

THROUGH THE PRISM OF SLAVE ART: HISTORY, LITERATURE, MEMORY, AND THE WORK OF P. STERLING STUCKEY

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Black Americans were sustained and healed and nurtured by the translation of their experience into art above all in the music. That was functional . . . My parallel is always the music because all of the strategies of the art are there. All of the intricacy, all of the discipline. All the work that must go into improvisation so that it appears that you've never touched it. Music makes you hungry for more of it. . . It slaps and it embraces, it slaps and it embraces. The literature ought to do the same thing. I've been very deliberate about that. . . I have wanted always to develop a way of writing that was irrevocably black. I don't have the resources of a musician, but I thought that if it was truly black literature, it would not be black because I was, it would not even be black because of its subject matter. It would be something intrinsic, indigenous, something in the way it was put together—the sentences, the structure, texture and tone—so that anyone who read it would realize [it]. . . Sometimes I hear blues, sometimes spirituals or jazz and I've appropriated it. I've tried to reconstruct the texture of it in my writing—certain kinds of repetition—its profound simplicity. . . What has already happened with the music in the States, the literature will do one day and when that happens, it's all over.

Toni Morrison¹

During my first semester as a graduate student, I had a conversation with Professor P. Sterling Stuckey that—unbeknownst to me—was to change the direction of my graduate studies. He asked me how it came to be that I so readily accepted the critical importance of Africa in the study of the Americas generally, and in the study of American slavery in particular. I responded, "it never occurred to me that it could be any other way." Later, I realized something of the immensity of the debt that my response implied. While reading Stuckey's seminal article "Through the Prism of Folklore," I came to understand the manner in which Stuckey, and a mere handful of others, so resolutely—and in the face of tremendous opposition—proclaimed the absolute necessity of Africa for American slavery studies.² Only those monumental efforts allowed me to speak of Africa's importance so easily, so casually. In the years since our first meeting, Professor Stuckey has revealed to me in innumerable ways not only the importance of history, but more importantly, the importance of memory—the importance of remembering. The following, then, is intended as a reflection on the memories mobilized by enslaved Africans, and of our memories of them.

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To begin, we are well to remember that things had been very different. One historian argued in the first decades of the 20th century that enslaved Africans' engagements with Christianity were primarily mimetic, that "the [N]egroes merely followed and enlarged upon the example of some of the whites."³ By mid-century, scholars still asserted that most so-called Africanisms were lost within a generation because of the general decay of African culture in the Americas. Of those aspects of slave spirituality that ran counter to evangelical Christianity, one historian wrote: "There is no need to trace back to Africa the slave's . . . dread of witches, ghosts, and hobgoblins, his confidence in good-luck charms, his alarm at evil omens, his belief in dreams, and his reluctance to visit burying grounds after dark. These superstitions were all firmly rooted in Anglo-Saxon folklore."⁴ To the contrary, Stuckey argued, nearly twenty years ago, in *Slave Culture*, "Christianity provided a protective exterior beneath which more complex, less familiar (to outsiders) religious principles and practices were operative."⁵ In the singing of the Spirituals, the dance that characterized worship, and even in the baptismal ritual itself, Africans in the Americas engaged in a Christianity imbued with "deeper African religious concerns."⁶

In this way Stuckey provided a generation of scholars with the tools necessary to decipher and distinguish cultural behavior from cultural meaning. Though some enslaved Africans adopted the behavior of Christianity, the meanings that they ascribed to it were often different, if not outwardly oppositional to the meanings espoused by members of the master class. Nearly forty years ago, Stuckey first articulated the significance of the distinction between behavior and meaning in his consideration of the Spirituals and folk tales. Building on the work of Sterling A. Brown, Stuckey struck a blow at those scholars who had long argued that evidence of enslaved Africans' contentedness could be found in the ubiquity of slave song and dance. To the notion that the enslaved sang because they were happy, Stuckey referred to Frederick Douglass who long ago maintained that slaves sang, not because they were happy, but rather sang "when they were most unhappy"; that singing soothed the pains of slavery "only as an aching heart is relieved by its tears."⁷

