*Poetics of the Hold* by Fabienne Kanor

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*(Translation of the introductory chapter and first chapter)*

Odyssey of Absence: Preliminary Meditations

If I had to hold to custom, retracing the path that this text has taken, I would fall short. I would get mired in the hodge-podge of conventional origin stories, clutter it with arid explanations, I would concoct arguments, I would fake it. If I had to fore-tell (a term I prefer to “preface”) this written work, I would caution: This is not a history book. I will present no new findings on the transatlantic slave trade. I will offer no sage lessons. I will not pontificate. I will not eulogize.

I will work my way forward.

One day, I went into my writing room and meditated on the slave trade, on how the great Catastrophe had come to me, been transmitted to me these past twenty years in West Africa, South America, the French Antilles, and the former slave trade capitals of France. One day, it seemed that the only way to confront this past was to return in my mind to the place where everything had been upended and thrown into turmoil: the hold of the slave vessel. That *down there* where the course of humanity had collapsed, that down-there where lineages had been wiped out, that down-there place that haunted me, though I had never fallen in.

One day, my father, Georges Omer, told me, “The sea has no family. At least you can hold onto land.” A sentence uttered *in passing*, without a thought. Georges does not realize that this belief is collective and enduring. It is the belief of a people marched by force to the sea. It is the belief of a people interrupted and *reborn* in blood and salt. It comes from the sea that truly had no family, no mercy, no shame when it allowed human beings to conquer other human beings, allowed people to buy and sell people, cloaked traders as victors, and dump the others out on the other side. Georges Omer is like many Martinicans: he distrusts the sea. Has a tenacious fear of a space which he knows is not the water, but which he is unable to name.

That space is the hold.[[1]](#endnote-1) More specter than space, it torments, it hounds the people of the peoples who were deported. Embedded in memory, yet impossible to portray, the hold is and is not.

It is an enigma or the prologue of a tale to offer the dead. There is hope of capturing the Shadow with only fragmented knowing, but the hold-word is veiled, the hold-word is fugitive. The hold-word is a poetics.

I want to go back down to this hold through poetry. Walk the path by moonlight and tell memories of the hold as they come, in whatever form they take, and with the debris that I exhume. I want to go through the archives on foot, fly from one land to the other, using as my point of departure a sketch, a written trace, a work of art, or a recovered spoken word. Depart, return, step across again, repeat the Passage.

This is an essay, that is, an endeavor. I am feeling my way along.

I have named my four points of departure *meditations*. More than announcing stages in an already-stable text, they prefigure twists in the path imagined and foreshadow jolts and obscurities that await me. They are not premonitions of chapters to come, but the first fleeting images that came to me as I stumbled unarmed toward the Shadow. Phantoms can’t be hunted with science, I thought at the start. I will not search for the Specter or the disappeared people of the hold. I will let them come in, as I always have, as I do when I wait for my characters and transcribe their sagas.

**Meditation 1**: In Guadeloupe, at the northern edge of le Moule at the cove of Sainte-Marguerite, there are dead who sleep under the sand. No one ever quotes them because no one knows their names. They have been repatriated to no other place, not to *any* other soil. Who can say whose roots they extend? Who knows where their placenta rests? In the late 1990s, scientists who dig up ground to probe ancestors turned over the sandy stretch of L’Anse Sainte-Marguerite, revealing a burial ground which contained some two hundred seventy-two women, men, children, and infants.[[2]](#endnote-2) These dead, asleep beneath the shoreline, had been made slaves during their lifetime. The oldest of the corpses date from the late eighteenth century. The rest were buried during the first half of the nineteenth century.

According to these scientific explorers, the cemetery contains two categories of enslaved people: those born on the island and those brought directly from Africa.[[3]](#endnote-3) *Down beneath* the sandy shore at the cove, there are dead who survived the Middle Passage. Down in the terrible hole where they almost disappeared, a thousand times for a thousand reasons, they thought back to the rain that grew the millet in the fields. They worried over their animals who gave milk and meat. They lamented the sacred bush, the savannah, their village, the *there* from which they had come.

*Down there*, beneaththe sepulchral sand, the dead are dreaming.

The excavation report notes that most of the exhumed human remains are in an acceptable state of preservation. A few photographs of the graves validate these observations. Here, an adult is laid out on his back, legs outstretched the width of the hips, arms parallel to the body, feet slightly turned in, the gaze turned toward the setting sun. Over here, a child slumbers on his back, head pressed against the head of an adult. Over there, two adults occupy the same grave. One is still intact. The other is in fragments, a constellation of bones.

Examining these corpses without flesh, without skin has allowed scientists to shed light on the causes of death and the conditions of their life. The presence of multiple skeletal lesions [“vertebral lesions of the type spondylitis,” “serpiginous lesions on the endocranial surface,” etc.] indicates that numerous individuals suffered from tuberculosis, immune system deficits, and mechanical stress (arthrosis).[[4]](#endnote-4) Seeing these learned terms applied to the lesions breathes life into the injuries and injects color into the stale images. They take us back to scenes of promised punishment, legalized by the *Code Noir*. Let’s run through them employing the past tense, since they did occur. Received corporal punishment, which could be “no less than the whip and the fleur-de-lys,” those who, belonging to different masters, assembled together (Article XVI); Was punished with “afflictive sentence, even death,” the thief of horses, mules, oxen or cows (Article XXXV); Was beaten with canes and branded with a fleur-de-lys, the thief of sheep, goats, pigs, fowl, sugarcane, and peas or other vegetables (Article XXXVI); Had ears cut off and were branded on the shoulder with a fleur-de-lys, those who were first-time fugitives (Article XXXVIII); Were shackled and beaten with canes or cords, those whom the master declared deserving (Article XLII). In her study “Sévices contre les esclaves et impunité des maîtres,” Caroline Oudin-Bastide brings back from her passage through the archives stories of even more barbaric punishments, drawn from trials and planters’ chronicles. Slave-body tied fast to three or four stakes to the point of dislocation. Slave-body imprisoned in a cask until asphyxiated. Slave-body forced to ingest his own excrement.

Let’s move on.

The specialists who stirred up the sands at L’Anse Sainte-Marguerite also uncovered the remains of objects buried along with the humans. A rosary, a medal, a crucifix, a pipe, and buttons were identified and analyzed. As I study the photograph of the exhumed buttons, I notice that no two are alike. There is a flat button and a rounded button. A smooth button and a rough one. There is a button broken in two, one half of which remains. There is the mother-of-pearl button and one carved from bone. One button is still in functional condition, while another no longer looks like a button. Each of these traces of ancestors found under the ground are like points on a compass rose suggesting directions. Let’s try: one button points me to the canvas dress promised once a year to an enslaved person[[5]](#endnote-5) and the body it inhabits. Another button points to the silhouette of a woman, a birthmark on the back of her knee, a scar on her shoulder. I imagine her gait as she moves about. From another button, I see the sugar cane bundler returning after her labor. At night, she unbuttons her overall to huddle next to a frail form. In another button, I see the child.

