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Polyphonic Narratives and Lacanian Mirror Stage in Latham and Waters'
African Town (2022)

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Abstract:

This paper undertakes the exploration of Irene Latham and Charles Waters' *African Town*, commencing with a narrative synopsis followed by the contextualization of its historical milieu. It subsequently engages with the text through the intricate theoretical frameworks of Mikhail Bakhtin's polyphonic theory and Jacques Lacan's mirror stage concept, aiming to elucidate how these perspectives collectively inform the novel's exploration of identity, collective experience, and narrative multiplicity. Bakhtin's theory is employed to examine how various perspectives and voices in the novel intertwine to offer profound reflections on freedom, identity, and resilience. This analysis is then expanded using Lacan's mirror stage, focusing on the psychological odyssey of James as he grapples with newfound liberty amidst historical oppression in the post-Civil War era. The integration of both concepts enables an interdisciplinary exploration, guiding readers through the philosophical labyrinth of *African Town* while uncovering layers of individual and collective identity amidst societal adversity.

Keywords: Bakhtinian polyphony, Lacanian mirror stage, identity formation, narrative multiplicity, slavery and freedom.

Introduction

African Town employs a richly polyphonic narrative to illuminate the lives of the last documented group of enslaved Africans in the U.S., weaving their diverse experiences into a cohesive and multifaceted tapestry. By applying Bakhtin's theory of polyphony and Lacan's mirror stage theory, this paper seeks to uncover how the interaction of diverse voices and the

process of psychological evolution enrich the narrative depth and complexity. Bakhtin's notion of polyphony, characterized by the presence of distinct and autonomous voices, is evident in *African Town* through the intricate interactions of its characters, creating a dynamic story that explores African identity from varied yet unified perspectives. Concurrently, Lacan's mirror stage offers a compelling metaphor for James' character arc. Raised in slavery, James's journey towards self-understanding and freedom mirrors the developmental process described by Lacan, evolving from a fragmented self-concept to a unified identity. His personal growth, alongside his engagement with newly arrived enslaved Africans, deepens the novel's exploration of identity and resistance within a context of oppression, highlighting a broader quest for collective identity and autonomy.

African Town: Plot Synopsis

Irene Latham and Charles Waters are accomplished authors known for their work in children's and young adult literature, often addressing history and social justice. Their collaboration on *African Town* combines meticulous historical research with a powerful narrative style. This work educates readers while also honoring the enduring spirit of Africatown's residents.

African Town (2022) vividly chronicles the journey and legacy of the last known illegal shipment of 110 Africans to the United States aboard the Clotilda ship in 1860. The novel opens in the mid-19th century, setting the stage with America's complex relationship with slavery. Despite the 1808 ban on the importation of enslaved people, and the 1810 reinforcement that promised jail time for violators, the illicit trade continued due to its profitability.

Timothy Meaher, a wealthy shipowner and businessman from Maine, moves to Mobile, Alabama, in 1835. By 1859, confident in his ability to evade the law, Meaher bets that he can smuggle African captives into the U.S. He hires William Foster, a skilled Canadian immigrant and shipbuilder, to captain the schooner Clotilda for this clandestine mission.

In February 1860, Foster departs from Mobile aboard the Clotilda, heading to Ouidah, a major slave-trading port in the Kingdom of Dahomey, present-day Benin. Upon arrival, he negotiates with King Glèlè, who had succeeded his father, King Ghezo, in 1858. Foster purchases 125 Africans, aged between two and thirty, who had been kidnapped and sold into slavery. Among these captives is Kossola, later known as Cudjo Lewis, a nineteen-year-old from Bantè.

The voyage back to Mobile is perilous. By the time the Clotilda reaches Mobile Bay in July 1860, approximately 108 captives have survived. To avoid detection, Foster burns the ship, hiding evidence of their illegal activity. Despite efforts to cover up the crime, authorities arrest Meaher and his associates, but due to insufficient evidence, they are released without charges.

The story then transitions to the Civil War era, which begins in April 1861. The war significantly impacts the lives of the Clotilda captives. As the conflict unfolds, Kossola and his fellow captives face immense hardships, yet they also find moments of resilience and solidarity. The Union Army's arrival and the subsequent abolition of slavery in April 1865 mark a pivotal turn in their lives. James Dennison, an essential character and the husband of Kêhounco, enlists in the Union Army, highlighting the varied responses of African Americans to the war.

