

## REWRITING THE MIDDLE PASSAGE: SUZAN-LORI PARKS AND AUGUST WILSON'S VIEW

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*Abstract: When one mentions slave trade it is imperative to bring to attention the Middle Passage as well. Researchers argue that millions of Africans have been brought to the New World and close to half have died at sea. The present scientific paper focuses on the way in which the African-American playwrights Suzan-Lori Parks and August Wilson "rewrite" the Middle Passage, using their knowledge of their own history and their cultural background. Either through the "characters'" direct experience concerning this historical fact, or through their memories and visions, the playwrights provide the readers not only with real data, but they focus on their feelings and thoughts as well."*

*Keywords: history, plays, Middle Passage, rewriting, African-American*

*"Freedom is what you make it."*<sup>1</sup>

### I. Introduction

Both playwrights have had a major impact on African-American drama, winning numerous prizes and awards such as the Pulitzer prize, Obie awards, New York Drama Critics Circle awards etc. Furthermore, August Wilson is the first African-American playwright who has had the plays acted out on Broadway, while Suzan-Lori Parks is the first female African-American playwright to win the Pulitzer prize.

Some of their plays, especially those alluding to historical events or characters have certain similarities among them. One example in this case is that Parks, as well as Wilson, is interested in presenting the world the African-American history, seen as a continuum, choosing generic names such as Black Man with Watermelon or Aunt Ester. The first character creates the idea of continuum through his repeated deaths, in different oppressive historical periods, followed by his resurrections, until the final moment of the play, when his wife, Black Woman with Drumstick reveals to him that he is dead. The second character is Ester Tyler, or Aunt Ester, as everyone refers to her, a woman that is present in all the plays of the Pittsburg Cycle, except for "Ma Rayney's Black Bottom". Her very existence symbolizes the 366 years of African presence in America.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, the playwrights seek to

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<sup>1</sup> Wilson: 2006, 28

<sup>2</sup> Aunt Ester is said to have died at 366 years; this name is passed from woman to woman, together with the collective memories, from play to play, until her "ultimate" death, which occurs sometime in the 80s. This truth is uncovered during the play King Hedley II, but we are given somehow hope by Canewell, who performs a ritual through which he hopes to resurrect her. In "Radio Golf", the play that ends the *History Cycle*, even if she has been dead for a while, her name still influences the characters.

present the untold (hi)stories, to “unveil unrecorded histories” (Blumenfeld, 2009: 263), so as to support the African-Americans’ wish of being included in the general history, while preserving their distinct identity, at the same time: “to be acknowledged as active participants in general history, i.e. to be given a space which should be properly theorized and represented while preserving their identities as <<the others>>.” (Blumenfeld, 2009: 263).

The present scientific paper focuses on the way in which the two writers present the Middle Passage to the readers/audience, either giving them real data or dealing with the feelings and thoughts of the characters, or figures<sup>3</sup>. Three plays have been chosen in this respect, two belonging to August Wilson: *Gem of the Ocean* and *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone* and one belonging to Suzan-Lori Parks: *Imperceptible Mutabilities in the Third Kingdom*. Only two parts will be referred to from the last play, i.d. “Third Kingdom” and “Open House”, since these are abundant with Middle Passage topics<sup>4</sup>.

The Middle Passage is closely connected to the slave trade and it is considered to be part of the ocean route that linked Africa, America and Europe, forming a triangle. The Middle Passage is the middle of the journey that the captured Africans endured, from their home continent to the new one. There are three clearly marked stages during the voyage of a ship: the first stage is known as the “Outward Passage”, the next as the “Middle Passage” and the third as the “Return Passage”. For example, a ship carrying textiles, or firearms and gunpowder leaves England, exchanges them with slaves, gold and/or silver on the African coast, which are again traded for tobacco, flour, rum and others on the North American coast, returning with these goods home.

