ESSAYS

"NOTHING HUMAN IS FOREIGN": POLYPHONY AND RECOGNITION IN THE POETRY OF ROBERT HAYDEN

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For most of his career, Robert Hayden did not want to be known as a political poet. Although many of the poems in Hayden's first collection, *Heart Shape in the Dust*, are expressly socialist, Hayden's conversion in the early 1940s to the Bahá'í faith, which emphasizes the artificiality of all human categories and the underlying oneness of all belief systems, altered his approach to politics and his understanding of the relationship between politics and art. In a 1974 interview he summarizes his position on the matter:

> I am trying to, I think, reach the point where I am finally indifferent to designations. I don't care whether I am called a poet or a black poet or whatever because I know in my own heart what I am. I think of myself as being a poet. I am afraid today that *black poet* carries the implication, has the connotation, that the poet is interested in one kind of thing and that he closes his mind upon the world and concentrates on the ethnocentric. (Hayden 2001b, 18)

While he does not reference it explicitly, Hayden's comment hearkens back to the moment in his career for which he has become most famous: his defiant rejection of the term "black poet" at the First Fisk Black Writers' Conference in 1966.[1] Expressed at the

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height of the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s, his opinion made Hayden a minority voice within African American poetics and continues to resonate in discussions of his career and influence. In exploring the techniques through which Hayden sought to move past the limitations imposed by binaries, this essay will contend that current discussions of his work should do the same.

Despite his disinclination to use nation, race, or heritage as an all-encompassing marker of social identity, Hayden did consider himself an American poet, and was "deeply engaged by the topography of American myth" (Hirsch 2001, 80). But his resistance to political ideology meant Hayden remained at the same time an internationalist, suspicious of the prejudices nationalist dogma could produce. As a poet and artist, Hayden did not want to be constrained by his temporal and spatial location within American history. In one interview he uses W. B. Yeats as a poetic exemplar, maintaining that

> I think of myself as an Afro-American poet in the same way that Yeats was an Irish poet. I have no desire to ignore my heritage, to ignore my experiences as an Afro-American. I have no desire to turn away from that any more than Yeats wanted to turn away from being Irish. At the same time, I don't want to be limited to that. (Hayden 2001a, 33)

Writing within a particular historical and socio-cultural framework, Hayden understood, as Yeats did, that the way to broad applicability is through specificity, that the universal can be revealed through the particular. His acceptance of his blackness and Americanness does not contradict his critique of limiting social definitions and his interest in the possibility of overcoming these. As he suggests elsewhere, "I think my range is fairly wide; certainly my sympathies are broad and human. . . . Nothing human is foreign to me" (Hayden 1984, 114).

To date, insufficient attention has been paid to the manner in which Hayden's poems follow the rule he sets for himself to neither ignore nor be limited to his African American heritage. After all, the irony that attends Hayden's iconoclastic rejection of the Black Arts Movement at the First Fisk Black Writers' Conference is that almost all of his best poems deal directly with the question of race in the American context. However, for Hayden, writing within and about African American culture and history is about far more than narrating one version of the black experience. Rather, Hayden's poetry offers a career-spanning engagement with the philosophical

issues surrounding recognition of the other. Hayden's poems stage—and sometimes themselves perform—dramas of recognition in order to probe a series of questions about the human self. On the broadest level, his poems ask us to consider to what extent the subject can exert a shaping power upon the trajectory of history. What balance, in other words, inheres between socio-historical conscription and individual agency? The tableau Hayden uses to broach this topic is that of African American history, within which a similar query urgently resurfaces, one with trenchant philosophical implications: across the social divides that centuries of racial injustice have produced, is recognition still meaningfully possible? And if so, what links subsist between such forms of recognition, the identifications they produce, and the actions that could follow from these? I argue that Hayden's poems often use polyphony in order to provoke recognition. That is, by interweaving different voices through his poems—including the voices of various characters, historical figures, and a governing lyric speaker—Hayden explores the possibility of commonalities between subjects with markedly differing perspectives, backgrounds, and privileges. These commonalities allow for forms of recognition that, while neither resolving systemic injustice nor minimizing the immediate facts of inequality, allow for a basic "humanness" to encounter difference and so open up a space within which paths to reconciliation might begin to be articulated (Hayden 1985, 90). In what follows I examine at some length three Hayden poems that grapple with the history of racial relations in the United States and the diaspora. The poem "Night, Death, Mississippi" juxtaposes its characters with narrative and lyric voices in order to investigate the possibilities of recognition across racial and temporal barriers. In "Runagate Runagate" Hayden's hope for a better future is reflected in the several dialects he foregrounds in the poem, which together affirm the possibility of specific collective actions that register despite or beyond difference. Finally, "Middle Passage" encapsulates a theme prevalent in nearly all Hayden's poems: the historical path to freedom along which victims of oppression persist, and the desire for autonomy, buoyed by moments and acts of recognition, that fuels their persistence.

FORMS OF RECOGNITION: FANON, HEGEL, BAKHTIN

Before turning to Hayden's poems, some theoretical context is required to establish the significance of recognition in Hayden's

work. Scenes of recognition involve an affective connection between two or more individuals wherein the gaze directed from one (or more) subject to another causes the discovery of a quality common to both parties. These moments are of particular interest to Hayden whenever they take place in socio-historical conditions that impede their occurrence. Such conditions are also a central concern of Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*. Fanon notes that the relation between self and other is necessarily predicated on an implicit demand: "I find myself suddenly in the world and I recognize that I have one right alone: That of demanding human behavior from the other" (1967, 229). In some sense, Fanon stipulates, recognition of the other is essential to the basic functioning of any social contract: "freedom requires an effort at disalienation," as he puts it (231). From Fanon's existentialist perspective, our efforts in this regard determine the very nature of humanity: "I cannot disassociate myself from the future that is proposed for my brother. Every one of my acts commits me as a man. Every one of my silences, every one of my cowardices reveals me as a man" (89). For Fanon, this disalienation cannot be achieved in contemporary society; its lack is, in fact, a structuring element of existence for the black individual, for whom any authentic sense of self has disintegrated in the very moment of the demand for recognition: "I burst apart. Now the fragments have been put together again by another self" (109). This (white) "other self" represents the nexus of social power according to which all selves are defined, so that "not only must the black man be black; he must be black in relation to the white man" (110). Thus for Fanon "every ontology is made unattainable in a colonized and civilized society" (109).

