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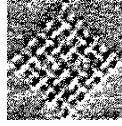
*Seeking Space
Shaping Aesthetics*

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*Propitiating Vengeful Duppies of History:
Therapeutic Interventions of
Caribbean Knowledge Workers*



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This paper is based on a keynote address which I delivered to the conference *The Caribbean Melting Pot of the Americas: From Upheaval and Origins to the Historical Future and its Representations*. The occasion constrained me to give thought to an issue raised in the call for papers: “analysis of the processes through which inequitable and extremely violent relationships between peoples and classes, for a long time perpetuated by slavery, have informed Caribbean societies”. I set out to investigate the interface between this and the mysterious Janus-faced concept embedded in the notion of “the historical futures and their representations.”

So what are historical futures?

- Are they submerged, unarticulated histories which thrust their rhizomes inexorably into our futures?
- Are they unpropitiated vengeful duppies of our histories who lurk in our present seeking pathways for bizarre materialization?
- Are they inescapable cycles of uncanny repetition which ensure that our futures relive our past?

The term is suggestive both of the challenges of representing our histories and the dynamics of intrusive repetition which disrupt temporalities and do not allow us to relegate the historical events to the past. These are the purview of archives. The archive is a Janus-faced representational repository which looks backward with eyes steadfastly set on the futureⁱ.

The insights of Anglophone creative writers on the manner in which the violations of our traumatic “origins” are materializing contemporaneously in myriad troubling incarnations are instructive. The originary trauma which lies at the root of modern Caribbean society is inextricably connected to rupture and displacement. Europeans – English, French, Spanish, Portuguese, Dutch – seduced away from their relatively settled societies by the promise of wealth and the pull of destiny, forcibly decimated indigenous inhabitants of the Caribbean, uprooted the tribal peoples of Africa and ruptured the attachment of rural peasants of the Gangetic plains of India. The clash of people

groups fuelled by the enterprise of the Indies generated plantation spaces of violent contestation. The wildness of the landscape required of the imperialists, acts of both patient endurance and rapacious conquest; the vastness of the enterprise imparted to the conquistadors, a heady sense of lordship and potentiality; release of socializing norms and mores gave way to excesses of carnal indulgence, which even today, challenge the reach of the human imagination.

It can come as no surprise that the traumatic origins of modern Caribbean Societies have created legacies of societal restlessness and dis-ease, as well as eruptive violence which beg for therapeutic intervention to interrupt their intergenerational continuity. Increasingly, our creative writers are reaching beyond the material, social, legal, political domains to probe the interface between the psychological condition of having been colonized and contemporary cultural and material practices. They are probing societal woundedness, grappling with an ethical stance to memorialization of trauma, imaginatively pursuing modes of spatializing woundedness, as well as generating spaces in which trauma can be alleviated.

Let us consider for a moment the repositories of our troubled histories. If we agree that the youthful societies of the Caribbean of recorded history suffer from an absence of ruins, what then of the state of its archives? Archives are traditionally conceived as locations for the knowledge of a people lodged against future retrieval; housings for histories which serve as a people's insurance against futile rounds of repetition; resting places for the past lest, unhoused and unaccommodated, its cycles of uncanny repetition leak into or even overtake our present and our futures; treasuries for cultural memory; organizers for selected events deemed worthy of social ordering and authorization. Gordon Rohlehr lamented that the state of our archives when he undertook research for *Calypso and Society in Pre-Independence Trinidad* (1990) clearly indicated that "we know absolutely nothing about ourselves...nothing". And George Lamming constantly vigilant to the deleterious impact of inequitable power relations on the West Indian psyche, associates the archives with the deployment of the power of knowing and naming. He questions in "whose interest is the archive preserved...who keeps and preserves ordered information and who decides not to and why" (260)

For the peoples of the Caribbean for whom to borrow David Chariandy's elegant phrase, "memory is a bruise still tender... history is a rusted pile of blades and manacles" (2007:32), the archives as a meeting ground of spatialization and temporalization, must be equally concerned with the preservation of material objects, as with traces and hauntings; with undead spectral entities, restless and wondering ghostly presences intruding unbidden and unwelcome into the present. Arguably then the process of archiving Caribbean realities, moves away from gathering of fragments of the past erased from imperial discourses and histories, to the articulation of the unspeakable; probing of the unknowable; grasping after the imperceptible. And these tasks emerge as fundamental to weaving a patchwork social fabric which is sturdy and resilient enough to bear a viable future.

