THE AFRICAN DIASPORA: AUTOBIOGRAPHIES THEORIZING ‘IN-BETWEEN SPACES’

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ABSTRACT

A comparative analysis of four autobiographical texts, The Interesting Life of Olaudah Equiano (Olaudah Equiano 1776), The Dark Child (Camara Laye 1954), I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings (Maya Angelou 1969), and Heremakhonon (Maryse Condé 1976) suggests that the African Diasporic experience is characterized by spatial and social fluidity generating from voluntary and involuntary movements of Black peoples across time and space. African Diasporic life histories are comprised of identity shifts, reflective of adaptability to change. The literary genre of autobiography offers a unique window into the process by which individuals attempt to negotiate their history through memory making.

The rendering of the African Diasporic journey through the narratives of Equiano, Laye, Angelou, and Condé underscore the contested nature of gender, race, and nation with respect to identity making. The Western socio-political conceptualization of social categories have been challenged by a number of revisionist scholars including Hortense Spillers, Brent Hayes Edwards, Charles Mills, and Paul Gilroy. I find that analysis of Black autobiography benefits from the alternative theoretical and methodological models proposed by these authors. Finally, I propose an African Diasporic approach as an inclusive framework for
the continued interpretation and comparative analysis of Black productions across geographies.
Dedicated to my family

I am thankful to all who have helped me along my intellectual journey. In particular, I wish to thank my committee members, beginning with my advisor, Dr. Rebecca Wanzo, for helping me find my own voice during this process. Dr. Panette Piercy for her endless enthusiasm and Dr. Olle French Morgan who inspired my interest in autobiographies of the African Diaspora.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract..................................................................................... .ii
Dedication................................................................................... .iii
Acknowledgements......................................................................... iv
Vita............................................................................................. v

Chapters:

1. Introduction................................................................................ 1
   1.1 Introducing Race Theory to Black Autobiography......................... 1

2. The African Diaspora: What’s In A Name?....................................... .22
   2.1 Defining the African Diaspora............................................. .22
   2.2 Applying African Diaspora Theory to Olaudah Equiano’s The
       Interesting Life of Olaudah Equiano........................................... 29
   2.3 Application of Migration Theory to Equiano and Laye......................... 42

3. Laye, Angelou & Conde: The Art of Diasporic Discourse............... .48
   3.1 Black Autobiographers and ‘New Griots’................................ 48
   3.2 Black Autobiography Representing ‘In-Between Spaces’.............. 58
   3.3 Conclusion..................................................................... 77

Bibliography...................................................................... .. ........ 82
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

"A culture is naturally the property of a spatially localized people... Once this is questioned, anthropological convention dissolves into a series of challenging and important issues about the contested relations between difference, identity, and place."

(James Ferguson & Akhil Gupta, 1997, pg.3)

1.1 Introducing Race Theory to Black Autobiography

The history of Black migration is steeped in an ongoing racial and geographic dilemma, which is characterized by movement away or towards a perceived 'home' or 'safeplace.' Though alienation and misunderstanding between White and Black subjects within the context of racialized history is problematic, the diasporic experience also has the effect of creating feelings of 'unbelonging' and distance between Black peoples over time and space. In this study, I employ an African Diasporic approach to examine autobiographical texts, which are important historical markers for understanding sources of distance between Black individuals and communities. The use of an African Diasporic framework to interpret Black diasporic narratives demonstrates the potential for creating a 'language' that bridges individuals and communities who lack understanding of a shared history.
Through their narratives, Olaudah Equiano’s *The Interesting Life of Olaudah Equiano* (1776), Camara Laye’s *The Dark Child* (1954), Maya Angelou’s *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969), and Maryse Condé’s *Heremakhonon* (1976) contribute to the diverse voices and life histories which constitute the African Diaspora. Each author attempts to reconcile their own experience of ‘unbelonging’ with their desire to ‘belong’ to a history to which they can relate. Condé dramatically expresses this strange dilemma as she turns away from Negritude philosophy in *Heremakhonon* (which means ‘Welcome House’ in Malinke), while simultaneously embracing continued self-exile and alienation from both her Guadeloupian identity and the African community she desired to connect with. Similarly, Angelou’s autobiography captures young Maya’s response to fear of racial violence, which is symbolized by her silent withdrawal from her beloved Black community. Finally, Laye, and before him Equiano, experience the distance that duality brings to their African and European identity.

Human history is a product of the imagination. Individuals in all societies value continuity and are active participants in the development of social paradigms, which inform human interactions. In their socio-historical contexts, symbols influence human perception of reality. In modern society, Western conceptualizations of space, gender, race, and nation are dominant social constructions which shape identity. Each category is imbued by symbols of power, domination, and control, which every individual of society either accepts or rejects. As we interpret these symbols, we consciously or unconsciously
undergo a sense of alienation or suspendedness even as we conform to societal norms.

Defying monolithic understanding of social categories, Black autobiography draws the reader into a theory of life, one that is sometimes at odds with the contemporary socio-political ideology of their day. Equiano, Laye, Angelou, and Conde’s autobiographies contradict essentialist discourses of their day, which purported ‘pure’ notions of identity, and which were antithetical to diversity. Though the authors successfully resisted these fixed notions of identity, their contradiction was met by social consequence.

The four autobiographical texts examined in this study represent Black subjects’ experiences with slavery, colonialism, segregation, and globalization. Together, these works span over three centuries of Black transcontinental and trans-cultural movement. Shifting geographic dislocation and anomie (alienation) from a larger group characterize the struggles of the authors’ life experiences. Each work signifies transient Black identity, which manifests itself in a journey towards socio-political acceptance and a quest for a place or nation to call home.

The goal of this study is to explore the issue of displacement and ‘distance’ through the lens of Black autobiographical texts. A breath of fresh air from Paul Gilroy’s (1993) geographically limiting ‘Black Atlantic’ conceptualization, Brent Hayes Edwards (2004) engages Khachig Tolongyan’s call to “return to diaspora” as it is “in danger of becoming a promiscuous category.” However, Edwards anticipates the epistemological difficulties that arise when theorizing about the African Diaspora and his innovative response
includes conceptualization of a new model for its exploration, based on the notion of décalage. Décalage is a misalignment or off set in time (e.g. advancing or delaying a schedule) or in space (e.g. shifting or displacing an object). According to Edwards, décalage alludes to the taking away of something that was there in the first place (32).

Edwards argues that “articulations of diaspora demand to be approached in this way, through their décalage,” which elucidates what escapes or resists translation through the African Diaspora (33). This innovative model was inspired by Leopold Senghor (1971), who described the relationships between African Americans and Africans as spun out of a gap (Edwards 3). These relationships, and all relationships between those of African descent occupying different spaces, appear to exhibit similar struggles in the process of assimilation within Western hegemonic modes and norms. Further, African Diasporic cultural evolutions across time and space result in cultural variances, which may be unrecognizable even among fellow ‘diasporans’ of the same socio-historical structure (e.g. Heremakhonon 1976). Thus, anomie sets in.

French sociologist Emile Durkheim introduced the concept of anomie in his book The Division of Labor in Society, published in 1893. Fascinated by the effects of social change on Western society brought about by the Industrial Revolution, Durkheim developed theories for its understanding. Within this work, he described the degeneration of pre-Industrial Revolution social structures by employing the concept of anomie, which is characterized by a state in which expectations on behaviors are confused, unclear, or not present at all. The
opposite of anomie is fatalism, which produces the desire for real or symbolic suicide when means and needs are imbalanced.

Within the African Diasporic context, anomie in Western society (the product of slavery) or outside Western society (the product of colonialization), created the need for ‘diasporan subjects’, all of whom have been displaced in some form of another, to create symbols of belonging. These efforts are challenged by Western nations’ use of powerful paradigms which attempt to maintain its own social order and belonging to history. Edwards’ brilliant notion of décalage is at work within the autobiographical texts representing the African Diaspora, and can be further theorized as a process, which produces anomie between its dislocated variables, Black subjects.

A divorce between socially valid goals and available means for achieving them as a Black Collective clearly functions to inspire and frustrate Equiano, Laye, Angelou, and Condé. As a social construct, I argue that theorizing the African Diaspora benefits from a décalage model in tandem with anomie, which is paramount in the development of an African Diasporic collective consciousness. Decalage and anomie provide a useful model for examining what Black people have been displaced from, as well as their responses to displacement with respect to other Black people and communities. However, I admit that décalage and anomie is not enough, thus I employ Critical Race Theory in an attempt to explore Black autobiography as a theoretical tool, and structural analysis of space as a framework for understanding racialized geography.
Critical race theory provides a useful model for interpreting Blackness, and in general non-Whiteness. Its goals are to recognize the reality of race and demystify race. The structural approach to critical race theory involves understanding social constructions as they intersect with power. Applying concepts of critical race theory to Black autobiography is useful in addressing the construction and function of racial categories. Specifically, I find the ideas postulated by Hortense Spillers and Charles Mills to be constructive in the analysis of Black autobiography representing displacement and fragmentation.

The materialized scene of what Spillers (1987) refers to as “unprotected” and “ungendered female flesh” offers a “praxis and theory, a text” for humanity (207). Inspired by Hortense Spillers’ convincing argument for women’s bodies as a source of understanding, this essay argues that Black autobiography represents this ‘scene’, intersecting memory and symbolic recreation of ‘self’. Spillers’ (1987) essay “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book” provides a useful framework for confronting racialized subjections, and for beginning the work of restoring human relationships.

Perhaps most importantly, Spillers rejects the myth that those perceived dominant or in power (i.e. Whites and males) were not affected by the gross trade of human flesh. An example of this is found in Spillers’ interpretation of the relationship between Mrs. Flint in Harriet Jacobs (1861), Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl. First, Spillers suggests that women, and particularly Black women, were traumatized by the inhumanity of slavery. Second, Mr. Flint’s sexual
conquest of Harriet Jacobs’ ‘de-gendered’ body was a further assault on Mrs. Flint.

We could say that African-American women’s community and Anglo-American women’s community, under certain shared cultural conditions, were the twin actants on a common psychic landscape, were subject to the same humiliation. Neither could claim her body and its various products (Spillers 223).

Both women found themselves unprotected physically and emotionally, as their bodies and minds were violated by the pathology that slavery and sexism produces in human relationships.

Spillers’ theory posits empowering language and weaves narratives that help demystify Black and White gendering and ‘othering’ due to hegemonic power relationships. Spillers argues that the “cultural subject is inscribed historically as anonymity/anomie in various public documents of European maleventure” (216). The consequence of this ‘othering’ and ‘silencing’, is distance from who we are, and our ability to relate to each other. For these reasons, Black autobiography is a powerful tool in the capturing of moments in history where voices which might otherwise fade into the deafening noise of Western hegemony, rise above its distractions.

Whether citing literary texts or examining structural effects, Spillers’ message is that humanity as a whole is impacted by the intersections of race, gender, and power. Furthermore, she implies that until humanity acknowledges that pathology brought on by racism, sexism, and other ‘isms’ is potentially regenerative, non-White and White subjectivity will persist.
In summary, Spillers' theory grounds this thesis, as it considers the ideas postulated in "Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book" to be ideally suited for the critical analysis of Black autobiography as the ‘materialized scene’ of re-membering. On a hopeful note which illuminates the message of the autobiographies to be explored, Spillers concludes that, “silence is the nickname for distortion, of the unknown human factor that a revised public discourse would both undo and reveal” (216).

Charles Mills' (1997) Racial Contract provides an invaluable evaluation of the social construction of race and power. In this text, Mills argues that the ideal Western polity, conditions society to non-White self-loathing and racial deference to White citizens (89). He contends that Europeans have generally pursued and characterized ‘unclaimed space’ (i.e. where non-Whites reside) as savage, uncivilized space. Here, Western space is empty and devoid of valued human beings. For these reasons, it becomes ‘legally’ and culturally claimed by Europeans, superceding prior histories and their meaning. But not their memory.