After the war, the freed captives work to build new lives. They purchase land from the Meaher family and establish Africatown, a community where they can preserve their African heritage. The early years are marked by hard work and cooperation. In 1870, they formally incorporate Plateau and Magazine Point (Africatown) and continue to expand their landholdings to accommodate a growing population.

Africatown's residents, including Kupollee, Gumpa, and Abilẹ̀, are determined to create a thriving community. They build Union Baptist Church in 1872, which becomes a central institution. In 1880, they establish a school that eventually evolves into the Mobile County Training School, reflecting their commitment to education and progress.

The novel also delves into the personal lives of Africatown's residents. Kossola marries Abilẹ̀ in 1880, and together they have children, including Cudjo, Jr. The story captures both joyful and sorrowful moments, such as the birth of Aleck Lewis in 1867, and the tragic death of Kêhounco and James's baby Jerry in 1866. The narrative also touches on the struggles of the community, including legal battles, such as Cudjo, Jr.'s manslaughter charge in 1899.

By the end of the 19th century and into the early 20th century, Africatown's residents continue to fight for their rights and improve their community. They petition the Mobile School Board in 1890 to build a new school, demonstrating their persistent dedication to education. Even as some of the original residents pass away, their legacy endures through the community they built and the cultural heritage they preserved.

Delving into *African Town*'s Historical Context

Slavery and the Transatlantic Slave Trade: The novel is set against the backdrop of the transatlantic slave trade, which forcibly transported millions of Africans to the Americas from the 16th to the 19th centuries. Although the U.S. officially banned the importation of enslaved people in 1808, the illegal trade persisted due to its economic benefits. The Clotilda's voyage in 1860, just a year before the Civil War, symbolizes the stubborn persistence of this inhumane practice, despite its official ban.

The Kingdom of Dahomey: During the 19th century, the Kingdom of Dahomey was a significant player in the West African slave trade. Its rulers, including King Ghezo (reigned 1818-1858) and his son King Glèlè (reigned 1858-1889), engaged in large-scale raids to capture individuals for sale to European and American traders. This collaboration with foreign traders was driven by both economic incentives and political strategy.

The Civil War and Emancipation: The American Civil War (1861-1865) was a pivotal conflict between the Northern states (the Union) and the Southern states (the Confederacy), primarily over the issue of slavery. The war led to the abolition of slavery with the passage of the 13th Amendment in 1865. This monumental change profoundly impacted the lives of African Americans, including the Clotilda captives, who were legally freed and began to assert their rights.

Reconstruction and African American Communities: The Reconstruction era (1865-1877) was a time of significant social and political upheaval as the United States sought to rebuild and integrate formerly enslaved individuals into society. During this period, African Americans made substantial gains, including establishing schools, churches, and businesses. Africatown is a prime example of such a community, where freed Africans created a self-sustaining society that blended African traditions with American life.

Africatown's Legacy: Africatown represents a unique chapter in American history. It is a testament to the resilience and determination of the Clotilda captives and their descendants. The community's efforts to preserve their cultural heritage and fight for their rights offer valuable insights into the broader African American experience during and after the era of slavery.

By intertwining historical facts with compelling personal stories, *African Town* provides a nuanced and comprehensive look at the lives of the last known group of Africans brought to

America on the Clotilda and their lasting impact on American society. Composed of an intricate mosaic of diverse narratives and characters, this literary tapestry explores its structural complexity through the theoretical framework of polyphony. Rooted in the intellectual currents of early German Romanticism and refined by Mikhail Bakhtin, polyphony offers a profound lens through which to appreciate the multiplicity of voices and perspectives that animate *African Town.*

