

Mourning, Orature, and Memory: Cultural Performativity as Historiography in Pearl Cleage's *A Song for Coretta*

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Abstract

This essay explores how Pearl Cleage's play, *A Song for Coretta*, engages with certain paradigms of cultural performativity, namely mourning, orature, memory, and history. In doing so, the play is explored through theatre, performance, and cultural theories. Analyzing the play in this manner, it can be critically seen how Cleage joins fellow playwrights in their use of playwriting as historiographical method to document the African American experience.

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Knowing grief and expressing sorrow are central to the process of self-actualization.

All over the world, women play a central role in public expressions of mourning.

– bell hooks

Introduction

In *A Song for Coretta*, the central action takes place at the public memorial for the First Lady of the Human Rights Movement, Coretta Scott King. Playwright Pearl Cleage has illuminated the Black experience from a relatively narrowed perspective through her dramatization of five African American women patiently waiting in line to view the body of King. By and large, the perspective can safely be placed under the scope of a womanist positionality. Individually, the women have been asked why they've each come to mourn the late ancestor – particularly, when they've never even met her. In order to answer the question, the women must recall their past. As they tell their personal histories through oral tradition, thereby evoking a West African practice of remembering and documenting, collectively they situate their memories within the social, political, and cultural context of African American history.

This essay explores how Pearl Cleage's play, *A Song for Coretta*, engages with certain paradigms of cultural performativity, namely mourning, orature, memory, and history. In doing so, I examine the play through theatre, performance, and cultural theories. Analyzing the play in this manner, I critically survey how Cleage joins fellow playwrights in their use of playwriting as historiographical method to document the African American experience.

While Coretta's public memorial is a multi-dimensional space to celebrate her life and accomplishments, and simultaneously mourn her loss, Cleage depicts her characters as mourning a loss while engaging with the concept of embodied experiences. The embodiment of such experiences is a mesh of history, memory, ritual, and future correlations thereof. Specifically, this space inhabits a phenomenological moment where the oral testimonial exchanges between the women serve not only as recognitions of history and enactments of memory, but even more emphatically, the collectiveness of the women's testimonies serve as a search for identity and unity through sisterhood.^[1]

The objective in this essay is to examine how Cleage engages with certain paradigms of cultural performativity. My use of the term cultural performativity is used here to embrace and be inclusive of the theory of embodied practices. For the purpose of this essay, these practices, or rather performances encompass chiefly: mourning, orature, memory – which, inherently, all lie at the helm of history. In reading the play through several critical lenses, my goal is to discuss each of the previously listed tropes within African American culture as historiographical method to document African American experiences.

Mourning Coretta, Mourning Self

As *A Song for Coretta* opens, Zora Evans, a twenty-two year old senior at Spelman College appears on the stage speaking into a recording device. Due to the nature of her speech, the audience can safely assume that she is a journalist or news reporter. More importantly, it is the message of her speech that sets up one of the primary themes of the play, mourning Coretta Scott King:

ZORA. It is a cold and rainy night outside of historic Ebenezer Baptist Church, but that doesn't seem to matter to the hundreds of people from all walks who have left the warmth of their homes and come here to say goodbye to Coretta Scott King...a woman they have never met. For those born after the civil rights era who never experienced the sit-ins and freedom rides and marches, it is difficult to understand what motivates these patiently waiting people to stand hour after hour for the briefest glimpse of a stranger...some simply said that she was a great lady. Others, that she was the heart of the civil rights movement. Some said they just wanted to be a part of history. Witnesses to the end of an era. Whatever their reasons, they have all been deeply touched by something they cannot define...^[2]

As the play continues, we are introduced to the remaining four characters: Helen Richards, a senior citizen who met Coretta twice as a little girl during the civil rights era; Mona Lisa Martin, a Hurricane Katrina survivor who hitchhiked from New Orleans to Atlanta to attend Coretta's memorial; Keisha Cameron, a seventeen year old who is pregnant for the second time; and Gwendolyn Johnson, a Second Gulf War soldier. Due to Zora's persistence, each of the women have agreed to be interviewed by her on why they've come to the church on the spur of the moment to say goodbye to Coretta. As the women simultaneously memorialize the ancestor and give her reverence for their own personal journeys, one begins to recognize the distinct cultural significance of mourning and its placement within the African American community.

In her book, *Passed On: African American Mourning Stories*, Karla F.C. Holloway provides a critical analysis of death and mourning and its emblematic impact on African America. Recognizing that African American mourning and memorializing formalities derive from West African rituals, Holloway notes:

The anticipation of death and dying figured into the experiences of black folk so persistently, given how much more omnipresent death was for them than for other Americans, that lamentation and mortification both found their way into public and private representations of African America to an astonishing degree ... Black culture's stories of death... were inextricably linked to the ways in which the nation experiences, perceived, and represented African America. Sometimes it was a subtext, but even the ghostly preserve of these narratives reminded us that something about America was, for black folk, disjointed. Instead of death and dying being unusual, untoward events, or despite being inevitable end-of-lifespan events, the cycles of our daily lives were so persistently interrupted by specters of death that we worked this experience into the culture's iconography and included it as an aspect of black cultural sensibility.^[3]

The "disjointed" and "black cultural sensibility" that Holloway speaks of is very much rooted in and an indication of the critical history of Black America. Not only is this history demonstrated in countless forms, moreover, this history continues to be memorialized. Holloway explains that, "the act of memorializing retains a particular aspect of a culture's narrative... some notion of racial memory and racial realization is mediated through the veil of death."^{[4] [5]}

Holloway's discussion of death as being a part of Black America's daily social fabric resonates intensely throughout the play, specifically in the speeches of Helen, Mona Lisa, Keisha, and Gwen. Inviting Mona Lisa to share her umbrella, Helen acknowledges the passing of her husband of thirty-four years: "I'm glad I brought this big old umbrella... The undertaker gave it to me at my husband's funeral."^[6] Symbolized in the upcoming stage direction, one can assume that Mona Lisa feels unease with Helen's comment: (*Mona Lisa steps back out from under the umbrella immediately*).^[7] Indicative of Holloway's suggestion that death, for black folk, is a social expectancy, Helen responds to Mona Lisa's unease: "*I didn't mean to spook you. I know some people don't like to talk about death, but to me it's all part of life, you know?*" Mona Lisa replies: "*Talking about it ain't the hard part.*"^[8] Mona Lisa's snappy retort is later recognized in the telling of the recent death of her grandmother.

