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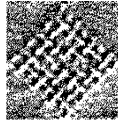
Haunted Histories: Spectres of the Middle Passage in Caribbean Literature



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At the opening of the play, *Philoctetes*, Odysseus recounts to the audience, "I was exposed long ago to the native of Malis, Poeas's son, Philoctetes whose foot was all running with a gwaning disease. His wild, ill-omened cries […] filled the *whole* camp continually with *shrieking* [and] *moaning*"[1] (emphasis added). The description of the Philoctetes' wound is more closely translated as a 'dripping foot.' Notably, the circumstances of his injury are public in nature, centralizing the haunting impact on both the victim and the collective. Moreover, Philoctetes introduces the possibility of the elision of the material and immaterial understandings of historical trauma; the wound is a gangrenous injury that trickles through all of his senses[2]. In this sense, the pain is caught in an endless movement, re-emerging as a type of haunting that returns the victim to the initial experience. This allusion is not to say that there is a unified concept of trauma to be found within ancient Greek thought. What it provides is a contemplative exploration of the multiple levels of suffering and the presence of a wound in more than a cause-and-effect manner.

For nearly four centuries, more than 25 million Africans[3] were brutishly and mercilessly kidnapped from the shores of Africa by European slave traffickers and forcibly shuttled across the Atlantic Ocean to the New World[4]. Also referred to as the "African Holocaust,"[5] the Middle Passage connotes the global commercialization, exploitation and mass movement of African peoples from Africa to the Americas. The after effect of this slave trafficking system on Africans throughout the diaspora at large is beyond words. The African myth of the Sankofa[6] affirms the impulse to explore the cultural and collective historical experience of those left in the wake of these histories, scattered across the globe in the diaspora. Na'im Akbar in his 1996 dissertation, entitled, *The Psychological Legacy of Slavery*, argues that "the current generation of African American and [Caribbean people] still carry the scars of [slavery] in both our social and mental lives[…]. [T]he

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1 Sophocles, *Philoctete*, pp. 4-12.

2 Aeschylus. *Agamemnon,* Edited with a Commentary by Eduard Fraenkel. Trans. Eduard Fraenkel, Clarendon Press, pp. 179-183.

3 See Araujo's, *Public Memory of Slavery: Victims and perpetrators in the South Atlantic*.

4 Eltis, D. (2000). A brief overview of the transatlantic slave trade. *Voyages: The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database.* See also Franklin, J.H & Moss, A.A. (2000). *A History of African Americans: From Slavery to Freedom* (8th ed), Alfred A. Knopf.

5 Abdullah et al., 1995

6 The Sankofa is figuratively illustrated as a bird bearing a gestating egg in its mouth while looking backward while simultaneously advancing forward into the future.

persistence of problems in our mental and social lives…clearly have roots in the historical phenomenon" (7). By this token, this essay explores the manner in which the spirit presences of the hundreds of African souls that drowned in the Atlantic materialize within specific Caribbean discourses. The Middle Passage is selected as a site of analysis, particularly because it is positioned in-between the points of departure and arrival and produces a curious sense of temporality in the selected narratives. Moreover, it is a disaster that shares a peculiar relation to memory. Its survivors are no longer present with us, yet, there is the inherent unforgetting of the trauma that reaches over generations. By focusing on trauma as a culturally transmitted marker of communal history and experience, Roy Eyerman concludes that trauma affects not only the individual, but also the victim-survivor populations; it is a "tear in the social fabric, affecting an entire group of people"[7]. The idea that trauma is a transgenerational presence is central to my discussion of the phantom, a concept that lends itself to the analysis of diasporic experience and haunting. Furthermore, this inquiry contends that the traumatic history of the contemporary Caribbean societies have created legacies of societal disease, shameful secrets, eruptive violence, rage and hurt that call for "therapeutic intervention to counteract their intergenerational continuity." (Morgan 2016)

While NourbeSe Philip does not actually perform such an application of those experiences in *Zong!*, her literary method of ghostwriting interrogates the trope of the phantom as an interpersonal and transgenerational consequence of silence; it is a technique that illuminates the impact of silenced histories on the individual psyche. Moreover, her work reflects many of the symptoms enlisted in the framework of trauma – continual re-experiencing of pain, re-enactment of emotions and speech patterns rooted in the traumatic event and the counter-resistant numbing of emotions[8]. *Zong!* is a literary demonstration of how silence plays out on the level of collective psychological experience. Not unlike Philip, Nichols's obsession with unforgetting is a project of evoking oceanic and plantation memories as expressed in her collection of poems, *I is a Long Memoried Woman*. She entertains the possibility that the female body and mind are imprinted with the unconscious knowledge of violence, especially as it relates to the body. The long-memoried woman demonstrates that memory is laden with extreme experiences which is reflected in the elusive form and shape of the poems. Both oeuvres indicate that absent presences may be visualized and spatialized through literature. To that end, I argue that immaterial presences pour through the fissures of memory, the archive and other methods of historical exactitude. These hard-to-touch, hard-to-see abstractions or duppies loom from the silences and absences that were elided by classical discourses. By taking ghosts as their subjects, the poets seek to yield a kind of truth about a particular event through the literary imagination. Erica Johnson takes up a position on the literary endeavour of ghostwriting, contending that, "[a]s a present absence, the ghost is conjured into being as a literary subject by the authors, each of whom fleshes out history by imaging a life for her subject and, by extension, demonstrates how

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7 Eyerman, "Out of African: The Making of a Collective Identity," *Cultural Trauma*, p. 61.

