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I, Rebecca M Frank, hereby submit this original work as part of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English & Comparative Literature.

It is entitled:
The Last Time I Saw Manila

Student's name: Rebecca M Frank

This work and its defense approved by:

Committee chair: Donald Bogen, PhD
Committee member: Danielle Oeulen, PhD
Committee member: John Drury, MFA

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The Last Time I Saw Manila

A dissertation submitted to the
Graduate School
of the University of Cincinnati
in partial fulfillment of the
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DOCTORATE OF PHILOSOPHY
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by
Rebecca Morgan Frank

M.F.A. Emerson College, 2003

Committee Chair: Don Bogen, Ph.D.
Abstract:

This dissertation consists of two parts: a book-length collection of poems and a critical essay. The creative portion of the dissertation is *The Last Time I Saw Manila*, a volume of poems that examines American and Japanese occupation of the Philippine Islands from the Spanish American War through World War II. While one hybrid family's narrative serves as a unifying thread in this collection, multiple personae allow the actions and impact of imperialism and war to be depicted from shifting points of view that encompass characters of different ethnic, religious, and national identities. Varied poetic forms and personae mirror the complexity of mestizo and colonial identity in a colonized territory, while the unified lyric voice serves to both argue for, and question, the presence of a fixed moral viewpoint in the face of the atrocities of war and occupation. This collection serves as historical documentation in snapshots, deconstructed family narrative, and contemporary commentary on the legacy and consequences of American imperialism.

The critical portion of the dissertation is an examination of the poetic structures used in C.S. Giscombe’s *Giscombe Road* and Kevin Young’s *Ardency: A Chronicle of the Amistad Rebellion* to interrogate dominant historical narratives that have traditionally erased African American experience and history. Giscombe engages in deconstruction of language and the apparently fixed and “true” object, the map, through disruption, fragmentation, and the inclusion of visual typographical and topographical elements. Young revisits and recontextualizes images and texts from John Warner Barber’s 1840 history of the Amistad rebellion through the use of personae that voice the African perspective and through doubling within poetic figures. Each poet offers structural solutions to problems that arise in poetic explorations of historical narratives.
Grateful acknowledgement is made to the following publications in which some of the poems have previously appeared, some in different versions: *Bat City Review*, *Best New Poets 2008*, *Birmingham Poetry Review*, *Blackbird*, *Guernica*, *Harpur Palate*, *Hawai‘i Pacific Review*, *Hayden’s Ferry Review*, and *The Poetry Center of Chicago’s 2009 Juried Reading Chapbook*.

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This book could not have been written without the work of John Russell Frank, who has written a historical memoir of my family history in *On the Road Home: An American Story*. A heartfelt thank you to him and to all of my family who have lived, collected, and told these stories.
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for my grandfather
Shall we? That is, shall we go on conferring our Civilization upon the peoples that sit in darkness, or shall we give those poor things a rest?

-Mark Twain
DRAMATIS PERSONAE

ANDREA MAGNO: daughter of “Mora VI,” father unknown (b. Mindanao, P.I.)

PATRICK HENRY FRANK: nickname Boss (b. Tyler County, East Texas, U.S.)

EUGENIA GARCIA: daughter of Andrea Magno & Fermin Garcia, married to Boss (b. Cotabato, P.I.)

SAMUEL BOONE FRANK: son of Boss and Eugenia, baptized José, nickname Sam (b. Zamboanga, P.I.)

PATRICK JAMES FRANK Sr., son of Boss and Eugenia, baptized Emilio, nickname Pat (b. Zamboanga, P.I.)

LAURA: daughter of Boss and Eugenia, baptized Laora (b. Zamboanga, P.I.)

OKIO YAMAGOUCHI: anab (nursemaid/nanny) to José, Emilio, Laora (b. Nagasaki, Japan)

GENEVIEVE FRANK: married to Pat, nickname Sug (b. St Louis, U.S.)

PRISONERS: thousands of civilians (including Pat, Sam, and Boss) imprisoned in various camps in the Philippines by the Japanese Army during World War II.
I.

PULÀ, PUTÌ, ASUL

(1898-1940)

“Innibig ko ang ngalan ni Washington
I love the name of Washington”

from *The Baldwin Primer*, c. 1900, brought by American schoolteachers to the Philippines
MORA VI, INFIDEL

We barely wear our history noted
Bind the body in bondage to God, the blood flow
slowed steals the quick out of the bullet’s rip,

makes you unstoppable for that flight
of blade that smites the godless bodies.

A streak of dominos falling from your
welded touch, a stroke of devoted luck.

The moving holy body perforated by a useless gun
guides guerilla warfare: the jungle-buried bodies,

prone, your target, and your flash attack bates
the ineffective smack of bullet. Bodies lie.

Arms are in evolution, now created to cap
this newfound spectacle: a man who dies for love

of the afterlife, no country here his own.
Stories say that women passed, bound their breasts

and spun through town, whirling dervishes
wielding the kris. A fearless edge that gave birth

to the Colt .45, engineered to stop the juramentado.
The latest weapon in the battle of gods.
Innibig ko
Loving the flag, is the first thing,
learning the names of men to love comes next.

Pulá
First had come Christ, son of a Virgin,
his bloody palms, his sacrifice for you.

Putí
A grainy line drawing
of a white wig, white collar, white man.

Asul
His deep blue flannel, his American blue eyes,
the soldier that saves you.
A FAMILY’S HISTORY OF LIGHT

Blooming ylang ylang trees sparkle with swarms
Okio, sing home, sing home
sing, sing, sing to the girl in the bath,
let her splash, splash, her fingers
path the scar from your nape
to your waist; sing no more
lullabies of Nagasaki, home.

Sing the story of a picture bride
taken to the island of Basilan.
Blood, blood, sing blood, the body
of your Dutch husband quartered
by a Moro with a barong. Sing,
sing to Laora, your charge—
nothing’s wrong—the blade then
bled down your back, a hack
that missed—sing, sing, lullaby,
sing of Nagasaki. Home.

Run, run, the other Dutchman’s
wife has fled, run for her life—
only her braid is on the other
side of the knife: Blood,
blood everywhere, sing!
Scrub her nutmeg skin and sing—
It was more than luck:
the other bride sent the Yakans
who found you alive—Sing! Sing!
Hear the sound of their oars
leading you to shore. Sing, sing
to Zamboanga, sing of your new home,
hush the baby with your notes.