To the idea that when slaves sang of freedom, they meant only what whites meant, namely the freedom from sin, Stuckey put forward the revolutionary idea that the arts of the enslaved constituted the seedbed for black resistance to slavery. Even more, Stuckey suggested that their arts, especially the tradition of the Spirituals, offered bondsmen and women an opportunity to relate "to divinities on terms more West African than American."⁸ In this sense, enslaved Africans not only used their artistic traditions to oppose slavery, but did so on their own terms by referring to West African ritual practices, divinities, and cosmologies. The power of these arguments may be felt not only in the manner in which they helped destroy the image of an edenic antebellum America, but also in the virtual explosion of work that has since sought to interpret various aspects of slave culture and

belief. In short, most scholars of American slavery now take for granted the slippages between cultural behavior and cultural meaning, though fifty years ago this distinction was rarely acknowledged.⁹ Though recast by some as "hidden transcripts" in recent years, the idea that some of the presumably conciliatory behavior of the oppressed often belied more revolutionary aims—often in the very presence of the oppressor—was suggested by Stuckey some four decades ago.¹⁰ In this, Stuckey challenged students of American slavery to reconsider the facile presumptions that many had made concerning slave behavior; thereby giving the lie to the notion that slavery was a "hermetically sealed monolith—destructive to the majority of slave personalities."¹¹

Perhaps more importantly, Stuckey's work has forced students of American history to reconceptualize that which constitutes valid historical source material in the study of plantation slavery in the Americas. At a time when historians discerned the contour of slave life principally through sources created by members of the master class (including diaries, records of slave sale, wills, etc.), Stuckey demanded that sources from the lived experiences of the enslaved, including visual art, song, dance, aesthetics, and vernacular traditions, no longer be ignored. As a result, the study of American slavery fled the staid confines of the "Big House" to be regarded through the senses. So, at least one team of scholars configures American slavery as an experience in sounds.¹²

If Stuckey's use of art changes our view of history, then the converse is equally true; that his historical portrait of American slavery also informs our understanding of a good deal of contemporary art, especially literature, by adding texture, context, and meaning to contemporary fiction. Neither should this surprise us overmuch because as is clear from his work on Arna Bontemps, Richard Wright and, of course, Herman Melville, Stuckey has long regarded history and literature as close consorts. The following, then, constitutes a treatment not only of the ways in which Stuckey acknowledges the historical truths that are reflected in contemporary literature, but also the manner in which certain fiction writers have relied on the work of Stuckey, directly and indirectly, in the formation of their own narratives.

Africans held captive in the New World searched desperately for the sanctity of simple human contact and communication. Many nations were brought from Africa to this continent, and with them, many different tongues, practices, customs, and manners. Out of many peoples, there was a single determination among the enslaved to create continuity. And so, where languages were unintelligible, where gesture and manner remained unfamiliar, enslaved Africans dug deep, mining the mineral ore of their commonality, that they might speak and pray and live together as one. It was within the context of the Ring Shout, within the confines of spherical spiritual space that Africans began the business of community building. As P. Sterling Stuckey writes: "The Ring Shout was the main context in which Africans recognized values common to them . . . [that] wherever in Africa the

counterclockwise dance was performed—it is called the Ring Shout in North America," the dancing and singing being directed to the ancestors and to the gods.¹³ Indeed, Stuckey argues that the Ring Shout is "the key to understanding the means by which [the enslaved] achieved oneness in America."¹⁴

But slaveholders forbade both dance and drum on many southern plantations. Still, the determination of the enslaved would not be bent by the simple interdictions of the master class. While dancing was defined by the crossing of the feet, the Ring Shout was little more than a simple shuffle, during which the feet never crossed. And so, those enslaved, under the guise of obedience, worshipped in the privacy of praisehouses, paying deference to deities and to the deceased.

Writing in *Praisesong for the Widow*, Paule Marshall fashioned a narrative marked by song, dance, and memory. Indeed, Marshall's protagonist, Avey Johnson, recalled the dance of faithful parishioners, the sons and daughters of slaves, who allowed their falling bodies every liberty. Still, their feet "never once left the floor or, worse, crossed each other in a dance step . . . even when the spirit took hold and their souls and writhing bodies seemed about to soar off into the night, their feet remained planted firm. *I shall not be moved.*"¹⁵ From all over the church "the amens rushed forward . . . the dust motes in the spring sunlight slanting into the pews from the windows broke into a holy dance."¹⁶ Avey Johnson remembered Africa when the poor and precious ones inscribed the sanctity of their steps in circles upon the pine wood of Sea Island church floors; of prayer planted guilefully under the hardened soles of a field-hand's foot. Those believers remembered Africa and danced for her along prescribed rainbow orbits, counter to the clock and against the better judgment of sense and logic, approaching divinity and returning to ash-dust with each half turn—as Oshun and River Samba; Damballah and the slither of snakes; as Ogun and the operation of the implements of war; or as total water immersion and the Ring Shout.

