

# Voicing Memory and History: Diaspora Consciousness in Contemporary Fiction by New World African Writers

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## Resumo

*Com base na hipótese que a (re)criação de lares epistêmicos na ficção da diáspora africana é alcançada mediante uma apropriação do espaço histórico, mental, corporal e discursivo (a apropriação de signos que abre e torna dinâmica uma história, identidade e imaginação fechada, fixa e distorcida) este ensaio traça estratégias discursivas de resistência com o objetivo de investigar diferentes significações do conceito de lar em selecionados romances de escritores negros do Canadá, Estados Unidos, Caribe e Brasil. Neste processo focaliza a (re)criação do lar a partir da errância, a reescrita da história por meio da memória, ao problematizar a memória como lugar da (re)construção identitária, da luta ética sobre o acesso à significação e da (re)visão epistêmica.*

*Palavras-chave: ficção da diáspora negra nas Américas; memória; história; identidade.*

Where are your monuments, your battles,  
martyrs? Where is your tribal memory?  
Sirs, in that gray vault. The sea. The sea has  
locked them up. The sea is History.

(Derek Walcott)

Some people don't understand that it is the  
nature of the eye to have seen forever, and  
the nature of the mind to recall anything  
that was ever known.

(Alice Walker)

My hum is mostly below range, private,  
suitable for an old woman embarrassed by  
the world; her way of objecting to how the  
century is turning out. Where all is known  
and nothing understood.

(Toni Morrison)

[...] le vieux nègre de la Doum révèle  
dessous l'Histoire, des histoires dont aucun  
livre ne parle, et qui pour nous comprendre  
sont les plus essentielles.

(Patrick Chamoiseau)

The African diaspora space is one of the inter-American contact zones par excellence. From the period of early slave trade, colonization and plantation system to the present this space has been subjected to the *métissage*, the creolization, the mixture of cultures and identities. Dispersal, displacement, and dispossession, these quintessential aspects of the African diaspora experience, constitute a complex borderland where borders and maps are moved *and* (re)established through the intermediary link between redemption and doom. In their problematization of cultural in-betweenness, African diaspora writers in the Americas point to an apocalyptic history †a history gone away in the context of the Atlantic slave trade and its aftermath †as the source of their characters' identity crisis and errantry. The result of this holocaust has been such that people of African descent in the Americas define their identity and subject position between different geographical locations and signifying systems. This hybridity, as Homi Bhabha (1994, p. 114) has pointed out, produces cultural ambivalence because of the continuing latent impact of the imperial value system on colonial subjects. Dionne Brand has recently described this interstitial state of mind and existence as follows: "To live in the Black Diaspora is... to live as a fiction – a creation of empires, and also self-creation. It is to be a being living inside and outside of herself.... There is the sense in the mind of not being here or there, of no way out or in.... Caught between the two

we live in the Diaspora, in the sea in between” (BRAND, 2002, p. 18-20). For Brand, the African diaspora subject’s liminal episteme and existence has been caused by a three-dimensional rupture: “a rupture in history, a rupture in the quality of being” that “was also a physical rupture, a rupture of geography.” She calls this fissured “creation place of Blacks in the New World Diaspora... the Door of No Return, a place emptied of beginnings.” A place between Africa and the Americas that has multiplied into lived and imagined non-places throughout the diaspora where the missing sedimentation of history casts fractal beams of memory onto the oblivion-remembrance interface. Brand describes the haunting, shadowy presence-as-absence of this interstitial door as a “consciousness” whose “cognitive schema is captivity” (BRAND, 2002, p. 5-6, 25, 29). If the mind and body of African diaspora subjects were and continue to be imprisoned and alienated within a labyrinth of languages, images and values imposed and determined by the experience of slavery, the plantation system, and different forms of neocolonization – an ongoing historical experience which destroys the continuity between ethos, worldview and language – then identity has no home: it drifts in betweenness. This identitarian betweenness as imposed cultural and ethnoracial difference produces split egos, or to use Fanon’s words, “individuals without an anchor, without horizon, without color, state and roots – a race of angels” (1967, p. 170). Therefore, home, “the capacity to create in one’s own i-mage” (PHILIP, 1996, p. 15) †a recreation/reimagination of one’s self and the world through one’s own eyes †is one of the key issues in inter-American African diaspora literature. Reverend Misner, a character in Morrison’s *Paradise* (1998, p. 213) describes the concept of home as follows:

can’t you even imagine what it must feel like to have a true home? I don’t mean heaven. I mean a real earthly home. Not some fortress you bought and built up and have to keep everybody locked in or out. A real home. Not some place you went to and invaded and slaughtered people to get. Not some place you claimed, snatched because you got the guns. Not some place you stole from the people living there, but your own home, where if you go back past your great-great-grandparents, past theirs, and theirs, past the whole of Western history, past the beginning of organized knowledge, past pyramids and poison bows, on back to when rain was new., before plants forgot they could sing and birds thought they were fish, back when God said Good! Good! – there, right there where you know your own people were born and lived and died. Imagine that... place.