The dead in the colonial cemetery at L’Anse Sainte-Marguerite are not dead. They *are*, in the medal, the rosary, the crucifix, the surviving buttons, and the pipe that the earth spit back out. Under the sand, the dead still sleep and, in their permanent slumber, they bequeath to us lines of history and the possibility of lineage. Never have such marvels, such resurrections taken place on the open sea. The insatiable hold went down with its bodies. Not one button has resurfaced.

**Meditation 2**: I trace the archeologists’ steps to their disinterred relics and to the immortalized button made of mother-of-pearl. I recall seeing its twin in a documentary film titled “El Botòn de nàcar (2015) [The Pearl Button], by Patricio Guzmán, which weaves together two stories: the genocide, decreed in the nineteenth century, of the indigenous people of Patagonia;[[6]](#endnote-6) and the massive crimes committed by agents of the Augusto Pinochet dictatorship, some still unrevealed and unsolved.[[7]](#endnote-7) Shared features emerge from these two catastrophes, separated by more than a century. In each case, there was a massacre. In each case, there was amnesia. In each case, there is a button. It is the story of the young Jemmy Button. In 1830, in exchange for a mother-of-pearl button, he agreed to leave his native land of Patagonia and set sail for England, where he would be “civilized.” After a year of acclimation, he was sent back to his land where the effects of this double transplantation broke his mind in two like the button in the colonial cemetery. It is the story of those who disappeared under the Chilean dictatorship and in particular, the story of Marta Ugarte Román whose body, dumped into the sea, washed up onto a beach unexpectedly in September 1976. It had been lying at the bottom of the ocean in a sack, when a Pacific Ocean current, the Humboldt current, carried it to shore. The body was in an “acceptable” state of preservation, though the autopsy revealed a dislocated spinal column, a thoracic abdominal trauma, multiple fractured ribs, a ruptured liver, a burst spleen, a dislocated shoulder and hip, and a double fracture to the right forearm.

In his documentary film, Guzmán does not inventory these injuries; instead, he reenacts the woman’s disappearance with the help of a journalist and life-size mannequin. The film shows the wrapping process in its entirety. The “corpse” is wired to an iron pole that weighs 30 kg, then wrapped in plastic and a huge canvas sack. We know the epilogue. We know what happened. Marta and who knows how many other opponents of Pinochet regime were pushed out of a helicopter. Women as well as men. Young people as well as adults. Alive or dead. Dressed or half-naked. Some wore shirts and some of the shirts had buttons. While visiting the Villa Grimaldi Park for Peace in Santiago, which, under Pinochet, was one of the primary centers of detention, torture and extermination, but is now dedicated to the memory of those who disappeared, the filmmaker Guzmán noticed a shirt button on one of the steel bars used by the torturers as ballast for the bodies they sent into the sea. This remnant recalling the tragedy of Jemmy Button, inspired Guzmán to create a work in which the mother-of-pearl button provides the narrative thread.

I can see Guzmán in the villa, now a Chilean site of collective memory, where photos, letters, and personal effects of those who disappeared are assembled as testimony on the Catastrophe and to ease souls in mourning. I see him gathering traces in his mind and reflecting on them. Four thousand five hundred captives passed through the gates of this sinister edifice.

The path that leads down to the hold of the ship offers the traveler no such guiding thread. Deciding to follow the path means consenting to change direction at any point, risking dispersion and meanders which, along with physical violence, lay at the core of the experience of the Middle Passage. To this day, no museum offers the ability to see or touch those who disappeared. The bodies of the hold are too old to abandon their Atlantis and return to us. The bodies of the hold wore no shirt when they were dumped into the ocean. The slave trade altered the dance of the sun. A part of the African people was put into the hold and deported to the four corners of the world. In the Netherlands, England, Argentina, France, Mexico, Spain, Portugal, America, Peru, Chili, etc., there emerged peoples of gold and water, peoples of herds and trade, peoples of the forest and plains. In Guzmàn’s country, the longest in the world, there is no memorial for those people who disappeared.[[8]](#endnote-8)

**Meditation 3:** On Fidjrossè beach in Cotonou, Benin, a color photograph lies dozing in the sand, and I hesitate before picking it up. The people of my lineage have firm beliefs: you don’t touch what doesn’t belong to you. Especially when it is on the ground. Especially when the object is a photo of a man, and you’re not sure if he is alive or dead. Forget tradition! I bend down to pick up the image. The unknown individual staring out at me could be twenty years old or four times that age. He could be wearing a shirt, maybe one he slipped on right before this once clean, smooth, unscratched unimaginative photo was taken, probably in a studio, shortly before he embarked on his voyage. For a moment, I think of the *cayucos* riding low in the water with the men, women and children, awaiting dawn to set the motor rumbling and run the human cargo to the other side of the sea. For a moment, I think the man in the photo, his age the same as my father’s or my son’s, is sleeping somewhere under the sea. A strong current or squall pried him from the smuggler’s boat, tossed his migrant body about, rumpled his clothing, pillaged his sack, and vomited his ID photo onto the first beach it encountered. This is an ordinary fate, not a fable. The boat runners still operate, just differently.

The portrait in my palm has the impermanence of a mother-of-pearl shell that needs water to breathe. Before long, the face will fade. Nothing will remain but a white void in the middle of a photo that non-human beings on the beach will take for themselves. We will no longer know what this person looked like. We will not know from which Africa, in Africa, he came.

When the “wooden monsters with entrails of chains”[[9]](#endnote-9) set sail from the coasts by the thousands, photography did not yet exist. The word first appears in the *Dictionnaire général de la langue française* in 1832, and the first clear image dates from 1827. This heliography (literally “sun writing”), the cornerstone of the 8th Art, represents not a human being, but a residence. Taken by Nicéphore Niépce, it captures the view from the second-floor window of his French country house, now a museum of the history of photography. The photograph titled “Point de vue du Gras” evokes the pared down, geometric landscapes of Cubism. Would Niépce have been as inspired, standing before the epic Atlantic? Would he have waited for the sun to inscribe the tin plates and reveal the outlines of those who were never photographed? Would he have posed the subjects or taken candid shots of them in their naked truth? Let’s imagine the characters: a mother with her remaining child, a warrior standing straight as a spear, a young girl covering her breasts, an old woman watching her. All in a wide shot. It takes time to make a successful portrait.

