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## The Time of Slavery

For to me history was not a large stage filled with commemoration, bands, cheers, ribbons, medals, the sound of fine glass clinking and raised high in the air; in other words, the sounds of victory. For me history was not only the past: it was the past and it was also the present. I did not mind my defeat, I only minded that it had to last so long; I did not see the future, and that is perhaps as it should be.

—Jamaica Kincaid, *The Autobiography of My Mother*

Slavery here is a ghost, both the past and the living presence; and the problem of historical representation is how to represent the ghost.

—Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*

**A** memorial plaque posted near the entryway of the courtyard of Elmina Castle reads, “In everlasting memory of the anguish of our ancestors. May those who died rest in peace. May those who return find their roots. May humanity never again perpetrate such injustice against humanity. We the living vow to uphold this.” As the plaque suggests, reckoning with our responsibility to the dead necessitates not only our remembrance but also a promise to forswear the injustice that enabled this crime against humanity to occur. It would appear that our lives

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and even those of the dead depend on such acts of remembrance. Yet how best to remember the dead and represent the past is an issue fraught with difficulty, if not outright contention.

The difficulty posed by the plaque's injunction to remember is as much the faith it bespeaks in the redressive capacities of memory, as the confidence it betrays in the founding distinction or break between then and now. For the distinction between the past and the present founders on the interminable grief engendered by slavery and its aftermath. How might we understand mourning, when the event has yet to end? When the injuries not only perdure, but are inflicted anew? Can one mourn what has yet ceased happening? The point here is not to deny the abolition of slavery or to assert the identity or continuity of racism over the course of centuries, but rather to consider the constitutive nature of loss in the making of the African diaspora and the role of grief in transatlantic identification, especially in light of the plaque's behest that those returning find their roots, which is second only to the desire that the dead rest in peace.

I attempt to grapple with these questions by examining the role of tourism as a vehicle of memory, specifically tourist performances at Cape Coast Castle and Elmina Castle in Ghana and at La Maison de Esclaves on Goree Island, Senegal, and the ways in which the identifications and longings of the tourist, the formulas of roots tourism, and the economic needs of African states shape, affect, and influence our understanding of slavery and in concert produce a collective memory of the past.<sup>1</sup>

As the plaque intimates, to remember the dead is to mend ruptured lines of descent and filiation. In this regard, remembrance is entangled with reclaiming the past, propitiating ancestors, and recovering the origins of the descendants of this dispersal. To remember slavery is to imagine the past as the "fabric of our own experience" and seizing hold of it as "the key to our identity."<sup>2</sup> And the belated return of the African-American tourist is fraught with these issues. The fixation on roots reveals the centrality of identity not only to the transactions of tourism, but in staging the encounter with the past. Identification and bereavement are inextricably linked in this instance; since the roots we are encouraged to recover presuppose the rupture of the transatlantic slave trade and the natal alienation and kinlessness of enslavement. Put differently, the issues of loss and our identification with the dead are central to both the work of mourning and the political imagination of the African diaspora.<sup>3</sup> And, for this reason, *grief* is a central term in the political vocabulary of the diaspora.

By looking at a range of practices—the bartering of letters of welcome and return, the state’s role in the fabrication of a common memory of slavery, tourist performances and the peregrinations of middle-class African-American tourists—I set out to explore the time of slavery, that is, the relation between the past and the present, the horizon of loss, the extant legacy of slavery, the antinomies of redemption (a salvational principle that will help us overcome the injury of slavery and the long history of defeat) and irreparability. In considering the time of slavery, I intend to trouble the redemptive narratives crafted by the state in its orchestration of mourning, the promises of filiation proffered by petty traders, and the fantasies of origin enacted at these slave sites. As well, the “time of slavery” negates the common-sense intuition of time as continuity or progression, then and now coexist; we are coeval with the dead.

A central component of UNESCO and World Tourist Organization’s Cultural Tourism Programme on the Slave Routes is the development of “roots tourism,” that is, tourist products and excursions geared for North Americans in search of their roots. Of concern here are the kinds of identification facilitated and the degree to which they are determined by the national location and political imaginary of African-American tourists, the development strategy of African states, and the staging of these tourist excursions as the return of the exiled and the displaced. While it is neither implausible nor far-fetched to describe those in the diaspora as exiled or estranged children, I question the sufficiency or adequacy of “return” as a way of describing this transatlantic journey, which some have gone so far as to dub a “reverse Middle Passage” and the nature of this encounter with the past. To what degree can the journey of the “native stranger” be termed a return?<sup>4</sup> How can one go back to a place that one has never been or never seen? Is return, then, a figure that stands in for a more adequate language of longing and estrangement and one that gainsays undeniable and definite difference as it attempts to mend the irreparable?

If Pan-Africanism has been animated by the desire for a “unity of sentiment and action” between Africa and the diaspora, a return to ancestral land, an abiding nostalgia, and unmet and perhaps unrealizable longings for solidarity throughout the black world, then this desire has been engendered by captivity, deportation, and death.<sup>5</sup> Loss affixes our gaze to the past, determines the present, and perhaps even eclipses a vision of the future. W. E. B. Du Bois described this blocked horizon of possibility and enduring moment of injury as dusk. It is, as Jamaica Kincaid writes, “the time . . . when all you

have lost is heaviest in your mind; your mother, if you have lost her; your home, if you have lost it, the voices of people who might have loved you, or who you only wished might have loved you. . . . Such feelings of longing and loss are heaviest in that light.” It has been dusk for four hundred years. If this past does not pass by it is because the future, the longed for, is not yet attainable. This predicament and this yearning are centuries old.

