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“Fasten Your Shackles”: Remembering Slavery and Laughing about It in George C. Wolfe’s *The Colored Museum*

‘Cause I’m not what I was ten years ago or ten minutes ago. I’m all of that and then some. And whereas I can’t live inside yesterday’s pain, I can’t live without it. —Topsy Washington, in George C. Wolfe’s *The Colored Museum* (1986)

In his 1986 play, *The Colored Museum*, George C. Wolfe offers audiences a humorous, and at times deeply poignant engagement with the complexities of black life. In the eleven loosely connected scenes (or “exhibits,” in the playwright’s lexicon), Wolfe explicitly engages with the injuries, or “wounds,” that set blacks apart from other Americans. For example, the play begins by referencing the atrocities of the slave trade, which the playwright uses to frame and contextualize the exhibits that follow. By structuring his play about black modern life in relationship to the legacy of slavery, Wolfe engages in a debate about what role that historical wound should play in the ways that contemporary blacks conceive of themselves: he ponders whether slavery constitutes a necessary means for assessing subsequent black disfranchisement, or whether it weighs blacks down, making their racial identity tantamount to victim status. In *The Colored Museum*, Wolfe argues for the importance of “claiming” historical injury for blacks. Yet at the same time that the playwright suggests the necessity of confronting that legacy, he also explores the difficulty and psychic pain involved in bearing it.

One strategy that Wolfe employs in order to reflect on the black past is in casting the play as a “museum,” a place where objects and historical phenomena are presented for contemporary reflection. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett reminds us that in museums, “objects are . . . set in context by means of other objects, often in relation to a classification or schematic arrangement of some kind, based on typologies of form or proposed historical relationships” (21). That is, like all classification systems, museums have an underlying logic and ideological charge. In the case of *The Colored Museum*, by beginning with an evocation of the slave trade, Wolfe suggests that all black life is indexed by a relationship to the trauma of forced migration and enslavement. However, without the curatorial notes or guides that help contextualize museum spaces, Wolfe’s audience must themselves make connections across the scenes. Wolfe thus encourages an active, even contested approach to the interpretation of slavery’s legacy across the exhibits.

Additionally, throughout the play, Wolfe employs humor to undercut a message that might otherwise seem hopeless and overdetermined. Indeed, the play’s premiere in 1986 at the Crossroads Theater in New Brunswick, New Jersey, upset some theatergoers and critics because of its bracingly satirical tone. Each of the eleven vignettes touches on a different element or experience peculiar to black American life, and the play draws in equal parts from Brechtian-style alienation technique and variety-show dynamism. Each exhibit features a different set of characters, and the scenes are connected in only a loosely thematic way. In addition to slavery, other revered elements of black life are treated with both scrutiny and scathing humor; these include

black-owned publications like *Ebony* magazine, the politics of black hair, and most shockingly, black playwrights Ntozake Shange and Lorraine Hansberry in the play's most talked-about exhibit, "The Last Mama on the Couch Play."

By engaging the history of slavery through humor in the play's first scene, "Celebrity Slaveship," Wolfe joins a long line of black writers and artists who have employed satire to political ends, beginning in the nineteenth century and extending through the contemporary moment. In her book, *Laughing Fit to Kill: Black Humor in the Fictions of Slavery*, Glenda Carpio argues that abolitionist writers such as Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs employed satire to lampoon racists. However, the clearest predecessor of Wolfe's work in the nineteenth century is performer William Wells Brown, who both directly addressed the difficult topic of slavery and, as Wolfe does, employed stereotypes to do so. In Carpio's account,

Brown animates racial stereotypes, exaggerating their features in order to highlight their theatricality and their status as masks. Although he did so with the ultimate goal of critiquing their use to brand the "complex subject with the seal of reductive caricature and/or bad habit," he also got at the heart of what is appealing and powerful about them. Stereotypes fascinated Brown. Although they were (and are) too often used to deny the humanity of his brethren, Brown knew that they could also be used as the means to freedom. (33)

Wolfe, like Brown, risks reinforcing stereotypes of black inferiority with his humorous performances. As I discuss later in the essay, the laugh that Wolfe encourages is an uneasy one: the fact that audiences might engage in laughter, both at the expense of black abjection *as well as* racist notions that make such scorn possible, creates the potential for critical self-reflection.

This essay closely reads three scenes in which Wolfe most explicitly engages the link between blackness and injury. As I mention above, though the exhibits are loosely linked, each stands alone in terms of characters and subject matter. I have chosen to embark on an associative, thematic reading of these scenes, rather than analyze the play as a whole, because this best captures the way that viewers themselves are forced to find linkages and make meaning across seemingly disparate episodes. I also feel certain that reading these scenes together will make explicit the playwright's nuanced approach to the history of slavery, as well as his insistence on its continuing importance to the psychic lives of contemporary blacks.

In my analysis, I first address the "Celebrity Slaveship" exhibit that begins the play. Here, Wolfe uses the flight attendant "Miss Pat" to satirically comment on blacks' simultaneous overrepresentation in celebrity culture and ongoing disfranchisement beginning with the slave trade; I suggest that both experiences are linked through a logic of value that prizes the capital that blacks generate over their intrinsic worth. Next, I address "The Gospel According to Miss Roj," a scene centering on a confrontational drag queen. In this exhibit, I suggest Wolfe addresses a particularly vulnerable population: Snap! Queens, or a small subculture of gay men living in New York City during the 1980s. By reading this scene in relationship to "Celebrity Slaveship," I interpret Wolfe as both alluding to the AIDS crisis and suggesting that it, like the slave trade, constitutes a genocide enabled by capitalism's excesses, and its attendant inequalities and exclusions. Finally, I turn to the exhibit "Permutations," a scene that follows a young girl named Normal, who has laid an egg. Though Wolfe makes subtle connections between the girl's suffering during childbirth and the slave trade, I argue that the playwright shifts his focus to the possibility enabled by the dispersion of African peoples throughout the New World. I conclude by suggesting that Wolfe uses the metaphor of madness to encompass both an embrace of and a critical distance from the wounds that help define, and at times circumscribe, blackness in America. Throughout *The Colored Museum*, Wolfe looks to the ways in which expressive culture has enabled blacks to embrace racial pain without being wholly defined by it.

