THE SHATTERED GOURD

Yoruba Forms in Twentieth-Century American Art
1 / Introduction

Ethiopia Awakening

It has taken us a couple of generations to begin—just begin—to perceive . . .

an activation of unconscious and sleeping resources in the phantom limb
of dismembered slave and god. An activation which possesses a nucleus
of great promise—of far-reaching new poetic form.

—WILSON HARRIS

But something else has begun: the head of Orpheus,
dismembered, sings anew.

—IHAB HASSAN

The black American journey began in Africa, where the following story
starts, before crossing the Atlantic waters. Once upon a time,¹ at the
verdant dawn of time and space, life was lush and fresh, everything
as perfect as it could possibly be, people did not die, everybody felt happy
and fulfilled. This utopian state existed because the Igbà Ìwà, the divine
Calabash of Being containing the essential Water of Life (Omi Ìyè), was safely
nestled behind the royal throne. The insignia of the world, the divine cal-
abash was fragile, delicate, and light. A calabash by nature is brittle, as is the
nature of life itself; it is fragile, a metaphor for the delicacy of human rel-
ations and interaction.

Despite the fragility of life, nobody died. Because mortals failed to die,
the other divinities asked Death whether he would ever perform the task of
harvesting people, for which he was specially created. But Death swore he
would never be found alive on earth, as long as the calabash with its ritual
water was also there. They asked Death what it was about the calabash and
the water that scared and deterred him. He said he could not say specifically,
but that there was something unsettling in the permanently calm, mirror-
like surface of the water in the calabash. The water-filled Igbà Ìwà was thus
carefully curated and gingerly handled—hardly ever touched—so as not to
tamper with the essence of the delicacy and fragility of life. Tampering with
the Igbà Ìwà was tantamount to tampering with life itself, a risk no one was
willing to take. But that blissful state of security was not to be for long.

One fateful day, Oduduwa² invited two of his wives to settle a lingering
quarrel between them. After listening carefully to the arguments on both
sides, he passed what he considered a just judgment. The senior wife, however, felt that his decision was biased against her and partial toward the younger wife, which infuriated her. She took a dirty swipe at his royal face. But knowing her to be a woman with a volatile temper, he anticipated the blow and ducked, causing her to hit the Igbá Ìwà behind the throne. The sacred calabash fell on the floor. The entire contents of Omi Ìyè (the Water of Life) spilled onto the ground as the gourd broke into pieces, the various parts flung all over the floor, dis-membered like an animal sacrificed to the war divinities. Since the Omi Ìyè was what prevented Death from invading the world, people began to die as soon as Death swaggered in, having learned about the fate of the sacred water and the shattered gourd. Suddenly, imperfection filtered into human affairs and the world, out of joint, became dismembered, like the shattered gourd.

For the moment you may ignore the gender and sexual implications of the story. What I want to dwell upon is the equation of the world with a calabash, and how the shattering of that calabash has brought anomie into the world. In a metaphor that links mythology with history, the impact of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, colonization, and neocolonization on the body of the Yoruba culture echoes the shattering of the calabash. The same impact that caused the disintegration and cultural transformations also flung the calabash pieces to every corner of the world.

This volume focuses on the representations of that disintegration and the resultant germination of the Yoruba culture outside of the African continent, particularly along the shores visited by the Atlantic slave ships. I will limit this survey to the twentieth-century art of the United States, among those who identify themselves as blacks, and whose work is only a small portion of a larger corpus that I call black Atlantic art. I will attempt, in this short work, to show how twentieth-century black Atlantic artists of the United States have used art as a means of healing the lesions of slavery and its traumatic aftermath by projecting their works as a metaphor for seeking and reconstructing the shattered calabash. It is the story of how the phantom limb was not only reactivated, as Wilson Harris observed above, but poetically re-membered to the damaged body, as part of an ongoing healing process.