Sing, Okio, sing, of the women who
prayed for you, of the men who paid pesos
to reward the killers’ captors. Sing
of the man who takes you in, makes you
the amah to his three mestizos, sing
how you are there for every call
and cry. Sing! Sing of home!
Hear the neighbors say you
surely were the most beautiful girl
in Nagasaki and oh, how lucky you are,
how lucky you are to be saved.
Sing, Okio, sing to the child
in your arms. When she dies,
her father will find a bride, and ship you back home, back to Nagasaki, before the war.
MOTHER, MOTHER TONGUE, MOTHERLAND

Wind-gust sparks shoot memories
JOSÉ/SAM’S FIRST GAME

String-wrapped tire rubber
EMILIO/PAT, FROM ZAMBOANGA TO HONG KONG

No one can see me
PAGSANJAN FALLS

The workers laughed to watch
Cadena de Amor laces the Manila home–
GENEVIEVE

The amah closes the door to
Build soldiers a local saloon,
What a man’s hands make makes him made, or is man made by what his mind creates? Laborers with portable hemp machines break production limits, lessen loss. Capital rises with the turning crank. This reduced-sized tool serves whoever devises the shaft, the metal grooves, and joints—all the small pieces, the louver where light filaments find fiber. But war removes records; invaders claim a tenant’s design. A man even loses his mind. This is what a patent is and is not, this is how war levels the talented maker: harvests and shreds until what is left is sinewy, determined. Threads knotted tightly to the past. Stripped dead.
THE LAST TIME I SAW MANILA

The red sky sunk the sun
OCCUPATION

A prisoner knows his warden, his guards.
II.

Happy Life Blues
1941-1945
Accounts

They were at the toll bridge, waiting
A jungle dance hall harbors
knife fights, liquored scrapes, bears

the moniker *Bucket of Blood*
like the old saloons.

Rests quiet in the days,
awaiting revelry.

What arrives are captive refugees,
279 bodies sleeping

and wasting waking lives over
and under the wooden dance floor.

Chaperoned by guards who force
them to fence themselves in.

No one wants to shovel
rows of holes in the heat,

to keep one hole ahead of the shit
that fills the dirt, a measure

of days, weeks, months.
The stench moves closer
to where they sleep.
Three men volunteer.

Each man devotes his body daily
to digging. To building

modesty with covers
of *nipa* and bamboo.

One digs to forget a wife
who has disappeared.

One digs for bigger rations
of rice for his children.

Pat digs for exercise,
for the sanity of industry.
They dig to be tired enough to sleep and dig again.

They watch Sam’s group build the fence past the designated measurements of the gunned guards.

Giving them all a little freedom, inch by inch.
She picks brown bugs out of the *mongo* beans,
SHANTY

Not one nail was used.
A saw and a crow bar, bamboo,
nipa, bijuco, my hands:
that was all.

Ten feet by twelve feet–
the world breathed
through my walls.

Once, up in the dorms,
a woman held her child out the window
to urinate in the night,
and she showered a guard.
I was not part of the punishment.

I moved to the essentials:
chairs, tables, even shelves
to hold things
bartered and borrowed.
I was a salesman.
We all put our pasts to good use.

What did we have but our minds,
and the histories they cradled?
As months passed, we formed
schools, a baseball league,
choirs, a theatre club.

We smelled each others’ piss
and rot. Our quarrels were not
our own. Some fell out of love.
A priest fell in.
All around us, neighbors died.

And still we built.
We built things to last.
GENEVIEVE’S PRAYER

After Ave Maris Stella

Star of the sea, mother of the
ANATOMY OF THE LIVING

Is there more than this sunken body,
DOMESTICATED ANIMALS

My orphaned friend’s Chilean boyfriend, the horse
Desire falters. Molts,
**DUSK AT SANTO TOMAS**

Only one of them is remembering
A Feast Among Friends

There’s no need to stalk a starving cat
once the recipe has been devised:
a bartered-for onion, a stolen clove of garlic,
abundance of curry that had been inedible
in other meatless, watery soups.
It was Elsa’s idea, watching her pet shrink
to tough muscle, surprisingly angular bones.
She found the shape of a cat an illusion,
its flesh and fur hiding something harder, more mean.

Harold, her husband, broke the cat’s neck,
then my grandfather skinned and boned it.
Years later, he’ll tell me this story of a feast,
of times when hunger shapes a new ethic,
when war carves a family
into small pieces that float to the surface.

How could I know the pleasure they found
in a friendship of sharing the least?
In chewing flesh, boiling bones
into a marrow soup that soothed their small child
days after the meat was gone?
Santo Tomas

Enter the walled city— concrete barricades and iron bars
progress from keeping out to keeping in,

this landscaped gem of higher learning transformed
by rows of stalls and mud path streets

to villages of shanties named Glamorville,
Jerkville, Froggy Bottom, Over Yonder.

This slum differs by design. An army contains you,
citizens with your new, small powers. Complicit

or brave. Businesses erupt on need, lead
to black market loans and deals.

What can you pay for a cot, an extra allotment
of sugar, milk for your child, soap, shoes, booze,

a cigarette, a cup, a spoon, a pass to leave?
What surgeries would you endure, lies

would you weave, who would you deceive for hunger
to be assuaged, for temporary freedoms?

Will you be the snitch, the spy, the liar? Fight
over the inches of real estate, a place in line,

in a world where the word mine begins to rot, and still,
every day someone finds a new venture, makes way

for dealing and doling, falls to theft, the petty crimes
of moonshine, of washing a dish

in the bathroom sink rather than waiting in long lines.
Will you clap when the loudspeakers boom

offenses and incarcerations, punishing aloud
this human desire to survive?
PAT REMEMBERS THE FRENCH-EGYPTIAN JEWELER’S DAUGHTER

There's not a hell of a lot of human being left
Remember, my most gracious Virgin,
ON EATING OFF THE LINE

Slugs, *lugae*, dog, cat, pig ear, rat, banana skin—
The doctors saw their beaten bodies: *mauled, pommelled,*
ESCAPE AND PUNISHMENT: THE UNITED STATES

I saw a man shot, once, his back to the wire.
RESCUE

I.  
_Santo Tomas Internment camp, Manila_

The hero arrives in an armada, years after you begin dreaming of him in black and white.

Armies stamp through your sleep, dole out chocolate, dried milk with a chalkiness you long for.

In daylight hours you imagine your baby’s face grown into a young man, age sounds of crying into words, and answer chores, homework, grounded:

You long to punish someone.

Men die for talking back. You collect retorts, place them in a bamboo box that took days for you to make.

Some nights they come on horseback, charge and sweep you up, as if you were a girl, a damsel, a princess. You wake, shamed, in sweat.

Other times they throw you a sword and you fight back. You pin the officer’s sleeve with the blade and make him stand until he falls in fatigue.

_This is what it is to be weak._

You have seen strong men become bone, beggar, betrayer.

You dream of when you were a small boy, crying in a dorm in Hong Kong. No one comes. Then, footsteps. Your dead mother vanquished by each strike of the cane.

Once you rescued a starved dog from a man with a stick. On the walk home, it bit you, drawing blood.

_God damn dog._ Your waking words. The fleet has come. Or tomorrow, the fleet will come. Every night, the fleet comes.

II.

What do I know about rescue? The dead possum with her babies writhing in the mess a car made on impact?

How I got on the school bus and left them there, drowning in blood?
Here is what rescue looks like in a photograph:
A sea of starved faces, a General:

MacArthur rescues my grandfather from internment.