I argue then that while we cannot productively look into our impoverishing and ideologically skewed state sponsored archives for the key to our historical futures, we can look to our creative voices who have been persistent in their identification of the myriad ways in which the region's traumas of have been archived.

The oceans of the Caribbean have come to function in actuality and symbolically as a repository of the trauma of the middle passage – a shifting and fluid archive. Paul Gilroy's reads the slave journey as the interstitial liminal space in which free men and women were transformed into the enslaved and the enslaver. Then the slave ship termed by Cornel West as floating sarcophaguses wreaking of death, and trailed by sharks lured by the promise of a diet of human, becomes iconic of the spatialization of trauma. This materializes most famously in the Zong massacre in which some 133 sick and weak slaves were thrown overboard by the ship's captain in the hope of collecting insurance for cargo lost at sea rather than losing currency for those who died on the journey. The Zong massacre which became the subject of the infamous 1783 insurance case *Gregson v Gilbert*, in which the underwriters sought to avoid compensation for the drowned slaves has been engaged by numerous creative writers including Fred D'Aguiar in *Feeding the Ghost*, David Dabydeen *Turner* and NourbeSe Philip's *Zong!*.

I have discussed the literary representations of the Zong massacre at length elsewhere (Morgan 2014). Of interest to this conversation is the manner in which these fictional explorations interface with archival functions, intended to inform contemporary developmental pathways. Significantly all of these writers embarked on revisionary acts of writing back to various ways in which this case is archived in the British historical records. D'Aguiar reacted to its nondescript display in the Liverpool Maritime Museum which he visited in 1994. Dabydeen penned his ekphrastic poem in reaction to the manner in which the famous 19th Century Art Critic John Ruskin commenting on JW Turner's painting "Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying" erases moral responsibility, in his ecstasies of praise on the aesthetic of the sublime. NourbeSe Philip reacted to reductionism reflected in the one-page judicial statement in records related to the Zong Massacre.

By way of example, witness the series of complex transmutations involved in NourbeSe Philip's layering the archives in relation to the Zong massacre. The sea is the archive of the terror and pain of the drowned souls. Their bones have been bleached, then fragmented, then disintegrated. Their voices silenced. Their untellable stories exceed narrative genres and form, yet haunt generations of story makers, with the compulsion to recount. Given the loss of the ship's documents, the judicial statement for NourbeSe Philip becomes an archive of the event:

I write reminding myself that the case is a tombstone, the one public marker of the murder of those Africans on board the Zong, locating it in a specific time and place. It is a public monument, a textual monument marking their murder, their existence, their small histories that ended so tragically. ...This story must be told; that can only be told by not telling. (*Zong!* 194)

The judicial statement records for posterity the non-being of black laboring bodies as subhuman property whose value to the capitalist enterprise is limited to their insured exchange value of thirty pounds per head.

NourbeSe Philip ruptures this neat equation. The case is a tombstone. The event is encrypted. The writer is a crypt raider. The language is inadequate. The horror can only be told by dispersing ghosts to haunt sensibilities further and further afield. NourbeSe Philip using the one-page judicial statement in the case of *Gregson v Gilbert*, anagrammatically rearranges, fractures, amplifies its words to demonstrate that this legal document contextualized by the broad systemic which generated it, could not possibly mean what it purports. The sterile surface of judicial language is replaced by unintelligible sounds, moans, groans, stutters, sighs to capture pain which escapes the symbolic referentiality of language. By fracturing language, she proliferates significances and constrains the reader to become complicit in its task of making meaning out of this horrific event.

