TRANSFORMATIONAL DISCOURSES, AFRO-DIASPORIC CULTURE, AND THE LITERARY IMAGINATION[1]

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Canta para sentar o axé, Io! Io!
Canta para sentar o axé, Io! Io!
Canta homem, e canta mulher
Canta para sentar o axé, Io![2]

I. The Project

Three Afro-diasporic forms will serve as paradigmatic moments through which this essay will develop. These express for me the translocational, transformational aspects of Afro-diasporic culture that speak directly to the generating questions of this Macalester International Roundtable, particularly the way in which the creative imagination and subjectivity articulate in the face of a variety of social processes thrown forward by, in my view, some of the manifestations of late capitalism.

This essay seeks to pursue some of the meanings identified above in three portions. The first part discusses the notion of Afro-diasporic culture, the second conceptualizes transformational discourses, and the third examines some of the ways in which literature and the creative imagination have expressed some of the ideas. Its generating moments are clearly the direction of my work and my own "migratory subjectivity," but, in this instance, the impetus has come from Macalester College, which invited me to respond to the theme of the International Roundtable.

The Roundtable's directed questions of "global culture," "hybridity as a response to multiculturalism," and the larger question of the place of the creative imagination and literature within the context of this globalization allow me to pursue my own reading of the ways in which Afro-diasporic culture has

already lived the transnational because of forced migration and the politics of liberation. Thus, for me, there is no uniform "global culture" except under capitalist dominance. Rather, I see a variety of cultures that have lived and are living their responses to large-scale and microhistorical processes — processes over which they sometimes had little control — and have activated and are activating a variety of strategies to deal with the material and psychic terms of their historical and contemporary conditions. I also see Afro-diasporic culture as the "other" of globalization, i.e., an already existing transnational culture that moves sometimes in different directions, with different intent than the contemporary notions of globalization.

II. Afro-Diasporic Cultures

Candomblé—the Afro-Brazilian sociocultural, religious, interpretative belief system—presents for me an important convergence of the transformational and Afro-diasporic culture as it is expressed through questions of memory and reelaboration. While in this belief system the individual is always endowed with the energy of a particular *orishá*,[3] through preparation and participation, the transformational is intensely manifested in some individuals,[4] primarily in the moving of the body and its corporeality to another level. It is a movement from the daily circle of life, work, and struggle to one of emotional and spiritual possibilities. In my reading, it is also a movement to a level of history, diaspora memory, return, and reconstruction. Diaspora memory, in this context, recalls Africa as originary source; it is also, simultaneously, located in the memory of the crossing as well as in the deliberate reinterpretation of "remembered" cultural forms in a new space and in new conditions. Thus, in *candomblé*, as African *orishá* are recalled to practical existence, they are also given space to move outward, from the past, into a realm of present and future existence.

The significance of manifestation and possession is not only in the reappearance of an African entity with particular, identifiable characteristics that cross lines of gender, place, corporeality, spatiality, and temporality, but also in that it allows the individual person to occupy a different location in relation to the community. The individual physically becomes something else,

somebody else, momentarily escapes the mundane, the "real," the normal, and, with the sanction of the community, exists in different space and time and history. The community in its turn also participates in this process as it witnesses. In fact, it is not uncommon for members of the witnessing community to also move to that level of possibility. Thus, I am using "witnessing" here in the sense in which it is used in African-American religion. While there is a particular level of spectatorship and performance in place as well, there is a recognizable witnessing, because of the antiphonal, interactive nature of the process, to an alternative way of being, away from practical definitions of limiting existence.

The public version[5] of a *candomblé* ritual begins with drumming and the initiated participants entering and making a circular parade around the center of the space they are using for that ritual. Progressively, through drumming and the sound of the *agogô*, canticles, and a variety of other ritual experiences, some participants become other-endowed. Once the *orishá* manifests itself and that preliminary level is completed, the participants leave the public space and return endowed with — literally, dressed in—the clothing and ritual accoutrements as well as the behavioral attributes of the entity manifested. The body becomes visibly present but not as its original self. One therefore witnesses *shango* or *yansan* or *nana* at the same time that one witnesses the force of transformation in the individual. It is important to note that various versions of the same entity often occupy the same space.

A variety of Afro-Brazilian scholars[6] identified *candomblé* as a source of resistance to the hegemony of European culture in Brazil. Julio Braga, in "Camdomblé: Força e Resistência," states that *candomblé* is a system of preservation, of balance and knowledge that always attains a level of harmony of man with nature through his interaction with the sacred world without losing the sense of confronting the adversities of life in society as it searches for freedom and social harmony.[7] It is interesting that although *candomblé* is specific to Brazil, a variety of other versions of the same thing exist throughout the African diaspora, ranging from *lucumi* in Cuba and *shango* in Trinidad to *santería* in Puerto Rico and New York City, all operating at the level of both "spirit work" and community work.

Quilombismo — or *marronnage* — is the second transformative Afro-diasporic pattern I am identifying. This year, 1995, Brazil celebrates the three hundredth anniversary of Zumbi of Palmares. Until 1695, Palmares had been the longest-lived maroon settlement, or *quilombo*,[8] that existed as an alternative space, and as a space of resistance to slavery. Palmares was also a site of transformation, an elsewhere, a location that demonstrated by its very existence that there was a practical possibility of "another world" outside of the given definitions of reality at that time. Yet, according to Abdias do Nascimento in "O Quilombismo: Uma Alternativa Politica Afro-Brasileira," Palmares was just one of innumerable isolated black communities that would be identified as *quilombos* today.

> Desligados do fluxo da vida do pais, muitas delas mantem estilos e hábitos de existência africana, ou quase. Em alguns casos, ainda se utilizando do idioma original trazido da Africa, estropiado, porém assim mesmo uma linguagem africana mantida e conservada na espécie de quilombismo em que vivem.[9]

> Disconnected from the flux of life of the country, many of them continued styles and habits of African patterns of life. In some cases, still utilizing the original idiom brought from Africa, disfigured, but even so an African language maintained and conserved in the form of *quilombismo* in which they lived. (my translation)[10]

Throughout the Americas there were similar "other worlds," such as that created by Maroon Nanny of Jamaica, the extent of which is still being documented.

