

The Future of Slavery: From Cultural Trauma to Ethical Remembrance

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This paper focuses on the current and ongoing engagement with slavery as a space for traumatic remembrance and explores how one's sense of self and identity might be transformed by applying ethics to the remembrance of slavery. I reject the ideas central to trauma theory purported by Cathy Caruth (1991) that considers cultural trauma to be rooted in the tragic episode itself, arguing that it is driven by the strategic, practical and political interests of both nationalist discourses and the Black diaspora. By engaging with new thinking in cultural trauma proposed by Jeffrey C. Alexander (2004), I maintain that trauma is evoked through the effects of stories, narratives and images which are adopted and accepted as our history and attempt to look past the constructed slavery narratives premised on death and victimhood to reveal subjectivities that expose tropes of renewal, creative energy and agency. I further criticise trauma theory's denial of unconscious fantasies and psychopolitical forces behind the representation of traumatic memories and consider the importance of applying psychosocial thinking to the impact of this cultural atrocity on a post-slavery generation. The paper attempts to fashion an ethical mode of remembrance by engaging with postcolonial thinkers such as Franz Fanon, Paul Gilroy, Saidiya Hartman and Toni Morrison and includes literary pieces by Caryl Phillips, Octavia Butler and William Blake. In addition, Judith Butler's (2005) theory of 'opacity' is used to reveal the fragmented nature of slavery and slave subjectivity. Overall, I argue that applying ethical thinking to the memory of slavery is of critical importance not only for the creation of black subjectivity and political lives, but also for the future of multicultural relations in the UK.

Keywords: Memory, Slavery, Cultural Trauma, Psychopolitical, Ethical Remembrance.

'They will remember that we were sold but they won't remember that we were strong. They will remember that we were bought, but not that we were strong.'

William Prescott, former slave in the United States, 1937¹

Introduction

As an event, institution and phenomena, the trans-Atlantic slave trade was arguably one of the most

astonishing atrocities to have existed in human history. The rationale for this paper is based on my concern with the lack of contemporary black British voices with regards to the topic of slavery as well as the ongoing pathologisation of its memory in the postcolonial present. With the 200th anniversary of the abolition of slavery having been commemo-

rated in England recently, it seems a good time to think again about black British subjects and their relationship to slavery such that our experience is included alongside the monopoly of American slavery studies that already exists within the academy (Wood 2003).

By engaging with cultural critic Arlene Kiezer's (2004) assertion that 'representing the broadest range of black subject positions under slavery enables the representation of a myriad of black subjectivities of the present and the future' (Kiezer 2004, 16), I argue that modern representations of slavery in the public domain have a tendency to focus on the sentimentally constructed slave, reifying factors such as passivity, death, victimhood and the pathology of plantation life. However, there seems to be less focus on the stories of slaves who demonstrated agency, personhood and above all, a critical consciousness. The paper is concerned with the polarisation of slavery's memory as a one dimensional story of terror and explores the significance of ethical remembrance as a means through which to locate narratives that move beyond terror and pathology. This practice asks that we seek a new language to narrate cultural histories premised not only on trauma but also creation, renewal and mutual recognition.

In order to expose the mediating forces and political regimes inherent in the representation of slavery's

memory I explore new perspectives in cultural trauma focusing specifically on the work of theorists Jeffrey C. Alexander (2004) who reject the common sense ideas central to trauma theory as purported by Cathy Caruth (1991) and Shosana Feldman & Dori Laub (1992). I argue that trauma theory's emphasis on the 'event' as the trauma inducing stimulus is reductive when we consider the unique circumstances of raced subjects and the role of symbolic fantasies and psychopolitical forces in the practice of remembrance. In an attempt to create alternative strategies for remembrance based on ethics, I demonstrate how Judith Butler's (2005) theory of 'opacity', which proposes a way of 'seeing differently' to release the subject from a tyranny of fantasies and projections, can offer something new to the way in which we engage with the remembrance of slavery. In addition, I explore slavery's position within the context of the wider world and other cultural atrocities and consider the importance of recognising 'another-side' to the 'white perpetrator' of slavery's memory; aspects not usually discussed in traditional studies of the slave experience.

Taking a multidisciplinary approach, my exploration of slavery and ethics is conceived through the ideas of postcolonial theorists, writers and novelists such as Franz Fanon, Paul Gilroy, Saidiya Hartman and Toni Morrison and employs literary pieces by Caryl Phillips, Octavia

Butler and William Blake. Situated with the works of Dominick LaCapra, Paul Ricoeur and other theorists concerned with history and ethics and its role in contemporary lives, this paper aims to make an original contribution to the current debates in slavery studies and considers its application a pedagogic resource for future generations.

A Tale of Terror

It is a commonly held belief that trans-Atlantic slavery is an experience that belongs to the past. Certainly, contemporary global and local lives seem to be preoccupied with their own new revolutions, injustices and fresh acts of barbarism. Moreover, black British subjects, born and raised in the modern Western world to immigrant Caribbean parents, already occupy a diasporic location that is twice removed from their ancestral home of Africa, perhaps making the experience of migration more powerful and relevant than the memory of slavery in contemporary black British lives (Gilroy 1993a).

Such a notion of the past repeating itself has preoccupied postcolonial thinkers and theorists, all of whom are interested in slavery's legacy in the modern world as well as its impact on black British cultural lives. These theorists argue that the experience of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, where millions of Africans were, in Althusserian terms, 'interpellated' through the

force of Western hegemonic ideologies and discourse into racially bounded, non-human subjects, not only continues to shape the socio-political ideology of Britain today (Gilroy 1993a), but also has a profound effect on the becoming of black subjectivities (hooks 2003). The legacy of slavery continues to haunt public memory in contemporary black society through recollections that are 'memories' passed on through generations and retained across various representations and specific discourses (Eyerman 2004). This 'familial discourse' forms the root of collective identity amongst black people (Eyerman 2004, 108) and culminates in a "shared racial memory" across black diasporic communities (Gilroy 2000, 263).

