

Title: ‘When the sea of living memory has receded’: Cultural Memory and Literary Narratives of the Middle Passage

Abstract:

This article considers the emergence of the slave Middle Passage between Africa and the Americas as a pervasive topic and figure in modern black diasporic literature. It explores representation of the Atlantic crossing alongside broader questions about the formation and mutation of group identity based on understandings and constructions of a shared past. Three textual examples, taken from the work of David Dabydeen, John Edgar Wideman and Toni Morrison, are used to illustrate the agency, variety and suggestiveness of this oceanic imaginary and to highlight some specific functions of literary media. Theories of collective and cultural memory help address concerns with memorialization, the recovery of ‘forgotten’ histories, the role of cultural production, and counter, contextual and shifting narratives of the past.

Keywords: black diaspora, counter memory, group identity, literature, memorialization, slavery

**‘When the sea of living memory has receded’: Cultural Memory and Literary
Narratives of the Middle Passageⁱ - Jennifer Terry**

Introduction

This article will consider the emergence of the slave Middle Passage between Africa and the Americas as a pervasive topic and motif in late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century black diasporic literature. It represents a convergence of two interests: research into African American and Caribbean writing, especially representations of and engagements with the history of racial slavery, and the rise or renewal of scholarship in the area of memory studies. It will explore expressive figurations of the Atlantic crossing in relation to broader issues surrounding the formation and mutation of group identity based on understandings and constructions of a shared past. Questions about the functions and meanings of ‘culture’ and about the specific modes and capacities of literary media will also be raised. After outlining some contexts in terms of theories of collective memory and literary history, I will move on to offer three contemporary textual examples, analysing the work of David Dabydeen, John Edgar Wideman and Toni Morrison, to illuminate the variety and suggestiveness of such representations. I argue that an imaginary of the Middle Passage offers a distinctive and revealing example of the work done by cultural memory. Although Marianne Hirsch and Valerie Smith (2002) claim that the dehumanizing ‘institution of slavery,’ like ‘The unspeakable victimization of the Holocaust ... has come to shape much recent thinking about trauma, memory, memorialisation, and transmission,’ I suggest within memory studies there could be further examination of the forms of remembrance of slavery, something potentially advanced by stronger links to postcolonial, African American and black diaspora studies (3–4).

Memory Studies

I foreground the term ‘cultural memory’ in my title because the general backdrop to the questions raised here is the growth of interdisciplinary memory studies and renewed interest in notions of collective/social/cultural memory since the late 1980s. This coincides with an identity politics frame of more self-conscious recovery of minority pasts. The term cultural memory, although used variously, suggests a sense of memory as connected to socio-cultural contexts and my focus is on the order of memory which sees social groups constructing a shared past via media, institutions and practices, this in turn contributing to the shaping of communities.ⁱⁱ Pierre Nora’s well known concept of *lieux de mémoire* (or sites of memory) articulated during the 1980s and early 1990s offers one specific theoretical point of reference. Informed by understanding of shifting relations to the French national past, Nora (1989) delineates a flexible definition of such ‘sites’ (material, functional and symbolic) as marked by the contemporary desire to access them: ‘there must be a will to remember’ (19). His model though embeds an opposition between memory and history and coheres around the nation state; the territorial foundation potentially obscures or generates tension with differently defined group imaginaries.ⁱⁱⁱ Perhaps more instructive here is Jan Assmann’s distinction between communicative and cultural memory drawn out from his work on ancient societies in the 1980s.^{iv} Assmann identifies everyday, local, passing ‘communicative’ memory and long-term, institutionalized ‘cultural’ memory which is connected to collective self-image (an awareness of unity and specificity), common consciousness of the past and the reproduction and stabilization of identity. Cultural memory entails both enduring resources or ‘figures of memory’ and shifting contextual relations: ‘Cultural memory works by reconstructing, that is, it always

relates its knowledge to an actual and contemporary situation. True, it is fixed in immovable figures of memory and stores of knowledge, but every contemporary context relates to these differently, sometimes by appropriation, sometimes by criticism, sometimes by preservation or by transformation' (Assmann, 1995: 130). There is a powerful sense of longevity and changing meaning in his model: 'In cultural formation, a collective experience crystallizes, whose meaning, when touched upon, may suddenly become accessible again across millennia' (129). Assmann's definition of cultural memory thus allows for the endurance, dormancy and reimagining of the experience and site of the Middle Passage, although the metaphor of 'fixed ... stores of knowledge' will be revisited later.^v

Turning from Assmann's conception of 'fateful events of the past' retaining significances which may be tapped into again (129), we find in Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic* (1993) a more localized study which nonetheless shares similar concerns. Gilroy's proposition of a fractal, transcultural formation made up of various circulations and encounters initiated by the Atlantic slave trade has proved widely influential in the arts and humanities and the social sciences. Most pertinent here is his work in relation to the 'imaginative proximity to terror' felt by slaves and their descendants and the evolving response to this in black expressive cultures (222). For example, Gilroy discusses 'the narratives of loss, exile, and journeying which ... serve a mnemonic function: directing the consciousness of the group back to significant, nodal points in its common history and its social memory' (198).^{vi} He poses a series of questions that helpfully, if loosely, frame my investigations in this article:

How do black expressive cultures practice remembrance? How is their remembering socially organised? ... asking what part the memory of the terrors

and bondage that have been left behind plays in securing the unity of the communities of sentiment and interpretation which black culture helps to reproduce. How do changes in the ways that these terrors are summoned up illuminate the shifting, restless character of black political culture? (212).