In Morrison’s critical and creative works, home figures as a *concrete utopia* in Ernst Bloch’s sense, that is, a yearning for a

yet-to-come emotional cross-cultural relationship whose essence is shot through not with racism, sexism, or any other hierarchical order, but with a collective willingness to accept, respect, and nurture difference as relational diversity.<sup>1</sup>

In Dionne Brand's *Another Place, Not Here*, the pattern of diasporic scattering sets in with Adela, the great-great-grandmother of the woman who raised Elizete. Forced to leave Africa and taken to the Caribbean as a slave, Adela remembered the route across the Atlantic. In the new place, however, her memory made way for oblivion. Apart from the fact that she named the island "Nowhere," she passed on no knowledge to her descendents (BRAND, 1996, p. 19). Elizete, while understanding the reason for Adela's resistance, her denial to put down roots in the killing fields of a space where belonging was lost on the distant horizon of the Atlantic Ocean, vows to turn Adela's geographical and temporal space of in-betweenness, her willed unbelonging, into a place of belonging:

Nothing barren here, Adela, in my eyes everything full of fullness, everything yielding, the milk of yams, dasheen bursting blue flesh.... Where you see nowhere I must see everything. Where you leave all that emptiness I must fill it up.... the place beautiful but at the same time you think how a place like this make so much unhappiness. [...] I make myself determined to love this and never to leave (BRAND, 1996, p. 24-25).

How can this "nowhere" be transformed into a home? How is it possible for New World Africans to cross the *limen* into a meaningful future without repressing, forgetting, distorting, or ignoring the past? How do they embrace a diaspora *space*, where here, there, and elsewhere constitute a no-man's land, and transform it into *places* that do not hold them down with the heavy load of History? How do they avoid perishing in the "damp and hungry interstices" of this space (BRAND, 1999, p. 167)? The three key words which I want to distil from the above-quoted passages by Brand and Morrison – willingness, consciousness-raising, imagination – lead me to establish the hypothesis that the creation of home places in African diaspora fiction is achieved through three fundamental devices: an appropriation of historical space that is simultaneously an appropriation of mental and bodily spaces – both accomplished through an appropriation of discursive space. The appropriation of signs, by means of which a closed, fixed and distorted history, identity, and imagination is opened up and set in motion once more, should be regarded as a healing process since its objective is to get "the word/i-mage equation" (PHILIP, 1996, p. 21) back into balance.

In this sense, healing means resistance to individual and collective otherization. If healing, according to Gayl Jones (1998, p. 32, 209) involves freeing oneself "from the tyranny of others"

<sup>1</sup> For Morrison's thoughts on home, see her essay "Home" (1998). For an in-depth analysis of Morrison's novels, see WALTER (2003, p. 201-264). On the issue of cultural difference and diversity, see WALTER (2005).

and learning “to manage oneself” – prerequisites for communal healing – then it needs, following Morrison, willpower imbued with imagination, that is, a “[s]tepping in to find the pinpoint of light. Manipulating it, widening it, strengthening it” (MORRISON, 1998, p. 247) so as to gain knowledge of “the things behind things” (MORRISON, 1989, p. 46-47). Houston A. Baker, Jr. (1987, p.49), has described Black discursive strategies of resistance, which create homes out of homelessness, as a movement from “the mastery of form” to the “*deformation of mastery*.” Bell hooks (1990, p. 148) argues that it is from the various margins that home places are being created in the arts, cultures, and daily experiences of African people throughout the diaspora. For hooks, the concept of home acquires different meanings in the struggle for liberation in that it fluctuates between locations and thus effects “varied and ever-changing perspectives,” opening up “new ways of seeing reality” and “frontiers of difference.” Healing, then, could be seen as an ongoing process of identity construction: the arduous movement from “double-consciousness” – “this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity” (DU BOIS, 1961, p. 16-17) – to double vision, the sense of seeing and imagining one’s self and the world through the eyes of one’s own cultural episteme. In the following, I want to examine the above-mentioned multidimensional process of appropriation-as-resistance to probe different significations the concept of home has taken on in selected creative works by pan-American writers of African descent.

Edouard Glissant (1992, p. 99-100) pointed out two functions in his study of the formation of national literatures: a desacralizing function “of demythification, of desecration, of intellectual analysis, whose purpose is to dismantle the internal mechanism of a given system, to expose the hidden workings, to demystify, “ and a sacralizing function intent on “reuniting the community around its myths, its beliefs, its imagination, or its ideology.” In terms of African diaspora literature, this movement from double consciousness to double vision reveals what Spivak (1988, p. 171) has termed the “epistemic violence” of imperial politics resulting in the schizophrenic chaos of “nonhistory” and nonbeing. One of the most important devices of epistemic resistance to this violence, thus, has been the rewriting of history, the ripping of the veil which has been drawn over certain facts of black experience, by focusing on the subaltern Dasein-as-agency (systematically denied by the dominant discourse) of African people in the New World. For an example, let me focus on the resistance myth and agency of the maroons, which has been denied by both the official discourse and a large part of the Caribbean population.

