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## Fighting Amnesia as a Guerilla Activity: Poetics for a New Mode of Being Human

Karen M. Gagne

SUNY Binghamton, kgagne@binghamton.edu

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## *Fighting Amnesia as a Guerilla Activity* Poetics for a New Mode of Being Human

Karen M. Gagne

*Binghamton University*

kgagne@binghamton.edu

**Abstract:** Radically anti-colonial workers must work towards the dismantling of the disciplinary boundaries of academia. This means rejecting the artificial separations between the humanities and the sciences, between the activist and the scholar, and between the purely Western mind/body/spirit split. By keeping these boundaries intact, we fail to see that it is only through poetry (art) that humans can have access to whole modes of cognition that were penned up as a result of the colonial/enslavement process and the rise of Western Man. Autopoiesis is crucial for bringing about a new mode of being human (an "After Man" mode of being human). It was through this that another new mode of being human—the Bourgeois Man—was ignited. Only an indigenist "autopoiesis" of such magnitude enable us to *leave* it. While poetics is typically confined to "the humanities" in Western academia, we must work towards the dismantling of these disciplinary boundaries or efforts at serious *social* change remain a futile endeavor.

*In the ethno-poetics and performance of the shaman, my people, the Indians, did not split the artistic from the functional, the sacred from the secular; art from everyday life. The religious, social and aesthetic purposes of art were all intertwined. Before the Conquest, poets gathered to play music, dance, sing and read poetry in open-air places around the Xochicuahuil, el Árbol Florido, Tree-in-Flower. (The Coaxihuil or morning glory is called the snake plant and its seeds, known as ololiuhqui, are hallucinogenic.) The ability of story (prose and poetry) to transform the storyteller and the listener into something or someone else is shamanistic. The writer, as shape-changer, is a nahual, a shaman.*

—Gloria Anzaldúa (1987/1999, 88)

I do mean *guerilla*—in the battlefield sense.<sup>1</sup> Guerilla warfare is a familiar topic of study in historical sociology. Movements are studied in South and Central America, South East Asia, Africa, and Afro-Asia (known as the Middle East)—all places where political, economic and military repression occurs. The terms *guerilla* and *war*;

<sup>1</sup> See Greg Thomas, "On Black Bodies & Battlefields: Toni Cade Bambara, Elaine Brown, Safiya Bukhari-Alston and Assata Shakur" forthcoming in Omofolabo Ajayi-Soyinka's *Women Write War*. In this article he demands that Black bodies are "real battlefields—where 'regime changes' of gender and sexuality are constantly promoted." He names these four "women," Bambara, Brown, Bukhari, and Shakur, as hardcore insurgents who write "against *this* war, from *this* war zone," p. 4.

Karen Gagne is currently working on her dissertation on "Poetics as a Guerilla Activity." She has authored "Falling in Love with Indians: The Metaphysics of Becoming America," published in *CR: The New Centennial Review* (Fall 2003); and is co-author of "On Coloniality and Condemnation: A Roundtable Discussion of Elaine Brown's Condemnation of Little B," published in *ProudFlesh: the New Afrikan Journal of Culture, Politics, and Consciousness* (vol. 2, 2003).

however, are rarely used in reference to goings on inside the political borders of the “United States.” Greg Thomas argues, “[d]espite its living history of genocide, slavery and endemic state repression, which is to say, its continued definition as a settler-colony and slave state, the ‘United States of America’ is rarely construed as a ‘war zone’ by Western Academics.” However, the wars *in* North America, are central to the ability of the U.S. to conduct wars elsewhere. Thomas adds, “even these police actions are no less avoided by ‘intellectuals’ who prefer to focus on other, internecine conflicts, out-of-context, when that context is contemporary imperialism spearheaded by a neo-slaver and neo-colonialism that is synonymous with the ‘U.S.A.,’ nonetheless” (forthcoming: 3-4).

“Amerikkka,” as named by Assata Shakur, needs to be acknowledged as the war zone that it truly is—today. Simultaneously, sociologists must shake off their middle-class academic perspective concerning where, how, and upon whose bodies the battles are fought (17). War goes far beyond one-dimensional discussions of military tactics or the election of popular political candidates. As Thomas writes, “resistance, rebellion and revolution are to be had in matters of sex or eroticism, creative arts, spirit, styles of dress, speech or language *as well as* guerilla struggle in arms, especially when had among the masses” (2004, my emphasis).

One of my favorite essays by Anzaldúa, well-cited at this conference, is “How to Tame a Wild Tongue” (1999). In between a recount of a trip to her dentist where he remarks, “We are going to have to control your tongue,” whereby Anzaldúa describes the visit with vivid detail, complete with the stench of draining puss and “wads of cotton, pushing back the drills, [and] the long thin needles” and her dentist fighting against her tongue that is persistently in the way, and a story about her being punished for speaking Spanish at re-

cess, she quotes Ray Gywn Smith, who said, “Who is to say that robbing a people of its language is less violent than war?” (75). Anzaldúa’s dentist had proclaimed, “I’ve never seen anything as strong or as stubborn” (75). I don’t think he knew what he was up against. This war in defense of the human tongue is only getting warmed up.