Running as a solid foundation to the shifting words, terms, phrases, sounds, spaces is Philip's naming of the unnamed – the only text not derived from anagrammatic rearrangement of the judicial statement. The naming imparts humanity, lineage, family, meaning, belonging. The naming overturns reductive cataloguing and archiving both in terms of the monetary value of each slave and the workings of global capitalism. It revises the archive as a gap in need of radical reformulation. As Ian Baucom terms it: "Contemporary black Atlantic allegoresis on the Middle Passage animates its hauntological interrogating of a classical discourse on justice and exchange by repeatedly posing the question of value as a problem of naming and seeing."

I would now like to turn attention to Erna Brodber's politically incorrect allegory *The Rainmaker's Mistake* published in 2007 in recognition of the bicentennial of the abolition of the slave trade. Brodber, continuing her decades-long concern with colonialism as an agent of spirit theft and zombification, seeks in this allegory, a psychosocial explanation for the infantilization of the formerly enslaved and the failure of black diasporic populations to thrive and to fully inhabit freedom, some 200 years after the abolition of the slave trade. Evoking the body as the baseline site for the spatialization of trauma, Brodber subordinates political, economic and legal facets of the decolonization project in the interest of probing flawed, deeply interiorized, ontological notions of self-worth, value, autonomy and purpose.ⁱⁱ What can account for the persistent nature of subjugation; what, even after the extensive passage of time, is the root of ongoing obsession with the return of Mr Charlie as rescuer and saviour? And at the deeper level what happens when trauma is so deeply embedded and so pivotal to the formation of the subject that it becomes impossible to pass through the state of mourning into wholeness; in other words, what is the nature of subjectivity when the state of melancholy becomes inevitable?

In *The Rainmaker's Mistake*, an early demarcation is drawn between the enslaved, youthful innocents of the six-year-old about to be pickney gang and Woodville the overseer. The innocents cheerfully embrace the myth that they entered the world as brown yams, the issue of Mr Charlie's seed buried in the patient earth. Secure and oblivious in the paternalistic love and care of Mr

Charlie, they know no responsibility except for assigned estate work, no maturation, no sexuality, no aging, and no death. The majority of the infantilized, formerly enslaved possess a joyful gullibility befitting to the burgeoning consciousness of frisky six-year-old children. With emancipation, comes a slow, painful descent into decision-making, self-provision, self-knowledge, and the alarming prospects of sexuality, aging and mortality.

The formerly ageless overseer Woodville returns to the newly freed subjects as a heuristic device to impart the knowledge necessary for them to inhabit their freedom. Paralyzed and little more than an ejaculating, living corpse, the silenced subject becomes the archive which demonstrates historical futures in both of the senses suggested earlier – the trajectories of being and becoming which emerge from traumatic, troubled past; and the silent, intrusive spectre which must be made to unsilence the unspeakable, if the community is to find its way into a viable future “in the free”. (Brodber 150)

Earlier we noted NourBese Philip’s identification and revision of the *Gregson v Gilbert* judicial statement as a tomb. Brodber here presents the former overseer as the embodiment of a cryptological archive. Jonathan Boulter points to the distinction between Freud’s notion of mourning or a healthy working through of loss, as opposed to melancholia in which the subject maintains a continual narcissistic response to the lost object, which in turn triggers its ongoing intrusion into the present. Boulter entertains the possibility that the subject maintains this melancholic identification because the traumatic moment is pivotal to identity formation. Referencing Derrida’s notion of melancholia as “uncannily fleshy” Boulter points to an image of history as “a kind of viral, material presence, working its way into the body of the melancholy subject, who becomes, in its turn, a kind of cryptological archive.” (Boulter 6)