Mills contends argues that the way we’ve been taught to understand the construction of space is incorrect. The Racial Contract demonstrates that Europe’s violent and unethical construction of colonized geographies links race to its history. Seventeenth century Enlightenment Philosophy indoctrinated nationalism and Eurocentricm, both of which fostered theories which arguably attempted to justify the devaluation of ‘others’ on the basis of superiority. Even as rationality and reason ousted ‘Dark Age’ concepts such as Divine Right, new absolutist ideology filled the hegemonic vacuum. In articulating the impact of
this intellectual shift on Non-Whites, Mills suggests that ideas of this era need to be revisited.

Jacques Rousseau (1762) argues that civilized man is destined to make a crucial metamorphosis into the state, and to become a political man, as opposed to remaining a mere resident of nature. Non-Whites living in ‘savage’ space must therefore be savages, for they lack politics and not exhibit refinement which require judgment, reason, and moral character. Such ideology encouraged Westerners to pursue the savage lands and bodies, which these ‘lawless’ humans occupied, for this ‘wasted’ space offered great wealth yet to be gained. What Europeans failed to understand, or refused to acknowledge, was that Non-Whites also possessed civilizations and intellects. Thus, Rousseau’s Social Contract posited that only citizens within the ‘legal space’ of the state are legitimate, and continued to facilitate European colonialism, now neo-colonialism.

Hence, Whiteness was born out of the contestations that took place in defined or in-between geographies, creating non-White groups in a blazing trail that left them inconsequential and ‘homeless’. Women became the property of White men, and non-Whites were viewed as the occupiers of space made useless by their bodies and by their indigenous cultural mores, unless they became colonized. According to Mills (1997), it is the meeting of Europeans with non-Whites wherein the Social Contract’s application to the non-Whites becomes the Racial Contract. Mills exemplifies European conditioning to this process with Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, in which Europeans view nonwhite space as ‘blank space’ (45). Once incorporated into White space, these apparently ‘blank’
spaces become 'New Europes'. In his critique of European colonialism, Mills (1997) cites Franz Fanon (1965) as having argued for the recognition of how this strange partitioning of space impacts societies (Mills 48).

Mills' response is to create a theory for understanding that human bodies are 'taking up space' and the way in which race informs spacial constructions. The alternative is continued silence, which the great writer James Baldwin describes as,

White supremacy forces Americans into rationalizations so fantastic that they approached the 'pathological', generating a tortured ignorance so structured that one cannot raise certain issues with whites because even if I should speak, no one would believe me, and paradoxically, they would not believe me precisely because they would know that what I say is true (Mills 97).

Ralph Ellison dedicates The Invisible Man to all those made 'invisible' by White's refusal to 'see', apparently overcome with racial amnesia.

Mills challenges all human beings to consider how we have been conditioned to accept the blindness of a Racial Contract, and contends that we need to reject it, towards the end of informing new social relationships based upon right intent. Like Spillers, Mills views the Racial Contract as both regenerative and degenerative. Like a religion of 'bad faith', continued engagement in Racial Contract morals, which denies the link between race, space, and personhood, will result in perpetual human suffering. The Australian historian Lewis Gordon comments on this strange racial conditioning, which he describes as a 'cult of forgetfulness' practiced on a national scale with respect to Aborigines (Mills 97-09).
The work of Mills and others who have dealt with these issues (e.g. Gordon, Spillers, etc), is clearly useful in translating the experienced phenomena of race as it relates to other social constructions such as power, space, and gender. Their theoretical value is unquestionable in the interpretation of literary works whose themes include displacement and fracture. Power relationships are clearly related to value, and the Black autobiographical voice in particular permeates scenes of pathos related to the devaluation of Black bodies. Thus, non-White literacy, including autobiography, often expresses the angst and frustration associated with this particular subjectivity over space and time.

Understanding the processes by which individuals give meaning to their world is neither logical nor mathematical. Nevertheless, this study attempts to articulate the possibility of universal patterns of shifting symbolic realities of the African Diaspora. The autobiographical texts which will be used in this analysis are treated as cultural artifacts, and specifically as self-ethnographies illuminating the history of a particular person or of a particular cultural grouping. Therefore, the works are interpreted as theories that express intellectual thought and philosophy based on the authors’ experiences.

A comparative analysis of the narratives is employed to accentuate the processes of identity formation and negotiation that these specific authors share over time and space. Not unlike paintings, which await the art historians’ analyses, literary texts benefit from reliable methodologies and the application of specific theories to socio-historical products.
The autobiographies of Equiano, Laye, Angelou, and Conde express a desire for belonging to real or imagined communities. Though autobiography implies the telling of an individual’s story, *The Interesting Life of Olaudah Equiano, The Dark Child, I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* and *Heremakhonon* reflect the struggles of a larger Black community. What is also unique about these texts is that they coincide with Pan African, Negritude, Black Power and Creole Movement ideologies, respectively.

As each author considered his or her life’s history, it is unlikely that they were immune to identity politics. Thus, in articulating what is in essence a theory of their lives, Equiano, Laye, Angelou and Conde’s works reflect acceptance or rejection of the ideas of their day. The thoughts and expressions within each autobiography provide rich data with which to analyze the actual or imagined realities of the Black experience.

In chapter two, “The African Diaspora: What’s In a Name?”, I examine the theoretical debates which shape the methodology for the study of issues related to the African Diaspora. This methodology is critiqued and suggestions are made for the future application of African Diaspora theories to historical and social realities.

Finally, in chapter three, “Laye, Angelou & Conde: The Art of Diasporic Discourse”, I introduce the interpretation of autobiography as a weapon that informs the ideals of Black political movements, and explore the challenges this creates for writers of the African Diaspora. Writing, as a form of remembering
and imagining the full potential of 'being', is shown to be the ultimate inspiration in Black autobiographers' quest for voice within African Diasporic discourse.
CHAPTER 2

The African Diaspora: What's In a Name?

“The aggressive seizure of intellectual space, like the seizure of land, amounts to the aggressor occupying someone else’s territory while claiming it as his own. The problem with this is that cultural analysis takes a back seat to galloping ethnocentric interpretations of phenomena.”

(Molefi Kete Asante, 1987, pg.9)

2.1 Defining the African Diaspora

This chapter introduces and clarifies several theories of the African Diaspora as a framework for understanding Black movement, and explores how the framework is being employed in the interpretation of identity making within Black autobiography. I critique this methodology and offer suggestions for future application of African Diaspora theories to historical and social realities.

The African Diaspora is a geographical process which predates what David Eltis and David Richardson (1997) referred to as the largest long distance coerced migration in history, in which more than 12 million Africans journeyed to the Americas in over 27,000 voyages between the 16th and 19th centuries. Kristin Mann and Edna Baye (2002) contend that the concept of the African Diaspora first developed among Africans. John Mbiti’s and Robert Hill echo this contention, arguing for the scholarly attention to difference among African diasporas, which existed on the continent of Africa prior to the introduction of the European slave-trade.
Almost 30 years ago, African historian Mbiti (1970), who wrote a book entitled *Introduction To African Religion*, which teaches that trade, political rule, and the migration of peoples have culturally and geographically linked Africa with its European and Asian neighbors for thousands of years. Much of Mbiti's research demonstrates the way in which religion dominates the thinking of African people, shaping their cultures, social life, political organization, and economic activities across time and space. Mbiti's lifelong research on African religions tells a story of cultural reciprocity between Africa and its neighbors.

An example of diasporas and its consequent cultural transmissions includes the earliest Arab expeditions in North Africa in the seventh and eighth centuries. Nehemia Levtzion's (2000) argues that these movements connected Africa to the Arabian peninsula, thereby facilitating trade and spreading of Islamic religion, laws and customs in African societies (63). Writing in 1078, the Andalusian geographer Abu Ubayd Abd Allah al-Bakri collected invaluable information about the process of Islamization in Western Africa. His meticulous accounts include the history of the ancient kingdoms of Ghana, Mali, and Songhay, which reflect the impact of economic and cultural exchange between Near East Asia and African.

The Muslim presence in Medieval Ghana illustrates that cultural exchange took place in the Northern region of Africa and spread West and South. The kingdom of Mali illustrates how West African Kings often combined traditional African beliefs with Islamic beliefs in order to enhance their power, legitimacy, and prestige. For example, in 1324 A.D. Mansa Musa made a pilgrimage to
Mecca, thereby fulfilling the 5th pillar of Islam and beginning the tradition of West African kings who would participate in the Hajj.

King Soni Ali of the Songhay Kingdom was “a typical Islamized king of the western Sudan” who “combined elements of Islam with beliefs and practices of the Songhay traditional religions” (Levtzion 69). Though not atypical for a West African king, his successful military exploits gave him control over regions that had previously been under stronger Islamic influence (Levtzion 70). These circumstances led to criticism of Soni Ali’s observance of Islam by the uluma (religious scholars), to widespread opposition to his rule, and perhaps to his mysterious death in the Niger river (Levtzion 66-70).

Upon the fall of the Songhay Dynasty, Morocco sent its army to take over the area, undeterred by the Sahara desert, which divides the Northern and Western regions of Africa. The Moroccans eventually withdrew, while the arma clan remained, resulting in the Dyula diasporas, which further spread Islam to other parts of Africa. The spread of Islam in Africa illustrates the creation of African diasporas through movements and collisions, thereby initiating the cyclical process of cultural diffusion and negotiation. The African Diaspora provides a useful framework with which to conceptualize the Black experience, past and present.

Brent Hayes Edwards (2004) defines the African Diaspora framework as one which inaugurates an ambitious yet radically de-centered analysis of transnational circuits of culture and politics that offers alternatives to frames of nations and continents. In his discussions on the origins of the term African
Diaspora within scholarly debate, Edwards provides an interesting analysis of George Shepperson’s work. In 1965, Shepperson presented his paper “The African Abroad”, or the African Diaspora, originally delivered on a panel arranged by Joseph Harris, at the International Congress of African Historians at University College, Dar es Salaam. Though Edward’s (2004) noted that Shepperson believed he was not the first one to employ this term, this paper is usually credited with introducing the notion of the African Diaspora into the study of Black cultural politics and history. Shepperson (1968) envisioned African Diaspora Studies not only as the “idea and peace of African unity” but also as an understanding of slavery. This focus was influenced in particular by the historical work of W.E.B. DuBois and C.L.R. James, who consider the Trans Atlantic slave trade as central to any understanding of Western modernity or “universal history” (Edwards 14).

However, Shepperson (1968) also suggests that the diaspora “can be considerably extended, both in time and space.” Shepperson suggests that this concept arises not in terms of Black cultures in the New World but in the context of revising isolationist and restrictive trends in African historiography. Ironically, the term African Diaspora was used to move beyond the limited scope of Pan-Africanist analysis. Shepperson called for at least four strategies within the diasporic framework as a disciplinary approach:

1. Acknowledgement of the Trans Atlantic slave trade and its significant impact on Western modernity and “universal history.”
2. Investigation into the effects of the Trans Atlantic slave trade, and on subsequent imperialism on Africa itself, and the influence of these institutions on patterns of dispersal.

3. Analysis of “African survivals” in Black cultures of the New World.


In response to exclusion in reactionary Black political thought, scholars promoting the African Diasporic framework often produce theories based on experience of un-belonging or of spatial displacement (e.g. Gilroy, 1991; Wright, 2003). This most recent trend within African Diaspora research makes the case that although those of African descent have a link to Africa, that linkage back to the continent is not only unnecessary for Black unity, but usually it is based upon mythical attachments to an imaginary homeland.

The African Diaspora within this particular framework, largely represented within the works of Paul Gilroy and Michelle Wright, is challenging essentialist theories in radical ways. However, is African Diapora theory in danger of becoming as exclusionary as the Pan-Africanist modes of thought which inspired the conception of African Diaspora interests in the first place? Is it time to challenge African Diaspora theories that revolve around the concept of the African Diaspora as largely based on the idea of shared migratory experience outside of Africa?

