

Elvan Zabunyan

The Muted Sound of Speaking Silence

“after you know that the dead
are still walking,
after you realize that silence
is talking,
that outside and inside
are just an illusion,
what is left?”
Assata Shakur¹

For four centuries and until the end of the nineteenth century, the Atlantic Ocean was a place of triangular trade where twelve to fifteen million Africans were transported to the Americas in slave ships. This deportation is known as the *Middle Passage*. During the crossings, millions of captives died, committed suicide, were tortured, thrown overboard when they were sick or fed to mutant sharks that, over time, followed the prison ships to leave the African shores and ventured to the American coast.² All this history lies at the bottom of the sea.³ Artists, activists, poets, philosophers and historians have questioned this unfathomable underwater space in their works, listened to the ghosts that inhabit the Atlantic, and opened their ears to the silence of the sea to bring forth its memory.

In *La matière de l'absence*, Patrick Chamoiseau (born in 1953) writes:

“But let’s talk about these African deaths in the Atlantic. There are undoubtedly those who committed suicide during the crossing because of an overactive memory, reluctant to erase itself, helpless to not be able to explain with its own means what was happening in the hold. There are those whose memory had disappeared in the circles around the famous tree, who believed it so, and who found themselves in an insurmountable existential void. What is the best

way to survive the hold of these despicable ships: the urgent preservation of memory or the loss of memory?”⁴

Gazing at the ocean in the early 1970s, Assata Shakur (born in 1947) wondered how many Africans are buried there, “slaves from another time”.⁵ Michelle Cliff (1946–2016) wondered: “That ocean floor must be something else again. Where the sand covers centuries.”⁶ This round trip between the African and American continents and the way of considering the Atlantic as a cemetery was central to the investigation of the artists who chose imagination to bring the spirits that had disappeared back to life. How to visually represent what is no longer there? How can buried sounds and watersoaked screams re-emerge from the depths? Artistic and literary allegories make it possible to make visible and audible resilient narratives that have survived thanks to the power of orality and the grace of mental images that appear, seeking, at every moment, to make manifest the traces erased by centuries of violence and dehumanization.

In a conversation with Jean-Luc Godard (born in 1930) in 1992, Artavazd Pelechian (born in 1938) touches on an idea that resonates with the poetic concepts proposed by Patrick Chamoiseau, he speaks of “absent images”, saying: “I think you can hear images and see sound. In my films, the image is on the side of sound and the sound on the side of images.”⁷ This echo, between seeing and hearing, between image and sound, vibrates in a perceptible way if we choose to take it on to think about the experience of death in the Atlantic Ocean during the *Middle Passage*. To get closer to this idea, one can choose to contemplate the immensity of the paintings of Frank Bowling (born in 1934). As you immerse yourself in them, you see silence; you grasp it through abstraction and the way in which the paint is diluted on the canvas, dull sounds, waves from the afterlife.

In the early 1970s, Frank Bowling, who left his native British Guiana several years ago and travelled from the West Indies to Great Britain (in 1953) and then to New York (in 1966), represented, through maps drowned in aquatic colours, the spatiality of this experience of displacement, which is also that of slavery. His canvas *Middle Passage* dating from 1970 is an aesthetic experimentation in flamboyant red, orange, yellow and green tones, mixing collage, silk-screen printing and abstract nuances which nevertheless represent the element “water” through the fluidity of the colours. Bowling repeatedly added photographic portraits of his mother and son and the maternal home in Guyana to the surface of the canvas, a recurring motif in his paintings. Faces and maps amidst these colours symbolizing Africa speak through the title, *Middle Passage*, and through the desire to reflect in the present while thinking about this chilling past.