In Maryse Condé's *Crossing the Mangrove*, Xantippe, feared and ostracized by the entire community of Rivière au Sel, is the last one who pays his regards to the dead Francis Sancher. Throughout the book, the reader gets to know Xantippe through the perspectives of various other characters as the town's idiot, whose language nobody understands. Yet at the end of the book, through Xantippe's narrative stance, he appears as the last maroon who has witnessed the historical development of Guadeloupean society and thus knows about colonial crimes, the changes the island went through, the times when white plantations were set aflame by revolting slaves, when freed blacks left the plantation in the hills to seek their fortune in the towns of the coastal regions, when schools were built and children learnt: "Our ancestors the Gauls..." (CONDÉ, 1995, p. 204), when whites brought progress to the island and the heart of the people hardened. In search of shelter in the woods and at the margin of the rivers, Xantippe remembers the past:

It was on the buttress roots of its manjack trees that the pool of my blood dried. For a crime was committed here, on this very spot, a long, long time ago.... I know where the tortured bodies are buried. I discovered their graves under the moss and lichen. I scratched the earth and whitewashed the conch shells, and every evening at dusk I come here to kneel on my two knees. Nobody has pierced this secret, buried and forgotten (CONDÉ, 1995, p. 205).

<sup>2</sup> Maroons were fugitive slaves who went to the mountains to fight for freedom rather than wait in unfreedom for freedom to be given by others. However, resistance to slavery and colonization is but one side of this historical figure. Another one is their collaboration with Europeans, which even included official treaties with the British and their implication in the slave trade. For a critical examination of the maroon, see CAMPBELL (1988). In *Ségou*, Condé delineates Jamaican maroons as traitors.

<sup>3</sup> Translated into Toni Morrison's creative opus, one may argue that out of Pecola's schizophrenic zone of non-being in *The Bluest Eye* flowers Milkman's flying zone of being in *Song of Solomon*. Conscientization and the resultant assumption of responsibility for one's agency have the power to transcend the fetters of mental and physical captivity.

<sup>4</sup> In Adrienne Rich's sense: "the act of... seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new, critical direction" (RICH, 1979, p. 35).

Condé uses Xantippe to revalorize the maroon as a resistance fighter and to criticize those who have degraded maroons to werewolves so as to frighten children.<sup>2</sup> Instead of appropriating the maroon as a symbol of resistance, a founding myth of a shattered, fragmented collective memory, instead of turning to one's own history, islanders have turned outward (to the colonizing Other) in search of myths. This failure of mythopoetic and discursive processes to embrace local experiences of time and space and the concomitant internalization of the dominant culture's value system has created fissures and voids in the Caribbean imagination and psyche. These fissures and voids, which are not empty spaces, constitute what Fanon (1967, p. 8) has described as the "zone of nonbeing, an extraordinarily sterile and arid region, an utterly naked declivity where an authentic upheaval can be born" – that is to say, these zones of double consciousness carry the seeds of a revisionary double vision.<sup>3</sup> Let me focus on Patrick Chamoiseau's *Texaco*, Émile Ollivier's *Passages* and Conceição Evaristo's *Ponciá Vivêncio* to further elaborate on the "re-vision"<sup>4</sup> of history and cultural identity. In the process, it is necessary to consider such issues as memory and orality in that they constitute important elements/devices in the process of creating homes out of homelessness in African diaspora fiction of the Americas.

*Texaco* (1992) is a creative manifesto against the forgetting of history and orality. By constituting a written tapestry of multivoiced oral remembrance – Marie-Sophie Laborieux’s notebook entries recording the words of her father, Esternome; Oiseau de Cham’s transcription of Marie-Sophie’s statements recording her story, which is *Texaco*’s story as she told it to the urban planner; Chamoiseau’s letters to Marie-Sophie; and the urban planner’s thoughts sent to the author – and different styles of the French language, the narrative translates the hybrid process of creolization on the level of its structure, style and theme. As such, it constitutes a multilayered crossroads that captures manifold intonations and implications of fluid experiences mutually determining each other. Furthermore, the focus on different generations’ maroon agency and its impact on the foundation of *Texaco* †a Martinican shantytown located on the outskirts of a city that threatens to engulf it †through a variety of voices, points of view and perspectives, translates description into a meandering process of fragmented becoming; a process of hybrid confluence that undermines fixity as a function of power †represented by the city’s power brokers who want to destroy *Texaco* †through the nomadic mobility of the marooning squatters, the founders of *Texaco*, as a function of resistance. To write-speak against the erasure of *Texaco*’s history from its beginning as an illegal settlement in the 1950s till its legal status as a suburb in the 1980s means not only to render the story of its survival composed of the many stories of its inhabitants. Most important, it means to reveal the historical uprootedness and “homing desire” (BRAH, 1996, p. 180) of its squatting founders from the times of the plantation system onward. This transformation of non-history into lived and imagined histories fills the voids and silences of a willfully distorted official discourse with multiple epistemic meaning, providing the community of *Texaco* with the founding myths and categories, the ethos and worldview, the language and the variety of discourses which establish and explain their specific Martinican *Dasein*. This power to unwrite and rewrite the world – a power that sparks from the anxiety of displacement that troubles the desire for home, the memory of this mediatory moment between diasporic scattering and putting down roots – contributes to the gradual sedimentation of history as collective memory in that it provides knowledge as both lived and imagined relation with the past and the present, an understanding of oneself as part of a collective imaginary within a specific place in the world. In this sense, the mythopoetic creativity of *oraliture* (“nommer – en nous-mêmes pour nous-mêmes – jusqu’à notre pleine autorité”; CHAMOISEAU, 1992, p. 498) has the power to create, renew and refashion, that is to re-member, identities.

