1994

Disseminating Heterotopia

Robert F. Reid-Pharr
CUNY Graduate Center

How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!

Follow this and additional works at: http://academicworks.cuny.edu/gc_pubs

Part of the [African American Studies Commons](#), [Film and Media Studies Commons](#), [Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Studies Commons](#), and the [Literature in English, North America Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Reid-Pharr, Robert F., "Disseminating Heterotopia" (1994). *CUNY Academic Works*.
http://academicworks.cuny.edu/gc_pubs/292

This Article is brought to you by CUNY Academic Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in Publications and Research by an authorized administrator of CUNY Academic Works. For more information, please contact AcademicWorks@gc.cuny.edu.

Disseminating Heterotopia

*Utopias afford consolation: although they have no real locality there is nevertheless a fantastic, untroubled region in which they are able to unfold: they open up cities with vast avenues, superbly planted gardens, countries where life is easy, even though the road to them is chimerical. Heterotopias are disturbing, probably because they shatter or tangle common names, because they destroy "syntax" in advance, and not only that less apparent syntax which causes words and things (next to and also opposite one another) to "hold together." This is why utopias permit fables and discourses: they run with the very grain of language and are part of the fundamental fabula: heterotopias desiccate speech, stop words in their tracks, contest the very possibility of grammar at its source: they dissolve our myths and sterilize the lyricism of our sentences. (Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things*)*

Robert F. Reid-Pharr is Assistant Professor of English at The Johns Hopkins University.

*I resented seeing Nature and History confused at every turn, and I wanted to track down, in the decorative display of what-goes-without-saying, the ideological abuse which, in my view, is hidden there. (Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*)*

Most of us are accustomed to speaking of myths as if they were discrete and static objects. Indeed it seems at times that the most cherished, and contested, of American myths—Family, Democracy, Equality, and Prosperity—are treated, on the one hand, as if they were the most fragile of antiquities, constantly in need of repair and conservation, and, on the other, as if they were themselves the very sources of despair and injustice. I would argue, however, that this tendency to ossify myths, to read them as objects or ideas, leads only to further confusion. Barthes, among others, has shown us that myth is best understood as a form of communication. It is not the substance of the message, but the form in which it is transmitted, that casts it as myth. One might argue, in fact, that myth is best described as a process similar to the one represented by algebraic equations. That is to say, the two sides of the "sentence" can be understood as equivalent, but not necessarily as equal. The emphasis is on form not substance, process not content.

It is this understanding of the mythic process, if you will, that informs the work of Black British filmmakers Isaac Julien and Maureen Blackwood in their 1986 work *The Passion of Remembrance* and Black American speculative fiction writer Samuel Delany in his 1979 novel *Tales of Nevèrÿon*. Indeed the goal of these artists is not to explode any one myth, but to demonstrate that myths are not hermetically sealed "truths" or even self-consciously fashioned ideologies, but, on the contrary, modes of communication, or formulae, that work to support "common sense" notions of right and wrong, native and foreign, self and other.

In the process, the artists directly confront traditional notions of what constitutes proper identity and community politics, especially as these have been articulated by previous generations of Black artists in both Britain and the United States.

Indeed, in both *The Passion of Remembrance* and *Tales of Nevèrjôn* the goal is to demonstrate that the lines of demarcation between the Black community and the white, the gay and the straight, are themselves constructions, a fact which the (mythic) language of (Black) nationalists obfuscates. Yet, as I argue below, this deconstructive process, this collapsing of the distinction between the Black and the non-Black, the gay and the non-gay, can rebound upon itself, creating a situation in which it becomes terrifically difficult to make any positive statements about either identity or politics.

In Delany's *Tales of Nevèrjôn* as well as Julien and Blackwood's *The Passion of Remembrance*, the artists hold up to view or "mirror," if you will, the various elements of the mythic equation. This represents, in several respects, a radical break with the work of many Black artists. As I have already argued, neither Julien and Blackwood nor Delany treats myths as objects. Their project is neither to destroy negative myths nor to construct new ones. On the contrary, their work is driven by a desire to demonstrate that, as a *form* of communication, myth can be neither destroyed, nor transcended, nor ultimately even domesticated.