Gilroy argues for a renewed critique of race-thinking which continues Shepperson’s discussion. Gilroy’s notion of the African Diaspora differs from
Shepperson’s view in two important ways. In his seminal work *The Black Atlantic*, Gilroy (1993) asserts that a ‘Black Atlantic’ framework is historically and presently characterized by the desire of Black people to transcend the structures of the nation-state and the constraints of ethnicity, both of which are embedded in Eurocentric ideology. Additionally, he argues that African Diaspora scholars must continue critiquing Enlightenment assumptions and avoid the pitfalls of essentializing Black narratives.

Gilroy conceives of a ‘Black Atlantic’ world as a single complex unit of analysis where those of the African Diaspora represent “the stereophonic, bilingual, or bifocal cultural forms.” *The Black Atlantic* challenges the ways in which cultural and political histories of those representing the Black Atlantic have thus far been conceived. Specifically, Gilroy calls for an explicitly transnational and intercultural lens for viewing the Atlantic world (The triangle), thus problematizing modern European/American thought (particularly in the field of Cultural Studies), which largely assumes that cultures flow into patterns congruent with borders of essentially homogeneous nation-states.

Gilroy contributes to scholarship on border theory, ethnicity, and nationality, by offering original ideas for the analysis of 1) ships (and Black sailors) as historical representatives of shifting spaces (and bodies) in between the fixed spaces that they connected, and of the 2) Black Atlantic experience with exile, relocation, and displacement as possibilities for understanding the rich cultural/artistic exchange (and negotiations) that reforms the dynamic space which is the Atlantic world.
Gilroy points out that the concept of race should be re-examined because it only serves to categorize people. Identity, even if based on differences among people, only separates people further and could lead toward a type of supremacist behavior. In *Against Race*, Gilroy (2003) continues to rethink his theories on 'Blackness' and argues for the need to debunk the concept of “race” altogether. He argues that the concept of nationality as a link between those of similar biological traits is fallacious because it produces a “racialized consciousness” that generates “fascist thinking.” Gilroy (2003) also argues that cultural absolutism or purity, based on Diasporic identity is problematic because it replaces individual identity in favor of a model of “sameness” within the construct of a larger group identity, which “stands opposed to the distinctively modern structures and modes of power orchestrated by the institutional complexity of nation-states” (5). The limitations of the ‘Black Atlantic’ model and its fascination with for the Atlantic frame, particularly its focus on the triangular slave trade, reels even Gilroy back into the quagmire of origins. Edwards (2004) points out that Gilroy admits of his own model, that there is “a tension that gets set up around modernity as a chronological and temporal category – when did modernity begin?” (Edwards 29).

Applying an inclusive diasporic framework potentially creates room for an even more fluid interpretation of communities of African descent. Research on oceanic frameworks such as the Black Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean remain limited. As Edwards (2004) argues, connections can be made between these geographic boundaries if we adopt the diaspora approach. For as James
Ferguson and Akhil Gupta (1997) contend, “community is never simply the recognition of cultural similarity or social contiguity but a categorical identity that is premised on various forms of exclusion and constructions of otherness” (13).

2.2 Applying African Diaspora Theory to Olaudah Equiano’s *The Interesting Life of Olaudah Equiano*

Identities are socially and historically constituted in a process that is being made and remade, conditioned by time and space. Interdisciplinary approaches to interpreting these processes within the contexts of the Transatlantic Slave Trade, colonization, and other historical/current manifestations of Black culture requires rigorous scholarship. This endeavor requires scholarship to allow ‘space’ for varied interpretations. The following illustrates how institutional religion has worked to abdicate ethical responsibility for the exploitation of human beings. The case which will be examined is the Transatlantic Slave Trade and its impact on African slaves through the life of Olaudah Equiano.

Society defines social relationships in a number of ways, including through its institutions which socialize members and its non-members, as the case may be. Indeed, hierarchal structures often dictate who has decision making power, and these social arrangements often reflect this phenomenon. Empirical data illustrates that the state and social institutions such as the Church assisted in the racial spatialization which came with slavery. Specifically, the Church played an important role in defining social relationships, which in turn motivated strict hierarchal structures. However, members and non-members of a given society
have the ability to negotiate power, with the caveat that in order to make a *claim* on other society members, you yourself must be a member.

Slavery in the United States conditioned within the society strict regulation of time. Enslaved Africans were worked from sunup to sundown with little time for rest, which led to high mortality rates in the Americas, particularly in North America. The expense of human life as a consequence of optimized productivity succinctly captures the unethical side of capitalism. Greatness of wealth overshadowed greatness of humanity as capitalist gain stood at the forefront of the early American imagination.

However, the interdependence of Blacks and Whites steeped the beginnings of the newly forming capitalist state, knee deep in insecurities. As scholar Sterling Suckey (1999) stated in *Inequality in Early America*,

> As the American Revolution approached, slaves were doing the work of tobacco and rice cultivation in Virginia, Maryland, and the Carolinas. Who was dependent on whom for the profits of that labor? The dependence of the master on the slave cannot be separated from the continuing need for African slave imports in colonial North America (167).

Economic as well as moral insecurity over the issue of slavery reached a crisis which the state and social institutions took a role in ‘correcting’. Jon Butler (1990) argues for a continued discourse on the way in which the Christian church informed American social arrangements during (and after) slavery (Butler 131). Most slaveholders and participants of the slave trade were Christians, and more specifically they were Protestants.
Hence, much of the moral concern over slavery in the context of the United States was based upon the widely held belief about the relationship between Protestant Christianity and individual freedom. The question of whether Christianity precluded slaveholding, which was otherwise economically attractive, incited a common ethical dilemma which needed to be appeased (Butler 131). Another more obvious concern added to the moral conflict was whether Christianity would empower slaves, thereby threatening the institution? Without the institution of religion, the state was unable to respond to this dilemma, or to the growing anomie (alienation, confusion of social relationships) which the practice of slavery caused.

In the year 1700, the Anglican Society for the Propagation of the Gospel (SPG) was founded in London by Thomas Bray (Butler 135). SPG was largely responsible for the large conversion of enslaved Africans in Europe and overseas. Butler notes that the amount of enslaved Africans converted was limited due to the lack of ministers that were sent to North America and because some slave owners objected for their slaves to be taught Christian beliefs. However, the significant appeal of SPG ministers was that they were able to have a far reaching sermons (Butler 140). SPG ministers’ conversions (or brain-washings) of individuals included the insistence that Africans understood that they had no soul, and the demand that enslaved Africans allow Europeans total control over their bodies. Jon Butler finds that this unique Anglican Christian institutional life in the late seventeenth century southern colonies in particular, dictated Anglican public comment on slavery (135).
For instance, SPG bishop Fleetwood of St. Asaph wrote a very influential 495 page document entitled *Relative Duties* (published 1701) which reinterpreted Paul’s advice to the Corinthians on servitude and slavery. This reinterpretation tells masters and slaves that slaves should: “Obey your Masters in all things, according to your *Contract* and *Agreement*, behave yourselves as diligently and faithfully, as you have *Promised* them to do, or by the *Custom of the Place* presum’d to have promised them” (Butler 136).

Christian doctrine went as far as convincing members and non-members (enslaved persons, serfs, indentured servants, women) of their social ‘rights’ or lack thereof. SPG philosophy was particularly compelling as most people indulging in the Trans Atlantic Slave Trade were constantly threatened by indigenous African spiritual beliefs, which incorporate ideals of freedom and emphasize physical movement or ‘possession’ (symbolically or literally) that can only be caused by spirits.

Butler (1990) references the words of Father Fleetwood in *Relative Duties*, who admits the corruption and insecurity behind the Trans Atlantic Slave Trade,

> I would not have any one’s Zeal for Religion (much less my own) so far out run their Judgment on these matters. We are a People who live and maintain ourselves by *Trade*; and that if *Trade* be lost, or so much discouraged, we are a ruined *Nation*; and shall our selves in time become very Slaves, as those I am speaking of, thou’ in another kind” (Butler 138).

Thus, State and religious laws aimed at disciplining White men and their rights against slaves. As this brief analysis demonstrates, institutionalized religion brings important benefits to centralized societies. Jared Diamond (1999)
contends that religion solves the problem of how unrelated individuals are to live together without killing each other, and that religion gives people motives for sacrificing their lives (or others’ lives) on behalf of others (Diamond 278).

Ministers like Thomas Bacon encapsulated his sermons in the ideals of absolute obedience vs. rational thought, and the world of obedience took precedence over moral courage. As if rational choice were not an option, these spatial arrangements can be viewed as the beginnings of American racism, since this perspective allowed for racist allusions, which perpetuate themselves since slavery.

Emile Durkheim (1912) argued that moral remaking of a society is achieved through collective processes such as meetings, assemblies, and congregations, in which the individuals reaffirm together their common sentiments (429). Though these were possibilities he envisioned, Durkheim was saddened by societies’ lack of imagination for what slavery and its societal transformations might mean for the future.

We are no longer electrified by those principles in whose name Christianity exhorted the masters to treat their slaves humanly; and besides, Christianity’s idea of human equality and fraternity seems to us today to leave too much room for unjust inequalities (429).

I depart from Butler’s ultimate argument, which led to the annihilationist view that enslaved African had no power and that their cultures were lost to them. In the following section, I examine the varied interpretations of African Diaspora with reference to the Trans Atlantic Slave Trade. Here, recent studies of slave populations’ configuration during the Trans Atlantic slave trade complicates
previous notions of randomization and organization onboard slave ships bound for the New World.

This endeavor often draws on slave databases for quantitative data and on first-hand slave accounts for qualitative data. Scholars such as Douglas Chamber and Philip Morgan, whose research is featured in *Routes To Slavery*, illustrate just how diverse scholarly positions are on this trade. Having graduated from the question of whether or not enslaved Africans communities were able to transmit their cultures to the New World, these scholars are questioning the degree to which they were able to do this, employing Equiano’s autobiography. The latest debates include fundamental questions such as whether or not the Trans Atlantic Slave Trade should be considered the beginnings of the African Diasporic experience.

Scholarly interpretation of Olaudah Equiano’s (1789) autobiography *The Interesting Life of Olaudah Equiano* reflects the varied schools of thought concerning issues of African Diasporic continuities and discontinuities. In accepting that slavery occurred and that cultures ‘shift’, is it not possible to speak of hybridity as an option for understanding the present, no matter where on the globe we are as people of African descent? Essentialism within scholarly approaches to interpreting Black histories remains problematic for the understanding the evolution of the African Diaspora over time and space.

Scholars of the past and those of today continue to engage in the challenge of interpreting African migrations from the distant and recent past. Attachment to ideas of African nationalism transported from Africa (e.g. an Igbo nation ideology
in the New World during slavery, usually supported by ‘evidence’ from Olaudah Equiano), leads Douglas Chambers and others to purport a seemingly precise or un-shifting interpretation of African socio-political culture with reference to migratory patterns, beginning with the Trans Atlantic slave trade.

Black autobiographies are said to possess the quality of using their stories as weapons, contesting various institutions or ideologies most often manifested through cultural oppression as a weapon for social change. Equiano describes his own life history as an enslaved African from Guinea in The Interesting Narrative. Most of his life was spent on board ships, first as a slave and later as a captain’s apprentice. Ultimately, he purchases his freedom in 1776, yet he continues his search for identity and place within the lucrative transatlantic slave trade. Equiano’s autobiography is derived from his unique insight into his experiences on slave ships, which he meticulously captured in travel logs. Later, he would compile these writings into what would become a powerful testimony against slavery, directed primarily towards important British parliament members exploring the possibility of illegalizing slavery.

Chambers argues that Equiano's own personal diaspora transformed his identity from that of a member of a particular kindred in a local Igbo group in Africa to one of the many natives of Igbo. Chambers suggests that the organization of enslaved Africans was not as randomizing as was once thought, thereby allowing room for an emerging Igbo identity in the New World. However, when considering identity formation among slave populations in the
New World, to what extent can we interpret the construction of Igbo nations as a function of slave trading?

