“A History of the Future”: Fabulative (Re)inventions of the Historical Past in Contemporary Black Drama

By
Holly Berkowitz

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy
(Interdisciplinary Theatre Studies)

at the
UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON
2022

Date of final oral examination: 12/16/2022

This dissertation is approved by the following members of the Final Oral Committee:

Aparna Dharwadker, Professor, English & Interdisciplinary Theatre Studies
Mary Trotter, Associate Professor, English & Interdisciplinary Theatre Studies
Mike Vanden Heuvel, Professor, Theatre and Drama & Interdisciplinary Theatre Studies
Sandra Adell, Professor, African American Studies

Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my best friend Mara Model (1990-2021), whose memory and spirit I keep with me always and hope to honor.

Acknowledgements

This dissertation would have not been possible without the help and guidance of my advisor, Aparna Dharwadker, whose feedback, encouragement, and advice have been invaluable to this process. Many of the ideas that inform this project were introduced to me in her Postcolonial Theatre course, which I was glad to have taken early on in my PhD coursework. In addition to reading and advising my (very long) chapter drafts, Aparna helped me develop materials for fellowship applications, provided insightful comments on article drafts, and wrote numerous letters of support for me throughout the years. Aparna has also been gracious in her hospitality. She and her husband, Vinay, have welcomed Cameron and I into her home on several occasions, which made me feel more at home in a city far away from my own family. I was worried about a lot of things while working on this dissertation (a side effect of writing during a global pandemic), but completing it was far down on the list, since I knew that Aparna would make sure it happened. I'm incredibly grateful to have been able to learn from and work with her over these years.

I am beyond thankful to my committee—although the pandemic limited the contact we had, each member helped to shape my project, my thinking, and my teaching in significant and invaluable ways. In addition to conversations which sparked my thinking and extremely helpful comments on my proposal, I was fortunate to teach under both Mary Trotter and Mike Vanden Heuvel for multiple semesters, and I am extremely lucky to have had them as mentors. Mary helped me develop my teaching persona and was an inspiring model for me when it came to figuring out my classroom style and approach to working with students. Mike's class provided me with the opportunity to teach some of my favorite authors and artists, and it is an experience I don't know if I will get again. Taking classes with Sandy Adell, particularly her Black Feminist Drama class, helped to sharpen my thinking about African Diasporic theatre and provided me with a productive space to explore some of the earliest ideas that would lead to this dissertation. I'm indebted to Sandy for her kindness and insightful pedagogy.

My thanks also to the UW Madison Graduate School and my department of Interdisciplinary Theatre Studies for funding this project and my studies with fellowships, awards, and assistantships that allowed me to devote time to writing and research. Within ITS, I'm grateful that I found such engaging and energetic colleagues who would wind up becoming my friends, including Ashley Bellet, Scott Campbell, Scott Harman, Joshua Kelly, Molly Mattaini, Sunghee Pak, and Bridget Vanderhoof. And an extra special thanks to ITS friends who doubled as cat caretakers and faced the wrath of a hungry Albee and Magnus—looking at you, Kathleen Cawley and Rini Tarafder.

I am grateful to the UW Writing Center for being both my place of work and for providing a space to get feedback on early drafts. Helping others with their writing has fundamentally shaped my own writing process and made me a better, more critically reflective writer.

I would like to acknowledge my family and friends, without whom none of this would matter. People I love are scattered across almost a dozen states, and yet have been there for me whenever I needed. I specifically want to thank my parents and siblings—Susan, Jess, Amy, Kenny, Jillian,

and Spencer—for being such a strong and enduring support system during the very protracted arc that has been my graduate school career.

And finally, thank you to my husband Cameron, who has read every word of this dissertation—more than once. We met at the beginning of both our graduate school journeys, and I can say without hesitation that none of the last nine (!) years would have been possible or bearable without you. Your unwavering support and confidence in me bolsters everything I do.

Abstract

In *A History of the Future,* I examine a set of theatrical works from Black playwrights that represent the historical past onstage. In so doing, I argue that these plays can and should be considered in a subgenre of the Black History Play that I term "fabulative history." I define fabulative historical approaches as drama that deliberately reinvents or re-makes the historical past, weaving in moments of what-if or what-will-be. To this end, each chapter considers alternative sites for memorializing and recording the incomplete history of enslavement and emancipation. These sites include multifaceted temporal phenomena such as echo and time travel, as well as charged landscapes such as stages, waterways, plantations, and gravesites. Rather than examining drama from one specific region or period, this project takes an expansive approach to considering Black theatre, suggesting that the shared trauma for African descendants who write about the historical past comes out of the experience of enslavement and the Middle Passage. These playwrights interrogate how their dramatic present is a product of this shared past and is necessary to confront as a means of imagining conditions for a livable future.

This study begins in the 1970s, a decade which saw both the resurgence of interest in delineating a field of Black studies and Black history as well as the founding of several independent postcolonial nations. The works I analyze are united by a shared recourse to the dramaturgical method of fabulation, through which they confront the historical past to reveal how archives and historiographic documents historically occlude and overwrite Black narratives and experiences. I argue that these fabulative histories reject dramatic formal conventions, which includes the distortions of linear temporality, deviation from a unified setting, and experiments with standard forms of English. Alongside these similarities are important differences related to geographic perspective, particularly between Caribbean and African American playwrights deriving from nations with varied legacies of racism and subjugation. These distinctions frame the way that postcolonial authors approach the protracted and at times ungovernable history of Black enslavement and freedom.

In my introduction, I discuss the social, political, and literary context of Black history in the 1970s and explain its significance as a starting point for my project before tracing a lineage of Black theatre's investment in the historical past. My second chapter examines echo as a model for fabulative history, using Djanet Sears's *Harlem Duet* (1997) and Suzan-Lori Parks's *The America Play* (1994) to consider how echo threatens to trap Black subjects in a feedback loop where they are destined to repeat the past. My third chapter looks at aquatic settings and imagery in Marcus Gardley's *...And Jesus Moonwalks the Mississippi* (2010) and Nathan Alan Davis's *Dontrell, Who Kissed the Sea* (2017) to argue that waterways paradoxically serve as both sites of rupture and danger as well as alternative repositories for memory and familial connection across the African diaspora. My fourth chapter considers the phenomenon of time travel in plays about the slave past, including Robert O'Hara's *Insurrection: Holding History* (1996) and Dennis Scott's *An Echo in the Bone* (1974), as a means of examining the role of the plantation as a resonant Black geography. My fifth chapter analyzes the ostensibly barren landscape of the gravesite in Parks's *Venus* (1996) and Sistren Theatre Collective's *QPH* (1981) to demonstrate how both works call attention to the need to resurrect the testimonies and histories of marginalized women. Finally, my conclusion considers the importance of theatre as a medium to fabulative works, particularly concerning notions of liveness and embodiment in historical performance. In suggesting that we pay attention to the ways that playwrights engage with both the material of the past and the gaps within the archive, this dissertation seeks to critically examine fabulation as an inherent practice in the crafting of history plays in Black theatre.

Table of Contents

Introduction: A History of the Future

[H]ow might it be possible to generate a different set of descriptions from this archive? To imagine what could have been? [. . .] Beside the defeat and the terror, there would be this too: the glimpse of beauty, the instant of possibility. . . I wanted to write a romance that exceeded the fictions of history—the rumors, scandals, lies, invented evidence, fabricated confessions, volatile facts, impossible metaphors, chance events, and fantasies that constitute the archive and determine what can be said about the past.

—Saidiya Hartman, from "Venus in Two Acts," 2008.

A History of the Future investigates the strategies that contemporary Black artists and authors use to explore the archives of the historical past, particularly the reverberations of plantation slavery, to create works of fiction for the theatre. What does a return to this past look like, this project asks, for authors who are actively denied knowledge of and access to it? More specifically, my project interrogates the ways in which these playwrights engage with extant historiography on Black life and events, especially when faced with gaps and silences in records. Unearthing history and gaining access to the archives of the past has long been a central focus of writers and thinkers from Black communities across the diaspora. Hence this dissertation also examines how the preoccupation with history and historiographic methods in Black creative thought have shifted across the century—from Arthur Schomburg's contention in 1925 that the "American Negro must remake his past in order to make his future" to Mark Anthony Neal's conception of post-Soul or post-Black aesthetics as a "sacrilegious approach by contemporary African American artists to sacred icons of the African American past" (670; 269). Both Schomburg and Neal bring into high relief the abiding tension Black writers face, and have faced since the early twentieth century, between the occlusion of Black history and the desire to turn (or not to turn) toward "history" to reclaim that past.

To this end, my dissertation intervenes in the nascent critical field of contemporary Black theatre by arguing that there is an emergent subgenre of dramatic texts that can be considered

"fabulative histories," a term that draws on and extends Black studies' theories of critical fabulation. This area of study is relatively recent, due both to the newness of many of the plays as well as the underrepresentation of Black theatre in scholarship on historical drama.[1] Furthermore, the plays considered in the following chapters are rarely interrogated together, particularly in examples where I collocate work from different countries or time periods. Overall, my dissertation examines works of African American and African diasporic drama that re-imagine Black history in performance. I define Black history here as a narrative of the past that centers on Black experience by portraying historical figures, alluding to archival documents or historiography, or telling stories of important eras, such as plantation slavery or Reconstruction. Rather than examine works that simply reproduce historical narratives, I focus specifically on theatre that deliberately re-invents or re-makes the historical past, weaving in what-might-have-been or what-will-be moments.

My first chapter examines two plays from the close of the twentieth century: Suzan-Lori Parks's *The America Play* (1994) and Djanet Sears's *Harlem Duet* (1996). My second chapter looks at two quite recent African American plays—Nathan Alan Davis's *Dontrell, Who Kissed the Sea* (2017) and Marcus Gardley's *. . .And Jesus Moonwalks the Mississippi* (2010)—alongside the second installment of August Wilson's Century Cycle, *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* (1984). My third chapter analyzes a set of time travel dramas from four different decades,

[1] There are some significant precursors to my study, however, whose analyses of contemporary Black theatre I build from. Stacie McCormick and Soyica Diggs Colbert both study drama which explores the traumas of slavery, often in dramaturgically experimental ways. In particular, McCormick's *Staging Fugitivity* (2019) and Colbert's *The African American Theatrical Body* (2011) include discussions of several of the plays I examine in my project with an eye toward the ways that the past reverberates in the present. Further, there is a sizable body of literature on historical fiction and imaginative recovery as it pertains to literature, particularly African American literature and the genre of Afrofuturism. To return to theatre history, there are several studies that analyze the presentation of the past onstage, all of which inform my thinking. Specifically, Thomas Postlewait's edited collection *Representing the Past* (2010) and Freddie Rokem's *Performing History* (2000) signal the importance of theatre globally as a means of staging interrogations of the historical past.

beginning with George C. Wolfe's *The Colored Museum* (1986), Dennis Scott's *An Echo in the Bone* (1974), Robert O'Hara's *Insurrection: Holding History* (1996), and Sigrid Gilmer's *Harry and the Thief* (2016). My fourth chapter conducts a comparative analysis of two Black feminist works, including Parks's *Venus* (1996) and Sistren Theatre Collective's *QPH* (1981). The primary dramatic works this project surveys range in date from 1974, with Scott's *Echo in the Bone,* to 2017, when Davis's *Dontrell, Who Kissed the Sea* first premiered. My goal in selecting works from the last fifty years is to mark a starting point for this specific interest in fabulative histories in drama. Further, the plays considered come from writers in three distinct sites of the African Diaspora—the United States, Jamaica, and Canada. In constellating these works, this dissertation is interested in thinking expansively about Black drama across the diaspora, rather than limiting its scope to dramatic output from one nation. This is significant for two reasons: first, in thinking across countries and continents, the focus becomes the means of representing the shared experience of the Transatlantic Slave Trade for African descendants of the enslaved; second, shifting the grounds of focus away from national geography and toward a geography that manifests in different landscapes or chronoscapes allows me to examine how artists use the stage to interrogate connections between overlapping times and spaces.

Key Terms and Generic Intersections

My project emerges from a set of central terms that motivate my analysis of these dramatic works. These include history, echo, fabulation, figuration, and ecology. To begin a discussion of what I and others term the "Black History Play," it is necessary to delineate the

distinct categories of history, historiography, and historical fiction.[2] This is of particular importance for an analysis of works that interrogate periods in Black history that emanate from the period of race-based plantation slavery. In parsing these distinctions, I wish to gesture toward the ways that the playwrights surveyed in this dissertation explore the tensions between the lived experience of the past and how these events are recorded into authoritative historical documents. With regard to the preservation of Black history, testimonies, and memories, the problem emerges from the fact that the recording and documentation of the experience of plantation slavery is inherently flawed. This historiographical record of the past, then, becomes the evidence for our understanding of history and its dissemination in classrooms and media. Thus, a central concern with historiography of the slave trade is that it reflects the opinions and editorializations of the writers, who, due to centuries of literacy suppression, were largely white and free[3].

Furthermore, instances in which formerly or currently enslaved people attempt to provide testimony are often marred by spurious historiographical practices. This is evident in the many examples of "Histories" written in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries by planters or colonial settlers in Caribbean outposts; although these accounts are from the perspective of the oppressor, the descriptions of the conditions of slavery are taken as fact.[4] One example relevant

---

[2] While the Black History Play is not necessarily a generic category, the phrase has been used by scholars such as Sandra Mayo to approach an analysis of Black theatrical works that seek to represent or reimagine events, moments, and figures in the Black historical past.

[3] This point is underscored by the fact that it was not until the mid-twentieth century that historians in the United States developed approaches to the study of the period of slavery that relied on mining alternative archives. For example, Michael Zeuske's investigation into the research problems of slavery shows that it took until the 1950s for Caribbean researchers began looking for evidence of slave resistance and rebellion (95). This point is further emphasized by the trend in historical scholarship which uncovers "hidden" aspects of the slave past: examples include a 1996 article by Michael Tadman and a 2013 article by Stephanie Yuhl that expose the history of the domestic slave trade in the US and South Carolina specifically. These historiographic excursions often reveal a history or set of memories that already existed just beneath the surface.

[4] Two salient examples from this period include British military officer Marcus Rainsford's *An Historical Account of the Black Empire of Hayti* (1805) and plantation-owner Edward Long's *History of Jamaica* (1774) Both are

to the material in this dissertation is *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (1851), a pamphlet written and published by local lawyer Thomas R. Gray soon after Turner's execution. *The Confessions,* as its title suggests, purports to be a firsthand account of Turner's motivations and inner thoughts, drawn from several conversations Gray and Turner may have had while the latter was in prison awaiting sentencing. However, more recent scholarship argues not only that there is little evidence to suggest *The Confessions* contain Turner's words, but also that Gray's intention was likely to paint Turner as a religious zealot and homicidal maniac.[5] Even in cases where there is a specific focus on testimonies from African Americans, such as in the Federal Writers' Project's Slave Narrative Collection, we see problematic practices that threaten to obscure any claim to authentic "truth." For, despite the wealth of knowledge contained in the roughly 2,300 interviews conducted with former slaves from 1936-1938, scholars have shown that we should view these narratives with a critical eye. In addition to the power imbalance struck by white interviewers and Black interviewees, Rebecca Onion reveals that some interviewers did not explain the function of their presence while others were direct descendants of those who had enslaved the interviewees (Slate). I note this here in order to reinforce the idea that when we discuss the history of slavery, we are always discussing a necessarily incomplete narrative.

Into this gap between experience and its written record, or history and historiography, come playwrights who grapple with the form of historical fictions. Although "historical fictions" is a capacious category that exists across multiple genres, here I consider such fictions to be works by Black artists that take seriously fiction's ability to create new possible worlds. Unlike

---

routinely studied as authoritative historical documents for their in-depth, personal accounts of slave colonies in the Caribbean.

[5] The most thorough exploration of the enduring legacy of Turner's rebellion and the attending way his memory is represented by white authors for white audiences comes in Kenneth Greenberg's edited collection *Nat Turner: A Slave Rebellion in History and Memory* (2004).

historical fictions that seek to augment or provide another perspective on moments from the past, the historical fictions examined here operates at a historiographic deficit. Despite this, Black playwrights across the diaspora respond to the continuing violences of the antebellum period by exploring the fragmented documents of the past as launching points for their own excursions into the past. In my chapters, this begins with Parks's representation in *The America Play* of the chasm of historical memory as an empty hole in the ground; fiction becomes the means by which we revisit the moment of Lincoln's assassination from myriad guises. Other playwrights grapple even more pointedly with the fabrication of extant historical documents: *Insurrection* uses Gray's account of Turner's confessions to suggest the work's fallacious nature, while *Dontrell* uses the symbol of the tape recorder to provide an alternative means of capturing the protagonist's encounters with his ancestors.

The second key term that informs this project is "echo," both as a sonic event that theatrical works can stage and a metaphor for the reverberations of the past in the present. In my second chapter, I look at two works that overtly engage with echo as a central symbol for the violence and suffocation that results from the deprivation of distance from history, and I suggest that echo can be considered a useful frame for examining the strategies playwrights use when exploring the past onstage. Further, since the etymological derivation of Echo is Ovid's myth in which a woman's body becomes absorbed by the natural world so that only her voice remains, I examine echo as a function of space over time. In chapters three through five, then, I argue that echo is inherent to the different landscapes and temporal schemas introduced. For example, I examine charged echoic spaces, such as the Middle Passage and the plantation, that ostensibly index death for African descendants, but can be mined through the fabulative practices that explore new ways of engaging with these landscapes. Further, I suggest we consider the

thematics of time travel and resurrection as echoic temporalities. Due to their temporal layering, these works invoke the concept of the echo as the phenomenon in which an original moment is altered, prolonged, and projected into the future. Each work is also experimental or postmodern in form, often using echo as a way of challenging linear dramatic structure. This includes temporal experimentation, unorthodox stylistic and language choices, and plays that experiment with presentational style and multimedia. Overall, I see echo as a structural and formal device around which history plays are constructed, because they take moments from the past and either project them into the present or hold a space for them to be re-presented in the future.

The third key term is "fabulation." Because this dissertation explores fabulation as a dramaturgical method, it is necessary to clarify how I see fabulation functioning in the works I examine. To my thinking, fabulation deploys the provocative "what-if" as a means of challenging dominant historical discourses and representation. For example, Donna Haraway claims that "taking fabulation seriously entails proposing possible worlds. . . . It is a speculative proposal, a 'what-if'" (554). Haraway views fabulation as a critical and deliberate mode of thought, which aligns with Saidiya Hartman, who looks at fabulation as a historiographical tactic. When faced with the violence embedded in the archive of transatlantic slavery, she draws upon critical fabulation and asks "how might it be possible to generate a different set of descriptions from this archive? To imagine what could have been?" (Hartman 11). Hartman's simultaneous acknowledgement of and refusal to succumb to the limitations afforded by the archive of enslaved African life and death informs my approach to imaginative Black historical projects. Finally, Tavia Nyong'o's *Afro-Fabulations* (2018) augments the discussion of fabulation to introduce what he identifies as the mode's disjunctive temporality, noting that fabulation operates in a "tenseless time" (10). He defines afro-fabulation as an "insurgent

movement" that "tethers together worlds that can and cannot be. . . investigating possibilities outside our present terms of order" (6). Nyong'o imbues fabulation's imaginative capabilities with a necessary radicality, an insurgency that entails changing our present order.

Overall, I argue that Black playwrights use fabulation as a means of exploiting history and challenging its claims to "truth" and proximity to power. In practice, fabulative histories take on many guises throughout the surveyed works, which I will briefly list here, but discuss in depth in my individual chapters. Fabulative tactics include the overlaying of multiple disjointed time periods; the use of metatheatre to "stage" histories; the deployment of irony or satire as a means of revealing absurdities; the inclusion of historical figures whose characterization deliberately clashes with their public image; and the altering of historical narratives that are widely accepted as fact. Taken as a whole, these fabulative dramaturgies are employed to generate what British performance artist Mojisola Adebayo calls "a history of the future," in which the past is retooled and reshaped in order to consider how these stories can be told differently going forward (56). These staging choices are of great significance because they suggest that narratives which center the historical experience of enslavement and the periods following must necessarily be at least partially invented.

Part of my project's aim is also to argue for the category of fabulative histories as a generic subset of works Black playwrights generate about the past. Even more forcefully, I suggest that the plays surveyed become historiographical documents in their own right and function as lodestars for a new generation of Black creatives. To call a fictive engagement with history fabulative denotes a particular approach to the representation of the past. Rather than a revisionist history, which augments the historical evidence or narrative around an event in order to offer a renewed interpretation, or a counter-history, which provides an alternative or

marginalized account of a historical event, fabulative histories do more than revise and challenge dominant modes of narrativizing history. Instead, the plays I consider directly engage with methods of data collection and the material of historical documentation to stage confrontations with the archive and the very act of recording the past.

The concept of figuration as an element of both style and technique is central to my analyses of these plays, for critical fabulation invites a recourse to the creation of metaphors to explain and explore the world. By figuration I refer to both the use of metaphor or allegory as a structural device as well as the use of evocative poetic language and abstracted imagery. This dissertation deliberately focuses on playwrights who operate in non-realistic, at times anti-realistic, performance modes. As a result, the plots, dialogue, and thematics within their plays are often abstract, poetic, and multivalent. Due to the persistent use of figurative imagery and language as a means of performing the historical past in non-realistic guises, figural representation is a fundamental commonality between the works I examine. Beginning with echo in Chapter 2, each chapter investigates tropes, metaphors, symbols, and motifs both as theoretical frameworks and as stylistic or formal elements that playwrights weave into their works. These include the larger recurring ecological symbols such as plantations, waterways, and burial grounds as discussed in Chapters 3, 4, and 5 respectively, but also smaller metaphors such as blackface or soil and figuratively charged stage properties such as the handkerchief in *Harlem Duet,* the tape recorder in *Dontrell, who Kissed the Sea,* or the coffins in *QPH.* These figurations also often repeat and echo across chapters, such as the recurring symbols and thematics of slave narratives, classical myth, and the Bible. Because each work in this project responds to some degree to the continuations of White supremacy and slavery's effects into the present, these

staging and language choices contain the capacity to affect audiences viscerally and operate along multiple emotional registers.

Further, figurative language and ideation recurs throughout the theoretical texts this dissertation engages. This is in due in part to the poetic register in which many of the artist-scholars I include write, but even more so suggests the need for other metaphoric language when discussing the experience of the slave trade and plantation slavery. As Hartman suggests in this chapter's epigraph, to write productively about the slave past requires writing through and with an incomplete archive; thus, she gravitates toward "impossible metaphors" (PAGE). And indeed, each chapter grapples with and examines the metaphorical limits of concepts such as echo, anachronism, and burial. More specifically, Chapter 3 centers theorists who discuss the pull of the African Diapora through symbols found in "tidalectics" of waves, the "greenification" of a ship's chains, and in the chemical processes of organic matter in the ocean. Despite the overarching figurative nature of many of these texts, the metaphors crafted by both playwrights and theorists are freighted with real weight. Christina Sharpe's metaphor of residence time as the contemporary experience of Black folks is borne out in the science of marine biology, just as, in the fictive realm, echo is both a metaphor for the repetition of history as well as an acoustic recurrence of gunshots in *The America Play.* The visceral, *real,* nature of these examples both calls to and mirrors the way that each play in this project uses fabulative, figurative methods and forms to connect the historical past to the present moment.

The final key term is "ecology," which I isolate because this dissertation aims in part to consider the differing forms of environments that playwrights use to stage their encounters with the historical past. I argue throughout that an attention to the material of these dramatic settings allows us to see how artists centralize charged temporal sites that serve as links to the past,

present, and future. Although eco-theatre as a genre tends to be more invested in works that actively discuss themes such as climate change and the environment, I posit a connection between this genre's interest in producing lively landscapes and the ways in which temporally unmoored sites like the plantation or the Middle Passage are represented. To this end, Una Chaudhuri's seminal article in the field, "There Must be a Lot of Fish in That Lake: Toward an Ecological Theatre," (1994) argues that in making a space in dramatic work for the consideration of landscape, "the theatre can become the site of a much-needed ecological consciousness" (28). In the examples of Black drama surveyed here, this ecological consciousness contains not only an acknowledgement of the ways that racism affects geography and environmental safety, but also a consciousness of the ways that slavery produces its own, unfinished ecologies. Ultimately, the use of fabulation and reappropriation exploits these charged sites as fertile ground for exploring the continuities between past and present, with an eye toward ameliorating conditions for Black life across the US and throughout the diaspora**.**

In addition to defining the key concepts that guide this dissertation, it is also necessary to situate my project and its central texts within the various genres in which they are in conversation. To this end, the first generic convention that my dissertation engages with is that of "history from below." Also at times called a people's history, an oral history, or sometimes history from the bottom-up, a history from below denotes a praxis of care and attention to underutilized vectors of historical knowledge. Or, as Sabyasachi Bhattacharya writes, it is the process of placing the "history-less, the oppressed" back into the historical record (4). Examples of this practice in action are often historiographic approaches to certain periods with alternative forms of evidence or testimonies as their basis (such as Paul Ortiz's *An African American and Latinx History of the United States* (2019)), or simply the exercise of a rigorously researched

volume on a people or event rarely taught or circulated (such as C.L.R. James's account of the Haitian Revolution in *The Black Jacobins* (1938)). However, my project suggests that we need to revalue the work of imaginative or "what-if" approaches to historiography and attend to their uses in fictive, dramatic works. Moreover, one of the central arguments this dissertation makes is that Black playwrights who stage fabulative encounters with the historical past are in effect creating their own historiographies in which they look to alternative repositories of information and memories.

A second generic category this project engages with is that of speculative fiction, particularly from an Afrofuturist perspective. Although the majority of playtexts considered here are outside of the realm of science-fiction or speculative fiction that invests in fantastical world building, my time travel chapter addresses the importance of these supernatural dramatic narratives in fabulative histories. In a set of interviews with African American scholars, Mark Dery proposes the use of Afrofuturism as a term to signal the ways that sci-fi stories provide alternate possible futures for Black life. However, a focus on the future requires a paradoxical focus on the past, for as Tricia Rose notes in one such interview, "if you're going to imagine yourself in the future, you have to imagine where you've come from" (Rose qtd in Dery 215). The importance of these dual histories—one of the future and one of the past—again conjures an image of the present as a hinge around which these narratives suture.

Due to the period in which the majority of the plays within this dissertation emerge, there is an abiding influence from postmodernist theory and thought, particularly as it pertains to the narrativization of history. For example, Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth exposes the postmodernist view of history as one rooted in fabulation. She writes, "postmodern narrative emphasizes the power of invention and fabrication to the point . . . of making it the foundation of discourse"

(50). This point is also taken up in Linda Hutcheon's *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (1988), in which she advances her theory of the genre of historiographic metafiction, a postmodern approach to the writing of historical fiction that exposes in a metatextual way the act of writing a historical narrative. More specifically, Hutcheon argues that historiographic metafiction "reminds us that, while events did occur in the real empirical past, we name and constitute those events as historical facts by selection and narrative positioning" (97). This is an important takeaway in that it locates within postmodern thought a theoretical basis for considering the constructed nature of history, instead of accepting it as an authoritative discourse about the past. Ermarth, Hutcheon, and other postmodernist scholars call attention to the imbrication of historiography and fiction; the two are "seen as sharing the same act of refiguration, of reshaping our experiences of time" (Hutcheon 100). These concerns are of great significance to my project, for it is through the imaginative act of reinvention that playwrights stage encounters with the past from the perspective and positionality of the present.

One postmodernist precursor to the fabulative histories I examine is the genre of the neo-slave narrative. Named by Bernard Bell, the neo-slave narrative is primarily a literary form that draws on the formal and stylistic conventions of the traditional nineteenth-century slave narrative.[6] However, neo-slave narratives often simultaneously subvert and reject generic conventions, utilizing tactics such as satire and metatextuality to draw connections between the slave past and today; or, as Stacie Selmon McCormick observes, they offer "often irreverent depictions of slavery" (5). Further, Ashraf Rushdy's study describes the "discontinuous intertextuality," of neo-slave narratives, which he argues is "a means of challenging the very

[6] Although most examples of neo-slave narratives are novels, Stacie Selmon McCormick's *Staging Black Fugitivity* (2019) looks at the form from the perspective of theatre and performance. In McCormick's estimation, *Insurrection, Colored Museum,* and *Slave Ship* are all dramatic developments of the neo-slave narrative form (6).

processes and racial dynamics of canonicity" (17). This challenge to dominant narratives is a thread that Timothy Spaulding's work on the neo-slave narrative picks up as well, as he argues that these authors see the history of slavery as something in need of revision: these writers "create an alternative and fictional historiography" in which their texts "call attention to their own process of re-forming slavery" (2-4). Taken together, the neo-slave narrative allows novelists to inject the concerns of Black political subjects in the wake of the Black Power movement into textual forms that can be re-tooled to spotlight the voices of the enslaved. It is my contention that dramatic fabulative histories draw from this same well of discontinuous intertextuality and alternative historiographies, expanding their focus to contain the history of slavery but also, importantly, its afterlife.

Roots and Routes: The Black History Play in Context

One useful touchstone for contextualizing this dissertation's starting point is Alex Haley's *Roots: The Saga of an American Family,* which was published in 1976, with a television adaptation released the following year. The work traces Kunta Kinte's journey from growing up in the Gambia to his capture and enslavement in Virginia, and then follows Kunta's descendants to the present day. Both versions of Haley's story received wide critical and popular acclaim; the book was a bestseller, and the series garnered historic numbers of live viewers. But even more than the empirical evidence of consumption, *Roots* became a metonym for a larger cultural interest throughout the United States and elsewhere in returning to the period of the Transatlantic Slave Trade and exploring continuities between the events of the past and the social and political turmoil of the 1960s and 70s. In the US, the release of *Roots* coincided with the codified celebration of Black History Month, which was picked up in later decades by both Canada and

the UK.[7] Further, the late '60s and early '70s were also the period during which many Black Studies or African American/Africana Studies departments were created after campus activism across the nation.[8] Francesca Morgan introduces yet another vector, as she connects *Roots's* cultural impact to a lay interest among Black folks in genealogy and lineage tracing. Morgan notes that the increasing academic interest in Black life and culture as a field of study in the '70s led to "the flourishing of black historical studies . . . the ascendance of social history ('history from the bottom up')" (53). This alignment of Black historical studies and the focus on histories from the bottom up—histories from below—suggests the importance of finding different ways of telling stories of the past that do not replicate white narratives which exclude or alter contributions of African Americans and other minoritarian subjects.

Haley's *Roots* is significant for several reasons. The novel ushered in a substantial set of textual and artistic explorations of Black history, particularly the history of slavery, in relation to the contemporary phenomena of state-sponsored racism and anti-black violence. The coterminous rise in a collective effort to document Black history, celebrate Black historical achievements, and trace lineages to the slave past also situate the 1970s as a generative moment to begin my inquiry into what strategies Black diasporic playwrights use to stage engagements with the Black historical past. Beyond this context, however, is the thematic importance of *Roots* and the critical responses to it, particularly because in this dissertation I am interested in the gaps between "authentic" historiography and imaginative recovery exercises that are not wholly fantastical, but are also not wholly rooted in fact.

---

[7] Although it had been celebrated since 1970, Gerald Ford's 1976 bicentennial address on the observance of Black History Month led to its widespread adoption nationally.

[8] 1968 saw the founding of the first Black Studies department at San Francisco State College and by 1971, Noliwe Rooks notes, there were over 500 programs or departments devoted to Black studies (chronicle.com).

Despite the fact that *Roots* was cataloged as a fictional work, it was marketed and framed as an autobiographical exploration of Haley's lineage and past. In the final chapters of the book, for example, we see the generations who have succeeded Kunta and Kizzy, until we reach the current moment and Haley's own parents, and then Haley himself, enter the narrative and become characters in the familial saga. Haley, in his own meditations on the book's form and genre, uses the term "faction" to describe *Roots*. Faction is a neologism—as well as an example of figuration—that brings together "fact" and "fiction," but it also semantically connotes conflict and in-fighting. Importantly, "faction" allows for the entwinement of imagination and historical recovery. We can view Haley's *Roots,* then, as a response to the lack of a robust, archived, documented connection to the slave past. He uses the authority conferred upon documents found in library holdings across the country and the authenticity of the griot he consults in the Gambia to generate a work of historical imagination that is neither fully fact nor fully fiction.[9] In fact, Haley's book eschews those categories entirely. Because of its effect on audiences, its controversial afterlife, and the method of its writing, *Roots* serves as an entryway into considering how inventing narratives of the past can ultimately be the most effective way to reexamine history. Further, its temporal context is a starting point for considering the kinds of confrontations with the archive of slavery that Black dramatists stage in the 1970s and beyond.

To fully contextualize the writers and theatre-makers that the authors in my dissertation are in conversation with, I spotlight thinkers in the development of the Black History Play since the beginning of the twentieth century. Sandra Mayo stresses the shared importance of historical recovery to the foundation of Black drama in the US: "historical recovery and reimagining

[9] This point is particularly interesting from a perspective of narrative authority, considering the recent debates that have emerged around universities such as Harvard whose holdings contain photographs taken of enslaved Black people taken without consent.

through drama traversed the first half of the twentieth century in African American theatre" (26). This interest in historical origins goes back even further, however, to what is considered the first instance of a play by a Black playwright—*The Drama of King Shotaway, Founded on Facts Taken from the Insurrection of the Caravs on the Island of St. Vincent, Written from Experience by Mr. Brown* (1823). The play was written by William Henry Brown, also one of the founders of the famed African Grove Theatre where the play premiered. Although there are no extant copies of the script today, we can glean some important details about *King Shotaway* as the inaugural work of staged professional drama by an African American. The play centers on an eighteenth-century slave revolt in St. Vincent in which the Garifuna people (also sometimes called Caribs) fought for independence. Based on the title, the story is told through the lens of its titular character, a heroic king who led the Garifuna into two wars and ultimately perished during what is known as the Second Carib War. This is significant because it not only reveals an abiding concern with representing the past horrors of slavery onstage, but it also provides an alternative lens through which audiences learn of their attempts at resistance to oppression. Second, the play's title follows a naming convention that had mostly fallen out of vogue by the nineteenth century, in which the author attempts to convey their narrative authority; here, Brown's reference to facts and his own experience denotes an appeal similar to Haley's—that their work be read as both history and fiction.

Efforts to delineate a history for Black Americans continued into the twentieth century, as is evident from W.E.B. DuBois's reformation of the historical pageant—a dramatic form popular in Edwardian England as a means of celebrating the British past—for Black audiences. Errol Hill and James Hatch suggest that DuBois saw something promising in the pageant's visuality and sparse dialogue, a suggestion that finds purchase in DuBois's opinion that this development

would ideally teach "the colored people themselves the meaning of their history and their rich, emotional life through a new theatre" (DuBois qtd in Hill and Hatch 201). His *Star of Ethiopia* opened in 1913 to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of Emancipation and ran until the 1920s, reaching thousands of theatergoers. This work is yet another significant precursor to the fabulative histories examined throughout this study, for its goal is to reframe the narrative of Black progress across the centuries. Beginning with the great advancements of African civilizations, such as the discovery of iron and the erection of the pyramids in Egypt, the pageant then moves to the advent of the slave trade and the years of Africans in bondage, before closing with a spotlight on the struggles toward freedom, with appearances from groups such as Jamaican Maroons and rebelling Haitians, and historical figures such as Crispus Attucks and Nat Turner.

This protracted view of history is not uncommon in Black theatrical work from this period, and through the first half of the twentieth century. Langston Hughes's popular *Don't You Want to be Free?* (1937) similarly traces the history of African Americans, from the period of slavery to the current moment, through the use of music and dance. In the Caribbean context, these decades are marked by parallel concerns with documenting Black history: according to Hill, Martin Banham, and George Woodyard, the 1930s saw the first published works by Caribbean authors, and Marcus Garvey produced three dramatic pageants in Kingston on the evils of colonialism (142). The advent of the Black Arts Movement (BAM) in the 1960s changed the tone and form through which Black playwrights addressed the long arc of history, but the echoing concerns of the slave past remain a central component of BAM works. One salient example of this is Amiri Baraka's (then LeRoi Jones') *Slave Ship: A Historical Pageant* (1967). As the title suggests, Baraka borrows DuBois's form and reappropriates it for his own theory of

revolutionary theatre that seeks to shock African Americans out of complacency and toward direct action. *Slave Ship* traces a history of African descendants, beginning with the Middle Passage and arrival in America, but rather than a celebration of African achievements, the play centers on the violence and disruption of captivity and uses sensory cues such as intense darkness, loud sounds, and strong smells to create its sense of spectacle and pageantry. The mode of challenge and protest found in Baraka and other BAM artists' work can also be found in colonial outposts during this period, particularly once the nations of Jamaica and Trinidad (now Trinidad and Tobago) gain independence in 1962. In these sites, a focus on African retention rituals became an important means of connecting to a shared past and creating performance practices for the future. The work of Jamaican playwright and theorist Sylvia Wynter serves as a paradigmatic example of this as she integrates West Indian carnival into her most famous play, *Maskarade* (1970). Throughout and across temporal periods and geographic spaces, we can see an underlying current of investment in creating plays and performance pieces that function both as entertainment and as examples of Black historiography. They are fabulative examples—factions, we might say—but they share an urgency toward reappropriating the narrative of Black history and centering voices, bodies, and stories that were not and are often still not seen on mainstream stages.

Structuring the Argument

One of the central aspects of this project is its interest in thinking expansively about Black drama across both time and geographic space. Although more than half of the texts my dissertation analyzes are from the US, this project requires thinking beyond the confines of the category of African American theatre, for it seeks to elucidate generic formations that emerge

across the Black diaspora in response to the shared trauma of the loss of history due to the rupture of the Transatlantic Slave Trade. The nations represented in this project—the US, Canada, and Jamaica—serve as an aperture and an invitation to extend the bounds of the study outward.

In her contribution to the *Cambridge Companion to African American Theatre,* Sandra Richards argues for the importance of considering the African diaspora in such a study, noting that "self-identification as black has always exceeded the nation-state" (230). Further, she notes that "many African American playwrights, theorists, and audiences have not only posited emotional and political links with non-US black populations but have also looked outside these geographical confines for aesthetic concepts to guide their construction of theatre" (Richards 230). I take Richards's point seriously, for it opens up a line of thinking about theatre and performance in the diaspora that allows me to consider the nuances of historical drama. For example, Caribbean playwrights make copious use of African retention rituals in their plays as a form of colonial resistance, whereas African American playwrights experiment dramaturgically with inherited notions of linear dramatic time and space. At the same time, Richards points out that what binds these works together as diasporic dramas is of the utmost importance, suggesting that "experiences of unsettlement, loss, and recurring terror produce discrepant temporalities—broken histories that trouble the linear, progressivist narratives of nation-states and global modernization" (236). Richards connects the inherited trauma of forced dispersal to a trend in representation; it is precisely these "broken histories" that the playwrights my project considers are invested in exploring—not to mend them, but to explode them and rebuild them from the ground up.

Each chapter in this study conducts a comparative analysis of at least two dramatic works, with an intentional focus on less obvious pairings across different nations or periods, to explore a shared theme or landscape that emerges in reinventions of Black historical narratives.[10] The primary means of engagement with these works is through textual analysis, but for certain plays, such as *Dontrell, QPH,* or *Venus,* there is an analysis of performance and staging choices as well. The order in which the chapters progress is also significant. For example, I begin with a focus on the US and Canada in my first two chapters to develop a framework for considering fabulative histories in African American theatre before moving toward a comparative analysis with Caribbean, primarily Jamaican, examples. Second, I begin with an analysis of echo because it is a concept that reappears throughout the rest of my chapters as a method for, and a landscape in which, reverberations of the past continue. In a similar vein, I close with a chapter on the ecology of the gravesite because it mirrors the ways in which authors who set their stories at sites of death reject death as an end and instead look for forms of resurrecting what remains.

In Chapter 2, titled "'Trapped in History': Echoes of the Past in *The America Play* and *Harlem Duet,*" I examine the phenomenon of echo as a mythical referent, as a metaphor for bodiless voices, as an index of time and distance (or lack thereof) from the historical past, and as a landscape in itself. To do so, I consider echo as a charged ecology or landscape that engenders an ability in Black subjects to return to the historical past, however flawed that engagement might be. I turn to Djanet Sears's *Harlem Duet* (1996) and Suzan Lori-Parks's *The America Play* (1994) as case studies for thinking about echo's function in Black historical drama. Both works,

[10] The one exception to this is my second chapter, which focuses on two African American dramatic responses to historically important waterways during the period of slavery. However, this discussion is geographically expansive in its inclusion of Caribbean and African theorists who write about the function of water in diasporic narratives, and it could quite usefully be augmented by other aquatic plays from outside the US–namely British playwright Winsome Pinnock's *Rockets and Blue Lights* (2020) and *Imoinda: Or, She Who Will Lose Her Name* (2008) by British-Grenadian playwright Joan Anim-Addo.

crafted through a Black feminist lens at the close of the twentieth century, explore the violent reverberations from historical moments and figures, both onstage and off. Whereas Sears interweaves her retelling of *Othello* with the conflicting ideologies of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr., Parks looks to Abraham Lincoln's assassination to meditate on the lasting effects of both that moment and the gunshot itself. Through an analysis of echo as a scenic, sonic, and historical phenomenon, this chapter posits that theatrical and physical engagements with echoes of the past contain the potential to either trap subjects in an echoic feedback loop or provide spaces for the past to repeat, but repeat differently.

After establishing echo as a fabulative ecology that produces speculative engagements with the Black historical past, my third chapter, "Waterways of Memory: Examining the Black Aquatic in Marcus Gardley's *...And Jesus Moonwalks the Mississippi* and Nathan Alan Davis's *Dontrell, Who Kissed the Sea,*" moves to the charged landscape of waterways. This chapter investigates water in Black drama as a paradoxical site of both safety and refuge as well as death and danger. Through an engagement with theoretical frameworks such as Rinaldo Walcott's conception of the "Black Aquatic," Kamau Brathwaite's theory of "tidalectics," and Christina Sharpe's retooling of the marine biologic phenomenon of "residence time," I argue that these plays are shaped around bodies of water that serve as sites of memory and graves for those who never fully disappear. Ultimately, this chapter argues for a consideration of the function of water in Black diasporic and historical drama as a crux for the imagination and creation of possible futures for Black life.

Chapter 4, "'A bullet through time': Slavery and Anachronism in Time Travel Drama," considers the mechanism of time travel in fabulative Black drama that explores the era of slavery. In particular, this chapter investigates the physical space of the slave plantation in the

US and Caribbean as a fabulative geography that contemporary Black playwrights mine to explore the consonances and dissonances of Black life "now" and "then." The chapter opens with the first "exhibit" of George C. Wolfe's *Colored Museum* (1985) before moving to an analysis of three time travel dramas: Jamaican author Dennis Scott's *Echo in the Bone* (1974), Robert O'Hara's *Insurrection: Holding History* (1996), and Sigrid Gilmer's *Harry and the Thief* (2016)—to examine how traveling to the plantation past allows these dramatists to re-organize and re-imagine a history of Black life in the face of unfreedom. This chapter advances anachronism as a theoretical apparatus that Black playwrights use to explore enslavement. This sense of being out of time is driven by the paradoxical feeling of returning to a past that one has never known, an experience that is compounded by the return to the period of slavery. Overall, I argue, these plays imagine time travelling back to the period of slavery as a means of addressing contemporary issues that plague Black people in the present and, most importantly, orient themselves towards a future that does not depend on the ghosts of the past.

My fifth chapter, "History from Below the Grave: Acts of (Un)burial in *Venus* and *QPH,*" acts as an inversion of my first; whereas I began by examining Echo—a woman with a voice but no body—here I consider performative engagements with women who are overdetermined by their bodies but denied a voice. This chapter looks to the landscape of the gravesite and augments the framework of "history from below" to place attention on the stories and lives of those who have been long interred and forgotten. History from below the grave calls for the shifting of focus to the materiality of sites of death and interment as generative sites of knowledge about the past. Suzan-Lori Parks's *Venus* (1996) and the Jamaican women's theatre group Sistren Theatre Collective's *QPH* (1981) contain what I term "acts of (un)burial," a metaphorical resurrection of physical and historical remains that is necessarily temporary. In

centering the material conditions and narratives of these women's deaths, we revisit these women's lives—not through the lens of historical authenticity, but through the lens of fabulation. Ultimately, both plays acknowledge the inaccessibility of any historical or archival "truth" in relation to the recovery of Black voices; in addition, the staging choices of both plays ask audiences to challenge assumptions and predominate narratives about Black women across the diaspora.

Lastly, my conclusion weaves together some of the common threads that bind the works I examine throughout, particularly in relation to the medium of theatre. For example, I discuss the playwrights' shared exploitation of the "liveness" of the theatrical act and the belief that theatre is a site which allows for the wholesale (re)invention of historical narratives. In addition, the conclusion points to a few of the abiding differences in historical perspective among the plays; in particular, I note the distinctions between authors who depict moments in history from a postcolonial, Caribbean frame and those who discuss race and oppression from a specifically US-context. Finally, I point to potential avenues for further research, including expanding the geographic regions represented, conducting comparative analyses of fabulation across various mediums, and further exploring the significance of the plays in performance.

Chapter 2: "Trapped in History": Echoes of the Past in Suzan-Lori Parks's *The America Play* and Djanet Sears's *Harlem Duet*

"Joyce is right about history being a nightmare—but it may be the nightmare from which no one can awaken. People are trapped in history and history is trapped in them."
—James Baldwin, from "Stranger in the Village," 1953.

Introduction[11]

I begin my study with an analysis of echo as sonic phenomenon, literary trope, and defining feature of both landscapes and bodies because I view it as intrinsic to an understanding of history, fabulation, and afterlives. John Hollander's *Figure of Echo,* to date the most thorough interrogation of echo within literature, observes that echoes "affect us not as repetitions, but rather by prolonging the original sound or altering its apparent timbre" (1). This distinction places echo not as a mere reproduction of sound, but instead as an extension or even a revision of the original sound. Thinking about echo in this way is significant for the study of contemporary Black historiographical plays because it is both a thematic and dramaturgical methodology through which playwrights examine how the Black historical past repeats differently in our current moment. Echo is a useful model of historical representation for several reasons: first, it is defined through its relation to and distance from an origin, which is often historical sources, archival documents, or even putative fact. Second, echo contains within it the threat of entropy, or what Hollander calls "the decaying dynamics of successive echoes," which can trap the audience and characters in a feedback loop (3). However, echo also contains the possibility of new figuration and creation. Third, because echo is rooted in literature and mythology as a kind of ghostly presence of life-within-and-after-death, it is helpful to use as a model for plays that interrogate what happens when the past and its heroes refuse to die, and instead their voices, or

[11] Some portions of this chapter appear in a recently published *Modern Drama* article titled " 'This could go on forever': Rethinking the End in Suzan-Lori Parks's Apocalyptic Dramas."

even bodies, live on. This chapter surveys Suzan-Lori Parks's *The America Play* (1994) and Djanet Sears's *Harlem Duet* (1996) as case studies of Black historiographical plays that present both the dangers of echo's entropic feedback loop as well as the possibility for imagining that the past, present, and future can play out otherwise. Ultimately, although both plays explore the possibility of exploding historical inevitability, they nevertheless remain tethered to an understanding of the past as that which replays into the present.

In what follows, I begin by looking at the mythological figure of Echo in both classical myth and Beckett's postmodern re-telling as a means of examining how Echo's disembodied voice, which emanates from her bones, literalizes the metaphor of performing a history from below the grave. Next, I set forth my framework for examining echo as it appears acoustically, metaphorically or textually, and bodily or ecologically. Overall, echo's polysemic nature and its rootedness in both time and space makes it a perfect place to start with an analysis of how the past is re-played and re-made on contemporary stages.

Harlem Duet and *The America Play* utilize echo as metaphor and as a dramaturgical device in order to critically interrogate theatre history, Black history, and their imbrication. My analysis focuses on several overlapping thematic and conceptual considerations. First, both Parks and Sears use sound design to explore the resonances of racial politics—in *The America Play* this emerges as the sounds of gunshots connote our relative lack of distance from the echoes of anti-Black violence; in *Harlem Duet* this takes the form of snippets from popular Black musicians and intellectuals which make Black history come alive onstage and mirror the dissonance of the play's multiple timelines. Second, both works use space to examine echo as a form of fabulative ecology: in *The America Play* the setting is an unmarked hole that contains the physical and material remains of plantation slavery, while *Harlem Duet* is set in at the

intersection of Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X Boulevards in Harlem across three time periods, restaging the central tension between assimilationist politics and the Black power movement. Finally, Sears and Parks utilize not only Black history but theatre history as well to trace the fraught lineage of African American performance—*The America Play* reenacts the play *Our American Cousin* (1858) at which Lincoln was assassinated as well as the performance of historical impersonation; *Harlem Duet* intervenes into the history of minstrelsy and blackface in performance in *Othello*'s production history. Despite these provocative similarities, it is my contention that by setting *Harlem Duet* in temporally and geographically specific locations Sears is more interested in how the past replays in our current moment. In contrast, *The America Play* presents a world that is out-of-time, where the past is signified through iconography and repeated performances.

Echo and her Bones in Myth and Literature

It is instructive to begin by examining the etymological origin of echo itself, which derives from the myth of Echo and Narcissus. Although the myth appears in several ancient sources, from Homer to Longus, the most widely disseminated version comes from Ovid's *Metamorphoses.*[12] In Ovid's telling, Juno punishes Echo's mischievous garrulousness by limiting her powers of speech so that she "only repeats the last of what is spoken and returns the words she hears" (3.475). While this is ostensibly a curse of mere repetition, the description of Echo and Narcissus' first meeting reveals Echo's more dynamic capabilities:

[12] Although I do not have the space to include other well-known versions of the myth here, it is interesting to consider how those which pre-date Ovid interpret Echo. For example, Hollander notes that in Longus' *Daphnis and Chloe,* Pan is in love with Echo and her singing voice, and his envy causes him to endow the shepherds with madness so that they tear Echo into a series of "singing limbs." Clearly these myths take a more visceral approach to the theme of dis-articulation (meant as both the robbing of speech and the tearing of flesh and bone).

> That day he was cut off from his companions, and called out, "Anyone here?" "Here!" answered Echo . . . He halts, astounded by that other voice: "Here let us come together," he cries out, and Echo gave her heart with her reply, "*Come! Together!"* And leapt out of the woods, eager to give her words a little help by swiftly embracing the desired neck; he flees and fleeing cries, "Hands off! No hugs! I'll die before you'll have your way with me!" *"You'll have your way with me,"* Echo replied. (3.499-505)

This chance encounter underscores Echo's ability, both as trope and acoustic occurrence, to refigure meaning by building upon what has come before. Echo's replies to Narcissus, while constrained due to what Ovid calls her "nature," succeed in shaping his words to her intent. Her ability to choose what she repeats in order to achieve her desired outcome signals an element of opportunism and malleability embedded within the myth. The culmination of this is the final exchange, in which Echo turns Narcissus' outright rejection into a declaration of love. Though she repeats his words, Echo is not repetition. She actively employs his fragmented refrains and imbues them with new meaning—she creates through fragmentation.

Echo's fate, which follows upon Narcissus' rejection, introduces Echo's innate relationship to landscape, the body, and trajectories of life after death.

> Spurned, shamefaced, she slipped into the woods and hid herself, living alone in caves from that time on. And yet her love endured, increased even, by feeding on her sorrow: unsleeping grief wasted her sad body, reducing her to dried out skin and bones, then voice and bones only; her skeleton turned, they say, into stone. Now only voice is left of her . . . for only the sound that lived in her lives on. (3.505-516)

This account lays bare how Echo is embedded within the resonant geography of the caves. Not only does her retreat to the caves both create the condition for the acoustic phenomenon and bear the trace of her curse, but her bones turn to stone, becoming a permanent part of the land's ecology. As Peter Doyle notes, "The remnants of her existence are eventually displaced into the landscape" (40). Echo's myth emerges as an ecological parable, significant in light of both *Harlem Duet* and *The America Play,* which present echo in part as a connection between disparate landscapes and a means of calling the past forth into the present. Specifically, Parks's play uses the ecology of a giant, earth-filled hole (a site perfect for sonic echo), whose emptiness and convexity signals the ongoing absence of life. In presenting Harlem across three temporal spheres, Sears too examines the ways that geographic sites retain the memories of the past.