It is in this sense that the idea of *heterotopia* is useful. We might define this concept as a prophetic vision of society that allows for the presence of constant change and improvisation. As a consequence, the tendency to collapse the various elements of myths into well-understood, never-changing signs is checked. Within heterotopia the emphasis is always on the possibility of possibilities. Myth becomes, therefore, a field on which many different ideologies might be expressed, challenged, and defended.

Utopias afford consolation: although they have no real locality there is nevertheless a fantastic, untroubled region in which they are able to unfold: they open up cities with vast avenues, superbly planted gardens, countries where life is easy, even though the road to them is chimerical.

The clearest indication that a work is intended to be read as myth is the presence of some marker that demonstrates that the narrative exists outside of (the audience's) space and time. The formulaic opening of fairy tales, "Once upon a time in a land far, far away," immediately alerts the reader to the fact that the story is not meant to be taken literally, but as an allegory of social and cultural structures that exist in the "real world." Every element of the tale takes on multiple levels of meaning. Humpty Dumpty is not simply an egg that falls to the pavement and cracks, but a symbol of permanently changed social relations: "And all the king's horses and all the king's men could not put Humpty back together again."

The Passion of Remembrance opens with a shot of an unidentified woman dressed in black, looking at the audience and speaking directly to it in "poetic language." One is immediately forced to relinquish "common-sense" notions of the proper construction of narratives, particularly film narratives. This film does not invite its audience to forget the barriers that separate it from them. The audience is not a silent partner in the action of the film, but a clearly delineated *Other*. Moreover, the woman's clothing and form of address deemphasize her own subjectivity, opening the way for the emphasis to be placed on language that is immediately recognizable as poetic, allegorical, and mythical.

Delany is also quick to focus the reader's attention on language and the process by which one might use language to gain and convey knowledge. He accomplishes this through the use of two epigrams that

precede the text. The first is taken from Gayatri Spivak's introduction to Jacques Derrida's *Of Grammatology*, the second from Edward Said's *Beginnings: Intention and Method*. Both speak to the fact that all discourse is constructed and, therefore, "provisional and inconclusive." Language is not, then, an equitable arbiter between all forms of knowledge. On the contrary, its construction is based on the maintenance of certain knowledges and the suppression of others. Those who would know the "unknown" must first challenge the very bases of language itself. Spivak writes:

the authority of the text is provisional, the origin is a trace, contradicting logic, we must learn to use and erase our language at the same time If one is always bound by one's perspective, one can at least deliberately reverse perspectives as often as possible, in the process undoing opposed perspectives, showing that the two terms of an opposition are mere accomplices of each other

The reader is alerted to the fact that, while it is impossible to escape one's perspective, it is quite possible to both understand and demonstrate how this perspective is maintained. When we accept the idea that something is true, we must also accept the idea that something else is untrue. When we switch perspectives, however, we find that the same logic of truth versus untruth applies. Once again we are left with an equation in which the equivalency of the two sides is maintained, or mystified, by a (provisional) authority.

... utopias permit fable and discourse: they run with the very grain of language and are part of the fundamental fabula

Even within the realm of the fantastic there are linguistic and narrative conventions that work to maintain coherency between the text and the reader. In science fiction, to

say that "her world exploded" denotes a literal occurrence—a planet exploding—that is outside of human experience. Yet in realistic fiction it might mean simply that her particular set of circumstances changed quite drastically. The language of science fiction is taken, then, beyond the limits of metaphor to metonymy in a manner that might be described as "liberating." Even so, the author cannot fully exercise this "liberty." There is still a limited range of meaning to the phrase *her world exploded* such that even speculative fiction writers must restrict themselves in order to assure a work's "readability."¹

Delany constructs a story that is well within the limits of the "sword-and-sorcery" form in which he works. It centers around a male protagonist, Gorgik, who travels through a land "on the brink of civilization," Nevèrjôn, meeting fantastic, nearly supernatural characters and eluding innumerable perils along the way. This mystical land takes its name from its capital city, Nevèrjona, which in typical sword-and-sorcery fashion is a haven in which characters can negotiate both the conservative and radical forces operating within their society (Spencer 64-65).