Although popular and nationalist discourses in Britain tend to position slavery as an event from the past and unconnected to modernity (Gilroy 1993b), its memory is nonetheless a central, albeit silent feature in the lives of black British individuals. This perhaps uncommon idea has been fully embraced by historian Sidney Mintz (1974), who describes the embedded nature of cultural memory as forever sutured onto its host:

we might be struck by the breath and depth of the embedding of the slavery institution in the social fabric not of one but of many different new world societies – an embedding so intimate and persistent that the aftermaths of slav-

ery still endure in the social forms and perceptions of new world peoples (Mintz 1974, 62).

The legacy of slavery therefore is always-already residually active in the present such that it is cyclically 'lived and living' (Eyerman 2004, 108), despite the 'historical amnesia' of its memory in Britain (Hall 1997, 173).

If the historical consciousness of the Black diaspora is, as argued by French postcolonial theorist Edoard Glissant (1996), 'the product of shock, contradiction, painful negation and explosive forces' (Glissant 1996: 62), then contemporary black individuals are automatically implicated in and are carriers of a violent cultural memory embodying the psychic 'afterlife' of slavery (Hartman 2008, 6). In addition, they are deemed to be collectively haunted by the shame, domination and abuse inflicted on their ancestors by European perpetrators (hooks 2003), which means that its memory has been framed within a narrative of cultural trauma. In its simplest form, this trauma pertains to the symptoms and traumatic effects experienced by a group who have been subjected to a rapid and massive social change due to a sudden and unexpected episode (Alexander 2004). As a result, in the modern Western world black people who have no direct experience of the event of slavery are nonetheless implicated in a common fate

which insidiously haunts the collective (Eyerman 2004).

The concept of trauma itself originates from Freud's (2003) work in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, where he demonstrates that the patient's inner conflict, motivated by a traumatic event, would become an outer reality through the 'acting out' of internal dramas (Freud 2003). Contemporary thinking about trauma has been rooted in the work of scholar Caruth (1991), heralded as having produced some of the most pioneering work on trauma to date. Along with fellow trauma theorists Feldman and Laub (1992), Caruth's trauma theory has been used to explain the traumatising effects of the Holocaust on post-survivors and delineate a unifying theory of post-atrocity generations as they experience trauma's effects from the past:

In its most general definition, trauma describes an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena (Caruth 1991, 181)

The hallucinations and delayed effects that are the symptoms of living in the aftermath of slavery's legacy have been explored by theorists bell hooks (2003) and Joy Degruy Leary (2005), who consider the traumatic effects of slavery to be at the heart of pathological and de-

structive behaviours amongst contemporary blacks living in the New World. In her book *Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome*, Leary asserts that the trauma of forced domination and systematic torture suffered by the slaves has caused future generations to suffer from traumatic stresses such as low self esteem, anger, and aggression. This form of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, linked directly to the horrors of slavery, is also affiliated with distorted notions of masculinity, fatherhood and underachievement (Leary 2005). Similarly, In *Rock My Soul: Black People and Self-esteem*, hooks (2003) maintains that slavery's legacy has created an 'internalisation of shame' for black women which impacts on feelings about hair texture, skin colour and body shape (hooks 2003: 37). These examples are what sociologist Piotr Sztompka (2000) identifies as the side-effects of a massive social change which might produce 'dislocations in the routine, accustomed ways of acting or thinking [and] change the life-world of the people in often dramatic ways' (Sztompka 2000, 456). He argues further that this type of trauma is also the 'most threatening' as it takes its hold upon each generation:

like all cultural phenomena it has the strongest inertia; it persists and lingers considerably longer than other kinds of trauma, sometimes over several generations, preserved in collective memory or hibernating in collective sub-

consciousness (Sztompka 2000, 458).

With such a powerful force at play within the collective cultural psyche, there are huge efforts to facilitate 'recovery' from the traumatic loss of history and identity. In trauma theory, the recovery from such a traumatic loss is worked around the idea that this unconscious memory must be revisited in order for the event to be assimilated, understood and accepted (Caruth 1991). Therefore, the postmodern trend is towards subjective narratives premised on redemption and return and hidden histories which include the recovery of slave narratives, oral histories, documents, images, poems and rebel slave accounts. Narratives are the important substance of remembrance and it is through this medium that the 'education of memory' finds its voice and where some form of healing is able to begin (Ricoeur 1999, 8).

However, my concern here is that the canon of redemptive novels unearthed as part of an ethical postcolonial project to represent a traumatic past has produced 'fragmented accounts' which offer an 'intensity' of experience yet little insight into the depth of the human condition (Parker 1997, 169). For example, slavery historian Marcus Wood (2003) explains how aesthetic trauma influenced the most popular and widely disseminated representations of slavery during the 18th

century within which stereotypes such as the mulatto mistress, the rape victim, the runaway and the idle slave were constructed (Wood 2003). In addition, American abolitionist literature at this time was particularly interested in the pathology of plantation life, while British slave literature tended to focus on the terrible conditions of the middle passage in an attempt to appeal to an emphatic public and secure political support against the evils of the slave trade (Wood 2003). Using poems, stories, pictures and other representations, the horror of the slaves' condition was depicted through a series of polarised categories such as passivity, victimhood, shame, abuse and pathology. Similarly, autobiographical slave narratives have dominated our contemporary understanding and memories of what life was like for a slave and despite the fact that some of the most popular and widely disseminated slavery texts contain recurrent themes of whippings, lynchings, mutilation and death alongside the highly charged emotional responses of shame and anger, this action of 'witness' to the testimonies of slavery claims to facilitate acknowledgement, recovery and self-transformation (Feldman and Laub 1992).

