THE PRESENT ELSEWHERE: THEORIZING AN AESTHETICS OF DISPLACEMENT IN CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN AMERICAN AND POSTCOLONIAL LITERATURES

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A dissertation submitted to the faculty of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of English and Comparative Literature.

Chapel Hill
2010

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ABSTRACT

Mary Alice Kirkpatrick: The Present Elsewhere: Theorizing an Aesthetics of Displacement
in Contemporary African American and Postcolonial Literatures
(Under the direction of Minrose Gwin)

“The Present Elsewhere” investigates the aesthetic traits and political implications of
displacement in contemporary African American, Caribbean, and Canadian works. Arguing
that displacement resonates textually, I interrogate the degree to which artists purposely leave
their works in states of flux. Framed through the lens of nomadic, transitional figures
(including diasporic cultural orphans, child clairvoyants, and reincarnated ghosts), this
project develops the notion of an aesthetics of displacement – that is to say, an aesthetics
informed by political urgency. Writers such as Michael Ondaatje, Toni Cade Bambara, and
Octavia Butler rearrange customary geographic and chronological placements, unsettle
narrative lines, and challenge shared histories of oppression. Propelled into active
engagement, readers are encouraged to adopt new roles as migrants and witnesses. The
political significance of works that displace radiates externally, as readers are directed toward
sites of change well beyond the confines of individual texts. By bringing together seemingly
divergent traditions, “The Present Elsewhere” examines the specific historical conditions,
cultural backgrounds, and geographic contexts that produce sites of displacement within the
Caribbean island, U. S. South, African desert, New Orleans cityscape, and even architectural
landscapes. While carefully upholding the distinction and integrity of individual experience, I
demonstrate that this aesthetics of displacement, as a theoretical model that engages with
literary aesthetics, politics, and ethics, generates new opportunities for comparativist scholarship within and between African American and postcolonial literatures.
For Dee Anne and Kathryn, 
my biggest believers, dearest friends, 
and greatest inspirations
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Unofficially, this project is dedicated to my mother. I say unofficially because she never saw me graduate from college, much less enter a PhD program. Yet one of her oft-repeated sayings, a platitude she reserved for seemingly insurmountable tasks – and writing a dissertation certainly qualifies as such – helped me maintain focus. With a gleam in her eye, Jackie would exclaim, “How do you eat an elephant?” One of her three daughters, typically she to whom the question was directed would, eyes rolling heavenwards, begrudgingly reply, “One bite at a time.” And this dissertation has been written – finally – one bite at a time.

As time has marched on, my intellectual and personal debts have accumulated. What a wonderful, humbling realization! Writing a dissertation signals an incredibly solitary undertaking, but completing this project involved the overwhelming support from a vast network of mentors, friends, and family members.

Minrose Gwin took me on as her first UNC doctoral student veritably sight (and certainly work) unseen. Quite simply put, she astounds me. As a scholar and a writer, she has left no genre untouched. Her relentless drive and high expectations for her own pursuits pushed me to conduct rigorous research, articulate strong arguments, craft clear prose, chase theoretical sophistication, and embrace ethically responsible scholarship. An unexpected yet delightful benefit of writing under Minrose’s direction was gaining Ruth Salvaggio’s input as well. Her intellectual generosity and unflagging spirit for endless projects ending proved instrumental at several key junctures along the way.

Some of the most respected minds converged on my committee and thus shaped my dissertation. I have been so honored and privileged to work with these individuals. From the outset, Bill Andrews and Trudier Harris sparked and nurtured my abiding interest in African American literature. As models for visible, committed, and lifelong intellectual engagement, they represent the very best of what a public university can offer. In working with Bill Andrews, I had the wonderful opportunity both to contribute to and collaborate on his North Carolina Roots anthology. I reserve the utmost respect for Dr. Harris. Her contributions to the field are renowned, yet her advocacy on behalf of students is far more impressive. I was privileged to witness and experience both firsthand. Many thanks to Rebecka Rutledge Fisher, whose insightful comments on a late chapter draft prompted me to begin conceptualizing this project as a book manuscript. I can imagine neither a better nor more instrumental mentor than Pam Cooper, who literally accompanied me from my first day of graduate school until my very last. At each step, whether introducing me to The English Patient or directing my M.A. thesis, counseling me through the prancing demands of doctoral exams or chairing my dissertation committee, she has offered tangible support and unending kindness. I am forever grateful.
I also am indebted to several individuals well outside my fields of expertise. Chief among those is Megan Matchinske, whose sage wisdom, incisive reading, concrete suggestions, and collegial banter made both the job market and finishing this year almost pleasant. Perhaps I should have received a minor in early modern studies, if only by proxy. Throughout my graduate career, Reid Barbour and Jessica Wolfe offered excellent counsel and undaunted enthusiasm, typically dispensed as I was either arriving to or departing from their house while dogsitting for the dynamic dachshund duo.

Among a wonderful group of friends and colleagues, I am deeply, profoundly grateful to these folks: Julie, who physically brought me bags of food in the waning weeks and, long ago, became more like family than any friend; Phil, the best colleague and commuting partner-in-crime for two years running, who offered a patient listening ear and humor of the most deliciously biting sort; Mary, whose consistent encouragement and strong belief proffered invaluable perspective; Donna, whose prophylactic support shored up sanity at an insane time; Susan, whose shocking (if fleeting) subversion provided much-needed levity in a challenging moment; and Robert, whose long-distance rallying and formatting genius propelled me across the finish line. Other colleagues, mentors, friends, and family who deserve mentioning by name: Claudia Allums, Kristina Bobo, Melissa Bostrom, Anne Boyle, Maura D’Amore, Nancy Dayton, Neal Fann, Evan Gurney, Chris Hill, Anna (Kirkpatrick) Scott Huser, Judy Kencke, Jennifer Larson, Andy Leiter, Steve Messer, Emily Plummer, Karah Rempe, Rose & John Scott, Amy McGuff Skinner, Tara Tang, Jane Thrailkill, Rashmi Varma, and Alicia Wagner. And the list could go on. Thanks very much to each of you.

I have saved the very best for last: acknowledging my immediate family’s bountiful support. Thanks to my father, whose occasional query – “Well, when are you going to make any real progress?” – kept me honest. Moreover, the Stonehenge intensity, work ethic, ambition, and appreciation for advanced degrees gave me the confidence to “give ‘em hell.” To F. Jeremy Freeman, truly the best brother-in-law in the world, there’s only one suitable thing to say: “Boomtown!” This project is dedicated to my amazing sisters, Dee Anne and Kathryn. I really am at a loss for words. Suffice it to say, your presence kept me alive and sustained me through the darkest times imaginable. And finally to Matt, who hung in there through the bitter end. You are, unequivocally, the year’s best surprise. I look forward to what’s to come.
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INTRODUCTION

How and why do artists, many of whom are themselves “displaced,” intentionally craft narratives that remain unsettled? “The Present Elsewhere: Theorizing an Aesthetics of Displacement in Contemporary African American and Postcolonial Literatures” examines this question, looking across histories and cultures for its answers. This dissertation argues that contemporary writers of displacement deliberately, even insistently, place their works in other contexts, other countries, to write about a “homeland” to which they themselves may choose never to return. By featuring in their works liminal, wandering figures (including the witch, the specter, and the seer), authors such as Randall Kenan, Octavia Butler, and Shani Mootoo relocate familiar geographic and chronological “placements,” disrupt narrative continuities, and prompt active engagement beyond the confines of their texts. Indeed, displacement resonates textually. The works most troubled by migrating, otherworldly characters remain in states of flux; they drift between geographic locations, float across variable landscapes, and even journey through historical periods. Their spatiotemporal dislocations activate the potential for transformation by insisting on engaged readership. Readers are asked to undertake new roles as interpreters, recorders, migrants, and witnesses. Displacement unsettles us as readers, forcing us to reject pat answers when confronted with shared histories of oppression or disenfranchisement. Readers are provoked to direct responses and actions beyond the confines of individual texts.
To investigate how displacement fuels these narratives, I examine various nomadic figures that operate in dynamic relation to the works they populate. Consider, for example, a glimmering ghost that floats between the living and the dead, animating and troubling the literary work while migrating into a textual present. By occupying transitional spaces, hovering in the gaps between racial, sexual, or gender determinacy, figures like the ghost open new territories for critical exploration. Such enigmatic wandering achieves embodied form, materializing at the level of character, enfolding narrative structure, and unhinging chronologies. Like their spectral inhabitants, works of contemporary displacement traverse literal geographies and migrate through time in order to reveal fragmentary, recursive structures. Narratives of migration and homeland roam (through dreams, memory, or altered conditions) and radically interrupt temporal and spatial continuities. These incursions also mobilize a transformative “elsewhere” located beyond the text itself. I contend that this very mobility powerfully creates the space for transformation: a “present elsewhere.”

While many postcolonial or diasporic treatments of displacement lapse into one of two polarities, lamenting the “unhomed” subject’s dislocation or commemorating the exile’s emancipatory insight, my project argues that the political significance of these works radiates externally. Attuned to the deep craving for home, freedom of expression, and space that resonates throughout much African American and postcolonial literature, “The Present Elsewhere” considers the degree to which authors purposely leave their works unresolved. In a 2000 interview with Dave Welch, poet and novelist Michael Ondaatje comments on such deliberately muddled states:

I don’t see novels ending with any real sense of closure. I see the poem or the novel ending with an open door. . . . It’s a responsibility of the writer to get the reader out of the story somehow. It’s a balancing act. You don’t want to make it too neat or too
smug. You want to suggest something new, but at the same time, resolve the drama of the action in the novel. (powells.com)

Ondaatje’s statement demonstrates both his awareness of “ending with an open door” and his commitment to this “responsibility of the writer”: to demand participatory readers. The notion of consciously eschewing closure and instead embracing openness also resonates with Toni Cade Bambara’s 1980 novel. While The Salt Eaters ostensibly centers on Velma Henry and her fractured community, the impetus toward collective healing extends outward. The fates of Velma and the fictional Claybourne, Georgia populace are cloaked in lingering uncertainty, with the novel’s conclusion proffering merely a hesitant promise “rising . . . [from] a burst cocoon” (Bambara 295). Yet the arduous weight of healing and the elusive potential for change propel Bambara’s “reader[s] out of the story.” Readers are charged with critically assessing and mending the schisms within their own communities. This textual moment captures the overlapping temporal ambiguities, the contrast between motion and stasis, as well as the concurrently aesthetic and political contingencies that surface when theorizing displacement.

Transnational in scope and interdisciplinary in method, my investigation develops a critical vocabulary that addresses both the aesthetic and political implications undergirding works of contemporary literature that “displace.” An aesthetics of displacement, as I conceive it, is an aesthetics informed by political urgency. In formulating my theoretical approach, I have adopted a decidedly interdisciplinary set of tools drawn from current studies in cultural geography, philosophical aesthetics, cognitive linguistics, and trauma analysis. Modeled upon textual movement across space and through time, this perceptual window allows me to interpret the peculiar interventions staged by figures of “crossover.” Picture the phantom lover whose narration authoritatively recounts the histories of great civilizations
interspersed among tales of violent sexual encounters, remnants of archeological field expeditions, and the beguiling intrigues of war and espionage. By disturbing the narrative line and sketching an intricate net of history, positionality, and politics, the phantasm’s presence demands that readers make sense of such complexities.

Figures like the phantom lover dynamically glide between borders delineating rigid national, ethnic, or sexual identities. The stories they inhabit similarly roam, flickering through multiple topographies, disconnected memories, and unhinged chronologies. For instance, Brenda Marie Osbey’s 1997 poetry collection *All Saints* both moves within its clear regional placement in New Orleans and encompasses a vast global network vis-à-vis the African slave trade, colonial expansion, and multicultural cross-pollination. Even as individual poems record private loss through elegy, the collection as a whole pays homage to unspoken communal histories, with the blood of slave ancestors literally carved onto the city’s brick streets. Such layered narrations – narrations that summon the dead while interceding among the living – provoke an emotional uncanny. As Michael P. Clark suggests in his introduction to *Revenge of the Aesthetic*, “Understood as experience, reading retains its temporal form and is oriented toward feeling and action rather than toward objects in the world” (16; italics in original). The demands of a disorienting textual nomadism press readers into action. Readers are either plunged into the uncomfortable position of complicity or prompted toward responsible action outside the text. I trace a politicized as well as a politicizing aesthetics to argue that writers of contemporary displacement purposely invoke this trope to challenge readers and direct them toward potential sites for change.

Yet the stakes of this project are actually much broader. By invoking an aesthetics of displacement, I demonstrate that the very intimacies of difference hauntingly echo along
shared aesthetic and political axes, creating in those recalibrations new avenues for comparativist scholarship. “The Present Elsewhere” offers a theoretical model that puts seemingly disparate works – works that originate from distinct cultural and historical traditions – into dialogue while maintaining the integrity and autonomy of individual experience. Linked by shared yet unique anxieties over displacement, movement, and stability, these texts evince similar aesthetic traces. Their expressions, written on variable landscapes (i.e., the sentient island in Morrison’s *Tar Baby*) or destabilized spatial structures (i.e., the war-ravaged Villa San Girolamo in Ondaatje’s *The English Patient*), adopt the “faces” of diasporic cultural orphans and spectral figures that occupy sites of transition. Their ambivalent presence enables these contemporary authors, even across divergent locations and traditions, to resist fixity and exclusion, to challenge rigid boundaries and borders, and to promote alternative historical/political visions. Each writes within a particular moment, a moment informed by individual circumstances that nevertheless manifest and mutate textually. In their political motivations and aesthetic energies, such writers and their literary productions both align and deviate along important biographical, geographical, and cultural contexts.

Just as Ondaatje notes the responsibility of the writer, here I stress the responsibility of the scholar to rigorously uphold distinctions even while exploring connections. Mine is not a naive undertaking. The grave risk of any comparative endeavor is to overlook or to conflate difference unintentionally. Displacement must be understood as geographically particular and historically specific. Its peripatetic movement – both through time and across space – surfaces and transmutes in explicit texts and contexts. Thus, while I explore the U.S. South and the African desert as sites of displacement, to recast the South as a place of departure and
return confronts a different set of historical contingencies than challenging the supremacy of colonial power and the primacy of the nation-state. Although both groups existed under the sinister threat of violence and repression, African Americans were enslaved within the southern landscape, whereas colonized nations were invaded from outside their borders. As Angelika Bammer explains, displacement may occur through expulsion away from an ancestral home or “within [a] native culture by processes of external or internal colonization” (xi; italics in original).

Whether occurring without or within, such coercive dislocation unfolds through a series of physically and psychologically violent encounters. Individual cultural identity is viciously appropriated and branded as “Other.” Kamila Zahno’s “Ethnic Monitoring or a Geography Lesson” traces this very process of “Othering” identities and the clear link to colonial cartography. Her speaker exclaims:

Black, Asian, White, FAR EASTERN, Other!
The boxes on the tear-slip remain blank.
I never thought there’d be a space for Indo-Swiss!
but my mind turns its attention
To the mind behind the confusion
Behind those mixed-up boxes.

Is there a line between middle east and far east?
And where’s nearly east?
And can’t someone be black, asian, and far eastern?
In my colonial style geography books
With whole areas coloured empire pink
There was a line (Zahno 1-12)

From the outset, Zahno stresses the multiplicity and hybridity of both ethnic and national identities. She counters the arbitrariness of “boxes” and “a line,” indicting the pernicious

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1 Davies identifies Zahno as “a Black British woman writer of Asian descent” (20). Fascinatingly, the poet is also the founding member of Zahno Rao Associates and, according to the company’s website, “is a specialist in regeneration and economic development throughout the UK,” holding several advanced degrees in geography. Her online vitae also specifies that, “[she] is particularly interested in undertaking consultancy which
“mind behind the confusion” that would confine individual human complexity to derisory labels. The poet also highlights the tedious, malevolent ubiquity of “empire pink.” Carole Boyce Davies remarks that the poem “goes on to problematize the ways of geography in which the maps, produced by the colonizers, continue to maintain artificial separations” (20). As the title proposes, controlling the terms of representation – “ethnic monitoring” – goes hand in hand with the colonization of space. Thus, as Edward Said points out in “Yeats and Decolonization,” “if there is anything that radically distinguishes the imagination of anti-imperialism, it is the primacy of the geographical in it” (10).

Even within comparable geographic locations, empire’s presence and its devastating aftershocks vary between nations. When writing about the contested Caribbean home-place, I carefully bring together three different island locations: Morrison’s wholly fictional Isle des Chevaliers, with its legendary African night riders; Mootoo’s imaginary Lantanacamara, modeled after Trinidad and populated with South Asian transplants, living remnants of an indentured labor system; and Kincaid’s actual birthplace, the economically exploited island of Antigua. Situated within specific cultural and historical frameworks, these narratives unveil the prevailing pathos of painful dispersion from the island figured as home. Yet through their portraits of a mutable, fluctuating Caribbean home-place, Morrison, Mootoo, and Kincaid evidence a mutual political urgency. Such “discourses of home and exile,” Davies supports, “are central to any understanding of the politics of location” (20).

With diasporic displacement characterized by the fraught quest for an abiding homeland, critical treatments routinely concentrate on spatial wandering, as scattering subjects are forced across geographic borders. In her 2007 comparative study of Caribbean

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contributes to social inclusion, and has conducted many research assignments which aim to increase the participation of socially excluded people in education, training and employment.” (Information transcribed from: http://www.zahnorao.demon.co.uk/pkamila.htm)
and Pacific Island literature, Elizabeth DeLoughrey draws upon models of transoceanic migration (i.e., “tidalectics”) to probe how shared histories are shaped by geography. *Routes and Roots* considers both geopoetics and geopolitics to explore “the intersections between space and time, place and history” (2). Yet in her epilogue, DeLoughrey merely gestures toward “how the geopoetics of routes and roots remap the dynamic relations of space in ways that help us deepen our concepts of time and its ruptures” (269). Throughout my analysis, I demonstrate that a diasporic aesthetic – and displacement, broadly speaking – necessarily engages with the temporal realm as well. Caren Kaplan, while focusing on the shifting relationship between modernist exile and postmodern migrancy, similarly advocates, “[new analyses of] the ways in which spatial and temporal axes intersect and interact. When a ‘place on a map’ can be seen as a ‘place in history’ as well, the terms of critical practice have made a significant shift” (25). This temporal axis is interwoven with overlapping narrative chronologies, characters’ longing for homeland, and the complex histories that travel with individuals. Geographic migration (whether between islands and the mainland or from the Jim Crow South to the urban North) is closely linked to the intersecting question of history. Kaplan continues: “location can be seen to be a place in relation to history, used . . . to unpack the notion of shared or common experience” (25). In the works I examine, clashes between indigenous and imperial histories terrifyingly collide within intimate domestic spaces, with disturbing tales of abuse (frequently unleashed against innocent children) recorded in the home. Hence home is not only destabilized and unmoored but also revealed as another site of inevitable departure and possible return. This further disrupts the placement/displacement binary, for even placement, which often denotes permanent or at least rooted connectedness, here signifies ruptured movement.
Displacement – interrogated vis-à-vis the ebb and flow of meandering texts and figures in African American and postcolonial literature – is embedded in a distinctive space-time grid. To adequately account for both spatial and temporal axes, I position these works and authors in terms of their physical geographies and cultural histories. Through this methodological approach, the very politics of location converge with questions of artistic agency. Informed by both critical race and postcolonial theories, my dissertation draws upon a wide range of fields such as conceptual physics and trauma memory studies. Opening up my theoretical framework to a variety of critical traditions allows me to conceptualize space as interactive as well as interconnected to time and history. It allows me to underscore the complex field of social, cultural, and power relations endemic to questions of space, place, and displacement. Thus, the African American writer Randall Kenan, even as he firmly locates A Visitation of Spirits and Let the Dead Bury Their Dead in the southern landscape, concurrently exposes the persistent bigotry and blatant hypocrisy evident in rural Tims Creek, North Carolina. His fictional works introduce angelic and prophetic intermediaries, what I label vectored visionaries, that powerfully bisect an otherwise insular world, cutting across historical and geographic planes.

Cultural geographer and critic Doreen Massey emphasizes the degree to which any discussion of the spatial must account for an extensive range of dynamic power relations at both local and global levels. In her introduction to Space, Place, and Gender, she offers a useful definition of space-time:

“The spatial” . . . can be seen as constructed out of the multiplicity of social relations across all spatial scales, from the global reach of finance and telecommunications, through the geography of the tentacles of national political power, to the social relations within the town, the settlement, the household and the workplace. It is a way of thinking in terms of the ever-shifting geometry of social/power relations, and it forces into view the real multiplicities of space-time. It is a view of space opposed to
that which sees it as a flat, immobilized surface, as stasis, even as no more than threatening chaos – the opposite of stasis – which is to see space as the opposite of History, and as the (consequently) depoliticized. The spatial is both open to, and a necessary element in, politics in the broadest sense of the word. (Massey 4)

To characterize space as continuously interactive and inflected by time and history operates against the inclination to reduce an intricate field of social relations to a singularizing overview. This conceptualization also highlights the prevailing aesthetic energies – of movement and mobility, of dynamism and multiplicity – that evoke the relational and political expediencies embedded within local, national, and global spheres. As Massey illustrates, “the spatial” cannot be divested from its intersections with “the political.”

Frequently breaking down, multifaceted margins – between nations, races, ethnicities, genders, and sexualities – appear open, porous, and permeable. Yet newly- or re-imagined spaces and places, at times arising from painful rupture, often generate conflicted energy. This pain literally may be written on characters’ bodies, as in Octavia Butler’s *Kindred* or Phyllis Alesia Perry’s *Stigmata*, novels in which characters Dana Franklin and Elizabeth Joyce DuBose physically and psychically bear witness to an injurious American history. Entrenched in the discussion of unsettled, transitioning spaces are lingering tensions between geographic location, cultural position, and historical background: the complex interplay of “politics in the broadest sense of the word.” Whether at local or global levels, the inextricable entanglements between space and time, geography and history, aesthetics and politics call to mind James Clifford’s assertion: “practices of displacement might emerge as constitutive of cultural meanings rather than as their simple transfer or extension” (3; italics in original).

Over the course of this dissertation, I argue that the power of contemporary displacement to trouble and destabilize coalesces along aesthetic and political axes. This jointly spatial and
temporal realm – “the present elsewhere” – offers us as readers the potential for the politically not yet realized.

Each of the four chapters considers a different configuration of displacement. The first two examine geographic migration, diasporic unhomeliness, and the attendant historical implications of such dispersion. The broader experience of diaspora is steeped in individual stories of migration and dwelling, the relentless tension between initial crossings and later homecomings. “Vexing Histories and the Caribbean Home-Place: Diasporic Flight and Return in Toni Morrison’s *Tar Baby*, Shani Mootoo’s *Cereus Blooms at Night*, and Jamaica Kincaid’s *A Small Place*” reveals portraits of home positioned along axes of abuse, namely the inherited ruins of enslavement and colonization. Elsewhere connoting stability, safety, and security, “home” in these cases has been irrevocably dislocated from its moorings. Morrison and Mootoo construct tales that meander through individual memory as well as collective myth, presenting in their novels individuals who undergo multiple migrations. In her emotionally laden essay-memoir, Kincaid writes as the diasporic subject, painfully detached from her Antiguan homeland. Yet throughout their accounts, whether fictional or semi-autobiographical, these authors speak directly to the repressive legacy of colonization. The Caribbean home-place’s itinerancy highlights a diasporic aesthetic that not only speaks to movement away from a corrupted place of origin but also prompts readers to testify to the anguish of such journeying.

Whereas chapter one inaugurates the project’s transnational focus by charting a series of endless departures, my second chapter examines a very specific site of regional displacement *and* return: the U. S. South. African American writers Toni Cade Bambara and Randall Kenan introduce “roving visionaries” that profoundly disrupt a stagnant landscape
and confront blighted histories of slavery and racial violence. Whether a fabled healer or a child clairvoyant, their wandering figures, despite migrations that traverse multiple spatiotemporal planes, remain firmly planted in this geographic region. Moreover, their otherworldly incursions create new spaces that emerge as regenerative sites within the South. Bambara’s and Kenan’s efforts to re-imagine this double-edged location – with its recent past littered by Jim Crow segregation, reckless vigilante justice, and widespread racism – strikingly contrast traditional migration narratives. In such tales of northern migration, Farah Jasmine Griffin maintains, the South is depicted “as an immediate, identifiable, and oppressive power” (4) – a region from which to escape. As Trudier Harris persuasively argues in *The Scary Mason-Dixon Line*, most African American writers understandably betray a “duality of attraction and repulsion” and thus “place their characters in situations where there is a pronounced fear of the South” (2-3).

Intriguingly, Bambara and Kenan primarily address persistent forms of social prejudice, economic struggle, and political disenfranchisement in passing. Throughout *The Salt Eaters*, Bambara focuses less on rectifying racial inequalities than on identifying the destructive internal rifts afflicting the African American community of Claybourne, Georgia. In a similar vein, Kenan, with his portrayal of rural Tims Creek, North Carolina, harshly reprimands the black church for its inbred homophobia. The religious community’s intolerance of sexual difference in fact drives brilliant young Horace Cross, “the Great Black Hope, . . . the Chosen [One]” (*A Visitation of Spirits* 13), to commit suicide. Even when presenting characters disconnected from their respective communities, both writers energize textual permutations of displacement along self-consciously aesthetic and political axes. They stage their interventions directly in the southern landscape. By enacting such powerful
returns, Bambara and Kenan activate a renewed political consciousness – yet with the
responsibility for change directed outward, thrust upon readers.

Chapters three and four forego geographic displacements to focus instead on time
tavel, shifting landscapes, and global hierarchies of power. In chapter three I extend my
discussion of narrative movement across time in Butler’s *Kindred* and Perry’s *Stigmata*,
illustrating how each novel’s wandering figures get displaced by, through, and across
historical periods. In these instances time travel is characterized not by traveling forward but
by traveling back through layers of collective memory. In the case of *Stigmata*’s Lizzie
DuBose, the torture of enslavement gets transmitted across matrilineal generations, not only
preserved through oral and written accounts, but also mystically attached to material objects:
her great-grandmother’s diary and her grandmother’s quilt. For Butler’s heroine and readers
alike, the mode of Dana Franklin’s transport to nineteenth-century Maryland is never
explained. Yet its inexplicability seems inconsequential compared to the purpose of her
journeying into an ancestral past. Dana is summoned back so that during her relocation(s) to
the slaveholding South, she may preserve both her black and white bloodlines. Specific
moments in historical time – through acts of traumatic injury – are painfully inscribed upon
these *contemporary* female protagonists. Relived ancestral memories are literally marked on
their bodies, visible scars from shackles and whippings, as well as agonizingly carved into
their psyches: Lizzie and Dana cannot help but remember.

Yet with the past revisited and repeated, the two novels’ cyclical, layered time also
enfolds and implicates readers, made responsible as witnesses to both individual memories
and collective history. In her preface to *Trauma and Survival in Contemporary Fiction*,
Laurie Vickroy closes with a question: “Can trauma fiction make overwhelming
psychosocial dilemmas available to individual readers by personalizing them?” (xvi). Indeed it can, “by using narrative to try to make readers experience emotional intimacy and immediacy, individual voices and memories, and the sensory responses of the characters” (Vickroy xvi). By displacing their modern day heroines through time, Butler and Perry shrink the presumably comfortable distance between the past and the present. History’s horrors are made hauntingly personal. How might readers respond? Perhaps by animating and extending this excruciating sensibility of the past, its “emotional intimacy and immediacy,” Butler and Perry engender an ethical dimension that posits accountability.

My final chapter integrates questions of geography and history, both the spatial and the temporal realms, to interrogate fluid landscapes and expansive topographies. “Written in Geography: Absence, Presence, and Spectrality” explores porous, permeable borders that bespeak local and global contiguities. Whereas Osbey’s New Orleans testifies to the trans-generational aftershocks of black enslavement and the triangular trade of colonial powers in goods and lives, Ondaatje’s Libyan desert transpires not only as a morphing, mythic landscape, excavation site for his international gathering of explorers, but also as a “theatre of war” (Ondaatje 252). In this chapter, I argue that Brenda Marie Osbey and Michael Ondaatje portray undulating landscapes that defy definition and spectral figures that merge with literal terrains, thereby challenging the totalizing effects of Western European dominance.

Just as the spatial transpires amid complex, interrelated social systems, so conventional definitions of place must be complicated. As Massey elaborates,

One way of thinking about place is as particular moments in such intersecting social relations, nets of which have over time been constructed, laid down, interacted with one another, decayed and renewed. Some of these relations will be, as it were,
contained within the place; others will stretch beyond it, tying any particular locality into wider relations and processes in which other places are implicated too. (120)

This fluid concept of place, with its overlapping networks of social relations, suggests an ambiguous periphery useful to my discussion of the New Orleans cityscape, African desert topography, and even architectural ruins. Like the figures in their texts, the drifting, malleable settings these writers depict exist under threat. Overlaid with processes of decay and renewal, life and death equally infect one another. Certainly, the decapitated Luís Congo,\(^2\) with his detached head ghoulishly crying out for water, and the enigmatic “English” patient, burned beyond recognition and reposed like a dying saint, evoke the specter that glides between the living and the dead. Through such topographical changeability and spectral hovering, *All Saints* and *The English Patient* highlight alternative narrative histories: timeless, placeless narratives that get transferred to spatial structures and recorded on the landscape. Moreover, by bringing together Osbey, the 2007 Louisiana poet laureate and lifelong New Orleans dweller, with Ondaatje, the Dutch-Sri-Lankan Canadian citizen and poet-turned-novelist, this last chapter gestures toward a transformed critical landscape.

My introduction opened by contemplating the degree to which contemporary African American and postcolonial artists, who may themselves inhabit locations far from an originary homeland, *purposely* invoke the trope of displacement. Indeed, what does it mean when Shani Mootoo – who was born in Ireland, raised in Trinidad, and immigrated to Canada – writes about South Asian diaspora in the Caribbean? As she herself hesitantly ponders:

\(^2\) As Osbey explains in her glossary, Luís Congo was “a free Kongo man who in 1726 was employed in New Orleans as a keeper of the High or Bayou Road, where he established a plantation estate; the official executioner of slaves escaping New Orleans via Bayou St. John, he is said to have died mysteriously at the hands of slaves” (124).
I wonder where is the “creollised” part of the, or rather, my, Hindu Indian identity. When a phrase in patois glides out of your mouth I admit to a feeling of having been robbed of authenticity, a feeling that I don’t remember having had in Trinidad, but experience here, in Canada. Here having a language of one’s own can be a double edged [sic] sword: exoticisation on one edge, dismissal and banishment on the other. (“Dear Shani, Hiya Richard”)

Fascinately, Mootoo’s purposeful preoccupation with her multiple hybrid identities – the “creollised” part(s) – coalesces in the multiple geographic locations that she names: India, Trinidad, and Canada. As she references Creole patois’ disorienting sound in her adopted country, her nomenclature, of “dismissal and banishment,” evokes displacement. Then there are the accompanying historical realities that Mootoo, as a lesbian Hindu Indian longing for her Trinidadian homeland, necessarily provokes. These past narratives include Britain’s colonial presence in India, the forced relocation of South Asian indentured laborers to the Caribbean, and finally the pernicious half-life of British legal jurisprudence in decolonized Trinidad.³ This dilemma, of “having constantly to negotiate between home and abroad, . . . between a here, a there, and an elsewhere” (Trinh, “Other than Myself” 9), again raises the question of artistic agency and political immediacy. “The Present Elsewhere,” by exploring the shared aesthetic energies, political intercessions, ethical implications, and critical reverberations engendered by works of contemporary displacement, contends that such disruptions and their artistic forms expand temporal possibilities through and to an engaged readership.

In the final lines of her oft-cited piece, “Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation,” Toni Morrison issues a powerful charge to her fellow artists: “yes, the work must be political. It must have that as its thrust . . . It seems to me that the best art is political and you ought to

³ Here I allude to the Sexual Offences Act of 1986, which M. Jacqui Alexander convincingly traces back to Britain’s Offences Against the Person Acts. The Trinidad and Tobago Parliamentary act “naturalized heterosexuality . . . by criminalizing . . . non-procreative sex” (Alexander 5).
be able to make it unquestionably political and irrevocably beautiful at the same time” (344-345). While attending to aesthetic and political axes, my project concentrates on geographies that reveal porous borders and permeable boundaries, with provisional homes and transitory homelands. I also investigate the spatiotemporal interruptions enacted by otherworldly figures, particularly when paired with nomadic narratives that refuse to settle. Hence Morrison’s title, “Rootedness,” may ring discordantly here. In fact, when I initially selected this same quotation as the epigraph for my dissertation proposal, one committee member posed that very question. Having now completed at least one permutation of my study, allow me to offer a brief response. Fragmentary narratives of displacement do flicker and roam, embarking upon almost endless series of itinerant flights. Yet this seemingly contradictory notion of “rooted mobility” proves compatible with an aesthetics of displacement, in which various works characterized by pendulous motion unite via authors’ deeply invested political commitments. Through a coalitional model, roaming textual nomadism extends outward, artistically intended for readers and critics alike. Thus, the abiding question of contemporary displacement compellingly reverberates, not only within the present moment but also toward a future elsewhere.
CHAPTER ONE

Vexing Histories and the Caribbean Home-Place: Diasporic Flight and Return in Toni Morrison’s *Tar Baby*, Shani Mootoo’s *Cereus Blooms at Night*, and Jamaica Kincaid’s *A Small Place*

Shani Mootoo’s haunting first novel, *Cereus Blooms at Night* (1996), closes amid two peculiar returns: the recurring fantasy of a child in flight and the possibility of a diasporic subject coming back to her Caribbean home. In the first figurative return, Mootoo revisits her previously introduced figure of flight, the abused child floating in the disturbed mind of an elderly woman. On the novel’s final pages, Mala Ramchandin, now an old woman, imagines her younger self Pohpoh soaring away from the island of Lantanacamara. The victim of her father’s sexual degradation now reunited with her childhood friend and adolescent lover Ambrose, Mala has at this point looked to “the sky and traced a distant flight pattern that she alone could see. She laughed as her eyes followed what her finger described, and waved to whatever it was she saw. She trembled with joy. In a tiny whispering voice, she uttered her first public words: Poh, Pohpoh-poh, Poh, Poh, Poh” (248-249). By charting the horrific consequences of a home corrupted through repeated sexual violation, *Cereus Blooms at Night* traces the attendant loss of innocence, failure of language, and collapse of individual identity. Hence this moment, with Mala tentatively forming “her first public words,” heralds

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4 The impulse to escape through flight achieves greater resonance in *A Visitation of Spirits*’s Horace Cross, who longs for freedom through transformation into a red-tailed hawk, and *The Salt Eaters*’s Velma Henry, who tentatively embraces possible metamorphosis through an emergent pair of wings.
not simply the fleeting possibility of language restored but also the potential merging of Miss Ramchandin’s two identities: the girl Poh-poh with her adult protector Mala.

Mootoo also gestures toward a more literal return, not flight from but flight to the Caribbean island. The final lines anticipate a long-hoped-for arrival, both of the yearly blooming cereus and of the diasporic subject’s return. Pulling back to the text’s overarching frame narrative, Mala’s caretaker Tyler issues an appeal directly to her younger sister, the girl who did escape Lantanacamara and their father’s devastating predation many years ago. As Tyler, the older Miss Ramchandin’s nurse, witness, and storyteller, explains to an absent Asha, “You are, to her, the promise of a cereus-scented breeze on a Paradise night” (249). While Poh-poh dreams of escape through flight, her double, the senior Miss Ramchandin, longs for reunion. Ushered in by the gently wafting fragrance that bathes the island, such promise suggests both renewal of the sisters’ relationship and restoration of the child’s lost innocence to the elderly woman’s traumatized psyche. Yet the full redemptive potential of this imagined conclusion remains suspended, never occurring within the novel’s pages. The text simultaneously invites and repels resolution and closure, proliferating multiple interpretive meanings. Like the intoxicating yet double-edged scent of the cereus, with its “vanilla-like sweetness” that allures and its “curdling” moldiness (152) that repulses, the narrative’s diasporic aesthetic draws readers into its possible island voyages, projected “flights of fancy” in which the sisters Mala and Asha Ramchandin are (or perhaps not) together once again.

The broader experience of diaspora is steeped in individual stories of migration and dwelling as well as the shared tension between initial crossings and later homecomings. As James Clifford clarifies in Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century,
Diaspora is different from travel . . . in that it is not temporary. It involves dwelling, maintaining communities, having collective homes away from (and in this it is different from exile, with its frequently individualist focus). Diaspora discourse articulates, or bends together, both roots and routes to construct . . . alternate public spheres, forms of community consciousness and solidarity that maintain identifications outside the national time/space in order to live inside, with a difference. (251)

With his emphasis on maintaining communities and having collective homes, Clifford perhaps conceptualizes diaspora in slightly more rooted (rather than routed) terms. Yet for the works investigated here, perpetual movement, whether physical or psychological, in fact surfaces as the central mode of being for members of this diaspora. They interweave patterns of dispersion with images of rootedness. However, portraits of home are positioned along axes of abuse and disenfranchisement, the inherited ruins of enslavement and colonization. Elsewhere connoting stability, safety, and security, “home” in these cases has been irrevocably dislocated from its moorings. While examining more generally the inflected questions of diaspora and home, the lingering pull between routes and roots, and the images of scattering and return, this chapter focuses upon a particular geographic locality: the Caribbean island.

As in Mootoo’s *Cereus Blooms at Night*, home for the diasporic subjects in Toni Morrison’s novel *Tar Baby* (1981) and Jamaica Kincaid’s essay-memoir *A Small Place* (1988) is deferred and dislocated, cast off and set aside. Their vexed Caribbean home-places, sites powerfully marking the convergence of the transnational slave trade and the pandemic of Western colonialism, expose the historical complexities embedded in such island landscapes. Colonialist rhetoric, through the violent erasure of others’ stories, crafts an essentializing version of history. By way of powerful contrast, these writers deliberately invoke myth and fantasy, procuring blended cultural translations that remain ever conscious of their positioning as alternate narratives and histories.
Despite their notable differences, including literary genre and cultural background, these three works share a preoccupation with personalized scenes of geographic conflict, places in which “the recesses of the domestic space become sites for history’s most intricate invasions” (Bhabha 13). The debris of the past takes on frightening, intimate faces as Morrison, Mootoo, and Kincaid capture violent histories devastatingly carved throughout the home. Hence the Caribbean home-place, haunted by memories of individual abuse and collective oppression, emerges as the painful site of cultural rupture, what Bhabha, further expanding Freud’s concept of unheimlich, terms “the estranging sense of the relocation of the home and the world – the unhomeliness” (13). While connected to a specific location, their “unhomeliness” also bespeaks global realities and histories. Such unhomely homes, grounds of neither safety nor sanctity, noticeably disrupt the presumed binary between placement and displacement. Whether the formidably dysfunctional L’Arbe de la Croix, inhabited by its itinerant global wanderers, and the torpid, sterile greenhouse in Tar Baby, the decayed and collapsed architecture of the Ramchandin house in Cereus Blooms at Night, or Antigua’s prevailing vulnerability and poverty as captured in A Small Place, the literal and symbolic valences of home appear “infinitely dispersed, indefinitely deferred” (Bammer xiii). For Jamaica Kincaid, both the history of Antigua’s colonization by the British and its continued exploitation through the tourism industry are intensely personal. As she writes from the United States about a now-remote homeland, Kincaid remains curiously detached from the island figured as home.

Through an extended meditation on home, Madan Sarup, drawing upon his own position as a Punjabi-born Indian residing in England, examines the overlapping connections between home and identity, roots and exile, belonging and estrangement. He later ponders:
“Roots are in a certain place. Home is (in) a place. Homeland” (Sarup 96). With diasporic subjects so often removed from the homeland, identity becomes characterized by a “simultaneously split and doubled existence – stretched across the multiple ruptures between ‘here’ and ‘there’” (Bammer xii). Tar Baby’s global wanderers evidence this same rift between rooted and routed identities, having been dispersed across the United States, Europe, and the Caribbean. Son Green and Jadine Childs search endlessly for attachment “between ‘here’ and ‘there’” – whether to recapture the lost home represented by Son’s birthplace in Eloe, Florida, or to reassemble an independent, stable sense of self embodied by the woman in yellow.5 In addition to those displacements away from the ancestral home, Bammer underscores the idea of displacement within, of “people who are not expelled from but displaced within their native culture by processes of external or internal colonization” (xi). Focalized in the Caribbean with its histories rife with forced relocations of enslaved Africans and South Asian laborers, multiple migrations elsewhere, as well as widespread economic and political disenfranchisement on the islands themselves, people are displaced both within and without. In reflecting “the cumulative effect of colonial and imperialist policies” (Bammer xi), Morrison, Mootoo, and Kincaid depict profoundly tainted, corrupted Caribbean homes.

Where does homeland exist, then, for members of this diaspora, individuals undergoing frequent, multiple migrations? Certainly the characters in Tar Baby, variously self-exiled and removed from the country of origin, suggest precarious instability: home remains overwhelmingly elusive. In her essay significantly titled “Home,” Morrison draws an important contrast between home as a source of rootedness and the home that travels. She

5 In almost mythically transcendent terms, Jadine refers to her as “that woman’s woman – that mother/sister/she; that unphotographable beauty” (Morrison 46).
writes: “Questions of concept, of language, of trajectory, of habitation, of occupation, . . . they remain in my thoughts as aesthetically and politically unresolved . . . In no small way, these discourses are about home” (5). Trinh Minh-ha articulates a similar conceptualization of “home in motion,” an ambivalence that at once suggests roaming movement or displacement as well as deepening attachment or placement. Elucidating this seeming paradox, she suggests, “travelling back and forth between home and abroad becomes a mode of dwelling” (“Other than Myself”15). The friction inherent in “traveling as a mode of dwelling” coheres in an early conversation between Margaret and Valerian Street.6 Whereas she protests, “This is crazy. I live in airplanes now. Nowhere,” the Candy King counters, “Lots of people live in two places” (Morrison 28; italics in original).

