

Meredith Monk: Between the Cracks

Hadley Smith

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Thesis Direction: Lynn Garafola
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“I work in between the cracks, where the voice starts dancing, where the body starts singing, where theater becomes cinema.” – Meredith Monk

Meredith Monk is seen as a visionary force in the fields of contemporary music and dance. Monk has expanded the idea of how the body and the voice can communicate. Monk’s work is cross-disciplinary in the truest sense, it is not only that she creates multi-media works, but that she envisions various techniques of communication as seamlessly caught up with one another. Her use of language captures this unique thought process best. She describes her dance works in terms of landscape or portraiture and uses terminology from filmmaking to explain the various sections of her theatrical works. For Monk, each of these techniques, these forms, are all simply a part of the same process of storytelling, communicating with the viewer, and allowing the viewer to see the world around them in a new way. While Monk in recent decades has devoted more of her time and creative process to vocal and instrumental works, an examination of the first part of her career is fascinating for anyone who wants to understand the power of the interplay of form, content, and communication with the viewer. Monk, for all of her attention to form, does not allow the structure of her work to overpower the content. And despite all of the ways that Monk invites the viewer into the process of the creation of meaning, she is not quite able to completely relinquish the idea of the artist as an anointed figure in society. The most intriguing parts of Monk and her career lie in such contradictions: in the spaces between voice and movement, form and content, and the visionary and the viewer.

Born into a musically talented family in 1942, Meredith Monk was immersed in the arts from childhood. The exchange between dance and music was one of the earliest themes in her life, and it was to become one of the most salient in her work. One would be hard pressed to find an interview in which Monk does not acknowledge the easy interchange between dance and music in her early education and her family's role in bringing both into her life. Monk often mentions that she could read music before words and that her mother, a classically trained professional singer, placed her in a Dalcroze eurhythmics class taught by Lola Rahm after noting that Monk had issues with coordination due to a visual impairment.¹ By seven she was studying Humphrey/Weidman technique, and when she was nine she started ballet lessons, all the while continuing formal and informal studies of music and singing. In high school she studied ballet intensively and belonged to several choral groups. In discussions of her early training Monk moves back and forth between descriptions of her vocal training and her dance experiences and credits her early mentors, especially Bessie Schonberg at Sarah Lawrence College, as encouraging her to utilize her musical training as a dancer. Thus, by the time Meredith Monk graduated from college and entered the dance scene in New York as the Judson Church movement began to wind down, the path her career would take – the constant moving back and forth between the role of composer and choreographer – seems clear in retrospect. Yet Monk did not originally see herself as inhabiting these dual roles. During her first years in New York she saw singing and her studies of music as pursuits that were worthy simply because of her own interest in them, whereas making dance pieces was her work – her goal. In a conversation with Deborah

¹ *Speaking of Dance. Meredith Monk*. Presented by the American Dance Festival. Camera and direction by Douglas Rosenberg. 58 min. 1996. Videocassette.

Jowitt she describes having a “revelation” around 1965 that the voice could be “as flexible as the spine,” and that she could create a vocabulary of sounds with her voice as idiosyncratic as the one she had created for her body.² This revelation began the real synthesis of Monk’s vocal and movement pieces, and its effect on her work is easily seen in *16mm Earrings* (1966), one of her earliest dances to receive serious attention.

16mm Earrings can be seen as a precursor to almost every work that Monk has created. She sings and plays guitar, projects films of herself on screens and her own body, and moves in a way that could be considered pedestrian yet is too declarative to be truly non-preformative. The dance begins with Monk’s back facing the audience, and throughout the course of the piece she figuratively moves away and towards the audience, at times slipping away as films of her holding magnifying glasses up to her eyes play, at other times taking off her dress and making simple yet forceful movements as she roams the space. She places a large white globe over her head while an image of her face is projected on the globe and finally gets into and out of a trunk. By presenting many different perspectives of the body to the viewer Monk asks us to consider our relationship to others bodies as well as our own.

16mm is the first piece that Monk scored entirely on her own.³ Unlike pieces she has made since then, text is used, and throughout the piece one hears loops describing sexual excitement, what should be going on in the dance, a description of a “patient,” a voice calling for Jane Jones, and the cheering of a crowd. Near the end of the dance Monk sings “Greensleaves” while accompanying herself on the guitar.

² Quoted in Kathy Halbreich, ed., *Art Performs Life: Cunningham/Monk/Jones*. (Minneapolis, MN :Walker Art Center, 1998), 74.

³ Deborah Jowitt et al., *Meredith Monk*. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997) , 56.