For Gwen, the occurrence of death is posited in the sense of being both, past and future. Death as *past* is revealed when she talks of her experiences while serving as a medic during the Second Gulf War. In addition to preparing for her return to the war, it is Helen who foreshadows Gwen's *future* death—referring essentially to Gwen's mother—who is assumed to be cancer stricken:

Helen. How's your mother?

Gwen. The chemo was hard on her, but she's doing okay.

Helen. I need to go by and see her.

Gwen. She'd like that.^[9]

Similar to Gwen, death for Keisha is also multifaceted. Unlike Gwen, however, death has already preceded and therefore, proceeded to disrupt Keisha's reality. While engaging in a verbal quarrel with Helen, Keisha's states: "Old people always talkin' about people died for us, like that means something. Well, people die all the time nowadays, in case you didn't notice, and it don't even matter what for. They still just as dead!"^[10] What is interesting about Keisha's rebuttal is that she not only mirrors the statement made earlier by Helen regarding death and dying being routine, but more importantly, that she is intimately responding to a triple-death: the death of motherhood as she gave up her baby for adoption, the death of her own relationship with her mother, and the death of Coretta. Subsequently, after Helen and Keisha's quarrel reaches its climax, Mona Lisa interjects, speaking primarily to Helen:

The thing you gotta remember, Miss Helen, is that Coretta had a whole movement full of people, clapping and singing and feeling that freedom in the air. It must have been quite a time, but there isn't any movement anymore. There's nobody coming to put their arms around Li'l Bit [Keisha] and her baby any more than there was anybody coming to see about me laying in that beat-up car looking at where my life used to be.^[11]

Mona Lisa's interjection into the argument as Keisha's protector is not a singular happening. In fact, she adopts the role as Keisha's guardian throughout the play – defending her at various moments against the other characters. During Mona Lisa's own performance of orature it is revealed that while clinging for survival during Hurricane Katrina, she encounters a young girl who is being sexually harassed by a group of men. Failing to save her, Mona Lisa treats Keisha, in a spiritual sense, as the girl from New Orleans. It can also be said that death for Mona Lisa is also multifaceted: the death of her grandmother and the plausibly assumed death of the girl from New Orleans. However, the death for the New Orleans girl does not necessarily have to be in the corporeal sense. If the goal of the men was to rape her, then naturally she could experience the death of her spiritual psyche and innocence.

It is here, I argue, where the concept of mourning is signified as being performative. Performative in the sense that the "exigencies of everyday life" for Zora, Helen, Mona Lisa, Keisha, and Gwen, are thus "acted out."^[12] Genevieve Fabre supports my argument within the African American context of performance, suggesting that "the action is not only seen and acted out but is also told and often presented...from which a moral or message should be drawn: each recorded event is turned into a message."^[13] Coretta's memorial therefore becomes a site that inhabits a collective of experiences which is further inhabited by the cultural memories of the women. In this moment of memorialization, the women's subjectivity becomes the mourned center at the very moment they deliver their narratives.

Seen in this light of public mourning, the death of Coretta acts as a stimulus for agency, wherein the characters deliver, in a metaphorical sense, a self-eulogizing performance. The absent Coretta, or rather her body, consequently, plays a very significant role within this mourning-act. Joseph Roach, scholar of English, theatre and performance studies, has shed light on the deceased's performative role within the context of mourning rituals, writing that "the body of the deceased performs the limits of the community called into being by the need to mark its passing. United around a corpse...the members of a community may reflect on its symbolic embodiment of loss and renewal."^[14]

Scholar of religion and psychological studies Peter Homans has led me to understand that an anthropological reading would speculate Coretta's death to be a "social-symbolic context of loss."^[15] Homans furthers this notion, this time re-reading Victor Turner's theory of liminality to aid in understanding the transformation that occurs amongst the women as mourners. He writes:

[Liminality] refers to a transitional period between two well-established roles. The liminal stage characterizes the mourners and mourning. The mourners are "between" roles... Both deceased and mourners pass from attachment to society to a liminal or transitional state (not attached to society) and from this transitional state back to society... Together, the deceased and the mourners undertake parallel journeys.^[16]

Noticeably, Homans does not use the term grief in his analysis of mourning and liminality and its placement within society as interpreted through the mourner's reaction to the "social-symbolic context of loss". He explains that while many will use the term grief and mourning interchangeably, there is a significant difference. For grief refers to emotional reactions to death which inhabits sorrow, anger, guilt, and confusion and that mourning refers to "culturally constructed social response to the loss of an individual."^[17]

Homans makes an enthralling argument; yet, it is Holloway, again, who positions the community's response to loss within a cultural space, specifically the space of African America, stating that "When the community [comes] together for a funeral [or memorialization], there [is] a collective expectation for the moment. It serve[s], in a sense, as a periodic catharsis for the weight of living black in the United States."^[18] Holloway's interpretation of loss and the relationship with the African American community actually blends the concept of mourning and grief. In *A Song for Coretta*, mourning is the collective performance, while grief is the individual performance of each character. Furthering her argument, Holloway writes:

Although the ritual formality and spectacle of black funerals... were clearly deliberate attempts to make the "home-going" ceremonies of African Americans underscore or encourage a view of each life as important and notable, there were occasions when the struggle of black life and black event was instead the surviving message of the ceremonies. [. . .] The community ownership of and commentary on these events are haunting indicators of the way in which black death and dying envelope both a national and public space, as well as intimate, neighborhood spaces of black cultural memory. The territorial exchange of these narratives contributes to their permanence. They appear and reappear like an ephemeral but persistent remembrance, a ghostly embodiment of national and cultural memory.^[19]

This "ephemeral but persistent remembrance" is repetitively evident throughout the play. After each character briefly discuss Coretta's influence and why she felt it necessary to say goodbye in person, quickly the public expressions of mourning shift focus from Coretta to each character's self-eulogizing narrative. The women each summon personal histories that are contributory to the collective Black experience. Helen remembers her childhood and the developing moments of Black freedom and liberation at the helm of the civil rights movement, while at the same time juxtaposing it with her concern for the current condition of the Black community. Mona Lisa's piercing comments on her own experience eventually lead up to a full-

length remembrance of the 2005 disaster, Hurricane Katrina. In order to discuss Coretta and her reasons for attending the memorial, Keisha must first remember a prior prenatal period and now second pregnancy that is at the forefront of her current calamity. As a result of Zora's prodding, like Keisha, Gwen remembers extremely critical moments of her term in Iraq during the Second Gulf War. So, it can be reasoned that while the women initially unite to mourn (a) loss (es), there is an indicating exploration happening; indicating in the practical sense of first remembering and secondly, documenting. This indicative exploration, as a result, evokes other cultural performances that concurrently revisit history, while establishing a new history.