Of course, we would not blame those who, upon patterning their rhythms with the ring, lost sight of sun-backed earthen floors, and the oppressions of the here and now. The frenzy of spirit space can be overwhelming for some. Such was the case for Avey's Aunt Cuney in *Praisesong* who had been caught crossing her feet in a Ring Shout. She was subsequently asked to leave the ring. But Aunt Cuney refused to leave, first denying that she had mis-stepped, then claiming that "the Spirit" had been so powerful that it had forced her to get all crossed up. Finally, she tried another approach, "Hadn't David danced before the Lord?" she asked. In the end, she nearly had to be removed forcibly from the ring.¹⁷

Taken together, Stuckey's body of work sheds significant light not only on the history of American slavery, but also on contemporary African American literature. His reading of the role and importance of the Ring Shout in the historical formation of an early African American identity heightens our awareness of Marshall's Avey Johnson. Though heir to a comfortable

middle-class life in the aftermath of the social and political upheaval of the 1960s, Avey relies on her memories of her Aunt Cuney to be transported not only to the cultural milieu of her own childhood, but also back to an antebellum South where Africans performed the Ring Shout as a centrally important ritual. But even more than this, Avey's memories of Aunt Cuney lead her symbolically to Africa, suffering in her own Middle Passage. While traveling on an overcrowded boat to participate in the "Excursion," an annual ritual celebration in "Carriacou" that brought families and friends together in a highly charged ritual environment, Avey remembered Africa. She remembered the Middle Passage on that small, god-forsaken boat, with its cramped deckhouse and darkness:

A fetid heat and the airlessness of a hold . . . she was alone in the deckhouse yet she had the impression as her mind flickered on briefly of other bodies lying crowded in with her in the hot, airless dark. A multitude it felt like lay packed around her in the filth and stench of themselves . . . their moans, rising and falling . . . their suffering, the weight of it in the cramped space—made hers of no consequence.¹⁸

Indeed, memories of the Middle Passage comprised a major part of her childhood. When Avey was but a child, Aunt Cuney led her to a spot called "Ibo Landing" on the maps, though the people in Tatem, South Carolina, simply called it "The Landing." Avey remembered Africans on that August day, her hand manacled by the tight grip of Aunt Cuney as she found herself being dragged forward, "the forest behind them and the river at their feet," a point at which the smaller waters met up with the larger seas.¹⁹ Aunt Cuney had never quite fit in with her neighbors because though her body might be in Tatem, her mind was ever with the Ibo.²⁰ Consider those millions, Africans held by manacle and funneled over river or across scorching soils toward the larger seas and the slavery that awaited them:

It was here that they brought 'em. They taken 'em out of the boats right here where we's standing. . . . And the minute those Ibos was brought on shore they just stopped, my gran' said, and taken a look around. A good long look. . . . And they seen things that day you and me don't have the power to see. 'Cause those pure-born Africans was peoples my gran' said could see in more ways than one. . . . Well, they seen everything that was to happen 'round here that day. The slavery time and the war my gran' always talked about, the 'mancipation and everything after that right on up to the hard times today. . . . And when they got through sizing up the place real good. . . . [t]hey just turned, my gran' said, all of 'em. . . . and walked on back to the edge of the river here. . . . they just kept walking right on out over the river. . . . and when they got back to where the ship was. . . . they just walked on past it."²¹

In her youth, Avey asked a simple question, "But how come they didn't drown . . .?" Aunt Cuney's reply: "Did it say Jesus drowned when he went walking on the water in that Sunday School book your momma always sends with you?" Avey would most certainly have drawn on these childhood

memories as she was symbolically transported along the same route that had brought millions of Africans to this continent.

