that divided self from Other, Christian from pagan and gave the swords a divine sanction.

The Christianizing of the ruling elite who created Europe, beginning with Constantine the Great, demanded the repression of the pagan past as a sinful time that was surpassed by revelation. It was a separation from the past whose memory was charged with political affect and was, in my reading, abreacted through the Middle Passage. In the Christian tradition sin, sex and the body are interlocking. It is a division and exclusion that extracts a self from body and creates the very category of the Other to represent the body.

In Foucault's scene the boat that carries the insane down the river is the law that has the discontents of civilization removed and set howling and drooling on a course of exile. I take that image of the boat and the passage of discontents of civilization beyond its border and use it analyze the Middle Passage. The slave ship and the ship of fools were, in Agamben's terms, states of exception. They were a place where the heathen, the slave, the Black, the mad and Other were contained and expelled. They were a place where the law was suspended until the suspension became the norm. The politicization of life that existed in these liminal places underwrote slavery and genocide as a taming and

cleansing of impure blood-lines. The slave ships of the Middle Passage were the ancestor to the death camps of the Holocaust. Although centuries separate them, they share a logic that binds them in a morbid unity as two related states of exception. Agamben writes, "The camp is the space that is opened when the state of exception begins to become the rule. In the camp, the sate of exception, which was essentially a temporary suspension of the rule of law on the basis of a factual state of danger, is now given permanent spatial arrangement, which as such nevertheless remains outside the normal order." (Page 169) Using Agamben's work we can bypass the thematic of Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic*, in which ships are not just vessels but conduits of the new Black Atlantic culture,

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

It is unique thematic but flawed for two reasons. First, the ships provide an initial image to ground his thesis yet they disappear quickly from his text. Second the re-configuration of culture beyond national borders is a classical Marxist maneuver, one that seeks to return the creation of culture to those whose labor made it possible. It is an admirable tactic but the Black Atlantic paradigm Gilroy offers is focused on the dispersal of the claims of authenticity to open the possibility of inclusive politics that does not

exclude allies because they do not share "blood". Against Gilroy, who is moved by the an inclusive intellect that abhors difference making at the expense of a unifying literary practice, I hold that the violence was an act of abreaction within a state of exception. So even though Agamben's work is not directed at Gilroy in particular, it has consequences, the most important for this argument is anticipated in Houston Baker's book *Turning South Again*. He criticizes Gilroy for raising the image and history of the slave ships while missing the violent and pleasurable disciplining of bodies that were its reason for being.

> *The Black Atlantic* remains surprisingly abstract and indeterminate with respect to the very 'chronotrope' the book claims as its analytical 'organizing symbol'…After early mention, *ships* virtually disappear from Gilroy's work. They disappear as chronotropes, material vessels 'transplanting' black populations, dread transports of 'conquered peoples to penal colonies of the Americas. *Ships* – as disciplinary and carceral 'holds' on the shackled body – receive no extensive treatment in *The Black Atlantic*. (Page 85)

He goes on to situate the slave ships as "prison ships" where bodies were incarcerated and disciplined. Baker employs Foucault's Power/Knowledge analytics to map a link between the cramped spaces the slaves lived in, the gaze that measured their value and the repetition of that scene in what he calls the "South". It is not as a geographical place but an ideological practice that roams across borders, uniting far flung cultures into a single "South" that disciplines and blackens bodies. It is a curious act for Baker. His prose is an impassioned calling for emancipation yet the tradition of analysis he uses, specifically Foucault's Power/Knowledge/Resistance, is not amicable to emancipation.

Foucault has often stated that power in fact produces the form of its own resistance and that no pure rebellion can be envisioned that will not lead to a return of a hegemonic power.

Judith Butler's *The Psychic Life of Power* pulls out the inconstancy of Foucault's Power/Resistance thesis in which systems that reproduce power also produce the form of resistance to it, an example being the standard reading of sexuality as not being repressed by the law but a production of it. Butler goes a step further in theorizing that not only does the law produce sexuality but *the law itself is sexual*. She writes, "The repressive law is not external to the libido that it represses, but the repressive law represses to the extent that repression become a libidinal activity." (Page 49) If the law can, in Butler's and later Zizek's reading, become sexualized or is always already erotic then we return full circle to the state of exception and the slave ships of the Middle Passage. Sadistic joy in power and rape was a trope in the testimony of captains and slave-witness-survivors. Not only are the discontents of civilization formed by the discourse that represses them but repression causes the enjoyment of the abreaction, of the transport itself.

What is necessary for us is to read the experience of the erotic law, of the very jouissance of white supremacy as the most important cargo the slave ships brought to the New World. The ship is a metaphor for civilization, a cocoon of divine language floating through the dark void, carrying in its holding cells an ordered society, a human hierarchy within its holds to form the New World. The first mythological metaphor of the ship as salvation from the eternal flood that pours in from the Real into subjectivity, from Eternity into human time is of course Noah's Ark.

In the Bible myth God is weary of the wickedness of humanity. The law God set down to be a dam to sinful behavior is broken and floods God so that his "heart was filled with pain." Here it is humanity which threatens divinity by multiplying its desires. God who is the very the figure of the law, who gave Adam the power to name drowns in grief as people abandon the law to listen and name their own desires. We read in verse eleven and twelve, "Now the earth was corrupt in God's sight and was full of violence. God saw how corrupt the earth had become, for all the people on earth had corrupted their ways." The way that has been corrupted is the path from humanity to divinity through faith, of the breath that God blew into Adam who uses it to shape the name of animals, a power reminiscent of the scene in Genesis where words separated darkness and light, sea from land. Now that holy breath circles within humanity itself naming its own desire and not returning to its source. Again we are confronted with a crisis of origins, of an impeded path to the source and a growing divide between God and humanity that leaves God to drown. The flood that comes is the metaphor of this human desire that is drowning God in silence that breaks through into the human world. Only those who have kept the faith will be able to float to safety. Only Noah who has pledged his voice to God's law even in an era of temptation is given the sacred word that will save him, his family and the animals of the earth.

The Ark is a metaphor for divine law floating safe in the chaos of human desire. The void between God and man is emptied out on the earth, raining down from the heavens it snuffs out the sacred breath which Adam and his descendants shaped the many names of life. The waters dissolved the bodies created from dust. So the principle of the Biblical destruction is one of dissolution of what was stable and by sealing Noah's family

and pairs of animals in the envelope of wood that is the Ark, they are protected by a law that separates the faithful from the fallen. Life is redeemed with a logic that links the multiplying of desire to evil since desire does not return to the law and its source. The free negative space in which it multiplied is reversed in the flood. No gap can exist between the law and the world made in its image, yet a space does exist and the world slips into new forms and the law responds in violent genocide and a fundamentalist re-ordering. The ordered hierarchy in the Ark is the hope for the New World; it is based on a pruning of desire into need, of pairs of male and female animals who are allowed to live only to reproduce. In Agamben theory we can see that the true seed, the true cargo of the ship is the law itself.

My argument is that the myth of Noah's Ark gives us an image of the state of exception, of the law confronted with the negative space of desire and a world that does not reflect it. The law reacts with violence and a fundamentalist re-ordering that creates a New World in the wake of the destruction of the Old. In the Middle Passage we again see a ship whose cargo is numbered animals being taken across the sea to a New World, human livestock who are reduced to procreation and labor, whose life is scaled along a fundamentalist reading of the body. We can read in the documents of the time that law erecting the same "South" in the New World, a unified hierarchy that crossed national boundaries. In the first phase of the colonization of the New World the word of God in the Judeo-Christian tradition became the erotic law of White Supremacy. The Ark that was the metaphor of God's word, in which the last refugees of humanity could float safe from the flood that was destroying the earth, was transformed into the material reality of slave ships carrying heathen-animals through the Middle Passage to the New World.

Middle Passage as Rite of Passage

In his famous essay *What is Enlightenment*; Foucault urges us to not fall into the trap of the "blackmail", of being forced to choose to solidarity or resistance to the heritage of the Enlightenment. He writes,

> This ethos implies, first, the refusal of what I like to call the "blackmail" of the Enlightenment. I think that the Enlightenment, as a set of political, economic, social, institutional, and cultural events on which we still depend in large part, constitutes a privileged domain for analysis… one has to refuse everything that might present itself in the form of a simplistic and authoritarian alternative: you either accept the Enlightenment and remain within the tradition of its rationalism or else you criticize the Enlightenment and then try to escape from its principles of rationality. And we do not break free of this blackmail by introducing "dialectical" nuances while seeking to determine what good and bad elements there may have been in the Enlightenment. (Page 43)

Foucault insists on the impossibility of full emancipation from the Enlightenment and the necessity for it. So much of his career was driven by the analytics of dispersal in which figures of consolidation, such as the Author, were exposed as fetishized fictions and the final achievement of the Enlightenment rather than the beginning of its proper critique. Instead, he said we must search for authentic freedom in the strategies people use to maneuver in the system of power which can distort or displace its ideological supports. It is, Foucault assumes, a respectable freedom since it does not "claim to escape from the system of contemporary reality so as to produce the overall programs of another society, of another way of thinking, another culture, another vision of the world, has led only to

the return of the most dangerous of traditions." (Page 46) Instead he calls for us to search in the hidden past, the one not chosen in the crucial moment of the event when power and potentiality collided and whose repression is the concealed site of potential that forms the present. He writes for us to continue "historical investigation into the events that have led us to constitute ourselves and to recognize ourselves as subjects of what we are doing, thinking, saying." (Page 46)

I diverge with Foucault in his refusal of the "blackmail" of solidarity or resistance to the inheritance of the Enlightenment by signifyin' on the Enlightenment as the refusal of the *black male*, the allegorical, albeit masculine figure who represents the millions whose bodies were blackened into commodities in the Middle Passage. Instead of us siding or not with the era, who did the era side against to create the tradition we now debate? The claim to "escape from the system of contemporary reality" Foucault warns against is for the enslaved the experience *of being claimed* as the residue of a reality that had evolved beyond them. The African peasants blackened by slavery became representations of a pagan past that Europe projected from its own Christian blind-spot and later when the rise of the Enlightenment brought in secular ideals, those blackened were seen as the artifacts left on the earth by evolution. The ability to own and sell them recalls the scene of the initial separation of a child from its mother in Freud's famous Fort/Da scene discussed earlier, where absence is mastered by creating signs that represent it and the control of that sign heralds the emergence of the autonomy of the subject.