Captured here is a sense of memory as a practice, as something we do rather than something we have. In addition, not just group identities but communities of memory are indicated, with cultural production playing an important role in their shaping and maintenance. Shared pasts of suffering serve an ongoing function even while the purposes and modes of ‘summon[ing] up’ shift, evolve and change. I will subsequently consider the slave Middle Passage as a significant historical ‘nodal point’ *and* mnemonic narrative within modern black culture, suggesting that its imaginative reconstruction across the diaspora can paradigmatically illuminate wider questions around contexts and dynamic networks of memory.

Within memory studies, cultural memory has been taken to encompass all manner of practices, sites, institutions and media, ranging from public memorials to household objects to ritual events to intergenerational conversations. The place of artworks and, more specifically, literature is subject to some debate but is a growing focus of this interdisciplinary field, from the outset defined by multiple intersections including with literary studies. If we agree with Astrid Erll (2008a) that ‘it is only via medial externalization ... that individual memories ... and versions of history can be shared’ then examining media must be a part of examining collective memory (12–13). Jan Rupp (2011) points out, ‘While the contribution of ... other media of memory is frequently discussed, the specific role as well as the distinctive functions of literature in memory culture still deserve greater attention’ and this recognition informs my

approach which combines interests in diaspora writing and memory studies (350).

Birgit Neumann (2008) identifies a distinctive place for literature, which ‘creates its own memory worlds with specifically literary techniques’ (334), while Erll (2008b) notes ‘Literature is a medium that simultaneously builds and observes memory.

Prominent reflexive modes are constituted by forms which draw attention to processes and problems of remembering’ (391). As ‘literary texts stage and reflect the workings of memory’ they can ‘influence readers’ understanding of the past and thus refigure culturally prevailing versions of memory’ (Neumann, 2008: 334–35). Through narrative features such as perspectivization different aspects of memory are made visible, sometimes constituting ‘an imaginative counter-memory,’ while critically reflexive elements heighten awareness, for example, some ‘contemporary novels problematize the processes of remembering on a meta-level’ (338–39 & 337).

Furthermore, ‘If one starts from the premise that literature is ... a part of the principal meaning-making processes of a culture ... then an analysis of literary stagings of memory can provide information about a culture’s predominant memorial concepts’ (335). This assumption is enabling for my examination of late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century representations of the Middle Passage: in historicizing this particular moment; in considering the ‘form’ of cultural memory; and in thinking through relations to group identity.

Like Neumann, Ann Rigney (2008) touches on literature as a ‘critical force’ and the idea of ‘oppositional memory’ but additionally points out ‘narrativization has emerged, not just as an interpretative tool, but also as a specifically *mnemonic* one. Stories “stick.” They help make particular events *memorable* by figuring the past in a

structured way that engages the sympathies of the reader' (348 & 347). Given this, Rigney invites further investigation into 'memorability, aesthetic power, and cultural longevity' (347). In this branch of critical thought, narrative forms, prominently including literature, can enhance the endurance of memories as well as offer a reflexive rhetoric of memory.

Literary Representations of the Middle Passage

Although treated in a few eighteenth-century autobiographical texts by ex-slaves (for example, Olaudah Equiano's (1789)), the voyage made by Africans across the Atlantic to slavery in the Americas only fully emerged as an important reference point, a haunting experience to be imaginatively reinhabited, for creative writing in the late twentieth century. The terrible conditions and suffering of the crossing, its disjunction as an irruption into bondage and racialized oppression, and/or its marking of entry into a new identity, into cultural mutation in the so-called New World, figure large in fiction, drama and poetry by black diaspora artists during this recent period. Early examples of its depiction are provided in the 1940s by African American Robert Hayden's poetry and in the 1950s in fiction by Barbadian George Lamming. Still, considering her own US context, in the 1980s Toni Morrison identified a silence with regards to this particular element of the slave past. Later commentary reflecting on her oblique inclusion of a Middle Passage experience in her novel *Beloved* (1987) typifies this assessment:

It's like the history of the middle passage. All those people who threw themselves into the sea had been violently ignored; no one praised them, nobody knows their names, nobody can remember them, not in the United States nor in Africa. Millions of people disappeared without a trace, and there is

not one monument anywhere to pay homage to them, because they never arrived safely on shore. So it's like a whole nation that is under the sea (Morrison, 1994: 38–9).

Revealed here is a need to remember and honour those who have been discounted and forgotten and to offer up a monument or memorial of sorts in the novel itself.^{vii} The Middle Passage clearly assumes significance as a site tied into group identity as well as loss: 'a whole nation that is under the sea.' Engagements by writers Derek Walcott, Amiri Baraka and Paule Marshall predate *Beloved*, but Morrison's 1987 novel marks a turning point with many more representations following in its wake (for example, work by Charles Johnson, Michelle Cliff, Caryl Phillips and Fred D'Aguiar, to name but a few). Although frequently defined as unrecorded, a gap in communal knowledge, by the turn of this century there was a rich array of depictions of the Middle Passage in diaspora art. Critical work excavating the haunting presence of the voyage in earlier canonical American literature such as Herman Melville's *Benito Cereno* (1855) has also grown. The white authored archive in terms of ships' logs and memoirs by slave traders sometimes offers a departure point for writers seeking to reimagine the transatlantic crossing, usually with an emphasis on presenting slave perspectives (for example, Hayden's poem 'Middle Passage' collages and revoices the documentation of the Amistad case). Additionally, in the 1980s and 1990s, the Middle Passage becomes an important figure in the thinking of such theorists as Paul Gilroy, Édouard Glissant, Wilson Harris and Hortense Spillers.

