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The 'Slave Sublime'

How do Chamoiseau's *Biblique des derniers gestes* and Jones' *The Known World* contribute to a critique of trends in the remembrance of slavery in France and America?

CONTENTS

Abbreviations:

Biblique des derniers gestes: BDG
The Known World: KW

Introduction

In 1987, Stanley Crouch attacked Toni Morrison's Pulitzer Prize-winning *Beloved* in provocative terms. "*Beloved*, above all else, is a blackface Holocaust novel", he asserted, "written in order to enter American slavery in the big-time martyr ratings contest". This acerbic comment, with its implications of racism, mimicry, and its irreverence toward horrific events, may seem like simple shock tactics upon first reading. But by 1987, the comparison between transatlantic slavery and the Holocaust was so commonplace that this form of antagonistic opposition was not as surprising as one might assume (Sundquist 2005: 449). Morrison's dedication to "Sixty Million and More" tapped into an intellectual trend in which the Holocaust is both the measuring stick of atrocity and the object of resentment for groups who feel their historical suffering is overlooked. Extremists and academics alike discuss transatlantic slavery - the 'black holocaust' - with reference to the Nazi era. Memory becomes politicised, a battleground in which atrocity is aestheticised and past suffering is equated to present moral authority.

Paul Gilroy cites Crouch's comments in the section of his influential text *The Black Atlantic* (1993a) devoted to "the slave sublime", a chapter which deliberately brings together the experiences of the Jewish and the black diaspora. I wish to examine this idea of a 'slave sublime', assessing its prevalence and its implications. Ultimately, I wish to suggest its limitations. The 'slave sublime', Crouch's comments suggest, arises from a memorial culture in which discussion of the Holocaust creates a paradigm for remembering. Notions of ineffable, unrepresentable horror, connected to psychoanalytic theories of trauma, have become prevalent in Holocaust discourse and are frequently linked to the postmodern sublime. Following the many critics who, like Gilroy, have juxtaposed the black and Jewish experience, I wish to examine the memory of slavery in both France and the United States through this 'sublime' paradigm.

My first chapter will draw upon existing critiques of 'Holocaust piety' in order to outline the limitations of the 'slave sublime', a form of remembrance in which the suffering of African slaves is endowed with mystical significance for the present and the over-used notion of 'trauma' is seen as a pathway into the transcendent. Examining the ways in which slavery is commemorated, my second chapter will locate this tendency in France and America, linking it to current intellectual trends. Finally, my last two chapters will examine a case study from each nation, two contemporaneous novels which have enjoyed critical and popular success. Literature may be regarded as a lens through which a society views the past and the present: it both shapes and mirrors attitudes towards history. Looking at the work of Jones and Chamoiseau, I wish to read their texts as part of a continuing negotiation of how the difficult history of transatlantic slavery is to be remembered.

Chapter One
Sublime Horror and Modernity

How is transatlantic slavery, an era filled with destruction, cruelty, and the negation of humanity, transformed into a sacrosanct, even uplifting, memory? It is perhaps useful to begin, as Crouch does, with James Baldwin. "This past, the Negro's past, of rope, fire, torture, castration, infanticide, rape", he writes, "yet contains, for all its horror, something very beautiful" (Baldwin 1963: 105). It is this location of beauty within horror, the idea that suffering may contain a message for humanity, which Crouch (1987) and Gilroy (1993a) criticise. "Blessed are the victims", in Crouch's acerbic words, "for their suffering has illuminated them, and they shall lead us to the light". Historian LaCapra argues that "there has been an important tendency in modern culture and thought to convert trauma into the occasion for sublimity" (2001: 23). The notion of trauma has become ubiquitous within the humanities; arguably, it dominates our understanding of the past, especially such difficult episodes as slavery (see Alexander et al 2004). And certain interpretations of trauma, LaCapra suggests, allow for mystification, even glorification, of difficult events.

In this introductory chapter, I wish to outline exactly what exactly a conception of the 'sublime' based upon racial terror might involve. In doing so, I will draw upon academic discussion of the Holocaust, the understanding of which is crucial to memory studies. The Jewish genocide is often perceived as an event which overturns all norms of language, thought, and representation; and public expressions of memory around Atlantic slavery are increasingly informed by such ideas. However, the politics of memory come into play when the experiences of the black and Jewish diasporas are brought together. Bitter debates have raged over who suffered most; whose pain is given more attention; whose past matters more. I do not wish to engage with such competition, which informs much discussion of slavery. Rather, I wish to take it as a starting point. If these two historical events are so frequently invoked together, what might this add to our understanding of both? Public awareness of slavery is unquestionably lower than it needs to be; yet engaging with other atrocities need not mean undermining the significance of slavery. Instead, the existing debates over memorialisation may be used in order to critique this tendency to glorify or

mystify historical suffering in the context of slavery. Using Holocaust theory to examine slavery, I wish to explore what it means when historical suffering is interpreted as martyrdom, when suffering becomes the basis for identity or a pathway into the spiritual; and to suggest the problems inherent within the 'slave sublime'.

How, first, are we to categorise the sublime? Briefly, the sublime may be characterised as an overwhelming exposure to reality, such that any attempt to comprehend or articulate it becomes impossible. As Shaw writes, "whenever experience slips out of conventional understanding, whenever the power of an object or event is such that words fail and points of comparison disappear, then we resort to the feeling of the sublime" (2006: 2). In postmodern thought (chiefly, in the works of Lyotard), the sublime is explained as a rupture, a shattering of all systems, be they of language, ideology or comprehension. The 'slave sublime', in Gilroy's work, denotes a certain school of thought in which the 'ineffable' terror of slavery is given an almost religious significance, "a special redemptive power produced through suffering" (1993a: 216). However, *The Black Atlantic* does not elaborate at length upon the implications of such 'sublimity'. Durrant points out that Gilroy's use of the term 'sublime' relies upon Burke's definition more than the Kantian theories which are at the heart of Lyotard's postmodern sublime. For Durrant, the Kantian idea of the sublime as an incomprehensible infinite which induces a crisis in the subject is integral to the deconstructive and psychoanalytic theories which have emerged from the Holocaust:

> It is as a breach or rupture in the subject's powers of presentation that the experience of the sublime is linked to the Freudian category of trauma. The 'monstrous' histories of slavery, colonialism, or the Holocaust are sublime insofar as they do violence both to the individual and the collective imagination (2004: 3).

Trauma as a concept has become ubiquitous within the humanities and is now suffering something of a backlash (for an overview see Ball 2000; Douglass & Vogler 2003). There is no space here to engage with the vast literature which has been consecrated to defining and debating the terms of 'trauma'. However, a brief examination of how it might relate to the theoretical issues of the sublime is necessary. Caruth defines trauma as an "overwhelming experience of sudden or

catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena" (1996: 11).   As Radstone (2000) and Leys (2000) point out, various versions of trauma theory exist.   In the model most frequently cited by Holocaust critics, language itself is compromised by the incomprehensibility of the traumatic event, rendering true witness impossible.   Chronology is also disrupted in favour of what Edkins labels "trauma-time", an achronological, compulsively repetitive state of mind (2003: 16).   It is the first model which is most widely cited by Holocaust critics (Felman & Laub 1992; Tal 1996; Wood 1999).   What links the 'sublime' to this theory of trauma is, as Durrant points out, violence: both involve the shattering, rupturing and overturning of norms, be they of chronology, language, philosophy, or perception.   "In the sublime", writes LaCapra, "the excess of trauma becomes an uncanny source of elation or ecstasy […] of negative sublimity or displaced sacralisation" (2001: 23).

This 'displaced sacralisation' may be seen most clearly in attitudes to the Nazi atrocities.   Around the memory of the Holocaust, schools of thought have arisen which treat the Jewish genocide as qualitatively different from normal history.   The 'negative sublimity' LaCapra describes may be discerned within Holocaust discourse in a variety of ways.   Religious formulations are used: for example, Des Pres writes, "The Holocaust shall be represented, in its totality, as a unique event, as a special case and kingdom of its own, above or below or apart from history" (Des Pres 1976: 42). Commemorative rituals are proposed, such as the sacramental eating of 'the rotten bread of Auschwitz' suggested by Rabbi Greenberg (in Novick 1999: 199).   For many, including historians, the historical 'uniqueness' of Auschwitz has become an article of faith (see Stone 2003). Survivor Elie Wiesel is the leading proponent of this view, fiercely protecting what he has described, in an intriguing choice of words, as "the forbidden sanctuary of the nocturnal kingdom that was Auschwitz" (in Weissman 2004: 49).   The Holocaust, for Wiesel and his adherents, is "the ultimate event, the ultimate mystery, never to be comprehended or transmitted" (in Novick 1999: 211). This insistence upon the impossibility of ever understanding or adequately representing the horror of the concentration camps has been termed 'Holocaust piety' (Rose 1996: 43).

