

**THE FRIGHT OF REAL TEARS: SLAVERY, TRAUMA, AND TRANS-
GENERATIONAL HAUNTING IN AFRICAN DIASPORIC LIFEWORLDS**

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A past of slavery, until you confront it, until you live through it, keeps coming back in other forms. The shapes redesign themselves in other constellations, until you get a chance to play it over again.

-Toni Morrison

Funerals are so important to us....If we don't bury a friend or foe well, we are likely to see his ghost often until the day we unbury him and bury him again according to the tradition. We didn't bury colonialism well, and we can see its ghost everywhere.

-Jean Marie Teno

I think it is safe to say... that the psychoanalytic object, subject, subjectivity now constitute the missing layer of hermeneutic/interpretive projects of an entire generation of Black intellectuals now at work.

-Hortense Spillers

Black people still go mad, yet this strand has not won out in cultural studies in the 80s and 90s. It has been displaced in favour of linguistic textualisation. The ugliness of the social and the way that Black psyches disintegrate in social relations is almost intolerable.

-Kobena Mercer

INTRODUCTION

In Lydia Maria Child's introduction to Harriet Jacob's ("Linda Brent") Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: Written by Herself (1845), in which she details Jacob's sexual abuse, she states:

I am well aware that many will accuse me of indecorum for presenting these pages to the public; for the experiences of this intelligent

and much-injured woman belong to a class which some call delicate subjects, and others indelicate. This peculiar phase of Slavery has generally been kept veiled; but the public ought to be made acquainted with its monstrous features, and I am willing to take the responsibility of presenting them with the veil drawn [aside].¹

In a powerful response to this introduction, Toni Morrison states: “But most importantly—at least for me—there was no mention of their interior life.”²

Inspired by Morrison’s powerful and profoundly important questions, I try to suggest in the litany of epigraphs above and the paper which follows, the long and troubling history of the relationship of Black people to the psychotherapeutic and psychoanalytic institutions and the way in which these discourses have failed to comprehend the enormity of racial slavery. The very premise of returning to the site of the ‘talking cure’ carries with it the dangers and traps which have so often led to these institutions acting as agents of social control of people of African descent. On the other hand, psychoanalytic accounts of subjectivity and psychic life have the capacity to address the complexity of the inner life

¹ Lydia Maria Child, introduction to Harriet Jacobs, Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: Written by Herself (1845) revised edition with introduction by Jean Fagan Yellin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987):

² Toni Morrison “The Site of Memory” in Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures eds. Martha Gever, Trinh T. Minh-ha, Cornel West, and Russell Ferguson (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990): 299-305

of Black people. Considering that, for most of the history of the United States, as Houston Baker has said, “African-Americans were denied the possibility of even a germ of thought³,” I would suggest that psychoanalysis, at the very least, acknowledges the existence of a rich and ambiguous inner life of the Black subject, one denied in white supremacist social science discourses.

My aim here, given the enormity and tentativeness of such a project, is modest. I attempt to read Black psychoanalytic critical theorists alongside Black psychotherapeutic and psychoanalytic clinical practitioners and more conventional psychoanalytic theorists who try to make sense of what Cornel West would call “the absurdity of Black life in America,” in order to point out some directions for further work in the dialectical movement of a psychoanalytically informed theory and praxis in a liberatory framework.⁴

³ Houston A. Baker, Jr. “Critical Memory and the Black Public Sphere” *Public Culture* vol. 7, no. 3 (Fall 1994)

⁴ There has been a growing interest in psychoanalytic cultural politics among Black feminists. Much of the current (and often divergent) thought in this area is usefully gathered in: eds. Elizabeth Abel, Barbara Christian, and Helene Moglen *Female Subjects in Black and White: Race, Psychoanalysis, Feminism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997). For a concise and explicit black feminist critique of psychoanalysis, see Biodun Iginla, entry on “Black Feminist Critique of Psychoanalysis” in ed. Elizabeth Wright *Feminism and Psychoanalysis: A Critical Dictionary* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1992)

Firstly, I will outline those areas in which Black critics, psychotherapists, and cultural practitioners have taken on psychoanalysis as both hermeneutic and clinical discourse in order to figure lines of flight out the pain engendered by white supremacy, patriarchy, and homophobia.

Frantz Fanon is paradigmatic here, though his blindneses around the oppressive weight and violence of patriarchy and homophobia make problematic a wholesale endorsement of his project.⁵ I make no claims a prescriptive cure as this is an ongoing project which far exceeds the space permitted here. I do not wish to install psychoanalysis as a meta-discourse which can then be grafted onto Black subjectivities, thus reproducing the worst racist and pathologizing projects of the psychoanalytic institution. An early instance of the pathologizing impulse involved using the first US census of the “insane” as pro-slavery

⁵ for more on Fanon’s deeply troubling sexual politics, see Kobena Mercer “Decolonisation and Disappointment: Reading Fanon’s Sexual Politics” and Lola Young “Missing Persons: Fantasising Black Women in Black Skin, White Masks” both in Alan Read ed. The Fact of Blackness: Frantz Fanon and Visual Representation. (London: ICA & Seattle: Bay Press, 1996) (hereafter referred to in the text as FB). T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, writing from a largely existentialist position, discusses the ambivalent relation of Fanon to a decolonizing feminist project in Frantz Fanon: Conflicts and Feminisms. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998)

propaganda. This census, conducted in 1840, claimed that “in the slave states one in every 1,559 Negroes was insane or idiotic”.⁶

It is important to keep these racist projects in mind as one grapples with the formation of new black subjectivities and psychoanalytic discourse. After all, “that there can be no last word-not psychically, not politically-is the fundamental principle of psychoanalysis.”⁷

The character of this thesis is characterized by a good deal of speculative thinking because of the extraordinary paucity of work done in the field of slavery and group trauma. I modestly attempt to grasp some of the large and desperate questions which the study of slavery and trauma beg. The title, “The Fright of Real Tears,” is by no means accidental. I would suggest that the reason that the relationship of US racial slavery to massive group psychic trauma has been neglected is that such a discussion is one which brings to the surface a great many unpleasant feelings; feelings many people would rather not discuss in academic discourse. Close consideration of the sheer brutality of slavery

⁶ A. Deutsch. “The First US Census of the Insane (1840) and its Use as Pro-Slavery Propaganda” *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 15 (1944): 469-82

⁷ Jacqueline Rose. Introduction to: Wulf Sachs. Black Hamlet (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996). Originally published as Black Hamlet: The Mind of an African Negro Revealed by Psychoanalysis. (London: G. Bles, 1937)

brings pain to many black people and causes white liberals to shrink in guilt, thus creating an impasse extraordinarily difficult to breach.

In South Africa, Nelson Mandela created the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in order to bring to light the tremendous state-sponsored racialized violence that took place under apartheid. Some have complained that by granting leniency to those who have perpetrated unspeakable crimes, redress to the victims will be inadequate.⁸ However, this attempt by the state to come to terms with its violent past is something that has never happened in the post-Civil Rights US context, and this is manifested in the ongoing and seemingly ineliminable social crises over 'race relations'. I am not suggesting that public recognition of the African genocide would completely heal the wounds of slavery. However, monuments such as the Vietnam Veterans' Wall and The National Holocaust Museum are ways in which the state has tried to grapple with the narratives of horror and violence which constitute the fabric of American life and history.