In the closing passages of *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon returns to the idea of recognition to theorize a possible solution to this state of affairs: "The only means of breaking this vicious circle that throws me back on myself is to restore to the other, through mediation and recognition, his human reality, which is different from natural reality. The other has to perform the same operation. . . . In order to win the certainty of oneself, the incorporation of the concept of recognition is essential" (1967, 217). However, this restoration through recognition—and the propulsive return to human from natural reality that might follow from it—"can be achieved only through conflict and through the risk that conflict implies" (218). Several of Hayden's poems can be thought of as test cases for the applicability of Fanon's thesis. Hayden's approach is more optimistic than

Fanon's. While his poems are very much about the divide between what Fanon calls "natural" and "human" reality, they intimate that recognition, which can initiate a movement from the former state to the latter, can take effect without conflict, even in socio-historical moments in which it is presumed impossible. In fact, for Hayden, it is not (physical) conflict that must precede recognition. Instead, recognition can precede and bring about (ideological) conflict by provoking the clash of competing worldviews through which social progress may happen.

Before examining how recognition functions in Hayden's poetry, it will be beneficial to turn to another well-known philosophical consideration of the concept—G.W.F. Hegel's description of the dialectic between lordship and bondage.[2] "Self-consciousness," Hegel writes, "exists in itself and for itself, in that, and by the fact that it exists for another self-consciousness; that is to say, it is only by being acknowledged or 'recognized' [*Anerkannt*]" (1967, 231). Such recognition entails a reciprocal relationship between two individuals on the level of consciousness itself, since to know oneself as a distinct self requires, paradoxically, acknowledgment from without: "this other is for itself only when it cancels itself as existing for itself, and has self-existence only in the existence of the other" (231). For Hegel, complete knowledge of selfhood is a function of interdependence, which means that recognition of the other is not only a prerequisite for the development of a society, it is fundamental to the possibility of the very concept of a self. Hegel makes this clear when he notes that recognition—because it reveals to the self not only the other, but *the self as other* in the eyes of the other—is the hinge on which human relationality turns:

> Each is indeed certain of its own self, but not of the other, and hence its own certainty of itself is still without truth. For its truth would merely be that its own individual existence for itself would be shown to it to be an independent object, or, which is the same thing, that the object would be exhibited as this pure certainty of itself. By the notion of recognition [*Anerkennung*], however, this is not possible, except in the form that as the other is for it, so it is for the other; each in its self through its own action and again through the action of the other achieves this pure abstraction of existence for self. (Hegel 1967, 232)

Hegel's discussion of recognition provides a useful philosophical interface for understanding its role in Hayden's poems, which stage scenes of recognition both between individuals and between distinct

cultural categories wrested from their conventional positions and forced into productive collision with each other. Separate idioms and nationalities encounter one another within the space of a single poem, sometimes a single line of poetry, in order to provoke moments of cultural and cross-cultural recognition.

One of the most basic of these cultural categories is speech, which, as a mode of communication, tacitly encourages recognition. As Fanon observes, this makes language a phenomenon through which can be discovered "one of the elements in the colored man's comprehension of the dimension of *the other*. For it is implicit that to speak is to exist absolutely for the other" (1967, 17). Socially generative and engendered, speech is essentially participatory, linking the speaker with the addressee. As Jacques Derrida puts it, "Each time I open my mouth, each time I speak or write, I *promise*" (1998, 67). Similarly, in *The Dialogic Imagination*, his influential study of the language of the novel, the Russian theorist Mikhail Bakhtin states that not only everyday dialogue, but

> every other sort of discourse as well is oriented toward an understanding that is "responsive"—although this orientation is not particularized in an independent act and is not compositionally marked. Responsive understanding is a fundamental force, one that participates in the formulation of discourse, and it is moreover an *active* understanding, one that discourse senses as resistance or support enriching the discourse. (Bakhtin 1981, 280–81)

Bakhtin mentions both resistance and support; for while language can be a unifying force, it can equally become an instrument of power or exclusion when sufficient ideological force is attached to a given dialect. As such, language is one means by which subcultures differentiate themselves from one another, or, in the case of racist or colonialist cultures, overpower others. Even the attempt to mark off a particular idiom as pure and sacrosanct is one that challenges, and is challenged by, whatever looms outside its self-created borders. As Aldon Nielsen writes, "each attempt to draw borders within the language of race and to establish ownership of a territory encounters and is countered by the already-in-place deterritorializing language of the other" (1994, 7). It follows from this that language, even in its everyday use, makes political demands of those who use it. Indeed, the historical process of its very formation can constitute a politically charged act (though one performed collectively and unknowingly). As Bakhtin reminds us, the publicness of language

induces this phenomenon: "Language is not a neutral medium that passes freely and easily into the private property of the speaker's intentions; it is populated—overpopulated—with the intentions of others" (1981, 294).

If linguistic idioms have the power both to unite and to subdue, to effect identification and to antagonize, our ability to shape language toward positive ends begins, Bakhtin argues, with the realization that every dialect is itself interwoven with outside voices and systems of signification. This fact informs Bakhtin's notion of "polyglossia," which alone "fully frees consciousness from the tyranny of its own language and its own myth of language" (1981, 61). Against language's polyglossic character, linguistic norms work to corral language into specific ideological patterns; they are the "forces that unite and centralize verbal-ideological thought, creating within a heteroglot national language the firm, stable linguistic nucleus of an officially recognized literary language" (270–71). For Bakhtin, the novel is a revolutionary genre precisely because it resists this movement, setting diverse and even opposing linguistic forces against each other in dialogic confrontation. A similar process takes place in Hayden's poetry, in which idioms and voices are set against each other to disjunctive, liberating effect. Hayden regards the space of poetry not as the hallowed arena of a language clinging to an ideal of purity (as Bakhtin argued poetic language must do)[3] but as a platform in which various linguistic forms and cultures, and the individuals created to depict them, cohabit a shared space. This space is delineated not by the totalizing impulse of a hegemonic master language but by dialogue between dialects and by the *between* as such (and the recognition it might spark). Hayden's work thus fits into what might be termed a poetics of diaspora, to borrow Paul Gilroy's sense of the word as "attempt[ing] to specify differentiation and identity in a way which enables one to think about the issue of racial commonality outside of constricting binary frameworks" (1993, 120). His poems instantiate and remark on what Gilroy calls the "chaotic, living, disorganic formation" of the diasporic model (122), and in so doing, they express at the level of form the hopeful and connective politics that such a model can produce.

