Crossing the (black) Atlantic: Spatial and Temporal Displacements in Meredith Monk’s *Ellis Island* and Jonzi D’s *Aeroplane Man*

**Introduction**

Wheras the first two chapters in Part II focused on in-between spaces derived from actual spaces between dancers (in Chapter 5), and from diasporic spaces (in Chapter 6), a discursive in-between space provides a symbolic reference for the exploration of displacement in the context of the politics of migration in this chapter. *Ellis Island* (1981) and *Aeroplane Man* (1997) are both concerned with experiences of displacement in in-between spaces on actual and metaphorical journeys which are like rites of passage. This chapter examines how these two works explore issues of identity, difference and power, spatially and temporally in the course of these journeys.

The British postcolonialist Paul Gilroy’s concept of the ‘black Atlantic’ illustrates the complexities of identity formation that arise out of various spatial and temporal displacements. The idea of the black Atlantic represents not only the enforced crossings of slaves from Africa but also return crossings of liberated African Americans in search of education and employment in Europe. It reveals the ‘complex of difference and similarity that gave rise to the consciousness of diaspora inter-culture’ (Gilroy, 1996: 20). *Ellis Island* and *Aeroplane Man* are both concerned with how the diasporic movements of peoples at different times ‘muddy the waters’ of identity formation. *Ellis Island*, a film created by American artist, Meredith Monk, shows immigrants, black and white, who have crossed the Atlantic being processed as they pass through the US immigration centre on Ellis Island in New York harbour in the early twentieth century (Plate 7). *Aeroplane Man*, a rap performed by British artist Jonzi D, tells of his semi-autobiographical travels back...
and forth across the Atlantic in search of his roots. These works, by revealing the roles which space and place play in identity formation and the construction of difference, expose some of the causes of displacement. In-between spaces formed by the construction of borders are key in both works. The immigrants on Ellis Island are displaced in a liminal, in-between space on the borders of the state they wish to enter. Jonzi D experiences the marginality of displacement in Britain and the in-betweenness of not belonging as he crosses borders on his travels.

The role of power in creating identities based on difference that result in feelings of displacement is exposed in both works. The French post-structuralist Michel Foucault’s theories of disciplinary technologies of power when explored particularly alongside Ellis Island reveal the ways in which power creates ‘others’ through constructions of difference. Both works show how these discourses of power are perpetuated and how their effects, which importantly include resistance to power, construct and contribute to experiences of displacement, but also to alternative subjectivities where difference is valued.

I see Ellis Island and Aeroplane Man as complementary. Where Ellis Island focuses on institutional mechanisms which construct subjects of difference, Aeroplane Man explores the results of this construction in an individual’s experience. They are also complementary in their spatial and temporal treatment of these issues revealing the interdependence of these two dimensions. Their exploration of in-between spaces draws on and points to histories of racial and colonial oppression while indicating their contemporary relevance. Ellis Island shows the immigration centre in operation at the turn of the century and as contemporary ruined buildings which tourists are shown around. In Aeroplane Man Jonzi D, drawing on history, travels to Africa and the Caribbean in search of his roots, but his performance reveals that these journeys are prompted by his contemporary experience of racism in Britain. Both works explore history and memory but ‘re-order them within patterns of meaning which belong to the present’ (Betterton, 1996: 175).

The in-between spaces of Ellis Island and Aeroplane Man are in the margins, characterized by the African American feminist bell hooks as being ‘both sites of repression and . . . resistance’ (1990: 342). Mechanisms of institutional repression are portrayed in Ellis Island. In Aeroplane Man the repression of contemporary racism in Britain is depicted. Resistance is evident in affective elements in the works which exist outside the symbolic boundaries of the contained subject constructed