

RITUAL AND THE POETICS OF MEMORY
IN FRED D'AGUIAR'S *BILL OF RIGHTS*

By

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Remember ye not the former things, neither consider the things of old.

--Isaiah 43:18

I'm speaking here not as uh, the administrator, I'm speaking as a prophet today.

--Jim Jones, November 18, 1978

On the day of the Jonestown massacre, Jim Jones's voice on the so-called FBI "Death Tape"—the transcripts in the *Jonestown Audiotape Primary Project*—revealed his weirdly compelling performance in many registers and roles, not the least of which was as a kind of prophet. Again and again, his voice by turns stammering and composed, Jones draws the congregation of the People's Temple from questions about the past to the acting out of his apocalyptic fantasy, where death in an unjust world is better than life in it. When reminded by People's Temple member Christine Miller of his former promise to move the community to Russia, should their mission fail in Guyana, Jones dismisses her as "a very good agitator," as backwards-looking, unimportant, and above all, as a delay for the arrival of his own version of heaven's kingdom. If, a denial of the past, its promises and traumas, was the means for Jones to enact his November 18 ritual of apocalyptic presentness, then a reclamation of the *past*, through acts of remembering, might constitute a contrary motion to Jones's. Staging a ritual of remembering, or *anamnesis*, would, in other words, constitute the antithesis of Jones's, and Jonestown's, temporality. This antithesis would serve as an occasion for the re-introduction of an historical dimension, making *anamnesis* a repetition that asserts a disruptive difference. (Voegelin 1990, 10-11).

My use of the term *anamnesis* here and throughout this paper draws on the work of Eric Voegelin, which attempts to make sense of what he calls the “horizon of consciousness” as “a ceaseless act of expanding, ordering, articulating, and correcting itself” (Voegelin 1990, 4). The fact that Voegelin regards individual consciousness as both a field of activity and an act, as both noun and verb, quite usefully applies to my analysis of Fred D’Aguiar’s book-length poem, *Bill of Rights* (1998). In this paper, I intend to read D’Aguiar’s attempt at recovering the past from and through its violences as both a representation of Jonestown’s final events and as an ethically and politically fraught re-presentation.¹ Rather than being simply an act of mimesis, *Bill of Rights* performs a transformative ritual aimed at making a new version of the traumatic events of Jonestown and at healing the historical wounds inflicted there.

Bill of Rights represents the subject, topically and in terms of the poem’s split speaker, of the Jonestown deaths. Its double-voiced lyrical engagement with imagined events, within Jonestown before and after the November, 1978 calamity, construct a self-alienated speaker whose “triangular journey,” as Hena Maes-Jelineck writes, evokes not only the African slave trade through recalled experiences in Brixton, Chattanooga, and Kalamazoo but also a “persistent mind enslavement” unique to modernity (Maes-Jelineck 1997, 211). Drawing a connection between Jim Jones’s cult of personality and William Blake’s “mind-forg’d manacles,” Maes-Jelineck conflates modernity with objectivizing ideologies of industrialization and conquest that make possible the theory and practice of

¹ For non-fictional works that attempt to recuperate the image of Jonestown, and of Jones’s followers, see works by Rebecca Moore (1985, 1988, 1989). Moore’s family was directly involved with the Peoples Temple, and her multiple volumes on the subject of Jonestown constitute an almost entirely unique documentary resource.

slavery.² Indeed, the flight of D'Aguiar's speaker to Guyana has strong echoes of the claustrophobic conditions aboard a slave ship, with the speaker, "among/ The agile ones, curled in the overhead/ Luggage compartment" (D'Aguiar 1998, 2). Maes-Jelineck further reads D'Aguiar as using poetry as a "polyphonic instrument" that maps "the extraordinary cultural diversity and resources of the English language in Britain and, in the process, asserting the people's human rights" (Maes-Jelineck 1997, 212). But Maes-Jelineck is unclear about exactly how D'Aguiar's poetic strategies constitute something like "the people's"—Which people? Where? When?—"bill of rights"—What is the nature of the bill? Which rights will it protect? She is likewise unclear about whether poetic polyphony, however skillfully deployed, is truly capable of interrupting the smooth and continuous functioning of the monomaniacal ideology of a charismatic tyrant like Jim Jones.

Maes-Jelineck's essay largely summarizes D'Aguiar's poem as a point of departure for her more involved reading of Wilson Harris. And since little else has thus far been written on *Bill of Rights*, I will begin with what I see as a constructive juxtaposition. By placing D'Aguiar's poetics in *Bill of Rights* alongside those of another twentieth-century book-length poem, William Carlos Williams's *Paterson* (1963), as well

² Although this essay does not specifically address D'Aguiar's representations of race and trauma, Rinaldo Walcott writes compellingly about the traumas of slavery in his essay, "Pedagogy and Trauma: The Middle Passage, Slavery, and the Problem of Creolization," in *Between Hope and Despair: Pedagogy and the Remembrance of Historical Trauma*, Roger J. Simon et al., eds. (New York: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2000), 135-52. His view of the process of psychic healing stands parallel to the one I read in terms of D'Aguiar's poetics in this paper in that both processes require a reconnection and reintegration to be made after a radical separation or rupture. So, to be a New World black person involves both reconnection with a "severed 'Mother Africa'" and the making of a reparation by "breaking away from the mother" and "loving the creolized self." See Walcott, 147.

as in the context of Shoah literature, I hope to gain some traction on D'Aguiar's representational strategies and their implications for dealing with cultural trauma. I will then situate D'Aguiar's poetics of language, trauma, and the body, as articulated in his critical prose and poetry, in relation to those of Wilson Harris, a fellow Guyanese author whose work has been influential to D'Aguiar. Out of these relations emerge some key questions: What does it mean for D'Aguiar to write *at all* about Jonestown, especially when it is relatively recent in our collective memory? What does it mean for him to have written in the particular ways that he has? Is healing possible through the fictional representation of such a past and if so, by what means is healing effected? What is language's role in the representation of a violent past; a past, moreover, whose violence was so brutally and abruptly physical? What, in other words, is the place of language in recalling violence done to body and mind? Finally, how might we consider D'Aguiar's poetic project in *Bill of Rights* as performing, or perhaps just as interestingly and importantly, failing to perform a ritual of healing that moves against the forgetting of the past?