It is worth mentioning that while *16mm Earrings* is not a piece dependent on any type of virtuosity and can be described as somewhat sparse despite the many elements contributing to it, the piece is extremely theatrical. There is a sense of drama, a weight given to meaning, that is not often apparent in the works of other choreographers - Yvonne Rainier, Merce Cunningham, Trisha Brown – at the time of its creation. Part of this arises from Monk herself: with her long loose dark hair and the weight and consideration she gives to each task, she presents an extremely compelling figure. As she moves throughout the space, dressing and undressing, putting on a red wig, watching red crepe paper blow up from a table and move in the wind of a fan, the viewer may come to many conclusions about what this figure is experiencing. But the idea of each event as meaningless – dance for dance sake, crepe paper for crepe paper’s sake – does not seem right. As she experiments with form, she does not seem to need to reject content.

Monk has reflected that she now sees the piece as a coming of age story though at the time she thought it was all about multiple surfaces – those of her film, her body, her voice. That she now considers the piece to be about a coming of age is telling in that the making of *16mm Earrings* can be seen as the first time that Monk really came into her own as an artist. Not only is it the first piece in which she was responsible for the score, but it is also the first time that she ever fully incorporated voice, film, and movement into one work.⁴ The simultaneous use of each of these techniques has come to define her career ever since.

Monk describes her experimentation with the voice in a very “bodily” way. When she addresses the subject she talks about the breath, the diaphragm, and making “vocal

⁴ Halbreich, 72.

gestures.”⁵ The voice takes on the quality of something physical, tangible – as concrete as the body – rather than something ethereal.

Monk’s vocal pieces are as difficult to categorize as her dances. They oscillate between being haunting and ancient or silly and playful. The aspect of her vocal compositions easiest to pinpoint is that they are usually not textual in any way. Whether they drive the action of the piece or create a context for movement they are in no way an explanation. While *16mm Earrings* provides an exception in that it uses text, the text is not narrative. Monk understands the voice as being apart of a universal human language in which text or words have no place. Thus, no language is as universally expressive as the voice alone. In some ways her removal of the text from things that are “spoken” allow the voice, not the word, to become an object that we regard on its own. The omission of text creates an opening for the audience and their experiences to enter the piece. Without the definitive authority of the word the viewer is allowed to create his or her own meaning. In *Notes on the Voice* Monk presents us with this idea: “1. The voice as a tool for discovering, activating, remembering, uncovering, demonstrating primordial/prelogical consciousness. 2. The voice as a means of becoming, portraying, embodying, incarnating another spirit. 3. The dancing voice. The voice as flexible as the spine. 4. *The voice as a direct line to the emotions. The full spectrum of emotion. Feelings that we have no words for.*”⁶ Allowing human emotion to transcend languages or vocabularies of any kind is a theme that runs strongly through all of Monk’s works, and the use of non-textual vocal language is intrinsic to this concept.

⁵ Ibid. 74.

⁶ Quoted in Jowitt, 56. Emphasis added.

Monk employs vocal techniques and tones not often used in Western music, and her compositions are often seen as something of the “other.” Unlike many composers of her generation, Monk developed her vocal/musical techniques without deliberately searching outside of Western culture for inspiration. She preferred to work within her own body to discover techniques authentic to herself. When Deborah Jowitt asked her if she has been influenced by non-Western forms when she began exploring the possibilities of the voice, Monk responded:

There has always been a misunderstanding. There are people who do learn the the styles from other cultures or they study with a teacher...That is a perfectly valid way of working. But I have worked very directly with my own voice and body, and when you do that and you are not just staying with the Western vocal tradition, you come upon sounds within your own vocal instrument that could be termed “transcultural.” For example, if I, by my own exploration, come across the glottal break – the place where the lower register becomes the upper register – that break, which is usually smoothed over in Western technique, becomes a rich area to explore.⁷

By moving outside the boundaries of the classical Western music tradition in which she was raised and discarding all linguistic text, Monk has created a way of using the voice that is transcultural in that it belongs to no specific time or place.

As evidenced by *16mm Earrings*, Monk’s interest in film arose quite early in her career. At Sarah Lawrence she pursued a combined performing arts program and studied filmmaking as well as dance and music. In *16mm Earrings* Monk uses films of herself to play with the ideas of surface and scale. In one frame she holds two differently sized magnifying glasses to her eyes so that the viewer’s perception of relative size is distorted. The tactile quality of the moving dancing body – the flesh - is contrasted with the relatively still images of her projected on a two-dimensional surface. Monk has incorporated not only film into her pieces but also more importantly she has incorporated

⁷ Halbreich, 75.

the techniques of filmmaking into her live work. In this adoption of methods from one practice of art making to another one can begin to understand the re-imagining of dance that takes place throughout Monk's work. Another early piece of hers, *Needlebrain Lloyd and the Systems Kid* (1970), staged around the Connecticut College campus, was billed as a live movie. Again, Monk worked with scale, only on a more epic level. Scenes of dancers and actors spread out across a large field created the impression of events separated in space and time. Outside the proscenium stage Monk felt that she could create a sense of close-ups and pans, or the movement of a camera across a wide swath of space. In this way the audience sees live bodies in an unfamiliar way.