Julien and Blackwood also utilize a number of familiar conventions. In fact, one need not look further than "teenage-love-and-adventure" films to find models for their surface narrative. Like the sword-and-sorcery tales, these films are preoccupied with liminality. The teen hero is struggling to assert independence while necessarily having to bow to the dominance of adults and other teens. As a result, s/he must seek some free space in which to (un)self-consciously experience liminality and assert desire, particularly sexual desire. This "space" usually takes the form of both a quasi-rebellious community, a group of other "outsiders" that acts as a buffer between the teen and his/her

conflicting reality, and a festival, a place that emphasizes music and dance and that is somewhat protected from the immediate intervention of parents and peers—the party, the prom, the disco. Music and dance become, therefore, symbols of teen struggle itself.²

It seems that, even while the formulae that these “directors” have chosen are attempts to demonstrate liminality, they are also attempts to resolve it. The hero’s world does not remain in flux indefinitely but changes to meet his needs. The realities of both the swordsman and the teen become the dominant realities of the narrative. They always win the prizes: the money, the girl, control over themselves and their environment. The (adolescent) audience is left, therefore, with a sense that its perception of the world is the correct perception. The disquieting feeling of vertigo, of only half-understanding reality, is temporarily abated.

It is precisely this “comfortableness” that the three artists are most eager to spoil. That is to say, their work challenges the notion of absolute closure. Their emphasis is always on process. In both *Tales of Nevèrjon* and *The Passion of Remembrance* readers are led to the understanding that myths are not precious objects, but complex systems of signification which cannot be transcended but which can be understood apart from their specific (ideological) content.

This seemingly untenable project is accomplished quite simply in both Delany’s work and that of Julien and Blackwood. Following the Derridean model suggested above by Spivak, they simply construct a number of narrative and symbolic reversals

which destabilize the logic(s) that the audiences bring to the work:

If one is always bound by one’s perspective, one can at least deliberately reverse perspectives as often as possible, in the process undoing opposed perspectives, showing that the two terms of an opposition are mere accomplices of each other . . .

The trick is to learn to manipulate the myths with which we fashion ourselves in such a way as to privilege both multiplicity and solidarity, the one and the many.

That is exactly the project in both *Tales of Nevèrjon* and *The Passion of Remembrance*. The works center around a series of binary oppositions—slavery/freedom, man/woman, Black/white—which the artists destabilize through a reversal of the value attached to each and the subsequent illumination of the logic that binds these “oppositions” together. As Julien argues, “There needs to be an attempt to make things less binaristic. I’m interested in having those

dichotomies break down. . . . that’s the kind of ‘difference’ that I’d like, the kind of postmodernism I’d be interested in” (Rich 69).

In both works the perfunctory “sexual tension” is maintained, but it is certainly not in the form expected by the audience. The adolescent, (hetero)sexually unrestrained, sword-and-sorcery hero is replaced by Delany’s adult, homosexual character Gorgik. His sex, moreover, is anything but unrestrained. Gorgik is, in fact, only able to perform sexually when either he or his partner wears a slave collar, a fact that is a point of contention between him and his young, barbaric lover Small Sarg. His heroism, on the other hand, is indisputable, but is almost never directly illustrated. During the “great battle scene,” Gorgik is being tortured in a dungeon. Each moment of the ritualistic event is described—in detail—to

the reader. Meanwhile, Small Sarg, the non-commanding—and sexually submissive—youth, does the actual ransacking of the castle and rallying of the slaves. Nowhere in the novel is Gorgik actually seen wielding a weapon, slaying a dragon, or rescuing a damsel in distress. This last honor is reserved for Raven, a female warrior from a female-dominated society.

(Homo)sexuality also stands at the center of Julien and Blackwood's film. The only development of a romantic relationship is of one between two Black men who consummate their passion in a kiss that comes neatly—and unexpectedly—after a night at the disco. And just when the audience is thoroughly shocked, the kiss is interrupted by white youths who are attacking the home of a Black family. Racism and racial violence are imagined, therefore, as disruptive of both the Black family, and the full expression of Black sexuality. Moreover, this image forces the audience to question what is truly shocking and "abnormal," homosexual passion or "normal" racial terrorism.³

This latter point becomes particularly interesting when viewed in the fuller context of Julien and Blackwood's—and Delany's—examination of liminality. The attacking white youths are angry that their victims will not leave England and go back to their "own" (presumably Caribbean, African, or Asian) "homelands." While they attack "the home," they are clandestinely watched by the two young, Black homosexual lovers. These characters, we may assume, have spent most of their lives in Britain. Liminality insinuates itself, then, even more deeply into the narrative: "If my home is not here, then where is it?"