“Git on Board”

As I mention above, Wolfe sets the tone for the entire play by beginning with an evocation of the slave trade, and thus the painful history that set the African diaspora into motion. The first words the audience hears at the beginning of *The Colored Museum* are, “Welcome to Celebrity Slaveship,” delivered by a cheery flight attendant. Before these words startle the audience with their incongruity, viewers see a series of images of brutalized slaves flashing on a projection screen behind which an actress appears. On *Celebrity Slaveship*, Wolfe conflates the circum-Atlantic movement of the slave trade with luxury air travel. When Miss Pat tells viewers to “fasten [their] shackles,” she refigures them as passengers (Wolfe 1). Thus, at the same moment that the audience become “slaves,” they also become successful, present-day people onboard the *Celebrity*. Key to interpreting the scope of Wolfe’s play is understanding why he purposefully conflates the slave past and the present moment, as well as why he includes the audience in this gesture.

Just as Miss Pat’s name suggests, she glibly repeats myths about the role of the history of slavery in the black American imagination. For instance, she repeats, to great comedic effect, that though blacks will suffer for hundreds of years, the resulting “complex culture” that they will create is the very same that will enable them to succeed in the realm of popular culture with dance and song. Additionally, in a moment of characteristic zealotry, she asks the newly appointed “slaves” of the audience to “just think of what you will mean to William Faulkner!” (Wolfe 3). Yet at the same time that Miss Pat lauds black expressive culture, she insists on silencing the drumming that she hears emerging from “coach,” a nod to the rebellious possibility of expression happening outside of her controlling gaze. To convince the audience-turned-slaves that their silence will “pay off,” Miss Pat tacitly suggests that the millions of dollars earned by future black basketball players alone justify the suffering of slaves.¹

Indeed, during the Crossroads Theater’s 1986 production of the play, when Miss Pat holds up the basketball, the audience begins laughing even before she delivers her line. The uproarious laughter betrays both the audience’s expectation of the next of the actress’s progressively more audacious claims, but it also reveals that the audience already knows the joke’s punch line: that is, their response suggests that the slave-to-celebrity story that Miss Pat tells fits into an American rags-to-riches narrative that is as familiar as it is absurd. The tension between the audience’s being on an “airplane” and Miss Pat’s use of the future tense (*e.g.*, “All right, so you’re gonna have to suffer for a few hundred years”) also fuels the absurd tone of the scene.

However, Miss Pat’s shocking, if comedic comments have moments of sharp poignancy. Wolfe employs a satirical tone that sends up traders and merchants, who for centuries tried to justify the trade in slaves through the logic of “value.” For instance, a few minutes into her monologue, Miss Pat says, “OK, now I realize some of us are a bit edgy after hearing about the tragedy on board *The Laughing Mary*, but let me assure you *Celebrity* has no intention of throwing you overboard and collecting the insurance. We value you!” (Wolfe 3). In response to abolitionists, those invested in the slave trade frequently argued that their interest in a financial return necessitated the humane treatment of their chattel. Yet, as many scholars of slavery have argued, investor demands for higher profits often led merchants and plantation owners to put the lives of their charges in the utmost danger. This included the overpacking of slaves in the hopes of maximizing those left alive after the passage, or, in the case of sugar planters, choosing to replace rapidly dying slaves rather than invest in their health and well-being.²

But the specific incident that Miss Pat refers to here occurred on a slave ship called the *Zong* at the end of the eighteenth century; on that ship, the captain decided

that the ailing slaves onboard were “worth” more dead than alive. More specifically, the captain tried to benefit from a loophole in insurance laws that suggested that slaves who died out of necessity (he lied on documents to suggest that the ship lacked the water to sustain the crew and cargo) would result in an insurance payout while those who died of “natural causes” would not. Thus, thinking of the slaves through this notion of “value” enabled the captain to throw more than a hundred living slaves overboard.³

With this critical eye to the meaning of value, Wolfe remarks on the intersection of the beginning of the era of finance capital in the slave trade and present-day consumer culture. As Ian Baucom explores in *Specters of the Atlantic*, the slave trade marked a change in the moneymaking potential of trading in goods. Because of the strengthening of the insurance business, lending large sums to merchants for a return of their profits became lucrative. Baucom argues that this was an era in which, for the first time, investors could rapidly accumulate money from others’ debt rather than from goods alone. A focus on insurance also calls attention to how the eighteenth century marked the first era in which lives could be conceived of in terms of monetary value.

Yet “Celebrity Slaveship” calls attention to the ways that all subjects are currently *subject* to transnational corporations. Thus, relevant to Wolfe’s scene is Baucom’s assertion that the first era of finance capital is now reflected in the manner in which the “value” of contemporary subjects is constituted through the creditor/debtor relationship.⁴ Though Baucom perhaps overstates the extent to which modern subjects understand the meaning of their lives in monetary terms, his ideas dovetail nicely with Wolfe’s own use of hyperbole. Calling all blacks “celebrities” brings attention to the manner in which they are hypervisible in the media at the same time that they are economically marginal; by setting the scene on a slave ship, Wolfe thus remarks on their dubious progression from a status as objects to their place at the bottom rung of a society of consumers. Also implicit in Miss Pat’s remarks is the unsatisfying nature of an American mythology of overcoming personal adversity to pursue the “American dream.” Because of centuries of systematic disfranchisement, for most blacks the dream of prosperity so closely linked with the idea of celebrity status is an ever-receding horizon. With “Celebrity Slaveship,” Wolfe suggests a historical reduction of black lives to what those lives produce, a logic that links slaves in the middle passage to contemporary blacks like those who labor using the basketball that Miss Roj holds aloft. Whether in relation to slaves or “celebrities,” Wolfe seems to suggest, this reduction of black humanity to “value” itself constitutes a wounding.

