

'Home – or a hole in the ground'?

Spaces of Possibility in African American Literature

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Submitted for the degree of Ph.D.

School of English Literature, Language and Linguistics

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Summary of “Home – or a hole in the ground’?: Spaces of Possibility in African American Literature”

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The following five chapters will address how the symbolic use of narrative liminality enables black writers to resist or appropriate the cultural and ideological structures imposed by white Europeans in the New World and also those structures later developed within a rapidly urbanising North American society. Firstly, Harriet Jacobs’s slave narrative addresses the restrictive architecture of slavery and domesticity and, through Linda Brent’s attic hideaway, Jacobs expresses a concern with endurance and female authority. The Ralph Ellison chapter examines the shifting nature of liminality and subjectivity in the post-slavery migration environment; *Invisible Man*’s cellar engages with racialised tropes of deterritorialisation and desire. John Edgar Wideman addresses ideas of race and artistic responsibility in his treatment of a contemporary suburban bombsite, assessing the difficulty of achieving spaces of possibility in the face of racialised urban decay. The concluding chapter uses Nalo Hopkinson’s speculative fiction to challenge the essentialist construction of an African American liminal aesthetic by enacting its subversive qualities across the geographical boundaries of the black Atlantic. Hopkinson’s projection of a racialised underground onto the new spaces of technology also disturbs traditional models of genre and discourse.

Abstract

This thesis argues for a complex relationship between African American literature and liminal space, predicated on the historical facts of transatlantic slavery. While recent critics of African American literature have argued for the importance of historical and civic space in shaping racialised discourse, the role of liminal space has not been well examined. This thesis examines texts by three African American writers – Harriet Jacobs, Ralph Ellison and John Edgar Wideman – and one Caribbean Canadian author, Nalo Hopkinson, to argue that their literary representations of liminality perform two functions: firstly, symbolising the experience of slavery and its attendant experiences of incarceration; and secondly, problematising mainstream categories of race and identity. By investigating the narrative construction of these liminal spaces, this thesis will extend the categories of ‘African American’ and ‘literature’ in two important directions: towards the future and into the ‘black Atlantic’.

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Introduction:

Space, Text and Racialised Discourse

One day I hit my head against something, and found it was a gimlet ... [I] succeeded in making one hole about an inch long and an inch broad. I sat by it till late into the night, to enjoy the little whiff of air that floated in. In the morning I watched for my children.

Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*¹

Stepping out of the elevator that had brought her to the roof, she was led to a table just in front of a long window whose gently moving curtains suggested a cool breeze. It was, she thought, like being wafted upward on a magic carpet to another world, pleasant, quiet and strangely remote from the sizzling one that she had left below... [She] looked out over some lower buildings at the bright unstirred blue of the lake reaching away to an undetected horizon.

Nella Larsen, *Passing*²

In a scene from Nella Larsen's 1929 novel, *Passing*, an African American woman, Irene Redfield, ascends to the roof of the Drayton Hotel in order to escape the sweltering summer heat of the Chicago streets. Irene rides the hotel elevator like a 'magic carpet' and is ushered to a seat near a window from where she can look out 'over some lower buildings at the bright unstirred blue of the lake reaching away to an undetected horizon'. The rich irony of Irene's elevated position and command of the spaces around her, however, is that they rest upon a delicate act of racial passing. Far from idealising the stout discourses of racial uplift promoted by Larsen's near contemporaries, the activist and scholar W. E. B. Du Bois and the educator and community leader Booker T. Washington, trading on her light skin colour alone affords Irene her 'cool' ride to the top of the whites-only establishment.

¹ Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* [1861], ed. and introd. by Jean Fagin Yellin, 2nd edn (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), p. 115. Subsequent page references will refer to this edition and are given parenthetically in the text.

² Nella Larsen, *Quicksand & Passing* [1929] (London: Serpent's Tail Press, 2001), p. 147.

How different, then, from the circumstances portrayed by Harriet Jacobs sixty-eight years earlier. In a scene from Jacobs's 1861 narrative, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, a slave, Linda Brent, conceals herself in her grandmother's attic in order to escape sexual harassment at the hands of her master in rural North Carolina. Shut in a space measuring only nine feet by seven feet, Linda finds a tool with which she is able to bore a small hole 'an inch long and an inch broad' in the wooden plank of the wall, in order to 'enjoy the little whiff of air that floated in' and to 'watch [...] for my children'. Clearly, a shift towards liberation has occurred between the two texts in the relationship between African Americans, the spaces they inhabit and their literary representation.

Read chronologically, the movement from Jacobs's antebellum attic to Larsen's 1920s roof-top in many ways represents a spatial analogue for the African American's ascent from slavery to freedom, where Jacobs's 'little whiff' of air becomes Larsen's 'upward' 'waft', for example. The height of Larsen's hotel building, its northern urban setting, the modern and effortless movement of the elevator, the expansive panorama and the liberating promise of the 'undetected horizon' triumph over the fear of discovery and modest maternal impulses which crowd the pathetic dimensions of Jacobs's claustrophobic hideaway. Indeed, the elevator makes a contemporary appearance in Colson Whitehead's *The Intuitionist*, published in 1999, where its fantastical, 'black box' space critiques traditional discourses of racial uplift and so-called 'white' technological advance.³ The 'magic' of Larsen's scene might be read as an illustration of the urban energies of the Great Migration, which saw over one

³ Colson Whitehead, *The Intuitionist* (New York: Anchor Press, 1999), p. 229.

million African Americans move to northern cities in the first half of the twentieth century, and also of the flowering of the Harlem Renaissance, out of which Larsen's novel arose.

Yet while the nature of the African American relationship to space – in particular urban space – undoubtedly underwent dramatic change in the early years of the twentieth century, it is clear that the narrative of elevation which might govern a larger thesis regarding the literary representation of African American spaces remains compromised. The reality of Irene's double identity as both black and white reflects Larsen's own mixed race heritage and places the character between two races; her seemingly dominant position on the hotel roof is in reality a liminal one, shaped by the same fear of exposure (suggested through that wonderfully ambivalent phrase 'undetected horizon') that characterises Jacobs's attic. Moreover, Linda's position in the attic is also liminal because it sits between the states of slavery and freedom, a position which allows it to cut across narrative expectations by fostering the possibility of maternal authority. Liminality rather than uplift, then, becomes the most pertinent and enduring discourse within changing African American representations of space.

Thesis overview

This dissertation will seek to highlight some of the unexplored intersections of race, spatial theory and subjectivity by questioning the implied discourses of marginality that shape the most established African American literary constructions of race. Addressing the Cotton States and International Exposition in Atlanta in 1895, Booker T. Washington endorsed a message of

racial compromise, insisting that '[i]n all things that are purely social we can be as separate as the fingers, yet one as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress'.⁴ Eight years later, W. E. B. Du Bois declared that 'the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color-line'.⁵ Washington's metaphor of 'separate fingers' and Du Bois's 'color line' attest to the constitutive role of the margin in the scripting of racial conventions, representations and ideology in the United States. African American writing comes out of and responds to a political, sociological and cultural circumstance that is marked by oppression and marginalisation.⁶ However, the narrative construction of liminal spaces in African American literature offers a liberating alternative to the margin. African American writers, often considered displaced, suffering segregation and alienation from mainstream culture and frequently consigned to negative environments, use language to create alternative spaces in which black culture and identity can be explored and the multiple discourses within them exposed apart from any marginal, prescribed place.⁷

These spaces of possibility are marked as liminal; they exist wholly in the threshold between two separate states (for example, the binaries of margin

⁴ Booker T. Washington, "Atlanta Compromise Speech", 18th September 1895, Cotton States and International Exposition Atlanta, Georgia, in *The Booker T. Washington Papers*, ed. by Louis R. Harlan, Vol. 3, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1974), pp. 583–587 (p. 585).

⁵ W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* [1903], ed. by David W. Blight and Robert Gooding-Williams (Boston, MA: Bedford Books, 1997), p. iv.

⁶ For key works of African American cultural criticism that have invoked the margin in their titles, see particularly: bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1984); Kimberlé Crenshaw, 'Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics and Violence Against Women of Color', in *Critical Race Theory: The Key Writings that Formed the Movement*, ed. by Kimberlé Crenshaw, et al. (New York: New Press, 1995); Samira Kawash, *Dislocating the Color Line: Identity, Hybridity, and Singularity in African-American Narrative* (Stanford, CT: Stanford University Press, 1997); John Cruz, *Culture on the Margins: the Black Spiritual and the Rise of American Cultural Interpretation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999).

⁷ Melvin Dixon, *Ride Out the Wilderness: Geography and Identity in Afro-American Literature* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986), p. 2.

and centre, slavery and freedom, black and white, urban and rural, real and fantastic) and are thus able to suspend preconceived labels and deterministic constructions of race and identity. African American and Caribbean writers can escape essentialised notions of blackness by using these new narrative spaces to bolster subjective agency while also questioning the variety of discourses used by a diverse set of black communities to inscribe themselves on their environment. In this respect, this thesis investigates four texts which can show how this is achieved by a variety of authors: two canonical works of African American literature, Harriet Jacobs's slave narrative, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, and Ralph Ellison's novel, *Invisible Man*; John Edgar Wideman's contemporary novel, *Philadelphia Fire*; and Nalo Hopkinson's Caribbean-inspired speculative novel, *Midnight Robber*.

Such a de-regulated paradigm of racial subjectivity must apply in equal measure to diverse literary traditions of the black African diaspora, which construct similar liminal spaces partly in response to postcolonial discourses of margin and metropolitan centre. The extension of liminal space into the black diaspora is highlighted here through a reading of *Midnight Robber*. Undergirding this project is an understanding of space as fundamentally discursive. Certain spatialised encounters imagined in the texts analysed here disturb the idea of movement as liberatory. Harriet Jacobs's break for freedom, for example, *Invisible Man*'s participation in the Great Migration and the dynamic urban centre, John Edgar Wideman's transatlantic odyssey and his love of basketball's speed and beauty, and Nalo Hopkinson's desire to reach and colonise the stars are not what they seem. All involve a complex relationship between racialised subject and material environment that belies any simple

trajectory of emancipation. The ground for possibility is found not so much in the black triumph over space as in an equivocal engagement with it.

In the course of identifying and evaluating these spaces of possibility in African American and black diaspora writing, this thesis makes wide use of the philosophers and social theorists Gaston Bachelard and Michel Foucault, the Marxist cultural geographers Henri Lefebvre and David Harvey, the postcolonial theories of Paul Gilroy and the work of African American critical theorists W. E. B. Du Bois and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. In the eighteen years since Gates's *The Signifying Monkey* appeared, very few studies have attempted to synthesise the many varied readings of signifyin(g) that have been attempted across African American and black Atlantic literature, like Gilroy's sailing ship metaphor and his 'slave sublime' which is so indebted to Gates, or like Morrison's evocation of the flying African myth in Milkman Dead's leap from the mountain in *Song of Solomon*.⁸ This thesis offers a new critical engagement with African American and black Atlantic literature by presenting both a critique of Gates's signifyin(g) model in a diasporic context and a careful examination of the varied narrative constructions of liminal space in four important texts.

Historical framework

Space, as much as colour, has a defining role in the experience of race and its cultural representation in the New World. A number of key events in

⁸ Toni Morrison, *Song of Solomon* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977). A number of recent studies have begun to explore the inconsistencies between Gates's theories and new constructions of the black diaspora, notably Michel Feith, 'Henry Louis Gates Jr's *Signifying Monkey: A Diasporic Critical Myth*', in *African Diasporas in the New and Old Worlds: Consciousness and Imagination*, ed. and introd. by Genevieve Fabre and Klaus Benesch (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2004), pp. 59-80; and John Cullen Gruesser, *Confluences: Postcolonialism, African American Literary Studies, and the Black Atlantic* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2005).

the history of Africans in the New World can show that narrative discourses of liminality have concrete historical referents that hold places of peculiar power in the collective historical consciousness. Foremost among these historical referents is the transatlantic slave trade, which established space as a key paradigm of race in North America from the sixteenth century onwards. The enforced displacement of over eleven million Africans across the Atlantic during what was known as the 'Middle Passage' in an effort to supply a labour shortage in the Caribbean islands and new American colonies including Carolina, Virginia and New England, resulted in the permanent association of new ideas about racial superiority with Western dominance over global territory and the calculated manipulation of the physical, cultural and legal spaces that enslaved Africans were forced to inhabit. Captured Africans were transported in overcrowded slave ships like the one illustrated in Figure 1 on a journey that averaged six to eight weeks in length.

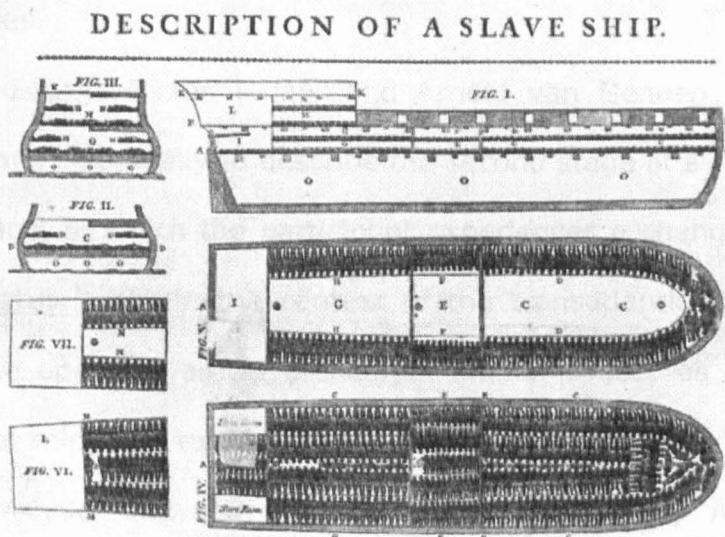


Figure 1: Plans of the Liverpool slave ship, the *Brookes*, in 1789, showing 482 slaves.

Even those who wrote of the Middle Passage with moral repugnance, such as Reverend Robert Walsh, who boarded the slave ship, *Feloz*, off the African coast on the morning of 22nd May, 1829, found their descriptions turning continuously to the spatial deprivations endured by the ships' cargo:

[The] circumstance which struck us most forcibly was how it was possible for such a number of human beings to exist, packed up and wedged together as tight as they could cram [...] The space between decks was divided into two compartments 3 feet 3 inches high; the size of one was 16 feet by 18 and of the other 40 by 21; into the first were crammed the women and girls, into the second the men and boys: 226 fellow creatures were thus thrust into one space 288 feet square and 336 into another space 800 feet square, giving to the whole an average Of (sic) 23 inches and to each of the women not more than 13 inches.⁹

However, Walsh's fixation with the material dimensions of the Middle Passage masks the profound metaphysical dislocation also experienced by the African slaves. The period at sea acted as a psychological threshold or *limen* (from the Latin meaning 'threshold') characterised by ambiguity, openness and indeterminacy, within which the slaves confronted the loss of their former African identities.

Anthropologists Victor Turner and Arnold van Gennep have used the term 'liminal' more generally to describe the second stage of a ritual, especially a rite of passage, in which the participant experiences a change, especially in their social status.¹⁰ Within the context of the transatlantic slave trade, the Middle Passage operates as an archetypal liminal space; as a geographical area, it was not relegated to the 'edge' but rather suspended in the middle of a triangular threshold between the continents of Europe, Africa and the

⁹ Walsh, Robert, *Notices of Brazil in 1828 and 1829* (London: Frederick Westley & A.H. Davis, 1830). Available at URL: <<http://www.eyewitnesstohistory.com/slaveship.htm>> [accessed 3 August 2007].

¹⁰ Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, trans. by Monika B. Vizedom and Gabrielle L. Caffee (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1960); Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Chicago, IL: Aldine Publishing, 1969).

Americas. Moreover, the slave ship itself, once put to sea, became (as any ship does) a social world of its own, within which the slaves' sense of identity dissolved as they struggled to adjust to the temporary rules and routines on board. Although captured slaves had little opportunity for agency on board, there were limited occasions for resistance. Each ship typically held slaves from a variety of different African tribes and communication could be difficult among them, but a number of resistance strategies developed, including shipboard revolts, suicide and fasting. Impromptu linguistic communities opened up, which contested the dominance of spatial and linguistic discourses of whiteness imposed upon enslaved Africans.

These strategies have been popularised in contemporary culture by ABC's 1977 television miniseries, 'Roots', based on Alex Haley's acclaimed novel, *Roots: The Saga of an American Family*, and also by the 1997 Steven Spielberg film, *Amistad*, for example.¹¹ Among the first written documents about the slave trade are the surviving Middle Passage narratives (including ships logs, journals and memoirs), which carry within them these prevailing and counter-ideologies of space. Most famous among these is Olaudah Equiano's *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African*, published in London in 1789. A number of recent critical studies of these oral and written narratives, with titles like *Radical Narratives of the Black Atlantic*, *Genius in Bondage* and *Pioneers of the Black Atlantic*, make a point of foregrounding the variety of competing discourses involved in representing the Middle Passage, and the frequent manipulation of linguistic, figurative and generic spaces undertaken by the authors in

¹¹ Alex Haley, *Roots: The Saga of an American Family* (New York: Doubleday Press, 1976); *Roots*, prod. Stan Margulies, ABC Television, 1977; and *Amistad*, dir. Steven Spielberg, Dreamworks, 1997.

presenting blackness to their audience.¹² Indeed, Toni Morrison's 1987 novel, *Beloved*, makes a contemporary case for revisiting the slave narrative, but this time exposing the taboo spaces of sexual abuse and violence that were hidden by many nineteenth century writers.¹³

If the Middle Passage functioned as a liminal site of ambiguity and indeterminacy, however, it developed none of the teleological implications of Gennep and Turner's anthropological model. Slaves did not emerge from this period of physical and personal dissolution into complete possession of a new, higher-status identity, but were forced by the intractable structures of racism and economics that confronted them on arrival in the New World, to remain in an in-between state – 'in an expanded West but not completely of it', as Paul Gilroy has put it.¹⁴ The slaves' situation became permanently liminal. The sugar, tobacco and cotton plantations in the Caribbean and the American South required slave labour to work the land but the slaves were nevertheless imprisoned in the plantation's highly ordered spaces. Divisions and jealousies among the slaves themselves were encouraged and maintained by the owners' conscious distinction between field and house slaves, and even between those allotted to the downstairs kitchen and those to the person of the mistress upstairs, for example. In this way, the plantation became a complex system wherein slaves were both essential to, and excluded from, the production of both wealth and space in a rapidly developing nation.

¹² See Alan Rice, *Radical Narratives of the Black Atlantic* (New York & London: Continuum Press, 2003); *Genius in bondage: literature of the early Black Atlantic*, ed. by Vincent Carretta and Philip Gould, (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2001); *Pioneers of the Black Atlantic: five slave narratives from the Enlightenment, 1772-1815*, ed. by Henry Louis Gates, Jr and William L. Andrews (Washington, D.C.: Civitas Counterpoint Press, 1998).

¹³ Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Knopf Press, 1987).

¹⁴ Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double-Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), p. 58.

While Middle Passage narratives have been the subject of increasing critical and theoretical attention over the last decade, of much more established interest to the African American popular consciousness is the nineteenth century phenomenon of the Underground Railroad. The network of clandestine land and sea routes which guided escaped slaves from the South to freedom in the Northern states, and often beyond into Canada, during the antebellum period was first documented by William Still's unique 1872 compilation of firsthand accounts, collected from fugitive slaves themselves and those who helped in their 'hardships, hair-breadth escapes and death struggles'.¹⁵ Still's volume was followed by Wilber H. Siebert's groundbreaking study, *The Underground Railroad from Slavery to Freedom* (1898), and by modern revisions, including Larry Gara's *The Liberty Line: The Legend of the Underground Railroad* and Keith Griffler's *Front Line of Freedom*, which have overturned Siebert's classic thesis that it was white operatives who shuttled passive blacks northward, and have resuscitated the role of the fugitives themselves and the free blacks who lived along the northern banks of the Ohio River.¹⁶

Whereas the Middle Passage is often held to symbolise one of the darkest periods in African American history, the Underground Railroad is now directly associated with racial pride, the development of black political and personal agency and the symbolic realisation of a dynamic African American

¹⁵ William Still, *The Underground Railroad: A Record of Facts, Authentic Narratives, Letters, etc.* (Philadelphia, PA: Porter & Coates Press, 1872), frontispiece. Available at URL: <www.quinnipiac.edu/other/ABL/etext/ugrr/ugrrmain.html> [accessed 3 August 2007].

¹⁶ Wilbur Siebert, *The Underground Railroad from Slavery to Freedom* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1898); Larry Gara, *The Liberty Line: The Legend of the Underground Railroad* [1961] (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1996); Keith P. Griffler, *Front Line of Freedom: African Americans and the Forging of the Underground Railroad in the Ohio Valley* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2004).

subjectivity. Many of the spaces used by fugitives were liminal: the ditches, cellars, boxes and coffins in which many runaways were smuggled northward contribute to a figurative landscape of enormous potency in which the black body moved into the threshold between slavery and freedom. Among the most famous narratives of slave escape is the *Narrative of Henry 'Box' Brown, Who Escaped From Slavery in a Box 3 Feet Long and 2 Wide* (1849). Brown was born into slavery in Louisa County, Virginia in 1815 and in 1849, with the help of a freedman, James C.A. Smith, and a white shopkeeper, Samuel Smith, contrived to escape by having himself shipped to a free state in a box:

I took with me a bladder filled with water to bathe my neck with, in case of too great heat; and with no access to the fresh air, excepting three small gimblet holes, I started on my perilous cruise. I was first carried to the express office, the box being placed on its end, so that I started with my head downwards, although the box was directed, "this side up with care" [...] but I lifted up my heart to God in prayer, believing that he would yet deliver me, when to my joy, I overheard two men say, "We have been here two hours and have travelled twenty miles, now let us sit down, and rest ourselves." They suited the action to the word, and turned the box over, containing my soul and body, thus delivering me from the power of the grim messenger of death [...]. One of these men inquired of the other, what he supposed that box contained, to which his comrade replied, that he guessed it was the mail. "Yes," thought I, "it is a *male*, indeed, although not the *mail* of the United States."¹⁷

As Figure 2 (overleaf) illustrates, Brown's box was received and opened by Philadelphia abolitionist James Miller McKim, along with William Still and other members of the Philadelphia Vigilance Committee on March 24th, whereupon it was noted that Brown sang a psalm from the Bible that he had carefully selected for his moment of release.

¹⁷ Henry Brown, *Narrative of Henry 'Box' Brown, Who Escaped From Slavery in a Box 3 Feet Long and 2 Wide, Written From a Statement of Facts Made Himself*, ed. by Charles Stearns (Boston, MA: Brown and Stearns Press, 1849), pp. 60-61. Available at URL: <<http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/boxbrown/menu.html>> [accessed 3 August 2007].



Figure 2: Resurrection of Henry Box Brown, at Philadelphia.

Brown's passage in the box undoubtedly mirrors in its figurative 'narrow prison' the cruel space of the Middle Passage slave ship, but its liminality is temporary. Although Brown's narrative plays with a slippage between sign and signifier, punning on the indeterminacy of 'mail' and 'male', nevertheless the linguistic and figurative emphasis remains firmly on Brown's ultimate requisition of his status as a 'man' and, intriguingly, on a firm rejection of that ownership clause, 'of the United States'. In this sense, the liminality of the Underground Railroad is constructed as a space of reclamation, leading to a nominal resolution which the more profound dislocations of the Middle Passage could not offer.

Modern representations of the Underground Railroad have become a major cultural industry and have appropriated the Railroad's symbolism in such a way as to fetishise its landscape of liminal spaces. The National Underground Railroad Freedom Centre, in Cincinnati, Ohio opened in 2004 at a cost of \$110 million and reproduces the 'authentic structure' of a slave pen, along with a

'Suite for Freedom' which showcases multimedia presentations.¹⁸ If facilities like these make available information about African American history to a wide audience, they also invert and reshape the essential indeterminacy and 'nowhere-ness' of these crucial sites. What was once liminal has been redefined as a uniquely public space, nationally visible, in which the diverse discourses of fugitivity as recorded by William Still, for example, have been amalgamated into a central, unilateral narrative of (African) American liberation: the Freedom Centre's mission statement declares its intention to 'help visitors discover the power of one voice - shared with many'. The Middle Passage and the Underground Railroad represent two major historical referents for the narrative construction of liminal spaces in African American literature. That spatial consciousness is a fundamental characteristic of African American history and of its literary record is indisputable. This thesis will analyse four texts in the light of these historical liminalities.

Justification and critical context

The contribution of this thesis is two-fold: firstly, it fills a gap in the existing research by identifying and evaluating the intersection of race, subjectivity and liminal space in African American literature; and secondly, it calls for the extension of this thesis to an examination of African diasporic literatures.

Contemporary developments in African American literary criticism increasingly reflect the diversity and complexity of African American literary production. The resolutely theoretical approach of criticism in the 1980s has

¹⁸ The National Underground Railroad Freedom Centre, Ohio, available at URL: <www.freedomcenter.org> [accessed 3 August 2007].

now expanded to include developments in feminist theory, cultural studies, psychoanalysis and queer theory. An increasing sensibility to space can be perceived in a number of these areas, evident from a glance at the titles of various studies: bell hook's *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (1984); Kimberlé Crenshaw's influential legal essay, 'Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics and Violence Against Women of Color' (1995), which explores the erasure of African American women from the legal categories of 'woman' and 'African American' and their attendant securities; and Samira Kawash's *Dislocating the Color Line: Identity, Hybridity and Singularity in African American Fiction* (1997).

This current project arises directly out of the expanding influence of cultural studies in African American literary criticism of the 1990s. Studies, such as those included in Oxford University Press's influential Race and American Culture series, sought to read the earlier theoretical turns of Henry Louis Gates Jr and Houston Baker Jr within a specifically cultural context. Farah Jasmine Griffin's insightful study, *Who Set You Flowin'?: The African-American Migration Narrative* (1995), for example, reads the narrative construction of 'safe spaces' in the literary testimony of the Great Migration of African Americans to the northern industrial cities across a wide range of texts, including novels, photographs and music.¹⁹ Baker himself recognised the pressing need to investigate the relationship between race and cultural manifestations of space, most notably in his edited volume, *The Black Public*

¹⁹ Farah Jasmine Griffin, *Who Set You Flowin'?: The African-American Migration Narrative* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995). See also Sandra Gunning, *Race, Rape, and Lynching: The Red Record of American Literature 1890–1912* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996) and Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

Sphere: A Public Culture Book (1995), which includes various chapters on Martin Luther King Jr's transformation of prison into a legitimate public space of protest, the symbolic effect of the Rodney King video on a collective historical consciousness or the bio-politics of Michael Jordan's basketball body.²⁰ Baker's study is a successful attempt to theorise an African American public sphere (in response to what he considers to be Habermas's inadequate bourgeois model), and his volume, along with Griffin's study, consolidates renewed critical attention towards both the advantages of an interdisciplinary approach to African American literary criticism, and the importance of spatial paradigms through which to analyse black subjectivity.

The present thesis follows the broader disciplinary imperatives of African American literary criticism of the 1990s, and Farah Jasmine Griffin's model in particular, by exploring the dynamics of racialisation and representation across literary, geographical and architectural discourses. Its central concern may be characterised as an inversion of Baker's black public sphere: the narrative construction of liminal or hidden spaces in African American literature. While discourses of spatial deprivation have been long acknowledged as part of the African American historical experience, and a substantial number of academic studies carried out on the sociological impact of black urban ghettos, for example, or African American literary tropes of imprisonment, there have been few that have combined architectural, geographical and literary discourses to

²⁰ Houston A. Baker, Jr, and the Black Public Sphere Collective, *The Black Public Sphere: A Public Culture Book* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995). This collection includes the essays: Houston A. Baker, Jr 'Critical Memory and the Black Public Sphere', pp. 5-38; Paul Gilroy, "'After the Love Has Gone": bio-politics and ethno-poetics in the black public sphere', pp.53-80; and Elizabeth Alexander, "'Can You Be BLACK and Look at This?": Reading the Rodney King Video(s)', pp. 81-98.

examine the specific role of liminality as a subversive force across a wide variety of African American and black diasporic imaginative writing.

Patricia McKee gets closer than most to this thesis in her study, *Producing American Races* (1999), in which she develops an idea of a white public sphere constructed through the trope of visibility. This sphere is created when white characters in novels – she chooses examples by Henry James and William Faulkner – constantly reproduce white visual orders to establish their whiteness over and against an implicitly unproductive blackness. Black writers, McKee argues, have responded by developing alternative modes of production, like those based on desire and rhythm in Toni Morrison's *Jazz*, which shun the visibility trope. While McKee's thesis proposes that 'the space of circulating signs and images is more important to the unity of a group than [...] any bounded structure', it leaves a curious gap in the assessment of what surely are key structural sites for looking and seeing – namely, the plantation house, the slave auction room and the city apartment stoop, for example.²¹ Her emphasis on the literary and the metaphoric loses touch with the real spaces of history that shape such tropes. My own work attempts to locate and read what McKee identifies as subversive black modes of production in such key structural sites.

While recent scholars have given considerable attention to the Great Migration and the role of the northern city, as well as the respondent construction of stable spaces in the African American imaginary (Farah Griffin's 'safe spaces' or Valerie Prince's concept of 'home', for example), few have

²¹ Patricia McKee, *Producing American Races: Henry James, William Faulkner, and Toni Morrison* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 1999), p. 15. See also Sara Blair, 'Review of Patricia McKee, *Producing American Races: Henry James, William Faulkner, Toni Morrison*', *Modern Philology*, 98.4 (2001), pp. 708-712.

given specific notice of the geographical sites of liminality which also emerge in this imaginary.²² Melvin Dixon's *Ride Out the Wilderness*, published in 1987, is an early study that specifically addresses alternative geographies of race by exploring representations of the wilderness, the underground and the mountaintop in twentieth century fiction as 'the primary images of a literal and figurative geography in the search for self and home'.²³

Dixon's well-crafted project was published in the same year as Bernard W. Bell's *The Afro-American Novel and its Tradition* and performs a similar kind of cultural anthropology to Bell's important survey as it mines the 'lonesome valley' imagery of slave songs and spirituals and traces its development in the African American novel.²⁴ The subterranean worlds and mountaintops become places of deliverance. But Dixon's study is almost too well-crafted; its trajectory 'bends too steadily upward' and his idea of black subjectivity is too transparent, leaving the problematic relationship between author and protagonist unexplored.²⁵ The liminality which defines Dixon's symbolic geography becomes a way of channelling an essential idea of black identity back home to itself – a kind of cathartic descent-and-emergence paradigm that neatly arrives at a holistic vision of African American literature and takes little account of the more problematic ways in which cultural spaces and a postmodern black subjectivity might interact. This present thesis will present a

²² Valerie Sweeney Prince, *Burnin' Down the House: Home in African American Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).

²³ Dixon, p. 4

²⁴ Bernard W. Bell, *The Afro-American Novel and its Tradition*, [1987], 2nd edn (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2004).

²⁵ Cheryl A. Wall, 'Review of *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* by Houston A. Baker, Jr and *Ride Out the Wilderness: Geography and Identity in Afro-American Literature*, by Melvin Dixon', *American Literature* 60.4 (1988), pp. 680-682 (p. 682).

more equivocal understanding of geographical liminality which is able to engage and critique multiple cultural and racial discourses.

I have outlined the scarcity of critical attention given to the construction of geographically liminal spaces in African American fiction. However, there has been much useful work done recently on postmodernism and the discursive relationship between race and contemporary spaces, in particular the role of the northern city (its ghettos, suburbs and civic architecture) and developments in technology. Liam Kennedy's *Race and Urban Space in American Culture* (2000) argues that race is frequently implicated in discourses of urban decline.²⁶ Kennedy's thesis will inform an analysis of the postmodern urban landscape particularly in John Edgar Wideman's writing, where the narrative construction of liminal spaces attempt to challenge discourses of urban decline. Paralleling Kennedy's interest in alternative discourses of race and space in the postmodern era is the growing critical interest in new spaces of technology. Kali Tal's popular article, 'Unbearable Whiteness of Being: African American Critical Theory and Cyberculture', has been recently followed up by Adam Banks's more thorough study, *Race, Rhetoric and Technology: Searching for Higher Ground*, in which Banks argues that the race divide is commensurate with the digital divide.²⁷ The competition for access to technology by minorities, argues Banks, mirrors the competing discourses of racism, but the ability to embrace new media offers new possibilities for

²⁶ Liam Kennedy, *Race and Urban Space in Contemporary American Culture* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000).

²⁷ See Adam J. Banks, *Race, Rhetoric and Technology: Searching for Higher Ground* (Florence, KY: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2005), and Kali Tal, 'The Unbearable Whiteness of Being: African American Critical Theory and Cyberculture', *WIRED Magazine*, October 1996. Available at URL: <<http://www.gse.buffalo.edu/FAS/Bromley/classes/socprac/readings/Kali-Tal-unbearable.htm>> [accessed 3 August 2007].

African American rhetoric. Banks's study offers a serious consideration of the discursive relationship between race and the new spaces of technology, and will inform a reading of this relationship across architectural and geographical paradigms presented particularly in Nalo Hopkinson's vision of a technological diaspora in *Midnight Robber*. When paired with discursive constructions of the Atlantic diaspora, such as those of Gilroy discussed below, the 'invisible' spaces of the internet offer a new range of possibilities for the development of a literary black subjectivity.

Methodology

This thesis combines close textual analysis with the use of theoretical models from cultural geography and from African American and postcolonial critical theory. Close reading is crucial as an approach in this instance because it facilitates the main aim of the thesis, which is to determine the primarily linguistic and literary strategies of self-definition employed by black writers. Similarly, theoretical paradigms drawn from African American and postcolonial traditions, as well as Euro-American cultural geography and social philosophy, are able to engage with and illuminate the variety of discourses employed by these linguistic strategies.

'History cannot ignore W. E. B. Du Bois', proclaimed Martin Luther King, Jr on the occasion of the influential African American scholar and civil rights activist's 100th birthday.²⁸ The intellectual and artistic legacy left by Du Bois has indeed proved both prescient and enduring: the radical lyricism and eclectic collage structure of his groundbreaking treatise of 1903, *The Souls of*

²⁸ Dr Martin Luther King, Jr, 'Honoring Dr. Du Bois', *Freedomways*, 8 (1968), pp. 104-111 (p. 104).

Black Folk, has become a model for every subsequent movement in African American literature. The book became a foundational text for the hopes and struggles of an entire people, and correctly predicted that 'the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color-line', establishing the margin as the primary metaphor for an emerging racial subjectivity in the United States.²⁹ Du Bois imagined the African American consigned by historical circumstance to the 'veiled' margin of the white world:

[T]he Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world, – a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness, – an American, a Negro; two warring souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.³⁰

For many, the experience of marginalisation as expressed in the figure of the veil has come to represent the essence of black struggle in America. The internalisation of the colour-line imagined by Du Bois, moreover, transforms the black body into a 'dark' microcosm of this struggle. Both metaphors, the veil and the body, have since been wholly adopted into the lexicon of black consciousness. The bronze statue of the College founder in Ellison's *Invisible Man*, for example, refers directly to the famous statue at Tuskegee University, depicting Booker T. Washington 'lifting the veil' from the face of a half-naked, kneeling slave. Ironically, *Invisible Man* is 'unable to decide whether the veil is really being lifted, or lowered more firmly in place'.³¹ As inspirational as Du

²⁹ Du Bois, *Souls*, p. iv.

³⁰ *Ibid.* p. 2-3.

³¹ Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* [1952], introd. by John F. Callahan (London: Penguin Press, 2001), p. 36. Subsequent page references will refer to this edition and are given parenthetically in the text.

Bois's metaphors are, they repeatedly construct blackness as the object, not the subject of marginalisation.

A more useful approach is to re-imagine the margin as a threshold. Intimations of liminality can be found in Du Bois's concept of 'double consciousness' itself. The experience of doubleness explicitly situates the black consciousness in an inquiring position between the opposite terms of American and Negro, allowing the black subject a degree of linguistic agency in what is otherwise a debilitating bodily metaphor under constant threat of 'being torn asunder'. *The Souls of Black Folk* champions the ability of figurative language to express that which cannot be grasped – to articulate the space between 'two unreconciled strivings' that is African America. This doubleness, Du Bois stresses, is a 'gift' as well as a curse. Du Bois's idea of a double-consciousness, then, underscores my thesis of black subjectivity as liminal, hybrid and inextricably linked to language. With this in mind, this dissertation re-reads double-consciousness within a geographical and architectural context in an attempt to uncover parallel concrete spaces of possibility.

The relationship between language and liminality re-emerges as a key critical question with the advent of Gates's theory of 'signifyin(g)'. During the 1980s, the impact of theoretical work by Henry Louis Gates, Jr and Houston Baker Jr, together with the rise of black feminist scholarship, signalled a shift away from the militant nationalist concerns of the Black Arts Movement of the sixties and early seventies, towards what might be called 'black aesthetics'. This meant a reassessment of the space of the literary canon and also of the role of figurative language, like Du Bois's metaphor of the veil, in shaping an historical black subjectivity. Henry Louis Gates Jr's *The Signifying Monkey: A*

Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism sets out a principle of African American rhetorical practice based upon 'black difference', which he calls signifyin(g). Constructing a 'myth of origins' around the trickster figures of Esu-Elegbara and the Signifying Monkey, Gates points out that black vernacular favours figurative language and ambiguity rather than literal interpretations and determinate meanings.³² Approached in this way, the African American text becomes a vernacular space in which everyday, idiomatic discourses are exposed. One such discourse is that of geographical liminality.

Gates is excited by the way in which signifyin(g) revises and critiques both the common English usage of the word signifying and the structuralist concept of the sign, as first discussed by Ferdinand de Saussure. In the same way, this thesis will argue that signifyin(g) can be used to describe the project of revision undertaken by concrete vernacular spaces in relation to external, hegemonic spatial systems which enforce a rigid language of marginalisation (for example, slavery, segregation and urban decline). Such a project involves the move from subjugated margin to revisionist liminal space. This, in part, resumes Dixon's earlier argument for spaces of 'deliverance' in African American literature, but whereas Dixon eschews almost all theory in his monograph, I will seek to highlight the role signifyin(g) can play in describing the function of subversive narrative space. All four of the texts discussed in this thesis seek to signify upon the architecture of racism through the disruptive potential of liminal sites constructed through language. Moreover, a signifyin(g) relationship exists among the liminal spaces of different black texts

³² Mustapha Marrouchi, *Signifying with a Vengeance: Theories, Literatures, Storytellers* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2002), p. 4.

themselves, thus establishing a mode of production alternative to the dominant white discourses of visibility (such as those identified by McKee) and capitalism.

The ostensible project of *The Signifying Monkey* is to fathom a path between what Kenneth Warren has called a 'mealy-mouthed cultural nationalism' inherited from the Black Arts movement and an 'eviscerated deconstructive critique' drawn from a Euro-American post-structuralist theory.³³ Gates's dramatic response is to claim that intertextuality and indeterminacy (the key points of post-structuralism) are in fact integral to the black literary tradition. In other words, the strategy of signifyin(g), or the celebration of figurative language and ambiguity in black literature and culture, is the expression of 'discrete black difference'.³⁴

This has the beneficial effect of answering those who argue that black culture is purely sociological and uninterested in theory, but also throws up a paradox in Gates's seeming endorsement of race as the basis for a claim on signifyin(g). Aren't the linguistic strategies involved in signifyin(g) available to any number of writers and traditions? Of course, Gates acknowledges his revisions of Saussure's theory of sign and signifier, and also his revisionist relationship with other theorists, Derrida and Bakhtin. Nevertheless, it is his provocative insistence on signifyin(g)'s 'black difference' that forces black literary practice from the margins into the centre of Euro-American theoretical discourse. Gates's study, then, is less a confused post-structuralist reformulation of old cultural nationalist claims and more a conscious political

³³ Kenneth Warren, 'Review of *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism*, by Henry Louis Gates, Jr', *Modern Philology*, 80.2 (1990), pp. 224-226 (p. 224).

³⁴ Henry Louis Gates Jr, *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 66.

intervention that stimulates interest in reassessing the place of black vernacular culture in the wider canon.

However, *The Signifying Monkey* throws up a number of problems that run counter to my thesis. Firstly, Gates focuses too exclusively on linguistic models of resistance to the exclusion of others. His emphasis on the trope of the 'talking book', for example, which he traces from the earliest slave narratives through to Zora Neale Hurston's novel *Their Eyes Are Watching God* (1935) and Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972), privileges a metaphor of literacy and orality – of language – as the primary vehicle to realising black subjectivity. This thesis will instead trace alternative extra-literary discourses of resistance in black literature which challenge the franchise of the dominant power in new ways. Geographical and spatial tropes, also expressed linguistically, provide an alternative construct within which black literary subjectivity may be developed and critiqued. The trope of self-incarceration, for example, appears in both Linda Brent's seven-year stretch in her grandmother's attic described in Harriet Jacobs's narrative *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, and in the walled-off basement room ablaze with 1,369 light bulbs that becomes the centrepiece of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*. Voluntary withdrawal of the black body plunges the black subject into the fissure between margin and centre (or black and white/slave and free), generating a dialogic and dialectical process of self-inscription on the material environment. Tropes of language and literacy are left behind. Likewise, the architectural language of 'black holes' and 'bottomless pit[s]' of John Edgar Wideman's *Philadelphia Fire* are shaped by themes of fugitivity and entrapment.

The second problem presented by *The Signifying Monkey* is its prevailing concern over the margin. It is a concern mirrored by black feminist criticism, notably articulated in bell hooks' *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Centre*, but also by the rise of postcolonial theory, which pursues a radical de-centring agenda in questions of race and national identity. Edward Said, and, later, Gayatri Spivak and Homi Bhabha have all written of the need to acknowledge the 'double-voice' with which marginal colonial and postcolonial communities learn to speak, and to theorise different kinds of 'writing back' to the colonial metropolitan heart.³⁵ In contrast, Paul Gilroy has tried to shift the focus away from a margin-centre dynamic towards a new postcolonial territory defined instead by liminality and hybridity. Gilroy's enormously influential *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double-consciousness* endorses geography as a base for race studies and is the third major theoretical work to inspire this dissertation. Gilroy argues that black identity in Europe and the New World can be seen as an ongoing process of travel and exchange across the Atlantic. Space is no longer only metaphoric; the Atlantic becomes an active participant in the shaping of black culture. Slavery forms the constitutive ontological ground of this diasporic experience, notably through phenomena like the Middle Passage, thus constructing a concept of blackness based on liminality and hybridity. The chapters that follow will read Gilroy's thesis of black modernity back into African American literature by highlighting discourses of

³⁵ Motifs of literacy and orality also dominate much postcolonial terminology. For key works in postcolonial theory, see in particular, Edward Said, *Orientalism: Western Concepts of the Orient* (London: Vintage Press, 1978); Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Poststructuralism, marginality, postcoloniality and value', in *Literary Theory Today*, ed. by P. Collier and H. Geyer-Ryan (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990), pp. 219-244; and Homi Bhabha, 'Of mimicry and man: the ambivalence of colonial discourse', in Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York and London: Routledge, 1994), pp. 212-235.

liminality in slave narratives and black fiction. Crucially, however, it will also read Gilroy forward into diasporic fiction which embraces new media. By extending the work of signifyin(g) into the diaspora, *The Black Atlantic* builds on Gates's liberating metaphor for African American literature in the figure of Esu, the fork-tongued god of the crossroads.

Recent scholarship has begun to investigate interdisciplinary representations of liminality in the black Atlantic, notably Alan Rice's 2006 essay on the British Barbadian poet Dorothea Smartt, the British Zanzibari artist Lubiana Himid and the monument at Sambo's Grave on the Lancaster coastline.³⁶ Taking up this challenge, this thesis will examine how Caribbean Canadian speculative writer, Nalo Hopkinson, constructs radical liminal spaces in cyberspace and science fiction in her novel, *Midnight Robber*. Moreover, by writing sideways to the African American tradition and not exclusively to an orthodox metropolitan centre Hopkinson articulates the multiple discourses of blackness that can exist independently of that binary dynamic.³⁷

While situating itself within current black theoretical trends, this thesis also makes use of a number of other key theorists. Gaston Bachelard's book, *The Poetics of Space*, stirred the imagination of late modernist Europe.³⁸ First published in France in 1957 and translated into English in 1964, its

³⁶ Alan Rice, 'Sea Shore/Sea-borne Texts: The Radical Politics of Liminality in Black Atlantic Discourses from Sambo's Grave (1736) to Dorothea Smartt's *Lancaster Keys* (2003), and Lubaina Himid's *Cotton.Com* (2002) and *Naming the Money* (2004)', in *The Dynamics of the Threshold: Essays on Liminal Negotiations*, ed. by Jesus Benito and Ana Ma Manzananas (Madrid: Gateway Press, 2006).

³⁷ For articles regarding the postcolonial relationship between Hopkinson's work and Canada, see Michelle Reid, 'Crossing the Boundaries of the 'Burn': Canadian Multiculturalism and Caribbean Hybridity in Nalo Hopkinson's *Brown Girl in the Ring*', *Extrapolation*, 46.3 (2005), pp. 297-314; and Gordon Collier, 'Spaceship Creole: Nalo Hopkinson, Canadian-Caribbean Fabulist Fiction, and Linguistic/Cultural Syncretism', *Matatu*, 27-28 (2003), pp. 443-56.

³⁸ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* [1969], trans. by Maria Jolas, and introd. by R. Stilgoe, 2nd edn (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1994).

philosophical meditations on oneiric space represented the application of phenomenology to architecture – a rare pursuit of symbolic meaning in concrete space. ‘We are far removed from any reference to simple geometric forms’, argued Bachelard. ‘A house that has been experienced is not an inert box. Inhabited space transcends geometric space’.³⁹ His lyrical examination of attics, cellars, drawers and nests, for example, works to draw out the symbolic meaning of Harriet Jacobs’s attic crawl-space in Chapter One by establishing the crucial leap from physical to metaphorical conceptions of space. Interestingly, the French philosopher has been invoked by African American criticism before; Houston Baker Jr signifies on *Poetics of Space* in the final volume of his critical trilogy, *Workings of the Spirit* which attempts to explain the poetics of African American women’s writing through the study of ‘imagistic fields’, undetermined by historical context.⁴⁰

Inspired in part by Bachelard’s scientific method and the postcolonial work of Edward Said, French philosopher and poststructuralist Michel Foucault has advanced into the study of society the idea of discourse, which he sees exposed in multiple cultural contexts – history, power, sexuality, and otherness. Architecture is prominent among these contexts: Jeremy Bentham’s Panopticon, for example, or the map of a classroom function as heterogeneous assemblages of concrete, figurative, moral and scientific discourses within which systems of power and identity can be contested.⁴¹ Foucault’s conception of discursive space, moreover, has the advantage of moving both in and

³⁹ Bachelard, p. 47.

⁴⁰ Houston A. Baker, Jr, *Workings of the Spirit: The Poetics of Afro- American Women’s Writing* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1991), p. 61.

⁴¹ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, [1966] (New York and London: Routledge, 2002); and Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* [1975], trans. by Alan Sheridan (London: Penguin Press, 1991).

beyond the text. While drawing generally on Foucault's idea of discourse as a method of interrogating racialised discourses of space, this thesis makes particular use of his essay, 'Of other spaces', in which he imagines the existence of 'counter sites', in which 'all other real sites that can be found in culture are simultaneously represented, contested and inverted'.⁴² Foucault names these counter sites as heterotopias, and insists that '[p]laces of this kind are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality'.⁴³ Foucault's concept is related to Michel de Certeau's assertion that the modern subject is born into 'a sort of a void', created by the loss of the 'Word of God' as the organising logic of the cosmos. This void 'drives the subject to make himself the master of space and to set himself as a producer of writing'.⁴⁴ The construction of narrative liminal spaces within African American and African diasporic fiction allows the modern black subject to re-appropriate the 'void' as a locus for subversive writing.

At the opposite end of the spectrum, cultural geographers Henri Lefebvre and David Harvey owe much to Jurgen Habermas in their offering of useful theories regarding the mechanisms behind the capitalist production of space. Marxist in approach, Lefebvre's *The Production of Space* may be read productively against Harriet Jacobs's slave narrative in the way his idea of representational or 'lived' space allows us to view the attic hideaway as a political and spatial – as well as figurative – critique on white systems of power and economy.⁴⁵ Also working from a Marxist perspective, David Harvey

⁴² Michel Foucault, 'Of other spaces', *Diacritics*, 16.1 (1986), pp. 22-27 (p. 24).

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 24

⁴⁴ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. by Steven Randall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), pp. 138-139.

⁴⁵ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* [1974], trans. by N. Donaldson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell Press, 1991), p. 39.

interrogates the relationship between money, time, space and power in *Spaces of Capital and Consciousness and The Urban Experience*. His trademark notion of the 'spatial fix', although loose and heterogeneous, refers to the forms of spatial reorganisation and geographical expansion that temporarily manage the crisis-tendencies inherent in capitalist systems of reproduction.⁴⁶ Lefebvre's 'lived' spaces of representation work in opposition to these 'spatial fixes'. Harvey's most recent articulation, *Spaces of Hope*, however, discusses the failure of a number of utopias materialised in spatial and usually urban forms (he focuses a large part of his discussion on Baltimore). Instead he argues for a 'spatiotemporal utopianism' that might enable the leap 'from the prison of contemporary socioecological circumstances into a freer space for thought experiments about alternative possible worlds'.⁴⁷ Such theorising is partly anticipated by Nalo Hopkinson's construction of a 'possible world' in outer-space, which she also characterises as an escape – but perhaps not as unequivocal as Harvey's – from the failed 'socioecological' urbanism of Earth.

Structure

The five chapters that follow explore a variety of ways in which narrative liminal sites are constructed and operate in African American and black diasporic literature. By reading contemporary novels by Hopkinson and Wideman across earlier texts by Jacobs and Ellison, I hope to give a sense of the span of black New-World literature and the contesting discourses within it. The selection of texts does not claim to be comprehensive or inclusive. I have

⁴⁶ David Harvey, 'The Spatial Fix: Hegel, von Thünen and Marx', *Antipode* 13.3 (1981), pp. 1-12.

⁴⁷ Richard Peet, 'Review of *Spaces of Hope*, by David Harvey', *Contemporary Sociology*, 31.1 (2002), pp. 61-62 (p.61).

chosen the texts in order that they may illustrate a set of distinct responses to my thesis regarding spaces of possibility. Other texts could be read in the same way.

