

“Love Letter to My Ancestors:” Representing Traumatic Memory in Jackie Kay’s *The Lamplighter*

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Jackie Kay’s *The Lamplighter*, published in 2008, was first broadcast on BBC radio in 2007 to coincide with the commemoration of the bicentenary of the abolition of the African slave trade in Britain. Kay’s dramatised poem or play, as it has alternately been defined, focuses on the female experience of enslavement and the particular forms of dehumanization the female slave had to endure. Kay’s project can in fact be described in terms of Marianne Hirsch’s concept of “postmemory,” or more specifically of “feminist postmemory.” As such, literary devices are employed to emulate the traumatic events at the level of form such as intertextuality, repetition and a fragmented narrative voice. While commemorating the evils of the past, Kay simultaneously wishes to draw attention to contemporary forms of racism and exploitation in the pursuit of profit. Through re-telling the story of slavery, *The Lamplighter* can ultimately be regarded as Kay’s tribute to her African roots and the suffering endured by her African forebears and contemporaries.

Keywords: slave trade; traumatic memory; postmemory; Africa; Britain; Jackie Kay

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“Love Letter to My Ancestors:” La representación de la memoria traumática en *The Lamplighter*, de Jackie Kay

The Lamplighter, de Jackie Kay, publicado en 2008, fue retransmitido por la BBC en 2007 coincidiendo con la conmemoración del bicentenario de la abolición del tráfico de esclavos y esclavas africanos en Gran Bretaña. Este poema dramático y obra de teatro, como ha sido definido alternativamente, se centra en la experiencia femenina de la esclavitud y en las formas particulares de deshumanización que las esclavas padecían. El proyecto de Kay puede, de hecho, describirse mediante el concepto de “postmemoria” de Marianne Hirsch, o más concretamente, como “postmemoria feminista.” Como tal, emplea técnicas literarias para emular los acontecimientos traumáticos en el plano formal, tales como la intertextualidad, la repetición y una voz narrativa fragmentada. Al tiempo que conmemora los males del pasado, Kay busca simultáneamente dirigir la atención hacia las formas contemporáneas de racismo y explotación en busca del beneficio económico. Al volver a contar la historia de la esclavitud, *The Lamplighter* puede en última instancia considerarse el tributo de Kay a sus raíces africanas y al sufrimiento experimentado por sus antepasados y antepasadas africanos y contemporáneos.

Palabras clave: comercio de esclavos; memoria traumática; postmemoria; África; Gran Bretaña; Jackie Kay

My story is the story of sugar. / My story is not sweet.

JACKIE KAY, *The Lamplighter*

Several decades after the first twentieth-century female slave narratives appeared in the United States, a number of Black British women writers published so-called “neo-slave narratives” to mark the 2007 bicentenary of the abolition of the African slave trade in Britain. Jackie Kay’s *The Lamplighter* (2008), which has been described as a dramatised poem, a multi-layered epic poem or simply as a play,¹ focuses on the female experience of enslavement and the particular forms of dehumanization that the female slave was forced to endure. Apart from stressing the dialectics of memory and forgetting and providing silenced female voices with an identity and a past, Kay makes it a point to commemorate how slavery financed and powered the industrial revolution and how Britain, and thus her native Scotland, profited and prospered from the trans-Atlantic slave trade.

Based on extensive research, *The Lamplighter* is a conscious effort to write back at history and to set the record straight. However, the play not only serves as a powerful reminder of the evils of the past, but it also resonates for the present when one of the characters states, “My story is the story of Great Britain / The United Kingdom, The British Empire” (81). In this effort, *The Lamplighter* forms part of a network of texts referred to as “contemporary narratives of slavery” or “neo-slave narratives,”² which serve as a reminder of “proceedings too terrible to relate” (Morrison 2004, 2293), and are at the same time committed to “breaking the silence of the past in order to promote a new understanding” (Beaulieu 1999, xv). Jackie Kay clearly subscribes to such a conceptualization of representations when she says in her essay “Missing Faces:” “I thought of all the silences— the silences from African people . . . and from white people . . . The history of the slave trade is not ‘black history’ to be shoved into a ghetto and forgotten, or to be brought out every 100 years for a brief airing, then put back in the cupboard. It is the history of the world. It concerns each and every one of us” (*The Guardian*, 24 March 2008). Ultimately, Kay’s act of resistance exhibits what bell hooks has argued of oppressed people who “resist by . . . naming their history, telling their story” (1989, 45).³ In this narrative or rather dramatic re-enactment of untold stories, gender is of paramount concern in the formulation of a decidedly female perspective with a focus on the specific physical and psychological indignities that enslaved women were subjected to, such as sexual exploitation, forced reproduction and subsequent loss of their children.

¹ See, for example, Amanda Nadalini who refers to the text as a “radio play, epic poem, or dramatized poem” (2012, 51), or Gioia Angeletti, who calls it a “radio and stage play, a polyphonic epic poem” (2013, 215) and an “epic play” (218). Jackie Kay herself refers to *The Lamplighter* as a “play” (“Missing Faces,” *The Guardian*, 24 March 2008).

² Compare Amanda Nadalini’s discussion of the subgenre (2012, 52 and 52, 53).

³ Compare what Paul Gilroy says about the significance of “telling your story” in *The Black Atlantic*: “The telling and retelling of these stories [narratives of loss, exile, and journeying] plays a special role, . . . striking the important balance between inside and outside activity—the different practices . . . that are required to invent, maintain, and renew identity” (198).

The Lamplighter was first broadcast on BBC radio on 25 March 2007 to significantly coincide with the date—25 March, 1807—on which the bill to abolish the British slave trade was signed, and was later published in book form accompanied by a CD of the radio play. While the text establishes a dialogue with original and contemporary slave narratives and appropriates existing conventions and themes of the genre, such as the first-person voice and descriptions of the horrors of the Middle Passage and life on the plantations with its attendant hardships,⁴ it is precisely in this dramatic/auditory dimension in conjunction with its fragmentary, poetic form and the gendered focus on the female experience that *The Lamplighter* most obviously and originally differs from other contemporary narratives about slavery. At the same time, in *The Lamplighter* Kay re-works dominant themes which she has consistently addressed during her writing career, such as a pronounced feminist concern, explorations of the issue of belonging, her status as a black Briton, race relations and her relationship to her African ancestry; pressing issues—relating to the past as well as to the present—which are interwoven into the representation of the British slave trade.