I don’t know what it is to be confined from life.
To be worthy of an army, of thousands of prayers back home.

What do I know about rescue?

Or the lack of it, as I was pinned to a bed.
Or later, chained to the near dead.

Who wants to hear these tales of local losses, of misplaced sacrifice?
Small parts of ourselves scalped, carried off by the victor.
The ones we had been trying to rescue.

What do I know about rescue, how to go in and do the job
and then leave?

MacArthur never moved into the camp and became a prisoner.
What is it about leaving I don’t understand?

III.

*after Nelly Sachs*

We the rescued carry forth your burdens. We take them
in flight across the South China Sea, the Philippine Sea, the islands between.

We beat the tin can of our enclosure, the failing wing,
the sing song of an engine dying. We drop ourselves into the white stretch

of our task, each grain a mask of who we have become. The sun
grazes against our teapot of a temper, the whistling grows:

When will we be rescued? We the rescued report that you
have not returned us to ourselves. The plants are dying all around you.

Where is the water, the secret potion, the band-aid in the first aid,
the white apron, the history of helpers, the stethoscope, the doctor’s

note: excuses for ourselves and everybody else. Resuscitated
blame. Why have you not come?

We the rescued are the ones already dead, the ones you said
had returned. We the rescued come postage paid. Bury us, take us
back to our soils. There is no place that does not call us home.
We are skinless, eyeless, we have no tongue. Can you hear us?

We the rescued rely on memory. You cannot forget
what follows you like a low dust, settling across

the tables and shelves, the back of the chair, whitening your hair.
We are everywhere you have not been. Do you feel us sticking

the elevator door? We the rescued, we are waiting. Can you
not hear our songs? How have you never come?
III.

NATIONAL BODY

(1945-)

"Roll out the barrel."

-message dropped by an American pilot
into Santo Tomas camp right before liberation
HOME FRONT

Prayer waves up from each continent to each God–
WAITING OUT THE WAR (1944)

Wet air billowed and banged under stilted
PRISONERS AT LIBERATION

We cheered, rushed you, hugged you, men with chocolates
The boys had bodies like trees, trunked
There were two Los Banos

I. Prison Camp

Rescue stings like a tranquilizer
DEAR GHOSTS

I dream in blood, bones, and dirt,
AFTER

It took months to eat the flesh
ALL AMERICAN

Tulipmania kept time with hybridization
A History of Love

I.

Love is on the kitchen counter, a quarrel
The process can
Hannah Beswick saw her brother move before the coffin lid shut, and in 1895, a physician claimed thousands more British were buried well before they were dead. Some animals wander off to die in silence, seek the peace of privacy. Soldiers in the Bataan Death March stumbled off from mercy to die alone so as to spare bodies that would carry their bodies. There’s controversy over whether air quickens a corpse’s decomposition or not, which complicates things for the coffin maker. In Ohio a dangling angel fell from stage pulleys and the audience watched blood seep through wilting tulle wings. Art can make something of afterlives, but after the war my grandfather sold cars and after another war my father taught Proust and became a night clerk. I’m always wondering about the angel, if she felt a sense of flying when the apparatus failed, if she wanted to crawl from the stage, wanted the leftover trap door to turn back to the ditch the gravediggers dug in last week’s high school *Hamlet*. Hannah had herself mummified in Manchester with orders she be checked for signs of life. Maybe mourning is eased by turning a coffin into a casket from which no one is knocking. The crowd watched the fall. Marchers wrapped bodies in burlap sacks to carry on sticks. Many people conspired to hide the flag draped coffins. Somewhere there was a physician checking a mummy’s pulse one last time before lowering the coffin into the ground.
NATIONAL BODY

The flesh of the body is the nation.
Wood, refuse and string rafts on the river
bear children fishing for trash:
tin for cash or building. Sellable glass.

Up on the mountain of debris,
adults gather cardboard and cans,
food for their pigs, a chair, a broken fan.

This is free commerce, capitalism
born by accident, such wealth dispersed
from the States’ defeat of the Spanish. First,

we came as ministering angels, not
despots who thought nothing sinister
of manifest destiny, a generous gesture

of twenty million dollars and a war
to free Guam, Puerto Rico and the collar
of it all, these islands. Like trawlers

denying they are capturing fish
while the net’s weight waves
the sea: so a colonist saves

a colony from its former master.
Now the new world comes
for the picked fruits of a people. A slum

is born a hundred years later
in its wake, a reminder
of our ministering, lingering.
“Mora VI Infidel”: *Mora* comes from the word *Moro*, which the Spanish used for the native Muslims living in the Philippines. *Mestizo de sangley* was a term used by the Spanish colonialists for a person of Chinese and indigenous Filipino heritage.

“*Juramentado*”: The Spanish used the word *juramentados*, which has its roots in the word for oath, for the martyrs who went to their death killing those they considered to be enemies of Islam. *Juramentados* would kill large numbers of people, usually civilians of all nationalities and ethnicities, including Christian Filipinos. Existing weapons were not able to stop the *juramentado*, so the Colt .45 was designed for this purpose. The *kris* is a curved sword used by the *juramentado*.

“Okio”: A *barang* is a type of sword. The Yakan are a Muslim ethnic group who lived on Basilan, the island where Okio and her husband lived. An *amah* is a nursemaid or nanny. *Mestizo* is one of mixed race.

“Emilio/Pat, From Zamboanga to Hong Kong”: *Hinto* (Tagalog), *parar* (Spanish), and *bu xing* (Chinese) all mean stop. The two brothers were sent to the Diocesan School & Orphanage in Hong Kong for one year after their mother’s death. After that, because *mestizo* were not allowed into the good schools on the island, they were sent to boarding school in Texas.

“Intellectual Property”: Patrick Henry Frank spent much of his life designing a portable hemp stripping machine. Having only completed a sixth-grade education, he was a self-educated man. He lost the patent to this life’s work to Japanese businesses.

“The Last Time I Saw Manila”: The title comes from a piece written by Genevieve Frank in which she says, “Whenever I hear that haunting song, ‘The Last Time I Saw Paris,’ I always think of Manila, for the last time I saw Manila her ‘heart was young and gay’ and now, like Paris, she is sad and wise with too much knowledge of death and destruction.”

“Accounts”: Prisoners in the camps kept careful accounts of property taken by the Japanese army. These items came from a list by a 71-year-old man.

“Happy Life Blues”: This was the name of the cabaret where the Davao internment camp was finally located as the number of internees increased. For years of internment on Mindanao, my grandfather and brother were held at the Happy Life Blues property. They were previously held at the Davao Club, where they and eleven other businessmen surrendered, and a private house taken over by the Japanese army. They were later transferred by boat to Santo Tomas.

“Shanty”: *Nipa* and *bejucu* are types of palms.