Performing Orature

I have come to believe over and over again that what is most important to me must be spoken, made verbal and shared, even at the risk of having it bruised or misunderstood. That the speaking profits me, beyond any other effect.

– Audre Lorde

Helen: Okay, Miss Zora Evans. Turn on your tape and I'll tell you what I know.

–Pearl Cleage

Keisha: If I wanted you to turn off the tape, I wouldn't be talkin' to you at all, would I...
Do you want to hear this or not?

–Pearl Cleage

The above epigraphs create a rhythm that finds itself embedded within the overall arc of this section. The rhythm allows for the intersection of various positions for the performative role that the speaking voice plays. Pertinent to African American drama and performance, ^[20] storytelling is a key trope in *Song* that initiates the performance of call and response among the women.

Storytelling, however, is not a performance that goes without its discussion of the African primaries. Generally speaking, in spaces that are demarcated for cultural existence and expression, there happens to be a common form of participation. That participation for Black folk, diasporically speaking, is the use of language. Yet, in order to discuss language one must discuss the duality in which language exists. In *Decolonising the Mind*, Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o posits that duality into the areas of *culture* and *communication*. Theorized in and stemming from the diasporic terms – oral tradition, oral literature, and orature – the oral performer uses language as an “image-forming agent.”^[21] Echoing Harry Elam Jr. and his study of characterization in the dramas of African American playwrights, namely August Wilson, the women in *A Song for Coretta* perform as oral historians or New World African Griots – in this case Griottes^[22] – as they are “repeatedly speaking their history as they and we consider its meaning within their current circumstances” and thus creating an “authentic historical record with multiple and

multilayered meanings.”^[23] Moreover, it is here, Elam points out, where the “oral mode of historical transmission, communication, and performance embodies... orature.”^[24]

Orature, a complex term, is a performance in and of itself. The term was originally coined by Ugandan scholar Pio Zirimu; his idea for the term was to avoid an oxymoron with the usual term, oral literature.^[25] Zirimu defined the term as “the use of utterance as an aesthetic means of expression.”^[26] The credit for bringing the term into the academic fold is given to Kenyan scholar Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong’o, who acknowledges that the term has certainly spread to encompass new and manipulated meanings but “remains tantalizingly out there, pointing to an oral system of aesthetics that did not need validity from the literary.”^[27] Storytelling is profoundly rooted in the oral system as one of its aesthetic principals, with the originating purpose of historical recording.

For the remainder of this section, I want to focus on two specific characters in *Song* for a couple of reasons. They are Helen Richards and Keisha Cameron. First, in the sense of Western theatre, they represent the traditional roles of protagonist (Helen) and antagonist (Keisha). As noted earlier, this is best observed through the tension that exists between the two which eventually results in a climactic quarrel. Additionally seen through their sporadic bouts, their histories are placed at polar opposite moments in Cleage’s overall discussion of African American history, spanning from the Civil Rights Era through the twenty-first Century. Finally, as a result of Cleage’s use of dramatic structure, Helen and Keisha are the only two that perform orature which envelopes Pitika Ntuli’s use of the term. He explains:

Orature is more than the fusion of all art forms. It is the conception and reality of a total view of life. It is a capsule of feeling, thinking, imagination, taste and hearing. It is the flow of a creative spirit... In poetry it is not only the images but also their present action. Orature is the universe of expression and appreciation and a fusion of both within one individual, a group, a community... It is a weapon against the encroaching atomization of life. It is the beginning come full circle on a higher plane. It is a gem, an idea, a reality that beckons us to be part of it.^[28]

Although scripted, both Helen and Keisha perform the basic elements of orature, including its improvisational qualities.

After listening to Zora’s journalistic reporting, Helen immediately catches her attention with a daunting question: “You’re not much of a journalist, are you?”^[29] Zora responds to Helen with general and respectful answers to her continued line of questioning. The line of questioning immediately switches from Helen to Zora once the two women are introduced and the premise of Zora’s reporting is discovered. Zora learns that Helen not only witnessed the Civil Rights Era, but that she in fact met Coretta Scott King. Conversely, Helen is reluctant to participate. Helen mistrusts the printed word over the oral, and rightly misinterprets Zora as young, therefore naïve:

Helen. What do you call yourself doing anyway?

Zora. I’m doing a piece on Mrs. King.

Helen. *What kind of piece of piece on Mrs. King?*

Zora. Her life, her work, what it was about her that would make people come out here on a night like this to say goodbye to someone they’ve never met.

Helen. You keep saying that like it’s a fact, but you never asked me.^[30]

Finally, Zora admits that her inquiry is more than a chance to have her show on National Public Radio, but she is interested in documenting candid experiences of folk who were a part of the Civil Rights era of Black America's national fight for liberation and equality:

Zora. Look, I was born after the civil rights movement, but I always wished I had been there. Most people my age have never experienced that kind of commitment to an idea. We've never had to face dogs and fire hoses and lynchings. We've never really been tested. I just want to understand what that felt like.

Helen. What's your name?

Zora. Zora Evans.

Helen. You named after the writer?

Zora. Yes.

