

Spring 2019

Textuality and Historical Crisis in John Edgar Wideman's Philadelphia Fire

Zelda Mazor-Freedman
Bard College

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.bard.edu/senproj_s2019

 Part of the [African American Studies Commons](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 License](#).

Recommended Citation

Mazor-Freedman, Zelda, "Textuality and Historical Crisis in John Edgar Wideman's Philadelphia Fire" (2019). *Senior Projects Spring 2019*. 225.
https://digitalcommons.bard.edu/senproj_s2019/225

This Open Access work is protected by copyright and/or related rights. It has been provided to you by Bard College's Stevenson Library with permission from the rights-holder(s). You are free to use this work in any way that is permitted by the copyright and related rights. For other uses you need to obtain permission from the rights-holder(s) directly, unless additional rights are indicated by a Creative Commons license in the record and/or on the work itself. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@bard.edu.

Textuality and Historical Crisis in
John Edgar Wideman's *Philadelphia Fire*

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Language and Literature
Of Bard College

By
Zelda Mazor-Freedman

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York
May 2019

Acknowledgements

Thanks to,

Beth,

For your continued support, trust and honesty.

For helping me find my place in the literature department.

Sally,

For a friendship that is indiscernible from my education.

And to all the friends who shared their thoughts with me.

And to Mom and Dad,

For teaching me love and thoughtfulness synonymously.

Table of Contents

Introduction.....1
Chapter 1: “The MOVE Bombing and *Philadelphia Fire’s* Historical Interpretations of Black
Death”.....8
Chapter 2 “*Philadelphia Fire’s* Evocation of Caliban as a Figure of the Oppressed Person”
.....27
Coda.....52
Works cited.....54

Introduction: John Edgar Wideman's Textualization of Philadelphia

In the novel *Philadelphia Fire*, John Edgar Wideman textualizes the city of Philadelphia by mapping its regions, zones, occupants, and histories onto a fictional narrative. Given the disparate and sprawling nature of this project, *Philadelphia Fire* uses a variety of narrative styles and genres to textualize the city. The novel fuses modernist and postmodernist style with documentary writing, political theory, and the language of political advocacy. All of this occurs through a series of vignettes, contained within the novel's three parts.

Philadelphia Fire responds to the MOVE Bombing, an actual bombing that the Philadelphia Police Department, in accordance with city officials, enacted against the Afrocentric organization MOVE. The novel describes this event at the beginning of its second part. It reads,

On May 13 1985, in West Philadelphia, after bullets, water canon and high explosives had failed to dislodge the occupants of 6221 Osage Avenue, a bomb was dropped from a state police helicopter and exploded atop the besieged row house. In the ensuing fire fifty-three houses were destroyed, 262 people left homeless. The occupants of the row house on Osage were said to be the members of an organization called MOVE. Eleven of them, Six adults and five children, were killed in the assault that commenced when they refused to obey a police order to leave their home. A grand jury subsequently determined that no criminal charges should be brought against the public officials who perpetrated the assault. (98)

Narrating the MOVE Bombing, this passage describes the destruction caused by “bullets, water canon and high explosives,” as the decimation of “fifty-three houses” and the displacement of “262 people” fragmented and disordered an entire city block (98). Here, the novel describes the kind of city that it textualizes. Staging the scene of Philadelphia in chaos, this passage reveals how the novel’s structure functions as a textual representation of a city that has been blasted by bombs, bullets, and hoses. Here, the vignettes through which *Philadelphia Fire* executes its narrative read as disjointed fragments, that textualize the aftermath of the MOVE Bombing.

Through written in response to the MOVE Bombing, the novel extends well beyond the immediate aftermath of the event to consider the Bombing within the context of a broader history. Writing on this in her essay ““If the City is a Man”: Founder and Fathers, Cities and Sons in John Edgar Wideman’s *Philadelphia Fire*” critic Mary Paniccia Carden states, “John Edgar Wideman’s 1990 novel *Philadelphia Fire* assesses the contemporary implications and outcomes of black activism of the 1960s and 1970s—the promises of civil rights and the demands of the Black Power movements” (472). Here, Carden expands the historical moment *Philadelphia Fire*’s addresses, and connects the novel’s work within 1985 Philadelphia to the historical outcomes of “black activism of the 1960s and 1970s” (472). Expanding on this further, Carden goes on to examine how the novel’s response to “black activism of the 1960s and 1970s” is rooted in “a detour through the nation’s colonial history,” that allows for the textualized Philadelphia to serve “as a map and metaphor for the colonial past and (post)colonial present” (472). Here, Carden outlines the historical scope of this novel in a manner that extends well beyond the immediate aftermath of the MOVE Bombing. Reading this alongside the textualization of Philadelphia, we can begin to see how this clarifies the manner with which

history and time function within the textualized city, as the events of 1985 Philadelphia are placed alongside its recent past, and vast historical lineage of American Coloniality.

The vast historical scope through which *Philadelphia Fire* considers the events and ramifications of the MOVE Bombing is paired with the novel's frequent forays beyond the bounds of Philadelphia, and into matters of international concern. Here, the novel implicates an international scope with its textualized city and allows for the MOVE Bombing to be read on a global scale. By implicating a broad historical and geographical scope within the bounds of *Philadelphia Fire*'s textualized city, the novel challenges the confines of the city's borders and configures the event within an interconnected network of social and political relation.

In her essay, "Narratives of Self and the Abdication of Authority in Wideman's *Philadelphia Fire*" Susan M. Pearsall writes on artistic liberties that allow for the novel's textualization of Philadelphia to encompass concerns well beyond that of 1985 Philadelphia. She states, "through a fragmented narrative and a modernist collage of voices, the novel treats the city of Philadelphia as a self-enclosed world of the artist's creating, a consciously *textual* world that contains, unifies, and imitates universalized themes within its structure" (16). Here, Pearsall describes how the artistic liberties of the "consciously *textual* world" enable the novel to work through "universalized themes" (16). Pearsall attributes the novel's work with universalism to the "overarching possibility for creative freedom" that exists within the textualized city of Philadelphia, as the textualization troubles the boundaries of the city, and makes connections between the MOVE Bombing and broader historical and political discourses (17). Predicating this on the novel's "fragmented narrative and modernist collage of voices," we can connect the artistic liberties enabled by the novel structure to its textual representation of post-MOVE

Bombing Philadelphia. Here, we can see how the artistic liberties that allow for the novel to extend beyond the geographical boundaries of Philadelphia are constituted by the literary methods predicated upon its textual interpretation of 1985 Philadelphia, thereby connecting the novel's universal themes to its work in response to the MOVE Bombing.

However, as Madhu Dubey identifies in her essay "Literature and Urban Crisis: John Edgar Wideman's *Philadelphia Fire*," the novel's usage of unfixed geographical and historical boundaries in its textualization of Philadelphia addresses issues beyond the universalized themes that can be read through the MOVE Bombing. Rather, Dubey identifies the manner with which *Philadelphia Fire* troubles the city's borders in order to address the nationalist concerns at stake when working through a textualized representation of a community. Dubey considers "the issues of urban authorship and community" within contemporary African American literature, by examining the conflict between "urban literary representation" and the nationalist implications of literature and community. Dubey writes,

Novels that configure community through textual (or book-based) tropes open an unusual and valuable view of African-American literary production, in that they provoke a reconsideration of the organic models of community that prevail in vernacular and nationalist conceptions of black literature. Tropes of reading, writing, and the book offer especially apt means of framing questions about urban community, because authors cannot assume the immediately present, face-to-face audiences addressed by oral media of communication. As commodities, printed books circulate within conditions of reception marked by temporal and spatial distance between producers and consumers,

authors and readers. For this reason, reading communities are always abstract and "imagined," in Benedict Anderson's sense of the word. (579)

Here, Dubey addresses the manner with which the novel's textualization of Philadelphia imagines new communities of reception through which the novel can be read, thereby troubling the "nationalist conceptions of black literature" (579). The disrupted bounds of textualized Philadelphia trouble the nationalist conceptions of reading communities broadening the "conditions of reception" that ensure reading communities to be "abstract and 'imagined,' in Benedict Anderson's sense of the word." (579). Dubey considers how the vast historical and geographical scope of *Philadelphia Fire*'s textualized city disrupts the reader's ability to imagine the "conditions of reception," for this novel with a national context. Therefore, the novel's unique geographical and historical scope functions not only as a method from which universal trope can be brought onto a broader scale, but a manner with which the novel contends with the nationalist implications of community.

In an in a 1988 interview published in the appendix to James W. Coleman's book *Writing Blackness: John Edgar Wideman's Art and Experimentation*, Wideman speaks towards the role the reader plays within the community that he outlines, and within the novel itself. Here, Wideman contends with the novel's "conditions of reception," by describing how the novel's textualization of Philadelphia implicates the reader within the community of the novel. He describes this through an explanation of his writing style, which he deems a "call and response" that engaged the reader in order to implicate them reader within the writing of his texts. In the interview, Wideman states,

I try to invite the reader into the process of writing, into the mysteries, into the intricacies of how things are made and so, therefore, I foreground the self-consciousness of the act of writing. And try to get the reader to experience that, so that the reader is participating in the creation of the fiction. In fact I demand that and in fact scare lots of readers away, because that's not light stuff. But for me that's a funny version of call and response, my particular version of a communal work being made. (159-60)

Here, Wideman describes the manner with which his writing style implicates the reader within the creation of "communal work," and thereby place the reader into the novel's community. In implicating the reader within the text, the novel troubles the boundaries of the textualized Philadelphia. The permeability of the city's boundaries allow for the continual reconstitution of the textualized city, as it compasses new readers into the community that it creates. This broadens the scope of the Philadelphia on the level of the citizen, and thereby complicates the subjects being considering within the aftermath of the MOVE Bombing. This poses a series of questions surrounding the after effects of the MOVE Bombing, and the manner with which the reader is implicated within the after effects of this event. Is the community that the novel implicates the reader in that of the eleven victims of the attack? That of the Black neighborhood that was destroyed? That of the global and historical relations of race and subjugation? Or is the novel concerned with the community created by the reader and the novel, as the reader occupies Philadelphia within Wideman's disrupted imagination of the city?