The four texts are addressed in chronological order. This has the benefit of both clarifying the cultural context for each piece of literature and offering a reasonably transparent way of negotiating around the manuscript, but it should not be used to infer a diachronic reading of liminal space itself. The narrative constructions of liminal space which feature in this study have an equal relationship to each other and represent distinct and unique responses to their own specific cultural context as well as to each other. Thus, the *Middle Passage*, for example, does not function as an *ur-space* to which all subsequent narrative constructions of space are slavishly bound. This thesis is indeed strongly affiliated with the historical reality of the Middle Passage slave ship, which functions as an early example of racialised liminality, but such a symbolic space is not intended to function as an origin for the subsequent liminalities – be they linguistic, architectural or geographical – explored in the thesis. Although both Jacobs's and Wideman's texts have an explicitly factual basis, this does not privilege them over and above the psychological expressionism and surrealism of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* or speculative fantasy of Nalo Hopkinson's *Midnight Robber*.⁴⁸

Rather than a selective deconstruction of African American and diasporic literature, this thesis is an attempt to arrive at a general theory of such literature based on the mutual employment of metaphors of liminality across a

⁴⁸ For the historical contexts of Jacobs's experiences, Jean Fagin Yellin suggests reading John Hope Franklin, *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of American Negroes* (New York: Knopf Press, 1967), and Herbert G. Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750-1925* (New York: Random House Press, 1976).

number of discourses. If there is a geographical focus in new writing of the twenty-first century, it is one of liminality, written less from the metropolitan heart than from the urban ghettos and the Atlantic fringe where languages and cultures intersect. Writers like Jamaica Kincaid, Octavia Butler, Tananarive Due, and Colson Whitehead write from these 'other' places. This thesis makes clear, in its examination of three African American and one Caribbean Canadian text, the expansive use of these spaces of possibility throughout the literature of the New World diaspora.

Chapter One presents a reading of liminal spaces in Harriet Jacobs's 1861 slave narrative, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Jacobs's narrative is among the first known texts by an African American woman author, and has been the subject of much theoretical and feminist critical analysis since its re-discovery and authentication by Jacobs's biographer, Jean Fagin Yellin in the early eighties. This chapter will consider how Jacobs constructs the attic, where the protagonist Linda Brent hides for approximately seven years, as the text's most important liminal space. Its symbolic power allows a rigorous interrogation of the restrictive structures of slavery and a subtle consideration of the multiple discourses of blackness available to a writing female slave. Here, in a space where she is neither slave nor free, Jacobs expresses a concern with endurance and female authority.

The chapter will consider Lefebvre's concept of 'lived space' in the context of race and the antebellum South, and its discursive relationship with historical sites like the Underground Railroad and the generic space of the slave narrative. It will further argue that as a 'lived space', the attic successfully critiques rigid categories of race and identity based on capitalist

economics. The disruption of the female body and the gendered spaces of the slave-owning house (for example, Brent's hiding under the kitchen floorboards) will also be considered. Lastly, the construction of narrative liminal spaces in religious architecture and song will be discussed as an arena for subversive commentary on Southern slavery.

Chapter Two moves on to examine further architectural discourses of liminality in Ralph Ellison's seminal African American novel, *Invisible Man*. Published in 1952, Ellison was writing at a point where blackness had become invisible – too visible, too easily and crudely read by a white segregationist society. *Life underground* is *Invisible Man*'s response to his crisis of identity. The chapter will examine the figurative role of the underground in a modernist, urban setting. *Invisible Man*'s cellar engages with racialised tropes of deterritorialisation and desire as *Invisible Man* deconstructs the idea of 'blackness' against a Harlem backdrop. The chapter will consider the construction of liminal spaces in the migration narrative, as the Southern spaces of Trueblood's cabin and the Golden Day bar give way to Northern 'underground' spaces like Brockway's engine room and the dilapidated boxing arena. Unlike Jacobs's narrative, *Invisible Man* introduces discourses of urbanism and masculinity to questions of race and liminal space. Moreover, Ellison's language of surrealism and psychological expressionism itself creates a kind of liminal architecture in which identity can be multiplied or divided and in which the categories of race can be contested.

Chapters Three and Four offer a close reading of John Edgar Wideman's 1990 novel, *Philadelphia Fire*, and enable an examination the narrative construction of contemporary urban liminality. Wideman engages with the idea

of artistic responsibility in his treatment of a suburban bombsite in Philadelphia, addressing the difficulty of achieving spaces of possibility in the face of urban decay. Chapter Three offers a definition for urban space, and uses the Marxist critiques of Lefebvre and David Harvey, together with Liam Kennedy, to argue that the city is a space produced by social forces, in particular, racism. Urban spaces are homogenised and internally stratified by racialised class rhetoric and increasingly articulated through racialised metaphor of urban decline. These are a product of larger socio-economic forces affecting mid-twentieth century urban America, including the rural-urban migration of black populations.

Particular ways of dwelling in the city, like belonging to an African American street gang or a Black Nationalist political group, are often acts of civil disobedience whose goals involve the establishment of a black space in the urban terrain. The narrative construction of such disobedience makes use of liminal discourse; examples include the radical Afro-centrist organisation MOVE, park theatre and subway graffiti. Liminality becomes a physical challenge to hegemonic constructions of whiteness and urban spatial decorum.

However, Marxist emphasis on the realities of socially lived space ignores the possibilities of spatial representation. Reading Foucault's concept of 'heterotopia' in the context of Du Bois and Gates, Chapter Four considers the more hopeful symbolic and imaginary (re)productions of 'black' space in the urban terrain. Examples of these spaces of possibility include the basketball court and the bombsite, both of which force Wideman's African American protagonist, Cudjoe, to reassess the discursive relationship between racial tension, architecture and the role of the artist.

Chapter Five extends this thesis's spatial paradigm in two important directions: towards the future, and into the black Atlantic. The conflict between real and imagined spaces and the narrative construction of a diasporic subjectivity through such spaces are the main concerns of the speculative novel, *Midnight Robber*, by Caribbean Canadian writer Nalo Hopkinson. Through close textual analysis of the novel, this chapter will consider the important discursive relationship between black science fiction and spaces of possibility – as Walter Mosley suggests in his essay, 'Black to the Future':

The genre speaks most clearly to those who are dissatisfied with the way things are: adolescents, post adolescents, escapists, dreamers, and those who have been made to feel powerless. And this may explain the appeal that science fiction holds for a great many African Americans. [...] Through science fiction you can have a black president, a black world, or simply a say in the way things are. This power to imagine is the first step in changing the world.⁴⁹

Like the African American science fiction author, Octavia Butler, Hopkinson's novel attempts to imagine a space outside of artificial constructions of 'race'. Making use of Gilroy's concept of the black Atlantic and Foucault's idea of heterotopia, this chapter will examine the narrative figurations of liminal space in the novel and their ability to critique colonial and gender-based structures of oppression. Within radically alternative sites like the outer-space colony of Toussaint and the prison planet of New Half-Way Tree, Hopkinson's protagonist, Tan-Tan, is able to re-figure crucial African American and Caribbean spatial metaphors like the mirror, the veil and the flying African, in an effort to map out a new and vibrant diasporic subjectivity in space. In this

⁴⁹ Walter Mosley, 'Black to the Future', in *Dark Matter: A Century of Speculative Fiction from the African Diaspora*, ed. by Sheree R. Thomas (New York: Aspect Press, 2001), pp. 405-406.

light, the following chapter will investigate the early construction of radical liminal spaces within the African American slave narrative.

Chapter One:

Loopholes of Retreat: Henri Lefebvre, Lived Space and Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*

[M]y dear friend let me thank you for your kind and generous offer of the hospitality of your pleasant home which would afford me much pleasure [...] [Mr & Mrs Brackett] were here and spent a day and night with me and saw from my daily duties that it was hard for me to find much time to write — as yet I have not written a single page by daylight — [...] And you my dear friend must not expect much where there has been so little given — Yes dear Amy there has been more than a bountiful share of suffering given enough to crush the finer feelings of stouter hearts than this poor timid one of mine but I will try and not send you a portraiture of feelings — just now the poor Book is in its Chrysalis-state and though I can never make it a butterfly I am satisfied to have it creep meekly among some of the humbler bugs —¹

These words were written in 1854 in a letter by Harriet Jacobs, a recently freed fugitive slave and an active member of the abolitionist movement. Addressed to her white Quaker friend, Amy Post, they describe the manuscript that Jacobs was then writing, giving an account of her life as a slave, the seven years she spent hiding from her master in her grandmother's attic and her eventual success in winning freedom for herself and her children.² The letter itself highlights a number of the main themes of her manuscript, which was eventually published in 1861 as *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*: namely, the peculiar hardships of slavery for women; the creation of a space of articulation for the often silenced woman's voice; and the mingling of discourses of liminality, duty and feminine 'feeling' as a way of representing the indeterminate position Jacobs occupied as a black female author in the antebellum period. Jacobs's particular expression of the struggle for recognition of the female voice through the mouthpiece of her pseudonymous narrator, Linda Brent, means

¹ Harriet Jacobs to Amy Post, March [1854], 'Correspondence', in Jacobs, p. 259. This is one of ten letters from Jacobs to Post that Yellin reproduces from the collection of thirty in the Isaac and Amy Post Family Papers in the Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Rush Rhees Library, University of Rochester.

² Yellin, 'Introduction', in Jacobs, pp. xv-xli (p. xv).

that her narrative has become the celebrated subject of feminist analysis after its re-discovery in the early 1980s by Jean Fagan Yellin.³ However, Jacobs's narrative construction of liminal spaces throughout her writing testifies to her wider use of architectural and geographical discourses, as opposed to only those of the voice and the pen, in order to radically destabilise accepted norms of both race and gender, and reveal multiple discourses of blackness.

Describing her manuscript to Amy Post as a 'Chrysalis', Jacobs draws a figurative parallel between the transitional status of her developing text and the indeterminacy of her attic hideaway, which she describes in her narrative as a 'Loophole of Retreat' (114).⁴ The location of both spaces in the threshold between the states of slavery and freedom, or 'daily duties' and the white 'single page', affords a critical space which articulates Jacobs's sense of the ambiguity of the black female agent within a landscape of repressive domestic rules and chattel slavery, but also allows her to question the architectural and ideological apparatus which supports such binaries and explore how the discourses of sexuality, motherhood and authorship may be inscribed by such an agent upon their environment. By constructing narrative liminal spaces in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Jacobs interrogates the restrictive structures of antebellum slavery and

³ For the discovery of Jacobs's letters, see Jean Fagan Yellin, 'Written by Herself: Harriet Jacobs's Slave Narrative', in *American Literature* 53.3 (1981), pp. 479-486.

⁴ Jacobs's original editor, Lydia Maria Child re-uses her chrysalis metaphor in a letter to Sarah Shaw dated 19th December, 1877, '[T]ransition is necessary to growth [...] The chrysalis seems a dead thing; but there is a beautiful winged creature within it, and in due time it comes forth'. *Lydia Maria Child, Selected Letters, 1817-1880*, ed. by Milton Meltzer and Patricia G. Holland (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1982), p. 546. Alain Locke also invokes the metaphor of the chrysalis seventy-one years later to the same radical cause as Jacobs: 'By shedding the old chrysalis of the Negro problem we are achieving something like a spiritual emancipation'. Alain Locke, *The New Negro: An Interpretation* (New York: Macmillan Press, 1925), p. 5.

domesticity, and interrogates the space of the body, the domestic house and the text as sites for multiple discourses of black female subjectivity.

The central issue dividing those who study slavery is whether one views slaves as a population utterly crushed by slave-holding states, or as a people able to act creatively from within the 'peculiar institution'. Eugene Genovese, for example, represents the traditional view of slavery as an essentially patriarchal institution. A newer academic generation prefers instead to stress what they consider to be the complete and irreversible damage caused by slavery.⁵ Historians in this aspect may be quicker to accept the sterility of slave life than literary critics, who deal by default with the creative output of slaves. Jacobs's construction of narrative liminal spaces in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* simultaneously acknowledges the extremity of slavery's restrictions and articulates a sense of black creativity and authority. This equivocal approach is mirrored in studies like Walter Johnson's *Soul by Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market*, which argues that slaves were able to manipulate their own purchase in the auction ring through the performance of particular attitudes. This chapter will elaborate on the radical potential of such equivocal spaces in the slave narrative.

Producing Race in the Spaces of the American South

Under the system of chattel slavery that operated in the Southern United States until the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863, race was

⁵ Referring to Ira Berlin's *Generations of Captivity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), George M. Fredrickson argues that recent historical studies have 'romanticized an experience that [...] was in many ways disabling. [...] The pendulum has swung so far in the direction of creative action by slaves [so obscuring the extreme brutality of the system] that a corrective may be impending'. George M. Fredrickson, 'America's Original Sin', *New York Review of Books*, 25 March, 2004, pp. 34-36 (p. 34).

produced by a particular spatiality in which the black body and the plantation structure were key sites. The slave-holding states were the pre-eminent force in both the Senate and the House of Representatives before 1865, and sought to produce a social and legal ideal of whiteness, what Cheryl I. Harris identifies as 'whiteness as property', through the architectural and geographical structures of capitalism which sustained their political and economic power.⁶ Indeed, the American system of chattel slavery was one of the most complete examples of western capitalism taken to the extreme. The Southern production line, which saw the black bodies of slaves put to work in fields of plantation cotton, for example, produced financial profits for white landowners while reinforcing the ideology of racial superiority. Henri Lefebvre, in *The Production of Space*, published in 1974, argues that space is not something passive but is actively produced and reproduced through human intentions. Capitalism, moreover, has laid 'its imprint upon the total occupation of all pre-existing space and upon the production of a new space', shaping space not just to ensure the optimum conditions for production in other spheres, but because 'the market in spaces themselves' is itself a profitable and important sphere.⁷ Thus the increasing division and fetishisation of Southern plantation space – the plots of labour worked by field gangs and the division of the plantation house into work space and leisure space, for example – reduces social relations to a

⁶ Harris argues that 'whiteness and property share a common premise – a conceptual nucleus – of a right to exclude'. Through the historical processes that turned slaves into objects of property, American 'courts established whiteness as a prerequisite to the exercise of enforceable property rights' and this process of 'according whiteness actual legal status converted an aspect of identity into an external object of property, moving whiteness from privileged identity to a vested interest'. Cheryl I. Harris, 'Whiteness as Property', *Harvard Law Review*, 106.8 (1993), pp. 1707-1791 (pp. 1714, 1724-1725).

⁷ Lefebvre, pp. 236, 86. See also Harvey Molotch, 'The Space of Lefebvre', *Theory and Society*, 22.6 (1993), pp. 887-895 (pp. 890-891).

wholly spatial dimension in which race is directly allied to and traded as a spatial commodity.

Moreover, the dialogical relationship between the field and the plantation house, and the slave hut and the master's veranda, or Betty's downstairs kitchen and the jealous mistress's bedroom in Jacobs's narrative, for example, mirrors the relations of production and domination at large by reproducing architectural spectacles of whiteness over and against spaces inhabited by slaves (35, 103). In a brief episode from *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Jacobs interrogates the imbrication of race and class against production of domestic spaces of whiteness. The episode concerns a raid on the townhouse of Linda Brent's grandmother, a free black woman, by local poor white militia in the aftermath of Nat Turner's insurrection of 1831. Brent has called a white gentleman to oversee the company's assault:

My grandmother had a large trunk of bedding and table cloths. When that was opened, there was a great shout of surprise; and one [soldier] exclaimed, 'Where'd the damned niggers git all dis sheet an' table clarf?'

My grandmother, emboldened by the presence of our white protector, said, 'You may be sure we didn't pilfer 'em from *your* houses.'

'Look here, mammy,' said a grim-looking fellow without any coat, 'you seem to feel mighty gran' 'cause you got all them 'ere fixens. White folks oughter have 'em all' (65).

The white expanse of sheets, table cloths and 'fixens' belonging to Brent's grandmother reproduce the spectacle of the plantation house to which she alludes over and against the inferior domestic spaces of the low class militia: 'You may be sure we didn't pilfer them from *your* houses'. Despite the seeming validation of the free black domestic space as morally inviolable, however, Brent's grandmother is caught in an architectural 'fix' by the need to refer back to her 'white protector' and the figure of his white plantation house for authority. Moreover, the relations of spatial production

remain dominated by discourses of racial rather than class superiority: as the solidier reminds them, 'White folks oughter have 'em all'. This privileging of a socio-spatial dialectic in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* involves the shifting of the entire social and cultural production of race into a spatial rather than an historical framework. As Lefebvre comments,

With the advent of modernity, time has vanished from social space [...] Economic space subordinates time to itself; political space expels it as threatening and dangerous (to power). The primacy of the economic and above all of the political implies the supremacy of space over time.⁸

The normative sphere of whiteness, represented by Jacobs in the white table cloths and sheets, the white 'protector' and the imagined white plantation house, becomes an 'inexorable social horizon ... wholly saturated with ideology and politics', indistinguishable from the landscape it requires for economic success.⁹

The neighbouring plantations are networks of fetishised sites:

When [the slaves] had finished their daily toil, they must hurry to eat their little morsels, and be ready to extinguish their pine knots before nine o'clock, when the overseer went his patrol rounds. He entered every cabin, to see that men and their wives had gone to bed together, lest the men, from over-fatigue, should fall asleep in the chimney corner, and remain there till the morning horn called them to their daily task' (49).

The division and supervision of time as well as space described in this extract maintains the white male's position. His regular appearances within each slave cabin reveal a practice of visual display, in which his racial difference is closely connected to the authority of time and space. Thus, his whiteness becomes a normal space, against which the slave must define his working day.

⁸ Lefebvre, p. 8.

⁹ Julian Murphet, 'Grounding Theory: Literary Theory and the New Geography', in *Post-Theory: New Directions in Criticism*, ed. Martin McQuillan et al. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), pp. 200-209 (p. 203). The rise of space as a theoretical discourse was first championed in the early 1970s by Marxist geographers like Lefebvre, David Harvey and Manuel Castells.

The majority of Jacobs's narrative, however, is not set on a plantation but in the small town of Edenton on the coast of Albemarle Sound, illustrated in Figure 3. The map attests to the grid layout of the streets and the proximity of a variety of public and private buildings to the open space of the public wharf. The heterogeneous architecture of the town facilitates what Patricia McKee calls a 'symbolic visual field' of looking and seeing which replaces the plantation system of architectural spectacle in representing the 'abstract powers and abstract character' of whiteness.¹⁰ In the light of this, it is intriguing to note that the map places the market house, where slaves would be brought from the wharf to be sold, in the unique position at the centre of a crossroad, its lines of sight towards the wharf and the town commons bolstering its symbolic status as the town's pivot and a place of looking and seeing.

But, whereas McKee claims that 'the space of circulating signs and images is more important to the unity of the group than [...] any bounded structure', it is precisely the town's streets, dockyards and public spaces of trade in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* which act to reinforce white standards of professionalism and 'decency', as well as to protect slaves from the worst excesses of racial violence.¹¹ Linda Brent's master, Dr Flint, threatens her continuously with sexual abuse, for example, but 'he did not wish to have his villainy made public'. Brent recalls,

It was lucky for me that I did not live on a distant plantation, but in a town not so large that the inhabitants were ignorant of each other's affairs. Bad as are the laws and customs in a slaveholding community, the doctor, as a professional man, deemed it prudent to keep up some outward show of decency (29).

¹⁰ McKee, p. 8. McKee argues that whiteness is produced through a 'visual culture' that operates through the collective exchange of views and images of whiteness.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

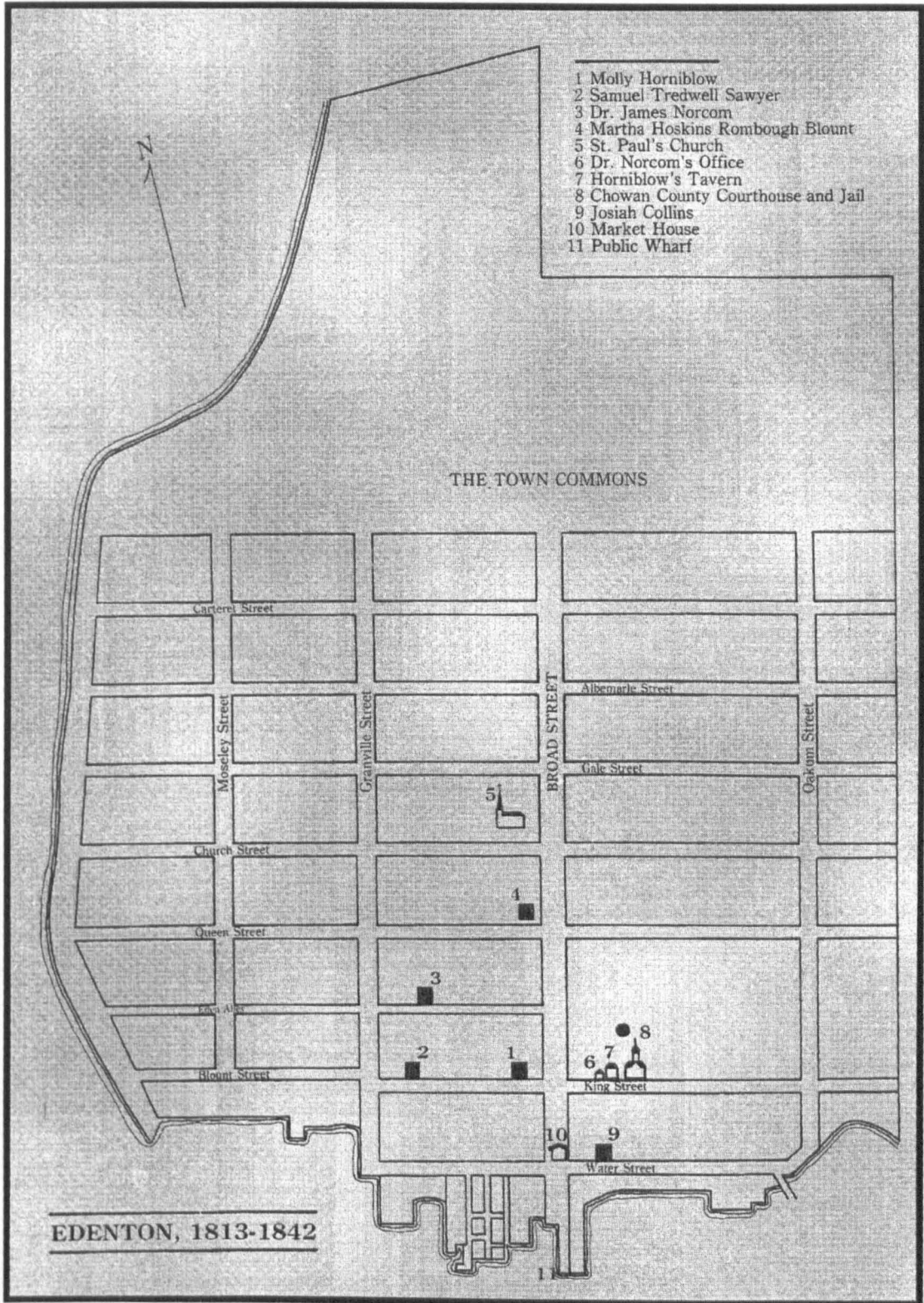


Figure 3: Map of Edenton, North Carolina, 1813-1842.

The production of whiteness is located directly in the real spaces of history. The acts of looking and seeing prompted in the white community by the grid of the town plan, itself constructed around models of agricultural and slave commerce, produce a public sphere of whiteness managed through the 'show' of reputation.

The production of these hegemonic discourses of whiteness in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, however, is disrupted by the construction of narrative liminal spaces which destabilise accepted categories of race and identity. Drawing upon terms set out by Toni Morrison in *Playing in the Dark*, but explored in a variety of recent studies on whiteness and race, whiteness necessarily constructs itself against that which it is not.¹² In spatial terms, the spectacle of the plantation house and the town's spaces of commerce and mutually-reinforced public reputation are 'legible only in relief' against the enforced marginality of a black presence.¹³ Thus, in the aftermath of the Nat Turner rebellion, the dominance of white space in the South is reasserted through the systematic negation of black space. Jacobs describes the destruction of the slaves' church in Edenton:

[T]he wrath of the slave holders was somewhat appeased by the capture of Nat Turner [...] The slaves begged the privilege of again meeting at their little church in the woods with the burying ground around it [but] their request was denied, and the church was demolished. They were permitted to attend the white churches, a certain portion of the galleries being appropriated to their use (67).¹⁴

¹² Morrison argues that in white 'construction of blackness and enslavement could be found not only the not-free but also, with the dramatic polarity created by skin color, the projection of the not-me'. Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, William E. Massey Sr. Lectures in the History of American Civilisation (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), p. 38.

¹³ Blair, p. 709.

¹⁴ In 1831, it became a crime for 'any slave or free person of color to preach, exhort, or teach 'in any prayer-meeting or other association of worship where slaves of different families are collected together'. *Acts Passed by the General Assembly of the State of North Carolina 1830-31 [Revised Statutes]* (Raleigh: Lawrence and Lemay, 1831), 27.1, p. 578; John S. Bassett, *Slavery in the State of*

The architectural site of the white church is essentially an empty signifier in this context, having no intrinsic value except in contrast with the erasure of the slaves' church and the enforced marginality of the remaining black congregation as a indeterminate, floating 'other' within the white body itself. Indeed, the singularity of whiteness as an abstract concept is produced within Jacobs's narrative at large through the representation of the coerced liminal 'other' in key sites of production – the body, the house and the text.

Edward Soja argues that any challenge to such systems of political and social oppression must recognise the importance of reclaiming these spaces of production:

Spatiality is not only a product but also a producer and reproducer of the relations of production and domination, an instrument of both allocative and authoritative power. Class struggle, as well as other social struggles, are thus increasingly contained and defined in their spatiality and trapped in its 'grid'. Social struggle must then become a consciously and politically spatial struggle to regain control over the social production of this 'space'.¹⁵

The racialised individual seeking to negotiate such socially-produced space has access to a variety of spatial practices, however limited. As on board the Middle Passage ship, the plantation slave might seek to reclaim the space of production (both the black body and the plantation grounds themselves) in a limited way by disrupting work in the cotton fields with sporadic bouts of truancy; likewise, the close physical and often emotional relationship between a mistress and her house slave (they often slept in the same room) might lead to complex transgressions of the strict social and

North Carolina, 1867-1928 (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1899), pp. 48-49.

¹⁵ Edward Soja, 'The Spatiality of Social Life: Towards a Transformative Rethorisation', in *Social Relations and Spatial Structures*, ed. by Derek Gregory and John Urry (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1985) pp. 90-120, (p. 110).

racial boundaries that existed in the house and plantation as a whole.¹⁶

Such transgressions, however, were often sporadic and always limited in their effect. Henri Lefebvre's *The Production of Space* calls for the mobilisation of representational space in the cause of more profound social change. Space for Lefebvre is 'only one reflexive moment in a dialectic between social action and the spatial and geographical aspects of society, the economic mode of production and the cultural imaginary'.¹⁷ He proposes the construction of representational or 'lived' space that acts a locus for radical change in the social landscape by harnessing the symbolic power of the 'cultural imaginary' against the deadened practices of capitalism. Identifying 'lived' space in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* can illuminate the possibility of multiple discourses of race in the representational landscapes of the slave narrative and suggest a theoretical context for liminality itself as an agent of resistance.

African American symbolic space is frequently liminal. While Lefebvre might see a house, a bedroom or a town square as a lived site in itself, for example, Jacobs highlights within the house the indeterminate space of the attic; Ellison, moreover, singles out within the bedroom the symbolism of the 'hot and dark' interior of a grandfather clock; and Wideman highlights the presence of sunken graves beneath Philadelphia's Washington Square.¹⁸ Lived space is represented as liminal in African American literature in order to articulate black writers' particular concerns regarding race and slavery. The material realities of slave life prompted unique systems of signification

¹⁶ For example, see the close relationship between Eliza Harris and Emily Shelby in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, [1852] ed. by Elizabeth Ammonds (New York and London: W. W. Norton Press, 1994), chapters I and II.

¹⁷ Rob Shields, *Lefebvre, Love and Struggle: Spatial Dialectics* (New York and London: Routledge, 1999), p. 158.

¹⁸ *Invisible Man*, p. 58; John Edgar Wideman, *Philadelphia Fire* (New York: Holt Press, 1990), p. 98. Subsequent page references will refer to this edition and are given parenthetically in the text.

that reflected the too frequent silences and erasures they experienced. The symbolic and political resonances of Jacobs's liminal text and others like it enabled ex-slave authors to reclaim these spaces of silence and erasure. The location of representational black space in the threshold is a matter of compulsion but also of choice; it enables the antebellum black writer to critique those structures of oppression.

The key sites of production in the antebellum Southern United States, namely the plantation, the town, the house and the slave body itself, are contradictory spaces. They reproduce a social idea of whiteness that rejects history and time and becomes wholly spatial – an architectural singularity that, conversely, relies upon the presence of a black 'other' which is forced to occupy a marginal zone. Jacobs's narrative undoes this uneven relationship by re-appropriating liminal space as a representational site. By representing liminal spaces in language and text, Jacobs creates 'kernels' of symbolic meaning which perform both a critical and a creative function with regard to Southern spaces of capitalism. They destabilise hegemonic spaces of authority and gender while also interrogating a multiplicity of black discourses of identity, suggesting ways in which the black female subject can create her own identity as a mother, a writer and a producer.

This argument represents a significant development of the claims for the production of race put forward by Harris, McKee and Morrison. It seeks to read Harris's thesis regarding the importance of built space into the literary context examined by McKee and Morrison. Whereas McKee sees race as the product of visual images, and thus blackness construed as invisibility, this chapter argues that race is the product of architectural and geographical space, and that blackness is construed as liminal. Likewise, the status of slaves as pieces of property which, Harris argues, is a

manifestation of their legal liminality, is represented by Jacobs not as a public object to be built and traded, but as a threshold wherein slaves can interrogate the multiple discourses of their own selfhood.

Liminality and Blackness in the American South

The garret was only nine feet long, and seven feet wide. The highest part was three feet high, and sloped down abruptly to the loose board floor. There was no admission for either light or air [...] To this hole I was conveyed as soon as I entered the house. The air was stifling; the darkness total. A bed had been spread on the floor. I could sleep quite comfortably on one side; but the slope was so sudden that I could not turn on the other without hitting the roof (114).

The description of the cramped attic above her grandmother's house in Edenton functions as the main symbolic space of Jacobs's narrative. Figure 4 depicts the attic belonging to Jacobs's grandmother, Molly Horniblow, on whom the figure of Brent's grandmother is based. After years as a slave in Dr Flint's household, and having given birth to two children through a relationship with another white man, Mr Sands, Linda Brent is told that she and her children are to be transferred to a plantation to be 'broke in' (94). Instead, her family hide Brent in the attic, where she remains hidden for seven years until her eventual escape north. The narrative mirrors events in Jacobs's own life: Joshua Coffin, founder of the New England Anti-Slavery Society, expressed astonishment on Jacobs's arrival in Philadelphia that 'she was hidden for seven years! in a small upper room of a house occupied by colored people & within a hundred yards of her master's house', and noticed that '[s]he has been shut up so long that she can hardly walk'.¹⁹ The physical restrictions of the attic represented in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* are symbolic of the wider, institutional

¹⁹ Joshua Coffin to Lydia Maria Child, 25 June [1842], 'Correspondence', in Jacobs, p. 249.

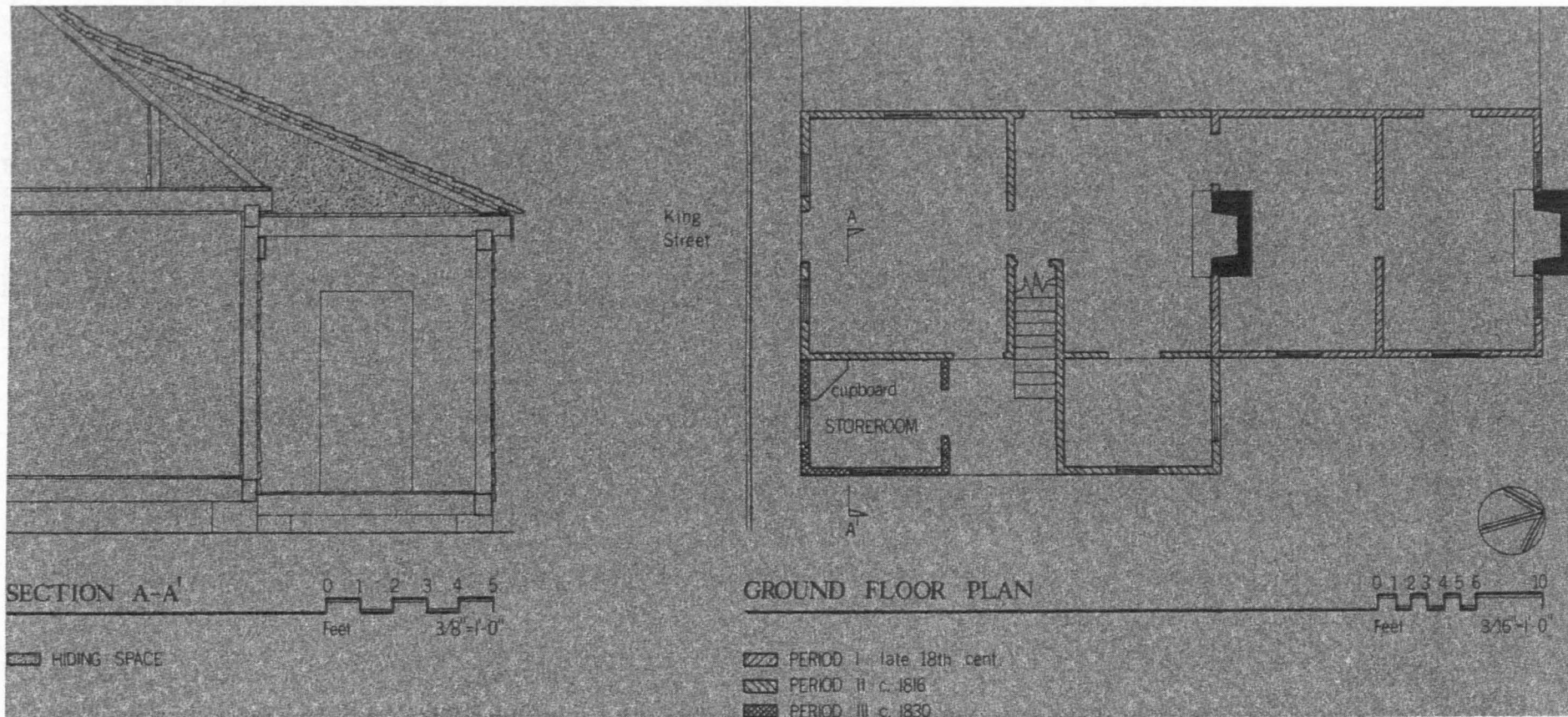


Figure 4: Molly Horniblow's house: reconstruction to scale of elevation and floor plan showing Jacobs's hiding place.

suppressions of slavery which Jacobs was keen to highlight for her abolitionist readership. The emphasis on the exact dimensions of the space echoes the Reverend Walsh's polemic on the slave ship *Feloz*.²⁰ However, as a liminal space which is neither completely free nor fully within the bonds of enslavement, the attic is also a site which prompts 'alternative restructurings of institutionalised discourses of space and new modes of spatial *praxis*'.²¹ Rather than losing itself within the hegemonic architecture of the white town, the attic actively problematises those white structures of slavery by interrogating multiple discourses of black subjectivity, especially economic, legal and authorial discourses.

The liminal site of the attic functions as a radical lived space within Jacobs's narrative. Lefebvre argues that space which is 'directly *lived* through its associated images and symbols, [...] which the imagination seeks to change and appropriate' overlays physical space and functions as a direct challenge to the abstract spaces of capitalist power:

Redolent with imaginary and symbolic elements, [lived spaces] have their source in history – in the history of a people as well as in the history of each individual belonging to that people [...] Representational space is alive: it speaks. It has an affective kernel or centre: Ego, bed, bedroom, dwelling, house; or, square, church, graveyard. It embraces the loci of passion, of action and of lived situations, and this immediately implies time.²²

Jacobs's attic is a lived space since it enables Linda Brent to 'speak' in a variety of ways. Firstly, she is able to write misleading letters to her master Dr Flint from her hiding place. Having been taught to read and write at a young age by an indulgent former mistress, Brent contrives 'to read and to sew' in order to relieve the 'tedious monotony' of her seclusion (116). The

²⁰ See the introduction to this thesis, p. 6.

²¹ Shields, p. 164.

²² Lefebvre, pp. 39, 44.

attic soon becomes the locus for a more dramatic act of literacy, however, in response to Dr Flint's persistent attempts to discover her whereabouts:

In order to make him believe that I was in New York, I resolved to write him a letter dated from that place. [...] I wrote two letters, one to my grandmother and the other to Dr. Flint. I reminded him how he, a gray-headed man, had treated a helpless child, who had been placed in his power, and what years of misery he had brought upon her (128).

Brent deliberately disturbs the spatial structures of slavery in this episode. Her decision to date her letter from New York acknowledges the habitual routes of escape taken by many fugitive slaves, generally on the Underground Railroad to cities in the North; the liminal status of the attic, the true origin of the letter, undermines Flint's expectation of these routes and adds ironic force to Brent's claim, especially as it fools Flint into searching for her in New York and Boston. Brent recalls, 'this was certainly as good as a comedy to me' (30). Indeed, the episode's play on space exposes a number of radical black discourses which critique essentialised notions of race. By allowing Brent to cultivate the role of an author, vocalising her condemnation of Flint's abusive treatment, and the role of a comic trickster, scripting her own illusory geography within the space of the letter, Jacobs rejects both the image of the slave as a mute victim of white oppression and the equally common trope of the sober, even solemn ex-slave narrator.²³

Brent is also able to create a 'peeping-hole' in the attic wall, offering a further opportunity for radical speech from within her liminal environment (116). Through the space of the peep-hole, Jacobs articulates the powerful role of social witness. Brent describes how the hole is made:

²³ For the radical use of humour in slave narrative, see especially Granville Ganter, '“He made us laugh some”: Frederick Douglass's Humor', *African American Review* 37.4 (2003), pp. 535-552.

One day I hit my head against something and found it was a gimlet [...] I bored three rows of holes [in the wall], one above another; then I bored out the interstices between. I thus succeeded in making one hole about an inch long and an inch broad. I sat by it till late into the night, to enjoy the little whiff of air that floated in (115).

The spy hole disrupts the heterogeneous spaces of Edenton by affording Brent a unique and overarching visual perspective on the town. This allows her to escape the town's various sites of looking and seeing which maintain the white citizen's public reputation and the slave's subordinate position. From her liminal position in the attic, Brent is able to get 'glimpses of things out of doors' which are in fact the inarticulate spaces of slavery and suffering that are forced to be played out in the passages between houses and on the outskirts and riverbanks of the town. These 'glimpses' disturb the authorised spatial narrative of the town by representing the marginal and forgotten spaces in Jacob's narrative. In the first instance, for example, Brent recalls seeing 'a slave pass our gate, muttering'. The slave's incoherence might serve to support white expectations of the black subject as alien, opaque and somehow unable to be read. However, Brent articulates the slave's words which otherwise would never have been heard - 'It's his own, and he can kill it if he will' - and elaborates the slave's concealed dilemma in clear terms to her readers:

My grandmother told me that woman's history. Her mistress had that day seen her baby for the first time, and in the lineaments of its fair face she saw a likeness to her husband. [...] The next day she and her baby were sold to a Georgia trader (122).

In another episode, Brent bears witness to a woman who commits suicide. This act is a symbolic, if equivocal, act of subjective agency that is played out on the periphery of the riverbank. Brent recalls,

Another time I saw a woman rush wildly by, pursued by two men. She was a slave ... [and] for some trifling offence her mistress ordered her to be stripped and whipped. To escape the degradation and the torture, she rushed to the river, jumped in, and ended her wrongs in death (122).

The slave's suicide attempt recalls the suicides on board the Middle Passage slave ships recorded by Olaudah Equiano and others. However, Jacobs's narrative construction of the liminal riverbank and the path past 'our gate', structurally reflected in the liminal space of the attic, enables these zones to assume symbolic meaning within a larger trope of liminal resistance. In assuming a narrative form, these zones of resistance become spaces of articulation for the silenced slave voice. Likewise, the attic's peep-hole grants Brent a visual and spatial authority that articulates the multiplicity of black subjective discourse.

In Jacobs's hands, moreover, the attic's narrative space 'speaks' on a political and moral level to a national readership by representing the 'affective kernel' of North American slavery and its pernicious effects through the complex and intensely emotive symbolism of Brent's hiding place. All of the acts of 'speaking' which occur in Jacobs's attic are acts of critique inseparable from their liminal condition. Without the author's concealed presence in the town of her enslavement, Brent's falsified letters from the North would lose their ironic power; without the anonymity afforded by the attic, Brent could not observe the town's secret slave life with impunity. Indeed, the attic's power to engage with moral abstractions like freedom and evil is derived from the paradox of its situation as a place of incarceration within a house owned by a free black woman.

The attic's power to channel radical speech is mirrored in the ruins of the black church, which was destroyed in response to the Nat Turner rebellion. The liminal territory literally speaks to Brent:

As I passed the wreck of the old meeting house, where, before Nat Turner's time, the slaves had been allowed to meet for worship, I seemed to hear my father's voice come from it, bidding me not to tarry till I reached freedom or the grave (91).

Brent's symbolic path forward lies in the threshold between 'freedom or the grave'. The quiet space of the graveyard has always been special for Jacobs because it reminded her of the past, but it now assumes a pro-active, creative role. Out of the dark 'wreck' of a building – that black hole burned in the cultural heart of the slave community, which prefigures the bombed suburban basement of Wideman's novel – emerges a voice urging her to action. It is within this significant dark space, then, that Jacobs is literally inspired to take action within the stagnant world of slavery. The graveyard becomes not a morbid place of reflection, but an inspiring place of family and community identity.

The attic's ability to support radical acts of speech is paralleled by its ability to recover a collective African American history from the featureless plane of capitalist space which has erased all sense of time. The attic seems at first to be defined by an extreme paucity of 'action and of lived situations', which Lefebvre argues 'immediately implies time'. Yet Jacobs converts the 'dismal little hole' into a dynamic site which reclaims history and time (148). The symbolic representation of the attic space recalls the larger, historical sites of slavery. For example, Jacobs makes clear the physical and psychological similarity between the attic hideaway and the slave-hold of a Middle Passage slave ship. Brent is 'deprived of light and air, and with no space to move [her] limbs' (148). The 'loose board floor' recalls the wooden decking of the ship. Indeed, Jacobs compares her period of incarceration to the marooning of 'Robinson Crusoe' on an island in the middle of the Pacific Ocean and fears that she might be 'drowned out of [her] den [...] for the slight roof was getting badly out of repair [...] and [her] clothes and bedding were often drenched' (114, 115, 148-9). The attic becomes marked by the metaphorical presence of thousands of Middle

Passage slaves, thus rehabilitating a sense of African American collective history within the narrative liminal space. The metaphor of the attic as slave ship adds symbolic depth to the liminal space amongst the 'abstract spatialisation embodied in capitalism and technocratic knowledge structures of the state'.²⁴

The liminal site of the attic also reclaims time within the narrative. The liminal space of the attic is the only space within Jacobs's narrative to be given a specific time frame. The 'nearly seven years' which Brent endures in her hiding place reclaims the attic as a space of temporal, lived experience in contrast to the wholly spatial system of chattel slavery which dominates the Southern environment (148). The deliberate marking of 'season after season, year after year' in Brent's cramped enclosure allows Jacobs to develop a sense of Brent's heroic physical and mental endurance and her growth in conviction and determination (148). Jacobs thus succeeds in fashioning Brent's attic into a space alive with a variety of imaginary and symbolic elements, charged with Abolitionist sentiment and deeply aware of history and the passage of time.

In addition to reclaiming time and history, the liminal space of the attic also articulates a variety of black discourses. Firstly, economic discourse, as Jacobs's self-incarceration in the attic subverts the prevailing capitalist mentality by entirely removing her body from the spatial economy of the slave system. The non-productive and almost non-liveable space Jacobs inhabits violates the spatial codes of the dominant social order. The dark space of the attic, despite its enormous physical discomfort and emotional distress, is ultimately a creative space for Jacobs. Through it, she obtains the product of freedom for herself and her children: 'My friends

²⁴ Lefebvre, p. 146.

feared I should become a cripple for life; and I was so weary of my long imprisonment that, had it not been for the hope of serving my children, I should have been thankful to die; but, for their sakes, I was willing to bear on' (127).

Secondly, the attic re-appropriates legal discourse as a space for the articulation of black identity. Legal discourse was often used to enforce the abstract spaces of white power onto the real environment. Near the end of the narrative, for example, Jacobs describes Brent's experience of the spatial impact of the Fugitive Slave Law of 1851 on New York City:

I seldom ventured into the streets; and when it was necessary to do an errand for Mrs. Bruce, or any of the family, I went as much as possible through back streets and by-ways. [...] This state of things, of course, gave rise to many impromptu vigilance committees. Every colored person, and every friend of their persecuted race, kept their eyes wide open (196).

The written text of the 'Law' prescribes how the city streets are negotiated in practice. Fugitives were therefore forced to negotiate the city's marginal spaces, 'through back streets and by-ways'. Jacobs's decision to characterise Brent's attic as a 'loophole of retreat' uses the legal terminology of 'loophole' to suggest that the narrative construction of the attic is similar to the creation of a linguistic trick within the wording of a legal document. Thus Jacobs disturbs both the legal and architectural spaces of slavery, and exposes the multiple discourses of blackness. The narrative construction of a 'loophole of retreat' also interrogates the religious and domestic connotations of a 'retreat' from society. Jacobs re-appropriates the discourses of genteel withdrawal into the domestic sphere and moral and religious duty by associating Brent's space with the space of the nunnery and the domestic house. The skilful mixture of radical and traditional discourses allows Brent to assume the multiple roles of trickster, homemaker and religious.

The attic also re-appropriates the traditionally white, male discourse of logic. Firstly, the attic represents a complex inversion of *perceived* space and practical logic: Jacobs's body, which has been an incubator for slaves, now seeks escape that slavery by being itself crammed into a grotesquely small 'womb'. Secondly, there are the laws and social codes which constitute an accepted discourse on *conceived* space within antebellum Southern society: the Fugitive Slave Law, for example, dismantled the idea of a haven in previously relatively safe Northern states like Massachusetts, and reinforces the status of Jacobs's attic hideaway as illegal. Jacobs begins to develop her own spatial logic as she dismantles that of slavery:

With all my detestation of Dr. Flint, I could hardly wish him a worse punishment... Yet the laws allowed him to be out in the free air, while I, guiltless of crime, was pent up here, as the only means of avoiding the cruelties the laws allowed him to inflict on me! (125)

Jacobs's choice is a stubborn act of social and legal disobedience which breaks all the rules. The clarity which Jacobs offers us lies in the recasting of the attic as a lived space. The lived experience of incarceration in the attic harnesses practical logic and legal coding together with utopian potential (or, rather, practical //logic and //legal coding): an inverse dream of a time when black bodies are not manipulated as objects of slavery.²⁵ The need for inversion springs from a need to compensate for the perverted conception of space promulgated by slavery (the //legal coding). There must be a balancing practical illogic; hence the situating of lived space in inverted or liminal sites.

²⁵ Shields, p. 147.

Liminality and Gender in the American South

Gaston Bachelard's *Poetics of Space*, published in 1958, establishes a crucial shift from a physical to a metaphorical conception of domestic space. In elaborating an idea of 'felicitous' space in the images of the house, the drawer or the nest, for example, Bachelard insists that '[s]pace that has been seized upon by the imagination cannot remain indifferent space, subject to the measures and estimates of the surveyor [...] For it concentrates being within limits that protect'.²⁶ These felicitous spaces are directly opposed to Lefebvre's fetishised abstract spaces. The house, moreover, represents 'the topography of our intimate being... [It] is one of the greatest powers of integration for the thoughts, memories and dreams of mankind'.²⁷ The threshold is positioned at the point where the domestic character of the inside of the house comes into contact with the social, making the threshold the locus for a loss of security for the occupant.

However, this spatial paradigm is reversed within the environment of the Southern plantation house. The house no longer represents 'the powers of integration' but is instead divided and fetishised into spaces of abstract white power. Consequently, the threshold now becomes 'seized upon by the imagination'. In one respect, these felicitous liminal spaces offer security to the 'intimate being' of the slave. The attic and the space under the kitchen floor in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, for example, are figured as temporary spaces of security in which Linda Brent may hide from her master. In another respect, however, because the threshold remains a point of conflict between the domestic and the social, as well as 'free' and 'not-

²⁶ Bachelard, p. 10. This move is echoed in Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic*, which imagines the physical space of the Atlantic as a metaphorical site of cultural exchange.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 6-7.

free', these narrative liminal spaces are also profoundly destabilising. They seek not to 'concentrate [racialised] being' but to interrogate its multiple discourses. In fact, they invert the idea of 'felicitous space' altogether, while remaining opposed to the fetishised spaces of white power. The construction of liminal domestic spaces in the houses featured in Jacobs's narrative enables her to critique the institutional structures of white domesticity by disrupting the economy of work and leisure spaces. However, not only does each liminal domestic space enable a critique of essentialised notions of gendered blackness by interrogating the discourses of motherhood and sexuality, but writing itself represents an alternative space, both legal and imaginative, where Brent (and also Jacobs) is able to resist the prescriptions of nineteenth century domesticity and explore her own authorial power. It is no accident that the hidden domestic spaces in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* are also spaces of writing.

The 'codified spatial practices' which Lefebvre argues confer knowledge and mastery can be traced most clearly in the interior workings of the Southern slave-holding house. Jacobs, when describing the sexual threats made by her master Dr Flint, reveals the house to be a battle ground in the war of knowledge. Flint wants to 'master' Jacobs and consequently divides the household space into separate 'apartments' between which people are traded and exchanged:

After repeated quarrels between the doctor and his wife, he announced his intention to take his youngest daughter, then four years old, to sleep in his apartment. It was necessary that a servant should sleep in the same room [...] I was selected for that office, and informed for what purpose that arrangement had been made. [...] He was well aware of how much I prized my refuge by the side of my old aunt, and he determined to dispossess me of it (31).

