

# African Diaspora Literature and the Politics of Transformation<sup>1</sup>

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Canta para sentar o axé, Io! Io!  
Canta para sentar o axé, Io! Io!  
Canta homem, e canta mulher  
Canta para sentar o axé, Io!<sup>2</sup>

Three Afro-diasporic forms will serve as paradigmatic moments through which this discussion will develop. These express for me the translocational, transformational aspects of Afro-diasporic culture. They also speak directly to the issues of the creative imagination and subjectivity articulated against some of the manifestations of late capitalism.

This paper seeks to pursue some of these meanings in three portions. The first part discusses the notion of Afro-diasporic culture, the second con-

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was commissioned for the Macalester College International Roundtable on 'Literature, the Creative Imagination and Globalization'. It was prepared in Brazil during my Fulbright semester there. As such, it is informed by my beginning research into Afro-Brazilian culture and my current thinking through some of these questions. No attempt is being made here to claim definitiveness. Still, during my graduate school research in African Studies at Howard University, we were repeatedly told that none of our research into African cultures was fully representative without broadening the knowledge base to include Brazil. I see myself as engaged in that process now but still with much more work to be done.

<sup>2</sup> This chant, used in Afro-Brazilian poetry circles, was created by the literary group Quilomboje in São Paulo and aims to infuse creativity in the group. *Axé* is roughly 'the power to be' or 'the power to create'. Literally the song says, 'Sing in order to seat the ashe; Sing in order to seat the ashe; Sing man, sing woman'. It is an opening or transitory formula which goes in two directions, towards the Afro-Brazilian belief system and towards literary creativity. The source was the poet Lia Viera, Niteroi, Rio de Janeiro, July 3, 1995. This may be compared with Audre Lorde's (1984:53-59) 'Uses of the Erotic: the Erotic as Power'. She uses the notion of the 'erotic' in much the same way as the force of creativity. According to Nise Malange, a COSATU poet from South Africa, the equivalent is *musho* in Zulu (private discussion in Durban, September, 1995). See also the discussion in Thompson (1984:5-18)

conceptualises transformational discourses and the third examines some of the ways in which literature and the creative imagination have articulated some of these ideas. Its generating moments are clearly the direction of my work and my own 'migratory subjectivity', as well as contemporary questions of 'global culture' and 'hybridity as a response to multiculturalism'. The larger question of the place of the creative imagination and literature within the context of this globalisation allows me to pursue my own reading of the ways in which Afro-diasporic culture has already lived the transnational because of forced migration and the politics of liberation. Thus, for me there is no uniform 'global culture' except under capitalist dominance. Rather, I see a variety of cultures which have lived/are living their responses to large scale and micro historical processes. These responses have activated/are activating a variety of strategies to deal with the material and psychic terms of their historical and contemporary conditions. Thus, Afro-diasporic culture can be read as the 'other' of globalisation, i.e. an already existing transnational culture which moves sometimes in different directions, with different intent than the contemporary notions of globalisation.

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*Candomblé*, the Afro-Brazilian socio-cultural, religious, interpretative system, presents an important convergence of the transformational and Afro-diasporic culture as through it are expressed questions of memory and re-elaboration. While in this belief system the individual is always endowed with the energy of a particular *orishá*<sup>3</sup>, through preparation and participation, the transformational is intensely manifested in some individuals<sup>4</sup>, primarily in the moving of the body and its corporeality 'elsewhere'. It is a movement from the daily circle of life, work, struggle, to another level of possibility, the emotional and spiritual. In my reading, it is also a movement to a level of history, Diaspora memory, return, and reconstruction. Diaspora memory, in this context, recalls Africa as originary source but is also simultaneously

<sup>3</sup> Sometimes spelt *orixa* in Brazilian Portuguese. The author wishes to thank Milson Manuel dos Santos of Salvador-Bahia for his unwavering support and his many discussions on this particular point.

<sup>4</sup> This is an 'Afro-diasporic form' because there are versions of this reinterpretation of African religious practices in a variety of locations in the Americas, ranging from *shango* in Trinidad to *santería* in Puerto Rico and New York to *lucumi* in Cuba to *winti* in Surinam to *vodun* in Haiti. In each case, the form and symbology is not identical or transferable one to the other, although there would be common elements and traces. It is more in the order of a repetition with difference identified by Benítez-Rojo (1992). The link to Africa is more in the order of memory and more particularly Diaspora memory which aims at recalling the crossing.

located in the memory of the crossing as well as in the deliberate reinterpretation of 'remembered' cultural forms in a new space and in new conditions. Thus, in *candomblé*, as African *orisha* are recalled to practical existence, they are also given space to move outward, from the past, into a realm of present and future existence.

The significance of manifestation and/or possession lies not singly in the reappearance of an African entity with particular, identifiable characteristics that cross lines of gender, place, corporeality, spatiality and temporality, but that it also allows the individual person to occupy a different location in relation to the community. The individual physically becomes something else, somebody else, momentarily escapes the mundane, the 'real', the normal, and with the sanction of the community, exists in different space and time (and history). The community in its turn, also participates in this process as it witnesses. It is not uncommon for members of the witnessing community to also move to that level of possibility. Thus, I am using 'witnessing' here in the sense in which it is used in Afro-U.S. religiosity. While there is a particular level of spectatorship and performance in place as well, there is a recognisable witnessing, because of the antiphonal, interactive nature of the process, to an alternative way of being, away from practical definitions of limiting existence.