8 See Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History*. John Hopkins UP, 1996.

the literary imagination provides a vital means of access to otherwise lost biographies"[9]. That "the sea is history", as Walcott avers, calls to mind the Caribbean Sea that washes ashore, these drowned biographies. The Caribbean region is posed as a metaphor of the wounding, forever pouring salt into the abrasions that have not healed. The quarrying of a poetics of restless Atlantic spirit presences provides a form of grieving and lamentation which generates a visceral response to historical pains. In their literary depictions of the trail of human bones stretching from Africa to the New World, Caribbean writers not only elegize those who have passed on, but provide symbolic expression of buried subjectivities and thus, counteract the anonymity that surrounds their history. Consequently, in mining the lost archives, the region's creative writers imaginatively reproduce the formal elements of history and in turn, appraise their language and authority. It is a project of recovering lost biographies by digging deep into Antillean tombs, collective memory and artifacts.

Zong!

First, *Zong!*, is a haunting poetic of how a quest for justice is fulfilled by an engagement with and responsibility to the dead. NourbeSe's text responds to the erasure of a historically oppressed and elided subject. Throughout the collection, the poet endows language with the medium of a witness- the trial of the 1781 Zong Massacre. In her fiction, she recuperates the oceanic spirits, that is, the bodies of those 143 sick and weak African slaves who were thrown overboard by a sea captain in the hope of collecting insurance money for cargo lost at sea. Philip achieves this through a re-arrangement of the case's syntax, semantics and phonemes to relate the moans, grunts and cries of the African enslaved body in pain. Philip spins her narrative between the scant existing historical points of reference while working with a paradigm of memory. What was elided from the dominant archive returns as a palpitating presence.

Some of the most popular scholarly works on cultural haunting as it relates to postcolonial fiction, include Jacques Derrida's *Spectres of Marx* (1994), Avery Gordon's *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (1997), Kathleen Brogan's *Cultural Haunting: Ghosts and Ethnicity in Recent American Literature* (1998), Blanco and Peeren's *The Spectralities Reader: Ghosts and Haunting in Contemporary Cultural Theory* (2013), among several others. These critics have written in response to an interest in collapsed temporality where ghosts shape-shift across boundaries as signifiers of unknowable fragments of the human experience. While these western intellectual systems prove useful in unpacking notions of haunting, they fall short in articulating Caribbean ways of knowing and interrogating the Antillean condition. It signposts a gap in the theorizing of Caribbean ghost narratives and haunting and a need for sensitivity to the many facets of ideological complexity in the Caribbean.

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9 Erica Johnson. "Introduction," *Caribbean Ghostwriting*, p. 14.

Caribbean scholars including Paula Morgan in "Reading Caribbean Discourse of Trauma "calls for a new application of ways to be human […] and for a more practicable pathway for Caribbean societies to negotiate legacies of colonialism and its aftermath".[10] It will prove useful to search for answers as it relates to notions of haunting within Caribbean receptacles through which the region's critics have expressed modalities, world views and discourses of becoming. The working handful of Caribbean scholars who have endeavoured to explicitly or otherwise engage with notions of haunting include Erica Johnson, Martin Munro, Wilson Harris, George Lamming, Gordon Rohlehr and Olive Senior. Munro in his introduction to *The Haunted Tropics* (2012) focuses on issues of haunting as it relates to the Atlantic slave trade:

> Every island of the Caribbean is the site of a deep haunting […]. The Atlantic slave trade fed the plantation system with an apparently endless supply of African bodies, uprooted and transported to the New World in a passage that must have felt like death. To be a slave was to be a kind of ghost, living a half-life in a foreign land […]. Slavery continue to haunt the Caribbean, the ghosts of the past live still in the minds and habits of Caribbean people, and history is at times a burden, made heavy by the passage of time and the sheer magnitude of suffering that occurred on the plantation […]. [T]he region [is] a place in which memories swirl and the past is often associated with displacement, hardships, death and hauntings […]. Elitism haunts the Caribbean […and] phantoms of social attitudes […] continue to deform its societies.

Articulating a similar position, Olive Senior's *Gardening in the Tropics*, provides an interpretation of the haunted landscape that remains marked by the cruelties and excess of the past. The land according to Senior bears to this day, the scars of imperialism in treeless landscapes, polluted beaches and eroded hillsides. For the poet, the landscape is a storehouse of ancestral human bones[12]- a persistent icon of trauma that unwittingly haunts generations. The scholarship brings home-grown approaches to reading Caribbean discourses of trauma and haunted heritage. These writer-critics have argued that where haunting is generations removed from the specific traumatic event, the subject at the centre of analysis remains transfixed by the traces it has left in the world.

In her 2008 interview with Patricia Saunders[13], Philip relates the contemporary relevance of the Middle Passage and its atrocities, specifically, the relationship between the law and African descendants: "How do […] we relate to the law when it once said that we were things, and upheld all of these decisions that supported that view? Think of the law today and what it is being used to do in terms of Guantanamo Bay? It's the same old story where all of these disciplines such as

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[10] Morgan, Paula. "Reading Caribbean Discourses of Trauma: Indigenous Constructs of Caribbean Being and Becoming." p. 3 (Forthcoming).