Marie-Sophie explains the memory-identity interface as follows: “écrire, c’était retrouver mon Esternome, réécouter les échos de sa voix égarés en moi-même, me reconstruire lentement autour d’une mémoire, d’un désordre de paroles à la fois obscures et fortes” (CHAMOISEAU, 1992, p. 411). Given the transitoriness of impressions and feelings and the changing mood of reflections, which transform the images and values of places, landscapes and beings, memory needs spatial frameworks and arrangements – that is, it needs specific sites. Thus it is *l’En-ville* (the city), Texaco (*la ville créole*), the *mornes* (the hills of volcanic origin), *la savane* (open, often grassy space) that function as the most important enduring spatial images triggering Marie-Sophie’s remembrance. By stating that “[l]a ville créole qui possède si peu de monuments, devient monument par le soin porté à ses lieux de mémoire. Le monument, là comme dans toute l’Amérique, ne s’érige pas monumental: il irradie” (CHAMOISEAU, 1992, p. 431), the urban planner stresses Texaco’s restive, dynamic memory that unites different times and spaces, spreading beyond boundaries: a memory as “social practice” (NORA, 1989, p. 14) that levels “monumental” hierarchies through its power of radiation. This horizontal memory does not hide its bloody underside; on the contrary, it spreads from below upward, linking opposed ethnic “lieux de mémoire” in contradictory complementarity. The present bleeding of Texaco’s memory into that of *l’En-ville* has its rhizomic roots in the bleeding of the enslaved, marooning African’s memory into that of the European enslaver and his descendant, the *béké*: a multispatial, multitemporal, multi-ethnic and multilayered memory as creolized and creolizing site in which the subjective capacity for historical experience is recovered. It is regained within a “zone of nonbeing” where memory was consciously suppressed, as Marie-Sophie highlights in her remembrance of Ninon’s mother, who tellingly has no name other than “l’Africaine”:

[l]a mort de l’Africaine ouvrit un nouveau temps. [...] Ninon resta devant la tombe. Seul, désormais, ce retourné de terre décoré de calebasses attestait que sa mère lui provenait d’Afrique. Vaste pays dont on ne savait hak. L’Africaine elle-même n’avait évoqué que la cale du bateau, comme si elle était née là-dedans, comme si sa mémoire, juste là, avait fini de battre. Ninon ne savait pas encore que tout en cultivant le souvenir de sa mère, elle oublierait l’Afrique: resteraient la femme, sa chair, sa tendresse [...] mais rien de l’Autre Pays. Pas même le mot d’un nom (CHAMOISEAU, 1992, p. 154-155).

Memory, then, is not only lived but also invented/imagined. Elizabeth R. Bethel (1997, p. 5, 92) argues that the historical events of daily life, struggle, and survival became “lieux de mémoire” of collective representation which formed the “em-

pirical and symbolic sites" from which "African American cultural memory developed." She suggests that these moments were lifted from their particular historical context and recrafted from "event to moral and spiritual vehicle for the construction of a lost past"; transformed into a collective representation only loosely connected to the original event, these "lieux de mémoire" became catalysts for collective mobilization and political action by inspiring a sense of collective past. An important point that Bethel's argument emphasizes is the discontinuity between the lived and the remembered past. At the heart of "lieux de mémoire" is not historical truth but rather versions of the past generated and sustained by "invented" memory. As the last generation of Africans died, lived memory became "invented" memory transferred from the individual experience of African ancestors to the collective imagination.