For LaCapra, this 'displaced sacralisation' is founded upon a confusion between what he terms 'structural' and 'historical' trauma. Structural trauma is related to the absence of foundational certainties, such as God or community. Historical trauma, on the other hand, is specific to events, such as the Middle Passage or Hiroshima. The danger, for LaCapra, lies in conflating the two: in drawing a causal relationship between a horrific event such as the Holocaust and the absence of a divinity, of referential language, or of a unified subject. It is this tendency he identifies within postmodern thought. "Structural trauma is often figured as deeply ambivalent, as both shattering or painful and the occasion of *jouissance*, ecstatic elation, or the sublime" (2001: 80). LaCapra also points out that historical trauma may form the basis for community, albeit one dedicated to the memory of past atrocity. This paradoxical value accorded to past suffering is indeed visible in contemporary Western society (see Mowitt 2000). As Amato points out, victimhood carries with it great moral capital: to identify oneself with the suffering of a class, group or race, he writes, is "the communion call of the twentieth century secular individual. It is his sincerity, his holiness, his martyrdom" (1990: xxii).

How does the memory of slavery fit into this model of remembrance? Gilroy coins the phrase 'slave sublime' in a discussion which attempts to create a dialogue between the Jewish and African diasporic experiences. Whilst such dialogue has become more visible in academic circles since *The Black Atlantic* was published (see for example Michaels 1999; Newton 1999; Zierler 2004; Sundquist 2005), it has become no less fraught. The problem stems from the fact that, relatively speaking, slavery has *not* been adequately remembered, and is not accorded the importance it deserves today in any of the former slave-owning nations. This is undeniable; what is more controversial is the perceived 'dominance' of the Holocaust in public memory, especially in America where, aside from individual immigrant survivors or liberating GIs, it is not a direct part of the nation's history. As Baldwin, once again, states:

> The Jew's suffering is recognised as part of the moral history of the world and the Jew is recognised as a contributor to the world's history: this is not true for blacks. Jewish history, whether or not one can say it is honoured, is certainly known: the black history has been blasted, maligned, and despised (cited in Gilroy 1993a: 216).

Such views are echoed by black figures from Césaire to Dieudonné, from Morrison to Farrakhan, and they reflect the resentment which is felt over the perceived neglect of slavery. Accusations of anti-Semitism and racism fly in these embittered 'memory wars'. What is at stake is an assertion of identity and of worth in the present, increasingly defined by one's past suffering. Sundquist provides an illuminating overview of what has been termed '*blackjewishrelations*' (Newton 1999). African Americans, he argues, responded immediately to the racial genocide of the Nazis. As the term 'holocaust' became less referential and more representational, he writes, "it began to exercise an eerie, enthralling power in which a people's identity might be codified only in their destruction, nowhere more insistently than in African American culture" (2005: 436). The phrase 'the black holocaust' is the most extreme example of this phenomenon, symbolizing an aggressive competition which has occasionally degenerated into outright anti-Semitism.

Nonetheless, there is much to be gained in bringing together these two experiences of diaspora and persecution, in "facing Black and Jew". Newton (1999) uses Levinas' idea of 'facing', a form of dialogue which respects the alterity and distance of the other, to suggest ways in which the two experiences may inform each other. In this spirit, Gilroy (1993a) builds on Bauman's argument to suggest that slavery, as much as Auschwitz, needs to be placed at the heart of modernity. Such juxtaposition of the Jewish and black experiences chimes with the work of genocide scholars such as Moses (2007) and Stone (2003). Moses suggests an analysis of genocide which traces its roots in Eurocentric thought and scientific theories of race and eugenics, moving away from the stifling debate over the 'uniqueness' of the Holocaust and toward examination of what he terms the 'racial century', beginning in 1850 and culminating in the Holocaust. Benjamin's 'Angel of History', according to Durrant, might be reconfigured thus: "colonialism, apartheid, slavery, and the Holocaust are, for all their historical differences, nevertheless part of the same 'single catastrophe' to which the Angelus Novus bears witness" (2004: 7).

There are further parallels to be drawn between the black and the Jewish diaspora if one places them in the context of modernity. Ethnocidal terror, it has been suggested, goes hand in hand with the evolution of modern, Enlightened Europe. Far from being an aberration, events such as slavery and the Holocaust are integral to modernity's

narrative of 'progress' (Bauman 1989; Gilroy 1993a; Sala-Molins 1987). Durrant (2003: 3) draws a parallel between Lyotard's notion of 'the jews', an abstract notion with a complex relationship to Jews per se, and other excluded 'others' such as Spivak's subaltern and Bhabha's 'native'. For Lyotard, 'the jews' represent an irreversible exclusion, a 'Forgetting' of the humanity of the Other which is irreversible, unrepresentable, and sublime (1995: 1990). Without over-simplifying two very different concepts, I wish to suggest a connection between 'the jews' and Morrison's notion of the 'Africanist' presence in American literature, "the denotative and connotative blackness that African peoples have come to signify" (1992: 6). Morrison is discussing the ways in which the African diaspora are represented in white canonical texts; 'the jews' is a philosophical category; and yet both point to the exclusion of the racialised other, and the fundamental importance this exclusion has in the formation of the modern Western subject. Dayan (1995) reiterates the argument that the negation of the African's humanity is an essential part of the Enlightenment. Comparing Descartes' *Discourse of Method* with the Code Noir, Louis XIV's infamous edict defining the regulation of French slavery, she points to the parallels between the European subject's disavowal of all corporeality and the slave object's exclusion from all cerebral existence. As she writes, "the making of enlightenment man led to the demolition of the unenlightened brute" (1995: 45). The African slave and the Jewish 'other' represent a fundamental element in the construction of modern Western subjectivity; both are "at the same time within, on the margins of, and radically excluded from Western thought" (Caroll, in Lyotard 1990: xi).

It is upon these grounds that I wish to examine France and America. If slavery is at the heart of modernity, an essential counterpart to Enlightenment thought, then the United States and France provide a unique point of comparison.   Whilst the two nations now have very different attitudes towards minorities, they share certain notions of citizenship based on *jus soli* and nationhood which stem to Enlightenment philosophy (Ravitch 1997). France and America are joined by national narratives explicitly invoking republicanism, liberty and equality, which coexist uneasily with the foundation of racial subjugation and colonial expansion upon which the two nations are built. They share a special relationship to the Enlightenment and to modernity, in its temporality and inception (see Anderson 2006: 192-5). Despite the differences between slavery in the Caribbean and the American South, France and

America are significant both to the system of thought within which the sublime is theorised, and the racial terror which accompanied that thought's development.

The 'slave sublime', then, is a pattern of remembering in which the horrors of slavery – most particularly the Middle Passage, but also the continual breaking up of the family unit, the punishments and arbitrary killings, the process of dehumanisation – are approached with an awe-filled reverence, as experience beyond language which may carry a lesson for us. This attitude may be seen in the writing of critics such as Marcus Wood, whose discussion of visual representations of slavery very much engages with the discourse of sublimity established within Holocaust studies. Throughout his study, Wood explicitly draws upon that model, asserting, "in the spirit of Felman's work on the Holocaust, that the historic trauma of transatlantic and plantation slavery must not be encapsulated within a history believed to be stable, digested and understood" (2000: 11). In critiquing the Liverpool Museum of Slavery, he is particularly incensed by the statement in the museum literature that 'in order to come to terms with the past, it is necessary to understand it':

> Such sentiments could not be expressed easily about the memory of the Nazi Holocaust, and if they were expressed would fly in the face of the ethically meticulous work of Claude Lanzmann, Kali Tal and a host of artists and intellectuals who have gone a long way to making sure that we continue to understand that the Holocaust is something the West must work very hard never to 'come to terms with' (2000: 297).

It is hard to argue with many of Woods' points: there is most certainly a lack of care and sensitivity in much commemoration of slavery, as the following chapter will demonstrate. However, such a turn away from understanding is not necessarily the most appropriate manner of commemoration. Figures such as Felman have been accused of shrouding the Holocaust in obscurity, creating what Agamben terms "cheap mystifications" (1999:13). The "ethically meticulous" work of Lanzmann in particular has come in for much criticism (see Weissman 2004; LaCapra 1997; Rose 1996). To conclude this chapter, I wish to outline the problems which have been associated with the 'Holocaust sublime', and point to their importance for the 'slave sublime'.

The problem with the idea of 'incomprehensibility', as critics point out, is that it perversely elevates horror; as Agamben asks, "[w]hy confer on extermination the prestige of the mystical?" (1999: 32). Weissman concurs, arguing that insistence upon 'ineffability' in fact enhances the power and fascination of these horrors (2004: 205). For others, the danger of this 'sublime' interpretation of racial terror is that the contemporary audience does not have to contemplate the roots of such atrocity. To describe the Holocaust as 'unique' in fact robs it of all consequence for the present (Stone 2003: 191). One might equally argue the same for slavery. Removing certain events from the path of 'normal' history, designating them too 'enormous' or 'terrible' to be comprehended, absolves us of the need to understand them. 'To argue for silence, prayer, […] non-representability, *is to mystify something we dare not understand*, because we fear that it may be all too understandable, all too continuous with what we are – human, all too human" (Rose 1996: 42).