“On Eating Off the Line”: *Lugao* is rice porridge; *polai* is unhusked rice; *pechay* is Chinese cabbage/bok choy.
Mapping Poetics: Structural Embodiment of Displacement in C.S. Giccombe’s *Giscome Road* and Kevin Young’s *Ardency: A Chronicle of the Amistad Rebels*

Kevin Young’s *Ardency: A Chronicle of the Amistad Rebels* and C.S. Giccombe’s *Giscome Road*, two book-length poetic sequences that explore African and African American displacement, each offer structural solutions to the difficulties of exploring histories built on narratives and documents of the dominant white culture of North America. The aesthetic surfaces and depths of these poetic volumes differ: Giccombe’s text is shaped as a fragmented travelogue, a journal of cuts and pastes, a series of sketches. Young’s sequence is organized in sections of formal unity, each drawing on received texts, images, and forms. While the approaches of these two poets are starkly different, each asks us to join him in a deconstruction of history and the texts that shape it, and much of that interrogation happens through the integration of visual elements and connected innovative structures, both internal and external.

Neil Fraistat, in the introduction to his anthology *Poems in Their Place*, introduces the idea of looking at collections of poems in terms of “contexture,” defined as a confluence of “the contextuality provided for each poem by the larger frame within which it is placed, the intertextuality among poems so placed, and the resultant texture of resonance and meanings” (3). This term is particularly useful for dealing with texts such as *Ardency* and *Giscome Road*, which are not simply collections of discrete verbal units, but rather built texts with visual elements and significant paratexts shaped by the authors. Addressing the contexture is an important component in identifying how structure serves subject in Giccombe’s poetic exploration of identity and place. For while the unified collection serves as the medium for the social, political, and historical context, Giccombe’s use of interruption and displacement through the use of line and visual elements forces the reader to make the interconnections, and disconnections, between individual experiences and
places found in separated sections and lines. Thus this “texture of resonance and meaning” structurally reflects the displacement of Black experience in history and geography that Giscombe navigates through his physical and textual journey.

It is important to note that Giscombe tackles this same material, that of the search for identity and history, both of his family and of African Americans in North America, in a linear narrative in his nonfiction book *Into and Out of Dislocation*, published in 2000, two years after *Giscome Road*. Both books are born of a journey Giscombe himself took through Canada after discovering his family name, or a modification of it, at least, as a town named Giscome on a Canadian map. In the nonfiction narrative, Giscombe posits the question, “Who was the first black man to enter B.C.?“ (Into 11). This is a question he has difficulty finding the answer to as he discovers that there seems to be little record of Black people in the towns and histories he encounters. Throughout the book, he explicitly debunks both local anecdotes and codified historical narratives, revealing how they are perhaps no different from one another in their origins or in the way they erase African American presence. For example, he demonstrates how racial identities are often assumed about men and women in history. The acceptance of the resulting narratives that leave African Americans out of histories is indicative of the premise that “we all have to go along with things, to not question the conventional” (Into 10). His use of the same material in *Giscome Road* appears to be a quest to no longer “go along with things,” as he deconstructs the conventions of history and text, and thereby forces the reader to join him in an interrogation of what has been accepted as historical fact.

He destabilizes the conventional “known” by deconstructing false narratives and breaking apart the questionable symbols and maps that are created by those narratives. Giscombe’s tools for such deconstruction in *Giscome Road* include disruption and fragmentation. The book deals in stops and starts, moving from fluid long lines to interruptions by staccato short lines. But disruption is most noticeable in the use of visual elements such as sketched maps, symbols, and fragments of
published maps; these serve to displace the reader through the use of a material that is assumed to orient the reader.

The first map the reader encounters comes after two pages of lineated text that makes liberal use of white space, utilizing the full page. This map merges text and image; the image consists of a combination of a hand drawn curving line with an arrow point at each end, as shown below.

This map is an informal map of waterways and seems to be designed by an insider who knows things by name and for whom specific details of direction are unnecessary. The names of bodies of water are typed along the curving lines and in the margins on the side of it. Here map and waterway seem synonymous: the force and shape of the natural world, the watershed, is what once guided travelers and created boundaries, place, and direction. Within this organic guide of the waterway, the focus of this first section of the book, entitled “Sound Carries,” begins as the remembrance of a
naturally formed place that is “centerless” and to which “all roads to there are the same, all roads” (16). The original map, before it was “fleshed out” was a document of voice. The arrow moves in both directions, yet the text preceding it gives directionality: “meaning the map/of sound got fleshed out so it, the map,/ got to be more than a ‘document of voice’ but a way/ bending north (out of range, peripheral & sourceless): “ (14-5). The northward movement is depicted as moving away from, even “out of range” of, what he refers to as the source, which serves as both the source of the waterway and the source of a people and culture.

The act of fleshing out through naming and mapping, Giscombe seems to argue, reinforces the move away from that organic structure, from what he names, with typographical emphasis of capitalization, “SOURCE /(& MOUTH)” (17). This capitalized text explicates itself in a description of John Robert Giscome who is himself centerless due to the history of removal and movement from his own source, his home country of Jamaica: “the rootless surname up on the river names rocks and water up there, the beauty/of apparitions is broken down & inflected both, the old Islands name,/The name that came and comes from the Islands” (17). Thus the dual arrow of the map, the centerless water which moves both ways, represents John Robert Giscome, the descendant who both moves to and comes from. He simultaneously comes from outside of the boundaries, and is left out by them, and symbolizes the presence of a source that reaches out beyond those same culturally created boundaries.

By the second section, “The Northernmost Road,” Giscombe leaves this organic structure behind. The watershed is no longer what defines or guides through this territory. Now we see a received typed and printed map that is clearly marked by boundaries (25). This map appears below.
The map itself has a boundary of a solid black line that separates it from the rest of the blank page, and within this map dotted lines and shading create more boundaried areas. Here we are shown development: we see the mark of humans with such place names as “Exhibition Complex & Campground,” which speaks to people passing through, reflecting the location as a place from which to both arrive and depart. There is also the mark of industry in a road named after a function; the name “Northwood Pulp Mill” speaks to destruction of both the natural environment and human workers, and to industrial development that ironically ties humans to environment through the act of destruction as humans physically change the organic structure of the land. The names embody
how change is enacted upon a place, while the markings, which represent both roads and boundaries, fail to delineate and contain places and people who resist such actions by their very existence.

It is in this section that Giscombe refers to the people who were brought to this place and their relationship to it: “A real world for the talk between Europeans traveling far afield, our little palaver, and the Africans themselves, some story ‘intended to charm or beguile’: /tell me it’s creolized, tell me that it’s a bridge between destinations” (23). The organic elements of song and water are now opened to the possibility, or the hope, of some sort of union, a merger that creates something new: a shared language and culture. For despite the inked clear boundaries of the map that work to create distinctions, people are not kept within boundaries, geographical or racial. Giscombe makes this clear throughout by showing the mutability and movement that lies beneath the map: “Giscome road’s a real road, ‘the path made by a moving point’”(26). Yet such a version of unity, one that requires equality, has been established as impossible from the beginning of this section when the narrator introduces the word “miscegenation,” declaring that “miscegenation’s/the longest nuance, the longest-lasting open secret”(21). Giscombe reminds us, “’panish’ was always a euphemism…” (27). History is not only erased by maps, but by language, which is manipulated to try to cover up the presence of Black or mixed race people.