Since Williams's long poem, *Paterson*, deals substantially with historical and individual acts of violence, it makes for a point of useful comparison for understanding historical trauma in D'Aguiar's work. Neither D'Aguiar's nor Williams's poems is especially elegiac, as neither makes mourning its central speech act. Instead, both poets problematize mourning as a fraught site of language's fragility, breakdown, and reconstruction. Both present loss through violence as something foundational to the formation of a historical subject. In *Paterson*, the violence suffered by individuals is contained within and attended by acts of nation-building in the United States, including

the displacement and genocide of Native American peoples, as well as the Middle Passage and slave trade. We see in Book 1 the dispossession of Tuscarora Indians who, “forced to leave their country” after a “massacre by the Indians, hanging, and exile,” go on to create the racially mixed “Jackson’s Whites” (Williams 1995, 12). This dispossession leads to the poem’s central speaker, Dr. Paterson, describing a *National Geographic* photo of “some African chief” and to various ruminations on breasts and wives, which gives way again to a journalistic account of Sarah Hemmings, a Paterson resident, disappearing on her wedding day in the falls of the river. Placing these events alongside one another cancels out the gravity of any one of them; here, all historical traumas and their linguistic representations become equalized and equalizing. *Paterson*’s metonymic movement asserts the possibility of remaking the present moment linguistically out of the bric-a-brac of disasters big and small. Riddel calls the poem “anti-modernist” because of its rejection of transcendent versions either of language or of history.

It is worth mentioning that this sort of leveling of history’s individual events works as a kind of inverse of Jones’s logic for mass suicide, although it is not a point I wish to pursue at great length here. Jones repeatedly describes the world outside of Jonestown as unchanging in its evil, a kind of outward sprawl of injustices. Historical time, for Jones, was a bad dream, from which death was the only means to awake. “It’s the will of Sovereign Being that this happened to us,” Jones intoned just before the cyanide was administered, “that we lay down our lives in protest against what’s been done. That we lay down our lives to protest in what’s being done” (“Jonestown Audiotape”). He goes on to describe the world as unchangingly and pervasively

corrupted: “The criminality of people, the cruelty of people.... There’s, there’s no point, there’s no point to this. We are born before our time. They won’t accept us” (“Jonestown Audiotape”). Unlike in Williams, however, Jones can only read negatively the overwhelming sameness of history’s traumas and, in fact, provides the ultimate rationale for the rejection of the idea of futurity itself in his comments about killing Jonestown’s children: “And I don’t think we should sit here and take any more time for our children to be endangered, for if they come after our children and we give them our children, then our children will suffer forever” (“Jonestown Audiotape”).

Indeed, because of, or despite, the representation of historical traumas in *Paterson*, Joseph N. Riddel reads Williams’s poem as engaging in a poetics of *jeu*, or play. He describes the poem’s linguistic opening not onto anomic confusion or despair but onto endless metonymy, or more specifically, onto metonymic relations that embody through language the endlessly expansive forms of desire and human freedom. Following Williams, Riddel locates a foundational violence in language itself, and specifically, in a linguistic tradition that has celebrated and enshrined the mimetic, representational faculties of language. The “origin of writing,” though, lies in an “original act of unconcealment, which involves a breaking up (deconstruction) of the already unconcealed, those received historical forms” (Riddel 1974, 58). To recover the “primordial roots of language” requires the poet endlessly to “de-center the idea of a center” and maybe most fundamentally, by refusing mimesis’s false promise of representing the past without the mediation of the imagination.

For Riddel, Williams’s African chief must give way to Sarah Hemmings, who must, in turn, make way linguistically for other murders and deaths and disappearances in

the torrential litany of historical violence that becomes the poem. In *Paterson*, there is no risk, either ethical or aesthetic, in representing historical trauma, because each individual case will be decentered by the proliferating existence of other traumas, other accidents, displacements, and dispossessions, and by the ordering agency of the imagination in recalling traumas. To remember the traumas of a place and its many peoples, then, is to undertake the building of a kind of prophylactic house of language: prophylactic because its endless metonymic sprawl exemplifies human freedom, and also because such remembering is a disruption of and a defense against ideology. Poetic remembering in this way entails a systematic reordering of relations. To remember, as Williams does, is, in Riddel's phrasing, to build "a poem, a field of language or a house of being, a 'measure' of things, a 'relation'" (Riddel 1974, 10).

In contrast to the rather optimistic vision of language post-trauma that Riddel reads in Williams, I read Fred D'Aguiar's poem, and the representational strategies underlying it, as ostensibly constructing a radically dis-integrative and alienated vision of language and of subjectivity in the face of cultural violence. By the close of *Bill of Rights*, we see the speaker isolated and despairing of his cultural dislocation; this, in spite of his efforts to testify to the events in Jonestown, and in so doing, remake himself as a whole person. In testifying to Jones's madness and to his own violent participation in the Guyanese Peoples Temple, his sense of self seems to have only further disintegrated. The disintegrative force of trauma and traumatic memory has, of course, also been well-documented in Shoah literature; the fact that the writing of *Paterson* coincides roughly with World War II and its aftermath also makes Shoah literature a relevant context to this paper.

In his work, *Remnants of Auschwitz* (1999), Giorgio Agamben remarks on the lacuna that characterizes the testimony of trauma survivors, writing that the gap between the traumatic experience and any linguistic representation of it “calls into question the very meaning of testimony” (Agamben 1999, 33). Given this lacuna and the provisionality of testimony, the only “true” or “complete” witnesses are those who have “touched bottom,” those who have died:

The Shoah is an event without witnesses in the double sense that it is impossible to bear witness to it from the inside—since no one can bear witness from the inside of death, and there is no voice for the disappearance of voice—and from the outside—since the ‘outsider’ is by definition excluded from the event (1999, 35).