NARRATIVE JUXTAPOSITIONS IN "NIGHT, DEATH, MISSISSIPPI"

Hayden's poem "Night, Death, Mississippi" describes an imagined rather than a historical event, but Hayden explains in an interview

that he wrote the poem in response to racist acts that occurred in the mid-1960s in the US South "as a sort of catharsis for [himself]," having "read about the young Civil Rights workers who were killed in Mississippi" (Hayden 2001a, 38).[4] Even apart from these facts, the poem's title provides the reader with an immediate grasp of its setting and mood. Five distinct personas are featured in the poem—the narrator, the old man, his son, his daughter-in-law, and an ahistorical lyric voice that appears in italics. At the beginning of the poem, the two dominant voices are those of the narrator and the old man, who is listening with envious pleasure to a lynching taking place in the distance. Small cues alert us to the distance between the narrator's point of view and the old man's. Observing the old man "limping to the porch to listen / in the windowless night," the speaker views the scene with a calm detachment, but the couplet's final adjective, "windowless," conveys not only the heavy closeness of the night air but a corresponding sense of physical and moral entrapment. In addition, the narrator pays particular attention to the old man's poor health: his limp, his "reek / and gauntness," and his longing to be in better condition ("if I was well again") all serve as indices of his physical deterioration. These descriptions set up a moment of dramatic irony in which the old man, "fevered as by groinfire," looks back nostalgically to a castration in which he took part (15). The point is clear: for all his reveries about emasculating others, it is the old man himself who, lacking the agency to do more than limp and mutter, has been emasculated, his fantasies of power undercut by his own powerlessness.[5]

In the next section of the poem, the old man's son, having returned, recounts his activities:

> Then we beat them, he said,
> beat them till our arms was tired
> and the big old chains
> messy and red. (Hayden 2001, 16)

Immediately following this stanza, a lyrical voice enters the poem, one that we can think of as separate from the narrator and the poem's characters—the voice of the poem or of poetry itself, perhaps, responding to the scene it depicts as if no longer able to hold back: "*O Jesus burning on the lily cross*" (16). After this apostrophic exclamation, the son resumes his anecdote:

> Christ, it was better
> than hunting bear

which don't know why
you want him dead. (Hayden 2001, 16)

Two more lyrical interjections, along with the wife's instruction to the children to fetch water so their father can wipe the blood from his hands, conclude the poem. The relative paucity of detail Hayden offers the reader invites us to ask why the narrator chooses to record these particular scenes—all at one remove or more from the actual lynching—rather than the violent act itself. One might even charge Hayden with an evasion of history, of the event in all its singular brutality.

Before making such a charge, however, it's worth considering to what purpose Hayden may have chosen to construct the poem in this way. Instead of simply depicting racially motivated violence, Hayden depicts white supremacists' *accounts* and *memories* of racial violence. Allowing his characters to describe these events in their own words only makes their viewpoints all the more manifest. Given the horror on display even in these accounts, it is clear that Hayden does not wish to avert his eyes from the ugliness of history. Rather, his intention is to confront not only the event but the ideological constructs that give rise to it. Physical acts of violence merely symptomatize the networks of social power that legitimize them. In giving a racist family—father, son, and daughter-in-law—space on the page to articulate their worldview, Hayden demonstrates how in enclosed formations, polyphony can function as self-validation, each new voice reinforcing an existing social code.

Indeed, this point introduces a difficulty in parsing the connection between polyphony and recognition in "Night, Death, Mississippi." The multiple voices in the poem certainly make its polyphonic structure evident; but since all its characters share the same prejudiced viewpoint, little opportunity for transformative recognition appears available. But Hayden's careful deployment of the poem's narrator and of its lyrical, apostrophic mode unveil the ways in which recognition remains a central trope in the poem. Hayden assembles word-groups and associations that link the white supremacist to his remembered victim, and the lyric voice to the racist son, but in contrasting formations. To take a previously mentioned example, the father, who looks back fondly to a literal emasculation, is himself metaphorically emasculated. And in the poem's second section, the son's flippant use of the name "Christ" as an epithet connects to, yet contrasts, the invocation of Jesus in

the italicized line that precedes it. These inverse parallels perform a double function, emphasizing the gulf between the viewpoints of different subjects in the world of the poem while simultaneously reminding the reader of the systems of meaning common to all of them and, therefore, of the potential for recognition between them despite the immediate lack of it.

These instances hint at Hayden's attempt to locate these troubling worldviews within the realm of the human even as he condemns them. To see how he achieves this, it's important to consider the significance of the disjunction between the poem's narrative proper and what W. D. Snodgrass terms its "lyrical interjections," which "stand in sharp contrast and opposition" to the main body of the poem (2001, 227). One can think of these interjections as the voice of the poet intruding on the scene he is evoking, compelled to respond to a narrative whose inhumanity will not let him keep silent. But any trajectory that leads us back to the voice of the poet—or, put differently, to poetry itself—must inevitably remind us that it is the poet who has imagined these voices and who has orchestrated their overlapping narrations. This brings to the fore what is surely the most radical aspect of "Night, Death, Mississippi," particularly when considered in relation to the political movements initiated in black poetry in the early 1960s: Hayden's decision to narrate in the first-person the thoughts and words of a family of white supremacists. The extension of such a gesture from a black poet to the white subjects of his poem is not merely a test of the limits of identification (though it is that). Its very success is a repudiation of the warped ideology it conveys, a reminder that racial injustice can be confronted, grasped, and overcome by art. It is for this reason that the lyric persona—the voice of poetry itself—has the last word in the poem. In this sense, "Night, Death, Mississippi" is an instance of not of poetry documenting or encouraging recognition, but simply of poetry *as* recognition, taking place in the mind of both poet and reader in the process of the creation, depiction, and encounter of a racist worldview. For Hayden, history demands these kinds of interventions, these discomfiting juxtapositions. In facing the unavoidable humanness of those whose views we wish to reject, we foster the dialogical action through which, as Bakhtin argues, social change takes place. Such challenging exercises in ethical imagination are for Hayden necessary ingredients in the path toward progress. As he writes in his poem "Words in the Mourning Time," our anger at injustice should be tempered by an awareness

of how these deaths, how all
the agonies of our deathbed childhood age
are process, major means whereby,
oh dreadfully, our humanness must be achieved. (Hayden 1985, 90)

THE COLLISION OF IDIOMS IN "RUNAGATE RUNAGATE"

While the formal patterns of Hegelian recognition instantiated in "Night, Death, Mississippi" are more hypothetical than historical, Hayden's poem "Runagate Runagate" demonstrates that these principles have been realized within the history of US race relations. "Runagate Runagate," whose title derives from "an archaic expression for a runaway slave," re-imagines the experience of escaped slaves traveling along the Underground Railroad (Williams 1987, 101). Throughout its various sections, the poem parallels the challenging physical journey the African Americans must undertake with a spiritual journey that includes the poem's speaker and audience as well as its subjects. Faced with "the night cold and the night long and the river / to cross," the fugitives imagine the unnamed "star-shaped yonder Bible city" that awaits them (Hayden 1985, 59). This idealization of their ultimate destination emphasizes that the journey being made here is more than a literal flight from slavery; it is also a search for a more metaphysical form of freedom. "And this was the way of it, brethren brethren / way we journeyed from Can't to Can": in the repeated word "brethren" we can observe the communal nature of the journey (60). Such community may indeed be a condition of the symbolic movement "from Can't to Can"—from inaction to agency, from impossibility to possibility—that the poem's next line describes.