⁸ for a psychotherapeutic consideration of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, see John Dommissie "The Psychological Effects of Apartheid Psychoanalysis: Social, Moral, and Political Influences" *International Journal of Social Psychiatry* vol. 32, no. 2 (Summer 1986), Brandon Hamber "The Burdens of Truth: An Evaluation of the Psychological Support Services and Initiatives Undertaken by the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission" *American Imago* vol. 55 no. 1 (Winter 1998), and Joyce Hickson and Susan Knegler "Child Shock: Effects of Apartheid on the Mental Health of South Africa's Children" *International Journal for the Advancement of Counseling* vol. 4, no. 2 (June 1991)

Suffice it to recall Kara Walker's artwork, which appears, at first glance, as a series of Victorian black-and-white paper cut-out vignettes, but is in fact a series of ghostly photographic negatives through which can be seen the sexualized violence and psychosis constitutive of slavery. These seemingly innocent, child-like images are the *mise-en-scene* of a barbarity and perversion so incomprehensible that they can only be seen in outline. For to "fill in," or give ontological weight to these spectral images would be to bring the full and dreadful burden of horror into a space of realist representation, in other words, something no one could bear to look at. Kobena Mercer has pointed out that "Obscene means off-scene." And Kara Walker is aware "that what you do not see is all the more horrific, all the more compelling, precisely because you do not see it."⁹ Do not African-American artist Bettye Saar's claims that Walker is acting irresponsibly in creating such images speak volumes not only about the fear of a 'full' representation of slavery, but of the political urgency of working through its spectral, transgenerational effects.

This paper will also explore, in a tentative and interrogative spirit, the ways in which conventional psychoanalytic notions of psychic trauma

⁹ Kobena Mercer. "Decolonisation and Disappointment: Reading Fanon's Sexual Politics" in *FB*: 120-21

and its eventual abreaction might be used to illuminate the unspeakable crimes of slavery, and conversely how African diasporic music might in turn illuminate aspects of trauma specifically not addressed by conventional psychoanalytic discourse.

HISTORICAL AND THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

I was... aware of the contradiction of a colonial culture, of how one lives out the colour-class-colonial dependency experience and of how it could destroy you subjectively...from then on, I could never understand why people thought these structural questions were not connected with the psychic-with emotions and identifications and feelings because, for me, those structures are things you live. I don't just mean they are personal, they are, but they are also institutional, they have real structural properties, they break you, they destroy you.

-Stuart Hall¹⁰

Recent studies emphasize the difficulties that even those directly exposed to extreme trauma have in taking in that experience and re-creating it in some form. How much greater is the problem of death-related knowledge for the next generations. But probing just that difficulty can teach us a great deal about the ways in which the mind explores or resists currents both powerful and amorphous.

-Robert Jay Lifton¹¹

What cannot be talked about can also not be put to rest; and if it is not, the wounds continue to fester from generation to generation.

-Bruno Bettelheim¹²

¹⁰ Stuart Hall, in "The Formation of a Diasporic Intellectual: An Interview with Stuart Hall by Kuan-Hsing Chen" in eds. David Morley & Kuan-Hsing Chen. Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies (New York: Routledge, 1996): 488

¹¹ Foreword to ed. Danieli Yael. International Handbook of Multigenerational Legacies of Trauma (NY: Plenum Press, 1998) (hereafter referred to in the footnotes as Yael)

¹² Afterword to C. Vegh. I Didn't Say Goodbye (NY: Dutton, 1984)

A disavowal of objectivity is crucial to my project, and since there can be no apolitical scholarship, I would like to situate the present project from my enunciative position. The thinking, which led to the current project, comes quite directly from my relationships to Black women who do not and will not conform to what Michele Wallace has described as the “myth of the superwoman.”¹³ This idealized African-American woman is expected, in a racist and patriarchal society, to be productive in what now passes for a black public sphere: a marketplace which places little value on Black life, intelligence, and creativity. So often, normative psychotherapeutic discourse and the Black media turn their attention to the “success stories” of African-American women. Left unsaid in these discourses are, to put it quite bluntly, the experiences of those women whose struggles with depression mean they are unable to get out of bed in the morning.

The discourse of “Black success stories” is the historically understandable reaction to the perceived inability of Black people to thrive and succeed in a nation that has systematically worked to deny Black people mobility, agency and economic empowerment.

¹³ see Michele Wallace. Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman. (London: Verso, 1979)

But what about the Black people whose success is achieved at enormous psychic cost, or those for whom success (and here I am not suggesting that success is synonymous with material accumulation, though it does not preclude the latter) has been a frustrating, painful, and lonely journey? In other words, attention must be paid to pain, loneliness, and anger as everyday structures of feeling to offset maudlin self-help discourses which evacuate political concerns, turning their sole attention to internal change thus deflecting profound consideration of institutionalized white supremacy, patriarchy, and homophobia.

A number of approaches have historically grown up around the relation of Black people to psychoanalytic discourse and subject formation, and techniques of well-being, by which I mean the ways in which Black people find the existential resources necessary in the battle against white supremacy. Literary theorists such as Claudia Tate and Hortense Spillers work on the dialectic between the social and the psychic, extending the boundaries of conventional literary criticism to take up questions of historiography and anthropology in relation to Black people, slavery, and pathologization.

Tate's path-breaking article "Freud's Negro: Psychoanalysis as Enemy and Ally of African-Americans"¹⁴ raises crucial issues about the alliance of Freudian psychoanalytic theory and nineteenth-century scientific racist discourses. She poses the question of whether an organically disfigured psychoanalytic discourse might reveal the repressed racist component of psychoanalytic theory in order to fashion a liberatory psychoanalytic practice. In other words, Tate proposes turning psychoanalysis against itself in order to reveal its gaps and blindnesses around racialized subjectivities.

Spillers is working in a similar direction. Two of her essays deal explicitly with anthropological and historiographical material in order to negotiate the fine and dangerous line between psychoanalytic discourse deployed in the service of the pathologization and criminalization of Black people, and a liberatory psychoanalytic ethics.¹⁵ In her extended and path-

¹⁴ Claudia Tate. "Freud and his 'Negro': Psychoanalysis as Enemy and Ally of African-Americans." *Journal for the Psychoanalysis of Culture and Society* vol. 1 no. 1 (Spring 1996): 53-61; see also Claudia Tate. Black Novels and Psychoanalysis: Desire and the Protocols of Race. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998)

¹⁵ Michele Wallace, among others, has indicated the dangers of the pathologizing impulses of conventional psychoanalytic discourse, "If a black man were to take his clothes off in public, he would be immediately criminalized/pathologized. He would be incarcerated, not viewed as possibly mentally ill" (personal conversation, September, 1997). Additionally, the trope of the 'mad or eccentric genius' which runs through the history of Western letters, from Virginia Woolf to Sylvia Plath, and Dylan Thomas to Jean Genet (to name only a few) is, I would suggest, not available to the black subject. What is of significance here is that Black people are not allowed what might tentatively be

breaking piece in *Boundary 2*,¹⁶ she raises questions around the universalization of the Oedipus complex, what she refers to as the "ur-paradigm of psychoanalytic theory," in relation to two anthropological texts: Marie-Cecile and Edmond Ortigues', Oedipe Africain¹⁷ and Ibrahim Sow's Les Structures Anthropologiques de la Folie en Afrique Noire.¹⁸

Following the approach of scholars such as V.Y. Mudimbe¹⁹, Spillers interrogates these anthropological sources, the former written by an African man, the latter by two white, western anthropologists and finds

called the "luxury of eccentricity" as the site of creative fecundity. In other words, white writers are often praised for flights of fancy made possible by such conditions as manic-depression and schizophrenia, a clear instance of the romanticization of mental illness. I would suggest that black people are criminalized rather understood as "eccentric," the latter a far less perjorative term. Theorist Arthur Jafa has suggested a Black Asylum Initiative in which black geniuses are kidnapped in times of spiritual and mental fatigue and brought into nurturing and healing environments away from the forces of white supremacy.

