

## Ocean and Beyond: A Benthic Imagination of the Black Historiography in August Wilson's *Gem of the Ocean* and Henry Dumas's "Ark of Bones"

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### Abstract

*Ocean can be read as a mnemonic text, from anthropological, historiographical, sociological, and literary perspectives, despite ocean being constructed, in our popular imagination, as a void – a 'non-place' in Mark Auge's term. Ocean, in general, symbolizes chaos. The present study seeks to identify the symbolic and material connotation of ocean water, recognizing how ocean becomes an integral part of African-American diasporic identity, cultural, and historiographic legacy, predicated on a mnemonic context, as represented in August Wilson's play *Gem of the Ocean* and Henry Dumas's short-story "Ark of Bones," bringing out a literary-historical dimension of ocean water, closely linked with identity-formation.*

**Keywords:** *Imagination, Sociological, Diasporic, African-American, Identity.*

### Introduction

It would not be wrong to claim that ocean can be read as a historiographic material, or as a mnemonic text. Human beings, unlike other animals on the earth, have an age-old relationship with ocean. Even, the very foetal existence is of an amphibian characteristic, floating on the amniotic ocean. On materialistic plain, the importance of ocean has been felt on and from the 15th century, when European explorers started venturing into the unknown lands. For example, Italian explorer, Christopher Columbus's 1492 discovery of the new world, America, made a mark in the world history, and almost the same can be said to be true of the Portuguese explorer, Vasco da Gama's first landing on Calicut, India, in 1498. There is no doubt that these sea voyages, which was apparently predicated on a holistic quest motif – the perennial human desire to explore the unknown – had obvious intention of colonial economy, if looked deeply, the material consequence of which has remained unpardonable. However, one cannot deny that these sea-voyages have forged cultural liaisons. Therefore, seas, which, on the surface structure, seem to separate lands, on the deep structure, are responsible for establishing connections, between cultures and nation-states. Even, Man's relationship with ocean dates back to the ancient age, when oceans provided the only means of avenue, in the absence of routes on the flat surface of the earth and on the sky. The prehistoric men used canoes for travel and fishing. Nonetheless, throughout history, ocean has been constructed, in our popular imagination, as a void – following Mark Auge's term, it can be deemed to be a 'non-place.' In his book, *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, French anthropologist, Mark Auge, who is credited with coining the term, 'non-place,' writes,

If a place can be defined as relational, historical, and concerned with identity, then a space which cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity will be a non-place (...) supermodernity produces non-places, meaning spaces which are not themselves anthropological places and which, unlike Baudelaire's modernity, do not integrate the earlier places: instead these are listed, classified, promoted to the status of 'places of memory', and assigned to a circumscribed and specific position." (77-78)

In both material and spiritual terms, seas and oceans are seen as connecting and linking spaces, but, in popular and literary imagination, they represent and symbolize chaos and threats, and for this reason, ocean has been shoved to the margin. In literature, specifically, in English literature, we have various representations of this fluid landscape, which occupies seventy percent of the earth's surface. In the old