In Chapter One, I consider the global and historical scopes of the novel, as they relate to the text's consideration of loss. I track the images of the ocean with the novel, and identify a poetic relationship between the novel's usage of the ocean and its historical, racial, and

geographical negotiation of death. Tracking the manner with which the novel draws the reader down to the bottom of the ocean, I identify how the novel connects the MOVE Bombing to the transatlantic slave trade through images of the Black body at the bottom of the ocean. Here, I examine how this connection reveals the historical internationalism of Philadelphia, as the city was made global through its Black population, its reliance upon the slave trade, and its eventual role at the forefront of an international abolitionist discourse. This leads me into observing how the novel compares death in the city to death in the ocean, and thereby connects the MOVE Bombing to the city's global histories.

In Chapter Two, I consider how the international scope of the novel considers the role of the oppressed subject on a global scale. I identify the novel's evocation of Caliban, the enslaved native from Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. I examine how the novel evokes Caliban in a manner that frames him as a colonized subject, both through the content of his speech, and through his variably connoted ethnicity. I then identify how the novel's evocation of Caliban frames him as the forefather of a vast array of subjected persons, in a manner that examines subjugation on both an international scale, and within 1960s Philadelphia. This leads me to consider Caliban's within postcolonial thought, and examine Philadelphia Fire's evocation of Caliban around the work of Paget Henry, Gayatri Spivak, and a broader community of Afro-Caribbean postcolonial intellectuals. Considering the manner with which this discourse negotiates Caliban as figure of the subjected person, I then observe the ultimate pessimism through which the novel frames its evocation of Caliban, thereby designating Caliban's ultimate inability to speak towards the conditions of the entire subjugated world.

Chapter One: The MOVE Bombing and *Philadelphia Fire's* Historical Interpretations of Black Death

In the novel *Philadelphia Fire*, John Edgar Wideman follows the narrative of Cudjoe, a Philadelphia native and writer in exile. Living on the Greek Island of Mykonos, Cudjoe hears of the MOVE Bombing, a non-fictional attack that occurred in Philadelphia in 1985. A Black Philadelphian himself, Cudjoe crosses the ocean to respond to this event and write a novel of his own. Before exile, Cudjoe was part of a community of Black activists working within the civil rights movement. He participated in the political organizing of his local Black community, as well as the desegregation project of an unnamed Philadelphian university that sponsored the education of himself and a group of Black students. Leaving Philadelphia in the mid-seventies and returning in 1985, Cudjoe arrives to the city to observe the outcomes of 1960s and 1970s Black activism, and to reconcile this period with the tragedy of the MOVE Bombing. The novel contextualizes this reading of Philadelphia's racial politics by considering Philadelphia's colonial past, the history of the slave trade in America, and the African Diaspora. Here, the novel places the political events of 1980's Philadelphia within a timeline that spans over 300 years, thereby making connections between the MOVE Bombing and Philadelphia's historical relationship to slavery and coloniality.

The novel connects the MOVE Bombing to Philadelphia's history of slavery and coloniality by examining the depths of the ocean and the histories that rest there. These histories

are communicated through the poetic relationship between the ocean and death that Cudjoe articulates. For Cudjoe, salt water and mortality are synonymous through the death of his grandmother, which is described as her “turning to water” (7). Considering death and the ocean further, Cudjoe is plunged to the bottom of the sea through the fall of his “body clock” as it “dropped 30,000 feet from the 747” into “the gray ocean” (52-53). Through this fall, the novel places an image of the Black body at the bottom of the ocean, thereby characterizing the relationship between death and the sea as a condition of Cudjoe’s Blackness. The relationship between Blackness and death at sea is then fully announced, as Cudjoe considers the “corpses throw overboard” from slave ships crossing the Atlantic. Here, we can see how *Philadelphia Fire*’s representation of the ocean is predicated on the historical relationship between Blackness and death at sea, thereby designating the transatlantic slave trade as the historical origin of its work around Blackness in 1980s Philadelphia.

Connecting the MOVE Bombing to the transatlantic slave trade, the novel tracks the historical relationship between Philadelphia’s founding and the enslaved Black community that ensured the development and growth of the city. However, rather than containing the MOVE Bombing within a local history of Philadelphia, the poetic relationship between the ocean and death imagines the MOVE Bombing on a global scale, as it connects Philadelphia’s history to the international networks of the slave trade. We can consider this alongside Glissant’s consideration of the ocean in his essay “The Open Boat” to clarify the relationship between the ocean, Blackness, and the manner with which we may conceive of time in the wake of the transatlantic slave trade. Considering the relationship between death and geography, Cudjoe states “when you choose to live in a city, you are also choosing a city to die in” (24). However, as critic Madhu

Dubey observes in her essay “Literature and Urban Crisis: John Edgar Wideman's *Philadelphia Fire*” the city in *Philadelphia Fire* is not a contained and bounded location. She writes, “*Philadelphia Fire* treats social space as an asymmetrical global system of interconnected locales whose meaning is ‘always everywhere at once’” (583). Reading the international history of the slave trade alongside John Edgar Wideman’s global rendering of Philadelphia, we can see how the poetic relationship between death and the sea connects Philadelphia’s history to the global history of the transatlantic slave trade, thereby placing death in the city onto an international scale.

The opening passages of *Philadelphia Fire* are laden with images of the sea. Standing on the shores of Mykonos, Cudjoe “watches the sea cut up, refusing to stay still in its bowl. Sloshing like the overfilled cup of coffee he’d transported this unsteady morning from marble topped counter to a table outdoors on the cobblestone esplanade” (4). Looking out onto the ocean, Cudjoe draws a poetic relationship between the sea and death by observing its waters alongside the memory of his grandmother “turning to water” (6). Recounting this death, the text reads,

She lay in bed, thinner every day the summer after the winter his grandfather died. She was melting away. Turning to water which he mopped from her brow, from her body parts when he lifted the sheets...His grandmother’s sweaty smell will meet him when he returns to the house on Finance and walks up the front hall stairs and enters the tiny space where he cared for her that summer she melted in the heat of grief. Her husband of forty years dead, her flesh turning to water. Sweat is what gives you life. He figured that out as life drained from her. (6-7)

In this passage, the novel establishes a connection between death and water through this memory of Cudjoe's grandmother's passing. Here, death interacts with water in two distinct ways. Firstly, Cudjoe observes his grandmother's death as the process of "her flesh turning to water" (7). Describing this as a "melting away," Cudjoe imbricates his grandmother's passing with the leakage of her sweat (6). Here, Cudjoe creates a poetic relationship between sweat and life that designates sweat as life's purveyor. However, if sweat is the purveyor of life, then the evacuation of sweat from the body is the process of death. Therefore, Cudjoe's consideration of sweat imagines it as a lifeforce when within the body, but as a sign of death when found outside. Considering death and water as he looks out upon the ocean, Cudjoe connects this relationship to the "necklace of churning sea" that contains the island of Mykonos (5). Here, Cudjoe relates the waters of the ocean to the waters of his grandmother's death, thereby imbricating the sea with a sense of mortality. However unlike the scene of Cudjoe's grandmother's death, these waters are not initially accompanied by a dying body. Rather, the novel travels to the bottom of the ocean to identify the deaths that create the ocean's relationship to mortality, and thereby connects mortality and the ocean to the transatlantic slave trade.

Philadelphia Fire ventures to the bottom of the ocean to identify the deaths that imbricate the ocean with the sense of morality as those of overthrown captive Africans. To arrive at this, the novel tracks the fall of Cudjoe's "body clock" to the ocean's floor. However, this is not the first instance in which the novel imagines the ocean's depths. In the opening passages of *Philadelphia Fire*, the reader is introduced to Zivantias, a Greek sea captain who drowns after taking his ship out on unsailable waters. Zivantias's death at sea stages the novel's first venture to the ocean's floor. However, though the trajectory of his sunken ship may carry the novel to the

ocean's floor, his body cannot be found there, as there is "never a trace. Not a bottle or bone" found of Zivaniias's shipwreck (4). Rather, it is only Cudjoe that we find at the bottom of the ocean, in the form of his "body clock". Zivaniias operates as a foil to Cudjoe, pointing us to the history that lie on the ocean's floor.

Zivaniias is established as Cudjoe's foil throughout the novel's first pages. Starting at an unnamed coastal town, *Philadelphia Fire* moves towards the ocean by following Zivaniias's brief life. The novel also follows Zivaniias into a comparison with Cudjoe, that ultimately introduces the character. Cudjoe and Zivaniias's comparison is often negotiated through their similar and dissimilar approaches to the ocean. This is executed as the novel examines their respective arrivals to the shore, the manner with which they interact with objects of the ocean, and their relationships to the ocean's floor. Across these three points of comparison, we can see as Cudjoe and Zivaniias's relationship articulates itself around the ocean, thereby centralizing the ocean within the novel as it characterizes their differences. Comparing their relationship to the ocean, the two differentiate in a manner that reveals the historical relationship between Cudjoe's Blackness and the depths of the sea.

In Zivaniias's narrative, the novel tells of his initial arrival to the shore, his lauding as "captain of captains (3)," and his ultimate fate at sea. We learn that Zivaniias "deserted a flock of goats, a wife and three sons up in the hills, scavenged for work on the waterfront till he talked himself onto one of the launches jitneying tourists around the island" (3). At the waterfront, Zivaniias's relationship to the ocean is then solidified, as he becomes, "A captain soon. Then captain of captains. Best pilot, lover, drinker, dancer, storyteller of them all" (3). In these passages, the novel traces Zivaniias's trajectory towards the ocean. Following a course from land

to sea, Zivaniias passes from the inland hills of Mykonos to the coastal shore in order to create distance between himself and his family. This is an experience that him Cudjoe and share. A father and former husband himself, Cudjoe also traveled to Mykonos to escape his family. Later in the novel, Cudjoe describes this, stating “Nothing here for me so I crossed the ocean. Bummed around a year. South of France, Spain, North Africa. Then I found my island. Mykonos” (86). Here, the novel shows the course through which Cudjoe abandoned his family. Much like Zivaniias, Cudjoe abandons his family through a journey that concludes at the shores of Mykonos. It is here that the two meet, through their similar personal histories, and convergent arrivals to the shore.