These scenes of slavery, which are often all too horrific to digest, produce a series of tyrannical memories that govern its narrative as a dominant discourse and crystallise potent emotions into essentialist ac-

counts. Moreover, these fragmented stories leave no room for other subject positions or alternative slave subjectivities to emerge (Kieser 2004). Given that a heavy dose of Manichaeism and polarised subject positioning exists in the representation of slavery, Trinidadian theorist and poet Derek Walcott (2006) warns that history in this context 'petrifies into myth' and results in a 'literature without morality' (Walcott 2006, 371):

In the new world servitude to the muse of history has produced a literature of recrimination and despair, a literature of revenge written by the descendents of slaves or a literature of remorse written by descendents of masters. Because this literature serves historical truth it yellows into polemic or pathos (Walcott 2006, 371).

With its memory dominated by a grand narrative of 'pathos', is it surprising that slavery is considered somewhat of a taboo subject which remains an uncomfortable tale for both blacks and whites living in Britain today? (Gilroy 1993b; Woods 2010). Moreover, should it shock us that it is only as recently as 2008 that slavery history lessons were made compulsory in British schools?² Fanon made quite clear his feelings about slavery in his remark, 'slavery? It was no longer even mentioned, that unpleasant memory...I forgot it all' (Fanon 1967, 115) and certainly, for Hartman (2008)

the terror of slavery often meant that 'remembering warred with the will to forget' (Hartman 2008, 16). According to Friedrich Nietzsche, this trope of 'active forgetting' forms an integral part of remembrance by creating a 'clean slate' from which to transform and diminish feelings of anger and revenge (Nietzsche in: Galloway 2006). Yet, something is very wrong if post-slavery generations actively choose to blindly disassociate from slavery due to the very unpleasantness of its memory, especially if we pay heed to Paul Gilroy's (2012) warning that 'So much of the crises in contemporary multiculturalism depends...on the ability to look at the past and to be comfortable with that past' (Gilroy 2012). What is acutely evident here is that the memory of slavery communicates its force as a trauma and pathology inducing site and it is in this way that its legacy seems to have 'swung decidedly toward despair' (Brown 2009, 123⁵). My concern therefore is that if slavery is doomed to such a polarised interpretation across national discourses and representations, what then is at stake for contemporary black political lives if our history and collective identity is rooted in the horrors and traumas of the past? In other words, must we continue to be 'united in terror?' (Hall 1997)

Whose Trauma is it Anyway?

New ideas about cultural trauma pioneered by theorists Alexander

et al (2004) have allowed us to ask questions as to why the memory of slavery is represented as a one dimensional, pathological experience. That slavery was traumatic is understood and I do not wish here to dilute the memory and importance of the trauma experienced by the millions of Africans who lived and died throughout the time of slavery. However, in their book *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity* the authors argue that trauma is in fact a socially constructed phenomenon, not 'naturally existing', but altogether created, mediated and historically produced (Alexander et al 2004, 2). This line of thinking runs counter to the common sense ideas of trauma theory which posits the 'event' and the remembrance of the event as the authentic trauma inducing stimulus.

Alexander et al (2004) explains that fundamentally, events do not create cultural trauma. Dominant narratives of slavery are not produced by the collective group but by social agents or 'carrier groups' who maintain their own political and personal interests (Alexander et al 2004). We have already seen how slavery's memory can be disseminated through a narrative of terror and pathology to garner both psychological and political support, yet it is also filtered through bodies such as the mass media, entertainment, religious groups and state institutions who all have their own personal interests with regard to the

way in which slavery is represented (Alexander et al 2004). These are the agents of the 'trauma process' that create the channels through which trauma is injected into the collective cultural psyche and who decide what to include in slavery's memory (Alexander et al, 2004). My concern is what happens when one's cultural memory is colonised in this way? And how do these narratives affect our relationship with the past, present and future? In her paper *Collective Remembering and the Importance of Forgetting*, Anne Galloway (2006) warns of the danger inherent in having others control the way we remember since 'without being able to decide what we can remember and forget we are effectively left without hope of becoming different people or creating different worlds' (Galloway 2006, 1).

Trauma theory's focus on the event becomes even more problematic when we consider that there is a distinction to be made between the 'event' of slavery and the 'legacy of slavery' as an ongoing process that has transmuted into a living social condition. The reality is that in spite of slavery having been abolished over 150 years ago, many of its ideologies still remain within institutions and practices throughout the diaspora (Mama 1995). For example, attitudes and beliefs about race, inferiority and superiority are arguably as embedded today as they were during the time of slavery given the plethora of studies revealing

the unequal status of black people in housing, employment and education (Gilroy 1993a) and the disproportionate number of black men in UK prisons and mental institutions (Fernando 2002). Theorist Hartman (2002) argues that these uneasy feelings associated with feeling excluded from society are usually our first trigger to remembrance:

if slavery persists as an issue in political life...it is not because it is an antiquarian obsession of bygone days or the burden of a too-long memory but because black lives are still imperilled and devalued by a racial calculus and a political arithmetic that were entrenched centuries ago (Hartman 2002, 6)

Her analysis alludes to the force of racism that is 'clearly entangled with an older racial discourse' (Gilroy 1993b, 7), as well as regimes and forms of 'social death' in the present. Thus, even if one seeks to disassociate entirely from their slave past, the anxieties bound up with belonging, exclusion and feeling like an outsider are nonetheless at the heart of slavery and are characteristic tropes of New World diasporic identities (Hartman 2002). However, popular accounts of trauma do not consider the emerging field of the psychopolitical that enables us to consider the mechanisms of racism and the raced subject's relationship with the Eurocentric fantasies of the social symbolic - a Lacanian

idea that describes the symbolic forces which interrupt the individual's sense of self identity by working its ideologies and fantasies into the psyche³.