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English literature, for example, in the poem “The Seafarer,” the narrator, all alone in his solo sea voyage, narrativizes his experience in the sea, and, in this case, the sea represents desolation, hardships, and the uncertainties of life, and the constant flux, set in sharp contrast to the fixity and certainty of land, but, yet, the call of the sea is wild and irresistible, and the hardships, represented by the sea, need to be overcome, in order to reach celestial completion of life. Who can forget those brilliant plays by Shakespeare, where the sea, or the ocean, for that matter, performs a very crucial role, the role of an important catalyst, of the role of a destroyer and/ or preserver. In several of Shakespeare’s plays, such as, *The Tempest*, *Twelfth Night*, *The Comedy of Errors*, the sea plays a crucial role in sealing the fate of the characters, writing their doom and also blissful reunion, paradoxically at the same time. In *Antony and Cleopatra*, for example, Shakespeare has made a brilliant use of the sea by symbolically intertwining it with the central theme of the play – the sea, here, symbolizes the fluidity of character and the emotional excess, which is set in contrast to the Roman rigidity, symbolized by the land. However, Shakespeare has, here, played with this binary of land and sea, and has transcended it wonderfully at the end. The twain have not been able to meet in this world, but they shall certainly meet again in heaven, when they dissolve into each other, and the split gives way to a reunion, implemented by the death of Antony and Cleopatra, who embody this reunion in their afterlife – a paradise regained. Later, in the 18th century, the travel narratives had mainly focused on the sea voyages. Of the many examples, *Robinson Crusoe* and *Gulliver’s Travels* are notable, which are instigated by a hidden colonial motive, which surreptitiously predominate these texts. Seas have, therefore, social, cultural, economic, historiographic, anthropological, and, in fact, literary, philosophical, and spiritual significance as well, which demands critical study. It has been a recent trend, in the scholarly field, to think about the ocean critically, from these various perspectives of scholarly studies, although, in the field of science, it is not that old. In science, the marine ecology is an important aspect of investigation, besides studying the material properties of the marine water, but there is an alternative aspect as well and an alternative discourse to this marine life.

However, if we delve deep into black history, we find that the world’s largest holocaust, which is alternatively known as *The Middle Passage* – because it refers to the middle leg of the triangular journey for slave-trading – was carried out in the great Atlantic Ocean. In the Jewish Holocaust, approximately six million people had ruefully perished, and this number becomes its ten times more, when we are reminded of Toni Morrison’s dedication in her eponymous novel, *Beloved* – ‘sixty million and more’ – a novel which brilliantly depicts the horror of slavery and the after-life. This present study, therefore, seeks to identify the symbolic as well as the material connotation of the ocean water, and to recognize how the ocean water becomes an integral part of black American diasporic identity and of black cultural and historiographic legacy, predicated on a mnemonic context, as represented in August Wilson’s *Gem of the Ocean* and Henry Dumas’s “*Ark of Bones*,” and it aims to bring out a literary-historical dimension of ocean water, which is related to identity-formation, and it would hope to make a significant contribution to *Oceanic Studies*. This study concentrates its focus in particularly bringing out the historiographical and spiritual aspect of ocean water, specifically, of the Atlantic Ocean, because the Atlantic, here, serves as a catalyst. The Atlantic Ocean, other than the war-fronts of the two World Wars, has been a witness to the exhibition of the rampant inhumanity of the Western World, throughout history, who claimed themselves, quite paradoxically, to be the most enlightened ones. The ocean played a significant role in the world’s worst kind of inhuman trading, the slave-trading, which was carried out all through this Atlantic Ocean, or, alternatively, it is the site of the holocaust, quite like *Auschwitz* in Germany, as mentioned above. On one hand, it refers to the most painful catastrophe, and, again, on the other hand, this same ocean pertains to the ancestral place of the African Americans, and it has become an essential part of their subjectivity. Their tragic story has been written on the surface of the ocean water, but, on the bed of it, lies their ancestral graveyard, the legacy of which they have to carry to their present and future. The present study, therefore, seeks to bring out this historiographical and spiritual aspect, and shows how the water of Atlantic can be read as a mnemonic text, or the memoir of a community.

## Theoretical Background and Methodology

In terms of its theoretical aspect is concerned, it brings out the relevance of memory in the contemporary context, and, specifically, in this case, it shows how the ocean becomes a reservoir of collective memory,

or rather, the site of the collective, cultural memory of a community. In the first part of the paper, it shows how the dimension of memory has changed – in its recent intervention, memory is no longer a fragment of a moment, or a mark on the body of time, as retained in our psyche, but, rather, it has an intrinsic connection with space – it is not only a part of our psychic geography, but it is quite a part and parcel of the physical geography as well. In the second part, it will weave black literature, spatial memory, and the ocean in a single framework. The limitation in the scope of the paper will not enable me to undertake a wide survey of the black literature, but it will certainly refer to the tip of the iceberg, again an oceanic metaphor.