Before embarking on a closer textual analysis of *The Lamplighter*, it seems noteworthy to consider that Jackie Kay initially refused the BBC's offer to write about slavery for the abolition bicentenary, because, she argued, “it sounded exactly the sort of thing black writers were expected to do” (Nick Thorpe, “Jackie Kay. Interview,” *Sunday Times*, 25 March 2007). When she eventually agreed to the project, she “realised [she]’d almost been hiding from it” and felt that she was “being renewed,” as if she “got that energy back” (Thorpe 2007). Kay's reluctance, which could be interpreted as an unconscious refusal to address the memory of slavery, and the subsequent experience of renewal appears to be a process one could usefully describe in terms of trauma scholar Marianne Hirsch's well-known concept of “postmemory,” which refers to the memory of traumatic events that affects those future generations that did not experience them directly and enables the understanding of a traumatic experience that is inherited rather than witnessed first-hand (2008, 8).

Jackie Kay's explanation that her work on *The Lamplighter* eventually became “a sort of obsession,” and that she was writing “out of a need, out of things you feel strongly about” (Thorpe 2007) further illustrates Hirsch's emphasis on an ethics of empathy, on the affective dimension of postmemory—which in Hirsch's understanding is significantly not restricted to immediate relatives of survivors of traumatic events but operates “across the differences of gender, race, and generation (2002, 89).

While Kay's immediate ancestors did not experience slavery directly—especially not in the Caribbean to which most of the play refers, unlike the forebears of other British writers of contemporary works about slavery such as Caryl Phillips, Fred d'Aguar or

⁴ See Nadalini's comments on Kay's “appropriation of the conventions and forms of the literary subgenre of the neo-slave narrative . . . and disregard of others” (2012, 53) and Bringas López's observation that the text “both echoes and diverges from the traditional slave narratives” (2010, 3).

Andrea Levy—she places herself within the discourse of slavery from the perspective of someone who is both British-Scottish and African, that is from a highly complex, hybrid subject position. In relation to the question of belonging and the decision to write *The Lamplighter*, Kay explains: “In a sense I was on a trail back to my own past. A lot of original Africans were taken from the West Coast of Africa, where my father came from. So I was thinking if I trace back my family tree far enough I would find slaves” (Thorpe, 2007). In continuation, when pondering the “very complex question” of home and belonging, she states in the same interview that “everything that I write somehow feeds into that question” (Thorpe 2007). It is thus from the point of view of her mixed-race heritage that she sets out to explore both her connection to her African ancestry as well as her position in the British context.

It seems worthwhile to note that this interplay between explorations of the slavery past and contemporary concerns of racial inequalities has been articulated in Kay’s earlier work on some of the few occasions on which she addressed the topic of slavery. For example, the poems “Even the Trees” and “Finger”—both included in the collection *Other Lovers* published in 1993—bridge the gap between the past and the present by ending with a reference to current evils of race relations. “Even the Trees” closes with a prophetic warning expressing the fear of repetition, “Everything that’s happened once could happen again” (2007, 70), while “Finger” finishes with the following lines: “They say it doesn’t exist anymore. / This is another century. Take my fingerprint” (2007, 114), which points to the high number of Black people checked at borders, arrested or imprisoned, and hence calls attention to new forms of slavery and racism in a different guise. In other words, Kay’s enquiry into the terrors of the past is a reflection of an ongoing struggle, of the “battle to represent a redemptive critique of the present in the light of vital memories of the slave past” (Gilroy 1993, 71).

With its primary focus on the lives of four women slaves, Mary, Constance, Black Harriot and Anniwaa, alias the eponymous Lamplighter, the play chronicles the condition of slavery from capture to eventual freedom. Even though the Lamplighter—who was initially abducted in Africa and received her name from an Inn in Avonmouth of the same name where she was sold after she had run away—can be regarded as the main voice in the text, her story is consistently accompanied by the stories of the other three enslaved women to create the impression—as indicated early on in the stage directions—“that any single story is a multiple one” (15). In a compelling interaction of discourses of the oppressor and the oppressed, interspersed between the personal testimonies by the four female characters is the “official” — and only—male voice of MacBean, who is significantly of Scottish background and appears to be a representative of all white male, mostly pro-slavery, discourse. Significantly, however, more space is given to the women’s voices, which suggests a shift in power relations or at least the claim to space and the demand to be heard.

As the voice of white, male authority MacBean provides the “Shipping News” in the form of reports on weather conditions juxtaposed to a recording of the loss of slave lives

which are reduced to mere numbers in the economy of trade, dispassionate descriptions of the conditions on board of the slave ships (44, 45), forms of corporeal punishment (48), excerpts from the journal of a plantation owner (50), but also adopts the role of a slaver at a slave auction (17) or communicates other “facts” pertaining to the slave trade.⁵ While throughout most of the play MacBean represents the voice of pro-slavery discourse, at the end of the text it is he who announces the termination of the slave trade and transforms into the voice of abolitionist discourse. The text thus also reflects the changes in western thought on the institution of slavery and even points towards possibilities of racial and gender reconciliation—echoing Sojourner Truth’s famous speech “Ain’t I a Woman?:”

MACBEAN: Am I not a Man and a Brother?