The use of time is also an important aspect of her work, if not necessarily a technique. Because of her musical background Monk feels that everything she creates has a sense of rhythm and that this rhythm or timing becomes a platform for everything she does.⁸ She speaks of working with time as a "sculptural" element, and in her work timing goes beyond following the rhythm of music rather; it is a subject unto itself. In both *Vessel: An Opera Epic* (1971), based on the figure of Joan of Arc, and *Juice: a theater cantata in 3 movements* (1969), Monk uses extended periods of time (in some cases days, in others a month) between the three sections of each performance in order to engage the viewer's memory of the last section as a part or layer over the section they are currently viewing. *Juice*, a piece made up of three sections that diminished in scale from performance to performance is a particularly good example of this. The first section took place in the Guggenheim Museum with a large cast, the second in Minor Latham Playhouse at Barnard College with a four-person cast, and the third in an art gallery

⁸Ibid., 70.

where only remnants and artifacts left behind from previous performances were on display. As the scope of the piece diminishes, the audience's memories of previous sections play a larger part in the creation of meaning. A less extreme example would be the use of timing in *16mm Earrings*. Here Monk slows the pace and separates each element of the work, for example, seldom moving while a film is playing. She thus allows each moment to register with the audience, deftly creating a rhythm that invites the viewer into a piece that in reality has many, many elements occurring simultaneously. In some ways Monk's distortion and manipulation of time created by unexpected stops in the action or painfully slow moments – recall techniques of filmmaking. During *Education of a Girlchild* (1973) a group of women pause for long periods of time while gathered around a table, giving one the impression of looking at a film still. Monk speaks of coming from a “time medium” and working with the idea that time can be compressed and expanded within the performance. In some of her works this idea is carried out quite literally. In *Book of Days* Monk brings visions of the future, or current history, to a young girl living in a medieval Jewish city. Eventually a wall is torn down, revealing current day street scenes within the city itself. The disruption of the linear historic narrative plays a part in many of her works, and the compression and layering of history can be seen as an extension of Monk's understanding of time. While the manipulation of time contributes to the otherworldly ritualistic quality of her work, it also has a more practical application; creating the mental space needed to process the many layers of action of her performances. In Marcia Siegel's review of *Vessel: An Opera Epic* (1971) she describes Monk's restraint and the fact that in such a multi-layered performance only “one thing

was allowed to happen at a time.”⁹ While the audience watches each event unfold separately, memories of the performance linger in the individual mind, allowing for members of the audience to create their own strata of images. In this way the individual’s experience and perception of the work is given priority and allowed to develop without being overwhelmed.

Monk frequently speaks of creating a style of movement adapted to her own body. In some ways this echoes the ideas of earlier modern dancers such as Isadora Duncan, yet unlike this founding mother of modern dance, Monk does not impose her way of moving onto other bodies. Monk’s notes or journals about the creation of specific works make clear that she gives her performers a lot of agency in the creation of their roles. Both the movement and the vocal work are highly influenced by the performer inhabiting a role or archetype, and it is very clear that Monk is not interested in placing her performers within the boundaries of a certain technique. Her encouragement of movement particular to and developed by each person she works with makes it difficult to pin down specific aspects of how she uses movement. In many ways as the vocal techniques she uses became more technically challenging and specific the movement she employs becomes less so. Yet there are aspects of movement that show up repeatedly in her works. In many of her works the movement takes on a pedestrian but highly rhythmic quality that mimics and follows the vocalizations. Percussive gestures and walking are often seen. Simple movements are repeated to create more complex patterns: Monk can elaborate on the theme of kicking a leg front to back until it looks quite complicated. Although she encourages her dancers to create movement for themselves and crafts simple movement

⁹ Jowitt, 38.

phrases for groups, the dancing is always very deliberate, and even the raising of an arm seems well planned out.

The majority of Monk's work, from her films to her vocal arrangements, can in some way be traced back to *16mm Earrings*. The techniques used in this piece – the film, the voice, the use of time, and the movement are the base upon which Monk builds layers of content.

