

“Who and what are you?”: Tracing the Middle Passage in Afro-Latinx Writing

By Karen S. Christian

How origins tend to curl like a wave
then break
curl like a wave
then break
curl then break
bits of ancestors clotting each froth
--Adrián Castro, “Poem to Greet Your Memory”

Who am I if I lose my memory? What do I become if amnesia, or dementia, or trauma strip me of the memories that define my identity? In the absence of our own memories, we depend on those of other people to know who we are. The 2019 documentary *Tell Me Who I Am* clearly and poignantly illustrates this through the true story of Alex Lewis, who suffered total amnesia following a motorcycle accident and relied on his twin brother Marcus to restore his memories of childhood and adolescence.

While the experiences of Alex and Marcus are personal and familial, a similar process of forgetting takes place when cultural/historical memory is silenced or erased, as in the case of the descendants of slaves in the Americas. Saidiya Hartman explores this process in depth in *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route*, discovering that the slave trade left a gaping hole, a devastating absence where no trace of the African ancestors could be found. In one instance during her year-long research stay in Ghana, an adolescent boy gives Hartman a letter in which he declares, “Because of the slave trade you lose your mother, if you know your history, you know where you come from.” Hartman reflects that “To lose your mother was to be denied your kin, country, and identity. To lose your mother was to forget your past” (85). She is confronted again and again with the intricate connections that link memory, history, and identity. In the condescending attitude of a Ghanaian man who immediately recognizes Hartman as an outsider, she perceives that what he really wants her to tell him is “Who and what are you?” (56). In H.G. Carrillo’s 2004 novel *Loosing My Spanish*, similar incomprehension and suspicion infuse the hostile question “What the fuck are you?” hurled at the Afro-Cuban American narrator by African American boys who hear him speaking Spanish (175).¹ In both cases, the unintelligibility of these black Americans stems from the absence of a complete, unbroken narrative of their history. As Christina Sharpe points out in *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, the history of the descendants of slaves is characterized by “myriad silences and ruptures...accumulated erasures, projections, fabrications, and misnamings” (12).

These silences, ruptures, and erasures are acute for Afro-Latinxs; they share the legacy of the Middle Passage with African Americans but their intergenerational trauma stems from slavery in the Caribbean, not the American South. The novels and poetry discussed in this study resist erasure in different ways. Nelly Rosario’s 2002 novel *Song of the Water Saints* insistently reminds readers of the traces that the violence of slavery has left on ensuing generations. The poems in Adrián Castro’s collections *Cantos to Blood and Honey* (1997), *Wise Fish: Tales in 6/8 Time* (2005), and *Handling Destiny* (2009) respond to the question “Who and what are you?” through vivid evocations of the Middle Passage, Africa-centered imagery, and calls for remembrance.

Loosing My Spanish proposes a thorough interrogation and rewriting of Latinx history that demands recognition of the collective trauma of the slave trade. These writers engage in postmemorial work that pushes readers to “wake up” and acknowledge the impact of the Middle Passage, the Afro-Latinx “past not yet past” (Sharpe 13) that cannot – must not – be silenced.

Recuperation of suppressed histories is necessary in order to counter challenges to the very possibility of Afro-Latinx identity. Afro-Latinxs may be perceived as culturally and racially unintelligible because their identity defies easy classification according to American racial categories (neither Latinx nor African American). In a 2000 *Miami Herald* interview, Mariel refugee Natividad Torres calls attention to the near invisibility of black Cubans and their contributions in discussions about the exile community. Describing this phenomenon as “white silent noise,” Torres declares, “It’s as if we didn’t exist” (Santiago 1E). Two incidents involving the narrator of *Loosing My Spanish* corroborate Torres’ observation. Óscar recalls walking with his friend Román and encountering “boys from another school, black boys, boys who looked like us, [who] heard our Spanish and asked, What the fuck are you? What the fuck are you?” (175) He is reminded of this disturbing encounter years later when his elderly mother wanders off and is found with a group of African American evangelists: “Faces just like ours, Román’s, Amá’s and mine. I know that look, seen it before: black faces wondering how Spanish came out of our mouths. What are you?” (236-237) Óscar suggests that the writers of history bear some responsibility for this denial, having relegated Afro-Latinxs to the shadows. This character, a history teacher at a private boys’ high school in Chicago, compares Afro-Cubans like himself to ghosts:

I have disappeared. There are no dates, no events by which I can mark my existence. I suddenly have no right to be in front of a room; the literature denies my existence; I am disappeared by the very text that I quote: pues, señores, yo soy the apparition that speaks for ghosts. Somewhere between the grand sweeping mention of Latin American slavery and the Spanish-American War, voiceless, nameless—sin azúcar, sin boca—I’m left the blithe espíritu negro de los campos y cabaret until el 8 de enero de 1959 when Castro rides into Cuba to declare all of la Isla mulato (110-111).

