

ZITA C. NUNES – “LOVING OUR CHILDREN TO DEATH:” IDENTIFICATION AND THE AFRICAN DIASPORA

In the introduction to “The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness”, Paul Gilroy addresses the double consciousness and cultural intermixture that distinguish those defined through the African Diaspora. He looks to African-American thinkers to challenge what he calls the “narrowness of vision which is content with the merely national.” According to Gilroy, these thinkers should be “prepared to renounce the easy claims of African-American exceptionalism in favor of a global, coalitional politics in which anti-imperialism and anti-racism might be seen to interact if not to fuse” (Gilroy, 1995: 4). The interactions among diasporan writers of Africa, the Caribbean, and of North and South America – as well as those of their characters – indicate how complex these coalitional politics can be.

In “Paradise”, Nobel prizewinning author Toni Morrison explores what it means to be a diasporic Black people in America through the novel’s references to Africa, South America and the Caribbean. This 1997 novel recounts the relationship between Ruby, a black town in Oklahoma, and the previously abandoned convent on its outskirts now occupied by women of various races who are both loved and feared by the town’s inhabitants. In the middle of the novel on the occasion of the schoolchildren’s Christmas nativity play, Ruby’s teacher and historian, Pat Best, enters into a discussion with one of the town’s religious leaders, the Reverend Misner:

[Pat Best:] “You think what I teach them isn’t good enough?”
[Rev. Misner:] Had she read his mind? “Of course it’s good. It is just not enough. The world is big, and we’re part of that bigness. They want to know about Africa.”
[Pat Best:] “Oh, please, Reverend. Don’t go sentimental on me.”
[Rev. Misner:] “If you cut yourself off from the roots, you wither.”
[Pat Best:] “Roots that ignore the branches turn into termite dust.”
[Rev. Misner:] “Pat,” he said with mild surprise. “You despise Africa.”
[Pat Best:] “No, I don’t. It just don’t mean anything to me.” (Morrison, 1999: 209)

The play is an allegory for Ruby’s founding and for the way that the population has sealed itself off from the outside world. For Misner, this isolation is Ruby’s most troubling quality. For Ruby’s founders and leaders, however, this very isolation is the sole guarantor of the town’s strength and immortality, because it protects Ruby from the threat that outsiders represent. As they continue their conversation, Pat acknowledges Misner’s impatience at the zeal with which the town’s elders also use this isolation to preserve the darkness of their black skins. They prize the color of their skins for it gives no sign of the taint of slavery that color of racial mixture would evidence (Morrison, 1999: 209). Pat suggests that Misner, unwittingly perhaps, aligns himself with the desire of the town’s elders to deny the shameful legacy of slavery when he nostalgically reaches back in time and across the space to Africa. For Pat, Africa might be a place one returns to or flees from. It might even be a place that experienced variously and ambivalently as betrayed and betraying by both those who left and by those who didn’t. But regardless of Africa’s significance, the conversation between Pat Best and Reverend Misner implies that Africa’s significance for America cannot be understood without taking slavery and the resulting Diaspora into account. The question of Diaspora exceeds simple internationalism. I have discussed elsewhere (Nunes, 2002) how the publisher of the “Chicago Defender”, Robert Abbott, was severely criticized in the Afro-Brazilian press for speeches and articles outlining his impressions of what he saw once he arrived in Brazil