Education of the Girlchild (1973) consists of two acts and contains many themes found throughout all of Monk's work. The first act focuses on a group of women all dressed in white clothing that is not particularly evocative of any time or place, except for the character originated by Coco Pekeilis who wears a colorful, traditional Mexican dress. The piece begins in silence punctuated by sporadic wails originating offstage. One by one the women take their places at a table and assume poses that cause them to look frozen in place mid-conversation. Monk is the last to enter led in and seated by another woman. Throughout the piece the women face the audience, grouping themselves in scenes of such stillness that it seems as if they are being photographed. The piece alternates for quite a while between scenes of stillness in which every motion is slow and often paused midway into the gesture or movement, and scenes of the women as they bounce and shuffle in a line to the percussive beat of an organ as if they are journeying. At one point Monk leaves the group to begin a small solo underneath a banner reading "A TEST." Her distal round movements are interspersed with small hops as she makes her way through the dance giving off a sense of uncertainty and youth. After this an otherworldly looking woman is carried in on a litter by two figures in black. The women appear before her with white veils over their heads and sing softly. One by one the

women approach this unnerving matriarch. Unveiling themselves and performing short solos in front of her, as she shrieks, as if haranguing them, in a non-verbal manner. After this scene Monk surveys the group of women spread on the floor as they alternately sob, wail, and laugh. Finally, a banner bearing the words “A TALE” appears and the women stand beneath it laughing and crying out percussively while bouncing. It is an oddly joyous scene compared to the landscape of sadness that precedes it, although it takes on a manic quality as one of the women impishly throws a bag over the heads of the others and leads them off stage. By the end of this first act Monk is sitting out in the floor calling out in a voice both childlike and elderly, “I still have my skin, I still have my mind...I still have my books...I still have my money, I still have my philosophy, I still have my memory, I still have my mouth.”¹⁰ She too is led away. Many things take place during this first act and Monk is smart to break them up. She has two elderly people with canes who walk through or assume brief domestic-themed poses between each scene. Initially these intrusions do not make much sense to the viewer, and one wonders if Monk intended them as some sort of red herring in the piece. Yet as the first act continues, the appearance of the couple is like a visual palate cleanser, refreshing the audience’s senses so that they are ready to take in new information from the piece.

The second act of *Education of the Girlchild* is one continuous solo performed by Monk as she transforms herself from an elderly woman to the young girl she represented in the first act. Monk begins by sitting on a stool on a small platform covered by a sheet of white muslin fabric that forms a path as it winds down through the space. Monk begins by breathing heavily until her breath turns into a rocking motion reflecting the song

¹⁰ *Education of the Girlchild.*, produced and directed by Meredith Monk., 1973, videocassette.

played on an untuned piano. Her movements begin very separated from one another, and she performs them stiffly as she sings out in a rough voice. As she moves down the pathway created by the fabric, her movements and voice become more authoritative; at one point after shedding her wig she crosses her arms with her feet firmly planted on the ground and sings loudly and directly to the audience. As she sheds her glasses and apron and undoes her hair, her movements become wide and distally initiated again, and her voice takes on a clarity as she moves in a way that echoes her solo during the “A TEST” section in the last act.

Monk often describes her pieces using terminology from the visual arts. She has described the first act of *Girlchild* as a landscape and the second act as a portrait. But in both common themes of ritual, community, and archetypes become apparent to the viewer. Each of these themes leads back to the idea of the ancient being presented in a post-modern context. Monk has at times referred to her works as pieces of archeology, excavating the past to observe something new in ourselves. Yet Monk is not an archeologist in the sense that she digs up and displays artifacts or recreates past events. The past she refers to in her works consists both of events that actually occurred and our own mythologized idea of our ancestors. Monk creates along the lines of ritual and archetypes appropriated and recreated for our time. Communities both past and present appear and then fade, mimicking the cycles of civilizations. And potent archetypes are spun into the web of action providing universal touch points for any audience that can admit to its own humanity.

Monk speaks of performance as being near to or even inhabiting a sacred conceptual space. She believes that within the context of performance one should be able

to create a non-denominational spiritual space.¹¹ In Monk's work unique rituals are enacted on the stage without reference to particular deities or systems of belief. Her use of time – especially when it is stretched out through the use of slow movements – lends a sense of seriousness to acts not found in performances that aim only to entertain. Repetition is used in her works in a way that is similar to the repetitive nature of religious ceremonies. Actions are repeated not only to drive home a point, but also to soothe. During the first section of *Juice*, for instance, Monk asks her large cast to approach the barriers of the Guggenheim's spiral walkway and retreat from them many times. The resulting ebb and flow allows the viewer not only to understand the relation of this mass of bodies to the building and its architecture but also to be soothed by the idea of knowing what to expect. Monk later jolts the audience from this comfort zone by having her cast run around the spiral walkway so that the Guggenheim suddenly appears to be spinning against the movement of the dancers. This first section of *Juice* combines two of the most important aspects of ritual – the soothing repetition of the familiar and the revelation of the surprising and miraculous. In this way Monk turns the Guggenheim into a sort of futuristic cathedral.