Once the demand for slaves in the New World increased, the slave ships established direct routes from Africa to the North American colonies. The first American slave ship was “Desire” (1638 - Massachusetts) and the last was “Huntress” (1864 - New York). Such ships were given the right to carry a certain number of slaves; however, the crew overcrowded the vessels and transported double the number of slaves or even more. Such a case was that of a British ship, *Brookes*, who could legally carry maximum 295 slaves, but it once brought home up to 609. Not only did the crew overcrowd the slaves, making the journey very difficult for them, as they could barely move, but sometimes, they would execute captives for various reasons. Some historians say that between 25 to 50 million of Africans were imported to the New World through slave trade, but possibly half died during the journey, which lasted between six to eight weeks under good weather conditions, or thirteen or more when dealing with bad weather.

Olaudah Equiano was one of the very few slaves that got educated and thus he was able to write a famous book, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African, Written by Himself*<sup>5</sup>, in which he gave details from his life as a slave, from the moment when he was kidnapped and sold, at only 11 years old. He was part of the Ibo tribe and from what he wrote, his father was an important person. Equiano was kidnapped together with his sister, but at a certain point they got separated. When he was brought to a

<sup>3</sup> Parks (1995, 12) argues, in her essay “Elements of Style” that her characters are inappropriately named “characters”; instead, they should be referred to as “figures, figments, ghosts, roles, lovers maybe, speakers maybe, shadows, slips, players maybe, maybe someone else’s pulse”.

<sup>4</sup> Mona, Chona and Verona, the figures from the first part, “Snails” appear in the “Third Kingdom” as well, under different names; for example Mona is Kinseer, a fig haunted by the question “Should I jump should I jump or what?” (Parks, 1995: 26), “Shouldijumporwhat?” (ibidem, 40). However, the last part of the play, “Greeks” (or “Slugs”) is not at all connected to the topic of the present article.

<sup>5</sup> EBook. The second chapter deals with the journey through the Middle Passage and what he felt seeing the conditions in which they travelled and how many people lost their lives.

slave ship, he was horrified, as he thought he would be eaten by the white crew: “I asked them [black people who brought him aboard] if we were not to be eaten by those white men with horrible looks, red faces and loose hair.” On that ship, he saw different Africans, from different tribes, speaking different languages. None of them knew what awaited at the end of the journey and Olaudah was so terrified that he would have given anything to remain a slave in known territories rather than find out what awaited for him at the end of the journey: “if ten thousand worlds had been my own, I would have freely parted with them all to have exchanged my condition with that of the meanest slave in my country.”

The poor conditions in which the slaves were transported included scarcity of food, tying the slaves in pairs with shackles or leg irons, overcrowding them below deck, in sleeping position, with no possibility to go to the toilet buckets, thus lying in their filth, lack of proper ventilation, which, combined with the heat and smell made the air unbreathable, etc. The slaves that died were thrown overboard, as well as the dying ones. Sometimes, the crew killed the slaves simply to collect the insurance money or because of lack of enough food and fresh water. The slaves preferred to commit suicide rather than find out what fate had in store for them, so they either threw themselves in the ocean or they refused to eat. However, the crew became vigilant and tied them up or forced them to eat. Equiano wrote in his book about this: “the crew used to watch us very closely who were not chained down to the decks, lest we should leap into the water: and I have seen some of these poor African prisoners most severely cut for attempting to do so, and hourly whipped for not eating. This indeed was often the case with myself.” Moreover, Equiano considered he would have been luckier to be dead in the ocean among the others who had lost their lives, rather than continue the journey under deck: “Often did I think many of the inhabitants of the deep much more happy than myself. I envied them the freedom they enjoyed, and as often wished I could change my condition for theirs.”

## II. Suzan Lori Parks and August Wilson’s View

In *Understanding August Wilson*, Mary Bogumil states that “Wilson is committed to a drama that explores and exposes the past” (1999: 9). The history within his plays is an “oral history”, involving “a wide variety of stories of spiritual reconciliation.” (idem) These stories, the critic adds, “diverge from an historical account in an objective sense in order to incorporate this mystical dimension as expressions of personal will.” (1999: 9-10). In order to authenticate themselves, the characters “must draw upon broader, African cultural identity for spiritual solace” (1999: 10). Perhaps a good example here is Herald Loomis from *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*: he cannot get over his incarceration by Joe Turner until he performs a bloody ritual, during which he has visions of the Middle Passage.