in 1923. In his editorials for the foremost newspaper of its days, he celebrated the Black people he saw in positions of responsibility and in all strata of society. Afro-Brazilian journalists and commentators, however, blamed him for not taking into account that the visible is always mediated and that one “learns” to see. They blamed him for not understanding that the Black people he saw and wanted to identify with “as” Black people were not really Black people who identified “themselves” as Black people. But, most of all, they blamed him for not understanding that although there were many Black people in Brazil, a majority in fact, they were as invisible to him, Abbott, as they were to the Brazilian state and to official representation. He did not address his comments or projects to them. Abbott’s misrecognition of, and failed identification with Blacks in Brazil invites us to ask what, in fact, does it mean to be constituted in and through the African Diaspora – to identify ourselves with one another as a diasporic black community. Identification, in the psychoanalytic sense as the narcissistic form of incorporation, secures identity (Abraham and Torok, 1994: 111), and promotes its fantasy of wholeness and an ethical valuing of peace. Identity incorporates alterity or otherness, while simultaneously obscuring the history of that incorporation, making it seem that the identity is given not made. The remain[ders]s of identity’s past losses and exclusions are encrypted and silenced. If this is so, how then do those who are remainders from this process of Americanization, those whom the visual artist Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons calls “the sons and daughters of those who made the long involuntary journey and who remember the where [in a reference to slavery and the Middle Passage] the pain starts” (cited by Harris, 2001: 51) deal with their own losses and exclusions? If identification has secured American identity, what then are we to make of the identity of the African Diaspora? Do these sons and daughters of those who made the long journey have an alternative to cannibalize the remains of the past? In the continuation of the conversation between Pat Best and Richard Misner quoted above, Misner tells Pat Best that the isolation, which the community relies on to preserve their blackness, kills. Her response, in which she asks him if he believed that they didn’t love their children, resonates through “Paradise”. In the “Afterword” to her translation of “The Women of Tijucopapo”, by the Brazilian novelist Marilene Felinto, Irene Matthews recapitulates Pat’s question in the one that drives Rísia, the novel’s protagonist: “Rísia asks a three-part but fundamentally inseparable question: Can a perfect act of love procreate and, if so, should “only” a perfect act of love procreate and, if so, how can you justify, ratify, the existence of a child not born out of love?” (Felinto, 1994: 125). “Paradise” links this question, as it pertains to individuals, to the formation of a people in the wake of slavery. Would the justification, ratification – most often understood as political and psychological reparation – of a diasporic black community necessarily entail, as Reverend Misner fears, loving our children to death?

The work of two contemporary visual artists, Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons and Keith Piper, suggests an approach to these questions. Because they both address in their art the legacy of slavery and the work of recollection before a scattered and shattered past, they allow me to address the framing issues of this essay in relation to the visual that is so confounding in discussions of blackness in an international frame. These two artists, as well as Toni Morrison, are not interested in preserving a false integrity of the past; therefore, their fissured work of recollection, which differs from the completion of a work of remembering, relies on fragments, transparency, contingency, and technology. Like the works of Campos-Pons and Piper, “Paradise” explores the ways in which slavery and the accompanying scattering of people necessitate an unsettling examination of how we form our black communities internationally. It addresses the formation of community, the violence that this formation entails, and the losses that derive from same – losses that are variously figured as corpses, as excrement, and as other remainders.

Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons was born in Cuba and has resided in Boston since 1990.

Her installations combine large-scale Polaroid photography, videotape, performance, painting and sculpture. These are images from an ongoing series entitled "History of a people who were not heroes". The first part is called "A Town Portrait", the second is "Spoken Softly with Mama" and the third part is "Meanwhile the Girls Were Playing". The entire series addresses the history of the artist's family, and other families like hers, the current inhabitants of a town in Matanzas, Cuba. The family home stands where the slave quarters that had housed her great-grandfather, an enslaved Yoruba, once had stood.

Included in these installations are photographs of family members, of the slave quarters, of the sugar plantation's bell tower now in decay. One sees the actual bricks, stones and dirt from the site, as well as glass irons, a glass fountain, and embroidered sheets fabricated by the artist. A video projects images of a circling spoon dissolving sugar in a glass of water and of the artist working at a spinning wheel accompanied by a soundtrack of children playing games and of childhood songs sung by the artist. Many of these elements, evocative of Cuba's sugar plantation economy, had been produced or collected in Cuba with the collaboration of the artist's sister and mother, who still reside there. Campos-Pons composed some of the photographs in the United States, which were then taken, according to her directions, by her sister or a friend in Cuba. The pictures are projected onto piles of sheets, onto walls, planks of wood evocative of slave ships, onto bits of earth, brick or other objects or drawings that historicize and fragment the integrity of that memory-identity and present the past, not as "the" past, but as a mediated past. Keith Piper's work, like that of Campos-Pons, considers the relationship of history to current discussions of identity and culture. Of Caribbean descent, Piper was born in Malta and raised in Birmingham, England. Piper joined Eddie Chambers, Claudette Johnson, and Donald Rodney to form the BLK Art Group. In 1981 and 1982, the group mounted a series of provocative exhibitions entitled "The Pan African Connection". The exhibitions challenged the accepted view of an English national aesthetic culture linked to British modernism by exploring the relationship between black political struggles and contemporary artistic practices. After the BLK Art Group disbanded, Piper expanded his interest in appropriated images to multi-media installations that brought together painting, sculpture, texts, textiles and music. Piper shifted to computer-based technology in the late eighties, in order to create a space in his collage for the viewer's associations and interpretations of the ever shifting digital layers of his work. The collaboration of the artist and viewer allows for a contingent and unfolding collective narrative that defies a linear recounting. Piper's "Relocating the Remains" was commissioned by InIVA (The Institute of International Visual Arts) and exhibited in London in 1997. It is also available as an interactive CD-ROM and as an interactive website . Its three sections, titled "Unmapped," "Unrecorded," "Unclassified," reprise Piper's earlier work and reflect his enduring concern with the effects of slavery, colonization and industrialization on "the geography of the black body as alternately a vessel, a commodity, and a symbol of colonial expansionism" (Cameron: 1999). According to Piper, "'Unmapped' [is] an investigation of the various perceptions of the black body as defined beneath the dominant gaze. 'Unrecorded' examines the gaps in historical narratives that continue to distort and obscure black presence. 'Unclassified' centers around an examination of the impact of new technologies on surveillance and policing, especially in relation to notions of community, nation and cultural difference" (Piper, 1997: 10-1).

