

Words, Images, and the Body: Memory Media and Ethical Predicaments in *Middle C* and *The Piano Lesson*¹

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Abstract Words, images, and the body are memory media that are used in personal and cultural communication to construct our memory interactively. In literary works, these memory media carry historical and cultural memories and ethical connotations. William Gass's *Middle C* and August Wilson's *The Piano Lesson* are both works presenting the idea of historical memory and cultural norms through words, images, and the body. By exploring three focal points, i.e., characters' self-identities, traditional cultural memory, and the fusion of different cultures in these two literary works, this paper analyzes the characters' ethical predicaments indicated by memory media and reveals the writers' attitudes towards and memorization of historical events.

Key words Words; images; the body; *Middle C*; *The Piano Lesson*

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Introduction

Words, images, and the body have been the media through which cultural traditions have been formed in order to “provide the material support underlying cultural

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memory, framing it and interacting with individual human memories” (Assmann 11). The semiology experts Juri Lotman and Boris Uspenskij of Russian Tartu-School defined culture as “non-hereditary memory of a collective,” so cultural memories rely on “certain practices and mediums” (Lotman and Uspenskij 3) and a “communication system” (Tamm 6). Individual and cultural memories are constructed and preserved through their mutual communication and interaction. Though each medium has its own unique patterns and channels for displaying cultural memories, words have always been held higher than the other media of memory. However, memory media have been constantly changing and interacting with one another. Words, images, and the body are used by different individuals and cultures in communication to construct memories. Individuals refresh their memories by memory media. On the other hand, memory media represent the past ethical scenes and reveal people’s ethical predicaments and identity crisis. In literary works, memory media such as the body and images are constantly integrated with written words, through which readers build their historical knowledge and memory. The contemporary American writer William Gass and playwright August Wilson emphasized Holocaust and slave history respectively in *Middle C* and *The Piano Lesson*, showing their same keen concern about traumatic memories in American and African American history. It is worth noting that their recording and representation of trauma are similar in these two works, in which words, images, and the body are mostly juxtaposed, and the memory medium and the ethical connotation evoked by memory media have always been the focus. Based on these two works, this paper attempts to explore different memory media in which the characters’ ethical predicaments are revealed and examine the authors’ ethical intention and choice towards memory.

From Words to Waste: Uncertainty and Search for Self-identity

German cultural memory theorist Aleida Assmann concluded that the history of writing has gone through four stages, i.e. pictographic writing, alphabetical writing, analogous writing, and digital writing (Assmann 199). Indeed, words are crucial to the study of the medium of memory. Words belong to a technical medium for writing and communication, so words are expected of recording and storing memories. However, words are described as a fragile box that “must perish”. (Wordsworth 96) Milton, on the contrary, stressed the power of words, and believed that books contain “a potency of life...preserve the purest efficacy and extraction of that living intellect that bred them” (Milton 11). That is to say, words function as the medium of memory and its metaphor. Though words are a “dynamic, productive,

and inaccessible part of memory, [they] cannot be replaced” (Assmann 175). As memory medium, how much do we know about the past through written words? From the point of view of Thomas Carlyle, words are “falsified, blotted out, torn, lost...difficult to read or spell” (qtd. in Assmann 195). On the ground of these definitions of words, Assmann extended the medium of words to traces. Traces are “two-edged, open a very different path to the past from that of texts, and link memory inextricably with forgetting” (Assmann 197). Furthermore, she shifted traces to waste. The process of the interest of cultural memory moves from texts to relics, relics to traces, and traces to waste, so people put their “reverence of the insignificant and turned waste into information” (Assmann 201-2). As a result, in the ubiquitous traces and waste, the reliability of memory is deconstructed, and the characters are faced with ethical dilemmas due to the crisis of their ethical identity.

In Gass’ *Middle C*, there were a group of people who were constantly changing their identities. They had more than one identity and ended up not knowing which one they should identify with. Joseph Skizzen’s father, Rudy, was originally a Viennese Catholic. When he was prescient of the coming disaster, he disguised his family as Frankels and changed his family’s identity to Jewish, so they successfully escaped from Europe. Soon after they arrived in London, where Blitz began, Rudy proclaimed once again that the whole family was British, and they were Scofields after a surprise visit by six men in black. Inasmuch as the father won a race prize in an accident, he abandoned his family for America and never returned. As Professor Nie Zhenzhao pointed out that “in literary texts, all ethical issues are often related to ethical identity. There are many kinds of ethical identities, such as those that based on blood lineage, on ethical relations, on moral norms, on collective and social relations, and on occupation” (Nie 263-264). Rudy’s continuous changing of the family name and identities aroused his son Skizzen’s uncertainty of his ethical identity that are based on collective and social relations. Skizzen collected various historical clues and traces and preserved his collected “treasure” in the attic that was named as “Inhumanity Museum”. He was born in London, and was totally unfamiliar with his parents’ experience in Europe, so he tried to know their history from all kinds of writings, relics, and traces. From the inside, he has been defending his innocence and following his father’s practice, guarding himself with various false identities (Joey, Joseph, Professor Skizzen).