Algerian psychiatrist Fanon (1967) was one of the first to explore psychological trauma and the black man's relationship with the 'gaze' of the symbolic. In *Black Skin White Masks*, Fanon introduces us to the power of Eurocentric fantasies of superiority embedded within a still ongoing colonial system, through which he says, 'I discovered my Blackness, my ethnic characteristics; and I was battered down by tom-toms, cannibalism, intellectual deficiency fetishism, racial defects, slave ships...' (Fanon 1967, 112). Fanon demonstrates that colonial fantasies create symbolic links between the slaves of the past and the excluded 'minorities' in the new world who live antagonistically in relation to the social symbolic. Thus, for Fanon it is the ongoing 'colonial situation' and the white man's fantasy of superiority that is the root cause of the black man's cultural trauma. Clearly, due to the ongoing traumatic effects of racism, domination and exclusion, there are no 'flashbacks' of the atrocity, from which trauma theory's post-survivor holocaust generation are said to suffer, since, there is simply 'no time to make it unconscious' owing to the 'racial drama' (or trauma) being 'played out in the open' (Fanon 1967, 150). It is therefore not the

event of slavery, but the strength in which its effects linger residually into the present that renders its memory traumatic (Eyerman 2004).

We find therefore that it is the strain of modern racism in contemporary lives that colours much of what we choose to focus on and how we choose to feel when approaching remembrance of slavery (Hartman 2002). We might for example, feel empathy towards the slaves and anger at the white slave masters, but in an act of double vision motivated by fantasy, we inadvertently activate the trauma of our own lives:

We imaginatively witness the crimes of the past and cry for those victimized—the enslaved, the ravaged, and the slaughtered. And the oblitative assimilation of empathy enables us to cry for ourselves, too. As we remember those ancestors ...we can't but think of our own dishonored and devalued lives and the unrealized aspirations and the broken promises of abolition...The intransigence of our seemingly eternal second-class status propels us to make....unshakable explanatory narratives, and sites of injury (Hartman 2002, 767).

Remembrance in this context serves as an outlet for feelings of revenge and victimization and therefore creates a 'masochistic attachment' to slave victims of abuse (Hartman 2002, 8). British Arts and

Heritage Consultant, Baroness Lola Young (2007) also claims that focusing on victimhood might 'masquerade as a source of comfort' through which to deviate from our own contemporary circumstances as the modern victims of racism. This act of voyeurism and over-identification with the slaves is the 'darker side' of empathy and has little to do with honouring their memory.⁴ Instead, our own desires and fears linked to racism take centre stage.

Similarly, over-identification with the illusion of white superiority also acts as a mediating force in slavery's memory; a trope which theorists argue continues to permeate the remembrance of slavery in the UK today (Young 2007, Woods 2010). This abolitionist's narrative, recognised as a celebration of white triumph and superiority is what Gilroy (2005) describes as a type of 'post-colonial melancholia' - an aftermath of empire which has caused the west to hang on fiercely to stories of their own triumph while excluding others. It is this pathologic force which ruminates insidiously underneath the abolitionist narrative, where heroes are white and deemed to be acting autonomously while black protagonists are ignored and their agency disavowed. This systemic violence⁵, woven deep within the fabric of the social symbolic injects its trauma inducing fantasies into the memory of slavery through highly seductive and polarised stories. Ricoeur (1999) describes this exercise as

'abuses of ritualised commemoration' and therefore, 'an opportunity for the abuse of memory' (Ricoeur 1999, 9).

By taking into account the unique experience of post-slavery black communities and the way in which slavery's memory impacts on history, subjectivity and the psyche, what becomes apparent is that there is a need to 'decolonise trauma' seeing as its strong link to Holocaust Studies has meant the exclusion of other groups whose spatial, temporal and symbolic relationship to atrocities of the past exist outside of the current model (Rothberg 2008). In the case of post slavery individuals, the psychopolitical framework of racism and the symbolic fantasies of white superiority are already designed as a system of knowledges through which all narratives pertaining to the black self and the Other are filtered. The central argument therefore contends that contemporary ideas around cultural trauma and memory should not focus solely on celebrating memory as contestatory or subversive of established grand narratives, but must also be concerned with deconstructing the 'regimes' of memories and the frameworks within which they are positioned (Radstone 2005).

Black theorists and writers who engage with the creation of new sites within which to communicate with slavery warn that its memory is 'in more danger now than 30 years ago' (Morrison in: Gilroy 1993, 178)

and in need of an emancipatory vision that is not solely premised on recovery and mourning (Hartman 2002). Gilroy (1993b) argues that slavery should be seen from the slaves' point of view and suggests a certain ethics by advocating the importance of recognising that slaves had a conscience. Perhaps most interesting is Toni Morrison's proposal that we must 're-inhabit' the slaves in order to make ethical rather than traumatic connections with ancestors (Morrison in: Gilroy 1993). In light of this vantage point, the central question that this paper asks is can we move towards ethical remembrance of slavery and remember this event in a way that is non-pathological, productive and useful for contemporary lives?