[11] Munro. "Introduction", *The Haunted Tropics*, pp vii-viii.

[12] Senior, "Seeing the Light," *Gardening in The Tropics*, p 95.

[13] See Philip's interview with Patricia Saunders, entitled, "Defending the Dead" pp. 66-67.

[the] law […] is being drafted into the service of a larger destructive force. […] I highlight the fact that the experience of slavery spawned […] sciences that were drafted into service of proving the “inferiority” of black people, as well as the larger project of greed and a lust of power and wealth. [T]he same set of questions and issues are presenting themselves to us across these historical periods.”[14] Middle Passage discourses are thus composed with layers of symbolic meanings which descendants in the diaspora are likely to peel back as they work through the pain of their own reality. Racial memories of slavery for those in the diaspora are articulated for example, through continual representations of and responses to terror, claustrophobia, economic and social disparities, diminished motivation, bitterness towards life, landlessness and other atrocities.

From the onset, Philip simulates the horrific nature of the Zong Massacre and the enslaved experience. The poem opens with a frantic repetition of the phonemes, ‘w’ ‘a’ ‘t’ ‘e’ ‘r’, spread across the page:

Zong! # 1

www w a wa
w a w a t
er wa s
our wa [15]

Through an attempt to visually connect the graphemes, the reader can re-construct the word, “water --a signifier of both death and survival in the history of the Zong. The onomatopoeic effect in sounding out the poem and its graphic representation express a visually wide space. A hole appears in the middle of the graphemes. What persists here is the image of the brooding sea that dovetails with the sensation of being at a loss which readers themselves are very likely to experience when grappling with the text. On this point, Philip’s elegy enacts a process of lamentation as she creates a space where the loss of the enslaved and murdered Africans is grieved. Through a visual dismemberment of the text, the poet commemorates the loss of ancestors in an elegiac song of sorrow, a lament for the dead. This act of mourning invites the readers to join in this procession, thus seeking an active critical engagement with the text’s aesthetic elements. Through this signifying technique, NourbeSe is moving into the larger unconscious, societal and cultural realms. This finds further explications in the semantic associations enabled by the efforts of the eye, moving from right to left, and all over the page which often fosters frustration. Yet as Philip explains, “the resulting abbreviated, disjunctive, almost non-sensical style of poems demands a corresponding effort from the reader to “make sense” of an event that eludes understanding”. [16] The struggle to recount the event involves integration with carrier groups of ancestral burdens. By thematically and stylistically manipulating

[14] Saunders, p. 67

[15] *Zong!* p. 3

[16] *Ibid*, p.198.

the scribal elements of the original case, Philip's episodic narrative symbolically re-constructs the slave experience of mutilation to the contemporary audience.

Trauma scholar, Ruth Leys, describes the experience of those persons who are clinically, imaginatively or otherwise predisposed to a traumatic event. Leys spotlights the role of imitating the absence, or "acting out" the scene of trauma within a hypnotic or trance state (much like what Philip does). Leys contends that:

> the tendency of persons to imitate or repeat whatever they were told to say or do [provide] a basic model for the traumatic experience. Trauma is defined as a situation in which the victim unconsciously imitates, or identifies with the aggressor or traumatic scene in a condition that was likened to a state of hypnotic trance. Trauma therefore can be understood as an […] imitation or identification [with an event], that appeared to shatter the victims' cognitive-perceptual capacities.[17]

Philip's narrative then, suggests the pain of exhuming the scattered bones from the abyss of the Antillean sea bed and the process through which that pain may be recovered and exorcized. If, as Leys contends, that the knowledge of who it is that we mourn, and as Senior suggests in her narrative gardening escapades, where their remains lie, is central to every process of mourning, it acquires even deeper implications in those cases when the dead is made anonymous. Literature here acts as a cathartic agent and a vehicle for the grieving process. The significance of reading the horror narrative, further gains relevance as it can be potentially transformed into an interpersonal process of collective and cultural mourning, thus prompting reflections on what it means to re-member history by dismembering its fantasies and fictions.

Philip's splicing linguistic method raises oceanic ghosts, whose return opens up to analysis the disavowed and neglected aspects of the past. By superimposing form and content, she recomposes a more inclusive and symbolic record of the Zong Massacre. A world of spirits exists at the heart of *Zong!* and phantoms halo the content of the poems: "The...negroes […] lying dead under [the] seas […] groan and plea [and] sing a sad tune […]. [Their] bone[s] [find] no rest."[18] Here, the narrative opposes the materialism of the archives that neglect to mediate the full account of history. By drawing upon Atlantic vestigial presences, the poet aspires to acquire recompense for the injustice.

The piece is visually ghosted, and it is the collection's fragmented compositional arrangement that makes the oceanic apparitions loom, forming a cacophony of images through the visual emphasis on mutilated memories and bleached bones. The overall structure of Philip's work foregrounds broken arcs, circular shards and parenthesis that elide a straightforward reading. The question of

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[17] Leys, Ruth. "Freud and Trauma," *Trauma, A Genealogy*, p. 38.

