

2012

## Performing nostalgia: body, memory, and the aesthetics of past-home

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**PERFORMING NOSTALGIA: BODY, MEMORY, AND THE AESTHETICS OF PAST-HOME**

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
Agricultural and Mechanical College  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

in

The Department of Communication Studies

by

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December 2012

## Acknowledgements

First, I thank my family for their continued support and for going above and beyond to make sure I had the opportunity to pursue all of my educational endeavors. For this, I am eternally grateful and forever in debt. Although I will never be able to repay you for all you have given me, please consider the following. Dad, you are hereby forgiven for tossing “Ping,” my grease-stained construction paper duck, in the garbage when I was a child. And Mom, you were right—However unconsciously, I do tend to leave cabinets open. To my grandmothers, I draw my strength (and good genes) from you. To my Jordan, I love you always.

I extend my heartfelt thank you to each one of my friends and colleagues whose company, help, and knowledge have been invaluable. Dr. Joe Rhodes, I forgive you for the hideous blue paint in our first office. Dr. Danielle Dick McGeough, thank you so much for our long talks, for your encouragement every step of the way, and for your great friendship. Crissy Stafford, we can always say we wrote “sistertations” together. Emily Graves, Annemarie Galeucia, and Mikeala Durrant, you guys are the best study buddies in the universe and I have loved my time with each of you. To everyone who was involved in my shows and/or in my independent study course, thank you, thank you, and thank you. Those memories will last forever. Additionally, I would like to thank all the graduate students who have touched my life since moving to Baton Rouge. You know who you are and you know I look forward to embarking on our careers together. Thank you for working with me in class, in shows, and in life.

I extend my appreciation to the great minds that have guided me along the way with their knowledge, patience, and belief in my abilities. To Dr. Trish Suchy, Dr. John Fletcher,

Dr. Femi Euba, Dr. Tracy Stephenson Shaffer, Dr. Stephanie Houston Grey, Dr. Nathan Crick, Dr. Loretta Pecchioni, Dr. Rachel Hall, Dr. Michael Bowman, Dr. Brian Rusted, Dr. Lisa Flanagan, Dr. Danielle Vignes, Dr. Sharon Weltman, Dr. Mindy Fenske, Dr. Jason Munsell, Dr. Helen Tate, Dr. Tamara Burk, Sara Nalley, Kyle Love, all the brilliant folk from the Black Feminist Performance Institute, and others, I express my gratitude. Each of you has touched my world and this dissertation in some wonderful way. I have benefitted greatly from the quality and diversity of your approaches to research, performance, and pedagogy.

I owe a big thank you to each member of my dissertation committee. Your thoughts, provocations, and critique continue to influence my thinking about this project. I especially thank Dr. Ruth Laurion Bowman, my dissertation advisor, for her love, respect, and unwavering confidence in me throughout my doctoral studies. I am sorry I burned your okra. But I am not sorry I had the opportunity to be one of your advisees. Guiding me knowingly and skillfully, encouraging me to be my best, you have been a lifeline, an inspiration, and a friend. I believe that I can do more, that I am more, because of my relationship with you. This dissertation would not be possible without you, and I look forward to our future collaborations.

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## Abstract

Since its etymological beginnings, the meanings and usages of nostalgia have shifted markedly. In the shifting, nostalgia's associations with the body and with the concept of home has diminished. This study of African American nostalgia for Africa uses genealogical inquiry, personal and autoethnographic narrative, and performance theories and practices to reinvigorate the relations between body, memory, aesthetics, past, and home. Attending to operations of time and space, I theorize the aforementioned relations in order to build a theory of critical nostalgia. Following Debora Battaglia, I argue and illustrate that nostalgia is an act realized in performance, and I develop my theory of critical nostalgia investigating three primary sites of memory: two African American genealogy websites, Elmina Castle, a slave castle located on Ghana's West coast, and my own staged theatre production *Copious Notes: A Nostalgia Tale*.

Informed by Michel Foucault's method of critical genealogy and Joseph Roach's genealogies of performance, I offer critical nostalgia as a method of scholarly inquiry, as an active practice of personal and cultural memory, as a tool for representing memories of past-homes, and as a compositional aesthetic. In the study, I interrogate the history of nostalgia and its use for scholars as a critical category. Theorizing the positionality of the corporeal black body within nostalgic appeals of home, homeland and community, I attend to the relations between origin, roots, and identity. Further, I explore the performative possibilities of nostalgia in relation to affective bodily experience and in relation to narratives of trauma. Finally, I illustrate the utility of critical nostalgia for creating aesthetic performances sensitive to time and space, and I synthesize the major tenants of critical nostalgia for use in performance praxis.

## Chapter One

### Tracing the Body of Nostalgia: Nostalgia, Performance, and Performing Nostalgia

In 1688, Swiss physician Johannes Hofer coined the term “nostalgia,” combining the Greek *nostos*, meaning to return home, and *algos*, for pain or longing, to refer to a familiar pathology we might call homesickness today. Since its debut in medical terminology, nostalgia has enjoyed a rich career as a descriptive and critical category in the social sciences and in the humanities. In “The Nostalgic Subject: A Genealogy of the ‘Critique of Nostalgia,’” Nauman Naqvi traces the development of nostalgia through history in order to “induce or heighten anxiety about the use of the word as a critical category” (Naqvi 7).<sup>1</sup> According to Naqvi, nostalgia emerged as a medical term in the seventeenth century to describe the malady of desperately homesick “peasant-soldiers.” In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, nostalgia became associated with criminology, describing motivation for a variety of criminal activity, such as arson and assault. By the 1930s and 1940s, nostalgia was known as a psychological disorder, a mental condition that most commonly affected university students (Naqvi 7-8).

Further, somewhere along the line, nostalgia transformed from use as a diagnostic tool, applied to individuals displaying specific behaviors, to an indistinct critique “target[ing] the valorization and manipulation of the past” (Naqvi 5). This change marks two shifts crucial to my study. The first shift is the movement away from the corporeal body as an indication of nostalgic tendencies toward an emphasis on psychology. The second shift is that from diagnostic tool to social critique, turning nostalgia into a largely theoretical and subjective concept. Nostalgia transforms from being subject-centered to

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<sup>1</sup> For other current reviews of nostalgia, see Susannah Radstone, *The Sexual Politics of Time: Confession, Nostalgia, Memory*; and Jenelle Wilson, *Nostalgia: Sanctuary of Meaning*.

being centered on the subjective evaluation of a text or other expression, attitude or style. Nowadays, nostalgia is used often in the colloquial as a style of dealing with or writing about the past, at best in terms of romanticism or escapism and at worst in an effort to censor the past.<sup>2</sup> By the end of his study, Naqvi concludes that the term nostalgia, or any temporal orientation, “cannot service as a critical category” because it “obfuscates our judgment” and “tells us nothing about the ethical and political texture of a way of thinking” (Naqvi 48). Naqvi argues that the history of nostalgia and its negative associations embroil it in the “losses and torments of modernity” (Naqvi 48). According to Naqvi, nostalgia minimizes the consequences of modernity and specifically colonialism by characterizing the past as pleasant and productive, in collusion finally with the modern project of progress.

Conversely, in this dissertation, I argue that the etymology and history of the term nostalgia give weight to its critical power. In response to Naqvi, I show that nostalgia can counter narratives of modernity.<sup>3</sup> To do so, I return to a theory of nostalgia that features the body, a body theorized and realized in performance. Above, I outlined what I see as two major shifts in the history of nostalgia, namely, the movement away from corporeal experience and knowledge and the movement toward nostalgia as a largely theoretical concept. In “On Practical Nostalgia: Self-Prospecting Among Urban Trobrianders,” Debora Battaglia retains the corporeal and material aspects of nostalgia, noticing how “it can be *practiced* in diverse ways” by users for their own purposes (Battaglia 77; emphasis in original). In keeping with the etymology of the term nostalgia, denoting a “return home,”

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<sup>2</sup> David Lowenthal writes that negative critiques of nostalgia, as a false remembering for instance, limit our understanding of nostalgia by overlooking to what nostalgia may respond and the pleasures associated with nostalgia (Lowenthal 29-30).

<sup>3</sup> Radstone provides a comprehensive review of the scholarly debate regarding whether nostalgia is a friend or foe of modernism in Chapter Two of *The Sexual Politics of Time*.



the title of this dissertation represents my attempt to return nostalgia to its associations with the body by exploring its manifestations in performance as an aesthetic yet critical encounter with memory. In other words, I extend nostalgia as a site of knowledge exercised through performance, considering its efficacy as a critical category and elucidating its potential to make connections between the body, memory, and aesthetics physically manifest.<sup>4</sup> In the study, I am particularly concerned with performances of nostalgia that feature African American history, memory, and bodily experience.

Below, I provide a review of relevant literature, articulate my method of study, and specify the sites of performance I analyze in the upcoming chapters. I conclude with a discussion that anticipates the significance of practicing and theorizing nostalgia as a critical performance. This discussion lays the groundwork for the theory of critical nostalgia, which will unfold over the course of the study.

### **Tracing Nostalgia, (Re)locating Bodies**

While studying nostalgia as performance has received little notice in the scholarly community, nostalgia itself is a hot topic, discussed in many ways across several disciplines. The main conversations focus on nostalgia as disease, as desire embedded in objects of memory, as escape, as impacting identity, and as a complex narrative of home. Authors address the significance of these topics by attending to the character or quality of nostalgia, its scope, and function. When authors address character or quality, they tend to evaluate nostalgia as a good or bad idea or practice, as a progressive or regressive phenomenon, or as an ontological or epistemological concern. When scope is featured, authors focus on the operation of nostalgia at different levels, such as the personal or

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<sup>4</sup> In *Fictive Domains*, Judith Broome retains connections between nostalgia and the body by focusing on how the body is configured in novels and other creative texts of nostalgia from 1717-1770.

individual, within a specific community or culture, or at the level of mass communication and culture. Scholars concerned with function ask questions regarding how nostalgia operates or is applied, for what purpose and whose benefit. The above-noted typology is incomplete and shifting of course, and many studies fall within multiple categories. Below, then, I select and discuss a handful of significant studies that together represent the main topics and perspectives and that are of pertinence to my research.

Nostalgia as a disease of the body or brain carries negative connotations typically, and thereby speaks to the character or quality of nostalgia. In a 1941 article, “Nostalgia: A Review of Literature,” Willis H. McCann chronicles the definitional and clinical life of nostalgia. He notes its negative origins, explaining how at first nostalgia was thought to cause just about anything from bad breath to delirium. While nostalgia is no longer used to diagnose the maladies of an individual (corporeal) body, it continues to carry negative connotations, particularly when understood as a social sickness.<sup>5</sup>

Conversely, a handful of scholars have sought to redeem nostalgia, lauding its reflective or conservative qualities as generative. For example, in her analysis of Geina Mhlophe’s 1986 South African play, *Have You Seen Zandile?*, Jennifer Delisle argues that nostalgia acts as a powerful reconstructive tool in post-apartheid communities by allowing natives to look upon the past as a resource for productive identity building. In this way, nostalgia is good. While it is not uncommon for scholars to use a good/bad binary in their evaluation of nostalgia, gradations are common too. The gradations appear in two forms, which may or may not be applied simultaneously: Qualifiers modify or append descriptors to the term to highlight certain traits of nostalgia, while the dialectic form stresses

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<sup>5</sup> Susan Stewart refers to nostalgia as a “social disease” (Stewart 23); and Lowenthal as “modern malaise” (Lowenthal 31).

definitional tensions.<sup>6</sup> For instance, Marchegiani and Phau use the qualified term “unified nostalgia” negatively, to argue against a nostalgia that would ignore the historical versus personal dialectic embedded in their understanding of the term. Just as Marchegiani and Phau develop an argument of scope to negate a particular way of viewing nostalgia, hence addressing the character of nostalgia also, Delisle attends to the character of nostalgia as based on its ability to build community, thereby addressing scope as well.

A second common way scholars study nostalgia is as a desire or feeling people embed in certain objects, especially older ones.<sup>7</sup> Old family photographs or items found in a vintage store hold a nostalgic allure for many. Nostalgia is used often to sell items by associating them with the “good old days,” which people can recall and own by purchasing the items. Deneen Gilmour looks at nostalgia in terms of human motivation and actions. In an effort to expand Burke’s theory of substance, she addresses the practice of U.S. consumers purchasing “nostalgia-based furnishings” (Gilmour 57). Her theory of simulated substance describes a “materialistic mask in which people use personal possessions, such as furniture, houses, cars, clothing, or decorations to signal their substance to others” (Gilmour 58). Gilmour claims that the purchase of nostalgic items serves as a way for people to display a longing for and privileging of past times and memories. An argument of scope and function, Gilmour’s study focuses on personal motivations to start, but by questioning who gains from the purchase of nostalgic goods, the study embraces broader issues of gender, race, and class.

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<sup>6</sup> Examples of qualifiers include Renato Resaldo’s essay on “Imperialist Nostalgia” and Jonathan Bach’s essay on East German nostalgia. Examples of dialectics include Greg Dickinson’s study of “nostalgia for the exotic and nostalgia for home” (Dickinson 13); and Svetlana Boym’s essay on “reflective” and “restorative nostalgia” (Boym 41).

<sup>7</sup> Stewart theorizes the stakes of objects that carry a past with them, such as the souvenir (Stewart 134-138).

Nostalgia as escape connotes a mental journey, a shift in time and place that for some functions to disconnect them from the present and reconnect them with the past. Much of the scholarship concerned with this mode of thinking focuses on the effect of the cognitive shift in time and place on the present. Kimberly Smith argues that nostalgia emerged out of a “resistance to industrialization” and modernity, recalling an agrarian past perceived to be more in touch with the elements of life (Smith 128). Likewise, Stuart Tannock observes, “invoking the past, the nostalgic subject may be involved in escaping or evading, in critiquing, or in mobilizing to overcome the present experience of loss of identity, lack of agency, or absence of community” (Tannock 454). Both Tannock’s and Smith’s observations on nostalgia as escape reveal an assumption concerning the quality of nostalgia, characterizing it as an ontological question of being developed in response to material conditions. The ontological query highlights the scope of nostalgia as well. An individual’s desire to escape the present by recalling what she perceives as a better past, particularly a past-home, implies the impact of broader social conditions and collective recall.

In the prior discussion, the influence of nostalgia on identity is noted, and many scholars handle it directly in their research, asking how nostalgia functions to develop and validate, empower or not, as the case may be, the identity of an individual or group. In “Patty and Me: Performative Encounters Between an Historical Body and the History of Images,” Rachel Hall counters negative conceptions of nostalgia by illustrating the efficacy of nostalgia as a site for political engagement.<sup>8</sup> Hall chronicles her changing orientation toward Patty Hearst as a subject of history, thereby reconstructing history and identity on

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<sup>8</sup> In his 1979 text, *Yearning for Yesterday: A Sociology of Nostalgia*, Fred Davis anticipates Hall’s critical counter, theorizing nostalgia as a politically viable tool.

personal and historical levels. In her narrative entwining her life with the life of Patty Hearst, Hall makes the case for a qualified nostalgia, a feminist nostalgia that infuses the image of the helpless white female victim with agency. By means of her performative writing, Hall demonstrates how, by engaging the past, one is able to negotiate who one is and where one belongs.

In a more explicit manner than Hall, Greg Dickinson extends the scope of nostalgia in identity politics by examining how a communal identity is constructed through nostalgic appeals. In “Memories for Sale: Nostalgia and the Construction of Identity in Old Pasadena,” Dickinson, like Gilmour and Smith, argues that nostalgia is a response to modernity and the fragmented identity associated with it. He observes, “times of rapid change or insecurity encourage a tremendous desire for the past” (Dickinson 1), and finds that “Old Pasadena gains its rhetorical force by being a legendary place fully involved in the past,” its strength lying “in its nostalgic invocations” (Dickinson 7). Dickinson proceeds to analyze how, in old Pasadena, nostalgia is created by the “copious repetition” of embedded fragments, signs and inscriptions, which contribute to the development and sustenance of a collective Pasadena identity (Dickinson 7-8). Delisle makes a similar argument regarding South African identity, maintaining that a productive function of nostalgia is its ability to create positive versions of a communal identity in contrast to those indelibly marked by racism and discrimination.

Embedded in the study of how nostalgia impacts identity is an interest in how it functions as a strategy of persuasion for political ends. In Smith’s analysis of nostalgia, she highlights its political function noting that nostalgia necessitates a questioning of “whose memories count, what kind of attachments and modes of life are valuable, and what kinds

of harms are politically relevant” (Smith 516). Shawn J. and Trevor Parry-Giles analyze the rhetorical function of nostalgia in Bill Clinton’s 1998 address commemorating the March on Washington, which was one of the largest protests for African American civil and economic rights in the U.S. The authors maintain that Clinton’s speech “reveals how the presidency functions as a site for the construction and formation of collective memory. In [Clinton’s] address...memory is nostalgic and distorted, evidencing a multifarious character of collective memory of political and strategic ends” (Parry-Giles and Parry-Giles 418). Operating under the premise that the appeal of nostalgia lies in its ability to create identification with and provoke an emotional response from an audience, Parry-Giles and Parry-Giles conclude that nostalgia encourages a speaker to “distort the past” (Parry-Giles and Parry-Giles 427). Characterized as historical revisionism, nostalgia is viewed by the authors as a false experience and expression of history and community.

A similar view is held by Susan Stewart in her study of nostalgia as manifested in the “miniature” metaphysics of home or domesticity. Her position and Lucy Lippard’s response to it exemplify the range of perspectives on the character and function of nostalgia, particularly as it relates to home. In *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*, Stewart contends that nostalgia is a “social disease” informed by a domestic ideology (Stewart ix). Provincial and reactionary, a nostalgic view of the world discredits the present and glorifies an ideal past. Stewart writes, “nostalgia, like any form of narrative, is always ideological: the past it seeks has never existed except as narrative, and hence, always absent, that past continually threatens to reproduce itself as a felt lack” (Stewart 23). Conversely, in *On the Beaten Track: Tourism, Art, and Place*, Lippard experiences nostalgia as a generative “return home” (Lippard 153). While she

understands why scholars like Stewart associate nostalgia with “duplicity and sentimental inauthenticity,” she refuses to discredit a longing she feels for her past-home of New England, experiencing nostalgia as “the dreamlike process of memory” (Lippard 153) or remembering, which she enacts on the pages of her book. Although nostalgia feels dreamlike for Lippard, the feeling is grounded in her revisiting her home and seeing and recalling events and objects of her past. In these ways, Lippard counters Stewart’s assertion that nostalgia is “a sadness without an object” or “a desire for desire” (Stewart 23). Instead, by means of her actions of touring and writing, Lippard demonstrates how nostalgia is very much “part of my lived experience,” a “desire unremoved from the senses,” which she considers “a seamless and positive part of life” (Lippard 164).

My approach to nostalgia is similar to Lippard’s in that I retain a “return home” and the importance of physical experience in my conception and application of the term. Below, I focus on these key aspects and how they operate in the study.

As my literature review demonstrates, many scholars of nostalgia overlook the etymological association between nostalgia and home, implementing instead a more general understanding of nostalgia as a particular view of the past. Following Lippard, I emphasize the connections between nostalgia and home, arguing that practices and discourses of home alter and specify orientations toward the past. The variables of home I undertake in my study include: 1) Home as a place of origin, indicating a birthplace or the physical location from which ancestors derive. In *Yesterday’s Self: Nostalgia and Immigrant Identity*, Andreea Ritivoi theorizes nostalgia as rooted in exile, immigration, and Diaspora. 2) Home as a feeling that signifies a sense of belonging, as in “I feel at home here.” 3) Home as a place of personal history or attachment to a material area. In Lippard’s essay, home as

a feeling of belonging and a place of personal history predominate. 4) Home as community denotes the people and culture of home not necessarily attached to a place. Over the course of the study, I enter into, move between, and expand these different notions of home while also addressing the aforementioned topics of disease, escape, identity, and how nostalgia is embedded in material items.

In my literature review, the noted topics demonstrate a negation or subordination of the physical body, at least as handled by contemporary scholars. For instance, by abstracting disease from diagnostics, nostalgia is propelled outside the realm of physical bodies. Even studies of embedded nostalgia rely on metaphysical discussions, of simulation, for example. In sum, according to the bulk of literature on nostalgia, bodies may be influenced by nostalgia or they may feel nostalgia internally, but they do not *do* nostalgia, they do not create or enact it externally. If we understand nostalgia as a return(ing) home to a past of some kind, there is nobody there, no body at home. Thus, the material body is virtually absent from discussions of nostalgia. As counter and supplement to this treatment of nostalgia, I argue that the physical body is a site where home is recalled and created. In other words, I approach nostalgia as people performing a return home.

To date, there are very few studies that aim to theorize nostalgia in terms of performance. I am aware of three: Ray Cashman's study of material culture in Northern Ireland, Debora Battaglia's study of yam growing by urban Trobrianders, and Judith Hamera's deployment of Battaglia's theory in her analysis of ballet studios and practice. In "Critical Nostalgia and Material Culture in Northern Ireland," Cashman finds that Irish Catholics and Protestants preserve and display local artifacts from the past in ways that invite critical thought in the present and highlight possibilities for social change in the



future. In “On Practical Nostalgia: Self-Prospecting Among Urban Trobrianders,” Battaglia endows nostalgia with the potential to encourage people to create practical manifestations or performances. She finds that the Trobrianders perform nostalgia by performing the actions and sensibilities of home. Drawing on Battaglia, Hamera theorizes a “tactical nostalgia” in ballet practice where, by means of their labors and the expressive technique their labors recall, dancers forge a generative homosocial community (Hamera 114-115). Like Battaglia and Hamera, I examine the relationship between nostalgia and performance in my study. Extending and countering Cashman, I also theorize nostalgia as a critical practice aimed at recalling and rearticulating the past and its affective registers, as compared to positioning the past solely in service to the needs of the present and future.

## **Methods**

I use a variety of methods in the study, allowing my case studies to inform the analytical approach. The methods include genealogical practices, textual analysis, autoethnographic narrative, and various performance techniques. Joseph Roach outlines the basic approach and aim of critical genealogies, specifically genealogies of performance, telling us they “document – and suspect – the historical transmission and dissemination of cultural practices and attitudes through collective representations” (Roach 25). Roach’s use of the term “suspect” is anticipated by Michel Foucault when he highlights that a key aim of genealogy is to unearth and stage forgotten histories that highlight the “dissension” between rather than “inviolable identity” of historical remnants (Foucault 142). In this study, then, I unearth the complex histories of nostalgia and decipher them as and through performance practice in order to better understand how and why people create, enact, and thereby use nostalgia purposefully, as a critical activity that we, in turn, might draw on and

use. In my application of the method, I examine the nostalgic performances of African Americans in an effort to focus my study and address my interest in black performance.

As required by the practice of critical genealogies, I also undertake close textual analyses of various texts, events, activities, in other words, performances, in order to examine how nostalgia is embedded in them and to what purpose or function. I also act on as well as analyze the scope of nostalgic activity. That is, I supplement the cultural aspects of nostalgia as communicated through practices of collective memory by including autoethnographic narratives. Based on my experiences of African American nostalgia, the narratives highlight the role of personal memory and bodily knowledge in the performance of nostalgia. These narratives also allow me to articulate my personal experiences in relation to broader social systems, contexts, and histories, and they allow me to explore my positionality with respect to African American and academic communities. Like Bryant Alexander:

I am continually interested in using ethnography as a tool to excavate the meaningfulness of familiar cultural sites. In which case the reporter (ethnographer) holds a dual membership – in both the cultural community that [she] reports on and the cultural communities that [she] reports to – the intricacies of which offer greater opportunities for interpretation, translation, and transference. (Alexander 139)

Following Alexander, I implicate my body as part of the African and African American communities I report on and the academic community I report to.

Finally, I draw on various performance theories and methods in order to examine how nostalgia is performed in everyday life and might be performed aesthetically, on a stage for an audience. The ideas and practices of Bertolt Brecht, Constantin Stanislavski, and Anne Bogart provide frameworks for composition that help me realize how nostalgia is created through the interaction of bodies, time, and space. In this way, too, the noted

practitioners contribute to a vocabulary for expressing an aesthetic of nostalgia, an aesthetic of return, for use in performance composition.

### **Sites of Nostalgia**

In “Between Memory and History,” Pierre Nora describes “*lieux de mémoire*” or sites of memory, which people create in response to what Nora perceives as an acceleration of history, such that the present slips quickly into the past.<sup>9</sup> Noting evidence of this culture of imminent disappearance, Nora remarks, “We speak so much of memory because there is little of it left” (Nora 7). He continues:

Our interest in *lieux de mémoire* where memory crystallizes and secretes itself has occurred at a particular historical moment, a turning point where consciousness of a break with the past is bound up with the sense that memory has been torn – but torn in such a way as to pose the problem of the embodiment of memory in certain sites where a sense of historical continuity persists. (Nora 7; emphasis in original)

In this study, I “speak of memory” and of the ruptures Nora describes so as to highlight and theorize the “problem of the embodiment of memory” using the vocabulary nostalgia offers. Further, I query the ways in which the sites of performance I select promote or deconstruct the illusion of historical continuity.

I have selected three main *lieux de mémoire* or sites of memory to analyze. In performance terms, one site is constituted by social or everyday life performances. A second site falls within the rubric of cultural performance, where deliberate and typically more elaborate displays of heritage and community are offered, as is the case with a ritual or festival. The third site of memory is an aesthetic performance, which draws on and displays explicitly artistic forms framed for audience consumption. The social performances I examine are two websites targeted at African Americans who desire to

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<sup>9</sup> Nora contrasts *lieux de mémoire* with *milieux de mémoire* or the mythical environments of memory, which he argues no longer exist because of the rapid acceleration of history (Nora 7).

track their ancestry through DNA testing, on one website, and community resource documents, on the other. The cultural performances consist of the actual site, physical tour, and video tour of the Elmina slave castle in Ghana, West Africa. The aesthetic performance consists of the script and staging of *Copious Notes: A Nostalgia Tale*, a piece I wrote concerning African American nostalgia for Africa. Addressing as they do social, cultural, and aesthetic contexts, the three sites speak to the scope and function of nostalgic practice. Moreover, as each is an actual event where people do things, they allow me to concentrate on how bodies perform nostalgia.

In the chapter summaries that follow I elaborate on each performance site and clarify my selection and use of theories and methods. You might notice that the material in Chapters Two through Four is organized so as to activate the broad process of a critical genealogy. In the second chapter, I question the operations of “origin” in performances of African American nostalgia; in the third chapter, I descend into the literal and figurative body of said origin and discover the disparate histories that support and confound it; and in the fourth chapter, I ascend to a literal stage to compose a genealogy that displays the contentious histories that have emerged in my research.

In “Chapter Two: The Nostalgic Body: Practices of African American Genealogical Memory,” I focus on the social practices of popular and genetic genealogy and how African American individuals and communities engage and perform them. Specifically, I analyze the activity on two websites of memory or remembering: *AfriGeneas.com*, which involves users in tracking their ancestry through community resource documents and materials, and *AfricanAncestry.com*, which connects users with their past (ideally African) home through DNA testing. To examine the sites, I draw on the method of critical genealogy,

particularly genealogies of performance as conceived by Joseph Roach following Foucault. Roach's principles of surrogation, kinesthetic imagination, behavioral vortex, and displaced transmission help me analyze the two sites as performance. As a result, I find and query how the website performances both displace and center the nostalgic body by positioning it within a socially-shared understanding of a past-home and how they inspire global community building. The chapter examines the intersection of genealogies, nostalgia, home, homeland, and community, focusing on how bodies embedded in text and in front of computers activate these key topics through performance. Imagining the theoretical implications of genealogies of performance informed by nostalgia, I specify my theory of critical nostalgia through a discussion of origin, roots, and identity.

In Chapter Three, "My Nervous Body: Performing Nostalgia at Elmina Slave Castle," I use a combination of genealogical inquiry, including close textual analysis, and personal narrative to examine the scope and function of nostalgia in cultural performances of Elmina Castle. Located on Ghana's coast, the castle is now a UNESCO World Heritage Monument, preserved for its infamous role in the slave trade. The main performances I examine are the castle itself as a site of memory embedded with nostalgia, a video tour of the site, and my recollections of a tour I took when I visited the castle in 2007. By recalling these performances, I descend into the castle and into my own bodily experiences. Ascending to stage my findings, I analyze the performances in terms of a bittersweet nostalgia that emerges through the use of oppositions and ironies, formations of space and place, and historical and personal knowledge in the performances. The chapter then demonstrates how nostalgia is practiced, performed, as a social strategy and tactic, in this case for confronting the traumatic ghosts of the past. In conclusion, I place trauma and nostalgia in

conversation, arguing that, as a critical act, nostalgia can engage disturbing memories and histories without idealizing them or itself as a redressive measure.

In Chapter Four, “Staging Nostalgia: Time and Space in *Copious Notes: A Nostalgia Tale*,” I demonstrate the potential of nostalgia as an aesthetic, a compositional tool, and a subject of stage performance. In the chapter, I present and analyze the script of *Copious Notes: A Nostalgia Tale*, a piece I wrote and staged in the HopKins Black Box at Louisiana State University. *Copious Notes* is a dramatic interpretation of my experiences in Ghana, and therefore connects with Chapter Three by bringing some of its content and conflict to the stage. Aligning Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory of the chronotope and Roach’s behavioral vortex, I analyze the piece in light of the interaction between bodies, space, and time. My interest of course concerns if and how said interaction results in an aesthetic of nostalgia or, more precisely, an aesthetic of critical nostalgia. My main aim in the chapter is to discover and express how we might compose bodies in space and time in order to recall the past in explicit ways and imply an attitude toward it, i.e., perform critical nostalgia. I find that the three major chronotopes in operation in *Copious Notes* result in a grotesque nostalgia, and that the piece illustrates one particular way to do critical nostalgia. While many performance methods, such as Bertolt Brecht’s epic theatre, are concerned with similar matters, the difference here is that the historicization of events is focused on the actions and sensibilities of returning home. In this chapter, I detail my composition process, calling on the methods of Constantin Stanislavski, Anne Bogart, and Susan Harbage Page. I look at how homeplace functions on stage and how an aesthetic of return is enacted. In addition, I turn to analyze the space and time dynamics of the dramatic characters in the play, finding that they serve not only as forces in the dramatic vortex but also as representations of

shifting notions of home. I close the chapter by introducing “seeing and feeling time” as a way to contextualize the body in time.

In the concluding chapter, I recollect the major ideas in the previous chapters, pointing to relevant avenues of research beyond the scope of the study. Here, I posit the potential in exploring “homeplace as body” and developing vocabulary for the relations between nostalgia and affect. In the chapter, I rearticulate major ideas in the study by placing them in conversation with one another. In doing so, I discuss the research journey that brought me to the theory of critical nostalgia, framing the journey as an oscillation between domestic and academic spaces. Theorizing these two spaces in terms of the content of the dissertation more broadly, I elaborate on the relationship between home, domesticity, and the body by looking at women’s bodies across the sites of study. And I elaborate on the relationship between representation and the body by attending to the politics of the black body on stage and to the politics of writing. The chapter also refunctions the major ideas of the study so that they serve as twelve “notes” detailing the theory of critical nostalgia for performance praxis. I end the chapter with a reflection on the development of the study in terms of its contribution to black performance and performing memory more generally.

### **Nostalgia for Performance (Studies)**

Recognizing that nostalgia has an explicit past orientation, I formulate my theory of critical nostalgia drawing on existing ideas of performance as constituted by/in the past. An idea that connects different definitions of performance is that performance repeats itself; it is interdependent on what came before it. In this way, performance has a historical consciousness, although a performer may not be aware of it and a performance may not

call attention to it. The work of performance theorists Richard Schechner, Dwight Conquergood, Victor Turner, and Judith Butler provide insight on this idea.

According to Richard Schechner, performance is “restored” or “twice-behaved” behavior (Schechner, *Between Theatre and Anthropology* 36). In performance, people call on and enact certain cultural forms and conventions, practices and expressions that preceded them. Further, while a performer may aim for precise imitation, the restoration is never exact and inventive alterations are likely and often deliberate. In Schechner’s definition then performance shows itself to be reliant on the past and yet also liable to change.

Soyini Madison offers a succinct explanation of Dwight Conquergood’s take on performance, writing, “the triad of mimesis, poiesis, and kinesis is one of Conquergood’s most popular conceptualizations” (Madison, *Critical Ethnography* 169). Recalling the aesthetic preference of the ancients, mimesis is the attempt to imitate life by repeating certain forms and conventions, of what we call realism today. Because of its ocular and stylistic bias, mimesis does not fully capture performance in all its facets. Poiesis stresses the processes of performance, understanding performance as something we do and asking questions about it and its consequences rather than, for instance, asking questions about its meaning. Kinesis, for Conquergood and Madison, focuses on performance as an emergent practice where individual or social change is the promise and aim. Conquergood credits the anthropologist Victor Turner for shifting the “thinking about performance from mimesis to poiesis. [Further] Turner’s work on the productive capacities of performance set the stage for a more poststructuralist and political emphasis on performance as kinesis, as movement, motion, fluidity, fluctuation, all those restless energies that transgress



boundaries and trouble closure” (Conquergood 138). While Conquergood highlights poiesis and kinesis and their present and future orientations, it should be noted that Turner is well known for his understanding of how repeating structures, in ritual particularly, are embedded with their own anti- or counter structures. That is to say, performers restore the past not only to sustain it, but in many cases to question and alter it, demonstrating that transgressive and resistant as well as conservative acts emerge from the practice of restoring the past.

For feminist scholar Judith Butler, performativity is a “stylized repetition of acts” (Butler, “Performative Acts” 519) that cites “a norm or set of norms,” suggesting that the “act that one does, the act that one performs is, in a sense, an act that has been going on before one arrived on the scene” (Butler, *Bodies That Matter* 12). Butler’s specific interest is in how performativity affects gender identity, Butler arguing that gender is inscribed on the body through the repetition of heteronormative structures and acts.

As with the theories I outlined above, performances of nostalgia recall the past, but in a specialized way that features an orientation, attitude, and affect toward ideas and practices of home located in the past. We might use the descriptor “past-home” in order to highlight both space and time and to avoid conflating nostalgia with historical perspectives generally. An orientation towards a past-home connotes one’s realization of their position in relation to it, suggesting that performances of nostalgia acknowledge their historical consciousness. An attitude towards a past-home implies an evaluation or judgment that is manifested in action. And affect towards a past-home refers to the emotional dynamics at play in repeating or returning to a past-home.

A key contribution of this study then is that it offers a way to talk about performance that emphasizes its past referencing abilities; that values or finds currency in the historical consciousness of performance. This emphasis differs from many theories of performance that focus on the present and future referencing abilities of performance. In "Performance, Utopia, and the Utopian Performative," Jill Dolan remarks on the struggle to describe what is ineffable about performance and provides a theory of the utopian performative as a partial answer to the question. Dolan writes, "I believe that theatre and performance can articulate a common future, one that's more just and equitable, one in which we can all participate more equally, with more chances to live fully and contribute to the making of culture" (Dolan, "Performance, Utopia, and the Utopian Performative" 455). While articulating a utopian mission for performance is generative, it is my feeling that such a mission has an equally generative counterpart in nostalgia. Attending to what a performance restores, how and why, is important to understanding the structures and counter structures at work in any one performance, and attending to those concerned specifically with a past-home provides insight into the orientations, attitudes, and affective dynamics of home, time and place, body and mind, history and memory, and how these forces effect identity. To conceive of performance in terms of the present or future only runs the risk of a dangerous forfeiture of knowledge(s) and people(s) of the past. Indeed, this dissertation asks, if moments of utopia, moments that create wonderful little "no-places," are the hope for the future, what then shall we do with the past? Is there a formulation of performance that calls on the past in a way that supplements restoration with the aim of revealing bodies within the textures of their affective histories?

It is my premise that attending to histories that include and account for affective relations is imperative to a politically invested theory of performance. This dissertation promotes such a theory by making strange the conventional use of the term nostalgia, i.e., as a pleasant remembering. In the study, I reconfigure nostalgia as a complex performative process, asking how it affects and effects the body in performance. Performing nostalgia allows us to look at the phenomenon in a way that exposes its assumptions about the body and acknowledges its physical and metaphysical tensions. I argue that to embody nostalgia is to force a confrontation with materiality. I mobilize the idea of nostalgia as a critical act by introducing the problems and possibilities of nostalgia as a mode of performance within social, cultural, and aesthetic realms and analyzing the gendered, raced, and classed body as it traverses the relations between history, memory, and imagination. These relations force us to negotiate the past in such a way that does not deny affect or longing. Looking at nostalgia through a performative lens expands its use as a critical category while returning it back to its roots, grounding it in the body.

## Chapter Two

### **The Nostalgic Body: Practices of African American Genealogical Memory**

“Where are you from?” he inquires. “Where are you from?” It was my first time abroad. I found myself in Prague, Czech Republic, on a study abroad for a semester. In order to get to the international college we attended, my colleagues and I walked several blocks to the metro and then another mile or so to the school. Our daily trek took us through the back alleys of shops and restaurants. The streets were made of uneven stone, and the buildings seemed to have been there forever. There was a man who worked at one of the restaurants, and almost every morning as I passed the back door of the restaurant, he’d be there smoking a cigarette.

My first few engagements with the man consisted of polite nods of acknowledgement. He would eye our group as we walked together, chatting. He was a tall, slender man with very little hair on his head and face. After a couple of weeks of casual passing, he began to greet us with words. “Good morning,” he’d say. He was blond, as far as I could tell. One day, he asked us where we were from. The group consensus was “different places across the U.S.,” I think. He wore a black half-apron. Another day, as I was traveling past his restaurant in a smaller group, he singled me out. “Where are *you* from?” he asked. “America,” I replied. He withdrew with his face. Not many days later, he posed the question to me again, “where are you *from*?” this time placing emphasis at the end of his question. Clearly “America” was not going to cut it. I tried “South Carolina” on another day. The exchange became a game, or a challenge, or a research question. By the end of my trip, I realized that no answer was going to be satisfactory and that it would take a certain

amount of social, historical, and corporeal work to even begin to tackle his question, “where are you from?”

To pursue such an investigation, I might begin by teasing out the more implicit questions embedded in the inquiry. Where are your people from? How do you connect yourself with your history? How do you name and claim a history? How do you reconcile and locate your body with respect to the bodies and stories of those who came before you? To ask, “where are you from?” is perhaps to ask, “what is your past and even what is your home?” As I pointed out in Chapter One, Hofer coined the term “nostalgia,” combining the Greek *nostos*, meaning to return home, and *algos*, for pain or longing. This combination articulates nostalgia’s etymology with notions of return, home, affective relations, and the body.