The centrality of the ocean in Cudjoe and Zivaniias’s relationship is further articulated as the two identify their differences over a shared plate of fried fish. Seated across from one another in a reflective posture, Cudjoe and Zivaniias sit together and have a meal. Throughout this scene, Zivaniias notes their points of difference by marking the disparity in their eating habits. The text read, “They’d shared a meal once. Zivaniias crunching fried fish like Rice Krispies. Laughing at Cudjoe. Pointing to Cudjoe’s heap of cast-off crust and bones, his own clean platter (3).” Here, Cudjoe and Zivaniias once again meet through their proximity to the ocean. Looking over his platter to Cudjoe’s, Zivaniias recognizes how the two differ. Cudjoe picks apart his meal, casting off the pieces he deems ill for consumption, while Zivaniias gobbles his fish whole heartedly. Fish is a staple food in Greek culture due to the abundant shoreline. However, overfishing has made local fish expensive in areas frequented by tourists, thereby marking the significance of this meal with a hefty price tag. Through his manners, Cudjoe bungles the occasion of the meal, by picking at his food. Zivaniias notes the foreignness of Cudjoe’s custom, and highlights the

peculiarities of Cudjoe's manners through taunt and jest. Though posed here with a sense of peculiar foreignness, Cudjoe's manners can be traced to his understanding of water. Considering this scene alongside that of his grandmother's passing, the novel displays Cudjoe's instinct to pick apart the images he considers. As both fish and water comprise the ocean, the novel shows Cudjoe picking apart the elements of the sea. In this dissection, the novel displays an anxiety that Cudjoe holds around the ocean, that significantly contrasts Zivania's bold consumption.

The varying manners through which Zivania and Cudjoe engage with the ocean are clarified further in scene of Zivania's death. Zivania described as having unique confidence when engaging with the ocean. This is reflected through the posture he dons when navigating his ship. Describing this posture, the text reads,

Zivania would hold his boat on course with his foot. Leaning on a rail, prehensile toes snagged in the steering wheel, his goatskin vest unbuttoned to display his hairy chest, eyes half shut, humming an island ballad, he was the sailor-king of the sea, a photo opportunity his passengers could not resist. (4)

Here, the text offers a visual description of Zivania's confidence atop the water. Bare chested, brazen, and visibly relaxed, Zivania inhabits the role of the "sailor-king of the sea" with confidence. He leans so greatly into his role, that he can stretch way back and steer with his toes. Though framing Zivania admirably, this description is tinged with the knowledge of his impending death. This is framed by context through which the novel describes Zivania's confidence. Prefacing this passage, the novel designates that "On a day like this the big toe of Zivania failed him" (3). Here, the novel implicates Zivania's confidence within the fact of his mortality. This is clarified through a description of Zivania's death. We learn that Zivania,

acting on his pride, he set sail on tempestuous waters, only to drown in the resulting shipwreck. The text reads, “On a day like this when nobody else dared leave port, he drove a boatload of bootleg whisky to the bottom of the ocean. Never a trace. Not a bottle or bone” (3). In this passage, the novel describes Zivaniias’s untimely end beneath the ocean’s waters. Attributing Zivaniias’s death to his boastful attitude towards the ocean, the novel describes his confidence with bitter irony, by noting his death at sea. Here, Zivaniias’s trajectory from land to sea is punctuated by his ultimate fate beneath the waves. Following the continuation of this trajectory, the novel travels down toward the bottom of the ocean. However, as *Philadelphia Fire* moves toward the ocean’s floor, it describes that there’s “Never a trace. Not a bottle or bone” of Zivaniias to be found (3). Therefore, the ocean’s floor is marked by Zivaniias’s absence.

Rather, it is Cudjoe who we find at the bottom of the ocean, through the fall of his “body clock”. Cudjoe’s “body clock” falls to the ocean’s floor as he travels from Mykonos to Philadelphia. The novel tells of this in retrospect, as Cudjoe reflects on this flight from the resulting state of exhaustion. Jet lagged and delirious in Philadelphia, Cudjoe imagines this fall as the cause for his disrupted sense of time and distressed body. This is described through the succinct phrase, “body clock”. Falling from a 747, Cudjoe’s “body clock” arrives to the ocean’s floor as a natural extension of his relationship to the sea. He falls into the ocean by picking apart his exhaustion as he picked apart his fried fish and understanding of water. Discarding the prospect that his jet lag will eventually go away, Cudjoe follows the theory of his lost “body clock,” and thereby buries his time and person at the bottom of the sea.

Here, the novel locates Cudjoe’s Black body at the bottom of the ocean. Tracing this fall during Cudjoe’s flight from Mykonos to Philadelphia, the novel frames the fall of Cudjoe’s

“body clock” within his transatlantic crossing. Reading this alongside *Philadelphia Fire*’s direct references to slavery, we can see how the fall of Cudjoe’s “body clock,” clarifies the relationship between the ocean and death, by predicating it on Cudjoe’s Blackness and the Black history that rests on the ocean’s floor. This is made clear later in the novel, as Cudjoe reminisces on a family vacation he spent on an unnamed island off the East Coast. Locating Cudjoe on an island once again, the novel follows Cudjoe’s considerations of the water, and thereby announces the relationship between the ocean and death more explicitly. The text reads,

Gulls floated over the dump. Gull cries, the lazy circling of gulls. Gulls had followed the ferry across the sound. A second wake in the air. Gray and white like the plowed sea. Gulls hovering in the squat-bottomed boat’s slipstream, patiently sailing, scanning the water for bilge. He’d read that sharks trailed the stench of slave ships all the way across the Atlantic, feasting on corpses thrown overboard. (60)

In this passage, the novel presents another scene of Cudjoe looking out onto the ocean, and plainly describes the history considered in the poetic relationship between the ocean and death. Designating the deaths implicit in this poetic relationship as those of “corpses thrown overboard” from “slave ships,” the novel grounds its reading of the ocean within the history of the transatlantic slave trade (60). Here, the novel creates a historical connection between the moment that it responds to and the transatlantic slave trade. This firstly occurs through the novel’s identification of Cudjoe’s Black body at the bottom of the ocean as he travel home to respond to the MOVE Bombing. As the novel connects the bottom of the ocean to Cudjoe’s return to Philadelphia, it traces the fall of Cudjoe’s “body clock” in a manner that mimics the trajectory of the overthrown captive Africans who arrived at the bottom of the ocean during the

transatlantic slave trade. Here, we can see how the novel establishes a connection between the MOVE Bombing and the international networks of the slave trade, so as to ground the MOVE Bombing within a historical scope that spans over 300 years.

In considering this historical scope, we now turn towards Edouard Glissant's "The Open Boat," in order to relate the poetic relationship between the ocean and death in *Philadelphia Fire* to Glissant's work on the ocean, death, and time. Through the usage of the phrase "body clock" the novel pairs the image of the Black body at the ocean's floor with the clock's measurement time. In, "The Open Boat," Glissant develops his theory on the ocean and mortality by examining how Black bodies were brought to the bottom of the ocean by the violences of the slave trade. Glissant works around the "scarcely corroded balls and chains," that dragged Black bodies to the bottom of the sea to explain the relationship between these instruments of death and the measurement of time (6). He states, "time is marked by these balls and chains gone green" (6). Through corrosion, balls and chains measure the time passed since the Transatlantic slave trade. Arguing that they also inform the manner with which the ocean can be interpreted, Glissant comes to characterize the ocean with a sense of death, and connects this death to the "vast beginning" caused by the transatlantic slave trade.

Glissant characterizes the conditions of a slave ship crossing the Atlantic. Here, Glissant constructs a poetics "for the Africans who lived through the experience of deportation to the Americas" (5). Through these poetics, Glissant describes the experience of "confronting the unknown with neither preparation nor challenge" (5). Glissant asserts that "what is terrifying partakes of the abyss, three times linked to the unknown" (6). Here, Glissant begins to work through the unknowable abysses that facilitated the deportation of captive Africans. Identifying

“belly of the boat,” “the depths of the sea,” and “all that had been left behind” as the abysses of his concern, Glissant examines how these abysses mark, constitute, and enact the experience of deportation for the captive African (6-7).

The second abyss of his concern, “the depths of the sea,” relates, for Glissant, to the geographical implications of the slave trade. Glissant portrays the geographical implications of the slave trade by describing a historical scene in which captive Africans were plunged to the depths of the sea. The text reads,

Whenever a fleet of ships gave chase to slave ships, it was easiest just to lighten the boat by throwing cargo overboard, weighing it down with balls and chains. These underwater signposts mark the course between the Gold Coast and the Leeward Islands. Navigating the green splendor of the sea-whether in melancholic transatlantic crossings or glorious regattas or traditional races of yoles and gommiers-still brings to mind, coming to light like seaweed, these lowest depths, these deeps, with their punctuation of scarcely corroded balls and chains. In actual fact the abyss is a tautology: the entire ocean, the entire sea gently collapsing in the end into the pleasures of sand, make one vast beginning, but a beginning whose time is marked by these balls and chains gone green.

(6)

In this passage, Glissant describes how the slave trade informed the geography and chronology of the ocean. Describing the history of death at sea, Glissant notes how the ocean and death were imbricated through the tragedy of the slave trade. Tracking this relationship through the “scarcely corroded balls and chains,” that weighed down overthrown captives, Glissant outlines how these instruments of death become “underwater signposts,” that then inform the manner

with which the ocean is navigated (6). Glissant reads the geography of the ocean from the bottom up, thereby implicating death at sea within his ongoing reading of the ocean.

Reading Glissant's imbrication of death and the ocean alongside his considerations of "balls and chains gone green," we can see how Glissant's measurement of time defines the "vast beginning" made by "the entire sea gently collapsing in the end into the pleasures of sand" as a result of the transatlantic slave trade. Reflecting the time between the present day and the moments of these captive deaths through algae and corrosion, these balls and chains inform how the ocean marks the passage of time. Here, we can read this beginning as the start of the historical period which exists in the wake of the slave trade. This "vast beginning" is also constituted through the personal experiences of the captive Africans, who faced entirely new imaginations of their selfhoods and lives upon crossing the Atlantic. By connecting the "vast beginning" measured by the ocean to the history of the transatlantic slave trade, Glissant sets a historical scope through which he reads interconnected relations of race. Here, Glissant follows the ocean in order to read the Blackness over 300 years. Considering this alongside *Philadelphia Fire*'s work around Blackness, the ocean, and death, we can see how the novel configures the ocean in a similar manner, as it uses images of the ocean to read its historical concerns with Philadelphia over a timespan of 300 years. Here, we can read as the ocean creates a "vast beginning" within the novel as well, as it is used to cite the historical origin of 1980s Philadelphian racial politics. This is also reflected within the structure of the novel, as the ocean greets the reader on its opening pages, thereby marking the "vast beginning" of the text itself.