I would like to pay tribute to Anzaldúa at this conference dedicated to her by engaging the subject of “ethno-poetics” and her insistence on the potential for the poem to retaliate in warrior fashion against the violent robbing of peoples’ tongues (and, hence, their *culture*), and in doing so, to invent what Sylvia Wynter calls a *new mode of being human* (1984; 1991; 2000). That this restitution and thereby re-invention is not only possible but necessary *through* poetry is one of Anzaldúa’s foundational premises. Why this message would be of significance to sociologists interested in human rights is the question subject I wish to address. When we acknowledge the level of violence that is used to rob the people of their language, it will be necessary to acknowledge the level of violence possible in the restitution, by any means necessary, by the same people of said language. This certainty should not be taken lightly by academics caught in silly debates between “material reality” and “discursive/literary fluff” (See Thomas, 2001: 94-95). As posed by Elaine Brown (2004), is when the shit comes down—and it will come down—there will be no room for folks sitting on the fence. It is my argument that if we are to invent a new mode of being human, we must use guerilla measures to retrieve alternative modes of human cognition that have been suppressed *by* the rise of the West, since the 16<sup>th</sup> century and invent new ones. Only then could “human rights” be seriously addressed on a world scale; or, as Aimé Césaire put it, would we be able to live a “true humanism—a humanism made to the measure of the world” (1972: 56).

In the interest of this “true humanism” whereby “human rights” would mean something real, we must first work towards the dismantling of the disciplinary boundaries of academia, or efforts at serious *social* change will remain a futile endeavor. This means rejecting the artificial separations between the humanities and the sciences, between the activist and the scholar, and eliminating the purely Western-European split of mind, body, and spirit. By keeping all these boundaries intact we, of the West, fail to see that it is only through art (fiction, music, religious ritual, and myths of origin included)—that humans can have access to whole modes of cognition that were penned up as a result of the colonial/en-slavement process and the rise of Western Man (Wynter, 1976: 83; 1990: 466), modes that are fundamental for inventing a new way of being human.

This message is very clear in the work of Anzaldúa. As Sonia Saldívar-Hull argues in the introduction to the Second Edition of *Borderlands/La frontera: The New Mestiza* (1999), the many borders that this text challenged included, importantly, those stubbornly upheld by academia:

This *transfrontera*, transdisciplinary text also crossed rigid boundaries in academia as it traveled between Literature (English and Spanish), History, American Studies, Anthropology and Political Science departments, and further illuminated multiple theories of feminism in women’s studies and Chicana studies. It...changed the way we talk about difference in sexuality, race/ethnicity, gender, and class in the U.S. Read within its historical context, *Borderlands* resists containment as a transcendent excursion into “otherness.” (12-13)

This “otherness” that defines the “ethno” of “ethno-poetics,” that Anzaldúa calls

into question, must be understood as the product of a mutation that occurred from the 16<sup>th</sup> century. As she illustrates, this “other,” this “ethno,” was created when Western culture “made ‘objects’ of things and people” and when it “distanced itself from them, thereby losing ‘touch’ with them.” This dichotomy, Anzaldúa argues “is the root of all violence” (59).

Anzaldúa’s anti-bourgeois, anti-Western/academic/disciplinary work, her rejection of the academic disciplinary boundaries, and her analysis of the dichotomy of Western Self/Other as the source of violence link her to a tradition of notable *indigenist* cultural workers in the Africa, the Americas and the Caribbean. In my dissertation, I have chosen three auto-poetic cultural workers to discuss in-depth: Leslie Marmon Silko, Toni Cade Bambara, and Julie Dash. Like Anzaldúa, these artists reject the “canonical” and “aesthetic” confines that would keep “historical depth” and “cultural possibility” (Brathwaite, 1984: 134) as separate endeavors. Each one works in a variety of “genres” or “media” to portray the 500 years of sado-masochistic colonial empire and the unflinching resistance to that domination. In their practical and functional—“utilitarian,” as Micere Githae-Mugo (1982) would say—approach to writing resistance, rebellion and revolution—towards the end of all things European in America, “the word” is something endowed with the power to affect the spirit and influence spiritual transformation rather for the mere conveyance of material “information.” This touches upon an area that “social scientists” remain unable to grasp. Finally, I am calling the works of these artists “demonic” based on Wynter’s use of the term to refer Cervantes’s *Don Quixote* and Ellison’s *Invisible Man* (Wynter, 1990a: 468-469).

Silko, like Anzaldúa, writes of the movement of Indians, the long history of migration and long walks, and the return of the Giant Serpent. This time, they both

write, the people are moving from south to north (Anzaldúa 33; Silko, 1996:148). In my dissertation that *Almanac of the Dead* (1991) be read as the almanac that it is, as an epic of the past, present and future of resistance and revolutionary movement to the 500 years of enslavement and colonization of Africans and Amerindians in and of the Americas.

When I initially proposed the project, I received the response, on more than one occasion, that such a project was not “doing sociology” and that it was more appropriately a project of an English department. I continue to be amazed by this reply given the historical relevance of this work, but have come to understand that even in self-professed “interdisciplinary” departments, there is such a thing as an “outside” and a “not us” imposition of the rules of “historical” knowledge production and reproduction.

