

BODIES IN TRANSIT: BODY, TRAUMA AND, TEXT IN THE WORKS OF  
HENRY "BOX" BROWN, JEAN TOOMER, AND CHARLOTTE DELBO

By  
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To the Faculty of Washington State University:

The members of the Committee appointed to examine the dissertation of ERIN MAE CLARK find it satisfactory and recommend that it be accepted.

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Abstract

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*Bodies in Transit* unites a diverse array of authors from across space and time to examine the methods by which trauma is translated into literature. The central focus is on mapping articulations of traumatic history in works that defy genre classification while powerfully reflecting the origin and transmission of trauma in the technologies of power in their time. Railroad technologies disrupt cultural fabric and often aid authors who struggle to represent the unrepresentable by invoking the markings of trauma in technologies already capable of denoting disruption and shock. Such trauma resists genre, for the chaos of traumatic memory is not contained by rigid structures. Rather, the works examined in *Bodies in Transit* are united in their use of technological symbols to emphatically indicate memory of physical and psychological pain.

Henry Box Brown's multimedia panorama narrative defies the slave narrative template and focuses on Brown's performance of his escape via the railway as a way of expressing the realities of slavery that are otherwise lost in strictly textual works. Jean Toomer and Charlotte Delbo similarly negate generic

singularity and rely instead upon the power of technology to delineate the shape of trauma. What emerges is a fuller understanding of how authors circumvent genre in order to connect readers and viewers with the horrors of genocide and violence, and ultimately, the very essence of humanity.

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This dissertation is dedicated to my mother, who bought me my very first writing desk and always believed in the power of the written word.

## INTRODUCTION

### GENRES OF THE BODY: WITNESSING AND THE EMBODIED TEXT

*“And your very flesh shall be a great poem” –Walt Whitman*

In a 2007 special edition of *PMLA*, guest editor Wai Chee Dimock urged scholars to reexamine the heavily policed borders of genre, pointing out that despite the rigid templates and structures imposed upon categorical genres, they have always inevitably resisted or denied the possibility of strict categorization. What’s more, Dimock notes, is that literary scholarship has refused to investigate the less obvious ties that bind texts to one another both within and between genres. “Literary studies needs to be more fluid in its taxonomies,” she writes, “putting less emphasis on the division of knowledge and more on its kinships, past, present, and future” (1384). The special issue, “Remapping Genre,” furthers Dimock’s work already begun in her *Through Other Continents: American Literature Across Deep Time*, in its contemplation of genre as an organizing principle in literary studies. Deep time emerges as a framework for understanding the connections American writers from Emerson to Fuller forged with centuries-old Greek and Roman writing, connections that suggest more cross pollination occurred between authors separated by time than previously

thought. While deep time suggests a historical, cultural, and chronological distance where aesthetic and literary strategies find commonalities in the latter writing's influence by a previous era's methods, the connections I outline in the following chapters celebrate the deep ties that link authors who express the injustices that have defined and shaped our understandings of traumatic experience.

Trauma animates the very struggle to recognize deep ties across literatures, and as Dominick LaCapra points out, trauma writing "falls within the compass of no single genre or discipline" (204). Further, LaCapra argues that the narrative of trauma often manifests in a hybridized form that "cut[s] across and may even disrupt generic *or* disciplinary boundaries" (204; emphasis mine). As any scholar of literature can attest, concentration of time period and a keen understanding of the genres that characterized that literary time and space is one of the fundamental pillars of literary scholarship. Yet literature of trauma invites us to view texts that simultaneously reveal their particular historical moment and the particulars of individual trauma. In short, trauma resists genre, and in the chapters that follow, the deep ties between the markings of trauma and three texts written across literary space and time trace a kinship that unites the inexpressible through literary expression.

Henry "Box" Brown's visual panorama, *The Mirror of Slavery*, Jean Toomer's *Cane*, and Charlotte Delbo's *Auschwitz and After* not only subvert our

traditional notions of genre, but in fact negate genre altogether to impress the markings of trauma. In Brown's case, the panorama stood in for a reality that simply could not be expressed within the template of the slave narrative, and while the panorama form is a visual genre in and of itself, his use of multimedia to punctuate the visual panorama builds a text that could not tell a story within the structure of one single genre. In his recitation of song, oral narration, and performance of emerging from the packing crate that carried him to freedom, Brown exposed the realities and cruelties of an institution he could not write himself.

Jean Toomer similarly evades genre by drawing upon multiple literary forms in *Cane*, his poetry-prose novella exploring the deep wounds inflicted by racial violence on the African American community. The African American oral tradition permeates the text, and its presence throughout the poems, short vignettes, and dramatic dialogue reveals a trauma that is interconnected, multifaceted, and intertextual. The presence of genre in *Cane* is noncommittal, and while Toomer relies on a number of genres to trace a community of trauma shared across geographic lines, the stories negate singularity of form to relate the complexities of trauma that cannot be expressed by a single genre. Full of terror and shock, the bodies of *Cane* unite in their inability to fully express deeply impressed markings of trauma demonstrated in the swift transition from sketch to poem.

Charlotte Delbo's *Auschwitz and After* reveals a similar transition between genres, and it is through the permeating presence of the Greek chorus that Delbo traces a collective trauma. Composed of vignettes and poems, the individual experiences of Holocaust survivors are enjoined through Delbo's narrative "we," simultaneously differentiating the individual while demonstrating the individual's indelible ties to the collective. What *Auschwitz and After* outlines are the complex layers of trauma that cannot be contained by a single narrative form, but rather spill over into the collective.

What unites these three authors across space, time, and even linguistic planes, is their steadfast negation of traditional genre in order to transmit a trauma that knows no borders or structure. Despite the academy's recognition of trauma as a distinct genre in literature, each of these artists has configured differently the methods of transmission, and their refusal to adhere to a specific generic formula indicates that formulating a genre of trauma is a more complicated endeavor than finding similarities where a kinship can more aptly demonstrate narrative choices.

### **Circumventing genre**

To begin with Henry "Box" Brown is to acknowledge the long history of racism in the United States and the difficulties encountered by ex-slaves who endeavored to tell their stories. In most states where slavery was legal, it was

unlawful to teach a slave to read, underscoring what Ana-Isabel Aliaga-Buchenau deems the “dangerous potential” of reading. To teach a slave to read was to empower him or her, and to put in jeopardy the slave system as a whole – as many slaves who did learn to read found out, “knowledge equals power” (Aliaga-Buchenau 14). Brown never learned to read, and though he successfully escaped captivity, he was forced to rely on an amanuensis to faithfully transcribe his experiences under slavery. Despite his well-aimed intentions of raising awareness as to the immorality and horrors of slavery, Brown’s amanuensis sentimentalized and altered the narrative provided by Brown, and his subsequent panorama offers a space for Brown to forego mediation to present the narrative of his life on his own terms.

Brown was not alone in finding difficulty presenting his own narrative, as the slave narrative template controlled the narrative choices of African American writers who published their narratives. Frederick Douglass and Harriet Wilson have chronicled the acutely traumatic impact that slavery and racial violence have had on those subjected to such injustice. The nineteenth century slave narrative dictated the terms by which Douglass conveyed the experiences of slavery, and despite his iconic status in cultural history, he too was limited by the acceptable margins of the literary marketplace. Equally restricted, Harriet Wilson penned the first novel written by an African American, yet its contents were

heavily mediated by the American audience's voracious appetite for the slave narrative genre.

While Douglass and Wilson illustrated trauma within a strict narrative template, an examination of Henry "Box" Brown's narrative alongside the *Mirror of Slavery* panoramic exhibition illustrates trauma's inability to successfully correspond to formulaic genre design. An iconic emblem of the antebellum abolitionist movement, Brown escaped slavery by enclosing himself in a packing crate and travelling as cargo aboard a train bound for Philadelphia in 1849, where he enjoyed an instantaneous conversion to free man upon his arrival. He shortly thereafter became a fixture on the lecture circuit, and only a few short months after his escape, the first narrative of his life as a slave was published and Brown set to work orchestrating a massive anti-slavery panorama entitled *The Mirror of Slavery*. When viewed alongside the narrative that not only adhered to the slave narrative formula, but was doubly distanced from Brown due to his lack of literacy, the panorama offers a circumvention of genre that invites the viewer to hear, read, and visualize slavery outside the restrictive margins of the slave narrative template.

The challenge Brown's visual narratives offer to the slave narrative genre is vast, and his alternative text offers the most potent example of the faults of genre border policing. Brown's body is not only the subject of his visual texts, but is in fact the alternative textual medium that represented a corporeal

negation of the strict borders of the slave narrative genre. In viewing his harrowing journey in a 3x2 crate from Richmond, Virginia, to Philadelphia as a chapter in Brown's visual text, I follow Susan Stewart's observation that the book intensifies the relationship between the borders of the body and the borders of the text. Brown's famous escape becomes not merely a rich metaphor for the restrictions placed on African American writers in the nineteenth century, but a new way of viewing the exchange between the oppressed body and the text. When faced with the possibility of returning to Richmond after the passage of the Fugitive Slave Bill shortly after his conversion to a free man, he took his act across the pond to England, adapting the panorama's contents to address a very different audience, and in the process he found new ways of translating bodily enslavement and pain in a transnational context.

What enabled Brown to successfully draw crowds from Providence and Philadelphia to Liverpool and Leeds was his manipulation of multimedia narrative to evoke the terror and disorder of trauma. Through live reenactments of his escape, religious songs, aural narration by Brown and other guides, and printed broadsides detailing the trajectory of the performance, audiences were immersed in the experience and residual effects of Brown's narrative, all of which was connected through a painted representation of the course of slavery, from Africa to the shores of the United States. The panorama's improvement upon the intangible rigidity of the slave narrative in many ways demonstrates



the fault of the textual narrative. In its printed form, the traumatic is “always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available” and can only be described through a woefully inadequate vocabulary not capable of conveying the sensations of the multimedia (Caruth 4).

In Chapter 1, I examine Henry “Box” Brown’s attempt at conveying the magnitude of trauma inflicted by the institution of slavery through an interactive and intertextual visual narrative that not only evades the genre of the slave narrative, but transforms it. Brown’s multimedia narrative-panorama resists the impossibility of strictly narrative representation by emphasizing the body moving in space and time rather than the limits of the text; his performance foregrounded the physical realities of the trauma he had experienced as it was mirrored in the box that shipped him to safety.

### **Transforming Genre**

In the years following the emancipation of over four million slaves in the South, while chattel slavery had been eradicated, race relations continued to dictate the rigid borders of African American presence in the South, and Americans were barely closer to reconciling African American identity with the politics of difference in Northern states. Over seventy years after Henry “Box” Brown produced *The Mirror of Slavery*, another writer would circumvent genre to

invoke the panoramic consciousness of racial violence in America in the 1923 text *Cane*. Jean Toomer's ties to both the literary movements of modernism and the Harlem Renaissance mask the author's massive undertaking of tracing the traumatic markings of the past. An eclectic mix of poetry, drama, and vignettes, *Cane* reveals simultaneously the sinister violence of the South, while connecting the Northern urban environment to the landscape of terror.

Jean Toomer's *Cane* is, much like Brown's *Mirror of Slavery*, a collection of narratives told through the traumatic sufferings of the body at the hands of cultural violence, and as such evades our generic expectations of how narratives operate by offering multiple experiences in a multigenre sequence with no explicit connections between each of the sketches and poems. One of *Cane*'s most famous chapters, "Blood Burning Moon" relates the events leading up to the lynching of Tom Burwell. Toomer's graphic description of the Southern lynching describes a brutalized body that demonstrates the permeating violence of the early twentieth century on African American bodies, in the face of relative silence of Northern state citizens.

Circularity and linearity are opposing forces in *Cane*, and the geographic trajectory of South to North and back to South again indicates the modern technological travel model that locates each sketch, even as it abruptly shifts to the next traumatic moment, and ultimately, genre. *Cane* need not pivot on linearity or remain genre-specific in its translation of trauma, but rather relies on

movement to indicate the transmission of trauma across geographical boundaries.

Many of *Cane's* short stories and poems connect with one another through either explicit or implied violence, and it is through the metaphors of technology that Toomer himself envisioned *Cane's* interconnectedness. *Cane* oscillates between fluid movement and harsh, interruptive technologies in its narrative style. Toomer crafted the alternating prose sketches and poems to form a circular style that would mirror the shifting regional focus "from the South up into the North, and back into the South again" (*Letters of Jean Toomer* 101). Time and again in *Cane*, technology operates as an interception between the past and the present, connecting the painful violence of the South on the African American body with an ominously brewing violence of racial hatred in Washington, D.C. and Chicago.

Chapter 2 examines the juxtaposition of fluid natural landscapes in Part I of *Cane* and the disruptive and fragmented frustrations of urban life in Part II to view connections between bodies that transcend state and regional borders through a panoramic examination of the continued injustice toward African Americans in Northern and Southern states. The metaphors of technology reveal past trauma that is powerfully and persistently reflected in the modern moment.

Across another continent and separated from Toomer by language and nearly twenty-five years of time, Charlotte Delbo witnessed and lived through

the most heinous instance of organized genocide to occur in the modern era, and her attempt at remembering not only evades genre but creates a space for collective remembrance. Her most famous work, the trilogy published in English in 1995 as *Auschwitz and After*, transforms the Greek chorus to cement the collective experience of her French convoy, while noting the continuing presence of violence that permeates the European continent. Through explorations of the Holocaust and references to the Algerian War and the My Lai Massacre in 1968, Delbo calls attention to not only the horrific destruction of the Nazi machine, but the ongoing trauma of war that unites bodies across cultural and national boundaries.

While the body itself signifies the untranslatable dislocation of the traumatic moment, Delbo also fused together the language of technology with the victimized bodies acted upon by governmental murderous regimes. In the first chapter of *None of Us Will Return*, Delbo roots the Nazi deportations in the familiar language of the train station:

There is a café called “Arrivals” and a café called “Departures.”

There are people who arrive and people who leave.

But there is a station where those who arrive are those who are leaving  
a station where those who arrive have never arrived, where those  
who have left never came back.

It is the largest station in the world. (3)

While the passage indicates the difficulties language poses for translating the traumatic experience, it also points out the sinister connection between train travel and wide-scale European mobilization that the Nazis exploited in the early 1940s. As the chapter progresses and the familiar setting of the train station breaks down into the site of Nazi deportation, Delbo describes the bodies of those arriving at the concentration camps, including those who were gassed immediately upon arrival. The initial familiar setting quickly and drastically transforms into what Zygmunt Bauman has called the “hidden possibilities of modern society” (12). While the Holocaust was carried out with the help of technological advancements such as railway travel and chemical discoveries that led to the development of gas chambers, technological advancements had always contained the possibilities of mass execution.

Chapter 3 examines the remembrance and continuing presence of murderous technologies in Delbo’s *Auschwitz and After*, revealing the web of collective suffering Delbo calls our attention to through the collective chorus. Delbo returns time and again to the connections between victimized bodies in a global landscape, and the distanced governments who communicate with and destructively affect bodies through oppressive technologies.

### **Bodies in transit: A kinship of the collective**

Separated by national ties and divergent traumatic experiences, Brown,

Toomer and Delbo share a common concern for the sinister outcomes of modernity's ironic progress toward a future that seems to both suppress its past and continue its abusive agendas. Slavery, racism, annihilation, genocide and political exclusions are loaded concepts that all three authors see painfully present in the reality of modern society. The body's abuse brought on by the ravages of war, technology and racial hatred illustrate the complex configuration of historical memory in literature through their inscription of the past on the present body in motion.

Nicholas Mirzoeff has argued that diasporas "do not occur one by one but inevitably overlap, creating polyvalent symbols that are sometimes shared, sometimes contested" (210). Mirzoeff cites the image of the train as a potent example of this simultaneously common yet divergent territory between diasporas, noting that while Jewish diaspora often attaches to it memory of the Holocaust and deportation of millions from all over Europe to concentration camps in Germany, African American diaspora might see a connection to the Great Migration wrapped up in its symbolism. Yet escape from Southern states did not guarantee an erasure of race across geographical boundaries, and African Americans who journeyed North in search of jobs and a more favorable racial climate during the first few decades of the twentieth century found hidden racial prejudice while facing increasing urbanization and industrialization of labor. The overlapping association between diasporic movements and symbols of cultural

and racial persecution, Mirzoeff argues, connect the past and present through the symbol's powerful ability to contain memory.

Brown's journey to the North via railway car, Toomer's use of the train to symbolize the racial tension that tore apart a Georgia community, and Delbo's emphasis on the conversion of the railway into an instrument of terror all demonstrate the degree to which technology reflects and contains traumatic memory. What Mirzoeff's argument suggests is the tendency for technologies to reveal trauma while in some cases remaining the origin of trauma. That is, while the image of the train reveals an interstice between diasporas that attach meaning to its symbolism, the historical memories that are affixed to such symbols suggest that technologies are capable of signifying the past and present in a much larger context that unites bodies of people through a shared connection. The train is a symbol of the powerful testament of technologies that signify trauma and unite diverse bodies of people affected by violence and injustice. The train's ability to both signify and literally rush beyond the past is significant to literatures, as it represents a critical view of how technology is utilized to step the everyday in the historical markings of the past. A global map might be traced between systems of oppression that were made possible by modernity's rapidly growing technologies, forging a complex sketch between the bodies that fell victim to racial and cultural violence facilitated by technology, and the remembrance attached to symbols of technology.

In the chapters that follow, symbols of traumatic technology both signify the violence inflicted on survivors of injustice and act as vehicles of preservation of traumatic moments for those who bore witness to injustice. Brown, Toomer, and Delbo invoke the image of the train to relate the realities of trauma that inform our everyday world, even as they are particular to the instances of injustice they commemorate.



## CHAPTER 2

### THINKING OUTSIDE THE BOX: HENRY ["BOX"] BROWN, THE MIRROR OF SLAVERY, AND THE BORDERS OF THE BOOK

*"The question of the book, and of the history of the book, should not be conflated with that of writing, or the mode of writing, or the technologies of inscription" –Jacques Derrida,*

*"The Book to Come"*

#### **I. Narrative and Technologies of Power**

On 23 March 1849, with the help of friends in Richmond, Virginia, and the facilitation of abolitionists in Philadelphia, Henry "Box" Brown escaped from slavery. Secured in a 3 x 2 crate with only a few crackers and a calf bladder full of water to sustain him, Henry "Box" Brown's precious cargo was addressed to an office in Philadelphia and placed on a northbound train with a sign that read "This Side Up with Care." Despite the box's fragile contents, he was at times hoisted and violently thrown from railway car to railway car, and was even placed upside down on his head for hours at a time. When an understandably disoriented Brown emerged from his crate in the Philadelphia office of the Anti-Slavery Society and muttered "how do you do, gentlemen?", he promptly fainted. After he had sufficiently recovered, Brown then sang a version of the

Fortieth Psalm to his abolitionist benefactors, which would become a standard feature of his reenactment performances on the abolitionist circuit.

Henry Brown's popularity on the abolitionist circuit erupted virtually overnight. The sheer metaphorical power and brilliance of his escape were immediately recognized by abolition enthusiasts, who on more than one occasion fought the impulse to reveal daring escapes to the public, and just as with previous escapees such as that of William and Ellen Craft, they chose to ignore even a fellow abolitionist newspaper, the *Pennsylvania Freeman*, in warning that revealing Brown's method of escape would mean any subsequent attempts by slaves to escape the South might be in jeopardy (*Freeman* 5 July 1849). The many speaking and reenactment engagements, as well as the almost immediate addition of "Box" to Brown's name suggest that the ironic "This Side Up With Care" warning was heralded with as much negligence on the part of abolitionists as the many baggage handlers Brown faced along his journey. During most of his public appearances on the lecture circuit, Brown was asked to perform both his resurrection from the packing crate and the "Hymn of Thanksgiving" he sang upon emerging. In the newly created persona of Henry "Box" Brown, it seems abolitionists recognized the great physical manifestation of their fight against the commodification of bodies, and Brown's willingness to perform the part of the liberated body.