The bedrooms of Flint's house have particular currency in this system of spatial exchange because they are crucially identified with both femininity

and sexuality. Jacobs clearly links the bedroom space with vulnerable femininity by identifying the presence of Flint's 'youngest daughter, then four years old' and referring to Brent's habit of sleeping 'by the side of my old aunt'. By refusing to allow Brent to sleep with her female relative and instead forcing her to sleep in his own bedroom, Flint effects a kind of spatial violation symbolising the actual bodily rape he intends. Mrs. Flint's suspicions and jealousy regarding her husband's intentions create themselves into a campaign of terrorism and spying, again hinged crucially upon the surveillance of the fetishised spaces of the household:

[My mistress] now took me to sleep in a room adjoining her own. There I was an object of her especial care, though not of her especial comfort, for she spent many a sleepless night to watch over me [...] At last, I began to be fearful for my life. It had been often threatened; and you can imagine, better than I can describe, what an unpleasant sensation it must produce to wake up in the dead of night and find a jealous woman bending over you (33).

The abstract spaces of white power and domination are practiced through a negotiation of fetishised territories within the house. Both Dr Flint and his wife attempt to exert their control over their own relationship, their own desires and over Jacobs in particular, through complex strategies of spatial manipulation. Both attempt to subdue her by having her sleep in their private rooms. Both attempt to extract or suppress information through containing people within particular areas. The entire house is a field of operations, where every space (including the body space of slaves themselves) has a part to play in the power relations of the slavery household.

Jacobs argues that gender assumes a uniquely powerful significance within the slave system, warning that 'slavery is terrible for men; but it is far more terrible for women. Superadded to the burden common to all, *they* have wrongs, and sufferings, and mortifications peculiarly their own' (77). A

slave woman often had to endure the sexual violation of her own body space by her white master, for example, and Jacobs often presents Brent's body as an overtly feminine site on which power is contested within her narrative. In one episode, for example, Dr Flint asserts his dominance over Brent by cutting her hair. This might seem a symbolic repudiation of Brent's femininity, but in fact acts to reinforce Brent's claim to the gentler sex in the eyes of Jacobs's Northern readership. Intriguingly, Brent seeks to ameliorate her master's legal and physical control over her body by accepting the advances of another white man who is not her master:

It chanced that a white unmarried gentleman had obtained some knowledge of the circumstances in which I was placed. [...] I knew the impassable gulf between us; but [...] it seems less degrading to give one's self, then to submit to compulsion. There is something akin to freedom in having a lover who has not control over you, except that which he gains by kindness and attachment. [...] Revenge, and calculations of interest, were added to flattered vanity and sincere gratitude for kindness. I knew nothing would enrage Dr. Flint so much as to know I favored another; and it was something to triumph over my tyrant even in that small way (55).

Her reaction to the invasion of her body space is informed by an increasing appreciation of her own limited power. In electing the man she sleeps with, Linda exerts a limited agency on an almost hopeless situation. Doing so, she is able to frustrate Dr Flint's intentions and it is in this that Linda gains some degree of autonomy over the spaces of production.

The attic represents a radical gendered space in Jacobs's narrative. Firstly, it problematises spaces of white motherhood and white sexual violence. The attic re-appropriates white discourses of motherhood, showing that they can apply equally to black mothers. Brent insists, for example, that the presence of her children alleviates the 'wretched' conditions of her hideaway:

I suffered for air even more than for light. But I was not comfortless. I heard the voices of my children. There was joy and there was sadness in the sound. It made my tears flow. How I longed to speak to them! (114)

Brent's display of the typical tropes of white femininity, especially her 'tears' and her expressions of 'joy' in the small amount of contact she has with her children, impinges on the racially exclusive nature of these models of behaviour and emphasises, as Jacobs expresses elsewhere in the narrative, that the slave mother 'may be an ignorant creature, degraded by the system that has brutalized her from childhood; but she has a mother's instincts, and is capable of feeling a mother's agonies' (16). Brent should be understood by Jacobs's readership to have as much right to maternal feeling for her children as a white mother.

If the attic calls into question the rhetorical space of white motherhood, it also re-appropriates the black body which has been a site of white sexual violence and intrusion. Making indirect use of the discourses of pregnancy and motherhood, Jacobs constructs the narrative space of the attic as a symbolic womb, an alternative to Brent's own physical womb, which has been threatened by Dr Flint, violated by Mr Sands and has given birth to two of Mr Sand's children. She describes the attic as a 'darkness total', a 'little den' in which the 'heat [...] was intense' (114, 116, 115). Jacobs critiques essentialised notions of the black body as simply a site for the physical inscription of violence at the hands of white men. The metaphorical attic-womb becomes the site of a unique, black, female act of self-production. Brent is now the foetus anticipating the moment of birth: she 'longed to draw in a plentiful draught of fresh air, to stretch my cramped limbs, to have room to stand erect, to feel the earth under my feet' (121). Indeed, the attic articulates multiple discourses of blackness. Jacobs extends the birth metaphor to include discourses of authorship, for

example, imagining in her letter to Amy Post that her manuscript of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* emerges from a chrysalis. While white experience of motherhood is portrayed in Jacobs's narrative as disempowering, the narrative representation of liminality as pregnancy empowers black women to produce books and themselves as much as children.

In a brief episode from *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Jacobs constructs another gendered liminal site which is both felicitous and disturbing. The episode concerns the loss of Brent's daughter, Ellen, under the foundations of the plantation house belonging to Dr Flint's son, to which they have been forcibly taken. Brent recalls how,

as it was near noon, I ventured to go down in search of her. The great house was raised two feet above the ground. I looked under it, and saw her about midway, fast asleep. I crept under and drew her out. [...] That night [Dr Flint] sent Ellen a biscuit and a cup of sweetened milk. This generosity surprised me. I learned afterwards, that in the afternoon he had killed a large snake, which crept from under the house (89).

The construction of this narrative liminal space under the foundations of the plantation house symbolically disturbs the abstract spaces of power encoded within the building above.

In another minor episode of the narrative, Jacobs interrogates a traditional domestic space and reveals radical discourses of race and gender within it. The episode concerns the decision to hide the newly-escaped Jacobs in a space beneath the kitchen floor of a neighbouring house. The slave Betty, who works as a cook in this house, has heard a rumour that Brent is about to be discovered and decides to hide her immediately:

She locked the door, and lifted up a plank in the floor. A buffalo skin and a bit of carpet were spread for me to lie on, and a quilt thrown over me. 'Stay dar,' said she, 'till I sees if dey know 'bout you (103).

This liminal space disrupts the traditional spaces of domesticity represented by the kitchen and the repressive spaces of slavery represented by the slave cook. Slaves were expected to prepare food for the white family and tight controls were kept on the amount of food used, with 'provisions [...] weighed out by the pound and ounce, three times a day' (12). The space of the kitchen was used to reinforce the abstract spaces of white power at work in Southern society more generally. Jacobs describes Mrs Flint as 'totally deficient in energy', but maintaining a tight control over spaces of domestic production:

If dinner was not served at the exact time on that particular Sunday, she would station herself in the kitchen, and wait till it was dished, and then spit in all the kettles and pans that had been used for cooking. She did this to prevent the cook and her children from eking out their meagre fare with the remains of the gravy and other scrapings (12).

The fetishised spaces of domesticity extended to the figure of the slave cook herself. 'Old Betty', like Dinah in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, is representative of the trope of the Southern black mammy. The black body of this figure is inscribed with white discourses of power: its corpulence is debilitating; it is de-sexualised; its smiling face and cheery demeanour corroborate the myth of the happy slave.

However, in hiding Brent under the kitchen floorboards, 'Old Betty' literally and figuratively undermines these fetishised white power structures. She warns, 'If dey comes rummaging 'mong *my* tings, dey'll get one bressed sarssin from dis 'ere nigger' (103).²⁸ Betty expresses a fierce appreciation of what she regards as her own property – '*my* tings' – and her symbolic repossession of the liminal space under the kitchen allows Linda to participate covertly in the traffic of the house. The space critiques

²⁸ This idea of the kitchen as a space able to foster limited resistance to slavery's effects springs in large part from the example of Dinah's kitchen, Dinah being a slave cook appearing in Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

essentialised notions of black femininity, and exposes multiple discourses of race and gender. Linda's position under the kitchen floorboards is an active use of liminal space to preserve her freedom, collect information and to maintain her contact with society:

In my shallow bed I had but just room enough to bring my hands to my face to keep the dust out of my eyes; for Betty walked over me twenty times in an hour, passing from the dresser to the fireplace. When she was alone, I could hear her pronouncing anathemas over Dr. Flint and all his tribe... When the housemaids were about, she has sly ways of drawing them out, that I might hear what they would say. She would repeat stories she had heard about my being in this, or that, or the other place. To which they would answer, that I was not fool enough to be staying round there; that I was in Philadelphia or New York before this time (103).

Liminality and Religion in the American South

Jacobs signifies upon the binary model of Christianity, representing liminal spaces within the abstract zones of religion and the physical zones of the church. She politicised these traditional Christian territories by inscribing discourses of race and resistance upon them. In pointing out the hypocrisy of rigid moral codes in America, Jacobs critiques them through the presence of 'in-between' spaces. Within Jacobs's text there is a clash between two different orders. The latter is the one described above, where the limen represents a stronghold of creative resistance to the effects of slavery. The former, however, derives from a more conservative, Christian order, and is one that Jacobs ostensibly seems to subscribe to. This Christian order works on a simple binary system. Thus the underground is associated with evil and lack of morality, while height is associated with heaven and good. Jacobs describes her eventual seduction by Mr Sands in such westernised Christian terms:

What could I do? I thought and thought, till I became desperate, and made a plunge into the abyss...There may be sophistry in all this; but the condition of a slave confuses all principles of morality, and, in fact, renders the practice of them impossible (55).

However, Jacobs does not accept Christian binaries wholesale. In constructing liminal religious zones in her narrative, she articulates an alternative moral geography which critiques the spaces of slavery and articulates multiple discourses of blackness.

The white clergyman has traditional concept of liminal space as negative. The 'pious Mr Pike', the Episcopal clergyman to the white community to which Mr Flint belonged, takes great delight in scourging his occasional black audience thus:

You that live in town are eye-servants behind your master's back. Instead of serving your masters faithfully, which is pleasing in the sight of your heavenly Master, you are idle, and shirk your work. God sees you. [...] Instead of being engaged in worshipping him, you are hidden away somewhere, feasting on your master's substance; tossing coffee-grounds with some wicked fortune teller, or cutting cards with another old hag [...] You sneak into the back streets, or among the bushes, to pitch coppers. Although your master may not find you out, God sees you; and he will punish you (70-1).

Here, the minister explicitly links liminal zones such as back streets, bushes and hidden rooms with moral and religious corruption. Yet the slave congregation turns the minister's own tools against him by playing on the double entendre of the hymn lyrics. They sing, 'as though they were free as the birds':

Ole Satan though he had a mighty aim;
He missed my soul, and caught my sins.
Cry Amen, cry Amen, cry Amen to God!

He took my sins up on his back;
Went muttering and grumbling down to hell.
Cry Amen, cry Amen, cry Amen to God!

Ole Satan's church is here below.
Up to God's free church I hope to go.
Cry Amen, cry Amen, cry Amen to God! (73)

The axis of horizontal and vertical movement constructed by these words reclassifies the minister's church as an alternative hell hole: 'Satan's church

is here below'. However, in the midst of this act of undermining, the slave singers still cling to a traditional wish to go 'up' to heaven.²⁹ The rhetoric of the slave singers announces one intention while practicing another, signifying on the intentions of the white clergyman.

In summary, Jacobs's decision to structure her narrative around loosely related 'incidents' destabilises such teleological forms of traditional spiritual narrative. It does this by continuously exposing liminal sites which devalue the representative merit of any eventual goal. Each liminal space articulates a radical, female consciousness that seeks to reinterpret women's experience of the restrictions of slavery in new and provocative ways. Among the many in-between spaces scattered throughout the text of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* without any attempt at a redemptive design, the attic and the space under the kitchen floor, for example, are more powerful in symbolising the liminal nature of the Southern slave experience and in expressing a radical gendered sensibility than any resting place that Brent can construct in the North.

Moreover, there is a generative tension in Jacobs's narrative between a desire to destabilise a capitalist phenomenology of space which supports the structures of the Southern slave system, and a desire to create a parallel phenomenology of spatial resistance. The attic and the hole under the kitchen floor, for example, are always struggling to burst their confines and destabilise themselves, having proved so effective in disrupting the essentialised notions of blackness encoded within the rigid spaces of the

²⁹ See Frederick Douglass's appeal to his readers: 'Judge me not by the heights to which I have risen but by the depths from which I have come'; Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage & My Freedom* [1855], ed. and introd. by John David Smith (London: Penguin Press, 2003). Here we again find the idea of verticality to describe morality, where the journey from slavery to freedom – and therefore from evil to good – is figured in terms of ascendancy. However, Douglass strikes out against this moral positioning by clearly allying himself with the 'depths' (of slavery, and history) even from his own present position of success. 'Depths' are now a breeding ground for greatness as well as a place of moral degradation.

town and the white domestic sphere. Articulating a sense of the dynamism of slave strategies of resistance by anchoring them in localised geographical points seems contradictory. Jacobs chooses to maintain this tension in part because such points were efficient in attracting the imagination of her overwhelmingly white, northern, abolitionist readership. Yet Jacobs's narrative liminal spaces are much more than anchors: they are black holes within which the female black subject is able to challenge the rigid and patriarchal structures of prejudice and oppression imposed by slavery. In this context, the following chapter will develop the construction of narrative liminal spaces in African American literature by examining their function in Ralph Ellison's novel of the Great Migration era, *Invisible Man*. Published over ninety years after Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Ellison's novel is similarly interested in disrupting teleological discourses of race, although he is most concerned with post-emancipation discourses of uplift, migration and urbanism. While Jacobs's narrative articulates a radical female sensibility, moreover, *Invisible Man* interrogates the relationship between subjectivity and surrealism.

Chapter Two:

A Fall into Space: Deterritorialisation and the Rhizome in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*

In a brief episode of the 1952 novel, *Invisible Man*, Ralph Ellison's narrator relates the liminal imagery of the blueprint to his own desires and self-conception. The episode concerns the migrant narrator's encounter in Manhattan with Peter Wheatstraw, a blues-singing street eccentric, and suggests Ellison's sense of the inadequacy of prefabricated blueprints of Southern migration and mechanical discourses of racial uplift.¹ Wheatstraw pushes a cart full of discarded blueprints through the streets of Harlem. 'Here I got 'bout a hundred pounds of blueprints and I couldn't build nothing! [...] Folks is always making plans and changing 'em'. The narrator replies, 'Yes that's right [...] but that's a mistake. You have to stick to the plan'. Invisible Man's naïve confidence in a rigid scheme of migration and success meets with bemusement from a 'suddenly grave' Wheatstraw – 'You kinda young, daddy-o', he retorts (172-175). The folk-inspired trickster figure of Wheatstraw would rather Invisible Man turn instead to the forgotten blueprints in his cart and become a master of his own space by exploiting the liminality these 'texts' represent.

The liminal imagery of the blueprint is also invoked by Harriet Jacobs in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* as a way of destabilising imagined migrations northward. Dr Flint, the legal owner of Jacobs's fugitive narrator, Linda Brent, is convinced she has travelled, like so many other runaway slaves,

¹ Paul Allen Anderson, 'Ralph Ellison on Lyricism and Swing', *American Literary History* 17.2 (2005), pp. 280-306 (p. 290).

to a city in the North. In order to distract attention from her near-by hiding place, Brent becomes a trickster by deciding to pit her 'cunning' against her master's machinations:

In order to make him believe I was in New York, I resolved to write him a letter dated from that place. I sent for my friend Peter [...] [and] expressed a wish for a New York paper, to ascertain the names of some of the streets. He run his hand into his pocket, and said, 'Here is half a one, that was round a cap I bought of a pedler yesterday.' [...] Early the next morning, I seated myself near the little aperture to examine the newspaper. It was a piece of the *New York Herald*; and, for once, the paper that systematically abuses the colored people, was made to render them a service. Having obtained what information I wanted concerning streets and numbers, I wrote two letters, one to my grandmother, the other to Dr. Flint (128).

The scrap of newspaper, which has been smuggled South by a 'pedler' (also reminiscent of the trickster Wheatstraw), performs a similar unsettling function to Wheatstraw's forgotten blueprints by projecting an imagined urban geography into the 'little aperture' of Brent's hideaway. The scene suggests Jacobs's sense of the potency of this liminal map which, with its imagined 'streets and numbers', tricks both the anti-slavery rhetoric of the *New York Herald* into 'rendering [slaves] a service' and undermines Dr Flint's efforts to pursue Brent along pre-determined escape routes.²

However, while Jacobs's newspaper blueprint remains fundamentally engaged in a critique of slavery, transforming her immobile North Carolina attic into a radical, 'speaking' space that reaches out imaginatively to Northern landscapes, Ellison is concerned instead to critique the teleological discourses of racial uplift and migration that emerge after slavery in the subsequent post-Emancipation era. In materialising Brent's blueprint in the real spaces of New

² Founded in 1835 by James Gordon Bennett (1795-1872), the *New York Herald* openly expressed its anti-black, anti-abolitionist bias in its regular denunciations of the *Tribune's* Horace Greeley and his 'nigger worshippers'. See Frank L. Mott, *American Journalism*, 3rd edn (New York: Macmillan Press, 1962), p. 350.

York City, *Invisible Man* expresses a comprehensive desire to disrupt the urban realism that was so vital to Brent's imaginative letter-writing project, and to frustrate more fully the end-orientated mythos that still engrosses Brent at the end of Jacobs's narrative.³ The deterritorialised text of Brent's newspaper blueprint does indeed find its parallel in urban space, but in the form of Wheatstraw's blueprints, which are more about how to ride than write the city's liminal spaces. As he takes leave of Ellison's narrator on a street corner, Wheatstraw emphasises the importance of trickster-like 'cunning' in negotiating an alternative route to the rigid structures of migration and urbanism:

'Well, daddy-o, it's been good talking with a youngster from the old country but I got to leave you now. This here's one of them good ole downhill streets. I can coast a while and won't be worn out at the end of the day. Damn if I'm-a let 'em run *me* into my grave' (175).

As discussed in the introduction, this chapter will examine the construction of narrative liminal spaces in Ellison's novel of the Great Migration era. The linear discourses of migration and concurrent discourses of racial uplift are manifested in fixed points in the migration landscape between the South and the North. This is because these discourses are teleological; their potential is entirely invested in the idea of an end-point. Thus, for example, the white line of the highway, the New York City Men's House and the Liberty Paint factory are architectural points within *Invisible Man* which articulate the ideological goal of the Southern migrant (180). Ellison disrupts these

³ Jacobs recognises the potential for resolution offered by the Underground Railroad in contrast to the profound dislocations of the Middle Passage, but chooses to defer it beyond the end of the narrative: 'The dream of my life is still not realised', Brent protests, 'I do not sit with my children in a home of my own. I still long for a hearthstone of my own, however humble' (201).

teleological discourses by constructing narrative liminal spaces which operate a deterritorialising model of race wherein many possible discourses of blackness are interrogated. Alan Nadel has argued that Ellison prosecutes the same disruptive agenda with regard to the Western literary canon, and that his novel works as a piece of literary criticism. It 'engages the issues of marginality and decentring, of ethno- and logo centrism, of encoding and interpretation in ways which anticipate much contemporary European theory and much American re-historicizing'.⁴ In signifying upon the European models of James Joyce's *Ulysses* and Dostoevsky's *Notes from the Underground*, together with Richard Wright's short story, 'The Man Who Lived Underground', Ellison is concerned to exert a black difference on the spaces of the European canon in the same manner as with American spatial discourses of power, economics and aspiration.⁵ Deterritorialisation disengages space from the discourses of verticality and 'bigness' that govern the development of American culture in general and urban culture in particular, and which privilege height and size as the gauge of cultural success.⁶ Ellison, like Jacobs, insists on the importance of real space in a discursive paradigm of race, but his narrative liminal spaces – the most important of which are Invisible Man's cellar and the New York City subway system – seek to disrupt the Harlem tenements and Southern highway in more surreal and profound ways.

⁴ Alan Nadel, *Invisible Criticism: Ralph Ellison and the American Canon* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1988), p. xii.

⁵ James Joyce, *Ulysses* [1922] (London: Picador, 1997); Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Notes from the Underground*, [1864] (London: Vintage, 1993); Wright, Richard, 'The Man Who Lived Underground', in *Cross Section: a collection of new American writing*, ed. by Edwin Seaver (New York: L. B. Fischer Press, 1944), pp. 58-102.

⁶ For discourses of verticality, size and 'bigness' in American urban planning, see for example Rem Koolhaas, Hans Werlemann and Bruce Mau, *S,M,L,XL* (New York: The Monacelli Press, 1994), and Douglas Tallack, *Twentieth-century America: the intellectual and cultural context* (London: Longman Press, 1991).

Desire and the Migration Narrative: Deleuze and Guattari

Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari have argued in *Anti-Oedipus* and *A Thousand Plateaus* for the importance of dynamic space to the development of modes of thought. Known as the philosophers of desire, their work proposes the idea of space as alive, composed of 'rates of flow' within which the intransigent force of desire operates but is continuously subject to regulation. Life, however, is a string of 'creative encounters' with space which, at best, result in an estrangement from and a dramatic transformation of the desiring self – a process that Deleuze argues results in 'all manner of "becomings"'.⁷ These radical encounters occur at the threshold, at the junction of things – namely, in liminal spaces. *Invisible Man* is similarly concerned with role of dynamic models of thought in shaping ideas of race and identity. Discourses of desire and race are under constant pressure from all sectors of society to become a desire-for-something, which is the only form in which they can be regulated.⁸ Thus, the teleological discourses of Southern migration and racial uplift seek to channel the multiple processes of racial consciousness and self-determination that were set in motion by Emancipation, into one centrally defined discourse manifested in fixed geographical and architectural points. Ellison's novel confronts this system of homogenisation by constructing a string of narrative liminal spaces which privilege the process of 'becoming' rather

⁷ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* [1980], trans. by Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), pp. 3, 21; Gilles Deleuze, 'On the 'Crystalline Regime'', trans. by D. N. Rodowick, *Art and Text*, 34 (1989), pp. 21-27 (p.22).

⁸ Ian Buchanan, 'Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari', in *John Hopkins Guide to Literary Theory and Criticism*, 2nd edn (2005), available at URL: <<http://litguide.press.jhu.edu/entries/index.html>> [accessed 3 August 2007].

than arrival, and allow the racialised self to become estranged from regulated discourses of desire.

Discourses of Southern Migration and Racial Uplift

Invisible Man initially elaborates these teleological discourses of racial uplift and Southern migration in several episodes spanning the first section of the novel, which deals with the narrator's early, naive years growing up in the Southern United States. One of these episodes involves the narrator's encounter with Mr Norton, a wealthy benefactor of the Southern college which he attends. The episode suggests Ellison's sense of the natural ambiguity and plurality of racial discourses of desire by mocking Norton's stout belief in the architecture of racial uplift. 'Young man [...] you are bound to a great dream and to a beautiful monument', Norton announces. Invisible Man, who has been asked to take Norton on a scenic drive, wonders in response, 'Was he kidding me? [...] He raised his head and our eyes met for an instant in the glass, then I lowered mine to the blazing white line that divided the highway' (44). The white line channels the desire of Ellison's narrator to please his white patron – 'I felt that I was sharing in a great work, [...] with the car leaping leisurely beneath the pressure of my foot' – and divides the space of travel, thus symbolising the segregated, linear discourses of advancement and 'progress' that Norton hopes to reinforce in the narrator (39). The line's whiteness itself becomes its own destination, clearly symbolising the racial ideal which Invisible Man is asked to mimic.

Ellison loosely based the representation of his narrator's Southern college on the prestigious Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute established

by Booker T. Washington in Alabama in 1892, and it is Washington's philosophy of racial uplift, self-reliance and accommodation to the segregationist principles of Southern society, expressed in his famous 1895 Atlanta address that urged African Americans to 'cast down your buckets where you are', which Ellison critiques through the college architecture.⁹ The highway line's 'hostile' and unremitting whiteness is further manifested in the features of the college itself, whose buildings are adorned with linear 'white pillars like those of an old plantation manor house', whose 'small white Home Economics practice cottage' is 'whiter still in the moonlight' and whose 'whitewashed reviewing stand' stands in the courtyard (99, 100, 34, 36). The intertwined discourses of racial uplift and Southern migration are thus fixed in solid, architectural loci, what Deleuze and Guattari call 'points or positions', as a way of regulating the desire for change.¹⁰ Of particular importance is the way in which Ellison ensures the progressive, upwards gesture of the pillars and the potential of the 'practice' building are undercut by a symbolic return to antebellum sites of power and surveillance through the 'reviewing stand', and the diminutive use of 'cottage' in relation to the 'plantation manor house'. The administrative correspondence between architectural points and curtailed black desire is one Invisible Man himself recognises: 'In this brief moment of passage I became aware of the connection between these lawns and buildings and my hopes and dreams' (99).

However, Ellison creates out of the rigid white spaces a 'line of flight' which disturbs, even here, the parameters of regulated desire. Deleuze and

⁹ Washington, 'Atlanta Compromise', p. 583. Ellison himself won a scholarship to study music at Tuskegee Institute from 1933 to 1936.

¹⁰ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus* [1972], trans. by Robert Hurley, Mark Seem and Helen R. Lane (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), p. 8.

Guattari describe a 'line of flight' as 'a fibre strung across borderlines' and as such it is a means of deterritorialisation, of thinking afresh:

Multiplicities are defined by the outside: by the abstract line, the line of flight or deterritorialisation according to which they change in nature and connect with other multiplicities. The plane of consistency (grid) is the outside of all multiplicities. The line of flight marks: the reality of a finite number of dimensions that the multiplicity effectively fills.¹¹

Ellison's sense of the dynamism and plurality of racial discourses of desire disrupts the vertical principles of uplift upon which the college is founded and his text begins to draw out horizontal planes of meaning in response to the growing sense of repression Invisible Man feels on campus, to the extent that even the traditional boundaries between text and reader are threatened. The narrator's drive with Mr Norton goes disastrously wrong, and when Invisible Man naively takes his white patron to the local Golden Day bar for refreshment, they are both accidentally caught up in a brawl with the inhabitants of a nearby insane asylum. From within the mass of 'scuffling, reeling men', Norton's face is suddenly thrust towards the narrator in a 'mass of whiteness looming two inches before my eyes' (86). Invisible Man is terrified by the vision:

He was like a formless white death, suddenly appeared before me, a death which had been there all the time and which had now revealed itself in the madness of the Golden Day (86).

The passage signifies upon the symbolism of whiteness in Melville's *Moby Dick*, where Ahab claims, '[t]o me, the white whale is [a] wall, shoved near to me'.¹² As with the white spaces in Melville's novel, a thread may be drawn between

¹¹ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, pp. 249, 9.

¹² Herman Melville, *Moby Dick* [1851], ed. by Hershel Parker and Harrison Hayford, 2nd edn (New York: W. W. Norton Press, 2002), p. 162.

the singularities of the 'white line' of the Southern highway, the human face of Mr Norton (also figured in 'his white forehead livid where it had scraped the screen' and in the moon 'as white as a white man's bloodshot eye') and the white page of the text (86, 98, 110). Ellison, however, enacts the black difference. The radical line of flight between these white spaces destabilises not just the textual integrity of the narrative but also critiques the linear discourse of racial uplift, which is of major concern to Ellison, in a manner that anticipates the novel's later exploration of urban liminality. Indeed, Ellison's narrative puts Invisible Man, 'Oh my Lawd, in the WHALE'S BELLY' (10).

Ellison's focus in the first section of the novel, however, remains mainly on the composition of linear motifs of migration. Ellison interrogates other, traditional motifs of flight as variants of the Southern migration model, for example. In an episode which precedes his eventual expulsion from college, the narrator has a dream in which his grandfather warns him of the danger of false letters:

He told me to open my brief case and read what was inside and I did, finding an official envelope stamped with the state seal; and inside the envelope I found another and another, endlessly, and I thought I would fall of weariness. 'Them's years', he said. 'Now open that one.' And I did and in it I found an engraved document containing a short message in letters of gold. 'Read it', my grandfather said. 'Out loud!'

'To Whom It May Concern', I intoned. 'Keep This Nigger-Boy Running' (33).

Unlike Jacobs's 'cunning' letters, written from her attic in the hope of tricking her master and disrupting premeditated routes of escape, the letters which appear in *Invisible Man* are both complicit with rigid discourses of racial uplift and a crude re-interpretation of pre-determined models of black flight. The narrator's grandfather warns that white lines, be they highway markings,

college pillars or paper trails, are all designed to regulate the unruly multiplicities and movements of black identity. These white lines become the lines of cocaine which regulate the urban ghettos of John Edgar Wideman's Philadelphia, explored in Chapters Three and Four. The 'Nigger-Boy Running' has replaced the mythic figure of the 'flying African' as a symbolic articulation of African American identity; the restorative flight back to an African homeland is forfeit to an endless series of choreographed acts of running away.

The principle of the 'Nigger-Boy Running' assumes architectural substance as the narrator now makes the inevitable journey to New York City, in order to fulfil his dreams of becoming a success. His grandfather's letters find their narrative echo in the letters of recommendation offered to him by the college principal. Invisible Man dutifully delivers these to potential employers in New York City, unaware that their contents abuse him. The letters regulate his desire to make a success of himself just as they regulate his engagement with the unfamiliar urban landscape, although the dream-like quality of his grandfather's warning remains strong:

I distributed my letters in the mornings, and saw the city during the afternoons. Walking about the streets, sitting on subways beside whites, eating with them in the same cafeterias [...] gave me the eerie, out-of-focus sensation of a dream (168).

Nevertheless, the real script of these letters mingles the rhetoric of racial uplift with a perpetuation of this sterile vision of migration: 'it is to the best interests of the great work which we are dedicated to perform, that he continue undisturbed in these vain hopes while remaining as far as possible from our midst' (191).

Deterritorialisation and Liminal Discourse

Ellison interrogates the multiplicity of racial discourses of desire by constructing narrative liminal spaces within *Invisible Man* which challenge the territorialised discourses of Southern migration and racial uplift and critique the essentialised notions of blackness which they promulgate. The narrative liminal spaces accomplish this through a process of deterritorialisation, which Deleuze and Guattari have defined as an estrangement from the self that precipitates transformation or the experience of 'becoming'. This shift from the rigid self to the fluid self-in-process allows Ellison to articulate the complex, ambiguous but too often silenced experience of blackness in mid-twentieth century America.

The abandoned cellar which first appears in the prologue of *Invisible Man* is a radical liminal space positioned in the threshold between 'a home – or a hole in the ground, as you will' (6). Ellison, in the introduction to the thirtieth anniversary edition of *Invisible Man*, makes explicit the role of the liminal underground in discourses of innovation, and possibility, arguing that 'the voice of invisibility issued from deep within our complex American underground'.¹³ It is the main narrative site where blackness is deconstructed. Ellison's narrator has become disillusioned by his experiences in New York City and when he accidentally falls into a coal cellar beneath a Harlem tenement, the incident prompts him to abandon his old life and take up permanent residence underground. In this space, lit by 1,369 light bulbs powered by energy siphoned from the Monopolated Light & Power Company, *Invisible Man* listens to jazz, smokes dope and narrates the ensuing novel. The cellar

¹³ Ellison, 'Introduction', in Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* [1952] 30th Anniversary Edition, with an Introduction by the author dated November 1981 (New York: Random House, 1982).

symbolises the experience of slavery and recalls both the nineteenth century Middle Passage slave ships and the cramped attic hideaway in Jacobs's narrative, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Invisible Man describes the location of his cellar, for example, 'in a section of the basement that was shut off and forgotten during the nineteenth century', and claims that it has 'a stench in the air, which [...] might be the smell of death' (6, 580). Likewise, Invisible Man's drug-fuelled reveries duplicate the exploitative spaces of capitalism that Jacobs identifies in the Southern antebellum town. His cellar, for example, becomes the stage for an image of '*a beautiful girl the color of ivory pleading in a voice like my mother's as she stood before a group of slaveowners who bid for her naked body* [original italics]' (9).

However, the cellar also symbolically destabilises the physical structures of white power. Firstly, in describing the events that precipitate his discovery of the cellar, Invisible Man appropriates and inverts the imperative discourse of Southern migration which has shaped his experiences of New York up to now. Caught up in a race riot where the 'walks' of Harlem 'shimmered like shattered mirrors' with broken glass and 'all the street's signs were dead', Invisible Man takes refuge in the familiar strategy of running away: 'I ran through the night, ran within myself. Ran' (537, 534). This strategy, of course, parodies the figure of 'Nigger-Boy Running' which his grandfather had mocked, and itself critiques the type of black identity that is produced through thoughtless, compulsive motion through space. The cellar, however, offers a different mode of spatial practice. Invisible Man describes how

someone, for some reason, had removed the manhole cover and I felt myself plunge down, down; a long drop that ended upon a load of coal that send up a cloud of dust, and I lay in the black dark upon the black coal no longer running (565).

The liminal space of the cellar disrupts the unthinking discourses of running and the linear coordinates of migration. In contrast to the 'blazing' presence of the highway's 'white line' that dominates the novel's early Southern sections, for example, *Invisible Man* describes his present underground hole in New York as 'blackness' and 'space – unbroken and impenetrable' (567). By shifting the discourse of race into a wholly unregulated, 'unbroken' spatial dimension, Ellison challenges the linear logic of the white line, which produces a social idea of whiteness that is directive as well as divisive, cutting the road in half. Alternatively, the cellar has been completely dislocated from the vertical tenements and skyscrapers of its urban context, and thus disengaged from any participation in the mythic landscape of the Southern migrant. The cellar is no longer a destination, but a radical, deterritorialised event that rejects all fixed spatial determinants.

Secondly, the cellar's liminal space challenges the rigid social structures of segregation encoded within the fabric of the New York tenement. After the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863 abolished slavery in the South, racial discrimination became regulated by the so-called Jim Crow Laws which enforced strict segregation along colour-lines. The 'separate but equal' dictum remained in force from the landmark U.S. Supreme Court decision on the case of *Plessy v. Ferguson* in 1896 to the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Rental signs in the large northern cities exploited the logic of spatial segregation, like the disingenuous sign that confronts Lutie in Ann Petry's *The Street*, advertising 'three rooms, steam heat, parquet floors, respectable tenants. Reasonable'. Lutie correctly surmises that the term 'respectable' disguises a multitude of the unwanted – 'the good people, the bad people, the children, the dogs, the god-

awful smells' – but she is compelled to accept the rooms, nevertheless.¹⁴ In contrast, Invisible Man claims to 'live rent free in a building rented strictly to whites' and in so doing he cheats both the landlord and the principle of segregation itself (6). Invisible Man's liminal 'hole' stands in contrast to the vast structural system of 'filthy traps' that extends across Petry's urban landscape.¹⁵

The underground is a relatively common, stable political allegory within post-war African American literature. It becomes absorbed into the zeitgeist of socially-conscious black literature, most prominently championed by Richard Wright. 'The Man Who Lived Underground', for example, was based on a 1941 story in the magazine *True Detective*, in which a white sewerman launches a series of burglaries on a Los Angeles neighbourhood from a secret basement lair. Wright, in relocating the action to an anonymous Northern city (probably Chicago) and recasting the white thief as an innocent black servant framed by the police for murder, gave the 'matter-of-fact underground of the Los Angeles story a deeper allegorical resonance of social and racial alienation'.¹⁶ As David Pike argues, the 'condition of living underground' was developed in literature of the modern period as a method of analysing the social conditions facing African Americans in post-war society.¹⁷ Ellison, however, rejects the Black Nationalism advanced by Wright through these metaphors as much as he discounts the Du Boisian trajectory expressed in *Souls of Black Folk*, which required the synthesis of two different selves. He reaches beyond common political allegory to represent the limen not as a familiar space of protest, but

¹⁴ Ann Petry, *The Street* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Press, 1946), pp. 3-4.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 73.

¹⁶ David L Pike, 'Urban Nightmares and Future Visions: Life Beneath New York', *Wide Angle* 20.4 (1998), pp. 9-50 (p. 20).

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

as an alien environment wherein the artificial category of 'blackness', over and above the trenchant, and similarly artificial spatial discourses of whiteness, is dismantled and interrogated.

Having challenged the rigid social structures of segregation and migration through a symbolic disordering of the fabric of the New York tenement and the white highway line, the cellar further destabilises essentialised notions of blackness by uncoupling racial identity from the social imperative of W. E. B. Du Bois's 'talented tenth'. Speaking to the African American community in 1903, Du Bois advocated 'developing the Best of this race that they may guide the Mass away from the contamination and death of the Worst'.¹⁸ In contrast, the cellar is a site of an estrangement from Du Bois's idea of the 'best' racialised self. As the narrator is warned by a voice from the darkness, "*Black will make you [...] or black will un-make you*" [original italics]' (9-10). On reaching the liminal space of the cellar, Invisible Man has to 'un-make' his cherished vision of a college-educated, socially acceptable black Southerner. He is forced to confront his own blackness without the props of social aspiration or institutional correction. The literal black space of the cellar symbolises Invisible Man's confrontation with his own subjective blackness, which threatens to estrange him from his previous personality.

Deleuze and Guattari have explored this estrangement of the self from regulated discourses of desire and selfhood through the idea of schizophrenia.¹⁹ They conceive of schizophrenia as a 'deterritorialised and deterritorialising mode of thought', by which they mean a mode of thought that

¹⁸ W. E. B. Du Bois, 'The Talented Tenth', in *The Negro Problem: A Series of Articles by Representative Negroes of To-day*, ed. by Booker T. Washington, et al. (New York: Arno Press, 1903), pp. 31-75.

¹⁹ See Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus* and *A Thousand Plateaus*.

is somehow radically 'in-between' the usual dialectical coordinates of identity and non-identity, not as a 'third term' but rather as the inherent potential of both.²⁰ Deleuzian schizophrenia, then, is ideologically related to Du Bois's idea of 'double consciousness' which conceives blackness as a profound estrangement of the racialised self from its own consciousness— what he called 'this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others'.²¹ Invisible Man's cellar, by virtue of its abandoned, subterranean position beneath Harlem, is the architectural manifestation of his own racialised 'schizophrenia' because it exists outside the physical boundaries which usually define identity. Ellison re-appropriates Du Bois's discourse of doubleness, and argues that the in-between space that it offers can itself be the source of a creative and complex black identity.

Indeed, Ellison builds this in-between space into the fabric of the text. Like Harriet Jacobs's slave narrative, *Invisible Man* is conspicuous in its deferral of a final resolution. However, while the absence of such a resolution impairs the traditional narrative arc of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, it bolsters the structure of *Invisible Man*. Ellison's narrator is on the brink of emerging from his cellar at the end of the novel: 'I'm coming out', he declares on the last page, 'And I suppose it's damn well time' (581). Yet the novel would be nothing if it followed him out into Harlem; its symbolic strength lies in the ability of his liminal interment itself to articulate the ambiguity and multiplicity of blackness. Of particular importance, then, is the narrative technique of continuous distancing or postponement of the emergence event, so that it

²⁰ Buchanan, see URL.

²¹ Du Bois, *Souls*, p. 10.

expands the liminal space to such an extent that it swallows or absorbs everything, like a black hole.

The cellar therefore becomes the locus for an interrogation of multiple discourses of blackness. The novel's prologue describes a vision that Invisible Man experiences while underground which enacts, through a series of fantastic liminal sites, the process Deleuze and Guattari term 'liberated desire'. Invisible Man's progress through these sites elaborates a black spatial surrealism enhanced by the Louis Armstrong blues record that he plays on his radio-phonograph:

That night I found myself hearing not only in time, but in space as well. I not only entered the music but descended, like Dante, into its depths. And *beneath the swiftness of the hot tempo there was a slower tempo and a cave and I entered it and looked around and heard an old woman singing a spiritual [...] and beneath that lay a still lower level on which I saw a beautiful girl the color of ivory pleading in a voice like my mother's as she stood before a group of slaveowners who bid for her naked body, and below that I found a lower level and a more rapid tempo and I hear someone shout:*

"Brothers and sisters, my text this morning is the 'Blackness of Blackness'" [original italics]' (9).

The surrealism of Ellison's phantasmagoria magnifies the imaginary leap Jacobs makes in her letters with her fantasy 'streets and numbers' because Ellison's art is free of the political duties of abolitionism. In *Invisible Man*, the urban and Southern landscapes have collapsed to such an extent that historical space has come completely under the command of Ellison's own imagination. The bizarre dimensions of Invisible Man's vision recall the elongated sculpture of Alberto Giacometti (which features heavily in John Edgar Wideman's *Philadelphia Fire*), the anti-colonial surrealism of Negritude writers like Aimé Césaire, and also prefigure the speculative postcolonial landscapes of Nalo

Hopkinson, all of which share an interest in interrogating identity against the possibilities of space.²²

Although *Invisible Man* himself likens his experience to the descent of Dante into Hell, his journey doesn't conform to the moral prescriptions of the *Inferno*. Instead, each successive liminal space, from the cellar to the 'cave', from the imagined slave auction block to the church platform from whence the sermon is broadcast to 'Brothers and sisters', privileges indeterminacy and expresses states of 'becoming', rather than the binaries of 'being' and 'Nothingness' offered by segregated American society.

By re-imagining the auction block as a narrative liminal space where *Invisible Man* confuses the 'ivory' girl on sale with his own mother, for example, Ellison transforms the flat economic transaction into an exchange alive with Freudian anxiety and anticipatory of further revelations of self-knowledge. Likewise, *Invisible Man's* encounter with the old woman mourning the death of her master transforms the binaries of master and slave. 'Maybe freedom lies in hating', *Invisible Man* suggests to her. 'Naw, son, it's in loving', replies the woman. 'I loved [my master] and give him the poison and he withered away like a frost-bit apple' (11). Freedom from slavery is thus imagined as the product of ambiguity, a love that kills. The possibility drives *Invisible Man* towards an incipient realisation of his own black self, choreographed as a bizarre re-birthing sequence: 'I wandered down a dark, narrow passage. [...] A tom-tom beating like heart-thuds began drowning out the trumpet, filling my ears. I longed for water and I heard it rushing through

²² For anti-colonial discourses in Aimé Césaire's surrealism, see especially *Refusal of the Shadow: Surrealism and the Caribbean*, ed. by Michael Richardson (London: Verso Press, 1996). For surreal landscapes in John Edgar Wideman and Nalo Hopkinson, see chapters 3 to 5 of this thesis.

the cold mains my fingers touched as I felt my way' (12). The narrator's vision is structured by a feeling of constant imminence.

One can go too far in deterritorialisation, of course – a little identity is always needed to keep things 'steady'.²³ The psychological internalisation of the historical spaces of slavery in Invisible Man's reefer dream – the Negro church sermon, for example, or the slaveowners' auction, and especially the singing slave-woman in the cave, which resonates so strongly with the example of the letter-writing Jacobs in her attic – all bind his psychological experiment firmly to the real spaces of history and to the example of Ellison's literary antecedents.

Invisible Man's new, deterritorialised mode of thought functions by way of mutable liminal spaces in which race is freed from the imperative either to be or not to be – that is, to be neither too fixed, too easily and crudely read by white society, nor erased from utter existence by its prejudiced laws and conceptions. If, as Harold Bloom argues, Ellison enacts a black difference by signifying on Melville's white whale from within 'the WHALE'S BELLY', he also signifies upon Ahab's desire to 'strike through the mask!' by privileging Invisible Man's ability to 'see around corners' that comes as a result of his invisibility (10).²⁴ Being able to manipulate the threshold, rather than destroy it, allows Invisible Man to signify upon the architecture of the urban landscape and destabilise the discourses of power and racism in those spaces. Ellison performs a profound transformation of the boundary lines of identity, without erasing them completely.

²³ Buchanan, see URL.

²⁴ Melville, pp. 162-163. See also Harold Bloom, 'Two African-American Masters of the American Novel', *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, 28 (2000), pp. 89-93 (p. 90).

Ellison's narrative liminal spaces, moreover, are not Lefebvrian 'affective kernels' like Jacobs's attic, but operate dynamically across the landscape. The sense of constant shape shifting, and the unfamiliar fluidity of identity that Invisible Man experiences underground are expressed as a type of 'nomad thought' which travels within the liminal passages and corners of Invisible Man's phantasmagoria. The deterritorialised black self is has come to be articulated through pure direction of movement which promotes multiple forms of connection, rather than through fixed coordinates in the landscape. The cellar, moreover, is a symbolic break in the narrative sense of *Invisible Man*, allowing the narrator to move across the difficult gap left by his invisible presence in racist American society, while invoking a sense of continuity with folk tradition, jazz and European literature, especially Joyce and Dante.

If the narrative liminal space of the cellar succeeds in symbolically dismantling the static structures of segregation and the teleological logic of discourses of migration and racial uplift, then a series of other liminal spaces within *Invisible Man* go further in articulating not just the deterritorialisation of blackness, but its active mobilisation across the text in the form of a liminal rhizome.

The Rhizome and the Migration Narrative

Deleuze and Guattari argue in *Anti-Oedipus* that continuous sequences of 'becoming', like those constructed in the narrative space of Invisible Man's cellar, constitute a 'rhizome' which, like a 'tuber', must ceaselessly establish connections between any, and all points. 'A rhizome has no beginning or end', they argue,

it is always in the middle, between things, interbeing, *intermezzo*. The tree is filiation, but the rhizome is alliance, uniquely alliance. The tree interposes the verb 'to be', but the fabric of the rhizome is the conjunction, 'and...and...and...'.²⁵

Within this non-linear model of connectivity, desire is able to flow freely, manifesting itself in directions of movement rather than fixed points in the landscape. The rhizome is a way of negotiating on a wider scale the deterritorialised, or liminal, thought patterns that structure *Invisible Man*. Because of its unique emphasis on multiplicity and indeterminacy, the rhizome offers a model for the narrative articulation of black subjectivity that subverts established linear models of black movement, like migration or fugitivity, and maximises the possibilities of liminality.

Thus, a line of flight exists between Invisible Man's cellar and the engine room of the Liberty Paint factory, the boxing arena in Harlem, an abandoned Southern sports arena, and a Harlem street corner and stairwell, for example (207, 336, 275). Invisible Man experiences these spaces, of course, in his first months in New York City, well before he withdraws into the cellar. However, in prefacing the novel with a prologue on invisibility, from which the rest of the novel emerges retrospectively, Ellison disrupts the linear narrative and prompts the reader to construct imaginative lines of flight between the deterritorialised cellar and earlier, narrative liminal spaces. It is important for Ellison to stimulate such nomadic movements of thought because they provide a politically-charged service in disorientating both racial and national structures

²⁵ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 25.

of authority. As John F. Callahan has argued, 'for Ellison, the struggle with America has always been the struggle with form'.²⁶

These narrative lines of flight contrast sharply with the linear connections the Ellison's narrator has earlier been encouraged to make between education, self-reliance and racial uplift, or between the Southern college, the highway's white line and Harlem as 'the city [...] of dreams'.²⁷ Each of the narrative liminal sites which together constitute the liminal rhizome symbolically destabilises the architectural and ideological structures of white power in their own right; together, however, they articulate a dynamic paradigm for black subjectivity.

The New York subway system of Ellison's novel is a narrative liminal space which recalls the incarcerating spaces of slavery. It is the first place which confronts Invisible Man on his arrival into the city and it is where he comes, months later, to consider his failure. The intervening time has seen Invisible Man work a day at the Liberty Paint factory, where he is injured in a paint explosion and hospitalised. Having now lost his place at the men's hostel, he joins the mysterious Brotherhood and begins speaking at their political rallies. He soon becomes disillusioned with their race politics, however, and the subsequent murder of his colleague Tod Clifton signals a crucial shift in Invisible Man's mind away from the rigid discourses of the Brotherhood and towards thoughts of the South and home.

Waiting to catch a subway train, Invisible Man describes a group of African Americans 'waiting still and silent there on the platform, so still and

²⁶ John F. Callahan, "'Riffing" and Paradigm Building: The Anomaly of Tradition and Innovation in *Invisible Man* and the Structure of Scientific Revolution', *Callaloo*, 30 (1987), pp. 91-102 (p. 97).

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 159.

silent that they clash with the crowd in their very immobility; [...] harsh as a cry of terror in their quietness' (440). The subway platform recalls both the immobility of the Middle Passage, where the commuters are 'entombed' in subway car as slaves were packed into the ship's hold, and the claustrophobia of Jacob's 'silent' attic (441). Even the 'cuffs fitting snug about their ankles' put metaphorical leg chains on the African American commuters (440).

If, like the cellar, the subway symbolises slavery's confinements, it also operates as a metaphor for the radical way in which the narrative negotiates these liminal sites. It privileges the 'sub' in the same way that Nalo Hopkinson emphasises the 'dub side' of her science fiction landscape.²⁸ Its multiplicity of tunnels and routes is a structural critique of the linear highway that appears in the earlier sections of the novel, and its attendant discourses of migration and racial uplift. Instead, the subway resists teleology by indulging in radical 'plunges' through liminal space: the 'trains plunging in and out, throwing blue sparks', for example, mimic Invisible Man as he 'wandered down the subway stairs seeing nothing, my mind plunging' (438). Standing on the platform he wonders,

What did they ever think of us transitory ones? [...] birds of passage who were too obscure for learned classification, too silent for the most sensitive recorders of sound; of natures too ambiguous for the most ambiguous words, and too distant from the centres of historical decision to sign or even to applaud the signers of historical documents? (439)

The ambiguity of the subway system offers a way of negotiating the 'too obscure', 'too ambiguous' void imagined by Invisible Man. Indeed, the system itself is defined by imminence, by the continual anticipation of the next station

²⁸ Nalo Hopkinson, *Midnight Robber* (New York: Warner Press, 2000), p. 2. Subsequent page references will refer to this edition and are given parenthetically in the text. For the motif of the rhizome in black diasporic fiction, see chapter 5 of this thesis.

on the part of its passengers. The train is in a constant state of becoming, and thus the subway is a rhizome. By creating the narrative space of the subway, Ellison makes the connection between the rhizome and black vernacular practice. For example, *Invisible Man* uses the figure of the subway to describe his disorientation as an immigrant in New York:

I found the bridge by which I'd come, but the stairs leading back to the car that crossed the top were too dizzily steep to climb, swim or fly, and I found a subway instead [...] My mind went alternately bright and blank in slow rolling waves. We, he, him – my mind and I – were no longer getting around in the same circles. [...] The train plunged. I dropped through the roar, giddy and vacuum-minded, sucked under and out into the late afternoon Harlem. (249-250)

The narrator's adherence to the discourses of racial uplift and Southern migration mean that he is disconnected from his folk self, and therefore cannot 'climb, swim or fly' in order to negotiate the city, but the fact that Ellison has started to use folk language signals a shift from the white, clinical language of the preceding scenes, and recalling the badass language of Peter Wheatstraw. Indeed, *Invisible Man's* way of riding the city anticipates the cunning, efficient folk model of urban movement that the cart-man himself employs, and less the linear blueprint of imposed hierarchies. In this way, the rhizome mirrors vernacular processes of signifying which also emphasise the need for a black difference cultural practice. Deleuze's ideas of becoming, transformation and shape shifting are analogous to Gates's figure of the Signifying Monkey, the linguistic trickster that Gates uses to represent the African American vernacular. Signifying, then, might be imagined as a series of Deleuzian 'creative encounters' in space where the self experiences deterritorialisation and transformation.