Although Foucault was correct in exposing the hidden links between subject and the discourse that gave it the power of truth, a truth created by power itself, what is

missed is the indispensable experience for the creation of the illusion of autonomy was the erotic law of white supremacy and its anchor-referent of blackness as an absence to be mastered. Noah's Ark, the predecessor of the slave ship was the erotic law transformed into material reality and its anchor was the Great Chain of Being dropped into the abyss of nature to be lodged in the blackened skin of a slave. A more explicit and easier connection is made in the Scottish philosopher Adam Ferguson's *Essay on the History of Civil Society*, where a causal link is constructed between the evolution of civil society and the development of the individual self through the acquisition of private property.

> Of the nations…in trust their subsistence chiefly to hunting, fishing, or the natural produce of the soil. They have little attention to property, and scarcely any beginnings of subordination or government. Others having possessed themselves of herds, and depending for their provision on pasture…know the relations of patron and client, of servant and master, and suffer themselves to be classed according to their measures of wealth. This distinction must create a material difference of character, and may furnish two separate heads, under which to consider the history of mankind in their rudest state; that of the savage, who is not yet acquainted with property; and that of the barbarian, to whom it is, although not ascertained by laws, a principal object of care and desire. It must appear very evident, that property is a matter of progress. It requires, among other particulars which are the effects of time, some method of defining possession. The very desire of it proceeds from experience; and the industry by which it is gained, or

> improved, requires such a habit of acting with a view to distant objects, as may overcome the present disposition either to sloth or to enjoyment. (Page 93)

The modern era, for all its celebration of immanence, was in the beginning defined by its acquisition of private property that demanded a consciousness freed from the present by planning for the future. It was a temporal literacy that for Ferguson and Kant was something the “less cultivated parts” can not achieve, trapped as there are in the sensual moment of instant gratification. The Middle Passage became for Europe a Rite of Passage, a way of enslaving the representation of its own past and forcing them to work at building the future unity of whiteness and modernity.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Race Against Capital

How has the slave sublime shaped the history of the Diaspora? Its signal tropes are a three-stage cycle; first a capture by the Other, then a return through violent Acting-Out or aggressive imitation and finally the impossible gesture of arrival at the original self. We can see this spiral in the rhetoric surrounding popular movements. In scenes of great transport; from slavery to freedom at the end of the Civil War, the Great Migration of the early 20th Century to the near transport of Rev. Jesse Jackson's presidential run the sublime flashes again and again. The necessary question is where will it the end?

In order to prepare an answer, we first must look at the historical forces that have caused the slave sublime to emerge. We saw in the 20th Century a new emphasis of the aesthetic dimension of the political. The rational individual of liberal thought was split by Freud into an id, ego and super-ego, then by Lacan into the Symbolic, Imaginary and Real and then Foucault into discursive formations and then by Derrida into a subject propelled by difference to faith in a transcendental signified. The liberal subject was cast from the body by structuralism and post-structuralism into a system of language both anonymous, total and beyond the control of the self. In the post-industrial West the human was no longer the source of genius, of a privileged consciousness that could synthesize the sensual world but rather a character created and destroyed by the currents of discourse whose immense power caused the 'death of the author', an author who drowned and dissolved into the undertow of reason.

It was a scene of de-centered subjectivity set against the background of late capitalism whose attendants were post-modern subjects, enlisted by the freedom and exile of abstracted existence. The sacred interior of the liberal subject, its 'soul' was now the product of power relating to itself. The personal became political and we came into forced awareness of the politics of everyday life. Simple consumption was no longer innocent but implicated in the acting out of a code. Identity was defined as a performance with no truth to guarantee it. The obvious reversal of this is the aesthetization of politics. We lived amidst the collapse of grand narratives into a void where no direction could be determined as true or false but were steps in the dark that vanish and reappear. Truth was no longer based on the transcendent powers of reason but the intensity of trauma. The merging of the political and the personal allowed for power to be seen as a spectacle with no anchor in the real, of politics as a theatrical drama by characters with no core that connects them to a source beyond representation. Politics becomes an art whose stage is history, whose canvas is flesh and whose tools are war.

It would seem that Post-Structuralism which does not settle for reading the world in the text but making the world a text to read would be an ideal ally of African American criticism, itself a tradition intent on connecting literary practice to political effectiveness. One can trace this legacy from W. E. B. Du Bois's *Criteria of Negro Art* to Richard Wright's *Blueprint for Negro Writing* to Amira Baraka's *Expressive Language* each essay a proscription of how to utilize art in the service of political liberation. Instead the meeting of Post-Structuralism and African-American criticism in the shared space of the academy began in accusations from Dr. Joyce A. Joyce of selling out to obtuse European jargon, a position which in turn was ridiculed by Dr. Houston A. Baker and Dr. Henry

Louis Gates as backward and provincial. More importantly, post-structuralism was suspected of uncoupling the connection between experience, language and authenticity that guaranteed the power and pathos of African-American art.

It would seem that the fears critics had of post-modernism were both prophetic and myopic. The problem of the severance of sign from referent is not a new dilemma, in fact it was a problem during the very origins of capitalism and the very blackness that is now threatened by this split between sign and referent was itself created as the anchor-referent for the new sign of whiteness. We can trace this in Baucom who proposed that the precarious link between sign and referent became an issue with the rise of speculative finance from which rose debt and credit and the abstract imaginary value of capital which in turn liberated Europeans from a locked existence in peasant life to a new mobile life as an abstract citizen in the emerging modern states.

> Bills of exchange, then circulated on and extended a double economy: an economy of monetary value and an economy of trust whose foundation was the credibility, the character, the trustworthiness of the person signing the bill over and the value of the trust that person had placed in the previous holder. To accept a multiply circulated bill of exchange was not only to accept a form of paper money but to express trust in one's own ability to read character and trust in the capacity of one's fellow citizen to do likewise. If the system were to survive, it depended not only on the soundness of the slave markets of the Caribbean but on the stability of this network of mutually invested trust and, ideally, on some means of training individuals in how to read one another's character, trustworthiness and credibility. (Page 87)

Buacom proposes that the liquid, ephemeral capital that flowed back and forth across the Atlantic required a new "reading" of personality to guarantee the integrity of the loaner and loaned, a regime of interpersonal relations in which the former world of locked social hierarchy of medieval ages melted into a fluid and more flat social plane of modernity. It was a trust among slaver, plantation owners and the imperial bureaucracy built around the trade itself that was balanced by the trust in the 'thingness' of slaves themselves. As Baucom writes,

> The Liverpool businessmen invested in the trade had, by the same procedure, transformed what looked like a simple trade in commodities to a trade in loans. They were not just selling slaves on the far side of the Atlantic, they were lending money across the Atlantic. And, as significantly, they were lending money they did not yet possess or only possessed in the form of the slaves. The slaves were thus treated not only as a type of commodity but as a type of interest-bearing money. They functioned in this system simultaneously as commodities for sale and *as the reserve deposits* of a loosely organized, decentered, but vast trans-Atlantic banking system: deposits made at the moment of sale instantly re-converted into short-term bonds. (Page 61) (Italics Mine)

If we accept this account, of slaves as commodities guaranteeing the trust in profit making for economic actors on the opposing shores of the Atlantic then we have to ask what commodification deposited in their bodies. Marx defined commodity fetish, the decisive blinding to the labor hidden in the object that connected it to a person and not simply to other objects of exchange. In slavery, it is the decisive blinding of the humanity hidden within the person transformed into an object, a humanity that connects him or her

to the slave-traders themselves and not simply to the money offered for their sale. The reification of the Other, disciplining bodies into blackness was the basis of the modern abstract citizenship of capitalism. It was a freedom denied to those blackened by enslavement, their permanent estrangement that created the freedom to trust between strangers. The trust opened a space of social mobility for peasants to leave the medieval era and enter modernity. If as the Du Bois said "The problem of the Twentieth Century will be the problem of the color line" it was a problem created through the aporia, the blind-spot of white supremacy, an abyss into which the bodies of millions of enslaved peasants were blackened by a certain utilitarian blindness.

From Pre-Black Africans to Post-Black Art

In the African-American tradition, the experience of being blackened by a ruling class seeking its security in the capital accumulation of profit from slave labor, allowed for a 'double consciousness' or more accurately a triple consciousness. The internalized false consciousness of the master, the self-consciousness of the slave and the distance between the two through which the human within the mask navigated to survive. The *black voice* exposed the violent truth of power through the power of its own multiple consciousnesses that knew of the master of itself and of the dangerous distance between them.

It may a painful irony that the very economic system that created blackness may be what destroys it. I don't say that with celebration but if that questionable hypothesis is confirmed it follows the economic arc already outlined in Eric Williams' *Capitalism and Slavery*. In it he detailed colonial need for labor to turn the soil of the New World into

profit. After native Amerindians died or hid from the “discoverers” Africans were hauled across the ocean to work the land. At first, their enslavement was justified by religion but the Industrial Revolution turned over the theology of the Medieval Era with secular values. Religion ceded to race, the blood guilt of deicide smeared on Jews by Christians for centuries was transformed into the motif of inferior blood of the blackened body. Skin color was transformed into the ideological alibi and the biological anchor of Capital. It was the one solid thing that did not melt to air.

Economic heat was generated by the ever quickening circulation of capital, a swirl of debt and credit and slavery and surplus accumulation that began to chafe against the import restrictions needed by the colonial planter class. As island colonies began production they required and got a secure market in the metro-poles. English consumers were forced to buy from colonial producers. Soon Williams shows, the very monopoly that secured a market for their products now stood in the way of a global free market.