Chambers attempted to define diaspora according to how the concept was experienced by Equiano himself in the mid 18th century. The flaw in this examination, however, lies in the fact that terms such as ‘nation’ and ‘ethnicity’ are taken for granted in his research and are never clearly explicated. This is not uncommon in most research in the field of African Diaspora Studies or Black Studies. Nevertheless, Chambers makes a worthy attempt to allow Equiano (a subject of the African Diaspora) to inform an understanding of identity formation from this historically bound informant’s point of view. However, there are some aspects to this research which must surely be questioned.

The geographic displacement and identity fragmentation which came with slavery is vividly described in Equiano’s text, but so are the memories which connect him back to Africa. Equiano remains conscious of this former life history even as he grows to manhood and is confronted with new cultural forms in Europe and in the Americas.

Chapter one of *The Interesting Life of Olaudah Equiano* is an ethnographic rendering of the Igbo peoples through which Equiano is a descendant. Igbo cultural orientation is thickly described, from forms of dress, to political governance, to memories of a nation of “of dancers, musicians, and poets” (34). The opening pages of Equiano’s narrative celebrate the value of simplicity. For instance, communalism is conveyed through his description of communities assisting in the construction of a home, whose structures are built for
simplicity rather than extravagance (36). Even Igbo cuisine is “unacquainted with those refinements in cookery, which debauch the taste” (35). Respect for elders, one’s parents, ritualistic circumcision, and the universe, including its ancestors, form the idyllic backdrop from which Equiano is usurped around the age of five or six.

Even in his first encounters with outsiders, Equiano notes the differences between Igbo and non-Igbo traditions. Most non-Igbo do not wash or pay libations to their ancestors before eating (53). Worse yet, they swear incessantly and debase the Creator (204). Spirituality becomes an important theme in Equiano’s account, perhaps because he does not wish to succumb to European materialism. This spiritual value is expressed as stemming from Equiano’s deep pride and connection to the cultural values of his Igbo heritage, which he consciously gives reverence to throughout his autobiography.

In the later half of Equiano’s narrative, he continues to describe his identity shifts in a linear fashion. As Equiano becomes immersed in European knowledge, he breaks away from traditional Igbo beliefs. By chapter four, Equiano admits, “I no longer looked upon them (whites) as spirits, but as men superior to us, I had a strong desire to resemble them; imbibe their spirit, imitate their manner” (78). By the end of the autobiography, Equiano comes to terms with his new self, which is a mixture of European and African values. Equiano undoubtedly reflects the double consciousness associated with his Igbo values of his early youth, and with coming of age in European society.
Chambers’ analysis of the identity formation among slaves employing the life experiences of Equiano illustrates an assumption, based on pre-migration locale identities, of shared nationality among many African Slaves exported to the New World. Chambers argues that Equiano perceived his identity as being bound to a local Igbo ethnic grouping with a shared history, language, and cultural values. However, Chambers goes on to suggest that only by being taken out of Igbo Africa does Equiano first learn to call himself Igbo. In fact, Chambers claims that it was Equiano’s experience of forced migration that informed his understanding of being in exile away from his ‘own nation’. In Chambers’ assessment, enslaved Africans ascribed the concept of ‘nations’ only once departed from African soil.

On the other hand, Joseph Miller (2000) argues that the sequence of multiple sales of those enslaved in Africa, and multiple transfers of Slaves between their place of seizure and the coast, diverted the flow in almost any direction, creating a motley crew by the time caravans reached the coast. There is some truth to both positions. Nonetheless, upon reflection on African continuities and discontinuities, Miller’s research supports Philip Morgan’s convincing position that using the argument of shared African nationhood to stress homogeneity in the New World is harmful to this endeavor. Whether a ship landed at one or two African ports, the real issue at hand is the complexity of the African networks deep within Africa that funneled slaves into nodal points on the coast.
Though separated from his sister, who is also held captive, Equiano is later reunited with her later in the course of multiple sales in the seven-month journey to the coast from their place of seizure in Southeastern Nigeria. However, Equiano is eventually separated from his sister forever near the Atlantic coast. By chance, several men who Equiano refers to as men from his nation are his shipmates in the journey to the Americas. Though Equiano experiences contact with people of his nation at the beginning of this coastal journey, in the end he loses contact with even those from different ethnic groups who speak his native tongue.

Upon landing in the New World, Equiano re-renders the confusion he experiences as Africans from his vessel and other vessels are herded into a yard. On the beat of a drum, “buyers rush into the yard where the Slaves are confined, and make choice of that parcel they like best.” Not unlike the scene of the New York Stock exchange, Equiano recollects “the noise and clamor” as relations and friends were separated without scruple, including those of his own nation. From here on, Equiano uses the term country-people to describe all fellow Africans.

African culture in the New World as an expressive and political form was hardly concerned with essential notions of nation and ethnicity. Then what was culturally created in the New World? Clearly, if Africanity was retained then so were form and function, but their meanings underwent significant transformations.

Closer reading of Equiano’s capture supports Morgan’s argument that if the lens focuses similarly on the American side of the Atlantic, the emphasis
should be on heterogeneity (142). In not ‘recognizing’ other Africans, including those of ‘Igbo’ descent in Africa, Equiano’s experience supports Robert Hill, John Mbiti, and others, who argue that diasporas on the continent of Africa were only complicated by the slave trade, North, South, East, and West. Too long have scholars of the African Diaspora fallen into the trap of applying European concepts of nationhood, based on categories such as language, physical features, and geography, all of which belie cultural unity.

Equiano’s testimony is an appeal to humanity and to Western civilization, to review their terrible actions and realize their sin in taking ‘god-like’ control over others. Inhuman attempts to erase Black ‘Others’ within Western history through the reproduction of Black bodies for free labor, instead produced the desire among Black subjects to reproduce their selves and their histories, which connect them back to humanity and to a real or imagined home.

Particularly rich texts such as The Interesting Narrative can be compared to each other and to broader theories. By framing African Diasporic experiences within such interdisciplinary approaches, scholars and laypeople can link the many academic arrangements and voices whose struggles are a reflection of humanity’s goal: inclusion into the human family and its history-making.

Equiano’s experience is one that reflects the African Diaspora, as an evolving décalage in time and space. Décalage and anomie remind us that all social ‘norms’ are only temporary, shifting even in ‘fixed’ locales. Perhaps all those who experience displacement to some degree also experience anomie with their societies. It is apparent that Equiano first understands that space and time
are related in processes of décalage when he first comes upon a watch and a picture hanging on a wall, during his short stay on a plantation in Virginia (62, 63). From here, Equiano remains in a state of anxiety until close to the end of the narrative. This anxiety was produced in part by linear symbols of time and space within Western culture.

Ultimately, rather than succumbing to self-annihilation during his darkest moments of alienation, Equiano draws the reader into his evolution towards wholeness. This journey takes him back to Africa through memory, and takes him physically on a final journey back to Guinea, which tragically ends in his death before reaching the continent. In a sense, Equiano is the father of Pan Africanism, as his time embodies the desire to ‘return’ to wholeness. Through the processes of writing his life history and giving meaning to his experiences, Equiano’s identity is altered irreversibly. Though it would take almost nineteen years to complete, the parliamentary struggle to end the slave trade began in May 1788 (304). The African Diaspora, Creolization, Black Atlantic, and Pan-Africanism movements attempt to capture the intertextualities of the Black peoples.

Interdisciplinary approaches to interpreting the Black experience as it pertains to the Transatlantic Slave Trade, colonization, and other historical and current manifestations of culture, requires rigorous scholarship of such histories. The challenge for scholars of the field is to articulate interdisciplinary Black discourses while leaving room for varied interpretation of the Black experience. Attachments are at work in what seems to be evolving as a universal field for the
study of all Black people: African Diaspora Studies. Obviously, scholars and lay practitioners alike will find it impossible to shed all biases.

2.3 Application of Migration Theory to Equiano and Laye

Modification of the environment has occurred most drastically in the past century as technology has irreversibly transformed our world, and ultimately, our perception of the world. However, the modern world cannot negate the symbolic nature of human beings, though it can be argued that we are becoming more systematic and mechanic in our mode of knowledge productions. With the advent of modernity and technology, both Equiano and Laye are able to transport the symbolic meaning of their lives in Africa to impact geographically extended communities. Just as migration theory permeates transatlantic slave history making, so does the postmodernist interpretation of movement among colonial subjects. Comparisons of Equiano and Laye’s autobiographies find that the study of contemporary and past Black migrations relevant to the African Diaspora illustrate a process of décalage and of Black subjects’ disjointed realities.

Furthermore, a comparison of Equiano and Laye’s autobiographies suggests that even across time and space, their lives signify spatial displacement. Symbolically, autobiography represents the freedom which imagination brings to one’s memory of his or her life history, and the possibility of altering realities. Equiano and Laye’s narratives may at first seem limited, as slavery and colonialization seem to undermine African civilizations and cultural systems. However, “the shifting spaces in-between the fixed places they connect” deflect the possibility of non-White ‘erasure’. Black autobiographical texts can be
studied as artifacts of in-between spaces where the subjects attempt to become real or whole, through the negotiation of not so ‘fixed’ realities.

Olaudah Equiano’s *The Life of Olaudah Equiano* (1776) and Camara Laye’s *The Dark Child* (1954) are testimonies to the experience of involuntary and voluntary exile from their African homelands, as they both write about the cultures they’ve left behind, and about their struggles to adapt to European cultures. Equiano and Laye provide excellent portraits of the dualism which resulted from their blending of Eurocentric and African worldviews. Unlike Equiano, Laye has the opportunity to grow up in his country of birth, Guinea, and to be socialized as Malinke before his voluntary exile to France in the early 1950’s. *The Dark Child’s* celebration of culture is inextricably tied to a sense of longing or loneliness. Within the text, Laye comes to the realization that he must carry the burden of living in two worlds. One world is Africa, and the other is Europe and the knowledge it offers. Self-exiled in France, the bitter fruit of knowledge sets in, and Laye comforts himself by writing *The Dark Child*.

Scholar Eustace Palmer asserts that Laye’s artistic expression is at its best when he gives himself up to the power of imagination and relives the beauty of Malinke life (93). Indeed, the reader is most compelled when Laye does not demonstrate, but rather relives his cultural experiences. In those moments, the reader celebrates with Laye the aspects of Malinke culture that he found most meaningful. One aspect is the symbolism behind the crafts of his parents. His father’s position as goldsmith within the community held great significance. Individuals near and far would go to his father and have him fashion their gold
into intricate pieces. The 'go between', or griot, would take out his cora, or harp, and sing his father's praises (32). This fascinated young Laye.

Malinke customs and rites of passage hold symbolic meaning in The Dark Child. The rites of passage in particular have powerful meaning for Laye, who dedicates a chapter to the magical moment in time. So powerful is this experience, that the reader wonders if without it Laye would have failed in gathering the strength it would take to accept the burden of coming into manhood in the face of modernity. In fact, Laye's experience with the Society of the Uninitiated and the circumcision ritual can be viewed as metaphors for the challenges he experiences in self-exile.

Malinke culture provides members of its society with the opportunity to overcome their baser nature. In the rites of passage ceremony, the power of the Konden Diara, a fearful 'creature' young uninitiated Malinke children have only thus far 'heard' about, is met face to face. The roaring of the Konden Diara frightens the initiates, whose eyes are closed during the ceremony. This sound, like lions roaring, turns out to be synthesized boards which the older men strum nearby. However, nothing would "remain of the trial by fear", as Laye points out, if the initiates had known the Konden Diara's roar was a hoax (109).

As a main argument against slavery, Equiano argues that "When they (African slaves) come among Europeans, they are ignorant of their language, religion, manners, and customs. Are there any pains taken to teach them these?" (45). Here, Equiano explores the idea of knowledge evolving within cultures. He reminds, "Let the polished and haughty European recollect that his ancestors were
once, like the Africans, uncivilized, and even barbarous" (45). Equiano asserts that Europeans, Blacks, and all men and women are able to be cultivated, and those practicing higher forms of religion are obliged to teach and accept those who are not yet as civilized.