The question is further complicated by the fact that Julien and Blackwood choose to foreground the sexism and homophobia of some segments of the Black community. In

fact, one might make the claim that the reason these homosexual lovers are in the position to see and understand the true nature of white racism is precisely because they have been forced to express their sexualities outside of what we might call the traditional Black home. Unlike the older generation of Black people represented in the film, the gay lovers have decided to step outside of the enclave. Their trip to the disco represents not simply a short-lived escape from their difficult workaday lives, but also a willingness to participate fully in the culture of the metropolis, to mix, as it were, with the infinite variety of people and styles that compose the culture of contemporary London. It is the very rejection of the homosexual character that places him in the position of being able to comprehend the full reality of British racism. And it is precisely this knowledge that could be most useful to those people who have remained inside the home, the same people who initiated this cycle of rejection and observation.

Reversals within reversals, then, is the ordering aesthetic in both works. Delany's male hero Gorgik is rendered as tortured, submissive, feminine. "Masculine" aggressiveness is reserved for Gorgik's female counterpart, Raven. Julien and Blackwood's oppressed Black community, on the other hand, is also seen as oppressive and (self-)destructive, while some whites—gay men and women—are by inference imagined as community.

Significantly, in both works the artists choose the mirror to act as the signifier of this aesthetic. Julien and Blackwood include dozens of images of mirrors. They are a constant presence in the footage of the political events that they poetically weave throughout the film. Time and again we see the same images of political "happenings"—labor confrontations with police, gay and lesbian marches, Black rallies. And each time, they

try—through the use of color filters—to charge the image with a different visual effect from the one it held the time before. Repeatedly, however, the camera's gaze focuses on small mirrors being carried by participants in the events. The film ends, in fact, with a shot of Maggie, the central female protagonist, sitting at her dressing table, her face reflected in a mirror.

Delany's mirrors are fastened about the stomachs of young boys. The boys are being taught, along with their female counterparts, the values and structure of their culture. Their teacher is the infinitely wise Old Venn. Her tools for instruction are taken from the things that occur "naturally" in her environment, mirrors fastened to the stomachs of young boys included. With these mirrors she demonstrates that reflections are only representations of things, not the things themselves. Indeed the essence of the reflection is that it shares a similar pattern with its antecedent, but not the same substance. The pattern becomes, therefore, that much more visible:

When they painted the prow designs on . . . boats, frequently for the more delicate work that could not be done with the cut-out stencils, the painters checked their outlines in mirrors. The reversal of the image made irregularities more apparent . . . (66)

Irregularities, in turn, make regularities themselves more apparent. It is with the mirror, then, that we can see the structure that holds together both the object and the inverse, the One and the Other.

Heterotopias . . . destroy "syntax" in advance, and not only the syntax with which we construct sentences but also that less apparent syntax which causes words and things (next to and also opposite one another) to "hold together."

I have tried to reveal the manner in which Julien, Blackwood, and Delany have destabilized syntax. This destabilization does not involve trying

to destroy myth, but instead turns on the demonstration of myth as process. By changing the focus of the "reader," the artists are able to demonstrate that familiar narratives are indeed constructed—not natural, or inevitable, or transcendent. In the two works that we have examined narrative conventions are maintained, yet the audiences' expectations are thwarted through a series of jarring reversals. What has been destroyed, then, is not the syntax itself. On the contrary, the artists have worked precisely to demonstrate that there is indeed a constructed logic, a syntax, which holds together the narrative structures of the forms in which they work.