LAMPLIGHTER: Am I not a Woman and a Sister? (89)

On the audio recording MacBean’s “protean” identity is reflected to great effect in the speaker’s experimentation with different accents and an adjusted tone of voice. As other critics have pointed out, in its composition of multiple discourses, MacBean’s voice could be said to serve the function of the *Zeitgeist* of the time (Bringas López 2010, 4; Angeletti 2013, 216). As illustrated in the brief analysis of the representation of the “character” of MacBean above, the employment of a multiplicity of discourses emerges as one of the text’s dominant structural principles. Ana Bringas López notes that Kay’s use of multiple discourses contributes to “building up a complex structure which mirrors the intricate social structure of slavery” (2010, 4). Rather than focussing on the aspect of a reflection of the social organization of the institution of slavery, I suggest to conceive of the textual strategies employed in *The Lamplighter* as an attempt at the literary representation and textual mimesis of the trauma of slavery. If, as Marianne Hirsch has pointed out, the task faced by the belated witness, affected by the “transgenerational transmission of trauma” (2008, 103) is to make decisions about how to best mediate the “psychology of postmemory” (107), I wish to illustrate in the following pages how specific textual strategies are employed in *The Lamplighter* to emulate the trauma of slavery from a decidedly contemporary or even postmodern perspective. In her study *Trauma Fiction*, Anne Whitehead succinctly summarizes this contemporary (literary) approach when she writes: “The impact of trauma can only adequately be represented by mimicking its forms and symptoms, so that temporality and chronology collapse, and narratives are characterised by repetition and indirection. Trauma fiction overlaps with and borrows from both postmodern and postcolonial fiction in its self-conscious deployment of stylistic devices as modes of reflection or critique” (2004, 3). In other words, literary devices are deployed to emulate the traumatic events at the level of form

⁵ For the logs attributed to the character of MacBean, Kay used the log book of James Newton, a British slave ship captain who incidentally wrote the famous popular song “Amazing Grace” (see Kay, “Missing Faces,” *The Guardian*, 24 March 2008). Note that Caryl Phillips’s *Crossing the River* (1993) also draws on Newton’s logbook.

while simultaneously eliciting an emotional and critical response in the reader. The key stylistic features Whitehead identifies as foregrounded in most trauma narratives are intertextuality, repetition and a dispersed or fragmented narrative voice (84), adding that a text's multiplicity "implicitly allies it with the act of memory . . . Intertextuality can suggest the surfacing to consciousness of forgotten or repressed memories" (85). Amanda Nadalini reaches a similar conclusion when she says that "Kay's use of intertextuality is above all a mode of encoding memory—a traumatic memory" (2012, 54).

In *The Lamplighter*, it is first and foremost the overt generic reference to the literary tradition of the female slave narrative which establishes a conscious connection to a traumatic past. Hence, "any interpretive effort regarding *The Lamplighter* needs to place the text within the genealogy of black female narratives of slavery, since such contemporary works—and Kay's is no exception—tend to work as intertexts for one another" (Nadalini 2012, 53). The relation to this specific literary genealogy is most obviously confirmed through the direct quotation of the first line of Harriet Jacobs's alias Linda Brent's narrative *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: Written by Herself*: "Reader, be assured this narrative is no fiction" (15). This reference to the conventional assertion of authenticity found in original slave narratives further raises the central issue of self-representation to which I will return at a later stage of this discussion.

In an unpublished part of an interview with Jackie Kay conducted by the author of this article in March 2013, she declared her fascination with people like Harriet Jacobs and all those early, particularly women's, slave narratives but also with the work of contemporary black writers such as Jamaica Kincaid and Toni Morrison which led her to summarize that she thinks that she would definitely fit into a tradition of black women's writing. As far as more specific allusions to Black female writers of slave narratives are concerned, the Lamplighter's account of "hiding in the hole of a roof" (76) brings to mind Harriet Jacobs's hiding place in the attic of her grandmother's house; the description of Anniwaa's abduction as a child is reminiscent of Phillis Wheatley's capture into bondage as a young girl; and a slightly altered version of Sojourner Truth's question "Ain't I a Woman?"—referred to above—is repeated three times in the text: "Am I not a woman and a sister?" (87, 89, 90).

In keeping with Kay's mnemonic project of writing back to a tradition of silences and countering "postcolonial amnesia"—to echo Leela Ghandi—the central character Anniwaa,⁶ alias the Lamplighter, is elevated to an allegorical, quasi-mythical figure who as a representative of all female slaves and their suffering brings light and symbolically illuminates dark times:

I carried the light to light the lamps
The lamps across the wide dark sea . . .

⁶ See Leela Ghandi: "postcolonialism can be seen as a theoretical resistance to the mystifying amnesia of the colonial aftermath. It is a disciplinary project devoted to the academic task of revisiting, remembering, and, crucially, interrogating the colonial past" (1998, 4).

They call me the Lamplighter.
They call me the Lamplighter. (42, 43)

Preceded by Mary’s line “We call her The Lamplighter” (42), the character is in fact represented as providing the other women with “the light,” that is, with the power to endure the hardships inflicted on them. In this instance she supports Constance, whose little baby girl and other children before her were sold away from their mother.

LAMPLIGHTER:
I carried the light from the day
You lost her.
A bright light across the deep dark sea.

CONSTANCE:
I carried a light for my sons, my daughters. (42)

Apart from emphasising the effect of trauma as resulting in a splitting of identity, the portrayal of the Lamplighter, alias Anniwaa, as a double personality furthermore suggests an allegorical reading with Anniwaa speaking as the voice of Africa—the name is almost a homophone—and the Lamplighter symbolizing life in captivity. As a character in the play, Anniwaa could more specifically be conceptualized as the embodiment of Africa, as the violated female body, an understanding which intertextually recalls Maya Angelou’s well-known poem “Africa” in which the continent is described in terms of the body of a conquered and desecrated woman.

The circular structure of the text, which begins and ends with Anniwaa’s memories of her native village in Africa and subsequent capture into slavery, can be interpreted in psychoanalytical terms as an indication of the recovery of wholeness “to recompose her fragmented identity” (Angeletti 2013, 227) or as a suggestion that slavery is not over yet (Bringas López 2010, 9). With Africa providing the frame to the narrative, the use of this framing device seems to reinforce the connection to Africa that Kay so persistently seeks in her writing and thus draws attention to the prominence of Africa as the place from where slavery took its beginning and from where the suffering started. In this way, Kay firmly anchors the experience and traumatic memory of slavery in an African context.

Anniwaa’s insistence on remembering her name in her dialogue with the Lamplighter—that is in an interior dialogue with the two parts of her self—provides, on the one hand, further evidence of the traumatic identity split, but also of the dialectic between the constant desire for oblivion, as represented by the Lamplighter, and the pressing need to remember her African origins as urged by Anniwaa/Africa:

ANNIWAA: My name is Anniwaa.
LAMPLIGHTER: There are things I can’t help but remember.