Woodville embodies a submerged encrypted history which is embedded in his body but lost to his conscious mind until the moment of his death, when the entirety of life flashes before him. Woodville’s loss of ontology raises his value as an epistemological source of historical knowledge. His practically dead body which remembers what is lost to his consciousness functions as an exploratory device to teach the living. It speaks of black males used as studs such that they are essentialized to sexual energy, an ejaculating organ bereft of soul and spirit; it speaks of the loss of affective connection to and sympathetic identification with women whom he would have sought to love; it speaks to the impact of the absence of fathering supplanted by Mr Charlie’s seductive paternalism which masks economic opportunism; it speaks to apathy, paralysis, and social death suffered by nonpersons. Trapped in his exhausted maleness and diminished patriarchy, he can only weep and moan at the mention of the erased women he served as stud to people the plantation. For Brodber, who commends the excavation of submerged realities, no specimen is too far gone to yield the insight necessary for the advancement of community. The aim is not simply to find a place in the future but to find a place “in the free”. This requires the embrace of “naturalness twinned to mortality accompanied by hope and duly tempered by responsibility” (150).

The creative writers invite us to look beyond the thin, floating fragments of historical and archival records to pursue instead deep, embodied, lived histories. They are insistent that these histories ostensibly unspeakable, unknowable, and imperceptible are accessible to the creative imagination. This is the case even if they need to be traced through the pathologist's probings of the dead; unearthed by the skilled and patient archaeologists as tomb raiders. The writers collectively suggest power of the creative imagination to connect to and tease into articulation deeply interiorized haunting woundedness, re-member that which has not been made accessible to consciousness; to treat hurts which when treated respectfully, properly named and delicately probed, can be healed. To do otherwise to apply panaceas, to focus on necessary externalities; it is to "heal the hurts of the people slightly saying peace, peace when there is no peace". (Jer 6:16) Whereas the history of violent origins testifies to the Midas power of global capitalization to monetize and dehumanize everyone it touches, the writers are reclaiming the human and with it the potential for a viable future by exhuming cryptological archives and calling, naming and propitiating vengeful duppies of history.

And the time has come for this work of probing, understanding, addressing and healing. It is time to apply Fanon's and Lamming's understanding of how the brutish violence of slavery's economies of terror and pain are connected to gratuitous violence which manifests contemporaneously in too many post-colonial nations; how they in turn connect to rampant greed and rapacious acquisition on the part of holders of political office. Similar rhizomic connections are at work when anthropologist Deborah Thomas in her study of exceptional violence in Jamaica suggests that the violent excesses of slavery have become a collective repertoire from which to draw the incredible cruelties and sense of style which characterize contemporary gang warfare; and when Brian Meeks in *Envisioning Caribbean Futures* calls for a national reconciliation process to "exorcise the national cataclysm of 1976 to 1980, the spectre of which still broods over the country and inhibits any initiative towards national healing" (117). The same applies when I locate the urban hillside settlement of Laventille in Trinidad and Tobago as locus of and symbolic repository of national contagion and cultural identity and pride, resistance, autonomy, shame and blame. The time has come and these endeavours are exemplary of the broad-based, collective enterprise being undertaken by numerous knowledge workers who are probing the dis-ease generated by the region's tumultuous and traumatic history.

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ⁱ "According to Jonathan Boulter: "The archive like disaster, is situated in the aporetic or at least double temporality. It is about the presentation of the past, and yet its full ontology is futural" (11)

ⁱⁱ This study arguably can be linked to numerous related evocations. It is an understated down home representation of the process described by Dabydeen, in a turn of phrase which draws from the etymological root of pen and penis "Aboard ship he gave us selflessly the nipple/ Of his tongue until we learnt to say profitably/in his own language, we desire you, we love/you, we forgive you" (Turner 40). It also probes the nature of the wounding which Walcott describes in "Laventille" as a "deep amnesiac blow".