Despite the overarching importance of place, the myth centers itself around the transformation of Echo's corporeal figure.[13] The dissolution of Echo's body, from decomposing flesh to bones and dis-embodied voice, and then to voice only, renders Echo into an almost spectral figure who haunts the living. This characterization finds purchase in the assertion that despite her bodily decay, her voice lives on. Echo's simultaneous death and deathlessness—emphasized by Hollander's observation that her bones "petrify in time" to "forever remain voice only"—serve to furnish Echo as one who speaks, both literally and figuratively, from beyond the grave (9). Hollander notes that the "literary milieu" of Echo's tale across its varied iterations is "that of pastoral questing and lament for loss" (13). Echo's connection to lamentation or mourning is evident not only in the depiction of her loss of self, but in that of her complement Narcissus, who wastes away into a flower (another decorporealized figure who becomes part of the isle's biosphere). Upon hearing her love's last words, she echoes them back, the disembodied

[13] For, as Ryan Dohoney points out, Ovid takes care to foreshadow Echo's destiny when he introduces her: "Until this time, Echo had a body; though voluble, she wasn't just a voice, as she is now" (3.462).

voice that outlives her bidding him farewell. The effect of Echo's voice that lives on is reminiscent of a point made by Anthropocene scholars such as Elaine Gan, who look to the figure of the Ghost as a model for analyzing our contemporary landscape: "Ghosts show us multiple unruly temporalities" (Gan 6). Echo's life after death, then, functions as a prototypical model for thinking about how theatre can stage historical remnants in the present. Just as Echo does, when she alters Narcissus's meaning or when she uses others' words to mourn for his death, echo can be used onstage as a means of prolonging and altering the past into the present.

From this configuration of Echo as that which exceeds the categories of life and death and presents unruly temporalities comes Samuel Beckett's allusively titled short story, "Echo's Bones," first written in 1934. Initially composed at the behest of the editor of his short story collection *More Pricks Than Kicks,* "Echo's Bones" was deemed a "nightmare" and was excluded from the collection's publication (Prentice qtd in Nixon ix). Undoubtedly its nightmarish quality emanated in part from the fact that Beckett chose to write a final story that resurrected the collection's central character, Belacqua, who dies at the end of "Yellow." The story begins with the image of a dead man sitting atop his grave; given its digressional and morbid nature, it is not surprising that the story gave the editor "the jim jams" (Prentice qtd in Nixon xii). Here, I demonstrate how Beckett's riff on both the Echo myth and the trope of echo can be used as a model for analyzing how echo is deployed in the works of contemporary authors who use echo to revise historical scenes, such as those of Sears and Parks.

The opening lines of "Echo's Bones" introduce several important themes in the study of dramaturgical echoes: how echo carves a space for the geography of the dead, echo as the liminal space between life and death, and echo's tension in relation to materiality or corporeality.

> The dead die hard, they are trespassers on the beyond, they must take the place as they find it, the shafts and manholes back into the muck, till such time as the lord of the manor incurs through his long acquiescence a duty of care and respect of them. Then they are free among the dead by all means, then their troubles are over, their natural troubles. But the debt of nature, that scandalous post-obit on one's own estate, can no more be discharged by the mere fact of kicking the bucket than descent can be made into the same stream twice . . . at least it can be truly said of Belacqua who now found himself up and about in the dust of the world. (3)

In this introduction, Belacqua finds himself re-made, literally, among the dust and earth of the living. Beckett presents the afterlife through reference to space and place. He notes the shafts, the manholes, and muck that the newly dead crawl through to find the lord of the manor in the beyond. The recourse to the language of geography when speaking of the land of the dead is juxtaposed with the somewhat contradictory observation that despite the end of natural troubles, nature's debt claims his estate. This scene's interest in the claims the dead have on the living, along with Belacqua and Echo's ghostliness, call to mind a more contemporary discourse about the spectral quality of our material world. As Gan notes in *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet,* "every landscape is haunted by past ways of life . . . landscapes are also haunted by imagined futures" (2). The geography laid out before Belacqua in both life and death calls attention to his unsettled position between both his past, living self and his future in the afterlife.

The complex negotiation of space that the dead, particularly the dead who re-emerge among the living, engender can also be seen later in the story (which has a tripartite structure as Belacqua receives three visitors), when Belacqua awaits his final guest.

> Belacqua, at last on the threshold of total extinction as a free corpse, sat on his own headstone, drumming his heels irritably against the R.I.P. What with the moon shining, the sea tossing in her sleep and sighing, and the mountains observing their Attic vigil, he found it difficult to decide offhand whether the scene was of the kind that was called romantic or whether it should not with more justice be termed classical [. . .] perhaps classico-romantic would be the fairest diagnosis. A classico-romantic scene . . . a classico-romantic corpse. (36)

The image this scene evokes of Belacqua the living corpse, or what he terms a free corpse, sitting astride his own headstone and clicking his heels against his epitaph, is rife with mythological echoes. The sounds that Belacqua's corpse generates against the stone—recalling the stones to which Echo was reduced—reverberate throughout the graveyard. Yet again, the more familiar landscape of the dead that is the cemetery is juxtaposed with a more capacious description of Belacqua's surroundings. Belacqua's inability to classify the scene before him as either classical or romantic in genre points to yet another example of an environmental tension, here that of the tableau's milieu. The two reference points he chooses allude to the story's titular origin, which serve in turns as both a romance (Echo's unrequited love for Narcissus) and a classic. His self-classification, a classico-romantic corpse, could very well be used to describe Echo herself.

The story's title is allegorically tethered to Ovid's myth; the allusion comes full circle once Doyle, a gravedigger, unearths the coffin. Belacqua frantically attempts to lay odds on the likelihood that his remains lie inside, asserting, "nothing of me subsists in this grave . . . not a bone" (46). When he does finally look inside the coffin, Belacqua is described as petrified among "the hundreds of headstones sighing and gleaming like bones" (50). What he finds within ties his fate directly to Echo's: "In the coffin the handful of stones that Belacqua had found, the

lantern lying on its side, the sweet smell of tubers killed in the snuff of a candle" (51). Belacqua's body is literally and figuratively "displaced into the landscape," to recall Peter Doyle, and he is separated from his corporeal form at last. James McNaughton reads this ending alongside the myth of both Echo and Narcissus, noting, "Eager to see himself in his grave, a joke of a kind, all Belacqua finds, as he disappears at the end of the story, is a collection of Ovidian stones. Our Narcissus receives the punishment of Echo" (337). In employing the logic of myth, Beckett locates this experience of the return of the dead to the living, not as a ghost but as a corporeal remainder, in the myth of Echo and the process of her dis-embodiment. This notion of a living corpse, or disembodied-body, is central to both *The America Play* and *Harlem Duet,* for they present characters who die and yet continue to live on as echo-selves in other guises.

As several scholars note, Beckett's work is marked by an overarching interest in both the trope of echo and the themes that "Echo's Bones" introduces—disembodied voices, afterlives within spaces of death, and intertextual reverberations.[14] One might recall, for example, Estragon's haunting refrain in *Waiting for Godot*: "All the dead voices" for whom "to have lived is not enough" (Beckett 1392-1393). McNaughton reads Beckett's use of echo as a commentary on both politics and history, noting that the story parodies a variety of Irish political figures, such as the Irish Free State and the Protestant Ascendancy (321). Echo, McNaughton observes, underscores "repetitive political ideas . . . that find their expression in the late eighteenth century and predictably continue in subsequent centuries (321). Despite the predominating narrative that Beckett's work was largely apolitical, recent scholars such as Emilie Morin have pushed back against this assertion, revealing Beckett's affiliations with anti-apartheid resistance groups in

[14] Beckett's preference for both the title and the themes of voice, death, and return are taken up in Pauline LeVen's "Echo's Bones and the Metamorphoses of the Voice" (2018), Julie Campbell's "Echo's Bones and Beckett's Disembodied Voices" (2001), and Jose Francisco Fernandez's "Echo's Bones: Samuel Beckett's Lost Story of Afterlife" (2009).

South Africa, England, and Ireland as well as a connection to the Black Panthers in the US.[15] I pause upon this reading of the story's historical import and its attendant political significance because I take Beckett's allusion seriously as a starting point for thinking about how echo proliferates and mutates in the contemporary work of Black playwrights considering the Black historical past. This connection is solidified by the number of twentieth-century African American dramatists whose work is indebted to Beckett's style, including by not limited to Lorraine Hansberry in her later years, Adrienne Kennedy, and Parks, who cites Beckett's wariness of heavy symbolism in her essay "Elements of Style." Looking at Echo, Belacqua, and Echo's bones turned to tombstones, we find a model for analyzing how history repeats itself—by recalling the dead and setting them astride their graves, a movement inherent to the liveness of theatre, echoes of the past have the capacity to move beyond mere repetition.

To return to my primary works, it is necessary to briefly delineate why *The America Play* and *Harlem Duet* are productive case studies for examining echo in this way. Echo's relevance to these plays comes most obviously in both Parks and Sears's use of sound design; Parks uses the echoes of gunshots to structure the act breaks, and Sears includes distortion and overlapping audio clips to create a sonic echo of Black voices and music. But beyond the deployment of echo in performance, both plays use echo as spatial metaphor for the resonances of past, present and future. Through the portrayal of the same couple undergoing the same rupture, in the same physical location, in three timelines, Sears argues that the past is dynamic and shifting; it echoes and repeats with a difference throughout the centuries. For Parks, historical referents such as Lincoln's assassination become echoic moments that, despite the best efforts of the characters onstage, will not abate. Echo in *The America Play* is violent and compulsive; through this

[15] Morin's *Beckett's Political Imagination* (2017) provides a thorough re-evaluation of Beckett as a political agent and author.

figuration, Parks suggests that even if one would like to be free of the past, it will continue to reverberate regardless.

"back /at/ some beginning": Theoretical Framework for Echo

Now that I've provided literary antecedents for thinking through echo and Echo within contemporary Black drama, I turn to my theoretical framework for considering echo, which derives from a multidisciplinary group of theorists whose work ranges from literary criticism to art historicism to musicology. To begin, I draw again on Hollander who advances a framework for considering the use of echo as both allegory and structure in textual analysis. Taking his cues from the mythical accounts of Echo's bodily dismemberment, Hollander defines a key facet of echo as a break or a moment of discontinuity. He refers to authors who employ echo as "satiric fragmentation, in which the breaking apart of a longer word or phrase is literally and figuratively 'reductive,' and by which a contrary or self-emending meaning is shown to have been implicit in the original affirmation. Echo's power is thus one of being able to reveal the implicit" (27). As is clear in its mythological origins, echo has agency beyond reproducing what has come before; but, as we see in Parks and Sears, echo does more than reveal what is implicit—it creates something new by altering its original material.

Echo is both that which fragments and that which can paradoxically reveal and create meaning through this break. This concept is taken up in Hollander's thinking about echo in relation to the concept of the refrain, or that which breaks from what precedes it while retaining an inherent link. Hollander further defines echo as revision more than once, asserting, "the revisionary power of allusive echo generates new figuration" (ix). Here, echo's threat of discontinuity works to create new forms altogether. Revision, a key concept in both Sears's approach to *Othello* and Park's style of Rep and Rev, is located here within the allusive nature of

echo. Further, Hollander observes that echo's embodiment in "song or dramatic scene" has the capability to "augment and trope" its "subject" (31). Augmentation, which can be set in contrast to fragmentation, is yet another avenue along which we can read echo as a fabulative act—such as when Echo's responses to Narcissus reconfigure his original meanings.

Although Hollander approaches his subject from a metaphorical perspective, sound studies scholarship also considers the paradoxes inherent in the sonic phenomenon of echo. For example, Doyle's musicology-oriented work on reverberation is helpful in situating echo critically in terms of its relationship to landscape. Doyle notes that the most common adjective encountered in writing on the use of echo is "haunting," adding that echoic sounds connote "desolate, wide-open landscapes" (5). Thinking of echo as both a ghostly presence and a site of desolation brings to mind the scene laid before Belacqua's eyes as he sits atop his own grave.[16] Doyle explores how man-made echo can be viewed as "the paradigmatic instance of the (de)territorializing refrain. A sound emitted here is repeated there, the space in-between thus is delineated, mapped, known, possessed. Or perhaps the opposite occurs; the echo is diminishing, retreating, irretrievably other. The echo and the space between here and there is alienated, lost, unknowable" (17-18). Doyle's connection of echo to landscape and place allows me to look at how space and setting function as sites of echo in *Harlem Duet* and *The America Play*. The unknowability, that ambivalence about whether echo allows for a mapping and territorializing, or whether it creates a black hole of sorts, is paramount to the approaches Sears and Parks take to their plays which question the holes in Black history.

[16] Doyle also importantly observes that echo and reverberation's function is to make music appear as if it was coming from "a somewhere—from inside an enclosed architectural or natural space or 'out of' a specific geographic location" (5).

In a related vein to spatiality, theatre and art historian Jane Blocker builds upon Hollander and looks at echo in terms of what she calls its "nauseous temporality."[17] Because the echo is said to be a separate sound but not separate enough to go unlinked from its predecessor, Blocker looks at its temporal situatedness as a mirror of the contemporary. In doing so, she identifies echo as a present sound that casts a backward glance; what we experience in the echo is the phenomenon of history—the becoming pastness of the original sound. Hollander and Blocker together communicate the inability to affix the phenomenon of echo in any single direction since it can signify a relation to past, present and future. However, Blocker's final proposition on echo's recursivity asserts that "by virtue of its uncanny redoubling, nauseous temporality, the echo is an acoustic beat or rhythm. There is a sort of beating in its beat."[18] The nauseous rhythm, in its almost impossible movement, connotes a sort of swaying and un-fixity, which parallels the ambiguity and at times the ostensible contradictions found within all definitions of echo I have provided thus far. Part of what I wish to argue is that echo's unique non-fixity—between the poles of life and death, absence and presence, silence and noise—creates an aporia which is fundamental to echo as a model of history.

Further, Blocker links conceptions of echo and reverberation to both the historical past and the work of the historian who documents the past. In an essay on Beckett and the use of recorded sound, she asks, "What is history if not a confrontation with and attempt to make meaning from fragments, to make sense of noise?" (37). Blocker draws on the same vocabulary as Hollander and Dyson, following up this inquiry by defining the historian as "a performer whose work takes the form of an echo, a repetition, of . . . the original historical act" (13). This

[17] This and the following quotes within the paragraph are transcribed from a talk by Jane Blocker, given at UW-Madison on April 5th, 2018, entitled "Echo: Sound Recording and Racial violence in Contemporary Art History."
[18] Ibid.

linking of historiography to echo is apt, as both represent what has come before. While considering history as a kind of echo is not unique (after all, "history repeats itself" is an oft-repeated refrain), Blocker is quick to point out that, when performed, repetition and reenactment "can reveal cross-temporal interactions, reverberations, and encumbrances that trouble what we thought we knew about temporal unfolding" (25). I take her recourse to the metaphor of reverberation seriously here, as it is my contention that Sears and Parks, who stage alternative versions of the past, create works that resonate and destabilize linear temporality.[19]

Ideas about echo in relation to Black history, Black geography, and Black artistic production come to a head in the work of Nathaniel Mackey, a poet-scholar who writes on the African Diaspora. In the preface to his collection of poems, *Splay Anthem*, he lays out beautifully a poetics for thinking about echo as constitutive of writing about the Black historical past. Although he speaks specifically about the genre of the serial poem here, I contend that his theory is multidisciplinary and can be applied to dramatic works that contain narrative. He writes, "Provisional, ongoing, the serial poem moves forward and backward both, repeatedly 'back/ at/ some beginning,' repeatedly circling or cycling back" (xi). The bi-directional movement, the paradoxical end that is also a beginning, and the recursivity he describes are endemic to an understanding of echo in relation to representations of history described by Blocker, Hollander, and others. He invokes echo directly in this same vein, noting, "Earlier moments can be said to die and live on as echo and rearticulation . . . revisitation suggests that what was and, by extension, what is, might be otherwise . . . advancing a sense of alternative, a special view of

[19] Blocker also introduces to her study of echo the intersection of race, particularly the experience of traumatic echoes of violence and anti-black racism as a facet of Blackness. She plays on the polysemy of "beat" to argue for the violence inherent to echo, which motivates her assertion that this violence is racial violence experienced by African Americans who are deprived a reasonable distance from the past. Thinking about charged spaces, such as the Great (W)hole of History and Harlem as sites of echo is central to an understanding of echo as possessing its own ecology that allows for histories from below the grave to emerge.

history" (xii-xiii). Mackey casts echo as a relationship between the living and the dead—a revisitation. His suggestion that echo leaves space for the possibility of thinking otherwise and creating an alternative view of history aligns almost directly with Nyong'o and Haraway's definitions of fabulation, and what I term fabulative history. Further, Mackey connects these observations to a diasporic experience: "Here echo is homage, lineage . . . the spectre of dispersed identity and community" (xii). To locate echo as lineage, as those who have come before and been forcibly dispersed, is to think of echo along the lines of Parks, who looks for her history in the bones of those who have come before her, and Sears, whose characters replay the ghosts of slavery. Despite the solemnity of Mackey's assertion here, he ends with a reading of echo as a site of resistance, something akin even to liberation and insurgency. "Recursiveness, incantory insistence, is liturgy and libation, repeated ritual sip, a form of sonic observance aiming to undo the obstruction it reports" (xiv). It is in the echo's undo[ing] of the obstruction it reports, I argue, that the playwrights I examine within this study draw upon as they recast the past into the present to imagine alternative futures.

"He digged the hole and the whole held him": Echo-as-Ecology in *The America Play*

The America Play, first produced at Yale Repertory in 1994, tells the story of the Foundling Father, an African American grave digger-turned-Abraham Lincoln impersonator who decides to leave his family to move out West and dig a hole that resembles a theme park named the "Great Hole of History," at which impersonators of historical figures parade around and (re)-enact the lives and deaths of their counterparts. After the Foundling Father has died, his wife and son—Lucy and Brazil—are tasked with both digging his grave and excavating the hole at the replica. The play is notable for its use of echo as both a scenic and sonic structural device: the echoes of the gunshots from Act I continue through Act II, and the "Echo Scenes" in Act II

contain brief performances from *Our American Cousin.* As with *Harlem Duet, The America Play* is concerned with the uncovering of histories and their echoes. It views the hole and the theatre itself as a site at which to dig for African American history and takes the excavation of that which can never be recovered, the bones and the ghosts themselves, as its main topic of exploration. While critical attention has been paid to Parks's use of echo in *The America Play* as both a thematic and a sonic experience, I am interested in how Parks produces echo—whether textual, sonic, scenic, or thematic—as a model of fabulative history. She uses echo's unique relationship to past, present, and future to create a historical account of African American life where no records exist. Rather than echo signifying the mere repetition of history in the present, echo in *The America Play* is alteration and unfixity—a site with a latent possibility for change.

Throughout *The America Play,* Parks presents myriad forms of echo: the echoes of gunshots, of nineteenth-century theatre history, of assassinations, of racially motivated violence. All of these reverberations seem ostensibly to swallow the characters up in this Great Whole, so they appear fated to repeat the past. While this reading tends to predominate, I argue that Parks opens spaces in the play—through moments where she dismantles dramatic time and space— for Lucy, Brazil, and the Foundling Father to embody echo as new figuration. These sites house the potential for insurgent movement out of a cycle of white oppression and violence. I begin by looking at Parks's own writing on her theatre practice, particularly looking at her technique of Rep and Rev. I then analyze how echo figures within *The America Play*'s dramaturgy, focusing on its use of sound, setting, stage props and structure. Finally, I examine how Parks deploys echo as a model of history, closely reading for dominant themes of digging, resurrection, and recursive time. Overall, *The America Play* functions as an ur-text for contemporary historical

African American drama. Even more so than *Harlem Duet*, *America* is structured by echoes—of the past, of memories, of bodies themselves.

In her brief essay "Possession," Parks provides a provocative description of her craft, which links her writing process to that of the gravedigger. She writes,

> Theatre, for me, is the perfect place to 'make' history—that is, because so much of African-American history has been unrecorded, dismembered, washed out, and one of my tasks as a playwright is to . . . locate the ancestral burial ground, dig for bones, find bones, hear bones sing, write it down. The bones tell us what was, is, will be . . . through each line of text I'm rewriting the Time Line—creating history where it is and always was but has not yet been divined. (4)

Parks's archaeological method is predicated upon a dearth of available historical material. Instead of documents, she is faced only with bones in the graveyard (13). Parks understands history as mutable and malleable—to make history is to necessarily engage in a practice of fabulation in the wake of the lacunae in unrecorded, dismembered histories. Although she uses scare quotes around "make," the term is apt, as it speaks to the power of theatre to generate new realities. For Parks, the bones do not just serve to restore a historical narrative; they work to move history into the future. That she uses the word "divine" here is telling; it can mean to discover something or to use prophetic divinity to predict the future. Within her work, Parks hails the creation of new stories and new ways of articulating the historical past.

Parks has documented her own interest in echoes as both a structural and thematic component of her work. One of her signatures is repetition and revision, or Rep & Rev, which draws from the jazz tradition wherein a musical phrase is played and then repeatedly built upon. Parks notes that "Rep & Rev are key to examining something larger than one moment" (9). Rep

& Rev thus expands the scale of the echolalic drama to account for an understanding of time that is both recursive and expansive. Repetition and revision refuse to conform to a linear dramatic structure which moves toward a logical telos. "We are not moving from A→ B but rather, for example, from A→ A→ A→ B→ A. Through such movement we refigure A. And if we continue to call this movement FORWARD PROGRESSION, which I think it is, then we refigure the idea of forward progression" (9-10). Parks's diagram betrays the spatio-temporality of her dramatic structure. To refuse a movement from A to B in favor of a motion that resides at A for three beats, moves to B, and returns to A, is a move from beginning to end, to beginning yet again—it encapsulates the resurrection of whatever was perceived to be destroyed with the entrance of B. Not only does a return to A resist an easy terminus—it also refigures what that A might mean, which in turn refigures what that B might mean. In short, Parks asks us to consider what a drama might look like if a beginning was not the beginning and if an end was not the end. This dramatic action, which both repeats what has come before but allows for endless mutations and variations upon a theme, is the breeding ground for echo within *The America Play.*

And indeed, *The America Play's* dramatic structure is defined through a deployment of echo. Although Act I consists primarily of the Foundling Father's monologue, he is interrupted several times by what Parks terms "The Visitors," who have come to the Hole replica to re-enact the assassination of Lincoln. These interjections serve as moments of echo, both of the original assassination and the re-enactments that precede it. While each time the action is the same—the Foundling Father is "shot" and "slumps in his chair"—the event is repeated with a difference. For example, the Foundling Father plays with different sartorial choices, opting for a blonde beard and no beard at times for "variety" (168). Even the re-enactors inhabit the role of John Wilkes Booth in guises that shift throughout; the words they say upon pulling the trigger differ,

and once a couple comes in together.[20] Although the Foundling Father notes that those who choose the Derringer as their weapon are "ones for History . . . As it used to be," the irony of a re-enactment as always already failing to capture the real thing is overt (166). In this way, Parks stages capital-H History as a construct, a chasm in which only echoes reverberate.

In Act II, however, "The Visitors" from the first act become "The Actors" who rehearse scenes from *Our American Cousin,* the play at which Abraham Lincoln was assassinated. The doubling creates an intentional sense of parallelism between both forms of performance; indeed, the Foundling Father, dressed as Lincoln, watches the play-scenes as they unfold. Both Blocker and Rebecca Schneider look at re-enactment not as the desire to replay the past, but rather as an active site of echo. Blocker defines repetition and re-enactment as "modes of action, forms of doing, and behaviors that, when performed by the historian, can reveal cross-temporal interactions, reverberations" (25). In *Performing Remains* (2011), Schneider similarly sees the "doubling"s that occur in Civil War re-enactments as a place where one can interrogate not just the events of the past but also both the "as if" and the "what if" of history (2).[21] In *The America Play,* the echo scenes and re-enactments that constitute the play's narrative progression move beyond repetition. They reveal a network of relations between past and present—between assassinations fake and real, and between a history of violence against African Americans from the antebellum United States to now.

---

[20] The differing word choices become another site where Parks calls attention to the malleability of historical record. Though there is an agreed upon notion that Booth shouted "Sic Semper Tyrannis" upon shooting, each of the re-enactors has a different idea about what these famous words were. In this way, like Kurt Bullock notes in his essay "Famous/Last Words: The Disruptive Rhetoric of Historico-Narrative Finality in Suzan-Lori Parks's *The America Play*" (2001), there is a sense that even last words become an echo upon which one can repeat and revise.

[21] The "as if" approach to the past or historiography recalls Michel de Certeau in *The Writing of History* (1992), in which he provides the possibility for historiography to contain a facet of fabulation. De Certeau defines historiography as "a relation established between two antinomic terms, between the real and discourse. Its task is one of connecting them and, at the point where the link cannot be imagined, of working *as if* the two were being joined" (xvii).

Parks's script provides only a single note on its dramatic setting, calling for "a great hole. In the middle of nowhere. The hole is an exact replica of the Great Hole of History" (159). As we learn throughout the first act, the original Great Hole of History is a theme park which contained historical reenactments and impersonators who would parade around the grounds. Within his monologue, the Foundling Father reminisces about the time he and his wife visited the park, furnishing this memory as partial motivation for his digging of the hole's replica. The Great Hole of History is a physical space onstage, yet it also connotes the absence in White America of ideological and material remnants of the Black historical past. In situating the action of her play on the lip of a hole, Parks opens up a dialogue for history not as that which we can touch, see, or feel, but as that which must be excavated or divined when nothing can be retrieved. For Parks, the wordplay is central to its meaning. "You think of h-o-l-e and then w-h-o-l-e and then black hole, and then you think of time and space you think of history, and suddenly all these things are swirling around" ("Interview with Michelle Pearce" 46). The homophonic (w)hole of time and space leads scholars to look at the whole as a site that is paradoxically both empty and filled.[22] As S.E. Wilmer states, "Parks uses space simultaneously as a great void and as a multiplicity of co-present locations" (443). The hole is both a site of non-life and a site that is teeming with heretofore inaccessible forms of life.

Generally speaking, the hole is most often agreed upon as a dramatization of the ancestral burial ground Parks speaks of in "Possession." For example, Soyica Diggs Colbert notes that the hole "refers to graves and . . . evokes two historical holes: the hole the bullet bored in President

[22] Heidi Holder emphasizes its lack, noting that "instead of being built up, [it] is a hole in the ground" (21). Similarly, both Konstantinos Blatanis and S.E. Wilmer refer to the (w)hole as a void (173; 443). However, Laura Dawkins analyzes the whole not through its absence, but its presence: "Parks's use of the familiar African American literary trope of the 'underground' space [. . .] invites a reading of the hole as subterranean consciousness […] not an absence but an unbearable presence—the crushing weight of racial memory" (Dawkins 83).

Abraham Lincoln's head and the one resulting from the trans-Atlantic slave trade that the Middle Passage symbolizes" (1-2). To think of the whole as a grave, as Diggs Colbert does here, and which it more overtly becomes in Act II when the Foundling Father is buried, is to explicitly encounter the violence of dismembered histories and to see the hole as a site of racial trauma. This reading has several resonances within the play and within an understanding of echo as that which propels the ghostly figures of the past into the present. One early example comes in the opening lines of the play, spoken by the Foundling Father, whose monologue composes Act I (called "The Lincoln Act"). He begins with a series of phrases that use the literary device chiasmus, whereby a phrase is repeated in reverse order in the second part of a sentence. While three of the examples he recites are quotes—from the poetry of Oliver Goldsmith, Luke's book of the Bible, and the American Heritage Dictionary, respectively—he repeats one of his own making: "He digged the hole and the whole held him" (159). Here again is the explicit wordplay of (w)hole—the open wound or grave is conceived as a totality that he cannot escape. The past tense "held" recalls the hold of a slave ship, conferring a sense of history that recurs. And although he uses the past tense of hold, he remains held by the afterlife of slavery. The use of chiasmus binds him further; his words are echoed, yet they contain the danger of figuratively and literally trapping him on both sides.

Despite this somewhat grim reading, the hole is a site of echo that as such is defined through its unfixed and paradoxical nature. Angenette Spalink furthers this notion, conducting a "taphonomic history" of *The America Play* that focuses on its use of soil and dirt to make a case for the play's ecological character:

> Bodies buried in the earth, however, do not remain dead – eventually they teem with life as fungi, larvae, and bacteria colonize the remains. Mites, beetles, moths,

> and other organisms feed at the decaying body until the composted mixture becomes part of the soil. In the end, Lincoln's body becomes part of the soil, particles of which are potentially located in the very sites that the Foundling Father has dug. (79)

Spalink reads the hole as both a site of historic and ongoing death and a space for life within that death. The Great Hole is populated with bodies that are both dead and live on, much as we see in both Beckett and Ovid. This is significant, for it suggests that while the Great Hole contains the threat of being consigned to repeat the past, it also contains within it the ability to survive and seek out new forms of living with the traumas of chattel slavery.

Not only is the soil multivalent, but the act of digging itself is twofold: it is the action of echo, and echo itself digs. Whether the hole is a site of abject death or new life, absence or presence, or somewhere in between, the hole introduces the theme of digging. Digging threatens only to bring back iterations of the past—objects once buried, and now recovered. However, it also provides for the potential of new discoveries or divinations. The hole can be read as a model for the ecology of echo, as not only is the sonic quality embedded in its geography, but the hole we see is an echo of yet another hole. As an endlessly exhumable site of seemingly infinite depth, the Great Hole responds to John Hollander's observation, that the more concave the surface, the louder and more noticeable the echo (1). The great hole of history, then, in its inconceivable convexity, is perfectly situated for generating echo.

In addition to the echoing of dramatic space and structure, the echoing gunshots throughout *The America Play* emphasize how the continuing presence of the past manifests as racial violence. The effect of this repeated sound effect on the Foundling Father is palpable. He notes multiple times, "A slight deafness in this ear other than that there are no side effects. Little

ringing in the ears. Slight deafness. I can't complain" (170). The lingering effects that continuous gunshots—although themselves fake—have on him can be read as a metaphor for the latent violence of the echoes of racial trauma. The ringing in his ears gestures to the immediate past of enacted assassinations as well as to the longer arc of mortal violence against African Americans. Taken a step further, the persistent ringing can also be read along the axis of Parks's own interest in the figure and afterlife of Abraham Lincoln; not only does his death feature prominently in this work, but Parks's *Topdog/Underdog* (2001), for which she won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama, similarly interrogates the narrative of the president's assassination. Centering on two brothers aptly named Lincoln and Booth—the former of which works as a Lincoln impersonator in whiteface—the play ultimately re-stages the pair's final confrontation as Booth shoots Lincoln, suggesting a kind of historical inevitability with a twist. Parks's evident preoccupation with Lincoln the man and Lincoln as a symbol of American-ness is worth examining, for her compulsive return to this particular site of trauma mirrors, to some degree, the repeated assassinations themselves. In this way, we can read Parks's interest in Lincoln as a kind of trauma response itself, as she interrogates the echoes of his death and looks for the moments where it repeats with a difference. To continue to stage, over and over, this moment of political and social rupture, is also to acknowledge the violence bound up in the story of the man known for emancipating the enslaved.

While the sounds of gunshots are implicit throughout the re-enactment scenes, the closing stage direction of Act I makes evident the importance of echo to the play's sound design: "A gunshot echoes. Softly. And echoes" (173). The first act ends, then, with the reverberations of a gunshot. Whether these are the echoes of successive re-enactors or the echo of the original shot fired in 1865 is left purposefully ambiguous. To close with "and echoes," allows for an opening;

it is continuous. The echoes permeate the boundaries of the intermission, as Act II begins, "A gunshot echoes. Loudly. And echoes" (174). Parks presents an anomaly: rather than decrease in volume and intensity, the echo of the gunshot has gotten louder. This adverb modification brings together several lines of thought within the play. Not only does Act II begin with an example of revision, where the sound that closed Act I is replicated but with a variation, but the variation's perverse increase in volume serves an example of what Gan and Blocker call the unruly or nauseous temporality that defines the landscape of echo. Further, to open the second act with the echo that closes the first creates a sense of continuity between them, even though the second act takes place several years later, after the Foundling Father has died. But the sound itself, the gunshot that tears loudly through the fabric of dramatic time and space, also connotes a sense of dis/continuity—of rupture or fragmentation in the narrative of history.

This sense of dis/continuity persists throughout the second act, where the echoes of a gunshot punctuate the scene as Lucy and Brazil, the Foundling Father's wife and son, dig at the site of the Great Hole to search for physical remains of the past. After the echoes that open Act II, Lucy provides an explanation of the recurring sound: "Uh echo uh huhn. Of gunplay. Once upon uh time somebody had uh little gunplay and now thuh gun goes on playing: KER-BANG! KERBANG - Kerbang - kerbang - (kerbang) - ((kerbang))" (174). Although Lucy attempts to attribute the gunplay to an original source, she falls back upon a generic storybook opening—"once upon a time" lays bare the inability to pinpoint an originary moment of violence. Lucy's verbal and Parks' textual reconstruction of the echo attempts to map out its decaying progress through successive echoes, but the recurring stage directions belie this understanding of echo within the play. Rather than the softening of KER-BANG! to ((kerbang)), the continuing cue for "a gunshot echoes. Loudly. And echoes" deprives Lucy and Brazil a reasonable distance from

the past. In so doing, the sound presents the potential danger latent in echo—of a feedback loop from which the characters find themselves unable to leave.

In addition to Parks's experiments with *The America Play's* dramaturgy, echo as a trope or metaphor is used as a model of African American history. In both, Parks suggests that history is a Great Hole—a site of increasing echoes that, though in the liminal space between dematerial and corporeal, can have real effects on the body ("a little ringing in the ears"). To this end, Robert Vorlicky writes, "As thematically utilized by Parks, an echo is a dramatic trope that (re)captures a dimension of the vibrant history of African American life, as well as historical 'origins' of its drama and performance" (272). Although Vorlicky qualifies his description of Parks's intent by the use of scare quotes and parentheticals, I wish to push back against the claim that Parks is interested in the trope of echo as a kind of "re"-ness. For, as Ovid's Echo and Beckett's Belacqua make plain, this recourse to repetition contains the danger of becoming trapped in the recapitulations of history. Instead, I argue, just as Parks refigures forward movement, she refigures what "re"-ness, or the relationship of an echo to an origin, might look like. As Parks demonstrates throughout *The America Play,* the very concept of "origins" is fraught. Not only does Parks dramatize the instability of the historical archive, but she uses that instability to alter the dramatic fabric of her text. Throughout *The America Play,* the Foundling Father, Lucy, and Brazil encounter reminders of a history of cruelty against and the oppression of African Americans—through the repeated "assassinations," the gunshots, and the gravesite at which they dig and speak—but there are moments where the possibility of moving outside that past, of moving forward and away from the violence of the echoes, come to life.

One such moment that views echo as productive rather than iterative violence comes when the Lesser Known reflects on his honeymoon at the theme park with his wife Lucy.

> Reconstructed Historicities he has witnessed continue to march before him in his mind's eye as they had at the hole . . . the enemy was slain and lay stretched out and smoldering for dead and rose up again to take their bows. On the way home again the histories paraded again on past him although it wasn't on past him at all it wasn't something he could expect but again like Lincoln's life not 'on past' but *past. Behind him.* Like an echo in his head. (163)

The historical impersonators at the theme park are echoes thrice over: they are resonances of the historical figures they enact; once slain, they resurrect themselves to sit up and bow; and they echo in the Foundling Father's mind, who calls them echoes in his head. Further, the Foundling Father's parsing of past/passed reveals an understanding of echo's spatialization as that which is both literally and figuratively behind him, threatening to reappear over and over. The figures who repeat are unanticipated—like the echo of the gunplay that reverberates—transforming the Lesser Known's head into a site of echo itself. The echoes of the Reconstructed Historicities refuse to abate, as the Lesser Known continues: "At first they thought it only an echo. Memories sometimes stuck like that and he and his Lucy had both seen visions. But after a while it only called to him. And it became louder not softer but louder louder as if he were moving toward it" (163). The reference to echoes as memories recalls Schneider, who looks at theatre that reproduces the historical past as freighted with the "sticky viscosity of time," which drag "the temporal past into the sticky substance of any present" (60; 36). The echo that is more than a memory sticks to him, calling to him at an increasing volume. In this moment, echo engenders spatial upheaval and movement, chiasmatically upending governing logics of time and space.

A consequence of these ungovernable temporalities and spaces is the complexification of the seemingly neat boundary between life and death; in the second act, echoes both figuratively

and literally come to symbolize the porous membrane between these states at the site of the hole. One example of this comes in a scene titled "Archaeology," in which Lucy provides her son Brazil with her taxonomy of echoes.

> Echo of thuh first sort: thuh sound. (E.g. thuh gunplay.)
>
> *(Rest)* Echo of thuh 2nd sort: thuh words. Type A: thuh words from thuh dead. Category: Unrelated. *(Rest)* Echo of thuh 2nd sort, Type B: words less fortunate: thuh Disembodied Voice. Also known as "Thuh Whispers." Category: Related. Like your Fathuhs.
>
> *(Rest)* Echo of thuh 3rd sort: thuh body itself. (184)

Vorlicky reads Lucy's categories as collapsing and complicating bounded spheres of time and history, noting that "Initially, each of these echoes exists in real time as a past of Lucy's experience with her son. . . . [T]heir own sounds, words, and bodies locate a present that will inform the future as the present slips into recognizable, historical past" (273). And while it is true that one of echo's primary functions within the play is to resist an easy movement from A→ B, these echoes also structure the way that the play views the relationship between the living and the dead. All three of these forms of echo involve forms of life after life. The gunplay that will not quiet and continues to startle recalls the threat of the echo's perpetual futurity. Lucy's reference to the "disembodied voice" evokes the myth of Echo, whose voice lives on though her bones have turned to stone. But while the first two categories Lucy delineates are disembodied, the third form introduces echo as a facet of the body itself—such as Belacqua's corporeal ghost who sits atop his grave, or Parks's burial ground where the bones can sing and reverberate.

Parks also considers how bodies themselves might function as echoes in a heading within her "Elements of Style" titled *ghost.* Parks furnishes her definition: "They are *figures, figments,*

ghosts, roles, lovers, maybe, *speakers,* maybe, *shadows, slips, players,* maybe, maybe *someone else's pulse"* (12). For Parks, to be a ghost is not necessarily to lose corporeal form. Though a person can present as a figment or a shadow, what we would likely associate with the sphere of the spectral dead, they can also inhabit the sphere of the embodied living—they can even be someone else's pulse. It is the ghost, the dead, who paradoxically provides the body with life. In the time of the echo, ghosts are not phantom apparitions but the beating of the heart itself.

Park's ghosts serve as a way into thinking about the ending of the play, where history from below the grave is embodied through the return of the Foundling Father, who has died in the interim between Acts I and II. As with the Reconstructed Historicities, the Foundling Father is an echo two-fold—he is both Lincoln and himself. At the close of Act II, we see the Foundling Father's face on a television screen, which replays the events of Act I without sound. This meta-theatrical incursion, which mediates the Foundling Father and de-corporealizes him, serves at first to relegate him to the sphere beyond Lucy's "disembodied voice," to the disembodied image. While Lucy and Brazil watch him get "shot" over and over, Brazil observes, "he's dead but not really," as the Foundling Father enters the stage space again, a living ghost ready to be interred (195). In this way, we see the resonances of his assassinations on screen and his death from a "great black hole in thuh great head" create a loop of sorts, threatening to continue without end (199). But once he returns to the stage, Brazil looks at his father, very much a living, breathing actor, asking, "He's dead?" to which Lucy responds, "he's dead" (195). The tension found within the dead whose hearts still beat serves as the final, most visceral example of a history from below the grave. This final scene, titled "The Great Beyond," is eerily reminiscent of "Echo's Bones," as Belacqua banters in the vicinity of his own headstone only to conclude his story by returning to his coffin. The Foundling Father's interment presents the possibility of a

closure—though, as we see with *Harlem Duet,* its tenor is ambiguous. Does the burial of the past end the cycle of Great Holes and echoes of gunshots? Or does its very burial merely allow for its recurring disinterment as history repeats in an endless loop? The play does not have an answer, as it ends with the enigmatic stage direction "Takes his leave" (199). While the most common understanding of this phrase is to depart, it also connotes an individual good-bye, such as Brazil might say to his father, or even to depart with the promise of return, such as when one takes a leave of absence. Whether the echoes will decay into entropy or whether they are insurgent possibilities for sustainable forms of living, Parks suggests, is a question for the Great Beyond.

"Trapped in history. A history trapped in me": Collapsing Echoes in Djanet Sears's *Harlem Duet*

Another playwright who delves into the past and exploits the nauseous, unruly temporality of the echo is African-Canadian author Djanet Sears, whose play *Harlem Duet* premiered in 1997 at Toronto's Nightwood Theatre, the oldest feminist collective and women's theatre in Canada. Due to its imbrication of Shakespeare's source text—Sears has referred to it as "a non-chronological prequel to *Othello*"—the play was mounted again at the Stratford Festival in 2006, which generated a number of "firsts." It was the first play by an African Canadian produced at the festival, the first play directed by an African Canadian woman (Sears directed the revival herself), and the first to showcase an all-Black cast (the character of Mona, who is white, speaks from offstage). The play functions as a prequel to the action of *Othello,* as its main action occurs directly before the impending marriage of Othello and Desdemona. Its central character, Billie, is Othello's first wife, and much of the play explores her coming to terms with Othello's obsession with whiteness as a means of upward social mobility. Complicating this relatively straightforward narrative are the multiple timelines and axes along which this drama

plays out. *Harlem Duet* unfolds over three temporal spheres, although all three are set in Harlem and feature the same two actors: 1860-1862, where HIM and HER are enslaved on a plantation; 1928, where SHE and HE are in a dressing room and HE is a Black minstrel performer; and the present, where BILLIE and OTHELLO are in the midst of dissolving their nine-year relationship. These three strands are interwoven and at times do not follow linearly, creating an audience experience referred to by scholars as alienating, disorienting, and fragmentary.[23]

Because of its lack of adherence to linear dramatic time and its sole interest in black narratives, *Harlem Duet*'s relationship to its source text is complex. Sears is quick to dismiss a description of *Harlem Duet* as an adaptation, noting that, "the story is completely revised" (300). Her invocation of revision is important to both her own conception of her work and my argument about her work's connection to the theoretical framework of the echo. Just as Hollander asserts echo's revisionary power as the power to create anew, Sears notes, "I love the notion of revisioning. . . . Revisions look at a known story from a different perspective. Some people say they are appropriating the original text, but I actually think they're expanding it, because not only do they give you different dimensions to the main narrative, but they also point you back to it" (300). This conception of revisioning, akin to Parks's Rep and Rev, views echo as that which is connected to but also prolongs and alters the original. By re-presenting aspects of *Othello*'s story with which we are familiar—the handkerchief, central characters, and a male hero who is ultimately doomed by his proximity to whiteness—yet also presenting an entirely new story about a woman who is fated through time to lose her love to a white woman, Sears's play occupies the central paradox and ecology of echo.

[23] Margaret Kidnie, for example, refers to the play's "alienating effect" and "disorienting dramaturgy" (33).

Further, in Sears's essay "nOTES oF a cOLOURED gIRL: 32 rEASONS wHY i wRITE fOR tHE tHEATRE," she expands upon the personal significance of the source text and character of Othello. In particular, Sears connects the play's creation to the importance of recreating the myths and histories of women of African descent: "Shakespeare's *Othello* had haunted me since I first was introduced to him. Sir Laurence Olivier in black-face. Othello is the first African portrayed in the annals of western dramatic literature. In an effort to exorcise this ghost, I have written *Harlem Duet*" (14). Sears's repeated references to *Othello*/Othello as a specter that haunts her cast Shakespeare as the ghost that looms over not only Sears's work, but Black representation in theatre more generally. To bring in the rhetoric of ghostliness is also to recall Echo and Belacqua, those figures who live on beyond their death and alter the temporal landscapes in which they appear. As an exorcism, this play sets out by reckoning with the ghosts of the past head-on.

Overall, I am interested in how *Harlem Duet,* like *The America Play,* uses the language of sound and music, alongside its unconventional treatment of dramatic plot, space, and time, in order to generate an alternative Black history from below the grave that uses echo as its driving force. I argue that *Harlem Duet* uses both theatre history and the history of Black freedom movements and discourse to revise and recenter a Black woman's perspective and voice, creating a space for both *Othello* and the monolith of "Black Theatre" to explore more complex forms of Black identity. While scholars have looked at this play from a variety of angles, in terms of its discourse on Canada, its relationship to Shakespeare, and its dramaturgy, particularly in how it creates a sense of dis/continuity throughout its three temporal spheres, I look at *Harlem Duet* as a Black History Play, paying attention to how it fabulates upon extant historical records and creates space for alternative futures. Through a reading of this play as a site of echo, I am

interested in how *Harlem Duet* performs a discourse on both black theatre history *and* a discourse of black historical thought of the twentieth century. In what follows, I divide my reading of Sears's play into two parts: echo-as-phenomenon, examining how *Harlem Duet's* sound design—primarily in its use of music and recorded sound bites of African Americans throughout history—functions as a sonic companion to the play's narrative development. Second, I look at echo-as-trope, analyzing various sites of echo within the play, including time, space, the body, and the stage. Sears develops Parks's assertion that history is a site where events and relations are not necessarily fixed. Further, she brings a spatio-temporal specificity to this conversation, where rather than sitting in the "middle of nowhere," we are taken to Harlem in three distinct moments of time. Looking at *Harlem Duet* alongside *The America Play* is helpful because the former presents echo as that which can literally—through Billie and Othello's arguments on race relations—propel the debates of the past into the present.

The most notable piece of Sears's production design in *Harlem Duet* comes from its use of sound. As noted, each of the play's twenty-one scenes begins with a stage direction that dictates the kind of music that is playing, both the speed and tenor of the rhythm and a description of the recorded sound that plays simultaneously. The use of music is central to an understanding of how the play unfolds. Sears refers to *Harlem Duet* as a "rhapsodic blues tragedy," which holds significance from multiple angles (14). The invocation of the blues connects this play not only to the work of Parks, who writes her plays as extensions of both a Jazz and Blues aesthetic, but also to a history of Black expressive culture. Sears herself riffs on the importance that blues has for her work:

> I include jazz as an extension of the blues. . . . There's call and response to it, there's fragmentation to it, and polyrhythmic improvisation. Repetition is a very

> important element in the blues aesthetic. So for instance if you look at a blues song, when the same verse is repeated within a three-line stanza, it also changes, and that is part of the blues aesthetic. . . . So you can sing the same song, and the tune changing reflects a change within the person or the character singing it, or some change in the ark of the story of the song. All those elements are part of the blues aesthetic. (302)

Sears presents a syncretic view of music, wherein forms such as jazz, blues, and gospel all interweave. Her definition of a blues aesthetic draws upon much of the same language of sonic echo. She refers not only to its fragmentary nature, figured in the call and response, but also to its revisioning, its repetition with variation. Importantly, she asserts that the blues, while framed through repetition, allows for the possibility of change—the tune can change, yes, but so can the singer or the story themselves. In the blues, Sears isolates an echoic model of history.

Sears's musical definition of the play's genre is fitting, considering the role that music plays in creating the tone of individual scenes as well as the changes in narrative development. Sears calls for the only two instruments to be the cello and the bass, which she chooses because of their association with European chamber music. She notes, "In *Harlem Duet* I wanted a *tension* between European culture and African American culture. I used blues music . . . to create blues music for a cello and a double bass. But double bass and cello says chamber music. So the blues creates that tension" (Sears qtd in Knowles 29). This abiding sonic and cultural tension is embedded within the action of the drama, where the characters in each timeline chafe against White European expectations and demands upon their labor, their art, their lives. The call and response created by the dialogue between cello and bass, blues and chamber, European and African American expressive forms, occurs in real time, as the original and subsequent

productions employ musicians to play live in the corner of the stage space. I call attention to this fact not only because it adds another element of embodiment to this performance, but also because it jockeys with the use of the recorded sound that plays alongside. Through the use of live music and the piped-in voices of historical figures, yet another mode of call and response—between the past and present, the living and the dead—is played out onstage.

The music and the recorded soundbites of famous African Americans work together to create resonances and dissonances as the play spirals out of control. Each scene opens with a detailed stage direction dictating the style of music and the exact sound recording. In this way, the music works together with the recorded speeches to enact a sonic commentary on the echoes of the past that intrude into the present. This commentary is primarily a meta-narrative of the history of discourses of Black (un)freedom in the twentieth century United States, as the "heaving melancholic blues" of the prologue are accompanied by King's famous March on Washington speech (21). In another scene from the 1860 timeline, "A whining delta blues slides and blurs while the deeply resonant voice of Paul Robeson talks of his forbears, whose blood is in the American soil" (62). Here, the music and sound together invoke the afterlife of slavery. As we listen to Robeson tell the House Unamerican Activities Committee about his mother who was born a slave, we see HIM and HER argue about whether to leave the plantation and attempt an escape to freedom. The blues music which blurs and becomes enmeshed with Robeson's words mimics the sense of indistinct and imbricated temporality.

As the action of the play begins to unravel—Othello leaves Billie in the three timelines, chronology is displaced, the scenes become violent—the sound design begins to jar against itself. In the early scenes of Act One, Sears describes the music as "accompanied" by the sounds of Malcom X and King's oration, suggesting a harmony between the two sonic sources. Indeed, in

Scene Four, “the stringed duet croons gently as Malcolm X speaks about the need for Blacks to turn their gaze away from Whiteness,” and in Scene Seven, “dulcet tones barely swing” as Louis Farrakhan speaks (60; 64). Here the music functions almost as mood lighting for the oration, ceding its time to the voices. However, a shift occurs in Scene Eight, where we see SHE, in 1928, distraught and incoherent over the dead body of HE, whose throat she has just slit. Sears introduces this scene in kind, writing, “The cello and bass moan, almost dirge-like, in harmonic tension to the sound of Jesse Jackson’s oratory” (72). The stringed duet takes on the character of the scene before them—instead of crooning they moan as if for the dead. Instead of harmony, Sears refers to a “harmonic tension,” which pervades the scene, and it is this tension that dominates the acoustic space of the rest of the play.

The tension of Act One gives way to the chaos of entropic noise in Act Two. In Scene Four, we see another instance of violent rupture within the play, as Billie saturates the handkerchief with poison. The stage directions read, “A cacophony of strings grooves and collides as sound bites from the Anita Hill and Clarence Thomas hearings, the L.A. riots, the O.J. Simpson trial, Malcolm X, and Martin Luther King, loop and repeat the same distorted bits of sound over and over again” (92). Rather than in tension or accompaniment, the soundbites and music now collide to create a sense of disorder. The string duet is cacophonous, and the polyphony of voices results in both distortion and an echolalic feedback loop. The sonic documents that Sears samples are similarly chaotic and violent, representing sexual assault, murder, and police brutality. These sensational moments are coupled with the play’s two constitutive Civil Rights thinkers, performing a commentary on the nightmare that race relations have become. This moment sonically renders what Sears dramatizes elsewhere—history and its

echoes appear inescapable; they begin to echo until they are unrecognizable or distinct. This scene presents a sonic violence that threatens to overtake the world of the play.

This violence continues in the following scene, which acts in tandem with Scene Four and takes place the following day. Sears describes: "In counterpoint to the cello and bass, the distorted sound loop becomes a grating repetition" (94). The loop of sound from the previous scene is not contained and spills over into the next. Counterpoint, which in music holds the possibility of two distinct sounds becoming harmonious, here results only in "grating repetition." As Billie descends into madness, the stage directions become more dire, a sonic representation of the history trapped within her. The "distorted sound loop" makes its way to a scene in 1928, and when we return to the present "the plucked strings and the distorted audio loop have become even more dissonant" (99-101). The dissonant voices of the African American historical figures of the past take on an almost menacing, or haunting, quality, as they spiral toward pure noise.