The use of African and/or Native American religions, medicines, and therapies were as central to the maroon communities as were the very forces of resistance and transformation that ran through them. Do Nascimento identified sixteen principles that are generated from the historical idea of *quilombismo* that can be used to create a different pattern of life. These offer an alternative paradigm — one that stresses democracy and egalitarianism in the areas of gender, politics, economics, race, etc.

Liberatory movements — the third pattern I want to identify here — is represented in the series of liberatory movements undertaken by such people as Harriet Tubman and Sojourner

Truth. These present a deliberate sense of journeying to another world, at times occupying the wild space, outside of the most incredible level of oppression, which was slavery in the Americas. The concept of "migratory subjectivity," which I identified in *Black Women, Writing, and Identity: Migrations of the Subject*,[11] is useful here and relevant to contemporary discussions of globalization. In my case, I offer as a paradigm the deliberate and directed migration for liberation to other worlds as opposed to aimless wandering or containment within dominant discourses. Thus is created another set of movements outside of the terms of the politico-economic systems in place.

For me, then, these worlds and movements exist at the heart of what I see as an alternative global engagement—the transformational, the imaginative in Afro-diasporic culture: first, the level of the personal, psychic transformation that also moves within a community and has implications for resistance; second, the creation of an alternative physical, political space, outside of the terms of the dominant society; third, the deliberate journeying outside of the boundaries of restriction and oppression. These patterns, in my opinion, are related to the spirit of creative and imaginative space, which can sometimes become the impetus of the literary imagination.

I am not saying that all black literature is transformational, although at some level creativity, by nature, pursues this movement from imagination to actuality. But clearly there is a major trajectory of Afro-diaspora literature and culture that seeks change through memory, vision of alternative worlds, transformed existences, even in the critique of limitations of present or past existences. And this is this paper's concern: the ways through which the creative imagination articulates itself in Afro-diasporic culture, thus presenting an "other" version of globalization.

Thus, this essay rejects concepts of hybridity and syncretism, in favor of repetition and memory. To illustrate my position, I offer first the poem "Ave Maria,"[12] which for me reaches for that space, those other possibilities, that I registered above. It is clearly not a poem of syncretism, or hybridity, in the sense that the Virgin is hybridized with another Afro-diasporic cultural form. Rather, it references the fact that "Ave Maria" becomes the veil, almost, for what takes place behind, which is actually a

series of movements of possession, rebellion, and transformation within the terms of Afro-diasporic culture.

Spirits dance Bathed within sanctums Chambers
SoulsOur Souls Flying Tangling Spiraling Outward
Powerful possession of Rebellion

Our External Shells Sweating Panting to Drums that
Scream Singing Songs Bitter Sweet Sweat Sweetness.
Sensual Cantations of Struggle Journeys Stories Mine
Yours Her Story of Standing Unified Free

Free from Pain Struggle Break from grappling
Hooks Hands white from above which Scratch with rusty
Nails Tear Her bloody flesh which has been Shed for Us

Beautiful Petals formed richly red Profusion lick away the
shackles from Her Body Freeing Her Spirit once again.
The red Essence leaks from Our Hands Our tool of caress
that soothe longing Dead Roses baptized for Rebellious
Realm

Here pure Black swells transcending Here Hear Drum;
Never an ephemeral Heart Beat Singing Beating Free Freedom
Within our Heart Dancing with cause for the religion of the
Movement Rounding the tree of burning Bush We Womyn of
Culture shake eat drink Swallow its Fruit Feeding our Soul

Richly Raped Roots grown Strong Drum with no skin I have
shed Upon You The Skin falls I gain my boundaries We
Rest in pain Strength

Tic Toc Tic Lock Confined to Pure Clarity
of Vibrant Shallow Seclusion Crave Fight Silence
Black Bare feet will Never tire for Screaming
Drums continue to play.

III. Conceptualization of Transformation Discourses

In my view, therefore, the term "African diaspora" prefigures/refigures the contemporary notions of the transnational. African diaspora, in my understanding, refers to the articulation of a relational culture of African peoples, in an interactive politico-cultural pattern both within and outside of the terms of the nation-states in which they live. It is clearly not the transna-

tionality of the "global village" that seeks a boundaryless world in order to create more space for capitalist markets and international communication dominated by the West. Rather, since these nation-states were unnaturally constructed[13] under a term of dominance and were the final product of slavery and colonialism, those suppressed communities created other worlds sometimes even without reference to the existence of other similarly created spaces.

The conceptualization of "African diaspora" to redress the dispersal of Africans has been advanced by a number of black scholars. Further, the notion exists both outside and inside the terms of globalization. In other words, the Afro-diaspora already presupposes a global, or at least international or transnational, relationship between various communities of dispersed Africans without suggesting that everyone shares identical frameworks and histories for reformulating their existences. The work of the Howard Group, led by Joseph Harris,[14] has been significant in laying out the terms and contradictions in the elucidation of African diaspora and its global contexts. The more recent work of Robin Kelley and Sidney Lemelle[15] takes these discussions further as it presents a variety of debates on diaspora, Pan-Africanism, and nationalism. But it is in the work of activists like Marcus Garvey, who put forth a "Back to Africa" vision, and in the terms of his international organization Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) that one can see clearly the political formulations of African diaspora. Similar sentiments were also articulated at the level of state politics by Pan-Africanists such as Kwame Nkrumah, W. E. B. Du Bois, Sylvester Williams, George Padmore, and others, as well as by various Pan-African congresses. Still, while Pan-Africanism sought to emphasize an African center, Afro-diasporic culture, from my vantage point, resisted even that type of containment and implied African centering. Africa became an invented space of creativity, ancestry, and knowledge, as well as a deliberate place of practical existence to which one could return but which one could also re-create. In the same way, continental African communities began to participate in a series of interactions at the level of popular culture, politics, literature, and religious and social movements.[16]

In my reading, then, it is not so much the physicality of a return but the notion that this space of oppression under Euro-American dominance is not the desired location aesthetically, religiously, politically, economically, or educationally. And it is for this reason that I do not find the notion of hybridity as useful as I do the notion of repetition and reelaboration.