Whilst the 'slave sublime' is not nearly as widely visible as this 'Holocaust piety', it is still, I would argue, a problematic mode of remembrance. It is worth repeating that slavery does not receive the attention it should in the public memory sphere, in France, America, or indeed in Britain. But the transformation of slaves into secular martyrs and the Middle Passage into a transcendental memory is no solution. As Hesse writes, when the memory of slavery is perceived as sublime,

> its memory formations assume the absence of historical consequences […] They obscure how and why the development of republicanism, liberalism, and democracy in the West emerged in conjunction with slavery, ethnocide, and racism (2002: 158).

It is this connection between republicanism, modernity and Enlightenment on the one hand, and slavery, ethnocide and colonialism on the other, which critics such as Gilroy and Durrant seek to explore. Remembering slavery in this manner leads us to examine racism now and in the past, the roots of our contemporary society, and the collusion of the values we hold most dear in perpetuating subjugation and murder. If slavery is remembered as a sacred, aestheticised experience beyond words, it is dehistoricised. Thus, as Stone writes of the Holocaust, it becomes "without consequence". Unless slavery is understood in its proper context, unless we trace racism through colonialism, slavery, post-Reconstruction violence and current debates

over immigration in our postcolonial world, its implications for the present go unexamined.

Chapter 2

France and America: The Cultural Memory Landscape

Michaels (1999) points out that Holocaust studies are frequently driven by the need to prevent personal memory from becoming history. Morrison's aim in *Beloved*, he asserts, is the inverse: to turn distant history into vivid, relevant memory. The terms 'history' and 'memory' have fluid, much-debated meanings; what is important in his statement is the very real fact that slavery is far beyond living 'memory': that even the generation who might possibly recall hearing first-hand accounts is on the point of vanishing. In this context, literature becomes an important tool in the way that the past is represented. Along with other cultural representations, education, museums, memorials, and public commemoration, literature becomes one of the chief means by which a society learns about its past, a powerful means of creating an emotive connection to events long-gone. It is in this sense that I wish to analyse the two novels I have chosen as case studies; and in order to do so, an understanding of the general context into which they are written is essential. This chapter is not intended as a comprehensive survey of memorial and counter-memorial practices in France and America. There is such a vast difference in the way that slavery is remembered by those descended from slaves and those descended from slave-owners, such disputes within those groups over the importance of transatlantic slavery today, that to make generalisations about so vast a topic is unhelpful. Instead, what I hope to do is identify trends within the memorial landscape and define the predominant assumptions which underlie the forms of public remembrance listed above. Looking at the political, educational, memorial and cultural arenas, I will identify examples which confirm or refute the assumptions attached to the 'slave sublime' as I have defined it.

The French Context

In France, the memory of slavery has become a highly political issue, a weapon in the ongoing battle between the two opposing currents of thought which define French

intellectual life. First, there is the dominant culture of universalism, in which the state interacts with citizens upon an individual and equal level and any notion of minority identity, whether based on ethnicity, religion or gender, is seen as divisive (Schor 2001). However, this model has come in for increasing criticism for failing to answer the problems of discrimination and racism which continue in practice. The second trend is a more *communautariste* version of French identity in which differences are acknowledged in order to combat the totalising tendency of universalism (see Jennings 2000; Hargreaves 2007). Such a model is closer to the American model; indeed, sociologist Ndiaye cites the US when he calls for a French version of 'black studies', arguing that "black French people are individually visible, but they are invisible as a social group and as the focus of academic research" (2008: 17, my translation). Memory, explicitly opposed to history, has become a politicised element of the debate; and troubling elements of the French past, such as slavery or the Algerian War, are fought over, with 'memory activists' struggling to ensure that their history is included in the national narrative (see House and McMaster 2006; Stora 1998). The relationship of ethnic minorities to their historical experience has become subsumed in the wider debate over immigration, identity, and citizenship (Hargreaves 2005). The *lois mémorielles* are a recent body of legislation ranging from condemnation of the Armenian genocide to a hugely controversial law insisting that public education emphasise the positive aspects of the French colonial presence. These laws both reflect and feed this debate over the role of the past in determining the present and of the state in determining the past.

Where slavery is concerned, geography plays another part, as the *Départements d'outre-mer* continue to evolve a separate artistic and memorial scene from that of Hexagonal France. The history of French slavery has received increasing attention since the 2001 *loi Taubira* declared the slave trade to be a 'crime against humanity'. The law was declarative rather than punitive, calling for recognition of the horrors of slavery and for teaching in schools and universities to reflect this. It has had several practical outcomes. In 2007, President Sarkozy somewhat belatedly declared the 10th May to be a national day of commemoration for the memory of the slave trade, slavery, and its abolition. A *Comité pour la Mémoire de l'Esclavage* has been established, responsible for monitoring and suggesting ways of commemorating slavery, whether through events, memorials or museums. It is also charged with

ensuring that slavery is accorded space upon the national curriculum and that academic research upon slavery is funded and encouraged. On June 23rd 2008, President Sarkozy announced that the teaching of slavery would be mandatory not merely in secondary schools but from the very start of primary education (Nouvel Observateur 2008).

The 'slave sublime' is not highly visible in French cultural or memorial expressions. Indeed, slavery is frequently conspicuous in its absence from these arenas. Thus far, attempts to commemorate slavery are mainly to be found in the DOMTOMs, where memorials range from statues of *neg mawon* figures such as the Mulâtresse Solitude, to abstract memorials which mark the deaths of unknown slaves (for an overview see Reinhardt 2006). There is little evidence of the 'sublime', quasi-religious approach in these; indeed, some museums skirt over slavery all together, presenting a nostalgic 'sugar and rum' version of the past in which cultivation was apparently carried out by 'labourers' rather than slaves (ibid: 133). In Hexagonal France, despite a much-publicised 2007 statue entitled 'Le Cri, l'Ecrit' in the Jardins de Luxembourg (Gouvernement de France 2007), the memorial landscape is patchy at best. No national museum of slavery exists, and important trading cities such as Nantes and Bordeaux have made very few substantial moves to commemorate this episode of their past (Miller 2008: 36-37). In memorialisation, as in education, the history of slavery is all too often swallowed up in the self-congratulatory emphasis placed upon abolition.

Furthermore, slavery has traditionally played a small part in French popular culture. No French slave narratives survive; no abolitionist text such as *Uncle Tom's Cabin* ever caught the national imagination; no contemporary novel has provoked debate in the same manner as Morrison's *Beloved*. Since the 1998 celebration of abolition and the furore over the *loi Taubira*, there has been an increase in *téléfilms* and documentaries, such as *Tropiques Amers* (A-List: 2006); however, these appeared to peak around 2005. Slavery is not a frequent theme in artistic expression, partly due to the troubled relationship between Hexagonal French culture and that of its former colonies and overseas *départements*, between *francais* and *francophone* (for an overview see Laroussi & Miller 2003). This contradiction means that, whilst slavery has been portrayed in many ways by Caribbean writers such as Condé, Chamoiseau,

Césaire, and Glissant, these writers remain partitioned off from mainstream French culture (Daniel & Reeves 2003), and there are few attempts by Hexagonal authors to deal with slavery. Perhaps most tellingly, whilst African American rap and hip hop are filled with references to the antebellum period, French urban music does not cite the past of slavery in order to critique current conditions.

This brief sketch points to a France in which the memory of slavery, whilst growing in visibility, is still far from being accorded the attention memory activists demand. Where the ideas contained within the 'slave sublime' are visible in France is in the debate over the *loi Taubira* and its role in the much-disputed 'victim mentality'. Critics of this law see it as propagating a Baldwinesque version of the past in which France must continually atone for its past sins and debase itself in front of minority victims, whose past suffering is to be exalted at the expense of historical accuracy (Bruckner 2006; Lefeuvre 2006). Figures such as Nora (2006) argue that this 'criminalisation du passé' opens the door to a floodgate of 'repentance' for historical 'crimes' from the Crusades onwards. In Nora's interpretation, the empty signifier 'crime against humanity' becomes a yardstick against which all behaviour, conceived of in purely negative terms, is expressed. Values are defined purely in opposition to atrocity; and in this way, suffering is endowed with a special virtue. Indeed, it becomes the defining feature of humanity. This vision of contemporary values chimes with Badiou's analysis of *mal*, which is similarly sceptical of the rhetoric of human rights, which he sees as demeaning: "man is *that which is capable of recognising himself as a victim* (1998:12, my translation, italics in original). The ultimate 'crime against humanity' is of course the Jewish genocide; the *loi Taubira*, despite the intentions of its adherents, thus invites the uneasy comparison described in the previous chapter.