In *Texaco*, lived and invented memory as social practice – the selective process of encoding and decoding images and thoughts uniting the sacred and the profane in memory traces of a "speakerly" text – is an act of resistance to loss, dispossession, and displacement.<sup>5</sup> It is an act of resistance, I contend, in that it maps the "zone of nonbeing" as both destructive and creative. In *Texaco*, the multivoiced memory of all those who remember is determined by what Brand problematizes as "cognitive schema of captivity." Captured and held in captivity against their will before abolition and marginalized into various forms of serfdom after abolition, blacks in the New World diaspora have responded with different practices and ways of mobility for the sake of survival and freedom. Chamoiseau traces the effects of this multidimensional errantry as inter- and intraethnic fissures and fusions: the antagonistic relation between Afro-Martinicans and békés and among Afro-Martinicans based on color and status (field slave, house slave; freedman, free black, maroon) as well as the solidarity among those blacks who live in the hills and those who found *Texaco*. From Esternome's routes of errantry between the *mornes* and the *villes* to those of his daughter Marie-Sophie between *Texaco* and *l'En-ville*, Chamoiseau maps 150 years of violent nonbeing imposed on Afro-Martinicans: "le sentiment de l'injustice, de ne pas exister, d'être une chienne méprisée, la haine de cet En-ville ou je me tournaillais seule, livrée aux sept malheurs sans choisir le chemin" (CHAMOISEAU, 1992, p. 325).<sup>6</sup> Yet Marie-Sophie, together with all the other squatters, succeeds in resisting the plans of the békés and the mulattoes at city hall who want to destroy *Texaco*. Here it is important to note that their perseverance in the face of overwhelming odds goes back to the "noutéka" spirit of the *mornes* (CHAMOISEAU, 1992, p. 161-173): the spirit of collective solidarity based on subsistence farming in the hills,

<sup>5</sup> For the definition of a speakerly text, see Gates (1988, p. 239-258).

<sup>6</sup> Chamoiseau, like Brand, seems to be in dialogue with the Caribbean novelist, critic and philosopher Wilson Harris, who also opts for recovery of the split Afro-Caribbean psyche through creativity. The reconstruction process of the alienated psyche should be based on the creative affirmation of the colonial trauma and existential crisis (MAES-JELINEK, 1981, p. 139). Couched in the process of multivoiced remembrance the creative affirmation of the colonial trauma and its postcolonial aftermath in *Texaco* recuperates what according to Chamoiseau (1997, p. 144) oral memory should do: "retenir l'énergie d'une masse indistincte en lutte de survie."

which has served as “homing desire”; the desire to supplement the routes of captivity with the roots of freedom-as-home. If, according to Brand (2002, p. 49, 20) the cognitive schema of captivity situates Africans in the diaspora “always in the middle of the journey,” “in this inexplicable space” of the “sea in between,” then Esternome’s and Marie-Sophie’s journeys demonstrate that this space of captivity – the errantry of a nomadic life – contains places of discovery, consciousness-raising, and freedom, that is, places offering possibilities of choice. Thus, by imbuing the Afro-Martinican’s search for identity with a clear perception of its possibilities of concretization and projection toward the future – which implies the perception of freedom and the responsibility this cognizance implies, or, to use the narrator’s statement in Morrison’s *Beloved* (1989, p. 116): “Freeing yourself was one thing; claiming ownership of that freed self was another” – Chamoiseau goes beyond Brand’s hypothesis of black identitarian/existential betweenness, which focuses on the loss of roots giving rise to a seemingly never-ending routedness in unstable frames of reference and forms of individuality. In other words, the interior consciousness of the African diaspora, which according to Brand is the “door of no return” characterized by an apocalyptic, schizophrenic history which has blocked human possibility and thus reduced African diaspora experience to an enraged expression of suffering, becomes in Chamoiseau simultaneously a door of new horizons constituted by different forms of *marronage*, such as the “transwriting” (WALTER, 2003, p. 31-32) of *oralliture*. What keeps this door open and sparks creativity, then, is the tension of its *limen* separating and uniting loss and hope.

In Émile Ollivier’s *Passages* (1991) migration from Haiti to Montreal and Miami is an act of survival: a move away from starvation and political persecution. Yet the loss experienced as a result of this move translates into the characters’ schizo-traverses between places and spaces.<sup>7</sup> The novel’s double-stranded plot juxtaposes the journey of Amédée and Brigitte Hosange and their companions, who embark on a self-made boat to the promised shores of Florida, and Normand’s search for cultural roots between Haiti, Montreal, and Miami. As if to draw the reader into the unsettling experience of contemporary migration, the narrative renders their deterritorialization as nonsynchronous and nonlinear experience through a fragmented oscillation between the two narrative strands and a decentered narration based on different narrators. These devices connote the narrative’s underlying questions: why do Haitians leave their island and is homecoming possible if migrants never truly leave their home place? Thus, migration, seen both as a spatial and mental movement between “l’ennracinement

<sup>7</sup> On the difference between space and place, see Tuan (1987).

et l'errance" (BORDELEAU, 2001, p. 9), holds the development of specific themes: displacement, exile, uprooting, uprootedness, the dream of return, nostalgia and memory.

