

INTERNATIONAL RESEARCH JOURNAL OF MANAGEMENT SOCIOLOGY & HUMANITIES



ISSN 2277 – 9809 (online)

ISSN 2348 - 9359 (Print)

An Internationally Indexed Peer Reviewed & Refereed Journal

www.IRJMSH.com
www.isarasolutions.com

Published by iSaRa Solutions

The Body Remembers: Performing Revolutionary Memory in Ntozake Shange's *Toussaint*

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Abstract

How does a revolution survive after its leaders have died and its battles have ended? Conventional history locates the answer in archives, monuments, and written records. Ntozake Shange's *Toussaint* offers a different answer. Rather than presenting Toussaint Louverture as a distant historical figure, Shange transforms him into a living presence who accompanies, teaches, and finally reappears in the everyday life of a young Black girl in 1950s St. Louis. This paper argues that *Toussaint* relocates revolutionary memory from the archive to the body, where history is transmitted through imagination, voice, movement, and performance. Drawing on Diana Taylor's distinction between the archive and the repertoire, together with Jan Assmann's concept of cultural memory, this paper offers a close reading of the poem to show how Shange stages the formation of Black historical consciousness. The poem suggests that revolutionary history is not inherited as fixed knowledge but recreated through embodied acts of remembering. By transforming reading into performance and history into lived experience, Shange reimagines the body as a living archive through which the past continues to speak in the present.

Keywords: Ntozake Shange, choreopoem, performance, cultural memory, Haitian Revolution, Black theatre, embodiment

Introduction

History is usually understood as something preserved. It is stored in archives, recorded in books, displayed in museums, and remembered through monuments. These institutions promise permanence, suggesting that the past survives because it has been documented. Yet for communities whose histories have been shaped by slavery, colonialism, displacement, and racial violence, memory has never depended on written records alone. It has also survived through stories, songs, rituals, oral traditions, and performance. The question, therefore, is not only how history is remembered, but where it continues to live.

Ntozake Shange's *Toussaint* begins with a simple act of reading. A young Black girl enters the adult section of a public library in St. Louis and discovers a biography of Toussaint Louverture, the leader of the Haitian Revolution. What begins as an ordinary encounter with a history book soon develops into something much larger. Toussaint steps out of the archive and enters the child's

imagination as a companion, teacher, and guide. By the end of the poem, he is no longer confined to eighteenth-century Haiti. His revolutionary spirit reappears in the figure of Toussaint Jones, an ordinary Black boy living in St. Louis. Shange is not interested in resurrecting a historical figure. Instead, she shows how revolutionary memory survives by becoming part of everyday Black life. This movement from history to lived experience is one of the poem's most significant achievements. *Toussaint* is often read as a celebration of Black history or the Haitian Revolution. While these readings are valuable, they do not fully explain what makes the poem unique. Shange does more than recover a forgotten historical figure. She explores how history becomes meaningful in the present. The poem is concerned not simply with remembering the past but with showing how the past enters the imagination, shapes identity, and continues to influence the living. History becomes an experience rather than a record.

This idea can be understood through Diana Taylor's distinction between the archive and the repertoire. Taylor argues that while archives preserve documents and material objects, the repertoire preserves knowledge through embodied practices such as speech, gesture, movement, storytelling, and performance. Memory survives because it is performed repeatedly rather than stored permanently. Shange's choreopoem follows this logic. It begins with a library book, but it refuses to remain inside the archive. As the poem unfolds, history moves into the child's body, imagination, language, and everyday actions.

At the same time, *Toussaint* participates in a broader Black intellectual tradition that challenges the historical marginalisation of the Haitian Revolution. Although Haiti produced the first independent Black republic and fundamentally altered the history of slavery, it has often remained at the margins of dominant historical narratives. Shange restores this history, but she does so through performance rather than historical reconstruction. The poem suggests that recovering the past is not enough. History must also be lived, spoken, imagined, and performed if it is to remain meaningful for future generations.