The use of recorded sound within the play creates its own revisioned palimpsest of African American history, with an emphasis on discourses of Black freedom. The most overt way this takes place is through its evocation, yet again, of King and Malcolm X. While the prologue calls for King's oration of his dream, Act One, Scene One contains Malcolm X "speaking about the nightmare of race in America and the need to build strong black communities" (24). Here, as with Sears's manipulation of temporality and geography, the sound is used to underpin the play's historical and ideological poles of thought. Although King and Malcolm X are the most frequent soundbites within the play, Sears draws upon a diverse catalogue of voices. In addition to Robeson, the speakers include Marcus Garvey, Louis Farrakhan, Jesse Jackson, O. J. Simpson, Aretha Franklin, and Michael Jackson. Joanne Tompkins calls this citation practice a "compendium of African American history," noting that

"African history in North America is performed and thus documented onstage and in the cultural memories of the audience who witness the production" (272). While I agree that one goal of Sears's use of sound is documentation, another is surely to furnish a pointed portrait of Black American thought and culture, from presenting figures whose relationships to whiteness define them (Simpson and Jackson) to those who outright reject whiteness (Garvey and Farrakhan). As with Sears's other dramaturgical insertions, the out-of-time soundbites serve to create a sense of continuity between the ideals of King and Malcom X and the other voices. Just as the imbrication of the three timelines demonstrate, these debates continue to persist and threaten to trap the characters within them.

In addition to its explicit use of sound, *Harlem Duet* also plays with conventional notions of both dramatic and linear temporality. As noted, Sears dramatizes her revisioning of *Othello* through three different timelines, each of which contains the same two actors playing lovers—and each of which has the Othello figure leaving Billie for Mona. Because the timelines are of distinct milieux—the first is the Civil War-era south, the second is in the midst of the Harlem Renaissance, and the third is the putative "post-racial" present—the interweaving creates the sense of moving through space and time at an unreckonable pace. This structural and temporal disjunction, as scholars note, is tied to the play's interest in how the past comes back to haunt the present, and how the experience of blackness in a white-dominated society can create psychological fragmentation.[24] In this vein, Elizabeth Brown-Guillory notes, "Sears links Billie's story of love, sacrifice, abandonment, and race oppression to the extensive history of displacement of blacks in the African diaspora. She stages displacement by creating in her play textual disjuncture" (160). Brown-Guillory makes plain how connected the displacement of the

[24] Margaret Kidnie, Elizabeth Gruber, and Elizabeth Brown-Guillory all focus on the play's dramaturgical alienation and dislocation.

narrative is to the displacement of African peoples, a plot point that is placed at the center of the play through both the representation of a slave-era timeline and a running commentary on Canada's history as a haven for escaped slaves. This observation parallels Sears's own, when she asserts that her choice of three time periods "is part of the notion of repetition with variation. It's a way to not only comment and respond to today, but also a way to say that these narratives are not only about Billie and Othello's story, they're also about other stories, and may be repeated infinitely, at least on this continent" (Sears qtd in Rapetti 301). In this way, the temporal disjuncture that *Harlem Duet's* structure entails, then, is an outward movement that prolongs and alters; it is intimately tied to the time and space of the echo.

Importantly, the 1928 plot serves as the play's prologue, before the first scene of Act I begins in the present. By opening the play with a scene that takes place out of time—the sounds of Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech play over a scene which pre-dates it by several decades—the viewer is again treated to a sense of both transhistorical continuity and an essential discontinuity or rupture in time. Nedda Mehdizadeh reads this choice as a means of situating the play's outlook on temporality and history: "Sears's opening unmasks the cyclical nature of oppression that simply morphs into new iterations of itself over time. . . . Sears's reinvention of the familiar story of Othello within this anachronistic framework reveals the ongoing accumulation of injustice that defines the past, informs the present, and threatens the future of black citizens" (13-14). Mehdizadeh ties the echolalic structure to the oppression of Black people, a pervasive and insidious theme in all three timelines. The imbrication of past, present, and future implied by the setting of the prologue and its eventual jumbled timeline are brought to center stage in the play's opening lines, spoken by SHE to HE: "We keep doing this,

don't we?" (21). This question is a distillation of the world of the play, where repetition, reenactment, and revision on a theme are essentially compulsory.

Despite the temporal ambivalence of the woven plotlines and non-linearity, certain aspects remain the same in all three timelines. In each timeline, a version of Billie and Othello find that their irreconcilable views on race lead Othello toward Mona. In the Civil War-era timeline, Mona is the daughter of the plantation owner where HER and HIM are enslaved; in the Harlem Renaissance Mona is a fellow actress SHE who sees HE's potential; and in the present Mona is a fellow professor at Columbia in Othello's department. Regardless of how they are triangulated, as Tompkins observes, Othello leaving Billie for Mona is "an action that is performed over and over again" (271). However, as we know from following the dynamic implications of Echo, it is never just mere repetition. To this end we might favor Rapetti's approach, who notes, "History repeats itself, though in significantly different ways" (280). We see this primarily in how each of the timelines conclude: HER finds HIM lynched after HIM refuses to escape to the North out of loyalty to Mona; SHE kills HE with her own hand after learning of his plans to leave her; and in the present, Othello leaves the play ready to enter a new one, on his way to Cyprus to teach a course with Mona and Chris Yago. In effect, *Harlem Duet's* multiple timelines and disjunctions create a sense of echo in the play where relationships, histories, lives, and deaths are both repeated and yet retain the potential for alternative outcomes.

While time is the most immediate site of echo in the play, space functions as one of the most pervasive from a dramaturgical point of view. As the title suggests, Harlem occupies significance both as a geographical and psychological site within the play. Given the play's interest in how the discourse and experience of racial oppression can work to bring Black people together or tear them apart, Sears's choice of Harlem is fitting. Throughout, each character

espouses strong emotions toward the neighborhood, often seen as a geographic metonym for Blackness and Black expressive culture due to the Harlem Renaissance, the Apollo theatre, and the neighborhood's predominately African American and African Diasporic residents. Billie and her father express love and awe for the experience of being among a community of people who look like them, while Othello views the neighborhood with a sense of distaste and ironic detachment. Due in part to their differing views, Harlem becomes the battleground for the ensuing debates between Othello and Billie on what is best for the future of Black people, as well as the site that stays unchanged as the plot strands move backward and forward in time.

Many scholars have noted the relationship between time and space in *Harlem Duet*, in that the play's sense of time is non-linear and sprawling, whereas its place is fixed. Tompkins argues that these choices are in the service of the play's effectiveness, writing that "the deliberate play with chronological time is possible because of the 'local' specificity" (272). While this reading has purchase, I argue that the choice to fix Harlem in place while time moves around it serves to furnish Harlem as a site of echo. The through-line of Harlem establishes a continuity among the three timelines, despite the fact that they each exist in radically different Harlems. This is evident in the obvious differences between Harlem in the 1920s and the Harlem of today, but it is made even more manifest in the 1860 plot, which Sears, after looking for like-named towns in the South, named after Harlem, Georgia. She writes, "There was a need to make it logical, but I also wanted the different Harlems . . . in that sense the actual location doesn't really matter" (Sears 301). Although the actual location might not matter from a dramaturgical perspective, I contend that it matters very much, as the same physical site echoing with differences—due to time or even geographic location—mirrors the play's utilization of time. As the audience watches the same actors move through time and space, Harlem morphs yet remains

a lodestar throughout. As with *The America Play,* where the echoes of gunshots careen through Acts I and II, the location of *Harlem Duet* emphasizes its central dis/continuity.

The most convincing argument for the location's importance comes from narrowing it down further, to the very crossroads at which Sears situates her scenes. The play takes place not just in Harlem, but at the intersection of Martin Luther King and Malcolm X Boulevards—a popular intersection in the neighborhood as well as a metaphorically fraught one. Peter Dickinson argues that the play's "chiasmatic structure" is emphasized by setting the play at a literal crossroads, and the resonances of chiasmus both as a reversal in order and a boundedness on both sides are apt here (191). It is no accident that the first two voices we hear in the opening scenes come from King and Malcolm X—throughout the play, Billie espouses the radical separatist rhetoric of Malcolm X as Othello becomes a mouthpiece for King's theories of assimilation and equality. Sears marks the significance of this choice in her program note for the 2018 revival: "In 1963, after Martin Luther King's 'I Have a Dream' speech at the March on Washington, Malcolm X told a journalist that Martin's dream would become a nightmare before it was over. *Harlem Duet* explores both the dream and the nightmare" (back cover). The intersection of these two streets literalizes an abiding tension that works its way through the text. As a fixed point throughout, this intersection also performs an immediate commentary on the way that history echoes and lives in the present, through place name memorialization. King and Malcolm X exist not only as ideological forebears, but as street names, recorded voices, and echoes from the Black historical past. This physicalized dimension of historical resonance functions as a kind of Great Hole of History, a site where the (w)hole of Black history and thought emerge. However, rather than a grave, Sears presents the site of echo as a nightmare.

While *Harlem Duet* re-thinks the possibilities for Black thought and the weight of Black history in the present moment, it also reimagines *Othello,* particularly through the physical symbol of the handkerchief. Although *Harlem Duet* freely invents upon *Othello,* it takes seriously the import of the infamous handkerchief in all three of its timelines, which serves as an echo of both material and theatre history that finds its way into the present and propels itself into the future beyond the confines of the play. The first time we see the handkerchief is in the Prologue, when the stage directions note, "Lights up on a couple in a tiny dressing room. SHE is holding a large white silk handkerchief, spotted with ripe strawberries" (21). In this opening tableau, the handkerchief functions as both stage property and material echo from beyond the grave. In *The Stage Life of Props,* Andrew Sofer delineates how stage properties function in performance and beyond. First, he asserts that props are inherent to a play's creation of time and space: "props trace spatial trajectories and create temporal narratives" (2). Second, he observes that "the function of the stage property" is "to bring dead images back to life," noting that "props are haunted mediums . . . possessed by the voices of the past" (2; 27). The handkerchief, as it functions in *Harlem Duet,* works in this way on two levels, signifying both the action onstage and the echoes of *Othello.* The next time the handkerchief makes its way onstage, it has traveled back in time to 1860, as we watch HIM gift it to HER. HIM calls it "an antique token of our ancient love . . . my wife. My wife before I even met you" (35). HIM's description of their meeting is significant in that he characterizes it as both a kind of predestiny and a loop of time that recurs back on itself; however, the handkerchief's reintroduction onstage speaks even louder. It moves through time and space, from the hands of SHE in 1928 to HIM in 1860, haunted here by both the voices of the past, in the figure of the ancestors HIM invokes, and the voices of the future, in the figure of SHE and later Billie.

Although *Harlem Duet* has little to do with Othello's character arc or the figures that populate the original, Shakespeare's narrative haunts the edges of the play, both literally and figuratively. The aforementioned handkerchief moves with a life of its own through the plotlines; Mona's voice emanates from offstage to call Othello away from Billie's bed; a trip to Cyprus is imminently on the horizon. In this way, I argue, Sears's exorcism fails; or, rather, it shifts the location of *Othello*'s ghost from the center to the margins, where it emerges in other guises. While Shakespeare's source text is clearly present in the folds of *Harlem Duet,* Sears appears more interested in *Othello's* performance history, particularly in how it implicates centuries of black-face performance and performances of "blackness."[25] This is seen most overtly in the Harlem Renaissance timeline, where HE is a Black minstrel performer with designs of playing Shakespeare's great heroes. In Act Two, Scene Six, which takes place immediately before SHE slits HE's throat, the pair argue over the ethics of minstrelsy; when HE proclaims, "I am an actor," SHE cuts him off by rejecting this title, noting, "A minstrel. A Back minstrel. . ." (99). From this rebuke, the scene becomes an echo of the debates we see take place across each of the three plotlines—In 1860 HER decries the evils of whiteness while HIM is blinded by his love for his white Mistress; in the present, Billie espouses the importance of reparations and the beauty of an all-Black enclave while Othello seeks no "injustice against Whites" and refers to Harlem as a "reservation" (54-56). In this confrontation we see Othello's ideological grounding built out of a sense of false consciousness. Building from Karl Marx's assertion that beliefs and values are determined by the ruling or dominant class and fashioned in such a way that the oppressed class believes these values to be inherent to their own worldview, Paulo Freire suggests that

[25] Virginia Mason Vaughan's *Performing Blackness on English Stages, 1500-1800* (2005) contains a thorough analysis of how *Othello* on early English stages worked to reify White Europeans notions of Blackness through blackface performance.

assimilation itself is a form of false consciousness. Freire argues that education is needed to lead to a more critical consciousness, but as we see from Othello's willful historical ignorance, he neither desires nor possesses such education (86). Sears suggests that his proximity to whiteness in all timelines but particularly in the present—he has left his and Billie's apartment in Harlem and teaches at Columbia, an Ivy-league institution whose student body is less than ten percent Black—leads to the distortion of ideals that both he and Billie espoused when married. As a result, Othello is metaphorically blinded to the reality of the African American condition (not unlike his metaphorical blindness to reality in Shakespeare's source text).

Further, in the face of SHE's displeasure, HE proceeds to explain his artistic ambitions, lamenting the ways that his race has held him back: "I'll not die in black-face to pay the rent. I am of Ira Aldridge stock. I am a classical man. I long to play the Scottish king. The prince of Denmark. 'The slings and arrows of outrageous . . .' Or . . . Or . . . 'There's a divinity that shapes our ends, Rough-hew them how we will'. . . Those words . . . I love those words. They give me life" (99-100). HE references Aldridge, notable in part for being the first Black actor to portray Othello in 1833 as well as several titular White Shakespeare roles. However, HE's desire to play not only Othello but Macbeth and Hamlet is undercut by his current job as a minstrel performer who must don black-face in order to play an offensive stereotype of his own race. The Shakespeare snippets he chooses are pointed—they call to an inability to control one's often cruel fate. Through this depiction, Sears explores not only the harmful history of Black minstrel performance, but also the racist history of Shakespearean performance.

Sears's treatment of both collective history and individual memory comes to a head at the end of Act One, in which the final two scenes contain soliloquies by Othello and Billie where they articulate how they see themselves in relation to their historical and ancestral past. Read as a

pair, they present two very different outlooks on how the past figures in the formation of the present and the possibilities of the future. The first is from Scene Nine; Othello, who is packing his things to leave the apartment he shared with Billie, says,

> My culture is not my mother's culture—the culture of my ancestors . . . what does Africa have to do with me. We struttin' around professing some imaginary connection for a land we don't know. Never seen. Never gonna see. We lie to ourselves saying, ah yeh, mother Africa, middle passage, suffering, the Whites did it to me, it's the white's fault. Strut around in African cloth pretending we human now . . . I am an American. The slaves were freed over 130 years ago . . . things change, Billie. I am not my skin. My skin is not me. (73-74)

Othello attempts to create a sense of disconnect between himself and his African ancestors. Not only does he disavow his African heritage, but he desires to break free from any links to the previous generation. Nor does he feel kinship with Africa as a physical location. His future-orientation calls into question the very possibility of late twentieth century African Americans accessing Africa as an imagined community. Othello applies this sense of disconnect to his relationship to racial oppression, articulating a distaste for holding White supremacy or the afterlives of slavery accountable for contemporary racial inequity. Asserting his American-ness over his African American-ness or even his Blackness, Othello claims to exist outside of his body. This claim, along with Othello's disavowal of history and overwhelming desire to live in the present, is thwarted by the very atmosphere of the play itself. Not only do we know Othello to be entirely overdetermined by his skin—it is the basis of Shakespeare's drama and the cause of his demise in the other two plotlines—but he yearns for a present and a future that the play does not allow for, haunted as it is by the echoes and reverberations of the past. Yet again

Othello's false consciousness blinds him to the fact of his Blackness. He instead clings to a model of bootstrapping thought, which denies the long and continuous history of systemic inequities. Convinced in his belief that 130 years ago is the ancient past, Othello wishes to transcend and leave behind his racial and class markers. His glib remark that the slaves were freed over a century ago and "things change, Billie," is a dramatic irony that he is unable to grasp. In this play, where the opening lines are "We keep doing this again, don't we," things do not change enough to free Othello from his place in history.

Conversely, Billie understands the impossibility of living outside of racism. To this end, Elizabeth Gruber notes, "Tensions between Othello and Billie are propelled by their conflicting understandings of, and coping mechanisms for, history. Othello states a preference to divorce himself from the history of racism. . . . Billie's understanding of racial politics is much deeper" (358). We see this most clearly in the final scene of Act One, when Billie, who has just used Egyptian Alchemy to prepare a poison for the same handkerchief that appears in 1860 and 1928, delivers a temporally unrooted monologue while holding the haunted prop.

> I have a plan, my love. My mate . . . throughout eternity . . . Once you gave me a handkerchief. An heirloom. This handkerchief, your mother's . . . given by your father. From his mother before that. So far back . . . And now . . . then . . . to me. It is fixed in the emotions of all your ancestors. The one who laid the foundation for the road in Herndon, Virginia, and was lashed for laziness as he stopped to wipe the sweat from his brown with this kerchief. Or your great great grandmother, who covered her face with it, and then covered it with her hands, as she rocked and silently wailed, when told that her girl child, barely thirteen, would be sent 'cross the state for breeding purposes. Or the one who leapt for joy

> on hearing of the Emancipation Proclamation, fifteen years late mind you, only to watch it fall in slow motion from his hand and onto the ground when told that the only job he could now get, was the same one he'd done for free all those years, and now he's forced to take it, for not enough money to buy the food to fill even one man's belly. And more . . . so much more. What I add to this already fully endowed cloth, will cause you such . . . such . . . wretchedness. (75-76)

In this passage, which brings the handkerchief and its latent danger into the present moment, Billie articulates a sense of her and Othello's history as older than time. Here the handkerchief, as in the 1860 scene where HIM first gifts it, symbolizes the pair's ancient love. Rather than Othello's desire to untether himself from his ancestors, Billie states the heirloom is fixed in the emotions of all those who have come before them. Furthermore, the handkerchief here functions not only as a material echo of *Othello,* but also as an echo of moments of Black oppression in history. Not only does the object echo through time and space, but it also accumulates meaning with each owner as it is passed down—from the sweat wiped onto it, the tears dried with it, the dust which covers it, and the poison Billie adds to it. Even more tellingly, Billie's catalogue of the handkerchief's history stands in as a catalogue of Othello's lineage, populated with his ancestors from the time of slavery to the period of Reconstruction to "more, so much more." As Tompkins notes, Billie's sense of herself in relation to the past blurs clear distinctions between temporal spheres: "The 'life-story' of Billie is situated in the growing context of African-American history that stretches back to slavery, the effects of which continue to be felt today" (272). In a more overarching sense, Brown-Guillory connects this scene to Parks's punning on the (w)hole of history in *America Play*. She writes, "in a sense, Sears carves a hole in the whole of Western history**,** thereby inscribing in the story of the Moor a black heritage that eclipses the

story of his love for a white woman" (Brown-Guillory 168). In effect, Billie furnishes an ancestral line that Othello refuses to claim. Even unbidden, the handkerchief's ghosts re-emerge in the present. History here is guided only by the unruly, nauseous temporality of echo.

Given Billie's speech at the end of Act One, it would be easy to argue, as most scholars do, that the play is primarily interested in the reproduction of the past in the present. Indeed, toward the end of the play, when Billie has been driven nearly mad by the guilt of what she has done to the handkerchief and her grief at losing her love, she utters a non-sequitur that seems to encapsulate her, and the play's, relationship to the past: "Trapped in history. A history trapped in me" (101). Billie and Othello, SHE and HE, HIM and HER all reckon with the psychological, spatial, and temporal ramifications of being trapped within the echoic landscape of history. Even the sentence's syntax, the chiasmus with which Parks makes us familiar, hints at the sense of boundedness on both sides. In Billie's recasting of James Baldwin's assertion, she moves away from the collective "people" for whom Baldwin speaks to the individual level of "me." However, alongside the nightmarish image of a history that plays on an endless loop, the play provides notions of other possibilities. For example, directly before she speaks this line, Billie reclaims her real name, for which Billie is short—Sybil. In addition to the more intertextual symbolism of her name, which comes from Othello's claim about the handkerchief that "a sybil [. . .] in her prophetic fury sewed the work" (which serves as part of *Harlem Duet*'s epigraph), a sybil is one who can tell the future. That Billie becomes the sybil from *Othello* provides both the potential to foreclose alternative futures, as she fits now within the confines of Shakespeare's text, or to unfold new possibilities through divination.

In deciding whether *Harlem Duet* presents a world that is doomed to repeat itself into eternity or fabulate new forms of being into existence, it is important to consider the ending. As

scholars have noted, the final scene's tenor is ambiguous, as Billie's increasingly fragile state leads her to admit herself into a psychiatric ward. Although David Huebert sees it as ambivalent toward the future: "the play ends with a grey and hazy now, haunted by the legacies of multiple competing pasts," Dickinson notes that because the events of this play set up those of *Othello,* it is "an ending that of course is really only a beginning" (39; 202). While both have purchase—in the end Billie is recovering and has forgiven Othello, but is still haunted by whiteness, symbolized by dreams of flashing blue eyes—I find Kidnie's resolution to be the most supportable by the text of the play. "The potential stalemate . . . is countered, however, by the manner in which Sears evokes the bitter-sweet tone of Shakespeare's late plays, a genre positioned between comedy and tragedy, to suggest that there exist possible—albeit as yet indiscernible—ways forward for her protagonist" (Kidnie 41). That there are ways forward, not yet knowable but ultimately possible, is reinforced by the last lines of the play, which come during a tender moment between Billie and her father, Canada. Their relationship throughout the second act, when he appears, is fraught due to what she feels was his abandonment after their mother's death. But when asked if he will be returning to Nova Scotia, he responds, "Oh, I don't think I'm going anywhere just yet—at least if I can help it. Way too much leaving gone on for more than one lifetime already" (117). Canada's choice to stay, and his reference to multiple lifetimes, hints at the possibility of stability for Billie, of a way out of the loop in which she finds herself caught. Although there is a history trapped inside of her, as Sybil she can use that knowledge of herself and her relation to what has come before in order to free herself and Othello from the entropy of successive echoes.

Conclusion

"He digged the hole and the whole held him." "Trapped in history. A history trapped in me." These two chiasmi linguistically and figuratively display how echoes of the past—when they return from beyond the grave to the stage—contain the potential to trap and hold those who disinter them. Both Parks and Sears explore the boundaries of echo and chiasmus, as their characters grapple with their simultaneous tether to the past and their desire to create new futures. The effect is one of dis/continuity, where echo produces both connections to origins as well as attempts to break away from them and create new meaning. In *The America Play,* we see the totalizing effects of the Great (W)hole of History, where Lincoln's assassination continues to impact the present and gunshots rip through space and time; yet, the Foundling Father muses on the way he has lapped the Great Man, while Lucy and Brazil experience echoes that become louder rather than fainter. In *Harlem Duet,* we see Billie and Othello play out the same story in each timeline, and we see a handkerchief saturated with history; still, we end with the renewed possibility of hope. In both plays, there are glimmers of both Echo and Belacqua, two iterations of corporeal ghosts who inevitably become embedded in their own resonant geographies. We see examples of histories from below the grave—attempts at reinserting Black histories, narratives, and thinkers into spaces where they otherwise remained buried.

Chapter 3: Waterways of Memory: Examining the Black Aquatic in …*And Jesus Moonwalks the Mississippi* and *Dontrell, Who Kissed the Sea*

You know, they straightened out the Mississippi River in places, to make room for houses and livable acreage. Occasionally the river floods these places. "Floods" is the word they use, but in fact it is not flooding; it is remembering. Remembering where it used to be. All water has a perfect memory and is forever trying to get back to where it was.
—Toni Morrison, "The Site of Memory," 1995.

"The Atlantic is a Sea of Bones": Introduction

In recent years, there has been a critical turn to recontextualize a history of the relationship of Black people to environmentalism and the natural world. Often taught and theorized as genres populated by white thinkers and writers, naturalism and eco-poetics have been taken up by literature scholars who examine the rich history of Black nature writing.[26] Alongside these scholarly interventions has been a spate of recent work by African American and African Diasporic artists and writers that deals explicitly with environmental concerns, particularly environmental racism and its complex legacies. In particular, there is a renewed focus on considering the role of water in the formation of Black history, Black oppression, and Black community.[27] Taken as a whole, this body of artistic work is interested in examining the relationship between the past and the present through a meditation on the multiple valences of

[26] Salient examples include Camille Dungy's edited collection *Black Nature: Four Centuries of African American Nature Poetry* (2009) and Kimberly Ruffin's *Black on Earth: African American Ecoliterary Traditions* (2010).
[27] One vector of this trend includes art responding to contemporary water-based issues, such as Hurricane Katrina the Flint Water Crisis, while another examines the afterlives of slavery through imagining and meditating upon the legacies of the Middle Passage. There are many examples of art which responds to the loss of lives and governmental neglect of Hurricane Katrina, but most germane to my interests is a collection of plays published in 2011 titled *Katrina on Stage.* William L. Pope's ongoing performance art, which I have had the chance to see at the Whitney Museum and the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago, comments on the inequitable access to potable water in places like Flint, Michigan.

water. To invoke Toni Morrison from the epigraph above, water has a perfect memory—art that interrogates water is a form of engaging with that memory and what has come before.

This chapter examines two contemporary plays that use waterways to rehearse and re-make Black histories of suffering in order to envision more livable futures for unborn generations of Black folks. In particular, both Marcus Gardley's *... And Jesus Moonwalks the Mississippi* (2010) and Nathan Alan Davis's *Dontrell, Who Kissed the Sea* (2017) examine water as a symbol or metaphor for lost connections to the past and the unknowability of the future; as an ecological site that serves as both a historical refuge for African Americans and a site of death and danger; and as an embodied participant in the action, where the rushing waters are brought to life by actors through movement and voice work. Through an engagement with what Rinaldo Walcott calls the "Black Aquatic," which he describes as the inherent connection of Black subjectivity to the site and element of water, I isolate the key terminology for my arguments on the plays' structure, themes, and ecological grounding. Specifically, in relation to Gardley and Davis, I deploy Kamau Brathwaite's theory of "tidalectics," a diasporic understanding of the movement of the oceanic tides as both a historiographical and literary process. I posit that their work inhabits a tidalectic structure that mirrors the swaying motion of the tides as it interrogates what relics of the past the lapping shoreline might offer. I also examine Christina Sharpe's theory of residence time, which draws on marine biology to assert that the molecular makeup of humans who died at sea during the Middle Passage will remain in the ocean for millions of years. Through this formation, we can begin to think about how Gardley and Davis shape their plays around bodies of water that serve as graves for those who never fully disappear; water is not only a site of memory, but also a site of molecular and embodied history.

Overall, both the content and form of *Moonwalks* and *Dontrell* overlap in considerable ways, as their central figures go on aquatic journeys to find themselves in relation to their ancestors and families. In both plays, I argue, water functions crucially as a site of irresolvable and paradoxical contradictions: it represents both continuity and rupture, birth and death, danger and healing, past and present, history and future. Because of this structural dualism and inherent opposition, both plays are invested in future generations of Black life, but the futures they posit are ultimately tenuous and unsettled. These paradoxes and contradictions and unfixed notions of space and time are important because they furnish water as yet another site for thinking about this emergent poetics for the genre of Black historiographical drama. Here, these works function as histories from below the grave, but the grave does not rest below solid ground. It is watery, shifting—it floods, but it does not forget.

While there are several book-length studies on water, memory, and slavery's afterlife in literature, this theme has not been taken up in theatre or performance criticism. Theatre, as an embodied and active form, enables an inter-action with water and the environment that operates at both the register of the literary and symbolic and the register of the physical, where the landscapes of the past can be both figuratively and literally brought to life on stage.[28] It is my contention that, despite the relative lack of critical attention to Black eco-drama and Black aquatic theatre, Black drama that is located in and around bodies of water—whether that be the Atlantic Ocean, the Mississippi River, or somewhere in between—is a crux of Black historical drama that is concerned with the creation of possible futures for Black community.

[28] There is an increasing trend in Black theatre that interrogates water, evidenced most recently by the fact that when the theatres closed due to COVID-19 there were several new plays running on this very theme. Two notable examples include a staged version of Robert Johnson's novel *Middle Passage* at Lifeline Theatre in Chicago and Winsome Pinnock's take on JMW Turner and the British Atlantic Slave Trade in *Rockets and Blue Lights* at the Royal Exchange in Manchester.

To demonstrate this contention, I begin my chapter with August Wilson's 1984 play *Joe Turner's Come and Gone.* A seminal piece about the post-slavery era, *Joe Turner* includes a scene where a character invokes the Middle Passage as a mass grave from whence "bones people" emerge. This oft-cited moment provides a way into thinking about how water can function in Black theatre as a paradoxical site which contains links to both the past and the future, and the potential for both danger and healing. Loomis' prophetic journey serves as a central predecessor to Gardley's Demeter and Davis's Dontrell, as they move through their worlds attempting to resolve their conflicting and totalizing relationships to aquatic sites. The second chronological piece of the playwright's Century Cycle, *Joe Turner* takes place in 1911 Pittsburgh, where formerly enslaved African Americans have migrated and begun establishing roots. Wilson's opening note refers to people arriving in the Northern United States "Isolated, cut off from memory, having forgotten the names of the gods and only guessing at their faces . . . Foreigners in a strange land, they carry as part and parcel of their baggage a long line of separation and disbursement which informs their sensibilities and marks their conduct as they search for ways to reconnect, to reassemble" (1). This sense of a diasporic longing for connection informs the play's action, as characters who move throughout the boarding house that serves as the primary setting search for lost love and community. One of these temporary boarders is a man named Herald Loomis, who attempts to reconnect with his wife Martha and seeks out the help of a man named Bynum who performs binding spells.

At the close of the first act, the boarders are dancing a call-and-response dance called the Juba, when Loomis walks in and has a vision that shakes him to his core. In his vision, Loomis recalls seeing the skeletons of captured Africans who died along the Middle Passage and were either thrown overboard or jumped into the Atlantic Ocean. His account of what he sees, coupled

with the call-and-response style encouragement offered from fellow boarder Bynum, provides an instance that ruptures linear temporality so that the past and present become indistinct.

> LOOMIS: I done seen bones rise up out the water. Rise up and walk across the water. Bones walking on top of the water.
>
> BYNUM: Tell me about them bones, Herald Loomis. Tell me what you seen.
>
> LOOMIS: I come to this place . . . to this water that was bigger than the whole world. . . . I seen these bones rise up out the water. Rise up and begin to walk on top of it . . . Walking without sinking down. Walking on top of the water . . . A whole heap of them. They come up out the water and started marching . . . One after the other. They just come up out the water and start to walking.
>
> BYNUM: They walking on the water without sinking down. They just walking and walking. And then . . . What happened, Herald Loomis? What happened to the bones?
>
> LOOMIS: They just walking across the water . . . and then . . . they sunk down … All at one time! They just all fell in the water at one time.
>
> BYNUM: Sunk down like anybody else.
>
> LOOMIS: When they sink down they made a big splash and this here wave come up . . . It washed them out of the water and up on the land. Only . . . only . . .
>
> BYNUM: Only they ain't bones no more.
>
> LOOMIS: They got flesh on them! Just like you and me! . . . They black. Just like you and me. Ain't no difference… They ain't moved or nothing. They just laying there.
>
> BYNUM: You just laying there . . . What you gonna do, Herald Loomis?

> LOOMIS: I'm gonna stand up. I got to stand up. I can't lay here no more. All the breath coming into my body and I got to stand up . . . The ground's starting to shake. There's a great shaking. The world's busting half in two. The sky's splitting open. I got to stand up. (*Loomis attempts to stand up*.) My legs . . . my legs won't stand up! (51-53)

Loomis's vision of water "bigger than the whole world" is totalizing; it furnishes an understanding of this body of water, where bodies of captured Africans have been laid to rest and where his ancestors traveled in chains, as integral to his understanding of himself. Loomis envisions the Atlantic as a "sea of bones," to borrow from the title of a Lucille Clifton poem. Clifton's poem begins with an epigraph from a folkloric/ religious source attributed to "Traditional," which asserts that "them bones" will "rise again . . . walk again . . . talk again" (268). It is precisely this kind of osseous resurrection that Loomis imagines, where the bones begin to walk across the water toward the shore.[29] To rise up from a watery grave and walk atop the water, a feat associated with Jesus Christ and the realm of miracles, is to disobey the laws of physics, laws of the dead, and the laws of time and space. As Soyica Diggs Colbert notes, "The bones' rebellion against the natural order" functions as "a resistance to the rupture and dislocation slavery caused" (215). The perverse movement of these bones is heightened by what happens when they reach land. They become enfleshed, prompting Loomis to observe the similarities between them and himself: "They black. Just like you and me." While this serves to create a sense of continuity between those who were captured and died at sea and those who made the voyage and had children who now bear the same kind of racist violence, it also works

[29] This imagery returns in Wilson's *Gem of the Ocean* (2003), which is often read alongside *Joe Turner.* The play takes place in 1904 and sees an elder named Aunt Esther take a man named Citizen on a journey to the City of Bones aboard a slaver named Gem of the Ocean.

as a moment where the dead push back against the linear progressions of time and bodily decay. That the bodies seem to invert the process of decay, otherwise preserved within the water, literalizes the play's conception of water as a site of memory, of preservation.

My purpose here is to demonstrate how Loomis's vision of the water is one where those who died at sea still reside in its depths, where the logics of motion and the ravages of time can be temporarily punctured. I say temporarily because just as the bones sink, Loomis finds himself unable to stand, to march atop the proverbial water. Further hindering him from rising is his feeling that the world is cleaving in two. While this notion of a busted, split-open sky presents an immediate danger, it also opens up a site for unruly temporality—it is a break in both time and space. Loomis's words call to mind Christina Sharpe, who refers to trans*Atlantic time as "cracked . . . an oceanic time that does not pass, a time in which the past and present verge" (128). I begin here not only because Loomis's vision and *Joe Turner* more largely are taken up in several studies of the role of the Middle Passage in African American literature and culture, but also because it sets the stage for the two plays which I will examine in depth. Wilson conceives of the Middle Passage as a site where the dead do not disappear; they continue to animate the lives of those who come after, such as Loomis and Bynum. Further, Loomis's water is a paradoxical site of both connection and rupture—through his vision he sees himself in the bones people just as they sink below the surface again, beyond his grasp.

In what follows, I begin by laying a theoretical framework for looking at these plays through the lenses of Black geography studies, Black eco-criticism, diasporic theory, and scholars who examine the afterlives of slavery. I then move to a close reading of the two plays, which I organize by overlapping themes: their relationship to conceptions of myth and history; their experimental form and oceanic structure; how they represent the theme of water; and how

they orient their play-worlds toward the future. Although Demeter and Dontrell spend their time onstage searching for answers about their past, they both conclude their journeys by moving their focus to the next generation—Demeter's granddaughter in *Moonwalks* and Dontrell's unborn child in *Dontrell.* If, as Derek Walcott asserts, the sea *is* history for descendants of the African Diaspora, then this chapter asks about the strategies that contemporary Black playwrights use to interrogate the sea, not only as a metonym for the Middle Passage, or a metaphor for the cyclical motion of history, but as an active, Black site that has the capacity to both re-shape the past and re-map visions of the future.

"The Sea is History": Aquatic Foundations

My study emerges out of recent disciplinary formations in fields such as Black Geography studies and literary criticism that attends to the rich body of ecocritical and ecoliterary work by African American writers.[30] Despite the ongoing environmental oppression of minoritized peoples, Black geography studies allows for the insurgent potentials of the production of space. As Katherine McKittrick and Clyde Woods observe, "Black histories, bodies, and experiences disrupt and underwrite human geographies," which "can also trouble [dominant] modes of [geographic] thought and allow us to consider alternative ways of imagining the world" (4-5). Within this attention to Black geographies is a way of fabulative thinking that envisions more generative possible futures. Growing out of these broad scale approaches is an increasing understanding that the aquatic world, particularly the Atlantic Ocean as the route upon which slave ships sailed, is a necessary component to these studies.[31] A

[30] For example, Katherine McKittrick and Clyde Woods's *Black Geographies and the Politics of Place* (2007) explores how the development of physical geographic landscapes is inextricable from the climate of racism, while Kimberly Ruffin's *Black on Earth* links the development of environmental sensibilities to the period of slavery.
[31] This has not always been the case, however, as scholars point out the "terra-centrism" of Western scholarship and thought. Rediker discusses this idea in depth in *The Slave Ship: A Human History* (2008), and both Dawson in

marine-oriented line of thought, McKittrick, Woods, Ruffin and others make clear, is a way of exposing the continuing significance of the physical space of the Atlantic Ocean for those who are descended from captured Africans.[32] For example, Kevin Dawson's *Undercurrents of Power* (2018) traces the importance of aquatic culture to the African Diaspora, decentering the Middle Passage and instead using the more expansive term "waterscapes" (4). Thinking of waterscapes, I believe, is a way to reckon with how *Moonwalks* and *Dontrell* look not just at the route of the Triangular Trade, but at other rippling bodies of water such as the Mississippi River, our bodily tissues, and even the composition of H2O that resides within the blood in our veins.

A recent thread of scholarship on the importance of aquatics to Black studies situates my dramatic readings within an extant body of theory on the relationship between water and Black subjectivity. For example, Jonathan Howard's *Inhabitants of the Deep: Water and the Material Imagination of Blackness* (2017) provides a capacious way for thinking about the continuing role of water in Black expressive forms. Howard argues that "the problem of blackness is the problem of water," noting further that while the Middle Passage is the source of this problem, it is ongoing and moves beyond the space of water (5). He writes that this "problem of a precarious relation to ground . . . did not simply dissipate when slaves gained the other shore" (17-18). Howard's recourse to the metaphors of movement and space evokes the notion of a fluid history (as well as a history defined by a fluid) that leaves Black lives in a state of precarity. It is this very precarity that *Moonwalks* and *Dontrell* interrogate, as the plays characters' see in the water both a grounding for their past and an unstable ground for imagining the future. Despite the tenor

---

Undercurrents of Power and Howard in *Inhabitants of the Deep* use Rediker's thinking as jumping off points for their consideration of landscapes beyond land.

[32] McKittrick and Woods see the "Atlantic Ocean as a geographic region that can also represent the political histories of the disappeared; the materiality of a body of water prompts a geographic narrative that may not be readily visible on maps or nautical charts" (4).

of his outlook, others view water as a site for new creation. In "Black Aquatic," Walcott acknowledges the "ambiguous and ambivalent relationship that Black people hold to bodies of water" but argues that "the aquatic is a kind of foundational birth claim for blackness and thus Black diasporic people" (65). Here, waterscapes offer possibilities of recovering that which has been "flooded," as well as the mapping of new futures.

The structuring oppositions that constitute our ability to theorize about something as changeable and vast as the sea are discussed at length by African Diasporic writers, particularly those who hail from the islands that compose the Caribbean. One such writer is Kamau Brathwaite, who advances his theory of "tidalectics" in both his creative and critical work. "Tidalectics" is a reworking of a Hegelian, three-pronged dialectic which moves from thesis/antithesis to synthesis. Rather than an easily diagrammable, logically ordered movement, "tidalectics" attempts to capture the circular movement of the ocean's tides. In response to his own query about whether Caribbean "psychology is not dialectical," Brathwaite posits that the Caribbean psyche is "tidalectic, like our grandmother's—our nanna's—action, like the movement of the ocean she's walking on, coming from one continent/ continuum, touching another, and then receding (reading) from the island(s) into the perhaps creative chaos of the(ir) future" (34). Brathwaite directly connects the movement, the forcible dispersal, of the African Diaspora to the swaying of the tides. Further, he reads this movement, of receding and returning, as inherent to a relationship to both past—his grandmother, his ancestral homeland—and future. The ancestral quality of tidalectics provides the possibility for communal connection and kinship in a way that Hegelian dialectics do not, and it is this ability for the action to move backward in time and yet be oriented toward the future that *Moonwalks* and *Dontrell* engage. Walcott further invokes the ungovernable space and time of tidalectics, writing, "I turn to the black aquatic to

think the 'repeating sea' of Black life. . . . Tides and waves both bring in and take out elements from the shore to the sea but importantly tides and waves leave elements behind as well resulting in new and different formations" (66-67). Walcott sees the motion of the tides as an echo—it is the repeating sea, but it has the ability to repeat differently, to create new possibilities through what remains when the tide goes back out. I pause on tidalectics because I find this structural and theoretical apparatus particularly compelling as it applies to forms of Black historiographical dramas that linger on waterscapes. Particularly in *Moonwalks* and *Dontrell,* there is a forward orientation that is continually pulled back into the past—while at first it appears to mimic the oscillation of a boat upon the waves, it is more than that. It is moments when the characters look into the water and see their pasts, their ancestors, yet use this pull toward history to forge heretofore unimaginable communities.

Another version of this tidalectic structure emerges from Edouard Glissant's famous opening to *Poetics of Relation,* "The Open Boat," in which he calls upon the reader to imagine the journey along the Middle Passage in the hold of a slave ship.

> The next abyss was the depths of the sea. Whenever a fleet of ships gave chase to slave ships, it was easiest just to lighten the boat by throwing cargo overboard, weighing it down with balls and chains. . . . Navigating the green splendor of the sea . . . still brings to mind, coming to light like seaweed, these lowest depths, these deeps, with their punctuation of scarcely corroded balls and chains. In actual fact the abyss is a tautology: the entire ocean, the entire sea gently collapsing in the end into the pleasures of sand, make one vast beginning, but a beginning whose time is marked by these balls and chains gone green. (6)

Glissant envisions the sea as weighed down by those who were thrown overboard, whom he metonymizes as their shackles. He imagines them in part as ghosts who continue to haunt the sea; not only do these balls and chains age differently, barely corroding despite the passage of years, but they become hosts to new life; their greenification is more than just verdigris—it calls to mind forms of algae and moss which continue to grow from these otherwise deathly relics. Glissant, like Brathwaite, imagines water as recursive and illogical in its movement: it is one long beginning, but a paradoxical beginning instantiated by the unjust and horrific deaths of thousands. Indeed, of those who perished during the voyage, Glissant writes, "But their ordeal did not die; it quickened into this continuous/discontinuous thing" (8). This continuous/ discontinuous thing recalls the sense of dis/continuity Howard and Walcott address, just as it calls to the dis/continuity that structures *Moonwalks* and *Dontrell*. In both, water is where the characters connect to their pasts as well as a site of rupture, the slash wherein they confront the watery deaths of their kin, where they themselves almost drown and yet are reborn.

Scholarship that takes up representations of the Middle Passage in literature and art examines the ways that the aquatic site functions as both geographically and temporally rooted *and* an expansive space that reveals the indistinctness of past and present. For example, in the introduction to *Black Imagination and the Middle Passage* (1999), editors Henry Louis Gates Jr., Maria Diedrich, and Carl Pedersen refer to what they call "The extended Middle Passage" (10). This phrase is multivalent, as it refers not only to a notion of a past that is not yet past, but also to a genre of writing that does not view the Middle Passage as a bounded moment in history. In her writing on theatre that invokes the Middle Passage, Christina Knight calls attention to strategies that writers and artists use to navigate the improbable presence of the past, observing a foundational contradiction in how the sea positions Black artists in proximation to the historical

past and the contemporary present (6). As Tara Green argues in her introduction to *Reimagining the Middle Passage* (2018), "Whether historical events are acknowledged or not, they continue to exist in the place where they occurred. Nature never forgets" (26). This final cryptic assertion recalls Morrison. In artistic engagements with water, then, we see a negotiation between remembering the past and attempting to forge new futures.

I close this section by considering a final vector of thinking about the Black expressive culture that dwells upon the sea, which discusses the Middle Passage in terms of memory and history. In Saidiya Hartman's *Lose Your Mother* (2006), in which she recounts her journey to Ghana, she opens her chapter on the Dead Book thus: **"**It is said that if you look at the sea long enough, scenes from the past come back to life. It is said that 'the sea is history.' And 'the sea has nothing to give but a well excavated grave'" (136). Hartman presents the sea as a historical pageant, where the past is remade in front of you. The sea also, Hartman observes, has a certain literary resonance as she cites poems by Derek Walcott and Marianne Moore.[33] If the sea is history, or if the sea is a grave, it is a landscape at which linear temporality does not apply, and where the past has the potential to quicken. These aquatic qualities are taken quite seriously by Sharpe and Anissa Wardi, who examine how water's biology provides a way of thinking about art that simultaneously engages the sea as birth/death, present/past, danger/healing. In *Water and African American Memory* (2011), Wardi cites an environmental scientist who notes that water transforms everything it comes into contact with, observing, "humans, who lost their lives in the currents, have, by their very materiality, changed the composition of the waters" (7). Wardi reads the sea not only *as* history, but as that which has the ability to change history. She argues, "water manifests history; as a recycled element, water is not created anew, but continues in a

[33] The poems, respectively, are "The Sea is History" and "The Graveyard."

hydrological cycle. This is not to suggest that water is stagnant, replaying the exact drama again and again. Water is dynamic, in permanent motion, changing from liquid to solid to vapor. Yet despite these morphological alterations, it is the same water" (Wardi 20). Wardi provides a model of water that acts in an echoic fashion—it repeats, but it is not stagnant. In the same way, we might say, dramas that examine the past through the prism of the sea use the same material, but they find new formations from the motion of the tides to create new patterns for imagining community.

Sharpe's *In the Wake* (2016) thinks about Wardi's formulations on water in terms of the Middle Passage and the precarity of contemporary Black life. After citing Gaston Bachelard's provocative notion from *Water and Dreams* (1942) that "water is an element which remembers the dead," Sharpe questions, "In what ways do we remember the dead, those lost in the Middle Passage, those who arrived reluctantly, and those still arriving?" (20). Part of the answer, for Sharpe, is in a marine biological approach to what is known as residence time.

> There have been studies done on whales that have died and have sunk to the seafloor. The studies show that within a few days the whales' bodies are picked almost clean by benthic organisms . . . it is most likely that a human body would not make it to the seafloor intact. What happened to the bodies? By which I mean, what happened to the components of their bodies in salt water? . . . [B]ecause nutrients cycle through the ocean . . . the atoms of those people who were thrown overboard are out there in the ocean even today. They were eaten, organisms processed them, and those organisms were in turn eaten and processed, and the cycle continues. . . . The amount of time it takes for a substance to enter the ocean and then leave the ocean is called residence time. (40-41)

This passage contains an almost scientific-poetic quality, as it imagines the cycle by which those people forcibly removed from their homelands only to be thrown overboard or who threw themselves overboard continue to live on in the ecosystem of the sea. This biologic moment of fabulation sees within the way organisms are recycled in the ocean a means of grounding a set of relations to the past. It is my contention that in both *Moonwalks* and *Dontrell*, we see examples of a theatre that lives in the time of the wake. By invoking and staging waterscapes in myriad forms, Gardley and Davis examine how the sea can function as a palimpsest of past, present, and future. It contains the bodies of the dead, but it also contains a connection to history and kinship. In short, while the sea *is* history, it is also the imaginative capacity of the future.

"Weighed in the Water": Mythic Histories and the Paradoxes of the Black Aquatic

Moving into my reading of *Moonwalks and Dontrell,* I want to keep in view concepts of how Black geographies both disrupt and expose racialized spaces; how the aquatic can become an ontological question for some Black writers and thinkers; how the element of water recycles, preserves, and has a memory of its own; how the tides themselves become a way of thinking structurally and formally about oceanic histories and literature; and how the sea in the form of the Middle Passage is a paradoxical site that is both rooted in time and temporally unfixed. *Moonwalks* and *Dontrell* have several overlapping concerns in representing water as a site of both connection to and rupture from the past. Namely, both plays interrogate complex relationships of their central characters to both their immediate families and their ancestors; both plays figure waterways as paradoxical sites of birth and death, danger and healing; and both plays experiment with form and structure as a means of recreating the swaying unfixity of the tides. To this end, this section will conduct a thematic analysis of *Moonwalks* and *Dontrell*

together, examining how each play conceptualizes history, looking at the play's tidalectic structure and experimental form, and analyzing the themes of kinship and aquatics throughout.

I begin by examining the form and structure of *Moonwalks* and *Dontrell* in order to make two claims. First, in relation to form, I argue that through their use of ecological personification, both plays point to ways that landscapes and their inhabitants are interactive. Second, in relation to structure, I argue that the way the action unfolds in both plays is tidalectic in that both the characters' journeys and the movement of the plot oscillate backward and forward in a manner that resembles the oceanic tides. Both of these aspects highlight theatre's capacity as a temporally and spatially situated medium. This is particularly important for these works because, as Stephanie McCormick notes in her writing on neo-slave performance, "drama offers varied and dynamic methods to represent slavery while also calling attention to the fact we can never fully depict or *know* this history" (517). Because of the ways that Gardley and Davis represent the relationship between the natural world and the bodies onstage, and because of the narrative development that is simultaneously backward looking and future-oriented, we can see how these plays engage a Black Aquatic, opening up a potential avenue for examining work that interrogates the way water structures lives and subjectivities in the wake of slavery.

One notable aspect of *Moonwalks'* dramaturgy is the way it represents the natural landscape. The Mississippi River and the tree from which Damascus is hung are both personified and played by actors in the ensemble. The opening stage directions highlight the active role of these environmental features: "*In the distance there is a wood with trees that reach up like black, incredible arms praising God. To the right,* ***The Great Tree*** *stands bowing his head in shadow while dusk, red as southern clay is seasoned over the field. It reveals* ***Miss Ssippi River*** *who is black, blue; her quilted dress wide as all get out of town*" (350). The world of the

play is both situated alongside the banks of the Mississippi as well as within the literal folds of her dress, creating a sense of intimacy with the natural world. Further, Gardley takes care to describe the Blackness of the performers who embody the natural world; the Great Tree and Miss Ssippi River are both glorified bodies in repose, paradigmatic of *Moonwalks'* vision of Black Nature.

Despite the reverential tone of the stage directions, both Miss and the Great Tree are natural bodies that contain the potential to cause great harm, particularly to enslaved African Americans like Damascus. And indeed, he almost drowns in the river's undertow; he is lynched upon the Great Tree. However, through the act of personification and Black embodiment, these sites are re-figured. As Diggs Colbert writes, Gardley "rethinks corporeal autonomy by disrupting the division between human and non-human and rendering identity as an unsettled mode of being rather than a fixed state" (510). In recreating a lynching destination and a river in which countless people have drowned as Black performers and fledgling divinities, Gardley presents the relationship between the characters onstage and their natural environment as dynamic and contingent.

For example, Miss Ssippi's opening lines present the body of water as an active participant in the play's action. The list of dramatis personae refers to Miss as "The Quilter," and the other characters as "The Threads." Miss is not only a waterscape that has come to life, but she is also a driving narrative force. Upon waking, she recites in verse:

> The hot, hard dusk hangs like ear bobs of blood from meat
> Cripplin the half moon into a crescent, chipped tooth
> Tremblin some gum tree like voo doo bones 'bove my belly.
> M. I. crooked letter, crooked letter I. Crooked letter, crooked letter I.

Suh Sippi: I be Miss Ssippi

Though due south they call me Sip

For I'm simply a taste and not a swallow.

Though thick as God's thigh I'm merely a wink of water blue

Mostly mud, mostly immovable

Moved mostly to wrap my big river ways round your waist

And tease you a taste of a tale long untold old.

A tale without a tail, without a head

The gut of somethin

A stream

A thread of history needin to be needled-in

Knotted into your know-how

A Poem

Ripped from the ripples of an ancient rock throw

Hear it. Here it comes

Crumblin from a cloud.

A drop. (350)

Miss introduces herself as water personified, self-anatomizing in the style of a blazon. She refers to her own belly and gut and invokes bodily imagery—the ears and teeth—of the sky and trees around her. Miss invokes a world in which nature is bodily and active. Further, Miss is a storyteller; she is the poet who will set the play in motion. The tale which she prepares to tell, what she refers to as a "thread of history," is characterized as both previously untold and unfinished. It needs to be needled and knotted, etched into existence and the audience's minds.