The public version<sup>5</sup> of a *candomblé* ritual begins with drumming and the initiated participants entering and making a circular parade around the centre of the space they are using for that ritual. Progressively through drumming, and the sound of the *agogô*, a sequence of canticles and a variety of other ritual experiences, some participants become other-endowed. Once the *orishá* manifests and that preliminary level is completed, they leave the public space and return endowed with, literally dressed in, the clothing, and ritual accoutrements as well as the behavioural attributes of the entity manifested. The body becomes visibly present but not its original self. One therefore witnesses *Shango* or *Yansan* or *Nana* at the same time that one witnesses the force of transformation in the individual. Importantly, various versions of the same entity often occupy the same space.

A variety of Afro-Brazilian scholars<sup>6</sup> identify *candomblé* as a source of resistance to dominance and the hegemony of European culture in Brazil.

<sup>5</sup> It is a public version because there are numerous rituals in which only the members of the house participate. These take place before the outer community is allowed to participate. Prof. Muniz Sodre is acknowledged for listening to my thoughts on this subject and offering clarifying comments. The conclusions, though, are derived from witnessing a variety of *orishá* manifestations in Trinidad as a child and in Brazil from 1992-1995 (São Paulo, Salvador-Bahia, Rio de Janeiro) and from an interview with Mae Beata of Yemanjá, in Novo Iguaçu, Rio de Janeiro in June, 1995 and a variety of readings on this subject.

<sup>6</sup> See also Curry and Carneiro (1990:157-179) and the articles by Juana and Descoredes dos Santos (1994:47-55, 56-66).

Julio Braga (1992:17) states that *candomblé* is a system of preservation, of balance and knowledge which always attains a level of harmony of man with nature through his interaction with the sacred world without losing the sense of confronting its adversaries of life in society as he searches for freedom and social harmony. Interestingly as well, although *candomblé* is specific to Brazil, a variety of other versions of the same thing exist throughout the African Diaspora ranging from *lucumi* in Cuba to *Shango* in Trinidad, *santería* in Puerto Rico and New York City. All operate both at the level of 'spirit work' and community work.

*Quilombismo* or *marronage* is the second transformative Afro-diaspora pattern which I am identifying. In 1995, Brazil celebrated the three hundred year anniversary of the existence of *Palmares*. *Palmares* was the longest surviving *quilombo* (see Andrade 1993) or maroon settlement (until 1695) which existed as an alternative space, and as a space of resistance to slavery. *Palmares* too was a site of transformation, an elsewhere, a location which demonstrated by its very existence that there is a practical possibility of 'another world' outside of the given definitions of reality at that time. Still, Abdias do Nascimento (1994:23)<sup>7</sup> stresses that *Palmares* was just one of innumerable black communities living isolated lives that would be identified as *quilombos* today.

Disconnected from the flux of life of the country, many of them maintained styles and habits of African patterns of life. In some cases, still utilising the original idiom brought from Africa maintained, creolised, yet still existing as an African language maintained and conserved in the form of *quilombismo* in which they lived (my translation)<sup>8,9</sup>

Just as Maroon Nanny of Jamaica resisted, created another world and moved communities incarcerated in her evil present of enslavement, creating Nanny Town, so throughout the Americas would exist these 'other worlds' spatially, emotionally, culturally, the extent of which is still being documented.

Significantly, as well, the use of African and/or Native American religious, medicinal, therapeutic systems would be as central to the maroon

<sup>7</sup> The entire issue is devoted to 300 years of Zumbi, 1695-1995.

<sup>8</sup> Desligados do fluxo da vida do país, muitas delas mantem estilos e hábitos de existência africana, ou quase. Em alguns casos, ainda se utilizando do idioma original trazido da Africa, estropiado, porém assim mesmo uma linguagem africana mantida e conservada na espécie de quilombismo em que vivem.

<sup>9</sup> The author wishes to convey her thanks to graduate students in Brasília: Cleria Costa for the discussion of the meaning of *estropiado* in this context and for proofing of the translation and Claudia Quiroga for assistance with accentuation.

communities as would be the very force of resistance and transformation which ran through them. Do Nascimento would identify sixteen principles which are generated from the historical idea of *quilombismo* which can be used to create a different pattern of life for all the community. These offer a different paradigm of democratic political organisation which expresses an egalitarianism in the areas of gender, politics, justice, economics, race, etc. with the effect of promoting human happiness.

The third paradigmatic pattern which I want to identify here is represented in the series of liberatory movements of a Harriet Tubman or Sojourner Truth. These present this deliberate sense of journeying to other worlds, at times occupying the wild space, outside of the most incredible level of oppression and slavery in the Americas. The concept of 'migratory subjectivity' which I identified in *Black Women, Writing and Identity. Migrations of the Subject*<sup>10</sup> allows me to re-articulate it here within the level of contemporary discussions of globalisation. In this case, I offer as paradigm the deliberate and directed migration for liberation to other worlds rather than aimless wandering or containment within dominant discourses. Thus is created another set of movements outside of the terms of the politico-economic systems in place.