The expansion of time during *Education of the Girlchild* has a similar effect only within the confines of the proscenium stage. The stillness of the women sitting within a domestic scene is most effective because of the unnerving lack of familiar action in an otherwise familiar scene. The audience can at once recognize that something unusual, something special is happening here the same way that silence in a temple or bowed heads in a church immediately indicate a transformation of space. As the piece unfolds, Monk assumes the role of a young girl who is slowly absorbed into a community of

¹¹ Halbreich, 77.

women by performing the many ritual actions often found in ceremonies during which a child becomes an adult in the eyes of a community. She is put through “A TEST,” bears witness to the pain of adulthood, in this particular case womanhood, as she observes the members of the group spread out and weeping, and eventually is brought into the group’s ritual of dancing and bowing before a strange creature the group could be understood as worshipping. Throughout this section Monk incorporates many elements of religious rituals – the litter that bears the deity onstage, the kneeling of the women, the white veils that cover their faces – each contributes towards the creation of a ritual that despite its familiar elements is totally new.

Community is also a very strong theme running throughout Monk’s early works. It is evident, for instance, in her frequent use of community spaces – museums, open fields, vacant city lots – rather than the proscenium stage. *Juice*, *Needlebrain Lloyd and the Systems Kid*, and *Vessel* were all created in such spaces. Monk’s use of spaces free of theatrical mystique reflects more than generational ideas about where and how dance should be presented. (Trisha Brown, for instance, also used public spaces very effectively in her works as did many other contemporaries of Monk.) More importantly, Monk shows a willingness to invite the audience and its experience of such spaces into the meaning of her works. The use of these spaces also demonstrates a willingness on Monk’s part to have her pieces and dance in general interact with the public on a more visceral level. By utilizing a vacant lot in downtown Manhattan as she did in *Vessel*, Monk inserts her work very directly into the community in which she was then living and creating. Simultaneously, she injected this public space with the possibility of

reinterpretation, allowing her audience to perceive the familiar landscape in a totally new way.

Monk not only integrates her work into the community around her but also creates communities within her work. At a time when taking dance off the proscenium stage and placing it in the streets and other cultural institutions was quite popular, the importance of the concept of community to Monk can perhaps be measured better by the central role it is given in her works. For example, *Girlchild*'s content is not only the story of a young woman's coming of age, but of reaching maturity within a community. In *Girlchild* the symbiosis of a community of elders, teachers, and the individual pupil is given careful attention.

The women in *Education of the Girlchild* represent not only their own little band of travelers and worshipers, but they also evoke the idea of the community shared by all women everywhere. At times throughout the first act, Monk observes this community as the viewer does: she stands outside the group of women as they sob and laugh. Alone she observes the domestic scene of the empty table and chairs, covers them with a cloth, and dances by herself in a freer way than any of the other women, as if she is not yet ready to join them. Yet at other times she is brought into their circle, seated at the table by a minder, invited into their rituals, tested, and literally made a part of their "tale." This separation from the group and the latter's efforts to incorporate Monk into it is clearer than if Monk had been a part of the group from the beginning. Viewers are already apt to see groups of performers on stage as separate entities from the audience: the notion of a community on the stage is almost too obvious to be observed. But because the audience

can identify with Monk as a fellow observer and then witness her gradual immersion into the community of women, it is able to delineate the circle, the community more clearly.

Monk also thinks about community in terms of shared history, and the history of her own family. Descended from European and Russian Jews who immigrated to America in the decades before World War II, Monk found herself considering both the shared history of American citizens in a time of war overseas and the legacy of Europe as an occupied territory during the same war. With these thoughts in mind she created *Quarry: An Opera* (1976), a piece centered on themes of World War II that I will describe in more detail later. Within *Quarry* many communities are represented simultaneously on stage. Aside from individual and family dramas the most poignant moments occur as communities are formed and re-formed out of these individuals. The sheer scale of the piece allows this to happen quite fluidly as individuals join in the movement of the chorus or as couples portraying different parts of the Jewish community bid one another farewell and begin to drop all of their personal effects to the floor as they assume new identities as apart of a persecuted undifferentiated mass.