The ocean itself is a living history. It is a *lieux de memoir*, as Pierre Nora says in his monumental multivolume work, *Les Lieux de Memoire*, originally written in French in seven volumes and published in 1992, and, later on, an English translation was made by Arthur Goldhammer, titled as, *Realms of Memory: The Construction of the French Past*, and published in three volumes from Columbia University Press in 1996. This book is a ground-breaking work in the field of memory studies, particularly in the spatial understanding of memory. In this book, Nora says, “*lieux de memoir* [are sites] in which a residual sense of continuity remains. *Lieux de memoir* exists because there are no longer any *milieux de memoir*, settings in which memory is a real part of everyday experience” (1). According to him, it is not only enough to look at objects, or places for a historical reality, but to look beyond the historical reality to discover the symbolic reality and to recover the memory that it sustained (XVII). However, for the African Americans, the Atlantic Ocean is a traumatic site, and, at the same time, it is an ancestral place, a reservoir of tradition and cultural memory, because it is where the bones of their ancestors lie engraved. It might seem to be a little weird approach to locate memory in a place, but it is of great significance, when we follow what Patrizia Violi writes in her book, *Landscapes of Memory: Trauma, Space, History*, that “While memory appears at first sight as a phenomenon that concerns temporality above all, if we take a closer look, it reveals a constitutive and non-random relation with spatiality” (73). She further writes that “spaces not only have a memory of the past embedded within them, but memory reveals itself in essentially topological and spatial forms” (73), and space and memory are interconnected in accordance with a twofold reciprocal implication – space keeps track of the past, and allows a re-reading of the past (73). Human edifices, such as, monuments, shrines, museums, graveyards, memorials, trauma sites, and the like, created in different cultures, across the world, make a figurative representation of the memory/history, and contribute to the formation of culture. Pierre’s Nora’s *Realms of Memory* exemplifies the study of this kind – he shows, in this book, how French culture is shaped by the representation of the memory/history, embodied through such memorial spaces – a *lieux de memoir* in the absence of a real *milieux de memoir*. Paul Ricoeur, in his book, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, writes that “corporeal and environmental spatiality [is] inherent to the evocation of a memory” (148). He brings in a phenomenological dimension to it, saying “The first milestone along the way of the spatiality that geography sets in parallel with the temporality of history is the one suggested by a phenomenology of “place” or site” (149). Bringing an analogy of a city, associated with the concept of the lived space, or an inhabited space, he writes how urbanism shows the work of time in space – a city brings together, in the same space, different ages, and offers to our gaze a sedimented history of tastes and cultural forms (151). In her book, *Remembering Places: A Phenomenological Study of the Relationship between Memory and Place*, Janet Donohoe establishes the connection between place and memory, predicated on a phenomenological understanding, and she writes,

We usually think of memory in terms of time. We think of it as consumed with the past. Memory is the revitalization of some moment or moments of the past, collecting those moments into the present again. But in so closely associating memory with the past and temporality, we frequently overlook the equally fundamental connection between memory and place. It is not a far stretch to understand that memory is always impaled (...) Experience is impaled; memory likewise is impaled. As embodied beings, we do not have the advantage of a view from nowhere or a view from anywhere or everywhere (23).

This discussion can be elaborated further, when the reference is made to Edmund Husserl’s book, *Crisis of the European Sciences*, where Husserl, in a very substantive way, establishes the phenomenological understanding of the relationship between place and memory. In *Crisis of the European Sciences*, he makes a distinction between space and place. Space, according to Husserl, is the mathematization of the lifeworld,