The more recent scholarship of Paul Gilroy, Stuart Hall, Amon Saba Saakana, and Kobena Mercer in London has highlighted the nature of diaspora dialectics in music and popular culture.[17] In fact, Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic* returns deliberately to the question of black music that he raised in his former work, *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack*. This time he underscores some of the problematics of origin in the music itself, not so much in the sense of an unchanging diaspora but in the sense of a series of discontinuous movements in a variety of directions:

> This company spreads out in discontinuous, transverse lines of descent that stretch outwards across the Atlantic from Phyllis Wheatley onwards. Its best feature is an anti-hierarchical tradition of thought that probably culminates in C. L. R. James' idea that ordinary people do not need an intellectual vanguard to help them to speak or to tell them what to say. Repeatedly within this expressive culture it is musicians who are presented as living symbols of the value of self activity.[18]

The question of diaspora from which I operate here critiques nationalism, though not national liberation, even after Neil Lazarus's impassioned observation that there still exists through a version of nationalism the "burden of speaking for all humanity."[19] Contrary to Lazarus, in my view, one does not have to disavow decolonization, Fanon, and/or the various forces of national liberation that provided the ideological apparatuses of self-articulation for black peoples. Rather, one can see these movements of national liberation as one link in a chain of interrelated struggles for African peoples transnationally to articulate themselves in the face of a variety of oppressive systems.

Thus, in the oral endowment of the African diaspora, there also exists a substantial volume of literature on the movement away from the physicality of slave existence to a return to another world. Best articulated in "The People Could Fly" sto-

ries, a series of magical incantations would direct the body to take off on wings and leave the slavemasters' whips behind. Paule Marshall in *Praisesong for the Widow*[20] wrote into her text the oral narrative of Ibo Landing in which Africans walked off the ships and walked back over the waters to Africa. Further, Marshall would use this genre as the structuring frame on which her own narrative would develop.

Diaspora for me, then, exists in that same sense of repetition that Benítez Rojo[21] identifies and that remanifests itself in forms identifiable because of the modes of resistance of African peoples, their search for other systems, other modes of being. Diaspora memory is the ancestral memory as well as the received history of the Middle Passage, a basic vocabulary often articulated in song, mood, style, dance, and the corporeal generally, sometimes much more so than in literature. It is also reelaboration, rearticulation, redefinition. The elements of ancestry (Africa); historical memory (the Middle Passage, slavery, colonization); and contemporary realities (racial oppression, re-creation) are essential elements in movements of re-creation in Afro-diaspora culture. Movement away from limitations to other articulations of identity are also critical aspects.

I want to move my conceptualization of the diaspora beyond the notion that Michael Hanchard offers that "if the notion of an African diaspora is anything it is a human necklace strung together by a thread known as the slave trade, a thread which made its way across a path of America with little regard for national boundaries."[22] For me, although connection through the history of slavery represents an important element, the notion of re-creation or reelaboration carries the stress I want to give here. I also share Paul Gilroy's emphasis on black music. It capacitates us, he writes,

> in developing our struggles by communicating information, organizing consciousness and testing out, deploying or amplifying the forms of subjectivity which are required by political agency — individual and collective, defensive and transformational—[and which] demands attention to both the formal attributes and its distinctive *moral* basis.[23]

Afro-diasporic memory becomes real for me, for example, when I observe that within the community of Afro-Brazilians, Bob Marley is an icon of Afro-diaspora culture even to people who do not understand all the words of the language in which he sings. The message and meaning is nevertheless communicated. More currently, the proliferation of rap, carnival, calypso, and reggae and Rastafarian cultures worldwide is as significant in terms of the internationalizing of popular styles as are the repetitions of Afro-diasporic culture. For this reason, Afro-diasporic culture is not a recall of a romanticized or essentialized Africa but a series of transformations and reinterpretations of African-based cultures on an international level.

Thus, in my understanding, it is not only in black music that one can witness these transformations. One can see them also in black dance and movement, corporeality, and percussive traditions, which are as central to *candomblé* or *santería* as they are to the black festive behavior, carnival traditions, and resistance movements. Take, for example, the movement of the *toi toi* from Egypt to South Africa. These are what I would call movements of reelaboration, the re-creation, the level of the transformative.

For African peoples in the diaspora, a profound dissatisfaction with the conditions under which we were produced as subjects in the wake of European modernism and Enlightenment (and the concomitants of slavery, colonialism, capitalism, and late capitalism) has triggered a series of movements that include discourses of *quilombismo* or *marronnage*; uprisings and rebellions; abolitionist, civil rights, and black power movements; independence, anti-colonialism, decolonization, and labor movements; and a variety of nationalisms, socialisms, and feminisms. These movements have been both oppositional and transformational; they have both produced and been produced by historical conditions under which they/we live.

Still, I do not want to suggest that these questions have been put into place singlehandedly by African diaspora peoples. Contemporary feminist inquiry, for example, has questioned the construction of the female as subject, the ways in which discourses of the "private" can camouflage oppressive practices on women and children, and the necessity to move these to the public sphere. In addition, a variety of other theorists and scholars and members of progressive socialist movements — Marx-

ism, in particular — had as a fundamental impetus the need to create more egalitarian systems, expressing, at the level of ideology and economic conditions at least, a profound concern for the transformational. Perhaps more important is the reconstitution of the bases of knowledge. In this spirit, Foucault writes,

> I prefer the very specific transformations that have proved to be possible in the last twenty years in a certain number of areas that concern our ways of being and thinking, relations to authority, relations between the sexes, the way in which we perceive insanity or illness; I prefer even these partial transformations that have been made in the correlation of historical analysis and the practical attitude, to the programs for a new man that the worst political systems have repeated throughout the twentieth century.[24]