If the rhizome re-imagines the urban environment through folk motifs, however, it never endorses the motif of the tree as a model for racial identity. The figures of the tree and roots occur frequently throughout African American literature, from Alex Haley's *Roots* to the scars on Sethe's back in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, which resemble a 'chokecherry tree. Trunk, branches, and even leaves', and the 'holy Tree of Life' preached by Wideman's charismatic Afro-centrist leader in *Philadelphia Fire* (10).²⁹ The rhizome, however, prefers a more surrealist approach to spatial models of race than the genealogy of roots and branches:

Unlike trees or their roots, the rhizome connects any point to any other point [...] The rhizome is reducible to neither the One or the multiple [...] It is comprised not of units but of dimensions, or rather directions in motion [...] Unlike the graphic arts, drawing or photography, unlike tracings, the rhizome pertains to a map that must be produced, constructed, a map that is always detachable, connectable, reversible, modifiable, and has multiple entranceways and exits and its own lines of flight.³⁰

The subway system and the text of *Invisible Man* itself are the articulation of Deleuze and Guattari's rhizomic 'map', in the same way as Wheatstraw's blueprints are examples of 'tracing'. The narrative reconstruction of the subway as a space of black vernacular 'becoming' transforms the liminal urban structure into a subversive rhizome which is able to symbolically destabilise both the flat New York grid and the ideological architecture of white power inscribed upon it. The novel produces, constructs and uses its liminal rhizomic structure to interrogate the multiple discourses of blackness that compete against linear models of movement during the Great Migration era.

²⁹ Morrison, *Beloved*, p. 16.

³⁰ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 21.

This sense of black 'becoming' is echoed in other spaces in the narrative. For example, in an episode concerning his first job in New York City, the narrator links the liminal imagery of falling unconscious to his own disintegrating sense of self. He has come to work in the basement of the Liberty Paint factory, under the supervision of the irascible furnace engineer Lucius Brockway, when an accidental pressure leak causes an explosion which knocks the narrator out, making him literally estranged from himself. 'I ... was shot forward with sudden acceleration into wet blast of black emptiness that was somehow a bath of whiteness. It was a fall into space that seemed not a fall but a suspension' (230). As for Deleuze and Guattari, everything for Invisible Man now becomes about space. The narrator's suspension recalls the in-between status which confronted African slaves during the Middle Passage. The sudden realisation of liminality within the 'suspension' deterritorialises the narrator from the nominal hierarchies of 'black' and 'white' and articulates Ellison's sense of the multiplicity of black discourse by implying imminence – an endless anticipation of what effect such deterritorialisation will have on the narrator. The 'bath of whiteness', moreover, connects in a line of flight to the highway's 'white line' and the 'formless white death' of Mr Norton's face from earlier in the novel. Crucially, these horizontal planes of multiplicities which trespass over the predictable narrative line parallel the horizontal 'acceleration' of the explosion itself.

The Liberty Paint basement itself critiques racialised discourses of masculinity and production. Invisible Man's descent into the darkness deliberately recalls Dante's passage through the Inferno: 'it was a deep basement. Three levels underground I pushed upon a heavy metal door

marked 'Danger' and descended into a noisy, dimly lit room' (207).³¹ The metaphorical link between Lucius Brockway and Satan is subtle within this passage, which describes him as an 'animated black walnut' with 'shrewd, reddish eyes', whose very name signifies on the name Lucifer (207). Ellison here pushes racial stereotyping to the limit; blackness performs the evil role so often attributed to it by racial abuse. Consequently, the basement becomes the space in which Brockway is able to indulge the malevolence of his race:

It was not just an engine room... For one thing, the furnaces were made differently and the flames that flared through the cracks of the fire chambers were too intense and too blue. And there were the odors. No, he was *making* something down here... something too filthy and dangerous for white men to be willing to do even for money (212).

Crucially, Brockway's basement is a site of black production – he is 'making' something 'too filthy and dangerous for white men'. Patricia McKee has identified discourses of black production which resist white phenomenological discourses of image and sign. She identifies the rhythms of jazz and blues, and of desire, which shun the visibility trope. Brockway's production of something 'filthy' and 'dangerous' corresponds with the dangerous and dirty black talk and music which was written as 'black cultural media' and produced varying forms of identity and relation.³² Ellison constructs this narrative liminal space as the site of 'dangerous' and threatening black production. The product is a destabilised sense of blackness. On entering the basement, rather than feel repulsed, Invisible Man's first reaction is one of spontaneous identification: 'there was something familiar about the fumes that filled the air and I had just thought *pine*, when a high-pitched Negro voice rang out above the machine

³¹ See Dante, *The Divine Comedy* [c.1320], trans. by C. H. Sisson and introd. by David Higgins (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

³² McKee, p. 200.

sounds' (207). The line of flight that links Brockway's mechanical production to Invisible Man's sensual memory of rural production undercuts the enclosed space of the engine room. Invisible Man recognises that liminality is the key to producing a vital, multifarious and distinctive black identity.

A brief episode concerning an impromptu speech Invisible Man makes on the curb of a Harlem street reveals another liminal space which unsettles discourses of Southern migration by reminding the narrator of the potency of his Southern heritage and his slave past. Walking aimlessly in the city night, Invisible Man stumbles across an old black couple, the Provos, being forcibly evicted from their apartment in front of a large, increasingly angry crowd of onlookers. The contents of the Provos's apartment have been strewn along the snowy curb at the bottom of the apartment stairs, in a gross symbolic act of regurgitation, making Invisible Man wince:

I turned away, bending and searching the dirty snow for anything missed by my eyes, and my fingers closed upon something resting in a frozen footstep: a fragile paper, coming apart with age, written in black ink grown yellow. I read: FREE PAPERS. *Be it known to all men that my negro, Primus Provo, has been freed by me this sixth day of August, 1859. Signed: John Samuels. Macon...* I folded it quickly, blotting out the single drop of melted snow which glistened on the yellowed page, and dropped it back into the drawer. My hands were trembling, my breath rasping as if I had run a long distance or come upon a coiled snake in a busy street (272).

The liminal space of the curb, placed provocatively against the felicitous space of the drawer, symbolises the ambiguous positions which the Provos have been forced to inhabit by slavery, by migration and now by eviction at the hands of white policemen. Even their 'three lapsed life insurance policies with perforated seals [are] stamped "Void"' (272). Ellison is exerting a black difference upon Michel de Certeau's assertion of a 'sort of a void' into which he argues that the

modern subject is born, following the loss of God's 'Word' as the ordering logic of the cosmos.³³ Indeed, the dereliction of the white 'Word', whether manifested in the white man's signature on manumission papers or the stamp of economic authority on insurance papers, opens up a liminal space wherein the modern black subject is born. This void, as de Certeau suggests, drives the black subject to 'make himself the master of space and to set himself as a producer of writing'.³⁴ Struggling with his desire to protest publicly at the obvious injustice of the eviction, Ellison's narrator 'seemed to totter on the edge of a great dark hole' (275). It is crucial that this discovery of Invisible Man's first independent voice should be generated on a street corner. Even more significant is that this revelation should be sparked by a yellowing fragment from a slave's emancipation papers: liminal space upon liminal space.

At this strange juncture, Invisible Man finds himself pushed over the edge, literally and metaphorically as he is forced to construct an alternative spatial strategy. The apartment block is no longer for lodging in, or hurrying past; it is a platform for his 'hot anger', and, as the stoops in John Edgar Wideman's *Philadelphia Fire* foster a sense of community, so the steps of the Provos' apartment become a stage upon which the collective 'self-consciousness' of the crowd can play out (270).

Later, the rooftops and fire escapes offer Invisible Man an escape from the police. As he runs for the stairs, Invisible Man's first truly independent act is a movement of flight:

³³ de Certeau, pp. 138-139.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 139.

I took the flight in a bound and cautiously opened the door, and suddenly the sun flared bright on the roof and it was windy cold [...] Planes were rising over an airfield far to the southeast, and I was running now and seeing all the church steeples rising and falling and stacks with smoke leaning sharp against the sky [...] I swung over a partition and went brushing past a huge cote and arousing a flight of frantic white birds, suddenly as large as buzzards as they beat furiously against my eyes, dazzling the sun as they fluttered up and away and around in a furious glide and me running again (285).

The liminal landscape of rooftops and 'partitions' allows Invisible Man's experience of fugitivity, which clearly recalls Linda Brent's flight from slavery's 'cadge of obscene birds' in Jacobs's slave narrative, to transform into a spiritual experience of 'furious glide' and 'dazzling' movement (52). It also brings us back to the 'bright unstirred blue' of the rooftop retreat in Larsen's *Passing*, where, like Invisible Man, Irene's discomfort with her racial heritage and her flight from confrontation with her own identity is expressed through bird imagery, this time in the figure of her friend Clare in a 'fluttering dress of green chiffon'.³⁵ As in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, running away is transformed into a delight in movement for its own intrinsic quality. Brent's 'sensations when we were fairly sailing on Chesapeake Bay' bound for Philadelphia, and her joy in the 'beautiful sunshine! The exhilarating breeze!' and the 'sparkle' of the waves, for example, are echoed in Invisible Man's appreciation of the 'flare' of the sun and the 'windy cold' atmosphere of the rooftops (158). The horizontal impetus of Invisible Man's trajectory rejects the teleological movement implicit within discourses of racial uplift and migration in favour of a seemingly endless and constantly improvised 'running', which in turn enacts a fluctuating 'rising and falling' instead of a single rise.

In running, moreover, along the unobserved rooftops of Harlem, Ellison is able to construct a series of liminal spaces which signify upon one another

³⁵ Larsen, p. 148.

and produce a luminous instant. Viewed this way, the doves that Invisible Man disturbs and the 'dazzling' moment that they produce as they reflect the sun, are a glimpse of some understanding of himself that is the product of a ceaseless conversation between parts: from the rooftops, Invisible Man has glimpsed planes, indicative of travel; church steeples, representing the religious context of his Southern roots; 'stacks with smoke', which reference the industrial realities of the North; and, significantly, 'partitions' over which he has had to 'swing', a badass move Invisible Man will have to pull on more pervasive partitions encountered within Jim Crow society.

Although some of Ellison's imagery suggests descent, it is invariably paradoxical. The linear 'steeples' and 'smoke stacks' of the urban landscape are juxtaposed against the horizontal, Deleuzian lines of flight recorded in dynamic verbs like 'glide' and 'brush' and 'beat' and 'flare'. The urban landscape, seen from the liminal position of the roof, becomes a surreal environment filled with 'frantic white birds' and reminiscent of Ellison's prologue and that of Aimé Césaire's Caribbean surrealist *Cahier d'un Retour au Pays Natal*:

Rocked there on the breath of inexhaustible thought, I fed the wind, set monsters free and heard a river of turtledoves and savannah clover rising on the far side of disaster: a river in my depths as deep as the brazen twentieth story is high...³⁶

In a way that parallels Ellison's description of Invisible Man's rooftop flight, Césaire gives the sense here that depth and height are the same, resulting in a strange void from where a surrealist landscape of symbolic meaning can emerge. The black diasporic consciousness has been deterritorialized from the

³⁶ Aimé Césaire, *Cahier d'un Retour au Pays Natal* [1956] ed. and introd. by Abiola Irele (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2000), p. 37.

'brazen' urban architecture of the 'twentieth' century and celebrates a multiplicity of fantastic liminal environments, like the 'side of disaster'. Césaire uses the liminal spaces of surrealism to explore a model of blackness based on the francophone Negritude movement. The final chapter of this thesis will interrogate Césaire's spaces, which have been criticised by postcolonial critics for being essentialist and 'adopting the binarism of Western philosophy'. Nalo Hopkinson's speculative Caribbean landscapes re-imagine the horizontal, deterritorialised models of both Césaire and Ellison in a postcolonial and science-fiction context.

After his disastrous job at the Paint Factory, the narrator becomes involved with a mysterious group called 'The Brotherhood' which aims to incite class consciousness among Harlem's black community. The narrator is called upon to speak at a rally held at an old boxing arena in Harlem, but before his performance he 'crosses the alley [outside] to the dark side',

stopping near a fence that smelled of carbolic acid, which, as I looked back across the alley, caused me to remember a great abandoned hole that had been the site of a sports arena that had burned before my birth. All that was left, a cliff drop of some forty feet below the heat-buckled walk, was the shell of concrete with weirdly bent and rusted rods that had been its basement. The hole was used for dumping, and after a rain it stank with stagnant water. And now in my mind I stood upon the walk looking out across the hole past a Hooverville shanty of packing cases and bent tin signs, to a railroad yard that lay beyond. Dark depthless water lay without motion in the hole, and past the Hooverville a switch engine idled upon the shining rails (336-337).³⁷

Again, the symbolic parallels with spaces of slavery are clear. The 'dark depthless water' which lies above a 'great abandoned hole' symbolically reproduces the geography of the Middle Passage. However, the Harlem arena connects in an imaginative line of flight with Invisible Man's memory of an

³⁷ The many shack-towns which sprung up around the United States during the Depression Era were generally named 'Hoovervilles', after the presiding President. In Seattle, settlers dug themselves in underground to resist eviction.

abandoned sports arena in the South, a gesture which symbolically reverses the Great Migration's teleological rationale. The narrative liminal space which opens out between the two arena functions to deterritorialise Invisible Man's own sense of identity and to interrogate the discourses of masculinity, performance and identity against a more symbolic idea of blackness.

The arena is able to destabilise the narrator's own self-consciousness. While waiting in the changing rooms of a Harlem arena, in anticipation of giving his first public speech, the narrator has an out-of-body experience in which he witnesses himself split in two, 'as though I stood simultaneously at opposite ends of a tunnel. I seemed to view myself from the distance of the campus while yet sitting there on a bench in the old arena' (335). Invisible Man's fear of 'flying apart at the seams' is a further spatial realisation of what Deleuze and Guattari call 'schizophrenia' (335).

Moreover, the boxing arena and the Southern arena it invokes both critique traditional discourses of masculinity and performance in the figure of the black sportsman. Waiting his turn to speak at the Brotherhood's rally by pacing the changing rooms of the old boxing arena, Invisible Man encounters the image of a famous African American boxer, now dead, on a 'torn photograph tacked to the faded wall' (334). The narrator recalls his father's story of how the boxer 'had been beaten blind in a crooked fight, of the scandal that had been suppressed, and how the fighter had died in a home for the blind' (334). As an example of Houston Baker's black public sphere, the performative space of the boxing arena is the space for a failed performance of black masculinity.³⁸ Invisible Man's imminent verbal performance is likened to

³⁸ Baker, *The Black Public Sphere*, p. 5.

the fate of the blind boxer who, like the figure of the slave on the auction block, has been stripped of agency and reduced to a faded image on the changing room wall. However, Ellison re-appropriation of liminality in the real spaces of history offers an alternative to white phenomenological systems of race production. The narrative construction of a radical line of flight between the now dilapidated arena with its 'faded wall' and the ambiguous no-place of the 'home for the blind' emphasises instead the liminal spaces which support ambiguous models of black subjectivity. The line of flight posits a direction of movement that is more liberating and more equivocal than the patterns of movement expected of the boxer in the ring.

The black figure of the African American sportsman is routinely associated in popular culture with the motif of flying. Ellison invokes, and substantially critiques, the figure of the sportsman in his representation of the blind boxer. However, by constructing the narrative liminal space between the two sports arena, Ellison is able to re-appropriate the motif of flight as a symbol for the free movement of black desire, rather than as an expression of capital or image. Instead, the liminal space promotes a trope of running as pure action, a model of multiple connectivity which itself constitutes blackness. This motif of free flight is linked symbolically to the folk motif of the 'flying African' which expressed the desire of many enslaved Africans to return home over the Atlantic.

Narrative lines of flight enact a dynamic sense of black identity across the liminal landscape of Ellison's text, interrogating the historical spaces of slavery against the contemporary, migrant, urban landscape. The 'dark depthless water' which lies 'without motion' over the abandoned remains of the

Southern arena represents the Middle Passage, the stagnation of the Depression-era South, and also connects in a line of flight with the 'wet black blast' and 'lake of heavy water' which the narrator experienced in the Liberty Paint factory explosion (230). Both these spaces represent sites at which Invisible Man is apprehensive of some greater understanding about himself, although its ultimate revelation is constantly held; thus both sites are obscure, but are also site of 'becoming'. The Southern arena, moreover, with its 'shell of concrete with weirdly bent and rusted rods that had been its basement' prefigures the bombed Philadelphia basement in John Edgar Wideman's *Philadelphia Fire*.

In summary, these common experiences of deterritorialisation suggest that the fabric of *Invisible Man* is governed by the linguistic conjunction 'and...and...and...', which constitutes a radical and dynamic relationship between Ellison's narrative liminal spaces. The sports arena, the street corner, the paint factory basement and the subway platform are not related hierarchically; instead the text moves between each with 'a logic of the AND', which seeks to 'overthrow ontology, do away with foundations, nullify endings and beginnings'.³⁹ In such a way, Ellison encourages a rhizomic reading of *Invisible Man* that challenges the rigid discourses of racial uplift and urban migration that shaped American thinking about race in the first half of the twentieth century. While Jacobs's slave attic seeks to articulate a radical female voice, the surrealist phantasmagoria of Ellison's basement frees black culture and identity from the negative environments of slavery and segregation

³⁹ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 25.

and develops the radical potential of liminality to interrogate black culture's multiple discourses.

Thus, Ellison's narrator is able to claim that 'his world has become one of infinite possibilities' (576). The text of *Invisible Man* itself might be described as a 'Body without Organs', proposed by Deleuze and Guattari as an entity utterly given over to the principle of the rhizome, within which desire flows unhindered by the requirement 'to-be'. In deconstructing teleological modes of thought which require African Americans either to be invisible in their blackness, or to be nothing, Ellison encourages a dynamic model of racial consciousness which emphasises the possibilities of movement without need of conclusion. In the light of this, the following chapter will address John Edgar Wideman's reading of liminality and contemporary urban decay in his novel, *Philadelphia Fire*.

Chapter Three:

Disobedient Ways of Dwelling: Race, Text and the Urban Environment in John Edgar Wideman's *Philadelphia Fire*

In 1850, John Fanning Watson wrote in the *Annals of Philadelphia*: Many can still remember when the slaves were allowed the last days of the fairs for their jubilees, which they employed (light-hearted wretch) in dancing the whole afternoon in the present Washington Square, then a general burying ground – the blacks joyful above, while the sleeping dead reposed below (98).

Wideman's choice of historical anecdote, coming near the mid-point of his novel, *Philadelphia Fire*, provides a useful touchstone for the complex spatial politics that have historically shaped the production and experience of race in American cities, and for the subtle revision that Wideman attempts in his fiction. As an acknowledgment of slavery's past spaces in the city, the architectural palimpsest of Washington Square – jubilee, burial, slave auction, military muster – interrogates the legacy of racial metaphor in shaping the use of city space over time, while the inversion of spatial hierarchies implicit within John Fanning Watson's indignant protest against the 'blacks joyful above' the transformative energy within alternative constructions of the urban landscape. Watson's city square is a dialogue between liminal spaces: the appropriation of the (white) burial ground by the black jubilee works as a symbolic reclamation of black urban space but questions remain about the sustainability of such a space of racial empowerment.

The previous chapter demonstrated how Ellison's use of surrealism works with his sense of the importance of real city space in order to create an alternative environment for the free expression of multiple black discourses. This chapter will address the developing character of American urban centres,

and the use of racial metaphor in constructing literary ideas of urban decay and stratification that threaten to stem the deterritorialised flow of desire imagined within Ellison's Harlem basement. It will argue that, in an effort to reclaim a black space in the city, Wideman charts the narrative construction of disobedient liminal spaces which challenge the hegemonic structures of whiteness and decorum that are enshrined in Philadelphia's affluent suburbs and redeveloped corporate quarter of the late 1980s.

What is Urban Space?

In his study, *Race and Urban Space in Contemporary American Culture*, Liam Kennedy stresses the socially produced nature of urban space:

To treat space as a social product [...] prompts fresh consideration of the instrumentality of space as a register of not only built forms but also of embedded ideologies. This entails a demystifying of space as natural and transparent so that it is understood as a product with particular, localised meanings.¹

In tracing out the history of urban representation, Liam Kennedy summarises the traditional approach to the city as the physical manifestation of the principles of democratic citizenship:

In the formation of the classic tradition of American urban studies (from the Chicago school onwards) urbanity is the phenomenon of collectivity which emerges from the close proximity of strangers and face-to-face relations in public urban space. It valorises the multifarious forms of social interaction and interdependence in the city – the erotic and aesthetic variety of street life, the close encounters with strangers, the freedoms of access and movement in public spaces.²

¹ Kennedy, p. 9. Kennedy also notes that the work done by Henri Lefebvre, Edward Soja, and David Harvey among others to facilitate this demystifying of space may be a 'positive response to the decline of historicism [...] in the postmodern era' (Kennedy, p. 9).

² Ibid., p. 3. For urban discourses of citizenship and democracy, see: *The City*, ed. by Robert E. Park, Ernest W. Burgess and R. D. McKenzie (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1967); Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New

Although still active as an ideal, this manifold conception of urban life has given way to studies on the growing privatisation and commodification of public urban space, what Michael Brill has described as a 'literature of loss'.³ Mike Davis's *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles* makes much of what Davis calls the 'fortress aesthetic' now dominating American cities and suburbs:

Welcome to post-liberal Los Angeles, where the defense of luxury lifestyles is translated into a proliferation of new repressions in space and movement, undergirded by the ubiquitous 'armed response'. This obsession with physical security systems, and, collaterally, with the architectural policing of social boundaries, has become a zeitgeist of urban restructuring, a master narrative in the emerging built environment of the 1990s.⁴

This morbid fascination with the privatisation of city space, Kennedy persuasively argues, complements a distinct strain of anti-urbanism that can be traced back to nineteenth century narratives, and that has subsequently contributed to what Robert Beauregard has called a 'fully developed discourse on urban decline' in the United States.⁵ Within such a paradigm, vague concepts such as the 'underclass' operate to reinforce the myth of urban decline, generating 'images of criminals, delinquents, crack addicts, and unwed

York: Random House Press, 1961); Richard Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man* (New York: Knopf Press, 1977); William Whyte, *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces* (Washington D.C.: Conservative Foundation Press, 1980); and Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (London: Verso Press, 1983).

³ Michael Brill, 'Transformation, Nostalgia, and Illusion in Public Life and Public Place', in *Public Places and Spaces*, ed. by Irwin Altman and Ervin H. Zube (New York: Plenum Press, 1989), pp. 7-29 (p. 8). For further examples of this feeling of loss, see Jacobs, Sennett, and Berman above.

⁴ Mike Davis, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles* (London: Verso Press, 1990), p. 223.

⁵ Robert Beauregard, *Voices of Decline: The Postwar Fate of U.S. Cities* (Oxford: Blackwell Press, 1993), p. 6.

mothers, and of an urban scene in which crime, drugs, violence and educational failure are norms of existence.⁶

The underclass, moreover, is readily identified as black. Such racial representation of social, cultural and spatial failure has wide-reaching consequences, as Kennedy emphasises: 'applied to the underclass, the metaphor of urban decline associates spatial deprivation and decay with the pathological separateness of black ghetto poverty'.⁷ This chapter challenges this racialised model of endemic spatial deprivation by examining not only how black individuals and communities are able to subvert the racialised structures of urban representation to establish an independent 'black space' within the city, but also how in applying African American stylistic practices of signifying onto the material environment, they are able to establish discourses of production outside the dominant narratives of urban decline. These signifying discourses of spatial production are different from those 'discourses of regeneration' identified by Kennedy; they operate not within the vertical axis of descent and emergence but within the non-dimensional, rhizomic space of the threshold, where freedom originates in creative practice.⁸

W. E. B. Du Bois's concept of double-consciousness directly challenged earlier theories of race, sponsored by white slaveholders, which had promoted a conservative ideology of spatial domination.⁹ Whereas, for the American

⁶ Kennedy, p. 5.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid., p. 7. My conception of the non-dimensional, rhizomic space of the threshold is not to be confused with what Kennedy calls the 'spatial experiences of late capitalism – the simulacral, the hyperreal, the depthless' which some theorists argue is erasing the concept of place. The threshold which I intend to argue offers African Americans a space of self-discovery is in a very real sense a *place*, a space of symbolic importance to a collective group which adopts the 'contours of identity and location through representation'.

⁹ Du Bois, *Souls*, p. iv.

slaveholding population of the nineteenth century, ideology was a natural hierarchy governing all perception, in which white skin represented moral and intellectual superiority, Du Bois argued for an alternative theory of representation in which the unique experience of race and racism was expressed as a division of the racialised consciousness into two unique but overlapping spaces.

Henry Louis Gates, Jr's 1989 essay, 'The Blackness of Blackness: A Critique on the Sign and the Signifying Monkey', theorises this idea of division in the context of postmodernism. The racialised subject negotiates the 'limitless' space of representations by way of signifying – that is, repetition with difference. What has not been addressed is how many of the variants of this ideology of signifying have been registered in African American literature.

These two items form the corners of this chapter of this thesis: the image of slaves dancing in jubilee on a Philadelphia graveyard, and the challenge to find a racialised theory of representation. The city, with its speed and rhythms and danger, lies at the heart of the modern American sensibility and its representational history has embraced everything from the bleakness of modernism to the schizophrenic anxieties of postmodern era. The city has, however, special resonance in an African American context. Wideman is aware that the American city acts as a totalising gauge of social and political progress, and he has sought to assess for himself the profound effects of urbanism on African American experience and identity.¹⁰

¹⁰ Kennedy, p. 79. Kennedy cautions against an uncritical acceptance of the city's importance: 'The impetus of the myth of the American city as 'center and symbol of our times' needs to be questioned, as do attendant claims for the American metropolis as the epicentre of a universal modernity (and now postmodernity), or as the privileged locus of globalism and its urban futures' (Kennedy, p. 79). See also Louis Worth's classic 1938 essay 'Urbanism as a Way of Life', in *The City Reader*, ed. by

It is to the great cities of the North – New York, Chicago, Detroit – that the black migrant came in his thousands during the Great Migration of the 1940s and 1950s to escape the Jim Crow laws, just as his grandparents had fled northwards from the cruelties of slavery; it is Harlem, the black city-within-a-city, that fostered the first flowering of African American artistry during the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s; it is the same highly-charged streets that became the battlefield over Civil Rights. More recently, the poverty of America's urban centres, together with the increasing segregation of city space, the rise of the white suburb, and the spread of black ghettos, has exacerbated the ever-present tension between the two racial communities and seen it explode in a series of racially-complex riots and tragedies across America's cities.¹¹

However, the African American experience of cities does not conform to the apocalyptic trajectory of much post-modernist urban discourse; the racialised urban environment is more variable than the meta-narrative of racialised urban decline and disaster implies. Moreover, such meta-narratives of urban decline have the unfortunate habit of relegating urban space to the role of an arena or a stage in which the social and political narratives of the city play out. Wideman's fractured, sensitive and not quite successful attempt at representing Philadelphia's urban crisis of 1985 in his novel *Philadelphia Fire*, does, by way of contrast, recognise the urban environment as a living

Richard T. LeGates and Frederic Stout (New York and London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 189-197.

¹¹ See for example the Watts riots of 1965; the Los Angeles riots of 1992, which were inspired by the verdict on Rodney King's attackers; and the 1985 MOVE bombing in Philadelphia, on which Wideman's novel is based.

narrative itself, one that enjoys a vibrant representational history within the African American community. Wideman's city is an actor in its own drama.¹²

The tradition of recognising the city as a character in a text is well established within African American literature. For example, Toni Morrison's *Jazz* personifies Harlem as a vocal character within the novel. In Wideman's novel, however, the bodily division between the human protagonist and the nebulous character of the city becomes blurred. The homeless J.B. lives in a fragile symbiosis with the Philadelphia cityscape, a relationship which Wideman suggests is indicative of humanity's larger relationship to the spaces it lives in. In Wideman's eyes, the city is less an inert blueprint for "order" or "reality", and more like a spouse, tangled in a messy divorce yet retaining a profound ability to inspire love and desire in the face of tragedy:

What should open now in response to the tragedy of a city burning is the vista of your heart [...] If we could arrange the building blocks, the rivers, boulevards, bridges, harbour, etc. etc. into some semblance of order, of reality, then we could begin disentangling ourselves from this miasma, this fever of shakes and jitters, of self-defeating selfishness called urbanisation. In time a separation (spelled in case you ever forgot, with *a rat*) between your own sorry self and the sorrows of the city could be effected. If you loved yourself less, J.B. If you loved your city more (157-158).

Wideman is also keenly interested in engaging with and challenging the principles of formal arrangement. He sees the classical aesthetic process – the matter of arranging shapes on a surface for effect – as somehow intimately connected with the dismembering and remembering patterns of racism and urban living, but also the desire to impose and also dislocate order generally in

¹² The tradition of recognising the city as a character is well established within African American fiction. For example, see Toni Morrison, *Jazz* (New York: Knopf Press, 1992), where Harlem is personified as a character within the novel.

life. Cudjoe's first description of a survivor, Margaret Jones, concentrates on the architectural structure of her face:

A rainbow swirl of head kerchief hides her hair, emphasizing the formal arrangement of eyes, nose, lips embedded in blemishless yellow-brown skin. No frills, no distractions, you see the face for what it is, severe, symmetrical, eyes distant but ready to pounce, flared bulk of nose, lips thick and strong enough to keep the eyes in check (7).

The orthodox 'formal arrangement' of Margaret Jones's face may offer an alternative to the disorder of prejudice; it may signal her determination to control the chaos of the bombing's memory, or may comment ironically on the inability of the face to express such tragedy. Wideman's interest in formal aesthetics is not sterile, however. He is equally as interested in disassembling the elements of formal aesthetics, and scrutinising them for meaning. He is fascinated by unpicking the mechanics of harmony and proportion, in terms of art, the urban environment and race. Thus Margaret Jones's face is at once whole, 'blemishless', with 'no distractions', and a Picasso-like disarray of 'eyes, nose, lips, skin', each with their own competing energy. This is a metaphor for the discourse of decline in modernist urban sensibility and the competition between modernist sympathies, deconstructionist sympathies and a desire for a black space.

Critical Spatial Theory and Urban Space: Definitions

White ways of looking at space lead from a belief in a limitless space of representations to a hierarchy of power and dominance. Black ways of looking at space break from this hierarchy and take up again the idea of limitless space of representation. However, rather than the desiring subject negotiating by

unconscious transactions, it is the racialised subject who negotiates this representational or ideological space by way of the conscious practice of signifying. The racialised subject signifies upon the space outside of the established 'cone of vision'. This chapter will argue that the black American writer challenges white constructions of urban space and attendant systems of signification by constructing liminal narrative spaces which are disobedient and resist, or even appropriate, white urban systems.

The new wave of critical spatial theory that has recently come to prominence can be applied fruitfully to Wideman's fiction, in particular the work of Henri Lefebvre, Edward Soja and David Harvey. Critical spatial studies theorises space as a social product, an instrument of control and power, and as an effect of uneven and unequal relations and practices that are historically contingent. Much of the work of these theorists has been heralded in the fields of human geography, philosophy and socio-cultural study, and there has been significant interest in applying these spatial theories to the field of literary study. However, this chapter intends to address an important gap in this application of critical spatial theory to literature. Since literature is so fundamentally engaged in the process of producing space, be it on the page or in the imagination, the text must itself benefit from a consideration of the social factors governing such production. If critical spatial theory proposes that space is a social product, then Wideman further contends that the urban spaces of twentieth century Philadelphia are the product of one particular construct of society: 'race'.

For Wideman as a writer and an African American, the urban landscape is a product of racialised socio-political forces that govern how contemporary

cities are used by their inhabitants. Institutional and casual racism produces certain kinds of spaces in the city, among the most extreme examples of these being the segregated public facilities like cinemas and restaurants in American cities during the Jim Crow era. The very way in which all people, black and white, walked around and used the city streets, and the way in which they imagined their living environment too, was defined by racial attitudes. Yet the regulation of public spatial practice by the 'Whites Only' sign during the first half of the twentieth century was matched by a similar distortion of private urban space that has persisted into the modern era. Discrimination and poverty helped shape the vast, crime-ridden and alienating black ghettos of the northern cities.

Wideman's novel seeks to replicate these processes of racially-produced space in his novel in order to understand and bear witness to what is a central experience for so many African American urban dwellers. But Wideman also seeks to go beyond the binary of space as a product of racism, projecting the idea of space as a product of an African American cultural heritage. The socio-political patterns of urban living that are so dominated by the constrictions of racism also operate within a continuous history of African American spatial practice; a practice that has always acknowledged (perhaps more keenly than any other culture) the precarious status of space as a social product, and has developed a unique grammar of liminal spatial resistance in order to produce a specifically African American space within the hostile environment of white America. In tracing such representational and practical histories within urban space, Wideman both utilises and subtly subverts the Marxist principles of much critical spatial theory.

Lefebvre describes social space as any space that structures social interaction.¹³ While the relationship between humans and nature is key within the definition, however, the generality of the concept allows it to be applied more liberally to a variety of interactions between individuals, groups, social structures, ideologies and cultural formations, such as race. Lefebvre's broad definition of social space may therefore be joined to that on racial formation proposed by Michael Omi and Howard Winant in their influential 1986 text *Racial Formation in the United States*. Omi and Winant argue for the socially-constructed nature of race, contending that scholars have largely underestimated the profound extent to which 'U.S. society is racially structured from top to bottom'.¹⁴ Conflating this model with that of Lefebvre, this chapter argues that race as a structural category is contained within all American social relationships.

While Omi and Winant concentrate on the negative action of racism within this context, this chapter argues that many African American authors attempt to represent race and its spatial dynamics in new and potentially liberating ways. John Edgar Wideman is concerned with the breakdown of identity and the new social spaces which such a breakdown creates. However, 'new' spaces cannot entirely escape the ideology of dominant structures which

¹³ 'A social space cannot be adequately accounted for either by nature (climate, site) or by its previous history. Nor does the growth of the forces of production give rise in any direct causal fashion to a particular space or a particular time. Mediations and mediators have to be taken into consideration: the action of groups, factors within knowledge, within ideology, or within the domain of representations. Social space contains a great diversity of objects, both natural and social, including the networks and pathways which facilitate the exchange of material things and information. Such "objects" are thus not only things but relations. As objects, they possess discernible peculiarities, contour and form. Social labour transforms them, rearranging their positions within spatio-temporal configurations without necessarily affecting their materiality, their natural state (as in the case, for instance of an island, gulf, river or mountain)' (Lefebvre, p. 77).

¹⁴ Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States* (New York and London: Routledge, 1986), pp. 49-50.

they seek to contest. As Foucault argues, '[w]e do not live in a kind of void, inside of which we could place individuals and things. We do not live inside a void that could be coloured with various shades of light; we live inside a set of relations that delineates sites which are irreducible to one another and absolutely not superimposable on one another'.¹⁵

White Discourse: Urban Decline and the Fortress Aesthetic

Before moving on to a consideration of Wideman's representation of the racialised space of late twentieth century Philadelphia, it is necessary to address the American city in general, in order to contextualise Wideman's own project within the surrounding discourses on city space. The American city is one of the central gauges of the American zeitgeist. It is an important and changing place. The modernist urban ideal that accompanied the beginning of the city's representational history was based upon an image of utopian dimensions: clean, wide public spaces that allowed citizens of this brave new world to mix freely. Such interaction among citizens (white citizens, it must be noted) bound each together a homogenous whole, while also cementing the relationship of the whole to the public arena space in which they naturally converged. The formal areas of the city embodied the 'People'; the modernist urban dream was, in essence, the architectural expression of the American democratic impulse.

Harking back to earlier representations of such a utopic architecture, in particular Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*, Wideman acknowledges such a modernist

¹⁵ Foucault, 'Different Spaces', in *Michel Foucault: Aesthetics: Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984* (London: Penguin Press, 1994) pp. 177-178.

urban ideal within his novel.¹⁶ However, the subsequent discourse of decline from this modernist urban ideal, together with the 'fortress aesthetic' that blights the contemporary American urban living experience, resonates more fully with Wideman's pessimistic narrative outlook. The work Mike Davis and others have done in charting this discourse of urban decline in popular and intellectual culture has recognised the specifically racialised metaphors through which it is expressed. The calcification of the city and the privatisation of its spaces are represented through a directly racialised discourse.

Wideman acknowledges both the nightmarish claustrophobia of the postmodern city and its attendant invalidation of the modernist public collective in favour of the private 'miniblind' view, recreating as he does so Philadelphia as a contemporary Panopticon, in which private vision and memory predicate the city's existence:

He pushes open a blistered rectangle of glass above the toilet. His window on the world. Across an alley no sane person would consider entering after dark, a block of apartments extends to the corner, a row of four-story units, each defined by the zigzag iron railing of fire escape [...] Wasn't the city one vast window covered by a million miniblinds? [...] The city appears because this vast window is unshuttered a square at a time. Visible because it's remembered (53-54).¹⁷

The city landscape is re-created with each act of seeing; literally re-constructed by the viewer in their own mind. Wideman's point is that space is

¹⁶ *Metropolis*, dir. Fritz Lang, Universum Film, 1927.

¹⁷ These millions of miniblinds represent the subjugation of a public architecture and a collective arena of experience to the tyranny of privatised acts of visual consumption, highlighting what Madhu Dubey calls the 'fetishistic ways in which ideologies of consumption serve to legitimise contemporary urban order'. Dubey also suggests that this fetishisation threatens Wideman's struggle to acknowledge the 'structural interdependence between renovated city centres and their adjoining urban wastelands'. See Madhu Dubey, 'Literature and Urban Crisis: John Edgar Wideman's *Philadelphia Fire*', *African American Review* 32:4 (1998), pp. 579- 595 (p. 582). For a more detailed discussion of how a consumer democracy works fetishistically to conceal its inherent inequalities, see Stuart Ewen, *All-Consuming Images: The Politics of Style in Contemporary Culture* (New York: Basic Books, 1988).

fundamentally reliant upon perception; otherwise it loses not only its purpose but also its form. This makes the individual psyche's relationship with environment a reciprocal one: the eye shapes the space, while the space in turn shapes the viewer. What Wideman also acknowledges is that this eye is an African American one. In participating in the U.S. national narrative of urban decline (emphasising the subjective, precarious and compartmentalised spaces of the city over the utopic dreams of open civic space that had been cherished by modernists), Wideman situates himself within a well-worn literary tradition. In recognising the racialised metaphors which have come to govern much representation of this urban decline, Wideman remains conscious of the dominant national narrative.

However, Wideman also draws on a very different source from this U.S. national narrative: an aesthetic and representational practice that, while acknowledging the discourse of decline which positions liminal spaces as the ultimate realisation of the privatised, calcified 'horror' space (that is, that furthest from the modernist utopian ideal and therefore most open to racialised descriptors), simultaneously inverts this linear logic.¹⁸ Wideman draws upon an alternative discourse, rooted in the African American tradition of the threshold as a multi-lateral, hybrid space that offers freedom to signify upon

¹⁸ The discourse of decline remains central to any exploration and experience of black city space because black communities have borne the brunt of such urban dislocation and neglect. For example, poorly maintained housing in black ghettos of New York and Chicago; the lack of amenities and community spirit in the tenements of Chicago's South Side; endemic and institutional racism compounding the lack of these essential living amenities. While whites in the majority of cases moved to the spacious suburbs, African American communities were left to inhabit the empty shells of the urban centres, where lawlessness and poverty were left unchecked. Space became privatised in both suburb and urban centre, but black communities certainly suffered the worst. This chapter acknowledges that African American representational history draws heavily upon this experience of urban decline, and borrows from the essentially white discourse surrounding it.

the established order and, in this instance, upon the established discourse of racialised decline. In so doing, he explores dual traditions in urban spatial representation. He interrogates the urban-dwelling African American writer's engagement with the white discourse of urban decline, especially when it is so frequently cast in racialised terms. He also questions how such a national discourse may engage with and influence the long-held African American tradition of spatial manipulation and representation.

In her detailed study of the city's 'culture of production' Laura Rigal has argued that Philadelphia was erected 'according to principles of elevation, balance, and extension' – a pyramid-like spatial arrangement that was sustained by the hierarchies of labour and of looking.¹⁹ Various studies on the city's place in American history have upheld Philadelphia's carefully self-constructed image of social and visual order. From the beginning, Philadelphia was mapped as 'an imagined, rather than an actual space'.²⁰ Even in Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, the narrator makes her first stop northward in Philadelphia. It is here that she comes in contact with the first portraits of African Americans that she has ever seen:

One day [Mrs Durham] took me to an artist's room, and showed me the portraits of some of her children. I had never seen any paintings of colored people before, and they seemed to me beautiful (162).

Despite Jacobs's presentation of Philadelphia and of the black bourgeoisie as a haven of law and order and of cultured artistic expression, Philadelphia was soon, as Samuel Otter has pointed out, to be in the grip of a 'spectacular' riot

¹⁹ Laura Rigal, *The American Manufactory: Art, Labor, and the World of Things in the Early Republic* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), pp. 11, 17.

²⁰ Samuel Otter, 'Philadelphia Experiments', *American Literary History* 16:1 (2004), pp. 103-116 (p. 113).

that erupted on 1 August 1842. This riot was part of a series taking place in 1834, 1835, 1837, 1838, 1842, and 1849. This complex community, comprising of a large black population, in the seven decades before the Civil War, also suffered a series of devastating yellow fever epidemics (especially in 1793 when African Americans played a crucial and controversial role as nurses and carriers for the dead). It is this historical tension between imagined space and suppressed spaces of trauma that characterises the spaces of Philadelphia more keenly than other cities. Wideman's story 'Fever' and his novel, *The Cattle Killing* focus more specifically on this yellow fever experience.²¹

The Spaces of Urban Racism

Wideman reveals the city as a space produced by social forces, in particular, racism. Recent scholarship has interrogated the role of racialised metaphor in representations of the city, and its relationship to the desire to be able to make that environment legible. Michael Keith and Malcolm Cross argue that race 'is a privileged metaphor through which the confused text of the city is rendered comprehensible'.²² However, although

race commonly functions to frame ways of seeing and reading the city [...] this is not necessarily an explicit or transparent practice. [...] The relationship between the city as material environment and as imaginary space is one that is rendered opaque as well as transparent by the workings of representation. [Wideman] draws our attention to the (il)legibility of race as this is composed within networks of spatial production and cultural representation.²³

²¹ John Edgar Wideman, 'Fever', in *Fever: Twelve Stories* (New York: Henry Holt Press, 1989); and John Edgar Wideman, *The Cattle Killing* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Press, 1996). Wideman's writing is profoundly influenced by political event. His texts may use space in a symbolic way, but liminal space remains a profoundly political space.

²² Kennedy, p. 2.

²³ Michael Keith and Malcolm Cross, 'Racism and the Postmodern City', in *Racism, the City and the State*, ed. by Malcolm Cross and Michael Keith (New York and London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 1-31 (p. 9).

Urban spaces are racially homogenised and internally stratified by racialised class rhetoric and articulated through racialised metaphor. This racialised class rhetoric is clear, for example, in the manner in which Wideman's central character, Cudjoe, imagines the futures of the black children whom he has gathered to participate in an outdoor production of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. The scene occurs at a somewhat off-kilter point late in the novel's second section, but, we are told, 'this is the central event' (132). Cudjoe imagines the children caught up in the cycle of institutionalised racism and social stagnation that faces the majority of black Americans:

His kids have disappeared into a hole in the mountainside. Cleaning somebody's house. Washing dishes. Janitors. Cooks. Prisoners. Sanitation workers. Housekeepers. Doing all that invisible shit. Down the tubes, babe. Under the sidewalk we're standing on (132).

The inevitable relegation of these promising black students to a raft of menial, working class jobs is here yoked in Cudjoe's imagination to a metaphor of descent - 'down the tubes, babe' - which in turn revisits the discourse of decline promulgated by white postmodern urban narratives. The children's collective future is stratified according to the menial job they are to perform, and the degree of separation they will have from the collective, civic spaces of the city. A janitor, for example, might patrol only the corridors and basements of a public building; a cook relegated to the kitchen; sanitation workers to the forgotten architecture of waste that secretly supports the city. Wideman deliberately highlights this simultaneous homogenisation and stratification of urban space according to colour.

Moreover, if visibility is the act upon which urban space is predicated, as Cudjoe's million miniblinds have earlier borne witness, then these children are

destined to inhabit a strange urban hinterland when they grow up; a non-space defined by 'all that invisible shit' they are compelled to practice.²⁴ Here, then, liminal space and the state of invisibility represent the near-inevitable social reality facing black people in the modern city.²⁵

Wideman's establishment of the racial homogenisation of urban space due to social forces is crucially reinforced by the lack of narrative distance within the novel, which enacts the urban claustrophobia felt as a reality within the novel's plot. Wideman's stream of consciousness narrative allows the reader no distance from Cudjoe. We are thrust up against his thoughts from the start:

Green and dying. Green and dying. Who wrote that poem. Cudjoe says the words again, *green and dying*, can't remember the rest, the rest is these words repeating themselves, all the rest contained in them, swollen to bursting, but they won't give up the rest (5).

The claustrophobia that Cudjoe feels, sandwiched between sky and sea, is reflected in the absence of narrative distance. This lack of distance reflects the chronic lack of cultural and physical space afforded to African Americans, especially in Wideman's urban context. Wideman interprets Ellison's phantasmagoric meditations on the oxymoron of racial invisibility by reflecting this acute sense of absence in the decaying urban context of contemporary America, most symbolically in the bomb crater left at 6221 Osage Avenue.

²⁴ Wideman's reference here to the folk tale of the Pied Piper of Hamelin also implicitly questions Cudjoe's (and thus Wideman's own) artistic responsibility as leader and educator of the younger black generation. The 'hole in the mountainside', however, leads not to the paradise of the folk tale, but to a world of racial hierarchy in which black people can expect only a sliding scale of menial jobs (117).

²⁵ Wideman desires a sanctuary: 'dust that will accept his dust without complaint' (104). He imagines this sanctuary as outside the urban environment; the grief from which he escapes is, by contrast, envisioned as a city: 'time for the cities of his grief to be dismantled brick by brick, time for green grass to start pushing up through the broken bones' (105). This passage represents a personal vision of the wider resistance Wideman imagines against the cultural and racial hegemony of urban space.

Once established as a racially defined area, Wideman engages with representations of the urban liminal space as a war zone. These representations come from both black and white sources, but all subscribe to the same logic of spatial construction. The racialised rhetoric used by both black and white speakers internally stratifies the liminal 'black' space. The metaphor most frequently used is that of war:

As you ride beneath the city streets there are distant explosions, muffled artillery roar and crackle of automatic weapons, sounds of war you don't notice in the daylight world above. Down here no doubt the invisible warfare is real. You are rattling closer to it. It sets the windows of the trolley vibrating. Around the next blind curve the firefight waits to engulf you (21).

Wideman here identifies liminal space – in this case Philadelphia's subway system – as a place of 'invisible warfare' (21). Recalling similar constructions used by Ellison in *Invisible Man*, Wideman here sets up the metaphor of racial violence in a subterranean context. The threshold is the only place which acknowledges the violent tensions which support the city. For Cudjoe, and for Wideman, however, these tensions are primarily signalled through race, and that Wideman is deliberately playing upon a literary tradition of liminal space. The tensions, of course, are linked also to a wider urban malaise, a global viewpoint supported by Wideman's eclectic references. Here, although a place of conflict, liminal space is also marked as genuine and 'lived' because it acknowledges the violent reality of urbanism and racism, rather than masking it as King does (with his masked faces: 'her master's face a mask of masks. No matter how many you peel, another rises, like the skins of water'), or as corporate Philadelphia does' (15). Liminal space is therefore threatening, but it is also generative.

Such stratification can be seen in other elements of the novel, too. In fact, the act of splitting informs the general rhythm of the narrative, as Wideman attempts to uncover the hidden spaces of racism in the city. The second section of the novel is largely dominated by the autobiographical voice of Wideman himself, and it is here that he uses the story of his imprisoned son as a way of addressing the African American experience of this splitting. Wideman's pain at his failing relationship with his son mirrors the dislocation and sense of division that Du Bois identified as characterising the African American community itself. Wideman's grief, for example, metaphorically splits his face in two:

He bisects his face on the vertical axis with a towel and studies first one, then the other naked half. He believes he'll discover that half his face is frozen by sorrow [...] Half his face obliged to go on about the business of living, half as if asleep, dreaming over and over again the nightmare of his son's pain (111).

Wideman's towel becomes Du Bois's veil. Such personal tragedy becomes the prism through which the tragedies of the African American community are traced and through which the socially produced stratification of racialised urban space can be represented. Wideman uses the idea of prison space as heterotopia, too. For him, the prison cell is both incarcerating and freeing, of movement and stasis. It rests upon the fissure between 'wrenching' opposites of madness (life) and stillness (death). Wideman knows that such a space is a false sanctuary, unable to sustain its pseudo-calm rhythms:

Playing mindless, repetitive games, locked in but also grateful for the cage of inactivity, the stasis that for a while can pass for peace, control, coherence. Sanctuary. A blessed oblivion consciously sought, an oasis between wrenching, explosive takeovers (110).

The racialised non-space that Wideman's novel seeks to uncover as the central paradox of urban African American experience is paralleled by a similar no-mans-land in the emotional landscape of his own family. Fallen foul of the crime statistics, Wideman's son is serving time in prison. Wideman finds it impossible to communicate effectively with his son during their weekly telephone conversations. The emotional and linguistic spaces constructed in these periodic exchanges come to mirror the socially produced spaces of the concrete city. All are governed by a logic of stratification in which the natural hierarchy between father and son is distorted by the larger and more dominant structures of racism and race politics. The son is incarcerated through his own actions, perhaps, but his captivity is also representative of the captivity enforced on the urban African American male by poverty and racism. As a prisoner, he does not threaten his father's authority, but as a young black prisoner he yokes his father uncomfortably into a shared social space. It is the claustrophobia – indeed, paralysis – of such a shared space that makes the exchange so uneasy:

I say, Hey. How are you?

And that's that. We go on with our conversation for a decent interval, until the guard cuts us off or long enough so the little serious joke about not letting Ma Bell get rich off us is appropriate closure. We also don't go on. Can't move past the initial formulas of greeting.