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

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

<sup>10</sup> Glissant's (1981, 1990) concept of *errance*—drifting, wandering, the pilgrimage, the search for roots, migration—is related but not identical to my formulation. It is related in the sense that I agree that *errance* is embedded in the history of the Caribbean. See also Robert Aldrich (forthcoming).

Thus, this discussion rejects concepts of hybridity and syncretism, in favour of repetition and re-memory. To illustrate my position, I offer preliminarily the poem 'Ave Maria' (see Boyce Davies & Ogundipe-Leslie 1995) which for me reaches for that space, those other possibilities, which I articulated above. It is clearly not a poem of syncretism, or hybridity, in the sense that the Virgin is hybridised with another Afro-diaspora cultural form. Rather, it references the fact that 'Ave Maria' becomes the veil almost for what takes place behind, which is actually a series of movements of possession, rebellion and transformation, within the terms of Afro-diaspora Culture:

**'Ave Maria'**

Spirits dance. Bathed within sanctums Chambers  
Souls Our Souls Flying Tangling Spiralling Outward  
Powerful possession of Rebellion

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

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

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

Here pure Black swells transcending Here Hear Drum  
Never an ephemeral Heart Beat Singing Beating Free Freedom  
Within our Heart Dancing with cause for the religion of the  
Movement Rounding the tree of burning Bush We Women of  
Culture Shake eat drink Swallow its Fruit Feeding our Soul  
Richly Raped Roots grown Strong Drum with no skin I have  
shed Upon You. The Skin falls I gain my boundaries We  
Rest in pain Strength  
Tic Toc Tic Lock Confined to Pure Clarity  
of Vibrant Shallow Seclusion Crave Fight Silence  
Black Bare feet will never tire for Screaming  
Drums continue to play.

In my view, therefore, the terms of 'African Diaspora' prefigures/refigures the contemporary notions of the transnational. African Diaspora, in my understanding, refers to the articulation of a relational culture of African

peoples, in an interactive politico-cultural pattern both within and outside of the terms of the nation states in which they live. It is clearly not the transnationality of the 'global village' which seeks a boundary-less world in order to create more space for capitalist markets and international communication dominated by the west. Rather, since these nation states were unnaturally constructed<sup>11</sup> under the terms of dominance and were the final product of slavery and colonialism, those suppressed communities created other worlds sometimes even without reference to the existence of other similarly created spaces.

The conceptualisation of 'African Diaspora' to redress the dispersal of Africans has been advanced by a number of black scholars. Further, the notion of 'African Diaspora' exists conceptually both outside and inside the terms of globalisation. In other words, Afro-diaspora already presupposes a global or at least an international or trans-national relationship between various communities of dispersed Africans without suggesting that they each share identical frameworks and histories for re-formulating their existences. The work of the Howard group led by Joseph Harris (1993; see also Skinner 1993), has been significant in laying out the terms and contradictions in the articulation of African Diaspora and its global contexts. The more recent collection of Robin Kelley and Sidney Lemelle (1994) takes these discussions further as it presents a variety of debates on Diaspora, Pan-Africanism and nationalism. In the work of activists like Marcus Garvey who articulated a 'Back to Africa' vision and in the terms of the international organisation of his UNIA, the political formulations of African Diaspora found expression. It would also be articulated at the level of state politics of the Pan-Africanists like Kwame Nkrumah, W.E.B. DuBois, Sylvester Williams, George Padmore and others and the work of the various Pan-African congresses. Still, while the terms of Pan-Africanism would seek to articulate an African centre as base, Afro-diasporic culture for me would resist even that type of containment and implied Africa centring. Africa would become invented, imaginative space of creativity, ancestry, knowledge as well as a deliberate place of practical existence to which one may return but which one may also re-create. In the same way, continental African communities would begin to participate in a series of interactions at the level of popular culture, politics, literature, religious and social movements<sup>12</sup>.

In my reading then, it is not so much the physicality of a return but the notion that this space of oppression under Euro-American dominance is not

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<sup>11</sup> See for example Homi Bhabha's (1994) discussion in 'Anxious Nations, Nervous States'.

<sup>12</sup> See various discussions in Lemelle and Kelley (1994), Joseph Harris (1993) and Alan Gregor Copley (1992:349-370). The latter also references a previous piece by Martin (1991).

the desired location aesthetically, religiously, politically, economically or educationally. And it is for this reason I do not find the notion of hybridity as useful as I do the notion of repetition and re-elaboration.