Calvin Hernton suggests that in "Runagate Runagate" Hayden uses the "the most rudimentary forms and elements of the African American poetic tradition, which includes call-and-response, improvisations, polyrhythmic sounds, runs, and syncopations," to associate his poem with a specific cultural community (2001, 324). While the colloquy of traditional African American dialect is very much present in the poem, the poem's several voices shape and twist this dialect in strikingly divergent ways. The interplay of these various personas stages incipient moments of provocative recognition within the form of the poem (just as in "Night, Death, Mississippi"). By framing such moments within a specific narrative context, Hayden demonstrates that recognition not only operates within the poem,

but is formative outside the poem, in the lived black history of the United States.

"Runagate Runagate" begins in an unpunctuated burst—"Runs falls rises stumbles"—with four verbs all conjugated in the present tense (Hayden 1985, 59). The sense conveyed is one of panic; each word follows the next absent the sense of pacing or order a more grammatically correct phrasing would produce. Additionally, the verbs lack, at this early point in the poem, a clear subject, evoking the lack of agency granted to the fugitive. The poem's opening seven lines impress on the reader the enormity and drama of the action; Hayden here uses, in Calvin Hernton's phrasing, "words that reach out and engage, if not engulf, the reader" (2001, 322). We are privy in these lines to the thoughts of the escapee, who is clearly focused on the conclusion of his or her journey, and the struggles that must be overcome to reach that endpoint:

> and the hunters pursuing and the hounds pursuing
> and the night cold and the river
> to cross and the jack-muh-lanterns beckoning beckoning
> and blackness ahead and when shall I reach that somewhere
> morning and keep on going and never turn back and keep on going
> (Hayden 1985, 59)

The enjambment in these lines occurring between the noun "river" and the verb "to cross," as well as between "somewhere" and "morning," offers (in the space between these words on the page) a visual representation of the distance that must still be traveled before day breaks and before the destination is reached. In a similar fashion, the repetition of the phrase "keep on going"—which, since it repeats, itself keeps on going—captures the dogged persistence required to achieve the goal of freedom.

In this manner, the poem establishes its focus not only on the fugitive African American in question, but also, by analogy, on an American culture that is itself traveling, in Hayden's estimation, through the darkness of prejudice and injustice toward an arduously won freedom. The next section of the poem expresses its resistance to whatever might impede that progress—a resistance localized in the fugitive's determined refrain: "No more auction block for me / no more driver's lash for me" (Hayden 1985, 59). Taken from the chorus of an African American spiritual, these lines emplace their speaker within a broader lyrical tradition that contains many other voices, reminding us that the struggle for recognition can only be

successful because it is polyphonic, that is, because it is a collective rather than a solitary one.

Following this couplet, the poem introduces us to a new character, whose desires and motivations could not more starkly contrast those of the preceding one. The stanza takes the form of an advertisement seeking escaped blacks, Pompey and Anna. "Catch them if you can," the voice exhorts, "but it won't be easy" (Hayden 1985, 59). At the close of the stanza, a response appears in the form of another couplet, this one from the spiritual "Oh Freedom": "And before I'll be a slave / I'll be buried in my grave" (60). The slaver's aggressive assumption of ownership, captured in his possessive claim over the African Americans as "my Pompey" and "my Anna," is countered by an equally aggressive claim to freedom on behalf of the escapees. Through the ordering of these lines on the page, the poet contrasts two competing worldviews: one predicated on a failure to recognize the other and a reduction of humans to objects valuable solely in economic terms, and the other predicated on a determined belief in the possibility of autonomy and on the absolute refusal of further denigration. The dichotomy Hayden presents is reminiscent of Fanon's development of a similar opposition in *Black Skin, White Masks*. Fanon distinguishes between two basic human inclinations: a "movement of aggression, which leads to enslavement or to conquest"; and "a movement of love, a gift of self, the ultimate stage of what by common accord is called ethical orientation" (1967, 41). For Fanon, the desire for power over others is countered by the giving of the self to others, rather than by the ambition to be free—a differentiation that makes his dialectic model more explicitly ethical. But Hayden's poem too suggests that freedom at the individual and communal level is exactly what is required to actualize such an ethical framework.

His depiction of these opposed inclinations notwithstanding, Hayden presages his characters' conflicting voices with lines that group them together:

> Some go weeping and some rejoicing
> some in coffins and some in carriages
> some in silks and some in shackles (Hayden 1985, 59)

In the historical setting of this poem, race is chief among the demarcations that determine whether one will wear silk or shackles. But the divides listed here, while emotional, political, financial, or legal, are not ontological; at the level of identity, the only designation

provided is "some." Hayden thereby links under one encompassing pronoun the myriad and competing voices that appear within (and outside) the poem. This strategy of unification establishes the potential for recognition across the cultural barriers that separate individuals.

Hayden's collage-like layering of interpenetrating voices does not necessarily result in a depiction of a scene of recognition within the narrative of the poem itself. As in "Night, Death, Mississippi," in "Runagate Runagate" Hayden emphasizes the process of polyphony rather than its results, which may belong only to the future for which he advocates. But by including Harriet Tubman—"woman of earth, whipscarred"—in the poem, Hayden signals its real-world historical significance (1985, 60). In this way, the clash of perspectives in "Runagate Runagate" reminds us of the veracity and practicality of the poem's vision; this course of action can work in the future because it has worked in the past. Hayden makes use of various other idioms besides the African American poetic tradition in the poem: Biblical language; snatches of Negro spirituals; the coaxing invective of a slave owner; the curt jargon of a *Wanted* poster; and, of course, the words of Tubman herself. These idioms and the social forces they represent intermingle and collide—which is, as the poem's framing and call-and-response techniques serve to remind us, just how history happens. In one such example, the speaker quotes Tubman's words directly: "Dead folks can't jaybird-talk, she says; / you keep going on now or die, she says" (60). The phrase "You keep going on now or die" is both Tubman's brusque injunction to the fugitives and the wider historical imperative the poem urges: on this journey, as on the journey of human civilization to its own potential flourishing, to pause is to perish.