This paper argues that *Toussaint* traces the formation of Black historical consciousness through performance. Rather than presenting Toussaint Louverture as a completed historical figure, Shange transforms him into a living presence who moves from the archive to the imagination and finally into everyday Black life. Through its vernacular language, episodic structure, dialogue, rhythm, and choreopoetic form, the poem demonstrates that revolutionary memory is not fixed or complete. It is continually renewed through embodied acts of remembering.

The discussion begins by examining existing scholarship on Shange, performance, and cultural memory. It then offers a close reading of the poem through three connected stages: the discovery of history in the archive, its transformation into imaginative performance, and its reappearance in everyday Black life. Finally, the paper argues that Shange's choreopoem redefines performance as a living archive through which communities preserve histories that official narratives have ignored or erased. In doing so, *Toussaint* reminds us that revolutions survive not only in history books but also in the bodies, voices, and memories of those who continue to perform them.

Literature Review: Remembering Beyond the Archive

Scholarship on Ntozake Shange has largely focused on her contribution to Black feminist literature, experimental theatre, and the development of the choreopoem as a performance form. Most critical studies examine *for colored girls who have considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf*, discussing its challenge to patriarchal structures, its use of Black vernacular, and its integration of poetry, music, dance, and theatre. As a result, *Toussaint*, one of Shange's earliest choreopoems, has received comparatively little sustained critical attention. When it is discussed, scholars usually read it as a celebration of the Haitian Revolution or as an attempt to recover Black histories neglected by mainstream historical narratives.

These readings are important because they recognise Shange's commitment to restoring Black historical memory. However, they often focus on **what** the poem remembers rather than **how** it remembers. In many discussions, Toussaint Louverture remains the central subject, while the child's encounter with history and the poem's performative structure receive less attention. This paper argues that the poem's originality lies not simply in recovering a historical figure but in showing how revolutionary memory becomes part of a child's lived experience.

The poem does not present history as a sequence of events. Instead, it stages an encounter between a young Black girl and a revolutionary past that gradually reshapes her imagination. Toussaint Louverture is introduced through a library book, but he does not remain there. He becomes a companion, a teacher, and finally a living presence in the child's world. By tracing this transformation, Shange shifts the focus from historical representation to historical experience. The poem is less interested in explaining the Haitian Revolution than in exploring how historical consciousness is formed.

Jan Assmann's work on cultural memory provides a useful framework for understanding this process. Assmann argues that societies preserve the past not only through written records but also through stories, rituals, symbols, and repeated cultural practices. Memory survives because it is continually transmitted from one generation to another. This perspective helps explain why Toussaint Louverture functions in the poem not as a distant historical figure but as a recurring cultural presence who acquires new meaning within the life of the child.

Performance studies offers another important way of reading the poem. Diana Taylor distinguishes between the archive and the repertoire. The archive preserves books, documents, and other material records, whereas the repertoire preserves knowledge through embodied practices such as speech, gesture, movement, ritual, and performance. Unlike archival documents, the repertoire exists only when it is performed. This distinction is central to *Toussaint*. The poem begins in a library, yet the knowledge contained in the book gradually moves into the child's imagination, language, and actions. Reading becomes an embodied experience.

Joseph Roach extends this discussion through his idea of surrogation, suggesting that communities keep the past alive by continually performing inherited memories rather than reproducing them exactly. Each generation creates new forms through which older histories survive. This idea is especially relevant to the final movement of *Toussaint*, where the historical Toussaint Louverture

finds an unexpected continuation in Toussaint Jones. The revolutionary is not literally reborn. Instead, his spirit survives in another body, another place, and another historical moment.

The historical importance of Haiti also shapes the poem's political context. C. L. R. James demonstrates that the Haitian Revolution transformed global ideas about freedom, race, and colonial power. Michel-Rolph Trouillot later argues that this revolution was systematically marginalised in dominant Western histories because it challenged accepted ideas about political modernity and racial hierarchy. Shange responds to this silence by bringing Haiti into the imaginative world of a Black child. Yet she is not writing historical reconstruction. She is creating a theatrical space where revolutionary memory can be experienced rather than simply studied.