Reading the novel's timespan over 300 years, we can see how the text interconnects the MOVE Bombing and the slave trade both through the poetic relationship between the ocean and

death, and Philadelphia's specific historical interactions with the transatlantic slave trade. The historical breadth of this novel is fully articulated as Cudjoe attends the memorial service for those lost within the MOVE Bombing. Arriving at the memorial service at Independence Square, Cudjoe projects images of 1805 Philadelphia on to the 1980s. The text reads,

Less than an hour before the memorial service for the dead of Osage Avenue and Cudjoe is surprised to see the square's nearly empty. For a second he populates it with ghosts. All of Philadelphia crammed into Independence Square. It's 1805, a Fourth of July rally. In their customary place at the rear of the crowd, dressed in their Sunday best, toting picnic baskets and jugs for this annual day of feasting, speeches, fireworks and merrymaking, black Philadelphians, descendants of the 150 slaves who arrived in 1684,... (190)

In this passage, the novel describes a scene of interlayed historical moments that span from the 1980s to 1684. The 1805 Fourth of July celebration in Independence Square mediates the connection between these two dates. The scene Cudjoe describes references the work of artist John Lewis Krimmel, who captured the the 1805 Fourth of July celebration in a painting titled *Fourth of July Celebration in Centre Square*¹. In this painting Krimmel depicts the Fourth of July celebration within a series that chronicled numerous Philadelphian Independence Day celebrations. Here, the novel recasts the representation of this event, and includes historical information left out of Krimmels work. Describing this event, Cudjoe recounts that the Black Philadelphians present at the 1805 Fourth of July Celebration were driven out by "their howling fellow countrymen, the thunder of thousands of feet, sticks and stones and curses like hail pelting

¹ Image of this painting and historical information was found at within the PBS Research Bank: "Historical Documents: Fourth of July Celebration in Centre Square ." *PBS*, Public Broadcasting Service, www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part3/3h467.html.

their heads, like a storm spoiling their holiday outing” (190). Projecting this historical scene of violence onto the memorial for the victims of the MOVE Bombing, the novel situates the MOVE Bombing within Philadelphia’s history of racial violence. Designating the victims of this mob scene as the “descendents of the 150 slaves who arrived in 1684,” the novel expands the historical scope set here to encompass the international slave trade (190). By making this connection, the novel clarifies the historical relationship between the MOVE Bombing and the transatlantic slave trade, and thereby reveals the connection between Philadelphia's founding and its involvement in the transatlantic slave trade.

In Ira Berlin’s chapter “Slavery, Freedom, and Philadelphia’s Struggle for Brotherly Love, 1685 to 1861,” within *Antislavery and Abolition in Philadelphia: Emancipation and the Long Struggle for Racial Justice in the City of Brotherly Love*, the relationship between Black Philadelphians and the growth and establishment of Philadelphia is described. Berlin writes “African Americans shaped the growth, ethos, and reputation of Philadelphians among themselves and throughout the Atlantic world. As enslaved and free people, black men and women helped construct the city, protect it against its enemies, enhance its wealth, and make it the worldwide capital of abolition” (19). Describing the historical role of Black Philadelphians within the creation of the city, Berlin cites the same “150 slaves who arrived in 1684,” that are described in *Philadelphia Fire* (190). Berlin describes the significance of the 1684 “*Isabella*, a slave ship out of bristol” which carried “some 150 Africans” (20). Noting how this arrival influenced the small Black population of pre-1684 Philadelphia, Berlin describes how this population altered the city’s demographics. He writes, “African slaves equaled about one-seventh of Philadelphia’s population” (20). Describing the ramifications of this influx in

population, Berlin states, “their arrival transformed both the city and the city’s black population, establishing a pattern whereby black life would be constantly reconstructed” (20).

Here, Berlin describes the relationship between Philadelphia and the Slave trade, by describing the manner with which Black Philadelphians populated the earliest formations of the city, and thereby ensured it’s “growth, ethos, and reputation” (19). Berlin connects the foundations of Philadelphia to the Black population brought over by the international slave trade, thereby providing a historical connection with which we can read the MOVE Bombing in relation to Philadelphia’s involvement within the transatlantic slave trade. However, the connection between the slave trade and the MOVE Bombing does not contain the event within a strictly Philadelphian history. Rather, by connecting the two historical moments, the novel reveals the manner with which the MOVE Bombing relates to a global history of violence and exploitation, thereby allowing the bombing to be read within a “global system of interconnected locals whose meaning is ‘always everywhere at once’” (Dubey, 583).

For Berlin, the global historical stakes of Philadelphia is designated both through its relationship to the international slave trade, and through its role as the “worldwide capital of abolition” (19). Connecting the city’s global status to its slave population, Berlin writes, “the changing character of slavery in Philadelphia shaped the struggle over freedom in the city and influenced it far beyond the city’s boundaries” (20). Here, Berlin describes the manner with which the influx of an international population of Black Philadelphians influenced the cities abolitionist discourse in a manner that shaped the project of Abolition on a global scale. Considering the influx of a global population and the output of international discourse, Berlin

configures Philadelphia as an international city, thereby connecting its histories to the global scope of the international slave trade.

Reading this historical configuration of Philadelphia alongside critic Madhu Dubey's work on *Philadelphia Fire*, we can see how the novel draws upon the historic internationalism of the city, and considers the crises of the Philadelphia on a Global scale. In her essay, "Literature and Urban Crisis: John Edgar Wideman's *Philadelphia Fire*", Dubey considers how the novel's textualization of Philadelphia deals with questions of waste, overconsumption and urban decay on a global scale. Considering the manner with which "*Philadelphia Fire* graphically renders the grotesque consequences of wasteful consumption," Dubey relates "wasteful consumption" to the "possibility of excess made real by the city" (580). She reads *Philadelphia Fire* for the "metaphorical vision of the city as a monstrous machine that consumes and expels humanity" and then examines the "image of urban zones of scarcity inhabited by human beings who have no choice but to feed on waste" (580). Here Dubey tracks the character JB, a homeless man and occasional narrator of the novel. Considering JB, Dubey connects this character to Wideman's critical work, writing "a person like JB belongs to the class of "surplus people" whom Wideman writes about in his essay 'Dead Black Men and Other Fallout of the American Dream.' Describing surplus people as the casualties of a global restructuring of industrial economy, Wideman insists that the problem of "urban decay" be understood in terms larger than the "strictly American" (156)" (Dubey, 580). Dubey then observes how the novel configures these questions "urban decay" in Philadelphia "within a global structure of uneven development," stating,

By means of frequent parallels between Philadelphia and "Third World" cities (79), Philadelphia Fire locates American urban spaces such as the renovated Philadelphia downtown within a global structure of uneven development. The novel thus offers a "way of seeing that unmask[s] the fetishisms" promoted by the capitalist production of urban space-fetishisms which, as David Harvey argues, treat the spatial text of the city as a self-contained object (9, 250). In order to resist this kind of myopic vision, Cudjoe resolves that "he must always write about many places at once. No choice First step is always ... toward the word or sound or image that is everywhere at once, that connects.... Always moving," the contemporary writer must "travel through those other places" (23) because no place contains its own meaning. (580)

Here, Dubey connects the internationalism of *Philadelphia Fire* to the global concerns of "uneven development" (580). Considering class within questions of exploitation in Urban environments, we can see how Dubey reads 1980s Philadelphian politics on a global scale. Here, Dubey's reading of Philadelphian urban politics extends the international reading of Philadelphia to the mid-eighties. Here, we can see how the connection the novel makes between the MOVE Bombing and the slave trade implicates the bombing within a vast history that reaches well beyond the boundaries of Philadelphia, and considers the event on a global scale.

This is fully announced after Cudjoe plunges to the depths of the ocean. Following the drop of his "body clock," exhausted Cudjoe dreams of Philadelphia. This scene plays across a registry of images derived from Cudjoe's actions earlier in the novel, thereby framing the scene within a dreamt version of Philadelphia. In his dream, Cudjoe observes a variety of historical moments enacting themselves within the streets of Philadelphia in a manner that also places

Philadelphia alongside images of global concern. He watches as a group of “miniature sheiks” become “the players from the court” and “then the kids in the hollow ” (52). Before falling asleep, Cudjoe played basketball in Clark Park, and observed as a group of kids gathered in an area of the park, referred to as “the hollow.” In the dream, we come to find that “each one” of the kids were “wearing hooded, milk-white robes,” with “conical hoods ” (52). As an obvious reference to the KKK, this image evokes a series of violent events within American history. However, in this novel, the KKK also holds another meaning. The acronym also refers to “*Kaliban’s Kiddie Korps.*,” a troupe of lawless Philadelphian children who identify with Shakespeare’s enslaved native, Caliban (88). Here, the novel connects early European colonizing voyages, the American KKK, and Black Philadelphian children in the 1980s. This connection travels across a vast historical and geographical scope, thereby enacting the novel’s concerns with history and internationalism simultaneously.

As the scene unfold, new characters are added into the dreamscape, and the novel reveals that the kids surround a scene of minstrelsy. Mr. Tambo and Mr. Bones, two characters from the infamous blackface group Christy’s Minstrels, are identified amongst the children. Surrounded by the hooded kids, Mr. Tambo and Mr. Bones speak to their audience, “discussing the cost of oil and laughing (52).” Describing their performance for the children, the passage reads, “Mr. Tambo inquires of Mr. Bones: How many cars can you name that start with *P*? Mr. Bones rubs his nappy Yankee Doodle bearded chin, stutters, P P P P Pontiac, Packard, P P P Plymouth Por Por Porsche (53).” AS characters from an 1843 touring minstrel group, Mr. Tambo and Mr. Bones further characterize the vast historical scope with which the novel reads the political events of Philadelphia. Here, once again, the novel pairs its historical scope with networks of

international concern. Discussing the global network of the oil market, the two embed questions of international concern with the dreamt city of Philadelphia. This performance then inspires the children to literally piss on oil, as Cudjoe watches one, “raise the hem of his garment and P P P piss into the tank of a Mercedes. The kid winks at him, waves at the mob of scandalized citizens. Want me to check the oil too (52)?”

In *Philadelphia Fire*, the ocean is imbricated with a sense of death in a manner that reflects Cudjoe’s familial lineage, Blackness, and historical relationship to the bottom of the sea. Plunging the reader to the bottom of the ocean, the novel establishes a comparison between the the MOVE Bombing and the slave trade that draws the historical scope of this novel across the span of 300 years. Here, the novel combines the poetic relationship between death and the sea with historical information, and thereby clarifies that the sense of death that characterizes the sea exists within the legacy of the slave trade. This leads the novel to consider the vast history of Blackness with the city of Philadelphia, and to clarify the role of Black Philadelphians within the city’s founding. However, rather than functioning as a local history, *Philadelphia Fire* stroubles the geographic boundaries of the city, and consider the political events of Philadelphia on a global scale. This internationalism is an condition of the historical connection the novel makes between the MOVE Bombing and the slave trade, as the international stakes of the slave trade prove to inform the foundation and growth of Philadelphia. Here, the novel relates the international histories of Philadelphia to its textualizations of the city, and reveals its concerns with global scopes as a condition of its history. Therefore, as the novel considers death and the ocean, it carries the internationalism of Philadelphia to it’s work on the MOVE Bombing, and thereby reads the MOVE Bombing within a global history of exploitation.

