

FORMS OF REARRANGEMENT:
HABIT, INJURY, AND MOURNING
IN AFRICAN AMERICAN AND CARIBBEAN LITERATURE

BY

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VITA

Anna Bay Gillian Thomas grew up across Ontario, Canada, the child of immigrants from Trinidad and from Wales. She pursued her Bachelor of Arts (Honours) at Queen's University at Kingston, Ontario, and spent one year of her undergraduate degree at the University of St. Andrews as a Robert T. Jones Scholar. She earned her Master of Studies (M.St) in English and American Studies at Corpus Christi College at the University of Oxford, after which she spent a year in Paris and another year in Oxford, this time as a Bodleian Libraries Graduate Trainee at Jesus College Library. In 2013 she began her doctorate at Brown University. There, she held a Social Sciences and Humanities Council of Canada Doctoral Fellowship, was a Graduate Fellow in the research seminar at the Pembroke Center for Teaching and Research on Women Fellowship and held a Cogut Institute of the Humanities Graduate Fellowship. She taught the undergraduate seminar "Writing the Black Diaspora: Speaking Truth to Power" in Spring 2016, as well as assisting courses on gender and sexuality studies, "India in English," and Shakespeare. Her article "Circuits through Injury: economy and form in Charles Chesnutt and V.S. Naipaul" is forthcoming from *Cultural Critique*. Since September 2019, she has been Assistant Professor of African American Literature at the University of Toronto.

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“as if a fresh life infused in this dead body and came to know of all the facts”

I: Beginning, Archive

In the fall of 2016, I visited archives in Trinidad, and I had, unsurprisingly, the works of Saidiya Hartman in mind as I imagined producing literary theory from an archival document, and the work of Lisa Lowe as I imagined contributing simultaneously to the material and theoretical understandings of slavery and indenture. I imagined weaving a theory about interaction and unevenness that accounted for a terrain that was shared and apart, that challenged our vocabularies of difference and nuanced our language of similarity. What I found was a collection that layered metaphors of the incomplete onto material histories of archival destruction: the then majority of colonial archival holdings in Trinidad were destroyed in a fire in Red House—the island’s primary governmental building—in 1903. It was an event known to me anecdotally as the reason why many families did not pursue genealogical research—the other, likewise anecdotal, being that some histories were better left unknown. Yet for those eager, for academic or personal reasons, to engage the archive, there have been further difficulties: between fire and insects, collections were destroyed in 1932, 1946, 1948, and 1949; this national archive literalized the partial and the happenstance.

That the first major loss occurred in 1903 is by no means insignificant; after the abolition of slavery, but before the end of indentureship, this destruction has meant that the unevenness I set out to investigate through my work was more materially evident than I expected. Much of the material relating to slavery was destroyed. Not only were the bureaucratic records going to be necessarily uneven, but, additionally, indentureship records were rigorously produced in order to construct and maintain distance between the

two systems of enforced labour. To illustrate this doubling: the obvious distinction between slavery and indenture, that ownership and contract were distinct legal mechanisms of enforcing labour, is a precondition of unevenness. Further, that land grants were granted to those who traded passage back to India in order to remain in Trinidad contrasts directly with the mechanisms of exclusion from property ownership imposed on those formerly enslaved. The happenstance of archival destruction post-slavery but in the midst of indenture means that this history—already marked by ontological and legal distinctions—becomes a third form of unevenness. Never interested in a quantitative archival project, I was nonetheless astounded as the very grounds of comparison I had hoped to at least observe were shown to have been burned or chewed away. When I asked about collections pertaining to Indigenous people of the Caribbean, I was met with a laugh—“Try Spain!”—and again, the necessarily entwined and uneven histories of comparative empire rendered these histories differently accessible, scattered across language, continent and imperial power. The archive thus made stark the material conditions for the production of the uneven. Population, people, document, and record were not only subject to the concerted efforts to produce particular histories that contributed to particular narrative hierarchies, but these very narrative hierarchies were shaped, propped, and eroded by the happenstance of error and insects.

Had I found, in the end, nothing worth writing about, this dissertation would have a very different opening—and, as I will go on to suggest, would be a very different project indeed. Yet in the archive there were glimpses, like those in Anne Stoler’s work on the affects of imperial collections,¹ that allowed me to view an imperial system that

¹ *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010.

attested to an almost alchemical belief in bureaucracy's capacity to produce, manage, and—again and again, '*care*' for subjugated and exploited populations. These were not instances of great historical moment. I was not uncovering previously unheard-of crimes against humanity—just observing small instances of those crimes and the ordinary magic of their dual recording and denial.