Jason Bush refers to Parks’s work as “a type of recovery project” through which she “intends to counter the erasure of African American history” (2007: 73). However, the historical experience of her plays is, in Bush’s view, “a history of repeated cycles of trauma”, “from slave ships to contemporary poverty and violence” (2007: 74). Another critic, Heidi Holder, points out, in her essay *Strange Legacy: The History Plays of Suzan-Lori Parks*, that the playwright, besides focusing on contradictions in African American history (specifically in *The Death of The Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World*), draws attention upon “the hidden or invisible thing that must be revealed” (2007: 21). Since a recurring repetition is to “write it down and hide it under a rock”, this may be an allusion to the need of African Americans to feel part of the mainstream history.

*Gem of the Ocean* is the first play from the *Century Cycle Plays* (given this name as the plays reveal the events unfolding within 100 years), a collection of ten plays, also known as *The Pittsburgh Cycle* (because all but one are set there) or the *History Cycle*. It is the only play where Aunt Ester (the unifying character) actually appears onstage. In the other plays, she is spoken about, but she is not present. It is the play closest in time to slavery. In this decade, protests against segregation took place. It is also the period when the First Migration to the North started. This play comprises two acts, each containing five scenes. The action takes place in the “parlor of Eli, Aunt Ester and Black Mary’s home at 1839 Wylie Avenue” (Wilson, 2006: 6), in the Hill District of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. There are seven characters in the play, who are either ex-slaves or born of slave parents.

The play begins late at night, with an agitated Citizen Barlow, who seeks the counsel of Aunt Ester. Because of him, another character, Garret Brown was accused of robbery and, consequently, he committed suicide, thus determining Citizen Barlow to seek redemption. As the action progresses, we find out more about the other characters and their ties to slavery; for example, Solly Two Kings is an ex-Underground Railroad Conductor, Rutherford Selig is a white character, a friend of black people and the People Finder in *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone* etc. We also read about the Great Migration, the decaying conditions for the African-Americans in the South, etc. Aunt Ester eventually helps Citizen Barlow redeem himself by taking him to the City of Bones, that City in the middle of the Ocean, where the souls of the Africans who have perished on the voyage to the New Found Land have gathered. There, he sees Garret Brown and asks for forgiveness. When Solly dies at the end of the play, he takes his hat, coat and his stick and, as he discovers the letter from his sister, he exits. Thus, the readers/spectators are let to think that maybe Citizen Barlow takes Solly’s role as an Underground Railroad conductor and goes South to help people, including the deceased’s sister, whose letter he has found in the hat.

The title of the play can be regarded as the first reinterpretation of history within this play, as it can be seen from a triple perspective. Firstly, it alludes to the song *Columbia, the Gem of the Ocean* (about patriotism, war and freedom; published in 1843<sup>6</sup>, very popular during the Civil War). Secondly, it might refer to the play *Columbia, the Gem of the Ocean*, written by Amiri Baraka’s (who wishes to instill upon African-Americans a sense of solidarity). Thirdly, it can be connected to the Middle Passage, more specifically to a slave ship, as Aunt Ester herself explains: “You see this boat, Mr. Citizen? It’s called the Gem of the Ocean.” (2006: 63). This boat is in fact symbolical, it is represented by a paper boat made from her Bill of Sale, and Citizen Barlow must “hold on to that boat” during the symbolical voyage to the City of Bones, and “everything will be all right” (idem). While returning from that place, she tells him how the ship is in peril and how the captain abandons it, leaving the other men behind. In addition to the above mentioned, Phillis Wheatley, the first African-American woman poet to be published, also makes references to Columbia, in one of her poems.

Aunt Ester offers Citizen Barlow the opportunity to cleanse his soul by going to the City of Bones and ask for forgiveness. This City of Bones is a very important symbol, as it “actively remembers the loss of those that did not make it across the water. In a proactive act of reconstructing history at the bottom of the sea, those seemingly forgotten black travellers (...) have built a city.” (Elam, 2007: 79). The burial ground for so many Africans who have lost their lives at sea, during the slave trade, is described by Aunt Ester:

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<sup>6</sup> full lyrics: <http://www.whatsoproudlywehail.org/curriculum/the-american-calendar/columbia-the-gem-of-the-ocean>, access date, March 12<sup>th</sup> 2016.