In an interview, Émile Ollivier said that "créer, c'est produire du sens; c'est rendre visibles des strates de sens et de signification qui traversent le projet humain en général; [...] à la fois rendre compte des fantasmes qui traversent les personnages, de leur enracinement social, et... viser l'au-delà du social concret" (GAUTHIER, 1997, p. 71). In this sense, both narrative strands, the boat people's voyage from Haiti to the United States and Normand's schizo-journey from Montreal to Miami, name an ongoing "coloniality of power" (QUIJANO, 1997) at work in our contemporary phase of global relations and denounce its devastating effects. For Ollivier coloniality of power implies and constitutes itself since the fifteenth century through the interplay of culture and imperialism by way of which Haiti and its inhabitants become rearticulated, reimagined and remapped in hierarchical power, class and ethnoracial relations. The inhabitants of Port-à-l'Écu, a Haitian village in the poverty-ridden shadows of global progress, never had a say as to the destiny of their home place. After having gone through the violent onslaught of global expansion at the hands of the Standard Fruit Company (the loss of income and land; the destruction of their crops and houses) and being confronted with the government's plan to use their land as dump for toxic waste, some of the small subsistence farmers opt for emigration. Brigitte's questions – "Qu'avons-nous fait pour payer un tel tribut d'incendies, de vols, de viols, de massacres? Et quand aurons-nous fini de payer?" (OLLIVIER, 1994, p. 28-29) – dramatically express the neocolonial subaltern side of modernity: a global world system of uneven disjunctive flows, creating flows of migrant workers as a result of both an external form of colonialism that allocates countries such as Haiti as strategic places for global practices and an internal form of colonialism whereby global designs are appropriated by local power struggles. Ollivier makes cogently clear that the present stage of globalization and its forms of subalternization are deeply rooted in Western expansion since the fifteenth century: "Christophe Colomb était venu de la mer; tous les malheurs de ce peuple lui sont venus de la mer: les négriers, les flibustiers, l'armada du général Leclerc, l'occupation américaine, les cyclones, la petite vérole, la syphilis, le sida" (220). Whether "coupeurs de cannes et de bananes" (OLLIVIER, 1994, p. 117) in Haiti or hotel and restaurant servants, artists and prostitutes, offering "l'exotisme des îles en plein coeur de Montréal" (OLLIVIER, 1994, p. 118), these subalterns, while catering to Canadian tastes, are "claque-murés"

(OLLIVIER, 1994, p. 52) in their voicelessness, unable to speak and thus rendered invisible since nobody listens to them.

Normand's odyssey is interwoven with the boat people's voyage in that he witnesses the arrival of the shipwrecked in Miami and interviews Brigitte, one of the survivors. A Haitian exile in Montreal, where he has fought a losing battle against his declining health, Normand is on vacation in Miami when he suddenly dies. On the surface, the motive for this journey is to exchange "l'enfermement hivernal" in Quebec, "empesé dans un suaire de neige" (OLLIVIER, 1994, p. 78-79), for a whiff of the Caribbean sun and wind in Miami. The real reason, however, resides in Normand's past. As is disclosed in the conversation between Amparo and Leyda, who retrospectively unfold fragments of Normand's life, Normand led "[u]ne vie en suspens... de recluse" in Montreal (OLLIVIER, 1994, p. 68-69). A lonesome errant, Normand drifted through his years of exile on "voiliers de hasard" and "aléatoires chemins, sans but, sans trajet préalablement déterminés" (OLLIVIER, 1994, p. 87) – a traverse with no distinct departures and returns. He oscillated "entre deux impossibilités: la chimérique résurgence du passé, puisqu'on ne peut pas repasser par sa vie, et l'oubli de ses racines qui souvent conduit à la folie" (OLLIVIER, 1994, p. 112). Haunted by the traumatic memory of having witnessed the death of his father by the *macoutes*, Normand was unable to reclaim the suppressed past, to re-member, to put together the dismembered fragments of his past in order to make sense of his psychic dislocation in the present and gain control over his life and future. His failure to decode and recode the traumatic images and thoughts in memory traces through collective recall deprived him of the knowledge through which positionality is delineated, articulated and transformed. In this regard, it is important to note that Normand hardly ever speaks throughout the narrative. Normand's silence, then, is a metonym for his incapacity to recognize and give voice to the patterns of his suffering.<sup>8</sup> Whereas for Amparo and Leyda to go home again becomes the spatial equivalent of intersubjective recall, their shared memories of the man they loved, for Normand there was neither a geographical nor a mental homecoming. Wandering through a space of loss, Normand, a symbol of immobility, while moving "ne fait que marquer le pas" (OLLIVIER, 1994, p. 183).