How are you?

Ok.

I've learned the hard way that I've always known next to nothing about him (98).

The stratification that governs the social spaces emerges also within the linguistic patterns of their conversation. Each assertion made by Cudjoe is undermined by a subsequent admission, alternately blocking off the passages of communication and calcifying the dialogue into linguistic strata. Working

against the intrinsic dynamism of the dialogue is an admission that, while the pair 'go on', they 'also don't go on'. They are held in a limbo between the irrevocable movement of time and a petrified state of isolation. Wideman's prose has to contort itself around this limbo space between movement and stasis, forcing the reader to experience the disappointments of this space themselves. The text continuously offers the reader models of movement – 'I've learned the hard way', and 'we go on' – before challenging such movement with an onslaught of negatives: 'don't go on', 'can't move past', 'next to nothing'. In a way, this 'next to nothing' is the space of absence around which the entire novel is built. Commentary on emotional space is specifically informed by racial context, thus merging those spaces of familial frustration with the more public spaces of racism and race politics.

Black Discourse: Rural - Urban Migration

In *The Black Atlantic*, Gilroy argues that to represent the experience of race requires us to face

the difficult task of striving to comprehend the reproduction of cultural traditions, not in the unproblematic transmission of a fixed essence through time, but in the breaks and interruptions which suggest that the invocation of tradition may itself be a distinct, though covert, response to the destabilising flux of the post-contemporary world.²⁶

It is this use of 'breaks and interruptions' in culture as places where racial identity may be recalled and re-imagined as well as anxious non-spaces reflecting the contingent nature of identity that I wish to study here. These stratified urban spaces are a product of larger socio-economic forces affecting

²⁶ Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, p. 101.

mid-twentieth century urban America, including the rural-urban migration of black populations during the 1940s and 1950s in particular. The influx of black migrant labour intensified the class-based hierarchy that governed the division of city space; blacks were relegated to the lowest ranks of society, below the Irish, Mexicans and other immigrant communities, excluded from many spaces and forced to live in cramped and unhygienic spaces.

However, the aspirational South/North dynamic of rural to urban migration that defined the African American experience throughout much of the early twentieth century sat in productive conflict with the sense of decline that much of the white population felt in relation to their fading dream of a modernist utopia. Black migrants undoubtedly experienced disappointment, even misery in the hyper-regulated, stratified spaces of the Northern city, yet the African American perspective on urban space was significantly different than that of the white population; they carried a different kind of spatial experience to the city, and a different way of moving, informed not by the precarious vertical ethics of white expansionist rhetoric, but by a folk-inspired horizontal dynamic of repetition with difference; aspirational, yes, but flexible, too. It is this ability to maintain a folk identity by signifying on space – by repeating spaces but maintaining a subtle dialogue through small changes – that defines the African American engagement with the urban landscape. Race and the use of space become indivisible.

Wideman's novel centres upon one man's search to reclaim his African American heritage through the reclamation of such creative power over the urban landscape. As the novel opens, Cudjoe is completely lost: separated from his wife and children, and living in self-imposed exile on a Greek island

for ten years, he yearns for what critics have called an ancestor figure that will re-orientate him within his landscape, and envies Zivanias, his Greek sailor friend:

He would like to be named for something his father or grandfather had done well. A name celebrating a deed. A name to stamp him, guide him (3).

When Cudjoe does eventually return to his home city of Philadelphia, he finds he has lost touch with the flexible, signifying techniques that defined the African American urban experience more generally. Because he does not know how to map his place in the city, Cudjoe is separated from the civic history that might restore his identity as a black citizen, and the personal history that might restore him to himself. For the moment, Cudjoe is left with a half-developed metaphor of space as stage sets: a way of looking at space that is potentially creative, but is somehow frozen. The stage sets have no actors, have no plot, no dialogue and no audience:

You remember people, Timbo. I have places, almost like stage sets, in my mind. I've been trying to find them since I've been back but they're gone. Buildings, streets, trees. Stores I used to shop, bars where we partied. The Carousel. I can picture it perfectly. But there's no Carousel anymore (85).

Wideman's novel is about the process of discovery Cudjoe must attempt in order to re-learn a more creative model of spatial movement.

The protest novel and spatial representation

The black author in representing his own experience in print had to deal with a 'burden of multiple allegiances'.²⁷ These are evoked in Du Bois's concept

²⁷ Maryemma Graham, 'Introduction', in *The Cambridge Companion to the African American Novel*, ed. by Maryemma Graham (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 1-16 (p. 4).

of double-consciousness, which, has been reinterpreted by Bernard Bell as 'socialised ambivalence'.²⁸ He describes 'the network of understandings that defines black American culture and informs black American consciousness [...] resulting from systematic barriers of exclusions and discrimination [...] and producing a residue of shared memories and frames of reference'.²⁹ The alienating nature of Du Bois's double-consciousness has been reinterpreted by successive generations of African American writers as a gift, an opportunity to exploit their knowledge of both cultures and to convert the space 'in-between' into a position of plurality and consciousness.

The protest novel of the mid-twentieth century, most notably Richard Wright's *Native Son*, engaged with the twin issues of race and space head on.³⁰ For Wright and his contemporaries, the physical conditions of black life in the cities were abysmal. Space was at a premium, with overcrowded brownstone tenements uptown and segregated downtown spaces. Wright's novel was an attempt to confront these spatial injustices, which he saw as directly linked to the social and racial injustices that black men and women suffered at this time. The migration novel's strategy was to realistically depict the living conditions of the black urban dweller, and in doing so, reveal the litany of basements, sewers, alleyways, tenement corridors and backstreets that the African American was forced to inhabit because of urban racism. For instance, it is the basement sewer that becomes both refuge and grave for Bigger Thomas in *Native Son*. For Wright and his fellow protest novelists, the spatial narrative of the Great Migration was merely the exchange of slavery's shackles for the shackles of the urban slum. The protest novel's job was to accurately replicate

²⁸ Bell, p. 5.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

³⁰ Richard Wright, *Native Son* (New York: Harper Press, 1940).

this spatial slavery within the confines of the novel form. Wright's *Native Son* and his autobiographical *Black Boy* consolidated a tradition of social and political criticism, while Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* can be more appropriately termed 'modernist' because, as Maryemma Graham notes, 'it privileged textual concerns over ideological ones. For some it was a choice between Wright's pathological sense of black life in America and Ellison's inventive, regenerative vision of black culture'.³¹

The Contemporary Novel and Spatial Representation

Contemporary African American fiction has developed a different formal strategy in addressing issues of space and race in the latter half of the 20th century, in response to the changing relationship between the racialised subject and the urban landscape. Where the protest novel of the 1940s sought to realise the claustrophobia of urban racism in its depiction of slum life, contemporary novels such as *Philadelphia Fire* seek to move beyond protesting about the black man's entrapment with the ruins of a white urban narrative and instead project the possibility of an alternative, racialised construction of space that is able to manipulate and imaginatively overcome the very sewers that were Bigger Thomas's doom. Through the exiled figure of Cudjoe, for example, we are able to abandon and then symbolically reclaim the spaces of urban racism. The black hole between such an abandonment of his racial identity and his reluctant return is a gap not easily forgiven, especially by Margaret Jones, one of the few members of the MOVE group to survive the fire bombing on Osage Avenue.

³¹ Graham, p. 2. See Richard Wright, *Black Boy* (New York: Harper Press, 1945).

Polite, accommodating to a degree, she also maintained her distance. Five thousand miles of it, plus or minus an inch. The precise space between Cudjoe's island and West Philly. Somehow that distance bothered her, she held it against him, served it back to him in her cool reserve, seemed unable ever to forgive it (9).

The five thousand mile gap mirrors the gap between the city's ideal and its racist reality.³² The idea that space is something to forgive is fascinating: space as a moral choice. Here, in this extract, the space of five thousand miles of sea and land is a bargaining chip between Margaret Jones and Cudjoe. For it, Cudjoe must exchange the emotional distance that the woman survivor claims. Perhaps, as Wideman hints, Cudjoe's rejection of the claustrophobic trauma of Osage Avenue in his escape to Greece is also an implicit rejection of the incarcerating spaces of racism more generally.

In seeking individual escape, Cudjoe has abandoned his own cultural obligations as an African American – he has abandoned the collective experience and, worse, denied the metaphorical (and too often literal) incarcerating experience of blackness in America. Cudjoe's journey through the narrative, therefore, is less a search for escape and more an attempt to recover and acknowledge the invisible spaces of racism. Such recovery work requires a different strategy of urban movement that has its origins in the African American aesthetic practice of signifying. Wideman's novel is ambiguous as to the ultimate success of Cudjoe's project, and at times fails in its ambitious attempt to disassemble and reassemble the novel form according to its negative space. Wideman's formal project, if you like, is to make a photographic negative of the novel, so all its invisible, negative spaces are

³² Such a gap might also be reflected in the distance between Reconstruction rhetoric and the realities of racism in the South.

thrust forward, and the rest recede into the background. As such, it aims to be the ghostly twin of *Native Son*. What makes Wideman's novel different in temper from Wright's, however, is its attempt to find some conversation between these negative spaces – to project some signifying relationship between them that might gesture towards an African American spatial strategy that breaks free of the vertical authority of white urban discourses.

Wideman might be seen in this context as following in the footsteps of Ellison. As Keith Byerman notes, 'Ellison's break with the protest tradition associated with Richard Wright can be understood precisely as his willingness to use modernist methods in conjunction with vernacular elements'.³³ Ellison began to see the radical potential in experimenting with vernacular forms. If Wideman's vision is 'much darker' than Ellison's, it nevertheless maintains a belief in the potential of vernacular form.

Producing Black Space in the Urban Terrain

They say Jericho's mighty walls brought down by trumpets. They say this Republic's built to last, blood of twenty million slaves mixed into the cement of its foundations, make it strong, brother, plenty, plenty strong (173).³⁴

³³ Keith Byerman, 'Vernacular modernism in the novels of John Edgar Wideman and Leon Forrest', in *The Cambridge Companion to the African American Novel*, ed. by Maryemma Graham (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 253-268 (p. 255).

³⁴ The central tension is laid bare here between white discourses of urban verticality (the mighty Jericho easily read as Philadelphia in this context) and black discourses of liminal space. The conflict is immediately a moral one: the city is built upon the injustice of slavery; liminal space immediately functions as a place of protest. It is also worth signalling at this point that the metaphor of the 'mighty wall' becomes the first in a series of walls throughout the novel, culminating Corey's view of a wall of cloud being held by the 'upthrust of green hills' and 'swallowed' by the night. Quite apart from its links to the large body of criticism on African American prison narratives, the fact that none of these walls exist in isolation but in a relational series seems to combat the fate of destruction that each succumbs to.

In her essay, 'Literature and Urban Crisis', Madhu Dubey connects community and concrete space by using David Harvey's notion of 'community as concrete abstraction'.³⁵ Registering a 'contemporary crisis in black urban community and a concomitant crisis of literary representation', she assesses Wideman's response in *Philadelphia Fire*:

Wideman uses these books-within-his-book to assess the writer's role in mediating urban crisis and to explore different ways of constructing knowable urban communities in literature. *Philadelphia Fire* forcefully rejects organic notions of community, and gropes instead for more complex ways of representing urban communities as 'concrete abstractions' rather than as self-contained units of social experience and value.³⁶

If there is a crisis in urban community, it must necessarily be expressed through a crisis in the concrete fabric of the city. Moreover, if there is a solution, it must also be effected with the city's fabric. Dubey argues that Wideman tries to express ('black') nationalistic ideals in concrete space but ultimately fails because the ideal order doesn't exist. Wideman does seek to construct a number of ideal communities throughout the novel, all of which follow some kind of nationalist agenda.

However, as Dubey notes, 'the contemporary writer seeking to invent an ideal urban order perforce becomes complicit in preserving the hierarchical spatial and social divisions of the city'.³⁷ The devastating failure of these ideal communities, the MOVE house on Osage Avenue in particular, is evidence that Wideman is well aware of the inadequacy of these nationalistic formulae. While Dubey concludes that Wideman's attempt to construct a 'knowable urban community in literature' now fails, it is also important to note that Wideman

³⁵ Dubey, p. 581. See also David Harvey, *The Urban Experience* (Oxford: Blackwell Press, 1989), p. 9-10, 165.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 580.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 581

continues to look beyond nationalist constructions of space in order to imagine alternative ways to represent the African American community in space. This involves admitting and working with the concrete spaces outside the ideal order. The vernacular practices of signifying allow such spaces to operate in a non-hierarchical, flexible and intermittent manner. By doing so, these outside spaces are able to register and transmit collective knowledge and cultural values through the fabric of the city, thus sustaining a marginal community.

Invisible Spaces of Racism

Wideman's novel could be read as an exercise in exposing the invisible spaces of racism.³⁸ All his novels, but particularly *Philadelphia Fire* are constructed around a gap.³⁹ As Kennedy acknowledges, however, Wideman 'writes a provocative meditation on the spatial divisions – between self and other, author and subject – which haunt many forms of writing dealing with black urban experience. He does not presume to bridge the gap between the academy and the ghetto through the example of his own writing'.⁴⁰ What he does presume to do, however, is to turn his attention to activity within that

³⁸ Jean-Pierre Richard, 'From Slavers to Drunken Boats: A Thirty-Year Palimpsest in John Edgar Wideman's Fiction', *Callaloo* 22:3 (1999), pp. 656-664. In a study of Wideman's fiction from 1981 onwards, Jean-Pierre Richard has foregrounded metaphor of the drunken boat, arguing that his later novels are shaped by a layering of contested rhythms. The endless 'back and forth' storytelling, like the eurhythmic of love-making, has the potential to erase the slave ship's transatlantic shuttle. Certainly, such a 'queasiness' and 'uneasiness' can be found *Philadelphia Fire's* cityscape (43). Where such an analysis fails, however, is in its willing ignorance of the many silences and gaps that threaten such a rhythmic conversation. Richard argues that the narrative shuttle frees the text from its racial history; I believe that it is the interruptions to this shuttle that offer greater release.

³⁹ See Charles H. Rowell, 'An Interview with John Edgar Wideman', *Callaloo* 13.1 (1990), pp. 47-61. Rowell argues that this mirrors the gap in Wideman's own biography, between the 'two pieces' of his life, 'the life of the black kid growing up in a predominantly black neighbourhood in Pittsburgh, the life of a middle-class academic in a white world' (Rowell, p. 52).

⁴⁰ Kennedy, p. 85.

gap, eschewing a didactic role for the author and instead exploring more creative responses to questions thrown up by contemporary black urban living. He stresses that his writing 'is an expressive activity... not simply instrumental... Writing for me is a way of opening up, a way of sharing, a way of making sense of the world'.⁴¹ As Kennedy notes, Wideman's primary effect lies in his 'efforts to provide forms of momentary definition and insight – a provisional legibility – that will illuminate historical and psychological components of what he terms the 'miasma' of urbanisation'.⁴²

The inability to represent and resurrect African American memory accurately gives way to an unconscious use and development of a liminal sensibility that is creative in denial. Quoting David Harvey, Dubey has argued that the novel 'offers a 'way of seeing that unmask[s] the fetishisms' promoted by the capitalist production of space – fetishisms which, as David Harvey argues, treat the spatial text of the city as a self-contained object'.⁴³ Wideman might thus be seen as a natural successor to Ellison, who, as Herman Beavers has argued, writes a 'narrative of injury' in which suffering is inevitable and instructive; the 'mythopoetic' idea of death and rebirth merges with ideas of descent and emergence.⁴⁴ Wideman's pathological examination of the MOVE bombing in *Philadelphia Fire* and his obsession with describing dark holes and gutted buildings, refuse sites, bomb sites and building sites might be read as part of his descent into the 'narrative of injury' that shaped the vision of earlier authors of liminal space. Collective critical opinion seems to conclude,

⁴¹ Rowell, p. 92.

⁴² Kennedy, p. 86.

⁴³ Dubey, p. 583.

⁴⁴ Herman Beavers, 'Finding Common Ground: Ralph Ellison and James Baldwin', in *The Cambridge Companion to the African American Novel*, ed. by Maryemma Graham (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 189-202 (pp. 189-190).

however, that Wideman does not countenance emergence from this underworld of racism and oppression; the postmodern multiplicity of image and the dislocation of sign and meaning have scattered the possibility of a permanent and collective racial identity.

Figures 5 and 6 graphically illustrate the extent of the devastation of the fire on Osage Avenue.



Figure 5: Smoke from Osage Avenue on the day of the bombing, May 13, 1985.



Figure 6: Aerial photograph of Osage Avenue after the bombing, May 18, 1985.

In reproducing the dark clouds of smoke and the black bomb crater for a mass media audience, the photographs dislocate the images from their reality in time and space and flatten out the symbolic resonance of liminal space of the crater. It is, in fact, intriguing to recall the reduction of antebellum social relations to a market of fetishised spaces, which we have seen in Chapter One, in the light of late twentieth century efforts to produce and sell media images of disaster zones. Both practices place society and meaning in a wholly spatial dimension in which race is directly allied to and traded as a spatial commodity. In contrast to much critical opinion, however, while Wideman does indeed reject ideas of rebirth and emergence in the same way as he rejects the psychological idealism of Ellison, he does explore the possibility that black holes in the decaying urban landscape might be made to create some kind of subterranean possibility of their own. In this light, Wideman's approach is less pathological and more creative. Wideman thus acknowledges and reclaims the hidden spaces of racism in the city by following a strong tradition of protest literature.

The basement of 6221 Osage Avenue is a key liminal space in Wideman's novel. It is an everyday space that quickly becomes the symbol of the entrapment African American culture experiences in the city. With its destruction, it becomes the burnt bombsite. In both incarnations, the site is a locus for entrapment. As King and the MOVE group make 6221 Osage a site of 'lived' space, to borrow Lefebvre's term – a messy, communal squatter house that reflects the Afro-centric, back-to-nature ethos of its users, the basement space remains stubborn in its reminder of the darker history of racism in the city. In contrast to MOVE's ethos of free living, the basement prison tells of a

latent entrapment that such an ethos has not been able to significantly loosen. The only child to escape the fire in the novel, Simmie, is pushed from the burning basement by his mother:

Simmie said he was scared, didn't want to go. Nkisa had to shove him out the window. He said she threw him and then he doesn't remember a thing till he wakes up in the alley behind the house. Must of hit his head on something. He said he was dreaming he was on fire and took off running and now he doesn't know when he woke up or when he was dreaming or if the nightmare's ever gon stop (19).

The boy's impulse to run is a response to the trauma that Wideman now chimes with the African American motif of the running man. As the slave ran from the master on the Underground Railroad, so Simmie, a literal product of the liminal space from which his mother metaphorically gives him a second birth him, runs. Cudjoe identifies with this impulse, born of the dislocation of identity and space. What he seeks, through his attempts to locate and thus find a place for Simmie, is his own reconciliation with his physical and cultural environment. The fire, however, seems to have exposed the hidden dislocation between community and space: 'Where's the houses', Margaret Jones asks, 'the old people on their stoops, the children playing in the street? Nobody cares. The whole city seen the flames...But it's quiet as a grave, ain't it? Not a mumbling word' (19). Thus Wideman continually situates the liminal space of the basement on Osage Avenue within the context of other, earlier spaces of slavery: the slaveholder ships of the Middle Passage, the Underground Railroad, the prison and the city slum. In doing so, Wideman acknowledges the unbreakable legacy of oppression that the threshold has always represented for African Americans.

Disobedient Urban Space

Wideman's attempts to cast the liminal spaces of his novel as part of an everyday architecture of revolution may be read within the context of Lefebvre's notion of lived space, which we discussed in Chapter One alongside Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Lived space, as discussed in Chapter One, is space that is consciously inhabited; whose dimensions hold a symbolic meaning beyond physical geography. By inverting the official rhetoric of stratification that governs the city, socially dubious spaces like the MOVE household on Osage Avenue in Philadelphia challenge the city's racialised habitus, in which citizens unconsciously use the network of city spaces according to an invisible hierarchy of racial prejudice.

Lefebvre's emphasis on the spaces of everyday life reflects a similar concern within theories of African American vernacular. Both positions are interested in the radical potential of process rather than product, especially, as Byerman reminds us, since 'the product, in Alice Walker's phrase, is for "everyday use"'.⁴⁵ The establishment of the Afro-centrist organisation MOVE in a row-house on Osage Avenue, like the hijacking of street architecture by a gang of graffiti artists, is an example of how Byerman sees the vernacular disturbing authority.⁴⁶ As such, perhaps, these places are modernist.

The Example of MOVE

The MOVE household forms one of the novel's most radical attempts at creating lived space, and one of its most catastrophic failures. Members of

⁴⁵ Byerman, p. 255. See the short story 'Everyday Use', in Alice Walker, *In Love and Trouble* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Press, 1973).

⁴⁶ Byerman's essay focuses on the vernacular in general; this chapter puts his arguments regarding vernacular radicalism into a spatial context.

MOVE, a radical Afro-centrist group dedicated to rejecting all regulations and norms of white Western society, had chosen 6221 Osage Avenue as their base. Explaining the rationale behind the MOVE organisation, Margaret Jones says of King, their leader, 'he taught us to praise Life and be life' (11). The organisation anticipated the time when 'society dies from the poison in its guts, [and] we'll be there and the Tree [of Life] will grow bigger and bigger till the whole wide earth a peaceful garden under its branches' (11).

In this Edenic wish-fulfilment fantasy, Jones also articulates MOVE's spatial ideals: the world as one homogenous space, surveyed by the overarching branches of the 'Tree of Life'.⁴⁷ This space is one of 'Life', but is fundamentally different from Lefebvre's lived space, in that the latter calls for conscious use of the space by every individual. Such lived space exists, therefore, as multiplicity by the very nature of the multiple individual consciousnesses that are shaping it. In contrast, MOVE's ideal is to shape one space through a single consciousness – the 'Tree', or King himself.

MOVE directly attacked the unconscious use of space practiced by the black middle class community around them.⁴⁸ Margaret Jones identifies her reluctance to deviate from her habitual practice of walking home as the catalyst for her joining MOVE. She must walk past MOVE's unpleasant and odorous headquarters every day:

⁴⁷ Madhu Dubey notes that 'MOVE's back-to-nature ideology was meant to provide a vehicle of critical opposition to the city rather than an imaginary "elsewhere"'. Dubey cites as evidence a document written by female members of the original MOVE group while in prison: 'As long as the city exists, to move to the country would be to divert from the problem and not to correct it. [...] The city was once the country. But it is city now, because the sickness MOVE is talking about spread itself and will keep spreading if it isn't stopped. It is MOVE's work to stop this sickness' (Dubey, p. 585). See for example Hizkias Assefa and Paul Wahrhaftig, *The MOVE Crisis in Philadelphia* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1990), p. 11.

⁴⁸ It is similarly interesting to note the police force's actions as the product of habitus – reacting to space according to expectation and habit.

To get home I have to pass by him. His wall, his house, his yard. Either pass by or go way round out my way. Got my route home I've been walking twelve years. Bet you find my footprints in the pavement I been walking home from work that way so long. So I ain't about to change just cause some nasty man sitting there like he's God Almighty. Huh. Uh. This street min much as it's anybody's (13).

This is the unthinking habitus that Lefebvre cautions against. Viewed from this perspective, the MOVE organisation is also cautioning against this habitual use of space. By marking out 6221 Osage Avenue as different from the other similar middle-class neighbourhood houses by way of smell, noise, use of materials, patterns of living and so forth, MOVE is challenging the black middle class population of the suburb in which they live to take notice of the space which they inhabit. Margaret Jones refutes the media's attempts at a smear campaign:

Newspapers said King brainwashing and mind control and drugs and kidnapping people turn them into zombies. Bullshit (15).

The presence of the MOVE household on Osage Avenue represented a profound challenge to the spatial hegemonies surrounding class and race in 1980s Philadelphia. MOVE upset the surrounding black middle-class community because it threatened accepted structures of living, from the shape of their houses to their carefully nurtured belief in social betterment. MOVE's disdain for white notions of success, as well as its disregard for cleanliness and order in the home disgusted – but also disturbed – large sections of Philadelphia's black community. 'Draped' over the cinder block wall of his home, 'cocked back and all pleased with hisself', King claims as his own this prosaic no-man's-land between middle-class order and African chaos (12). In allowing him to do so, Wideman draws upon a long tradition in African American culture of edges,

barriers and in-between spaces being used as symbolic spaces of resistance. There may be walls around the MOVE household, but King's mocking appropriation of them demonstrates the ability of African American activists to successfully manipulate the white architecture of the city.

The MOVE project is to mark out a hyper-black space within this predominantly black community, one that challenged everything white America stood for. Offered instead were the liberal principles of communal living, together with a zealous belief in Afro-centrism. Yet the MOVE venture fails horribly. Attacked by the police department with approval from the city's black mayor, the pocket of Afro-centric resistance is reduced to a bombsite. A subsequent fire destroys sixty one houses on the block. Accounts still differ over who was responsible for the real-life tragedy, but in Wideman's fictional world, King's household was never as complete or radical a challenge to white spatial hegemony as it claimed. In their attempt to defend a purely black space from police attack – in particular by erecting a fortification on the roof of the house that was variously described either as a purely defensive structure, or a 'gun turret' – King's people clung to static principles of spatial organisation that worked against their previous, more mobile models of manipulation and disturbance.⁴⁹ The MOVE community may have sought to transgress community barriers by broadcasting political diatribes laced with profanities from loudspeakers, by allowing their stench to permeate the neighbourhood, and by publicising their back-to-nature agenda, but, fundamentally, black space was something exclusive; borders were things to produce and reinforce,

⁴⁹ Brian Jenkins, 'MOVE siege returns to haunt city', CNN Interactive, April 2, 1996. Jenkins's article, posted on CNN's website, states that the mayor of Philadelphia, Wilson Goode, 'gave the go-ahead to drop four pounds of plastic explosives on the group's rooftop gun turret'. Available at URL: <http://www.cnn.com/US/9604/02/move_court/> [accessed 3 August 2007].

not transgress. It may be argued that such static use of space was purely reactionary, a necessary response to aggressive police policy and not characteristic of the movement as a whole. However, MOVE's extreme Afrocentrist policies demanded the separation of the races and the establishment of a black-only African homeland within America (similar arguments were made by the Black Panther movement in the 1960s and 1970s). These arguments are the flip-side of white hegemonic narratives of urban space, and conform to the same ideals – the division of the space according to race. As such, they represent no development of spatial practice. There was no imaginative *reproduction* of space, which I will discuss in my third section.

The Example of Graffiti

In *The Black Atlantic*, Gilroy argues that while race is a constructed and constantly changing category, centred within a discourse that rest on a language of authenticity, it remains powerful regardless of its unreality. The attempt in Wideman's novel to establish a resistant black space in the urban environment takes a textual turn in the proliferation of graffiti in West Philadelphia. Such graffiti, the novel suggests, retrieves its power from a long tradition of liminal aesthetics. This mode of expression broadcasts a specifically black voice on the surface of the city architecture, at once public and collective, but also a liminal, anonymous medium. It is very conscious of the racial 'war' that lies within the streets:

Kids Krusade. Kaliban's Kiddie Korps. Cudjoe saw the graffiti everywhere. Triple K's. MPT. Double K's. Money Power Things. Anywhere and everywhere [...] War paint, Cudjoe thought. Gearing up for battle. Kids priming the city with a war face. MPT. KK. A ritual mask summoning power: a dream, a revelation as the features of the city change before our eyes. Does anyone besides him recognize

what's happening? Did it happen too quickly? Nobody paying attention to walls, billboards, sidewalks, fences and then one morning, boom, the signs had appeared (88-89).

For Wideman, urban graffiti is a positive force. Recalling Lefebvre's work on habitus, or the unthinking use of everyday space through habit, Wideman condemns those who live in the city and pay no attention 'to walls, billboards, sidewalks, fences'. Their use of these spaces is disengaged and routine. All of the spaces which Wideman lists are liminal and exist on the border between two states: walls and fences, for example, are literal borders between different spaces; billboards are alternative spaces of fantasy and advertising, which, together with sidewalks, are often situated at the side of motorways.

All of these spaces provide important functions, but are unnoticed objects in themselves. Wideman argues that the urban graffiti challenges this insidious spatial habitus by utilising the social potential of the numerous liminal sites around the city. By making 'walls' and 'sidewalks' the canvas for radical political and social commentary, the variety and crucial function of such sites, previously ignored as marginal, are emphasised; people recognise the centrality of these spaces as they become Lefebvrian lived spaces. They contain an idea, and this idea links the space and the observer at the moment of engagement, thus momentarily completing the site's function as a participatory space.

There has always been a resistive black space in the history of the English language. This history of linguistic resistance hijacks the architectural metaphor that language has perennially preferred, even from the time of Babel, and situates its challenge on edges, corners, shadows, seams and the like. This re-energising of liminal linguistic space is a radical act, and one that

Wideman takes care to trace back to the experience of the Middle Passage. Then, as now, language is intimately related to the architecture of power, and is frequently expressed through architectural metaphor, reflecting the vertical discipline and racialised discourse of white models of urban space. Wideman, however, identifies a sustained counter-narrative that challenges the racially coded structure of language by playing upon liminal spaces in its architecture. The 'sidewalks and fences' of late twentieth century Philadelphia find their antecedents in similar double-sided metaphors of the Middle Passage:

The lingo is English landwich. Quack of the baddest, biggest Quacker. King's English. Pure as his tribe. We've hear it before, leaking from a circle of covered wagons, a laager squatting on the veld, a slave fort impacted on the edge of a continent, its shadow athwart the deep blue sea, a suburban subdivision covenanted to a lighter shade of pale (129).

Wideman here points out that language is historically and intrinsically related to space. More specifically, language, here characterised as the 'King's English', is often constructed as a space that has to be defended from outside contamination, in order to protect its purity. Conversely, it is this 'pure' language that defines the cultural space in which it is kept. By using the illustration of the Afrikaans 'laager' or defensive wagon ring, built to protect the Afrikaans settler from the African, Wideman interrogates the spatiality of language in terms of racial politics. Language here is of a culturally and racially specific value; it is used to define by exclusion.

By invoking a series of interrelated spaces, each of which converse across time, Wideman is able to build up an argument for the exclusionary nature of white language throughout the various stages of English's impact upon African American history. For example, while subtly gathering his child audience into a collective 'we', Cudjoe imagines the 'leaking' of Afrikaans

English from the perspective of the Southern African native. The enclosed space of the Afrikaans defensive shelter is reflected in the slave fort 'on the edge of a continent', which similarly occupies a border sight, this time between land and sea (and the status of free and slave), rather than between canvas and open veldt. Wideman here interrogates the action of language at such a juncture, where the 'pure' English of the slave trader would have asserted its muscular pre-eminence over the cacophony of various tribal languages brought together as the slaves were assembled for deportation. The corralling function of language in such a situation mirrors the authoritative spaces in which it was meted out: language as a tool of power and a display of racial superiority. As the slave fort signified upon the Afrikaans laager, so the 'suburban subdivision' defines within its quasi-religious spatiality the superiority of pale skin.

However, as much as all of these linguistic spaces assert their purity and dominance, they also rest perennially upon border territory: the veldt, the sea, the jungle and the urban 'other' remain threateningly present. Wideman acknowledges this spatial threat and plays upon the positive significations of such border territory. Describing English as a 'landwich', he plays with the connotations of sandwich and land in order to suggest the spatial enclosure attempted by English speakers. This also throws up the idea of division in parts, however. Cudjoe's own use of slang in his speech to his class of children and Wideman's own use of the vernacular in his novel reveal the infringement of the rigid linguistic borders discussed above. The purity of the 'English landwich' has been 'corrupted' by the slaves that were overpowered by it on the shores of Africa. It has grown malleable in their hands; it has become fascinated with the process of change which saw the pure form accept and

integrate the 'other' languages and sounds; it has developed rhythms to reflect this fascination with change, so that within each sentence it plays with repetitions and shifts in meaning and sound.

The African American vernacular, the product of such bastardisation of the 'pure' English language, has embraced signifying as its defining technique. Language can be both exclusionary and embracing. African American vernacular has at its heart a love of movement, of spatial consciousness – it is always highly conscious of the physical and semantic spaces which it occupies and is never content to remain within any one. As a language, it resides wholly within the space of transference – in the act of signifying between one space and the next. Wideman also uses the vernacular to break down social barriers.

Despite this long tradition of resistive black spaces in language, Wideman remains equivocal about the radical potential of the graffiti project in Philadelphia. As an illegal act of writing upon spaces which have been forgotten or overlooked in the urban landscape, the graffiti Cudjoe encounters represents a symbolic re-appropriation of the city's official architecture and a desire to inscribe onto real space the authentic experiences of the too-often silenced black population of late twentieth century Philadelphia. However, the principles expressed through this graffiti are resolutely mercantile and seemingly work against these more idealistic claims. The graffiti's glorification of 'Money, Power, Things' is both a satire on the excesses of contemporary consumer culture and also a candid representation of the enormous social and economic desires shaping a disadvantaged and marginalised community (88). Wideman is suggesting that the achievement of solid 'things' is more important to the representation of black urban identity than the symbolism of liminal

spaces. The 'Kaliban Kiddie Korps' who write such graffiti, for example, represent a strange amalgam of radical resistance and susceptibility to the soft power of white-sponsored capitalism (89). The potential of their liminal status as an invisible army poised between childhood and adulthood to escape essentialised notions of black urban subjectivity, to re-appropriate the language of Southern racist organisations like the Ku Klux Klan and to open up a variety of expressive discourses with which to engage the city space is curtailed by a desire for preconceived labels of success. Indeed, Cudjoe acknowledges that the radicalisation of space engendered by the act of graffiti is very quickly forgotten:

Second nature instantly. Blending into the cityscape nobody ever sees. Kids Krusade. Money Power Things. Kaliban's Kiddie Korps. Unnoticed. Like dead trees, dead rivers, poisonous air, dying blocks of stone (89).

The Limits of Critical Spatial Theory

In summary, Wideman fails in his effort to construct disobedient narrative spaces in his novel that would develop Ellison's deterritorialising project and effectively challenge hegemonic constructions of whiteness and urban spatial decorum in late 1980s Philadelphia. All Wideman's disobedient liminal spaces fail. Madhu Dubey calls *Philadelphia Fire* 'an aborted modernist mission to shore up literary value against the ruins of the contemporary city'.⁵⁰ Certainly, Wideman attempts to unmask the fetishisms and spatial hierarchies that operate in the urban environment; his ostensible efforts to re-energise the role of the artist as cultural leader and locate a modernist space within the city clearly fail. However the production of black space is limited because its

⁵⁰ Dubey, p. 582.

discourse remains within the linear rhetoric of stratification (albeit inverted). As Fritz Gysin notes, 'with Wideman, black invisibility has become visible, but as an off-white counterimage, as it were, comparable to the white negative picture on a photographic plate'.⁵¹ Critical spatial theory's Marxist emphasis on the realities of socially lived space ignores the possibilities of spatial representation, which might offer a more hopeful reading of Wideman's novel.

Jean-Pierre Richard expounds on Wideman's interest in the in-between-ness of things, claiming that essential to his fiction 'is his total rejection of the 'atonist' mind'.⁵² For example, Wideman's introduction to an edition of Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk*, claims to repudiate 'either/or terminal distinctions: black/white, male/female, young/old, good/bad, rich/poor, spirit/flesh'.⁵³ His writing goes beyond such impoverishing alternatives and seeks for the hidden colors: 'Black and white are gone. What came next'.⁵⁴ As Richard insists, "'Possibility" is the master word here'.⁵⁵

⁵¹ Fritz Gysin, 'Predicaments of Skin: Boundaries in Recent African American Fiction', in *The Black Columbiad: Defining Moments in African American Literature and Culture*, ed. by Werner Sollors and Maria Diedrich (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), pp. 286-297 (p. 295).

⁵² Richard, 'From Slavers to Drunken Boats', p. 611.

⁵³ Wideman, 'Introduction', in W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* [1903] (New York: Vintage Books/Library of America, 1990), p. xiii.

⁵⁴ Wideman, *The Cattle Killing*, p. 142.

⁵⁵ Richard, 'From Slavers to Drunken Boats', p. 611.

Chapter Four:

The Hollow Loses Its Bottom: Heterotopia, Signifying and the Urban Landscape in John Edgar Wideman's *Philadelphia Fire*

In the previous chapter, we have seen how Wideman traces several examples of the failure of black folk culture in the modern urban environment. This is part of a larger trend in Wideman's oeuvre: the restorative power of family, history and cultural expression in his first three novels – *A Glance Away*, *Hurry Home*, and *The Lynchers* – but especially in his Homewood Trilogy, gives way in *Reuben* and *Philadelphia Fire* to misgivings about the effectiveness of vernacular culture in a contemporary setting.¹ In these novels, the construct of 'black' space is unable to free itself from imitating the conventions of so-called 'white' space, and offers no strategy for negotiating the racialised miasma of urbanisation that is contemporary society. It is true that the collective practice of storytelling and what Keith Byerman calls the 'blues environment' of vernacular culture expressed within the family is at least discredited and at most completely absent from *Philadelphia Fire*.²

However, Wideman has not abandoned but rather shifted this 'blues environment' onto the vernacular architecture of the city, which now functions as a repository of cultural values and offers a significant, if precarious, strategy for survival. Here, the responsibility for reading such an architectural narrative is taken on collectively, not by the artist alone. By juxtaposing and mediating

¹ John Edgar Wideman, *A Glance Away* (Chatham, N.J.: Chatham Bookseller Press, 1967); *Hurry Home* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World Press, 1970); *The Lynchers* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1973); *Reuben* (New York: Henry Holt Press, 1987).

² Byerman, p. 263.

between the discourses of race and architecture, blues and basketball, the black verbal arts, the visual arts and contemporary urban culture, Wideman sets up a dialogue between African American fiction and wider cultural and philosophical debates centring around postmodernism. This engagement with the postmodern, Fritz Gysin notes, has been the 'age-old condition of marginalised groups', but Wideman's mediation between the negative spaces in text, architecture and culture serves as much to signify upon African American creative practices of survival as to illuminate the disintegration and fragmentation privileged by contemporary critical trends.³ As Maryemma Graham suggests, '[e]ven when African American novels resist normative closure, they consistently point to a mythic, fantastic, or functional return to order, the importance of cultural continuity, innovation and radical change'.⁴

This chapter will examine the symbolic and imaginary reproductions of black space in the urban terrain of Wideman's *Philadelphia Fire*. The previous chapter argued that the narrative representation of the suburban headquarters of the Afro-centrist MOVE organisation, and the bombsite which subsequently marks it, represent a failure to articulate a radical black territory in the contemporary urban environment. Cudjoe's failed attempt at staging Shakespeare outdoors is a metaphor for the failure of Black Arts movement's desire for a 'new breed' of visible, politically active black Nationalists.⁵ The narrative spaces of the city are divided and commodified in a similar way to the division of the antebellum South in Jacobs's slave narrative according to

³ Fritz Gysin, 'From Modernism to Postmodernism: black literature at the crossroads', in *The Cambridge Companion to the African American Novel*, ed. by Maryemma Graham, pp. 139-155 (p. 139).

⁴ Graham, p. 12.

⁵ Larry Neal, 'The Black Arts Movement', *The Drama Review* 12.4 (1968), pp. 28-39 (p. 28).

spaces of capital. The graffiti of the Kaliban's Kiddie Korps, conflated neatly with historical memories of the Ku Klux Klan, identifies a series of commercialised black urban territories marked by the signifier 'Money, Power, Things' (89). The radical potential within Invisible Man's cellar seems to have corrupted on emergence from the underground.

However, Wideman signifies upon the space of loss. He interrogates the dynamic relationship between narrative liminal spaces as a way of recovering a measure of possibility within these flat urban spaces. The space of Clark Park and the basketball court, which signifies upon Invisible Man's boxing arena, are constructed as narrative sites of destabilisation and possibility. The Osage Avenue bombsite, moreover, is represented as a narrative heterotopia and reflected in the increasing formal destabilisation of the text itself. These symbolic sites represent, contest and invert the racialised and divided spaces of the city and interrogate the multiple possibilities for black urban identity.

Reproducing Black Space in the Urban Terrain

If space is socially produced, and racism produces a particular organisation of space in the city, then African Americans have developed a counter organisation of space in order to represent themselves more fully. This spatial resistance to racism takes a socially-lived form that draws heavily upon the historical experience of slavery; that is, racism is combated through an everyday use of the urban environment that privileges liminal geography (a similar attempt to locate representative black space occurs within cultural production; in this case, specifically within literature). This strategy is effective

in two ways: firstly, by positioning liminal sites as symbolic protest spaces, and secondly by generating an unlikely and subversive conversation between such sites. In this way, the spatial lessons of slavery are re-imagined within a narrative urban context. The liminal sites that punctuate *Philadelphia Fire* – for example, the ‘stone ghetto’ of downtown Philadelphia that is the object of Timbo’s redevelopment plans, or the ‘garbage dumps’ that Cudjoe encounters both in Torremolinos and Philadelphia – are strident reminders of the failure of urban modernism and the inscription of racialised discourses of decline on the city landscape, but they also act symbolically as powerful narrative spaces of memory and cultural identity (78-79, 24). Many critics have concluded that *Philadelphia Fire* is a novel about failure: the failure of the black community to protect its children; the failure of capitalism in the postmodern city; and the failure of Black Arts optimism in the face of contemporary urban decay, in particular.⁶ Wideman constructs narrative liminal spaces within the context of this sense of failure. On the one hand, he despairs of the coherence of such potent but hidden spaces, imagining black consciousness splintering over his narrative as his protagonists struggle to locate a sense of themselves in the city; on the other hand, he suggests the possibility that these splinters may be in dialogue with each other.

In much of his writing, especially in *Philadelphia Fire*, Wideman draws upon the spatial principles behind the realist tradition of social commentary established by Wright during the 1940s. Of course, Wideman’s approach is more surrealist than realist. As in *Native Son*, the narrative liminal spaces

⁶ See, for example, Susan M. Pearsall, “Narratives of Self” and the Abdication of Authority in Wideman’s *Philadelphia Fire*, *MELUS*, 26.2, (2001), pp. 15-46; and James Kyung-Jin Lee, ‘Where the Talented Tenth Meets the Model Minority: The Price of Privilege in Wideman’s *Philadelphia Fire* and Lee’s *Native Speaker*’, *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 35.2-3 (2002), pp. 231-257.

within *Philadelphia Fire* function as metaphors for the physical and social constraints of urban racism, and as spaces of symbolic protest. Thus Bigger Thomas's basement might be seen to map easily onto the basement of 6221 Osage Avenue: both initially function as a sanctuary for blackness but are violated and destroyed by acts of racism. Their destruction allows liminal space to become a physical indictment of racial prejudice. As we have seen in the previous section, Wideman is concerned to re-establish the validity of such protest spaces within the geography of 1980s Philadelphia. For many critics, however, the failure of this desire – the very bleakness of the Osage bombsite, and its inability to inspire real change (remember the emptiness of the square during the victims' memorial service with which the novel ends) – in the end defines Wideman's narrative project. This failure is due to the fact that liminal space as it is conceived here operates (albeit critically) within a modernist vertical hierarchy that places black space at the bottom of the heap. These liminal spaces remain caught in a binary, caught in an oppositional stance whose primary function is to critique the white system of urban space, not provide an alternative one in which space is able to escape the constructs of 'race'.

However, Wideman's garbage dumps and construction sites also operate as everyday geographical counters to hegemonic urban whiteness by establishing a productive discourse amongst themselves. This differs from the essentially static opposition of the protest spaces above in ushering in a dialectic between stasis and movement. It also marks a departure from the critical spatial theory, for example that produced by Lefebvre, towards a hybrid approach which mixes critical spatial theory with African American literary

theory, including Du Bois's idea of double-consciousness and Gates's concept of signifyin(g). What marks African American liminal spaces as particularly complex is their ability to be both static (thus representing the repressive history of slavery) and also create movement. Each site repeats and subtly modifies the other – that is, signifies upon the other – to create a network of creative communication. Thus the garbage dump in Greece is able to reclaim and signify upon the garbage dumps of Philadelphia. Similarly, the novel's central signifying space, that of the bombsite on Osage Avenue, actively engages with other craters and black holes across time and space. These ways of dwelling are also acts of civil disobedience, but their central difference from the social protest spaces is the element of process, which breaks the binary between black and white space; these spaces are being reproduced, not just produced. The practitioners of these racialised spaces must also signify in order to fully realise their own representation in their environment. Therefore, the three narrators of the novel, Cudjoe, J.B., and Wideman himself, develop, with varying degrees of success, a way of signifying upon the liminal spaces of the narrative. *Philadelphia Fire* represents a significant development from the work of Jacobs and Ellison in that his text deals explicitly with the protagonist in open engagement with society. If *Invisible Man's* re-entry into the world starts as Ellison's narrative concludes, the text could in fact be seen as a prologue to Wideman's novel; Cudjoe's narrative starts with his emergence from such self-imposed exile. The novel as a whole, including Cudjoe's story, Wideman's political musings on Shakespeare, the act of writing, and his relationship with his son, and, finally, J.B.'s apocalyptic story, engages with this desire to enact a liminal aesthetic. The depiction of real liminal spaces in

the narrative, and the creation of parallel liminal spaces in the text seek to replicate the spatial restriction that has always been central to the experience of race in the New World. These liminal spaces have also been developed into collective spaces of resistance that challenge the dominant spatial hegemony of white culture in America.⁷

Liminality as Heterotopia

Liminal space as heterotopia is a more radically disobedient space than the attempt at creating a symbolic lived space undertaken by MOVE because it operates on completely non-linear systems. Several spaces in the novel function as heterotopic arena: spaces outside of time and geography which play host to the imagined presence of other spaces of significance, allowing parallels to be drawn between them. Such spaces (including the text itself) engage in symbolic and imaginary representations of racialised space, as well as remaining physical expressions of it. These spaces, operating symbolically as well as socially, can be read as heterotopia. Foucault addresses the possibilities of spatial representation that other critical spatial theorists ignore, by introducing the symbolic dimension.

Jean-Pierre Richard has commented upon the strong presence of a metaphor of circulation in both *Philadelphia Fire* and Wideman's short story, 'Fever', equating the city's

⁷ For further examples of racialised liminal metaphor, see Toni Morrison, *Jazz*. Morrison describes the 'cracks' that develop in Violet's consciousness, 'dark fissures in the globe light of the day' as she struggles to accept the death of her husband's young lover. The psychological damage that the 'cracks' represent leads the narrator to predict that Violet and Joe will eventually kill each other, but the narrator is proved wrong. The cracks lead not to morbid repetition but to a creative signifying upon the crack, allowing Violet and Joe to fashion a loving relationship out of the series of dispossessions they have faced: 'I was sure one would kill the other. I waited for it so I could describe it. I was so sure it would happen. That the past was an abused record with no choice but to repeat itself at the crack and no power on earth could lift the arm that held the needle' (Morrison, *Jazz*, p. 220).

function with that of the human body.⁸ The malaise of the postmodern urban condition is apparent in the action of the fever of racism within these environments, an inadvertent product of the heartless geometrical grid on which the Quaker city was laid out. As Richard argues of Wideman's short story 'Fever', 'Philadelphia does not typify 'circulation' between men, but the lack of it, as the city splits into two unconnected parts: the rigid grid of the town center and the chaotic maze of the periphery where the latest immigrants and the vast majority of the Black inhabitants barely survive, 'cocooned like worms' in holes dug out of the river banks'.⁹ Yet, if these river bank cocoons are poisonous clots within the social and cultural geography of the city according to Richard's reading, as heterotopic liminal sites they may also function as imaginative portals offering an alternative process of spatial circulation. The river bank cocoons in the story 'Fever' are reflected in the bombsite, the waste dumps and the subterranean gravesite in *Philadelphia Fire*. By virtue of their symbolic liminal location, these sites are able to counteract the clogged geography of urban racism and allow the subject to circulate among the various sites that are called up through this symbolic portal.

These liminal positions are able to encompass the tenuous balance between immobility and freedom that has historically characterised African American social and cultural experience; they are transformed into spaces outside time and geography, in which the symbolic meaning of selfhood within place may be explored with impunity. Richard argues that Wideman invents 'a different kind of time: textual time, which the writer can fully control', in order

⁸ Richard, 'From Slavers to Drunken Boats', p. 604.

⁹ Ibid.

to inject movement into the fractured cityscape.¹⁰ It might be possible, however, that in productively disrupting Wideman's city dystopia, liminal heterotopia operate on a similar temporal plane, shaped by the signifying artist.

While Richard sees 'time' and movement being recreated by the reader's eye across the shards of Wideman's fractured novel, it is also true that such willed synthesis exists only between the shards; that Wideman insists less upon the urge to connect the dots as to realise the creative potential already existing in the space between them. Viewed this way, the clear failure of Wideman's text to present a coherent face becomes irrelevant; the creative movement has been sourced elsewhere.

The reading of African American space as heterotopia has a long history. In his essay, 'Harlem is Nowhere', published in 1964, Ralph Ellison emphasised the extreme psychological and cultural impact of the transition from rural to urban symbolised in the growth of Harlem as a black neighbourhood.¹¹ As Liam Kennedy notes, 'this transition epitomised the African-American's sense of instability as a 'displaced person of American democracy'. For Ellison, the 'nowhere' of Harlem is the symbolic 'scene of the folk-Negro's death agony' and of his 'transcendence'.¹² Like the other heterotopia of Wideman's novel – Philadelphia's Clark Park, for example – the heterotopia of Harlem is born out of the economic migration of rural black populations to the Northern cities. However, unlike Ellison's urban 'nowhere', which is essentially a temporary

¹⁰ Richard, 'From Slavers to Drunken Boats', p. 608.

¹¹ Ralph Ellison, 'Harlem is Nowhere', in *Shadow and Act* (New York: Random House Press, 1964), pp. .

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 294-302. See also Kennedy, p. 72.

symbolic space allowing the emergence of a transcendent black subjectivity, Wideman's urban heterotopias are more sceptical spaces.

For Wideman, the state of transition experienced in the Great Migration is part of a larger series of historical transitions experienced by African Americans, stretching back to the Middle Passage. The 'nowhere' space of Harlem, then, is part of a series of heterotopias that emerge as a response to these transitional experiences and which provide a symbolic space less with the intention of provoking a final transcendence of the African American subject, but more with the desire to sustain a creative relationship between the subject and the experience of transition. With Ellison and Wright's novels of the 1940s and 1950s, the city has become the focal point for such debates over spatial representations of the black subject.