and by lifeworld, he means the lived world, the world which is experienced by a subject, and, moreover, this experienced world is habitually oriented to the subject – the lifeworld, therefore, refers to the familiar world of the subject, in contrast to an unfamiliar world, or an *unheimlich*. The mathematization of the lifeworld, therefore, simplistically speaking, refers to the subjective orientation of a specific place – our body, thus, carries the memory of our lived world. Place, on the other hand, according to Husserl, is the objective physical sensations, or sense-perceptions of a particular site, to which a subject's body is oriented. In a word, place is objective, whereas space is quite subjective. Space, according to Husserl, is the expansion of the sphere of places, which is constituted around the body, and it is the ground from which space is constituted. Therefore, the relation between our biological body and place is twofold and reciprocal – our body is not simply contained by the place we inhabit, but it constitutes a space, at the time of inhabiting it. Janet Donohoe writes, in her book, *Remembering Places*, which is mentioned above, that the importance of place to memory is not simply that memory is impaled – it means that it is not just the fact that place provides a backdrop to the action of our lives, or that places are simply settings for our experiences, but that places are embodied in such a way that we carry them with us, and they inform our constitution of the world. Places, therefore, inform and are informed by a kind of body memory, which can be reawakened, when these places are revisited, or the subject returns to such places. This return, or revisitation is not just a literal return, but it is a metaphorical and a symbolic return as well. Body memory and / or place memory, therefore, are not about the nostalgic return to the past temporal dimension, but they are about the very present and the future, and thus they create a rather temporal disjunction, quite paradoxically. It is, again in Husserl's word, the absolute here of my experience of the world. The concept of body carrying the memory of the space, it inhabits, has a deeper significance, because if a place is modified, transformed, or appropriated by an act of human intervention (by human intervention, I mean the intervention by the state, or by any dominant group), which is external to it, this leads to the erasure of the memory of that space as well, making the body, inhabiting it, both spiritually and culturally vulnerable, because place and body are intrinsically connected to each other by the umbilical cord of memory. The erasure and appropriation of forests, swamplands, and other such natural habitats, in different parts of the world, for industrial production and growth, is, therefore, a threat to the inhabitants of such landscapes, or to those communities – a threat of cultural and spiritual extinction. The ecocritical movements, worldwide, and the entire study of ecocriticism clarify and validate this aspect.

Drawing reference to these aspects, the aim of this paper would be to find a kind of Borromean knot between human body and water body in general, and, to be specific, of black body/African American cultural body and water body, or, rather, bodies, of which the ocean would be a synecdoche. Human body and water body is likened, apparently in terms of the flow – the flow of water and the flow of blood within human body, which goes by the universal law. As water, or water courses connect different parts of the landscapes, similarly, blood functions as the connecting agent, connecting every nook and corner inside the human body. In fact, seventy percent of the total mass of the human body is comprised of water. Peter Swanson, in his book, *Water: The Drop of Life*, writes

One could say that each of us – every man, woman, and child – is a small river (...) a 1-percent deficiency of water in our body makes us thirsty, 5 percent causes a slight fever; at 10 percent we become immobile. A 12-percent loss of water; and we die. There is no option, no alternative, no substitute. From the elderly to the young, rivers within each of us need a continuous supply of clean, fresh water. (qtd in Wardi 4)

Indeed, water acts as a life-force inside the human body, and not only that, water has memory, and, it is not just metaphorically, or symbolically speaking, that water has memory, but it is confirmed by the recent scientific investigations. William E. Marks, in his book, *The Holy Order of Water: Healing Earth's Waters and Ourselves*, writes that the marine scientists, now, have the ability to identify the genetic markers and other features on the body of the fishes to provide information about the stream where any salmon is born – it can be ascertained by the examination of the fishes' scales, because the water has the unique characteristics that it carries an imprint of the place (Wardi 5). The same thing goes for blood as well, as Marks further writes that many life forms which occupy our planet, at any given time, carry within their blood a chemical imprint of the place where they were born and the environment in which they have an intercourse with (Wardi 5). In fact, according to Marks, scientists have discovered that the eleven elements which a sea-water

contains exactly the top eleven elements that make up the human body (Wardi 7). Even, human tears have the same properties, as the ocean water has. Tom Lutz, in his book, *Crying: The Natural and Cultural History of Tears*, writes, quite interestingly, that the hormone, called prolactin, which stimulates the production of breast milk in the females, is the same hormone, which is responsible for the production of human tears (92). Thus, it is seen that the water creates an interconnected network inside the human body, as the water-courses, governed the universal law of circulation, create the same on the earth. Both water and human body, therefore, remember and affect each other. If different water-bodies on the earth, like rivers, oceans, and lakes, and as such, are read from an ecocritical perspective, it becomes evident that how water keeps a record of the nefarious human activities on the earth, quite like a historical parchment. Similarly, the Atlantic carries the history of the World's worst capitalistic venture, which is the slave-trading, and which is resulting from the moral, ethical, and sinful degradation, brought by the corrupting influence of capitalism, and, as a result, it leads to a traumatic upheaval for an entire community, from which they are seeking redemption.