As Morrison, Mootoo, and Kincaid also reveal, the ruptures produced when people are pulled between multiple locations, particularly those with roots, contain profound psychic consequences. Surely the father’s sadistic cruelty in Cereus Blooms at Night, a direct product of his own multiple displacements, sounds a dire note of warning. Bhabha’s language of “a tenebrous sense of survival” in his introduction to The Location of Culture resounds hauntingly: “the ‘beyond’ . . . in the moment of transit . . . [that] cross[es] to produce complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion, . . . here and there, . . . hither and thither, back and forth” (1-2). Mala Ramchandin’s psychological splitting, whereby she constantly shifts perspectives between the young child and the elderly woman, translates this theoretical trope of here/elsewhere into unsettlingly intimate terms. Diasporic experience is circumscribed by painful, private memory. As a diasporic subject, Jamaica Kincaid echoes Bhabha’s paradox, the

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6 The surname, “Street,” intriguingly captures this tension between home as location and the movement of travel.
uncomfortable suspension between “here and there,” the oscillation “back and forth.”
Throughout *A Small Place*, her recounted memories shrink the distance between Antigua figured as home and the island construed as elsewhere. Even as she sketches colonialism, tourism, and their aftereffects in somewhat broad terms, Kincaid nevertheless personalizes these narratives. Her recollections of being a young school girl, the old Antigua of her childhood, and the difficult lessons passed down by her mother connect her back to the “the millions of people, of whom I am just one, made orphans: no motherland, no fatherland” (Kincaid 31). Hence the connections between the aesthetic, the political, and the personal that Morrison suggests in her essay “Home.”

Such displacements resonate textually – whether painfully localized within the home, inflicted through a series of intimate violations *here*, or externally occurring from without, instigated *elsewhere*. The tensions entrenched in *Tar Baby, Cereus Blooms at Night*, and *A Small Place* encapsulate this diasporic aesthetic. Morrison’s figure of the cultural orphan, powerfully embodied in her almost mythic characters of Son Green and Jadine Childs, betrays an irreconcilable tension between an identity steadfastly rooted in the ancestral as home and a newly formed identity associated with perpetual movement. As Kenneth Warren contends, such are “the ambiguities that inhere in diasporic thought” (393). Though Warren further suggests that these “ambiguities . . . make diasporic visions possible” (393), the multiple, expanding narratives investigated here write against certainty and foreclosure. Less celebratory yet no less visionary, their shared diasporic aesthetic signals an accompanying political injunction that demands expansive revisions of history. Such creative encounters require moving through history’s vise, expelling versions that ignore or elide individual human experiences (Morrison, “Unspeakable” 2320). Raising the intersecting questions of
exploitation and subjugation throughout *A Small Place*, Kincaid similarly underscores the injurious magnitude of colonial domination in the Caribbean. Her writing under the oppressive weight of the presumptuous “motherland,” a ubiquitous Great Britain, highlights the issue of the home-place corrupted from afar. Even as she criticizes the prevailing ugliness of tourism, Kincaid presents the Antiguan writer as a perennial diasporic subject who eschews return to the island and mourns the symbolic raping of her former island home.

Each of the three works addressed here unveils the complicated realities of leaving and returning “home” for the displaced Caribbean subject. Regardless of whether the locations described are fictional and imaginary, as in *Tar Baby* and *Cereus Blooms at Night*, or represent an extant island’s history, as in *A Small Place*, their authors investigate the Caribbean island’s contested physical spaces as well as its ambivalent psychic potentials. In their novels, Mootoo and Morrison portray psychologically damaged, contaminated homes invoked through the effects of molestation and physical abuse perpetrated against the helpless, innocent bodies of children. Kincaid routes her scorching assessment of tourism’s impact on the Antiguan landscape through memory, inflected by her use of personal pronouns. She occupies a peculiar position as both insider and outsider. She notes, “The Antigua that I knew, the Antigua in which I grew up, is not the Antigua you, a tourist would see now. That Antigua no longer exists” (23). Yet each author, regardless of her subject position, reveals the degree to which violence enacted against human beings in fact mirrors the abuses that colonial powers and their legacies have unleashed upon the Caribbean and its inhabitants. As Kincaid concludes in *A Small Place*, “Antigua is beautiful. Antigua is too beautiful. Sometimes the beauty of it seems unreal” (77). Such exoticism and unreality belie
the “pauperedness” and “simpleness” (78) that accompany ordinary, everyday life on the island.

Insistently, Morrison, Kincaid, and Mootoo interrogate the Caribbean home-place, “that place which enables and promotes varied and everchanging perspectives” (hooks 148). Into their provocative island settings they insert cultural orphans, characters that perpetually move back and forth – within and between – islands and mainland(s), which are themselves in flux. Members of a Caribbean diaspora, these individuals undergo literal and symbolic voyages while striving to reconcile a sense of identity formed under the oppressive weight of imperialism’s histories. Their portraits demonstrate that, as Stuart Hall explains in “The Local and the Global” (1997), “The homeland is not waiting … to be learned about, but the past is now seen, and it has to be grasped as a history, as something that has to be told. It is narrated. It is grasped through memory. It is grasped through desire. It is grasped through reconstruction. It is not just a fact that has been waiting to ground our identities” (38).

History must be told and narrated primarily through memory’s reconstruction. With their emphasis on memory’s multiplicity, history’s indeterminacy, and diaspora’s uncertainty, Morrison, Mootoo, and Kincaid highlight the shifting movement of home and place while prompting their readers to bear witness to – and at times even undergo – the travails of such journeying. Through fluid cultural landscapes that challenge the exploitative logic of colonization and figures of diasporic wandering that remain perpetually in transit, each powerfully evokes the trope of contemporary displacement. In so doing, these works reveal not only the pathos of frequent dislocations, the painful dispersion from a homeland, but also a shared political impetus and drive.
Multiple Migrations, Ideological Opposition, and the Diasporic Aesthetic: Searching for Home and Identity in *Tar Baby*

In *Tar Baby* diasporic wandering functions at the level of ideological fluidity, character, narrative structure, and setting. The novel shows the multiple movements of diaspora and persistently exposes an analogous spreading of identity, especially in relation to its two main protagonists, Jadine Childs and Son Green. Characters migrate from the South to the North in the United States, between the Americas and Europe, as well as from the Caribbean island to a Floridian mainland. The ability to locate home – as a place of comfort and security, a source of stable identity, or a site of ancestral connection – remains remote and illusory. The degree to which home has been displaced both within and outside an island setting gets heightened by the very trajectory of the narrative. Just as an oddly sentient natural world and a powerfully mythic backdrop intensify such uncertainty, so traces of a diasporic aesthetic, embedded in the novel’s structure, vex any notion of the text settling permanently. In all, *Tar Baby* powerfully reproduces the experience of diasporic scattering and being scattered for its readers, who must embark upon narrative voyages eerily similar to those of its central characters.

Before examining the specific avenues of such nomadic drifting, I will provide a brief overview of the intersecting complexities that inhere throughout *Tar Baby*. Whereas early reviewers such as Valerie A. Smith applaud the novel as “the most ambitious of Morrison’s works,” Smith also argues that the disorienting effects of “the imagery [Morrison] uses to animate the local history and landscape occasionally rings false” (39). Robert G. O’Meally, in his pointedly titled piece, “Tar Baby, She Don’ Say Nothin’,” begins by charting the

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7 Thanks to Dr. Rebecka Rutledge Fisher for pointing out the symbolic value of these names. Son Green possibly signifies an (immature) organic rootedness; Jadine (jaded?) Childs, by virtue of her name, is also not a fully evolved character. Both cultural orphans require nurturing.
remarkable sales of Morrison’s fourth novel before off-handedly commenting, “All this hyping puts pressure on the scholar in the field of black literature. But what is the book’s real value?” (33). Such “hype,” O’Meally concludes, is largely unwarranted: despite “all the makings of a good novel[,] what’s missing is the spark of life that makes a good novel not a formula but vibrant art” (33). What these and other critics misconstrue, when fixing on the absence of a single, clearly delineated message or positing Toni Morrison’s “true model” for racial authenticity, is the degree to which she strategically deploys various character types to expose these same incongruities. Such oppositions are embodied in the figure of the modern black woman (Jadine), the mythic folk hero (Son), and the prominent role occupied by the ancestor (Thérèse). An analysis that primarily highlights characters’ shortcomings and inconsistencies fails to consider how and why the author manipulates deliberate typecasts. In an interview with Nellie McKay, Morrison notes that although “Philadelphia Negro” Sydney ostensibly fulfills the role of “a good old Uncle Tom” (148), his life proves far more complexly layered. According to the author, she seeks not to promote “a clear resolution in a novel” but rather to provoke “a very strong visceral and emotional response as well as a very clear intellectual response”: a kind of literary “haunting” in her readers (McKay 145, 147).

The novel’s wandering structure, its recursively cyclical movements, further contributes to the difficulty of fashioning a unified interpretation. Such textual journeying, another manifestation of the diasporic aesthetic, requires “having constantly to negotiate between home and abroad, . . . between a here, a there, and an elsewhere” (Trinh, “Other” 9). From Son and Jadine wandering the globe in search of an ever-elusive human connection to Margaret and Valerian Street sorrowfully awaiting their long-absent son’s return, the characters experience the pain of symbolic exile, what Edward Said calls “the perilous
territory of not-belonging” (“Reflections on Exile” 162). Yet *Tar Baby*, by perpetuating sites of displacement as “a discontinuous state of being” in which “exiles are cut off from their roots, their land, their past” (Said 163), obviates the illusion that home connotes a stable sense of place or a secure experience of belonging. Throughout all of Morrison’s works, home is terribly, terrifyingly fraught. With *The Bluest Eye*’s devastating house of brutal incest, *Beloved*’s haunted 124, host to slavery’s excruciating re-memories, and *Paradise*’s houseful of women mercilessly gunned down in Ruby, Oklahoma, home materializes as the locus of unspeakable violation. Even when transplanted to an evocative Caribbean landscape, the colonized/colonizing “home” in *Tar Baby* can never emerge as a productive, safe space. Only through a sentient natural world does Morrison gesture toward a potentially generative island (as home) that might balance the tension between stasis and movement.

From the steady oscillation among the isolated Isle’s local histories and the wider global implications to an ambiguous “lickety-split” conclusion, the novel ostensibly unfolds as a series of ideological contradictions. These include the competing impulses of individual independence versus communal obligation, repeated clashes over traditional notions of gender (as well as race, class, and sexuality), and contested definitions of “home.” As Sandra Pouchet Paquet has argued, “The novel offers no solutions. Instead it maps, through its myriad characters, the ongoing interaction of conflicted ideologies” that remain “unresolved” (501). On the one hand, Morrison champions the regal African woman Jadine meets in Paris as “the original self – the self we betray when we lie, the one that is always there” (McKay 422). Consistent with Thérèse’s invective against Jadine that “she has forgotten her ancient properties” (*Tar Baby* 305), the author suggests that ancestral rootedness, the collective link to a shared historical past, signifies the only true source of identity. Thérèse’s word choice
echoes the writer’s own as Morrison delineates her genealogy in the novel’s dedication, when she acknowledges the litany of revered women “and each of their sisters, all of whom knew their true and ancient properties.” Well before the opening pages, she foregrounds the primacy of ancestral connection. However, *Tar Baby*’s conclusion, with Son’s final decision to join the blind African horsemen, implies yet another migratory beginning. As “he felt around, crawled off and then stood up” (304), the mysterious stranger who formerly lurked outside and later hid inside Valerian Street’s house quickly gains confidence during this second birth by the Isle des Chevaliers. Even as “the mist lifted” and the forest trees parted (305) to welcome their newest Son, the narrator explains neither what his choice nor the landscape’s reception signifies. Likewise, his unwavering direction, as “he ran . . . lickety-lickety-lickety-split” (305), remains altogether unknown.

In her well-known essay “Unspeakable Things Unspoken,” Morrison acknowledges the many possible interpretations of this ending:

The close is 1) the last sentence of the folk tale. 2) the action of the character. 3) the indeterminate ending that follows from the untrustworthy beginning. 4) the complimentary meter of its twin sister . . . , and 5) the wide and marvelous space between the contradiction of those two images: from a dream of safety to the sound of running feet. The whole mediated world in between. This masked and unmasked; enchanted, disenchanted; wounded and wounding world is played out on and by the varieties of interpretation . . . Winging one’s way through the vise and expulsion of history becomes possible in creative encounters with that history. (2320)

In addition to underscoring the interpretive difficulties posed by offering “the whole mediated world in between,” Morrison emphasizes the competing impulses that inhere within the figure of the cultural orphan. *Tar Baby* unveils the inescapable contradiction inscribed into the very fabric of diasporic displacement. Nomadic restlessness, an inability to settle permanently, coexists with a deep desire to construct a rooted, stable home. The routed multiplicities of literal and metaphorical travel are paired with an overwhelmingly tangible
ancestral presence. What of the practice of diaspora? To account for the strange cohabitation of seemingly oppositional inclinations within diasporic thought, Brent Hayes Edwards examines the complex interplay between black discourses and cultural artifacts. As he notes, such “exchange is never a neat and happy call and response between blacks in different places in the diaspora. It is equally shaped by a profound series of misapprehensions, misreadings, persistent blindness, and solipsisms, a series of self-defeating and abortive collaborations, a failure to translate even a basic grammar of blackness” (291). The failure of the characters in Tar Baby to achieve any semblance of abiding harmony echoes such diasporic dissonance. And ironically, comparable misapprehensions, misreadings, and mistranslations characterize the discourse surrounding the novel itself, whether displayed in the futile search for a cohesive narrative of racial wholeness or the disorientation produced by an often alarmingly animate island world.

Drifting between ideological positions further underscores the perpetual movement associated with diasporic migration. The novel may portray presumable ideals about a grounded source of racial wholeness or the individual’s greater duty to promote a communal good only later to expose vilified hypocrisies associated with such attitudes. The island’s women, with their magical, all-nourishing breasts, convey a potent ancestral presence. Thérèse, the visible form of the ancestor, may guide Son successfully back to the island, encouraging him to embark upon a new journey home. However, her individual influence and effectiveness are compromised severely. As Paquet points out, “She speaks authoritatively in a ‘national-historical’ context but her authority beyond this time-space mode is limited” (509). Thérèse does not occupy a position of ancestral authority equivalent to the inimitable Pilate Dead or the venerable Baby Suggs. She cannot stabilize this
fluctuating Caribbean home-place. Riddled by inconsistency, the island washerwoman frequently promotes her own agenda, one independent from the community’s greater needs. In her current state, Thérèse is redolent of the stagnation associated with outmoded superstition rather than an illuminating ancestral insight.

This figure of the ancestor also implies a link to cultural identity formation, of an ancient, mythic tie to home. To clarify the author’s often ambiguous conceptualizations of fully actualized black manhood and contemporary black womanhood, some scholars attempt to identify the definitive source or meaning of a supposedly “authentic” African American identity. Even an article published as recently as 2006, Yogita Goyal’s “The Gender of Diaspora in Toni Morrison’s Tar Baby,” addresses the importance of both the island swamp women and the “diaspora mothers” who function as timeless, symbolic, and “authentic emblems of an enduring black womanhood” (399). I would suggest that this continuing preoccupation with how Morrison constructs, models, and defines an authentically black self is problematic. This approach risks neglecting the “varieties of interpretation” (“Unspeakable” 2320) she herself so celebrates. Morrison consistently threads the boundaries between seemingly incompatible pairs: a masked/unmasked tar baby tale, an

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8 For instance, in an attempt to reclaim her former prestige as a wet nurse, a service made redundant by the imported Enfamil formula, Thérèse popularizes erroneous myths about America, “where it was not uncommon or strange to see people with both penises and breasts” (Morrison 151). When threatened by disenfranchisement, she challenges the far-reaching grasp of the United States, asserting that its society operates against the natural order.

9 See Anthony J. Berret’s article, “Toni Morrison’s Literary Jazz,” in which he identifies Son as “the center of a primal consciousness that senses humanity in all things” (277) and later argues that Son occupies a “double role as social critic and mythical hero” (280). Erickson’s “Images of Nurturance in Toni Morrison’s Tar Baby” criticizes Jadine as being “cut off from her roots, with the result that her own identity is impoverished and distorted” (21), precisely because she neglects the community’s greater good. Marilyn E. Mobley similarly asserts that Jadine’s “quest for wholeness is unsuccessful because she accepts values and mores of white middle-class culture without question and she rejects the very cultural constructions of race and motherhood that could heal and transform her consciousness” (763).
enchanted/disenchanted island landscape, a wounded/wounding cast of characters adrift in
the narrative, a located/dislocated Caribbean home-place.

The incongruities embedded in such untidy exchanges also come together at the level
of character, particularly in the relationship between Son and Jadine. Both have faced a series
of geographic migrations, yet after traversing oceans and wandering continents, these two
cultural orphans and their contradictory impulses collide and collude on the Isle des
Chevaliers. Not only alienated from the original self but also betraying her ancestral roots,
Jadine, as Peter B. Erickson notes, is “drifting, in trouble, . . . [with a] desire to ‘make it’ that
may be self-destructive” (31). Somewhat paradoxically for a woman who variously calls
Baltimore, Philadelphia, Paris, and New York City home, “she was more at loose ends here
[on the island] than anywhere” (Morrison 158). Jadine, fundamentally at odds with herself,
cannot preserve a stable sense of identity, regardless of her specific location.10 This
exoticized Parisian model, the ostensible embodiment of refinement, culture, and
sophistication, hovers in a curious space of geographic ambivalence. She is entirely removed
from “home” configured as placement and connection. As Massey notes, “Morrison’s
writing . . . undermines for ever [sic] any notion that everyone once had a place called home
which they could look back on, a place not only where they belonged but which belonged to
them, and where they could afford to locate their identities” (166). The critique that this
“copper Venus” (Morrison 115) has abandoned her ancient properties yields to another, more

10 Mobley finds fault with Jadine: “Tar Baby can be interpreted as a modern cautionary tale in which Morrison
draws on the Afro-American oral narrative tradition to expose the pitfalls for the black woman of white middle-
class aspirations and to illustrate the consequences of her social and cultural ‘misbehavior’” (762). Though such
critique relies on a perturbing logic of racial authenticity, Mobley’s identification of “the potential
consequences of success predicated upon disconnection from one’s racial identity and cultural heritage” (762)
somewhat echoes Morrison’s own anxiety over Jadine. Consider the author’s 1981 interview with Charles Ruas:
Jadine “is cut off. . . . she does not have what Ondine has. There’s no reason for her to be like Ondine – I’m not
recommending that – but she needs a little bit of Ondine to be a complete woman” (104).
devastating reality: the recognized collapse of cultural identity. In Jadine’s own words, “I’m an orphan” (118).

Detached from an abiding sense of rooted identity, Jadine finds that any true connection to home dangles just out of reach. While an alert, responsive Caribbean landscape may proffer one form of reconciliation through the mysterious ancestral swamp women, Jadine (in direct contrast to Son) seems incapable of joining their numinous ranks. The encounter between the witches, rumored lovers of the blind African horsemen, and the art history student, who “saw planes and angles and missed character” (158), in fact transpires as a burgeoning conflict. A cultural elitist impervious to any sense of communal obligation, Jadine openly prefers Picasso to an Itumba mask (74). She hides her embarrassment at black art shows, which she considered “eighty percent ludicrous and ten percent derivative to the point of mimicry” (74). At first bemused by her surroundings, she describes the protective foliage using inadequate similes – the circle of trees “like a standing rib of pork, . . . like . . . an elegant comic book illustration” (182). The sketchpad-toting interloper, ignorant of the island’s properties, grossly misjudges the stability of the mossy floor and sinks into the oozing tar. Accustomed to dashing stylishly between fashion capitals throughout Europe and the United States, the model finds herself ignobly stuck. Entrapment presents a fundamental if obvious contrast to her jet setting lifestyle. Here, among the watchful swamp women, “Movement was not possible” (182). In this moment of forced stasis, Morrison again emphasizes the degree to which Jadine, having returned to L’Isle des Chevaliers as a vacationing tourist, remains ever the cultural outsider.

Though appearing more grounded with roots in his birthplace of Eloe, Florida, Son Green finds himself equally estranged within the same island landscape. As he confides to
Sydney, “I feel out of place there” (160), never fully accepted into the household. Whether skulking outside Valerian’s house or concealed inside Margaret’s closet, he stays always an observer – never a participant. His profound isolation amid the Streets’ foreign opulence reveals the degree to which the proverbial Son does not belong, certainly not within this vexing microcosm of American society. With the accompanying racial and class hierarchies of the United States relocated to the Caribbean, Son’s displacement gets inscribed linguistically, the ambivalent location indicated by the adverb “there.”

Despite dislocation from a homeland, Son – precisely because he hails proudly from the all-black town of Eloe (172) – has been heralded as Jadine’s opposite; however, he emerges as a deeply problematic character as well. An undeniable misogynism leaves readers disturbed by his supposed model of authenticity. His troubling early encounter with Jadine, in which “[she] felt the fear again and another thing that wasn’t fear. Something more like shame. Because he was holding my wrists so tight and pressing himself into my behind?” (123), smacks of rape. Despite dislocation from a homeland, Son – precisely because he hails proudly from the all-black town of Eloe (172) – has been heralded as Jadine’s opposite; however, he emerges as a deeply problematic character as well. An undeniable misogynism leaves readers disturbed by his supposed model of authenticity. His troubling early encounter with Jadine, in which “[she] felt the fear again and another thing that wasn’t fear. Something more like shame. Because he was holding my wrists so tight and pressing himself into my behind?” (123), smacks of rape. Those scholars who would unequivocally extol Son as Morrison’s figure of integrated racial self-identity, a character grounded in community and thus the

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11 Perhaps most unsettling about Son is the sexualized violence associated with his and Jadine’s interactions. Though scornfully dismissing Margaret’s all-consuming fear of rape, the racist southern mythology of an inviolate, irresistible white female sexuality, Jadine appears frightened of being so overpowered. She maintains: “He doesn’t want you, Margaret. He wants me. He’s crazy and beautiful and black and poor and beautiful and he killed a woman but he doesn’t want you” (186). As the narrative makes clear, Son does evidence elements of the folk hero, appearing self-assured in his identification as a strong black man. Berret praises Son as the improvisational jazz master, noting “Son’s role as social critic and mythical hero” (280) and labeling him “the center of a primal consciousness” (277). Yet Morrison seems unwilling to accept his heroic presence unilaterally. While Jadine’s fear is sensationalized, an overreaction evident in her vicious language, “You, motherfucker, do not [belong], and you, motherfucker, are leaving now” (Tar Baby 125), the intimation of rape and its accompanying humiliation disrupt the vision of Son Green as Morrison’s definitive model of ideal black masculinity.

In Can’t I Love What I Criticize: The Masculine and Morrison, Susan Neal Mayberry offers a more positive interpretation of Son’s overt sexuality. Referencing his forceful flicking of the cyclamen stems in Valerian’s non-blooming hothouse, she explains that Son’s “sometimes gentle, sometimes jarring revitalization of repressed things, what Valerian calls ‘black magic,’ takes its strength from the truth behind it. . . . Son inspires life into the masks of all the people sitting round [the table]” and “brings the possibility of both death and growth” (146). Rather than “emphasize the dangers of order threatened by chaos,” the novel, Mayberry continues, “highlights the dangers of disrupted disorder” (138).
visible contrast to the self-centered Jadine who belongs to no one but herself (Tar Baby 118), do not adequately account for the author’s insistence on ambiguity. She deliberately creates characters that contain “combinations of virtue and flaw, of good intentions gone awry, of wickedness cleansed and people made whole again” (McKay 148). Such coexistence, in exploiting “the wide and marvelous space between the contradiction of those two images” (“Unspeakable” 2320), again emphasizes the contrast between stasis and movement: the text refuses to settle.

Discussions of diaspora, often noting the fraught search for an abiding homeland, regularly feature an examination of spatial routes, of displaced peoples scattered across geographies. Tar Baby’s diasporic aesthetic elusively engages with the temporal realm as well, not only by examining the complex histories that travel with individuals but also through a frequently disrupted narrative structure. This question of the temporal gets interwoven between characters’ longing for home and the novel’s overlapping chronologies. Together, Son and Jadine are cast as geographically migratory figures. Yet individually, Son remains mired in the past, while Jadine appears focused exclusively on the future. They abandon the island in search of a new life with each other, a simultaneously reinvented and remembered sense of home: “There was a future. . . . planning. Thinking through a move long before it was made” (219). As Son eagerly awaits Jadine’s arrival in New York, he realizes that, though the city leaves him disoriented, “he had been looking for her all his life. . . . [and] if he loved and lost this woman . . . , he would surely lose the world” (220). For Jadine, “This was home, she thought with an orphan’s delight; not Paris, not Baltimore, not Philadelphia. This is home. . . . a black woman’s town, New York” (222). In their thoughts
the temporal subtly, intriguingly converges amid this sprinkling of urban locations. Whereas Son has pondered arranging a future together, Jadine’s mental shift in tense marks another notable transition: her movement from the past that “was home” to the present that “is home.”

Caught in states of endless migration, however, neither can convert an abstract ideal into tangible reality. Jadine, in search of “other ways to be a woman” (281), must transform her identity from an exoticized object into “a real, . . . complete individual who owns herself” (McKay 147). Once again en route, she vows to “go back to Paris and begin at Go” (Tar Baby 290), to locate home within herself.¹² The novel’s final portrait of Jadine reveals another beginning, another quest: “the blinding anticipation and herself, there, airborne, suspended, open, trusting, frightened, determined, vulnerable” (291). For Son Green, after eight years spent wandering the globe, he now belongs to the floating diaspora. His identity, despite previously appearing rooted, now scatters. Jadine’s “blinding anticipation” aboard the Paris-bound airplane almost prophetically foretells Son’s literal blindness – his future fraternity with the blind African riders. Thus the novel’s final lines, in all their “lickety-split” ambivalence, contain the incipient possibility of Son’s diasporic return and reclamation of a mythic ancestral rootedness. Yet within Tar Baby, a newly constituted Caribbean home-place is never realized fully. Home as stability and security – what Morrison labels the myth of safety – skitters just out of reach, beyond this story’s borders.

While circuitously charting individual patterns of migration, the narrative periodically enacts the diasporic in its structure, wandering both spatially and temporally and then returning – even to the very same point in time. The text is laden with numerous bizarre,

¹² She muses: “A grown woman did not need safety or its dreams. She was the safety she longed for” (290).
curious, and utterly baffling moments that meander recursively, unsettling and complicating its ongoing progression. What of the narrator’s habit of sprinkling largely unexplained references to pie ladies (the upstanding church women in Eloe, Florida), the “Principal Beauty” (Ondine’s pejorative against pageant queen Margaret), and a sweet boy child (later identified as Michael Street) humming incoherently under the sink? As Valerian complains, the distinct sensation of “everything temporary” (37), heightened by a steady “coming and going, going and coming” (19), further disorients the story’s chronology. So transmuted, the diasporic manifests textually.

Initially, readers may track one character’s “vision,” yet the narration frequently interrupts any outward continuity. Consider when Gideon (called Yardman) beholds the freshly washed Son standing half-naked in Jadine’s window: “All out in the open!” (106). In the original telling, Gideon surreptitiously observes the visitor Son’s audacious display and sneeringly recounts the incident to Thérèse. Yet nearly thirty-five pages later, the same temporal moment circles back. Before experiencing this return, readers sift through a lengthy sequence of interludes: Thérèse’s insertion of Son into the legendary blind African tribe; Gideon’s back story, the naturalized U.S. citizen tricked into an island homecoming through beguiling promises of land ownership; Jadine’s sexualized encounter(s), first with the European-imported baby sealskin coat and later with the Atlantic Ocean-transported intruder; Margaret’s conversation about the beautiful stranger; and, finally, Son’s journey to the Street household. As Son recalls his years roaming the wide world, Morrison’s readers undergo another form of time travel: ambling through layers of narrative asides. When the incident of Son’s nakedness and Gideon’s surveillance does reappear, the second iteration dramatically
alters both visual perspective and spatial location. In place of Gideon’s secret scrutiny, Son sentimentally looks down from the window, “now watching Yardman” (140).

Readers again jolt (within a single internal page break) as the narrator abruptly shifts from Son’s gaze to that of L’Arbe de la Croix’s aging patriarch. While altering vantage points, the speaker nevertheless depicts a corresponding pattern of jointly collapsed and expanded time. Here, sequestered “in his greenhouse staring out of the one glass window imagining what was not so” (140), Valerian Street embarks on an emotional journey. Transported first to his childhood, he transposes the unnamed Philadelphia washerwoman with the enigmatic Marie Thérèse Foucault. Evoking his father’s death, Valerian’s private reverie stirs again and rapidly moves from his current “exile,” prompted by “the fact . . . he’d become a stranger in his own city” (142), to his dead first wife’s visitations from “the Beyond” (143). Only momentarily does he linger on these memories from their unhappy marriage. Despite his regret, Valerian’s conjuring mind quickly summons – in place of two aborted pregnancies 13 – his single male heir, “both the winsome two-year-old under the sink and the thirty-year-old Socialist” (144-145). Indeed, it is Michael Street, both the traumatized toddler of the past and the vanished grown man of the present, whose ghostly traces preoccupy the “house . . . prickly with tension and unanswered questions” (142). This wounded intellectual migrant “who sought other cultures he could love without risk or pain” (145) opts for willful detachment, refusing not simply a Christmas homecoming but his own familial-cultural inheritance as well. Wading through the hovering spectrality of buried memories and childhood secrets, readers encounter another manifestation of the diasporic aesthetic etched throughout the novel.

13 Valerian gives only a brief account: “In nine years of marriage she had had two abortions, and all she wanted to talk about during these visits was how relieved she was that she’d had at least that foresight. He wished she felt something else” (143).
Through this dislocated narrative structure that echoes Jadine’s feelings of not belonging anywhere and Son’s inability to create an idyllic version of home either in Eloë or the Isle, Morrison conjures another ambivalent myth that encapsulates diaspora’s paradox: that of safety. The novel’s opening line, “He believed he was safe” (3), cyclically returns in the final pages. Readers once again find Son swimming purposefully to shore, approaching Isle des Chevaliers under the cloak of darkness. These two thematically overlapping episodes provide an ostensible framework for *Tar Baby*. Without clearly delineated chapter headings, they function as virtual “parentheses around the book” (McKay 150). Yet the sections, standing well outside the novel’s boundaries, also extend its spatiotemporal margins.

Furthermore, the repetition of Son’s mythic birth scene uncoils another layer of recursive time. The closing image features a man steadily rising to his feet and confidently running into the darkness to embrace the island’s legends, “Lickety-split” (306). “Although the word [believed] suggests [Son’s] conviction,” Morrison explains, “it does not reassure the reader. . . . The unease about this view of safety is important because safety itself is the desire of each person in the novel. Locating it, creating it, losing it” (“Unspeakable” 2319).

For readers and critics alike, the uncertainty entrenched in this repetitive process of finding, producing, and misplacing security recreates moments of diasporic wandering and cultural displacement. Jadine and Son leave the island together, only to return separately before migrating elsewhere. With each lover unsuccessfully attempting to rescue the other, the relationship implodes somewhere between Son’s stagnant past and Jadine’s overwrought future. The narrator elucidates their mutual failures: “One had a past, the other a future, and each one bore the culture to save the race in his hands” (Morrison 269). Without any break signifying a shift in audience, the voice then queries, “Man-spoiled black man, will you
mature with me? Culture-bearing black woman, whose culture are you bearing?” (269). The separate addresses, articulated as questions that presumably challenge the values affiliated with Western culture, curiously exist both within and outside the novel’s realm. Who speaks and to whom? Here, two adolescent black figures – the immature Son and the overgrown female Child(s) – are charged directly, first to pursue self-maturation and then to uphold a distinctly African American culture. Yet with and because of their lickety-split departures, the lovers’ stories have been foreclosed, irrevocably truncated.

Along with such repeated ruptures of narrative continuity, the Caribbean home-place is likewise revealed as the site of departure and return, further disrupting the binary between placement and displacement. Morrison exposes the conflict between an enduring landscape and an encroaching civilization, chronicling events associated with exploitative consumption. The novel’s official beginning focuses on the natural world and overlays “the end of the world”: “a collection of magnificent winter houses on Isle des Chevaliers” (9). The arresting juxtaposition between the world’s end and this cluster of neocolonial estates immediately places Tar Baby’s island setting within a broader cultural context: a history plagued by colonization, slavery, and the abuses of power. Yet Morrison intersperses these larger, well-documented historical realities – of earth forcefully overhauled, seasons brutally disrupted, and rivers painfully re-routed – with the equally vexed but personal tales of her characters. Just as the island remains haunted by French colonial presence, so L’Arbe de la Croix appears troubled by the specter of hidden cruelties.

The trauma of the landscape closely mirrors the recurring violence inflicted within an intimate domestic sphere, and the disturbing image of the repeatedly displaced,
simultaneously colonized and colonizing home intensifies the contrast between the presumed sanctity of the natural world and the reality of its destruction. Set against a landscape desecrated through development, the plot unfolds upon “a house of sleeping humans” (43). Paradoxically “both closed and wide open,” the house “resists easy penetration but cannot brace for attack” (43). The house constructed here, with its unresolved questions of habitation and occupation, echoes the home Morrison conceptualizes in her essay, “Home.” Both remain unsettled. While physically placed in the Caribbean, this “house on a hill” (53), variously filtered through characters’ memories, nevertheless roams psychically. Consider Margaret Street’s dreamlike musings, in which she longingly reminisces about her beloved childhood trailer in Maine, later recalling hopelessly “feeling drowned” by the “spaciousness” of Valerian Street’s three-story Philadelphia mansion, marked “with pearl-gray S’s everywhere” (58). In fact, the narrator peculiarly catalogues and proliferates structural images of the house, dropping allusions to homes placed on the Caribbean island, in assorted cities across the United States, and even extending abroad to Europe.

The tension Morrison creates within domestic space gets amplified further, as an overriding ambivalence yields to the corrupt revelation of traumatic abuse. The looming absence of the violated child Michael Street shatters the notion of home as a place of safety. Almost compulsively the subject of conversation, at least until Son reveals his presence, Michael never materializes in person: “He’s always coming. Ain’t got here yet” (35). Yet this specter of childhood tragedy lurks in corridors and closets, rocking and humming beneath the sink. Although the abuse, which Margaret worries will warrant exposure in the tabloid world of the National Enquirer, took place in another house, veiled insinuations of Michael’s hidden injuries reverberate through individual recollections. While deferred by time and
distance, home as the displaced locus of abuse only surfaces late in the novel. The recurring traumatic event has been hermetically sealed off, repressed deep in the private memories of Margaret, Valerian, and Ondine. Only when the household internally disintegrates, shuddering under the weight of countless silent years, does the secret get voiced. Only when “everyone was out of place” (208) does Ondine explosively convict Margaret of relentlessly hurting her son: “You cut him up. You cut your baby up. Made him bleed for you . . . stuck pins in his behind. Burned him with cigarettes” (208). Despite Michael’s complete erasure from the text, the decades removed from his childhood, and the geographic distance from the originally corrupted home space, the devastation of his abuse steadily invades L’Arbe de la Croix, further displacing and destabilizing the Caribbean home-place – from without and within (to echo Bammer).

Adding another, still more complicating dimension to this image of the collapsed, violence-ridden, and displaced home is Valerian Street’s stagnant greenhouse, an ostensible sanctuary in which the plants neither flower nor grow. The narrator explains: “When he knew for certain that Michael would always be a stranger to him, he built the greenhouse as a place of controlled ever-flowering life to greet death in” (53). In the greenhouse, life coexists with death, and motion is overlaid with stasis. Yet all productive movement through fertilization and new growth gets suspended and trapped. Somewhat perplexingly, Valerian first has cultivated and later has retreated to this isolated, non-generative greenhouse to fill the void produced by Michael’s absence. Just as an unspeakable history of childhood abuse excises Michael from the world of the text, so the non-flowering greenhouse both displaces and replaces the natural world: a lush Caribbean landscape. Only the outsider Son’s home

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14 As Dr. Rebecka Rutledge Fisher insightfully mentioned during our dialogue, the irony of such invasion crystallizes when considering the house’s official name, L’Arbe de la Croix, as a place that signifies holy shelter.
remedies, using mirrors rather than noxious poisons to repel ants and sexually “jacking up” the “cyclamen” (148) through the powerful flicking of his fingers, can introduce new life into this dormant, torpid world. Though he has overhauled the island’s natural properties, “adjusting the terrain for comfortable living” (53), Valerian ineffectually harnesses the power of the island that “vomit[s] up color like a drunk” (187).

Perhaps the most enduring presence throughout the novel, then, is the island itself, a remarkably thinking, feeling natural world. Even as *Tar Baby* opens with details of Son’s watery escapade and closes amid his “lickety-split” dash to join the blind African horsemen, what truly anchors the text is a prescient nature. It is the ominous fluttering of the emperor butterflies, the droll observations of an avocado tree, and the clamoring protest of the champion daisy trees that interpret events. While the anthropomorphized island steadily emerges as a character in its own right, this same Caribbean landscape actively resists interpretation. Jadine, for instance, finds herself undone by its impenetrable excesses. She muses: “it must be this place. The island exaggerated everything. Too much light. Too much shadow. Too much rain. Too much foliage . . . the wilderness [outside] creeping into” the domestic space (68).

Nothing so dismantles this interior/exterior dichotomy than the subtly penetrating blanket of fog. With chapter two having closed upon a house asleep, chapter three opens not with its occupants waking but instead amid an all-engulfing mist – or, rather, its enigmatic animus – during an unusually formal dinner service:

Fog came to that place in wisps sometimes, like the hair of maiden aunts. Hair so thin and pale it went unnoticed until masses of it gathered around the house and threw back one’s own reflection from the windows. . . . The gray of it, the soil and swirl of it, was right in the room. . . . Patience was difficult to come by in that fuzzy caul and breathing harder still. It was then that the word “island” had meaning. (62)
Jadine and Margaret, smothered by the air’s oppressive dampness and needing to dry those “places the maiden aunts were kissing” (62), distractedly blot away moisture. Witnessed by the same “maiden aunts [that] smiled and tossed their maiden aunt hair” (65), the meal marking Son’s grand entrance also uncovers the painful racial, class, and familial hierarchies that enshroud L’Arbe de la Croix. Even as Jadine convinces herself that “this house full of decent folk situated in the pure sea air” (68) provides an otherworldly oasis, the narrative steadily betrays an accumulation of delusions, even falsehoods: that the boy Michael will arrive in time for Christmas; that the gift of B. J. Bridges, poet and former teacher, will right the unspoken wrongs of childhood; that the blended family, with Jadine “playing daughter” (66), will happily reunite. Along with Son Green’s disruption of the house’s tenuous order, the private tragedies of individual memories furtively invade. Testifying to such unraveling are “the maiden aunts cowering in the corners of the room” (71). In this moment of palpable discomfort, the reader must take emotional cues not directly from the narrator but indirectly from the “maiden aunts,” the fog’s peculiar personification that both reflects the home’s internal fracturing and records the gradual unveiling of a traumatic past.

As this bizarrely sentient nature monitors the house’s inhabitants, the story’s action is framed by elements in the landscape: the fog’s reluctant witness as well as the varying perspectives offered by insects, flowers, and trees. While fluttering emperor butterflies excitedly cluster outside Jadine’s bedroom (81), strangely detecting her sensual pleasure, courtesy of boyfriend Ryk’s exotically rare sealskin coat, “[o]nly the bougainvillea saw [Jadine] standing in the window, her head thrown back to catch all the breeze she could in the soft place under her chin” (90). While puzzling over the island’s abundant mysteries, the very earth, it seems, breathlessly waits for the tale to unfold. Like the butterflies and
bougainvillea, the avocado tree appears suspended in a largely watchful state. Only after Jadine curses Son and his disruptive presence, namely his refusal to play by the house’s “white people . . . rules” (126), does the heretofore-unacknowledged avocado tree weigh in. And the natural world soundly rejects Jadine’s intrusion. Returning to Jadine’s earlier exclamation (“Oh, horseshit!”), the narrator reports: “The avocado tree standing by the side of the road heard her and, having really seen a horse’s shit, thought she had probably misused the word” (127). Deeply disapproving of Jadine’s misapplication of “horseshit,” the avocado tree protectively withdraws its fruit – both from her hypercritical sight and further verbal assault.

Taken together, the fog, butterflies, and even the foliage function as an all-seeing, all-knowing chorus that filters the novel’s events. Morrison comments on this same choral presence: “all of nature thinking and feeling and watching and responding to the action going on in Tar Baby, so that they are in the story: the trees hurt, the fish are afraid, clouds report, and the bees are alarmed” (“Rootedness” 341-342). As with the maiden aunts at dinner, readers are enjoined to witness their anxious testimony. The novel, having centralized this story of the natural world, increasingly expunges any overriding human presence from its pages. With characters such as Valerian and Margaret or Sydney and Ondine consumed by their own efforts to conceal painfully repressed memories, Morrison implies that her readers, accompanied by the guiding animus of the island itself, must reassemble this narrative of an agonizing past.

In speaking of the potential cultural/political work of displacement, Bammer suggests that what has been pushed aside nevertheless abides: “Displaced but not replaced, it remains a source of trouble, the shifting ground of signification that makes meanings tremble” (xiii).
Certainly the manifold resonances of *Tar Baby*’s ambiguous “lickety-split” conclusion suggest trembling potential. Perhaps through glimpses of restructured time as opposed to space – in the prolonged stasis of the swamp women that also conveys a deliberate sense of movement through the past – Morrison alludes to something more generative. She recasts history and its elements. In her retelling, the tree women reign supreme not only in the island’s local history but also within broader global histories. In rearticulating global histories, told vis-à-vis the local island and its legends, Morrison writes against the dominant colonizing narrative, thereby countering tourism’s limited view of the Caribbean. The political injunction of recognizing additional arbiters of history – through individual memories – likewise speaks to the vexed home-place. As Trinh suggests, “The meanings of here and there, home and abroad, third and first, margin and centre keep on being displaced according to how one positions oneself. Where is home?” (20). In crafting a diasporic aesthetic that enjoins readers to undergo an analogous form of journeying, Morrison interrogates otherwise privileged subject positions. She collapses the distance between the “third” and “first” worlds as well as the margin and the center through the lens of her profoundly destabilized, displaced Caribbean home-place.

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15 In discussing (with both Charles Ruas and Thomas LeClair) the tar baby folktale’s function as history and prophecy, Morrison identifies the tar pit as “a holy place,” a site for building things (LeClair 122). Referencing this very scene, she explains, “For me, the tar baby came to mean the black woman who can hold things together. The story was a point of departure to history and prophecy” (122). Elsewhere Morrison associates an elusive “tar quality” with images of nurturing and building (Wilson 131). Hence Jadine, this detached cultural orphan, becomes trapped in the tar because “she has lost that tar quality, the ability to hold something together that otherwise would fall apart” (Wilson 131).