Brown's popularity wasn't limited to abolitionist groups, and by late 1849 the story of his escape had already appeared in other contemporary venues. Ann Preston's *Cousin Ann's Stories for Children* (1849) relates Brown's journey to the North, then directly confronts the restrictions of literacy for slaves in the South, lamenting that "no one in Carolina is allowed to teach a slave to read or write; so [Brown] will never get a letter from any of his family, and it is not likely they will hear from him, or ever know that he is free" (26). The allusion to Brown's illiteracy is somewhat buried in sentiment, yet it further illustrates the indifference even well-meaning authors such as Preston displayed in considering Brown's authority to relate his experiences. Brown's escape becomes a sensationalized morality story meant to instruct children in *Cousin Ann's Stories*, while still others on the abolitionist circuit were critical of his illiteracy in relation to the delivery of his story. The *National Anti-Slavery Standard's* review of Brown's first appearance at a meeting of the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society in June of 1849 commented that he related his escape experience "in an artless manner," and noted, "he is, of course, unlettered, but his adventures and the fortitude with which he passed through an unparalleled journey of suffering and extraordinary danger, exalted a thrill of sympathy and admiration in every one who listened" (7 June 1849). Despite the reviewer's criticism of Brown as an "unlettered" speaker, the fact that his observations noted the tremendous

emotional capacity the escape story possessed demonstrates the potential abolitionists saw for their public campaigns against slavery.

Aside from his on-stage exploits, Brown also published at least two different narratives of his slavery experiences and independently erected a massive panorama. The 1849 narrative, *Narrative of Henry Box Brown, Who Escaped from Slavery, Enclosed in a Box 3 Feet Long and 2 Wide. Written from a Statement of Facts Made by Himself. With Remarks Upon the Remedy for Slavery*, grew out of his collaboration with Charles Stearns, an independent Boston publisher and staunch militant abolitionist whose uncle was George Ripley, the famed founder of the Brook Farm colony that would later be immortalized in Nathaniel Hawthorne's 1852 novel, *The Blithedale Romance*. Described by historian Jeffrey Ruggles as an unconventional critic of Christianity's role in justifying enslavement, Stearns was intensely religious but on his own terms, often advocating Christian principles that he interpreted independently of any church affiliation. On more than one occasion he called for a radical abolitionist movement that would reject the "war part" of the Old Testament that had been used to justify enslavement, and demanded that any mention of war in the Old Testament should be "hurled to the pit of woe from whence *its war part* sprang" (qtd. in Ruggles 60).<sup>1</sup> His collaboration with Brown was, according to Ruggles,

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<sup>1</sup> Ruggles' *The Unboxing of Henry Brown* is perhaps the most important source available that describes the life and works of Brown. The original *Mirror of Slavery* panorama did not survive

most likely due to Brown's understanding that Stearns was an independent publisher whose ties to the the Anti-Slavery Society of Boston were tenuous at best (61). With Brown's keen eye for entrepreneurial entertainment and his later rejection of any business partners or directors, it isn't a stretch to assume that he might have recognized Stearns as one who would not further tie him down to a particular abolitionist cause.

While there is some speculation as to why Brown sought out Stearns's help in publishing the narrative, it is clear that the collaboration yielded a less than reliable testament to Brown's experiences. Of course the process of altering Brown's experiences had already begun with Brown himself, and throughout his speaking tours during the summer of 1849, he tailored his experiences to the interests of the audience. Ruggles cites William Andrews' assertion that speakers often altered their stories to appeal to diverse audiences influenced by religion, temperance movements, and other interests (Ruggles 193 n.40). That Brown placed particular emphasis on his emergence from the box and his performance of the "Hymn of Thanksgiving" seems to suggest that he had the Christian doctrine of resurrection in mind. Nevertheless, Stearns's heavily didactic rants overshadowed the narrative, leading one reviewer in Garrison's *Liberator* to conclude, "it is to be regretted that it was not prepared with more care, as its

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into modern times, and therefore Ruggles' historical unearthing of sources that help us to piece together the content of the panorama is invaluable.

loose and declamatory style greatly mars its interest" (14 September 1849 *Liberator*). The story of Brown's escape had yet to be presented to the public in a manner befitting the demanding abolitionist audience, for as Brown's public recitation garnered criticism for its artlessness, Stearns's narrative style was deemed too artful.

The style through which Stearns conveys one of the most celebrated escapes of the pre-Civil War period is verbose and awkwardly sentimental, and it is hard for one to imagine that the narrative even narrowly resembled Brown's abolitionist circuit presentations:

Far beyond, in terrible suffering, all outward cruelties of the foul system, are those inner pangs which rend the heart of fond affection, when the "bone of your bone, and the flesh of your flesh" is separated from your embrace, by the ruthless hand of the merciless tyrant, as he plucks from your heart of love, the one whom God hath given you for a "help-meet" through the journey of life; and more fearful by far than all the blows of the bloody lash, or the pangs of cruel hunger are those lashings of the *heart*, which the best of slaveholders inflict upon their happy and "well off" slaves, as they tear from their grasp the pledges of love, smiling at the side of devoted attachment. Tell me not of kind masters under slavery's hateful rule! (12-13)

James Olney observes that aside from the fact that the text purports to be “written from a statement of facts made” by Brown, “precious little of Box Brown” is likely present in the narrative due to Stearns’s “self-conscious, self-gratifying, self-congratulatory philosophizing” (161). Indeed Stearns’s editorial overshadowing of the narrative is far from an isolated incident in the publication of slave narratives in the nineteenth century, and most critics have decried the contrived intervention of abolitionist editors and amanuenses who invariably altered the experiences of ex-slaves for rhetorical effect and political gain.

Editorial styling of Brown’s experiences was also present in later editions of the narrative, and despite emigrating to England after the passage of the Fugitive Slave Bill, Brown continued to be at the mercy of amanuenses. He would publish two English versions of his narrative in 1851 and 1852, the former publication in Manchester and the latter in Bilston. One major difference between the initial American narrative and the two subsequent English editions is the presence of direct editorial commentary in the American edition; yet while Stearns’s bombastic rhetoric did not mar the English narratives, the scope of editorial control problematizes any privileging of the written narratives. Just as was the case with their American counterparts, the British were fascinated with the horrors of American slavery, and their interests bore influence on the details related in the lecture circuit. In addition, in the adaptation of the print narrative to British audiences, similarities in wording suggest that the amanuensis

consulted Stearns's version over the course of the adaptation process. The narratives have all but been discredited due to these complications, but there has been renewed scholarly interest in Brown's other artistic projects in recent years, most notably his stateside performances of and transatlantic journey to unveil a panorama he commissioned mere months after gaining his freedom.<sup>2</sup>

Many critics have read Brown's performances on the abolitionist circuit and his 1849 moving panorama *The Mirror of Slavery* as critiques of the peculiar institution as well as of abolitionism, preferring to ignore as subordinate the heavily mediated narratives of his life. *The Mirror of Slavery* was a massive moving panorama reportedly one mile long, depicting the origins of slavery in one part, and life in slavery hundreds of years later in the United States, culminating in a frame titled "Universal Emancipation." While the original panorama has since been lost, it is certain that the panorama incorporated a live performance consisting of songs, reenactments of Brown's liberation from the box, and spoken narration alongside the visual depictions. As Cynthia Griffin Wolff has demonstrated, the massive *Mirror of Slavery* was a "singular, sophisticated, intertextual narrative" that "unmasked America's self-serving hypocrisies" that designated white Americans as immigrants and Africans as

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<sup>2</sup> For example, Daphne Brooks notes that the mediation of Brown's story veils the commentary he made in the panorama, and thus the performance of his story is the more authentic version. Her study of Brown's work focuses on the panorama and not the narratives, while Cynthia Wolff Griffin similarly focuses on the panorama's ability to translate Brown metaphorically and physically into freedom – the narratives are not a focus of her work.



property upon arrival (Griffin Wolff). The narratives of Brown's experiences were just further exercises of merchandising that commodified the stories of former property (Griffin Wolff). While Brown's illiteracy prevented him from mediating the printed page, it is clear that slave narratives carried a merchandising power that was rarely controlled by those whose experiences they contained.

Promoted and produced by Brown himself, *The Mirror of Slavery* as testament to the experiences of slaves is a more genuine performance that circumvents problematic mediation due to Brown's inability to write his own text. It avoids the rigid template and editorial interventionist rhetoric of the slave narrative genre, which often included sentimentalized accounts of events, and it returned Brown's story to an oral and visual form that he could control. Yet without inspecting the barrier that illiteracy posed to Brown's lifework, his visual translation becomes an entity unconnected to the struggle Brown encountered in representing himself. To be sure, Brown's narratives are certainly no match for the creative work he produced independently, yet what I would like to suggest is that by ignoring the narratives in deference to the panorama, a crucial avenue of inquiry – reading as a technology of power – is cut off, and an understanding of the immense cultural project Brown undertook in his lifetime is incomplete at best.

What remains to be discovered is how the panoramic consciousness Brown invoked in his visual narrative relates to the heavily mediated text to which he did not have editorial access. In this vein, I refer to literacy as a technology of power in order to denote the function of the written word for those seeking to publish accounts of their experiences. The function of the written word is to reflect the author's narrative intent. Because slave narratives have no choice but to reproduce the template generated by particular abolitionist groups and publishers, as a source of power, literacy simultaneously empowers and restricts the content of the narrative by dictating the terms by which experiences are presented. Panoramas tended similarly to stick to a formulaic design, but in Brown's case the visual contents were under his control, and he introduced live performance elements that simply could not be a part of the print narrative.

Abolitionist-mediated narratives may be suspect in this regard, but other publication venues for slave narratives included legal records, church tracts, and independent publications of narratives, and each represents a varying degree of control over the narratives related. In fact, Marion Wilson Starling estimates that at least half of all slave narratives (approximately six thousand in total) were published in venues not controlled by abolitionist groups, the most disturbing of which were printed as broadside "confessions" by ex-slaves put to death for a crime. The same sensational medium popularized by Hogarth's *A Rake's Progress* was transformed into serial crime entertainment for an eager American public.

Courts could barely keep up with the demand for such material. On the other hand, independent publications of narratives proliferated in the first half of the nineteenth century, and ex-slave authors demonstrated a very different kind of eagerness to disseminate their stories to the public. Ex-slaves such as Henry Bibb and Noah Davis published narratives independently of abolitionist and church groups in 1849 and 1859, respectively, and in the latter half of the century, many undertook the process of recording their experiences for posterity.

Despite the independent publication of many narratives, including Brown's, literacy as a technology of power remains a barrier to those seeking to tell their stories. As Walter Ong reminds us in his seminal classic, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*, literacy requires a specific set of tools not necessary in oral recitation, and the writing of a narrative transforms Brown's written narrative into an artificial version, or as Ong terms the process, a "reduction of dynamic sound to quiescent space" (81). The 1849 publication of Brown's narrative credited Henry Brown alongside that of Stearns as publisher and amanuensis, although the original narrative of Brown's life in slavery was dramatically altered to reflect both the technological prosthesis of the print narrative and the strict structure of the slave narrative. Stearns's potent political stance against slavery also bled into the narrative he transcribed, making the double-billing of both Stearns and Brown as authors of the work little more than a ceremonious acknowledgment of Brown's involvement in the production of the

narrative. Whatever Brown's intentions for carrying out his performance career, written narrative was one mode of transmission that would not accomplish this feat, even without the heavy-handed interventions of Charles Stearns.

In Brown's case, the technology of reading and writing also demonstrates the limitations of the written word; he often altered the panorama performances based on the religious and cultural makeup of the crowd, which would not have been possible in a print narrative that remained constant. While Brown could not write his own narrative, he certainly could emphasize particular aspects in the performance that were not subject to a rigid narrative template. Daphne Brooks has posited that Brown's panorama visually dramatized a "'third' narrative space between abolitionist pulpit and the literary slave narrative," and constitutes "an alternative method for reading and reinterpreting the slave narrative genre" (Brooks 77). Brooks identifies Brown's panorama as a performance of dissent, a multimedia indictment of restrictions placed on African Americans, and in this case, particularly on those who lacked literacy.

Despite many critics' insistence on Brown's high degree of craft and noble intentions in constructing *The Mirror of Slavery*, there remains a lack of critical awareness surrounding the question of literacy and what, in Brown's case, constitutes a "text." This is not a problem isolated to Brown, yet our placement of Brown in the illiterate box has been only too limiting. While critics Daphne Brooks and Cynthia Griffin Wolff rightly acknowledge the rich meaning and

serious critique implicit in Brown's panorama, they ultimately focus on Brown's *performance* of his critique and ignore the ways in which he intertextually adapted what might normally remain a formulaic narrative design. As Elizabeth McHenry has posited, scholars "remain less cognizant of the variety of processes of intellectual production and exchange that have existed within African-American communities" (150). As in Brown's own time literacy represented what McHenry also identifies as "technologies of power," histories of the book and marketplace continue to privilege textual literacy by ignoring oral and visual literacies that function as a site of cultural and intellectual exchange. I would like to suggest that Brown's *Mirror of Slavery* points us to a critical redefinition of literacy, using Brown's multisensory text as a model for understanding the complex negotiations African Americans confronted outside of print, but still located well within the mainstream marketplace.

Literacy is, as Walter Ong has aptly illustrated, a limiting term that makes difficult the task of viewing works outside of print, leading to a decentering and often avoided experience for modern print-laden cultures. Print-literate peoples find that "to think of words as totally dissociated from writing is simply too arduous a task to undertake, even when specialized linguistic or anthropological work may demand it" (14). The result is a dichotomizing effect that stigmatizes print illiteracy and designates "text" as a modifying term for "literature." Yet Ong points out that the word "text" itself has more potent ties to oral culture

than to print culture, and the literary historian's privileging of literary texts ignores the oral roots of much literature (154).<sup>3</sup> Positioning Henry "Box" Brown in the literacy/illiteracy dichotomy neglects the complicating factors represented by writing as a technology of power and further relegates Brown's live visual and oral narrative to the status of strict performance. My intent here is to bridge the gap between the literary and the visual without resorting to subordinating Brown's panorama as a substitute for the text he could not write. Brooks echoes this positioning in her estimation that the panorama "allowed [Brown] to reenter the text of his own narrative and, in so doing, make new the landscape of fugitive slave autobiography" (77).

Furthermore, Derrida reminds us that modes of writing are not easily categorized, and the book as artifact of writing is not identical to the writing it contains. Implicit in Derrida's demand that we not fasten together the book with its mode of inscription is the difficulty of defining the book beyond its physical materiality (Derrida 4-5). To take this a step farther, I would also suggest that the book was for Brown a limited form, one that simply could not contain the visual and aural elements that constantly altered and redefined his mode of artistic inscription.

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<sup>3</sup> I point this out to demonstrate the degree to which Brown's panorama would form a bridge between the heavily mediated narrative, and the panorama's oral and visual dissemination.

Yet to distinguish further, *The Mirror of Slavery* is a text, for its readability and clear narrative critique invite interpretation in a way that strictly oral recitations or a painting on a wall do not. The canvas combined combined forty-nine separate scenes sewn together in what is best described as a travelogue that is ordered by narrative rather than independent scenes (Ruggles 94-95). The difference between a painting and Brown's text is the sequential ordering that moves the viewer along the "text" of its canvas, saturating the viewer with images that all at once call for interpretation.

Few scholars have looked to Brown's *Mirror of Slavery* as a text in own right. Daphne Brooks ultimately contends that while the panorama provided a medium through which Brown might engage the original terms of his narrative, she also differentiates between the written, literary text and the "representational form" of the panorama performance (77). Brown may not have been capable of revising the printed narrative of his life, although he was aware of the fetishizing tendencies of his abolitionist benefactors. Only a few months after his escape, and just weeks after the first narrative of his life appeared in print, Brown began securing his book royalties to help him construct the enormous panorama. *The Mirror of Slavery* was deliberately constructed as a reaction to his newfound freedom in the North, where Brown "had learned that even if African Americans in the North did not 'starve and die in filth and misery,' all was not as it ought to be" (Ruggles 59). Well versed in the terms by which he would retain a prominent

status on the abolitionist lecture circuit, which was contingent upon his reenactments and performance of freedom, Brown demonstrated in the construction of *The Mirror of Slavery* an acute sense of cultural awareness surrounding the particular manner in which he must represent himself in order to remain a fixture on the circuit.

One of the most striking tasks that Brown accomplishes in *The Mirror of Slavery* is in its employment of a visual narrative that had been expressly called for in an earlier antislavery poem. Published by Charles C. Green in 1845, *The Nubian Slave* was a long illustrated poem that followed a fictional African family stolen and transported to North America, where they are sold to separate families and subsequently brutalized by the peculiar institution. In his description of the poem's intentions, Green claims that "the application of PICTORIAL ART to MORAL TRUTH is capable of producing a great, and, as yet, almost untried force" in the abolishment of slavery (Ruggles 80). That he sustained in *The Mirror of Slavery* a vital connection to written text is significant not only in its dialogic answering of Green's call, but in its challenge to the shortcomings of the written word.

The considerable overlap of content and the ordering of the panorama frames according to Green's plot scheme are no accident. Henry Brown's clear answer to Green's call led the fugitive slave to adopt Green's poem as a template for positioning his own narrative on canvas. This time, however, it was Brown's



template, not that of an amanuensis or the abolitionists, and despite his inability to read Green's poem, the visual depictions became the ordering template for *The Mirror of Slavery*. Ruggles has suggested that the narrative format of *Panorama of the Bible*, likely combined with a poetic representation of abolitionist propaganda, Charles C. Green's *The Nubian Slave*, were the underlying artistic catalysts for what would become later that year *The Mirror of Slavery*.<sup>4</sup>

## II. American Panoramic Consciousness and *The Mirror of Slavery*

Some history of the panorama as it existed before Brown unveiled his panorama both stateside and abroad is further critical in understanding how *The Mirror of Slavery* circumvented and altered the slave narrative genre, while maintaining a critical dialogue with the visual and written texts of its time. By the time his commissioned panorama was unveiled in 1849, the panoramic medium had already reached its peak and waned in popularity amongst European and American audiences, although exhibitions were still capable of drawing large crowds.

Composed of a series of scenes that moved sequentially along one unified canvas, panoramas immersed the viewer in representations of landscape that

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<sup>4</sup> *The Panorama of the Bible* was not, like most popular panoramas of the time, ordered by a sense of geographical rootedness, but rather propelled by the narrative of the Bible. Brown's focus on geography as noted in the first frames does emphasize the landscape of Africa, but ultimately it is the journey forced upon the kidnapped slaves that orders the narrative.

boasted life-like quality (Ruggles 73). The panorama had first been introduced in Europe by the Scottish painter Robert Barker in an unsuccessful 1787 exhibit, but later versions were more successful, including 1798's *Panorama of the Battle of Aboukir*. The medium had lost much of its popular momentum by the time American painters such as John Banvard, Sam Stockwell, Henry Lewis, and John Rowson Smith recognized its potential for convincing a reluctant American public to move into developing western territories. The aesthetic capability of the panorama was the propagandistic answer to the pastoral dream that came up short in the rough and tumble West. The panorama was a technology employed to lure New Englanders to move West based on the romantic independence and gorgeous landscape depicted before them (Miller 739). The seduction of the American traveller was further hindered by political fireworks when the slavery question time and again crept slowly west towards the Mississippi. As Angela Miller notes, "the Mississippi valley would have to be 'sold'" as a geographical location "mythically exempt from social and political tensions, where progress would prevail and where the institutions of culture would soon take a firm foothold" (739-740).