## Discussion

If we enter into the fictional world of Henry Dumas's *Ark of Bones*, which is the title of one of his collection of stories, in which "Ark of Bone," is also the name of a short-story, we see how, through an allegorical and biblical framework, Dumas, in the titular short-story, presents the Mississippi river as a synecdoche of the great Atlantic ocean as a vast reservoir of the cultural and spiritual memory – the ocean, by dint of a symbolic connotation, not just remains a material space of memory, but becomes a conduit to the African American spiritual world. The story is simple, but it has the depth of its own. In this story, there are only two main characters – Fish-hound and Headeye, who are friends to each other – and the story is told in the first person, from the point of view of Fish-hound. Fish-hound and Headeye, both are black boys. Fish-hound, as the name suggests, is an apt fisherman, and Headeye, on the other hand, is a river rat, who knows the river, Mississippi, well. Headeye is so called, because, from the side view, his eyes look larger than his forehead, which signifies his prophetic power, which is enhanced by his possession of a mojo bone. Although Fish-hound, at first, belittles his possession of the mojo bone by relegating it to voodooism, "What kind of voodoo you work with that mojo?" (11). But, in response to that, Headeye says, "This is a keybone to the culud man (11), signifying, thereby, that this bone is not just related to petty magical power, but this has a far deeper significance – it is, rather, related to the mystic element of the black ancestry. In identifying himself with the biblical prophet, Ezekiel, (it has been mentioned earlier that the story is predicated on a biblical framework), who, under God's ordain, visited, in spirit, the 'valley of dry bones,' and bound them together, which is a symbolic act of spiritual unification with the ancestry. This is, apparently, a mnemonic act, but it is not just going back to the past, but, rather, it is an act of reliving the spiritual past. Headeye makes the prophesy that he "shall come and put flesh upon them from generations and from generation," and that God told him, addressing him as the 'Son of man,' "Son of man, these bones are the whole house of thy brothers, scattered to the islands. Behold I shall bind up the bones and you shall prophesy the name" (11). It is to be mentioned that the phrase, 'the whole house of thy brothers, scattered to the islands,' evidently refers to all the African Americans, or the diasporic African subjects, to whom the bones represent the 'whole [treasure] house,' the house of spiritual and cultural ancestry. However, Fish-hound, at first, had not grasped all these things. With a simple intention of fishing, he went to the river bank, followed by Headeye, but Headeye, in no way, had the intention of fishing. Rather, he was there for something else, to portend, in the very positive and mystic sense, the most unexpected thing to happen shortly. Spatially, they approximated themselves to the old part of the riverbank, which is known as the Deadman's Landing, because, once, an unidentified dead man was found there, after whom the place is known so. The dead man's body was "so rotted and ate up by fish and crawdads that they couldn't tell whether he was white or black. Just a dead man" (12), which indicates a collapse of the binary, both of black and white as well as of past and present. Shortly after this, Headeye, putting his hands up to his eyes, looked far out over the water, a distance which would take a couple of hours by boat to cross, and which Fish-hound could barely make out, as if he was envisioning something – indeed, he envisioned the approaching of the great Ark, "The Ark is comin" (13). As the dusk falls and the atmosphere becomes gloomy, Headeye, taking a water-immersion, - "he one waded out about shoulder deep ..." (15) with Fish-hound at his side, "I know I was side by side with Headeye" (15), and the "Two men, about as black