The cases of Dieudonné and Pétré-Grenouilleau, both of whom have been prosecuted under the *lois mémorielles*, are illustrative of the intensely politicised nature of these debates over memory. Dieudonné's evolution from anti-racist comic to political *enfant terrible* began with his attempt to make a film about the *Code Noir*. Blaming his failure upon supposed 'Zionist elements' within the *Centre nationale de la cinématograhie*, Dieudonné embarked upon a series of provocative remarks and actions which verge from leftist anti-Zionism to unmistakable anti-Semitism. Fined

in 2005 for describing the 'dominance' of Holocaust commemoration as "pornographie mémorielle" (Le Monde 2005), he was found guilty in 2006 of 'incitement to racist hatred' for denouncing his Jewish critics as "slave traders who had converted to bankers" (Touret 2006). Historian Pétré-Grenouilleau (2005) cited 'l'affaire Dieudonné' in an interview for which the DOMTOM group *Collectif des Antillais, Guyanais, Réunionnais* started legal proceedings against him on a charge of 'denial of crime against humanity' (see Montvalon 2006). In the interview, Pétré-Grenouilleau criticised the *loi Taubira* for misleadingly painting the slave trade as a genocide, thus inviting explicit comparisons between transatlantic slavery and the Holocaust and contributing to Dieudonné-style anti-Semitism. The furious reaction of historians to the charges against Pétré-Grenouilleau caused the *Collectif* to withdraw their complaints; but the two incidences have divided French public opinion over the role of the state and the significance of the past. Both point to the continued connection between transatlantic slavery and the Jewish genocide in public opinion.

The American Context

In the United States, the slave-owning past has undoubtedly had a greater impact upon the body politic and cultural scene. Conversely, however, it has always been a difficult and controversial issue, the "family secret of America" (Rushdy 2001:2). In keeping with what Huyssens (1995) identifies as the contemporary "memory boom", slavery has an increasing presence in public life (Berlin 2007: 1). Even from across the Atlantic, the theme of slavery is unavoidable: a single British newspaper shows not merely a story about anti-Democratic merchandise bearing the legend "Obama is my slave", but also an advertisement for an album by rapper Nas which visually references the famous Civil War image of Gordon, the scarred runaway slave (Guardian 21st July 08). The debates which have arisen around Barack Obama's presidential candidacy demonstrate the complexity of the memory of slavery. Revelations over his mother's slave-owning ancestry add fuel to accusations that this Kenyan-American politician is 'not black enough' (see Coates 2007; Dickerson 2007; Younge 2007). The colour line, in this case, is defined not by skin colour but in relation to the slave past: 'race membership', as Angelou terms it, is dependent upon the shared 'cultural trauma' of slavery (Eyerman 2001: 5).

Since the 1965 controversy over Moynihan's 'Report on The Negro Family', which identified a "tangle of pathology" resulting from the effects of slavery upon the family unit, politicians have been eager to avoid engaging with slavery (Moynihan, Rainwater & Yancey 1967; Patterson 1996). Attempts to obtain a public apology were rejected throughout the 1990s; however, on July 29th 2008 the House of Representatives ruled that "slavery in America resembled no other form of involuntary servitude known in history […] the system of slavery and the visceral racism against persons of African descent upon which it depended became entrenched in the Nation's social fabric" (cited in Brown 2008). The legislation skirts round the issue of reparations and has thus been labelled 'hollow' in some quarters (see Samad 2008). Nonetheless, the way reparations has moved from a fringe demand by more radical elements of the African American political scene to an issue championed by the conservative NAACP demonstrates increasing awareness of the past injustice of slavery (Posner & Vermeule 2003; Michelson 2002; Henry 2003). It also points to the complex relationship between memory and the present: claiming victim status may carry financial benefits in an American context.

Loewen (1995) points out that slavery is often taught as an isolated era with no links to racist discrimination today, a dehistoricisation which may contribute to the 'sublime' mode of remembrance. Changes in the way that the African American past is taught have reflected the political developments, especially of the 1960s; and concurrent with the growth of African American studies, as it is now known, came the move to the mainstream of Afrocentric ideas (for an overview see Howe 1998; Lefkowitz 1996; Asante 2007). Afrocentric professors are employed in many Ivy League universities; and in the 1990s, public debate flared over the issue of Afrocentric teaching in public schools (Binder 2002). The relationship between Afrocentrism and the 'slave sublime' is a complex one. Critics point out that Afrocentric thought tends to ignore slavery (Gilroy 1993a; Howe 1998); as Patterson dismissively writes, its focus is "princes, pyramids and pageantry" (in Eyerman 2001: 214), a glorified version of the past that turns away from the indignity of slavery to focus upon ancient Egypt as an example of African achievement. However, there are links between Afrocentrists and proponents of the 'black holocaust' school of thought. Whilst an in-depth discussion of these issues is impossible here, I would suggest a

parallel between the de-historicising effects of Afrocentrism and the problems outlined in the previous chapter with a 'mystical' interpretation of suffering. In very different ways, these two perspectives upon the past both minimise the implications of plantation slavery for the present day.

The museal and memorial culture around slavery demonstrates a certain ambivalence. Critics continually refer to the absence of a National Museum of Slavery on the symbolic Washington Mall, frequently in discussions of United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (Luke 2002; Landsberg 2004; Douglass & Vogler 2003). A museum of African American culture is planned for the Mall. However, the lack of funding for the National Museum of Slavery under construction in Fredericksburg indicates the problematic nature of slavery in American national consciousness (see Klein 2008; Fox News 2008). As Wood points out much depiction of slavery within museums either fetishizes artefacts of torture or replicates unthinkingly the image of the slave common from abolitionist literature, "visualised in a manner which emphasised their total passivity and prioritised their status as helpless victims" (2000:19). The black body is all too often represented in terms of hyper-corporeality, as a vehicle for either sexuality or violence (see McDowell 1999; Doane 1991) and museum exhibitions do not always challenge this. The 2000 exhibition of photographs of lynchings, 'Without Sanctuary', generated heated discussion over the ethics of representation, frequently with reference to the Holocaust (see Apel 2004; Smith 2004; Austin 2004).

In popular culture, slavery is again less visible than might be imagined. One might cite the lukewarm response to the film version of *Beloved* (1998), or compare the failure of Spielberg's *Amistad* (1997) to the success of *Schindler's List* (1994). Currently, Danny Glover's attempts to make a film about Toussaint L'Ouverture are meeting funding difficulties; he claims backers were unwilling to finance a 'black film' (Zimbio 2008). The most frequently invoked representation of slavery is the wildly successful 1976 television adaptation of Alex Haley's *Roots*, a fictionalised account of a dynasty descended from slavery. Edward Ball's *Slaves in the Family* (1998) echoes this family history approach; but examples such as these are isolated and, as Landsberg points out, may ignite public interest in genealogy rather than slavery (2004: 105). However, in the politically charged field of rap and hip-hop

music, a very widely disseminated cultural form (see Rose 1994), references to slavery abound. The invocation of past injustice to express anger about present-day deprivation is summed up in the following lyric from the late Tupac Shakur: "Fathers of our country never cared for me/ They kept my answer shackled up in slavery/And Uncle Sam never did a damn thing for me/Except lie about the facts in my history" (Shakur 1989).

The 'slave sublime' is present in a number of ways in America, but it was with the publication of Morrison's *Beloved* that the ideas it contains became widely accepted. As novelist and as critic, Morrison has done much to introduce the notion that slavery, like the Holocaust, is ineffable and ungraspable: that it concerns "unspeakable things unspoken" (Morrison 1987; 1989; 1992; 1995). Whilst unrepresentability is not often engaged with by "black holocaust" [1] theorists, whose books and websites are filled with illustrations of torture and execution, these also engage in competition over numbers ("Sixty Million and More") and reiterate the immense violence of slavery. As an example, *The Black Holocaust for Beginners* (Anderson 1995) repeats as a mantra the need for "REMEMBERING… NEVER FORGETTING; and proposes a 'MiddlePassage Commemoration Ceremony™' to honour the dead. Anderson's text is an extreme example of what is in fact a common trend in the remembrance of slavery; indeed, Sundquist argues that *Beloved* differs from *The Black Holocaust for Beginners* "only in genre and artistic accomplishment" (2005: 460). What is at stake, he writes is "a past discoverable only through an ineffable language of enduring, unspeakable pain, transformed through the act of 'rememorying' into the essence of racial identity" (ibid: 461). The 'slave sublime' is clearly visible in this representation of slavery: incomprehensible, beyond articulation, yet paradoxically never to be forgotten. African Americans, in this interpretation, are defined, like the Jews, by their relationship with this ineffable memory, duty-bound to maintain the impossible task of constantly remembering what is beyond the bounds of consciousness.