This interplay of various linguistic cultures is required for the progress the poem seeks. If, as Bakhtin suggests, languages develop within and gradually come to enforce ideological constructs, then exchanges between individuals and ideas from different linguistic backgrounds will help to broaden these ideologies, exposing their limitations by forcing them into contact with one another. Our linguistic categories, as Bakhtin argues, are

> conditioned by specific historical destinies and by the task that an ideological discourse assumes. These categories arose from and were shaped by the historically *aktuell* forces at work in the verbal-ideological evolution of specific social groups; they comprised

> the theoretical expression of actualizing forces that were in the process of creating a life for language. (Bakhtin 1981, 270)

"Runagate Runagate" examines the "specific historical destinies" of a particular oppressed minority group—formerly enslaved African American fugitives—in order to show how their halting progress northward is obstructed and gradually refracted in the various linguistic forms they encountered. These patterns of dialect impinge on one another as part of a process that is itself dialectic (in the Hegelian sense), and in so doing they generate the moments of connection by which history progresses. In its final two lines, the poem provides an image for this forward movement of history, together with the deeper impulse that causes it: "Come ride-a my train / Mean mean mean to be free" (Hayden 1985, 61). Each new repetition of the word "mean" unlocks further definitions: "to mean" as to intend, "mean" as scant or slight, and "to mean" as to signify. All these senses of the word interlock: despite their unprepossessing status, the determined will of the fugitives will one day mean freedom, on a cultural level if not an individual one.

In this manner, "Runagate Runagate" demonstrates the limitations of accepting politics as shaped by racial or national divides, since these divides are themselves shaped by the idioms that precede and inform them. Indeed, language, nation, and race are all, for Hayden, interdependent constructs that can and should be unraveled and critiqued. The structure of each depends on the others so much that they cannot adequately be understood in isolation. One way to work towards an understanding of the ways in which these categories influence each other is to turn to the past events through which they have come to be defined. To do so is to practice a politics that critiques not only racism but the cultural and linguistic practices that can reify the divides through which racialist ideologies are fostered. As Vera Kutzinski remarks, Hayden does more, in poems such as "Runagate Runagate," than to reject the enslavement of humans: "his struggle is also against the linguistic vestiges of slavery manifest in the continued confinement of Afro-Americans by a language that denies not only their complex historico-cultural identities, but their humanity" (1986, 179). "Runagate Runagate" attempts to expand these confining linguistic borders by interweaving separate idioms with one another, placing them in a tension that works to free the self from the linguistic (and therefore cultural and political) impositions

placed on it and to re-open it to the possibility of previously unconsidered definitions.

"MIDDLE PASSAGE" AND THE WILL TO RECOGNITION

Hayden's long poem "Middle Passage" contains a refrain that appears in full at its beginning and end, and in truncated form in its middle: "voyage through death / to life upon these shores" (1985, 48). These lines link the poem to a theme evident in "Night, Death, Mississippi" and especially in "Runagate Runagate": the slow, uncertain progress of humanity through and despite misery and injustice. "Middle Passage" and "Runagate Runagate" share many other similarities. Their formal features are alike; both recount an event in African American history, though one is imagined and the other documented; and both use the technique of placing multiple and contrasting idioms in close contact with one another to produce recognition and reconfiguration. However, there are also important points of difference between the poems, one of which can be noted by comparing their settings. While the precise time and place of "Runagate Runagate" is unspecified, "Middle Passage" depicts, among other scenes from the journey from which it derives its name, the events of the *Amistad* Rebellion (so named because it took place on the ship *La Amistad*). There, on July 2, 1839, a group of 53 enslaved Africans being transported to Cuba revolted against their captors and took possession of the ship.[6] Hayden researched the history surrounding the rebellion working for the Federal Writers' Project of the Works Progress Administration in the 1930s, and was gradually able to shape his archive of copious notes and ideas on the topic into a poem (Fetrow 1984, 6, 15).

Hayden's attention to detail makes it clear that he intended the poem to be as historically accurate as possible. The poem's veracity constrains its narrative to the precise dates, places, and characters involved in the rebellion, but this narrative is itself sufficiently multifaceted to offer Hayden numerous thematic footholds. For instance, the slave-owners' ships form a space in which individuals of various nationalities are forced into contact, thus offering a transnational context unavailable in "Runagate Runagate." Indeed, the listing of ships in the poem's first line serve as immediate reminders that the poem is international in the most literal sense: it is set between nations rather than within one. The characters within it are constantly in motion simply by virtue of being aboard ships, which, as

Gilroy has pointed out, carry a potent symbolic currency in that they "were the living means by which the points within the Atlantic world were joined" (1993, 16). As such, ships are not only physical structures used in transportation and trade, they are "something more—a means to conduct political dissent and possibly a distinct mode of cultural production" (17). Hayden's "Middle Passage" explores these forms of dissent as posited both in the world at large and on the laden ships by which early modern worlds were connected.

Like the Hayden poems we have already examined, "Middle Passage" is constructed using a variety of different voices. Their intermingling reflects the real-world situation on the ships involved in the Middle Passage. Stephanie Smallwood notes that their "cargoes regularly comprised multiple ethnicities and often many linguistic and cultural threads," and that three or four major language groups were often represented by the enslaved Africans alone (2007, 105). Citing Bakhtin, we might point to such a historical moment as a prime site for the potential destabilization of language groups and the cultural assumptions that proceed from them. But the polyglossic conjunction of dialects on the transatlantic journeys described in "Middle Passage" produced more misprision than recognition. The voices of the Africans on these ships were typically either ignored or wilfully misheard. And yet, the poet's ability to recreate such a wide variety of voices within "Middle Passage" depends on his ability to imagine and intuit the consciousnesses that make use of them. Hayden's poem thus documents how the reception of an utterance can change over time. He imbues voices with a poignancy or irony apparent to the contemporary reader if not to their original speaker or hearer. As such, they depict the possibility that on a long enough time scale, scenes of recognition can emerge even from events in which recognition is nonexistent. The poem's refrain, which speaks of movement from death to life, captures this basic sentiment. Despite the atrocities it documents, Hayden's "Middle Passage" remains optimistic about the perseverance of recognition in the face of its most distressing absences.