One of the first known photographs to portray enslaved people in America dates from 1850. A scene of labor, it centers on three men hauling baskets filled with cotton on their head. What is arresting about this black & white photograph, taken in Greene County, Georgia, is the black woman, just a step away from the porters: she is unexpectedly idle. Hand on her hip, she gazes directly at the camera lens. The imperfect focus prevents me from reading into the woman’s thoughts, however, I can glean her intentions. In this state, where cotton is king and the enslaved is its slave, this woman is granting herself the right to stare at whoever is staring at her. She is allowing herself a break in a day that contains none. She is offering her body brief respite, her body which is probably subjected to the same stress as those who sleep in the colonial cemetery at L’Anse Sainte-Marguerite. This image, a longtime family treasure sold at auction, and now accessible to all at the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in Kansas City, takes me back to my quest and to the absence. Photography did not exist when the wooden monster with entrails of chains swallowed thousands of captives.

**Meditation 4:** In Sevilla, where memory of the slave trade has not wakened,[[10]](#endnote-10) I am watching “Peripeteia” (2012), a fictional short film by John Akomfrah. Here is the plot: set in a sixteenth-century European village, two Africans dressed like local peasants are wandering as if searching, evoking their native country as they struggle to remember it. Transplanted to hostile soil and condemned to permanent exile, these two protagonists never cross paths. The male character, recalling a past when he had been a warrior, fashions a spear from a tree branch, while the actress clutches a wooden doll, like the ones carried by women anticipating a prosperous marriage fecund with children. The British filmmaker’s 18-minute film, inspired by real individuals whose charcoal and metal-point portraits German painter Albrecht Dürer drew in 1508 and 1521, hurls us back into the hold, which *is* and *is not*.

Where is the slave ship—the one that unloaded Akomfrah’s deported figures? From what village, what kingdom did these two melancholy protagonists come? What was their name before they became Dürer’s black models? Between what nameless person and what other nameless person were they wedged in the hold during the Passage? Were they tempted to break the hatch open and revolt? In their land, did people search for them high and low? For how long? Do their people still lament their strange absence? Have they grown used to it? Do they call it death or disappearance? Do they attribute it to fate or the Catastrophe?

Back to the ship: Was it as strong as a thousand bulls? With people stacked up inside, as usual? How many nets filled with human beings were tossed overboard? How many tongues were swallowed? How many survivors, and to what Non-World were they abandoned? Might the children of the children of their children be buried in the cemetery of L’Anse Sainte-Marguerite? Could all their descendants be resting, if they are at rest, if they no longer suffer, in a grave in Greene County? In Akomfrah’s short film with no dialogue, which features no slave ship, we understand the exiled woman’s tears. We understand why, in her long, billowing dress, she leaps, tries to fly. No ocean will take her back to her mother. There will be no return.

The unnamed who dream at L’Anse Sainte-Marguerite, the unknown of Chile, the mute woman of Green County, and the uprooted human beings in Akomfrah’s film are the first passersby, the first silhouettes on the road that leads to the Specter. I say road, but *chemin-chien*, a dog path, is what comes to mind. In Martinique, Guadeloupe and Guyane, a *chimen chyen* is a smaller path outside those clearly marked. Absent from road maps, it makes you sidestep old grasses, mangroves, ravines, volcanos, arborescent growth, unpredictable vines. Sometimes a short-cut, sometimes a detour, sometimes a double-back, it conjures darkness. The not-cleared and the terrifying. Taking the *chemin-chien* toward the phantom vessel means facing the twists and turns of absence. Thinking, at the bend in the path, that you’ve caught sight of the boat, but never glimpsing more than its shadow. With each step, it means daring to wonder what it was like *down below*, beyond the silenced call-and-response and the thickness of the enigma.

The hold *is* and *is not*.

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**Path 1**

**The Breadth of the Absence**

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1. **The Enigma of the Departure and the Question of the Return**

As an Afro-descendant of a lineage of deportees, I know that my story doesn’t begin in 1967 (the year my parents arrived in Orléans), but dates from several centuries ago and comes from Africa. One day, in Bamako, a woman reading cowrie shells revealed to me that I was descended from a people of walkers. She said she had *seen* me crossing the desert along with others who looked like me. She had seen the heavy seas swallow me, but did not divulge the beginning or the rest of my odyssey. I had never known what village, savannah or coast marked my starting point, so I decided it would be Kano. This city which is also a state in northern Nigeria, is not one I’ve been to. All I know of Nigeria is the border town of Badagry. I went there in 2005 after a time living and writing in Senegal and Benin. I roamed the beach where slave ships had set sail in the past. I visited the ruins of the old slave market at Velekete. Two days, I lasted there, that was it! I took a taxi back to Cotonou.

I will probably never go to Kano, but that makes no difference to me. I like the idea that the people of my people were born there, distinguished themselves, and built a life there. So, I come from Kano. I carry the name inside me. My name is Kanor. We are Kanors, we are from Kano. This region in West Africa is where our first placenta was buried.

In the French Antilles, most patronyms sprang from the imaginations of civil officials charged with taking a census of the newly free population after slavery was abolished for the second time in 1848. In those emancipated colonies, where the inhabitants forever carry the names of fruits, animals, tools, saints, Greek gods, names that evoke laughter by designating intimate body parts, attributes, or physical defects, or else names lifted at random from the dictionary of common names—just holding to my belief that my patronym comes from Africa is both an act of faith and a retort to former colonial domination. *My name is Kanor and I come from Kano* is a praxis in the Ancient Greek sense, a transformative practice. In making this declaration, I retrace my steps back through the centuries and across the Atlantic Ocean. I recover my village name and the fragments of my scattered history.

For the populations who were colonized by other peoples, the question of the being rubs necessarily against the problem of origins. What these populations were before they were twisted by colonization, remains a fabulous rebus that some have never stopped wanting to decipher. “To know where you’re going, you must know from where you’ve come.” Those who find that this well-known Berber saying resonates will set out to surmount the time lost, naïve and transfixed by nostalgia, and focusing on roots that they imagine to be authentic, a root-layer that they want to believe is still intact. For nations whose peoples were deported and scattered, the return to origins is viewed with some suspicion and comes at some risk. At the time of displacement and uprooting, what would be the value of this quest if it only led back to a static “Once upon a time”? Furthermore, assuming that time can be turned back, how do we resolve the riddle of place? How can we know *from where we come*? How can we bring light to this past which has bequeathed so few traces to the present? Finally, we must consider the cost of the quest. Is it possible to come back from this meander through time unscathed, free of trauma? It is too soon to elucidate this term borrowed from healers. I suggest that we first pause on the word “root,” and begin with memories and individual stories of the departure and the return.