The Middle Passage has been variously envisaged as dislocation, starting point, end point, loss, unspeakable or repressed traumatic memory, abyss, contact zone, gateway, transformation, common ground and a site of potential mythic or historical

recuperation. A crude attempt to categorize the mechanisms by which the crossing is depicted in just the novel genre might outline four approaches: (i) historical fiction set during the time of the transatlantic slave trade; (ii) an incorporation of memories or dreams of the earlier Middle Passage in a more recent narrative present; (iii) a dialogic relation to the Middle Passage in representations of other journeys in the diaspora (for example, the slave ship being remembered via a voyage ‘back’ to Africa or between the Caribbean and Europe); and finally (iv) more fantastical, mythical or futuristic invocations of the experience. A spectrum of identity politics can be read into these twentieth- and twenty-first-century representations: some emphasize the Middle Passage as a loss of the African homeland; some delineate the initiation of a specifically American experience; and others map webs of connection rather than displacement in the subsequent diaspora. At times we can also identify a ‘writing back’ to familiar narratives of the New World, of European fantasy, migration and settlement. Taken altogether, the modern body of literature offers an intriguing resource or case study when it comes to investigating the workings and work of cultural memory. It invites us to probe how such mnemonic narratives might relate to the present context and speak to diasporic communal identities. It also prompts consideration of literary media’s distinctive ‘memory worlds’ and staging of memory processes (Neumann, 2008: 334). I will next examine three specific examples.

David Dabydeen, ‘The Old Map’ (1988)

The poetry of Guyanese British writer David Dabydeen is preoccupied by the history of colonialism and slavery in the Americas, inhabitation of the landscapes of the Caribbean region, and migrant experience. However, in his long poem ‘Turner,’ inspired by JMW Turner’s painting ‘Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and

Dying' (first exhibited in 1840), he also offers an engagement with the experience, and the erasure and memorialization, of the Middle Passage. A postcolonial 'desire for transfiguration' is evoked but, too, the nets of oppressive memory, official history and deterministic representational frames (Dabydeen, 1994: x). To sample Dabydeen's handling of the Middle Passage to the New World, I will turn to a shorter work first published in 1988, his irregular sonnet 'The Old Map.' In this text a vivid poetic 'map' of the Caribbean and its waters offers a distilled account of past colonialism. At the same time, it conveys the exclusion of the region from, the denial to its peoples of, recognized History.^{viii}

'The Old Map' begins with imagery of a mythic seafaring world, the first line summoning a realm of pirates and plundered 'treasure chests' (Dabydeen, 1994: 41). Drawn from the place of the Caribbean past in the British popular imagination, this scene is swiftly undercut, however, by lines two and three: 'And jettisoned slaves washed / Into an arc from Jamaica to Guiana.' Here the span is traced of a sweeping, fractal Caribbean archipelago, recalling Derek Walcott's (1998) pronouncement 'Antillean art is this restoration of our shattered histories, our shards of vocabulary, our archipelago becoming a synonym for pieces broken off from the original continent' (69). While both authors share an evocation of dislocated 'fragments,' an impression of the islands as deformed bits (in Dabydeen's case 'Haiti is a crab with broken claw,' Walcott referring to 'pieces broken off'), the explicitly restorative vision present in Walcott's essay is lacking in Dabydeen's poem. Rather 'The Old Map' offers a stark sense of the dumping of enslaved Africans, like the 'Empty treasure chests' considered trash, whether as corpses or ailing, and therefore expendable, stock. This horror is further intensified as the sonnet develops its

geographical figuration: 'Islands aborted from the belly of the sea / Forever unborn in rock and swamp.' The violent use of 'aborted' continues the association of this site with death, but the lines also begin to suggest the marginalization of the region in terms of dominant discourses of history; Caribbean society and its cultures have been designated 'Forever unborn,' denied a coming into existence and a movement towards maturity in Western narratives of civilization and progress. Indeed, an impression of the subject of the map being somehow left behind or left to decompose is anticipated by the earlier 'departed ships' and later reinforced through imagery of detritus abandoned to 'rot in the sun.' This includes the 'dead Amerindian,' a reference introducing the history of the genocide of peoples native to the Caribbean. The alliteration of a repeated 'c' sound ('cane chewed and spat / From coolie mouth') adds an impression of colonial contempt in the lines which treat those who came to the islands as indentured workers from Asia, joining slave and indigenous populations.

Lines nine and ten take the poem to a new phase, adding Haiti and Cuba to the collection of named places initiated with Jamaica and Guiana, and conveying spatial location in terms of the rest of the continent as well as a relationship of subjugation to the powerhouse of mainland North America: 'droops in fear at the foot of America.'

The poem concludes with a quatrain organized around a bright palate of colours:

Blue is deep and everywhere of European eye,
 Green of seamen's hopes and gangrene,
 Yellow of the palm of dead Amerindian
 Unyielding gold.

Here we find a three part list of blue for the 'deep' sea and roaming 'European eye,' a green both naïve and morally corrupt for 'seamen's hopes and gangrene,' and yellow

or gold, returning us to the ‘treasure chests’ and material greed of the opening, for the empty futile ‘palm of dead Amerindian.’ These colours are employed to encapsulate the racialized history of conquest and exploitation of which Dabydeen offers a poetic remembering. The hues of the old map thus assume a vivid symbolism that is reinforced by a threefold iterative pattern, disrupted only by the short ‘Unyielding’ last line.