The lines of the poem that immediately follow the first iteration of its refrain take the form of an excerpt from the ship's log. The excerpt begins with the recorded date of the entry, April 10, 1800, which places this voyage almost forty years prior to the fateful rebellion described later in the poem. The setting of "Middle Passage" is therefore not a single transatlantic crossing, but a series of them. The sense of retributive justice felt in the poem accrues

from the duration of the inhumanity endured, decade after decade, by the transported enslaved Africans. Following the account in the ship's log, four euphemistically named ships— "*Desire*, *Adventure*, *Tartar*, *Ann*"—underline the greed and exploitation that came to define the journey (Hayden 1985, 48). Already in 1800, well before the *Amistad*'s fateful trip, the possibility of revolt permeates the tense relationships between crew and captives:

> Blacks rebellious. Crew uneasy. Our linguist says
> their moaning is a prayer for death,
> ours and their own. Some try to starve themselves.
> Lost three this morning leaped with crazy laughter
> to the waiting sharks, sang as they went under. (Hayden 1985, 48)

In this brief account, the sailor appeals to the authority of a translating linguist, indicating his own inability to understand the Africans' intentions. In its pointed contrast to the "crazy laughter" of the Africans, the matter-of-fact tone of his description exemplifies one of the poem's chief paradoxes: its categorical inversion of civilization and savagery, high-mindedness and amorality.

Many critics have observed stylistic affinities between "Middle Passage" and T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, and even if, as Brian Conniff argues,[7] Hayden builds on Eliot's poem in order to contrast the despairing worldview of *The Waste Land* with his own stance of resolute confidence in the future, the formal similarities between the poems remain evident. Just as Eliot does in *The Waste Land*, Hayden alludes to the passage in Shakespeare's *The Tempest* in which the sprite Ariel tells Ferdinand of his father's death. But where Eliot incorporates a line from this speech—"Those are pearls that were his eyes"—within *The Waste Land* as a reflection on the production of art through and despite human suffering, in "Middle Passage" Hayden revises the words in Ariel's song to fit his theme:

> *Deep in the festering hold thy father lies,*
> *Of his bones New England pews are made,*
> *Those are altar lights that were his eyes.*
> (Hayden 1985, 48, emphasis in original)

In *The Tempest*, the dead father's bones become coral and his eyes pearls—beautiful, though inanimate, objects. In "Middle Passage" these body parts become, respectively, church pews and altar lights. In this way, as it links back to the sailor's report of blacks leaping overboard to escape the conditions on the ships, the poem connects the terror of death by drowning to institutionalized religion,

specifically American Puritanism, some of whose adherents tried to legitimize the slave trade by touting its missional value:

> We pray that Thou wilt grant, O Lord,
> Safe passage to our vessels bringing
> Heathen souls unto Thy chastening. (Hayden 1985, 48)

As Nielsen suggests, in placing their words within his poem, Hayden intends to "allow the slave traders' own language to redound against them, to let their own prayers raise the questions of who is truly heathen and whose souls are in need of chastening" (1994, 125–26). Similarly, Hayden's insertion of lines from the hymn "Jesus, Saviour, Pilot Me" into the poem brings the hypocrisy of the slave merchants into sharp relief, noting and critiquing the religious justifications for slavery common to the time period.

The next voice in the poem is again encountered in the form of an entry into a diary or ship's log. Here, in the growing unease of a sailor, Hayden begins to indirectly document some of the atrocities experienced by Africans on the Middle Passage:

> A plague among
> our blacks – Ophthalmia: blindness – & we
> have jettisoned the blind to no avail.
> It spreads, the terrifying sickness spreads:
> Its claws have scratched sight from the Capt's eyes . . .
> (Hayden 1985, 49)

Ophthalmia, an inflammatory disease of the eye causing blindness, was a common affliction aboard slave ships, both among the blacks and their captors. It is the first specific indication of the inhumane living conditions suffered by the Africans on the journey (besides, of course, the telling fact that some threw themselves overboard), and this likely owes to its symbolic potential. If the contagion of literal blindness has spread on board the ship to the extent that even the Captain has succumbed, a figurative blindness to the hurts and wants of the other is still more deeply present. This blindness is further symptomatized in the fact that, while numerous voices feature in "Middle Passage," no voice of an enslaved African appears anywhere in the poem. Besides reinforcing the fact that this oppressed group was systematically denied a voice in history, this omission may also indicate that Hayden did not feel it was his place to articulate such suffering from a first-person perspective. Instead, the reader witnesses this suffering indirectly (as in "Night, Death, Mississippi"), often through the voices of those who assisted in perpetrating it. In

one such passage, a witness's statement in a courtroom deposition describes in unemotional and matter-of-fact terms further horrors that took place at sea, including autosarcophagy, gang rape, and the burning alive of enslaved Africans.[8] Hayden would have come across documented accounts of such events in the course of his research. Its unflinching attention to these atrocities imbues the poem with its moral force.

But "Middle Passage" is an attempt to do more than simply condemn the historical actors responsible for what Hayden calls a "[v]oyage through death, / voyage whose chartings are unlove" (Hayden 1985, 51). As in his other poems, Hayden depicts points of similarity or contact that subsist between the crew and the captive African Americans despite the antagonisms that separate them. Some of these connections are negative: the physical perils associated with the blacks also sometimes prove harmful or fatal to the crew, such as the blindness whose "claws have scratched sight from the Capt.'s eyes" and the flames that caused the crew to abandon ship, leaving their captain to "peris[h] drunken with the wenches" (49, 50). In a narration resembling the one in "Night, Death, Mississippi," an old slave trader recalls "kill[ing] the sick and old" over a twenty-year career spent imprisoning Africans, only to admit that it is now he who is sick and old: "I'd be trading still / but for the fevers melting down my bones" (51). The evident mortality of the crewmen does nothing to absolve them of their crimes, of course, and seems to lead to increased division rather than to scenes of recognition. Nonetheless, the deaths and sicknesses of the traders imply the limitations, and eventual end, of the colonialist subjugation of the enslaved Africans.