The tale is also connected to a history long gone, the ripples—echoes—of an ancient rock throw that appear to us in the present. This transtemporal framing, along with Miss's assertion that her tale has neither tail nor head, beginning nor end, frames the action of *Moonwalks* as that which lives in the afterlife of slavery; or, as Sharpe would say, in the past that is not past. It is also a tidalectic structure, whose non-teleological thrust mimics the movement of water. It is not incidental, then, that the language of Miss's poetry is aquatic, as it comes from the steam, the ripples of a skipping stone, a drop of rain from the sky. These references to moving forms of water recall Glissant: Miss opens the world of the play up as a vast beginning, marked only by the undergrowth of the balls and chains beneath the sea.

In *Dontrell,* the site of the ocean is similarly presented through choreography, creating literal "bodies of water." This is done primarily through the ensemble's voice and movement work, as the company uses their bodies to "become" the ocean. This is most apparent in an example from the end of the play, where Dontrell and his girlfriend Erika are adrift on the Atlantic attempting to locate Dontrell's ancestors. As they row, the stage directions call for the remaining actors to begin simulating the sound of the water from offstage:

> *(The Ocean begins to hum.)*
>
> *(The humming of the Ocean becomes louder and louder.)*
>
> *(The humming is coming from the* ***Company****.)*
>
> *(They hum.)*
>
> *(They sigh.)*
>
> *(They clap.)*
>
> *(They stomp.)*
>
> *(They hum all the while.)*

*(They surround **Dontrell** and **Erika.**)* (72)

The humming of the ocean is revealed to be emerging from the mouths of the company, who use their bodies to generate the roar of the sea as they close their ranks around Dontrell and Erika. Their voices, body percussion, and movement all serve to personify the water. This instance of embodiment is made more thematically powerful by the fact that the rest of the company are members of Dontrell's family; thus, in this moment the ocean is revealed to be populated by his kin. Although this representation of water differs from that in *Moonwalks,* it uses personification to render the play's waterscape interactive and all-encompassing. It is a way in which Davis alludes to the bodies who continue to live in the residence time of the sea.

In a similar vein, the prologue to *Dontrell* contains what the stage directions call a "simple ritual," which introduces a set of actions and thematics that will be re-played and re-deployed as the play unfolds. The prologue involves the full company, as they circle Dontrell and each individually provide him with sustenance before he begins his journey onto the Atlantic Ocean. Although the action of the prologue occurs during the play's penultimate scene, it prefigures what is to come, turning the future into an evocation of the past. This sort of unfixed temporality is important to consider in this otherwise relatively linearly paced drama because it instills the following action with a motion of the tides. The ritual follows:

Robby: *(Giving Dontrell a mini-cassette recorder.)* Keep a record.

Shea: *(putting a cassette in the recorder)* Speak it right.

Dad: *(Holding up a pair of very old shoes)* Walk in these.

All company: Tread light

Erika: *(Giving him a sip of water from a cup)* A river for your thirst.

Danielle: *(Feeding him a piece of cake.)* Pack you a snack.

Mom: (*Tilting up his head by the chin)* Eyes to the East:

All company: *(Claps their hands. (Clap.) – (Clap.) – (Clap.)*

(A Great Sound: as of a giant monument crashing into the ocean.) (9)

This passage betrays an insistence on record-keeping, on leaving something behind for those who will follow. Dontrell's role as an archivist is set in stark contrast to the lack of records for those generations who preceded him. The pair of shoes his father provides him serves as a literal and metaphorical means of allowing Dontrell to walk in his father's footsteps. The impetus is heightened further when we learn later in the play that these shoes belonged to his grandfather, his namesake and the first Dontrell Jones. There is the sense that Dontrell is physically carrying the past with him as he moves toward the unknown. The final sound of a monument crashing into the ocean is yet another example of how, in the play's more esoteric moments, the company works together to create a network of support for Dontrell.[34] This sound cue is a thematic cue for the play as a whole, signaling a literal sea change: monuments thrown into the sea and new monuments forged within that same body of water.

The form and structure of *Moonwalks* and *Dontrell* work in tandem with their mythological and historical frameworks to ground their characters in relation to the past. In particular, the use of Greek myth in *Moonwalks* and familial myth in *Dontrell* function in a classical capacity, providing origins and foundations for the present and explanations for that which is otherwise inexplicable or unknowable. In these plays, myth provides a narrative for the way things are, but also for thinking about the way things could be, recalling myth's necessary fabulative quality. While in *Moonwalks,* the mythological framing is global, but has local

[34] Writing this in the Fall of 2020, it is hard not to bring a presentist lens to this moment, projecting onto this 2015 play the images of Confederate monuments crashing down or, even more presciently, the statue of slave trader Edward Coleston being dragged and thrown into the River Avon in Bristol.

significance, *Dontrell* presents localized history that has global and diasporic significance. These approaches brush up against Derek Walcott's assessment of New World writing in his essay "The Muse of History," in which he explores writers and thinkers who "reject the idea of history as time for its original concept of myth" (37). In seeing the resonances of the past—the echoes of colonial violence—in contemporary life, Walcott argues, "Fact evaporates into myth. This is not the jaded cynicism which sees nothing new under the sun, it is an elation which sees everything as renewed" (38). Through their mixture of historical fact and invented myth, Gardley and Davis suggest that we view history as myth, as a site for imagination.[35]

The most evident connection to myth within *Moonwalks* comes from the play's inciting incident, when Damascus, a runaway slave who identifies as male, is changed upon his death into a woman named Demeter. This transformation occurs after Damascus is lynched by slavecatchers on a branch of the Great Tree. The Great Tree then performs a temporary resurrection, which he does not only by bestowing new life upon Damascus but also by bestowing a new body: "When you wake you will no longer be Damascus, the old road, for you have fallen deep, you have seen the way. You are a new creature with a new body. Like Saul arose as Paul when you arise you will be Demeter. A woman resurrected from a tree. You have only three days before your body rots then you must come home to me" (360). The Great Tree's account of this transition operates along multiple registers: first, we see the importance of historical allusion to the play's overall project. Damascus/Demeter's resurrection invokes

[35] This linking of myth and history is not unique to an African American context; African playwrights such as Nigerians Wole Soyinka and Femi Osofisan have written extensively about the value of integrating myth into contemporary stories. Soyinka pulls freely from classical Greek myth in his adaptation of *The Bacchae of Euripides,* but his *Myth, Literature and the African World* (1976) examines the importance of Yoruba mythology and theology in Nigerian tragic drama. Alternatively, Osofisan views history as an unfixed interpretation of events often determined by oppressors; in its place, he uses elements of Yoruba myth and recasts them in modern contexts, such as his interpretation of Moremi's myth in *Morountodun* (1982). This connection is notable, for it extends and suggests the importance of fabulative engagements with the slave past in drama of postcolonial Black Africa.

Christianity; however, unlike Jesus, who returns and ascends to heaven after three days beneath the earth, Damascus is brought back to life for three days only to then return permanently to the world of the dead.[36] Further, The Great Tree's allusion to Demeter's rotting body prevents this scene from existing purely in the theological or mythical space. Gardley provides a twist on biblical history—a resurrection in suspension. That Demeter occupies this liminal space calls attention to the kind of precarity and tenuousness with which *Moonwalks* presents the spheres of life and death. Here, Demeter's death, the murder of an enslaved Black man, cannot be halted or prevented; it can only be stalled in order for broken chains to be reunited.

The culture jamming that scaffolds *Moonwalks* results in a syncretic conception of myth, whereby allusions to the antebellum South, early Christian Rome, and ancient Greece are all woven together. While Damascus is named in a reference to the road along which Saul converted to Christianity and became Paul, he is re-named not in the theological but rather in the mythological tradition, after the pre-Christian goddess Demeter. The choice to re-birth Damascus as Demeter is notable, as the Greek goddess reigns not only over the harvest and agricultural fertility, but also over the underworld. As Ellie Mackin Roberts notes, Demeter is uniquely positioned in her relationship to life—through fertility and crop bounty—and death—through barren soil and her role as Mother-in-Law to Hades.[37] Roberts writes that Demeter has the capacity to bestow both life and death; she is associated with the chthonic (underground) because of the belief that she hides seeds beneath the earth that sprout new life with the changing seasons

[36] As I have noted, resurrection is a common theme in the genre of theatre my study attempts to define; it is something that appears either obliquely or overtly in each chapter, whether through dramatic non-linearity, fabulative re-conjuring, or supernatural intervention. It is a way of responding to and reanimating history.
[37] For a detailed look at Demeter's positioning within what she calls the "agriculture/death dichotomy," see Ellie Mackin Roberts' *Underworld Gods inf Ancient Greek Religion: Death and Reciprocity* (2020).

(60-65). These allusive fragments cohere around the figure of Demeter within *Moonwalks* to create the sense that she is reborn from the world of the dead just as seeds emerge from soil.

The mythic character of Demeter, however, is never far away from the historical reality of plantation slavery, another structuring framework that Gardley deploys alongside the more fantastical sources from Greek myth and biblical parable. A central example comes from the parallels between Demeter and Persephone in Homeric myth and Demeter and Po'em in *Moonwalks.* In the former, after Persephone is abducted by and married to Hades, her anguished mother wreaks vengeance and manipulates her position of power over the soil's fertility in order to retrieve her daughter from the underworld for half of the year.[38] In the latter, a parent who has been separated from their daughter due to the inhumane slave-era practice of selling off family members to other plantations, is lynched while attempting to find her again. Gardley's recontextualization of the Demeter myth allows him to re-invent and re-imagine African American history. This is particularly significant for *Moonwalks* because so much of the play revolves around what we cannot know in terms of both our origins and our futures. While the paradox of water is the central way Gardley unpacks this unknown, the use of grounding myth is another way the characters find footholds for themselves in the world of the play.

Another central example of how *Moonwalks* represents its relationship to myth and history comes from Gardley's epigraph, an excerpt of Langston Hughes' poem "The Negro Speaks of Rivers." A significant poem in the genre of Black ecocritical writing, here introduces the action of *Moonwalks* as both outside of time and space while paradoxically rooted to the waters of the Mississippi. The poem follows:

[38] An in-depth account of the myth's themes, including death and rebirth, can be found in Mara Lynn Keller's article "The Eleusinian Mysteries of Demeter and Persephone: Fertility, Sexuality, and Rebirth" (1988).

> I've known rivers ancient as the world and older than the flow of human blood in human veins.
>
> My soul has grown deep like the rivers.
>
> I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young.
>
> I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep.
>
> I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it.
>
> I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln went down to New Orleans, and I've seen its muddy bosom turn all golden in the sunset. (Hughes qtd in Gardley 348)

Hughes parallels the speaker's personal growth and the global development of waterways. The poem's scope is totalizing—from dawn to dusk, from Euphrates to the Mississippi—and creates a sense of Black subjectivity as temporally unmoored. It recalls Gates, Diedrich and Pedersen's conception of the "extended Middle Passage" in a geospatial as well as temporal sense. Ruffin's focus on myth is pertinent here as well, as she argues, "Myth conveys the conceptual complexity of our connection to place, past, present, and future in language. . . . the activity of myth-making remains unfinished" (112). Through myth, *Moonwalks* presents the afterlives of the Middle Passage as both geographically expansive and in-progress.

In *Moonwalks*, this relationship to water is figured, as in Hughes's original poem, as something simultaneously individual—the "I" of the speaker—and collective—the references to civilizations and use of plural nouns. This is clear in a later scene when Demeter encounters the personified Miss Ssippi. Demeter becomes angry, insisting that all she needs to do is find her daughter so that she can give Po'em her song. This use of the first person (my/mine) angers Miss, who counters: "It comes from your ancestors! You don't know it cause your powers been

sleep for three hundred years but you are the descendant of Goddesses who bathed in the Nile. Their tears flow in your veins deep as the Euphrates and in your daughter's veins. If you don't plant the song in the child and get her to sing it, the song will be forgotten. And so will your daughter" (387). Demeter is chastised for thinking individually rather than collectively; Miss exhorts her to consider her connection to her ancestors and the Egyptian Goddesses from which she descends. The reference to the Nile and Euphrates recalls Hughes's poem, though here water is invoked not just through these bodies of water, but also through the water in Demeter and Po'em's bodies—their tears and the blood in their veins. Further, in this movement away from an "I" to a collective and back to an "I" again, we begin to see the importance of both family history and poetical-ecological myth. The song of Demeter's ancestors is an ephemeral yet tangible relic, like that of water itself, upon which Demeter and Po'em's legacies rely. In this way, ancient myth, familial legacy, and the histories of the Atlantic slave trade all cohere in *Moonwalks* to create a sense of urgency around both self-realization and identification with community.

Conversely, *Dontrell* presents a turn not toward a global notion of mythic history, but rather a notion of myth that develops around the local in the form of Dontrell's family. We see this in the play's first scene, where Dontrell recounts his proleptically prophetic dream, in which he sees his direct ancestors aboard a slave ship on the Atlantic.

> Captain's log: Future generations, whoever finds this: I hope it finds you well. This Dontrell Jones the Third, of Baltimore. Spittin' to you live through space and time . . . Just dreamt of a captive African, name unknown,/ One among a mass of tight packed bodies,/ Swaying with the tide of the Atlantic,/ In the womb-like darkness of the slaver's vessel./ Said African is alert. A cunning mind./ I hear his

> shackles opening. I hear,/ A thud as his feet meet the floor . . . And I can see him now: He has my father's face./ I speak to him: 'I am Dontrell Jones the Third./ What is your name?' (11)

Dontrell opens not only with an evocation of the Middle Passage—one of the symbols around which this work revolves—but also with Dontrell's own origin myth. Dontrell utilizes the form of the "captain's log," a generally nautical genre but one that has particular implications during the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade because it is often one of the only places where information about those captured and enslaved was recorded.[39] It is fitting, then, that Dontrell places himself in the role of an archivist, recording his missives for future generations. The phrase "future generations," which hails potential as-yet unborn listeners, more specifically seems to call out to his own progeny who, like him, will seek out connections to their ancestral past. Further, the content of the dream itself works simultaneously in a historical mode, as it imagines the experience of an anonymous man abord a slave ship, as well as in the mythical mode, as it allows Dontrell to come face to face with his ancestor. Indeed, Dontrell immediately sees himself in the African man's resemblance to his father, quite literally staging the meeting of past and present. The reference to the captain's log and the improbable meeting work together to furnish his dream's mythic quality. Ruffin writes of "myth's constructive ecological capacity and its ability to build connections among natural elements, even in the face of serious challenge to this connection," and it is this capacity, in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean despite the centuries that have elapsed and the lacunae of the archives, that Dontrell engages (116). Dontrell calls forth a

[39] This same genre of the Captain's Log is also notably used by the main character in Charles Johnson's novel *Middle Passage* (1990), a seminal and oft-cited example of a postmodern neo-slave narrative out of which *Dontrell* emerges. It is interesting here that Dontrell places himself in the role of the captain of a slave ship, as Rutherford Calhoun (the protagonist of Johnson's novel) does. While in Johnson's novel this action creates an inversion of power and assertion of agency central to its narrative, here I believe it works mainly to prefigure Dontrell's eventual move toward the ocean along his own nautical vessel.

moment of connection between himself and his forefather of whom he can know almost nothing because of the slave trade's epistemological ruptures.

Dontrell's dream continues to reveal the importance of this moment to his familial history. For, it is aboard this ship that Dontrell sees the conception of his first ancestor to be born upon American soil. Not only does his dream vision provide him the opportunity to travel back in time and encounter his ancestor, but it allows him to see the beginning of the Jones line. When Dontrell wakes, he asks: "How am I to answer this priceless vision? Should I believe what I already think I know? That it's now my burden to pull him up to shore?" (11-12). Dontrell's tether to this man, his irresistible urge to pull him up to shore, is undergirded by the way that the water perversely pulls him toward it, actively asking him to attempt to connect to his lost ancestor. As a whole, this dream sits uncomfortably between the interstices of myth and history; it allows Dontrell a means to access his inaccessible past while providing him an origin myth.

As in *Moonwalks*, Davis presents a conception of myth that is inextricable from Black history, with an attention to the ways in which this history is forever incomplete. Dontrell's journey is propelled forward by the very fact that his ancestry is only available to him in the sphere of dreams. Both playwrights present a syncretic conception of mythological history which draws from both the local and the global in the service of presenting a ground on which these characters can stand. If, as Howard argues, the "problem of blackness is the problem of water . . . of having no ground," then we can see Davis and Gardley as presenting an alternative: water *as* ground—water as grounding, as the site of mythic origins (5-7).

It is to the grounding that water provides that I move my analysis, as *Moonwalks'* interaction with waterways as both a metaphorical and historical site and a physical geographical landscape is key to understanding this drama as part of the Black aquatic. First, it is necessary to

return to thinking about the play's settings through a Black geographical lens. *Moonwalks*' setting is notable, as the Mississippi River has a longstanding history in literature and African American culture. Catherine Gooch's work notes how the Mississippi has been represented in myriad and conflicting ways—as the site of "violence, resistance, and trauma," but also as "sites of redemption" (3). Further, Gooch points to the importance of the Mississippi to American history, particularly in the antebellum era. The river, she observes, was central to the expansion of both the nascent capitalist cotton industry and the enslaved workforce that produced it (4). Using a more historically oriented framework, Dorothy Zeisler-Vralsted provides an "alternative history" of the waterway. Like Gooch, she observes the river's conflicting meanings in African American culture, noting its dual role as both "oppressor and liberator" (94). Specifically, she writes that "despite what was a well-known hostile and threatening landscape . . . the African American slave experienced the river as the site of escape" (85). Taken together, it is evident that the Mississippi takes on a set of conflicting and multivalent meanings in African American history.[40]

Moonwalks reveals the Mississippi's conflicting qualities by presenting water in the play through a set of paradoxes. One of the most salient examples of these dissonances is that the river is figured as both a site of redemptive healing and a site of mortal danger. This theme is common in African American literature about the Middle Passage, as scholars such as Brown-Guillory note. She views the Middle Passage as "the tropological site of identity disintegration" and looks at writing that reenacts this site as a means of "becoming whole" (Brown-Guillory 5).

[40] While Gardley's choice to set the action of *Moonwalks* along the Mississippi, as well as his decision to make Miss a central character and moral arbiter of the work as a whole, the specific sites of action enact yet another commentary on the significance of the waterway. For example, the timeline that sees Jean Verse and a Union defector meet takes place during the siege of Vicksburg, one of the last battles of the Vicksburg Campaign in which the Union Army sought control of the Mississippi River. In this instance, Gardley juxtaposes the river's slave history alongside its military history, bringing into focus how multiple violences settle alongside the river's banks.

Evie Shockley similarly emphasizes this sense of healing, writing, "confronting the forgetting and fingering the fragments may help descendants of the Middle Passage heal," despite the fact that "neither the law nor the imagination can make us w/hole" (816). These preoccupations come through clearly in the opening scene of the play, which finds Damascus wounded and hiding within the folds of Miss Ssippi's dress. Upon spotting him, she places herself in the role of his protector. Miss uses maternal language to create a sense of kinship between her and Damascus. She refers to him as a babe in her breast and seeks to cradle and rock him in her waters. However, just as she figures herself as his guardian, she reveals the limits of her particular form of aegis. Miss notes that she can take him as far as the ocean, though once her waves reach its mouth, she must leave him; he will "spew"—a curious subject verb formation that reveals her lack of agency—out of her belly and into open waters (351). This image elicits a simultaneous notion of freedom from bondage and the danger of the unknown. Miss's proposed solution, that she will re-plant him as a tree on the banks of the river, is similarly fraught. To be a tree is to embody a certain kind of freedom from the constraints of humanity and the tortures of enslavement, but it is also a death of sorts.[41] In short, Miss reveals the tensions that constitute Damascus's relationship to the water in which he seeks refuge.

The dual sense of protection and danger—of the vastness of the river and the boundedness of her domain—continues when Miss decides what to do with Damascus as the slavecatchers approach.

> I scout for a way out, babe clutched in arms
>
> But there be no where to flood.

[41] This reference to re-planting also recalls the story of Daphne, the nymph who, upon bring relentlessly pursued by Apollo, begged her father to change her form. In response her father Peneus turns her into a laurel tree, which Apollo then renders evergreen. While the echoes of this myth are less overt in *Moonwalks,* the notion of becoming a tree as a form of freedom is present, helping to constitute the mythic fabric that undergirds the play.

I weep deep. I wail!

Tides wide as my waist weigh him down

Drag him 'neath my dress!

Hold him! [. . .]

And

He

sinks …

Folds, unfurls inside my thick-ass mesh

Fightin, reachin for his last breath

He tries to swim

(If I were his momma I'd drown him.)

But I be just rivers: fathers of rivers

Mothers of livin waters

It's my nature to release

So I set him Free. (351-352)

Miss refers to Damascus as her child, imagining what she might do for him. However, as above, the limits of their relationship are stressed. It is only "if" she was his mother; instead, she is a body of water, and she cannot fight her nature. Miss is presented as having a potentially liberatory agency that is thwarted at every turn. She cannot flood, and although she sobs to widen the tides and hold Damascus down, she must let him go. Water is at turns a site of escape and liberation, although this liberation comes through death. That Miss views the act of drowning as preferable to his fate in the hands of the slavecatchers reveals the complexity of the river throughout the play; it is more than a contradictory site of danger and protection—it represents

the stakes between living and dying. Despite Miss's conflicting urges, however, she sets Damascus free—an ironic freedom that will lead to his lynching. As written, the text performs Damascus's semi-revivification, as he appears to sink down across the page, taking in his last breath, only to emerge ashore again. I note this connection because it brings to the fore how *Moonwalks* operates on both a global and local scale, telling a story about one man's brush with life and death but in conversation with a larger history of the aquatic afterlife.

Thus far, my goal has been to trace how *Moonwalks* approaches the Black historical past in and through water—as metaphor and as landscape. In so doing, I am interested in how water is presented as a site of inherent and irresolvable contradiction. Because of this structural aporia, *Moonwalks* occupies a tidalectic movement that moves backward toward the past in order to look forward. As such, the future it looks toward (our present) is tenuous and fraught. A central example that explores the water's tensions is when Damascus, now Demeter, learns that Po'em has died before the action of the play begins. The facts of her death remain unclear: one account calls it a suicide while the other claims murder. In both accounts, however, Po'em dies beside the river, and her body—either deliberately or accidentally—falls into the Mississippi. This detail emphasizes the river's paradoxical quality as rather than the safety of the river's banks, Po'em only finds violence and death.

When Demeter hears that Po'em is dead, she is at first inconsolable, which leads to a scene that expands the ways that the Mississippi functions as an intrinsically paradoxical site to the characters within the play. As Miss sings of baptism, crooning, "Take me to the water/ To be Revived," the stage directions read: *Near the mouth of the Ocean, beyond the plantation,* **Miss Ssippi** *pours libation over* **Demeter** *who weeps in the river's dress. . . . A chorus of voices as if at a church sing while* **Miss Ssippi** *speaks and anoints* **Demeter***'s head.* (389). Gardley presents

water as multivalent, focusing not only on the Mississippi River but on the ocean and even Demeter's tears. The directions note that this scene is placed beyond the plantation, at the point where the river begins to morph into a tributary of the Atlantic. This geolocation is important, as it situates the action outside the reach of the plantation's grasp. Instead, at this transitory point where bodies of water merge, we see a libation ritual occur, which emphasizes the water's central ebb and flow. As Demeter weeps, and water leaves her body, her tears fall onto Miss's dress; they are recycled and re-absorbed by Miss, who pours libation over Demeter. In this way, Morrison's vision of the river with a perfect memory and Sharpe's conception of the ocean's cyclicality are recalled and staged—the water that exits her body is returned to it.

The ritual itself hinges on Gardley's blend of theology and myth, whereby he creates a syncretic and ostensibly oppositional rite of healing. The first stage direction connotes despondency and mourning, as Demeter sobs while Miss pours libation over her. Libation—an ancient ritual that has carried over to Western and Central African cultures and into the African Diaspora—is an action done in remembrance of the dead. The act of pouring liquid in an offering to those who have passed, here Po'em, is paired with the baptismal act that Miss performs immediately after. Miss refers to the baptism as an opportunity for the revivification powers of water, and a chorus sings as she anoints Demeter. To recall Hartman and Walcott, this moment evokes the way that water is associated with both the history of Black death as well as the amniotic fluids of birth. These notions are brought to a head when Miss attempts to console Demeter after performing her dual libation-baptism. In so doing, she focuses not on Po'em's death, but on her life after death, in the residence time of the wake. She says,

> Your daughter is no more for this world, Demeter. She has gone to the seas of her mothers to bathe in the waters of Oshun. She is a goddess, worshipped in the land

> of your forefathers and she is content there. You must not mourn for her. *For her child and the future children of this child need her story You must plant it inside of her*. (389)

Rather than dwell on the past, Miss focuses on the future, emphasizing the importance of passing along her and Po'em's stories to future generations. Indeed, although Po'em has died, likely during an attempted escape in Miss's very waters, she is figuratively re-planted in a site of collectivity and kinship. She moves her body from the bottom of the river to yet another body of water—the seas of her mothers and the waters of the Yoruba god Oshun. Through her recourse to the language of nature and gardening, Miss forges Po'em's return to Africa. Miss moves within the logic of various myths; she creates a world for Po'em that lives beyond her physical death. Although we cannot be certain about how Po'em died, we know that her body found its way to the river. This moment thus presents waterways as sites of both life and death. The only way to resolve this abiding tension, the play suggests, is to look toward future generations, to create new myths.

Dontrell's geography is relatively straightforward, as Davis includes a note on setting which lists the three successive locations in which the play's action occurs: "Baltimore, Maryland; the Chesapeake Bay; the Atlantic Ocean" (np). There is a certain telos to this trajectory, which ends in open waters, although this is belied by the opening dream sequence which begins in a boat along the Middle Passage. The city of Baltimore serves an important purpose within the work as well; as a coastal city, it is surrounded by bodies of water, its harbors serve as central tourist attractions, and it is home to the country's National Aquarium. More than its relationship to water, however, *Dontrell* takes pains to note the city's historical ties to the enslavement of African Americans. In one scene, Dontrell and his best friend Robby are driving

when Robby puts on an instrumental track and begins to freestyle over it. His rap serves as both a love letter to and an indictment of Baltimore:

> *CHARM CITY SLEEPS IN, BUT WE GET IT DONE,*
>
> *OLD BUILDINGS WE REFURBISH 'EM*
>
> *OLD DESIGNS WE REPURPOSE 'EM*
>
> *WE THE MASON AND THE DIXON,*
>
> *WHERE THEY BROUGHT THE SLAVE SHIPS IN,*
>
> *WALKIN' OVER PRISONS*
>
> *GHOSTS BENEATH THE STREETS,*
>
> *AND THEY WONDER WHY WE STRIDE*
>
> *JUST A LITTLE OFF THE BEAT* (16)

Robby's verse, specifically its references to the slave trade and the ghosts that live beneath the streets, renders Baltimore a site that lives in the time of the "extended Middle Passage," where the contemporary city is haunted by the legacies of slavery. Robby, like Dontrell, looks to what escapes the bounds of the city's architecture, seeing the prisons that lay below the pavement and the generations who are buried beneath their feet. In fact, the city of Baltimore had a sizable slave population in the eighteenth century, and the Inner Harbor, now a draw for tourists, served as a central port where enslaved people would be docked on route to locations further South such as New Orleans.[42] Robby notes the city's refurbishing and repurposing, suggesting a connection to the past rather than a break from it. In short, Davis configures the city itself, just as the water that surrounds it, a geography that is inextricable from the history of slavery, unable to leave the ghosts of those who perished behind.

---

[42] For more on this history, see this article in the *Baltimore Sun*, "A Bitter Inner Harbor Legacy: The Slave Trade," written by Ralph Clayton: https://www.baltimoresun.com/news/bs-xpm-2000-07-12-0007120236-story.html

To explore the ghosts of the past to which Robby refers, whose echoes continue to populate *Dontrell's* stage, it is necessary to return to the dream Dontrell recounts in the first scene of the play. As discussed above, Dontrell's dream consists of him meeting an African man aboard a slave ship, who he subsequently realizes is his ancestor. After this realization, Dontrell continues to speak into his tape recorder, leaving a sonic trace of his vision for future generations. After watching the man encounter another woman in the hold, he says,

> He climbs on top of her. . . . They find each other's rhythm. Her fields cultivate themselves, and a little seed is nourished there. They lie together. Man, woman and child. In the darkness and the stench of the belly of the ship. Floating on the freshness of the new moon sea. Before sunrise the man rises. . . . He turns his head slowly to the right, then to the left. He springs into the deep. As I rush to the ship's edge to give chase, the cool air blows my eyes awake—and I am here. . . (11-12)

In Dontrell's account, the ocean emerges as the central site through which he attempts to access his ancestral past. There is something inherently fabulative to Dontrell's vision; there is an overwhelming sense within this scene of yearning for an inaccessible knowledge of the past. This is due in part to the unspecific nature of his dream: the people he sees are unnamed and thus stand in as archetypes rather than embodied characters; the actions they undertake—conception and suicide—are bold and broadly sketched out through Dontrell's narrative. Indeed, in this portion of the dream, we learn that not only is the man related to him, but we are also privy to the moment of his first African American ancestor's conception. Conceived along the Middle Passage and born into slavery upon American shores, this unborn child represents Dontrell's most concrete link to his African American lineage. Davis's recourse to the language of seeds

and crops recalls *Moonwalks,* where Damascus's rebirth is described as a re-planting of sorts. The nourished and cultivated seed, however, jars with the death that follows, and the enslavement into which we know the seed will born. In fact, the dream is structured by the jarring language of opposition, where the stench of the ship's hold is set alongside the freshness of the darkened surface of the sea. This conflicting diction is a means of setting up the oppositional actions of birth and death that bookend Dontrell's dream and represent the ocean as a site where both forces exist in active tension. Just as Dontrell's ancestor creates new life inside his partner, he ends his own, thus extending and rupturing the generational cycle.

The Atlantic Ocean becomes not only the metaphorical repository for inaccessible pasts, but it also becomes a physical repository as we see the man jump overboard to his death. Through the ancestor's suicide, Davis furnishes an understanding of the sea as that which is, to recall Glissant, a continuous/discontinuous thing. As Kevin Greene writes in his review of *Dontrell's* Chicago production, "the ocean is a part of black history in America, an enormously consequential moment that for some would be their last. With history pulling at the spirit of this play like a gently ebbing tide, [*Dontrell*] quietly suggests that the Middle Passage never truly concluded" (New City Stage). The ocean presents a scene from his ancestral past before him, providing him a sense of genealogy only to have it abruptly end with death.

This familial and mythic relation to water is no clearer than when Dontrell's cousin Shea reveals the history of her and Dontrell's grandfather, the original Dontrell Jones:

> Grandpa tried to hijack an oysterman's skipjack. Down on the bay. Didn't get very far. That's what sealed it for him. When the police reined in the boat he screamed like he was possessed. He jumped in the water and sunk. They rescued him, then put him in the asylum. He screamed so much, after a week his voice was gone. So

> he started writing letters. . . . He suffered there as long as he could bear it. Then he drowned himself in the tub. We got us a legacy, cousin. The question is, how do we answer it?" (60)

Through this backstory of a character we never meet, a history from below the grave manifests itself in unlikely places. The grandfather's fate echoes the missed chances of Damascus's story in *Moonwalks*. But more immediately, Shea's description allows us to recognize in the grandfather's history the echoes of scenes we have seen played out onstage already: a man compelled by the water to the point that he begins to act irrationally; a drowning attempt that, rather than see a man sink, sees him rescued; compulsive transmissions, here through letters, to unknown interlocuters; a man who, presented with entombment in an asylum, chooses a watery death. Dontrell Jones the first's story provides both a template for our Dontrell's actions and an echo of their shared ancestor, who jumps overboard rather than live as a slave. Dontrell is struck with an inevitable pull toward the sea, then, one that recalls the predestined, fated lives of mythical figures from the pages of Ovid and Homer.

Shortly after we learn about Dontrell Jones I's history, Dontrell III finds letters written by his grandfather, which thematically echo Dontrell's tidalectic desire to look to the past in order to move forward. Stuffed inside of his grandfather's old shoes and addressed to no one, these letters reveal the older Dontrell's aquatic fixation and obsessive archivism. One such letter is read in turns by the entire company:

> If I am a madman, as sane men say I am, then what I write is of no consequence. And if my words are of no consequence, then I beg this ink to sing, or dance, or shimmer, by some light I cannot see from here, and say what I cannot, and speak to those who follow after me, and tell them that to suffer is to live. And tell them

> that when I have pulled out my hair, and screamed away my voice, and rent my clothes, it is because the Spirit Beneath the Sea, a long lost father of my line, remains there in the deep, while I am here. I wish my veins were rivers to the ocean, and my surging heart a bay. My sanity proclaims that blood is but blood, and hearts are hearts, and what is lost is lost, and by that logic I am driven mad. Forgive me, future, what I have left undone. Forgive me, that I never learned to swim. How strange: a wanderer on life's sea, who cannot swim. (64)

It is no accident that Dontrell's full name is Dontrell Jones III; this is one of many ways he is linked to his origins as well as positioned toward a future line of Dontrell Joneses. Like our main character, the original Dontrell is visited by his ancestor who died along the Middle Passage and is similarly obsessed with returning to the sea to access this previously unthinkable past. The Spirit Beneath the Sea, who remains in the depths of the ocean after his death centuries ago, is rendered as a powerful and harmful force, drawing Dontrell's grandfather toward suffering and insanity. Although his grandfather wishes for his body to become host to various waterways, he is plagued by their inaccessibility, as he cannot swim. This inherent contradiction, to wish one's body were a tributary to the ocean and yet to be unable to traverse said body of water, underscores the way that water functions as a site of historical and diasporic dis/continuity. Like his grandfather, Dontrell seeks to repair an undone and unraveled thread between himself and his past; like his grandfather, Dontrell cannot yet swim, but wishes his body to become an ocean. These final lines are strikingly parallel to Dontrell's recorded transmissions to "future generations," hailing and asking atonement from an ambiguous "future" reader. In this way, *Dontrell* presents its focus on the future as that which is necessarily first pulled toward the past;

it figures the ocean as a vast beginning where legacies reside but where new journeys begin. It is a tidalectic notion to be sure, but it proposes a tidalectic future.

To close this section, I turn to a consideration of both plays' final scenes, which move toward future horizons. Both scenes take place in the Atlantic Ocean, evoking the legacies of the slave trade and the unknown histories of those who did not survive the journey across in body, yet remain in spirit beneath the sea. As both plays are structured around quests—Demeter's quest to give Po'em, and later Po'em's daughter Free, her song; Dontrell's quest to find his lost ancestor and reconnect with his past—these final scenes conclude their journeys and are oriented toward the future. Further, there is a narrative shift away from the past because both scenes feature children prominently. Because of the dual, paradoxical pull of the ocean, however, toward gravesites and toward new beginnings, both plays present the future as an ultimately tenuous and fragile site.[43]

The final scene of *Moonwalks,* named, aptly, "Metaphor—to carry across," sees Demeter and her granddaughter Free Girl at the confluence where the Mississippi feeds into the ocean. In the intervening scenes between Demeter learning about Po'em's death, we learn that Free is Po'em and her slave master Jean Verse's daughter. Born on the same day as Blanche, the daughter of Jean and his wife Cadence, Free is raised to believe she is Blanche's twin sister. Now, at the end of Demeter's allotted three days, at the mouth of the open sea, she attempts to convince Free to drown with her so that they can leave the earthly world and join Po'em. Demeter's insistence coupled with Free's reticence bring to the fore the uncertainty of Free's

[43] It is also worth considering that both plays end by implying that the future generations to come are biracial, as both Free Girl and Erika and Dontrell's unborn child have one Black parent and one White parent. While the scope of my study is a bit outside the theorization of how race and racial identity is figured in these plays, there is a clear implication in both works that part of what opens up potentials for unknown futures *and* what makes them tenuous is this biracial identity.

future on land. What lies ahead in the Reconstruction era South for Free, who is biracial and has lived her whole life under the auspices of whiteness, is tenuous. But Free's reluctance to dive in—she recoils at the water's depth and coldness—suggests that an unsure future on land is preferable to the unknown vastness of the sea. The stage directions emphasize the import of this choice, as in reply to Demeter's question, "Are you going back to that cruel world. Or are you comin' with me," they read, "*Free looks into the direction of the ocean floor then to the land*" (410). Despite the pull of both worlds, Free rejects the water rather than risk getting caught in its undertow.

While the ocean represents the unknown and the unknowable to Free, it connotes a certain kind of freedom for Demeter, who sinks deeper and deeper into the ocean, eventually succumbing to her second bodily death. The divergent paths followed by her and Free are solidified in their final moments together, in which Demeter gives Free Po'em's quilt, exhorting her to "add your thread to it, and pass it long" (410). The stage directions that narrate Demeter's death present an obverse picture of her first death at the hands of the slavecatchers. It more closely resembles her near death at the hands of Miss Ssippi, who instead released her. In this way, her death acts as a closing of a circle. Even more pointedly, the seawalls close around her as she sinks, creating a sense of mutuality—it is almost an embrace. Demeter's second death is multivalent, as Gardley presents the process as a shedding of her outer skin; she leaves it in the water to be recycled in residence time as she joins Po'em in the water.

This multivalence is strengthened and expanded upon by what follows as Free and Blanche sing while standing at the mouth of the ocean. Their song is a variant of the spiritual "Wade in the Water," which takes its line "God's gonna trouble the water" from a biblical verse in which an angel troubles the water below, and those who enter it thereafter are healed. The

song is also tied to its apocryphal use along the Underground Railroad to instruct those seeking freedom to hide beneath the water in order to escape detection.[44] These meanings converge in its usage here, as the play begins with Damascus stealing into the river to avoid being caught. In these two connotations, the water is both a site of healing and a site of potentially mortal danger. In Free and Blanche's iteration, "Wade in the Water" becomes "Weighed in the Water," which the children repeat until they are joined by a chorus of voices (412). The homophonic revision renders water as an inherently multivalent, conflicting landscape, as the use of "weighed" most immediately calls to mind those in the play who have drowned or fallen below the weight of the water—Jean Verse, Demeter, and Po'em. The weight also refers to its symbolic nature—in *Moonwalks,* to be in the water is to be either reborn, like the greenery of Glissant's ball and chain, or left for dead. Finally, the act of weighing connotes the act of judging or assessing, which centers Free, who has weighed her options in the water and chosen this tenuous path forward with her half-sister and improbable twin.

Blanche and Free's song is interspersed with a poetic coda recited by Miss, which provides a historical frame to the play's closing moments.

> A trail of blood that bleeds upon the war-torn world
>
> A way to the river that weeps toward one's home [. . .]
>
> Having come together like the threads of this tale
>
> Wanting to weave into one good, thick rope.
>
> To hang history
>
> Here

[44] A few sources which detail the potential connections can be found through the Harriet Tubman Historical Society (http://www.harriet-tubman.org/songs-of-the-underground-railroad/) and Pathways to Freedom (https://pathways.thinkport.org/secrets/music2.cfm)

Where they hold in their hands the needle and know-how

To unstitch the sex of his story

Her story hangs here [. . .]

A rip

While the child looks into the fabric of night

Another rip

She rips it . . .

Line by universe

Word by World

Letter by tree

Ripping it . . .

Lifting the pieces to freedom [. . .]

I: River. Water. Woman. Mother Sippi.

Though due North they call me The way to Freedom.

Full of tales

Full of heads

Full of body. (412)

The play's final lines harken back to the beginning and dramatize the play's motion of the sea, as one "vast beginning" with neither "tail nor head" but full of tales and full of heads. Her conflation of blood, rivers, and tears as forms of damaged water calls to mind not only the dead—from war, the brutalities of slavery, or otherwise, that reside beneath her banks—but also reminds us of the resonances between blood and water, blood as water. It recalls Dontrell's grandfather's wish that his body would become a river itself. Miss then transitions to her

evocation of history, as the woven rope, or the thread that opens and closes this tale. Diggs Colbert suggests that the woven rope symbolizes Free and Blanche's kinship, calling it a "move from individual to collective action, as the girls carry their shared history into a shared future" (513). And indeed, Miss's invocation of "her story," and her call to "unstitch the sex of his story," orients the audience toward Free, whose story *Moonwalks* becomes. This play on words is a call to action for Blanche and Free, to finish needling history and create a livable future. Per Diggs Colbert, "Free's journey models how one might rearrange the threads of that history. . . Through ripping and unstitching 'word by world,' one can begin to loosen the hold of history" (514). Miss charges Free with the ripping of the fabric of the night, "line by line, word by word, letter by tree." This image recalls Herald Loomis's frightened cry that the world is busting half in two and the sky is splitting open. As in *Joe Turner,* this is a rip in the fabric of time, space, and history. These rips are also an example of fabulation, allowing for a pervasive hope in an ultimately unknowable future. As Tavia Nyong'o argues, fabulation "can rearrange our perceptions of chronology, time, and temporality" (4). Miss sees in Free's decision not to choose an early death but to attempt to forge a life on land, an insurgent movement, as she "lift[s] the pieces to freedom." In so doing, Free creates a space for herself to live up to her name.

Even more so than *Moonwalks,* the final scene of *Dontrell* sets itself upon the precipice of a new world. Returning to the setting of the prologue, Dontrell and Erika board a boat and take to the ocean in an attempt to connect with the bodies that remain below its depths. The shift in setting is central to the play's metaphorical and geographical journey, which Erika makes clear as she narrates their transition past "the threshold where the bay gives itself to the ocean" (68). The crossing of this threshold orients the play away from the terra-centric concerns that dominate the play's earlier action—Dontrell's matriculation to John's Hopkins, Erika's complex

relationship with her father—and instead toward the pair's aquatic future. Indeed, upon Erika preparing to admit something "corny" to Dontrell, he replies, "That's a word for land-dwellers. Crop growers. We're sea people, you and I" (71). We see this narrative re-orientation as Erika and Dontrell begin to speak of their unborn child, an embryonic yet material manifestation of the "future generations" Dontrell continually addresses. He says, "Our child should learn to swim early. Water birth, and from there, sky's the limit. He or she won't have to come way out here. No loose ends to knot up. He or she might find a whole new way of swimming. A whole new way of being, maybe" (70). Dontrell takes the notion of a water birth quite literally, imagining a child born of water. He hopes for his child to have a drastically different relationship to water than he does; unlike Dontrell III, II, and I, this child will not be pulled toward the water for what it represents about the past, but rather for what it offers as a means of looking toward the future. Not only will this child learn to swim early, a skill with which the earlier Dontrells were unequipped, but Dontrell muses that this child might find an entirely new way of swimming, of encountering the aquatic realm. Dontrell imagines a child whose relationship to water might forge the way for an entirely new way of being in the world.

This pervasive sense of newness is furthered as Dontrell provides offerings to his ancestor in an attempt to summon him aboard his vessel. The first of these offerings is his grandfather's letters: "*As if tossing seeds onto fertile soil, Dontrell scatters the letters into the sea*" (73). This account renders the action akin to tending a growing garden; the ocean, host to the body of his deceased ancestor, has become fertile soil. When the letters do not immediately conjure any changes, Dontrell throws his grandfather's shoes overboard. The action of sending his grandfather's material remains to meet his ancestor's bodily remains is reimagined and transmuted here as the act of scattering new seeds in the earth to create new life. Finally,

Dontrell sacrifices his tape recorder, the central symbol of this dual orientation toward the past and future. Dontrell's final transmission follows, "Future generations: I am sorry, but I have to let you go. I hoped you would remember my name. But what are names? The symbols of ourselves. We may yet be without them" (74). Dontrell rebukes his compulsive archivism, suggesting instead that keeping a record in the pursuit of posthumous infamy is unsuitable for his oceanic ventures. When the throws his recorder into the sea, the action reads doubly: it ostensibly asserts water as the site where future generations such as his child will hear his recordings, just as it seems to be a rejection of the relics of the past—the dated recorder, the old letters, the worn shoes. In this moment, the sea is history, and the sea is futurity.

Dontrell's final offering is his own body, fulfilling the circular promise of his earlier near-drowning. As Demeter does in *Moonwalks,* Dontrell offers his body to the ocean in exchange for direct access to his past: "*Dontrell looks to his right. Then to his left. He springs into the deep. . . . Dontrell swims down* (74). The initial stage direction is an almost verbatim echo of Dontrell's account of the ancestor in his dream, who looks both ways before springing over the railing of the ship and into the depths of the ocean. Here, Dontrell jumps overboard from his own vessel, both revising the original action and exploring the ways that he is predestined to repeat it. This scene is thus both a repetition and a revision of his mythic history and personal history; it is a dramatic echo. Once beneath the sea, Dontrell appears to drown, sacrificing his life for the potential to honor his legacy and the haunts of history. However, he instead meets his ancestor again, who is described as "part man, part ocean spirit" (74). This second encounter is an inversion of the first, where Dontrell questions the man aboard the ship about his lineage. Now, not floating above the waves but far below them, the ancestor asks Dontrell his name and origin, querying: "Ta ni e ti o peja fun oku? [Who are you that comes

fishing for the dead?]" (75). The past and present finally meet, as the ancestor recognizes Dontrell as part of his own line. In this moment, we see the power of fabulation within this work—to recall Nyong'o, *Dontrell* "tethers together worlds that can and cannot be" (6). It is through this incompossibility, to use Nyong'o's phrase, that a livable future is possible.

Their meeting is cut short, however, and the dis/continuity of the sea brought back to the fore, by the fact that Dontrell is drowning. The stage directions read: "*(Ancestor gestures upward. Indicating that it is time for Dontrell to go. Dontrell declines. Ancestor gestures up again. Dontrell opens his mouth to answer and the ocean rushes in. Dontrell passes out.)* A o Jo maa lo [We shall all go with you]" (75). Although Dontrell attempts to follow his ancestors' footsteps by drowning himself, the spirit intervenes, and the cycle is forestalled. At the very moment that Dontrell is about to join the members of the dead, the ancestors bring Dontrell back to safety. Like Free, his journey continues not beneath the sea, but on land.

The play ends with a set of stage directions that call for more of Dontrell's ancestors whose remains reside within the water to come up for air, joining in song and dance.

> *More Ancestors emerge. All remaining members of the Company. Swelling music, as they enter, dancing. It is the dance of Yemaya, Goddess of the Ocean. Their garments are like the waves of the ocean. Their faces and bodies are streaked in blue. Dancing. Dancing. Dancing. As the dance picks up energy and intensity, Dontrell rises. He joins in the dance. He dances. Dontrell is lifted back into the boat, where he stands beside Erika. Ancestor stands with them. Gathered in and around the boat, the Company stomps on the ground.* (76)

The final image—of a familial history which emerges from below a water grave—is one of community and cultural syncretism. It is an image of the past, the present, and the future all

mingling. It is hopeful, despite the way in which the water almost claims Dontrell's body. These last moments present a sense of life after death as it exists within water. The ancestors who emerge are played, the note tells us, by the remaining members of the company, creating a sense of continuity between the living and the dead. Further, the ancestors are dressed and described as part of the water themselves; their clothes, movements, and bodies derive from the ocean. This vision of the afterlife calls to mind Dontrell's hope for his unborn child, as his ancestors have experienced a belated water birth of their own. Despite the hopefulness of closing dance, the play ends on a moment of fragility and ambiguity. Although Dontrell rises from his unconscious state and dances with his ancestors, they ultimately place him back inside the boat, where he stands with his ancestor and the rest of the company. His ancestors are with him in spirit, but at this juncture they must part. Davis represents Dontrell and Erika on the edge of the present, dipping forward into new territory. Although they are charting unknown waters, they are not alone.

"Wading in the Water:" Conclusion

Throughout this discussion of all three plays there has been a persistent and recurrent theme of biblical and Christian imagery. Beginning with Loomis's vision of the bones people—the skeletons of captured Africans who walk atop the water much like Jesus might have—and continuing through to Demeter's Saul-like resurrection and Dontrell's quest to beget a new race of people, these works use waterways to interrogate the tensions between Christian theology and alternative forms of folklore and ritual practices. On one hand, the integration of biblical lore serves to keep present the fraught history of Christian doctrine as it relates to colonialism and enslavement. For not only did enslaved Africans experience forced Christian conversion in America, but the Christian bible was also simultaneously used as a central text in the service of pro-slavery rationalizations for the dehumanization of an entire race. To further expand the

problematic nature of Christianity's dominance, we can consider the impact of colonialist missionary trips to African nations with the express intent of conversion as a means toward subjugation. Thus, according to a Pew study, almost all African Americans who report adhering to a specific religion belong to a sect of Christianity.[45] In *Joe Turner, Moonwalks,* and *Dontrell,* this affiliation is troubled and alternative forms of spirituality are introduced. This is most evident in the recourse to classical and familial myth in *Moonwalks* and *Dontrell,* but it also includes Wilson's evocation of the folk nightmare refrain "dem bones." Even the new forms of embodiment these watery worlds produce—the personified river and tree in *Moonwalks* and the ancestors/sea-people in *Dontrell*—call attention to the limitations of Christianity as a sole source for Black origins and groundings. The deliberate enmeshment of Christian theology suggests both the amalgamated nature of spiritual practice produced through the African diaspora as well as the need for other, more expansive forms of origin stories.

To this end, I close, in tidalectic form, with a return to *Joe Turner.* For, in the play's final scene, Wilson provides an image of a revisionary baptism that merges theology and spirituality in the service of future generations. Here, Loomis and his wife Martha are finally reunited, but Martha has already moved on. When she pleads with him to find salvation, he explodes:

> I've been wading in the water. I been walking all over the river Jordan. But what it get me, huh? I done been baptized with blood of the lamb and fire of the Holy Ghost. But what I got, huh? I got salvation? My enemies all around me picking the flesh from my bones. I'm choking on my own blood and all you got to give me is salvation? . . . Blood make you clean? You clean with blood? . . . I don't need nobody to bleed for me! I can bleed for myself. . . . *(Loomis slashes himself*

[45] The study was conducted in 2009, but lay research shows that these figures are consistent with the religious demographics of today ("A Religious Portrait of African-Americans").

across the chest. He runs the blood over his face and comes to a realization) I'm standing! I'm standing! My legs stood up! I'm standing now! (85-86)

Loomis, like Free and Blanche, is weighed in the water, though his use of the gerund conveys a continuous, unrelenting search for his own personal freedom. His invocation of the river Jordan recalls Hughes's poem and places Loomis's journey outside of space and time, centuries long. These encounters with water, however, are not salvific but instead threaten only danger. Although Loomis has waded in the waters of the Jordan River—biblically said to provide miracles for those who seek its shores—and although he has been baptized and doused in both water and blood, he has found no peace. Indeed, rather than an aquatic salvation his own blood has begun to betray him. He is one of the bones people, sinking down as he attempts to walk across the water, but then a crucial shift occurs. Loomis, like Dontrell, recognizes within water, here figured as the blood that flows through him and that flowed through his ancestors, a mode of action—of taking matters into his own hands. As scholars note, the blood that Loomis spills in this sacrificial and ritual cleansing is a node of connection to the past and a means of generating the future, just as it evokes centuries of bloodshed.[46] Cleansed with his own blood, a form of baptism that he was otherwise denied, Loomis can stand again, a feat he is prevented from doing at the close of Act I. This suggests a tenor of hope, a closing of the circle. However, although it is hopeful, Wilson leaves *Joe Turner* on a final note of ambiguity, of redemption shot through with violence. What lay ahead for Loomis, for Free, and for Dontrell is not yet known, but these works pave the way for the possibility of leaving the world better than they found it.

[46] Diggs Colbert writes that "The sacrifice of blood, in the final scene of the play, reproduces fragmented and violent histories as it creates hope for life after the physical and symbolic death the trans- Atlantic slave trade and its aftermath caused" (229). Wardi takes a similar approach but focusing on memory, writing, "Wilson holds that the blood carries a collective memory, which allows a communion with something greater than himself, a connection with a shared African past" (5).