Dialogic Symphonies: Exploring the Polyphonic Tapestry of *African Town*

Chronologically speaking, this paper will discuss the emergence of the concept of "novelistic polyphony" first by the German Early Romantic thinkers and then move to Bakhtin's perspective. The analogy between musical and novelistic traditions, as shared by the former, argues that "a theme in a musical composition is assigned the same function of compositional unit as an idea in a philosophical one" (Steinby 41)—that is, while the compositional unit in music is the theme, it is an idea in a philosophical composition. In the context of the novel, Friedrich Schlegel, considered the pillar literary theoretician of the movement, asserts that "[t]he method of the novel is that of instrumental music. Even the characters in a novel may be dealt with as arbitrarily as themes are dealt with in a musical composition" (qtd. in Steinby 43). In this context, music serves as a model for the novel's composition, where each character functions as a fundamental element, akin to notes in a musical piece. However, "the characters are mentioned as an example of the materials only with which the author is expected to deal as 'arbitrarily' as themes are dealt with in music," not as the mere compositional unit of the novel (Steinby 43). Based on Schlegel, Steinby broadens the literary composition of the novel to be more encompassing and concludes "that the elementary units of the musical composition are here events or other elements of the fictive world, as far as they bear a certain meaning or a general quality, by which they contribute to the meaningful whole of the work" (44). However, Steinby clarifies that:

It would be an oversimplification to say that corresponding to the themes of a musical composition are those of a literary composition in the sense in which the term is used in literature, namely the abstract thematic content of a concrete event or object in the fictive world of the work of art, although that sometimes seems to be the case. Schlegel, however, is thinking more concretely: the material of which a literary work of art is made does not consist of abstract thoughts but of concrete events, persons and objects, which bear a specific meaning. The compositional units are thus both concrete and meaninglful, i.e. not only things in the physical world; they oscillate between a concrete thing or event and

the abstract meaning given to it in this particular work of art. Being both concrete entities in the fictional world and the bearers of a meaning, the units of a literary composition differ from those of a musical composition, in which the units consist of 'mere' sound. (44)

Only if one explicitly traces a historiographic study on the emergence and development of the word, or if one is explicitly studying 'polyphony' in the context of the German Early Romantics, would one find themselves referring to 'polyphony' in the sense of a literary structure analogous to the complexity of polyphonic music. In this context, 'polyphony' denotes a narrative approach that reflects the intricate layering found in polyphonic music. However, in contemporary usage, the concept is employed almost exclusively in a Bakhtinian sense, overlooking its application to other aspects of a literary work of art.

In discussing the latter, Bakhtin's aesthetic theory, developed in *Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity*, states that the content of a literary work of art comprises its hero, his acts, and experiences. In contrast, its aesthetic form derives from the hero (Steinby 38). As a concrete individual in the novel, the hero indeed:

is the autonomous subject of ethical acts. He experiences a multitude of things, he makes ethical decisions, and he often in self-reflection ponders upon his experiences and doings, but he never conceives of his life and himself in consummated, finalized form; only the author is capable of doing so: 'The author stands totally over against this activity of the hero, the activity of living his life, and translates it into aesthetic language, i.e., produces a transgredient artistic determination for every constituent moment in the hero's activity of living' (Bakhtin 1990, 174). (Steinby 38).

Through aesthetic contemplation, the author sympathetically co-experiences the hero's life in relation to another human being: "co-experience in this form does not in the least strive toward the ultimate point of totally coinciding, merging with the co-experienced life […] A sympathetically co-experienced life is given form not in the category of the *I*, but in the category of the *other*, as the life of *another* human being, another *I*" (qtd. in Steinby 38).

In this work, Bakhtin "does not distinguish between the 'consummating form' bestowed upon the hero by the author and the form of the work of art" (Steinby 38). However, he seems to have abandoned this theory a few years later in his studies of Dostoevsky's novels, which he referred to as polyphonic (Steinby 39). In *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, Bakhtin identifies the monologic novel as one in which the author is the central subject who gives the

consummative definition of the hero and whatever exists in his world. This contrasts with the polyphonic novel, in which the characters are not constrained by the author but *appear* as autonomous subjects. Dostoevsky "creates not voiceless slaves (as does Zeus), but free people, capable of standing alongside their creator, capable of not agreeing with him and even rebelling against him. What unfolds in his works is not a multitude of characters and faces in a single objective world, illuminated by a single authorial consciousness; rather, a plurality of consciousnesses" (qtd. in Steinby 39).

Recapitulating the constituents of the polyphonic novel, Steinby states that "the polyphonic novel is characterized, first, by the presence of a number of 'heroes', in contrast to the single hero in *Author and Hero*. Second, from the retreat of the author from his former position as the central subject in the novel there ensues a fundamental alteration in its architecture. Third, the idea of polyphony implies not only a plurality of voices, but also a genuine encounter among the various subjective points of view" (Steinby 40).