In her novel, *Jazz*, for example, Toni Morrison sees the Harlem heterotopia as a seductive anti-community, a place of naïve optimism in which the community structures of the past can be forgotten in the novelty of surface aesthetics, such as 'how men accommodate themselves to tall buildings and wee porches, what a woman looks like moving in a crowd, or how shocking her profile is against the backdrop of the East River'.¹³ In contrast, Wideman views the city's architecture as host to a multiplicity of heterotopias – smaller 'no-wheres' within the larger 'nowhere' of Harlem – all of which are spaces of remembrance rather than forgetting, of connection rather than narcissism, of depth rather than surface aesthetics. Clark Park, Osage Avenue bombsite, the graffitied subway station, J.B.'s alleyway hideout, the empty slums of West Philadelphia offer non-spaces which may be signified upon endlessly, creating a

¹³ Morrison, *Jazz*, p. 34. See also Kennedy, p. 74.

community of spaces across time, pools of conscious, symbolic self-knowledge. These black holes offer the racialised subject a way of accommodating and transforming their central experience of transience into a sustainable cultural and architectural practice.

Du Bois, Gates and Foucault

The narrative liminal spaces in *Philadelphia Fire* are spaces where the black aesthetic theories of Du Bois and Gates are read against Foucault's theory of heterotopia. The extra dimensions of the symbolic and imaginary allow a challenge to both the homogenisation and stratification of urban terrain, replacing it by a signifying aesthetic in which liminal spaces replicate and converse in both physical and symbolic terms. This becomes an alternative, signifying way of dwelling in the city. Foucault's definition of heterotopia serves as a reminder of the problematic nature of any social structure:

Utopias afford consolation: although they have no real locality there is nevertheless a fantastic, untroubled region in which they are able to unfold; they open up cities with vast avenues, superbly planted gardens, countries where life is easy, even though the road to them is chimerical. *Heterotopias* are disturbing, probably because they make it impossible to name this *and* that, because they shatter or tangle common names, because they destroy 'syntax' in advance, and not only the syntax with which we construct sentences but also that less apparent syntax which causes words and things (next to and also opposite one another) to 'hold together'.¹⁴

Heterotopias serve as actual spaces which re-energise the social position of marginal groups. What makes them relevant to Wideman's fiction is their determination to disrupt basic social structures and the discourses of power and dominance inherent within them. The ambiguity of heterotopia lies in their

¹⁴ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things*, p. xviii.

role as spaces within society that serve to undermine the very structures of which they are a part.

Wideman includes within his writing an interlocking series of re-figurations of Du Bois's concept of double-consciousness, which, he argued, characterised African American cultural production. Wideman's narrative figurations rely upon the visual reproduction of the theme of the double. For example, doubleness is emphasised in the idea of reflection, as Cudjoe remembers a recent ferry trip while looking out over a rubbish dump:

Gulls floated over the dump. Gull cries, the lazy circling of gulls. Gulls had followed the ferry across the sound. A second wake in the air. Gray and white like the plowed sea (60).

The narrative here folds over on itself several times: Cudjoe is remembering the experience of a memory and reporting it to us. Moreover, one space, Cudjoe's west Philadelphia apartment, constructs another, the space of the island rubbish dump, which in turn constructs another space, that of the 'sound' which the ferry must cross. Each space is a heterotopia – that is, a space of absence that resides in-between two states of being; a space outside the parameters of cultural norms. Wideman redevelops Foucault's idea of heterotopia by linking it with Du Bois's concept of double-consciousness.

The idea of a racialised heterotopia as developed in *Philadelphia Fire* proposes that the space in between the two doubles of Du Bois's construction (i.e. in the position of the veil) represents the non space that Foucault addresses. African Americans are particularly able to identify with this space of absence, since it has characterised their social and cultural status from its inception. In a sense, African Americans carry this experience of heterotopia with them permanently as an emotional and cultural event. Wideman's fiction

argues for the recognition of this racialised heterotopia (figured in the space where the hyphen used to be, between African and American), and spends much of his novel revealing its physical ramifications in urban planning and social organisation in Philadelphia. As has been said before, Wideman's project in this novel is to reveal the hidden spaces of racism. However, he also argues for the unique creative properties of such racialised heterotopia. The outside status of such space (if the stoops have gone, Wideman reclaims the 'hollow' of the park) enables a greater freedom of expression, together with a better view of both sides of the coin (29).

The temporal gaps of the narrative re-enact the spatial signifying that occurs within the passage above. The wake of the ferry in the sea is paralleled by the birds' 'second wake in the air', opening a blank gap in between. This horizontal gap is echoed by the gap of the 'sound' between both land masses. Cudjoe then signifies upon these heterotopic spaces, by drawing a parallel between his twentieth century experience and that of the Middle Passage slave ships:

He'd read that sharks trailed the stench of slave ships all the way across the Atlantic, feasting on corpses thrown overboard. Gulls screech and glide above the refuse of the islanders (61).

The slave ship is, of course, the central heterotopic space on which Wideman signifies, recalling the liminal space of the Middle Passage and, in narrative terms, Harriet Jacobs's attic hideaway and Invisible Man's cellar. It is a conglomerate of a number of Foucault's heterotopias: the ship and the grave. Neatly, the rubbish dump reappears at the conclusion of the paragraph, completing the echoed series of refuse spaces. Wideman's novel is an elegant and complex series of echoes, or signifying, between such spaces of absence,

or gaps, not only throughout the novel, but also between different textual registers. The style and physical text itself reflects and develops the narrative spaces conjured by the plot. In turn, these comment on and develop the larger cultural and historical spaces of African Americans more generally.

Wideman sees this gap in everyone's lives, too. His novel addresses the absences in life beyond race, and it is more profound for it. For example, in Rachel's succumbing to cancer:

He'll hear of the cancer and be afraid to call. He'll forget then be reminded when he hears the cancer has removed her. To the other side. From one place to the other. Out of the goddamned middle (71).

Wideman presents his vision of a racialised ideology of representation. Instead of the 'cone of vision' predominant in theories of representation since the 1970s, where the act of looking is an act of objectification, he constructs a space where the racialised act of looking is one of symbolic vision:

You watch the sky crack. You see deep into the night. Lightning hold for a fraction of a second too long and you see farther into the darkness than you've ever seen before, another island, a city of trees and hills, teeming, terraced, dropping into the sea a thousand miles away, beyond the horizon line that till this moment has always defined the limit of your vision (147).

Through the action of the 'crack', a new and limitless arena of representation opens out beyond the limiting horizon. Such a construction challenges Western classical cosmologies of space which held that, as F.M. Cornford writes, 'the universe of being was finite and spherical with no endless stretch of emptiness beyond. Space had the form of [...] a sphere with centre and circumference'.¹⁵ In contrast, Wideman's characters are plagued by a constant apprehension of

¹⁵ F.M. Cornford, 'The Invention of Space' in *Essays in Honour of Gilbert Murray* (London: George Allen & Unwin Press, 1936). Quoted in Victor Burgin, *In/different Spaces: Place and Memory in Visual Culture*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), p. 40.

this 'endless stretch of emptiness beyond' – '*Where did I come from?*' (148). Wideman responds to this question by revealing (albeit momentarily) a parallel city, 'another island, a city of trees and hills, teeming, terraced', which, in doing so, signifies on Du Bois's sense of doubleness and also enacts Gates's calls for a representative multiplicity of vision. Here, in contrast to 'cone of vision' is a space of representations which the racialised subject is able to negotiate through the conscious act of signifying.

Clark Park as a Heterotopia

Clark Park is a heterotopic arena. It may have slipped down the ranking of prosperous public spaces, avoided by families and becoming instead a meeting place for local gangs and drug dealers, but the novel attempts to revive the playful creativity that once inspired Cudjoe's evening basketball games in the hollow. Cudjoe's conscious reconstruction of the park's significance as a racialised space through a series of visions and memories helps reconfigure the hollow as a lived space. The 'hollow' in Clark Park becomes one of the most important lived spaces in the novel. It becomes an arena for imaginative practice. Not only is it host to the creative and socially mobile game of basketball, the hollow also becomes the site of Cudjoe's dream at the end of Part One of the novel.

Cudjoe identifies singing with the hollow, but it also becomes the site at which he discovers the body of a lynched boy hanging from the rim of the basketball hoop. This could be an indictment from Wideman of the slender hopes many African American males pin on basketball as a way of escaping the ghetto lifestyle of poverty and violence. But, more symbolically, the conflating

of what Cudjoe sees as creative and liberating (i.e. basketball) with the loss that the boy (possibly Simba) challenges some assumptions about the role of certain special sites in the city.

The hollow now embraces the entire spectrum of lived sites that occur throughout the novel, both good and bad. It becomes the basement where children died, it becomes the fire, and it becomes the space of friendship and racial community, especially when the boy is cut down. The space becomes an arena for a remembering of every other lived space in the book until it makes music of all the spatial riffing. The space also re-imagines the Christian crucifixion scene, with Cudjoe playing the Mary role. Whatever Wideman is saying about the politics of space (how urban space exploits and exacerbates and sometimes eases racism), in the space of the hollow, Wideman portrays a significant lived space that, in expressing the variety of racial experience in the city, serves to bear witness to it and thus prove that liminal space is vitally linked to racial experience and expression.

Wideman sees the space of the park, with its expressly collective agenda, as an alternative to the incarceration of the basement or the dislocation underneath urban architecture, be it civic or residential. This is because parks represent a symbolic link with nature within the urban landscape. This link with nature represents for Cudjoe and for Wideman too a connection with a more harmonious link between identity and environment. What is interesting, however, is that Wideman does not reject the urban landscape, but sees parks as integrating lived space in patchwork fashion within the urban grid; at once part of it and also resisting the grid too. These lived spaces are Wideman's 'riffing' on the grid. Thus Clark Park is defined by

its grid position, and yet represents a space of freedom, communication and air. Margaret Jones, for example, suggests that Cudjoe tape-record her memories of the MOVE bombing while they walk in the nearby Clark Park, complaining, 'I don't like being in[side] with that machine sucking up all the air' (20).

By creating the narrative liminal space of the park, Wideman enables the site to signify upon other, historical liminal spaces. These spaces create a depth of history and symbolism within the seemingly barren park space. Clark Park, for example, is represented as Noah's 'ark' in the rhymes of the city's children:

*In the park called Clark we rule the dark
Live like Noah in his ark
They tried to shoot us, bomb us
Drown us burn us
They brought us here, but they can't return us (165).*

Here the ancestral/rapcity/JB/voice is now also the voice of the boy missing in the fire, Simba. Simba links Clark Park with Noah's ark and, metaphorically, with the Middle Passage ships. They are all heterotopic spaces created by violence but which also provide provisional escape from the artificial construct of 'race' in America.

The Osage Bombsite as a Heterotopia

Many critics have talked of the city as a place of forgetfulness and of writing as an act of resurrection, an act of literature set in opposition to the urban environment and charged with the mission of recovering lost memories of southern communal identity. This is what Kennedy calls 'the Africanist sense

of archeomythology, linking memory and place to a diasporic history which [Wideman] argues through his narratives must be remembered or recovered to sustain the blighted neighbourhood of Homewood with a sense of community' (Kennedy, p. 80).¹⁶ Wideman himself frequently casts his own literary acts in this light, constructing the Osage Avenue bombing that forms the central event of *Philadelphia Fire* as a buried event that needed relief. He argues in a 1989 interview that

[t]he concerted, ruthless campaign of a city government – ironically, a city government under the control of a black mayor – to destroy difference is one of the most important public events that I've observed. It was particularly important because it was buried. A whole city is afflicted by amnesia. In the press it got a little play for a while, but then it was forgotten.¹⁷

However, memory functions well in liminal spaces. Rather than being totally lost in the collective 'amnesia' of the urban landscape (see, for example, the pathetic memorial service in the final pages of *Philadelphia Fire*, where the square is virtually deserted and the event passes unnoticed by the majority of Philadelphia citizens), memory collects in specific liminal sites within the city. The act of writing is not to excavate these memories of the South, of organic or nostalgic communities, but to tap into and reflect the subterranean energy that sustains these liminal sites of memory. A large part of Wideman's novels moves in parallel with the subterranean signifying energy – connecting liminal spaces in symbolic, temporal and spatial ways, so that links may be made from the present anxious urban community to the past structures of community and forward into projected ways of dealing with dislocation. It is the style that saves you. As Kennedy points out, in doing so, Wideman very consciously

¹⁶ See also Jean-Pierre Richard, Bonnie TuSmith and Wideman himself on occasion.

¹⁷ Rowell, p. 58.

echoes the protest tradition and apocalyptic tradition of James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time*, but sidesteps the tradition also.¹⁸

The bomb site is outside of time and geography and therefore is a heterotopia. This outside space is claimed as more African American than ghettos or slums because it is a way of thinking about space without the oppositional politics. It contains all the history and spatial memory of slavery and allows some purchase on them because of its 'outside-ness'. It is a place of profound movement, and without movement at all. MOVE organisation's headquarters on Osage Avenue and the bombsite into which it was rapidly converted are both unacceptable spaces in the city; the former shunned by the surrounding black middle-class neighbourhood, the latter by city of Philadelphia as a whole, unwilling to acknowledge the prejudice and violence that threatens its carefully constructed civic order. However, while the MOVE house was a lived space in the sense that it sought to disrupt middle-class spatial habitus by promoting an extreme Afro-centrist city space, the bombsite which it becomes offers a more profound challenge to white hegemonic discourses of urban space. Like Cudjoe's re-imagined park hollow, it holds out the possibility of three-dimensional movement in the face of crippling models of racially coded space. As lived space in a greater sense than Lefebvre imagines it, the devastated bombsite becomes the ultimate space of African American consciousness in Philadelphia, speaking truthfully of the realities of urban racism. It forces Cudjoe to reassess the interrelation of black and white urban architecture. It represents the results of a disobedient way of dwelling in

¹⁸ James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (New York: Dial Press, 1963).

the city and critiques the dominant white urban discourses of hegemony and hierarchy.

Signifying on Heterotopias

These heterotopic spaces are outside of time and geography. Their freedom from patterns and constructs of the dominant narratives of life mean that they are free to nurture other forms of movement. In this case, Wideman explores the possibility of establishing an African American aesthetic within these symbolic urban spaces, namely signifying.

Why this Cudjoe, then? This airy other floating into the shape of my story. Why am I him when I tell certain parts? Why am I hiding from myself? Is he mirror or black hole? (122)

Here, Wideman draws the spaces of textual reflexivity into the debate on liminal space as a medium of expression for African American sensibility. Wideman's narrating voice identifies and questions the gap between his authoring self and the created self of the character Cudjoe. At times, this gap is a reactionary space, a space for 'hiding'. The splitting of the self between character and author that is implicit in the act of narrative, and perhaps in any act of creation, is, in Wideman's eyes, a cowardly move, helping to dislocate the meaning of the story from any relevance to the outside, real world, from the truth. Such a split, is, in fact, alien.

This construction of narrative viewpoint parallels Du Bois's concept of double-consciousness, where the black sense of self is fundamentally separated into two distinct parts by the action of systematic racism. However, the division that Wideman identifies between himself and Cudjoe functions also

as a subversive space that disrupts the 'shape of my story'. If this story is a black story, and thus one plagued by the divisions of double consciousness, then the disruption caused by the gap between author and character challenges such divisions. Rather than being a sterile 'mirror' to reflect the painful double life the black subject is forced to lead, the creative invention Cudjoe is a 'black hole' - infinitely more disturbing but also challenging and resourceful. The creative gap between author and character is a resistive and positive space of change, rather than a space of record or a space of concealment.

The main example of this is the reproduction of liminal spaces themselves - from the central heterotopic space of the bomb site, to the smaller liminal spaces that reference it and change it and converse with it. For example, the alleyway in which JB hides. Also, all the liminal edge spaces too - the stoop, the graffiti fence. Their horizontal conversations, hosted by the presence of these heterotopic spaces, resist the spatial hierarchies of traditional narratives of white urban space. Wideman signifies here upon the water imagery that Ellison uses to describe Invisible Man's experience of the subway system. Ellison imagines the discourses of Southern migration as similar to the distorting effects of the bends. Watching a group of African American men waiting on a subway platform in New York City, Invisible Man asks,

[w]hat about those of us who shoot up from the South into the busy city like wild jacks in the box broken loose from our springs - so sudden that our gait becomes like that of deep-sea divers suffering from the bends? (440)

Wideman imagines the sea enacting a different kind of change to Cudjoe as he takes the Philadelphia subway on his return to the city. In an echo of *The*

Tempest that Cudjoe attempts to stage in the park, the water imagery enacts a profound sea-change on Cudjoe, taking him

under ground, under the sea. When the train slows down for a station you can see greenish mold, sponge-like algae, yellow and red speckling the dark stones. Sometimes you hear the rush of water behind you flooding the tunnel [...] rushing closer and closer each time the train halts. [...] When Cudjoe's aboveground, heading toward Clark Park, the sidewalk's unsteady under his feet. Should he be swimming or flying or crawling (23).

Rather than the distorting effects of Southern migration, the sea reminds Cudjoe of the traditional folk movements that have been lost in the city. In asking whether he should be 'swimming or flying or crawling', Wideman quotes almost verbatim from *Invisible Man* (249-250). Similarly, the 'rush of water' recalls the fantastic images of rebirth with which Ellison describes *Invisible Man's* phantasmagoric vision in the cellar (12). The sea is for Wideman the agent of possibility, re-imagining the flat surfaces of the racialised urban landscape in terms of folk symbolism. The sea is now represented in the urban subway system, which moves 'toward the word or sound or image that is everywhere at once, that connects and destroys' (23). Like Deleuze and Guattari's rhizome, it exists in 'many places at once, [...] always moving' (23). This is the model for a deterritorialised black subjectivity that Wideman reaches for, and adapts to the contemporary urban environment.

Wideman re-imagines the text as a social agent that combats the myopia of capitalist spatial production by writing 'about many places at once. No choice... First step is always... toward the word or sound or image this is everywhere at once, that connects... always moving' (23). The text helps reconstruct some of that interconnection between zones that Cudjoe's city has

lost, and thus restore some political and social responsibility to the artist. Madhu Dubey argues that this means 'no place contains its own meaning.... Mobility and simultaneous occupation of several places are necessary conditions of contemporary urban writing because no place remains still long enough to permit a stable spatial or temporal perspective'.¹⁹ Yet this construction does not recognise the incredibly strong power that a particular place may wield over a person through memory, personal significance and symbolic meaning.

Dubey's effort to place Wideman's theory of writing in a post-capitalist context means that she ignores how his own African American stylistic heritage complicates such a desire for spatial cohesiveness. There is also the presence of stasis too; that the struggle between stasis and movement that lies at the heart of so much African American writing (see the movement within stasis model that characterises Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*) also forms a creative environment here. Rather than there being no place in *Philadelphia Fire* that contains its own meaning, there are places which conflate all the meanings gathered from other spaces; put another way, there are heterotopic spaces in Wideman's novel that serve as portals through which the writer's act of writing about many places at once can be channelled. These signifying heterotopic spaces are always located at liminal sites, where the generative struggle between movement and stasis is at its greatest. Dubey's socialist ideal can now be reconfigured as the creative advent of signifying, allowing contemporary urban writing to simultaneously react to the challenges

¹⁹ Dubey, pp. 583-584.

of postmodern space and draw upon traditional aesthetic practice.²⁰ This might also relate, as Richard Powell suggests, to a view of unity as Deleuzian 'anti-logos' or 'open-ended multiplicity, essentially marked by multiple rhythms', rather like Romare Bearden's 'rhythmically-oriented' collages.²¹

Architectural Riffing

Liminal spaces signify upon each other to create a network of heterotopia around the city. Brooklyn painter Adam Cvijanovic discusses Osage Avenue and his own art installations based on the bombing, describing them as a 'complicated, riffing on the grid'.²² Cvijanovic has researched the avenue's appearance before the bombing and Penn's Quaker ideas for the city of Philadelphia itself. 'But in general', he says, 'utopianism also has a strand that's separatist [...] What makes it interesting is that you can see the decisions by homeowners to do things, like get aluminium siding, or strip away a lot. It's all the same but the differences are amazing. Only two houses in the middle were not changed. These two blocks burned down'.²³

The 'riffing' that Cvijanovic identifies is this personalization of the utopic, this need to create individuality amongst the conformity of the grid. Hence the modifications residents made to the yards outside the houses, or the materials

²⁰ This in no way resembles a primitive or organic model of community, the presence of which Dubey strongly refutes in *Philadelphia Fire*. The novel in fact actively critiques pastoral and nostalgic views of the city, such as William Penn's 'greene Country Towne', or African American 'tall tales' of 'clan, family, and ancestry that evoke racially authentic communities moored to an idealized past' (Dubey, p. 587).

²¹ Richard Powell, 'Art History and Black Memory: Towards a "Blues Aesthetic"' in *History and Memory in African American Culture*, ed. by Genevieve Fabre and Robert O'Meally (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), pp. 228-236 (p. 240).

²² Adam Cvijanovic and Roberta Fallon, 'Philadelphia Story', *Artnet Magazine*, February 2004. Available at URL <<http://www.artnet.com/Magazine/features/fallon/fallon4-2-04.asp>> [accessed 3 August 2007]

²³ Cvijanovic, 'Philadelphia Story'. See URL.

used on their buildings. Implicit in his words is the suggestion that the destruction of the houses was linked to the riffing they embodied. This spatial riffing is expressed not only in the individual changes residents made to their properties, but was taken to the extreme by MOVE's actions within Number 6221. This made such riffing impossible for the authorities to ignore. Wideman's own linguistic structures seek to replicate this spatial riffing (both low-level changes to express individuality and extreme and unpalatable changes like the MOVE bombing) in an effort to explore this relationship between Utopia and the individual process of living.

Moreover, the relationship between space and the construction of racial identity, and the development of individualism and collectivism within that category are important. By riffing on the utopic grid system, the residents of Osage Avenue and, later, the MOVE organization, sought to express African American cultural and linguistic patterns of signifying onto an urban environment that had been planned by a white man, and was also symbolic of the postmodern dislocation of society from natural processes and rhythms, from the land, from the South, from the past. That such riffing was unsuccessful (or, rather, so destructive) is perhaps indicative of how dislocated modern urban living had/has become from genuine forms of cultural expression. In particular, it demonstrates how alienated cultural and spatial identities have become from each other. Wideman seeks to use Osage Avenue as a symbol of the wider alienation of African American communities from their physical urban environments. He also laments the inability of architecture (or living space) to reflect and accommodate cultural patterns, such as signifying. A similar example could be the graveyard practices of African Americans.

Stoops, Community and Resistance

New houses they building up on Osage spozed to be pretty nice.
 No stoops, man. How you spozed to have a neighbourhood with no stoops?
 Check it out. What's up there mostly holes in the ground.
 Where the people living lost their homes?
 Not in City Hall. Not in the mayor's neighbourhood.
 At least they're living (42).

This conversation is interesting because the entire debate on race in an urban environment inevitably expresses itself in spatial terms. In this environment, and at this stage in the development of African American fiction, space assumes a new priority. In the above conversation, space is highly charged in political terms. The ball players identify City Hall – the corporate centre of Philadelphia – in opposition to the bombsite at Osage Avenue; they argue that racism expresses itself spatially in the city, with the homeless black victims of the fire unable to find a place in the official, sanitised, public city in which they live. The players' point is that black people have no place in this official face of the city, especially black people that represent (even associatively) the truth about racial division in the city.

Space is also highly charged in cultural terms as well. Central to African American concerns is the concept of 'neighbourhood', or community. The new houses planned for Osage Avenue are 'pretty nice', but are missing stoops on the outside of the façade. Stoops are a liminal space which bridges the private and public worlds, being both attached to a private house and also open to view from the street. They are neither inside nor wholly outside. They are closely identified with the action of seeing: occupants of the stoop can observe the activity of the community, while also making themselves available for observation. The liminality of such a space fosters the particular network of

informal communal relations that sustains African American social groups because its resistance to rigid cultural or spatial hierarchies (such as inside/outside, movement/stasis, house/street) acknowledges and reflects the similarly resistive spaces that African Americans have had to develop in social, linguistic, political and cultural terms within a racist white-dominated society since slavery times.

The failure of the city authorities to include stoops in the new housing development on Osage Avenue could be read as a subtle attempt to stifle the development of traditional African American communities, and thus eradicate the presence of what might be seen as ghettos: 'How you sposed to have a neighbourhood with no stoops?', asks one of Philadelphia's black residents (41). Wideman does suggest a link between this subtle spatial warfare and the ostensible project of City Hall Philadelphia, which seeks to impose European-inspired architectural order and spatial hierarchies upon the urban geography.

The last element of the above conversation is vital in offering an alternative to this imposition of spatio-racial discrimination. One player says, in reply to an observation about the lack of stoops, 'Check it out. What's up there mostly holes in the ground' (41). Holes in the ground are offered in the conversation as a more extreme illustration of the same principle: the lack of stoops represents the absence of community; the holes in the ground represent the ultimate spatial expression of this absence, as well as concomitant violent rejection African American culture faces from mainstream American culture. Yet, the conversational context in which Wideman sets this debate itself provides the glimmer of a solution – a solution that is crucially spatial in its application and meaning. In taking the expression of absence

down in successive metaphors to its lowest level, the conversation between these young, black sportsmen has itself been an expression of linguistic signifying. The conversation is a free space because of its nothingness, its emptiness. Cudjoe notes,

The mood, this time belongs to nobody. Each man free as long as they relax here letting night close over them. If a city lurks beyond the borders of the park, it's no more real that the ball games they play again as they talk (43).

These men are standing in a black hole (literally, the 'hollow' of the park's basketball court at dusk), but creating a narrative for the life of their community. The 'holes in the ground' on Osage Avenue have similar properties to the 'black lap' of the basketball court; they are the spaces which have opened 'which haven't been there before' (40). This sense of newness is a positive force. The change, the constant shifting and signifying and elaborating and checking of each other's narratives within the basketball players' conversation is evidence of this same signifying energy. The holes on Osage are representative of the spaces of racism, but are also able to be transformed by narrative (whether spoken, as in the players' conversation, or written, as in Wideman's novel) into spaces of creativity, which neither negate nor accept the spatio-racial implications of the bombing.

The 'Raggedy' Aesthetic of the Ghetto

Certain ways of dwelling in the city are acts of civil disobedience whose goals are the establishment of a black space in the urban terrain. Primary among these is the use of the liminal site as a physical challenge to the spatialised racial homogeneity; examples include MOVE, park theatre, ball games

and subway graffiti. The discourse of liminal space offers an innovative model for the development of racial identity in the urban environment.

Hegemonic urban whiteness is represented in *Philadelphia Fire* by the enormous urban regeneration plans that Cudjoe encounters on his return to the city. His childhood friend, Timbo, now works for the Mayor's office and is in charge of the inner-city re-development:

This used to be stone slum. Raggedy row houses and vacant lots. Stone ghetto, baby. Now every square foot is solid gold. City underwrote the project. Bought up those tobacco-road shacks for next to nothing. Leased the land to private developers and they put up dorms, apartments, town houses, condos (78).

Such development privileges geometric regularity and homogeneity over racial diversity. They also privilege immobility (or, at the very least, hyper-regulated movement) over flexibility. Cudjoe is disturbed how far Timbo has distanced himself from the black community; now Timbo heads what is in fact a regeneration of the old ideal of the white modernist urban utopia, in which the university and the art gallery, seats of Western ideology, are glorified. Ghetto architecture is being replaced with luxury private accommodation. Space has been stripped down to its barest economic function, with each 'square foot' holding value as 'solid gold' investment, unlike the 'vacant' 'stone ghetto' spaces that preceded it.

However, these ghetto spaces are physical counters to the white architectural hegemony, and periodically disrupt the novel's narrative surface as messy reminders of an alternative set of spatial values. Economic function was important in the 'stone slum', too, but it was balanced by a 'raggedy' aesthetic: the 'tobacco-road shacks' supported the rich tobacco trade by housing the workers that tended the tobacco crop. What has happened now is

that the space itself has become the 'crop', pushing the inhabitants and workers out. This echoes the same commodification of economic space that Lefebvre identifies as a characteristic of capitalism, and which is evident in the division of spaces of work within the domestic and plantation spheres of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*.

The architecture of the slum accurately mirrored the social and economic and cultural deprivation of its inhabitants; now, as the geographical space rises in value, the architecture is violently divorced from the cultural and economic realities of African American urban existence. This is because the city 'underwrote' this project of divorcing space from inhabitant. Wideman suggests here that the corporate body is engaged in unscrupulous dealings in facilitating such a space/place divorce. Again, liminality reappears as a motif in Timbo's language:

See, down here, paralleling the railroad tracks we're laying a new street. Direct access off and on the expressway. All this mess around in here, warehouse, garages, shanties, all these eyesores got to go. When redevelopment's finished, a nice, uncluttered view of the art museum [...] Cross by way of bridges and tunnels to the brain power and the computer power of the universities. Modern urban living in the midst of certified culture (78).

Again, the 'mess' of urban architecture that reflects the principles and diversity of African American community culture as well as the truth of the poverty experienced by this group has 'got to go', according to Timbo and the mayor's office. This is another step in the project to divorce architectural space from cultural and social truths. Wideman tries to address this destructive project by reversing the process in his novel. He tries to resurrect the link between the architecture of text and language, and cultural truth: 'Technique, technique, my bucko, is truth' (64).

Wideman bears this saying of Cudjoe's mentor, Sam, out in his novel because his novel is all about narrative technique and linguistic versatility. It is through the manipulation of form and voice that Wideman seeks to tell the truth about African American experience in the city, and also a more general truth about the human condition. In Timbo's grand clearance project, 'bridges and tunnels' will be used to traverse the space between the museum and the university – the past and the future. This is just a reconfiguration of the old modes of transport, the confinement of movement to liminal sites because of its unaesthetic qualities, i.e. variety, irregularity, poverty, etc. Here, the liminal site (and the overground site, figured in Timbo's mention of 'bridges') is figured as negative spaces which act to hide the truth in order to maintain the visual integrity of the new urban myth.²⁴

The cultural and architectural regeneration of Philadelphia, together with the explosion in drug trafficking, has resulted in the destruction of African American communities, and, in Timbo's words, pushed 'some of these pitiful bloods off the map, bro. And they know it' (79). Wideman uses a specifically spatial metaphor to express the cultural and social changes that the African American community in Philadelphia is undergoing. As Wideman presents it, the city of Philadelphia is developing two distinct geographical areas: the prosperous and aesthetically pleasing central district, and 'over in the north and in the west where people from here forced to move, what's growing is

²⁴Also interesting is the idea of certified culture and, consequently, certified space. The act of certifying something is an act of authority that Wideman seeks to reject in the architecture of his writing. Hence, the text of *Philadelphia Fire* is democratic, in that it has various competing types of text within it. The spaces that the words and chapters create are not arranged in a hierarchical order, but compete against each other on a vertical plane.

garbage dumps' (79). The urban landscape is a battlefield between two cultural systems of spatial representation.

As doomed as the slums appear from Timbo's perspective of urban renewal, they remain a persistent presence in the novel. Both the physical space of the ghetto and the manner in its inhabitants live are disobedient ways of dwelling within the hyper-planned city. It is these strategies that Wideman subtly evokes, playing upon the official rhetoric of stratification and modernist discourse and inverting it. Wideman himself plays the part of a disobedient listener to the official rhetoric of his friend Timbo. Timbo directly connects liminal space in the form of a 'hole' with the downward spiral of African Americans into despair and destitution:

Everyday people sinking deeper in the hole. Losing people everyday. Enough of them go down the tube they gon start climbing back out. Walk up each other's back and climb out the hole. What we gon say then? What's the mayor gon do when the city start to cracking and pieces break off the edges and disappear (80).

Yet, even here, liminal space figures as a double space, both negative and positive. Liminal space swallows African Americans in poverty, but it also reverses the process, so that, at a critical point, 'they gon start climbing back out'. This act of agency – the literal act of climbing out of poverty through sheer numerical superfluity – induces an apocalyptic vision of the destruction of the entire city structure. This act of agency absorbs and reflects the destructive impulse back onto the city that rejected them. Liminal space is both the linguistic and spatial expression of such dispossession, and also the origin of a symbolic resistance against it. Of course, the final vision Timbo leaves the reader with is one of apocalyptic destruction. But it is a general and final destruction of the urban myth, not a slow and silent destruction of a

specific racial group. As such, this global urban apocalypse is the positive result of a collective African American refusal to accept defeat, and a collective desire to use the figurative power of the threshold to undermine the rigid assumptions of urban planning. By cracking the city, the 'hole' of poverty and African American urban despair is itself inverted into a source of spatial and cultural regeneration. All these implications lie beneath the surface of Timbo's words, the language itself enacting the same principle of 'sinking'. One can think of Wideman's text as one written on a fault-line, with hidden implications bubbling under the surface.

Technique as Truth: Formal Approaches to Urban Identity

The problematic union of movement and stillness is of perennial interest to Wideman. The recurring image of a jar is a symbol of the balance between movement and stasis. Cudjoe has brought back as a souvenir from Europe a crystal ball with a winter scene, and describes how, '[w]hen you turn it upside down, a thousand weightless flakes of something hover in the magic jar' (5). This jar link neatly into T. S. Eliot's famous 'Chinese jar' in *Four Quartets*, when the poet looks for 'the form, the pattern', for that which enables words to reach 'the still point of the turning world', where 'the dance is / But neither arrest nor movement'.²⁵ Eliot insists upon '[t]he stillness, as a Chinese jar still / Moves perpetually in its stillness'.²⁶ This productive tension between movement and stasis is enormously characteristic of African American cultural production. Underground, where things are invisible, it might be said that form

²⁵ T. S. Eliot, 'Burnt Norton', II, l. 62-64, in *The Complete Poems and Plays of T.S. Eliot* (London: Faber, 1969), p. 173. See Jean-Pierre Richard, 'Philadelphia Fire, or the Shape of a City', *Callaloo* 22.3 (1999), pp. 603-613 (p. 610).

²⁶ Eliot, IV, l. 140-43, p. 175.

cannot exist; however, African American form exists in productive tension between invisibility and visibility.

When Cudjoe tells Timbo his dream, the blank spaces in his narrative are at a premium. Timbo tells him to 'wake up and make up' – to fill in the blank, liminal spaces with invention to as to complete the story and not leave the listener hanging – to satisfy the reader with a complete space (94). However, Cudjoe is reluctant to discard the blank spaces of his narrative because they straddle the seam between real space and dream space. They have so much to say about the current cultural situation in which the African American community finds itself within the urban landscape:

The dream stops there. Everything surrounding it's gone. I want to know the rest, too. Thought telling you might help. But it doesn't. I feel myself beginning to invent. Filling in the blanks but the blanks are real. Part of the dream.

Dream?

Yeah.

Shit, man (94).

There is a strange coincidence here between Wideman and Jacobs in the way they imagine such 'blank' space. Talking about a one-time colleague's dismissal from the University of Philadelphia, Wideman insists that he can hear 'none' and yet 'all' of the racial and personal abuse suffered by this man in his words: 'I heard none of that [pain], all of it, in the silent interstices binding his words as he spoke to me over the phone' (114). This recalls the interstices in Harriet Jacobs's wall, as well as the earlier examples of Wideman's interest in the gaps between words, which are at once empty and also full of the most meaning; that is, they are the most dynamic of spaces.

Signifying on Form

Part of Wideman's project in this novel is the search for a 'true' space for the African American urban voice, as much as the African American urban

body. However, just as the search for the latter remains unresolved in the narrative, so too does the search for a black vocal space. The question is whether this lack of resolution is, in itself, some kind of answer within the urban landscape; moreover, whether it is related in some way to the liminal aesthetic that provides a measure of facility to the black urban body. Wideman's syncopated structure generates its energy from the gaps between rhythms. In his discussion of Wideman's textual style, Jean Pierre Richard draws on Robert Farris Thompson's idea of 'rhythimized textiles', arguing that with its three widely differing parts, *Philadelphia Fire* is an 'emphatic multistrip composition' that requires to be scanned metrically as textual syncopation. The de-centering of the 'central event' helps generate added energy. Richard argues that 'in Mande and other African-related textiles [this multistrip aesthetic is] a deliberate "venture into disordered regions"'.²⁷

In a discussion of doubleness in Wideman's fiction, Yves-Charles Grandjeat addresses the restorative value of literature, arguing that fiction restores those that fell victim to racism: 'it restores them, although *not quite*, so that a tiny margin of absence remains in the work of re-presentation – and this is what Wideman chooses to describe as syncopation'.²⁸ For example, Wideman elsewhere describes the relationship between brothers as '[t]wo hearts beating, the slightest syncopation, this brother or himself off by a quarter beat as he discovered he was two, not one'.²⁹ The margin of absence in syncopation is here figured through the trope of the double brother, but in this

²⁷ Richard, 'Shape of a City', p. 610. Richard refers to Robert Farris Thompson, *Flash of the spirit: African and Afro-American art and philosophy* (New York: Vintage Press, 1984), pp. 211, 222.

²⁸ Yves-Charles Grandjeat, 'Brother Figures: Rift and Riff in John Edgar Wideman's Fiction', *Callaloo* 22.3 (1999), pp. 615-622 (p. 615).

²⁹ Wideman, *Brothers and Keepers* (New York: Holt Press, 1984), p. 64.

thesis it is figured through the architecture of the city. In his re-figuration of doubleness, Wideman moves Du Bois's mournful lamentation of the tragic doubleness of race towards a celebration of the multiplicity that lies behind that doubleness. As Gates says, 'Signifyin(g) is the figure of the double-voiced, epitomized by Esu's depictions in sculpture as possessing two mouths'.³⁰ Grandjeat observes that Wideman moves from the motif of the double to that of multiplying: 'the loss [of a brother], which has opened up a vacant space, is never to be compensated. It calls for substitutes, but no single substitute, of course, can ever quite replace the original. [...] The original split gives birth to a bursting proliferation of others pulling the ego apart and threatening to scatter its pieces'.³¹ The familial 'vacant space' can also be read in the concrete spaces of the urban landscape.

Many critics have recognised Wideman's especial interest in liminal space. Grandjeat, for example, notices his 'uncanny and rather perilous but also extremely rewarding ability to position [his text] in the tenuous space of negotiation where sound and silence keep intersecting [...] This brings the reader to look at those silent gaps which cleave Wideman's texts as the vital, strategic hinges or thresholds across which speech keeps being othered into its many soundings. In the process, such reading encourages revisiting the long prevailing critical position holding that Afro-American literature should be primarily read as powerful evidence of the validity of the equation between speech and freedom'.³²

³⁰ Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*, p. xxv.

³¹ Grandjeat, 'Brother Figures', p. 618.

³² Yves-Charles Grandjeat, "'These Strange Dizzy Pauses': Silence as Common Ground in J. E. Wideman's Texts', *Callaloo*, 22.3 (1999), p. 685-694 (p. 685).

However, few critics have linked this interest to the architecture and concrete spaces of the city itself, or, rather, the equation of open space and freedom. This chapter argues that liminal space provides the same function as silence as Grandjeat means it; in fact, silence is a black hole. Wideman makes this link explicit, arguing that the sense of negation of the self is overwhelmingly unsettling: 'not exactly fear and panic but an uneasy, uncontrollable momentum, a sense of being swallowed, engulfed in blackness that has no dimension, no fixed points. That boundless, incarcerating black hole that is another person'.³³ For Grandjeat, the presence of a 'truly independent Other in the text can only be marked by a sudden *rip* in the texture of discourse. That black hole in the fabric of words is, of course, an occurrence of silence [original italics]'.³⁴ Grandjeat sees invisibility and silence as 'equally open sites of freedom'; the threshold as the architectural parallel of these sites.³⁵

Wideman was only the second African American to have been awarded a Rhodes scholarship and remains a practicing academic, currently holding a professorship at Brown University. Reflecting his own wide academic experience, his text is crammed with references to works from English literature, in particular to Shakespeare. Wideman succumbs to temptation and revisits the well-worn arguments surrounding the ambiguous figure of Caliban in *The Tempest*. Cudjoe is staging the play in a park with a cast of black schoolchildren, and the voice of Caliban leaps in and out of the narrative with a strong Jamaican accent:

³³ Wideman, *Brothers and Keepers*, p. 77.

³⁴ Grandjeat, 'These Strange Dizzy Pauses', p. 690.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 690.

Wait. Wait please, breddars, before you put your hands together, man. Tis I and I mek for one last word so. This the church. This the steeple. Open sez me. Out come all de peoples. See. Like roach, man. When you light oven in morning (120).

Many critics before Wideman have addressed *The Tempest* within a postcolonial context, reading Caliban as the archetypal black figure denied his birthright and enslaved by the invading white man. There is nothing new in this, nor in Caliban's use of the vernacular. The latter, of course, raises the question of whether the vernacular is the 'true' linguistic space for African American texts: do *Philadelphia Fire's* glimpses of truth lie only in the slivers of vernacular speech that lace the novel? Is the Book of Life, that handwritten MOVE manifesto that reappears throughout the novel, the only genuine expression of a black voice? What does it signify, therefore, that the Book of Life spontaneously combusts in the final pages of the novel, or that the real-life manifesto was transcribed and published by a white academic?

The novel remains unconvinced that any narrative form, vernacular or otherwise, can be said to truly represent the black voice. Rather, the black voice finds expression in the act of transference between forms. Alongside his reworking of the Caliban metaphor, Wideman begins to suggest that the black text, like the black body, draws strength from liminal positions within the urban landscape. Therefore, the Book of Life does not remain a typed manuscript transcribed by a white academic as it was in reality, but in *Philadelphia Fire* becomes a handwritten text whose incoherence (J.B. cannot read the 'squinchy small' writing) is a metaphor for the voicelessness of black people in the city (187).

Yet the Book of Life is passed around many different characters in the novel, from King to Corey to J.B. to the street kids, and it seems to mutate at

every stage; so much so, that on its spontaneous combustion in the sleeping hands of J.B., it somehow filters out and is appropriated in another medium, the words making a reappearance in graffiti and urban folklore. Wideman's narrative structure is so fragmented in this section that it is hard to know whether the street kids have in fact stolen the book and set J.B. alight themselves. Rather than being a defeat of coherence or legibility, however, this ability of the black text to survive by traversing the liminal spaces of form (typed manuscript to handwritten volume, through ashes to graffiti and urban folklore – as well as a reincarnation in *Philadelphia Fire* itself) is a confirmation of its durability within change. It is, after all, as Paul Arnett says, 'language *in use* that differs from the official language of power and reflects complex intercultural relationships charged with issues of race, class, region, and education'.³⁶ Hence, as Keith Byerman argues, Wideman's emphasis on the 'critical and subversive authority' of vernacular language use.³⁷

As Madhu Dubey has suggested, the act of reading may be used in *Philadelphia Fire* as a further disruption to the prevailing order of urban commodity consumption. Dubey points to the example of the Book of Life circulating through the text by theft, but the same lesson may be seen in the rap passages of the text, which challenge the textual authority of the page. If the text is the city, then the reader is the citizen. Dubey ultimately argues that despite the 'plural and indeterminate readings available in the city, [the novel] ultimately suggests that the oppositional potential of these reading is bounded

³⁶ Paul Arnett and William Arnett, eds, *Souls Grown Deep: African American Vernacular At of the South, Volume 1: The Tree Gave the Dove a Leaf* (Atlanta: Tinwood Books, 2000), p. xv.

³⁷ Byerman, p. 254.

by the socioeconomic and ideological system of the city'.³⁸ The technique of signifying brings truth. But does it bring aesthetic resolution, and is this an aim worth having? Indeed, it is interesting that a technique or a pattern can have so profound an effect on a way of dwelling that it brings with it its own 'truth'.

Interestingly, 'truth' can be expressed both rhythmically and spatially. Cudjoe is master of technique in the way he can 'cut and paste images' on the television; in this way, we are all artists. But this technique is not technique, because it brings with it no truth (100). The cut-and-paste mentality is indicative of the discordant and fragmented experience of postmodern urban existence. Cudjoe's 'flashes forward and flashes backward and fast shuffles and digital displays popping and muting' parallels his moves on the basketball court; both games involve movement (100). Wideman makes this postmodern claustrophobia a specifically racial malady by arguing that:

[e]ven if you spin the dial till the colours run together and the tigers melt chasing each other's tails [...] Sambo's always caught in the middle of the ring. Puzzled. Appalled by the unforeseen consequences of his good intentions (102).

This vision of the black man 'puzzled' by modern technology and the rhythms of urban living is, however, grossly flawed – a parody of itself. Wideman signifies upon this racist parody of Sambo but what he retains about the figure's situation – what strikes him as true and relevant – is the space in the middle of the ring. This space is empty and incarcerating (he is 'caught' there), but also one of magic, of special symbolic, ritualistic significance. Is the black man trapped by the modern patterns of urban racism, or is he able to use this space of isolation in a symbolic way in order to achieve an amount of power? Wideman sees himself as the former, unable to make any difference to the

³⁸ Dubey, p. 590.

events of the fire that are unfolding on screen in front of him. However, this Sambo metaphor, hints at the possibility that the futile limbo space in which Wideman now finds himself thrust has the potential to also become a space of symbolic power. This dual function is the defining feature of liminal space as discussed in this thesis.

Textual Heterotopia

Wideman's frequent shifts in register throughout the novel are a further example of his attempt to represent the principle of signifying within the text. The inadequacy of conventional patterns of signification – the mark of the sign upon the page – in the face of incomprehensible acts of racial violence is revealed in the disintegration of meaning as Cudjoe imagines the experience of the boy who escaped the fire:

What Cudjoe has discovered is that the boy was last seen naked skin melting, melting, they go do-do-do-do-do-do-do-do like that, skin melting Stop kids coming out stop stop kids coming out skin melting do-do-do-do-do-do-do do like going off – like bullets were going after each other do-do-do-do fleeing down an alley between burning rows of houses (8).

Wideman's use of Italics constructs a kind of textual heterotopia within the narrative, a limitless space unbounded by grammar wherein the structural hierarchies of sign and signifier can be unwound and a raw momentum generated between the rapidly multiplying gaps between letters – '*do-do-do-do-do-do-do*'. The phrase means nothing on the surface, and yet, because of its position within the italicised heterotopia, we are encouraged to signify multiple meanings onto these dislocated sounds. The words resemble the baseline of a hiphop track, the crack of police gunfire, or even, at its most basic unit, a slew of Imperative calls to black action: to 'do' and 'do' and 'do' is perfectly

weighted, moreover, against the 'stop stop' desired of the police rifles. The text must re-order itself spatially if it is firstly to accurately represent the experience of racial violence in the city, and secondly to simultaneously recognise the power of African American modes of representation in offering a principle of generative movement.³⁹

It is no surprise, then, that Wideman situates this generative unravelling of language in 'an alley between burning rows of houses'. As in Jacobs and Ellison, Wideman makes a conscious link between linguistic techniques and the built environment. The alley is a space of profound trauma, but precisely because it is a space 'in-between', it may operate as a heterotopic space – an escape route, a place of movement that, like the 'do-do-do-do-do' phrase, replays one of the central motifs of African American fiction, that of the running man.

Summary: Black Urban Spaces of Possibility

Keith Byerman argues that Wideman's 'vernacular modernism' – his use of the subversive potential of the everyday spaces of African American culture and their delight in process not product – is ultimately invalidated by Wideman's pessimism.⁴⁰ Conflating Wideman with Cudjoe, his central character, into the ultimate personification of the high-modernist artist-intellectual, Byerman conjectures that 'while [Wideman] has a sense of the

³⁹ Wideman applies this principle to the novel as a whole. Just as the italicised sections of the narrative act as counterpoint to Cudjoe's own understanding of the events of the fire, so Cudjoe's initial section of the novel acts as a counterpoint to Wideman's own consciousness (which 'narrates' the novel's middle section), and to that of J.B., the vagrant who delivers parts of the final section. Each consciousness signifies upon the other to create a signifying system of representation governing the entire novel and allowing Wideman's writing to accurately reflect the African American urban experience.

⁴⁰ Byerman, p. 263.

beauty of the vernacular realm, his essentially modernist reading of the world as a wasteland leads him to emphasize the fragility of that beauty and of even the most sophisticated art'.⁴¹ It is mistake to read Wideman as a modernist, however. Doing so necessarily invests Wideman's novels with a teleological morality: the artist's role is to make use of cultural materials to give whatever meaning might be found in the cultural wasteland that is contemporary society. To read Wideman as a postmodernist, however, is to acknowledge the possibility that meaning is not the property of the artist, and neither does it exist as a positive space to be found or lost. Byerman argues that 'the church, the music clubs, the basketball games and the family stories [in Wideman's fiction] can offer little more than temporary respite from the pain of everyday life'.⁴² But why must temporary be bad? From a postmodern perspective, permanence is a fallacy; meaning can and must be generated in the gaps between these spaces of 'respite'. Moreover, African American culture, as I have tried to suggest throughout this thesis, has developed a long tradition of spatial resistance to systems of power and dominance that generates meaning specifically through the processing of negative space.

Of course, the looming presence of Cudjoe, and Wideman himself, as disappointed outsider-narrators does signal Wideman's strong modernist sympathies, as do the persistent presence of wasteland imagery and the emphasis on the unreliability of memory. Wideman is never comfortable with the loss of a final, coherent resolution to what Du Bois terms the 'problem' of race in the twentieth century city.⁴³ A counter-narrative exists within the narrative, however, that disables this pessimism. The vernacular architecture

⁴¹ Byerman, p. 266.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 265.

⁴³ Du Bois, *Souls*, p. iv.

of the city – the basketball court, the community park and the row-house stoops – together create a process of signifying between liminal spaces that challenges grand narratives of dislocation precisely because it exists outside of modernist certainties.

If Wideman fails to achieve an aesthetic resolution, he does create something valuable in his novel that testifies to the usefulness of the artist in real life. As Wideman asserts in an interview with Charles Rowell, the unique value of literature is that it is not 'instrumental' but 'expressive' – it need not effect direct change, but can 'bend reality, create illusions, entertain imaginary possibilities that are socially valuable'.⁴⁴ Literature, according to Wideman, can counter the collective amnesia caused by 'the accelerated push of contemporary life' and exacerbated by the 'speed of the mass media'.⁴⁵ The ability of literature to escape absolute social determination and to steal a 'long stunned moment between' is affirmed in *Philadelphia Fire* (138). Literature, then, may exist in a black hole, a gap in-between, otherwise characterised as a heterotopia.

Dubey emphasises the 'highly mediated and modest social function' of such a space; for her, the respite from regulated space that Wideman's novel affords must be seen in the larger context of its failure to effect permanent social change.⁴⁶ However, Dubey does not explore the potential models of community encoded within the practice of signifying that goes on within this 'long stunned moment between'. These models of creative practice – the ability to maintain cultural identity even within rapidly shifting or highly organised urban structures by the aesthetic and social practice of repetition with change

⁴⁴ Rowell, p. 53. See also Dubey, p. 592.