Chapter Two: *Philadelphia Fire*'s Evocation of Caliban and the Figure of the Colonized Subject

In part two of *Philadelphia Fire*, the text uses a variety of narrators that speak in multiple tones. Among these narrators, the novel poses a reinscription of Caliban, the enslaved native from *The Tempest*. Caliban first appears in *Philadelphia Fire* to perform a monologue on the colonial conditions he experienced within *The Tempest*. Later in the novel, context is given for this monologue, as Cudjoe reflects on an elementary school production of *The Tempest* he staged “in the late, late 1960s” (134). In this production, *The Tempest* is “revised,” in order to recenter the play around Caliban’s subjection. Addressing a room of Black Philadelphian children, Cudjoe designates Caliban as the “great great great greater than god grandfather” of Frantz Fanon, Marcus Garvey, Bob Marley, Medgar Evers, and Martin Luther King Jr.. After articulating this sweeping lineage, Cudjoe tacks his Black Philadelphian students onto the end of this list, by describing Caliban as “your Godfather” as well (128). Here, the novel imagines a lineage of oppression that spans from the early European colonizing voyages of the 16th century to 1960’s Philadelphia. As the patriarch of this lineage, Caliban stands as a figure for a vast array of subjugated persons.

Caliban can be read alongside an anticolonial academic discourse that negotiates the politics of Caliban as a literary inscription. Originating from the Afro-Caribbean postcolonialists of the mid-fifties and early seventies, this discourse examines Caliban for his historical origin, his relationship to the colonial project, and his ability to model abjection. Decolonial theorist Paget Henry proposes the term Calibanization to articulate the process through which colonized

subjects are made synonymous with nature. Here, Caliban is read as a figure from which conditions of colonial subjugation can be understood. This reading of Caliban coincides with the work of the mid-fifties to late seventies postcolonial intellectuals in Africa and the Caribbean, who identify with Caliban as a model of the colonized subject in order to locate themselves within the British canon. By positing Caliban as a figure of the colonized subject, *Philadelphia Fire* enters into this work, by articulating a lineage of subjected persons that traces back to Caliban. However, In her essay, “Three Women’s Texts and a Critique of Imperialism,” theorist Gayatri Spivak critiques the politics of reading Caliban in this manner. Spivak argues that reading Caliban as a figure of the subjected person overly generalizes Caliban, and thereby fails to understand his role within the British canon. Here, Spivak breaks apart the logic of Caliban as a figure for the colonized subject, and thereby challenges his role within postcolonial discourse. This critique applies to *Philadelphia Fire*’s evocation of Caliban, and allows the reader to examine the novel’s configurement of Caliban as the figure of the oppressed subject.

However, though initially framed as the figure of the subjected person, Caliban’s role within the novel is reconsidered as the text expands on Cudjoe’s production of *The Tempest*. The novel interrupts descriptions of this project with the reminiscence of a later Cudjoe. This Cudjoe expresses the fated failure of the play, calling it “this bullshit, this hairbrained project” (146). Ultimately, this production is rained out, thereby washing away *The Tempest* with a tempest, and thereby proving that “you can’t rewrite *The Tempest* any damn way you please” (144). Here, Cudjoe’s production of *The Tempest* fails, and with it fails his attempt to rewrite Caliban as a figure for the oppressed person.

Caliban enters *Philadelphia Fire* during the novel's second part. In this section, the novel obscures the connection between its vignettes by utilizing various genres and narrative styles. Here, the novel collages together letters, quotations, documentary materials, ruminations, references, and scenes of Cudjoe. These changes introduce a series of narrators who speak in first, second, and third person. Here, the novel offers a detailed description of Caliban. Marked by parenthesis, this reads as a character description. In this character description, Caliban's race, regional origin, and physical appearance are described in a manner that reflects the experience of colonial subjection. The text reads,

(Enter Caliban, heavy, heavy dreadlocks resembling chains drag nearly to the floor. A cloak of natty wool. His natural cape, suggesting, repudiating Prospero's dashing midnight-blue silk one with all its devices, astrological symbols, alchemist's calligraphy, Stars, Stripes, sickle moon, comet and tail, ect. Caliban is naked under his dreads, but they cover him without hiding him, his proper, modest fur...). (120)

In this passage, Caliban is described through his "heavy, heavy dreadlocks," which function as "chains" (120). In addition to weighing him down, these dreads act as a "cloak of natty wool. His natural cape" that "cover him without hiding him" (120). Here, Caliban's dreads serve many purposes. Firstly signaling his Blackness, these dreads then pair the image of "chains" with Caliban's "natural cloak," juxtaposing the relationship between Caliban's nature and his racialized subjugation (120).

We can read this novel's consideration of nature and Caliban's bondage alongside Paget Henry's work around "Calibanization". This term originates from *Caliban's Reason*, in which Henry articulates the relationship between coloniality and philosophy in the Caribbean. Henry

turns towards Shakespeare's Caliban for his ability to reveal the functions of colonial subject making. He writes,

Among the most enduring accounts of the refiguring of Caribbean identities produced by this European/Euro-Caribbean tradition of writing has been the character Caliban, from Shakespeare's play *The Tempest*. This work was inspired by the colonizing voyages that Europeans were making to the Caribbean, particularly the highly publicized wrecks of Thomas Gates and George Summers off the coast of Bermuda. The play dramatized the new vision of existence as the global conquest of nature and history. To imperial Prospero, native Caliban (the Carib) was identical with nature—a cannibal, a child, a monster without language, and hence a potential slave to be subdued and domesticated along with nature and history. Much like the raw materials of nature, the labor of Caliban was there to be exploited for the purposes of imperial Prospero. (4)

In this passage, Henry highlights the manner in which *The Tempest* “dramatized” the “global conquest of nature and history” and how Caliban was made “identical with nature,” and thereby vulnerable to exploitation (4). Reading this alongside *Philadelphia Fire*'s description of Caliban, we can see how Caliban's “natural cloak” evokes a form of vulnerability, and thereby allows him to be read as a colonial subject.

In *Caliban's Reason*, Henry goes on to note that later interpretations of *The Tempest* read Caliban as a colonized African, alongside the scramble for Africa. Reading this as the process of Africans becoming “Calibanized,” Henry reveals how Caliban's relationship to nature creates a natural/philosophical binary that articulates the bounds between the colonial subject and the colonizer. Explaining this, Henry states,

This ‘Calibanization’ of Africans could not but devour their rationality and hence their capacity for philosophical thinking. As a biological being, Caliban is not a philosopher. He or she does not think and in particular does not think rationally. In the European tradition, rationality was a white trait that, by their exclusionary racial logic, blacks could not possess. Hence the inability to see the African now reinvented as Caliban, in the role of sage, philosopher, or thinker. In short, this new racialized identity was also the death of Caliban’s reason (12).

In this passage, Henry articulates how colonizer served to “Calibanize” the besieged Africans by rendering them “biological,” and thereby not a “sage, philosopher, or thinker” (12). Through this “exclusionary logic,” colonizers designated the colonial subject with a series of “natural” characteristics, that are read here through the attributes of Shakespeare’s Caliban. Lacking the “white trait,” of rationality, Caliban serves as the antithesis to the colonizer, thereby enabling colonial powers to announce their “rationality” by building a comparison to the native’s “biology”.

In *Philadelphia Fire*, a similar comparison occurs through the description of Caliban and Prospero’s cloaks. Where Caliban’s cloak is “natty” and “natural,” Prospero’s is “dashing midnight-blue silk” (120). Prospero’s silken cloak is adorned “with all its devices, astrological symbols, alchemist’s calligraphy, Stars, Stripes, sickle moon, comet and tail, ect,” thereby enshrouding him with imagery of man-made “devices,” such as astrology and alchemy (120). Prospero is also adorned with the “Stars, Stripes” of the American flag, thereby “suggesting” that Prospero is cloaked with the imagery of an imperialist statehood, as well as that of alchemy and astrology (120). Here, the novel compares Caliban’s naturalness to Prospero’s thought, science,

and imperialism. This creates a dichotomy between Caliban and Prospero that mimics the relationship between the colonizer and his subject as is outlined in *Caliban's Reason*. This allows us to read this evocation of Caliban as a colonial subject in a manner that enters him into a larger anticolonial discourse.

Following the description of Caliban's appearance, *Philadelphia Fire* characterizes Caliban's speech. In Caliban's visual description, his colonial subjection is outlined through his relationship to his colonizer, Prospero. In the description of his accent, *Philadelphia Fire* lists a variety of geographies implicated within the colonial project, and thereby allows for us to read Caliban as a model of the oppressed subject through his relationship to geography. The text reads, "...His speech is queerly accented, traces of the Bronx, Merry Ole England, rural Georgia, Jamaican calypso, West Coast krio, ect.)" (120). Describing the creolization of Caliban's accent, *Philadelphia Fire* provides a vast geographical scope upon which he can be read as a figure of the colonized. Here, the novel posits Caliban as a colonial figure that speaks for the experience of exploitation within multiple regions.

Voicing this role, Caliban then makes an impassioned speech on the exploitation he has experienced. Caliban states, "Think of this play this man done. Him broken my island all to pieces" (121). Here, Caliban works through two usages of the word "play," to register two forms of address. The most apparent of these occurs through the colloquial usage of "play". Using the term to refer to an organized and deceptive tactic or offense, Caliban regards the colonial exploitation he experienced within *The Tempest* as him getting "played". In this usage, the term remains within *The Tempest's* narrative, and posits "this man" as Prospero.