ANNIWAA: Remember my name is Anniwaa.

LAMPLIGHTER: There are things I wish I could forget.

ANNIWAA: Don't forget my name is Anniwaa.

LAMPLIGHTER: These are the things I cannot stop remembering;/ these are the things I cannot stop forgetting. (35)

The conceptualization of Anniwaa as an incarnation of the women's African past is further reinforced when towards the end of the play she says, "I am the ghost of the child past. I am your past" (81). As this line is not addressed to any of the characters in particular, it could in addition be understood as an appeal to the reader/audience for identification and empathy, to assume responsibility as slavery forms part of everyone's history.

Structured around the three-legged trajectory of the Middle Passage—Africa, the Caribbean, Britain, Africa—with Africa forming the central part of this infamous passage, references to the Atlantic Sea emerge as a central trope in *The Lamplighter*, predominantly in the six scenes titled "Shipping News" and in Anniwaa's account of her confinement in the slave fort.

BLACK HARRIOT:

Into the howling, moaning Atlantic.

Into the open-grave-green sea.

Into the choppy waters, another body.

Another stiff black wave into
the tight black waves of the sea.

Into the turbulent waters,
another body yet. (12)

LAMPLIGHTER:

Into the shark infested Atlantic,

The black deaths slipped. (44)

While the frequent use of the adjective "black" evokes Paul Gilroy's concept of the "Black Atlantic," and thus points towards the diasporic reach of *The Lamplighter*, it is the high death toll of captured Africans during the transatlantic passage that is consistently commemorated through the employment of the image of the sea, culminating in a description of the deplorable incident of the slave ship *Zong* when live slaves were thrown overboard into the "early, unmarked, grave of the sea" (55).

From Anniwaa's child-perspective, resonating with all the fright and anxiety of a desolate child who cannot make sense out of where she is and what is happening to her, "the Sea" turns into a "wild monster" (10), a "big monster" (13). In fact, the creation of an African child self for the main character has allowed Kay to bring home the horrors

of captivity and transportation to an unknown destiny in its full force. Anniwaa’s pre-traumatic memories of her family and native village, introduced by the fairy-tale formula “once upon a time,” and the expression “a time now ago” (9) provide a powerful sense of nostalgia, not only about the tragic personal loss of kin and home, but also about a time of innocence that is forever lost.

As has become apparent in the discussion so far, throughout *The Lamplighter* Kay enters into critical dialogue with a large variety of literary and other texts. These intertexts include official records such as slave codes (30, 63) and facts garnered from historical documents (i.e., 75, 81, 84,) but also song lyrics (75, 76) and quotations from religious discourse (31, 37), which are deployed with critical intention either to reverse or to destabilize received notions and ultimately to denounce the institution of slavery. In contrast—at other moments—intertextual references are used to reinforce and pay homage to black cultural expressions such as the myth of the flying African (42) or the musical tradition of spirituals (37-38, 51, 57).

In the following, I would like to provide a more detailed discussion of a few selected intertextual references which acquire a particular prominence in the text.

In several instances, Kay appropriates the form of the nursery rhyme or permutes well-known popular rhymes into sinister ones to address themes such as imposed servility, hard labour and sexual exploitation:

CONSTANCE:

Lord, Lady, Sir, Master, Misses, Miss,
Yes, No. Yes Miss, No Miss. Yes Sir, No Sir.
Three bags full sir. (27)

CONSTANCE:

In the house: I learned: sewing, spinning, steaming, boiling, hot.
Wiping, cleaning, polishing, spick and span.
The Man can have you any time he can.
Shimmy shammy. Hand on foot. Rub a dub.
Three men in a tub. Shimmy shammy. Mammy.
Mammy. Mammy. Filthy, dirty. Dirty, dirty, clean. (40)

The appropriation of this particular genre is especially compelling as nursery rhymes are traditionally associated with the innocence and purity of childhood. The clash between such expectations of conventional nursery rhymes and the re-written and re-contextualized version of the children’s rhymes in *The Lamplighter* provokes unease in the reader/audience and brings all the corruption, indeed the “filth,” of slavery forcefully to the fore. Kay’s counter-hegemonic use of nursery rhymes can hence be regarded as an act of undermining and destabilising a specifically Western form of literary discourse. In an essay on Karen King-Aribisala’s *The Hangman’s Game* (2007), Bénédicte Ledent suggests

that the “subversive power” of nursery rhymes is “part of an attempt to go beyond the surface of things and disrupt the established order” (2008, 64), an attempt that seems to be confirmed in Kay’s contestatory employment of the genre.⁷

In a similar act of cultural appropriation and cynical re-contextualization, Kay quotes from Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, that is, from a key canonical western text by *the* writer representing quintessential Britishness, to address the precarious condition of a slave’s bare life:

CONSTANCE

Visible. Invisible. See. Be not Seen. Hear be not heard.

To be seen and not heard.

To be or not to be, that is the Question. (32)

Due to its canonical status in world literature and prominent role in the colonial education system, used to inculcating “Western” values into the “natives,” Shakespeare’s work has served as a primary intertext for numerous efforts of postcolonial writers to “write back” to “the centre.” In a Caribbean context, it is mainly *The Tempest* and the figures of Caliban and Prospero that have functioned as a basis for a critical interrogation of the dynamics between the colonizer and the colonized, between master and slave, as articulated for example in Kamau Brathwaite’s work or in George Lamming’s *Water With Berries* (1971), while from a Black British perspective *Othello*, as in Caryl Phillips’s *The Nature of Blood* (1997) or Shakespeare’s sonnets to the Dark Lady, as in Zadie Smith’s *White Teeth* (2000), have been re-fracted to explore issues of belonging and race relations in a British or European context.

Interestingly, Kay’s reference to *Hamlet* evokes yet another intertextual allusion. Following the Chinese box principle, Wole Soyinka’s poem titled “Hamlet” comes to mind, in which the corruption reigning in Denmark reflects the rotten state of affairs in Nigeria at the time of the writer’s imprisonment. In view of this web of citations, Kay’s allusion to Shakespeare’s play can be read as an analogy to Britain’s sickness and rottenness during the times of slavery and—again with an additional contemporary ring to it—as a pointer at the current state of the nation.