For Agamben, the paradox of testimony, that neither insider nor outsider can signify the traumatic event in a way that constitutes bearing witness, necessitates a reexamination of the language of testimony. Accordingly, he turns to a figure from Primo Levi’s account of the liberation of the Buna camp in Monowice by Russians, a three year-old boy called Hurbinek. Levi describes how this boy began to repeat a word over and over again, “a word that no one in the camp can understand and that Levi transcribes as *mass-klo* or *matisklo*” (1999, 38). This word remains “obstinately secret,” an utterance of what Agamben terms a “non-language,” and serves as an example of how testimony might approach the silent, forever secret knowledge of the “true witnesses” of trauma. It shows how language may “give way to a non-language in order to show the impossibility of bearing witness” (1999, 39). In order to bear witness, this senseless sound, this non-language, must not remain in a condition of “its own non-sense,” but must, in turn, be “the voice of something or someone that, for entirely other reasons, cannot bear witness” (1999, 39).

Agamben's theorizing of the language of testimony parallels the representation of historical violence in *Paterson*. Both texts underscore the need, in order to bear witness, to return to the violent origins of language in historically immanent situations such as that of the boy, Hurbinek, or of Native American tribes' displacement. Where I see Williams's poetics diverge from those of Shoah survivors and theorists is in Williams's use of a kind of *deus ex machina* for the historical subject. Confronted with historical violence, there is in *Paterson* the sense of being able simply to play among the ruins and wreckage of past traumas, and therein to construct a safe dwelling through writing. Agamben's sense of testimony is much more provisional than Williams's poetics. D'Aguiar's own comments on his poem echo this provisionality in the ways he describes the lastingness of the wound in the survivor's memory as well as the evacuation of trust in the survivor's consciousness.

D'Aguiar reflects on the historical and psychic wounds that Jonestown inflicted at the end of his lecture, "Made in Guyana": "The Guyanese interior was bruised by the Jonestown settlement but it is now overgrown and returned to the wild. The scar is not physical in terms of landscape—that has healed—but human, and psychic. Once you know about Jonestown, how can you trust ideology or charisma or have faith again? A body and mind are emptied of all three" (D'Aguiar 1998, 13). For D'Aguiar, the condition of knowing trauma, even trauma experienced only second hand, amounts to a decisive loss that is at once cataclysmic and oddly empowering. It is cataclysmic because it signals a rupture—"a body and mind... emptied" of trust in "ideology or charisma" or "faith"—, empowering because traumatic knowing creates critical consciousness:

D'Aguiar's trauma survivor, having been "emptied" by both physical and psychological violence, is no longer caught, or, it seems, catchable within the spell of ideology.

Having been evacuated by violence of naïve optimism or belief in Jones, the subjectivity of D'Aguiar's Jonestown survivor resembles that described by Walter Benjamin in his *Theses on the Philosophy of History*. There, Benjamin answers D'Aguiar's questions—"how can you trust ideology or charisma or have faith again?"—by describing the "emergency situation" that all survivors live in, and by calling for a revolutionary consciousness (a "real state of emergency") that highlights the abuses of tradition by the ruling classes (Benjamin, section VIII, online). Although Benjamin's remarks were made in the context of Nazi fascism, their characterization of oppression through exploitation of the concepts of history and tradition is appropriate for making sense of the "emergency situation" that occurred in Jonestown, as well. The messianic consciousness that Benjamin calls for from the oppressed also raises the question, for D'Aguiar's speaker, of whether such an empowered subjectivity ever appears in *Bill of Rights*, and whether the revolutionary ideal is possible for those who survive violence.

For D'Aguiar, it is clear that other forms of trust and relation must take root, or else the survivor may become merely cynical. D'Aguiar writes, "The romantic gene—so necessary for regeneration—is eviscerated and replaced by the cynic. One is left in that cynical condition and then expected to raise children, and raise hope for the future" (D'Aguiar "Made in Guyana" 1998, 13). But this is a decidedly ambiguous concluding sentence to a passage that describes the critically empowering aspects of trauma. It is especially ambiguous in describing the fate of the poetic persona in *Bill of Rights*. Does historical trauma, when reenacted, serve as a source of agency and healing for the subject

who repeats it? Or does historical trauma repeated engender further suffering? *Bill of Rights* suggests that one answer to these questions involves the vexed relation between language and the body.

In both “Made in Guyana” and *Bill of Rights*, the body and the natural world show up as sites of language’s, and meaning’s, departure from the historical dimension and an eventual return to it. Describing a child’s sense of the physical world and the limitations of language, D’Aguiar writes that it is “as if words alone are never enough for what you have to say, and what your body must do about this and that, with this body and that body, and this thing and that thing, and here, there and everywhere all at once, and right now before time runs out and words go out of season” (D’Aguiar “Made in Guyana” 1998, 3). Here, the urgency of embodiedness accompanies linguistic relation in creating meaning; it also threatens to surpass or overwhelm language’s power to mean, to create coherence. The body emerges again and again in D’Aguiar’s writing as the site of a Freudian repetition compulsion that, read positively, becomes also the site of cultural witnessing and transformation of historical trauma. As the narrator of D’Aguiar’s novel, *Feeding the Ghosts* (1997), pronounces, not ambivalently, the bodies of slaves thrown overboard, after being consumed by the sea and transformed into elemental materials, “will have to be a witness again” (D’Aguiar 1997, 5). Despite the drowning of the voices of the Middle Passage, their memory must be made to speak, to bear witness, and D’Aguiar locates their possibility for speaking in the natural world.