Slaves, Strangers and Aliens

Attempting to apply ethics to the memory of slavery means that we must re-consider what we think we already know about slavery. Ideas concerning the interplay of ethics, history and memory have been well debated across the academy by historians such as Hayden White, Dominick LaCapra, and Nancy. F. Partner⁶ who have argued against simple notions of historical accounts underpinned by ideological interests, advocating instead ways in which to use the past as an on-going dialogue for the future generations (LaCapra 1985). This deconstruction of history based on ethics lends itself well to new think-

ing in the fields of relational psychoanalysis and feminist theory where the questions, 'who are you?' and 'can I know you without my own projections and fantasies getting in the way?' are foundational themes (Benjamin 1998; Pedwell 2002; Butler 2005). Moving towards ethical remembrance of slavery within this paradigm is to be acutely aware that one can not really know what slavery was like for the slaves, instead, we must become mindful of our 'invariable and partial blindness' about ourselves and others and exercise 'a certain patience with others that would suspend the demand that they be self same at every moment' (Butler 2005, 42). When we position the slaves solely within a framework of suffering and victimhood we ask that they are the same person in every scene of slavery. An ethical mode of remembrance however, is rooted in acknowledging the ambiguity of slave subjectivity and strives to connect with the 'stranger' or 'alien' Other (Benjamin 1998).

In her post-Hegelian analysis, Butler also reminds us that Others are not transparent, but display an 'opacity' which indicates that we can not know all aspects of ourselves or the Other since there are always shadows and spaces which we are unable to penetrate (Butler 2005). This willingness to 'experience the very limits of knowing' means that we refrain from condemning the slaves to a singular and vertical subjectivity based on responses to

terror and instead excavate for the 'pre-history' or an alternative slave consciousness. This ethical exercise allows a post-historical slave to emerge into the future, one who displays multiple selves and subject positions that 'interrupts the story' of the memory we have taken so far as fact (Butler 2005, 78). When cultural memory is linked to identity in this way it reinforces the 'use-value' of memory and creates a space where remembrance can become psychologically and politically resourceful in the future (Kansteiner 2002, 184). In this ethical turn, the memory of slavery exists as a 'living intellectual resource' revealing that modernity does not involve an 'absolute break with the past' but is merely disillusioned by its own rigid concept of temporality (Gilroy 1993b, 39).

Octavia Butler's (2004) neo-slave narrative⁷ *Kindred* for example, uses the concept of time travel to allude to the slippery nature of memory and its deep connection to contemporary life. The protagonist of the novel is Dana, a modern African American woman who inexplicably travels back and forth through time and is able to relive the past as a slave. In one scene, her arm is cut off in her slave life and she returns to the present with her arm still severed. Butler claims that this might be a metaphor for our 'disfigured heritage' or the fact that 'slavery didn't leave people quite whole' (Butler in: Crossley, 276). Given that Dana must save her white ancestor

in order to be born in the future, her account also opens up a new type of dialogue with the past that enables us to witness the opacity of our links to the slave masters.

Instead of entertaining the polarized subject positions and vertical narratives that dominate the memory of slavery, ethical remembrance recoils from the desire to legitimate one's own projections and releases memory from its epistemological prison:

By not pursuing satisfaction and letting the question remain open even enduring, we let the other live since life must be understood as precisely that which exceeds any account we must try to give it. If letting the other live is part of any ethical definition of recognition then this version of recognition will be based less on knowledge than on an apprehension of epistemic limits (Butler 2005, 43).

Suspending our own sense of 'what it is to be a slave' means there is 'vision rather than voyeurism' (Williams in Doss 2010, 276) which enables us to welcome subjectivities 'beyond recognition' (Oliver 2001, 85). Doing the ethical work means making honest connections with these alien Others and requires that we excavate otherwise unknown aspects of slave consciousness in order to expand subject positions which are currently limited by a tragic language.

Are We Dead Yet?

To argue that there is more to the popular conception of slaves as victims who experienced social death within the abusive regime of transatlantic slavery is not to say that these subjectivities did not exist. When considering the institution of slavery we can quite confidently rely on the assumption that it did indeed destroy the self-hood and the lives of millions of Africans. Scholar Vincent Brown (2009) however, has criticised Orlando Patterson's (1982) seminal book *Slavery and Social Death* for positioning the slave as a subject without agency and maintains that those who managed to dislocate from the nightmare of plantation life 'were not in fact the living dead', but 'the mothers of gasping new societies' (Brown 2009, 1241).

The Jamaican Maroons were one such disparate group of Africans who managed to band together and flee the Jamaican plantations in order to create a new mode of living under their own rule. These 'run-aways' were in fact 'ferocious fighters and master strategists', building towns and military bases which enabled them to fight and successfully win the war against the British army after 200 years of battle (Gotlieb 2000, 16). In addition, the story of the Windward Jamaican Maroons disrupts the phallogocentrism inherent within the story of the slave 'hero' by the very revelation that their leader, 'Queen Nanny' was a woman (Gotlieb 2000). As a lead-

er, she was often ignored by early white historians who dismissed her as an 'old hagg' or 'obeah' woman (possessor of evil magic powers) (Gotlieb 2000, xvi). Yet, despite these negative descriptors, Nanny presents an interesting image of an African woman in the time of slavery who cultivated an exceptional army and used psychological as well as military force against the English despite not owning sophisticated weapons (Gotlieb 2000). As an oral tale, her story speaks to post-slavery generations through its representation of a figure whose gender defying acts challenged the patriarchal fantasies of the Eurocentric imaginary and as such 'the study of her experiences might change the lives of people living under paternalistic, racist, classist and gender based oppression' (Gotlieb 2000, 84).