When considering that Hamlet found himself in a situation beyond his control, contemplating the possibility of suicide, the quotation moreover seems to call attention to the conundrum of death over slavery, of the “turn towards death as a release from terror and bondage” (Gilroy 1993, 63) to escape the condition of the “living dead” reflected in the Lamplighter’s words: “I am dead and alive” (57). The theme of “death as agency” (Gilroy 1993, 63), which most immediately evokes Sethe’s desperate act of infanticide in

⁷ See also the counting rhyme on page 31. For the use of nursery rhymes in the context of slavery note also Erna Brodber’s novel *Jane and Louisa Will Soon Come Home* (1980), which is structured around various forms of nursery rhymes.

Toni Morrison’s novel *Beloved*, is most hauntingly expressed in the Lamplighter’s words, which she repeats four times in the course of the play: “I would rather die on yonder / Gallows than live in slavery” (23).⁸

Along with intertextuality, the frequent employment of repetition in the text emerges as another prominent technique closely linked to trauma and memory. Following Anne Whitehead, “One of the key literary strategies in trauma fiction is the device of repetition, which can act at the levels of language, imagery or plot. Repetition mimics the effects of trauma, for it suggests the insistent return of the event and the disruption of narrative chronology or progression” (85). Besides *The Lamplighter’s* circular plot structure already referred to, repetition works predominantly at the level of imagery, and in particular of language, as seen in the above example. Throughout the narrative Kay keeps revisiting crucial topics such as the Middle Passage, sexual and other physical and emotional exploitation and abuse in order to portray the haunting power of a traumatic past. But it is especially in terms of language and subversive word play that Kay—who is after all predominantly a poet—employs repetition to represent the symptomatology of trauma. For example, central terms such as “I remember” (63), “imagine” (25-26) or the two corresponding terms “runaway” and “running away” (62-63) are reiterated numerous times in a matter of just a few lines.

In other instances entire passages are repeated—as in the example below, which addresses the recurrent theme of escape and freedom, in a matter of just two pages:

BLACK HARRIOT:

Runaway runaway, country or town.
Runaway, runaway, don’t slow down.
Runaway, runaway, girl or boy.
Runaway, runaway, freedom is joy. (66, 67)

Reminiscent of the already discussed pattern of the nursery rhyme, the rhythm of this lyrical passage is similarly suggestive of the haunting effects of trauma.

Frequently Kay employs the device of repetition through the use of key words which in turn trigger an entire chain of associations in order to simulate the workings of traumatic memory:

MACBEAN

The Ship Building Industry. Shipping.

CONSTANCE

Ship bread, ship biscuit, ship breaker, slaver, ship broker, ship fever, ship store, slaver, ship cargo, ship stowage, stow away, ship rat, slaver, ship days.

⁸ See also pages 45, 69, 90.

MACBEAN

Ship: to put or to take (person or things)

Ship: to shoulder a burden

CONSTANCE

HARDSHIP, Workmanship, WORSHIP, relationship, authorSHIP! (72)

The use of alliteration in the first passage attributed to Constance turns it into a bit of a tongue-twister and thus powerfully re-enacts the stress symptoms on the level of oral expression while the employment, or rather the compulsive repetition, of the key terms “ship” and “slaver” reflect the repeated establishment of the traumatic scenario on board the slave ships. It seems significant to note that Constance, the speaker of these lines, did not only lose her speech—like Anniwaa at the beginning of the text—but is also reported to have suffered from frequent convulsions following the loss of her baby girl (67). When in an interview titled “Living Memory,” Toni Morrison states that “black women had to deal with post-modern problems in the nineteenth century and earlier,” and mentions in particular “certain kinds of dissolution . . . [c]ertain kinds of madness, deliberately going mad . . . ‘in order not to lose your mind,’” and further refers to these “strategies for survival” as a “response to predatory western phenomena” (qtd. in Gilroy 1993, 221), it is precisely this kind of fragmentation, or these “kinds of madness” that are reflected in Constance’s verses. The intensity of the traumatic experience is also compellingly captured in the pun on “ship” as a bound morpheme versus a noun and further stressed through the use of capitalization. What adds to the force of this passage is the contrast established between Constance’s voice of distress and MacBean’s articulation of emotionally detached, factual pieces of information in relation to the meaning of the word “ship,” especially in its relevance to the slave trade.

The trope of the ship, in fact, occupies a primary place, not only in this passage, but throughout the entire text of *The Lamplighter*, predominantly in the scenes titled “Shipping News” through the descriptions of the voyage across the Atlantic sea. Special attention is drawn to the ships at the beginning of scene twelve with the enumeration of the names of slave ships, taken from key systems of western civilization such as ancient mythology (the *Diana*), literature (the *Othello*), Christianity (the *Angel*, the *Jesus*, the *Grace of God*), or female first names (the *Bridget*, the *Charming Sally*) and western virtues (the *Perseverance*); a strategy which powerfully exposes the hypocrisy of the slave trade supposedly acting in the service of “civilization” (68).

The centrality given to the image of the ship in *The Lamplighter* indeed posits a link to Paul Gilroy’s comment on his use of the trope of ships “as a central organising symbol” for his seminal study *The Black Atlantic*: “The image of the ship—a living, micro-cultural, micro-political system in motion—is especially important for historical and theoretical reasons. . . . Ships immediately focus attention on the middle passage, on the various projects for redemptive return to an African homeland, . . . as well as the movement

of key cultural and political artefacts: tracts, books, gramophone records, and choirs” (1993, 4).

Aside from articulating in formal terms the impact of trauma, intensifications such as those discussed so far communicate a sense of urgency to the readers/listeners with the effect of involving them in the story and thus, by extension, in the history and experience of slavery.