One of the concerns of Dabydeen’s verse is the negotiation of existing modes of representation of the Americas, whether in the form of the cartography and maritime navigational methods integral to Europe’s colonial ventures or mythic narratives of piracy, castaways and treasure. A key function of the Middle Passage here is as a jarring disruption of prevalent accounts, repositioning a past of ‘jettisoned slaves washed / Into an arc’ as a central part of this picture. As mentioned earlier, like Walcott, Dabydeen interrogates hegemonic interpretations of the region as being on the periphery or outside of history as defined by the ‘European eye.’ The title ‘The Old Map’ thus suggests not just an artifact that has survived from an earlier period but, too, extant chartings and dominant stories that are under revision as the poem shapes its own counter memory.

The prevailing imagery of the poem is of fragmentation, abortion and corruption, and yet perhaps in this interventionist mapping something potently alive is birthed from ‘the belly of the sea.’ The sonnet form enables a compressed yet richly allusive account that, within just fourteen lines, remembers the region’s past in a powerful manner. Poetic language that draws on the sensory and evokes a vivid corporeality contributes to the impact: the verse cumulatively references various body parts,

‘belly,’ ‘foot,’ ‘eye,’ ‘palm,’ but also suggests viscerally physical action and damage, ‘claw,’ ‘spat,’ the encroaching ‘rot’ of ‘gangrene’ and so on. In addition, literary techniques permit condensed imaging of an ocean site or figure for thought, something that might be linked specifically to a black diaspora imaginary. For example, the waters of the Caribbean are emphasized through the use of diction as ‘ships’ traverse and slaves are ‘*washed* into an arc’ (my emphasis) and ‘jettisoned,’ the latter verb coming from and calling up the maritime term jetsam. Here then we can identify a poetic recovery of the Middle Passage, alongside other regional histories, that both shapes a counter narrative and self reflexively addresses the contestatory operation of cultural memory. The displacement of the oppressed, rather than say a story of ‘discovery’ by Columbus, becomes the starting point for modern Caribbean identity and attention is drawn to the process of revising prior representations or old maps.

John Edgar Wideman, *Philadelphia Fire* (1990)

US writer John Edgar Wideman’s fiction exemplifies the invocation of the past horrors of the Middle Passage within a more recent narrative setting. In *Philadelphia Fire* (1990) brief references to slave ships are incorporated within the central story of urban African American life in the second half of the twentieth century. The text chiefly is focused on the tragic ‘holocaust’ of the state assault on and burning out of a so-called cult community in Philadelphia in 1985 (Wideman, 1990: 7). Yet what the development of Wideman’s narrative reveals, compiled from protagonist Cudjoe’s multiple shifting memories and including some other focal views, is the fluid, entangled nature of the known past: the fact that, far from being isolated or fixed, different historical accounts intermingle and change across retellings. The prose

composition thus stages partial and plural recollections, through literary technique drawing attention to memory processes and, in this case, resisting chronology and stability.^{ix} While *Philadelphia Fire* begins with the premise of a ‘story of a fire and a lost boy that brought him home,’ Cudjoe being drawn back to the US from Europe, the looping progression of the novel explores the interrelatedness of various places and past experiences, the complex overlapping of memory that constitutes individual and collective senses of history (7).

The layered, shifting texture of the past explored by Wideman feeds into his handling of the history of slavery as well as more recent recollections. The most explicit engagement with the Middle Passage in *Philadelphia Fire* comes as Cudjoe remembers an island visit to his, now dead, friend and editor Sam, when the two men took ‘plastic sacks of garbage’ for disposal:

one split, scattering eggshells, coffee grounds, lemon peels, an empty vodka bottle ... at the foot of a mound of garbage bags ... Gulls floated over the dump. Gull cries ... Gulls had followed the ferry across the sound. A second wake in the air. Gray and white like the plowed sea. Gulls hovering in the squat-bottomed boat’s slipstream, patiently sailing, scanning the water for bilge. He’d read that sharks trailed the stench of slave ships all the way across the Atlantic, feasting on corpses thrown overboard. Gulls screech and glide above the refuse of the islanders (59–61).

Here the memory of his crossing to the island off the US coast and the scene at the dump prompt a startling association for Cudjoe of ‘sharks trail[ing] the stench of slave ships ... across the Atlantic.’ The scale and smell of the refuse, but also the birds looking to feed on it, present a grotesque analogy for the disposal of the corpses

created by the trade in human beings (thus, too, conjuring up the terrible, often fatal ordeal of the sea voyage for the enslaved). The listing of spilling ‘eggshells, coffee grounds ... an empty vodka bottle’ conveys the overwhelming detritus left behind by modern Western society, suggesting uncontainability but also perhaps linking back to the patterns of consumption that fuelled the development of slave labour and the plantation system in earlier centuries. The flight formations of the gulls create a ‘wake in the air’ that echoes that ‘plowed’ in the sea yet use of the word ‘wake’ in addition connotes funerary rites and mourning for the departed. Significantly, the protagonist does not inhabit the experience of the Middle Passage; the interior narrative does not adopt a witnessing position. Cudjoe has ‘*read* that sharks trailed the stench of the slave ships’ (my emphasis), establishing a degree of mediation and self-consciousness about how and whether we can access or know the past.