The label of 'social death' is rejected here on the grounds that it is a narrative which is positioned from the vantage point of a European hegemonic ideology. Against the social symbolic and its gaze, black slaves were indeed regarded as non-humans since their lives were stunted, diminished and deemed less valuable in comparison to the Europeans. However, Fanon's (1967) assertion that 'not only must the black man be black; he must be black in relation to the white man' (Fanon 1967, 110) helps us to understand that this classification can only have meaning relative to the symbolic which represents the alive-

ness of whiteness against the backdrop of the dead black slave (Dyer 1997). Butler (2005) makes it clear that the 'death' one suffers relative to the social symbolic is imbued with the fantasy that having constructed the Other and interpellated her into 'life', one now holds the sovereignty of determining the subject's right to live or die:

this death, if it is a death, is only the death of a certain kind of subject, one that was never possible to begin with, the death of the fantasy of impossible mastery, and so a loss of what one never had, in other words it is a necessary grief (Butler 2005, 65).

The point to make here is that although the concept of social death has proved useful for theorists to describe the metaphysical experience of those who live antagonistically in relation to the social symbolic, it is nevertheless a colonial narrative within which the slaves are confined to a one dimensional story of terror. In keeping with Gilroy's (1993b) argument that the memory of slavery must be constructed from the slaves' point of view, we might instead concentrate, not on the way in which the slaves are figured within the European social imaginary, but on how they negotiated their own ideas about self and identity. We might therefore find some value in studying a group like the Maroons who not only managed to create an autonomous world outside of the

hegemonic discourse which negated them, but also, due to their unique circumstances, were forced to create new modes of communication which would include a myriad of African cultures, languages and creeds (Gottlieb 2000). This creative and resistive energy of slave subjectivity not only disrupts the colonial paradigm of socially dead slaves, but also implies the ethical tropes of creation, renewal and mutual recognition.

In contrast, the passive slave proved to feature heavily in the 2007 bicentenary commemorations causing journalist Toyin Agbetu to interrupt the official speeches and exclaim that it had turned into a discourse of freedom engineered mostly by whites with stories of black agency excluded⁸. Young's argument that 'one of the damaging side effects of the focus on white people's role in abolition is that Africans are represented as being passive in the face of oppression', appears to echo the behaviour in the UK today given that a recent research poll reveals that the black vote turnout is significantly lower than for the white majority electorate and that forty percent of second generation 'immigrants' believe that voting 'doesn't matter'.⁹ Yet, Gilroy (1993a) argues that this political passivity may not simply be a self fulfilling prophecy, but might allude to the 'lived contradiction' of being black and English which affects one's confidence about whether opinions will be validated in

a society that, at its core, still holds on to the fantasy of European superiority (Gilroy 1993a). Without considering the slaves' capacity for survival and their fundamental role in overthrowing the European regime of slavery, we limit the use-value of the memory and risk becoming overly attached to singular slave subjectivities seeped in death and passivity. The Maroons story however, enables slave consciousness to rise above the mire of slavery's abject victims and establishes an ethical relation with our ancestors who lived and survived in the time of slavery.

Mirror memory

Having applied modes of ethical thinking to the memory of slavery by unearthing the hidden regimes inherent in its remembrance and in turn using these insights as a counter-narrative in debates within the field of trauma theory, we move towards reflection on how to place slavery's memory within the context of the wider world and other cultural atrocities. This step is important as it illuminates the relational theory that we are constituted through others and therefore suggests that the memory of slavery is itself a product of 'Other' protagonists. Young (2007) argues that this ethical move would be of value to black people since they might find that they are not 'wholly determined by a history of enslavement' (Young 2007).

To undertake the ethical mission

of global relation through remembrance, French postcolonial theorists have drawn upon their experiences of Caribbean Creole cultures which are hybridised nations consisting of a myriad of racial mixes. Given that the concept of hybridity (a practice that allows for the giving and receiving of different cultural forms amongst diverse groups)¹⁰ leads to collective relation, it is a useful metaphor and interpretive tool for understanding the dynamic of 'entering into relation with the world' (Glissant 1996). In this context, the concept of hybridity is used to describe a global framework where one is able to conceive of 'a global imagination' across heterogeneous groups and nations (Glissant 1996). This ethical turn towards global remembrance encourages the pedagogical ideal that there are moral lessons to be gained from what we might call the *mirroring of memories*. This practice attempts to locate the commonalities within each trauma narrative and succeeds in mirroring the Other's pain to establish some form of global healing and acknowledgement (Smelser 2004).

Yet, the challenge remains as to whether a move towards global historical consciousness is a concept that has arisen prematurely considering that local communities are still unable to settle their differences and accept different forms of cultural expression.¹¹ In his book *The Black Atlantic*, Gilroy (1993b) has already explored the possibility of blacks

and Jews finding a common voice, yet he severely overestimates the capacity for the global holding of the dynamic space of fetishized wounds, distorted fantasies and fictional truths that are all linked to traumatic memories across cultures. Certainly in the UK, any attempt for blacks and whites to remember slavery together is already tempered by deep racial divisions within society and with cultural memories heavily invested with the tropes of community, unity and belonging, a global historical consciousness, as advocated by Edouard Glissant (1996) runs the risk of atrocities collapsing into each other and disarticulating them from space, time and context. It also remains to be seen whether such groups are ready to give up the only space where they might feel free to reflect on self, identity, culture and history without judgement from Others.

For Walcott (2006), the tendency to establish a rigid classification of what constitutes as trauma and for whom, proves redundant when one considers, 'who in the new world doesn't have a horror of the past, whether his ancestor was torturer or victim? Who in the depth of conscience is not silently screaming for pardon or for revenge?' (Walcott 2006, 371). Walcott implies that all humanity is in some way traumatised by their own social or political circumstances and that the spirit of remembering together could be better located in modern global is-

ues such as exploitation, racism and abuse of human rights. In an ethical turn, we might consider instead the plight of the eleven thousand Sudanese men and women who have been abducted to work as slaves for Arab militiamen. Francis Bok (2003) is one survivor of this contemporary regime who details being captured and living for ten years as a slave in his book, *Escape from Slavery*.