More presciently, in their movement throughout history and literature and from one speaker to another, the poem's italicized sections explore a variety of affective reactions to the evils of slavery. These range from an abject and racialist terror of the possibility of "*jungle hatred / crawling up on deck*" to a momentary recognition of the human toll these crimes have exacted: "*the living look at you / with human eyes whose suffering accuses you*" (Hayden 1985, 49, 52). This brief identification with the suffering other produces, again, no immediate effect— the voice expressing it lapses into a fear of "*hatred reach[ing] through the swill of dark*" (52). But in the following lines, this voice interprets these accusing, suffering eyes as an acute expression of the will to freedom, and in so doing presages the act of rebellion that secured that freedom.

This act is the focus of the final section of "Middle Passage," which concludes with a paean to Cinquez, the leader of the *Amistad* rebellion. In some ways, Hayden's poetic celebration of this event allies him with Fanon. Although the two men could never be said to share identical views (Hayden rejected nationalism in any form, while Fanon embraced it as a political necessity for oppressed cultures), "Middle Passage" depicts the *Amistad* rebellion not as a violent rupture on the path to unity, but as the necessary though violent means by which autonomy will one day be achieved. As such, Hayden's rendering of the event corresponds in some ways to what Fanon calls the "fighting phase" of a nationalist literature, in which

> the native, after having tried to lose himself in the people and with the people, will on the contrary shake the people. Instead of according the people's lethargy an honored place in his esteem, he turns himself into an awakener of the people; hence comes a fighting literature, a revolutionary literature, and a national literature. (Fanon 1963, 222–23)

Hayden differs from Fanon, however, in that he sees violent attempts to achieve freedom as instrumental in achieving not only ethnic self-realization, but also a multiracial unity that supersedes it. Hayden values transnational and transcultural interdependence rather than nationalist independence; for this reason his work consistently affirms the importance of moments of connection between individuals from divergent ethnic or economic backgrounds. Ultimately, the difference between the two is philosophical: Hayden allows for the possibility of recognition in spite of systems of racial division that, for Fanon, entirely preclude it.

Hayden's optimism in this regard is clear in the closing lines of "Middle Passage," which attend to what *does* survive the Middle Passage despite the death and inhumanity that define it:

> The deep immortal human wish,
> the timeless will:
> Cinquez its deathless primaveral image,
> life that transfigures many lives. (Hayden 1985, 54)

The synonyms "immortal," "timeless," and "deathless" are linked here both by their meanings and by their placement: each is the middle word in its line. Besides intimating that these words are the focal point of the passage, their placement denotes a sense of completeness or wholeness that adds to the register of invincibility they figure. Following the final synonym, "deathless," the word "primaveral"

affirms vitality and rebirth. Far from being detached from history, the immortal human wish for freedom operates within it. The final verb of the stanza, "transfigures," points back to the change this wish demands and catalyzes. In Hayden's poems, this wish surfaces as an urgently voiced will to freedom or will to life, a refusal to be subjected to the rule of another—a demand for recognition that will not relent until met. This will is one of Hayden's great themes; in "Night, Death, Mississippi," in "Runagate, Runagate," and in "Middle Passage," he demonstrates the degree to which every denial of recognition instigates a renewed expression of the desire for it. This repeated desire appears in the closing lines of "Middle Passage," where the poem's refrain echoes a final time: "Voyage through death / to life upon these shores" (54). For Hayden, life—specifically, the communal social flourishing for which his poems consistently contend—depends on a rejection of the practices emblematized by the Middle Passage. The *Amistad* Rebellion, as a historical moment that crystallizes this rejection, provides an apposite image of how the demand to be recognized as human can overcome, on a long enough timeframe, cultural forces that attempt to curb it. "Middle Passage" is rife with juxtaposed idioms, perspectives, and ideologies precisely because their confluence produces moments of tension that unravel the binaries on which such cultural forces depend. What finally survives the Middle Passage, then, is both the will to freedom (the intensity with which the enslaved "mean mean mean to be free") and the will to recognition that eventually ensures that freedom.

As formal choices, the polyphonic scenes that occasion recognition are thus central to the purpose of Hayden's poetry. But the trope of recognition also contributes to a political vision that transcends aesthetics. Hayden's poems affirm the need to move beyond mere labels and signifiers in our assessments of self and others. By their nature, labels constrain and delimit; the content of a poem (or, say, a poetry movement) can often be powerful and meaningful outside the category to which it is assigned. Hayden's "indifferen[ce] to designations" (Hayden 2001b, 18), cited earlier in this essay, should be understood in this light: designations tend to veil the complex and ungovernable nature of subjectivity more than to reveal it. But the notion of recognition takes the argument one step further, for recognition is precisely the act of seeing beyond designations (albeit from a limited and subjective position) to encounter the reality they delimit and approximate. The word "recognize" derives from the Latin *recognoscere*, "to know again." To know again could, of

course, simply imply the return or recollection of a knowledge of something that remains essentially foreign to the self. But in the moment of the *initial* encounter with the human other (which is the moment Hayden is most interested in), no such recollection is possible. In this context, "to know again" is to see the familiar *in* the foreign. By avowing the reality of this sort of recognition, Hayden's poems insist that we negotiate difference—social, ethnic, racial, or otherwise—within the scale of the human, so that to perceive the other is necessarily to perceive an altered mirror of the self. Indeed, "to know again" is a phrase that can call to mind not only a repetition or a doubling, but a mirroring. The achievement of Hayden's poetry is to bring his readers into view of this mirror. What we do once there, of course, is up to us.

NOTES

[1] The First Fisk Black Writers' Conference was attended by some of the most prestigious African American writers of the era, among them the Pulitzer Prize-winning Gwendolyn Brooks and the up-and-coming poet Amiri Baraka. In Harlem, New York, Baraka had recently begun to propagate what was to become known as the Black Arts Movement, and if the first question the conference organizers asked its attendees is any indication, one of the purposes of the conference was to weigh (but really to affirm) the value of this aesthetic stance. John Hatcher describes the conference as "center[ing] around one simple but pivotal question. . . . It asked simply: What are you first, a Negro or an artist?" (1984, 75). Hayden's response not only made him an outlier at the time, it has become, as Brian Conniff writes, the "defining moment" of his career—though Hayden himself surely wished otherwise (1999, 488). "Visibly disturbed" by the question, Hayden publicly identified himself as a poet whose blackness was incidental, and thus not essential to his art, referring to himself (as Julius Lester recalls the phrase) as "a poet who happens to be a Negro" (quoted in Hatcher 1984, 78). In responding to Hayden's remarks, the poet Melvin B. Tolson, who had honed his skills in oratory and argument for many years as both professor and coach of the debate team at Wiley College Texas, seized on Hayden's use of the word "happens" and its implication of a kind of fatalism or lack of agency. His flair for the dramatic, which included, in David Llorens's recollection, a "sweeping gesture" and "booming voice," can only have made his retort to the comparatively mild-mannered Hayden all the more devastating: "Hap, hap . . . let me see, hap means accident. Is someone going to make M. B. Tolson an accident? . . . I'm a black poet, an African-American poet, a Negro poet. I'm no accident—and I don't give a tinker's dam what you