Through his paintings in liquid tones, he pays tribute to this journey without return experienced by captive Africans. As Okwui Enwezor (1963–2019) points out in a very beautiful essay he wrote about the artist:

“Maps were also about the coordinates of space, a signifier of historical narrative; of crossings and double-crossings (the Atlantic and Middle Passage), consciousness and double-consciousness (the universal world of artists and the narrow straits of black art). In some ways, the ‘map paintings’ recall J.M.W. Turner, whom Bowling deeply admired.”⁸

One of Turner's (1775–1851) paintings in particular remains the main reference for many aesthetic, theoretical and historical approaches to the possibility or impossibility of representing the horror of slavery and the need to overcome this horror to transcend it with beauty: *The Slave Ship* whose original title was *Slavers Throwing overboard the Dead and Dying—Typhoon coming on*. Dating from 1840, the work reports a real event that occurred in the Caribbean Sea in 1781. The crew of the *Zong*, a Dutch slave ship bought by a British slave maker and carrying two hundred and forty slaves, decided to throw one hundred and thirty-two of them into the sea, fearing that there

would be a shortage of water on the ship but hoping above all to recover the insurance money since each slave was insured as property. Records indicate that on 29 November at eight o'clock in the evening, forty-four women and children were thrown into the sea through the cabin windows. The time was chosen because it corresponds to the time of the next shift when the men making the rounds are all present. On 1 December, forty-four other slaves, this time only men, suffered the same fate and were pushed into the water from the rear deck. In the following days, thirty-six other men died in the same way and about ten dived into the sea to commit suicide.

This painting by Turner illustrates many works on the history of slavery. It is mentioned by Paul Gilroy in the introductory pages of his famous *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*.⁹ It was contextualized the same year by Michelle Cliff in her novel *Free Enterprise: A Novel of Mary Ellen Pleasant*, when she described the scene where the painting was revealed to a social gathering by the Boston-based collector who had just acquired it. She is speaking to the main character, an African-American woman who subsidized the purchase of weapons used in the insurrection led by abolitionist John Brown on the Harpers Ferry in 1859.

“‘Miss Pleasant?’, ‘Yes Miss Hooper?’, ‘Perhaps you can instruct the company about the incident the painter was illustrating?’ I wasn't at all sure. What incident had Turner chosen? Which of the hundred that came to light? Didn't it coincide with those I knew? ‘I'm afraid I am not at all sure.’ ‘Oh’, she said, clearly disappointed in my inability to recall, even to invent something for the guests. [...] I could feel my emotions rising. My eyes were locked on the foreground of the painting, where a few brown arms, some lengths of chain, and one brown leg glanced through the waves, alongside magnificently colored fish. The fish were clearly in their habitat; the arms and leg and chains were alien to the sea.”¹⁰

The scene described by Mary Ellen Pleasant is the one that irrigates different works. Derek Walcott (1930–2017) cites bones that weld to coral in “The

Sea History” in 1979; Ellen Gallagher (born 1965) initiated her *Water Ecstatic* series in 2004 by recreating an aquatic space where black figures wrapped in algae act as reminders of those bodies that have been swallowed by the ocean. The video installation by John Akomfrah (born 1957), *Vertigo Sea* (2015), also explores the underwater territory, editing and juxtaposing BBC film archives of fish, interlaced plants and minerals. The aquatic space serves as a tomb, a grey vault from which rays of light escape. Walcott writes:

„that was the Ark of the Covenant.
Then came from the plucked wires
of sunlight on the sea floor”¹¹

The empty pages of the story described by the poet from Saint Lucia are those of the amnesiac sea that vexes John Akomfrah and which he chooses to approach with infinite images, waves and flows, reversing the points of anchorage and earth and sky in nuances where the sea absorbs and fascinates, at once death and a path. Akomfrah chooses to confront creation with absence through several layers. He brings together figures and shapes, waves and fauna, light and apnoea, shipwreck and hope, reminding us that the sea is for migrants a terrifying space but also the hope of freedom. He also evokes the relationship to fatality and the common future of captive Africans in the eighteenth century and today’s refugees, with, as a fatality on this sea, Africans who cannot choose to escape it. The whaling images that punctuate the installation *Vertigo Sea*, composed of three projections, echo his reading of *Moby Dick* (1851) by Melville, whose long experience with whalers makes his descriptions of harpooned whales even more real, even more visual. These images of *Vertigo Sea* also bring a chromatic contrast with the waters dominated by blue. The red that bleeds from the wounded flesh of whales stains the image and reinforces the extreme paradox of cruelty alongside marine beauty. The whales’ song must have accompanied the agony of the drowning slave bodies; the unfathomable sounds and the cavernous and rhythmic reverberations produced by the monumental mammal are also ancestral.