Still, it is the very notion of European Enlightenment that can be subjected to scrutiny, as it produced simultaneously the subordination and oppression of a variety of people and their knowledges. Paul Gilroy pursues a series of discussions of the conjunction of "slavery" and "enlightenment," even as the European philosophers (e.g., Locke, Descartes, Rousseau) and scholars sought to disavow this concurrence in the modernist project:

> There is a scant sense, for example, that the universality and rationality of enlightened Europe and America were used to sustain and relocate rather than eradicate an order of racial difference inherited from the premodern era.... [I]t is hardly surprising that if it is perceived to be relevant at all, the history of slavery is somehow assigned to blacks. It becomes our special property rather than a part of the ethical and intellectual heritage of the West as a whole.[25]

But perhaps Gilroy doesn't go far enough. Revisionist students of philosophy would argue, as Aimé Césaire does in *Discourse on Colonialism*, that domination is central to a great deal of Western humanist philosophy.[26] Philosophical bases for enslavement, oppression, and racism reside within the discourses of many European thinkers.

The space that Marxism, postmodernism, feminism, and decolonization provided for thinking through the gaps in discourse and, more importantly for me, the deconstruction of mas-

ter narratives of all sorts, including postmodernism itself, allows the articulation of the transformational. A radical alteration of the social bases of our existences addresses the disproportionate patterns of power relations in a variety of situations in the world. Such an effort consistently calls for the type of alternative spaces I discussed above.

In an earlier work, I identified "uprising discourses" as those textualities that capture the movement upward and outward from submerged spaces.[27] The question of "uplift," or equality, may, of course, be the furthest end of this discourse, as in some streams of African-American and feminist literary and historical discourses, i.e., rising toward an equality with the oppressor only. Thus the importance of locating "transformational discourses" as a necessary accompaniment to any movement to social change. For me, the transformational is an area suitable for linking activist and intellectual work; thus,

> [t]ransformational discourses then can be assigned to those discourses which both challenge and re-create, which seek to begin anew on different and more humane grounds, which combine both intellectual work with activism and creativity. Transformational discourses then speak as well to curricula transformation as well as transformations in consciousness; the transformation of epistemological and pedagogical bases of those responsible for the futures of countless minds in and outside of academic contexts. Transformational discourses reject on principle the "discriminatory paradigm" (deployed in many contemporary societies) which operate on the basis that discrimination is a given and that each group must therefore negotiate its way out of discrimination and prove itself worthy of consideration. They resist the variety of oppressive practices in existence in our world and seek to transform them, move one from positions of limitation to positions of action.[28]

The imperative to transform the bases of knowledge and unsatisfactory reality runs through every piece of black feminist scholarship I have seen. As early as 1852, at the Women's Rights Convention in Akron, Ohio, Sojourner Truth, a black activist for women's rights and emancipation, asserted that women have the responsibility to transform the world that men had despoiled.[29] Much later, Cheryl Clarke lamented the failure of

nerve to change critical elements of the culture of the black community.[30] Here, the question of homophobia arises. For Clarke, particular versions of black nationalism became the basis for a paradigm of prejudicial sexuality similar to that held by "patriarchal slavemasters." She concluded that "homophobia is a measure of how far removed we are from the psychological transformation we so desperately need to engender."[31] Both Sojourner Truth and Cheryl Clarke were speaking, in different ways and at different historical moments, to the change of mentality that must precede or accompany any genuine social departure from oppressive practices. In a similar vein, Audre Lorde identifies another set of engagements, this time from silence to language and action.[32]

Thinking through these questions, I have come across numerous versions of the desire for the transformational in the works of other scholars. For example, in Larry Neal's "Some Reflections on the Black Aesthetic,"[33] one can tease out a series of articulations that are suggestive of a search for both resistance and self-articulatory paradigms. The larger project of transformation must be then the task of searching for a series of interrelated discourses that critically interrogate issues of imperialism, patriarchy, and other oppressive practices and, in response, seek liberated spaces and worlds.[34]

The practical work of social transformation offered in postapartheid South Africa calls for a particular mention within this framework. Because my concern has been with transformation as a discourse, I am cognizant of the fact that the practice of creating an alternative social system demands a comprehensive approach that takes into account, among other things, the complicated and difficult issues of institution building. Nevertheless, it is safe to say that the issuance of the *Reconstruction and Development Programme*,[35] as well as the interim constitution, seem to offer some of the possibilities for profound social change. Despite the promise, however, I can say that even in South Africa, it is much more difficult to develop a practice that matches the energies of both the theoretics as well as the popular mass.

IV. Literature, the Creative Imagination, and Transformation

Poesia de negro e axé
Poesia de negro e axé
E axé
Axé babá eu digo
Eu digo axé Nagô
Quando entro nesta roda
Incomodo, sim senhor
Olha o tambo(r)
Olha o tambo(r)
A poesia negra
Tem a força de um quilombo!

Black poetry is ashe
Black poetry is ashe
It is ashe
Ashe, baba, I say
I say ashe Nagô[36]
When I enter this circle
It is to disturb you, yes sir
Listen to the drum
Listen to the drum
Black poetry
Has the force of a quilombo!
(translation mine)[37]

The above chant moves the desire to "seat" *axé* to another level. It claims that black poetry is *axé*, that it is life force, creative energy, the power to be, and further that it has the force of a *quilombo*, that "other world" of resistance existing outside of the terms of Western/global cultures. One can find a related assertion in Edward Said's "Figures, Configurations, Transfigurations" in which he says that in the processes of decolonization and reconstruction of national cultures, literature has been crucial to the

> re-imagining and re-figuring of local histories, geographies, communities. As such then, literature not only mobilized active resistance to incursions from outside, but also contributed massively as the shaper, creator, agent of illumination within the realm of the colonized.[38]

This concluding portion of the essay provides a variety of explorations within the Afro-diasporic tradition, showing how the transformational converges with the diasporic creative context, or at least how writers are striving to articulate some of these positions creatively.