Coinciding with this reading, Caliban's usage of "play" also allows the reader to consider *The Tempest's* genre, and thereby read this passage as an address to the play itself. Here, the novel places Caliban's experience of exploitation within *The Tempest* alongside the historical stakes of the play as a literary and cultural object. In *Caliban's Reason*, Henry clarifies these stakes by explaining that the origins of Caliban's inscription can be traced back to "the colonizing voyages that Europeans were making to the Caribbean" (4). Networks of empire and coloniality served to shuttle information across the ocean, as it did goods and people. Therefore, Caliban's entry into the British canon can be traced back to these networks, thereby clarifying the role of colonized peoples within Shakespeare's inscription of Caliban. Working through both meanings of the word "play," Caliban addresses the history of exploitation that enabled this inscription, thereby pointing a finger at Shakespeare. By becoming canonized, Caliban was then implicated within the networks of the British literary canon, and thereby disseminated images of the colonial imagination. Therefore, we can see how Caliban acknowledges multiple layers of exploitation within his monologue, thereby considering the exploitation he experienced within the play's narrative and as a part of the British literary canon.

Negotiating these two registers of address further, Caliban discusses the exploitation he experienced as it occurred within the narrative of *The Tempest*. Here, Caliban clarifies the manner with which literature and exploitation intersect through *The Tempest*, and identifies how Shakespeare and Prospero relate to colonial powers. Addressing the audience, Caliban's berrates an unfixed "him," stating,

Do you listen? Do you hear down dere weeping and wailing? All fall down on golden sand of this island mine.

Or was mine. Once pon time. As that fancy one dere does testify. Mine by way Queen Sycorax my mother. Him say all dat and say my mother am witch. Why him play dozens now? Say island belong to him now. Say my mother dead in nother country. Why he swoop down like great god from sky, try make everybody feel high? Take ebryting. Den ebryting give back. Go off teach at University. Write book. Host talk show. Jah self don't know what next dis dicty gentleman do.

Ebryting restore but what him first stole. Island mine from my poor mother.

Island stole from me. (121)

In this passage, Caliban tracks the sins of his oppressor. Given the historical contexts of *The Tempest*, and Caliban's seeming awareness of the play, we can continue to read the object of Caliban's disdain as either Shakespeare or Prospero. We can see this resonating through the godlike postures Caliban identifies in the colonizer, as he accuses his unfixed oppressor of swooping "down like a great god in the sky," to "take ebryting. Den ebryting give back" (121). Through this critique, we can see as Caliban narrows in on the overdetermined sense of agency and godlike control exhibited by the author Shakespeare, the Duke Prospero, and the actual agents of coloniality (such as the slave trade, the companies that promoted exploration, and novelistic forms that perpetuated the sense of mystery and exploration, and the political powers that ensured the success of this project).

Here, the novel examines Caliban across the global scope of the British literary canon, thereby allowing him to be read as a broadly generalized colonial subject. However, this broad reading of Caliban is interjected with fragments of cultural specificity that trouble the conception of Caliban as a highly generalized figure of the colonial subject. Within his speech, Caliban uses

fragments of culturally specific language that suggest Jamaican patois. This is reflected in his usage of “jah” and “ebryting” (121). This is coupled by a series of reggae lyrics, such as “try make everybody feel high,” from Bob Marley’s “Get Up, Stand Up,” and “weeping and wailing”, from the Burning Spear song of the same name. Given that Caliban also wears his hair in dreads, we can read as the novel baits the reader into positing Caliban as a Jamaican Rastafarian. However, this reading is troubled by the interjection of Black American vernacular, such as a reference to the Black urban tradition of playing the “dozens” (121). Therefore, while the novel troubles the generality of Caliban as the figure of a colonized individual through the interjection of culturally specific language, it also leaves his cultural origin undecidable. Here, Caliban is placed in between two distinctive modes of reading, one which attempts to imagine him as the broadly defined colonial figure, and one which tries to excavate his cultural origin, through which he could provide a more specific mode of representation.

Caliban’s unfixed cultural origin is examined further as the novel provides context for his entry into the text. Returning to third person narration, the novel returns to Cudjoe, and watches as he stages an elementary school production of *The Tempest*. Cudjoe introduces the play to his class in a sermonic, dogmatic summary, that poses the relevance of the work to a room of Black Philadelphian children. Cudjoe clarifies how Caliban relates to his rewriting of *The Tempest*, by asserting that the goal of his revised production is to “demonstrate conclusively that Mr. Caliban’s behind is clean and unencumbered, good as anybody else’s” (131). Here, Cudjoe sets the goal of his production around the rewriting of a “clean and unencumbered” Caliban, thereby reappropriating this character, in order for him to speak freely for the oppressed person.

Here, Cudjoe dramatizes Caliban and Prospero's relationship, framing it as the dynamic between a master and slave. Cudjoe states, "Mr. prosperous Prospero who wielded without thought of God or man the merry ole cat-o'-nine-tails unmercifully whupping on your behind" (131). Cudjoe then equates Prospero to "Simon Legree," a slave owner from Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Here, Cudjoe imagines Caliban and Prospero within a master/slave relationship that gestures towards American slavery within the Antebellum south. By reading Caliban and Prospero within the history of Black Americans in the south, Cudjoe recasts the characters within a context that announces their functions as models of the oppressed and the oppressor.

Setting the scope in which Caliban can be read as the figure of the oppressed person, Cudjoe traces a genealogy that tracks a series of major Black thinkers of the 20th century back to "Godfather Caliban" (128). The text reads,

Point is, long before Fanon or Garvey or Marley or any of that, before the spring storm in Memphis that ate the foliage and opened the line of sight from the window of a motel up on a hill down to the balcony of the divine lorraine, long before a bullet booked down that long lonesome highway and ended the life of a man who'd just enjoyed a plate of fried fish...your Godfather Caliban was hatched. (128)

In this passage the novel implicates the work of Frantz Fanon, Marcus Garvey, Bob Marley, and Martin Luther King Jr (who was shot on the balcony of the Lorraine hotel), within the historical lineage of Caliban. Serving as their shared origin, Caliban unifies the disparate mediums, practices, and cultures that these figures were situated in. This genealogy allows for Caliban to be read as a figure of the oppressed Black subject within a broad scope, as he is read alongside

the political action in Marley's Jamaica, Fanon's Algeria, and the United States. Spanning a vast geographic scope, Caliban's lineage allows him to be read both broadly and generally, as he applies to multiple and disparate historical scenes of oppression.

However, much like in the initial evocation of Caliban, the internationalism with which he is firstly imagined is then trouble by the interjection of culturally specific language. Breaking from its list, the novel begins to ruminate on the image of fried fish. Considering the plate of fried fish left behind in Martin Luther King Jr.'s hotel room, the novel breaks into an imagination of his last meal, in a manner that mimics the scene of Leonardo Da Vinci's *The Last Supper*. The text reads,

(the dish still sits in the room and the dish was what broke my heart, summoned him back from wherever he was, to stand full of life and smile and not know its his last supper, ummmm, this fish is good man. Some good fish. Here, have some brother Malcolm, brother Chaney, brother Goodman, and here, Addie Mae, honey, you cute little angel you, taste a piece and take some for your lovely sister too, you surely look beautiful today, my children. Help yourself, Medgar. Go on, man. It's good fish.) (128)

In this scene the novel imagines a Last Supper attended by Black Americans who were assassinated during the civil rights movement. Passing out fried fish, Martin Luther King Jr takes the role of Jesus at this table, with the fellow dead as his disciples. Amongst those at the meal are Medgar Evers and Malcolm X, both famous for their role within the American civil rights movement. The two are accompanied by Addie Mae Collins, James Chaney, and Andrew Goodman, all of whom were assassinated by the KKK between 1963 and 1964. This passage is interjected within the description of Caliban's lineage, flooding this section of the text with

details of the American Civil rights movement. This is punctuated by the assertion that Caliban is the “godfather” of the Black Philadelphian children as well, which thereby grounds Caliban within the moment from which he is described. Here, the novel troubles the broad scope across which Caliban is described by interjecting an onslaught of historical specificities, all of which ground Caliban with 1960’s Black America. Here, once again, we can read as Caliban is posed between two forms of readings, the general and specific, with neither succeeding in grounding Caliban within a particular historical moment.

By failing to fit neatly within either mode of reading, Caliban resists interpretation. Here, the only definitive claim that can be made on this Caliban is that he is derived from *The Tempest*. This is largely confirmed within his speech, which outlines a series of dynamics that occurred within the plot of *The Tempest*, such as the seizure of his stolen island, and his enslavement. This Caliban’s origin within *The Tempest* is also announced by the tone of his abjection, as it matches the temperament of Shakespeare’s Caliban. In his monologue within *Philadelphia Fire*, the novel frames Caliban’s abjection as an anticolonial sentiment, and thereby reads *The Tempest* as a colonial narrative. The plot of *The Tempest* largely grounds such a reading, as it follows Prospero, the exiled Duke of Milan, who lives on a conquered island. Utilizing his mystical powers, Prospero enslaves the native Caliban, after his attempted rape of Prospero’s virginal daughter Miranda. This rape is also posed as the justification for the seizure of Caliban’s land. Having secured power over the island, Prospero then pursues his political enemies, who he has shipwrecked onto the island’s shores. In the background of this pursuit, Caliban and his fellow slave, Ariel, pursue their freedom.

By reading this plot as a colonial narrative, *Philadelphia Fire* mimics the work of mid-fifties and early seventies post colonialists, who attempted to reappropriate *The Tempest* as a founding colonial narrative. In his essay, “Caribbean and African Appropriations of *The Tempest*” critic Rob Nixon provides the historical context of this moment, stating,

The era from the late fifties to the early seventies was marked in Africa and the Caribbean by a rush of newly articulated anticolonial sentiment that was associated with the burgeoning of both international black consciousness and more localized nationalist movements. Between 1957 and 1973 the vast majority of African and the larger Caribbean colonies won their independence; the same period witnessed the Cuban and Algerian revolutions, the latter phase of the Kenyan "Mau Mau" revolt, the Katanga crisis in the Congo, the Trinidadian Black Power uprising and, equally important for the atmosphere of militant defiance, the civil rights movement in the United States, the student revolts of 1968, and the humbling of the United States during the Vietnam War. This period was distinguished, among Caribbean and African intellectuals, by a pervasive mood of optimistic outrage. (557)

Within this historical context, Nixon examines how “Caribbean and African Intellectuals,” enacted uprisings within academic communities. These intellectuals were often “graduates of British or French universities”, and therefore highly familiar with the British canon (557). This community called “collectively for a renunciation of Western standards as the political revolts found their cultural counterparts in insurrections against the bequeathed values of the colonial powers” (557). Within this project, “a series of dissenting intellectuals,” turned towards *The Tempest* in order to amplify “their calls for decolonization within the bounds of the dominant

cultures” (558). This project also began to posit *The Tempest* “as a founding text in an oppositional lineage which issued from a geopolitically and historically specific set of cultural ambition” (558). The community of post-colonial intellectuals in the mid-fifties and early seventies “hailed Caliban and identified themselves with him,” thereby entering him into a tradition of academic decoloniality, and literary protest (561).