Yet the scene develops further to introduce another frame of reference:

Cudjoe tried not to breathe as he helped unpack a week’s trash from the trunk ... Sun was a bitch. A minute in the open and you were soaked ... [eventually] you had to inhale stink ... The mounds grow tall as a house, a pine tree. Body bags stacked a mile high rotting in the sun. Bad meat. Dead boys coming home from Vietnam were Cudjoe’s age, Cudjoe’s color, his high-school classmates. You couldn’t see color through the thick, green bags. You could smell corpses, but all of them – red white black brown yellow – stink the same ... Cudjoe is guilty. Others crossed an ocean and died for him. Guilty he didn’t fight, didn’t die (61).

Already suggestive of the Middle Passage, here the gull-plundered garbage sacks become correlatives for ‘Body bags,’ for the devastation of life in the twentieth-

century military conflict involving America and Vietnam. The dump's accumulation of rotting material becomes a horrific heaped-up figure for the 'Bad meat' of human remains, for the decomposing dead soldiers shipped back to the US. Literary language enables vivid sense impressions of heat and stench, of stifled breath, summoning up both the horrific conditions of the Middle Passage and the handling of the bodies of war casualties. Through this episode of trash disposal then, Wideman links the atrocity of the transportation and suffering of slaves to the costly killing fields of the Vietnam War. Although the narrative observes that whether 'white black brown yellow' all corpses smell the same, like the Middle Passage, this wastage is bound to a racialized matrix of power, in terms of imperialist US foreign policy but also as the returned American bodies are disproportionately 'Cudjoe's color.' In this memory the slave sea crossing is invoked as part of a potent history of racial oppression, at least to some extent, in order to inform a critique of carnage in the 1960s and 1970s and in Cudjoe's own contemporary milieu a decade later. Focal narrative allows a layering and association of multiple timeframes that, in itself, is meaning making.

Interestingly, it is in the recollection of the more recent past that the character personally bears witness, experiencing survivor guilt and mourning the wartime loss of peers and friends. The more distant history of the Middle Passage operates as a provocative cross reference or resonant temporal intersection, recalled even in Cudjoe's phrasing 'Others crossed an ocean and died for him.' As a politicized haunting if not a living memory, the voyage is brought forth in a very physical way with an emphasis on corpses and corporeality shared with Dabydeen's poem. The narrative association enacted in this scene from *Philadelphia Fire* might relate to Michael Rothberg's (2009) assertion that 'remembrance both cuts across and binds

together diverse spatial, temporal, and cultural sites' (11). It certainly stages the entangled nature of the pasts we recall and draws attention to the complex processes and motivations through which we shape stories.

Toni Morrison, *A Mercy* (2008)

In her most recent novel, *A Mercy* (2008), Toni Morrison returns to representation of the Middle Passage, an event remembered via the anachronistic recollections of the titular character in *Beloved* and referenced through local legend in *Tar Baby* (1981). Set over the period 1682–1690, in this new historical fiction Morrison shows the transatlantic slave trade and its part in the tobacco, rum and sugar industries as increasingly important to the economies and ideologies of Europe, colonial North America and the Caribbean. For example, very early in the novel a Portuguese Maryland planter and importer of slaves blames his financial insecurity on the loss of human goods in transit to disease and then maritime mishap:

D'Ortega's ship had been anchored a nautical mile from shore for a month waiting for a vessel ... to replenish what he had lost. A third of his cargo had died of ship fever. Fined five thousand pounds of tobacco by the Lord Proprietary's magistrate for throwing their bodies too close to the bay; forced to scoop up the corpses – those they could find (they used pikes and nets, D'Ortega said, a purchase which itself cost two pounds, six) – and ordered to burn or bury them. He'd had to pile them in two drays (six shillings), cart them out to low land where saltweed and alligators would finish the work.

Does he cut his losses and let his ship sail on to Barbados? No ... he waits in port for another month for a phantom ship from Lisbon ... While waiting to fill his ship's hold to capacity, it sinks and he has lost not only the vessel, not

only the original third, but all, except the crew who were unchained, of course, and four unsalable Angolans red-eyed with anger (Morrison, 2008: 16–17).

This incident introduces the practice of shipping Africans to the Americas with the terrible conditions being indicated by mention of ‘ship fever’ and the large scale dumping of corpses overboard. The narrative captures D’Ortega’s disregard for the devastation to the live ‘cargo’ except in terms of his own material misfortune; here people are seen as interchangeable with inanimate goods in a very direct way.^x

However, such a self-interested, supremacist view is subtly framed by the perspective of Anglo-Dutch protagonist Jacob Vaark who receives the tale with distaste for both his debtor’s ineptitude and the trade in human flesh. It is Jacob’s sarcasm about D’Ortega’s foolishness and greed that we hear in lines like ‘Does he cut his losses and let his ship sail on to Barbados? No’ as Morrison employs narrative means to privilege Jacob’s understanding over and against that of the Portuguese slaveholder. Although Jacob later becomes one of the ‘insatiable,’ complicit through his investment in Caribbean sugar cane, here his stance is critical (54). This technique, of incorporating more than one ‘voice’ within a third person discourse, presents multiple accounts of events in a way that undercuts a single ideology but can also work to marshal the reader’s sympathies. Neumann (2008) points out that ‘A fundamental privilege of fictional texts is to integrate culturally separated memory versions by means of mutual perspectivization’ but, as seen in this instance, that does not determine an effect of relativism (338–39).