The first panorama to appear on American soil was in New York in 1804, and its popularity spread quickly to other cities on the eastern seaboard, including Boston and Baltimore (Mazow 56). The subsequent decades following its introduction, panorama took on new meaning as it became embedded in the

American lexicon, and as Leo Mazow argues, in the American consciousness.

With its sweeping visual sensationalism and profound effect on a captive audience,

Message and medium were distinctively intertwined. Indeed, the unbound, moving panorama matched nineteenth-century American metaphors of progress, freedom, growth, and optimism...By the second decade of the nineteenth century, panorama carried secondary meanings of “continuous passing scene” and “an unbroken view of the whole surrounding region.” (Mazow 56)

The loaded metaphor of the panorama extended to and influenced literary works as well, as Mark Twain’s reference to Banvard in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. What’s more, Twain envisioned *Huck Finn* as a “panorama of American life along the Mississippi River,” demonstrating the powerful transformative appeal the visual medium had on the American consciousness.<sup>5</sup>

While most panoramas of the time have been lost or destroyed (the sheer size and manner of upkeep required to maintain the fragile panorama was

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<sup>5</sup> Twain was one of the first writers to exhibit panorama’s vernacular appeal in his writing. In *Life on the Mississippi*, when a deeply in debt Stephen attempts to hustle the young and naïve Yates out of his money, Stephen exclaims,

Just look at him! LOOK at him!

Ain't it just GOOD to look at him! AIN'T it now? Ain't he just a picture! SOME call him a picture; I call him a panorama!

That's what he is--an entire panorama. (113-114)

Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick* was also reportedly inspired by Benjamin Russell and Caleb Purrington’s 1849 exhibition, *Whaling Voyage Round the World*.

equally as damaging as the constant wear due to traveling exhibitions), Banvard's famous panorama of the Mississippi continues to be the most well-known of the American panoramas. Entitled *Description of Banvard's Panorama of the Mississippi River, Painted on Three Miles of Canvas, exhibiting a View of Country 1200 Miles in Length, extending from the Mouth of the Missouri River to the City of New Orleans, being by far the Largest Picture ever executed by Man*, Banvard's panorama incorporated images of humans alongside sweeping landscape scenery and was billed to audiences as "the largest picture in the world." As the exhibition's popularity grew in America and Europe grew, the grandiose descriptions of the panorama's size and importance swelled, and the 1849-1850 London exhibition pamphlet reflects an addendum to the title that reads "*being by far the Largest Picture ever executed by Man*" (McDermott 31-32). Indeed, the panorama had already been introduced to a well-acquainted American public by the time Banvard released his exhibition of the Mississippi River, but the political discourse in which the medium would participate in Banvard's time had never before been a feature of the panorama.

At the time Brown began his project, the moving panorama had enjoyed a significant renaissance, with crowds across the Northern and Southern states clamoring to view the most popular panoramic exhibitions of the day, including Banvard's *Life on the Mississippi* (1847) and John Rowson Smith's 1848 *Smith's Leviathan Panorama of the Mississippi River*. Brown most likely recognized the

monetary opportunity of such an endeavor, and it has been suggested that *The Mirror of Slavery* was a response to Banvard's panorama, which depicted content slaves in some scenes working the plantations that sprawled along the Mississippi River's surrounding countryside. While the genesis of the idea is unknown, Jeffrey Ruggles suggests that "the idea may have popped into [Brown's] head: 'Go and get a panorama, and put yourself in it'" (73).<sup>6</sup> Whatever the reason for beginning the project, the result constituted the first and only large-scale panorama erected for the abolitionist cause.

The literary roots from which the idea for the panorama sprung are just as important as the inspiration Brown culled from the visual medium, and there are two major literary structures that provided the foundation for the *Mirror of Slavery* project. While the raging popularity of Banvard's Mississippi panorama undoubtedly influenced Brown and his collaborators, the *Panorama of the Bible* exhibition was also likely attended by Brown and Stearns. John Insko Williams's exhibit travelled to Boston in late 1849, merging biblical narrative with the visual media of the painted panorama, instead of the common geographically-themed visual exhibitions of Banvard and the competing *Smith's Leviathan Panorama of the Mississippi River*.

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<sup>6</sup> As Ruggles notes, Brown and Charles Stearns were also in Boston at the time of the *Panorama of the Bible* exhibition, and were no doubt familiar with the raging popularity of John Banvard's 1847 *Panorama of the Mississippi River* and its 1848 competitor, *Smith's Leviathan Panorama of the Mississippi River*.

As a multimedia experience accompanied by a vocal recitation of each scene's narrative continuity, *The Mirror of Slavery* portrayed on canvas expansive painted scenes that juxtaposed the plight of slaves in the South with ongoing racial injustice in the North. Geographical borders are noticeably erased, and what visually ensues is a bird's-eye view of American race relations in motion. In addition to the transatlantic visual fare, a pamphlet describing the scenes was distributed to viewers, guiding and directing the audience's interpretation. A crew of all black panorama guides read aloud from the printed pamphlets, and the simultaneous aural and visual narration immersed audiences in a multisensory exploration of a United States steeped in the practice of slavery. Furthermore, the removal of geographical markers and boundaries, save for those listed by scene on the printed text, at once "mirrored" back and blurred the lines of Northern geographical entitlement. That is to say, while Northern and Southern scenes were not ordered and instead conflated and alternated, the effect was to invoke the viewer's reflection and participation in the scene as a whole.

Ultimately a combined visual narrative punctuated by live interjections that complemented the audience's viewing, the viewer had to work hard to ascertain the panorama's intent. *The Mirror of Slavery* then in many ways recalls and refines Wolfgang Iser's explanation of the relationship between text and reader, in that the reader interacts with a text that must be processed through a

realization of an interpretive message. As the work that is done to interpret the text “must inevitably be virtual” due to the text’s inability to confirm textual explication, the viewer must organize and manage a complex restructuring of codes, which Iser refers to as “gaps” or “blanks” (293). As “the unseen joints of the text,” these blanks vanish once an interpretation has been reached by the viewer, seamlessly folding into the previously fragmented structure (Iser 293). This interaction must occur, Iser argues, for an interpretation of the text to occur.

The gaps for the viewer of Brown’s panorama are numerous and multifaceted, and while the exhibition was in part a form of entertainment, it was also a serious work that demanded hard interpretive work from its audience. The visual narrative begins as *The Nubian Slave* does, depicting slaves in Africa, and their subsequent transportation to plantations in the South. The first four frames of the panorama establish a cause and effect relationship between the impending slave trade and the kidnapping of Africans, yet in the fifth scene, titled “Beautiful Land and Mountain Scenery in Africa,” the African landscape shows an existence denied for those depicted in the first frames.<sup>7</sup> The sixth and seventh frames carry on the interpretive call, with the seventh frame “View of the Cape of Good Hope” following “March to the Coast” that likely depicted the kidnapped subjects leaving their home to board the Slave Felucca, a ship named in the title of the following frame. If the audience is to ascertain the profound loss that

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<sup>7</sup> See Appendix A for a full description of the panorama’s title contents.

affected the kidnapped slaves and subsequent generations of slaves who were denied access to their ancestral roots, the blanks of that interpretation must be understood in relation to the journey unfurled before them on the text of the canvas.

Ironically, the function of the panorama medium was to replace real-life experience with the painter's rendition, and to orient the viewer's sense of geographical placement by immersing the viewer in a clearly defined and delineated landscape. As travelogues, both painted panoramas and performed panoramas, the latter of which incorporated guides who performed dialogue along with the painted scene, impressed upon the audience a sense that a journey was "continually unrolling" (Ruggles 94 and Baker 90). Territories acquired in the American West were areas of intense interest in panoramas, where the debate over slave and free states determined the fate of many African Americans. Brown's *Mirror of Slavery* tapped into this nationalist dialogue by subverting its calculated, processing tendencies and presenting a United States that could not easily be geographically categorized. In its resistance to the clear mapping evident in many panoramas of the time, Brown's piece reveals that the trafficking and shackling of bodies crossed all state and geographical boundaries.

Henry Brown's panorama exhibition was not alone in its quest to call attention to the geographical boundaries of slavery, as Ian Finseth points out. Nineteenth century slave narratives were intensely concerned with conveying to



the reader the pain of geographical upheaval and relocation as a result of the peculiar institution (Finseth 238). Exploration of geographical boundaries in the slave narrative text, while part of a standard template that often began either in the Southern slave states or in Africa, “link[ed] individual emotional and moral conflicts to broader cultural and racial issues” (Finseth 238). In the case of Brown’s printed narrative, Stearns and Brown indicated that when Brown’s wife and children were sold to a different plantation, an event that triggered his emotional grief at being sold to a different master away from his own father, Brown decided that the pain of displacement from his family firmly planted the idea of escape into his head. Perhaps even more telling, it wasn’t until both Brown and Smith realized that their involvement in the church and Smith’s own willingness to remain in the South would only facilitate the institution of slavery that the two men decided on a mode of escape (*Narrative* 6).

The impetus for Brown’s escape is not depicted in the panorama; however, Brown chose to indicate the link between broader cultural issues and slavery in a different manner that implicated American social consciousness in the ongoing struggle to abolish slavery. He accomplishes this by tracing the route of his escape from Richmond to Philadelphia, choosing to depict landmarks that are pillars of American society. In Part II of the panorama, the trajectory of Brown’s escape begins at the whipping gallows in the eighth frame, followed by a view of the Virginia landscape and the securing of Brown’s body in the packing

crate in the ninth and tenth frames. The eleventh frame depicts Jefferson's Rock and Natural Bridge, landmarks that seem to Ruggles to "claim Jefferson for the antislavery cause," although it was well-known that Jefferson himself owned slaves (101).

While it's impossible to ascertain whether or not Brown actively invoked this contradiction, the three frames that follow suggest a critique of the contradictions of abolitionism, in addition to the sweeping criticism of Americans' ambivalence towards and in some cases opposition to the practice of slavery. Generally regarded by abolitionists as one who was in opposition to slavery, George Washington's tomb is depicted in the fourteenth frame, preceded by the juxtaposition of the nation's capital and "Slave Prisons at Washington." According to a review of the panorama, the nation's capital frame places front and center the House of Congress, while in the distance, a slave auction can be seen going on, and in "Slave Prisons at Washington," President Taylor is portrayed riding into Washington "whilst his four grey steeds are frightened by the cries and groans of a gang of slaves" (qtd. in Ruggles 101). The frames were designed to critique the government's continuing support for slavery, yet in placing Washington's tomb directly following the presence of slavery in the capital, Brown calls into question the abolitionist reliance on George Washington as an ironic choice. Brown illustrated that no geographical region or political figure was free from blame when it came to the slavery question.

In some cases, even texts outside of the slave narrative genre challenged geographical boundaries as a means of engaging in a critique of the cultural position of African Americans, as Harriet Wilson's 1859 *Our Nig* makes plain. Set in New Hampshire, Wilson's novel reflects the pervasive effects of Northern racism, suggesting that Northern free blacks were no better off than their Southern counterparts. Brown echoes this sentiment in *The Mirror of Slavery*, and in another frame juxtaposition, the beautiful countryside landscape of Philadelphia is followed by a jarring scene in which a frowning Brown emerges from his crate while white abolitionist spectators cheer. While some might view these scenes as representative of Brown's passage into freedom, the two scenes are arranged similarly to frames seven, eight, and nine of Part II, in which the violent impetus for Brown's escape is depicted. Brown had barely emerged from the packing crate when abolitionists recognized the great metaphorical power of his escape method, and in the frame, Brown is the only figure not smiling. In Brown's view, Northern abolitionists were just as suspect as Southern slaveholders, and America emerged as "spectacle – ultimately the object of shrewd and stinging derision" (Griffin Wolff 23). While the South was typically implicated as the sole purveyor of the institution of slavery, the panorama suggests a collective facilitation of the American slave system. The Northern "free"/Southern slave binary opposition is subtly but boldly traversed, revealing

a reflection of the collective United States that is hardly obsequious and wholly damning.

As an alternate text to the heavily mediated printed narratives, *The Mirror of Slavery* dynamically alters even the panorama medium in a fashion that before Brown had not been utilized. William Wells Brown began erecting his own panorama chronicling the practice of slavery, but it would not appear until its unveiling in London in October 1850, months after Brown had begun exhibiting *The Mirror of Slavery* in the United States.<sup>8</sup> Yet the panorama's roots have been connected to the advent of Jeremy Bentham's panopticon device, reportedly sparking Robert Barker's vision of a work that both illuminated the artistic scene and captivated a darkened room where a captive audience took in the scene (Friedberg 400). Barker made this connection when in 1787 he was imprisoned for debt and forced to search out the only shafts of light that entered his cell in order to read letters sent to him. The illumination from above inspired him to erect a similar art piece after being released from prison, and it is Friedberg's contention that the spectator/facilitator position of the cellmate in relation to his

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<sup>8</sup> William Wells Brown's panorama, *A Description of William Wells Brown's Original Panoramic Views of the Scenes in the Life of an American Slave, from His Birth in Slavery to His Death or His Escape to His First Home of Freedom on British Soil*, was first exhibited in Newcastle-upon-Tyne. Twenty-four frames were accompanied by a forty-eight page pamphlet describing the visual exhibition (Ripley et al. 191).

letter that overall made an impression on the artist. Bentham's panopticon device is also remarkably similar to the exhibition rooms where the narrators and guides could see the audience, but the audience could not see the narrators unless the illumination focused on them at any point during the exhibition. Brown's exhibition included acts that featured the guides and Brown himself, so in Friedberg's estimation Brown was in the Foucauldian sense the instigator for interpretation. Brown's choice of the panorama medium was a loaded one, rich with multiple interpretations that confronted and challenged the audience, while ensuring that once entered into the panorama, the narrative could not be ignored. If the darkened room served as the facilitation of the illuminated scene, *The Mirror of Slavery's* erasure of geographical boundaries reflected back to the audience a scene that demanded interpretation and promoted the viewer's self-reflexivity.

While the viewer of Brown's panorama might have been perplexed by the lack of distinction between Northern and Southern states, the blanks that are transformed into coherent scenes by the very nature of both text and panorama could easily have been interpreted by an audience member's keen eye. The structured form of the panoramic content deliberately constructs visible gaps that call attention to the structure itself, requiring work on the part of the viewer in order to interpret the message. With the sequential order of landscape scenes and critique scenes operational in both Northern and Southern panoramic views,

the blanks the viewer must fill are both nominal and radical in their clear connection between slavery and ongoing racism.

While the content of the panorama invited – indeed demanded – interpretation by its audience, concurrent spoken narrative by guides and the addition of songs sung by Brown himself and friend James C. A. Smith posed an additional multisensory challenge to the viewer in the darkened audience. Positioned at scenes throughout rather than as a side show to the panorama, Brown and Smith sang a version of Brown’s standard Fortieth Psalm and “several [other] pieces of sacred music” (qtd in Ruggles 106). At still other scenes in the panorama, narrative guides (and sometimes Brown) offered a spoken narrative storyline that described the scenes and offered an oral version of Brown’s printed narrative.

No doubt the audience who viewed the panorama was familiar with the 1849 narrative, but the oral recapitulation of events was noticeably different from its printed counterpart simply due to the fact that it was Brown’s version, not Stearns’s. One reviewer of a British exhibition notes the incorrect grammar and “crude” oration style, while a reply run a few months later corrected this view, denoting it was “not in the n\*\*\*er style, but in English” (qtd in Ruggles 105). The review may have been overtly racist, yet it illustrates the very strong reactions of the panorama’s audience, and ensures that even negative reviews noted the difference between the printed and visual texts.

*The Mirror of Slavery* certainly made an impression on American and British audiences alike, and Brown's ability to entertain a crowd with interactive elements from singing to parades ensured a successful run. In a truly engaging sense of showmanship, he had his business partner, James C.A. Smith, enclose him in the packing crate he regularly brought to exhibitions and place him on a train to Leeds, where the box was placed in a coach and paraded through the town, accompanied by onlookers who followed the procession to the panorama performance. Noted one reviewer in the *Leeds Times*, "the entertainment then commenced, and gave great satisfaction to an audience which was by no means so numerous as the merits of Mr. Brown and his panorama deserve" (qtd. in Ruggles 128).

### **III. The Present Past: The Enduring Legacy of Henry "Box" Brown**

As this review suggests, fascination with Brown's persona was crucial to the success of *The Mirror of Slavery*. The abolitionist circuit was aglow with admiration for Brown's escape, and he was immediately entreated to attend the American Anti-Slavery Convention in Boston only two months following his escape. Ellen and William Craft, William Wells Brown and Frederick Douglass were all in attendance at the Boston convention, where immediately he was christened with a new middle name to ironically reflect his ongoing confinement by the terms of his new benefactors. Brown's celebrity status on the abolitionist

circuit would continue to grow, and at a meeting of the American Anti-Slavery Society held in New York in 1850, Pastor William H. Furness would allude to Brown when he announced to the crowd, “A slave, worth a few hundred dollars, was put into a box. That box was nailed down; and, after being well shaken, and turned over a number of times, it was opened, and out leaped a freeman, whose value no man can compute. That box has magic in it” (*Anti-Slavery Standard*). That Furness does not refer to Brown by name is significant; that Furness refers to his estimated worth as a slave but not as a “freeman” is telling. His middle name given to him and his shackled body liberated by the abolitionists, Henry “Box” Brown was financially indebted to the abolitionists.

The funding Brown secured in the months preceding the opening of the exhibition was from lectures on the book tour circuit following the publication of the Stearns narrative, and from payments for reenacting his liberation at meetings for the Anti-Slavery Society. In addition the broadsides advertising the panorama’s debut featured a representation of the box and a reprint of the Fortieth Psalm Brown sang in the Philadelphia Anti-Slavery offices. Samuel Rowse’s 1850 lithograph depicted Brown emerging from the crate, and was sold in an effort to generate funding for the panorama. The scheme worked; in only two months Brown had raised enough money to cover the expenses for constructing *The Mirror of Slavery*, affording Brown a considerable amount of control over his work. If he must reenact his liberation for a crowd that



desperately wished to see the benevolence of white abolitionists, the funding of the panorama and the damning critique of its contents were at least wholly and indivisibly his.

What Brown's financial struggle for control over his narrative makes clear is the complicated relationship that existed between author and text in the nineteenth century. Yet Brown's struggle to obtain funding for the panorama also is a testament to the extreme popularity of the slave narrative in the nineteenth century. As Charvat notes, while Melville struggled to publish, even taking out loans with his publisher to do so, Brown's success on the abolitionist circuit secured him enough funding in a matter of months (Charvat 44).

Brown's inability to write his own narrative in print form also highlights the added obstacle that literacy posed to those who escaped the conditions of slavery. The restrictive form of the book forced Brown outside of its borders, to a medium that collapsed boundaries and immersed the viewer in the narrative's full potential. In fact, the panorama medium took the book one step farther: one could not escape the all-encompassing expanse of the panorama's damning critique.

In 1993, Bronx born artist Glenn Ligon unveiled his new exhibit, "To Disembark" at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Gallery in Washington, D.C. In the first of a series of layered multimedia installations, Ligon sets up a number of packing crates to pay homage to the slave who in 1849 mailed himself

to freedom, Henry “Box” Brown. Each box is covered in recreations of nineteenth century broadsides describing the physical characteristics of a runaway slave, and a different sound emerges from each, including a heartbeat and a sung spiritual. Ligon’s installment has been hailed as a creative homage to the slave narrative tradition, and its legacy for contemporary African American art forms. Yet Ligon’s crates are not merely visual symbols of Brown’s journey, but multimedia interpretations of the ongoing African American struggle to escape from the confinement of stereotypes. The slave narrative may have brought the voices of the oppressed to a national audience, but the fetishization of oppressed bodies continues to proliferate in white mass consumption of rap music, which tellingly blares from one of Ligon’s packing crates. Despite Henry “Box” Brown’s harrowing journey from slavery to slave narrative, his heartbeat pulsing from the packing crate suggests that his celebrity was and continues to be inextricably tied to the slave narrative tradition – one that simultaneously creates the author’s identity and restricts the function of authorship.