This paper builds on these scholarly conversations while offering a different emphasis. Instead of treating *Toussaint* primarily as a poem about historical recovery, it argues that Shange is concerned with the performance of memory itself. The poem demonstrates how a child develops Black historical consciousness through reading, imagination, speech, and embodied performance. Revolutionary history does not remain inside books. It moves into everyday life, where it continues to shape identity and community. Through this process, Shange transforms the choreopoem into a living archive where memory survives because it is continually performed rather than merely preserved.

From Archive to Embodiment

One question remains: why does Shange choose the **choreopoem** to tell this story instead of a conventional lyric poem or historical drama? The answer lies in the relationship between form and memory. A conventional historical narrative usually reconstructs the past through chronology, facts, and documented events. The choreopoem works differently. It privileges rhythm, movement, voice, and association over linear narration. Memory rarely unfolds as a neat sequence of dates and events. Instead, it returns through images, sounds, gestures, emotions, and fragments of experience. The choreopoem reflects this process, allowing memory to be felt as much as understood.

This formal choice is also political. The history of slavery disrupted the transmission of cultural memory by separating families, suppressing languages, and destroying social traditions. Under such conditions, written records alone could not preserve collective experience. Memory survived through oral storytelling, songs, dance, ritual, and performance. These embodied practices carried histories that official archives either ignored or deliberately erased.

Shange's choreopoem emerges from this tradition. Its fragmented structure, shifting voices, musical rhythms, and Black vernacular reject the detached authority of conventional historiography. Instead of presenting history as something complete and finished, the poem invites readers and performers to experience it as something living. Every performance becomes another act of remembering. In this way, the poem refuses to treat the Haitian Revolution as a closed historical event. It keeps the revolution alive by allowing it to be reimagined through the body.

This understanding shapes the close reading that follows. Rather than asking what the poem says about Toussaint Louverture, this paper asks how Shange transforms historical knowledge into lived experience. The answer begins not on the battlefields of Haiti but in an ordinary public

library, where a young Black girl discovers a history that changes the way she understands herself and the world around her.

The Library: Entering the Archive

The opening lines of *Toussaint* are striking in their simplicity:

*de library waz right down from de trolly tracks
cross from de laundry mat
thru de big shinin floors & granite pillars*

Shange does not begin with Haiti, revolution, or Toussaint Louverture. She begins with a neighbourhood library. The setting is ordinary and familiar. Streetcar tracks, a laundromat, polished floors, and granite pillars locate the poem firmly within the everyday landscape of St. Louis. This ordinary beginning is important because it shows that history is encountered not in extraordinary places but in the spaces of everyday life. The revolution enters the poem through the experience of a child, not through the voice of a historian.

The library is more than a physical setting. It represents the archive, the institutional space where knowledge is collected, organised, and authorised. Yet the archive the child first encounters offers little that reflects her own experience. The children's shelves are filled with familiar white protagonists: Pippi Longstocking, Christopher Robin, Winnie the Pooh, pioneer girls, adventurous boys, and fairy-tale characters. Their presence is not the problem in itself. The problem is that Black children searching for themselves within these stories find very little. The archive appears open to everyone, yet it silently privileges some histories while excluding others.

For this reason, the child's decision to enter the Adult Reading Room becomes more than an act of curiosity. She knows she is crossing a boundary. She admits that she "waznt sposedta," yet she enters anyway. This small act of disobedience becomes the poem's first political gesture. Instead of accepting the version of history made available to her, she searches for another one. Shange presents this moment quietly, without dramatic language, but its significance is profound. The child's journey toward revolutionary consciousness begins with the simple decision to look beyond the limits imposed upon her.