What he really wanted the world to see, were his lifelong ruse to be discovered, was the equivalent of Moses’s tablets before they got inscribed: a person pure, clean, undefiled, unspoiled by the terrible history of the earth. So he

could rightly say to his accusers (and accused he would be): When you were destroying yourselves and your cities, I was not there; when you were debasing your noble principles, I was not there; when you were fattening on lies like pigs at a trough, I was not there; when you were squeezing life from all life like water from a sponge, I was not there. So see me now! Untarnished as a tea service! I've done nothing brave but nothing squalid, nothing farsighted but nothing blind, nothing to make me proud, yet never have I had to be ashamed. (Gass 321)

It is worthy of being noted that Gass is good at “producing characters his consciousness inhabits via the words that create and express them so as to learn and judge what possible or impossible self lies lurking in scattered fragments among all the exploded debris of the modern psyche” (O'Hara 207). Skizzen was also addicted to the writing world, and believed that art and fiction could seek solace against the memories of atrocities. However, the more obsessed he felt, the more unsure he became. As Oedipa Maas's network “W.A.S.T.E.” in Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*, Skizzen's “Inhumanity Museum” looked like a messy waste dump filled with empty soda cans and trash containers, which were associated with violence and disaster in individual memory. Once again, the memory of history was wrapped up in the unreliability of writing, and in the novel “anything will do” (O'Hara 211), The character's ethical identities remained changeable, and the true one was obscured by the false ones. When Skizzen thought that he would be exposed for all his hypocrisy and fake identities, he survived again, and his fake identities sustained. Though Skizzen used wastes and words to search his ethical identity, his puzzlement was not solved. He was caught in his predicament.

Similarly, August Wilson's play, *The Piano Lesson*, via memory media, presents the puzzlement of ethical identity of African Americans in the first half of the 20th century. The heroine Berniece stayed with her 11-year-old daughter Maretha in her uncle Doaker's house. Buried in grief of their families' deaths, Berniece and Doaker spoke no more of the past. At the beginning of the 20th century, most African Americans are illiterate, so written words were not a reliable way for them to record and understand the past. Doaker's recollection of the past showed the absence of writing. He used to be a cook, working on the railways, so his identity was revealed mainly through the items in his kitchen. As he stood in the kitchen, washing and cooking, he recalled his reminiscence in the railway. Those fragmentary memories flowing in his song pieced his past experiences together. “Gone leave Jackson Mississippi/and go to Memphis/and double back to Jackson/

Come on down to Hattiesburg” (Wilson, *The Piano Lesson* 55). To Africans the oral tradition is the “mnemonic devices peculiar” (Gates 5), and also the medium of “nonlinguistic sighs” that leads to the past (Assmann 197). As a railroad worker, Doaker’s working song served as a kind of trace that linked individual memory with forgetting. However, it was the cooking utensil, like dishes, pots, and seasoning bottles that revealed Doaker’s identity, which were in resonance with Assmann’s “waste”. They were the most insignificant items in daily life, but they were signs, working as “signifying signs to stimulate the subject to remember” (Zhao 44). These kitchen utensils reactivated Doaker’s memories of his time on the railroad, signifying his past ethical identity, but he was puzzled with his identity as a railroad cook because he had other identities. He had been obsessed by several black women, sneaked into the slaveowner Sutter’s house with his two brothers to get their piano back. These identities were kept in others’ memories and left to gossips. He never confirmed their authenticity and decided to forget the past. In addition, Berniece was uncertain about her identity and searching for her ethical identity. The death of her mother and her husband involved her into a crisis of ethical identity, and her hesitation of marrying Avery showed her fear of the loss of her identity as a child, a wife, or a mother. Martha, even as a little girl, faced a crisis of identity resulted from her mother’s refusal to tell her anything about her family history. In a world where various memory mediums coexisted with deliberate forgetfulness, historical memory was challenged, and waited to be awakened.