> Whereas before, in the eighteenth century, every important vested interest in England was lined up on the side of monopoly and the colonial system; after 1783, one by one, every one of those interests came out against monopoly and the West Indian slave system. British exports to the world were in manufactured goods which could be paid for only in raw materials – the cotton of the United States, the cotton, sugar and coffee of Brazil, the sugar of Cuba, the sugar and cotton of India. The expansion of British exports depended on the capacity of Britain to absorb the raw material as payment. The British West Indian monopoly, prohibiting the importation of non-British-plantation sugar for home consumption, stood in the way. Every important vested interest – the cotton

> manufacturers, the ship owners, the sugar refiners; every important industrial and commercial town London, Manchester, Liverpool, Birmingham, Sheffield, the West Riding of Yorkshire, joined in the attack on West Indian Slavery and West Indian monopoly. The abolitionists, significantly, concentrated their attack on the industrial centers. (page 154)

Economic necessity drove ideology and soon slavery changed from a natural inevitability to a national shame. Abolitionism may have begun as a pure moral force but it was driven forward by national interest. Slavery itself had not changed but the loyalty to colonial producers that forced the metro-pole to sanction it had now become a wall to free market policy. In the name of human brotherhood the wall would be smashed but the force to do so was generated by the desire for wealth, the subjective excess promised by capital that had to circulate faster and could not be chained to the needs of slave-owners.

Here one could raise an eyebrow and ask if I am not repeating a vulgar Marxist reading, in which culture is a super-structural appendage of real economic laws, a mere surface representation of an inner presence. In a risky inversion, I keep that division but not its definition. In other words, I follow through on post-structuralist method and empty out the transcendental signs of use-value and need. Each term is in a struggle against the other, a scene of binary reductionism that refuses to see the common epistemological field that unites them. Yet even as I continue the post-structuralist method of denying the economy the status of a full ontological presence that drives cultural representation, *it is* the site of commodity fetish, of reification that connects to and shapes repression. In my reading, the economy is the political unconscious. An approach to this can begin with Slavoj Zizek's mirroring of Freud and Marx in *The Sublime Object of Ideology*,

> There is a fundamental homology between the interpretative procedure of Marx and Freud – precisely, between their analysis of commodity and of dreams. In both cases the point is to avoid the properly fetishistic fascination of the 'content' supposedly hidden behind the form: the 'secret' to be unveiled through the analysis is not the content hidden by the form (labor concealed in the form of commodities, desire concealed in the form of dreams) but, on the contrary, the 'secret' is the form itself. (Page 11)

The binary sets such as use-value and exchange value, need and desire, labor and capital were once read as concealment of ontological fact within an epistemological fiction. We can now read them as creation of the alibi of ontology itself. It is a traditional post-structuralist critique elaborated by Jean Baudrillard in his seminal book *The Mirror of Production*. He writes, "The system of political economy does not produce only the individual as labor power that is sold and exchanged: it produces the very conception of labor as the fundamental human potential." (page 31) Emptying signs of transcendence exposes their transparency. As a window becomes a mirror when blackness is behind it, so does sound become meaningful words when belief is within it. Rainer Maria Rilke came to this understanding in his poem *Requiem for a Friend*, "I'm sure you have gone astray if you are moved to homesickness for anything in this dimension. We transform these Things; they aren't real, they are only the reflections upon the polished surface of our being." (page 73) The belief in the reality of things, of their ontological fact that requires a blindness to see itself, an attitude of as-if, noted by Zizek in his essay *The Interpassive Subject*,

> A typical bourgeois subject is, in terms of his conscious attitude, a utilitarian nominalist – it is in his social activity, in exchange on the market, that he acts *as if* commodities were simple objects endowed with special powers, full of theological whimsies. In other words, people are well aware how things really stand, they know very well that the commodity-money is nothing but the reified form of the appearance of social relations, i.e. that, beneath the relations between things, there relations between people – the paradox is that, in their social activity, they act *as if* they do not know this and follow the fetishist illusion. (Page 2) (Italics mine)

If Zizek is correct in not searching the content in the form but the form itself for the secret of capital then we can go a step further and ask how does one account for two things, the repeated binary structure of ontology versus epistemology. In more traditional terms, it is known as the contest between materialist and idealist thought. We know it as the post-structuralist gesture of denying the possibility of ontology point blank.

I suggest that we keep the division but not the definition. Words are always other than what they say because the secret of commodities and desire is not only that the form itself is the secret but the *form secretes the repression necessary to reify and fetishize the noumenal world. Form secretes resistance to being-in-itself*, which is an ontological utopia thinkable only after our being becomes humanized through language. So when I ask that we keep the binary division but not its definition, I am trying to dispel the naive belief in ontology but translate the experience of belief in it, evidenced through the *as-if* attitude. It is an attitude Zizek cites as the division that structures our relation to the economy and our unconscious. When African peasants were transformed into

commodities, *the reification of them as objects was possible only through a "blackness" secreted by the form of commodity exchange that itself was a link in a chain leading back to the original repression that constitutes human consciousness*. Fanon analyzed this in his famous book *Black Skins, White Masks*. He writes,

> European civilization is characterized by the presence, at the heart of what Jung calls the collective unconscious, of an archetype: an expression of the bad instincts, of the darkness inherent in every ego, of the uncivilized savage, the Negro who slumbers in every white man. In Europe, the black man is the symbol of Evil. How else is one to explain, for example, that the unconscious representing the base and inferior traits is colored black? (Page 189)

Let us return to Eric Williams now and with a new definition of the economy as the cultural unconscious of a nation, the site of reification of both objects into carriers of relations between people and *of people themselves transformed into objects*. The binary division is kept but the definition is changed, no ontology serves as a guarantee but the intense resistance that led us to believe it did is the resistance secreted by the categorical form imposed by the mind on reality, *the secretion of form itself*. The blackened body is a reified body whose transformation in the economy is intimately connected to the original split in human consciousness. It is a device of projection, of envelopment of the body of the Other in a fantasy of darkness that both promises a false unity to the subject and traps the Real inside a frozen image.

Blackness is, as we will see in the following history, a reification ultimately undone by the need for more capital accumulation since capital accumulation itself is a demand for recognition by the ruling class and those lost in the false-consciousness that

supports it. Capital accumulation is a demand for recognition of ruling elite power. Hannah Arendt wrote of this peculiar insecurity that drives the economies of the modern era in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*,

> This process of never-ending accumulation of power necessary for the protection of a never-ending accumulation of capital determined the 'progressive ideology' of the late 19th Century and foreshadowed the rise of imperialism. Not the naïve delusion of a limitless growth of property, but the realization that power accumulation was the only guarantee for the stability of so-called economic laws, made progress irresistible…the endless progress of bourgeois society, which not only did not want the liberty and autonomy of man, but was ready to sacrifice everything and everybody to supposedly superhuman laws of history. (Page 143)

Of course Marx saw this much earlier in his essay *Theories of Surplus Value* where he wrote, "The immediate purpose of capitalist production is not 'the possession of other goods,' but the appropriation of value, of money, of abstract wealth." (Page 446) The series of economic crisis return in cycles, each episode a collision of money and market and overproduction which demands new consumers. Capital accumulation collides with its own barriers, *including the barrier of blackness itself* as it searches for secure markets in its shadow where it has cast the Other, The Other, blackened by the shadow of the West into a racial category would become a necessary actor. So let us return to Eric Williams and follow this spiral through the time.

If William's historical argument stands and the periodic economic crisis of over-production, the demand for new markets to re-invest capital accumulation and the mad speculation that follows merged briefly with the humanist motives of the Abolitionist

movement can we see this again in other eras as a spiral of history that loosened the anchor-referent of blackness. How did this affect the sublime transport experienced by slaves transformed into free legal citizens? My thesis is that when capital accumulation collided against it barriers, it allied with humanist rhetoric to unhinge the anchor-referent of blackness to continue the economic machine. Also, when African-American writers described those moments of opening the language they used inherited, consciously or not, the rhetorical legacy of the sublime. The transformation from enslavement to freedom was an ascent through the abyss which had been their home to the acceptance by others as equals, a change so total that the literature around it was elevated to sublime rapture. Yet as we will see the connection between the slave and the sublime existed in the origin of the sublime tradition, it was the narrative arc that required the address of an authorizing Other who accepted the payment of rapture.

The Great Migrations

In the American Heritage Dictionary the sublime is "characterized by nobility and majesty." Close by is the Freudian term sublimate of sexual instinct transformed into culture. Both definitions merge in the scene of transport from slavery to freedom, in that a human being degraded to the status of an animal is emancipated and elevated to the realm of mutual recognition, lifted out of the nature it is assumed slaves are locked within. It was a nature that was a projection of the Real within the master out on to the slave to stabilize his or her own subjectivity. As the slave emerges into the field of recognition it also enters the discourse by which the human is defined, by which the human is divided from nature. The slave arrival in discourse is not an ontological freedom floating in a vacuum but entrance into an epistemological web of power and

knowledge glistening as Foucault would say, "over the abyss." The freed slave *sublets* a space within the anonymous network of language from which subjectivity is constituted. I use the word sublet deliberately for it offers a precise and close relationship with the words sublime and sublimate and gives the sense of temporary address, of the symbolic space which is the scene of transformation of instinct into noble and magisterial culture, it is where the body leases its home in the time created by language.