as anybodyblack wants to be” (15), being drenched in the rain water, “The rain had reached us” (15), astoundingly welcomed the most astonishing thing, they have ever seen, by steadily rowing down to it with the help of a small boat (...) it was just movin and standing still at the same time. The damnest thing I ever seed. It just about a damn boat, the biggest boat in the world. I looked up and what I look for clouds was sails. The wind was whipping up a sermon on them” (15). The water-immersion is significant here, which is going to be unveiled shortly. After a while, when they got close to that great Ark, they met an old man, “dressed in skins” with his hair “grey and very woolly” (16), walking towards them, and, gradually afterwards, they were “goin down steps into the belly of that Ark, where they saw,

Bones. I saw bones. They were stacked all the way to the top of the ship. I looked around. The underside of the whole ark was nothing but a great bone house. I looked and saw crews of black men handling in them bones. There was a crew of two or three under every cabin around that ark. Why, there must have been a million cabins. They were doingitvery carefully, like they were holding onto babies or something precious. Standing like a captain was the old man we had seen top deck. He was holdin a long piece of leather up to a fire that was burning near the edge of an opening which showed outward to the water (...) All along the side of the ark them great black men were haulin up bones from the river. It was the craziest thing I ever saw. I knowed then it wasn’t no animal bones. I took a look at them and they was all laid out in different ways, all making some kind of body and there was big bones and little bones, parts of bones, chips, tid-bits, skulls, fingers and everything. (18-20)

The old man was reading up something, which seemed to be a foreign talk to Fish-hound, from a scroll, and, after he finished reading it, he “starts to walk in a crooked path through the bones laid out on the floor (...) walkin frontwards, backwards, sideways and every which a way (...) bein careful not to step on them bones” (19), and, the, addressing towards Headeye, he said, “Son, you are in the house of generations. Every African who lives in America has a part of his soul in this ark. God has called you, and I shall anoint you” (20). Indeed, keeping Fish-hound as an witness, he anoints him by holding the scroll over his head and by making him chant the following words, “Aba, I consecrate my bones./Take my soul up and plant it again./Your will shall be my hand./When I strike you strike./My eyes see only thee./I shall set my brothers free./Aba, this bone is thy seal” (20).In order to have both visionary and tactile experience of the ark of bones, which is a spiritual epiphany to Headeye and Fish-hound, they needed to undergo the water-immersion first, which signifies a symbolic immersion into the spiritual past, and the Mississippi symbolically turns out to be the Atlantic, and the ark of bones becomes a symbolic representation of the slavers that carried the Africans from their homeland to the new world and changed their life forever.

August Wilson’s *Gem of the Ocean* is a two-act play, which is set in the twentieth century. It is the first instalment of Wilson’s ten play chronicle, which is known as *The Pittsburg Cycle*. The spatial setting of the play is 1839 Wiley Avenue, which is in Pittsburg’s Hill district. There is a fantasy element in this play, particularly in the representation of aunt Ester (Ester Tyler), who isa 285-year-oldmatriarch, and who is a former slave, and, as the oldest matriarch of the community,she is a spiritual faith-healer and the spiritual advisor for the community.The plot of the play is centred round Citizen Barlow’s, a young man and a character, who is in his late twenties, and who is in a spiritual turmoil, coming in close contact with aunt Ester, who leads him on a spiritual journey across the ocean to the City of Bones. At this stage, the two texts, Dumas’s “*Ark of Bones*”andWilson’s *Gem of the Ocean*, quite like the two rivers, enter into a confluenceat the estuary.The play seems to resemble the same surrealistic atmosphere that Fish-hound and Headeyeencountered, as they saw the approaching of the ark of bones. Here, aunt Ester tells Solly Two Kings, who is a suitor to aunt Ester and a former Underground railroad conductor, “I dreamed you had a ship full of men and you was coming across the water. Had that stick and you was standing up in this boat full of men. You come and asked me what I was doing standing there. I told you I wanted to go back across the ocean.”However, in courseof the play, it is seen, as mentioned earlier, that Citizen Barlow is going on a spiritual quest, and aunt Ester is helping him to that. There are lots of water-imageries, scattered across the text, one important among which is the elaborate bathing process that Citizen has to undergo, before making his spiritual journey. Aunt Ester tells him,