I’ll begin with a group memory: the concert by the African-American pianist, singer and composer Nina Simone at the Jazz Festival of Montreux, Switzerland on the evening of July 3, 1976. When this performance took place, two years had passed since the artist had resided in the United States. In 1974, on the advice of Miriam Makeba, Simone set out for Liberia[[11]](#endnote-11) to live in Monrovia. An article written by Katherina Grace Thomas and titled “Nina Simone in Liberia,” provides perspective on Simone’s three years spent there: the continuous parties in the Liberian capital, bathing in the sea, the gang of friends, the parade of men, and her suspended career. No new albums during that period, no major tours organized. Simone seem to have appeared mostly in private circles and settled in Libera with the hope finding a man and marriage, and confident of finding a particular kind of freedom, as well as what she calls “home” in her memoirs titled, *I Put a Spell on You*, and in her “Liberian Calypso,” composed a few years after her 1977 departure from Liberia.

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The French language has no word for this. It can talk about hearth, domicile, one’s own place, but none of these terms embrace, or even carry, the notion of the house. Philosopher Gaston Bachelard articulates this idea clearly and affirms it. In *La Poétique de l’espace*, the house becomes a synonym for shelter and protected personal life. The house warms the heart and remains in the memory long after the body has left it. More than a factual or material phenomenon, it is an image which we return to mentally and which makes us happy each time we reflect on it. The ghosts residing in Bachelard’s house are not evil. They are the familiar and nurturing “Lares gods”[[12]](#endnote-12) which are passed down from generation to generation in families, and who protect them from misfortune. These good ghosts, considered part of the furnishings, provide us with what the philosopher calls “fixations of happiness.” In these poetic spaces (poetic because we recreate them through memory and dreams), we feel protected and in our space, as we did in the maternal womb. “For the house is our corner of the world. It is – as has often been said – our first universe.” Bachelard is the only who knows how to transcribe the anglophone *home* into French*.* He integrates safe, nurturing scents, “unique” fragrances emitted by a closet or by “grapes drying on the trellis.” He inserts habits – forever inscribed in the reveries of those who have lived there. He inserts doors, too. For there is home, and there is the outside world, a place of discomfort, instability and dispersal. “We are secure in our knowledge that we are more calm, more at peace in the old residence, the house of our birth, than we are in the house and in the streets that we inhabit only in passing.”

Nina Simone, born Eunice Waymon, was brought into this world in a wooden shack with sheet-metal roof, erected on brick pilings at 30 E. Livingston Street in Tryon, North Carolina. Visitors to this little town today see the shady plaza bearing the artist’s name as well as a statue representing her. With tight corn rows on her head, and an African-inspired necklace around her neck, the almost life-size, bronze Nina sits at a floating, undulating piano keyboard. She is dressed in a long gala dress, slit to the top of her thigh. The statue was realized by Zenos Frudakis in 2010. By happy miracle, and thanks to the will of a handful of artists and activists, the modest wooden house where Eunice-Nina lived has resisted the passage of time. Today there is probably a plaque mounted on the facade, the usual kind, saying here lived the singer, pianist, composer, etc. However, though Nina Simone’s house stands there on a hilly road of an ordinary American town, Liberia is where we find her house in the sense described by Bachelard. This is where her Lares and her good memories rest; in a particular corner of the world, an image that makes her happy anytime she brings it to mind.

The 1976 concert in Montreux gives us insight into how Simone inhabited this particular corner of the world and pondered the question of roots. Especially at the end of the concert.[[13]](#endnote-13) In response to the ovations of the international audience, Simone comes back on stage and performs what I would call the dance of eternal quest and eternal absence. In her body, too electric to gyrate for real, and in her black rock dress that comes down to her knees, the African American does her best to emulate the steps and movements that she has seen, learned in Liberia. She opens with a cry, a dance that exhales the quest and weeps at the absence. Standing close to her musicians (a drummer and a percussionist) at the edge of the stage, the singer emits a long howl to get herself going, crouches down, stands back up, then puts her hands together in prayer before commencing. Her thighs flex. Her hips sway. Her pelvis swings. Her arms, shoulders and torso undulate. She weaves about, stamping her feet, hesitates, then starts in again. Goes down, rises back up, flexes her legs, swivels her hips, hands, arms, shoulders, torso, pounds the ground, stops, starts again, stops and raises her arms. If the concert hall in Montreux did not have a roof, Nina Simone would take flight. Like John Akomfrah’s isolated African, she would gather her energy and fly off to her *home*. She would not stay there, vacillating.

What is most disconcerting in this ten-minute sequence is Simone’s suspended movement and obstructed flight. The concert in Montreux hangs by a thread from the very beginning. At various moments, the African-American seems to want to walk off the stage. What merits closer attention, I think, is what she states before dancing. “Let’s just give them some rhythm of what it feels to be in a bush. Maybe it will work, maybe it will not At least, after that, you will know where I am *trying to come from*…”[[14]](#endnote-14)

The italicized phrase is unsettling. We don’t *try* to come from somewhere. We come from somewhere. Period. Whether we have forgotten or have chosen never to remember this place, it exists within us, for always. It coincides with an irrevocable, irreplaceable place on a map. As an Afro-descendant from a lineage of deported people, Eunice Waymon, born in Tryon, North Carolina, *is trying* to come from Africa. But this path that she is following to a past that has to be reconstructed, to a mythic space, is nothing like a freeway. It is a path punctuated with halts, surprise curves, hidden twists and potholes; this is what is entailed by the verb *to try*. By virtue of its protean form, this path borders the concept of “diasporic spider”[[15]](#endnote-15) developed by researcher and artist Nadine George-Graves, in *Black Performance Theory*. In her polyphonic essay, George-Graves proposes that the roots of the African-American diaspora are not found under the ground, in a static and stable African cellar, as was long thought. On the contrary, the roots are dynamic and receptive to other cultures. They are living, they evolve, depending on the use and the desires of each individual. Having integrated the experience of chaotic disruption, voyage, and the unexpected, they remain open to the world and sustain a continuous state of renewal.

*Trying* to come from Africa, then, means welcoming this variability. As Nina Simone demonstrates on the stage at Montreux, it means consenting to situate oneself between the quest and the absence. It means turning this primary tension (*I was born in Tryon* versus *I come from Africa*) into a drive to unfurl oneself in history, multiply oneself in space and, finally, perform the diaspora. I hold onto the image of Simone’s swaying body dancing the quest and the absence to infinity. For me, anyone able to follow the path back, thighs flexed, pelvis swaying, feet winged, arms snaking, is a living archive.