Wolfe’s exploration of the link between the present moment and the legacy of slavery engages his own historiographical moment’s interest in animating the perspectives of the dead by bringing them into conversation with contemporary ones. While the first production of Wolfe’s play precedes Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* and the inauguration of the University of California Press series, *The New Historicism* (both 1987) by a year, all pay similar attention to the connection between contemporary lives and the desire to access the lives and experiences of historical figures. As Walter Benn Michaels articulates in his essay “‘You who never was there’: Slavery and the New Historicism, Deconstruction and the Middle Passage,” New Historicist scholars and writers like Morrison use ghost or possession tropes in the service of transforming historical events into memory. For Morrison, “rememory” offers a way of understanding how the past haunts those still living; for scholars like Stephen Greenblatt, the desire to “speak with the dead” endures even as we acknowledge that their voices are indistinct from our own (Greenblatt qtd. in Michaels 6). Though Wolfe does not foreground this relationship to the dead directly in “Celebrity Slaveship,” the audience itself becomes figured as those who endured the middle passage: that is, a desire for contemporaneity with the dead is enacted literally in the space of the theatre, and the blurred line between the perspectives of the dead and our own is manifest within each spectator’s experience of the play.

Wolfe's specific concern with the political relationship between slaves and present-day blacks is also prescient of a turn among contemporary historians of slavery. These include cultural critic Saidiya Hartman, anthropologist Stephan Palmié, and Anglophone Atlantic scholar Ian Baucom, to name only a few.⁵ Each of these writers has tried to understand the political connection between the past and the present, or more specifically, the debt contemporary Americans owe to the slaves who helped build this country. As Hartman puts it in *Lose Your Mother*,

I, too, live in the time of slavery, by which I mean I am living in the future created by it. It is the ongoing crisis of citizenship. Questions first posed in 1773 about the disparity between "the sublime ideal of freedom" and the "facts of blackness" are uncannily relevant today. (133)

Hartman takes this "relevance" further, suggesting a moral debt that necessitates a look backwards. Likewise, Palmié queries his relationship to a ghostly figure, the slave Thomas, in order to map his personal investments in telling stories missing from slavery's archive. And lastly, Baucom suggests that the contemporary moment is "haunted" by its relationship to the past, a condition productive of an active engagement with that era's traumatic social restructuring along racial lines.

However, by using humor to situate the audience within the "time of slavery," to use Hartman's phrasing, Wolfe introduces an uncomfortable politics. When Miss Pat tells the audience to fasten their shackles as she occupies the cabin of an airplane, the captive state of the audience's immobile bodies, organized in rows like those in a slave ship, is played for laughs. Though the audience ostensibly gives life to a depiction of slavery immortalized by the flattened abolitionist image of the *Brookes*, an image that is among those projected onstage before the play begins, the humor of the scene threatens to turn the audience's embodied experience into caricature. Thus, from the beginning of the play, Wolfe poses the question: To what degree *can* audiences imagine themselves in relation to slaves, particularly when our understandings of their experiences have always been mediated through historical texts and images?

Echoing the renaming of the *Zong* as the *Laughing Mary*, the strength of the scene lies in its juxtaposition of the somber attitude that many associate with slavery with Miss Pat's cheery, deadpan delivery. Rather than give in at any point to sentimentality, Miss Pat relentlessly repeats many of the subtle ways that Americans justify the presence of "celebrity" blacks in popular culture with their notions of blacks as the "undeserving" poor. This juxtaposition of tone and content culminates in a "turbulent" moment on the plane ride, which Miss Pat explains by suggesting that the passengers are flying through a "time warp." Part of Miss Pat's monologue is as follows:

On your right you will see the American Revolution, which will give the U.S. of A exclusive rights to your life. And on your left, the Civil War, which means you will vote Republican until F.D.R. comes along. And now we're passing over the Great Depression, which means everybody gets to live the way you've been living. (*There is a blinding flash of light, and an explosion. She screams.*) (Wolfe 4)

This moment on Celebrity Slavery establishes that *The Colored Museum* will address the uneven relationship between the black past and the contemporary moment. Indeed, turbulence becomes an apt metaphor for how the past erupts into the present and how the traumas of history keep us from "flying" in a straight line from the past into the future. Danitra Vance, the actress playing Miss Pat in the original Crossroads production, demonstrates this disruption by acting as though she is being tossed around the cabin of the plane. Her "involuntary" response to the violent meeting point of different historical moments suggests the tension between the willful black body and the uneven and often unpredictable events that constitute black American history.