Longing and loss figure centrally in the strategies of roots tourism—the loss of one’s origins, authentic African names, progenitors, and ancestral land all act as impetus to visit, shop, and purchase. Tourism slakes longing, exploits loss, and proffers a cure by enabling cathartic and tearful engagements with the era of the slave trade. As the brochure for the Elmina and Cape Coast castles states, “Prominent among these are the reenactments of the horrors of the slave trade as well as a solemn, touching portrayal of the final journey of the Africans as they walked through the hellish dungeons into awaiting ships that transported them to the Americas.”

Yet, what does it bode for our relationship to the past when atrocity becomes a commodity for transnational consumption, and this history of defeat comes to be narrated as a story of progress and triumph? If restaging scenes of captivity and enslavement elide the distinction between sensationalism and witnessing, risk sobriety for spectacle, and occlude the violence they set out to represent; they also create a memory of what one has not witnessed. The reenactment of the event of captivity contrives an enduring, visceral, and personal memory of the unimaginable. These fabricated and belated encounters with slavery enable a revisiting of the past only fleetingly visible in the unabashed contemporaneity of Africa, recovering origins in the context of commercial transactions and exchanges, and experiencing the wonder and welcome made possible by the narratives of return. In the context of this encounter with death much comes into view: the continuing crisis of black life in the post-civil rights era, the social foreclosure of grief, and bereavement as a response to the limits and failures of political transformation. Essentially, these belated encounters bring to light the broken promises of freedom.

### **Encounter One**

A sign posted at the entrance of the fenced area surrounding Elmina Castle warns that no one is allowed inside this area except tourists. A group of adolescent boys are gathered past the entryway in obvious defiance of this

injunction. As I climb the muddy path to the entrance of the castle, they greet me, “Sister!” “One Africa!” “Slavery separated us.” Each boy asks me to be his pen pal as he hands me a letter scribbled on the crumpled pages of a school notebook. The letters are betrothals pledging we are family. Each one opens with the salutation, “Dear Sister” or “Beloved Sister.” Despite knowing that love promised is stoked by hunger, inflected with envy and distrust, and precipitated by the unequal relations between us, I am pulled by the lure of filial devotion extended by these budding amorists. For a moment, these boys and I are part of the same brood, kith and kin, of one house, and not panderer and patron.

“Beloved Sister” skillfully circumvents and negotiates accusations of love and betrayal. The boys’ letters are stock items in the local circuits of roots tourism. The artisanal mode of production and the stiffly crafted narrative of slavery, separation, and dislocation recounted in these epistles do not fail in their appeal.

Kwesi’s letter begins,

Please write me. We are one Africa which simple [*sic*] means we are the same people and I know it’s because of the slave trade that’s why you left here to U.S.A and I want you to know that you are my sister and I am your brother according to the history of our ancestors and Africa is both of us motherland so you are welcome back home (Akwaaba) please let[’s] keep in touch by letters so that we could learn from each other and know ourselves well as brother and sister. Share my greetings with my other brothers and sisters in America. Thank you. Peace and love to you senior sister.

Isaac’s letter is short. In three lines, he states the basics: his grade in school, need of pencils and paper, and my status as an orphan. It closes with an admonishment that I learn my history or risk not knowing who I really am: “Because of the slave trade you lose your mother, if you know your history, you know where you come from.”

Francis Mensah writes, “Don’t forget to write me because we are one Africa which simple [*sic*] means we are the same people but only because of the slave trade that’s why you lose your motherland to another country and this is time we should learn from each other and understand ourselves as brothers and sisters and may those who die on the way to America will come back to the motherland and I always remember all of my Africa brothers and sisters in my prayers and may God bless you to live in long life and pros-

perity and I hope you will never forget to write Africa brother and you know is very painful that they trade our ancestors as slaves and I became very sad whenever I read the history of the slave trade.”

The rush of declaratives in these galloping sentences, the lack of pause or caesura, no time even to catch the breath, inadvertently express the enduring presence of slavery. I lose my mother again and again and again, not in the past, but today. Kwesi, Isaac, Francis, and I exist in the painful present of the slave trade. These forged and formulaic letters prey on longings that I am loath to admit. For I would rather not acknowledge that the language of kin still holds some appeal. “Dear Sister” pierces through the armor of my skepticism, which, like a scab covering a wound, is less the sign of recovery than it is a barrier against the still pulsating state of injury.