In her autobiographical story, *All God’s Children Need Travelling Shoes*, published in 1986, African-American author and activist Maya Angelou relates her two-year stay in Ghana, including an incident that is thought-provoking for those whose desire to untangle their roots is persistent. One day, while taking a walk in the city of Keta, about a two-hour drive from Accra, on the shores of the Gulf of Guinea, the writer suddenly realizes that she is treading on the soil of her ancestors. Her knowledge is not scientific: it comes out of no research or genetic testing. But Angelou knows what she feels. From the way some of the villagers stare at her and call out to her, she senses that at one time, she was of this same world, this same community, in this case, the Ewe tribe. By coming to this coastal city where she has never been, she has recovered her African identity and reinscribed herself in a lineage. No longer is she the foreigner, but rather a phantom that the inhabitants recognize. She is the *revenant*. A present-day incarnation of the Egùngùn.

In the Yoruba culture of southern Benin, Egùngùn (Yoruba for “revenants”) represent the spirit of the disappeared that returns to the world of the living. They manifest themselves on very specific occasions (deaths, births, traditional celebrations) and in the course of certain ceremonies dedicated to the memory of the ancestors. Generally, they come out during the day and are always covered (from head to foot), and ornamented with shells and colorful, spangled fabrics. The opposite of vampires or zombies, which one might wrongly be tempted to compare them to, revenants do not set out to torment, punish or lose people. Though Egùngùn might amuse themselves by scaring onlookers and chasing after them, and although addressing them directly or touching them is strictly forbidden (under pain of death), Egùngùn are considered nurturing entities. In the eyes of the community, their appearance is considered a blessing. The people ask Egùngùn for assistance, peace and prosperity; and offer them gifts to express their loyalty and gratitude.

The revenants dance for the assembled public to the rhythm of a *chanté*, rattles, and drums. The song and dances are frenzied, but sacred. Under their costumes, which must not be touched, and behind their opaque masks, the revenants remain invisible to mortals. A mystery. They are called revenants, but where do they come from, really? From the heart of the earth or the depths of the ocean? Do they dance for our benefit or their own? Bring us peace or demand it for themselves? In Ouidah, where worshipping the Egùngùn has been practiced since the 19th century,[[16]](#endnote-16) in Ouidah, a port of no-return for the captives and one of the most busiest ports for slave ships in West Africa, it is tempting to detect a link between these festooned spirits of the dead and the Africans who were deported. As the masks move and whirl about, it can seem like we’re seeing the spirit of those who disappeared. We imagine their errant wandering and perpetual ordeal – how to die in peace without the rituals of the grave?

The story of revenants is absent from Angelou’s story. The American writer mentions no religious beliefs in her memoir. After her realization in Keta, she gets back in the car, leaves for the big city in Accra. In 1964, she moved back to the United States, where she resided until her death in 2014. While it is true that she never returned to live on the African continent, her work continued to be haunted by the question of origins and the *return to the native country*. This phrase borrowed from Aimé Césaire probably applies in only a limited sense, since it supposes a departure that Maya Angelou denies, at least in part. Indeed, at the end of her Ghanian adventures, the African-American recalls that “Long before, I had been taken from Africa by force. […] The second time, leaving will be less painful, for I knew then that my people never quite left Africa.”[[17]](#endnote-17) What is interesting about this epilogue, is that it invites us to conceive the Middle Passage as a deportation process that failed. Not all of Africa was torn up by the roots and placed shackled in ships. Those who were sold, those who were bought, those who were taken away by force, they all left behind mothers, fathers, elders, children, who did not forget/have not forgotten them. Those who remained know what woman, what man bore a given name, carried a given lineage. They continue to honor the ancestors and bury the placentas. Angelou’s “never quite left” thus suggests that the departure was never permanent. Palpable traces remain beyond the archives, and immutable connections between the dispersed black worlds. Her *never quite left* allows us to think that those who died at sea are not completely dead, and that those who disappeared beyond the sea, those who became arms laboring on the plantations of the New World, have not been erased from the family or from collective memory. Angelou was unquestionably “taken away by force,” but the Ewe in Keta remember her, are not surprised to see her come back, since they also know that she never *completely* left.

This brings to mind a black & white photographic portrait. It is from a book published by Zora Neale Hurston in the 1930s. The book was unearthed almost sixty years after the author’s death and published in 2018. The text, titled *Barracoon, The Story of the Last “Black Cargo*,” is based on an interview with Oluale Kossola. I have chosen to retain here only Kossola’s original first and last names, those he carried before being captured by the Dahomian warriors in 1860, imprisoned in a barracoon (a detention structure that held the enslaved before the Middle Crossing) in Ouidah, and deported to Alabama, in America, with some hundred other captive West Africans, aboard an illegal slave ship named the Clotilda. In the introduction, Hurston explains that the expedition was illegal because it took place more than fifty years after the law of 1808 prohibiting the importation of slaves to the United States. What also makes this story notable is its ending. Liberated five years after their arrival in the United States, some of those deported from Ouidah, including Kossola, founded the community of Africatown, also known as Plateau, where features of West African culture survived into the 1950s.

That is where the black & white portrait of Kossola was taken. Dressed in his Sunday best, suit jacket and trousers, he is staring directly into the camera. He is eighty-six years old and in this elderly man’s eyes, we get a glimpse of the basic contours of his life. A life of little, a life of suffering in an America damaged by slavery and segregated. Kossola has the fierce smile of those who have never slowed down to complain or relax. Kossola is the body of history. Solemn, he holds himself straight. He will not move while the photo is being taken. Zora Neale Hurston offers us a few details on this photo session. Rather than pull out her camera immediately, she waited until the old man was ready. She watched him go into his wooden cabin to change his clothes. When he came back out onto the veranda, he was dressed in his “most handsome suit,” and noted that he had “slipped off his shoes” “to make it look like I am in Affica [Africa].” In many respects, what Kossola does and says reveals an astonishing modernity. As he is about to be immortalized by Hurston’s camera, he decides to stage himself. By adopting the pose, imposing a frame (his front porch), choosing the clothes and accessories that he’ll wear, Kossola shows that he controls his own image and that he is conscious of the potential power and impact of this portrait on the community of viewers.