Helen. Okay, Miss Zora Evans. Turn on your tape and I'll tell you what I know.^[31]

One could argue that Helen's initial reservations were not only impeded when Zora gave her final plea, but that she agreed to participate in the interview when there was an association detected concerning Zora's name and the great writer from the Harlem Renaissance, Zora Neale Hurston. Cleage exemplifies specific characteristics within Zora to further resemble the writer in the mere fact that Zora Neale Hurston herself, along with being a writer of many fields, was also an anthropologist and folklorist. Precisely, as replicated in the characterization of Zora, Hurston conducted interviews and formed a working relationship with the participatory act between storyteller and listener.

Helen eventually invites Zora into her world and as a result performs her orature. Again, Helen's performance of orature finds itself manifested in Ntuli's description. Not only does she deliver her history in the manner of oral tradition, but her orature exhibits "the conception and reality of a total view of life." Helen starts off by providing thorough details involving an array of her public and personal life – all situated at the root of the Civil Rights movement:

Zora. So you actually met Mrs. King?

Helen. Yes, I did. I met her twice. Once at the beginning of the bus boycott in 1955 and once again on the day it ended.

Zora. The Montgomery Bus Boycott?

Helen. That's the one.^[32]

Helen's story then shifts from the surface of the Civil Rights to a more local place in her history:

Zora. *So how did you meet Mrs. King?*

Helen. I met her the first time after one of those meetings. My mother was on the Maids Committee...A lot of the women who were walking worked as maids like my mother, and the white folks' houses were way on the other side of town, so my father and some of the other men who had cars would pick them up in the morning and take them out to work and then pick them up at night and carry them home. After awhile, some of the white women started driving their maids themselves to be sure they got there on time. They told their husbands they needed to be sure some-body was there to cook and clean and take care of those kids, but in private, they knew it was wrong, making people sit in the back just for being Negroes. (She smiles at the old-fashioned word.) That's my mom talking

out of my mouth. Everybody said Negro back then. If you called somebody black you had to fight.^[33]

Helen continues her story and shares specific moments of her encounter with Coretta Scott King. Yet, at this point the locale of her history becomes extremely personal and reminiscent of the past climate of the Black community – which she seemingly longs for:

Zora. What do you remember most about meeting her?

Helen. I remember how pretty she was and how good she smelled. Like a birthday cake.

Zora. What about the second time.

Helen. The second time it actually was my birthday and we had won. After walking for a whole year, the bus company had to take down those “colored” and “white” signs and we could sit wherever we wanted to. Daddy said he had a very special birthday present for me and that me and Mama should put on our Sunday dresses and come downstairs as quick as we could.

Daddy...took my hand and Mama took the other one and we walked three blocks to the bus stop. We rode that bus all the way to the end of the line...Daddy brought me and Mama each a chocolate ice cream cone, even though we were going to have birthday cake later.

Zora. So when did you see Mrs. King that day? On the bus?

Helen. Right after we left the soda shop. We were walking home past Dexter Avenue Baptist Church ...and Mrs. King was standing on the front steps beside her husband, talking and laughing with some other people who had been on the bus with us. Mama and daddy stopped to say hello to everybody and Mrs. King smiled and said, Well, Miss Brown, how do you like your freedom? And I said, If freedom feels this good, I want to be free every day! All the grown-ups laughed, but I think they felt it, too.^[34]

As Helen concludes her story, the moment of revelation begins to fester. Helen confesses to Zora that she rarely shares her history, but even more emphatically, one easily assumes there is a bitterness within Helen as the kindred spirit amongst the Black community is lacking: “*I haven’t told that story in a lone time. Saying it out loud kind of got me back in the right spirit.*”^[35] Zora responds with a typical comment and Helen’s concern for the current condition of the Black community is thus revealed:

Helen. Sometimes when I think about what we used to be as a community of people, and then I realize what we’ve become, it gets me down.

Zora. When you say we, you mean we under thirty, don’t you?

Helen. I guess I do. I don’t understand young people anymore. The music, the clothes, the way you talk, what you talk about. (She’s getting wound up.) People weren’t fighting and dying for somebody’s right to sell crack and hang their pants off their behind.

Zora. All of us aren’t like that.

Helen. I didn’t mean to start fussing. The older I get, the crankier I get. Sorry.^[36]

Although Helen clearly has a likeable affection towards Zora, later in the play she shows her disdain for the younger generation twice over. At this point, it is with Keisha when Zora asks her to be interviewed:

Helen. You think NPR is going to care what Li'l Bi has to say about Coretta King?

Zora. I can always edit the piece if she says anything...inappropriate...I do want to show a cross-section of the community and I don't have any young people yet.

Helen. Lord help us if that's the face we're going to show to the world... If you're going to tape her, then erase me. I don't want to be on the same tape with a fool.^[37]

The second time is an actual confrontation between Helen and Keisha. Reacting to Keisha's ignorance towards the Civil Rights Movement, Helen says:

You don't see what all the fuss was about? (She speaks with rising anger.) You've got a lot of nerve even coming down here. Look at you! Even worse, listen to you. Everything coming out of your mouth sounds crazy! People died for your freedom and the best thing you can think of to do with it is have a bunch bad babies and get a drug dealer to pay your rent. Coretta King would be ashamed of you! They shouldn't even let you go inside.^[38]

There are two points to pull out with the above examples. The first deals with Helen and her age. While her comments are short but blunt, one can argue that she ascertains the fact that she is no longer of the younger generation and times have certainly changed. For the second, Helen recognizes that there is a distinction to be made regarding the generational gap – and that distinction is best observed between Helen and Keisha. As oral historian, Helen's orature therefore carries a central and persistent magnitude of ancestral embodiment that "represents, and indeed re-presents, the bodies and the embodied experience of her ancestors whose previous actions invoked her current presence."^[39]

Keisha is also an oral historian; though her history is situated within the current climate of African America and she is of the generation that Helen has a specific disdain for. While Keisha's performance of orature surely resonates within Ntuli's description, it is more expressed within Afrocentric scholar Molefi Kete Asante's description. Joining the aforementioned scholars, Asante establishes that orature "is the comprehensive body of oral discourse on every subject and in every genre of expression produced by a people."^[40] Asante, being an African American scholar, has added to the description of orature as he discusses the use of the "word" from original African retained practices throughout its permeation into African American culture. Perhaps the significance in Asante's description of the term orature is his argument of African American history having an essential linkage within the performance of African American orature. He writes:

A central aspect of African American history is the persistent public discussions related to our American experience... That a principal dimension of black history is encompassed by platform activities in the form of lectures, sermons, and agitations should be understood without question... The study of black speeches, then, emphatically imposes itself upon any true investigation into our history and orature. . .^[41]

Dissimilar with the other characters, Mona Lisa calls upon Keisha to share her story:
Mona Lisa. That's the one you need to interview. Get a young's person's point of view.
Helen. You've got to be kidding.
Keisha. I'll do it. Contrary to some people's opinion, I got a lot of stuff to say. . .^[42]

As an oral historian, Keisha's performance of orature invites the audience/listener to participate. In the telling of her story, she forces the listener to question the change in African American history – as juxtaposed with Helen's narrative – and therefore the concern of African America shifts from local to national.