¹⁶ Hortense Spillers "All The Things You Could Be By Now If Sigmund Freud's Wife Was Your Mother: Psychoanalysis and Race" *Boundary 2* vol. 23, no. 3 (Fall 1996): 87-141

¹⁷ Marie-Cecile & Edmond Ortigues. Oedipe Africain (Paris: Editions L'Harmattan, 1984)

¹⁸ Ibrahim Sow Les Structures Anthropologiques de la Folie en Afrique Noire (Paris: Payot, 1978) translated in English by Joyce Diamanti, Anthropological Structures of Madness in Black Africa (New York: International Universities Press, 1980)

¹⁹ See, for example, among his many other works, V.Y. Mudimbe. "Where is the Real Thing?: Psychoanalysis and African Mythical Narratives." *Cahiers d'Etudes africaines* vol. 28, nos. 3-4 (1987): 311-327. Mudimbe is a self-admitted Jungian, who once embraced Lacanian ideas. For other cogent discussions of the colonialist impulse in ethnography see Christopher L. Miller. Blank Darkness: Africanist Discourse in French. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), Johannes Fabian. Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes its Object. (NY: Columbia University Press, 1983) and a number of the essays in eds. James Clifford & George E. Marcus. Writing Culture: The Politics and Poetics of Ethnography (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986)

Sow's account of an transatlantic Oedipal trauma persuasive. She argues for a contemporary cultural politics that would articulate the "interior intersubjectivity" of the African-American subject. She re-thinks Black agency in terms of a "self-consciously assertive reflexivity," a project that is at once psychoanalytic and political. Her tentative suggestions regarding the long-running debate around the universality of the Oedipus complex allow her to put forward a non-essentialist view of African retentions in the new world. By refuting Fanon's view that the Oedipal drama is not present in Black subjects, Spillers looks at the ways in which the trauma and violence of Middle Passage brought about a massive separation anxiety which remains in contemporary African-American life. But rather than suggesting that the African-American subject retains an essential core of "Africanity," she looks to ways in which such traumatic memory has been inscribed in the body and the psyche.

Spillers also stresses the need for a consideration of "speaking" as opposed to "talking" at the site of the 'talking cure', suggesting that the weekly gatherings at a Black church in Los Angeles to discuss the O. J. Simpson trial were an instance of a "speaking cure."²⁰

²⁰ Hortense Spillers. "All The Things You Could Be By Now if Sigmund Freud's Wife Was Your Mother" *Boundary 2* (Fall 1996)

It might be useful at this point to consider the recent proliferation of self-help texts directed toward African-American women. Among these, the most hopeful and forward-looking is bell hooks' Sisters of the Yam²¹. Given hooks' commitment to Black liberation struggles on the ground and her persistent critique of homophobia and sexism, her project is grounded in an understanding of the dialectic between the social and the psychic. Her approach is sympathetic to those Black women who have found conventional talk therapy approaches unsuited to their needs. Michele Wallace has also pointed to the need to found an African-American therapeutic practice which begins from Black oral traditions.²²

Another strand of work, which explicitly combines hermeneutic and clinical approaches to social misery is exemplified by Amina Mama's Beyond The Masks: Race, Gender, and Subjectivity.²³ Mama, a Black woman, is a practicing psychologist/psychotherapist in London, whose work combines Gramscian approaches to ideology, and Fanonian, Lacanian, and Althusserian approaches to subjectivity with careful

²¹ bell hooks. Sisters of the Yam (Boston: South End Press, 1994)

²² Michele Wallace. "The Search For the 'Good Enough' Mammy: Multiculturalism, Popular Culture, and Psychoanalysis" in ed. David Theo Goldberg. Multiculturalism: A Critical Reader (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1994)

²³ Amina Mama. Beyond the Masks: Race, Gender, and Subjectivity. (New York: Routledge, 1995)

attention to the narratives of her Black female client/patients. This dialectic of the hermeneutic and clinical dimensions of psychoanalytic discourse is remarkable for its path breaking methodological approach. Mama points to the divergence between her thinking and that of the American school of "Black psychology", which works with ego-psychology to a greater degree. Ego psychology is, broadly speaking, a normative discourse which seeks to return the patient/client to "productivity" in late capitalism and for that reason, is certainly highly problematic for black people in psychotherapeutic contexts. Jacques Lacan defined ego psychology succinctly when he termed it "the theology of free enterprise."²⁴

The discourse of "Black psychology," of which Mama is highly critical, is worth discussing here in detail because it undergirds a great deal of the clinical practice of Black therapists in the US context. In the inaugural issue of the *Journal of Black Psychology*, Wade W. Nobles, who presently runs the Westside Community Mental Health Center in Oakland,

²⁴ Lacan's view of ego psychology, and other psychoanalytic epistemologies was prefigured in US black intellectual discourse by the mid 1950s. See Charles I. Glicksburg. "Psychoanalysis and the Negro Problem" Phylon: The Atlanta University Review of Race and Culture vol. 17 no. 1 (1956)

California, delineates his conception of the “Negro Self-Concept.”²⁵

Nobles, still a prominent voice in the field, suggests, quite rightly, that: “it is indeed no accident that in this society the subjects of social and psychological studies are in some capacity the powerless.” He then goes on to discuss the parallels between ‘political colonialism’ and ‘scientific colonialism,’ adding that the latter directly implicates the psychoanalytic institution.

The Journal of Black Psychology,²⁶ which is perhaps unwittingly aided and abetted by The Moynihan Report²⁷, reports on aspects of “Black psychology” using the empirical methods so commonly encountered in racist social science assessments of “Black personality” and “Black pathology”. By starting with the assumption that such a monolithic entity as “Black psychology” exists, the ideological position of the journal already situates it in what I consider to be a profoundly normative discourse. In an article entitled "Awareness: The Key to Black

²⁵ Wade W. Nobles. “Extended Self: Rethinking the So-Called Negro Self-Concept” *Journal of Black Psychology* vol. 1, no. 1 (1974): 15-24

²⁶ in particular, see the inaugural issue of the *Journal of Black Psychology* vol. 1 no. 1 (Fall 1974)

²⁷ Daniel P. Moynihan “The Moynihan Report” [The Negro Family: The Case for National Action.] Washington, DC: US Department of Labor, 1965]

Mental Health," Luther X (Weems) delineates a "Black disorder" called "white psychopathology":

the white psychopath is a person whose familial and cultural experiences have so duplicated the modal white experience in this country that they have in fact developed a Western consciousness which disposes them to markedly similar disorders as those experienced by Europeans within their cultures.²⁸