*“It’s only half a mile by half a mile but that’s a city. It’s made of bones. Pearly white bones. (...) That’s the center of the world. In time it will all come to light. The people made a kingdom out of nothing. They were the people that didn’t make it across the water.” (Wilson, 2006: 52)*

Aunt Ester also recounts how difficult the voyage has been for her, a witness of the Middle Passage, with the stars as her sole companions, stars which eventually receive her children’s names. She sometimes imagined what it would be like for the wind to stop blowing so that the ship would remain still in the middle of the ocean.

In order to go to the City of Bones, Citizen must embark on the ship *Gem of the Ocean*, given to him by Aunt Ester and made out of her Bill of Sale. He is advised not to get out of it, at any costs. The city is inhabited by Bones People, who are white as ivory and who have tongues of fire, that allow them to sing strong songs. This city has twelve gates and twelve gatekeepers and some stairs that lead to the bottom of the ocean. During his voyage to it, Citizen is symbolically chained to the boat and whipped by the others, who are wearing European masks as part of the ritual. One of the gatekeepers proves to be Garret Brown and, in order for Citizen to be allowed in the City of Bones, he must confess his sin. As soon as he does this, the gate opens. “Overwhelmed by the sheer beauty of the city and the people with their tongues on fire, Citizen Barlow, now reborn as a man of the people, sits down and begins to cry.” (idem, 70) He is redeemed now when accepting the past and confessing his mistake (i.e. stealing the bucket of nails and not taking the blame when Garret Brown was falsely accused, leading thus to that man’s suicide).

August Wilson’s second play that reinterprets the Middle Passage is *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone* (written in 1984), set in the 1910s, a decade when the Ku Klux Klan was revived, when the U.S. entered World War One, encouraging African-Americans to fight in the war, when racial segregation was ordered in all federate states. These are but a few examples of the many changes that the decade brought. The title of the play alludes to a blues sung by the wives of those men who were forced into labour in the post-slavery period and it is like an extension to slavery, under a different name. The action of the play takes place in Bertha and Seth’s boardinghouse, born in the North, from free parents, and it starts with the two watching Bynum, a root worker, doing a ritual involving the sacrifice of a pigeon and a dance. Herald Loomis (the main character) appears at the boardinghouse, searching for his wife, from whom he has gotten separated because of Joe Turner (Joe Turney on his real name). He needs to reunite her with their daughter, and to say farewell, so that he can move forward. The impact of Turner’s incarceration and forced labour is so high that Loomis has lost his song (i.e. his identity). The play ends well for all characters, as each of them finds what they have been looking for: a song, a Shiny Man, love, a wife, a daughter.

In this play, as in the previous one, the Middle Passage is reinterpreted through a vision. This time, the vision is not triggered by a journey to the burial ground of those who perished at sea, in order to cleanse one’s soul, but by the juba, which is “*reminiscent of the Ring of Shouts of the African slaves. It is a call and response dance. Bynum sits at the table and drums. He calls the dance as others clap hands, shuffle and stomp around the table. It should be as African as possible, with the performers working themselves up into a near frenzy. The words can be improvised, but should include some mention of the Holy Ghost.*” (Wilson, 1988: 52). Herald Loomis enters the boardinghouse somewhere in the middle of the juba and he is upset when hearing about the Holy Ghost, as he sees Him too big, “Why he got to be bigger than me? How much big is there?” (idem) It is after this moment that the ex-

deacon “is thrown back and collapses, terror-stricken by his vision” (idem, 53). The next verbal exchange is between him and Bynum and it is a summation of the playwright’s rewriting of the Middle Passage. Mary Bogumil believes that what actually bothers Loomis is “the sense of community, of solidarity, of an atavistic legacy of Africa and sadly the bondage still in the consciousness of the post-Civil War generation” generated by the Juba, which is against his will to regain autonomy. (1999: 59)

During his vision, Herald Loomis talks in tongues, he sees the victims of the Middle Passage and he reminds everyone about them. The ancestors who perished at sea are represented by “bones walking on top of the water” (Wilson, 1988: 53), the water that is “bigger than the whole world” (ibidem). Since he cannot put order in his mind, Bynum guides his way in remembering the vision and talking about it. All these bones, all of a sudden, sink back into the water on which they have been walking and the impact triggers a wave that washes them on shore. However, they are not bones anymore, but rather they are African-Americans, like the rest of the characters, in flesh and blood.