Glissant's proposal for the creation of memorial centers in every nation, dedicated to the memory of slavery seems rather ambitious when we consider that slavery's memory is not static and bound, but a multi-layered, unfixed entity and highly contingent upon the narratives through which it comes to life. Consequently, Sztompka (2000) maintains that 'traumatizing events may be qualitatively quite opposite for various groups: destructive and disruptive for some, beneficial and welcomed for some, ignored and neutral for others' (Sztompka 2000, 459). We find his argument clearly demonstrated in Hartman's (2008) account of her visit to the slaveholding castles where she encounters Ghanaians who were confused as to why 'something that happened so long ago could hurt us', choosing instead to remember slavery as a time of opportunity rather than a tale of woe and suffering (Hartman 2008, 75):

In Ghana slavery wasn't a rallying cry against the crimes of the

west or the evils of white men; to the contrary, it shattered any illusions of humanity of sentiment in the black world and exposed the fragility and precariousness of the grand collective 'we' that had yet to be actualised (Hartman 2008, 75).

Quite simply, 'there is no common idea of slavery' and therefore no diasporic unity that can be claimed through its remembrance (Hartman 2008, 73). The problem with establishing new voices outside of the hegemonic narrative of slavery is closely linked to what Gilroy (1993b) calls the 'Americentricity' of black political lives which is an invented framework driven by the political interests of the Diaspora through which the memory of slavery is disseminated and filtered. We can argue therefore that choices about what we remember, how we remember and for whom are controlled by a regime which establishes its own 'meta-physical notions of what it means to be black' (Gilroy 1993b). The hegemonic discourse of an Americanized version of the memory of slavery therefore presents another a set of knowledges at work which serve to colonise the spaces through which other representations, images, articulations and narratives of slavery can emerge. Trauma theory fails to acknowledge the heterogeneity of cultural groups and therefore limits the expression of alternative voices and discourses of slavery's memory

(Radstone 2007).

Glissant's (1996) hope that one day all atrocities will be integrated into the global psyche is flawed if he rushes towards the ideal of mutual understanding without considering in what form, within which narratives and according to whose story these memories are to be interpreted. Despite its limitations, Glissant's vision of relationality, which is rooted in respect for the Other and one's continuing ambiguity, is central to the practice of ethical remembrance, yet if the mission to encourage global remembrance of all atrocities serves as his utopian ideal for the future, exploring the possibility of blacks and whites in Britain remembering slavery together might be a more practical place to start (see also McCusker 2009).

White Trauma

Gilroy (1993a) has argued extensively that blacks and whites have always been in a symbiotic relation with one another despite the racial fractures embedded within modern society. Many theorists and writers such as Toni Morrison, Caryl Phillips and Fred D'Aguiar have also alluded to the importance of integrating whites into the memory of slavery beyond the dichotomy of master and slave so as to disrupt the traditional narrative of 'good vs. evil' and create the possibility for a new encounter with the 'perpetrator'. In *The Pagan Coast* for example, Phillips explores the torment of a

slave master who displays ambivalent feelings towards the slave trade and wishes to 'divest himself of the burden...of being a slave owner', developing like his father before him an 'aversion to the system which has allowed his fortunes to multiply' (Phillips in: Low 1998, 133). In this case, the inescapable thrust of capitalism appears as the insidious evil which distorts the white psyche, a trope often missed in popular slavery texts.

Nevertheless, the difficulty of imagining another side to the white perpetrator of slavery should not be underestimated since for black people living in its aftermath, the haunting of anger and bitter emotions towards cruel white masters can not be given up easily, nor can the unconscious distortions and fantasies towards those masters be wiped out overnight. Butler (2005) however, warns of the ethical violence inherent in denying the Other to become part of one's own consciousness and states:

If we forget that we are related to those whom we condemn, even those we must condemn, then we lose the chance to be ethically educated or 'addressed' by a consideration of who they are and what their personhood says about the range of human possibility that exists, even to prepare ourselves for or against such possibilities (Butler 2005, 45).

Butler's thesis helps us to under-

stand that denying the importance of the perpetrator in slavery's memory only serves to reify its role of terror and forecloses the possibility of discovering new subjectivities and counter-narratives of the white experience. The basic argument here is that slavery is about the white experience too, however, in popular representations of slavery the emphasis tends to fall on the traumatic life of the black slave while the white master remains as a ghostly figure embodying the darker side of humanity. Might it be possible to gain a more ethical means of relating to the white mistresses and masters who lived in the time of slavery if they were also allowed the space to exhibit their own opacity?

In the poem *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, poet William Blake (2008), himself deeply opposed to slavery and committed to its abolition, exposes the psychic state of Bromion, a white slaveholder, who rapes Oothoon, a white woman. Rather than concentrate on the powerless black female slave, Blake's narrative points to the deep seated patriarchal fantasies at the heart of slavery. For Bromion, Oothoon is like a country to be conquered, such that he proceeds to 'rent her with his thunders' and claims her as if property, declaring that 'the soft American planes are mine and mine thy north and south' (Blake 2008, 46). The tropes of power and domination, conquest and owning people as property, which are at the heart

of a colonialist mindset, are found to be underpinned by a patriarchal ideology. Thus, by inverting the popular discourse, Blake demonstrates that there is more to the story of slavery such as questions about class, the treatment of white women and white male 'rage', which are often overshadowed by the penetration of racial politics.