As he uncovers doubleness, and hidden identity, Giscombe also pursues the alternatives of fluidity and hybridity. This becomes clear in the closing lines of the section:

[T]here was music on the French service that had flamenco overtones to it,
the sketch of openings in an edge or series of edges, the rough drift
outward, “over the edge,” no end in sight, no word for the way
music appears. (27)

These products of human expression, whether they be the symbols of maps, or the evolution of
dialects or music, are shown to be fluid, coming from many sources and leading to many others. But naming seems to deny this. “What is the word for this?” Giscombe asks us of the things he discovers. Must we deal only in “euphemism”? Or accept that there is no word for what is created that is not linear, not discrete? He has begun to show us that euphemism and other forms of textual erasure have manifestations in the world outside of the text: entire histories and cultures are also erased. At the same time, new culture emerges from the coming together of peoples, and he is directing us to the evidence of it all around us, including on maps and in music.

If in that section Giscombe has deconstructed any possibility of a linear dominant historical journey, in the subsequent section, “Giscome Portage,” he further discounts it on the opening page with a dark and unreadable map of British Columbia from 1871 (31), shown below.

Giscombe has pulled the camera far away, giving us a broader geographical vision and a longer temporal range. He moves past the fluid history of Blacks in the region and introduces visual elements that represent the people who pre-date both the white and the Black man in North
America. A history, he seems to tell us, does not simply begin with the arrival of one people or end at the particular boundaries drawn by them. The images in this section are excerpted from Teits’ *The Thompson Indians of British Columbia* (37) and include an organic-shaped map of the world that includes such elements as “Trail leading from the earth to the land of the ghosts, with tracks of the soul” (35). Here Giscombe quotes the author of the original text underneath the image/map: “Saïd Jas. Teit. ‘They call their entire tribe NLak a ‘pamux.’ But are called the Thompson River Indians, that name ‘taken from the name of the river in the neighborhood of wch they make their homes’” (35). Clearly this is a name placed upon both the river and the native people by colonizers. With the inclusion of these documents, which chronicle a people who were earlier “Americans,” Giscombe demonstrates that naming and mapping are not new forms of erasure: we are reminded that an entire people themselves, not just the place they live in upon “discovery,” are both named, and nearly eradicated, by the colonizers.

In the following section, “Giscome, B.C.,” Giscombe continues to grapple with these broader pictures of history, unveiling the complications that a linear and singular narrative doesn’t allow for. The text is fragmented and the maps are fragmented. This is most evident in the section titled “[Notes incorporating 2 lines by Barry McKinnon],” in which each numbered section offers snippets of places, stories, thoughts, and sometimes maps, in the form of a sliver of a map. In section 6, for example, there is a thin slice of a map that is only the height of the typed name of the town Giscome. The lineation adds to the sense of fragmentation and disconnect: “no more/ saturday nights there/the town bull/ dozed but the evidentness on passing even quickly through of some-/thing having happened there…” (48). The fluidity of the long lines of the first section has been left behind: the lines are short, choppy; time seems to have frozen in this investigation of the town’s history; we are lost with the narrator as he himself tries to navigate. If earlier the idea is developed that what is named and what is marked become a history, then the mystery continues of
how the name Giscome, which serves as a symbol of the absence of a documented or known Black history, has somehow remained despite absence of any clear knowledge or record of a person or people by that name, or of any Black Giscomes in anecdotal or recorded history. None, of course, but the presence of the author and his own name, which is spelled differently. Stephen Collis, in his review of *Giscome Road*, summarizes this discovery of Giscombe’s:

> The traces are few and faint; an article in a small colonial newspaper, a mountain pass and a nearly abandoned town named Giscome, just north of Prince George – although no one is certain who the places are named after (more often than not it is Giscombe who tells the locals, revealing the “heart of darkness” in the “great white north”). The reasons for the near erasure of black history are the same as elsewhere: “the focus of history in northern B.C. is white penetration and settlement.” Some accounts do not even mention that John Giscome is black, although every Giscome and Giscombe that C. S. has ever met is and came, at some point, through Jamaica, as John Robert is know (sic) to have.

As Giscombe tries to follow his roots based on the fragmented detail of one name on a map, he continues to discover that maps are part of the erasure of Black history. History, in part through naming, partitioning, and recording, can be shaped and revised according to the tellers, who can act to erase histories that are not their own or which problematize their own histories. Recorded texts and maps are passed on and continue to solidify this erasure.

In the final section of *Giscome Road*, “Over the Edge,” Giscombe’s narrator verbalizes this act of erasure and alteration: “The talking map began to seem inauthentic, began to look to be the stylized repro-/duction of a series of explanations” (60). Not only is the “talking” map proving to be inauthentic, but the false narrative, or “explanations” have been passed on by what is ongoing, expressed with the emphasis on “series” with italics. Giscombe therefore lets go of the “talking map”; in this section, the map provided is topological and is compartmentalized by numbers, not
language. Or rather one town name remains: Giscome. This is also the map from which the earlier sliver of map, reading “Giscome” has been excerpted. This map unfolds out of the book as a full two-page spread; the scale and separation of this provides a sense of this as the map we are to recognize. There is no renaming, repartitioning, erasing here. Giscome survives in this geographical landscape. We now see the whole of the area in readable form. Concurrently, in the text of this section, Giscombe returns to the language of sound and source, returns to the water as the center of the map, returns to the geography itself, freed of the naming and shaping which reinforces the systems of oppression which erase the histories of native Americans, of Blacks, of those who were the source of human presence in these parts. He returns to the task of trying to create language about lack of language as he says there is “no word for the way blood arrives” (64), and “Human nature’s ambiguous,/you see it in the outermost quantities: it’s wordless itself,/it’s a description” (67). Human history is merged with natural history as boundaries are removed and as the limitations of language are removed. After the cycle of maps offered through the text, we are finally offered a source map, a topological map that we understand will be altered through natural and human history. But perhaps now this history has the possibility to be polyphonic and inclusive.

Throughout *Giscome Road*, Giscombe’s use of visual elements serves as a catalyst for the reader to question what appears fixed even on the physical plane, both in the geography itself and in representations of that geography. By the end of the sequence, the reader, after navigating both text and visual elements, is left with many questions, questions much larger than an individual’s search for family history. Who measures and marks the territories? What creates a road? Who uses it? What of those who moved through a territory before the formation of a map? How do maps create and change historical narratives? A map gives the illusion of being fixed, yet is part of a process involving both natural changes and changes made by man. Territory is removed, divided, developed,
shared, destroyed, and cut off, leaving the reader to try to reconstruct history and land alongside of Giscombe.