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[1] It must be noted that the term 'black holocaust' sometimes refers to lynching in the post-Reconstruction era; such is the focus of the Black Holocaust Museum in Milwaukee.

Chapter 3

Chamoiseau's *Biblique des derniers gestes* and Physical Memory

Biblique des derniers gestes is a sprawling epic which unites many of the themes running through Patrick Chamoiseau's other works of fiction: celebration of Caribbean hybridity; playful experimentation with the limits of the French language; nostalgia for lost community and lore. Most pertinently, and indeed, most strikingly, the work is suffused with reflections upon the memory of slavery and its effect upon contemporary Martinique. The Middle Passage is presented as a moment of genesis, an originary trauma whose implications endure to the present day. And memory is at once feared and sought after, inhabiting the landscape or erupting in bodily symptoms. In *Biblique*, I wish to argue, the 'slave sublime' is clearly discernable. However, the manner in which the memory of slavery is presented here may best be explained through LaCapra's analysis of absence and loss, of structural and historical trauma. Nostalgia is a distinctive feature of Chamoiseau's writing, in which the old values, community spirit, traditional lore and Créole language are mourned and the faceless *bétonisation* of French hegemony is deplored. I wish to place this nostalgia in the context of the troubling memory of slavery, the 'Genèse' of *Biblique*, and examine to what extent the text conflates a specific historical loss, slavery, with an absence, that of community and of the gendered African 'motherland'.

To briefly contextualise, Chamoiseau is one of the most successful writers of the French Caribbean, in both readership and critical acclaim. Like all DOMTOM authors, his relation to the Antillean culture he writes of and to the mainstream French culture he writes for is complex. Whilst his work espouses the values of the *Créolité* movement he is associated with (see Bernabé, Confiant & Chamoiseau 1989), in which the cultural diversity and specificity of the Caribbean are celebrated, his creole identity is compromised by his choice to write in French. The ambiguity of this position is reflected in his novels: there is an almost agonised self-consciousness to the portrayal of the narrator-author figure, the "marqueur de paroles", or "word-scratcher", who features in most of his work. The author portrays himself as a humble scribe, attempting to capture the language and lives he sees disappearing from the island. Interestingly, in *Biblique*, the role of the *marqueur de paroles* has changed somewhat. The vast bulk of the book depicts, in flashback form, the life of the

protagonist Balthazar Bodule-Jules, or Bibidji. As he sits dying in silence, the narrator intuits his life story (BDG: 53). In this admission of fictionalisation *Biblique* marks something of a departure. The orality of texts such as *Solibo Magnifique* (1988) and *Texaco* (1992) is replaced with silence and communication is instead transmitted through landscape and body. The narrator is no longer scribing but translating; and what he is translating is, above all, the memory of slavery, which has indelibly marked the island of the Caribbean and their inhabitants.

Slavery is a theme present to some extent in almost all of Chamoiseau's work, increasingly so in recent years. *L'esclave vieil homme et le molosse* (1999) precedes *Biblique* and is an uncharacteristically short and simple novel which reads like a fable, as some have argued: the archetypal story of the Caribbean (see N'Zengou-Tayo 2000; Barjon 2002). Whilst *Biblique* has a far wider scope, slavery continues to permeate the text. It may in fact be read as a continuation of the simultaneous rejection and embracing of the past seen in *L'esclave vieil homme* (1997):

> Stories of slavery do not really enthuse us. Very little literature is written on this subject. Here, however, bitter sugar lands, we feel inundated by the knotted memories and tainted by their acrid stench of forgetfulness and screaming presences (translation in Gallagher 2002: 48).

Memory has become an increasing preoccupation in Chamoiseau's work, and is the over-riding theme of *Biblique*. The hero's dying reminisces form the picaresque plot; the memorial fever which has overtaken Martinique in the past years is satirised; and the figure of Man L'Oubliée signifies in her name the interplay of remembrance and forgetting, representing lost arts, arcane knowledge and ancient memories upon the verge of disappearing. Maeve McCusker's recent work *Patrick Chamoiseau: Recovering Memory* (2007) charts the treatment of these themes in much depth and I am indebted to her analysis in this chapter. As she points out, the memory of slavery is presented as a trauma in *Biblique*, a textbook example of the model described by critics such as Caruth and Felman (2007: 137-9). Repressed, buried in the landscape, the traumatic experience recurs in bodily illnesses, the inhabitants of Martinique condemned to perpetual acting out of a trauma not yet confronted or assimilated. Unspeakable - "Not one would pronounce the word 'slavery'" (BDG: 458, my translation) - slavery is referred to as "la malédiction", indeed, "malédiction

fondamentale" (BDG: 454); and it manifests itself in corporeal expressions which McCusker, using Caruth's term, describes as 'unclaimed experience' (2007: 138). Children are born with bones in the head which will not knit, "as if they were filled with memories which could find no home" (BDG: 486, my translation). Traumatic memory is preserved in the landscape, in sites of horror such as the ravine into which unruly slaves were thrown inside boxes of nails: a child who falls into the ravine is gripped by a mysterious fever (BDG: 490). And, most vivid of all, a baby is born with terrible irritation of the skin upon his neck, wrists, and ankles:

> …it was the slave chains, collars of servitude, flesh-eating handcuffs, back-breaking iron collars … This was how one of the child's ancestors must have died; he had passed this memory onto the child […] and […] the pain had appeared in the same places where for centuries the slave's body had suffered. *Never forget, never forget…*
> (BDG: 525, my translation).

Passages such as these spell out in literal terms that for Chamoiseau, slavery is conceived of as "un traumatisme majeur" (BDG: 60): a breach in the collective consciousness, a memory buried in the very soil of the Antilles which must be confronted and placated. However, to depict something as traumatic does not necessarily mean to depict it as sublime. To what extent is this assertion of the centrality of slavery to the Caribbean a form of ' displaced sacralization'?

The above passage provides a good starting point. In it, the word 'esclavage' is not spoken by any character; rather, it is the narrator who guesses at the thoughts of the young protagonist and explains to his audience the significance of the illness. For the characters, slavery is approached with a hushed, watchful mixture of awe and fear. Mere language, as in certain interpretations of the Holocaust, is deemed inadequate to describe the horrors of the past. The trauma of slavery is depicted here as so severe that, like the sublime, it has overturned the natural bounds of subjectivity, chronology, and rationality. In Man L'Oubliée's final injunction, too, we see an echo of the discourse which surrounds the Holocaust, and the familiar litany of 'Never Forget'. To forget, here, is to participate in the guilt of the perpetrators. Such attachment to the past may be a natural and valuable response; or it may be, as has been suggested, "impossible, endless, quasi-transcendental grieving" (LaCapra 2001: 69).

In the oblique actions of the characters and the explicit ruminations of the narrator, the slave experience is indeed presented as an ineffable terror. It must be noted, however, that the graphic descriptions of the slave ship's hold share little in common with the discourse of unrepresentability contained in much Holocaust discourse:

> In this terrible cradle, an unknown corpse pressed against him, growing eternally cold and stiff […] The iron fangs fixed to his neck, his wrists, his ankles crucified him within the miniscule space in which he was meant to survive. The dead flesh remained pressed against him, icy as the abyss […] he felt, kicking inside him, the six hundred and fifty-three men, women and children who had begun to lose their souls in this nameless hell (BDG: 62, my translation).

Such concrete description differs from the notion of unrepresentability advanced by Lanzmann and Felman; in its poetic language it is very different from the flat style which Wiesel uses in order to convey the horror of Auschwitz; and there is none of the linguistic or formalistic experimentation used by figures such as Morrison or Delbo to express traumatic memory.

However, whilst the evocation of the slave ship may not reflect the "crisis of witnessing" associated with trauma (Felman & Laub 1992), the description certainly points to a transcendental interpretation of the Middle Passage. The lexicon of "eternally", "hell", "soul" and "crucified" chimes with the Judeo-Christian framework which is established by the title and reiterated throughout the novel. Horrendous death, here, is presented as a pathway to the spiritual; and whilst it may not be unrepresentable, the ship's hold is most certainly unnameable. The context of this passage also reinforces this notion of the slave trade as an ambivalent, quasi-religious moment of horror. The Middle Passage is not merely a traumatic memory but a moment of traumatic origin, for aging *guerrier* Bibidji and for Caribbean society as a whole. Bibidji claims three dates of birth: one commensurate with his age; one fifteen billion years ago as the earth is formed; and one in the "terrible cradle" of the slave ship hold. Slavery is thus presented as 'une Genèse', as "the founding crime of the Americas" (BDG: 59, my translation). As such, it might well be described by LaCapra as "the founding trauma – the trauma that paradoxically becomes the basis for collective or personal identity" (2001: 80). And the reiteration of the overwhelming nature of the slave experience links it to the sublime. The Middle Passage is the abyss, a breach in the passage of time and in our understanding of the

past. Most notably, the notion of excess is repeated throughout the description of the slave-ship hold. The ship's captain has "exceeded the limits" of his ship's capacity; the slaves' pain is "inconceivable"; the slave trade opens up an "infinite space" of "absolutes", in which no horror is too great to take place. What characterises the horror of the slave trade is "son absence de limites" (BDG: 60). The Middle Passage is a site of boundless horror faced with which our understanding falters; as with Kant's sublime, it "cannot be contained in any sensible form" (in Shaw 2006: 80). "Founding crime", it unites the African diaspora in a continual cycle of acting out and repression, accessible only through the language of the spiritual.