Genealogy, or the practice and study of ancestral tracing, is a compelling example of how people perform Hofer’s composite term, “nostalgia.” Genealogy takes several forms and is practiced in various ways. In this chapter, I look at genetic genealogy, popular genealogy, critical genealogy, and performance genealogy and, in the prior two cases, as used by African American individuals and groups. Additionally, I consider the theoretical implications of a performance genealogy informed by nostalgic thought. I seek to elucidate the ways in which the concept of nostalgia interacts with and functions in these performative practices. Finally, my intent is to imagine the practice of genetic and popular genealogy alongside theories of critical and performance genealogy in order to engage and question the positionality of the corporeal black body within nostalgic appeals of home, homeland, and global community.

I begin with a discussion of the aforementioned forms of genealogy, attending to differences, similarities, and performative dimensions. Then, I activate the forms of genealogy through the analysis of two websites: *AfriGeneas.com* and *AfricanAncestry.com*, which represent two poles of the popular genealogical spectrum. Drawing on principles of performance genealogy, I enact critical nostalgia through my own body as I interact with these websites. To close the chapter, I develop my concept of critical nostalgia further by specifying its ethics by discussing the relationship between “origin” and “roots.”

### **A Typology of Genealogy**

I use the term “genetic genealogy” to refer to the type of genealogy that utilizes biology, specifically DNA testing, as its primary mode of investigating ancestral connections. According to the *American Heritage Dictionary*, genetics is “the branch of biology that deals with heredity, esp. the mechanisms of hereditary transmission and the variation of inherited characteristics among similar or related organisms,” or, in its second definition, “the genetic makeup of an individual, group, or class” (“Genetics” 578). On the preceding page of the dictionary, the authors define genealogy as “a record or table of the descent of a person, family, or group from an ancestor or ancestors; a family tree” (“Genealogy” 577). In its second definition, genealogy is simply, “direct descent from an ancestor; lineage or pedigree” (“Genealogy” 577). And definition number three deems it, “the study or investigation of ancestry and family histories” (“Genealogy” 577). Combining the terms genetic and genealogy might seem redundant at first glance. However, as the definitions above illustrate and this analysis reveals, there are different types of genealogies, and the distinctions are significant to what one learns and how.

The phrase genetic genealogy is necessary for two reasons. First, the term genetics denotes a specific treatment of the corporeal body. It is a body that is determined by the discourses of science and medicine, and hence, it is a body that can be studied, traced, ordered, and documented in parts. A simple anatomical diagram shows the precision with which a body is divided into individual, though often interacting, parts for study. In genetics, although the physical body is central to the analysis, the most invisible part of the body, its DNA code, can be viewed as the key to understanding the composition of a body and establishing relations between bodies. Performance theorist Diana Taylor theorizes the relationship between DNA and performance, recognizing that DNA is a knowledge system that performs specific cultural tasks. She writes, “DNA functions as a biological archive of sorts, storing and transmitting the codes that mark the specificity of our existence both as species and as individuals. Yet it also belongs to the human-made archive, forensic or otherwise” (Taylor 171).

Similar to the idea of constructing the body in terms of a code, Richard Schechner refunctions “computer jargon” in order to argue that the performing body might be understood in “bits” (Schechner, “Magnitudes of Performance” 41). Just as DNA carries molecular units called genes, Schechner’s bits represent “the smallest repeatable strip of action”; a “molecule of action” (Schechner, “Magnitudes of Performance” 41). As a coding device, Taylor sees DNA as a structural element that simultaneously denotes the similitude of the human species and individuality within the human species (Taylor 171). Likewise, in Schechner’s theory of actor training, bits serve not only as basic units of human behavior, but they also can be recalled and “rearranged” by the actor “to make new action,” (Schechner, “Magnitudes of Performance” 41), thus informing Schechner’s broader

understanding of performance as “restored behavior” (Schechner, *Between Theater and Anthropology* 35). In this way, both genes (invisible code) and bits (visible strips of action) possess potential for organization and originality.

Taylor’s and Schechner’s ideas highlight the ways in which bodies are constituted, addressing Paul Connerton’s concern that the body not only be seen as socially “constructed as an object of knowledge or discourse,” but also as “socially constituted in the sense that it is culturally shaped in its actual practices and behaviour” (Connerton 104). Indeed, Taylor points to the performative dimensions of DNA; that is, the fact a body can be coded only if humans construct it in terms of code *and* behave in such a way that enacts said code.

Genealogy, on the other hand, is not a practice of coding the body scientifically, but rather a practice of tracking the relations between bodies more generally. While the principal element of genetics depends on internal (and invisible) processes of the body, genealogy is focused on the external, visible, and relational processes, which establish links between bodies. As a third grade project, I created a genealogical chart. I began by drawing a picture of myself at the bottom of a piece of construction paper. Then, I drew my mother and father above me. Above them, I crayoned likenesses of each of my grandparents. In the end, my project displayed human figures of all shapes and sizes, arranged in relation to birth order, ascending toward the top of the paper, labeled with names, gendered by poorly drawn ponytails or crew cuts. By means of this genealogical process, a creative process finally, the individual body expanded, extended itself into multiple bodies. A genealogy is a record of tracking the multiplications and permutations of the body. Whereas the symbol of genetic code, the double helix, represents an abstract,



metaphysical, or invisible body part, in genealogy, the singular corporeal body grows extra arms and legs, limbs and trunks, branches, and roots. A “family tree” is formed, the guiding metaphor of genealogy; a metaphor that moves away from the interior biology of human matter to a symbolic manifestation that imports cultural understandings of natural science, notions of hierarchy and rank, and the importance of origin. The family tree is not only a metaphor for familial connection, but also a chart that organizes cultural material while implicitly supporting its ubiquitous status as “natural.”

The relationship between genetics and genealogy highlights the treatment and construction of the material biological body and the process by which this body is charted in relation to other bodies. The relationship excites three central questions: 1) What happens to the corporeal body in the theory and practice of genealogy? 2) If genealogy is the construction of a “family tree,” what material, emotional, and cultural materials are used in this construction? 3) And what does this construction reveal about practices of community memory?

Genetic genealogy, as defined above, is a subset of what I will refer to as popular genealogy. Popular genealogy is genealogy broadly conceived. It is “the study or investigation of ancestry and family histories” (“Genealogy” 577). This definition implies that genealogy is the broad practice of “looking into” lineages. The breadth of this practice is illustrated in the definition provided on the website of the Board Certification for Genealogists:

Genealogy is the study of families in genetic and historical context. Within that framework, it is the study of the people who compose a family and the relationships among them. At the individual level, it is biography, because we must reconstruct each individual life in order to separate each person’s identity from that of others bearing the same name. Beyond this, many researchers also find that genealogy is a study of communities because kinship networks have long been the threads that

create the fabric of each community's social life, politics, and economy. (*Board for Certification of Genealogists*)

As a nod toward the ideas of personhood, people, and populace evident in this definition, I append the modifier “popular” to the practice of genealogy described above. I also mean to suggest that popular genealogy reflects a concept of genealogy more readily accessible to the general public, the layperson, and non-specialist. Popular also accounts for the increased visibility of genealogical practices due to the influx of television shows and internet websites on genealogy in the first decade of the twenty-first century. Additionally, popular genealogy might serve as an umbrella term, housing a range of cultural practices enacted for the purpose of establishing ancestral relations. Such practices include searching census data, reviewing slave inventory lists, exploring death and marriage records, and conducting or submitting to genetic testing. Finally, popular genealogy should be distinguished from the other types of genealogy I detail in this chapter, namely, genetic genealogy, critical genealogy, and performance genealogy. The types are not mutually exclusive, of course, but do indicate different modes of enactment and investigation.

If genetic genealogy specifies popular genealogy in terms of practices related to genetics, “critical genealogy” and “performance genealogy” entail a specific method of historical engagement. Historians, academics, and performance scholars have adopted the practice of critical genealogy to describe specific types of cultural analysis. In “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” Michel Foucault proposes “critical” or “effective” genealogy as an approach to historical inquiry that “rejects the metahistorical deployment of ideal significations and indefinite teleologies” (Foucault 140). He clarifies, “It opposes itself to the search for ‘origins’” (Foucault 140). For Foucault, critical genealogy should not search for origins because they represent the fiction of claiming an ultimate truth, essence, or

stable identity. Instead, a critical genealogy “focuses on the physical rather than the metaphysical event. It then reads the physical event meticulously so as to reveal the various and divergent particulars that show the culture(s) in action and cultural histories as enacted” (R. Bowman, “Diverging Paths in Performance Genealogies” 168). A genealogist, in Foucault’s terms, should not pretend to go back in time to repair broken narratives or suggest continuities, but instead she should seek out the ruptures and fissures in traditional histories, documenting the transmission of discontinuous and piecemeal fragments of history. She seeks the disparities that undergird traditional histories, that is, histories with a unified attitude and aim, due often to the use of a single overarching narrative.

Foucault conceives of critical genealogy as active and living. When Foucault says that genealogy is “history in the form of a concerted carnival,” he means that genealogy is a method of historical inquiry that is activated deliberately by the historian and her critical tools of investigation (Foucault 161). The phrase also implies that histories are made or constructed out of competing narratives and bodily activities. Thus, a genealogist should view an artifact, event, or memory in context looking at how it came to occupy its place in history, seeking out the often contentious relations that lie in its material circumstances as regards bodies in culture. For Foucault, the domain of descent is the body. He writes, “Genealogy as an analysis of descent, is thus situated within the articulation of the body and history. Its task is to expose a body totally imprinted by history and the process of history’s destruction of the body” (Foucault 148). In summary, critical genealogy, as professed by Foucault following Nietzsche, represents an activation of historical events in such a way that opposes origin and centers on the body.

Joseph Roach outlines another body centered approach to genealogy in the introductory chapter of his book, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance*. He writes, "Genealogies of performance attend not only to 'the body' as Foucault suggests, but also to bodies – to the reciprocal reflections they make on one another's surfaces as they foreground their capacities for interaction" (Roach 25). This "performance genealogy" is thus also interested in the bodily and discursive transmission of memories across time and space (Roach 26). Considering Roach's genealogical approach, Ruth Laurion Bowman contends, "Bodies 'do' things...they do a lot of things, differently and in excess. Roach's resource base and corporeal sensitivity gird his theoretical project, which is to locate performance as central to historical processes" (R. Bowman, "Diverging Paths in Performance Genealogies" 170).

In order to centralize performance in history, Roach investigates a wide variety of circum-Atlantic performance traditions deploying the term "orature," which resists a distinction between orality and literacy. Orature recognizes that various forms of "communication have produced one another interactively over time and that their historic operations may be usefully examined under the rubric of performance" (Roach 11-12). In so attending to orature, in practice as well as theory, Roach attends to Foucault's notion of "'counter-memories,' or the disparities between history as it is discursively transmitted and memory as it is enacted by the bodies that bear its consequences" (Roach 26).

To better understand and activate a performance genealogy, Roach provides three principles: kinesthetic imagination, vortices of behavior, and displaced transmission. Kinesthetic imagination is a "faculty of memory," which serves as "impetus and method for the restoration of behavior," i.e., performance in Richard Schechner's terms (Roach 27).

For Roach, kinesthetic imagination refers to the ways in which memory and imagination come together to burgeon and manifest as bodies doing things, restoring things.

Kinesthetic imagination then is understood as “virtual” in the sense that experience is produced through simulation. Here, “truth is the truth of simulation” and bodily experience is experience “at once remembered and reinvented” (Roach 27).

Renaming Pierre Nora’s “places of memory,” Roach uses the term “vortices of behavior” to identify technologically or architecturally produced sites that induce particular types of performance. Vortices of behavior “canalize specified needs, desires, and habits in order to reproduce them” (Roach 28). Roach likens vortices of behavior to Roland Barthes’s “ludic space” and evokes Bakhtin’s theory of carnival to assert that “the vortex is a kind of spatially induced carnival” (Roach 28). The vortices that Roach describe might best be understood as marketplaces where the “magnetic forces of commerce and pleasure” collide, simultaneously producing and legitimating performances and performance communities in public spaces (Roach 28).

Displaced transmission is the process by which cultural performances are passed on and refunctioned in new contexts. Roach theorizes that this process happens through surrogation or the testing out and performing of alternatives in the case of a rupture in the social fabric. The phrase, “The king is dead. Long live the king” is a classic example of Roach’s surrogation, illustrating how societies usher alternates “into the cavities created by loss” in an attempt to sustain the status quo or tradition (Roach 2). In his theory of surrogation, Roach agrees with Schechner that while the restoration of certain behavior may appear consistent across many generations, the repetition is never exact. It is a “doomed search for originals,” an imperfect repetition that for some spells failure (Roach

3). Displaced transmission then is a process of “adaptation” whereby people attempt to locate origins, however (in)effectively, through the transmission of cultural and historic activities in new situations and environments (Roach 28).

The present chapter evokes and interacts with each of the aforementioned types of genealogy, drawing on the principles of critical genealogies and genealogies of performance to undertake analyses of two websites that encourage genetic and popular genealogical practices. Integral to my analysis is an address of the role the body plays, as each type of genealogy articulates a particular bodily relationship to the search for origins, and it expresses this relationship using the vocabulary of home, homeland, and community.

### **Genealogy (Web)Sites**

Aided largely by popular television shows like NBC’s “Who Do You Think You Are?” and websites such as *Ancestry.com*, popular genealogical practices have gained significant visibility in the U.S. A simple internet search uncovers the vast and multifaceted landscape of genealogical discovery. Websites devoted to popular genealogy fall along a continuum that stretches from DNA testing sites at one end to community resource sites on the other. Informational sites, training and certification sites, and sites that serve particular ethnic or regional populations appear along this spectrum. My research led me to two websites dealing with African American genealogy. The first is called *AfriGeneas.com*, and the second is titled *AfricanAncestry.com*. I would place *AfricanAncestry.com* closer to the DNA testing end of the continuum and *AfriGeneas.com* closer to the community resource end. Like most genealogy sites, these sites are devoted to collecting or establishing documentation of human lineage or pedigree.

*AfriGeneas.com* is not the easiest site to navigate. The first thing I notice when I open the website is that the visual elements are arranged in such a way that makes it difficult to concentrate on one item. Save for the central image, the homepage is cluttered and the items seem unrelated or disorganized. Experiencing trouble processing the site, I fix my attention on the image in the center of the page. It is a faded sepia portrait of what appears to be a family, a black family of eight. There are three standing adults, one of them holding a baby. There also are two older adults, seated, and two children, one standing and the other sitting on the ground below. It is hard to make out the facial features of any of the subjects, but it is clear that no one is smiling. The subjects' attire indicates that the picture may have been taken in the late nineteenth or early twentieth century. The edges of the photograph are invisible, and the image is framed by wording. Above the picture is the name of the website, "AfriGeneas," with a subheading just below, "African Ancestored Genealogy," and below the image there is a phrase that reads, "from Africa to the Americas" (*AfriGeneas.com*). Below the portrait is a brief description of the site. The website consists of a large number of resource and research tools. Some of the tools include mailing lists, message boards, weekly genealogy chat pages, a beginner's guide to African American genealogy, databases, forums, community event calendars, and directories. *AfriGeneas.com* is devoted to African American Ancestry in the Americas in particular. The site outlines its mission, vision, and goals on its welcome page:

**OUR MISSION:** AfriGeneas provides resources, leadership, promotion and advocacy for the mutual development and use of a system of genealogy for researching African related ancestry. **OUR VISION:** To find and document the last slaveholder and the first African in each family. **OUR GOAL:** To encourage and support all African ancestored individuals and families to begin and continue researching their roots until all possible resources are exhausted and the results are published. (*AfriGeneas.com*)

Although the website has rather lofty goals, it does provide an array of tools for doing genealogy. Over the course of my research, I visited the site many times, discovering new aspects each time. On one occasion, I noticed a pronunciation key right there on the homepage. I wondered how I had not seen it before. It reads, “The word AfriGeneas is derived from African American Genealogy Buddies. It’s pronounced: A · fri · GEE · nee · as” (*AfriGeneas.com*). A link that provides an oral pronunciation is there, so I click on it. Hmm. Sounds like “afri-genius.” That would have been nice to know before I gave a presentation on the website at the Southern States Communication Association conference in April 2012. I thought it was “afri-gen-nay-us” or something like that.

To the left of the portrait on the homepage is an events calendar, and the one activity listed is “King to Obama-DuBois and Back Again,” an all day event at the Auburn Avenue Research Library on African American Culture and History in Atlanta, Georgia. To the right of the portrait is an area for recent posts, featuring announcements of address changes, book festivals, and directives for those seeking information on particular descendants, such as, on one day, the descendants of Ramon Napoleon Harris. Scrolling down the page reveals advertisements of all sorts, for census search sites, obituary records search sites, DNA testing sites, and the popular *Ancestry.com*. I return to the top of the page to check out options I had neglected previously. Clicking on each tab exposes an enormous amount of resources. Overwhelmed, I access the site map to see what exactly is on the site and how it is organized. Here, I count 92 linked pages, outlined under the headings: About us, networking, people, chat center, mailing list, message boards, records-databases, resources-tools, calendars, directories, holidays and observances, contributing to AfriGeneas, and affiliated sites.



I navigate back to the homepage, and it is here that I discover that the site hosts chats: a “lunch bunch” from noon to 1:30 pm, Monday-Friday, and a Tuesday night chat at 9:00 pm. Intrigued by the prospect of interacting with other users of the site, I set my sights on the chat pages. I realize that in order to access them, I need to create an account complete with a username and password. My username will be “generesearcher1,” I decide quickly. The signup is relatively easy, and I am able to access the chat page immediately, which appears as a new window. To the right of an old chat strain, I notice that I am able to post a status that comments on my level of availability. The options are away, be right back, phone, food, and boss. Hmmm. Boss? I conclude that people must sneak and do genealogies while at work. I seem to be the only one online as my username is the only one visible. I decide to hang out and wait for the “lunch bunch” chat.

As I wait for the chat, I explore some of the other tools available on *AfriGeneas.com* and am relieved to find a beginner’s guide to African American genealogy, an interactive slide show created by Dee Parmor Woodtor, author of *Finding a Place Called Home*. Two options are atop the screen: exit or begin. I click on begin. The slide show is prefaced by what is labeled a Wolof proverb, “Know who you are before they have to tell you.” The welcome page of the guide displays an outline of the contents of the slide show:

- What the Internet Can Do To Help You
- What the Internet Can Not Do To Help You
- Telling the African American Family’s Story
- What Will My Genealogy Project Look Like Once I’m Finished?
- What is Genealogy?
- Genealogy is a Mission: Fantastic Lives and Stories to Discover
- Your Interactive Guide: Essential Steps for Beginners
- Genealogy Knots for Beginners: Calling Names of Other People’s Ancestors in Vain
- The Future of African American Genealogy on the Internet
- Ready, Set, Go Off the Web (*AfriGeneas.com*)

I spend two hours navigating the interactive slide show, thereby discovering that I am being recruited for a job or a project of sorts. Namely, if I wish to know “who I am before some else has to tell me,” I am going to have to find out for myself. Implying that adequate records of African American lineage are not readily available and often non-existent, the site compels the visitor by empowering them, by arming individuals with the tools and support system to become a genealogist.

Although the site is dedicated to the business of genealogy, it manages to have a sense of reflexivity and humor. On a tab devoted to genealogy humor, I found the following poem, “Tracing My Tree,” which according to the webpage was “found on Roots-L List” and contributed by *AfriGeneas.com* staff:

I started out calmly, tracing my tree,  
To find if I could find the makings of me.  
And all that I had was Great-grandfather's name,  
Not knowing his wife or from where he came.  
I chased him across a long line of states,  
And came up with pages and pages of dates.  
When all put together, it made me forlorn,  
Proved poor Great-grandpa had never been born.  
One day I was sure the truth I had found,  
Determined to turn this whole thing upside down.  
I looked up the record of one Uncle John,  
But then I found the old man to be younger than his son.  
Then when my hopes were fast growing dim,  
I came across records that must have been him.  
The facts I collected made me quite sad,  
Dear old Great grandfather was never a Dad.  
I think someone is pulling my leg,  
I am not at all sure I wasn't hatched from an egg.  
After hundreds of dollars I've spent on my tree,  
I can't help but wonder if I'm really me. (*AfriGeneas.com*)

I remember that I was supposed to be waiting for the lunch bunch chat and revisit the chat window. Scrolling through a conversation that has started already, I see that several members have welcomed me and become annoyed with my lack of response. “Hi

Generesearcher!" "Welcome, Generesearcher." "Generesearcher must be mute!"

Immediately regretting my choice of username, I think, "Oh gee, I had better answer." I provide an excuse about becoming distracted by the site's many resources and type it into my dialog box and click send. There are seven users on the chat now and most of them direct questions towards me without delay. "What are your surnames?" "Where are your folk from?" "What counties are you researching?" "What city are you operating out of?" I can barely keep up. My nerves produce misspellings. I become flustered, and a wave of guilt washes over me. After responding to as many questions as I can, I decide to out myself as a beginner and a researcher of the process of genealogy rather than a practitioner proper. A brief moment passes before the questions and comments return in bulk. "That sounds great Generesearcher!" "Feel free to ask us any questions; we have wonderful researchers in the group." "Are you doing a survey?" I explain that I am taking more of an autoethnographic approach, and that I am interested in the relationship between different types of genealogy, such as popular genealogy and genetic genealogy. I inform the lunch bunch that I am looking into how people do genealogy and why.

In addition to referring me to several different forums on *AfriGeneas.com*, members of the lunch bunch group respond with personal anecdotes. One tells me he started his search with the intent of locating one particular ancestor and got "hooked." Another member takes the opportunity to speak for the group saying, "We all love the search." Another member started in an attempt to verify details of his 105.5 year old grandmother's oral history. Realizing she was "100% correct" about geographic details and family lineage, the user became intrigued by the process and never stopped. Another user continues the conversation by saying that over time he or she has become less focused on his or her own

family and more interested in community history. Before long, a particular comment leads to a brief discussion of genetic genealogy. Two users agree that DNA testing should not be trusted without an accompanying “paper trail.” The same two users express concern and suspicion of DNA testing because it tends to lack account for “migration and colonization.” A couple of users admit to using DNA testing. One user says that it is not a “priority.” After an hour or so, the users bid farewell to the group, one by one. Each takes special care to wish me good luck with my studies. One member gives me his website URL and email address, and encourages me to keep in touch. I chuckle, take a deep breath, and enthusiastically relay my chat experience to my study buddies at the coffee shop where all this transpired.

Do you know where you are from?  
Not the city where you were born,  
But the place where your ancestry began...  
More than 500 years ago.  
Finally, with African Ancestry you can...  
Uncover the roots of your family tree.  
Trace your DNA.  
Find your roots.  
Do you know?  
African Ancestry is the only company that can trace your ancestry back to an African country of origin. (*AfricanAncestry.com*)

The second website that concerns me is *AfricanAncestry.com*. In contrast to *AfriGeneas.com*, the visual elements of this site are crisp and clear. The message is focused, and the tools of genealogical investigation are limited to one: DNA. The mission of the website is evident, “African Ancestry: Trace your DNA. Find your roots” (*AfricanAncestry.com*).

I type into my browser slowly, carefully, in my characteristic hunt and peck way: *www.AfricanAncestry.com*. Soft, melodic, yet dramatic music plays without any prompting

on my part. The homepage features an embedded video screen placed off-center to the left. A video loads within seconds. A flashing, digitalized map of continents greets me, followed by a close up on a familiar geographic shape formed by yellowish squares against a white background: Africa, I recognize. The scene changes quickly to the shadowy image of a tree waving in the breeze, the sun piercing through its branches while birds fly across the screen from right to left. Just as quickly, the scene changes again. A large double helix stretches across the width of the screen. Parts of the structure are highlighted momentarily as sections are illuminated in flashes of red and yellow, blue and green. Scene change. A close up on a vibrant green leaf simultaneous with an isolated brownish root atop black fertile soil. Scene. A revolving semi-transparent globe. Scene. A split screen. The right side features a fair-skinned child with pink lips and piercing green eyes. The continent of Africa is mapped onto the child's face. The face map appears in tones of green, brown, and yellow. I imagine the image to be the result of intricate and remarkable stage make-up, the geographical divisions protruding from the skin like burned facial tissue or scarring. Opposite the boy's face are words that frame my consumption of the site. "African Ancestry is the only company that can trace your ancestry back to an African country of origin" (*AfricanAncestry.com*). The company's logo, an upside down "V" with a double helix running up the left side, appears just below these words. Below the logo, are two prompts: 1) discover your maternal roots; and 2) discover your paternal roots. It seems I have to choose.

To the right of the video screen is a section titled "News and Updates." I scroll down to get a sense of the site related information. My first discovery is a plug for PBS's *Finding Your Roots* television series. "Check out *Finding Your Roots* on your local PBS station and

watch as *AfricanAncestry.com* picks up where the show's genealogical paper trail ends for guests such as Condoleza Rice, Samuel L. Jackson, and Wanda Sykes. Find a complete schedule here" (*AfricanAncestry.com*). The further I scroll, the more curious the news and updates:

|STILL STANDING FILM TOUR|

African Ancestry partners with Tyler New Media and BlackAndMarriedWith Kids.com to support the launch of the documentary, "Still Standing." Check out the documentary screenings in DC, Chicago, Houston, Dallas, and ATL. Click here for more info...

|WIN A TRIP TO GHANA!|

Enter the Know Your Heritage Sweepstakes at The Africa Channel. You can win a trip to Ghana. Contest ends on March 2, 2012...

|HAPPY ANNIVERSARY!|

On February 21st, African Ancestry celebrated NINE years in business. Over 30,000 families now know their roots. Do you know?...

|NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF BLACK JOURNALISTS|

The 2011 National Association of Black Journalists Annual Convention and Career Fair will be in Philly Aug 3-7. This is the premier venue for digital journalism education, career development, and the nation's leaders in media, business, arts & entertainment and technology...

|HARLEM WEEK|...

|DC HIP-HOP THEATER FESTIVAL|...

|McDONALD'S 365BLACK |

African Ancestry is partnering with the McDonald's 365Black Awards. The 2011 honorees will learn their roots during the ceremony at the Essence Music Festival. (*AfricanAncestry.com*)

Overwhelmed, I focus my attention on the banner that heads the homepage. It features an advertisement for gift certificates in increments from \$25 to \$500. I wonder how much the tests cost in the first place. I study the menu bar, which consists of eight clearly labeled tabs. I decide to navigate each one.

## Tab 1- AA is the Answer

As I direct my cursor to hover over this tab, two options appear: benefits and testimonials. The testimonial section especially intrigues me. I spend an exorbitant amount of time watching you-tube videos and reading comments from satisfied “AA” customers from all walks of life. Included in the array of testimonials are statements from recognizable black celebrities, such as Spike Lee, Blair Underwood, and Kimberly Elise. The testimonial from actress Kimberly Elise reads:

Learning my material lineage has been profoundly enlightening. Not only to myself but to my daughters, mother, aunts and so forth. The information African Ancestry provided to me has given me an anchor to my past, thus making my present all the more valuable and precious to me. And that self knowledge gives me power. I know my lineage and the history of MY PEOPLE. I come from the Songhai people and through my research I learned my ancestors are known to be great artisans, royalty and warriors of great strength and skill. Knowing these traits are the nuclei composition of my DNA puts all the pieces of who I am instinctually into place and gives me the fortitude to continue living as I always have - from my heart and from my guttural instincts as I move through life. I can now pass this on to my children and they can remind themselves as I do." I am born of Songhai - queen, artist, warrior, and wise." I LOVE that! I love that. (*AfricanAncestry.com*; emphasis in original)

In addition to celebrities and African Americans with notable titles, I notice several entries that are labeled vaguely, “African Ancestry family member.” One such testimonial reads, in part:

How did I feel and how do I feel? Euphoric, delighted, humbled, and honored. Euphoric with the excitement of just knowing – delighted to know that I had genetic ties to Yorubas, a people I know well, as my husband is Yoruba from Nigeria. Humbled, because I know that there was a Yoruba woman from whom a line of women descend down to me, and it is her strength that brought me here, and I felt honored that I have been so privileged to have lived to a time when such things are possible.

I have researched this line for more than 20 years, beginning in Arkansas, back to Mississippi, to Tennessee and to Virginia. This DNA test with African Ancestry has given me the opportunity to look through the Middle Passage, and to now know this one piece of my history and understand that I now have a tie to place

that I can call home. It is not just the land and home of my husband's family – it is also a place that I can call home. (*AfricanAncestry.com*)

As I scroll up and down the page, I discover that on *AfricanAncestry.com* the above-quoted excerpts represent the testimonial norm. Rereading the testimonial from Kimberly Elise, I notice what seems to be a typo. It reads, “Learning my *material* lineage has been profoundly enlightening. Not only to myself but to my daughters, mother, aunts and so forth.” Hmm. Given that Elise references her female family members in the next sentence, she must mean *maternal* not *material*, I conclude. I pause to think about the slippage and the material consequences of such testimonials. Finding myself caught between curiosity and cynicism, I wonder what my own testimonial might sound like. On the one hand, I delight in the exultations of the folks on the testimonial page. I envy the expressions of empowerment derived from “knowing” from whence one comes. On the other hand, I grow tired and critical of the thematic repetitions: triumph over colonialism, reclamation of home, tales of return. I move to the next tab.

#### Tab 2- Trace your DNA

The options here are geared toward simple explanations of DNA testing as a vehicle for establishing familial connections. Under “Understanding Lineages,” the process of DNA testing is explained by telling the user how it will contribute to their ancestral knowledge: “Our tests are designed to determine the ancestry of a direct maternal lineage and/or a direct paternal lineage, one at a time” (*AfricanAncestry.com*). An interactive chart is displayed on the screen. The directions read, “Your great grandparents represent eight lineages that you can trace with the help of other family members. Click on the lineage you want to trace to find out who can provide the DNA” (*AfricanAncestry.com*).



### Tab 3- Find Your Roots

I click on tab 3. In choosing each option available, I learn about the maternal and paternal lineage tests. The maternal test is called the “MatriClan Test Kit,” and the paternal test is called the “PatriClan Test Kit.” Not much scientific detail is provided. It is here that I am told I can take the maternal test only, as I do not have the Y chromosome necessary for the paternal test. I would have to have a male from my father’s side take the test for me. I imagine soliciting a test from my dad. His response is less than receptive.

The site describes a simple process whereby users purchase ancestry tests online or by phone and receive the test kit in the mail within 7-10 days. Upon receipt of the DNA testing kit, the user must swab his or her mouth, providing a DNA sample. Then, the user must put the sample in an envelope, seal, and return it to the testing facility via mail. Six weeks after the sample is submitted, users receive a “results package” that consists of a results letter (including DNA sequence), a certificate of ancestry, a guide to understanding and sharing the results, postcards to share your results with friends and family, and membership to the African Ancestry Online Community. I chuckle at the inclusion of the postcards and imagine what they must look like. I think I would rather create my own.

### Tab 4- Buy Now

MatriClan™ Test Kit...299.00...  
PatriClan™ Test Kit...299.00...  
Personalized Certificate of Ancestry... A great gift idea!...15.00...  
Limited Edition WE ARE AFRICA T-shirt...\$15.00...  
African Ancestry Logo Baseball Cap...\$18.00...(AfricanAncestry.com)

Much like buying a pair of shoes online, in order to make a purchase, one must place her wanted items into the electronic shopping cart, create an account, and checkout with an accepted credit card.

Tab 5- Once you know

As its caption suggests, tab five is of little use if you do not know (i.e., who you are). It provides links for information about African countries. There also is an option called “Ask Lyndra.” Who is Lyndra? I wonder. The site claims that Lyndra is a professional genealogist with over forty years of experience. What I assume is her likeness appears in cartoon form above a question and answer column. And then there is the online community link, but “Membership to this group is exclusive! Only people who have taken an African Ancestry test and have received their results have access to the online forum” (*AfricanAncestry.com*).

Tab 6- About AA

Tab 7- FAQ

Tab 8- Blog

Convinced that I have ascertained an understanding of the site, I move through tabs 6 through 8 relatively quickly. These tabs provide information about the company, its history, and its management team. One tab addresses frequently asked questions and another features a blog, which seems to run independently of the site, chronicling African American engagements with African related politics and projects.

I return to the homepage and spot an item I had not noticed before. There is a “Wall of Return” section at the bottom right of the screen. I click on it. The “Wall of Return” is discursively and visually juxtaposed to the “Door of No Return.” The “Door of No Return” references the door through which African captives passed as they departed slave castles on West African coasts to board slave ships. The description of this section explains that through DNA testing, *AfricanAncestry.com* can “return us to our roots and reconnect us to

our ancestries” (*AfricanAncestry.com*). Below the description, the caption, “Our list of notables that have found their roots,” appears in white against a salmon colored marble backdrop. Under the caption is a long list of well known African Americans, their names followed by their discovered country of origin, and below this, a picture of the “Door of No Return,” presumably taken at a slave castle. One question hangs above the arched passageway leading to the “Door of No Return”: “Do you know?”

African Diasporic genetic genealogy centers on creating a biological link between the dispersed black Diaspora and specific locations, tribes, and relatives in a perceived homeland of Africa. Corporations and institutions like *AfricanAncestry.com* facilitate genetic genealogy and appeal to those who are interested in establishing a blood connection to African peoples, for a price. Unlike *AfriGeneas.com*, which asks users to create their own genealogies, *AfricanAncestry.com* solicits your DNA. The rhetoric of the site leads me to conclude that DNA testing is the best and only way to answer the questions the site constructs as important to gaining a sense of self and community. The site is clear, direct, and user friendly. Aside from the curious “news and updates” section, the site rarely provides more information than needed. It never asks questions for which it does not provide answers. It is successful in cultivating in me a curiosity that wins out over my cynicism. I want to know “the place where [my] ancestry began” (*AfricanAncestry.com*). I want to know.

I revisit *AfricanAncestry.com* several times before I make the decision to take the DNA test, coming quite close to completing the online order form several times. When prompted to type in my credit card information, I shut down, opting instead to close out the webpage. The price itself and the idea of paying for my past are deterrents. The price with

tax is \$309.00. Curiously, my final attempt at purchase is interrupted by a phone call from my mother. She reports that she and my father want to pay for my plane ticket home to South Carolina. After this conversation, I open another window on my MacBook in order to research flight prices. I discover a non-stop flight for \$310.10 including taxes and fees. This must be a sign. Realizing the cost to go home to my family (paid for by mom and dad) and the cost to purchase my past essentially cancel each other out, I return to the checkout page of *AfricanAncestry.com*. After a short moment, I type in my credit card information and select the option to submit payment. Painless. Kind of.

A week later, I fish the testing kit out of my mailbox. I had thought the package would be bigger, more substantial. Or at least crisper and cleaner. The black envelope seems to have suffered some damage during delivery. Six days pass before I can bring myself to open the envelope. On Monday, I retrieve the package from the pile of mail, give it a once over and then set it aside. On Tuesday, I chunk it in my backpack with the rest of my research materials, and it travels around with me from coffee shop to library and back. On Wednesday, I pull it out at the coffee shop where I study, but am too embarrassed to open it. What am I going to do, obtain my DNA sample right here in the coffee shop amidst a room full of strangers? I promptly return it to my backpack, where it lives until I opt to show the still unopened package to my advisor during a dissertation meeting. On Saturday evening, I convince myself to attend to the testing kit. Okay. I am home, among my own things. I will do this. How bad could it be? I look around my apartment, surveying, searching for the souvenirs I bought while visiting Ghana. Hey, I wonder if I am Ghanaian? I have been told that I resemble the Senegalese on more than one occasion. Masks. Paintings. A naked wire woman holding two pots. A tapestry. Wooden figures. A jewelry

box. The black envelope. On the back of the envelope, just beneath the opening flap, it reads, "Discover the roots of your family tree and transform the way you define yourself with African Ancestry, the pioneer of genetic ancestry tracing for people of African descent. Testing materials enclosed." I check my cell phone for the time as I open the envelope and spread its contents across my desk. Startling me, the phone rings. HOME in all caps and illuminated. It is my mom. By the end of our conversation, I had to rush out to meet friends for sushi, leaving the testing kit on my desk. I return at 9:26 pm. Fearing, the sample might be compromised by my sake consumption, I decide to go to bed.

I manage to avoid the test for a few more days. On one occasion, I wake up, commence with my morning routine in anticipation of completing the test, only to realize that the directions stipulate that toothpaste, caffeine, tobacco, and alcohol should not be used for at least three hours prior to taking the test. I am somewhat pleased I was right about the sake and, having just brushed my teeth and craving my morning coffee, this attempt fails too.

The final attempt to complete and submit my DNA test is short, simple, and successful. On the particular morning, I remember not to brush my teeth. I spread out the contents of the testing packet on the carpet of the living room. I sit cross-legged, leaning my upper body over the materials. I scan the enclosed pamphlet, "there is no blood, no pain, and no hassle," it tells me. Based on my experiences thus far, I beg to differ. I fill out the information form to include with the sample. I decide to take a few pictures of the contents. There are three swabs in a plastic pouch. I remove them one at a time. I insert the swab into my mouth and quickly run the cotton against the inside of each cheek, twenty times per cheek. Per the directions, I do this for each swab, and then place them into a

provided envelope. Sixty cheek rolls in all. My mouth is sore by the end of the procedure. I purse my lips and fill my mouth with air so as to stretch out my cheeks. The instructions advise a thirty minute drying time for the sample, so I boil a couple of eggs and pack my research materials to pass the time. After the time is up, I carefully place the information sheet and the sample into a pre-stamped envelope and seal it shut. On my way out for the day, I stop by the mailbox. The envelope barely fits through the outgoing mail slot, so I bend it a bit and force it through. I sigh and return to my car as my procrastination converts into waiting.