For fuller treatments of the tar baby tale’s multiple meanings, see Trudier Harris’s detailed examination of the folktale’s significance in chapter five of *Fiction and Folklore: The Novels of Toni Morrison* and Craig Werner’s article, “The Briar Patch as Modernist Myth: Morrison, Barthes, and Tar Baby As-Is,” which frames Morrison’s novel in terms of Barthes’s theory of myth.
Colonial Abuse, Paternal Incest, and the Controversial Space(s) between: Portraits of South Asian Diaspora in *Cereus Blooms at Night*

Though treatments of the diasporic Caribbean frequently focus on spatial wandering, with migrating subjects crossing geographic boundaries, such dispersion is closely tied to the intersecting question of history as well. Certainly Jamaica Kincaid’s *A Small Place*, which I will discuss later, addresses Antigua’s anguishing history of imperialist exploitation as well as the cruel, far-reaching aftershocks plaguing the island well into the 1980s. Kincaid writes as the diasporic subject physically and psychically displaced from her Caribbean home-place.

While Morrison appears equally critical of oppressive narratives imposed from without, she mainly gestures toward – rather than directly engages with – the overlaying of history and memory in *Tar Baby.* For the Indian-Trinidadian-Canadian Shani Mootoo, whose first novel shares Kincaid’s personal investment in and Morrison’s aesthetic rendering of the Caribbean diaspora, clashes between imperial and island histories as well as their grievous reverberations converge upon the intimate yet imaginary location of Lantanacamara.

In an interview with Lynda Hall, Mootoo comments on her impulse to bring together personal and global histories, emphasizing the power of narrative to translate individually traumatic events. As she explains, “I use word-based storytelling to try to ‘speak out’ my life, but not just to tell what has/had happened to me. Also to try to break down the world, even the pain and trauma of the world into smaller parts, that are step-by-step logical, so that I, and others, might understand, and rage against or sympathize with it” (Hall 109). Through a candid exploration of sexual abuse and its horrific consequences, *Cereus Blooms at Night* is

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16 Morrison more explicitly interrogates these questions in her nonfiction essays, the connection to the ancestor explored in “Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation” and the role of communal remembrance in “Unspeakable Things Unspoken.”
informed by Mootoo’s own subjection to childhood molestation. While the manifestation and redressing of such trauma, encased in Mala Ramchandin’s fragmented memory, take on inexorably haunting forms, the novel also reframes this private story of paternal incest. Both victim and perpetrator are placed within the broader narrative of colonization. Both are disastrously wounded.

As Mootoo charts the devastation produced by recurring rape and victimization within a single household, the cultural and historical implications of Chandin Ramchandin’s viciously predatory relationship with his daughters radiate externally. Such abuse, even while localized in a specific house, arguably gets focalized elsewhere: the specter of the British Empire’s relentless colonization of India. Political, economic, and cultural subjugation enforced not only dislocations within a former homeland through the excision of “native” traditions but also radical displacements from the home country through expulsion of this diasporic labor force. The British occupation of India extended well beyond conventional geographic boundaries, with indentured Indian laborers traumatically removed from one colonized place and relocated to another: the Caribbean island. While the forced migration of enslaved Africans to the Caribbean has been well documented, the British Empire’s later reliance on bonded laborers to tend these same sugar plantations comprises a less familiar narrative. As Madhavi Kale’s *Fragments of Empire* records, the years between 1837 and 1917 resulted in another massive human relocation. Under the indentured labor system, nearly 430,000 men and women were transported from India to the British Caribbean (Kale 1).

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17 As Mootoo discloses in this same interview, “I had tried to tell my grandmother that one of my grandfather’s friends was touching me in ways and in ways that felt uncomfortable. . . . she told me never to say such words again. . . . It was not until years later, when I was in my late twenties, that I was forced to come face to face with the demons of child sexual abuse” (Hall 109).
Along with the boundary crossings implied by patterns of forced migration, Mootoo’s novel journeys through a collective past. Yet in relating this tale, she focuses less on the intersecting global intricacies of multinational capital, labor, and exchange than upon the domestic intimacies of the Caribbean home-place. Here in this specific locale, the town of “Paradise” set on the fictive island of Lantanacamara, history and memory devastatingly overlap. This excavation of the past primarily unfolds through individual memory: Tyler’s frame narration, Mala’s split psyche, Otoh’s recollection of his/her transgender difference, and even Chandin’s excruciating experiences of racial otherness. Equally underscoring the inextricability of individual stories and collective histories for interpreting diasporic pasts, Stuart Hall argues that the past “is always constructed through memory, fantasy, narrative and myth,” encompassing “not an essence but a positioning” (“Cultural Identity and Diaspora” 395; italics in original). *Cereus Blooms at Night* explores the past as an alternative positioning, assembling the tales of racial, gender, and sexual others so often expunged from colonialist accounts. Rather than privilege official records, Mootoo bathes her story in legend, namely that of the mysterious jungle surrounding Mala’s collapsed house, where “the plants were not arranged in any order and no path seemed to exist” (176). Unlike the formal English garden, with its manicured lawns and hedges, her tropical garden is wild, uncontrolled, and chaotic. The night-blooming cereus, with its heady odor that saturates the island, defies containment. The intoxicating cactus, Johanna Garvey observes, functions as “a multivalent symbol of hybridity, of boundaries that blur and categories that lose their sharp outlines” (98). The novel abounds with hybrid figures such as Otoh Mohanty, the woman-turned-man, that obscure rigid external categories. The narrative itself blurs temporal limits,
drifting through Tyler’s self-conscious reflections, occasional lapses, and retelling of traumatic events.

Somewhat less preoccupied with the island setting than either Morrison or Kincaid, Mootoo nevertheless renews a cultural landscape that challenges the perverse logic of imperial power through the vehicle of remembrance. As Clifford says, the very “[e]xperiences of unsettlement, loss, and recurring terror produce discrepant temporalities—broken histories that trouble the linear, progressivist narratives of nation-states and global modernization” (263). While excavating such broken histories, Mootoo personalizes rather than theorizes displacement. She elaborates in an interview: “I love reading academic theory and so on, but to my mind what actually ends up creating change comes from metaphor, and I love storytelling for that reason.”¹⁸ As Gayatri Gopinath suggests, Cereus Blooms at Night “is primarily concerned with those subjectivities, desires, and modes of collectivity that escape nationalist narratives and that fall outside their teleological structures . . . her novel maps the violences that undergird the home as it is prescribed within the logic of colonialism” (178). Yet I would go a step beyond Gopinath’s analysis to propose that, by overlapping personal memory with an acute consciousness of “broken histories,” Mootoo harnesses a joint aesthetic-political exigency through metonymy. The sexual abuse and its private history concurrently derive from and point toward the cultural history of colonization. Moreover, by foregrounding such exploitation and its endlessly proliferating aftereffects, Cereus Blooms at Night investigates the spaces between geographic and temporal borders, what Clifford terms “enunciative boundaries” (5): the mysterious recesses between life and death, the ambiguity of assessing racial or gender determinacy, and the emergent narrative gaps between recorded national histories.

¹⁸ Transcribed from http://writerscafe.ca/mp3/shani-mootoo_he-drown-she-in-the-sea.mp3
The lingering architecture of British imperial power nevertheless assumes a very concrete form as England, obliquely referred to as the Shivering Northern Wetlands, materializes throughout the novel. Writing out of a distinctly colonial inheritance, Mootoo features the at-times overlooked history of South Asian indentured labor in the Caribbean. In terms of *Cereus Blooms at Night*, the very presence of Indo-Caribbeans attesting to this indentured labor system proves far less significant than the accompanying racial, gender, and cultural hierarchies. According to Madhavi Kale,

Indentured labor was peculiarly suited to imperial, post-emancipation conditions because it recognized and implicitly capitalized on a racial differentiation – indeed racial hierarchy within the empire by contributing to naturalizing [and] universalizing a bourgeois-imperial sexual division of labor that was not only predicated on, but also reproduced, women’s banishment to the domestic: to domestic space, labor, and identity. (174)

Certainly Chandin Ramchandin is made painfully aware of his racial difference, especially through its phenotypic manifestation: dark skin. While longing to simulate whiteness, studying and imitating Reverend Thoroughly’s gait, gestures, and mannerisms, he has encountered his true visage with horror. Gazing into a full-length mirror, Chandin “saw what he most feared: a short and darkly brown Indian-Lantanacamaran boy with blue-black hair” (Mootoo 34). Years later when Lavinia Thoroughly visits his home, he again reviles the visible evidence of his own difference, passed down to his children through their too dark skin (51).

Chandin functions as the dark other: silenced and repressed, ashamed by his Indian parents and religious heritage. He recalls studying theology as the only Indian – and therefore only non-white – student among the pale Wetlanders who longed to “get first-hand experience in a tropical climate among non-Christians” (Mootoo 38). In his peers’ ostensibly good-natured patronage, Chandin identifies himself not as an equal but instead worries that
he stands in as representative “of the race it was their mission to Christianize” (38). His continuing affiliation with the Thoroughly family actually solidifies his otherness. The Reverend forbids any romantic relationship between Chandin and his adoptive sister Lavinia, suggesting that it would be “against God’s will” (37). With supposed religious conviction conspicuously couched in the language of racial purity, “that love must remain pure” (37), the minister’s objection stems less from Chandin’s quasi-brotherly status than his definitive racial marker – his otherness. As a member of this South Asian Diaspora, he remains separated by powerful distinctions of race, class, and nation. He can never gain access to or acceptance into the full rights of citizenship. At their core, such distinctions are profoundly racialized. As Paul Gilroy suggests in Against Race, “diaspora identities . . . are creolized, syncretized, hybridized, and chronically impure cultural forms, particularly if they were once rooted in the complicity of rationalized terror and racialized reason” (129). Thus, despite Gilroy’s debatably utopian conclusions concerning both race and race relations, this notion of contaminated identities effectively underscores the racist rationale that undergirds the reality of diasporic existence, particularly in the Caribbean. The recurring divestment of power that characterizes Chandin’s childhood and “the chaos of his uprootedness” (Mootoo 31), unmistakable consequences of colonial Britain’s indentured labor system, create the conditions of self-revilement and self-hatred that result in his brutal acts of rage. Again

19 Chandin exhibits the “production of alterity” Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri detail in Empire: “Racial difference is a sort of black hole that can swallow up all the capacities for evil, barbarism, unrestrained sexuality, and so forth” (124). As they continue, such “alterity is not given but produced” (125; italics in original). Colonial rhetoric fashions this island boy as the threatening dark other that must be excluded.

20 Gilroy in fact acknowledges his “utopian tone,” which he suggests, “should not disguise its practical purposes” (7). Yet to advocate the “pursuit of liberation from ‘race’” (15), to triumph the renunciation of “race,” and to use the term “post-racial” to describe contemporary society highlight the discrepancy between theory and practice. Hypothetically, we may discuss what it means to be “beyond race,” but at the level of the everyday, we are not so liberated. We need look no further than still-existing, widespread forms of inequity, discrimination, and injustice.
falling victim to entrenched hierarchies, he ultimately does get banished and confined to the domestic sphere, as embodied in his retreat away from active life on the island.

Displaced from the ancestral home in India, removed from his Indo-Caribbean homestead by white missionaries, and ostracized from his adoptive family due to a forbidden love for his white “sister,” Chandin Ramchandin is the fully, *Thoroughly*\(^2\) colonized boy. By association, this includes sexual debasement – or at least humiliation. Sexual degradation of both male and female members of the South Asian diaspora is cemented into the very foundation of the Caribbean island economy. Whereas Kale focuses on the subjugation of Indian women, the degree to which their “sexualization . . . and the labor they performed was [central] to emergent bourgeois-capitalist notions of free labor, freedom and nation” (167), in fact Chandin perpetrates the extreme sexual degradation occupying so much of Mootoo’s novel. However, his own cruelly prolonged victimization counteracts the impulse to interpret him exclusively as sexual predator.\(^2\) Through the dehumanizing process of internal colonization, this island boy is made the source of cross-cultural contamination. By threatening the racial purity of the British family, Chandin’s desire for his adoptive sister Lavinia Thoroughly casts him back into the position of perverse dark other. The now-bastardized son, upbraided for his polluted longing and isolated as a potential contaminant, can only cultivate violent fury and eventually act out his prescribed role as this contaminated subject. Heather Smyth similarly links Chandin’s sexual perversion with its antecedent:

\(^{21}\) This irony first struck me thanks to Smyth’s parenthetical aside regarding the “monolithic colonizing discourse (represented by the exclusivity of the surname ‘Thoroughly’)” (151).

\(^{22}\) In much the same way, *The Bluest Eye*’s Cholly Breedlove displays his own sexual anxieties, arising during his adolescence in the American South, that get projected onto his young daughter Pecola Breedlove. The seeds of her pregnancy may be traced to his sickening encounter in the pine woods. Cholly’s violation of Pecola is clearly linked to his own humiliation – and feminization – during his first sexual experience with the hapless Darlene.
desire across races. As she maintains, “The question of incest also masks an instance of interracial attraction” (Smyth 148). Significantly, not until after Sarah Ramchandin rejects her husband in favor of an interracial love affair with the very object of his earliest affections does Mala’s father, once again emasculated, force his own sexual anxieties and sadistic anger onto his two young daughters. This Indo-Caribbean man has been multiply displaced, first from his biological family (and, by extension, a distant homeland), later from his adoptive one, and finally from the household he himself corrupts.23

With *Cereus Blooms at Night* inflected by this historical backdrop, the enduring presence of colonial exploitation gets unleashed within a discordant Caribbean home-place. While alluring in its mystery, the supposedly idealized location of “Paradise” connotes not comfort and security but rather unfolds as a terrifying inferno of abuse and captivity. Mootoo positions her tale in and around the contaminated Ramchadin house, where punishment is exacted upon innocent female children, the sisters Mala and Asha. Through Mala, whose psychic splitting results in a shattered identity, the author reveals the individual damage levied upon this contested Caribbean, the site where personal and collective histories merge. Homi Bhabha sketches the transformation of historical agency in terms of “the metaphoricity of the houses of racial memory” (18). Within this framework, the Ramchandin home functions as both extended metaphor and extracted memory – another example of Mootoo’s politically conscious metonymy. Paternal incest bespeaks imperial Britain’s appropriation of colonial subjects, the exploitation of their labor and capital, as well as the racist, supremacist

23 In the incisive language of Claudia MacTeer, he has been “put outdoors,” something “criminal” (Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* 17). As the nine-year-old narrator differentiates, “If you are put out, you go somewhere else; if you are outdoors, there is no place to go. The distinction was subtle but final. Outdoors was the end of something, an irrevocable, physical fact, defining and complementing [a] metaphysical condition” (17). Chandin, too, has been cast away, metaphorically put outdoors. Interestingly, in death he is locked inside the house and all its violent horrors. After blockading the sewing room and isolating her father’s body, Mala “never lit a lantern in that house again. Nor did she, since that day, pass a night inside its walls” (Mootoo 230).
logic buttressing this violent enterprise. Chandin Ramchandin’s internal self-hatred and self-abjection, painfully inculcated in the Thoroughly household, outwardly attach to partial (at least genetically speaking) self-incarnations through the unspeakable violation and contamination of his offspring. His daughters Mala and Asha denote a truncated lineage, yet vicious cycles of incest appalling reinscribe the South Asian diasporic subject’s loss of a past as well as a future heritage. Strategically placed within the Caribbean home, then, is Bhabha’s sense of

> private and public, past and present, the psyche and the social [which] develop an interstitial intimacy. It is an intimacy that questions binary divisions through which such spheres of social experience are often spatially opposed. These spheres of life are linked through an ‘in-between’ temporality that takes the measure of dwelling at home, while producing an image of the world of history. (19)

The novel centers on Mala’s devastating story, captured through Chandin’s overbearing presence “in every nook of the house, in every corner of the yard, watching her every move” (Mootoo 224). Yet the broader narrative, filtered through the lens of acutely private horrors located within the home, spotlights the parallel abuses written upon other displaced bodies. The fictional realm fuses Mala’s fragmented memories and thereby projects a collective history – the present and the past here brought together.

Mootoo presents a narrative “in-betweenness” that underscores colonization’s devastating global reality vis-à-vis the domestic sphere’s inescapable intimacy. Whereas Kincaid focuses on the island Antigua’s prolonged desecration, first at the hands of the unfeeling British and later by thoughtless European and American tourists, Morrison and Mootoo portray comparable corruptions through disturbingly tainted houses, locating abuse and incest against the most helpless bodies in their structural recesses. However, the mistreatment of Michael Street in *Tar Baby* is largely deferred. The tale of his trauma, the
harsh pinches and pinpricks administered at the hands of his mother, is revealed only in conjunction with present-day events, retold within an island setting. The narrator avows Michael’s presence solely through his absence from the text, and his abuse, whether figured as remote history or traumatic memory, resides far beyond its pages: geographically placed not in the Caribbean but in the United States, temporally located in a distant past. Despite Margaret Street’s shocking confession near the novel’s conclusion, Morrison’s readers remain distanced from these past injuries, never placed within the original house of Michael’s abuse. Conversely, readers of Mootoo’s novel reluctantly participate in an uncomfortable “readerly witnessing ‘act’” (Hall 111), forcibly confined to the Ramchandin household.24

Mootoo presents one such active, witnessing reader through the figure of Tyler, the only male nurse on Lantanacamara, the elderly Mala’s primary caretaker, and the reluctant recorder of her tale. Just as he sifts through layers of rumored hearsay and disjointed memory, so readers slowly piece together the tragic tale of forbidden love and devastating incest. Bounded by the strictures of Mala’s traumatized psyche, Tyler hesitatingly “set[s] the story down” as an act of reclaimed narrative memory. Through such retelling, Sissy Helff notes, this safeguard of the older woman’s secrets “invests in the retrieval of almost lost stories” (288). Yet his narration, more than merely retrieving forgotten or suppressed tales, works at the level of collective remembrance. While striving to remain solely the “relater” of details, Tyler recognizes that, “being a narrator who also existed on the periphery of the events, I am bound to be present” (3). He inhabits a space concurrently distant and proximate

24 During her interview with Mootoo, Lynda Hall makes this observation: “As well as creating a ‘reality’ for the self through the writing process, the writer also provides witness for others. The readerly witnessing ‘act’ creates community, and understanding through that community; as well, the writings encourage social transformation by actively intervening to disrupt the cycles of abuse” (111).
to the novel’s events. A heightened awareness of this paradox further transmutes the
intimately witnessing reader into another role, that of testimonial storyteller.

The frame narrator operates as the critical nexus between the purely referential and
the ambivalently interpretive. Tyler’s task is twofold: to record events and to decipher their
significance. At times he remains static, merely documenting the novel’s internal action. In
other moments he must translate Mala’s bewildering behavior and extract meaning from her
“jumbled, mumbled words” (71), metaphorically “fashioning a single garment out of myriad
parts . . .” (105; italics in original). As such, Tyler’s dilemma of how best not only to
represent Mala’s story faithfully but also to decode its details resonates with the author’s
own. Consistently in interviews, Mootoo has identified the centrality of Trinidad and her
island upbringing as well as Canada (her current home) in shaping the landscape of her work.
She also has elaborated upon the prevailing difficulty of writing even a fictionalized
Caribbean, of accessing her former life there. The writer comments on this conundrum in a
digital interchange:

> My childhood is now like a muddled and fading dream: here [in Canada], my
> Trinidadian past has been exoticised away (by myself as well as by others), and I am
> afraid that I am losing my grasp on what I once considered banal details, but which
> now I long to snatch back as precious specificities that might keep those early
> Trinidad days alive in me – banal details which I tended to omit because they were
> not easily translatable to the uninitiated. (“Dear Shani, Hiya Richard”)

Whereas diasporic migration often is represented as geographic dislocation, here Mootoo
frames such displacement in predominantly temporal terms. Significantly, she references
both the challenge of preserving moments from a past life(time) and the impossibility of
returning to this Trinidad, a former version existing solely as a “muddled and fading dream.”
A fellow member of the West Indian Diaspora, Fung expresses a similar awareness of living
suspended between past and present, here and elsewhere. “Our work,” he writes, “is fueled
by this constant going over, a continuous reevaluation of what we once took for granted, a look at the past as a way of understanding the present. My invocation of Trinidad is a way of understanding Canada: lands apart, lands connected” (“Dear Shani, Hiya Richard”). Both authors speak precisely, poignantly to the persistently nagging tension that accompanies migration: the physical and psychological struggle to locate an enduring homeland.

This challenge of “living on the borderlines of the ‘present’” and the resultant “sense of disorientation, a disturbance of direction, in the ‘beyond’: an exploratory, restless movement” (Bhabha 1-2) repeatedly surface in *Cereus Blooms at Night*. What I have identified as a diasporic aesthetic manifests through Tyler’s hesitation over the accuracy of details, his compulsion to elucidate Mala’s life, and his own in-between status as a conflicted gay man living in a hostile environment, one that deems his sexual orientation a perversion. Reflecting upon his time away from the island, he remarks, “my desire to leave the shores of Lantanacamara had much to do with wanting to study abroad, but far more with wanting to be somewhere where my ‘perversion’ . . . might be either invisible or of no consequence to people to whom my foreignness was what would be strange” (47-48). As a man who favors cross-dressing, he has endured feelings of alienation, disorientation, and even self-loathing, having been permanently judged an “outsider” (6).

Tyler’s queer identification lies well outside the realm of acceptable social practice, at least according to the Sexual Offences Act of 1986. As M. Jacqui Alexander persuasively demonstrates, the Trinidad and Tobago Parliament enacted one of several “racialized

25 Very early in the novel, he vows to understand the seemingly incomprehensible Mala Ramchandin: “I needed to know the woman who lay hidden by the white sheet” (11).

26 While this act was passed in Trinidad and Tobago, most scholars (myself included) interpret Lantanacamara as a fictional parallel for the Caribbean nation – just as the Shivering Northern Wetlands presumably stands in for England.
legislative gestures that have naturalized heterosexuality by criminalizing . . . non-procreative sex” (5). Intolerance of Tyler’s queerness, undeniably an incisive critique of Lantanacamara’s insularity, also represents yet another residual of colonial oppression. Historically, this legally sanctioned prejudice may be traced directly to Britain’s Offences Against the Person Acts, which included state-authored morality statutes concerning so-called “unnatural offences” (i.e., “buggery”) and “carnal knowledge” (i.e., prostitution). In extending Empire’s rule, “colonial practices . . . policed and scripted ‘native’ sexuality to help consolidate the myth of imperial authority” (Alexander 8). Gopinath, citing additional studies by feminist historians Rhoda Reddock and Patricia Mohammed, notes that Indian “indentureship [in the Caribbean] was marked from its inception by a discourse of sexual morality” (179). She focuses on the disciplinary strictures for Indian women, namely their confinement to domestic space and divestment from “laboring and sexual agency” (181). Yet the far-reaching detrimental effects of this “legislation of heteronormativity” (Gopinath 181) necessarily applied to any individual first British law and later the decolonized nation deemed sexually deviant. Thus, as a gay Caribbean subject, Tyler has endured displacement within his own culture; however, his dislocation has originated from without, stemming from a history of (imported) colonial jurisprudence.

While clearly placed outside legislated heterosexual norms, Tyler speaks with a renewed authority that the text accords narrative memory. His metonymic position subtly conjoins the novel’s aesthetic and political valences. By narrating tales of diasporic

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27 The Bahamas government followed suit three years later with the Sexual Offences and Domestic Violence Act of 1989. As Alexander argues, “the effects of political economic international processes provoke a legitimation crisis for the [postcolonial] state which moves to restore its legitimacy by recouping heterosexuality through legislation” (7). She compellingly links the state’s governing of bodies, particularly the regulation of citizenship through sexuality, with “the ongoing and complicated process of decolonization and reconstruction of the self” (6) – not only to define the nation but also to restore its autonomy on the global stage.
movement, of leave takings and homecomings, of past abuse and future redemption, Tyler concomitantly recounts and inhabits the position of the displaced Caribbean subject. His representational and interpretive prominence signals Mootoo’s unwavering commitment to a joint aesthetic-political exigency. She appoints the gay, cross-dressing nurse to confront arbitrary categorizations dictating “appropriate” gender identity and sexual desire. As he wryly comments, “Over the years I pondered the gender and sex roles that seemed available to people, and the rules that went them” (47). With Tyler questioning the legitimacy of these performative roles and their accompanying rules, Mootoo interrogates their wanton insufficiency and ruthless application. Thus, Cereus Blooms at Night unfolds through a series of tragic, forbidden affairs, enabling the author to expose the devastating consequences that ensue when lovers are forced into repressive secrecy. Lavinia Thoroughly and Sarah Ramchandin’s relationship – or, rather, its disastrous aftermath – serves as the most brutalizing example of such repression. Mootoo challenges the imperial prescription of heterosexuality by chronicling the catastrophic human penalty exacted whenever individuals must hide their true identities.

The novel also expands the possibility of so-called “acceptable” desire, particularly through the romantic connection forged between Tyler and Otoh. Bolstered by the watchful sympathy of Mala and their “shared queerness” (48), the narrator falls in love with the androgynously alluring Otoh, formerly known as Ambrosia. Even Otoh’s nickname, a condensed acronym for his/her favored expression, “on the one hand, but also on the other,” undermines dichotomous reasoning and the colonial dialectic. Earlier, the nurse may have mourned his own displacement, “Not a man and not ever to be a woman, suspended nameless in the limbo state between existence and nonexistence” (77), yet he ultimately finds
belonging within such ambiguity. His romantic companionship with the man/woman who clings to “his (her) strong belief that he (she) was really and truly meant to be a boy” (110) is portrayed as a productive partnership. Such blurring categories, a notable transition away from empire’s rigid hierarchies, suggest the mobile fluidity of sexuality and desire.

Temporally, Mootoo moves from the past, framed through Mala’s former relationship with Otoh’s father, Ambrose, and later reincarnated in a future that opens to embrace the potential crossings of formerly rigid boundaries of gender and sexuality. The diasporic aesthetic is again suggested through “the character of Otoh [and I also would include here Tyler and Otoh’s relationship] embody[ying] the ways in which travel and movement occur within the space of home itself, within bodies that are in motion without leaving home” (Gopinath 184). Curiously, this bodily mobility transpires within a newly formed Caribbean home-place, not the ancestral site of past abuse but instead the “Paradise Alms House.”

However, until the novel’s final pages, in which multiple, layered, and simultaneous narratives are finally brought together, *Cereus Blooms at Night*’s elusive structure has in fact challenged the conventions of linear time. Like the constantly changing island jungle, the story’s chronology has remained suspended, woven through memory. Even as a relative outsider, Otoh observes these mystical properties, located in Mala’s garden: “On this side of the fence, the world seemed quieter, as though time had slowed down” (Mootoo 150). Through this reclaimed sacred space, her fragmented recollections, and the child’s night wanderings, Mala pieces together an alternative story for Pohpoh – for herself. She “wished that she could go back in time and be a friend to this Pohpoh. . . . With piercing eyes she would pull the walls of that house down, down, down” (142). Following the traumatic

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28 Mala’s protective impulse for Pohpoh echoes Mootoo in her exchange with Richard Fung. Having earlier referenced the “dirty old men [who] proved to be perfect cowards,” she comments, “In my teens, after I had
murder of her father, Mala’s deep desire to reshape the past and to save her young self, the abused child, overtakes her present reality. Rape, the bloodied cleaver, psychic loss, and betrayal interrupt the enchanting story she imagines with her lover Ambrose, a veritable fairy tale complete with “a gallant suitor” and an “elegant lady” who dance eternally to the gramophone’s magical music (208).

Through this wounded, traumatized figure, Mootoo connects the human body with topographical metaphors: the island. Strangely, Mala Ramchandin’s tragic story seemingly merges with that of Lantanacamara (as her father’s seemingly merges with that of India’s). Having been absorbed into the jungle landscape, she emits “an aroma resembling rich vegetable compost” (Mootoo 11), a smell that evokes the sickly sweet fragrance of the night-blooming cereus. Even as the child Pohpoh, she has found refuge in the jungle landscape, “an uncanny communion” (152) in which she “become[s] one with the trees, shrubs, weeds, fences, thorns, water and mossy ground . . . inspecting and greeting the space” (Mootoo 151). Described in her old age by Tyler as “a tiny spectre of a being” (11), Mala, with her “skeletal structure” (11), appears both exotic and spectral. Like the disorienting, impenetrable jungle and its overwhelming lushness, this individual, in her madness, resists interpretation. She is safe in her tropical haven, protected by an “appalling … odour . . . thick, like a miasma” and the “putridity under [her] house” (153). Eventually, her body melds with the decaying, rotting landscape. Meticulously collecting every insect and animal corpse in her sacred garden, Mala – through her very person – conveys the sense of life coexisting with death. She has been placed outside her home both by her father’s abuse and its traumatically reinscribed

successfully defied normalcy by playing cricket in the streets with the boys, by helping them build a house in a mango tree, and refusing to wear dresses, my fantasies began to include a girl whom I would rescue, never from the elements or from nature, but from family, from men, from society.”
memories. She takes comfort in this “scent of decay . . . the aroma of life refusing to end. It was the aroma of transformation. Such odour was proof that nothing truly ended” (128).

With her repository of disjointed memories, Mala Ramchandin negotiates those spaces between the living and the dead. She coexists amid multiple narratives, irretrievably split between the abused child and her adult protector. As she inhabits a mysterious space somewhere between memory and fantasy, past and present, then and now, the child Pohpoh’s gaping absence nevertheless asserts haunting presence in the old woman’s psyche, what might be termed displacement within. In returning to the past in order to redeem Pohpoh’s childhood, Mala projects a future in which the child escapes through diasporic flight. Using a modified breaststroke, Pohpoh (perhaps like her younger sister Asha) flies away from Lantanacamara: “Down below, her island was soon lost among others, all as shapeless as specks of dust adrift on a vast turquoise sea” (186). Set against this backdrop of perpetual displacement, both within and without the Caribbean home-place, any return – even when facilitated by crossing over formerly repressive borders and boundaries – appears fraught by a conflicted past, one characterized by throbbing (if shared) memories. Despite the distant promise of renewed community, Mootoo leaves such questions queerly, queryingly open. The prospect of the child’s voyage, coupled with the lost letters from Asha that end the novel, provides but fleeting glimpses toward wholeness. Yet with this compelling image of flight, Cereus Blooms at Night circles back to the suggestion of future possibility, curiously inscribed through the reclamation of personal memory.

Thus the poignant language, “nothing truly ended,” alludes to a productive circularity, in which “endings are but beginnings that have taken to standing on their heads . . . . Even

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29 In addition to those displacements away from the ancestral home, Bammer underscores the idea of displacement within, of “people who are not expelled from but displaced within their native culture by processes of external or internal colonization” (xi).
beginnings have their own beginnings” (170-171). As readers witness, Tyler and Otoh are brought together under Mala and Ambrose’s tacit blessing at the Paradise Alms House. Mala and Ambrose’s reunion, taken together with Tyler and Otoh’s burgeoning love, suggest the almost magical reincarnation of a previous romance. While Ambrose was powerless to facilitate Mala’s escape from her father, Otoh, his daughter/son, helps Tyler find abiding connection. And the novel’s chronology, which now gestures toward a future with “the promise of a cereus-scented breeze on a Paradise night” (249), is recursively disrupted no longer.

Linked to the clear evocation of a diasporic aesthetic, then, is an equally evident political impulse. Mootoo’s celebration of gender/sexual fluidity echoes along numerous intersecting axes, pointing to Clifford’s “enunciative boundaries” (5) and Hong’s “sites of potential” (92). While undeniably fiction, Cereus Blooms at Night also contains an autobiographical element, further elucidated in Mootoo’s online exchange with Fung. She mentions “constantly battling with the deeply inscribed memory in my body of umpteen generations of gendering.” In response to the conversation, she continues

I agree with you that ‘our sensitivity to the political construction of landscape comes out of . . . displacements’ through ‘our actual journeys across geography.’ But may I include gendering as a displacement for those of us who cannot, will not be placed inside its structure, and landscape as a significant haven and site of reinvention and imagining?30

Within her fictional landscape, Mootoo hints at the possibility of reinvention. Her series of sexual and gender “others,” while mirroring both the island’s indeterminacy and Mala’s spectral hovering, also direct readers toward a queerly inflected “trope of elsewhere.”

The Personal as Political: Jamaica Kincaid’s Violated Small Place

Jamaica Kincaid’s *A Small Place* (1988) stands out as somewhat an anomaly among her early publications, the 1983 collection of short stories, *At the Bottom of the River*, and two novels, *Annie John* (1985) and *Lucy* (1991). While certainly not fiction, the slim volume (at less than 80 pages) has been variously labeled “seething narrative” (Ippolito 153), “a brilliant satire” (Broeck 822), “a diatribe against the tourism industry” (Braziel 115), and “an elegy” within a collection of “anticolonialist essays” (de Abruna 179-180). Giovanni Covi, in an attempt to identify the text’s hybrid forms and effects, suggests, “it is a political essay for its content, but it reads like fiction, while sounding like a speech delivered with the passion and rhythm of a song” (38). Indeed, as Kincaid explicitly addresses “you . . . a tourist,” later identified as “a North American or European” (4), the writer adopts a first-person voice that rapidly shrinks the distance between speaker, text, and readers (or listeners in Covi’s construct). Relentlessly political while offering the specific testimony of private loss as might be found in memoir, *A Small Place* remains difficult to classify in terms of genre. The author routinely draws upon Caribbean and colonial histories, economic theory, autobiographical details, and assorted anecdotes to assemble her four-part piece.

Perhaps Kincaid’s essay-memoir seems an equally unusual choice for closing my chapter, which so far has investigated two novels set within imaginary Caribbean islands. Intriguingly, Kincaid’s fiction does share remarkable similarities with both *Tar Baby* and *Cereus Blooms at Night*. Much like Morrison’s myth- and legend-inflected Isle des Chevaliers, the various settings throughout *At the Bottom of the River* communicate a prevailing sense of indeterminacy. Characterized by an almost ambivalent supernatural presence, Kincaid’s short stories reframe reality to encompass the fantastic. In “At Last,” for
example, an unidentified voice ruminates, “Sometimes I appeared as a man. Sometimes I appeared as a hoofed animal, stroking my own brown, shiny back” (*At the Bottom of the River* 17). Like Mootoo, whom Gopinath declares “self-consciously antirealist” (179), Kincaid eschews realism in recounting tales of the *jablesse*, shape shifters that morph and take on alternate bodies, and the impenetrable mysteries of *obeah*, West Indian folk magic. As she elaborates in an interview with Selwyn R. Cudjoe, “The idea of a story – or anything – being realistic, the idea of representing something as it is was absurd . . . And I knew that whatever I did, I would not be interested in realism” (223). With her fiction writing against the temptation merely to capture the world “as it is,” *A Small Place* decries the world as it has been made.

Through her penetrating snapshots of Antigua, Kincaid exposes the vagaries of power unleashed upon a small place: the grievous wounds inflicted under British domination, the unrelenting tourists that consume precious natural resources, the direct links that connect widespread government corruption “today” to colonial exploitation in the past. She underscores the economic disparities that primarily linger beneath the surface in both *Tar Baby* and *Cereus Blooms at Night*. Morrison raises the issue of global expansionism through a peripheral critique of multinational capitalism; the inhabitants of her natural world (the clouds and fish) mourn when the land gets cleared, forcefully overhauled to construct winter houses. Mootoo, by focusing on colonial law’s policing of human bodies, exposes the cross-generational contaminations wrought by entrenched racial hierarchies and the legislation of acceptable desire. Yet it is the Antigua-born Kincaid who unwaveringly exposes the tremendous costs of tourism for the Caribbean – both its landscape and its peoples. She systematically records a litany of past abuses: “You murdered people. You imprisoned
people. You robbed people” (35), excoriating the “bad-minded,” “ill-mannered” English (34). Perhaps more psychologically debilitating than the persistent economic instability and pervasive government corruption is the corresponding colonization of history itself, for “you distorted or erased my history and glorified your own” (36). While not overlooking clear distinctions of genre, I would contend that A Small Place, even more insistently than Tar Baby and Cereus Blooms at Night, makes clear the political urgency of this project. For here Kincaid, embracing both pathos and politics, writes as the diasporic subject displaced from her violated Caribbean home-place.

As she recasts the distant colonial and proximate consumerist histories of Antigua, Kincaid writes from within and between several peculiar intersections: the personal and the polemical, the individual and the communal, the margin and the center. Even while situated outside the island nation, her understanding is that of an insider who spent her childhood there. She also highlights the ambivalent potential of home for the diasporic subject. In the interview with Cudjoe, Kincaid confesses the difficulty of fashioning an identity as an individual who refuses to return to the West Indies. She explains her choice of a pen name: “It was a kind of invention: I wouldn’t go home to visit that part of the world, so I decided to recreate it. ‘Jamaica’ was symbolic of that place” (220). Her dilemma, of residing within the United States, not only the center of neocolonial power but also the producer of more Caribbean tourists than any other nation, curiously echoes that of Indian-British writer Salman Rushdie in Imaginary Homelands. Born in Bombay but living in London, he ponders the significance of being geographically distant from a homeland: “Can [displaced writers] do no more than describe, from a distance, the world that they have left? Or does the distance
open any doors?” (13). Identifying such musings as “political questions,” Rushdie later asserts that, “description is itself a political act” (13).

Kincaid’s opening description, which begins with the tourist’s view from the V. C. Bird International Airport, an internal commentary about “what a beautiful island Antigua is . . ., where the sun always shines and where the climate is deliciously hot and dry” (3-4), exposes the holiday tourist’s glib ignorance. From the outset, she sharply confronts the indifferent cruelty of exploitation through this global industry of tourism. More than merely depicting the widespread economic and political disenfranchisement on the islands, the author reveals profound alienation from Antigua itself. In order to attract and keep the tourists coming, ministers in government ensure that taxi drivers ferry their precious cargo in flashy, expensive vehicles. While “the banks are encouraged by the government to make loans available for cars,” however, “loans for houses are not so easily available” (7).

Fascinatingly, this example reveals an opposition between roots and routes that surfaces within both the Antiguan economy and its island landscape. Kincaid portrays the ability to own a home, to invest in and build a local community, as literally under threat. Cars, as modes of transport, are readily available to entertain tourists who luxuriate in the wealthy, impermanent façade. Locals suffer from woefully inadequate housing, a beleaguered educational system, and hospitals “staffed with doctors no actual Antiguan trusts” (8).

The very same beauty that the transient tourists celebrate, an endlessly beaming sun and sparkling water that “is pale, silvery, clear” (13), obscures the oppressive realities for permanent residents. Everyday living in “this place . . . where the sun always shines” means “constantly” combating “drought” (4) and rationing the precious fresh water that tourists readily take for granted. Hilton McDavid further elucidates these hidden “politics of water.”
He cites a study (from 2000) that “estimates that . . . the current per capita tourist requirement for potable water supply is ten times that of a local resident” (65). While speaking less specifically about tourist consumption, Kincaid disabuses a naïve faith that the ocean’s appearance, its untainted crystalline beauty, accurately reflects reality. The fact that “in Antigua, there is no proper sewage-disposal system” (14) corrupts the breath-taking image. As “you see yourself, you see yourself . . .” (13), “you,” the global customer ravishing the offerings of an exotic culture, never behold the water’s pollutants of human waste, detritus of “your” vacation.

What emerge, then, are contested natural resources and geographical spaces, distilled into consumable goods and services. Thus, when Kincaid mocks “an incredibly unattractive, fat, pastrylike-fleshed woman enjoying a walk on the beautiful sand,” accompanied by an equally unsightly, corpulent male companion, with both taking “pleasure . . . in their surroundings” (13), she highlights the disparities between work and leisure, subsistent survival and lavish luxury. Even the beach, presumably open to all, becomes marked by rigid boundaries. As Anne P. Crick explains, all-inclusive hotels, in addition to covering accommodation, food/beverages, and entertainment, market both their novelty and security through an exclusive access to secluded locations. The result is to “segregate visitors from the outside world,” thereby “keeping locals and visitors apart” (Crick 166). In analyzing the Jamaica Tourist Board’s efforts to capitalize on the island’s top industry, Crick characterizes the customary nature of tourist/host interactions as “highly asymmetrical,” “ephemeral,” “segmented and instrumental,” and “especially open to mistrust, cheating and broken

31 Although McDavid’s study targets the island of Jamaica, his findings regarding tourists’ disproportionate consumption of natural resources are consistent with Kincaid’s anecdotal observations. His later statement, “Of particular concern is the damage that can be created during the construction of facilities and pollution caused by the discharge of sewage, solid waste and cleaners and detergents” (McDavid 67), sounds extraordinarily similar to Kincaid’s description of the ocean.
contracts” (164). Often operating at the level of “crude stereotypes,” tourists and locals alike approach transactions already burdened by misunderstandings and inaccurate expectations (164). Highlighting a mutual discomfort and unease, Kincaid quickly shocks her readers. She comments first as a declarative statement, “They do not like you,” before repeating the line verbatim, except for a pronoun shift, italics for emphasis, and exclamatory incredulity: “They do not like me!” (17). Through repetition and visual emphasis, Kincaid underlines the sensation of not belonging, homelessness, and displacement – but transferred to her readers.

Beyond the field of charged emotions plaguing these semi-contractual interactions, the widespread economic realities remain daunting. As Nikolaos Karagiannis and C. Salvaris maintain, “tourism has further subjected Caribbean economies to outside dependence, making them highly vulnerable” (39). The implications of a nation’s Gross Domestic Product and Gross National Product so enmeshed in tourism, a peculiar service industry that almost exclusively caters to foreign visitors, are far-reaching. Amid “territories [that] are overpopulated, underdeveloped countries,” Karagiannis and Salvaris continue, “prosperity coexists with squalor and deprivation, and population growth generally exceeds the rate of employment growth” (41).

In lodging blame, Kincaid initially launches her invective commentary against a heretofore-unnamed readership. According to Rosemary Weatherston, “[her] ruthless elimination of any western illusion of benign cultural consumption begins with the [text’s] first line” (145): “If you go to Antigua as a tourist, this is what you will see” (Kincaid 3). Not simply a tourist, Kincaid further contextualizes, “you” are “a North American or European – to be frank, white” (4). Neocolonial tourism, like British imperialism, is profoundly

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32 Whereas the major colonial power in the West Indies was Great Britain, in terms of the modern tourism industry, “The USA has always been the largest tourist generating market for the Caribbean, providing well
racialized. The economic disparities of class difference get distributed inequitably across a non-white landscape. Perhaps not surprisingly, Kincaid links Antigua’s current economic vulnerability and corrupt government as well as the diasporic subject’s psychic displacement to British colonization. She unveils colonial presence in terms of an intimate invasion, the transgression of domestic space. Colonizers “far away from their home” (29) threateningly materialize as unwelcome “strangers in someone else’s home” (27). With its inhabitants having been made “orphans: no motherland, no fatherland” (31), Antigua’s cultural inheritance, linguistic distinction, racial diversity, national identity, and history have likewise been overtaken and colonized.