Herald Loomis is one of them and he is waiting to breathe again: “The wind’s blowing the breath into my body. I can feel it. I’m starting to breath again.” (idem, 55) An earthquake follows and all the people that the water brought on land start walking towards the road. It is interesting to see the allusion to the Great Migration, as Wilson connects this moment from the beginning of slavery with a moment from its aftermath. Young interprets this vision of the Middle Passage as a way in which the ancestors’ spirits ask Herald to “stand and walk like a renewed man” (2004: 135).

In her turn, Suzan-Lori Parks also reinterprets the Middle Passage, in her play entitled *Imperceptible Mutabilities in the Third Kingdom*. It comprises four parts: “Snails”, “Third Kingdom”<sup>7</sup>, “Open House” and “Greeks” (or “Slugs”), which present the history of almost 300 years. The play is about the African-American person as object of study, the Middle Passage, slavery, the African-American soldier, the loss of identity, the lack of opportunities and it is seen as “the blueprint of an event.”, as Parks says (apud Garret, 2007: 4), because, simultaneously, it describes and distorts history, it reinterprets history. The Middle Passage voyage is retold by the “ghosts” from “Third Kingdom” and by Aretha, from “Open House”. The figures are stuck there and they have to live over and over again that experience. The title is important in understanding the playwright’s view on history, as it seems to refer to something innovative and perhaps difficult to cope with. The structure “imperceptible mutabilities” alludes to the changes that cannot be sensed, while “Third Kingdom” is “a watery space connoting tears as well as the perverse baptism of the Middle Passage” (Garret, 2007: 10). The figures are trapped in different places (on a boat during The Middle Passage, on the deathbed, on an island, guarding a rock or in a flat full of “roaches”).

The characters in “Third Kingdom” are afraid that if they continue speaking, they might be jettisoned<sup>8</sup>, which was the case of so many slaves during the slave trade voyages. Thus, Over-Seer constantly urges the others to stop talking, in order to avoid being thrown in the sea. The figures in this part seem to lack the ability to have a proper dialogue; each is obsessed by repeating the same idea. For example, Mona/Kin-Seer keeps asking: “Should I jump should I jump or what?” (Parks, 1995: 26), “Shouldijumporwhut? (ibidem, 40). This brings to mind what Olaudah Equiano mentioned in his book, that some preferred to jump and die, rather than discover what awaited them at the end of the voyage. This type of question

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<sup>7</sup> The figures here are the other selves of Mona, Chona and Verona, from “Snails”.

<sup>8</sup> Thrown overboard.

can be associated to a division of the Self, which is normal considering the torment through which the “ghosts” go.

The writer herself explains, through this figure’s voice, the division of the Self, produced by the Middle Passage: there is a self on the shore behind them, waving good-bye at the ship full of slaves, a Self on the new shore, that does not resemble the old Self, and a Self stuck in the Middle Passage who relives infinitely the sorrows of the sea voyage. Mona/Kin-Seer talks about the place that she left behind, mentioning that the place where she came from looked very differently: “But where I comed from diduhnt look like nowhere like I been” (Parks, 1995: 37). She dreams of the places she has been before this voyage to the unknown: “Last night I dreamed of where I comed from. But where I comed from diduhnt look like nowhere like I been” (idem). This idea is similar to the one in *Gem of the Ocean*, where Aunt Ester used to think of the places where she had been and she was terrified by not knowing where she was being taken to. Furthermore, Kin-Seer describes the world as a place delineated by two cliffs<sup>9</sup>, where her two selves are waving good-bye at each other. As she talks about her memories, she does emphasize that her story is the story of black people, as she keeps associating this colour to different elements: “black speck”, “big-black-sea”, “Black folks”, etc. The third Self, that is born from the Third Kingdom, is a new Self, different from the first two, that wonders whether transformation has brought with itself happiness or not: “Is my new Self happy in my new-Self shoes?” (ibidem, 39).