But the act of witnessing that attends *Bill of Rights* enacts, at first, a poetics of language *in extremis* as a kind of useless tool, reduced to meaningless repetition and recombinations in the face of brute physical force. The poem’s double voicing, signaled

through italicized and non-italicized typefaces, at first promises a stable subject formation by engaging in what Edouard Glissant, in writing about the co-existence of colonial and pre-colonial languages within a single nation, terms diglossia or fruitful intertextuality: “neither fusion nor confusion, if it is to be fruitful and capable of transcendence, the languages that end up involved in it must first have been in charge of their own specificities” (Glissant 1997, 118). D’Aguiar’s speaker’s multiple selves correspond, albeit quite roughly, to the ritual process of initiatory exuberance, luminal anxiety, and reintegrated stability. These selves also correspond, in tones and registers, to the weird ecstasies and traumas of the Jonestown experience and are indeed many-voiced. The poem invokes calypso song (“*Water in the well.../Is not the truth I a-tell,/ Is pure lie*) (D’Aguiar 1998, 23) among many other musical genres, including 1970s British reggae (Steel Pulse), American pop (Fine Young Cannibals), and contemporary jazz (Cassandra Wilson). Biblical references and registers (or their inversion, as in “*Holy the serpent of temptation/ Holy Pontius Pilate holy Judas Iscariot*”) (D’Aguiar 1998, 6) appear alongside pop culture (Kodak Instamatics, Seiko watches, nunchakas, etc.). Despite these many intertexts and cultural specificities, *Bill of Rights*’ speaker is rarely “in charge” of their meanings. Instead, these cultural artifacts form a brittle collage assembled under duress, a kind of ersatz and distracted subjectivity culled out of fragments that subside from the speaker’s consciousness as quickly as they arise. To invoke T.S. Eliot, whose also shored the fragments of culture against his *Wasteland*’s ruin, there is no transcendence, no still center to this turning world (Eliot 1963, 177).

Instead, as the poem goes on, the motion of its world starts to spin radically out of control. When its speaker is most “out of [his] carnivorous brain,” language’s

representational capacities start to strain under his psychological burdens and traumas. Describing his jealousy at having his lover taken by Jones for his own, the speaker ruefully notes Jones's predilection for virgins: Jones is "aroused by my girl's obvious/ Plural virginity" (D'Aguiar 1998, 31). The speaker's world then turns cartoonish, and he feels "like Coyote, always out of reach/ Of roadrunner," when he sees a jeep, a tangible contact with the outside world, "overshoot/ This commune" (D'Aguiar 1998, 32), the air filling with the jeep's/roadrunner's "beep-beep." Elsewhere, doing violence to others "on a mission" in nearby Georgetown, the speaker runs into a demonstration, presumably against Jim Jones and his followers. Breaking his "stave of greenheart" and "nunchakas too," the speaker's italicized voice goes on callously to boast that he was "*unhurt by their women screaming/ Unhurt by their children crying....*" The people that he encounters and beats are only ever occasions for the speaker's glib deployment of pop slogans, "*souls*" who, "discontented" and "ungrateful" are, like the macho persona that the speaker adopts when he is at his most violent, "*cruisin'-for-a-bruisin'*" (D'Aguiar 1998, 36).

It is under extreme pressure that D'Aguiar's speaker is most heteroglossic and least transcendent. In moments of most extreme crisis, when the violence of his situation is most immanent, his narration turns paranoiacally repetitive. We might recall Agamben's discussion of the "Bohemian" boy, Hubinek, and Levi's description of the word he repeated over and over again. "It was not," writes Levi, "always exactly the same word, but it was certainly an articulated word; or better, several slightly different articulated words, experimental variations of a theme, on a root, perhaps even on a name" (Levi 1986, 192). We also see such variations in the italicized anaphoras in *Bill of Rights*. As with Hubinek, the repetitions of D'Aguiar's speaker appear as privacies of the

speaker's mind that attempt to recuperate language that has been distorted beyond recognition by the life of the camp. The repetitive phrasings of D'Aguiar's speaker read like a privacy that has turned nightmarish. They resemble tortured schoolbook grammar exercises or, to use a reference fitting for *Bill of Rights*, Mad Libs, conjugating verbs, mixing and matching parts of speech, to make a litany that has been both evacuated of meaning and that becomes, nevertheless, a kind of consolation:

*What came to pass
Has come to pass
Has come and gone
Came and went*

*What came to pass
That has not always passed
Already came and passed
What comes must pass... (D'Aguiar 1998, 17)*

Shuffling through all grammatical permutations of his original phrase, "And God like a man in our midst/ Telling what came to pass," the speaker's repetitions enact a poetics of arbitrariness, in which singing to oneself shows up only as a childlike consolation, whose impotence is apparent in the face of Jones's physical and mental abuses.

Given the speaker's encounter with a "feisty griot" who provides him with "a story full of the warm South" and a lullaby played on the bone flute left over from a devoured canary, these repetitions also read like hollowed-out or ineffectual chants (D'Aguiar 1998,14-15). In representing ritual chanting in his poem D'Aguiar conflates the typically West African figure of the griot, or praise singer, with that of the distinctly Amerindian bone flute. Wilson Harris comments on the latter figure in the preface to his 1960 novel, *The Palace of the Peacock*, noting that the "Carib bone flute" is metaphorically both the "spirit-bone of water" of Guyana's numerous rivers and literally

a flute “hollowed from the bone of an enemy in time of war” from which “specters arose” (Harris 1960, 9). In D’Aguiar’s poem, the griot denies this spirit bone to the speaker, devouring the canary from which it might be fashioned and leaving the speaker with nothing. Indeed, by the poem’s conclusion, the speaker confesses to having failed to “hollow an enemy’s bone/ Into a flute.” Instead, he has become a kind of bone flute himself, capable only of mimicking or channeling others’ music and unable to resist the ventriloquism not just of Jones but of all cultural influences (D’Aguiar 1998, 130). The poem’s many discursive registers finally overwhelm and deny the possibility of subjective coherence.