Without this defense, I am exposed and vulnerable, a naive woman on an impossible mission: the search for dead and forgotten kin. And these pubescent boys trading for pens and pocket money are the bridge I would travel to my past. In their dire scramble for small change, I imagine Ethiopia stretching forth her hand. In the clichéd and purloined prose of their letters, I see my redemption. I wear the title *senior sister* proudly, despite knowing that terms of endearment and affiliation are part and parcel of the lingua franca of trade. I war with myself in a battle between desire and discernment. Slavery denied the captive all claims of kin and community; this loss of natal affiliation and the enduring pain of ancestors who remain anonymous still haunt the descendants of the enslaved. “Dear Sister” extends the promise of restored affiliations, but it is a placebo, a pretend cure for an irreparable injury. In Elmina, sister and brother are a kind of currency and, as such, these endearments circulate promiscuously. These scruffy adolescents, pockets stuffed with dreams of return and promises of belonging, play rough-and-tumble with my yearnings; their fleeting and evanescent gifts of sodality cut me to the quick.

*Belated encounters.* The journey “home” is always a journey back, that is, back in time, since the identification with Africa as an originary site occurs by way of the experience of enslavement. And, above all else, it is a belated return. One has come too late to recuperate an authentic identity or to establish one’s kinship with a place or people. Ultimately these encounters or journeys occur too late, far too long after the event, to be considered a return. In short, returning home is not possible. Nor is this an encounter

with Africa in its contemporaneity, the present is eclipsed by an earlier moment—the event of captivity and the experience of enslavement in the Americas. It is the encounter of those who have come after “that event”—the Middle Passage and after slavery. More importantly, this belatedness might be considered an essential feature of the diasporic in that, as James Clifford notes, diasporas usually presuppose “a constitutive taboo on return,” so that the homeland is that which is always already lost. It is this loss that underlines the impossibility of return and the inevitable belatedness of these encounters. It is interesting to note that the residents of Cape Coast and Elmina also invoke the notion of belatedness to describe the African-American encounter with Africa. Frequently African Americans are identified in Fanti as “*asika fo amba ntem*”—the rich ones who have come too late, if they would have been here earlier, we don’t know what they would have done.<sup>6</sup>

Essentially, these belated encounters illumine the disparate temporalities of unfreedom.<sup>7</sup> The encounter with the seemingly remote anteriority of the past—slavery and the transatlantic slave trade—provides a vehicle for articulating the disfigured promises of the present, that is, equality, freedom from discrimination, the abolition of the badges of slavery, and so on. In short, what becomes clear is that the past is neither remote nor distant and that Africa is seen, if at all, through the backward glance or hindsight. For these reasons, it is crucial to consider the matter of grief as it bears on the political imagination of the diaspora, the interrogation of U.S. national identity, and the crafting of historical counternarratives. In other words, to what end is the ghost of slavery conjured up?

What is at stake here is more than exposing the artifice of historical barricades or the tenuousness of temporal markers like the past and the present. By seizing hold of the past, one illuminates the broken promises and violated contracts of the present. The disjuncture between what David Scott has described as “that event” and “this memory,” beyond comprising an essential dimension of belatedness, raises a host of questions about the use and relevance of the past, the political and ethical valence of collective memory, and the relation between historical responsibility and the contemporary crisis, whether understood in terms of a masochistic attachment to the past, the intransigence of racism, or the intractable and enduring legacy of slavery.<sup>8</sup> In other words, Africa as an atavistic land as well as the character and consequences of an identification with Africa are mediated by way of

the experience of enslavement, and perhaps, even more important, by way of a backward glance at U.S. history as well. That is, the identification with Africa is always already after the break.

Added to this is the question of whether Africa serves merely as a mirror that refracts the image of the United States, thereby enabling the “returnee” to explore issues of home and identity with a measure of contemplative distance. Certainly, this is not surprising when we take into account the way in which slavery and Africa function as “the generative and constitutive points of reference” in continuist narratives of African-American history and cultural survival.<sup>9</sup> For this reason, it is important to disaggregate Africa and slavery in order to apprehend the ways in which they come together.

The journey to Elmina Castle, Ouidah, or Goree Island is first and foremost a way of commemorating slavery at its purported site of origin, although one could just as easily travel to Portugal or visit the Vatican. The paradox here is that the title to home and kin emerges only in the aftermath of the dislocation and death of the Middle Passage and the social death of enslavement; in short, it is a response to the breach of separation. Kinship is precious by virtue of its dissolution, and “wounded kinship” defines the diaspora.<sup>10</sup> The pristine and idealized vision of home and kin is even more esteemed as a consequence of its defilement. It is, in this way, not unlike virginity, which Faulkner observed “must depend upon its loss, its absence to have existed at all.”

The dissolution of the self or estrangement from ancestral land necessarily precedes “the achievement of a full, restored, and authentic identity” held out by return. That is, enslavement fundamentally mediates this diasporic identification with Africa and accentuates what Kobena Mercer has described as the essential constituent of diasporic identity—“the rupture between me and my origins.” Yet if this rupture engenders diasporic identity, then the search for roots can only exacerbate one’s sense of being estranged, intensify the exilic consciousness, and confirm the impossibility of reversion.<sup>11</sup> The want of an authentic identity and long-awaited reunion with Africa exacerbates the crisis of homelessness.