Closely related to the "Black psychology discourse" though far more explicitly political is the Afrocentric approach to an African-American therapeutic practice found in the work of Marcia Sutherland.²⁹

What becomes clear in a reading of *The Journal of Black Psychology* (hereafter referred to in the text as *JBP*), particularly in its early issues from the mid 1970s, is the extent to which the groundwork was prepared in the journal for the rise of Molefi Asante's Afrocentric discourse, the popularity of which has grown exponentially since the first issue of the

²⁸ Luther X (Weems) "Awareness: The Key to Black Mental Health" *Journal of Black Psychology* vol. 3 no. 3 (Fall 1976)

²⁹ see, in particular, Marcia Sutherland. *Black Authenticity: A Psychology for Liberating People of African Descent*. (Chicago: Third World Press, 1997). Though the text makes essentialist claims for the existence of an 'authentic black psychology,' (as psychic configuration rather than practice) it is a powerful antidote to the proliferation of color-blind self-help texts, obviously too numerous to cite here. One of the very few exceptions is Angela Mitchell with Kenise Herring. *What the Blues Is All About: Black Women Overcoming Stress and Depression* (NY: Perigree, 1998). See also Evelyn C. White. *The Black Womens' Health Book* (Seattle: Seal Press, 1994)

journal in 1974³⁰. Here, a genealogy of the concept of the “Black personality” or “African personality” put forward in *JBP* might be helpful in understanding how the National Association of Black Psychologists came to codify the notion of a fixed, coherent “Black personality” in its platform.

In the aforementioned “Extended Self...” piece by Nobles, the author offers a schematic representation of the binary distinctions between what he calls “European World View” and “African World View.” (I should add that, for Nobles, the latter statement refers to all African diasporic subjects.) Within this schematic it is not difficult to detect the direct influence of certain strands of Negritude thought espoused by Leopold Sedar Senghor. Nobles, like Senghor, suggests that the “African World View” is composed of elements in direct opposition to those of the “European World View” At the center of Nobles’ schematic is the suggestion that the “African ethos” is “one with nature,” not dissimilar to similar claims made by Senghor.³¹ Where the two part ways is clear: Senghor suggests that the French language be taken up by the

³⁰ The key text here is, of course, Molefi Kete Asante. *The Afrocentric Idea* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987)

³¹ Leopold Sedar Senghor. *Leopold Sedar Senghor: The Collected Prose and Poetry* trans. Clive Reed and Alan Wake (London: Heinemann, 1981)

Francophone African subject in order to express his or her negritude, while Nobles calls for a countersupremacist stance which posits an “African World View.”

A close reading of the work published in *JBP* points to the absence of a consideration of the role of subjectivity and the unconscious.³² As soon as the therapists involved in the *JBP* detected what they believed to be a unitary, fixed “Black personality,” they appear unable to account for the disruptive force of desire and the resistance to singular, fixed identities which lie at the heart of psychic life. The fixing of a “Black personality” effectively circumscribes Black subjectivities, flattening and homogenizing Black subjects and denying the possibility of Black cultural differences along axes of class, gender, and sexual orientation. For to accord white supremacy omnipotence is, I would suggest, an unwitting move towards curtailing Black social agency.

³² US ego psychology approaches have also consistently failed to look at the unconscious life of the black subject. See, for instance: V. Adembimpe "Overview: White Norms and Psychiatric Diagnosis of Black Patients" *American Journal of Psychiatry* 138 (Fall 1981), H. Weidman . "Falling Out: A Diagnostic and Treatment Problem Viewed from a Transcultural Perspective" *Social Science and Medicine* vol. 13, no. 2 (1979), in which Weidman characterizes black responses to intolerable social conditions as a medical complaint, thus pathologizing particular Black structures of feeling. In a British context, see also the heavily empirical but politically useful work found in: Philip Rack. Race, Culture, and Mental Disorder (London: Tavistock, 1982) and Suman Fernando Mental Health, Race, and Culture (New York: St. Martin's, 1991)

One should not, however, make the mistake of dismissing too rapidly Afrocentric discourse that concerns itself with slavery and trauma. Work in the humanities and non-Afrocentric Black studies discourses has neglected the psychic dimension of slavery and trauma in US history, but Afrocentricity is unafraid of confronting that issue quite directly. Thus, though Afrocentricity may have blindspots in regards to gender and sexual orientation and a problematic relation to potentially fascistic forms of nationalism³³, it has kept in its purview slavery and the ways in which it continues to wreak havoc at the level of the social and psychic.³⁴

There is a contemporary movement among African-American feminist psychotherapists, which opposes the essentialist notions put forward in the pages of *JBP*. Clinical psychotherapist Beverly Greene discusses the blind spots around racism and sexism in conventional psychotherapy. Greene points out that "effective psychotherapy with African-American women explicitly requires cultural literacy of its

³³ For the idea that Afrocentric black nationalisms often come dangerously close to novel and unexpected forms of fascism, see Paul Gilroy's highly controversial and provocative essay: "Revolutionary Conservatism and the Tyrannies of Unanimism" *New Formations* 28 (1996) and Paul Gilroy. The Status of Difference: From Epidermalisation to Nano-Politics. (London: Goldsmiths College Centre for Urban and Community Research Occasional Papers, 1995)

³⁴ Perhaps the most powerful evidence of this is Sultan Abdul Latif & Naimah Latif. Slavery: The African-American Psychic Trauma (Chicago: Latif Communications Group, 1994). It is not unimportant to note the extreme difficulty in obtaining this text, one which many Afrocentric bookstores do not sell.

practitioners"³⁵. While her point is well-taken, the currents of her argument suggest that 'racial sensitivity' is a pre-requisite for a non-dominating and oppressive psychotherapeutic practice, and this leaves unquestioned the role of subjectivity, desire, and identification in the therapist-client relationship. Though Greene and Virginia Hammond emerge from a somewhat conventional psychodynamic psychotherapeutic discourse, the work of African-American feminist psychoanalysts is revealing for its direct confrontation with the socio-political and the psychic. In a recent, pioneering essay, Kimberlyn Leary states:

I attempt to extend the psychoanalytic conversation about race and ethnicity by discussing the intersubjectivity of race and racial difference...I suggest that contemporary psychoanalytic formulations and multicultural perspectives from outside of psychoanalysis can together create more meaningful conceptualizations which take into account the lived realities of race and the ways in which these may be shaped by individual psychology³⁶

³⁵ Beverly Greene "African-American Women: Derivatives of Racism and Sexism in Psychotherapy" in eds. Joan Chrisler and Doris Howard, New Directions in Feminist Psychology (New York: Springer, 1992): 122-139; and eds. Lillian Comas-Díaz and Beverly Greene Women of Color: Integrating Ethnic and Gender Identities in Psychotherapy (New York : Guilford Press, 1994). See also: Virginia W. Hammond "'Conscious Subjectivity' or Use of One's Self in Therapeutic Process" in ed. Lenora Fulani, The Psychopathology of Everyday Racism and Sexism (New York: Harrington Park Press, 1988)

³⁶ Kimberlyn Leary "Race, Self-Disclosure, and 'Forbidden Talk': Race and Ethnicity in Contemporary Clinical Practice" *Psychoanalytic Quarterly* vol. 67, no. 2 (1997): 163-189. Leary's other work, surprisingly overlooked among psychoanalytic theorists in the humanities, despite the fact that she brings to bear post-structuralist and 'post-colonial' (including Fanonian) critiques of the psychoanalytic institution, is also richly suggestive. See, for example: "Psychoanalytic Problems and Postmodern Solutions" *Psychoanalytic*

Leary's comments here echo Spillers' notion of an "interior intersubjectivity"; the ego's dialogue with the disciplinary super-ego, and the places where the social and political are inscribed in the psychic, understanding that this is never simply a unidirectional process.