This reading draws upon the postures Caliban inhabits within *The Tempest* itself. Throughout the play, Caliban continuously voices protests against his enslavement, and the seizure of his land. Looking at the text itself, we can now see which passages of the play make an anticolonial reading of the work possible. In his introduction within the play, Caliban is called upon by his master Prospero, who describes the labors of his bondage, stating “he does make our fire,/ Fetch in our wood and serves in offices / That profit us” (1.2.312-14). The two then converse about the conditions of Caliban’s enslavement. Throughout this conversation, Caliban expresses the manner with which he has faced exploitation, by describing his relationship to land and language as it is filtered through the burdens of bondage. As they discuss Caliban’s enslavement, Prospero, Miranda, and Caliban narrate the history of their relationship, and justify the origins of Caliban’s bondage. Here, *The Tempest* poses the origin of Caliban’s enslavement in order to construct the narrative of a justly deserving slave. However, within this scene of justification, Caliban bemoans a series of exploitations and burdens, that have subsequently enable his role within postcolonial thought.

Disturbed from his dinner by Prospero’s call, Caliban curses Prospero in the name of his dead mother, the Queen Witch Sycorax. Expanding on his disdain, Caliban contends with Prospero, stating “This island's mine, by Sycorax my mother,/ Which thou takest from me”

(1.2.333-334). In this passage, Caliban bemoans the loss of his island, rightfully his by inheritance of his mother Sycorax. Here marking his filial relationship to the island, Caliban designates his loss of the island as the seizure of of his rightful land. Caliban then goes on to explain how he aided in his loss of the island, by imbuing Prospero with the skills he needed in order to inhabit the land. Hereby outlining his role within the seizure of the his land, Caliban describes his first encounters with Prospero. Describing their initial friendship, Caliban states,

When thou camest first,/ Thou strokedst me and madest much of me, wouldst give me/
Water with berries in't, and teach me how/ To name the bigger light, and how the less,/

That burn by day and night: and then I loved thee/ And show'd thee all the qualities o' the
isle,/ The fresh springs, brine-pits, barren place and fertile:/ Cursed be I that did so! All
the charms/ Of Sycorax, toads, beetles, bats, light on you!/ For I am all the subjects that
you have,/ Which first was mine own king: and here you sty me/ In this hard rock, whiles
you do keep from me/ The rest o' the island. (1.2.334-344)

In this passage, Caliban describes the process through which Prospero was enabled to control the island. After the death of Sycorax, Caliban was cared for by Prospero. Prospero's kindness inspired Caliban to offer native knowledge of the island, thereby ensuring that Prospero was equipped to inhabit the land. However, it was this knowledge that then secured Prospero's seizure of the island, and Caliban's subsequent bondage.

In exchange for his native knowledge, Caliban was also offered Miranda and Prospero's language, which taught him how to "To name the bigger light" (1.2.336). This exchange is very significant in both his direct discourse with Prospero, and the larger discourse surrounding Caliban as a colonial figure. After making mention of this, Caliban, Miranda, and Prospero begin

discussing the stakes and process of Caliban's education. We come to find that Miranda also engaged in this tutelage. She describes how she cultivated a relationship with Caliban in attempt to teach him language, stating, "I pitied thee, / Took pains to make thee speak, taught thee each hour / One thing or other: when thou didst not, savage, / Know thine own meaning, but wouldst gabble like / A thing most brutish, I endow'd thy purposes / With words that made them known" (1.2.354-358). Here, Miranda expands on her project to impart Caliban with an understanding of language, and describes the manner with which Caliban utilized the language he obtained. Suggesting that her tutelage "endow'd thy purposes / With words that made them known," Miranda suggests that language revealed Caliban as "A thing most brutish" (1.2.357-358). Here, Miranda condemns Caliban for the postures through which he inhabited language. From this, she extrapolates on how Caliban's usage of language reflects his nature, stating, "But thy vile race, / Though thou didst learn, had that in't which good / natures / Could not abide to be with. Therefore wast thou / Deservedly confined into this rock, / Who hadst deserved more than a prison" (1.2. 357-361). Here, Miranda connects Caliban's usage of language, objectionable behavior, and subsequent imprisonment to the "nature" of his "vile race". Considering this alongside Henry's work through nature, we can read how these passages provide the foundation for his concept of Calibanization, as they equate the postures of a deserving slave to the "natural" condition of Caliban. Here, language functions as a colonial tool, as it serves to provide justification for Caliban's enslavement, and enter him into discourses of the "natural". Seeming to acknowledge this function, Caliban confesses to his accused misuse of language, stating that, "You taught me language; and my profit on't / Is, I know how to curse" (1.2.364-365).

In these passages, Caliban speaks towards the conditions of his servitude as they are outlined within *The Tempest*. The nature of his abjection and subjugation enabled his role within the discourse of Caribbean and African Intellectuals as his language becomes familiar to a community of intellectuals who have seen their countries gain independence. *Philadelphia Fire* draws on this relationship when posing its inscription of Caliban. In *Philadelphia Fire*, Caliban can be read alongside the global discourse that follows the histories that he marks, the nature of his speech, and his role within the British literary canon.

However, by posing its inscription of Caliban, *Philadelphia Fire* also leads the reader toward an examination of Caliban's relationship to the British empire. In "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism," Gayatri Spivak critiques the anticolonial theorists and literary critics who read Caliban a model for the subjected person, as this reading forgets the relationship between literature and British colonialism. Here, Spivak proposes a reading of Caliban that reasserts his role within the British colonial project, by describing the manner with which the British literary canon represented "England to the English" (240). Elaborating on this, Spivak states,

It should not be possible to read nineteenth-century British literature without remembering that imperialism, understood as England's social mission, was a crucial part of the cultural representation of England to the English. The role of literature in the production of cultural representation should not be ignored. These two obvious "facts" continue to be disregarded in the reading of nineteenth-century British literature. This itself attests to the continuing success of the imperialist project, displaced and dispersed into more modern forms. (240)

Here, Spivak describes the inherit relationship between “nineteenth-century British literature” and “imperialism” (240). Asserting that “the role of literature in the production of cultural representation should not be ignored,” Spivak clarifies that the ability to ignore imperialism’s role within literature “attests the continuing success of the imperialist project” (240).

Considering this in relation to the British literary representations of the colonized subject, Spivak considers *The Tempest*, and the manners through which postcolonial communities attempt to appropriate Caliban.

In addressing this function within colonial thought, Spivak examines how Ariel and Caliban have been imagined as the “model for the Latin American intellectual in relation to Europe (245).” Spivak arrives at these models by examining the work of Jose Enrique Rodo and Roberto Fernandez Retamar. In 1900, Rodo put forth Ariel as such a model. To understand the nature of such a posit, we can think of Ariel as an educated native, who benefits from, but is still subject to, the soft power of the colonizer. Therefore, we should understand that the formulation of Ariel as the model Latin American intellectual perpetuate colonial axioms of power. In 1971, Retamar revisited Rodo’s model, and published “Caliban”. In this essay Retamar “recast the model as Caliban” (245). While noting the thematic differences between the two, Retamar is careful to assert that Ariel and Caliban are “both are slaves in the hands of Prospero, the foreign magician” (245). Retamar goes on to clarify the variance of the two model, stating “But Caliban is the rude and unconquerable master of the island, while Ariel, a creature of the air, although also a child of the isle, is the intellectual” (245). Through this, we read the model Caliban as a representative of the colonial subject that addresses his colonizer with abjection. This is made further evident when Retamar calls for us to “seek from Caliban the honor of a

place in his rebellious and glorious ranks" (245). Here, Spivak identifies how this reading of Caliban "works alongside the narrativization of history" that the British literary canon also serves to produce. Directly speaking towards an academic community, Spivak expands on this, and outlines how Retamar's reading of Caliban misreads the role of literature within the British colonial project. She states,

If, however, we are driven by nostalgia for lost origins, we too run the risk of effacing the 'native' and stepping forth as 'the real Caliban,' of forgetting that he is a name in a play, an inaccessible blankness circumscribed by an interpretable text. The stagings of Caliban work alongside the narrativization of history: claiming to *be* Caliban legitimizes the very individualism that we must persistently attempt to undermine from within. (245)

By addressing the form of individualism that arises when postcolonialist attempt to embody Caliban, Spivak dismisses the false origins that this global decolonial discourse attempts to contrive through Caliban's posture. Compelling the reader to remember that Caliban is "a name in a play, an inaccessible blankness circumscribed by an interpretable text," Spivak reasserts Caliban's textuality, and compels her reader to address Caliban as a form of representation within British imperialism that disseminated images of the colonized to the colonizer (245). By being "driven by nostalgia for lost origins," Spivak's reader "runs the risk" of forgetting the history of the British canon that Caliban actually carries, and thereby attesting to the "continuing success of the imperialist project" (240). In ensuring that the historical role of Caliban is recollected, Spivak develops a method for reading Caliban that addresses him in a historically specific manner without imposing "lost origins" (245). Here, Spivak breaks apart the broad

manner through which Caliban is read within postcolonial discourse, by refuting the politics of his reinscription within false historical moments.

In *Philadelphia Fire*, the novel approaches this moment in academic discourse by deconstructing the figure of Caliban in a similar manner. Over the course of a lengthy, twenty page description of Cudjoe's "revised" version of *The Tempest*, a later Cudjoe interjects to reflect on this project and assert its fated failure. In these interjections, Cudjoe asserts that his attempted to stage a "revised" version of *The Tempest* was always impossible, and that the very assumption of its possibility was predicated on his performance of false confidence. Attributing the momentum of the project to his own performance of confidence, the novel ties a sense of performativity to its reinscribed imagination of Caliban, and thereby reveals to the reader that its interpretation of Caliban was always predicated upon falsities. Condemning this performance in retrospect, Cudjoe breaks down the performativity of the project alongside his generalized model of Caliban, thereby does away with the possibility of Caliban speaking for all of the subjected world.

Throughout Cudjoe description of the project, the novel zooms in on moments in which the likelihood of the production is plainly asserted. The reader watches as Cudjoe rattles off the logistics of the production, discussing the need to "build a stage. With wings and tower and a machine for flying Ariel" (134). In response to this, the novel poses the thoughts of a detractor, who states, "Good luck, dude. Better take out lots of insurance on any them black kids you expecting to fly" (134). Immediately, Cudjoe meets this detraction with assurance, as he replies, "It's going to happen. Needs to happen. Negative shit's bound to come up. This is the kind of

thing scares people. So they'll be bitching, moaning, and backsliding. But I guarantee you. It's going to happen" (134).