The complex and ambivalent forms of identification and disidentification with Africa and the United States facilitated in these excursions hint at an anxiety about home, that is, a fear that being a stranger in a strange land might be an inveterate condition on native soil and ancestral land. In the end, these peregrinations might be less about the search or reclamation of



home, than expressions of the contrarities of home. Let me make clear that my intention here is not to reinscribe a racialist account of diaspora, position Africa as primordial land, suggest that diasporic identity is best explained along the singular axis of reclamation, or fall prey to what Gerald Early describes as the “confused wonder” of black Americans in the face of things African, but rather to interrogate the dominant framing of this encounter with the past and elucidate its vexed character.<sup>12</sup>

As David Scott suggests, the kinds of questions that need to be asked about the place of Africa in the cultural and political discourse of the diaspora need not make any claims regarding “the ultimate ontological status of Africa and slavery in the present of the cultures of the New World.” Thus the important task here is not asserting the genuineness or falsity of these assertions, establishing the verifiable presence of Africa in the diaspora, or refuting this connection by insisting that no essential relation exists, either because Africa is an empty signifier or race is a spurious ground for identity. Instead Scott encourages us to consider “the ways in which Africa and slavery are employed . . . in the narrative construction of relations among pasts, presents, and futures [and] the rhetorical or ideological work that they are made to perform.”

The bridge between Africa and the Americas is articulated negatively in terms of separation, the unremembered dead, and the second-class status of African Americans in the United States. Or, as Toni Morrison remarks, “it is bridged for us by our assuming responsibility for people no one ever assumed responsibility for.” The place Africa holds in the political and historical imagination is complicated since origin is figured as loss and the tale of one’s becoming is a death foretold. More important, fabricating narratives of continuity is entangled with a critique of the present, since these encounters reframe the history of the trade from the vantage point of the North American diaspora and critically reflect on the meaning of U.S. national identity. That is, the ideological construction of the past is guided by the current political interests of the diaspora; in fact, the unavoidable disfigurements of the present articulate the meaning of a diasporic and U.S. national identity. The past called Africa in these narratives is very much a history of the present. The past interrupts the present not by virtue of cultural affinity or the status of Africa as “authentic cultural origin of the diaspora” but because of the extant legacy of this captivity and displacement.<sup>13</sup>

What becomes apparent, despite the proclaimed unanimity of the ances-

tors and their descendants in the commonplace pronouncement “You are back” is the ambivalence of the identification with Africa forged in these encounters. After all, the origin identified is the site of rupture and, ironically, the forts and castles built by Europeans come to approximate home. Loss predominates at this imagined site of origin, since the genesis of the diaspora is located in this commercial deportation. This unhomey home hints that this state of exile and estrangement might well be inescapable.<sup>14</sup> Nor is an African identity easily reclaimed, since one is as likely to be called *obroni*, which means “foreigner” or “white,” as “sister” and these salutations actually achieve a strange equality as designations of exchange relations, markers of foreignness, and inducements to buy. While remembering the “anguish of the ancestors” is a central aspect of the pilgrimage to these monuments of the transatlantic trade, recursion is also informed by the imperatives and longings of the present. That is, dispossession is itself an inheritance that tethers us to “that event.” Racial subjection, incarceration, impoverishment and second-class citizenship: this is the legacy of slavery that still haunts us.<sup>15</sup> The duration of injury and the seemingly intractable character of our defeat account for the living presence of slavery, and as well for the redress proffered by tourism.

*A reverse middle passage?* At the Door of No Return—the passage from the dungeon to the slave ship—the tour guide declares, “It is not really the Door of No Return because now you are back!” These words cast the tourist as the triumphant captive and returning descendant. This proclamation, regularly issued at the final exit, is the ultimate moment of convergence between the past and the present and one that reveals the dilemma of mourning as both a recognition of loss and replacement of the lost object by way of identification.

The return is a fantasy of origins; it is in the class of fantasies that Jean Laplanche and J. B. Pontalis describe as primal. Akin to collective myths, such fantasies “provide a representation of and solution to whatever constitutes a major enigma for the child” and “dramatise the primal moment or original point of departure of a history. In the ‘primal scene,’ it is the origin of the subject that is represented.”<sup>16</sup>

Clearly, the primal scene that explains the origin of the subject is the event of captivity and enslavement, thus the sites returned to are the dungeons, barracoons, and slave houses of the west coast of Africa. The journey through

the dungeons is a kind of time travel that transports the tourist to the past. Not only do these fantasies have complicated and mixed origins, but their enactment is no less vexed; for the identification of origins, the drama of return and the staging of recovery are shot through with an awareness of both the impossibility and the necessity of redressing the irreparable.

At the portal that symbolized the finality of departure and the impossibility of reversion, the tensions that reside in mourning the dead are most intensely experienced. Mourning is both an expression of loss that tethers us to the dead and severs that connection or overcomes loss by assuming the place of the dead. The excesses of empathy lead us to mistake our return with the captives'. To the degree that the bereaved attempt to understand this space of death by placing themselves in the position of the captive, loss is attenuated rather than addressed, and the phantom presence of the departed and the dead eclipsed by our simulated captivity.

"You are back!" We are encouraged to see ourselves as the vessels for the captive's return; we stand in the ancestor's shoes. We imaginatively witness the crimes of the past and cry for those victimized—the enslaved, the ravaged, and the slaughtered. And the obliterative assimilation of empathy enables us to cry for ourselves, too. As we remember those ancestors held in the dungeons, we can't but think of our own dishonored and devalued lives and the unrealized aspirations and the broken promises of abolition, reconstruction, and the civil rights movement. The intransigence of our seemingly eternal second-class status propels us to make recourse to stories of origin, unshakable explanatory narratives, and sites of injury—the land where our blood has been spilt—as if some essential ingredient of ourselves can be recovered at the castles and forts that dot the western coast of Africa, as if the location of the wound was itself the cure, or as if the weight of dead generations could alone ensure our progress.