A NON-PRESCRIPTIVE FORM OF HEALING

I listen to Charlie Parker, John Coltrane, and Aretha Franklin for the sheer pleasure and joy they bring me, but also because they give me reason to go on living.

-Cornel West

Thanks to hip-hop and the magic of digital science, we can now know how black culture felt to those living in the past, though the discourse around our feelings now is impoverished for lack of a blues culture commensurably *psychoanalytical* to arouse *emotions* in the heart of the postmodern, nay, post-mortem black breast. (emphasis mine)

- Greg Tate

Quarterly vol. 63 no. 3 (1994); "Reaching Across the Boundaries of Culture and Class: Widening the Scope of Psychotherapy" *Journal of American Psychoanalysis* vol. 45 no. 3 (Summer 1997); "Interpreting in the Dark: Race and Ethnicity in Psychoanalytic Psychotherapy" *Psychoanalytic Psychology* vol. 12 no. 1 (Winter 1995), "Race in Psychoanalytic Space" *Gender and Psychoanalysis* vol. 2 no. 2 (Fall 1997), and "Freud and Beyond: A History of Modern Psychoanalytic Thought" *Contemporary Psychology* vol. 42 no. 2 (February 1997). The work of clinical psychoanalyst Dorothy Evans Holmes is also suggestive in this regard. See "Race and Transference in Psychoanalysis and Psychotherapy" *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* vol. 73 part 1 (Spring 1992).

If we are to take seriously the notion that massive group psychic trauma such as that of the African slave trade and the Middle Passage might have considerable effects on the generations who follow those who have been traumatized, and I believe we must, then it becomes an urgent ethical and political task to work out how such trauma might be confronted so that, to paraphrase Marx "the tradition of all the dead generations *no longer* continue to weigh like a nightmare on the brains of the living."³⁷

As I commented earlier, the extraordinarily limited discourse around slavery and trauma led me to Holocaust Studies scholarship in which serious attention *is* paid to the suggestion that massive group psychic trauma does not end with the death of those who experienced traumatic events, but rather lives on in the psyches of their descendants.³⁸ Thus,

³⁷ Karl Marx. The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon. (London: New Left Review Books, 1967)

³⁸ This is not the place in which to address the range of work done around the Holocaust and its ghosts, but that work has been instructive in understanding how group psychic trauma might be approached. For a sobering and disturbing clinical perspective, see Miriam L. Vogel "Gender as a Factor in the Transgenerational Transmission of Trauma" *Women and Therapy* vol. 15 no. 2 (1994), Nechama Sorscher & Lisa J. Cohen "Trauma in Children of Holocaust Survivors: Transgenerational Effects" *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* vol. 67 no. 3 (July 1997), Cecilia H. Schulberg "An Unwanted Inheritance: Healing Transgenerational Trauma of the Nazi Holocaust Through the Bonny Method of Guided Imagery and Music" *The Arts in Psychotherapy* vol. 24 no. 4 (Winter 1997), Uriel Last "The Transgenerational Impact of Holocaust Traumatization: Current State of the Evidence" *International Journal of Mental Health* vol. 17 no. 4 (Winter 1988). These essays address the notion of transgenerational trauma among Jewish subjects following the Nazi Holocaust in clinical contexts. As can be noted from

there is a need to look to analogous historical events in order to begin to grasp slavery and its after-effects. It is imperative for this political project to abandon what might be called “comparative” genocidal discourse, in which one attempts to establish a hierarchy of suffering. We know very well from the lessons of Black feminists that to posit a hierarchy of oppression blocks the emergence of truly radical political projects.³⁹ However, an alarming number of young Jewish men and women have sought out psychotherapy due to Holocaust flashbacks, which often arise in the context of nightmares in which their grandparents told stories of the concentration camps. This suggests that story telling of former slaves, which are passed on through generations of African-Americans, have the same effect.⁴⁰ Suzanne Lori-Parks’ *The America Play* brings to light the historical events in the all-black southern town of Rosewood:

the dates of the citations, the clinical work in this area has been growing rapidly over the past decade. There is very little work in the clinical psychotherapeutic field on transgenerational trauma prior to the mid 1980s in the US context. These essays provide powerful empirical evidence that trauma is not simply a metaphor deployed in the humanities to talk about memory and history, but a very troubling fact in the psychic lives of those whose ancestors experienced horrendous psychic and physical violent traumas.

³⁹ Perhaps the most well known and cogent essay to address this problematic is: Kimberle Crenshaw. “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, Violence Against Women of Color” *Stanford Law Review*. vol 43 no 6 (July 1991)

⁴⁰ The extraordinary and painful stories told by former slaves is found in eds. Ira Berlin, Marc Favreau, and Steven F. Miller *Remembering Slavery: African Americans Talk About Their Personal Experiences of Slavery and Emancipation*. (NY: The New Press, 1998) This

The impact of the conspiracy of silence is chillingly evident in an interview with Ms. Robie Mortin, a survivor of the week-long rampage of a white mob in Florida in 1923, during which the largely Black town of Rosewood was burned to the ground, and many were killed or wounded, and others were forced to flee and hide for days in the swamps. Ms. Mortin said that her life was ruined, and her birthright taken away, by that week. “My grandma told me not to say a word. My grandma said never to look back. We weren’t supposed to talk about Rosewood”.⁴¹

As James Hannaham has suggested “What’s left in posterity [is] what Parks, in ‘The America Play’, calls the “the Great Hole of History”.

Similarly, in Robert O’Hara’s play ‘Insurrection: Holding History’, the protagonist Ron feels that he is “holding history” when he wraps his arms around his great-great-grandfather, who was a slave.⁴² The tremendous gap between work done in the empirical sciences and that done in what gets called the 'humanities' makes clear that the epistemologies of these

text echoes in many ways narratives of holocaust survivors. For a close consideration of Nazi holocaust survivors and the politics of memory and healing in a Jewish diasporic context see eds. Jonathan Boyarin and Daniel Boyarin. Jews and Other Differences: The New Jewish Cultural Studies (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press,1997), Jonathan Boyarin. Polish Jews in Paris: The Ethnography of Memory (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), Jonathan Boyarin. Storm from Paradise: The Politics of Jewish Memory (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), ed. Jonathan Boyarin Remapping Memory: The Politics of Timespace (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), ed. Efraim Sicher. Breaking Crystal: Writing and Memory after Auschwitz (Urbana: University of Illinois Press,1998, and L.L. Langer. Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990)

⁴¹ Yael. p. 6

⁴² Robert O’Hara. *Insurrection: Holding History*. Play directed by the author, produced by the Joseph Papp Public Theater/New York Shakespeare Festival, December 1996, unpublished manuscript, cited in Yael p.6

broadly-defined fields must be brought into a dialogical relation if any fruitful *clinical /therapeutic* work is to begin.