What I propose is the following personal scenes of sublime transport from slavery to freedom stand for a collective moment. The author's emancipation is made possible by the convergence of capital accumulation breaching race with the aid of humanist politics. In the spiral of history, the anchor-referent of blackness is unhinged from its symbolic point of reference. We go now to a scene of emancipation from this first era of capital accumulation colliding against its barriers. It is a pivotal moment in the slave-narrative by Olaudah Equiano. After years of working and saving he buys his freedom from a reluctant master. He writes,

> When I went in I made my obeisance to my master, and with my money in my hand, and many fears in my heart, I prayed him to be as good as his offer to me, when he was pleased to promise me my freedom as soon as I could purchase it. This speech seemed to confound him; he began to recoil; and my heart that instant sunk within me. 'What,' said he, 'give you your freedom? Why, where did you get the money? Have you got forty pounds sterling?' 'Yes sir,' I answered. 'How did you get it?' replied he. I told him, 'very honestly.' The Captain said he knew I got the money very honestly and with much industry, and that I was particularly careful. On which my master replied, I got the money much faster than he did;

> and he said he would not have made me the promise which he did, had he thought I should have got the money so soon. 'Come, come,' said my worthy Captain, clapping my master on the back, 'Come, Robert (which was his name) I think you must let him have his freedom…Come Robert take the money.' My master then said, he would not be worse than his promise; and, taking the money, told me to go to the Secretary at the Register Office, and get my manumission drawn up." (Page 100)

If faced with only Equiano as witness, the master would have denied his request to honor the promise of manumission. As Orlando Patterson noted in his book *Slavery and Social Death*, the slave was, "forever an unborn being." Equiano, exiled as all slaves were to outside the law's protection had to rely on tactics of sympathy to secure protection. He did so from his Captain, who in working with Equiano, identified with him through common labor and forced the master to honor his promise to Equiano. It was the trust between the master and Captain, a trust as noted before, that was balanced on the blackened bodies of peasants and now was extended by the Captain to Equaino and imposed upon the master. Equaino goes to the registry and is inserted into the Symbolic Order as a full human being. He writes,

> These words of my master were like a voice from heaven to me: in an instant all of my trepidation was turned into unutterable bliss, and I most reverently bowed myself with gratitude, unable to express my feelings, but by the overflowing of my eyes, and a heart replete with thanks to God; while my true and worthy friend, the Captain, congratulated us both with a peculiar degree of heartfelt pleasure. As soon as the first transports of my joy were over, and that I had expressed my

> thanks to these my worth friends in the best manner I was able, I rose with a heart full of affection and reverence, and left the room, in order to obey my master's joyful mandate of going to the Register Office. (Page 100)

Here is one of the earliest documents of the sublime transport from slavery to freedom. It is a transformation beyond words channeled through religion to allow the expansiveness Equiano needs. His ardent faith in God was both sincere and strategic. God was common between him and the free men he worked with and through religion he was linked to others in a spiritual equality that could be leveraged to legal equality. As the scene develops, Equiano whose initial steps toward recognition were through religion will now ascend through its rhetoric of salvation.

> "My imagination was all rapture as I flew to the Register Office; in this respect, like the apostle Peter (whose deliverance from prison was so sudden and extraordinary, that he thought he was in a vision) I could scarcely believe I was awake. Heavens! who could do justice to my feelings at this moment? Not conquering heroes themselves, in the midst of a triumph – Not the tender mother who has regained her long lost infant, and presses it to her heart – Not the weary, hungry mariner, at the sight of the desired friendly port – Not the lover, when he once more embraces his beloved mistress, after she has been ravished from his arms! – All with my breast was tumult, wildness and delirium! My feet scarcely touched the ground; for they were winged with joy, and like Elijah, as he rose to Heaven, they 'were with lightning sped as I went on. (Page 101)

Equiano ascends through religious rhetoric to full legal subjectivity and as he claims his body he also claims it through metaphors that uncannily echo his own life. The figure of

the mother re-united with her son, a sailor longing for home and a lover who was taken away. Each image mirrors his real loss of love and now surfacing after having been repressed as beyond the hope of a slave to regain. The very physical description, of the memory of the flesh that is all that is left of family and home is then sublimated into a religious evocation of ascent to Heaven. It is a moment of sublimity, of instinct that had been repressed transformed into ennobling art.

The gathering of the past to pass into a new self is the basic thematic of psycho-analysis. A scene repeated through academia is the Fort/Da of Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. In it Freud watched a child replacing the absent mother with a toy he could pull and push thereby mastering absence. Lacan re-formulates this saying, "the thing must be lost in order to be represented" and so the thing is lost and what is found is loss itself. The human goes from being an object of the Other's desire to becoming a subject through mastering the loss and return of objects that represent the Other. The price of the freedom of going from an object of the others desire to being a subject is that the subject of the signifier is always *becoming* and can never simply *be* again. The consequence of this separation is the unconscious. It becomes a depository, the site of refuse and refusal, of a forced forgetting that never dissolves memory but holds it in place. It is kept outside of symbolic time retrieval in sublime moments of achievement.

So for Equiano the sublime is passing through the past. He followed the gravity that directs the flow of language to return to its repressed core. The sign, in representing the absent thing does not, obviously, return the material object or the temporal moment. It is the chain of signs through which the subject becomes, arrives in history, fades from full possibility again.

Let's turn again to history and find again this transport, of when the past opens up with the possibility of the future and the present is no longer going from the one to the other, or one to the Other in a linear act within symbolic time but collapses time within itself. In order to locate this "time outside of time" I turn again to another scene where slaves were transported to freedom. The Civil War stands as another example of capital accumulation colliding with its own boundaries and creating an opening for the mass experience of sublime transport. The North and aligned itself with Abolitionism to further its interests in the emerging markets at the western frontier. The transport that followed the Emancipation Proclamation parallels Equiano's religious rapture.

War is the "other sacred" time, where men break every law that creates humanity and are released from debt by locating their actions in a transcendent cause. It first began with black slaves enlisting as soldiers and fighting and then the day came which Dubois writes in *Black Reconstruction in America: 1860 - 1880*,

> No American now believes in his religion. Its facts mere symbolism; its revelation vague generalities; its ethics a matter of carefully balanced gain but to most of the four million black folk emancipated by civil war, God was real. They knew Him. They had met him personally in many a wild orgy of religious frenzy, or in the black stillness of the night. His plan for them was clear; they were to suffer and be degraded, and then afterwards by Divine edict, raise to manhood and power; ands so on January 1, 1863, He made them free. It was all foolish, bizarre, and tawdry. Gangs of dirty Negroes howling and dancing; poverty-stricken ignorant laborers mistaking war, destruction and revolution for the mystery of the free human soul; and yet to these black folk it was the apocalypse. The magnificent trumpet tones

> of Hebrew Scripture, transmuted and oddly changed, became a strange new gospel. All that was Beauty, all that was Love, all that was truth, stood on top of these mad mornings and sang with the stars. A great human sob shrieked in the wind, tossed its tears upon the sea, - free, free, free. (Page 124)

Du Bois bares his conflict here. He praises with Longinian rhetoric the sublime beauty of slave singing to the stars and judges them as ignorant for seeing war as "mystery of the free human soul." And yet was it Du Bois who was mistaken? The wrecked land and smoking cities through which the freed slaves followed the Union army was the end consequence of the explosive contradictions in capitalism. When the Du Bois writes that the "ignorant laborers" mistook the "destruction and revolution for the mystery of the free human soul" he was writing as one who experiences culture as the redemption of labor, of art as a purified form of human existence that distills from tragedy a beauty that justifies it. Against this I balance Walter Benjamin's reading of culture from his book *Illuminations*,

> Whoever has emerged victorious participates to this day in the triumphal procession in which the present rulers step over those who are lying prostrate. According to traditional practice, the spoils are carried along in the procession. They are called cultural treasures, and a historical materialist views them with cautious detachment. For without exception the cultural treasures he surveys have an origin which he cannot contemplate without horror. They owe their existence not only to the efforts of the great minds and talents who have created them, but also to the anonymous toil of their contemporaries. There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism. (Page 256)

The slaves saw very clearly that the weight of wealth, the glittering grandeur of the new nation was the product of a barbaric system of pain and profit. It was their labor that had built the civilization which in turn had forced on them a mask of obedience and it all had to be destroyed for them to be free, for the 'mystery' of the human soul to be released. If we follow Foucualt's logic that power creates knowledge through disciplinary practices, that as he says in *Discipline and Punish*,

> It would be wrong to say that the soul is an ideological illusion, or an ideological effect. On the contrary, it exists, it has a reality, it is produced permanently around, on, within the body by the functioning of a power that is exercised on those punished – and, in a more general way, on those one supervises, trains and corrects, over madmen, children at home or at school, the colonized…this is the historical reality of the soul…born out of methods of punishment, supervision and constraint…the soul is the effect and instrument of a political anatomy, the soul is the prison of the body. (Page 30)

The blackened human being, disciplined by the whip, the iron-muzzle, the fear and hate of the self, who read skin as the sign of debt to a civilization that one could not join, saw it collapse in fire. The power that created the soul in which one was imprisoned now lay broken by war. The soul of the slave collapsed with the civilization that created it and into time stepped the free human body that was in rapture. They were in sublime awe at the presence of a God that was and has been through human history the sacred place of concealment for a consciousness that must deny itself, the projection of a figure into the sky that heard and recorded the whispered confessions. Now this God, imagined and

hoped for had seemingly answered them and Du Bois writes of the freedom-song the slaves sang,

> There was joy in the South. It rose like a perfume – like a prayer. Men stood quivering. Slim dark girls, wild and beautiful with wrinkled hair, wept silently; young women, black, tawny, white and golden, lifted shivering hands, and old and broken mothers, black and gray, raised voices and shouted to God across the fields, and up to the rocks and the mountains. A great song arose, the loveliest thing born this side the seas. It was a new song and its deep and plaintive beauty, its great cadences and wild appeal wailed, throbbed and thundered on the world's ears with a message seldom voiced by man. It swelled and blossomed like incense, improvised and born anew out of an age long past and weaving into its texture the old and new melodies in word and in thought. (Page 125)

It was rare, new and old. It came from slaves, a people defined by social death and resurrection. The black voice was not, as it became later in the Harlem Renaissance, a guarantee of authenticity but a sound of hope. The voice, if we follow Freud and Lacan, is created from the need to master the presence and absence of lost love by replacing it with signs that could be reeled back at will and cast away again. The black voice had no power to bring back a loved one, to stop a sale, to say no to the lust of an owner and had to reach further and ask for an absent God to become present and speak for them. The black voice was denied entrance to the dialogue that created the world of human time and spoke instead to a sacred absence in which the presence of their lives was locked. The sublime transport came when war exploded the wall and they could call and be heard by the heavens. In the passion of religion they found an address for their voice.

The Great Migration

After the Civil War, the next scene of capital accumulation and financial speculation that opened opportunity for political progress was the Roaring Twenties. Again capital collided with its own barriers and offering a moment of mass transport, not just physically but an emotional, subjective ascension. A Great Migration of rural black folks was caused by white supremacist terrorism and drought in the South, the lure of jobs and social freedom in the North. It merged in the Northern cities with ambitious artists to create the New Negro Movement. An era of artistic freedom centered in New York brought the black voice into modernity.