Chapter 4: "A Bullet through Time": Slavery and Anachronism in Time Travel Drama

"We're just caught in a little time warp": Introduction

In my previous two chapters, I have analyzed the spatio-temporal phenomenon of echo and the geo-temporal site of the ocean, ultimately to argue that these are mechanisms and landscapes through which Black dramatists and artists fabulate about the past and invent new historical narratives. In this chapter, I bring together the strands of temporal and spatial disjunction that fabulative histories create by considering the phenomenon of time travel in theatre and performance. Specifically, I open by examining George C. Wolfe's *Colored Museum* (1985), conduct a comparative analysis of Robert O'Hara's *Insurrection: Holding History* and Dennis Scott's *An Echo in the Bone* (1974), and conclude with a reading of Sigrid Gilmer's *Harry and the Thief* (2016). I focus on time travel for several reasons. Despite the trope's prevalence in contemporary drama, there is a relative dearth of scholarship on time travel in theatre, which tends to focus more on time travel in literature, film, and television. This chapter intervenes in a discourse on temporality in contemporary media and specifically in Black performance art to insert the importance of considering time travel as a trope and experience that allows for the rupturing of temporal chronology to reconstitute relationships between past, present, and future. To this end, this chapter develops a framework for thinking about anachronism from multiple perspectives: as a historical and archival concept; as a temporal concept; and as a metaphorical concept for thinking about the tensions between "now" and "then." Because time travel is predicated on the destabilization of both chronological time and unitary space, it provides another shifting ground upon which dramatists interrogate the historical past and its relationship to both our present and future.

George C. Wolfe's 1985 *The Colored Museum* is an experimental, episodic drama that catalogues the evolution of African American culture through a series of satirical staged

"exhibits," and it opens with a moment of time travel. The vignette, entitled "Git on Board," stages the journey along the Middle Passage. The scene begins with a deliberately recognizable visual cue, as the stage directions call for slides containing "images we've all seen before, of Africans being captured, loaded onto ships, tortured" (1). These images evoke a museum exhibit on the horrors of the slave trade with which an audience would be familiar—it thus appears to engender a kind of time travel in which a viewer is ostensibly transported to the past through empathic engagement with an archive. However, Wolfe deviates from these expectations, instead representing the harrowing journey from the coast of Africa to the shores of the Americas as a transcontinental flight on an airplane called the "Celebrity Slaveship," replete with a stewardess named Miss Pat who instructs the passengers to "fasten your shackles" and refrain from "call-and-response singing between cabins" (2). In transforming the hold of a slave ship into the cabin of an airplane, Wolfe dramatizes the disjointed nature of temporal and spatial relations that the slave trade creates, as the captive Africans and crew who are placed mid-air travel through both time and space. The airplane not only centralizes the anachronism inherent to this scene, but it also paradoxically invokes a notion of freedom—soaring through the skies—while presenting the transformation of free subjects into property. In short, "Git on Board" exploits the ubiquity of one image of slave history (evoked by the opening slides) only to perform a bait-and-switch of sorts, retelling the story of the slave trade as a story about time travel.

In this first exhibit, the Middle Passage becomes a site of performance where time and space are unstable, and the linear progression of African American history is explicitly called into question. This is clearly demonstrated in one of Miss Pat's admonishments to the passengers on board, as she attempts to quell any in-transit rebellions by informing the captives aboard of the future to which their progeny can look forward:

> Miss Pat: OK, now I realize some of us are a bit edgy after hearing about the tragedy on board The Laughing Mary, but let me assure you Celebrity has no intention of throwing you overboard and collecting the insurance. We value you. . . . Why the songs you're going to sing in the cotton fields, under the burning heat and stinging lash, will metamorphose and give birth to the likes of James Brown and the Fabulous Flames. And you, yes *you,* are going to come up with some of the best dances. The best dances! The Watusi! The Funky Chicken! And just think of what *you* are going to mean to William Faulkner. All right, so you're gonna have to suffer for a few hundred years, but from your pain will come a culture so complex. *And,* with this little item here. . . . *(She removes a basketball from the overhead compartment.)* . . . you'll become millionaires! (3)

Miss Pat positions herself outside of time, speaking from the future to these figures from the past. Her suggestion that the enslaved passengers bear the tortures of slavery with the promise of contributions to the fields of music, dance, and literature is biting—Wolfe performs a commentary on the notion of a tokenistic, culturally "complex" future. Despite her obviously satirical tone, Miss Pat provides a decidedly deterministic version of history, which moves from the plantation to the basketball court in the space of a sentence. The airplane itself sits in an uncomfortable temporal and spatial position, as it lives in the rarified air of an eternal, unspecified present—neither fully in the antebellum past, as evidenced by the basketball that lives in the overhead compartment, nor fully in the future. Miss Pat presents the "few hundred" years of suffering as a blip on the timeline, an exchange that, as a time traveler herself, Miss Pat can assure the passengers they will want to make.

The discomfited space in which the Celebrity Slaveship sits is dramatized when the passengers and crew experience what Miss Pat refers to as a "time warp," which dislodges the action entirely from occupying any one temporal or spatial sphere. The time warp occasions not only a panoramic view of the unfolding years of African American oppression, but it also creates a version of the historical past that is wholly untethered to chronology.

> **Miss Pat:** Time warp! *(She turns to the audience and puts on a pleasant face.)* The captain has assured me everything is fine. We're just caught in a little time warp. *(Trying to fight her growing hysteria.)* On your right you will see the American Revolution, which will give the U.S. of A. exclusive rights to your life. And on your left, the Civil War, which means you will vote Republican until F.D.R. comes along. And now we're passing over the Great Depression, which means everybody gets to live the way you've been living. *(There is a blinding flash of light, and an explosion. She screams).* Ahhhhhhhhh! That was World War I, which is not to be confused with World War II . . . *(There is a larger flash of light, and another explosion.)* . . . Ahhhhh! Which is not to be confused with the Korean War or the Vietnam War, all of which you will play a major role in. Oh look, now we're passing over the sixties. Martha and the Vandellas … "Julia" with Miss Diahann Carroll . . . Malcolm X . . . those five little girls in Alabama . . . Martin Luther King . . . Oh no! The Supremes broke up! (*The drumming intensifies.)* Stop playing those drums! Those drums will be confiscated once we reach Savannah. You can't change history! You can't turn back the clock! [. . .] Hi. Miss Pat here. Things got a bit jumpy back there, but the Captain has just

> informed me we have safely landed in Savannah. Please check the overhead before exiting as any baggage you don't claim, we trash. (4-5)

The time warp, which Miss Pat uses as an opportunity to act as a time travel tour guide of sorts, is both violent and totalizing. It moves first through scenes of war to scenes of the Civil Rights movement, ostensibly asserting historical continuity while simultaneously revealing the ruptures and discontinuities through time. The time warp is thus a metonymic way for thinking about how traveling to the past, whether literally as in the plays I examine in this chapter, or metaphorically through engagement with an archive, necessitates distortion. Distortion is a useful frame to consider in time travel drama, particularly that which concerns the slave past, because it implies a sense of alteration and play. To be caught in a time warp is to reckon with the movement through space and time that defies logic. Here, it is occasioned by the speed with which the plane hurtles toward a plantation in Savannah; elsewhere, it is occasioned by an African descendant's visit to a slave past he cannot otherwise access.

Time travel, often defined through its dangerous potential to engender paradox (for the traveler to the past must be wary at all times of altering the past and consequently the future), is presented here as inherently paradoxical. On the one hand we see Miss Pat charting an inexorable journey for generations of African Americans from bondage to freedom to cultural vanguards, while on the other we experience the "jumpiness" of the time warp, full of narrative holes and proleptic assertions of what will come but which has, of course, already happened. Further, just as Miss Pat tells the audience and travelers alike that they "can't change history," her words are actively undermined; the metamorphosis of slaver to airplane rewrites history before our very eyes. Once they have made it through the time warp and landed safely "back" in time, Miss Pat provides one final instruction to the African captives, explaining that any baggage

they do not claim will be trashed. We can read this as another instance of parody, in which the stewardess's rote directives jar with the knowledge that, of course, these newly enslaved Africans do not have baggage to claim at the carousel. However, we can also read this line as a gesture toward what Soyica Diggs Colbert and others term the "psychic hold of slavery," a temporal abeyance in which African Americans "experience a discontinuity between the historical past of slavery and the antiblack domination of the present" (8). This baggage is literal, metaphorical, and temporally contingent. If the passengers don't hold tightly to their baggage, this scene suggests, it will be discarded and forgotten—it is up to the individuals on board to carry it with them into the present.

I begin this chapter with a reading of *The Colored Museum* because of the ways that "Git on Board" functions as an example of how Black dramatists use time travel as a means of exploring resonances of the past in the present. Wolfe examines how Black life today is shaped through and against the history of the Transatlantic slave trade. Rather than dramatizing African American history with images and soundbites that are ubiquitous in representations of the slave trade, *The Colored Museum* defamiliarizes the moment in history, exploiting theatre's inherent capacity for time travel. In staging the journey as a commercial airline flight, Wolfe exploits the potential of anachronism and parodies historically deterministic relationships between slavery and the present moment. Instead, Wolfe offers us a time warp, a moment in which his characters are bound neither to here nor there, neither to now nor then. This is important because it is a paradigmatic example of how Black authors and artists reject conventions of time travel narratives and narratives about enslavement to inject humor, irony, satire, anachronism, and surrealism as a means of warping or distorting the chronology of African American history.

This chapter considers time travel narratives that return to the era of transatlantic slavery and use the anachronistic encounter between dramatic present and antebellum past to stage an intervention, suggesting that, contrary to Miss Pat's assertion, you *can* change history, you *can* turn back the clock, if only for the duration of stage time. Although the plays I consider here adopt different dramaturgical approaches to time travel, each work chafes against the generic convention set forth in science fiction by removing the fear of paradox, and instead revels in and centers the anachronistic encounters that emerge. I contend that the Black dramatists surveyed exploit the anachronism inherent to time travel narratives as a means of intervening into a historical narrative on slavery that excludes and occludes Black voices and lived experiences. This sense of being out of time, or of being both before and after one's time, is driven by the paradoxical feeling of returning to a past that one has never known, an experience that is compounded by the return to the period of slavery. In the plays I analyze, anachronism is the method by which new futures can be created, precisely because of the lack of ownership over the past. In these time traveling dramas, the past is the site where historical are affirmed, but it is also where the possibilities of the future are explored most deeply; to travel to the past of slavery is to simultaneously experience a break with and a suturing to one's history. In these works, the time traveler becomes the conduit between temporal and spatial spheres and is tasked with the forging of new histories, the carrying forth of baggage, lest it be trashed.

To begin, I build a theoretical framework by considering the concepts of time travel, anachronism, and temporality in relation to the performance of race and slavery, looking primarily at scholars who explore the afterlives of slavery in contemporary art and performance. Here, I demonstrate how engagements with the past, particularly through the guise of time travel, allow dramatists to explore the spatial and temporal implications of returning to a past that is

only made known through texts written and disseminated by white colonial voices and authors. l then move to an analysis of two time travel plays, each of which presents a different vision of how the slave past affects the present: while O'Hara's *Insurrection* is invested in its protagonist traveling to the past to engage with the prominent and enigmatic African American historical figure of Nat Turner, Scott's *Echo* looks to the legacies of the plantation in twentieth-century Jamaica. I examine how both plays approach the technology of time travel, what moments of anachronism or temporal paradox they introduce, and how they position the future of Black life in relation to the history of chattel slavery in the Americas. Overall, I argue, these plays imagine time travelling back to the period of slavery as a means of addressing contemporary issues that plague Black people in the present and, most importantly, orient them toward the future that does not depend on the ghosts of the past. To conclude, I consider a more forceful example of time travel drama that gestures toward what I term the fabulative future. Gilmer's *Harry* uses time travel as a means not only of interrogating the slave past, but actively and materially changing the present and future of Black life.

Black Temporality in Context: Time Travel, Anachronism, and Performance

The concept of paradox is central to theories of time travel, both in fiction and in physics, as the time traveler is a constant threat to the integrity of temporal distinction. In fact, David Deamer argues that in time travel narratives, the "temporal paradox . . . is exposed as the condition of time" (36). To travel through time is not only to become non-chronological, but it is also to imperil chronology as we know it. Although Deamer sees time travel narratives as predominantly ameliatory, as they allow writers to transform and re-order reality, I am interested in narratives that actively resist this order and instead revel in the dis-order traveling through time creates. The sense of fabulation and disorder associated with time travel is intimately bound

up in its association with play, discussed at length by scholars such as Matthew Jones, Joan Ormrod and Jacqueline Furby.[47] This sense of malleability and fantasy is ultimately a form of fabulation, in which time periods become fodder for articulating new modes of relationships to temporality. This notion of malleability is useful, for it is through this nature of time travel that playwrights can revisit the past and view it not as a calcified, unchanging monolith, but as a physical and psychological landscape that can be altered.

It is necessary to begin by defining anachronism broadly, for its connotative meanings have evolved since its first usages. Margreta de Grazia notes that, in a fittingly anachronistic fashion, despite its ancient Greek origins anachronism does not appear in the lexicon until the seventeenth century. Its first use in print refers to an anachronism as "an error in chronology" or "an error in computing time" (de Grazia 15). While an error in computing time ascribes the fault of anachronism to the historian or timekeeper, an error in chronology is more abstract, almost existential. It connotes a sense of being out-of-order temporally. This is reinforced by Jeremy Tambling, who sees anachronism as "what is out of time, what resists chronology" (1). This sense of resistance suggests a radical possibility latent in historical anachronism.

As with the temporal paradoxes of time travel, its anachronistic quality also provides for an inherent sense of play and malleability, akin to fabulation. Anachronism-as-fabulation builds upon the notion that "errors" in chronology or historization are always generative moments for destabilizing the power of the historical record.[48] Jacques Ranciere expounds upon this point in

[47] Matthew Jones and Joan Ormrod signal this in a reference to the "malleability of time" opens up space for "play" (17). Similarly, Jacqueline Furby unpacks what she terms "play-time" in time travel fiction, which connotes a sense of freedom that she likens to a "temporal playground" (77). Furby argues that in stories where there is temporal manipulation, "we encounter a malleable play time and are given a chance to fantasize a different relationship with time that is not necessarily based on the familiar, linear, unidirectional model" (77).

[48] To connect this again to the evolution of meaning, de Grazia explains that John Dryden called Virgil's famous anachronism (turning Dido and Aeneas, who did not live at the same time, into contemporaries) a "falsehood" and, in turn, a "false computation of times" (18). While this term alone connotes a sort of creative falsity aligned with

"The Concept of Anachronism and the Historian's Truth," in which he writes, "The accusation of anachronism is not the claim that something did not exist at a given date. It is the claim that something *could not have existed* at this date" (28). Ranciere presents an opportunity to imagine otherwise; if anachronism suggests the impossibility of two temporal spheres co-existing, it also allows for the possibility of creating the conditions for their coexistence.

Although some scholars contend that all history is anachronistic, Ranciere instead suggests that *no* period is anachronistic:[49]

> There is no anachronism. But there are modes of connection that in a positive sense we can call anachronies: events, ideas, significations that are contrary to time, that make meaning circulate in a way that escapes any contemporaneity, any identity of time with "itself." An anachrony is a word, an event, or a signifying sequence that has left "its" time, and in this way is given the capacity to define completely original points of orientation . . . to carry out leaps from one temporal line to another. And it is because of these points of orientation, these jumps and these connections that there exists a power to "make" history. (47)

Ranciere, like de Grazia, provides another way for thinking about the past in relation to the present that does not devalue anachronism, but rather reconfigures it. The modes of connection that live outside of contemporaneity, outside of the present, are the means by which Ranciere argues events, words, and, I add here, people themselves, can "leap from one temporal line to

---

fabulation, de Grazia further points out that in the 18th century, anachronism became allied more with errors in narrativizing history: "an anachronism would be less a chronological error than a rhetorical solecism" (20).

[49] Other authors discuss anachronism from a postmodernist standpoint; for example, Amy Elias and Jeremy Tambling suggest that all history is inherently anachronistic. Amy Elias offers anachronism as that which supplements or intervenes chronological time in order to assert a discontinuity (112). Echoing Elias, Tambling comes to a similar conclusion, writing, "If history is what happened, and what we say happened, the first only knowable through the second, history can only be anachronistic" (5-6). However, it is Ranciere's position, and my own, that to think of history this way is to see anachrony as totalizing, potentially neutering its insurgent qualities for fabulation.

another," essentially an articulation of time travel. In these leaps is the power to "make" history, to fabulate and create new narratives about the past. It is this creative leap that defines the time travel plays I consider here, as they travel to the slave plantation not as cautious observers, but as anachronies ready to make history.

For example, in analyses of theatre, authors such as Maurya Wickstrom and Jaclyn Pryor examine the intersecting discourses surrounding temporality and performance studies to argue for an essential radicality that emerges from the deliberate warping of time.[50] In *Fiery Temporalities* (2018), Wickstrom argues that theatre and performance have the capacity to "invent or inaugurate particular types of time, which allow us to be in history, as history, in a time of our own creation" (1). The notion that theatre provides for the creation of a unique temporal experience that allows for a participatory engagement with the historical past is significant, as it carves out a space for an embodied and non-chronological investment in the past. Further, Wickstrom uses the phrase "to initiate" as a means of describing the revolutionary capacity of theatre that is past-oriented without simply reproducing narratives of the past. She writes, "To initiate is to create a disorder by means of a temporal innovation within processional history . . . to nominate an alternative possibility for what it means to live for those whom 'history' has meant to vanquish" (15). To initiate, then, is to create an alternative trajectory from past, to present, to future, in which linear history is rejected in favor of disordered temporality.

Pryor is similarly invested in non-chronological staged encounters with the past; while their focus in *Time Slips* (2017) is on the trauma and temporality of queer people's experience,

[50] For length considerations I focus only on Wickstrom and Pryor here, but Tavia Nyong'o's essay "The Scene of Occupation" and Alice Rayner's essay "Keeping Time" are both good examples of further explorations of temporality in performance, with a focus more so on minoritarian performance. Nyong'o examines what he calls the "precarious time of occupation" (139) while Rayner argues that time should be considered "not as a series of points on a line but as a modality or manner, which is to say, as an *adverb*" (174).

we can augment their reading to include the trauma of slavery that haunts the time travel narratives I examine. As with initiation, Pryor's conception of "time slips," a time travel term itself, offers an alternative to procession and linearity. Pryor writes,

> A time slip reveals a previously unseen aspect of either the past, present, or future (while complicating the presumably linear relationship among and between each)—with an eye toward hidden histories, buried traumas, unclaimed experiences, invisible structures, and previously unimaginable futures. (9)

Pryor's reference to the "buried traumas" that occupy past and present recalls Miss Pat's loaded instruction to the passengers to claim their baggage. Here, Pryor locates performance as a site where that baggage, rather than weighing subjects down, can free them from temporal domination. In short, these terms for thinking about alternative temporalities in performance allow for the experience of time to be distorted—elongated, shrunk, or bypassed altogether.

In the opening to *Race and Performance After Repetition,* Soyica Diggs Colbert, Douglas Jones, and Shane Vogel similarly attempt to move toward something like a cracked time outside of repetition, with a particular focus on how this move parallels necessary moves in the fields of black and ethnic studies: "Performances of race . . . insist that repetition is but one way that past/present/future can be configured in relation to each other" (13). This insistence, they argue, comes from the ways in which Black subjects are excluded from dominant modes of linear temporality: "Often operating under different notions of temporality, black studies and ethnic studies have shown how Western conceptions of history and time have rendered minoritarian subjects frozen in the past, lagging behind, or perpetually on the threshold, even as historical

traumas erupt in the present" (8).[51] As a counter, then, the authors ask, "What other time signatures organize minoritarian performance?" (Diggs Colbert et al. 15). This useful and provocative question asserts that a distorted temporality serves as an overarching mechanism for Black performance. As Joshua Chambers-Letson writes in his exploration of performance artist Alexandria Eregbu's work, "despatialization of blackness and of the racialized body requires a concurrent process of differential temporalization. That is, the blackened may be out of space but it is also out of time" (273). In this formulation, Chambers-Letson suggests that the ontology of Blackness itself is an anachronism, a time warp.

A central facet of thinking about temporality and performance is race, and specifically for my purposes, the intersecting concerns of blackness and temporality in performance.[52] In an essay on temporality in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man,* Alexander Weheliye draws on this same sense of precarity to explore the conditions of black temporality. His reading parallels Diggs Colbert's assertion that minoritarian subjects are not allowed access to Western time, using Ellison's narrator who notes that the members of the Brotherhood in the novel are "falling out of history . . . men out of time" (Ellison qtd in Weheliye 322). Weheliye goes on to argue, "[B]lack subjects are not intrinsically outside of history . . . but are actively and often ferociously 'recorded out' of it, which, in turn, has led to the forging of other means to record black history"

[51] Although she is writing about Native performance and literature specifically, Wickstrom's take on this notion of being frozen in time seems relevant to the ways that African American history is often centered on moments of defeat, which serves to freeze time.

[52] In relation to depictions of slavery, much scholarship has been produced about how the afterlife of slavery in contemporary life dictates its representations in popular media. For example, *Visualising Slavery: Art Across the African Diaspora* collects essays from critics and artists alike who examine different exhibits and works from the Black visual art world that engage directly with the history of the Transatlantic slave trade. Helena Woodard's *Slave Sites on Display: Reflecting Slavery's Legacy through Contemporary "Flash" Moments* similarly turns an eye toward twentieth and twenty-first century explorations of the slave past in various media with a focus on landscapes such as the African Burial Ground in New York and the Slave Ship Exhibition. In another transdisciplinary study, Lisa Woolfork's *Embodying American Slavery in Contemporary Culture* looks at the ways that the Black body is subject to different forms of interpellation by examining examples such as Octavia Butler's time travel novel *Kindred* and the slave reenactments at Colonial Williamsburg.

(326). Weheliye links the experience of being outside of time to that of being out of history, calling to alternative recording and archival practices, which, I suggest, include fabulation and anachronism. This notion of other means to record Black history becomes increasingly significant when looking at works such as *Insurrection, Harry,* and *Echo,* for they share a fascination with the disparities between writing on the past and the character's experiences of past landscapes. These texts imply that a fabulative, staged journey to the imagined version of Jerusalem, Virginia (the location of Nat Turner's revolt) is no less "real" than the experience of reading Turner's *Confessions.* Put another way, official records of Black history, written by those who seek to silence or diminish Black voices, are as much of an imagined exercise as the excursions to the past these playwrights stage.

An important theoretical thread of thought on Black temporality and time travel surrounds what Colbert, Aida Levy-Hussen, and Robert Patterson term the "psychic hold of slavery," or the unwillingness of African diasporic writers and thinkers to "let go" of the slave past. The authors argue that this unwillingness stems from a temporal problem: "twenty-first century subjects experience a discontinuity between the historical past of slavery and the antiblack domination of the present" (Colbert et al. 8). A chapter in *The Psychic Hold of Slavery* by Afro-pessimist theorist Calvin Warren echoes this notion of contemporary Black experience in relation to the history of slavery as a problem of time, arguing that slavery's inability to be temporalized and placed "within a scheme of time" is what prevents African descendants from "getting over" what is inherently non-chronological and ongoing (55). Instead, Warren offers a model for what he terms "black time," which resists narratives of linearity and provides another means of temporalizing the slave past: "Black time is time without duration; it is a horizon of time that eludes objectification, foreclosing idioms such as 'getting over,' 'getting through, or

'getting beneath'" (56). Black time is the time of anachronism and time travel—it is thoroughly de-spatialized and de-chronological; for these reasons, I argue that Black time is the temporal schema through which the time travel narratives I explore in this chapter navigate. Through Scott, O'Hara, and Gilmer's experimentations with dramatic and historical chronology, the antebellum past and the site of the plantation are no longer histories to "get over."

One final shared aspect of each of these plays is a deliberate use of dialect, such as African American Vernacular English (AAVE) and Jamaican patois, by Black characters that operates in opposition to the standard English used by white characters. Dialect and non-standard English permeates both Black postcolonial and African American theatre. There is a long-standing debate over the use of English in African drama from former British colonies such as Nigeria and Kenya, evidenced most strongly by Ngugi wa Thiong'o's assertion in *Decolonising the Mind* (1986) that "the choice of language and the use to which language is put is central to a people's definition of themselves" (4). In Caribbean postcolonial contexts such as *Echo* describes, there is often a historical chafing between the English introduced and spoken by colonial settlers and plantation owners and the resultant hybridized linguistic practices of the Black people held captive on these islands—although English was mandated in schools and made standard post-emancipation (a process Thiong'o calls the "psychological violence of the classroom"), African languages were often retained and creolized forms emerged (9). In Jamaica, creole or patois is spoken by almost 95% of the population, and in *Echo,* the creolized English used by the company members when embodying Black characters stands in stark distinction to their language style when acting as white colonial figures (Leith 133).

A similar thread exists in theories of Black sociolinguistics, which acknowledges the roots of Black English in similar African language retention practices and suggest that choosing

to write in AAVE—used throughout *Harry* and even more heavily through the dialogue and typography of *Insurrection*—is a form of coalition building for African Americans (Zeigler 169). This takes on a more pressing register in live theatre, as Daphne Brooks points out Black drama's origins in vernacular practices such as folkloric and oral performance traditions (4). Put another way, Suzan-Lori Parks defines a "black play" in a revised version of her essay "New Black Math" in purely vernacular terms: "A black play makes do if it got to/ fights/ screams/ sings/ dreams/ WORKS IT/ talks in code and tells it like it is ALL UP IN YA FACE" (576). In presenting the language of the populace rather than that of the oppressors, O'Hara, Scott, and Gilmer suggest that with the destruction of native languages during imperialist conquest, this syncretic, mashed-up version of the master's tongue is the sole means of communication that remains after the temporal and spatial disjunctures of time travel.

Plantation Pasts and Fabulative Futures in *Insurrection: Holding History*

Robert O'Hara's *Insurrection: Holding History* is a 1996 play about a PhD student named Ron, who is writing a dissertation on the Nat Turner rebellion. Along with his 189-year-old great-great grandfather TJ, Ron travels back in time to the plantation on which both TJ and Turner were enslaved at the time of the latter's insurrection. In the play's opening note, O'Hara writes: "this play should be done as if it were a Bullet through Time" (262). This image is multivalent, signaling the violent, ungovernable speed at which the play moves through time. Scholars such as Faedra Chatard Carpenter and Stacie McCormick note the significance of this imagery at the play's outset, calling attention to the way the image suggests the play's "holes and gaps as it boomerangs back and forth between past and present" (Carpenter 188).[53] Bullets through time allow for time to become malleable, but they also importantly connote a kind of

[53] McCormick 119.

irrevocable rupture to the fabric of space and time. In many ways a bullet through time recalls the gunshot that echoes through the scenes of Suzan-Lori Parks's *The America Play,* rupturing the drama's sonic field while tethering the action together through that very rupture. I invoke Parks here to suggest that O'Hara's vision of the bullet structures *Insurrection* through a similar sense of paradoxical (dis)continuity in which the action is both temporally unstable and connected through that same instability. In what follows, I argue that *Insurrection* paradoxically suggests that you cannot change the past even as the audience and reader experience the alteration of the past through anachronistic tensions and encounters. Specifically, I examine the act of traveling back in time as a phenomenon that geographically and psychically tethers the characters to a plantation past, the focus on problematizing the historical record of enslavement in the United States, and the meta-textual treatment of anachronism. *Insurrection* offers a mode of engagement with the slave past in which the only means of changing historical trajectories is to alter and augment the ways that the past is recorded by present and future generations.

The tension between the written historical record and a faithful presentation of the past is central to *Insurrection* primarily because of the play's interest in Nat Turner and his infamous revolt. Turner is an interesting figure in African American history, not only because of the apocrypha surrounding his connections to god, but also because of the way in which his story was written and inscribed into the historical record.[54] During the aftermath of the uprising, in which about sixty people, largely white, were killed, hundreds of freed Blacks and enslaved persons were murdered and tortured as retribution. When Turner was eventually captured months later and awaiting execution, his "confessions" were taken by Thomas Gray and published.

[54] The American Conservatory Theatre notes from their Insurrection's production include a compendium of sources from contemporary African American figures and historical writers alike. Another useful companion text to consider Turner's far-reaching influence is Jean Cash's "Nat Turner: Misguided, fragmented, disjointed images" (2019).

Although Gray purported to transcribe Turner's thoughts "word for word," the fact that Gray himself owned slaves and was plainly biased against Turner—his *Confessions* include an aside in which he writes, "I looked on him and my blood curdled in my veins" –casts doubt upon this assertion (Gray qtd in Whitcomb 18). Further complicating Turner's narrative for a contemporary audience is the 1967 publication of William Styron's novel *The Confessions of Nat Turner,* in which Styron, working heavily from Gray's document, ventriloquizes Turner's life and the events leading up to the insurrection. Although the novel won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 1968, the controversy surrounding a white author, using a white account of Turner's last days, attempting to tell Turner's story serves as a lasting example of the kinds of silencing and occlusion that Black and enslaved voices encounter in the archive. As several critics, such as Carpenter, McCormick, and Robert Andreach foreground in their analyses of *Insurrection,* the textual and oral afterlife of the enigmatic figure of Turner is precisely what draws Ron, via O'Hara, to his subject.[55] Rather than attempt to solve the enigma of Nat Turner's unknowability, *Insurrection* exploits this gap, positing a what-could-have-been instead of asserting a what-was.

Insurrection opens on a 189th birthday celebration for T.J. This biological feat attracts attention from the local community, evidenced by the fact that a dubious reporter attends the festivities each year to question the elderly man and his family. Through the premise itself, O'Hara highlights the falsity of our perceived distance from the past of slavery, symbolized through the living (although decrepit) body of T.J. That the reporter, played by the sole white actor in the ensemble cast, finds T.J.'s history to be dubious speaks to the oft-held belief that chattel slavery is a relic of an ancient, irrecoverable past. These questions of distance and

[55] In particular, McCormick (2019) points out the figure's contested nature (119-120); Andreach (1999) holds that rather than studying or learning from history, which is revealed to be a false and ultimately futile enterprise, Ron comes to learn the value of holding history in an embodied and experiential way (54).

proximity to the history of enslavement come to a head in the opening scene. In the beginning moments, we see figures from the past—Nat Turner and his henchman Hammet—creeping across the park in an alternate timeline; when the reporter spots them, he turns his focus away from T.J. and begins to inhabit the role of Thomas Gray in an interrogation scene.

> **Reporter**: Mr. Turner? *(No Answer.)* Mr. Nat Turner? … My name is Thomas R. Gray and I'm here to take your confession. *(No Answer.)* Mr. Turner? . . . *(No Answer.)* Look you can give me your story or I can make it up and even if you do confess to me I'm probably gonna put in a little filler here and there . . . *(No Answer. Ron and Hammet watch. Stunned. As: The reporter begins to write.)* . . . the CONFESSIONS of NAT TURNER [. . .] SPEAK. And history shall REVERBERATE with your name.
>
> **Nat**: My name is Nat. Turner *(A police helicopter appears above and drowns Turner in Light.*) [. . .]
>
> **Nat:** And a Voice said unta me [. . .] the FIRST should be LAST and the LAST should be FIRST FIRST. LAST. LAST. FIRST [. . .]
>
> **Reporter** *(A live broadcast)*: [. . .] What about reports that all three major networks and TURNER NETWORK TELEVISION which many feel is owned by the distant relative of your former now decapacitated slave master what about reports that they all offered you 6 figure deals for your story and film rights? Who do you think should portray you in the 8 hour mini-series that FOX TELEVISION wants to produce? (266-268)

This moment serves to introduce the unbound temporality with which O'Hara imbues *Insurrection.* Although Nat is alive and present in his own time, he and Hammet are first

introduced in a sort of time slip, wherein they have become dislocated from the nineteenth Century and instead fallen into the twentieth. The overlapping temporal spheres are not occasioned by an inciting action—the explicit time travel comes in the following scenes—but is rather woven into the tapestry of the play's dramatic world. The reporter's seamless shift from questioning T.J. to interrogating Nat further demonstrates the slipperiness of time, as the actor morphs his role mid-scene to embody Thomas Gray. These cracks in the fabric of linear time allow for the first staging of O'Hara's fabulative, anachronistic forays into the past.

The reporter's confession-taking transforms into a primetime broadcast, complete with the sound of helicopters flying overhead, spotlights flooding the stage, and references to *Roots* and television networks such as FOX and TNT. The disjunctive collision that emerges from the reporter's anachronistic suggestion that Turner's story will be sold to the highest bidder, alongside Turner's death sentence, highlights the tension between the narrative of Turner's revolt and the personage of Nat Turner himself. O'Hara is explicit about his lack of interest in uncovering a "real" Nat Turner; he notes, "I am not interested in dealing with the events in any sort of real way because I have no way of knowing what the reality was. I can only put my own spin on it" (18). To this end, the reporter's "interview" of Nat functions as a "what-if " scenelet, in which the audience is given an imaginative version of Gray and Turner's conversation in his jail cell. Although he is prodded to speak, the reporter's admissions that he will make up portions of the narrative or "add a little filler" here and there undermine his claims that Turner's testimony will be remembered. And while the reporter is not wrong in his assertion that books will be written about Turner and that history will "reverberate" with his name, both books and historical record reproduce Gray's narrative, not Turner's. Even in the play's earliest moments, O'Hara centers the conflict between the recording of the past and embodied experience.

This conflict is heightened and dramatized further by Ron's position as a PhD candidate in "slave history" at Columbia University, where he is writing a dissertation on Nat Turner's rebellion. As a Black, gay man, doubly on the margins of society, Ron's alignment with the ivory tower (a phrase that serves also to reflect the predominant racial demographics of those who inhabit it) places him in an uncomfortable position between institutional repositories of knowledge and alternative, more embodied forms of learning. A brief exchange about T.J. between Ron's aunt Gertha and cousin Octavia, juxtaposed with Ron's own take on the slave past, serves to demonstrate the importance of varied forms of engagements with history:

> **Gertha**: Don't talk lak that 'bout yo' Gramps this man useta be a slave.
>
> **Octavia**: And?
>
> **Gertha:** And that means somethin'.
>
> **Octavia**: What?
>
> **Gertha:** That you ain't suppose ta talk 'bout 'im that's what. (270)

Gertha and Octavia represent a repressive attitude toward slavery; whereas Octavia doesn't understand the significance of her ancestry, her mother identifies its importance but is unable to articulate it. Although Ron attempts to untangle his own complex relationship to Turner's history as well as his personal attachment to slavery, he ultimately falls back on its affective impact.

> I don't know where it came from but i can't git it outta my head and i have nothing new to say about him or slavery there's nothing new about the fact that he lost his mind and started slashin' folks and okay we survived OKAY ALREADY i mean so what throughout history millions of people have survived horrible events and american slavery is MINUTE when you think about it in terms of what happened during the Crusades and even the uh i don't know i mean turner's revolt was

> NUTHIN compared to how those brothas and sistas were kickin' up in Haiti okay nat turner slavery BIG DEAL move on
>
> But it won't let me Go!! (271)

Ron's stream of consciousness monologue is useful for exploring the psychic hold of slavery in the present. Despite Ron's purported belief that slavery and Nat Turner have been written about ad nauseum and that it's no longer a "big deal," he importantly cries that it won't let him go. Even through his attempts to distance himself historically and temporally—he uses relativism to note atrocities that have happened since the dawn of civilization and places American slavery on a vast timeline to shrink its influence—the slave past, both figuratively and literally, will not let him go. There is a sense then, that this family, through its relationship to the formerly enslaved T.J., is both physically and psychically held by the corporeal ghosts of slavery.

Slavery's hold is made even more manifest when T.J. reveals that he was enslaved on the same plantation as Nat Turner. T.J. asks Ron to bring him back to Southampton, pleading, "take me home Ronnie. Drive me. Carry me. Push me. Take. me. Home. Home. . ." (271). T.J. himself becomes a vessel for traveling through time, literalizing the way that familial ties motivate the excursions into the past in plays such as *Dontrell* and *Harlem Duet.* Further, T.J.'s words exemplify the extent to which this central notion of "holding" history is located in the body just as much as in the psyche. It is this sense of embodied history that substantiates Colbert's assertion that embodiment functions in the play serves to "as a negotiation with the past," further noting that when Ron "takes hold of the past" he is animating an embodied connection with T.J. and Turner (504). The moment when T.J. and Ron physically travel back to the past occurs shortly after T.J. makes his request, as they sleep in a motel located nearby Turner and T.J.'s plantation. As they sleep, the stage directions read: "*Mutha Wit's Song fills the space. Ron and*

T.J. sleep. The song moves the bed. The song lifts the bed. The bed flies upon the notes, the rhythm surrounds the bed and it soars it rocks it travels BACK" (281). Mutha Wit's song launches the pair back in time, drawing on elements of the fantastic and allowing for the suspension of reality and chronological time. In these stage directions, the bed's movement is emphasized—it flies, soars, rocks, and travels through time.

Insurrection's vision of its past landscape is spatially, temporally, and culturally imbricated. Once the bed is transported to the past, the budget motel where Ron and T.J. intend to stay the night becomes a plantation named Motel Farm, run by Massa and Mistress Mo'tel. Geographically, the same plot of land that the motel is built on in the present contains the ashes and bones of an antebellum plantation. O'Hara interrogates the role that the plantation plays in the contemporary African American psyche, presenting a wholly fabulative but incisive landscape that deliberately plays upon collective notions of "slave life." Katherine McKittrick's reading of what she terms "plantation futures," a "decolonial poetics" for examining the role that the physical and psychical remains of the plantation occupy in the Black present, is particularly useful here. McKittrick foregrounds the temporal unboundedness of the plantation, arguing that "the plantation uncovers a logic that emerges in the present and folds over to repeat itself anew throughout black lives" (4). Although this is a fictional exercise introduced by O'Hara, it asks the audience to grapple with such ghostly landscapes. What does it mean for Ron and his family to be over a century removed from slavery but only a short drive from its taphonomic and architectural remains? It is certainly an example of both temporal and spatial anachronism, in that it allows for the past to continue to haunt the peripheries of the present, never fully allowing a linear progression of time or discrete movements through space. It is also, to return to Calvin

Warren, an example of "black time," in which the experience of "getting over" slavery is wholly impossible and ultimately undesirable.

We can see this even more clearly as Ron and T.J., who is now a young, able-bodied man as he was in 1831, navigate the predictably dramatic encounters that emerge from Ron's sudden presence in this time period. Although T.J. pretends that Ron is a free Northern Black man who is just visiting, the other slaves on the plantation are skeptical of Ron's clothing and manner of speaking, and he is forced to pick cotton along with his great-great-grandfather and the others. During this scene, O'Hara stipulates that Nat appears only to Ron, T.J., and the audience in "another reality" and begins to alter the fabric of Ron and T.J.'s world. It is Ron's very presence in the past—a walking, talking anachronism—that engenders this rupture. When the Overseer returns and Ron is not able to stop himself from intervening in his abuse, the Overseer forces T.J. to whip Ron, which causes the natural world to alter yet again. The first time Ron is whipped, the stage directions read, "THE SUN DARKENS. THE EARTH SHAKES," implying that the perversity of the act itself—from a moral, familial, and temporal perspective—is enough to rend the fabric of reality. The second time T.J. picks up the whip, he uses it to kill the Overseer, which has the effect of making the sun shine again, but also instantly changes the dramatic scene to the present. Here, Ron and T.J.'s actions fly in the face of time travel logic, in which alterations to the past are punished with grave consequences. In *Insurrection,* this power reversal allows the sun to re-emerge, but it also occasions a timeslip, in which we are no longer in the past. This bullet through time is more than a dramaturgical exercise; O'Hara's brand of time travel interrogates the temporal domination inherent in slavery. Both Colbert and McCormick see in Ron's experience a challenge to "chrononormativity," or "deterministic, teleological conceptions of the past's impact on the present" (McCormick 121; Colbert 506). Ultimately, normative

notions of time are unable to account for the bullet through time; in this way, *Insurrection* functions as a contestation to forms of temporal domination.

In addition to the exploration of the slave past that Ron and TJ undergo, O'Hara stages a series of scenes in the present that metatheatrically illuminate the experience from Gertha and Octavia's perspective. Although these characters do not diegetically travel to 1831, the double casting calls for the women to play characters in both the past and present, and the play investigates the effect this has on their bodies and minds. In fact, O'Hara dramaturgically imbricates both time periods onstage, often having the women attempt to explain the inexplicable time shifts. This ability to slip between 1831 and 1996 functions as both a metatheatrical device necessitated by the multiple roles each actor plays and a means of demonstrating the instability of linear time and unitary space. A useful example of this phenomenon comes in Act II, immediately after T.J. has killed the Overseer and the dramatic action shifts to the present. Gertha and Octavia, who respectively play Mistress Mo'tel and Katie Lynn (a house slave) in the past, find themselves abruptly in the present:

> **Gertha**: What you wearin' girl? *(Gertha and Octavia look at each other and then at themselves. Pause)* Octavia honey we don' both lost our minds together. Was *Gone with the Wind* on any time last night? . . . How 'bout *Roots?* . . . Are you sho we awake?
>
> **Octavia:** I don't know last thang I remember was dreamin' 'bout pickin' cotton. . . . That's what I fell ta sleep dreamin' 'bout this woman that I didn't even know had my body and was going around pickin' cotton in my dream. (298-299)

Gertha and Octavia are forcibly jettisoned from the past into the present, but they are otherwise marked as relics of the antebellum period. As Gertha explains, they are still wearing their

costumes from their alternate roles, replete with rags and chains. In this way, they are neither fully "out" of the past nor "in" the present. This moment can be read in multiple ways, one of which is to see the chains and rags as part of the women's "baggage" that they and their ancestors have been carrying since their transcontinental flight. Earlier in the play, Gertha and Octavia demonstrate their lack of understanding about what it means to be descended from enslaved Africans—here, this lack is dramatized by the fact that they are simultaneously metachronistic (a chronological error in which someone or something is placed too late) *and* prochronistic (in which someone or something is placed too early).

Although *Insurrection* delights in the ways the present and past brush up and chafe against one another, it ultimately offers a somewhat pessimistic outlook on the possibilities of truly altering the past as a means of securing a more livable future for the descendants of African slaves. Toward the close of the play, the slaves on Motel Farm have assembled to discuss the execution of Nat's plan for revolt and escape. Ron, positioned between the fervor of Nat and his acolytes and the knowledge of the devastating ramifications of the uprising, attempts to put a stop to the impending bloodshed. In his plea to Nat and the other insurrectionists, Ron draws an inexorable line between the events of the past and those of the present.

> **Ron:** Prophet Nat they're gonna catch you after 60 days you gon' hide up in trees in dark damp caves under cold hard rocks without food-
>
> **Nat:** I don' that befo'—
>
> **Ron**: —and then they're gonna catch you and hang you . . . you gotta believe me I know (*HE PULLS A BOOK OUT OF HIS BOOKBAG)*. I read it! (317)

The moment when Ron removes Gray's *Confessions* from his bag serves as a prime example of generative anachronism—here, the record of the past is brought directly in contact with the

historical actors. This is a moment of paradox, where the insurrectionists are presented with the facts of their inevitable capture and deaths, yet are pointedly unpersuaded by the facts of this "record." The tension between Ron's surety about the future and the insurrectionists' disbelief in any written testimony comes to a head when Nat begins to read from his own confessions, underscoring the dubiousness of narrative accounts from enslaved people.

> **Nat:** I'm supposed to have tol' this white lawyer i never even heard of all my thoughts and all my ideas all my life stories? [. . .] this ain't wrote lak i talk. You believe i said what he say i said
>
> **Ron**: not all . . . um not all of it
>
> **Nat:** this the serpent's work brotha. (318)

Nat immediately distrusts the document, aligning it with satanic impulses. Not only is he suspicious of a turn of events in which he will trust a white man enough to disclose his innermost thoughts, but he also points to the language in which the confessions are written. Nat's criticisms of the *Confessions* lead Ron to become momentarily sheepish, as he tells Nat that he does not believe that the entirety of Gray's account is true. This exchange configures a dialectical relationship between historical documentation and truth, suggesting that Gray's inscription into the annals of history should be regarded as no less faithful to any "reality" than O'Hara's play.

The book comes to stand for the inexorable pull of history, even as Nat and his fellow enslaved insurrectionists resist its weight. As Ron continues his attempts to galvanize the slaves by showing them that their very names are included in the *Confessions*' appendices, with their death sentences pronounced, he makes an impassioned plea to the group to change their minds.

> **Ron:** More hatred
>
> More brutality

> More . . . blood
>
> That's the future prophet
>
> That's the future
>
> That i know.
>
> *(RON holds BOOK out to NAT 1 last time. NAT discards the book.)* (320)

The act of discarding the book suggests a faith in action and intervention, a faith in the present and an unknown future, over and above the archive. Put another way, Carpenter suggests that the play stages two insurrections, in which the second is "an insurrection against the limiting perspectives of conventional archives" (187). As a time traveler to the past, Ron is cursed with the knowledge of what is to come from both his lived experience as a Black man and his doctoral research into Turner's rebellion. Although Ron is allowed to return to his ancestral past, he is ultimately positioned in the role of an observer, helpless to stop the events that must happen, precisely because they have already happened. At this juncture, Saidiya Hartman's notes on her own experiences with slave sites on the West coast of Africa are useful, as she describes the experience of returning to a homeland you have never known as an inherently "belated encounter." She writes,

> The journey ''home'' is always a journey back, that is, back in time, since the identification with Africa as an originary site occurs by way of the experience of enslavement. And, above all else, it is a belated return. One has come too late to recuperate an authentic identity or to establish one's kinship with a place or people. Ultimately these encounters or journeys occur too late, far too long after the event, to be considered a return. In short, returning home is not possible. (Hartman 762)

Hartman views the act of returning to charged sites such as plantations as a form of time travel, in which one is physically and geographically transported to the past. For Hartman, this form of travel is ultimately flawed, as the African descendant is always already too late—or, we can say, out-of-time. Ostensibly, *Insurrection* refutes Hartman's final assertion, as we watch Ron and T.J. return to the latter's home. However, in Ron's inability to alter the course of history, he arrives too late. The belatedness of his return to a past accessible only through the fantastical flight of time travel seems to undermine the inherent radicality of Ron's and T.J.'s journey back. Despite his academic expertise and documentation, Ron is ultimately powerless to stop the insurrectionists from signing their own death warrants and entering the historical record. His research, culled from archival records that seek to overwrite the narrative of Nat's revolt, is shown to be flawed in the presence of the insurrectionists themselves.

The above scene ends with a furious T.J. deciding to take Ron back to his own time, before which he delivers a speech that, at first glance, appears to function as a standard recitation on the nature of history and the passage of time. T.J. argues that we accrue meaning by inheriting the scars of our ancestors, of the past, which speaks to a central tension between himself and his great-great-grandson; whereas Ron does not want or think it necessary for suffering to occur, T.J. deems it essential.

> we change in oura OWN time
>
> not. in. othas.
>
> You wake up ev'ry mornin' breathin' the AIR that NAT TURNER fought fo' you ta breathe and you sleep ev'ry nite wit no FEAR cuz that crazy nigga SHOUTED Out at the Moon askin' his Gawd fo' a way thru dis trouble and you think you can show up back heah and BLOCK that!!! Ronnie you are who you are because them

> people that's gon' git shot up hung up cut up is what will 'llow you ta enter them doors of that fancy college ya go ta read them wordy books and write them thesis papers SEE these niggas heah cain't understand that ALL they know is that they wanna be FREE and that's what the plannin' ta Do.
>
> so they gon' WIN
>
> they might DIE
>
> but they gon' WIN
>
> You. da proof. *(the SLAVE and the FREE MAN clock each other)*
>
> slavery.
>
> ends . . . (321-322)

T.J.'s assertion that we change in our own time, not in others, ultimately becomes the play's mantra as Ron must reorient his focus away from the past and toward the future. T.J.'s logic ostensibly reads as upholding the dictums of chronological time; he draws a straight line between Nat's existence, up to and including the revolt, and Ron's trajectory 160 years later. To T.J., Ron's attempt to dissuade the insurrectionists from destruction is nothing more than an attempt to "block" the inevitable; their deaths are what has allowed him to enroll at Columbia and pursue a PhD. Further, T.J. seems to suggest an impassable divide between Ron and the insurrectionists, as he notes that their desire to be free prevents them from understanding Ron's perspective, just as he is incapable of understanding their decision to put themselves in harm's way. However, I argue that the close of T.J.'s speech undercuts his earlier assertions and instead opts for a more open, ambivalent understanding of the past's tether to the present. T.J. says twice that the insurrectionists "win," a characterization of Turner's rebellion that jars with convention. Despite Thomas Gray's account and Styron's novel, which furnish the insurrection as an ultimately

tragic, failed affair, T.J. rewrites these narratives to declare them victorious. His last cryptic statement, "slavery. ends," is called into question by the ellipses that follow and ultimately close the passage. Does slavery end, O'Hara asks us, or does it continue in the dots that mark the break between the past and the present? Overall, *Insurrection* offers a paradoxical, complex approach to the question of whether we can change the past. We change in our own time, where the alteration of the past can be seen and felt, rather than intervening in the past itself. Although there is a fixity here, O'Hara's play reminds us that we must acknowledge the ways in which the past makes possible the change we inhabit.

In the play's final moments, Ron is forced to watch the bloodshed, culminating in the death of his great-great-grandfather T.J. As he holds the now decrepit body in his arms, he exclaims to Gertha and Octavia, who look on: "holding history. I'm holding history in my arms" (335). At *Insurrection's* close, Ron has exchanged the documentation of American slavery for the embodied knowledge that his journey through time has provided. Although it is a belated, anachronistic encounter, it opens up new avenues for understanding how Turner and the insurrectionists are invisibly linked to Ron and his future. In a truly temporally disjunctive fashion, the play's final lines are not "the end" but rather "THE BEGINNING" (335). The play's close directs us away from the past, from endings, and positions itself, and Black life, in the present, moving toward an unknown future.

"Thirty years long like three hundred": Breaking the chains in *An Echo in the Bone*

Whereas *Insurrection: Holding History* conceives of time travel as a means of interrogating slavery's legacies in the United States, Dennis Scott's 1974 drama *An Echo in the Bone* concerns the slave trade's reverberations in the plantation colony of Jamaica. As an exemplary work in post-independence, Michael Manley-era Jamaica, *Echo* serves as an

exploration of the ways that the history of plantation slavery ruptures the experience of time and space for those Black inhabitants who carry the physical and psychical scars from the past.[56] *Echo* was first performed in 1974 at the University of the West Indies' Drama Society in Mona, Jamaica as part of the University's twenty-fifth anniversary celebrations. The play's frame narrative is set in 1937 rural Jamaica and begins nine nights after the presumed death of the central family's patriarch, a man named Crew, who has gone missing after the murder of Mr. Charles, the village's white landowner. Crew's wife Rachel gathers Crew's friends and family for a traditional Nine Night ceremony, a ritual which has its roots in precolonial Africa and is attributed to revivalist cults such as Pocomania.[57] Led by Rachel, the cast engages in the ceremony and is transported through time and space to relive and re-enact moments of Jamaican history. It begins with the arrival of new slaves in Jamaica in the eighteenth century, returns to the moment when slavery was abolished in Jamaica, and ends in the near present, where the white landowning community abuses their power over the struggling Black laborers. A form of time travel, ritual ruptures linear temporality; it places these moments in time along a continuum of racial oppression and brings long dead history to the fore.

In contrast to *Insurrection,* which shuttles its characters and audience between two specific moments in the past and present, *Echo* functions similarly to the Celebrity Slaveship in *Colored Museum,* presenting a protracted aerial view of the last three centuries, warping time

[56] Michael Manley was the Prime Minister of Jamaica from 1972-1980 and again from 1989-1992. As a representative of the democratic socialist People's National Party, Manley and his regime was instrumental in funding arts and education programs that allowed playwrights such as Scott to produce and stage work in the 1970s as well as introducing social reforms that sought to better the lives of impoverished Jamaicans.