### “ETHNO OR SOCIO POETICS”

*It is poetry, the poem that continues, with increasing difficulty, the general human power to create signs. For the poem constitutes each time that it happens—since a poem is an “event” rather than an object—a field force which reinterprets and reinvents anew the meaning of the sign; that is, the poem creates anew the sign. Each poem reinvents the nature of the sign as not arbitrary; but depends on the “openness” of the sign to be able to reinvent it. The market reality produced by the production process reifies the sign into a finite category. It is through its imperative to dereify to market-created signs that poetry finds itself poetically/politically, on the opposite side of the barricades, the rebel side of the battle lines.*

—Sylvia Wynter (1976: 88)

I begin with Sylvia Wynter. From the late 1950s and 1960s as a playwright, actress, and novelist, and from the 1960s with an essay called “We Must Learn to Set

Down Together and Talk a Little Culture” (1968), to the many other critical essays that would bring us to the present, Wynter has been “break[ing] through to a new way of thinking” (2000b, 153), working toward a “new mode of being human.”

In an article entitled “Ethno or Socio Poetics,” Wynter responds to George Quasha’s talk, “The Age of the Open Secret,” and his definition of “ethnopoetics.” Quasha states that the term refers to a “‘local’ incidence of ‘poesis’” which is “rooted in ‘self-poetics,’ ‘our kind’ of poetics.” Wynter challenges him with a question: “But who are ‘we’?” She then argues that “ethnopoetics” can *only* be valid if it is “explored in a context of *sociopoetics* where the *socio* firmly places the *ethnos* in its concrete historical particularity” (1976, 78). In other words, if *ethnopoetics* is to be an “other”—counter-hegemonic poetics—to the hegemonic Western Cultural poetics, then it is first necessary to understand how these terms “We” and “They” and “Self” and “Other” came to serve an *operative* function and define a relationship *between*, from the 16<sup>th</sup> century, whereby “ethno” would be defined as “Other” of the Western “We.”

What occurred, that allowed for the rise of the West, was a *mutation*, an absolute rupture, whereby the “X factor” was the discovery of the New World. Vast areas of land hence became “the frontier” that transformed a group of people and their states into what we today call the West. This mutation bound together the *We* and *Other* in a concrete relationship, a hierarchical global relation. While many theorists would involve themselves in the now famous Western transition to “from feudalism to capitalism” debates, Wynter argues what gets ignored is that *the* essential determining factor of this new relationship was the “discovery and existence of the vast new lands of the “New World” and that these lands “served as the catalyst for that total ‘commercialization of land and labor’ that is the central dynamic of capitalism”

(82). It is important to note, however, that while this would become an economic relationship, Wynter insists that it was FIRST and PRIMARILY a *cultural* one.

The world that would emerge for all, which would include the rise of Europe, The West, and the bourgeoisie, would be in relationship to this process, culturally, economically, socially, and politically. The debate between Bartolomé de Las Casas and Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda represented a profound shift from the Church's conception of *spiritual* perfection/ imperfection to a secular conception of *rational* perfection/ imperfection. This shift would be instituted in Western Europe by the early seventeenth century.

In considering the work to be done in the new millennium, Wynter poses that our struggle will be one between two groups: (1) those who wish to secure the well-being of our present ethnoclass (i.e., Western bourgeois) conception of the human, Man, that presents itself as if it were the human itself; and (2) those interested in the well-being, and therefore the full cognitive and behavioral autonomy of the human species itself/ourselves (Wynter, 2003: 260). Discussions of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, struggles over the environment, global warming, severe climate change, and the sharply unequal distribution of the earth's resources, are all differing facets of the central ethnoclass Man vs. Human struggle (260-1).

Why this should be of significance to the anti-colonial critical thinkers—people at this conference, for example—is, Wynter argues, because “Western Man” can no longer be considered a racial signifier. We *must* see it as a cultural term. This *alternative mode of cognition*, while still a living force for the majority of the world's population areas, remains available to Western Man (which is all of us here in the academy) only through poetry, as the generic term for art (83). Therefore, and this is Wynter's crucial point—shouted out in capital letters—

in the exploration of this alternative mode of cognition,

There can be no concept of a liberal mission to save “primitive poetics” for “primitive peoples” the salvaging of ourselves, the reclamation of vast areas of our being is dialectically related to the destruction of those conditions which block the free development of the human potentialities of the majority peoples of the third world. (83)

The retrieval of this penned up mode of cognition, Wynter argues, is crucial for the invention of a new way of being human. Wynter, as Aaron K. Kamugisha notes, needs to be located in the tradition of “radical Caribbean humanism,” among the likes of Aimé Césaire and Frantz Fanon (Kamugisha 142; Wynter 2000b: 153-4).

For Césaire, Fanon and Wynter, the retrieval of this mode of cognition and absolute rupture from colonialism is not a return to a utopian past. Wynter, like Fanon, proposes the creation of a *new society*. This society must be created by those who continue to be cast aside by Europe, as “the West has never been further from being able to live a true humanism—a humanism made to the measure of the world” (Césaire, quoted in Kamugisha, 142). However, as David Scott argues, the placement of Wynter with Fanon and Césaire, on the one hand, and with the “embattled humanism” of Foucault's archaeological critique on the other hand, is but a *partial* location in each instance. Scott writes, “no single set of coordinates can exhaustively situate an aesthetic-intellectual career as full and plural as that of Wynter...perhaps one of the more striking features of her work is its foundational character, its restless quest for the most interconnected and totalizing ground on which to secure the humanist ideal for which she aspires” (Scott 121).