We are in 1927 when Zora Neale Hurston carries out her interview and presses the button on her camera. However, it is clearly not first time that Kossola has posed, nor the first time that a black man has been both model and author of his own portrait. Since Frederick Douglass was the most photographed politician of the nineteenth century, we know that photography was a tactic used by the defenders of civil rights to restore the stolen dignity and humanity to all dominated people. Of the multiple shots taken of Douglass and left to posterity, one profile always emerges: a man’s unflinching gaze at the camera, an American citizen impeccably dressed, his Samson hair neatly combed, his long suit jacket, his buttoned vest, his bowtie and immaculate shirt collar. The typical image of a powerful man. An effective image for this abolitionist, whose goal was to rehabilitate and elevate Black people in American society and in the world.

But for Kossola, the stakes are different. America, where Black people are battling to the death to gain equality with the Whites, is not his promised land. His anthem is not Langston Hughes’s cyclonic poem, “I, Too,” in which the bard of the Harlem Renaissance claims his place at the table and his piece of the pie in discriminatory America. What Kossola dreams of can’t be obtained on this soil of “Americky,” as he calls it, where he has been transplanted. What he wants is to go home. Kossola’s bare feet, revealed by Hurston, cry yes and no at the same time. They affirm a desire to return to his native country, and also this African’s refusal to be transformed into an American. As Léon-Gontran Damas writes in his poetry collection *Pigments*, “I feel ridiculous /in their shoes/in their suit.” This is a poem for a black identity threatened. A poem-weapon where the Guyanese attacks assimilation, that sickness of colonialism, and rebels against what France has made of its former colonized people; black bodies wearing white masks, made-French-by-force, feeling hemmed in by their suits and their ill-fitting shoes. Fakes. Published in the mid-1930s, these lines of poetry likely would have inspired Kossola, who was buried in the Africatown cemetery in 1935. Buried barefoot, I assume, to be unencumbered for the ultimate crossing.

Let’s go back to the portrait, to Kossola’s face, to understand where his gaze is focused. His eyes are not fixed on Hurston’s lens, but on the great country, disappeared beyond the waters. Despite having spent some sixty years on United States soil, Kossola has never completely left Africa. He was born African and will die African. He is the last African of America, the last African of the Africa torn apart by the transatlantic slave trade. And probably the first enslaved man to relate so intimately, from inside himself, the Africa from before the slave ships.

This contrasts with the slave narratives[[18]](#endnote-18) in which the author-narrators, most of them born outside of Africa, dwell on their former captivity and the thorny path to emancipation. As such, these stories can be seen as processes of double conversion: once converted to a

 citizen, himself, the formerly enslaved person converts his White readers to the abolitionist cause. Kossola’s speech is rooted in a concrete Africa, presented as it is, without any pedagogical, religious or ideological sheen. Both vagabond (Kossola speaks only when he wishes) and serpentine (Kossola’s story takes detours), his speech takes us to his

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native village of Takkoi where smaller stories overlap with History.

We hear the tale of the lion-woman who, to avenge herself against a hunter who has shot her young, changes into a femme fatale and seduces the aggressor; the fable of the Ape who goes around telling his friends among the beasts in the bush about the Camel’s treachery and deceit; the saga of the reckless man condemned to death for stealing the sacred pelt of a leopard, for lying and employing sorcery; the story of the hut called “the fat house” because it is where the engaged couple fatten up before the wedding… Through these tales and true stories that stretch and sometimes beckon to the audience (in this case, Hurston), we gain access to a singular West African way of perceiving time and space, being and community, power and duty, death and life. In Takkoi, everything is in its place and everything in its time; the king commands the chief who commands the father who commands the boy. Hunting, war, and marriage are arts that are taught. Whoever betrays the community is punished. Whoever kills is killed. Whoever goes off the rails, falls.

It can be useful to compare Kossola’s deep Affica to the Africa depicted in the slave narratives. I’ll briefly examine two examples. In the first chapter of his autobiography titled *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African: Written by Himself*, Olaudah Equiano, who was born in Essaka around 1745, enslaved and deported at the age of ten, provides a kind of general introduction to the study of his native country. Though he explicitly includes himself in the human group that he introduces, saying, “We are almost a nation of dancers, musicians, and poets […]. We have many musical instruments”[[19]](#endnote-19) and though he refers to himself as “the African” right from the front cover, he seems detached from the landscape that he is describing and presents his knowledge with an explanatory rigor that is disconcerting. One would expect a more personal and less ethnographic style from someone who had spent his youth at the place where this story begins, and from an author who had decided to testify to the tragic misfortune that had befallen him. The objectifying that permeates this text affects the way in which the African continent is represented. Through the scientific gaze of this observer, Africa atrophies and dematerializes. No longer is it the land of the child born there. It has become “that part of Africa known by the name of Guinea, where slave commerce is conducted [and which] extends along the coast for more than 3,400 miles.” By transforming his native country into an object of study and confining it to the features of its geography, Equiano ends up exoticizing it. He erases the ancestral roots that bound him to it. He obliterates the connection.

My second example: *A Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Venture, a Native of Africa: But Resident above Sixty Years in the United States of America. Related by Himself*. More confessional than the autobiography of Olaudah Equiano, this narrative-memoir, published in the United States in 1798, is the work of Broteer Furro, rechristened Venture Smith by the American who acquired him for the price of four gallons of rum and a length of calico. As is customary in slave narratives, the author-narrator retraces his odyssey from the beginning. First there is West Africa, and Dukandarra, where he was born in 1729, endured enslavement at the age of seven, embarked from present-day Ghana, crossed the waters down in the hold, arrived in Rhode Island and endured the ordinary tribulations of a man who passed from master to master, from chore to chore, from hearth to hearth, before purchasing freedom for himself and his family. In the first pages of this autobiography, we see Africa exoticized. In the preface, Furro states his intentions. He will confine himself to relating the facts. Such a narrative mode, which supposes the author’s discretion, engenders the disappearance of Africa as heartland in his story:

  Before I dismiss this country, I must just inform my reader what I remember concerning this place. A large river runs through this country in a westerly course. The land for a great way on each side is flat and level, hedged in by a considerable rise of the country at a great distance from it. It scarce ever rains there, yet the land is fertile.

Here, as in Equiano’s account, the African *I* pales before the panoramic view and an accumulation of scientific observations directed to “my reader,” a Western audience. He holds Africa at arm’s length, using no possessive with the continent. It is that country, that place over there, in other words, a far-off, foreign country, as inaccessible to the reader, but also to the narrator, whose memoir is not a miraculous resurrection, à la Proust, but merely a place of factual knowledge. For Furro, whose past is forever lost, the intent is to relate a series of events in stark terms, not revive the emotional states of that time. Hence, our difficulty today, accessing the internal state of the *I* who is testifying, our difficulty in placing ourselves at the heart of the psychological experience of an African being torn from his soil. We will know less about the depth and extent of this uprooting than we will about the state of the rivers in the rainy season, or the socio-spatial organization of huts and compounds, the process for making wine, palm oil, or the sacrifices made to nourish the spirits. Although these external narratives produced by individuals who, in the past, had been from the interior, do document the Africa of traditions and the slave trade as an organized practice, they lack the curative power of a work like *Barracoon*; they do not create *home* within us. They do not repatriate us to the lost country.