Set against this backdrop of the de-/colonized nation, Kincaid heightens the powerful opposition existing within the very country of Antigua, the marked contrast between the impressions that tourists take home and the narrator’s memories of a distant past. She speaks with mournful poignancy of a lost Antigua, subjected to the effects of decolonization. While in part attributable to “the passing of time” (23), Antigua remains preserved solely through acts of remembrance. Even after the British vacate the island, imperialism’s cruel aftershocks render the process of constructing a cohesive national identity anxiously fraught.

Through the joint processes of revealing an exploited Antiguan landscape, demonstrating its weakened, corrupted economy, and charting an historical trail littered with broken relations, Kincaid shifts from the vocabulary of economic discourse to the language of profound psychic loss. She exposes the widespread “wreck and the ruin and the greed”

over half the total arrivals in the region” (Karagiannis and Salvaris 44). As the compiled charts from the Planning Institute of Jamaica and the Caribbean Tourism Organization reveal, at each five-year interval between 1985 and 1999, this dominant American presence constitutes between 64.5% and 75.8% of all tourists to the Caribbean. Furthermore, the sheer number of American tourists more than doubled between these same years (Karagiannis and Salvaris 44). Or, in Kincaid’s habitual terseness: imperialism extended through tourism, “at the hands of the Americans” (74).
(Cudjoe 224), the sudden, devastating change fashioned in the “incredible history” of Antigua, which “went from colonialism to the modern world – that is, from about 1890 to 1980 – in five years” (Cudjoe 217). Almost plaintively, she references this problematic history: “Do you ever try to understand why people like me cannot get over the past, cannot forgive and cannot forget?” (A Small Place 26). Her somber piece bespeaks deeply private pain, the impossibility of according the symbolic, anchoring value of home to a place that no longer exists. Amid the harsh realism of her hybrid essay-memoir, the personal and the political meld, merge, and cohabit.

In her review, “Relentlessly Exploited,” Kelly Cherry criticizes the presumed insularity of A Small Place, its very located sense of loss. Attempting to universalize the experience of feeling cut off or misused, Cherry counters, “Everyone one of us is an island, ‘a small place’ harboring the humiliations and despairs of a history of abuse, racial or sexual, political or economic, personal or professional” (19). In a misguided effort to affirm a shared sense of humanity, Cherry elides the distinctiveness of the Antiguan experience. This move to distribute experiences of abuse across racial, sexual, political, and economic lines overlooks important historical and cultural distinctions.33 The universalizing tendency ignores the degree to which Antigua existed as the subjugated property of Great Britain.34 Cherry arguably participates in a form of ideological tourism by appropriating the specific degradations western imperialists (the British) unleashed upon their powerless subjects (not only the Antiguan people but also their enslaved African ancestors). Her relational impulse

33 I treat Cherry at length because beneath her indignation lay the subtle machinations of power and privilege. Her position is one I repeatedly encounter with my undergraduate students. While clearly reactionary, this stance also betrays a disturbing (and still present) narrative of entitlement.

34 Elsewhere Kincaid retorts, “[the British] should never have left their home, their precious England, a place they loved so much, a place they had to leave but could never forget. And so everywhere they went they turned it into England; and everybody they met they turned English” (24).
patently disregards years of callous, racialized exploitation. As Susan Sniader Lanser elaborates, “when Cherry turns Kincaid’s ‘small place’ into a metaphor, she erases the particular pain of slavery and colonialist racism beneath a fiction of universal and presumably equal suffering” (299). By demanding located specificity, Kincaid exposes this same fiction. She writes against multiple myths of liberation: historically, she rejects the British Empire’s arrogance, its self-deluded efforts to impart a “civilizing” influence; economically, she challenges the tourist industries, ostensible redistributors of the world’s wealth, as global farces; ideologically, she excises those positions of privilege that would claim individuated experiences of oppression as part of the universal human condition. From an analogous theoretical perspective, Angelika Bammer highlights the ensuing ontological problem that often plagues such paradigms: that “to ‘be’ in the postmodern sense is somehow to be an Other: displaced,” a conceptualization of identity in which “differences, thus universalized, disappear,” as does “the historical experience of difference” (xii-xiii).

Whether originating within or without, displacement is geographically particular and historically specific. Kincaid insists upon such spatiotemporal locatedness, frequently reminding her readers, “Antigua is a small place, a small island. It is nine miles wide by twelve miles long” (80). In such a small place, she suggests, “people cultivate small events” (52). Hence the 1974 destruction of the library due to “The Earthquake” – with the sign, “REPAIRS ARE PENDING,” still hanging over a decade later – denotes more than merely an “unfulfilled promise” (8-9). Perhaps anticipating readers’ skepticism concerning the building’s significance, the writer frames its loss in terms of ruined innocence and aching heartbreak:

Why is she so undone at what has become of the library, why does she think that is a good example of corruption, of things gone bad? But if you saw the old library,
situated as it was, in a big, old wooden building painted a shade of yellow that is beautiful to people like me, with its wide veranda, its big always open windows, its rows and rows of shelves filled with books, its beautiful wooden tables and chairs for sitting and reading, if you could hear the sound of its quietness [ . . . ], the smell of the sea [ . . . ], the beauty of us sitting there like communicants at an altar, [ . . . ] if you could see all of that in just one glimpse, you would see why my heart would break at the dung heap that now passes for a library in Antigua. (42-43)

This passage seemingly aligns the library’s former, unassuming splendor – its soothing quietude and reverent occupants peacefully bathed by the smell of gentle ocean waves – with the previously untainted beauty of the island itself. The idyllic image lifted from childhood starkly contrasts Antigua’s current state of “corruption,” with its political infrastructure “gone bad” and the cultural “dung heap that now passes for a library.” In this moment, tinged with the quasi-religious fervor of “communicants at an altar,” Kincaid’s earlier aside, “we make everything so personal” (36), attains an almost confessional timbre. The library’s permanent condition of disrepair attests to an ineffectual government, yet this political reality is personally anguishing. As the native Antiguan grieves, “my heart would break.”

Curiously, on the final page of A Small Place, Kincaid pauses briefly in her series of scorching allegations. She momentarily interrupts recounting the litany of abuses proliferated at the hands of the colonizing British and neo-colonial Americans. In place of masters and slaves, she proposes, “once you cease to be a master, once you throw off your master’s yoke, you are no longer human rubbish, you are just a human being, and all the things that adds up to. So, too, with the slaves. Once they are no longer slaves, once they are free, they are no longer noble and exalted; they are just human beings” (81; italics for emphasis). The author, albeit fleetingly, shifts from translating personal loss, namely the cruel destruction of her homeland, to reframing the relationship between master and slave, colonizer and colonized. She neither vilifies “you” nor valorizes “them.” Though skeptics might reasonably argue that
the text’s earlier hostility finally collapses into helpless resignation, Kincaid seemingly purveys more than embittered ruination. She closes with an unexpected image of unity and shared humanity: “you” and “they” are “just human beings.” Here in this moment, she emphasizes the fundamental equality distributed across the range of human experience. By shrinking the distance between the personal and the polemical, perhaps Kincaid evokes a new mode, a relational impulse that acknowledges the wreck and ruin of history while signaling an ambivalent potential elsewhere – “and all the things that adds up to.”

**Multiple Routes Embedded in the Caribbean Home-Place**

In thinking about the hyphenated struggle of diaspora, Trinh Minh-Ha adopts an emotionally laden, almost lyrical voice to express migration’s painful leave takings and homecomings. She writes in *When the Moon Waxes Red*:

Re-departure: the pain and frustration of having to live a difference that has no name and too many names already. Marginality: who names? whose fringes? An elsewhere that does not merely lie outside the center but radically striates it. Identity: the singular naming of a person, a nation, a race, has undergone a reversal of values. . . . Rather, the return to a denied heritage allows one to start again with different re-departures, different pauses, different arrivals. (Trinh 14)

The intensity of such loss, of a displaced and displacing homeland, profoundly echoes throughout Morrison’s *Tar Baby*, Mootoo’s *Cereus Blooms at Night*, and Kincaid’s *A Small Place*. Yet the implicit danger of the comparative inclination between works variously lifted out of African American, South Asian-Caribbean, and Afro-Caribbean diasporic traditions is to overlook cultural and historical difference. For the characters in Morrison’s and Mootoo’s novels, to return to “a denied heritage” and encounter the possibility of “start[ing] again”

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35 Arguably, even in the text’s blistering first section, Kincaid implies a similar human connection. While exposing the tourist industry’s voracious consumption of her native Caribbean, she also writes, “For every native of every place is a potential tourist, and every tourist is a native of somewhere. Every native everywhere lives a life of overwhelming and crushing banality and boredom and desperation and depression” (18).
flickers and recedes, vanishing into a distant layer of future time. With Kincaid speaking as the diasporic subject, her overriding grief and bitterness as a result of Antigua’s internal and external corruption inscribe deep pathos throughout *A Small Place*. While their approaches to exposing the lingering architecture of colonial power and its abuses may differ, Morrison, Mootoo, and Kincaid all portray contested Caribbean home-places, tainted by painful re-departures. They chart the accompanying struggles through “different pauses . . . and arrivals,” of enduring additional scatterings. In exploring the range of multiplicities evoked by the conflicted realities of contemporary diasporic existence, their texts reveal “the principled ambivalence about physical return and attachment” (Clifford 248). Moreover, the power of these works not only to heighten such uncertainty for their readers but also to provoke responses to this emotional uncanny rests with their vivid portrayals of the grievous human cost. The perpetual migration that emerges as a peculiar form of dwelling happens to specific people. In “Home” Morrison identifies the individual bodies subjected to this excruciating process: “the estranged body, the legislated body, the violated, rejected, deprived body” (5). Indeed, the bodies within these texts have been subjected, individually and collectively, to countless cruelties. When written into history, such abuses have been administered by representatives of colonial power, the decolonized state’s legally sanctioned prejudice, and even global tourism’s exploitations. When carved into memory, such violations (against Michael Street, Mala Ramchandin, or a native Antiguan) have transpired within the home itself, with violence desecrating domestic intimacies.

What of the underlying question of diasporic identity – the “singular naming of a person, a nation, a race” – Trinh raises? In *Routes and Roots: Navigating Caribbean and Pacific Island Literatures*, Elizabeth DeLoughrey suggests that “attention to [diasporic]
movement,” rather than advocating a purely rootless identity, “offers a paradigm of rooted routes, of a mobile, flexible, and voyaging subject who is not physically or culturally circumscribed by the terrestrial boundaries of the island space” (3). Acknowledging the unimaginable accumulation of loss that individual members of the diaspora have undergone, I want to propose an emergent theoretical function of a politicized aesthetic. Such movement and dispersion inevitably extend geographic boundaries. Crossing or transgressing borders writes against the singularizing viewpoint. As Kincaid demonstrates, historically the Caribbean, whether through the imperialist account of the past or the neo-imperialist version of economic co-option, has been rendered in very limited terms. The Caribbean has been evaluated in terms of its commodity worth: the “free” labor procured through slavery and indentureship or the “cheap” goods and services exploited by the tourist industry.

Yet within a mobilized, politicized diasporic consciousness, the home-place gets recast and re-imagined. As bell hooks argues in *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics*, “Home is no longer just one place . . . One confronts and accepts dispersal and fragmentation as part of the constructions of a new world order that reveals more fully where we are, who we can become, an order that does not demand forgetting” (19). Embedded in hooks’s move toward futurity – the sense of becoming – is a decided shift away from attachment to a certain kind of identity politics, an identity politics that would intensify or antagonize difference. She instead suggests embracing a coalitional model sketched in relational terms, that “we” may create “a new world order” that preserves and remembers.

Despite such promise, even to invoke the trope of displacement immediately connotes the traumatic dislocation from an identifiable homeland, divestment from connectedness, and
deprivation from the rights of national citizenship. In *Questions of Travel*, Caren Kaplan postulates a rootless intermittency that nevertheless conveys rooted immediacy:

> Each metaphor of displacement includes referentially a concept of placement, dwelling, location, or position. Thus exile is always already a mode of dwelling at a distance from a point of origin. Tourism is travel between points of origin and destinations. Diaspora disperses the locations of dwelling into an interstitial habitus. Nomadism is the most attenuated concept in relation to location. Yet even theories of nomadic rhizomes include ‘nodes’ – those sites of intersecting movements or “lines of flight.” Thus most notions of displacement contain an oppositional notion of placement and vice versa. (143)

Certainly the characters in *Tar Baby* and *Cereus Blooms at Night*, characters that repeatedly travel between the Caribbean, Europe, and the United States, inhabit this peculiar state. Yet in the problematic home-place, originary placement gets prevailingly revealed as illusion. Even as Kaplan underscores the preeminence of wandering travel that nevertheless connects back and referentially entails a return, Morrison, Mootoo, and Kincaid heighten textual ambiguities. In place of an imaginary origin or fixed location, they reflect and reproduce for their readers those fragmentary narratives that constitute diasporic flight, offering only fleeting images of delayed returns.

However, I would like to suggest that these very same scatterings might be reframed in terms of diasporic identities and their potential coalitions. The overall mode of *A Small Place* is one of invective critique. Yet Kincaid’s final move is not to launch another excoriating blow against the “bad-minded English” or “ugly tourists.” Even as she parenthetically remarks, “(all masters of every stripe are rubbish, and all slaves of every stripe are noble and exalted; there can be no question about this)” (80), her eventual appeal is for unification along the lines of a shared humanity. From rubbish and slaves, then, colonists, tourists, and (local) residents alike are transformed into human beings. Francophone theorist Édouard Glissant speaks to this very phenomenon. What he calls “the tale of errantry,” of
diasporic wandering and the conflicted home-place, travels through the pathos of exile\textsuperscript{36} to claim relational power—\textit{A Poetics of Relation}. Jointly aesthetic and political,

Errantry, therefore, does not proceed from renunciation nor from frustration regarding a supposedly deteriorated (deterritorialized) situation of origin; it is not a resolute act of rejection or an uncontrolled impulse of abandonment. Sometimes, by taking up the problems of the Other, it is possible to find oneself. . . . That is very much the image of the rhizome, prompting the knowledge that identity is no longer completely within the root but also in Relation. . . . The thought of errantry is a poetics, which always infers that at some moment it is told. The tale of errantry is the tale of Relation. (Glissant 18)

Glissant’s apparatus of errantry reconciles a painfully displaced homeland and reexamines scattered identities through the poetics of relation(s): “Sometimes, by taking up the problems of the Other, it is possible to find oneself.” Toni Morrison, Shani Mootoo, and Jamaica Kincaid unveil haunting intimacies of difference that take up others’ plights. Their fluctuating, conflicted Caribbean home-places powerfully align along a shared coalitional impulse, an impulse extended to their readers. Within the textual confines of their works, such transformative coalitions drift just out of reach. Yet hovering in the wings of an activated, engaged readership, the politicized promise of “a present elsewhere” abides.

\textsuperscript{36} I am thinking in particular of Said’s “Questions on Exile.”
CHAPTER TWO

Politically Recasting the Southern Landscape:
Roving Visionaries in the Fictions of Toni Cade Bambara and Randall Kenan

James Baldwin’s 1964 play, *Blues for Mister Charlie*, betrays a bitterness that saturates every page. Outraged over the brutal 1955 murder of Emmett Till and the horrific 1963 assassination of civil rights leader Medgar Evers, Baldwin artistically mobilizes his act of political protest. In the figure of Richard Henry, the failed blues musician who, despite having been born and raised in the South, reluctantly returns from New York City to “Plaguetown, U.S.A” (Baldwin xv), the author finds a particularly suitable outlet for his rage. Richard, perhaps echoing Baldwin’s own sentiments, scornfully comments on his southern homecoming: “What I can’t get over is this – what in the world am I doing here? Way down here in the ass-hole of the world, the deep, black, funky South” (17). This expression of scathing disbelief reveals not only his deep dissatisfaction but also an equally strong sense of displacement, the feeling of being dislocated, of not belonging.

Much African American literature expresses a similar dis-ease, haunted by the U.S. South and its infamous history of slavery, reckless vigilante justice, and strident practices of racial segregation. Like the contested Caribbean home-place, the South, even when materializing as the proverbial true home, often appears charged with conflict and paradox.

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37 The fourteen-year-old Till, recently arrived from Chicago for a visit with relatives in Money, Mississippi, was summarily beaten, tortured, and mutilated for supposedly whistling at a white woman. Medgar Evers, shot in the back outside his home in Jackson, Mississippi, died on June 12, 1963.
African American writers who intentionally return to this region portray a double-edged South. Within the very same text, they may express a muddled blend of attraction and revulsion. The stakes entrenched in turning southward are high. In “October Journey,” for instance, poet Margaret Walker captures the tension of feeling drawn to the South, with its connections to family, land, and culture, while fearing a violent homecoming. Her speaker both marvels at spring’s wondrous seasonal “earth changes” (18) and declares a somber warning: “Traveller take heed for journeys undertaken in the dark of the year” (1). Although “train wheels hum, ‘I am going home, I am going home, I am moving toward the South’” (43-44), the rhythmic, hypnotic reverie shatters: “an evil moon bleeds drops of death” (35); “my heart fills with hungry fear” (54); “the promise of a sun-lit hour dies” (59). In place of the vernal equinox’s promised renewal, “October Journey” closes amid desolate images of decay, stagnation, and rot – “hating, resentful, and afraid, . . . and full of slimy things” (78-79). The speaker may muse nostalgically about “going home,” yet the reality of her return is one of terror and resentment. In light of such aversion and ambivalence, what are the implications of reclaiming this problematic place? When and how can the South transform into a dynamic, productive space?

My chapter investigates this specific site of geographic displacement and return through the lens of two contemporary African American writers of fiction, Toni Cade Bambara and Randall Kenan. Informed by Angelika Bammer’s insistence, “what is displaced – dispersed, deferred, repressed, pushed aside is, significantly, still there: Displaced but not replaced, it remains a source of trouble, the shifting ground of signification that makes meanings tremble” (xiii), I argue that Bambara and Kenan introduce liminal, wandering

38 “October Journey” first was published in Langston Hughes and Arna Bontemps’s 1949 anthology, The Poetry of the Negro.
figures that peculiarly affirm displacement’s power to trouble and destabilize. These roaming characters, while positioned in an invariable southern setting, radically bisect otherwise-insular worlds, fundamentally disrupting their ideological alignments. Such figures’ placements in the South, “not so much bounded areas as open and porous networks of social relations” (Massey 121), materialize as a challenge of sorts. Their very presence connotes multiplicity of meaning. Bambara and Kenan write against any presumed stability or fixed identity of place, discovering new spaces that emerge as regenerative sites in spite of – or perhaps because of – their southern location. To explore how these two authors stage powerful interventions in the southern landscape, I examine Bambara’s 1980 novel, *The Salt Eaters*, Kenan’s 1989 novel, *A Visitation of Spirits*, as well as his 1992 collection of short stories, *Let the Dead Bury Their Dead*. Motivated by an undeniable political impetus, they actively contest and transform this place, mythically recreating the American South. The grim reality of a history mired in slavery teems throughout their pages. However, Bambara and Kenan enact deliberate returns to this region – physically, psychically, and artistically – and reinvigorate its spaces through their mystic visionaries.

Poised at an important theoretical juncture, this chapter builds upon a current body of scholarship that emphasizes the connections between American southern experience and that of other groups both within and outside the United States. In their December 2006 *American Literature* “Preface: Global Contexts, Local Literatures: The New Southern Studies,” Kathryn McKee and Annette Trefzer argue that the South, when repositioned in a global framework, emerges as “a porous space through which other places have always circulated” (679). They further posit “a shape-shifting South whose boundaries are fluid” (682), championing a project “to unmap, remap, and demap the U.S. South” (688). Recasting the
South as a permeable interface injects dynamism and movement into and across its borders. Yet well before the *American Literature* special issue, Houston Baker made a similar call in his 2001 Prologue to *Turning South Again*. He likewise appealed for a “new southern studies,” one that fully acknowledges the “ghostly emanations of southern economies of violence against the black body” (9).

Adding an explicitly literary dimension to this growing debate, *South to a New Place: Region, Literature, Culture* (2002) further complicates the discussion of place and the revisionist moves of “unmapping” and “demapping.” For example, Scott Romine broadly reflects on “place’s conceptual instability” (23) in literature as well as its intricate, multifaceted “texture” (24). With Romine identifying the resultant ambiguity as a fundamental “crisis of place . . . in a time of transition” (24), Barbara Ladd’s “Dismantling the Monolith” interrogates the “current anxiety surrounding place . . . particularly surrounding southern places” (47). This crisis of place and the ensuing problem of remapping southern borders emerge still more acutely in African American literature, with its long-discordant relationship with the U. S. South.

Thus, perhaps writing and creating *through* inordinately personal and historical rifts, long antagonized by a menacing southern landscape, procures the true revisionist project. To breach formerly rigid boundaries creates new interpretive possibilities, extended across time and through space. Indeed, not even the monolithic South has remained static and inert. Doreen Massey underscores the tendency of places to change and evolve, cautioning against “attempts to fix the meaning of particular places, to enclose them, to endow them with fixed identities and to claim them for one’s own” (4). Instead, she observes, even specific locations are steeped in nuance and complexity; such multilayered “envelopes of space-time in which
and between which we live and move (and have our ‘Being’)” appear interconnected and porous (Massey 122).

In exploiting the permeability of these fluid envelopes, Bambara and Kenan craft peripatetic texts that, by the structural strangeness and paranormal interlocutions of their stories, disrupt narrative time/space while collapsing the past, present, and future. Throughout *The Salt Eaters*, Bambara weaves together a complicated tale of individual rupture and communal healing, evoking African conceptions of time and space as she reorients the city of Claybourne, Georgia. She presents “folk magic as art and fiction as a form of conjuring” (Pryse 2) while filtering her heroine’s psychic wholeness through layers of shared consciousness. In Kenan’s works, most notably the stories collected in *Let the Dead Bury Their Dead*, interventions traverse various spatial, geographical, historical, and metaphysical planes. His roving visionaries – whether a mysterious angel, clairvoyant child, or ghostly vision – cut across multiple fields of action. Their multiplanar impact comes into focus through the lens of vector space, a conceptual framework developed out of recent psycho-cognitive and linguistic studies. Even as they utilize distinct techniques, both authors issue an appeal to further realign these fictional spaces, ultimately rendering readers themselves as migratory figures. Bambara and Kenan propose not only the fictional reorientation of southern spaces but also the mobilization of a renewed political consciousness on the part of readers that encourages its actualization.

*The Salt Eaters: Healing and Community across a Space-Time Continuum*

Both Toni Cade Bambara and *The Salt Eaters* appear firmly situated in a specific cultural, historical, and literary moment. Like a number of black female writers prolific
during the late 1970s and early 1980s (and courtesy of critical anthologies such as Claudia Tate’s *Black Women Writers at Work* and Mari Evans’s *Black Women Writers*\(^{39}\)), Bambara has commented extensively on her fiction. Both she and her debut novel have contributed to the dramatic increase of African American women’s texts found in the academic classroom, on university syllabuses, and within scholarly studies.\(^{40}\) Rising from the renewed political consciousness jointly ushered in by the civil rights and feminist movements, *The Salt Eaters* seems inflected by a peculiar anxiety and urgency. As Ruby, a member of the fictional Women for Action group, laments, “Malcolm gone, King gone, Fannie Lou gone, Angela quiet, the movement splintered, enclaves unconnected” (Bambara 193). Bambara further contextualizes her work in an interview with Claudia Tate. She notes that, in “trying to organize various sectors of the community, . . . I was struck by the fact that our activists or warriors and our adepts or medicine people don’t even talk to each other. . . . The novel, then, came out of a problem-solving impulse – what would it take to bridge the gap, to merge those frames of reference, to fuse those camps?” (Tate 15-16).

By depicting the story of communal healing through the figure of a blighted black woman, Bambara complicates lingering visions associated with the “Movement” and debunks the dominant image of an all-powerful black male leader. In the text’s scathing portrait, this demigod-like speaker shows up unspeakably with a limousine entourage. A


\(^{40}\) In addition to the “holy triumvirate” of Alice Walker, Gloria Naylor, and Toni Morrison, writers such as Paule Marshall, Gayl Jones, Octavia Butler, Sherley Anne Williams, Terry McMillan, and Ntozake Shange, among others, all immediately come to mind.
multitude of women have suffered for hours on the streets, “shot at, spit on . . . and no food, no food” (Bambara 34), awaiting this leader’s arrival. As one participant wryly observes, “What a disaster” (35). The representative amalgam, an ineffectual marionette that “looked a bit like King, had a delivery similar to Malcolm’s, dressed like Stokely, had glasses like Rap, but . . . never . . . say[s] anything useful or offensive” (35). Through her portrayal of an exceedingly fractured 1970s society, the author critiques these political movements for replicating oppressive power structures that hasten and exacerbate communal breakdown. In addressing the destructive schisms that afflict the black community, she focuses on the importance of rectifying gender disparities and proposing a model for intra-racial reconciliation, whereby competing factions may pull together in cooperative efforts of self-healing.

Thus Velma Henry, the community leader and activist hospitalized in the Southwest Infirmary for her double suicide attempt, emerges as the individual representation of communal disintegration. With fabled healer Minnie Ransom posing this pointed question to Velma in the story’s very first line, Bambara seemingly challenges her community: “Are you sure . . . that you want to be well?” (3). Just as the novel opens with a question, so it closes a dense and cyclical three hundred pages later amid the vague suggestion of future possibility: Velma rising from a “burst cocoon” (295). Yet in her present state – ignobly perched on a stool, “hair matted and dusty, bandages unraveled and curled . . . the hospital gown huge in front, but tied up too tight in back” (4) – Velma makes an unlikely redeemer.

Much of the related scholarship on The Salt Eaters comments on its almost impenetrable layering, overlapping textures, stylistic density, and structural complexity.41

41 Karla F.C. Holloway suggests in Moorings and Metaphors that Bambara’s “thick descriptions . . . complicate the dimensions of this text. Its metaphorical and structural density holds both meaning and wholeness hostage.
Many critics articulate strategies for successfully introducing students to this work, including tips for generating cogent interpretations within the classroom. Concern over the use and abuse of nuclear power presents an accurate, familiar snapshot of American culture in the late 1970s. Yet for the most part, the novel offers little else that seems readily accessible. Through both its winding structure and language of syncretistic spiritualism, it ostensibly refuses to impart a clear, decipherable strategy for organizing its component parts. *The Salt Eaters* primarily meanders through history, memory, dreams, and hallucinations. The text also ambles through psychic space, filtered through Velma’s ruptured consciousness. Frequent flashbacks, rambling passages devoted to somewhat peripheral storylines, and incursions of an otherworldly dialogue occurring between modern healer Minnie Ransom and her ancient spirit guide Old Wife recursively disrupt narrative continuity.

Nevertheless, the limited action, which transpires according to some scholars’ calculations in the brief span of two or three hours, radiates out from Velma. In an effort to explain the novel’s intricate structure and its intrinsic connection to this disheveled character, Gloria T. Hull constructs an elaborate diagram that visually maps the factions in Claybourne, Georgia: The Master’s Mind, The Academy of the Seven Arts, The Seven Sisters, Women for Action, and The Brotherhood, to name a few. As Hull clarifies, “From the center, the threads web out, holding a place and weaving links between everything and everybody. At

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A consequence of the density is a certain obscurity that threatens to overwhelm the story of Velma’s journey towards spiritual recovery” (125). In *Race, Gender, and Desire*, Elliott Butler-Evans likewise attends to “the novel’s discontinuities, [the] radical alterations of spatial and temporal relationships” (175) that characterize this “complex narration” (177).

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42 One critic contends that teaching the novel “can be a political act” (Hull 216-217). Margot Anne Kelley, largely based on her own teaching experiences, proposes filtering the text through chaos studies, which can provide critical insight into an “irreversibility of time” that underscores the importance of “becoming, as opposed to … being” (480; italics in original).

43 Hull asserts that, “the literal plot, which takes place in less than two hours, is almost negligible” (221).
the same time, this center is a nexus which pulls the outside in – setting up the dialectic of connectedness which is both meaning and structure of the book” (217). And half-dressed Velma, improbable bearer of future wholeness, emerges as the arguable center of this fictional world: its critical nexus.

Just as Velma’s disjointed psyche anchors the narrative, so the novel’s setting in Claybourne, Georgia operates as its central place. *The Salt Eaters* temporally and spatially ranges beyond this quasi-urban location, yet its geographic placement remains constant. Like Velma, Claybourne would benefit from a structural overhaul, for the city is afflicted by deep ideological and class divisions. While Velma’s husband Obie negotiates ongoing petty rifts of egoism concerning the Academy’s proposed name and program changes, the city’s poorer areas increasingly fall into disrepair (92-93). Indeed, “the stark reality of the street” (181) presents a marked contrast to this lofty, albeit ingrown, ivory tower. Venturing out from the equally pristine Infirmary and wandering through Claybourne’s less privileged areas, Dr. Julius Meadows is also struck by the prevailing inequity. He observes:

> There were broken-down stoops that looked like city and leaning porches that looked like country. Houses with falling-away shutters and brick walkways that wouldn’t make up their minds. Claybourne hadn’t settled on its identity yet . . . Its history put it neither on this nor that side of the Mason Dixon. And its present seemed to be a cross between a little Atlanta, a big Mount Bayou, and Trenton, New Jersey, in winter. (181)

Desolate “in winter,” the city itself reflects the split identity of its inhabitants. Written on this variegated cityscape is a prevailing tension between urban and rural ways of life. Like the novel’s characters, individuals who remain detached from their shared ancestry, Claybourne appears characterized by profound uncertainty. The city betrays displacement within the southern landscape – here figured as painful dislocation from an agrarian past and paranoid

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44 This also holds true in Kenan’s fiction, which he places in the rural South of his own creation: Tims Creek, North Carolina.
disconnection from the present “transchemical” (i.e., nuclear) power crisis. Claybourne strangely hovers in the ambiguous space of a Mason-Dixon border, “neither on this nor that side.” Its external structures and internal pathways are bizarrely anthropomorphized, perhaps conveying a certain degree of pathos, or at least ambivalence, that infects the city itself.

However, this same ambiguity also expands the city’s transformative potential; while suspended in spatiotemporal liminality, Claybourne possesses the latent power of home. The city, through the power of a “vexing dream,” mysteriously summons back the free-ranging, politically mobilized Palma, Velma’s sister. As a member of the Seven Sisters, an all-women’s performance group, Palma has pursued collective activism, tirelessly working to promote change. She also has “gotten cut off in a way traveling with the troupe: transplants all” (238). Called back to support Velma’s – and, by default, the Claybourne community’s – search for healing, the migratory Palma arrives home in time for the city’s “carnal carnival” (179). This ritualistic rite of spring, initially portrayed as a “scattered, fragmented, uncoordinated mess” (201), powerfully reenacts the Crispus Attucks-led rebellion against the British. Such carnivalesque energy, first routed through a journey into the historical past, implies the promise of future renewal.45 By moving toward wholeness through collective, commemorative actions, the community may reassemble its fragmented shards and heal deep internal fissures. This same community, Bambara suggests, must come together through a shared commitment: to dwell intentionally in this place through cooperative unity. The physical location of The Salt Eaters does not change. Yet its mythic construction,

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45 Mikhail Bakhtin’s notion of the profaning, blaspheming power of carnival seems useful here. As he writes in Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics, “Carnival is the festival of all-annihilating and all-renewing time” (124). This dual “pathos of shifts and changes, of death and renewal” (124; italics in original) surely characterizes the Claybourne carnival.
conjectured as a transfigured Atlanta, heralds not the stability of place but rather its re-
imagination.\footnote{In addition to pagan spring rite rituals, Bambara saturates the novel with mythic and mythological references. These include allusions to African gods such as the Yoruban Ogun, Haitian loas, Medusa (257), and elements of conjure. As a member of the Master’s Mind affirms, “The dream is real . . . The failure to make it work is the unreality” (126).}

Affirming that “the material without the spiritual and psychic does not a dialectic
make” (64), Bambara pursues avenues for spiritual healing. Toward that end, she introduces
roving visionaries – Minnie Ransom, Old Wife, and even Velma herself – who further
rearrange the city. With Velma called to “heal [herself] in the earth” (169), this site of
metamorphosis powerfully converges on the southern landscape. But it is the mysterious,
oddly ephemeral Minnie who foregrounds the novel’s focus on psychic restoration, asking
the all-important question, “Are you sure, sweetheart, that you want to be well?” (3).

Masterfully “spinning out a song” (4) in the center of the Master’s Mind twelve-member
prayer circle, Minnie enjoins Velma to embrace the weight of healing. So Bambara uses the
model of supportive, community-based transformation to prompt change outside the text’s
confines. In response to the “something crucial . . . missing from the political/ economic /
social / cultural / aesthetic / military / psychosocial / psychosexual mix” (259), she presents a
potent mysticism that blends West African tribal customs with elements of conjure, Haitian
vodou, folk magic, and the language of traditional Christianity. Such radically expansive
spirituality even redefines this landscape: “Panic. Pan. Pan-Africanism. All of us. Every.
God. Pan. All nature. Pan. Everywhere” (170). The initial “panic,” clearly Velma’s
previously suicidal state, powerfully mutates through Bambara’s riffing on the all-
encompassing root “pan.” This veritable life force emanates throughout nature and extends
“Everywhere.”
Through its geographic rearrangement with the clear link to Africa, *The Salt Eaters* hybridizes porous borders. The novel appears infused by African-inflected modalities, particularly in its orientation to time, space, nature, community, and the ancestral. Flirting with the idea of Pan-Africanism, of roots that stretch across continents, Bambara consciously presents models that imply African – as opposed to traditional western – metaphysical structures. As John S. Mbiti explains in *African Religions and Philosophies*, the African concept of time transpires as “a composition of events which have occurred, those which are taking place now and those which are inevitably or immediately to occur” (16). Personal experiences, events located in both the past and the present, are privileged over the recorded mathematical moment. Mbiti continues: “actual time [as opposed to “potential time”] is therefore what is present and what is past . . . [and] moves ‘backward’ rather than ‘forward’” (17). Both the simultaneity and relational quality of events, along with the notable absence of specific time references, counter the western notion of a linear progression through a discrete past, present, and future.

The novel’s multiple dissonances, overlapping tales, and seeming circularity connotes a decidedly non-linear, anti-progressive orientation to time. In place of steady advancement, characters hover in fissures and gaps, journeying not toward objective goals or identifiable locations but through layers of consciousness: individual, collective, and ancestral. Instead of Cartesian dualism’s mind/body split, Bambara reveals layered unities, in which the visible and invisible worlds coexist. For example, Minnie and Old Wife occupy multiple spatiotemporal planes that bring together the spiritual and physical realms. Old Wife’s presence, a clear testimony to the enduring, integral power of the ancestor, demonstrates the

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47 The novel includes almost no time markers. One exception that occurs early in the text, “And here it was already going on 3:00” (10), remains imprecise and unfixed.
“need for legend and fable . . . the need for magic” to promote both physical healing and spiritual wholeness (Bambara 268). Interestingly, such healing, while linked to spiritual renewal, equally affirms humanity’s fundamental connection to the natural world, a connection made more explicit with the novel’s conclusion. This new “beginning . . . ushered in by an unusual storm” (281) effectively transforms the landscape. Accompanied by the “call and response” of primeval “tom tom” drum beats, the fantastically violent storm “slashed tree pitch ooze chopped down hollowed out rum burnt tree drums green black mottled-gold thumped” (250). From the pulsating call and response embedded in the ancestral thumping to the hybrid colors – green, black, gold, and the implied red – of various Pan-African flags, the text reveals a Pan-African vision that moves outside the South, further reorienting its geography.

Bambara similarly channels an abstract expansiveness that links the fate of the community with that of the individual. She stresses the interconnectedness between past and present, individual and communal, material and metaphysical. Hence Minnie must intervene across multiplanar dimensions. She floats in and out of Velma’s altered consciousness, prompting her patient to harness spiritual wholeness from within. But first Velma must identify her own internal brokenness, facing past wounds and traumas in order to comprehend her present anguish. As the community watches, waiting expectantly, Minnie periodically intones, “Release, sweetheart. Give it all up. Forgive everyone everything. Free them. Free self” (18). Velma must take an active role in healing herself and embark on her

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48 Ann Folwell Stanford also asserts that The Salt Eaters “draws on African and Afro-Caribbean healing traditions that similarly stress the relational aspects of the human condition” (21).

49 The most famous is Marcus Garvey’s flag of African nationhood: green for the earth, black for the people, and red for the blood spilled. Later permutations include gold for the richness of the people. The case might be made that the oozing pitch, the veritable life-blood from the “slashed trees,” symbolically evokes the color red.
own extrasensory journey. Merely an observer to the rituals of healing, the pregnant teenager Nadeen watches “something drop away from Mrs. Henry’s face” (101). Velma enters an altered state, having been transmigrated to her kitchen. She relives her suicide attempts in every painful detail. Haunted by unusually tangible memories as well as what her godmother M’Dear Sophie calls “the gathering’s demands” (19), Velma must travel back “to claim her life from the split imposter” (148). With Minnie’s guidance, she journeys through her own psychic space “in a telepathic visit with her former self” (18). Breaching narrative time and moving outside three-dimensional space, Velma returns to claim her own history.

Such profound moments of displacement transcend linear chronology and further contribute to these temporal/historical revisions. After introducing her striking array of migratory figures, juxtaposed against the oddly unwavering setting of Claybourne, Bambara invokes the mysterious, elusive power of Damballah. This spirit in Haitian vodou traces back to an ancient African deity. “Damballah-wedo, the great serpent,” Herbert Marks explains, “is a powerful loa of Dahomean origin . . . and among the few Voodoo deities not conceived in human form. Interpreted abstractly, mobility would be his animating principle and, as such, he is associated with the genesis and maintenance of all life” (62). In summoning the life force of Damballah, Bambara implies that securing future wholeness for both Velma and the community demands the mystic harmony available only through sacred non-western rites that transcend spatiotemporal boundaries.

Thus, even Minnie undergoes time travels, communing with the dead witch, Old Wife, and connecting with her spiritual ancestors. As she finally recognizes, “There was no escaping the calling, the caves, the mud mothers, the others. No escape” (19). Somewhat ironically, the woman who facilitates Velma’s psychic wellness finds herself dislocated at the

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50 Dahomey is the former place name (until 1975) of present day Benin.
novel’s conclusion. Minnie interrogates her own spirit guide: “None of this ain’t happened yet? Some of this is happening now? All of this is going on, but I ain’t here? All of the above? None of the above? Will you at least tell me, is it raining or not?” (295). The oddly synchronous convergence of events, in conjunction with Minnie’s prevailing uncertainty and confusion, vigorously reorganizes time and space while leaving the novel’s ending profoundly open. By infusing this openness with Damballah’s mysticism, Bambara emphasizes the idea of connectedness across metaphysical planes. As the freelance journalist Campbell already has concluded, “Damballah is the first law of thermodynamics and is the Biblical wisdom and is the law of time and is . . . everything that is now has been before and will be again in a new way, in a changed form, in a timeless time” (Bambara 249). The laws of nature, biblical truths, and scientific theories are propelled and controlled by this sentient force. The reconfiguration of existence – as inherently spiritual – takes precedence. Questions of epistemology give way to those of ontology, of how to be in the world.51 Bambara underscores the inherent unity connecting these overlapping forces, calling for the mystery of a transformative, timeless moment.

Simultaneously compressing and expanding narrative time, Bambara finally enjoins her readers to participate in a symbolic journey with the Claybourne community. Perhaps the reader emerges as the final migratory figure, embarking on an enterprise concomitantly interior and exterior. Within the text’s confines, readers must sift, organize, and process the veritable onslaught of details, resisting the centrifugal forces that threaten to disrupt the story permanently. In the bus incident involving Fred Holt, Bambara relies on her readers to piece together a coherent account of “what really happened.” Watching in horror, we observe as

51 Mbiti in fact characterizes religion in African traditional life as “an ontological phenomenon, . . . that the whole of existence is a religious phenomenon” (15).
Palma and the other bus passengers, distracted by their own internal crises, remain blissfully unaware of driver Fred Holt’s potentially calamitous decision: whether to propel the bus into marshy oblivion. Only readers accompany Fred during his struggle to reconcile his friend Porter’s senseless death.

Vexingly, Bambara toys with elements of both storylines, the eventual outcome of the bus safely reaching its destination as well as “the bus rocking, slipping down for a tour of the caverns” (103). What of this other “bus incident . . . a dream only just now recalled” (103)? Out of such preoccupation, who dreams and then recalls the nightmare’s terror? Before the bus reaches its final stop, the narration is interrupted and an alternative possibility emerges:

They might’ve been twenty-seven miles back in the moment of another time when Fred Holt did ram the bus through the railing and rode it into the marshes, stirring bacteria and blue-green algae to remember they were the earliest forms of life and new life was beginning again. In the sinking bus trying to understand what had happened, was happening, would happen and stock still but for the straining for high thoughts to buoy them all up. (86-87)

In language that echoes Minnie Ransom’s dilemma, the narrator imaginatively projects this “moment of another time” that perplexingly stretches back primordially to the “earliest forms of life” while slowly reaching forward to the “new life [that] was beginning again.” As the text migrates and refuses to resolve conclusively, the reader’s own quandary, of “trying to understand what had happened, was happening, would happen,” comes into focus: to piece together the past, present, as well as a conditional future. Fascinatingly, the nature of this dilemma coalesces in the passage’s syntax. The tense shifts from past perfect, with the action already having been completed, to past progressive, with an ongoing action implied, and finally closes amid an intriguing ambiguity – what “would happen.”

Yet a vital sense of groundedness, of being firmly situated within the larger community, curiously balances the discursive tension of everything unraveling and pulling
apart. Bambara broadcasts a strong political message that harshly critiques both Velma’s initial tendency to withdraw and Dr. Meadows’s self-isolation; she warns against failing to recognize the truth rooted “in one’s own people” (169). True regeneration requires being “centered in the best of one’s own traditions” (169). Whereas the novel alludes, through a fleeting flash forward to the summer of 1984, that Dr. Julius Meadows ultimately does work on behalf of his black community, the final image of Velma, while implying eventual metamorphosis, merely shows her “rising on steady legs . . . [as if] from a burst cocoon” (295). The storm ushers in a new beginning, yet the text concludes before Velma can figuratively take flight, pursuing life under the weight of healing. Readers, then, must absorb the final burden and negotiate the centripetal forces of reassembly. Concluding the novel with the same openness with which it began, Bambara only gestures toward wholeness. It remains for her readers to follow her proposed path toward psychic healing and communal unity, to complete the novel’s incipient journey.