Building on these already established characteristics of the polyphonic novel, *African Town* is approached in this paper as a polyphonic verse novel whose deployment of multiple narrative voices and perspectives aims to portray the experiences of the last known group of enslaved Africans. The story builds on their various points of view as it weaves their forced migration to the US, their experience of enslavement, and the establishment of their community. The authors of the novel take a 'new artistic position' "in which the characters are assigned 'independence, internal freedom, unfinalizability, and indeterminacy', a 'fully realized and thoroughly consistent dialogic position" (qtd.in Steinby 41).

The author and hero stand in a dialogic position in the same way the characters themselves are in a dialogic position, where each character's encounter with the other is characterized by "openness to each other's 'truths': 'Whenever someone else's "truth" is presented in a given novel, it is introduced without fail into the dialogic field of vision of all the other major heroes of the novel'" (Steinby 41). *African Town*'s structural dimension in itself supports the dialogic polyphony of the novel. However, the voices support the narrative, yet they "remain independent and, as such, are combined in a unity of a higher order than in homophony" (Steinby 42). The concept of 'dialogue' transcends mere conversational exchanges, as "In Bakhtin, dialogue is not so much a question of the exchange of rejoinders between an I and a you. Instead, Bakhtinian dialogue is tantamount to involvement, unindifferent participation with the other, co-implication, intercorporeality. It brings into play both voice and gesture" (Petrilli 113), emphasizing deep involvement and mutual shaping

between participants. In *African Town*, this engagement is evident as the characters' interactions reflect genuine involvement and mutual influence. This dynamic interaction aligns with Bakhtin's idea of 'co-implication' and 'intercorporeality,' highlighting the novel's polyphonic structure where each voice contributes to the collective narrative, enriching the depiction of African identity through interconnected yet independent voices.

It would not be impossible to suggest the presence of a single authorial consciousness manifested through the multitude of characters facing a single objective world—a world in which all of these Africans face the same reality of being kidnapped from their homeland and forcibly transported to the US, obliged to survive the circumstances they found themselves in. This reality in itself is incontrovertible. Its truth is absolute, beyond debate or contradiction. There are no alternative viewpoints or conflicting opinions; it is an irrefutable reality. This can either suggest the presence of an "objective," single authorial consciousness through the various points of view, or the presence of the author's voice through one of the characters employed consciously or unconsciously because a polyphonic novel does not in any way suggest the absence of the author's influence. The polyphonic novel "does not prevent the author from trying to monopolize the discourse and dominate the other voices" (Fløttum 8).

The multiple consciousnesses and perspectives manifest not only in the structural dimension of the novel through narrative building, but also in the thematic dimension. The characters sometimes exhibit diverse perspectives on freedom and varying approaches to their predicament. This itself may suggest a single authorial consciousness, where the authors aim to depict objective truth as it is and represent the different 'consciousnesses' authentically without imposing the perspective of a single hero. While this might initially appear contradictory, as the presence of various points of view defies the characteristics of a monologic authorial consciousness, it is possible to interpret the multiple perspectives and voices as the authors' attempt to faithfully represent reality as it unfolds. This objective depiction *becomes* the single authorial consciousness. The characters in *African Town* can all represent the single authorial consciousness through their shared, unified experience. This experience, with its varying voices and perspectives, becomes, in a sense, the "single authorial consciousness".

In this paper, I am not asserting this argument as its core, but I do not entirely dismiss it either. However, I contend that the multiple perspectives, voices, and consciousnesses manifest on both the structural and thematic dimensions of the novel, reflecting the complexities and viewpoints among the enslaved Africans in the US. Latham and Waters intricately weave a tapestry of voices and perspectives, illustrating a polyphonic narrative that extends beyond mere

structural multiplicity. It delves into thematic polyphony, which is particularly evident in its treatment of freedom and differing perspectives among characters. At its core, *African Town* embraces a polyphonic structure by presenting diverse viewpoints through its characters. Each character, from James, a lifelong American-born enslaved person, to those illegally shipped from Africa, contributes unique experiences and interpretations. For instance, James's view of freedom differs from the nuanced understanding held by those who once knew liberty in their homeland. This diversity enriches the narrative texture and underscores the complexity of human experiences under oppression.