think" (quoted in Farnsworth 1984, 297). On the day, Hayden was badly outnumbered and his position dismissed, and he became the pariah of the conference. In later assessments, though, he has been vindicated somewhat; even Robert Farnsworth, who authored the authoritative biography of Tolson, conceded that "Hayden was unfairly steamrollered by a vintage Tolson performance" (1984, 298). Some defenders of Hayden are harsher in their descriptions of his antagonists; in Conniff's summary, for example, "a group of writers and students, led by Melvin Tolson, assailed Hayden as the stooge of exploitive capitalists and, all in all, a traitor to his race" (1999, 487). More equably, Darwin Turner points out that all Hayden had done was to "stubbornly [fight] back for the very right that Black cultural nationalists were demanding for Black people: the right to define himself and to resist any definition thrust upon him by others" (2001, 93).

[2] For more on recognition in Hegel, see Robert R. Williams's book *Hegel's Ethics of Recognition*. Williams argues that while the concept of recognition was introduced in the German philosophical tradition by Fichte, it was Hegel who "appropriated and transformed the concept of recognition and regarded it as the fundamental intersubjective structure of ethical life" (1997, 26).

[3] My treatment of Hayden's poetry is not entirely Bakhtinian, since for Bakhtin, the relationship between the poet and language is markedly different than that between the novelist and language. Unlike the novelist, the poet *owns* his language, such that it is (in a rather Hölderlinian fashion) wholly of a piece with the poet's intention: "The language of the poet is *his* language, he is utterly immersed in it, inseparable from it, he makes use of each form, each word, each expression according to its unmediated power to assign meaning (as it were, 'without quotation marks'), that is, as a pure and direct expression of his own intention" (1981, 285). As a result, Bakhtin argues, "The concept of many worlds of language, all equal in their ability to conceptualize and to be expressive, is organically denied to poetic style" (286). Bakhtin wrote at a time when the possibilities inherent in poetic form were only just beginning to be stretched, and his undoubted awareness of these developments in poetry is reflected by his inclusion of the following caveat: "Elements of heteroglossia enter [poetry] not in the capacity of another language carrying its own particular points of view, about which one can say things not expressible in one's own language, but rather in the capacity of a depicted thing. Even when speaking of alien things, the poet speaks in his own language" (287).

To align Hayden's work with Bakhtin's theory, one would have to fit his poetry into this last category, in which other voices and dialects appearing in the poem are not "authentic" but depicted, and are in the final analysis subsumed under the poet's own voice. This distinction ultimately seems a tendentious one, however, particularly in the wake of

the poststructuralist moment, which has demonstrated the impossibility of ever "owning" language. Even if we accept the terms of Bakhtin's argument, we can note that while Hayden demonstrates his control over the various spheres of language and history he brings into conjunction, his poems can be said to offer, at the very least, *representations* of the collision of diverse linguistic and ethnic instances.

[4] Hayden refers here to the tragic deaths of Michael Schwerner, James Chaney, and Andrew Goodman, three civil rights workers who were killed on June 21, 1964, in Neshoba County, Mississippi. For an analysis of the causes, history, and repercussions of this crime, see Nicolaus Mills (1992).

[5] I wish to thank the reviewer at *College Literature* for alerting me to this connection.

[6] Critics and historians have examined the *Amistad* Rebellion and its effects at some length. For a detailed account of the incident and its aftermath, see Howard Jones (1987). See Iyunolu Folayan Osagie (2000) for an insightful consideration of how the *Amistad* Rebellion figures in relation to questions of American cultural memory. On the relation of the *Amistad* Rebellion to the production of national and masculine identities, see Maggie Montesinos Sale (1997, 58–119). On the responses of Black Abolitionists to the revolt, see Roy E. Finkenbine (2001).

[7] Conniff posits that the problem Hayden locates in Eliot is his equivocation between clear moral condemnation and a lack of "convincing or consistent moral ground" (1999, 499). In constrast, "Middle Passage" locates moral agency—and the pragmatic social concern that attends it—in the rebels' response to the injustice they experience.

[8] The unbearable conditions in which many America-bound Africans crossed the Atlantic has been well-documented. Melvin Tolson offers a powerful, if brief, summation of the Middle Passage in *Libretto for the Republic of Liberia*: "here / Gehenna hatchways vomit up / The debits of pounds of flesh" (1953, lines 149–51). Smallwood writes that given the ships' crowded conditions, "illness was nearly impossible to avoid. . . . Exhaustion, malnutrition, fear, and seasickness resulted in depressed immune systems and increased vulnerability to disease," which included smallpox, tuberculosis, and dysentery (2007, 136). The historian Herbert Klein lists "gastrointestinal disorders and fevers" as "the "biggest killers," adding that scurvy and dysentery were also common (2010, 153–54). To prevent them from escaping, the enslaved Africans—especially the males—were required to wear "iron shackles" for "weeks and sometimes months at a stretch" (143). It was not altogether uncommon for Africans to leap to their deaths if given the chance (an occurrence described in "Middle Passage"); for example, Smallwood cites an entry in a ship's log which records that a captive "Leaped over board & drowned himself" (2007, 145).

One of the most tangible, if incomplete, ways to measure the suffering endured by Africans on the Middle Passage is by the number of them who died on the journey. Smallwood reports that "20 percent of the Africans carried into the Atlantic in the seventeenth century died at sea" (150). According to Klein, improvements in medicine and attempts to standardize requirements for passage, among other factors, meant that "slave shipbound mortality declined to less than one-half this level in the late eighteenth century" (2010, 138). This decline owed mainly to improvements in the blacks' living conditions. Since each enslaved African represented a financial investment, these improvements can in turn be attributed, at least in part, to their owners' wish to forestall economic losses (Smallwood 2007, 151). Even so, Klein reports, due to "the special conditions of slave transport," "rates never fell below 5 percent for any large group of vessels surveyed" (2010, 153). In summary, Klein cautions us against reading the Middle Passage as "the totally disorganized, arbitrary, and bloody experience pictured in the popular literature," but allows, in spite of this qualification, that "death occurred constantly on ship" (160).

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