### **Nostalgia and Home**

As noted in Chapter One, in “On Practical Nostalgia: Self-Prospecting Among Urban Trobrianders,” Debhora Battaglia offers a cogent argument that nostalgia is performed by people engaged in particular acts. Her “embodied nostalgia” is a nostalgia that is created by and for corporeal bodies laboring to create affective knowledge systems and practices of home. Battaglia writes:

Nostalgia may be in fact a vehicle of knowledge, rather than only a yearning for something lost. It may be *practiced* in diverse ways, where the issues *for users* become, on the one hand, the attachment of appropriate feelings toward their own histories, products, and capabilities, and on the other hand, their detachment from – and active resistance to – disempowering conditions of postcolonial life. (Battaglia 77; emphasis in original)

Battaglia theorizes a tensive notion of nostalgia, stressing the importance of retaining its affective attachments and its productive (that is, producing) ties to home, homeland, and community. The two websites I visited create nostalgic communities. By means of certain actions, users create communities acting upon and through a longing for past and home, often articulating counters to their postcolonial environments. These nostalgic

communities are interested in a return home, one through the performing of popular genealogy and the other through genetic genealogy.

As a scholar interested in using critical genealogy to look at the ways in which a longing for home, homeland, and global community is performed in African American communities, I am confronted with the question of what type of return home is created at these sites. To activate this central question I build on Battaglia's concept of practical nostalgia, which retains the importance of and the need for home, by reading nostalgia as constituted equally by performances of past *and* home. Such performances of nostalgia create past *and* make home. In his analysis of Danielle Vignes's "Hang it Out to Dry," David Terry uses "home" as a verb to describe the performative process by which one makes or constructs a (sense of) home. He describes "homing" as a performance that negotiates tensions like those Battaglia expresses (Terry 366). Terry argues that in her performance of residents returning (and not) to Chalmette, Louisiana, after Hurricane Katrina hit in 2005, Vignes engages in multiple homings through her actions on stage. He writes, "the beauty of her performance is that Vignes does not reconcile the tension between these 'homings' but precisely works...at finding a home for herself in and among the tensions themselves" (Terry 366). As Terry would have it, performers of nostalgia enact homing using personal and cultural memories as creative tools to do so. And, following Battaglia, I would add that performers of nostalgia navigate the tensions between attachment and detachment as well as those that arise between past and home.

### **Africa for Sale**

*AfriGeneas.com* and *AfricanAncestry.com* are, in Roach's terms, marketplace vortices. As marketplaces, the websites sell "Africa" and do so in distinct ways. Each presents

“histories, products, and capabilities” that construct networks of bodies connected by blood and common descent and predicated on geographic and familial perceptions of home (Battaglia 77). In the following section, I analyze the marketplace vortices and the networks of bodies they construct. First, I demarcate the two types of marketplaces represented by *AfricanAncestry.com* and *AfriGeneas.com*, the “store” and the “mall” respectively, and I reflect on their structural elements. Next, I continue to draw on Roach’s principles of performance genealogy, kinesthetic imagination and surrogation especially, in order to make sense of the performances and marketing strategies employed within the store and the mall. And finally, I further develop my theory of critical nostalgia using articulations of “origin” and “roots,” which I extract from behaviors within the two marketplace vortices.

Drawing on Nora’s “places of memory,” Roach argues that vortices of behavior are crafted by technological invention, specifically architecture, and social organization (Roach 28). Examples of such places include the grand boulevard, the square, and the marketplace (Roach 28). I apply the marketplace vortex to *AfriGeneas.com* and *AfricanAncestry.com* as a metaphor for the homing experiences prompted by the websites. At the risk of over-alliteration, the structure of each website creates a space for competing and complimentary commerces, where cultural merchandise is sold and the law of supply and demand is in full effect.

The marketplace is where desires are created through instilling lack in the consumer, after which the desires are satisfied and affirmed through products or product imagery. That is, in addition to serving as a center of socialization, the main operation of the marketplace is the cultivation and reproduction of often heavily crafted desires.



*AfriGeneas.com* and *AfricanAncestry.com* each function as a marketplace vortex, utilizing different “gravitational forces” to create and inspire performances of desire (Roach 28). Sociologist Arthur Frank theorizes the body in performance by inquiring around four dimensions: self-relatedness, other-relatedness, control, and desire (Frank 51-52). With regards to desire, Frank writes, “the question here is whether the body is lacking or producing?” Realizing that bodies can be in the business of instilling and producing desires, lacking and consuming them, Frank observes “consumer culture makes the problem[s] of desire acute” (Frank 51). The problems of desire are in operation at *AfriGeneas.com* and *AfricanAncestry.com*. Among other things, the marketplace must organize cultural material in such a way as to create gaps to be filled by performers and performances.

Architectural and organizational structures play an important role in the production of lack and desire. *AfriGeneas.com* and *AfricanAncestry.com* are structured in markedly different ways. While *AfriGeneas.com* is difficult to navigate with its murky merger of many options, *AfricanAncestry.com* is clear in organization, its options labeled in a direct, straightforward manner. Whereas I experience *AfriGeneas.com* by clicking on each link without knowledge of what it holds, my experience of *AfricanAncestry.com* is determined and somewhat predictable. I always have a good idea of what lies behind each tab. So, while both sites propose to put me in touch with my roots, at *AfriGeneas.com*, I am asked to discover how to accomplish this task on my own, which I learn involves ignoring many of the visual elements and focusing on one item at a time, choosing what is relevant. For example, the website provides a vast array of services, but its homepage is cluttered with advertisements for other sites. I must choose to stay and not visit another site. Navigating

*AfricanAncestry.com* does not tempt me with such choices, as the elements, namely the tabs I described above, imply what I should do. The banner-like arrangement of tabs across the homepage encourages me to click on each tab, in order from left to right. As the choice appears user-friendly and efficient, I do not think to go anyplace else. Structurally, the lack created by *AfriGeneas.com* is one of place and placement, which must be redressed by a skillful navigator. The lack created by *AfricanAncestry.com* is one of guide and guidance, redressed by following a predetermined route rather than leading the way.

Both websites function as marketplaces, but my experience of the *AfricanAncestry.com* marketplace is like that of being in a single store, its content and brand clearly displayed, its merchandise readily accessible, and its signage organized and visually appealing. My experience of the *AfriGeneas.com* marketplace, on the other hand, is more like a mall. Here, multiple stores on multiple levels compete for my attention. Just as a newcomer to a large mall peruses the map of retailers located at the entrance, I access the site map in order to locate where I am and where I might go. Further, if the principal capital exchanged at *AfricanAncestry.com* is DNA and money, the currency at *AfriGeneas.com* is time and energy. As my experiences in the lunch bunch chat room illustrate, I am compelled to perform the specific actions required for that locale. In the chat room, I must spend time chatting with others. Whereas at *AfricanAncestry.com* the notables serve as instruments in the selling of Africa, the members of the lunch bunch serve as door greeters, recruiters, sales staff, and customers of *AfriGeneas.com*. Members of the lunch bunch inquire as to what I need and suggest resources available elsewhere on the site. The *AfriGeneas.com* site encourages interpersonal interaction, featuring people who serve and require service, greet and are greeted, are welcomed and are welcoming, chat

and are chatted about. Of course, this same interaction makes room for “familial” disagreement, dysfunction, and the potential to feel out of place. Indeed, if visitors feel “at home” in a mall or a store, it is because people perform in such a way as to enact a sense of home.

Certain enactments of home at both websites facilitate the selling of Africa. Specifically, the websites use marketing strategies to cultivate lack and desire for home, for roots, for Africa. As marketing strategies go, *AfricanAncestry.com* is driven by testimonial. Specifically, it is invested in name dropping, touting the participation of “notables” who “have found their roots.” As the Wall of Return and the testimonial provided by Kimberly Elise demonstrate, the website creates interest in DNA testing under the claim that “these famous folk did it, and so should you.” I see three implications here with regard to lack and desire. First, the Wall of Return and the testimonials refunction DNA testing as a kind of fashion or crafted taste, a mechanism for and perpetuation of “keeping up with the Jones’s.” Second, the marketing strategy highlights and reinforces class divisions within the African American community. A have and have not rhetoric is used that specifies the quotidian class struggle to those who can afford knowledge of their past and those who cannot. Third, the notables work as marketing tools because they represent some level of identification for many African Americans. In these three ways, the notables sell Africa to visitors of the website. Indeed, I was struck by all the names on the Wall and spent hours upon hours perusing testimonials.

On the testimonial page, I discovered a theme of “triumph in the face of colonialism” that strikes me as peculiar because of its double-edged quality. It is markedly uncritical and affirming at the same time. Several users profess that DNA testing (via

*AfricanAncestry.com*) is able to mend connections with Africa and Africans despite the historical rupture of the transatlantic slave trade. This may be true. But, due to the use of tools of (late) capitalism, itself a colonizing agency, the reconnection simultaneously evinces dis- or misconnection. As Audre Lorde's oft-quoted phrase suggests, the tools of the master will never truly dismantle the master's house (Lorde 110). In the epilogue to *Embodying Black Experience*, Harvey Young takes an inventory of the ways in which certain racial assumptions continue to manifest in the everyday lives of African Americans. He pauses to reflect on the connection between racism and DNA testing:

Although it is tempting to place the "problem of the color line" squarely within the twentieth century and to look forward, with blinders, and assert that past racisms no longer structure the experience of black folk, such an act not only would overlook the daily experiences of black people but also ignore the many ways in which twenty-first century thinking resembles nineteenth and twenty-first century racial logic. At the current moment, the study of genetics, specifically DNA tracing, has offered "new" evidence of the biological differences between blacks and whites...In addition, for-profit companies are performing genetic tests for paying customers and offering them an opportunity to document their ancestral origin on the African continent and, for a few dollars more, to obtain a certificate of racial authenticity. (Harvey Young 210-211)

Young's reflection articulates the double-sidedness of DNA testing, which documents connections to particular places in Africa, on the one hand, and documents biological differences of race, on the other. Young places said testing and documentation in a long line of continued methods for the oppression of African Americans in the U.S. Yet, some users find DNA to be a useful tool of empowerment. As one user maintains, "If someone else defines you they tend to define you in terms that position themselves for power and you for subjugation" (*AfricanAncestry.com*).

The testimonials section of *AfricanAncestry.com* offers both "African Ancestry family members" and "notables" the space to define their experiences of DNA testing. Kimberly

Elise uses the words, “instinctually,” “from my heart,” and “guttural instincts” to perform her connection to her newly discovered lineage (*AfricanAncestry.com*). The double-edged quality of DNA testing figures in her words as well. Just as she seeks to communicate her affective ties to Africa as homeland, she reifies essentializing notions of blackness as “all desire,” “all body,” or “all instinct,” as opposed to fully contextualized thinking and feeling human beings.<sup>10</sup> Additionally, while Elise’s nostalgic comments establish appropriate attachments to her perceived homeland, her words highlight conceptions of nostalgia as uncritical, romantic, or naïve. However two-sided, the testimonial section of *AfricanAncestry.com* serves primarily as an advertisement, a gravitational force that instills and redresses lack by promising its consumers membership and participation in a community who “know” their origins or roots.

The structural elements and the marketing strategies of the sites indicate how bodies are compelled to perform, and Roach’s principles of performance genealogy assist in specifying these performances in terms of how they interact with ideas about home. Below, I use Roach’s tools to delineate select relations, discussing how kinesthetic imagination is evident in the discourse regarding a singular home, and how homeland is constructed within the marketplace vortices by attaching ideas of home to a physical place. I also analyze how displaced transmissions are enacted through surrogacy, as “community” is built by users trying out alternate persons (and methods) in their genealogical performances.

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<sup>10</sup> Joseph Arthur Comte de Gobineau, French aristocrat and author of *An Essay on the Inequality of the Human Races* (1853–1855), is credited for supplying modern racist structures by dividing humans into racial categories. In the noted book, Gobineau describes “the negro” as an inferior race due to his inability to control desire.

Roach, in his assessment of the function of Mardi Gras Indians, argues that the point of their performances is “publicly to imagine *a space, a continent*” constructed in their own terms; specifically, they perform “the imaginative re-creation and repossession of Africa” (Roach 207; emphasis mine). I find a similar aim in operation at *AfriGeneas.com* and *AfricanAncestry.com*, the performers’ actions revealing a desire to perform Africa not as culturally and geographically diverse, not as plural, but as a singular continent “imagined as a potentially mythic space of meaning that [can] embody a fullness absent in the present” (Ebron ix).

Kinesthetic imagination, that place where memory and imagination meet and coalesce in bodily action, is deployed to activate the idea and ideal of home. Further, when constructed in the singular, home activates the “truth of...fantasy, or of daydreams,” and its “material consequences” play out in performance (Roach 27). For example, at *AfriGeneas.com*, the beginner’s guide encourages the user to search for “a place called home,” a search that in one caption turns whimsical: “Genealogy is a Mission: Fantastic Lives and Stories to Discover” (*AfriGeneas.com*). The caption suggests that deliberate action is required in order to discover one’s fantastic life and story, one’s “truth of fantasy.” This “truth” is specified in the welcome and homepages of *AfriGeneas.com*, where the stated aim is to realize a future in which “all African ancedored individuals and families...research their roots until all possible resources are exhausted” and that search ranges “from Africa to the Americas,” implying that in the search for roots, Africa is the objective, the life, story, and home we search for (*AfriGeneas.com*).

*AfricanAncestry.com* foregrounds another way in which the fantasy of genealogy performs a fantasy of home. Specifically, the website “inhabits the realm of the virtual” or

that of “simulation,” creating a simulated experience of home (Roach 27). In *Simulacra and Simulation*, Jean Baudrillard argues that the era of simulation, of approximating truth through representation, has given way to an era of simulacra in which the erasure of truth is accomplished through the elimination of all references (Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* 2). Simulacra, then, refers to the hyperreal, which is “sheltered from the imaginary, and from any distinction between the real and the imaginary” (Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* 2-3). Baudrillard offers up Disneyland as a prime example of simulacra. He contends, “Disneyland is the perfect model of all the entangled orders of simulacra. It is first of all a play of illusions and phantasms...This imaginary world is supposed to ensure the success of the operation” (Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* 12). Disneyland is imagined forth in such a way that it conceals the existence of a real world (and real world references) outside itself, implying that the “childishness” produced within its gates is actually everywhere (Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* 12).

For me, *AfricanAncestry.com* is the Disneyland of popular genealogy. Its ready-made easy-to-access products are channeled through carefully crafted messages and function to perpetuate their own existence. “Do you know?” the site repeatedly asks. “African Ancestry is the answer,” it replies (*AfricanAncestry.com*). Just as the smiles of Disney’s princesses are slightly too wide and the workers a bit too chipper, the testimonials of *AfricanAncestry.com* are a little too neat and a smidge too jubilant. And, just as visitors pay a hefty admission to enter the world of Disney, visitors to *AfricanAncestry.com* pay a sizable sum to learn about themselves, thereby gaining entrance to a community of other informed members. The hidden processes of *AfricanAncestry.com* include said community, the ill-explained testing process, and the testimonials from unnamed yet greatly satisfied “African

Ancestry family members.” Indeed, the website masks the “reality” of unstable origins and shifting identities, supplying easy answers to tidy questions.

However, within the thick allure of “knowing” created in the simulacra of home, room for a counter imaginary exists, co-exists actually, in the same hidden processes I mentioned above. The less than transparent testing process creates the conditions in which I imagine myself to be Ghanaian or Senegalese as I await my test results. It is within the frame of “easy testing” that I oppose my story of carrying around the testing packet for eight days, as if it were a burden or obligation of some kind. Within the same frame, I conjure a fantastic tale of laboratory elves inventing my place of origin out of magical ancestral dust. Indeed, it is my kinesthetic imagination that prompts my correct guess that sake and genetic testing do not mix. And it is my kinesthetic imagination that guides my subsequent in/action given this presumption. Within the broad idea of Africa as home, as a singular and thereby uncomplicated origin and final destination, I move through the websites affected, and I craft my movements through, upon, and against the idea.

The performative creation of Africa as “homeland” is closely related to the idea of Africa constructed as “home.” Appending “land” to home emphasizes home in relation to geography, to physicality, and to place. Africa as homeland imports concepts of home as singular and yet also makes room for users to localize Africa. On the websites, producers and consumers enact the noted dynamics by referring to Africa as a singular “motherland” and by associating it with the specific geographic regions along the west coast. The value of affixing land or place to home is articulated in the following testimonial written by an *AfricanAncestry.com* family member:

This DNA test with African Ancestry has given me the opportunity to look through the Middle Passage, and to now know this one piece of my history and understand



that I now have a *tie to place* that I can call *home*. It is not just the *land and home* of my husband's family – it is also a *place that I can call home*. (*AfricanAncestry.com*; emphasis mine)

Enacting a sense of home always involves enacting a sense of community. Even as I sit hunched in front of my computer interacting with genealogy websites, I kinesthetically imagine myself as a part of a broader community. I build my sense of community through the websites I explore, and the websites encourage my participation in the communities they offer. While membership is exclusive, *AfricanAncestry.com* sponsors “The African Ancestry Online Community (AAOC),” which “has been created to offer a forum for people to talk, discuss issues and share perspectives” (*AfricanAncestry.com*). *AfriGeneas.com* offers over thirty message boards based on different topics and hosts daily and weekly chats. At these places, people with similar interests create communities.

Roach uses the term displaced transmission to describe how communities sustain practices over time, resituating them in new contexts and places. Through surrogation, communities are able to preserve and practice memory. Connerton explains that this preservation happens through immediate “bodily activity” or incorporating practices, and through inscribing practices or the ways we “store and retrieve information” (Connerton 72-73). Largely because they exist as technologies of computer science, the incorporating and inscribing practices on *AfricanAncestry.com* and *AfriGeneas.com* are difficult to isolate from each other. For example, I experience a kind of incorporating co-presence with the lunch bunch, and our interactions are documented (inscribed in text) simultaneously. On *AfricanAncestry.com*, the illusion of interacting with the notables is made possible by the storage and retrieval system integrated in the form of the testimonial page. Put another way, the websites have the ability to hail performers and store their performances at the

same time. It is through contemporaneous inscription and incorporation that transmission by surrogation occurs, and to perform genealogy at *AfricanAncestry.com* and *AfriGeneas.com* is to participate in a community continuously in the process of surrogation. Genealogy as practiced at the websites is in the business of surrogation, testing alternate peoples and methods in distinct ways. This idea first occurred to me when, on *AfriGeneas.com*, I stumbled upon the announcement of those seeking the relatives of Ramon Napoleon Harris. It seems there are holes in the Harris family tree that must be filled with suitable candidates. In this way, the announcement is a call for auditions.

But the Harris family is not unique, as the website encourages all visitors to enact surrogation consciously, filling in the blanks with bodies until “all possible resources are exhausted” (*AfriGeneas.com*). On *AfricanAncestry.com*, part of the allure of the notables is that they represent a prototype in place of which users (surrogates) kinesthetically imagine themselves. With regard to DNA testing, behind the explicit logic, “they did it, so should you,” is the more implicit, “if you do it, you are one of them.” This imaginative body transference is activated also at the Wall of Return. It is here I am compelled to literally appear before the Door of No Return. By means of clicking on a link, my body is transported into the simulated position of captives just before embarking on the treacherous Middle Passage. In building his theory of “phenomenal blackness,” Harvey Young argues that African Americans share similar experiences as a result of racialized assumptions projected across black bodies. As I encounter the image of the Door of No Return located just below the list of notables, “an idea of the black body” (Harvey Young 4) – i.e., as captive – is projected upon my body by the website engineers and indeed by my own internalized racial imagery. Additionally and concurrently, I come face-to-face with

the literal projected image of the Door of No Return. As I sit before my computer screen, my body is transmitted, surrogated. My body is auditioned as substitute for other bodies that once stood before the door. My body is standing in, whether I want it to or not.

The Door of No Return is an instance in which my black body is offered up for surrogation, but there also are ways for me to attend the audition on my own accord. Users of both websites participate in the created communities not only by testing and finding candidates, but also by trying out alternate methods of performing surrogation. These methods include DNA testing, message boards, chat rooms, interactive guides, question and answer forums, all of which can be utilized or not for diverse reasons. For instance, two lunch bunch members exhibit a suspicion of DNA testing and another views it as “not a priority.” As Roach notes, surrogation is never exact and often precision is not even desired. Surrogation runs the risk of “failure.” The poem on *AfriGeneas.com* engages the possibilities that emerge through failure with a sense of humor:

The facts I collected made me quite sad,  
Dear old Great grandfather was never a Dad.  
I think someone is pulling my leg,  
I am not at all sure I wasn't hatched from an egg. (*AfriGeneas.com*)

Conversely, a family member on *AfricanAncestry.com* appears unhappy about the failure of exact surrogation, writing, “I had been worried that we were among the 30% of African-American men whose DNA would be linked to Europe due to white slave-owners' forced sexual advances” (*AfricanAncestry.com*). Here, the “30%” articulates what the website and its user deem to be a failed surrogation, an unsatisfactory performance of DNA. The meaning of the number belies pristine ancestral desires, making the politics of entering the community more complex than the website’s more official narrative would have it appear.

Functioning as vortices of behavior that cultivate desire through commercial means, *AfriGeneas.com* and *AfricanAncestry.com* occupy virtual places where kinesthetic imagination is the main process by which users engage the websites and perform the process of surrogation. On each website, a certain amount of both distance and distillation is realized by the bodies located in front of the screen and those created through the site's activities. My bodily experience of *AfriGeneas.com* and *AfricanAncestry.com* is mediated through the postures and pains of my corporeal body as I navigate these two places of memory. Whatever my delights and annoyances with the websites, I am free to disengage from or differently engage the appeals of home, homeland, and community by simply closing my MacBook, exiting a chat page, or not opening my DNA testing kit. To add to the complexity of bodies inhabiting these websites, I must ask whose bodies are implicated here. Despite the powerful gravitational allure of *AfriGeneas.com* and *AfricanAncestry.com*, both are located on the periphery of mainstream culture. The websites create, service, and legitimate not just any bodies (as does *Ancestry.com*, for instance), but black bodies. Thus, the communities built through these websites are influenced by multiple histories, oppressive and resisting forces, strategies and tactics unique to African Diasporic bodies. These forces and counter forces exist within, upon, and against the behavioral vortices described above.

It is through the kinesthetic imagination of popular genealogy, largely one of nostalgia, that African Diasporic bodies interrogate and order their histories and creatively reclaim Africa as home. Popular genealogy is as much about addressing the needs and desires of its practitioners as it is about the mechanics of filling out a family tree. I believe that these needs and desires are nostalgic. That is, they are indicative of an affective

orientation toward past and home. Performing transatlantic nostalgia through kinesthetic imagination, users engage in the transmission of ideas and performances of Africa.

### **From Critical Genealogy to Critical Nostalgia**

*AfriGeneas.com* and *AfricanAncestry.com* serve as two stages on which performers practice Africa as home, homeland, and community through the continuous action of fitting suitable alternates and within a group of people connected by desires for origin and roots. Likewise, critical nostalgia, itself a kind of transmission, entails an inclination toward return (in this case indicated by perpetual surrogation) and community. Indeed, the transmission of performance from one time and place to another requires three actions: 1) a return to that which was executed or inhabited previously; 2) a (re)performance of that which was and now is executed or inhabited; and 3) a communal exchange between bodies, which are connected in some way.

Taking my cue from *AfriGeneas.com* and *AfricanAncestry.com*, I extend Roach's transmission model of surrogation and specify critical nostalgia by offering an ethic of "care and repair." Surrogation occurs when there has been a rupture in the social fabric and alternatives are sought and fitted in order to foster the illusion of historical continuity. For Roach, the job of the genealogist is to reveal rather than uphold the illusion, asking who gains from the seamless tale, how and why. Given the circumstances, however, we also might perceive the break as an injury in need of repair, and the effort to get surrogation "right" is motivated by a desire to make the wound feel better. The job of critical nostalgia, then, is to take care to analyze or critique the nature of the injury and to enact restorative methods. One may cover a wound with a whisper, a dance, a kiss, or a band-aid, each one more or less effective and comforting.

Critical nostalgia also asks that we attend to and inquire about our desire to make the wound feel better, looking at the affective registers of returning to a past and creating a home, or homing. *AfriGeneas.com* and *AfricanAncestry.com* attempt to heal historical wounds by fostering and validating desires for origin and for roots, often using the words interchangeably. The pitch below is a clear example of the obscure relationship between origin and roots:

Do you know where you are from? Where you are really from? ... The place where your bloodline *originated* and the *roots* of your family tree truly began. Many of us know we come from Africa, but could not claim a specific ancestral homeland. That is, until now! African Ancestry is the ONLY company that can trace your maternal and/or paternal ancestry back to a specific present-day African country of *origin*. (*AfricanAncestry.com*; emphasis mine)

Over the course of my research, I discovered that when websites seek to cultivate connections between bodies, they often use the term “roots,” but when the goal is to locate a singular place, “origin” is frequently used.

The nuances of origin and roots are constructive in the effort to better understand the ethics of critical nostalgia.<sup>11</sup> Genesis, the Greek word meaning origin, also the first book of the Bible, denotes the beginning of humanity. Like many origin myths, the book of Genesis outlines the historical beginning of a developing world, constructed as a godly creation and followed by a long succession of humans begetting other humans until the world is populated. Genesis illustrates the association of origin with truth in that it claims that something came “first.” That is, it promotes the idea that there is a point that history cannot cross, where return is no longer possible. To be first is to exist as the original, the model, the prototype to which subsequent copies are compared. As Plato once claimed, the

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<sup>11</sup> This discussion of origin and roots is not mine alone. Just as the lunch bunch at *AfriGeneas.com* create their genealogies together through the sharing of resources, my study buddies and colleagues, Annemarie Galeucia and Emily Graves helped me greatly, taking time away from their own projects to talk through and question my ideas about origin and roots.

first form is associated with the purest form just as, in more contemporary terms, “Origins,” a skincare line, claims the “purity” of its products.

Roots, on the other hand, connote connectedness. An underground operation, roots simultaneously connect and anchor. The slippage between root and route foregrounds the way in which roots forge pathways for connection. Colloquial use of the word roots emphasizes a location where one has labored to connect with other people and places. The popular U.S. mini-series *Roots*, based on Alex Hailey’s novel, *Roots: The Saga of an American Family*, chronicles the family of Kunta Kinte, a captive of Gambia turned chattel slave, over several generations. The enduring popularity of the 1970s miniseries highlights both the continued fascination with family tree stories and the discursive connections between roots and genealogy. Roots also signify another connection to the process of popular genealogy. A root word is a word that holds the possibilities for other words, which consequently remain linguistically related. Along the same lines, a genealogical chart or family tree not only holds possibilities for multiplications and permutations of the body, but records the connections between bodies.

The introductory video on the homepage of *AfricanAncestry.com* features a close up of the roots of an unidentified plant accompanied by language that implores the visitor to uncover her “roots” too. In the same video, the image of a child with the continent of Africa mapped across his face is aligned with text that uses the word “origin.” While the word “roots” has a familiar visual referent, an icon actually, the word “origin” does not and making the link between word and image is difficult. The metaphor of roots is viable then largely because of its visual and functional qualities, a network of support growing downward and outward, absorbing nutrients for use in the life of the organism.

Against the pervading organizational formation of the root-tree system, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari craft a rhizomatic approach to theory and research. In *A Thousand Plateaus*, they proffer the term “rhizome,” an underground stem that sends out roots in all directions, as an anti/structure that counters hierarchical, binary, and chronologic, syllogistic structures and norms. Rhizomatic theory is without genesis and without ending, and it privileges connection, heterogeneity, and multiplicity. Deleuze and Guattari argue that the rhizome is a map as opposed to a tracing, and that this “map is open and connectable in all of its dimensions; it is detachable, reversible, susceptible to constant modification” (Deleuze and Guattari 13). With regard to the relationship between roots and rhizome, Deleuze and Guattari write, “There exist tree or root structures in rhizomes; conversely, a tree branch or root division may begin to burgeon into a rhizome” (Deleuze and Guattari 17). In the hands of Deleuze and Guattari, then, the rhizome is a process of engagement characterized by “ceaselessly established connections between semiotic chains, organizations of power, and circumstances relative to arts, sciences, and social struggles” (Deleuze and Guattari 8).

The map that Deleuze and Guattari imagine reminds me of the site map at *AfriGeneas.com*, an overview of the vast array of resources available on the website. However, while overwhelmed by the many options and bombarded with different questions, tasks, and provocations, I do not believe *AfriGeneas.com* operates as a rhizomatic anti/structure. The lunch bunch chat in particular illustrates the importance of keeping the roots metaphor intact. It also underscores the ethic of care and repair that I associate with critical nostalgia. While building their histories together, members of the lunch bunch enact care for one another, joking and offering their stories, resources, advice, and well



wishes. “Welcome, Generesearcher.” “What are your surnames?” “Where are your folk from?” “What counties are you researching?” “What city are you operating out of?” The ethic of care and repair is inquisitive; it is interested in the needs and desires of memory makers as they navigate the affective registers of past and home. Care and repair require a curious attitude about past-homes, investigating origin and root while reading the positionality of the body. One must ask two questions concerning bodies in order to practice critical nostalgia as a method for engaging the ways in which people perform past and home. The first is about bodies with respect to origin: “from whence do you come?” The second question is about bodies with respect to roots: “to what are you connected?” Performances of nostalgia live in the crux of these questions. This is why *AfricanAncestry.com* is successful in producing and validating my desire to “know,” by asking the question, “do you know?” It is why the questions from the lunch bunch inspire me to out myself as a researcher of genealogical processes and to participate actively in the conversation. And it is why I continue to engage differently inflected questions posed by a probing Czech restaurant worker.

Critical genealogy and performance genealogy, in their attempt to foreground the body and counter the seductive allure of origins, are useful tools of historical investigation. However, as I see it and as the present case reveals, critical genealogy would do well to emphasize and investigate its own roots and origins. That is, to recognize, return to, and utilize the potential of its origin, its etymological prototype: popular genealogy. And it also should remember its roots, that to which it is connected. Namely, critical genealogy should remain germane to its usage in everyday life as a popular form of research. While featuring etymology was not a goal of this chapter, the various definitions and discursive journeys of

genealogy, origin, roots, and rhizome make etymology a major feature nonetheless. This feature points to the tension that lives between genealogies. If we cannot use critical and performance genealogies to study the performance of genealogical practices in everyday life, we should inquire about the limits of what we can learn and study through the method.

Whereas a critical genealogist avoids the search for historical continuity and stable identity, the self-made African American genealogist uses *AfriGeneas.com* to create and track down an origin, to return home through the active process of charting a history. Indeed, as some performances at the websites illustrate, the practice of charting may be active without necessarily being reflexive. And, while critical genealogy would require a descent into a body perceived as unstable and shifting, *AfricanAncestry.com*, professing to pick up where the paper trail dies off, seeks to create a body ordered and fixed through the scientific practice of DNA coding. Because of this tension, I am prompted to wonder if a performance genealogy informed by nostalgic thought is needed.

Critical nostalgia is indebted to critical genealogy and performance genealogy because they attend to the affective and the performative dimensions of histories. In fact, critical nostalgia might be thought of as an extension of genealogies of performance, which stresses the investigation of origin *and* roots, the goal being to continuously revisit and refunction them as interacting tools for activating histories. Critical nostalgia and critical genealogy both possess a historical consciousness and an attitude toward the past. The distinction I wish to draw here is about the quality and ethic of this attitude toward the past. A critical genealogist seeks to uncrown the importance of origin. Foucault argues, “What is found at the historical beginning of things is not the inviolable identity of their origin; it is the dissension of other things” (Foucault 142). I agree, adding only that “other

things” include enactments of differing orientations toward origin. In a description of Foucault’s treatment of origin, Ruth Bowman observes that “the interpretive spin on the origin may change” (R. Bowman, “Diverging Paths in Performance Genealogies” 167-168). What critical nostalgia offers is an interpretive spin on origin that includes a consideration of roots. Given that the relationship between origin, roots, and identity are precisely what critical nostalgia seeks to investigate, I share Foucault’s aspiration to analyze the dynamics of origin for its power structures, while also considering its roots.

Approaching nostalgia in a critical manner asks us to locate the desire for origin and inquire around its cultural and communal importance. At *AfriGeneas.com* and *AfricanAncestry.com*, the continent of Africa often figures as the origin sought. Thus, we analyze the appeal and the affective relations involved in this transatlantic yearning and the performances it produces. At both websites, Africa as origin and as home function to reproduce the desires of racialized commerce on the one hand, but, on the other hand, the websites perform what bell hooks calls “homeplace,” or “safe place[s] where black people [can] affirm one another and by doing so heal many of the wounds inflicted by racist domination” (hooks 42). I argue that the body created in the performative space of African American popular and genetic genealogy is a nostalgic body, one that must navigate and reconcile home and past, belonging and longing, global community and corporeality, performatively engaging the question, “where are you from?”

## Chapter Three

### **My Nervous Body: Performing Nostalgia at Elmina Slave Castle**

One of the most popular Asante symbols in the now independent nation of Ghana, once the European Gold Coast, takes the image of a long-necked bird reaching up and behind with its head to remove an egg from its back. Sankofa represents the mythic bird of Akan and signifies the effort to reach back into the past to reclaim knowledge. The symbol can be interpreted as “return and take it,” a meaning both instructional and value laden that highlights two tenets: one should not fear return and return is necessary. Embedded within Sankofa is a struggle centered on the interrelations of past, present, and future. While visiting a market in Ghana, I once had a vendor attempt to sell me a pair of Sankofa earrings by telling me the symbol meant “go back to your roots,” a modification of the traditional proverb designed presumably to appeal to my nostalgic sensibilities as an African American tourist-pilgrim to my “homeland” of Africa.<sup>12</sup> I did buy the earrings. But, upon considering the implications of this pleasurable purchase juxtaposed to the sobering experiences I had over the course of my journey, particularly my experiences in the slave castle at Elmina, I realized my feelings did not constitute a typical nostalgia. The nostalgia I felt was not driven by a yearning to escape the present and revel in an idealistic version of the past. Instead, it was a realization of the Asante proverb represented in the Sankofa bird, a nostalgia born out of a desire to reclaim and better understand the memories of the past and the knowledge they might hold.

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<sup>1</sup> In her study of the castle at Elmina, Sandra Richards selects the term “tourist” to identify herself, arguing that “our collective inability to escape a mediatised cultural economy” is a key part of the discourse of travel (Richards 619). I use the term “tourist-pilgrim” to represent myself as both a tourist in Richards’ terms and as a pilgrim on a spiritual sojourn to Ghana.

In “What is to Be Remembered?: Tourism to Ghana’s Slave Castle-Dungeons,” Sandra Richards relates the symbolism of Sankofa to the precarious position of visitors to Ghana’s most (in)famous attraction. She writes:

Presumably, the bird looks at any number of resources available to him and chooses the one best suited for his trip. In journeying to these slave sites, travelers need to ask: Who are we? How are “we” constituted such that we share an identity with “them,” or conversely, have adversarial interests? What morsel(s) of wisdom from the past are we to collect from these sites of memory? Toward what future(s) [and past(s)] are we – and they – poised for flight? (Richards 637)

In this chapter, I continue my practice of critical nostalgia by responding to Richards’ provocations concerning the constitution of identity and the spatial and temporal dynamics of memory and history as they relate to bodily experience. Drawing on my experiences visiting Elmina and its castle, those of scholars who visited the castle too, and a troubling DVD tour of the same castle, I extend Richards’ body metaphor of the bird “poised” for flight by placing the tensions of Sankofa and the tourist-pilgrim squarely within the fully sensate body (Richards 637). The present chapter then connects with Chapter Two by, in Foucault’s terms, descending further into the body and bodies that concern me, a necessary movement for the practice of critical and performance genealogies. In writing this history, I also ascend to the pages of this document to express my analysis as a “stage [or staging] of forces” (Foucault 148-149). In this case, the forces are the ironies and oppositions of the slave castle. The notion of critical emergence through ascent is exercised as well in my concluding discussion regarding an aesthetic of return, which is articulated by bodies that are subject to and of the nostalgic performances within the slave castle vortex.

When I speak of descent into the body and bodies that concern me, I include in my purview the behavioral vortex that is the slave castle of Elmina. Elmina Castle inscribes the

bodies that enter its walls, hailing performers to engage in behaviors that are framed and mediated by efforts to make the slave castle more familiar to its foreign tourist-pilgrims. In this chapter, I descend into this vortex and describe performances of familiarization and defamiliarization (i.e., making the castle strange) using the vocabulary of space and place.

Space theorist Henri Lefebvre conceives of social space in terms similar to those of Roach's vortex. He argues:

[Social space] subsumes things produced, and encompasses their relationships in their coexistence and simultaneity - their (relative) order and/or (relative) disorder...Itself the outcome of past actions, social space is what permits fresh actions to occur, while suggesting others and prohibiting yet others. Among these actions, some serve production, others consumption. (Lefebvre 73)

Like Roach's vortex, social space is "a center of cultural invention through the restoration of behavior" for purposes of production and consumption (Roach 28). In Lefebvre's terms, the social space of the slave castle houses and holds the potential for an array of possible performances. Place, on the other hand, refers to particular performances that serve to situate or locate. Articulating material differences between space and place, Michel de Certeau contends, "A place is...an instantaneous configuration of positions. It implies an indication of stability" (de Certeau 117). My analysis of Elmina Castle draws on ideas of space and place in order to comprehend the ways in which the body performs (consumption and production) at the site.

Performers at Elmina Castle consume and produce informed by the ironies the castle engenders and the rhetoric of opposition expressed in the narratives used to promote the site. In "Tourism in Ghana: The Representation of Slavery and the Return of the Black Diaspora," anthropologist Edward Bruner describes four ironies evident at the slave castle, which also unfold in this chapter: 1) ancestral sadness and pride; 2) feelings of

foreignness and familiarity; 3) differing senses of family and home; and 4) the ambiguity of return. While Bruner's ironies describe the positionality of tourist-pilgrims to Elmina, an oppositional rhetoric is featured in the official narrative of Elmina Castle as told by tour guides. I define oppositions as discursive constructions that highlight stark differences between two things, such as high and low or black and white. In this chapter, I argue that the tension created within and between the ironies and oppositions of the site produce an oscillating field of place and space. My body, the body of an anticipating tourist-pilgrim, anxiously navigates this oscillation.

The chapter also highlights the tensions of nostalgia, between return and home especially. In this case, to return home means to revisit an unpleasant past. My body engages an atypical nostalgia for this past-home as I recollect my memories of Elmina Castle, which serves as both a pilgrimage destination for many members of the black Diaspora and as a historical site of trauma. Inquiring as to the extent to which nostalgia operates as a type of performance, I explore the ways in which nostalgia interacts with trauma. In *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, Dominick LaCapra writes, "Trauma is a disruptive experience that disarticulates the self and creates holes in existence" (LaCapra 41). In this chapter, I adapt LaCapra's definition, identifying trauma as an injury, historical, personal, or otherwise. And, as I do with nostalgia, I explore trauma as a function of the body and as a critical tool of investigation. I close the chapter with a discussion of the affective and aesthetic implications of this performative interaction, grounding these implications in the experiences of my body at Elmina Castle.