The most striking affect-generating feature foregrounded in *The Lamplighter* is, however, the focus on descriptions of physical sensations, which has not escaped the notice of other critics.⁹ Considering that in its original Greek meaning “trauma” is a wound levied on the body, the focus on sense impressions to communicate the emotional and bodily experience of slavery is only consistent. In the context of postmemory, “postmemorial work . . . strives to *reactivate* and *reembody* more distant social/national and archival/cultural memorial structures by reinvesting them with resonant individual and familial forms of mediation and aesthetic expression Memory signals an affective link to the past, a sense precisely of an *embodied* “living connection” (Hirsch 2008, 111; emphasis added).

Jackie Kay writes that “we don’t want to imagine how slavery would affect each of the five senses” (“Missing Faces,” *The Guardian*, 24 March 2008), and it is precisely the immediate physical effects of the violent enslavement of human beings that *The Lamplighter* concentrates on in many of its passages. This heightened corporeal perspective is frequently adopted with specific reference to the five senses in order to capture the memory and the horrors of slavery: “I can still stretch my arms back and be able to touch it again, / smell it again, taste it again. Slavery. The feel of it” (20), or—in contrast—to depict pre-traumatic memories of a life that has subsequently been numbed: “The life before, the life I lived, / the life when I could breathe, / when I could smell the smells / and taste the tastes” (24).¹⁰ Kay writes a new embodied history—or “herstory” (Bringas López 2010, 7)—in which the bodies of the enslaved women become a central feature through descriptions of hard physical labour, child breeding, corporeal punishment and rape, but also of hunger, thirst, weight (19) or diseases (56, 57). In many passages the violence inflicted on the victims is intensified through the use of enumeration: “Torn, yanked, pulled, pushed, kicked, stamped, branded” (33) to produce affect in the reader/audience. Again following Marianne Hirsch: “These ‘not memories’ communicated in ‘flashes of imagery’ and ‘broken refrains,’ transmitted through ‘the language of the body,’ are precisely the stuff of *postmemory*” (2008, 109).

References to the terrors of the Middle Passage, the scarcity of space on the ships and the death toll, equally emphasize the sensuous, physical experience and culminate in a passage which foregrounds the repulsive odour of human bodily excretions:

⁹ In her discussion of the text, Ana Bringas López, for example, stresses the fact that through the strategy of “building up an embodied herstory . . . Kay brings slavery home in its full horror” (2010, 7). With reference to the work of Hortense Spiller’s distinction between “body” and “flesh,” Amanda Nadalini discusses the “reduction to flesh” (2013, 62) in relation to *The Lamplighter*.

¹⁰ See also pages 36 and 68.

MACBEAN

Two days before docking in
 The slave galley could be smelled,
 The putrescence of blood, faeces, vomit and rotting bodies,
 Wafting downwind,
 The smell of the dead . . . (45)

Kay's careful orchestration of a veritable invasion—or even assault—of the corporeal shocks the reader/audience into an awareness of the institution of slavery in all its cruelty, rawness and physical reality.

One should not forget that *The Lamplighter* was also written to be broadcasted on the radio as well as performed on the stage. Apart from the spoken word, it also contains songs, sounds and, of course, on the stage, the bodies of the actors. With the choice of the dramatic genre Jackie Kay reinforces literary language or verbal representation through auditory and visual evocations and thus employs a sensory textuality which enables the transmission of emotional and physical memory. In addition, by opting for the dramatic form, Kay connects to the distinctly oral nature of black cultural expression as can also be said about the use of repetition mentioned above. In this context it seems interesting to relate Kay's strategy to Paul Gilroy's emphasis on the histrionic aspect in his discussion of "transfiguration" and the role it plays in the vernacular cultures of the black Atlantic diaspora: "The politics of transfiguration strives in pursuit of the sublime, struggling to repeat the unrepeatable, to present the unrepresentable. Its rather different hermeneutic focus pushes towards the mimetic, dramatic, and performative" (1993, 38). In view of Gilroy's further observation of the "public significance of lynching as a spectacle . . . as a popular theatre of power" (118), Kay's preference for the dramatic mode may also be regarded as an uncanny reminder not only of the "performance" of public lynchings but also of the public exhibition of captured Africans on the auction block.

As art historian Jill Bennett suggests, "in sense memory [the] past seeps back into the present, becoming sensation rather than representation" (2000, 92). This focus on sensation is emphasized when considering for example the following stage directions in scene thirteen, "British Cities:" "(*The women should speak fast in this section and overlap each other, to give a sense of the city being built, brick by brick, in words*)" (70; emphasis added). That is to say, in this passage language and the physical world in the form of sensations are intertwined to simultaneously elicit an affective and sensory response in the reader/audience. The language of sense memory leads to an increased immediacy and seems to be intended to address the reader's/audience's own body memories since, as Marianne Hirsch has argued, "The past is in the present, spatially in the room" (2002, 86). In one instance, the women's focus on the "mouth"—similar to the example of the image of the ship—triggers off a chain of associations:

CONSTANCE:

Avonmouth, open mouth.

BLACK HARRIOT:

We were sold . . .

At the slave ports of Lancaster, Whitehaven, PORTSMOUTH,
PLYMOUTH, DARTMOUTH.¹¹ (16)

While Gioia Angeletti reads this passage as “suggesting a social and economic system that devours humanity” (2013, 227), an interpretation which is supported by the use of the names of cities regarded as complicit with the slave trade, I would argue that, in addition, the dwelling on the “mouth” points to the more immediately physical act of (food) consumption. Numerous times in Kay’s epic poem attention is drawn to the cargo—primarily tobacco, rum, and coffee (23, 55)—but above all sugar in its various manifestations (45) that is shipped to the western world in order to cater to the “British sweet tooth” (44). In his seminal work *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois significantly identifies “debauchery”—which for the sake of the current argument would translate into “gluttony”—as one of the evils characterizing the “contact between European Civilization with the world’s underdeveloped peoples” (1989, 114).

Through the employment of multiple sensory impressions, Kay invites her audience to participate in a cultural act of remembrance. In this way, *The Lamplighter* engages in a sensory discourse of trauma which compels one “to perceiv[e] history *in one’s own body*, with the power of sight (or insight) usually afforded only by one’s own immediate physical involvement” (Felman and Laub 1992, 108).