The dominant logics of the artists' tales become quite apparent when they are rendered in another vernacular. When we reverse, for example, the terms with which the Myth of Liminality is usually rendered—adolescence, masculinity, hetero-sexuality—the myth is not lost *per se*. Instead it becomes that much more apparent. In the process, however, the reader comes to understand that myth is not ahistorical or atemporal. The very fact that a myth's constituent elements do indeed exist inside space and time is what makes it possible for us to interpret the meaning of the equation, to unpack, if you will, the ideological content of the myth:

Mythical speech is made of material which has *already* been worked on so as to make it suitable for communication: it is because all the materials of myth (whether pictorial or written) presuppose a signifying consciousness, that one can reason about them while discounting their substance. (Barthes 110)

This process of destabilization is, moreover, infinitely expansive. Already we have seen the artists turn their "mirroring" gazes from the symbolic and narrative conventions of the forms in which they work to the "logically" constructed oppositions be-

tween slavery and freedom, Black and white, man and woman. And with the initiation of each reversal it becomes increasingly apparent that all myths, even those which hold together language, are constructed and, therefore, deconstructible.

Both the language we criticize and the language with which we criticize should be recognized, then, as "provisional." This includes the very surface on which these claims are made. Julien, Blackwood, and Delany are concerned with routing out even the myths that provide logical unity to their own texts, rendering them—the texts—common and "frivolous." This effect is particularly apparent in Delany's description of a young girl, Norema, watching as men from her village set fire to a foreign ship moored in their harbor. All of the ship's sailors, except one—a striking Black man—are female. Their crime, the horror for which they are being murdered, is that their "lifestyle" resonates too deeply with Ulvayn myths of sex and slavery:

Certain storytelling conventions would have us here . . . go back and insert some fictive encounter between the girl [Norema] and one or more of the sailor women: a sunny afternoon on the docks, Norema sharing a watermelon and inner secrets with a coarse-haired wide-eyed twenty-year-old; Norema and a fourteen-year-old whose dirty blond hair was bound with beaded thongs, sitting knee to knee on a weathered log, talking of journeys taken and journeys desired; or a dawn encounter at a beached dinghy between Norema and some heavy-armed redhead falling to silent communion at some task of mending, bailing, or caulking. Certainly the addition of such a scene, somewhere previous to this in our text, would make what happens next conform more closely to the general run of tales. The only trouble with such fictive encounters is, first, they frequently do not occur, and second, frequently when they do, rather than leading to the action fiction uses them to impel, they make us feel that, somehow we have already acted, already done our part to deploy a few good feelings—

especially when the action required goes against the general will. (116-17)

I have included this rather lengthy passage because it eloquently illustrates what I have just tried to describe: the process by which even the writer's own language is problematized. While we are alerted to the fact that there are certain narrative "conventions" that a tale might follow we are simultaneously alerted to the fact that this tale is indeed being told. The biases that govern are open to debate and revision. They are, in fact, just as constructed as the constructions they illustrate. Julien and Blackwood also engage in this deconstructive (self-)destructive project. Their film revolves around the work of a Black woman filmmaker, Maggie. Throughout, the audience is made to watch her watching her film. This image alone begs the necessity of our recognizing Julien and Blackwood as part of this cycle of watcher and watched.

Our work transgresses the notion of identity, which doesn't fit neatly into compartments: you know, this is black, this is gay, this is a lesbian, this is a black woman, this is politics, this is culture. (Isaac Julien, qtd. in Rich 68)

Literature as we know it today is a local illusion. The notion of a self-evidently superior group of texts, which eventually defines an interdependent group of literary genres . . . genres which, in their idealized form . . . constitute "literature" per se, is not very far from the notion of a self-evidently superior group of individuals, which eventually defines an interdependent array of civilized social categories, . . . social categories which, in their idealized form . . . constitute "civilization" per se. (Samuel R. Delany, qtd. in Reid-Pharr 530).

In this essay, I have attempted to demonstrate how three artists, Isaac Julien, Maureen Blackwood, and Samuel R. Delany, have struggled to demonstrate that the myths with which we organize our various cultures are not some fixed, immutable quantities, but rather dynamic forms of communication. That being done, I think it important to try to understand how these artists relate their project(s)

to the practice of identity politics—a practice that their texts indirectly criticize.