The scholarship of Paul Gilroy, Stuart Hall, Amon Saba Saakana and Kobena Mercer in London, have articulated the nature of Diaspora dialectics in music and popular culture<sup>13</sup>. Paul Gilroy's (1994) *The Black Atlantic. Modernity and Double Consciousness* returns deliberately to the question of black music which he had raised in his former work, *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack* (1987). This time, however, he raises some of the problematics of origin in the music itself, not so much in the sense of an unchanging Diaspora but in the sense of a series of discontinuous movements in a variety of directions:

This company spreads out in discontinuous, transverse lines of descent that stretch outwards across the Atlantic from Phyllis Wheatley onwards. Its best feature is an anti-hierarchical tradition of thought that probably culminates in C.L.R. James' idea that ordinary people do not need an intellectual vanguard to help them to speak or to tell them what to say. Repeatedly within this expressive culture it is musicians who are presented as living symbols of the value of self activity . (Gilroy 1994:79)

The question of Diaspora from which I operate here, likewise, critiques nationalism, though not national liberation. Neil Lazarus's (1993:69-98) impassioned observation that there still exists, through a version of nationalism, the 'burden of speaking for all humanity', fails to make that subtle distinction between nationalism and national liberation. National liberation fights for the liberation from colonial domination. Nationalism becomes a reified 'nation state' discourse which obscures difference. Contrary to Lazarus then, one does not have to disavow decolonization, Fanon, and or the various movements of national liberation which provided the ideological apparatus of self articulation for black peoples. Rather, one can see these movements of national liberation as one link in a chain of interrelated struggles for African peoples transnationally to articulate themselves in the face of a variety of oppressive systems.

Similarly, in the orature of the African Diaspora, there exists a substantial volume of literature on the movement away from the physicality of slave existence to a return to another world. Best articulated in 'The People Could Fly' stories, a series of magical incantations, voicing the will to move from oppression, would direct the body to take off on wings, leaving the slave masters' whips behind. Paule Marshall (1983) in *Praisesong for the Widow* would write into her text the oral narrative of 'Ibo Landing', in

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<sup>13</sup> See Paul Gilroy (1987, 1994), Sebastian Clarke (1987) and Stuart Hall (1989:65-81).



which Africans walked off the ships and walked back over the waters to Africa, and further would use this piece of orature as the structuring frame in which her own narrative would develop.

Diaspora for me then exists in that same sense of repetition that Benitez Rojo (1992) identifies and that re-manifests itself in forms identifiable because of the modes of resistance of African peoples, their search for other systems, other modes of being. Diaspora memory is the ancestral memory as well as the received history of the middle passage, a basic vocabulary often articulated in song, mood, style, orature, dance and the corporeal generally, sometimes much more so than in the literate traditions. It is simultaneously re-elaboration, re-articulation and re-definition. The elements of ancestry—Africa; historical memory—the middle passage, slavery, colonisation; and contemporary realities—racial oppression, re-colonisation become essential elements in movements of re-creation in Afro-diaspora culture. Movement away from limitations to other articulations of identity would also be critical aspects.

I want to move my conceptualisation of the Diaspora through and beyond one of the points that Michael Hanchard (1990) offers that

if the notion of an African diaspora is anything it is a human necklace strung together by a thread known as the slave trade, a thread which made its way across a path of America with little regard for national boundaries (see Hanchard 1990:31-42 & 1991:83-106)

For me, though, connection through the history of slavery would represent an important element, the notion of re-creation or re-elaboration carries the emphasis I want to give here. I further share Paul Gilroy's emphasis on black music as having that power

in developing our struggles by communicating information, organising consciousness and testing out, deploying or amplifying the forms of subjectivity which are required by political agency—individual and collective, defensive and transformational—and which demands attention to both the formal attributes and its distinctive moral basis<sup>14</sup>.

This sense of Afro-diaspora memory becomes real for me, for example, on observing that within the community of Afro-Brazilians Bob Marley becomes an icon of Afro-diaspora culture even to people who do not understand all the words of the language in which he sings. The message and

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<sup>14</sup> See Gilroy's (1993:120-145) 'It ain't where you're from, it's where you're at, the dialectics of diaspora identification' and his chapter 'Jewels Brought from Bondage. Black Music and the Politics of Authenticity' (Gilroy 1994:72-110).

meaning is nevertheless communicated. More contemporaneously, the proliferation of rap, carnival, calypso and reggae and Rastafarian cultures world-wide would be as significant in terms of the internationalising of popular culture as are the repetitions of Afro-diasporic culture. For this reason, Afro-diasporic culture is not a recall of a romanticised or essentialised Africa but a series of transformations and re-interpretations of African-based cultures on an international level.

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

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For African peoples in the Diaspora, a profound dissatisfaction with the conditions under which we were produced as subjects in the wake of European modernism and Enlightenment and the concomitants of slavery, colonialism, capitalism, late capitalism has driven a series of movements ranging from discourses of *quilombismo* or marronage, uprisings and rebellions, abolitionist, civil rights and black power movements, independence and anti-colonialism, decolonisation, labour movements, anti-apartheid struggles, a variety of nationalisms, socialisms, feminisms. As social movements, these have been both oppositional and transformational; have both produced and been produced by historical conditions under which they/we live.