Through Miss Pat's call and response, she encourages the audience to feel that they are on the same journey, the same ship that throws the flight attendant into disarray. As Brandi Catanese notes, this interpellation of the entire multiracial audience into both "Celebrity Slaveship" and blackness has the potential to reveal the arbitrariness of race. Catanese's argument is worth quoting at length:

In addition to politicizing the authorship of history, Miss Pat fulfills another key role for Wolfe by effecting a significant audience transformation necessary to experience the rest of the play: audience members, regardless of their ethnic/cultural backgrounds, assume the shared identity of new arrivals in a strange land. If the black condition is one of estrangement, we all become black (as social status, though not culturally) through our participation in the performance. The effect of Miss Pat's historical narrative assimilating a diverse audience into a newly constructed social group points to the important role history plays in shaping identity, in helping create subject positions in the present. (21)

Catanese aptly notes that Miss Pat's arbitrary assertion that everyone in the audience is a slave onboard *Celebrity Slaveship* suggests that historical contingency has shaped black identity as much as some quality central to black people's genetic makeup. Wolfe's scene also reminds us that that same arbitrariness has been obscured in our cultural maintenance of blackness as an identity; this includes whites invested in racial difference because of racism, but also blacks intent on maintaining a sense of black community to combat racism.

Though the scene marks "blackness" as both a shifting and contextual identity, it also hints that employing the term can nevertheless constitute a powerful political gesture. Indeed, as Orlando Patterson reminds us with his term "fictive kinship," slave ships were spaces in which different ethnic groups became "black" by crafting careful alliances with one another (Patterson 27). By evoking the slave ship through Miss Pat's address to its "passengers," Wolfe thus suggests the manner in which blackness could operate as a way for slave-ship passengers to see themselves collectively, even as it also functioned as the tool by which those in power systematically disenfranchised the group based on skin color.

However, bringing together an audience composed of different races in the service of remarking on the legacy of the black past may have also had the effect of displacing responsibility for historical injustices. Looking to the reviews of the period suggests that those writing about the play may have missed some of its insightful critique of the history of slavery and its relationship to contemporary consumer culture; indeed, many reviewers dwelled instead on the play's refusal to assign blame to whites. For instance, writing for the *New York Times*, Frank Rich suggested that "Mr. Wolfe too [like Lorraine Hansberry], has torn 'at the very fabric of racist America'—but not before he has revealed the cultural blind spots of blacks and whites alike" (C17). Writing for *Newsweek*, Jack Kroll goes further, saying that the show was "bound to shake up blacks and whites with *separate-but-equal* impartiality" (85; emphasis added).⁶ Kroll's use of the language of Jim Crow is no less telling for all of its seeming unconsciousness. Wolfe said of his own aims: "So at one point I became very interested in trying to reexamine the mythology of African-American culture, and also trying to appropriate or trying to reclaim certain of the silhouettes; the silhouette of the trickster, the silhouette which some people would call the 'coon,' the silhouette of the 'mammy' " (Rowell 605).⁷ At a time when political correctness was at a premium, Wolfe powerfully chose to engage with black stereotypes rather than images of respectability. Though Wolfe meant to engage both blacks and whites with his humorous meditation on the slave ship, the lived experiences of racial and class oppression of some viewers surely divided the audience. If, as Catanese argues, "Git on Board" indicted everyone in the audience, it also resisted assigning responsibility in a way that was gladly co-opted by the media. Also, as Wolfe himself points out, this problem of interpretation was compounded by the fact that many blacks refused to review the work at all.⁸

Yet, while the laugh performed when Miss Pat holds her basketball aloft does not offer a clear political message, it does suggest the potential to recognize a racial logic, shared and maintained by blacks and whites alike. Through comedy, Wolfe thus simultaneously deflects guilt for the crime of slavery while asking us what audience members' continued investments are in its legacy, particularly when those investments are used to justify the consumption of images of black celebrity at the expense of the largely disenfranchised black masses. This question of how contemporary Americans selectively choose to remember the black past sets the tone for the entire play; in subsequent scenes, however, Wolfe directs the question more exclusively toward black viewers.

“The Gospel According to Miss Roj”

In “The Gospel According to Miss Roj,” the fifth exhibit in Wolfe’s play, Wolfe takes this exploration of racial wounding to the contemporary inner city, specifically to a seedy dive bar populated by Snap! Queens and other social “undesirables.” Just before this exhibit, a scene titled “A Soldier With a Secret” about a deranged, hallucinogenic veteran has set a somber tone. In “The Gospel According to Miss Roj,” the eponymous drag queen considers equally tragic subject matter, but does so with searing comedy: Miss Roj alternates between entertaining her imaginary audience and leveling indictments at them for the suffering that takes place outside of “The Bottomless Pit,” where she holds court. More specifically, Miss Roj laments urban people’s indifference to suffering; she also discusses the particular struggles facing poor urban blacks, and implicitly, she addresses the victims of the AIDS crisis who arguably occupy the “bottom” of Reagan’s America. Though Miss Roj’s monologue does not engage explicitly with the history of slavery, Wolfe does seem to ask us, as he does with all exhibits in *The Colored Museum*, to think about the ways that slavery informs what takes place in the scene. Specifically, he asks us to imagine what kinds of responses to oppression blacks can now muster, as the “drums” of our past resistance seem largely forgotten.

Though the exhibit is only a few minutes long, it traverses a broad range of moods and dramatic strategies, and one of the most important of these vehicles is camp. For example, the first line that Miss Roj utters is, “God created black people and black people created style” (Wolfe 14). Already, Miss Roj both references and revises Susan Sontag’s famous “Notes on Camp,” wherein Sontag tells the reader that “camp is a vision of the world in terms of style—but a particular kind of style. It is the love of the exaggerated, the ‘off,’ of things-being-what-they-are-not” (56). When Miss Roj emerges onstage, she wears patio pants and go-go boots, visual cues that this flamboyant Snap! Queen indeed employs an exaggerated style for the audience’s entertainment. However, when she insists on attributing style to blacks, Miss Roj makes an intervention into Sontag’s implicitly white, middle-class formulation.⁹