These examples suggest that in the United States, Afro-Latinx identity may be completely off the radar of mainstream society.

The invisibility of Afro-Latinxs to which Óscar alludes is in part due to the tendency of historians to ignore the human aspect of the Middle Passage. This is one of the most painful discoveries that Saidiya Hartman makes through her research in Ghana. She observes that “the men and women and children...were all but invisible in most of the history written about the slave trade,” adding that “The ocean never failed to remind me of the losses” (32). Toni Morrison similarly identifies the ocean as a symbol of the absence of millions of slaves from the annals of history:

All those people who threw themselves into the sea had been violently ignored; no one praised them, nobody knows their names, nobody can remember them, not in the United States nor in Africa. Millions of people disappeared without a trace, and there is not one monument anywhere to pay homage to them, because they never arrived safely on shore. So it’s like a whole nation that is under the sea (38–39).

In *Song of the Water Saints*, Rosario also incorporates the image of a “nation under the sea” when the character Amalfi tearfully asks her mother, “¿Mamá, did you know about that civilization of Atlantis that disappeared a long time ago under the sea?” (199-200). Here the parallel to the human toll of the Middle Passage is unmistakable. Adrián Castro offers a poetic vision of this devastating loss through the dramatic, powerful imagery in his three poetry collections. In *Cantos to Blood and Honey*, Castro portrays the innumerable nameless slaves as “Those who were whipped into ships / whose planks squeaked the word torture / whose peste reeked the noise agony / whose treasures were never found” (“XIV.” *Cantos* 98). He emphasizes the connection between word and reality, suggesting that excluding Africans from the historical narrative – failing to tell their story – imperils their very existence:

Yet none of this was written in book
tale keeps changing
memory is survival...
Tales of first arrivals
bereft of language (“In the Beginning (II),” *Cantos* 151)

Castro continues to develop this theme in *Wise Fish: Tales in 6/8 Time*. In “Misa Caribeña,” he again highlights the writing of history, specifically the existential threat presented when the voices of those in power are the only ones heard: “?How to proceed / when your script has been writ by others / declared to be in your best interest / without finding your best interest” (*Wise Fish* 61).

In a similar vein, Carrillo critiques the omission of the monumental contributions of slaves from the official history of the Caribbean. During a class lecture, Óscar urges his students to start with an already huge number and then multiply “by a million billion, and you’ll have the approximate number close to a billionth of the number of strokes, beads of sweat, bleeding fingers and broken backs that lined the sugar bowls of the best of houses in La Habana, in the palatial estates of Santiago, and *it all got there without an acknowledged voice*” (92, my emphasis). In this passage, Óscar starkly contrasts the sheer magnitude of the slave trade and the total disenfranchisement of the slaves themselves. In *Handling Destiny*, Castro explores the concept of erasure at the level of individual identity, asking “How does a child bereft / of history make his petition / acceptable to spirits?” (“Handling Destiny: On Crossing Borders,” *Handling Destiny* 48). The image of the “child bereft of history” resonates with Hartman’s conclusion that the descendants of slaves in effect lack a clear genealogy: “No matter how much we embellished and dressed things up, the truth couldn’t be avoided: slaves did not possess lineages” (77). These writers underscore the disjointed nature of historical memory with regard to the trans-Atlantic slave trade and its legacy.

Marked by invisibility, voicelessness, and loss, the Middle Passage represents a kind of oblivion that is closely linked with forgetting. The act of forgetting, deliberate or unintentional, individual or collective, plays a pivotal role in producing the “myriad silences” that mark the history of Afro-descendants. In *Lose Your Mother*, Hartman calls attention to the significance of this act, asking “What is it we choose to remember about the past and what is it we will to forget? Did my great-great-grandmother believe that forgetting provided the possibility of a new life? ... Was the experience of slavery best represented by all the stories I would never know? Were gaps and silences and empty rooms the substance of my history?” (15-16). She sums up the historical amnesia surrounding the African diasporic experience by declaring, “I am the relic of an experience most preferred not to remember” (18).