Devoid of a griot’s historical and religious effectiveness, the speaker’s use of repetition also lacks the dialogical element of a griot’s performance, as the speaker can only respond to his own calls through italicized speech. What becomes ever more conspicuously absent in *Bill of Rights* is a community who responds.³ The epistolary format of the poem, with each “entry” standing as a letter to the speaker’s friend in Brixton, “L--,” further underscores this fact of the speaker’s isolation, as does the revelation that “L—” has been “cut down by the big C;/ My letters to him, all wait for me” (D’Aguiar 1998, 124). Resigned and alone, the circle closes and the only addressee for the speaker’s letters, his acts of witnessing, is he himself.

Prior to this revelation, though, the speaker’s monologic situation moves him to turn to the land itself as companion and addressee. Often in his failed chants, it is the natural world that appears anaphorically, as when the speaker, having given up on

³ See Walter F. Pitts and Vincent L. Wimbush, *Old Ship of Zion: The Afro-Baptist Ritual in the African Diaspora* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 61.

recovering his lost Seiko wristwatch, locates a new source of temporal orientation in the sun:

Light hoods our eyes
Light creases our foreheads
Light makes our bones porous
Light darkens our skin
Light peels our heads
Light lifts us off the ground
Light puts us underground... (1998, 43)

The speaker's anaphoras attempt to create meaning out of a scene that is meaningless to him. They are, again, satirical versions of shamanistic song, or chanting. Their satire consists in the fact that, as so often happens in this poem, the formal acting out of a transcendent gesture does not guarantee that it will be meaningful, let alone transcendent. In his hunger for a spiritual father, for release from that father, from Jonestown, and for plain, literal food, his language gets pulled inexorably as into a black hole and toward primal and bodily reference points like "light," "belly," "fire." Working in the fields, he imagines being utterly self-sufficient, living off the land with his "fingers [as] my knife and fork," using "grass to wipe my ass." But this fantasy quickly gives way to simple hunger, "a growl/ In my belly and my belly on my mind." Quickly, the hunger consumes all else—dreams, mother, father, wife, children—until the speaker is left, at the end of language's meaningfulness, in a tautology of simple physical need: "*My belly in my belly*" (D'Aguiar 1998, 45).

Here, physical necessity reduces language to a condition of impotence. It is also, however, the means by which language, to use D'Aguiar's phrase, becomes "emptied out" of its former meanings. This evacuation is what I want to call the initiatory moment in the ritual of *anamnesis* that the poem stages, a moment of evacuation and separation

from language's protective and enclosing properties, and of confrontation with a physical world that is more than just, to use Wilson Harris's phrase, "the void of civilization." This initiatory moment is equivalent to breaking the spell of ideology that Benjamin calls taking "control of a memory" in a "moment of danger"; a moment and a political situation of emergency that is essentially ongoing (Benjamin, online). Part of the uniqueness of D'Aguiar's version of the poetics of memory, though, lies in his engagement with the natural world in the ritual process of recalling the past. In D'Aguiar's Jonestown, language's mimetic power is doubly threatened by ideology and by the material world's capacity to trump any imagined world, again and again. So, the speaker's physical expulsion from the false Eden in Guyana parallels an epistemological expulsion from an Adamic paradise, where the right names correspond faithfully to the things of the world. Expelled from meaning by violence, thrown back upon the physical world in its brutal and raw materiality, D'Aguiar's speaker is banished into a double wilderness: into the literal jungle of Guyana and into the figurative jungle of meaninglessness.

This double expulsion appears maybe most trenchantly when the speaker addresses his lover. Near the end of *Bill of Rights*, we see the speaker, through a poem, addressing his lost beloved, an indigenous woman, with whom he falls in love with early in his time at Jonestown but whom Jones eventually impregnates. Reduced to sound and circular logic, the speaker's language becomes the "poetry" that struggles to assert not just his desperate longing for his long-unnamed lover but also to transcend the in-folding temporality and "despotic authority" that the speaker doesn't even have the "dreads to

shake at.” So he professes to his lover, somewhat melodramatically, that “*When poetry dies my love for you dies too*” (D’Aguiar 1998, 54).⁴

Oddly, though, this profession of faith in language’s transcendence of its historical situation gets twisted, derailed by its ending, when the speaker meanders away from a defiant expression of “*us versus timelessness*” to a formulation, where the distinctly Jonesian timelessness is equated with love itself:

*Our love no less than time no more
Than life itself us in that love
With nothing to lose if we lose our lives
Since that love has slipped from time
From Death and lives as life itself* (D’Aguiar 1998, 55)

In this formulation, we can read Jones’s talk of “revolutionary suicide” insinuated into what begins as a declaration of love’s power to revolt against the eradication of time, or against Jones’s denial of an outside world and history. What this love poem suggests is a different role for language than what Riddel sees in Williams. Jones’s rhetoric and its trajectory of displacement and distraction cannot, it seems, be countered through language alone; indeed, language repeats the dominant ideology even when it sets out to be most subversive. This is maybe the key risk that D’Aguiar’s poem describes in re-imagining the traumatic past. At both the level of the fictional persona, caught within the act of narrating and remembering Jonestown, and at the level of the poem, which involves us as witnesses to its own act of witness, there is the constant threat of the poem representing the past in ways that dull or mute its violence. This risk also underscores the

⁴ For much of the poem, the speaker says about his lover that she is simply “Someone’s wife, she was Waiyaki or Makusi.” After her suicide/infanticide, though, she takes on the name “Tikka.”

need for language to be ritually evacuated of its prior meanings in order for it to become a useful tool in the making of a stable self.

D'Aguiar addresses this potential for the muting or dulling of historical trauma in a 1999 interview, where he explains his choice of the long poem as generically best suited for re-imagining the events of Jonestown:

The other thing that struck me was how fragmented the experience must have been for a survivor of Jonestown as it is for those who have lived through Guyana's transition from a British colony to an independent state. So it could not be a work of coherence as many novels turn out using linear narrative. I found the long poem, broken and fractured as it can be, to be the best form for this subject (D'Aguiar 2009, online).