In conversation with Wynter, Thomas

says that she remarks that when she writes “she would like to sound *in theory* like Aretha Franklin’s ‘Queen of Soul,’ baptizing African Gods *in song*.” Thomas adds, “We get another Black revolutionary mouth for sure, sounding truly divine in her ‘secular’ transcendence ...

...Some [in the Black Radical Tradition]<sup>2</sup> may be stronger on certain points than others, points we could commence to list: (1) Continental cultural-historical consciousness; (2) Pan-African and Diasporic scope of vision; (3) concrete political application to compulsory categorization or corporeal dichotomization; and (4) ideological anti-heterosexuality...None, it seems, get at the root like Sylvia Wynter. We cannot get at the root without her conceptual *root-work*. The Sex Word and its related categories of existence—white Western bourgeois existence—may crumble in her wake. (2006: 95, emphasis in the text)

Like Wynter, we are indebted to Anzaldúa for her own thorough root-work. With the determination of her own dentist, Anzaldúa has done much to get at the source of the stench, causing the release and removal of colonialism’s puss from her people.

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<sup>2</sup> Specifically, Thomas was referring to Toni Cade Bambara, Merle Hodge, Ifi Amadiume, Nkiru Nzegwu, Oyeronke Oyewumi, Cheryl Clarke, and Elaine Brown, all who write about sex, empire, and the Black Radical Tradition *politically*. See Greg Thomas, “The ‘S’ Word: Sex, Empire and Black Radical Tradition (After Sylvia),” in Anthony Bogues (ed.) *After Man, Towards the Human: Critical Essays on Sylvia Wynter* (Kingston, Jamaica: Ian Randle Publishers, 2006).

## AMNESIA AND CONSCIOUSNESS

*If what the artist does is create in her own i-mage and give name to that i-mage, then what the African artist from the Caribbean and the New World must do is to create in, while giving name to, her own i-mage—and in so doing eventually heal the word wounded by the dislocation and imbalance of the word/ i-mage equation. This can only be done by consciously restructuring, reshaping and, if necessary, destroying the language. When that equation is balanced and unity of word and i-mage is once again present, then and only then will we have made the language our own.*

—Marlene Nourbese Philip (1989: 21)

Paule Marshall (1983b) argues that through fiction (the word), and by presenting Black people as if they had a right to *be* in the world, the writer (artist/storyteller) prepares the mind *to carry on the struggle*. Fiction raises political consciousness by insisting on a strong sense of self in a world that seeks to erase this self. The job of the writer, according to Toni Cade Bambara, is to service the community and to share a vision of what that society is to be—*to make revolutionary struggle irresistible*. Fictional characters allow one to pursue various theoretical frameworks, and serves to lift up the community *without hustling anybody*. This is where the contradictory pull of both the fictional impulse and the documentary impulse are worked out (Bambara, 1982).

Bambara insists that we see the consequence of amnesia and the importance of reconnection when she introduces Julie Dash’s film *Daughters of the Dust* (1991) by relating it to a passage from Paule Marshall’s *Praisesong for the Widow* (1983a). Amnesia and reconnection are central themes in both works. In *Daughters of the Dust: the Making of an African American Woman’s Film* (1992), she highlights Marshall’s account of the journey of a woman who has “bar-gained away her cultural heritage in ex-

change for the 'respectable' life." Through a powerful reconnaissance with the past, however, she "learns to read again the codes and signs of her heritage." Bambara writes, "Now centered Avatara envisions a new life's work—warning the assimilated away from eccentricity. She'll haunt office buildings and confront amnesiacs" (xii).

Julie Dash, following in Marshall's footsteps, from the early stages of the making of her film *Daughters* puts forth "her stance regarding the great American afflictions, amnesia and disconnectedness" (Dash 1992, xi-xiii; Bambara 1996, 109). Both Marshall and Dash link the histories of all Africans in the Diaspora to that moment when the Ibos, seeing what was ahead of them when they got off the slave ships (and the many while still on the ships) on what would be the Carolina Sea Islands, headed back toward Africa. The name "Ibo Landing" in the film speaks of stories still told on these islands AND in the Caribbean. Bambara notes that the place in the film is called "the secret isle" because the land is both bloody and blessed:

A port of entry for the European slaving ships, the Carolina Sea Islands (Port Royal County) were where captured Africans were "seasoned" for servitude. Even after the trade was outlawed, traffickers used the dense and marshy area to hide forbidden cargo. But the difficult terrain was also a haven for both self-emancipated Africans and indigenous peoples, just as the Florida Everglades and the Louisiana bayous were for the Seminoles and Africans, and for the Filipinos conscripted by the French to fight proxy wars (French and Indian wars). (Bambara, 1996: 94-95)

The linking of these two artists, Marshall and Dash, in their stance against am-

nesia by Bambara is also linked to Bambara's *own* stance against amnesia and disconnectedness, when at the end of *The Salt Eaters* (1980) she spoke through the voice of Velma:

Thought the vaccine offered by all the theorists and activists and clear thinkers and doers of the warrior clan would take. But amnesia had set in anyhow. Heart/brain/gut muscles atrophied anyhow. And these folks didn't even have a party, a consistent domestic and foreign policy much less a way to govern. Something crucial had been missing from the political/economic/social/cultural/aesthetic/military/psychosocial/psychosexual mix. And what could it be? And what should she do? She'd been asking it aloud one morning combing her hair, naked and tattooed with serrated teeth and hair alive, birds and insects peeping out at her from the muddy-heavy hanks of the ancient mothers' hair. (Bambara, 258-259)