Afro-Latinx writers share this inherited trauma and the legacy of silence. In “The Pact,” Castro underscores the importance of knowing one’s history – “Memory & continuity. Keeping el hilo de la conversación. Never losing the wavy & fragile link that keeps you grounded to yr root” – but acknowledges that this may be impossible: “No one remembers the details of their creation... No one remembers. Ésto sí es trágico” (*Cantos* 126). Castro’s “Poem to Greet Your Memory (II)” poses the compelling question “What dishes would burst if you were never mentioned again” and continues with the painful recognition that “There aren’t any elders who nod / who say I remember yr birth / yr initiations yr marriage yr children / even the dancers at yr funeral” (*Cantos* 27). Here he alludes to forgetting that begins at the level of families and communities and can eventually fragment cultural memory² or destroy it altogether. As described by scholars Jan Assmann and John Czaplicka, cultural memory “preserves the store of knowledge from which a group derives an awareness of its unity and peculiarity” (130). The loss of cultural memory, then, can impact the identity of the group and render it invisible.

Connections among memory, forgetting, history, and identity are foregrounded in *Loosing My Spanish* as well. Óscar’s mother (Amá) suffers from dementia and begins to forget who she is; Cuban-born characters find that as their exile in the United States stretches into years and decades, they gradually forget the details of their past; and Óscar’s lectures reveal the degree to which the Middle Passage and the tragic history of slavery have been forgotten. Óscar draws a parallel between Amá’s dementia and other forms of forgetting: “It’s so much like knowing that the place that you think of as home, the place that held every dream you had before you got to it, ancestral dreams completely made up of then and will be, is the same place that you’ll pack and leave or simply flee into the night” (256). The novel thus reads like a desperate attempt to recuperate family history as well as the missing pieces of Afro-Cuban history – both complicated, broken narratives – to weave them together, and to make sense of them.

The silencing of Afro-Latinx history is one of the many ways in which the contributions of Latinxs in the United States are ignored or even erased. The legacy of the Middle Passage and slavery have marked Afro-descendants throughout the Americas, yet the absence of documentation leaves a void where their history should be. As Hartman reflects, “Words like ‘oblivion’ and ‘catastrophe’ crossed my mind. In the dungeon, there were remains but no stories that could resurrect the dead except the stories I invented” (116). This need for creative intervention suggests that artists may play a key role in resisting erasure.³ The stories told by writers like Rosario, Castro, and Carrillo reflect what Holocaust scholar Marianne Hirsch calls postmemory. In the early 1990s, Hirsch coined the term to describe “the relationship that the ‘generation after’ bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before” (*The Generation of Postmemory* 5). Hirsch asserts that these devastating experiences are so powerful that they can be transmitted to later generations “so deeply as to seem to constitute memories in their own right” (“The Generation of Postmemory” 103). Mediation of these memories – postmemorial work – can occur through literature as writers “[strive] to reactivate and reembody” traumatic histories by interpreting them and lending them aesthetic expression (Hirsch, “The Generation of Postmemory” 111).

Following Castro’s assertion that “memory is survival” (“In the Beginning [II],” *Cantos* 151), I would argue that the postmemorial work in which many diasporic writers engage is a compelling form of resistance. For example, African American writer and activist George Jackson eloquently expresses his perception of assimilating ancestral trauma in *Soledad Brother*:

My recall is nearly perfect, time has faded nothing. I recall the very first kidnap. I’ve lived through the passage, died on the passage, lain in the unmarked, shallow graves of the

millions who fertilized the Amerikan soil with their corpses; cotton and corn growing out of my chest “unto the third and fourth generation,” the tenth, the hundredth (233-234; cited in Hartman 233).

Hartman echoes Jackson’s inherited pain, pondering “Could I trace my despair back to the first generation stolen from their country?... [W]as it that each generation felt anew the yoke of a damaged life...?” (130) Both of these writers are processing the residual trauma of postmemory, vestiges that can also be traced in the fiction of Rosario and Carrillo and in Castro’s poetry.⁴ Ruptures and omissions in history have left the question, “Who am I?” unanswered for Afro-Latinxs. These contemporary authors are members of what Hirsch and Leo Spitzer would call “postgenerations” that are “haunted by stories that have not been worked through.” In “Small Acts of Repair: The Unclaimed Legacy of the Romanian Holocaust,” Hirsch and Spitzer observe that “Postgenerations still find that they owe the victims this act of attentive listening, as well as this work of historical repair” (18).