For Laye, exploration of scientific knowledge is significant to his own breaking away from the traditional African beliefs, but not entirely. He admits, "The blackboard's blank surface was an exact replica of our minds. We knew little, and the little that we knew came out haltingly" (80). For Laye, knowledge is power and hard work, but it is also a point of self-doubt and a fear of cultural loss.

Both Equiano and Laye are confronted with contradictions, particularly as they explore scientific knowledge as expressed through numbers and empirical reasoning. In terms of exploration of self-knowledge, it is important to note that Laye was self-exiled while Equiano was not; Equiano was forcibly taken into slavery. Equiano arguably shed his 'African self' while becoming more confident with his "European self", whereas Laye became more and more depressed as he gained European knowledge and modernity, which became his beast of burden.

Both Equiano and Laye testify to their experience of being caught between two worlds. Equiano is literally 'caught' and made a slave who then must struggle with his loss of 'home' and 'identity.' Laye grows up in an evolving Guinea where development is inevitable and he must choose between tradition and European educational values. One is a victim of slavery, the other of
development. Both give meaning to their peculiar historical position and give testimony to their struggles.

Laye wrote *The Dark Child* to comfort himself while at school in Paris. The autobiography attests to the loneliness of his situation and to the self-doubt he experiences as he moves away from the environment he knows, and moves into a 'foreign' world. The aching pain of leaving his family, especially his mother and father, are symbolic of the loss of identity and fragmentation which those of the African Diaspora struggle to understand.

The title of Laye's autobiography conveys the sense of testimony of all 'African children' lost from home in developing Africa. Although Laye's account is taken by some to be apolitical, the message is subversive.

That past is, however, still quite near: it was only yesterday. But the world rolls on, the world changes, my own world perhaps more rapidly than anyone else's, so that it appears as if we are ceasing to be what we were (75).

In "Olaudah Equiano and the Art of Spiritual Autobiography", Adam Potkay contends that Equiano renders his life, and perhaps by extension the life of his race, as mirroring the movement of Biblical history from the Old Testament to the New Testament. Potkay says, "He reads the pattern of his life as reduplicating the pattern of salvation history found in the Christian Bible" (680).

In his discussion on Black autobiography, Roger Rosenblatt makes the compelling statement that our heroes are always 'uniquely alone' (171). It is therefore understandable that both authors must in fact turn towards a higher power in order to forge a sense of connection to and understanding of the larger
universe. Rosenblatt describes the 'sense of circus or madhouse' that controls the decisions of our heroes within Black autobiography (174). Though the genre is the history of individual 'craziness', Rosenblatt argues that in Black autobiography, the world in which our heroes move is one of craziness. In order to adapt, main characters within Black autobiographies become masters of both physical and psychological disguise (175). Indeed, Equiano covets Europeans looks, manners, and wisdom, while rejoicing in his Igbo roots.

Through the weaving of their memories, Equiano and Laye found spiritual rhythm, a meaning to their life's experience that makes sense in retrospect. Their stories are communicated with this manifest organization. Rosenblatt (1993) tells us that every autobiography is an extended suicide note. The author tells his story, isolates it, and then lays it to rest. Both Equiano and Laye illustrate such a quality. Indeed, authors both write autobiography as a weapon but also to 'pronounce and vindicate' their experience. Finally, the similarities that we derive from their works gives a shared voice to the African Diaspora experience across time and space.
CHAPTER 3

Laye, Angelou & Condé: The Art of Diasporic Discourse

"...The human mind is a composition of two substances: mind and body...Our minds have access to knowledge independent of environmental input, this presents a theory of human nature that is very inconvenient to church and state authorities who seek to control human minds."

(Richard Hopkins 1999, pg. 341)

3.1. Black Autobiographers and ‘New Griots’

In Becoming Black, Michelle Wright (2004) argues that, “A truly diasporic approach to Black subjectivity must not be too specific, yet must provide some sort of specificity. It must translate across languages and cultures yet not effect so much transformation as to be unrecognizable to other Black communities” (3).

On the other hand, reactionary identity politics, past and present, permeate much of African Diasporic experiences. Here, in attempts to create the antithesis of what ‘Whiteness’ or ‘Westernization’ represents, Black political thought has often fallen prey to essentialist desires for a ‘return’ to some original, pre-Western state. Derived from Enlightenment philosophy from the 17th century, these dialectics and dialogues often prescribe imagined identities for belonging, and normalize essentialized frameworks for understanding Black subjectivity (usually in relation to White ‘other’).

In the process, these counter-discourses inscribe new stereotypes, which entrench new doctrines for ‘belonging’ to Blackness (Barbara Lalla 89). The
following chapter examines Laye, Angelou and Condé’s response to these reactionary counter-discourses within Black political thought. Here I suggest that their approach is reflective of the African griot.

Some scholars describe Black autobiography as a weapon (e.g. Sally Ann Ferguson). Black autobiographical texts demonstrate spatial displacement (both physical and mental) as evidenced by protagonists who operate in-between White spaces. Within these texts, imagination functions to negate White hegemony and to empower non-White subjects. The role of imagination in this context is analogous to ideology of non-White political movements such as Pan-Africanism and the Non-Alignment Movement, because they too attempt to unite through imagined shared identities. The use of imagination in Black autobiographies and by political movements has found limited success in the symbolic remembering of non-White bodies. However, it may be possible to apply the process by which some Black autobiographers achieved wholeness, to universal attempts for remembering and reunification.

Literary proponents of the Negritude movement had begun to fight for cultural liberation with the pen by the time The Dark Child was published in 1954. Those who did not were heavily criticized. Phanuel Akubueze Egejuru (1980) identified three phases intrinsic to this movement in the first chapter of his work Towards African Literary Independence. First, in order to cultivate the revolution, writers had to mentally de-colonize themselves and their art. They had to correct images and notions of African culture that had been distorted by colonialism and this was often achieved by glorifying African values. In the
second phase, Negritude writers exposed the injustices that the colonized peoples suffered. In the third phase, these writers were expected to evaluate societies of Independent Africa with its myriad of challenges in the absence of colonial powers.

The Hegelian dialectical structure of ideal Negritude work begins by examining the influence of Whites (the thesis) on the production and performance of African writers (the antithesis). Ultimately, a synthesis emerging from the negation or refinement of the antithesis (reactionary modes) forms a new thesis. Writer, Wole Soyinka argues that this structure imposes a Western view upon African literature (interview with Egejuru 1980). Ezekiel Mphahlele goes as far as to say that the concept of Negritude has served no practical purpose for the African masses because the “current economic, social and political structures run counter to African values” (interview Egejuru 11).

However, in an interview with VéVé Clark (1989), Condé argued that Negritude helped us value our Blackness, without which, perhaps we would still be ashamed of ourselves. On the other hand, Condé reflects that:

The proponents of Negritude made a big mistake and caused a lot of suffering in the minds of West Indian people and black Americans as well. We were led to believe that Africa was the source; it is the source, but we believed we would find home there, when it was not a home. Without Negritude, we would not have experienced the degree of disillusionment that we did (Clark, Interview with Maryse Condé 117).

In his examination of the failure or success of the Negritude movement in liberating Africans and their art from the ex-masters, Egejuru (1980) finds the outcome ironic. Here, writing for a European audience and publishing in Western
languages are obvious issues. Additionally, in Egejuru’s view, the writer, who is
supposed to play a leading role in reestablishing Africa’s cultural identity and
political independence through artistic skill, remains dependent on the ex-master’s
literary tradition, taste, and approval.

Less discussed failures of the Negritude movement includes its inability to
connect Africans of the Diaspora with the African continent and its refusal to
revise or rework essentialist ideology. Despite these criticisms, one cannot deny
that Negritude philosophy added new dimensions to the Western idea of the
novel. Africa as the subject matter is ubiquitous in African Literature. Uniquely
African themes and literary techniques that writers of the African Diaspora
employ continue to challenge Western thought with their depth and originality.

Laye, Angelou and Condé have been described as a new kind of griot or
jali. In Africa, the griot is the witness, recorder of events and master of the epic
tradition. The griot does not tell his or her story, but instead relates the exploits of
others. In some cultures the griot is known as the ‘praise-singer’. Many scholars
and lay practitioners have, from various frameworks, remarked on the griot
tradition as ‘praise’ in its totality. However, Daniel Avorgbedor (1994) reminds
us that the content, form and outward efficacy of the tradition often show that
irony and indirection, veiled and sometimes open criticisms or insults, cohere the
griot or praise tradition. An ability to weave the two is a mark of a great jali, the
African griot.

In an interview with Egejuru, Laye compares the African writer to the
griot:
The African writer has a need to express himself because he feels better than others the suffering of his people. He feels, in his capacity as a creator, the voice of his people just as the griot does; in Africa the griot is weak. When the griot comes to flatter you, he is given money because he is weak, but he can express your feelings better than you can, and when the king speaks, it is the griot who gives meaning to his words (Egejuru, Interview with Camara Laye, 119).

In this portrayal of the African writer, Laye also tells Egejuru that unlike European poets, African writers are not men and women of immeasurable grandeur. In fact, for the African, the writer is a ‘weakling’ like the griot (119). This weakness is what strengthens the author’s ability to promote his or her cause. It is important to remember that Laye’s use of the word ‘weakling’ does not hold the same meaning as it does in a European context. Here, ‘weak’ means possessing the ability to absorb the experience of ‘others’ into one-self, thus allowing for accurate narration of experience. Laye, Angelou and Condé each use the griot style of storytelling in order to achieve their cause.

Laye’s *The Dark Child* illustrates the gulf that develops between young Laye and his Malinke community in colonial Guinea, due to encroaching modernity in the 1930’s and 1940’s. Laye is mostly concerned with depicting the beauty of Malinke culture in his autobiography. In his article, “Camara Laye And The Quest For The Vanishing Self,” Mildred Mortimer (1990) argues that because of the ‘chasm’, which disallows Laye from following the tradition of his father as goldsmith, Laye instead follows the path of the griot. Laye does not become a Malinke poet in the spoken word, but rather, a master of the written word. It is through this path that Laye creates a beautiful narrative of Malinke culture and the happy life of the African child.
Mortimer also contends the poetic style of Laye is influenced by European realists and Romantic poets such as Flaubert (39). Indeed, Laye's African voice shifts to a European one at various intervals within *The Dark Child*, effectively symbolizing Laye's dual cultural legacy. Maintaining that he is an African with adopted European values, Laye embodies the 'splitting' quality of being acculturated to two worlds. At the beginning of Laye's autobiography, the reader is hopeful that this dual acculturation will prepare young Laye to be comfortable in both worlds. By the end of the novel, the reader wonders if he will ever fit comfortably in either?

Some have criticized Laye for not explicitly confronting the issue of colonialism in his autobiography. This criticism came largely from supporters of the Negritude movement, which gave birth to the 'normative model' Laye did not fit. To this disapproval, Laye responded by arguing that the function of the artist is to search for a special kind of reality that "does not admit the representation of ugliness which would fight against idealism" (Yoder 110). In fact, *The Dark Child* underwent seven drafts and thus represents a deliberate attempt by Laye to present an idealized version of reality (Yoder 111). Through the selective elimination of "ugliness," Laye succeeds in communicating a highly subjective truth, family, and community love. Thus, the 'new griot' is selective in what he chooses to acknowledge and how he chooses to tell his story, and if that does not conform to 'normative expectations', this new griot is often criticized.

In *Heremakonon*, Veronique, a Guadalupian who has spent nine years of self-exile in France travels to the continent of Africa in search of her lost identity.
Her narrative was inspired by her personal suffering, reflecting the broader community of peoples within the African Diaspora who cannot relate to Black identity discourses of her day. Some have said that her autobiography is a sort of anti-discourse on the subject of Black identity.

In her interview with Clark (1989), Conde conveyed that she does not see herself as a griotte of contemporary Guadeloupean society. In fact, she notes that her literary work does not praise, but instead does the exact opposite. In describing the function of literature to Françoise Lionnet, Conde contends that “The role of literature is to provoke thought and reflection, to articulate the existential anguish which burdens the people” (Lionnet 173).