[57] I don't explore the origins of the ritual in depth here, but Helen Gilbert and Joanne Tompkins' footnote on the ceremony in *Post-Colonial Drama: Theory, Practice, Politics* (1996) provides a useful and concise summary: "The Nine Night ceremony (similar to the Haitian Ceremony of the Souls) is one of the standard death rituals observed in Afro-Caribbean religions, particularly in revivalist cults such as Pocomania. It derives from ancestor possession cults of the Ashanti and involves rigorous dancing, often called Kumina, which leads to the manifestation of the spirits. The term 'Kumina' is sometimes used in the wider sense to refer to syncretic cult religions and/or rituals which maintain significant African influences, particularly rituals based on possession" (102).

and space to reveal occluded moments in Jamaica's colonial slave history. In this section, my goal is twofold: first, I suggest that the scenes of ritual possession and transportation can and should be read as scenes of time travel which produce anachronistic encounters and highlight the way that the slave past looms over the post-independence present. Although the small body of scholarship on *Echo* highlights the play's use of ritual to engender commentary on the modern subaltern Jamaican subject, the time travel scenes themselves are rarely analyzed in terms of their challenge to normative chronology.[58] As a counter, I argue here that the moments in which the action of the play and the characters themselves are brought back in time serve as politically charged "time slips," which initiate new historical realities into being. In short, these time travel excursions do more than unearth untold or occluded histories; they augment the historical record and present an alternative timeline that provides the conditions for the cyclical nature of white domination to play out differently for Rachel and her family in the future. Second, this section argues that *Echo* uses time travel as a means of commenting on the connection between time and space in the wake of slavery, particularly by centering the unchanging nature of the plantation, which, even in the 1930s of the play's present, subjugates its poor Black residents to the white landowning class. As a form of social redress, then, Scott's time travel drama suggests that an embodied approach to the (re)visioning of history will allow for the breaking of both metaphorical and physical chains.

Even before the play's ritual frame is introduced, the characters in *Echo*, composed of Crew's family and close friends, discuss the ways that time dilates on the plantation. As the

[58] Some examples of sustained discussion of the Nine Night ritual in Scott include Renu Juneja's "Recalling the Dead in Dennis Scott's *An Echo in the Bone"* (1992), Christopher Balme's "The Caribbean Theatre of Ritual: Derek Walcott's *Dream on Monkey Mountain,* Michael Gilkes's *Coubade: A Dream-play of Guyana,* and Dennis Scott's *An Echo in the* Bone" (1992), and Helen Gilbert and Joanne Tompkins's *Postcolonial Drama: Theory, Practice, Politics* (1996).

group prepares the altar for the Nine Night ceremony, they discuss and lament Crew's fate. Although his body has not been recovered, Rachel believes that he has drowned himself rather than face judicial punishment for the murder of a wealthy white man. When P, a marijuana dealer and compatriot of Crew's, brings up the dead man's legacy, he cannot help but connect both his life and death to the echoes of the slave past, musing: "Is a terrible thing to go out like a fire that the rain put out. This is what a man must live for, eh? You cut down the canes for a lifetime, every year you drag the sweetness out of the ground with you bare hands and pray the next season will be easy. Three hundred years crying into the white man's ground, to make the cane green, and nothing to show" (18). P's account of the accumulation of time centers around its repetition and cyclicality. P similarly emphasizes Crew's relationship to the land, suggesting that the recurring nature of the harvest is a further indication of the lack of futurity and change offered to the laboring class in Jamaica. Crew's occupation as a farmer who works on Mr. Charles' land further cements this sense of nothingness—although it has been three hundred years since enslaved Africans were brought to work the land of Jamaican plantations, Crew is still tasked with working the "white man's ground" for a lifetime. Rachel's response to P's estimation of Crew's legacy is telling, as she wearily affirms, "I remember. I remember. Thirty years long like three hundred" (18). Rachel's rejoinder works not only to connote a sense of collapsed time, but also to reveal the futility of linear conceptions of time in the face of what Rinaldo Walcott terms the "long emancipation."[59] Not only have the last thirty years mirrored the last three hundred, but to Rachel's mind, they are indistinguishable, placing *Echo's* characters simultaneously inside and outside of normative temporality.

[59] Walcott's *Long Emancipation: Moving Toward Black Freedom* (2021) suggests that Black subjects across the globe are still living in the time of emancipation, which is distinct from freedom.

The Nine Night ritual is yet another formation of altered temporality, as the ceremony requires that the living participants create an altar for the dead, who then returns to possess the members of the ritual until both the living and the dead are satisfied, and the dead can pass onto the next world. Nine Night, then, is invested in the reorganization of relationships between past, present, and future, allowing for an attenuation of the boundary between temporal spheres. That the ceremony's spiritual dimension includes bodily possession is significant, particularly considering the multiple valences possession takes on in the context of chattel slavery, in which humans were viewed as possessions and were thus dispossessed. Additionally, Renu Juneja's analysis of the play's ritual framework importantly calls attention to Nine Night as an example of a "cultural survival" ritual that survived the Middle Passage (89). Juneja further notes that in the colonial period, Nine Night was viewed as anti-white, thus imbuing the ceremony with a sort of insurgency: "The Nine-Night ceremony, then, is not only evidence of cultural continuities with Africa but is also associated with direct political resistance" (99). As a ritual with a history of communal survival and resistance, the Nine Night ceremony is deployed in *Echo* as the means through which the characters encounter moments in their own collective and personal histories, working to counter the paucity of written and disseminated records by supplanting them with forms of embodied knowledge.

The embodiment that this form of time travel drama requires underscores the play's metatheatricality as well as its interest in the bodies of the performances themselves. As in *Insurrection,* Scott's play calls for the actors to play multiple roles; unlike *Insurrection,* however, which indicates which set of characters each actor will play, *Echo's* characters are always themselves, Black Jamaicans, playing roles in the various time travel scenes that they cast off when the action returns to the present. I pause on this distinction because it underscores the

performative mutability inherent to *Echo,* which sees in turns these characters playing roles such as white slave auctioneers or maroons. That these moments of time travel require the characters to perform a kind of racial drag hails them as embodied anachronisms, out of time and space.

In the play's first moment of time travel the group is re-cast as newly captured Africans and the crew of a slave ship in 1792. This scene serves as a return to the site of original trauma of forcible removal, exploring the anachronistic engagements that emanate from this far-removed role play. Scott's decision to set his first "flashback" scene on the coast of Africa is notable, as it invites both the characters and the audience to imagine a possible moment unrecorded and unremembered in history.[60] Relatedly, Imad Khawaldeh et al. read *Echo's* temporal flights as a form of counter-history, using Michel Foucault's definition which asserts that "in counter-history, the struggle against discursive omissions and exclusions entails a 'return to the origin'" (72). This notion of return recalls Hartman, who argues that a return home is never possible and always flawed. Here, we can read the flawed encounter with one's origins as a form of productive anachronism.

Anachronism's productive quality is further emphasized when we see the character of Rattler, the mute drummer who facilitates the ritual in the present, use his tongue in 1792 to spit in the face of the bosun. As retaliation, Stone/Bosun cuts out Rattler's tongue for insubordination, thus turning him into the mute man we encounter 150 years in the future. Valerie Bada connects Rattler's muteness (which he retains across all the time travel scenes that follow) to the lasting effects of original trauma, noting that "It reflects both the brutal fracture of 'his-story,' i.e. the 'unspeakable' erasure of being, and the silent development of a collective

[60] This choice is more notable considering that each of the following time travel moments occur within Jamaica, often in close proximity to where the present action takes place and as a means of centering the connection between temporal and spatial stasis.

consciousness refashioned from broken fragments of history" (90). Rattler's muteness, which transcends time and space, can thus be read as a form of embodied history and anachronism, as its persistence confounds the logic of chronology. Through Rattler, time travel allows for fabulative challenges to normative time to emerge and survive across temporal boundaries.

In addition to the commentary on violence which Scott invokes, the 1792 scene includes a paratextual commentary on the question of dominant, recorded forms of history. This commentary derives from Brigit, who plays a young British woman who will be relocating to the "islands" and wishes to observe the "nature of the creatures" (23). Brigit's desire for a more experiential form of knowledge is in part due to the lack of clarity in written accounts of African peoples; she laments, "one had such conflicting reports from various writers!" (24). Although Brigit's reference to conflicting reports implicates only the variety of accounts found in travel histories produced by Europeans across the Afro-Atlantic world, she also performs a commentary on the ways that these conflicting narratives come to serve as official forms of knowledge production in terms of learning about the "Other."[61] Indeed, Trevor Burnard's study of plantation societies in the Caribbean notes the "considerable corpus" of colonial writing on Jamaican life, history, and geography (162). That these are all examples of colonial knowledge production is worth mentioning, for in *Echo,* Brigit carries around and quotes from one work in particular: Bryan Edwards' *The History, Civil and Commercial, of the British Colonies in the West Indies,* published in 1793.[62] Scott's meta-textual inclusion of Edwards' history invites viewers to interrogate the veracity of recorded, official forms of knowledge alongside

[61] Here I am thinking of "histories" (a generic term rather than an endorsement of historical fact) such as Marcus Rainsford's *An Historical Account of the Black Empire of Hayti* (1805), Edward Long's *History of Jamaica* (1774), and John Gabriel Stedman's *Narrative of a five years expedition against the revolted Negroes of Surinam* (1796).
[62] It is another interesting anachronism that the scene is said to take place in 1792, yet Brigit notes that Edwards' *History*, made widely available in 1793, was "just published."

experiential, oral forms. As William Bond's introduction to Edwards' text makes plain, *The History* was an "enormously influential" work, which was translated into several languages and reprinted in several subsequent editions (Ragatz qtd in Bond, n.p.). Edwards, a white, British-born Jamaican planter and staunch anti-abolitionist, thus serves as an arbiter for the circulation of knowledge on the Caribbean. In *Echo,* however, despite Brigit's delight in reading about the differences in African tribes according to Edwards, what she experiences emphasizes the disparity between the limits of written accounts and any notion of veracity. Brigit cannot bear the sight of the violence, or the stench that the bodies in the hold produce; ultimately, this scene suggests that Edwards and other historians like him are unable to account for a true history of the West Indies.

As a counter to the first time travel scene, which centers on the subjugation and torture of captured Africans, the final scene of Act I transports the group to a moment in the historical past that highlights Jamaican *marronage,* a form of radical resistance.[63] Set in 1833, the scene follows a white man, played by the ironmonger Stone, who has lost track of the wild pig he was hunting and comes into contact with Jacko and Sonson, Crew's sons in the present who play as maroons. As Stone is unfamiliar with the woods in which he finds himself lost, Jacko is easily able to overpower him and hold him captive. The scene involves a charged dialogue between the two men, as Jacko taunts the immobile Stone just as Stone hurls racial epithets at his captor. The scene is notable for two reasons: first, Scott's inclusion of *marronage* in his imagined timeline of Jamaican history centers resistance and cunning alongside more common tropes of violence and

[63] Although there is a spate of contemporary scholarship on Maroon societies, particularly as they arose in West Jamaica, research suggests that only in the late 1980s and 1990s (after the production of *Echo)* did writing and large-scale histories emerge for a larger readership. However, as E. Kofi Agorsah writes, "Maroons of Jamaica successfully resisted re-enslavement throughout the History of British authority on the island, forcing the latter to pass more than forty major ineffective laws and taking unsuccessful punitive measures to control marronage and Maroon activities, until peace treaties were signed in the early 1730's" (404).

oppression. Second, the scene contains a tonal shift, in which the future, a previously inaccessible site due to the lack of opportunities offered the ceremony participants in the present, is now invoked with impassioned fervor. For example, when Stone chides Jacko for using what he terms a "white man saying," Jacko replies, "A black day for you when you taught us your tongue. Busha. All the tribes coming together, under the one language. The word is freedom, and one day the whole country going stand up and shout it out" (44). Like Caliban before him, Jacko turns Stone's derision back onto him, turning white into black and foretelling a future in which tribal coalitions will dismantle the oppressive forces that bind them. As this scene takes place the same year that the Slavery Abolition Act was passed, there is a note of defiant hope in the promise of a new nation; however, as anachronistic time travelers, we know this hope to be ultimately deferred, as Jamaica was under British rule until 1962. This scene then serves as a fabulative moment of what-if, positing a future world which will not materialize.

The play's uneasy tension between past and future, which threatens to trap its subjects in an eternal present, comes to the fore in the opening scene of Act II, which brings the action back to the sugar barn amid the confused and travel-weary ceremony participants. As earlier, the topic of futurity and change develops quickly.

> **STONE**: I watch how the big land-owners they corner up with their own and sell the sugar back to us for four times what it cost us to raise. I know. I see the inside of the offices sometimes, and the big house that they build from two hundred years ago, when all of us worked the land for nothing, like animals. You think things change any?
>
> **P**: We free now, Stone. That is a big change.

> **BRIGIT**: You feel so? You skin white, then Mass P? To them you is still dirt, nothing you can say will change the way they look at you. . . .
>
> **STONE**: [S]omeday there is going to be blood. This land is used to it, and it is crying out for rain, for two thousand years that is what the cane grow with, and I fraid to see into the future. It looking too much like what gone before. (47-49)

Stone's evident distrust of the white land-owning class is predicated on his knowledge of not just his immediate past, but a protracted history that spans centuries. He is able to move from his current anger at the buying price for sugarcane straight to resentment for the wealth disparities that cemented in the era after slavery. His ability to collapse time mirrors his pronoun usage; as he speaks, his use of "us" in describing his ancestors' slave labor elides any distinction between present and past. There is a truth to this anachronistic suggestion, as we watch the characters embody nameless figures from the slave past, often in scenes that could have occurred on the very land they now occupy. Despite this lamentation, however, P attempts to assert their freedom; after all, slavery has formally ended, although national independence has not yet been won. P's suggestion that things have changed is met with derision, ultimately leading Stone to reiterate the importance of the land to any conception of real change. Two hundred years becomes two thousand, and, like Jacko as the maroon implies, Stone asserts that a soil-nourishing shower of blood, a violent revolution, is necessary to alter the future. Stone is explicitly afraid to look into the future, lest it reveal more of the same. In this exchange Scott reveals the extent of *Echo*'s reach; it appears ostensibly to be a play about the recent dead, nine nights ago, but it stretches to center the long dead—both the bodies of the ancestors but also the architecture and ecology that remains: the Great House, the shores, crops, and woods of Jamaica.

This sense of impending entrapment is redoubled as the second act progresses and the time travel scenes begin to frequent the immediate past, beginning four years prior when Mr. Charles has returned from England to live in the Great House and operate his business. To do so, as Stone notes above, Charles employs the poor Black residents of the village for low wages and with few resources, essentially extending and transmuting the conditions of slavery in the era of "freedom." In the scene where Charles has returned, he (played by Stone) is attempting to convince Rachel to work as his housekeeper, establishing the house as a haunted site where the past still lingers. He pleads, "The old house is falling to ruin. It's a disgrace. Built well, mind you. Your ancestors worked hard at it. . . . It's a big old house, though I'll probably close down half of it. Maybe make it into a museum. There's some fine stuff there from the past. My wife never appreciated it. Solid stuff. Enduring" (62). The plantation's great house, as with the land, is a site that exists in no one period, as Charles collapses its present moment of decline and its former glory into one utterance, just as he seamlessly collapses Rachel and her enslaved ancestors. His estimation of the "fine stuff" from the past serves as a dual comment on the people he employs; a century earlier, people whom his own ancestors held as property. Charles views the town's unchangingness as "enduring," a stark contrast to the fear and anger with which the past is treated by those who work his land. Indeed, he aims to turn the house into a museum, a site which threatens to fix its subjects in time, depriving them of a future.[64]

The final time travel moment takes its characters and viewers to the very immediate past, shuttling us to an argument between Crew (who is still possessing Sonson) and Rachel on the day of the murder. Rachel wishes to take the housekeeper position, which Crew interprets as an

[64] This reference to turning the plantation house into a museum also recalls Helena Woodard, whose *Slave Sites on Display* (2019) names museums as slave sites; in particular, Woodard cites Andreas Huyssen who notes the museum's dialectical position as both a "burial chamber of the past" and a "site of possible resurrections" (48).

attack on his ability to provide for his family. He is correct in part, as the Great House and Mr. Charles have diverted the river, turning his fields too dry for proper cultivation. When Rachel suggests that Crew give up farming and find a job in town, Crew becomes irate at the suggestion that he "give up the land," even as his lack of fiscal ownership has been laid bare.

> **Sonson**: I know every step of it. Every bush; like the back of me hand. Is a history behind every foot of it. Look at me, woman! I don't have nothing except what I get from the ground. I born by it and marry by it and one day it going to kill me. Maybe even now, but is what I know, it is what nothing can change. I trying to tell you, and I don't have the word to tell you, I am like a dumb man trying to tell you what happen to him. I only can trace the line here in the hard dirt, see? And the line going from here to there, and this end is where them bring my great grandfather, here, and this is me. If you take away the line from the ground I am nothing. I am nobody!
>
> **Rachel**: The land don't have to take the bread out of your mouth. The land is not everything!
>
> **Sonson**: It is everything! Everything! I will tell you! My father and his father sweat for it, year after year. It is my birthright that say I am not a slave anymore. I don't have to work for no man, I don't have to beg no man for bread to pass down to my children. . . . I will find a way out. (79)

The intertwined significance of time and space come to a head, as Crew locates within the land not only the history of his progenitors, but the years that have passed over the plot on which they stand. Crew attaches his very livelihood, his birth and death, to the tilled soil, tracing a straight line from himself back to his enslaved ancestors who arrived in Jamaica centuries prior.

Importantly for Crew, the land is solid and reliable; it is "what nothing can change" and tethers him—physically, biologically, and emotionally—to the plantation past. Although Rachel attempts to convince him that the land is not everything, and indeed, a line in the sand is by definition unstable and ephemeral, Crew continues to assert its importance. In the land he finds his freedom; paradoxically, it is the very same land in which his ancestors found their bondage.

As the following exchange ends, "Crew" exits and the lights dim again, signaling that we are back in Rachel's and Crew's barn, in the world of the present. However, when Sonson wakes from his stupor upon the ritual's conclusion, he is still Crew. A scenelet follows, in which the group looks on as Sonson and Stone re-enact the murder. Sonson/Crew obsequiously asks Stone/Charles for a loan due to the redirected river; Charles, unmoved, tells him to come around to the back of the house if he wishes to speak with him, which in turn makes Crew deliriously angry and, in his rage, he stabs Charles. This re-enactment, a moment of embodied time travel, is notable for several reasons. First, there is a perversity to the father occupying the son's body; rather than move forward toward future generations of his own, Sonson must grapple with his predecessor. In so doing, both Sonson/Crew becomes a bodily anachronism, signaling the pair's existence outside of normative time and space as well as highlighting Crew's belatedness to the grave. Second, this enactment serves as a further indictment of the way that laboring Black Jamaicans live in an extended period of unfreedom, distinct from chattel slavery but not altogether different. This moment brings Stone's premonition that the land will be soaked in blood to fruition.

In the present, Crew maintains his hold on Sonson, taking stock of his options now that he has murdered a white man. Yet again he insists on a model of time that is uninterrupted and unchanging: "They going come and find me. I not going to jail for this, you hear me! I suffer too

long—three hundred years! Three hundred!" (83). Like his friends and family who assemble to mourn him, Crew cannot help but see his own subjectivity as a point along a collapsed continuum in which the only important node is the arrival of ships on the African coast. Not only does this view disallow the vision of a future to emerge, but it also collapses the past and the present, closing the aperture so that only the haunts of slavery can be viewed. It is this stance that Scott's time travel scenes seek to dispel, as together they create a fabulative, alternative timeline that, though anachronistic and non-normative, provides a historical framework for the characters to see themselves in and through.

Crew's single-minded focus ultimately becomes hazardous to those in the present, as he attempts, in Sonson's body, to repeat his suicide, thus affirming the hold of the past and the compunction to replay what has gone before. At the play's opening, Scott provides a direction on scenery, noting that the central playing space, the barn in which the ritual occurs, is "dominated by a huge chain that is looped to the roof in two places" (2). Batra reads this chain symbolically, arguing that it holds dual meaning: "Signifying enslavement, enforced labor, and dehumanization, its rusty links are also a reminder of the biological and social connections between the slaves and their Afro-Caribbean descendants" (40). And indeed, like the straight line Crew draws in the sand from his life to those who came generations before him, the chain stands as a reminder of simultaneous oppression and kinship across time and space. At the play's close, however, the chain also performs a more material function, as it becomes the way in which Crew tries to escape, stranding Sonson who perilously hangs from the chain on an unstable beam across the roof. To break the spell and save Sonson, his brother Jacko attempts to talk Crew down from his ledge, convincing him that Mr. Charles is still alive and that all is well until Sonson can be safely brought down and revived with water. The group's intervention—for they

aid Jacko as he coaxes Sonson/Crew—is of vital importance; without it, Sonson is doomed to repeat his father's actions, setting into motion the same sense of futility and stasis. But in this moment, the cycle is broken, if only briefly. Of course, ultimately, Mr. Charles is dead, and although the group can play around in the past, they cannot change it. In this scene we can hear the echoes of T.J. who warns Ron that "we change in oura own time" (O'Hara 321).

Scott ends his play on a somewhat ambiguous note in response to the question of whether his characters can alter the course of history, or whether the hold of the past is too strong. For after Crew has left Sonson's body and the boy is firmly on the ground again, Rattler begins to drum again in celebration, and in the play's final lines Rachel muses:

> Sometimes is not a good thing to cry too long. My man is dead yes. But not all the crying in the world going bring him back. And I fraid to lose what leave. We is here, don't is so? And tomorrow the sun going come up same as ever. No matter what is past, you can't stop the blood from drumming, and you can't stop the heart from hoping. We have to hold on to one another. That is all we can do. That is what leave behind, after all the rest. Play, Rattler. Play for what leave behind. Play for the rest of us. (90)

Rachel's monologue espouses the play's central paradoxical approach to the passing of time; although she recognizes the importance of letting go of the past in its physical form, her version of the future is marked by a sense of sameness and cyclicality—the sun that will rise as always, the drum whose beat will go on. Despite the emphasis on community and hope, there is still a sense that a markedly different future is out of reach. However, while this reading has purchase, Joseph Roach suggests an alternative, looking to the play's celebratory finale and direction that the curtain only go down "when the stage is full of their celebration, somewhere in the ritual"

(90). Roach sees a challenge to temporal and spatial domination in this ending, asserting that "The affirmation contests the closure of investing the future with the fatality of the past" (35). This reading productively complicates any notion that this play ends where it begins. Ultimately, *Echo* does not deny that the pull of the past is inexorable or even inescapable; it does not refute the continuity between those who were forced to work against their will at the Great House and those who are paid paltry sums for the privilege of doing so centuries later. What it does offer, however, is the chance for an envisionable future. Rachel closes by centering what remains, what is left behind—these are the seeds, Scott suggests, with which the land will begin to grow again.

Conclusion: Changing the Past in *Harry and the Thief*

To conclude, I turn to a recent time travel drama that explores the far-reaching possibilities that returning to the antebellum past affords its African American characters. Although Gilmer's play is indebted to Scott and O'Hara's for its conception of time travel as that which allows you to reorder your experience of history, I close with *Harry* because it functions even more like "a bullet through time" than its predecessors. Due to its sincere insistence that the past can ultimately be altered through the fabulative act of time travel, *Harry* offers the present as a site open with possibilities. *Harry* centers on a petty thief named Mimi and her cousin Jeremy, a PhD student in Physics. Jeremy convinces Mimi to use the time machine he has created to travel to the 1860s and provide guns and artillery to Harriet Tubman, in the hopes that, during the Civil War, she will be able to overpower the opposing white armies and create a Black Republic that will ameliorate life for African Americans in the present. From her encounters with Harriet Tubman, named Harry here, and other enslaved African Americans on Scarlet plantation, Mimi repositions her understanding of herself both in relation to her ancestral past and as an agent of historical change. As with *Colored Museum, Insurrection,* and *Echo,* Mimi's journey

through time serves as a means of interrogating whether contemporary Black subjects can "break free" from the chains of historical inevitability.

One of Gilmer's signature means of staging interventions in the historical past is through a series of what I call, in reference to Parks's dramaturgical practice, "rep and rev" scenes, in which the forward action of the play is halted and scenes are re-played. These moments, which are facilitated by the play's narrator, Anita, reveal a falsity behind the determined path of history. For example, in a scene that provides an origin story of sorts for Harry, we see both the historical past and dramatic arc become malleable and unfixed.

> **ANITA**: When Harriet Tubman was 15 she put herself between her massa and a runaway slave. *(White Man throws the rock at Harry hitting her in the head. She collapses. She gets up. She tosses the rock back to White Man.)*
>
> **ANITA**: When Harriet Tubman was 15 she put herself between her massa and a runaway slave. *(White Man throws the rock at Harry hitting her in the head. She collapses. She gets up. She tosses the rock back to White Man.)*
>
> **ANITA**: When Harriet Tubman was 15 she put herself between her massa and a runaway slave. *(White Man throws the rock at Harry. She catches it. She stares at it in her hand. She stares at the White Man. He runs off.)*
>
> **ANITA**: After that she was never the same. (Gilmer 23)

As Anita narrates and re-narrates the scene, Harry and the White Man pantomime a quite literal flipping of the script, in which the recognizable tableau of racist abuse is transformed before the audience's eyes. This change, this crack in the rehearsed performance both parties had agreed upon, functions as a form of Wickstrom's initiation, which, like fabulation, creates an alternative trajectory and a shift of the power that concepts such as temporality and history invoke. *Harry*'s

use of rep and rev in this scene suggests an encounter with history that is agential and interested in the capacities and possibilities that temporal play offers. Before confronting him, Harry tosses the rock back twice, signaling both her complicity in the interaction as well as the central playfulness of this scene. In the final iteration, we see Harry refuse to allow the script to play out as it did the previous two times, and instead she catches the rock, preventing it from hitting her and irrevocably altering the flow of power between them. Anita tells us that this event changes Harry, who afterward was never the same, but it also signals a flexibility to the historical narrative. In short, this instance of rep and rev hails a new world into being, where historical inevitability no longer directs the action of our antebellum narrative.[65]

Although Mimi begins her journey skeptical about her ability to alter the circumstances of the Civil War, by the play's close she has formed a deep connection with Harry. After she delivers the modern-day arsenal to Harry, however, the pair are thrust into battle; Harry is shot and Mimi vows to take her place. As Harry dies, the play stages a time slip, which, as Pryor writes, "flashes up in a moment of danger, awakening the dead, the living, and the not yet born" (9). At the very moment where the troubling of the historical past threatens to claim one of the central figures of the abolitionist movement, Gilmer intervenes:

> *(Mimi begins to weep over Harry's body. Harry inhales sharply. She rips the bandana off of her head and shoves it into Mimi's hands.)*
>
> **Harry**: Take the bandana. Become the General. Get your shit together. Don't fuck it up. *(Harry dies)* . . .

[65] Interestingly, this scene parallels a moment in *Insurrection* where the plantation's Overseer forces TJ to whip Ron and, after doing so once, uses his second strike to lash and kill the Overseer. Through this action, TJ realizes his power to alter the circumstances of his world—his decision not to replay the thrust of history but to instead rebel in the face of said history has far-reaching consequences. The sun returns to the sky and the action is immediately transported to the present—just as in *Harry,* "rewriting the Time Line" manifests new forms of time and space.

Vivian: The General is dead. *(Mimi grabs Vivian.)*

Mimi: The General is not dead. *(Mimi puts on the bandana.)* (97-98).

Using material signifiers of history—not unlike Ron's time traveling copy of the *Confessions* in *Insurrection* or *The History* in *Echo*—Gilmer surrogates Mimi for Harry through the act of securing Tubman's famous kerchief on her head. This act of transfer sets in motion Gilmer's most outlandish alternative historical trajectory, a narrative that Anita provides for the audience:

> Harriet Tubman made 20 trips to the south and brought 300 enslaved people to freedom. Including her entire family. The bounty on her head was 40,000 dollars. During the Civil War Harry frees over 700 people. 2 years after the war ends Harry's first husband John was found dead in Maryland. April 14, 1865 Harry is at the Ford Theatre. A grateful president puts Harry in charge of Reconstruction. With an abundance of weaponry and allies both black and white, Harry transform[s] the southern United States into a haven for free thinking, free love, social, racial and gender equality. In 1882 the South invades the North. In 1890, Harriet Tubman is elected President of the United States of America. (98-99).

Anita's final speech furnishes a vision of the past that is wholly unrecognizable or compatible with our present—it is a fabulative past that will engender an alternative future. Her first descriptions of Tubman align with historical record, but beyond that, a shift begins to take place. Anita moves from speaking in the past tense to speaking in present tense, despite the grammatical awkwardness that results therefrom. The grammatical tension mirrors the tension between fact and fiction that follows, as we learn that not only does Mimi-as-Harry prevent Abraham Lincoln's assassination, but she takes control of government policy, re-shapes the South into a hospitable landscape for Black folks, and ultimately becomes President. This

iteration of an historical what-if is undoubtedly played for laughs, as much of the play's parodic moments are, but I take its fabulative possibilities quite seriously. Through *Harry,* Gilmer argues for time travel as an escape hatch of sorts from history, which threatens to trap and freeze Black subjects in the time and space of subjugation.

I close with *Harry* because it provides the most radical challenge to the notion that to return to one's origins is always a flawed homecoming; instead of changing in our own time, Gilmer presents a world in which the past is mutable and mutated for the benefit of Black people globally. Both O'Hara and Scott use time travel and the anachronistic encounters this distortion of time and space leads to as a means of exploring the continuities between past and present and challenging deterministic visions of the future that seek to consign Black life to forms of living in the past. But what in O'Hara and Scott's plays is a latent possibility– the material alteration of the past itself—becomes possible in *Harry.* If, as Wolfe suggests, the experience of visiting and attempting to make sense of the slave past necessarily involves a "little time warp," then Gilmer turns the warping of time into the new fabric of reality. Time travel is never neutral—it always involves the distortion of time and space, the central paradox of existing in two periods at once, the anachronism of being outside of normative time. But, most importantly, time travel allows for new forms of knowledge to emerge and circulate. Rather than stories of domination and silence, traveling to the plantation past allows these dramatists to re-organize and re-imagine a history of Black life in the face of unfreedom. Although we know that the failures and horrors of the past cannot be undone, the experience of watching the past be undone onstage allows us to imagine new modes of engaging with oppression in the present and future.

Chapter 5: History from Below the Grave: Acts of (Un)burial in Suzan-Lori Parks's *Venus* and Sistren Theatre Collective's *QPH*

The massive oak is gone
from out the churchyard,
but the giant space is left
unfilled;
despite the two-lane blacktop
that slides across
the old, unalterable
roots. . . .

Here the graves soon grow back into the land.
Have been known to sink. To drop open without
warning. To cover themselves with wild ivy . . .
–Alice Walker, "Burial"

among the rocks
at walnut grove
some of these honored dead
were dark
some of these dark
were slaves
some of these slaves
were women
some of them did this honored work.
tell me your names
foremothers, brothers,
tell me your dishonored names.
here lies
here lies
here lies
here lies
hear
–Lucille Clifton, "at the cemetery, walnut grove plantation, south carolina, 1989"

"Hear the bones sing": Introduction

My final chapter functions in many ways as a rejoinder to my first; whereas I began by examining the landscape and phenomenon of echo—derived conceptually in part from the myth of Echo as a woman with a voice but no body—in what follows I consider performative engagements with women who are overdetermined by their bodies but denied a voice. To this end, this chapter analyzes yet another charged landscape for descendants of the African Diaspora by paying close attention to the historical and theatrical implications of the burial ground or grave site. Specifically, this chapter considers dramatic works that resurrect historical and everyday figures—Black, impoverished women on the margins of society—at the site of their deaths and burial. Through a comparative analysis of Suzan-Lori Parks's controversial 1996 play *Venus*, which centers on the brief life and tragic death of Khoisan woman Saartjie Baartman, and Sistren Theatre Collective's 1981 devised performance piece entitled *QPH,* which revolves

around three women who were trapped in one of Jamaica's deadliest fires in a Kingston almshouse, I argue that the space of the stage allows for these women to perform what I term acts of (un)burial. By this I mean that both Parks and Sistren use the figurative and literal space of the gravesite or burial ground to perform a temporary resurrection—I emphasize the ephemeral nature of this resurrection because both works also center the inevitability of these women's deaths and their imminent returns to the grave. In so doing, however, Parks and Sistren suggest that in centering the material conditions of these women's deaths, we revisit these women's lives—not through the lens of historical authenticity, but through the lens of fabulation. Furthermore, I will demonstrate through my readings of these plays and their structural considerations of dramatic form, space, and time, that *Venus* and *QPH* present both an acknowledgement and a call. First, each work acknowledges the inaccessibility of any historical or archival "truth" in relation to the recovery of Black voices. Second, through metatheatrical and materialist staging, both plays call to audiences in the present to make connections between the past and our current moment, asking audiences to challenge assumptions and mainstream narratives about Black women across the diaspora. Ultimately, these plays function as histories from below the grave, resurrecting these women and their stories in order to critique the extant narratives that would seek to silence Baartman, Queenie, and others.

Although *Venus* and *QPH* are separated geographically and temporally, they have a shared diasporic quality and investment in thinking through complex notions of geography and power. While *QPH* is in a large part interested in the effects of Edward Seaga's US-centered, globalized policies on working class Black women, *Venus* tells a story of forced removal from one's homeland and the experience of Baartman in the hostile environs of England and France, all while speaking to a US audience on contemporary issues of race and gender. Further, the two

plays' formal similarities and their interest in drawing connections between past and present histories invite a reading that collocates the works and emphasizes their shared commitment to fabulative history as a valid theatrical and historiographical form. In short, I examine both plays through the lens of burial and the materiality of death because both *Venus* and *QPH* are set at the sites of burial, and both open and close with the disinterment of their main characters.

Further, both plays are interested in the ways that the histories they are re-telling intersect with concerns of the present day; in *Venus,* this is most clear in the critiques of the late 1990's fetishization and preoccupation with the butts (for lack of a better word) of women of color such as Jennifer Lopez. In *QPH,* the use of woman-centered ritual and testimony asks audiences to consider the ways that, in the decades following independence, Jamaican society neglects its most vulnerable citizens. And despite the fact that Parks is mining the archive to present a story about a woman from the early nineteenth century while Sistren develops *QPH* from interviews with survivors of the 1980 fire, there is a shared interest in restoring a semblance of voice to the heretofore voiceless, and also in complicating the issue by questioning whether disremembered histories can ever truly be restored or retold. As a result, the un-burial and re-burial each work performs results in an alternative method of remembering and preserving history that centers not on what we can know, but on all that we cannot.

Before moving to a more detailed discussion of the plays, I want to first provide a definition for what I am calling (un)burial within these works and others. Drawing initially on Sara Warner's appellation for Parks's plays, specifically *Venus,* as "dramas of dis-interment," I use (un)burial to denote the ways that both Parks and Sistren use the space of the stage to literally and figuratively un-bury figures both long dead and recently passed. I place the "un" in parentheses because it evokes the central paradox of these plays: although they provide a space

for bringing the dead back to life, the latter are ultimately re-interred and brought back to the realm of the dead for the play's close. These acts of (un)burial, whether it be the Venus announcing her untimely death while very much alive onstage, or the carefully arranged coffins from which the fire's three victims emerge and are reborn, allow for the proliferation of alternative histories, alternative ways of engaging with the legions of ancestors whose names and stories are unrecoverable.

The (un) also signals the central paradoxical liveliness of these staged resurrections, which emphasize the fleshly bodies of Baartman and the fire victims just as their deaths are replayed and retold. Further, to un-bury something is also to remove its protective cover or shroud, and indeed in parsing the etymological root of "to bury," we arrive at the Germanic "bergh," which the *OED* glosses as "To give shelter; to protect, preserve; to deliver, save" (oed.com). With this definition in mind, we can imagine (un)burial as a fraught process by which Parks and Sistren open up the very real figures they dramatize to the possibility of re-objectification and violence, albeit in a fictive environment. Both plays treat their protagonists as victims of sexist, racist, and colonialist abuse, but they do not present uncomplicated victim narratives. This is important because it furnishes (un)burial as an always unfinished and ambivalent process; just as it provides the occasion to enshrine these women, it also opens their histories and stage bodies up to the larger public.

The notion of (un)burial is intertwined with the dramaturgy of *Venus* and *QPH,* as their structural and formal qualities work together to center the material, historical, and geographic conditions of their deaths and funerary rites. We can see this firstly through the way that both plays draw on a circular, echoic structure that begins and ends with the deaths and/or burials of the Venus and Queenie, Pearlie, and Hopie, respectively. Second, this centering of their deaths

through structure is bolstered through the material focus of each play, particularly in the way that the physical aspects of death—the clothing, the coffins, the dirt, the shovel, etc.—are emphasized through staging choices throughout. Finally, both plays use metatheatrical interventions which break up the narrative action, such as direct addresses to the audience, plays within plays, and flashbacks or flash-forwards. These tactics serve to call attention to the fundamental ways in which the past has not yet passed, asking the audience to consider the stories onstage as constitutive of larger echoes throughout history.

I argue that these acts of (un)burial function as fabulative histories or histories from below the grave, concepts that I will address at length in the following section. Here, however, I note that both *Venus* and *QPH* focus their interrogations on unheard voices, on moments in history defined by and through a lack of care toward women, particularly Black women. In the face of the silences their histories and narratives produce in the written record—the only documented instance of Baartman speaking is at her indecency trial, in which it is difficult to be sure whether or not she was speaking under duress, and the Jamaican women whose stories are featured were not all literate, nor were their concerns about the conditions of the almshouse heard—Parks and Sistren choose to forge ahead into the silence and, as Parks puts it, "hear the bones sing, write it down" (4). Both playwrights and performers have different approaches to what it means to hear the bones sing, and thus they employ different methods of fabulative historiography. Whereas Parks digs into and curates an archive, replete with footnotes and a glossary, Sistren takes recourse to oral history and the power of testimony. Both works use the inability to recover marginalized voices to suggest that engagement with an incomplete history leads to fragmented modes of storytelling, which paradoxically exposes the connections between recorded gaps in history and the enforced silence of the present.

At this juncture, the epigraphs which open this chapter are useful to examine, as they both relate to the notion of (un)burial and the paradoxically lively landscape of death. Alice Walker's 1972 poem "Burial" is written from the perspective of Walker herself, who meditates on the resonant geography of the cemetery upon bringing her daughter to her great-grandmother's gravesite. The poem remains at the cemetery but moves between the present day visit and the speaker's memories as a young child attending her great-grandmother's funeral and burial. Walker presents this ostensible site of non-life as marked with simultaneous contradiction; although this is initiated at first by the mingling of future generations and the ancestral past, we see that the landscape too is marked by shifting ground and unmovable reminders. Although the "massive oak" Walker remembers from her childhood is gone, its absence furnishes its presence—the great space remains unfilled almost as an invisible memorial to what once was. The line break separates "left" and "unfilled," which gives the latter word its own line to underscore the empty space that, despite its silence, speaks volumes. Walker further emphasizes the stubbornness of the burial site's geography, asserting the prominence of the "old, unalterable roots" despite the two-lane road that runs through the previously landscaped churchyard. The roots, which lay below the earth, are not as easy to raze, Walker suggests, as the oak tree that stood atop the ground, or the grass that has given way to tar. These roots are unchangeable, unchanging in the face of change.

The notion that the roots speak back—resist, so to speak—returns in the poem's next stanza, which ascribes a personified liveliness to the graves themselves. Here, Walker's speaker tells us, the graves and the decomposing bodies therein do not behave in the still and lifeless manner we would expect: they sink, they settle into the earth and entwine themselves with the flora that surrounds them. More than that, Walker tells us that the graves have been known to

spring open, again breaking up the line so that "without" and "warning" are appropriately separated to signal the suddenness with which graves may come alive. Taken as a whole, Walker's estimation of the Wards Chapel A.M.E. Church (a still active church in Augusta, Georgia) leads us to consider the unruliness of the vegetation surrounding death, and the very graves themselves. Rather than merely a site for Walker to memorialize her great-grandmother, the absent presences—the oak tree, the headstones, the bodies themselves—furnish the burial ground as an active landscape where she and her daughter can materially engage with the remains of the past. It is this same tactile, fragmented form of engagement that Parks and Sistren model in their attempts to recapture the lives of women who were unruly in life and in death.

Alongside Walker's poem, Lucille Clifton's elegiac "at the cemetery, walnut grove plantation, south carolina, 1989" serves as another meditation on the putative silence of the Black burial ground. Like Walker's personal motivation, Clifton wrote this poem after attending a tour of the plantation in the poem's title; moved by the glaring omission of slavery and the role of the enslaved who lived at Walnut Grove in constructing the plantation's very architecture, Clifton uses "at the cemetery" to directly address those who were enslaved and buried in unmarked graves. Clifton's speaker creates a sense of intimate connection between herself and those "honored dead," addressing them directly: "your silence drumming/ in my bones,/ tell me your names." It is difficult not to draw a connection between the sensation Clifton feels when she stands in the graveyard and Parks's theories on the function of the playwright. Parks, too, is preoccupied with bones, although she sees her task from the perspective of the archaeologist who must "locate the ancestral burial ground, dig for bones, find bones, hear the bones sing, write it down" (4). Faced with the silences of the historical record and the humming of the burial ground, both Clifton and Parks choose to record, however, fragmentarily, what they find below the earth.

In the passage excerpted above from the poem's close, Clifton's words become an incantation of sorts, attempting to restore a semblance of honor to the "dishonored names" of those who have been lost to time. Pointedly, Clifton notes earlier in the poem that the plantation's inventory "listed ten slaves/ but only men were recognized," suggesting the irrecoverability of enslaved women's names and stories. Despite this, Clifton persists, bringing the women into the narrative directly, forging connections by referring to her foremothers and brothers and fabulating a narrative for what might have been at Walnut Grove over a century earlier. In the final stanza, the poem becomes a dirge, as she attempts to memorialize the dead whose bones she feels below. Her play on the homophonic pair of "hear" and "here" locates the grave as a dynamic site where, as Walker writes, graves may drop open and the dead may testify without warning. Clifton's wordplay calls to the fore the ways in which sites of burial become synonymous with silence, and her final exhortation, "hear," can be read as both a plea to the reader as well as a reminder to the writer to listen for the singing of the bones. In concert, Walker and Clifton's poems—both based on encounters with real, historical gravesites—serve to demonstrate how a fragmented, fabulative engagement with sites of death can produce alternative forms of engagement with the past.

Using these poetic interventions as lodestars, this chapter will examine *Venus* and *QPH* through their attention to the landscapes of death and burial and focus on resurrection, demonstrating how these plays produce histories from below the grave. To begin, I introduce several theoretical frames that motivate my analysis, including discussions of the importance of death and burial in Black expressive culture and literature and the importance of death and embodied resurrection in modern theatre more generally. I then look at accounts and studies of Black burial grounds and funerary rites in the Caribbean and United States, specifically to argue

that the spate of "missing" graveyards dedicated to non-white and enslaved populations instantiates a culture of disrespect and invisibility surrounding the culture of death and allows for these paradoxically lively landscapes of death to emerge in Black performance. In my close reading of both *Venus* and *QPH,* I examine each play's form, particularly their recourse to metadramatic techniques and echoic structure. It is my contention that while both plays use the space of the stage as a temporary space for disinterring their historical figures, Parks is ultimately more cynical in her approach, whereas Sistren aims for a hopeful vision of the future. Both plays, however, demonstrate the importance of theatre and the stage as a powerful tool for resurrecting dead matter and long-forgotten stories. Further, both works attempt to critically rethink how we engage with dominant historical narratives, particularly when they concern Black women.

"The dead acknowledge no borders": Staging the Black Burial Ground

In *Passed On,* Karla Holloway's groundbreaking study of African American death culture, she observes an unfortunate historical fact that undergirds life in the US, writing, "African Americans' particular vulnerability to an untimely death in the United States intimately affects how black culture both represents itself and is represented" (2). To put it plainly, Black death is bound up in Black life, and the persistent, myriad ways that Black lives are under siege means that death has become a mainstay in African American cultural expression. This cultural connection to death is not bound to the United States, however, and as Vincent Brown notes in *Reaper's Garden,* his study of eighteenth-century Jamaica*,* death was an organizing principle of Jamaican life. In addition to the common understanding of Jamaica as the "grave of Europeans" due to the high illness and mortality rate of colonial settlers, Brown notes "the omnipresence of corpses, mortuary commerce, and funeral rituals" (10). Brown, however, argues that death in the Atlantic world is in fact a form of social cultivation, as its attendant rituals structured an

otherwise unpredictable life; he suggests that "death was as generative as destructive" (4). This notion is a productive place to begin my inquiry, not only because it figures death as a capacious concept that seeps into everyday life, but also because of the suggestion that death gives way to life in the form of cultural and societal production. To think of death as a site for creation and creativity alongside the loss of life is central to Parks' and Sistren's projects, as they look to the past to generate stories for the future.

The ubiquity of mortuary culture and representations of death, scholars argue, works to eliminate the temporal and spatial boundaries that separate death from life, the past from the present. Holloway argues that death is "an untimely accompaniment to the life of black folk," further suggesting that the experience of death in African American culture is "disjointed" and temporally unmoored, disrupting normative experiences of linear time (6). This sense of untimeliness or disjointed time is central to Parks and Sistren's depictions of death and burial, as each play pointedly follows a structure that begins at the end and works in a circular fashion back toward that end. The lack of boundedness between life and death in Black expressive culture, Anissa Wardi argues, results in an abundance of absent presences—a motif that recurs in Walker and Clifton's poems. Wardi's analysis takes her specifically to the graveyard in African American fiction, where she suggests that these burial sites "mediate the play between past and present" and function as metaphors for "buried histories that are invisibly present" (18). From Wardi and Holloway's assertions, we can see how the grave serves doubly as a site of absence and presence—a site at which persons come to remember the dead even as they continue to dematerialize below the ground.

Sharon Holland's seminal study of Black feminist subjectivity, *Raising the Dead,* emphasizes the ways in which Black female bodies are and have historically been coded as

nonhuman.[66] Holland's discussion assumes the porousness of death, viewing it as a site that provides the potential for the dead to return to the world of the living and tell their stories. Specifically, Holland contends that death can provide figures with "an uncanny power," allowing them to "'talk back' from a heretofore finite place" (24). I pause on this point because it articulates a central facet of what Parks and Sistren provide in their focus on disinterment and (un)burial; both plays refute the finality of burial and allow for their deceased protagonists to speak back from the margins.[67] Holland follows Josette Feral's reconfiguration of marginality as a position of power, ultimately suggesting that the marginality that death provides in Black cultural expression can become "a site one stays in, clings to even, because it nourishes one's capacity to resist. It offers the possibility of radical perspectives from which to see and create, to imagine alternative, new worlds" (159). In Holland's estimation, we can imagine an embrace of marginality, such as *Venus* and *QPH* present through their acts of (un)burial, as a necessary precursor to the kinds of critical fabulation these works employ.

While Holland's work on death and subjectivity in literature and culture is seminal for the study of Black art, literary critics such as Brian Norman and Claire Raymond develop concepts for examining the agency provided to female figures who return from the dead. Norman's *Dead Women Talking* identifies what he calls a curious trope of dead women speaking from beyond the grave in American literature, which he argues constitutes a counter literary "tradition" in which "writers address pressing social issues that refuse to stay dead" (1). It is important to note the political efficacy that these acts of (un)burial produce, particularly when extending Norman's

[66] Holland, as do other scholars considered in this chapter who write on Black women in relation to themes of death and histories of colonialism and enslavement, draws on the theories of Hortense Spillers. Spillers's "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book" discusses the ways that Black women were viewed as ungendered flesh in the time of slavery.

[67] This is not to suggest that both plays do this equally; in fact, as my discussion of *Venus* delves into, many scholars take issue with the lack of voice accorded to Baartman's character in Parks's re-telling. However, is it my contention that the act of staging and providing voice and body to the figure of Baartman is in itself a radical act.

argument to the live and embodied art form of theatre. *QPH* presents a clear critique of the Jamaican government's neglect of its most vulnerable citizens, while *Venus* suggests a lack of distance between the spectralization, fetishization, and abuse of the Black female body in the nineteenth century and today. Norman asserts that dead women talking provides "posthumous citizenship," by which he means acceptance by a community that denied these women full rights in life. Interestingly, despite Norman's focus on textual forms, his focus on the concept of citizenship leads his discussion toward the importance of a physical body in order to obtain citizenship (posthumous or otherwise). The focus on the physical body is something that Parks and Sistren take up directly in their performative engagements with dead women, not only because they stage embodied resurrections before an audience's eyes, but also because they demonstrate how Black women's bodies are continually policed and specularized, even in death.

Raymond's line of inquiry is similarly textually focused, as her book *The Posthumous Voice in Women's Writing from Mary Shelley to Sylvia Plath* examines the form of the "feminine self-elegy" in women's poetry. In her discussion of the ways that women writers appropriate and re-tool the historically male form of elegy, Raymond centers what she calls the "rhetorical posthumous voice" as a method of redress against dominant modes of representation. Per Raymond, "The rhetorical posthumous voice arrives belatedly at the scene of a tragedy—the narrator's premature death, a death placed before her text—but ironically uses this . . . belatedness as temporal and physical exclusion, to steal into the 'exclusively male' place of elegy" (2). Despite the focus on textuality, there is a clear connection between the strategic belatedness of (un)burial—it postdates the death just as it suggests its tragic prematurity—and the agential potential of the posthumous voice. When the Venus pronounces her own death in the opening scene, or when Queenie, Pearlie, and Hopie tote their own coffins during scene changes,

are we hearing their voices, seeing their movements, from beyond the grave? And, if so, how does this disrupt our understanding of these women and their place in Black history?

Alongside this discourse surrounding the function of dead bodies in literature or onstage, it is necessary to introduce a discussion of the function of setting as well, for the space of the burial ground is intimately linked to notions of race, colonialism, and power. Jimmy Noriega's introduction to *Theatre and Cartographies of Power* is instructive in its connections between metageography, or the physical and ideological geographies that form in relation to networks of power, and theatre in postcolonial spaces.[68] Noriega reminds us to consider the significance of place in drama, particularly a charged space such as the graveyard, with its own matrix of power. As an ostensible site of death, the burial ground is often thought of as barren. But although it indexes absence, graves themselves function as paradoxically live sites of memorial, for future generations of the bereaved can return and revisit the dead long after they pass. Parks and Sistren make plain how the grave is also a site for creativity and life—for digging and reimagining histories. The practice of memorializing our dead in specifically designed spaces is not new in Western culture—as Joseph Roach observes in *Cities of the Dead*, this was often the churchyard before the notion of segregating the dead became popular in eighteenth-century Europe (50). With the rise of the cemetery also comes a distinct form of engaging with the dead at specific sites or landscapes, which signals the importance that gravestones and cemeteries have in the larger culture of memorialization. I note this because of the large gap between these practices of memory-keeping for the dead in mainstream Western culture and the unmarked burial sites of women of color whose lives were deemed forgettable. This is particularly significant in these plays, which meditate on the lives and brutal deaths of Baartman and three Kingston women.

[68] Noriega draws from geographers Martin Lewis and Karen Wigen's book *The Myth of Continents: A Critique of Metageography* (1997).

More to this point, Noriega suggests the stage contains the potential for redistributions of power and space: "The errant nature of theatre possesses the capacity to redraw the maps of power by exposing their present configuration to the promise that other and multiple maps are possible" (10). Here we see how theatre can make spaces and histories malleable. As Parks has said of her playwrighting process, "through each line of text I'm rewriting the Time Line" (5).

The burial ground is an ironically fertile space to dig deeper into notions of power and geography, due in large part to the ways that funerary and mortuary rites intersect with identity markers such as race, gender, and class. For example, Helena Woodard's *Slave Sites on Display* suggests that the discovery of previously neglected or unrecorded bones and remains of African peoples throughout the colonized world serves as a point of connection throughout the diaspora. Woodard writes of those whose ancestors were unrecognized in death, "United similarly by ethnicity, culture, and fate . . . the descendants symbolize the site of burial itself as literal and figurative space in which to recover, reembody, and ultimately alter the status of the historically devalued enslaved African" (55). Woodard argues that free people of African descent view the gravesite as both a physical and psychological landscape, and the verbs she chooses—recover, reembody, and alter—convey the sense that through engagement with the materiality of death, one can work to reshape their connection to those who have passed and reshape their legacies.