## **A Castle on a Coast**

In the summer of 2007, I participated in a study abroad performance program held by New York University. The program centered on West African dramatic traditions and culture. I was one of nine or ten performance students interested primarily in playwriting and acting. As a part of the curriculum, we were taken to Elmina and Cape Coast, in Ghana, to visit the castles there.

The castle of Elmina sits unapologetically on the coast. It seems unaware of the time and space it occupies, sharing the shoreline with possible descendants of the very inhabitants it used to hold inside its impenetrable walls. At the same time, it shares itself with the flood of tourists and pilgrims that flow in and out of it on a daily basis. Declared a UNESCO World Heritage Monument, the castle is marketed on the web in terms of its historical significance. Of particular stress are the shifts in ownership and the role the castle played in the slave trade.<sup>13</sup> Reasons for visiting the castle abound. History. Tourism. Pilgrimage. Although most of the visitors to the castle are Ghanaians and Europeans, according to Bruner, a considerable portion is African American. Bruner writes, "Some are upscale tourists in organized tour groups, others are independent travelers. Some make the journey on a budget, and still others prefer to stay in African homes and to eat local food, for a more intimate African experience" (Bruner 290). I visit in reluctant anticipation of identifying a key part of my history and, in doing so, am exposed to a haunting side of humanity.

Elmina Castle is the oldest of its kind. In 1482, after having negotiated with the natives of the former Gold Coast, the Portuguese built a castle as a permanent structure

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<sup>13</sup> For in-depth analyses of the history, ownership, and tourism politics of Elmina Castle, see Richards and Bruner.



meant for trade in gold, ivory, and spices. Later, with the discovery of the new world and the development of the transatlantic slave trade, the castle was used for a very different enterprise. It was a holding place for captured Africans from nearby areas as they awaited shipment across the Atlantic. As many as 600 captives were held at Elmina Castle at any one time. The Africans were held under deplorable conditions. Many of them died before the ships even arrived. The castle includes male and female dungeons where the slaves were kept, living quarters for the European Governor and his soldiers, a mess hall, a church, a magazine where weapons and artillery were held, and a courtyard.

In 1637, after several attacks, the Dutch were successful in seizing control of Elmina Castle, whereupon they continued trading in flesh and expanding the castle's physical structure for over 230 years. The British then gained control of the castle in 1871, using it as an officer training facility until 1957, when the Gold Coast regained its independence, and the nation of Ghana was formed officially. The Ghanaian government is now the owner of the castle. It has been restored, renovated, and is marketed as a tourist site primarily in terms of its historic role in the slave trade.

Often the castle is mentioned as a tourist attraction in literature on Panafest, a cultural festival held in Ghana every two years. An advertisement on the website *Black Africa*, for example, reads, "PANAFEST activities include performances and workshops in theatre, drama, music, cinema, poetry, colloquia and lectures. Attendees can also witness the colorful traditional durbar of chiefs and experience the popular excursions for any Ghana Tour – the slave castles of Elmina" (*Black Africa*; emphasis in original). This description of what the festival has to offer a tourist highlights how Ghanaian tourism exercises what Bruner describes as ancestral sadness and pride. The return of the black

Diaspora to the castle requires the management of conflicting emotions. On the one hand, they may feel “at home” in Ghana, a place of perceived origin and a source of pride. On the other hand, they are confronted with the sobering weight of the atrocities their ancestors faced. Bruner characterizes the contrasting sentiments evident at the castle. He writes, simply and correctly, “the situation is full of ironies” (Bruner 295).

### **To Enter**

I have a nervous body.<sup>14</sup> My heart beats too fast. My stomach clenches up. The clench keeps my core intact so that I do not burst into many directions all at once. I enter the castle at a tour guide’s request. I am a part of a group, but I feel alone and isolated. I enter the castle grounds, I enter the space marked as the entrance of the castle, I enter the female dungeon, I enter the male dungeon, I enter a church, I enter a museum of sorts. There are several entrances to the castle and several exits. And there are parts I simply do not remember. I do not remember the shape of the person’s face who worked at the gift shop on the castle grounds. I imagine him as a he and that he had a warm smile and a careful glance. I do not meet him until after I tour the castle. He sold me a DVD. It is titled, *The Elmina Castle and The Slave Trade*.

The video opens with festive music, an upbeat tempo with horns, drums, and clapping as the credits roll. A male tour guide appears. I assume he is native Ghanaian because of his accent and comportment. He has a round pleasant face with a distinctly neutral expression and a clear and direct tone of voice. He is clothed in a black button-up shirt with gold markings on it. He addresses us in a sober tenor:

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<sup>14</sup> I use the word nervous to highlight associations between the corporeal body and nostalgia. Nervous connotes the body’s nervous system and the tendency for nostalgia to reflect nervousness about the present. For more on nostalgia in relation to the present, see Cashman; Smith; and Tannock. The word nervous comes from the Latin “sinew,” which in its first definition denotes a thing that holds muscle to bone and, in the second, a thing that gives strength or binds items together. I mean to compare the way my nervous body, in the present context, binds together the physical and metaphysical components of nostalgia and trauma.

Thank you my dear viewers for taking the time out to watch this. I know some of you have seen this building before, been through it before. So now it's time to sit back and reflect on the tour you had. For others also this will be the first time of having a look at this. If that is the case, you need to understand that this story is so painful; it's so sad and depressing. However the motivation for doing this is not to make you sad, bitter, or angry, but to help each and every one of us learn from these horrible mistakes of the past. [Unclear, possibly "Try out"] more ways to correct these mistakes by way of taking informed and humane decisions so collectively we can stop this from rehashing in any form in the future. And that's all this is about. (*Elmina Castle*)

The guide invites the viewer to tour the town of Elmina before entering the castle. As the music plays, I suspect learning about the past in order to secure the future is not "all this is about."

The ballad I hear is both robust and harrowing, featuring male voices that moan melodiously. The singers are disembodied, never shown. Their voices seem to echo from above the scenes, as if aligned with the camera eye that so often looks down from above. The rounded sounds of the song continue through the course of the pictorial tour we take of the city. The lyrics of the song evince a peculiar nostalgia that informs the remainder of the video, the tour of the castle itself, and my experiential understanding of it.

You've been gone, it's an empty home.  
Come on back where you really belong.  
You are always welcome home,  
Welcome home.  
You've been kept down for much too long.  
Stand up please and say I am free.  
Don't forget you are welcome home,  
Welcome home.  
Come with me on this happy trip back to the Promised Land.  
All will be happy and gay. (*Elmina Castle*)

As the music plays, the video offers assorted views of Elmina, first showing the town's inhabitants and then focusing extensively on historic buildings and sites:

*You've been gone, it's an empty home.*

A crowded dock with murky water; townsmen busily working.

*Come on back where you really belong.*

A close up on a man preparing his fishing net while perched securely in his boat. He looks over his shoulder as though he suspects someone is eyeing him.

*You are always welcome home.*

Three men sail under a low hanging bridge in a small angular boat without sails.

*Welcome home.*

I cannot isolate any women in the scene.

*You've been kept down for much too long.*

A wide shot of boats on the move in the water.

*Stand up please and say I am free.*

A series of landmarks captioned in faint white lettering.

*Don't forget you are welcome home.*

Military shrines with prolonged views of figurines and other icons atop buildings.

*Welcome home.*

*Come with me on this happy trip back to the Promised Land.*

The oldest Catholic Church viewed from several angles.

*All will be happy and gay.*

The oldest Catholic parish hall viewed from the street.

Elmina New Town, viewed from above and behind a white stone arch.

The Dutch cemetery juxtaposed to the repeating lyric, *welcome home.*

*Come with me on this happy trip back to the Promised Land.*

*All will be happy and gay.*

*You've been gone; it's an empty home.*

*Come on back where you really belong.*

*You are always welcome home. Welcome home. (Elmina Castle)*

Our tour guide appears at the entrance of Elmina Castle. “You are welcome back. Now we move on inside the castle to see what the castle really has to offer” (*Elmina Castle*). Our guide turns, and the camera follows him as he walks slowly and deliberately over a suspended bridge. He enters the castle, as do I.

I have a nervous body. My heart beats too fast. My stomach clenches up. The clench keeps my core intact so that I do not burst into many directions all at once. I enter the castle at a tour guide’s request. I am a part of a group, but I feel alone and isolated. I enter the castle grounds, I enter the space marked as the entrance of the castle, I enter the female dungeon, I enter the male dungeon, I enter a church, I enter a museum of sorts. There are several entrances to the castle and several exits. And there are parts I simply do not remember.

Recalling Elmina Castle returns me to an experience I am glad to have had, even as it exposes me to an injurious history. I experience a nostalgia similar to the one I felt when I purchased the Sankofa earrings. It is a mixture of pleasure and pain best described as bittersweet. In *Nostalgia: Sanctuary of Meaning*, Janelle Wilson, following Marie Mills and Peter Coleman, describes nostalgia as a type of memory that is characterized by bittersweet recollection (Wilson 23). *Dictionary.com* defines “bittersweet” as “both pleasant and painful or regretful,” providing the phrase, “a bittersweet memory,” as an example (“Bittersweet,” def. 2). Describing the discursive life of nostalgia, Wilson writes, “My analysis (and experience) of nostalgia is such that I find this to be a term that embodies ambiguity and contradiction” (Wilson 23). She continues, “[Its] bitter sweetness makes nostalgia an unwieldy concept” (Wilson 23). The unwieldy character of bittersweet nostalgia might be understood by applying Bruner’s ironies, themselves specifications of

“ambiguity and contradiction.” As you’ll recall, Bruner’s ironies consist of: 1) ancestral sadness and pride; 2) feelings of foreignness and familiarity; 3) differing senses of family and home; and 4) the ambiguity of return. These ironies often arise concurrently and are neither mutually exclusive nor descriptively exhaustive. Although both the video guide and actual tour guide use oppositions as part of their rhetorical strategies, there are ways in which the video also performs ironies.

In the introduction to the video, ancestral sadness and pride are highlighted through the music and narrative. The opening credits are accompanied by the jubilant sounds of horns, drumming, and hand clapping. However, upon the appearance of the tour guide, the attitude of the video shifts from rejoicing to a pensive temperament as the tour guide warns, “this story is so painful; it’s so sad and depressing” (*Elmina Castle*). The juxtaposition of the joyous music with the words of caution suggests to me that I am welcome, but with certain reservations. The undertone implies, “you may enter the house of your ancestors with pride, but you must remove your shoes first and then enter quietly, with solemnity and sadness.”

Feelings of foreignness and familiarity emerge at the same time as ancestral sadness and pride. Frequently, the camera positions the viewer looking down at the city from above. This perspective fosters the viewer’s sense of ambiguity as both tourist and pilgrim by creating two different viewing positions. The first appeals to sight and distances the viewer. As noted, the camera often places the viewer above rather than in the streets of the city amidst the people who live there. Further, in a panoptic move of surveillance, the camera enlists the audience to steal views of people (un)aware of the camera eye, as is the case with the man busy at work on his fishing net. I can see the man, but he cannot see me

or the camera. We are spatially and temporally distanced from each other. Second, the film presumes and instills a position of longing for immediacy and intimacy. The distance created by the aforementioned camera technique is confirmed and countered by the curious song lyrics: The line, “you’ve been gone,” substantiates distance while the line, “come on back where you really belong,” promises future intimacy. Gaston Bachelard writes, “If we return to the old home as to [an empty] nest...it is because the home of other days has become a great image of lost intimacy” (Bachelard 100). In Bachelard’s terms, the video constructs Elmina as a “great image,” lost and foreign (i.e. remote) and yet also immediate and intimate (i.e. familiar), the nostalgia providing a relatively safe way to experience the pain of the past.

The politics of home are articulated through the kind of home (and family) the video constructs. The lyrics invite the audience to “Come with me on this happy trip back to the Promised Land” where “All will be happy and gay.” It is clear that the video appeals to sentimental, even utopian, notions of Elmina-Ghana-Africa as a past-home. Although it is a home that is constructed as spatially removed and temporally distanced, it is billed as a good home, a simple home, a home worth revisiting.

The invitation to the viewer is instructive here. The video may be about Elmina, but it is not crafted for the citizens of Elmina. The people in the video are busy at work performing everyday activities. No one pictured is smiling. It seems no one has informed them of their casting as inhabitants of a “Promised Land” or told them they should be “happy and gay.” The video refunctions Elmina and its castle so as to cater to black Diaspora returners. For example, the lyrics of the song welcome home only those who have departed, and the tour of the city, which displays everyday activities and architectural

features, is of little use to the folk who live there. The lyrics also declare that the absence of Diaspora peoples have created an “empty home,” which then implies that the current residents have failed to fill said home sufficiently.

The ambiguity of home is related to the ambiguity of return. Like the proverb of Sankofa, the video encourages, indeed instructs the viewer to return home and reclaim the knowledge of the past, to cast oneself simultaneously as prodigal child and historian. The tour guide frames the return as a rite of passage of sorts by characterizing the remembrance of the pain associated with the castle as necessary to guide present and future moral action. In this way, the proper return of the black Diaspora to Elmina Castle entails the crossing of a threshold of historical understanding, which is marked by pain and suffering. Presumably, on the other side of the threshold awaits a better way to be in the world with others. As our guide says, “the motivation for doing this is not to make you sad, bitter or angry, but to help each and every one of us learn from these horrible mistakes of the past” (*Elmina Castle*).

As a symbol of both the transatlantic slave trade and perceived ethnic home, Elmina Castle is taut with contradiction. Although the lyrics espouse a welcome to this home, one should not expect a warm-bodied embrace upon entrance here. Elmina Castle, at once home and dungeon, should give anyone pause. The narrator seems unaware of the contradiction. As the tour guide he is devoted to the materiality of the castle, and he is a careful steward of the stories he tells. I feel the incongruities of the castle deeply and acutely. This video makes me nervous.

The four ironies of Elmina help me to parse out and explain my ambiguous relationship to not only the video tour, but also the physical tour I took of the castle. Due to



their similarities (the one a video taping of the other), the two tours are conflated in my mind and memory, and from here on, I will refer to both as one.

### **To Navigate**

Our guide appears. This time he is inside the castle walls, his body framed by an entrance archway. After a lengthy description about the changes in ownership and various uses of Elmina castle, the guide moves to explain the dynamic intertribal relations that resulted in the practice of some Africans selling other Africans into slavery:

I have been here for some time, and I do hear people talking about Africans giving out brothers and sisters. In fact, if they see it from the angle that all Africans are one people and therefore giving out brothers and sisters, that's correct. But then, if we come think of it that they mean the literal sense of brothers and sisters, they are wrong. In those days, people were limited to their tribes and kingdoms, and one tribe never saw the next tribe to be same, let alone brothers and sisters. So that in case of wars and kidnappings, they were giving out enemies, nowhere near brothers and sisters. In other words, those of the same tribe never gave themselves up but, rather, those of other tribes, and they never saw themselves to be brothers and sisters. (*Elmina Castle*)

The guide returns to a more neutral account of the war in which the Dutch, with the help of local Africans, overthrew the Portuguese who then took control of the castle, but continued to trade slaves. He moves quickly through the remainder of the castle's history, ending with the independence of Ghana that led to the ownership of Elmina Castle by the Ghanaian government. The guide gestures toward the entrance that has been lurking behind him.

"Now we can move on to see the various places" inside the castle (*Elmina Castle*).

The first space is the female dungeon. The guide describes the horrendous health conditions of the castle and juxtaposes them to a gendered narrative of desire and aggression, observing that the white men never brought their wives with them. As a result, the white male authorities of the castle "kept on raping the women in the dungeons" (*Elmina Castle*). The guide details:

Whatever the governor wanted, because of his position the story says, up on the balcony he stood...Women were then brought out from the dungeons all around to the courtyard so then he just looked through and then made his choice. The woman chosen could have been in the dungeon for a whole month, all the time in there she never cleaned her [unclear]. She never took a bath or bathed, gone through the menstrual sometimes, and still the governor was interested. (*Elmina Castle*)

The guide proceeds to describe the process by which the selected woman was cleaned.

Then, as the guide moves out of the frame, the camera focuses on a staircase leading up to the governor's quarters. The guide's voice relays the sexual abuse of the woman and the various consequences of the rape, which potentially included freedom if the woman was found pregnant. As the guide talks, the camera's eye moves up the stairs and into the governor's bedroom, placing the viewer in the position of the raped captive woman, or perhaps the position of the governor. As the ascendancy occurs, the guide speaks of the "almost insignificant" number of women who became mistresses of castle authorities.

Houses were built for them and their children in town because the authorities wanted them close at hand.

I have a nervous body. My heart beats too fast. My stomach clenches up. The clench keeps my core intact so that I do not burst into many directions all at once. I enter the castle at a tour guide's request. I am a part of a group, but I feel alone and isolated. I enter the castle grounds, I enter the space marked as the entrance of the castle, I enter the female dungeon, I enter the male dungeon, I enter a church, I enter a museum of sorts. There are several entrances to the castle and several exits. And there are parts I simply do not remember.

I do remember walking more softly than I typically do. I remember my jaw getting tight from grinding my teeth and being silent for so long. I remember the sound of gasps and sighs at almost every description of events. Questions are rarely asked. People are

both curious and anxious. They listen intently, hanging on every word the tour guide utters, and they are quiet, as if silence might ward off the ghosts of injustice housed in the place. They also are hyper-aware, looking at each other for a clue as to how to comport themselves. I did not know what to do with my body, so I was often still. Pensive. Affected. I attempted to appear still, pensive, affected. At one point, I remember my white colleagues seemed unable to look at me and the other African Americans on the tour. In truth, I had difficulty controlling the activity of my own eyes. I tried to cry. I watched others manage the act. I closed my eyes at many points having tired from seeing too much of nothing. Empty rooms, empty walls, echoing footsteps.

Richards describes the process of recollecting memories in the emptiness of the castle. She writes, "Part of the pain of walking through the lower levels of this castle-dungeon, of imagining the life that transpired here, relates to absence. I can smell what I imagine is the stench of suffering, but no material scrap remains inside the dungeons" (Richards 92). For Richards, the lack of physical evidence highlights the absence or loss of those held within the walls. However, the enduring materiality of those same walls seems to tell a related tale. Standing within them, one cannot escape from the immense size of the rooms. They envelop the body, catching and trapping one in a history that is evident by its material remains, but unbelievable in the scope and scale of the cruelty attached to it. Like Richards, I looked, felt, and grasped for meaning. I tried to justify why I wanted to know about this history. Why was it so important for me to take in this information? Why do I, to this very day, feel attached to, almost in love with this memory of cruelty and injustice that I never experienced and would never want to? This is no typical nostalgia. The truth is that there is not much to do here but try and listen for your place.

At Elmina Castle there is not a tightly constructed sense of duty or justice, but rather memories of past violence roaming free. The official narrative of the castle attempts to tame these wandering memories through the language of historical fact, which is expressed through a rhetoric of oppositions. The tour guide is careful to describe in meticulous detail the pain and suffering that occurred in the castle, recalling the injuries through implicit and explicit oppositions: governor/captive, black/white, holy/evil, dirty/clean, men/women. For example, the guide is careful to balance and oppose talk of the slave traders with talk of the enslaved Africans. During the tour of the governor's sleeping quarters, the guide mentions that the slaves were housed just below the floorboards. At one point in the tour of the church space, he contrasts the beauty of the architecture with the crudeness of the dungeons. When touring the dungeons, the different conditions in which the female and male slaves were held and the differences in their gendered experiences are highlighted. The guide constructs an opposition of dirty/clean in his description of the women who were transformed from soiled to sanitary in preparation for impending rape. Indeed, the tour guide spends a good deal of time describing the sexual violence perpetrated against the African women while they were held captive in Elmina Castle, deploying strategies that minimize the introduction of nuance into the official narrative. However, as symbols of miscegenation and bearers of racially mixed children, the raped and impregnated women pose a threat to the black/white opposition established in the narrative. The guide manages the ambiguity by deeming the number of these women as "almost insignificant" and explaining they were removed from the castle and kept nearby, thereby dislocating them from his narrative purview.

The guide appears to use oppositional rhetoric in order to facilitate unambiguous stories, which are designed ostensibly for easier consumption and maximum dramatic effect. The oppositions also serve the practical purpose of concision. After all, both the physical and video tours operate under time constrictions and cannot go on forever. Whatever the purpose of the contradictory structure of the official narrative, such oppositions do not provide answers to the questions Elmina Castle raises.

The oppositions instead interact with the ironies the castle engenders. The irony of foreignness and familiarity is no doubt enacted and sustained by the ways in which the castle familiarizes and defamiliarizes itself. Drawing from Chinese acting, Bertolt Brecht describes alienation as turning the familiar into something unfamiliar, which then necessitates knowledge of the target audience or culture and what is familiar to them. Spoken by the tour guide, the narrative of Elmina Castle appeals to Diaspora nostalgia for Africa as homeland in order to establish the castle as a familiar site. The tour guide's discussion of intertribal disconnections and his detailed descriptions of the varying sections of the castle function not only as information, but as familiarizing techniques, communicated through the language of historical fact. The words he uses create and animate the areas of the castle he describes, establishing the conditions for empathy and reconnection with one's ancestors. Concurrently, the use and slippage of oppositional rhetoric operate to make these same "incidents...appear strange" (Brecht 91). As neither visitors to the site nor viewers of the video are able to fully inhabit either side of the opposition (governor or captive for instance), they are distanced from the account and forced to establish their own relationship to the stories through kinesthetic imagination. The oppositions tip off the audience to the fact that the production is crafted, and for them

especially. In this way, as Brecht would have it, the audience is “hindered from simply identifying itself with the characters” established in the narrative (Brecht 91). Instead they are forced to engage the strangeness, thus creating a critically active audience.

The visitors’ enactment of kinesthetic imagination operates to both fill and question the gaps created by the use of oppositions in the narrative. As Richards notes, “I must acknowledge that even if the guides were to supply additional data, that would not fully assuage a sense of loss; whether I knew then that representation is bound to fail before the enormity of historical violence, I do not remember” (Richards 91). While one is affected by the familiarizing methods of the narrative, one also leaves the castle with a primary question of defamiliarization, “how could something like this happen?”

The tension between feelings of foreignness and familiarity, forces of defamiliarization and familiarization is manifested also in terms of space and place. I am particularly interested in how bodies perform in the space or vortex of the slave castle in light of said forces. In an effort to interpret space in bodily terms, Judith Hamera invokes de Certeau’s understanding of the differences between space and place. She explains, “space is multivocal, characterized by perpetual possibilities for transformation. Place is univocal, stable, proper” (Hamera 65). Hamera observes, “the construction and reproduction of place from space can be explored in performative terms” (Hamera 65). In other words, individuals perform actions that turn space into place, and it would seem the reverse is also true. In light of the official narrative of Elmina Castle, visitors are placed and place themselves as returners to a “Promise Land,” as captives in the castle dungeon, as clean rather than dirty, or perhaps it is the reverse? On the other hand, then, assuming these very roles (of pleasure and pain, clean and dirty) destabilizes one’s sense of place.

The familiarizing aims of historical fact and easy oppositions are displaced by the experience of bittersweet irony, returning the visitors and the castle too to a shifting space of difficult questions and few answers.

In the title to her essay on slave castle tourism, Richards poses one of these difficult questions when she asks, "What is to be Remembered?" To ask what is to be remembered at Elmina Castle is to inquire about what we must *do* in order to make sense of a fractured and disturbing history. What do we *do* in light of the ironies and oppositions? How do we *enact* that which is bittersweet? To answer Richard's question, I would say that I remember the pleasures and pains of my body in connection to the events that transpired in the castle not because they are good, but because they are mine. By walking through the castle and engaging the stories told, my remembered space of Africa as home is turned into a more personal place, enveloping the various ambiguities of the castle in relation to my ailing body. Conversely, as I seek connection with the ailing bodies of ancestors I imagine, this very action highlights the ways that Africa simply exceeds my experience and understanding.

**Journal Entry: July 31, 2007**

I should have cried. All that I experienced, all that I saw and heard. I should have cried. At one point during the tour of the castle, I remember making a conscious effort to cry. I thought that if I could just crank out some tears then I wouldn't feel such a loss. Oddly enough, my sense of loss was not for a lost people, but for a loss of emotion. I wanted to feel sad for my ancestors and for humanity, but I was not sure how to channel the sadness. I even appreciated the irony of the beautiful white castle sharing the shoreline with the dark skinned natives of the town, while the whispering of history revealed

another, more brutal truth about this monumental symbol of oppression. The feeling I felt was similar to watching news coverage of some devastating event like Hurricane Katrina or the genocide at Darfur. Damn that's sad, but not quite personal enough for my tear ducts to fill, not home-hitting enough for one saline drop to fall.<sup>15</sup>

After we left the castle, I went to sit alone by the beach. I remember thinking how calming it was. A young man came and sat beside me, and I thought, "If he tries to sell me something, I'm going to scream." As it turns out, all he wanted was conversation. The young man is eighteen years old, and he has a name. He has one sister who is not yet married, and he goes to a local school where he is trying to be a better student. We talked easily, about trivial things, until he told me that his desire is to live in the U.S. I asked him why, and he replied, "There is real happiness in America. We never have money here, so there is not much happiness." I recall some bullshit response of mine, about how real happiness is being with the people you love. The young man was not moved. Looking over at the beach, I asked him if he liked to swim. He then told me of how two weeks earlier he and his friends went swimming at night and his classmate was sucked into the ocean and drowned. His classmate's name was TooSweet, and his sister was married the same day that he drowned. When the body was found, it had no eyes. I shook my head and said, "Wow, that is so sad." What am I? What is wrong with me? I should have cried.

## **To Return**

I am nervous telling this story in such a public way. I tell the story because I think it is important for people to know that wounding and longing flow in many directions across

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<sup>15</sup> The noted experience might be thought of in terms similar to those Baudrillard articulates in his 1995 book, *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*. While Baudrillard acknowledges that for some the war did occur in physical terms, his argument is that for most of us it occurred as a mediatized event, crafted and functioning in terms of simulation and the hyper-real.



the Atlantic. My experience on the beach forces me to confront the excesses created by the slippage between my own bodily experiences and the bodies of the people who live in the place I long for. I feel my nostalgia as a longing for connection to my origins and roots in my homeland of Africa, while the young man expresses his yearning as a desire for happiness in the U.S.

In hopes of finding their roots, tourist-pilgrims who come to Ghana to visit Elmina Castle run the risk of isolating their tale of return in such a way that it renders the sensibilities of the current Ghanaians irrelevant. The harrowing song that introduces the DVD constructs Elmina as an “empty home,” but those who construct such a frame are not the only culprits in the crafting. In the guise of a mundane conversation, this young man told me a story of life and death, creating his own set of oppositions. The juxtaposition of matrimony and mortality, happiness and sadness strikes me and frustrates my efforts to place my body as tourist-pilgrim in the space of the conversation. I did not pay for *this* sad narrative; I did not intend to enter *this* vortex.

Still, the forces of his oppositions make the ironies of Elmina active and complex. My ancestral sadness and pride is troubled by my experiences of the young man’s sadness and by having roots in both Africa and the U.S. My feelings of foreignness and familiarity are compounded by the strange dynamics of this intimate conversation with a practical stranger. My sense of family and home are the means by which I empathize with what I imagine to be the feelings of TooSweet’s family upon news of his death. The story activates my experience of the ambiguity of return as it signals to me that there are many tales of return to be told, that these stories flow in multiple directions, and are not all mine.

It is certain that TooSweet has a history, a personality, and a story of his own. He came to me in a narrative crafted for my audiencing and at the height of my reflexivity while on my “return” to Africa. It is for these reasons that I cannot help but relate TooSweet’s dead body, absent of those highly subjective symbols we call eyes, to my own return specifically and to the risky return of the African Diaspora more generally. Try as I might to resist, there are ways in which I experience my corporeal body as an embodiment of traumas past, fished out of the ocean in need of mourning and care, a barely recognizable returner wanting to be reclaimed. In light of this experience, the story renders me silent, reflexive, guilty.

The young man’s story also represents the ways in which Ghanaians assert their own performative subjectivity with, upon, and against my own and others. Bruner details how ordinances are used to keep the citizens of Elmina away from the castle, and how in turn inhabitants counter such strategies. For one, they refuse to pay to enter the castle on the grounds that, as citizens of Elmina, it belongs to them. Richards asks tourists to the slave castle to consider “who are we? How are ‘we’ constituted such that we share an identity with ‘them’ [the citizens of Elmina] or conversely, have adversarial interests?” (Richards 637). Richards’ questions inspire me to think about the ways that we are tourists in the streets, but returning pilgrims within the now safe haven of the castle, free from the eyes of the inhabitants of Elmina, Ghana, Africa.

### **No Return**

Of the ironies Bruner highlights, such as ancestral sadness and pride, feelings of foreignness and familiarity, and differing senses of family and home, the ambiguity of return makes me especially nervous. Our guide appears again. He explains the horrors of

the Middle Passage, stating that the captives' lives "only got worse" (*Elmina Castle*). The guide is pictured in the shadows of a stone passageway. A narrow shaft of light brightens just one side of his face and body. As he gestures towards the opening, he tells the viewer that this is the door that led to the ships that dispersed Africans to places far and away, the Door of No Return.

The guide then describes a welcoming ceremony held during Panafest, in which those who have traveled to the festival are welcomed and homage is paid to those who died in the slave castle. Gifts in the form of wreaths are presented, "one from the chiefs, one from the government, and one from all Africans in the Diaspora" (*Elmina Castle*).

We need to understand, and I believe that everyone who has been to the castle and would come to the castle will bear in mind that those who died in the process never died in vain and will believe that – as we go through the dungeons leaving us at the point of no return where we're marching the Africans in chains going out of the castle. It should reflect on us that we have a responsibility. And now, to get yourself acquainted with that responsibility, over here we keep a minute of silence in memory of all those who died. And we vow in us to do whatever it takes to make sure that when we say never again, means never again. (*Elmina Castle*)

### **My Return**

I have a nervous body. My heart beats too fast. My stomach clenches up. The clench keeps my core intact so that I do not burst into many directions all at once. I enter the castle at a tour guide's request. I am a part of a group, but I feel alone and isolated. I enter the castle grounds, I enter the space marked as the entrance of the castle, I enter the female dungeon, I enter the male dungeon, I enter a church, I enter a museum of sorts. There are several entrances to the castle and several exits. And there are parts I simply do not remember.

I approach the Door of No Return. I am amazed by how small the door is, and the guide explains that people were smaller back then. My mind drifts back to when I visited a

silver mine in the Czech Republic, and the tour guide told me the same thing. In the present case, the guide adds that poor nutrition, brutality, and terrible living conditions contributed to the diminished size of the captives by the time they passed through the Door of No Return. I cringe at this. My stomach is tethered to itself from all of the clenching. You see, I tend to compress when I am nervous. The walls of my belly become sensitive. All feelings seem to originate in my throat and then dive down through my heart only to be caught by the intersecting tightropes that are my tightened core. This triggers backache. I imagine bodies bending, tied to one another. I think of all the people who move in and out of this room on a daily basis. In. Out. In. Out. They must duck down, bend over, and orient their differently sized bodies to this uncomfortable space. I think about the countless returns of the tour guides and castle workers, returning over and over again to tell the tale. I suppose tourism is all about return. Perhaps someone should rename this room, this door.<sup>16</sup> I have returned. Many have not. The doorway is barred. The light pierces through the bars illuminating the dark room and forcing eyes to adjust and bodies to react. I squint. I negotiate the tension between my face and my core. My back hurts. I attempt to feel some emotional pain congruent with my nervous body. I imagine a scenario I cannot now recall. Time passes. I grow tired of trying to feel things. I grow tired of forcing connections through the pit of my stomach. I want to go home.

Manifestations of nostalgia and its promises of return are not limited to the experiences of the black Diaspora. As I hope to demonstrate above, the nostalgia I feel often reflects a highly self-centered and even Americentric flow of memories. My nostalgia

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<sup>16</sup> At the Cape Coast slave castle, there is a sign affixed to the Door of No Return that is visible from the outside only, upon reentry. The sign reads, "Door of Return," and it was placed as a gesture of welcome for members of the black Diaspora.

affirms the politics of nostalgia as I practice elective remembering and selective forgetting. Bruner reminds us, “African American interest in slavery and the dungeons focuses on one event and one time range in the past, as opposed to a return to all the expressive cultural aspects of contemporary African culture” (Bruner 296). A considerable performance of nostalgia in its own right, festivals like Panafest, of which tours to Elmina Castle are a part, stress a complex activation of pleasurable and painful memories. The slave castle at Elmina then is a vortex within a vortex – although while inside the castle it is easy to forget what is happening outside. It is for this reason that I abstained from visiting a second castle on the same day we visited Elmina Castle, opting instead to roam the beach and reflect on my visit to the site.

### **Performing Nostalgia and Trauma**

I have argued above that bodies in the vortex of the slave castle are such that they create and navigate a field of oscillating forces, such as the oppositions and ironies of the castle. The oppositions are presented through the language of historical fact in an effort to encourage easy consumption of the site, producing performers who align themselves with one of the opposing sides. The ironies of Elmina add complexity to the field of oscillation by troubling and destabilizing the oppositions through defamiliarization, which prompts the performers to distance themselves from and question the oppositions. As an oscillating fan moves back and forth, propelling and organizing the air of a room, the forces within the castle move to and fro, shaping the space and the bodies that occupy and create it. An oscillating fan does not stay in one position for long. As the fan moves away from a given area of concentration, air molecules reorganize themselves: they fall out of place or place themselves differently in a room. Bodies at Elmina likewise reposition and refashion how

they occupy the space of the slave castle and how they direct the course of oscillation through their actions.

But inquiring about the oppositional discourse and embedded ironies of the castle is not the only way to get at the bitter and the sweet of this site. Performers also navigate between the affects of nostalgia and the affects of trauma, feelings of longing and feelings of wounding. Recollecting my experiences at Elmina Castle has its pleasures and pains. The feelings that emerge constitute a strange nostalgia, a nostalgia experienced in the face of historical trauma. Within this tension lie two theoretical concepts. The first is nostalgia, and the second is trauma, or what Stephanie Houston Grey defines as “the impact of events that produce severe ruptures in social cohesion and threaten the stability of these cultural narratives” (Grey 175).

Trauma, Greek for “wound,” shares a similar discursive journey to that of nostalgia. Once used in the medical community as a synonym for homesickness in the diagnoses of soldiers, nostalgia is used most commonly today as a way of dealing with the past. According to Cathy Caruth, trauma once referred to the physical wounding of the body, and it was not until the nineteenth century, aided by Freud, that it came to mean a violent psychological wound (Caruth 3). Over time, then, both nostalgia and trauma have been transformed from referring largely to physical experiences to those of a metaphysical character. The present project returns both nostalgia and trauma to a fully contextualized notion of body, to bodies that resist the Cartesian mind/body opposition.

Felt in the confluence of mind-body, Elmina Castle inspires a curious combination of wounding and longing. At the start of the DVD, the tour guide characterizes the events of the castle as “horrible mistakes of the past” to which we must attend in order to prevent

them from “re happening” (*Elmina Castle*). This framing narrative identifies the castle as a site of historical trauma and cautions its recurrence in the present and future. The tour guide fears what Hershini Bhana Young calls an “inheritance of injury,” the traumatic re-memory of painful events (H. B. Young 118). Before the viewer enters the vortex of the slave castle, she is attuned to the trauma associated with it, and once she enters, the highly descriptive tales of suffering serve to further articulate and activate the trauma frame. The activation of trauma combined with the nostalgia at play in welcoming the black Diaspora creates and substantiates bodies of wounding and bodies of longing. The tour guide, for instance, provides a list of atrocities crafted for the visitors’ consumption of trauma, such as the kidnapping and trading of Africans by other Africans and Europeans, the dreadful conditions of the dungeons, the raping of African women, the movement through the Door of No Return, and the horrors of the Middle Passage.

In the remainder of the chapter, I explore implications I see emerging from the interaction between trauma and nostalgia at Elmina Castle. First, I examine the noted interaction in terms of the problem of in/authenticity. Second, I articulate how bodies perform consumption and production of Elmina and its castle through an aesthetic of return.

Performances of both nostalgia and trauma inspire scholarly discussion of in/authenticity. Central to in/authentic trauma is an interrogation of the politics of questioning a person’s or a culture’s traumatic experience. In the present case, a question of authenticity might be: are the feelings of ancestral connection that African Americans experience in the slave castle “authentic” or “real?” In his analysis of the different representations of Ghanaians and African Americans with respect to the slave castles of

Ghana, Bruner finds, “from a Ghanaian perspective, they [African Americans] become ‘too emotional,’ which suggest the Ghanaians do not understand the feelings of Diaspora blacks” (Bruner 293). Part of this misunderstanding can be explained in terms of the relationship between identity and trauma. Although trauma is defined as a destabilizing rupture, this rupture may be deeply connected to the identity of a person or culture. LaCapra terms this intense identification “founding trauma” and describes the occurrence as “how something traumatic, disruptive, disorienting in the life of a people can become the basis of identity formation” (LaCapra 161). As a result of the personal alignment, questioning the reality of trauma is taboo, and some subjects even gain a degree of cultural capital. As Grey explains, “traumatized subjects can sometimes achieve an elevated status in our culture,” their distressing experience being a source of “legitimacy and institutional authority” (Grey 186). In the case of Elmina Castle, feelings of ancestral attachment are legitimated discursively, and as an identity building agent, trauma becomes hyper authentic, expressing an authenticity that is inextricable from a person’s or a group’s lived experience.

Central to the question of in/authentic nostalgia is whether nostalgia serves a positive or negative function. Susan Stewart characterizes nostalgia as distinctly negative, as a narrative that lacks authenticity.<sup>17</sup> I quote Stewart at length in order to grasp her full assessment:

Nostalgia is a sadness without an object, a sadness which creates a longing that of necessity is inauthentic because it does not take part in lived experience. Rather, it remains behind and before that experience. Nostalgia, like any form of narrative, is always ideological: the past it seeks has never existed except as narrative, and hence, always absent, that past continually threatens to reproduce itself as a felt lack. Hostile to history and its invisible origins, and yet longing for an impossibly

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<sup>17</sup> Parry-Giles and Parry-Giles likewise characterize nostalgia as inauthentic, framing it as tool a speaker can use to distort the past (Parry-Giles and Parry-Giles 421-427).



pure context of lived experience at a place of origin, nostalgia wears a distinctly utopian face, a face that turns toward a future-past, a past which only has ideological reality. (Stewart 23)

Stewart argues nostalgia is bad because it is not real, and because it does not constitute embodied experience.