Following this exchange, Cudjoe reflects on the manner with which he asserted his assuredness. Framing his previous statement with a sense of underlying doubt, Cudjoe states, I think back to the beginning. When the project was just an idea teasing me. Black kids doing Shakespeare. How impossible it seemed. Farfetched. Maybe not even a good idea, even if I could pull it off. Blowing smoke. Talking to anybody who'd listen. Black boys and girls mastering Shakespeare. Bucking myself up by telling everybody how confident I was. Constant PR campaign with me as supersalesperson. At the same time I didn't believe a word I was saying. (134)

Here, Cudjoe plainly designates that his attempt to stage *The Tempest* was "impossible," farfetched", and entirely reliant upon "bucking myself up by telling everybody how confident I was" (134). Marking the falsity of both his production and his performance, this passage also displays how the novel contradicts itself. Speaking in direct contradiction to the previous passage, Cudjoe's statements on the impossibility of the project designates the previous passages as lies. Therefore, the novel's ability to lie, when read in conjunction with its statements on performance, provide the reader with the sense that it performed a false reading of Caliban, in order to prove this reading's ultimate failure.

Expanding further on the relationship between the novel's falseness and its representations of performativity, Cudjoe begins to identify how his performativity turned insidious, and began to break apart. Cudjoe states,

For a long while I didn't believe. Convincing other people I could pull it off was my way of keeping the idea alive. I didn't believe a word I was saying, but if they believed, well I was encouraged to talk more. Bounce the notion off someone else. Easier than trying to convince myself, easier than lying to myself. I can look back now and admit. Yes, I was depending on an illusion. I was strengthening myself by feeding other people a lie. I marginalized myself. If all these other people believe this bullshit, this harebrained project, what's wrong with me, why can't I believe it? Why should I be different? I talked them into talking me into doing it. If that makes any sense. And it probably doesn't. Or if it does, the sense is a scary kind of sense. Something not to be examined too closely. The point is the, at some point I began acting as if the play could be staged. The act became a habit. The habit brought the play closer and closer to life. (146)

In this passage, Cudjoe's production of the *The Tempest* is framed with utter pessimism, as he calls it "a lie," "hairbrained," and "bullshit" (146). Bemoaning his false confidence alongside the failure of the project, Cudjoe explains how this play was "depending on an illusion" that "marginalized" himself (146). Observing how this act "became a habit" that "brought the play closer and closer to life," Cudjoe describes how the performance of confidence made the play seem likely, but also alienated himself from the project. Here, Cudjoe describes how the audience to his performance maintained his project, as he "was strengthening myself by feeding other people a lie" (146). During the moments of his dogmatic sermon, this audience was both the children he spoke to, and the reader he indirectly addressed. Here, the reader is brought into the role of audience, and is thereby implicated within the performance of Cudjoe's false confidence, and the false staging of Caliban as well.

From here, Cudjoe begins to outwardly express doubt about the possibility for Caliban to be revised, reframed, and reappropriated. He states, “you can’t rewrite *The Tempest* any damn way you please” (144). This sentiment is then paired with a direct address to the impossibility of gaining just for Caliban through the salvation of theatrics, as Cudjoe again doubts the project, stating “Everybody knows can’t nobody free Caliban but his own damn self” (145). Here, Cudjoe definitively states that the project to reinscribe Caliban as the model of colonized peoples is predicated upon false interpretations of both Caliban and the play itself.

These reflexive moment is then further disrupted by the interjections of the “fabulator,” who claims to have written *Philadelphia Fire*, and displays unique knowledge on the book itself. This fabulator relates this staging of *The Tempest* to the rest of the novel, thereby making claims on the significance of the play being brought into *Philadelphia Fire*. The fabulator informs the reader that Cudjoe’s production of *The Tempest* was never actually performed. The fabulator sets up this revelation by speaking on the nature of the play itself. Interrupting Cudjoe’s speech on Caliban as a model for the subjected person, the fabulator speaks directly towards the reader, stating

Think on it and place it in the proper perspective because it rained the Saturday the show scheduled. And Sunday. Then blue again Monday. No one survived the weekend. We had to start all over again. Lost again. Cudjoe wondering why the weather had been so mean. Whose idea was it to wash away *The Tempest* with a tempest before it even got started. So one more ring of imaginary, of play around the play because as we consider it further it’s only fair to break the news that it never really came off. (133)

Here, the fabulator outlines that Cudjoe's attempt to stage a rewritten Caliban never succeeded. Rather, this rewritten version of *The Tempest* is washed away by a "tempest before it even got started" (133). Plainly noting the irony of this, the fabulator marks how the revision of *The Tempest* was washed away by "mean" weather, that thereby ensured the failure of the play. Having lost the opportunity for his culminating performance, Cudjoe does away within his false confidence, and instead resigns himself to the project's disappointing end. From a later date, Cudjoe discusses this with Timbo, and fellow political advocate-turned government official. Discussing the unsatisfactory fate of the project the two speak. Their conversation reads,

Never happened, did it?

No. We were all set to go. Then it rained. Two days and two nights.

Too bad.

A lot of hard work went into it. The kids were ready. I know it would have been a smash.

They were very good.

Was it ever performed?

Nope. Things happened. Time ran out. I quit the teaching job. Went to grad school.

Whole business just petered out. (149)

In this conversation, Cudjoe marks how his attempt to restage *The Tempest* and receive justice for Caliban was ultimately foiled by a lack of time. Quitting the project, Cudjoe also "quit the teaching job. Went to grad school" (149). Hereby leaving his community of Black Philadelphian children behind, Cudjoe marks how his attempt to rewrite Caliban, though impossible and "hairbrained" also ensured his immediate role within his community. Leaving this community

behind alongside the failure of his project, Cudjoe retreats to academia, in order to contend with Caliban there.

Having done away with Caliban as the figure of the colonized subject, the novel also discards usage of performances in order to convey false information. Here, the novel marks the failure of Cudjoe's production of *The Tempest*, and concludes its description of the production. Rather than leading reader to a moment amongst Caliban's "glorious ranks," these passages discard of Caliban as the figure of the colonized subject, thereby doing away with the reader's ability to read oppressed peoples through a generalized understanding of their circumstances. Following the work of Spivak, Henry, and a community of Caribbean and African postcolonial thinkers, the novel tracks its usage of Caliban alongside his role within academic discourse. Performing his role within various moments within this discourse, the novel then concludes it's negotiation of Caliban by positing him alongside Spivak's critique of the false narrativization of history, and thereby conclusively reads Caliban within his role in the British canon. Here, the novel performs a false reading of Caliban, only to break this model apart, and return Caliban to his inscribed origins.

Coda

In considering the global scope of *Philadelphia Fire*, I have found myself repeatedly drawn to the economic, literary, and cultural networks that characterize the novel's international pervisions. By connecting the MOVE Bombing to the transatlantic slave trade, the novel roots its global scope in an economic discourse, that imbricates global tragedy with international capitalist systems. This is then further nuanced through the novel's consideration of Caliban, which negotiates the figure through the global economic networks that evolved alongside the refiguring character, such as the economic systems that folloed early European coloniality, and the growth of the transatlantic slave trade, that then refigured Caliban as an enslaved African. By tracking these economic networks through Caliban, we can observe the circulation of the British literary canon, that thereby constitutes a global network of thought and story that works in tandem with the British colonial project.

Reading *Philadelphia Fire* for the presence of these networks, we can arrive upon a sense of its global scope that imbricates this internationalism with tragedy and death. Therefore, the novel's global considerations of politics serves as measure of responsibility, that recognize a

global history of exploitation, rather than imagine an optimistic future, in which the globe is harmoniously unified. Alongside this configuration of global politics, the novel traces the intellectual communities that exist within the wake of the colonial and imperial networks that outlined an international scope. In examining the post-colonial work that exists around Caliban, the novel identifies yet another global network. This network exists both within the wake of and in reaction to the global networks established by a history of violence and exploitation.

Therefore, the novel locates itself within an academic community existing in the wake of global violence, thereby situating itself within a global aftermath, alongside the immediate aftermath of the MOVE Bombing.

Works Cited

- Berlin, Ira. "Slavery, Freedom, and Philadelphia's Struggle for Brotherly Love, 1685 to 1861." *Antislavery and Abolition in Philadelphia: Emancipation and the Long Struggle for Racial Justice in the City of Brotherly Love*, edited by Richard S. Newman, and James Mueller Louisiana State University Press, 2011
- Carden, Mary Paniccia. "If the City is a Man": Founder and Fathers, Cities and Sons in John Edgar Wideman's *Philadelphia Fire*." *Contemporary Literature*, Vol. 44, No. 3 (Autumn, 2003), pp. 472-500. University of Wisconsin Press.
- Coleman, James W. *Writing Blackness: John Edgar Wideman's Art and Experimentation*. Louisiana State University Press, 2010.
- Dubey, Madhu. "Literature and Urban Crisis: John Edgar Wideman's Philadelphia Fire." *African American Review*, Vol. 32, No. 4, pp. 579-595. Indiana State University.
- Glissant, Édouard. "The Open Boat." *Poetics of Relation*. Univ. of Michigan Press, 1997.
Translated by Betsy Wing.
- Henry, Paget. "Introduction: the General Character of Afro-Caribbean Philosophy." *Caliban's Reason: Introducing Afro-Caribbean Philosophy*. New York: Routledge, 2000. Print.
- "Historical Documents: Fourth of July Celebration in Centre Square ." *PBS*, Public Broadcasting Service, www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part3/3h467.html.

Nixon, Rob. "Caribbean and African Appropriations of 'The Tempest.'" *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 13, no. 3, 1987, pp. 557–578. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/1343513.

Pearsall, Susan M. "'Narratives of Self' and the Abdication of Authority in Wideman's *Philadelphia Fire*." *MELUS*, Vol. 26, No. 2, Identities (Summer, 2001), pp. 15-46. Oxford University Press on behalf of Society for the Study of the Multi Ethnic Literature of the United States.

Shakespeare, William. *The Tempest*. Edited by Ann Keay. Beneduce and Gennady Spirin, Philomel Books, 1996.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism." *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 12, no. 1, 1985, pp. 243–261. *JSTOR*, JSTOR.

Wideman, John E. *Philadelphia Fire*. New York: Random House, 1991. Print.