### CHAPTER 3

## THE TRAUMA OF THE TEXT: JEAN TOOMER'S CANE AND THE BODIES AND TECHNOLOGIES OF MODERNISM

*“Man has the potentiality of forming three distinct, and, in a sense, independent bodies: a physical body, an emotional body, and a mental body. Of these three, the physical body is the only one which is actualized” -The Wayward and the Seeking*

*“I was perhaps born a potentially locomotive type” -A Jean Toomer Reader*

In 1921, when Jean Toomer accepted a position as interim principal at the Sparta Agricultural and Industrial School in Sparta, Georgia, he was struck by the slow demise of what he considered a unique spiritual center of African American culture in the South as it was being replaced by the harsh and blinding technologies of modern life. His observation was one that recognized the departure of rural culture into one of modern urbanity:

With Negroes also the trend was towards the small town and then towards the city – and industry and commerce and machines. The

folk-spirit was walking in to die on the modern desert. That spirit was so beautiful. That death was so tragic. Just this seemed to sum life for me. And this was the feeling I put into *Cane*. (*The Wayward and the Seeking* 123)

Toomer's time in Georgia led him to view the South not as a romantic country landscape imbued with a rich sense of spirituality; rather, in the 1923 prose poetry novel, *Cane*, he articulated a "swan-song" that reflected the "song of an end" to a length of African American history indelibly tied to slavery and violence through its folk songs and agricultural ties to cotton and sugar fields.

Toomer left his administrative post in the South after a mere three months, but as he wrote to Sherwood Anderson shortly after his return, Sparta had impressed upon him a deeper understanding of Southern cultural and historical roots. "My seed was planted in the cane- and cotton-fields," he wrote to Anderson, "and in the souls of black and white people in the small southern town" (*A Jean Toomer Reader* 17). That Toomer felt rooted in the traditions of the South (and as the content of *Cane* makes clear, he most strongly identified with African American southern culture) is a rare testament for an author who would later oppose authorial race designation, yet his remarks to Anderson express his early optimistic views of the co-habitation of black and white in the rural South as markers of a new American hybrid that would negate racial segregation.

Along the course of his writings on race, Toomer vehemently argued that Americans would soon enter a new racial climate that would negate racial designation altogether, resulting in what Toomer identified as a distinctly American race rather than one based on skin color. Skin color variations would also disappear in this new American landscape, and a “blue man” undivided by classification systems would emerge both physically and socially. He likened such an emergence to a process of digestion that underpinned the strength of the American social structure:

The achievement of a country occurs when it has transformed all of its food into blood, a blood unique to itself, and when, from the life of this blood it produces people, bodies and souls, and customs and culture special to it. This is true of the individual members of a nation. It is true of the nation as a whole. A country is like a huge stomach into which enters all kinds of materials, some unusable, some usable; and its existence is maintained, it is nourished, it grows and develops by subjecting these materials to the processes of digestion and assimilation, rejecting unusable matters, incorporating usable materials into its structures and functions.

*(“The Americans,” A Jean Toomer Reader 106-107)*

Toomer’s estimation of cultural production is one rooted in organic function, stressing the body’s natural mechanical efficiency as a model upon which we might view the comingling of blood and material; the body as a machine is

capable of shaping a distinctly designed structure of racially-liberated beings.

While machine culture had infiltrated and threatened to erase the folk traditions Toomer so admired, he regarded the possibilities machine culture held for eradicating racial classification somewhat ambiguously.

Despite the efficient body-machine process of consumption that Toomer outlines above, he further notes that such a liberatory process would no doubt involve a struggle, as those Americans who hold steadfast the rigidity of racial codification “must die before there can be new life” (107). “Some foods, in relation to some eaters,” he argues, “do not noticeably resist dying and being eaten. The apple does not noticeably resist us. But certain foods, such for example as race-forms, though entering the stomach of a nation, do resist” (1907). The struggle is one that pits the consumer against the consumed, the American arena of cultural production against that of a historical propensity for resisting racial harmony. For the machine-body of America to produce a singular identity that Toomer advocated, he recognized clearly what obstacles racial antagonism posed to the consumption and racial singularity production process, and much of his apprehension is apparent in the numerous binary divisions he investigates in *Cane*.

*Cane* explores the challenge that binary divisions pose to producing racial harmony, and what the text offers is a view of the circuitry of racism consuming the modern moment. That Toomer is oft-debated as both a pillar of the Harlem

Renaissance and a writer of the literary modernist movement suggests that while his fascination with the traumatic shock of modernization and its technologies is a driving force for *Cane's* commemorative swan-song, it was during the *Cane* years that his growing racial consciousness sought to reconcile the threats of technological modernity with longstanding racial tensions and violence around the country. Technology is an integral part of the circuit of racism, and as Toomer demonstrates, its reverberations also have great metaphorical bearing in describing the effects of racism. Ralph Ellison's 1952 novel *The Invisible Man* would most clearly make this connection in its use of electricity to reveal the powerful charge of racism, yet it is in *Cane* that we see the first marriage of race and electricity to signify modernity's continuing antagonism of racial boundaries.

Toomer was not alone in his distrust of modernized technology, and the electrically charged sketches of *Cane* suggest that he recognized the potential of electricity to reinforce the circuit of racism that is powerfully inscribed in both American society and its technologies. Tim Armstrong has described Americans' relationship with electricity as what might be deemed a kind of double consciousness, for, "seen as duplicating the motive forces of the nervous system and perhaps even the 'spark' of life itself, it was at the same time becoming part of a network of power which transcended the scale of the human body and could kill" (14). As early as 1890, electricity was being used to execute prisoners at Sing

Sing, and its inception was “part of a search for an ‘efficient’ method of state homicide, in contrast to the crude and body-distorting technologies of hanging and decapitation” (34). The visible markings of execution made evident as a result of earlier methods were eclipsed by an invisible (and seemingly less intrusive) technology that privatized the formerly public spectacle. The appeal of electricity to legal and other policing institutions horrified the general public, and nowhere was the ambiguity of electricity more apparent than in modernist texts, which Armstrong contends “[plug] into a scientific rhetoric which channels flows of energy and information” (19). Writers from Howells to Dreiser recognized the complex metaphorical possibilities of electricity, and the anxiety that surrounded American technological progress would be articulated in Toomer’s *Cane* as directly related to racial unrest.

How Toomer positions technology in the American cultural fabric is critical to unlocking his critique of the circuit of racism, yet scholarly interest has largely centered on what is construed as optimism in his most famous work. Mark Whalan posits that Toomer must have seen technology as “a way out of [the] closed circuit of aesthetics, oppression and violence within the rural South” (Whalan 467). Whereas many prominent African American intellectuals and writers, including W.E.B. DuBois and Claude McKay, were suspicious of technology’s role in reenforcing the circuit of racism, he argues that “it is perhaps unsurprising that a writer with less than definite links to the Harlem Renaissance



should present one of its most enthusiastic – and aestheticised – responses to machine technology” (Whalan 463). Despite Whalan’s insistence on the latent potential technology posed for offering a way out of the circuit of racism in the first decades of the twentieth century, the text offers another view of technology’s ability to eradicate racism and racial classification, and the communion between body, technology, and nature that Gorham Munson championed was left unanswered.<sup>9</sup> As a counterpoint to the pastoral tradition seeped in violent history, technology only seems to aid in re-membering the trauma of racial violence.

In fact, racial discord is the driving force for the novel’s pastoral and technological structure, and Toomer’s dual focus emphasizes the profound shifts modernity underwent, without losing its stronghold on racism. What I wish to underscore here is that while Toomer advocated a singular American identity devoid of racially-based status markers, the consumption model demonstrates Toomer’s anxiety surrounding all kinds of divisions and classification systems, whether racial, technological, or geographical, on which *Cane* would be centrally concerned. Such divisions were symptomatic of a larger circuitous route of racism in the United States, and *Cane* takes up the task of actively mapping out

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<sup>9</sup> Munson was a literary critic introduced to Toomer by Waldo Frank, and they would remain friends for years afterward. In his review of Munson’s *Waldo Frank: A Study* for the magazine *S4N*, Toomer expressed interest in the spiritual connection between human and machine espoused by Munson. His optimism is not evident in *Cane* or his mystical writings post-*Cane*, however.

the divisions that were part and parcel of racial classification. The racial melting pot he predicted would theoretically consume racial classifications until one single racial organism emerged in a unified America, but the violence that usually coincides with cultural change must be made to withstand such resistance. The magnitude of this dilemma is worked out in *Cane*, where a series of divisions between technology and nature, trauma and harmony, as well as geographical divisions between North and South all converge, resulting in all-encompassing racial violence. Cultural production in *Cane* looks to the fading oral folk spirit of the past to heal the ruptures of historical trauma rooted in division. What Toomer found in Georgia was a mixture of historical terror and spiritualism threatened by divisions of the past and present, which inspired him to divide *Cane* into a series of vignettes, poems, and dramatic dialogues.

The deep appreciation that Toomer developed for the African American oral folk tradition of the South is an essential element of *Cane*, and despite his well-intentioned homage to the spirit of the South, the text has eluded literary scholars with regards to its genre classification, suggesting that Toomer was more concerned with the thematic structure of racial representation than with the laws of genre.<sup>10</sup> In *Folklore in New World Black Fiction*, Chiji Akoma wholly

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<sup>10</sup> Literary classification in part depends on how the text is situated with regards to the Harlem Renaissance and the modernist movement. For example, in *The Cambridge Companion to the*

dismisses the academic debate over genre classification, pointing out that *Cane* resists generic singularity and invites us instead to reconsider applying Western conceptions of literary classification to a work that demonstrates “remarkable totality of artistic performance” (117). “If the performance does not announce itself as such and follows a different structure,” he perceptively poses, “why seek a novel where there are no sufficient components of the form?” (117). What *Cane*’s central focus on divisions and the circuitous route of racism in America makes clear is that genre classification cannot clearly diagnose a text that refuses to adhere to its structure.

*Cane* subverts our traditional notions of the novel since it contemplates the division between African American folk-spirit orality and its written manifestation. In the original first edition, Toomer describes the text that follows as “vaudeville of the South,” and indeed the comingling of poems, short sketches, and drama, interspersed with folk spiritual songs, certainly supports this assertion. Chiji Akoma argues that *Cane* “[restores] the oral form as primarily a tradition that has survived by its penetration into every facet of the culture so that its power lies in its omniscient presence” (118). Such an assertion is supported by Toomer’s impressions of the South, for despite its waning influence, he saw in the spirituals sung by his neighbors a positive spirit whose

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*Modernist Novel*, Anna Snaith discusses *Cane* as a novel of the Harlem Renaissance that draws upon modernist collage, while Frederick Rusch views it as an avant garde text that mirrors jazz composition (Snaith 219, Rusch 23).

endangerment “seemed to sum life for me” (*A Jean Toomer Reader* 123). Toomer’s later disenchantment with *Cane* was in part due to his supreme discontent over efforts to brand the author himself as an African American artist, as opposed to the label he preferred, American, for it did not divide him from other writers. His insistence on describing *Cane* as a text modeled on the lively caricature performances of vaudeville tradition suggests that Toomer was experimenting with the written word’s relationship to the omnipresence of orality in African American culture, while reveling in the multiplicity and “variety” of the vaudeville tradition.<sup>11</sup>

While performance is indeed a focus of much of *Cane*, as evidenced in “Box Seat,” “Theater,” and the dramatic dialogue of “Kabnis,” Toomer’s performance of Southern oral tradition is tellingly punctuated by the immense power of technology to supplant, and ultimately destroy, utterance. As Walter Ong has demonstrated, there is no technology that has done more to radically shift consciousness on the whole as the technology of writing. While the oral word dies almost as soon as it is uttered, the written word is capable of repeated resurrection (and thus, life) by a reader, even as it supplants living memory (Ong

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<sup>11</sup> The term vaudeville is generally regarded as an adaptation of the French, “voix de ville,” or “voice of the city.” Many promoters preferred to advertise performances as variety shows to avoid the French connection.

80).<sup>12</sup> Those folk-spirit traditions Toomer sought to safeguard were threatened by technological progress, and no medium could impart a sense of such vital preservation and imminent destruction as well as the written word. Barbara Bowen likens Toomer's written homage to the residual existence of orality to that of the call-and-response tradition, and *Cane* addresses the paradox of writing the spoken word "because the call-and-response form which *Cane* explores and celebrates is exactly the form it shows is no long possible" (202). In other words, *Cane's* resistance to adhering to the rule of genre is due to its reliance on oral tradition to suffuse the poems, vignettes, and drama with its ability to commemorate and re-member traumatic past, even while technological progress threatened to dismantle such remembrance rooted in Southern soil. Throughout *Cane*, spiritual refrains operate as reminders to the reader that the sub-text of the present is rooted in an omnipresent violent history.

Historical instances of violence are always already invoked in the Southern landscape saturated by re-membering utterance. For example, Scruggs and VanDemarr note the connection between the poem "Song of the Son" and the later sketch, "Blood-Burning Moon," in the use of the terrorized natural environment to utter such terror hidden in the beautiful landscape of the South.

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<sup>12</sup> Ong notes Robert Browning's poetic paradox regarding the practice of flower preservation via book pressing, a practice that reflects the "deadness of the text, its removal from the living human lifeworld" even while it becomes a dormant living thing, capable of resurrection (80).

The link between the natural environment in “Song of Son” and that of “Blood-Burning Moon” is one in which “the ‘son’ soon learns that terror and beauty in the South are intertwined; the ‘singing tree’ and the lynching tree are the same tree” (Scruggs and VanDemarr 164). Similarly, in “Kabnis,” the tortured voices of parishioners frighten Northerner Ralph Kabnis, who is intimidated by living memory that confronts him everywhere he goes. It is interesting to note that the story of Mame Lamkins, the pregnant woman brutally murdered along with her unborn child in a mob lynching, is transmitted orally, for as Professor Layman points out, such memories only survive safely through oral transmission:

“Thems th things you neither does a thing or talks about if y want t stay around this way” (*Cane* 90).<sup>13</sup>

The threat to orality in the South contrasts sharply with the Northern sections of *Cane*, and in lieu of nature or folk spiritualism, technology in the North serves as reminder of both a violent past and a racially divisive present. Much of the text is imbued with technological anxiety regardless of geographical location, however, for Toomer seems to have been deeply influenced by the cultural symbolism of the railway. He claimed to have begun the novel’s array of

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<sup>13</sup> Barbara Foley has traced the fictional lynching of Mame Lamkins to the real-life lynching of Mary Turner in Valdosta, Georgia, before Toomer arrived to his post in Sparta (Foley 191). The significance here of Toomer’s literary rendering of a documented incident is in his conversion of the death of Lamkins into an orally transmitted incident that Sempter townsfolk are too terrified to disseminate widely.

sketches en route via railway back to his home in Washington, D.C., and in addition, one of the novel's most damning explorations of Southern racism places the title character of "Becky" literally between two tracks, and Paul of "Bona and Paul" is haunted by the Chicago elevated train that violently slices through his silent contemplations. Though the novel is saturated with distinctive images of Northern and Southern life, the railway figures prominently in the composition of the text. This connection seems to have influenced the novel's spatial and thematic structure. Ultimately, those characters affected by the railway find themselves consumed by racial division and omnipresent terror.

Toomer joins a long list of writers and artists who were influenced by this decidedly modern method of travel that collapsed the divisions between machine, person, and differentiating landscapes. Just as technology threatened to displace Southern folk traditions, the railway underscored the immense erasure occurring between the body and medium of travel. Beginning with the advent of the American railway system in the nineteenth century, the experience of train travel profoundly transformed the experience for those who were accustomed to slower travel that allowed the passenger to view and experience the climate and geography through which they were passing. Wolfgang Schivelbusch has noted that the "directness with which the railroad proceeds through the terrain destroy[s] the close relationship between the traveler and the traveled space," resulting in a transformation of landscape as concrete concept

to landscape as an abstract geographical entity (92). Travelers for the first time experienced the technological mark of modernity in the absence of a sustained connection to landscape that relegated their position to “mere parcel” within a steel entity. It was as if the body and steel bullet had merged capacities, and notwithstanding one’s position as a traveler or bystander, the confluence of nature and technology signaled a new modern consciousness.

Whereas one might see the traveler’s position in this light as without agency, Schivelbusch points out the confluence of the body and technology that came to reflect Americans as a whole. An 1858 *Atlantic Monthly* article that compared the English and American systems of building railway tracks suggested that while the British model “fights Nature at every point” to engineer straight lines of travel, the American railway engineer is “always respectful (though none the less determined) in the presence of natural obstacles to his progress, [and] bows politely to the opposing mountain-range” (qtd. in Schivelbush 96). The synergy of machine and human triumphed in the latter half of the nineteenth century, only to be met by confusion and a feeling of disconnection at the advent of automobiles, urban transportation systems and intensified electrical systems during the first decades of the twentieth century.

Despite the largely optimistic view Americans held of the railroad system, the transformation of American soil from landscape to mere geography had ushered in a modern sensibility that coincided with the massive departure in



waves of African Americans into the North and Midwest. While a steady stream of African Americans had already begun to trickle into Northern states immediately after slavery and throughout the period of Reconstruction, 1915 to 1930 saw over a million African Americans relocating to the North, where, as Steven Hahn argues, “the African-American population would become national,” finding “precious new space” within urban centers during a surge in labor opportunities afforded by the First World War (Hahn 465). The Great Migration was also prompted by the threat of growing racial violence in Southern states, where mob actions by white men were the primary catalyst for migration. Economic venture and lack of job security in the agriculturally based South were no doubt reason enough for many African Americans to leave, yet Farah Jasmine Griffin rightly argues that economics tended to obscure the terror of the South. The Chicago Urban League informed the public in 1920 that “after a lynching, colored people from that community will arrive in Chicago inside of two weeks,” and while academic inquiries generally center on questions of economic struggle, “the vast majority of literary texts focus on violence as the principal catalyst for migration” (Griffin 17-18).<sup>14</sup> Billie Holiday’s musical

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<sup>14</sup> Most academic inquiries into the social conditions informing Toomer’s *Cane* note the duality of violence and economic depression as important catalysts for migration, but one notable exception is in David G. Nicholls’ *Conjuring the Folk: Forms of Modernity in African America*. Nicholls traces the boll weevil infestation of 1921 that led to the migration of 43 percent of the population away from Georgia’s Greene County (28). He cites Barbara Foley’s research into the mixture of violence

masterpiece, "Strange Fruit," Langston Hughes' "One Way Ticket," and Jean Toomer's *Cane* would all locate lynching violence as distinctly Southern forms of terror that engendered mass migration in response to mass violence.

Violence might have prompted thousands to head North in search of a more tolerant social climate, but the North was not without its racial tensions, and Toomer sought to unite in *Cane* both the overt and more subtle forms of racism that joined South to North. Racial segregation in the South gave way to gentrification and low pay for African Americans who ventured North, merely reinforcing the circuit of racism that was at the root of lynching violence. With the memory of imminent violence only recently past (and very much in the present due to increased public pressure to expose and prevent such occurrences), the circuit of American racism was fueled by a traumatic combination of the remembrance of violence and new forms of social segregation.