Understanding that nostalgia has been linked with inauthentic experience, Lucy Lippard recovers nostalgia as a “seamless and positive part of life,” countering Stewart’s assumptions about the separation between real experience and nostalgic longing (Lippard 164). Lippard writes, “nostalgia is part of lived experience...a desire unremoved from the senses,” and “a longing that may never be fulfilled but functions positively for that reason” (Lippard 164). Like Lippard, I too believe that nostalgia may serve productive ends, and that nostalgia is an important activity not thoroughly investigated using the binary of good or bad. Lippard writes about her efforts to recover nostalgia and save it from the good or bad referendum:

Try as I may to de-construct the obvious artifices negatively attributed to nostalgia, it has not helped me kick the habit of pondering places and ways of life that are out of reach of my own memory. Nostalgia in the broad sense, as the word is used today, suggests a poignancy that need be neither gloomy nor reactionary. Inherited layers of class, race, and gender attitudes...can be excavated from its depths...the complexity of such musings is lost when they are divided into good and bad. (Lippard 154)

Michael Bowman offers a way out of the good/bad binary and an alternative to the question of authenticity in his analysis of tourism sites associated with Mary Queen of Scots. He contends that criticism based on authenticity is misplaced:

[It] betrays an essentialism that assumes “authenticity” is a stable, pure, prediscursive quality or state rather than an emerging, shifting, differentially constructed one. Moreover it often begs the question of whether “authenticity” is what a heritage site should strive for, or whether it is in fact what visitors and tourists actually seek from heritage sites. (M. Bowman, “Tracing Mary Queen of Scots” 208)

Bowman proceeds to argue that Jacques Derrida's concept of hauntology, which refers to the incomprehensible ways in which the past intrudes upon the present, provides a more compelling and useful analytic frame with which to view tourism sites. Hauntology asks, "how the site recruits and mobilizes bodies to perform acts of remembrance" rather than evaluating the site based on a yeah or nay referendum of authenticity, which finally is a wholly subjective experience (M. Bowman, "Tracing Mary Queen of Scots" 208). Bowman contends "hauntology offers us a far more generous way of understanding visitors' expressions of fondness for and interest in history and heritage than dismissing their remarks as mere nostalgia" (M. Bowman, "Tracing Mary Queen of Scots" 209).

As Bowman argues, the video illustrates, and my recollections of the physical tour reveal, experiences at Elmina Castle do not represent "mere nostalgia." Instead, the performances create nostalgias that move and encourage movement, nostalgias that work and are worked on through the performance of memory. Annette Kuhn uses the term "memory work" to refer to acts of remembrance, emphasizing the mental and physical labor involved in remembering. In *Family Secrets: Acts of Memory and Imagination*, Kuhn identifies memory work as a conscious and active recollection of memories that adopts an inquiring attitude toward the past and its representation. Kuhn notes that memory structures our inner worlds and actively creates meaning. She shows how memory texts have their own set of conventions that activate the cultural imagination and inspire community and ideas of nationhood. Kuhn's memory work is not concerned with truth, and it views what is remembered as material for interpretation. Part of the memory work of critical nostalgia is to counter the "stable, pure, [and] prediscursive" notions of authenticity to which Bowman responds. As with constructs and uses of the word "origin,"

authenticity assumes a unique truth that critical and performance genealogies query. At Elmina Castle, nostalgia functions not only as a recruiting tool for soliciting certain types of memory work, but as a critical and creative method one can use to process historical trauma.

Like Kuhn's memory work, critical nostalgia necessitates a working relationship with memories. It invokes an attitude toward the past, its make-up, and the way it is represented. Whereas Kuhn asks her reader to adopt an inquiring attitude toward the past, critical nostalgia requires a critical attitude. This attitude should be indicative of both inquiry and evaluation, remaining alive to the various problems and possibilities of past and home. The Sankofa proverb is a figurative example of how critical nostalgia encourages memory work through the question of origin. When a person asks the colloquial "chicken or egg" question, she is asking a question of origin, of genesis, of "which came first?" While the chicken and egg scenario queries what came first, the proverb of the Sankofa bird queries and instructs us as to what to *do* with that which came first. Indeed, clear instructions are given: "go back and take it."

The Sankofa bird is frozen in the act of removing an egg from its back, caught in the act of recovering its symbol of the past. The image begs questions crucial to the proverb and to critical nostalgia. What inspires the bird to inhabit such an awkward position? Does the egg beckon the bird, calling her forth, and under what pretense or allure? How did the egg come to occupy the space on the bird's back in the first place? Is the egg heavy, a burden? What shall the bird do with the egg once it is retrieved?

At Elmina Castle, performers are inspired to occupy the uncomfortable space of the slave castle because they seek knowledge about the trauma it represents and because they

are affectively tied to it as a symbol of their past-home. The castle calls or hails performers through the ambivalent allures embedded in rhetorical oppositions and experiential ironies. The official narrative of the castle situates the traumatic past upon the backs of its visitors by framing the experience as a rite of passage, something that must be done in order to take one's proper place among one's people. A plaque placed at the door of a dungeon for rebellious captives condemned to death articulates the noted challenge. The inscription 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" (*Elmina Castle*). The plaque, like the Elmina tour video, is bittersweet. It asks visitors to "find their roots" within the same walls said to house the "memory of the anguish of their ancestors." Nostalgia is, after all, about how we remember and enact our past-homes. Similar to the proverb of Sankofa, the plaque articulates both the necessary burden of remembrance and instructions as to what to do. The instructions? Return to your past and find your roots, your connections.

The instructions call for active bodily invention, for kinesthetic imagination, employed toward realizing an aesthetic of return. I use the word aesthetic to highlight the characteristics of the performances revealed through my analysis of Elmina Castle and to query their implications for critical nostalgia.

To enter and navigate the complex intersections of nostalgia and trauma embedded in Elmina Castle involves returning to a past home and to an injurious event. The return evokes a simultaneous wounding and longing. At Elmina Castle, the aesthetic of return that undergirds the performances looks differently upon the past. With regards to trauma,

performers look to the past in order to stop troubling events from occurring again. With regards to nostalgia, performers look to the past in order to garner a keen understanding and relationship with it. Both orientations suggest that return is an important and productive activity. Indeed, the importance of return is signified by the name of the doorway that led African captives to slave ships on the Atlantic. It is not called the door of departure, but rather the Door of No Return. This name marks a point at which the desirable act of return is presumably no longer possible. The return of the black Diaspora to Elmina, then, is both a negation and revision of the Door of No Return. In this way, the castle is able to operate under the explicit theme of “never again,” all the while whispering, “welcome home” (*Elmina Castle*).

The aesthetic of return is dependent on the movement of bodies. In order to “go back and take it,” one must engage the project of going “back to Africa,” and in this case, going back to Ghana and back to Elmina. Let us not forget the bodies of the tour guides that occupy Elmina on a daily basis, their jobs dependent on their return to the same narratives of trauma, to the same stories of their ancestors. Let us think also of the toll this return must take on their bodies. The aesthetic of return, marked by trauma and nostalgia, makes possible an oscillating field of affect caught between contradictory associations. That is, home, homeland, and community on the one hand and violence, death, and wounding on the other. My nervous body straddles and navigates this line.

To recall in this space is less about excavating the crevices of my mind for changing and uncertain memories and more about mining and performing my own bodily histories. It is also about recognizing the excess, that which escapes my memory and denies my attempts at placement. I seek not only history, but also the textures of affective

attachments inextricably linked to the histories and herstories rooted in contradictory senses of home, past, and trauma. Although visiting these feelings may be perceived as a threat to healing or to progress, I view this activity as productive. By performing return, I bring my body into conversation with cultural memories that roam the castle walls.

Experiencing one's body in Elmina Castle means walking into the crossfire of ironic and oppositional forces. Narratives take pains to place bodies, and pain-riddled bodies free narratives into space. Elmina Castle presents a crisis of memory, an interrogation of the past on one hand and an interrogation of the self in relation to the world and to home on the other. We are bound to our bodies in different ways than we are bound to narrative text. An aesthetic of return puts us in touch with our ancestors not through conventional knowledge, but through an active physical engagement with the traumas of the past.

In *The Atlantic Sound*, Caryl Phillips enters, navigates, and returns to issues of transatlantic identity. Ultimately, he concludes, "it is futile to walk into the face of history," describing remnants of the past as "shards of memory" that may "draw blood" (Phillips 275). He is right. They may. And he is right to be nervous about nostalgia for a traumatic past. It is my contention however that nervousness is no reason to discount or avoid our feelings about the past. This case of nerves is symptomatic of nostalgia moving us through memories in ways that encourage and feed our attachments to historical moments, heeding Bowman's call to "[discover] truths contained in our affective relations to the past" (M. Bowman, "Tracing Mary Queen of Scots" 211). Nostalgia helps us to contextualize trauma in a way that centers on emotional, bodily experience and encourages us to engage both the problems and the potentialities of the past. While we may never truly go home, nostalgia offers a way to return, a way to connect, and a way to practice the pleasures and pains of

memory, privileging the expressive body as conduit. This is no typical nostalgia. Instead it is a nostalgia that encourages a critical stance toward the past, and indeed, it is one that asks us to return (n)ever again.

### **Postscript**

There is a moment in my adolescence that returns to me again and again. The consistency of the recall is due I suspect to the event being the first time I dealt with death; the first time I realized people die despite how much I love them.

I was at my favorite aunt's funeral service. It was a warm day, and we had fallen into a moment of silence when my cousin screamed out in utter torment, "Wake up, Mama! Wake up!" Her voice was intense with sorrow, guttural and thick and meaty, as if summoned from the entrails of her body. "Wake up, Mama! Wake up!" Her keening was both an assumption, that her mother was only sleeping, and a command, that her mother return to the family where she belonged. My aunt's name was Malvolia. We called her Aunt Mal. After the funeral, I wrote a poem so I would not forget her. I tucked the poem in a diary, out of sight.

In high school, I served as editor-in-chief of the school's literary magazine. In one of the issues I contributed a short story, which I titled, "It Used to Sing," or something like that. In the story, I related the death of my Aunt Mal to a rotating musical porcelain clown that my aunt used to own. I coveted the musical clown because I loved its soft coloring and the melody it produced. Eventually, Aunt Mal gifted the clown to me. But over time, and over use, it stopped working, turning, and singing. I shared the short story with my family. They were touched. There were tears, and proclamations that one day I would be a writer.

Much later, I produced a performance in the HopKins Black Box at Louisiana State University called "Home Bodies." The show was a collaborative project featuring a collection of personal narratives and ethnographic performances centered on the idea of home as enacted through the expressive bodies of students from Baton Rouge Community College, Louisiana State University, and Xavier University. When one of my students, Alicia, was having trouble coming up with a concept for her piece, I encouraged her to write about an event that returns to her again and again. As an example, I forwarded her a version of "It Used to Sing." Together Alicia and I interwove the stories of my aunt's passing and the birth of Alicia's little girl. This time as director, I staged my cousin's yells through the body of Alicia. With her head turned over her left shoulder, her left leg slightly bent, and her hands cuffed around her mouth as if calling across a field, Alicia whispers, "Wake up Mama!" It is a whispered scream, drawn out, enunciating every syllable, "Wake up Mama! Wake up!" Now, this whisper revisits, carrying the memory of visceral screams, gentle songs, a story of birth, a poem in a well hidden diary, shared words on a page. A body with no eyes, a clown with no song. Threatening, comforting, wounding, healing, the moment returns.



## Chapter Four

### Staging Nostalgia: Time and Space in *Copious Notes: A Nostalgia Tale*

Three human figures revolve on the flat surface of a stage. They are embodied, rhythmic landscapes of three distinct sets of space and time relations. As the bodies shift slowly and carefully in a circular pattern, they catch glimpses of each other, often at difficult angles, and are affected in their rotation, creating constantly engaging agents of symbolic, emotional, and bodily melodies.

The movement I describe above derives from one of a trilogy of pieces I developed and staged as a doctoral student in the Performance Studies program of the Department of Communication Studies at Louisiana State University between 2008 and 2012. The trilogy includes *Black Body Business*, *Copious Notes: A Nostalgia Tale*, and *Home Bodies: A Collaborative Performance Project*.

Following George Wolfe's play, *The Colored Museum*, *Black Body Business* is an ensemble piece that interrogates the consequences of remembering and performing blackness in the U.S. by looking at the discursive and corporeal terrain of blackness and presenting this interrogation as a series of interrelated episodes. *Black Body Business* was performed first in the HopKins Black Box at Louisiana State University in February 2010, and later performed at Baton Rouge Community College's ArtsFest 2010.

*Copious Notes: A Nostalgia Tale* focuses on nostalgia as aesthetic and critique, and it explicitly dramatizes the relations between performance, nostalgia, time, and space.

*Copious Notes* was performed in the HopKins Black Box in September 2010, and at the Petit Jean Performance Festival in October 2010, the National Association of African American Studies in February 2011, and Baton Rouge Community College in April 2011.

*Home Bodies: A Collaborative Performance Project* is the result of a series of workshops in which student performers from Baton Rouge Community College, Louisiana State University, and Xavier University investigated the idea of home through oral history, personal narrative, stylistic movement, and performance of literature. Bringing together students from a community college, a large research university, and a historically black institution, *Home Bodies* debuted in November 2011, appearing at the HopKins Black Box, Baton Rouge Community College, and Xavier University. In April 2012, it was presented at the Petit Jean Performance Festival in Morrilton, Arkansas.

Each of the aforementioned performances contributes to the development of my theory of critical nostalgia, and they represent the means by which I conceive, test, and enact my ideas. During the production of *Black Body Business*, I discovered the creative potential in articulating the experiences of black bodies in relation to notions of memory, past, and home. The collaborative *Home Bodies* project provided a space for me to explore meanings of home and community alongside colleagues and students from diverse institutions. And *Copious Notes* allowed me the opportunity to share my own nostalgic story, present my research on nostalgia, and build an aesthetic for critical nostalgia.

In this chapter, I revisit and analyze *Copious Notes: A Nostalgia Tale*. The play follows Ambi, an ambidextrous graduate student conducting research in Ghana, West Africa, as she negotiates her ambiguous status as African/American, tourist/pilgrim, and ethnographer/nostalgic. The play is autobiographical in part, channeling my experiences in Ghana through a collage of dramatic scenes, projected notes, and movement sequences. In the context of this study, the play and the chapter pick up where the prior chapter left off, emerging from a descent into the body and bodies of the slave castle of Elmina, Ghana

(broadly, a descent into African American nostalgia and trauma), to quite literally stage the forces at work in that descent. To do so, the play activates a theory of critical nostalgia to show the theory in practice, as a staging tool, and also to query its ethics and performative possibilities and limitations. In the ascent to the stage, and page here, I am interested not only in how the forces of nostalgia operate in Ambi's story but also in the theory and practice of critical nostalgia.

Following this introduction, I provide a guide for reading the script of *Copious Notes*, a Director's Note, and the script itself. Then, I turn to analyze the script and staging drawing on Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of the chronotope. In my analysis, I foreground three chronotopes, the dramatic chronotope, the projection chronotope, and the movement chronotope. Broadly, I argue that the interaction of these chronotopes gives rise to a grotesque performance of critical nostalgia.

Mikhail Bakhtin describes the chronotope as the process by which time "takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movement of time, plot and history" (Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination* 84). Michael Bowman focuses this definition using language that is similar to the language Roach uses to describe vortices of behavior. Bowman writes, "Of special interest to Bakhtin are the ways that chronotopes 'imagine' – enable and constrain – action, agency, historical time, and 'social' and 'individual' space" (M. Bowman, "Novelizing the Stage" 12). Both chronotopes and vortices imagine action, agency, etc. through "the gravitational pull of social necessity," meaning the "magnetic forces" of cultural exchange prompt certain experiences and usages of the body in space and time (Roach 28). Roach's notion of the vortex then is related to the chronotope, concerned as it is with how bodies are enabled and constrained by the forces

of time and space, the interaction resulting in a thematic that helps us better understand the text or culture(s) under study. The chronotope and vortex differ in that the chronotope embraces the endless range of body, space, and time dynamics, not just those of commerce and pleasure or the marketplace.

Noting the potential of the bodily aspect of chronotopes for performance theory, Judith Hamera reminds us that “chronotopes are corporeal as well as textual. They are enacted by material bodies that invigorate formal, representational grammars and protocols...and, in turn, manipulate these grammars and protocols for their own ends” (Hamera 73). Encouraged by Hamera, I offer the script and analysis of *Copious Notes* as a way to ground my discussion of critical nostalgia in bodies doing things. I argue that the types of bodies that emerge in the performance operate to evoke the actions and sensibilities of varying concepts of home and past, and that multiple chronotopes invigorate the complex aesthetics and emotional registers of critical nostalgia with and through the moving bodies on the stage.

In Roach’s terms, and in light of the history that informs *Copious Notes*, both the stage and the page might be thought of as spatial surrogates, substitute venues in which the processes of displaced transmission occur. The stage referenced in the script and the script provided in the pages that follow imagine alternative spaces (e.g., to Africa and Ghana to start) for performers to test out ways to engage past-homes through kinesthetic imagination.

*Copious Notes: A Nostalgia Tale* was performed as a staged reading and ran for two nights in the HopKins Black Box in September 2010. The one hour production featured three performers, including myself. To clarify a few format choices in the script, all single

spaced text in brackets refers to action that occurs on stage during the performance, but is not voiced aloud by the Narrator. That is to say, the Narrator does voice many lines of stage direction, describing characters and often prompting them to action. The three performers played multiple characters over the course of the play. To indicate their full embodiment of a character, I use the character's name. To indicate their presentation of themselves as a performer, I use their performer name.

As performing nostalgia often involves techniques of return or repetition, you will find that the script of *Copious Notes* contains some discourse that I articulated in Chapters One, Two, or Three. In this way, the script enacts an aesthetic of return that recognizes the academic journey by means of which I developed the idea of critical nostalgia. A portion of the Director's Note I included in the program for *Copious Notes* instigates that aesthetic here:

In keeping with the etymology of the term nostalgia, denoting a "return home," this staged reading represents several attempts at return. First, it reflects on my time in Ghana, where I studied performance and culture on my first trip "back to Africa." Second, I've returned to the original script of *Copious Notes* written during that journey in 2007, in an effort to reevaluate it in light of my current interests. And finally, this project attempts to return "nostalgia" to its associations with the body by exploring its manifestations in performance as an aesthetic and critical encounter with memory. Enjoy.

#### COPIOUS NOTES: A NOSTALGIA TALE

##### CHARACTERS

NARRATOR: played by Michael Sanders

COMMENTATOR: provides context for the events as they unfold, played by Jade C. Huell

AMBI: an African American graduate student eager to learn about life and culture in Ghana, played by Kim Hardy

PROFESSOR VOICE: the instructing voice of a professor that resounds in Ambi's head, voiced by Michael

MOTHER VOICE: the voice of Ambi's mother (or any mother) that resounds in Ambi's head, voiced by Jade and Kim in unison

BEGGAR BOY: a street boy of 7 years who can't or chooses not to use his voice, played by Michael

MELODY MANGO: a woman who sells fruit by the roadside, played by Kim

REV. ACHIEF PEACE: a teacher, a poet, a grandmother, a preacher, Nana, played by Jade

TWISTED MAN: a man of 60 years who changes his mood capriciously, played by Michael

SCHOOL GIRL: a curious, pleasant looking girl of 10 years, played by Jade

ENGLISHMAN: a middle-aged tourist, played by Michael

[Upon entering the theatre, the audience finds a display of home items, created by the cast and crew. Suspended above and to either side of the collection are two large scrolls with inscriptions regarding home and nostalgia. Below the collection is a large handmade memory board fashioned out of fabric scraps and mismatched ribbon.

Just beyond the installation are three banks of audience risers facing the playing space, which is arranged in a proscenium. There is a paper plate or napkin and a pen on each audience seat. On the plate or napkin is a written prompt that encourages the audience to think about definitions and images of home, nostalgia, or memory.

The stage set is minimal. There are three black chairs placed in a horizontal line, center stage. DR is a large black box made up to look like a kitchen table. DL is an old wooden rocking chair. Small black boxes are positioned UL and UR. A basket of unfolded clothes sits next to the UL box, while a clipboard and notebook sit atop the box UR. The small boxes and the chairs each have pens affixed to them in case anyone needs to take notes.

There is a technical assistant seated in the second row of the audience risers who runs the projections from a small projector. The projections are cast such that the entire upstage wall is illuminated by the projected image. All the projections are composed to look like a piece of faded yellow notebook paper. Whenever the projections are cast, the performers sit quietly in the central chairs taking notes. Aside from taking notes in the shadows of the projections, nothing else occurs on stage.

At the top of the show, the projection reads:

You have been given items on which to take notes. During the reading, please take time to record any thoughts, images, or notations you may have in response to the prompt you have received.

Over the course of the piece, there are two main musical tracks. Track One is a lullaby used twice, as the audience enters and exits the theatre. Track Two track begins with non-rhythmic haunting sounds, changes to a drumming rhythm, which is overlaid eventually with choral voices. The second track is repeated throughout the performance.

When the audience is settled, Track Two fades in as the three performers enter the stage, each holding a script contained in a black folder. The Narrator begins his speech in the aisle and eventually makes his way to and sits in the center chair. When referenced by the Narrator, Ambi sits in the chair to the right of the Narrator. The Commentator sits on the box UL, folding and unfolding the clothes in the laundry basket.]

**NARRATOR** [aloud]

The action takes place on a crowded street in Accra. Ambi steps off of a plane labeled Independence Airways, walks down a few rickety steps and directly onto the street UC, which is occupied by street dwellers, taxi drivers, tourists, and vendors, all going about their day as usual. Some people fight over whatever people fight over, the men watch the women, the women watch the men, and the children watch them all watching. Goats and chickens mingle with the people as they commence with loud chatting and finger snapping as their customary handshakes end. Ambi takes an exaggerated deep breath, and then suddenly, a loud sound like a bus backfiring echoes across the crowded stage. All action ceases momentarily, and then it continues just as before. The sound rings out again, but louder, and the crowd slowly and ceremoniously backs away from center stage creating a pathway for Ambi to walk downstage. Additional performers, on either side of the stage, travel slowly in circular clockwise and counterclockwise directions. No character ever leaves the stage. Ambi holds a bright green notebook and has a pocket full of pens at all times. Able to write with either hand, Ambi is always writing and taking notes.

As the plane moves off UR, an upstage screen is revealed fully. It displays a busy African street, much like the one created on stage, filmed from Ambi's perspective. As a

result, the audience can see only where Ambi is headed and not where Ambi has been. There are no acts and no scenes but for the sake of form: Act One, Scene One (of One).

**NARRATOR** [introducing, prompting]

Ambi, smiling profusely.

**AMBI**

What is home but a place to rest one's thoughts from the heaviness of the day? And so I can stretch my legs and spread my arms and lay down here on this soil that I have never seen but strangely I call home. What a bittersweet moment is this? A moment where art meets poetry and poetry meets myth and myth meets history and history meets me. Ah, here on this soil! Ah, this soil. So rich and dark and happy!

**NARRATOR**

Noticing a piece of trash on the ground, Ambi picks it up and tosses it aside.

**AMBI**

You will not pollute my fantasy!

[The Commentator stands and reads from her script.]

**COMMENTATOR**

One of the most popular Asante symbols, common in and around the now independent nation of Ghana, takes the image of a long-necked bird reaching over to remove an egg from its back. Sankofa signifies the effort to reach back into the past to reclaim knowledge. "Return and take it." In essence, the proverb insists on two things: that one should not fear return and that it is necessary to do so. Sankofa has embedded within it an essential struggle, a tension centered on the relations of past, present, and future.



Although many in the African Diaspora may look upon Africa as an idealized place of origin, it also must be connected with the abuses of the past.

While visiting a market in Ghana, I once had a vendor attempt to sell me a pair of Sankofa earrings by telling me the symbol meant “go back to your roots,” presumably to appeal to my nostalgic sensibilities as an African American tourist-pilgrim to my “homeland” of Africa. I did buy the earrings. But after considering the implications of my journey “back to Africa,” I began to wonder if my feelings articulated a different kind of nostalgia; one only partly driven by a desire to escape the present and revel in a glorious and idealistic past. This nostalgia was also a realization of the Asante proverb represented in the Sankofa bird, a nostalgia born out of a desire to reclaim knowledge of the past in order to better understand the present and future.

[The Commentator sits, places her script on the floor, and continues to fold laundry.]

**NARRATOR** [introducing, prompting]

Professor Voice, emanating from above.

**PROFESSOR VOICE**

Now remember, the most important thing about observing other cultures is to not forget that you are an observer. You are actually a participant observer because your very presence affects the authenticity of what you see and hear. But then we must question what authenticity is as well. Is anything ever truly authentic, and who measures authenticity anyway? Nevertheless, the goal is to capture accurately as much as you can. Write about anything and everything. Write about what you see, what you hear, how it makes you feel. Do not be afraid of being biased or ignorant. Accept that you are infinitely

biased and inexorably ignorant. Make copious notes and take lots of pictures, and you can piece together what you have learned at a later time.

[The Commentator stands, draws the script to her nose and peers at it closely.]

**COMMENTATOR**

In a concise essay titled, "A Note Upon the Mystic Writing Pad," Freud explores what he finds to be an apt analogy of memory: a layered erasable wax tablet, which for Freud expresses the relationship between perception and memory. Perceptions make contact with the bottom layers of memory. The traces last for a time, until the surface is erased. Above, a transparent layer protects the ego from damage by minimizing the power of impressions from the outside. And beneath it all, the remembered inscriptions remain.

Memory as writing is an interesting prospect. Writing never fully erased, making us all writers of time. Note takers of copious notes printed upon our minds.

**NARRATOR** [prompting]

Ambi, looking out into the audience and out into the street to come.

**AMBI**

So much to do and so much to see. I...I'd better get going.

**NARRATOR** [prompting]

Ambi takes out a pen and opens up the notebook.

**ALL THREE PERFORMERS** [alternating lines]

My Africa

All I know is what I have not seen

All I am is what I have been

My skin mocks a self that has never been

I was born from my father's tears  
Washed in my mother's laundry  
Mixed in with the master's smelly underwear  
What a sour smell is life  
The former laundry of former slaves  
A pair of mismatched socks am I  
One stained in blood  
And the other just black  
Faded black  
But how is it that I have rolled onto the wrong shore?  
A shore that I was never supposed to see  
So drenched in sea water  
I can't see beyond the sea.  
Oh mother, wash me  
And give me a new smell.

**NARRATOR** [introducing, prompting]

Mother Voice, a nurturing voice, seemingly coming from below. Ambi puts an ear to the ground.

**MOTHER VOICE**

Hear my voice and know what I say is true. True, damn true, because I said so. Be thankful for this experience child. We are all so proud of you.

[Track Two fades in and plays over the course of the projections. Aside from the performers taking notes in the shadows of the projections, nothing else occurs on stage.]

The projections read:

Nostalgia: In 1688, Swiss physician Johannes Hofer coins the term “nostalgia,” combining the Greek *nostos*, meaning “return home” and *algos*, for “pain” or longing to refer to a familiar pathology we might call homesickness. Nowadays, it is generally used to describe a sentimental longing or affection for the past.

Critical: To look at a phenomenon in a critical manner means to view it in such way that you are able to appreciate its value while pondering its problematics.

A Critical Nostalgia?

What are the implications of taking a critical approach to nostalgia?

How might such a concept inform performance?

Note 1: Performances of critical nostalgia imply an attitude toward the past as constituted by [a] home. Performances of critical nostalgia desire to interact with [a] home in social and aesthetic terms.

Track Two restarts and plays over the course of Movement Sequence I.]

### **MOVEMENT SEQUENCE I**

The performers place their scripts face down on the seats of the chairs. Each stands in back of one of the chairs, facing a wall. Each extends an arm backwards to clasp the hands of the other performers. Attached by clasped hands, the performers extend their bodies forward by leaning into a bent left knee, leaving the right leg extended behind them. The extension pulls the bodies apart.

The performers wander the space investigating their faces with curiosity until they situate themselves at three points on the edge of the stage. Jade stands UC, facing the audience. Kim stands LC, facing center stage. Michael stands RC, facing center stage and mirroring Kim’s relaxed stance. All the performers look left. Right. Up. And then down.

As the music settles into a steady rhythm, the performers raise their faces to focus on the rocking chair DL and a few feet away from Kim. The performers approach the rocking chair slowly. Kim slides along the wall, never moving her eyes from the chair. Jade

sneaks up on it from behind. Michael advances from the side. With feet relatively still, the performers hover over the chair, retracting their upper bodies in a rhythmic repetitive examination of it. Then they all freeze.

As the music swells, Jade crosses to a spot in front of the reading chairs. She pauses to face the audience. Kim follows. Michael does the same. Jade grabs the air to the left of her body and throws it across the room and into the distance. Simultaneously, Kim propels her shoulder backward as if her arm has been yanked from her body violently. Jade freezes in a throwing position. Michael pulls the air around the center of his body backwards, as Kim jerks her leg backwards, causing her to balance on one knee.

With a torn face, Kim eyes the audience as Michael and Jade press the thick air beneath their fingers downward. Kim gradually descends to the floor, her right ear almost touching the ground. Michael and Jade descend in a similar fashion.

Michael raises an arched torso from the surface of the stage floor while rotating his head and neck to face the opposite direction. Kim and Jade repeat the movement.

The music continues to resonate with deep drumming and vocal undercurrents. Jade raises her torso from the floor, this time rotating her elbows, forearm, and hands. Jade alternates her head position, putting the other ear to the ground. As Jade slides her body down, Kim and then Michael repeat Jade's movement. Then, in unison, the performers lift their chests from the floor and focus on the audience pensively.

The performers face stage right with their bottoms on the floor, right leg bent and tucked under the left leg. Their backs are erect, and their hands are on the ground to the sides for support. In a single motion, the performers remove the right leg from under the left and protract it at a 45-degree angle while placing the left leg in a bent position to the

side of the right. Creating a body clock, the performers repeat the noted movement until they rotate a full 360 degrees.

Each performer plants both feet beneath their body, and in prolonged ascension, roll up their spine to a standing position, facing the audience.

One by one the performers return to their area of origin, standing behind one of the chairs with an arm outstretched behind them. Jade returns first, then Kim, then Michael. Before each settles into position, they investigate the body that arrived before them, using the motion they used at the rocking chair.

Attached again by clasped hands, the performers extend their bodies forward by leaning into a bent left knee, leaving the right leg extended behind them. The extension pulls the bodies apart.

The performers wander the space investigating their faces with curiosity.

Kim touches the rocking chair. It rocks.

[The music fades out. Kim and Michael, now as Ambi and the Narrator, return to their chairs. Jade as Commentator perches on the small box UR, pen in one hand and pad in another, feigning a grand gesture of writing.]

**NARRATOR** [prompting]

Ambi, rising from the floor with a new resolve, tries out a pen, but it no longer works, so she puts it into a back pocket.

**AMBI**

So torn am I

Torn in the soul they didn't think I had

Torn in a love that treated me so bad.

Oh, oh no, that rhyme pattern is just too much, and it sounds too elementary. No one would read truth into that. But it is how I feel, so what difference does it make if the rhyme pattern is a little rudimentary? So is my heart and my soul in this new place.

**NARRATOR** [prompting]

Feeling a tickling of the hand, Ambi looks right and discovers a small boy.

**AMBI**

Let go of my hand little boy. Didn't your mom teach you any manners?

[As the Narrator transforms into the Beggar Boy, the Commentator freezes in an awkward position, her arm suspended in the prolonged gesture of writing she has been engaged in for some time.]

**NARRATOR BECOMING BEGGAR BOY**

Dressed in ragged clothing, looking with sad eyes, the small boy lets go of Ambi's hand, puts his right hand to his mouth, and rubs his tummy with his left hand. He mouths the words "please," "hungry," "food," and "money" over and over.

[Still frozen in the act of writing, the Commentator voices the highlighted words of the Beggar Boy.]

**BEGGAR BOY**

As Ambi walks faster, avoiding eye contact, the boy hastens his pace and blocks Ambi's path.

**AMBI**

Okay, little boy, here's some money!

**NARRATOR** [prompting]

Gives the boy one Cedi.

**AMBI**

Now please, leave me alone... I...

**NARRATOR** [prompting]

The Beggar Boy disappears from Ambi's sight before Ambi finishes speaking. Ambi looks around, but can no longer see the boy. The Beggar Boy takes the money to his mother who is among the crowd on the roadside selling mangos and other fruits quite successfully. She pulls out a large wad of money and folds the boy's Cedi into it. After some protesting, the mother implores the Beggar Boy to practice his beggar act. She claps and smiles and gives him a small coin, which he puts into his pocket. Meanwhile, Ambi is taking notes.

**AMBI**

Well, this is an interesting notation to make. Maybe I shouldn't have been so mean to the Beggar Boy at first. I mean. This is Africa after all, and the poor child probably hasn't had anything to eat in over a week.

**NARRATOR** [prompting]

DR the Beggar Boy buries his face in one of his mother's mangos.

**AMBI**

Ah, all this activity in one day. Come to think of it, my stomach is growling, and I haven't had anything to eat all day. But where should I go? All of these places look extremely suspect. Do they expect me to eat from one of those large tin bowls they carry on their heads? Ah, but those little bread thingies sure look good. No remember, "Wash it, peel it, cook it, or forget it!" Or at least that's how I think it goes. Maybe it was "Boil it, peel it, or forget it!" Anyway, this is all too confusing, and I'm getting so hungry that I can't see straight.



**NARRATOR** [prompting]

Looking toward the floor DL, imagining.

**AMBI**

I wish I was home right now, and it was Sunday dinner. My mom would be serving me a nice healthy plate of chicken, rice and gravy, green beans, macaroni and cheese, and cornbread.

**NARRATOR** [prompting]

DR the Beggar Boy's mother serves him a large plate of food.

**AMBI**

Umm...Umm...I can just smell it now. Oh, the chicken is so juicy, oh, the gravy is so brown, and oh, the beans are so green, the macaroni so cheesy and the cornbread so...

**NARRATOR** [prompting]

Holding up one finger.

**AMBI**

...corny.

**NARRATOR** [prompting]

After eating the food, the Beggar Boy rubs his belly and licks each finger.

**AMBI**

They probably never eat like that here. I...I should be nicer to the natives. Poor souls. Bless their little hearts.

**NARRATOR** [prompting]

The Beggar Boy rises and blends back into the crowd as Ambi catches a glimpse of the boy's mother.

[As the Commentator speaks, Kim and Michael cross to either side of her. They fold into themselves, rolling their bodies downward and then slowly back up again.]

### COMMENTATOR

Nostalgia has, at its root, the notion of a return home. Home as origin, home as a feeling, a sense of belonging. “I feel at home here.” Home as a place, home as community and a culture not necessarily attached to a place. Greg Dickinson isolates two forms of nostalgia: nostalgia for the exotic and nostalgia for home. Since most African Diasporic peoples have little connection to the physical continent of Africa outside of cultural narratives, nostalgia for the exotic surely plays a significant role in transatlantic nostalgia. Blacks around the world are no doubt exposed to mediatized representations of Africa that highlight its exotic and often erotic features. So what do we have? Interacting ideas of origin, desire, and home.

[Track Two fades in for the projections. Aside from the performers taking notes in the shadows of the projections, nothing else occurs on stage.

The projections read:

Note 2: In *Utopia in Performance*, Jill Dolan writes, “writing about the affective experience of theatergoing requires evoking the primary ‘stuff’ of a moment of performance” (Dolan, *Utopia in Performance* 33).

Performing critical nostalgia involves the “stuff” of the past and the “stuff” of home, using them as raw material for imaginative enterprise.

Track Two restarts for Movement Sequence II. The sequence is centered around the large black box DR. The box is draped with eyelet fabric. The box peeks out from under the cloth’s unfinished edges and peers through the holes in the stitching. Atop the tablecloth are three place settings, each with a plate, saucer, and teacup stacked atop the other. The pieces are mismatched, in varying shapes and patterns of white, yellow, green, and blue. Each setting is positioned near a corner edge of the table. In the fourth corner is a white porcelain teapot with a hand painted pink flower on its rounded belly and green edging around its lid and base. In the center of the table sits a pair of ceramic salt and pepper shakers.]

## MOVEMENT SEQUENCE II

Michael stands and then places his script face down on the seat of his chair. He crosses to the table DR. While seated in their chairs, Kim and Jade lean from their waists toward Michael. Michael looks left, right, above, and then as the music changes to a quick, rhythmic pattern, he carefully picks up a cup and places it to the side. He removes a saucer and places it on the mouth of a cup. He takes the cup and saucer and places them on an empty plate. He repeats. And repeats again until each setting is disrupted. Michael sinks behind the box until his eyes are level with his creation.

Kim and Jade approach the table on either side of Michael. The performers carefully return the items to the positions they were in at the start of the scene. A plate atop a table, a saucer atop a plate, a teacup atop a saucer. All are mismatched, in varying shapes and patterns, white, yellow, green, and blue. Each performer then lifts a place setting and exchanges it with another performer. The performers lower the tableware and straighten it once more. Eyes on the table, Michael and Jade cross back to sit in the central chairs, leaning their torsos toward Kim.

Kim has a warm facial expression and welcoming comportment. She eyes the teapot, picks it up and kisses it, and then cradles the teapot against her breast while she moves around the covered box, attending to each dish. She consoles a teacup. Scolds a saucer. Pushes all the dishes together for a portrait. Puts the salt and pepper shakers to bed. She looks at them proudly and longingly.

Michael and Jade cross to the table. The performers carefully return the items to the positions they were in at the start of the scene. A plate atop a table, a saucer atop a plate, a teacup atop a saucer. All are mismatched, in varying shapes and patterns, white, yellow,

green, and blue. Each performer then lifts a place setting and exchanges it with another performer. The performers lower the tableware and straighten it once more. Eyes on the table, Michael and Kim cross back to sit in the central chairs, leaning their torsos toward Jade.