Beyond its structural intricacies, *African Town* resonates with thematic polyphony, which is particularly evident in its exploration of freedom. The novel elucidates how freedom is perceived differently based on one's background and lived experiences. Characters like James, confined within the bounds of slavery since birth, grapple with a concept they have never known, whereas others, cognizant of lost liberties, yearn to reclaim what was taken. This thematic variation aligns with Bakhtin's theory of polyphony, where conflicting viewpoints and interpretations converge, enriching the narrative discourse and inviting readers to contemplate the multifaceted nature of freedom.

One poignant example is the contrasting attitudes towards escape within the narrative. While some characters, including Kehounco, meticulously plan their flight to freedom, others, such as Abilè, steadfastly endure their circumstances, viewing escape as a perilous endeavor rather than a beacon of hope. This divergence underscores the characters' agency and autonomy and highlights the novel's commitment to authentically representing varied perspectives.

The multitude of viewpoints enriches the narrative and highlights the importance of shared histories and collective memories, challenging the concept of a singular narrative authority. It reinforces the idea that truth and meaning arise from the interplay of diverse perspectives, as "information, or any act of communication, is valued only when confirmed by a multitude of voices" (Behzadi 18). Additionally, "with a polyphonic conception of meaning, the aim is to demonstrate how utterances can signal the presence of several voices, or points of view in Nølke's terminology, and not only the point of view of the speaking subject" (Fløttum 9). Unlike the monologic novel, wherein readers experience the story solely through the lens of one hero, the polyphonic novel allows for the author's voice to be represented through a single character among the others. Behzadi suggests that "authors appear as one voice among others, taking part in a polyphonic concert, the outcome of which is uncertain," conveying "an awareness of the unreliability of a single voice" (19). This may challenge the notion that a

polyphonic novel entirely eliminates the author's monologic perspective. Although the author's voice is no longer the sole, dominant narrative force, it still stands alongside other voices as an equal participant, contributing to the dialogic structure of the novel. Moreover, the author's voice can be seen as encompassing the multiplicity of characters, as it attempts to represent objective reality through a complex interplay of diverse perspectives. In this sense, the author's voice doesn't disappear but reconfigures itself within the multitude, *making the polyphonic and monologic novel less polar opposites than they initially appear.*

The fragmented stories of the characters come together to form a unified narrative representing the intertwined histories and shared experiences of the African community in Mobile, Alabama. The polyphonic approach reflects Bakhtin's idea that the self is constructed dialogically and liminally. As Owen observes, "the conception of the self story as created dialogically and liminally can help overcome the limitations of the individual life which when conceived as autonomous and whole can be fragmented from the larger life process of others, of humanity and of the world" (150). This interconnectedness allows readers to see how each character's journey contributes to the overall tapestry of the community's history and identity. Through its polyphonic narrative, *African Town* transcends the limitations of individual stories and highlights the importance of communal memory and solidarity. Lazzarto emphasizes this idea, stating, "from the polyphonic composition of these different accents a new meaning is born" (16), as each character's narrative contributes uniquely to the portrayal of struggle, resilience, and identity formation, echoing the historical and cultural complexities of the community.

This multifaceted approach highlights the collective experience and invites a deeper exploration of individual identities within the communal framework. In this light, the character of James offers a compelling lens through which to examine the intersection of personal and collective identity, particularly through the metaphorical representation of Jacques Lacan's mirror stage theory.

Through Lacanian Mirrors: Reflections of Identity and Freedom

While this paper does not introduce a groundbreaking link between Bakhtin's polyphony and the Lacanian mirror stage theory, it contributes to the ongoing discourse by exploring these connections through their examination in the novel *African Town*. This relationship has been addressed in different contexts by previous researchers, such as Kalinova

in "Exotopy: Mikhail Bakhtin and Jacques Lacan on the Outside Context of Discourse" and Ravenscroft in "Two Cultures, Two Dialogists and Two Intersecting Theories".

The novel provides a fertile ground for examining Lacanian framework, particularly through the character of James, an African American grappling with newfound freedom. Lacan's theory offers a metaphorical framework for understanding James's psychological transformation, as his journey toward self-awareness and freedom parallels Lacan's mirror stage concept. This stage is described as a pivotal moment in self-development when the infant recognizes its reflection and begins to form a sense of identity. Lacan calls this recognition a 'jubilant assumption' of the self, marking the transition from a fragmented to a more coherent identity (76).