[18] *Zong!* pp. 35-106

dismemberment continues to resonate throughout the poems. To further clarify this point, the following excerpt is referenced.

salve the slave
this is but an orasoralve to sin sthe *oba* sobs
*video*sthmotaids thbloss within i am
am and *ave*
there is creed lorde visions *ave*
there is flower a rose i say
a rose for Ruthere is the *oba* sobs
no provisionsand oh oh
oracle for truth
from is suppose truth
to was there are thow the seas
finding asave the yamh oh with she
found cutthghost
andsave the yam oraport
negroes not thfirheatmurder my lord
payment you say liege lord ought evidence suppose *ifa*
then what for my de*ifa i*
fa my us
the rat the rat truth my we a rose my fate
suggesta the cat over falling
the cat got the rat & sunder crew from
over withcaptain
own frohe falls &
found the crime slave over
a roshtcatew touching under from
be absolute writer found africa there is fate
underfrom there is creed
water mocathe ear there is proved
justice dangeours oh oh

Figure 1:
An illustrative excerpt from the section entitled "Ebora", *Zong,* 177

The artfulness of the book, especially in its use of the sepia tones and vellum reveal that even in its construction, the manuscript shares symbolic resonance with the original haunting, terrifying temporality and giddy journey of the Middle Passage. The repetition and revision of the legal document mimic the confusion and disruption that characterized the oceanic crossing. By layering words with more words and constantly re-texturing language, the readers feel pulled, snatched and yanked into history. Memory then is far more than a motif; it is a foundation to cathartic progression. That the poet is presenting lost knowledge as a cathartic agent, allows the readership an epiphany or benefaction. Virgina Woolf wrote on the impact of haunted literature, contending that, a properly affective literary haunting must, "terrify us not by the ghosts of the dead, but by those ghosts that are [latently] living within ourselves".[19] Woolf's article illuminates the notion of repressed tendencies, which, through an engagement with literature, "forces us to chart excursions into our dark and hidden past". [20]

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[19] Woolf, Virginia. "The Supernatural in Fiction." *Collected Essays Vol. 1,* edited by Leonard Woolf, Harcourt, Brace and World, 1967, pp. 239-296.

[20] *Ibid.*

The text then, becomes a space where the counter-discursivity of the African enslaved body can begin to be written. Fittingly, the script is fractured into six segments: Os, Sal, Ventus, Ratio, Ferrum and Ebora. "Os" is Yoruba for Bones, "Ferrum" for iron and "Ebora" for oceanic spirits. By utilizing the indigenous language, Philip imparts humanity and meaning to the tribal families who subsumed the only catalogue the poet exhumes in the archives — 'negro man', 'negro girl', 'meager,' etc. Humanizing loss through language conveys the visceral desire for self-recognition and belonging. Embedded within the splintered manuscript, reifies such desires for mourning work, which, once completed leads to moments of relief and illumination that would transcend the traumatic unknowing.[21]

The feeling of loss, abandonment and 'nowarianism' are arguably embedded within most African American and Caribbean postcolonial psyches. Richardson and Wade address this phenomenon in *What Mama Couldn't Tell Us About Love*, claiming that the haunting aftershocks of slavery involved many modern African-Americans expressing a bitterness for life, diminished motivation and the difficulty of living with a 'hyphenated identity'. The latter is signpost for the African-American or African-Caribbean individual on the move. This becomes a thematic and stylistic concern in Nichols' collection of poems as the hyphen is a metaphoric contemplation of a wound, a splice that embodies a range of violent experiences that generation upon generation of African slaves and their descendants have sustained in the diaspora[22]. The hyphen here symbolizes the cuts in cultural memory caused by a long line of separation from family and friends from the Middle Passage to the tearing apart of families under the arbitrary power of slave holders. What characterizes these experiences is the denial or elision of mourning throughout the generations. Philip's narrative espouses to undo this disremembering through revolutionizing the methods by which history is read. One learns then, to read differently, listen differently and pay attention to the different voices that are entangled in the cacophonic after-cries of slavery. To fully achieve this vision, words must secrete from the archive and find breathable space. The fragmented form creates a series of alternative meanings. The text then becomes an aesthetic translation of the enslaved physical containment and it is as if in fragmenting the words, the ghosts locked within the initial archive, are released. *Zong!'s* visual emphasis on mutilated bodies compensates, to an extent, for bodily loss, although, black texts cannot replace black bodies.

Arguably, it is the poem's fragmented aesthetics that refashions death as a means through which new life can generate. With dissolves and fades and metamorphoses of the kind that she employs, Philip introduces the possibility of creating something anew. The poet constructs a palimpsest. The overwriting of words on a parchment that has been partially erased allows new information to emerge while maintaining traces of previous inscriptions. Here, the work eradicates the old

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[21] Derrida, "Introduction: To Reckon with the Dead", *Spectres*, pp. 1-13.

[22] See "from One Continent to Another," "Skin-Teeth," "Holding My Beads," "Island Man," "Back Home Contemplation," "Winter Thoughts," "In My Sea-House," "Palm-Tree Seductions," and the poems from *The Fat Black Woman's* Collection.

case of Gregson vs Gilbert, leaving behind a cast of spectres who alter the narrative of the archive itself, resulting in the possibility of charting a dialogic relationship with trauma theory, the ghosts of history and literature in a non-prescriptive way. As a discursive system, that makes the dead human bones speak, *Zong!* demonstrates that literature is a project that carries the power to convey redresses since the poet stiches together a patchwork to create a social fabric that is sturdy and resilient to bear a viable future.