Jade removes a place setting and places it cautiously on the floor, one foot away from the table. She repeats this action two more times. In a similar manner, she removes the teapot and salt and pepper shakers. She caresses the tablecloth briefly and then mounts the box, placing her feet under her body and sitting erect atop the table. Jade bends over to collect a small portion of the cloth and doubles it over carefully and strategically in her lap, pulling the excess fabric upwards. The fabric climbs the box until all is gathered and folded. When Jade runs out of material to collect, she pushes the folded cloth under her legs quickly. Ceremoniously, Jade reaches behind her body with one hand and pulls up the stretch of fabric left at the rear side of the box and raises it in the air. She then takes the cloth in her hands and wrings it around her hands, winding it into an eyelet white rope. Jade pushes this under her body quickly until she senses Kim and Michael drawing near, at which point she jumps off of the box.

As Kim and Michael unfold the cloth and drape it over the box, Jade bends down and lifts a place setting gently. The performers carefully return all the items to the position they were in at the start of the scene. A plate atop a table, a saucer atop a plate, a teacup atop a saucer. All are mismatched, in varying shapes and patterns, white, yellow, green, and blue. Each performer lifts a place setting and exchanges it with another performer. The performers lower the tableware and straighten it once more.

[Michael and Kim return to their reading chairs. Jade as Commentator crosses DL in front of the rocking chair and stands close to the audience in a spotlight.]

## **COMMENTATOR**

The concept of nostalgia is often noted for its metaphysical features. How it floats around on a breeze out there, somewhere, waiting on someone to...catch it. But there is, no doubt, an embedded nostalgia; that is, the idea that nostalgia lies within items; that a chair or a dish is implanted with a certain quality that makes it a desirable object of the past. And what is more, we can purchase these items, own them, fill our places with them, materializing our own personal brands of nostalgia and place them on display.

**NARRATOR** [introducing, prompting]

Melody Mango, in a high-pitched, screeching sing song voice.

## **MELODY MANGO**

I see your hungry eyes my child,

I know you haven't had food in a while.

Let me give you the refreshment you need,

I have every fruit of every African tree.

Come, my child, my name is Melody,

You come, I want you to come and buy from me.

**NARRATOR** [prompting abruptly]

Melody Mango grabs Ambi's hand forcefully and pulls Ambi to her fruit stand.

## **MELODY MANGO**

See, I have apples and oranges,

Don't they look delicious?

I have mangos and pineapples,

Nothing is more nutritious,

They will give you the strength to finish your day,  
Put down that note pad,  
And hear what I say!

**NARRATOR** [prompting]

Hesitantly, Ambi places the notebook under an arm and picks out several fruits.  
Melody Mango chops the fruits quickly and strategically.

**MELODY MANGO**

I will chop up these mangos and apples and such,  
And make you a fruit salad that your mother can't touch.  
You are my customer, I love you, don't be in a rush,  
That will be FIVE GHANA CEDIS, thank you very much!

**NARRATOR** [prompting]

Ambi, holding a wallet, pauses as if to question the price.

**MELODY MANGO**

What? You are my friend, I know you very well.  
It is a good price...eh...this is how I sell.  
It is a good price I tell you,  
The best price you can pay.  
You are my first and only customer.  
I have no money and haven't sold a thing all day!

[With a sinister sarcastic laugh, the Commentator crosses to sit in the chair to the left of the Narrator.]

**NARRATOR** [prompting]

Mother Voice, a sarcastic voice coming from below, Ambi puts an ear to the ground to hear it.

**MOTHER VOICE**

Hear my voice and know what I say is true. True, damn true, because I said so. Be thankful for this experience child. We are all so proud of you.

[Track Two fades in. Aside from the performers taking notes in the shadows of the projections, nothing else occurs on stage.

The projections read:

Note 3: Critical nostalgia attends to the historical consciousness of performance without precluding affect, emotion, or an attitude toward the past.

Note 4: Critical nostalgia provides us with a complex vocabulary for discussing community by means of understanding the complexities of home.]

**NARRATOR**

Ambi jumps up quickly from the floor and starts to hand Melody Mango the money with the left hand and then, at the last minute, switches to the right hand. Ambi eats the fruit from a black bag with a toothpick. Not finding a trash can, Ambi crumples the bag and puts it in a back pocket, then chooses a new pen and takes some more notes.

**AMBI**

Where does all the trash go?

There is no where to put it,

The gutters are full of trash and stink,

I will not let myself add to it.

I'll do this country some good yet.

I will not pollute my own fantasy.

Where does all the trash go?

Who cleans the gutters?

Who cleans the stink?

**NARRATOR** [introducing, prompting]

Rev. AChief Peace opens a bible and selects a verse to read. She reflects on what she has read and proceeds to look for someone to preach to. She mimes talking to members of the crowd. Some turn away, some listen, and then she spots Ambi and approaches.

**AMBI**

I really don't mean to be rude ma'am, but I am actually on my way to somewhere really important. I don't have time to listen to your message. Maybe next time, okay?

**NARRATOR** [prompting]

Rev. AChief Peace pauses for a moment. She gives AMBI a deep stare. Ambi falls to the ground.

Mother Voice, a scornful voice, yelling from below. Ambi trembles as the voice echoes. Then, Ambi looks around and notices the diversity of the crowd on stage. Ambi nods, smiles, frowns, and acknowledges the other characters.

**MOTHER VOICE**

Hear my voice and know what I say is true! True, damn true, because I said so. Be thankful for this experience child! We are all so proud of you!

**NARRATOR** [prompting]

Ambi rises from the ground as the Reverend speaks loudly and fervently.



**REV. ACHIEF PEACE**

Are you rushing the word of God my love? God took his time when he made you. He made you perfect just the way you are in the image of Himself. Perfect, with your American smile and your caramel skin. Not dark enough for me, not white enough for them, but perfect for God. Bless your soul and may he make you as clean as fresh laundry.

**NARRATOR** [prompting, escalating in volume]

Ambi, moved by her words, relaxes, but then hears a voice from above that gets louder and louder.

**PROFESSOR VOICE**

Write about any and everything. Write about what you see, what you hear, how it makes you feel. Do not be afraid of being biased or ignorant. Accept that you are infinitely biased and inexorably ignorant. Make copious notes and take lots of pictures and you can piece together what you have learned at a later time.

**AMBI**

Excuse me ma'am, but where are you from? What do you do for a living? Are you a preacher? Do you preach here, on the street every day? I want to know a little about you if you don't mind?

**NARRATOR** [prompting]

Ambi takes out a pen. It doesn't work. Ambi places the old pen in a back pocket and gets out a new one, preparing to take notes.

[As Rev. AChief Peace speaks, Ambi rises from her seat and questions the audience with her eyes. Ambi walks around her chair searching the stage space.]

**REV. ACHIEF PEACE**

Do you write in the same place you pray? Can you write yourself into heaven? You sure have a lot of pens there in your pocket. Are those magic pages you have there in that book? When will what you write come to truth? Now or later or never? Do you write in the same place you pray? I have magic pages in my hand!

**NARRATOR** [prompting]

Holding up her Bible.

**REV. ACHIEF PEACE**

I read, and pray, and cry all in the same place! My husband wasn't always twisted, my daughter did not always set her children out on two different paths. We and I are many things, many things that you cannot possibly write! Can you write yourself into heaven, my child? Will you write a letter for me?

[Track Two fades in. Aside from the performers taking notes in the shadows of the projections, nothing else occurs on stage.

The projection reads:

Note 5: Critical nostalgia requires the negotiation of individual memory and cultural memory.]

**NARRATOR** [prompting]

Ambi, frustrated and confused.

**AMBI**

Thank you. Now, I really must go. I'm sorry ma'am.

**NARRATOR** [prompting]

Ambi walks away. Rev. AChief Peace reaches out for Ambi, holding her Bible to her chest tightly, but Ambi does not see the gesture. Rev. AChief Peace disappears into the crowd shaking her head, jumping up and down, and praising God. Ambi writes.

Water and sea and the cleaning of me

This is the story of my visit to my people

This is a destiny that I could not have named myself

I give of myself all that I have to give

A tourist in my own home

A simple tourist am I

Too brown to be black

Too brown to be white

A simple tourist am I...a simple...

**NARRATOR** [prompting]

Ambi, not paying attention to the path, trips and falls over a man lying in the street. Before rising, a voice is heard, a solemn voice coming from below. Ambi puts an ear to the ground to hear it.

**MOTHER VOICE**

Hear my voice and know what I say is true. True, damn true, because I said so. Be thankful for this experience child. We are all so proud of you.

**NARRATOR** [prompting]

Ambi turns around and faces the man on the ground.

## **COMMENTATOR**

Sankofa: "Return and take it." Nostalgia: A bittersweet return home. This transatlantic nostalgia, riddled with tension, weighted down by history, is not always easy.

## **NARRATOR** [prompting, introducing]

Twisted Man, mocking and sarcastic.

[In his chair, the Narrator slowly transforms his body into a contorted pose. Other areas of the stage go dim and a spotlight illuminates the Twisted Man.]

## **TWISTED MAN**

If I had a voice I would tell you that you are as contorted as I am. You are in my country as an imposter passing yourself off as clean. You stink of master's piss, yet you hold your nose when you pass over a gutter. You wonder if the sweetest fruit in the world might make your pathetic stomach sick. You come here to put us up on a pedestal but at the same time you give to us only what you don't want. You, my child, are drunk with ignorance. You vomit shit and lies. Now write that down you heaven writer. Now write that down and get out of my face. You are in the one spot that I can call mine. Can't you let me have that? If I had a voice I would tell you that you are as contorted as I am. You cursed soul. You master's bastard child washed in blood, tears, and sea water. You stink just as bad as me.

[The spotlight fades as the Twisted Man slowly morphs back into the Narrator. Track Two fades in softly for Movement Sequence III.]

## **MOVEMENT SEQUENCE III**

The performers place their scripts face down on the seat of their chairs. One by one, they move center stage, closer to the audience. Jade tensively grabs the air to the left of her body and throws it across the room into the distance. In a simultaneous movement, Kim

propels her shoulder as if her arm has been yanked from her body violently. Jade freezes in a throwing position. Michael pulls the air around the center of his body backwards as Kim concurrently jerks her leg backwards, causing her to balance on one knee.

With a torn face, Kim eyes the audience as Michael and Jade press the thick air beneath their fingers downward. Kim gradually descends to the floor, ending prostrate, her right ear almost touching the ground. Michael and Jade move downward in a similar fashion.

In unison, the performers lift their chests from the prostrate pose, pushing off of the floor with widely spread fingers, pensive faces focused on the audience. Then, in their own cautious yet idiosyncratic ways, the performers each plant both feet beneath their bodies. In prolonged ascension, they roll their bodies up, arms hanging loosely by their sides, to find the audience there, once again.

[All performers cross to and sit in the center chairs.]

**NARRATOR** [prompting, introducing]

Ambi looks up to see a vendor with an outstretched hand. As Ambi takes the man's hand, a small schoolgirl brings the Twisted Man a little bowl of chopped mangos and a blanket. She kisses the man on the forehead. He accepts the items, but pushes the girl away. Ambi does not witness this exchange. The School Girl approaches Ambi singing a lullaby.

School Girl, skipping, singing, and smiling.

**SCHOOL GIRL**

La la la la

Jesus

Oh oh oh oh

Savior

Hey hey hey

Take me home

La oh hey

Oh hey la

Hey oh la

Take me home

Hello. You are very nice and I like your skin. I was wondering if you would like to contribute to my schooling. You see no one in my family has much money, but I have a special talent. I like to write, and I am actually very good at it. I write poems and short stories. I write all the time. Is that a notebook under you arm? Do you like to write too? You know my teacher once asked me to show my classmates how to take more effective notes. My teacher always wants me to teach the others. But the problem is I need to go to a special school to develop my skills, but my family is having trouble coming up with the money.

**NARRATOR** [prompting]

Ambi shows the School Girl an empty wallet. She peeks into it and responds quickly but cheerfully.

**SCHOOL GIRL**

Oh, it's okay, you must have spent all your money on those tee shirts. Oh, it's okay, my mom will chop, my brother will beg, my grandfather will fuss and complain, and my Nana will pray, and it will be okay.

**NARRATOR** [prompting]

The School Girl looks at Ambi's front pocket.

**SCHOOL GIRL**

You know, at my school, we have trouble getting pens and pencils.

**NARRATOR** [prompting]

Ambi pauses and pats each pocket.

**AMBI**

No problem, little girl. You keep writing now, you hear?

**NARRATOR** [prompting]

Ambi puts the notebook under the other arm and then gives the girl all the pens from a *back* pocket. The girl skips away singing her song.

The screen slowly turns green and then the image of a quiet beach is shown.

Professor Voice, emanating from above.

**PROFESSOR VOICE**

Write about what you see, what you hear, how it makes you feel. Write about what you see, what you hear, how it makes you feel. Write about what you see, what you hear, how it makes you feel. Accept that you are infinitely biased and inexorably ignorant. Make copious notes. Make copious notes.

**AMBI**

Ahh, a quiet place where I can rest and read all that I have written today.

**NARRATOR**

Ambi sits on the edge of the stage.

**AMBI**

The shoreline is a lot smaller than I imagined.

**NARRATOR**

She opens the notebook and flips the pages.

**AMBI**

This is the story of a lost home

A tale of return

Where myth meets history and history meets me.

**NARRATOR [prompting]**

Mother Voice, a sobbing voice seemingly coming from below. Ambi puts an ear to the ground.

**MOTHER VOICE**

Hear my voice and know what I say is true. True, damn true, because I said so. Be thankful for this experience child. We are all so proud of you.

**NARRATOR**

Shaken by the voice, Ambi rises, but drops all the pens on the beach along with the green notebook. All the characters come out from the crowd and dive in front of Ambi to retrieve the fallen items. The characters rip the notebook apart and dance and sing under the falling pages as Ambi stands motionless and confused. An Englishman walks up with his camera in hand and prepares to take a picture of what he sees as a celebratory native event. Ambi smiles for the camera. The picture is projected on the screen. Lights out.

[Track Two fades in and plays during the course of the projections. Aside from the performers taking notes in the shadows of the projections, nothing else occurs on stage.

The projections read:



Note 6: Performing critical nostalgia enhances the concept of nostalgia as a metaphysical state by concretizing it in the act of performance.

Performing critical nostalgia assumes the existence of and utilizes the *nostalgic act*.

One More Note...

Performing critical nostalgia asks: If performance has the ability to lift us out of the present and into another place, why can't that place be a past home? Why can't we revel or linger there for a second, tinker with things, make them right?

Track Two restarts and fades in and out for the duration of Movement Sequence IV.]

#### **MOVEMENT SEQUENCE IV**

Sitting in their chairs, the performers remove large, white, decorative paper napkins from the last page of their scripts and place their scripts face down on the floor. The napkins lay unfolded in their laps. In unison, the performers fold the napkins over and over, paying particular attention to making sure each corner meets. As they crease and fold the napkins, they bring them closer to their faces. As the music swells, the napkins become too difficult and tiny to fold. When the rhythm of the music changes, the performers unfold the napkins abruptly and then hold them steadily in front of their bodies. They shake the napkins to release any remaining creases. Once. Twice.

The performers stand and move to the sides of their chairs. They place their napkins delicately across the back of the chairs and stand motionless for a moment. Leading with a pointed index finger, each performer propels their right arm up and around in a circular motion that ends at their side. The same with the left. With pointed index finger, each pokes at the air behind them for a count of eight. Right, left, right, left, as they look upon the audience with questioning faces. Led by their pointed index finger, each moves at a 45-degree angle downward toward stage left.

The performers find themselves with their bottoms on the floor, right leg tucked under the left leg, which is bent upward. Backs are erect, and hands are to the sides for support. The performers remove the right leg from under the left and protract it, gently placing the left leg in the bent position to the side of the extended leg. A body clock. Repeat. A 360-degree rotation. Again. Again. Again. Until the right leg surprises each performer by bumping into a chair leg. The performers pause for a moment and then incorporate the chairs into the movement. The right leg pushes the chair, bringing it along in a circular pattern, causing the chair to scrape the floor until it is restored to its previous location, facing the audience, with a delicate paper napkin across the back. The performers scoot closer to the chair legs. Then, in their own cautious yet idiosyncratic ways, they plant both feet beneath their bodies and in prolonged ascension, they roll their bodies up, arms hanging loosely by their sides, to find the audience there, once again.

The performers sit in their chairs and then rise slightly so as to lift the chairs just off the ground. With bent bodies, the performers back up slowly taking the chairs with them. There is a look of surprise when they hit the upstage wall. The performers reposition the chairs so that they face the wall. Backs to the audience, the performers reach across their bodies, over their right shoulders, to remove the napkins from the backs of the chairs.

Out of sight of the audience, the performers fold the napkins in their laps. And then unfold them. They stand and face stage left. The performers shake the napkins to release any remaining creases. Once. Twice. They return the napkins to their places on the backs of the chairs. The creases remain. The music fades. Eyes on the napkins, the performers slowly move away.

[The projection reads:

If you have not already, please take time to record any thoughts, images, or notations you may have in response to the prompt you have received.

You may place your item on our memory board at the rear of the theatre.

Thank you.

Track One plays as lights rise for the curtain call and the performers take their bow.]

### **Staging Nostalgia, Performing Social-Aesthetic Spaces**

In her analysis of kitchen chronotopes in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Ruth Laurion Bowman refers to chronotopes as “social-aesthetic spaces,” a phrase that highlights the many forces at work on bodies in space and time (R. Bowman, “Domestic(ating) Excess” 116). *Copious Notes* stages complex and competing social-aesthetic spaces, demonstrating the consequences of the different forces on and through the performers’ bodies. At times, the bodies are dancing or singing, at times they are held in suggestive abeyance, at times they are mourning or on the receiving end of searing lamentations as they make and long for home. Caught in a whirlwind of forces, the bodies in *Copious Notes* are in the process of navigating and creating space, time, and cultural and personal memories.

Below, I first describe what I see as three primary chronotopes that govern the action of *Copious Notes*: the dramatic chronotope, the projection chronotope, and the movement chronotope. Second, I call on two theories of composition, namely, Constantin Stanislavki’s System and Anne Bogart’s Viewpoints in an effort to articulate how I composed *Copious Notes*. Understanding that chronotopes stimulate and are stimulated by action and agency, to name but two variables, I proceed with an analysis of the characters in *Copious Notes* in order to explain their function as agents in the chronotopes. I argue that the reciprocal influence of the chronotopes upon and against each other generates a

grotesque way of doing critical nostalgia. Lastly, I explore the intersections of nostalgia and performance, spotlighting useful vocabulary for theorizing the body in space and time and speculating on the role of affective relations within this theorization.

### **Copious Chronotopes**

*Copious Notes* reveals three interactive chronotopes that I consider primary to the development of the play and to understanding the influence of chronotopes on stage: 1) the dramatic chronotope; 2) the projection chronotope; and 3) the movement chronotope. At times I refer to these primary chronotopes as vortices, signaling that each chronotope is an area of canalized motion. As such, each chronotope performs its own sense of authority and features a different intersection of time, space, and body.

The dramatic chronotope is the time and space created in the tensive relationship between the fictive and theatrical realities, which operate in all stage performance. The fictive reality refers to the pretend world of the characters interacting with each other in a space and time ignorant of that of the audience in the theatre. In *Copious Notes*, the minor characters exist exclusively in this world. Broadly, the fictive reality (a chronotope and vortex finally) is aligned with representational aesthetics. The theatrical reality refers to the real world of the audience sitting in a theatre watching actors perform a play, all the noted participants aware of the double life they have agreed to be a part. In *Copious Notes*, the Narrator and the Commentator and, to an extent, Ambi exist in this reality as well as that of the fictive reality. Again broadly speaking, the theatrical reality is aligned with presentational aesthetics.

In *Copious Notes*, the script inhabits both the fictive and theatrical realms, marking the productive tension between them. On the one hand, it generates the fictive reality in so

far as it holds the story, plot, characters, and action that constitute the piece. On the other hand, as a material text the performers pick up and read, it calls attention to the constructed nature of performance, interrupting the flow of the fictive reality to remind the audience that the play has a history prior to the current event. In this way, the presence of the material script recalls a past, enacting an aesthetic of return. Similarly, when the Narrator transforms visually and deliberately into Beggar Boy, he both motivates the forward movement of the drama and highlights the construction of the piece. In *Copious Notes*, the main occupation of the dramatic chronotope is to show the drama of Ambi while insisting that narrative reflection and reflexivity occur, thereby activating compositional modes and forms integral to invoking the past and the experience of nostalgia.

The second chronotope is the mediatized vortex of projection. The main business of the projections is to relate conceptual and theoretical information about nostalgia to the audience. The chronotope is accessible visually and textually on the rear wall of the stage in the form of “notes,” which imply that the projections are keeping track of what is going on and recording pertinent information. By means of scholarly discourse, the projections explain a theory of nostalgia and thus serve a pedagogical function, enacting and seeking to motivate bodies to thought and reflection.

The projection chronotope is primarily interested in motivating the audience, encouraging them to reflect on what they have seen and heard in the play and how it relates to the projected notes. We might think here in terms of “a project” and “to project.” When used as a noun, the term “project” connotes a collaborative enterprise or a proposed undertaking usually embarked on by more than one individual. In *Copious Notes*, nostalgia is framed as a project that the author, performers, and audience must embark on. The final

note provides the clearest example of nostalgia as a group project. It reads, “Performing critical nostalgia asks: If performance has the ability to lift us out of the present and into another place, why can’t that place be a past home? Why can’t we linger there for a second, tinker with things, make them right?” The note uses first person plural language, such as “we” and “us,” to propose the project of critical nostalgia to the audience through the two suggestive questions, which require reflection and action. Bakhtin might understand this interaction to be a “creative chronotope,” which he argues animates the life of a work as housed in the exchange between the text, the author, and the reader or listener (Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination* 254). In these terms, the project of nostalgia is a creative project that fosters what Bakhtin calls “co-creativity” or the conscious understanding that supplements textual creativity (Bakhtin, *Speech Genres* 142).

When used as a verb, “to project” means to forecast or estimate an outcome or to extend outward or beyond. The projected notes anticipate and encourage audience response by projecting discourse that “faces outward away from itself,” inviting the audience to co-create by offering text meant exclusively for them (Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination* 257). The importance of the invitation is signaled by crafting the projections so that they take up a lot of space and time. In scale, the projections cover the upstage wall, their visual dominance unchallenged by the performers who sit quietly in the shadows taking notes during these segments. In duration, the notes are shown for a long time, longer than it takes most people to read them. As with narrative description that luxuriates in a slow, close-up view of the subject, time slows down in the projection chronotope, assuring the audience they can take their time reading and thinking about the notes and how they relate to the sections that preceded them. Of course, it is by means of

interrupting and contrasting the surrounding chronotopes (the dramatic and movement chronotopes) that additional focus and interest is generated.

In his study of Brecht's epic theatre, Walter Benjamin explains that audiences are incited to critical thought and reflexivity by means of interruption (also known as alienation or defamiliarization). Benjamin writes:

Epic theatre does not reproduce conditions; rather, it discloses, it uncovers them. This uncovering of the conditions is effected by interrupting the dramatic processes...it brings the action to a standstill in mid-course and thereby compels the spectator to take up a position towards the action, and the actor to take up a position towards his part. (Benjamin, *Understanding Brecht* 100)

In *Copious Notes*, the projection chronotope interrupts the dramatic processes and brings things to a standstill by interrupting and making what has become familiar, strange. The interruption occurs in regards to form by altering bodies in space and time (in other words, by altering the chronotope), and in regards to content by disrupting Ambi's tale with scholarly discourse on nostalgia in the form of notes. Copious notes. Whether an audience is moved to critical thought is unknown for, as Michael Bowman following Frederic Jamison warns, there is no "presupposed connection between reflexive or presentational form and a 'critical' attitude when techniques of alienation or estrangement have become the dominant stylistic tokens of postmodern capitalism" (M. Bowman, "Novelizing the Stage" 5). Nonetheless and at the very least, in *Copious Notes*, the audience is made to sit still and wait, implicated in an aesthetic that resists forward moving time and its presumptions of progress. In this vortex, one is made to pause. Reflect. Be still. Slow down. Linger. Imagine.

Dishware is meticulously organized, removed, and then each item is restored to its proper place. A musical track fades in and out, always revisiting the same rhythmic tune. Laundry is dumped onto the floor, folded, and placed back into the

basket...Bodies meet in the center of the stage, disperse and separate, and then return to home base. Some returns are more effortless than others. (McGeough 1)

The above quote is taken from Danielle Dick McGeough's response to *Copious Notes*, presented at a talkback session following the run of the show. The actions she describes articulate the third major chronotope, the movement chronotope, which consists of four distinct sequences spaced evenly over the course of the play and stylized movement used sporadically within the dramatic scenes. One sequence includes the following action: "With a torn face, Kim eyes the audience as Michael and Jade press the thick air beneath their fingers downward. Kim gradually descends to the floor, her right ear almost touching the ground." Another movement:

One by one the performers return to their area of origin, standing behind one of the chairs with an arm outstretched behind them. Jade returns first, then Kim, then Michael. Before each settles into position, they investigate the body that arrived before them, using the motion they used at the rocking chair.

Attached again by clasped hands, the performers extend their bodies forward by leaning into a bent left knee, leaving the right leg extended behind them. The extension pulls the bodies apart.

The performers wander the space investigating their faces with curiosity. Kim touches the rocking chair. It rocks.

In the movement chronotope, the performers' bodies claim focus as they execute everyday actions stylized to evoke the sense and sensuality of terms central to the show's concerns, such as home, the past, memory, and nostalgia. As Bakhtin says of time in the chronotope, the terms here "take on flesh" and become "artistically visible" (Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination* 84). Like the projection chronotope, the visual temperament of time is slow and contemplative generally, and the aim is to suspend the forward rush of time. However, in this case, the suspension is realized by means of extensions of the body rather than by still words projected on a large page (i.e., the upstage wall). The movement also is directed downward, backward, and across space, often returning to and repeating gestural



sequences executed earlier in the show. The above-noted description of Kim “almost touching her ear to the ground” recalls Ambi putting her “ear to the ground” as directed by Mother Voice in the fictive tale of the dramatic chronotope. The second movement I quoted above illustrates how, throughout the piece, the performers move away from, navigate around, but ultimately return to the three chairs located center stage, what we might understand as their home base or place. The movement of the performers’ bodies to and from center stage might be thought of in terms of body language, the performers, here, communicating a language of return.

Near the top of the show, the Commentator gestures towards the languages of the body when she tells us that we are “all writers of time.” While writing is visible as text in the projection chronotope, in the movement chronotope bodies enact writing as they inhabit the time and space of the stage. The performers taking notes busily in the shadows of the projections is a clear example of the multiple evocations of writing in the show.

The noted example also demonstrates how the movement stages a “conscious engagement” with “its own status as articulation...its own status as ‘writing’” (M. Bowman, “Novelizing the Stage” 14). Elyse Pineau theorizes a similar idea but in terms of the body when she advocates an “articulate body” that demonstrates its ability to “create and practice theory” (Pineau 2). For Pineau, the practicing of body theory is situated “precariously between the logic of print and a disciplinary epistemology that privileges the present and articulate body as the primary constitutive apparatus in human sense-making” (Pineau 2). While, in the movement chronotope of *Copious Notes*, a present dynamic is in operation, the chronotope also features physical movement oriented toward the past, creating and practicing theory about the past, past-homes, and past bodies. In Movement

Sequence IV, bodies point literally to the past “with pointed index finger[s],” each [poking] at the air behind them for a count of eight. Right, left, right, left, as they look upon the audience with questioning faces.”

Further, the bodies of *Copious Notes* are not always articulate in the sense of being coherent or fluent. Danielle McGeough in her response to *Copious Notes*, observes, “Bodies contort and twist in an effort to look back. Backward movements are clumsy, and sometimes we find ourselves running into a brick wall” (McGeough 1). Likewise, in a grand gesture performed by the Commentator, pen in one hand and clipboard in the other, she stretches her arm out behind her and over her head, slowly drawing her pen closer to the clipboard. Just before her pen hits the page, she drops the pen onto the floor. Fully capable of performing precision, the Commentator opts instead to theorize and practice a clumsy body of writing, in/articulate in its claim to comment on the past. The two examples demonstrate that while much of the action in *Copious Notes* is not articulate in the general sense of the word, the action does articulate bodies struggling with ideas central to the show, which suggests that our relationship to nostalgia, to returning to homes located in a past, is not an easy one and not easily rendered (articulated) in coherent or fluent ways.

The invitation extended to the audience by the in/articulate body is to join in the performance experiment of figuring generative ways to re-present nostalgia and those ideas associated with it, such as the past and home. In her analysis of chronotopes of the ballet studio and practice, Judith Hamera offers one such way I find useful. Arguing that the “chronotope functions as a dialogic intersection of the world and the representational grammars and protocols that organize and reproduce it,” Hamera uses the term “corporeal chronotope” to refer to the ways bodies actualize rules of time and space (Hamera 72 &

74). Hamera identifies two corporeal chronotopes to describe the organization of bodies in ballet: “roam” and “home.” Channeling Bakhtin’s chronotope of the road, Hamera’s roam denotes the “process of moving, as well as the location of movement,” “to roam is to move away from ‘home’” (Hamera 74). Hamera suggests that home offers comfort and the potential for connection and that home is primarily a place to return to. She observes, “just as all movements in ballet begin, go through, and end in a position, all roaming revolves around, starts from, or ends at home” (Hamera 75). Likewise, the movement in *Copious Notes* creates a chronotope of roam, as the “bodies meet in the center of the stage, disperse and separate, and then return to home base” (McGeough 1).

Throughout the performance, center stage is the home base or place that the roaming departs from and returns to. The roaming creates a topography of past-home, an imaginary landscape inscribed on the floor of the stage by the movement of the performers, showing they have “been there,” they have roamed and returned home. Put another way, through the chronotopes of roam and home, the performers write with a past orientation, choosing time and again to go back “home,” in order to reread, reflect, and rewrite. Their movement to “homeplace” is less about resistance and more about a “return for renewal and self-recovery” (hooks 49). Emerging from the dramatic chronotope into the movement chronotope, the performers put their scripts down and leave center stage to explore ideas through their slow laborious movement. At the end of their labors, breathing heavily, they return to their homeplace on stage seeking a place to sit and recover before they re-enter the dramatic chronotope.

Another way that the movement chronotope suggests a return home is through the performers’ interactions with material objects. McGeough observes, “Dishware is

meticulously organized, removed, and then each item is restored to its proper place... Laundry is dumped onto the floor, folded, and placed back into the basket...An empty rocking chair. Trash...A family portrait...A napkin is folded and unfolded” (McGeough 1-2). The performers interact with domestic items to insist that nostalgia be connected with a return home rather than with a more general sense of the past. Further, the interaction counters Susan Stewart’s claim that “nostalgia is a sadness without an object, a sadness which creates longing that of necessity is inauthentic because it does not take part in lived experience” (Stewart 23). In the movement vortex, nostalgia is revised by bodies living the experience of nostalgia by interacting with the objects of home.

The main chronotopes of *Copious Notes* do not operate independently of each other. Rather, as Bakhtin says of chronotopes generally, they “are mutually inclusive, they co-exist, they may be interwoven with, replace, or oppose one another” (Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination* 252). An important question then is what is produced in the coexistence, the interwoven places, the replacements, and the oppositions Bakhtin anticipates?

Above, I observed how the three chronotopes treat body, home, and past. The dramatic chronotope deals with the content of past-home through direct references by the Commentator and through “in scene” character dialogue. The projection chronotope features scholarly notes about nostalgia in a long slow format that may be difficult for some to “feel at home” in. The movement chronotope invokes past-home through the slow sensual inscription of movement that constantly returns on itself. Taken together, the bodies that inhabit and navigate the fictive and theatrical realities of *Copious Notes* are challenged by the forces of the past, by the imagery, actions, and objects of home that they prove subject of and to. This orientation is exacerbated by the disruption of the different

chronotopes knocking up against each other, resulting in the interruption of familiar forward moving action with the in/articulate fits and starts of reflective and reflexive activity. Indeed, in *Copious Notes*, the main chronotopes and the bodies sustained by and sustaining them shift into other orbits constantly, physically and figuratively affecting each other in the process of their rotation.

We might think of the chronotopes as planes of activity stacked on top of each other, ever shifting and rotating. While, in some aspects of content or form, the planes may fit together neatly, in others they are incompatible. Because each plane articulates a different time and space reality of home and past, there is bound to be some places that do not match up. These places reveal the incongruities, oppositions, ironies, and excesses produced in the juxtaposition of chronotopes.

Performance theorist and practitioner Vsevolod Meyerhold identifies this mismatch aesthetic as the grotesque. For Meyerhold, the grotesque is a “genre of surprise” that “mixes opposites” and “celebrates incongruities” (Pitches 61). Further, it expresses a “capricious, mocking attitude to life” (Meyerhold 137; emphasis in original). *Copious Notes* carries many of these traits, composed as it is of a collage of incongruous chronotopes that interweave diverse genres, modes, and discourses. Further, the piece approaches nostalgia with an enigmatic attitude that juxtaposes celebration and mourning, sincerity and mockery as well as themes of past and present, academic and domestic, materiality and transcendence. One of the ways Meyerhold realized the grotesque in his work was by highlighting the constructed aspect of the piece, thereby insisting on the double life of performance. Likewise, within and between the chronotopes of *Copious Notes*, there are interruptions that expose the seams of the show, not only insisting on the past construction

of the play but that audience members interact with past and past-home as subjects to which they are called.

In his theory of carnival and the carnivalesque, Bakhtin offers a little different take on the grotesque. For Bakhtin, grotesque realism features the contradictions and excesses of the body, that is, the body of low rather than high corporeal domains. The “source of all that is excessive and superabundant” (Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* 303), the grotesque body revels in its orifices of transmission rather than its smooth impenetrable surfaces. It is a body of the bowels, phallus, gaping mouth, and anus, embracing themes of birth, disease, death, gigantism, sweat or salt, earth and sea, urine and excrement. It is a body that abuses and curses (Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* 325-335). In explicitly political terms, it is a body of constant becoming, of the collective mass, rather than the isolated being of the modern individual.

Bakhtin writes, “the grotesque conception of the body is interwoven not only with the cosmic but also with the social, utopian, and historic theme, and above all with the theme of the change of epoch and the renewal of culture” (Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* 327). With respect to the grotesque, the social, utopian, and historic excesses of past and home undergird *Copious Notes* and pull the focus to the body through curses and celebrations. Beggar Boy, after gorging on the food of home, rubs his belly and “licks each finger.” Twisted Man verbally abuses Ambi, calling her a “cursed soul” saying, “you vomit shit and lies.” On the other hand, Rev. AChief Peace leaves her conversation with Ambi “shaking her head, jumping up and down, and praising God.” Further, performers spread their legs, one woman mounts a table, and the trio together make constant contact with the

ground. The grotesque elements of nostalgia, or past-home, emerge in the performance and move toward an ironic, satiric, and critical end.

### **Chronotopes in Process**

The performers face stage right with their bottoms on the floor, right leg bent and tucked under the left leg. Their backs are erect, and their hands are on the ground to the sides for support. In a single motion, the performers remove the right leg from under the left and protract it at a 45-degree angle while placing the left leg in a bent position to the side of the right. Creating a body clock, the performers repeat the noted movement until they rotate a full 360 degrees.

The above description depicts a sequence of movement the cast came to refer to as the body clock. It involves three bodies positioned center stage (at homeplace), expanding and contracting over time, rotating in a complex and intricate pattern. In addition to expressing a thematic of return and home, the movement calls attention to performance as a process of composition.

In this section, I address how the cast and I composed *Copious Notes* in order to shed light on the practices and practicing of nostalgia and specifically critical nostalgia in performance. The aim is to revisit how we composed the show and, based on that description, extrapolate broader principles and processes that others might use to build performances concerned with the past and past referencing, history, memory, if not also nostalgia or the return to past-home.

Prior to rehearsal, I revisited the script of *Copious Notes* that I had written in 2007, to reflect on my tour and pilgrimage to Ghana. The changes I made to the script were to add an embodied Narrator and a Commentator, in the latter case to highlight connections between Ambi's tale and nostalgia. I added the projections for a similar reason and to interrupt the forward flow of the dramatic plot in the fictive reality. Lastly, I decided we would include movement sequences, but did not predetermine their precise composition.

During the first rehearsal, I defined critical nostalgia for my cast, saying, “To perform critical nostalgia means to use the body to negotiate time and space in order to reference a past and a home and to imply an attitude concerning them.” I also explained that our task would be to embody notions of past-home and craft our attitude(s) accordingly, i.e., in Pineau’s terms, to theorize past-home through creativity and practice. We then set to work, our exploration informed by the methods of Constantin Stanislavski and Ann Bogart and an aesthetic I see operating in the artwork of feminist artist Susan Harbage Page.

Stanislavski’s System of actor training is a process of psychological and physical techniques. Actors learn and apply the techniques in a conscious manner so as to stimulate inspiration and creativity. Stanislavski believes that the subconscious holds the key for all great art and considers the goal of an actor is to spark and mine the subconscious for its imaginative power, or inner creative state. The cultivation of this inner creative state is described in *An Actor Prepares*, where Stanislavski addresses action, imagination, and emotion memory among other principles. His well known psycho-technique consists of doing an action, selected in terms of the given circumstances of the text and character, thereby stimulating an appropriate feeling, sense or emotion memory. In other words, for Stanislavski, trying to act a feeling was unnatural whereas doing an action that stimulated a feeling organically was not.

In my summary of Stanislavski’s System, the importance of interrelating action and feeling so as to spark creativity is evident, I believe. As Stanislavski advises, “one cannot always create subconsciously and with inspiration. No such genius exists in the world. Therefore art teaches us first of all to create consciously and rightly, because that will best



prepare the way for the blossoming of the subconscious, which is inspiration” (Stanislavski 15). In applying the System to composing *Copious Notes*, I became intrigued by how nostalgia is understood currently as a metaphysical condition, an inner state of mind lingering somewhere between the conscious and subconscious. In light of the System, I thought I might re-theorize nostalgia as an inner creative state activated through concrete actions we do, sub- or unconsciously in everyday life, but quite deliberately in creative endeavors, such as composing *Copious Notes*. In other words, I thought to activate the double occupation of critical nostalgia as a state of being and a state of moving.