This history, and all the imaginary worlds that result from it, needed to be able to exist through mas-

terful artistic, visual and musical creations that made it possible to perpetuate memory. Drexciya’s two creators, James Stinson and Gerald Donald, politically active in the racialized electronic music scene in Detroit and having voluntarily remained anonymous for a long time, founded the myth of an underwater community of babies born in the water to pregnant slave women and who survived after their mothers died in the waves. The strength of this idea and the quality of the music that resulted from it had a major impact on contemporary artists in the late 1990s. In his book *More Brilliant than the Sun: Adventures in Sonic Fiction*, Kodwo Eshun (born in 1967) dedicates a section to Drexciya, which he entitles “Marine Mutation across the Black Atlantic”:

“Every Drexciya EP navigates the depths of the Black Atlantic, the submerged worlds populated by Drexciyans, Lardossans, Darthouven Fish Men and Mutant Gillmen. In the sleevenotes to *The Quest*, their ’97 concept double CD, the Drexciyans are revealed to be a marine species descended from ‘pregnant America-bound African slaves’ thrown overboard ‘by the thousands during labour for being sick and disruptive cargo.’ Could it be possible for humans to breathe underwater? A foetus in its mother’s womb is certainly alive in an aquatic environment. Is it possible that they could have given birth at sea to babies that never needed air? Recent experiments have shown mice able to breathe liquid oxygen, a premature human infant saved from certain death by breathing liquid oxygen through its underdeveloped lungs. These facts combined with reported sightings of Gillmen and Swamp Monsters in the coastal swamps of the Southeastern United States make the slave trade theory startlingly feasible.”

Drexciyans are “water breathing, aquatically mutated descendants,” webbed mutants of the Black Atlantic, amphibians adapted for the ocean’s abyssal plains, a phylum disconnected from the aliens who adapted to land.¹²

When we listen to Drexciya’s music, reinforced by the electronic rhythm, we hear something resembling

heartbeats arising from another dimension and that could be those of the Drexciyans.¹³ The crossed diasporic stories, consequences of the deportation produced by slavery, insert themselves with this sonic and metaphorical production into a poetic and magical form of science fiction. The *Alter-Destiny* of Sun Ra (1914–2013), the founding father of an emancipated Afrofuturist jazz linking African and American genealogies, can also be called upon when it is a question of listening, between the audible notes, to those which, in their silence, appear as absences filled by floating memories.

Kodwo Eshun founded with Anjalika Sagar (born 1968) the Otolith Group in London in 2002.¹⁴ As critics and artists, they work precisely on the darkness of the slave trade and on what they call “the ghosts of the Atlantic” by conducting extensive research on the sources they choose to explore. In 2010, they made the film *Hydra Decapita*, which is the result of their investigation into this universe described by Drexciya. In *Hydra Decapita*, the sea is, hypnotically, the ultimate place of contemplation. The film, which claims a conceptual posture, is built from the narrative of a fictional author who receives the remains of Drexciya transmissions from an aquatic surface whose signals are lost. For Otolith Group, the links between Drexciya’s origin and Turner’s painting are clear – the reminiscences of the voices of *Zong* survivors have spanned centuries, carried by maritime waves. These reminiscences are also philosophical if we look at the myth of Atlantis first formulated by Plato in *Timaeus* when he evokes in one of his last Socratic dialogues the existence of a civilization carried by the figure of Atlas, who, fighting the Athenians and awakening the wrath of the gods, was swallowed by the Atlantic Ocean. Slipping between the stories, this black Atlantis is that of the *Middle Passage* resurrected by Drexciya.