Community can also be observed as an important aspect of the creation of Monk's pieces. In 1968 she formed a troupe of performers and artists known as the House. She would continue to work with many people in this group for more than a decade, and their backgrounds as painters, actors, and dancers infused her already multi-dimensional work with yet more facets. Her collaborations with Ping Chong, an artist and performer she met while teaching a workshop at New York University, are the most frequently mentioned examples of Monk's work as a collaborative artist. Yet as Monk's notes and journals make very clear, she collaborates with each performer in her works; she not only

allows but also invites her performers to contribute their voices and sensibilities to the project. In a collection of journal entries titled “Digging for Quarry,” in which Monk records her experience restaging the piece during the 1980s, she writes about the first day of rehearsals as a “reunion.” She notes, “The rehearsal has an easy-going discipline about it. Everyone participates in the investigation.”¹² *Education of the Girlchild* is also a good example of Monk’s predilection to work collaboratively and to bring the lives of her fellow artists into the work as it was created. The kitchen table of the early sections evokes not only the legacy of the kitchen as a domestic space, but also references the kitchen table around which the cast would sit in a member’s home as they discussed the piece before rehearsal.¹³ The collaborative nature of the House, especially in the 1960s and 1970s before Monk began to work with more highly trained vocalists, as well as Monk’s interest in and incorporation of cast members’ lives into the work reveal to what extent the process of art making for Monk is a community venture.

In almost all of Monk’s work there exists at some point an archetypal reference plucked from myth or history and reformatted for her purposes. In *Juice* the figure of a reaper stalked the ramps of the Guggenheim, and in *Quarry* the dictators who appear are quickly dominated by Ping Chong’s ultimate dictator. Injecting the figure of the reaper into a postmodern site-specific work about memory and scale tells us a lot about Monk’s willingness to reach deep into the history of collectively held images and reframe them in a context to which they do not initially belong. By using archetypes in this manner Monk forces us to rethink what they stand for and how they have been employed in many different forms of storytelling. Instead of merely using the archetypes as simple guides to

¹² Jowitt, 76.

¹³ Ibid. 14.

meaning in a specific work Monk uses the work to reform our ideas about the meaning of the archetypes themselves.

In *Quarry* the dictator figures serve as another kind of re-imagining of archetypes that Monk often employs – creating composites of figures from history and myth in order to portray the ultimate idea behind these figures without confining them to a particular moment in history. In this way the figure takes on a hyper-real “presentness” that no portrayal of a historical figure could convey. Rather than turning to the most obvious and horrific example of a twentieth century dictator – Hitler – Monk allows Chong to channel the pure nature of dictatorship in a series of wordless, echoing bellows. Unlike the parodies of “great rulers,” who precede him, Chong’s character is “slinky, reptilian, rubbery, changeable, evil in a casual way. Human life means nothing. Never showing fear or feelings although a kind of anguish shows through as if it were there without the character knowing it. Someone totally possessed and in control at the same time. Dictator as businessman.”¹⁴ As a composite of many types of dictators, Chong’s character allows the viewer to see not only a frightening figure from our own recent history but also the permutations that this ideal type could take on in the future.

Monk twists, bends, and reverses archetypes allowing for their reinterpretation on the stage and among the audience. Throughout *Education of the Girlchild* the cast assumes many archetypes of womanhood and appropriates certain male archetypes to explore in the realm of women’s lives. Monk has explained that during the making of *Girlchild* she thought quite a bit about heroic male bonded groups and about creating a bonded group of heroines.¹⁵ The table around which the women first gather refers not

¹⁴ Ibid., 75.

¹⁵ *Speaking of Dance*.

only to female domestic space but also to the Knights of the Round Table. This reference grows stronger as the piece continues and the women endure tests, journeys, and religious experiences.¹⁶ This imagining of a matriarchal culture formed by the many types of women onstage allows us to re-imagine a culture that resituates all women in roles of power.

The woman brought out on a litter in the middle of the first act calls up many possible sources: the hysterical woman, the witch, the female oracle. This combination of archetypes can be seen as both a reference to roles society has cast upon women of power or potency and a reworking of that history in that the women in this piece accord her power and pay heed to it, acknowledge it through ritual and tribute. The old women at the beginning of Monk's solo in Act II is another example of Monk paying tribute to less beloved archetypes and reimagining their roles. The figure portrayed at the start of this dance could represent the hag or the crone, the ridiculed or reviled old woman from myth and fairytales. But as Monk portrays her life, moving backward through a narrative we usually only think of as going forward in time, the archetype becomes fleshed out. As the details of her history are revealed to us, her memory and experience become valued.