Ironically the declaration "You are back!" undermines the very violence that these memorials assiduously work to present by claiming that the tourist's excursion is the ancestor's return. Given this, what does the journey back bode for the present? What is surprising is that despite the emphasis placed on remembrance and return, these ceremonies are actually unable to articulate in any decisive fashion, other than the reclamation of a true identity, what remembering yields. While the journey back is the vehicle of remedy, recovery, and self-reckoning, the question begged is what exactly is the redressive work actualized by remembrance. Is not the spectacular abjec-

tion of slavery reproduced in facile representations of the horrors of the slave trade? What ends are served by such representations, beyond remedying the failures of memory through the dramatic reenactment of captivity and the incorporation of the dead? The most disturbing aspect of these reenactments is the suggestion that the rupture of the Middle Passage is neither irreparable nor irrevocable but bridged by the tourist who acts as the vessel for the ancestor. In short, the captive finds his redemption in the tourist.

The celebration of return actually threatens to undermine the work of mourning “by simulating a condition of intactness,” rather than attending to the ruin and wreckage of slavery and by declaring that those deported have in fact returned through their descendants.<sup>17</sup> In the dungeon, the history of decline is narrated as a history of progress. The ease with which the “greatest crime against humanity” is invoked and instantaneously eclipsed by the celebration of the return of those descendants of the Middle Passage would suggest that in the last instance the language of return acts to disavow the very violence that it purportedly gives voice to and insinuates that the derangements of the slave trade can be repaired.<sup>18</sup>

## Encounter Two

At La Maison de Esclave on Goree Island, I join a group of African-American tourists from Miami comprised mostly of retired teachers and nurses. The curator of the slave house, Mr. Boubacar N’Diaye, attuned to the longings of African-American tourists, spins a history of slavery designed to remedy its injuries and confirm African-American exceptionality. In narrating the history of the slave trade, N’Diaye describes those captured and taken to the Americas as the most beautiful people in Africa, and, as proof of this, he points to the superior physique of the African-American athlete. For us, he makes a production of joining the group, as if he has just decided to join us because of the auspiciousness of our return, and promises that it will be a special tour because we have returned home. This staged spontaneity apparently isn’t required for European tourists, despite his assertions to the contrary, all the tours are the same, except for the notable silences around racism, and the failure to share his critique of the church’s participation in the slave trade or compare the slave trade and the Holocaust when guiding Europeans through the slave house. The special pitch geared for African Americans endows every remark with undue gravity, enshrines each object,

requires additional aides to escort those crying out of the children's dungeon and to the Door of No Return, and ultimately casts N'Diaye not only as the guardian of memory, but as the original slave. A huge portrait of him wearing a loincloth, shackled and straddling the Door of No Return, hangs in the museum shop.

The tour through the slave house is extremely fast paced in order to get large groups in and out in twenty to thirty minutes. Besides the odd collection of detail and anecdote, scant historical information is provided on the tour. Prompting black visitors to shed tears seems to be its principle aim. The tour starts out at the children's dungeon. Upon entering the children's dungeon, some of the women begin to cry. I am surprised since I have been unable to shed a single tear; moreover, this shoddy and sensationalist tour incites my anger, which seems the only emotion I can express with any ease. Yet watching these women, I realize that they have come here to act as witnesses, pay respect to those held captive, and properly mourn those described by Morrison as "the unceremoniously buried," regardless of the lures and clichés of roots tourism. They are aided by and indifferent to the prompting of N'Diaye. My own reactive self-fashioning as an "anti-tourist" seems cynical, adolescent, and ultimately a failure to grapple with the messy entanglements of memory and commodification and terror and tourism.

I am not trying to suggest that these weeping women are exemplary models of mourning, especially given the ease with which the group moves from tears to a smiling portrait in front of the Door of No Return to an afternoon of shopping; in fact, it is quite difficult, if not impossible, to separate the mourning that exceeds tourism from the contained catharsis promoted by it. Nonetheless, it is important to consider the possibility of mourning as a counternarrative to the exclusions of U.S. national history and a personal seizure and appropriation of the narrative resources made available by tourism. In short, all I am suggesting is that the tears shed by these women might possibly exceed the closures of tourism, if only momentarily, and that grief might be a form of critically engaging the past, or, at least one that calls emancipation into crisis. As W. E. B. Du Bois noted a century ago, despair was sharpened rather than attenuated by emancipation. In the face of the freed, not having found freedom in the promised land, could be seen the "shadow of a deep disappointment." Tears and disappointment create an opening for counterhistory, a story written against the narrative of progress.

Tears reveal that the time of slavery persists in this interminable awaiting—that is, awaiting freedom and longing for a way of undoing the past. The abrasive and incommensurate temporalities of the “no longer” and the “not yet” can be glimpsed in these tears.