This larger framework of a changeable and manipulated history is brought together by how the individual visual elements speak to each other from section to section. Indeed, the text avoids linear progression, and the deconstruction of the maps reveals how the linear progression implied by maps is false. The series of maps he has shown us do not add up to the dominant narrative of progress and development: instead, they are complicated by misinformation, replacements, inaccuracies. Later, in Into and Out of Dislocation, Giscombe will take this further and examine how the histories of self and personal identity are also to be questioned. As he says, when speaking of a young girl he meets on his journey: “I wondered, the next day, did she know she was black. And I wondered later still, two days and a hundred miles up the road it stopped me, at the chance of her being a relative” (Into 123). While such a venture into the racial identity of the living is not explored explicitly in his poetic exploration of the subject, the larger framework encompasses it. Who made the people here? How can one know one’s own identity if it has been erased through all of the documents and orally histories available? Giscombe wants us to know by the end of Giscome Road that there is no clear discovery, that such a discovery has been obfuscated by a trail of changing narratives and modified and limited mapmaking. The disrupted parts and the unification of the act of journeying and questioning join together to create the “contexture” of this poetic sequence, which aims to rewrite received history and reveal patterns of dislocation in the texts that convey it.

Kevin Young’s Ardency: A Chronicle of the Amistad Rebels is also concerned with displacement, both geographical and linguistic. This book tells the story of the famous successful shipboard slave rebellion on the Spanish ship The Amistad in 1839 and the subsequent trial that took place on American soil. This was a trial in which the rebels, the Mendi, were first seen to have two outcomes: to be treated as property and returned to Cuba as slaves or to be put to death for their rebellion.
Eventually, they were granted their freedom on the basis that the original capture and transportation of them was illegal: they were not “legal” slaves. The Mendi later returned to Africa with a handful of missionaries. This story has been retold several times, most famously in popular culture in Steven Spielberg’s film, *Amistad*. Young’s contemporary Elizabeth Alexander also explores the story through several points of view in the third section of her 2005 book, *American Sublime*. Young’s project clearly responds to Robert Hayden’s *Middle Passage*, which also draws from historical accounts and texts. Young’s book is told solely from the perspective of the Africans, save for the poems that are told in the voices of a few missionaries included in the final section “After Word.”

Young’s book, on the surface, offers structural convention: there are recognizable and titled individual poems divided into four sections. The first section consists of personae poems told from the perspective of the translator at the trial, a young African named James Covey; the second includes translated letters from the imprisoned Africans, the Mendi; the third is, according to Young, “a libretto spoken/sung by Cinque, leader of the rebellion”; and the last is an “After Word” of poems in the voice of Covey, a Mendi named Sarah, and the missionaries who returned with the Mendi to Africa to set up a mission (ix). Each section, as in Giscombe’s book, is prefaced with an inherited image that involves text; unlike Giscombe, Young does not use images within the sections themselves, but the prefacing images disrupt the text as tonal commentary on what follows and initiate Young’s own deconstruction of historical documents. The images and documents he uses concerning The Amistad come from John Warner Barber’s *A History of the Amistad Captives…* (full title below) from 1840. In Barber’s preface to his book he says, “Free use has been made of what Professor Gibbs, of Yale College, and others, have published respecting the Africans. The compiler has also had the opportunity of personal conversation with them, by means of James Covey, the Interpreter, and has confined himself to a bare relation of facts.” He has also made “free use” of the results of a phrenologist, drawing on the pseudoscience of measuring and studying heads that was
used to justify and perpetuate racial oppression and specifically, slavery. On the front and back cover of *Amistad*, there are a series of 22 numbered silhouettes of heads compiled from Barber’s text. The Amistad captives, or the Mendi, as they are called based on their heritage, were on display through the trial. Thousands of people visited the jail, including a phrenologist who measured them and took casts of all of their heads for display. Barber’s descriptions of the captives include these sketches and descriptions of some of the Mendi based on phrenology. The inclusion of the numbers remind us that the captives were treated as exhibits rather than humans in a trial that would decide whether they were legally property or humankind.

The paratext continues to be an essential part of the book in the form of the visual references in the cover page, shown below, which is an imitation of Barber’s own cover.

Like the book cover, the cover page reminds us that the history of the Amistad rebellion has been told about the Africans rather than by them. The formatting echoes narratives of the time, in which
the African and African American are subjects, not speakers. Here the Mendi are referred to as “The Africans” on “their” voyage. Barber’s own cover page is seen below:

Young has begun to rewrite this history: “History” itself becomes “Chronicle,” acknowledging that, like Giscombe, Young questions historical texts as definitive history. “Captives” becomes “Rebels,” acknowledging the agency of the Mendi. “Circumstantial” becomes “Epic,” moving the language from that of the trial with “circumstantial,” to that of the telling of a human story, not a case. The use of the word epic re-envisions the Mendi as heroes and acknowledges the long journey they endured. But the change that most clearly establishes the tone and commentary of this re-visitation of the story is the use of “phrenological studies” rather than “biographical sketches.” The reference to phrenology, repeated from the visual reference on the cover, once again encompasses a history of dehumanizing examinations of Africans and pseudo-scientific justifications of racism. It also asserts both what the earlier text was not–it was not the biography or stories of the Africans themselves–and what Young’s text will be–it will not be a “phrenological study,” but an attempt to tell the Africans’ story and to move toward authenticity and agency.

The paratext continues to set the tone and comment back on Barber at the bottom of the cover page which reads, “compiled from authentic sources by Kevin Lowell Young.” This echoes
Barber’s prefatory remarks in which he refers to himself as a “compiler” and asserts that his sources, which we know to be questionable, can lead to “a bare relation of facts.” As with Giscombe’s historical inquiry, here we are reminded from the outset that these “Authentic” texts and artifacts are not accurate. We are reminded that the primary history of the Amistad that we have received comes from the perspective of those who believed in phrenology and other dehumanizing theories used to view Africans and African Americans. The irony of the paratext and its references to Barber, of course, is that Young’s book is one of the few texts that begins to actually tell the story from the Africans’ point of view. But for it to do so, the untold and mistold narratives must be acknowledged, shown for what they are. Like Giscombe, Young is on a quest to both trouble the inherited narratives and convey the story of those who were not allowed to speak, or, who, in this case, were further kept from speaking by language barriers.

In Young’s text, the heart of the revision of Barber’s image is in the voicing of the Africans’ experience, so that is what I will examine here. The exception to the language barrier is the twenty-year-old African translator, James Covey, the persona through whom Young narrates the first section of the book. This interpreter for the incarcerated rebels is first introduced to the reader with Barber’s image paired with Barber’s text that gives us a synopsis of his life, as seen in the image below.
We learn here that Covey’s early childhood was in Africa, where he was sold as a slave within the country and then sent on a Portuguese slave ship from which he was freed by the British, given an English education, and later taken from an English ship to translate for the Amistad rebels.