Still, I do not want to suggest that the questioning attitude in these discourses have been put into place singly by African Diaspora peoples. For example, the fundamentals of mainstream, contemporary feminist inquiry put into question the construction of the female as subject, the ways in which discourses of the 'private' can camouflage oppressive practices on women and children, and the necessity to move these to the public sphere.

In addition, a variety of independent theorists and scholars and progressive socialist movements—Marxism in particular—would have as a fundamental impetus the need to create more egalitarian systems, expressing therefore at the level of ideology and economic conditions, at least, a profound concern for the transformational. Perhaps more important is the transformation of the knowledge bases. Foucault (1984:46f) for example, talking on the transformational would say,

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

Still, it is the very notion of European Enlightenment which can be subjected to scrutiny as it accompanied simultaneously the subordination and oppression of a variety of people and their knowledges. In his section on 'Slavery and the Enlightenment Project', Paul Gilroy pursues a series of discussions of the conjunction of these two projects, 'slavery' and 'enlightenment' even as the European philosophers (Locke, Descartes, Rousseau and so on) and scholars sought to disavow this conjunction in the modernist project:

There is a scant sense for example, that the universality and rationality of enlightened Europe and America were used to sustain and relocate rather than eradicate an order of racial difference inherited from the premodern era ... It is hardly surprising that if it is perceived to be relevant at all, the history of slavery is somehow assigned to blacks. It becomes our special property rather than a part of the ethical and intellectual heritage of the West as a whole (Gilroy 1994:49).

But perhaps Gilroy doesn't go far enough. Revisionist students of philosophy would argue as Césaire (1972:15) does, that the fundamentals of domination are central to a great deal of Western humanist philosophy, that it is within the discourses of many European philosophers that reside the philosophical bases for enslavement, oppression, racism.

The space that Marxism, postmodernism, feminism and decolonisation provided for thinking through the gaps in discourse and, more importantly for me, the deconstruction of master narratives of all sorts, including postmodernism itself, allows the articulation of the transformational. Radical transformation of the social bases of our existences, addresses the disproportionate patterns of relations to material, knowledge and happiness that exist, often based on race, gender and class and so on in a variety of situations in the world. Radical transformation has consistently called for the type of alternative spaces which I identified above.

In an earlier work, I identified 'uprising discourses' as those textualities which capture the movement upward and outward from submerged spaces<sup>15</sup>. The question of 'uplift' or equality may, of course, be the most limited aspect of this discourse, as in some streams of African-

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<sup>15</sup> See chapter 4, 'From 'Postcoloniality to Uprising Textualities' in Boyce Davies (1994:80-112)

American and feminist literary and historical discourses, i.e. rising towards an equality with the oppressor only. Thus arises the importance of locating 'transformational discourses' as a necessary accompaniment to any movement to social change. For me, the transformational is an area of linking activist and intellectual work. Transformational discourses then can be assigned to those discourses which both challenge and re-create, which seek to begin anew on different and more humane grounds, which combine intellectual work with both activism and creativity. Transformational discourses then speak as well to curricula transformation as well as transformations in consciousness; the transformation of epistemological and pedagogical bases of those responsible for the futures of countless minds in and outside of academic contexts. Transformational discourses reject in principle the 'discriminatory paradigm' (deployed in many contemporary societies) which operate on the basis that discrimination is a given and that each group must therefore negotiate its way out of discrimination and prove itself worthy of consideration. They resist the variety of oppressive practices in existence in our world and seek to transform them, move us from positions of limitation to positions of action (see Boyce Davies 1994:xvi).

The imperative to transform the bases of knowledge and unsatisfactory existences runs through every piece of black feminist scholarship which I have seen. As early as 1852, at the Women's Rights Convention in Akron, Ohio, Sojourner Truth, black women activists for women's rights and emancipation, asserted that women have the responsibility to transform the world which men had disturbed (see the version in Stetson 1981:24). In 'The Failure to Transform: Homophobia in the Black Community', Cheryl Clarke (1983) would much later lament that, via particular versions of black nationalism, discriminatory paradigms in this case based on sexuality, were often reinstated by those who wittingly or 'unwittingly absorbed the homophobia of their patriarchal slavemasters' in Afro-U.S. communities as it is found in the larger homophobic culture in which we live. Thus she concluded that

... [H]omophobia is a measure of how far removed we are from the psychological transformation we so desperately need to engender (Clarke 1983:207).

Both Sojourner Truth and Cheryl Clarke were talking in different ways and at different historical moments about the particular psychological transformation that must precede or accompany any genuine social transformation away from oppressive practices. In similarly pursuing a movement for social change away from oppressive paradigms, Audre Lorde (1984:40-44) identifies another set of transformations, this time from silence to language and action.

Thinking through these questions I have come across numerous versions of the desire for the transformational in the works of other scholars. For example, the very last line of Larry Neal's, 'Some Reflections on the Black Aesthetic', is the word 'Change'. One can therefore identify a series of articulations which include but are not limited to the search for resistance and self-articulatory paradigms in women's cultures outside of the knowledge of imperialism's master discourses. I am referring then to a series of inter-related discourses which examine issues of imperialism and patriarchy and other oppressive practices and instead seek transformed worlds (see also Spivak 1987).