*Cane* traces this circuit of American racism as it unfolded, beginning with its violent origins in the South, continuing into the North, and uniting the two geographical regions in its final chapter. While on the surface the text appears ordered only by geography, *Cane* was designed by Toomer to move narratively in a circular style "from the South up into the North, and back into the South

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and agricultural woes that Toomer witnessed upon his arrival, but ultimately he argues that agricultural devastation alone was responsible for migration.

again," narratively tracing its own circuit map of the lack of division between North and South where racism is concerned (*Letters* 101). The whole of Part I is located in the fictional Sempter, Georgia, which was based on Toomer's experiences in Sparta, while Part II's sketches move between Washington, D.C. and Chicago. The final section returns the setting to Georgia to follow a partially autobiographical story of a Northern schoolteacher who struggles to escape the threat of Southern racial violence and hatred. *Cane* ends where it began, completing the circuit of trauma that Toomer masterfully maps out.

What's more, the disruptive machine animation of railroad tracks and trains in *Cane* collide frequently with swan-song nostalgia for the pastoral, suggesting that the industrial progress of the early twentieth century not only endangered the memory of African American history, but threatened to erase cultural traditions Toomer saw as vital to the survival of African Americans in the South. As he observes Fern from the window of the train, the narrator of "Fern" describes the countryside as flowing into her, even after noting that her organic connection to the land only led to violence. One man, captivated by Fern's beauty, is nearly trampled to death by a buggy, and despite her stunning appearance and her seemingly spiritual communion with the Georgia landscape, "nothing ever really happened" (*Cane* 19). The crisis Toomer observed in the South was the introduction of damaging technologies that "destroyed humanity's balance with Nature, creating spiritual conflicts," and accentuated

the need to re-energize technologies to operate concomitantly with spirituality (Hutchinson 48). Mark Whalan has claimed that technology in *Cane* might instead represent a “potentially liberating” function of modernity, but the swan-song of the pastoral reminds us of the possibility of erasure that the machine encompasses.

The short sketch “Becky” makes clear that whatever liberatory functions technology may possess, it may just as easily be used to reenforce the circuit of racism. Becky’s banishment to “the narrow strip of land between the railroad and the road” is meted to her unknowingly by John Stone, a local mainstay of the community, after the townsfolk – black and white – shun her for becoming pregnant by a black man (*Cane* 7). It is at this literal crossroads that Becky becomes the symbol of multiple divisions plaguing the community, and by extension, the rest of the country. Divisions between black and white, as well as between the pastoral and technological machine culture, are inscribed upon Becky, for just as she has been banished for her racial breach, her daily life is encroached upon by the train and road traffic that “shook the ground under her cabin” and threatened the very structure built to confine her (7). Despite the activity flourishing outside, Becky becomes virtually invisible to the town, vanishing into the space between the road and the railroad track, and the only human contact she has beyond her sons is indirectly entertained through food and scribbled messages dropped by passengers on passing trains. The trains that

pass may be transporting passengers away from the plagued community and its shame that is visible from the train car window, yet its path has made Becky invisible.

The circuit of racism becomes complete once the town's banishment has bestowed upon Becky's children (as well as Bob Stone of the culminating chapter "Blood-Burning Moon," the son of John Stone) the very same hatred and bigotry that led to her banishment between the railroad and the road. Confused and angry, Becky's sons physically attack and shoot the townsfolk responsible for their confusion and anger, and then promptly leave, bringing with them violence and the memory of Southern racial hatred. Despite their violent attempts to break the pattern of racism that held them captive, their flight never succeeded in freeing their mother from its grasp. Becky remains invisible to the townsfolk after her sons' departure, yet the physical structure violently acted upon by the tremor of traffic outside eventually caves in on her, and the racial hatred of the town virtually consumes her, only to continue producing the same bigotry.

Consumption plays a crucial role in silently enforcing the circuit of racism, and the house that consumes Becky aside, food consumption ensures the routine enforcement of racism's invisible currency. A slew of sympathetic townsfolk bring food to the sequestered Becky, and yet none of them is aware of the others' actions, suggesting that despite private resistance to Becky's treatment, the rules of Southern race relations are made to withstand the objections of a few.

Toomer believed that it could not be until social rules and the physical body were separated that racial harmony would emerge, and while “Becky” demonstrates the hopelessness of such a division taking place in the racially divisive South, the technologically progressive North proved as great a challenge to mind-body harmony. He wrote in his unfinished autobiography of a mystical experience he encountered while waiting for an elevated train in New York City, which in many ways is an extension of the revelations made in *Cane*. As Toomer relates in “The Experience,” a section of the unpublished manuscript, “From Exile to Being,” of a sudden, he felt “startled by an uncommon inward event” as he “reflected on the condition of man” while waiting for a train to arrive (*A Jean Toomer Reader* 33-34). The uncommon event to which he refers might be characterized in lay terms as an out-of-body experience, but Toomer goes to great lengths to identify this experience as one wholly incongruent with both the urban landscape around him and the mechanical apparatuses that punctuate the urban landscape. Not only does this revelation begin while he waits – and lets pass – trains that operate on a swift schedule, but he later describes a different kind of transportation outside of the punctual machine:

I was being transported. *I* was. Not my body. It stood there motionless on the “L” station. Not my being...Transport is the exact term; so is transcendence. I was rising above my habitual level. I was coming over all that formerly had kept me from my real life and being. Liberation is the

exact term. I was being freed... (39)

That this experience originated on an elevated platform is reminiscent of Paul's violent dismemberment by the shadow of a train in "Bona and Paul," although in its later configuration, the train is not the primary agent of action, nor is it an agent of terrorizing memory, but rather is the catalyst for Toomer's transcendent revelation. Transportation in the above context is not merely a practical means by which Toomer relates the out-of-body experience; it represents one of his many subtle reformulations of machine metaphor. Instead of boarding the train, he is transported out of his own human body to a space of consciousness wholly disconnected from modern habits, yet it is through the vocabulary of technology that he relates his transcendence.

Even the ritual of eating is described as a process of machine efficiency, yet still he rejects the actual markers of mechanical efficiency and consumption. "We give authority to clocks and calendars," Toomer begins the tenth chapter, "Restaurant," "and they rule us," and even as he resists the enforced schedule of machine transportation, he notes that eating had become engrained in his body as an unnaturally habitual process marked by clock cycle. What used to be a cycle dictated by the body's nutritional needs has been replaced by obligatory consumption, something technology enforces by replicating the structure of the body's cycle. If the body is not hungry, the clock cycle forces observance of the consumption process, disrupting the natural function of eating. The ruling of the

body by machine cycle is of central importance to Toomer's structuring of *Cane*, and through three separate vignette cycles, he positions the terrifying union of machine and body at the pinnacle of disconnection from natural balance, as evidenced in "Fern," "Blood-Burning Moon," and the final chapter, "Kabnis."

Yet technology not only functions as an interruptive device designed to mirror the harsh structural transitions between chapters but also as a mediator for the reunification of the geographical circle. That is, while the layout of *Cane* forms a complete circle, independent vignettes and poems indicate a more chaotic formation of disorienting chapters that move geographically from point to point. The technologies that enter the narrative serve as much to complicate the lives of the characters as they do to reunite the text with an implied historical narrative rooted in geography. In the Chicago-based chapter "Bona and Paul," Paul stands before his apartment window:

Paul is in his room of two windows.

Outside, the South-Side L track cuts them in two.

Bona is one window. One window, Paul.

Hurtling Loop-jammed L trains throw them in swift shadow [...]

to a pine-matted hillock in Georgia. (73)

The reference to Georgia no doubt alludes to the geographical dislocation experienced by many during the Great Migration of African Americans from all over the South to northern and Midwestern cities like Chicago. A threatening



and violent language characterizes the elevated train movements that cut through his windows and “throw them into swift shadow” (73). The train’s technological ferocity not only intervenes in Paul’s contemplations before his date with a white woman, but reunites Paul with historical narratives of trauma and suggests the violence of the South has not been escaped, but is rather less conspicuous and omnipresent.

The circular cycle of *Cane* is not merely a geographical one, as “Bona and Paul” implies; the cycle of internal cultural violence that permeates otherwise everyday examples of the characters’ lives throughout *Cane* suggests a multitude of circular action taking place outside of the novel’s structure. From cane fields to urban transportation and back, the circularity of symbolism finds its nexus in the bodies that populate the text, and in each sketch a direct or indirect reference to violence is punctuated by poems that juxtapose natural settings against a backdrop of disconnection, trauma and violence. While Toomer saw in the South an undeniable spirituality amongst the African American community, it was the disappearance of spirituality that revealed its presence to him initially, and *Cane*’s oscillation between optimism and mourning propels a cycle that seeks to reveal an uncertain, almost oxymoronic modern moment.

“Kabnis” is critical to unlocking the meaning of the text as a whole, and it is through an examination of the landscape of terror that Kabnis’ impotence and traumatic stasis reveal clues linking terror and trauma to technologies of power.

A school teacher recently transplanted from the North – like Toomer himself, and indeed the story is to some degree autobiographical – Ralph Kabnis is haunted by the hidden violence of the South throughout the story. As Kabnis gradually becomes indoctrinated into life in the Southern town, he loses his job and is taken under the wing of Halsey, a local handyman who employs Kabnis to help repair and construct machines and tools for locals. Father John lives silently in the basement, where his only words are spoken regarding sin, much to the nervous and confused chagrin of the other inhabitants. The final section of “Kabnis,” and the end of the novel, relates Kabnis’ explosive reaction to Father John’s impassioned accusation of “th sin th white folks ‘mitted when they made the Bible lie” (117). Visibly shaken and angry, Kabnis rebukes the old man and returns to the shop upstairs, resigned to his role. In the final lines the sun rises as Carrie kneels before Father John, and the cyclical mourning song linking black mother and child that began the play punctuates Carrie’s plea, “Jesus, come” (117).

Kabnis’ perturbed reaction to Father John’s declaration of the sins of white folks signals the deep-seated memories of fear he had long since buried, but ultimately, he abandons those fears for the safety of the tool shop where he takes refuge in technology. The cycle of mourning and the cycle of fear are indelibly linked, as the very fear Kabnis is struck by at the start of the section is rekindled by the old man’s blunt frankness. As he struggles to put his anger into words,

Kabnis exclaims, "The whole world is a conspiracy t sin, especially in America, an against me. I'm th victim of their sin. I'm what sin is" (116). His haphazard explanation of his own role in the cycle of violence is a marker of the inability of language to fully transmit traumatic experience, and without a full understanding of the old man's' words, Kabnis is unable to reconcile the meaning of the past with the fear of his present. Ultimately his refuge in the tool shop is a familiar refuge reminiscent of Becky's sequestering next to the railroad tracks, where she too is unable to reconcile the past and present, and remains to the end of her life a symbol of the irreconcilable.

Toomer does not merely attribute Ralph's fear and his sensitivity to the threat of violence to his Northern upbringing, which he makes clear with Lewis, the school teacher described as "what a stronger Kabnis might have been," for Lewis seems successful in evading the markings of trauma that hold Ralph captive (97). Self-assured and confident, Lewis ironically does not see the potential for hidden violence that Kabnis anticipates. He is not ignorant of what Yi-Fu Tuan has termed the "landscape of fear" inherent in the countryside, and Tuan argues that, despite the traditional American association of crime as an urban problem, violence in the Southern countryside is ever-present, yet hidden just out of view, for "suffering leaves no mark on the country" but instead "[dissolves] into a landscape" (Tuan 139, 144). Despite this dissolution of

violence into the scenic backdrop of the Georgia landscape, Kabnis – like Toomer – senses its omnipresence.

Ralph Kabnis, more so than Lewis, captures the multiple worlds within which Toomer the writer operates, and his sensitivity to the omnipresence of violence reflects the very real threat of violence of which Toomer himself was painfully aware, evidenced by his almost immediate composition of *Cane's* sketches as soon as he boarded a train back to Washington, D.C.<sup>15</sup> As an outsider new to the South, Kabnis is shocked by the possibilities of racial violence, and likewise shocked that an educated Northerner might end up the victim of mob violence. His shaken reaction to an antagonistic note hurled at him made realistic this threat, and he automatically sees himself in immediate physical danger:

God Almighty, theyre here. After me. On me. All along the road I saw  
their eyes flaring from the cane. Hounds. Shouts. What in God's name did  
I run here for? A mud-hole trap. I stumbled on a rope. O God, a rope.  
Their clammy hands were like the love of death playing up and down my  
spine. Trying to trip my legs. To trip my spine. Up and down my spine.  
My spine...My legs... (93)

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<sup>15</sup> Barbara Foley has demonstrated Toomer's awareness of specific lynchings that occurred in Georgia, before his tenure at the Sparta school, and in his correspondence with Waldo Frank, he notes that visiting Georgia might not be possible, for "certain conditions there...make it not the best place in the world at this time" (*Letters* 60).

The signifiers of hidden violence, chiefly hound dogs and rope, haunt the fleeing Kabnis, and despite the absence of visible danger, the natural environment once again reminds one of the distinct reality rooted in historical trauma. The sugar cane veils and contains the absent, angry mob, and Kabnis' imagined altercation becomes the traumatic wound he would suppress and release in his dispute with Father John.

While Kabnis is consumed by the weight of his fear and anxiety over the threat of imminent violence hidden in the Georgia landscape, "Rhobert" articulates the slow and eventual destruction enacted by the structural environment of race in the North. The second vignette of the second section set in the Northern states, "Rhobert" describes the title character as embodying a literal housing structure whose heaviness crushes its human occupant. While the poetic refrain points out that "life is water that is being drawn off," Rhobert is virtually drowned by this "dead thing that weights him down" as he struggles to hold in the water of life (42). So consumed by the magnitude of his decaying structure, very little else is revealed about him aside from his physical calamity, and the only personal information offered indicates he at some point had a wife and children. The short sketch ends with the narrator musing about dedicating "a monument of hewn oak, carved in nigger-heads" to Rhobert once the water that fills his house-body structure has dried up (43). In his immense physical

pain, the memory of Rhobert's past and the details of his life become irrelevant as it has been replaced in life by a house, and in death by a mere monument.

Rhobert's inability to escape his physical agony suggests that material structure throughout *Cane* only heightens the intensity of bodily pain. While Rhobert cannot escape his agonizing house-body, in the first section and third sections, Southern violence is inextricably linked to material objects or structures that invoke the terrorized body. The technology of the lyncher's rope, the automobiles that stalk lynching victims, and even the tool shop where Kabnis seeks refuge powerfully imply the threat of imminent bodily pain, and "Portrait in Georgia," "Blood-Burning Moon," and "Kabnis" invoke Southern terror through exactly these implicit symbols. Toomer's method ultimately follows the tradition of writing the body through implication rather than direct signification (Henderson 3). As Carol Henderson explains, while signification links a specific wound to the body's past trauma, implication hints at a trauma whose markings are more subtle. My purpose here is to call attention to the significance of implication in literature that attempts to write the body. Henderson argues that scars and other markers of trauma need not manifest in a physical wound, but that in America, "all black bodies [are] marked" by some form of scarring directly related to historical trauma; how a scar is translated in literature is through either signification or implication, or, put another way, "as an actual bodily wound and as a rhetorical narrative device" (Henderson 7).

In "Portrait in Georgia," Toomer implies violent history that is powerfully invoked by the southern white woman's body when he describes her hair as "coiled like a lyncher's rope" (29). Bodily wounds are not visible in the penultimate sketch of the first section, and in using the white woman's body as a rhetorical referent for violence, Toomer calls attention to the often falsified claims of rape that had been grafted onto the white female body. He also implies the origin of such deadly allegations, focusing on her lips and breath, where "old scars" buttress "the last sweet scent of cane" that permeates the terrorized Southern landscape, only to be consumed and re-produced by instigators of terror.

Whereas "Portrait in Georgia" invokes the symbolism of lynching, the sketch that follows, "Blood-Burning Moon," directly confronts the terror of lynching, focusing specifically on the role that sexual consumption plays in reproducing violence. When Tom Burwell and Bob Stone fight over Louisa, a black woman desired by both men, Toomer also inverts the terms by which lynching arises, correcting the Southern lynching narrative to its more historically accurate precedent (Williams 96).<sup>16</sup> Louisa herself becomes symbolic

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<sup>16</sup> That is to say, while in the South it was common for black men to be accused of engaging in sexual activity with white women, "white men's rape of black women was as rampant as the lynching of black men" (Williams 96).

of consuming violence, as she is sexually consumed by Bob Stone when he sees her “bent over [the] hearth” used as a cooking range during slavery (*Cane* 33).

The process of violent consumption recreates the master-subject dynamic of slavery, giving way to Tom Burwell’s later consumption by mass mob violence, linking the black female body to the circuit of racialized terror. Moments before the lynching, the bodies of Tom and Louisa powerfully converge when Louisa “slip[s], crumbled, her body loosely propped against the woodwork of the well,” followed by Tom, who “seemed rooted” to the well (35). Inextricably linked, the bodies of Louisa and Tom are both terrorized by the threat that sexual abuse poses.

This interconnection textually represents the circuit of racism that Toomer strives to signify in *Cane*. The circuit itself is a highly volatile interconnection charged by terror originating beneath the skin, for as the vignettes and poems of *Cane* demonstrate, the source of terror inflicted on the African American body is the implication of imminent white mob violence, and, consequently, bodily pain. The threat of violence may be very real, yet mere implication is powerful enough to shock, indicating the source of traumatic origin is its imminence. While *Cane* mourns the eventual loss of the southern African American folk spirit and relies heavily on the pastoral landscape to carry out this swan song, the central threat to folk spirit is the electrical currency shock of the circuit of racism.



The African American female body is yoked to the circuit of racism throughout *Cane*, perhaps most evidently in “Esther,” where currency takes on an alternate connotation. Esther has been indoctrinated vis-à-vis the family business to view race as a division one must both uphold and collapse, for as her father remarks, “good business comes from remembering that the white folks don’t divide the niggers,” yet he also tells her to “be just as black as any man who has a silver dollar” (24). That Esther dreams of two babies she rescues – one black and one raceless – suggests the deep divisions she has internalized, and as Scruggs and VandeMarr argue, her business education is rooted in capitalist practices that reveals the role of currency in reinforcing those divisions:

“currency is always both current and colorless, that is, the human exchange on which it is based remains hidden” (152). While the traumatic markings of the past are located well within the past, only to be recharged by the circuit of present racism, monetary currency is an immediate, hidden source of currency protected and maintained by white systems of capitalism. The racial division taught to Esther by her storeowner father, and her struggle to reconcile “distinctions between the business and the social worlds,” suggests yet another circular pattern of currency in *Cane* that uncovers the larger circuit of racism.

While electrical and monetary currency trace the systematized circuit of racism in *Cane*, ultimately the threat of white violence is an omnipresent force that can be invoked by both natural and mechanical environments. Farah

Jasmine Griffin argues that white instigators are described in terms likening them to machines, while black characters are yoked to the natural environment, although in the case of “Blood-Burning Moon,” another significant inversion occurs that aligns the white mob with the natural environment, while the instruments of terror they use to elicit violence remain aligned with the machine [27]. The mob is likened to “ants upon a forage”:

Except for the taut hum of their moving, all was silent. Shotguns, revolvers, rope, kerosene, torches. Two high-powered cars with glaring search-lights. They came together. The taut hum rose to a low roar. Then nothing could be heard but the flop of their feet in the thick dust of the road. The moving body of their silence preceded them over the crest of the hill into factory town. It flattened the Negroes beneath it. It rolled to the wall of the factory, where it stopped. Tom knew that they were coming. He couldn't move. And then he saw the search-lights glaring down on him. A quick shock went through him. He stiffened. (36)

While the mob does take on the characteristics of a machine that terrorizes the black townsfolk, Toomer merges natural imagery with technological metaphor, resulting in a kind of electrical shock once Tom sees the mob in full view. That is, the machine trauma of the lynching scene is in response to the objects carried or utilized by the lynch mob – the collective bodies of the white men and the

instruments of terror are one in the same. Toomer need not rely on the machines of the South to invoke terror, for the instruments of terror are omnipresent.