The classic text of this era is of course *The New Negro* edited by Alain Locke, which asked the audience to hear "the Negro speak for himself" rather than be spoken about. It was the new speech of a race that crossed the line between the Old South and the North, between the feudal fascism of share-cropping to the free market bustle of the urban Industrial North. The New Negro was being recreated by the address imagined by its speech, a place beyond the plantation and the mask of obedience. The sublime transport that for Equiano moved from the body through religion to a legal self now was in this era, split into twin movements. The first scene of transport was the Harlem Renaissance in which art was the key to claiming citizenship. The second was the U.N.I.A. in which the journey was through Pan-African mythological utopias to a claim of being the Original Man. In both, nobility was no longer guaranteed by whiteness or God but by a new blackness which was not emptiness, a historical void or a metaphor of Nature although the traces of all that lingered. It was instead a blackness of fertility where a world had grown despite the war raged on it.

Two essays of transcendence from Harlem Renaissance are *The Racial Mountain* by Langston Hughes and *How it Feels to Be Colored Me* by Zora Neal Hurston, in each one the writer ascends through limits imposed from the outside on his and her voice to achieve a new freedom. Hughes used the metaphor of the mountain that black artists had to climb to ascend to the limitless whiteness. He warned the very strength spent to get there will be wasted. He writes, “But this is the mountain standing in the way of any true Negro art in America – this urge within the race toward whiteness, the desire to pour racial individuality into the mold of American standardization, and to be as little Negro and as much American as possible.” (Page 1311) In Equiano there was never a question of the authenticity of blackness or blackness as the source of possibility, since he had been *blackened* or in other words he entered it and survived by adopting English culture in the hope that imitation would earn him security. The sublime transport for him took him back to his lost family and then through the ascending rhetoric of religion.

Here Hughes will also use the image of upward mobility and rapture in the climbing of the ‘racial mountain’ but it will be in a blackness whose authenticity is not a biological given but based on and in a tradition of surviving, of the “tom-tom of revolt against weariness in a white world, a world of subway trains, and work, work, work; the tom-tom of joy and laughter, and pain swallowed in a smile.” The narrative of sublime ascent, of transformation begins with the hard sensuous life of “low-down folks” and ends with claiming the beauty as their birthright, one that can be owned unlike nationality which Hughes, as Dubois before him, sees as hopelessly folded over with whiteness. Hughes writes,

> "But then there are the low-down folks, the so-called common element, and they are the majority – may the Lord be praised! The people who have their hip of gin on Saturday nights and are not too important to themselves or the community, or too well fed, or too learned to watch the lazy world go round. They live on Seventh Street in Washington or State Street in Chicago and they do not particularly care whether they are like white folks or anybody else. They joy runs, bang! into ecstasy. Their religion soars to a shout. (Page 1312)

Unlike the prior example, in which the ecstasy of the song of the freed slave was its arc from social death to legal resurrection, here the black voice is locked within itself. It is a dizzy spiral, a self-enclosed circle of drug and dance and delirium that Hughes and later Hurston will romanticize as the truth of blackness found in jazz. Yet the "people" weren't claiming beauty through jazz, it was a release, a return to the body in a haze of smoke and the burn of drink, a return to the body in a blur of limbs swinging to back-rhythms but jazz did not transport the "people" from one identity to another. After the music was over the world returned to what it was before and the transport led them back to the weary world they could not escape. The "people" did search for beauty, an awesome vision to guide them and for that they turned to Marcus Garvey.

Sublime transport must also be a symbolic transport and it must end with the subject being different than who he or she was before. Equiano's transport took him from one position to another. In Hughes and Hurston the symbolic position of race is a referent they circle without breaking out of its ideological circuit. They projected a primitivism on to the working-class, seeing them through the white gaze even as they critiqued it. Hurston shows us this in her essay *How It Feels to Be Colored Me* in which she writes,

> This orchestra grows rambunctious, rears on its hind legs and attacks the tonal veil with primitive fury, rending it, clawing it until it breaks through to the jungle beyond. I follow those heathen – follow them exultingly. I dance wildly inside myself; I yell within. I whoop; I shake my assegai above my head, I hurl it true to the mark yeeeooww! I am in the jungle and living in the jungle way. My face is painted red and yellow and my body is painted blue. My pulse is throbbing like a war drum. I want to slaughter something – give pain, give death to what, I do not know. But the piece ends. The men of the orchestra wipe their lips and rest their fingers. I creep back slowly to the veneer we call civilization with the last tone and find the white friend sitting motionless in his seat, smoking calmly.
>
> 'Good music they have here,' he remarks, drumming the table with his fingertips.
>
> Music. The great blobs of purple and red emotion have not touched him. He has only heard what I felt. He is far away and I see him but dimly across the ocean and the continent that have fallen between us. He is so pale with his whiteness and I am so colored. (Page 1032)

Again the sublime transport, the rhythm that cuts one loose from the self and the images we read are stock racist images. The point for us being that Hurston's sublime ascension is through the fantasy of the black primitive created by the white supremacist gaze. The scene re-enacts the earlier one of her childhood performances for visitors passing through her town. The personal meets the political. She is, in Lacanian terminology, traversing the fantasy, totally identifying with the trope of the modern primitive and the excess that is sanctioned in its name.

Fantasy is in psychoanalysis the subject's last refuge from castration, the inner drama that is acted out and allows for him or her to experience a unity with the Other or at least imagine it. Hurston like Hughes transports themselves through the image and rhetoric of sublime primitivism, of tom-toms and drums and rhythmic frenzy. They found an escape from the Nordic Negroes, the assimilation into White America that demanded they bleach any differences. Yet in celebrating black art and culture they did so from the angle of the white gaze which sabotaged the integrity of the transport they so desperately wanted to accomplish. The solidarity they achieved was not with the desire of the black working class but with a romantic image of them created by whites, a fantasy screen of modern primitives that allowed the consumption of black song and dance and abandon without feeling the frustration that fueled it.

Hurston does offer more than a repetition of the white gaze. She offers the narrative of symbolic transport in her classic *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. The relationships between the protagonist Janie Woods and her men are an allegory of the black community going from Reconstruction, the Great Migration and the Great Depression. Hurston, a folklorist, created a mythic novel to map the changes she saw during the decades. The first man, Logan Killicks was the symbol of post-Reconstruction isolation and patriarchic power. Joe Starks was the symbol of New Negro optimism, industry and migration. Tea Cake returned us to the nomadic poverty and spontaneous beauty of solidarity of the Great Depression. The last lover Janie has is herself. She comes to be a new woman after telling her full story, or in Lacanian terminology full speech which moves the subject from his or her prior identification to a new self that has claimed what before had been denied.

The reconstruction of history was the also the passage through which the masses of working-class blacks achieved symbolic transport. Pride in the past was the one of the major attractions of the Garvey movement. It was a past appropriated by the leaders of the Moorish Science Temple and the U.N.I.A. to entice a migrant people into an image of unity. It was also a past to which the West itself was turning toward. The Great War disillusioned Western intellectuals and artists who in search of primal passion to rescue them from the ego found the "Negro". It was precisely the link to Africa that once condemned blacks to civic-exile that now earned them the erotic halo of primitivism. A continual theme in Diaspora culture heightened during the Harlem Renaissance to a crisis-pitch was the relationship to Africa. The continent had long been maligned in the social sciences. Popular mediums like film, pulp fiction and radio added to its image as a steamy jungle of cannibals, a fertile place left fallow in the hands of native culture that needed Western domination to bring its raw resources to the world's benefit. So for black artists, Africa was not an automatic heritage one could cherish.

Black artists of the Harlem Renaissance responded to the fetish of origins and aesthetics in tones from careful to raucous, satirical to sanctimonious. Langston Hughes climbed its mountain announcing his freedom from the center of his dark body, Countee Cullen eulogized his sexual frustration with the language of a lost erotic African Eden and Zora Neil Hurston, determined as always to shock said "Slavery was the price I paid for civilization, and the choice was not with me." The importance of the question of Africa lies not only in the answers it elicits from Black artists but also as a way to ask *why* it became important.

The tension for African-American artists was how to make use of white mainstream interest in Black culture while evolving past the stereotypes that caused it. The push and pull of cultural heritage, origins and the politics of self-representations are balanced on a familiar binary of double-consciousness first outlined by W.E. Du Bois. It is this binary, between American and the various titles of Otherness that African-Americans bore that defined the Harlem Renaissance. Du Bois's definition betrays bourgeoisie timidity, in that it is not a double-consciousness, not two formed selves competing for a single body but an example of colonization. In his formula the "Negro" body is left mute, spoken for by a language that crams it in racist categories.

The point of articulation, the symbolic fulcrum that balances the drives and sensations of the body against the repressive filtration of language, is American. Never does the "Negro" speak. But he did. Du Bois just didn't like what he heard. A long tradition of Afrocentric thought, most of it admittedly esoteric or naive was structured on a binary exactly opposite of Du Bois. It was a seductive scheme in which the origin of civilization itself was Black and the only true religion was Black and its language was transparent to reality. If there was any "double-consciousness" it was because during the Diaspora the descendants had lost their original tongue.