If we peer through a recurrent blind-spot in psychoanalytic discourse, the centrality of *affect*, we can see how this gap might reveal the possibilities for the working out of trauma that psychoanalysis attempts to do, but that have long been at work in various musical forms of the African diaspora, particularly dub music. It was already Nathaniel Mackey who pointed out that:

Of the post-bop innovations of such musicians as Albert Ayler and Sun Ra, (Amiri) Baraka writes 'New Black Music is this: find the self, then kill it.' To kill the self is to show it to be fractured, unfixed. The dismantling of the unified subject found in recent critical theory is old news when it comes to black music.⁴³

Far from being an exercise in intellectual sophistry, my intention here is to bring into a productive, dialogical relation both psychoanalytic discourse and black music in order to begin to confront the horrors of slavery that have yet to pass into representation. If we are to take seriously the notion that music is a non-representational art form, which, as it were, flies under the radar of linguistic and visual systems of signification which ground so much post-structuralist, and, I might add,

⁴³ Nathaniel Mackey. "Limbo, Dislocation, Phantom Limb: Wilson Harris and the Caribbean Occasion" in Discrepant Engagement: Dissonance, Cross-Culturality, and Experimental Writing (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993)(hereafter referred to in the footnotes as DE)

psychoanalytic discourse, then we must look beyond the 'linguistic turn' inaugurated by Saussure and his followers. J.L. Austin's work on the speech act and its subsequent rearticulation in contemporary theories of performativity also fail to register that dimension of the social and psychic which dwell outside the domain of the linguistic. As far as conventional psychoanalytic and post-structuralist discourse is concerned, particularly of the Lacanian variety, we are treading on dangerous ground in suggesting that linguistic ways of knowing might not be entirely appropriate in grasping the enormity of the psychic trauma visited upon enslaved Africans and their ancestors. Lacan's famous claim that the "unconscious is structured like a language" must be seriously contested.⁴⁴

As a starting point, I would like to refer to richly suggestive remarks made by cultural critic and filmmaker Arthur Jafa regarding what he calls the "lost and the found, the rupture and repair of black life on a structural level."⁴⁵ I will quote Jafa here at length for two reasons. Firstly, because these remarks were made as part of an unpublished lecture and secondly,

⁴⁴ a cogent challenge to this Lacanian commonplace can be found in Jean-Luc Nancy & Phillippe Lacoue-Labarthe "The Unconscious is Deconstructed like an Affect" (Part I of "The Jewish People Do Not Dream")" *Stanford Literature Review* n. 6 (1989)

⁴⁵ Arthur Jafa. "69" in ed. Gina Dent. Black Popular Culture (Seattle: Bay Press, 1992)

I feel that they speak directly and poignantly to the project in which I am engaged:

Understanding who African-Americans are really has to do with looking at what I term "primal sites". And primal sites are essentially those group experiences that reconfigure who we are as a community. More often than not, they're psychic experiences. One of the critical primal sites would be The Middle Passage. If you understand the level of horror directed towards a group of people, then you start getting some sense of the magnitude, impact, and level of trauma that that had on the African-American community, and how it was particularly one of the earliest group experiences that reshaped or reconfigured what I would call an "African psyche" into what was the beginning of an African-American psyche. Black people were emancipated from these boats into a world that said "not only was this (The Middle Passage) not a bad thing, this was a good thing. This was the basis of the economic development of this country that we're trying to construct. You are not human beings." We came right off those boats into a world that fractured our families, even the tentative connections that we created in those spaces, in those boats, were fractured almost immediately. Once we step into the Americas, and we start dealing with so-called "American experience." a number of things begin to underlie experiences we have as a group. One is the sense of loss or absence, which I think would be a good place to talk about Miles, a lot of Miles' "postural semantics," the way he occupies social space, speaks to this question of loss, management of loss, and silence, and not knowing. The 'not knowing' comes in, for example, if you had a family, or a wife or a child. If somebody comes to me and my daughter and they shoot my daughter right next to me, it's not to say that I'm not going to be angry about it, but I really know what to do with that anger in a certain kind of sense. Either I'm going to try to kill them or go into revenge mode. Whereas, if somebody comes and takes my daughter, and takes her out into the world, in a world which I can pretty much assume is a horrible world, a world of slavery, and I never know what happens to her. That's a different kind of hurt, that's a different kind of pain. Because it's pain not only with a sense of loss but also a sense of not knowing. Now, for example, you can look at Black music and see certain structural things that really are about reclaiming this whole sense of absence, loss, not knowing. One of things I'm thinking of is dub music or dub structures. You can see, in the classical sense, in dub music in Jamaica whereby basically what they would do is take recordings and by producing them in a certain way, they would underline the absence of certain kind of presence. For example, if you think of the bass in dub music, where it's very pronounced, fat, it takes up a lot of space, and then you have this cat-scratch guitar, and then you have a drum beat behind it, and they're all playing simultaneously. And then at a certain point in the music, everything would drop out except for one thing; it'll just be the bass left. And what ends up happening when the bass remains, it underlines all the things that are gone. Then, at a certain point, the other

instruments will be re-introduced into the fabric of the music. You can see this also in jazz. The point is that if you look at something on an apparently arbitrary structural level, it ends up really speaking about common experiences because the structure of the music; about things dropping out and coming back in, really is reclaiming this whole sense of loss, rupture, and repair that is very, very common across the experience of Black people in the diaspora.⁴⁶

Jafa's highly suggestive and provocative remarks offer powerful evidence that trauma is *constitutive* rather than *reflective* of life in African diasporic lifeworlds. Jafa's comments resonate closely with James Snead's richly suggestive thinking regarding repetition as a figure of black culture:

Black culture, in the "cut," builds accidents into its *coverage*, almost as if to control their unpredictability. Itself a kind of cultural *coverage*, this magic of the "cut" attempts to confront accident and rupture not by covering them over but by making room for them inside the system itself. In one unexpected sphere of European consciousness, however, such an orientation towards the "cut" has survived: on the level of the psychological phenomenon which Freud fully details as the eruption of seemingly unwilling repetitions of the past into the individual's present *life-repetition compulsion*.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Arthur Jafa. unpublished keynote address. Organization of Black Designers Conference Chicago, IL October 1994 (Organization of Black Designers/ Audio Visual Education Network)

⁴⁷ James A. Snead. "Repetition as a Figure of Black Culture" in eds. Trinh T. Minh-ha, Cornel West et. al Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures (Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 1992)

Nathaniel Mackey has suggested, in reference to jazz, that “we need more than content analyses based on assumptions of representationality,”⁴⁸ and Walter Pater once commented that “all art constantly aspires towards the condition of music,”⁴⁹ by which he meant that music was not saddled with the burden of representation. But as Mackey suggests, black music as both “fugitive aesthetic” and communicative act, contains within it the possibility to speak, in a dialogical relation, to black structures of feeling that are not circumscribed by white supremacy.