⁴⁵ Rowell, p. 57.

⁴⁶ Dubey, p. 592.

- represent a more permanent response to the nightmare of the postmodern city than Dubey gives credit, especially when seen in the context of the long trajectory of such aesthetic and social practice. Wideman's novel may refuse to 'sanctify' the writer or endow literature with explicit powers of social and political change, but this does not preclude a belief in the equally radical aesthetic example of heterotopic signifying.⁴⁷

Philadelphia Fire's own literariness is not an abdication from the political or social spheres. Nor is its hyperliterary style, as Dubey argues, entirely 'an aborted modernist mission to shore up literary value against the ruins of the contemporary city'.⁴⁸ Of course, Wideman's novel makes no claim to solve the dystopian urban reality, but Wideman's literary response to the problems of urban representation owe as much to a deep-rooted African American sensibility as to any failing modernist or nationalist assessments of literary value.⁴⁹ It is this sensibility, and the ability to develop meaning from an ambivalent space that offers a positive link with the past and a creative model for racialised representation in the present, while linking to Wideman's recognition of literature's 'capacity for wonder, for play, for imagination'.⁵⁰ The struggle between failed and imaginative liminal spaces within *Philadelphia Fire* articulates the social, cultural and ideological challenges facing black

⁴⁷ Dubey, p. 592.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Dubey asserts that *Philadelphia Fire* is essentially an exploration of ideological failure, rejecting both nationalist and modernist approaches to the urban literary representation: 'Whereas nationalist aesthetic theorists construed literary form as a transparent vehicle of social and political content, *Philadelphia Fire* obtrusively calls attention to its own literariness, as if to accentuate its departure from nationalist resolutions to problems of urban literary representation... Contrary to nationalist aesthetics, Wideman's novel suggests that causal links between literature and social change can never be precisely calculated. However, this suggestion of literature's tenuous relation to social reality stops short of a modernist celebration of aesthetic transcendence. The novel warily flirts with but ultimately rejects both nationalist and modernist assessments of literary value' (Dubey, p. 592).

⁵⁰ Rowell, p. 57.

communities in late 1990s urban America. As we will see in the final chapter of this thesis, however, developments in technology and the growth of speculative fiction within the mainstream literary market in the first decade of the twenty-first century offer alternative ways of building communities and enable black writers like Nalo Hopkinson to reclaim the silenced spaces of the Middle Passage and the black urban ghetto by re-imagining them in a futurist universe.

Chapter Five:

Warping the Mirror: Cyberspace and Nalo Hopkinson's *Midnight Robber*

Previous chapters have shown that liminal space is crucial to representations of black identity in African American literature. Liminal space serves two main purposes in this context: to represent the material conditions of slavery; and to problematise mainstream categories of race and identity. This final chapter will show that Nalo Hopkinson's contemporary Caribbean Canadian novel, *Midnight Robber*, which is also a work of speculative fiction, places similar value on liminal space as a means of engaging with the traumatic spaces which have shaped black identity and may thus be read productively beside the work of African American authors Harriet Jacobs, Ralph Ellison and John Edgar Wideman.¹ It will further argue that through this common emphasis on liminality, the Caribbean Canadian Hopkinson performs a deterritorialisation of the metaphors of space and race examined in earlier sections of this thesis, and is thus able to offer a liberating response to the sense of entrapment that had begun to frustrate Wideman in *Philadelphia Fire*.

The history of blackness in speculative fiction is sustained and complex, but too often overlooked. With the rise of cultural studies in the 1990s, critical interest has grown in the engagement of popular fantasy, horror and science fiction with issues of race, gender and sexuality and in their ability to

¹ Terminology surrounding the description of black Canadians is controversial. The term 'Caribbean Canadian' has been challenged because it ignores the Caribbean's non-African population but is used here, in place of a more specific appellation, to reflect Hopkinson's childhood which was spent in both Jamaica and Trinidad, as well as periodically in the United States. The umbrella term 'speculative fiction' is commonly used to embrace science fiction, magic realism and fantasy genres, among others.

deconstruct stereotyped images of black people in those genres. The public profile of such arguments has grown too, as M. Asli Dukan's documentary project, 'Invisible Universe: a history of blackness in speculative fiction', and Vanessa E. Jones's recent article, 'Race, the final frontier', for the Boston Globe attest.² In deconstructing stereotypes of the black female body within the fantastic spaces of the ultra-technologised world of *Midnight Robber*, Hopkinson expands liminality beyond national and empirical boundaries, opening up new, futuristic spaces of possibility where rigid categories of race and identity may be further disrupted, while also responding to and developing a strong tradition of representations of liminal space within African American literature.

Common Metaphors of Liminality

As a Caribbean Canadian author, Hopkinson is profoundly conscious of how spatial narratives have shaped heterogeneous notions of black identity, and she is keen to emphasise within *Midnight Robber* the common liminal metaphors which link African American and African diasporic traditions.³ She establishes her central motif through the figure of an artificially-intelligent being called an 'eshu', which performs the role of house slave for its black-skinned human masters. Hopkinson presents this figure as a cadaverous composite of advanced technology and vibrant Caribbean and Latin American *Dia de los Muertos* tradition:

² See: M. Asli Dukan, *Invisible Universe: a history of blackness in speculative fiction* (in production), available at URL <www.invisibleuniverse.com> [accessed 3 August 2007]; Vanessa E. Jones, 'Race, the final frontier', *Boston Globe.Com*, July 31, 2007, available at

<www.boston.com/ae/books/articles/2007/07/31/race_the_final_frontier_?> [accessed 3 August 2007].

³ See Appendix for a plot summary of *Midnight Robber*.

Today the a.i. had chosen to show itself as a dancing skeleton. Its bones clicked together as it jigged, an image the eshu was writing onto Antonio's optic nerve. It sweated robustly, drops the size of fists rolling down its body to splash *praps!* on the 'ground' then disappear. 'What I could do for you?' The eshu made a ridiculously huge black lace fan appear in one hand and waved it at its own death's head face (5).

In choosing to name this macabre figure an 'eshu', Hopkinson invokes the trickster motif which inspires Henry Louis Gates's study of African American literary theory, *The Signifying Monkey*. Gates probes the roots of such trickster figures recurring throughout the black diaspora and connects them to a larger unified entity,

the divine trickster figure of Yoruba mythology, Esu-Elegbara. This curious figure is called Esu-Elegbara in Nigeria and Legba among the Fon in Benin. His New World figurations include Exú in Brazil, Echu-Elegua in Cuba, Papa Legba in the pantheon of the loa of Vaudou in Haiti, and Papa La Bas in the loa of Hoodoo in the United States. [...] Esu is the guardian of the crossroads, master of style and of stylus, the phallic god of generation and fecundity, master of that elusive, mystical barrier that separates the divine world from the profane.⁴



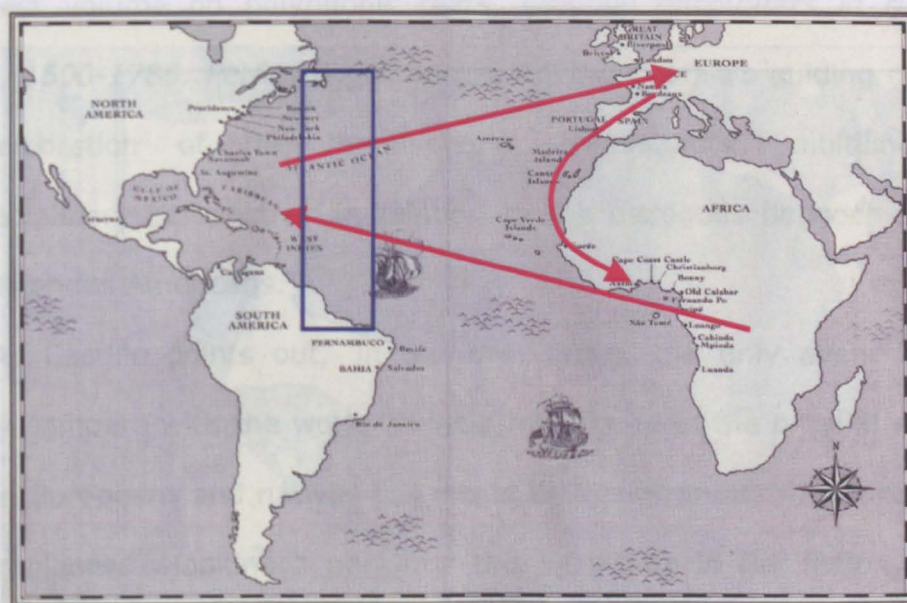
Figure 7: Esu-Elegbara.

As can be seen in Figure 7, the janus-faced Esu is often depicted an image of doubleness, clothed half in red, half in black and perched in the

⁴ Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*, pp. 5-6.

middle of a yellow crossroads, between images of night and day. The verbal echo between Gates's 'Esu' and Hopkinson's 'eshu' reveals the importance of liminality as a common figure amongst the African American and African diasporic traditions and Hopkinson's desire to tap into what Gates calls 'the veritable seething cauldron of cross-cultural contact' created by slavery in the New World and the 'dynamic of exchange and revision among numerous previously isolated African cultures'.⁵ If Hopkinson shares with African American writers, including Jacobs, Ellison and Wideman, a common root in the material conditions of a slave past (North America and the Caribbean were both destinations for the Middle Passage slave ships) she also shares in common metaphors which have been used to interrogate the role of liminality in shaping a sense of black identity in North America. Ellison's number-runner, Rinehart, in *Invisible Man*, Wideman's political opportunist, Timbo, in *Philadelphia Fire* and Jacobs's slave-in-hiding, Linda Brent, in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, like Hopkinson's bizarre 'eshu', are all manifestations of the same trickster figure which exploits its socially liminal status in a continuous negotiation of its own identity. Like Jacobs, Ellison and Wideman, then, Hopkinson is profoundly interested in investigating the relationship between liminality and black identity. As a Caribbean Canadian author, however, Hopkinson is also interested in expanding their distinctly African American liminal spaces into the global space of the African diaspora. Figure 8 shows how Hopkinson's territory (marked in blue) disrupts the triangle of Gilroy's black Atlantic (marked in red), appropriating its cultural and ideological systems of meaning beyond the accepted borders of the Middle Passage.

⁵ Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*, p. 4.



Map I: The Atlantic World circa 1750. Based on "The Atlantic Littoral, ca. 1700," *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in America* (Cambridge, Mass., 1998), 91-92, by I. Berlin. Reprinted by permission of the publisher, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press. Copyright © 1998 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College.

Figure 8: Map of the Atlantic World c.1750, showing slave trade routes.

Gates's African American rhetorical figure of the Signifying Monkey – expressed here as the trickster Esu – offers a liberating metaphor for narratives of liminality among literatures of this black diaspora. By signifying upon Esu in the Caribbean Canadian context of her novel, Hopkinson successfully deterritorialises liminal metaphors in order to embrace an increasingly dynamic model of contemporary black identity.

In fact, *Midnight Robber* performs deconstructive work on both the essentialist and positivist constructions of space inherent in the African American thesis of previous chapters – the very same deconstructive work that it has been argued liminal space performs within African American fiction itself. This destabilising project has also been undertaken in other areas of postcolonial and colonial writing, notably by Susan Castillo in, for example, *The Literatures of Colonial America: An Anthology*, edited with Ivy Schweitzer, and

her latest volume on polyphonic texts, *Colonial Encounters in New World Writing, 1500-1786: Performing America*. Among Castillo's guiding concerns is the celebration of the 'hemispheric, transatlantic, multilingual and multidisciplinary perspective' in relation to the dialogues between Europeans and indigenous Americans.⁶

As Castillo points out, 'in our own times, the only event that could possibly compare with the world-shaking magnitude of the original encounters between Europeans and natives [...] would be a confrontation with beings from another planet.'⁷ Hopkinson performs this very leap in her fiction, exploring past and present conflicts between the competing cultures and belief systems in the Caribbean by imagining them in a science fictional context. As a Caribbean Canadian novel, *Midnight Robber* challenges the geographical exclusivity of African American liminal metaphors which we have explored in Jacobs, Ellison and Wideman, and seeks to examine the role of liminal space within the wider black diaspora. As a piece of speculative fiction, moreover, *Midnight Robber* is able to jettison the real space of the Atlantic altogether. It introduces technology as a new 'space' within which the material conditions of slavery may be fantastically refigured and the continuing role of liminality in problematising mainstream categories of race and identity may be questioned for a twenty-first century readership.⁸

⁶ Susan Castillo, *Colonial Encounters in New World Writing, 1500-1786: Performing America* (New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 17.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

⁸ See: Cameron Bailey, 'Articulating Race in Cyberspace', in *Immersed in Technology: Art and Virtual Environments*, ed. by M.A. Moser (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1996), pp. 29-49; and David Silver, 'Margins in the wires: Looking for race, gender, and sexuality in the blackburg electronic village', in *Race in Cyberspace: Politics, Identity, and Cyberspace* ed. by B.E. Kolko, L. Nakamura, and G.B. Rodman (New York: Routledge, 2000), pp. 133-150. For a general overview, see David Silver, 'Looking Backwards, Looking Forward: Cyberculture Studies, 1990-2000', in

Response to John Edgar Wideman

Hopkinson's willingness to expand representations of liminal space can be read as a direct response to John Edgar Wideman's novel, in which liminal spaces have become traps. The scattering of Sam's funeral ashes in *Philadelphia Fire*, for example, sets off a series of increasingly oppressive memories: a visit to the 'cave of smells' that is Sam's nearby barn provokes memories of the nightmare space of the Middle Passage – '[s]waybacked boards buckle under Cudjoe's steps [...] Large, moist-breathed beasts had inhabited this space. Their blood was on his hands. In his belly. Their presence like a hood settling over him' – which in turn provokes newer memories of the bombsite on Osage Avenue, as the barn sits like 'a bereaved animal, its innards the color Rachel must have been inside as she let Sam go one last time. Ashes. Ashes in the wind' (69). The spiral of Wideman's remembered spaces is trapped in an inevitable, cyclical return to the 'ashes' of the past. Hopkinson's ability to open up liminality as a space of possibility outside the empirical frame of history – that is, in the fantastic world of speculative fiction – speaks of her value in responding to and expanding the tradition of liminal space in African American literature.

The project of this chapter, then, is twofold: firstly, to examine how Hopkinson, through a common investment in the interpretative figure of Esu, is able to engage with the black diaspora as a whole and interrogate the discourse of liminality which defines this network of exchange. Secondly, to examine how Hopkinson, by inscribing a science fiction aesthetic onto the oral

traditions of the black diaspora, seeks to project what Gates characterises as a 'dynamic of exchange and revision' onto new spaces of technology and to explore how black identity might be negotiated within this new environment that has so radically altered perceptions of space.⁹

This chapter will first define the general structures involved in Hopkinson's project and set out the ways in which Hopkinson seeks to re-imagine them. Gilroy's concept of the 'black Atlantic' is useful in expanding the African American focus of previous chapters, and in bridging the critical tensions between African American and postcolonial discourses. In projecting African American liminal space into the black Atlantic, *Midnight Robber* replicates a number of important liminal spaces that appear in Jacobs, Ellison and Wideman and that these perform the same problematising function in the expanded arena of the black Atlantic. Moreover, Hopkinson presents a further challenge to this map of shared spaces by projecting the black Atlantic into cyberspace. Technology profoundly alters our spatial environment and liminality must be reconsidered within it. *Midnight Robber* re-imagines a number of key African American and Caribbean metaphors in the context of cyberspace - for example, the ship, the veil and the mirror - which enables her to disrupt and appropriate the cultural and ideological structures imposed by what is largely presented as a white, male technological elite. By constructing liminal spaces within cyberspace, Hopkinson is able to perform female black difference within a landscape too often wrongly figured as irrelevant to or beyond questions of race and gender.

⁹ Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*, p. 3-4.

The Black Atlantic and Discourses of Liminality

As we have understood since Paul Gilroy's 1993 publication, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, modern notions of race and identity have been shaped by the historical negotiation of liminal space.¹⁰ Gilroy's black Atlantic paradigm may be usefully applied to *Midnight Robber* in order to interrogate the role of liminality in the diaspora, expanding it beyond the American borders of the previous chapters of this thesis. In his influential monograph, Gilroy is concerned with the role black Atlantic culture had in shaping notions of modernity, and the difficulty black people had in reading themselves into Western concepts of modernity. In response to these questions, he argues for the black Atlantic as 'one single complex unit of analysis' through which racial identity may be imagined – a conceptual model of exchange and revision, enacted by a series of crossings and re-crossings of people and ideas within the triangular space between North America, Africa and Europe which defined the historical trading routes of the Atlantic slave trade.¹¹ Borrowing the concept of 'double-consciousness' from W. E. B. Du Bois, whose treatise *The Souls of Black Folk* argues that 'the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line', Gilroy asserts that the literature and culture of the black Atlantic has been defined by a preoccupation with the 'striking doubleness' which characterises its position 'in an expanded

¹⁰ See also Gilroy, 'Absolutism', in *Cultural Studies*, ed. by Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson and Paula Treichler (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 197-198; *Small Acts: Thoughts on the Politics of Black Cultures* (London: Serpent's Tail Press, 1993); and 'Route Work: The Black Atlantic and the Politics of Exile', in *The Post-Colonial Question: Common Skies, Divided Horizons*, ed. by Iain Chambers and Lidia Curti, (New York and London: Routledge, 1996) pp. 17-29.

¹¹ Gilroy, *Black Atlantic*, p. 58.

West but not completely of it'.¹²

As Vincent Carretta and Phillip Gould have recently argued, Gilroy's concept of the black Atlantic offers an 'influential' path beyond nation and race as master terms, '[i]magine instead a diasporic model of racial identity'.¹³ Moreover, by reading African American texts and theory (notably Du Bois) in what John Cullen Gruesser has termed 'an expanded frame of reference', Gilroy has established liminality as a principle and a practice which transcends national borders and through which African American and black diasporic cultures may be justifiably compared.¹⁴ The racialised 'doubleness' which Gilroy identifies as a key component of black Atlantic culture transforms the slave trade triangle into an ideologically liminal space hanging between the three continents of Africa, America and Europe. This triangular space is made more liminal by the unspeakable nature of the human traffic which it historically supported and the silence that inevitably surrounds it, despite the transatlantic slave trade's abolition by the United States and Britain in 1807. A comprehensive database compiled in the late 1990s puts the figure of Africans forcibly transported to enslavement in North America, South America and the Caribbean at just over eleven million. Of those, fewer than 9.6 million survived the so-called 'Middle Passage' across the Atlantic, which could take anywhere from one to five months.¹⁵

These material erasures are reflected in the ideological liminality of Gilroy's black Atlantic model. As John Cullen Gruesser notes, the black Atlantic

¹² Gilroy, *Black Atlantic*, p. 58.

¹³ Carretta, p. 3.

¹⁴ Gruesser, p. 5.

¹⁵ *The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade 1527-1867: A Database on CD ROM*, ed. by David Eltis, et al., sponsored by the W. E. B. Du Bois Institute for Afro-American Research (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

is 'predicated on the experience and/or memory of new world slavery, which links African Americans, black Britons, and West Indians of African descent'.¹⁶ It is precisely this network of 'links' that re-inscribes the silent and terrible void of the slave trade triangle as a site of extraordinary creative and intellectual agency. This thesis argues that the slave trade triangle operates as a paradigm for representations of liminal space in African American literature, where liminality is both representative of the material conditions of slavery and able, through its 'distinctive pattern of crossing and cultural production', to disturb mainstream categories of race and identity.¹⁷

As we have seen in the Introduction, Hopkinson emphasises the transatlantic nature of liminal metaphor through her invocation of the black Atlantic figure of Esu, which in turn invokes Gates's African American trope, the Signifying Monkey. Moreover, Hopkinson encourages this parallel with every act of naming: 'Tubman', 'Toussaint', 'Douglass sector', 'Garvey-prime' and 'Cudjoe' (329, 18, 2, 144). Hopkinson identifies the valorisation of the liminal, the interest in the un-nameable and the facility of language to express it as key points of commonality between her own fiction and that of the African American tradition and uses her novel *Midnight Robber* to trace this discourse of liminality within the black Atlantic.

Canada as a Black Atlantic Nation

As a Caribbean Canadian writer, Hopkinson offers an interesting challenge to popular conceptions of the black Atlantic. Canada's role in the development of a black Atlantic Imaginary has been largely ignored. From the

¹⁶ Gruesser, p. 17.

¹⁷ Gilroy, 'Route Work', pp. 17-29.

late 1960s to the 1990s, scholarship in the field of Atlantic Canada had been dominated by a regionalist approach, focusing on issues such as economic under-development and the notion of 'limited identities'; in framing their analyses, scholars 'invariably looked westward, fixated on the question of why the Atlantic region lagged behind Central Canada'.¹⁸ Yet since the 1990s, the field has begun to explore an alternative reading of Canada as a nation on the Atlantic rim, in response to the exponential growth of the 'Atlantic world' as a major area of research in North American, Caribbean and British studies.¹⁹ Moreover, Canada's participation in the black Atlantic (a Black, Red, White and Green Atlantic, as well as an English, French, Spanish, Portuguese and even a criminal Atlantic have also been the subject of academic study) has grown as a prominent area of study.

The relevance of African Canadian literature to both African diasporic and Canadian studies receives a unique and thorough examination in George Elliott Clarke's *Odysseys Home: Mapping African-Canadian Literature*.²⁰ Clarke is careful to distance himself from earlier studies of black Canadians – and in particular the 'small-l liberal, American bias' of Robin Winks's *The Blacks in Canada: A History* – which he believes either underplay the importance of a populist affirmation of black culture in Canada within their anti-essentialist approach or over-emphasise 'nationalism [and] its tendency to decay into

¹⁸ Jerry Bannister, 'History 8220 Course Outline: Atlantic Canada in the Atlantic World', Dalhousie University, *The Atlantic Canada Portal*. Available at URL: <<http://atlanticportal.hil.unb.ca/dal8220>> [accessed 3 August 2007].

¹⁹ For an example of general scholarship in this growth area see Bernard Bailyn, *Atlantic History: Concept and Contours* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005). For examples dealing with Canada as an Atlantic nation see 'Forum: Back to the Future: The New History of Atlantic Canada', *Acadiensis* 30:1 (2000), pp. 3-91.

²⁰ George Elliott Clarke, *Odysseys Home: Mapping African-Canadian Literature* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002).

fallacious myths, misty romanticisms and blood-rite fascism'.²¹ Clarke's approach to African Canadian literature as a mixture of nationalist and black Atlantic sensibilities clearly reflects general trends in current scholarship, and his receptiveness to conflicting narratives of black Canada opens the way for Caribbean Canadian authors like Nalo Hopkinson – who interpose a third, Caribbean dynamic into the African-Canadian dialogue – to test the borders of their own fiction. Although born in Jamaica and spending a number of early years in the United States, Hopkinson has spent the majority of her adult life in Canada, moving to Toronto from Trinidad in 1977 at the age of seventeen and studying at York University, Toronto.²² *Midnight Robber*, however, reveals the continued importance of Caribbean language and folklore in her writing. As a Caribbean Canadian author, Hopkinson is at once part of a Canadian sensibility and also the black Atlantic triangle that marks out a Caribbean sensibility; her writing therefore lies in a doubly liminal space where these two sensibilities coincide.²³

Moreover, Clarke's scathing condemnation of the 'liberal lies' of Robin Winks, the 'American' or 'US' author of *Blacks in Canada*, reveals a second, equally fraught dynamic between Canada and the United States.²⁴ The perceived tendency for America to blame Canada for a variety of perceived problems, such as 'uncontrolled' immigration and 'pervasive' social liberalism,

²¹ Clarke, pp. 63, 183. See also Robin W. Winks, *The Blacks in Canada: A History*, [1971] 2nd edn (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queens University Press, 1997).

²² See the official website for Nalo Hopkinson, available at URL: <<http://nalohopkinson.com/>> [accessed 3 August 2007].

²³ The aim of this thesis is to examine the problematising effect Hopkinson's novel has on African American models of liminal space and therefore readings of Canadian nationalism in Hopkinson's fiction are largely set aside here. Important work is still to be done, however, on the relationship between nationalist and black Atlantic models in her work.

²⁴ For references to Winks as an American, see Clarke, pp. 30, 124, 189; for references to Winks as a citizen of the U.S., see *Ibid.*, p. 155.

is perhaps best satirised in the contemporary American shock animation series, *South Park*, whose Oscar-nominated song, 'Blame Canada' was sung live on stage in 2000 by Canadian comic Robin Williams and has since become a national catchphrase. Former Canadian Prime Minister, Pierre Trudeau described relations with the United States as being like 'sleeping with an elephant. No matter how friendly and even-tempered is the beast', quipped Trudeau, 'one is affected by every twitch and grunt'.²⁵ However, Hopkinson's experience of living in the United States and her acknowledgement of the influence of seminal African American science fiction writers, particularly Samuel R. Delany and Octavia Butler, speak to the black Atlantic aesthetic of exchange and revision which this thesis argues structures her novel *Midnight Robber*. The novel lies ideologically within the liminal nexus between African-Canadian, American-Canadian and American-Caribbean imaginaries. Reading Gilroy's diasporic discourse of 'doubleness' onto this expanded black Atlantic territory, Hopkinson prioritises liminal space as a site in which the material histories of racism may be inscribed while essentialist notions of black identity may be productively complicated.

African American and Postcolonial Discourses

The opening sections of this chapter suggest an uncontroversial transition between African American structures and those of the black Atlantic. Gates's African American concept of a transatlantic 'dynamic of exchange and revision' in *The Signifying Monkey* appears to coincide with Gilroy's idea of the

²⁵ From a speech by Trudeau to the National Press Club in Washington, DC, on 25 March 1969; authorship of the speech was later attributed to Ivan Head, Trudeau's adviser.

black Atlantic as 'one single complex unit of analysis'. Despite the many similarities between their disciplines, however, postcolonial theorists and African American theorists have been surprisingly resistant to collaborative ventures. The first major publication to attempt to define postcolonial studies, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-colonial Studies* (1989) defines its subject area as 'all the culture affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day'.²⁶ As John Cullen Gruesser points out, this in fact qualifies all of American literature as postcolonial, yet Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin ignore black American writing in the main because, they contend, African American studies 'has had a widespread and often quite separate development from post-colonial studies, to which it is related only in a complex and ambiguous way'.²⁷ African American studies has indeed grown out of a very different context from other postcolonial literature paradigms, including that of Caribbean literature.²⁸ However, there are a significant number of points on which the two may be usefully compared, to the benefit of both. These coalesce under the banner of spatial critique.

Firstly, both African American and postcolonial studies foreground the desire to uncover a critical black voice within the dominant white canon, as expressed in Said's idea of postcolonial criticism in his seminal work

²⁶ *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-colonial Literatures*, ed. by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, [1989] 2nd edn (New York and London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 2, 6.

²⁷ Gruesser, p. 8. Of course, African American texts are not strictly 'postcolonial' texts in that they have no direct colonial centre with which to contend: America itself was in dialogue with England (and Europe more generally) as a colonial power; African Americans therefore existed at a double remove from this European coloniser. In fact, the emerging American culture itself acts as a surrogate colonial centre for black Americans, who must 'write back' both to the shadowy European coloniser but also to America itself.

²⁸ Caribbean literatures are 'produced by a Black majority population of an independent nation', making them crucially different from African American literatures, 'produced by a Black minority in a rich and powerful white country' (Ashcroft, p. 19).

Orientalism, and Toni Morrison's vision for African American criticism as expressed in *Playing in the Dark*. The collection of postcolonial and African American essays that appeared under the title '*Race, Writing and Difference*' in the 1985 Autumn edition of *Critical Inquiry*, edited by Henry Louis Gates Jr, (and which was later published as a book by the University of Chicago Press in 1986) remains a landmark of cross-cultural scholarship.

Secondly, postcolonial theorists have long made use of the concept of liminality. Their interest in racially marginalised cultures has led them to privilege concepts of hybridity, diaspora, migration and doubleness as crucial elements in identity formation. As Ray Chow comments, 'rather than understanding identity in terms of stable reference points, the theorists of these notions have collectively shifted the conceptualisation of identity to an epistemological paradigm in which it is liminality, instability, impurity, movement and fluidity that inform the formation of identities'.²⁹ Both African American and postcolonial critiques are based upon a common experience of displacement. Gruesser reminds us of Homi Bhabha's interest in comparing black American and South African writing on this point:

In the introduction to *The Location of Culture* (1994), a meditation on contemporary attempts to 'locate the question of culture in the realm of the *beyond*', Homi Bhabha reads the 'freak social and cultural displacements' in the "unhomely" fictions' of the African American and South African Nobel laureates Morrison and Nadine Gordimer.³⁰

²⁹ Rey Chow, 'The postcolonial difference: lessons in cultural legitimation', *Postcolonial Studies*, 1.2 (1998), pp. 161-169 (p. 166).

³⁰ Gruesser, p. 3. Homi Bhabha's description of postcolonialism is inclusive: 'postcolonial perspectives emerge from the colonial testimony of the Third World countries and the discourses of 'minorities' within the geographical divisions of East and West, North and South'. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, p. 171.

Not only does Bhabha here identify the shared experience of displacement or 'unhomeliness' as a positive link between postcolonial and African American traditions, his naming of the space of cultural dislocation (and of the confluence of the traditions) as 'the realm of the *beyond*' points productively towards the formal concerns of science fiction and their relationship to issues of race and otherness. The speculative world depicted in Hopkinson's work offers one version of Bhabha's 'realm of the *beyond*' in which the traditions of postcolonial Caribbean culture meet and inform African American culture. The prison colony planet of New Half-Way Tree in *Midnight Robber* offers a vision of what a space of dislocation might look like while also suggesting itself as the realm in which cross-cultural fertilisation might flourish. Being an interventionist like Gates, Hopkinson signifies upon the stock science fiction motif of the prison colony, finding, in its representation as a liminal space, echoes of the silenced spaces of the Middle Passage and slavery, which she is now able to refigure as spaces of futuristic possibility. As a political act, Hopkinson re-imagines the construction of the stock science fiction landscape by reading the space of the prison colony through the liminal lens of race.

The authors of *The Empire Writes Back* regard displacement as an integral component of the postcolonial condition, engendering 'the special post-colonial crisis of identity, [that is] the concern with the development or recovery of an effective identifying relationship between self and place'.³¹ Within the American and Caribbean context, both the white settlers and the black population are displaced – the first from the metropolitan centre (i.e. Europe), and the latter from their African homeland, although the latter

³¹ Ashcroft et al., p. 8.

displacement is marked as unique by the 'violence of enslavement' and a 'treble (i.e., spatial, linguistic and cultural) displacement'.³² Hopkinson's novel, *Midnight Robber*, concerns itself with this experience of displacement on a personal and cultural level as the protagonist Tan-Tan seeks to recover her identity as a black woman in exile through the re-membering action of Caribbean folklore and language. This recovery project is also evident throughout African American fiction where the black body has often been doubly displaced, from Africa in the first instance and then often refigured through migrations northwards within the United States itself. This experience of African American displacement is figured early in the Middle Passage narratives, later filtered through the escape motifs in slave narrative and also through successive migrations from the rural South towards the urban centres of industry in the North. In each instance, African American writers are concerned with recovering some meaningful relationship between self and place in order to rehabilitate a coherent identity lost through the actions of slavery. African American and postcolonial texts, therefore, may be seen to share a common (formal and bodily) experience of displacement. However, the literary 'recovery' attempted in Hopkinson's *Midnight Robber* explicitly rejects the search for a home or even a transcendent space. The use of science fictional and technological models of space offer Hopkinson alternative ways of problematising the relationship between self and place and it is this problematisation that she values in *Midnight Robber*.

³² Gruesser, p. 7.

Producing Liminality in the Black Atlantic

Midnight Robber replicates a number of important liminal spaces that appear in Jacobs, Ellison and Wideman and these perform the same problematising function in the expanded arena of the black Atlantic. The texts examined in the first three chapters of this thesis present spaces that may be described as 'lived' spaces, which Lefebvre describes as

[those spaces with] an affective kernel or centre: Ego, bed, bedroom, dwelling, house; or, square, church, graveyard. [They] embrace the loci of passion, of action and of lived situations, and this immediately implies time.³³

Many are very real historical spaces. For example, Jacobs's attic is a real place, situated in Molly Horniblow's house in the town of Edenton, North Carolina. Her slave narrative makes a factual claim for Jacobs's seven year confinement in this attic, anchoring the text in historical and geographical reality. Likewise, Wideman's text makes much of its direct and precise relationship to history through its focus on a specific historical event: the bombing of 6221 Osage Avenue, Philadelphia on May 13th, 1985. Even *Invisible Man's* cellar, although fictional, is located firmly in the context of 1950s Harlem, connected by the electricity cables to the historical world above, and validated in the rest of the narrative by the detailed descriptions of social unrest and by the appearance of several historical figures such as Marcus Garvey in the guise of Ras the Exhorter, and Sweet Daddy Grace of the 'Heaven in Harlem' Church.

All the liminal spaces examined, however, represent a wilful disruption of history or a conscious removal from the passage of time. Jacobs's attic and Ellison's basement both operate outside the history that shapes the rest of

³³ Lefebvre, p. 44.

their narratives; the spaces represent a deliberate withdrawal by the black subject from the action, passion and time of real life. In providing sites which are not governed by linear models of history or time, they allow complex and mutable identities built within these models. Wideman's bombsite, too, offers to reveal a space outside of time and history:

You watch the sky crack; you see deep into the night. Lightening holds for a fraction of a second too long and you see further into the darkness than you've ever seen before, another island, a city of trees and hills, teeming, terraced, dropping into the sea a thousand miles away, beyond the horizon line that till this moment has always defined your vision (147).

The first three chapters, therefore, reveal a tension between historical models of space and the problematising presence of liminal sites which, while to varying degrees anchored in history, offer an escape from the linear spaces of history and their attendant structures of racism. If Jacobs, Ellison and Wideman attempt to disrupt history with liminal space, Hopkinson shifts such spaces entirely into a fictional realm and severs all but metaphorical links to history. *Midnight Robber* charts the story of Tan-Tan, a young girl who is kidnapped by her father from the Caribbean-colonised planet of Toussaint and transported to the brutal, 'low-tech' prison colony of New Half-Way Tree. Here, the creatures of Caribbean folklore are real. Growing up, Tan-Tan is sexually abused by her father and outcast into the wild, but finds strength in her friendship with the native population of bird-like creatures called Douen and a new identity as the mythical 'Robber Queen' of folklore. Hopkinson's spaces represent the next step in the project started by Jacobs, Ellison and Wideman to disrupt the linear spaces of history. By introducing the multidimensional 'network' of the black Atlantic into the equation, Hopkinson offers a greater scope for the problematising of race and identity.

Liminality and Public Arena

The sports arena appears in all three texts examined in earlier chapters as a space which represents the material conditions of slavery and its attendant experiences of incarceration, as well as problematising mainstream categories of race and identity. The Battle Royal which opens *Invisible Man* reveals within the 'neat rows' around the portable boxing ring and the 'gleaming space of [its] polished floor' the queasy dichotomies which characterised Southern racism of the 1940s:

I finally pulled erect and discovered that I could see the black, sweat-washed forms weaving in the smoky-blue atmosphere like drunken dancers weaving to the rapid drum-like thuds of blows. [...] 'Uppercut him! Kill him! Kill that big boy!' [...] The harder we fought the more threatening the men became. And yet, I had begun to worry about my speech again. How would it go? Would they recognize my ability? What would they give me? (23-24).

Yet, it is the old, abandoned sports arena near his childhood home which *Invisible Man* remembers much later in the text as a 'great abandoned hole' and which comes to represent a profound problematisation of the well-oiled structures and obsequiousness of the earlier Battle Royal (336). For Wideman also, the basketball court represents a problematising space within the rigid city geography, where 'spaces open which haven't been there before, the hollow loses its bottom, a black lap you'd sink into forever' (40). Both spaces imagined by Wideman and Ellison problematise the motif of the 'running man', the implied futility and racist implications of which *Invisible Man* is exhorted to remember by his grandfather: 'To Whom It May Concern [...] Keep this Nigger-Boy Running' (33). The boys in the Battle Royal long to 'run away' from their humiliation just as in *Philadelphia Fire*, Cudjoe longs to run away from 'The hurt. The truth. Run. Run. Never look back [...] Run. From the nighthawk, the

bear, the slithering lizard, the coiled snake. Run. Run. Run' (70).

Yet, the 'black lap' of Wideman's basketball court, like the 'abandoned hole' of Ellison's remembered stadium, offers an alternative space in which running has the possibility to become a fruitful movement – running as sport; running as identity; running as an end in itself. These spaces critique the figure of the tragic black sportsman as well as the grand narrative of sports architecture. History and memory are also dislocated from their cultural and temporal context in these sports arena; they function as palimpsests, signifying upon the performative space of the slave auction floor which is referred to in Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*.

The sports arena makes an appearance in Hopkinson's *Midnight Robber* in the shape of the fight yard, playing upon both the arena in earlier African American fiction and slave narratives, and also upon the common gladiatorial motifs that recur throughout science fiction as a genre:

The fight yard! The place where challengers trained to fight in the Jour Ouvert morning duels on the first day of the Carnival parade. [...] Them does fight in the old ways, with machete and bull pissle and stick and thing. All to remind them of their history, of times back on Earth [...] The yard big so like a sugar cane field, but pack down flat all over; just dirt, no pavement (34-35)

Here, in the dirt circle, Antonio fights for his honour as a husband against his wife's young lover, but the carnival space of the ring is also a palimpsest, clearly signifying on the troubled slavery space of the cane field (prominent in many slave narratives) and functioning as a locus for collective memory of 'times back on Earth'. Hopkinson's futuristic re-figuring of the symbolic cane field through the eyes of the articulate, urbanised and pro-active female character of Tan-Tan is a riposte to the languid, often silenced rural female

figures in Jean Toomer's *Cane*.³⁴ Hopkinson's fight yard is not a liminal space, however, but a ritual space within which the colonial society may reaffirm its own foundation myths. More subversive in terms of race and identity is a reflection of this ritual fighting space which occurs in the final pages of the novel, when the exiles from Toussaint decide to recreate the Carnival spaces of their home planet. In the celebration, a circle opens up around Tan-Tan who has decided to perform a ritual speech in the spirit of the occasion. Within this circle - which speaks, of course, to the fight yard of Toussaint and the cane field of slavery as well as Ellison's 'abandoned hole' and Wideman's 'black lap' - Tan-Tan assumes the identity of the Robber Queen:

Power coursed through Tan-Tan, the Robber Queen's power - the power of words: 'I you will never catch, for I is more than a match; I will duck your base canards; I will flee and fly to flee again.' Nanny, sweet Nanny, yes. Tan-Tan bad inna Robber Queen stylee.

'You're going to come with me, woman!' Janisette lunged for her, caught the brim of her hat. Tan-Tan zigzagged out of reach.

'Not wo-man; I name Tan-Tan, a 'T' and an 'AN'; I is the AN-acaona, Taino redeemer; the AN-nie Christmas, keel boat steamer; the Yaa As-AN-tewa; Ashanti warrior queen; the N-AN-ny, Maroon Granny; meaning Nanna, mother ,caretaker to a nation. You won't confound these people with your massive fibulation!' And Tan-Tan the Midnight Robber stood tall, guns crossed at her chest. Let her opponent match that (320).

Hopkinson's performance ring problematises categories of race and identity. As the crowd 'pull in closer to hear', it creates a space in which the Midnight Robber is able to riff on Tan-Tan's identity with its signifying power - 'Tan-Tan bad inna Robber Queen stylee.' The expectant mother becomes a genderless, gun-toting combatant. Linguistic and gender structures are destabilised: '[n]ot wo-man', for example, but a cacophonic array of ideas and sounds and grammatical units. Essentialist representations of race are challenged by

³⁴ See in particular 'Avey' in Jean Toomer, *Cane* [1923] (New York: W. W. Norton Press, 1988), pp. 44-49.

Hopkinson's use of strong female myths from Caribbean, African American and African cultures, which open out the interactive space of the diaspora on Earth. The historical Anacaona, for example, is a figure that has attained almost legendary status in narratives of anti-colonial resistance in Hispaniola during the early years of Spanish conquest. Also called the 'Golden Flower', she was a Taino queen, native to the Bahamas and celebrated as a composer of ballads and narrative poems, called areitos. 'Annie Christmas' features in an African American tall-tale about a fictional keelboat pilot on the lower Mississippi River who is generally agreed to be six feet eight inches tall and the mother of twelve children.³⁵ The story of Yaa Asantewa of the Ashanti, moreover, is one of inspiration to some and controversy to others. In 1900, when the British attempted to colonize the Gold Coast, now known as Ghana, Asantewa is said to have made a stirring speech in which she urged the Ashanti to resist the British. Despite dying in exile in 1923, she is still held in great reverence.

Of course, these new carnival spaces in which Tan-Tan performs exist on the other side of the 'dimension veils' that separate the planets and are thus always characterised as double: 'Truth to tell though, nothing could be completely right about Carnival in this shadow land of New Half-Way Tree. Everyone here was an exile; this could only be a phantom of the celebration they would have on Toussaint' (314). In this state of doubleness, the Carnival performance ring allows Tan-Tan to at last tell the truth about the sexual abuse she suffered at the hands of her father, Antonio, in a voice that speaks with a double tongue:

³⁵ For a modern re-telling of the Annie Christmas tale, see Robert D. San Souci, *Cut from the Same Cloth: American Women of Myth, Legend, and Tall Tale* (New York: Putnam Press, 2000).

Could the Robber tell the rest? Rough with emotion, her cracked voice came out in two registers simultaneously. Tan-Tan the Robber Queen, the good and the bad, regarded Janisette with a regal gaze and spoke:

That plan for love never come to transaction. When Antonio find out, he rape she, beat she, nearly kill she (325).

Language use destabilises categories of race and identity, but I suggest that this occurs only within a specific liminal space – what Foucault might call a heterotopia, which profoundly disturbs grammar and meaning. Hopkinson presents an experience of heterotopia in which the dissolution of verbal meaning and identity signals the dissolution of space, too. Hopkinson offers us not just the reflexive space of the black Atlantic but a deeper, more profoundly disorientating 'hole' (variously represented by Tan-Tan's performance ring; by the phantom planet New Half-Way Tree, hidden behind the many dimension veils) that is created by the spaces of technology. This black hole, Hopkinson suggests, unsettles rigid categories of race and identity that rely on rigid structures of language and space to exist.

Liminality and Body Space

In *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, the symbolic space of the attic complicates the space of the female body, itself a site of sexual slavery and debasement. Examples of this debasement include the physical attacks inflicted by Dr Flint on Linda Brent, the cutting of Brent's hair by Flint as a symbolic assault on her femininity, and Brent's affair with Mr Sands, which results in two children. The attic, however, disrupts both Brent's role as the object of sexual abuse and her role as mother to her children by replacing physical contact with a solitary, observational life, and by inverting the metaphors of penetration and gestation, allowing the attic to become a 'womb'

wherein Brent herself is reborn to herself as an author and a free woman. This tradition of using liminal space to problematise the female body can be traced in Hopkinson's *Midnight Robber*. Examples of the body as a site of sexual slavery in this context include the sexual abuse Tan-Tan suffers at the hands of her father Antonio and the pregnancy that follows, and Antonio's murder that she is forced to commit as an act of self-defence. Like Brent, Tan-Tan retreats into voluntary exile to escape the abusive relationships forced upon her body. This state of exile, and the nomadic life that Tan-Tan adopts, act as the liminal space which provokes debate over the space of the female body and the traditional role of motherhood. In the forest, Tan-Tan displays traditionally masculine traits such as physical stamina, a knowledge and ability to hunt and kill wild prey, and a rejection of physical comfort, all of which run contrary to Tan-Tan's status as a pregnant woman.

Moreover, Tan-Tan adopts the persona of the Midnight Robber in a symbolic relinquishment of her femininity; the Midnight Robber is anonymous, armed with pistols and operates outside the established laws of community and gender. This state of nomadic exile and the persona of the Midnight Robber operate as liminal spaces in a similar way to Jacobs's attic: they challenge traditional images of the female body by inverting stereotypes and mirroring Tan-Tan's physical pregnancy with her symbolic re-birth as the androgynous Midnight Robber. Tan-Tan's body thus rejects its earlier role as a site of sexual abuse and becomes a performative site on which she herself may inscribe her new identity. Tan-Tan is both a mother and a bandit; androgynous and yet positioned in dialogue with an entire tradition of strong, black literary women.

Further examples of the use of liminal space to problematise black womanhood in *Midnight Robber* include the prominent use of the matriarch figure so prominent in the work of canonical black women writers, notably Gloria Naylor, Alice Walker and Toni Morrison. The matriarch appears in the work of Jacobs, Ellison and Wideman as an authority figure who represents the healing values of community within circumstances hampered by racism and discrimination. In all cases, the matriarch is directly connected to an experience of liminality through which she is able to bolster this sense of community. Linda Brent's grandmother, for example, owns and protects the attic in which her granddaughter hides, despite her intense disapproval of Brent's sexual transgressions; Mary Rambo sees glimmers of 'leadership and responsibility' in the destitute Invisible Man and offers her tenement flat as a liminal space in which to hide and gather strength – as Invisible Man thinks on sinking into her spare bed, '*If I don't think I'm sinking, look what a hole I'm in*' (253).

Likewise, Wideman signifies upon the matriarch figure in the person of Margaret Jones whose prophet-like stoicism ('no frills, no distractions, you see the face for what it is, severe and symmetrical') and injured sense of community ('Look round you at the neighbourhood. Where's the houses, the old people on their stoops, the children playing in the street?') – are forever linked to the liminal space of 6221 Osage Avenue, where it 'look like the atom bomb hit' (7, 19, 16). Hopkinson references this matriarchal tradition in her creation of 'Granny Nanny', but links this particular matriarch figure not with a liminal space but with the ever-present network of the 'web'; the values of community are now expressed through a centralised technological unit rather

than through the use of any number of liminal geographical sites. The space of the female body has thus been defamiliarised – no longer identified with liminality, the 'Grande Nanotech Sentient Interface' is curiously inhuman, its 'Granny' moniker simply a simulacrum of womanhood.

The female body as represented by the Granny Nanny network may symbolise the incarcerating experiences of slavery through its carefully policed spaces, but it also eschews any problematisation of race and identity. Within the rigorously policed body-space of Granny Nanny, race is synthesised into a single and indisputable unit through a process which re-imagines the American colonial project in race-blind terms: 'Taino Carib and Arawak; Africa; Asian; Indian; even the Euro... All the bloods flow[ed] into one river, making a new home on a planet' (18). The female body as Granny Nanny will not tolerate any subversive models of race or identity.

We are faced, then, with two complicated models of black womanhood in *Midnight Robber*, one in which the female body gains independence by electing to retreat into liminal space, and another in which the female body is irretrievably technologised with an erasure of all liminal space. Hopkinson argues that liminality is crucial to any meaningful representation of black womanhood; she is keen to investigate in this instance whether the technologising of black womanhood does indeed preclude such liminality. In other words, Hopkinson seeks to merge the two spatial models of black womanhood. 'Granny Nanny' remains a sinister sister to Big Brother until the act of Tan-Tan's abduction, which introduces a liminal space between the planets Toussaint and New Half-way Tree that Granny Nanny cannot cross. In striving to reach Tan-Tan, Granny Nanny is able to revive the matriarchal

attributes that define Jacobs, Ellison and Wideman's texts. The link which Granny Nanny establishes with Tan-Tan's son, Tubman, is of a different quality and points to a healthy problematisation of the Granny Nanny network which is now forced to acknowledge the prison colony as an 'outside' space.

Here, then, is another subtle revision of the traditional colonial enterprise. The Marryshevites have not converted themselves into masters, but rather constructed an artificial intelligent network to 'master' them in the process of freeing them. The eshu, then, is a digital expression of their black Earth cultural heritage and the principles of tricksterism, signifying and play that they enshrined in Granny Nanny herself. Are eshus machines? If the eshu is a trickster, its function as narrator and its reappearance (and reconnection) in the final pages of the novel reveal its tricky position as storyteller and spatial manipulator. The eshu keeps its identity hidden from us, the reader. Its voice transcends space (biological, planetary and textual). Its triumph is something to be celebrated.

Tan-Tan is also represented as a liminal figure in terms of race (when with the Douen), gender and age, she embraces her liminal status and exults in creating her persona as the Midnight Robber. It is this ability to signify upon the liminal geography of land and text that proves ultimately redeeming for Tan-Tan.

Cyberspace and the Black Atlantic Paradigm

Hopkinson presents a challenge to the map of shared spaces examined above, by projecting the black Atlantic into cyberspace. The complex relationship between race and the history of American space exploration has

attracted limited critical attention until recently. As Kim McQuaid notes in 'Race, Gender, and Space Exploration: A Chapter in the Social History of the Space Age', despite the fact that 'an era of space explorations and an era of expanded civil rights for racial minorities and women began simultaneously in the United States [...] such important social changes were rarely discussed in relation to each other'.³⁶ As Figure 9 shows, however, Soviet propaganda during the so-called 'space race' of the late 1950s, '60s and '70s, made capital out of the colonial implications of America's rocket age discourse. The cartoon depicts Yuri Gagarin saluting the African people from space, implying that each is engaged in the same, mutually supporting struggle against American imperialism.

The US astronaut program did finally open to women and minority groups in 1978, and the scholarship of McQuaid and others is valuable in assessing the previously neglected historical and social implications of such an inclusive move. Nonetheless, it also serves to highlight the need for similar investigations into impact of the changes in the US civilian space programme during the 1970s on writing by women and minority communities. Like fellow science fiction author, Octavia Butler, Hopkinson is interested in harnessing the increased awareness of women and minorities in space travel in order to deconstruct traditional white, masculine narratives of space colonisation.³⁷ Her techno-futurism is a bold attempt to recover lost histories through science fiction.

³⁶ Kim McQuaid, 'Race, Gender, and Space Exploration: A Chapter in the Social History of the Space Age', *Journal of American Studies*, 41.2 (2007), pp. 405-434 (p. 405).

³⁷ For science fiction using liminal metaphors, see especially: Samuel Delany, *Babel-17* (New York: Ace Press, 1996); Tananarive Due, *The Between* (New York: Harper Collins, 1995); and Andrea Hairston, *Mindscape* (Seattle, WA: Aqueduct Press, 2006).



Figure 9: 'In Tune with the Times ... Africa!' Yuri Gagarin salutes the African people from space. *The Morning of the Cosmic Era* (Moscow, 1961).