Listen to what I tell you. We gonna go to the City of Bones tonight but first you got to get ready. I want you to go and take a bath. Get scrubbed real good” (54). Aunt Ester also describes the City of Bones in the

following way, “Hey Citizen Barlow. So you going to the City of Bones. I been to the City of Bones. It’s something like you ain’t never seen. A whole city a half mile by a half mile made of bones. All kind of bones. Leg bones. Arm bones. Head bones. It’s a beautiful city. That’s where I’m going when I die (...) That’s what I always wanted to be. A keeper of the Gate!(56)

The journey is entirely a symbolic process, and, at the end of the journey, Citizen discovers the City of Bones, “There it is! It’s made of Bones! All the buildings and everything. Head bones and leg bones and rib bones. The streets look like silver. The trees are made of bones. The trees and everything made of bone” (68). Finally, Citizen Barlow comes to resolve his crisis by revealing the truth that it is he who had stolen the bucket of nails as a protest against the deprivation of the labourers of their due wages at the local mill, instead of Garret Brown, who was suspected of doing so, and, therefore, he had drowned himself by jumping into the river, thus committing suicide as a sign of refusing to submit to legal penalty for a false allegation. However, the suicide is not a mere act of suicide in the conventional sense. It evokes an entire history and belief of a community, and, therein, lies its significance as a cultural memory of a community. This suicidal gesture is a signifier here, for if Garret Brown had to commit suicide only, he could have committed it by various other means, which were open to him. So, the question is why he had to immerse himself into the river water, instead of doing anything else. The answer to this question leads us to an entire gamut of historical, mythical, and symbolic significance, to which this particular gesture refers. In a word, it was not just an act of suicide, but, instead, it was an act of historical immersion, and, at the same time, an immersion into the cultural history of the community. During the Middle Passage, suicide, by jumping overboard, was a popular mode of resistance for the captivated slaves, but it was not with the belief to end their life, but to harness a reverse Middle Passage, understood in spiritual terms. Rediker, in his *Outlaws of Atlantic*, clarifies this aspect, drawing on archival research. He writes,

The experience of death and the impulse to all forms of resistance were linked to a broadly held West African spiritual belief. From the beginning of the eighteenth-century to the time of abolition most captives seem to have believed that in death they returned to their native land (...) It persisted long after the Middle Passage (...) “Their opinion is that when they dye, they go to their own country(...) the Ibau “must return to their own country, and remain forever free of care or pain” (...) “It is an opinion, which the Africans universally entertain, that, as soon as death shall release them from the hands of their oppressors, they shall immediately be wafted back to their native plains, there to exist again, to enjoy the sight of their beloved countrymen, and to spend the while of their new existence in scenes of tranquility and delight . . . (140)

The myth of the Ibo-landing refers to the same incident. It was believed that after the slavers (the ships, which used to carry human cargo) reached the American shore, the captives jumped overboard, and they used to walk on the water, which they could, back to their own country to get reunited with their friends, families, and relatives left there, and, moreover, to get reunited with their motherland, the country to which they belonged. On realistic ground, these places of Ibo-landing were the sites of black mass-suicide, but, as mentioned, they were not seen as sites of suicide (because the hermeneutic of suicide was completely a Western perspective), but, rather, it was associated with the myth of flight. It was an act of choice, of making a wilful self-assertion over one’s own existence and of making a journey towards freedom, rather than a wilful allegiance to the system of slavery, and it is exactly what Agamben philosophically contemplates over the politicization of life, a matter of great debate and concern in this twenty-first century. Drawing on the conception of Karl Binding, a highly respected German specialist of penal law, which he explicates in his book, *Authorization for the Annihilation of Life Unworthy of being Loved*, Agamben writes in his *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (1998),