Zora asks Keisha a similar introductory question: "Can you tell us why you came down here to pay your respects to Mrs. King." Keisha responds: "Yes, I can, but first I gotta go back a little ways and talk about something everybody don't know about me or the other part won't make no sense. Is that okay?"^[43] Assuming that Keisha may not want to air her personal history – already in a local space in front of the women, but becoming national as it will be aired on the radio – Keisha responds in her usual tort-tone: "If I wanted you to turn off the tape, I wouldn't be talkin' to you at all, would I?"^[44]

Right away Keisha performs her orature. With the knowledge of the difficulties of being a young, single mother, she explains that she gave up her baby for adoption at the age of fifteen. Her orature also addresses that she is currently pregnant with a second baby and her mother removed her from the family home as a result. What I want to identify here is the use of the "word". Asante addresses this in his discussion of orature. Specifically, Keisha's orature is laden with an African cosmological element that invokes the power of the word: *nommo*^[45]. Asante explains:

Since the Africans brought to America a fertile oral tradition augmented by the pervasiveness of *nommo*, the generating and sustaining powers of the spoken word...the word influences all activities. Everything appears to have rested upon the life-giving power of the word: life, death, disease, health, and...liberation.^[46]

Prior to Asante, Paul Carter Harrison inserted and popularized *nommo* within the field of theatre and drama in his early work, *The Drama of Nommo* (1972). Harrison asserts, "We are concerned with the activation of images rather than the creation of forms, through manipulation of the forces in the mode until they give up the power of our designated reality."^[47] Harrison's statement is very much reminiscent of Thiong'o's comment referenced earlier regarding the use of language/word as an "image-forming agent". Additionally, Harrison contributes that *nommo* has a vigor "which activates all forces from their frozen state in a manner that establishes concreteness of experience. Reality. When *Nommo* is activated properly [it has] the power to designate all life forms, be they glad or sad, work or play, pleasure or pain, in a way that preserves...humanity."^[48]

When Keisha tells her story, *nommo* is thus activated and forces the other characters to change their prior perceptions of the young women. This change of perception is especially noticeable with Helen. Before Keisha begins her story, Helen exits offstage to inquire about the

expected length of time the women would be waiting to enter the church. As Keisha dwells on her current pregnancy and contemplates an abortion, Helen's stage direction best depicts the vigor of nommo: *Helen reenters. She doesn't speak to others, but she is clearly listening to the interview.*^[49] At the completion of Keisha's story, Helen then initiates a dialogue that seems to insinuate care and concern:

Helen. Don't you have any clothes for that doll?

Keisha. You just don't know how to mind your own business do you?^[50]

Naturally, Keisha is familiar with Helen's haughty attitude towards her. Therefore Helen's change of perception does not seem genuine:

Helen. All I'm saying is when your teacher looks at the picture that's going to prove to her what a good mother you are, do you want this doll's naked behind staring her in the face?

Keisha. I guess not.

Helen. Let me see that bag... Why don't you put these on her?^[51]

Another example of nommo is observed when Keisha is near the end of her story and the images of her experience come full circle; where the death of Coretta as stimulus for agency is the primal influence:

Keisha. The way I figure it, Mrs. King saved my baby's life and I wanted to say thank you, and big respect, and ask her permission to name my daughter Coretta. I know she dead and can't really say yes or no, but I think I would feel it if she didn't want me to, and I would respect her wishes.^[52]

Zora assumes the story is complete and Keisha is quick to remind her that she attended the memorial for two reasons:

Keisha. The other reason is while I was talkin' to that cryin' girl at the clinic, she asked me did I know that Mrs. King wanted to be a singer before she got married, and I said no. What did she sing? And the cryin' girl said, she sang everything, but after she got married, she only sang freedom songs because her husband was leadin' a whole movement. I had never heard of no freedom songs, but the cryin' girl said those songs really helped give people courage when they had to stand up to the Klan and stuff like that... I wouldn't mind being able to sing something that will help me stay strong while I figure out what me and li'l Coretta need to do next. I thought somebody down here might know one of those songs and could teach it to me.^[53]

Helen's change of perception, once again, is depicted in the stage direction, "*Listening to Keisha's story, Helen's face moves from disgust to compassion.*"^[54] After a brief moment of dialoging among the women, they began to discuss the critical necessity of freedom songs during the Civil Rights movement. At Keisha's request, Helen and Zora sing a key anthem of the Freedom Rights Movement, *We Shall Overcome*. Singing the song is another example and principal aesthetic within the African retained practice of oral tradition.

The performance of orature in *A Song for Coretta* is ultimately a method of historical recording for the women. It grants a space for the women as oral performers to tell their story in the present; therefore to place their histories in the continuum of African American experiences.

Through the use of the spoken word, the women not only claim their identity through positionality, but the legitimization of their histories is given a weight of importance. Even more significant is the cathartic effect that the spoken word sanctions. As Audre Lorde suggests in the epigraph, the spoken word – regardless of its ending effect – is certainly beneficial at the very least for the speaker.

Memory En Route of History

A black play is not ignorant of history.

–Suzan Lori Parks

The academic preoccupation with textual knowledge – whereby a culture continually refers itself to its archives – tends to discredit memory in the name of history

–Joseph Roach

Memory does not exist without history. And vice versa. Both are broad and complex topics as they concurrently intersect and relate to African Americans. As a cultural performance, memory acts as a means to provide historical accuracy through personal experiences. Such examples can be identified within the narratives of each of the characters in *A Song for Coretta*.