“Buzzard,” as the first section is titled, is James Covey’s version of the story. Covey’s voice is structured by the form Young shapes for him: the Covey section consists of 21 poems of 21 lines, each shaped by three stanzas of seven lines each. This is formally and visually orderly and consistent, reflecting the sense of a continuous and constant voice. In the opening poem “Exodus,” Covey narrates the story of the inhumane treatment and transportation of the Mendi on the Amistad. In the second poem, “Covey,” Covey returns his attention back to Africa, to the beginnings of his story when he is “Hijacked on the War Road” (8). But now he is addressing the Mendi themselves, telling them his own story as he says, “I was to be like you, a slave” (8). Already Young has shown that not only will the speakers be different in this History, but also the audience. The Africans themselves replace the white audience implied by the cover and cover page; they are both the narrators and the targeted audience for these stories.
Covey, however, feels his own separateness from his fellow Africans. Young begins by giving us the whole story from the perspective of someone who is neither of the Mendi nor of the Americans or Spaniards. While Giscombe uses a solitary lyric voice to deconstruct dominant history, Young’s use of personae allows him not only to deconstruct and question history, but to retell it. Young makes use of the tools of the lyric structure to both assert Covey’s voice and demonstrate his hybridity. The poem “Calling” draws on sonic, linear, and figurative structures to reflect Covey’s displacement. It is worth looking at the poem as a whole:

**CALLING**

Mine is the most unseen art: –I make others make sense. I take your foreign tongue,–the one I once was part–& turn it to polite. I read minds better than those shrinks the Committee called in,–wonder whether, on your Mission in Mendi, shall you think of me? Or just Jesus? My calling is to vanish, finish the thoughts others don’t know they own. My sea legs,–bow, winded–wish to drift like wood. Mines be the sailor’s need:–to see the world through a spyglass, find myself awake in a country stranger than skin. Never to be owned, or owe any one a thing. I am a dream the Lord, lonely, had of earth, –have only His mirror’s desire: – to see myself translated, made echo, you.

This is, at first glance, a lyric in which we explore the translator’s liminality, his doubleness, his sense of absence. But this self-examination simultaneously contains his story–it gives us where he has left, where he has ended up in the moment of utterance, and where he sees the prisoners and himself in
the future. His divided self, being both of and separated from the Mendi, is unified through figure and music.

The figures in the poem of translator and sailor both serve to depict the liminal state Covey inhabits. As lyric inquiry, the first stanza establishes Covey as artist, meditating on his “unseen art,” his act of creation and insight as a translator. The role of translator works as a figure of liminality: the speaker establishes himself as a liminal subject, neither of the world of the Mendi “the one/ I once was part” nor the world of “the Committee.” The narrative of his life is held in the space between those poles. The realities of his liminal state deepen in the second stanza, when he moves from wondering if he will be remembered by the Mendis or overshadowed by the God of the West. Indeed, it seems his calling is to “vanish” in the space between the two geographical, linguistic and psychological worlds.

At the same time, he resists this vanishing as he creates embodiment for that liminal state in the literal and figurative role of the sailor, always looking from a distance “through a spyglass.” Covey’s actuality as sailor holds the narrative of his voyage, begun as captive and ended in freedom. In the last stanza he addresses the freedom to “never to be owned or owe/any one a thing.” Yet ultimately he is this “unseen” Echo” who asserts presence in a world that demands his absence. He is allowed to exist as a free Black man by not existing, for to be either an African American or an American is, for him, to be a slave or a potential slave who is held against his will. In this world where to be a black man is to be a slave, Covey’s freedom is predicated on his place between cultures. The story of his life is the habitation of longing, homesickness, a desire to connect. The points of departure and arrival are no longer the keys to the narrative. The figures of translator and sailor embody this.

Sound, too, plays a role in story and characterization. The well-turned lines and the sonic elements—embedded rhymes, assonance, consonance—craft a smooth vessel of sound. Could this
man speak this way? Of course not: nor could the characters behind most personae poems. We must both accept the conceit of the medium and allow for our awareness of the poet as teller, as maker, one who various poles of language to effect. Young makes Covey himself a wordsmith. His ability to wield his only tool, one that gives him freedom yet also separates him—language, takes form in the language play in the Covey poems. Covey’s use of his new language in phrases like “Mine is” and “shall you,” suggests his time period, and the inverted slippage when mine is becomes “Mines be,” reminding us that this is not Covey’s first language or home. Covey is consistently removed from linguistic and temporal fixture. As Young says in an interview in the Paris Review, “they were learning English to become free, but there is a sense in the letters that they are trying to free themselves from English.” Young asserts this through the seeming inconsistencies in language, mentioned above.

This need to be freed “from English” is a concern expressed in Frantz Fanon’s Black Skin, White Masks, in which he says, “For the moment I want to show why the Negro of the Antilles, whoever he is, has always to face the problem of language. Furthermore, I will broaden the field of this description and through the Negro of the Antilles include every colonized man” (18). For “[t]he colonized is elevated above his jungle status in proportion to his adoption of the mother country’s cultural standards. He becomes whiter as he renounces his blackness, his jungle” (18). Covey becomes “whiter,” through his mastery of English, but his doubleness is reflected in the lyrics in his voice. Language itself is a trope for this duality. Covey can translate to both Mendi and English, but belong fully to neither. The agency Young provides Covey is not without awareness of this transparent irony: both Covey’s power and his invisibility are tied, in part, to his mastery of the “mother country’s” language.

Young, too, is translator, trying to convey his own world through the translation of Covey, just as Covey tells his story through the translation of the Mendi. Young says, “I didn’t want to
write about something old-timey. It’s not about the past really; it’s about America and African America.” (The St. Louis American.) In the persona poem, we cannot be each person telling his or her own story: we must be ourselves telling each story from our own language, our own point in history, this is, after all, a mask, and our audience is aware of this, so the work must acknowledge that, through doubling, through highlighting the craft and purpose of the teller. The surface artifice is not an interruption, it is a nod to the oral traditions in which the same stories were told, but what made them was the way they were sung. Young asserts himself linguistically through the persona.

To solely speak of the victims of the slave trade as one whole, however, is to perpetuate the dehumanization of the individuals who suffered in this narrative. Young brings in multiple new voices in the second section, Correspondence, which, according to Young in the Preface, “consists of the Mendi’s letters and speeches from jail (and subsequent freedom).” The image that prefaces this section demonstrates the Mendis as captives, showing the inhumane conditions they were in on the Amistad, as seen below.

The text of the section works against this image, and magnifies its horror, by giving voice to the
individuals who have, on the ship, been treated as a unit rather than as individuals and as humans. The imprisoned Mendi, like Covey, are learning both the American language and religion, for to speak to either those who imprison them or the committee who fight for their freedom, they must adopt both. To reflect this, the epistolary poems, addressed to those who the Mendi hope will help them, are largely in broken English, and the poems written in the voice of the Mendi as a group often have religious textual forms and titles, such as “Gospel,” “Testimony,” “and “Scripture.” In these latter poems, the personae are dropped, and Young returns to music similar to that used in the Covey section, making us aware, again, that Young is a translator bringing us this history, these poems.