Scholars of photography have called attention to the way that the rhetoric of photography's transparency has made claims for its truth that have made it a preferred

technology for surveillance and categorization, not least in colonial contexts. This critique of photographic transparency uncovers a mutually sustaining relationship in which the State, buttressed by the knowledge and control photographic evidence provides, invests photography with an authority that could not be reduced to its technical and semiotic properties. While the work of Piper and Campos-Pons is in conversation with this critique, their interest in transparency contains another set of concerns related to an aesthetic and ethical investment in the African Diaspora. Prior to undertaking the series "History of a people who were not heroes", Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons had addressed the Middle Passage in a work entitled "Tra" (1991). The installation revolves around the relationships among three generations of a Black Cuban family in the sugar-growing region of Matanzas. The title of the installation links, through the repetition of the first three letters, the various concerns of the piece: "travesía", "trata", "tragedia", "trampa" (Middle Passage, slave trade, tragedy, trap). The title also suggests a series of words indicative of movement: "traducción" (translation – from one place to another as well as from one language to another) and "transparencia" (transparency). Campos-Pons links transparency as a technique and a concept to the in-between. I would argue that "Tra" also evokes the Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz's notion of transculturation. His study of the history of Cuba from the perspective of the cultivation of sugar cane and tobacco must be an important point of reference for Campos-Pon's work. Ortiz's familiar neologism, coined to describe the results of the first contact among distinct cultures in what would become Cuba, distinguishes itself from acculturation, which is the unidirectional translation from one culture to another. For Ortiz, ransculturation aims to memorialize mutual transformation, a definition of transculturation that generally finds its way into discussions of hybridism and Diaspora in the redemptive, celebratory mode. Ortiz's neologism, however, is not so much an attempt to account for a New World, as it was conventionally understood, as for a new set of uncertainties and accumulated losses deriving from the violence of the encounter in Cuba. For Ortiz, national identity is secured not only through the successful transculturation of Europeans but also by those whose actual death and whose (social) death in life derives from their incorporation as one other.

Transculturation, in its description and its practice, produces the remains of those who could or would not be incorporated into a Cuban identity. The effect is that African and indigenous people can never be "Cubans" as this identity can only result from successful transculturation, a process that Ortiz's description forecloses for them. Transculturation, then, cannot be understood apart from death - from death figured in/as its remains as a corpse. In a compelling essay published in the catalogue for Keith Piper's "Relocating the Remains", Kobena Mercer argues for the aesthetics of black necrophilia. This idea derives from an interview that the filmmaker John Akomfrah gave on Black British cinema. In the interview when Akomfrah was asked about the omnipresence of corpses in black films, he suggested that "necrophilia is at the heart of black filmmaking." For Akomfrah, necrophilia entails "feeding off the dead." He points out that the "desire shifts from melancholia to necrophilia almost. You almost begin to desire these figures precisely because they are irretrievable, impossible to capture, therefore dead" (Banning, 1993: 33). Taking Akomfrah's suggestive formulation as a starting point, one could conclude that in a melancholic relation to the dead, the dead live by feeding off the living, while in a necrophilic relation to the dead, the living live by feeding off the dead. This formulation finds support in an observation made by Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok in the "The Shell and the Kernal". Abraham and Torok allow that there is a relationship to loss that does not fall into the dyad incorporation-introjection, both of which are related to identification. While incorporation denies the trauma of loss by encrypting the lost object and silencing it, introjection gives language to the trauma of