Hopkinson's reconstruction of liminal narrative spaces within the futuristic universe of *Midnight Robber* enables her to recover those too often silenced spaces in Afro-Caribbean history and also to reclaim the spaces of the future. As Jewell Gomez argues, 'the idea of speculative fiction [...] is that speculative implies possibilities [...] As African-Americans [and writers of colour], this seems to be at the core of our getting from day to day.

Speculating that there are other possibilities other than doom.³⁸ If Wideman is concerned with the imaginary spaces of failure in the black urban landscape, Hopkinson moves out towards a futuristic environment alive with alternative stories and interventions. The novel re-imagines a number of racialised liminal metaphors – for example, the ship, the veil and the mirror – and argues that they offer the potential for new dimensions of possibility, in which race and identity may be reassessed in the context of current developments in technology.

Like her African American counterparts discussed in earlier chapters of this thesis, Hopkinson is profoundly interested in the sustainability of subversive models of black identity within liminal space. Uniquely, however, Hopkinson interrogates the plausibility of such conceptual models in contemporary society by projecting the spaces of Gilroy's black Atlantic onto the spaces of the future, where technology has come to dominate modes of spatial practice. What relevance, she asks, do the shapes of colonialism, slavery and black identity as we traditionally understand them have in a cyberspace environment in which physical geography gives way to abstract spaces of technology? How do we understand blackness in such a context? *Midnight Robber* re-imagines Gilroy's 'web of diaspora identities' as an entity known as the 'Grande Nanotech Sentient Interface'.³⁹ This vast internet system has been created to oversee the black colonial enterprise into outer space some three hundred years in the future:

³⁸ Jewell Gomez, 'The Second Law of Thermodynamics', in *Dark Matter: A Century of Speculative Fiction from the African Diaspora*, ed. by Sheree R. Thomas (New York: Aspect Press, 2001), pp. 349-368 (p.358).

³⁹ Gilroy, *Black Atlantic*, p. 281.

The tools, the machines, the buildings; even the earth itself on Toussaint and all the Nation Worlds had been seeded with nanomites – Granny Nanny’s hands and her body. Nanomites had run the nation ships. The Nation Worlds were one enormous data-gathering system that exchanged information constantly through the Grande Nanotech Sentient Interface: Granny Nansi’s Web. They kept the Nation Worlds protected, guided and guarded its people (10).

Hopkinson’s clear intention is to present a science fictional landscape in which the evocative vocabulary and patterns of the black Atlantic are refracted. The elaborate yet curiously informal spaces of technology which structure this futuristic world would seem to support Gilroy’s dynamic model of black identity: the primary function of ‘Granny Nansi’ Web’ is, after all, as an information exchange; it sustains routes of contact between the various colonised planets in a way that mirrors the passages which marked out the black Atlantic. Moreover, as a symbolic parallel of the World Wide Web, Hopkinson’s Granny Nansi Web launches a successful critique on questions of ownership. Hopkinson’s central act of signifying upon Gilroy’s ‘web’ provokes a flurry of other examples of signifying, so that her imagined universe is characterised both by the action of cultural exchange and by a ‘striking doubleness’. The homely moniker of ‘Granny Nansi’, for example, signifies upon the West African trickster god, Anansi, and emphasises the black Atlantic heritage of this futuristic society. Similarly, the black colonial effort into space signifies upon the white colonial discourses which have shaped American identity; the ‘nation ships’ signify on Middle Passage slavers; the planet ‘Toussaint’ signifies on the Haitian revolutionary leader and black Atlantic luminary, Toussaint L’Ouverture. Each act in outer space has its twin in the black Atlantic. This preoccupation with doubleness within *Midnight Robber* characterises its liminal position as part of an expanded colonial narrative, but not quite of it.

Technology as Absolute Space

Yet Hopkinson also debates these projected spaces of liminality. What does liminality mean in a technological landscape where time and space are conflated? Technology is a space which threatens to eliminate all traditional structures of black identity through its ability to bypass physical space altogether. The Granny Nanny web may be read as an expression of absolute space. The act of crossing and re-crossing space which Gilroy identifies as a vital process within black Atlantic narratives is nullified by the technical ability of the 'Granny Nansi Web' to maintain contact with all places at once. The voyage to England which Jacobs undertakes in the closing chapters of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* represents the author's eventual entrance into the intellectual network of the nineteenth century black Atlantic and becomes an expansion of her own identity as a free black woman. Ideas of transatlantic exile and return serve to structure Cudjoe's search for identity in Wideman's *Philadelphia Fire*.

Yet here Hopkinson's organisation of space tends towards centralisation: the priority of 'Granny Nansi's Web' is to keep the planets 'protected, guided and guarded' by a process of 'data-gathering', rather than data exchange. In an echo of the 'controllable zones' which divide Wideman's dystopic Philadelphia, the urban communities on the planet Toussaint are kept under the endless surveillance of 'Granny Nansi', who has been 'designed to be flexible, to tolerate a variety of human expression, even dissension, so long as it didn't upset the balance of the whole' (10).

The Black Matriarch

For example, Hopkinson's narrative construction of 'Granny 'Nansi' reinterprets the metaphorical figure of the black matriarch. Her traditional maternal characteristics are disturbingly reversed as 'Granny Nanny' becomes both masculine and disturbingly inhuman:

New Half-Way Tree is how Toussaint planet did look before the Marryshow Corporation did sink them Earth Engine Number 127 down into it like God entering he woman; plunging into the womb of soil to impregnate the planet with the seed of Granny Nanny (2).

Here we get a strange reversal of the gender equation: the master-slave dynamic of environmental mastery is subverted by the presence of 'Granny Nanny' as the prime cargo. The aging female figure at once questions the centrality of male potency (it is her 'seed' that impregnates the feminised planet) and the moral narrative behind the event. The story of Granny Nanny is more complicated than a traditional feminist reading might elicit; could it be that Granny is the master? What does this mean for the phallogocentric conventions of classic science fiction? What does it also mean for feminist narratives of female liberation, if Granny is equated with systems of technological control and environmental mastery? It is important to note that the technology Hopkinson genders female is network-based, namely the World Wide Web. The feminine has developed a technology specifically its own (hence the use of weaving and spider imagery, and the maternal characteristics of Granny Nanny as a caring authority). Hopkinson does not present this as a feminist narrative, however. Granny Nanny, unlike Tan-Tan, is disturbingly inhuman.

In problematising the spaces of technology and the reception of

traditional black Atlantic metaphors, Hopkinson's objective is to open up questions of space and race for a contemporary audience. What, she asks, does race mean in a world where the spaces that define people can be bridged, hacked, eliminated and traversed at speed? How might a black person define themselves as black in these new spaces of technology? The planet Toussaint is a site of conflict, where the spaces of technology have inhibited the models of black Atlantic identity with which they are so closely entwined. In order to investigate how – indeed if – a liminal space might begin to operate within such a technologically-unified environment, Hopkinson introduces into the narrative a space outside technology. Although the Granny Nansi Web maintains contact between all planets within the colony, it does not stretch to Toussaint's twin planet, the prison colony of New Halfway Tree. This planet becomes the most important liminal space within the novel. Concurrently, in a movement which reflects the crucial journeys of Jacobs, Ellison and Wideman, Hopkinson's young heroine, Tan-Tan, makes the journey across the space between these two planets. In doing so, she questions whether Gilroy's dynamic model of the black Atlantic may be re-animated within a technological environment.

The Ship: Warping Tropes of the Middle Passage

Like Jacobs, Ellison and Wideman, Hopkinson uses liminal space to represent the material conditions of slavery. However, she deterritorialises their African American liminal spaces – the attic, the basement and the bomb site – by relocating liminality within the dynamic arena of the black Atlantic. *Midnight Robber* makes use of a series of ship metaphors which recall

the claustrophobic space of the Middle Passage slave ship. The ship motif has been shown in previous chapters to be important to African American constructions of race and identity, notably in Ellison's signifying upon Melville's *Moby Dick*. Harriet Jacobs's narrative, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, uses the device of the boat both in the stages of Brent's escape from South Carolina: firstly in the swamp - 'Nancy's husband was seafaring man, and [...] he took me into his boat and rowed out to a vessel not far distant [...] They said I was to remain on board till near dawn, and then they would hide me in Snaky Swamp' - and secondly on the voyage 'northward' - 'And how shall I describe my sensations when we were fairly sailing on Chesapeake Bay? O, the beautiful sunshine! The exhilarating breeze! And I could enjoy them without fear or restraint' (112, 158). The boat also appears in Brent's later voyages to Europe but these voyages of freedom are poised against the infamous attic space, which may be seen to resemble a slave ship of the Middle Passage in its wooden boards and excruciating physical restrictions. Cudjoe's ferry trips and the queasiness of the urban landscape in *Philadelphia Fire* all recall the transatlantic journey too. The ship acts as a motif in *Midnight Robber* to recall the incarcerating experiences of slavery, yet the ship also functions as a stock motif within the science fiction genre, which Hopkinson here refashions in the light of racial issues.

In his study, *The Black Atlantic*, Gilroy singles out the ship as the defining image of the black Atlantic:

I have settled on the image of ships in motion across the spaces between Europe, America, Africa, and the Caribbean as a central organising symbol for this enterprise and as my starting point. The image of the ship-- a living, microcultural, micro-political system in motion-- is especially important for historical and theoretical reasons [...] Ships immediately focus attention on the middle passage, on the various projects for redemptive return to an African homeland, on the circulation of ideas and activists as well as the movement of

key cultural and political artefacts: tracts, books, gramophone records, and choirs.⁴⁰

Hopkinson by discovering liminal space within the dynamic framework of the black Atlantic rather than solely within the geographically finite area of the United States, Hopkinson is able to argue for liminality as an Atlantic-wide representational tool. She shows that authors of the black Atlantic all used liminal metaphors to represent the material conditions of slavery. In doing so, Hopkinson consciously revisions the metaphors of eighteenth and nineteenth century black Atlantic narratives, such as Olaudah Equiano's *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African* (1789), which sought to broadcast the material experience of slavery and its ramifications through ship metaphors. The metaphorical link between *Midnight Robber* and early narratives of the black Atlantic also helps to throw a retrospective light on the hidden black Atlantic metaphors within the African American texts of earlier chapters – notably, those surrounding Harriet Jacobs's journey to Europe.

That the Middle Passage slave ship is a persistent and powerful referent for the many liminal spaces that Hopkinson conjures in her novel is revealed in the example of the punishment box on New Half-Way Tree. The established punishment among the prison colonists at Junjah is to be locked in a metal box for at least a day. This box directly references Jacobs's 'loophole of retreat', a link made explicit by the care with which Hopkinson details the prison's exact dimensions and the inclusion of the 'one little air hole' drilled in the side (recalling Jacobs's own bore holes).⁴¹

⁴⁰ Gilroy, *Black Atlantic*, p. 4.

⁴¹ 'I bored three rows of holes, one above another; then I bored out the interstices

With the truncheon, Claude pointed out a galvanised metal box on one side of the path, suspended between four wooden posts. It looked scarcely big enough to hold a grown man. It had a ladder leaning up against it, leading to a door in its side. Above the door, it had one little air hole drilled in the galvanized metal, about big enough for Tan-Tan to stick her fist in (125).

Hopkinson is conscious of her own signifying on Jacobs's text as she is conscious that both spaces – the attic retreat and the metal box – talk back to an older space: the Middle Passage slave ship. This space holds enormous psychic power for black diasporic cultures because it acts as a sign for the multiple experiences of slavery: separation from homeland, incarceration, physical pain, mental endurance; a simultaneously collective yet profoundly isolating experience for the black body and soul. Tan-Tan makes the historical link herself:

Tan-Tan imagined being shut inside the dark box, no choice to leave, no room to move, drowning in your own sweat. Skin burning with from your own stinking piss, from the flux of shit running down your leg. Like crèche teacher had told them. Like her nightmares (125).

Here, then, we have a point of signification built around this gaping black hole in reality – the Middle Passage slaver – almost as if the infinite, negative implications of that central journey were multiplying outwards across future narratives. Yet, if Hopkinson believes it important to conjure the terrifying historical pedigree of enclosed space in her new colonial world, she is also bearing witness to connective possibilities of remembering such spaces. By folding Jacobs, Equiano and other writers of the black diaspora quietly into her

between. I thus succeeded in making one hole about an inch long and an inch broad. I sat by it till late into the night, to enjoy the little whiff of air that floated in...' (115). By describing the size of the air hole comparative to Tan-Tan's child-sized fist, Hopkinson performs another subtle talk-back to Jacobs because we are forced to imagine Tan-Tan herself in the box, whereas Jacobs used her air-hole to watch her children below. The distance between childhood innocence and physical pain is uncomfortably close.

novel, Hopkinson is performing a positive signifying, creating a community around the abyss. This conscious signifying upon the symbolic spaces of slavery is something Hopkinson herself confirms:

In *Midnight Robber*, the reasons that Caribbean peoples have banded together, all the races of them (remember that the characters are mixed race, as most Caribbean people are) have everything to do with the history of exploitation that has made the Caribbean what it was. Ben tells Tan-Tan that when she wears the ship hat on her head (which was an ancient Carnival tradition), this time it represents a ship in which people made the crossing to the new land as free people this time, and of their own will [as opposed to the Middle Passage which was forced] ...They've done so deliberately in opposition to the history of forced labor that decimated the native peoples of the Caribbean and press-ganged millions from Africa, India, China and poor people from Europe. Even centuries later, those people on the new planet, even if they've managed to create a more equitable set of societies, won't have forgotten all their histories. Some of it will remain in stories, in sayings, in the names for things. It will inform the way that they see the world. Change will happen, but it will be slow.⁴²

The Veil: Technology and Double-Consciousness

Du Bois uses the metaphor of a veil to describe the condition of doubleness that he argues defines the African American experience. As he says in *The Souls of Black Folk*,

the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world,—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world.⁴³

The veil, then, represents the division of African American identity and the creation of a liminal space – a space which 'yields [the black subject] no true self-consciousness'. Yet, as the first three chapters of my thesis show, this liminal space may operate in such a way as to challenge the stark doubleness imagined by Du Bois as the veil. Many African American writers imagine their

⁴² Nalo Hopkinson and Dianne D. Glave, 'An Interview with Nalo Hopkinson' *Callaloo* 26.1 (2003), pp. 146-159 (pp. 153-4).

⁴³ Du Bois, *Souls*, p. 10.

task as an effort to punch through this veil; Wideman certainly does – he is frustrated when the sky remains ‘serene and seamless’ at the end of *Philadelphia Fire*, signalling that the great rent in race consciousness made by the bombing on Osage Avenue has not lasted. Ellison’s *Invisible Man* expresses his desire to reject the veil by punching through to the outside world in the closing paragraphs of the novel; this moment, however, is always deferred. Jacobs’s narrative shows Brent boring a peep-hole through the wall of her attic chamber – problematising the ‘veil’ of doubleness, but only in a limited way.

Hopkinson, too, disrupts Du Bois’s metaphor of the veil in the context of diasporic science fiction. However, instead of trying to ‘punch through’ or rend the veil, she seeks to reappropriate the doubleness by playing on the liminality it creates. Hopkinson replicates the veil many times; this multiplication or signifying on the veil allows its binary nature to be transcended. The ‘shadow land of New Half-Way Tree’, a low-tech prison colony, is separated from the planet Toussaint by a series of ‘dimension veils’ through which Antonio and his daughter Tan-Tan must pass (314). They do this by taking a lift, the vehicle usually reserved for transporting ‘deportees to the ‘next Toussaint’ (72):

They reached a room marked SHIFT TOWER. They went inside. The room was tall and narrow and the ceiling was so high that it disappeared in the shadows above. In the middle of the room was a tall-tall column with four doors all around it.

‘That is how we going,’ Antonio said. ‘That is the half-way tree. You see the four pods?’ He pointed to the doors. ‘We go inside that one there – just like peas in a pod, right?’ He tickled her to make her laugh, but it didn’t work this time. ‘It will take we in, and point we at New Half-Way Tree, and fling we there like boulderstones from a slingshot’ (73).

This lift offers a type of movement very different from the dominant American models of identity discussed in earlier chapters of this thesis, all of which revolve around verticality. As we saw in Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, verticality

governs the American culture of success and is supremely expressed in the skyscraper architecture of large cities like New York.⁴⁴ In Wideman's novel, *Philadelphia Fire*, verticality is linked to Du Bois's idea of 'double consciousness' in the image of the towel bisecting Cudjoe's face in two (a white dividing line which subtly recalls the white lines dividing Invisible Man's first impressions of his college surroundings). Therefore, verticality is a paradigm of white success but also an expression of racial division. It is the opposite of a folk-inspired signifying dynamic. Hopkinson's dimension lift, on the other hand, challenges this verticality in the way it 'shifts' Tan-Tan and her father into another dimension. Cyberspace offers a new dimension in which to dislocate Du Bois's rigid paradigm of doubleness. This 'mirror planet' enacts the doubling which is so prevalent in much early African American scholarship, established by the figure of double-consciousness in Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk*:

You know how a thing and the shadow of a thing could be in almost the same place together? You know the way a shadow is a dark version of the real thing, the dub side? Well, New Half-Way Tree is a dub version of Toussaint, hanging like a ripe maami apple in one fold of a dimension veil (2).

Tan-Tan, therefore, lives in a world of doubles and is dramatically transported into a shadowy 'dub' world, a liminal no-space in which she has to forge her own identity independently of her home planet. As the lift executes a 'dimension veil' shift between Toussaint to New Half-Way Tree it breaks through a series of 'veils', a word which again signifies directly on Du Bois's metaphor of the veil.

The first shift wave hit them. For Tan-Tan it was as though her belly was turning inside out, like wearing all her insides on the outside. [...] A curtain of

⁴⁴ For another example of the lift as a racialised metaphor for white success that is problematised by the presence of blackness, see Whitehead, *The Intuitionist*.

fog was passing through the pod, rearranging sight, sound. Daddy's hand felt wrong. Too many fingers, too many joints (73-74).

The shift waves or veils deliver Tan-Tan to a new space but especially to a new consciousness. During the journey she imagines – and perhaps actually becomes – various animals, as if her identity literally changes as she leaves her home planet of Toussaint behind. This transition is a painful one, as Tan-Tan is disconnected from Granny Nanny, the web of interactive consciousness that governs the colony of Toussaint and whose control is disseminated through personal electronic servants or eshus:

Another veil. The light inside the pod turned pink. The air got hot. Very faintly both her eshu and the building eshu said together, 'Hold on, young Mistress, shift aborting.'

'No!' shouted Antonio.

Tan-Tan felt a little *pop!* inside her ears. She felt dizzy. 'Abort fail...' whispered eshu (75).

Central to this whole episode is the word 'shift'. Tan-Tan and her father are making a symbolic journey out from a black colonial consciousness into a peripheral or outsider consciousness – into a liberation that is also exile. They now see themselves without the protective identity of the Toussaint community. They are at once no longer under the watchful eye of Granny Nanny, but also are no longer a part of their community: they have the freedom to find their own identity, but have been robbed of the major context which gives them meaning. Hopkinson has linked this moment of passage neatly into black Atlantic narratives of passage, as well as into traditional science fictional narratives of space exploration. Tan-Tan herself makes the connection with the Middle Passage explicit: 'They were trapped in a confining space, being taken away from home like the long time ago Africans. Tan-Tan's nightmare had come to life' (74-75).

The colony of Toussaint, then, mirrors the original colonial experience it emerged from – that of the European colonies in Caribbean. It is a connection that the planet's very name conjures.⁴⁵ At a third remove, then, New Half-Way Tree is the shadowy replica of both Jamaica and Toussaint – a space in which the processes of colonisation, discrimination and exclusion can replay themselves. New Half-Way Tree is where the Nation Worlds send murderers and thieves, but it is also the 'planet of lost people [...] the drifters, the ragamuffins-them, the ones who think the world must be have something better for them, if them could only find which part it is?' (2). The question is whether New Half-Way Tree is able to escape from this seemingly inexorable repetition of the colonial/exile experience. I suggest that Hopkinson, through Tan-Tan, does posit an equal and opposite series of movements to counteract this recessive, *mise-en-abyme* effect. Each movement she effects extends outwards, rather than inwards.

The dimension shift pod is a metaphor for a shift in racial consciousness. As Tan-Tan moves through the veils that separate her planet from its shadowy other, she begins to understand what it is to be *other*. This moment of dawning consciousness is prefigured in a series of historical tags interleaved with Tan-Tan's own adventures, including references to the nineteenth century Atlantic slave trade, and figures like Toussaint, Douglass and Marcus Garvey. Tan-Tan's painful journey to New Half-Way Tree signifies on Jacobs's similar

⁴⁵ In fact, the names of the other Nation World planets recall significant figures throughout the black Atlantic world, including 'Garvey-prime' and 'Douglass sector' (Hopkinson, p. 2). Hopkinson's blurring of the boundaries between Caribbean slave history and that of the United States supports my contention that her novel should not be seen in an exclusively Caribbean or postcolonial context, but can be read in parallel with African American theory and writing. Parallel concerns with the political and cultural use of space as a medium of incarceration and liberty are able to be drawn from the two areas.

exile in her grandmother's attic, on Invisible Man's prolonged journey in the Harlem cellar, and on so many other journeys of endurance undertaken by people of the black diaspora. Hopkinson's speculative fiction, however, allows the full realisation of those ways of dwelling only hinted at in Jacobs, Ellison and Wideman. Where Jacobs suggests at the empowering space of the attic as a locus for female agency, the gaze and subversive strategies of resistance against her white master, Hopkinson is able to realise this space of exile as literally another world – the exile planet of New Half-Way Tree. Hopkinson is able to break the boundaries of realism and allow Tan-Tan to develop these strategies of resistance in reality. The liminal space of New Half-Way Tree becomes a place of creativity and storytelling, where Tan-Tan is able to elaborate and then inhabit the figure of the mythical figure of the Midnight Robber.

The geographical setting of *Midnight Robber* reflects the dislocation central to a colonial/ postcolonial experience, but Hopkinson's suggestion that the dimension veils that mark the spaces of absence between worlds are able to be 'played' – to become a method of transport and communication – emphasises the centrality of spatial signifying as a strategy of racial survival.⁴⁶

The Mirror: Black Holes and Tropes of Visibility

As the first three chapters of this thesis argued, the trope of visibility is consistently used within African American fiction to represent the incarcerating experience of slavery and to problematise mainstream categories of race and identity. Visibility informs one of the central motifs in African American literary

⁴⁶ See Hopkinson's sustained references to music as a signifying medium of movement, especially 'new-remembered rhythms', 'Nannytune', and 'bodystring' (i, 328).

theory, Du Bois's concept of race consciousness as 'double-consciousness' – the same doubleness which Gilroy later inscribes upon the wider space of the Atlantic. As Du Bois elaborates in *The Souls of Black Folk*,

the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world,—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.⁴⁷

For Jacobs and Ellison, the physical invisibility experienced by their main characters in dark, hidden spaces – namely, the attic and the cellar – spatialises this 'peculiar sensation, this double consciousness'. The liminal experience of invisibility acknowledges the debilitating physical effects of slavery and engages with the social and legal invisibilities that racism enforces on black Americans.

For *Invisible Man*, however, invisibility is more than a metaphor for racial inequality; the cellar becomes a site in which the rigid 'doubleness' of being black in America is able to be contested. There are mirrors in the college that *Invisible Man* attends which signal the presence of doubleness in the smooth and carefully manufactured environment of the school. Similarly, the invisibility of the attic gives Linda Brent an authorial view through the small hole she makes with a gimlet through the wall. The ability to see from a position of invisibility lends Brent enormous power and responsibility and challenges the traditions of her role as a black woman and mother in antebellum America. For Wideman, visibility has become a crucial element of

⁴⁷ Du Bois, *Souls*, p. 10.

twentieth century American society. The media culture has allowed race issues to become much more visible to the country as a whole. The image of the Osage Avenue bombsite, for example, is multiplied over millions of television screens globally. Contrary to the liminal sites in the first two chapters of this thesis, the Philadelphia bombsite is excruciatingly visible. Wideman, however, makes the point that this hyper-visibility is often quickly followed by erasure; television stations move on to the next crisis and the bombsite quickly becomes invisible among the general decay of the city. Wideman also uses the trope of visibility in the image of a mirror:

In front of the mirror, he bisects his face on the vertical axis with a towel and studies first one, then the other naked half (111).

The mirror represents both Cudjoe's search for personal identity and the struggle with the 'doubleness' of his identity as a black man in Philadelphia. Hopkinson sees it as her job to 'warp the mirror', that is take the binary nature of Du Bois's racialised 'doubleness' into another dimension.⁴⁸ Speaking of her writing, she claims that, '[s]peculative fiction is a great place to warp the mirror and thus impel the reader to view differently things that they've taken for granted'.⁴⁹ In referencing the mirror motif, Hopkinson is situated in the same metaphorical and theoretical context as Wideman, Ellison, Jacobs and other African American writers. All are bound by the doubleness that is part of the cultural heritage of the black Atlantic.

In offering to 'warp' this mirror, however, Hopkinson dramatically conflates science fiction terminology with African American literary metaphor

⁴⁸ Hopkinson, 'An Interview', p. 149.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

and signals her desire to unsettle the traditional spatial constructions of race that Du Bois and, later, Gilroy have proposed. If the bisected mirror represented the intractable 'doubleness' that faced Wideman's conception of race in America, the mirror in Hopkinson's novel has been 'warped' to provide a liberating alternative dimension. No longer does it resemble the rigid object which Du Bois argued gave the black American the sensation of 'always looking at one's self through the eyes of others'.⁵⁰ The mirror in *Midnight Robber* functions as a liminal doorway into an alternative space in which Tan-Tan can assume the identity of the mysterious Robber Queen in her own eyes:

'Eshu,' she whispered.

The a.i. clicked on in her ear. In her mind's eye it showed itself as a little skeleton girl, dressed just like her. 'Yes, young Mistress?'

'Make a mirror for me.'

Eshu disappeared. The wall silvered to show her reflection. Aces, she looked aces. Her lips wavered into a smile. She pulled one of the cap guns from its holster: 'Plai! Plai! Thus the Robber Queen does be avenged! Allyou make you eye pass me? Take that! Plai!' She swirled round to shoot at the pretend badjack sneaking up behind her. The cape flared out round her shoulders [...] It was too sweet (28).

Both Hopkinson's mirror and the figure of the Robber Queen appropriate Du Bois's 'double-consciousness' but as liminal figures they also disrupt the domestic space of the house and the racialised power hierarchies within it. The ability of liminal space to do such things is acknowledged by African American authors Jacobs, Ellison and Wideman, of course. For example, In *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, the space beneath Dr Flint's house rises up to expose the hypocrisy of slavery when Dr Flint is prompted to send milk and a biscuit to Brent's child by the discovery of a poisonous snake under the floor where the child has been playing. Likewise, during Invisible Man's dream of a white woman's bedroom, the dark interior of the wardrobe spills out the secret

⁵⁰ Du Bois, *Souls*, p. iv.

fantasies and horrors – the psychological truth of slavery, in all its horrible detail – into the pale innocence of the house. In each case, the construction of narrative liminal space seeks to provoke the categories of race and identity that are so carefully preserved in the segregated spaces of Southern households.

For Hopkinson too, the space of the house is one of sexual abuse, fractured family structures and racial segregation. The house on Toussaint in which Tan-Tan grows up becomes a rigid and incarcerating space after her mother's adulterous affair is discovered: 'People in her house would stop talking when Tan-Tan went into a room, even old Nursie. Ione was spending all her days locked up in her room in conference with Obi Mami-Bé, the witch woman' (16-17). Notice Hopkinson's conscious re-use of stereotypes of the slave woman often found in African American slave narrative in the figures of the infantilised 'Nursie' and the uncanny 'Obi Mami-Be'. However, Tan-Tan disturbs the rigid spaces of the house and its attendant racial hierarchies in a new way, unlimited by the persistence of Du Bois's model of double-consciousness. Through the twin items of the mirror and the Midnight Robber costume, Hopkinson introduces a 'warped' liminal space – one that subverts not simply by retreat into invisibility but one that actually signifies upon that invisibility with fantastic and empowering results:

Ione laid out a costume on the bed, a little Robber Queen costume, just the right size for Tan-Tan. [...] [T]he hat was the best part. A wide black sombrero, nearly as big as Tan-Tan herself, with pom-poms in different colours all round the brim, to hide her face in the best Robber Queen style. Inside the brim, it had little monkeys marching all round the crown of the hat, chasing tiny birds. The monkeys leapt, snatching at the swooping birds, but they always returned to the brim of the hat (27).

By referencing Gates's African American rhetorical trope, the Signifying Monkey, in the 'little monkeys marching', Hopkinson emphasises the Robber Queen's trickster role within Tan-Tan's society. The Robber Queen is a liminal figure and her sombrero, wide enough 'to hide her face in the best Robber Queen style' allows an individual to assume the powerful anonymity that goes along with the title. The liminality offered by the costume allows an unexpected confluence of violence and femininity, human and animal imagery, movement (the leaping and swooping) and containment ('they always returned to the brim of the hat') which challenges the clear gender roles and rigid spatial observations of Toussaint society. The young Tan-Tan identifies with this liminal figure as a way of responding to the pressures of these observations.

If Jacobs, Ellison and Wideman are concerned with problematising visibility as the method by which this doubleness is sustained (that is, they play with representations of invisibility as a way of re-conceptualising race) , Hopkinson is interested in what other modes of visibility science fiction and technology can offer which might further contest racial structures and categories. Her novel is full of different modes of seeing, from living video screens and a telepathic 'four-eye' communication system which Hopkinson bases on the Caribbean patois for fortune-teller. This opens up visibility as a space of possibility. In one way, Hopkinson's novel follows the heroine's journey from a world of surveillance (under Granny Nanny) to a 'headblind' planet which is invisible to the Granny Nanny network. Like Ellison's cellar or Jacobs's attic, or even Wideman's bombsite, the prison planet of New Halfway Tree is an invisible site which disturbs conventional categories of racial identity. But the double becomes repeated so often that it warps – there are

only black people in this society and so the traditional binary between white and black is not present; the half-bird Douen people in some ways take up the role of oppressed minority against the 'tallpeople' of Toussaint, but the binary has been lost.

In 'warping' the motif of double consciousness, Hopkinson projects African American theory into the black Atlantic, allowing Du Bois's binary between 'American' and 'Negro' to dissolve into the 'Taino Carib and Arawak; African; Asian; Indian [and] Euro' that make up the racial background of Hopkinson's space colonists (18). Such dissolution is readily visible in Hopkinson's language which joyously 'warps' an indiscriminate mix of Caribbean, French-creole, and science fictional terminology together, while celebrating the black Atlantic love of language. Here, for example, Hopkinson describes Carnival time on Toussaint, which privileges signifying, or 'the dozers' as a linguistic show of prowess:

Calipsonians were touring all the cities and towns on Toussaint. [...] There was a billboard in front of the tent. Its message: 'Woi, Mama; Is a Calypso Fight; Piquant for So Tomorrow Nite!' Behind the words flashed vids of the reigning Road March Monarchs, Mama Choonks and Ras' Cudjoe-I. Piquant was a competition of skill and wit. The singers had to make up insults for one another in song, right there on stage (37).

In 'warping' the mirror, too, she suggests that science fiction motifs might offer new ways of structuring race consciousness. At 'warp speed' instantaneous travel between two points can be achieved; what implications does this have for a racial identity which privileges an experience of the 'in-between'? Can the 'warp' action in fact offer to invest this traditional 'in-between' space with symbolic meaning? Speculative fiction, Hopkinson implies, is the ideal 'place' for such a project – a liminal genre in which liberties may be taken.

The Flying African

The myth of 'the flying African' is based on a Yoruba folktale that originated among African storytellers and was brought to the United States and Caribbean by free Africans sold as slaves. The story, which centres on a witch doctor or conjure man who empowers enslaved Africans to fly back to Africa, became popular among slaves on the isolated Sea Islands off the coasts of Georgia and South Carolina; for them, the story symbolized a means of escaping the cruelties of slavery.⁵¹ The motif of 'the flying African' is common throughout African American culture, but this thesis argues that Jacobs, Ellison and Wideman reveal a constant tension between this flight motif and more problematic models of racial identity. They all engage the flight motif at some point in their writing, but ultimately reject the teleological implications of flight back to Africa in favour of a more complex, continuously re-negotiated model of racial identity that unfolds within the spaces of the New World. Liminal sites within Jacobs, Ellison and Wideman function to disrupt rigid categories of race and identity, rather than offer a linear return to origin.

For example, on leaving hospital, *Invisible Man* finds 'the stairs leading back to the car...were too steep to climb, swim or fly, and I found a subway instead' (249). The traditional folk movements are unavailable to *Invisible Man* in the city; he chooses instead to continue his journey underground, where he is able to unpick his identity as an African American, as well as bear witness to

⁵¹ The original folktale, 'All God's Chillun Had Wings', was first recorded in *Drums and Shadows: Survival Studies among the Georgia Coastal Negroes*, Georgia Writers' Project, Work Projects Administration; Mary Granger, District Supervisor (University of Georgia Press, 1940). The story also appeared in *The Book of Negro Folklore*, eds. Langston Hughes and Arna Bontemps (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co. Press, 1958), and in revised form as 'People Who Could Fly' in *Black Folktales*, ed. by Julius Lester (New York: Grove Press, 1969).

the incarcerating experience of slavery. Wideman consciously references Ellison's musings on the inadequacy of folk movement as his character Cudjoe struggles to make his own way through a city some forty years later: 'When Cudjoe's aboveground, heading towards Clark Park, the sidewalk's unsteady under his feet. Should he be swimming or flying or crawling' (23). Jacobs's narrative uses the flight motifs that were common among nineteenth century slave narratives, but Linda Brent's decision to remain hidden in the town rather than escape Northwards cuts across this desire for flight. The attic represents a problematising alternative to flight, which of course ends badly for Brent's fellow escaped slave. Wideman, too, has realised that his enactment of the 'flying African' in his ten year exile across the Atlantic has not solved anything and that he must return to the spaces of Philadelphia to engage with his own identity.

Hopkinson's novel contains many 'flights' – firstly, the flight from Earth made by the original colonists into space; secondly, Antonio's flight from Toussaint to the prison planet of New Halfway Tree, with Tan-Tan in tow; thirdly, Tan-Tan's own flight into the jungle after killing Antonio. However, these flights are all flights away, not flights home, and they simply recreate the same prejudices and rigid social orders which were present in slavery. Hopkinson undermines the motif of flight by revealing that the Douens' capacity for flight dooms them to an arms race with the 'tallpeople' on New Halfway Tree. Motifs of flight are dead ends; there is no African homeland or essential black space to fly home to. Hopkinson instead puts more emphasis on a productive problematisation of race and identity within liminal spaces. She is interested in other forms of movement.

The Trickster

Hopkinson's foregrounding of liminality in her novel not only signals her debt to Gilroy's model of doubleness in the black Atlantic but also deterritorialises African American theory and in particular, the rhetorical practice of signifying. In his book, *Figures in Black* (1987), Henry Louis Gates Jr attempts to establish the practice of signifying as a liberating aesthetic model within the growing field of Black Studies. Rejecting earlier essentialist or 'repudiatory' approaches to black literature, which he felt relied too heavily on content and ignored structure and technique, Gates pioneered the use of poststructuralism in African American literary theory, and proposed signifying as

[A] uniquely black rhetorical concept, entirely textual or linguistic, by which a second statement or figure repeats, or tropes, or reverses the first. Its use as a figure for intertextuality allows us to understand literary revision without recourse to thematic, biographical, or Oedipal slayings at the crossroads; rather, critical signification is tropic and rhetorical. Indeed, the very concept of Signifyin(g) can only exist in the realm of the intertextual relation.⁵²

Signifying, then, is a liminal activity, taking place in the 'crossroads' space between texts of the tradition. Further, Gates locates the practice within a continuous tradition stretching back to Africa, arguing that as a 'counter-discursive strategy [it is] associated with the African American trickster figure of the Signifying Monkey, which ultimately derives from the Yoruba trickster and messenger of the gods, Esu-Elegbara'.⁵³ These African and African American trickster figures claim an anti-authority that exists only in the betwixt-and-between condition of the margin. This figure, as we have seen,

⁵² Henry Louis Gates, Jr, *Figures in Black: Words, Signs, and the Racial Self* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 49.

⁵³ Gates, *Figures*, pp. 12-13.

forms one of the main tropes in Hopkinson's novel through the characters called 'eshus'. Hopkinson also consciously reprises the trickster figure in her heroine, Tan-Tan, who survives by signifying upon the ambiguous figure of the Midnight Robber. The trickster's talent, therefore, lies in signifying. As the focal point of the novel, she is 'influenced by a blend of traditional Caribbean culture and post-modern/apocalyptic technology'.⁵⁴

Although Gates focuses on signifying as 'the rhetorical principle in Afro-American vernacular discourse', he does suggest that the aesthetic principle could be applied to other black writing of the diaspora; "'Blackness",' he argues, 'is not a material object, an absolute, or an event, but a trope; it does not have an "essence" as such but is defined by a network of relations that form a particular aesthetic unity'.⁵⁵ Indeed, Gates makes the invitation to other scholars explicit, offering signifying 'to critics of other literatures [who may] find this theory useful as they attempt to account for the configuration of the texts in their traditions'.⁵⁶ Signifying, therefore, provides a liberating aesthetic model for the African diaspora and allows Nalo Hopkinson as a Caribbean writer who lives in Canada to be purposefully and effectively critiqued alongside writers from the African American tradition.⁵⁷

Folktale as Liminal Narrative

As a signifying trickster, then, Tan-Tan is able to articulate a new

⁵⁴ Hopkinson, 'An Interview', p. 154.

⁵⁵ Gates, *Figures*, p. 40.

⁵⁶ Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*, p. xxv.

⁵⁷ Following Gates's footsteps, I wish to avoid essentialist readings of space within my thesis. All the texts I have chosen address the desire for and the impossibility of achieving an essentially 'black' space. Paralleling Gates's 'counter-discursive' theory of reading, they may be read as engaging in dialogue between two alternatives.

language in folk form. By allowing Tan-Tan to signify on the identity of the Midnight Robber, the signifying action is also played out in the signifying spaces of the narrative which appear sporadically throughout the novel: the folktale sections printed in a noticeably different, bold font and may be seen as playing or riffing off the 'realities' of Tan-Tan's life. These folktales, such as 'Tan-Tan and the Rolling Calf' and 'How Tan-Tan Learn How To Thief', process the fantastic events of Tan-Tan's life back into the mythical language that has always structured the culture of the black Atlantic, emphasising the importance of signifying to the process of storytelling. This traditional transmission of knowledge and identity is considered against the 'new spaces' of technology (the communication network nicknamed Granny Nanny which overrides physical distance and creates a kind of imaginary space of community, again drawing on traditional models of maternity and community). These liminal narrative spaces speak to the liminal space of the exile planet in the same way that Wideman's extensive italicised sections in his novel *Philadelphia Fire* speak to the liminal spaces of the graffiti-strewn underground and abandoned urban parkland of Philadelphia. The desert towns and 'low tech' liminality of New Half-Way Tree allow an 'other' voice to be spoken and signified upon.

The identity of the novel's narrator, whose commentary frames the narrative in a series of bold printed folktales, is revealed only in the final pages of the text. The narrator is a house eshu in conversation with Tan-Tan's unborn baby, Tubman. The narrating eshu invokes his liminal position between the narrative 'threads' of the novel and the inter-planetary 'veils' as the authority from which he speaks:

Well, maybe I find a way to come through the one-way veil to bring you a story, nuh? Maybe I is a master weaver. I spin the threads. I twist warp 'cross

weft. I move my shuttle in and out, and smooth smooth, I weaving you my story, oui? And when I done, I shake it out and turn it over *swips!* and maybe you see it have a next side to the tale. Maybe is same way so I weave my way through the dimensions to land up here. No, don't ask me how (2-3).

Re-visioning Slave Narrative as Speculative Narrative

Signifying also occurs on a generic level. *Midnight Robber* sits between two genres: science fiction, slave narrative. Formally, then, it exists in a liminal space that is also a space of hybridity, syncretism and strength. Hopkinson is able to use this 'half-way tree' to comment effectively on the limitations (and racial implications) of 'classic' science fiction while also using this genre's speculative spatial formations to develop slave narrative forms beyond their formal boundaries. In effect, Hopkinson signifies on both genres to create an elaborate hybrid that speaks peculiarly to contemporary narratives of the black Atlantic. Hopkinson re-imagines slavery and the colonial project in a science fiction setting, which allows patterns of resistance to be expressed in a different, more liberating, dimension.

In the hybrid space of *Midnight Robber*, the black female 'other' may re-inscribe herself onto 'classic' narratives of colonisation. In her call to reflect on the racialised (patriarchal) origins of nation space, Hopkinson identifies the black woman with the 'other' – the outcast, the alien. This is particularly evident in the figure of Tan-Tan who experiences ostracism many times: as a young kidnap victim on New Half-Way Tree, as a house-bound victim of sexual abuse, as a fugitive after stabbing her father to death, as a human within the alien world of the Douen people, and, most symbolically, as the carnival persona of the Midnight Robber. The appropriation of science fiction by a black 'other' represents an 'illogical' repost to white systems of logic that were used

to justify the Atlantic slave trade. As Gilroy points out in the final chapter of *The Black Atlantic*, a number of black artists from James Brown to contemporary writers have developed a 'slave sublime' that attempts to articulate the 'unsayable' experience of slavery. Gilroy notes that, while recognising the impossibility of such a project, these artists challenge the modern belief in Reason against the irrationality of Africans and the diaspora:

In particular, [the desire to pit Euro-American modernity against 'bestial' slaves] is formed by the need to indict those forms of rationality which have been rendered implausible by their racially exclusive character and further to explore the history of their complicity with terror systematically and rationally practiced as a form of political and economic administration.... It is being suggested that the concentrated intensity of the slave experience is something that marks out blacks as the first truly modern people, handling the nineteenth century dilemmas and difficulties which would become the substance of everyday life in Europe a century later.⁵⁸

Although Gilroy does not suggest it here, science fiction has become an ideal arena in which to play out racialised systems of reason and irrationality. Just as Jacobs's attic might be read as a perverse image of freedom and rebirth within the slave narrative, so the perverse spaces of *Midnight Robber* – the 'purple [tree] bark', the 'blue flowered...devil bush' of New Half-Way Tree, and the 'flexible', sentient network of 'infinite dimensions' called the 'Granny 'Nansi Web' – all these challenge the forms of rationality which have been used to justify the 'political and economic administration' of terror based on racial difference (76, 98, 10, 327, 10). Hopkinson fashions her own slave sublime in *Midnight Robber*, in which the unspeakable spaces of racial exploitation are partly recovered by a discourse of irrationality where liminal sites speak to each other and generate among themselves a narrative of exchange and revision.

⁵⁸ Gilroy, *Black Atlantic*, pp. 220-221.

Ideas of Resurrection

The theme of resurrection is a common one among African American culture and forms a common theme in my first three chapters. Linda Brent does resurrect herself from her seven years of incarceration in the attic by escaping northwards hidden in a box on a ship. This recalls Henry 'Box' Brown's escape from slavery in a mailbox, where he was Brown was 'resurrected' after a twenty six hour journey by abolitionist Miller McKim, William Still, and other members of the Philadelphia Vigilance Committee on his arrival.

Ellison's *Invisible Man* is on the point of resurrecting himself at the close of the novel, saying 'Perhaps that's my greatest social crime, I've outstayed my hibernation' (581). Wideman, too, is haunted by this desire for personal resurrection, and resurrection for Philadelphia as a city, but he is ultimately frustrated in his attempts to precipitate a phoenix from the ashes: 'The invisible string mooring [the memorial balloons] had unraveled from Cudjoe's chest. As the balloons raced away they emptied him. His lungs. His heart. He knew the precise moment when the string snapped. A kind of twang, pop. He has no more to give' (198). Hopkinson rekindles the possibility of resurrection through the birth of Tan-Tan's son, Tubman, whom she describes as 'the human bridge from slavery to freedom' (329). Through Tubman, the Granny Nanny web has been able to re-establish contact over the divide between Toussaint and the 'shadow' planet of New Half-way Tree. But, as the authors examined in previous chapters also acknowledge, the motif of resurrection is consistently challenged by the impossibility of achieving a 'final' communication with a free space or even a uniquely 'black' space. Jacobs, for

example, expresses her extreme disappointment to find that even in New York, 'everywhere I found the same manifestations of that cruel prejudice, which so discourages the feelings, and represses the energies of the colored people' (176).

Hopkinson's novel charts the results of a black colonial enterprise that sought to realise a uniquely 'black' space on Toussaint, both in technology by making it in the image of Caribbean folklore, and in language and race – the black Caribbean remains the dominant racial strand in the enterprise and on Toussaint. Hopkinson disputes the validity this exclusive 'black' space throughout her novel, but the result is not a frustration with resurrection models. Rather, Hopkinson reframes resurrection as a kind of endless pattern of signifying in the fantastic spaces of her creative universe. There is no transcendent 'black' space; there is no 'resurrection'. 'Black' identity is a continuous process which relies upon signifying upon liminal space.

Summary

In her novel *Midnight Robber*, Hopkinson becomes involved in a discourse of counter-conquest that disrupts entrenched power structures, perceptual categories, and literary forms and re-inscribes the historical figure of the displaced black subject onto the fantastic spaces of future. In so liberating the black subject from the historical Atlantic triangle, Hopkinson develops Gilroy's concept of triangular cultural exchange by projecting it onto a fourth dimension: the fantastic. *Midnight Robber* fuses the traditionally white, male genre of science fiction with Caribbean and African American themes and aesthetic structures. This generic 'in-between' sustains an elaborate and

joyous mixing of language, myth, and cross-cultural influence that positively shouts black pride. Hopkinson's novel, then, inhabits a space of liminality and of fusion. In its attempt to recover a 'social past governed by [the] terror and atrocity' of slavery, it functions as both a space of critique and celebration.⁵⁹ Moreover, if, as a writer of Caribbean extraction, Hopkinson is engaged in a postcolonial project in self-definition, her novel is also deeply involved with the African American tradition of spatial resistance.

The generic and geographical liminal spaces which pattern her novel are loci for numerous acts of signifying – that is, repetition with black change. By shifting liminal space from a position of nominal resistance (like that of Harriet Jacobs's attic), invisibility (Ellison's underground cellar), or the image of failed community (Wideman's bombed-out suburb) to one of fantastic possibility, Hopkinson is able to develop the historical relationship between space and the displaced black person in fruitful ways.

This thesis has shown the coherent development of representations of liminal space in the fiction of black writers from the United States and the Caribbean, and illustrated that these liminal spaces perform two functions: representing the material conditions of slavery, and problematising mainstream categories of race and identity. Writing sideways to the African American tradition, Hopkinson's Caribbean Canadian novel, *Midnight Robber*, reveals the extent of the use of symbolic liminal spaces, both physical and metaphorical, among black writers confronting the too-often silenced spaces in New World and black diasporic history. This thesis ends with three assertions: that there is a unique relationship between liminal space and fiction of the

⁵⁹ Pete Nowakoski, 'Paul Gilroy and the Black Atlantic', available at URL: <<http://www.english.emory.edu/Bahri/Gilroy.htm>> [accessed 3 August 2007].

African New World diaspora; that representations of this liminal space are related to the historical conditions of slavery; and that they consistently and productively disturb mainstream categories of race and identity.

Appendix:

Synopsis of Nalo Hopkinson's *Midnight Robber*

Nalo Hopkinson's *Midnight Robber* is a speculative novel combining science fiction techniques with a strong sense of Caribbean culture and language.

It is carnival time on the Caribbean-colonised planet of Toussaint and the population is celebrating with music, dance and pageantry. Large, decorated effigies of ships are paraded to recall the "leaving times" some 300 years since when the world's population abandoned Earth on the Marryshow Corporation's electronic "nation ships" after an unnamed disaster. Masked "Midnight Robbers" waylay revelers with flamboyant weapons and playful poetry. But to young Tan-Tan, daughter of Antonio, the mayor of Cockpit County, and his beautiful wife Ione, the Robber Queen is simply a favourite costume to wear at the festival – until her power-corrupted father commits an unforgivable crime.

Ione has taken a lover and when Antonio challenges him to a traditional machète duel, he deliberately poisons his blade. Such deception cannot go unnoticed. Every human thought and act on Toussaint is monitored by a benign electronic intelligence developed by the first colonists called the Grand Nanotech Sentient Interface – otherwise known as the Grande 'Nansi Web, or Granny Nanny. The system extends its power through "eshus" or electronic servants allocated to every human. Antonio decides to escape inevitable imprisonment by kidnapping Tan-Tan and deliberately exiling them both to the brutal world of New Half-Way Tree, the "shadow land" which exists on a different dimension to Toussaint.

Here, monstrous creatures from folklore are real and the humans are violent outcasts in the wilds. Tan-Tan must reassess the myths she has learned and become the Robber Queen herself in order to survive. They settle in the dusty border town of Junjah, run by rough exiles One-Eye and Claude, but, while Tan-Tan soon falls in love with fellow exile Melonhead, she also falls victim to her father's repeated sexual abuse and the jealousy of his new wife Janisette. "Good Tan-Tan" plans to elope with Melonhead; "Bad Tan-Tan" is driven to murder Antonio as he rapes her again. The rudimentary laws of New Half-Way Tree demand a death for a death, but Tan-Tan is saved from the Junjah dog-pack by Chichibud, a literate, bird-like native of New Half-Way Tree.

The Douen species work as slaves for the human exiles, but keep their intelligence and ability to fly a secret. A swift flight to the Douens' forest heartland lands Tan-Tan in a bizarre world where she slowly develops self-reliance and enters into the personality of the Robber Queen. Her encounters with the mythical "Rolling Calf" on the forest floor and the sinister "DryBone" in the marketplace of "Duppy Dead Town" begin to crystallise into folklore themselves, passed around the dusty towns of New Half-Way Tree. But Tan-Tan the nomad is still haunted by her double personality. It is only on a visit to the carnival in the town of Sweet Pone with her Douen friend Abitefa that she is able to confront her worst fears. Her father's wife, Janisette, has tracked her down among the festivities and aims to kill her in the town square. But, by metamorphosing for a final time into the Robber Queen, Tan-Tan uses the carnival's playful poetry to vocalise her own traumatic story and neutralise Janisette's threat.

Finally reunited with Melonhead, Tan-Tan gives birth to her father's child, whom she names Tubman. The child represents a re-connection with the Granny Nanny Web, which has been searching for Tan-Tan through the "infinite dimension veils" that separate the new planet from the old, and has, we now realise, been narrating the story to the foetus from the beginning. Tubman, the "human bridge between slavery and freedom", becomes a "weave in she web".

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