Attentive listening and historical repair aptly describe the processing of postmemory through which Rosario, Castro, and Carrillo push back against forgetting and oblivion and reclaim history, bringing it into the present. In *Song of the Water Saints*, Rosario makes subtle yet frequent allusions to the Middle Passage and the legacy of slavery in ways that suggest the pervasiveness of this ancestral trauma. Early in the novel, a frustrated Graciela “spat her bitterness into the water...whose depths contained...hundreds of ball-and-chained bones trapped in white coral” (31). Her neighbor, Viejo Cuco, observes her wanderlust and warns her that “Your pai always said it, gal, that you were born with the hot leg, like that maroon grandpai o’ yours” (47). Several characters reflect the negative attitudes about blackness that have marked Latin American society since colonial times.⁵ Unfavorable comparisons to slaves are common; Graciela’s second husband, Casimiro, urges her to take better care of herself by admonishing, “No one wants to end up with hair like a maroon’s...No need to work so hard, Cielo. Santana sent the slaves back to Haiti in the last century” (57). Similarly, after witnessing a young boy begging at a local shop, Graciela’s daughter Mercedita learns from the owner Mustafá (ironically of Middle Eastern descent himself) “never to behave or compare herself to people like that little boy, never to act so hungry, so slave-minded, so indolent, so black...” (108).

Yet try as she might, Graciela is unable to free herself from the weight of postmemory. When she leaves home and goes to live in a convent, she is haunted by terrifying recurring dreams that suggest that she may have inherited the memories of her enslaved ancestors: “The dreams continued... She tore through dense forest, her heels further ripping on thorns and exposed tree roots. Fear of rats, then of running guardias, then of slave-hunters with dogs...” (155). These vivid “memories” of escape from captivity could be interpreted as reflections of Graciela’s intense yearning to be free of family responsibilities and societal expectations. But perhaps this same desire for freedom has been passed down through the generations. At the end of her life, she drifts into a semi-conscious state that once again evokes the trauma of slavery:

Running. The pillow was cool against her copper hands – copper turned green from the sea, the evil sea. Pillow, cotton softness smelling of the cane field where her forgotten grandfather held her hand as a child. Long stalks that hid him once from torches running in the night... ‘Graciela,’ her marooned grandfather’s words returned to her (173).

Considering Graciela's condition, this could hardly be described as "attentive listening," yet she has nonetheless assimilated her grandfather's history into her own life story. In so doing, she engages in the recuperation of historical memory on an individual level.

In addition, Rosario weaves references to slave markets and the rape of female slaves into Graciela's present. Having left Casimiro and their young daughter, Graciela meets Eli, a German man who is doing "research" on the sexual merits of Caribbean women. After she bathes, Eli inspects her in a way that bears a striking resemblance to the way that slaves were evaluated before purchase: "He made Graciela walk around the tub of dirty water. Had her bend over from behind. Had her raise her arms. Had her untie all of her hair. She did. And more. He could easily replace her with a smaller waist and a rounder ass, she knew, so she shimmied harder" (80). This scene involving a white man in effect buying a black woman serves to "memorialize chattel slavery and its afterlives, which are unfolding still" (Sharpe 20). The brothel in which Graciela's sexual encounter with Eli takes place is likewise linked to the slave trade through the family history of the madame, La Pola. According to Eli,

Legend goes that the family business started with the rape of La Pola's enslaved great-great-great-grandmother, in the times of the colonies, before your slave rebellions. Quirós, slaveowner sent by the Devil himself... [s]aid blood-mixing spit out better fruit than the original. Eh, son of a bitch sired his own babes for sale... ¿La Pola's great-great-great-grandmother? Was the first of his slaves to supply his stock (75-76).

This passage presents the systematic violation of slaves as a form of inherited trauma that has an afterlife in the present, as both origin and destiny for poor Afro-Dominican women like Graciela. In *Bridges to Memory: Postmemory in Contemporary Ethnic American Women's Fiction*, Maria Rice Bellamy comments on the legacy of the "postmemorial daughter" and her role in the recuperation of suppressed history:

[S]exual violence against slave women by their masters engendered a class of people born out of violation and raised under the oppression of actual relatives. In these instances, identification with the traumatic inheritance requires the postmemorial daughter to recover the silenced voice, violated body, and discredited knowledge of the victim, while recognizing herself as the inheritor of the legacy of violence (8).

Although Graciela most likely lacks the self-awareness to recognize this about herself, the narrative of which she is part nonetheless brings this tragic and largely silenced history to the forefront.