As one of the principal investigators of slave burial practices, Stuckey enhances our understanding of Ibo Landing by detailing the critical importance of proper burial customs among Africans and their progeny enslaved in the Americas. The desire of the Ibos to return to Africa—even if it required walking on water—and the significance of that story for those enslaved and their sons and daughters is revealed in Stuckey's consideration of a belief held by many Africans throughout West Africa during the era of slavery and the slave trade that upon death the spirit of the deceased returned "to its native town in Africa [to] communicate there with the souls of relatives and others it had known in its lifetime."²² Thus, one notes the critical importance of being buried in one's own homeland so that the spirit might be quickly integrated into the land of the dead. But the Ibos in Marshall's retelling, seeing the future before them, knew full well that they would lose life and limb in a foreign land and thus never have a life after life. For Stuckey, the notion that spirits would not enter into the realm of the creator or be reconnected with their loved ones long gone constituted an "Ibo equivalent to the Christian hell."²³ And so, seeing before them slavery, death, and hell, and the vastness of the ocean behind them, those Ibo chose the latter. For Aunt Cuney, and a multitude of others, that was a choice worth remembering.

Finding herself in the midst of the Excursion on Carriacou, Avey, who had long cultivated the manners of middle-class propriety and sobriety (as she understood them) finally danced. Avey remembered Aunt Cuney, the shadowy forms of long-ago dances and rum kegs for drums, the bare bones, and Africa; "her bare feet scarcely leaving the ground—to the accompaniment of the drums and the voices of those looking on."²⁴ Avey remembered ancestral returns, the Ring Shout, and the spirits of the deep.

So unfortunate, then, that so many have forgotten. The distance that time provides soothes; or, to be more precise, numbs us to our sense of ourselves.

When they hear
 These songs, born of the travail of their sires,
 Diamonds of song, deep buried beneath the weight
 Of dark and heavy years;
 They laugh.

When they hear
 Saccharine melodies of loving and its fevers,
 Soft-flowing lies of love everlasting;
 Conjuring divinity out of gross flesh itch;
 They sigh
 And look giggle-eyed
 At one another.

They have forgotten, they have never known,
Long days beneath the torrid Dixie sun
In miasma'd riceswamps;
The chopping of dried grass, on the third go round
In strangling cotton;
Wintry nights in mud-daubed makeshift huts,
With these songs, sole comfort.

They have forgotten
What had to be endured—

That they, babbling young ones,
 With their paled faces, coppered lips,
And sleek hair cajoled to Caucasian straightness,
 might drown the quiet voice of beauty
With sensuous stridency;

And might, on hearing these memories of their sires,
Giggle,
And nudge each other's satin clad
Sleek sides. . . .²⁵

But even when we forget the meaning of those times and that place; even when we have never known, the very landscape retains the memory of it. So did Toni Morrison's spiteful house, 124, hold its own history within its rafters:

You know. Some things you forget. Other things you never do. But it's not. Places, places are still there. If a house burns down, it's gone, but the place—the picture of it—stays, and not just in my rememory, but out there, in the world . . . I mean even if I don't think it, even if I die, the picture of what I did, or knew, or saw is still out there. . . . Someday you be walking down the road and you hear something or see something. . . . So clear. And you think it's you thinking it up. A thought picture. But no. it's when you bump into a rememory that belongs to somebody else.²⁶

As Hershini Bhana Young argues in *Haunting Capital*, rememory is constituted not just by a single individual's memory and forgetfulness. Rather, rememory exists "with and without us, a knot of material forces/spirits whose trace lingers long before and after us."²⁷ While Bhana Young argues that rememory "takes the form of shadows, images, and shapes that flicker by," I am arguing that their traces yet affect the material world, as illustrated by Morrison's 124.²⁸ In addition, rememory operates on the level of practice as revealed in the Ring Shout as a ritual constituted by "a social landscape where resistant bodies, through time as dense as fog, imperfectly re-member, limb by limb, that which has been imperfectly forgotten."²⁹ Robert Farris Thompson and Joseph Cornet have investigated just this sort of gestural and behavioral rememory in various African cultures throughout the Americas. Noting that linguists have documented a virtual dictionary of words used by African Americans whose roots suggest West and West Central African origins,

Thompson and Cornet argue that there is also a "dictionary of gestures" found in the African cultures of the Americas.³⁰