In Chamoiseau and Ollivier, then, the inhabited link between space, time, and discourse writes the errant subaltern/migrant into the larger history of the New World African diaspora through memory. Individual memory, in order to become a consciousness-raising force, has to be linked to what Halbwachs (1968) called "collective memory," a socially shared

<sup>8</sup> Here I am drawing on Herman (1993), who shows in a very powerful and subtle way that this recognition and articulation is a necessary stage in moving past that suffering.

and disseminated memory. Both writers use memory as a transformative force in the construction, contestation and revision of individual and collective identities and history. Intersubjective remembering makes sense in that it entails interpretation, problematization, and rectification. As such, it generates (re)constructive semiotic energy and becomes a shaping factor in acts of identitarian and political legitimization. This “speakerly” memory is a healing force of transformation in that it constantly creates new rhizomic connectivity between diverse elements, challenging through its meandering essence the arbitrary relation between culture, identity, memory, and territory.

Conceição Evaristo’s Bildungsroman *Ponciá Vicêncio* (2003) delineates an Afro-Brazilian woman’s identity crisis resulting from emotional shocks (the death of her grandfather, father and seven children, the separation from her mother and brother) and social factors (poverty, social injustices). Filtered mainly through Ponciá’s remembrance, weaving a tapestry of multiple “idas, partidas,” “mutilações” and “ausências” (EVARISTO, 2003, p. 76, 131), this crisis links the past and present as a site of memory. What she decodes and recodes in this mnemonic process is the reason for her family’s uprootedness. Their errantry between the countryside and the city is embedded in the multiple axes of ongoing social inequality in Brazil – race and color, social class, gender, region, latifundio system – summarized by Ponciá as follows:

Nascer, crescer, viver para quê? [...] A vida escrava continuava até os dias de hoje. Sim, ela era escrava também. Escrava de uma condição de vida que se repetia. Escrava do desespero, da falta de esperança, da impossibilidade de travar novas batalhas, de organizar novos quilombos, de inventar outra e nova vida (EVARISTO, 2003, p. 83-84).

To continue to work for the white land owners as sharecroppers after abolition in 1888 was one thing. To be robbed of the land by the same landowners who had given them the land was another. This objectification of being had driven her grandfather mad, provoking him to murder his wife. Yet the family’s legacy of shame goes back to earlier times. Writing her name, Ponciá feels the pain of an existential vacuum: “Era como se estivesse lançando sobre si mesma uma lâmina afiada a torturar-lhe o corpo.” Her family name was given to her great-grandparents by their owner before abolition. Thus, the name carries the memory of chattel slavery, “deixando a marca daqueles que se fizeram donos das terras e dos homens” (EVARISTO, 2003, p. 27). It turns her into a cipher within a historical process that continues to write endless new chapters. Afro-Brazilians, as the novel reveals, occupy the bottom rung on the social scale of a racialized system in which they are “donos da miséria, da fome, do sofrimento, da revolta suicida” (EVARISTO, 2003, p. 82).

Evaristo points to love and tenderness, the collective give-and-take, rememory and artistic creativity as means of conscientization and healing of identitarian alienation and fragmentation. Ponciá's return to her birthplace and her resumption of working with clay, which she gets at the banks of a river and then shapes into figures and sculptures, is deeply embedded in African spirituality: it reestablishes her connection with Oxun, the female *orixá* of freshwater, the luxury of cool, life-giving river water, love and fecundity, and with her dead grandfather. This double connection with Oxun and her grandfather, which was established when she was an embryo, consolidated through her childhood and adolescence yet interrupted from the moment she left town to live with her husband, creates a circular plot. Her suffering as a married woman can be seen as an intermediate stage in the process of ritual initiation, a margin or *limen* between the earlier stage of separation and the later one of reaggregation. Elaborating on Arnold van Gennep's concept in *Les rites de passage*, Victor Turner (1974, p. 274, 47, 52, 14) has argued that liminality is not only a phase between states, but a state in itself, "a movement between fixed points," which accounts for its "ambiguous, unsettled, and unsettling" nature. It "refer[s] to any condition outside or on the peripheries of everyday life" and as "a sphere or domain of action or thought rather than a social modality" it "may imply solitude... the voluntary or involuntary withdrawal of an individual from a social-structural matrix" as well as "alienation from... social existence." Liminality, then, is not only a temporal but also a spatial interface, a movement in between places and subject positions. As such, the liminal process enables the border subject to undo and revise his/her position and to "formulat[e] a potentially unlimited series of alternative social arrangements." Ponciá's suffering during this liminal experience is life giving in that it creates a mnemonic circle of remembrance functioning as a ritual healing process. In that Evaristo keeps suffering alive in the individual and collective memory of Afro-Brazilian people, as the unnamed narrator suggests, maybe these will search for "um outro destino [...] pela força do desejo" (EVARISTO, 2003, p. 130).

The narrative, then, confronts us with a multidimensional circularity: the circle of Ponciá's cathartic remembrance; the circle of her artistic work; the circle between the individual and the collective, the human world and the spirit world, the living and the dead. These circles within circles bespeak a consciousness of cosmic interlock – an interdependence of all things and spheres. Times, spaces and identities are fluid, complementary, in process. Western borders of cultural patterns (identity/alterity; exterior/interior) open up into transcultural border-

<sup>9</sup> I am drawing on the difference between "cultural patterns" and "cultural borderlands" established by Rosaldo, (1993, p. 26-30).