The one archetype that Monk has employed continuously throughout her career is that of the seeker, the visionary. A role often inhabited by Monk herself, the visionary figure appears as Joan of Arc in *Vessel*, the child at the center of tumult in *Quarry*, and the traveler in *Atlas*. In her descriptions of these figures one can see that Monk identifies the role of the artist with that of the seeker. She describes Joan of Arc as "someone who received information and acted on it."¹⁷ In discussions of her role as an artist she makes it

¹⁶Jowitt, 49.

¹⁷Ibid., 86.

clear that she must act as the “antennae of society,”¹⁸ sensing the issues not just of our times but all human time and showing them to us in new ways. Monk views her work in terms of the possibilities for new perspectives it can bring to an audience. The centrality of visionary figures who see the world around them in a new or different way fits with this idea.

The centrality of ritual, community, myth, and archetypes in non-narrative postmodern work can seem like a paradox. But in assimilating these ancient themes and tropes into a modern multimedia work Monk is able to bring a sincerity into a time and place where it is equated with copping out, or being weak. In her notes on the restaging of *Quarry* Monk recalls addressing the chorus and saying, ““Can we in the 1980s do something that has a quality or purity, innocence? Not naiveté. Eyes wide open so to speak but a kind of cleansing...Can we drop the irony and cynicism for ten minutes?” Working with the chorus I realized that the irony and the cynicism which seem to be part of the vocabulary of the times are only that. That everyone has the possibility of letting them go.”¹⁹ The themes found in Monk’s work have existed since the beginnings of theater or any kind of storytelling. Monk constructs each of her theatrical pieces using techniques common to the work of postmodern artists – rejecting the authority of language and narrative, yet she stops short of discounting the importance of meaning and emotion. By using themes so deeply ingrained in human consciousness she is able to access the viewer’s emotions in a sincere, not manipulative, way.

Quarry: An Opera was created in 1976 a year after a film by the same title that was worked into the expanded staged work. The piece was first conceived while Monk

¹⁸Ibid., 56.

¹⁹Ibid., 76.

was traveling in Europe and thinking about the lives of Europeans during World War II as well as the idea of dictatorship – and its possible manifestation in all humans. *Quarry* is one of Monk's epic, larger cast works, consisting not only of many main characters but also a large chorus. Monk plays a young child, who for most of the piece is confined to her bed by an unidentified illness. Her bed is surrounded by a number of scenes most of which are easily identified with the World War II era. A gray-haired couple in a domestic scene, a radio singer at her desk, three women around a kitchen table, the child's mother and father, and the family's maid provide a sketch of the lives inhabiting the child's world. The piece is divided into three sections: "Lullaby," in which we become familiar with the characters inhabiting the world on stage; "March," in which different prototypes of dictators are displayed and then killed off by Ping Chong's character; and finally "Requiem," in which World War II, the Holocaust, and the frenzy of masses under the rule of a dictator are evoked most directly. Throughout this piece Monk uses text and words to allude to characters and their conversations without directly narrating any action. It is worth noting that the most important and poignant moments – such as the frenzy of action in "Requiem" and the "speech" given by Chong as the dictator are not textual.

With so many elements going into each work – dance, film, music, theater – a synthesis or as Monk sometimes prefers, "a visual rhyme," is necessary for the creation of intelligible meaning. It is here that Monk excels as a multi-media artist. Her ability to layer each element of her works in a way that makes them seamless despite the numerous events that occur during each of them is extraordinarily impressive. *Quarry* is a fine example of this. Despite five or six different vignettes occurring simultaneously at almost

every point, a huge chorus that weaves in and out of these scenes, and the use of vocal, movement, and theater elements, very little seems to get lost. Monk was first sent to a movement class when she was three because a visual impairment was causing her to see two images at once when looking out of both eyes, and this was beginning to affect her coordination. It seems oddly poetic that the impairment that first brought Monk to movement classes as a young child could be seen as driving the rest of her career. The metaphorical vision of multiple layers and images has now become her greatest asset rather than an impairment.

Quarry is not only one of Monk's finest works in terms of complex layering, but it is also one of the first examples of her work with truly complex vocal arrangements for a larger cast. This work is one of the first that Monk held a large audition for and recruited dancers and singers from outside of The House. She described wanting to work with individuals "who could really sing" adding that, "It (professionally trained singers) gives me resources that I need for my own growth."²⁰ Two years after originally staging *Quarry* Monk began working with Meredith Monk and the Vocal Ensemble, a group of artists with stronger vocal backgrounds. At this stage in her career she began a gradual transition into working more frequently as a composer than a choreographer.