Suzan-Lori Parks also uses her figures to explain what the Third Kingdom means; as happens with August Wilson; her Third Kingdom is his City of Bones. In her case, the underwater kingdom is the resting place of numberless bleaching bones – “Thuh hullholesfull of bleachin bones.”. (ibidem, 39) of many “black” people. There is also an allusion to Bleached Bones Man, a figure that also appears in August Wilson’s *Joe Turner Come and Gone*, but under a slightly different name: The Shiny Man... One of the Seers from the ship alludes to the Igbo population, who choose to commit suicide rather than survive to discover what happens at the end of the journey.

Shark-Seer, another figure from this part, repeatedly denies being on a boat; perhaps this symbolizes the African-Americans’ refusal to embrace their destiny as future slaves, or it may be an allusion to the riots they organized on slave ships. However, the other figures keep reminding Shark-Seer that they are, in fact, on a boat. Shark-Seer is also a “ghost” interested in feelings such as happiness and love, which have been long forbidden for black slaves. Over-Seer is the one who keeps reminding everyone of the risk of getting jettisoned, while Soul-Seer and Us-Seer play minor, unimportant roles.

“Open House”, focuses on the story that Aretha, an old dying slave, tells from her hospital bed. She has been done injustice by her white owners, Charles (the father) and his two children, and by Miss Faith, the slave trader. The title alludes to a slave ship and to the numbers of Africans that could be overcrowded on it. As Aretha tells the story of her life, she is helped by Miss Faith to give details about the slave trade: the size of the typical slave ship, the proportion of male and female slaves. For example, the *Brookes*, an English slave ship was 3,250 square feet, which meant that it had room for 451 slaves. However, 600 slaves were transported on it in one voyage and the usual ratio male to female was 2:1.

The action does not proceed linearly, it begins with Aretha on her death bed, then it continues with her taking care of the young children, then with measuring the Brookes ship, afterwards it proceeds with her having her teeth removed, one by one, as she gets closer to

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<sup>9</sup> One of the cliffs represents the world she was taken from and the other represents the world where she is being taken to.

expiration date. Everything appears to be written in Miss Faith's book, including Aretha's precise death time: June 19<sup>th</sup> 1865. This date also coincides with the emancipation of slaves from the Confederate States. Thus, it is both tragical and ironical for Aretha to die on the same day as other slaves obtained their freedom, showing once again that African-Americans are at the mercy of their white owners (the Emancipation Proclamation was actually issued on January 1<sup>st</sup>, 1963, meaning that for approximately other two and a half years Aretha was forced to work as a slave, as was the destiny of thousands of others slaves).

Aretha has her teeth pulled out so that she can be taken out of the register and is told, by Miss Faith, that she is going to expire soon, probably alluding to her death. Thus, Aretha may realise that the only way to escape her fate is precisely through her death. The act of pulling out her teeth and taking her out of the register might be also seen as her removal from history, an act that Suzan-Lori Parks tries to right through her historical plays.

### III. Conclusions

To conclude, both August Wilson and Suzan-Lori Parks try to fill the gaps in the history of loss, concerning the Middle Passage, in order to remove "the historical amnesia around the fate of African Americans, not only before and during the Middle Passage, but after..." (Elam Jr., 2004: 9). Indeed, both writers have presented their own views regarding the Middle Passage, in Wilson's case in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, through Herald Loomis's visions, and the symbolic journey to the City of Bones in *Gem of the Ocean*, and in Parks's case, the event is mentioned in *Imperceptible Mutabilities in the Third Kingdom*.

Their plays can be seen as a project to "right" history, a history written by the white dominant class that has not done justice to the black representatives. Left outside the mainstream of history, ignored by a society that first enslaved them and then freed them without giving them any chance to enter that society, African-Americans have strived to find a purpose in life, or, as August Wilson beautifully writes in his plays, to find their song (i.e. their Self). He has explained that for him, history does not begin in Africa, nor in America, but rather when the first slave ship has brought the first slave on the American land, because he is neither African, nor American – he is African-American. Suzan-Lori Parks, in her turn, also tries to recover the lost histories of her people and to rewrite them and place them "under a rock", so as to avoid losing them again. In this way, she counters the erasure on African-American culture and, implicitly, history.

Although their views differ considerably, there are also common elements, which probably come from their common knowledge and understanding of the African-American culture and, implicitly, history.

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