Yet the most immediately powerful impression from this passage is made by the measures D’Ortega was compelled to take after jettisoning his spoilt imports too close to the shore: ‘forced to scoop up the corpses ... (they used pikes and nets ... two

pounds, six) ... He'd had to pile them in two drays (six shillings), cart them out to ... saltweed and alligators' (16). As with Dabydeen and Wideman's writing, once more our attention is drawn to slave bodies, the physical remains from the crossing; pikes, nets and alligators convey a gruesome sense of the methods of disposal. The grim realities of this itemized and costed process, meant to safeguard public health, obviously contrast with and sharply undercut the Edenic idealizations of colonial American life set up elsewhere in *A Mercy*.^{xi} Indeed, this early episode establishes a sense of New World waters and littorals, the conduits of the Middle Passage, as polluted both physically and ethically.

Morrison's wider novel, however, presents a multifaceted maritime world that encompasses a different recuperation of slave experience. For example, seafaring is also prominent in the story of orphan Sorrow; her discovery half drowned in a river, her apparent prior life on a ship captained by her father, and her own memory of 'being dragged ashore by whales' give her an aura of unconventionality and miracle (51).^{xii} Belying communal consensus about her mental deficiencies, the narrative details the character's rich interior life, including oceanic 'fish girls with pearls for eyes,' furthering a link to the strange and dreamlike and reinforcing the centrality of the Atlantic to the late seventeenth-century Morrison depicts (127). One moment in particular illustrates the slave trade's part in this sea-dominated imaginary:

Sorrow slept and woke, slept and woke, lulled continuously by ... the thousandfold men walking the waves, singing wordlessly. How their teeth glittered more than the whitecaps under their feet. How, as the sky darkened and the moon rose, the edges of their night-black skin silvered. How the smell of land, ripe and loamy, brightened the eyes of the crew but made the sea walkers

cry (122).

In this interwoven tale of ‘night-black ... sea walkers’ *A Mercy* conjures a mythology of the Middle Passage, of a ghostly population that traverses the Atlantic waves and is saddened by indication of land, presumably as this signals arrival at slavery.

Representative of those lost during the crossing, the ‘silvered’ sea walkers also parallel the legend of the Ibo Landing in Paule Marshall’s novel *Praisesong for the Widow* (1983). There, on reaching the Americas and foreseeing the suffering to come, a cargo of enslaved Ibos turn and walk off across the water, rejecting shore and bondage and ship. Although only a small fragment, Sorrow’s lulling story contributes to the fiction’s wider vision of voyages and trade routes, summoning up the singing, glittering presences of the ‘disremembered and unaccounted for’ (Morrison, 1987: 274). It works as a suggestive commemoration and presents a positive counterpoint to D’Ortega’s objectified Angolans and troublesome corpses.

Sorrow’s sea scene in *A Mercy* thus exemplifies the turn to myth or fantasy in some present day cultural responses to, and recoveries of, the Middle Passage.^{xiii} Its incorporation adds to a diverse range of viewpoints offered through both first and third person narrative means as personal recollections, communal pasts, and conflicting histories are made visible. As Neumann (2008) puts it, ‘divergent, perspectively refracted memories mark the undeniable plurality of memory creation and the characteristic stratification of memory cultures’ (339). Overall, as Morrison’s historical fiction reimagines a heterogeneous seventeenth-century America, the spectrum of encounters recalled operates to undercut a hegemonic settler narrative of New World origins and ocean borne arrival.

Conclusions and Questions

We can identify the Middle Passage as a commonly recurrent subject in modern black literature, a site, event or experience imaginatively reconstructed, often in an attempt at memorialization. In my limited sample of poetry and fiction by Dabydeen, Wideman and Morrison, representations of the Middle Passage can be seen to perform several functions and types of meaning making. Although different authors interpret this ocean crossing differently, it is one of the key elements shared by writing emergent from such diverse locations as the US, the Caribbean and Europe and therefore seems to reveal convergences of cultural memory across the diaspora. It can be invoked as part of an attempt to ‘write back’ to previous discourses of history or literary representations. It frequently presents a troubling encounter with dislocation, terror and death, figured as a haunting presence or recollection. At times the expressive engagements show self-awareness about the mediated and/or instrumental nature of this tapping into the past. Additionally, in the case of some of the literature, we find the forging of a kind of recuperative mythology, offering an alternative vision to one of suffering.

One concern in this article has been with the specific possibilities of the medium of literature. Hirsch and Smith (2002) write ‘cultural memory is the product of fragmentary personal and collective experiences articulated through technologies and media that shape even as they transmit memory. Acts of memory are thus acts of performance, representation, and interpretation’ (5). As understandings of a common past are forged and shared by a group the means of articulation themselves play a shaping role and some techniques and capacities distinctive to creative writing have been explored here. ‘The Old Map’ achieves much of its impact and nuance, and

therefore agency as a counter memory, through condensed poetic language and figuration. *Philadelphia Fire* and *A Mercy*'s development of layered, intersecting timeframes and sophisticated perspectivization within prose narrative proves engaging and suggestive *and* works against monologic, linear, totalizing discourses of the past. Literature can reflect and feed into a community's remembrance but also stage the workings of memory and, in drawing attention to process, operate at a meta or critical level.