In consideration of the marked physical presence of the female characters and the consistent emphasis on their corporeality, the fact that MacBean is not physically present as a character but only as a disembodied voice makes for quite a striking contrast. His absent presence could be said to very effectively capture the commanding, haunting omnipresence of the invisible, god-like power of the institution of slavery and, in effect, of white, western, male oppression and patriarchy in general.

In addition to the literary devices of intertextuality and repetition, with the use of a collective narrative voice, *The Lamplighter* employs yet another technique central to trauma narratives. Seen in comparison to other polyphonic contemporary slave narratives, for example Caryl Phillips’s *Crossing the River* (1993) or Fred D’Aguiar’s *The Longest Memory* (1994), the originality of Kay’s rendition of slavery rests predominantly in its specific dramatic form of an interactive chorus of voices which according to Bringas López “renders the play profoundly heteroglossic and dialogical” (2010, 5). Building on this observation, one could further argue that Kay’s

¹¹ Note also the references to other vital body parts (“lips, teeth, chest, heart, lung”) in the same passage and especially the pun on chest: “CHESTER” (16).

text eludes any attempt at generic classification as it is not a usual play with a linear plot structure or conventional dialogue, but rather a loosely connected sequence of scenes that—despite their apparent chronological order—consists of fragmented, dislocated narratives—which, however, constantly converge and intersect to weave a common story representative of the experience of all enslaved women. This form of anti-narrative organization in fact aligns Kay’s text with a type of subversion that, following Madhumita Purkayastha, finds particular expression in feminist discourses: “It seeks to challenge ordered and coherent narrativity and deconstruct hegemonic forms and structures of monologic and phallogocentric discourse” (2014, 2). Unlike in the original slave narrative which is restricted to the perspective of a single narrator, Jackie Kay orchestrates a chorus of interacting female voices so that what Anne Whitehead has concluded in a discussion of Kay’s novel *Trumpet* (1998) also seems to apply to *The Lamplighter*: “The narrative voice is dispersed or fragmented so that each of the protagonists takes up the story, adding to it . . . her individual perspective. The multiplicity of testimonial voices suggests that recovery is based on a community of witnesses” (88). It should be observed in this context that the voice of MacBean also closely interacts with the voices of the women who frequently take up and re-contextualize the exact same words or phrases used in his speech as for example in this extract from the captain’s log:

MACBEAN:

Biscay. Southwesterly veering westerly. Very rough or High.

LAMPLIGHTER:

Very rough or High. (22)

This interweaving of the voices of the female slaves with the “master’s” voice seems to reflect the closely knit texture and interdependence of the regime of slavery, implicating both sides—however differently—in the process.

Apart from sharing the experience of slavery, with each of the women recounting her own specific story, through her elevation to the level of myth, the Lamplighter performs an additional symbolic function. As Morna Fleming aptly observes, “Lamplighter is ‘Herself’, at once her own person, her own identity, and a representative of all enslaved womankind. Her experience is typical of that of the other women, but is *her* own experience, as each of them has her own experience” (2011, 2). In keeping with this observation, in *The Lamplighter* much emphasis is placed on self-articulation and self-representation:

BLACK HARRIOT: This story was written by Herself.

MARY: This is Herself talking . . .

LAMPLIGHTER: Nobody ever told my story before. (15)

While mimicking and implicitly referencing the Ur-form of the autobiographical slave narrative with its emphasis on the authenticity and veracity of the slave narrator’s story, this insistence could also be interpreted as a self-reflexive comment which draws attention to the fact that any retrospective narration—as is the case with the present text—is unavoidably and consciously a re-articulation of the slave experience from a contemporary perspective. The Lamplighter’s phrase quoted above could thus be extended to read: “Nobody ever told my story before – the way it is told here.”

Kay sensitively portrays Anniwaa’s gradual awakening from the trauma of capture and enslavement, following her progression from the pathological response of speechlessness, “I stop talking” (10), to self-articulation and self-assertion through textual testimony:

LAMPLIGHTER

This is the story of the Lamplighter:

One day, I finally managed to tell

My story. I wrote it down.

It was printed and reprinted

And told.

And retold again. (92)

In line with the stress on the contemporary nature of *The Lamplighter* pointed out above, the emphasis placed on “reprinting” and “retelling” in this passage suggests a link to Toni Morrison’s concept of “rememory,” which has been defined as a narrative “strategy of subversive representation” (Purkayastha 2014, 1). The connection to Morrison can be extended when considering the following exchange between Constance and the Lamplighter:

CONSTANCE

The *passing on*, quick – quick, of an idea

Is irrepressible.

LAMPLIGHTER

I can write it down! I will write it down and *pass it on*. This is a letter from me to my ancestors.

CONSTANCE

This is the story of the Lamplighter. (84; emphasis added)

The use of the phrase “pass on” in this passage can be identified as an overt intertextual reference to the repeated assertion in the epilogue of Toni Morrison’s novel *Beloved* that “this is not a story to pass on” (275). However, unlike in Morrison’s text in which “pass on” is used ambiguously to signify both forgetting and remembering in the sense that this story should not be repeated, but also not “passed on,” that is “skipped,” omitted or

repressed, Kay's narrative emphasises the power of the written word and the responsibility of passing the story on in honour of the dead ancestors in an act of communal memory.

Kay's presentation of the Lamplighter's story as a testimony of black female empowerment, a celebration of the power of self-fashioning through narration, can be related to the idea articulated in trauma theory which regards writing as an "inherently curative process" (Whitehead 2004, 87). Following Anne Whitehead, "Conversion from traumatic memory to narrative memory represents the process of recovery from trauma" (87). Kay's emphasis on storytelling is critical for her reconstructive project as it points to the possibility of recovery from a past of trauma and pain if one can arrive at a narrative articulation that enables reflection and renegotiation.

As already mentioned at the beginning of this essay, communal memory is not limited to the descendants of victims of the slave trade but speaks to the entire British nation and, indeed, to the world at large. If, as Sofía Muñoz Valdivieso contends, "narratives of the British nation have traditionally managed to shift the focus away from the participation of Britain in the institution of slavery to highlight its role as a European leader in the movement to do away with the slave trade" (56), Kay's play is a further contribution to the rectification of this narrative as portrayed in the already existing body of contemporary slave narratives. *The Lamplighter* is pervaded with references to the economic motivation behind and the profit gained by the slave trade, both of which are specifically addressed in two scenes entitled "Sugar" (scene eight) and "British Cities" (scene thirteen) respectively.