What is the "something" that is missing from the "mix"? How has it caused amnesia to set in, and what does it have to do with "the muddy-heavy hanks of the ancient mothers' hair"? Bambara, Wynter, Marshall, Dash, and Erna Brodber (1988; 1997) all realize the price to pay for ignoring the mud mothers and for running from answers that stare us in the face. In one analysis of this passage by Bambara, Gloria T. Hull argues that we run from wisdom that is *intuitive and unconscious*. We ignore the "thought, imagination, magic, self-contemplation, change, ambivalence, past memories...passage to 'the other side'—all symbolized by the mud mothers and the mirror" (130), and this is increasingly so in the present-day when "many seasoned political workers are beginning to devote



themselves more exclusively to their art or to seemingly privatistic personal development" (131, 134).

The subjects of bargaining away one's cultural heritage in exchange for the "respectable" life and the importance of learning again to read the codes and signs of one's cultural heritage can be found throughout the literature. Fundamental to these "guerilla" works<sup>3</sup>, like that of Bambara's *The Salt Eaters*, is subject of the connectedness of the past, present, and future—through this ancestral presence. Bambara put forth *what is possible*, not in a utopian sense, and only futuristic in the sense of knowing this possibility *because it already happened*—that a new society that can be imagined and brought to reality is one that is part of a continuity, part of a *memory* (Bambara, 1982).

Part of the reaction to my proposed dissertation topic, I understand, has to do with the fact that *Almanac of the Dead* is technically classified as "a novel." It is not a novel. Writing about spirits, I understand, poses a problem for the Western "social scientist."

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<sup>3</sup> The list is much longer than I can provide, but here are a few that I include: Kwei, Ayi Armah, *The Healers* (Nairobi, Kenya: East African Publishing House, 1978), and *KMT: In The House of Life* (Popenguine, Senegal: Per Ankh, 2002); Toni Cade Bambara, *Those Bones are Not My Child* (New York: Pantheon, 1999); Erna Brodber, *Myal* (London: New Beacon Books, 1988), and *Louisiana* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press); Julie Dash, *Daughters of the Dust*. (New York: Plume Books, 1999); Audre Lorde, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (Trumansberg, NY: Crossing Press, 1983); Paule Marshall, *Praisesong for the Widow* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1983; and *Reena and Other Stories* (New York: The Feminist Press, 1983); Toni Morrison, *Song of Solomon* (New York: Knopf, 1977), and *Tar Baby* (New York: Knopf, 1981); Leslie Marmon Silko, *Ceremony* (New York: Penguin Books, 1977), *Almanac of the Dead* (New York: Penguin Books, 1991), and *Gardens in the Dunes* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999); Sylvia Wynter, *The Hills of Hebron* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1962); and Denise Harris's recent works, *Web of Secrets* (Leeds, England: Peepal Tree Press, 1996), and *In Remembrance of Her* (Leeds, England: Peepal Tree Press, 2004).

Considered unverifiable, it is not acceptable for the average leftist/materialist/social scientist, no matter how radical one might think oneself to be, to admit such a thing aloud—even if one were a spiritual person *in private*. Silko, however, through her fictitious characters, implicates "leftist" movements of Western-Marxist-trained Cuban revolutionaries for ignoring this very indigenous source of power, that they deemed primitive/illiterate/irrational/crazy and an *obstacle* to "the revolution." To undo the amnesia, the five-hundred-year link, therefore, the spiritual realm must be seriously dealt with in *serious* discussions of ANTI-colonial consciousness, past or present.

The denial of the *reality* of spiritual power and neglecting the presence of the dead is the very big part of the amnesia. Again, while entertained at the level of anthropology—far removed from the social scientist's own verifiable "ordered/law-like, factual expository" of truth—it remains an avenue primarily explored *through* the "chaotic/anarchic, impressionistic/poetic" (read: unverifiable/meaningless/ neither true nor false, but nevertheless entertaining) humanities, most notably through works of fiction. Kamau Brathwaite put it this way:

...we witness again and again a chain reaction moving the ex-African's core of religion into ever-widening areas. It is this potential for explosion and ramification that has made blackness such a radical if subterranean feature of plantation political culture; for the African "phenomenon," continuously present, like a bomb, in the New World since the abduction of the first slaves—a phenomenon subsisting in bases deep within the Zion/Ethiopian churches of the United States and in the *hounforts*<sup>4</sup> of the Caribbean and South Ameri-

ca—triggers itself into visibility at each moment of crisis in the hemisphere: 1790 in Haiti, 1860 in Jamaica, 1930 in the West Indies, and 1960 in the New World generally. (1984, 109)

That this source of power could be directly linked to William Gordon, Paul Bogle, Toussaint L'Ouverture, Jean-Jacques Dessalines, Henri Christophe, Sam Sharpe, Nat Turner, or Walter Rodney, to name but a few notable leaders, remains ignored by "leftist" and "anti-colonial" economic/historical/ political/social scientists.