I earlier posed the question of whether, as a prominent example of a group 'memory' that has been imaginatively reconstructed, an experience beyond living recollection, the slave Middle Passage in literary representation can tell us something more broadly about social/collective/cultural memory. Should it be viewed as a 'fateful event ... of the past' (Assmann, 1995: 129) or an historical 'nodal point' (Gilroy, 1993: 198), accessed later as part of a black diasporic mnemonic narrative informed by the context of the present? Does this help explain and interpret the emergence of the Middle Passage as a pervasive topic and motif in the late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century moment? If the 1980s publication of *Beloved* is recognized as a marker within a literary history of slave memorialization, do we see this as representative or catalytic or both? I would suggest that the prevalence of the subject of the crossing in contemporary literature could itself be reflective of and responsive to the turn towards the concept of 'diaspora' as a means of understanding black identity in the West.

While a postcolonial or decolonizing context in which voicings of so-called minority counter narratives and recoveries of the past are more openly and broadly valued is influential, and the rise of trauma studies and/or memory studies in the late twentieth century may have played some part, this particular emergence also seems to hold a

more specific relation. If apprehended in terms of shifting notions of group identification, which increasingly emphasize diaspora, then the Middle Passage's potency comes from understandings of it as a past event shared by people in divergent locations as much as from the suffering it entailed. This would indicate that the Middle Passage has assumed greater significance or usefulness with the ascendancy of models of transition and anti-essentialism over ideas of Afrocentrism or even nationalism in scholarly and popular discourses. Returning to Assmann's (1995) theory of enduring 'figures of memory' to which groups relate back 'sometimes by appropriation, sometimes by criticism, sometimes by preservation or by transformation' (130), we can begin to unpick how the socio-political situation, and corresponding expressive sensibilities, now and in the recent past has shaped this cultural pattern. Or perhaps, rather than Assmann's 'immovable figures ... and stores of knowledge' or, indeed, Nora's territorialized sites, we need other paradigms to accommodate and account for such adapting, transnational narratives of memory (130).

Thinking comparatively, it might be revealing to ask if cultural memory of the Atlantic voyage differs from that of other oppressive and dislocating past events and experiences. Is the distant Middle Passage in some ways more 'available' for imaginative re-invention than some other atrocities that have shaped group identity, the twentieth-century Jewish Holocaust perhaps being the most conspicuous reference point? Does the crossing's relatively undocumented position prompt particular modes and methods of recollection in art? In posing questions about the work of cultural memory and representations of different histories of suffering, the complex debates within memory studies on such issues require at least brief mention. Resistance to

comparative approaches is often strong because of arguments about specificity and uniqueness and wariness of an effect of ‘weighing up’ atrocities.^{xiv} Yet the recent work of Michael Rothberg (2009) is founded on ‘unusual conjunctions ... uncovering a countertradition in which remembrance of the Holocaust intersects with the legacies of colonialism and slavery and ongoing processes of decolonization’ as he seeks to move discussion beyond ‘competitive’ memory towards the notion of ‘multidirectional memory’ (xiii & 3). Addressing possible pitfalls but also potentially illuminating cross references in an exploration of the concept of diaspora that might probe both Jewish and black pasts, Gilroy (1993) offers a starting point: ‘The issues of *tradition* and *memory* provide a key to bringing [the two histories] together in ways that do not invite a pointless and utterly immoral wrangle over which communities have experienced the most ineffable forms of degradation’ (my emphasis) (212). Whilst the focus of my paper has not been in this sense ‘the interactions that take place among collective memories’ (Rothberg, 2009: 7), these debates highlight further the politicized role of memory, the centrality of cultural production in present understandings of the past, and variation and shifts in theoretical approaches.

Lastly, I will close with some speculative thoughts about metaphor. Could the depiction and figure of the Middle Passage have been compelling and enabling for so much recent writing in part because of the resonance of the very image of the ocean and/or water? The sea provided Gilroy with an image for envisioning and conceptualizing his transcultural formation the black Atlantic. But it is also present in views of memory itself, Nora’s phrase in my title being a case in point. When trying to reconstruct and articulate the forgotten pasts of slave experience, faced with scant recorded resources, the transitional crossing into slavery in the Americas via the

conduit of a deep, vast and moving ocean perhaps carries suggestions and associations that facilitate a distinctive and powerful imaginary.^{xv} Among other things, sea imagery conveys mobility, submergence, distance, interconnection and fluidity, all of which might prove evocative and valuable in a contemporary cultural response to and definition of diaspora identity. While Nora invests with the properties of water ‘*living memory*,’ for him a lost type of communal knowledge receding before history in the modern nation, recent black diaspora writers draw on the Atlantic ocean to articulate more dispersed, shifting forms of *cultural* memory (my emphasis). Here, as the title of one of Derek Walcott’s poems has it, ‘The Sea is History.’

ⁱ My title quotation is taken from Pierre Nora’s (1989) ‘Les Lieux de Mémoire’ (12).

My readings and ideas here are a development of the earlier piece Terry (2010).

ⁱⁱ In a recent handbook that exemplifies the scholarly turn Astrid Erll (2008a) explains, “‘Memory,’ here, is used metaphorically. Societies do not remember literally; but much of what is done to reconstruct a shared past bears some resemblance to the processes of individual memory, such as the selectivity and perspectivity inherent in the creation of versions of the past according to present knowledge and needs’ (5).

ⁱⁱⁱ The critique along these lines of Nora’s approach is exemplified by a recent special issue of *Yale French Studies* which also draws attention to the concomitant ‘elision of France’s long and complex colonial and postcolonial history’ and advances the ‘counter image’ of networked noeuds de mémoire (or knots of memory) (Rothberg, 2010: 6-7).

^{iv} Like many late twentieth-century theorists of memory, Assmann (1995) is influenced by the earlier projects of Maurice Halbwachs and Aby Warburg to ‘shift

the discourse concerning collective knowledge out of a biological framework into a cultural one' (125).