Biblique is thus exemplary of the 'slave sublime', in which historical trauma paradoxically leads to transcendence. What I wish to argue is that this 'sublime' conception of trauma is linked to the nostalgic element so visible within Chamoiseau's writing. *Texaco* and *Solibo* evoke the loss of the Créole language and the marginal communities of the city, which are buried under the encroachment of the tourist industry and the centralisation of the French state. *Biblique* is similarly elegiac. Man L'Oubliée's intimate knowledge of the natural environment is a last remnant of tradition, in the face of a growing separation between humans and their historical/geographical environment (see Bojsen 2005). Martinique is presented as a forgotten backwater, the helpless recipient of aid from NGOs and mainland France despite its artificial prosperity as a *département* (BDG: 15-30; 765-783). Lost language; lost sense of community; lost lore and tradition: whilst this may seem unconnected to the treatment of slavery and its traumas in the novel, LaCapra's writings upon structural and historical loss and trauma suggest a link between the two. For LaCapra, the distinction between absence and loss is often blurred, with detrimental and even dangerous results. "When absence is converted into loss, one increases the likelihood of misplaced nostalgia" (2000: 46), he writes; and "[w]hen absence itself is narrativized, it is perhaps necessarily identified with loss (for example, the loss of innocence, full community, or unity with the mother)" (ibid: 49). In this context, the lost 'full community' which Chamoiseau mourns may be read as a confusion between historic and structural trauma. Nostalgia may be explained as the yearning for a unity which has in truth never existed. For LaCapra, the conversion of absence into loss is indelibly associated with myth-making. And indeed, Chamoiseau is frequently criticised for construing a falsely mythologized sense of the past, a

Martinique which is forever on the point of being lost: what has been dismissed as a "museumified Martinique, a diorama'd Martinique, a picturesque and 'pastified' Martinique" (Price & Price 1997; see also Condé in Britton 2008: 105; Gallagher 2002). As critics point out, the celebration of diversity within Chamoiseau's novels is at odds with his reliance upon a rather essentialised notion of Caribbean identity (Britton 2008; Cottenet-Hage 1995).

Is such nostalgia connected to the trauma of slavery? I would argue that it is: that such glorification of a lost past may be read as a displaced expression of the trauma of slavery. C*réolité*, viewed in this manner, is not so different from the *négritude* its proponents are at such pains to dismiss. Gilroy's exploration of the 'slave sublime' opens with a discussion of Afrocentrism, a mindset which, as we saw briefly in the last chapter, sets tradition against modernity in a simple dichotomy. Such nostalgia for a lost way of life, be it the tribal 'harmony' of Africa or the *créole* community of the Caribbean, is, in his reading, a refuge from the difficulties of modern life, characterised by "obsessions with origin and myth" (Gilroy 1993: 188). Chamoiseau is neither an Afrocentrist nor a proponent of *négritude* (BDG 17-18; 59). Nonetheless, Africa is evoked throughout the novel, both as the site of the originary trauma and as maternal homeland. This last point brings us to the matter of gender, a contentious issue for the writers of *créolité* (see Arnold 1995; Price & Price 1997; Vergès 1995). Africa, which Bibidji visits, is greeted with wonder, described as "mother" and "womb" (BDG: 457). The word "womb" links the African homeland with the slave ship hold. McCusker has commented upon the theme of childbirth which is recurrent throughout the novel. Rightly, she questions the continual reiteration of the female body as the site of trauma, pointing to "an uneasy sense of indulgence (and even, perhaps, explicit misogyny) in the extended descriptions of the devastated female body" (2007: 148). It is interesting to compare *Biblique* with a previously mentioned text, Anderson's *The Black Holocaust for Beginners*. As Sundquist comments, texts such as Anderson's work on the assumption that "black life, and therefore black memory, is characterized not peripherally but centrally by a heritage of psychic and cultural destruction" (2005: 462): by the founding trauma of slavery.

What links Chamoiseau to the incensed rhetoric of Anderson's work is the unmistakable emphasis upon trauma inflicted upon female sexuality, reproduction and vulnerability. *The Black Holocaust* repeatedly portrays the female body being raped and tortured, with sections given titles such as 'DEMENTED SEXUALITY'. In *Biblique*, which counts few significant male characters aside from the warrior/lover protagonist, the manifestations of repressed slave memory appear for the most part upon the bodies of women, with unsuccessful, damaging childbirth a repeated theme. The description of Africa as 'matrice', and the rebirth of Bibidji into the womb of the slave ship hold, suggest that for Chamoiseau the trauma of slavery may be equated to the 'trauma' of childbirth. In this reading, the lost African homeland is explicitly linked to the lost womb: so, by extension, is the lost unity which Chamoiseau's work mourns. As LaCapra writes, "[a] golden or paradisiac age fulfils a similar function to the divinity or the phallic mother in that, either as a putative reality or a fiction, it is situated at a point of origin" (2000: 51). It is possible to argue that Chamoiseau's engagement both with a nostalgic vision of Martinican culture and with a discourse of lost 'mother Africa' conforms to the construction of a 'golden or paradisiac age'. Mythical Martinique, with its rich community of *conteurs*, *djobbeurs*, and *belles créoles*, thus functions in a similar manner to lost Africa, the divine mother and homeland. Both act as a compensatory fantasy for the difficult memory of slavery, providing a simplifying and comforting myth in which the absence of certainty is translated into the loss of something tangible.

So where are we to situate Chamoiseau in the wider French context? It seems likely that *Biblique* is informed by the recent debates over 'mémoire' and 'histoire', which have focussed especially upon the DOMTOMs. It is possible also that Chamoiseau, like many in this field, has been influenced by the spread of trauma theory. Politically, this novel is firmly on the side of the memory activists and the *loi Taubira*: slavery is portrayed as an overlooked 'crime against humanity'. Chamoiseau is firmly opposed to the universalising version of French nationality and history exemplified in Nora's monumental *Les lieux de mémoire* (1984-2007), in which not one essay covers either the DOMTOMs or the slave trade. However, there is a sense in which Chamoiseau's approach to slavery merely replaces one monolithic version of the past with another. Celia Britton's recent analysis of 'community' in Antillean fiction points to the extreme difficulty of defining this concept in

fragmented Caribbean societies. *Texaco* seems to celebrate diversity, and yet is conservative, filled with familiar, stereotypical figures (2008: 98-109). One might say the same of *Biblique*, whose characters (the wise old woman; the beautiful *métisse*; the heroic freedom fighter) are not merely familiar but almost archetypal. The memory of slavery is so politicised it becomes a weapon, a means of asserting identity in the face of centralisation and dependence; and this necessarily entails a level of distortion. Rather than being confronted, slavery is woven into a mythic tale of origin and displaced loss, a melancholy nostalgia which ultimately avoids direct confrontation with the legacy of the slave era.

Chapter 4

Jones' *The Known World* and the 'Grey Zone'

Unlike Chamoiseau's text, *The Known World* is a straightforward historic novel, in which the limitations of a universe regulated by racial hierarchies are portrayed. Whereas the American context increasingly, as we saw, engages with a 'traumatic' portrayal of the past, Jones' text is antithetical to that mode of remembrance. *The Known World* does not portray the suffering of African American slaves as ineffable, as a traumatic entry into the sublime. Instead, the focus upon the little-known historical oddity of free black slave-owners, a point of interest for critics, becomes in Jones' hands a device which forces the reader to rethink assumptions around the era, so frequently perceived in terms of the black/white dichotomy artificially created by slavery. Atlantic slavery as a system depended upon the strict division of black and white, slave and citizen; and the 'slave sublime', I would argue, depends upon a strict division between victim and perpetrator, between helpless black slave and cruel white slave-master. The morass of impossible decisions with which Jones' characters struggle under the 'peculiar institution' brings to mind Primo Levi's exploration of the 'grey zone' of morality (1988). Levi provides a clear challenge to 'Holocaust piety', in which victims are portrayed as blameless and holy; and his calm exploration of human morality strikes a chord with Jones' indictment of racial slavery. I wish to use Levi's ideas to explore Jones' text, in order to see what useful insight may be gained from bringing historical tragedies together. I do not wish to suggest any comparison between either authors or subject matter. Rather, I hope to demonstrate that the dehistoricising effects of the 'slave sublime' may be countered, our understanding of humanity increased, by such "facing" of different historical experiences.