In *African Town*, James undergoes a similar transformation. As the narrative progresses, James's internal conflict becomes more apparent. Raised in the U.S. as an enslaved person, he has always perceived himself through the lens of enslavement. However, as he grapples with the concept of freedom, he begins to see himself differently, much like the child in Lacan's mirror stage. This process is vividly depicted in his reflections and decisions. Lacan notes that "the child, at an age when he is for a time, however short, outdone by the chimpanzee in instrumental intelligence, can nevertheless already recognize as such his image in a mirror. This recognition is indicated in the illuminative mimicry of the Aha-Erlebnis, which Köhler sees as the expression of situational apperception, an essential stage of the act of intelligence" (75). Similarly, James's recognition of his potential and identity as a free man marks a moment of situational apperception. His realization of his freedom parallels Lacan's mirror stage: just as the child sees its reflection and begins to form a coherent sense of self, James redefines his identity in light of his newfound freedom. Lacan explains:

> This event can take place, as we know from Baldwin's work, from the age of six months on; its repetition has often given me pause to reflect upon the striking spectacle of a nursling in front of a mirror who has not yet mastered walking, or even standing, but who-though held tightly by some prop, human or artificial (what, in France, we call a *trotte-bébé* [a sort of walker])-overcomes, in a flutter of jubilant activity, the constraints of his prop in order to adopt a slightly leaning-forward position and take in an instantaneous view of the image in order to fix it in his mind. (75-76)

James's journey toward understanding his identity extends beyond the experience of enslavement. This realization marks a critical turning point in his self-conception, moving from

a fragmented identity defined by the brutal constraints of slavery to a more integrated sense of self as a free man. Lacan's theory of the mirror stage, which describes the moment of self-recognition and the formation of a coherent identity, parallels James's internal struggle. Though initially "held tightly" (Lacan 76) by the psychological and social bonds of enslavement, James experiences a "flutter of jubilant activity" (76) as he begins to perceive his own freedom, a realization that represents the "instantaneous aspect of the image" that reshapes his self-identity. This moment of self-recognition, captured in James's reflections, illustrates the transformative power of seeing oneself beyond imposed limitations.

> I wish I felt pure
>
> joy like the others, but I'm
>
> conflicted—I want
>
> to go, but I keep thinking:
>
> I should be in uniform. (Latham and Waters 281)

This quote captures James's internal struggle, reflecting the fragmented self that Lacan describes. James is torn between his longing for freedom and his deeply ingrained sense of duty and identity as a soldier. This conflict embodies the 'succession of phantasies' Lacan refers to, in which an individual transitions from a fragmented self-image to a more coherent identity..

As Lacan explains, "It suffices to understand the mirror stage in this context as an *identification*, in the full sense analysis gives to the term: namely, the transformation that takes place in the subject when he assumes [*assume*] an image" (76). James's assumption of his new identity as a free man is a transformation that echoes this identification process.

His subsequent realization, "Even though we're 'free,' I know the white man can snatch away your freedom faster than a rattlesnake can strike. I promise you that" (281), marks a crucial point in his journey. His awareness of the fragility of freedom resonates with the drama of the mirror stage, where an individual's identity is in constant negotiation and redefinition. Lacan further notes:

> This jubilant assumption [*assumption*] of his specular image by the kind of being – still trapped in his motor impotence and nursling dependence-the little man is at the *infans* stage thus seems to me to manifest in an exemplary situation the symbolic matrix in which the *I* is precipitated in a primordial form, prior to being objectified in the dialectic of

identification with the other, and before language restores to it, in the universal, its function as subject.

This form would have to be called the Ideal-I. (76)

James's moment of realization and acceptance of his freedom can be seen as the formation of his "Ideal-I," a new identity that is both empowering and challenging. Additionally, his experience as someone who is born into slavery resonates profoundly with a critical insight from psychoanalysis. Johnson writes: "According to psychoanalysis, it does not take long for a child to realize that it is not the sole object of its mother's desires. The consequence of this realization is that the child must then invest serious time and effort into trying to determine just who or what its mother does desire so that it might transform itself into this object" (5). This realization, metaphorically speaking, mirrors James's struggle to comprehend his own identity within the oppressive structure of slavery. Like the child in Lacan's mirror stage, James is forced to confront the harsh reality that his existence is perceived not as autonomous but as a means to fulfil the desires of his owners. This epiphany propels him into a relentless quest for self-identity and autonomy, despite the dehumanizing forces at play. In this light, James's journey is not merely a struggle against external chains but an existential endeavour to assert his humanity and redefine his self-worth in a world determined to negate it. This dynamic reveals a profound philosophical and psychological battle, underscoring the intricate dance between imposed identities and the intrinsic dignity of the self.