The explosion of the Yoruba calabash is formulated as dis-membering and the germination / recuperation in the diaspora as re-membering. This link between recovery, memory, and healing is practically and theoretically a form of algebra, a setting of fractured bones, a cultural orthopedic that is basically a survival strategy for African Americans in the United States, people
whose lives lie in America, and for whom Africa is often too distant both physically and psychically.

In the twentieth-century culture of the black artist in the United States, what is crucial is the algebra (al-jebr) employed for re-membering the essential cultural spirits of the two continents that have drifted away from one another. Understanding that connection enables one to perceive the essential role of visual metaphors in the survival of African Americans during slavery, and their recuperation during the twentieth century. According to Paul Gilroy, “Artistic expression . . . becomes the means towards both individual self-fashioning and communal liberation. Poieses and poetics begin to coexist in novel forms—autobiographical writing, special and uniquely creative ways of manipulating spoken language, and, above all, music.” The significance of the visual, material culture in this therapeutic aesthetics, crucial as it is, is often subordinated. The visual connection is provided by black artists in the Americas and Europe, who recover African images in their works, using forms replete with nostalgia, ethnic celebration, and self-affirmation. The works of these artists interweave verbal and visual elements, textures, and textualities, to braid a crossroads of influences from every corner of the world.

To fathom the puzzle of this crossroads is to understand how African Yoruba elements have arrived and thrived so lusciously in the diasporas. In the words of the Yoruba art scholar Robert Farris Thompson,

It is a tale of a triple diaspora. First the Yoruba came in the Atlantic trade to Cuba, mostly in the first half of the nineteenth century, though there are earlier attestations. Then came to North America Cuban devotees of the orisha (the Afro-Cuban oricha), plus Puerto Rican santeros from Afro-Cubanizing barrios of that island. Migration from the Caribbean was continuous, from the thirties through the seventies. All of which was reinforced by a third arrival, the Mariel boatlift of 1980.

The fact that substantial Yoruba influences have been absorbed into the fabrics of diaspora life is demonstrated in the works of several artists from Brazil, Cuba, Haiti, Trinidad, Britain, and the United States. Why the Yoruba culture prevails in the diasporas remains hardly studied and may really be beyond the scope of this investigation. What is remarkable is that the Yoruba culture has become one of the most crucial crossroads for exploring the cultural map of the Black Atlantic.

Three interacting and intersecting crossroads—known in Yoruba as
Introduction

Oritamọta—structure this volume. The first explores the explosion of the African gourd, leading to the scattering of Yoruba elements all over the world. The second maps the germination and transformation of these African elements in the black Atlantic diasporas. The third provides a semiological framework for negotiating the connections between the first two crossroads. The first is the pathological intersection of the crossroads. The second is the recuperation from that debilitation. The third, the therapeutic mode of cultural dissemination.

Elaborating on the use of Yoruba images by black American artists, I explore how a visual idiom in diaspora art transits to the stage of re-membering from that of dis-membering, from a position of confrontation to that of celebration, from a space of opposition to that of commemoration. By focusing on the racial, gender, sexual, religious, and class conflicts, disruptions, contradictions, and resolutions radiating in the compositions of several black Atlantic artists—including Meta Warrick Fuller, Aaron Douglas, Jeff Donaldson, Faith Ringgold, Elizabeth Catlett, Howardena Pindell, and John Biggers—I analyze how algebra, or re-membering, as a healing, mnemonic, and aesthetic process, is crucial toward an analysis of the use of African images in their works. These artists are selected because of their creative incorporation of diaspora and Yoruba influences, not merely for the sake of aesthetic gratification, but essentially for healing purposes.