Woodard devotes a chapter of her study to the fraught history of the African Burial Ground in Lower Manhattan. As this is the purported oldest and largest excavated cemetery for Africans and people of African descent, much has been written about the discovery and subsequent exhumation of the burial ground in the 1990s.[69] As is quite common in these

[69] Most sources document the process of the ground's excavation and forensic investigation or provide a reassessment and analysis of uncovered elements from an archaeological perspective, such as Cheryl LaRoche's "Beads from the African Burial Ground, New York City: A Preliminary Assessment" (1994) or Erik Seeman's Reassessing the "Sankofa Symbol" in New York's African Burial Ground" (2010). Others take a broader

"discoveries," remains were found during the beginning planning stages for a federal building that was to be erected atop what is now a national monument. Although sustained protests from the Black community and historical preservationists ultimately resulted in the excavation and recovery of remains from over 419 Africans and African Americans (archaeological research also showed that at least 15,000 Black people were likely interred at what was called the "Negroes Burial Ground"), Woodard points out that there is a limit to what data can tell us about the lives of these now long deceased people. She observes that while "a mixed portrait emerges for the African Burial Ground decedents, which combines raw data about physical traumas and other indignities they suffered with some creative narratives about their identities and ethnic origins . . . stories and aspirations for other captive Africans remain speculative" (Woodard 56). Woodard's estimation of the forensic team's efforts brings to mind the role of the playwright in bringing untold histories to the stage—both Parks and Sistren mine their available archives and repositories to craft their characters and chart the central action, but the process requires a practice of critical fabulation.

From an archaeological and geographical perspective, recent studies of burial grounds across the US and the Americas have cropped up to document the historical fact of destroyed and forgotten Black cemeteries in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Although burial grounds for the enslaved in the Caribbean tend to remain intact at various plantations, recent scholars have explored excavated cemeteries in places such as Barbados and Guadeloupe and determined demographic makeup due largely to malnutrition markers in the bodies of the enslaved.[70] In

---

sociological and humanities-based approach, such as Joyce Hensen and Gary McGowan's *Breaking Ground, Breaking Silence: The Story of New York's African burial Ground* (1998).

[70] For example, archaeologist Jerome Handler has published widely on slave burials and cemeteries in Barbados; Delle and Fellows look at the work of scholars who note the orientation of buried family members as well as the composition of grave stone markers in plantation-era Guadeloupe.

Jamaica, however, James A. Delle and Kristen R. Fellows examine the burial practice of a nineteenth century coffee plantation, noting that gravesites commemorating enslaved Africans were almost always unmarked and often they were placed in mass graves (482). As a whole, we can see an unsurprising but important trend of disrespect toward the body in life that appears to continue through death and interment.

In a United States context, Ashley Lemke looks at what she terms "missing cemeteries" in Texas, observing that a team of researchers went on a recovery mission and found thirty-six unnamed and missing cemeteries whose only commonality was that they served non-white communities (primarily African American and Hispanic). Lemke suggests that "the loss of these cemeteries is a phenomenon grounded in bias and structural racism," and it is difficult to see how else so many dead could go unnoticed for so long (619). Similarly, Ryan K. Smith's work on the history of Richmond's Second African Burial Ground—which interred over 21,000 people and was a central part of the Black community in the 1800s—serves as an excellent example of how these re-emergent burial sites point to ruptured connections between past and future. Smith discusses how, despite the graveyard's prominence, in 2016 it was deemed ineligible for the Register of Historical Places because "there was no known association with important people or events" and it "did not have the potential to yield future information" (17). In the Register's refusal to include the burial ground, they effectively deny the space both a past—no known association with people or events—and a future, all at once. However, the Richmond residents and other activists took a unique approach to their claim to historicity, adjusting their argument for the burial ground's historical significance to center on the site as a historical example of the destruction and neglect that African burial grounds often face. I see in this reappropriation and failure and decay a sort of critical fabulation—it recalls Holland's embrace of marginality as a

position of potential empowerment. These examples serve to instantiate Woodard's argument that despite the more prevailing theoretical and functional objectives of a memorial, "the burial ground resists attempts to reorder the past in a seamless narrative for the present and future" (63). Overall, despite the enduring history of neglect, destruction, and violence that resulted in the disappearing of thousands of formerly enslaved and freed Africans, the graves themselves present a persistent malleability. They are reshaped and reshape-able for new meanings, and it is this quality that leads both Parks and Sistren to set their stories at the site of burial.

It is at this juncture that the conception of "history from below" emerges as a helpful tool for thinking about the role of histories of the dead in performance. However, it is not solely history from below that Parks and Sistren document, though they do lend voice to the often voiceless and re-tell their histories by foregrounding those at the bottom of the hierarchy. It is history from below the grave—history that, long interred, is dug up during the course of the death rituals that necessitate, cry out for, revivification—not only of the bodies of the dead, but of their stories, their histories. "History from below the grave" augments the concept of "history from below" and accounts for the ways that a growing corpus of drama and visual art uses so-called dead matter and brings it back to life through the act of artistic creation and performance. In using this phrase, I refer to a set of practices, both artistic and historiographical in nature, that seek to present a radical people's history of Black life by unearthing the dead or by injecting the dead space of the past with new life. Saidiya Hartman observes that in writing counter-histories of slavery, "a history of the present strives to illuminate the intimacy of our experience with the lives of the dead, to write our now as it is interrupted by this past" (4). History from below the grave, then, can be read as a site for examining the writing of Black history, of looking into the past as a means of projecting into the future. Helene Cixous defines the stage as a site "where the

living meet and confront the dead, the forgotten and the forgetters, the buried and the ghosts, the present, the passing, the present past and the passed past" (306). Together, Hartman and Cixous evince the ways that both theatre and history entail a proximity of the living to the dead; it is this uneasy proximity that Parks and Sistren mine in order to disinter the remains of the past and confront the incomplete archive of the history of enslavement.

History from below the grave is also a fundamentally fabulative process, and to this end I also draw on feminist historiographic practices such as Sarah Noble Frank describes in her writing on feminist rhetoric. Frank theorizes what she, drawing from the work of Michel de Certeau, calls the "as-if," viewing it as a "performative gesture" that provides the conditions for feminist revisionist histories to emerge. Further, Frank writes, "The *as if,* in other words, marks the becoming-possible of what has formerly been impossible, *as such*, and therefore also marks the possibility of finally producing historical knowledge claims about these impossible subjects" (196). I argue here that Frank's as-if is the grounds on which Parks and Sistren develop their own fabulative histories, and it is only through performing an imagined construction of the past that radical knowledge about the past can emerge. In this way, Baartman and Queenie are themselves "impossible subjects," about whom knowledge cannot be produced without the aid of fabulation. Katherine Kelly's chapter on the "Feminist History Play" similarly draws on the importance of feminist historiographers in her assessment of feminist playwrights in the 1970s, suggesting that both were interested in reappropriating the historical record to reinject women. Importantly, Kelly argues that while the feminist history play has the potential to unearth forgotten pasts, "a history play does not replicate the work of history writing. . . it invites the audience to know again—to undo and redo—the past in the present of performance" (211). Essentially, the history play, particularly one grounded in the fabulative practice of the "as-if," is an active negotiation

between truth and fiction, past and present, audience and actor. Parks and Sistren do not attempt to present a "history" of their protagonists' lives, for there is no complete history in these women's words upon which to draw.

"Thuh Venus Hottentot iz dead": Acts of (Un)Burial in *Venus*

In many ways, *Venus* is similar to *The America Play,* particularly in its shared preoccupation with digging, gravesites, and the echoic nature of Black history. *Venus* is a departure from Parks's earlier work, however, due to both the (relatively) linear nature of the plot and its interest in Blackness outside of the US. Beginning and ending with the pronounced death of its eponymous protagonist, *Venus* presents a quasi-historical, fictional account of Saartjie Baartman's life. Baartman is brought from South Africa—where she works as a servant—to England, where she is sold to a freak show. Along with the Chorus of 8 Wonders, Baartman (referred to as "the Venus" throughout the play) is exhibited for paying customers who grope and leer at her as she performs. After a run-in with the legal system, she is purchased by the Baron Docteur, a version of French anatomist Georges Cuvier; the pair fall in "love" (a fraught concept within the play) and begin a sexual relationship, even as the Docteur and his team of anatomists measure the Venus's body in preparation for her posthumous dissection. After a blackmail attempt from a jealous scientific peer, Cuvier releases the Venus, and she dies shortly thereafter of "exposure." Throughout, Parks interrupts her central narrative for metadramatic excursions, including the reading of "historical artifacts" such as autopsy reports and court proceedings and staged scenes from a fictional play entitled *For the Love of Venus.*

In her account of *Venus*'s premiere at the Public Theatre in 1996, Shawn-Marie Garrett makes an important argument about Parks's historical resurrection project, noting, "of all the stage figures Parks has written before and since, Baartman is the least likely to stay dead anytime

soon" (78). Garrett touches upon one of the central challenges to taking on Baartman's story, as her personage has in many ways taken on a life of its own. During her life, Baartman's image—exaggerated to emphasize the size of her buttocks—was used to advertise the Piccadilly Square freak show in which she was exhibited. After her premature death in 1815, Baartman's body was dissected by Cuvier; his findings were published widely, and Baartman's remains, as well as a plaster cast of her body, were kept on view in the Museum of Natural History in Angers and later Paris's Musée de l'Homme until 1970. Baartman's physical body has been a subject of interest for centuries, and Parks's dramatic representation is but one of several examples of works by predominantly Black women artists who have been drawn to Baartman's history.[71]

As a result, it is difficult and likely impossible to separate Baartman the icon and signifier from the "real" Baartman, whatever that might mean. This is due in large part to the fact that any evidence as to the circumstances of Baartman's life, both before she was brought from the Cape of South Africa to England and during her time in the UK and France, is sparse at best.[72] It is curious, given this context, that Ben Brantley's *New York Times* review laments the Venus's lack of interiority, as he writes, "*Venus* is best when it drops the sweeping, condemning historical perspective and narrows its focus to the personal" (C3). Brantley decries the "sweeping" and "condemning" historical perspective, but it is precisely this perspective that Parks is interested in. For Brantley and others, access to the "real" Venus is paramount; however, it is this very desire that Parks's play critiques and places in a larger historical context of demanding access to Black bodies and spaces.

---

[71] Some of the more salient examples include Black feminist poet-scholar Elizabeth Alexander's 1990 poetry collection, *The Venus Hottentot*; South African dancer Nelisiwe Xaba's 2007 choreographed performance entitled "They Look at Me and That's All They Think"; and Lydia Diamond's 2008 play *Voyeurs de Venus*.

[72] As will become important in Parks's play later in my analysis, the central example of documentation comes from an 1810 public indecency trial held in London at the behest of British abolitionist groups who viewed Baartman's exhibition as a form of coerced labor. Although Baartman is on record as stating that she was in England of her own accord, it is impossible to determine whether or not she was speaking under threat.

This tension between the personal and the public (or historical) with regard to Baartman's narrative also motivates the central controversy surrounding *Venus*. Many critics take umbrage with Parks's choice to depict Baartman as more than simply a victim of racist and sexist abuse. The most vocal is Jean Young, who argues that Parks incorrectly and unethically presents Baartman as complicit in her own fate, which diminishes the tragic quality of her life and the fact of her victimhood. Due to this belief that any uncovering of Baartman's story should necessarily remain faithful to a "truth," Young underscores the dangers of (un)burial, as it removes a layer of protection even as it raises awareness and resurrects dead matter for the space of the stage. In this vein, Young is wary of the largely positive critical reception *Venus* received, noting that its accolades among the cohort of well-known, white male critics is a double form of victimization, "first, by nineteenth-century Victorian society and, again, by the play *Venus* and its chorus of critics" (701). While I don't fully endorse Young's argument, it makes clear the ways that Baartman's body is inscribed and reinscribed throughout her afterlife, as well as the chafing concerns over Baartman's personal identity and victimhood.

In what follows, I demonstrate the ways in which Parks mines the materiality of death and the ostensibly barren landscape of the burial ground to stage the Venus's (un)burial. *Venus* has been discussed critically at length in terms of topics such as its complex, international historical backdrop, its representation of Black embodiment and intersectionality, and its presentation of the theme of complicity—both on the part of the playwright and the protagonist, and through Parks's use of language and form both on the page and onstage.[73] However, there

[73]On the importance of the play's historical frame, one notable example is Sara Warner's "Suzan-Lori Parks's Dramas of Disinterment," which shines a spotlight on the play's intersection with the South African Truth and Reconciliation trials. In writing on the play's exploration of Black embodiment, Harvey Young devotes a chapter to *Venus* in his monograph *Embodying Black Experience;* Harry Elam and Alice Rayner take a similar approach to the Venus's embodied performance in their article "Body Parts: Between Story and Spectacle in *Venus* by Suzan-Lori Parks." Several writers also take up the theme of complicity, both in terms of Parks herself and the character of the

has not been a thorough exploration of the theme of death, burial, and resurrection as it relates to Parks's fabulative practice of history-making. To this end, I argue that Parks's attention to the Venus's body and grave as a site of paradoxical life-in-death, coupled with the defamiliarizing and metatheatrical formal elements, reveals how the historical formations of sexualization, fetishization, and objectification of Black female bodies can be relegated neither solely to the past nor to the present. In centering Baartman's corporeal haunting of the stage and furnishing her body as an incomplete text, Parks suggests that in order to engage with the fragmented histories of colonialism, we must engage in what she terms fabrication and I identify as fabulation.[74] Most importantly, I suggest that Parks's (un)burial is a fundamentally generative process, in which the unrecorded gaps in the historical ledgers give way to alternative, less narratively cohesive forms of engaging with the history of anti-Blackness and colonialism. Parks's "as-ifs" surrounding Baartman's court case, her exhibition, and her refusal to provide interiority to Venus or closure to her story are intentionally jarring, for we cannot know what is unknowable, and that fact can and should make readers and audiences uncomfortable.

One notable way in which Parks clues the audience and reader into the temporality and dramaturgy of (un)burial and resurrection is through *Venus*'s structure, which moves in opposing directions. Even as the dramatic action moves forward linearly, the scenes are numbered in reverse order, so that the opening scene is #31 and the final scene is #1. This is thrown into further confusion when we consider that the first and final scenes are mirror images of each other, creating a circular structure that begins and ends with the Venus's reported death. This choice has several effects, not least of which is the sense of disjointed dramatic time it produces.

Venus, such as Jennifer Griffith's "Betrayal Trauma and the Test of Complicity in Suzan-Lori Parks's *Venus*" and Karen Kornweibel's, "A Complex Resurrection: Race, Spectacle, and Complicity in Suzan-Lori Parks's *Venus.*"

[74] In an interview with Peter Sellars, Parks says of her approach to constructing *Venus,* "most of it's fabricated […] it embraces the unrecorded truth" (Parks qtd in Garrett 79).

The tension among these three narrative motions recalls Holloway's argument that the spate of Black death results in a sense of untimeliness; Parks attempts here to defamiliarize and bring the audience outside of time. Greg Miller makes a similar argument, writing that the result of watching the scenes in this way "resembles a mirror" (134). The notion of viewing something through a convex lens, almost as if through a funhouse mirror, is apt, considering the circus-like quality to the play. There are also historiographical implications to this structure, as several scholars have noted. Carol Schafer connects the play's trajectory to the loaded notion of "posterity" as she suggests that the posterior becomes "a component of both the past and the future" (184). Along the same lines, Brandi Wilkins Catanese terms the scene progression a "retrospective structure" that suggests the "impossibility of defining the past as the past in order to abandon it there" (58). What emerges from these estimations is the historical distance that Parks's scene-ordering denies. Instead of envisioning the past and present as distinct categories, Parks suggests that we have carried that past forward into our current moment.

In addition to the sense of unease generated through the multiple dramatic arcs, Parks includes direct addresses to the audience as a means of implicating them in the narrative. Most notable are Parks's narrative breaks, which serve to demonstrate the multiple vectors and texts along and through which Baartman is inscribed as "the Venus." For example, *Venus* includes several of what Parks calls "footnotes," though they appear in the main text of the play. Each is announced by the character of the Negro Resurrectionist, and each is categorized as a particular genre of "historical extract." The extracts range from "real" archival sources, such as news items and court proceedings, to fabricated sources Parks creates snippets of, such as the Docteur's reports and the Venus's autobiography. The imbrication of fictional and authentic, of medical and theatrical, of inter and intra-textual, underscores the way that our understanding of Baartman

is always already mediated. Further, the deliberate enmeshment of fact and fiction suggests both the inability and futility of disentangling them, particularly since the only extract that gives us Venus's perspective is wholly fabulative. To call them extracts is finally to gesture toward the limitations of any historical archive to produce knowledge about Baartman, as they are part of the necessarily incomplete project of (un)burial.

As noted above, the historical extracts are read aloud or introduced by the Negro Resurrectionist, the only character within the play whose name and role remain the same throughout.[75] The Negro Resurrectionist serves choric functions throughout *Venus*– he is our narrator, calling out the scene changes and introducing new characters, and reading the historical extracts aloud. He remains onstage for almost the entirety of the play, watching the action, the Venus, and the audience; as Karen Kornweibel notes, the Negro Resurrectionist "is never presented as separate from the spectacle" (68). Some scholars have also suggested that he is a stand-in for the Black playwright or Parks herself, as he mediates and orchestrates the dramatic narrative and is ultimately responsible for the Venus's fate.[76] For example, Jennifer Larson's article on the theme of complicity within the play focuses on the parallels between Parks and the Resurrectionist, writing, "To equate Parks and The Negro Resurrectionist, then, indicts Parks as one of Venus's oppressors, damning her—through the written and performed word—to still more involuntary display" (212). Here again we see the danger that emerges through the Negro Resurrectionist's unburial, for through his role as the master of ceremonies, he reopens the historical wound that is Baartman's story.

---

[75] Although Baartman's character is also only played by one actor, in the dramatis personae she is listed as, "Miss Saartjie Baartman, a.k.a The Girl, and later The Venus Hottentot," signaling a change in her role as the play progresses.

[76]Some examples of this line of thinking include Kornweibel's article on the function of digging and Parks-as-playwright, Arlene Keizer's suggestion in "Our Posteriors, Our Posterity: the problem of embodiment in Suzan-Lori Parks's *Venus* and Kara Walker's Camptown Ladies" that the Resurrectionist stands in for creators in the Black diaspora, and Jennifer Larson's study of the Black playwright in *Venus.*

Further, the Negro Resurrectionist's title is significant for its multiple meanings; he is both instrumental in Baartman's onstage resurrection and performance, and he holds the historical job of a resurrectionist or gravedigger. Through the Negro Resurrectionist, Parks exploits the fertile conceptual ground of graverobbing throughout *Venus,* as he both waits for and announces her death *and* mines her resting place to disinter her body for posthumous inspection. It is not surprising, then, that Parks refers to the Resurrectionist's "death watch" in the play's second act, particularly considering the historical context of African American gravedigging ("Interview with Suzan-Lori Parks" 313). In this vein, Edward Halperin's research on the use of marginalized corpses for US anatomical education in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries provides a picture of how Black bodies were continually under the threat of white violence, even after death. Not only did Southern US medical schools routinely use bodies of deceased slaves to advertise their programs, but they would put out calls for white planters and others to exchange their corpses of the enslaved for monetary reimbursement, yet again signaling the lack of autonomy or bodily freedom accorded even in death (Halperin 491-492).[77]

The first act of (un)burial the Negro Resurrectionist undertakes is the disinterment of the Venus in the play's first scene, which Parks titles "The Overture." In the Public Theatre production, Adina Porter as Venus stood on a revolving platform as the ensemble encircled her from below, emphasizing both the spectacle of her body—it should be noted that Porter wore extensive padding, particularly around her buttocks, for the role—as well as its ostensible live-

[77] This culture of disrespect and violence toward the remains of both enslaved and freed Black people comes to a head in the story of Grandison Harris, an enslaved man who was purchased by the Medical College of Georgia to serve as an official cadaver procurer. Harris, a version of Parks's Negro Resurrectionist himself, unearthed graves primarily from cemeteries housing indigent Black populations. He is also part of the lore surrounding Black resurrectionists—Colin Dickey suggests that the tale of the Night Doctor, who would kidnap and murder African Americans to use their bodies for dissection, was a means of spreading fear in Black communities during the period of the Great Migration (Dickey "Night Doctors"). Parks includes this context in *Venus* toward the close of the play, when the Venus has been remanded into the Resurrectionist's custody so he can await her death and deliver her corpse for money.

ness. The Negro Resurrectionist has the first line of the play, in which he simply announces: "The Venus Hottentot!" (1). In this evocation, the Venus is resurrected as she stands atop what becomes her eventual grave. It is also the Negro Resurrectionist, who, merely seconds after presenting her to the Chorus, pronounces her death: "I regret to inform you that thuh Venus Hottentot iz dead" (3). Despite the fact that her enfleshed form is revolving, allowing audience and ensemble members to get a 360-degree view, the Venus herself tells us, "I regret to inform you that thuh Venus Hottentot iz dead. There wont be inny show tuhnite" (4). These moments present us with a seemingly unresolvable contradiction: the Venus tells us she is dead, and there will not be any show, even as we are watching her speak to us and perform.

As with all of Parks's plays, language is not only a means of expression, but also a way of indicating the excesses of space and time within the world of *Venus.* Elizabeth Dyrud Lyman looks at the printed version of the play, arguing that "Parks's unconventional typography and spelling serve purposes from punning to creating a sense of otherness" (92). In this first scene, language is used to otherize the Venus along several axes: referring to her heathenness and sinfulness, consigning her to death over and over, and relegating her to the world of the jungle. One example comes from a character who plays the Mans Brother (who brings Venus to England), the Mother-Showman (who exhibits Venus) and the Grade-School Chum (who attempts to steal Venus's corpse). They announce:

> Behind that curtain just yesterday awaited:
> Wild Female Jungle Creature. Of singular anatomy. Physiqued in such a backward rounded way that she outshapes
> All others. Behind this curtain just yesterday alive uhwaits a female. (5)

Parks plays with her tenses, moving from the first, grammatically correct iteration "just yesterday awaited" to the more sprawling "just yesterday alive uhwaits." In the first, we have a sense of what has passed—we can no longer view the Venus behind the curtain because she no longer awaits our patronage. In the second, however, something has happened to the linear progression of past tense, and we get the sense that a dead body awaits us behind the curtain, someone who was alive just yesterday, but not anymore. Further, the references to her physique as "backward rounded" call to mind the structure of the play itself, which both moves backward through time but is ultimately rounded through the beginning and ending at Venus's death site. The suggestion that she "outshapes" all others is ambiguous, for it reads as either a form of superlative or a recognition of Venus's excess. In both interpretations, her shape does not conform to the confines of this narrative; her shape, her bodily form, cannot be contained even as it is constrained through her death.

Scholars examining this scene all note its curious emphasis on death and absence; Warner suggests that the Venus's proclamation and its repeated iterations through the scene "alerts us to the fact that the protagonist's death is central to the story, that it is, in fact, the contingent foundation of this drama" (189). Taking this argument a step further, Catanese writes that centering the Venus's death "reminds audiences that all efforts to reconstruct Baartman's life–fictional or otherwise–must contend with the absence of a 'real' referent" (50). It is clear that Baartman's death both motivates the drama and points to other absences in the archive of her life, and indeed, it is hard to refute this emphasis on death and lack; a quick survey of this first scene counts fifteen instances of characters using "death," "dead," or "died." What are we to make, then, of her performative aliveness, indexed by the very medium of theatre? Stacie McCormick offers another contradiction, suggesting that in the opening scene, the audience must

contend with a figure who is "at once both alive and dead" (188). McCormick's estimation of Venus's paradoxically lively corpse which haunts the stage recalls Parks's own definition of "ghost" in her "Elements of Style." Parks maintains, "They are *figures, figments, ghosts, roles, lovers* maybe, *speakers* maybe, *shadows, slips, players* maybe, maybe *someone else's pulse*" (12). In essence, Parks conceives of a corporeal ghost, not relegated to the margins but instead centerstage. This notion of a ghost so alive that it can be found in someone's beating pulse is furthered by the staging choices of the original production; as noted, Porter's heavily padded prosthetics created an exaggerated and almost comical portrait of the Venus's posterior, but it also reveals the constructed nature of the character in an important way. For, as Harry Elam and Alice Rayner argue, "her body now equals a body suit, but both an imaginary and real body are on display" (272). Elam and Rayner identify two "bodies" that produce meaning onstage—Porter's real, unadorned body, and the body of the Venus that the padding creates—but we can also consider her absent body, the remains of the real Baartman, as a third text that occupies the stage, despite not being given voice.

In this way, the opening scene functions almost as an inversion of Echo's story from Chapter Two. Rather than a figure who loses her body but maintains her voice, haunting the site at which the two were severed, we have Venus's body in many forms, but her voice is absent, overwritten at each turn by the text of her body. Although we hear her speak a few times, her lines repeat the lines of those above, contributing to the scene's function as one of reportage. Venus's resurrected form becomes the material remains of Baartman's story, ultimately framing *Venus* through the absence and fragmentation of (un)burial. Her death is reported as a matter of public interest, not as a moment for mourning or reflection. In fact, upon hearing the news, the Chorus merely shouts "outrage!" and asks for their money back (5). This opening, set in the

graveyard and centralizing the Venus's resurrected form, focuses on the material remains of Baartman's story, ultimately framing *Venus* through the absence and fragmentation of (un)burial.

The Overture sets the stage for an engagement with the Venus's absent presence, a tension that is echoed in her own desire for privacy coupled with her forced public exhibition. The most sustained example of this comes in the set of scenes depicting Baartman's court appearance in 1810, when British abolitionists brought the legality of her forced exhibition—particularly in light of the 1807 Slave Trade Act—before a judge. The scene as a whole comprises an "historical extract" and unfolds over ten sub-scenes, each titled, "The Venus Hottentot Before the Law." The crime with which she and her handlers are charged is illegal exhibition. As the Chorus of the Court asserts, "we have hauled into Court the case of a most unfortunate female, who has been known to exhibit herself to the view of the Public," and shortly following they ask Venus if she was "making her exhibition against her will" (64). Throughout, Parks plays on the polysemy of "exhibit," referring to the Venus's exhibition of herself, Hendrik Cesars and Alexander Dunlop's exhibition of the Venus, and as the Venus's body itself as an exhibit of evidence. Further, the use of "exhibit" calls to mind Baartman's remains, including the plaster cast of her body on view at the time of writing. With this context in mind, Baartman's exhibition extends beyond the stage and calls to her body's continued objectification past death. Rather than shy away from that fact or present it one-dimensionally, Parks explores the past, present, and future resonances of the exhibition in question.

Parks further exemplifies the thematic significance of Baartman's trial by focusing on the writ of *habeas corpus*. Habeas corpus is invoked multiple times throughout the trial scene, but it is the Venus herself who provides a definition: "*Habeas Corpus.* Literally: 'You should have the body' for submitting. Any of several common-law writs issued to bring the body before the court

of the judge" (65). Parks, through Venus, literalizes the legal definition; rather than referring merely to the presence of the offender in court, it comes to stand in for the tension between the ownership and autonomy of Baartman's physical form. Elam and Rayner make a similar point, writing that although Baartman "has" the body and therefore the right to present herself, other regimes and machineries control the meaning of her representation (269). For, although she has produced the requisite body, the narrative of her exhibition and relative agency is outside of her control; before she can provide her own testimony, the Negro Resurrectionist delivers a brief monologue summarizing the outcome of the inquest and several witnesses take the stand to attest at various times to her heathenness (a man who had a private visit with the Venus), her religiosity (the Mother-Showman, who had her baptized), and her captivity (members of the abolitionist sect who assert her enslavement). When we finally arrive at the Venus's appointed testimony, the "indecency" of her exhibition has already been prescribed onto her body. Taking this argument further, we can see the ways in which the Venus's body itself becomes the site of the crime, for it is her large buttocks and semi-nude form that are under interrogation, and it is her body which will need to be removed from England if the court deems it necessary. In the same way that the opening scene presents the Venus's body as the very landscape of her death and burial, her body also becomes a landscape for incrimination and legal debate.

When the Venus does testify on her own behalf, her words complicate the very function of the trial as a form of revelation and disclosure. At the first chance accorded her to offer insights into whether or not she acts of her own free will, she refuses, merely offering, "The Venus Hottentot is unavailable for comment" (74). However, she ultimately provides a brief argument for why she should be allowed to stay in Europe, drawing on the language of scientific racism. In place of any truth, the Venus instead wishes that she could "wash off my dark mark. I

came here black. Give me the chance to leave here white" (76). It is difficult to hear the Venus's testimony and not recall Jean Young's argument, for in the moment where Parks might have provided an interior perspective, she has Baartman's character first decline to speak and then parrot racist ideology. However, I suggest that we can and should read Parks's dialogue as an intentional intervention into the chasm of knowledge surrounding the trial. Gordon Chipembere importantly calls our attention to the lack of Baartman's voice in the archived court proceedings– her name is not mentioned and her record as a witness is given only through white male translators (9). To disrupt this putative silence, Parks chooses critical fabulation through a necessarily partial, flawed form of burial and resurrection; rather than attempting to recreate what Baartman might have said, Parks has the Venus unable to freely speak her mind, and instead of revelation we are left with the putative silence of the archive.

The play's intermission, which features the Docteur conducting Baartman's autopsy, further explores the absence and presence of the Venus's live/dead body. The scene's title cues us into its resurrective function, as it reads, "Scene 16: Several Years from Now: In the Anatomical Theatre of Tübingen: The Dis(-re-)memberment of the Venus Hottentot" (91). Parks uses the space of the intermission to lurch the Time Line forward well past Baartman's death, providing the posthumous context of her eventual dissection and the display of her remains. The use of "dis(-re-)memberment" implies both the systematic disarticulation of her bones and flesh as well as the sense of dislocation and dismemory that it entails.[78] In his anatomical dissection *and* the act of reading his dissection notes aloud from his notebook, the Docteur also commits the Venus's body in life to the realm of the forgotten; the position of "memberment" cast to the

[78] Parks's phrasing and punctuation also call to mind Toni Morrison's conception of "rememory" and her character Sethe's use of the verb "disremember" in *Beloved.* For Morrison, the terms suggest both the trauma of inherited memories and histories of Black death and violence, as well as the ways that memories of trauma disallow a clean break between past and present.

side of the parentheses also suggests a removal from community. The Venus's removal from any sort of community or from popular memory is particularly jarring for an audience member, as the final scene of the first act ends with the Baron Docteur purchasing the Venus and promising her money and safety. "Several years from now," but only seconds removed, we are yet again faced with the inevitable death and dismemberment of Baartman. Or, as Elam and Rayner note, "In the time between acts, that is, the Venus has become nothing but a text" (27).

The intermission is also notable because of Parks's choice to stage it as a scene during which audience members can choose to remain in their seats or not. The stage directions read, "Scene 16 runs during the Intermission. House lights should come up and the audience should be encouraged to walk out of the theatre, take their intermission break, and then return" (91). This scene takes the tension between private and public and brings it to bear on the audience themselves. As Greg Miller writes, "Here Parks effectively stages *us;* the play presents a 'history' with which we are profoundly uncomfortable, and the intermission stages the audience as wanting something else" (Miller 135). What we "want," as I suggest above, is insight into Baartman or Cuvier's interior life; what we get is a jargon-heavy (so much so that Parks provides a glossary of medical terms at the end of the printed text) reading of Venus's measurements and anatomical markers. While in the previous scene her body was the site of crime and excess, her body is now fragmented and inscribed in the Docteur's notebook. The Baron Docteur opens by calling our attention to the importance of his research:

> The height, measured after death,
>
> Was 4 feet 11 and ½ inches.
>
> The total weight of the body was 98 pounds *avoirdupois.*
>
> As an aside I should say

that as to the *value* of the information that I present

there can be no doubt.

Their significance

will be felt far beyond our select community. . . .

I do invite you, Distinguished Gentlemen,

Colleagues and yr Distinguished Guests,

If you need *relief*

please take yourselves uh breather in thuh lobby.

My voice will surely carry beyond these walls and if not

my findings are published. (91-92)

Baartman is reduced to this textual reproduction of her height and weight after death, but the Docteur's focus initially is on ensuring the audience understands the far-reaching implications of his work. His suggestion that the significance of his findings and their inherent value—note the use of italics here as a means of centralizing the importance of economic exchange and Baartman's commodified body—will be felt beyond the community in attendance is telling, as it calls attention to both the enduring racism and sexism that Baartman's brief period in Europe inspired as well as Baartman's legacy in visual and literary culture. Parks has the Docteur interpellate the audience directly, calling to the distinguished gentlemen and colleagues who would compose the audience of his reported findings. In encouraging them to relieve themselves, Parks underscores the audience's relative freedom; although they can drift in and out as they please, the doctor's voice carries beyond these walls. Does this mean that the audience members can hear him while they use the facilities? Or is he gesturing to the dominance of Cuvier's voice in determining Baartman's narrative? Regardless, this scene provides us with the Docteur's

booming voice alongside the Venus's dis-re-membered body; she has been unburied, but her body is still fragmentary, her story still incomplete.

Two brief scenes between the Docteur and the Venus further underscore the Venus's status as living-dead, as her corpse is placed, almost as a palimpsest, over her still live body. The first comes in Scene 12, when the Baron Docteur and the Chorus of the 8 Anatomists are practicing taking the Venus's measurements and sketching her anatomical frame. As the Docteur guides them in the proper way to take measurements from her head to her feet, one of the men asks, "The measurements of her limb-bones will of course be corrected after maceration, sir?" (120). It is clear in this moment that the anatomists are preparing for the Venus's dissection, even as she stands enfleshed before them. The introduction of the concept of maceration prompts the Venus to ask for clarification; although no one responds to her, the Negro Resurrectionist provides a footnote aside for the audience, defining it as "a process performed on the subject after the subjects death. The subjects body parts are soaked in a chemical solution to separate the flesh from the bones so that the bones may be measured with greater accuracy" (120). Again, the audience is made complicit, as we learn the anatomists' purpose before the Venus does, and we must contend with the paradoxical alive-ness of this figure we know to no longer be living. The Resurrectionist uses "subjects" to refer to Baartman's body, rather than the possessive "subject's," which serves to remove the Venus further from a claim to her own body and its parts. Linguistically, even the "subjects" death is removed from her own possession.

Subjectivity becomes vital when the Venus becomes pregnant. Her pregnancy is yet another moment in which life and death commingle—in this instance they are too close for comfort, and the Docteur immediately arranges for an abortion. Not only is the Docteur already

married, but a pregnancy would greatly forestall his plans to posthumously examine the Venus.[79] The juxtaposition of new life and inevitable dissection and decomposition emphasizes the inescapability of death as the organizing schema of *Venus.* When the Venus becomes pregnant again shortly after, the Baron Docteur must make a choice. At his Grade School Chum's prodding, he ultimately decides to expel her from his home and leaves her to die, chained to a stake in the burial ground that the Negro Resurrectionist watches over. Before making this decision, he has one final exchange with his rival:

The Baron Docteur: She would have made uh splendid wife.

Grade School Chum: Oh, please. She'll make uh splendid corpse. (144).

The Docteur use of a past tense conditional ("would have") is already belated, as it indexes the inability to go back and reverse the course of time. The Grade School Chum responds in the future tense, suggesting that both Baartman's past and future are already foreclosed and any avenues for life and fertility are closed off.

The play's final scene repeats and revises upon its first, restaging the Venus's death as the scenes countdown to her inevitable demise. Although the scene itself does not offer much new dialogue, it is instructive to read the ending through the context of Baartman's historical afterlife. One of the Venus's final lines in this scene, situated atop the site of her death, brings us to the site of her continued exhibition: "Loves corpse stands on show in museum. Please visit" (161). This entreaty is belied however, Arlene Keizer tells us, in the original production at the Public Theatre, where Adina Porter's Venus holds a skull during this monologue. Keizer writes, "What made this moment in the performance so haunting, so viscerally painful, is that the

[79] Although it is beyond the scope of this analysis, Mehdi Ghasemi makes a compelling argument in his article "A Study of 'Quad Ps' in Suzan-Lori Parks's *Venus*" that the Venus's multiple pregnancies and subsequent abortions are a means of demonstrating bio-power and colonialist forms of bodily control (62)

audience was forced to see the Baartman character contemplate her own death, imagine herself as a skeleton who would live on, unwillingly, so far from any location in which she would have been recognised as fully human" (210). The choice to have the Venus so materially ruminating on her belated death underscores the importance of the burial ground and the physicality of what remains for Parks and the larger project of history from below the grave. Further, as *Venus* was in previews and making its premiere in 1995, the battle for stewardship of Baartman's remains was underway between South Africa and France. Gordon-Chipembre, Warner, and Catanese detail how, after the African National Congress party was victorious in the 1994 election, post-Apartheid South Africa galvanized around the effort to repatriate Baartman's remains; in particular, the Griqua National Council, who are descended from KhoiKhoi people as Baartman was, viewed France's purported ownership of her body (although it had not been on view since 1970, her remains were still housed in storage at the Musée de l'Homme) as an example of colonial oppression. In 2002, her remains were repatriated and re-buried in Hankey, the South African town where she was born, to much fanfare across the nation. The funeral was held on Women's Day, a holiday in South Africa, and the grave now sits alongside a memorial sculpture and plaques with commemorative poems. Most notably the gravesite is enclosed by an iron-wrought gate; although it is hard to not equate a mourner peering through the bars with a voyeur peeping through Baartman's cage, two hundred years after her exhibition, her remains have been endowed with a semblance of privacy.

"Mi must bury good": Acts of (Un)Burial in *QPH*

Sister Theatre Collective's 1981 *QPH* is an evocative devised performance piece that was created in response to the deadly fire at an almshouse in Kingston the year prior. On May 20, 1980, a fire spread through the women's Myers Ward of the Eventide Home, an institution for

impoverished and disabled women, men, and children; the structure burned to the ground within minutes, and over 150 women perished. To date, it is the deadliest fire in modern Jamaican history; of the 211 women housed there, only 58 are believed to have survived. Although in death the women were buried in a mass grave at National Heroes Park on May 26, which Prime Minister Manley named a national day of mourning, in life they were on the outermost margins of Jamaican society. The fire is significant for a number of reasons, not least of which is the fact that the tragedy brought worldwide attention to the unsafe and near inhumane conditions of Eventide and homes like it.[80] The fire also reflects the tense political landscape of Jamaica in 1980, as a national election for the office of Prime Minister took place in October of the same year. Manley, the progressive incumbent representing the People's National Party, was challenged by Edward Seaga, a US-born member of the more conservative and globalized Jamaican Labour Party. News outlets such as The *Times* and the *Jamaican Observer* note the importance of this political backdrop, noting how the fire became a chance for each political party to assert the other's culpability for the mass deaths.[81] Although the fire was never officially connected to any foul play, many believe the fire to have been an act of arson in line with other acts of violence from the months leading up to the election. This context demonstrates not just the staggering loss that Sistren's work responds to, but it also intervenes into a national battle for political sovereignty, even as the women who populated Eventide were denied full citizenship and freedom in their country at the moment of their death.

---

[80] The *New York Times* coverage of the fire, for example, notes that the women's building had been previously called a "fire trap."

[81] For reference, the *Jamaica Observer* article "The Bloody General Election that Changed Jamaica" takes a more historical, long-view approach, whereas the *NYT* coverage in "157 Elderly Women Die in Jamaica Fire" is an immediate take on the event and its political context.

In the face of both the overwhelming loss of life and a new governmental regime that sought to decrease funding for budget items such as state-funded arts programming and public housing, Sistren Theatre Collective devised *QPH* as a critique of Jamaican society's treatment of the working class and Black women, as well as a memorial project for the women who perished in the fire. *QPH* stands for Queenie, Pearlie, and Hopie, the names of three of the fire's victims; the central action of the play follows each of their respective narratives and societal downfalls before they all meet at Eventide. In Hopie's portion, we learn that as a child she was sent to work as a domestic servant for her aunt and cousin, but after her aunt's death, she is fired and must resort to begging. As a light-skinned girl from a wealthy family, Pearlie is arranged to be married to a suitable match; however, upon learning that Pearlie has become pregnant with the gardener's child, Pearlie's mother throws her out, and Pearlie turns to prostitution and alcoholism. Queenie's story spotlights her role as a Sister in a Pocomanian church; when the other women become jealous of Queenie's rising role in leading services, she is accused of stealing money and, in the absence of the Bishop under whom she serves, is cast out.

Taken together, these stories tell a narrative of injustice and misogyny in Jamaican life, coupled with the lack of adequate social services. In keeping with Sistren's body of work, *QPH* is a process-oriented piece; although the script is attributed to director Hertencer Lindsay, its communal generation is suggested in the opening note, which states that the play was developed through improvisation (157). Through speaking with surviving victims of the fire and those who knew the victims who did not survive, the performance group used improvisation and devised rehearsal techniques to develop a story that both honors three real women who perished and gestures toward the large-scale plight of the women whose names are not invoked within the piece. Helen Gilbert's introduction to the work tells us that "the stories move outwards from

personal experiences to their socio-political causes" (154). In this way, *QPH* reflects a similar tension to that of *Venus,* in that it represents a personal narrative as a means of communicating a meta-narrative about the public and the importance of social programming.

Although Sistren's work has been discussed in scholarship internationally, particularly with attention to the group's importance as a postcolonial, grassroots theatre collective that draws upon the tactics of Augusto Boal, individual works are generally not given the same critical treatment. This is in part due to the fact that many of Sistren's performance scripts have not been published or widely disseminated, but *QPH* is notably included as the Jamaican example in Gilbert's *Postcolonial Plays: An Anthology* (2001). Even so, there is a dearth of scholarship on the play, which I believe stems from *QPH*'s extensive use of devising techniques and the creolized-English language of Jamaican Patois. In this section, however, I provide a critical treatment of *QPH,* analyzing the play's use of African retention ritual as a form of (un)burial. Through a close reading of the play's circular structure, gravesite setting, and use of stage properties that evoke the mass deaths, including coffins and bandages, I argue that Sistren uses the stage in *QPH* as a space for revivified histories where these women's life stories are elevated and made public, as are the trauma and violence they suffered both in life and death. As a result of the incomplete, fragmented process of (un)burial, we are never removed from the materiality of their inevitable deaths, but we are also asked to think about the future; in short, Sistren's *QPH* responds to the political and social crises of early 1990s Jamaica just as it suggests that an acknowledgement of the strength of struggling working-class women is an opening for healing and restructuring dynamics of power in the ashes of the fire.

In an essay preceding *QPH* in *Postcolonial Plays,* Gilbert writes that through the use of the Etu ritual, "the dead women are 'raised' to relive fragments of their lives" (154). Gilbert's

gloss frames the ritual resurrection as a mode of (un)burial, as she highlights both the necessarily incomplete nature of the women's revivification—they are indeed raised but it is a temporary status—and the fragmentary nature of these women's performed narratives. As in *Echo in the Bone* (a play often discussed in concert with Sistren due to its similar emphasis on African retention practices in Jamaica), the ritual opens the play and sets the plot into motion. In *QPH,* as noted, the women perform the Etu ritual, which is a woman-centered ritual focused on themes of birth and creation. In this vein, the production note reads:

> The Etu ritual involves singing, dancing, and feasting, with women playing important roles in the ceremony. A table is set with ritual food and rum for the ancestors, and players are anointed with a goat-blood cross to the forehead. . . . the Queen, as lead dancer, controls the dancers. Each soloist represents a family with its own song and dance patterns. Dance movements are centered on the pelvic area, symbol of fertility, birth, and rebirth. (157)

Notably, Etu provides women with the agency to direct the ritual, as the Queen dictates the movements and leads the shawling. Further, the ritual connotes a sense of community, which is important to consider as Queenie, Pearlie, and Hopie's stories are linked by a lack of communal care. Here, however, the women become the soloists, and their dances are linked to that of their family and ancestors. The emphasis on the pelvis and themes of fertility and birth are ostensibly at odds with the play's morbid subject matter; however, it becomes clear as the ritual accompanies Queenie, Pearlie, and Hopie's awakenings that the notion of rebirth and fertility at a site otherwise marked for death is a deliberate intervention on the part of Sistren, disallowing these women to fall into dis-memory. The Etu ritual is also an example of an African retention practice, which originated in West Africa among the Yoruba people, and survived the period of

enslavement and colonialism to continue today. This aspect of Etu is of central importance to Sistren founder Honor Ford-Smith, who links the group's frequent use of ritual to the influence of legendary Jamaican choreographer Rex Nettleford. Ford-Smith writes that engaging with his work "led to an encounter with *kumina*, revival, *burru*, *brukins*, and *ettu* as coded statements of difference within our own communities and then as common and familiar movement vocabulary. It led to the reclaiming of transformed African memory not as an act of nostalgia for a lost or perfect past but as a step to destabilizing Eurocentrism" (160). The use of Etu, then, serves as a political statement, particularly in the wake of Seaga's 1980 electoral victory.

The play's prologue furnishes the stage space as a burial ground, perhaps the mass grave in which the women rest today. The opening stage directions follow: "Pearlie is inside the coffin on stage right, Hopie is in the coffin on stage left, Queenie is on the centre coffin, bandaged and in a hospital gown. As the opening action progresses, we realize that she is recalling the lives of the women and reliving the nightmare events leading up to a fire" (157). Upon entering the world of the performance, the audience is confronted with markers of death: two occupied coffins and a woman bandaged from the fire atop her own. Just as *Venus* opens and closes with the death of its protagonist, *QPH* follows an echoic structure that draws upon the materiality of these women's deaths. Following the coffin tableau, the chorus of women begin a dirgelike chant, reciting the women's names and bringing the memory of the fire into the playing space.

> Queenie's burning (repeat)
>
> Look yonder (repeat)
>
> Fire, fire
>
> And we have no water. . . .
>
> Queenie, Queenie, Queenie

> Pearlie, Pearlie, Pearlie,
>
> Hopie, Hopie, Hopie
>
> Fire, Fire, Fire
>
> Help, Help, Help! (157-158)[82]

This brief moment is haunting, particularly considering that Pearlie and Hopie are still inside their coffins and were unable to survive the fire or receive help in time. Their words are ultimately futile, as we know the calls for help will fall on deaf ears; indeed, in calling to an audience for help, they are placed in a similar position of helplessness. The repeated insistence that there is a fire and they have no water, as well as the repeated calls for help, remind us that the Eventide Home fire did not occur merely by chance; rather, it was the result of years of underfunding and lack of governmental attention. In the opening action, Sistren's staging makes plain the play's function as memorial and censure.

Shortly after Queenie awakes in a hospital, the play begins in earnest as our burial ground begins to shift before our very eyes. The stage directions read:

> Etu drums beat and penetrate Queenie's consciousness. The chorus of old women is *transformed* into the celebrants of the Etu ritual. They chant Queenie's name three times. Queenie rises and is *transformed* into the Queen of the ritual. The Etu drums pulsate and crescendo. Two women of the Chorus *turn* Queenie's head and arm bandages into a ritual headwrap and an Etu shawl which is draped around her neck. A third takes off the hospital gown: underneath she has on her ritual dress. (158, emphasis mine)

[82] Although I do not include the full quote here for space, Pearlie and Hopie's names are given a verse as well in the first portion of the chant.

The role of Etu is paramount, as the drums enter and inhabit Queenie's body and mind, enabling the stage's transformation from a site of death to one of resurrected life. There is an emphasis on the transformative properties of the ritual, as the woman become celebrants, Queenie becomes the ritual's leader, and the bandages and hospital wear that adorn her burned body are turned into a headwrap, shawl, and dress. The malleability of stage properties suggests a certain artificiality or constructedness to the notion of identity; here, it indicates the quick slippage with which we will move from dead to living and back again. I note the importance of this transformation because it indexes the way that Sistren takes the physical markers of death and makes them strange, or reshapes them to become something entirely new. In *QPH,* this change marks a shift toward the play's memorial function, as Queenie's rejection of mourning in favor of celebration injects a source of life into the barren opening processional and occasions the play's (un)burial.

The most prominent aspect of *QPH*'s set design is the use of the three coffins for the women whose stories appear in the play. Through this choice, the audience is presented not only with the bodies of the (un)dead onstage, but also the material evidence of their eruption from below the earth. The perverse placement of these coffins above ground is tied to their ritual function, for after Queenie has transformed into the Queen of the ritual, she is able to act as resurrectionist. The stage directions read, "Queenie dances to the table, takes the white rum, puts some in her mouth, sprays the coffins with it, and raises Pearlie and Hopie from the dead. They emerge from the closed coffins" (158). In this moment, the ritual becomes an act of (un)burial, as it allows the women to re-embody their cadavers and relive their pasts. Although there is a note of celebration to this aspect of the ritual, there is also an inherent violence to this disinterment, as the women return from death to revisit moments where they were mistreated and at times abused in life. Notably, the inescapability of the coffins gestures toward the underside of this act. The

coffins are a central scenic element; throughout the play and as needed, they at turns transform into beds, tables, and closets. Although their immediate use might shift, the coffins are always identifiable as coffins, lending a morbid, posthumous quality to the scenes that take place before the women lived at Eventide.

Even further, the women who compose the cast are tasked with aiding in scene transitions and moving their coffins around the stage; the directions state, "It is important that the women in the ritual bear the burden of moving these coffins and that no stage hands come onstage" (Sistren 158). Throughout *QPH,* the women must physically bear the burden of their death, creating a tension between this continuous oppression and the celebratory revivification ritual. In her chapter on Sistren, Kanika Batra argues that "Foregrounding the 'actors' bodies' in the creation of the stage environment serves the dual purpose of presenting acting as 'work' involving bodily labor and the consequences of a violent, abusive, and exploitative environment on bodies as material entities" (52). Here, she links the work involved in the movement of coffins explicitly to the body and its exploitation. In foregrounding the labor of (un)burial, Sistren refuses to deny the existence of the body's materiality even in death.

Alongside the play's ritual frame is a set of three narratives, which serve to both address gender and class inequalities as well as provide the women a space to provide a testimony of their mistreatment. In Nicole Aljoe's *Creole Testimonies,* she argues that the "haunting and generative aesthetic power of the fragment . . . is engendered by the creole culture of the West Indies and Caribbean" (19). Aljoe links the fragmentary structure of Caribbean slave narratives—her book's focus—to the syncretism found in the genre of the *testimonio,* a Latin American and Caribbean term for dictated accounts of marginalized subject's lives. Notably, Aljoe writes that *testimonios* "require collaboration and often do not focus on the inner self, but

rather on communal experience" (18). In this estimation, we can see Sistren's alignment with *testimonio,* particularly through their investment in collaborative dramaturgy and their use of individual stories to make larger social commentaries. As in *Venus,* there is a move away from pure interiority in favor of a more collective, and thus less personal, approach. And, indeed, this approach necessarily involves fragmentation because of the removal of one centralized author and the inability to access Queenie, Pearlie, and Hopie's perspectives. Although we see snapshots of each woman's life, the narratives are at times disjointed. For example, Hopie's shuttles between scenes where large gaps of time have passed, and Pearlie's story excises the portion where she gives birth. In this vein, Raphael Dalleo analyzes what he calls Sistren's "testimonial impulse," arguing that Ford-Smith uses *testimonio* "as a way of recuperating, or even manufacturing, a pure, indigenous Caribbean culture . . . emphasiz[ing] urban working-class women as the repository of an alternative native cultural sensibility" (177). While I am wary of making any claims to Sistren's investment in indigeneity, his suggestion that testimony is a way of remaking Jamaican narratives is apt. Through Sistren's spotlighting of Queenie, Pearlie and Hopie's stories, incomplete and fragmentary as they are, the group works to reshape contemporary history and asks us to reconsider whose voices matter in creating an archive.