Mackey and Pater's rich suggestions, understood here in dialogical relation, might be a place to begin considering the ways in which psychic trauma visited upon generations of Black people in the New World, in the context of what Cornel West has called "New World African modernity,"⁵⁰ continue to generate intolerable levels of pain, and the ways in which that psychic pain is passed on. This also directs us to a reconsideration not only of the temporal scale of the healing rituals of psychoanalysis, but the

⁴⁸ Nathaniel Mackey “Other: From Noun to Verb” *Representations* 39 (Summer 1992): 51-70 (hereafter referred to in the footnotes as *Other*)

⁴⁹ Walter Pater. "The School of Giorgione" in The Renaissance (Cleveland, OH: World Publishing Company, 1961)

⁵⁰ Cornel West. introduction to Keeping Faith: Race and Philosophy in America (NY: Routledge, 1993):

modes through which they are figured, which are, more often than not, structured around the linguistic utterance. If we move beyond the notion that relief from misery in the analyst-analysand paradigm must take the form of dialogical linguistic utterances into the realm of the not-quite representational, it allows consideration of music as homeopathic art which addresses forms of suffering that exceed the grasp of the linguistic.

If we are to take seriously conventional psychoanalytic notions of trauma and its subsequent mourning and loss, then it might help to situate the chronology of psychoanalytic narratives regarding trauma within a specific African diasporic context. In their entry on "psychic trauma" in The Language of Psychoanalysis, psychoanalytic theorists Jean Laplanche and J.B. Pontalis suggest that the trauma is constituted by:

An event in the subject's life defined by its intensity, by the subject's incapacity to respond adequately to it, and by the upheaval and long-lasting effects that it brings about in the psychical organisation. In 'economic' terms, the trauma is characterized by an influx of excitations that is excessive by any standard of the subject's tolerance and capacity to master such excitations and work them out psychically.⁵¹

⁵¹ Jean Laplanche & J.B. Pontalis The Language of Psycho-Analysis (trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith) (New York, Norton: 1974): 465-469. (hereafter referred to in the footnotes as Laplanche & Pontalis)

Cathy Caruth makes explicit the urgent political task of recovering the traumatic past in order to exorcise the ghosts of terror which continue to haunt the traumatized:

The phenomenon of trauma has seemed to become all-inclusive but it has done so precisely because it brings us to the limits of our understanding. If psychoanalysis, psychiatry, sociology, and even literature are beginning to hear each other anew in the study of trauma, it is because they are listening through the radical disruption and gaps of traumatic experience.⁵²

Her suggestion that trauma brings us to "the limits of understanding" implies a certain relation to the place of re-presentation in a process of bringing the scene of trauma to the site of healing, particularly if "understanding" is not simply grounded in a hermeneutic or epistemological frame, but is thought of in terms of the difficulty of representation.

I want to continue to insist on the importance of Caruth's notion of the limits of understanding as they relate to the question of representation because I think that notion holds some valuable insights into how trauma might be worked through for black subjects. She goes on to state: "The trauma is the confrontation with an event, that in its unexpectedness or horror, cannot be placed within the schemes of prior

⁵² Cathy Caruth. "Introduction" to *Psychoanalysis, Culture, and Trauma*. *American Imago* (vol. 48, no. 1) 1991

knowledge.". Thus, trauma can not simply be inserted into a pre-existing epistemological frame. In fact, its very "presence" is a fracture of the *episteme* on the part of the traumatized subject. Again Caruth points to the persistence of traumatic after-effects: "In its repeated imposition as both image and amnesia, the trauma thus seems to invoke the difficult truth of a history that is constituted by the very incomprehensibility of its occurrence".⁵³

However, as Caruth points out later in her introduction: "the impossibility of a comprehensible story, however, does not mean the denial of a *transmissible* truth."⁵⁴ (emphasis mine)

Kobena Mercer has suggested that, until the pain of trauma can pass into representation, the violence keeps coming back. With that in mind, I think it is necessary to examine the ways in which distinct African diasporic communities have found recourse to forms of healing that take into account the painful question of whether Black people in the new world "can be reconciled with a past that can never be fully known."⁵⁵

⁵³ Cathy Caruth. "Introduction" to *Psychoanalysis, Culture, and Trauma.. American Imago* (vol. 48, no. 4) 1991

⁵⁴ Caruth, p. 421

⁵⁵ Kobena Mercer. "To Unbury the Disremembered Body" in New Histories (Boston, MA: The Institute of Contemporary Art, 1996): 165

Black people in the west, through the unnamable histories of racial terror, have had to make sense of what Cornel West calls, in an existential mode, "the absurdity of Black life." One of the ways in which this has been undertaken is through the potent and extraordinarily influential power of music; from what Paul Gilroy has called the "slave sublime" to the present. It is extraordinarily difficult to account for the overwhelming global cultural influence of music of the African diaspora in late modernity. How is it that despite its continued commodification and circulation through channels of global capital, Black music flies above the circle of the commodity form to address structures of feeling that cannot quite be comprehended in linguistic terms? The crucial and oft-repeated mistake to avoid here however, is to consign Black music to the realm of the non-intellectual and purely reflexive, as if driven by blind sensorial impulse. To commit that mistake is to ally oneself with long-running racist discourses around black modes of expression.

This brings us back to the vexed question of trauma and representation. In the tentative spirit of this writing, I would suggest that Black music in the West might be regarded as what Wilson Harris has

called a "phantom limb"⁵⁶ which tries to reconstitute the fragments left by "the ruined fabric of the shattered human." Was this not Fanon's point when he stated that: "I was indignant; I demanded an explanation. Nothing happened . I burst apart. Now the fragments have been put together by another self."⁵⁷

Given Pater and Mackey's insistence on the non-representational character of music, we might suggest that Black music, as a homeopathic art, is that which exists in a para-representational space; that is in the volatile and unstable space in which narrative and visual figuration as modes of representation cannot yet reach but music might begin to approximate. If trauma is unrepresentable, how might music be the beginning of a non-teleological process in which the horrors of the past move through what might provisionally be called a para-representational space, such as music; in forms such as the 'blue note' in jazz, before those memories can pass into psychic representation at the level of consciousness?

⁵⁶ Nathaniel Mackey. Bedouin Hornbook: From a Broken Bottle Traces of Perfume Still Emanate (Callaloo Fiction Series) (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 1986): For a Cartesian view of the role of the phantom limb see Rene Descartes. "Meditation VI", in E.S. Haldane and G.T.R. Ross. The Philosophical Works of Descartes (2 Vols). (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 189

⁵⁷ Frantz Fanon. "The Fact of Blackness" in Black Skin, White Masks trans. Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1991): 109

With Wilson Harris, we might conceive of Black music as "figurative acts of memory...spectral and phantom rememberings of a dismembered past":

It has taken us a couple of generations to begin-just begin-to perceive, in this phenomenon, an activation of subconscious and sleeping resources in the phantom limb of dis-remembered slave and god.⁵⁸

So, I would like to ask whether we might understand Laplanche and Pontalis' notion of the "foreign body" of trauma at the heart of the psyche in relation to Harris' notion of the "phantom limb," through the lens of James Snead's' remarks on the omnipresent "cut" in African diasporic music. As Snead states, "if there is a (non-teleological) goal in black culture, it is always deferred; it continually "cuts" back to the start, in the musical meaning of the "cut" as an abrupt, seemingly unmotivated break...a willed return to a prior series." In other words, Snead's notion of the "cut" as a distinctive feature of African diasporic music, resonates closely with Harris' metaphor of the phantom limb precisely because Harris derives that metaphor from the violent and distinctly non-metaphorical loss of limbs among those Africans transported across the Atlantic; limbs lost to enchainment, physical restraint, and infection.