Her search reaches its turning point when she discovers a single name:

TOUSSAINT

Shange isolates the name on the page, allowing it to stand alone. The surrounding white space interrupts the rhythm of the poem and forces the reader to pause. Before the child knows who Toussaint is, his name already carries dramatic weight. It enters the poem not merely as historical information but as a theatrical presence. The typography itself performs the moment of discovery. The child's response reveals why this moment matters:

my first blk man

This brief line is one of the most important in the poem. The child does not say that Toussaint is the first Black historical figure she has read about. She says he is "**my first blk man.**" The phrase is deeply personal. History immediately becomes relationship. The archive has not simply provided new information; it has introduced someone with whom the child can identify. For the

first time, history offers her a figure who reflects courage, resistance, and Black agency. The encounter is emotional before it is intellectual.

This moment marks the beginning of the poem's central transformation. The archive has done its work by introducing Toussaint Louverture, but it cannot contain what follows. Once the child forms a relationship with this revolutionary figure, history begins to move beyond the pages of the book. Reading becomes imagination, imagination becomes performance, and performance eventually becomes a new way of understanding both the past and the present.

My First Black Man: Reading as Performance

The discovery of Toussaint Louverture does not remain an intellectual experience for the child. It immediately becomes emotional, imaginative, and deeply personal. After finding his biography, she says:

TOUSSAINT waz the beginnin uv reality for me

This line marks a decisive turning point in the poem. Reality does not begin with school, family, or official history. It begins with the discovery of a Black revolutionary. Until this moment, the child has encountered a world largely shaped by stories that do not reflect her own identity. Toussaint offers an alternative way of seeing history and, more importantly, of seeing herself. Reading becomes an act of self-recognition.

Shange reinforces this transformation through the child's excitement and urgency. She enters the library contest simply so she can continue reading about Toussaint. The contest itself is not important. What matters is that institutional rules unexpectedly provide access to a history that had previously remained hidden from her. The library, which first appeared as a place governed by restrictions, now becomes the doorway to another historical world.

One of the poem's most striking moments occurs when the child says:

he waz dead & livin to me

The apparent contradiction is central to Shange's understanding of memory. Historically, Toussaint Louverture died in a French prison in 1803. Within the child's imagination, however, death does not end his presence. He continues to exist because memory is not limited by historical chronology. Once history is embodied through imagination, it becomes capable of crossing the boundary between past and present.

This transformation illustrates what Diana Taylor describes as the movement from the archive to the repertoire. The biography provides historical information, but the child's imagination gives that information life. Toussaint is no longer confined to printed pages. He begins to speak, move, and accompany the child in her everyday world. Knowledge is no longer simply stored; it is performed. The poem develops this idea further through the child's playful language:

i wanted to be a zombie too

At first glance, the image seems humorous and unexpected. Yet it carries deeper significance. Zombies traditionally exist between life and death, refusing a simple distinction between the two. By comparing herself to a zombie, the child expresses her desire to inhabit the same imaginative space as Toussaint. She wants to cross the boundaries that separate history from the present. The

image is therefore less about horror than about continuity. Revolutionary memory refuses to remain buried.

The intimacy of this relationship becomes even clearer when she calls Toussaint her *secret lover*.

The phrase should not be understood literally. Rather, it reflects the intensity of the child's emotional attachment to the historical figure she has discovered. Like many childhood heroes, Toussaint occupies a private space that belongs entirely to her imagination. She hides books beneath her bed, reads with a flashlight after everyone has gone to sleep, and continues conversations with him long after the library has closed. History has become companionship.

This intimacy is one of Shange's most significant achievements. Rather than presenting Toussaint Louverture as a distant national hero, she allows him to enter the ordinary emotional life of a child. Revolutionary history becomes affection, curiosity, admiration, and play. The poem suggests that historical consciousness is not created through memorising dates or political events but through forming a personal relationship with the past.

At the same time, Shange's use of Black vernacular plays a crucial role in this transformation. Expressions such as "waz," "blk," and "uv" are not simply stylistic choices. They establish a voice that refuses to conform to standard literary English while asserting the legitimacy of Black linguistic expression. The language itself performs resistance. Just as the poem rejects dominant historical narratives, it also rejects linguistic norms that have traditionally defined literary authority. Form and politics therefore work together. The language of the poem becomes another way of preserving cultural memory outside institutional structures.