With her previously mentioned series *Water Ecstatic* (2004) through to *Dr. Blowfin’s Black Storm* or *Stabilizing Spheres* (2014), titles she takes directly from the Drexciya track, Ellen Gallagher explores the possibilities of reviving the memory of slavery by probing the deep ocean.¹⁵ The sea and its multiple layers of narratives are at the heart of her work and the pictorial ramifications are committed to analysing the material-

ity of water. There is a clear desire to question both the trauma and the dematerialization of memory through figurations whose liquid character is also an aesthetic and critical vector when it comes to making a history painting. The story of these women and men who were captured and enslaved, the story of the bodies that were hindered and whose emancipation depends on their dissolution in the abyss. “I am thinking about the spatial relationships between bodies. The content in the work is not sequential but spatial. So often black bodies have been materially and physically constricted and I think that I am less interested in locating ‘being’ inside the body – in order to make the point that being doesn’t *only* exist inside the body. Like most Americans I am obsessed with captivity, but this is not a slave narrative. It’s *after* the explosion. The fracture has already happened.”¹⁶

By choosing to represent death during the murderous journey, the artist creates forms that resist, vanish but also flourish in allegories transfiguring the violence of trafficking. Drexciya’s pieces, which are revisited by Ellen Gallagher, are a means of *pictorially* expressing the oral hallucinations of the Middle Passage. “Hearing the images and seeing the sounds”, said Pelechian. The sea as a surface where deaf sounds and buried tears forever collide is also one of Gallagher’s guidelines. In an essay on her work, Philip Hoare recalls:

“The sea is a mortal, eternal place; always the same, always changing. A vast volume, or a mere exchange of gases. Penetrable, permeable, but rejecting, resisting, defying human nominal dominion. For its inhabitants, water is the tangible means of connection, conducting sound rather than light. Our vaunted, human sense is useless in those sunless depths.”¹⁷

From these few artistic forms, the possibility of simultaneously reading what the history of slavery has been able to produce as spatial and temporal disjunctions is affirmed. A memory of absence, a fusion of bodies with the elements of earth, water and air, a concrete reference to the cosmogony, a radiance of words, sounds and images, are at the heart of these poets’

and artists' research. Their work is a compass to connect consciousness to a tangible reality. That of the history that remains to be written. Just as Derek Walcott recalls in his wonderful poem "The Sea Is History":

"the plangent harps of the Babylonian bondage,
as the white cowries clustered like manacles
on the drowned women,
and those were the ivory bracelets
of the Song of Solomon,
but the ocean kept turning blank pages
looking for History.
Then came the men with eyes heavy as anchors
who sank without tombs,
[...]
and in the salt chuckle of rocks
with their sea pools, there was the sound
like a rumour without any echo
of History, really beginning."¹⁸