Along with these clear references to slavery, Rosario has woven recurring motifs into *Song of the Water Saints* that allude to the pervasive impact of the Middle Passage on the novel's Afro-Dominican characters. In this context, the symbolic weight of ships and ocean imagery is evident, for both are directly connected to the slave trade. Ironically, however, these images bear a largely positive connotation for Graciela, who associates ships with freedom. As a young girl, she tells her mother "Mai, God willing, I'm gonna ride ships" (26). Later she shares this sentiment with Eli: "She told him she wanted to learn to read, and to ride a ship someday" (73). Even in childbirth ships hover near: "The day her daughter was born, Graciela had rocked under anvils of cumulonimbus ships" (34). Indeed, from the first page of the novel Graciela is portrayed as a character whose essence is somehow linked to the sea. In the erotic postcard photo for which she

and her boyfriend were paid to pose, the caption reads “*There is ocean in her eyes*” (3). Of course, the prevalence of sea imagery is not surprising considering the Caribbean setting and diasporic focus of *Song of the Water Saints*. As Jennifer Terry points out, “sea imagery conveys mobility, submergence, distance, interconnection, and fluidity, all of which might prove evocative and valuable in a contemporary cultural response to and definition of diaspora identity” (485). In Graciela we see a fascinating juxtaposition of the ocean as symbol of freedom and independence but also as embodiment of the Middle Passage, all integral parts of her Afro-Dominican identity.

In the poetry of Adrián Castro, who claims both Dominican and Cuban heritages, postmemory is a thread that runs throughout, calling on the voices of history. These voices speak through African spirituality and rhythms, and through imagery that painfully recalls the Middle Passage and slavery, proclaiming forceful resistance to silence and erasure. In a poem entitled “In the Beginning (I)” that chronicles “The wedding between Spain & Africa,” the phrase “talkin’ ‘bout tribe y history” is emphasized through repetition (*Cantos to Blood and Honey* 14, 17). To talk about “tribe y history” there must be access to memories, or more accurately postmemory. In “The Logic of Goatskin,” the poetic voice declares that “We’re summoned by the echo of memory ... as you & I are summoned / to share the same memories—” (*Cantos* 34-35). These verses speak to postmemory as a collective process that can involve a community that shares a common history, in this context “the memory sold thru generations / crossing oceans” (“In Summary the African Cycle,” *Wise Fish* 71). In the aptly entitled “Poem to Greet Your Memory,” Castro likewise incorporates ocean imagery to reflect the movement intrinsic to diasporic identity; the poetic voice describes

how origins tend to curl like a wave
then break
curl like a wave
then break
curl then break
bits of ancestors clotting each froth (*Cantos* 25)⁶

The ancestors in Castro’s poems are largely African, with spirituality, mythology, and music that are intrinsic to Afro-Caribbean identity. Two poems that combine these African-inspired elements with subtle allusions to the Middle Passage are “Misa Caribeña” and “Ontological Afro Logic.” In the former, the poetic voice warns,

Filter the rhythm
music of
accents
‘or else’
end up at the bottom of the sea
grinding bone con bone
busy trying to get born
again
in another place— (*Wise Fish* 65)

These richly-layered verses, with their haunting image of bones on the sea floor, suggest the danger inherent in losing a connection with one's ancestral culture. The latter poem extends this metaphor through the voice of Olúwò, a head priest/elder of the Yoruba Orisha tradition:

'There are too many
spirits lying in the ocean'
says Olúwò
Water in spite of having
no legs no
arms
has made sand of them bones (*Handling Destiny* 90)

This existential threat, similar to Saidiya Hartman's notion of losing one's mother, is dramatically portrayed in "Cancioncita Pa' la Ceiba/Song for the Sacred Mother Tree":

In African jungles she was teak
but when her children were
kidnapped
they could not bring her
aboard
ships whose wood squeaked the word
torture... (*Cantos* 56)

The pain of leaving behind the mother tree – the ancestors – is even more devastating because the wood from other trees has been made into vessels of the slave trade.

Yet other voices in Castro's poetry combat this loss by insistently telling stories that fill in the blanks and the empty pages of official history. Like a firsthand observer, the poetic voice of "Pulling the Muse from the Drum" paints a vivid picture of slave capture:

When chiefs 'n princesses
were traded for spice & steel
chained & herded unto Spanish galleons
How ominous to watch from a bush
sons of Felipe or Charles
iron vested men stalking
the Ivory Coast (*Cantos* 40-41)

This poem depicts the actions that initiated the Middle Passage, with the value of human life measured in consumer goods and the slaves treated as livestock. A clear link between slavery and the genesis of Afro-Caribbean identity is established in the poem "In the Beginning (I)," transforming intense images of suffering into a creation story:

In the beginning there were chains
entwined on legs like serpents on sugar cane
the bleeding syrup made the steel stick
.....

bits of flesh flew from ships
& landed on island soil
(giving birth to a new people) (*Cantos* 14)

A uniquely powerful representation of the magnitude of the slave trade and its human toll is conveyed through the metaphor of “floating coffins” in “One Irony of the Caribbean.” The poetic voice repeats this metaphor five times, including the following verses:

The triangle that ensnared freedom
corralled continents into a trinity of suffering
the ships which chiseled these shores
in effect floating coffins
.....
the same homes built
by survivors of floating coffins
They built them
with the same wood that bolted their ancestors’ chains
The same wood glued with sugarcane sap
.....
They launched it [a corpse] to sea to reach home to
reunite with the others
they launched it to sea
to begin anew
in effect a floating coffin (*Wise Fish* 35-36)

This poem is a tribute to the (post)memory of slavery through its wealth of motifs like the triangle, freedom, trinity, ships, the sea, chains, and sugarcane. At the same time, it serves as a pointed critique of the invisibility of the slaves who were crucial to the development of Caribbean societies. A floating coffin is adrift, lacking moorings and more importantly a permanent place to stay – a home. It is also anonymous, for no tombstone marks a floating coffin. In every way this image is a telling metaphor for the countless millions of slaves, unmoored from history, homeless, and nameless. Castro does not simply denounce the abuses and exploitation of slaves, however; in “Handling Destiny: Prayer on Four Tableaus” he pays homage to their strength and resilience. The poetic voice reminds Afro-descendants of

the countless masks that have come before you
clothing tattered
horrible in their skin—
they’ve weathered what loss can do
what forgetting can do
what loneliness what ignorance
can do
They stood firm on a cultivated field
while sugarcane was sold before their eyes
while they scorched fields of families
before their very eyes (*Handling Destiny* 29)

Reverence for the ancestors (“the countless masks that have come before you”) and their enormous sacrifices is evident. The poem honors Afro-Caribbean people’s ability to weather loss, forgetting, loneliness, and ignorance and to stand firm in order to survive.

This poetic recuperation of historical memory is a key form of resistance to erasure that runs like an ocean current through Castro’s work. In poem after poem, the importance of remembering is foregrounded, as in “Poem to Greet Your Memory”: “Entonces/then / then/entonces / yes we can resist the urge to forget / (se puede)” (*Cantos* 25). There is power and hope in this writing, which proclaims the invincibility of the African legacy and a vision for a new, inclusive history. In “Pulling the Muse from the Drum,” the poetic voice expresses this resistance, declaring

The language of hands hide & cedar
could not be silenced
the ancestor’s mother tongue
thundering who they were
where they come from
.....
We hear the sound of history (*Cantos* 42)

Several poems provide affirmation that postmemorial work can indeed perform the “small acts of repair” of which Marianne Hirsch speaks. “[T]he wise the ancestral were remembered / gourds of memory spilled / to refresh the present quench / the future,” reports the poetic voice of “In the Beginning (I)” (*Cantos* 15), while an Afro-descendant “returning” to the ancestral homeland is told, “you are history happening— / (Having come from across the waters / survived the onslaught of man / to re-tell history with your words—)” (“Petition at Òshun River, Oshogbo, Nigeria,” *Handling Destiny* 66).

One of Castro’s most eloquent testimonials to the tenacity and fortitude of the slaves and their legacy is “When Hearing Bàtá Drums...” This poem tells of Atandá, a Yoruba slave who was one of the first drummers brought to Cuba, “reciting history / praise names to remind that we came / from somewhere” (*Handling Destiny* 70). The bàtá drums, with their African origin and association with slavery, their unique shape and composition, and their rich, distinctive sounds and rhythms, are an effective metaphor for reclaiming historical memory: “These bàtá carved like hourglass / speak because of tension on skin / squeezing the bandages of injured history” (*Handling Destiny* 70). Virtually every image in these verses – a bàtá drum shaped like an hourglass, tension on skin, the bandages of injured history – alludes to the shared past of the African diaspora. In the final verses the poetic voice declares that the sound of the drum imparts “the flavor of who we are / *our history* rhythmic / bitter & sweet / hard but / *ours*” (71; my emphases). With this forceful ending, “When Hearing Bàtá Drums...” affirms the importance of postmemorial work, represented by the drumming of Atandá, in the process of healing the collective “injured history.”

Unlike Adrián Castro’s poetry, *Loosing My Spanish* contains few direct references to Africa or African cultures. Postmemory of the Middle Passage and slavery is nonetheless a key element in Óscar Delossantos’ narrative. Carrillo presents a touching scene in which Óscar’s mother wanders off and begins to dance in the street, in effect performing postmemory:

There are those who would say that it was her mother’s mother’s mother’s mother’s yambú,⁷ or maybe just my abuela’s, the yambú of a haughty negra...I don’t know if

my mother had ever seen mi abuela dance the yambú, or that she had ever done it before. All I know is that it was something that she seemed to reach for easily, like a spoon or a comb, and it was there. At hand, suddenly there. In the same way that something you have always known you knew, but had no idea that you knew (207-208).