Gass and Wilson did not deny all kinds of historical events, but questioned the reliability of historical memory. Just like any other texts of the novel, words as the medium of memory can give people only some comfort with traces of history. Readers still feel ambiguous and make free associations. Besides, the two writers also deal with the relationship between the memory and images.

The Memory of Images: The Fall of Traditional Culture

Due to the fact that “paintings and sculptures could not effectively protect whatever they represented against the ravages” (Assmann 179), words and images as memory media differ from each other, and are even in constant competition. Actually, images are viewed as an entrance to the past. Fritz Saxl further illustrated the relationship between images and the past. He wrote, “In pictorial sign language, in contrast to normal speech, a vast reservoir of experience is transmitted from primal times to posterity...It will always be a preserver of the early stages of human culture in history” (qtd. in Assmann 216). Images are therefore an indispensable part in the construction of memory, and provide memory with original clues. Though

words “supported a clearly legible tradition, the image was perceived as connected with emotion and the unconscious” (Assmann 208). In other words, the image as medium of memory is metaphorical, which is silent and eloquent. The image cannot be expressed or processed by words. When people see images, they are stimulated by the emotion or imagination hidden in the minds. In literary works, ekphrasis is related to the description of painting and images, including verbal representation, visual representation, and a rhetoric and cross-media distraction. Paintings can “tell stories, make arguments, and signify abstract ideas” (Mitchell 160). In a nutshell, the literary image representation not only projects images on readers, but also has dialogues with readers. Gass and Wilson excel at utilizing images in their works. They either use words to construct images, or emphasize the description of certain images, revealing the characters’ ethical predicament and the hero’s or the heroin’s confusion and loss of historical memories.

Gass’s *Middle C* is abundant in musical images. In the novel Skizzen was separated from traditional culture and faced with ethical chaos of professional identity. Though he received no actual training in music, Skizzen claimed himself as Professor Skizzen and boasted himself as an expert on the Austrian composer Arnold Schoenberg, the founder of the atonal twelve-tone. In Schoenberg’s opinion, art should neither be described nor symbolized, but directly express human’s spirit and experience. The atonal composition technique broke the melodic structure of traditional composition, and music was neither balanced nor repetitive. Meanwhile, the rhythm became unpredictable and unrestrained. In response to these characteristics, the novel was written in the nonlinear artistic technique, combined with the free-beat twelve-tone music. Thus, the novel was both simple and powerful. The novel’s title “Middle C” originally meant the note in the middle of the piano or harmonic system. However, the twelve-tone technique abandoned the idea of tonic and dominant and became a succession of distinct notes. Thereby, it is hard to grasp the theme of the novel. Gass put this idea into the novel, so the whole text was arranged like musical scale. Through various changes of font and typeset, the novel presented a musical image, showing the confusion and loss of human’s historical memories of the Holocaust. Skizzen was struggling to seek his own cultural identity, and his collection in his “Inhumanity Museum” and all events in his life presented a disorganized and messy image similar to the twelve-tone music image. All of a sudden, the crazy, despair, fear, and anxiety mingled with unpredictable human destiny, and he could not find the cultural tradition he was familiar with. In fact, the use of musical images and twelve-tone technique not only prevailed in *Middle C* but also demonstrated in the preface about the Holocaust in Gass’s *The Tunnel*,

in which the hero Frederick Kohler was continuously digging the tunnel in his basement, finding no direction and getting lost in his own language world. Skizzen was impressed by his first music teacher Mr. Hirk.

The notes emerge like children into an ordered universe; they immediately know their place; they immediately find it, for the order you hear was born with them... these notes are not born orphans, not maroons surrounded by worse than ocean, but they have relatives, they have an assignment in a system. (Gass 242)

Skizzen was searching for the system in music and life, only to find an anti-system. Like all Gass's protagonists, Skizzen finally turned to words for comfort, but the musical images in the texts played the dual roles of image representation and meditation, so he was caught by helplessness and confusion.