The intellectual project of reconstructing silenced histories also involves a recuperation of lost presences. While printed fonts, metrical and rhythmic arrangements and syntactical structures, suggest a corporeality that cannot be denied, the potential of the narrative to embody abstract ideas implies that even the physical object of the manuscript is pervaded with intangible significance. It demonstrates a methodology that invites the contemplation that unseeable forces may inform and shape Caribbean cultural reality. Terry DeHay in his introduction to *Memory, Narrative and Identity* contends that "[T]he ethnic writer's repertoire of subversive strategies includes […] the use of myths, rituals, legends, immaterial presences and cosmology"[23] which breathed life during and after the Middle Passage. Philip's narrative here raises two central questions: How do seen and unseen beings coexist in Caribbean discourse? Can ghosts be read as part of a fluid Caribbean aesthetic? Ghost narratives become, in effect, memorials to survival and persistence of ancestral presences. Through her deployment of a phantasmagoric aesthetic, *Zong!* gives rise to coeval modalities of unbroken connections with spirit presences, through which, as argued throughout this essay, the past is rectified, fellowships are imagined and healing is initiated.

I is a Long-Memoried Woman

Survivors of traumatic experiences are in numerous ways conduits of wounds in which a narrative or narratives are preserved. Such events are mediated over time through oral and print sources, ritual performances and public ceremonies. Grace Nichols's representation of the long-memoried woman, whose life spans other women's ordeals in the diaspora, reveals her multifaceted traumatic experiences under slavery. For Nichols, trauma is registered in the psyche; it remains unprocessed and is subsequently felt in the body. Memory is here, registered in the bones which gives rise to notions of possession. The poems offer a corpus of literature which details how plantation realities circulate in the female body. In *I is a Long-Memoried Woman* (1983) individual and collective remembrance are depicted as active processes. In that vein, conversations about the Middle Passage journey may begin from varying ideas, images, symbols and artifacts which are imbued with historical significance and which so quickly come to mind with the mention of the two-word term. By acknowledging an iconography of the Middle Passage, the poet demonstrates the symbolic and creative sites from which one may collectively, and sometimes

[23] DeHay, Terry. "Narrating Memory." *Memory, Narrative and Identity,* edited by Amritjit Singh and Joseph T. Skerrit, Jr, Northeastern UP, 1994, p. 19.

subconsciously, return to when one enters into a dialogue about this death journey. This essay therefore seeks to interrogate how the poet, not unlike Philip, utilizes the sea voyage as a contemporary reference point.

What can account for the persistent nature of subjugation is the root of an ongoing obsession with memory. It thus signposts that the traumatic events of colonization are deeply embedded in the psyche which risks the subject being trapped in an inevitable state of melancholy. At the deeper level what happens when trauma is so deeply embedded and so pivotal to the formation of the subject that a state of melancholy becomes inevitable. In the opening lines of Nichols's anthology, *I Have Crossed An Ocean*, of which *I is a Long-Memoried Woman* is the first section, the speaker describes her continuous brush with death in her dreams: "Even in dreams I will submerge myself/ swimming like one possessed/ back and forth across that course/ strewing it with sweet smelling flowers-/ one for everyone who made the journey".[24] The recurrent dream psychically transports the speaker to the oceanic crossing. Whether the dream reconstructs an ancestral memory or prompts a wrestle with the Middle Passage legacies in the present, it is an attempt to work through the suffering caused by that recollection. Through dreaming, the speaker is involuntarily plunged into a search for her roots. Her swimming ritual is cathartic and a mode of return that takes her back to an initial point of contact with her African ancestors in an African space; yet the motion only leads her forward again to the present without any resolve. Moreover, the image of the dark sea evokes the female womb and a birthing process, thus signaling her narrative as one that begins in the belly of the ship. Similarly, the image of the female womb signposts another type of trauma as it relates to the female experience aboard the slave ships. The sexual violation of African women on slaving vessels is another brutal and real dimension of Middle Passage traumas as it was a space where African identity was reshaped and where African and European cultures collided, eventually forming a Black community that was distinct from any particular native culture in continental Africa.

By returning to these sites, the speaker explores the interior and annulled lives of African people that were not written. To culminate her recalling, she scatters flowers on the watery graveyard to memorialize the dead who did not make the journey. Here begins an attempt to speak for the nameless millions that will be mourned. Writing about coping with the violent aftermath of empire is trauma scholar, Cathy Caruth who contends that "what returns to haunt the victim […] is not only the reality of the violent event, but also the reality of the way that its violence has not yet been fully known". [25] For Caruth, "[T]he trauma is the ongoing story of a wound that […] in its…belated address, connects uncannily to our very actions, our language and our experiences." [26] From this vantage point, vestigial presences are fashioned as palpable in the present moment. As such, the speaker makes use of prayers, memorials, rituals, dying, weeping, eulogies, burials,

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[24] Nichols, Grace. *I Have Crossed An Ocean*. p. 12.

[25] Caruth. "Introduction", *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, p. 6.

[26] Ibid, p. 4.

dances, never-ending journeying and other cultural habits to pinpoint the network of revenants that invade her reality. Their presences are reminders of the stains of the fateful oceanic crossing.