Within the literature that accompanied decolonization, Afro-diasporic writers from Ngugi wa Thiong'o to Ousmane Sembene, from Chinua Achebe to George Lamming, actively produced works that identified creatively the bases of colonization. Within this discourse of decolonization, both implicit and explicit articulations of transformations at different levels are present. In other words, the notion of "decolonising the mind"[39] implies an altered consciousness, a movement to a new self-constitution that transcends colonialism's malaise.

Interestingly, we are now beginning to see that the work of women writers, even when participating in those very discourses of decolonization, such as Paule Marshall's *The Chosen Place, the Timeless People*,[40] seems to simultaneously cover another territory. The works of Zora Neale Hurston and, even further back, Harriet Wilson are good examples. In addition to challenging the regime of slavery, literature of this type underscored the existence of gender issues. The upshot of this was the enrichment as well as the complication of both the abolitionist and decolonization struggles.[41] The writers, as in the case of African women writers, "become not just artists but also pathfinders for new relations between men, women, and children.[42]

Among contemporary writers, the work of Ben Okri (Nigeria), Grace Nichols (Caribbean), and Randall Kenan (United States) are notable; they reassert questions that were produced in the morrow of formal independence. In *The Famished Road*,[43] for example, Okri undertakes a series of movements for his child protagonist. Ever present in Okri's novel is the relentless hunger that accompanies deep societal oppression and that, consequently, mandates Okri's protagonist's frequent departure into spirit worlds. The kind of mediation between worlds that the Nigerian writer Wole Soyinka has undertaken in a text like *Death and the King's Horseman*[44] and that runs through Amos Tutuola's *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*[45] is well utilized by Okri.

The critique of the failed promises of the new nation-states, of the community, of masculinity, of particular forms of parenting begin to be articulated in some streams of literature in the epoch of what has been called neocolonialism or, more recently, post-colonialism. And for Okri in *The Famished Road*, it is taken to the point when memory, of other existence and other possibilities, persists in the spirit child, who must often decide whether the world of humans has the capacity to sustain him.

Diaspora memory, as I suggested earlier, is that desire to recall the experience of other more amicable worlds, worlds conducive to the flourishing of humane possibilities. This memory is negotiated through language, as Grace Nichols shows in her collection *I Is a Long-Memoried Woman*.[46] We may here cross-reference both Marlene Philip, who articulates well similar questions in *She Tries Her Tongue: Her Silence Softly Breaks*[47] and Afua Cooper's *Memories Have Tongue*.[48] For Grace Nichols, the long-memoried woman is that Afro-diasporic figure who is able to activate the memory of Africa, difficult passages, enslavement, new births, pain, and joy as she creates new worlds in the landscape of the Americas. This desire to reassemble or (re)member the (dis)memberment of the Middle Passage is beautifully crafted in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*.[49] Here, (re)memory is the central organizing principle through which the novel and its characters develop. The critical work of Edouard Glissant, particularly *Caribbean Discourse* (as, in some ways, does the distinguished work of Wilson Harris of Guyana), also speaks to the ways in which the Caribbean Creole communities were able to reassemble through their mythologies, landscape, and imaginations.[50]

Diaspora memory, then, is that imperative that runs through the mythology, ritual, and percussive, corporeal traditions that, in a creative and reconstructivist turn, recall other locations and other places. Witness the Trinidad and Tobago steel band tradition, for example, in which the rhythm of the drum, forbidden during slavery, is re-created using discarded oil drums and reinstituted in dynamic form, parodying some of the organizational principles of European symphonic tradition on top of what is actually an African base. Diaspora memory is also a movement to hear those unspoken voices, to read those unreadable texts, to find the word, as Brathwaite would say in *The Arrivants*,[51] to fling into the void.

In many ways, the Afro-diasporic literature struggles with that desire to attain the same level of the transformative. The most respected works are the ones that, in my view, strive toward a reawakening of the memory. *Beloved* by Toni Morrison is a work that is successful for me precisely because it engages that struggle for diaspora re-memory, that active sense of the past, with its pain, translated and reelaborated in the present. The title story from Randall Kenan's *Let the Dead Bury Their Dead*[52] struggles, in a different way, against the boundaries of history and literature, the processes of narrative, the complications of a variety of identities produced in the context of the past: Africa, enslavement, *marronnage*, fantastic and contemporary realities. It is for this reason, the weight of this struggle, that a number of writers in the African diaspora have sought out a new format — nonprint media. Most well known among the works in the nonprint media are the films of Julie Dash, Ousmane Sembene, and Frances Anne Solomon.[53]

If we accept the assumption that literature operates within its own discursive system, particularly at the level of narrative or novel forms, then the individual writer functions within a predetermined system that she struggles to make her own, particularly at the level of language.[54] It is not my intention to retrace the discussions of language in African literatures, but I suggest that the processes of transformation and Afro-diasporic memory with which I am working are consistently being re-presented in a variety of contexts. Further, I am asserting that all of this prefigures the contemporary notions of the transnational. The contributions of the discourses surrounding intertextuality and reinscription similarly advance this discussion, particularly in the sense of the intersection of a variety of textualities.[55]

The notion of the openness of the text that intertextuality presupposes, along with the imperative of memory, presents, already, an interesting challenge to the idea of individual authorship. Even as we celebrate individual acts of creativity, we recognize the role that memory and traces of other texts play in creation. Haitian writer Edwidge Danticat in *Breath, Eyes, Memory* and *Krik? Krak!: Stories*[56] is very clear about the role of the storytelling, the role of memory in both her writing and her grandmother's telling, and, further, the role of memory at the level of the reader. Thus, she often autographs her book

"from my memory to yours." And it is within this intertext that the question of the individual creative artist's search for diaspora memory operates for me. The Afro-diasporic author's awareness that the text can be a weaving together of numerous elements, primary among them history and memory and the role of the writer as translator or medium or articulator of these varied histories, and that of the reader in the making of the text, ameliorates some of the demands of stellar individual creativity, even as it celebrates the successes.