^v It is worth noting at this stage that more recent work within memory studies has emphasized the dynamic revision and adaptation rather than the 'immovable' nature of figures of memory (see, for example, Rigney, 2008).

^{vi} Gilroy (1993) continues, 'The telling and retelling of these stories plays a special role, organising the consciousness of the "racial" group socially and striking the important balance between ... the different practices, cognitive, habitual, and performance, that are required to invent, maintain, and renew identity' (198).

^{vii} Aleida Assmann's (2008) brief treatment of *Beloved* echoes this sense of lack or absence and the wish to chart and memorialize it: 'Morrison is a writer who deals with the gaps in historical records and archives ... the gaps that she discovers are ... the scar of a trauma that resisted representation and can only belatedly ... become articulated in the framework of a literary text ... Morrison's imaginary literary supplement to historical memory is not a filling of the gap but a marking of it' (106).

^{viii} In this concern we can identify an echo of Derek Walcott's (2007) poem 'The Sea is History,' first published in 1979 (123–25).

^{ix} Neumann (2008) identifies in fictions of memory 'a reminiscing narrator or figure who looks back on his or her past, trying to impose meaning on the surfacing memories from a present point of view' and to some extent we find this in Cudjoe (335). Yet, while for Neumann 'The failure to join together temporally differential dimensions goes along with a dissolution into disparate fragments of memory which indicate the instability of the meaning-making process,' in Wideman's novel meaning making is also simultaneously located in disparate, disordered glimpses of memory (337).

^x Here the language of accounting and blunt reduction of people to economic units resonates with Ian Baucom's (2005) study of finance capital and the spectre of slavery, organized around the insurance claim for the *Zong*, which in 1781 jettisoned and drowned one hundred and thirty-two of its human cargo to secure recompense. Baucom ties this 'hypermonetarized, hyperspeculative moment' to 'our own exorbitantly financialized present' (26).

^{xi} Just prior to this episode Jacob describes how 'Breathing the air of a world so new, almost alarming in rawness and temptation, never failed to invigorate him. Once beyond the warm gold of the bay, he saw forests untouched since Noah, shorelines beautiful enough to bring tears, wild food for the taking' (12).

^{xii} With 'woolly hair the color of a setting sun' Sorrow is posed as a figure of ambiguous racial identity (51).

^{xiii} I should note that the final section of *A Mercy* refocuses once more the horrors of the Middle Passage, this time from the first person perspective of a slave, Florens's mother, who recalls her capture in Angola and subsequent crossing of the Atlantic (see 162–66). A visual arts parallel to the literary turn to myth or fantasy can be found in the work of Ellen Gallagher (for example, 'Bird in Hand' (2006)). My sense of this type of inventive engagement with, and re-imagining of, the Middle Passage is distinct from Gilroy's (1993) notion of 'jubilee,' of markers of a liberatory rapport with death looking back to slave suicides during transportation (68 & 198).

^{xiv} In terms of the literatures of slavery and the Holocaust, the issue of drawing out relations and differences has not received much critical attention. However, Morrison (1987) herself provided a flash point with her dedication of *Beloved* to 'Sixty Million and more,' some of the responses to which I mention below, and there have also been several readings focused on shared concerns with unspeakability. Lisa Garbus (1999)

identifies a series of close parallels between Morrison's *Beloved* and Claude Lanzmann's film *Shoah* (1986) but does not really address the complex decisions underlying the performance of such comparative work or the ethical dilemmas that many perceive to be involved. Walter Benn Michaels (1996) tackles several of these issues in an article on memory, cultural representation, *Beloved* and the Jewish Holocaust. Naomi Mandel (2002) offers a short account of the fraught discourses at work in debate surrounding Morrison's dedication, going on to explore *Beloved*'s investment in a 'rhetoric of ineffability' also associated with accounts of the Holocaust (584). In his damning, and now infamous, review Stanley Crouch (1987) asserts, 'sixty is ten times six, of course ... for *Beloved* ... is a blackface holocaust novel. It seems to have been written in order to enter American slavery into the big time martyr ratings contest, a contest usually won by references to, and works about, the experiences of Jews at the hands of Nazis' (39). Problematic in all kinds of ways, Crouch's review nevertheless illustrates the danger of the setting of histories of suffering alongside each other being perceived as entering into a competitive, even gratuitous forum. A helpful response and engagement with the issues is voiced by Gilroy (1993) himself: 'What would be the consequences if [*Beloved*] had tried to set the Holocaust of European Jews in a provocative relationship with the modern history of racial slavery in the western hemisphere? Crouch dismisses without considering it the possibility that there might be something useful to be gained from setting these histories closer to each other not so as to compare them, but as precious resources from which we might learn something valuable about the way that modernity operates, about the scope and status of rational human conduct, about the claims of science, and perhaps most importantly about the ideologies of humanism with which those brutal histories can be shown to have been complicit' (217). Two fiction writers

who have taken up this challenge, Caryl Phillips and André Schwartz-Bart, are examined in Rothberg, Sanyal and Silverman (2010).

^{xv} Baucom (2005) explicates the centrality of the submarine ‘abyss’ to Édouard Glissant’s theoretical work and traces a philosophy of history within black diaspora texts that challenges the progressive logic of ‘a post-Enlightenment understanding of the unfolding of historical time,’ often through oceanic imagery offering the ‘promise of a transverse, relational now-being’ (312 & 317).

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Biography

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