In 1928, a con-man, circus performer, poverty pimp and amateur mystic name Noble Drew Al started the Moorish Science Temple, a pseudo-Muslim organization whose main text was the Circle 7 Koran, a book compiled of other esoteric writings and his own writings on the genealogy of black folks. Paternity was an obsession in the modernity. It seems that just as history was speeding up and social mobility increasing

various prophets appeared promising to teach the people their true lineage and thereby guide them home. Ali wrote,

> The matter of the various names given to these twenty-two million people with all colors of every race on the globe was an act of European psychology. They gave him a name then defined it as something inferior to theirs. 'White,' they defined as the color of purity; 'Black,' they say represents everything of evil. The 'Negro' as they were called in this nation, have no nation to which they might look with pride. Their history starts with the close of the Civil War or more properly with his being forced to serve someone else. Thus he is separated from the illustrious history of his forefathers who were the founders of the first civilization of the Old World. (Page 27)

Noble Drew Ali was among the earliest Afrocentric demagogues in the 20th Century. A precursor to Marcus Garvey, Ali reversed the integrationist dynamic of becoming American which left the African-American "always looking at oneself through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in contempt and pity". In the place of this Western Eye and the sadomasochistic double-consciousness it created to be a voyeur to its own destruction; Noble Drew Ali substituted an Ancient Eye that retains the sadomasochism but now it acts as a voyeur to its own redemption. One is being saved not from one's mute, illiterate 'black body' as in Du Bois's formula but from the fallen state of forgetfulness whose status is changed through faith. The taint of "race" is removed and one's subjection comes simply from being tricked. The reconstruction of honor and worth in the human community was based on the claiming of the dust-covered glories of ancient civilizations. The pyramids and tales of Hannibal's armies are a few

examples used by Ali. In this use of history, Ali offers a radical reading and immediately disfigures it with a false projection. He shows "race" to be a fiction, an act of linguistic terrorism for "Blacks" and a theater thin-prop of unearned privilege for "Whites". He does not follow through with sublime awareness that all symbolic structures are see-through, that the only thing real is our desire for a reality. Instead of building a political movement powered by a free human imagination, he enslaves it again to another impossible fiction of Moorish inheritance.

Even as Ali reversed Du Bois's binary, replaced hate of a 'black body' created by White Supremacy into a love of a self whose worth, he believed *had* to be guaranteed by a dubious genealogy, he still kept the binary. In both formulas what can't be trusted is the body itself. A law must underwrite it, as if the self created by language is more important than the body that experiences what the self can only describe. Garvey took this tactic even further. He promised a transport from the present in the re-enactment of the past to pass through in sublime trajectory. It was a path repeated a decade later by the Nazis, genocidal mad-men who found in the mythic-past an illusionary world of a natural order that if re-created will insure paradise. They promised a natural order to seal the innate constant contradictions in every society. Instead they simply re-directed the tension against a scapegoat, against those who represent the Other. It is, of course, the historical tactic of fascism.

The U.N.I.A. was a proto-fascist organization, a point of pride for Garvey who said, "We were the first fascists. We had disciplined men, women and children in training for the liberation of Africa. The black masses saw that in this extreme nationalism lay there only hope and readily supported it. Mussolini copied Fascism from me but the

Negro reactionaries sabotaged it." (Page 199) The Black Star Line was more of a metaphor than a material business. The shoddy ships were falling apart when Garvey bought them. Yet they embodied the dream of millions for emancipation, for transport out of the life of work and weariness. The fascist strategies Garvey used foreshadowed the rise of fascism in Italy and Germany and that eventually would lead to World War 2 and the Holocaust. It may be useful now to turn to a poet-witness-survivor of that age, Paul Celan and his poem *Speak, You Also* in which the image of a star that guides us home returns and brings with it an implicit rebuke to the violent nationalism he survived and standing on the other side of it stared back at the empty places where his mother and father once were,

Speak, you also
speak as the last,
have your say.

Speak –
But keep yes and no unsplit.
And give your say this meaning:
give it the shade.

Give it shade enough
give it as much
as you know has been dealt out between
midnight and midday and midnight.

Look around:
look how it all leaps alive –
where death truly is! Alive!
He speaks truly who speaks the shade.

But now shrinks the place where you stand:
Where now, stripped by shade, will you go?
Upward. Grope your way up.
Thinner you grow, less knowable, finer.
Finer: a thread by which
it wants to be lowered, the star:
to float farther down, down below

> where it sees itself gleam: in the swell
> of wandering words. (Page 69)

Celan's borrowed the form of his poetry from Martin Buber's I – Thou philosophy which sought truth not outside of humanity but as a force created within it. Such a philosophy required love to untangle consciousness from the signs that represent it. Buber demanded we bring our silence into speech and from there approach the other in all their totality. The 'shade' was Celan's image for that silence that was never empty but filled with our refused existence. In the last stanza, Celan gives us the image of the impossible to say, the immensity of it over-whelming what is possible to say and in that moment of crisis reaching up with a thin and fine thread of voice that has given room for what is felt and endured but cannot be claimed. In that moment, a remote light, a 'star' that 'wants to be lowered' floats to the surface of words and illuminates it with a light that exposes the swell and the fall and the wandering of words lost in meanings that have left behind the speaking man or woman who must live with experiences they have no way to witness.

The star and the light it shines being the image of the charged self, un-sealing language and letting the pure potential of it blaze on the unwritten flow of feeling, of the Imaginary and its desperate identifications, aggressive dismemberments and fetishizing objects touched by the Other. In the light of that star, we see who we are and why. *Speak, You Also* is poem, with its image of light and truth that challenges, however a poem can challenge, a mass movement driven by hunger and fed a Platonic Noble Lie. Celan was a poet-survivor-witness of the genocide unleashed by fascists who Garvey proudly claims as his ideological and organizational descendants.

The next scene of capital accumulation and its collision against the barrier of blackness is post World War 2. The Cold War heated up between the United States and

the Soviet Union. A new struggle opened between the super-powers. Each fought to align the newly independent nations on their side. The Civil Rights Movement caught the United States in a rhetorical double-bind by advocating for social reform in the name of democracy. They held the ruling elite to their vow of democracy by challenging their commitment to it at home as the cameras watched. The voice of this was of course Martin Luther King Jr., who versed in the Gandhian belief and practice of non-violent direct action made a more honest appeal than Garvey did, as noted by James Baldwin in his essay *The Dangerous Road Before Martin Luther King*,

> And, surely, very few people had ever spoken to them as King spoke. King is a great speaker. The secret of his greatness does not lie in his voice or his presence or his manner, though it has something to do with all of these; nor does it lie in his verbal range of felicity, which are not striking; nor does he have any capacity for those stunning, demagogic flights of the imagination which bring an audience cheering to its feet. The secret lies, I think, in his intimate knowledge of the people he is addressing, be they black or white, and in the forthrightness with which he speaks of those things which hurt and baffle them. He does not offer any easy comfort and this keeps his hearers absolutely tense. He allows them their self-respect – indeed he insists on it…I overheard him explaining to someone that bigotry was a disease and the greatest victim of this disease was not the bigot's object but the bigot himself. And these people could only be saved by love. (Page 251)

The Civil Rights Movement

World War 2 was The Good War fought against Nazis committing genocide under the banner of race purification. If political leaders of the United States denied blacks equal citizenship based on race they would betray the logic of the war itself and break the heroic halos the returning soldiers wore. Also in the first chill of the Cold War, the new independent nations of Africa and the Middle East were vital allies against the Soviet Union yet could not be won over when international news showed people of color being beaten in the streets for asking to be citizens.

In our earlier examples of the industrial sector of the British ruling class turning against the slavery to further its own interests and the industrial North waging war against the plantation South for control of new territory; we saw capital accumulation and anti-racism in brief synchronicity. Mary L. Dudziak's *Race and Image of American Democracy* outlines how American foreign policy experts saw the Civil Rights movement as a threat to the nation's reputation around the globe. She writes about the effect of one particularly savage lynching,

> While the investigations into the murders were stymied, demonstrators marched in front of the White House. This horrible crime was not a burden for Georgia alone to bear. The nation as a whole had a stake in its resolution. As fifty members of the National Association of Colored Women marched in front of the White House their picket signs asked 'Where's Democracy?' The press in other countries asked the same question as the incident was widely covered overseas. The lynching was the lead story in the Soviet publication Trud. (page 3)

The federal government stood embarrassed by its resemblance to Nazi racialism and needed to assuage the newly independent nations of its commitment to democracy. Under

scrutiny and in an increasing realization of the needs of its foreign policy a slow but grudging alliance began. The Civil Rights Movement benefited from the resonance of its claims to democracy in the post-war geo-political context. Even as the economic boom lifted the standard of living for most U.S. citizens, automation and segregation eroded the place of the black working class, a trend that would intensify and accelerate into the well known crisis of globalization. King described this in *Why We Can't Wait* but added another factor, the sense of history, of the century celebration of the Emancipation Proclamation and the urgency it caused.

> With the dawn of 1963, plans were afoot all over the land to celebrate the Emancipation Proclamation, the one-hundredth birthday of the Negro's liberation from bondage…but alas! All the talk and publicity accompanying the centennial only served to remind the Negro that he still wasn't free, that he still lived a form of slavery disguised by certain niceties of complexity. As the then Vice-President, Lyndon B. Johnson, phrased it: 'Emancipation was a Proclamation but not a fact.' The pen of the Great Emancipator had moved the Negro into the sunlight of physical freedom, but actual condition had left him behind in the shadow of political, psychological, social, economic, and intellectual bondage…The Negro also had to recognize that one hundred years after emancipation he lived on a lonely island of economic insecurity in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity. (Page 9)

As in our other examples of sublime transport, I choose the Civil Rights Movement because it has symbolic import that changes the position of the subject. King's writings

and speeches in particular are sublime in that they transport the subject. Uncanny resemblances unite him to Longinus, the critic of antiquity who first defined the sublime.