Morrison's rememory is closely connected to Stuckey's notion of a black cultural ethos that developed in the Americas among enslaved Africans. In short, Stuckey argues that the enslaved fashioned "a life style and a set of values . . . which prevented them from being imprisoned altogether by the definitions which the larger society sought to impose."³¹ First articulated in his 1968 article "Through the Prism of Folklore," Stuckey forwarded a notion of community based on the expression of material and aesthetic culture. In song, folklore, and dance, enslaved Africans and African Americans established a community and culture that spoke to the diversity of their origins even as it instigated the development of a new identity. In this way, those who participated in the Ring Shout remembered Africa. And this rememory was based in materiality; that is, based on aesthetic expression. Just as Morrison's 124 held in its very framework the memory of what had come before, Stuckey's Ring Shout, in its movement, circularity, and ecstasy held in its particular form of ritualized dance the memory of a life before slavery and its oppressions. In the epigraph that opened this article, Toni Morrison discusses the possibilities of an art that is irrevocably black. In much the same way, the cultural ethos among enslaved Africans, observed by Stuckey, is rooted in the expression of cultural meanings held in common. The Ring Shout was an activity that, if not irrevocably African, was at least irrevocably linked—in the minds of the enslaved—to the horrors of slavery and the slave trade and a particular West African cultural zone where dances and rituals around the ring were commonplace.

So it had been with little Indigo, of Ntozake Shange's *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo*, who came to know firsthand the memory that things possess. She had been in the Caverns, a South Carolina jook-joint, home to gambling and song, wine and other such things. After having become all-too familiar with the Caverns, and at an all-too early age, Indigo came to know them for the first time with the realization that they had once served as a dungeon for newly-arrived Africans: "The slaves who were ourselves had known terror intimately. . . . Now they sang from the walls, pulling Indigo toward them. Indigo ran her hands along the walls, to get the song, getta hold to the voices . . . the Caverns revealed the plight of her people, but kept singing."³²

The late Jamaican poet and playwright Dennis Scott captured the essence of the manner in which things remember in his poem "Construction," which appeared in his most critically acclaimed collection, *Uncle Time*:

Some time in de greathouse wall
 Is like a thumb mark de stone,
 Or a whole han.
 Granny say is de work sign, she say
 It favor when a man tackle de stone, an' mek
 To tear it down, till de mortar tek de same shape
 as him han. But I feel say

is like summaddy push de wall
an' hole it dere until de brick dem dry
out. Now dat is hard.³³

So it had been with Julie Dash's Pezant clan in *Daughters of the Dust*, a story of Gullah women, grandmothers, and the grace of an unborn child. They were the embodiment of the Ibo and their folkloric flights for freedom. The wind blows, the sun rises over Sea Island sea shores, and a true slat-water Geechee clan moves toward the mainland. Consider the sanctity of isolated spaces, of tiny respites from cotton rows, privacy from the purview of the master class and a chain of water rocks that saved our sanity and our souls.

We would begin with the elders; Dash's Nana Pezant kneeling at the foot of a burial mound strewn with the broken glass, pipes, bottles, and personal effects of the deceased: "The ancestors and the womb are one," Nana Pezant tells us, "those in the grave, like those who're across the sea, they're with us."³⁴ We are well then to adorn the graves of the dead as we adorn the bodies of the living. It's a rum cup, a time-worn corn cob pipe, a Sunday meal prepared prayerfully and placed upon a mat made rich as memories' mosaic that the dead might remember the comfort of this world that they might make use of their personal implements in the next.

Like Nana Pezant, Stuckey also regarded the slaves' burial mounds and the rituals of interment as "bridges to the hereafter, making communications with God and the ancestors less abstract."³⁵ When we find Nana Pezant, she is imploring her progeny not to forget the life and culture that the Gullah had established in their many generations along the Sea Islands of the Georgia and South Carolina coast. Her family, enamored of the mainland, with its machines and modernity, risked forgetfulness of themselves as they emigrated from the island. But even more than their Gullah heritage, Stuckey, along with a host of others, argues that the burial mounds, and grave decoration that so marked black Sea Island culture reflected a more distant connection; that the "African character of slave burial ceremony was unmistakable."³⁶ For Stuckey, the decoration of graves with ceramics, glass, and the most adored objects of the deceased attests to its essentially African esthetic.

The funeral itself reflected deep African sensibilities. Enslaved African Americans regarded the preacher who presided over the ceremony as something of an African priest such that the "divine-kingship function of mediating with the ancestors was reborn on the plantations of the South."³⁷ As in the Ring Shout, enslaved African burial rituals facilitated the move toward a more cohesive African American identity from what had been diverse and variegated African identities. In this way, Africans from different points on the continent shared this vision, which, Stuckey argues, "could have strengthened an African trait under the conditions of North American slavery."³⁸ This strengthening was precisely what Nana Pezant had in mind as she counseled her family against the lure of the mainland.