Mourning makes visible the lost object, variously defined as the homeland, authentic identity, and/or the possibility of belonging. It also addresses itself to the dismissal of grief as whining and the repression of slavery from national memory. Certainly, the use of the word *loss* strains at the complexity of the event and its aftermath and risks imposing a too-neat narrative of continuity between that event and this condition. Yet the work of mourning, if it is not dedicated to establishing such connections, at the very least, succeeds in making them. At the Door of No Return, the litany of captives taken to the United States, Haiti, Brazil, Surinam, Jamaica, and so forth, maps the lines of affiliation between various parts of the Americas. In recounting the saga of captivity and enslavement a particular axis of identification emerges—the chronicle of slavery yields to the everyday terror of racism, the civil rights movements, and praises issue forth to a pantheon of African Americans including W. E. B. Du Bois, the Nicholas Brothers, Martin Luther King, Muhammad Ali, and Angela Davis.

In this regard, the history of the slave trade and the narrative of the diaspora recounted at these sites privilege the social location and historical experience of blacks in the United States. Captivity, deportment, slavery, Jim Crow, and a long-awaited integration and equality—this narrative is reinforced by the development strategies of African states, the incentives of the Ministry of Tourism, the directives of USAID, and the acuity of petty traders. Ironically, as a result of these combined efforts, slavery once again becomes a distinctly American story, with brief mention of African “traitors,” but with little reference to the impact of slavery on Africa or the regions now known as Ghana and Senegal.

Notwithstanding the limits of slave route tourism, at these sites the chronicle of dispossession and domination, which is often contained, localized, and dismissed in the United States by the rubric “black history,” receives official recognition, at least by UNESCO and the African states participating in the Slave Route Project, as one of “the greatest human tragedies.” The opportunities for witnessing and remembrance encouraged here center the marginalized presence of the transatlantic slave trade. At best, these sites of memory provide a public space to mourn, a space in which

black grief isn't made the stuff of national entertainment and prurient interest, since neither the millions of lives lost in the transatlantic trade nor the enduring legacy of slavery have yet to be acknowledged in the U.S. national context, where the aggrieved voice is dismissed as so much "bitching and moaning."<sup>19</sup> The dismissal or refutation of slavery's enduring legacy, not surprisingly, employs the language of progress, and, by doing so, establishes the remoteness and irrelevance of the past. As a consequence of this posture, claims for redress based on this history and its enduring legacy are disqualified and belittled as ridiculous or unintelligible, with some conservative critics going so far as to denigrate these claims as racists acts themselves.

Mourning, as a public expression of one's grief, insists that the past is not yet over; this compulsion to grieve also indicates that liberal remedy has yet to be a solution to racist domination and inequality. The seizing hold of the past is a way of lamenting current circumstance and countering the regular disqualification of claims for redress as complaint, envy, and a barrier to social advancement, so giving voice to the grief of the diaspora is especially important in light of the "extreme discretion of the scholarly community" regarding the slave trade and the glib dismissal or condescending embrace that can only understand these lamentations, or any effort to reckon with the breach and rupture induced by the slave trade as yet another example of Negro mimicry or "the holocaust in blackface."<sup>20</sup> In that it enables the aggrieved to recount the history that engendered the degradation of slavery and the injurious constitution of blackness, mourning can be considered a practice of countermemory that attends to that which has been negated and repressed.

Yet, the work of mourning is not without its perils, chief among these are the slippage between responsibility and assimilation and witnessing and incorporation. Can we mourn for those lost without assuming and usurping the place of the dead, and yet recognize that the injuries of racism tether us to this past? Does mourning necessarily entail the obliteration of the other through identification? Can we mourn the dead without becoming them? The ceremonies of slave route tourism and the fantasy of return suggest the opposite—to remember the dead is to assume their place. Yet mourning need not entail stepping into the ancestors' shoes or negating the difference between us and them with the bludgeon of identification. In other words, can we fashion an emancipatory vision not premised on recovery or disentangle mourning from overcoming the past? While the grief of the

diaspora and the longings for return threaten to replace the experience of those captured and enslaved with our own simulated captivity, deny the finality of deportation with our belated presence, and obscure the difference between that event and its enduring legacy, nonetheless there is still a need to mourn, a need augmented by the ubiquity of racist assault, the disallowance of this space of mourning within the United States, and the unwillingness to declare slavery a crime against humanity.

*History that hurts.* The dungeon provides no redemption. Reckoning with our responsibility to the dead cannot save them. The victor has already won. It is not possible to undo the past. So, to what end do we conjure up the ghost? Of what use is an itinerary of terror? Does it provide little more than evidence of what we cannot change, or quell the uncertainty and doubt regarding millions lost and unknown? The debate still rages as to how many were transported to the Americas, killed in the raids and wars that supplied the trade, perished on the long journey to the coast, committed suicide, died of dehydration during the Middle Passage, or were beaten or worked to death—22 million, 30 million, 60 million, or more?<sup>21</sup> Isn't it enough to know that for each captive who survived the ordeal of captivity and seasoning, at least one did not?