Further, the subject of divine possession is considered by the Euro-centric imperialist mindset to be "savage" or "demented." Still, that Ibos could have walked back to Africa is considered impossible (they must have drowned) while story of Jesus walking on water is left alone. The idea of stopping the amnesia by divine possession and by the regaining of conscious as a result of spiritual transcendence illustrates the very subversiveness of these Black female writers. As Cooper writes, the revalorization of "discredited knowledge" is the subject of these female-centered revolutionary works.<sup>5</sup>

Another central plot is the healing that must take place, which Hull suggests alienates her readers. Speaking still of Bambara, Hull writes, "TCB cuts no slack, gives no air." The issue of a spiritual continuation of life on earth doesn't come up; Bambara assumes its authenticity and "describes it with the same faithful nonchalance that she

accords to every other human activity" (126). This confident knowledge of spirits and healing *through* them is a direct challenge to the "rational," "Western," "scientific" way of thinking. It is Bambara's premise that all knowledge systems are really one system; *The Salt Eaters*, Hull argues, "demands our intelligent participation in disciplines and discourse other than our narrowly-conceived own" (130).

The subject of terror is another important theme of these fictional works. The collective amnesia is very much connected to the subject of how the community and the individual deal with the terror. The terror written about by Bambara, Marshall, Dash and Silko, is not only those visible scenes of terror, such as the routine display of the ravaged bodies of Africans and Amerindians that are routinely displayed with such an ease and casualness that they "often immerse us to pain by virtue of their familiarity" as Saidiya Hartman notes, that serve to reinforce the spectacular (as in spectacle) character of suffering. The terror is also presented in the subtler places: "slaves dancing, in the quarters, the outrageous darky antics of the minstrel stage, the constitution of humanity in slave law, and the fashioning of the self-possessed individual" or "the terror of the mundane," whereby the "ubiquitous fun and frolic that supposedly demonstrated slave contentment and the African's suitedness for slavery were mirrored in the panic about idleness, intemperate consumption, and fanciful expressions of freedom, all of which justified the coercive labor measures and the constriction of liberties" (Hartman 3-7; see also Thomas, 2006: 80; Wynter, 1979: 151-152; and Fanon, 1965: 29-30).

Because of the "invisibility" of this kind of violence, James Baldwin argued that there are facts that will never surface as evidence because of the terror suffered from being torn away from Africa, compounded by the terror of slavery. The depth of the terror "belongs to a category of

<sup>4</sup> For example, urban blues, the dozens, shouter churches, the Harlem Renaissance, Garveyite creative work, Rastafari, the Nation of Islam and Carnival "the heard and signal of the African experience in the Caribbean/New World," in Brathwaite, 111 & 122.

<sup>5</sup> Carolyn Cooper (1991): 65-66; and see Sylvia Wynter's *The Hills of Hebron* (1962), Erna Brodber's *Myal* (1988) and *Louisiana* (1997), Toni Morrison's *Tar Baby* (1981), and Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow* (1984).

things the sufferer and the perpetrator<sup>6</sup> of the suffering would rather, for the sake of physical and psychic comfort, forget." However, Baldwin continues, keeping this memory suppressed is helpful to no one because "what the memory repudiates controls the human being" (Depelchin 153; see also Baldwin xii; Bambara 1999; and Thomas 2003b: 236).

In the interest of remembering and witnessing the terror, one *must* venture outside the field of "social science." Such "science" insists upon the *absence of feeling and emotion*, which only serves to keep such "facts" hidden or unworthy of serious attention. This cannot be so, as shown in Toni Cade Bambara's novel *These Bones Are Not My Child* (1999), on the nightmare of the 1979-1981 kidnapping/sexual assault/brutal murders of more than forty Black children in the city of Atlanta.

However, indigenist "fictional" works include this crucial but missing—silenced—component of the story and thereby operate *as guerilla activities*, because they refuse to be silent and absent of self-empowering feeling and emotion. Therefore, these creative endeavors operate side by side with other such guerilla activities that are, often, deemed "legitimate" subjects of historical/sociological studies. While the scientists continues to look for visible and concrete "facts," writers most often search for the silences in between the facts, and this is where so much more to the story can be found (Depelchin 154). Like the actual gun and sword, the lyrical gun—the word (mouth, pen, and camera)—is no less deadly and is not separate in the indigenist anti-empire world.

A final, crucial, theme in these works is the return of the land, all of it, to the people. This idea remains unthinkable to even the most "radical," "leftist" academic. That this could happen sometime in the near future

<sup>6</sup> Wynter (1971: 98); Lewis R. Gordon (1995: 9 & 11), and Ronald Takaki, (1979).

and solely through the work of decidedly "non-intellectual," non-formally educated sector of the people, as Silko posits, is thoroughly unimaginable to folks in the academy. And this theme, the undoing of America itself, is why Silko's work continues to be labeled "fiction," and therefore, to be more "appropriate" in an English department.