Key points in this passage are the possibility expressed by Óscar that Amá had never danced the yambú nor even seen it done, and his observation that it seemed to emanate from within, “as a memory just under the skin, an imprint” (321). On the surface this incident seems to illustrate the concept of an “African essence” shared by the people of the diaspora. I would argue, however, that what appears problematically essentialist may in fact be postmemory resulting from shared history and collective trauma.

Óscar’s way of wrestling with his legacy as an Afro-Latinx is to teach about it. With nothing to lose as he approaches the end of his teaching career, he sets out to rewrite Latin American history in order to fill in the silences and omissions surrounding the slave trade. He engages his students in an “experiential learning” activity simulating the Middle Passage that requires them to physically feel the impact of history:

Your hands are bound; your legs are manacled... you pass over waves and swells in the sea that you tell yourselves is not the sea; not the sea now that makes you sick up all over yourselves during the first month or so out... Pretend you’re no longer lying in your own urine and excrement or that of the man next to you... You’ve forgotten Quiñones has been dead twenty days since the boat has begun to move underneath you, has been rotting since... You’ll be dead nearly a century and it will be your great-great-great-grandchildren who will be able to tell you – will be able to pronounce in your new language – that he died on an escuna, a goleta (77-78).

For Óscar’s Afro-Latinx students, this history is literally inscribed on their bodies. In one of his lectures on the history of Cuba, he reminds them of this legacy: “Azúcar, mis hijos, cane field after cane field... Blackness as commodity... blackness that could be inherited, passed down for centuries...” (60) He aims harsh critique at Spanish priest Bartolomé de las Casas, who is typically venerated for his battle against the exploitation and abuse of indigenous people in the Americas. The teacher focuses instead on de las Casas’ support for the enslavement of Africans (“African black las Casas ushered in boatload by boatload” [80]). The priest argued that these slaves were stronger and more resilient because of their “strong backs, strong arms; the ability to work long hours in the sun, skin used to sun, made for sun, made from the sun” and that they were “better suited for work in the fields, for work, for toil or slavery than the bodies of the indigenous” (81).

Óscar’s insistence on foregrounding the Atlantic slave trade and de las Casas’ role in it is characteristic of a rigorous historian who seeks to recuperate part of Latinx history that often goes untold. On a much more personal level, the narrator’s postmemorial work connects him and other Afro-Latinxs to a larger historical context. This link between personal history and major historical events is a recurring theme in *Loosing My Spanish*. When Óscar’s Abuela was working as a maid for a well-to-do Cuban family, she evoked visions through her fortune telling ability to remind her young daughter that their ancestors were slaves. Suddenly Amá is forced to “remember” who she is:

Past the clink of ankle shackles, past women sweating in field after field of azúcar, past women tending white children, until she could run no longer... niña... don't think you're better than anybody else, remember, negrita. Negrita. Negrita, there's laundry still on the line; there's ironing to be done; cover your hair, negrita, nobody wants to see that wool (55-56).

These seemingly inherited memories of a traumatic past dispel Amá's childlike fantasies of wealth, finery, and whiteness and in some ways define her.⁸ Marianne Hirsch observes, similarly, that the descendants of Holocaust survivors are shaped "however indirectly, by traumatic fragments of events that still defy narrative reconstruction and exceed comprehension. These events happened in the past, but their effects continue in the present" (*The Generation of Postmemory* 5). For both Amá and Óscar, postmemory is the afterlife of slavery in their present and plays a key role in their understanding of who they are.

We may now return to the question implicit in Saidiya Hartman's encounter in Ghana, "Who and what are you?" For Óscar, part of the answer lies in the significant impact of historical events, of slavery's tragic past, on the identity of Afro-Latinxs. He declares that "My face, this color, a subtle legacy of the British Royal African Company, is, as they say in the vernacular, el color of my Spanish" (21), a clear affirmation that Afro-Latinxs are not invisible, that they do exist. In Óscar's view, "Each and every one of us wakes each morning and quickly gathers up tiny bits of our pasts to know who we are. And it is by telling them over and over to ourselves that we live" (21).⁹ But what if one's history has been silenced, blocking access to memory, to those "tiny bits" of one's past? This is when literature takes on a vital role in the construction of cultural identity, through works that serve as what Aleida Assman calls "imaginary literary supplement[s] to historical memory" (106). The writings of Nelly Rosario, Adrián Castro, and H.G. Carrillo enrich historical memory through their exploration of Afro-Latinx identity that calls attention to the slave trade and its consequences. We can thus see the power in Christina Sharpe's image of a/wake: the "waking up" that is necessary to fully tell the ongoing story of the African diaspora; the wake of a ship that recalls the atrocities of the Middle Passage; and the loss and mourning associated with a funeral wake. "In the wake," Sharpe tells us, "the past that is not past reappears, always, to rupture the present" (9). *Song of the Water Saints*, *Loosing My Spanish*, and Adrián Castro's poetry suggest that for these writers of the African diaspora, one of the afterlives of slavery is a pressing need to find their mothers, so to speak, and to rescue their history from oblivion.