The book warrants our attention for two reasons. The first is that in order to explain the unpunishability of suicide, Binding is led to conceive of suicide as the expression of man’s sovereignty over his own existence. Since suicide, he argues, cannot be understood as a crime (for example, as a violation of a duty toward oneself) yet also cannot be considered as a matter of indifference to the law (...) Like the sovereign decision on the state of exception, the sovereignty of the living being over himself takes the form of a threshold of indiscernibility between exteriority and interiority, which the juridical order can therefore neither exclude nor include, neither forbid nor permit. (67)

Although Agamben's conception is in the context of euthanasia and the ethics of medical profession, it can be applicable to any state of exception, as he himself refers to the incidents of Jewish holocaust and the concentration camp, resembling, to a great extent, the incident of slavery and black holocaust, popularly known as Middle Passage. However, here, this tension is carried to the end of the play. Caesar Wilks, who is Black Mary's brother and a local constable, the law enforcement agent, is on a manhunt to find the real culprit, the one who had stolen the bucket of nails, but, finally, the truth is perceived, not through the repressive mechanism of law, but through the spiritual healing.

## Conclusion

In her essay, "The Site of Memory," Toni Morrison writes something very significant and thoughtful about the African American writers of fiction, and it is so relevant to our discussion. She writes,

... no matter how "fictional" the account of these writers, or how much it was a product of invention, the act of imagination is bound up with memory. You know, they straightened out the Mississippi River in places, to make room for houses and livable acreage. Occasionally the river floods these places. "Floods" is the word they use, but in fact it is not flooding; it is remembering. Remembering where it used to be. All water has a perfect memory and is forever trying to get back to where it was. Writers are like that: remembering where we were, what valley we ran through, what the banks were like, the light that was there and the route back to our original place. It is emotional memory – what the nerves and the skin remember as well as how it appeared. And a rush of imagination is our "flooding." (98 – 99)

It is evident in Morrison's comment, as I have mentioned earlier, is how place and memory are connected to each other, and how they are predicated on an affect. 'Flooding' is a metaphor, here, and the landscapes of the American south is symbolically-charged, and this symbolism is based on a mnemonic context. The present research has taken its roots from this particular aspect – it deals with the fundamental questions whether this issue of cultural memory mapped in the physical topography should be avoided, and, secondly, how to negotiate with the trope of water-imageries that are scattered across black American texts, and what do they signify. Garret Brown's act of plunging himself into the river, in Wilson's play, discussed above, is, therefore, not just to be seen as an act of suicide merely, but this suicide is the most philosophical question in the context of the play. It is to be seen, literally, as an act of resistance against a false allegation, charged against him by the culturally dominant group, and against the capitalistic exploitation – these Garret Browns are the slaves of the today's generation – but, also, it is an act of a metaphorical reverse Middle Passage. In the *Outlaws of Atlantic*, Marcus Rediker writes, "The experience of death and the impulse to all forms of resistance were linked to a broadly held West African spiritual belief. From the beginning of the eighteenth-century to the time of abolition most captives seem to have believed that in death they returned to their native land. This allowed them to meet their fate with a fortitude and indifference truly their own" (140). Therefore, if Garret Brown's suicide by jumping into the river reiterates the slave-resistance, Citizen Barlow's metaphorical journey to the city of bones, which is accompanied by the bathing rituals performed by aunt Esther, who is the living embodiment of the cultural tradition, and who herself represents the past, present, as well as the future, is a symbolic return to the amniotic sea and the eternal desire for it. In Henry Dumas's "Ark of Bones," this symbol is quite obvious. The two texts converge on the line of their symbolic journey to the city of bones, which is an ancestral site, and the Atlantic no longer remains a puerile, fluid space, but it becomes the repository of the black cultural memory, and, moreover, a politicized, liminal space, which, to end with Rediker's thought again in the *Outlaws of the Atlantic*, "... epitomized a deep dialectic of discipline and resistance – on one hand, extreme violence enacted ... against an enslaved individual ... and in response from the enslaved, extreme opposition to that violence and terror, individually and in the end collectively" (123).

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