Although the first half of *QPH* centers on the personal histories of three women, the latter portion of the play focuses on the women's collective struggles as they find themselves at Eventide Home together. This section is notable for its expansion of the play's themes– at the almshouse we meet characters such as Rocka, who is both deaf and mute, calling our attention not only to the treatment of the poor, but of the disabled as well. Most importantly, however, the play's third act serves as a form of foreshadowing, framing the stage as a gravesite before we see the fire take place. For example, Sistren inserts a brief scene in which a mother and daughter

who were victims of the 1976 Orange Lane fire try to find housing at Eventide. The fire occurred when a tenement building on Orange Lane was deliberately set ablaze, after which the perpetrators fired several rounds of bullets into the housing project. The incident was motivated by a PNP meeting taking place within the building, and it further underscores the ways that the political tension between parties resulted in the deaths of innocent Jamaican citizens. The mother, named "fire victim" in the playtext, explains to her daughter and the women in the almshouse yard that she has been unable to secure new housing; when they leave, Queenie remarks, "Is another Middle Passage and now all a we a travel again inna di same boat!" (172). Here, Queenie gestures toward Rinaldo Walcott's notion of the long emancipation, linking these women's current misfortunes to a centuries-long history of forced removal, enslavement, and colonial subjugation. As an example of postcolonial theatre, Sistren demonstrates the paradox between the promise of a new future for Jamaica, poised on the edge of an election, and the continuing disregard for its most vulnerable populations. Queenie's call to the past is coupled with the women's desire to forget the past: Pearlie blames her alcoholism on a desire to "blot out what in mi mind" just as Queenie urges her to "mek [the past] gwan. Just tink about now and di future" (173-174). Despite this call to orient themselves toward the future, the women's deaths are imminent and the imagery of this other Middle Passage, bringing these women unwillingly to their graves, reigns instead. This is the latent violence of (un)burial, as it moves toward an inexorable end in which the horrors of the fire are replayed and re-staged.

After the inevitable occurs and we watch Pearlie and Hopie perish in the fire before our eyes, the play's final scene functions as yet another form of testimony, where the surviving women are interviewed by an investigative commission. Throughout the monologues which compose this scene, there is a "Haitian Death March" drumming, which turns their speeches into

perverse eulogies. However, in the face of death and dis-rememberment, the women surveyed choose to cast their eyes steadfastly forward rather than backward. When one survivor named Eva is interviewed, she insists upon the importance of saving for death: "Yuh cyaan just dead and lef everything pon people so. Mi must bury good" (175). In part, Eva's philosophy aligns with Annie Paul's study of Jamaican funerary culture, which is invested in the purchase and display of lavish caskets, particularly in working class communities where "disproportionate amounts of money" are spent on expensive funerals (143). This emphasis on the materiality of death and burial is central to the notion of memorial, for just as Eva wants to be self-sufficient in death, she also wants to be seen, to be recognized as someone worthy of a lavish burial.

Queenie's final monologue is in a somewhat different tenor, as she instead focuses her speech on her demands for those who survived in the realm of the living. Her exhortations are ostensibly for the ears of the commission, but they function dually as Sistren's parting words to their audience. Queenie tells us that they do not want a replacement almshouse built out in the "bush," but rather in the spot that it stood, only "dem must build it properly . . . *ask we* what we want" (176). This direct call to action centers on listening to subaltern voices, on elevating testimony to the level of policy. It is through the revivification of Queenie, Pearlie, and Hopie that the audience is able to not only bear witness to their lives but to carry their stories with them going forward. Queenie closes with a final plea: "We waan live! Everybody haffi get old but member, di old have the key to di future cause we have di secrets of the past" (176). Ultimately, Sistren calls for a revaluation of these women, viewing their age and varied experience as a key that can bridge the distance between past and future. In the face of a culture and nation that would rather bury the dead and move forward, Sistren chooses to unbury these women and provide a fabulative history of their lives and their stories.

The play's final moments similarly refuse to consign these women solely to their graves, instead using the Etu ritual to stage a celebration of those who passed. Sharon Green notes the ways that the play shapes moments of death into moments of life, suggesting that "In *QPH* the death ritual is used not to mourn the women's deaths, but to celebrate their lives—and the lives of all the other women killed in the fire—and their struggles for independence and survival" (115). And indeed, this is no clearer than in the closing stage directions:

> Queenie freezes. Etu drumming. Chorus enters. A member brings white rum to Queenie. She sprinkles coffins and sprays people as they circle around her. Pearlie and Hopie rise and join Queenie on her coffin. They dance to the table and acknowledge the ancestors in dance. . . . All celebrate life as they reprise Etu sequences. . . . Lights slowly fade to black. (176)

Significantly, Pearlie and Hopie remain on stage through the play's last moments; rather than return to their caskets, they are able to rise and join in the ritual. The significance of Etu, particularly in its connection to fertility, birth/rebirth, and women, is made manifest, as this switch from the drums of the death march to the drums of Etu resurrect Pearlie and Hopie yet again. Although Sistren takes care to stage their deaths and does not shy away from portraying and restaging the violence these women have experienced, the closing action is one of communion and celebration. To invoke *Echo in the Bone,* we leave Queenie, Pearlie, and Hopie "somewhere in the ritual."

"Here Lies/ Hear": Conclusion

Throughout this chapter, I have argued that Parks and Sistren metatheatrically demonstrate the process of engaging with the incomplete archive of Black life and death that dates back to the period of the slave trade. Through a form of fabulative engagement with the

dead, one that rests on a praxis of (un)burial and does not seek to reproduce or restore a narrative that does not exist, these texts and performances function themselves as examples of historiographies of Black life and death. To bring this point home, I turn again to the literary to consider Alice Walker's essay "Looking for Zora," in which Walker recounts her experience of attempting to locate African American writer Zora Neale Hurston's grave. Despite Hurston's current vaunted status in African American letters, her contributions were almost lost to time. In the 1970s when Walker's essay was written, Hurston was all but written out of literary history. In the face of this erasure, Walker journeys to Florida, where Hurston is buried in an unmarked grave in an overgrown portion of the cemetery. As Walker and her companion trudge through waist-high weeds to find Hurston's resting place, the living author realizes the only thing to do is to call out to Zora and will her corpse to speak back.

> "Zora!" I yell, as loud as I can . . . "Are you out here?" . . . "Zora!" Then I start fussing with her. "I hope you don't think I'm going to stand out here all day, with these snakes watching me and these ants having a field day. In fact, I'm going to call you just one or two more times." On a clump of dried grass, near a small bushy tree, my eye falls on one of the largest bugs I have ever seen. It is on its back, and is as large as three of my fingers. I walk toward it, and yell "Zo-ra!" and my foot sinks into a hole. I look down. I am standing in a sunken rectangle that is about six feet long and about three or four feet wide. (105)

Walker's engagement with Zora is necessarily fabulative because so much of Hurston's life and the circumstances of her death is unknown. At the site of so much death and barrenness, Walker observes so much ongoing life—snakes, ants, and bugs abound. What follows in this site of life-in-death is a kind of call and response between the living and the dead; the sunken hole into

which her foot slips is Zora's rejoinder—her grave both figuratively and materially calls back to Walker. We can "hear" in this moment echoes of "Burial" and "walnut grove," in which not only the interred, but the graves themselves communicate with their poetic interlocutors. It is a communion borne out of fabulation and incompleteness, but in listening at the gravesite, Clifton and Walker find the bones and hear them sing.

Confronted with only a coffin-sized sunken spot of untended weeds and grass, Walker pushes forward in her memorialization project, asking an engraver to create a new headstone for Zora. In addition to providing the dates of her birth and death, Walker includes a brief epitaph which reads: "'A GENIUS OF THE SOUTH' NOVELIST FOLKLORIST ANTHROPOLOGIST" (107). The first portion is a reference to Jean Toomer, yet another African American literary giant; Walker's inclusion of a line from his poem "Georgia Dust" works to re-place Hurston among a network of Black life and thought in the early twentieth century. The latter portion similarly restores to Hurston a lineage and calls to hear work as both a writer and social scientist. When instructing the dubious engraver as to how to find Hurston's grave, Walker tells him he must "sound the spot" with a pole, for the grave is otherwise unfindable. What emerges from this encounter, both literally and figuratively, is a moment of history erupting from below the grave, here figured as the unadorned, sunken hole under which Zora's decomposed body lies. In preparing and erecting a headstone for the author, Walker refuses to see the barren cemetery as a site of silence and non-life, instead generating a new narrative and afterlife for Hurston and her work. As Walker writes, "a grave is not a pinpoint," but it is in the "sounding" for—both geographically and sonically—what lies beneath that dormant, unrecorded histories are brought to the surface.

Conclusion

"*Mapping the lives of the dead with the historian's tools alone is insufficient."*
—Hazel Carby, from *Imperial Intimacies: A Tale of Two Islands,* 2019.

Throughout this dissertation, I have turned to literary antecedents and used non-performance texts as interlocutors for the theatrical works I examine. It is evident that fiction such as novels and poetry by Black authors contain elements of critical fabulation, often drawing from the same shared experience of being denied an objective and accessible historical narrative. If this is the case, it begs the question as to why I focus so heavily on theatre and performance. Due not only to theatre's ability to warp time and space, but also to the embodied forms of meaning-making theatrical performance involves, I suggest that dramatic representations operate on both mimetic and diegetic levels to produce affective and cerebral engagements with their audience. To gesture toward Hazel Carby's above, theatre becomes the tool by which historical narratives may be recuperated. In this conclusion, I wish to begin by providing some contextualization and discussion of why theatre as a medium is particularly important for the creation of fabulative histories.

To begin, the dramatic works in each chapter acknowledge the importance of theatre as a unique medium and artform through which new ideas and old stories are told and re-made. This notion of the theatre as a place for revisioning calls to mind the stage as a site of echo; indeed, theatre's ability to call the past or future into being without sacrificing the presence of performance is what allows dramatists to explore non-linear means of engaging with historical moments. This is in part because of the liveness of the theatrical act, which imbues the storytelling with a present-ness that is often underexplored or excluded in other fictive forms. As Peggy Phelan discusses in *Unmarked* (1993), performance has an un-iterable quality; she notes that due to performance's "ephemeral nature, performance art cannot be documented," for it

turns into that very document (31). What does this mean, then, for theatre whose very aim is to interrogate and challenge dominant modes of documenting history? Playwrights themselves have commented on this important component of drama in performance: Marcus Gardley has noted in interviews that theatre is the "perfect place to grapple with ideas," which parallels Suzan-Lori Parks's observations in "Elements of Style" that "a play is a blueprint of an event: a way of creating and rewriting history" ("Marcus Gardley on Conversing with the Past"; 4). The act of performance serves as the fulcrum between dramatic engagements with the past and exhortations to ameliorate the future; the play becomes the vehicle through which, as T.J. in *Insurrection* puts it, "we change in oura [sic] own time" (O'Hara 321). Ultimately, Gardley, Parks and others turn toward the stage for the exploration of the historical past for its very ephemerality and revisionary capabilities.

Beyond the overt "liveness" or "presentness" of performance, a dramatic work's mise-en-scene and production design are a means of extending the playtext beyond the confines of the script itself and of creating the *physical* environment imagined in the words. This is a necessary aspect of these fabulative histories, for they bring to life the historical what-ifs to explore the gaps in historiography on the period of slavery. For this reason, theatre as an essentially mimetic art—by which I mean an artform that primarily generates meaning through the act of showing or enacting—is significant. In comparison to novels and poetry, which primarily employ diegesis and subjective expression—or narrative and description—theatre allows for actors to physically embody figures from the past and thus make the connections between "then" and "now" come quite literally alive for audiences. Mimesis and diegesis as terms were developed by classical Greek theorists who were suspicious of the power of artistic representation, although Aristotle is the first to link mimesis directly to theatre and drama. Mimesis in the theatre, in this estimation,

contains elements inherent to fabulation, as it allows for imaginative concepts to be borne out onstage by performers inhabiting roles. In the plays I consider, the manipulation of mimetic representation through actors is paramount, particularly in the works that often require double casting across temporal spheres. In *Harlem Duet,* for example, the same two actors play a pair of lovers in three timelines, which bodily underscores the cyclical nature of racial progress. Similarly, *Insurrection* and *An Echo in the Bone* stipulate that each ensemble member play several roles, physically communicating the disjointed temporality of time travel. As a whole, theatre's capacity to enact scenes from the past before an audience lends these works an almost haptic quality, as the past can quite literally be felt (one might recall O'Hara's Ron here, who "is holding" history in his hands).

The distinctions between mimesis and diegesis have the potential to become less rigid when considering the representational mode in which most of the playwrights discussed in this study write. At the level of form, the works in this dissertation challenge and play with inherited dramatic conventions, including but not limited to unitary space and linear time. Despite these experimental excursions, each play utilizes figuration and figural representation to express the emotional weight with which the texts are freighted. As the work of anti-realist or non-realist playwrights, these plays share many qualities with postmodern theatre, which Edyta Lorek-Jezinska notes often plays with the limits of narration onstage—for example, Samuel Beckett's characters narrating non-events to no one in particular (355). Anti-realism does not mean anti-theatricality, however, and the plays in each chapter of this project draw on myriad resources that theatrical performance offers to aid the creation of their non-naturalist, abstract dramatic worlds. These resources begin with the function of the live body in performance and can include costuming and makeup, movement and dance, use of song and sound, and physical stage

properties. As an example, my second chapter argues that *Harlem Duet's* sound design communicates central historical tensions in Black thought to the audience in increasingly entropic ways. My third chapter surveys poetic-dramas that evoke water: both *Moonwalks* and *Dontrell* use elaborate costuming and movement-work among the ensemble casts that bring the waterways to life on stage. In the same vein, my chapter on time travel looks at how *Insurrection* employs costuming while *An Echo in the Bone* utilizes voice work to furnish the distinctions between the antebellum past and the dramatic present. And finally, my fifth chapter explores how ritual—Etu in *QPH* and the ritual of carnival and circus in *Venus*—create the conditions for exhuming long-interred women and histories.

Of final importance in considering the plays discussed throughout as dynamic performance texts is the presence of a live audience. Unlike forms of literary fiction in which the reader's connection to the work is personal, individual, and privately conducted between the pages of a novel or poem, theatre necessitates an element of shared space between performer and viewer. It is for this reason that many of the plays are highly metatextual: a paradigmatic example is found in *Venus* and *The America Play,* where Parks exploits the presence of an audience by creating plays-within-plays that force viewers to reckon with their own complicity in the spectacle of Black suffering. The presence of an audience also reminds us of the inherent heterogeneity of viewers, which is particularly important in works that purport to provide a critique of the status quo; a white viewer will come away with one sense of how historiography has presented the history of Black life and struggle, while a Black viewer will have a very different sense, accompanied by the knowledge of their own lived experiences. With this in mind, we can view theatre's performative dimension as a central component of the active meaning-making process these plays invite.

In addition to the important implications of analyzing drama that is enacted through performance, there are other areas of confluence that are important to note here. First, many of the dramatic examples I analyze deliberately employ multiple forms of English dialect in crafting their dialogue. This can mean the use of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) and other forms of slang or abbreviated English in plays by Parks, O'Hara, Davis, Gilmer, and Gardley, but in Jamaican works by Scott and Sistren, it means the use of patois and non-standard Englishes—both call attention to dramatic voice as another axis along which Black artists challenge dominant modes of communication and thought. Second, there is a shared interest in origin stories among the plays within this project, which stem from a desire to place Black histories onto the "Time Line," as Parks calls it. In some plays, such as *Moonwalks* and *The America Play,* this manifests through biblical allusions; in works such as *Dontrell* and *Harlem Duet,* classical myth and familial lore form this basis. A third node of connection is that several works directly or indirectly confront the legitimacy and truth value of documents and evidence from historical archives. In *Venus* and *The America Play* Parks weaves in historical footnotes and snippets of found text that she juxtaposes with freely invented newspaper articles and autobiographical blurbs. In O'Hara and Sears, the narratives we inherit about history, particularly about Nat Turner in *Insurrection* and Martin Luther King and Malcolm X in *Harlem Duet,* are revealed to be constructed and determined by white authors, placing their veracity in question

Alongside these myriad vectors of alignment and connection, there are also several distinctions between and among dramatists' approaches to representing the historical past. These may differ due to geographic and chronological perspective, but they account for the varied formal approaches certain playwrights take when engaging with history. These methods suggest the nuance and complexity of Black theatre's representations of the past. Although this project

seeks to place disparate texts in conversation with one another, it does not wish to collapse the particularities of Black identity in the wake of slavery. The most notable distinction is between the drama that derives from postcolonial Jamaica and that which comes from North America, created by largely African American writers. For example, my analysis of *An Echo in the Bone* as it relates to *Insurrection* and *Harry and the Thief* shows that Scott's play centers the most strongly on land ownership. In Jamaica, where African descendants were first enslaved and then subjected to imperial rule, plantation spaces take on a protracted and personal register. Relatedly, although *QPH* and *Venus* contain a shared focus on gravesites and temporary resurrections, Sistren's work is aimed at redressing a national crisis with local significance and spotlighting voiceless women. Parks, on the other hand, uses the figure of Baartman to call attention to the constructed nature of historical narratives, and her critique is both more far-reaching and abstract in nature. This is a function both of differing historical and geographic perspectives and of differing genres. For while Parks writes in the wake of experimental postmodernist dramatists such as Adrienne Kennedy and Samuel Beckett, Sistren's work comes out of a Theatre for Social Change context, specifically that of grassroots theatre organizations. Further, the way that Scott and Sistren present time travel and resurrection is distinct from the plays they are set against, as both employ African retention practices as a means of staging a confrontation with colonial knowledge. Overall, these distinctions suggest the need for a more extensive analysis of works that emanate from a larger sample size of nations and regions, such as the Caribbean and Africa.

In addition to locational distinctions, there are also important differences at the level of language and form among the works. The first aspect of language to consider is the use of dialect or non-standard English, most evident in works such as *Venus* and *Insurrection.* In the plays by African American authors, this style choice adds another layer of commentary to the piece,

because in addition to serving as narratives about figures often left out of the historical record, these plays are spoken in ways that predominantly reflect Black speech. In the plays by Jamaican authors, the deliberate use of patois and Creole serves as both an endorsement of indigenous language practices and a rejection of an imposed colonial tongue. A second linguistic aspect that recurs throughout the plays is the use of poetry and song. As there is a longstanding tradition of verse drama dating back to the sixteenth century, the use of poetic language, voice, and typography in works like *Moonwalks* and *Dontrell* lends them a timeless quality. In so doing, these poetic dramas can shift and mutate through timescapes. Taken as a whole, the use of dialect and verse places these works up against forms such as hip-hop theatre and lyric drama, extending their generic capacities and the conversations in which they participate.

Before concluding, I wish to point to some areas of future study that my project opens up. Since scholarship on contemporary Black theatre, particularly theatre from Black artists outside of the United States or United Kingdom, is still relatively sparse compared to other fields of study of contemporary dramatic work, *A History of the Future* augments the earlier body of criticism and its approaches to Black history onstage. Furthermore, there has been a proliferation of recent works in other media that are either set in or return to the Black historical past, particularly the past of slavery, emerging over the last decade and even within the last five years. This pattern suggests the need for a larger critical undertaking that examines contemporary work by Black artists and thinkers who interrogate narratives about the past across the mediums of theatre, visual art, and film and television. One way of expanding research on this topic would be to conduct a comparative analysis of fabulative histories across genres, including literature, film, and visual art. Although I suggest throughout this dissertation that the medium of theatre is uniquely suited for an exploration of the historical resonances of the past in the present, looking

at a more extensive sample of works demonstrates both the significance and ubiquity of Black fabulative histories. Topics adjacent to mine have been discussed at length with respect to African American and Caribbean novels, particularly the use of fantastical elements and non-linear storytelling as a means of disrupting historical chronology.[83] With regard to film, a trend in recent Black cinema coming out of the US has been works that examine place-making with regard to Black geography. This parallels the ongoing fabulative and evocative work in visual and installation art; taken as a whole, these potential connections underscore the many ways in which examining a variety of creative forms can cement fabulative histories as a subgenre of both global Black theatre and historical theatre.

A second means of extension involves examining theatre and literature from a wider variety of geographic regions. As it stands, this project includes works from only the Caribbean nation of Jamaica. However, due to its unique history as the site of the first slave revolt, including work from Haitian writers who touch on this past would be productive. In this same vein, it would be instructive to examine texts that come from authors and artists across the African diaspora, particularly from nations with sizable Black populations in Europe and South America. Since both of these regions have their own histories, not only of slavery and colonialism but also of immigration and migrant experiences, a critical look at work that examines this history in a fabulative guise would be a helpful extension of this project. Furthermore, a future avenue of study could examine the methods that playwrights or authors from African nations use to represent Black history. In particular, African drama's entwinement

[83] Examples of works that could be placed in productive conversation with the drama I consider include Colson Whitehead's *Underground Railroad* (2016), which reimagines these escape networks as a literal form of train transport. To take a more fabulative tack, young adult fiction from Caribbean writers, such as Nalo Hopkinson's *Midnight Robber* (2000), creates worlds that exist both in and out of Black history, often melding elements of African cosmology with the reverberating traumas of slavery.

with myth, evidenced in works such as Wole Soyinka's *A Dance of the Forests* (1960), could furnish the extant discussion of origins and fables in a dynamic way.

An attention toward the critically under-explored but prolific genre of fabulative histories about the Black historical past is significant in 2022 at the level of the local, national, and the planetary. In doing so, I do not suggest that we adopt a heavily pessimistic attitude about the future, but I point instead to the need for looking at contemporary theatre and performance that challenge a strictly fatalistic trajectory. The varied responses from playwrights across the African diaspora to the gaps and erasures of the historiographical record of Black life all share an insistence that the use of imagination and poetic language can both recover, and work to build an alternative repository, of stories and testimonies about the past. Through the ways in which the works examined in this dissertation approach this form of historical fiction that is rooted in a lack of boundaries between fact and imagination, then and now, it is my contention that this model of Black historical drama rethinks the limits of the presentation of the past in the present. A repeated refrain in the 2019 Broadway musical *Hadestown,* first spoken among the characters and then to the audience directly, is as follows: "to the world we dream about, and the one we live in now." This simultaneity of dreaming for as-yet-unrealized futures and contending with the present as it stands is a tension that occupies all the works I examine in my project. The creation of a contemporary narrative of the historical past can and should be viewed as a radical act of historiographic in(ter)vention.

Works Cited:

Agorsah, E.K. "Vibrations of Maroons and Marronage in Caribbean History and Archaeology." *Proceedings of the CV International Congress for Caribbean Archaeology,* edited by Ricardo E. Alegria and Miguel Rodriguez, 1995, pp. 401-414.

Aljoe, Nicole. *Creole Testimonies: Slave Narratives from the British West Indies (1709-1838).* Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.

Andreach, Robert. "Robert O'Hara's Insurrection: The Meaning of the Subtitle, Holding History." *The Griot,* vol. 18, no. 2, 1999, pp. 54-62.

Bada, Valerie. "Slavery and Silence in Ina Césaire's "Mémoires d'Isles" and Dennis Scott's "An Echo in the Bone." *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association,* vol. 34, no. 1, 2001, pp. 86-93.

Baldwin, James. "Stranger in the Village." *Notes of a Native Son,* Beacon Press, 1955.

Banham, Martin, et al., editors. *The Cambridge Guide to African and Caribbean Theatre.* Cambridge University Press, 1994.

Batra, Kanika. *Feminist Visions and Queer Futures in Postcolonial Drama: Community, Kinship and Citizenship.* Routledge, 2010.

Beam Alex. "The prize fight over Alex Haley's tangled 'Roots.'" *Boston Globe,* 30 Oct. 1998, p. D1.

Beckett, Samuel. *Echo's Bones*. Edited by Mark Nixon, Reprint edition, Grove Press, 2014.

---. *Waiting for Godot. The Norton Anthology of Drama,* edited by Ellen Gainor et. al., W.W. Norton, 2014, pp. 1358-1415.

Bhattacharya, Sabyasachi. "'History from Below.'" *Social Scientist*, vol. 11, no. 4, 1983, pp. 3–20.

Blatanis, Konstantinos. "Enacting History. Defining Wholeness: Suzan-Lori Parks's *America Play and Topdog/Underdog." The Search for Wholeness and Diaspora Literacy in Contemporary African American Literature,* edited by Sylvia Pilar Castro-Borrego, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011, pp. 171-188.

Blocker, Jane. *Becoming Past: History in Contemporary Art.* University of Minnesota Press, 2015.

---. "History in the Present Progressive: Sonic Imposture at *The Pedicord Apts.*" *TDR: The Drama Review,* vol. 59, no. 4, 2015, pp. 36-50.

Bond, William. "*The History, Civil and Commercial, of the British Colonies in the West Indies in Two Volumes* (1793): A Scholarly Introduction." The Early Caribbean Digital Archive, Northeastern University Digital Repository Service, 2016.

Brantley, Ben. "Theatre Review: Of an Erotic Freak Show and the Lesson Therein." *New York Times,* 3 May 1996, p. C3.

Brathwaite, Kamau, and Chris Funkhouser. *Conversations with Nathaniel Mackey*. We Press, 1999.

Brenier, Celeste Marie, and Hannah Durkin, editors. *Visualizing Slavery: Art Across the African Diaspora*. Liverpool University Press, 2016.

Brooks, Daphne. *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850-1910.* Duke University Press, 2006.

Brown, Vincent. *The Reaper's Garden: Death and Power in the World of Atlantic Slavery.* Harvard University Press, 2008.

Brown-Guillory, Elizabeth, editor. *Middle Passages and the Healing Place of History: Migration and Identity in Black Women's Literature*. Ohio State Univ. Press, 2006.

---. "Reconfiguring History: Migration, Memory, and Re(Membering) in Suzan-Lori Parks's Plays." *Southern Women Playwrights: New Essays in Literary History and Criticism,* University of Alabama Press, 2001, 183-197.

--- "Place and Displacement in Djanet Sears's *Harlem Duet* and *The Adventures of a Black Girl in Sears of God*." *Middle Passages and the Healing Place of History: Migration and Identity in Black Women's Literature*, edited by Elizbeth Brown-Guillory, The Ohio State University Press, 2006, pp. 155-170.

Bullock, Kurt. "Famous/Last Words: The Disruptive Rhetoric of Historico-Narrative 'Finality' in Suzan-Lori Parks' 'The America Play'." *American Drama,* vol. 10, no. 2, 2001, pp. 69-87.

Burnard, Trevor. *Planters, Merchants, and Slaves: Plantation Societies in British America,1650-1820.* The University of Chicago Press, 2015.

Campbell, Julie. "'Echo's Bones' and Beckett's Disembodied Voices." *Samuel Beckett Today*, vol. 11, 2001, pp. 454–60.

Carby, Hazel. *Imperial Intimacies.* Verso, 2019.

Carpenter, Faedra Chatard. "Robert O'Hara's *Insurrection*: Que(e)ring' History." *Text and Performance Quarterly,* vol. 23, no. 2, 2003, pp. 186-204.

Catanese, Brandi Wilkins. "Remembering Saartjie Baartman." *Atlantic Studies,* vol. 7, no. 1, 2010, pp. 47-62.

Chambers-Letson, Joshua. "The Body Is Never Given, nor Do We Actually See It." *Race and Performance After Repetition,* edited by Soyica Diggs Colbert, Douglas A. Jones Jr., and Shane Vogel, Duke University Press, 2020, pp. 270-292.

Chaudhuri, Una. "'There Must Be a Lot of Fish in That Lake': Toward an Ecological Theater." *Theater*, vol. 25, no. 1, Feb. 1994, pp. 23–31.

Cixous, Helene. "Enter the Theatre (in Between)." *Modern Drama*, translated by Brian J. Mallet, vol. 42, no. 3, 1999, pp. 301–14.

Clifton, Lucille. *The Collected Poems of Lucille Clifton 1965-2010*. BOA Editions, Ltd., 2015.

Colbert, Soyica. "Reconstruction, Fugitive Intimacy, and Holding History." *Modern Drama*, vol. 62, no. 4, 2019, pp. 502–16.

Colbert, Soyica Diggs. *The African American Theatrical Body: Reception, Performance, and the Stage*. Cambridge University Press, 2011.

Colbert, Soyica Diggs, et al. "Introduction: Tidying Up after Repetition." *Race and Performance After Repetition,* edited by Soyica Diggs Colbert, Douglas A. Jones Jr., and Shane Vogel, Duke University Press, 2020, pp. 1-28.

---. Colbert, Soyica Diggs, et al. "Introduction: Do You Want to Be Well?" *The Psychic Hold of Slavery: Legacies in American Expressive Culture*, edited by Soyica Diggs Colbert, Robert J. Patterson, Aida Levy-Hussen, Rutgers University Press, 2016, pp. 1-16.

Dalleo, Ralphael. "The Testimonial Impulse: Michael Barnett and the Sistren Theatre Collective." *Caribbean Literature and the Public Sphere: From the Plantation to the Postcolonial*, University of Virginia Press, 2011, 175-198.

Davis, Nathan Alan. *Dontrell, Who Kissed the Sea*. Samuel French, 2017.

Dawkins, Laura. "Family Acts: History, Memory, Performance in Suzan-Lori Parks's *The America Play* and *Topdog/ Underdog*." *South Atlantic Review,* vol. 74, no. 3, 2009, pp. 82-98.

Dawson, Kevin. *Undercurrents of Power: Aquatic Culture in the African Diaspora*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018.

de Certeau, Michel. *The Writing of History.* Columbia University Press, 1992.

de Grazia, Margreta. "Anachronism." *Cultural Reformations: Medieval and Renaissance in Literary History,* edited by James Simpson and Brian Cummings, Oxford University

Press, 2010, pp. 13-32.

Delle, James A. and Kristen R. Fellows. "Death and Burial at Marshall's Pen, a Jamaican Coffee Plantation, 1814-1839: Examining the End of Life at the End of Slavery." *Slavery & Abolition,* vol. 35, no. 3, 2014, pp. 474-492.

DeLoughrey, Elizabeth. *Routes and Roots: Navigating Caribbean and Pacific Island Literatures*. University of Hawaii Press, 2007.

Dery, Mark. "Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel R. Delany, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose." *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture,* edited by Mark Dery, Duke University Press, 1994, pp. 179-222.

Dickey, Colin. "Night Doctors." *The Paris Review,* 11 Oct. 2016, https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2016/10/11/night-doctors/.

Dickinson, Peter. "Duets, Duologues, and Black Diasporic Theatre: Djanet Sears, William Shakespeare, and Others." *Modern Drama*, vol. 45, no. 2, 2002, pp. 188-202.

Diedrich, Maria, et al. "The Middle Passage between History and Fiction: Introductory Remarks." *Black Imagination and the Middle Passage*, edited by Maria Diedrich et al., Oxford University Press, 1999, pp. 5–19.

Dohoney, Ryan. "Echo's Echo: Subjectivity in Vibrational Ontology." *Women and Music: A Journal of Gender and Culture,* vol. 19, 2015, pp. 142-150.

Doyle, Peter. *Echo and Reverb: Fabricating Space in Popular Music 1900-1960.* Wesleyan University Press, 2005.

Dugdale, John. "Roots of the problem: the controversial history of Alex Haley's book." *The Guardian,* 2017, theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2017/feb/09/alex-haley-roots-reputation-authenticity.

Elam, Harry and Alice Rayner. "Echoes from the Black (W)hole: An Examination of *The America Play* by Suzan-Lori Parks." *Performing America: Cultural Nationalism in America Theater,* edited by Jeffrey Mason and Ellen Gainor, University of Michigan Press, 1999, pp. 178-192.

—. "Body Parts: Between Story and Spectacle in *Venus* by Suzan- Lori Parks." *Staging Resistance: Essays on Political Theatre,* edited by Jeanne Colleran and Jenny S. Spencer, University of Michigan Press, 1998, pp. 265-282.

Elias, Amy J. *Sublime Desire: History and Post-1960s Fiction.* Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001.

Ermarth, Elizabeth. "Sequel to History." *The Postmodern History Reader,* edited by Keith

Jenkins, Routledge, 1997, pp. 47-64.

Fernández, José Francisco. ""Echo's Bones": Samuel Beckett's Lost Story of Afterlife." *Journal of the Short Story in English. Les Cahiers de La Nouvelle*, no. 52, 2009, np.

Ford-Smith, Honor. "The Body and Performance in 1970s Jamaica: Toward a Decolonial Cultural Method." *small axe,* vol. 58, 2019, pp. 150-168

Freire, Paulo. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed.* Continuum, 1993.

Fuchs, Elinor. "Reading for Landscape: The Case of American Drama." *Land/Scape/Theater,* edited by Elinor Fuchs and Una Chaudhuri, University of Michigan Press, 2002, pp. 30-52.

Furby, Jacqueline. "Control Dramas and Fantasy Time: Tales of Redemption and the Temporal Fantasist." *Time Travel in Popular Media: Essays on Film, Television, Literature, and Video Games,* edited by Matthew Jones and Joan Ormrod, McFarland, 2015, pp. 77-91.

Gardley, Marcus. "... And Jesus Moonwalks the Mississippi." *The Methuen Drama Book of Post-Black Plays*, edited by Harry J. Elam and Douglas A. Jones, Methuen Drama, 2012, pp. 347–412.

Garrett, Shawn-Marie. "'For the Love of the Venus': Suzan-Lori Parks, Richard Foreman, and the Premiere of *Venus*." *Suzan-Lori Parks: Essays on the Plays and Other Works,* edited by Philip C. Kolin, McFarland & Company, 2010, pp. 76-87.

Ghasemi, Mehdi. "A Study of 'Quad Ps' in Suzan-Lori Parks's *Venus*." *Journal of Black Studies,* vol. 46, no. 3, 2015, pp. 258-281.

Gilbert, Helen and Joanne Tompkins. *Postcolonial Drama: Theory, Practice, Politics.* Routledge, 1996.

Gilmer, Sigrid. *Harry and the Thief.* Original Works Publishing, 2016.

Glissant, Édouard. *Poetics of Relation*. University of Michigan Press, 1997.

Gooch, Catherine. *"I've Known Rivers": Representations of the Mississippi River in African American Literature and Culture*. 2019. University of Kentucky, PhD dissertation.

Green, Sharon. "On a Knife Edge: Sistren Theatre Collective, Grassroots Theatre, and Globalization." *Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism,* vol. 21, 2006, pp. 111-124.

Green, Tara T., author. *Reimagining the Middle Passage: Black Resistance in Literature, Television, and Song*. The Ohio State University Press, 2018.

Greene, Kevin. "Endless Voyage: A Review of Dontrell, Who Kissed the Sea at First Floor Theatre." *New City Stage*, 9 Mar. 2018, https://www.newcitystage.com/2018/03/09/endless-voyage-a-review-of-dontrell-who-kissed-the-sea-at-first-floor-theater/.

Gruber, Elizabeth. "Practical Magic: Empathy and Alienation in *Harlem Duet*." *Lit: Literature Interpretation Theory*, vol. 19, no. 4, 2008, pp. 346–66.

Haley, Alex. *Roots: The Saga of an American Family.* Da Capo Press, 1974.

Halperin, Edward C. "The Poor, the Black, and the Marginalized as the Source of Cadavers in United States Anatomical Education." *Clinical Anatomy,* vol. 20, 2007, pp. 489-495.

Haraway, Donna, et al. "Anthropologists Are Talking – About the Anthropocene." *Ethnos: Journal of Anthropology*, vol. 81, Routledge, 2016, pp. 535–64.

Hartman, Saidiya. *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route*. Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2008.

—. "The Time of Slavery." *The South Atlantic Quarterly,* vol. 101, no. 4, 2002, pp. 757-777.

—. "Venus in Two Acts." *Small Axe*, vol. 12, no. 2, 2008, pp. 1–14.

Hill, Errol G. and James V. Hatch. *A History of African American Theatre.* Cambridge University Press, 2003.

Himmelfarb, Gertrude. "Telling it as You Like It: Post-modernist History and the Flight from Fact." *The Postmodern History Reader,* edited by Keith Jenkins, Routledge, 1997, pp. 158-174.

Holder, Heidi. "Strange Legacy: The History Plays of Suzan-Lori Parks." *Suzan-Lori Parks: A Casebook,* edited by Kevin J. Wetmore Sr. and Alycia Smith-Howard, Routledge, 2007, pp. 18-28.

Holland, Sharon. *Raising the Dead: Readings of Death and (Black) Subjectivity*. Duke University Press, 2000.

Hollander John, *The Figure of Echo.* University of California Press, 1981.

Holloway, Karla F.C. *Passed On: African American Mourning Stories.* Duke University Press, 2002.

Howard, Jonathan. *"Inhabitants of the Deep": Water and the Material Imagination of Blackness*. 2017. Duke University, PhD Dissertation.

Huebert, David. "Othello's Testicles, Sybil's Womb: The Interracial Child in Harlem Duet and

Its Progenitor." *English Studies in Canada*, vol. 41, no. 4, 2015, pp. 23–50.

Hutcheon, Linda. *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction.* Routledge, 1988.

Jiggetts, Shelby. "Interview with Suzan-Lori Parks." *Callaloo,* vol. 19, no. 2, 1996, pp. 309-317.

Juneja, Renu. "Recalling the Dead in *An Echo in the Bone." ARIEL,* vol. 23, no. 1, 1992, pp. 97-114.

Jones, Matthew, and Joan Ormrod, editors. *Time Travel in Popular Media: Essays on Film, Television, Literature, and Video Games.* McFarland Books, 2015.

Keizer, Arlene. "'Our Posteriors, Our Posterity': the problem of embodiment in Suzan-Lori Parks's *Venus* and Kara Walker's *Camptown Ladies.*" *Social Dynamics,* vol. 37, no. 2, 2011, pp. 200-212.

Kelly, Katherine. "Making the Bones Sing: The Feminist History Play, 1976-2010." *Contemporary Women Playwrights: Intro the Twenty-First Century*, edited by Peggy Farfan and Lesley Ferris, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, pp. 199–214.

Khawaldeh, Imad, et al. "Recalling the Past in Postcolonial Drama: From Counter-History to Sociopolitical Redress." *Advances in Language and Literary Studies,* vol. 8, no. 5, 2017, pp. 71-78.

Kidnie, Margaret Jane. "'There's Magic in the Web of It': Seeing Beyond Tragedy in Harlem Duet." *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, vol. 36, no. 2, 2001, pp. 29–44.

Knight, Christina. *Performing Passage: Contemporary Artists Stage the Slave Trade*. 2013. Harvard, PhD dissertation.

Kornweibel, Karen Ruth. "A Complex Resurrection: Race, Spectacle, and Complicity in Suzan-Lori Parks's *Venus.*" *South Atlantic Review,* vol. 74, no. 3, 2009, pp. 64-81.

Larson, Jennifer. "'With Deliberate Calculation': Money, Sex, and the Black Playwright in Suzan-Lori Parks's *Venus*." *Reading Contemporary African American Drama: Fragments of History, Fragments of Self,* edited by Trudier Harris, Peter Lang Publishing, 2007, pp. 203-217.

Leith, Dick. "English—Colonial to Postcolonial." *Changing English,* edited by David Graddol et al., Routledge, 2007, pp. 115-151.

Lemke, Ashley. "'Missing Cemeteries' and Structural Racism: Historical maps and Endangered African/African American and Hispanic Mortuary Customs in Texas." *Historical Archaeology,* vol. 54, 2020, pp. 605-623.

LeVen, Pauline. "Echo's Bones and the Metamorphoses of the Voice." *Greek and Roman*

Musical Studies, vol. 6, no. 1, 2018, pp. 14–25.

Lorek-Jezinska, Edyta. "Mimesis in Crisis: Narration and Diegesis in Contemporary Anglophone Theatre and Drama." *Text Matters,* vol. 7, no. 7, 2017, pp. 353-367.

Lyman, Elizabeth Dyrud. "The Page Refigured: The Verbal and Visual Language of Suzan-Lori Parks's *Venus*." *Performance Research,* vol. 7, no. 1, 2002, pp. 90-100.

Mackey, Nathaniel. *Splay Anthem.* New Directions, 2006.

"Marcus Gardley on Conversing with the Past." *Youtube,* uploaded by Doris Duke Charitable Foundation, 21 Apr. 2020, youtube.com/watch?v=zvzq2ffdMMM.

McCormick, Stacie. "Witnessing and Wounding in Suzan-Lori Parks's *Venus*." *MELUS,* vol. 39, no. 2, 2014, pp. 188-207.

McCormick, Stacie Selmon. *Staging Black Fugitivity.* The Ohio State University Press, 2019.

—."'Stories That Never Stop': Fugitivity and Neo-Slave Performance." *Modern Drama*, vol. 62, no. 4, 2019, pp. 517–38.

McKittrick, Katherine. "Plantation Futures." *Small Axe*, vol. 42, 2013, pp. 1–15.

McKittrick, Katherine, and Clyde Woods, editors. *Black Geographies and the Politics of Place*. South End Press, 2007.

McNaughton, James. "Samuel Beckett's 'Echo's Bones': Politics and Entailment in The Irish Free-State." *Modern Fiction Studies*, vol. 60, no. 2, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014, pp. 320–44.

Mehdizadeh, Nedda. "Othello in Harlem: Transforming Theater in Djanet Sears's *Harlem Duet*." *Journal of American Studies*, vol. 54, no. 1, 2020, pp. 12–18.

Miller, Greg. "The Bottom of Desire in Suzan-Lori Parks's *Venus.*" *Modern Drama,* vol. 54, no. 1, 2002, pp. 125-137.

Morgan, Francesca. "'My Furthest-Back Person': Black Genealogy Before and After *Roots.*" *Reconsidering Roots: Race, Politics, Memory,* edited by Erica L. Ball and Kellie Carter Jackson, University of Georgia Press, 2017, pp. 63-80.

Morin, Emilie. *Beckett's Political Imagination.* Cambridge University Press, 2017.

Morrison, Toni. "The Site of Memory." *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft and Memoir*, edited by William Zissner, 2nd ed., Houghton Mifflin, 1995, pp. 83–102.

Neal, Mark Anthony. *Soul Babies: Black Popular Culture and the Post-Soul Aesthetic.*

Routledge, 2002.

Noble Frank, Sarah. "As If: Performativity and Representation in Feminist Histories of Rhetoric." *Rhetoric Review*, vol. 36, no. 3, 2017, pp. 187–99.

Noriega, Jimmy and Analola Santana. "Introduction: Subverting the Theatrical Map." *Theatre and Cartographies of Power,* edited by Jimmy Noriega and Analola Santana, Southern Illinois University Press, 2018, pp. 1-25.

Norman, Brian. *Dead Women Talking: Figures of Injustice in American Literature.* Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012.

Ngugi wa Thiong'o. *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature.* Longman, 1986.

Nyong'o, Tavia. *Afro-Fabulations: The Queer Drama of Black Life*. NYU Press, 2018.

—. "The Scene of Occupation." *TDR: The Drama Review,* vol.56, no. 4, 2012, pp. 136-149.

O'Hara, Robert. *Insurrection: Holding History*. Theatre Communications Group, 1999.

Onion, Rebecca. "Is the Greatest Collection of Slave Narratives Tainted by Racism?" *Slate,* 6 July 2016, http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/history/2016/07/can_wpa_slave_narratives_be_trusted_or_are_they_tainted_by_depression_era.html.

Onwueme, Tess Akaeke. "Visions of Myth in Nigerian Drama: Femi Osofisan versus Wole Soyinka." *Canadian Journal of African Studies / Revue Canadienne Des Études Africaines*, vol. 25, no. 1, 1991, pp. 58–69.

Ovid. *Metamorphoses.* Translated by Charles Martin. W.W. Norton, 2005.

Parks, Suzan-Lori. *The America Play and Other Works.* Theatre Communications Group, 1995.

—. "New Black Math." *Theatre Journal,* vol. 57, no. 4, 2005, pp. 576-583.

—. *Venus: A Play.* Theatre Communications Group, 1997.

Paul, Annie. "'No Grave Cannot Hold My Body Down': Rituals of Death and Burial in Postcolonial Jamaica." *small axe,* vol. 23, 2007, pp. 142-162.

Pearce, Michelle. "Alien Nation: An Interview with the Playwright." *Suzan-Lori Parks in Person: Interviews and Commentaries*, edited by Philip C. Kolin and Harvey Young, Routledge, 2014, pp. 46-48.

Phelan, Peggy. *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance.* Routledge, 1993.

Pressley, Nelson. "Buoyant 'Dontrell, Who Kissed the Sea': Heavy Themes, Light Touch." *Washington Post*, 11 May 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/theater_dance/buoyant-dontrell-who-kissed-the-sea-heavy-themes-light-touch/2015/05/11/a1833780-f7ef-11e4-9030-b4732caefe81_story.html.

Pryor, Jaclyn I. *Time Slips: Queer Temporalities, Contemporary Performance, and the Hole of History.* Northwestern Press, 2017.

Rancière, Jacques. "The Concept of Anachronism and the Historian's Truth (English Translation)." *The History of the Present,* vol. 3, no. 1, 2015, pp. 21-52.

Rapetti, Valentina. "Beyond Othello: Performing Stages of Resistance to Racial Surveillance in Djanet Sears' Harlem Duet." *Journal of Adaptation in Film & Performance*, vol. 11, no. 3, 2018, pp. 271–93.

---. "Catching Othello's Echoes in Harlem Duet: A Conversation on Shakespearean Adaptation, Blackness and African Diaspora Theatre with Djanet Sears." *Journal of Adaptation in Film & Performance*, vol. 11, no. 3, 2018, pp. 295–313

Raymond, Claire. *The Posthumous Voice in Women's Writing.* Routledge, 2006.

Rayner, Alice. "Keeping Time." *Performance Research,* vol. 19, no. 3, 2014, pp. 32-36.
Richards, Sandra. "African Diasporic Drama." *The Cambridge Companion to African American Theatre,* edited by Harvey Young, Cambridge University Press, 2013, pp. 230-254.

Rediker, Marcus. *The Slave Ship: A Human History.* Viking Press, 2007.

Roach, Joseph. *Cities of the Dead.* Columbia University Press, 1996.

Roberts, Ellie Mackin. *Underworld Gods in Ancient Greek Religion: Death and Reciprocity*. Routledge, 2020.

Rooks, Noliwe. "The Beginnings of Black Study." *The Chronicle of Higher Education,* 2006, chronicle.com/article/the-beginnings-of-black-studies/.

Ruffin, Kimberly N. *Black on Earth: African American Ecoliterary Traditions*. University of Georgia Press, 2010.Rushdy, Ashraf H. A. *Neo-Slave Narratives*. Oxford University Press, 1999.

Sahgal, Neha and Greg Smith. "A Religious Portrait of African-Americans." *Pew Research Center,* 30 Jan. 2009, https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2009/01/30/a-religious-portrait-of-african-americans/.

Sears, Djanet. *Harlem Duet*. Scirocco Drama, 1998.

Schafer, Carol. "Staging a New Literary History: Suzan-Lori Parks's *Venus, In the Blood,* and *Fucking A*." *Comparative Drama,* vol. 42, no. 2, 2008, pp. 181-203.

Schneider, Rebecca. *Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment.* Taylor and Francis, 2011.

Schomburg, Arthur A. "The Negro Digs Up His Past." *The New Negro,* edited by Alain Locke, Atheneum Press, 1992, pp. 231-237.

Scott, Dennis. *An Echo in the Bone. Plays for Today,* edited by Errol Hill, Longman Publishing, 1985, pp. 74-137.

Sharpe, Christina. *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*. Duke University Press, 2016.

Shockley, Evie. "Going Overboard: African American Poetic Innovation and the Middle Passage." *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 52, no. 4, 2011, pp. 791–817.

Sistren Theatre Collective. *QPH. Postcolonial Plays: An Anthology,* edited by Helen Gilbert, Routledge, 2001, pp. 157-178.

Smith, Ryan K. "Disappearing the Enslaved: The Destruction and Recovery of Richmond's Second African Burial Ground." *Building and Landscapes,* vol. 27, no. 1, 2020, pp. 17-45.

Sofer, Andrew. *The Stage Life of Props*. University of Michigan Press, 2010.

Soyinka, Wole. *Myth, Literature, and the African World.* Cambridge University Press, 1990.

Spalink, Angenette. "Taphonomic Historiography: Excavating and Exhuming the Past in Suzan Lori Parks's *The America Play.*" *Modern Drama,* vol. 60, no. 1, 2017, pp. 69-88.

Spaulding, Timothy. *Re-Forming the Past: History, the Fantastic, and the Postmodern Slave Narrative*. The Ohio State University Press, 2005.

Tambling, Jeremy. *On Anachronism*. Manchester University Press, 2013.

Tompkins, Joanne. "The Politics of Location in *Othello*, Djanet Sears's *Harlem Duet*, and Ong Keng Sen's *Desdemona*." *Contemporary Theatre Review*, vol. 19, no. 3, 2009, pp. 269–78.

Tsing, Anna, et al., editors. *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet: Ghosts and Monsters of the Anthropocene*. University of Minnesota Press, 2017.

United Press International. “157 Elderly Women Die in Jamaica Fire.” *New York Times,* 21 May 1980, p. A1.

Vorlicky, Robert, “An American Echo: Suzan-Lori Parks’s *America Play* and James Scrugg’s *Disposable Men*.” *Interrogating America through Theatre and Performance,* edited by William W. Demastes and Iris Smith Fischer, Palgrave, 2007, pp. 271-290.

Walcott, Derek. *Selected Poems*. Edited by Edward Baugh, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2014.

---. *What the Twilight Says: Essays*. Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1998.

Walcott, Rinaldo. “The Black Aquatic.” *liquid blackness,* vol. 5, no. 1, 2021, pp. 63-73.

---. *The Long Emancipation: Moving Toward Black Freedom.* Duke University Press, 2021.

Walker, Alice. “Burial.” *Blue Ridge Journal,* 1972. blueridgejournal.com/poems/aw-burial.htm

— “Looking for Zora.” *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens,* 1975, pp. 93-116.

Wardi, Anissa. *Death and the Arc of Mourning in African American Literature.* University Press of Florida, 2003.

—. *Water and African American Memory: An Ecocritical Perspective*. University Press of Florida, 2016.

Warner, Sara L. “Suzan-Lori Parks’s Drama of Disinterment.” *Theatre Journal,* vol. 60, no. 2, 2008, pp. 181-199.

Warren, Calvin. “Black Time: Slavery, Metaphysics, and the Logic of Wellness,” *The Psychic Hold of Slavery: Legacies in American Expressive Culture*, edited by Soyica Diggs Colbert, Robert J. Patterson, Aida Levy-Hussen, Rutgers University Press, 2016, pp. 55-68.

Weheliye, Alexander G. “The Grooves of Temporality.” *Public Culture,* vol. 17, no. 2, 2005, pp. 319-338.

Whitcomb, Margo, et al. *Words on Plays, an educational guide to Insurrection: Holding History.* The American Conservatory Theatre Foundation, 1998.

Wickstrom, Maurya. *Fiery Temporalities in Theatre and Performance.* Methuen Drama, 2018.

Wilmer, S.E. “Restaging the Nation: The Work of Suzan-Lori Parks.” *Modern Drama,* vol. 43, no. 3, 2000, pp. 442-452.

Wilson, August. *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*. Samuel French, Inc., 1990.

Wittenberg, David. *Time Travel: The Popular Philosophy of Narrative*. Fordham University Press, 2013.

Wolfe, George C. *The Colored Museum*. Grove Press, 1988.

Woodard, Helena. *Slave Sites on Display: Reflecting Slavery's Legacy through Contemporary "Flash" Moments.* University Press of Mississippi, 2019.

Woolfork, Lisa. *Embodying American Slavery in Contemporary Culture.* University of Illinois Press, 2008

Young, Jean. "The Re-Objectification and Re-Commodification of Saartjie Baartman in Suzan-Lori Parks's *Venus.*" *African American Review,* vol. 31, no. 4, 1997, pp. 699-708.

Zeisler-Vralsted, Dorothy. "African Americans and the Mississippi River: Race, History and the Environment." *Thesis Eleven*, vol. 150, no. 1, 2019, pp. 81–101.