Pearl Cleage's engagement with history is integral to her dramaturgy. Even more emphatically, Cleage has been recognized for her engagement with paradigms of trauma and traumatic memory. Theorizing about those paradigms as they relate to Cleage's staple plays,^[55] Benjamin Sammons writes:

Though neither packaged nor produced as such, these plays constitute a trilogy as they employ the same formal structure to explore a common subject matter, namely the nexus of violence, freedom, and traumatic memory in African American experience. Set in disparate geographical regions and historical eras, the plays each address the problem of constructing and maintaining a space in which black men and women can pursue personal liberation by escaping the grip of a traumatic past... The work of memory, in fact, claims so prominent a position in these plays as to require a theory of its own.^[56]

Many scholars have written on the subject of memory and trauma in the form of collectivity; in all probability, among them are Cathy Caruth and Ruth Leys.^[57] Concentrating on major American events of the twentieth century, Professor of Sociology Arthur G. Neal has also contributed to the discourse in his book, *National Trauma & Collective Memory*, arguing that “a national trauma differs from a personal trauma in the sense that it is shared with others.”^[58] In his final chapter Neal discusses how the documenting of past histories has always privileged dominant groups. More importantly, Neal distinguishes two subgroups that, historically speaking, have always been at a disadvantage when it comes to collective memory and historical accuracy. The two groups are African Americans and women. Offering perspective, he states that

“very little attention was given to the brutality of the institution of slavery from the vantage point of the victims” and that “while women constitute more than half of the population, their experiences have been underrepresented.”^[59] Neal goes on to finalize his exploration concluding that there is a new, modern consciousness of the two groups where they are “call[ing] for a new look at the ways in which history has been written in the past” and it grows primarily “out of an interest in broadening the scope of historical analysis.”^[60]

This section of the essay self-locates at Neal’s observation. Neal’s premise is illuminated in *A Song for Coretta* towards the end of the play with a scene reminiscent of magic realism between Mona Lisa and Gwen. In the scene and in a structural format that borrows heavily from the trope of call and response, Mona Lisa and Gwen recall their harrowing experiences. For Mona Lisa, it is the treatment of poor African Americans during Hurricane Katrina, and for Gwen it is a “war crime” incident in the Second Gulf War. Mona Lisa’s story privileges the memory of African Americans, while Gwen’s memory sheds light on the experience of being a woman in the military. In comparison to the stories of Helen and Keisha, Mona Lisa and Gwen demand that the idea of collective memory be situated and performed within a context of duality. Specifically, collective memory is triggered in the communal telling of their traumatic experiences; however, it takes on a more theoretical meaning as both of their stories no longer remain personal. Mona Lisa and Gwen reinvent not only themselves, but the collective community of African Americans and women by “performing their pasts in the presence of others.”^[61]

In his book, *Cities of the Dead*, Joseph Roach offers a hypothetical framework for this type of performance. He calls it surrogation. For Roach, surrogacy is branded at the intersection of memory, performance, and substitution – yet the specific setting of Roach’s thesis is pointedly the performance of memory as substitution.^[62] In his exploration of hybridity within culture and performance of the Circum-Atlantic World, Roach explains:

In the life of a community, the process of surrogation does not begin or end but continues as actual or perceived vacancies occur in the network of relations that constitutes the social fabric. Into the cavities created by loss through death or other forms of departure...survivors attempt to fit satisfactorily alternates.^[63]

Roach clarifies that “Because collective memory works selectivity, imaginatively, and often perversely, surrogation rarely if ever succeeds...The fit cannot be exact. The intended substitute either cannot fulfill expectations, creating a deficit, or actually exceeds them, creating a surplus.”^[64] At this idea, my use of surrogacy is to clearly examine the performance of memory as a substitution “for something else that preexists it.”^[65] “Performance, in other words”, states Roach, “stands in for an elusive entity that it is not but that it must vainly aspire both to embody and to replace.”^[66] In other terms, “surrogacy designates multiple levels of substitution in representations...the past standing in for the present-that trouble the identities and subjects they depict as well as those they indirectly invoke.”^[67]

Precisely, Mona Lisa and Gwen no longer represent themselves in the telling of their traumatic experiences, but their performance of collective memory through the process of surrogacy exceeds beyond the mere documentation of history. They both embody Black America’s continuance of oppression and marginalization. Furthermore, their traumatic

memories mark and identify the subjectivity of women. Mona Lisa stands in for Hurricane Katrina victims. Gwen stands in for women in the U.S. military.^[68] Collectively, their memories fluctuate between multitudes of representational spaces: personal, regional, and national and hint toward the international.

When Mona Lisa tells Helen why she traveled from New Orleans to attend Coretta's memorial, she starts with a small anecdote:

It's not much of a story really. It's just that the longer I laid there, like I do every night, looking out the window at where my house used to be – where my whole street used to be. Miss Mary's, with all those sunflowers in the front yard. Pap's place on the corner, always with that good gumbo. Those two girls upstairs from Miss Cat who were going to Dillard and wanted to learn how to speak Chinese....^[69]

Immediately, her memory takes on an insinuation of community representation as effected by the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Zora enters the scene learning that Mona Lisa is a Hurricane Katrina survivor and is quick to ask for an interview. Depicted in the stage direction, Mona Lisa looks at Zora as to suggest her aggravation. Zora responds: "I just thought you might want to go on the record so that people know what really happened."^[70] Mona Lisa counters: "*People know what really happened*"^[71] and at this point she brings in to speculation the legitimacy of historical documentation. She assumes the role of surrogate and speaks of and for the victims of Hurricane Katrina.

Zora and Helen urge Gwen to stand up and take action against what she's witnessed in Iraq. Helen starts to tell Gwen of the old days of collective action for African Americans, which includes Gwen's mother. Helen begins: "Just like in the old days when me and your mom."^[72] However, Gwen abruptly cuts her off and similar to Keisha, reminds her that the times have certainly changed: "This is not the old days! It's just me, okay? It's just me! And I don't want to stand up! I just want out!"^[73] Gwen recaps for the audience/listener that death and mourning are ever so present. Gwen's comment on being alone is reminiscent of the consequences of death; hence, her mother's bout with cancer and the deaths witnessed in Iraq.