Conde is an excellent example of a great jaliya. Throughout Heremakhonon, Conde very effectively uses irony, indirection, and insults, as she weaves the story of herself as Guadeloupean exile Veronique, in search of her lost identity in Guinea. Succumbing to notions of Africa as ‘welcoming mother’, Veronique believes that during her visit to Africa, she will discover the ‘essence’ of Africanness, and by association, her ties to the continent. Her Romantic ideal or imaginings of ‘mother Africa’ is highlighted through the use of imagery. Instead, myths of Negritude and the essentialist view that there are metaphysic-like ‘ways of being’ intrinsic to all peoples of African decent, collapse. When this occurs, Veronique experiences an intellectual paralysis in the African country of her sojourn, tragically represented through her relationships with political strongman Ibrahima Sory and her colleague. The narrative is passive, voyeuristic and yet liberating for the young Veronique who seeks complete freedom, as she
pursues a controversial states-man in politically unstable Guinea. Saliou. This individual, Ibrahim Sory, takes on the (imagined) redemptive ability to cure Veronique of her ‘malady’.

Veronique is determined to control her role by building walls, which separate her from the political violence of Guinea. The artistic style Condé uses to depict Veronique’s situation is humorous and voyeuristic. Condé’s writing style reflects the ideals of the sexually liberated woman, the European intellectual, and the Antillean bourgeoisie, searching for pure identity, all of which lead to a dead end and to tragedy. Reminiscent of victim behavior, Condé recounts herself, films all, bares everything, yet desperately separates her ‘self’ from the pain that comes with realization of and separation from false hopes.

Through Condé’s skillful writing, the reader senses this fragmentation and somehow sympathizes with the anti-heroine. Condé employs dual voice and metaphor in particular, in order to elicit the reader’s sympathy. These techniques successfully communicate to the reader Veronique’s alienation from herself, the peoples of Guinea, and even those of her own country of birth. Also, Veronique’s dual voice makes possible Condé’s witness of a former self’s painful experience. Arguably the most ‘disruptive’ of the three Black autobiographies, Condé’s style is a Sylvia Plath-like journey into one African Diasporic woman’s pathos.

Condé’s response is to begin the process of remembering herself by rejecting ‘essence’ philosophy and by realizing the need for a discourse that addresses the issues of other African Diasporic female ‘nomads’ like herself, who have had similar experiences with disjuncture but lack a workable framework for
returning to 'wholeness' (Lionnet 187-89). The novel is a defiant celebration of recaptured self, cultural hybridity, and creolité. In short, it is a controversial antithesis of negritude.

Angelou expresses concern over 'the souls of Black folk' in the changing landscapes of 1930 and 1940's America, in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. At the turn of the century, Donna Franklin (1997) suggests that at least eighty percent of Blacks lived in the rural south, primarily near the Cotton Belt (30). The period of 1915-1920 alone beckoned some 500,000 Blacks to the North. This Great Migration continued into the 1940's after World War II, and impacted the Black family unit, which although struggling, maintained itself as a unit prior to the Great Migrations of the 20th century. Franklin’s research finds that by the 1920’s, scholars began to observe that many Black women were raising children without a spouse present; they found that only about 75 percent of Black mothers were married and living with spouses (38).

In reverse fashion from the Great Migration pattern, Angelou’s divorced parents send three-year old Angelou (Maya) and her four-year old brother southeast from California to live with Grandma (Momma) in Stamps, Arkansas. There, Maya experiences the tensions and joys of being Black and living in the rural south. As Maya comes of age, Momma is the matriarchal figure through whom she learns of strength through God and the community. Maya’s real mother is the Blues figure through whom she learns of strength through individualism. In-between, Maya learns of life through her love of all forms of knowledge, from Shakespeare to James Weldon Johnson. She says, “If we were a
people much given to revealing secrets, we might raise monuments and sacrifice to the memories of our poets, but slavery cured us of that weakness” (184). Similarly to Laye, Angelou perceives the importance, but not the decadence, of the Black poet.

The legacy of slavery in the Black community is that of hiding one’s source of strength, lest the ‘masters’ take it away. The legacy of slavery is also the legacy of the poet, perhaps the griot in disguise. Slave historian John Blassingame claims that one of the strongest forces operating against the cruel treatment of slaves was religion and spirituals (Blassingame 268-69).

Furthermore, scholars such as W.E.B. DuBois, argue that the traditional medicine man (or woman) manifested himself as the Black Preacher (DuBois 110-13).

Angelou says that preachers, musicians and blues singers are to be included in our definition of ‘poets’ (Angelou 1969). In likeness to the griot, Angelou praises:

Oh, known and unknown poets, how often have your auctioned pains sustained us? Who will compute the lonely nights you made less lonely by your songs, or by the empty pots made less tragic by your tales (Angelou 184).

This brief comparative analysis of Laye, Angelou and Conde’s poetic styles illustrate the cultural heritage shared by those of the African Diaspora. The poetic styles of Laye, Angelou and Conde illustrate artistic appreciation for the griot style of expression, community and identity discourse. These authors employ artistic techniques that appeal to the readers’ emotion and sense of rationale. The reader empathizes with the universal themes which Laye, Angelou and Conde experience, such as transitioning from childhood to adulthood, moving
physically from one space to another, and searching for oneself. At the same
time, each writer contributes to intellectual thought on the issue of Black identity,
as will be explored in the following sections.

3.2 Black Autobiography Representing ‘In-Between Spaces’

*The Dark Child* is a quest for liberty and times lost but not forgotten.

Laye, homesick for Africa while studying in Paris, writes about his experience
growing up in Guinea. Laye concerns himself with remembering ideals; only the
threat of modernity brings darkness to this African child. Laye’s romantic
longing for the ideal life he left behind in Africa makes one wonder whether he
came to this realization before or after living in France. For Laye’s
(re)membering is laced with a nostalgia which can only be felt after an
experience. Here, the reader is reminded that autobiography reflects the mood of
the author at the time he or she writes the account. In *Soliloquy On Viewing My
Life*, W.E.B. Du Bois confesses, “Eager as I am to put down the truth, there are
difficulties, memory fails, especially in small details so that it becomes finally but
a theory of my life” (DuBois 1969). Laye’s theory of what life has been is a
combination of his life’s experiences along with the interpretations of these
experiences, which we call memory. The resulting child of Laye’s memory
intermingles with the dark adult from the moment his pen wrote the first words of
the text, “I was a little boy playing around my father’s hut” (Laye 17). To the last:

I sat a long while without moving, my arms folded tightly to
stifle the sobs that wracked me.... Later on I felt something hard
when I put my hand in my pocket. It was the map of the metro
(88).
The use of dual voice is one way in which the movement from happiness to sadness in *The Dark Child* is conveyed. In the following, I discuss how this dual voice is used when Laye speaks of his Malinke concession and his experiences with modernity, symbolically represented by the snake and the railroad. Ironically, the totem of Laye’s father is also a snake, a specific snake that visits his father early in the narrative. Laye recalls the mysticism of the ‘visit’ and remembers refraining from placing his hand on the snake that is his father’s “guiding spirit”. The dual voice of the child and man combine in this moment. The sadness, which that moment represented to the child and man moment is reminiscent of what Freud has termed a “sphere of melancholia”. “I felt now that he (the snake) would have nothing to tell me. I was afraid that he would never have anything to tell me” (Laye 29).

Permeating existential flavor, *The Dark Child* leaves the reader with no doubt that Laye mentally exists within two worlds: The African and the European. This splitting quality, according to Frantz Fanon (1965) has negative effects on the African. Laye cannot deny his Guinean self, nor can he choose it over the French influence that so strongly directed his life, thus creating an existential dilemma.

After World War II, Jean-Paul Sartre and others provided a framework for discussion on the philosophy of existentialism. In the spirit of existentialism, they tell us that angst or anxiety over one’s existence in the world is a healthy journey towards action and self-understanding. But is this the case for Laye?
At the beginning of *The Dark Child*, we see young Laye, age five or six, playing in his parents’ hut. There is a fence of planted reeds marking the boundary between his parents’ concession and the outside world. A snake finds its way through the boundary and Laye, upon seeing the snake, decides to go out and play with it, unaware of the danger. Just as a snake is about to bury its fangs into Laye, one of his father’s apprentices whisks the child into his arms. Laye remembers, “I felt myself lifted off my feet, I was safe in the arms of one of my father’s friends” (18).

In this episode, the snake serves as a metaphor for the danger that exists ‘outside’. In opposition to the anxiety certain snakes bring, the concession symbolizes calmness, organization and safety. Laye recalls being saved by the protection and love that surrounded him before he ‘strayed’ from home. The reader imagines this safe world, and apprehensions build as we wonder if it will always exist.

A railroad situated beside Laye’s concession serves as another metaphor for the double-edged sword that is modernity. In colonial Africa, the systemic exploitation of goods and raw materials maintained many populations in the most degrading poverty and dependence. The railroads also consumed large quantities of wood for fuel, thereby debasing the land (Moore & Dunbar 154). From the beginning of the narrative, Laye alludes to the dangers that the railroad brings to the community, implicitly portraying the ills of colonialism and the modernity it brings with it (Moore & Dunbar 19).
The railroad “glistened cruelly” in Laye’s memory and he remembers wondering if the pesky snakes are attracted to its “baking heat” and the constant smell of oil. Laye presents us with an ominous image of the snakes “crawling on that hotbed” and we are told that if the snakes make it into the compound, the result will be fatal. Laye creates suspense as the reader wonders if the snake or the train will bring distress to the community. The reader is reminded of the constant presence of the train and the fascination it holds for Laye, “Even when there is no train... much of my time was spent watching the iron rails” (21).

Ardent exponents of the Negritude movement, which was at its height when *The Dark Child* was published, accused Laye of political apathy. Laye’s idyllic portrayal of the daily life of an African child upset many politically orientated critics, who felt that the autobiography refused to confront the problem of Africa’s collision with Europe.

In an interview with Egejuru, Laye contends that *The Dark Child* fulfills the initial objectives of the Negritude movement by projecting a positive image of Africa. However, Laye was specifically criticized for exoticizing the first phase of Negritude writing, and ignoring the second phase altogether. To this, Laye expressed grim concern over the lack of liberty for the African writer and how this crippled his vision of art.

Liberty is important for a work of art. But there is no liberty. Liberty has never existed for the ‘natives’. It is a problem for the African writer. First we had to deal with colonizers and there was no liberty. Today we have to deal with men of African culture, and there, liberty is not complete either. That is the tragedy (Egejuru, Interview with Camara Laye, 119).
Laye insists that the best way he knew how to fight colonialism was to talk of African civilization.

"What interested me at that time was not colonization, which was staring me in the face, but the African civilization that I had to show to a world that was skeptical of its existence" (Egejuru, Interview with Camara Laye, 21).

Some literary critics argue that Laye’s *The Dark Child* is a response to Joseph Conrad’s (1980) *Heart of Darkness*, in which the typical colonial writer, “Obsessed by the idea of a mysterious, superstitious society... stressed fear as the underlying element of the African experience” (Mortimer). To oppose this stereotyped conception of his culture, Laye offers the feelings of love and concern associated with his own childhood (Yoder 1991). Where there are elements of fear, Mortimer argues it is “tempered by a strong sense of concern emanating from the larger community” (1990).

Furthermore, Mortimer says, fear depicts a higher reality transcending fear itself (e.g. initiation ceremonies), where through the battle to overcome fear, a child catches a clear glimpse of the profound expression of love surrounding him. Indeed, the reader feels a tremendous sense of loss at the end of the novel as Laye ventures into the modern world that is France. Reminiscent of the Garden of Eden, the snake, dressed up as modernity, lures Laye with the ‘forbidden fruit’ of foreign education. Or perhaps more akin to the Prodigal Son, Laye, eager to leave home, departs for adventure only to find that there’s “no place like home.”