Perhaps more importantly, by using camp in her discussion of those suffering on the margins in New York, Miss Roj revises Sontag’s suggestion that camp and political commitment are mutually exclusive. Sontag says that “to emphasize style is to slight content. It goes without saying that the Camp sensibility is disengaged, depoliticized—or at least apolitical” (54). By contrast, intermingled with the humorous accounts of daring fashion choices (she says she cornrows the hairs on her legs to spell her name) and encounters with ignorant thugs (she tells us how she “snapped” to death a Brooklyn bodybuilder), are moments that suggest that Miss Roj is in touch with a critical political vision, even if it does not articulate a clearly defined stance. Indeed, as the scene progresses, Miss Roj begins to make prophetic claims about injustices in the world that the audience inhabits. Claiming that her special abilities

to see the world as it is come from being an “extraterrestrial,” she explains that the “flashing lights” of her galaxy tell her how long this world has until its collapse. This identity of Miss Roj’s fits into a history of black performance that includes free jazz experimenter Sun-Ra, as well as Parliament Funkadelic musician George Clinton. When Miss Roj says that she is an extraterrestrial instead of a “regular oppressed American Negro,” space becomes a metaphor for possibility and experimentation, but also for a spiritual alternative to the restrictions placed on “earthly,” or material black experiences (Wolfe 14).

**Wolfe employs a satirical tone that sends up
traders and merchants, who for centuries tried to justify
the trade in slaves through the logic of “value.”**

But Miss Roj’s extraterrestrial ability enables a painful vision of both suffering and excess, both of which are racialized. For instance, she says, “A high-rise goes up. You can’t get no job. Come on everybody and dance. A whole race of people gets trashed and debased. Snap those fingers and dance” (Wolfe 17). Miss Roj’s command to snap and dance mocks the imaginary people who join her in the club, partying while others suffer. And tellingly, this vision is linked with the social realities of the 1980s, which include industrialization, institutional racism, and increasing homelessness.

An element of her persona that lends her message efficacy is what Marlon T. Riggs describes as the Snap! Queen’s strange appeal to mainstream sensibilities. In an essay titled “Black Macho Revisited: Confessions of a Snap! Queen,” Riggs probes why mainstream culture seems so disgusted by drag queens, yet features them so regularly in popular comedies. He suggests that their appeal is linked with audiences’ perception of the Snap! Queen’s “relentless hilarity in the face of relentless despair” (390).¹⁰ Snap! Queens’ ability to make light of their marginality, or at the very least, to craft entertaining personae out of sometimes heart-wrenching social abjection, fits nicely within a political moment of backlash against the gains of the civil rights movement. That is, though, just as beneath the “joke” of the Snap! Queen lies trenchant social critique, grievance is easily ignored when it is disguised in outrageous costume. Yet Miss Roj’s cadence signifies in multiple ways: she alternates between free-associating, like someone under the influence of drugs, orating like a great black preacher, and channeling the language and postures of the Harlem ball scene. Perhaps Miss Roj’s ability to “see” thus relates to her indeterminacy, or her denial of the easy, predictable laugh that Riggs discusses.

Part of the power I associate with Miss Roj’s ability to signify in multiple ways includes her interstitial gender identity. It is far from clear in the context of the scene whether the character considers herself to be in drag, or is transgendered. However, in the Mark Taper Forum and Crossroads Theatre iterations of the play, Miss Roj maintains enough elements of her original gender identity that the transition from male to female is impartial; for instance, she wears makeup, but does not try to imitate womanly breasts or hips. Also, when Wolfe describes the character, he alternates (seemingly unconsciously) between calling the character a “she” and a “he.”¹¹ In this in-between state, Miss Roj is gender-queer: she complicates an understanding of gender that operates on a woman/man binary. In the Mark Taper version of the play, Miss Roj’s transition to apocalyptic prophet is marked by a performance of possession brought on by her increasing intoxication. If the character of Miss Roj is indeed “possessed,” her gender ambiguity fits into the work of scholars who find linkages between priesthood in Yoruba-derived traditions in the New World, and

nonnormative gender identities and sexual practices.¹² Regardless of whether the “Gospel”-preaching Miss Roj fits into Christian or Yoruba frameworks, her message is a deeply ethical call for respect, if not understanding, of difference. Sharing her disgust with the patrons in the bar as well as the drinks and the music, Miss Roj says, “Give me Aretha Franklin any day. (*Singing*) Just a little respect. R. E. .S. P. E. C. T.” (17).

Miss Roj’s complaint, as well as her call for respect, is made through language and gestures that originated with drag culture, but have also extended into the larger gay community, as well as more mainstream spheres: these are “reading” and “throwing shade.” Signifying practices among gays of color, both reading and throwing shade suggest a dressing-down of a third party. In an ethnographic study of the use of “snapping” among gays in the American South, E. Patrick Johnson remarks that “‘Reading’ has a number of meanings, depending on the context. To read someone is to set them ‘straight,’ to put them in their place, or to reveal a secret about them in front of others in an indirect way—usually in a way that embarrasses a third party” (125). Throwing shade is similar to reading, though it is largely a nonverbal practice that includes the snap! that Miss Roj employs repeatedly. Throughout the scene, Miss Roj “reads” those around her in the imaginary bar. For example, to the waiter who serves her, she says, “you tell Miss Stingy-with-the-rum, that if Miss Roj had wanted to remain sober, she could have stayed home and drunk Kool-aid” (15). Rather than simply asking for a stronger drink, Miss Roj speaks in an indirect and biting way about her unmet needs. Yet, during her monologue as she transitions from discussing personal experiences, Miss Roj extends her “reading” practice to larger social ills. In a tone that becomes increasingly heated, she says, “Snap for every time you walk past someone lying in the street, smelling like frozen piss and shit and you don’t see it” (Wolfe 17). Here, the vocative in Miss Roj’s diatribe includes all audience members, who, through their silence, acquiesce to pervasive homelessness and suffering.