My discussion of black diaspora art is preceded by a section focusing on Old World Yoruba art because it is essential to explore Yoruba images before examining how they have spread all over the black Atlantic. I have chosen artists that participated in, and images that articulate the crises that led to the dispersal of blacks all over the world, during the Atlantic slave missions. Àtahun Àtejò, a large wooden panel with 24 registers carved by the renowned sculptor Dada Arowoogun, is explored in some detail in this book. Arowoogun connects Western and African histories through his visual documentation of the historic interactions between African and European leaders, as well as the sale of enslaved Africans to European merchants who took these Africans abroad to form the nucleus of black Americans. This marks the first stage of the “triple diaspora” of which Thompson speaks. Arowoogun’s Àtahun Àtejò is a space in which art, history, and anthropology combine into a complex cultural structure, demonstrating the multi-dimensionality inherent in Yoruba concepts of art, where ọnà and ẹnà intermingle fluidly. Olowẹ and Arowoogun’s work also present the African antecedents for the elaboration of hegemonic issues in black Atlantic art.

The hegemonic positions of black Atlantic artists on a map in which blacks are regarded as the margin, where artists are “striving to be both European
Introduction

and black” inform the forms and contents of their images. By focusing on the adaptations of Yoruba images in the works of black American artists, I analyze the metaphorical and ideological transitions—in black diaspora art and aesthetics—from the ethical position described by bell hooks as “counter hegemonic”7 to what I call “auto-hegemonic”. from a reactive position pitted in perpetual conflict with authority, to an active position that derives authority, power, autonomy, and agency from itself. Auto-hegemony therefore refers to a concept of kinetic energy that generates its powers from its own system, rather than as a reaction to the authority and actions of others. Within these two poles, an endless intersection of gray areas exist, transforming the icon beyond a binary, or two-dimensional rendering.

The articulation of auto-hegemony as a theoretical concept is not new, based as it is on old practices in several parts of Africa, specifically among Yoruba-speaking peoples. The Yoruba ideas informing auto-hegemony are too multivalent to fit within the binary formats of most Western theories. Olabiyi Yai, the Yoruba literary scholar, has noted that “even deconstruction theory and idiom, often praised as the most advanced mode of criticism, lacks the vocabulary to account for Yoruba attitudes towards ‘representation,’ since its ‘decentering’ concept presupposes a center.”8 This view agrees with that of the African Americanist literary theorist Craig Werner, who opines that “post-feminism, post-colonial, post-modern, post-structural, etc.: all maintain a relationship with a pre-existing set of assumptions regarding the analytical relevance of margins and centers.”9 Such Manichaeism is eschewed in Yoruba cosmology, in which the concept of bipolarity is always mediated by a third factor as in the Yoruba saying “Àgbààgbà méjì ló mọ idi eëta.” This translates as “Two elders know the meaning of three,” but the application is that “Two implies three,” or “In two is contained the third.” The third factor here stands not merely for the number three, but for an unknown factor, an entity beyond our measure, the fact of fate, the unpredictable “X.”

The idea of auto-hegemony is briefly raised in the philosophy of W.E.B. DuBois and finds its eloquent articulation in the Yoruba concept of ori. In his legendary plea for a harmonious social relationship between white and black America, DuBois called for the cultivation of a nonconfrontational cultural aesthetics and praxis among blacks, as part of their contribution to the intellectual and artistic experiences in the United States. In his words, “we need . . . the ideal of fostering and developing the traits and talents of the Negro, not in opposition to or contempt for other races, but rather in large conformity to the greater ideals of the American Republic, in order that some day on American soil two world-races may give each to
each those characteristics both so sadly lack.” He admonishes blacks to cooperate with whites and vice versa, to facilitate the emergence of a powerful pluralism in America, cutting across racial dimensions. His plea may be interpreted as a call for an auto-hegemonic culture, rather than a confrontational, oppositional, and reactive artistic response by blacks to white initiatives and whites to black initiatives.