The chain of historical events is read as inescapable cycles of uncanny repetition which ensure that the persona relives her past. In the poem, "One Continent to Another," she is presented as a victim of various social, cultural and economic injustices. The poem opens with the metaphor of childbirth: "Child of the middle passage womb/push/daughter of a vengeful Chi/[…]/into the new world/birth aching her pain/from one continent to another."[27] The image conveys the idea that this movement is not a natural birth but a forced one; thus, personified as a woman's birth, the Middle Passage pushes, and the child is delivered into the new world. Additionally, and perhaps more importantly is that the persona's history of violent origins testifies to the power of capitalization that lays hold of everything and everyone involved. Inherent in the experience of the historical voyage are the sexual and violent looks in the eyes of "the men who seed the children," suggesting again that rape is a residual aftermath. [28] Death is pervasive in this instant. The speaker anticipates the likelihood that these children will not possess the memory that explains to them their experiences of exile and dispossession and there is the possibility that their bodies as well as their minds will be imprinted with the unconscious knowledge of their mother's trauma. According to Paula Morgan in her keynote address at the *Caribbean Melting Pot of the Americas* Conference, "the situation is an allegory of the psychosocial explanation for the infantalization of the enslaved and the failure of black diasporic peoples to thrive and fully inhabit freedom some two hundred years after the abolition of the slave trade."[29] At the end of the narrative, the slave woman returns from her troubling re-memory of the past to her present life as a slave in the Caribbean and "piece[s] the life she would lead".[30] The scene illustrates how discreet events of brutality "exist in a symbiotic relationship with other events, past and future."[31] The repercussions and circulation of one event through a myriad of other interrelated events enable the reading audience to understand the trans-generational and trans-historical nature of the trauma and the manner in which Anglophone creative writers demonstrate how violent origins materialize contemporaneously.

To remember the Middle Passage is somehow to heal the pain from that passage even as it necessitates going through that pain again. In light of this, Nichols' poetry may be read as a cathartic mediator which dovetails with limbo. Through the spatial framework of limbo, writers like Grace Nichols, Fred D'Aguiar, NourbeSe Philip, Derek Walcott and Kamau Brathwaite probe societal woundedness while generating a space in which trauma can be alleviated. The limbo

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[27] Nichols. "One Continent to Another," *I is a Long Memoried Woman*, p. 9.

[28] *Ibid*, p. 13.

[29] Morgan, Paula. "Place as Archive." The Caribbean Melting Pot of the Americas: From Upheaval and Origins to the Historical Future and its Representations, 13 October 2016, CLL, UWI, St. Augustine Campus. Keynote Address.

[30] *Ibid.*

[31] Johnson. "Unforgetting Trauma," *Caribbean Ghostwriting*, p. 119.

dance is evoked by Nichols as a method of representation and a tool for working through the traumatic experience. Abdullah and Sheppard identify the Middle Passage phase as a "seasoning" period in which Africans were put through a brutal dehumanization process which transformed them into "slaves."[32] The image of a floating sea vessel perpetually drifting somewhere between slavery and freedom serves as a key site in which a vision of a surviving black community emerged. Here, the sea vessel caught between continents is resonant and stands as a powerful metaphor that Caribbean intellectuals, namely Wilson Harris, Jennifer Rahim, Joyce Jonas and Kamau Brathwaite use to create a vision of a people who drew on continental African cosmologies to survive the anonymity of their destination and fate. The ocean then, "comes to function in actuality and symbolically as a repository of the trauma of the Middle Passage- a shifting and fluid archive."[33] It may explain Caribbean people's sensitivity to the sea as a living entity, an agent in the tragedy of slavery and a site of their history.

When recalling limbo, the spider-god, Anansi is invoked. Functioning as one of the several incarnations of Esu-Elegbara is Anansi, the multi-limbed Yoruba crossroad god whose very meaning-system exists to apprehend, manipulate, and de-centre ideologies and structures that give power to matrices of oppression and exclusion. Anansi, as used to unravel ideas of limbo, addresses a Middle Passage sensibility. The trickster god may be read as a custodian of the in-between movement or journeying between the past and present. Apropos to this is Wilson Harris's contention that "limbo was born […] on the slave ships of the Middle Passage."[34] According to Harris, "There was so little space that the slaves contorted themselves into *human spiders.*"[35] What's more is that Anansi underwent a sea-change that not only altered his name, but his function in the diaspora.[36] This presents a cross-cultural image; "a special kind of synchrony between alien cultures… [creating as it were a]… cross-cultural space."[37] As such:

> "Limbo is the curious dislocation of a chain of miles reflected in the dance so that a re-trace of the Middle Passage from Africa to the Americas and the West Indies *is not to be equated with a uniform sum*. Not only has the journey from the Old World to the new varied with each century and each method of transport but it needs to be reactivated in the imagination. When one dwells on the Middle Passage: a limbo gateway between Africa and the Caribbean [appears]."[38]

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[32] Abdullah, Kali and Sheppard. "Post-traumatic Stress Disorder: A Diagnosis for Victims of Atlantic Holocaust United States of America Component," *The African Principle: Essay Series, I* (2), African World Community Press, p. 6.

[33] Morgan, Paula. "Place as Archive." The Caribbean Melting Pot of the Americas: From Upheaval and Origins to the Historical Future and its Representations, 13 October 2016, CLL, UWI, St. Augustine Campus. Keynote Address.

[34] "History, Fable, Myth" p 157.

[35] Ibid. (emphasis mine).