Endnotes

¹ This question resonates eerily with H.G. Carrillo's own experience as an author, in ways that were discovered only recently. After Carrillo's death on April 20, 2020, it was revealed that while he had professionally and personally presented himself as an Afro-Cuban who arrived in the U.S. at age seven, he was in fact Herman Glenn Carroll, born to African American parents in Detroit, Michigan. While unpacking this revelation is well beyond the scope of this article, it does shed ironic light on this passage in Carrillo's text. It also adds Carrillo's work to the ongoing conversation about the larger phenomenon of racial passing and cultural appropriation, themes that Afro-Latinx writers have explored. For the purposes of this piece, I will continue to refer to Carrillo by the name under which he published. I will continue to process the complications surrounding his own personal identity, though this does not change my analysis of Loosing My Spanish and its representations of Afro-Latinx identity and experience.

² In "Collective Memory and Cultural Identity," Jan Assmann and John Czaplicka define cultural memory as comprising "that body of reusable texts, images, and rituals specific to each society in each epoch, whose 'cultivation' serves to stabilize and convey that society's self-image" (132).

³ In this vein, Christina Sharpe asks, "what, if anything, survives this insistent Black exclusion, this ontological negation, and how do literature, performance, and visual culture observe and mediate this un/survival?" (14).

⁴ In the context of African Americans and other ethnic communities, Maria Rice Bellamy calls this manifestation of postmemory "trauma's ghost," a "haunting vestige" left by traumatic events "both on those who experience them and on their descendants for multiple generations" (1). She adds that trauma's ghost "today haunts every person descended from American slaves and slaveholders who has been imprinted by the institutions of racism that have so defined the United States" (2).

⁵ As Magnus Momer observes in *Estado, razas y cambio social en la Hispanoamérica colonial*, "en América la piel, más o menos blanca, decide la clase que ocupa el hombre en la sociedad. Un blanco, aunque monte descalzo a caballo, se imagina ser de la nobleza del país" (In the Americas one's skin, more or less white, determines the class that a man occupies in society. A white man, even if he rides bareback and barefoot, imagines himself to be part of the country's nobility; my translation) (86).

⁶ This description of the construction of Afro-Caribbean identity is in some ways similar to Antonio Benítez-Rojo's elegant "repeating island" metaphor to represent Caribbean cultures. Benítez-Rojo asserts that "within the sociocultural fluidity that the Caribbean archipelago presents... within its generalized instability of vertigo and hurricane, one can sense the features of an island that 'repeats' itself, unfolding and bifurcating until it reaches all the seas and lands of the earth...[E]very repetition is a practice that necessarily entails a difference and a step toward nothingness..." (3).

⁷ A form of the Afro-Cuban rumba, incorporating rhythms and dance moves brought by slaves from West and Central Africa (primarily Yoruba) combined with Spanish (gypsy and flamenco) influences.

⁸ These "memories" resemble Graciela's frightening dreams of being pursued by guards in *Song of the Water Saints*. In both works, a character experiences what Jennifer Terry describes as "a troubling encounter with dislocation, terror, and death, figured as a haunting presence or recollection" (483). Terry argues that this type of incorporation of the Middle Passage and slavery into works by writers of the African diaspora can be "part of an attempt to 'write back' to previous discourses of history or literary representations" (483), an endeavor to which Óscar Delossantos clearly contributes.

⁹ The irony of this line is apparent in light of the aforementioned discovery of H.G. Carrillo's fictitious biography. In a *Washington Post* article published after the writer's death, reporter Paul Duggan observes that "[Carrillo's] personal origin story, which he shared publicly and with those close to him throughout his adult life, was an extension of his fiction, a product of imagination...He had repeated that piece of biography so many times over the years to his professors and academic colleagues, to his husband and fellow writers, that 'he probably believed it himself,' said his sister, Susan Carroll" ("Novelist H.G. Carrillo")

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