Laye’s autobiography is ultimately subversive. There was, and still is, the ethnocentric notion that progress is made when Africans (and Blacks in general)
move away from 'the primitive' and toward the 'the civilized'. We have clearly seen that Laye reverses this notion as the happy mood of Guinean life gives way to development, which is 'dark' and dangerous. In fashioning such a mood in *The Dark Child*, Laye challenges the European idea of civilization and the decidedly Eurocentric value it holds. We have also seen that artistic freedom of expression is an ideal, and that although artists' reach for this ideal, politics intervenes. What is in question, it seems, is whether the artist with a cause expresses their cause explicitly enough for the politically minded. Artists such as Laye have not compromised the art for their cause. Nor has Laye ignored issues of Black alienation, which in his case comes with development as individuals often move away from home in order to 'progress'.

Angelou was praised by Black critics for lifting up the value system of African Americans in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. This narrative, like all her works, is very much in line with the ideals of the Black Power movement, which gave birth to Africentric thought. This movement occurred at a time when Whites were heavily criticizing Blacks for not adopting *their* normative model for family and social functioning. Writers like Tony Morrison, Alice Walker and Maya Angelou combated this kind of ethnocentric thought with the discursive politics of Africentric writing. *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* articulates the functional quality of folklore within the Black community. Angelou's griotte style speaks out against Eurocentric attitudes. Angelou views folklore as a cathartic outlet that helps dissipate troubles in the suffering Black heart. Here, her
role as griotte is to function as the bearer of positive information about Black culture.

Folklore within *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* pays homage to the art of association among members of the Black community, and emphasizes the 'collective' quality of the Black experience. Members within the Black community become legendary, elevating a people often made ordinary by racist circumstances.

An extension of the griot tradition, Angelou uses folklore to capture the story of herself and the Black community of her childhood. Folklore of Maya’s youth includes the story about the famed boxing match between heroic figure Joe Louis and The Great White Hope. Maya’s folk joyfully claim that Louis will ‘whip that cracker like it’s open season’ (Angelou 132). When it appears that Louis is losing, Maya says:

> My race groaned. It was another lynching, yet another Black man hanging on a tree. One more woman ambushed and raped. A Black boy whipped and maimed. It was hounds on the trail of a man running through slimy swamps. It was a white woman slapping her maid for being forgetful (Angelou, 135).

The use of the pronoun ‘my’ in the conveyance of this story accentuates the broader theme of community. Angelou portrays individual successes and failures of Blacks as *group* successes and failures. When Louis won the fight people, Maya remembers that people ‘drank Coca-Colas like ambrosia’ and ‘ate candy bars like Christmas’ (Angelou 136). The success of Louis is the success of all Blacks. The celebration and merriment is only vaguely checked by the reality of an encroaching white community. This dictated that those who traveled into
Stamps to join in the collective listening of the fight but ‘who lived to far’

traveled had to make arrangements to stay in town:

It wouldn’t do for a Black man and his family to be caught on a
lonely country road on a night when Joe Louis had proved that
we (emphasis) were the strongest people in the world (Angelou,
136).

Ordinary people are portrayed in comical lore such as the archetype of all
Sister Monroe(s). Sister Monroe, a member of Maya’s congregation misses
service for several weeks and becomes the center of attention at service when she
‘attacks’ the right Reverend Taylor when she ‘catches the spirit’ after a long
‘drought’. Stories of members of the community, perhaps insignificant to the
casual reader become legendary, ingrained on the memories of a people often
made ordinary by racist circumstances. Trials and tribulations as well as
humorous events are conveyed with equal detail and attentiveness. Church
revivals preaching the collective suffering of Blacks (Angelou 131) becomes just
as important as the story of a young boy who stands up in front of his 8th grade
graduating class and gives voice to Black pride after a deflating ‘eulogy’ by a
white man (Angelou 180, 181). The memory of cotton pickers, the depression’s
impact on Stamps, Arkansas, and a Black man’s lynching are all remembered by
Angelou through the art of folklore.

Angelou’s remembering is supported by throngs of Blacks in the
community who share similar memories, aided by ritual of passing on storied
through the oral tradition. Angelou’s use of folklore as an artistic devise is
effective as it gives meaning to Black consciousness. These ‘collective’ realities
are offered to us in Angelou’s artistic rendering of folklore in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*.

Giving pride back to the African American community, these incidents become part of who young Maya becomes, and remembering is fortified by throngs of Black people in the community who share similar memories are pieced together in the tradition of healing through storytelling. Trials and tribulations, as well as humorous events and accomplishments of the community, are conveyed with attentive, nurturing, give and take. Old and young alike are given the platform, and the responsibility of the storyteller is to tell his or her ‘tale’, while the responsibility of the receiver(s) of the story is to be open and accepting of its truths.

Folklore is also expressed as a healing device in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, a therapeutic aesthetic art form, has roots in African traditions. Healing through folklore is brilliantly conveyed through the supportive relationship between the storyteller and listener. Here, the storyteller, sometimes ‘patient-like’, conveys, and the dutiful listener, patient and attentive, takes in the storyteller’s joys or sufferings. This is exemplified by the incident where Rev. Taylor visits Maya’s home late in the night after he suffers nightmares. The shaken Rev. Taylor describes his wife (who died before having the children she had always wanted), who visits him in the night as a White cherubic baby. Momma, Maya, Bailey, and Uncle Willie listen intently. Maya then observes Momma soothe the agitated Rev. Taylor:
Their remarks and responses were like a Ping-Pong game with each volley clearing the net and flying back to the opposition. The sense of what they were saying became lost, and only the exercise remained (Angelou 167).

Rev. Taylor is not only fearful of the apparition, but also fearful that Momma won't believe him. Momma quickly dispels both fears, accepting that an apparition visited Rev. Taylor as his reality. Momma then sets out to convince the Reverend that his deceased wife just wanted him to work more with the children in the community. By the end of the conversation, “... the intoxication of doom had fled, as if it had never been, and Momma was encouraging Mr. Taylor to take in one of the Jenkins boys to help him with his farm” (Angelou 168). Maya wonders how Momma, “Could command the fretful spirits, as Jesus had commanded the sea. Peace, be still” (Angelou 168).

The generosity of telling one’s story is greatly valued in the Black community. Like an article much needed, Maya reflects that:

Whatever was given by Black people to other Blacks was most probably needed as desperately by the donor as by the receiver. A fact, which made giving or receiving a rich exchange (Angelou 49).

As an art form, the value of folklore is palpable. Young Maya and most Black people of the south are socialized to the folk wisdom of their people over space and time. A sense of community is founded upon the sharing of great suffering, and folklore serves to retain the group’s experience while providing a homegrown remedy for the soul. Angelou masters the skill of folklore to represent the ‘communal self’ but also ‘individual self’ in achieving agency. With the emphasis of strength through and with the community, arguably, young Maya
perhaps understands her own successes to be in part due to a collective consciousness.

Several years after Angelou’s novel, the American government published the infamous Moynihan Report. The report was a call to action to rectify the ‘pathological’ characteristics of the Black family. Years of historical conflict and misunderstanding between Black and White value systems resurrected themselves during this time, and a heated debate ensued. Governmental intervention aimed at ‘rectifying’ the Black family included reduction of single mothers’ access to welfare, lest the matriarchal household continue to thrive. In one camp, the White nuclear family was idealized, and in the other, the augmented or extended Black family was defended. Angelou’s achievement in lifting the values of the Black family and its mode for survival is memorialized in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. Angelou’s novel will always be used to educate political and social discourse on Black identity. Within its wisdom, the matriarchal figure, code switching between African American English and Standard English, folklore, and other Black traditions are all positively portrayed.

It is suggested that Black autobiographical texts are artifacts of in-between spaces where the subjects attempt to become real or whole, through the negotiation of not so ‘fixed’ realities. Theorizing about Black space came before Gilroy’s theoretical texts, in which he argues that non-Whites experience the desire (often successfully) to transcend ‘fixed’ notions of race, gender and space. In this work, our artist painstakingly recreates an art object (herself), that captures her life history, helpless here, developing there, finally powerful with agency. In
Angelou's autobiography there is a celebration of the imagination. In recollecting memory, imaginings serve unabashedly as a crucial tool in Angelou's artistic survival kit, necessary in her search for sanity, femaleness and then agency. To take this idea a step further, one could argue that for Black Autobiography it is all the more important for our protagonist to separate him/herself from a subjective reality in order to focus on identity.

Maya's attraction to imaginings through the depiction of Maya's handicapped Uncle Willie, Momma, and a white secretary. Upon closer examination of this text, we will begin to gain deeper understanding of imagination helps non-White subjects gain power in realities where they otherwise appear powerless. Perhaps the oppression of the South for Blacks in the United States is symbolized best through the character of Uncle Willie.

The perpetual blunderer, literally physically and mentally handicapped, Uncle Willie embodies the confines of Black men in the South. One afternoon, while Momma is absent from attending their family merchandise store, Uncle Willie 'pretends' to White customers that he is 'whole'. For the first time in her life, Maya sees Uncle Willie acting as though he is a mentally and physically able-bodied man. One of Maya's earliest memories, she is moved to 'play along' with this act, and the incident leaves an indelible impression on her. For 'one part of an afternoon, Uncle Willie wanted no part' of his crippled body, and pretended it away. Five-year old Maya understood and felt closer to Uncle Willie in that moment than "ever before and since" (Angelou 12).
In *Black Autobiography: Life as the Death Weapon*, Roger Rosenblatt argues that in Black autobiography, the outer world where heroes move is one of craziness (Rosenblatt 174). One such ‘craziness’ involves Momma (Maya’s Grandmother), who is keeping shop when a group of what Maya calls the ‘powhitetrash children’ invade the store. In this scene the ‘powhitetrash’ children brawl over the shelves, wreck havoc and affront Momma. Upon leaving, one girl in a dress executes a handstand in front of Momma, impudently revealing her bare body underneath as a final insult. The girls slap hands at this and finally go away, but not without Momma this incident, Momma sings aloud what she had been humming during this absurd act: ‘Glory, Glory Hallelujah’… She remains grounded in her faith, triumphant in the face of trial (Angelou 30-31). During this tense scene, young Maya drifts in and out of not ‘being there’ to witness such painful humiliation:

> I thought about the rifle behind the door, but I knew I’d never be able to hold it straight, and the .410, our sawed off shotgun, which stayed loaded and was fired every New Year’s night, was locked in the trunk and Uncle Willie had the key (Angelou 30).

Multiple scenes of pathos are conveyed throughout *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings*: Uncle Willie and the incident where he hides from whites in a bin of new potatoes (Angelou 19), and Maya and Bailey’s movie expeditions where they daydream about an actress who looks like their absent mother (Angelou 118) are just a few. A dramatic incident that required imagination to intervene is when Momma finds herself and young Maya dehumanized by a white dentists refusal to treat Maya’s painful tooth infection. Maya dedicates a page
and a half to the dramatic recreation of the event, which leaves the white dentist jostled, drooling and begging Momma for mercy (Angelou 189-91). Here, Maya demonstrates the ability to create an ‘alternative ending’ to painful experiences through powerful imaginings.

Maya describes these fragmented experiences between Blacks and Whites as having a theatrical quality. “Like actors who, knowing the play by heart, we were able to cry afresh over the old tragedies and laugh spontaneously at the comic situations” (Angelou 266). In one incident with a white secretary who refuses to give Maya an application to work as a conductorette in California, Maya describes how:

The secretary and I were like Hamlet and Laertes in the final scene, where, because of harm done by one ancestor to another, we were bound to duel to the death. Also because the play must end somewhere (Angelou 267).

In this particular scene the tug of war between Maya and the secretary ends in a truce. In refusal to play the only victim of this scene, Maya says, “I went further than forgiving the clerk, I accepted her as a fellow victim of the same puppeteer” (Angelou 267). Maya engages in frequent ‘sit-ins’ at this office until finally she wins the ‘game’ and is at last given an application and the job she desires. Maya’s imagination and a non-willingness to give up ‘the act’ the two women found themselves engaged in, provides her with strength in the face of adversity. The interactions between the two women, characterizes Hortense Spillers’ theory, which suggests that racialized power relationships manifest pathological behavior.
The ability to transcend ‘reality’ via imagination becomes a weapon in and of itself and within Black autobiography. Imaginings can therefore be understood, even expected of our hero or heroine, to the extent that they do not become a preoccupation. A redemptive exercise, while at times admittedly pathetic, imagining is powerful for Black protagonists in their journey toward agency, life’s meaning. “Without knowing it, I had gone from being ignorant of being ignorant to being aware of being aware” (Angelou 271).