The practical work of social transformation offered in post-apartheid South Africa for me demands a particular mention within this framework. In this paper, though, my concern has been with transformation as a discourse. The practice of transformation in political terms then demands study in much more developed ways in this instance and in other situations where social transformation was undertaken. For example, the new South African RDP *Reconstruction and Development Programme* as well as the interim constitution seem to offer some of the possibilities for social transformation. However, at this point I can say only tentatively that it is much more difficult to develop the practice to match the energy of the theoretics and of the popular mass struggles for social change.

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Poesia de negro e axé	Black poetry is ashe
Poesia de negro e axé	Black poetry is ashe
E axé	It is ashe
Axé babá eu digo	Ashe, baba, I say
Eu digo axé Nagô	I say ashe Nagô
Quando entro nesta roda	When I enter this circle
Incomodo, sim senhor	It is to disturb you, yes sir
Olha o tambo(r)	Listen to the drum
Olha o tambo(r)	Listen to the drum
A poesia negra	Black poetry
Tem a força de um quilombo! <sup>16</sup>	Has the force of a quilombo

(\*Nagô is another name for Yoruba culture in Brazil)

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<sup>16</sup> Lia Viera, Niteroi, RJ, July 3, 1995. This particular chant is a ring chant created by Quilomboje, Afro-Brazilian writing collective based in São Paulo, used to invite poetic recitations or declarations, generally with drum accompaniment. The translation is mine, a video version showing the poetry ring is available from ASPECAB Imagens, Niteroi.

This chant which begins this final section moves the desire to 'seat' *axé* to another level, claiming that black poetry is *axé*, that it therefore is life-force, creative energy, the power to be, and further that it has the force of a *quilombo*, that 'other world' of resistance, existing outside of the terms of Western/global cultures. One can find a related assertion in Edward Said (1990:1f) in which he says that in the processes of decolonisation and reconstruction of national cultures, literature has been crucial to the

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

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

Within the literature which accompanied decolonisation, Afro-Diaspora writers from Ngugi wa Thiong'o to Sembene Ousmane, Chinua Achebe to George Lamming, actively produced a literature which identified creatively the bases of colonisation, located as their writing was in that particular historical juncture.

The discourse of decolonisation carries with it the implicit and explicit articulations of transformations at different levels. In other words, the notion of 'decolonising the mind' (see Wa Thiong'o 1986) implies a transformed consciousness, a movement to new societal patterns beyond colonialism's malaise.

Interestingly, research is showing, nevertheless, that the work of women writers, even when participating in those very discourses of decolonisation as say a work like Paule Marshall's (1969) *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People*, seem to simultaneously occupy another trajectory as the work of Zora Neale Hurston or even further back that of Harriet Wilson reveals. Thus in some cases was produced a poetics which complicated, through issues of gender and location, some of the accepted trajectories of the literature which accompanied decolonisation as it did abolition<sup>17</sup>. It also sought transformation in terms of more egalitarian relationships between men and women, new paths for human existence. The writers, as in the case of African women writers 'become not just artists but also pathfinders for new relations between men, women, and children' (see Carole Boyce Davies and Elaine Savory Fido 1993:311).

<sup>17</sup> This point has been well developed in a variety of works on black women's writing as well as in my work in particular. See bibliographic references in Boyce Davies (1994).

Among contemporary writers, the works of Ben Okri (Nigeria) and Grace Nichols (Caribbean), Randall Kenan (U.S.A.) are interesting in their assertion of questions which were produced in the epoch after formal independence. In *The Famished Road* (1992), for example, Ben Okri undertakes a series of movements for his child protagonist between worlds. Ever persistent is a deep hunger which remains unfilled and a societal oppression which mandates his frequent departure into spirit worlds. The mediation between worlds which the Nigerian writer Wole Soyinka has also undertaken, for example in a text like *Death and the King's Horseman* (1975) and which runs through the work of the older writer Amos Tutuola, *The Palm Wine Drinkard* (1953) of Nigeria as well, is brought to the fore in this text.

The critique of the failed promises of the new nation states, of the community, of masculinity, of particular forms of parenting, begin to be articulated in some streams of literature, in the epoch of what has been called neo-colonialism or more recently post-colonialism. And for Ben Okri (1992), it is taken to the point when memory, of other existences, other possibilities persist in the spirit child who must often decide whether the world of human existence has the requirements to sustain him.

Diaspora memory, as I suggested earlier, is that desire to recall experience of other worlds as it suggests the desire for other creative and humane possibilities, and elsewhere. This memory is negotiated through language as Grace Nichols would show in her collection *I is a Long-Memoried Woman* (1983). We may here as well cross-reference Marlene Philip who would also articulate similar questions in her introduction and the body of the text of *She Tries Her Tongue. Her Silence Softly Breaks* (1989) and at a related conceptual level in Afua Cooper's *Memories Have Tongue* (1992). For Grace Nichols, the long-memory woman is that Afro-diasporic figure who is able to activate memory of Africa, difficult passages, enslavement, new births, pain and joy as she creates new worlds in the landscape of the Americas. This desire to reassemble or (re)member the (dis)membered of the Middle Passage is well articulated creatively in Morrison's (1987) *Beloved* in which (re)memory becomes the central organising principle through which the novel and its characters develop. The critical work of Edouard Glissant (1989), particularly *Caribbean Discourse*, as in some ways does the creative and critical work of Wilson Harris of Guyana, would also speak to the ways in which the Caribbean Creole communities were able to re-assemble through their mythologies, landscape, imaginations.