Randall Kenan: Biographical and Textual Revisions of the South

Like *The Salt Eaters*, both *A Visitation of Spirits* and *Let the Dead Bury Their Dead* consider the wide-ranging, often conflicting implications of African American displacement in the South. Certainly in their novels, Bambara and Kenan, through the characters of Velma Henry and Horace Cross, raise the issue of suicide as a catastrophic response to these external pressures. These works also explore the roles their respective fictional communities’ play in contributing to the heroine’s/hero’s suicidal impulses, implying that the African American community bears the greatest responsibility in preventing such loss. Whereas

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52 As Holloway insists, “Velma’s nexus is now part of a community that is simultaneously present and past, temporal and detemporalized. The collective at the end of the book is a spiritual one” (119).
Bambara criticizes the inequities of gender, the openly gay Randall Kenan takes up the question of sexual difference. Raised in Chinquapin, North Carolina, he returns to the rural southern landscape in crafting his fictional location of Tims Creek. Like James Baldwin before him, Kenan later lived and worked in New York; he also taught creative writing at several northeastern universities. Yet Baldwin, while incessantly compelled to write about the South, famously refused to live there. So fearful of its troubled past and haunted by the violent civil rights era, which regularly exposed vicious forms of white racism, James Baldwin exiled himself to Europe. Kenan, on the other hand, has returned to his “home” state of North Carolina and currently is on faculty at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. By coming back to the South, he presents an alternative migration narrative to Richard Wright’s earlier model.

Trudier Harris, in her introduction to The Scary Mason-Dixon Line, comments on Wright’s ambivalence when leaving for Chicago: “he qualifies his relationship to the South with ‘black though I was.’ That ambivalence – being a part of the South and not quite embracing it, being both insider and outsider – informs all his efforts to claim nativity in a society that always calls that status into question” (2).

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53 Kenan himself explicitly makes this connection to James Baldwin, frequently citing Baldwin as an important literary influence. He also published a short biography of Baldwin in 1994. A number of critics, among them Robert McRuer, Sheila Smith McKoy, and Sharon Patricia Holland, have noted certain thematic and structural similarities between Kenan’s first novel, A Visitation of Spirits, and Baldwin’s Go Tell It on the Mountain, Another Country, and Giovanni’s Room.

54 As Fern Marja Eckman notes in The Furious Passage of James Baldwin, “He still mistrusted himself in the deep South” (172). She continues by quoting the author at length: “It’s a principal terror when I’m down there. Anything I did might not only endanger me but might endanger everybody else, too. Which is really kind of nerve-racking. You’re frightened all the time – because nobody wants to die! Or to get, you know, his balls cut off. Or have an eye put out. Nobody looks forward to that” (172). In a letter written from Turkey in December 1962, Baldwin confides to his literary agent, “it’s much better for me to try to stay out of the US as much as possible. I really do find American life intolerable and, more than that, personally menacing. I know that I will never be able to expatriate myself again – but I also somehow know that the incessant strain and terror – for me – of continued living there will prove, finally, to be more than I can stand” (51).

55 According to Farah Jasmine Griffin, “During the years following the Harlem Renaissance throughout the Depression to World War II, Richard Wright’s version of the migration narrative was the dominant portrayal. For Wright, the South is never a site of possibility for the migrant” (10).
While Wright’s 1945 autobiography *Black Boy* champions his eventual move north, Kenan’s own biography inserts renewed energy and powerful legitimacy into the South. This pattern of reverse-migration appears enacted on several levels, through both objective physical placement and the created artistic setting. Kenan’s fiction, too, remains resolutely planted in this region – in rural North Carolina. As with *The Salt Eaters*’s mystical Claybourne, geographic placement stays constant, yet time and space do not. To challenge the insularity of Tims Creek, Kenan assembles a cast of unearthly characters that traverse multiple planes of action. He also employs a narrative style that roams widely before folding back upon itself spatially and temporally, thereby interrupting the community’s presumed sanctity.

Intriguingly, even as Randall Kenan initiates an unwavering turn southward and revives this setting in his fictional works, a number of African American literary critics reveal an overriding tendency to abandon Baldwin’s deeply “funky” place. Consider, for example, Charles Rowell’s 1991 *Callaloo* interview with Henry Louis Gates, Jr. Perhaps recalling the historically tormented relationship of many black writers to the South, Gates admits that instead of the suicide that ends *A Visitation of Spirits*, “I want Randall Kenan, as it were, to take Horace to the big city in his next novel” (454). Though he praises the novel’s realistic treatment of “gay themes” and the extent to which Kenan “desentimentalize[s] the notion of ‘community’ as an unadulterated good” (454), Gates appears uncomfortable with the idea of embedding transformative possibility in a southern landscape. Yet Kenan’s short story collection, *Let the Dead Bury Their Dead*, rejects the urban migration narrative. Rather than lift Horace “to the [presumably northern] big city,” most stories again transpire in Tims.
As Robert McRuer insightfully points out, “What Gates elides in his suggestion to Kenan is the fact that taking Horace to anywhere also entails taking him from somewhere” (185). Kenan will not remove his brilliant-yet-tormented, gay teenaged protagonist from his homeland. Significantly, not even Horace, when faced with his own homosexuality and the community’s blatant intolerance, considers abandoning Tims Creek. To escape his human suffering, he vows to transform himself into a red-tailed hawk. Driven by a baffling compulsion, that “he had to stay here” (Kenan 11), Horace fixes upon this particular bird of prey precisely because its species is indigenous to the area. Thus the novel, even while presenting a range of would-be transformations for its African American characters, remains situated in a southern context.

Though *A Visitation of Spirits* projects the possibility of change, to naively claim that Horace Cross finds redemption in Tims Creek would deny the extent of his sacrifice. This “tortured human” (12), while longing for the hawk’s transcendence, “unfettered, unbounded and free,” tragically cannot escape “human laws and human rules” (13). After a night spent wandering and communing with demons, journeying through his and the town’s collective past(s), Horace commits suicide. Strangely, at the very moment when the gun discharges, the

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56 In an unpublished interview (dating December 12, 2006), Kenan explains that in his next novel, tentatively titled “The Fire and the Baptism,” Gideon Stone, *A Visitation of Spirits*’s lone openly gay character (apart from several actors in the visiting troupe), will in fact relocate to a northern city.

57 Analyzing the degree to which Kenan revises the story of David in Baldwin’s *Giovanni’s Room*, Sharon Patricia Holland notes, “McRuer’s placement of Horace is useful in that it envisions a black gay Horace who is everywhere but nowhere” (111). Within this conceptual framework, Horace materializes as another wandering figure that denotes the fleeting possibility of change. Holland in fact argues that Kenan gives Horace a powerful voice – but from the dead. Even as she opens her chapter with the assertion that, “bringing back the dead (or saving the living from the shadow of death) is the ultimate queer act” (103), the conclusion vaguely gestures toward the role of critics and readers to acknowledge the significance of this ghostly speaker: a black gay man at home in the South.

58 Harris writes: “Implicit in the text is the argument that there ought to be a place in the small-town South where black Horace Cross, sixteen years old, could be homosexual and live” (*Scary Mason-Dixon Line* 129).
narration obtains proximal distance. As the irreversible calamity unfolds across the novel’s final pages, the reader gets lifted out of the first-person narrative. A remote voice, characterized by the journalist’s practiced detachment, mechanically yet forcefully drones a detailed litany:

The boy died. This is a fact. The bullet did break the skin of his forehead, pierce the cranium, slice through the cortex and cerebellum, irreparably bruising the cerebrum and medulla oblongata, and emerge from the back of the skull, all with a wet and lightning crack. This did happen. The blood did flow, mixed with grey brain matter, pieces of bone and cranial fluid. His entire body convulsed several times; it excreted urine. Defecated. The tongue hung out of the mouth and during the convulsions was clamped down upon, releasing blood to be mixed with the ropes of saliva stringing down. His heartbeat slowly decreased in pressure and intensity, soon coming to a halt; the arteries, veins, and capillaries slowly collapsed. The pupils of his eyes, now tainted in a film of pink, stopped dilating, resting like huge drops of ink surrounded by brown liquid in a pool of milk. Finally the eyes themselves rolled back, staring up, as though examining the sun through the canopy of tree limbs. In awe and respect. These are facts. (253-254)

After opening with the statement that Horace died, this unidentifiable voice perfunctorily traces the bullet’s trajectory, recording his death in the form of a medical examiner’s post-mortem pathology report. Readers accompany the bullet through the brain, clinically observing its irreparable damage – first through the outer skull, which pierces the cortex and cerebellum, continuing through its cross-section of the cerebrum and medulla oblongata, and eventually its explosive bloody exit. Yet the aloof intonation persists, reciting in textbook fashion death’s physical signs: the bladder and bowels release; the muscles relax and spasm; the heart slows and stops; the pupils permanently fix and dilate. Now sixteen-year-old Horace – who, accompanied by both the demon and the reader, has navigated memories that extend far beyond the novel’s central actions – officially is dead. This is a fact.

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59 This moment seems analogous to *The Salt Eaters*’s bus incident involving Fred Holt, as readers are similarly transported.
The meticulous account includes one final notice: “Most importantly, the day did not halt in its tracks: clocks did not stop. . . . And that night the sun set with the full intention of rising on the morrow” (Kenan 254). The sun may rise again, yet the narrative itself fractures readers’ relationship to time. The novel ends (April 30, 1984 at 7:05am) before it ever begins (December 8, 1985 at 8:45am). As in The Salt Eaters, in which time cyclically unfurls through Velma Henry’s consciousness, this sense of suspended, even foreclosed, time is embedded in the very structure of A Visitation of Spirits, which unfolds as two parallel, interwoven narratives. Both Horace and his cousin Jimmy “remembered remembering, . . . It was neither clear nor chronological” (Kenan 139). In a sense, the clocks, with specific times carefully marking most section breaks, do stop – at least on the visible page. Although the novel opens with Jimmy, Aunt Ruth, and Uncle Zeke embarking on a journey to Fayetteville, North Carolina, a mere eight pages later, the reader recognizably has traveled back in time, encountering Horace’s self-rumination (on April 29, 1984 at 11:30am), “…What to become?” (11).

A Visitation of Spirits includes frequent references to suspended time, the conflation of past, present, and future, as well as the reality of life and death coexisting. As Horace marvels during a bizarrely reenacted church service, most of the worshipers are in fact dead. The Mephistopheles-like demon he has conjured merely scoffs in reply: “Ghosts of the past. The presence of the present. The very stuff of which the future is made. This is the effluvium of souls that surround men daily” (73). Jimmy, too, muses about alternative possibilities in the future: “Today. Yesterday. Tomorrow. If …If …If” (208). In terms of documented time, the novel transpires over just two days, yet these two days remain separated by nearly 20
Like Bambara’s readers, charged with assembling narrative cohesion, Kenan’s readers must piece together the novel’s chronology, the sequence of events not only between but also before Horace’s initial meditation, the frightful night that ends in the boy’s violent suicide, as well as everything thereafter.

Therefore, as Jimmy and his two aged companions travel by automobile to visit their cancer-ridden cousin Asa Cross, who hovers near death in his Veterans Memorial Hospital bed, readers also rove through personal memory, family genealogy, and regional history. Against the chattering backdrop of Ruth and Zeke’s recollections, swapping stories and disagreeing over minutiae, their nephew, James Malachai Greene, offers his “Confessions.” Yet an hour later, with “a winter sky, white-grey and desolate” ominous above the travelers (45), the narration suddenly switches to Ezekial Cross’s point of view. Sparked by reminiscences about life “before the au-to-mo-bile” (47), Zeke turns from his own “eighty-four years” to recount a version of the Cross genealogy, presented in relation to “the deacon board of First Baptist of Tims Creek” (51). Almost as an oral history, he hearkens back to “the 1870s, once slavery was over” (51), first tracing his ancestral heritage, grandfather (Thomas) and father (Ezra), and later charting the lines of his progeny, son (Sammy) and grandson (Horace). Lulled by the droning engine and the “temperature of the car [that] was just right,” Zeke drifts off, dreaming about “a funeral” – his own (57). The dream soon becomes a nightmare, with “dead men burying a live man” and a coffin lid closing steadily (59). In this moment, history’s lurid truth coalesces with the present. Shortly after Zeke startles awake, the car passes by the “Fayetteville slave market” (64). The hauntingly innocuous site, “Red brick. Fancy arches. Flowers,” marks “the last one standing” (64). Here,

60 Bambara’s novel likewise presents a highly nonlinear narrative, although The Salt Eaters elaborately expands and elongates merely a few hours of action.
through the power of this place, personal memory and family history jarringly collide with a collective African American past.

With these recurring journeys into the historical past, the novel’s narrative refuses to settle. Like his grandfather Zeke, Horace metaphysically roams across time and space. With the exception of his travels through books, in which Horace “dreamed of transforming himself, through knowledge” (89) and mentally searched for answers resting outside the presumably closed system, his night wanderings are firmly located in and around Tims Creek. In a dizzying, whirlwind tour of individually formative sites – the Baptist church, the local elementary school, the high school classroom, the town theatre, and finally the community’s graveyard – Horace Cross also guides readers “to the terrible past they [meaning African Americans] all had to remember” (71-72). First on foot, “Down the road, where the highway bent . . . Down the lane” past the cornfields and the distantly shimmering town (68), readers join Horace’s trek during his last night on earth. In the demon’s command, “Let’s take a trip” (101), Kenan also prompts his readers: “We’ve got places to go before the sun rises” (102). Ferried in the spiteful Mrs. Daisy Sapphire’s “1967 puke-green Buick” (102), readers – through Horace’s narration – set off on a parallel journey. As the drama unfolds, particularly during the “Confessions” of one Horace Thomas Cross, textual details pass through Horace’s mind, literally with the bullet and metaphorically through his voice. Along with Horace, the reader remembers techniques for killing a chicken, musical interludes and television shows, the weight of physical exertion, the fear of raw desire, the miscellany of subjects studied during high school, the taste and smell of food, that unforgettable, decisive first sexual encounter, and finally the church’s cruel damnation of this act of love (245-251). Yet with A Visitation of Spirits closing amid the tragedy of death, the reader’s
migration concludes abruptly. At the final “hour of his transfiguration” (22), only Horace may proclaim, “I remember me” (251).

Arguably, it is the intriguing figure of the migratory reader, compelled to enter the fictional worlds of Tims Creek as well as Claybourne and later thrust outside this landscape, that most strongly aligns Kenan’s and Bambara’s texts. Through the power of shared memories, be that Velma’s return to the site of her emotional and psychic collapse or Horace’s nightly travels that recall his steady realization and acceptance of his own sexual difference, readers participate in their narrative voyages. Significantly, both Bambara and Kenan invoke images of flight, the emergent wings that herald Velma’s possible transformation and Horace’s dream to self-transfigure into a red-tailed hawk. They tie the outcome of their central characters, firmly planted in the South, with that of their respective communities. In the world of *The Salt Eaters*, as Ann Folwell Stanford notes, “Individual healing, far from providing a privatistic cure, enables its subjects to move beyond a narrow understanding of individual illness to become world healers themselves” (17). Velma Henry, as she rises unsteadily but determinedly to her feet, might draw together and mend a fractured community. In contrast to Bambara’s conclusion of hopeful expectancy, Horace Cross’s truncated flight, with escape obtainable only through death, precludes complete regeneration for Tims Creek and positions Kenan’s text in the realm of tragedy.

Through the intermittent narration both by Horace and Jimmy, *A Visitation of Spirits* reveals odd unities of time, place, and action as Kenan simultaneously revises and rewrites Aristotle’s definition of tragedy. Intriguingly, the theatre forms an important backdrop in

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61 To quote Aristotle’s well-known genre demarcation: “Tragedy, then, is a process of imitating an action which has serious implications, is complete and possesses magnitude; by means of language which has been made sensuously attractive, with each of its varieties found separately in the parts . . . through a course of pity and fear completing the purification of tragic acts which have those emotional characteristics” (Else 25).
the novel, with the stage heralding the peak of Horace’s sexual experimentation and his eventual conviction that he can no longer suppress his identity as a gay man. Compelled by the demon’s directions, Horace finds himself in the “empty parking lot of the Crosstown theatre” (210), location of the previous summer’s seven-week-running outdoor show: “The American Story.” There the role of stage doubles (220), the prevailing sense of performance, and Horace’s self-anointment of the harlequin makeup (219) all point to a dramatic rendering. Furthermore, Horace conceives his own purpose as a macabre “parody of a parody” (231) – perhaps the overlaying of tragedy and comedy. A chanting Chorus similarly evokes Greek tragedy. While Horace feels perplexed by “A voice. Where? In his head? In his mind? In his soul? It was the voice of a chorus, a host” (27), his steps are guided by this choral presence. Following the Aristotelian model, the novel remains in and around Tims Creek (the unity of place), and, in relation to Horace’s story, transpires within a single twenty-four hour period (the unity of time). Horace’s centrality to the text, with the action rising and falling in relation to his presence, suggests the unity of action. But should Horace be claimed as the proverbial tragic hero? Early in the text, Kenan makes the identification clear: “He was Horace Thomas Cross, the Great Black Hope, . . . The Straight-A Kid . . . the Chosen Nigger” (13). And upon the moment of Horace’s death, readers – even while distanced – are moved to embrace supreme pathos.

Yet Kenan’s contemporary tragedy refuses to impart purifying catharsis. In a powerful, ironic inversion of classical tragedy, he reveals that the “tragic flaw” falls not on

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Admittedly, Kenan makes use of a narrative – rather than a dramatic – structure. However, in both preserving these classical unities and powerfully generating pity for his blighted hero, he unmistakably engages this form. Kenan’s own habit of rereading Aristotle’s Poetics on an almost yearly basis further supports these parallels (December 2006 interview).

62 In his creative writing classroom, Kenan regularly introduces elements of playwriting to his students, designing exercises that require sketching out short scenes or exploring the utility of dramatic techniques (December 2006 interview).
Horace Cross but on the Tims Creek community that has repeatedly failed him. He harshly confronts the flawed ideology that informs Reverend Barden’s Romans 1 sermon, which denies the legitimacy of homosexual desire and instead pronounces sweeping judgment. Horace watches the service unfold: “Here was a community, not a word but a being. . . . Here, amid these singing, fanning, breathing beings were his folk, his kin. Did he know them? Had they known him? It was from them he was running. Why?” (73). Only after Horace’s death does Jimmy recognize the crucial “why”: that Horace was summarily “created” and later rejected “by this society” (188), the cruel being that effectually forced his eternal exile. Of the two cousins, only Jimmy remains. Only this largely problematic preacher who, even while admitting his own sexual experimentation, fails to ease Horace’s internal anguish, endures. Jimmy appears mired in a stagnant faith that implies not true belief but rather tradition’s obligation. Intellectually, he knows, “I should ‘get the fuck’ out of the South” (34), to take his brother Franklin’s advice and “Leave North Carolina. Get out [of] . . . the big bad, bloody South” (35). But in a moment that smacks more of resignation than of conviction, “I summed it up in one simple question: ‘If we all “get out,” who will stay?’” (35). Whereas Horace has traveled through his own memories and history, Jimmy turns to communal tales, archival research, and even a pseudo-historical account. Beyond the pages of *A Visitation of Spirits*, he writes “Let the Dead Bury Their Dead,” a self-consciously referential oral history of Tims Creek. With his quasi-ethnography that voices an unrecorded, largely undocumented past, Jimmy seeks to rectify his own shortcomings. Yet Kenan presents these efforts as a parody that mocks Jimmy the would-be-historian.64 Through the

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63 Here Kenan seemingly echoes Baldwin’s scathing pronouncement about “the deep, black, funky South,” particularly in the cadence and structure of his phrasing.
spiritual leader’s refusal to challenge the community’s status quo, Kenan offers his most
invective critique. As the author plays with history and its authority, the character of Jimmy
fails to fully authorize his existence, either as Tims Creek’s entrusted historian or his
cousin’s much-needed confidante. His complicity, the subtle acquiescence to a repressive
environment, marks Kenan’s strongest caution against the dangers of complacency, a
message left for his readers to interpret and implement.

**Vectored Visionaries: Remapping the Southern Field**

Throughout his fiction, Kenan infuses rural Tims Creek, North Carolina with
peculiar, mystical figures, roving visionaries that powerfully reshape the southern landscape.
Both *A Visitation of Spirits* and *Let the Dead Bury Their Dead* abound with distinctively
hybrid characters – racial, gender, and sexual “others” – that expose the falsity of supposed
normative sexuality and rigid racial demarcations. Populated by angels, demons, and ghosts,
these texts also blur boundaries between the living and the dead. Certainly Horace Cross, in
addition to his extensive interaction with the violently derisive demon, engages with a range
of otherworldly characters. From the spirit’s charge to slay a “dragon” (66) and his bloodying
at the slashing claws of “a yellow-face harpie” (81) to the winged specter’s thwarted offer of
salvation (168) and the lengthy conversations with Veronica the bison (209-215), Horace

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64 To a certain degree, Jimmy can only fail in this endeavor. The deliberate absurdity of Kenan’s account, which
persistently revels in loosely compiled oral histories, purposefully falsifies historical footnotes, and playfully
manufactures various archival collections, signals intentional parody. While grounding her treatment in the
question of “gender identity formation” (308), Lindsey Tucker’s “Gay Identity, Conjure, and the Uses of
Postmodern Ethnography in the Fictions of Randall Kenan” demonstrates that Jimmy suffers a thwarted vision.
Existing both inside and outside the community he studies, Jimmy, within such “troubled borders” (Tucker
314), appears “confronted with a field that is both past and present, home and away,” a problematic
“indeterminacy of position” (315).
meets a goodly number of these nomadic figures.\textsuperscript{65} Were he able to change into the red-tailed hawk, Horace himself might join their ranks. Such paranormal incursions endorse concrete interventions, performing roles that participate in both spatial and temporal reorganizations of the southern landscape. Through the presence of migrating figures, the writer exploits a porous, shape-shifting South. He introduces perspectives that originate outside Tims Creek even while keeping his location intact. Kenan suggests a world beyond – yet ironically inscribed within – that of the rural southern landscape. Within this fictional creation, what strategies exist for charting and evaluating the specific influence of such figures? How might readers assess the cultural, political, and aesthetic work they initiate?

Particularly in charting nonlinear forms of change across multiple dimensions, the notion of vector space seems useful in theorizing the degree to which Kenan’s itinerant, nomadic figures, which both arise from within and encroach from outside Tims Creek, enact change through temporal and/or spatial interruption. Developed out of mathematical models, vector space semantics has been applied to studies in logic, linguistics, and human psycho-cognitive functioning.\textsuperscript{66} As a concept in mathematics and physics, the vector is defined as containing both magnitude (i.e., force) and direction. A vector likewise can be broken into constitutive components (i.e., x- and y-axes), which may then be represented graphically. Useful for specifying location in terms of magnitude and direction, vectors in relation to their axes may have positive, negative, or zero values. They can function across multiple

\textsuperscript{65} In this case, the dragon, with its “yellow-white orbs focused ferociously” (Kenan 66), plainly denotes a truck transporting chickens down a country road; however, the sources of Horace’s later visions become increasingly difficult and even impossible to identify.

\textsuperscript{66} See, for example, Joost Zwarts’s “Vectors as Relative Positions: A Compositional Semantics of Modified PPs” or the article he co-authored with Yoad Winter, “Vector Space Semantics: A Model-Theoretic Analysis of Locative Prepositions.” He endeavors “to analyze a region as a set of vectors” (63). In “Vector Phase Space for Speech Analysis via Dimensional Analysis,” H. M. Hubey uses vectors for assessing both acoustic and articulatory content in speech. Through his analysis, he generates highly nonlinear mappings that contain both spatial and temporal domains.
dimensions. Moreover, a displacement vector often is used to account for an object’s change in position, both its net distance and direction. In the field of linguistics, vector space theory, according to Martina Fuller, has emerged out of the need “to account for phenomena in the spatial domain” (151), to consider both similarities and differences across various planes. She later suggests in “Dimensional Adjectives and Measure Phrases in Vector Space Semantics” that, “the ontology of vector space provides a very powerful mechanism, which should be sufficient to analyze linguistic expressions which require a multi-dimensional static or dynamic analysis” (Fuller 153). In effect, Kenan’s roaming figures act as vectors that cut across temporal and spatial planes, disturbing the stability of this place. Their interventions may be mapped in terms of the extent (i.e., the magnitude) of their disruption as well as the direction (i.e., internal/external or northward/southward).

Despite such spatial and temporal incursions, the multiplanar dynamism these figures inspire, perhaps the question still lingers: why apply physics to literary analysis? Significantly, Kenan himself did for a time major in physics at The University of North Carolina. Though he later changed his focus to creative writing, he completed a minor in physics. As he explained in a December 2006 interview, his particular interests rested in theories of light and color as well as the chronotope, the organic unity of time and space. Indeed, conceptual physics provides a fascinating backdrop in A Visitation of Spirits. Horace, for example, mentions overhearing Mrs. Hedgeson’s lecture to his physics class (13). He also tells his lover, Antonio, “I’m going to major in physics in college and . . . who knows . . . Create . . . create…” (225). Horace’s nighttime wanderings, especially when he eavesdrops on events existing outside clearly defined timeframes, suggest the “sum total of events which are simultaneous with a selected event,” namely “the four-dimensional continuum” of space.
and time that Albert Einstein proposes in *Relativity* (Einstein 149). In the waning pages of his final remembrances, Horace recalls “studying Einstein’s theory of relativity . . . and reading on my own about time/space and Maxwell’s equations and quantum dynamics and black holes and time/space warps” (Kenan 249).

In his short story collection, Kenan likewise invokes Bakhtin’s notion of the chronotope, which extends and applies Einstein’s theory of relativity to literature. Through this space-time lens, Bakhtin explains in *The Dialogic Imagination*, “Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history. The intersection of axes and fusion of indicators characterizes the artistic chronotope” (84). The increasingly tangible quality of Kenan’s history materializes throughout his fiction. Further, Bakhtin’s terminology of intersecting axes resonates with the language of vector space, of mapping change across multiply dimensional time and space. In the second epigraph to Jimmy’s pseudo-oral history, “Let the Dead Bury Their Dead,” Kenan directly quotes the passage from *The Dialogic Imagination* that refers to “the fantastic in folklore [as] a realistic fantastic . . . [that] works with the ordinary expanses of time and space, and experiences these expanses and utilizes them in great breadth and depth” (qtd. in Kenan 275). Through his vectored visionaries, Kenan repeatedly mobilizes folklore’s fantastic. Their interventions, inserted into a rural southern landscape and assessed in terms of magnitude and direction, radically reorganize time and space.

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67 Of course, my study is not the first to incorporate conceptual physics in proposing a revised theoretical framework for literary analysis. Wai Chee Dimock’s well-known *PMLA* essay, “A Theory of Resonance,” also turns to Einstein’s theory of relativity in order to “articulate something like a ‘kinematics’ of the text, theorizing the text’s continuous movement through time” (1064).
Yet those vectored visionaries originating within Tims Creek, even while heralding the “shifting ground of signification that makes meanings tremble” (Bammer xiii), can effect only limited change. Their impact is rendered inert by the community’s prevailing reluctance to accept and believe. The first short story in Kenan’s collection, “Clarence and the Dead (And What Do They Tell You, Clarence? And the Dead Speak to Clarence),” features a three-year-old child clairvoyant who makes shocking, embarrassing declarations such as the one to an unsuspecting Emma Chaney: “Your mama says Joe Hattan is stepping out on you with that strumpet Viola Strokes” (Kenan 5). Notwithstanding the incredible accuracy of Clarence’s predictions and “testaments” (8), his clear ability to commune with and relay missives from the dead, members of his family and the larger community try to “shrug off his testimonials from the grave” (8). As Trudier Harris argues in The Power of the Porch, “although this story is presumably about Clarence and the dead, it turns out to be more about the townspeople and the narrator. Clarence . . . appears in order to make pronouncements, and then the action moves away from him to follow the effect of his pronouncement. He remains a catalyst to action, not the center of action” (130). Even when his advice prompts action, as in the case of Mabel Pearsall, who bakes an apple pie for her husband Joe Allen and awakens to the renewed “taste and feel of real life” (Let the Dead 7), Clarence’s beneficiaries vehemently deny the source of their insight. Revealing a similar pattern of declaration followed by disavowal, the tale also introduces a talking hog whose first words, 68

68 The use of religiously laden language here is conscious. Throughout Let the Dead Bury Their Dead, Kenan etches his tales within the conventions southern Baptist Christianity even as he goes to great lengths to expose its hypocrisies and inconsistencies. He reserves his harshest treatment for judgmental individuals such as the Reverend Barden who, even while parading about as an upright “man of God,” hypocritically engages in a torrid affair and suffers private doubts, as revealed in “Ragnarök! The Day the Gods Die.” With his fiction, Kenan frequently takes biblical passages or allusions and challenges their literal interpretations or slots them into unusual contexts. Thus, the child Clarence who can see beyond the reality of life in Tims Creek, when dismissed by his own people, seemingly recalls John 1:11: “He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him.”
“Jesus wept,” were uttered “on a sunny day in June” (1). In light of his extraordinary abilities, owner Wilma Jones christens him “Holy Hog Francis”; however, both Wilma and the loquacious Francis generate scorn rather than awe. Through the humor of a toddler clairvoyant and a remarkably articulate as well as spiritually savvy swine, Kenan suggests the potential for communal transformation.

As with Horace Cross, characters arising from the Tims Creek populace can only suggest this transformation; the magnitude of their influence seems tempered by their original location. This is most clearly dramatized when Clarence, Francis, and a John Deere tractor possessed by Fitzhugh Oxendine’s vengeful ghost powerfully converge on the southern field. The geographic placement of this otherworldly event is significant. Kenan’s itinerant seers attempt to intervene specifically in the North Carolina landscape. The child clairvoyant, bolstered by knowledge that breaches temporal boundaries, and the hallowed hog that speaks with renewed biblical authority both upset the self-satisfied sameness of life in Tims Creek. But like the townspeople who dismiss Clarence’s messages from the hereafter, his grandfather, Mr. George Edward, ignores his grandson’s “queer knowledge” (12).

Indeed, it is the very queerness of this information that results in Clarence’s repeated

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69 On the day in question, notable only in that “things just didn’t want to go right at the Pickett place,” Mr. George Edward, accompanied by his frightened, watchful grandson, “disk[s] the old field over the branch” (10). When the tractor mysteriously malfunctions, he returns Clarence to the ground, notwithstanding the boy’s terrified objection: “He says he’s gone get you, Granddaddy. He says you’s a dead man” (11).

70 While doubtless referring to the peculiarity of Clarence’s knowledge (both in terms of its origin and content), Kenan intentionally adopts the language of queer identification. This reading appears further supported when the narrator mentions “‘Ellsworth Batts’s ‘unnatural affection’ for Clarence Pickett” (19) and recalls the resultant outcry. As Harris maintains, “A story that began as an intersection between the temporal world and the world beyond now gets another dimension — a ghost story is overlaid with homosexuality” (Power of the Porch 126). Kenan consistently disputes arbitrary definitions of what, particularly in the rural South, constitutes “acceptable” sexuality. As he reinvigorates this southern landscape, Sheila Smith McKoy observes, “Randall Kenan reconstructs the image of black gay manhood in his fiction by requiring his readers to understand the kind of ‘queer knowledge’ that his protagonists profess about homosexual desire and about being black men... And theirs is the uncomfortable knowledge that homosexual desire and heterosexual desire are intimately interwoven into the fabric of every community everywhere. Kenan reconciles what had been previously
denunciations, just as it is the oddity of a spiritually minded hog participating in public worship that produces a schism in the local Baptist church.

Yet this same queerness, refashioned as piercing insight, could drastically reorder a closed, repressive environment. When Clarence ominously predicts his grandfather’s demise, Wilma and Francis together secure Mr. George Edward’s salvation and rescue him from the violent ghost of his past. While Wilma subdues the lurching, out-of-control tractor and frees Mr. George Edward’s hand from the cultivator, a surprising exorcist arrives on the scene:

Francis, caterwauling and squealing and rolling about and biting in the dirt, like it was fighting with something or somebody. Mr. George Edward said this brought to his mind the scene from the Good Book when our Lord cast the demon from the man and sent it into the swine. Soon the dust was so thick you couldn’t see the hog, only hear it; and after a while the thing came trotting out with a look like contentment on its face. (Let the Dead 13)

Here Kenan positions his new southern mythology in relation to the biblical tale, a religious framing that should carry weight with the devout majority in Tims Creek. However, as in Luke’s gospel account, in which Jesus is asked to leave following his exorcism of the demon “Legion” (banished to a herd of pigs), the people reject the tale of Francis’s heroism. Ignoring eyewitness testimony that confirms the miraculous event, the community refuses to believe. As the ambiguous narrating voice testifies, “we being good, commonsensical, level-headed, churchgoing folk, . . . didn’t have no truck with such nonsense and third-hand tales” (14). Disavowing Francis’s salvific mediation enacted on southern soil and denying Clarence’s clairvoyance, the visions that reach back and forth across time, the community’s disbelief undermines the transformative potential of such vectored visionaries. While the magnitude of their influence is reduced within Tims Creek, these paranormal incursions irreconcilable in black southern literature: that it is possible to define black gay manhood” (33) – and in positive, productive ways.

71 For the full account, see Luke 8:26-39.
nevertheless bisect the sanctity of this symbolic place and its traditions beyond the page. A fictionalized Tims Creek may reject its own, yet the political thrust of the message is not lost. Kenan forces his readers, heretofore beguiled by the story’s playful absurdity, to become “co-conspirators” with an aloof narrator (Harris, *Power of the Porch* 119). He scathingly criticizes “our” collective forgetfulness.

Similarly marshaling the power of queer knowledge, “The Foundations of the Earth” features angelic and spectral figures that challenge the Tims Creek community’s central religious tenets. The story’s very title suggests a fundamental shift: the mysterious movement of the earth’s tectonic plates. Within these planes of meaning, surely Gabriel, the white gay man who visits his dead black lover’s grandmother in Tims Creek, connotes the messenger archangel. Indeed, “Gabriel had come with a body, like an interpreter for the dead” (*Let the Dead* 56). Having arrived from the northern city of Boston, thereby possessing a southward direction, Gabriel’s self-effacing persona seemingly disrupts the narrative very little. The change he prompts is an internal one in Mrs. Maggie MacGowan Williams, who must reevaluate her own internal prejudices, “to realign her thinking about men and women, and men and men, and even women and women” (63). The de facto force and magnitude of Gabriel’s geographic intervention and, by extension, that of the spectral Edward, who lives on through both his lover’s and grandmother’s memories, materialize when the normally mild, god-fearing church woman stands up to the vociferously self-righteous Reverend Barden and his staunchest supporter, “the prim and priggish music teacher and president of the First Baptist Church Auxiliary Council” (50). Not insignificantly, she “shakes these foundations” by protesting their vapid insincerity on a Sunday afternoon. In finally recognizing Hezekiah Barden and Henrietta Fuchee as “childish, hypocritical idiots and
fools,” Maggie may begin again “to learn” (72). Gabriel and Edward’s enormous if covert power to disturb the world of Tims Creek surfaces through her self-evaluation, reflection, and change.72

Guided by Gabriel, Maggie’s transformation transpires as a near religious conversion; she “had to make a leap of faith and of understanding” (60), to reach beyond “what she had been taught” (69). In a tale that appears grounded in questions of altering perspectives, not only the relative flatness and roundness of the earth but also shifting definitions of morality, revised interpretations of biblical mandates, and lingering worries about individual human mortality, Maggie’s “world began to hopelessly unravel” (57) in the aftermath of Edward’s sudden death. With her grandson’s passing, she is ushered into a painful new understanding: Edward vanished largely because he feared her rejection and lack of acceptance. Gabriel’s very presence, which elicits a strong emotional reaction from the woman who would prefer staidly to endure the funeral, forces Maggie to confront this turmoil. She must realign her inward experience and outward expression of mourning. Overflowing with guilt, rage, and anguish, this pillar of the community looks to Gabriel for guidance: “she wanted Gabriel to go ahead and tell her what to think” (65), to interpret his life, to explain his homosexuality, and most importantly, to translate the excruciating, accusatory silence left by Edward’s absence.

Over the course of the story, Maggie experiences a subtle change, a shift in her thinking that heralds a more direct intervention, one persuasively performed on southern soil. Significantly, just before the fateful “confrontation” between Morton Henry and Reverend Barden, she muses, “He should have known better. I should have known better. I must learn

72 Significantly, Edward and Gabriel’s relationship, not only homosexual but also interracial, confronts the weight of history as well.
better” (69). In the span of three short sentences, Maggie undergoes a powerful transformation, moving from an external locus of control (in which she blames Edward), a decision to claim personal responsibility, and finally the promise to convert. Structurally, the story itself culminates in Part VII, a moment made more significant in light of the commandment at issue: working on the “Sabbath (i.e., the week’s seventh) Day.” Within Kenan’s framework of a black female landowner and a white tenant, “A series of reversals informs these larger transformations” (Harris-Lopez 171). On this very soil, the southern field of soybeans and a working tractor, Maggie MacGowan Williams defends Morton Henry’s right “to do what you got to do” (72). Trudier Harris has argued that “Maggie emerges as the true preacher and Gabriel as her silent convert” (South of Tradition 170), yet Maggie’s need to have this “white man exonerate her in the eyes of her own grandson” (Kenan 72) perhaps indicates that Gabriel, though an unlikely visionary, in fact prompts her change. Just as Morton looks to this displaced northerner “as if to beg him to speak, make some sense of this curious event” (70-71), so Maggie turns to her grandson’s white lover. Arguably, Gabriel functions as both a median facilitating geographic change and an intermediary crossing the boundaries between life and death. Thus the story closes with Maggie, reflecting on the day’s events, in a state of transcendence: sitting “alone on her patio, contemplating the roundness and flatness of the earth, and slipping softly and safely into sleep” (72).

Such wandering figures saturate Let the Dead Bury Their Dead. At times appearing through characters’ dreams or hallucinations, their incursions nevertheless interrupt, disturb, and profoundly displace. While the mysterious angel Chi in “Things of This World; or,
Angels Unawares” heralds another spatiotemporal incursion, a presence beyond, the youthful stranger Shang in “What Are Days” potentially exists somewhere outside time and space, in the power of Lena Rose’s consciousness. This boy, “like a lost and fallen angel” (193), possibly participates in a metaphysical affair with Lena, thereby prompting her self-transformation. In “Tell Me, Tell Me,” the ghostly young boy who haunts Ida enacts a striking historical intervention, one that acknowledges the crimes of Jim Crow inequality and violence. Whereas the white judge Butch (Ida’s husband) was never charged for, not to mention convicted of, sadistically drowning the young black boy, the child’s ghost, the visible presence of the past, forces Butch’s wife to remember and admit her own complicity.

These roving visionaries, by acting as vectors that bisect the southern landscape, generate political and aesthetic energies that create room for new imaginative possibilities. For readers, the extent of their influence endures well beyond the page. Such figures directly engage with the past, present, and the future, concurrently collapsing and expanding time/space continuities. Just as Kenan’s title story “Let the Dead Bury Their Dead,” elaborately subtitled “Being the Annotated Oral History of the Former Maroon Society called Snatchit and then Tearshirt and later the Town of Tims Creek, North Carolina [circa 1854-1985], permits him to revise, recoup, and revisit history, so his vectored visionaries

73 Consider the narrator’s assessment: “Mr. John Edgar Stokes sat in his parlor on the day after his release from the county jail, troubled yet transformed, studying not just the present but the eighty-six years that had led him there” (47). When a now-contented Stokes confides that he is ready to “go home,” Chi, the angelic life force, eases his transition from life into death.

74 Though “What Are Days,” one of the collection’s two short stories not set in Tims Creek, takes place in Newark, New Jersey, the central protagonist originally hails from the rural town. Prompted by Shang’s presence, Lena undergoes a similar change as Maggie Williams; both must cast off mourning and resume living – but with a renewed outlook.

75 Commenting on this title story, Kenan discloses to Hunt: “I was playing with academic history as opposed to oral history as opposed to personal history, and memory, and plain old gossip. And how at once they are all very different and disparate, and all very much alike” (414).
transform the southern landscape by powerfully transgressing its temporal and geographic borders.

**Aesthetic and Political Implications for an Expanding South**

Proposing tidy resolutions for narratives that remain, by their very nature, largely unsettled and unresolved seems entirely untenable and inappropriate. Moreover, for a chapter that raises nearly as many questions as it answers, perhaps the more appropriate place to begin its “conclusion” is through a series of additional queries. In light of African American literature’s deeply problematic relationship with the South, “What place has place in fiction?” (Welty 116). The enduring tropes of entrenched aversion and persistent ambivalence to the specific place of the U. S. South generally preclude its emergence as a productive space in African American writing. Furthermore, considering African American displacement within the American South, what does it mean “to put the ‘place’ back into ‘displacement’” (Bammer xiv)? In suggesting even the possibility of spiritual renewal, Randall Kenan and Toni Cade Bambara are remarkably unique within the literary tradition. For throughout their wandering projects, these two writers continually advocate a radical expansion of “the South,” one that opens its borders and embraces a range of complex differences across racial, gender, and sexual lines. Such expansiveness also counters any inclination to elide place’s thorny, entrenched complexities. As Massey argues, “The identities of place are always unfixed, contested and multiple. And the particularity of any place is . . . constructed not by placing boundaries around it and defining its identity through counter-position to the other which lies beyond, but precisely (in part) through the specificity of the mix of links and interconnections to that ‘beyond’” (5). These are the links and
interconnections that Bambara and Kenan exploit, the narrative continuities they persistently expose. Through the repeated incursions of otherworldly beings that contest rigid demarcations between time and space, insistently crossing permeable boundaries between past and present, physical and spiritual, living and dead, these authors render such sites strangely “unfixed.” What their constructions of Claybourne and Tims Creek reveal is a nascent degree of possibility, a political potential that oddly dwells in the vexing tension both within and beyond the South.

In coming out of the Black Arts Movement, perhaps Bambara initially seems more stridently militant. As she has pronounced, “We are at war” (“Salvation Is the Issue” 47). Yet Kenan also shares her inflamed sense of mission, the compulsion to “interface between the political/artistic/metaphysical, that meeting place where all seeming contradictions and polarities melt” (Bambara, “Salvation” 43). In an equally political act, the South appears reframed as a permeable interface throughout their fictions. While Kenan’s construction of Tims Creek, imbued with the possibility of constructive change or wholesome community, may seem optimistic and hopeful in certain respects, he also forcefully depicts the decay and stagnation plaguing those who rigidly cling to outmoded and repressive beliefs. This becomes most clearly manifested in his frank, biting portrayal of religious hypocrisy. Moreover, unlike Bambara’s proposed metamorphosis in The Salt Eaters, Horace Cross soars into death; A Visitation of Spirits closes in tragedy for its openly gay protagonist.