Auto-hegemony, the concept that power and authority stem from and are exercised by the self, rather than by any exterior force or body, is metaphorically stated in the Yoruba orature of Ifá, based on its phrasing of ori. Ori, literally “the head,” is a metaphor for power and control, because it is the intellectual seat of the body and mind. In the words of Rowland Abiodun, the Yoruba art historian and philosopher, On all occasions, sacred or secular, the indispensability of ori is stressed. He is referred to as okó (husband, master), implying his invincibility and power to control or influence the outcome of any situation. Àṣè is located at the apex of a conically shaped shrine object known as ìbòrí [illustrated], which symbolically represents ori, the authority, power, or force needed to accomplish all things. Likewise, every creature and personified force uses its ori to solve problems and surmount obstacles...

The reliance on one’s ori (or the self) as the source of authority and power, rather than placing a futile hope in external sources, is not only implied above, but is idiomatically expressed in an Ifá chant documented by the leading scholar of that genre, Wande Abimbọla. In the piece entitled “Ori and the individual’s personal Òrìṣá,” the narrator asks eight major Yoruba divinities the following question: “Who among you gods / Could follow your devotee to a distant journey / Over the seas?” At first all the eight divinities respond that they would gladly follow their devotees on such a journey. However, when they fully reconsider the conditions of this enterprise, every one of them declines to travel. After careful deliberation on this problem, the oracle concludes that

It is ori, it is ori alone
Who can follow his own devotee to a distant
Journey over the seas.

When an Ifá priest dies
People may ask that his divination instrument
Should be thrown into the ditch
Introduction

When a devotee of Sàngó dies
People may say his Sàngó instrument should
Be thrown away
When a devotee of Òòsàlá dies
People may ask that his paraphernalia should be
Buried with him

Ọrúnnílá asked “Ever since human beings have
Been dying
Whose head is ever severed from his body before
Burial?”

Ifá said “It is orí
It is orí alone
Who can follow his own devotee to a distant
Journey over the seas without turning back.”¹⁴

The implication of this itàn or tale is that every individual must derive
authority, power, and energy from the self rather than from external stim-
uli, because ectogenic powers are unreliable. The Yoruba concept of orí thus
provides the basis for the formulation of an auto-hegemonic position, dis-
nostic from the counter-hegemonic opposition, whose impetus is reactive to
an external action and energy. Orí implies but is not limited to the visual
faculty and is demonstrated in the meaning of the word. Analyzed, orí can
be read as a sentence, “O rí,” meaning “You see,” or as “to see,” implying
vision and seeing, practically because the eyes (ojú) are features of orí (the
head). The connection between orí and ojú and its implication for the visual
arts are evident in Abiòdún’s statement that

the importance of ojú in art and ritual is clearly expressed in the axiom “Ojú
ni órò wà” (“Órò, the essence of communication, takes place in the eyes / face”). With a properly executed ojú either in a figural sculpture or in a well-
designed ojú-íbò for the altar of an oríṣá, concentration heightens, commu-
nication takes place, and supplication becomes more efficacious. Conversely,
the absence of orí and ojú in any sacred and secular activity, whether artistic
or not, would be tantamount to anarchy in human and spiritual realms of
existence.¹⁵

Thus when people say of a person, “Kò lórí” (“S/he has no head”), it means
the person has no luck, no chance, no energy. That individual is absolutely
powerless, impotent, and of no consequence whatsoever, because s/he lacks auto-hegemony. But when there is confusion, or when things are chaotic, Yoruba speakers say, “Kò lójú,” meaning “It has no eyes.” Thus there is a metaphoric connection between ojú (eyes) and form, and the lack of eyes is associated with formlessness.

The search for form becomes a major theme in Yoruba art, a search resumed by many black artists in the United States. The African American artists explored in this volume have developed an eye for Yoruba form, thus representing cultural re-membering with their images of recollection. Pictorially they excavate history, and reassemble its archaeological fragments by matching and re-membering them with present aspirations and forms. Their use of Yoruba images discloses an attempt to re-member a culture that exploded two centuries ago, flinging millions of its members to all the corners of the globe. Even though this disintegration often seems externally instigated, it is best defined like an explosion, because the dispersal is internally motivated and staged. In a formidable battle against four centuries of collective partial recollections, of struggles with amnesia, these black American artists recuperate certain Yoruba forms in their compositions. Their recovery of ethnic fragments contains race, gender, and class fractures, allowing one to observe the aesthetic and ideological metamorphoses, from one thematic position to another.