At best, the backdrop of this defeat makes visible the diffuse violence and the everyday routines of domination, which continue to characterize black life but are obscured by their everydayness. The normative character of terror insures its invisibility; it defies detection behind rational categories like *crime*, *poverty*, and *pathology*. In other words, the necessity to underscore the centrality of the event, defined here in terms of captivity, deportation, and social death, is a symptom of the difficulty of representing “terror as usual.” The oscillation between then and now distills the past four hundred years into one definitive moment. And, at the same time, the still-unfolding narrative of captivity and dispossession exceeds the discrete parameters of the event. In itemizing the long list of violations, are we any closer to freedom, or do such litanies only confirm what is feared—history is an injury that has yet to cease happening?

Given the irreparable nature of this event, which Jamaica Kincaid describes as a wrong that can be assuaged only by the impossible, that is, by undoing the past, is acting out the past the best approximation of working through available to us? By suffering the past are we better able to grasp hold of an elusive freedom and make it substantial? Is pain the guarantee of



compensation? Beyond contemplating injury or apportioning blame, how can this encounter with the past fuel emancipatory efforts? Is it enough that these acts of commemoration rescue the unnamed and unaccounted for from obscurity and oblivion, counter the disavowals constitutive of the U.S. national community, and unveil the complicitous discretion of the scholarship of the trade?

Bluntly put, is there a necessary relation between remembrance and redress? Can the creation of a collective memory of past crimes insure the end of injustice?<sup>22</sup> Can monumentalizing the past suffice in preventing atrocity? Or does it only succeed in framing these crimes against humanity from the vantage point of contemporary progress and reason, turning history into one great museum in which we revel in antiquarian excess? Can we get the merest hint of “that event” by spending half an hour in the dungeons? I am not trying to make light of these engagements with the past, but only to shake our confidence in commemoration and the accompanying conceits about world peace and universal history entailed in the designation of these monuments as World Heritage sites and, as well, consider whether the imagined and simulated captivity doesn’t in fact operate to contrary purposes — if it doesn’t minimize the very terror it sets out to represent through these mundane reenactments.

The point here is not to condemn tourism, but to rigorously examine the politics of memory and question whether “working through” is even an appropriate model for our relationship with history. In *Representing the Holocaust*, Dominick LaCapra opts for working through as kind of middle road between redemptive totalization and the impossibility of representation and suggests that a degree of recovery is possible in the context of a responsible working through of the past. He asserts that in coming to terms with trauma, there is the possibility of retrieving desirable aspects of the past that might be used in rebuilding a new life.<sup>23</sup> While LaCapra’s arguments are persuasive, I wonder to what degree the backward glance can provide us with the vision to build a new life? To what extent need we rely on the past in transforming the present or, as Marx warned, can we only draw our poetry from the future and not the past?<sup>24</sup> Here I am not advancing the impossibility of representation or declaring the end of history, but wondering aloud whether the image of enslaved ancestors can transform the present. I ask this question in order to discover again the political and ethical relevance of the past.

If the goal is something more than assimilating the terror of the past into

our storehouse of memory, the pressing question is, Why need we remember? Does the emphasis on remembering and working through the past expose our insatiable desires for curatives, healing, and anything else that proffers the restoration of some prelapsarian intactness? Or is recollection an avenue for undoing history? Can remembering potentially enable an escape from the regularity of terror and the routine of violence constitutive of black life in the United States? Or is it that remembering has become the only conceivable or viable form of political agency?

Usually the injunction to remember insists that memory can prevent atrocity, redeem the dead, and cultivate an understanding of ourselves as both individuals and collective subjects. Yet, too often, the injunction to remember assumes the ease of grappling with terror, representing slavery's crime, and ably standing in the other's shoes. I am not proscribing representations of the Middle Passage, particularly since it is the absence of a public history of slavery rather than the saturation of representation that engenders these compulsive performances, but instead pointing to the danger of facile invocations of captivity, sound bites about the millions lost, and simulations of the past that substitute for critical engagement.

These encounters with slavery are conditioned by the repression and erasure of the violent history of deportation and social death in the national imagination, and the plantation pastorals and epics of ethnicity that stand in their stead. In this respect, the journey back is as much motivated by the desire to return to the site of origin and the scene of the fall, as with the invisible landscape of slavery, the unmarked ports of entry in the United States, and the national imperative to forget slavery, render it as romance, or relegate it to some prehistory that has little to do with the present. The restored plantations of the South reek with the false grandeur of the good old days, and the cabins don't appear horrible enough. Too easily, one might conclude, Well, things weren't all that bad. The starkness of the dungeons seems to permit a certain dignity; their cavernous emptiness resonates with the unspeakable. These blank spaces hint at the enormity of loss, the millions disappeared, and what Amiri Baraka describes as "the X-ed space, the empty space where we live, the space that is left of our history now a mystery."

In the dungeon, we singularly devote ourselves to the task of mourning. In the slave hole, the lost ideal: mother, home, kin, and community beckon. The lure of these ideals is nowhere else as painfully acute and absolutely

elusive than in space imagined as the scene of our conception. Mourning enables us a fleeting vision of “before,” an image of ourselves as “those who we never were.” We envision the fall, our eyes fill with the sight of our former greatness, our hearts ache because of the people lost and the ideals lost, loss redoubled and rebounding.