By the end of this section, reading has been completely transformed. The child no longer reads about Toussaint; she lives with him. The historical figure has moved beyond the archive and entered her imagination, emotions, and everyday life. This prepares the poem's next movement, where imagination itself becomes performance, and the private space of the bedroom is transformed into a stage on which revolutionary memory can be rehearsed and embodied.

The Bedroom: Rehearsing Revolution

Once the child leaves the library, the poem undergoes a significant transformation. The archive has introduced Toussaint Louverture, but it can no longer contain him. History now enters the private space of the child's bedroom, where reading becomes imagination and imagination becomes performance. The bedroom is no longer simply a place of rest. It becomes a rehearsal space in which revolutionary memory is repeatedly enacted.

Shange captures this transition through an ordinary childhood image:

*i'd hide my library books under my bed
read'em by flashlight*

These lines describe more than a child's excitement about reading. Hiding the books suggests that this relationship with history belongs to a private world beyond adult supervision. The flashlight illuminates the pages much like a spotlight illuminates a performer on stage. Within the darkness of the bedroom, the child creates her own theatrical space where history can come alive. Reading is no longer passive; it becomes an embodied act of performance.

The secrecy of these nightly readings also reveals the intimacy of the child's relationship with Toussaint. She is not studying him as a historical figure or preparing for an examination. She is spending time with him. Every return to the biography becomes another performance through which the revolutionary is brought back into the present. Memory survives because it is continually repeated rather than simply stored.

As the poem progresses, the distinction between imagination and reality begins to dissolve. Toussaint no longer remains inside the pages of the book. He walks beside the child, speaks with her, and joins her games. The poem does not explain when this transformation occurs because, from the perspective of childhood imagination, such distinctions are unnecessary. What matters is not whether Toussaint is literally present but that he has become emotionally and imaginatively real.

One of the most revealing examples is the hopscotch sequence. At first, hopscotch appears to be an ordinary childhood game. Yet after discovering Toussaint, the child imagines it differently. Everyday play becomes connected to ideas of movement, escape, courage, and possibility. Shange does not suggest that the child is recreating the Haitian Revolution. Instead, she shows how revolutionary memory reshapes the way the child experiences even the simplest activities. Play becomes a rehearsal for freedom.

The same process appears in the scenes involving Raggedy Ann and other childhood toys. Objects usually associated with innocence acquire new meanings because they now exist alongside the child's revolutionary imagination. Shange refuses to separate history from childhood. Instead, she allows them to coexist within the same imaginative world. Revolution enters ordinary domestic life not through political speeches but through games, conversations, and fantasies.

The poem later refers to school integration in 1955, quietly linking the Haitian Revolution to the emerging Civil Rights Movement. This connection is never stated directly, yet it is deeply significant. The child does not experience these struggles as isolated historical events. Through Toussaint, different moments of Black resistance begin to speak to one another across time. Haiti becomes part of St. Louis, and the eighteenth century becomes part of the twentieth. Revolutionary memory refuses the boundaries of historical chronology.

The imagined journey to Haiti further expands this movement. Although the child never physically travels there, the poem allows her imagination to cross oceans and centuries. Haiti becomes less a geographical destination than a space of historical belonging. Through imagination, the child claims a history from which she had previously been excluded. This journey demonstrates that cultural memory is not limited by physical distance. It is created through acts of identification and participation.

Seen in this way, the bedroom functions as the poem's first theatre. There is no audience, no stage, and no formal performance. Yet all the essential elements of theatre are present: a performer, an imagined partner, dramatic action, movement, dialogue, and transformation. The child repeatedly performs her relationship with Toussaint until history becomes part of her own identity. The body itself becomes the place where revolutionary memory is rehearsed.