Metaphorically, these African American artists represent the historic health of diaspora life, from one ideological epoch to another, in the revolutionary and evolutionary dynamism of this mnemonic tradition. I interpret the various signs encoded by these African American artists in their compositions containing Yoruba images as visual significations of memory and nostalgia. In other words, I consider their works as intellectual codes, consciously designed by the artists, to open the eye and the mind of the viewer to the conflicts and resolutions that re-membering generates in the lives of the artists. The types of images designed by the artists, their thematic interests and stylistic preferences, are part of the signification process, adding up to create an intricate and complex system that defies immediate understanding, further chaoticized by the biases of the viewers.

The Yoruba images and techniques adopted by the artists signify their (artists’) anamnestic impulses, a successful attempt to cross the chthonic chasm of a collective loss of memory, into the realms of dreams, nostalgia, desires, and metaphoric re-membering. Through the fogs of memory flow in tides of retrievals of the past from the present, for the present and the future. At the moment of retrieval in image form, the past and the present
fuse into one composite site of montage: a polycultural collage of time and space. The cultural context is crucial for the comprehension of this intermingling of Yoruba images with twentieth-century American culture, where visual signs containing samplings of ancient Yoruba techniques and images (e.g., Ìyàgbó dance wands) combine with industrial American icons (e.g., the submachine gun), at the end of this millennium (see Jeff Donaldson, *Wives of Ìyàgbó*, in Chapter 4).

This study is structured in eight chapters, including this introduction. The second chapter, where I explore Arowoogun’s work, focuses on the Yoruba roots of black Atlantic art. What exemplifies him is his celebration of indigenous Yoruba materials and methods of creativity, his invocation of Yoruba divinities, and his documentation of Yoruba history. He is a contemporary manifestation of a tradition of art making that trails into antiquity and becomes the metaphoric pedestal on which is constructed the entire complex of black diaspora images discussed here.

Entitled “What a Carving Re-Members,” the second chapter contains an art-historical investigation of Arowoogun’s work, presenting the Yoruba foundation for a tradition of re-memberment in African American art. In a cosmology that represents itself as a calabash, the metaphor to best describe Yoruba culture as it moved into the twentieth century is that of a shattered gourd. Arowoogun’s *Àtahún Àtejo* precisely renders the shattering of that gourd. I examine this monumental panel, now resting in the vault of the British Museum, as a signification of that disintegration and dispersal. The grid-like structure of the compositions, in addition to the theme of oppressive hegemonic imbalance based on race, gender, and class, represents a period of dis-memberment of the calabash. In *Àtahun Àtejo* (Snake and turtles), Arowoogun captures most vividly the hegemonic relationships in the Yoruba societies in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, at the nexus between power and collapse. Many of those represented in Arowoogun’s panel as slaves found themselves sold to the Americas, some eventually ending up in the United States.

I see Arowoogun’s work as part history and part an attempt to re-member history, because he was not only working from personal and eyewitness re-collections of the nineteenth-century conflicts, but also from oral traditions and myth. Arowoogun’s work is not merely about the pathology of the shattered gourd. It is also an attempt to formulate the healing of the fragments, because the structure of his composition brings together 24 fragmented registers into one integrated design of a palace door. It is precisely this tension between making history while remaining immersed in time,
while being part of history, between representing the pathology of fragmentation and symbolically healing the injuries, that informs the aesthetics of the African American artists explored here.