Attempting to identify the very preliminary articulations of the black aesthetic, Larry Neal saw memory as significant in his tentative outlining of some categories that needed elaboration.[57] His work, which I believe has been revisited by many without ascription, was an attempt to identify as many signifying elements as one sees occurring, or possibly occurring throughout the Afro-diasporic culture. Without resorting to the essentialist paradigms of the black aesthetic that were created in the Black Arts Movement, I can see how his referencing of "race memory" is yet another version of diaspora memory. Many contemporary scholars have attempted to elaborate some of these elements. For example, Henry Louis Gates Jr., in his *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism*,[58] developed the significations that reside in Esu-Elegbara and provide the pretext for the signifying monkey, the New World trickster, in Afro-diasporic context. A similar line of examination can be developed for understanding *anancy*, of Akan origin, who also made the crossing into the Caribbean. For *esu* resides as well in all the Afro-diasporic systems as the *orishá* of opening, of fate, of crossings. And *anancy* as that development of trickery under slavery in order to "make a way" using primarily the intellect and language.

Mae Henderson in "Speaking in Tongues: Dialogics, Dialectics, and the Black Women's Literary Tradition"[59] and Houston Baker in *Workings of the Spirit: The Poetics of Afro-American Women's Writing*[60] provide an important bridge to my location of the transformative in Afro-Brazilian *candomblé*. For Baker, the "generative source of style in Afro-America is soul; the impetus for salvation is spirit." Spirit is associated then with nonmaterial modes of production or that which allows us to create, the power to be, or *axé*, which continues through an ever-continuing

movement within the community. Henderson relatedly pursues a Bakhtinian reading of the trope of possession at the level of language. Erna Brodber's work on Jamaican *myalism*, or spirit possession in *Myal*, is a creative approach to this same issue.[61]

In my view, then, the demands of literary creativity and diaspora memory are not necessarily conflicting tendencies. A series of writers and their works are showing that, indeed, these tendencies are an important necessity of articulation at the level at which the writer becomes "the site of transmutation" through which myths, legends, and history are reformulated and recirculated. The poetics and politics of audibility and visibility, the rewriting of history and the reconstitution of the dispossessed Afro-diasporic subject, the emphasis on the articulation of the intersections of a variety of discourses, and the critique of interlocking systems of oppression are some of the streams to be pursued. If literature itself is the space of transformation of the imagination, then the *axé* the Afro-Brazilian writers sing in order to "seat" is that which through creativity allows resistance and *quilombismo*, or *marronnage*, to be activated.[62]

V. Closing Remarks

Speaking intertextually to the notion that black poetry carries both *axé* and the force of resistance or *quilombismo* is a poem by a young writer named Marcia Douglas, called "Voice Lesson."[63] I see it as a work through which questions of Afro-diaspora memory and its creative articulation are activated by conceiving of "maroon" as a site of re-creation. I want to end this discussion, then, by offering the poem so that the reader can witness its significance for the central concern of the essay. Here, using language (voice-articulation-the performative), this poem refers to those other worlds outside of Western prescriptive contexts, using memory, history, a variety of languages, and variations of a particular form in order to speak that transformation and resistance.

Voice Lesson

Cimarrón.
Cimarrón.
Remember to roll the r's
(Think of the sound of galloping mustangs on a Nevada plain)

Cimarrón
(or the pound of buffalo hoofs)
Cimarrón
(or your grandma's mules broken loose last year)

Maroon.
Maroon.
Breathe in deep.
say it like a warrior hurling her spear through the air.

Maroon.
(Now think of bloodhounds, armed men at your heels)
Maroon
(or Nanny's boiling cauldron set to catch them)
Maroon
(or women wearing the teeth of white soldiers around their ankles.)

Maroon.
Maroon.
Pronounce the "a" soft like the "a" in "alone."
That's right,
Marooned
(Imagine dangling from an orange tree blindfolded—
stockings from someone's clothesline noosed around your neck)
Marooned
(or the one dollar to your name,
the eviction notice taped to the door)
Marooned
(think of a cold, soundproof room.)

Maroon.
Maroon.
Say it slow like a rich, full thing to the mouth.
Maroon.
(Remember yourself six years old,
talking sassy in your mother's dark lipstick)

Maroon
(or Zora's lips mouthing "just watch me,"
her felt hat tilted to the side of her head)
Maroon
(or all those women's mouths in Ebenezer choir, *Free at Last*,
singing for the fire locked up in their bones.)

Maroon.
Maroon.
Here's your chance now,
follow the instinct of your tongue
and say it your way,
Maroon.
Put on that hat you wear when you're all stirred up and need to
have a word or two.

Maroon
Hurl your spear if you like,
Or change the accent on the "a"—
perhaps something wide, free like the "a" in gallop
Maroon
Maroon
(Hear the call of an old abeng?)
Maroon
Say it
Say it rich
Say it full
(The twitch near your ear is only the remembrance of thunder.)
Maroon
Breathe in deep
Maroon
(This dust kicked up on the plain is sweet as nutmeg!)
Maroon
Say it!
Maroon
(Listen to the feet of summer rain behind you)
Say it strong
Say it now
Break loose speckled horse,
and take yourself back.

Notes

1. The first version of this paper was prepared in Brazil during my Fulbright semester there. As such, it is informed by my very fledgling research into Afro-Brazilian culture and my current thinking through some of these questions. No attempt is being made here to claim definitiveness. Still, during my graduate school research in African Studies at Howard University, we were repeatedly told that none of our research into African cultures was truly representative without broadening the knowledge base to include Brazil. I see myself as engaged in that process now but still with much more work to be done.

2. Chant among Afro-Brazilian poetry circles, particularly Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, in order to infuse creativity in the group. *Axé* is roughly the power to be; the power to create. Literally, the song says,

Sing in order to seat the ashe
Sing in order to seat the ashe
Sing man, sing woman

It is an opening or transitory formula that goes in two directions, toward the Afro-Brazilian belief system and towards literary creativity. Source: Poet Lia Viera, Niterói, Rio de Janeiro, 3 July 1995. Compare with Audre Lorde's "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power" in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Freedom, Calif.: The Crossing Press, 1984): 53–59, in which she uses the notion of the "erotic" in much the same way as the force of creativity. According to Nise Malange, COSATU poet, South Africa, in conversation with this author (Durban, September 1995), the equivalent is *musho* in Kwazulu. See also discussion in Robert Farris Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy* (New York: Random House-Vintage, 1984): 5–18.