The Known World, Jones' first novel, gained almost universally positive reviews, and won the Pulitzer Prize in 2004. African American literature has dealt with slavery from the publication of Olaudah Equiano's text in 1789; as Morrison point out, "[n]o slave society in the history of the world wrote more – or more thoughtfully – about its own enslavement" (1995: 90). Indeed, the literary tradition of black America stems from the 'slave narratives': first person accounts which not only denounced slavery but which asserted black subjectivity in the face of a system which denied it (Gates

1992; Heglar 2001).   This form has been revisited since the 1960s in what are commonly known as 'neo-slave narratives', a term sometimes applied to any text dealing with the slavery era.   However, *The Known World* is most definitely not a neo-slave narrative as defined by Rushdy: "contemporary novels that assume the form, adopt the conventions, and take on the first-person voice of the antebellum slave narrative" (Rushdy 1999:1).   Nor does it fit with the formally experimental style of Morrison.   It is instead an almost Dickensian portrait of society from top to bottom, from slave child to sheriff; and Jones deliberately plays with this nineteenth century tone, heading chapters with hints at what is to come and emphasising the omniscience of the narrator.   It is often argued that the African American narrative is by definition postmodern and disrupted (Gates 1987; Hogue 2002): indeed, it has been suggested that the realist novel "reinforce[s] a cluster of modern Western paradigms and modes of thought" and as such, is inadequate to describe the African American experience (Dubey 2002: 154).   *The Known World* ostensibly challenges this wisdom, but retains a reminder of artifice in the omniscient narrative voice which ties the novel to its twenty-first century setting.   Hints of magic realism, tongue in cheek offerings of folkloric wisdom, and carefully fabricated archival references all serve to undermine the initial impression of realism and to remind the reader of the constructed nature of Jones' 'world'.

The neo-slave narratives of the 1960s and 1970s were written, it has been suggested, in order to give depth and inner life to slaves, and were shaped by their contemporary context of Black Power (Rushdy 1999; Mitchell 2002; Morrison 1995).   Whilst their focus is upon the black experience, *The Known World* portrays master and slave equally.   According to Rushdy, the neo-slave narratives were to some extent written in answer to a slavery novel he describes as a 'master-text' – a portrayal of slavery which reinforced racial power relations (1999: 19).   William Styron's hugely successful *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (1967) was seen by the African American community as a racist appropriation of their history and art form.   *The Known World* is simultaneously slave narrative and master-text.   In the character of Henry Townsend, who starts life as a slave and dies the owner of thirty-three slaves, the reader is asked to imagine life as property and as owner of human property.   Henry Townsend does not travel from bondage to freedom; no Harriet Jacobs or Frederick Douglass, he seeks no Canaan-land of freedom in the North.   For him, there is no

alternative to the system. One must be either a master or a slave and so, remaining in the South, he merely fights his way to the top.   His intentions are even noble: as Jones tells us, "Henry had always said that he wanted to be a better master than any white man he had ever known. He did not understand that the kind of world he wanted to create was doomed before he had even spoken the first syllable of the word *master*" (KW: 64). Trapped in a Hegelian dependency upon the power relations established by racial slavery, Henry is a personification of the 'grey zone' of ambiguity and morality, both victim and persecutor.

It is this ambiguity, I would suggest, that makes *The Known World* so radically different from the mode of remembrance I have identified as the 'slave sublime'. In the 'slave sublime', the suffering of the Middle Passage and of the slave era is in some way sanctified and elevated; this suffering is transformed in memory from a deeply negative experience to a positive base for a memory-centred community; and the victims of slavery, the African American community through the ages, are perceived to carry some message for humanity. The 'slave sublime' necessitates an engagement with the idea of a historical rupture or caesura, and of a subsequent crisis in language, understanding, and representation. Perhaps the most obvious example of such a representation is Morrison's *Beloved*, which dominates the field of slavery studies. I do not wish to enter into a lengthy discussion of the text, which has been analysed at length; however it is useful to establish an example of the 'slave sublime' in literature.   Whilst Gilroy defends Morrison from the charge of competitive martyrdom levelled at her by Crouch (1993a: 218-222), the implications of 'Sixty Million and More' are hard to ignore; and the way in which Morrison approaches the memory of slavery displays a deployment of the discourse around historical trauma (see Zierler 2004).

Beloved is indeed frequently cited alongside works such as Lanzmann's *Shoah*, which seek to create a crisis of representation around the Holocaust. "*Beloved* and *Shoah* examine […] an event that makes the present incomprehensible because it is an event that constitutes a break, a fissure, a tear in the fabric of society" (Rushdy 2001: 4). The suffering of slaves becomes, in Morrison's presentation, "unspeakable things unspoken" (1989): ineffable, ungraspable horror. hooks points to the aestheticisation

of suffering in *Beloved*, the "mythic quality" to the portrayal of Sethe's scar, "almost as though it's a painting" (in Gilroy 1993b: 215). The understanding of slavery as transcendent horror depends, crucially, upon the aestheticised trope of the suffering black body. I want to argue that in order for the 'slave sublime' to function, a strict dichotomy is necessary between master and slave, between perpetrator and blameless, martyred victim. No ambiguity is possible in this sanctified remembrance.

The notion of the 'grey zone' of morality is introduced by Primo Levi in *The Drowned and the Saved*. "It would seem the time has come to explore the space which separates (and not only in Nazi Lagers) the victims from the persecutors", he writes. "Only a schematic rhetoric can claim that that space is empty: it never is" (1988: 25). Such ambiguity is uncomfortable for us to grasp. Our understanding of historical atrocities usually depends upon a clear division of right and wrong, as Levi points out. "What we commonly mean by 'understand' coincides with 'simplify'" (ibid: 22). His essay is critical of the tendency he identifies within human nature to impose a binary structure onto the complexities of the world, to draw a line between 'us' and 'them': "the tendency, indeed the need, to separate evil from good" (ibid: 23). The 'slave sublime' is absolutely a 'schematic rhetoric'. In order for such 'sanctification' of memory to occur, an unbridgeable divide is needed between victim and perpetrator. How else to explain the angry response of some to the suggestion that Africans profited from the slave trade? In order to achieve martyr status, victims must remain blameless; and this 'black and white' view of the past finds literal expression in racial politics. Morrison's text is of course a complex and nuanced novel, and yet, despite the 'good' white indentured servant (herself a victim of the system), a gulf is maintained between white master and black slave. In Jones' text, on the other hand, such dichotomies are utterly dismantled. Not only is the relationship between slave and owner portrayed in all its incestuous intimacy, but the dichotomy between those who own slaves and those who are owned, between perpetrators and victims, is challenged.

Jones' text is unique not merely in the ambiguity introduced by those free black characters who own slaves but in his questioning of racial categorization. The validity of 'race' is a complex and much-debated issue, far beyond the scope of this essay to engage with. The many texts upon racial identity, particularly, recently,

'whiteness', demonstrate the fluidity and controversy of any racial categorisations (see hooks 1992; Erickson 1995; Dyer 1997; Frankenberg 1993). Whatever the conclusions drawn, the terms 'black and white' are certainly a societal construct, a reduction of difference to a visual binary. Indeed, this terminology emerged concurrently with the system of transatlantic slavery (Rushdy 2001: 24; hooks, in Gilroy 1993b: 214); and grew in importance in American society as the difficulty of distinguishing between 'white' and 'black' increased. Dayan's discussion of Saint-Domingue points to the increasingly metaphysical language used to describe the 'stain' of blackness, which might hide in the 'blood' of a person of mixed race. As she writes, "the fiction of whiteness became a cult of purity" (Dayan 1995: 57). It is this fiction, essential to the antebellum American South, which is exposed by Jones. In *The Known World*, the uncertainty and ambiguity of race functions as a critique of the absurdities of racial segregation and as a literal manifestation of the 'grey zone'.

Throughout the text we are reminded of the boundaries of the 'world' portrayed, the world of slavery and racial subjugation. In it, human emotion competes with the forces of capitalism. Throughout the novel, the words 'price', 'value', 'worth' and 'property' are repeated, and there is a quiet litany of prices, ranging from the value of a slave in dollars to the amount in cents the preacher is given for each slave who attends his sermons. The following passage provides an example of these two competing elements:

> The man on the road sold the children for $527 […] and that openmouthed man sold the children to a rice planter from South Carolina for $619. The children's mother wasn't good for doing her job very much after that, after her children were sold, even with the overseer flaying the skin on her back with whippings meant to make her do what was right and proper. […] Robbins sold her to a man in Tennessee for $257 and a three-year-old mule, a profitless sale, considering all the potential the mother had if she had pulled herself together […] Robbins put a line through the name of the children's mother, something he always did with people who died before old age or who were sold for no profit (KW: 27).