The third chapter, “Harlem Nostalgia,” investigates the pioneering images of longing for Africa in African American art, during the twentieth century. One of the most crucial themes in African American art is the therapeutic struggle against amnesia, a condition that often accompanies intense traumatic experiences such as surviving the Middle Passage and the centuries of physical and psychological enslavement. It is therefore not surprising that a lot of works in early African American art, even before the twentieth century, address the issue of nostalgia as a threatening pathology. This yearning, transformed into the political aesthetics of the New Negro Movement, became most influential among African American intellectuals—philosophers, writers, artists, musicians, singers, and other performers—during the period popularly called the Harlem Renaissance. The sculptures of Meta Warrick Fuller, the paintings of Aaron Douglas, and the murals of Hale Woodruff are examples of metaphoric yearning for Africa, attempts by black artists to re-member their culture, and re-create and heal themselves, despite the transformations and deformations of their crippling experiences. In this chapter, I examine images of yearning by Meta Warrick Fuller, particularly *Ethiopia Awakening* and *Talking Skull*. I also study Aaron Douglas’s mural series dealing with African American history. Finally, I interpret all of them as reconnections with and disconnection from Africa, based on collections, connections, retentions, and reflections. I investigate their importance as the foundation for African American algebra, of counter-hegemonic and auto-hegemonic images, and the infinite shades of meaning between these extremes.

The fourth chapter, “The Double-Headed Axe,” highlights the invocation of Òsàúngó, the Yoruba divinity of lightning and thunder, in African American struggles for justice. A major aspect of healing is not only to see that the injured recuperate, that the victims are rescued from further damage, but also to ensure that culprits are apprehended and appropriate atonements made. Victims often want to see their violators punished, in addition to other reparations. When these conditions are not met, resentments, anger, and frustration accumulate against a system that allows evil to walk away unchastised. Examples of such remedies include the trials of Nazi leaders who permitted or caused the Holocaust. African and Native Americans were not to experience the relief of even seeing their violators rebuked officially. That enslaved people were released was considered sufficient, perhaps because slavery was not considered a crime when it was
practiced, by those who profited from it. That the crimes of slavery were not addressed, that the criminals were not punished, has built up considerable feelings of powerlessness and frustration in the psyches of the victims and their descendants. The sixties witnessed the explosion of these feelings of frustration which had hitherto been repressed. In the intensification of political activities by blacks, the counter-hegemonic potential of the Harlem Renaissance, rather than its auto-hegemonic promises, flourished in the sixties and early seventies, during the civil rights movements and the Black Power era. During that time, many prominent artists recollected and rendered images of the long centuries of African American subordination in the United States, particularly police brutality toward blacks, inter-racial riots, imprisonment of many young black men, and the general resistance of black people to dominating influences. These artists rendered in graphic details the dis-memberment of their communities by the combined forces of institutional racism and the sheer ravages of brutal and monstrous urbanization complicated by paralyzing poverty.

Many artists of that time explored African images for a variety of reasons: a large number of Africans had studied in black schools in the United States, especially Howard University, thus bringing to America the icons and images of their histories and cultures; struggles for independence by Africans were supported by many African Americans, who connected their struggles for civil rights in America ideologically with African independence movements; some black American artists, notably Elton Fax and John Biggers, paid visits to Africa, and their experiences in Africa manifested in their images; in addition, we must remember that along with enslaved peoples, sometimes on the same ships, came large hauls of African images from Africa to Europe. It is a fact that the Africans were always separated from these objects that came with them. By the beginning of this century, however, many museums in the major cities of the United States had collections of African art that attracted the attention of black American artists, just as they attracted the attention of Cubists in Europe. The focus by African American artists on Yoruba images, however, was partly due to the increasing popularity of Yoruba religions brought into the United States since the thirties by Cubans and Puerto Ricans. Furthermore, in the early sixties, artists including Ademọla Olugebefọla were initiated into the New York Yoruba Temple by Efuntọla Oseijemen Adefunmi, an African American pioneer of santería in the United States.