Additionally, James's interactions with newly arrived enslaved Africans further complicate his understanding of self and others. As he observes their arrival, he sees mirrored reflections of his subjugation and displacement, prompting a deeper reflection on his place within the hierarchy of enslavers and enslaved. This comparison highlights the complex interplay of identities within the oppressive context, where James not only navigates his own identity but also confronts the varying identities imposed upon and embraced by others in similar predicaments. Thus, James's journey unfolds not just as a personal quest for autonomy but as a broader exploration of collective identity and resistance in the face of systematic dehumanization.

Characters' experiences in *African Town* resonate deeply with Lacan's exploration of the interplay between the imaginary and the symbolic realms. Lacan's metaphorical model of mirrors illustrates that clarity of self-perception depends heavily on the symbolic relations one engages. He posits, "Whether you see the Image more or less clearly depends on the inclination

of the mirror" (qtd. In Sadler 16). This metaphor underscores the struggles of James, the enslavers, and the Africans (Clotilda survivors) to define themselves amidst the conflicting roles imposed and perceived through their interactions.

For James, the enslavers act as authoritative mirrors, distorting his self-image and compelling him to navigate a complex web of identity shaped by their desires and expectations. The symbolic order, as discussed by Lacan, governs these interpersonal relations, determining the completeness of one's identity with the imaginary. Lacan notes that "the inclination of the plane mirror is governed by the voice of the other. This doesn't happen at the level of the mirror stage, but it happens subsequently through our overall relation with other - the symbolic relation" (qtd. In Sadler 16).

Similarly, for the Africans who survived the Clotilda, their introduction into the symbolic order challenges the existing power dynamics. They offer James and the enslavers a mirrored reflection of resistance and shared cultural identity, disrupting the established symbolic framework of enslavement and introducing new symbolic possibilities.

Therefore, *African Town* portrays a complex interplay of identities within the symbolic order. It depicts James's existential struggle as he negotiates his identity within the framework imposed by enslavers, reshaped by the presence of African newcomers who challenge and redefine their roles within this symbolic structure. Through Lacanian insights, we understand the characters' journeys not merely as quests for freedom from physical chains but as profound battles within the symbolic order—a quest to reclaim autonomy, assert cultural identity, and redefine self-worth amidst conflicting symbolic reflections.

Conclusion

By synthesizing Bakhtin's polyphonic framework with Lacan's mirror stage theory, this paper seeks to unravel the intricate layers of *African Town*, illuminating how the novel's dialogic structure and psychological underpinnings intersect to construct a complex portrayal of African American identity and the dynamics of cultural memory. While the novel's polyphonic structure allows for a multifaceted exploration of African American identity, James' experience, in particular, offers a rich metaphorical representation of Lacan's theory. Through this lens, *African Town* not only tells a compelling historical story but also delves into the psychological and social dynamics of identity formation. This analysis contributes to ongoing scholarly conversations by bridging theoretical frameworks to offer an understanding of how narrative techniques and psychological theories intersect to convey cultural memory and

collective identity. *African Town* thus stands as a testament to the enduring legacy of African American communities, inviting readers to engage critically with the intersections of literature, theory, and history.

While this paper highlights the application of polyphony and the mirror stage to James' character, future research could explore other characters' perspectives and how their experiences contribute to the novel's polyphonic nature. Additionally, examining the impact of historical events on identity formation in *African Town* could offer further insights into the intersection of personal and collective identities. Also, although the analysis of polyphony in *African Town* is promising, it is essential to recognize the ongoing challenge in this field, as reflected in the scholarship, "par cette dernière réflexion, mon enthousiasme se manifeste assez nettement. Mais je dois dire que je garde un certain scepticisme aussi et qu'il y a du travail à faire avant de pouvoir déterminer l'intérêt de la polyphonie pour les études textuelles" (Fløttum 24). Translation: "With this last reflection, my enthusiasm is evident quite clearly, but I must say that I also maintain a certain skepticism in that there is work to be done before we can determine the interest of polyphony for textual studies" (Fløttum 24).

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