3. Sometimes spelled *orixa* in Brazilian Portuguese. Thanks to Milson Manuel dos Santos of Salvador-Bahia for his unwavering support and his many discussions with me on this particular point.

4. I say "Afro-diasporic form" because there are versions of this reinterpretation of African religious practices in a variety of locations in the Americas, ranging from *shango* in Trinidad, to *santería* in Puerto Rico and New York, to *lucumi* in Cuba, *winti* in Surinam, and *vodun* in Haiti. In each case, the form and symbology are not identical or transferable one to the other, although there are common elements and traces. It is more on the order of a repetition with difference that Benítez Rojo identifies in *The Repeating Island: The Caribbean and the Postmodern Perspective*, trans. James E. Marnaiss (Durham, N.C., and London: Duke University Press, 1992). The link to Africa is more on the order of memory but diaspora memory in terms of its recalling of the crossing as well.

5. I say public version because there are numerous rituals only for the members of the house that take place before the outer community is allowed to participate. Professor Muniz Sodre is acknowledged for listening to my thoughts on this subject and offering clarifying comments. My conclusions, though, are derived from witnessing a variety of *orishá* manifestations in Trinidad as a child and in Brazil from 1992 to 1995 (São Paulo, Salvador-Bahia, Rio de

Janeiro) as well as interviews with Mae Beata of Yemanja, in Novo Iguacu, Rio de Janeiro, in June 1995, and a variety of readings on this subject.

6. See also Cristiane Abdon Curry and Sueli Carneiro, "O Poder feminino no Culto aos Orixás," *Revista de Cultura Vozes* 84, no. 2 (March/April 1990): 157–79; and the articles by Juana Elbein dos Santos and Descoredes M. dos Santos, "A Religião Nagô Geradora e Reserva de Valores Culturais no Brasil," and Maria de Lourdes Siqueira, "'Agô Agô Lonan': Mitos, Ritos e Organização em Terreiros de Candomblé na Bahia," *Análise e Dados: O Negro* 3, no. 4 (March 1994): 47–55 and 56–66.

7. *Afro-Asia: Publicação do Centro Afro-Orientais da Universidade Federal da Bahia* 15 (1992): 17.

8. Mario Edson F. Andrade, "Do Quilombo A Fundação Cultural Palmares," Caderno 1, (Ministerio da Cultura, Fundação Cultural Palmares: Brasilia, 1993).

9. Abdias do Nascimento, "O Quilombismo: Uma Alternativa Politica Afro-Brasileira" in *Carta' 13: Falas, Reflexoes, Memorias* (Brasilia: Gabinete do Senador Darcy Ribeiro, 1994–4): 23. The entire issue is devoted to 300 years of Zumbi, 1695–1995.

10. Thanks to graduate students in Brazil: to Cleria Costa for a discussion of the meaning of "*estropiado*" in this context and for proofreading my translation and to Claudia Quiroga for assistance with accenting.

11. Carole Boyce Davies, *Black Women, Writing, and Identity: Migrations of the Subject* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994): 1–37. Glissant's concept of *errance*—drifting, wandering, the pilgrimage, the search for roots, migration—is related but not identical to my formulation. It is related in the sense that I agree that *errance* is embedded in the history of the Caribbean. See Edouard Glissant, *Poetique de la Relation* (Paris: Gallimard, 1990) and *Le Discours Antillais* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1981), translated by J. Michael Dash as *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays* (Charlottesville, Vir.: University Press of Virginia, 1989). See also Robert Aldrich's "From Francite to Creolite: French West Indian Literature Comes Home" in *Writing across Worlds: Literature and Migration*, ed. Russel King, John Connell, and Paul White (London: Routledge, forthcoming).

12. Carole Boyce Davies and 'Molara Ogundipe-Leslie, eds., *Moving beyond Boundaries: International Dimensions of Black Women's Writing*, vol. 1 (London and New York: Pluto Press and New York University Press, 1995): 235.

13. See, for example, Homi Bhabha's discussion in "Anxious Nations, Nervous States" in *Supposing the Subject*, ed. Joan Copjec (London and New York: Verso, 1994).

14. Joseph E. Harris, ed., *Global Dimensions of the African Diaspora*, 2nd ed. (Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1993). See, for example, pieces such as Eliot Skinner's "The Dialectic Between Diasporas and Homelands."

15. Robin Kelley and Sidney Lemelle, eds., *Imagining Home: Class, Culture, and Nationalism in the African Diaspora* (London and New York: Verso Press, 1994).

16. See various discussions in Kelley and Lemelle, *Imagining Home*, and Joseph Harris, *Global Dimensions of the African Diaspora*. See also Alan Gregor Cobley,

"Far From Home: The Origins and Significance of the Afro-Caribbean Community in South Africa to 1930," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 18, no. 2 (1992): 349–70.

17. Paul Gilroy, *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack: The Cultural Politics of Race and Nation* (London: Hutchinson, 1987), and *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994); Sebastian Clarke (Amon Saba Saakana), *Jah Music and the Colonial Legacy in Caribbean Literature* (London: Karnak House, 1987); Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Cinematic Representation," *Framework* 36 (1989): 65–81; and Kobena Mercer, ed., *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994).

18. Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*: 79.

19. Neil Lazarus, "Disavowing Decolonization, Fanon, Nationalism, and the Problematic of Representation in Current Theories of Colonial Discourse," *Research in African Literatures* 24, no. 4 (Winter 1993): 69–98.

20. Paule Marshall, *Praisesong for the Widow* (New York: G. P. Putnam and Sons, 1983).

21. Antonio Benítez Rojo, *The Repeating Island: The Caribbean and the Postmodern Perspective*, trans. James E. Maraniss (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1992).

22. See Michael Hanchard, "Identity, Meaning, and the African-American," *Social Text* 24 (1990): 31 – 42 and "Racial Consciousness and Afro-Diasporic Experiences: Antonio Gramsci Reconsidered," *Socialism and Democracy* 3 (Fall, 1991): 83–106.