An example: the medical log of a ship, on a journey embarking *from* Trinidad and returning *to* India. This return is itself of course a glaring record of the divergence between the oceanic labour systems of Indian and Atlantic worlds. The ship's surgeon superintendent, Hugh Vallance, logs that the health of passengers was "very poor" and states that "sickness prevail[ed]" "throughout the voyage... Malaria, chest, bowel, & the epidemic of influenza," and yet still feels able to conclude that, on arrival, the "general health of Emigrants" was "very greatly improved by the voyage."² This astonishing conclusion, that a voyage reportedly marked by prevailing illness could yet simultaneously claim to have improved the general health of the very people whose sickness was being recorded, imposes and evidences a powerful overarching narrative of healing that overrides its own purportedly factual account.

And yet there is nothing, according to its own logics, particularly eventful about this moment in the record—it was one of twenty-one journeys that Vallance made that patterned the oceans and connected Indian and Atlantic worlds through stops in the Caribbean, Fiji, and India. Crucially—as opposed to the slave ships—these patterns were not uni-directional. As this return journey indicates, indentured servants had the potential to return home after their period of enforced labour (or trade this passage home for land

² Vallance, Hugh. Surgeon Superintendent's Report of Arrival. National Archives of Trinidad and Tobago, Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago. Manuscript.

grants, the implications of which, in the context of African- and South Asian-descended relations I discuss in chapter two). The continuities between slavery and indenture fundamentally diverge; return and an ostensible concern for welfare (evidenced, for example, by contemporaneous comparisons of the amount of space allotted to each labourer as an improved, and regulated, square footage) are the markers of a system of enforced labour stridently differentiating itself from slavery to avoid abolitionist ire; thus, this intersection of bureaucracy and care reveal a differential injurious structure. Injury becomes a mark of difference. What is more, injury administered differently produces difference.

And so I found myself in a place where archival documents showed imaginative worlds—where injuries could not only transfigure but be transfigured. The odd, uneven space felt open not to historical but rather to literary readings. It was with these ideas in mind that I came across two letters—not an exchange, not a correspondence, but two texts that, together, sparked a thought about categories.

It struck me that categories—identifiably shared terminological or even philosophical designations—could occur in the same place, the same circuit, even the same paths of movement, and yet have radically resignified meanings. This became the foundation for my formal interest in reading documents, contexts, and literary texts for these sites of co-occupied terrains and to track their resignified meanings. In other words, it was a way of holding space with difference and similarity. This became most true when I was confronted by these two letters—letters I did not know how to think about then and have not stopped thinking about since.

II: “I was very glad to receive your letter”

On June 30th, 1908, the Government Emigration Agent for Trinidad writes a letter, paragraphs numbered, to the Honourable Protector of Immigrants *in* Trinidad:

Sir,

I have the honour to acknowledge your letter of 10th April respecting the notification to relatives in India of the deaths of indentured Emigrants and will conform with your proposal if you will forward me Quarterly statements.³

The letter begins by spanning continents with its bureaucratic reach, from port to port. The acknowledgement of the lists of the dead points to a morbid informational flow. The traffic of letters between the Protector of Emigrants and the Protector of Immigrants folds together the death of ‘relatives’ and of ‘labourers,’ of humans and of stock to be reported in a quarterly statement. The dual concern of loss and supply continues, but begins to also evidence an assiduous management of emotion:

2. I would however take this opportunity of remarking that such notification may come as a shock to relatives if the deceased has never corresponded with his home since embarkation and may have a deterrent effect on emigration generally.⁴

Here, the Government Agent for Trinidad introduces the affective response to the list of the deceased by posing the problematic of shock in order to maintain a steady flow of emigrants enlisting. The tension highlights the existence of a network of formal

³ Letter from Government Emigration Agent for Trinidad. Indian Indentureship Records. Letters 1907-1913. National Archives of Trinidad and Tobago, Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago.

⁴ Ibid.

recruitment and informal exchange of information: formal recruitment, which already preyed on scarcity and disaster, was to a certain extent dependent on the absence of bad reports. The shock of relatives, on top of the lack of communication, therefore has a greater chance of deterring recruitment through word-of-mouth networks. The Agent has a proposal to address this:

3. I would therefore ask you to consider whether some system may not be introduced into your colony whereby the Emigrants could be afforded an opportunity of corresponding with their friends at home twice a year through the assistance of a moonshee and for which charge could be made.⁵

This solution, while mimicking the mechanisms of informal exchange of information (letter writing in general but also the hiring of a scribe to make written communication available to those who are illiterate in particular), introduces a more formal economy—a strict timetable, and the passively-voiced “charge” that “could be made” suggests that informational and monetary value could travel through the figure of the scribe.