Attentive to the importance of action to the System, Ann Bogart fulfills Stanislavski’s call for a conscious approach to performance by means of her Viewpoints method. Viewpoints is an actor training and composition process based on the conscious awareness of one’s body, the bodies of others, and one’s surroundings in space and time. Although, in their development of Viewpoints, Bogart and her partner Tina Landau drew on the work of Mary Overlie and Aileen Passloff, they attribute Viewpoints largely to “the natural principles of movement, time and space” (Bogart and Landau 7). In this way, Viewpoints provides a helpful vocabulary and tool for composing and analyzing chronotopes.

Bogart and Landau identify nine Viewpoints of time and space. The Viewpoints of time include tempo, duration, kinesthetic response, and repetition. According to Bogart and Landau, tempo is “how fast or slow something happens on stage,” duration is “how long a movement or sequence of movements continues,” kinesthetic response is “a spontaneous reaction” to external stimuli, and repetition is “the repeating of something on stage” (Bogart and Landau 8-9). Viewpoints of space include shape, gesture, architecture, spatial relationship, and topography. For Bogart and Landau, shape is the “outline the body

(or bodies) makes in space,” gesture is “movement involving part or parts of the body,” architecture is the physical environment in which one works and how “awareness of it affects movement,” spatial relationship is “the distance between things onstage,” and topography is “the design we create in movement through space” (Bogart and Landau 9-10).

Clarifying misreadings regarding Stanislavski’s System and defining their own, Bogart and Landau assert:

Instead of forcing and fixing an emotion, Viewpoints training allows untamed feeling to arise from the actual physical, verbal and imaginative situation in which actors find themselves together. Another misconception about Stanislavsky’s theories of acting supposes that all onstage action is motivated by psychological intention... Viewpoints and Composition suggest fresh way of making choices onstage and generating action based on awareness of time and space in addition to or instead of psychology. (Bogart and Landau 17)

The final sentence is of interest to me as I am curious about the affect (psychological or otherwise) of a performance of nostalgia that demonstrates a conscious awareness of time and space. In other words, what *is* the affect?

To inform the broad aesthetic of critical nostalgia I hoped to create, I drew on two images from the artwork of Susan Harbage Page. The most inspirational image depicts a worn handkerchief with a small chair stitched in the center. As I understand the image, the chair in the napkin symbolizes the unfolding of time specifically as regards the history and historicity of domesticity. The second image shows a delicate white cotton napkin with the embroidered motif of a woman wearing a bonnet. Stitched around the woman’s neck is a pink noose, the end of which trails to the border of the napkin and disappears.

The two images are drawn from Page’s *Postcards from Home*, a collection of images that for me embodies the spirit of critical nostalgia: A Ku Klux Klan robe made of

seersucker. A portrait of a Victorian woman marred by a swath of brown paint across her face. The word “doubt” embroidered nine times in a circular pattern into a doily previously decorated with pink and yellow flowers. Through her postcards, Page recollects materials and memories from a past-home (a white racist home) and recomposes them in order to offer a critical, creative, and caring engagement of bodies past and present.

Keeping in mind Page’s aesthetic (and her particular deployment of an ethic of “care and repair”), I crafted the rehearsals of *Copious Notes* in an effort to evoke a similar orientation toward past-homes. Because the script was intact, we spent much of our time in rehearsal on the movement sequences. Although I made some decisions regarding movement prior to rehearsal, such as the amount of sequences and type of music, most of the specific actions emerged in the process of rehearsal. Below, I describe parts of our process as informed by certain Viewpoints.

The tempo of the movement was composed in relation to the tempos used in the music I selected. We used the same track for all four sequences. The music is slow and rumbling at first, and after some time, it picks up pace and drums add in. Agreeing that nostalgia, colloquially conceived, is similar to a dream state, we chose to slow down time, not only to interrupt the forward presumptions of the drama but to evoke a feeling of being “lost in time,” “lapsing into nostalgia,” or “pondering places...out of reach of [one’s] own memory” (Lippard 154). For example, in Movement Sequences III and IV, the performers need to rise from a prone position. Rather than simply stand up, the actors lift up onto their feet while still in a crouching position, extend their legs fully, and then roll up the remainder of their body slowly and carefully. A movement that could take a few seconds was extended to the better part of a minute. As a result of the slow tempo, we achieved the

effect of descriptive time where a slow, close-up view of the subject is encouraged, not necessarily in an effort to capture the subject as to reflect on it and one's relationship to it.

It could be said the duration of many of the movement sequences went on too long and took up too much space in the play. In Movement Sequence IV, for example, the 360 degree turning movement consisted of at least fifteen rotations one night. Indeed, we never fixed the exact number of rotations we would execute before our legs hit the chairs, relying instead on silent kinesthetic agreement. Having opted for a slow rather than fast tempo generally, we amplified the slow motion effect by extending the duration. This choice created suspense as well as suspension as the audience was held in abeyance even as they wondered when the particular movement would end or change to something else.

Kinesthetic response refers to spontaneous bodily reactions that arise in response to external stimuli (Bogart and Landau 8). Examples of a kinesthetic response include recoiling from heat or blinking when the wind is in your face. The principle is related directly to Stanislavski's technique of action stimulating sense or emotion memories and, indirectly, to Roach's principle of kinesthetic imagination where performers "think through movements" (Roach 27). That is, movement stimulates thought rather than the reverse. (I might mention that in Roach's understanding of kinesthetic imagination thought imagining action is important as well.) For me, the key point in this Viewpoint is that moving bodies and moving ideas are inextricably linked. In rehearsal, I use the term "body-idea" to communicate the connection to my cast, drawing for support on the cartoon image of a light bulb illuminating suddenly. Ta da! Like the illuminated light bulb, a body-idea is sudden, linking immediately the corporeal experience to cognition of accuracy, as in "now, that's the idea," and to potential or promise, as in "that's an idea."

Our processing of Movement Sequence II was informed by this principle. I asked the performers to bring objects of home to rehearsal. Of those, we settled on a tea set and agreed to set a table in a traditional way, alluding to a domestic dining room. Then, each of us approached the table on our own and acted immediately in response to it, allowing our kinesthetic response and imagination to guide the movement, trusting that it was accurate and promising precisely because it linked the body-idea.

Repetition is a prominent feature in *Copious Notes* and is evident in all chronotopes. In the dramatic chronotope, the dialogue features many repeating speeches and phrases, such as those of Mother Voice and Professor Voice. In the projection chronotope, the recurring format of brief “notes” in a suspended time frame encourages reverie if not critical thought and reflection. The same musical track is used in all four sequences of the movement chronotope, and many of the sequences restore action executed in prior scenes or sequences.

In *Copious Notes*, the aesthetic of return translates often as repetition. Each time performers roam and then return to homeplace, they repeat their initial position and pose center stage. However, the aesthetic of return leaves room for variations. Returning to the same movement allows one to query the characteristics of the repetition. In other words, how we repeat is far more significant than what we repeat, affecting the consequences of return and thereby speaking to function. For example, Mother Voice repeats the content of her speech many times, telling Ambi, “Hear my voice and know what I say is true. Be thankful for this experience child. We are all so proud of you.” As the Narrator indicates, however, Mother Voice colors the content differently each time, changing the attitude and tone from nurturing to sarcastic to scornful to sobbing. In light of this discovery,

understanding nostalgia as return (to a past-home) seems a more apt descriptor than nostalgia as “pleasurable repetition” (Broome 31) or as a “repetition which is not a repetition” (Stewart xii). Return holds the possibility of repetition and revision.

Of the spatial Viewpoints, I found topography to be the most influential on the choices we made. To review, topography refers to the landscape, floor pattern, or design created by bodies moving through space (Bogart and Landau 11), which is noticeable only upon review of where one has been. In *Copious Notes*, Movement Sequence IV offers the most obvious example of topography in that a pattern of scrapes was etched onto the floor of the Black Box as a result of the performers executing their rotations with chairs.

An especially intriguing example of topography emerged in Movement Sequence I, when Kim set the rocking chair to rocking. The rocking both evoked a body in the chair and drew attention to the absence of a body. Thereafter, whenever the chair was referenced or claimed focus, whether still or rocking, it recalled the presence and absence of a body, further associated with a mother, a mother rocking a child, home, childhood home. In this way, the rocking chair established a memory site and pattern of movement that resonating throughout piece, illustrative of the tensions between remembering and forgetting, presence and absence, desire and lack in ideas and experiences of nostalgia.

The Viewpoint of topography then helped us to realize and accentuate the past referencing aims of the show, challenging us to find ways to call attention to the invisible as well as visible traces by means of how we used our bodies in relation to space, place, and objects. A final example of the force of thinking and moving in terms of topography occurred near the end of the show, in Movement Sequence IV, when the performers manipulated their napkins:

The napkins lay unfolded in their laps. In unison, the performers fold the napkins over and over, paying particular attention to making sure each corner meets. As they crease and fold the napkins, they bring them closer to their faces. As the music swells, the napkins become too difficult and tiny to fold. When the rhythm of the music changes, the performers unfold the napkins abruptly and then hold them steadily in front of their bodies. They shake the napkins to release any remaining creases. Once. Twice.

While the performers attempt to shake loose the history embedded in the folds of the napkin, the creases remain and are visible to the audience as deep lines pressed into soft white cotton. As McGeough observes, “Like Freud’s wax tablet, each fold [of the napkin], even when released, leaves a crease behind – a remembered inscription” (McGeough 2).

In composing *Copious Notes*, my cast and I sought to actualize time and space through the strategic use of our bodies on stage. The actions we discovered in rehearsal not only fuelled the major chronotopes but also gave rise to the discovery of new times and spaces that would unfold in the interaction of movements, projections, and dramatic elements. Through rehearsal, we let our in/articulate bodies return to and revise the body-ideas of past-home, thereby discovering together ways to perform critical nostalgia.

### **Chronotopic Characters**

The characters that appear onstage are elaborations of the composition process. The characters might be thought of as forces within the dramatic chronotope especially, moving the plot toward cultural critique and the grotesque, finally. These forces are made manifest through the embodiment of and the dialogue between the characters in the play. In this section, I address the characters and their chronotopic relations, reflecting on potential meanings for nostalgia that derive from their actions in time and space.

Ambi is the protagonist of the play and the locus of most of the energy. As the play progresses, Ambi is increasingly challenged by the characters she meets and the situations

in which she finds herself. These challenges can be described in terms of space and time in relation to Ambi's body. Ambi's chronotopic orientation is "out" or "outside," connoting the different ways she is out of time and space. "Too brown to be black and too brown to be white," Ambi embodies outsideness, struggling between multiple poles of experience. But Ambi is not oblivious to her outsideness. Her speech indicates her condition as much as do the speeches of the other characters, one of whom feels she has "rolled onto the wrong shore."

Located primarily in the dramatic chronotope, Ambi is "out" and chronically so. Ambi is out of time, always missing by seconds key events that occur around her and running out of time to do her job as ethnographer. Often, she looks up and an important moment has escaped. For example, a famished Ambi misses the scene where Beggar Boy enjoys a home cooked meal. Her attempt to make connections and to organize the events of her day is foiled by her bad timing and compounded by her constant nostalgic daydreaming. For Ambi, time is negotiable. "So much to do and so much to see," her speech is marked by a sense of urgency. She wishes to capture as much as she can in her little time in Ghana. And yet she manages to set aside extended moments of reflection in which to ruminate on the comforts and contradictions of different notions of home rooted in her affective understandings of Africa on the one hand and the U.S. on the other. She is an inelegant "writer of time," consistently finding herself without enough time to comply with her ethnographic duty to make copious notes.

In addition to being out of time, Ambi is also out of place. She finds it difficult to negotiate the spatial demands on her body. She is led here and there by other characters, lowered to the ground, called at from above. She trips, falls, and is helped up again. Ambi is



clumsy. Space represents obstacles she must overcome. Her world is filled with incompatible outside spaces that she cannot and does not inhabit fully. She is “a visitor in her own home” and yet wishes she was “home right now.” She experiences “no typical nostalgia” and strives to find a place to rest comfortably between her multiple ambiguities. That is, she is neither fully African nor American. She is neither solely tourist nor solely pilgrim. And she is neither the alert ethnographer she wants to be nor the romantic nostalgic she sometimes slips into.

Ambi’s ambiguous outsidership is not unlike “double consciousness,” a term first coined by W. E. B. DuBois to explain the psychosocial split or “two-ness” that comes from experiencing life as black and American at once. Harvey Young deploys this idea noting that seeing one’s self through the eyes of another necessitates an “outside perspective that conceivably could be used to (mis)read [one’s] own body” (Harvey Young 13). Drawing on Paul Gilroy’s work, Young adds, “Arguably this double vision is accompanied by an internalized double voice,” (Harvey Young 13). Professor Voice and Mother Voice, for instance, serve this function with respect to Ambi’s inability to occupy either side of the ethnographer/nostalgic binary. Perhaps Ambi means to heed Michael Bowman’s suggestion that:

An analysis of tourist productions ought to adopt initially a pose of ambivalence toward its objects rather than a condescension toward them – or an astonishment before them. Ambivalence allows a thinking of the relations between contradictory states. It’s a “pose,” of course, a performance – but one that is probably more appropriate to the “everyday” experience and practice of tourism itself. (M. Bowman, “Performing Southern History” 155)

In this way, Ambi in her effort to be a neutral observer might be construed as a “poser,” and in so doing, she functions within another chronotopic iteration of “out.” She is “outed,” exposed by the other characters as out of her proper time and space, as not belonging, as

not one of us. She is labeled as an alien, an “imposter,” and finally, a “bastard child.” In Ambi’s chronotopic world, she can but oscillate in her attempt to get outside of her doublings. Ambi’s doublings are belied by her outsideness. Her ability to write with both hands, seemingly a positive double dexterity, is alas of little help.

Writing mainly about the author in relation to her text, Bakhtin places significant emphasis on occupying an “outside” position. In *Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Prosaics*, Gary Morson and Caryl Emerson write, “for Bakhtin, outsideness was the moral position necessary to co-experience a work of art” (Morson and Emerson 82). Bakhtin is cautious then about the use of autobiographical materials in literary texts as he believes the use compromises the distance required on the part of the author to extend the co-creative gesture to the reader. In Bakhtin’s estimation, as author of *Copious Notes* and this study, I should be more outside the character and play and my analysis of them here.

Although I am “inside” as author and performer, I still maintain a level of outsideness due to my position as director of the performance. It is from the outside that I make decisions that influence the way the chronotopes interact, the way each character occupies time and space, and the way critical nostalgia is enacted. However Bakhtin may feel about my position, his observations regarding the outside position are instructive. To occupy a position outside is to embody a particular corporeal chronotope that operates on the outskirts of some type of action. For Bakhtin, “outsideness creates the possibility of dialogue, and dialogue helps us understand a culture in a profound way” (Morson and Emerson 55). If this is true, an examination of the outside chronotope should reveal cultural dynamics that emerge in and through dialogue; specifically in the case of *Copious*

*Notes*, the dialogues Ambi has with the minor characters of Mother Voice, Professor Voice, or Twisted Man, for example.

If Ambi is outside time and space, then the Narrator is “in.” He is an omniscient raconteur inside each scene. Markedly comfortable with movement, the Narrator exaggerates his gestures, basking in the glow of the stage space and reveling in his role as Narrator. The Narrator incites action and reacts to it. His lines prompt Ambi to action and, with a trickster sense of humor, he chastises Ambi with his body language when she does not comply. For example, when the Narrator first introduces Ambi, he says, “Ambi, smiling profusely,” augmenting his prompt with a tilt of the head. When Ambi does not smile quickly enough, the Narrator queries her reluctance with a quizzical expression aimed at the audience.

Unlike Ambi, the Narrator is an agent in control. Generally remaining in-between Ambi and the Commentator, the Narrator’s chair is at the center of the action, with the other performers seated to his left and right. Always indicating his feelings with gestures, a wink, a nod, or a shrug, the Narrator sometimes opts out of the scene by tilting his body backward and relaying ambivalence with his face. In this example, the Narrator is in control and still in the scene by expressing his attitude nonverbally. This capricious character heightens his “inness” by agreeing and disagreeing with vocalized breaths, facial contortions, and head motions. He is in the know. In the scene. In the middle.

The Narrator engages the audience with a sense of authority not unlike that of the projected notes. From his position inside and in the know, he relays information to the audience that they would not have access to otherwise, as is the case with his opening speech:

The action takes place on a crowded street in Accra. Ambi steps off of a plane labeled Independence Airways, walks down a few rickety steps and directly onto the street UC, which is occupied by street dwellers, taxi drivers, tourists, and vendors, all going about their day as usual. Some people fight over whatever people fight over, the men watch the women, the women watch the men, and the children watch them all watching. Goats and chickens mingle with the people as they commence with loud chatting and finger snapping as their customary handshakes end.

As there are no planes, taxi drivers, goats, or chickens on stage, the Narrator is the only one who can relay this information to the audience and set up the scene for the other characters.

The Narrator takes advantage of opportunities to inspire, invade, and at times physically occupy some of the minor characters, such as Beggar Boy, Twisted Man, and Professor Voice. The Narrator morphs into the body of the Beggar Boy, folding his legs into his lap and making his body small, pleading with Ambi by mouthing the words, “please,” “hungry,” “food,” “money.” The Narrator also assumes the character of Professor Voice, the disembodied influence that resides inside Ambi’s mind. Whereas Ambi attempts to get outside her outsideness, the Narrator takes great pleasure in his position inside.

The Commentator is guided by a space and time chronotope of “trans.” Meaning across, beyond, or on the opposite side, trans connotes an orientation of traversing and making connections between disparate times and places. The Commentator introduces the notion of transcription as a metaphor of memory, or a remembering practice, “making us all writers of time.” In performing this character, I am constantly aware of the ways memory operates as transcription, written onto my body (as African-American, as academic, as author, as director, as performer) as I move across the differently constructed spaces and times represented in *Copious Notes*. Constructed as an ambivalent mix of storyteller, narrator, and instructor, the Commentator merges the spaces the others would

inhabit typically and forces them into conversation across the dramatic, projection, and movement chronotopes. For instance, using similar language as the projected notes, the Commentator supplements the limited history of nostalgia provided in the notes by offering additional information on nostalgia. While the notes provide a simple definition of nostalgia as return home, the Commentator extends the meanings to ideas of origin or place, for example. Unlike the projections, the Commentator's discourse must travel through my physical body, which is located in the same space as the dramatic action. This creates the potential for linking the projection chronotope to the dramatic chronotope.

The Commentator also promotes dialogue between the movement and dramatic chronotopes. This is achieved primarily through the use of gestural movement in the dramatic chronotope. Whereas the other main characters remain in their chairs for long periods of time, the Commentator is able to pop in and out of scenes and walk across the stage to deliver lines. Occasionally, the Commentator performs interpretive gestural sequences behind the dramatic action, and at other times, she voices words of characters, such as those of Beggar Boy.

By means of her actions, the Commentator enacts and subverts clichés of nostalgia. For example, when Ambi “noticing a piece of trash on the ground, picks it up and tosses it aside,” the Commentator dumps the neatly folded laundry onto the stage floor. And when Professor Voice instructs Ambi to “capture” as much information as she can by taking notes and snapping pictures, the Commentator hops onto the pile of laundry and pushes all the clothes under her tightly folded legs. During a significant part of the dramatic action, the Commentator lifts a pen in the air, arm extended behind her, slowly and intently preparing to make the pen meet a notepad only to drop the pen as it meets the page. With this

motion, the Commentator comments on the grandiosity of (Ambi's) writing. The body of the Commentator moves across the stage and across chronotopes in order to make connections with, enact, and imply an attitude toward the dramatic text and concepts of nostalgia.

In these ways, the Commentator is in charge of keeping the chronotopes moving and touching, as if three Chinese meridian balls. The Commentator is not interested in getting outside or instigating from the inside, but with transmitting and translating across theoretical tensions. The Commentator's authority then is drawn from an ability to connect and move across the space and time planes of the stage, always sharing with the audience the qualities of nostalgia and communicating the affective relations between body, past, and home.

From this transient perspective, the Commentator speaks of a transatlantic nostalgia. It is a nostalgia that surfaces in the staging of *Copious Notes* as a physical and metaphysical remembering practice intended to create connections between African Americans, as represented in Ambi, Africa, as represented in the place she visits, and Africans, as represented by Beggar Boy, Melody Mango, Rev. AChief Peace, Twisted Man, and School Girl. The relationship between nostalgia and memory is particularly cogent when investigating African American conceptions of the continent of Africa. The Commentator argues that these conceptions are nostalgic and that memory in this case works as a way of articulating nostalgia as a performance of a past-home. When considering the case of African American ideas about Africa as mythical homeland or place of origin, it seems that neither the views of Stewart who sees nostalgia as inherently negative nor Lippard who views nostalgia as positive can account for the turbulent and

complex relationship between Africa and her Diaspora. For this reason, I developed the discourse of the Commentator so as to highlight three inter-related concerns of African American nostalgia in regards to transatlantic experience. I wanted the Commentator's discourse to complicate the discussion of nostalgia as home or a place of origin; to point to the ways in which nostalgia specifically and memory in general operates as a performative process of identity construction; and to describe the possible functions of nostalgia in communication practice. In doing so, this character opens up the possibility of understanding nostalgia as a return home manifested through performance and points to the ways in which such a theory spans across time and space.

Danielle Vignes writes, "Home is a place where my affections are centered. Home is my place of origin, residence, my refuge" (Vignes 345). Through the voice of the Commentator, I highlight and traverse concepts of home that nostalgia for Africa (as concept and continent) brings to light. These concepts have space and time implications. The colloquial tendency to refer to an African American visiting Africa for the first or nth time as a "return" to Africa collapses "Africa" into a past time and space frame however accessible it may be in the present. Further, it does not appear to matter what part of Africa the person visits; it's all "the motherland." Perhaps the colloquial tendencies are, in Roach's terms, part of a performative repossession of Africa. Or perhaps they are simply indicative of a desire to define and perform past-home on one's own terms. Whatever the case, like nostalgia, images and ideas of Africa are likewise performed. In the introduction to *Performing Africa*, Paula Ebron writes, "as an enactment of difference, performance becomes a moment of *negotiation* of notions Africa" (Ebron 24; emphasis in original).

Ebron argues that performances or more generally representations of Africa allow for multiple perspectives to emerge and converse.

Mother Voice and Professor Voice represent meetings in time and space and point to affective bodily negotiation. Mother Voice comes from below shaking her spirit and forcing Ambi's "ear to the ground," while Professor Voice emanates from above, asking compliance as Ambi peers aimlessly into the heights of the theatre. Mother Voice bids Ambi to ground herself in the earthy historicity of her body, while Professor Voice calls her to transcend the space of her immediate surroundings so that she may "piece together what [she has] learned at a later time." Ambi's response is articulated through her body. She is floored, moved, affected by the voices from within. Although disembodied, Mother Voice and Professor Voice are in competition for authority over Ambi's body and over two types of past-home. Professor Voice reminds Ambi of her obligations to her institutional home, while Mother Voice aligns home with a family connection and motivates Ambi through first person plural language that positions her body as part of a larger family unit. "Be thankful for the experience child," she says, "We are all so proud of you."

The other characters affect and are affected by the key chronotopes, defining themselves differently in space and time and evoking shifting ideas of home. The Narrator turns into the Beggar Boy for a few moments and then fades away. Melody Mango takes on a distinct and rhythmic form of speech. In this colorful "singsong" scene, Melody Mango "knows" Ambi has not "had food in a while" and promises familial connection and comfort food for a price. Melody Mango sells home to Ambi by telling her that she will make her a fruit salad that Ambi's "mother couldn't touch." Rev. AChief Peace, speaking "loudly and fervently," poses a question (of time) to Ambi: "Are you rushing the word of God my love?"



God took his time when he made you.” Again, Ambi is asked why her clock ticks so fast and is instructed to slow down and attend to the historical relevance of her time in Ghana. Spatially, Rev. AChief Peace places Ambi’s body in a position between heaven and earth. In an evocation of religious home, the Reverend casts Ambi as outsider, as an objective petitioner, as neutral moderator. She implores, “Can you write yourself into heaven my child? Will you write a letter for me?” as if Ambi holds the spatial-temporal super ability to march right up to heaven and slip a note under God’s door.

The Twisted Man occupies space and time in a manner quite different from the other characters, evoking the politics of homelessness and providing the clearest illustration of the grotesque. Indicating a body in the act of becoming double, the Narrator slowly transforms into the contorted body of the Twisted Man. A spotlight isolates the character, providing him with a voice of authority he claims not to have. The Twisted Man’s monologue is all about the body in relation to time and space, and it houses almost all the elements of Bakhtin’s notion of the grotesque. His speech uses curses, abusive expressions, and sensory language to chastise and degrade Ambi and to provoke an affective response from the audience.

As a representation of childhood innocence or simply a childhood home, the School Girl approaches Ambi near the end of the piece. One result of their exchange is that Ambi no longer appears to be the innocent bystander we thought him to be. The School Girl’s questions reveal the consequences of Ambi’s detached style of nostalgia, and it foreshadows a shift in the plot perspective. The final character to enter Ambi’s world, the Englishman, asserts the ambiguity of home as he enters and transforms the plot’s point of view. By placing Ambi’s body inside the frame of his camera, the Englishman alters Ambi’s

space and time, casting her as just like the other Africans, placing her, as one might an object, inside the home she has been seeking all along.

### **Nostalgia, Performance, Chronotopes**

In *Reveries of Home: Nostalgia, Authenticity, and the Performance of Space*, Solrun Williksen and Nigel Rapport deploy the term “emplacement” to describe “the way in which the place of identity, of self and society, is continually generated by acts of home-making” (Williksen and Rapport 3). Similar to Hamera's concept of corporeal chronotopes, emplacement for Williksen and Rapport is based on a notion of technique. They write:

Techniques of emplacement may be manifold, spanning an arc from individual to collective, from formal to mundane. They incorporate a range of sensory deployments (visual, olfactory, tactile), and a variety of engagements with the passage of time, a variety of performances in space. (Williksen and Rapport 3)

The chronotopes, the compositional process, and the characters invigorate *Copious Notes*, articulating different techniques and engagements that not only make home but make the past. These components combine to produce what we might call a grotesque historicity, a topsy-turvy and sometimes blatantly cruel sense of past-home constituted by a curious mixture of scholarly discourse, lyrical poetry and dance, on the one hand, and “abusive and irreverent speech, symbolic and physical violence, images of degradation, inversion and ‘uncrowning’” on the other (M. Bowman, “Novelizing the Stage” 13).

The performance aesthetic that emerges from this mixing of opposites, this surprising amalgam of past and home, is not a comforting or comfortable one. Similar to Page's artwork, the performance interrupts normative notions of past-home. It is engaging and repelling at once. In *Copious Notes*, the production of a grotesque historicity specified by home exposes the seams of African American nostalgia for Africa, celebrating and questioning nostalgia in a way that is ironic, satirical, and markedly critical. However, this

engagement with the grotesque is just one way to do critical nostalgia. Different content, different homes, different pasts, different chronotopic dynamics would most certainly produce a different social aesthetic, one that may not be grotesque at all. That is to say, in *Copious Notes*, the juxtaposition of the three major chronotopes results in a critical nostalgia that is most certainly grotesque. The grotesque aids in the project of returning nostalgia back to the domain of the body. Further, it keeps nostalgia from getting caught in the chronotopes of the smooth, white, modern, metaphysical, present.

A chronotopic analysis is principally a descriptive one. The chronotope provides a way of understanding how bodies move through the world, thereby making it and perceptions of it. The benefit of approaching *Copious Notes* using this vocabulary lies in what kind of knowledge is produced through the comparative descriptions of interactive chronotopes. In this case, an aesthetic of critical nostalgia emerges from the interaction in performance. It is here that we investigate the possibility for multiple aesthetics of return and nostalgia. It is here that we engage performance as a plane on which to have improbable encounters and impossible dialogues with past-homes. It is here that times and spaces can, in Bakhtin's terms, enter into dialogue with other times and spaces.

Ruth Bowman demonstrates how chronotopes or social-aesthetic spaces incite certain actions and conversations to occur, positing that these occurrences spill over into culture and into everyday life. (R. Bowman, "Domesti(cating) Excess" 116). Similarly, we might envisage ways to carry critical nostalgia into hallways, homes, and horizons outside of the theatre, turning focus to typographies of our emplacement, the many ways our bodies are makers of space and writers of time.

Bakhtin promotes the ideas of seeing and reading time, praising the ability of those who write in ways that makes time unfold in a careful, precise, and engaging manner. Extending this concept with respect to performance in general and *Copious Notes* in particular, I offer the performance and analysis asking, what might it be like to feel time? Following Bakhtin's interest in seeing time, I speak now of *seeing* and *feeling* time. I evoke "feeling" here as Eve Sedgwick does in *Touching Feeling*, exploiting its internal double meaning, its physical and emotional registers (Sedgwick 17). Feeling time is locating the entire body in the discourse of time. Indeed, the concept and performance of nostalgia entails negotiation and navigation of space and time through a fully sentient knowing body.

In feeling time, we learn under what conditions we should slow things down so as to inspire acknowledgement of and reflection on historical processes and social memories. One would have difficulty enacting critical nostalgia solely in the realm of the affective, or solely in the realm of conventional history. Performing nostalgia, feeling time, attends to the affective and sensory histories of bodies and attempts a body centered approach to doing history and writing about memory. Perhaps an extension of Foucault's call to "[listen] to history" (Foucault 142), or a critical reenactment of Ambi's "ear to the ground," seeing and feeling time is not just about looking back in time, but rather looking back with acknowledgement of the shifting feelings, sentiments, and passions alive in the past. The enactment of that past through the realm of bodily movement circulates in every attempt to return home, in every foot meticulously placed beside a knee, in every encounter with a fragile saucer, in every body clock, in every chronotope of existence.

## Chapter Five

### Notes Toward Performing Critical Nostalgia: A Return Home

Two books, two homes. It is from my location within and between two social-aesthetic spaces – the home I created for myself in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, and the home of my youth in Columbia, South Carolina – that I write this dissertation. While in Baton Rouge, I purchase and begin reading Toni Morrison’s novel *Home*. The story tracks Frank Money, a Korean War veteran released from service a year prior to the tale, as he travels from the streets of Seattle to his childhood home in Lotus, Texas. Having fought in a racially integrated military unit, Frank’s return to a segregated U.S. prompts feelings of loss and confusion regarding his identity and home. With the end of my graduate career imminent, I feel like Frank in that I am “not totally homeless, but close” (Morrison 67). At times I catch myself lapsing into nervous inquiry regarding my return home, wondering, “whose house is this?” (Morrison i)

On one occasion after my return to South Carolina, I spy a sizable book displayed not far from where I write at a local bookstore. The cover is forest green with a large tree and a title embossed on the front, creating shiny gold impressions on the leather material. From my position, I squint. The title reads, *Our Family Tree: A History of Our Family*. I think, “Who is *our* family, and why is this book in the reference section?” After a few work sessions, my curiosity gets the better of me, and I decide to check out the book. Opening it, I realize that there is no “our family.” Rather, the book is filled with pages and pages of blank lines neatly ruled under genealogical prompts, such as “Husband’s Genealogy” and “Wife’s Mother’s Full Name” (*Our Family Tree* 5 & 11). The blanks are meant for the user to fill in with his or her family history. Looking through the book, I pause to question why the

first page is a mock marriage certificate and why most every page displays decorative images of Victorian styled white women and families. Maybe not *my* family history, not totally. I draw comfort however from the pages that encourage a more creative and anecdotal accounting, such as “Family Traditions,” “Oral Family History,” and “Extraordinary Events We Have Survived and Overcome” (*Our Family Tree* 116, 124, & 126). Beneath these headings are empty lines waiting, calling to be written on.

Two books, two homes. Taken together, the two books and two homes underscore my experience engaging in and representing my research. And together, they highlight the potential for critical nostalgia as a method of scholarly inquiry, as a deliberate practice of personal and cultural remembering, as a way of representing memories of past-homes, and as a performance aesthetic. I locate my body in the tug of war between the two books and the two homes, realizing that action is required at both sites and that critical nostalgia requires an active, embodied return to a past time and space.

With the aforementioned ideas in mind, in this chapter, I return to and summarize the prior chapters in an attempt to reshape the major ideas in a new space and time. I engage in this displaced transmission in order to: 1) recollect main concerns in prior chapters, pointing to areas of further research outside the scope of the present study; 2) rearticulate the ideas by placing them in conversation with each other; 3) refunction them via a distillation of the project of critical nostalgia; and 4) reflect on the implications of a theory of critical nostalgia as it relates to performance.

### **Recollect**

In Chapter One, I trace the roots and origins of nostalgia and its character, scope, and function as articulated in scholarship from diverse fields. In response to Nauman

Naqvi's claim that nostalgia should not be used as critique, I argue that the history and usages of nostalgia demonstrate its potential as a critical analytic of cultural phenomena and as a fruitful site for performance praxis. The chapter organizes scholarship on nostalgia in terms of the recurring topics of nostalgia as disease, as embedded in material items, as escape, as impacting identity, and as a complex narrative of home. Scholars extend the significance of these topics by addressing the character or quality, scope, and function of nostalgia. The chapter introduces the sites of memory that I analyze over the course of the dissertation. These sites are nostalgic performances practiced by African Americans in relation to a perceived home and homeland of Africa. The main arguments in the chapter are: 1) nostalgia has experienced shifts towards the metaphysical and away from the corporeal body; 2) any critical investigation of nostalgia must retain a connection to the idea of home as well as the past, a past-home to be precise; and 3) theory on nostalgia needs to be returned to the body through the analysis of nostalgic acts.

Anticipating questions that unfold in later chapters, I ask more or less explicitly: in terms of the recurring topics of disease, embedded-ness, escape, and identity (as well as a past-home), how do people practice or perform nostalgia? What do they restore and what does this "doing" tell us about nostalgia and nostalgic performances? What are the similarities and differences between nostalgia and critical nostalgia? And what is the relationship between nostalgia and performance, the body, history, and memory?

In Chapter Two, I define and apply four types of genealogy in order to reveal and analyze the nostalgic practices therein and to theorize critical nostalgia as a potential model for doing critical and performance genealogies. Guided by the central question of the chapter, "where are you from?" which was asked of me by a man I met in the Czech

Republic, I activate and analyze several genealogies or ancestral mappings. I undertake a critical performance genealogy to describe and analyze performances of popular and genetic genealogy at two websites targeted at African Americans, *AfriGeneas.com* and *AfricanAncestry.com*. Applying Joe Roach's principles of performance genealogy, such as surrogation, kinesthetic imagination, vortices of behavior, and displaced transmission, to the material on the websites, I reveal bodies inscribed by and inscribing a nostalgic history. My body is included in the process as I document my experiences navigating the marketplace vortices that sell Africa by means of nostalgic appeals. At the "store" of *AfricanAncestry.com*, I purchase Africa by submitting my DNA to be tested and linked to an African country of origin. At the "mall" of *AfriGeneas.com*, I am encouraged to take advantage of the countless resources for constructing a genealogy, including participation in chat rooms, where I find a lunch bunch of popular genealogists eager to offer me advice and support.

Acting on the lessons I learned at *AfriGeneas.com* and *AfricanAncestry.com*, I express the importance of critical and performance genealogies remaining open to genealogy as popularly practiced, which entails remaining open to the draw of nostalgia as a past-home. Activating critical nostalgia, I ask what type of home is created at the two websites and, in response, isolate different senses of home, homeland, and community. I demonstrate how these different senses are enacted through surrogation (as manifested in kinesthetic imagination, vortices, and displaced transmissions) and argue that nostalgia in popular and genetic genealogies is an act of continual surrogation. Further, in the two cases that concern me, the perpetual surrogation is inclined toward an ethic of care and repair, implemented by the performers in order to heal historical ruptures of birth and connection



or “origin” and “roots.” In this way, I activate critical nostalgia in terms of its ethical imperatives, arguing that a key aspect of practicing critical nostalgia is to attend to origin and roots and question their impact on identity. I argue that performances of nostalgia live in the crux of these questions: from whence do you come? And, to what are you connected?

In addition to asking what kind of homes and homelands are marketed on the websites, it might be fruitful to turn the question slightly and ask do *AfriGeneas.com* and *AfricanAncestry.com* function as homes and homelands themselves. Are they surrogates for “Africa” or some other place of home? In “Finding Our Way(s): A Theoretical Model for Performance Studies and Homeplace,” Shauna MacDonald proposes that there are four avenues for the activation of homeplace in Performance Studies: 1) homeplace as event; 2) homeplace as text; 3) homeplace as director; and 4) homeplace as performer. Below, I draw on examples from Chapter Two to demonstrate how these categories activate homeplaces.

Homeplace as event deals with the “ephemeral homeplaces” that are distanced temporally and performed through personal and cultural “memories and projections” (MacDonald 29). The longings for Africa as home and homeland expressed on the “Online Community” page of *AfricanAncestry.com* fall within this category. Although the distance is more spatial than temporal and more digital than ephemeral, I also feel the activity of chatting with the lunch bunch on *AfriGeneas.com* is a performance event that articulates a homeplace. This digital homeplace then is less of Africa and more of the current participants building homeplace through their memories, projections, and dialogue.

Homeplace as text refers to “everyday negotiations” that construct “who gets to feel at home and how” through performance (MacDonald 32). On the two websites, the desire

to gain knowledge of one's roots is imperative to negotiating home and feeling at home in the genealogical community. On *AfricanAncestry.com*, the testimonials of the notables, in particular, operate to imply who, having discovered their African lineage, is "at home" and who is not. One follows a "script" provided for "(would be) citizens" (MacDonald 32). And initially intending to attend the lunch bunch as a researcher of the genealogical process, on *AfriGeneas.com*, I am compelled by the lunch bunch to "talk the talk," i.e., to follow a script of popular genealogy.

Homeplace as director describes how performance practitioners engage "literal places, sites that can definitely be indexed on a map" (MacDonald 35). One such place is the Door of No Return. As composed on *AfricanAncestry.com*, the virtual door functions as a metonym for the actual door and the slave castle in which it is housed. This homeplace functions to direct the various performers and their movements, suggesting they "fill various roles" (MacDonald 35), such as captive, tourist, pilgrim, or guide. At the site proper, performers are directed to complete various actions, such as ducking one's head as they move through the door. Further, as a store and a mall, the two websites direct their users differently, resulting in different experiences of the marketplace-as-homeplace they provide.