<sup>10</sup> For an analysis of the circle in African thought, see Stuckey (1987). Note the importance of the circle in the structure, style and theme of Tony Morrison's *Beloved* and Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow*. Sethe's spinning around Paul D while circling the story of her infanticide, which parallels the narrator's circling narrative and is connected to "the circle of iron" of the living and dead beloved ones, those who died and those who survived the Middle Passage and its aftermath, as well as Avey Johnson's ritual reverse middle passage from the spiritually arid wasteland of North American individualism and materialistic consumerism back into the circular consciousness of Afro-Caribbean spirituality, which culminates in Avey's being pulled into the circle of dancers moving in counterclockwise fashion, calling to mind the slaves' Ring Shout, "a counterclockwise shuffling dance which frequently lasted long into the night. The shout often became a medium through which the ecstatic dancers were transformed into actual participants in historic actions" (LEVINE, 1977, p. 38).

<sup>11</sup> In reference to Edwidge Danticat's *The Farming of Bones* and *The Dew Breaker*, Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, and Danny Laferrrière's *Le Cri des Oiseaux Fous*.

<sup>12</sup> According to Stepto (1991, p. 67), "a landscape becomes symbolic in literature when it is a region in time and space offering spatial expressions of social structures and ritual grounds on the one hand, and *communitas* and *genius loci* on the other.

lands where Western rationalism and African spirituality meet.<sup>9</sup> This means that we are dealing with process, passage, traverse, and transition in an "interstitial cultural space" (JAN-MOHAMED, 1992, p. 97), a zone of cultural negotiations where remembrance effects alternative visions, new structures of authority, and culturally different discursive positions. A space, that is, where transmnemonic and transcultural translations establish cultural difference.

The circularity in the thematic and structural makeup of Evaristo's novel expresses a spiritual knowledge-as-consciousness that substantially characterizes various aspects of cultural expression throughout the black diaspora. Whether expressed through poems, music, dance, oral performance, folktales, folksongs, or in narrative forms, the cultural significance of the circle in precolonial Africa is endowed with new meaning in the Americas. In functioning as a symbol of balance, while being the sign and substance of unity between seemingly disparate philosophical principles, the circle functions as a connection to ancestral knowledge in both conscious and unconscious ways.<sup>10</sup> As such, the collective nature of its power demonstrates that spiritual continuity encompasses physical life and death as part of a natural regenerative order, and that scientific, rational, intuitive, and spiritual forms of knowledge are united.

I want to argue that this mythopoetic healing of the fragmented psyche based on the creative affirmation of the colonial trauma and its postcolonial aftermath is a fundamental ethical objective of the usage of memory in pan-American African diaspora fiction. In much of this fiction, memory is mined as a site of identity (re)construction, the activity of the self in search of its lost intimacy. To give pain and guilt caused by violence personal faces and historical roots, to recollect and problematize the experience of slavery, prison camps and torture (why and how these occurred) opens the possibility that these events will never happen again. It is a *farming of bones* and *beloved* souls and spirits that invites violence to participate in the act of reflection and conscientization and the humanization (if not redemption) of both the *oiseaux fous* and the *dew breakers*.<sup>11</sup> In this process, it demonstrates the capacity of human imagination to construct freedom from within unfreedom in a historical process.

African diaspora memory throughout the Americas, then, is also a site of ethical struggle over semantic and social authority, that is, over the access to signification. In search of "temporal duration" (GLISSANT, 1992, p. 144), historical revision and place as "symbolic geography,"<sup>12</sup> African writers of the New World diaspora mine memory as multiple epistemic sites between Africa and the Americas, the sea and the land, in order

to “raise a concealed world to the level of consciousness” (GLISSANT, 1992, p. 107): a transwriting intent on creating homes out of what Gilroy (1994, p. 133) calls “the tension between roots and routes.” Memory, then, is an important tool in the recreation of a past-present identity-as-place, what Glissant (1992, p. 234) calls “landscape” so that “desire for the other country ceases to be a form of alienation.”

### Abstract

*Based on the hypothesis that the (re)creation of epistemic home places in African diaspora fiction is achieved through an appropriation of historical, mental, bodily, and discursive space – the appropriation of signs, by means of which a closed, fixed and distorted history, identity, and imagination is opened up and set in motion once more – this essay traces discursive strategies of resistance to probe different meanings the concept of home has taken on in selected novels by New World African writers from Canada, the United States, the Caribbean, and Brazil. In the process, it focuses on the (re)creation of home out of errantry, the rewriting of history through memory, by problematizing memory as a site of identity (re)construction, ethical struggle over the access to signification, and epistemic (re)vision.*

Keywords: *New World African diaspora fiction; memory; history; identity.*

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