On this side of the Atlantic, glimmerings of a prelapsarian wholeness seduce and betray, rather than the dulling routine of work, the deforming misrecognition of slave, nigger, wench; at this site, one does not have to belabor the poverty of tragedy in imagining slavery, or participate in the numbers game that has taken the place of a sustained engagement with the past. One need not strain to hear the voice of our complaint still resounding.

### Notes

- 1 At a meeting held in Accra, Ghana, in April 1995, the World Tourist Organization and UNESCO drafted a declaration to “foster economic and human development and to rehabilitate, restore, and promote the tangible and intangible inheritance handed down by the slave trade for purposes of cultural tourism, thereby throwing into relief the common nature of the slave trade in terms of Africa, Europe, the Americas, and the Caribbean.” UNESCO, The WTO-UNESCO Cultural Tourism Programme, *The Accra Declaration* (Paris: UNESCO, 1995).
- 2 Walter Benn Michaels, “Slavery and the New Historicism,” in *The Americanization of the Holocaust*, ed. Hilene Flanzbaum (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 188.
- 3 Sigmund Freud, “Mourning and Melancholia,” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Work of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 14 (London: Hogarth Press, 1995); Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok, “Mourning or Melancholia: Introjection versus Incorporation,” in *The Shell and the Kernel*, ed. and trans. Nicholas Rand (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).
- 4 I borrow this term from Eddy L. Harris, *Native Stranger: A Black American's Journey into the Heart of Africa* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992).
- 5 St. Clair Drake, “Diaspora Studies and Pan-Africanism,” in *Global Dimensions of the African Diaspora*, ed. Joseph E. Harris (Washington, DC: Howard University Press, 1982).
- 6 This phrase also suggests that the newly rich ostentatiously display their wealth.
- 7 Homi Bhabha describes the dimensions of the disjunctive present as the staging of a past “whose iterative value as a sign reinscribes the ‘lessons of the past’ into the very textuality of the present,” the reiteration and restaging of these encounters, and the role of trauma in engendering diasporic identity. He notes that for minorities, migrants, and other emergent political identities the “passage through modernity produces that form of repetition—the past as projective. The time-lag of postcolonial modernity moves forward, erasing the compliant past tethered to the myth of progress, ordered in binarisms of its cultural logic: past/present, inside/outside. This forward is neither teleological nor

- is it an endless slippage. It is the function of the lag to slow down the linear, progressive time of modernity to reveal its 'gesture', its *tempi*, 'the pauses and stresses of the whole performance' . . . This slowing down, or lagging, *impels* the 'past,' projects it, gives its 'dead' symbols the circulatory life of the 'sign' of the present, of *passage*, the quickening of the quotidian." See Homi Bhabha, "'Race,' Time, and the Revision of Modernity," in *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 247, 253–54.
- 8 David Scott, "That Event, This Memory: Notes on the Anthropology of African Diasporas in the New World," *Diaspora* 1 (1991): 261–84.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 262.
- 10 This term is borrowed from Nathaniel Mackey's *Bedouin Hornbook* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1986). Fred Moten's *Event Music* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, forthcoming) brought it to my attention.
- 11 Eduoard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, trans. Michael Dash (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1989), 14–18.
- 12 Gerald Early, "The American Mysticism of Remembrance," in *The Culture of Bruising: Essays on Prizefighting, Literature, and Modern American Culture* (Hopewell, NJ: Ecco Press, 1994), 127.
- 13 Scott, "That Event, This Memory," 277.
- 14 Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny," in *Standard Edition*, 17:217, 252.
- 15 This is not to suggest that racism is unchanging, but to emphasize the intransigence of racism and the fact that one's condition is still defined largely by one's membership in the subject group.
- 16 Jean Laplanche and J. B. Pontalis, "Primal Phantasies," in *The Language of Psycho-analysis*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Norton, 1973), 332.
- 17 Eric Santner, "History beyond the Pleasure Principle: Some Thoughts on the Representation of Trauma," in *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the Final Solution*, ed. Saul Friedlander (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 144.
- 18 *The Accra Declaration* states that the slave trade is "the biggest single tragedy in the history of man on account of its scope and duration."
- 19 Hortense Spillers, "Moanin', Bitchin', and Melancholia" (paper delivered at the MLA, December 1996).
- 20 Stanley Crouch described Toni Morrison's *Beloved* as a holocaust novel in blackface. See his *Notes of a Hanging Judge* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).
- 21 Estimates regarding the number of Africans transported to the Americas and lost to raids, war, land and sea journeys, and so on ranges between 15 and 210 million. The summary report of the UNESCO conference on the African Slave Trade held in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, in 1978 states, "Despite serious efforts in recent years to reach a comprehensive conclusion, differences in the assessment of the global extent of the slave trade remain acute . . . Africa's losses during the four centuries of the Atlantic slave trade must be put at some 210 million human beings. According to others the overall total of slaves transported between the tenth and the nineteenth centuries should be put between 15 and 30 million persons" (*The African Slave Trade from the Fifteenth to the Nineteenth Century* [Paris: UNESCO, 1979], 212–13).

- 22 Steven Knapp, "Collective Memory and the Actual Past," *Representations*, no. 26 (Spring 1989): 137.
- 23 Dominick LaCapra, *Representing the Holocaust* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), 199.
- 24 Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (New York: International Publishers, 1981), 18.