> Great writing does not persuade; it takes the reader out of himself. The startling and amazing is more powerful than the charming and persuasive, if it is indeed true that to be convinced is usually within our control whereas amazement is the result of an irresistible force beyond the control of any audience. We become aware of a writer's inventive skill, the structure and arrangement of his subject matter, not from one or two passages, but as these qualities slowly emerge from the texture of the whole work. But the greatness appears suddenly; like a thunderbolt it carries all before it and reveals the writer's full power in a flash. (Page 4)

A constant point that Longinus is sublime speech is not disjointed or forced but is a natural flow that awes with overwhelming truth that transports the audience to majestic awareness. He will drawn a line between the experience of the sublime and the self-consciousness of the slave as two opposing states of being that can never meet. It is a line that asks us to inquire of its necessity, as if the sublime Longinus defines inevitably leads to the flattening of the social hierarchy separating master and slave and if maybe it was the fear of that truth that forced him to draw it. I ask in the light of the resemblances between his definition of the sublime and King's description of the Civil Rights Movement in which he writes,

> As in these two revolutions, a submerged social group, propelled by a burning need for justice, lifting itself with sudden swiftness, moving with determination and a majestic scorn for risk and danger, created an uprising so powerful that it

> shook a huge society from its comfortable base…Just as lightning makes no sound until it strikes, the Negro Revolution generated quietly. But when it struck, the revealing flash of its power and the impact of its sincerity and fervor displayed a force of frightening intensity. Three hundred years of humiliation, abuse and deprivation cannot be expected to find voice in a whisper. The storm clouds did not release a 'gentle rain from heaven,' but a whirlwind, which has not yet spent its force or attained its full momentum. (Page 2)

Again the scene of flashing power, of buried truth being resurrected in a human whose soul was created by the power and discourse of domination is broken and the "mystery" that Du Bois cherished found its way to be witnessed by others who knew what hope lay hidden in the dark. It is in the dark that we find another resemblance to the sublime as King writes in his prison cell,

> The life of the movement could not be snuffed out. What silenced me was the profound sense of awe. I was aware of a feeling that had been present all along below the surface of consciousness, pressed down under the weight of concern for the movement: I had never been truly in solitary confinement; God's companionship does not stop at the door of a jail cell. I don't know whether the sun was shining at that moment. But I know that once again I could see the light. (Page 63)

Over the following decades integration went from margin to mainstream. The black middle class grew and a new generation came of age when the goals of integration were accepted publicly if not in practice. If it wished to be a competitor on the global market the United States government and business class could not openly practice or advocate

racism. During the 1970's and 80's the outsourcing of manufacturing began. The working class was hit hard. The shifting economy closed opportunities for untrained workers. A generation was left behind to be warehoused in projects. Capital no longer needed the black working class but still needed to publicly proclaim its belief in integration.

The Rainbow Connection

The black middle class became a collective token while the working class was the collateral damage of international globalization. The contradiction culminated in the late 80's. President Ronald Reagan had cut social programs to fund an arms-race with the U.S.S.R. and cut more to show conservatives he heeded the neo-liberal call for personal responsibility. A crack epidemic, suspected of being part of a C.I.A. deal with Latin American reactionary forces, swept the black community. The crisis peaked in two moments, one being rapper KRS-1's collective ghetto anthem *Self-Destruction*, which sold 500,000 copies and whose proceeds went to the National Urban League. The other moment was Jesse Jackson's presidential campaign whose climax was his 1988 Democratic Convention speech. Amiri Baraka watched and listened to the speech and in his essay, *Black People and Jesse Jackson Part 2*, he also moves into the rhetorical tradition of the sublime to make sense of the historical forces flowing through Jackson's words,

> For instance when Jesse said near the end, 'Most poor people are not on welfare. They work hard every day that they can. They sweep the streets. They work. They catch the early bus. They work. They pick up the garbage. They work. They feed our children in school. They work. They take care of other people's children and

> cannot care for their own…' You could see black people openly weeping and whites too moved to some measure of understanding by this impressive, poetic brother. And yet…and yet…was it all for naught?
>
> I know he broke me down near the end. Only the coldness of my perception and rationale of what all this was prevented some open weeping. The whole was compendium of many of Jesse's speeches thoughout the campaign, and I had heard this part before as well. But it was still cutting, transporting, 'Don't give up. Hold on, for morning comes. How do I know? I understand. I am the son of a teenage mother, who was the daughter of a teenage mother. I understand. I was not born with a silver spoon in my mouth. I understand.
>
> You see Jesse Jackson on television. But you don't know the me that makes me me. Jesse Jackson is my third name. I am adopted. I never spent a night in my daddy's house. I really do understand.

Baraka is caught in the rhythmic scythe cut of Jackson's sentences that do what the sublime must to earn transport, lift what is degraded and ashamed and elevate it to a common cause for action.

> It was not just skill he maintained, but it was also feeling, real feeling. And that is Jesse's danger to the Democrats and to white supremacy that he does feel the needs of the people but now in his personal quest for 'acceptance' or 'significance' or even Jesse-Power (which is not the same as Black Power) he was willing to use the Real to cover the deal.

Emotional authenticity is, for Longinus, a prerequisite of the sublime. In nearly every one of his prescriptions for great writing, for transportive communication is that the speaker

not inflate or minimize or decorate speech as that throws words out of sync with the emotion that moves us to communion. In Jackson's speech, Baraka tells us, are both real feeling and duplicity. His words are honed by honest affect that ascend the social death from which Jackson speaks and yet as the audience listens Jackson ceases to listen them. He hears instead the dangerous echoes in the distance they have to cross rather than *what will deliver them.*

Jackson had to bring through his words the return the disappeared human connection between different races and classes. The intensity overwhelmed him and in that moment of his ascent, in which he could have created the symbolic freedom we needed, he allowed himself to be in his caught in imaginary identification with his mother.

> Jesse was blowing hard and pretty, like a rhythm blade cut through most of us. 'We didn't eat turkey on three o'clock on Thanksgiving day, because Momma was off cooking someone else's turkey. We'd play football to pass the time till momma came home. Around six we would meet her at the bottom of the hill carrying back Du Carcass. Yes, I swear I heard it, and then in the hotel a black minister had verified for me. The two of us telling everybody had Jesse had 'laid on symbol' as the ancestor jailees used to say. 'Lay on symbol' In the transcript of the speech that has now been changed to 'leftovers.' But he and we who heard know what he said and what he meant…We wanted to eat now, but all we were gonna get was Du Carcass, some leftovers. The white men and quite a few white women had already et. (Page 465)

Jackson was repeated the role of his mother and brought to the working masses the leftover of the holiday celebration. It may be the most historically pivotal example of Signifyin', which as Henry Louis Gates Jr. analyzed in *The Signifyin' Monkey,* "Black people vacated this signifier, then – incredibly – substituted as its concept a signified that stands for the system of rhetorical strategies peculiar to their own vernacular tradition." (Page 47) Jackson stood in front of millions, at the podium of power where words define reality for the citizens of an empire and through them defined reality for the planet and released the black sign which has been the shade, in Celan's use, of white supremacist English.

> It was a weird aura that gripped this country just after that speech. In the huge open hall where I sat, and later the media-people's bar there was a mixed expression it seemed to me. There had to be simple dismissal by the white majority since that is what their white supremacy instructed them to do, as far as consideration of Jesse's candidacy or even comprehending his stand on the various issues. Jackson had pushed the whole of the electorate to the left, however, made them consider questions and stances that simply would never have been raised without him running in the primaries. So that there was also, along with the automatic dismissal, a stubborn sympathy, at Jackson's courage?, his aggressiveness, his typical nigger problematic maddeningly continuous assertion of his (our) humanity. (Page 465)

Jackson had transported a national audience further Left, he lifted them there through sublime beauty so that as he cut with rhythm, image and emotion they did know the distance that was being crossed because it no longer seemed necessary. It was of course a

distance to protect them against the Other, a social segregation justified by manufactured disgust, by fear that highlighted minor differences into marks of alien strangeness. It was a distance Jackson pulled them across through sublime transport, a movement through rhetoric made possible by aesthetic anger, by autobiographical history transformed into national allegory that ended with a slip of tongue. The slip was through a crack in language that lifted him beyond his own control to unconsciously confess a truth at the height of collective awareness. He confessed not to the limits of the political moment but the limits his own ambition would impose on the movement. Jesse, like his mother, still worked for the Man and would bring home Du Carcass.

It was a flashing moment of truth, in which was united the many others in Jackson, his working mother, the man she worked for and the national audience he was serving. It was a moment saturated with history both personal and political. A question rises, why didn't Jackson push all the way through? He had the power of a nation surging through him. Why did he not speak power to truth? Instead he "lay on Symbol" as Baraka called it. Jackson caught in the currents of the slave sublime could have split the letter in the tradition of African-American Signifyin'. The history held in the word had to come down and immanent need be left as bare as the life that breathed through it. If we reach back to a scene more than a century earlier, we can find in Frederick Douglass an answer. He wrote of the slaves trusted enough to go to the Great House Farm,

> Few privileges were esteemed higher, by the slaves of the out-farms, than that of being selected to do errands at the Great House Farm. It was associated in their minds with greatness. A representative could not be prouder of his election to a seat in the American Congress, than a slave on one of the out-farms would be of

> his election to do errands at the Great House Farm. They regarded it as evidence of a great confidence reposed in them by their overseers; and it wan on this account, as well as constant desire to be out of the field from under the driver's lash, that they esteemed it a high privilege, one worth careful living for. He was called the smartest and most trusty fellow, who had this honor conferred upon him the most frequently. The competitors for this office sought as diligently to pleas their overseers, as the office-seekers in the political parties seek to please and deceive the people. The same traits of character might be seen in Colonel Lloyd's slaves, as are seen in the slaves of the political parties. (Page 400)

Douglass, as mentioned before, gives us a scene of Double-Consciousness long before Du Bois formulized it. The twist here is that Jackson, a descendent of slaves has entered politics and a double-burden was placed on him. He had a yoke on his neck and a noose on his tongue. Longinus long ago said freedom is a prerequisite of the sublime. Jackson was free of fear but not of love, he was locked in his mother's image. She was the last image to burn away and to do so he had to willing to die. Not physically but the self-in-the-body had to die to achieve the "invincible love for all that is great and more divine that ourselves." Only then can a man be his mother and give birth to the Word.

After Words: The Coral Reef

I would like to end this work where it began. My first images were of two photos. One was a slave shackled and the second was Eddie, the homeless man floating through the streets of New Orleans. They have been on my desk for over two years. When the words led nowhere, I looked at the photos and pushed through my fear or boredom to a thought with consequence. If no joy or pain jolted me, if no fear was broken then the words were erased. It was my way of paying for the right to speak of their lives and deaths. Whether I succeeded or not is not for me to say. What is for sure is this will be a lifelong work. At each try, I lift some of the weight from me into words. I don't have to carry the sight of men screaming in the street. Mothers weeping as children slept in their arms. A city drowned and a people walking the highways. Others can help carry the weight. If they follow my words they'll find the homeless who wander through America.

The writing of this dissertation was directed by a need that only after hours crystallized into a question. What is a witness? I wasn't alone in asking. In the early stages, I read Ian Baucom's magisterial *Specters of the Atlantic*. He called for a new sublime, not the Kantian spectator ravished by sense perception overwhelming concepts that contained them. Instead Baucom re-routed the sublime through Longinus, Adam Smith and Alain Badiou in order to demand we transport ourselves into the Other. I deeply admire his book but it could not answer for me the life and death question of how one survives being a witness.