⁵⁸ Wilson Harris, cited in DE: 169

At this point, we might turn to the suggestive work of Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, whose theories of transgenerational haunting are scorned by much of the psychoanalytic establishment due to the proximity of their thinking to the distinctly non-secular notions of ghosts and phantoms. Nicholas Rand, the editor and translator of their groundbreaking work, The Shell and The Kernel, captures the spirit of their thinking when he remarks that:

One could say metaphorically that Abraham calls for a psychoanalytic form of honoring the dead with rightful burial. But in the psychoanalytic realm, laying the dead to rest and cultivating our ancestors implies uncovering their...nameless and undisclosed suffering. *We should engage in this unveiling and understanding of the former existence of the dead not because we may want to appease them or prevent them from perpetrating their nocturnal pranks, but because, unsuspected, the dead continue to lead a devastating psychic half-life in us.*⁵⁹ (emphasis mine)

When Wilson Harris speaks of Yurokon, a protagonist in his novel Palace of the Peacock, he suggests that the "music of Yurokon's flute (was) a way of speaking a truth cannot be embodied."⁶⁰ Nathaniel Mackey points out that:

the phantom limb is a felt recovery, a felt advance beyond

⁵⁹ Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok. The Shell and the Kernel: Renewals of Psychoanalysis (volume one) Nicholas T. Rand. ed. and translator (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994): 167 (hereafter referred to in the footnotes as A&T)

⁶⁰ Harris. p. 175

severance and limitation which contends with and questions conventional reality, that it's a feeling for what's not there and which reaches beyond as it calls into question what is. Music as phantom limb arises from a capacity for feeling which holds itself apart from numb contingency. The phantom limb haunts and critiques a condition in which feeling, consciousness itself, would seem to have been cut off.⁶¹

In the light of Mackey's discussion of Harris' notion of the phantom limb, let us examine closely Abraham and Torok's notion of the phantom in their idiosyncratic psychoanalytic discourse. Nicolas Abraham states that: "Clearly the phantom has a function different from dynamic repression. The phantom's periodic and compulsive return lies beyond the scope of symptom-formation in a sense of a return of the repressed; it works like a *ventriloquist*, like a stranger with the subject's own mental topography."⁶² (emphasis mine.)

This notion is not dissimilar to one put forward by Mladen Dolar when he discusses traditional Euro-American musicological approaches in relation to the voice

The bones, flesh, and blood of the voice were divided without remainder into a web of structural traits, checklists of presences and absences. The inaugural gesture of phonology was thus the total reduction of the voice as the substance of language. Phonology, true to its

⁶¹ Nathaniel Mackey. "Sound and Sentiment, Sound and Symbol" *Callaloo* vol. 10 no. 1 (Winter 1987). Further elaboration on the thematic of this suggestive essay can be found in Kamau Brathwaite, ConVERSations with Nathaniel Mackey (NY: We Press, 1999)

⁶² A&T, p. 173

apocryphal etymology, was about killing the voice....⁶³

These suggestive remarks speak directly to the problematic being addressed here, i.e.-since slaves were so long denied literacy, what did the attempt at killing the voice produce? It produced a form of music in which language was not the privileged element, in which the tonality of the voice, the timbre communicated misery, joy, as well as densely coded messages regarding lines of flight out of plantation space, through the power of music not always or necessarily to heal, but to communicate.⁶⁴

Thus, it seems crucial to explore more fully the role of music as that which lies outside the field of linguistic (conscious) representation in the classical western sense of the term. Painful events and their transgenerational transmission might well result in the creation of art that is also painful. Thus, black music functions in a homeopathic relation to suffering, not a pharmacopic one. How else to account for a lyric such as "Everytime I hear the sound of the whip/ my blood runs cold/ I remember

⁶³ Mladen Dolar "The Object Voice" in eds. Slavoj Zizek and Renata Salecl. Gaze and Voice as Love Objects (SIC 1) (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996): 9

⁶⁴ For more on this extra-linguistic form of communication among slaves in the US South, see the essay "Characteristics of Negro Expression" in Zora Neale Hurston. The Sanctified Church (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1981). In this piece, Hurston recalls the story of High John de Conquer. The song he helps the slaves find "had no words. It was a tune that you could bend and shape in most any way you wanted to fit the words and feelings that you had."

on the slave ship / How they brutalized our very souls" (Robert Nesta Marley)? The Letter domesticates and softens trauma. Black music contains within it a densely coded communicative power to speak to the appalling, unresolved traumas of the past that are reiterated in daily life in a white supremacist world. In other words, how do you cope with a trauma that keeps coming back? If Freud's widely accepted notion of trauma in relation to repetition compulsion and symptom formation is taken beyond its conventional purview, how might we begin to revise that notion in the light of not only what might now be termed "flashbacks" in the discourse of post-traumatic stress disorder, but as reiterations of a traumatic series of events which took place among one's ancestors over two hundred years ago.

This is precisely the point at which the question of temporality becomes far more complex than Freud seemed able to elaborate. It might be useful to turn to Jean Laplanche's notion of "deferred action,"⁶⁵ and read it back through James Snead's illuminating remarks concerning deferral and repetition as figures of black culture. Laplanche suggests that the most appropriate English translation of Freud's term

⁶⁵ Laplanche & Pontalis, p. 112

Nachtraglichkeit might be "afterwardsness."⁶⁶ Significantly, as Laplanche points out, "afterwardsness" refers not to "lived experience in general that undergoes a deferred revision, but, specifically, whatever it has been impossible in the first instance to incorporate fully into a meaningful context. The traumatic event is the epitome of such unassimilated experience."

Thus, we might tentatively suggest that black music's homeopathic⁶⁷ relation to transgenerational trauma among African diasporic subjects is closely connected to the notion of repetition, in both Snead's sense of a return to the "cut" characteristic of black music, and Laplanche's sense of a deferred action. To support such an argument, it would be necessary to return to Harris' notion of the "phantom limb" and reduce some of its metaphorical dimensions in thinking about a cut, in

⁶⁶ for more details on Laplanche's notions of "afterwardsness," see "Afterwardsness" in Jean Laplanche: Seduction, Translation and the Drives: A Dossier eds. John Fletcher & Martin Stanton (London: Institute of Contemporary Arts, 1992)

⁶⁷ The Oxford English dictionary defines the noun "homeopathy" as "a system of medical practices that treat a disease especially by the administration of minute doses that would in healthy persons produce symptoms similar to those of the disease." Jacques Derrida discusses the distinction between the Platonic notion of Pharmakon and the homeopathic in "The Pharmakon" in Jacques Derrida. The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987). Though this piece is germane here, I have deliberately attempted to keep the work of Derrida and the Derrideans out of this essay because Derrida's work, though attempting to demystify the logocentric character of Western discourse, nevertheless finds recourse in the domain of the linguistic, a place in which, as I have suggested, the understanding of trauma remains stuck.

terms of a severed limb, or what Hortense Spillers refers to as the "seared, ripped-apartness of the flesh."⁶⁸ The notion of the phantom limb carries with it the brute fact that the limb will not be replaced. That is the irreparable loss of both physical and psychic trauma. But as phantom limb, black music in its repetitive beauty and return to the "cut", connotes a place where some of the pain might begin to wither, and the joy emerge.

⁶⁸ Hortense Spillers. "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book" *Diacritics* (Summer 1987).