The moment of capture is a recurring motif in the narrative organization of the stories of the enslaved. A pivot point where the hero-narrator’s change in status (from free to slave) exposes him to a series of catastrophes until the end of the story, which is always marked by a return to calm. Those who tell their story are survivors. In *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano*, the first odyssey or obstacle, to use the vocabulary of the old narratology, emerges at an unexpected moment. While their parents are laboring in the field, the young Olaudah and his sister are kidnapped by three foreigners who drag them through the bush and tie them up. A series of trials follows, including separation of the siblings. Of course, physical violence is integral to this disturbance of the original situation. A person being subjected to enslavement immediately loses control over the use of his body. He is moved, chained, imprisoned and beaten. In Furro’s autobiography, the narrator’s decline commences the moment his kidnappers deal him a blow to the head.

In 2004, as I was constructing my novel *Humus*, about fourteen African women being packed into a slave ship, I remember the trouble, the hellish difficulty I had imagining this primary obstacle, and finding the right words and the right tone to tell this story. In the chapter titled “the twins,” in which two young peasant girls from northern Senegal are captured by slave traders during a raid – their village is sacked, their elderly parents are exterminated – I decided to turned to the magic of the ellipse. Confer to silence the moment when Anta and Feyor are thrashing about in a panic, trying to escape their attackers. I gave up trying to describe how they dash toward the river, hoping to be able hide there, how they are trapped again, and how they struggle until forced to join the miserable trail of prisoners. Instead of further elaborating on their new identity, as mobile, branded body, I conclude: “The next day, wooden stakes had sprouted all over our bodies.”

In *Barracoon*, this breaking point has not fled the text. It is articulated, it is there, and persists through the space of massacre. In Kossola’s village, deep in the night, African hunters of men burst into huts and in the blink of an eye, transform the living into prisoners or cadavers. From this massacre recounted more than a half-century after it occurred, Kossola reconstructs the totality of the memory. The past becomes present. His tale is not an act of remembering. He is not trying to recall what happened to him that night in Takkoi. He is reliving the capture, and we live it with him. We see and feel death, death everywhere, the enormous blade of the woman-soldiers’ coupe-coupe, the profusion of slit throats, the bones protruding from jawbones, the heads falling and the obnoxious odor that they give off as they dry out.

In my performance piece titled, *The Body of History*, I wonder if I will one day understand what the ancestors endured the night the land disappeared. It is a question that I ask the audience. They, like I, can’t know. My question is rhetorical. I know that I will never know what happened at the heart of the “first darkness.” Thus speaks Édouard Glissant in *Poetics of Relation* to express “being torn from the daily country, from the god protectors, from the protective community.” Kossola’s memories shed light on the darkness. They cast a trickle of light on the enigma of the departure, the forced going of those bodies toward other worlds, the *voyage* for which Maya Angelou predicts, promises, the return ticket.

Is there a way to come back?

In Ouidah, in the rowboat taking young Kossola out to the slave ship Clotilda, he wonders. Behind him lies the beach with the black-skinned, white-skinned merchants making threats, and the ill-lit barracoons. Before him lies a ship of monstrous proportions, resting on a furious sea that cannot be crossed by a swimmer. Is it possible to go back? Kossola’s faded smile, intercepted by the lens, hints that he has been asking this question all his life. To Hurston, he confides that in 1865, five years after his arrival in America, he implored one of the captains who had brought him here to take him back to Benin. He was speaking for everyone, for all the other Africans taken from Ouidah aboard the *Clotilda*. Their prayer was not answered. The captain refused. He would have consented to repatriate them, had it been logistically possible. It would have required a ship able to cross back over the sea. But history says that upon reaching its destination and delivering its human cargo, the captain set fire to the *Clotilda*. The slave trafficker feared being pursued by the courts for illegally transporting a hundred slaves in violation of the 1807 statute outlawing the slave trade.

Kossola’s faded smile transports us once again to the Jazz Festival in Montreux, where an almost-African woman from a country unknown, alias Eunice Waymon, alias Nina Simone, is dancing the quest and the absence *ad libitum*. What would Kossola have done if he’d been there on stage? Would he have slipped off his shoes to dance with the star? Would he have confessed the reverse of Simone’s sentiment, “I am trying to live in Alabama”? He’d never lived there—it is important to emphasize that. Or rather, Alabama had never lived in him, as the thinker Monchoachi describes it. “What inhabits us is for us, what is closest and most essential.” I am of the opinion that the gap between Kossola and Nina Simone is situated at the heart of this notion of *inhabiting*, the way the term is constructed. Simone chooses to live in Africa to grow closer to her roots – roots partly external to her, despite all her efforts and willingness (I am *trying*) – whereas Kossola is inhabited by his native continent. Though exiled – a forced, irreversible exile, he has no need to celebrate or recreate his homeland to make it exist. He carries Affica inside him. He is Affica. There is no gulf between the man and the place.

One December day in Ouidah, my friend Martine gave me my first pagne: an indigo cotton rectangle of fabric, “a souvenir from Benin,” she called it. I thanked her, and slipped the gift into my suitcase. In Paris, a few days later, I put it away at the bottom of my armoire. It took me ten years to grow used to it, to feel at ease wearing it. Not made up or artificial: myself. The act of wrapping a pagne around the waist and grabbing the left end and pulling it toward the right, then taking the right to pull it toward the left is a complex operation that involves the body, of course, but also the mind. For a long time, while doing it, a voice inside me would grumble, “Stop acting as if you were from *over there*.” I have been pondering my own *Back to Africa*.[[20]](#endnote-20)

Whether it is gorging on the real or the marvelous, the return to the Africas is an experience common to all those of the Black diaspora, an experience imposed by the history of slavery. In quest of Africa and feeling its absence, much like Nina Simone, we have danced until we sweated to worship our unidentified African ancestors. We have nurtured the plan of becoming once again dust from *over-there*, following in the footsteps of historian, writer, and civil rights activist W.E.B. DuBois, who was buried in Accra. With pride equal to that of the Black poets of the Harlem Renaissance, we have attempted to reveal to the world what the Africas were to us. We have grown dizzy at the lyrical speeches of Marcus Garvey and have shared the dreams of the panAfricanists of *Black Star Line*.[[21]](#endnote-21) We have meditated on *African settings*,[[22]](#endnote-22) the bush and megalopolises that are finally ours. We have smiled – a smile of complicit understanding while reading the adventures of Maryse Condé’s and Lorraine Hansberry’s heroines who are infatuated with Africa. The nostalgia of Afro-descendants comes not from having left Africa, but from never having inhabited it for real. Their *Back to Africa* need not be realized to be real. It is temptation more than attempt. And therefore, an endless tale of initiation.