Similarly, as noted earlier in this chapter, in “Kabnis,” it is the electrically charged natural environment that invokes terror. As he walks along the cane fields, convinced that he will quickly become a victim of a lynch mob, Ralph stumbles upon what he believes to be a rope. The implication of the rope is enough to provoke a violent reaction from Ralph, yet as his early paranoia and the blaring eyes he imagines staring out at him from the cane stalks suggest, the natural environment triggers memory of the instruments of terror. The ghosts of terror that keep him awake at night are indelibly tied to the Georgia woods, and in order to release his emotional terror, he must consume and smother the natural environment, as he does with the chicken that wanders near his cabin.

Despite Ralph’s terror when transplanted from the North only to confront Southern terror, *Cane’s* second section makes ample references to the memory of violence, and it is in this section that technology becomes the primary interlocutor for violent memory. While Mark Whalan has read “Her Lips Were Copper Wire” as evidence of Toomer’s optimistic curiosity surrounding the possibilities of technology for eliminating the circle of racial violence, when read alongside Tom Burwell’s electrical shock in “Blood-Burning Moon,” as well as the electrically charged violence of “Box Seat,” a mere two sections ahead of the

poem, technology seems to merely reinforce – and indeed fully charge – the circuit of racism and violence that plague both North *and* South (Whalan 467).

To be sure, “Her Lips are Copper Wire” does, as Jean Toomer explained to Filippo Tammaso Marinetti, and as Mark Whalan posits, dabble in the positive machine imagery of Futurism, yet in interpreting the poem’s contemplation of machine culture, one might note a negatively repressed electrical charge in the female human-machine’s repressed sexuality (Whalan 467-468). For one thing, sexual intimacy is not equated with privacy, as the narrator commands the reader, “telephone the power-house / that the main wires are insulate,” opening the display of sexuality to voyeuristic audiences intent to view the comingling of the couple’s electrical structures (lines 6-7). That the sexually charged liaison is exposed to the public only heightens the repression of the female human-machine, who is instructed to “with your tongue remove the tape / and press your lips to mine / till they are incandescent” (lines 10-12). More than simply a “tension between free will and arbitrary restraints,” once she liberates herself from the bondage represented by electrical tape, the female human-machine returns her copper wire lips to the narrator’s, suggesting that while her captivity is eliminated, her only recourse is to bond herself to the electrical circuit that elsewhere in *Cane* is the site and origin of hidden trauma and imminent violence (McKay 88).

“Box Seat” further (and most clearly) defines the violence hidden in the Northern circuit of racism, and throughout the sketch, the main protagonist is haunted by a hidden violence that threatens to boil over at any moment. What unites “Box Seat” with the electrical currency of “Her Lips are Copper Wire” is a mutual dependency on the very structures of repression that fuel the circuit of racism. The female subject of the poem depends on contact with her male counterpart, yet their union may only be actualized through plugging into the electrical source, a move that ironically liberates and limits her choices. In the sketch that follows, the electrically charged “Box Seat,” the struggle to rewire the circuit of racism redirects the power into a human conduit controlled by one character. Dan’s union with the object of his desire, Muriel, may only come to fruition if she is freed from the social structures that Dan must destroy and redirect under his control.

The sketch begins with Dan traveling to visit the reluctant Muriel, and along the way he hints at the struggle to reconcile his desire for her with his anger over her acceptance of social propriety. Once he reaches his destination, Dan awkwardly attempts to enter the gate, only to become frustrated and imagine murdering its occupants. “Break in,” he tells himself, “Get an ax and smash in. Smash in their faces...Grab an ax and brain em. Cut em up” (59). His anxious frustration is masked by what he views as a virtuous act of entering “a sick world to heal it,” even if by healing he violates the borders of the flesh and

destroys the physical structure (59). Although his anger continues to seethe throughout his visit with Muriel, it isn't until he reaches the Lincoln Theater that his outburst reveals hidden violence that directly links him to the circuit of racism underlying his frustration.

Once ushered to his seat, Dan's internal dialogue and the narrator's description of his surroundings employ the dual nature-machine metaphors that dominate the first section of *Cane*, and as violence quickly becomes fused with machine imagery, hidden violence is suddenly and demonstrably visible. Hurriedly escorted to his seat, his frustration is at first alleviated in part by the woman sitting next to him, whose "strong roots sink down and spread under the river and disappear in blood-lines that waver south" (65). Despite his energetic, organic alignment with the woman and her connection to the roots that bind North to South (and thus are capable of transporting his frustration), Dan's aggravation with the crushing noise and activity of the crowd only increases, and an angry confrontation with a crowd member only leads him to a more destructive machine-like ferocity. He watches the stage as dwarves box for the entertainment of the crowd, and "his eyes [open], mechanically," as the spectatorial violence prompts Dan to transfer his frustration into thoughts of near-violent sexual confrontation (66).

Raw physical power on stage merges with Dan's hidden violence, and machine imagery both arms and disarms Dan's seething sexual frustration:

So framed, the proposition is a mental-filler, Dentist, I want gold teeth. It should become cherished of the technical intellect. I hereby offer it to posterity as one of the important machine-age designs. P.S. It should be noted, that because it *is* an achievement of this age, its growth and hence its causes, up to the point of maturity, antedate machinery. (67)

The mechanical language Dan uses to describe both sexual encounter and the “natural” outcomes of the machine age that produced the gold tooth prosthesis suggests more than a mere bolstering of technology, and as Karen Jackson Ford points out, it is “a revealing if tautological attempt on Dan’s part to unify the past and the present” (105-106). As such, Dan unites the inventions of the past that stand in for the weakened body with his present frustration in an effort to justify his desire for Muriel, and Muriel is relegated through this metaphor to the body filled in by machine.

Yet Dan Moore doesn’t connect the past with the present simply to assuage his frustration, and his violent outburst is precipitated by a fusion of past trauma with the electrical charge of the performance arena. He muses about an old man whose freedom from slavery was “not so long ago,” and when Dan visits him out of curious fascination, he realizes that despite slavery’s position as historical past, the former slave had born witness to oppression and progress within his lifespan (*Cane* 67). Before Dan can work out the significance of his

sudden remembrance, the crowd erupts into applause, leaving Dan to more violent thoughts:

I am going to reach up and grab the girders of this building and pull them down...Hid by the smoke and dust Dan Moore will arise. In his right hand will be a dynamo. In his left, a god's face that will flash white light from ebony...Lightning will flash. I'll grab a girder and swing it like a walking-stick. Lightning will flash. I'll grab its black knob and swing it like a crippled cane. Lightning... (68)

The physical structure is the target of Dan's destruction, and in his fantasy he imagines himself electrically charged, able to annihilate the invisible institution that holds Muriel captive by its social codes and rules.

Evoking a different kind of cane than the agricultural crop that dominated the first section of the text, Toomer alludes to the trauma of racism in the South, and its continuing – albeit invisible – omnipresent currency in the North. Like an electrical circuit, Dan seeks to redirect and control the circuit of power. His struggle to liberate Muriel from the strict norms to which she is bound manifests in his intense desire, yet unlike Becky, whose confinement is powerfully visible next to the railroad tracks, Muriel's confinement is an electrical force that Dan feels he must usurp in order to destroy its hold. Her participation in the role playing game on stage is too much for Dan to handle, leading to the culminating moment of Dan's explosive anger, in which he screams "JESUS WAS ONCE A



LEPER" and engages in a physical altercation with an audience member (*Cane* 69).

Electrification signifies the circuit of racism that consumes and wholly dictates the cycle of violence hidden in American notions of progress. While electricity serves as an outlet for Dan's frustrations, once articulated, his resistance to the circuit of racism vanishes. After following the man he punched outside the theater into a dark alleyway to continue the altercation, "Dan, having forgotten him, keeps going on" (69). What his forgetfulness suggests is that technology and the intense electricity that affords him an outlet for his frustration merely drains and supplants memory.

"Box Seat" shares with the Southern section of *Cane* an undercurrent of terror that is omnipresent yet wholly disconnected from present consciousness. The swan-song of *Cane* is not a lament for the terrors of the past that precipitated folk-spirit remembrance vis-à-vis song, but rather constitutes a lament for the historical amnesia of the present. Racial violence had by no means lessened at the advent of technology, and in fact, as Tim Armstrong points out, the technological electrification of America had only made more invisible the dangers of modernity. "What is to prevent [electricity] becoming a free-floating energy," Armstrong posits, "short-circuiting barriers of class, race, and morality in order to follow its desired pathway?" (39). The binary divisions that *Cane* traces are only strengthened by the technological progress of modernity, and the circuit of

racism is provided new powerful currency with which to destroy the memory of violence and enforce the divisions Toomer desired to dissolve. In his never-actualized sequel to *Cane*, he envisioned a protagonist who could tap into the currency of the machine in order to enact the “first and inevitable step in the racial unification of America”:

(1) A generator, making his own qualitative energy.

(2) A transformer, turning the crude energy of his material world into stuff of higher, rarer potency. (qtd. in Whalan, *Race, Manhood* 186-187)

The hopeful possibilities of usurping technology’s capabilities would be all but abandoned by Toomer shortly after the publication of *Cane*, but what his forsaken sequel illustrates was his desire to collapse the divisions responsible for the death of Tom Burwell, the terrorized anxiety of Ralph Kabnis, and the consumption of Becky.

In the years following the publication of *Cane*, Toomer grew weary of the literary marketplace’s insistence of generic formula and categorization, and after criticizing his publisher’s branding of Toomer as a Negro artist, he seemed to have lost interest entirely in harnessing the power of divisions that directed the circuit of American racism. He did, however, continue to believe in a new America that would not be fueled by racism. In the poem “The Blue Meridian,” he bemoaned the rise of cities that continued to link “old peoples” with the emergence of a new race, for this presence had “made roads, laid silver rails /

sang of their swift achievement / And perished, displaced by machines”  
(*Collected Poems* 52). All that could rebuild an overburdened, destroyed America was a technologically charged spirituality that recognized the need for Americans “to suffer and rejoice, create” in order that they might “circulate” (70). The “dynamic atom-aggregate” that would refurbish America was for Toomer a spiritual source, yet its powerful currency suggests a dynamo not unlike Dan of “Box Seat,” capable of harnessing electrical power that in Dan’s case was stopped short by the markings of a trauma that ran too deep for his control. The past and present of *Cane* refuse to reconcile, and in Toomer’s *Blue Meridian*, he found a structure that could not only reconcile the two, but negated racial division altogether.

## CHAPTER 3

### BODIES WITHOUT BORDERS: CHARLOTTE DELBO AND TRANSCULTURAL SUFFERING

*“There is a café called ‘Arrivals’ and a café called ‘Departures.’ There are people who arrive and people who leave. But there is a station where those who arrive are those who are leaving, a station where those who arrive have never arrived, where those who have left never came back” – Charlotte Delbo, Auschwitz and After*

Seated outdoors during a ceremony held to commemorate French victims of the Holocaust, betrayed by their own country at the hands of the collaborationist Vichy regime, and deported to their deaths in the German concentration camps as members of a so-called inferior race or as political prisoners of war, Charlotte Delbo was shocked to hear her own name read amongst the perished as it was uttered from the podium. Relates historian Lawrence Langer, “Her paralysis lasted only an instant; then she modestly raised her hand and murmured, ‘Non, Monsieur: présente’” (*Auschwitz and After* xviii). Haunted by the presence of doubt that she had in fact survived one of the worst tragedies of the twentieth century, Delbo nonetheless became a voice for the silenced, a tireless presence who would until her death in 1985 continue to confront – and ask that the international community confront – a resounding absence that forever altered Western landscapes of consciousness. She wrote

prolificly in the years following the war, including the well-known trilogy *Auschwitz and After*, a posthumously published memoir entitled *Days and Memory*, and other works ranging from plays to epistolary collections, all centered on the continuing need to commemorate and collectively re-member the presence of the absent past.

Born in 1913 at Vigneux-sur-Seine, Charlotte Delbo joined the Young Communists in 1932, where she met and married Georges Dudach, a fellow Communist and passionate activist for human rights. While studying at the Sorbonne, she wrote reviews and articles for *Cahiers de la Jeunesse*, the Communist journal for which Georges served as editor. Through a chance interview for the journal, Delbo met Louis Jouvet, the famed Parisian theater director, who invited Delbo to act as his assistant on his upcoming South American theater tour. Traveling with the theater group from 1937 to 1941, Delbo further developed a love for writing and theater that would later culminate in her numerous plays, memoirs, and works of biography and fiction after her liberation from the Nazi concentration camps.

It was in the summer of 1941 while in Buenos Aires with Jouvet and his troupe that Delbo first learned of the death of Andre Woog, a fellow Communist friend and resistance fighter against the Nazi collaborationist Vichy regime.<sup>17</sup>

Upon learning of his death, Delbo resolved to return to France to aid in the resistance. Despite Jouvet's insistence that she not "[rush] into the lion's den," Delbo returned to France, where Dudach waited. As she notes in *Convoy to Auschwitz*, Delbo and Georges "went to Paris by different routes: I had a pass to cross the demarcation line; he went by back roads through the Tours region" (74). Her return to France was dangerous, and her underground resistance efforts were what would lead to her arrest and deportation. The couple lived under an assumed name and printed resistance flyers, even issuing from their apartment an edition of *Lettres françaises*, the underground Communist literary magazine produced by Jacques Decour, leader of the resistance group *Comité national des écrivains*.<sup>18</sup> From November of 1941 until 2 March 1942, Dudach and Delbo lived in fear of their arrest, which would eventually occur after a careless messenger was followed by police into their residence. The messenger escaped, but Delbo and Dudach were taken into custody, and shortly after, on 23 May, Dudach was executed by firing squad at Mont-Valerien.<sup>19</sup> Delbo remained

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<sup>17</sup> Delbo knew about Woog's arrest before departing France, but his guillotine execution by Marshal Pétain's special court designed to convict political dissidents convinced her that she should return to France and rejoin the resistance movement.

<sup>18</sup> Decour would never actually see the edition of *Lettres Françaises* that Delbo and Dudach helped to make possible; he was arrested and turned over to the Nazis in February of 1942. He was executed on 30 May 1942, only 7 days after the execution of Georges Dudach by firing squad in his native France.

<sup>19</sup> Upon her repatriation, Delbo tracked down the two police officers who followed the messenger into she and Dudach's apartment. After filing paperwork to have them arrested for wartime treason, she was informed that the two officers joined the resistance and left the Vichy

imprisoned at Romainville until her deportation on 24 January 1943, to the infamous Nazi death camp known as Auschwitz-Birkenau. Moved to the satellite camp Raïsko and later Ravensbrück, Delbo was eventually liberated by the Swiss Red Cross on 23 April 1945. She began writing of her experiences immediately in Sweden, where she spent two years recovering from dysentery.

Her stay at Romainville and subsequent deportation from the station at Compiègne would prove a crucial element of the experience, uniting her with 229 other French women who were part of her convoy and who were housed together in the political prisoner barracks upon their arrival to the infamous extermination camp.<sup>20</sup> In an act of newly established solidarity and pride, the women of Delbo's convoy notoriously entered Auschwitz singing "La Marseillaise," the French national anthem.<sup>21</sup> The group's emotional attachment to and dependence on one another is strikingly apparent throughout *Auschwitz and After* trilogy and her posthumously published memoir, *Days and Memory*, where

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collaborationist regime. Their betrayal to the Gestapo by the Vichy regime thus went unprosecuted, and Delbo's fight to seek justice for her husband's death and her wrongful imprisonment was never fulfilled (*Auschwitz and After* xii).

<sup>20</sup> This particular convoy was the only all female convoy to be deported from France, and one of only a few convoys of non-Jewish deportees. Of the women deported along with Delbo were Marie Politzer, wife of the Communist sociologist Georges Politzer, Vittoria Daubeuf, daughter of Italian Socialist politician Pietro Nenni, and a number of scientists who saved Delbo from the death sentence of physical labor when she was chosen to farm kok-saghyz (a plant that yielded rubber-like material) needed for the German war effort (Długoborsk and Piper 115).

<sup>21</sup> Two women from this group, Annette Epaud and Noémie Durand, would later sing the French national anthem as they were escorted to their executions in the gas chamber (*Convoy to Auschwitz* 82).

Delbo notes the physical and mental support each woman unfailingly offered when another was too fatigued to continue laboring or too weak from dysentery to withstand the hours of roll call demanded by the meticulous German SS. So instrumental to her experience was this group that when only 49 returned, Delbo searched for information on both the survivors and those who perished to commemorate those who had been betrayed by the Vichy regime and delivered into the hands of the Nazi machine.<sup>22</sup>

The result of Delbo's quest for biographical tribute, 1965's *Le convoi de 24 janvier*, published in English as *Convoy to Auschwitz: Women of the French Resistance*, chronicled the lives, deaths, and repatriations of the entire French convoy. Delbo wrote a biographical sketch of each woman that included life before the war and their survival or manner of death, if known, offset by each woman's tattoo number issued upon their arrival at Auschwitz. Ironically, the Nazi machine of numerical efficiency would aid in her quest to humanize the dehumanized, and to commemorate the forgotten. She concludes with a final biographical sketch to a woman simply referred to as "Mado," who joined the convoy shortly before their scheduled deportation. The final words of the text read, "none of the women surviving today remembers her," underscoring

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<sup>22</sup> In using the term Nazi machine, I refer to the modern efficiency and vast grasp that many scholars note is the defining characteristic of Hitler's Nazi Germany.



Delbo's resolute determination to commemorate each victim, even when they perished without a trace or came from unknown origins (216).

The tattoo numbers assigned to inmates are a central feature of the biographical sketches, and as such are visually spaced apart from the text as testaments to the emotional, historical, and physical impact of the Vichy regime's betrayal of its own citizens and the indelible mark Nazi Germany left on millions of terrorized victims. Despite the textual separation between tattoo number and biographical information in *Convoy to Auschwitz*, the tattooed number plays a prominent role in Delbo's public persona as testament to the physical markings of the Nazi machine.

The remnants of Delbo's own physical scarring – her tattoo – stand out in the photograph chosen for the cover of Rosette Lamont's 1995 English translation of *Auschwitz and After*, capturing her ever present insistence on remembering the markings of the Nazi machine. With short sleeves and her Auschwitz number – 31661 – clearly visible and centered in the photograph, Delbo is depicted speaking and gesturing while sitting amongst a pile of her papers and books. She visually embodies her role as the vessel of experience that is “enveloped in the skin of memory,” and, seated amongst her archive of testimonial experience, she personifies her role as a tireless archivist for her collective convoy (*Days and Memory* 5). The striking symbolism of the photograph puts front and center the embodied style of Delbo, visually reproducing her quest to transmit a collective

memory of her convoy's experience in Auschwitz. Delbo was until her death in 1985 a herald of Holocaust memory, negating traditional notions of genre in her efforts to develop a central chorus that unites the victims and survivors.