[36] Ibid, p. 156.

[37] Bundy, ed. *Selected Essays*, p 74.

[38] "History, Fable, Myth," p. 157, emphasis mine.

These creolized spider-like mechanisms, Harris contends, were inspired by the Ghanaian trickster figure, Esu. Harris's argument at once traces the trajectory of Anansi in the New World and pinpoints the effects of the trickster god's movement across the Atlantic. Africa had to submerge or go into hiding for its own sake in the Americas. It does not equal disappearance but was a matter of survival and value of sacred belief systems that were lodged in memory and coded in song and dance. For the Guyanese surveyor-critic, the limbo can be viewed as a passage through a prolonged procession. It was a point of entry between worlds; an "axis or power line, that connected God above with the dead below."[39] The dance encompassed skimming beneath the horizontal bar at the crossroad where the dancer, possessed, has endured the worst and where the music, the drums of the silent gods, bring him/her through to the other side. The limbo pole can be posited then as a threshold for spirit presences[40].

One should not fail to note then, that Nichols uses the limbo as a spatial metaphor throughout her oeuvre. This is demonstrated in the long-memoried woman's embodiment of the African ancestor and trickster god, respectively, as she re-imagines herself as containing all the extremes between archetypal victim and victor. She suggests that a deep understanding of an African way of conceiving the world has endured and is intrinsic to the diasporic imagination. Flagging the vanishing point where corporeal and incorporeal realms meet, where body fuses with memory and the limitations of ordinary vision become acute, is the far seeing, long-memoried woman. Her slippage between realms becomes explicit in her display of code-switching, masking, parodying and veiling. In the poem, "Ala," for instance, the poet deconstructs one of the most pernicious myths about slaves-that is their passive acceptance of fate. The poem records the story of Uzo, an enslaved woman who outmaneuvers existing power structures by refusing her condition as a plantation breeder and as a result she commits infanticide. As a consequence to her transgressive act, she is tied to the stakes ("arms and legs spread-eagle"),[41] covered with molasses, and left to "the slow and painful/ picking away of [her] flesh/by red and pitiless ants". [42] The onlookers call upon Ala, the African earth deity to materialize and reclaim Uzo's soul. It is a moment that reveals a return to the Spirit world for consolation and solace as Africa is exhibited as a source of spiritual healing. In the end, Uzo returns to Ala's "womb" where her spirit finds rest.[43] Nichols's depiction of West Africa in this context, embraces the notion that the continent holds the capacity to function as a meaningful site of homecoming. By that token, Africa is grafted onto a global

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[39] Thompson, *Face of the Gods*, p 49.

[40] See Olaudah Equiano's *Interesting Narrative* and its account of his capture in Africa.

[41] Nichols, Grace. "Ala". *I Have Crossed An Ocean*. p. 20.

[42] *Ibid*, p. 23.

[43] Uzo's account demonstrates that African pasts linger into the diasporic present and as such complicate notions of temporality. This sense of the past inserting itself into the present is a fictional strategy that ultimately allows for African pasts to actively make a difference in a cosmopolitan society. Gray, James and Riedler Jeff. "Sankofa Ghana: A Spiritual Journey Home". Spring 2014, UU World, pp 18-19.

present; it is far from mute and inanimate. African ancestral spirits are contained in the idea of the long memoried woman and her defiance demonstrates their continuity in the New World.

The poem also seeks to voice the trauma inherent in articulating the dilemma of women who must decide whether to keep a child and raise it in unfavourable--sometimes unbelievably difficult--circumstances or to have an abortion. It is an issue that plagues contemporary debates. A frequently voiced assumption is that abortion is an easy way out, a position that completely ignores the reality that for most women facing an unwanted pregnancy there is no good solution. The poem, "Ala" facilitates this reflection and is a reminder that woman in such a situation has only two extremely difficult alternatives, and no matter what she decides, the effect is felt long after. The institution of slavery thus, can be put forward as a liminal space where life, liberation and healing teeter next to death, bondage and suffering. It is a space where death often signified liberation and life often signified bondage.

The notion of agency takes on both mourning and instructive roles. Nichols re-directs the enslaved woman's traumatic experiences and presents recovery through a framework of ritual. While Philip reshapes the legal document of Gregson vs. Gilbert, Nichols does the same in her usage of an elusive form with her allusion to African-Caribbean cosmologies. Both poets bring the past into the present through experimental forms that disperse ghosts into the contemporary world. The space of agency as sustained by the narrative forms, thus opens up a portal by which spirit presences stream into the present. Nichols demonstrates this alternative universe by establishing a proximal, invisible but palpable world of power with its associative qualities of different voices, personas and myths. Demonstrably, the poem, "I Coming Back", opens with an incantatory arrangement of words. The speaker chants, "I coming back 'Massa'/ I coming back/ mistress of the underworld/ I coming back/ colour and shape/ of all that is evil/ I coming back/ ball-a-fire/ and skinless higue/ I coming back". [44] It is within this 'lure of song' that the long-memoried woman voices her heady resistance. In this sense, the spirit world imbues the speaker with agential significance where she imagines returning from the realm of the dead to exact revenge on her master. Through a divine-human synergy, the persona moves from predicament to survival.