This movement prepares the poem's final transformation. If the bedroom is the rehearsal space, the outside world becomes the performance space. What begins as private imagination will soon enter everyday life, where Toussaint returns in an unexpected form through the figure of Toussaint Jones. The revolution will no longer exist only in memory. It will walk into the present.

Toussaint Jones: When History Walks into the Present

The final movement of *Toussaint* brings the child's imaginative journey to an unexpected conclusion. Throughout the poem, Toussaint Louverture has existed as a historical figure, an imagined companion, and a guide within the child's private world. In the closing section, however, Shange introduces another figure: **Toussaint Jones**. At first, the appearance of this ordinary Black boy seems surprising. Yet this moment is the logical culmination of the poem's central argument. History does not remain in books or even within imagination. It returns in the lives of ordinary people.

The child's reaction reveals the significance of this encounter. She immediately associates the boy with the revolutionary she has come to know through reading and imagination. Of course, Toussaint Jones is not literally Toussaint Louverture. He is neither a historical reincarnation nor a symbolic replacement. Instead, he represents the continuation of revolutionary memory within everyday Black life. The heroic figure of the Haitian Revolution is no longer distant or untouchable. His legacy has become part of an ordinary community.

This transformation reflects Joseph Roach's concept of **surrogation**. Roach argues that communities preserve cultural memory by continually creating new figures who carry forward the values, struggles, and aspirations of those who came before them. Memory is never reproduced exactly. It survives through adaptation. In *Toussaint*, the revolutionary does not return in the same historical body. He returns through another person whose very name evokes a history of resistance while belonging to a completely different social and historical context.

The choice of the surname **Jones** is particularly meaningful. "Louverture" immediately recalls one of the most celebrated leaders of the Haitian Revolution. "Jones," by contrast, is one of the most common surnames in the United States. By placing these names side by side, Shange performs an important political gesture. She brings revolutionary history out of the realm of exceptional individuals and into the everyday experiences of ordinary Black Americans. Revolution is no longer represented as something extraordinary that happened elsewhere. It becomes part of daily life.

This shift also completes the movement from archive to embodiment that has structured the poem from the beginning. The child first encounters Toussaint as a name printed in a library book. She then carries him into her imagination, where he becomes a companion, teacher, and source of inspiration. Finally, she encounters that same revolutionary presence reflected in another living person. History has moved through three stages: **text, imagination, and embodiment**. At each stage, it becomes increasingly alive.

The poem's closing images reinforce this transformation. Water and rivers appear repeatedly throughout *Toussaint*, suggesting movement rather than permanence. Rivers never remain fixed; they continue to flow while carrying traces of everything that has passed through them.

Revolutionary memory functions in much the same way. It does not survive because it is preserved unchanged. It survives because it continues to move across generations, communities, and historical moments, taking new forms without losing its essential force.

Seen in this light, Toussaint Jones is not the poem's final surprise but its inevitable destination. The child has spent the entire poem learning that history is something one lives with rather than merely studies. The appearance of Toussaint Jones confirms that lesson. Revolutionary memory has left the archive, passed through imagination, and entered the living world.

Shange's achievement lies precisely in this refusal to monumentalise history. Instead of placing Toussaint Louverture on a pedestal, she brings him back into everyday life, where he can continue to inspire new generations. The poem suggests that historical figures remain significant not because they are endlessly commemorated but because their ideas continue to shape how people imagine freedom, dignity, and resistance.

By ending with an ordinary child rather than a heroic monument, Shange fundamentally redefines the meaning of historical memory. The future of the revolution does not depend upon statues, textbooks, or official ceremonies. It depends upon people who carry its values into their own lives. In this sense, Toussaint Jones is more than a character. He is evidence that the revolution has not ended. It has simply changed its form.

Performance as a Living Archive

The journey traced throughout *Toussaint* demonstrates that performance is not simply one way of representing history; it is one of the ways history survives. The poem begins with an archival encounter in the library, but it refuses to remain within the limits of written documentation. Through imagination, language, movement, and everyday action, historical knowledge gradually becomes embodied experience. Shange's choreopoem therefore challenges the assumption that archives alone preserve the past. It argues instead that memory continues to live through performance.