It might be argued that here we have the familiar trope of black suffering: the mother separated from her children, the whippings, the utter indifference to human life aside from its monetary worth. The reader is intended to fill in the gaps, to imagine himself not in the position of Robbins but of the nameless 'children's mother', her maternal role reiterated and the word 'children' repeated in order to bring home the pathos

lying behind the final word 'profit'. The language of commerce (euphemistic references to 'potential' and 'job') merely highlights the vast gap between what is genuinely 'right and proper' and what the system proposes. Robbins, despite his pained self-presentation as a victim in this passage, comes across as a monster. However, the strength of this passage is its combination of the two perspectives. To focus upon the pain of the mother would fit into the well-established trope of the black suffering body. As Dyer (1997) argues, the black body traditionally bears the weight of corporeality against the invisibility of whiteness, and many critics have pointed to the frequency in which blackness is associated with the body, either in terms of sexuality or of death (Smith 2004; McDowell 1999). The danger with this trope, as Hartman points out, is that such images will "immure us to pain by virtue of their familiarity" (1997: 3); or indeed, as in Morrison's *Beloved*, become aestheticised and thus sanctified. Instead of this beautification, hooks calls for an examination of "the economics of slavery" (in Gilroy 1993b: 215). Rather than engaging with slavery as an absolute evil, Jones contextualises and explains the actions of those who profited from the system.

This indictment of the system rather than the individual goes against the grain of the 'slave sublime', which requires the elevation of the perpetrator into an absolute embodiment of evil. Robbins, in the above passage, is undoubtedly callous, indeed, almost monstrous in his indifference to black suffering. However, the violence he does to his slaves with a wave of his pen is immediately followed with the information that after an auction, he will usually spend the night with Philomena, his black mistress. This sexual hypocrisy is not the iniquitous exploitation to be found in the traditional slave narrative. Rather, it is a deep and troubling love with which Robbins struggles and for which he risks the opprobrium of the county. Indeed, by the time we read the above passage, the ambiguity of Robbin's attitude towards African Americans is clear: he is the besotted father of two mixed-race children. Philomena and her children are his property and yet, as the text makes abundantly clear, the records of ownership, of commerce and property, are inadequate to describe the complexity of human interactions:

> The census did not say that the children were Robbins's flesh and blood and that he travelled into Manchester because he loved their mother far more than anything he

could name and that, in his quieter moments, after the storms in his head, he feared that he was losing his mind because of that love (KW: 25).

Whilst the reader may not sympathise entirely with Robbins, we certainly understand his dilemma. His adherence to the system, from which he profits greatly, is continually tempered with his personal affection for the slaves he owns, from his children to Henry Townsend. In keeping with the reiteration of monetary worth, Robbins sees the 'storms in his head' as the "price to be paid" for his illicit love for Phenomena and their children (ibid: 25).

The memory of slavery, as we saw in Chapter 2, is gaining increasing importance in American society. Memory is a battlefield: Huyssens' 'memory boom' takes the form of ongoing debates over whose history counts, whose story will form part of the narrative of the American nation. Slavery, in this context, is increasingly utilised in a talismanic way, as a past that validates certain contemporary African American trends of thought. More importantly, the leaning towards trauma as a trope for all kinds of historical experience means that the suffering of Africans brought to America is increasingly configured as something beyond witness, beyond language, beyond representation: as a way into the sublime. Jones' text contradicts this. *The Known World* does not present us with an aestheticised vision of black suffering, with nameless victims of evil white perpetrators. Rather, the system as a whole is condemned, and in a manner that provokes reassessment of the legacy of slavery for the present. What do the terms 'black' and 'white' truly mean? What did they mean in a time when a dark-skinned man could own another so-called 'Negro' who to all intents and purposes appeared white? The white slave-owners in Jones' world are variously mean-spirited, well-intentioned, kind, callous, troubled; they have their counterparts in the black slave-owners, and in the slaves themselves. Slavery and racism are perpetuated not by representatives of absolute evil, but by people like Winnie Skiffington. When her adopted 'daughter' Minerva, officially her slave, runs away, Winnie is distraught, "for she loved Minerva more than she loved any other human being in the world". And yet the words 'Will Answer To The Name Minnie' on the poster begging her to return, the negation of humanity they contain,
mean that Minerva will never return; and Winnie will never understand her error:

> She had meant only love with all the words […] But John Skiffington's widow had been fifteen years in the South, in Manchester County, Virginia, and people down there just talked that way. She and the printer from Savannah would have told anyone that they didn't mean any harm by it (KW: 382).

There is no dichotomy between Winnie and Minerva: no blameless, sanctified victim, no heartless perpetrator. Rather, there are two women joined by bonds of natural affection, yet separated by the unbridgeable divide of the language of race and the system of slavery.

Conclusion

The 'slave sublime' is aptly described by Levi's idea of a 'schematic rhetoric', a simplification which, whilst comforting, does nothing to advance our understanding of historical atrocity. It is difficult to criticise those who wish to honour the victims of the past; in the context of transatlantic slavery, the 'suffering sublime' is perhaps an understandable response to the near universal "silencing of the past" that has been enacted by the West (Trouillot 1995). However, as my exploration of two diasporic black authors and the memorial context in which they write has demonstrated, sanctification of victims and emphasis upon the virtue of suffering does not allow the facts of slavery to be understood and contextualised. The elevation and transvaluation of trauma – perhaps even the overuse of the term 'trauma' itself as a description of historical process – places the Atlantic slave trade beyond analysis. Whilst proclaiming its importance, this form of remembering paradoxically obscures the significance of slavery. It mirrors both the omission of racial oppression and black agency which Trouillot identifies in Western historians to this day (1995: 97-107) and the falsifications of the Afrocentric vision. The 'slave sublime' merely feeds into the worst aspects of memory politics. Choosing to commemorate one group's tragedy as qualitatively or quantitatively more important than others creates a 'zero-sum game' of suffering, in which competition and bitterness predominate to the detriment of thoughtful analysis.

Memory in itself, writes Miller, "should not be fetishized as a panacea for the crimes of history" (2008: 38). History and memory need not be opposed so categorically; but his comments suggest the limitations of an approach which, like the 'slave sublime', looks exclusively at emotive reaction. Transatlantic slavery is emerging, slowly, from a long period in which its centrality to our conceptions of modernity, its role as a foundation for nineteenth century pseudo-science and the worst excesses of the twentieth century, were overlooked. Whilst awareness of these themes is increasing, such awareness is challenged by a tendency to venerate the human tragedy of slavery. Rather than focussing upon its 'inexpressible' horror, we must consider slavery in its historical continuum if it is to hold significance for today. Otherwise, its victims become icons for whom candles are lit and empty litanies are repeated: beatified, venerated, and ultimately robbed of all agency and complexity. Contemporary ideas

of race and power become meaningless when the development of racial thought is not traced through the destruction of indigenous peoples, African slaves, and European Jews.

APPENDIX

Citations as originally printed

Page 14: Ndiaye, Pap (2008: 17)
"les Noirs de France sont individuellement visibles, mais ils sont invisible en tant que groupe social et qu'objet d'etude pour les universitaires."

Page 17: Badiou, Alain (1998: 12)
"l'homme est *ce qui est capable de se reconnaître soi-même comme victime.*"

Page 22: Chamoiseau, Patrick (1997: 5)
"Les histoires d'esclavage ne nous passionnent guère. Peu de littérature se tient a ce propos. Pourtant, ici, terres amères des sucres, nous nous sentons submergés par ce nœud de mémoires qui nous acre d'oublis et de présences hurlantes. "

Chamoiseau, Patrick (2002: 486)
"comme s'ils étaient dépositaires d'une mémoire impossible de loger."

Page 23: (Ibid: 525)
"…le jeune bougre avait su qu'il s'agissait des chaines de l'esclavage, colliers de servitude, bracelets mangeurs de chair, carcans qui défolmantent les vertebres du cou… Un des ancêtres de l'enfant avait du mourir ainsi; il lui avait transmis ce souvenir comme on envoie une pensée, mais – cette offrande ne trouvant pas de sortie – elle lui était apparue en ces endroits du corps esclave ou, pendent des siècles, il s'était constitué. *N'oubliez jamais, n'oubliez jamais…*"

Page 24: (Ibid: 62)
"Dans ce terrible berceau, tout contre lui, un cadavre inconnu refroidissait éternellement. […] Le croc des fers fixés a son cou, ses poignets, ses cheville, l'avait crucifié dans l'espace minuscule ou il devait survivre. La chair morte était demeurée en ventouse contre lui, glaciale comme un abîme […] il avait senti ruer en lui les six cent cinquante-trois hommes, femmes, enfants qui commençaient a perdre leur âme dans cet enfer san nom."

(Ibid: 59)
" [l]e crime fondateur des peuples des Amériques"

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