A central feature of Delbo's writing, the collective voice is one duly informed by the historical trauma of the Holocaust and her reverence for Greek tragedy, the latter of which figures prominently in *Auschwitz and After*. Whereas the chorus is a characteristic feature of Greek drama, Delbo recognized its potential to unite distinct narratives amidst poetry and prose designed to indicate the disconnection of trauma. The traumatic shock of incarceration and extreme deprivation at the hands of the Nazi machine are delivered with intensity by Delbo's straightforward prose, and while individual recollections by survivors are differentiated from one another, the collective chorus punctuates the sketches throughout, creating a sense of cohesion amidst chaos. The first of many chorus interruptions between sketches, the text directly addresses the reader as the horrible events witnessed by Delbo and her comrades: "O you who know / did you know that hunger makes the eyes sparkle that thirst dims them" (11). Like Henry Box Brown's all-encompassing panorama, the chorus invites readers to confront atrocities to which the text bears witness, while emphasizing the impossibility of fully comprehending their lasting impact on the memories of the survivor. Oftentimes Delbo's poetic configuration of the chorus is invoked

alongside, following or preceding scenes of brutality in which bodies are acted upon or witness pain, offering a perspective that actively re-members.

The Greek chorus of *Auschwitz and After* infuses Delbo's writing with the sense of "unwanted beauty" noted by Brett Ashley Kaplan, while the individual experiences she recounts force the reader to confront the community of memory in the face of violence and the abject. While the tattoo remains a visible remnant of dehumanization, *Auschwitz and After* relies upon bodily fluids to relate traumatic brutalization that continued to haunt survivors, and was most often a death sentence for those whose bodies emitted them. Inmates were often plagued by diarrhea that signalled the breakdown of the body's ability to fight off disease that spread rapidly in the camps, and once the body began to deteriorate, so too did the ability to fathom one's survival. Kristeva has described this conflation of the body's physical pain and the mind's recognition of its polluting contents as the "horror within":

The body's inside, in that case, shows up in order to compensate for the collapse of the border between inside and outside. It is as if the skin, a fragile container, no longer guaranteed the integrity of one's "own and clean self" but, scraped or transparent, invisible or taut, gave way before the dejection of its contents. (53)

Delbo's prose stresses the constant collapse of the borders between inside and outside, life-threatening consequences that terrorize the women denied a clean

self. Delbo herself is struck by the comfort of bathing herself when she comes upon a stream while marching with her work unit. She admits she remembers nothing about the rest of the day except for the memory of bathing, and of viewing her body for the first time in months. She scrubbed quickly and harshly until she noticed that her rough strokes had made her bleed from the force (*Auschwitz and After* 153). In her desperation to take advantage of the seclusion she enjoyed from the prying eyes of the kapo, Delbo was reminded once again of the fragility of the boundary between inside and outside. Physical and mental anguish are often catalysts for the collapse between the inside and outside of the body, yet the Nazi machine elsewhere exploits this collapse, reminding the inmates that their survival indeed depends on the maintenance of this border.

Delbo's reliance on the Greek chorus also creates an intertextuality that links the suffering of the individual with the suffering of the whole. Before examining how Delbo utilized the chorus in *Auschwitz and After* to relate her comrades' experiences, it is important to note how Delbo viewed their experiences in relation to other survivors who were not present in Auschwitz, for Delbo's creation of collective memory extended beyond her immediate convoy to trace a kinship of suffering. In *Days and Memory*, she explored the experiences of a Greek village terrorized by the Nazis. One of several vignettes that reimagines the horrors of Auschwitz, "Kalavrita of the Thousand Antigones" muses on the

legacy of the Holocaust, and the transmission of a collective trauma into a future laden with everyday, purposeful remembrance:

And the words you want to say at that moment are for those who will go on, who will go on living and who will transmit to others what you said. As for us, we know what they would have told us and we have done it. We have brought up the children. We have looked after the animals and trees. We have kept the soil under cultivation. We have kept the house. We have kept the memory. (90-91)

As Delbo's alter ego and mouthpiece of the vignette, Kalavrita's female population is personified through the plural Antigone, whose traumatic legacy as offspring of the incestuous relationship between Oedipus and Jocasta has indelibly scarred her existence. While Delbo had not witnessed firsthand the events she describes, the chorus of Antigone provides a space for collective remembrance, while joining the trauma of Kalavrita with that of Delbo's French convoy. Antigone stands in as both the origin of and vehicle of transmission for trauma in the haunted landscape of Kalavrita.

Kalavrita is a Greek village in the Peloponnesus, where on 13 December 1943, German troops carried out a massacre of over 1200 men living in the town while containing the women and children in a nearby school institution. Today a historical monument pays tribute to the dead, killed in retaliation for a resistance insurgency in Northern Peloponnesus that claimed the lives of 78 German

soldiers. After a massive display of methodical power by German Wehrmacht troops occupying northern Greece, the women of Kalavrita were left behind to preserve the memory of their husbands, fathers, and sons, and it is from the perspective of the terrorized female survivors that Delbo approaches a collective telling of trauma.

Delbo's interest in Greek chorus developed over a period of many years, and it was initially through her assistance to Jouvet's acting troupe that she developed an interest in the communal aspect of Greek tragedy.<sup>23</sup> In her choice of *Antigone* to stand in for the survivors of the Kalavrita massacre, she may have been drawn to the communally-focused chorus of Sophocles' 442 B.C. tragedy. R.W.B. Burton points out that while his earlier play, *Ajax*, employed a chorus concerned only with the plight of the play's character namesake, Sophocles would turn his attention to a chorus that integrated perspectives not held only by the central figure of the tragedy, but demonstrated "loyalties [that] embrace a whole community, with the result that in *Antigone* especially they are independent of personal attachment" (Burton 85). Such a communal focus would have not been lost on Delbo, whose personal beliefs and writing style reflect the same commitment to individual experience's role in remembrance.

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<sup>23</sup> She even recalls reenacting plays while imprisoned at Auschwitz that had been performed by Jouvet's actors throughout South America, and as Rosette Lamont has asserted, her public and private persona were very much informed by the "remorseless Electra" (*Days and Memory* vii).

Delbo may also have, before writing *Days and Memory*, stumbled upon Jeanne Tsatsos' wartime journal, published in French in 1967. In an entry dated 17 December 1943, just four days after the Kalavrita massacre, Tsatsos writes,

Like the chorus in an ancient tragedy, one after another, black-garbed women entered my office in an endless line. Their faces were like marble, motionless, with a uniform expression of death which I have never seen before.

[...]

On the 13<sup>th</sup> of December the Germans encircled Kalavrita and began to ring all the churchbells madly. The people came out into the streets. They were taken to the school courtyard. There the Germans separated the men and boys over fifteen and drove them beyond the cemetery to a hill above the town...Then they set fire to Kalavrita. The men saw their houses burning, and heard the shrieks of the people. They were maddened to desperation, believing that their women and children were burning too. The executioners, after sadistically enjoying their torment, turned the machine guns on them and killed them all. (86-87)

Tsatsos' account of the tragic chorus of female survivors must have struck a chord with Delbo, whose own trilogy incorporated the chorus as a way of commemorating and uniting a diverse array of experiences in her convoy. In addition, in the above account, the executed men are characterized by the

surviving women as being terrorized by the razing of the town, which dovetailed with her focus on the female experience of brutalization. Delbo's vignette harnesses a different perspective of the violence noted by Tsatsos, centering instead on what Delbo imagines was the confusion and increasing desperation the women felt while waiting to hear of their loved ones' fates. She writes, "Each woman reproached herself for not having given her man a tender kiss when they woke that morning" (91).

The collective "we" of suffering in "Kalavrita of the Thousand Antigones" underscores Delbo's widespread insistence that she not merely speak for others who survived terror and tragedy, but that she assume the role of literary delegate for voices who have lost the ability to transmit experience from beyond the grave, or who simply have been forgotten in the years following the war. "Kalavrita" concludes with a request to the traveler in Greece to "look at the clock on the public square," for it permanently reads the time "it happened that day," reminding all who survived that the community – and the world – would continue to be cognizant of the traumatic loss (108). Michael Rothberg reads the clock's dysfunction as "material evidence of a crime" that "becomes a monumental index of genocide and a metaphor for its traumatic persistence" (*Extremities* 65-66). The Greek chorus and Delbo's reliance on the clock as testament to atrocity underscores the essential need to bear witness from the standpoint of the persistent collective that witnessed physical violence.



Delbo's ability to translate the physical markings of trauma onto the printed page aids in signifying the representation of terror inflicted on victims of the Nazi machine. Her unflinching representations of the final moments of life for those who she witnessed perish due to the extreme physical and mental anguish that inmates were subjected to is often followed in the first volume of *Auschwitz and After*, entitled *None of Us Will Return*, with a challenge to the reader to "Try to look. Just try and see" (86). In one such instance, Delbo describes horrific moments in which she witnesses a woman being transported to Block 25, the hospital block for inmates:

A woman dragged by two others, holding on to her arms. A Jewish woman. She does not want to be taken to block 25. She resists. Her knees scrape the ground...A flayed frog. Her loins are exposed, her emaciated buttocks, soiled by blood and pus, are dotted with hollows. She is howling. Her knees are lacerated by the gravel.

Try to look. Just try and see. (86)

Vehemently fighting her entrance to the infamous hospital run by Josef Mengele and known for merely allowing its patients to die or condemning them to the gas chambers upon arrival to the block, the woman becomes the embodiment of terror in the Nazi machine.<sup>24</sup> This vignette of the Jewish woman, which Delbo

commands the reader to “try to see,” is memorable not only for her resistance but for the ways in which her body exemplifies the Delbo’s recognition of the power of cleanliness, as the woman’s body is soiled, and the collapse of borders between inside and outside, as Delbo notes sees the woman’s body as “flayed” and with bodily fluids escaping. While her certain death is hidden from Delbo’s as well as the reader’s view, it is only this moment of extreme pain that Delbo implores us to witness that remains for us to commemorate.

In its style and structure, *Auschwitz and After* is Delbo’s attempt to represent, through marks on the printed page, the markings of trauma on the bodies of the victims as those marks were imposed by the Nazi machine. The murder of millions was not the operation of one single figure, but rather the product of a mass government and military orchestration aimed at extermination and expansion of the Aryan race in Europe. Referred to by Germans as the *Volksgemeinschaft*, the “people’s community” represented a “triumph of mechanism” that celebrated “energy [that] was supposed to be turned on and off with the precision of a machine” (Gonen 150). The concentration and extermination camps that transported inmates to their incarceration and/or death were extensions of this efficient machine, and as Zygmunt Bauman has

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<sup>24</sup> The Nazis ordered that patients be sent to the gas chambers if they were too ill to return to work, however in rare cases, they were admitted as patients to rest until they could return to their camp units. Medicine in Auschwitz was non-existent, although nearly sixty doctors were staffed to aid Josef Mengele’s torturous experiments on inmates who were well enough to proceed. Entering Block 25 carried the threat of death or torture (Friedrich 23-24).

argued, an unsurpassed wielding of power coupled with a systematization of existing technologies led to the dire consequences and inevitable negative capabilities of modern technological consciousness.

The initial shock of deportation is one common thread of experience that seems to connect prisoners, in its total and complete control over the victims' fates. The oft-quoted chapter "Arrivals, Departures" roots the reader in the experience of the deportee, dissolving the common association between trains and travel into an association of railway car and terror. Our introduction to the world of terror that Delbo and her comrades encountered began with deportation via rail, and it is through Delbo's prose in the first chapter of *Auschwitz and After* that the conversion process of the physical environment into an unalterable, tortuous reality is clear. If everyday objects become instruments of inflicted pain, the railway is "the first of many shocks" for victims transported to the numerous satellite concentration and extermination camps scattered around Europe (Gigliotti 97). Delbo writes this shock in "Arrivals, Departures":

People arrive. They look through the crowd of those who are waiting, those who await them. They kiss them and say the trip exhausted them.

People leave. They say good-bye to those who are not leaving and hug the children.

There is a street for people who arrive and a street for people who leave.

There is a café called “Arrivals” and a café called “Departures.”

There are people who arrive and people who leave.

But there is a station where those who arrive are those who are leaving  
a station where those who arrive have never arrived, where those  
who have left never came back. (*Auschwitz and After* 3)

At the outset, the setting and actions of the arriving and departing subjects are immediately recognizable, yet our comfortable familiarity quickly breaks down as Delbo converts all characteristics into uncanny reversals. In designating arrivals as a paradoxical indication of deportees who will continue on to their final concentration camp destination, she points to the complex nexus of transportation that is easily navigable for the casual traveler, but constitutes an uncertain process of torture characterized by destination uncertainty for the deportee. A persistent theme in writing of the Holocaust focuses on this sense of confusion, where the geographical landscape is one of alienation and unfamiliarity; Primo Levi noted that his convoy sighed in relief once they were made aware that Auschwitz was their destination, and Sara Nomberg-Przytyk similarly wrote that the name “Auschwitz” did not worry her since she had never heard the name before. Such spatial disorientation is certainly a central feature of Delbo’s work, as “Arrivals and Departures” omits geographical specificity in order that she might accurately indoctrinate the reader into the psychological confusion of the deportee.

The bureaucrats who orchestrated the deportations made railroads their primary means of totalitarian action, and “in their hands the railways became a live organism which acted in concert with Germany’s military, industry, [and] SS” (Hilberg 60). Hilberg points out that while the railway systems of Europe, and in particular, the efficient Deutsche Reichsbahn, had regularly been characterized by scholars as instruments or weapons that facilitated the mass manufacture of death in the concentration camps it transported its victims to, they weren’t considered “actors in their own right” (60). For many Jews and political prisoners, the train station even before deportation was known as a site of legend, a space where the familiarity of one’s home country is quickly transformed into an uncertain limbo rooted in terror. Despite one’s distance from the camps in Germany and Poland, the massive auxiliary structure of the Reichsbahn meant that far-flung cities such as Paris and Minsk were directly connected through satellite rail stations commandeered by the Germans. Thus, instead of being European railroads as passive vehicles of annihilation, European railroads were active perpetrators in carrying out the Final Solution.

Railroads not only facilitated but also were designed to act as active extensions of the Third Reich’s control of geographic space using technology. Perhaps the most glaring example of the yoking of technological and geographical ideologies developed after Hitler appointed Richard Walter Darré the Reich Minister of Food and Agriculture, a post he held from 1933 to 1942.

Darré supported Hitler's Eastern expansion model, claiming that "the concept of Blood and Soil gives us the right to take back as much Eastern land as is necessary to achieve harmony between the body of our people and geo-political space" (qtd. in Bramwell 64). At its most fundamental conception, "Blut and Boden" ideology sanctioned the right of Germans to unite modern technological agricultural prowess with biological eugenics, with the ultimate goal of creating a German *Völk* homeland free of Jews (linguistically designated as *Judenrein*, or "free of Jews") and ethnic undesireables, as well as political opponents of sovereign nationhood, most notably, communists.<sup>25</sup>

The deportation journey was not only an uncertain process that denied deportees any indication of their geographical destination, but a manifold "assault on space" that introduced deportees to the altered dimensions of any subsequent environment to which they would be subjected. Simone Gigliotti

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<sup>25</sup> Reviel Netz argues that communists and Nazis waged parallel wars against threats to political ideology, which for communists meant resisting capitalists while Nazis struggled with the Jewish question. In the same stroke, he also concedes that Nazi resistance to Jewry was based in a deep seated biological metaphor that pitted Jews as parasites that leached off the German host organism (195.) While Netz is correct in pointing out that both the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany fought to control a space that was not limited by national borders and thus necessitated immense concentration, both ideologies sprung from two vastly different kinds of "concentration" that are too disparate to concede similarities.

Even at its most fundamental level, Nazism concentrated Jews, political, and ethnic undesireables in an attempt to redistribute land to *völkisch* farmers, while Soviet concentration camps mirrored closely the communal housing of the communist regime. The Nazis viewed communal housing, a characteristic of Soviet living, as "anathema to the *völkisch* peasant," favoring "thatched-roof cottages that showed [organic] and blood ties to the soil" (Josephson 77). Thus, blood and soil was rooted in a re-agriculturalizing of Germany and occupied territories, and concentration was one means of freeing land that was to be redistributed.

argues in *The Train Journey: Transit, Captivity, and Witnessing in the Holocaust*, that the suffocating dimensions of the railway car led to “battles between maintenance of the civilized self, or at least its image, and relentless primal threats” that in survivor testimony is often manifest in shame and guilt over the public display of our most private moments that “break with the bounds of civility” (97). For the terrorized bodies of “Arrivals, Departures,” dehumanization led to extreme acts of violence and deprivation:

There is the inexhaustible crowd of those who live in cities where each one occupies his own cell in the beehive. Looking at the endless lines you wonder how they ever fit into the stacked-up cubicles of a metropolis. There is a mother who’s boxing her five-year-old’s ears [...] There are those who having journeyed for eighteen days lost their minds, murdering one another inside boxcars and those who suffocated during the trip when they were tightly packed together they will not step out. (*Auschwitz and After* 6-7)

Noting that convoys travel for days at a time from “France and Ukraine Albania Belgium Slovakia Italy Hungary Peloponnesos Holland Macedonia Austria Herzegovina from the shores of the Black Sea the shores of the Mediterranean the banks of the Vistula,” Delbo illustrates the effects of sustained confusion and deprivation that leads to acts of violence perpetrated by the railcar’s own victims, and unrelenting displays of suffering in its own passengers (*Auschwitz and After*

5). It is interesting to note that ultimately geographical displacement is yoked throughout “Arrivals, Departures” to the further breakdown of civility.

As the spatial dimensions of the railway car restrict movement, negate privacy, and restrict food and water supply, the railway car becomes the sole cause of all physical pain to its victims. Starvation, confinement, and the erasure of borders between public and private pain become powerful weapons in the railway car’s arsenal. Physical pain and the powerful effects of environment are important characteristics of torture that Elaine Scarry posits become conflated with one another. Furthermore, the combination of physical pain with that of public display alienates the victims from one another, as the obsessive focus on one’s own pain “brings with it all the solitude of absolute privacy with none of its safety, all the self-exposure of the utterly public with none of its possibility for camaraderie or shared experience” (Scarry 53). Delbo’s yoking of geographical displacement and the oppressive presence of physical pain illustrates not only the mental conversion of physical pain into the terror of torture, but the transfer of an instrument of travel into a technology of power capable of singularly implementing torture.

The experience of deportation was different for all women, and the microcosm of the world created by torture is an individually informed space that is first and foremost characterized by disorientation during the deportation process. This difference in experience amongst deportees is nowhere more



apparent than in the contrast between the experiences related by Delbo and Ida. Ida's experience, as related in *Auschwitz and After*, was not characterized by the sheer terror many experienced. She notes that while she was isolated from the other deportees due to her late arrival at the Drancy prison, she had not yet grasped the magnitude of her deportation to an unknown destination; like Primo Levi and Sara Nomberg-Przytyk, she had no particular expectations about the place to which she was being sent. She ascertained that wherever they were headed, "the food would be neither good nor plentiful," but her hope was fueled by the possibility of reuniting with her mother, who had been deported previously (*Auschwitz and After* 291). Although she was not yet aware of what awaited her and therefore was not petrified by their departure, she did notice that "mothers choked back their tears, clearing their throats as though they were sore; women who had no children cried soundlessly, bitterly" (290). Ida's experience differed even from that of the women around her.

In contrast, Delbo describes deportation as characterized by confusion and desperation in "Departure and Return," the introductory chapter of *Convoy to Auschwitz*. As the convoy marched to the train station from which they would depart in Compiègne, they pleaded with bystanders, shouting to them from the platform, "We're Frenchwomen! Political prisoners! We're being deported to Germany!" (*Convoy to Auschwitz* 3). Once bolted into the train cars, the women sat in darkness, desperately searching for weaknesses in the train car they might

break to escape at station stops along the way, and although they were given a small ration of food, it froze in the January cold. Their arrival at Auschwitz was an immediate shock, for no sooner did the train stop that “the cars were opened. Cries, shouts, incomprehensible orders, dogs, SS, machine guns, the clanging of weapons. A roadside that was not a station. The cold was piercing” (*Convoy 5*). It is this confusion that Delbo successfully converts into the terror of deportation in “Arrivals, Departures.” Once the reader’s familiarity with the train station has been effectively erased, the reader has been initiated into the environment of terror witnessed by Delbo and her comrades. What once was a form of travel has been converted to the first of many processes of torture they endured.