While I am generally sympathetic to Blackwood's, Julien's, and Delany's projects, I also think it is important that we resist the simple substitution of one set of myths for another. It would be wrong to assume that these artists' demonstrations of the syntax which hold together the Black/white, male/female, heterosexual/homosexual binarisms somehow transcend the mythic process. Indeed, as I argued above, the language with which we criticize mythic speech has already been worked upon to render it suitable for communication. The audience must always be addressed in a manner that audience members can understand.

It follows, then, that questions of identity would become terrifically important. That is to say, as artists create they must either assume an already existing audience, or work to create or "interpellate" one. This process is doubly complicated in the art of Julien, Blackwood, and Delany because of the fact that they have actively worked against simplistic notions of how race, gender, and sexuality constitute community.

Identity-based politics have been very important, but at the same time, these identities can't be held onto in a precious way. We somehow have to enter into our own kind of complex modernity. (Rich 68)

The question for me is, if indeed identity cannot be compartmentalized and literature is (historically and culturally) "local," then to whom have these artists addressed their works and how is it ever possible for "us" positively to effect political and cultural reality? By way of beginning to address these issues I would argue that there is indeed a fairly well-defined "we," a group of insiders, if you will, whom Julien, Blackwood, and Delany are addressing. Post-essen-

tialist, anti-essentialist theories of identity abound within the contemporary practice of art and criticism. There is a substantial market, moreover, for critique of the reductive, homophobic, misogynistic elements within African American cultural and intellectual life. Indeed the absent "we," the unnamed audiences of *The Passion of Remembrance* and *Tales of Nevèrjon*, might be said to be that very group of critics and artists who have so successfully problematized notions of Self, Community, and Truth. I must ask, however, how much we have actually gained in the process?

To state it flatly, I am concerned that, as we demonstrate the hybridity and multiplicity within our various selves, as we seriously problematize the practice of identity politics, we do not also suggest workable alternatives. Indeed I am led to wonder if the post-essentialism of many Black artists and critics, myself included, is as much a representation of our own class positions as an obviously necessary corrective to the reductive thinking of many students of Black culture. One may be able to put aside simple notions of Blackness within the (elite) classroom, but is the same possible within the welfare office, or the unemployment line? Indeed we might ask if Blackwood, Julien, and Delany have not introduced another set of binarisms: essentialist vs. post-essentialist, (male) sexist vs. (female) feminist, (straight) homophobe vs. (gay) homophile.

The dominant voice in *The Passion of Remembrance* is indeed The Woman's voice. The Woman's words provide the backdrop against which The Man responds. When they meet on the ravaged terrain of "homelessness," it is She who speaks with confidence about the very state of liminality itself. He, on the other hand, attempts to avoid this conversation altogether by focusing on the absence of "home." In *Tales of Nevèrjon*,

it is the "pastiche of understandings" that is valued. The novel is a compilation of separate stories, not the single recitation of one narrative. Moreover, Gorgik has been slave, soldier, court jester, and of course liberator. Indeed all of the work's major characters—Old Venn, Small Sarg, Raven, Norema—have at one point or another left their native lands, their homes, to boldly experience the culture of The Other(s). It is difficult, in fact, to hear the voice of "The Homebody" in this work.

The answer to this dilemma is necessarily as speculative as the questions that engender it. It is, in fact, not an answer at all, at least so far as *answer* implies closure, understanding, finality. Indeed the only "solution" I can offer is further inquiry: Is it ultimately disempowering to assume that the "knowledges" of all subjects, including oppressed subjects, are provisional? Does the recognition of the provisional nature of knowledge level the values of all knowledges such that every aesthetic, every ideology becomes equal? Is the recognition of this "provisionality" itself a privileged knowledge? How can one ever act in a world whose boundaries are constantly in flux? How can we know? I hope that these questions point to a certain skepticism about the efficacy of destabilizing notions of Truth and Self at precisely the moment when a few devalued Truths and Selves have gained some audience. I also hope, however, that these questions demonstrate a belief in our ability to accept the constructed nature of our realities, while at the same time utilizing these realities to spur progressive action.