Beyond his formal concerns for representing the fragmented experience of a Jonestown survivor, or what he sees as the long poem's lack of "coherence" and therefore its suitability for representing an internally divided, traumatized subjectivity, D'Aguiar also stresses the need to situate his poem's act of memory within the context of Guyana's colonial past. Arguing that "the post-colonial has robbed the ex-colony of its continuing colonial dependence by theorising the story out of the situation of the colonial consciousness," D'Aguiar aims to recover both, "to put both back into that situation" (D'Aguiar 2009, online).

The colonial context of *Bill of Rights* informs the speaker's performance in literal and figurative ways alike. Literally, the earth, the Guyanese jungle, is a presence that frustrates the stability of both the speaker and the Peoples Temple. Figuratively, the continuing presence of colonization appears in the contrast between the Jonestown project and a subtly backgrounded indigenous presence. In terms of the complications that wilderness as a physical force presents, we see the pervasive humidity of the jungle complicating the speaker's efforts to enjoy the quasi-militaristic aspects of his Jonestown

identity. The rain “rusts our joints” (D’Aguiar 1998, 6) and leaves the speaker prematurely “arthritic at thirty-three,” with an uzi “seized” by “damp everywhere” and himself with “the runs and chigoe,/ A fungus culture between [his] toes” (D’Aguiar 1998 8, 34). The Guyanese land likewise resists the community-building efforts of Jonestown to make livable dwellings, with the jungle’s “autochthonous wood” blunting or breaking “electric/ Saw after electric saw// In half” (D’Aguiar 1998, 7). This wood, the speaker concludes, in a blurring of the physical and the psychic, the historical and the mythical, “must have hardened itself/ Against further loss of face.” In another rapid catalogue, processes of colonization, exploitation, and pollution are collapsed and accelerated. The Jonestown presence in Guyana is likened to less than a wave of the hand to dismiss a mosquito:

*To wave a mosquito from the forehead
Takes more effort than to clear this forest
Clear this continent of all of its wood
Burn that wood into smoke into cloud
Spread that could over the entire planet
Sink our planet into a black hole
Send that hole spinning into unknown space* (D’Aguiar 1998, 5)

That this process figures so early in the speaker’s Jonestown experience suggests his sense of the fragility of Jonestown’s neo-colonial presence, a sense of its belatedness or at least of its pathetic re-enactment of Spanish conquistadores’ destruction of indigenous cultures and landscapes (the speaker likens his machete to a “cutlass” that “bounces off” the jungle’s vines) (D’Aguiar 1998, 24). Perhaps, like Williams’s depiction of the ephemeral human presences in Paterson, New Jersey, rendered in part through the generic ephemera of newspaper and magazine articles, the Guyanese jungle’s most powerful

resistance to colonial encroachments is its stubborn capacity simply to outlast what is human.

In light of these complications and frustrations that the natural world presents to the poem's speaker, we might wonder whether there is anything of a salvific possibility in the presence of wilderness. Taking into account D'Aguiar's remarks on the body and the material world as originating and revisionary sites for human meaning, it would seem that a return to wilderness, to the Guyanese jungle stripped of its toxic human presences, would make possible a journey toward recuperation and renewal. Indeed, D'Aguiar's reading of Wilson Harris's encounter with nature seems to support this view of the recuperative power of the natural world. D'Aguiar describes Harris's natural world as a modified version of that of the Romantics. "The difference between Harris's vision and that of the Romantics," writes D'Aguiar, "is that nature, in a Wilson Harris novel, not only instructs us in its many contradictory truths, it also alters *how* we perceive those truths" (D'Aguiar 1998, "Made in Guyana," 5).

Elsewhere in D'Aguiar's and Harris's writings, however, the natural world's "contradictory truths" and recuperative power appear more ambivalent. In Harris's experimental fiction, *Da Silva da Silva's Cultivated Wilderness* (1999), for instance, the figure of the "wilderness" necessarily, even compulsively, entails a confrontation with the violence of the past. It is the deeply storied landscape that the titular character, a "mad painter," tries to capture with his art, an art that requires

a compulsive excavation in 'wilderness' flesh and blood; and a confrontation dawns with soluble uniform that sticks to the psychology of each historic body in cradle or grave; a confrontation that may encourage the arousal of daemonic forces as freedom (bent upon the creation of genuine freedom) or may succumb to the inevitability or refinement of violence... (Harris 1977, 73).

This archaeological dig is something D'Aguiar's protagonist undertakes accidentally, out of necessity. The jungle confronts him with both physical and emotional hardships that lead to a reassessment of his relationship to Jones. For both D'Aguiar and Harris, then, the dialogue that Harris's "wilderness" demands entails a transformation of our human relations not just with the natural world but also with one another. It is a confrontation with "historic bod[ies]" and minds to which history's violences "stick," a confrontation with ancestors and ancestral places that continue to haunt us. This "wilderness," or the Guyanese interior in the case of Jonestown, stands not as an inert object or void but always as an agent for the potential redemption of human destructiveness.⁵ Its continual excavation, for D'Aguiar and Harris alike, is an excavation of our own relationship to historical trauma and, in large part, to the violence of colonialism.