Monk's pieces have been called many things from operas and live movies to cabarets, but the one thing that unites each work is that they can all be seen as total environments of sound and visual cues. These experiments with form resulting in works that can be thought of as total theatrical environments are not unique to Monk alone. Her work comes out of a trajectory that begins with Antonin Artuad and continues through the happenings of the 1960s. Monk builds upon these traditions not only by continuing to

²⁰ Ibid., 92-93.

experiment with form but also by allowing the reintroduction of content. Signe Hammer, an author who was also one of the founding members of the House, comments on this reintroduction of content in her essay “Against Alienation.” Hammer argues that as form became the preoccupying issue of theater and dance, emotions and feelings were pushed too far to the side. Monk’s work is holistic not only because her experiments with form aspire to the creation of total environment but also because she brings feeling and emotion into those experiments. Hammer describes Monk’s works as spirals of meaning rolling in and out of the realms of the public and private thus allowing feeling to be expressed without sentimentality. As Hammer puts it, “To describe elements separately is to show how Monk utilizes an enormous variety of them....The point is the way these elements relate organically as they spiral through the public and private, the mass movement and the solo, dream and reality.”²¹

Allowing the audience into her works is one of Monk’s greatest strengths as an artist, and she has done this in many ways. By using so many different techniques and media Monk draws in people who may not at first identify with every element of her work but could, for instance, see something particularly compelling in her use of film. By accessing themes from myth and shared histories, Monk is able to give voices to private feelings and emotions in a way that others can access and understand. This shared vocabulary of archetypal images and elements of ritual creates a shared language between Monk and the viewer enabling them, through discourse, create and share in the meaning of each piece. Yet this ability to allow the audience in and share in the creation of meaning becomes confusing when it is held up against Monk’s very strong idea of the artist as a visionary. Marianne Goldberg touches on this in her essay “Personal

²¹Ibid., 72.

Mythologies”: “Monk’s metaphor for the artist is the sybil or oracle – one who is available to receive images and able to create from them.”²² Throughout her work she has aligned herself as an artist with other visionaries such as Joan of Arc and Hildegard von Bingen, a nun and political radical who in Monk’s own words was a “visionary.”²³ Even the child that Monk plays in *Quarry* is special because her illness somehow channels and represents the illness in the world. The idea of the artist as the healer, the visionary, the barometer of society is not unique to Monk alone, but it is somewhat confusing when juxtaposed with Monk’s willingness to allow the audience their own agency within the meaning of her pieces. This becomes further complicated by Monk’s use of archetypes. While many of them are composite images open to interpretation, some like the “types” found in *Quarry* (the radio singer, the Gestapo referencing consort of Ping Chong’s dictator) seem like very direct references to a specific type of person from a certain history. Monk herself has acknowledged that the “language of images has a built-in booby trap of meaning.”²⁴ Compared to the openness of her non-textual vocalizations within *Quarry* and her other works, it seems that Monk is far more specific about when it is acceptable for the audience to draw their own conclusions and when it is not than one may originally think. We can both laud Monk for her willingness to construct pieces with multiple entry points that allow the viewer access and agency, and understand her as an artist struggling with the need for creative control. Monk has said, “In a certain way, I think the content of my work is human perception.”²⁵ She induces in her audience a new way of seeing our world and our history. The audience and the viewpoints they bring to

²² Ibid., 50.

²³ Halbreich, 83.

²⁴ Ibid., 83.

²⁵ Ibid., 80.

the theater are just as important a part of this discourse as the theatrical event that Monk has constructed.

Meredith Monk initially seems to be a study in contrasts: a choreographer/a composer, a dancer/a singer, and a postmodernist whose work resembles the epics of ancient myth. Yet Monk is less interesting because she embraces opposites than because of how she navigates and weaves them – much like the layers in her pieces – into a coherent whole. Her unique way of creating and the pieces that result from it are unlike the work of her Judson contemporaries during the early 1960s. Rather than embracing minimalism or pedestrian movement, Monk's work is extremely theatrical, sometimes opulent, in its layering of film, voice, and movement. The pieces that she creates are most postmodern because of this use of multiplicities – layers of expression not set against one another but coupled to create a rich theatricality and many points of entry for the viewer. As each of her pieces unfolds through time and space, Monk draws on the images of ancient rituals and archetypes while using postmodern techniques of presentation to create layers of meaning in conjunction with the viewer. The employment of these ancient ways of communicating and creating meaning within a postmodern context is surprisingly effective, yet occasionally problematic. While Monk manages to deconstruct many of the archetypes she uses, in the process creating new meanings, there is a danger to using symbols so entrenched in one particular meaning, and occasionally Monk's use of them seems to belie conflicts she herself may have about the role of the artist in the creation of meaning.

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