Diaspora memory, then is that imperative which runs through the mythology, ritual, percussive, corporeal traditions which in their creativity recall other locations, other places, and reconstructs them in the context of contemporary material realities. Witness the Trinidad and Tobago steel band

tradition, for example, in which the rhythm of the drum, forbidden during slavery, becomes tangibly re-created using discarded steel drums as a base, and reinstated in dynamic form, parodying some of the organisational principles of European symphonic tradition on top of what in actuality is an African base. Diaspora memory is also a movement to hear those unspoken voices, to read those unreadable texts, to find the word as Kamau Brathwaite would say in *The Arrivants* to fling into the void.

In many ways, the literary traditions struggle with that desire to attain the same level of the transformative. The most respected works in this tradition are the ones which in my view strive towards that level of memory. *Beloved* by Toni Morrison is a work which is successful for me precisely because it engages that struggle for Diaspora re-memory, that active sense of the past, with its pain, translated and re-elaborated in the present. The title story from Randall Kenan's (1992) *Let the Dead Bury Their Dead* in a different way struggles against the boundaries of history and literature, the processes of narrative, the complications of a variety of identities produced in the context of the past: Africa, enslavement, maroonage, fantastic and contemporary realities. It is for this reason, the weight of this struggle, that a number of writers in the African Diaspora tradition would as well consistently seek out creatively for inspiration or new format, the non-print traditions, in some cases the filmic tradition as does Julie Dash, Ousmane Sembene, Frances Anne Solomon and a variety of other writers and filmmakers<sup>18</sup>.

If we accept theoretically that literature operates within its own discursive system, particularly at the level of narrative or novel forms, then the individual writer operates already within a predetermined system which she struggles to make her own, particularly at the level of language<sup>19</sup>. This discussion does not propose to retrace the discussions of language in African literatures, but basically suggests that the processes of transformation and Afro-diasporic memory with which I am working are consistently being re-presented in a variety of contexts. Further, I am asserting that all of this pre-figures the contemporary notions of the transnational. The contributions of the discourses surrounding intertextuality and re-inscription similarly

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<sup>18</sup> Writers like Okot p'Bitek, for example, would reject as elitist, literature which began with a premise of excluding the majority of the population for participating in the aesthetic process and would seek to work within the context of Acoli orature. Ngugi wa Thiong'o would make the same point in his discussion of language in African literature in *Decolonising the Mind* (1988) as would Micere Mugo in many of her discussions of orature aesthetics.

<sup>19</sup> Marlene Philip in *She Tries Her Tongue* (1989) makes this point well. Edward Brathwaite's (1984) contribution of 'nation language' also aids us in this articulation in *History of the Voice. Development of Nation Language in Anglophone Caribbean Poetry*.



advance this discussion, particularly in the sense of the intersection of a variety of textualities<sup>20</sup>.

The notion of the openness of the text which intertextuality presupposes, along with the imperative of memory already presents an interesting challenge to the notion of individual authorship. Even as we celebrate individual acts of creativity, we recognise the role that memory and traces of other texts play in creation. Haitian writer Edwidge Danticat in *Breath, Eyes, Memory* and *Krik? Krak!* is very clear about the role of the story telling of her grandmother, the role of memory in both her writing and her grandmother's telling and further the role of memory at the level of the reader. Thus she often autographs her book with 'from my memory to yours'. And it is within this intertext, that the question of the individual creative artist's search for Diaspora memory operates for me. The Afro-diasporic author's awareness that the text can be a weaving together of numerous elements, primary among them history and memory, and the role of the writer as translator or medium or articulator of these varied histories, and that of the reader in the making of the text, ameliorates some of the demands of stellar individual creativity, even as it celebrates the successes.

Attempting to identify the very preliminary articulations of the black aesthetic, Larry Neal saw memory as a significant component in his tentative outlining of some categories which needed elaboration (see also Adison Gayle 1972). His work, which I believe has been revisited by many without ascription, was an attempt to identify as many signifying elements as one sees occurring, or possibly occurring throughout Afro-diasporic culture. Without resorting to the essentialist paradigms of black aesthetic which happened in the Black Arts Movement, I can see how his then referencing of 'race memory' is yet another version of Diaspora memory. Many contemporary scholars have attempted to elaborate some of these elements. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. for example would develop in his *The Signifying Monkey. A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (1988) the significations which reside in Esu-Elegbara and provide the pre-text for the signifying monkey, the New World trickster, in Afro-diaspora context. A similar line of examination can be developed for understanding *anancy*, of Akan origin but who also made the crossing into the Caribbean. For *eshu* resides as well in all the Afro-diasporic systems as the *orishá*, of opening, of fate, of crossings. And *anancy* as that development of trickery under slavery in order to 'make a way' using primarily the intellect and language.