In some ways, for Gwen, being a surrogate is not easily recognized. Or rather, it is not readily accepted. Roach explains that surrogates "could not perform themselves, however, unless they also performed what and who they thought they were not. By defining themselves in opposition to others, they produced mutual representations....sometimes in each other's presence."^[74] This is quite true and relevant for Gwen. Observed in the moment where she shares her plans to desert the Army, Gwen's position as surrogate produces multiple representations. In fact, it is Helen that reminds her she is no longer representing herself, but that her presence as a Black woman in the Army signifies past, present, and futured spaces:

Helen. Nobody forced you to raise your hand and take that oath. You stepped up and made a promise, and now you're going to just walk away? Don't you know how much harder that's going to be for the next little black girl who wants to be a soldier?

Gwen. I would tell that little girl to run as far as she could, as fast as she could, and never look back.

Helen. I never thought I'd say this, Gweny, but I'm ashamed of you.
Black women used to stand for something. We were the backbone of the movement. Rosa Parks, Myrlie Evers, Juanita Abernathy, Fannie Lou Hamer, Coretta King. These women risked their lives fighting for your freedom!
Gwen. Well, this is what my freedom looks like.
Helen. Then I guess we were wasting our time.
Gwen. Maybe you were.^[75]

At the climax of the play *Mona Lisa* and Gwen fully ignite their positions as surrogates. Their memories become African America's memory and historical journey. As surrogates, *Mona Lisa* and Gwen position memory as a cultural formality for the establishment of an historical documentation – thereby furthering the notions of a collective narrative as it relates to African American history. For as Geneviève Fabre and Robert O'Meally suggest in their book *History and Memory in African American Culture*:

Historians are storytellers after all, concerned with introducing characters and shaping their stories with some sense of the rhetoric needed to confront their audience's expectations and to bring the past to life. The first black American historians may have been the authors of slave narratives, those whose testimonies comprised not only eyewitness accounts of remembered experience but also a set of world views with interpretations, analyses, and historical judgments. At these points, and indeed at many points around the compass, memory and history come together.^[76]

To conclude, I'd like to place emphasis on the work of Adrian Kear and Deborah Lynn Steinberg. In the introductory chapter of their edited anthology, *Mourning Diana: Nation, Culture, and Performance*, the authors refer to Judith Butler, quoting, "We are made all the more fragile...and all the more mobile when ambivalence and loss are given a dramatic language in which to do their acting out."^[77] They contextualize Butler, writing that she:

Suggests an intimate and integral link between mourning and performance, in which mourning is featured as performance and plays a central role in the performative construction of identity. In many ways, theatre itself can be seen to be a place of mourning...Theatre evokes multiple losses, restaging past events and resuscitating the voices of those who are no longer there. At the same time, it enables an 'acting out' of projective losses, those phantasmatic griefs that remain unspoken within performance of everyday life.^[78]

The link between mourning, orature, memory, history, and performance as an assembly of cultural languages "plays a central role in the performative construction of identity."^[79]

Moreover, it illuminates what Patricia Hill Collins calls "collective identity politics" and situational knowledge."^[80] While it is seemingly easy to assume that Cleage's commitment to "collective identity politics" is only for the concern of women, and in this case, African American women, Collins begs to differ. She eloquently composes that "Cleage came to political struggle both as [a] unique individual and as [a] member of a historically constituted, oppressed racial group," therefore "Cleage...wishes to "work side by side" with Black men to foster the

liberation of all people.”^[81] Cleage’s goal is to foster a Black community that symbolizes a liberated zone.

Final Thoughts: Pearl Cleage and the African American Dramatic Canon

“Past and present, history and memory, ritual and reality all collide”, writes Harry Elam Jr. as he describes how “[August] Wilson (w)rights history through performative rites that pull the action out of time or even to ritualize time in order to change the power and potentialities of the new...[Wilson] reinterprets how history operates in relation to race and space, time and memory.”^[82] Joining her fellow colleague(s), Pearl Cleage has utilized those colliding traits, most recently within her play *A Song for Coretta*. Like Wilson, Cleage uses past and present (circum)stances of the African American community as the center of her play. Yet, unlike Wilson, Cleage does not necessarily (w)right history. Instead, Cleage employs what scholar Trudier Harris recognizes as “shaping identity in African American drama”. Precisely, Cleage utilizes an “imaginative point of departure from an event that makes clear the intersections of history... and African American positionality.”^[83] For *A Song for Coretta* that “event” was the public viewing of the late Coretta Scott King and the “imaginative point of departure” began when Cleage illustrated five fictional African American women who've come to mourn the ancestor at her public memorial at the historic Ebenezer Baptist Church on February 26, 2006

[1] For more on phenomenology as it relates to Black experiences, see Harvey Young, *Embodying Black Experience: Stillness, Critical Memory, and the Black Body* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010).

[2] Pearl Cleage, *A Song for Coretta*. (New York: Dramatists Play Service, Inc., 2008), 7.

[3] Karla FC Holloway, *Passed On: African American Mourning Stories* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 6.

[4] *Ibid.*, 7.

[5] Holloway’s use of the term “veil” stems from W.E.B. Du Bois’ book, *Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Penguin, 1989.), originally published in 1903. Holloway states that the term derives from his memorial-like passage about the death of his son.

[6] Cleage, *A Song for Coretta*, 13.

[7] *Ibid.*

[8] *Ibid.*

[9] *Ibid.*, 32.

[10] *Ibid.*, 28.

[11] *Ibid.*, 29.