Diana Taylor's distinction between the **archive** and the **repertoire** helps clarify this process. The archive safeguards documents, books, and material records, while the repertoire preserves cultural knowledge through embodied practices such as storytelling, gesture, movement, speech, and ritual. These practices are not secondary to history; they are themselves historical acts. Every performance carries inherited memories into the present while allowing them to acquire new meanings.

Toussaint enacts this movement repeatedly. Reading becomes speaking, speaking becomes imagining, imagining becomes play, and play finally becomes lived identity. The poem never abandons history, but neither does it allow history to remain static. Each performance renews the revolutionary past without reducing it to a fixed narrative. Memory is therefore not reproduced mechanically; it is recreated through embodied participation.

This understanding also explains why Shange chose the choreopoem as her artistic form. A conventional historical narrative might describe the Haitian Revolution, but the choreopoem allows audiences to experience how revolutionary memory feels as it enters the body, voice, and imagination. Rhythm, repetition, movement, and Black vernacular are not decorative elements.

They are the very means through which memory is transmitted. Form itself becomes an act of historical preservation.

Ultimately, *Toussaint* redefines the relationship between theatre and history. Theatre is not simply a space where historical events are represented after they have occurred. It is a living archive in which forgotten histories continue to circulate, evolve, and acquire new significance. Every reading or performance of the poem becomes another act of remembering, ensuring that the revolutionary spirit of Toussaint Louverture remains active in the present rather than confined to the past.

Conclusion

Ntozake Shange's *Toussaint* is often read as a poem that celebrates the Haitian Revolution or restores an important Black historical figure to cultural memory. While these readings remain valuable, this paper has argued that the poem is ultimately concerned with something more fundamental: **how revolutionary memory is created, embodied, and sustained across generations**. Shange does not simply recover the past; she demonstrates how the past becomes part of everyday life.

The poem traces a remarkable journey. It begins with a child discovering a biography in a public library, moves through imagination and private performance in the bedroom, and concludes with the appearance of Toussaint Jones, where history re-enters the living world. This progression reveals that memory is not a fixed historical record preserved only in books or monuments. Instead, it is continually renewed through reading, storytelling, imagination, language, movement, and performance.

Viewed through Diana Taylor's distinction between the archive and the repertoire, *Toussaint* shows that embodied practices are not merely ways of representing history; they are among the primary ways history survives. The archive introduces the child to Toussaint Louverture, but the repertoire allows her to carry that encounter into her own body, language, and imagination. Through this process, revolutionary history ceases to be distant knowledge and becomes lived experience.

Jan Assmann's concept of cultural memory further illuminates this transformation. Memory is sustained not because it remains unchanged but because each generation reinterprets and reanimates it within new historical contexts. Shange illustrates this process through the figure of Toussaint Jones, who demonstrates that revolutionary ideals do not belong exclusively to the past. They continue to circulate within ordinary communities, acquiring new meanings while preserving their historical significance.

The choreopoem itself becomes central to this process. Its combination of poetry, movement, rhythm, dialogue, and Black vernacular creates a form that resists the separation of literature, theatre, and history. Rather than describing memory from a distance, the choreopoem invites audiences to participate in its transmission. Reading and performance become acts of remembrance, ensuring that the revolutionary spirit of Toussaint Louverture remains active rather than commemorative.

Ultimately, Shange invites us to rethink the relationship between history and performance. History is not confined to archives, museums, or textbooks. It also survives in voices, bodies, gestures, and everyday acts of imagination. By transforming a historical revolutionary into a living performative presence, *Toussaint* demonstrates that cultural memory is not something we inherit passively. It is something we continually recreate through performance.

In this sense, the body itself becomes an archive not because it stores history unchanged, but because it continually performs, reshapes, and carries the past into the future.

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