23. Paul Gilroy, "It ain't where you're from, it's where you're at. The dialectics of diaspora identification" in his *Small Acts: Thoughts on the Politics of Black Cultures* (New York: Serpent's Tail Press, 1993): 132–33. See also "Jewels Brought from Bondage: Black Music and the Politics of Authenticity," chap. 3 of his *The Black Atlantic*: 72–110.

24. Michel Foucault, "What is Enlightenment?" in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon, 1984): 46–47.

25. Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*: 49.

26. Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, trans. Joan Pinkham (New York and London: Monthly Review Press, 1972): 15.

27. Carole Boyce Davies, "From Postcoloniality to Uprising Textualities," chap. 4 in *Black Women, Writing, and Identity*: 80–112.

28. Carole Boyce Davies, "On Transformational Discourses and Hearing Women's Voices: Finding a Light-Filled Place," preface to 'Molara Ogundipe-Leslie, *Re-Creating Ourselves: African Women and Critical Transformations* (Trenton, N.J.: Africa World Press, 1994): xvi.

29. See version in Arlene Stetson, *Black Sister* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1981): 24.

30. In Barbara Smith, ed., *Homegirls: A Black Feminist Anthology* (Albany, N.Y.: Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, 1983): 197–208.

31. Ibid., 207.

32. Audre Lorde, "The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action" in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Trumansburg, N.Y.: The Crossing Press, 1984): 40–44.

33. Larry Neal, "Some Reflections on the Black Aesthetic" in *The Black Aesthetic*, ed. Addison Gayle, Jr. (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday and Company, 1971): 13–16.

34. See also Gayatri Spivak's *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (New York: Methuen, 1987).

35. Johannesburg, ANC Publication, 1994.

36. *Nagô* is another name for Yoruba culture in Brazil.

37. Conversation with Lia Viera, Niterói, Rio de Janeiro, 3 July 1995. This particular chant is a ring chant used to invite poetic recitations or declarations, generally with drum accompaniment. There is a video showing the poetry ring available from ASPECAB Imagems, Niterói, Rio de Janeiro.

38. Edward W. Said, "Figures, Configurations, Transfigurations," *Race and Class* 32, no. 1 (1990): 1–2.

39. Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (London: James Currey, 1986).

40. Paule Marshall, *The Chosen Place, the Timeless People* (New York: Harcourt Brace and World, 1969).

41. This point has been well developed in a variety of works on black women's writing. See bibliographic references in *Black Women, Writing, and Identity*.

42. Carole Boyce Davies and Elaine Savory Fido, "African Women Writers: Toward a Literary History" in *A History of Twentieth-Century African Literatures*, ed. Oyekan Owomoyela (Lincoln, Neb., and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1993): 311.

43. Ben Okri, *The Famished Road* (New York and London: Anchor Press, Doubleday, 1992).

44. Wole Soyinka, *Death and the King's Horseman* (London: Methuen, 1975).

45. Amos Tutuola, *The Palm-Wine Drinkard and His Dead Palm-Wine Tapster in the Dead's Town* (New York: Grove Press, 1953).

46. Grace Nichols, *I Is a Long-Memoried Woman* (London: Karnak House, 1983).

47. Marlene Philip, *She Tries Her Tongue: Her Silence Softly Breaks* (Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island, Canada: Ragweed Press, 1989).

48. Afua Cooper, *Memories Have Tongue* (Toronto: Sister Vision Press, 1992).

49. Toni Morrison, *Beloved: A Novel* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1987).

50. Edouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse* (Charlottesville, Vir.: University of Virginia Press, 1989).

51. Edward K. Brathwaite, *The Arrivants: A New World Trilogy* (London: Oxford University Press, 1981).

52. Randall Kenan, *Let the Dead Bury Their Dead and Other Stories* (San Diego, New York, London: Harcourt Brace, 1992).

53. Writers such as Okot p'Bitek, for example, rejected as elitist literature that began with a premise of excluding the majority of the population for participating in the aesthetic process and sought to work within the context of Acoli orature. Ngugi wa Thiong'o made the same point in his discussion of language in African literature in *Decolonising the Mind*, as did Micere Mugo in many of her discussions of orature aesthetics.

54. Marlene Philip in *She Tries Her Tongue* makes this point well. Edward Brathwaite's contribution of "nation language" also aids us in this articulation in *History of the Voice: Development of Nation Language in Anglophone Caribbean Poetry* (London and Port-of-Spain: New Beacon, 1984).

55. Julia Kristeva, "Word, Dialogue, and Novel" in *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, ed. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980) and Edward W. Said, *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1983). In fact, Jacques Derrida's notion of textuality suggests that each element "is constituted with reference to the trace in it of the other elements of the sequence or system" in Derrida's *Positions*, translated and annotated by Alan Bass (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1981): 26. See also Heinrich F. Plett, ed., *Intertextuality* (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1991).

56. Edwidge Danticat, *Breath, Eyes, Memory* (New York: Soho, 1994) and *Krik? Krak!: Stories* (New York: Soho, 1995).

57. Larry Neal, "Some Reflections on the Black Aesthetic."

58. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).

59. Mae Henderson, "Speaking in Tongues: Dialogics, Dialectics, and the Black Women's Literary Tradition" in *Changing Our Own Words: Essays on Criticism, Theory, and Black Women*, ed. Cheryl Wall (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1989): 16–37.

60. Houston Baker, *Workings of the Spirit: The Poetics of Afro-American Women's Writing* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1991).

61. Erna Broadber, *Myal: A Novel* (London and Port-of-Spain: New Beacon, 1988).

62. See, though, Luis Camnitzer, "Art and Politics: The Aesthetics of Resistance," *NACLA Report on the Americas* 28, no. 2 (1994): 38–46, which talks about the importance of distinguishing between art as a tool to create culture and achieve independence and art as a globalizing commercial enterprise.

63. In *Claiming Voice*, a student poetry booklet compiled by Marcia Douglas for Carole Boyce Davies, Black Women Writers Course, 1994.