For Harris, there is more at stake than just the recovery of an historical and colonial past, though, as his fictional narrator, Francisco Bone, suggests in his "Letter from Francisco Bone to W.H." There, Bone describes the consequences of surviving Jonestown as difficult for the resulting necessity to engage not just the historically recent past but also a mythic past that opens up to the present survivor: "It is essential," he writes, "to create a jigsaw in which 'pasts' and 'presents' and likely or unlikely 'futures' are the pieces that multitudes in the self employ in order to bridge chasms in historical memory" (Harris 1999, 49). Using a term from Frances Yates's work, *History as an Art of Memory*, Bone calls this creation of a memorial "jigsaw" the practice of "Memory theatre." He goes on to describe this sort of remembering as an immersion in traumas

⁵ As Harris puts it in *Jonestown*, "The Wilderness comes into its own as extra-human territory which unsettles the hubris of a human-centered cosmos that has mired the globe since the Enlightenment." See Wilson Harris, *Jonestown* (London: Faber, 1997), 97.

rather than as a rejection of them, and as both antithesis of, and remedy for, a sort of overdetermined identity or “predatory coherence”: “The trauma that I suffered in Jonestown may have imprisoned me absolutely in a plot of fate. But thank God! it aroused me instead to contemplate a hidden mathematics within the body of language... Language is deeper than ‘frames’, it transgresses against the frames that would make us prisoners of eternity in the name of one creed or dogma or ideology” (Harris 1999, 49). This journey back to the “hidden mathematics” of “chaos” in language itself leads Francisco Bone to write his “Dream Book,” which he dreamed as “translating from a fragmented text or texts that already existed...” (Harris 1999, 50). For Bone, these fragmented texts, in turn, are residues or “apparitions” not just of a colonial past but of the “hidden textualities” of a pre-Columbian place.

Arguably, D’Aguiar’s speaker undertakes a similar project to that of Bone in that his unanswered letters, forming, in effect, the long poem we read as the text of *Bill of Rights*, attempt to escape their own “plot of fate” through the poetic means discussed thus far in this paper: multivocality, anaphoric chanting, and love poems and letters to worlds that are discursively beyond and apart from Jonestown. When faced with the wilderness of the jungle surrounding Jonestown, he also attempts to bridge historical and “mythic” memory, Guyanese natives and Jonestown outsiders, as seen in his fraught relations with Tikka and with the oddly displaced, recurring Aztec figure of Quetzalcoatl. In effect, though, what Harris calls the “hidden textualities” of pre-contact Guyana become just another text, another material, with which to bridge constructively the internal fracturing that results from the speaker’s experience of violence. Rather than having language transgress, in some completely successful way, the “frames” of history, D’Aguiar shows

us that its necessarily partial and provisional transgressions must proceed through an ethical reorientation that is sponsored, in an almost shamanic way, as a facilitator of the ritual process, by the presence of the natural world.

Moving for a moment from discussing the wilderness of the jungle to the wilderness of the sea, we might find that the imagining of wilderness as an ethical catalyst appears in explicit ways in D'Aguiar's own novel about the Middle Passage, *Feeding the Ghosts*. Its opening scene dramatizes the 1783 scandal on the slave ship *Zong*, in which 132 slaves were thrown overboard. After Captain Cunningham orders his reluctant first mate, Kelsal, to throw the first two people into the sea, a long description follows, in which the elements—the wind, the water—assume a voice and a presence that threaten not a remonstrance of the crews' murders but a radical disorientation. The voice of the wind filling the ship's sails speaks what the voiceless slaves below decks already know: it "knew Africa and how this sea was nowhere and how their destination was not a beginning but an end without ending" (D'Aguiar 1997, 27). In effect, the wilderness of the sea in its "knowing" creates, or reflects accurately, the cosmic and ethical disorientations of empire. The practices of slavery and colonization, and the genocidal logic that supports such practices, are known by the natural world to be a kind of living death, a permanent condition of being lost:

The voice above deck knew... that if the sea came to an end and another land suggested itself to them they would be lost forever but not dead, lost but never to be found. And love would be nowhere: behind them and impossible to recover; a flat line in the wake of the ship where the sky bowed down to the sea or the sea ascended into the sky. Love was lost somewhere in the very sea with its limitless capacity to swallow love, slaves, ships, memories (D'Aguiar 1997, 27).

Here, the wilderness voices the historical and ethical dimensions that Captain Cunningham's order attempts tyrannically to silence. But does *Bill of Rights*' speaker

have access to this sort of ethical knowing? Do his invocations of the body and the natural world allow him access to a coherent subjectivity, a safe dwelling in the house of language? I would argue that the subjectivity at the poem's conclusion is, despite the speaker's best attempts, a dis-integrated one.

This disintegration occurs despite the availability of what Harris's character, Francisco Bone, calls the mythic. In the poem, this dimension appears in the visionary and mundane presences of indigenous persons. They are, however, no more, and no less, effective than any of the other cultural inter-texts—whether Amerindian, African, British, or U.S. popular culture—that are available to the speaker. The connection to Williams here bears mentioning. Although D'Aguiar effectively levels historical and mythic events in a way comparable to what Riddel sees in *Paterson*, he does not give us a poetics of play. D'Aguiar's is really more of an anti-poetics, a view of language's failure to cohere. Despite the availability of materials out of which to forge a coherent subjectivity, the speaker is unable to recover from all he has experienced in Jonestown. He witnesses the repeated wounding of love's body: the speaker's rape and sodomizing of young girls on the compound; his loss of Tikka who, after giving birth to twins, whose father, Jones learns, is not him, but the speaker, takes her child to the river and to an ambiguous and probably fatal end; and finally, his administering of the cyanide cocktail ("Drink, I was ordering them, Drink/ As I tapped out that tune on the trigger" [D'Aguiar's 1998, 16]). Rather than shoring up subjectivity, these violently interwoven events only lead to the speaker's condition of constant debilitation.

But the poem nonetheless performs a ritual of *anamnesis*, perhaps more effectively because it posits no idealized healing or wholeness for the speaker's traumas.