Near the chapter’s end, Delbo further develops the conversion of the environment into a landscape of torture. What one might usually deem a natural process of fertilizing the agricultural fields becomes an exercise in terror:

In the spring men and women sprinkle ashes on drained marshland plowed for the first time. They fertilize the soil with human phosphates... Sweat trickles down their faces over the white powder traces their wrinkles. They need not fear running short of fertilizer since train after train gets here every day and every night, every hour of every day and every night.

This is the largest station in the world for arrivals and for departures. (9)

Delbo describes what should be a process of fertility and growth as one of terror and death: the ashes of bodies--in her horrifyingly scientific term "human phosphates"-- are used to fertilize the fields. The ashes of the dead cling to the living bodies, which will themselves become ashes and fertilizer, a perverse mechanical disruption, through the Final Solution, of the natural "ashes to ashes" return of bodies to the soil. The torture resides not only in the physical labor and the fact of the living being covered by the dead, but also by the recognition of the living that the production of the ashes is an unending process of which they are an inevitable part, thanks to Nazi machine and the trains that deliver its victims. The chapter ends with the same orientation that began *None of Us Will Return*, and "the largest station in the world" is only one defamiliarized space within the concentrationary universe.

Delbo was acutely aware of the ironic reversals of ordinary functions within Auschwitz, and as part of a labor detail that attended to the German's agricultural experiments with the rubber plant kok-saghyz, she saw firsthand the Nazi's technological war efforts. A dandelion root native to Russia, kok-saghyz did not take to the soil of Germany or Poland, yet Reichsführer Heinrich Himmler ordered that the plant be maintained by inmate work details made up of primarily female scientists (Clarence-Smith 7-8). A well-known French Jewish scientist named Claudette Bloch oversaw the first work detail to be instituted, and when Delbo's convoy reached Auschwitz in January of 1943, experimental

methods of fertilization using human remains were likely underway (Baumslag 64). Although the experiment ultimately failed, inmates were forced to spread the ashes of those terrorized by the Nazi machine onto the very soil meant to nourish the rubber plant on which the war munitions effort rested.

A further aspect of the conversion of the railway car into an active perpetrator of torture is one that is central to what has been characterized by David Rousset as *l'univers concentrationnaire*, or the concentration camp universe. I refer to two spatial components of *l'univers concentrationnaire* located in the first case in the events of the Holocaust pre-liberation, and in the case of the second, post-liberation. The texture and landscape of victims' memories would forever be changed with the advent of the Nazi concentration camp system, and once news broke that Allied troops liberated devastatingly starved and tortured human beings, a second aspect, that of public memory, would join survivors in interpreting and inspecting the boundaries of the concentration camp universe. An example of this framework most prevalent in literature of the Holocaust is the relation of language to a post-Holocaust world. In a chapter aptly titled "Old Words, New Meanings," from her recently rediscovered novel/memoir, *Auschwitz: True Tales from a Grotesque Land*, Sara Nomberg-Przytyk relates,

For some people, Auschwitz was an ordinary term, but now the word had taken on a completely new set of meanings. An unusually interesting psychological study might result if someone could demonstrate the way

in which meanings passed beyond the accepted boundaries of conventional significance. Why a psychological study? Because the new set of meaning provided the best evidence of the devastation that Auschwitz created in the psyche of every human being... We knew what those innocent words meant, such words as "gas," "selection," but we uttered them, nevertheless, as though there was nothing hidden behind them. (72)

For those who had not endured the torture of the camps, the experiences attached to "gas" or "selection" are unobserved, yet the very utterance of the terms in a post-Holocaust world provokes an austere alienation that Lawrence Langer argues makes it difficult for Holocaust survivors – particularly those who choose the medium of writing – to relate to audiences. "How do we verbalize the enigma of a language that alienates even as it struggles to connect?" Langer inquires (77). For writer-survivors, the task is nothing short of translation, even within one's own language. The universe of the concentration camp resists translation even as it invents a new language only spoken by survivors of its terrorized landscape.

Delbo's attempts at translating the reinvented and newly ambiguous surface of language begins with the conversion of the train station into an instrument of power fueled by terror, and is further developed when "Arrivals, Departures" gives way to five successive poems centering on the redefinition of

language and the resurfacing of the inmate's collapsed worldview. Directly addressing the reader, Delbo implores

O you who know

did you know that a day is longer than a year

a minute longer than a lifetime

[...]

Did you know that the stones of the road do not weep

that there is one word only for dread

one for anguish

Did you know that suffering is limitless

that horror cannot be circumscribed (11)

Delbo's invitation to the reader is one punctuated by an obvious sense of the gap between survivor and reader; that is, shared common knowledge is both invoked and challenged through Delbo's conversion of a minute into a seemingly infinite measure of time. Furthermore, her insistence on the lack of synonyms for the language of terror underscores just how radically language had been altered by *l'univers concentrationnaire*. As Michael Rothberg writes, "in not attempting to find words for the unthinkable, Delbo succeeds in representing an aspect of the experience of victims" (142). That there are no words to adequately translate the lasting traumatic marks experienced by survivors cannot be ignored, but Delbo

succeeds in pointing out the inadequacy of the very words she writes to describe trauma.

The ambiguity of language is a prominent characteristic of the post-Holocaust world for survivors, and just as the train station populated every day by unassuming travelers is haunted by the sinister orchestration of deportation, every day physical sensations carry the residual trauma of deprivation. As she notes in "Thirst," as children the physical discomfort of thirst is "an explorer's tale," not a reality, but in Auschwitz the reality becomes torture as she describes the obsessive quest to consume liquid and satisfy a persistent deprivation.

Delbo's translation of deprivation is evident in her repetition of the layers of thirst that characterize the survivor's experience, and alter the post-Holocaust landscape of language. She writes that there is "the thirst of the morning and the thirst of the day," which then proceeds to "the thirst of the day and the thirst of the evening," leading into "the thirst of the evening and the thirst of the night" (73-74). Just as she noted there was only one word for anguish or dread, there is only word for thirst, but thirst is characterized by a persistence that is never satisfied, but always confronted. Even the liberated Delbo likens the distance between herself and a brook they pass by as an explorer's journey "which takes longer than crossing the Sahara," a memory of childhood that informs her current memory of deprivation.

The ambiguity of language after the Holocaust reveals an important intertextuality of trauma that unites memories in the struggle to actively remember. Delbo relies upon the Greek chorus to aid in transmitting the damage of trauma from a collective standpoint, but she also relied upon texts to aid others in remembering the world beyond the concentrationary world. The French convoy sang “La Marseillaise” upon entering the camp, an act of solidarity that bonded them, and Delbo relied on reading from Molière’s *La Misanthrope* in exchange for a ration of bread to sustain her own memory that she feared might be lost. In the process she provided her fellow comrades with a brief escape from their current reality, and “until departure [from the camps], I kept the play within my throat” (*Auschwitz and After* 188).

The intertextuality of the camp experience extended to Delbo’s life after liberation, and would ultimately inform her writing and human rights activism until her death in 1985. Afraid of losing her memory, for “losing one’s memory is to lose oneself, to no longer be oneself,” she memorized all of the Paris Metro stations as well as an impressive number of poems because she “was so afraid they might escape my mind” (188). That she equated the same form of transportation and its geographical rootedness to the present with that of the printed page suggests that trauma was not only ever present for survivors, but always current and always on the move.



*Auschwitz and After* not only chronicles the torture and deprivation of Delbo's collective convoy, but it also highlights the manifold presence of trauma that continued to advance its assault on the present. After relating the beheading of an inmate while a crowd sang "La Marseillaise," in which "one lone voice [was] in turn cut short," the chapter concludes with a newspaper blurb from *L'Express*:

"Last week, an incoherent action, followed by several others, was decided upon by the new government: the execution in the courtyard of the sinister fortress of Montluc, in Lyons, of the Algerian patriot Abderahmane Laklifi. He was beheaded Saturday, at dawn, accompanied to the gallows by the singing of all his comrades, behind the bars of their cells" (*L'Express*, August 4, 1960). (132-133).

The women of Delbo's convoy entered Auschwitz singing the French national anthem, and Delbo concludes a chapter recalling the pride of French citizens even until the moment of their untimely deaths by noting the horrific acts of torture and murder that were part and parcel of the Algerian War of Independence, fought over a period of nearly eight years in 1954-1962.

That France was ashamed of its dark history during the Vichy regime's collaboration with the Nazis was an important battle Delbo confronted head on in this relatively buried paragraph in *Auschwitz and After*, but it demonstrates the degree to which the markings of trauma still permeated France and beyond.

When Alain Resnais screened *Night and Fog* at the Cannes Film Festival in 1955, he was met with animosity by East Germans and hostility on the part of French film critics, the latter of whom felt chronicling the events of World War II might hold back the national process of healing a decade after Allied troops liberated the survivors. With French novelist Jean Dutourd insisting that, if the film was shown, France could not recover from its shameful past collaboration with the Nazis, and the German embassy demanding the film's withdrawal from the competition at Cannes, it isn't difficult to imagine that Delbo's constant advocacy of viewing international human rights struggles in light of France's dark past wasn't met with much enthusiasm by the French public. As a passionate defender of Algerians during the war for independence that lasted from 1954 to 1962, and a poetic and journalistic mouthpiece for the voiceless women of Buenos Aires later in the 1960s, Delbo was committed to keeping the past within the purview of the present at all costs.

As Kathryn Robson rightly points out, Delbo is something of a "ghost writer" in this regard. Unlike the impotent, haunted figure of the fictional Ralph Kabnis in Toomer's *Cane*, who is tortured by the specters of violence in the American South, Delbo was driven by the absence of voices denied the right to relate the wounds of the past. Recapitulating memories of Auschwitz through the first person plural "we," Delbo moves beyond individual testimony to include her fellow inmates' experiences and integrates the stories of others

whose voices have been silenced by their untimely deaths. As she strives to tell the stories of the many who did not live to tell their tale after the horrors of Auschwitz, a composite picture of collective suffering is rendered cohesive and intensely visible from the printed page (Robson 160). The “unwanted beauty” that emerges from her texts signals the effective and often visceral power of Delbo’s literary renderings (Kaplan 38). The power of her words suggests that the body’s visibility in her texts is one that vividly and urgently transmits experience from the page.<sup>26</sup> Evoking images that are at once terrifying and uncomfortably beautiful, Delbo’s texts speak from bodies that witnessed and bodies that suffered through the Holocaust and the many other holocausts of the twentieth century.

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<sup>26</sup> Kathryn Robson’s assertion that Delbo is a “ghost writer” is one such example of a scholarly problematization of collectivity. Robson points out that a fuller sketch of Delbo’s own personal experience is set aside for the good of the collective, leading to her categorization as a “ghost writer” (160).

## EPILOGUE

On 14 June 2010, exactly seventy years to the date that Kazimierz Albin was deported from Tarnow, Poland, Albin and a group of fellow survivors embarked on the very same train route that brought them to the concentration camps in 1940. Their destination was Oswiecim, the Polish town where the Nazis built the most infamous of their concentration camps, Auschwitz-Birkenau. Their railway trip commemorated the forced deportation and murder of over one million people, and in its mode of travel demonstrates the traumatic memory that continues to be powerfully reflected in the image of the railroad. The very technology that signaled progress and transformed travel for Europeans in the nineteenth century had been used to facilitate the deportation and murder of nine million on the European continent. That the railway track leading directly into Auschwitz is one of the most iconic images associated with the Holocaust bears testament to the potent currency of technology to echo trauma even in its absence.

American commemoration of injustice under the practice of African American enslavement similarly focuses on the railroad, yet not on the mechanically engineered railway tracks of the American railroad. The Underground Railroad assisted the movement of human bodies across state lines and into freedom, guiding over 100,000 slaves to safe houses and guided paths

on their way to destinations in free states in the US, in addition to Canada and Mexico. The technological vocabulary and railroad metaphors used in the Underground Railroad underscore the irony of progress wrapped up in the history of an ever-expanding country based on the principles of freedom and liberty. The safe houses along the way were referred to as stations, guides along the route called themselves conductors, and even fugitive slaves were sometimes referred to as passengers or cargo. As Harriet Tubman noted to the crowd at a women's suffrage convention in Rochester, New York, "I was the conductor of the Underground Railroad for eight years, and I can say what most conductors can't say; I never ran my train off the track and I never lost a passenger" (Conrad 214). Tubman's clever remark tapped into the irony of a technological innovation designed to move passengers freely from destination to destination while nearly three million remained in shackles in the Southern states.

Divided by geography, language, and time, those who witnessed and transmitted the damage of cultural trauma often recognized the potential for technology to resonate the shape of traumatic experience, and in some cases traumatic experience was indelibly tied to the rise of technologies. With each progressive technology that offered convenient solutions to unique obstacles, its inception masked a sinister capability, whether that capability resided in the nooses used in lynchings, the railroads used to deport millions to their deaths, or the ships designed to transport millions into enslavement. The literal

manifestation of hidden violence in technology effectively demonstrates to readers the undeniable shock of trauma, as so often technology first comes to us as an invention that must be reconciled with past obstacles.

Some writers and artists chose to tap into the metaphorical power of technology as a means of relating suffering while simultaneously mirroring in that technology the jarring, disruptive effect of the memory of trauma on those victimized by violence. What the works of Henry Box Brown, Jean Toomer, and Charlotte Delbo demonstrate is the interstice at which the two functions of technology meet in the effort to transmit and preserve the past. Brown utilized the panorama form to relate to an American panoramic consciousness that as such did not recognize slavery's importance to the Northern free states, whose citizens viewed the South as a geographical entity disconnected from the culture of freedom and liberty cultivated in the North. His successful mirroring of that hypocrisy pivoted on his confinement in a box that traveled swiftly North, where he would continue to relate the markings of trauma through ironic reenactments. More so than the box, however, it was the method of travel that indicated trauma, as evidenced in his railroad to venue parade in England, and his innovative use of technology didn't stop there. Outside of the strict narrative bounds many other ex-slaves could not avoid, Brown, in his live performances that immersed audiences in interactive, multimedia technologies, "shattered the ceremonial and rhetorical properties of the formal lecture hall" and effectively

negated genre in order to transmit a story that already commanded a power all its own (Wood 107). Brown's legacy has carried into the present day, where his innovation and bravery are now central features of American memory. From Tony Kushner's 2005 Broadway play, *Henry Box Brown or, the Mirror of Slavery* to Ellen Levine's 2007 children's book, *Henry's Freedom Box*, his story has become a powerful metaphor for the injustices of slavery and the need to preserve historical memory.

Jean Toomer similarly harnessed the interactive power of technology to infuse *Cane* with a sense of electrical trauma that would carry into the future and influence other writers, despite distance through time and space. In 1952, Ralph Ellison published *Invisible Man*, an electrically charged novel that employs an unnamed narrator, and in many respects recalls the anonymous narrator(s) of *Cane* that recall past traumas linked to the present through technology. Forced to perform blackness for a white crowd in the South, the Invisible Man is unknowingly sent into a boxing ring, where after he emerges disoriented to collect a fee from a rug rigged to electrocute him. After being treated with electroshock therapy after an accident, he continues to be haunted by American racism, for even though he "fell to plotting ways of short-circuiting the machine," he ultimately decides that it is in fact freedom that he desired. "I was no Samson," he relates, "I had no desire to destroy myself even if it destroyed the machine; I wanted freedom, not destruction" (Ellison 243). Like Dan Moore of

Toomer's "Box Seat," the Invisible Man seeks freedom where the invisible circuit of power is impenetrable and powerful.

The legacy of Charlotte Delbo is, much like the legacy of Toomer and Brown, linked to the invisibility of power that was the undercurrent of post-Holocaust Europe. Her active protests of French treatment of Algerians during the War for Independence from 1954-1962 centered on the newly "improved" technologies of torture that to Delbo were reminiscent of the torture she suffered at the hands of the Nazi machine. Modern French culture had viewed the barbarism of Nazi Germany in a much different light than their own contemporary use of "clean" torture – that is, torture that "didn't leave any traces" due to a reliance on electrical power in the torture room, as well as a utilization of everyday objects such as toothbrushes and mattresses (Ross 112-113). What's more, after the Holocaust, French war theorists regularly noted that the space of war had dramatically shifted, and "the battlefield today is no longer restricted. It is limitless; it can encompass entire nations. The inhabitant in his home, is the center of the conflict" (qtd. in Ross 110). Haunted by her own memories of Auschwitz and the death of millions, Delbo was acutely aware of the presence of the past in her native France, for just as she had been betrayed by her own country, the space of war continued to perpetuate injustice on a new target.



Delbo did not merely compare her traumatic experience to that of Algerians and citizens of other French controlled territories, but actively sought to unite them. In *Days and Memory*, Delbo yokes contemporary French methods of modern warfare to the experience of Hannelore, a fellow survivor:

Torture in Algeria.

My language has been appropriated by the executioners.

Villages burned by napalm in Indochina.

Algerians hunted through the streets by the Paris police one day in October of 1961.

Algerians whose bodies were fished out of the Seine.

How often I have thought of you, Hannelore. (117)

In her references to both the ongoing assault on Algerians and the “Dirty War” in late 1940s/early 1950s French Indochina, she demonstrates that the memory of the Nazi machine is a trauma invoked by and omnipresent in contemporary France.

Like Brown and Toomer before her, Delbo recognized the presence of the past in the contemporary consciousness, and where innovation negates genre in order to transmit trauma, all three authors shared a common cause. Trauma resists strict genre, while technology powerfully invokes trauma, and in their steadfast circumvention of traditional narrative, Brown, Toomer, and Delbo demonstrate that the markings of trauma are very much in transit.

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## APPENDIX A. CONTENTS OF BROWN'S MIRROR OF SLAVERY

The contents of the panorama, *The Mirror of Slavery*, as billed on a broadside distributed at a performance:

### PART I.

*The African Slave Trade.*

*The Nubian Family in Freedom.*

*The Seizure of Slaves.*

Religious Sacrifice.

Beautiful Land and Mountain Scenery in Africa.

March to *the* Coast.

View of *the* Cape of Good Hope.

Slave Felucca.

Interior of a Slave Ship.

Chase of a Slaver by an English Steam Frigate.

Spanish Slaver at Havana.

Landing Slaves.

Interior of a Slave Mart.

Gorgeous Scenery of *the* West India Islands.

View of Charleston, South Carolina.

*The Nubian Family at Auction.*

March of Chain Gang.

Modes of Confinement and Punishment.

Brand and Scourge.

Interior View of Charleston Workhouse, with Treadmill in full operation.

PART II.

Sunday among *the* Slave Population.

Monday Morning, with Sugar Plantation and Mill.

Women at Work.

Cotton Plantation.

View of *the* Lake of *the* Dismal Swamp.

Nubians, escaping by Night.

Ellen Crafts [sic], Escaping.

Whipping Post and Gallows at Richmond, Va.

View of Richmond, Va.

Henry Box Brown escaping.

View of *the* Natural Bridge and Jefferson's Rock.

City of Washington, D.C.

Slave Prisons at Washington.

Washington's Tomb at Mount Vernon.

Fairmount Water Works.

Henry Box Brown Released at Philadelphia.

Distant View of *the* City of Philadelphia.

Henry Bibb, Escaping.

Nubian Slaves Retaken.

Tarring and Feathering in South Carolina.

*The* Slaveholder's Dream.

Burning Alive.

Promise of Freedom.

West Indian Emancipation.

Grand Industrial Palace.

Grand Tableau Finale--UNIVERSAL EMANCIPATION.