It does not take a large leap to connect Miss Roj’s assessment that “Miss New York is doing a slow dance with death” with the AIDS crisis that is consuming the city during the 1980s, a fact that adds an additional layer of meaning to her call for recognition and respect (Wolfe 15). In addition to her repeated attention to physical suffering, Miss Roj connects the New York party scene that she occupies in the Bottomless Pit to the ongoing deaths. She says,

Yeah, snap your fingers and dance with Miss Roj. But don’t be fooled by the banners and balloons ‘cause, child, this ain’t no party going on. Hell no! It’s a wake. And the casket’s made out of stone, steel, and glass and the people are racing all over the pavement like maggots on a dead piece of meat. (Wolfe 17)

The audience becomes willful participants in the “party-turned-wake” that constitutes the rapid infection and death of many gays and blacks in 1980s New York. Miss Roj’s message reflects Wolfe’s implicit desire to target and confront not just those occupying the metaphorical “bottom” with her in the club, but also the black middle class, particularly members who were responding to the AIDS crisis with moral judgment rather than compassion or activism. It is the black middle class in particular that Miss Roj indicts by saying that, as a group, it has “traded in [its] drums for respectability” (Wolfe 17). In an interview during the early ’90s, Wolfe spoke specifically about AIDS and the black community’s response. He remarked that

There’s this whole phenomenon that the black community has ultimately not dealt with: the dynamics of AIDS and what it means in terms of our country. It is attaching this Judeo-Christian morality judgment against the dynamics of the disease which has nothing to do with dying bodies! Has nothing to do with that. Your judgment is not going to stop those dying bodies. And those dying bodies are your daughters and your sons and your cousins, so I think it is that sort of simplistic morality that is no longer serving us. (Rowell 606-07)

Christianity, Wolfe argues, has become an excuse to ignore the vulnerability of an already marginal population. The audience, as in the earlier “Celebrity Slaveship” exhibit, thus embodies two realities at once in the scene: they are both clubgoers and middle-class theatergoers, two populations that must reconcile with each other in order to fight the disease that is decimating both blacks and gays in alarming numbers.

Miss Roj thus speaks back to Miss Pat, the slave-ship attendant who begins the play. Rather than suggesting, as Miss Pat does, that slave suffering was a means to an end, Miss Roj reminds us that the majority of blacks under late capitalism do not go on to attain status or fame. Instead, most continue to bear the burden of the enterprise’s economic and psychic devastations. Among those continuing to suffer indignities are those who occupy the most vulnerable positions. With Miss Roj’s focus on the decay of the bodies occupying the city, she seems to ask if those AIDS patients silently dying of neglect constitute yet another genocide.

To return to the gestures and verbal stylings of drag queens, I want to suggest that in “The Bottomless Pit,” Miss Roj conducts a “reading” of American racial and sexual politics, particularly in the way that they intersect in marginalizing AIDS victims. The biting quality of the snap! thus enables a way to identify a particular relationship of blackness to pain without reducing it to such. Miss Roj’s insistence that “we don’t ask for your approval. We know who we are and we move on it,” suggests a spirit that is not resigned to remain silently at the “bottom” (Wolfe 17-18). The snap! thus offers an answer to the question that I pose at the beginning of this section—that is, what can blacks do in the face of oppressing circumstances, given the absence of drums? For those, like Miss Roj, occupying the margins of contemporary society, the snap! is African drum in miniature; it is a sound and gesture that refuses the normativizing impulse of mainstream culture. In a world in which “Silence=Death,” the snap! is a resounding call for recognition.¹³

“Permutations”

In the play’s tenth exhibit, “Permutations,” Wolfe retreats from the explicit critique of contemporary politics in Miss Roj’s monologue to a more metaphorical meditation on the trauma that engendered the black diaspora, as well as the ways in which its members have coped with its destructive legacy. Just before “Permutations” is a scene titled “Lala’s Opening,” which draws on images of international stars like Josephine Baker and Diana Ross, juxtaposing their glamor with their roots in American racism and poverty. By contrast, Wolfe introduces the audience to a “nobody”: a simple country girl named “Normal.” Normal begins her monologue by explaining to the audience that her mother scorns and neglects her, a situation that becomes worse when she is impregnated by the garbage man and subsequently births a giant egg. The scene thus dwells simultaneously in the realm of the absurd as well as in the familiar media imagery of the black poor. Poignantly named Normal Jean Reynolds (a play on the name “Norma Jean,” Marilyn Monroe’s birth name, as well as a suggestion of the typical), the character celebrates the forthcoming birth of her children. The family metaphor, including Normal’s distance from her own mother and her embrace of her strangely conceived brood of children, evokes the birth of the diaspora via the slave trade and its subsequent spread throughout the New World. Though this scene addresses subject matter similar to that of “Celebrity Slaveship,” “Permutations” moves away from the connection that Miss Pat makes between injury and celebrity, and toward a meditation on fertility and possibility.

Perhaps tellingly, the play’s critics seemed most interested in interpreting the scene as a commentary on the “innocence” of a pregnant black girl. For instance,

Newsweek's Jack Kroll writes that, Danitra Vance, the actress playing both Miss Pat and Normal, is able to "lobotomize herself into a ghastly stewardess grin or *become a pregnant teenager proud in her angelic innocence* (Kroll 85; emphasis added). Frank Rich of the *New York Times* agrees, saying, "Ms. Vance is not only funny but also noble in a monologue in which Mr. Wolfe retrieves the dignity of a very innocent, very pregnant teenager" (Rich C17). Both critics correctly note that the scene focuses on the innocence of the girl, who, according to her monologue, is considered inconsequential by everyone, including her own mother.