In African traditional culture, the function of images is no less than that of words, especially paintings and carved images. To be specific, sculptures were used "during the entire life cycle of the African." (Sege 6) Wilson's *The Piano Lesson* reveals the function of sculptures in African American daily life. In the novel, the carvings on the piano were visual signs of the history of an African American family that was once enslaved. In the slavery period, the slave owner Nolander traded the great grandmother and grandfather of Berniece for a piano as a gift for his wife. However, Nolander's wife missed the traded slaves so Norlander asked Berniece's great grandfather to carve his traded families on the piano. The great grandfather was grieving for his loss of family members, so he carved all kinds of things on the piano, including the wedding ceremony of jumping the broom, Mama Esther's funeral, Norlander's journey with the two slaves, etc. The carvings evoked the family's miserable historical memories as slaves and conveyed the family's memories and emotions of the sufferings with blood and tears. For the descendants, it was challengeable for them to consider how to deal with the historical memory embodied by the carved images. African carvings contain images, and they, after proper ceremonies, are regarded as "the dwelling place of a 'spirit'...or ancestors or members of the family" (Segy 2-3). African traditional culture "is the practice of rituals and the recognition of the ever presence of the living-dead (ancestor), and allows the person to coexist in harmony with other members of the community and nature" (Kamara 503). At the very beginning, in the face of the piano with African carvings, Doaker and Berniece refused to touch it and recall their family memories when they were immersed in grief. Boy Willie attempted to sell it so that

he could “stand right up next the white man and talk about the price of cotton... the weather, and anything else [he] want to talk about” (Wilson, *The Piano Lesson* 92). As a result, Boy Willie and Berniece got angry about each other. Wilson’s demonstration of the African descendants’ attitudes towards the memory medium of craving images reflects the African American descendants’ ethical predicaments in identifying with their community and their indifference to traditional culture and family legacy. However, their conflict came to an end after they realized that the piano with African carvings had a close relationship with their ancestors.

Both Gass and Wilson are concerned about words, in which the writing and images as media of memory are integrated with each other. Such kind of technique enriches the creation skills of writing and broadens the boundary of the representation of images. It is worth noting that these two media also highlight the characters in the text and image context, and memories from the body are participated.

Body Writing: A Carnival of Trauma Memory

Assmann got her inspiration of body as medium from the Bible, in which God says “I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts” (31:33). The accumulation of the unconscious, as a habit or the trauma of brutality, will be imprinted on the memory, which features body writing. Body writing is regarded as a process of internalization, but it will be “externalized in a dramatic scene that once more links remembering and forgetting to an act of writing” (Assmann 232). The body is sensitive so it is vulnerable to the outside world. Therefore, body writing is not mere about individual experience, but also about memories of social experience. For instance, a tattooed man is a marked man, for “the body is a memory” (Clastres 184). The soldiers’ wounds in their bodies are memory of war. “The body memory of wounds and scars is more reliable than that of the mind” (Assmann 235). Since the ancient times, the tattoo custom has worked for the establishment of identity, while the memory of wounds and scars is a reminder of trauma which challenges the identity. Moreover, the depiction of trauma memory is prevalent in literature of the Holocaust. In Kluger’s memoir of the Holocaust, Auschwitz is described as “a lunatic terra incognita, [and] the memory of which is like a bullet lodged in the soul where no surgery can reach it” (Kluger 112). From the perspective of Sigmund Freud’s psychological analysis, trauma and the uncanny is closely connected. The features of uncanny include the present and past, memory and forgetting, return of repression, and negative emotions (Tong 88-90). The uncanny is resulted from the trauma that society put on individuals. The wounds in the body and the trauma in

the heart are two basic factors of body memory, which are constantly reconstructed under different ethical circumstances, building the true and false traumatic memories. The characters in Gass's and Wilson's works are engaged in traumatic memories, so they are confused about history and lost in their physical feelings and real experiences.

Like the protagonist in Gass's *The Tunnel*, Skizzen in *Middle C* neither experienced the Holocaust nor got scars on his body. Nevertheless, he suffered psychological trauma because of his parents' experiences. They tended to shut themselves in the cluttered attics where the used items delivered memories. His boyhood experiences were deeply embedded in Skizzen's physical memories, thus trauma remained. Though Skizzen had no personal experience of the Holocaust, his life was closely tied to it. At the beginning, his father took the whole family fled from their hometown, and then his father abandoned his family. Thereafter, he collected various items of atrocities and disaster, put them into his "Inhumanity Museum", trying to get an answer of his father's choice. It is no doubt that the father's sternness left the mother and children in the shadow of misfortune. Skizzen had no clear understanding of the Holocaust and his family's history from his parents' complaints. The fact is that the testimonies of the survivors of the Holocaust "don't come from the deep memory" (Langer 7) and the testimonies are "human documents rather than merely historical ones, so the troubled interaction between past and present achieves a gravity that surpasses the concern with accuracy" (Langer xv). Like the description of the war in Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Gass's dealing with his characters' trauma from the Holocaust is fragmentary. Skizzen's kick of the empty soda cans into a trash container in the attic implied the clutter of his collections and historical memories. The traumatic memories rendered Skizzen a growing sense that he could only find little comfort in art and language. The cause of the recurring atrocities on the weak is sometimes resulted from the perpetrator's selfishness, just as Skizzen's father Rudy did. Skizzen also managed to establish himself as a traumatized innocent man, so he kept changing his identity. In Gass's words, the "innocent people" like Skizzen are everywhere in the society. Confronted with the atrocities of history no one can be spared. "No shape in time. No beginning. No end. No middle. No knowing where you were"(Gass 161). This kept Skizzen in low spirit. "The fear that the human race might not survive has been replaced by the fear that it might survive"(Gass 22). This sentence constantly appears in the novel and flashes through Skizzen's mind, which displays Gass's extension of personal trauma to all humans, so Gass always emphasizes on finding comfort in the world of the words. The contrast between trauma and comfort is more impressive than the