In keeping with the theme of survival, Nichols describes how her speaker turns to sorcery, magic and the supernatural as conscious acts to help her endure the oppressive status quo. Similarly, in the poem, "Night Is Her Robe," the woman is enveloped in the auspicious moonshine. Here, she embodies a deep craft--its purpose dual--for good and for evil. Her agency is characteristic of Obeah and Voodoo practices in the Caribbean[45]. Indeed, to define Obeah and Voodoo simply as forms of sorcery which are evil in intent is constricting and misleading for as Grace Nichols's

[44] Nichols, Grace. "I Coming Back". *I Have Crossed An Ocean*. p. 28.

[45] For further reading, see Handler, Jerome S., and Bilby M. Kenneth. *Enacting Power: the Criminalization of Obeah in the Anglophone Caribbean, 1760-2011*. UWI Press, 2012 and Ferguson, Garland. *The Esoteric Codex: Haitian Vodou*, Lulu, 2015.

scholar, Sarah Lawson claims, “Obeah is, as Nichols notes, an important cultural retention in the Caribbean. It needs to be seen as part of a complex matrix of women-centred cultural activities which range from herbalism at one end of the spectrum to a belief that it is possible to control the actions of others”. [46] In that vein, the persona is able to regain a sense of self-worth, autonomy and value through spiritualist means, an appropriate vehicle for suggesting multiple histories as a basis for collective identification and their transmission. The speaker is a gatherer of “strange weeds/wild root/leaves with the property/ both to harm and to heal.” [47] Here, spirit presences encircle the material present. Magical, herbal elements are depicted as an agent that assists in the linkage between diasporic descendents and sage like wisdom of spirit ancestors. It illustrates the way in which dead, silent but potent presences shape the character’s life.

In the poem, “Yemanji,” African spirituality and mythology are likewise evoked as the long memoried woman walks alongside a waterway and imagines meeting Yemaji, “Mother of all beings sprawled/ upon the rivershore, her long/ breasts (insulted by her husband)/ oozing milk that lapped and flowed.”[48] The river can be perceived as a liminal space where contact with immaterial presences is made. The Yoruba goddess of the ocean embodies all women who have crossed the Atlantic. The oceanic deity is presented as a head full of reason and rationality, and a bridge that yet again, links the fluid waters of the Middle Passage with the fluid consciousness of the speaker. The encounter between the mortal being and the goddess provides sustenance and calming strength to the enslaved woman and inspires her to draw meaningful connections to a living past.

To continue the process of freeing herself from the bonds of slavery, the persona thrusts into the world of the gods as revealed in the poems, “Of Golden Gods” and “I Will Enter”. Although physically confined to the plantation, she transcends her physicality via spiritual journeying through time and space. Such journeying allows her to keep true to the freedom of her solitude, while associating with various women such as the Amerindians and other indigenous populations of the Caribbean on mythical planes. Her “chameleon spirit/take[s] its exit” (36) from the stifling, plantation and she is able to travel back to her childhood in the kingdom of her ancestors, across the continent of South America, back in time through ancient civilizations and “Inca ruins…/Mexican plains/…Aztec rites/…[and] genocides” (36). Here, ancestral and kindred spirits continue to assert themselves in meaningful and complex ways in accordance with the long-memoried woman’s diasporic circumstances. Her myriad spiritual journeys suggest a cosmopolitan outlook in which past and present, dead and living, ancestor and descendent sustain one another in lively and evolving ways. In this sense, she taps out of the plantation’s constraints of death and blazes a trail for herself and her sanity.

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[46] Lawson, Sarah. “Epic Journeying I: *I is a long memoried woman*.” *Grace Nichols*. p. 67.

[47] Nichols, Grace. “Night is Her Robe”. *I Have Crossed An Ocean*. p. 29.

[48] Ibid, “Yamanji”. *I Have Crossed An Ocean*. p. 34.

To read *I is a Long Memoried Woman*, is to read along with the struggles that we ourselves deal with when facing the many faces of death in the world. The great struggle we find ourselves locked in occurs when we are forced to ruminate over this fate to try and conquer an unknowable and at times, hostile world. However, in the trajectory from death's inevitable arrival, to her moment of freedom, Nichols's persona finds therapeutic pathways and coping strategies in life's in-between moments. The collection also demonstrates that Caribbean discourse on the supernatural reflects the notion that time can be collapsed and that bodies can mutate over multiple generations, thus giving the possibility of a physic-spiritual nurturing network. Hope is present at the end of the collection in the simplicity of possibility alone. In "Holding My Beads," the final poem in the section, the persona stands with the "power to be what [she is]/ a woman/ charting [her] own futures/ a woman/ holding [her] beads in [her] hand" (43). The quest for new knowledge carries on throughout the speaker's life and her search takes place parallel to her involvement in excavating the past while building, sustaining and suckling a community. In this sense, the imprint of hope far surpasses the traumatic and death invasive transatlantic crossing, for death represents but a moment, a method, and an end to but one plane of existence.

As these creative works demonstrate, the endeavour of freeing a distinct narrative of the past from its prison of silence cannot be achieved through the articulation of a singular voice, but through a cacophony of voices. The aim of such writing is not just to archive the unspoken past into the dead leaves of a book but to productively reclaim the past and incorporate the heretofore unheard voice into cultural memory. Committing themselves to such a cause, writers like NourbeSe Philip and Grace Nichols make the unspoken and unheard stories of history a part of living memory, something that this generation and generations to come can call to mind.

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