Morrison elaborates further to argue that white people, who found themselves having to assume the role of the master in the time of slavery, were also victims of a perverse ideology:

Slavery broke the world in half, it broke it in everyway. It broke Europe. It made them into something else, it made them slave masters, it made them crazy. You can't do that for hundreds of years and it not take a toll. They had to demonize not just the slaves but themselves. (Morrison in: Gilroy 1993, 178)

To talk of the legacy of slavery is also to talk of 'white trauma' and to realise that they too were traumatised by an event that they have 'trapped emotionally' such that its memory becomes a 'secret that no one can discuss' (Leary in Talvai 2002). To remember ethically then means to 'make trauma strange' and acknowledge that everyone implicated in slavery was traumatised and constrained by the ideologies of the enlightenment, capitalism and the European thirst for adventure

and domination.

Despite the possible benefits that may be accrued by reconnecting with the perpetrator in slavery's memory, for Fanon (1967), this utopian ideal of mutual recognition is believed to be foreclosed by the white Other who he argues denies any link with the black man and his extreme 'otherness'. This of course presents major obstacles to the idea of creating a third space for mutual recognition. In some support of this view, Rosi Braidotti adds that European identity must wake up from its 'lily-white...purity' and 'universalistic fantasy' and commit itself to the postcolonial turn that seeks to 'expose whiteness as a political issue' (Braidotti, 19).¹² Ethical remembrance desires that we liberate our historical consciousness by 'remembering oneself-as-another' (Kearney 2003, 27) and from this deeply ethical position we are able to 'release the historical past into a different, freer, future' (Kearney 2003, 27). Perhaps this ethical move towards exposing the ambiguity and opacity of the white experience during slavery marks the embryonic stages of lifting its silence and establishing its memory as a foundational and highly relevant part of British history.

* * *

Having interrogated the scene of slavery by applying ethical thinking, the main conclusion to arise is that memory can indeed be moulded,

manipulated and controlled to engineer feelings of trauma, vengeance, shame and ambivalence and as such, there is no memory of slavery that has not been mediated. Setting out to understand whether the black experience can be communicated through a narrative other than terror, employing ethics and the concept of opacity has allowed us to contemplate how we might move away from an event based history to one which provides lessons and examples for contemporary lives. By practising ethical remembrance of slavery we are able to arrive at useful resources, guides and tools to influence the creation of subjectivity which helps to lead us out of a traumatic past offering new routes to the future (Ricoeur 1999).

The goal is not to obliterate the narrative of terror and trauma in slavery's memory since it is a testament to the injustices and cruelty that the slaves endured. Rather, we seek to simply break its hold and contribute to the ethical mission that allows for the creation of other spaces, channels and routes of remembrance to emerge that reflect the precarity of black identities across the diaspora and their relationships to slavery. What becomes apparent is that doing the ethical work is not easy; instead it requires an enormous commitment to the challenges present in the process of undoing the self and the Other. Yet, we must do the ethical work to ensure that the master narrative of terror and pathology

does not dominate the memory of slavery or the black experience in general. Theorising the future of slavery is a vital practice as it allows us think about other modes of recovery which can help to eradicate the cycle of trauma from spiralling onward across successive generations. Given that 'trauma is created in our present and reinvented for the future' (Waugh 2006, 506), we have a moral duty to be continually critical of slavery's popular representations in the public domain and to scrutinize who or what is controlling its story. One day we will become ancestors for future generations and we therefore have an ethical responsibility to create multiple narratives of slavery that can also be positioned within the context of agency, life and new visions of self.

Endnotes

¹See <http://www.twmuseums.org.uk/slavery/online-exhibition/we-were-strong/>

² See Andrea Lipsett (2008). <http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2008/aug/26/slavery.schools>

³ For an interesting analysis of how the social symbolic influences subjectivity see Jacques Lacan. 1977. 'The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience' in Jacques Lacan. *Ecrits: A Selection*: 1-6.

⁴ This notion of a 'darker side' to empathy is inspired by the work of Susannah Radstone (2007) who states that 'criti-

cal 'empathy' is not without its darker aspects' (Radstone 2007, 23). For additional reflections on critical empathy, see also Gwendolyn's interview with Carolyn Pedwell (2012) (<http://feministing.com/2012/05/22/the-academic-feminist-goes-global-a-conversation-with-carolyn-pedwell/>).

⁵ For Slavoj Žižek (2005), when we look to the political landscape we find that 'there is a hidden violence, a political violence that is unlike the subjective violence we are familiar with' (Žižek 2005). He argues that aggression and violence are found in the underbelly of the social, it is a political organism that breathes life into its subjects and therefore is itself the cause of the subjective violence that is visible. See Slavoj Žižek. 2005. *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections*.

⁶ See *Metahistory* by Hayden White (1975), *History and Criticism* by Dominic LaCapra (1987) and 'Historicity in an age of Reality-Fictions' by Nancy F Partner (1995).

⁷ In an attempt to establish new ways in which to remember slavery, neo-slave narratives use the imagination to fashion an alternative slavery text by reconstructing past realities through re-visioning and imagination.

⁸ See David Smith (2007) <http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2007/mar/27/race.world1>.

⁹ See Roger Mortimore and Kully Kaur-Ballagan (2005) <http://www.ipsos-mori.com/Assets/Docs/ArchivePublications/ethnic-minority-voters-and-non-voters.pdf>

¹⁰ See Homi Bhabha (1994) *The Location of Culture*.

¹¹ For a recent example, see Matthew Taylor (2012) <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/mar/09/far-right-hardcore-armed-conflict>.

¹² See Rosi Braidotti 'The Return of the Master Narratives.' <http://www.e-quality.nl/assets/e-quality/publicaties/2003/e-quality.final.rosi%20braidotti.pdf>.

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