BLACK HARRIOT:

We were sold for sugar in the coffee.
Sugar in the tea.

MARY:

We were sold for tobacco and rice.
Sold to make the cities rise. (17)

Leading us back to the text's emphasis on corporeality discussed above, in her portrayal of the unholy alliance between the economies of trade and the cannibalization of human beings turned into "commercial objects" (Paul Gilroy, "12 Years a Slave," *The Guardian*, 10 November 2013), Kay consistently draws attention to the physicality and the brutalization of the slave's body:

MARY:

There is not a brick in this city

LAMPLIGHTER:

But what is cemented with the blood of a slave. (79)

BLACK HARRIOT

My story is the story of sugar.

I was stolen for sugar.

I gave my body up for sugar.

I nearly died for sugar.

Sugar is my family tree.

I have no sugar daddy. (49; emphasis added)

The central role assigned to “sugar,” which is repeated in every single line of the passage summarizes in brevis the history and hardships of slavery—capture, physical and sexual exploitation, death, loss of familial bonds—with sugar providing the prime motive in this cynical pursuit of “La dolce vita!” (46). The final pun on “sugar daddy” places special stress on the specifically female experience of forced sexual submission. This is to say, *The Lamplighter* consistently draws attention to the body as merchandise or to what Paul Gilroy has labelled the slaves’ condition as “capital incarnate” (“12 Years a Slave,” *The Guardian*, 10 November 2013). As the prime motivator powering the trade, “money” is repeatedly referred to frequently through the device of enumeration, associative word-play, proverbs and even sound:

CONSTANCE:

Ten twenty thirty forty fifty sixty seventy eighty one hundred
pounds, ten twenty thirty forty fifty sixty seventy eighty.

Two hundred thousand pounds. (*And so on.*)

Fx:

(We hear the sound of money being counted.) (73)

CONSTANCE:

Money makes the world go round.

BLACK HARRIOT

Money makes the man. (76)

This specific reference to the musical *Cabaret* with the persecution of the Jewish population as its historical backdrop seems to suggest an association between the ideological and capitalist nature of both slavery and the Holocaust. In placing these two histories of human suffering relative to one another, Kay appears to propose that anti-Semitism and racism are closely connected. In an attempt to counter arguments that wish to view these experiences as unique and incomparable, Gilroy, for example, also advocates that “a combined if not comparative discussion of its horrors and their patterns of legitimation might be fruitful in making sense of modern racism” (1993, 214).

Throughout scene thirteen “British Cities” (70-82), Kay encourages her readers/audience to realize that British cities were only able to rise and prosper on the backs of enslaved Africans who now lay claim to and demand their inclusion in the cities implicated in the slave trade: “CONSTANCE (*sings*): *Bristol belongs to me . . .* / BLACK HARRIOT (*sings*): *I belong to Glasgow and Glasgow belongs to me!*” (79), culminating in the enumeration of all the cities associated when Black Harriot says, “London, Liverpool, Bristol, Manchester, Glasgow belongs to me!” (80).

While various critics have pointed out that the inclusion of Glasgow as a major slave port in the above list highlights Kay’s particular concern with the involvement of her native city in the institution of slavery, most exhaustively discussed in Gioia Angeletti’s article titled “The Plantation Owner is Never Wearing a Kilt” (2013), and have furthermore observed that the line “I belong to Glasgow” refers to the eponymous popular Glaswegian music-hall song, it should be added that the assertion “Glasgow belongs to me” is an adapted, oblique quotation from Lord Kitchener’s famous Calypso “London Belongs to Me.” Apart from stressing the claim to affiliation and belonging, with this particular quotation the text enters into a dialogue with the history of migration from the Caribbean as an immediate consequence of slavery and colonization while simultaneously pointing to the persistent problem of contemporary racisms.

With its particular focus on the exploration of slavery and the slave trade through the lens of gender, *The Lamplighter* constitutes a specifically feminist contribution to the corpus of contemporary slave narratives that wish to make an intervention into British memory politics by reminding the country of its imperial past and presenting this legacy as integral to British mainstream history. Kay’s sensitive re-inscription of the history of slavery from the point of view of black women can in fact more accurately be defined as “feminist postmemory,” which Hirsch describes as a “particular mode of knowledge about the other, a particular intersubjective relation or ‘allo-identification,’” as a question of “how memory is constructed, of what stories are told, to whom, and by whom” (2002, 88), which Hirsch summarizes as “an ethical and political act of solidarity and, perhaps, agency on behalf of the trauma of the other” (89).

As I have tried to show in my analysis of *The Lamplighter*, partly guided by interpretive categories provided by trauma theory and studies of the literary representations of trauma, the questions articulated by Hirsch above are addressed and fictionalised in the original use of generic and narrative strategies employed in Kay’s imaginative re-articulation of the slave experience. In dialogue with past and contemporary narratives of slavery, Kay participates in the (paradoxical) project of black writers who enquire “into terrors that exhaust the resources of language amidst the debris of a catastrophe which prohibits the existence of their art at the same time as demanding its continuance” (Gilroy 1993, 218). Seen from this perspective, *The Lamplighter* can be conceptualized simultaneously as a historical reclamation and as a challenge to contemporary forms of racism, enslavement and the enduring exploitation of human beings in pursuit of profit. Through an imaginative return to Britain’s slavery past, Jackie Kay provides a critique

of the present moment, since “slavery and unfree labour are still far from over” (Gilroy 2013). Finally, with its emphasis on storytelling, on the telling and re-telling of the story of slavery, and the focus on the African origins of the slave trade, *The Lamplighter* can ultimately be regarded as Kay’s tribute to her African roots and the suffering endured by her African forebears. Indeed, as Jackie Kay affirms in her article “Missing Faces” about the process of writing the play: “I felt as if I was writing a love letter to my ancestors” (*The Guardian*, 24 March 2008).¹²

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¹² Significantly, a slightly permuted version of this phrase is also used by the *Lamplighter* in the play: “This is a letter from me to my ancestors” (84).

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