But what does one make of the inclusion of the egg? There are resonances in the exhibit with the issue of teenage ignorance of reproductive health, particularly that among uneducated black girls. Perhaps the giant egg was a strategy, if an unsuccessful one, to prohibit the audience from only thinking of Normal Jean in terms of the pathologizing of black families or the abundance (at least in the mainstream media) of young female welfare dependents.¹⁴ The issue is complicated by the fact that Wolfe's use of humor in the form of absurdity was simply lost on some viewers. In an interview with Wolfe, Charles Rowell, editor of the journal *Callaloo*, admits: "That is the only section that I'm lost in. I'll admit my shortcomings there; I don't understand that section" (Rowell 619). Employing humor always creates the possibility of misunderstanding; in the case of "Permutations," the deeply symbolic quality of the scene likely further stymied the clarity of its message.

Wolfe himself has suggested that the scene was meant to be a metaphor rather than a specific event in the black community. Of the scene, he says that: "A very violent and phenomenal event transpired in [Normal's] life; she does not spend her time consumed by the violation; she spends her time protecting and marvelling [*sic*] and celebrating the wonder that has come forth from that violation" (Rowell 619). In the context of the scene, the trauma that Wolfe refers to is not in her relationship with the garbage man with whom she says she slept, or even in becoming pregnant. Rather, she is traumatized by what happened in the aftermath of the act: she was shut into a dark room by her mother so that the neighbors would not see her, and she gave "birth" alone, an experience of particular agony. If this strangely graphic "tragedy" is part of an extended metaphor regarding black America, it is worth asking exactly what it is to which the scene refers.

In a play that often addresses the legacy of slavery in indirect ways, this exhibit also seems to conjure, particularly, the origins of the African diaspora in the slave trade. For example, Normal tells us that the relationship she has with her mother is one of estrangement. At the beginning of her monologue, Normal explains the way that her mother feels about her: "My mama used to say, God made the exceptional, then God made the special and when God got tired, he made me" (47). The maternal disdain that Normal describes thus justifies her mother's decision to lock her away once she becomes pregnant:

Well my mama locked me off in some dark room, refusin' to let me see light of day 'cause, "What would the neighbors think." At first I cried a lot, but then I grew used to livin' my days in the dark, and my nights in the dark. (47)

As Orlando Patterson notes, "natal alienation" is one of the key elements of American slavery, defining the condition of slaves in contrast to those free to manage their own kinship structures. Yet as Saidiya Hartman indicates in *Lose Your Mother*, "losing one's mother" is also euphemistic of the status of African Americans in West Africa as "slave babies," or children born in the diaspora in the aftermath of the slave trade (Hartman 4). As Hartman writes:

The most universal definition of the slave is a stranger. Torn from kin and community, exiled from one's country, dishonored and violated, the slave defines the position of the outsider. She is the perpetual outcast, the coerced migrant, the foreigner, *the shamefaced child in the lineage*. (5; emphasis added)

Normal's shameful status as outsider and castaway in her own home mirrors that of the slave, just as her being locked away shadows enslavement. The scene dwells, however, more on the different ways that Normal engages with her own offspring, the children of the mysterious egg.

The egg that Normal perches upon takes on the significance of being both her future offspring and the many kinds of black people whose "gestation" began in the slave hold; indeed, it is this multiplicity that is referenced by the name "Permutations." Further suggesting this connection, Normal remarks on her discovery of the egg by saying, "At first, I thought that someone had put it there as a joke, but then I could see the lines of blood that I could trace back between my legs and no doubt about it, I had birthed me this great big egg" (Wolfe 48). The vivid imagery of bloodlines makes a metaphor of birth: diasporic blacks are linked genetically, but also through the bloody violence of enslavement. Wolfe goes further to reference the movement and growth of the diaspora by having Normal begin to hear more and more heartbeats emanating from the egg, heartbeats that "talk [] to each other like old friends. Racing towards the beginning of their lives" (49). The ways in which the heartbeats multiply suggest the multiple sites of diasporic blackness; in a way crucial to this notion, Wolfe also scores Normal's children's heartbeats to sound like African drums.

If there is any doubt lingering about the metaphorical register of Normal's monologue, she elaborates the multiple kinds of experiences that will emerge from the diaspora, symbolized by skin color and hair texture. She says, "Their skin is gonna turn all kinds of shades in the sun and their hair a be growin' every which-a-way . . . 'cause its not everyday a bunch of babies break outta a white egg and start to live" (Wolfe 49). The egg at once becomes a symbol both for the slave hold and the circum-Atlantic slave trade, casting those spaces as the fecund beginnings of a race.

The fact that the same actress plays Miss Pat and Normal Jean thus provides a useful framework. If Miss Pat's slick corporate personality provides a mainstream narrative of black experiences, Normal Jean's youth and her experiences of both terror and wonder provide another, even subversive counternarrative. If, as Miss Pat suggests, slavery was a necessary means to black celebrity culture, Normal Jean suggests that it was instead a terrifying and traumatic experience that *nevertheless* resulted in opportunities for blacks to evolve and thrive in the New World. Having articulated that her own upbringing has been marked by a mother who both scorns and shames her, Normal vows to protect her offspring even as she admits to not knowing how they will develop in response to their environs. Perhaps more important, if her mother-child relationship stands in for the African diaspora, then Wolfe suggests that repair for historical wounds begins on the level of the interpersonal. The decision to nurture offspring, even those born out of terrible circumstances, is thus itself a political act. Normal's children, perhaps considered "nobodies" by a hegemonic mainstream, are reimagined as precious in themselves. Refuting Miss Pat's linking of the "value" of black lives with their financial output, the child-turned-mother reminds us that, "special things supposed to be treated like they matter" (Wolfe 48).