1. Like many poets and tellers of stories from history, I use the term “hold” to name this space below the deck, the area where captives were stowed, over-packed with captured human beings. There is a split in language here. The hold designates the area where provisions and barrels of water were stored, and was located below the lower deck, or orlop deck, intended for the captives. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. According to the estimates of archeologist Patrice Courtaud, based on the five excavations conducted at the site beginning in 1997, the cemetery probably contains more than five hundred graves. Paleopathological experts have conducted research on the remains to determine the state of health of the enslaved. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. To detect this indication of Africanity, scientists focused on the teeth. The presence of teeth sharpened to a point suggests that those individuals were born in and lived in Africa long enough to reach adolescence and undergo a rite of passage before their deportation. But the method of inspecting the teeth has its limits. Numerous Africans were deported before reaching adolescence. Furthermore, many of the enslaved lost their teeth as a consequence of a severely deficient diet. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. The remains of numerous individuals, including subjects under twenty years of age, showed evidence of this mechanical stress, which manifests as arthrosis. This is unusual (for young skeletons) and indicates daily exposure to heavy, repetitive tasks. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. The *Code Noir* (Article XXV) stipulates that the masters are responsible for providing their enslaved people with two articles of clothing made of canvas or else four ells (a length of about five meters) of canvas. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. At the end of the nineteenth century, Chile and Argentina proposed to the Europeans that they colonize Tierra del Fuego. The small number of European families who divided up the land massacred all the peoples who lived in the region. In under fifty years, they had disappeared, along with their languages and cultures. In his documentary film, Guzmàn gives voice to three descendants of these exterminated peoples. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. According to the reports of the two official commissions, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (Rettig report, 1991) and the Commission on Political Prison and Torture (Valech report, 2004-2005), the total number of dead and disappeared under the dictatorship stands at 2,279. These same reports indicate that 27,255 people were tortured. A reevaluation has been conducted since then, which determined the number tortured to be 38,000 and the total dead and disappeared closer to 3,200. To this day, only 40% of the crimes committed have been elucidated. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. There was a time when Arica, today a port city in North Chile, was a port where ships with entrails of chains docked. Many of the enslaved who were “stowed” there came from the Congo, Mozambique and Angola. At the time, Arica was part Peru, not Chile. After the War of the Pacific (1879-1883), Chile took possession of the province and implemented a policy of Chileanization consisting, in particular, of repressing the Indian and African cultures, which were vital at that time, and promoting Chilean tradition and culture. In this way, in Arica, Tacna and Tarapacá, the culture of the African descendants was erased from the country’s history. Cristian Báez Lazcano of the Chilean group Lumbanga is one of the few activists today collecting traces of the African heritage and culture in Chile. The country, which is resisting this collective work of memory and preservation, continues to deny the presence of a population descended from Africa. Despite late recognition (in 2019) by the Chilean State of the Afro-Chilean tribal people, the government continues to exclude this population from the constituent Assembly. In Guzmán’s country, the Afro-Chilean identity does not exist politically. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. The expression comes from the song “Tam Tam de l’Afrique,” by the French rap group IAM. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. On the urban landscape of Sevilla, the absence of markers commemorating the Catastrophe is disconcerting. From the discovery of the New World – as Amerigo Vespucci called it in the early sixteenth century – the city especially memorializes its historic explorers. Certain Sevillian monuments illustrate this myopia, for example, El Nacimiento de un hombre nuevo, a bronze statue of Christopher Columbus standing inside a stylized egg; the statue of Rodrigo de Triana (in the neighborhood named for him), a sailor who accompanied Columbus. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. The history of Liberia, which became an independent republic in 1847, is linked to the year 1822, when the entirely White American Colonization Society, founded in 1816, decided to create the colony of Liberia in West Africa and transfer there enslaved Blacks who had just been emancipated. Several convoys were organized. In this way, some fifteen thousand free Blacks established themselves in the “new” country in the hope of improving their living conditions and of escaping systemic racism and segregation. When Nina Simone chose Liberia as *home*, she was in part guided by this same hope. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. This expression, as well as those in quotes on page 33 [of the original *La* *Poétique de la cale*] come from *La Poétique de l’espace*, Gaston Bachelard, Paris, PUF, 1957, p. 24, 25, 31, 32, and 55. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. This entire Nina Simone concert is available online: “Nina Simone at Montreux 1974: Everybody took a chunk of me.” The excerpt analyzed here can be found at [00:57:35-01:01:11]. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Video time reference: [01:03:15-01:03:55]. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. In “Diasporic Spidering: Constructing Contemporary Black Identities, “George-Graves defines this notion as follows: [Will need to find original quote]. Nadine George-Graves, Black Performance Theory. Durham/London: Duke University Press, 2014, p. 33. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Originally from Oyo in Nigeria, the Egungun are Yoruba divinities introduced to Benin during the reign of Ghézo (1818-1858). It is said that one of the Nigerian slaves brought back by the king “created” them by striking the ground with a stick. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. [Maya Angelou quote – the English original is now integrated into the text.] [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Published in the 18th and 19th centuries in England and the United States, these slave narratives are the stories told in the first person by authors who felt the realities of slavery in their skin. They obey certain esthetic rules, including the traditional opening, “I was born…” in other words, to reclaim their genealogy. The most well-known among them, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, had enormous success. Thirty thousand copies were sold between its publication in 1845, and 1860. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa the African. Written by Himself*. New York: Negro Universities Press, 1837, p. 10. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Initiated in the 19th century, the “Back to Africa” movement was promoted and carried forth until the early 20th century by Jamaican Pan-Africanist Marcus Garvey. This movement encouraged Black Americans of African origins to return to Africa to establish themselves there. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Founded in1919 by Marcus Garvey to encourage the return of African-Americans to Africa, the Maritime Company created regular connections between the United States and certain African countries. It lasted three years. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. I am thinking of the romantic African landscape depicted in the fresco *The Negro in an African Setting* in the series *Aspects of Negro Life,* by painter Aaron Douglas, an artist of the Harlem Renaissance. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)