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<sup>20</sup> See Julia Kristeva, 'Word, Dialogue and Novel' in *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art* (1980) and Edward Said, *The Word, the Text and the Critic* (1983). In fact, Derrida's (1981:26) notion of textuality suggests that each element 'is constituted with reference to the trace in it of the other elements of the sequence or system'. See also the discussion in Heinrich F. Plett (1991).

Mae Henderson (1989) in 'Speaking in Tongues. Dialogics, Dialectics and the Black Women's Literary Tradition', and Houston Baker (1991) in *Workings of the Spirit. The Poetics of Afro-American Women's Writing* provide an important bridge to my location of the transformative in Afro-Brazilian *candomblé*. For Baker, the 'generative source of style in Afro-America is soul; the impetus for salvation is spirit'. Spirit, then, is associated with non-material modes of production or that which allows us to create, the power to be, or *axé*, which continues through an ever-continuing movement within the community. Henderson would relatedly pursue a Bakhtinian reading of the trope of possession at the level of language. Erna Brodber's work on Jamaican *myalism* or spirit possession in *Myal* (1988) would be a creative approach to this same issue.

The demands of literary creativity and Diaspora memory are not therefore conflicting tendencies, in my view. A series of writers and their works are showing that indeed, these become an important necessity of articulation at the level at which the writer becomes 'the site of transmutation' through which myths, legends, history are reformulated and recirculated. The poetics and politics of audibility and visibility, the rewriting of history and the reconstitution of the dispossessed Afro-diasporic subject, the emphasis on the articulation of the intersections of a variety of discourses, the critique of interlocking systems of oppression, become some of the streams to be pursued. If literature itself is the space of transformation of the imagination, then the *axé* which the Afro-Brazilian writers sing in order to 'seat' is that which through creativity allows resistance and *quilombismo* or *maroonage* to be activated<sup>21</sup>.

Speaking intertextually to the notion that black poetry, articulated in the opening chant, carries both *axé* and the force of resistance or *quilombismo*, is a poem by young writer Marcia Douglas, called 'Voice Lesson'<sup>22</sup>. I see it as working through well, some of the questions of Afro-diaspora memory and its creative articulation as it activates the word *maroon* as a site of recreation. I want to end this discussion then by allowing it to articulate some of the questions which have driven this discussion. Here, using language (voice-articulation-the performative) this poem refers to those other worlds outside of Western prescriptive contexts, using memory, history, a variety of languages and variations of a particular form, in order to speak that transformation and resistance.

<sup>21</sup> See though Luis Camnitzer (1994) who talks about the importance of distinguishing between art as a tool to create culture and achieve independence and art as a globalising commercial enterprise.

<sup>22</sup> In *Claiming Voice*, student poetry booklet compiled by Marcia Douglas for Prof. Carole Boyce Davies, Black Women Writers Course, 1994.

**'Voice Lesson' (Marcia Douglas)**

Cimarrón.

Cimarrón.

Remember to roll the r's

(Think of the sound of galloping mustangs on a Nevada plain)

Cimarrón

(or the pound of buffalo hoofs)

Cimarrón

(or your grandma's mules broken loose last year)

Maroon.

Maroon.

Breathe in deep.

say it like a warrior hurling her spear through the air.

Maroon.

(Now think of bloodhounds, armed men at your heels)

Maroon

(or Nanny's boiling cauldron set to catch them)

Maroon

(or women wearing the teeth of white soldiers around their ankles.)

Maroon.

Maroon.

Pronounce the 'a' soft like the 'a' in 'alone'.

That's right,

Marooned

(Imagine dangling from an orange tree blindfolded—  
stockings from someone's clothesline noosed around your neck)

Marooned

(or the one dollar to your name,')

the eviction notice taped to the door)

Marooned

(think of a cold, soundproof room )

Maroon.

Maroon

Say it slow like a rich, full thing to the mouth

Maroon.

(Remember yourself six years old,  
talking sassy in your mother's dark lipstick')

Maroon

(or Zora's lips mouthing 'just watch me',  
her felt hat tilted to the side of her head)

Maroon

(or all those women's mouths in Ebenezer choir, 'Free at Last,  
singing for the fire locked up in their bones.)

Maroon.  
Maroon.  
Here's your chance now,  
follow the instinct of your tongue  
and say it your way,  
Maroon.  
Put on that hat you wear when you're all stirred up and need to  
have a word or two.  
Maroon  
Hurl your spear if you like,  
Or change the accent on the 'a'—  
perhaps something wide, free like the 'a' in gallop  
Maroon  
Maroon  
(Hear the call of an old abeng?)  
Maroon  
Say it  
Say it rich  
Say it full  
(The twitch near your ear is only the remembrance of thunder.)  
Maroon  
Breathe in deep  
Maroon  
(This dust kicked up on the plain is sweet as nutmeg!)  
Maroon  
Say it!  
Maroon  
(Listen to the feet of summer rain behind you)  
Say it strong  
Say it now  
Break loose speckled horse,  
and take yourself back.

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