loss, thereby adjusting to and then overcoming it. Neither option is satisfactory for the former objects of slavery – now diasporic subjects of the legacy of slavery, and its remainders. Necrophilianecrophagia, however, provides a more interesting set of possibilities: An imaginary [ritualistic] meal eaten in the company of the deceased may be seen as a protection against the danger of incorporation [...]Necrophagia, always a collective practice, is also distinct from incorporation. Even though it might well be born of a fantasy, necrophagia constitutes a form of language because it is a group activity. By acting out the fantasy of incorporation, the actual eating of the corpse symbolizes both the impossibility of projecting the loss and the fact that the loss has already occurred. Eating the corpse results in the exorcism of the survivor's potential tendency for psychic incorporation after death. Necrophagia is therefore not at all a variety of incorporation but a preventive measure of anti-incorporation. (Abraham & Torok, 1994: 129-30). Necrophagia, unlike either introjection or incorporation, can acknowledge, at the same time, both the trauma of loss and the impossibility of overcoming the trauma of loss. The temptation is as great as it is perilous, when faced with loss and the desire for an ethical relationship to one's remain(der)s, to express this relationship through reparations: to name the unnamed, to represent the unrepresented, to give voice to the silent, to make the invisible visible. One might assume that this is what lies behind the doors of Piper's installation "Relocating the Remains", marked "Unmapped," "Unrecorded," "Unclassified." Yet, behind the doors is a proliferation of ways of naming and categorizing. Piper fragments these images with their emphasis on categorization and control and asks Us to consider identity – both black and white – through its mediated representation. Anne Cheng (2000) proposes that the collection and erasure that is the fragment is the only kind of history that can memorialize without appropriation. The fragmentary, shifting, and layered images of Piper's work expose the history of the mediated image. His installation suggests that repairing the fragment, in other words, offering a counter-discourse of healing wholeness and repaired identity, is to offer a solution that reasserts the problem –the enforcement of identity. Piper's work, with its valuing of chance and contingency, promotes relocation rather than re-incorporation of the remains.

The idea of an ethical relationship with one's remains, one founded on relocation rather than re-incorporation or disavowal, destabilizes a clear division between inside and outside and introduces a possibility of an in-between space. Campos-Pons has said that this in-between space is important to her. She links the in-between to transparency and to memory. Her glass objects embody this connection; were they to break, they could be glued back together, leaving in evidence the fissure that reinforces the idea of transparency elaborated in a passage cited above. There is a photograph in her series, "When I am not here. Estoy allá", which comments directly on these issues of selfhood and identity discussed above. The photograph is of the upper torso of the artist covered with mud in which are traced the words "Identity could be a tragedy". The face recalls an African mask and the pose invites the viewer to lock eyes with the object of the photograph in a gesture of sympathy and identification. Yet, the eyes are not open. They are shut but painted in such a way as to appear open. Evocative of Wilson Harris' "dead seeing eye" and "living closed eye" (Harris, 1985: 19), the presentation of the eyes inscribes the violence of identifying with another. The photograph shuttles the viewer back and forth between one other that one cannot recognize (recognition being the political form of identification) and the self, which, in the face of the refusal of that recognition, can no longer be so sure of itself. This photograph, which seems to be about identity, creates the in-between space, a space of a relationship to one other that is not, or not yet, appropriative. This space is a space of not knowing and of not being driven to know. The words written on the body of the artist are also significant. The

structure of the sentence “Identity could be a ‘tragedy’” at first seems to be a warning. The sentence, could, however, be fruitfully read as a statement of possibility. Bonnie Honig suggests in “Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics” (Honig, 1993) that tragedy is the appropriate genre for acknowledging the remainder, for tragedy revolves around the forced recognition that there can be no remainderless choice. In this case: “Identity ‘could’ be a tragedy”. The refusal of identity marks the work of both Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons and Keith Piper. This refusal is not an end in and of itself. It is a political strategy, a relocation of the remains rather than a re-incorporation that aims to redeem them.

Relocation leaves the remains as remainders that would be reminders not of something but of somehow, an unsettling and uncomfortable, perhaps, way of living with the remains of what can never be made whole. This representation of Diaspora models an ethical way of loving what remains, of accompanying rather than taking in, embracing rather than incorporating, of feeling “with” rather than feeling “for”.

<http://www.iniva.org/piper/welcome.html>

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