In “Scripture,” for example, the firsthand experience of the Mendi seems mediated by the twenty-first century consciousness about the implications of larger oppression as Young moves us into the examination of the physical bodies of the Mendi. We see “a doctor rapping//your chest, touching your hair/marking it unusual, warm lamb’s wool…” (42). The Africans become objects, and this touching of the head rings with the echoes of references to phrenology noted elsewhere in the book. He then moves into the “belly, its sound growing// thin, thinner” and the physical sufferings of exposure to the people and climate of America: “Hell is all//coughs, professors saying bless you . .” (42). But even with the subjugation of the physical body, the structure of language emerges as the solution of survival, for the line continues:

…professors saying bless

you and writing it down,— you’ll

learn the line, the cut, promises

of freedom. You’ll wait counting

voices, sleep, Bible Verses. Let all

the hearers of God’s word row
forth, bowing, into the world.” (42)

The act of writing is both the tool of the oppressor who objectifies the Africans, and the tool for liberation. This is made evident, for example, in the play with the word “line”–both the line that must be said (the religious and cultural terminology and colloquialisms and traditions, such as “bless you”), and the poetic line that Young wields in the act of the poem. Religion, too, serves these dual roles as a tool of subjugation that the imprisoned must enact in order to gain the sympathy of their supporters, but also a literary model that shapes the songs and poems of liberation and historical revision to come.

Finally, a new structure emerges when we move toward the voice of one of the letter writers, the rebel leader Cinque, in the third section, “Witness: A Libretto.” Cinque’s section begins with a portrait and description of him, much like Covey’s. In many ways, these poems echo those of Covey: there’s an emphasis on the music and wordplay that makes Cinque sound similar to his translator. The lines tighten, the pace quickens, and, most significantly, the word play intensifies beyond a subtle double meaning or turn of figure and line. The turns of the language can be read as mishearings or misreadings, but also as a signifying: “odor in the court” (90); “this Massa’s/-chusetts” (89). At other times, there are complete rewritings of familiar texts, such as in “Lawd’s Prayer”:

All father, whose art
is heaven, hollowed

by a nail, thy jailer
come, thy will be

cone, toiling earth, for
heaven Give us this day

our daily debt
& give us our free passes

That Cinque’s section would echo that of his translator, Covey, or that Covey would echo Cinque, makes sense: Cinque cannot speak for himself; Covey must speak for him. And Covey cannot speak
for himself: the narrator of the book must speak for him. In this section, Young lets go of the conceit of the personae, taking on another layer of removal through the form of the libretto. The presence of the writer, or perhaps the singer, Young, is forefronted. These layers of translation are a reminder, just as we saw in Giscombe’s work, that history is told by the tellers, that history is mediated, that history is malleable and questionable. At the same time, this means that history can be reclaimed and retold from beyond the dominant paradigms.

Disruption occurs more forcefully within the libretto. The lyrical short lined poems of the libretto are disrupted by what Young labels “Lessons,” including “Articulations,” “pronouncements,” and “Concert Phonic drills,” which are lists of words which are then integrated into the poems, implying how the infusion of new language and new vocabulary shapes story, history, culture, individual voice. The doubling of language being both forced upon the captives is used by them for their own gain. This is reflected in “Spelling B.” where we learn that they spell, sing, “dance/for change/jig, raise// money like hell–” (94). This refers to the period after the trial, in which the Mendi actually performed English and religious texts to raise funds for their return to Africa. Their performance both caters to what is expected of them and subverts it; their actions and reflection reveal their knowledge of how to release themselves from this world in which they are held hostage. In the subsection “Conversations,” we move into “Eclectic First Reader: Set Up and Stereotyped” (121). Here we have lessons that are epistemological and moral, and they are joined with textual disruption. That is, the telling of the larger story of the rebels, as sung by Cinque, is interrupted by “Language Lessons” “exercise,” lists of “words to be spelled,” “Slate work,” and excerpts of “Sentences.” The primer is chaotic, nonlinear, numbing in its content. It is rendered extraneous and absurd by the context, yet it is also rendered essential as the learned language is absorbed and used to make art, to tell the alternate stories, to sing the song of the slaves.
This new language is not just used for communication and for navigation of the new world; it also begins to mediate the world the Mendi have left behind. This becomes clear in “The Elephant,” in which the nonnative speaker is instructed “Do not say el-e-phunt for el-e-phant; com-muss for com-merce; at-act for att-ack; tug-ether for tug-ether; dread-f’l for dread-f’l” (182). This nods to the standardization of English, a continual shaping of what language will be used and how it will be used both in the time the Mendi were in the States and in contemporary times, where there are battles over “Standard” English. Young plays with sonic echoes of contemporary soundings of Black English, while also asserting the irony of being taught to reframe and resound one’s own world and language. The irony of the Mendi being instructed about how to say the name of a creature that is from their home continent is carried through in the colonialist description of a creature the colonists only see in terms of how it will serve them: “They are used/to carry burdens, and for traveling./Their attachment to their masters is re-mark-able;/ and they seem to live but to serve/and obey them. They always kneel/to receive their riders, or the loads/ they have to carry” (182-3). The master/slave relationship is echoed here, with the emphasis on the slave’s treatment as animal rather than human.

Both Young and Giscombe, in the words of Audre Lorde, use the masters’ tools to dismantle the masters’ house. The language and the structures that are made use of in these two poetic texts are familiar. We see religious shapes and structure, a non-African language, songs; we see poetic forms; we see maps, primers, illustrations. We see the pieces that have been used to educate, “civilize,” and oppress the Africans brought into this country. The original “texts,” a word we’ll use to reflect all of the former elements, have been fragmented, disrupted, or rewritten, and are used as fragments toward a rebuilding of a narrative. Geographical and historical narratives are both made and deconstructed through the figure of the text. Fragmentation, deconstruction, signifying,
and remaking through the creative act itself: these are solutions to the formal problem of using the “master’s” tools—including language and structures.

“The song’s a commotion rising in the current, almost an apparition: or the shape/ rises-obvious, river-like– in the blood [in the house that the blood made]” begins *Giscome Road*. Song serves as the solution to geographical and physical fragmentation; it is the unifying force in the context of literal and textual displacement. Something is made of these fragments, of these oppressive mistellings of America’s racial history. By removing texts and maps from their original contexts, and setting them within retellings from African American voices, these poets ask the reader to re-vision history, both in the form of narrative and document. To sing one’s own story, one’s own history, is perhaps a beginning of unraveling the oppressive histories. What is made is the song, the new house, the retelling of America, fragment by fragment, poem by poem.
Works Cited


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