At the end of I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings, innocence is lost and Maya puts aside childish things, including some of her wild imagination. However, her appreciation for those ‘things’ which helped her gain agency in an ocean of oppressive forces does not diminish, To be left alone on the tightrope of youthful unknowingness is to experience the excruciating beauty of full freedom and the threat of eternal indecision (Angelou 271).

Unknowingness, fear and helplessness were made less threatening by the imagination. Angelou shows us how the exquisite beauty of the ‘imagining’ state sets us free and enables us to ‘act’. As we have seen in Angelou’s account, it becomes essential for non-Whites to ‘create’ an imagined world less hopeless, where power can fluidly shift from the powerful to the powerless. Though fictitious, the psychological value of imagination is undeniable within Black identity making. Reminiscent of Surrealist ideology, which involves imagining the full potential of freedom beyond worldly subjectivity, Angelou’s autobiography is a celebration of imagination, and her ‘reveries’ are as humorous as they are infectious. I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings leaves us believing (or
at least curious) in imagination’s power and its ability to galvanize our energy
toward agency and freedom.

Maryse Conde’s *Heremakhonon* is another text, which expresses a
response to the deterritorialized and fragmented experience. The text is treated as
an artifact representing Gilroy’s ‘in-between spaces’ where subjects negotiate
their realities. Written partially in response to Negritude philosophy, Conde
objects to Negritude’s tendency, to identify European racism as the sole cause of
Black displacement, without reference to native African and New World Black
collusion, in the perpetuation of slavery (Clark 1989). As well, her work is a
theory about the specific issue of displacement of ‘African Diasporic nomads’ of
the world community. As in many of Conde’s writings, the protagonist presents
herself as a disposed person.

In Arthur Flannigan’s comparative research of Francoise Ega’s *Lettres a
Une Noire* by and Conde’s *Heremakhonon*, he describes the narrator in Ega’s text
as “a poor, black woman” and “in the eyes of her European employers, no name,
no rights, no power and... no body” (1998). Clearly, Charles Mills’ theory of
spatial on-being’ operates in literary texts of the African Diaspora. In one sense,
Black autobiography can be viewed as a response to the fear of ‘erasure’. Of
particular interest in the following analysis of Conde’s narrative, is how she
represents and understands her racialized body, and whether she is able to
successfully negotiate a stable identity within the chaos of her surroundings.

In *Heremakhonon*, the anti-moi form of self-ethnography achieves
Conde’s aim of bringing sharp focus to the lack of discourse available to ‘African
Diasporic nomads' who can't relate to African or European intellectual philosophy on identity. The result reflects Fanon’s idea of the double alienation of the intellectual who cannot embrace his or her own geopolitical and historical situation, thus getting caught up in a hopeless dualism (Lionnet). Condé uses the fragmented voice as a literary device to convey this message.

The autobiographical text of Maryse Condé bears witness to her life experiences. Like all works of this genre, experiences are given meaning derived from the author's memories of themselves in relation to the world in which they live. In the tradition of Black autobiography, Condé's work expresses experience with fracture or disjuncture between self and reality due to various historical and socio-political processes. Having experienced some form of alienation from her community or herself, Condé's text is an indictment of alienation and the role humanity has in this process.

The fragmented experiences reflect the existential dilemma basic to many Black peoples of the African Diaspora across space and time. Understanding Black autobiography within the context of history, allows scholars and readers to more fully the political and social conditions of our past and how these events impact our future. Condé represents a culturally hybrid heroine in Heremakhonon with one goal in mind: recollection of self or identity.

Veronique, unsatisfied with her individualist approach to life thus far, seeks a mental place where she can feel connected to her ancestors. Condé is also homesick for Africa and goes to Guinea in search of a 'pure' African identity. However, Condé's anti-heroine, Veronique, finds that there is no 'pure' African
identity that can be subsumed by the Diasporic nomad. At the end of her journey, Veronique’s illusion of an essential African identity is shattered.

From the beginning, *Heremakhonon* portrays Veronique as cynical and highly critical. Conde presents a cool-headed Veronique making fun of herself when questioned at the Guinea airport customs as to the nature of her visit. She is strangely distant from the people of this African country where she believes her identity will be found. “Don’t they know I don’t care a damn for their town? I’m not trying to get out of my element. The dubious exotism. “(Conde 8). The use of scornful voice and use of ‘their’ convey separateness between Veronique and the Guinean people. Veronique’s last statement in *Heremakhonon* epitomizes the sentimentality and bitterness that pervades her visit to West Africa:


> Here, the shift from ambivalence to dead end is dramatized. Ironically, Paris provides a dim possibility for renewal.

Throughout *Heremakhonon*, Veronique’s fragmented voice functions to disrupt its audience, as Conde has stated it was meant to do. If Camara Laye’s idyllic portrayal of daily life in Africa in *The Dark Child* upset critics because it did not touch on phase two of Negritude philosophy by pointing to the ills of colonialism, Conde’s lifting of the veil of terror in Guinea overstepped the bounds of phase three, which called for writers to discuss the challenges of African regimes in the absence of ‘the White man’.
*Heremakhonon* has also been criticized for its decadent individualism (Lionnet 174), in contrast to the Negritude philosophy, which projects the necessity of collective unity among Black people. After gaining independence, Guinean and Malian leaders in particular coupled ideas of individualism with selfishness. Sekou Toure of Guinea warned his followers against “aventures personnelles” (Lionnet 1989). However, Conde criticizes this kind of trajectory, maintaining the importance of the individual and of the hybridity of cultural value systems.

Eventually, Veronique’s “aventure personnelle” comes to an end in *Heremakhonon* when it becomes impossible for her to maintain impartiality in the face of political violence against those she loves. At the end of the narrative, Veronique finally comes to terms with the fact that her “nigger with ancestors,” political strong man Ibrahim Sory, is a murderer. Able to see through her illusions, Veronique realizes:

> Yes, one can forget everything. One can lean back in time. I want that less and less, I realize. As if the present had caught up with me. Not that I’ve won anything in exchange. I even prefer my old ghosts. They were good company: they didn’t have blood on their faces (Conde 117).

Veronique has not ‘won’ psychological satisfaction, but is content with accepting her past and letting go of myths. She comes to realize that this African country is harsher to bear than her old ghosts who at least preferred mimicry to bloodshed.

Conde believes that an alternative discourse to post-Negritude thought is possible, but understands that accomplishing it singularly is problematic.
Heremakhonon renders Veronique incapable of intellectual mobility even when she discovers that the 'traditional' Africa of her dreams is in fact permeated with Western ideology, competition, and violence. Edouard Glissant suggests that the tragic condition of Veronique is allegorical to the kind of cultural alienation Guadeloupeans experience as political dependents of France (87-89).

Consequently, Condé states that it is impossible to even talk about “cultural identity” in Guadeloupe because there are no existing economic and political infrastructures through which local and indigenous cultural responses can be articulated. However, a thriving Creole Movement may slowly make this possible. In her view, only when a federation of Caribbean states is created will Antilleans be able to begin to effect changes on the symbolic level, to think and act in terms of their own geopolitical situatedness (Lionnet 174).

3.3. Conclusion

Gilroy challenges scholars to beware of the dominant Euro-American cultural thought which tends to understand notions of culture flowing from “patterns congruent with borders of essentially homogeneous nation-states.” Here, Gilroy’s argument is as intriguing as it is disturbing given the ways in which recent Eurocentric paradigms of ethnicity and nationality have indeed been employed in theoretical and actual ways (Neo-Colonization).

The idea of shared migratory experience is problematic if the well-intentioned goal of African Diaspora as a strategy for belonging desires to be understood as an inclusive paradigm for all Black people wherever they may be in our increasingly globalizing world. African Diaspora discourse has the potential
to deflect fears of cultural loss and un-belonging. Theoretical implications are further complicated when one considers the intersecting forces of globalization and geographical displacements. Indeed, physical boundaries between cultures, as well as ‘locality’ and geographic complexity, are reduced by globalization, though its polarizing effects are worth exploring further in terms of ‘global apartheid’. In various locales and between complex social structures, the concept of the African Diaspora engages in various forms, reformations, contestation and negotiation of identity and politics.

The nature of culture (once geographically bound) is territory (less) through a historic dialectic, where societies blend, exchange, create and recreate society and identity alike, never moving backwards in time. Two of nature’s forces, time and space, are constructed by human beings in ways which limit agency. However, in-between spaces are the contested moments in time and space where and when lines of demarcation do not clearly exist. It is within these spaces that categories tend to shift. Repositories of such categories include slave ships, pre-colonial Native American Indian territories, nations in space without states such as Kurdistan and Palestine, or most recently, discredited nation-states such as Zimbabwe. Art and literature, also offer portraits into the resistance and negotiation.

Laye, Angelou and Condé represent culturally hybrid heroes and heroines with one goal in mind: recollection of self or identity through literature. Societal expectation of art affects the artist. Terry Eagleton (1983) posits that societies define literature on the basis of value judgments that are themselves historically
variable, related to social ideologies and to assumptions by which certain groups exercise and maintain power over others (12-16). This presents the challenge, as Maya ponders as a child, “to be or not to be?” For artistic freedom of expression reveals itself to be a double-edged sword. However, as we have seen, art as truth-searching emerges as the artist’s source of inspiration.

In unique ways, each author testifies to the ways in which Black identity formation is complicated by cultural fusion due to possessing multiple cultural heritages. Furthermore, this cultural fusion is shown to contradict strategic essentialism, a device often used politically towards the end of Black unification. Most importantly, these texts call into question Black desire for purity, which only temporarily assuages the legacy of absent histories, lost cultures and languages. The authors each vindicate the richness of cultural fusion, and suggest that the desire for purity only serves to veil the problem of exclusion of others based on fallacies.

This research has examined themes such as geographic displacement within scholarly theoretical debates and Black autobiographical texts representing the African Diaspora. Applying an African Diasporic approach, the study has shown that Black autobiographical texts since the slave narratives, have been employed to shed inform scholarly discussion of Black cultural negotiation over time and space. Furthermore, the debates surrounding the African Diaspora as a framework are shown to be useful in challenging European paradigms for understanding social construction and the role of power in its architecting.
Furthermore, the approach lends itself to re-visionary efforts whose goal is inclusive theorizing of Black subjectivity beyond essentialized notions. For the approach also centralizes the importance of including all voices in the production of African Diasporic histories, and questions which ones have been excluded and why? Finally, it is the hope that the application of Spillers’ and Mills’ theories of gendered and racial displacement to Black autobiography, representing subjectivity within this particular context, provides a useful model for future research on this subject.

In the tradition of Black autobiography, the writings of Laye, Angelou and Condé’s writings express fracture or disjuncture between self and reality due to various historical and socio-political processes. Indeed, having experienced some form of alienation from their community or from themselves, these authors created works that are an indictment of alienation as it pertains to the Black experience and the role that humanity has in this process. Furthermore, as we have seen, Black intellectual thought has been immune to European conceptualization of humanity.

On the positive side, Black art has galvanized political discourse and appreciation of political works of art in general, and in many cases, fueled political causes. Olaudah Equiano’s *The Interesting Narrative of Olaudah Equiano*, Paul Robeson’s intense rendition of “Old Man River,” Mariam Ba’s depiction of interracial love in *Scarlet Song* and the works of contemporary filmmaker Julie Dash are all prime examples of Black art that inspire social-political debate. Thus, politicizing art forms may subdue appreciation of artistic
creativity whilst discrediting the plethora of rationale behind the creation of a work, including creating it for ‘its own sake’. Those who understand this, however, might appreciate the artistic creativity even more.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