Endnotes

1. Excerpt from a poem by Assata Shakur in her book *Assata: an Autobiography* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1987), p. 147.
2. See Marcus Rediker, *Aboard the Slave, An Atlantic History of the Trade* (Paris: Seuil, 2013).
3. A research project in underwater archaeology has been initiated by several teams in South Africa and the United States. "While testimonies from those named and unnamed provide crucial historical evidence, there is a vast silence in the record overall, and the picture will remain forever incomplete without delving more deeply into other sources of evidence beyond the archive. In many ways, maritime archeology is one of those last untapped resources that will enhance our understanding of slavery. A world-wide initiative begun in 2008 is helping to fill this silence. The Slave Wrecks Project is an international network of collaborators whose mission is to help uncover these submerged stories, to begin to build and share knowledge about a part of history that has been considered unknowable, and to find ways for individuals and communities to come to terms with these difficult histories. Along with the National Museum of African American History and Culture, as the Project's host, core project partners such as Iziko Museums of South Africa, The George Washington University, the U.S. National Park Service, Diving With A Purpose, the African Centre for Heritage Activities and others bring together complementary strengths and capacities to mount international efforts with communities, in archives, within museums, on coastlines, and in the water." Paul Gardullo, "Meditation" in Jaco Jacques Boshoff, Lonnie G. Bunch III, Paul Gardullo and Stephen C. Lubkemann (eds.), *From No Return, The 221-Year Journey of the Slave Ship São José, 1794* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian, National Museum of African American History and Culture, 2016), p. 10.
4. Patrick Chamoiseau, *La matière de l'absence* (Paris: Seuil, 2016), p. 146.
5. Shakur, *Autobiography*, p. 155.
6. Michelle Cliff, *Free Enterprise: A Novel of Mary Ellen Pleasant* (San Francisco: City Lights, 2004, first published in 1993), p. 60.
7. A conversation between Artavazd Pelechian and Jean-Luc Godard, "Un langage d'avant Babel", *Le Monde* (2 April 1992).
8. Okwui Enwezor, "Mappa Mundi: Frank Bowling's Cognitive Abstraction", in Frank Bowling, *Mappa Mundi*, exh. cat. (Munich: Prestel, Haus der Kunst, 2017), p. 38.
9. Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic, Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), p. 13–14, particularly for the reference to Turner's painting.
10. Cliff, *Free Enterprise*, p. 72.
11. Derek Walcott, "The Sea Is History" (1979), in *Collected Poems: 1948-1984* (New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 1986), p. 365.
12. Kodwo Eshun, *More Brilliant than the Sun: Adventures in Sonic Fiction* (London: Quartet Books Limited, 1998), p. 83.
13. For an interesting analysis of Drexciya, see the article by Nettrice R. Gaskins, "Deep Sea Dwellers, Drexciya and the Sonic Third Space" in *Shima 10*, no. 2 (2016), p. 68–80.
14. The Otolith Group, "Information" <http://otolithgroup.org/index.php?m=information> (Accessed 1 November 2019).
15. To listen to the song by Drexciya, "Dr Blowfins' Black Storm Stabilizing Spheres", <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6Gso9eEEr-o8>. (Accessed 1 November 2019).
16. Jessica Morgan, *Ellen Gallagher*, exh. cat. (Boston: Institute of Contemporary Arts, 2001), p. 26.
17. Philip Hoare, "I'll Dream Fast Asleep", in *Ellen Gallagher: Accidental Records* (Los Angeles: Hauser & Wirth Publishers, 2017), p. 88.
18. Walcott, "The Sea Is History", p. 365. To be listened to as a sound conclusion: Drexciya, "Aqua Worm Hole", 1993, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PMbK631xevU>. (Accessed 1 November 2019).

Translated from French by Marc Feustel.

Abstract

The Middle Passage, the transatlantic slave trade, gives rise to a number of reflections on how African slavery between the fifteenth and nineteenth centuries was the beginning of a turning point in history. The one-way journey of 15 million captive people made the Atlantic Ocean a cemetery and the Americas a place where, based on this diasporic experience, an imaginary world needed to be reborn to counter the trauma. Artists and writers have reclaimed the memory of this long-lasting event in order to create an artistic and literary universe that would tell this story by confronting it with a political and aesthetic position. The artists featured in this article have chosen to look to those who perished during the crossing. By borrowing from African beliefs and bringing them back to contemporary forms of creation, they propose a visual and sonic history in which the sea becomes the place of history, the place where images are heard and sounds are seen.

Author

Elvan Zabunyan, a contemporary art historian and art critic based in Paris, is a professor at Université Rennes 2. Her current project on contemporary artistic production and the memory of slavery aims to investigate the routes for a global art history. For twenty-five years, she has contributed to national and international publications and is the author of numerous articles in periodicals and essays in books and exhibition cata-

logues. Her book *Black is a Color: A History of African American Art* (Dis Voir, 2004), published in French and in English, won the AFEA/SAES (Society of English Linguistic Specialists in Higher Education/French Association of American Studies) 2005 research prize.

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