Due to the association of the Yoruba divinity Sàngó, with retributive justice, the most frequently explored symbolism is from Sàngó mythology: images of the double-headed axe. Sàngó symbolism—as used by African
American artists including Paul Keene, Ademọla Olugebefọla, David Driskell, and Jeff Donaldson during the late sixties and early seventies—is the focus of Chapter 4. I consider the class and race representations in these artists’ works, as well as the gender connotations. These images are investigated within the rhetoric of counter-hegemony, using bell hooks’s iconography of the center and the margin. The therapeutic effect of this period on the psychological lesions suffered by African Americans seems greater than its economic relief for blacks. Concepts such as “black is beautiful” and Afrocentrism flowered in the political landscapes of the sixties and early seventies, easing the pain of centuries of orchestrated psychological abuse calculated to break the minds of enslaved people and their descendants, and to dehumanize them. Thus the counter-hegemonic strategies of the sixties were also part of the healing process within the larger therapeutic treatment of the abused psyche of black America.

Chapter 5, “(Re)visioning Africa,” is an in-depth focus on an individual male artist, Jeff Donaldson, in a phase of his life devoted to the construction of blatantly political counter-hegemonic forms. During the late sixties and early seventies, Donaldson, one of the most outstanding and inspiring artists of the Civil Rights era and the Black Power period, devoted himself to the production of astounding retrievals of Yoruba cultures. He played a leadership role by co-founding one of the foremost art groups in America, the AfriCobra. As representations of Donaldson’s political militancy, his counter-hegemonic imagery is best interpreted within the racial struggles of the period for healing. The political significations of his images confront class and gender interrogations, even when contrary to the intentions of the artist. His fetishization of the female body often contains implications of stereotypes, transforming Donaldson’s nostalgic excavation into an erotic theme. This eroticism, compounded with the image of Africa as female—i.e., motherland—creates a sexualized image of “African Woman,” lying vulnerable to the maleficent gazes of the sexualizing others. Thus, Donaldson’s women, framed around middle-class fascinations with ideal bodies, easily transform into metaphoric, heterosexual visual relationships. In this chapter, I examine the life and art of Jeff Donaldson, especially within the context of his visionary role in the efforts to re-member Africa with his depiction of Yoruba images. I focus on his significations of race, class, and gender, while he was mainly engaging the challenges of producing political counter-hegemonic images. His decontextualization of Sàngó images of Yoruba origin, and their recontextualization in American art, raise problematics of pluralism as a postmodern phenomenon. His work as a vision as well as a revision of African art provokes the dilemma of
Chapter 6, “When Memory Fails,” balances Donaldson’s chapter with an in-depth study of the work of a prominent female African American artist, Howardena Pindell. Her images become an arena in which counterhegemony and auto-hegemony interact, the visual conduit between oppositional and celebrational positions. In Pindell’s paintings, her individual memory, having failed after a car accident, conflicts with her persistent collective ancestral memory, subsuming her personal struggles with amnesia within the larger challenges of race, gender, and class conflicts in American society. In the processes of dealing with these bigger challenges, she succeeds in her battles with amnesia, while incorporating Yoruba textile techniques into her paintings. As she combines images with texts in her composition, her work breaks the barrier between writing and painting, thus becoming a link between the two. Beyond this, her work confronts enormous political, social, economic, and religious issues, on an international platform. In this chapter, I focus on Pindell’s life, demonstrating how her personal experiences are translated and transcended into collective representations in her compositions. Of most importance are the series of “auto-biographical” works that she embarked upon as therapeutic devices, after her amnesia. Even though she is a multi-media artist who has worked with video, computer, and photography, I have concentrated on her painting, the medium in which she is most consistent and famous. From these paintings, I investigate her resolutions of the conflicts between her individual and collective memory as an arena fragmented by tensions and resolutions of race, gender, and class. In her work, individual therapy coincides with collective healing most demonstrably, not because other black artists are less committed to this orthopedics, but because her personal trauma in the car accident becomes a metaphor for the racial trauma suffered by blacks in the historical accidents of human enslavement.