Homeplace as performer indicates the ability of places to perform in ways that are not "completely inert" (MacDonald 37). As homeplace performers, *AfriGeneas.com* and *AfricanAncestry.com* are embedded with an agency (a nostalgic and affective agency) that allows them to "reach out and grab people" (MacDonald 37). While *AfriGeneas.com* opens the door and invites folk to explore the website on their own, as they might a mall,

*AfricanAncestry.com* takes the user by the hand providing a succinct tour of the products they offer in their store.

MacDonald's model helps me understand the websites not only as performances that direct users to the desired homeplace of Africa, but as possible surrogates – displaced transmissions – for that homeplace. In further extension of MacDonald's model, it might be helpful to consider the body as homeplace; that is, as a physical entity that carries and claims (in space) ideas and practices of home. With respect to *AfricanAncestry.com*, the DNA of bodies holds the key for establishing home, which ideally is African in origin. At *AfriGeneas.com*, the lunch bunch asks me questions about my lineage. The naming of blood ties functions as the source and activity of placing me in my home, and it also builds a community between us, i.e., by our sharing information about lineage. In genetic genealogy and popular genealogy, if there is no body, there is no home.

Body as homeplace extends also to the physical ingestion of home, through the intake of food or smells, for example, and to other activities that make home through the body. To say, "I feel at home," implies both an abstract sense of comfort in relation to one's environment and the physical sensation of the body settled and rested in space and time, as if a well made house with a good foundation. Body as homeplace arises in the sentiments of Judith Broome when she writes, "we reside in our bodies" (Broome 17), or Tami Spry when she argues, "We live in our bodies, learn about self, others, and culture through analyzing the performances of our bodies in the world" (Spry 165). Body as homeplace fulfills Soyini Madison's call to experience our bodies as homes that we should open up to others. She writes:

We must embrace the body not only as the *feeling/sensing home* of our being – the harbor of our breath – but the vulnerability of how our body must *move through the*

*space and time of another* – transporting our very being and breath – for the purpose of knowledge, for the purpose of realization and discovery. (Madison, “Dangerous Ethnography” 191; emphasis mine)

The body as homeplace houses the potential for the realization and discovery of histories of nostalgia as grounded in the body, family stories of return and connection, origin and roots.

In Chapter Three, I mobilize the Sankofa proverb, “return and take it,” by associating the proverb with its colloquial counterpart, “go back to your roots.” Building on ideas of home, homeland, and community, origin and roots as established in Chapter Two, I descend further into the body of research I am subject to and the bodies represented there by entering the vortex of the Elmina slave castle. I use a combination of genealogical practice, including close textual analysis and personal narrative, to analyze how nostalgia operates in a video and actual tour of the castle.

The ironies and oppositions the castle engenders illustrate the complexity of nostalgia as a physical, emotional, rhetorical, and poetic device. Drawing on the work of Edward Bruner, I describe four ironies that arise at Elmina Castle: 1) ancestral sadness and pride; 2) foreignness and familiarity; 3) differing senses of home; and 4) the ambiguity of return. As a result of experiencing these ironies in juxtaposition with the oppositional rhetoric used in the official narrative of the site, I experience my body as nervous. This nervousness represents, in part, the meeting of trauma and nostalgia in the space of the castle.

By means of my analysis, an act of critical nostalgia finally, I emphasize the role affect and aesthetics play in representations of history and memory, particularly those of a painful past-home. I conclude that revisiting our memories of a past trauma through kinesthetic imagination renders questions of authenticity irrelevant and illustrates the

generative potential of nostalgia; generative because it is through an aesthetic of return (i.e., revisiting the wound) that an oscillating field of space and place is generated. In Elmina Castle, an array of narratives encourages one to locate or place their body in relation to what they experience (to know their place, as it were). Conversely, the same narratives operate to displace the body, propelling it into the space of ever-shifting histories and memories.

One way people are placed is through the oppositional rhetoric the guides use to tell the official narrative of the castle. Recall the example of the raped female captives who are useful to the narrative only as long as they offer a clear opposition to the slave trader. Once they become pregnant and bear racially mixed children, they are excised by the teller as “insignificant.” A story that is excluded completely from the official narrative concerns “domestic African slavery and an earlier period (1400-1600) of Arab slave trading across the Sahara to the Middle East and the Mediterranean” (Bruner 295). These histories trouble the black/white opposition by introducing other racial and regional actors into the vortex of slave trading. Bruner ends his essay with a series of oppositions implicit to all castles and a reflection on the politics of storytelling and power:

By their very nature, castles are dominant localities that define boundaries, that tell us who has the right to be inside the castle, within the center of power, in control, and who is outside, on the periphery. Castles are a dynamic presence, places that produce movement between home and abroad, sites for the construction of narratives of time and narratives of space. Old castles have long histories, stories of combat and battle, honor and degradation, beauty and cruelty, civilization and barbarism. Who owns the castles? Who has the right to tell their story? (Bruner 302)

Continued research might reveal the ways in which people and stories excluded from the official narrative of a place find ways to work themselves back in, the ways they perform return.

An aesthetic of return is at work in the form as well as the content of Chapter Three, and thus the idea of return and its manner of representation merit some reflection here.

Discussing basic composition forms, Ruth Laurion Bowman and Michael Bowman observe:

Poetry is based on a model of return, going back, beginning again (poetry is composed in “verses,” from the Latin *versus*, which means “return”) whereas the common speech of drama and narrative is based on a model of moving forward, proceeding, continuing on (prose, from the Latin *prosus*, which means “move on, continue.” (R. Bowman and M. Bowman, *Handbook for Performance Composition*).

It is fitting, then, that the overall form of Chapter Three is poetic in that I interweave recurring discourses, thereby creating a collage of constant return and revision. It is my hope that the form activates a similar affective experience for the reader. A fruitful venture for future research would be to put nostalgia, poetic forms, and affective experience into a more comprehensive conversation than I have pursued here.

Another avenue for future research would be to develop a vocabulary that would help to trace and theorize the range of affective relations to home, to past, and to past-homes. As Eve Sedgwick points out, “Affects can be, and are attached to things, people, ideas, sensations, relations, activities, ambitions, institutions, and any number of other things including other affects. Thus one can be excited by anger, disgusted by shame, or surprised by joy” (Sedgwick 19). In Chapter Three, I focus primarily on the bitter and the sweet of nostalgia, but no doubt there are gradations I have yet to discover and expressing a full range of affects would add complexity to my understanding of nostalgia. Nonetheless, in this case, I ciphered my bittersweet experience through the metaphor of nervousness, aiming to find an expression and form that would capture the physical as well as emotional affect of bittersweet. In her essay on “Performative Writing,” Della Pollock expresses what she sees as the similarities between corporeal and textual nervousness:

Performative writing is *nervous*. It anxiously crosses various stories, theories, texts, intertexts, and spheres of practice, unable to settle into a clear, linear course, neither willing nor able to stop moving, restless, transient and transitive, traversing spatial and temporal borders...[Performative writing] follows the body's model: it operates by synaptic relay, drawing one charged moment into another, constituting knowledge in an ongoing process of transmission and transferal, finding in the wide-ranging play of textuality an urgency that keeps what amounts to textual travel from lapsing into tourism, and that binds the traveler to/his/her surging course like an electrical charge to its conduit. (Pollock 90-91; emphasis in original).

Pollock's description performs a style of writing that is indicative of nervous movement.

Her articulation of performative writing draws on notions of the grotesque and Foucault's practice of critical genealogy, both of which are interested in entangled histories written onto the body. She argues, "Genealogy writes a body always already written by history" (Pollock 91). As enacted by my "always already written" nervous body, critical nostalgia writes a body that is never, not really, easy to write.

In Chapter Four, I performed an aesthetic of return, ascending in genealogical terms to the stage of the dissertation to stage the forces at work in my writing and directing of *Copious Notes: A Nostalgia Tale*, which was based in good part on my experiences in Ghana. To describe and analyze the forces, I drew on Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of the chronotope, which I aligned with Roach's vortex as it operates in genealogical practice. I foregrounded three chronotopes in my analysis, the dramatic, projection, and movement chronotopes. In *Copious Notes*, the interaction of these chronotopes with the particular material give rise to a grotesque performance of critical nostalgia.

In the play, I am concerned with questions of African American identity and the authenticity of experience in regards to the protagonist's visit to and view of Africa as home and homeland. I am interested, too, in nostalgia as a critical act and performance practice in both the fictive and theatrical realities of the play. Although Ambi has returned to what

she perceives as her place of origin, she runs into trouble finding connections or roots in Ghana. And, although she meets a range of characters that impact her experience in significant ways, she remains an awkward outsider. Ambi's guiding chronotope of "outside" is placed in dynamic juxtaposition with the "inside" chronotope of the Narrator and the "trans" chronotope of the Commentator.

Drawing on Brecht's tactic of alienation, I discuss the ways in which the dramatic action of Ambi's journey is interrupted by the movement and projection chronotopes, the effect of the interruption prompting the audience to critical thought, kinesthetic imagining, and co-creativity. To supplement how critical nostalgia operates in the play, I provide insight on the process of composing the piece, drawing on the practices of Constantin Stanislavski, Anne Bogart, and Susan Harbage Page. In concert with the content and chronotopes of the play, the use of these methods results in a grotesque aesthetic of nostalgia.

While, in Chapter Three, the oscillation between space and place is featured, in Chapter Four, time gains equal prominence due to my use of the chronotope as a method of composition and analysis. In *Nostalgia: Sanctuary of Meaning*, Janelle Wilson considers place and time in her response to Jan Morris who "raises the issue of whether nostalgia, as it is experienced today, relates more to *place* or *time*" (Wilson 22; emphasis in original). Wilson argues that, over time, there has been "a shift from longing for a particular place to longing for a particular time" (Wilson 22). The shift occurs because people assume they can return to a particular place but not to a particular time, which results in a longing for that time. While Wilson's study raises an intriguing question regarding "why" the noted shift occurred, she appears to treat time as a natural (forward moving) phenomenon rather



than an abstraction people construct in different ways. I also am troubled by the theoretical and practical separation of time and space with regard to nostalgia. It is important, I believe, to theorize time and space as they unfold together, as Henri Lefebvre does when he reminds us:

When we evoke “space,” we must immediately indicate what occupies that space and how it does so: the deployment of energy in relation to “points” and within a time frame. When we evoke “time,” we must immediately say what it is that moves or changes therein. Space considered in isolation is an empty abstraction; likewise energy and time. (Lefebvre 12)

In Chapter Four, I illustrate the ways in which time and space are coterminous by highlighting bodies as they navigate within and between chronotopes. For instance, the dramatic chronotope is constituted by fictive and theatrical realities, which are distinct from each other precisely because of how they compose both space and time. Should we omit consideration of one or the other – for example, should we consider the return of Ambi to Africa in terms of space only – we would lose the dynamic of Ambi *reflecting* on her experiences and the dynamic of the performer Kim *shaping those reflections* for the audience in the *theatrical reality*. The nostalgic return to Africa would be understood in terms of the “in scene” fictive reality only, which does not capture the experience of nostalgia and certainly not a critical one.

Another issue of chronotopes concerns Ambi’s position of being “outside” space and time. While, in the play, the position appears to be negative in many ways, it is a position lauded in some critical theories, such as Bakhtin’s view of the outside author. Also, in feminist standpoint theory, the outside position, however marginalized, is one of superior knowledge and excess sight. hooks writes:

As a radical standpoint, perspective, position, “the politics of location” necessarily calls those of us who would participate in the formation of counter-hegemonic

cultural practice to identify the spaces where we begin the process of re-vision.  
(hooks 145)

The outside then can be a place for theorization, for care and repair, and for articulating a self silenced elsewhere. In a description of self-reflexive writing styles, Kuhn speaks of the social importance of those who write from outside the prevailing positions of power. Her sentiments articulate Ambi's position and my own as a black female author:

Is there a connection between self-reflexive writing by contemporary socialist and feminist intellectuals and an older tradition of "outsider" life stories, narratives produced by members of social groups whose stories have traditionally been untold, hidden or silenced? How do life stories "from below" – by women, by former slaves, by working class men and women, for example – handle the relationship between life events, the narration of these events, and the narrating subject? Significantly, for such "outsider" autobiographers being a significant agent worthy of the regard of others, a human subject, as well as an individuated "ego" for oneself is not necessarily easy or to be taken for granted, and these writers also tend to shun the "great I" of conventional or bourgeois autobiography. (Kuhn 150-151)

Writing from a place that is autobiographical in part, in *Copious Notes*, I classify my writing as a revisionist task, and I ask along with Kuhn:

Can a questioning of bourgeois or patriarchal notions of identity and a desire to redress social and historical injustices be reconciled in autobiographical writing? If so, how? Revisionist autobiography certainly attempts such a *rapprochement*: usually by insisting, within the writing itself, on a gap between the "I" that writes and the "I" (or perhaps better the "me") that is written about; sometimes by drawing explicitly on formal bodies of knowledge or theories as frameworks within which to explore "I" or the "me," and its place in history, its contingency. (Kuhn 151)

As all the characters in *Copious Notes*, including the notes projected on the screen, are "not not me," I construct an autobiographical "I" that realizes Kuhn's aims. In the play, my personal position and views are not taken for granted as givens, but rather pulled apart into multiple characters juxtaposed in diverse chronotopes, and thereby, the constitution of the "great I" is questioned.

Wilson argues that nostalgia is “not simply ‘living in the past,’ but rather an active engagement with the past, and a juxtaposition of past and present” (Wilson 157). Over the course of and across the pages of this project, I hope to have expanded the idea of nostalgia to a point where it is fully contextualized as a living experience of the body. I hope to have captured both its physical and metaphysical qualities, theorized its potential in time and space, and achieved an effective and affective juxtaposition of past and present by resisting the urge to locate nostalgia’s power in the present tense. But I also realize that there is still much (memory) work to do.

### **Rearticulate**

I introduced this concluding chapter with a story about how two homes and two books frame my research and writing journey. But, with respect to the content of this dissertation, the homes and books stretch beyond descriptors of my research experience. They anticipate my next move, which is to place the chapters in conversation with each other in order to articulate two social aesthetic spaces that undergird my research, namely, the domestic space and the academic space. Below, I extend the ideas of space, time, and body set down in prior chapters in order to consider the noted spaces (and times) more generally.

A domestic space is in operation across the pages of this project. The handling of domestic items in *Copious Notes*, the site of women’s bodies at Elmina Castle, and the gendered experiences of genetic testing are examples that enact and challenge the domestic space. The Mother Voice that resides in Ambi’s head, a voice that grounds Ambi literally and figuratively, exemplifies this space. The domestic is seen also in Kim’s actions as she puts the salt and pepper shakers to bed and shushes a teapot, home defined here by

the actions of a woman's body in space and time. The female body moves in relation to objects embedded with nostalgia, it creates homeplaces that complicate notions of private and public, sacred and profane, and it utilizes critical nostalgia as a method of feminist resistance and critique.

The actors in *Copious Notes* navigate an environment of home things, items that are embedded with nostalgia and infer the sensibility and activities of the domestic space, alluding to the work of women preparing food, laundering clothes, rocking a child in a chair. These activities connect women's bodies to the activities of keeping house and making home, working with the body to care for other bodies. As hooks recalls, "in our young minds houses belonged to women, were their special domain, not as property, but as places where all that truly mattered in life took place – the warmth and comfort of shelter, the feeding of our bodies, the nurturing of our souls" (hooks 41).

The domestic space has been conceived of as a sacred place as well, especially in the U.S. in the nineteenth century, when a divide was constructed between the profane public sphere of labor and capital gain and the sacred private sphere of the home, where women saw to the spiritual education of their families while managing their home economy efficiently and typically invisibly. In "Domestic(ating) Excess: Women's Roles in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and Its Adaptations," Ruth Laurion Bowman points out how Stowe fashioned Rachel's kitchen as an example of the domestic ideal, Rachel managing to run her kitchen effortlessly while also caring for runaway slaves. In this way, "domesticity functioned as a counter-balance, a purgative and perhaps even an apologia, to the 'profane' business of making money in the public sphere" (R. Bowman, "Domestic(ating) Excess" 117). Writing about the nostalgia in the eighteenth century, Broome argues, "the female body, especially,

became an object of fascination, invested with nostalgia for some imaginary coherence and assigned the burden of tradition and redemption” (Broome 156). Taken together, for Broome and for Bowman, “the domestic project was a site of both hegemony and resistance” (R. Bowman, “Domestic(ating) Excess” 117).

In penning the domestic space in the chapters of this study, the double occupation of hegemony and resistance is evident. Hegemony arises in the lyrical opening to the Elmina Castle video when it “welcomes home” the viewer and in the nostalgic clichés when Ambi recalls her “mom...serving her a nice healthy plate” of food. Resistance may be read in my staging of the private space on stage, in framing the home for public consumption by an audience, and in locating the home as a site of academic enterprise. I critique the concept of home, joining Wilson who queries, “Following the original definition of nostalgia as extreme homesickness, we should pose the question: What is home?” asserting ultimately that “‘home’ could very well need a redefinition” (Wilson 32). Through my discussion of origin and roots, I seek to trouble home and its relation to nostalgia, as Morrison does when she writes in *Home*, “This house is strange./Its shadows lie./Say, tell me, why does its lock fit my key? (Morrison i). Here, Morrison questions the assumed stability of home, expressing doubt and questioning where agency lies in the act of returning home. The poem infers that there are times when we do not position our key in the keyhole, rather the keyhole summons our key to enter in.

Across the sites of memory in this study, women’s bodies enact and trouble concepts of home and nostalgia. Visitors to Elmina Castle, in search of their roots or a lost home, are confronted with narratives of women’s suffering. The tour guide tells the story of African women being raped using a series of oppositions. The white male governor

selects a black female captive. She is transformed from dirty to clean. She is brought up from the depths of the dungeons to the heights of the governor's chambers whereupon she is raped. If the woman is impregnated, she is moved to a place outside the walls of the castle. This latter contingency adds complexity to the narrative of castle as home, homeland, and (metaphorical) domestic space by deconstructing the noted oppositions, inserting the promise of a new and different life, conceived violently but introducing the possibility of escape.

In her analysis of European women's narratives of Algeria and Kenya, Patricia Lorcin argues, "The usual analysis of nostalgia as a longing to return home can be complicated by rethinking the concept in relation to notions of space and time and their use in women's personal strategies" (Lorcin 2). The artwork of Susan Harbage Page provides examples of Lorcin's point, demonstrating compositions that defamiliarize the longing for a past-home, the homeplace, and women's relationship to both. In her exhibition, *Postcards from Home*, Page displays a series of photographs of people wearing KKK garments made out of floral prints, velvet, seersucker, camouflage, denim, and delicate lace. The subjects' eyes peer through cut outs in the various fabrics. In some shots, the garments conceal only the faces of men, women, and children. In other shots, most of the body is covered. In two photographs the feet are exposed; a man wears gym shoes and a woman wears cozy socks. In her photos, Page draws on the beauty and seeming neutrality of fabrics and their crafting, i.e., she draws on domesticity, to stage her critique of the KKK, asking what lies beneath the innocent surface of our home and bodies?

Echoing Page's aesthetic, in Movement Sequence II of *Copious Notes*, I selected common objects of home – table, tablecloth, dishware for a tea party – and de- and

reconstructed them through movement. The choreography consisted of the performers removing the items from the table and fiddling with them, a woman mounting the table as if it were a bed and gathering the tablecloth between her legs, wringing it as if it were a dishrag and winding it into a rope, after which she dismounted the table and with the other performers restored the dishware to its proper place on the table, “a plate atop a table, a saucer atop a plate, a teacup atop a saucer.” The woman’s body troubled notions of domesticity, intermingling images of dainty tea parties with those of danger, sexual abandon, and pleasure.

In her review of *Copious Notes*, Danielle Dick McGeough observes that “the term domesticity can be broadened to include the process of domestication, which entails conquering and taming [what is perceived to be] wild, natural, and alien” (McGeough 1). In the play, Ambi attempts such domestication when she notices “a piece of trash on the ground...picks it up and tosses it aside,” remarking, “You will not pollute my fantasy!” Another example of domestication is DNA testing, which takes biological material and codes it into sequences that scientists can categorize and analyze for various purposes, such as making genealogical connections. Of course, the academy domesticates knowledge by dividing it into disciplines with distinct discourses, theories, and methods.

My move to domestication in the academy introduces the second social aesthetic space operating at the crux of my study, namely, the academic space. In *Copious Notes*, the academic space is exemplified by the Professor Voice that Ambi hears, bidding her to “capture accurately as much as you can” and to “write about anything and everything.” Whereas the main component of the domestic space is the woman’s body, the main component of the academic space is one’s claim to knowledge through representation.

How do I represent the knowledge I collect, and what do I do about that which I cannot represent?

Professor Voice tells us, “do not be afraid of being biased or ignorant” and to “accept that you are infinitely biased and inexorably ignorant.” In the academic space, this is a difficult task indeed. In fact, it is upon and against the fear of “being infinitely biased and inexorably ignorant” that I tell my stories and write up my research. I try to “capture accurately as much as [I] can,” and to “write about what [I] see, what [I] hear, how it makes [me] feel.” This is the voice, within and without, that I respond to when I substantiate my methods and emphasize the cultural significance of my personal stories. This is why I “take notes” and why I take them in the ways I do.

Due to the highly codified rules of the academy, capturing and representing knowledge requires the successful application of certain “formal, representational grammars and protocols” (Hamera 73) that are more akin to the language of my “books” than the language of my “home.” My struggle to master the requisite grammars and protocols undergirds both my written and performance research. As hooks notes, “Language is...a place of struggle” (hooks 146). The words below specify this “place” and speak to my sentiments above:

I have been working to change the way I speak and write, to incorporate in the manner of telling a sense of place, of not just who I am in the present but where I am coming from, the multiple voices within me. I have confronted silence, inarticulateness. When I say, then, that these words emerge from suffering, I refer to that personal struggle to name that location from which I come to voice – that space of my theorizing. (hooks 146)

Like hooks, much of my performed scholarship emerges in space and time as confrontations with in/articulateness, or silence, pregnant with what Harry Elam refers to as the “productive ambivalence” of the black body in performance (Elam 289). He argues



that black performers can call upon the productive ambivalence that arises when a black body steps on stage as a way to investigate meanings of blackness. This involves the black performer in three ways, as a “real person,” a theatrical representation, and a social-cultural construction (Elam 289-291). I call the productive ambivalence I experience as I represent my voice through performance and writing “in/articulateness,” “silence,” and “struggle” for a simple reason. It is difficult to find language to investigate blackness when performing before a predominantly white academic audience.

Laboring, for instance, to bring critical and performance genealogy more in touch with the voices and bodies that do popular genealogies, I have attempted to demonstrate rather than downplay the ways in which black bodies figure in the space and time of academia. Although at times the struggle inspires me and at times the silence debilitates me, I try to express successfully the ways in which my body in the academic space is both a site of gendered and racial experimentation and a site beyond representation; the ways that the black body is both laboratory and labyrinth.

### **Refunction**

As a young scholar of memory, performance, and the black Diaspora, I am indebted to the theoretical and practical work of scholars who came before me. Borrowing from scholarship in the areas of Performance Studies, Critical Cultural Studies, Memory Studies, African American Studies, and Diaspora Studies is a challenge and a joy. The research I have recollected, rearticulated, and refunctioned here underwrites the theory of critical nostalgia and helps me to put the “critical” in the term.

Below, I draw on the notes projected during *Copious Notes* to outline points I find important to the theory of critical nostalgia as it relates to performance. I call these points

“notes” toward performing critical nostalgia to infer the complexity of what informs the brief statements and so as not to forestall, to anticipate actually, the continued development of the theory.

1. Performances of critical nostalgia must be critical. That is, performances must imply an attitude of inquiry and evaluation toward a past-home and a willingness to negotiate events within the aesthetic realm. Performances of critical nostalgia must invoke a past-home creatively in order to engage and challenge its make up and manner of representation.
2. Performing critical nostalgia involves the “stuff” of the past and the “stuff” of home. It uses the past and various articulations of home as raw material for imaginative enterprise. Performances of critical nostalgia rely on an understanding of past *and* home, not either or.
3. Critical nostalgia provides us with a complex vocabulary for discovering home by means of understanding the complexities of home, homeland, and community. It also explores the idea of homeplace as event, text, director, performer, and body.
4. Critical nostalgia is the practice of critical genealogy, with a specification of home and an inclination toward the interrogation of (historical) origins *and* roots.
5. Performing critical nostalgia embraces the historical consciousness of performance but does not deny affect and emotion. Instead, it encourages insight and induces questions regarding registers, qualities, and functions of affective memory.

6. Performing critical nostalgia requires the negotiation and co-experience of individual (personal) memory and cultural (social) memory.
7. Critical nostalgia performs an ethic of care and repair, mining past-homes for injuries and enacting curative measures.
8. Performing critical nostalgia inspires us to question modernist narratives of progress and presence.
9. Performing critical nostalgia enhances the concept of nostalgia as a metaphysical state by concretizing it in the act of performance. Performing critical nostalgia assumes the existence of and utilizes the nostalgic act.
10. Performing critical nostalgia implies a consciousness of the body and utilizes body-ideas as creative tools. Body consciousness includes acts of reflexivity, or ideas about the role of self; reflecting, or ideas that emerge from active recall of the past; and reflection, or ideas about what the past means for bodies in the world.
11. Performances of critical nostalgia often embrace an aesthetic of return. This aesthetic involves the kinesthetic transmission or the poetic (re)visitation of past-homes.
12. Critical nostalgia is interested in the relations of time and space generally and therefore is not indebted to the present; it resists the urge to place nostalgia's critical power in the present tense. Critical nostalgia asks: If we argue that performance has the ability to lift us out of the present and into another place, why can't that place be the past? Why can't we revel or linger there for a second and tinker with things, make them right?

## Reflect

When Africa is regarded as a part of the cultural and political history of the African Diaspora, it is usually recognized only as an origin – as a “past” to the African American “present,” as a source of cultural “survivals” and “retentions” in the Americas, as an essence “preserved” in collective “memory,” as the “roots” of African American branches and leaves. (Matory 157)

It is with and against the words of African American Studies scholar J. Lorand Matory that I offer this project as a unique challenge to the power dynamics of which he speaks. These dynamics, which result ultimately in the abstracting and essentializing of Africa, bear out in terms of affective relations, time and space, the role of the body, and ideas about origins and roots. Matory’s words also imply a lack of or misuse of tools for investigating the relationship between Africa and her Diaspora. With this project, I seek to unpack affective relations to histories, herstories, and memories. I endeavor to add complexity to issues of time and space by enacting this complexity as it operates online, on the body, and on stage. I work to highlight the experiences of the corporeal body as opposed to so-called “survivals,” “retentions,” or “essences.” I venture toward the expansion of origins and roots in relation to identity such that they operate not only as metaphors but also as activities of cultural memory, activities that can and should be interrogated rather than valorized. Finally, I offer a method of scholarly inquest, a practice of memory, a means for representing memories of past-homes, and a compositional aesthetic. I name this method critical nostalgia. It is my hope that critical nostalgia inspires varied performances, which then will give birth to more memories. I have practiced this method across the pages of this project and will continue to imagine more ways that memories act. Or, as bell hooks might put it, I reflect on the typography of this project, tracing the “memories of old

conversations coming back again and again, memories like reused fabric in a crazy quilt, contained and kept for the right moment. I have gathered and remembered” (hooks 115).

As a hope to have illustrated through this study, critical nostalgia does not work in isolation. I agree with Bakhtin that co-creativity requires an invitation to do performance together with the reader, the listener, the audience. As all performances are not done in harmony, or to the same tune, I anticipate more movements of nostalgia. I hope to have initiated or, more aptly perhaps, shaken up the conversation for Performance Studies, for African American Studies, for Cultural Studies, for Diaspora Studies, for Memory Studies, for the study of myself and my multiple positions as I attempt to return nostalgia to the home of (my) bones, (my) body, from whence I feel, remember, theorize, with you.

## Epilogue

Weeks pass as I await the results of my DNA test from *AfricanAncestry.com*, and during this time, I often think about what the test may reveal. What have become of my cotton swabs, the fuzzy surrogates I sent in place of my body? What do the magical elves have in store for them? What procedure will they use to extract my country of origin from dried saliva? Weeks pass, and the DNA test slips away from my imaginary. I almost forget about the test until three separate emails remind me, each oddly saying the same thing:

Dear Ms. Huell,

The swabs for [your test ID#] have been received. You can expect your results in approximately six weeks. Thank you for choosing African Ancestry. We look forward to finding your roots. (African Ancestry Processing)

Weeks pass. During this time, I leave my home in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, as my graduate career comes to an end. Friends help me pack my belongings as we eat cheese and Chantilly cake and laugh. More friends help me move the items from my home into a storage unit. Furniture. Lamps. Way too many pillows for one apartment. Pots and Pans. Clothes and shoes. Decorative masks. More shoes. A naked wire woman carrying two pots. I dust the baseboards before I leave. They were dusty. And, upon completing that ritual, the apartment is no longer my home anymore. I drive twelve hours back to my parents' house, my childhood home, stopping many times.

In less than a week, I fetch an oversized envelope from my parents' mailbox. The return address says it is from *AfricanAncestry.com*, and I casually mention to my mother what I expect it to hold, the results of the genetic test I submitted as part of my research project. My inclination is to carry around the packet with me for a few days like I did the

testing packet. But, realizing the results may report the African country of origin for my whole maternal line, my mother bids me open the package, commands me even. I comply.

Inside the package there are two large pamphlets both with vibrant images on them. The first one features a solitary lime green plant growing up out of rich black soil. The plant has six leaves, and the text below the image has six words centered on the page, "Welcome to the African Ancestry Family." Below the words is the *AfricanAncestry.com* logo, an upside down "V" with a double helix growing up its left side. I open the first pamphlet, which contains three loose pages. There is a two page letter on yellowish brown stationary with a faded tree as backdrop. The other document is a map. I read the letter:

Dear Ms. Huell,

It is with great pleasure that I report your MatriClan™ analysis determined your maternal lineage to be of **Middle Eastern** ancestry. Our haplogroup prediction is that the mitochondrial DNA (mtDNA) sequence that we determined from your sample belongs to **Haplogroup N1c**, a non-African lineage.

Our haplogroup prediction is based on your mtDNA sequence data from the HVR-1 region. In most cases this prediction is sufficient, however the classification of haplogroups continue to change and in order to be completely sure of the prediction more sequence data from HVR-2 and the coding regions of mtDNA is needed.

MtDNA haplogroups are continent-specific, with very little mixing of mtDNA haplogroups from different continents.

TTCTTTCATG	GGGAAGCAGA	TTTGGGTACC	ACCCAAGTAT	TGACTCACCC	ATCAACAACC
GCTATGTATC	TCGTACATTA	CTGCCAGCCA	CCATGAATAT	TGTACGTAC	CATAAATACT
TGACCACCTG	TAGTACATAA	AAACCCAATC	CACATCAAAA	CCCCCTCCC	ATGCTTACAA
GCAAGTACAG	CAATCAACCT	TCAACTATCA	CACATCAACT	GCAACTCCAA	AGCCACCCCT
CTCCCCTAG	GATACCAACA	AACCTACCCA	CCCTTAACAG	TACATAGTAC	ATAAAGCCAT
TTACCGTACA	TAGCACATTA	CAGTCAAATC	CCTTCTCGTC	CCCATGGATG	ACCCCTCA

Your Sequence Similarity Score is 100%, which means that your sequence is 100% the same as sequences from Middle East populations belonging to Haplogroup N1c today. The bold letters indicate DNA sequence patterns that you share with Haplogroup N1c.

Enclosed you will find a Certificate of Ancestry that authenticates your maternal ancestry, a map that explains haplogroups across the world, a booklet to

understanding and sharing your results, and instructions for joining the African Ancestry Online Community.

We understand that this information may be difficult to absorb, especially if you were not aware of any Middle East ancestry on your mother's maternal line. It is important to note that even though we did not find African ancestry for your *maternal* lineage, it does not mean that you are not African American. It does not mean that your mother is not African American. And it does not mean that you have no African ancestry anywhere in your family tree. Please feel free to contact one of the specialists in our office to discuss other lineages that may be more likely to yield African results.

Thank you for your support and interest in African Ancestry.

Sincerely,  
Gina Paige  
President (Paige)

The map shows the world save for Antarctica. The (other) continents are delineated by their shape colored in shades of light green, beige, and brown. Each sports a label of uppercase letters that indicates their "haplogroup." There is also a series of white arrows that originate in Africa and Asia and branch off in several directions, merging, separating, joining, the points of the arrows landing finally at various locations across the map. An explanation of haplogroups is left justified on the page:

#### HAPLOGROUPS

Haplogroups represent specific mitochondria patterns found among the world's different populations. About 60,000 years ago a group of individuals moved out of Africa and their descendants, through the natural process of mutation in mtDNA, formed the M and N haplogroups. As mankind moved out of Africa and into the Middle East, Asia, Europe, and the Americas, unique genetic mutations were passed down to their descendants. Their descendants in Asia, Australia and parts of Europe evolved their own specific types. So, today, Europe is populated by the haplogroups H, I, J, K, T, U, V, W, and X; Asia by A, B, C, D, E, F, G, M, and Y; the Americas by the Asian branches A, B, C, D, and X; Papua New Guinea by P and Q; and Australia by further M and N types. Today, identifying your personal haplogroup is a gateway to understanding your ancestry.



## HAPLOGROUP N1

Haplogroup N1 is one of the earliest haplogroups to have migrated out of Africa. It is found largely in Eurasia. Haplogroup N1c is found in the Middle East. It is also found in Africa but its presence there is as a result of reverse migration back to the continent. Although it is uncommon in other populations, according to the National Geographic Project, N1 is also found among 3% of people from the Levant, Arabia, and Egypt. (Haplogroups)

Beneath the map I find a certificate of ancestry affixed to the inside of the pamphlet. Amazement. “The perfect irony,” I stop to appreciate. A bittersweet mixture of joy and confusion. I laugh as I read the content of the letter to my mother who sits nearby. She moves close to me, and we hover over the map provided by *AfricanAncestry.com*. We try to manage our emotions and navigate the map in order to find “The Middle East.” I snicker wildly at this point. My mom asks in her characteristic jovial shriek, “What?! Does that mean we ain’t black?!” I manage to re-read part of the letter to her, “It is important to note that even though we did not find African ancestry for your *maternal* lineage, it does not mean that you are not African American. It does not mean that your mother is not African American. And, it does not mean that you have no African ancestry anywhere in your family tree.” The first question I ask aloud in a voice I recognize as my mother’s and grandmother’s is: “How am I supposed to put this in my dissertation?”

Only minutes pass before my mom succeeds in contacting both my grandmother and my aunt, my mom’s sister. My granny and my aunt’s responses take the form of questions as well: “The Middle East?! Where is that?” and “How’d we get mixed up with those kind of people?” respectively. I make some phone calls of my own. One friend offers that perhaps I had neglected to swab the African part of my mouth.

As my mom is now busily looking up the “Middle East” and “Eurasia” on Wikipedia, I remember the second pamphlet and pick it up. It features a green valley below a blue sky

surrounding a cloud in the shape of Africa. My mind slips back to a meeting with one of my professors, Patricia Suchy, who designed the poster for my show, *Black Body Business*. In the meeting, I asked if it would be possible to insert cloud graphics along the top of the poster that resembled the shape of Africa. In the end, the poster pictured a large outline of a human figure. The interior of the figure is composed of a collage of body parts, compiled from photographs I had taken of my cast: intertwined legs, clasped hands, seven arms folded together, a tattooed foot, faces. The collage of images highlight the differences in the actors' skin tones ranging from creamy caramel to deep mahogany. My attention falls back to the second pamphlet.

The words, in black font and centered on the page, read, "Now That You Know." Inside is a detailed map of Africa, and a label, "Africa: The Great Continent," beneath which is a quote from Maya Angelou. A guide for understanding the results of the test is provided. It explains that the test uses the "mutations," the bold letters in the DNA sequence, to determine the location of ancestry. If the mutations indicate African ancestry, *AfricanAncestry.com* compares the test taker's genetic information with a database of African lineages in order to locate a country and an ethnic group.

Finding the information on Africa of little use to me now, I move to close the pamphlet. But, before I do, I notice a banner running the width of the pamphlet, reminding me, to "use the postcards included in the package to share your results with friends and family." I peer into the envelope for said postcards. They are missing. I reread my results again, landing on a sentence that holds my attention. "Haplogroup N1c is found in the Middle East. It is also found in Africa but its presence there is as a result of reverse migration back to the continent." Back to the continent. I think. If I am "from" Africa at all,

am I now the progeny of ancient returners who departed Africa only to one day return again? I sigh. And I smile, and I shrug.

I want to write a poem. I want to write a poem so as not to ask whether I am black or not, or where the Middle East is, or how it is I got all “mixed up.” I want to write a poem about the perfect irony of home and past and translate this irony into the language of creative repossession and unwitting dispossession. This poem will move in a circle, I decide. It will be about a gardener who plants her seeds in fertile ground, and it will detail her struggle to manage how large and in what directions her plants grow.

I look for the postcards once more, and I am unable to locate them. I suppose I am to make my own.

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## Vita

Jade C. Huell is from Irmo, South Carolina. During her teen years, she discovered her writing ability scripting and directing her first play *Mommy*, which was performed by her drama class. Jade served as editor of her high school literary magazine and was heavily involved in ballet and modern dance. She graduated from Dutch Fork High School in 2000.

Jade went on to earn a B.A. in Communication at Columbia College in Columbia, South Carolina, in 2006. While at Columbia College she studied abroad in the Czech Republic, interned at the local PBS station, and worked as a peer mentor in the department's speech lab. Jade was awarded the Outstanding Communication Student award while in attendance and has since returned to give a speech and run a workshop on Columbia College's campus.

Jade continued her education, earning an M.A. in English with an emphasis in Speech Communication and a Certificate of Graduate Study in Gender Studies from the University of South Carolina, in 2008. During her time at USC, Jade worked with the Gender Studies program as an instructor and mentor in the community juvenile arbitration program and participated in a summer abroad program with New York University in Ghana, West Africa.

Jade moved to Baton Rouge, Louisiana, to begin her doctoral coursework at Louisiana State University in the fall of 2008. In addition to teaching courses in communication and performance, Jade produced or directed three productions in the HopKins Black Box and contributed to a variety of other performances. In November 2011, Jade was awarded the Marie J. Robinson Scholarship by the National Communication Association's Performance Studies Division. Jade is currently the Black Performing Arts Postdoctoral Fellow in the Department of Performance Studies at Northwestern University.