## USES OF THE TONGUE

*I will no longer be made to feel ashamed of existing. I will have my voice: Indian, Spanish, white. I will have my serpent's tongue—my woman's voice, my sexual voice, my poet's voice. I will overcome the tradition of silence.*

—Gloria Anzaldúa (81)

Carole Boyce Davies illustrates how Jamaica Kincaid's "The Tongue," in *Lucy*, is at once a studied critique of white, middle-class, suburban manners, a recognition of how articulations for the dispossessed can take place, a critique of heterosexuality, and a critique of the privileging of language by male African and Caribbean writers. It is at all of these sites of Kincaid's critique that the erasure and silencing of the "native woman" remain current.<sup>7</sup> The tongue is an "organ like others, of speech, of pleasure, of stimulation" (1996: 342). Boyce-Davies argues that the dismantling of the colonial anxiety over language is best reflected by both Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Decolonising the Mind* (1986) and Kamau Brathwaite's *History of the Voice* (1984) as well as in the discourses around Caliban of Shakespeare, by Césaire, Lamming, Brathwaite, Retamar and others. All of these writers make important contributions to the exploration of submerged languages in the Caribbean by

<sup>7</sup> See also Abena Busia's "Silencing Sycorax. On African Colonial Discourse and the Unvoiced Female" (1990) and Sylvia Wynter's "Beyond Miranda's Meanings. Un/Silencing the 'Demonic Ground' of Caliban's 'Woman'" (1990b).

asserting that a “nation language is that which ignores the pentameter of the European language, that underground language which was constantly ‘transforming itself into new forms’” (344). However, it is the Caribbean female writers that are actually doing this transformation, regularly, *in the text itself*. Boyce-Davies notes, “the theory comes, not from the externalized exploration of what is taking place with the language, but from the very deconstruction of the meanings of ‘tongues’ and taste and language and ultimately of self” (344).

In another essay highlighting the work of Paule Marshall, Audre Lorde, Jamaica Kincaid and Michelle Cliff, Boyce Davies argues that the reconstruction of the Afro-Caribbean cultural experience is central, in particular, to the female writers migrating to the United States. The search for identity is a common theme among these four writers. These writers are often criticized, among the Caribbean canon, for not writing the “anti-colonial text” of did their mostly male counterparts who migrated to Britain in the 1950s. Boyce Davies rejects this claim and argues that the texts of these writers are “critically engaged in an anti-hegemonic discourse with the United States in much the same way that earlier writers waged an anti-colonial dialogue with Great Britain” (1990: 60).

Marshall’s fiction calls attention to the tensions between ancestry and youth, tradition and modernity, African civilizations’ tradition of respect for humanity and the disregard for life by the West. However, Boyce Davies argues that while critics (such as Eugenia Collier<sup>8</sup>) have considered Marshall’s descriptions of island life idyllic, the reality is much more complex:

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<sup>8</sup> Boyce Davies cites Collier’s article, “The Closing of the Circle: Movement from Division to Wholeness in Paule Marshall’s Fiction” in *Black Women Writers (1950-1980). A Critical Evaluation*. (New York: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1984): 295-315.

For the irony is that canefields are so wedded to Caribbean slavery and oppression of Africans that the child’s<sup>9</sup> rejection of them is an important departure from that particular experience and history. Yet her acceptance of America’s technological might is another form of slavery. Importantly, Marshall captures that falling away that often occurs between generations. For whereas the grandmother’s experience is of slavery and British colonialism, the insidious and also “colonial” relationship to America is also implicit in the child’s acceptance of American dominance. Da-Duh’s resignation evinces her understanding of this new master/slave dialectic. (1990: 61-2)

While language was and is certainly a crucial weapon of the colonizers, it was and is also a powerful means for undoing the efforts of the colonizers. The colonized peoples use(d) language to allow for the unconscious to come out and for building strength from within—within the community that they came to identify as their own. Paule Marshall notes in an essay entitled, “From the Poets in the Kitchen” (1983b), common speech and the plain workaday words are what make the best writers. The ability to tap, to exploit the beauty, poetry and wisdom of this language requires intimate exposure and a well-trained ear in as unglamorous a setting as the kitchen (3-4). Through creative use of “language” people are able to resist the humiliations of the workday. Speaking of the poets in the kitchen, Marshall states that language was the only readily available vehicle for them, and they made of it an art form that “in keeping with the African tradition in which art and

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<sup>9</sup> In reference to the child in her short story “To Da-Duh in Memoriam” in *Reena and other Stories* (New York: The Feminist Press, 1983): 95-106.

life are one," was an integral part of their lives; to counter the triple invisibility of being black, female and foreign, the poets of the kitchen "fought back, using the only weapon at their command: the spoken word... 'In this man world you got to take yuh mouth and make a gun!'" they would say (7).

Such is the sharpness of the word, as a weapon, that writer and filmmaker Toni Cade Bambara preferred to work with fictional characters so as not to *impale* real people (or to hustle them) with her pen—as is most often done in "social science studies" (1982). Still, the level of intimacy with one's characters is no less than if they were real people, and much more than possible between an anthropologist and her subject (object, that is) of study. Paule Marshall writes of one of her fictional characters, Merle, who is the central figure in *The Chosen Place, Timeless People* (1969):

"Part saint, part revolutionary, part obeah woman"...Merle remains the most alive of my characters. Indeed, it seems to me she has escaped the pages of the novel altogether and is abroad in the world. I envision her striding restlessly up and down the hemisphere from Argentina to Canada, and back and forth across the Atlantic between here and Africa, speaking her mind in the same forthright way as in the book...she calls the poor and oppressed to resist, to organize, to rise up against the condition of their lives...On a personal level, she is still trying to come to terms with her life and history as a black woman, still seeking to reconcile all the conflicting elements to form a viable self. And she continues to search, as in the novel, for the kind of work, for a role in life, that will put to use her tremendous energies and talent.