mere description of trauma.

Like those in Gass's novels, the characters in Wilson's plays suffer trauma too. Through the characters' attitudes towards memory and memory media Wilson shows the characters' struggle in the ethical dilemma and delivers his ethical intention of his writing. From an ethical point of view, memory "involves not only the individual emotions... also the relationship between individual and history... [so] memory touches the field of ethics and morality. The essence of memory is the human's obligation, namely, 'shall I remember,' and 'should I remember or forget'" (Zhao 124). In *The Piano Lesson*, the piano, as a memory medium, conveyed the trauma of Berniece and indicated the relationship between Berniece and her families. Berniece, in her early age, experienced her father's death in the fight for the piano and her mother's death from weeping on and wiping the piano. In her adulthood, Berniece's husband was beaten to death by a white policeman when he was trying to save Berniece's brother Boy Willie with a gun. The successive deaths and pains deepened the wounds within her, and she could not speak of the traumatic memories or remember them. Her husband's gun and the piano served as the media of fragmentary traumatic memories that communicated with her in silence. She said that,

When I played it she could hear my daddy talking to her, the pictures came alive and walked through the house. Some time late at night I could hear my mama talking to them. I said that wasn't gonna happen to me. I don't play that piano cause I don't want to wake them spirits. They never be walking around in this house. (Wilson, *The Piano Lesson* 70)

Thus, Berniece refused to touch anything that will stimulate her memory of the past sufferings. Her trauma was pertinent to Levee's in Wilson's another play *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*. Levee witnessed her mother raped by a gang of white people, got wounded when he spooked up to save her mother, and left in the chest "a long ugly scar" (Wilson, *Ma Rainey* 69). Not long before he saw his father was hanged and set by fire. The long scar became a medium that reminded him of the harshest and most vivid memory, and he was overwhelmed by long repression and hurt. Levee and Berniece were traumatized by racial slavery and persecution. Wilson demonstrates the performance of and reaction to the traumas suffered by the characters, and shows the role of African traditional culture in soothing the trauma of African Americans. Levee joined in a blues band, and proposed valuable ideas to develop blues. Berniece overcame her trauma and held a traditional African

religious ritual summoning the spirits of her ancestors to expel Sutter's spirit, which can be regarded as "a summoning of 'cultural memory'" (Noggle 71). Berniece in Wilson's work ultimately chose to touch the medium of memory and confronted with family's past suffering. Berniece's ethical choice delivers Wilson's ethical intention, namely, the African descendants' identification with African traditional culture. Religious rituals enable black individuals to integrate their traumatic memories into traditional culture where their individual trauma gets healed, so they realize their identity as African Americans and no longer get lost easily in the mainstream culture.

As it is demonstrated above, the body memories of the characters in Gass's and Wilson's works convey trauma. As the medium of memory, the body, integrated with words and images, is the extension of memory, and forms a mode of carnival as important internal memories in cultural memory.

Conclusion

Words, images and the body as memory media are different but closely related to one another, indicating different ethical scenes. In the historical context, these media construct our interpretation and imagination of the past. As a matter of fact, in the world of electronic information technology, words, images or the body as the media of memory is changing, with simpler means to spread and a broader scope and more acute memories of history and culture involved. Aleida Assmann writes in her *Cultural Memory and Western Civilization* that there is a "radical change in the concept of cultural memory. Previously, memory had been defined in terms of tradition, inscription, and storage, whereas the new historical consciousness defines it in terms of erasure, destruction, gaps, and forgetfulness" (Assmann 196). Therefore, the ethical choice of "what should we remember?" deserves more attention. The works of Gass and Wilson, by virtue of words, images, and the body as memory media reveal the authors' reflections on historical and cultural memories.

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