If we consider that D'Aguiar's fictional Jonestown survivor undergoes a ritual process of separation, transition, and reincorporation, and that the text of *Bill of Rights* performs itself as a ritual of *anamnesis* against the kind of forgetting of the historical dimension that arguably made the real Jonestown possible, then perhaps we can say that D'Aguiar's poem also revises the metonymic poetics that Riddel reads in *Paterson*.⁶ An interesting reading of *Bill of Rights* might open up by applying Victor Turner's revision of Van Gennep's middle stage (*liminaire*), in which liminality can show up positively as *communitas*, an unstructured community, where all members are equal. Read in this way, D'Aguiar's speaker could be seen as occupying a permanent condition of liminality, since, even after his reincorporation into British and American cultures, he is haunted by memories of the Jonestown dead in ways that linguistic remembering cannot exorcise. *Bill of Rights*, in other words, would dramatize a stunted ritual, in which a final reincorporation into the social order has been foreclosed, and, in its place, a perpetual limbo has been substituted.

In spite of the poem's speaker's liminality, D'Aguiar's poetics re-create Jonestown in such a way that repositions it discursively to be a continued provocation to our collective memory. Provocation forms the basis, in turn, for a seizing and transformation of the past. Jay Wright, in his essay, "Desire's Design, Vision's Resonance," finds ritual in traditional societies to fulfill not a dogmatic function but, on the contrary, a transformative one. It allows one "to look into experience and to go beyond what is merely given to invest it with a significance which enhances and restructures experience" (Wright 1987, 15). Rather than simply repeating experience in a

⁶ In defining ritual structure I am using Arnold van Gennep's three-part model from his 1909 work, *Rites of Passage (Les rites de passage)*.

lifeless way, ritual is the means for its engagement, reordering, and transformation. As with the speaker in D'Aguiar's poem, a bill of rights emerges, however slowly, out of this reiterative process. Those rights ultimately include the right to suffer, even relentlessly suffer, as a means for transforming past traumas. And they include, of course, the right to a view onto an ever-opening horizon that is protected, through acts of memory, at least somewhat, from the encroachments of ideology.

Metonymy alone will not save D'Aguiar's speaker. The free play of language, even when the speaker thinks of himself as most free, is always threatened by ideology and by trauma to repeat itself. In spite of this, I suggest that a ritual reading of the poem's poetics, where the *Bill of Rights*' speaker, after his initial enthusiasm for Jonestown wears away, and after the physical and emotional violences of the place wear him down, is forced as almost an Orpheus to pass through a meaninglessness. This meaninglessness is located where the natural world confronts a human language that has grown horrifically small. At these crossroads, an evacuation occurs: only once language, and the speaker, are emptied of meaning can the process of reconstruction begin. This reconstruction, however, is necessarily represented in the poem as partial. While the poetic persona in *Bill of Rights* does in fact survive the mass suicide at Jonestown, he eventually ends up back in the United States. There, in his "first hotel since Jonestown" (here the suggestion that Jonestown was itself a kind of hotel, instead of a jungle compound, forces a reexamination of America's transitory places and lifestyles), he throws out the Gideon bible and reads the phonebook, visited, horribly, by "the Devil" having "his way/ With us, with or without butter." This sodomy vision does not end but only closes with the suggestion of its ongoing repetition, an eternal recurrence: "It was a case of rock me

again/ And again, and again, and again,/ And again, and again” (D’Aguiar 1998, 122). Elsewhere, the speaker is in Augusta, Maine, as a shut-in only visited regularly by his “friend,” a prostitute who gives him “a discount for her love” (D’Aguiar 1998, 133). Even there, a specter himself, he is haunted by the Jonestown dead, feeling himself to be walking “over a thousand dead” and fearing to move at all, lest the “pattern” of their dying overflow his memory, spill over into the present, and “scramble into a town full of dead” (D’Aguiar 1998, 128).

The speaker is also cut off from his other past places and from the more stable identity or identities they represent. Before moving back to the U.S. from London, he is patient in a psychiatric hospital: his “new address --/ Denmark Hill,” is the site of King’s College’s Institute of Psychiatry. From his “locked ward,” he hears trains “clackety-clack to somewhere” he “can’t go: Chattanooga, Kalamazoo/ Or even Timbuctoo” (D’Aguiar 1998, 132). Although his healing is far from complete, the speaker’s physical and emotional journeys allow us to contemplate not only Jonestown’s physical brutality but also its narrow temporality from a new angle. As such, these journeys fulfill the recuperative function that D’Aguiar reads as being so crucial for Wilson Harris’s work, presenting to us as an act of contemplation “the opportunity for a reassessment of our present stance and past actions” (D’Aguiar 1998 “Made in Guyana,” 6).

Although the poem remembers the terrors of Jonestown in explicit and sometimes bewildering detail, and although the speaker clearly suffers in the present from the experience of past traumas, the poem successfully performs an *anamnesis*. Indeed, it does so because the cultural and personal healings it depicts are necessarily provisional, incomplete: necessarily incomplete, because to be otherwise would entail a wiping out of

the past, which would be an equivalent ideological feat to that attempted by Jones on November 18, 1978. There is a sense that, despite this performance, and despite the momentary recuperation of a more expansive horizon than the claustrophobic one created by Jones's omnipresent voice over the camp's loudspeakers, another act of violence is immanent. There is, in other words, the sense that Jonestown, in being remembered, forms what H el ene Cixous calls a stigmata. Although D'Aguiar describes Jonestown as having left a psychic scar on both his poem's speaker and on our larger collective memory, I suggest that its effects are different from a scar; rather, Jonestown remains an open wound, for D'Aguiar's speaker and for us, a stigmata that "wounds *and* spurs, stimulates" (Cixous 2005, xiii). *Bill of Rights* does not cover up Jonestown's memory but digs into its violence in the hope of opening up another possible future. As Cixous writes, "Traumatism as an opening to the future of the wound is the promise of a text" (Cixous 2005, xiv). Cixous's claim applies to all texts, potentially, but it is an especially apt characterization of the re-opening of Jonestown's wound that D'Aguiar achieves, and achieves so powerfully, by virtue of engaging with a ritual process whose closure leaves us with more stings than salves, more impossibilities than answers. And in these impossibilities there is, paradoxically perhaps, hope.

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