When engaging directly with the American South, even contemporary black writers must come to terms with the malicious, lingering tensions they encounter. Kenan comments on the intense complexity of this project in a “Conversation” with V. Hunt: “Being in the South, writing about it through your self, through your own response to it, and so often
reflecting about wanting to get out of the South, but at the same time knowing . . . that this is what sustains you, this is what makes you who you are” (413). Despite desperately “wanting to get out” or at least to move through its anguishing history, Randall Kenan and Toni Cade Bambara have staged compelling returns at once personal and political. Paradoxically waging their incipient war south of the Mason-Dixon line, their fictional creations – whether rural Tims Creek or urban Claybourne – redistribute time and space, reorganizing this place of the South. Thus, while the characters in The Salt Eaters, A Visitation of Spirits, and Let the Dead Bury Their Dead may not fully attain psychological wholeness, spiritual healing, or personal acceptance, Bambara and Kenan nevertheless reach beyond the spatial confines of their texts. These authors demand their readers’ active participation in both imagining and enacting change in the southern landscape: to extract fictional possibility as transformed reality.
CHAPTER THREE

Breaching Narrative Time and Space: Repetitious Rupture and Time Travel in Octavia Butler’s *Kindred* and Phyllis Alesia Perry’s *Stigmata*

The search for a place in which happiness may be found is always a metaphor for the search to recover a memory of happiness. The journey is a symbol of narrative. Narrative – as a structure of development, growth and change – the acquisition of knowledge and solution of problems – is conceived as a physical process of movement, of disruption, negotiation and return. The movement beyond liminality is marked by a literal movement outside the integrated regimes of a time and space. The “trip” constitutes a lapse in the regular rhythms of mundane existence, it leads to a place where time “stands still” or is reversed into a utopian space of freedom, abundance and transparency.

--Barry Curtis and Claire Pajaczkowska, “‘Getting There’: Travel, Time, and Narrative”

Before delving into my argument regarding narrative movement through time in two African American women’s novels, *Kindred* (1979) and *Stigmata* (1998), I would like to contemplate a poetic epigraph, one that poignantly occasions my discussion. “Requiem for a Tall Man (for Thomas Covington Dent 1932-1998),” a recent poem by Brenda Marie Osbey, movingly converges life and death, geography and history, individual and collective remembrance. Her speaker muses:

dead is a road.
and those we love and those we’ve loved not well enough
walk on it.
we carry them the little ways along we can
then stand aside
and watch them go
splitting memory and time
words like *asunder*
are useful in such moments —
slave ships in the distance —
centuries longer
nearer
than we care ever to have it said. (47-59)
This, the poem’s fourth stanza, traverses distance, not simply the geographic distance implied by traveling down a road or across the sea but temporal distance as well, both the individual life measured from birth until death and the centuries charting historical time. Unnamed yet not unremembered travelers plod along this road that stretches both before and behind, even as those who remain “stand aside/and watch them go.” Here the living can only observe these journeys as spectators until death enjoins their reluctant passage. In one such moment, which, by “splitting memory and time,” equally disrupts personal meditation and impersonal occasion, remote history abruptly collides with far-removed geography: the provocative silhouette of slave ships against the horizon.

This collision, made manifest through the poet’s charged imagery, marks a profound reorientation to time, which has been violently ripped asunder. At this very fissure, the speaker transmits horror at the slave ships’ relative temporal nearness. While “nearer/than we care ever to have it said,” this reality nevertheless has been spoken, articulated, and acknowledged through an act of written testimony: the very poem itself. Thus, while the bulk of “Requiem” commemorates the individual life of one Thomas Covington Dent, the fourth stanza extends outward as cultural memory and historical mourning.

**Legacies of Cultural Memory**

As artistic embodiments of American slavery’s haunting legacy, Octavia Butler’s *Kindred* and Phyllis Alesia Perry’s *Stigmata* perform acts of cultural mourning and memory. Like the shifting movement that characterizes the Caribbean island, the settings of these novels are oddly unsettled and transitory. While opening in clearly identifiable, present-day locations, California and Alabama, respectively, the seeming ordinariness of such
“placement” is almost immediately subverted. Published in 1979, *Kindred* predates *Stigmata* by nearly twenty years (1998). Yet the temporal settings of both novels, with *Kindred* variously set in 1976 and the early nineteenth century and *Stigmata* moving between nineteenth- and twentieth-century locations, overlap provocatively. Both female protagonists go back in time. With Dana Franklin “journeying” from Altadena, California to Maryland, Lizzie DuBose similarly crosses state lines. Whereas diasporic subjects principally traverse spatial geographies through metaphors of flight, however, Dana and Lizzie inexplicably travel back through thorny layers of historical time. Their border crossings are transgenerational, concurrently drifting between not only multiple spaces but also multiple times.

*Kindred* and *Stigmata*, akin to the otherworldly incursions enacted in the southern landscape by Kenan’s vectored visionaries, navigate spatiotemporal boundaries propelled by an almost spiritual animus. Rufus Weylin, Dana’s nineteenth-century white ancestor, psychically summons her to himself whenever his safety is endangered. In his power to effect Dana’s time travel, he materializes as a peculiarly voiced incarnation of the past. Lizzie DuBose’s female ancestors, her grandmother Grace, great-grandmother Joy, and great-great-grandmother Ayo likewise commune with her from beyond the grave. Having been snatched from Africa as a young girl, Ayo reanimates her soul across several generations, with Lizzie simply occupying the most recently reincarnated version of “a forever people” (Perry 7). As Lizzie explains to her lover, Anthony Paul, “You see, I think that Ayo reincarnated as Grace and Grace reincarnated as me” (181). Ayo’s profound unrest, this ghostly incantation from the dead, evokes Toni Morrison’s spiteful baby ghost, Beloved.76 Both figures harness intimacy and immediacy as the past is animated and made sentient. Morrison even imbues

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76 Morrison published *Beloved* in 1987, roughly midway between *Kindred* and *Stigmata*. 
this uncanny cohabitation of the living and the dead with a stirring emotional register. On the novel’s final pages, her narrator observes:

There is a loneliness that can be rocked. Arms crossed, knees drawn up; holding, holding on, this motion, unlike a ship’s, smooths and contains the rocker. It’s an inside kind – wrapped tight like skin. Then there is a loneliness that roams. No rocking can hold it down. It is alive, on its own. A dry and spreading thing that makes the sound of one’s own feet going seem to come from a far-off place . . . [Speaking of Beloved and doubtless alluding to “sixty million and more,”] everybody knew what she was called, but nobody anywhere knew her name. Disremembered and unaccounted for, she cannot be lost because no one is looking for her, and even if they were, how can they call her if they don’t know her name. Although she has claim, she is not claimed. (Morrison, Beloved 274-275)

The haunted house 124 – and, by extension, Sethe, steadily devoured and cannibalized by her daughter’s restless spirit – can only be freed through the Clearing Community’s return and powerful act of exorcism. Ayo’s spirit, housed first in her granddaughter Grace and later in her great-great-granddaughter Lizzie, must be returned permanently to the past. Intriguingly, however, ancestral memories of an originary displacement, the frightening transatlantic voyage, and the daily degradations of slavery become attached to material objects. Pieces of Ayo’s story are supernaturally distributed and tangibly located in an ancient scrap of dyed indigo cloth, a diary with its sacred “rites,” a single letter dating back to 1945, and a “mourning quilt” (Perry 72). These embodied memories are locked in the musty old traveling trunk bequeathed to Lizzie when she turns fourteen.

Yet Beloved’s mobile loneliness, which alternatively “can be rocked” or may “roam[ ]” on its own, also possesses presence: “It is alive.” It moves through and across time. Loneliness – figured as alienation, isolation, and detachment – calls to mind an affective timbre of displacement. Like Sethe’s dead baby girl, the ghost who takes on bodily form, the “sixty million and more” have been “disremembered and unaccounted for” in the historical record. Like Morrison’s Beloved, Butler’s Kindred and Perry’s Stigmata wrestle with how to
process and preserve slavery’s historical legacies and living memories. They exhibit the
degree to which the past is very much alive, that American slavery – as “an event that . . .
does not end” (Felman 67; italics in original) – is never truly past. Thus, this chapter remains
preoccupied with questions of cultural memory distilled through the lens of time. In Butler’s
and Perry’s accounts, riddled with narrative ruptures, fractures, and elisions, “time [itself] . . .
is ‘out of joint’” (Derrida, *Spectres of Marx* 103). Displacement here figures as a rupture in
time, with Dana and Lizzie displaced by, through, and across historical periods. Specific
historical moments are made manifest in the present, not Morrison’s ancestral ghost who
travels forward through unidirectional time, but rather the visible scars and living memories
that physically and psychically roam within and between the past and the present. Through
such traumatic memories’ embodied, corporeal forms, Dana and Lizzie bear witness to
transgenerational trauma.

With time continuously breached, unhinged, and destabilized in *Kindred* and
*Stigmata*, readers are pulled within a narrative structure jointly framed by the present and
folded into the past. This process mirrors that of the novels’ protagonists, who barely remain
attached to their contemporary worlds and are very nearly consumed by a voracious past. As
Timothy Spaulding observes, “Butler’s erasure of the boundaries between time and space
occur . . . violently for both her protagonist and, in narrative terms, her readers. By displacing
time across the physical and psychological planes of Dana’s identity, Butler creates a
narrative in which the conflation of time has damaging and lasting effects” (43). Yet what are
these effects for Butler’s and Perry’s readers? By collapsing the distance between the past
and the present, Butler and Perry “make overwhelming psychosocial dilemmas available to
readers by personalizing them” (Vickroy xvi). Similarly disturbed and discomfited by the
devastating proximity created by temporal dislocations, readers are pressed into roles as intimates, confidantes, and bearers of such personalized tales of slavery’s horror. Readers, too, become responsible for an accompanying ethical imperative: preservation through shared cultural memory.

**The Past’s Vexing Kinship**

In terms of its structure, *Kindred*’s external frame is characterized by circularity, ostensibly ending in the Epilogue where it began in the Prologue. In the novel’s first lines, Dana recalls, “I lost an arm on my last trip home. My left arm” (Butler 9); thus, the novel both opens and closes amid “an avalanche of pain, red impossible agony! And I screamed and screamed” (261). Yet through the episodic events that transpire within the novel’s six main (middle) chapters, *Kindred* unfurls through multiple historical periods and geographic locales. Its dizzying account features a heroine repeatedly yet inexplicably transported from twentieth-century California to the early nineteenth century in slaveholding Maryland. The novel straddles generations. Even as the story opens with the present moment in 1976, it is dictated from – and dominated by – the past.77

Within Butler’s extensive science fiction corpus, *Kindred* is somewhat an anomaly. When Dana Franklin, the novel’s modern day protagonist, mysteriously “zips back” to antebellum Maryland, having been summoned by her white ancestor, Rufus Weylin, the narrative provides no explanation for her mode of time travel. In a 1991 interview with Randall Kenan, Butler explains:

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77 Butler’s novel *Wild Seed*, published just a year after *Kindred* in 1980, also travels through time, though in a decidedly more linear fashion. *Wild Seed* steadily traces Anyanwu’s voyage: her capture in seventeenth-century Africa and coerced Middle Passage aboard her new master’s ship, the *Silver Star*. Various set in three different centuries, the tale also journeys across Africa and North America.
Kindred is fantasy. I mean literally, it is fantasy. There’s no science in Kindred. I mean, if I was told that something was science fiction, I would expect to find something dealing with science in it. For instance, Wild Seed is more science fiction than most people realize. The main character is dealing with medical science, but she just doesn’t know how to talk about it. With Kindred there’s absolutely no science involved. Not even time travel. I don’t use a time machine or anything like that. Time travel is just a device for getting the character back to confront where she came from. (495-496)

While eschewing the “science fiction” label, what Butler achieves through “just a device” is the remarkable ability to examine the realities of slavery from an unapologetically gendered perspective. Dana’s time travel, spiraling through throbbing layers of the United States’ slaveholding past, enables Butler’s subtly invective commentary on lingering present inequalities – but through the lens of elsewhere. Kindred evidences temporalities and geographies that are collapsed as well as collapsing, as the past refuses to settle or to fade into the distance. Past and present alarmingly commingle.

Dana concurrently inhabits multiple temporal spaces – what Adam McKible identifies as the “contemporaneity of history” (229) – through an arresting form of corporeal memory. History and its violations are discursively written on her material body. Such messages, which Stacy Alaimo labels “embodied knowledges” (129), get transmitted physically. Whereas Alaimo examines the “ethical commitments” prompted across species in relation to Wild Seed’s shapeshifter Anyanwu, whose “way of knowing collapses the very division between subject and object, as one transforms into the other” (129), Dana’s corporeal memory arguably works in much the same way. From visibly bruised ribs and broken teeth, a back flayed open by Weylin’s whip, and the brutal amputation of her left forearm, not to mention grievous psychological wounds, Dana’s body bears witness to the past’s trauma. No longer can she remain willfully insulated, cocooned in the casual comforts and relative
freedoms of her life in California. For her body, which roams between 1976 and the 1800s, remembers the disquieting historical realities of having both white and black ancestors.

Curiously, both forms of memory – the mind’s recollection of particular events and the body’s visible reminders – travel with Dana within and between the novel’s shifting temporal settings. What anchors her in the past, preserving both its reality and her sanity, is this painful corporeal memory. What anchors her in the present is her mind, her memories of life in California, both her work as a writer and her relationship with Kevin. Her body and mind testify to these relocations in time. While neither Dana nor the reader understands the mechanics of her travel through time, she evidences a clear set of “symptoms” whenever breaking through the time-space continuum. Almost like a migraine’s aura phase, Dana experiences nausea, dizziness, and loss of vision. Just as certain memories will become sensate, as the past becomes increasingly and alarmingly more real, so the effects of time travel (and not simply the episodes she survives in the past) are written onto her body and psyche.

Throughout *Kindred* Octavia Butler procures the “sensibility” of the past, philosopher Avishai Margalit’s idiom for “reliving the past” through remembered emotions. Such “sensibility,” Margalit clarifies in *The Ethics of Memory*, does not mean to live mired in the past but “to recover in our memory . . . What was it *like* to be in that situation or with those people then and there?” (16; italics in original). In the figure of Sarah who runs the house, for example, Butler reconsiders an oft-maligned stereotype, “the handkerchief-head, the female Uncle Tom – the frightened powerless woman” who “was the kind of woman who might have been called ‘mammy’ in some other household, . . . the kind of woman who would be held in contempt during the militant nineteen-sixties” (*Kindred* 143). In a 1997 interview
with Charles Rowell, Butler further explains her motivation: “I wanted to take a character . . . back in time to some of the things that our ancestors had to go through, and see if that character survived so very well with the knowledge of the present in her head” (51). Not only does Butler redress history, capturing its untold stories, but she also addresses a contemporary (at least during the 1970s) concern: black nationalism’s penchant for disparaging acts deemed too compromising or unforgivably accommodating. *Kindred* is a very culturally situated text. Published in the immediate wake of the Black Arts movement – just one decade later – Butler’s “taking on” or at least problematizing of the “militant nineteen-sixties” here is significant. In the same *Callaloo* interview with Kenan, she further contextualizes her novel: “*Kindred* was a kind of reaction to some of the things going on in the sixties when people were feeling ashamed of, or more strongly, angry with their parents for not having improved things faster, and I wanted to take a person from today and send that person back to slavery” (496). By naming Sarah “the female Uncle Tom” or “mammy” figure, she counters and complicates the pervasive “Aunt Jemima” stereotype.78 Over time,

78 I am reminded of Baldwin’s comments in “Many Thousands Gone” (included in his 1955 essay collection, *Notes of a Native Son*). He explicitly addresses the affiliated stereotypes attached to “Aunt Jemima” and “Uncle Tom.” According to Baldwin, “Aunt Jemima and Uncle Tom are dead. . . . [In the past,] [t]here was no one more forbearing than Aunt Jemima, no one stronger or more pious or more loyal or more wise. . . Aunt Jemima and Uncle Tom, our creations, at the last evaded us; they had a life – their own, perhaps a better life than ours – and they would never tell us what it was. . . . the image perpetually shattered and the word failed” (21-22).

Thinking about *Kindred* as falling within a broader Black Arts context, I would like to at least mention two art works that remake or unmake the “black mammy” figure through their militarized, militant Aunt Jemima(s). Joe Overstreet’s 1964 piece, “The New Jemima,” is a huge (8.5’ x 5’1’ x 1.4’) acrylic on fabric over plywood construction that looms in space. On the surface, viewers again encounter the familiar kerchief-wearing, smiling “mammy.” In this context, “Aunt Jemima” functions as a veritable domestic ideologue: the ultimate caretaker, nurse, cook, and laundress. Yet juxtaposed against her rounded figure, friendliness, and approachability are her muscled calves and rippling arms. The “New Jemima” is a physical specimen of decided prowess. In place of her body’s former sexual vulnerability, her physicality bespeaks aggressive power. New Jemima, who was “Made in the USA” (as stenciled at the top) literally packs heat. She holds a massive machine gun, aimed at the world and emitting an exaggerated lightning blast of firepower. Moreover, what could be a bottle of syrup and floating pancakes in the piece’s upper right quadrant also resemble a hand grenade and bronze shell casings.

Betye Saar’s 1972 mixed media assemblage, “Liberation of Aunt Jemima,” is substantially smaller in size (11.6” x 7.9” x 2.5”). Yet its layered images of Jemima, reproduced and simulated in several forms, potently unmake the old stereotypes. According to Margaret Lazzari and Dona Schlesier in *Exploring Art*,

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what Dana develops – and Butler reveals – is a more “relational point of view” (Troy 177). Having merged her identity with that of her ancestor, Dana Franklin and Alice Greenwood coalesce as “one woman . . . Two halves of a whole” (Butler 257). Through the vehicle of her body’s memory, this haunting continuation and the fragments of their relationship propel into the future.

Butler further splits memory and time through the uncanny physical embodiment and psychic evidence of the past’s coexistence with the present. Following her first two relocations back “home” to present day California, Dana’s husband, Kevin, who will not accompany his wife until her third temporal displacement (“The Fall”), expresses his understandable disbelief. Yet as Dana demonstrates, belief has nothing to do with it: “I went back to the beginning and remembered it all for him, relived it all in detail” (15). Curiously, Dana “remembered” an event from the historical past, “relived it all in detail” – but 165 years after the original event transpired. As Lawrie Balfour observes, Butler “literally insert[s] the past into the present” (185). Like Butler’s readers, Kevin questions the reality of her account: “Do you honestly believe you’ve traveled back over a century in time and crossed three thousand miles of space to see your dead ancestors?” (46). While traversing considerable geographic distance, her displacements through time are viciously more abrupt. The novel’s “migration between historical locations and consciousness” (Davies 150), its “erasure of boundaries between time and space” (Spaulding 43), heralds the past’s violent intrusion upon viewers behold “three versions of Aunt Jemima in a shallow display box” (457). Lazzari and Schlesier continue: “the middle Jemima is the largest figure and the most emphasized. Her checked and polka-dotted clothing is very bright and colorful. Her black skin makes her white eyes and teeth look like dots and checks, too. This Jemima holds a rifle and pistol as well as a broom. A black power fist makes a strong silhouette shape in front of all [the figures]. Militant power is now introduced to these images. The idea of Aunt Jemima, in any of its forms, can no longer seem innocuous. Saar enshrined these images in a glass box to made [sic] their spirit and energy venerable” (457).
her present existence. She frighteningly collides into episodes lifted from her ancestors’ lives, episodes that she then *remembers* and *relives* in her own time.

The episodic nature of *Kindred* exacerbates the narrative’s unsettlement and demonstrates the vexing interdependence of the past and the present. After witnessing racial violence firsthand during her second trip back, Dana’s initial credulity has all but dissipated as the challenges of surviving as a single, undocumented black woman in antebellum Maryland become dangerously real. Although Rufus’s protection – from a near drowning, a house fire, a terrible fall, and a violent fight – depends entirely upon Dana’s importation into his time, her own life, readers soon realize, is far more imperiled. Rufus is typically a victim of his own poor judgment; Dana is always subjected to the vagaries of white, slaveholding power. Despite her intellectually obtained knowledge about life under slavery, information gleaned through textbooks presents a poor approximation for the experiential knowledge painfully obtained by actually having been there. Just as Rufus’s safety provides the momentum for her travel back in time, fears concerning her own safety (i.e., whenever she faces imminent death) frantically catapult her into 1976. As Robert Crossley points out, Dana “lives out an imposed remembrance of things past,” those “convulsive memories [which] dislocat[e] her in time” and space (x). Rufus’s past – whether episodes transpiring in 1811, 1815, 1819, 1825, or 1831 – and Dana’s present in June and July of 1976 are remarkably compressed. Their disconcerting temporal immediacy unveils a disturbing intimacy, with Dana and readers steadily recognizing the degree to which these past moments shape lives in the present.

*Kindred*’s peculiar compression and elongation of time further disorders the narrative. As in every case when Dana is mysteriously pulled back into the past, Rufus Weylin remains
the animus behind “The Fire.” Once again, he has endangered himself, having set his curtains alight, and once again he needs rescuing by Dana. In relation to “The River,” this event transpires both four years and 2-3 hours later. In Rufus’s time, it is now ca. 1815 as opposed to 1811. Yet in 1976 California, Dana barely has time to shower, cleaning up from the muddy river in Maryland, and order in food for dinner before she is whisked back to Rufus’s side – this time his bedroom in the Weylin house. As Kevin anxiously watches the clock, a mere two or three minutes pass; however, upon her return, Dana knows she “had been gone for hours” (44). Given the novel’s clear preoccupation with time, this episode’s relation to time of day is significant. Dana observes: “It was dark outside. The sun had not set at home when I was snatched away, but here it was dark” (20). While explaining the time differential (i.e., the darkness) in terms of her geographic relocation from the West Coast to the South, Dana’s arrival at night, in combination with the incidents that follow, places her within a broader historical context. The temporal locator immediately brings to mind stories of slaves escaping to freedom, heading north under the cover of darkness. Without free papers verifying her status, this modern African American woman, while not enslaved, remains at greater risk of being captured (perhaps by the same patrollers tormenting Alice Grenwood’s parents) and sold to a passing slave trader. In that same vein, Dana contemplates a parallel journey to the North: “Would I really have to go all the way to some northern state to find peace? . . . The restricted North was better for blacks than the slave South, but not much better” (39). Just as the author “literally insert[s] the past into the present” within the narrative itself, so she locates Kindred within the slave narrative tradition almost immediately.
The events of “The Fire” episode further demonstrate the very plasticity of time, speaking well beyond their temporal placement in a nineteenth-century southern landscape. The metonymic function of nighttime fire, both its dangers and its secrets, evokes the racialized violence enacted upon black bodies not only under slavery but also during Reconstruction. A silent, hidden, and sensory witness to the as-yet-unnamed husband’s brutal whipping, Dana “could literally smell his sweat, hear every ragged breath, every cry, every cut of the whip. I could see his body jerking, convulsing, straining against the rope as his screaming went on and on” (36). Here the past becomes terrifyingly real, both intimate and immediate. Seeming to dissociate, momentarily detaching from the horror she beholds, Dana recalls the definition of “patrols,” a definition seemingly lifted from a remote textbook published sometime in the distant future. She reports: “A name for whites who rode through the night in the ante bellum [sic] South, breaking in doors and beating and otherwise torturing black people. Patrols. Groups of young whites who ostensibly maintained order among the slaves. Patrols. Forerunners of the Ku Klux Klan” (37). The connection to lynching, then, is made explicit in Dana’s references both to the rope that binds Alice’s father and the patrollers who prefigure the Klan. The novel’s penultimate chapter, significantly titled “The Rope,” likewise evokes its horrors.79

By concurrently inhabiting multiple tropological moments within the African American literary tradition, Kindred itself seems to roam. Jointly placed and displaced, the novel speaks outside its own temporal and narrative positioning(s). The novel – as a literary artifact from 1979 – intersects with several African American literary forms: the slave

79 While Alice Greenwood, Dana’s physical, historical, and ancestral double, is not murdered by a group of white marauders, her suicide, I would argue, rests within a lynching continuum. Rufus Weylin, the white man who has for years sexually abused Alice, is directly culpable for her cruel, unjust death.
narrative, the neo-slave narrative novel, and the lynching story (whether fictional or
dramatic\textsuperscript{80}). Whereas Jean Toomer’s poem, “Portrait of Georgia,” explicitly references “a
coiled . . . lyncher’s rope” (2) as well as the tell-tale signs affiliated with “black flesh after
flame” (7), “Blood-Burning Moon” recounts the catastrophic aftermath of a love triangle
between Bob Stone, Louisa, and Tom Burwell (also called “Big Boy”).\textsuperscript{81} Butler prominently
features at least two disastrous interracial love triangles in her novel. The one existing
between Alice Greenwood, her husband (Isaac Jackson), and Rufus Weylin most clearly
echoes the Toomer short story. Arguably, however, Dana gets incestuously folded into
another permutation of the Alice—Rufus triangle following Isaac’s brutal death. While first
functioning as a reluctant facilitator of their sexual relationship, Dana later stands in as
Alice’s substitute. Certainly, if Rufus had his way, he would inflict the same years of forced
concubinage on Dana as he did her ancestor, Alice. In all three cases, Tom Burwell—
Louisa—Bob Stone, Isaac—Alice—Rufus, and Alice—Dana—Rufus, “a [violently] destructive
love” (Butler 147) – also known as rapacious white desire to control and subject the bodies of
female slaves – drives these entanglements. The degree to which Dana, a modern black
woman, so quickly becomes ensnared in this violent interracial triad further shrinks her
presumable distance from this past.

\textsuperscript{80} In particular, I am thinking of Georgia Douglas Johnson’s one-act anti-lynching plays such as \textit{A Sunday Morning in the South} (c. 1925), \textit{Safe} (c. 1929), \textit{Blue-Eyed Black Boy} (c. 1930). (See Judith L. Stephens’s edited
collection, \textit{The Plays of Georgia Douglas Johnson}.)

\textsuperscript{81} Both “Portrait of Georgia” and “Blood-Burning Moon” are included in Toomer’s \textit{Cane} (1923). For a
scholarly account of lynching, see Trudier Harris’s \textit{Exorcising Blackness: Historical and Literary Lynching and
Burning Rituals} (1984). Other well-known literary accounts of lynching include Richard Wright’s “Big Boy
Leaves Home,” published in his 1938 short story collection, \textit{Uncle Tom’s Children}, and James Baldwin’s
“Going to Meet the Man” (1965). Unlike Wright’s “Big Boy Leaves Home,” which focuses primarily on the
African American community, Baldwin’s disturbing short story, which overtly sexualizes the violence of
lynching, centers on a white sheriff’s perverse recollection of the horrific lynching and castration he witnessed
as a boy.
Yet the image of the mutilated black body also circulates broadly as an abjected artifact of American culture. As part of the United States’ appalling racial imaginary, the images of mutilated black bodies – male and female, adult and child alike – become visual testimony to the rampant practices of racial violence that post-date Emancipation by well over one hundred years. Consider, for example, Billie Holiday’s haunting rendition of “Strange Fruit” (recorded in 1939), with lines that gruesomely contrast the beauty of the southern landscape with its depraved practices of racialized violence. As Farah Jasmine Griffin comments,

Although the song is based on a poem by Lewis Allen [sic], it truly belongs to Holiday. . . . No newspaper account, no graphic photograph, no literary description matches [Holiday’s] haunting pathos . . . Her portrayal of the naturally beautiful “pastoral South,” marred by the realities of burning black bodies, gives meaning and emotion to the descriptions [in literary accounts of lynching]. (15)

In the song’s second stanza, southern sights and smells are flagrantly contradictory. This “pastoral scene of the gallant South,” gently infused by the wafting “scent of magnolias, sweet and fresh,” is juxtaposed with the grotesque, as Holiday’s audience conjures the “bulging eyes and the twisted mouth” that are further corrupted by “the sudden smell of burning flesh.”

With Dana connecting the images she witnesses to more recent historical events such as the Nazis in Germany or South African Apartheid rule, Butler suggests the vicious global legacy of slavery. The author further shrinks this distance for her protagonist and readers alike when the past Dana witnesses becomes increasingly more proximate and “life-like.” Dana describes her newly awakened horror as any (psychologically) protective distance from the past’s violence collapses. Witnessing Alice’s naked father tied to a tree and summarily brutalized, she explains:
I had seen people beaten on television and in the movies. I had seen the too-red blood substitute streaked across their backs and heard their well-rehearsed screams. But I hadn’t lain nearby and smelled their sweat or heard them pleading and praying, shamed before their families and themselves. I was probably less prepared for the reality than the child crying not far from me. In fact, she and I were reacting very much alike. (36)

The irreducible horror slavery and its violent aftermath get powerfully transferred to Dana, a representative contemporary woman, as well as to Butler’s readers. This process of increasing pathos through witnessing, whether by an audience listening to Holiday’s “Strange Fruit” or Dana observing this grown man’s sadistic humiliation in front of his family, resonates with contemporary viewers of James Allen’s grisly collection, *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America*. With the first hardcover edition published in early 2000 and an online version readily available at www.withoutsanctuary.org, *Without Sanctuary* contains postcards and photographs dating from Reconstruction through the Depression (i.e., the 1880s—1930s). The effect on viewers is immediate, as the distance, which written or historical accounts may sometimes safeguard, is viciously shattered. Such racialized violence and its horrors, mournfully preserved and transmitted through both the historical collection and the literary work, may then be translated into cultural memory, articulated into existence hauntingly “nearer/than we care ever to have it said. (Osbey, “Requiem” 58-59).82

Aligned with Dana by way of first-person narration, readers are both displaced from the conventions of linear, chronological time and disturbed by Dana’s tacit compliance with Rufus’s despicable desires and demands. The lack of correlation between events transpiring in the ancestral past and time passing in 1976 further interrupts the narrative line. Dana’s

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82 For a provocative discussion of the cultural function of the “collection” vs. the “souvenir” (such as memory quilts), see Susan Stewart’s *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (1993). Stewart suggests: “while the point of the souvenir may be remembering, the point of the collection is forgetting – starting again in such a way that a finite number of elements create, by virtue of their combination, an infinite reverie . . . the question is what is inside” (152).
telekinetic transports rapidly elongate from minutes, hours, days, and months; however, her “time away” holds little equivalence in the present. As Sandra Govan notes, “time is totally disjointed for Dana during these transformations” (“Homage to Tradition” 89). Just as no explanation exists for her mysterious time travels, no set pattern emerges for measuring time in either location. In another essay, “Connections, Links, and Extended Networks,” Govan again comments upon Dana’s encounter with this oddly flexible temporal realm: “Time, for Dana, is subverted; she may lose seconds or minutes, later hours or weeks, out of her present life while time passes at its usual pace in the past” (86). Such ruptures and elisions, the loss of time, antagonize the unpredictability of Dana’s movement through and across historical periods. This is mirrored by the variability of elapsed time, whether here or there: “Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh” (Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination* 84). The novel may span over 250 pages, covering roughly twenty years in the nineteenth century (from approximately 1811 to 1831, the year of Hagar’s birth), yet the “current trouble” (apart from the Prologue and Epilogue, which extend just slightly) is characterized by relative brevity, a period of time dating June 9 through July 4, 1976.

The novel’s settings – both in the past and in the present – are further unsettled as Butler subtly suggests their increasing intimacy and immediacy through the discomfiting psychic mobility of *home*. Initially detached from the Weylin house, Dana dutifully engages her role as an actor and “observer[ ] watching a show, . . . watching history happen around [her]” (98). Yet this distance shrinks during her third return trip, with history crashing into not only the present moment but also the unavoidable reality of an imminent future for the plantation slaves. Unlike her white husband Kevin, she realizes that the plantation children, by performing scenes from the slave auction, practice through their play. More than merely
imitating adults’ actions, their horrific game in fact “prepare[s] them for their future” (99), what inevitably will come. The notion of “nineteen seventy-six shielding and cushioning eighteen nineteen” (101) gradually yields to a vexing connection to this vicious past. Disturbingly recasting the Weylin plantation as “home,” Butler emphasizes its uncanniness. In that Dana has grown accustomed to Weylin’s rules and dictates (and thus is far safer inside as opposed to outside his land’s geographic boundaries), the plantation seems familiar. Just as Dana wonders “what the years had done” to the Weylin plantation slaves (126), so readers wonder – as well as observe – what time in the past has done to Dana. Along with Dana, we are “startled” by her pronouncement, “Home at last,” even as she reminds herself of being in “a hostile place” (127). Dana’s understanding of displacement through time shifts from the rational to the affective realm: “I had begun to feel – feel, not think – that a great deal of time had passed for me too” (127). Despite returning to life in California, Dana feels time passing as it does for Sarah and Luke, Nigel and Carrie.

Butler blends the familiarity of home (heim) with the revulsion and horror of historical reality, evoking an emotional uncanny for both Dana and her readers. Well before the final migration that leaves Dana permanently maimed, she remembers, “I could recall walking along the narrow dirt road that ran past the Weylin house and seeing the house, shadowy in twilight, boxy and familiar, . . . [and] recall feeling relief…, feeling that I had come home” (190). Horrified and repulsed by this realization of feeling attached to so cruel a place, readers are further unsettled. How could this contemporary protagonist feel at home there? Alarmingly, Dana also grows increasingly dislocated from her own contemporary California residence: “though the time, the year, was right, . . . the house just wasn’t familiar enough. I felt as though I were losing my place here” (191; italics for emphasis). Not only
does Dana’s home hover in motion but also her feelings of attachment *and* revulsion – for both homes – cohabit uncomfortably. This emotional uncanny, due to her repeated temporal dislocations, underscores displacement’s affective register and extends outward to *Kindred*’s readers.

In blurring the borders between “home” and “away,” Butler collapses the psychological boundaries between the past and the present, again figured through placement and displacement from “home.” Like Morrison’s Sethe, being devoured alive by the baby ghost’s voracious presence in the house, so Dana is very nearly consumed by the past. Captured by one of the same patrollers who tortured Alice’s father, for example, she barely avoids certain rape and possible lynching. While leaving her visibly shaken, Dana responds here with indignation as opposed to the trauma victim’s overriding shame. In “Witnessing Otherness in History,” Kelly Oliver explains the source of this shame:

Most victims of torture and abuse feel ashamed to tell their stories . . . What is the source of this feeling of shame? Why would a victim feel ashamed of a wrong committed by the victimizer? I propose that the feeling of shame is caused by being made into an object. Even in a situation where one has no choice, where one is not strong enough to resist, the experience of becoming a mere object for another produces feelings of shame. Along with the memories of physical pain and torture, witnessing recalls memories of being an object, of losing one’s sense of self as an agent, of losing one’s subjectivity and ultimately one’s humanity. (62)

Because she concurrently inhabits historical and contemporary time, even when only preserved in her mind, Butler’s protagonist can voice anger. Yet as she steadily becomes a “dual” object/agent, both a victim and a quasi-perpetrator in history’s machinations, Dana begins to experience an increasing sense of shame, as pieces of her humanity are carved away by accumulated time within this traumatic narrative. Dana has been equipped with a task, to preserve both her black and white bloodlines, or to risk erasing her own existence completely. During the course of discharging “her duty,” she will be made complicit with,
even seemingly sanctioning, the very darkest, vilest horrors of southern slavery: the breakdown of the slave family (whether by separating a husband and wife or by removing a parent from his/her child) and the recurring trauma of rape perpetrated against African American women, often at the hands of their slave masters. Hence her arrival at a clear epistemological crisis, one heralded by the failure of her contemporary knowledge to make any noticeable difference in the past. Her modern history books and maps are effectively useless. Moreover, such knowledge becomes increasingly dangerous; her ability to read and write marks her as a person of increasing suspicion. Her knowledge, which she passes on to the other slaves, results in her horrific beating and whipping at the hands of Tom Weylin.

Yet the overriding collapse of knowledge yields to a prevailing ontological crisis, as Dana finds herself slowly adapting to and accepting, out of necessity, the practices of plantation life in antebellum Maryland. As Alice repeatedly accuses her, Dana becomes more like Sarah, the “mammy figure,” and less the progressive liberal woman transported from late 1970s California. Shockingly, she almost has grown comfortable in her role. More alarming still, this change occurs after relatively little time has passed. Echoing Oliver’s language, Dana comments, “I felt dully ashamed. Slavery was a long slow process of dulling” (183). In order to survive, to preserve her lineage, and to ensure that the baby Hagar (conceived between Alice and Rufus) is born, she must encourage Alice’s sexual relationship with Rufus. In 1831, after having variously “lived” across 20 years in the previous century, no longer does 1976 “cushion” the past.

83 In the well-known moment from his 1845 Narrative, Frederick Douglass describes a decided lack of emotional attachment to his mother. (Feminist scholars bell hooks in “Homeplace: A Site of Resistance,” which she includes in Yearning, and Hortense Spillers in “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe both address Douglass’s account of this relationship.) See also Frances Smith Foster’s Witnessing Slavery.

84 Alice sneers, “You sound just like Sarah” (159). In the same heated discussion, she continues, “‘Doctor-nigger,’ she said with contempt. ‘Think you know so much. Reading-nigger. White-nigger! Why didn’t you know enough to let me die” (160; italics in original).
In his critique of Eviatar Zerubavel’s *Time Maps* (2003), cultural anthropologist Johannes Fabian asserts that the book, despite its title, “is not about time. Its object of contemplation is representations of the past, mostly the stories that make up collective memory” (43). Fabian primarily takes issue with “this equation of time with the past” (43). In place of questions such as, “Why do we make up certain stories of the past, why do we consider certain points in the past significant and ignore others, why are certain dates commemorated by instituting public holidays?”(44), he suggests that we instead ask “how?” Fabian then outlines several provocative distinctions applicable to the nature of time, the past, and collective memory in *Kindred*:

**Why?** questions, asked of time, are aimed at time as duration, as flow, as explanations for causation that results in states. They find their answers in structures and schemes that are operative in representing history. . . . **How?** questions are addressed to *timing*, to the nature of events, to an understanding of what I like to call ways with time or temporal practices . . . **how?** queries regard temporal pragmatics rather than semiotics and they ultimately are about politics of time. (43-44; italics in original)

As both Butler’s heroine and her readers steadily recognize, the narrative’s resistance to “time as duration, as flow, as explanations of causation” ensures that asking “why” yields neither satisfactory nor conclusive answers. The passage of time – between 1976 California and its various episodic analogues in nineteenth-century Maryland – cannot be mapped consistently. Dana’s past does not mathematically correspond to her present. Whether here or there, time itself acts disordered and random, unfolding in capricious, unpredictable ways. In Butler’s rendering, both time and the past are devastatingly cruel.

*Kindred* – rather than faithfully *representing* history or mimetically *reproducing* an historical account – transmits the very ruptures of a horrific time in the past. My language here deliberately invokes Shoshana Felman in *Testimony*: “How is the act of *writing* tied up
with the act of *bearing witness…?*” (2; italics in original). *Kindred* transmits and bears witness to such fissures and their horrors. Yet with Dana recording her own story, readers are aligned with her perspective, drawn in as reluctant confidantes. As Felman continues, to what degree “is the act of *reading* literary texts itself inherently related to the act of *facing horror*?” (2; italics in original). What *Kindred* demonstrates, Spaulding suggests, is “that the legacy of slavery still marks the nation’s history and manifests itself in the physical and psychological wounds of the present. The juxtaposition of America’s two-hundredth birthday and the racial struggle grounded in the civil rights and Black Power movements allows the novel to occupy multiple social and historical contexts” (45). Such contexts, however, are continually inscribed and then displaced. This process transpires through the body – itself displaced through time – the body that not only records the narratives of violent injury but also intervenes through an embodied memory. As Dana kills Rufus out of self-defense, leaving behind her arm in an avalanche of inconceivable pain, the body’s death and dismemberment finally stop the relentlessly repeating cycles of temporal displacement. Indeed, Dana’s own genealogy, her individual timeline, has been preserved through the birth of Hagar. While the two ancestors, white Rufus Weylin and black Alice Greenwood, whom she meets in the past both die there, they nevertheless live on through their daughter’s body. Hence Dana is conceived as well as finally, conclusively re-oriented in her own time through a powerful form of violent rebirth.

Shortly after Butler’s shocking death in February 2006, Hortense J. Spillers penned her moving tribute, “Imaginative Encounters.” In this short piece, she captures the enduring legacy Octavia Butler the writer leaves for her readers:
That Butler indeed thought [the unthinkable], plucking this contemporary character out of a world that parallels our own and from the nesting place of an interracial marriage inscribes the most daring of fictional moves with a result that is profoundly disturbing: if fictional time lays claim to plasticity, then it can retrogress as well as progress. . . . We have no fiction quite like it in joining so terrible a historical contingency to the canons of the magical . . . [as well as] its rare refusal of a unidirectional concept of time and inevitability of progress. We do not want to know that the cost of our being here has been inestimable and that the way to our current peace swims in blood and the truncated bodies of the violent dead. Forced from our slumber of feigned innocence, we awaken here to full consciousness and its blasts of discomfort. In this instance, we have seen the future that is represented from one of its angles – the terrible past – and it is a cautionary tale that we dare not disbelieve. (5)

Engaging in this mode of cultural archeology produces a renewed historical consciousness that retools both the political and ethical spheres: “forced from our slumber,” we “awaken to full consciousness and its blasts of discomfort.” Through such legacy, Butler suggests that by acknowledging histories of oppression, artists may promote – or at least facilitate the possibility of – communal revival and change. While gesturing towards relational solidarity, Butler’s fictional portraits of the community and home, whether the Weylin plantation in Maryland or Dana’s new home in Altadena, California, reveal the degree to which slavery lives on. Kindred closes with Dana’s archival research at the Maryland Historical Society to investigate the “official” record: “newspaper clippings, legal accounts” (263). Dana longs to “touch solid evidence that those people existed” (264). While tangible evidence may not be verified through the archive, their living presence nevertheless survives, preserved not only through Dana’s memory but also Butler’s “fantastical” account. Butler’s audience is left with the impact of such visions. After beholding “the future . . . represented from one of its angles,” readers seem ethically charged, held responsible for generating what comes after.