Delany ends his *Tales of Nevèrjôn* with an appendix entitled "Some Informal Remarks Toward the Modular Calculus, Part Three." *The Passion of Remembrance* ends with a final rhetorical battle between The Man and The Woman, a battle that takes place on a

decimated, scarred terrain, an unsettling sign of homelessness. In both instances these "conclusions" lead the audiences away from their expectations of closure and consolation to an awareness that questioning only begets more questioning. These final remarks should be read, not as benediction, but as the artists' guides to reading the works which they have constructed; that is, their (self-)criticism.

Delany's appendix is indeed a further examination of the issues taken up in the novel. He tries to represent once again the difficulty an author faces when attempting to use one "relational system" to model another; that is, the difficulty of using the written word to model speech, which in turn models "reality." Moreover, this appendix is the second in a series that began with an "Appendix B," published as part of Delany's 1978 novel *Triton*. As part of a series, this appendix reminds the reader of both the open-endedness of these questions and the meaninglessness of "closure." The discussion specifically centers around a fictionalized interchange between archaeologists about the origin and translation of the Culhar Text, widely believed to be the oldest example of writing in existence. By the end of this interchange it becomes clear to the reader that the notion of origin is untenable. The Culhar fragment itself is a translation of some lost bit of writing, which in turn represents speech, which represents logic, which represents reality, itself a constructed notion.

Like Delany, Julien and Blackwood's "appendix" also takes up the questions that drove their film's narrative. The difficulty of resolving conflict and confusion is debated by The Man and The Woman until they reach an impasse. The Man then becomes frustrated with The Woman's challenge(s), and finally with the whole project of questioning and deconstruction. He starts to leave

the liminal terrain. The film ends, however, before he is able to exit "the conversation." We are left, then, at the very point at which we began.

In the spirit of reflexivity with which these two pieces were created, I would like to offer a few brief comments about my own investment in engaging with them critically. I must admit that it was indeed "identity politics" that drew me to both works. I am absolutely interested in understanding how other "Black" intellectuals negotiate the morass of inconclusivity and tenuousness that connects sexuality with ethnicity. Specifically, my "knowledge" of Isaac Julien and Samuel Delany as Black, gay men sparked a desire to connect, a longing to view the spaces that they had etched out for themselves in the absence of home. Yet, as the quotation marks around the word *knowledge* demonstrate, I am aware that the label *Black, Gay Man* can be read as an erasure of difference. Each of our identities is criss-crossed by a multiplicity of variables. Our individual selves lie at the nexus of these. The question of what specifically a "Black, Gay critic" has to offer in a reading of works by "Black, Gay artists" (especially when one of the works concerned has been created in collaboration with a woman) becomes, then, so incredibly complex as to seem unanswerable. Still, the fact remains that at some level my sense of a shared identity with Delany, Julien, and by extension Blackwood operates within this essay.

By way of beginning to reconcile the tensions that I have just described,

I would suggest that each of us is limited by the language(s) with which we communicate. That is, my deployment of the label *Black, Gay Man* does not conjure up, in the mind of the reader, an infinite array of possibilities. Indeed the "Black, Gay Man" is a quantity that most of us would presume to know. He is not alien, indecipherable, invisible. Julien's and Delany's respective identities remain, I believe, well-moored for the readers of this essay, even as I endeavor to demonstrate their slipperiness. I believe, in fact, that the small revolution in cultural production by self-identified Black, gay men in the past decade has added to the sense of confidence that many non-Gay, non-Black individuals may feel about who "we" are.⁴ The paradox for the contemporary critic, then, is that, just as the diversity underlying the label *Black, Gay Man* becomes increasingly evident, the desire to demonstrate and recognize that difference lessens. Samuel Delany becomes Isaac Julien becomes Marlon Riggs becomes Essex Hemphill becomes Joseph Beam.

My hope is that these remarks will help point the way to a politics of community that is both complex and efficacious—one in which we are not asked to relinquish one set of hierarchies for another, but which will not leave us in a vicious cycle of constantly proving who we are not. The trick is to learn to manipulate the myths with which we fashion ourselves in such a way as to privilege both multiplicity and solidarity, the one and the many. This road still lies before us.