Now after my interpretative work, I can speak the answer. It is more accurately, a recuperative work since many have survived worse than witness and written with more eloquence of their experience. When I read the Black Atlantic slave-narratives, the slave

sublime forced itself into my reading. I was open to receiving it because of my experience and the literature my work is set within. Yet the theorists who form the critical tradition must still be answered. One in particular is Slavoj Zizek, who like me, engages in a mélange of journalism and cultural criticism. He uses the sublime to interpret the fall of New Orleans, writing in an on-line essay,

> The first reaction is the standard conservative one: the events in New Orleans confirm yet again how fragile social order is, how we need a severe law enforcement and ethical pressure to prevent the explosion of violent passions. Human nature is naturally evil, descent into social chaos is a permanent threat... This argument can also be given a racist twist: those who exploded into violence were almost exclusively black, so here we have a new proof of how blacks are not really civilized. Natural catastrophes bring to the light the scum which is barely kept under check in normal times. What if the tension that led to the explosion in New Orleans was not the tension between "human nature" and the force of civilization that keeps it in check, but the tension between the two aspects of our civilization itself? What if, in endeavoring to control explosions like the one in New Orleans, the forces of Law and Order were confronted with the "nature" of capitalism at its purest, the logic of individualist competition, of ruthless self-assertion, generated by the capitalist dynamics, a "nature" much more threatening and violent than all the hurricanes and earthquakes?

Zizek offers us, as his is specialty, a counter-intuitive twist, a Hegelian back-flip. Yet I see this as a retreat from a necessary engagement. Yes, I agree that the capitalist dynamic is a drive that emerges from us, we churn it and we drown in it but I need more from thought than a new way of speculating the murder of others. For years now, I've have been going to art festivals where no money is allowed. Burning Man is the most famous one but in August I go to the Middle Passage Ceremony at Coney Island. Santeria and Voodun acolytes come dressed in white. Drums are set in a circle on the beach and it begins. Hands hit skin layering rhythm on rhythm, building a cascade of music that gets in the muscle. We dance, leap, shimmy. It goes on for hours, the rhythms interweaving. One fades, another rises. We ride it with our hips.

Later the sun sets and the sky cools. We go to the water and pray, lay flowers and fruit in the tides. Each wave rolls higher up and pulls farther back, soaking our feet and taking our gifts. I stood on the shore and peered into the past. My imagination would shape the images of slave ships. I saw people jumping into the ocean and felt their cold shock at breaking water. I imagined the weight of chains pulling me down and thrashing as the last bubbles of air left my mouth. The descent quickened. The ocean squeezed my body until the light in my mind was snuffed out. It was only an act of imagination but it was enough to feel too much. The drums would begin again. I'd return to the circle and stomp my anger and sorrow into the sand. On the way home, I realized that what remained of the Middle Passage were the numbers on the ship log, the margins of money made or lost and the rare narrative of a survivor. So many bodies sank into an ocean as dark as the ink of their bill-of-sale. The words these could not leave behind but that the survivor-witness did are with us today.

Words are fossils left behind. Language is the coral reef of humanity. After our bodies decay into wind, earth and water our words remain. Into them new generations are born and grow and live. The *coral reef* is an image in which I condense Baucom's urgent declaration "Time does not pass, it accumulates, and as it accumulates it deposits an ever greater freight of material within the cargo holds of a present that is eternally after the Enlightenment present." (Page 325) He is right. Time does accumulate until we can destroy the very language in which it is kept. The slave sublime, in its final ecstatic phase allows for that transport of the past to pass through our hands and be remade, to shape the too easy speech into shade. I have tried to offer a new language for others. My goal is to acknowledge what Paul Celan did years ago. The opening is where we meet.

I know,
I know and you know, we knew,
we did not know, we
were there, after all, and not there
and at times when
only the void stood between us we got
all the way to each other. (Page 137)

Muddy Waters

I went to New Orleans to be saved. During the summer the days were getting brighter and every flaw in my life became incredibly vivid. Nothing in me felt real except a loud emptiness. When I saw New Orleans fall apart it was my chance to join a cause that was undeniably good. The poor were fighting against nature and losing. They were innocent and could cure my guilt but that shallow reason for going left me helpless against their hunger and desperation. I was an emotional carpetbagger, a Northerner going south to re-create himself.

I packed food and medicine and flew to Baton Rouge. At baggage claim, people glanced around anxiously and tightened their grip on their bags. A black family camped near the wall, using their coats as blankets. A Southern woman turned to me and said, "It's awful what happened in New Orleans." She leaned in. "Many of them were already homeless." Her face searched mine for agreement. It troubled me and I pulled my dreadlocks back. It's a nervous tic. They are four feet long and heavy—their weight anchors me to blackness. I'm light-skinned, nearly her complexion but black enough, I hoped, to be safe among people driven mad with hunger.

In New Orleans I met Reverend Willie Walker. A friend had given me his name and number and we'd talked on the phone before I left New York. He was raised in New Orleans and had been rescuing people since the flood. We met in a parking lot. He hopped out of a Mustang and said, "Get ready, dude. It's crazy in there. You won't believe what you'll see." Immediately I thought: *Player*. He had the easy confidence and busy eyes of the best hustlers. Later I would find how wrong I was. We put on rubber boots and he strapped a gun to his waist, and we wandered into the flooded streets.

I stood knee-deep in dark water. A boat sped into the shallows near me. Inside it, a rescue worker named Tim hovered over a skeletal black man curled in a fetal position. A bloody defibrillator wire coiled out of his chest. Tim fanned the man's face with his hat. "Hang on, ya hear? We're gonna get you out." He looked around. "Can we get him to shade? He's cooking." We pulled him under a tree and yelled for help.

A van drove up and we hoisted the man in. After it left, I saw him in my mind: old, voiceless, begging with his eyes for help. Around me, men packed equipment and pushed boats into the water. Many of them had swallowed what they saw, but the shock of it never left their faces. I looked up. Ahead of me lay a city silenced by water.

I joined a rescue mission, and as we pushed off, reporters splashed through the murky water onto the boat. Cameras were focused, notebooks held like poker cards. Downtown New Orleans was a wide shimmering lake reflecting sky and buildings. A web of power lines drifted in the tide. Cars roofs were hazy squares under the water. The captain cut the engine and drifted up to a home where a family stood. "The federal cowboys are coming. We wanna get you out before they take you by force."

She agreed and tugged at her son to come inside, when the reporters hollered at her to wait. She held up her hands. "Please don't take pictures. I don't look decent." They aimed the lens at her. She crossed her arms over herself. "Please."

The cameras clicked and clicked. She stopped asking and pressed her mouth into a grim line. They would not give her the dignity she asked for because degradation sells papers. The most valuable thing she had was her tragedy.

Would those photos haunt her? Would she be reminded of her helplessness? Before coming to New Orleans I was surrounded by images of myself that scared me. During the summer my own reflection scared me. I saw a man whose ex-girlfriend would not take his calls, whose family was broken by pride and silence, whose mother was dying from overwork while he wrote poetry. I thought the time and money and sweat I gave to the poor would return an image of me as a decent man. It would be my reward. Instead I saw how small a part of their burden I could carry.

Later we passed some families on the road. I pulled over and handed them diapers, water, and toothbrushes, then drove them to the military post to search for their husbands. I saw the mothers quickly wiping their tears away so the children would not be scared, but the children knew. Their faces were made gaunt by knowledge that only the old should have, that nothing we own can be kept. They saw me looking at them in the rearview mirror and turned away.

We shuttled families until dusk. I went to a crowd to offer rides. A woman asked me how long I'd grown my dreads. "Ten years," I said. She said they were beautiful and held them like ropes that could pull her out of the chaos.

"We're a beautiful people," I said.

"We are," she said weakly.

"We are," I repeated, "but we can't see it unless we have money. Money is soap in America. It don't matter where you come from, you can be Brown, Yellow, Black. Money will wash you white." A ring of people gathered around me. "Why do you think no one came for you? Your life is not valued."

Their faces glowed. The woman stroked my dreads.

"Go on man," someone yelled. "Spit it."

"If they don't value your life, then don't value their lives. This is the latest battle in a war that began on the slave ships. They threw people overboard—they drowned them back then and they're drowning you now. Don't let them kill you." I was panting. My hands pounded the air as if it were a wall. Reverend Willie called from the van. I stopped and pulled away from the circle.

It was a long ride back. The rage that escaped in my rant still burned in my throat. I saw them again and again, asking me for food and water. Reverend Willie drove us to his church. We sloshed through brown water and entered the building. The floors were rotten. Slabs of the ceiling had fallen on the pews. When we sat, we began to argue about God, or at least I argued. "Just put your faith in God," he kept saying. "Don't doubt Him." I did more than doubt. I sat on the steps and twisted my dreadlocks around my wrists like chains and yanked and yanked. I wanted to be free of caring for people I could not help.

The next day, we went on our last rescue mission. Five men abandoned their flooded homes and came with us. One of them sat with me in the boat. "Thank you for talkin' sense into me," he said. "When you hear about all that craziness at the Superdome it seemed safer to stay." He kept looking around at the city, as if seeing it for the first time. The more he saw the quieter he got. I asked him what's lost of New Orleans that may never come back. He turned, wiped his face, and closed his eyes.

"I'm sorry," he said. He walked to the end of the boat and wept as we drove through the ruined city. I sensed what he lost but it was too immense to fully feel. Numbness had settled into me. It prevented feeling from getting in the way of action.

After four days, I returned to Baton Rouge airport to catch a flight to New York. When I first arrived I'd seen a small chapel room in the terminal. Now I saw it again and like the first time avoided it and went to the bar, the restaurant, and the arcade. I walked around in blind exhaustion and saw the chapel again and this time opened the door.
In the back was a dimly lit area with pews. I sat down and held my face in my hands. In my mind I saw them again, women who carried children too weak to walk. Men who asked for help I could not give. I saw pain flooding their eyes and leaned over and pressed my palms to my face. My chest heaved and all the water I saw and waded through came streaming down my fingers.

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