The burial site is not the only mediator between this world and the next. Locate a tree, sturdy and sure, and place about its branches the varied gourds, vessels, and bottles of everyday living. These bottle trees, much like those evident around the homes of the Pezant family, have protected Africans on both sides of the Atlantic for centuries. Eli Pezant remembers that protection when, kneeling before Nana Pezant, he speaks: "When we were children, we really believed you could work the good out of evil. We believed . . . in you tree of glass jars and bottles."³⁹ Eli was not alone. Other believers placed graveyard dirt, protective charms, amulets and other divine implements of the here and now inside those bottles. The bottles were then placed on trees just outside the front door of a home. Any evil spirit passing by the residence would be enamored by the bottles and ultimately trapped within its confines.⁴⁰

Dash's Bilal, one of a small community of Muslims in the Sea Islands, remembered Africa in his own way, kneeling toward the east, muttering litanies in foreign languages at the setting and reappearance of the sun, gathering the tattered pages of a Qu'ran scripted from memory and faith. Bilal's character is based on the historical Bilali (d. 1859 known also as Ben Ali) of Sapelo Island. Bilali held the position of slave driver on Thomas Spaulding's plantation and is perhaps best known for his collection of excerpts from an Islamic legal text known as the *Risala*.⁴¹ Bilali served as the patriarch of a large family of devout Muslims who used prayer mats and beads, recited the Qur'an, established certain dietary restrictions, engaged in daily prayer, and whose women wore the traditional headscarf or *hijab*. Dash's Sea Island clan remembered Africa.

So, when one scholar proposes "to give back to [a people] a bit of the past that lies beyond the scope of memory"; when he suggests that they deserve to have their past back; when he admits that he will have discharged a small part of his debt to them once he gives people back to themselves by rebuilding a bit of that long past and leaving it as a basket "along its sand road," I am reminded of Ayi Kwei Armah's *Two Thousand Seasons*:

On a clear night when the light of the moon has blighted the ancient woman and her seven children, on such a night tell them to go alone into the world. There, have them count first the one, then the seven, and after the seven all of the other stars visible to their eyes alone. After that beginning they will be ready for the sand. Let them seek the sea line . . . have them count the sand. Let them count it grain from single grain. And after they have reached the end of that counting we shall not ask them to number the raindrops in the ocean. But with the wisdom of the aftermath have them ask us again how many seasons have flowed by since our people were unborn.⁴²

So has it been from that day to this that we have come to know ourselves. We have come from that place to this, as on the wings of swirling breezes. And like the wind, we may not see its substance, but rather know its effects. Edward Kamau Brathwaite writes it well.

in december to about april every year, a drought visits the islands. the green canefields take on the golden deciduous crispness of scorched parchment. the blue sky burns muted. the dry air rivets the star nights with metallic cold. it is our tropical winter. this dryness, unexplained, is put down to 'lack of rain.'

but living in st lucia at this time, i watched this drought drift in towards the island, moving in across the ocean from the east, obscuring sails beating towards castries and i suddenly realized that what i was witnessing—that milky haze, that sense of dryness—was something i had seen and felt before in ghana. it was the seasonal dust-cloud, drifting out of the great ocean of sahara—the harmattan. by an obscure miracle of connection, this arab's nomad wind, cracker of fante wood a thousand miles away, did not die on the sea-shore of west africa, its continental limit; it drifted on, reaching the new world archipelago to create our drought, imposing an african season on the caribbean sea. and it was on these winds too, and in this season, that the slave ships came from guinea, bearing my ancestors to this other land. . . .⁴³

But the wind knew what happened, and what arrived as a dry breeze on St. Lucia, ravaged Willow Springs in Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day*. That wind too had started off somewhere in Africa, "a simple breeze among the palms and cassavas." It swelled slowly, bolstered by weeks of water and an abode about the equator. With no earthy masses to stop its advance, it lands on the Americas: "Moving counterclockwise against the march of time, it rips through the sugar canes in Jamaica, stripping juices from their heart, shedding red buds from royal poincianas as it spins . . . it dries a line of clothes in Alabama. It rocks a cradle in Georgia." By the time it finally meets Willow Springs, a small island off the Georgia and South Carolina coast, it screams: a single oak tree holds, "the rest is destruction."⁴⁴ Even the wind remembers Africa, carrying her in her line of destruction: knobby knee joints that know, shaved hair, sheared nail clippings, salt and sulfur packed tightly into conjure bags, bound up, and buried under backyard porches; of hospitals unwilling to help; root doctors and the laying of hands with love. Of high john, home visits, and health.