Conclusion

The final scene in *The Colored Museum* does powerful work to address, if not resolve, the relationship of blackness to the wounds of racism raised in prior exhibits. Referring yet again to slavery, this time through the monologue of a woman named "Topsy Washington" (after Harriet Beecher Stowe's impish character), Wolfe reassures the audience that a relationship to pain does not necessitate a loss of hope for contemporary black subjects. Topsy says:

And here, all this time I been thinking we gave up our drums. But naw, we still got 'em. I know I got mine. They're here in my speech, my walk, my hair, my God, my style, my smile, and my eyes. And everything I need to get over in this world, is inside here, connecting me to everybody and everything that's ever been. (51)

Topsy's words suggest that what has been passed down from the experience of slavery is a power similar to that which disrupts Miss Pat's monologue: the "drums" of the past have simply transformed into other modes of self-expression that Topsy carries within. To mirror what Miss Roj says earlier, black self-assertion lives on in *style*. But to echo what Normal Jean tells us, it also lives on in multiple ways within the diaspora, which is composed of children whose hair grows "every which-a-way." That is, both Miss Roj's snap! and the diaspora that hatches from Normal's egg operate as metaphors for the multiplicities of expression within blackness, and consequently for managing the pain that gave that blackness its origin.

Beginning *The Colored Museum* with the exhibit "Git on Board" allows Wolfe to query the ways in which the slave past continues to have impact upon the present. The slave trade is an important symbolic origin for black Americans, but the play's strength lies in its linking of that origin to the power of expressive culture (such as drums and snaps!, but also of theatre, like Wolfe's play) to redefine black American history. However, critics of *The Colored Museum* largely missed this orientation toward the history of slavery during the moment of its initial reception. Reading this play twenty-five years after its premiere offers us the opportunity to reflect both on its meaning at the moment of its first reception, and also on its continued relevance in the early twenty-first century, an era shaped immensely by the social and economic backlash of the Reagan era as well as by the ongoing legacy of slavery.

Miss Pat offers the last word in *The Colored Museum*, telling the audience that "any baggage you don't claim, we trash" (Wolfe 5). Her words remind us that the past requires active assessment, or marginal populations will find their histories swept away into tidy mainstream narratives. Yet thinking about a shared painful history as baggage also directs our attention to the ways in which blacks *bear* that history once they claim it. This distinctly African American process of holding on while moving on is what Topsy refers to when she says she "can't live in yesterday's pain, [but she] can't live without it" (Wolfe 52).

1. The two versions of this play that I viewed are both on videotape at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts. They include a version filmed at the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles in 1988, as well as a 1991 version taped for television. That version was a production of WNET (New York metropolitan area public television), in association with the New Jersey-based Crossroads Theatre Company. In my discussion of the live responses of audiences, I am referring only to what I hear taking place in the Mark Taper version, since it was performed before a live audience.

2. For more information about the conditions onboard slavers, see Rediker, chs. 1-3 and Smallwood, chs. 4-5. For discussion of the experiences of slaves on sugar plantations, see Mintz ch. 2. For a more recent example, see Brown, ch. 1.

3. For an excellent and extremely detailed discussion of the impact of this decision on the history of the slave trade, see Baucom, chs 1, 4.

4. Baucom links the transition with the movement away from the gold standard and toward using paper money. In describing that transition, he cites Žižek:

In order to arrive at paper money as we know it today this deictic promise with concrete dates and names has to be depersonalized into a promise made to the anonymous "bearer" to pay the gold equivalent of the sum written on the paper-money—thus, the anchoring, the link to a concrete individual was cut loose. And the subject who came to recognize itself as this anonymous "bearer" is the very subject of self-consciousness . . . this shift is again the very shift from S to \$. (Baucom 54)

According to Baucom, blacks, with their high rates of debt, now epitomize the modern subject, indicated by Žižek with a dollar sign.

Notes

5. In *Lose Your Mother*, Hartman searches for the missing traces of her enslaved ancestors in Ghana; in *Wizards and Scientists*, Palmié interprets nonconventional historical documents related to slavery and colonization in Cuba, and as I mentioned above, Baucom tries to link the present moment to the eighteenth century via a meditation on the emergence of finance capital and shifting definitions of subjectivity and “value.”

6. Also see O’Connor. He writes, “Mr. Wolfe is not preaching. He has no politically correct agenda to sell. On the contrary. As a character in the final sketch puts it, ‘Don’t waste your time trying to label me’ ” (C17).

7. Wolfe’s discussion of the silhouette in the exploration of racial stereotypes related to slavery prefigures the paper cutouts of visual artist Kara Walker. Though Wolfe’s use is metaphorical, both mine the extremes of racist representation through humor. For an excellent analysis of the workings of humor in Walker’s silhouettes, see Carpio, ch. 4.

8. See Rowell.

9. Recent scholars have also sought to make this intervention by exploring the use of camp by gay and lesbian people of color. For two excellent examples, see Muñoz, who challenges Sontag’s “Notes” through analysis of lesbian Chicana performance (119-20, 128) and Robertson, who considers the ways in which blackness has been used historically to authenticate performances of camp (393-95).

10. See Riggs.

11. See Rowell.

12. See Matory 224-66. Also see, Conner 112-14.

13. “Silence=Death” was the slogan of the organization ACT UP, or the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power, during the late 1980s.

14. Interestingly, the only newspaper review to mention Normal Jean without suggesting that she was a pregnant teenager was that of the historically black newspaper, the *New York Amsterdam News*. Richardson writes: “But while there are humorous lines, the story changes and becomes sadly meaningful as it does in another vignette titled ‘Permutations,’ in which a young girl (Danitra Vance) has laid an egg, and so now has something to love” (28; emphasis added).

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