Notes

1. For a discussion of narrative and symbolic conventions in science fiction, see Spencer and Altman.

2. Significantly, Isaac Julien's recent film *Young Soul Rebels* (1991) makes explicit the director's fascination with the mix of uncertainty and fluidity that characterizes much of adolescent experience. The work focuses on 1977, a year marked in Britain by the Queen's Silver Jubilee, but also by the convergence of a number of youth cultures: skinheads, punks, soul boys, gays. Julien

himself came of age in this period, in which Britain saw the proliferation of both dance spaces and underground radio stations around which varieties of young people began to imagine new forms of community and in which they found new forms of expression for their desires.

3. Julien had this to say about the kiss's shocking effect: "What we really didn't anticipate was the immense reaction black audiences have had to the scene where two men kiss. Even very progressive people say: well, it's all right that you're talking about it, but you don't have to show it. We really didn't anticipate that one" (Rich 68).

4. See Beam; Delany, *Motion*; *Tongues Untied*, dir. Marlon Riggs; Hemphill; and *Young Soul Rebels*, dir. Isaac Julien. This is by no means an exhaustive list, but it does, I believe, include most of the widely heralded "new" Black, Gay male artists.

Alterman, Peter S. "The Surreal Translations of Samuel R. Delany." *Science Fiction Studies* 4 (1977): 25-34.

Barthes, Roland. *Mythologies*. Trans. Annette Lavers. New York: Noonday, 1972.

Beam, Joseph, ed. *In the Life: A Black Gay Anthology*. Boston: Alyson, 1986.

Delany, Samuel R. *The Motion of Light in Water: Sex and Science Fiction Writing in the East Village, 1957-1965*. New York: Arbor House, 1988.

—. *Tales of Nevèrÿon*. New York: Bantam, 1979.

Hemphill, Essex, ed. *Brother to Brother: New Writings by Black Gay Men*. Boston: Alyson, 1991.

Reid-Pharr, Robert F. "An Interview with Samuel R. Delany." *Callaloo* 14.2 (1991): 524-34.

Rich, Ruby. "Isaac Julien: Filmmaker." *Outlook: National Lesbian and Gay Quarterly* 1.3 (1988): 68-69.

Said, Edward. *Beginnings: Intention and Method*. New York: Basic, 1975.

Spencer, Kathleen L. "Deconstructing *Tales of Nevèrÿon*: Delany, Derrida and the 'Modular Calculus, Parts I-IV.'" *Essays in Art and Literature* 14 (May 1985): 59-89.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty, trans. *Of Grammatology*. By Jacques Derrida. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1976.

Works Cited

The Passion of Remembrance. Dir. Isaac Julien and Maureen Blackwood. Sankofa Film and Video, 1986.

Tongues Untied. Dir. Marlon Riggs. Third World Newsreel, 1989.

Young Soul Rebels. Dir. Isaac Julien. British Film Institute, 1991.

Filmography

MLA Book Prizes

The MLA will award twelve book prizes in 1995, including the MLA Prize for a First Book, established in 1993, and a new award for a scholarly edition. Prizes most likely to be of interest to AAR readers number seven: for a book in any field of English or another modern language or literature, the James Russell Lowell Prize, the MLA Prize for a First Book, and the MLA Prize for Independent Scholars (each requires six copies); the Scaglione Prize for Literary Translation (a biennial award) for translations of literary works or works of literary criticism, history, or theory; the MLA Prize for a Scholarly Edition and the Morton N. Cohen Award for an Edition of Letters (both biennial awards); and the Mina P. Shaughnessy Prize for research on the teaching of English. The deadline for the Lowell Prize is March 1, 1995; for all others, it is May 1.

No book may compete for more than one MLA prize. Only books published in 1994 may compete for the annual prizes that will be presented in 1995; for biennial prizes, books published in the two preceding years are eligible. Only members of the MLA may apply for the Lowell Prize and the MLA Prize for a First Book; the other awards are open to members and nonmembers. All awards are presented at the MLA's annual Convention in December. Each prize consists of a cash award and a certificate. Send four (or, in designated cases, six) copies of each book and a letter confirming eligibility to: MLA Prizes, 10 Astor Place, New York, NY 10003; telephone (212) 624-6406; fax (212) 477-9863.