- [12] Adrian Kear and Deborah Lynn Steinberg, "Ghost Writing," in *Mourning Diana: Nation, Culture and the Performance of Grief*, ed. Adrian Kear and Deborah Lynn Steinberg (New York: Routledge, 1999), 7.
- [13] Geneviève Fabre, *Drumbeats, Masks, and Metaphor: Contemporary Afro-American Theatre*. Trans. Melvin Dixon. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983), 220.
- [14] Joseph Roach, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996) 14.
- [15] Peter Homans, "Introduction," in *Symbolic Loss: The Ambiguity of Mourning and Memory at Century's End*, ed. Peter Homans (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2000), 2.
- [16] *Ibid.*
- [17] *Ibid.*, 2-3.
- [18] Holloway, *Passed On*, 162-163.
- [19] *Ibid.*, 185-187.
- [20] Fabre, *Drumbeats*, 219. Fabre writes: "Oral expression, which encourages exchange and immediate response, serves as a model for patterns of participation and involvement...Because the oral tradition has long remained a living practice in Afro-American culture, the dramatic artist has been tempted to emulate not only the art and techniques of the storyteller, but also his prestigious social function – that of recording and reformulating experience, of shaping and transmitting values, opinions, and attitudes, and of expressing a certain collective wisdom."
- [21] Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 1986), 15.
- [22] Griottes is the feminine term for Griot, a West African originated term that can designate a person as a historian, storyteller, poet, etc. For further clarification, see Thomas A. Hale's *Griots and Griottes*.
- [23] Harry J. Elam, Jr., *The Past as Present in the Drama of August Wilson* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004), 12.
- [24] *Ibid.*, 12.
- [25] Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o, "Notes Toward a Performance Theory of Orature," *Performance Research* 12.3 (September 2007): 4-7. Also see Thiong'o's *Penpoints, Gunpoints, and Dreams: Towards a Critical Theory of the Arts and the States in Africa* for another reading on orature.
- [26] Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o, "Notes Toward a Performance Theory of Orature," *Performance Research* 12.3 (September 2007): 4.
- [27] *Ibid.*
- [28] Pitika Ntuli, "Orature: A Self Portrait," in *Storms of the Heart: An Anthology of Black Arts & Culture*, ed. Kwesi Owusu (London: Camden Press, 1988), 215.
- [29] Cleage, *A Song for Coretta*, 7.
- [30] *Ibid.*, 8.
- [31] *Ibid.*, 8-9.
- [32] *Ibid.*, 9.
- [33] *Ibid.*, 9-10.
- [34] *Ibid.*, 10-11.

[35] *Ibid.*, 11-12.

[36] *Ibid.*, 12.

[37] *Ibid.*, 21-22.

[38] *Ibid.*, 28.

[39] Young, *Embodying Black Experience*, 138.

[40] Molefi Kete Asante, *The Afrocentric Idea* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998), 96.

[41] *Ibid.*, 95-96.

[42] Cleage, 20-21.

[43] *Ibid.*, 22.

[44] *Ibid.*, 22-23.

[45] I emailed Molefi K. Asante, Temple University Professor of African/African American Studies and asked him to clarify the origin of Nommo. This was his response: "Nommo was first introduced by Janheinz Jahn in the book, *Muntu*, for American audiences. I met him many years ago as a graduate student at UCLA. He was a German who lived in France and wrote also in English. He found the word in the language of the Dogon people of Mali. So it is an African word, popularized by Molefi Asante and Janheinz Jahn."

[46] Asante, *Afrocentric Idea*, 96.

[47] Paul Carter Harrison, *The Drama of Nommo* (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1972), xix.

[48] *Ibid.*, xix.

[49] Cleage, *A Song for Coretta*, 23.

[50] *Ibid.*, 25.

[51] *Ibid.*

[52] *Ibid.*, 24.

[53] *Ibid.*, 24-25.

[54] *Ibid.*, 25.

[55] Cleage's staple plays are *Flyin' West*, *Blues for an Alabama Sky*, and *Bourbon at the Border*.

[56] Benjamin Sammons, "Flyin' Anyplace Else": (Dis) Engaging Traumatic Memory in Three Plays by Pearl Cleage, "In Contemporary African American Drama: Fragments of History, Fragments of Self, ed. Trudier Harris and Jennifer Larson (New York: Peter Lang, 2007), 99-100.

[57] See Cathy Caruth's *UNCLAIMED EXPERIENCE: Trauma, Narrative, and History* and Ruth Leys *Trauma: A Genealogy*.

- [58] Arthur G. Neal, *National Trauma and Collective Memory: Major Events in the American Century* (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1998), 4.
- [59] *Ibid.*, 214.
- [60] *Ibid.*, 214-215.
- [61] Roach, *Cities of the Dead*, 5.
- [62] Preluding his book *Cities of the Dead*, Joseph Roach talks about the interdependence of performance and collective memory as an emergence “from a project that would recast the category of literature, as a repository of texts, in relation to what...Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong’o calls ‘orature’, the range of cultural forms invested in speech, gesture, song, dance, storytelling, proverbs, customs, rites, and rituals.” in his article, “Culture and Performance in the Circum-Atlantic World,” in *Performativity and Performance*, edited by Andrew Parker and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, (New York: Routledge, 1995), 45-63.
- [63] Roach, *Cities of the Dead*, 2.
- [64] *Ibid.*
- [65] *Ibid.*, 3.
- [66] *Ibid.*
- [67] Diana Paulin, “Representing Forbidden Desire: Interracial Unions, Surrogacy and Performance,” *Theatre Journal* 49 (December 1997): 417-418.
- [68] It can be argued that Gwen perhaps is a surrogate for victims of war crimes. However, for this section I want to specifically focus on the subjectivity of women and Black America. A discussion of war crimes and the New Gulf War would take me too far from the topic at hand.
- [69] Cleage, *A Song for Coretta*, 15.
- [70] *Ibid.*, 17.
- [71] *Ibid.*
- [72] *Ibid.*, 34.
- [73] *Ibid.*
- [74] Roach, *Cities of the Dead*, 5.
- [75] Cleage, *A Song for Coretta*, 34-35.
- [76] Geneviève Fabre and Robert O’Meally, “Introduction,” in *History & Memory in African-American Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 6.
- [77] Kear and Steinberg, “Ghost Writing,” 6.
- [78] *Ibid.*
- [79] *Ibid.*
- [80] Patricia Hill Collins, *From Black Power to Hip Hip: Racism, Nationalism, and Feminism* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006), 124.
- [81] *Ibid.*, 125-127.

[82] Elam, *Past as Present*, 1-3.

[83] Trudier Harris, "Cracking the Mirror of History: Or, Shaping Identity in African American Drama," in *Reading Contemporary African American Drama: Fragments of History, Fragments of Self*, ed. Trudier Harris and Jennifer Larson (New York: Peter Lang, 2007), x.

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