Merle. She's the most passionate and political of my heroines. A Third World revolutionary spirit. And I love her. (1983, 109)

## INDIGENIST AUTOPOESIS

*We have a tradition of migration, a tradition of long walks. Today we are witnessing la migración de los pueblos mexicanos, the return odyssey to the historical/mythological Aztlán. This time, the traffic is from south to north.*

—Anzaldúa (33)

It was through "autopoiesis" that another new mode of being human—that of the bourgeois man—was ignited from the 16<sup>th</sup> century onward to the present. And, it will be through an "autopoiesis" of equal or greater magnitude that we will be able to *leave* this mode of being human. Poetry, Wynter writes, is the means by which humans name the world. By calling themselves into being, humans invent their "humanness." She argues, to name the world is to conceptualize the world; and to conceptualize the world is an expression of an active relation: "A poem is itself and of man's creative relation to his world; in humanizing this world through the conceptual/naming process (neither comes before the other like the chicken and the egg) he invents and reinvents himself as human" (1976: 87).

Indigenist "autopoiesis" has been and will be central to work of dismantling the bourgeois/Western mode of "Human"—a framework in which everyone remains confined. If the idea of the savage was a European *invention*, and it was made possible only as the negative concept of and the simultaneous *invention* of the European Self to be known as Man, this could only occur by suppressing whole areas of his Being. This mode of cognition, Wynter argues, which we remain aware of only through poetry. The exploration of an *alternative*

*mode of cognition*, still ideologically suppressed in everyone, becomes the salvaging of indigenous selves, and the reclamation of vast areas of our being (1976, 83).

The power of this poetry lies in its *noise*,<sup>10</sup> in the disruption it causes to our present episteme. This poetry, then, is not “for art’s sake,” but offers a “counter effect” to the project of colonialism (Grayson, 5); it is “disenchanting.” In it, we are able to see how pre-colonial and pre-enslavement ways of knowing are as important as post-colonial and post-enslavement systems of knowledge, if not more so. The significance of the circle in pre-colonial America and in pre-colonial Africa is illustrated in such a way that cannot be duplicated by any “sociological” or “anthropological” study.

Fighting against amnesia, restoring memory and reconnection to the past are key to true freedom in the present and future. The difficult but necessary process of restoring memory and reconnection is proposed as crucial to collective resistance of colonized peoples. This perspective should be undertaken more seriously by all “theorists and activists and clear thinkers and doers of the warrior clan,” to quote Barbara in *The Salt Eaters* (1980), in order to counter the continuation of slavery and colonialism *in the present*. That it is not followed more closely, however, speaks to the depth of this cultural amnesia that marks the path of academics and of upward mobility (Cooper, 1991: 81)—or rather, our *cultural systemic consciousness*, as Sylvia Wynter calls it—that continues to be enforced and reproduced globally, particularly in academia, by the very disciplines that “re-

search” and write about such events and social relationships of the “past.”

Ultimately, this poesis is an exercise in that “After” that Wynter writes about. It is to imagine the deconstruction of “our present memory of *Man*” as Wynter puts it and the end of all things European in the Americas, as Silko puts it. The proposed project for the 21<sup>st</sup> century is to move outside this field, and should be, Wynter argues, as with any poetic text, to deconstruct “the order of consciousness and mode of the aesthetic to which this conception of being human leads and through which we normally think, feel and behave...to redefine the human on the basis of a new iconography” (Wynter, 2000a: 26).

It is my premise—as is that of the many writers with whom I mention in this article, particularly Marshall, Bambara, Brodber, and Dash—that *through* academia, people become SO far removed from the community that they lose the power to affect that community.<sup>11</sup> In order to regain that power, as witnessed in the writing, a process of “unlearning”—an exorcism, if you will—and a regaining of consciousness must take place.

Engaging this “revelatory” work as witness and prophesy, *as almanacs*, and Anzaldúa, Wynter, Silko, Bambara, and Dash as cultural workers who have been engaged in such anti-hegemonic discourse for decades, actively writing “new facts into being,” is of considerable urgency. To do so would confront the artificial separation between the activist and the scholar, the purely Western-European mind/body/spirit split, and the fake debate between the artist and the politician/historian/scientist. One cannot be committed to truth and revolutionary struggle unless one is willing to follow one’s own words. So, with regard to my dissertation project *in sociology*, to cite

<sup>10</sup> See Carolyn Cooper, *Noises in the Blood: Orality, Gender, and the “Vulgar” Body of Jamaican Popular Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995); *Sound Clash: Jamaican Dancehall Culture at Large* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004); Elizabeth Cook-Lynn’s response to the critics of Leslie Marmon Silko’s “very angry” voice of *Almanac of the Dead*, in *Anti-Indianism in Modern America: A Voice from Tatekeya’s Earth* (Urbana: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 86.

<sup>11</sup> Greg Thomas (2003a) and Haile Gerima in Frank Ukadike, Nwachukwu “Interview with Haile Gerima,” (2002): 253-279.

Nancy Welch, et al, editors of *The Dissertation and The Discipline* (2002), in order to change the field, one must refuse to renounce the course that one's dissertation would necessarily take. It is at the level of the dissertation that "the disciplines" are produced and reproduced. It is where "we find our most profound, persistent beliefs about what it means to write and teach" (viii). So, if I want to change how writing gets carried out, and to resist replicating the status quo, then I must "see the dissertation as a site where the discipline is not just reproduced but could be reinvented" (viii)—or even dismantled.

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