NOTES

¹Paul Gilroy, "Living Memory: A Meeting with Toni Morrison," in *Small Acts: Thoughts on the Politics of Black Cultures* (London, 1993), 181–82.

²See, P. Sterling Stuckey, "Through the Prism of Folklore: The Black Ethos in Slavery," in *Going Through the Storm: The Influence of African American Art in History* (New York, 1994), 5.

³U. B. Phillips, *American Negro Slavery* (1918; reprinted Baton Rouge, LA, 1966), 314.

⁴Kenneth Stampp, *The Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Antebellum South* (1956; reprinted New York, 1989), 375.

⁵Sterling Stuckey, *Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory and the Foundations of Black America* (New York, 1987), 35.

⁶*Ibid.*

⁷Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845; reprinted New York, 1997), 19; quoted in Stuckey, "Through the Prism of Folklore," 5.

⁸Stuckey, "Through the Prism of Folklore," 6.

⁹At least one notable exception to this rule is, of course, W. E. B. Du Bois whose work prefigured so much that was to come. See, for example, W. E. B. Du Bois, *The World and Africa: An Inquiry into the Part which Africa has Played in World History* (1945; reprinted New York, 1992). For other works that interpret aspects

of slave culture see Lawrence Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (New York, 1977); Eugene Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York, 1972); John Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* (New York, 1972); Albert Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South* (New York, 1978); Michael Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks: The Transformation of African Identities in the Colonial and Antebellum South* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1998).

¹⁰James Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven, CT, 1990).

¹¹Stuckey, "Through the Prism of Folklore," 3.

¹²Shane White and Graham White, *The Sounds of Slavery: Discovering African American History through Songs, Sermons, and Speech* (Boston, MA, 2005).

¹³Stuckey, *Slave Culture*, 12.

¹⁴*Ibid.*

¹⁵Paule Marshall *Praisesong for the Widow* (New York, 1983), 34.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 199.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 33.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 208.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 37, 43.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 39.

²¹*Ibid.*, 37–39.

²²Stuckey, *Slave Culture*, 6.

²³*Ibid.*

²⁴Marshall, *Praisesong*, 237.

²⁵Sterling A. Brown, *The Collected Poems of Sterling A. Brown* (1980; reprinted Chicago, 1989), 104.

²⁶Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (1987; reprinted New York, 1998), 35–36.

²⁷Hershini Bhana Young, *Haunting Capital: Memory, Text, and the Black Diasporic Body* (Hanover, NH, 2006), 69.

²⁸*Ibid.*

²⁹*Ibid.*

³⁰Robert Farris Thompson and Joseph Cornet, *The Four Moments of the Sun: Kongo Art in Two Worlds* (Washington, DC, 1981), 165.

³¹Stuckey, "Through the Prism of Slave Folklore," 4.

³²Ntozake Shange, *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo* (New York, 1982), 49.

³³Dennis Scott, "Construction," in *Uncle Time* (Pittsburgh, PA, 1973), 12; quoted in David Scott, *Refashioning Futures: Criticism after Postcoloniality* (Princeton, NJ, 1999), 123.

³⁴Julie Dash, *Daughters of the Dust* (New York, 1992), 94–95.

³⁵Stuckey, *Slave Culture*, 41.

³⁶*Ibid.*, 41.

³⁷*Ibid.*, 42.

³⁸*Ibid.*

³⁹Dash, *Daughters of the Dust*, 95.

⁴⁰See Robert Farris Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy* (New York, 1983), 142–45.

⁴¹Michael Gomez, *Black Crescent: The Experience and Legacy of African Muslims in the Americas* (New York, 2005), 155–56; see also Allan Austin, *African Muslims in Antebellum America: Transatlantic Stories and Spiritual Struggles* (New York, 1997); Sylvianne Diouff, *Servants of Allah: African Muslims Enslaved in the Americas* (New York, 1998).

⁴²William McFeely, *Sapelo's People* (New York, 1994), 151, 152, 164, 168; Ayi Kwei Armah *Two Thousand Seasons* (1973; reprinted London, 1979), 1.

⁴³Kamau Brathwaite, "The African Presence in Caribbean Literature," in *Roots* (Ann Arbor, MI, 1993).

⁴⁴190.

⁴⁴Gloria Naylor, *Mama Day* (New York, 1988), 249–50.