Chapter 7, “Crossroads to Amnesia,” examines the continuation of autohegemonic positions at the end of the cold war, in an anticipation of the impending millennium. Apartheid in the southern hemisphere and the Cold War in the northern hemisphere have ended, coinciding with the end of the millennium. The end of the old geopolitical order of capitalist versus communist culture, and the white-versus-black racist rhetoricity, is tolled. At a time when Donaldson himself has stopped any direct appropriation of Yoruba images, another generation of artists has taken over. Muneer Bahauddeen, Winnie Owens-Hart, Michelle Tejuola Turner, and Michael Oluṣina Harris represent the generation of artists recollecting Yoruba cul-
ture in America, celebrating their relationship with the *òrìṣà* through the rendering of panegyric images, in a romantically free aesthetic that anticipates the twenty-first century, dissolves boundaries, and builds bridges across cultural gulfs.

In the annals of international politics, the counter-hegemonic rhetoric of the cold war is over. Similarly, in the context of the *òrìṣà* tradition in which these artists create, there is no longer the oppositional division based on black/white racial differences. This is partly because the South American and Caribbean arteries, whence came the *òrìṣà* traditions into the United States, have mixed African bloods with Spanish, Mexican, French, and Asian kinship, eliminating rigid racial stratification within the fold, building bridges across several racial divides. Bahauddeen, for example, first learned of the beauty and power of Yoruba culture from a white woman, namely Marilyn Houlberg.

Oppositional stratification into racial paradigms of black versus white is untenable within such traditions. Unlike Donaldson’s *Wives of Sàngó*, the works of these emergent artists are not “protest” art. The images are free of oppositional responsibilities: the artists systematically restore African culture in any way that they choose, under no pressures of protest. At this point the images are auto-hegemonic, not subversive of any center, not directed against any factor, but rendering their own recollections as contribution to the re-memberment, what each of them refers to as self and communal healing. I focus on their works to investigate the dynamics of this ideological and metaphorical transition in twentieth-century American art.

The final chapter of this book, “Conclusion: Spring and Renewal,” critiques the use of Yoruba images in twentieth-century art in the United States by comparing some of the different approaches favored by the artists. The increasing use of Yoruba images suggests that it is not only one of the most important bonds between the nineteenth and twentieth, but that it will also be one of the linkages of the twentieth with the twenty-first century. By examining the dynamism between nostalgia and creativity in the past, the exile’s dream of returning psychically home has really led to the future, where the experiences of this century become a bridge between the nineteenth and the twenty-first century.

The chapter, furthermore, affords me an opportunity to engage robustly the issues of racial essentialism that might problematize the recollection of African images within twentieth-century American art. While the African images being recuperated belong within a precapitalist economy and monarchical political context, the transplantation of these images into a consumerist capitalist economy, in a democratic political context, provokes
issues of decontextualization and appropriation. The chapter enables me to address the racial, class, gender, and sexual complications inherent in the use of African icons in American art, given the respective hegemonic positions between Africa and the West—a position that allows the West to name the black continent with nomenclatures ranging from Africa to Ethiopia.

“Ethiopia Awakening,” borrowed as the sub-heading of the present chapter from the title of Meta Warrick Fuller’s 1914 bronze work, highlights the connections among dreaming, remembering, and healing, as I demonstrate in some detail in Chapter 3. The subject of Fuller’s sculpture is dreaming, yet she is in the process of releasing herself from slumber, slowly waking up, reactivating supposedly dead / phantom limbs. Fuller, like the figure she has created, employs dream, memory, and art to heal herself after a devastating fire destroyed her home and her art collection. Does this therapeutic aesthetics, this dreamt reawakening, apply to many black Atlantic artists who reclaim Yoruba images in their works? That is a primary challenge facing this art-historical survey and thematic investigation of Yoruba forms in twentieth-century American art.