Ancestral Timelines and Genealogical Time
If *Kindred* proclaims the alarming proximity of the past, the present’s disquieting kinship with events that transpired centuries before, *Stigmata* announces the degree to which the past lives on, forever animating and troubling future generations. As in Butler’s novel, extra-temporal incursions from an ancestral realm profoundly disturb and disrupt the narrative line. Yet *Stigmata*, as its title makes clear, is permeated by a far stronger supernatural presence, namely the mystical reincarnation of Ayo who, despite her death in 1900, nevertheless cohabits two future times and inhabits two future bodies: that of her granddaughter, Grace (1900-1958), and her great-great-granddaughter, Elizabeth Joyce DuBose (b. 1960). Despite her origin in Africa, Ayo’s restless spirit, which seems recursively trapped within the geography of the United States, demands that the story of her original capture and transport in the slavers’ hold be endlessly retold and relived. Her traumatic memories, while reincarnated psychically and reinscribed physically upon future female generations, are not unilaterally passed on. The very patterned selectivity of this cross-generational haunting further unhinges the narrative.

Hence the novel’s preoccupation with genealogical time. The “three lives on top of each other” – lives which Lizzie, as Ayo’s most recent reincarnation and *Stigmata*’s first-person narrator, must constantly negotiate – understandably exert the most dominant presence. However, *Stigmata* in fact features five generations of women. That the novel both maps and privileges the ancestral past is made clear well before Lizzie (as narrator) ever utters her first line, “I guess it’s the contrast that makes me laugh” (1). This family tree exists outside the text’s physical timeframe. Furthermore, the dates temporally stretch back before the earliest recounted memory, which commences with Ayo’s capture and enslavement – her birth as a slave and thus symbolic death, as life in Africa ceases to exist. That Ayo remains
cut off from her African heritage, despite her assertion, “I come from a long line of forever people” (7; italics in original), is indicated by the genealogy’s starting point with Ayo herself. And from Ayo (dubbed “Bessie” by her white master, which represents yet another loss, that of her given name), her daughter Joy, Joy’s daughter Grace, Grace’s daughter Sarah, and finally Sarah’s daughter Elizabeth Joyce DuBose, Perry constructs a striking visual epigraph. Hence readers, before overhearing Lizzie’s “conversation” (in fact a psychiatric hospital exit interview) with Dr. Harper, encounter her location – her ostensible placement – within these matrilineal roots. Whereas Dana Franklin must ferret out her ancestral ties, vaguely recalling a genealogy inscribed in a family Bible, Lizzie knows from whence (and from whom) she came. Each one\(^85\) of her female ancestors variously dwells within her story; however, with Grace and Ayo, they also overtake and overrun her story, consuming it as their own.

Whereas time is jointly compressed and elongated in Kindred, time psychically roams in Stigmata. Curiously, the text’s temporal orientation – whether the family tree’s record of births, marriages, and deaths, the dates marking entries in Joy’s diary, which begins 12/26/1898 and ends 7/23/1900, or the external frame narrative itself (i.e., Lizzie’s own story) – is meticulously specified at nearly every turn. Chapter one establishes that Lizzie and readers alike are situated in “June 1994 – Atlanta.” However, such clear placement in time (and even space) is almost immediately subverted by the coexistence of two competing accounts: the lies Lizzie tells Dr. Harper (so that he will discharge her) and the truth she confides in her readers. In relation to the traumatic memories – her own, Grace’s, and Ayo’s

\(^85\) Joy’s voice becomes embodied through the written word, the diary containing her mother’s oral accounts and the material object passed down first to Grace and later deposited into Lizzie’s fourteen-year-old hands. Sarah, as the representative member of an ambiguous fourth generation, occupies a more problematic place in the novel. She seemingly has been forgotten, abandoned, and overlooked – not only in the past but also in the present. Hence as Lizzie begins making a “story quilt” for Grace, she includes her mother in this process of tangibly preserving and recording memory. Sarah’s peculiar role in the novel is underscored when she calls out to Lizzie/Grace/Ayo, “my daughter/mother” (197).
– she contains, Lizzie is reluctant to call forth the myth of her origin, “the beginning long ago and far removed from here, when the world was bloody” (2; italics for emphasis). In light of fourteen long years spent shuffling between psychiatric hospitals, her reticence seems reasonable. The trauma of enslavement, in all its permutations, encourages her silence. Hence the “obstacles to communicating such experience” that surface: the need for “silence, simultaneous knowledge and denial, dissociation, resistance, and repression” (Vickroy 3). Yet significantly, not only Lizzie but also Grace has encountered these very same obstacles, giving rise to her mourning quilt, assembled in order to materially represent – and voice – Ayo’s originary displacement. Ironically, both the quilt and the act of quilting, of piecing together multicolored fabrics and variegated textures into a coherent pattern, convey nurturance through an object meant to enhance rest. Yet when Grace’s quilt, which contains Ayo’s story, is passed down to Lizzie, it becomes the material source of her haunting. Physically shrouded beneath these layers of the past, Lizzie wakes with its injuries, wet from nearly drowning and bloodied from iron shackles.

Paradoxically, Stigmata, a narrative that initially seems so obviously situated within clear temporal demarcations, in fact only masquerades as such. Just as its central protagonist must play a role, performing “well-acted moments of sanity” (6), the narrative feigns discrete placements in time vis-à-vis the over-inscription of temporal markers. Readers are seemingly encouraged to take note, to obsessively chart shifting time and switching place. Corinne Duboin, who persuasively likens and links the organization of the novel to another permutation of the quilting metaphor, explains that the novel’s twenty-six chapters, as “disjointed textual units that alternate between three time periods” (296), construct a discernible pattern of coexisting temporalities. In Duboin’s schematic, “even-numbered
chapters make up Lizzie’s diary prior to and during her confinement in mental hospitals,” whereas “odd-numbered chapters encompass dated entries from June 1994 to July 1996, written after Lizzie’s discharge from the hospital” (296). Yet, I would argue, woven within this same temporal fabric are repeated dislocations, ruptures, and elisions that prove disorienting and jarring.

Again evoking an emotional register of displacement, the painful rupture from an African homeland and the ensuing cultural alienation Ayo endures through her irrevocable separation from family, nation, language, and culture, Lizzie recalls, “time’s doorway remains open, and Ayo and Grace have etched pain all over my body” (126). She also endures “the eerie feeling I’m living life in reverse” (27). As both Ayo’s great-great-granddaughter and Grace’s granddaughter, she inhabits multi-dimensional time, and it is excruciating. Later, when Grace begins folding Lizzie into her relived traumatic story, Lizzie must “adjust to the feeling of being two places at once” (162). Shortly thereafter, readers – along with Lizzie – are stunned to realize that in the mere blink of an eye, “There was Ayo first, then Grace. Two of them” (168). Three women, two of whom are long dead, are overlaid upon one another. Yet while they share consciousness, their memories are individual and distinct. More than merely claiming, “I can go back in time” (146), Lizzie also can, like Grace and Ayo before her, hover within (or outside? or between? – it remains unclear which) three bodies within three coterminous temporalities: “like remembering, but more” (82). This profoundly disorienting experience, first for Grace and later for Lizzie, mirrors Ayo’s prevailing dislocation – the overwhelming psychic and physical loss – of the body colonized, enslaved, and removed from a distant homeland as well as a spirit that continues to roam ceaselessly, searching for the way home.
Thus, with the past figured not as a direct line extending back in time but rather as a circle, Eva asserts, “If you walk long enough, you catch up with yourself” (117). In Stigmata’s psychic reorientation to time, the spiritual reincarnation of souls and the physical manifestation of remembered trauma repeat and cycle. The scars, as “permanent remembrance of the power of time folded back upon itself [provide] proof of lives intersecting from past to present” (204). In Joy’s first diary entry, she forecasts the narrative’s preoccupation with remembering – through reincarnation and the reinscription of genealogical displacements. As a voice from the dead, Ayo speaks through her daughter but also to Grace and to Lizzie, who will be drawn into this cyclical, fragmentary past of a “forever people” that nevertheless gets projected far into an imagined future. Joy records her mother’s words, which intone from beyond the dead:

*My name mean happiness she say. Joy. That why I name you that so I don’t forget who I am what I mean to this world. I come from a long line of forever people. We are forever. Here at the bottom of heaven we live in the circle. We back and gone and back again.*

*I am Ayo. I remember.*

*This is for those whose bones lay sleepin in the heart of the mother ocean for those who tomorrows I never knew who groaned and died in that dark damp aside a me. You rite this daughter for me and for them.* (Perry 7; italics in original)

Like Morrison’s ghost, representative of the sixty million and more who were “disremembered and unaccounted for” (274), Ayo insists that she be named and remembered. She ensures her own legacy through her reincarnation across generational time.

Grace, too, passes on her legacy – of having relived Ayo’s original traumas – through the quilt her granddaughter Lizzie inherits. Framed through Susan Stewart’s analysis of the souvenir, this mourning quilt powerfully marks “the transformation of exterior into interior,” for “the souvenir reduces the public, the monumental, . . . into the miniature, that which can be enveloped by the body, . . . that which can be appropriated within the privatized view of
the individual subject” (137-138). Furthermore, Stewart continues, “temporally, the souvenir moves history into private time” (138). What I want to emphasize here is the translation and transmission of the broad historical event (the exterior) into personalized memory (the interior). The degree to which Stewart’s language describes the quilt’s effects is remarkable. Ayo’s individual story gets passed on, with her history recorded and moved – through the material object – into “private time.” (Later, Lizzie will enter this same discourse, becoming a storyteller by piecing together a quilt that relates Grace’s life story.) Through her reincarnation, Ayo not only peculiarly speaks and remembers her own story but also powerfully interrupts – by displacing forward through time – the traumatic narrative.

Although she calls her name into existence, not Bessie but “Ayo,” and insists, “I remember,” her traumatic upheaval is reenacted, inflicted upon her very own offspring. Whereas “those whose bones lay sleepin in the heart of the mother ocean” – the countless unnamed victims who succumbed to the Middle Passage’s watery grave – are commemorated and claimed, their groaning deaths haunt Ayo’s future generations.

In Subjectivity, Identity, and the Body, Sidonie Smith examines the autobiographical practices of women, particularly focusing on “how the excluded and colorful have used autobiography as a means of ‘talking back’” (20). Smith poses a series of intersecting questions that link the history of the body with subjectivity: “Whose history of the body is being written? What specific body does the autobiographical subject claim in her text?” (23). In Ayo’s case, she claims the sacred rites of her body and her name as her own. Bodily memories of trauma are here transmuted, translated as actual, physical wounds – lifted from a distant past – and then embodied in the future. Similarly, her name remains on the lips of
future generations, first translated from the African tribal dialect into English as “Joy” and then lurking, always, through her reincarnated presence.

While Ayo may function as a quasi-autobiographical subject, in that she does retell her own story, Stigmata, generically speaking, is clearly fiction. The process of reincarnation, the presence of multiple bodies and temporalities coexisting, and the purpose of a ghostly ancestor who can – across centuries – inflict her past suffering onto future generations seemingly invoke the fantastic of folklore or magical realism. Perhaps Stigmata seems a far cry from the truth-telling accounts put forth through autobiography’s impulse to record and report. Yet fascinatingly, Perry’s account does operate as a form of cultural autobiography. Related as a first-person narrative, authenticated through material objects that testify to its veracity (i.e., the fragment of ancient indigo cloth, the diary, and even the quilt), this novel retains the most potent, persuasive elements of autobiography: its emphasis on relating and voicing an “I/eye”-witness account. In such a way, Stigmata powerfully testifies to – even from 1998 – the degree to which slavery and its infamous histories live on, possibly even “forever.” Like the Holocaust, this centuries-long past of slavery haunts still, “back and gone and back again” (Perry 7).

What Perry reveals through this process, then, are the ways in which the original pain of a people transcends time and space through cultural memory. Through her model of reincarnated, transgenerational time, framed and mediated through Lizzie DuBose vis-à-vis Grace vis-à-vis Ayo, Perry gestures toward an ethical imperative, necessarily directed toward her readers through the power of empathy. According to Murray Krieger,

The sociopolitical function of literature in its aesthetic dimension . . . is to destabilize the dominant culture’s attempt to impose its institutions by claiming a ‘natural’ authority for them, and by using . . . a false art (a conceptual rhetoric disguised as art) to create the ground of this illusionary naturalization of its claim to power. The
aesthetic reveals the fraudulence, and thus the deception of this attempt. (qtd. in Clark 12; italics in original).

Consider Perry’s depiction of psychology and psychiatry. Lizzie is incarcerated for fourteen wasted years until she eventually learns to pretend that she does not relive, remember, and bear witness to Ayo’s suffering. Perry portrays Western medicine, represented not only by the handsome Dr. Harper but also Lizzie’s own father, as senselessly pathologizing transgenerational suffering. Like the “false art” and the “fraudulence” Krieger denotes, Perry’s aesthetic draws attention to itself. Seemingly, the novel opens by acknowledging its own conceit: “I guess it is the contrast that makes me laugh” (1). Readers, then, are immediately made into intimate, sympathetic allies while observing as Perry – through Lizzie’s own self-healing – destabilizes the impositions of such external institutions.

*Stigmata*, like *Kindred*, features a disrupted narrative line through this same process of reincarnation. With Ayo painfully manifesting herself in both Grace and Lizzie, Perry unsettles not only her narrative line but also the master(s’) narrative line. In emphasizing the overwhelming, grievous loss of being removed from an African homeland, she privileges pathos over logos, the intimate feelings of violation rather than the pernicious rationale (whether economic, paternalistic, or purely sadistic) that slave traders and slave owners alike used to justify the global slave trade. Like Morrison and Butler, Perry harnesses the mobile loneliness – of psychic alienation and estrangement – that displacement’s emotional uncanny evokes. In destabilizing the narrative of American history, Perry prompts readers’ indignation. Yet she does so by mobilizing another emotional valence: the very empathy that demands an ethical response.
A Legacy of “Future Memory”

The term legacy, in connoting the past contributions to the present moment, seems imbued with an ambivalent kind of half-life. How do we delimit the “reach” of a legacy? Which remnants are left behind; which fragments move forward? Where, in the future, does the legacy of a particular moment recorded in historical time cease being significant? In the context of colossal cultural trauma, as in the case of the transatlantic slave trade, which possesses a racial, economic, and political legacy so insidious that it infects the very core of the United States and many other countries today, we cannot (nor should we) even hazard a guess. Similarly pondering the role cultural memory plays in shaping not only our interpretations of the past and understandings of the present but also those moments extending into the future, Minrose Gwin writes, “Cultural memory and mourning kept alive through writings and stories are as much spatial as temporal; they exist in both the past and the present, yet they move us toward a future that will inevitably become the past. What kind of future will that be, and what kind of history will it produce?” (Introduction 1).

In wandering between the past, present, and the future, Trinh T. Minh-ha affirms, “the return is also a journey into the layer of ‘future memory’” (“Other than Myself” 15). Notably cyclical, Trinh situates such spatial and chronological movement within and between here, there, and elsewhere. In effect, this chapter has examined yet another form of symbolic return – not by traversing geography through migration, although Dana is physically relocated in space and Lizzie is psychically teleported back to her great-great-grandmother’s village in Africa – but through layers of recursive time. Such journeying through the

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86 Trinh in fact borrows this term from Tahar Ben Jelloun’s “Les Pierres dus temps.” She translates Jelloun: “One relapses into memory as one relapses into childhood, with defeat and damage. Even if it were only to prevent such a fall, the writer sees to it that he is in a layer of ‘future memory’, where he lifts and displaces the stones of time” (qtd. in “Other than Myself”10). Both Jelloun and Trinh harness the power of the writer. A natural extension of this metaphor, I am arguing, includes readers in a projected layer of future memory.
historical past mystically ranges to a contemplative time and place beyond the present: what Trinh calls “future memory.” Within the African American literary canon, especially the neo-slave novel tradition – which, Ashraf Rushdy notes, is both “history-laden” and “present-minded” (228) – Trinh’s concept eerily echoes Morrison’s “rememory.” Both terms tremble with individual dissonance and communal resonance: the process of not forgetting personalized accounts of trauma by committing them to permanent cultural memory.

Yet what of the related question of time and its confluxures, my claim that *Kindred* and *Stigmata* reveal displacements by, across, and through the temporal realm? Consider Morrison’s definition of rememory, profoundly voiced through Sethe: “I was talking about time. It’s so hard for me to believe in it. Some things go. Pass on. Some things just stay. I used to think it was my rememory. You know. Some things you forget. Other things you never do. But it’s not. Places, places are still there” (Morrison 35-36; italics for emphasis).

As Caroline Rody elaborates, “‘Rememory’ as a trope postulates the interconnectedness of minds, past and present, and thus neatly conjoins the novel’s supernatural vision with its aspiration to communal epic, realizing the ‘collective memory’ of which Morrison speaks” (101). According to Fabian, “There is no time for us except embodied time, . . . a kind of contemporaneity (*Zeitgenossenschaft*) that is not a mere implication of coexistence in time” (50).

Whereas Morrison’s rememory reinvigorates the past and demonstrates its relevance to the present, Trinh ostensibly gestures toward a vague future possibility. Perhaps the shift from historical legacy toward cultural memory represents the crux of literature’s potential. In the very sites of anxiety and grief where *Kindred* and *Stigmata* reveal painful cultural displacements – “slave ships in the distance—/ centuries longer/ nearer/ than we care ever to
have it said” (Osbey, “Requiem” 59) – Butler and Perry imagine ethical transformation. Their legacies of “future memory” painfully sift through and remember layers of conflicting American history, envisioning what might transpire should their readers pause in a moment of shared cultural requiem.
CHAPTER FOUR

Written in Geography: Absence, Presence, and Spectrality in Brenda Marie Osbey’s *All Saints* and Michael Ondaatje’s *The English Patient*

The “identity of a place” is much more open and provisional than most discussions allow. First, what is specific about a place, its identity, is always formed by the juxtaposition and co-presence there of a particular sets of social interrelations, and by the effects which that juxtaposition and co-presence produce. Moreover, . . . a proportion of the social interrelations will be wider than and go beyond the area being referred to in any particular context as a place. Second, the identities of places are inevitably unfixed. They are unfixed in part precisely because the social relations out of which they are constructed are themselves by their very nature dynamic and changing. They are also unfixed because of the continual production of further social effects through the very juxtaposition of those social relations. Moreover, that lack of fixity has always been so. The past was no more static than the present. Places cannot “really” be characterized by the recourse to some essential, internalized moment.  

--Doreen Massey, *Space, Place, and Gender*87

Places and their identities, Massey suggests, are characterized by remarkable fluidity, even tenuousness. They are porously elastic. Even when a place name refers to a concrete site or city, this location inevitably intersects with far-reaching issues of history, geography, materiality, space, and dwelling. A place may appear literally “written in geography,” physically identifiable on a map, yet its presumably self-contained perimeters in fact betray permeable, malleable borders. Even “fixing” place as an idiom in language poses a challenge, for place may refer to a specific geographic locality or a broad abstraction (i.e., the concept of place).

Rather than endlessly proliferate these definitions and their fault lines, however, I would like to explore place and its deep complexities through two specific examples, through two different kinds of spaces: the urban cityscape and the desert landscape. Both the city of New Orleans, Louisiana and the landscape of the African desert reveal persistent degrees of

87 Quoted from pages 168-169.
fluctuation and mutability. In the desert, such variability transpires through the beguiling mirage that frustrates interpretation or the all-consuming wind and sand storms that fully expunge evidence of human presence. The desert emerges as an almost untouchable, sacred space steeped in ambiguous peripheries and evocative ambivalences. Analogously, the New Orleans cityscape, surrounded by the waterways of the Mississippi River, Lake Pontchartrain, and the ocean gulf, is fixed upon an edge, the border between land and water. Such is the paradox of a crescent-shaped city at once uniformly organized, laid out along mappable gridlines, yet always subject to possible peril: the waters may rise, the levees give way, and the city flood, an earth overtaken and returned to its watery home.88 The desert landscape and the New Orleans cityscape exist under prevailing threat, the potential for upheaval and extinguishment.

These questions of geography and topography, complexly imbricated with notions of place as well as displacement, further coalesce in literary works physically set in New Orleans and the Libyan desert: Brenda Marie Osbey’s 1997 collection of poetry, All Saints, and Michael Ondaatje’s 1992 novel, The English Patient.89 More than merely exemplifying the power of flexible, recordable landscapes, All Saints and The English Patient reveal profound local/global contiguities and suggest the efficacy, even necessity, of examining displacement within a transnational framework, one that extends across geographic, historical, and cultural boundaries. Despite the resonating aesthetic energies of their works, Osbey and Ondaatje do write out of distinctive cultural and historical backgrounds. A life-long resident of the city, Osbey approaches New Orleans in deeply personal terms. In

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88 Certainly in the horrific wake of Hurricane Katrina (August 29, 2005), the reality of such danger is palpable.

89 In fact, the novel presents two main settings: the Libyan Desert as well as an abandoned Italian villa. Despite their potential dissonance, these two settings reveal fascinating continuities as “bodily topographies,” a concept I develop at length later in the essay.
discussing this place, not only the setting for her poems but also her home, she observes, “Places make sense to us to the extent that they are or seem to be familiar. To be from someplace is not merely to have lived there for some time. Home is memory and blood, dust and air. It is also to be from and of that particular people. To be possessed by that history” (‘Writing Home’ 41). To the degree that the African American poet insistentely positions both herself and her poetry in New Orleans, Michael Ondaatje’s biography appears similarly reflected through his work, particularly in its global expansiveness. Born in Ceylon (present day Sri Lanka), Ondaatje is of both Dutch and South Asian ancestry. As a postcolonial subject, he was educated in England and later immigrated to Canada; now a Canadian citizen, he currently resides in Toronto. With The English Patient’s strident critique of British colonial rule and exposure of the racist underpinnings buttressing imperial power, Ondaatje’s work also reverberates along jointly personal and political axes.

In Questions of Travel: Postmodern Discourses of Displacement, Caren Kaplan in fact builds to her charge that displacement should be understood in terms of its political and historical valences. She queries: “How can we pose the question of widespread displacement in such a way as to render it historically and politically viable? How can we theorize the emergence of specific subjects in the midst of vast changes in the economic and social order?” (Kaplan 140). Ondaatje positions his tale at the precise moment of profound international turmoil, the years in and around World War II. Getting a fix on the historical time period for All Saints is virtually impossible; individual poems appear variously set across centuries, from the seventeenth century to the present time. Yet throughout the collection, Osbey underscores the widespread implications of the African slave trade as well as the palpable remnants of its heritage; the very bricks in the street testify to such presence.
Both texts proffer avenues for investigating displacement in terms of pervasive economic and social changes: transformations writ globally. *All Saints* and *The English Patient* map and record private histories and traumas enacted across a broader stage. Osbey’s New Orleans reveals the transgenerational aftershocks of black enslavement and the triangular trade of colonial powers in goods and lives. Ondaatje’s Libyan desert transpires not only as a morphing, mythic landscape, excavation site for his international assembly of explorers, but also as a “theatre of war” (Ondaatje 252).

Osbey and Ondaatje create locations with open, porous boundaries, revealing “precisely the presence of the outside within[,] which helps to construct the specificity of the local place” (Massey 170). Yet as Massey outlines, the problem with “attempts to fix the meaning of places, to enclose and defend them,” is the “singular” arbitrariness of such rigid definitions (Massey 168). Those who might support “static identities for places . . . interpret places as bounded enclosed spaces defined through counterposition against the Other who is outside” (168). This apt description of the colonizing mentality, in which a dominant, more powerful presence defines this “Other” (be that a citizen or its nations) as “counter,” again raises the question of geography. To effectively oppose empire’s expansionism, one project of decolonization advocates the vigorous reclamation of national territories and traditions. Speaking to this strategy, Edward Said maintains, “if there is anything that radically distinguishes the imagination of anti-imperialism, it is the primacy of the geographical in it” (“Yeats and Decolonization” 10).

Such is the imaginative power that Osbey and Ondaatje mobilize, the power to destabilize histories of domination and subjugation. Their challenge arises etched in geography. Through undulating landscapes that defy definition and nomadic specters that
merge with these terrains, Osbey and Ondaatje create works that oscillate through multiple historical accounts. In so doing, they directly challenge the imperialist notion that either places or their inhabitants may be bounded and controlled. Writing within specific temporal and geographic frameworks, these authors cast self-authenticating, alternative narrative histories – the timeless, placeless narratives of racial and colonial others – that get transferred to spatial structures and recorded on the landscape.

Poetic Inscriptions of New Orleans: Brenda Marie Osbey’s *All Saints*

*All Saints* is a new and selected poems collection, mostly new, . . . I wanted to do something that would touch on several different aspects of black New Orleans life. I wanted to focus specifically on religion, especially on hoodoo and Catholicism combined; I wanted something that focused on the slave heritage, something set in the 1600s, 1700s.

– Brenda Marie Osbey, in an Interview with John Lowe

Nowhere is the fluid, interactive sense of place and its interchanges made more evident than in New Orleans.\(^{90}\) This metropolis represents a rich conglomerate of language traditions and their hybrids. It contains a thick history that has trafficked in cross-cultural exchange. Perhaps more than any other city in the United States, New Orleans heralds the enduring confluence of nationalities, cultures, races, and religions, a site where the global is (and always has been) tangibly present in the local. Arnold R. Hirsch and Joseph Logsdon, in their introduction to Part III of *Creole New Orleans: Race and Americanization*, consider the patterns of race relations that make New Orleans unique well beyond the borders of the United States. Influenced by the lingering cultural presence of the French and Spanish empires,\(^ {91}\) this global seaport contained “a three-tiered Caribbean racial structure alongside

\(^{90}\) Supporting the degree to which New Orleans historically has been characterized by some degree of fluidity, Gwendolyn Midlo Hall notes, “New Orleans under French rule was a permeable frontier village” (61)

\(^{91}\) Beverly H. Wright and Robert D. Bullard propose that while the history of New Orleans is “intrinsically tied to the Vieux Carre,” the French settlement/Quarter, “little remains from the French colonial period, due to a
its two-tiered American counterpart” (Hirsch and Logsdon 189). Due to a very large population of free people of color, even during the early part of the nineteenth century (192), a vibrant black community thrived apart from white influence. In fiercely resisting white authority, African slaves and Native American Indians combined forces in leading uprisings (in 1729 and 1730) against the French at Natchez, Mississippi (Hall 75-77). This history of revolt likely fueled the undercurrent of resistance in New Orleans. This history of cross-cultural exchange, of French, Spanish, African, and Native American presence, powerfully reaffirms the cultural vibrancy present in All Saints, suggesting the very generational continuities that resonate throughout the collection.

The city’s physical layout and surrounding terrains, the swamps and bayous that allowed other communities such as the famed maroon populations to flourish, likewise suggest topography replete with provocative ecological margins. Gwendolyn Midlo Hall further attributes “the openness of New Orleans society” to the “ecology of the city and its surrounding Cyprus swamps and luxuriant waterways” (78). In his recent study, Time and Place in New Orleans: Past Geographies in the Present Day, geographer Richard Campanella examines the multi-faceted formation of New Orleans over time. From an aerial perspective, large portions of the city materialize as a series of even, measured grids. An “elegant pattern” in fact “radiates outward from a nebulous origin in the middle of the crescent toward” the Mississippi River’s watery edges, suggesting “the sweeping gesture of opening arms” (Campanella 84). Yet the New Orleans landscape, encircled and enclosed by disastrous fire in 1788 that destroyed eight hundred and fifty buildings” (173). However, the lingering cultural and linguistic influences, including those routed first through the French Caribbean, remain even today.

92 According to the table Logsdon and Bell reproduce in “The Americanization of Black New Orleans, 1850-1900,” population figures and percentages from 1769 and 1820 reflect similar patterns of population flow. Somewhat remarkably, free people of color constituted 28.7% of the New Orleans population in 1810 – as compared to 36.7% white and 34.6% slaves (Logsdon and Bell 206).
the river, the lake, and the gulf, nevertheless belies the downtown streetscape’s geometric rigidity. Campanella explains: “A city formed, restricted to the higher lands of the natural levees and dramatically reflecting topography in its shape and growth, . . . [afflicted by] gradual, subtle [problems] that undermine the very soils of the city, gnaw away at its land base, and expose it to the threat of fierce storms” (80). New Orleans reflects its topography, both its physical shape and gradual evolution. Yet the city also appears subjected to the same eroding forces of water and landforms that make up this topography. As I write a few short years following Hurricane Katrina and its dreadful aftermath, I am chilled by the haunting realities of a city mercilessly terrorized by an intruding geography.93

Yet it is precisely here, in the variable, malleable location of New Orleans, positioned within an intricate history of resistance and adaptation, that Brenda Marie Osbey insistenty places herself and her poetry. Throughout her 1997 collection All Saints, she creates a vibrantly pulsating New Orleans that pays tribute to a broad racial and cultural heritage, linguistically blending French, Spanish, and English into a Creolized hybrid as well as formulating a religious amalgam that acknowledges African, Caribbean, and Catholic roots. Her poetry records a journey at once personal and collective. Within a noticeably spatial orientation to the “Old City,” Osbey seemingly locates elements of her own identity: her family, her story, her home. The former Louisiana poet laureate and New Orleans native, through the process of creating and sustaining narratives that embrace rather than exclude racial and colonial others, lays claim to this place and its history as her own.

93 In “Black New Orleans: Before and After Hurricane Katrina,” Wright and Bullard detail this chaotic aftermath for New Orleans residents, especially for those among poorer socioeconomic classes. In considering the disproportionate number of African Americans killed, displaced, or otherwise disenfranchised due to the hurricane, they note the “Loss of Community Institutions” and the “Institutionalized Discrimination” that has characterized life for African Americans in New Orleans post-Katrina.
_All Saints_ opens with a powerful “Invocation” that suggests an overarching thematic focus while gesturing toward its later structural manifestations; both the prefatory poem, loosely arranged as a sonnet, and the collection as a whole unfold both as private memory and public remembrance. In organizing these “new and selected poems,” Osbey adopts a tripartite arrangement: the first section, “Live Among Your Dead, Whom You have Every Right to Love,” considers death primarily through elegy; “In the Faubourg” presents individual as well as communal tales of the city and its suburbs; finally, “Ex Votos” offers an almost enshrined series of saints and holy figures. With each section divided by a small photographic image lifted directly from the book’s cover shot, the collection is visually unified as well. A black-and-white montage of carved African sculptures, voodoo dolls and totems, Catholic saints and holy figures, as well as burnished crosses and metal vèvès focalizes the poems’ offertory nature. These snapshots pay visible homage to a host of spiritual forces. Mystical visions of spirit-deities and ancestors document the very figures inscribed throughout the _faubourgs_; they also prepare readers for the text’s 120-page written testimony. Osbey’s three-part structure stitches the city’s architecture into the very fabric of her collection, for throughout, she makes New Orleans, its peoples and histories, paramount. However, her poetic representations privilege those inhabitants (living as well as dead) most overlooked, giving voice to their histories and narratives. Through her provocatively personal-political investment, articulated as a “community of narrative/narrative of community” that arises/originates from “the talking to and the talking about or through,” Osbey compellingly enlarges and “re-invent[s] experience” (43).

94 Osbey makes this comment in a 1987 interview with Violet Harrington Bryan.

In a city where both time and space are layered and multiplied, the “Invocation” immediately transmits a peculiar sense of indwelling presence, a presence imprinted on the
landscape, implanted throughout the city’s physical structures, and inscribed in personal
memory. This initial incantation, which emphasizes generational continuity traced from the
slave narrators to their modern-day heirs, summons a series of witnesses that range from
minor deities to street performers. To their living spirits, as well as to those of the city’s dead,
the narrator chants an offering:

The slave ancestors who lie beneath the swamps, inside the
brick of which our
homes, our streets, our churches are made;
who wrought iron into the vèvès that hold together the Old
City and its attachments;
personal gods and ancestors, musicians and street dancers;
Hoodoo saints and their little Catholic cousins . . .
our saints continue to live among us. (1-8)\textsuperscript{95}

Even the speaker’s language suggests individual/communal blending in this story of the city.
Osbey’s New Orleans similarly appears animated by an almost nomadic spiritual force
equally infused by life and death. The first eight lines are characterized by pervasive
movement, both across space and through time. Roaming from the exterior swamps, through
brick-hewn passageways, past individual homes and community churches, and finally into
the Old City’s interior, the stanza itself covers tangible distance. Perhaps still more striking
than its geographic migration is the emergent journey through time. The speaker travels to
the past, returning to honor “the slave ancestors” long buried “beneath the swamps.” The
lines that follow attest to an enduring ancestral presence, largely revealed through the living
remnants of their labor: bricks fashioned and iron wrought. The ancestors, made incarnate in
the city’s very walls and edifices, signify its spiritual and architectural core.

Throughout \textit{All Saints}, Osbey invokes this spatial orientation to the “Old City” vis-à-
vis ancestors that cement together the place, its attachments, and its people(s). Private

\textsuperscript{95} The line breaks and spacing are Osbey’s own, precisely replicated here.
histories and personal grief(s) are publicly acknowledged, visibly inscribed on the walls of “our homes, our streets, our churches” (“Invocation” 2-3). From the collection’s outset, the poet highlights the past’s materiality through images of “a city within the larger city” (“Faubourg” 1). As in the poem “Faubourg,” the burdens of daily life – that “there is always work to be done” (8), whether as “a cook/a seamstress/a day’s-work-woman to find or be found” (19-21) – coexist with a pervasive awareness of and dutiful attention to the dead. Despite the noticeable distance between the brief first stanza, which introduces a community of women “moving along the slave-bricked streets” (3), and the third stanza, in which the dead are finally called by name, an abiding ancestral presence among the living never dissipates. As the speaker implies, there are too many obvious reminders evident within the city’s architecture, animated from the shared memory of “women’s work,” and even arising out of collective aesthetic energy: the “blues . . . sung or heard” (27).

Osbey speaks to this ineradicable “connection to the past” (104) in an interview with John Lowe. As she elaborates, “The past is always with us, even when we don’t recognize it. Our culture, or our cultures, are identifiable, even when we don’t know what the signs and the symbols are” (qtd. in Lowe 104). What Osbey implies, both in stressing the past’s pervasive presence and in showing this deep reverence for the dead, is that in order to go about the business of living, people must keep the past alive through memory. Hence the speaker chants: “the dead must be mourned and sung over/and prayers told them to carry to the other side” (“Faubourg” 30-31). Death saturates all aspects of living. In part, collective acts of mourning transpire amid the everyday, those practices that have been passed on or inherited: “yatta leaves … dried and woven into belts and baskets,/rags … burned in sulphur to ward off mosquitoes/and slave bricks crushed and scrubbed across doorways” (34-35). Yet
the ancestors must also be blessed and purified; ancient tombs require dutiful protection and regular tending.

In Osbey’s rendering, the ancestors are immanently, personally present; even the “slave bricks crushed” bear witness to their abiding, reverent presence. In her autobiographical essay “Writing Home,” she similarly claims the people from these past cities, referring to them in very personal terms as “Our Dead” (37). She explains:

The idea that Our Dead go to another plane where they keep guard over us was a key element of my upbringing in New Orleans. It is not simply that we pray for the departed soul of so-and-so, or clean tombs on All Saints Day, or light candles and ‘lift them up in spirit’ on the anniversaries of their deaths. Indeed we pray to them in times of difficulty as others pray to saints. Both tradition and faithfulness require that we acknowledge Our Dead in our day-to-day lives. (37)

Under systems of oppression, as in the case of slavery or colonialism, the very land, Lars Engle has observed, may contain elements of previously subdued histories. While originally applied to the fictional corpus of South African writer Nadine Gordimer, Engle’s conclusion aptly characterizes Osbey’s poetry as well: “the land itself is inscribed with a hidden history of relations, that it has its own consciousness and life, in which the relations and characters and events of . . . the present are recurrent symptoms or repressed pieces of history” (109). The very land testifies to these past oppressions. Whether revealing locations recognizable in their specificity or merely conjuring thoughts and images associated with home, All Saints returns to the notion of an embedded history that consciously must be “protect[ed] . . . from falling into the wrong hands” (“Faubourg Study No. 3,” 10.8-9). Thus “the city within the larger city” of “Faubourg’s” first line does not solely refer to the physical districts comprising downtown New Orleans; the poet instead alludes to multiple cities, the New Orleans of centuries long past that, while shifting and changing over time, nevertheless must be preserved and remembered.
Similarly thinking about New Orleans in terms of its multiplicity and variability, Barbara Eckstein frames her treatment through “the dialectic of platial folkways, spatially circulating techniways, and the evolving region that I think of as the pulse of the place-tone” (xi-xii). At once geographic and geometric, this orientation reaffirms the degree to which a place changes over time. Places are not bounded, fixed, or static. The movement evidenced in Eckstein’s language, “circulating” and “evolving,” evokes the dynamism of New Orleans, a dynamism written on the cityscape. Her phrase, “the pulse of the place-tone,” also foregrounds the question of sound – of tenor and timbre – that resonates with the oral quality of *All Saints*, its composite linguistic and acoustic sketch of New Orleans life and culture. Here the personal and the public again converge.

Rooted in the “haunted city’s folkways” (Eckstein xiii) are what Lynn Keller identifies as Osbey’s “vernacular modes of narration” (136). Such language appears deeply personal as well as collective. To claim the city means speaking of “our” homes, streets, and churches, welcoming saints “among us” (“Invocation” 3, 8). Moreover, this communal language connotes linguistic multiplicity; French, Spanish, English, and African dialect all converge under the hybrid of New Orleans Creole. Osbey further contextualizes her oral modes: “I write for both the page and the ear. . . . I’m concerned with capturing the essence of Creole experience spoken in English” (qtd. in Bryan 44). Along with this language of community, Osbey appears movingly precise – even exclusive – in identifying her audience, those for whom she captures this “Creole experience.” Despite the appended “Glossary of New Orleans Ethnic Expressions, Place Names, and Characters,” she comments, “I think my ideal listening or reading audience is probably black, New Orleans, and working-class . . . say, before 1950. So I think that to those people I don’t have to explain that language. When
those people look at the glossary at the back, they’re pleased that I’ve gotten the meaning right” (qtd. in Lowe 96). While preserving multiple versions of the city, then, Osbey identifies her audience in racially, socioeconomically, and chronologically specific terms. Such language is for the city residents who do not require the glossary’s aid, the intended readers she lifts out of the city’s diverse populations.

Hence in “The Business of Pursuit: San Malo’s Prayer,” a displaced speaker croons in several tongues, “o señor/m’sieu” (164-165). The poem in fact opens with a sense of drifting in “between this land and the other” (2), the semi-consciousness between waking and sleeping: “not free./displacement” (4-5). In conveying this sense of dislocation, the speaker suggests a frightening dream world, for “in your vision/the heads are bloodless on their poles/mask-heads laid aside in their season—” (26-28). By invoking the specter, the “eyeless, sightless, speechless thing[ ]” (29), the speaker breaches the dialectic of historical time. Such is the powerful “logic of the ghost” (Derrida 78), what Bhahba expresses as “the unspoken, unrepresented pasts that haunt the historical present” (18). Configured as a ghost (be that the speaker or San Malo), this figure “stand[s] outside … dreams/a hundred changeless years later” (30-31). Intriguingly, references to distance and motion, traveling “the high road” (1) or being “dutifully engaged/in the business of pursuit” (36-37), are also sprinkled throughout the poem. Yet this movement, rather than traversing physical geography, seemingly transpires within and between the living and the dead: “I can not say/‘he is coming or going’/-/I see only your form” (46-49). Again, the speaker emphasizes connections extending across centuries, finally concluding in the poem’s fifth section, “it is all the same” (190). In recording the passage of “one hundred, two hundred years” (196), the speaker hearkens back
to “luis congo” (200), the betrayal embedded in his “traitor’s heart” (198). A poem preceding “The Business of Pursuit,” “The Head of Luís Congo Speaks” marks the full presence of the specter, weeping “here at the crossroads of death and life.” Luís Congo – or at least his tortured head – in fact speaks from beyond the dead: the absent past rendered present. With the specter’s embodiment, the poet may reach back into history and offer alternative explanations for its presumable facts.

Osbey further reframes New Orleans history by re-examining the widespread historical implications of a city whose very bricks and mortar testify to a grim history: the African slave trade. Approaching “the lyric sequence as a form of testifying narrative” (Keller 136), her language bears witness to the truth of shared experiences while giving voice to those stories most often ignored. Osbey’s ritual acts of remembrance herald what Paul Ricoeur has referred to as “the enigma of a present representation of the absent past” (392). Hence “House of the Dead Remembering” warns against “the awesome forgetting” (65) that too often accompanies death, asserting “that as children we learn . . . to honor our dead/because memory is everything” (34-37). To further stress the indispensable cultural importance of memory, the speaker repeats this exact phrase, “memory is everything,” but over forty lines later. Indeed, “this mediation by history is made possible in its principle by the declarative character of memory” (Ricoeur 392). Osbey’s speakers claim this power of memory, to intervene in history through public, collective forums. “House of the Dead Remembering” reveals blended personal and communal works that rehabilitate the power of remembrance: “your own bruised past” (41) later augments to “the pasts we have accumulated/living as we have” (91-92).

96 Luís Congo was known as the official executioner of escaping slaves (Osbey 124); their heads were placed on stakes as a warning.
The centrality of personal memory and public remembrance coalesces in Osbey’s consistent privileging of untold, virtually unknown stories throughout *All Saints*. The poem “Sor Juana” is one such notable example. In her Glossary, Osbey only identifies this figure in relation to her brother, St. Martin de Porres, the black saint of Lima, Peru. While St. Martin routinely gets recognized as patron saint of the poor, of his sister “nothing is known” (126).

Opening the poem in Sor Juana’s indigenous Spanish, the speaker first establishes her great “saintliness” (“santísima”) and follows with her racial identification as the daughter of a dark (“morena”) mother. Osbey draws upon a hybrid linguistic form, alternating Spanish phrases and colloquialisms with a central narrative principally rendered in English. The speaker traces her own lineage to this mixed-race virgin martyred as a heretic, a possible “worker of black forces” (20). More than these ancestral connections, the speaker’s very fate appears intertwined with that of “Sor Juana.” Though she longs for expiation, the removal of the fathers’ sins, not even the ritual sacrifice of other young virgins brings relief: “it is one hundred years/it is two hundred years/and still we labor” (46-47).

In addition to identifying her shared bloodlines, the unnamed speaker alludes to shared multi-cultural roots. Moving well beyond New Orleans and even the borders of the United States, the poem brushes past Cuba, settles in Peru, triumphs with Chilean independence from Spain (in 1818), and worries over the 1828 threat of war with Ecuador. “Sor Juana” wanders and roams.

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97 The issue of religion marks another obvious cultural amalgamation. Consistently, Osbey links the reality of ancestral habitation to analogous spiritual manifestations – “personal gods” and holy saints, Hoodoo and Catholic alike. Luisah Teish in fact refers to voodoo as “a science of the oppressed, a repository of womanknowledge” (334). Poems such as “Expeditus,” a reference to the “false” (Catholic) St. Expedite created and claimed by practitioners of voodoo, and clear allusions to conjure, particularly women practicing conjure, support Teish’s assertion. Within the composite of New Orleans, Osbey gestures toward the spiritual (and perhaps uniquely feminine?) forces that allow African voodoo and Caribbean hoodoo to intermingle with elements of traditional Catholicism.
In ranging geographically, the poem also recasts history – yet through actual and symbolic ellipses. Consider the striking visual effect within and between lines 109 and 127 on page 91. On four separate occasions, ellipses occupy the entire space of a line.

the year is 1828, juanita
and there is talk of war with ecuador
in the streets
and across the great sertão
is it your desire, little sister

the year is 1939, juanita
and there is talk of invasion from angry chile, little sister.
they talk this in the streets
and across the great sertão
what is your plan, juanita
for the faithful among us?

the year is 1861,

it is 1895,
1930, ‘45

eternity, eternity, eternity (“Sor Juana” 109-127).

Here the speaker radically condenses time and chronology – at least on the visible page.

While deliberately leaving the American Civil War unidentified, except as the timeline date of 1861, the events of “1895/1930, ‘45” (123-124) appear still more ambiguous. In these two partial lines, the speaker collapses greater temporal distance: fifty years of ignored or elided history. No doubt referring to poems such as “Sor Juana” and “Mother Catherine,” Osbey

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98 I have reproduced the original spacing and punctuation.

99 In producing this “counter-narrative,” “Sor Juana” seemingly engages in the work Susan Stanford Friedman associates with contemporary women’s long poems. The literary equivalent of feminist social history, poets such as Osbey strive “to counter the narratives of their alterity produced by the dominant society, [so] they must tell other stories that chart their exclusions, affirm their agency (however complicit and circumscribed), and continually (re)construct their identities” (“Craving Stories” 17). They largely re-invent history, repositioned through the lens of this other narrative that challenges a prescribed “otherness.”
describes her work “as a kind of cultural biography, a cultural geography. Louisiana’s folklore has far outstripped its recorded history. I try to re-create something of that, of the experience of the culture, the family history, and folk history, in my work” (qtd. in Bryan 34-35).

While journeying back through time, All Saints also projects an implied unification in the future, when saints, ancestors, and the city’s current residents will come together. What inexorably ensues is “a haunting sense of place” (Lowe 93), a present landscape in which a broad global backdrop merges with the intimacy of the local. Osbey presents variegated images of New Orleans, portraying a highly blended cultural, religious, and historical location pulled together under the composite force of place. Despite the range of images depicted, all tales center on “the City, her people and our undeniable, irrepressible Spirit and resilience.” At once geographic and spatial, this portrait of New Orleans likewise seems informed by a deep sense of history, place, and abiding cultural presence: an animate timbre fully embodied in its people’s clamoring voices. The collection preserves this continuously flowing “place-tone” through repeated acts of remembrance – not only public memory but also private grief. And almost resolutely, as Osbey’s own voice steadily reveals, the fate of New Orleans curiously melds with her own: an identity powerfully routed through place.

Through this aesthetic framework, the body itself emerges as another landscape that inscribes presence. Significantly, the final poem is entitled “Suicide City,” in which the city overtly materializes as a distinct character. Perhaps having asserted the most sustained presence throughout the collection, the city is ontologically figured as a living, breathing,

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100 Following Hurricane Katrina, Osbey gave an address at the University of Colorado at Denver’s School of Architecture and Planning. This statement is made in an adaptation of this speech, available on her website at http://www.osbey.com/id42.html.
eternal ancestor, “here long before any of us.” Its bodily topographies provide a vibrant testament to an enduring power, the will to survive. “Suicide City” reveals both the city and its populace shrouded in peaceful slumber. Peering into this story of two lovers, reclining in bed and intertwined in one another’s arms, the speaker contends that even in private acts of love, “sex inside the city is almost communal./the street creeps in” (50-51). Such is the reality of a city that absorbs its people, where identification with a communal place seemingly trumps individual identity largely through the power of “belonging” (Lowe 98). In this final series of images, the city, its occupants, and the poet imaginatively rest together, “thrumming eternal” (“Suicide City” 224-225): “the city all around us and we dream/all together in our tribe we dream the city back to sleep . . . [and] the city dreams us back alive” (84-85).

Embodied Histories of War and Romance: Displacing Landscape and Identity in The English Patient

Here in the desert, which had been an old sea where nothing was strapped down or permanent, everything drifted. – Michael Ondaatje, The English Patient

In postulating the centrality of landscape in novels, J. Hillis Miller vehemently rejects the idea that landscape merely functions as “an indifferent background within which the action takes place. The landscape is an essential determinant of that action” (16); instead, “novels themselves aid in making the landscapes that they apparently presuppose as already made and finished” (16). In the process Miller describes, both the desert and architectural landscapes Ondaatje creates throughout The English Patient are made sentient through the power of the artist’s imagination, much as Osbey brings the brick streets of New Orleans, a city that “thrum[s] eternal,” to life in All Saints. Yet this “making” process, even while

showing that fictions may carve out topographies, nevertheless seems ambiguous. A
verifiable landscape (or cityscape, as in Osbey’s poetry) may position a text within a given
geographic framework or historical period, yet to define or even to posit the text’s role in
constructing its scenic backdrop becomes extraordinarily difficult. In Ondaatje’s
construction, the novel’s landscape, even while oriented physically in an African desert and
an Italian villa, additionally encompasses historical setting, the years surrounding World War
II. Landscape in fact mutates from geography, the topographical features of a vast, expansive
desert, as well as from architectural ruins, the buildings destroyed by bombs and mines
inflicted through violent warfare. As in Osbey’s All Saints, bodily landscapes also
materialize, with wounds carved onto the physical geographies of individual bodies.

In terms of history’s abiding presence in The English Patient, Ondaatje notes in his
Acknowledgments that, “some of the characters who appear in this book are based on
historical figures, and . . . many of the areas described – such as the Gilf Kebir and its
surrounding desert exist, and were explored in the 1930s” (303). The desert topographies
Ondaatje sketches, even distinctive features of ancient desert civilizations, prove remarkably
accurate, at least according to published archaeological findings. The April 1969 volume of
Anthropological Papers also reports on the international “mapping parties” that produced
several important discoveries during the 1930s. Hester and Hobler, supporting the English
patient’s musings on the desert as a sea as well as his references to Herodotus and Cambyses,
chart the early climactic changes that made one prehistoric period the “wettest recorded
during man’s occupation of the Libyan Desert” (159) while providing additional evidence of
Cambyses’s “ill-fated campaign” in 520 B.C.E. (160). The geological survey work they

102 Steven Tötösy Zepetnek actually traces the possible connections between real-life historical figures and the
detail in their special issue, *Prehistoric Settlement Patterns in the Libyan Desert*, includes photographs of excavation site artifacts such as “paint grinders” (16) found in the Wadi Terrace Sites (22) as well as reports on the “rock painting sites at Gebel Oweinat” (163). Their descriptions sound eerily familiar to the Cave of Swimmers and its painted figures. Despite the novel’s anthropological and archaeological precision, Ondaatje insists, “that this story is a fiction” (303). While consulting the London Royal Geographical Society’s *Geographical Journals* as well as “Dr. Richard A. Bermann’s ‘Historical Problems of the Libyan Desert’ (1934) and R. A. Bagnold’s review of Almásy’s monograph on his explorations of the desert” (303), Ondaatje privileges the novel’s fictionalized landscapes. Whereas history is palpably present, made overwhelmingly tangible in Osbey’s poetry, Ondaatje constructs an imaginary account of this historical backdrop.

Positioned in the years surrounding the Second World War, *The English Patient* reveals the degree to which places and landscapes, whether an Italian villa or an African desert, become transmuted and transmogrified by as well as through the novel. Further complicating “official” versions of the prehistoric Libyan Desert and its settlements are the disturbing making/unmaking processes that always accompany national violence and international war.103 The powerful implications embedded in trauma’s coding and recoding surface through the uncertainties produced by violent conflict. As in Osbey’s poetry, bodies appear directly linked to topographies as globally traumatic events – across Europe, Asia, Africa, and the Americas – fundamentally reorder the world. Perhaps in the very moments

103 Here I deliberately invoke Elaine Scarry’s work on violence and human pain in her seminal work, *The Body in Pain*. Arturo J. Aldama helps contextualize her scholarship: “What Elaine Scarry’s groundbreaking earlier study of torture and war . . . discusses as the ‘dream’ of the nation-state is to script the absolute interpellation, regulation, and control of its ‘unruly’ subjects through pain and wounding of the body” (6).
where historical facts and archaeological details encounter fictional renderings, then, novels reconstitute already extant landscapes. Throughout *The English Patient*, individual, national, and ethnic identities collapse alongside exploding geographies and imploding architectures, exposed as the desolate aftermath of international hostilities. Through a desert made more dreamlike than real and a series of textual displacements that correspondingly dislocate his readers, Ondaatje’s fictional topographies attest to an historical consciousness, that of the postcolonial subject, which relentlessly cries out to be embodied.

The text itself, set against the violent backdrop of World War II, appears populated by profoundly broken characters struggling to process acute, inconceivable loss, “overwhelmed by occurrences that have not settled into understanding or remembrance” (Felman and Laub 5). In charting these individual stories, Ondaatje portrays individuals who, mired in unspeakable grief, compulsively repeat acts of mourning while striving to reassemble both individual and national identities. Whereas Osbey speaks of honoring and remembering “Our Dead,” Ondaatje’s characters are controlled by ritualized grief. Four fragmented figures – in the catastrophic wake of personal traumas and a world chaotically restructured by war’s massive carnage – strangely converge on the abandoned Italian Villa San Girolamo. The international cast, which, in addition to the disfigured and enshrouded “English” patient, features the Canadian military nurse Hana, Kirpal Singh (called Kip) the Indian sapper, and the Italian Canadian thief Caravaggio. Like Osbey’s presentation of New Orleans, with its inflections of Spanish, French, African, Portuguese, and Creole cultures, Ondaatje brings together a range of nationalities and ethnicities: the “world” distilled to a specific locality.

Yet Ondaatje’s cast of “international bastards” has been displaced and unhinged by war, momentarily drawn together. Furthermore, in this post-war world, Rufus Cook asserts,
“all characters in the novel have suffered some sort of dismemberment,” and “all [are] driven by the need somehow to . . . reintegrate themselves” (44). The novel literally teems with an excessive repetition of shattered, violated bodies, accompanied by an unsettling slippage of identity manifested in the physical body’s rupturing as well as shifting scenarios of loss. For example, the twenty-year-old field nurse, Hana, blindly butchers her hair and embraces emotional indifference. Incapable of facing past losses, namely her aborted child (her foreclosed future) and slain father (her vanished past),104 she hopes permanently to erase her deeply troubling memories. Hana resorts to a dual act of self-preservation and self-negation. She wields the hacking scissors, instrument of bodily mortification, to mutilate far more than her physical visage. Hana is terrified by a shadowy figure that might entirely displace an already faltering identity. So far removed from her childhood in Canada, she, who had been brazenly confident at sixteen (as Caravaggio explains), cannot bear a glimpse of her former self and refuses to look into mirrors. Almost another form of spectral haunting, she accidentally glances at her fleeting image, and readers watch as the mirror corrupts the wholeness of her face by capturing just her cheek. Hana can only comprehend an ambiguous “She” in the mirror, muttering, “Hi Buddy, . . . trying to recognize herself” (Ondaatje 52).105 Despite surviving the war’s ravaging brutalities, Hana’s own identity fragments.106 Similarly

104 These two images also connote unmistakable instances of ruined bodies, and, in the case of Hana’s dead father, an erasure of (living) identity.

105 Significantly, Hana also refers to the wounded soldiers she treats as “Buddy.” The generic name’s ambiguity enables the nurse to comfort her charges through its presumed familiarity. By the same token, she maintains an all-important distance. When the soldiers do die, she can no longer be haunted by their true names. Thus Hana’s self-greeting to her reflection, “Buddy,” seemingly gestures to her recognition (if only subconsciously) of the profound psychological damage she has suffered.

106 Her disturbing disembodiment seemingly undermines conventional understandings of identity formation. Hana’s inability to locate herself in the mirror presents a strong challenge to Lacan’s mirror stage, wherein the infant child seeks to fuse a “fragmented body-image” (Lacan 181) through a process of identification. Instead, Hana finds herself profoundly dislocated, even regressed. In light of violent traumas, Ondaatje suggests, self-
displaced by war and relocated to the Italian villa, Caravaggio, like Hana, inwardly splits, a
dissociation embodied in the cruel amputation of his thumbs. With his occupation and
identity as a prominent thief-turned-spy lost irrevocably, Caravaggio’s physical disability,
with its attendant psychological ramifications, signals a greater form of psychic devastation.
The morphine addict “with bandaged hands” (Ondaatje 27) emerges utterly fragmented: “war
has unbalanced him and he can return to no other world as he is” (116).

In painting this particular landscape, one affiliated with bodily topographies, Ondaatje
repeats images of bodies disintegrating and identities distorting. While Kip presumably
represents the novel’s most stable character, having survived the war relatively unscathed, his
work as a sapper disabling bombs counteracts any delusion of security. In fact, the likelihood
of his death dramatically increases after the war. Once the victorious Allied armies vacate an
area, he is summoned to facilitate full disarmament. Ironically, the Indian Sikh whose home
country is occupied by British troops assists in returning other nations’ villages and homes to
their rightful civilian owners. Thus it is the atomic bomb, the Americans’ nuclear attack
launched against an unsuspecting Japanese populace, that proves Kip’s final undoing. Having
spent years counteracting war’s atrocities, deactivating its destructive machines, he is
outraged by the senseless slaughter rationalized and justified as a desperate act to end the
war. Symbolically rejecting his former benefactors, he attacks a reposed Almásy, cultural
repository of “English” knowledge, authority, and superiority. Rebuffing Britain’s
“benevolent” colonizing influence, Kip rages: “I grew up with traditions from my country,
but later, more often from your country. Your fragile white island that with customs and
manners and books and prefects and reason somehow converted the rest of the world. . . .

identity cannot be fixed; war heightens the ambivalence of subject/object difference and subverts individual
identity.
Was it just ships that gave you such power? Was it . . . because you had the histories and printing presses?” (283).\textsuperscript{107} Embracing the anti-imperialist rhetoric of his brother,\textsuperscript{108} Kirpal Singh immediately flees Europe as well as his “Western” lover Hana, “travelling against the direction of the invasion, as if rewinding the spool of war” (290). With “all weapons left behind” (290), he returns home, virtually disappearing into India, to create a life entirely separate from colonial inheritance. Thus, in a very real sense, World War II has fractured any semblance of stable national, racial, or ethnic identity – even the essentialist identities perpetuated by empire. As Hana, Caravaggio, Almásy, and Kip all demonstrate, only the individual casualties of such international reordering remain: its severely traumatized victims.

As the novel’s characters are portrayed in transitional states, having been unsettled and dislocated by war, so the Italian countryside has been terrorized, “besieged for more than a month, the barrage” of Allied artillery (Ondaatje 12). Ondaatje adds yet another layer of destroyed landscape, mapped onto the evacuated Villa San Girolamo. “The Villa,” as the first section is entitled, is in a state of complete disarray – “In Near Ruins,” as the second aptly describes. Its destroyed structure belies any feeling of stability. In light of \textit{The English Patient}

\textsuperscript{107} Extending history of the book scholarship and addressing the “technologies of circulation” (201), Alice Brittan reads the novel in light of Greg Urban’s “‘spatial portability’ of books” (qtd. in Brittan 202). “War and the Book: The Diarist, the Cryptographer, and \textit{The English Patient}” links the English patient’s veritable obsession with books as well as their physical production and distribution to wartime practices of code making and breaking.

\textsuperscript{108} Shannon Smyrl’s essay, “The Nation as ‘International Bastard’: Ethnicity and Language in Michael Ondaatje’s \textit{The English Patient},” likewise identifies Kip as challenger to the Western episteme. However, she traces his “decentralization of political and cultural power” (10) to an earlier moment in the novel in which Kip disarms the bomb found in the English patient’s room (Ondaatje 113-115). Smyrl argues that, “With the snip of the wire, Kip challenges the authority of the West to legitimate his actions and define his identity” (10). Although the Indian sapper’s capacity for subverting colonial authority does appear tied to his ability to diffuse explosives, the recognition – and accompanying disavowal – of his own internal colonization only comes in the novel’s final pages. Kirpal Singh perhaps implicitly embodies an anti-imperialist challenge. However, he remains largely inarticulate, instead consuming the English patient’s knowledge with the same voracious appetite evident when they share cans of condensed milk, \textit{until} news of the devastating atomic bomb reaches him.
Patient’s magnitude, the large-scale global events transpiring across European, African, and North American continents, the text intriguingly begins amid a relatively enclosed location: the villa’s garden. Contrasting its ostensible intimacy is the constant (albeit veiled) threat of unexploded mines buried throughout the grounds. Though Hana finds solace in her solitary garden wanderings, her supposed sanctity is undermined by the relentless threat of an exploding landscape. Displaced from home and family, she clings to false security: being firmly planted in this terrain despite the ubiquitous danger of imminent detonation.

Ironically an isolated sanctuary for Hana, Almásy, Carvaggio, and Kip, the villa approaches full structural collapse. The narrator recounts an architecture under siege:

> Sections of the chapel were blown up. Parts of the top storey [sic] of the villa crumbled under explosions. . . . Some rooms faced onto the valley with no walls at all. [Hana] would open a door and see just a sodden bed huddled against a corner, covered with leaves. Doors opened onto landscape. Some rooms had become an open aviary. The staircase had lost its lower steps during the fire that was set before the soldiers left. (Ondaatje 12-13)

Almost anarchically, the architectural integrity of the villa and its grounds has been completely compromised. Beyond the material loss of chapel alcoves, with sections obliterated entirely, the formerly extravagant villa is crumbling, literally falling to pieces. Individual rooms no longer contain walls; beds are exposed to the elements. Both the house and its furnishings merge with the garden, becoming indistinguishable from its leafy foliage. As nature encroaches on the building through newly created aviaries, the villa likewise invades the outside world: doors now open directly onto landscape. The very environment is saturated by the scars of war. Those spatial structures left standing have been charred by the

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109 For a fuller discussion of architecture’s prevailing precariousness, bound to strategies of writing and reading in the novel, see D. Mark Simpson’s “Minefield Readings: The Postcolonial English Patient.” Simpson argues that, “around architectural form in the text here spins a complex of tropes figuring legibility and illegibility, whether of form and space . . . or of choreographies of time” (217).
Nazi soldiers’ fiery exit, and the Italian geography has been equally marred by discharging mortar rounds.

In between caring for her lone remaining patient, Hana gradually surveys their shelter. Over the course of these opening two sections, she carefully maps the villa’s grounds. Almost like Almásy the desert cartographer, she plots important landmarks and formations: the mountains of excess “rubble,” the “bomb crater” (8) found in one room, and the gulf in the library – enduring evidence of an attack two months ago (11). Yet unlike the mapmaker, Hana’s charting employs the language of human injury, of bodily topographies. In characterizing the “oval-shaped library,” the nurse catalogues the room’s gaping hole almost as if triaging a soldier hurt on the battlefield. Much like its occupants, the library, she observes, “had adapted itself to this wound, accepting the habits of weather, evening stars, the sound of birds” (11). Just as human bodies may function as landscapes, so trauma, as in Osbey’s poems, appears painfully inscribed on spatial structures, carved into the villa’s architecture. Comparable to All Saints, in which the New Orleans city structures bear witness to a past marred by the slave trade, Villa San Girolamo – through its visible wounds – has recorded its immediate past of global conflict. In clearly traceable ways, the traumatic events associated with world war profoundly reshape the novel’s landscapes as well as its inhabitants.

In terms of its fragmented structure, The English Patient unfolds as a series of textual displacements and narrative dislocations. There is, of course, the perplexing question concerning voice (of who speaks, articulating the story of the unnamed English patient\textsuperscript{110}) as

\textsuperscript{110} In their essay, “The English Patient and His Narrator: ‘Opener of the Ways,’” Janis Haswell and Elaine Edwards address the pronounced indeterminacy of this narrator. Labeling Ondaatje the “master of reflexive narrative” (122), Haswell and Edwards identify the text’s “Narrator” as a “fifth presence” (122) that possesses “the attributes of an oral storyteller” (123).
well as the disruption created by an at-times episodic storyline. Like the books Hana reads to her patient, which “had gaps of plot like sections of a road washed out by storms, missing incidents as if locusts had consumed a section of tapestry, as if plaster loosened by the bombing had fallen away from a mural at night” (Ondaatje 7), the narrative, in its travel through dreams, memories, and hallucinations, also betrays cavernous fissures. Yet neither Hana nor the narrator appears bothered “as far as the gaps in plot were concerned” (8). As the ambivalent narrating voice drones, “She gave no summary of the missing chapters. She simply brought out the book and said ‘page ninety-six’ or ‘page one hundred and eleven.’ That was the only locator” (8). Perhaps the case may be made that both the painful relocations experienced by the villa’s current residents and the destruction mapped onto the landscape mirror readers’ disorientation.

For Caravaggio, arguably standing in as the figure of the reader in that he also must assemble this tale of wartime desert deceit, gaps between such “locators” might be filled with the descriptive “clarity” heralded by the regular morphine injections which offset Almásy’s reticence. Almost compulsively, he strives to unlock the mysteries of the burned patient’s true national identity and allegiances during the early war years, when British and German forces vied for control over the African desert. Like the novel’s readers, Caravaggio seeks to fill in any remaining “gaps of plot” (8). With every ampoule of morphine expended, he grows closer to unraveling “who was talking, back then,” of identifying the heretofore-unnamed “third person” who discovered the Uweinat rock paintings and spied on behalf of the Nazi commander Rommel (247). As another reader who must approach Ondaatje’s text

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111 As suggested when Kip violently reacts against the English patient, Almásy at times signifies the body of Western knowledge and power. Yet fascinatingly, he also constitutes the Other, “just another international bastard” (251) labeled a spy. As Caravaggio slowly discloses, the Hungarian desert spy was in fact under constant surveillance, monitored by “the great English web that was above us,” the “English machine” (237) as represented by Geoffrey Clifton, an undercover British Intelligence officer.
by assembling possible interpretations of a now-destroyed landscape, Caravaggio determines, “There is more to discover, to divine out of this body” (247). Like any wartime cryptographer, the counter-spy “travels within the code of signals” (247), attempting to untangle their secrets. Curiously, as the pieces finally fall into place and the six-years-old knowledge “vacuum” (253) is stoppered, Caravaggio suddenly longs to escape “the detritus of war, . . . [to] get out of this desert, its architecture of morphine, . . . [and to] return to his own world” (251). With a sense of resignation, he finally concludes, “It no longer matters which side [the English patient] was on during the war” (251). Readers, too, upon cohesively bridging the narrative’s spatial and temporal fissures, are left the only “guaranteed” surfeit of war: profound sadness. In light of both the collective tragedies that transcend the boundaries between nations or ethnicities and the individual traumas that can never be fully processed or integrated, knowledge (for its own sake – and that linked to Western systems of knowledge) finally loses its currency of power.

While processing the text’s embodied histories, moving between personal trauma and the broad stage of international war, Ondaatje charges his readers with sifting and translating the abundant intertextualities.112 The English Patient flirts with and then dismisses various conventions: the romance, classical mythology, and even the first-person war narrative. Although initially situated as a tale of love and war, the novel resists convenient genre categorization. Once again, readers must somehow gather a cohesive story. Just as Osbey’s draws upon stories of saints, St. Martin, Sor Juana, San Malo, to name a few, so Ondaatje

112 Much scholarship on The English Patient exhaustively treats the novel’s rampant intertextuality. For example, see Vernon Provencal’s “Sleeping with Herodotus,” Annick Hillger’s “‘And this is the world of nomads in any case’: The Odyssey as Intertext in Michael Ondaatje’s The English Patient,” or Bill Fledderus’s “‘The English Patient Reposed in His Bed Like a [Fisher?] King’: Elements of Grail Romance in Ondaatje's The English Patient.”
loosely establishes his novel within the casings of myth and romance. He offers profoundly displaced variations of the proverbial love story. This new tale scripts what Paula Rabinowitz appropriately labels “a romance and a dream: a cultural construction and a psychic reenactment” (103). Ondaatje regularly appropriates conventional romantic elements, presenting Katharine and Almásy’s clandestine affair in ways that evoke the ideals of courtly love. This story of “two lovers and a desert” (Ondaatje 174), only one in a series of parallel tales, is further displaced by tiered allusions. The narrator, for example, insists that Katharine and Almásy consciously repeat “the story of romance and deceit” told in Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina* (237). The British debutante and the Hungarian nobleman reinscribe the historic myth of Gyges, Candaules, and his queen. While constructing his story on the stage of romantic convention, activating the same patterns of possessive love that portend destruction, Ondaatje nevertheless complicates the nature of such interactions.

While Ondaatje enfolds Katharine and Almásy within multiple textual layers, emphasizing the “interrelation of story and history with the events of ‘real life’” (Ellis 33), he also transmutes their very bodies into living landscapes. Through the events that follow Katharine’s death, namely the act of retrieving her corpse from the Cave of Swimmers,

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113 The chivalric code actually prohibits enacting such love. As suggested to me by Pamela Cooper, courtly love comprises an expression wherein the plane of desire is never interrupted by consummation. Desire, when defined as lack, occurs solely in an experiential sense. Yet Ondaatje’s revised courtly romance erotically results in love fully consummated.

114 Like Candaules, the ill-fated Geoffrey Clifton continuously “sing[s] [Katharine’s] praises” (Ondaatje 229), “celebrat[ing] the beauty of her arms, the thin lines of her ankles” (230) and lauding her ravenous morning appetite. Featuring Geoffrey, his wife Katharine, and her lover Almásy in this adaptation, Ondaatje rewrites the Gyges myth. Inevitably, their love must collapse, thwarted by the obstacles that plague all such lovers: the jealous husband, her sense of moral purity, and his skepticism.

115 Such rewritten histories and myths may hearken back to another conception of the “romantic,” with the “romantic” postulated as supernatural visitation and vision: not only transcendence through Nature but also the frightening affliction of hell’s monstrosity transported to earth (i.e., the feral violence of Almásy as the jackal lover). In either case, the “prophetic” encounter is irrational and otherworldly, existing apart from finite time and dimensional space.
Ondaatje places his lovers within the ambiguous myth of Apollo and Daphne. Despite his compulsion to recapture her body, Almásy cannot extricate Katharine from death’s annihilating grasp. Laying her in the long-buried plane, its rotten wings crumble: “They are carrion” (175). Their human bodies are deformed, transmogrified into decaying flesh. And Katharine’s body, “her shroud unfurling in the noisy air of the cockpit, . . . collapses – acacia twigs, leaves, the branches that were shaped into arms uncoiling around him. Limbs begin disappearing in the suck of air” (175). Tree branches become indistinguishable from her breaking limbs, and, like Daphne, Katharine metamorphoses. Whereas Daphne, pursued by an impassioned Apollo, appeals to her father and is safely transformed into the laurel, “. . . her hair/is changed to leaves, her arms to boughs . . .” (Ovid 25), Katharine’s transformation – into a bodily topography neither living nor dead – confounds Almásy’s listener(s). In death, her body appears consumed by a living landscape, with human and vegetative forms blurring together. Previously, Almásy has presented an equally peculiar image of Katharine being absorbed by the desert, as “the sand collected in [and combined with] her mane of hair” (Ondaatje 143). Here she mutates again, inserted into the desert oasis as an acacia tree. As the plane crashes, Almásy watches as a “branch breaks free of [Katharine’s] shirt. Acacia and bone. . . . The woman translated into leaves and twigs, the broken glass to the sky like a jaw above him” (Ondaatje 175). Well beyond death, Katharine, through violent collision, has been transfigured into – fully fused with – both the natural and mythic worlds. And readers, at once familiar with these narratives, concomitantly experiences a sense of foreclosure, knowing how such tales traditionally end, as well as uncertainty, the mesmeric effect achieved by Ondaatje’s subversion.116

116 Freud’s notion of unheimlich speaks directly to the reader’s experience here: “the uncanny is the class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar” (qtd. in Engle 110). In the novel’s
Katharine, brought into existence solely by Almásy’s voice, preserved only through his memory, and framed exclusively within his narrative, materializes in the novel as part of his dream, his enduring fantasy of the past. In depicting her body according to its component parts, he maps her body. Indeed, his descriptions of her body are framed in terms eerily similar to his portrayal of the desert landscape. Just as he meticulously describes the Uweinat rock paintings, the behavior of sand storms, and the various features of this arid landscape, so he remains “obsessed . . . with her possible mouth, the tautness behind the knee, the white plain of stomach” (235). Cryptically abstracting her body, configured as “bony knees emerging from the plane that day” (Ondaatje 230), Katharine’s body materializes as yet another landscape, a living topography full of plains and valleys to be discovered. The seeming projection of male desire, Katharine supposedly participates only as passive offering. With Almásy disembodied her further, “That night, I fell in love with a voice. Only a voice. I wanted to hear nothing more” (Ondaatje 144), only echoes of Katharine’s presence animate the novel. Thus, Hana, Caravaggio, Kip, and readers alike rely solely on the power of his detached narration to speak Katharine into existence. Just as he remakes Herodotus’s Histories, cutting out passages and pasting his own descriptions and drawings of the desert’s ancient secrets into his beloved text, so Almásy recreates Katharine – first, as a bodily landscape he “discovers,” and later, in re-animating her through narrative, as the flitting voice that haunts his drug-induced storytelling.

perplexing moment of familiar estrangement, the reader, while intuiting a degree of understanding, is also disoriented by the unrelenting process of defamiliarization. While I have somewhat inverted the emphasis in Freud’s original definition by underscoring the frightening over the familiar, its application still applies. While the myths Ondaatje appropriates resonate culturally, they have been strangely revised and rewritten. I would argue that readers are again lured into a discomfiting position: an exacerbated (and exasperating?) displacement. Lars Engle provides a useful reworking of the uncanny, the “weird yet somehow intimately recognized as familiar” (114). In Ondaatje’s lexicon, he raises the question of estranging intimacy through Ondaatje’s term “felhomaly,” the disturbing intimacy between the living and the dead (Ondaatje 170).
Despite his presumable acts of narrative invention, the English patient, like the spectral Katharine who exists solely within his disjointed memory, is only a voice in the novel; his body, whether a text to be read or a topography to be mapped, has almost entirely been destroyed. Roaming through consciousness between the worlds of the living and the dead, he surfaces as an undeniably ghostly figure. Burned beyond visual recognition, his body and identity—routed through fire—fiercely resist interpretation. Fully marginalized, disfigured, disassembled, and textualized, he appears as a “pure carbon ghost, one more enigma, with no identification, unrecognizable” (Ondaatje 95). Taking on multiple bodies as invented skins, the “mask of herbs” (Ondaatje 8) that gives him “a bearing of grass” (9), the “ointments, or darkness, [pressed] against his skin” (9), the “green-black paste” made of ground peacock bone (10), and even the “tannic acid [that] camouflages [the] burned man’s rawness” (117), Almásy in fact becomes all border. He even bizarrely conjures himself as Katharine’s “jackal lover.” In a peculiar transcendence of time and space, the jackal lover, called Wepwawet, has accompanied Katharine through her Oxford university days well before the two lovers officially meet in Cairo. Hence their later relationship, preserved sexually and artistically beyond death in the desert’s Cave of Swimmers, constitutes an enduring “intimacy . . . between the dead and the living” (170).

Perhaps, then, it is Katharine who becomes the most supremely spectral figure, represented only after her death (years earlier) by a man who barely remains among the living. Their insatiable desire, which reaches across time and space, “is fundamentally nomadic not teleological, meandering, creative, nonrepetitive, proliferative, unpredictable” (Grosz, *Volatile Bodies* 168). As a result, not even death can extinguish such roaming desire. Necrophilia’s intimacy across these borders, an act by which Ondaatje transgresses and blurs
familiar margins of desire and sexuality, further disorients and disturbs his readers. With Katharine no longer a living topography, Almásy nevertheless passes through her decomposing cadaver: “Felhomaly. The dusk of graves” (170).

Such persistent spectral presence generates lingering effects on the novel. As Derrida suggests in *Specters of Marx*, “The subject that haunts is not identifiable, one cannot see, localize, fix any form, one cannot decide between hallucination and perception, there are displacements; one feels oneself looked at by what one cannot see” (136). In the case of Katharine Clifton, who haunts not only her lover but also the novel itself, she cannot be extricated “from the page” (Ondaatje 235). Almásy has permanently preserved the memory of her presence, “having translated her strangely into my text of the desert” (235-236). Homi Bhabha suggests in *The Location of Culture* that, “the ghostly discourse that enters the world[’s] . . . transitional” spaces reveals “private and public faces, its historical past and its narrative presence” (22). The specter occupies a logic that writes against the singularizing view of history passed down as an instrument of power. This figure exists outside national, racial, gender, and sexual borders, crossing over formerly impenetrable boundaries between life and death, history and memory. Like the mysterious desert landscape, it defies ownership. Along with the specter’s revelation of private and public faces, Ondaatje’s image of the fluctuating desert, the place where human presence is eradicated, heralds what Josef Pesch terms “the project of detotalizing” (130). With its shifting sands and ceaseless winds, the desert annihilates all attempts to establish permanence. Erasing individual national identities, the desert renders national self-referentiality obsolete, ignoring difference and remorselessly consuming whole armies regardless of ethnic or racial distinctions. As the
specter hovers at the border between the living and the dead, so the desert\textsuperscript{117} exists as an expansive border that refuses to be conclusively fixed or mapped. Through his natural and spectral landscapes, Ondaatje introduces sites that rupture imperialist logic.

In a world that seems more dreamlike than real, a strange sense of narrative suspension permeates this space-time grid. At least in the desert, that great well of memory, “There seems to be no time here. . . . So we will be remembered by others . . . a promise of some great future” (280). Like Osbey, whose poetry operates as an extended form of remembrance, Ondaatje invokes the power of collective memory. Despite war’s widespread destruction and fragmentation, individual bodies and identities peculiarly emerge as shared sites of collective history: “We are communal histories, communal books” (261). While death extinguishes Katharine and Almásy’s union, Ondaatje does imply an alternative “communal history,” this “promise of some great future,” through the prospect of Hana and Kip’s interracial relationship. Of course, counteracting the possibility of cross-cultural redemption is the reality of Kip’s rejection. With the bombings in Japan, he fully recognizes that power, particularly the sort administered by the colonizer, is never just: “American, French, I don’t care. When you start bombing the brown races of the world, you’re an Englishman . . . They would never have dropped such a bomb on a white nation” (Ondaatje 286). Having effectively abandoned Hana to the “raced” nation of unforgivable whiteness, Kip seemingly subjects her to the same reifying impulse that plagues the racist colonial mindset: they are all the same. As a result, the Indian sapper, formerly of the British Army, returns to the Punjab.

\textsuperscript{117} A case may be made that the natural world, most fully animated in the novel as the desert, achieves a certain degree of material agency. In its mobility, the desert emerges as a collective agent that erases human presence, refusing its imprints. As I discussed in the first chapter, the Caribbean island analogously figures as an animate, sentiment landscape.
Yet strangely, *The English Patient* concludes with snapshots of Kip and Hana all “these years later” (299). They remain separated by great distance and isolated in time, yet the former lovers nevertheless share an almost telepathic connection: “A stone of history, skipping over the water” (299). As Kip relaxes in his garden, “he watches Hana, her hair longer, in her own country. . . . He sees her always, her face and body” (300). Through this “limited gift” (300), silently imparted without explanation, Ondaatje refuses to break off their connection permanently. In the novel’s final moment of action, when Hana dislodges a glass from the cupboard edge, “Kirpal’s left hand swoops down and catches the dropped fork an inch from the floor and gently passes it into the fingers of his daughter” (301). A different object, yes, but the same symbolic act of “saving.” Under another set of circumstances, Hana and Kip might have shared a different future, one that has been lost – or perhaps deferred elsewhere. Their “otherworldly” connection, a suspended future, endlessly folds back into their shared past. Each oscillates somewhere outside spatial and temporal realities. Perhaps only readers can redeem the romantic possibility of the Sikh sapper eternally abiding with the Canadian nurse: to imagine, in some other landscape, an alternative ending as fictive postscript.

**The Ghostly Logics of Testimony**

The “logic of the ghost,” Derrida argues, crushes outmoded dualisms and their binaries, for “it points toward a thinking of the event that necessarily exceeds a binary or dialectical logic” (78). In terms of strident nationalism and the contradictions entrenched at its core, this comment on “national rootedness” reveals a fascinating connection between origins and their displacements. As he later asserts, “All national rootedness . . . is rooted
first of all in the memory or the anxiety of a displaced – or displaceable – population. It is not only time that is ‘out of joint,’ but space, space in time, spacing” (103). Applying Derrida “outward,” perhaps the psychic impetus behind empire’s project of expansion is the peculiar cohabitation of a remote memory with an immediate fear: the recurrent anxiety over dislocation, of being displaced. Ironically, colonial power, as Bhabha has theorized extensively (positing that an oppositional gaze may in fact be refracted back from the margin to the center), always exists under profound threat. The colonized subject may call the colonizer’s bluff, particularly over questions of identity, in which the illusion of fixed self-identity (the “Self” constructed as not the “Other”) can only endure through paranoid repetition. But returning to Derrida’s formulation of a new “ghostly” logic: in what ways is this figure of the ghost one of crossover? Probing the specter and its impact, he intriguingly gestures toward parallel temporal and spatial dimensions. Within spectral presence, time is “out of joint,” and, analogously, so is space. Taken together, history and geography, the vertical fourth dimension as well as the horizontal scape, reveal a corresponding “out of joint-ness.”

In terms of All Saints and The English Patient, each work presents porous, flexible landscapes that reflect and embody their inhabitants’ private stories – the alternative narrative histories of racial and colonial “others.” Hence the crimson bricks and wrought iron castings that line the New Orleans city streets make plain the past’s materiality, visible testimonies to the cruel labor extracted under slavery. In a similar fashion, the inconceivable loss and widespread destruction that accompany the trauma of world war appear written on Villa San Girolamo’s architecture as well as the surrounding Italian countryside. Both human and architectural bodies have been shattered. But what of these texts’ particular localities, their
placement(s) within specific geographies? While Osbey firmly places her poetry in and around New Orleans, writing for a black working-class audience living in the heart of the Crescent City, her deep sense of history, in conjunction with her poems’ geographic ranging – from North America, Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean – reveals an almost insistent displacement. Ondaatje’s novel similarly roams across the globe. While he may center his desert love story in the years surrounding World War II, such historical placement is far from fixed. With Kip, Hana, and their as-yet-unrealized, cross-cultural romance, Ondaatje also casts the possibility of an alternative future.

Through the invocation of spectral figures and visible landscapes that act as living testimonies to those narratives most often elided, Osbey and Ondaatje create bodily topographies that renew “a politics of memory, of inheritance, of generations” (Derrida, Exordium xviii; emphasis in the original). Jonathan Boyarin extends this “rhetoric about the past mobilized for political purposes” (2) in “Space, Time, and the Politics of Memory.” He encourages a “politics of memory” that not only bears witness to the past but also acknowledges shared experiences in the present moment. Toward the conclusion of his piece, Boyarin reframes one central question: “Is it possible to conceive of a ‘coalition’ or ‘dialogue’ between the claims of dead ancestors and the claims of distant contemporaries?” (27). Osbey and Ondaatje suggest that it just might be. Certainly they share the aesthetic energies that animate place and landscape, an ethical preoccupation with embodying untold histories of the “Other,” and a political impetus that decries the injustices of exploitative power relations. Whereas Osbey emphasizes New Orleans’s legacy as a cultural center for the global slave trade, Ondaatje condemns the atomic bomb, “this tremor of Western wisdom” (284), that seeks to validate imperialism.
Admittedly, these two authors, New Orleans’s unofficial “poet in residence” and the Dutch-Ceylonese writer living in Canada, also inhabit provocative sites of fissure. In fact, the most noteworthy venue treating Osbey and Ondaatje together, *Parnassus: Poetry in Review*, does so through heated debate. In “Big City, Long Poem,” a 1993 review of Osbey’s long narrative poem, *Dangerous Circumstance, Dangerous Woman* (1991), assistant editor Ben Downing concludes that, “the poem ends up ironically perpetuating the very problem it treats: the failure of memory” (229). Further, he objects to Osbey’s poetic representation of New Orleans, claiming (wrongly, one must note) that she adds “little to our literary image of New Orleans” (229). Still more condescendingly, Downing catalogues a series of novels set in New Orleans by way of unfavorable contrast; here he casts Osbey against Ondaatje, suggesting that “In form [*Dangerous Circumstance, Dangerous Woman*] resembles Michael Ondaatje’s *Coming Through Slaughter*, but Osbey’s poetry is considerably less rich than Ondaatje’s prose” (229). Not surprisingly, Osbey takes serious issue with these charges, lodging her objection in the very next issue of *Parnassus*. In her “Letter” responding to this reviewer’s longing for the “poet’s particular dazzle” that might enhance “[his] own mirage of that city” (Downing 229), Osbey summarily dismisses his preconception(s) about New Orleans as precisely this – a false mirage. She clarifies:

The city of New Orleans is more than 70 per cent African American. This is the history, language, and tradition, largely unknown – and certainly not explored in the works of Percy, O’Toole, or Ondaatje – out of which I am writing. And contrary to the stereotypes generated or underscored by the aforementioned works, lunacy, ennui, and energetic riffs do not make up the bulk of our history, life’s experiences, or primary topics of interests here. (“Letter” 481)

So the letter closes with an insider’s realistic, as opposed to a romanticized or stereotyped, portrait of the Crescent City.
Perhaps, then, Osbey’s poetry and Ondaatje’s fiction occasion dialogue not because they write out of identical “life[ ] experiences” but instead – and more persuasively – in relation to the ethical dimension of literature: the demand to portray truer, more inclusive versions of history. Boyarin in fact underscores such urgency. In this contemporary moment, “What we are faced with – what we are living – is the constitution of both group ‘membership’ and individual ‘identity’ out of a dynamically chosen selection of memories, and the constant reshaping, reinvention, and reinforcement of those memories as members contest and create the boundaries and links among themselves” (Boyarin 26). Through mutually resonant aesthetic traits and political energies, Osbey and Ondaatje reflect the transformative potential of such overlap. Even along highly contested borders, “the constant reshaping, reinvention, and reinforcement” of not only memories but also embodied histories introduce a compelling ethical imperative. It is this shared impetus that opens new avenues for imagining what might be “soon/One day” (Osbey, “Invocation” 12-13).
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