4. It might perhaps also be advantageous if the moonshees employed were previously advised when writing such letters for the Emigrants to insert a few words with the emigrants’ consent stating that they are pleased and satisfied with their surroundings.⁶

The letter-writing scheme becomes an imagined method of reporting (mandated) pleasure and satisfaction. While the letter does stipulate that the scribe should only do so with the consent of the emigrant, the proposed structure of advising raises the very question of

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

consent it seeks to quell, as well as adjacent concerns of tone, word choice, and mediation that become more pressing in the proposed model.

5. Favourable reports of the Colonies reaching India from the Emigrants themselves would very largely help our recruiters upcountry in those years of plenty when labour for abroad is difficult to obtain; and the Colonial Emigrant is notoriously out of touch with his people at home in India.⁷

The very status of ‘pleasure’ and ‘dissatisfaction’ becomes destabilized further as this proposed system to assuage anxiety and to ensure the circulation of positive reports from the immigrants becomes the *equivalent* of misfortune from the perspective of recruitment: misfortune at home or news from afar both forcing/encouraging migration.⁸ They thereby take part in a grieving economy whereby emotion is managed to maintain that economy’s profitability. The frame of the letter is not to *maintain* contact throughout the period of indenture in order to facilitate family continuity (which in itself could be seen as a good strategy to ensure recruitment) but rather the precise frame of the letter indicates another concern: namely, the mitigation of grief and shock that, within the frame of the proposal, becomes a structural inevitability—and a further extension of this morbid informational flow.

So far so bureaucratic—insightful, I found, and interesting, certainly. But it was not until I paired this letter with the second, dated four years later, on September 7, 1912, that the dynamic I am calling rearrangement came into view.⁹ This second letter, I will

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Lisa Lowe discusses how colonial procedures and laws, for example policy-induced famine causing displacement into urban cities and laws against vagrancy criminalizing those displaced, contributed to Chinese indenture contracts.

⁹ Letter from Bunshi Baksh. Indian Indentureship Records. Letters 1907-1913. National Archives of Trinidad and Tobago, Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago.

show, contains an *inverse* relationship amongst the tropes of death, affect, and information that I have traced in the first letter above, and whose glossary of terms seems so grounded in its imperial bureaucratic milieu. This second letter, by contrast, is written by Bunshi Baksh, to ‘Karamat,’ through the medium of a letter writer named Rukkin Udin. Whether Udin’s work as a scribe is a direct result of the earlier proposed system I was unable to ascertain. Regardless, the letter inhabits a similar circuit of communication with very different results:

... I was very glad to receive your letter as if a fresh life had been infused in this dead body and came to know of all the facts... You have asked me to inform you if any arrangement can be made for my return to India so that something may be done here and if any action can be taken by Government it would have the desired effect, and that you are very anxious about me. So I inform you about my condition as follows:—

I have been deceived.¹⁰

Here we have a scene that first reverses the flow of information: the letter that Bunshi Baksh has received is full of ‘facts,’ these facts fill him with gladness, and this emotion has the effect of reanimating the body he writes of as having been dead. If the first and earlier letter between government agencies expresses concern over the effect of a lack of information preceding the final fact of death on the recruitment of new indentured labourers, this letter, between two individuals (and mediated by a third) emphasizes the revivifying effects of information for a labourer who has, for one year, been cut off from communication in a situation, as the letter goes on to state, very far from the information

¹⁰ Ibid.

on which he based his decision to sign his contract. The letter renders the condition of the labourer as ‘having been deceived’—i.e., establishes the labourer’s condition in direct relation to (mis)information. His ‘dead’ body is infused by communication in a startlingly resonant reversal of the previous letter. The first is a communication that imagines future letters to India as pre-emptively mitigating affective responses to grief in order to maintain an economy of recruitment, while the second is a metaphorically dead labourer who is revived by a letter from India, which allows for an exchange of information and, as the letter goes on to recount, the fervent desire to be bought out of the contract.

Bunshi Baksh answers the appeal of his correspondent—to ‘inform’—by detailing how his labour (exact contractual information) contrasts with his expectations of work. He stresses the exact cost of purchasing him out of the contract, and of his passage home, and it is with a direct depth of certainty that he baldly states, “If you will not pay the above amount [£380] I cannot come.” Though the letter concludes on a monetary note, it recalls the letter’s opening, wherein information had a vivifying effect on his ‘dead’ body—the ability to inform and be informed melding the distinctions amongst fact and joy and the material, not through inaccuracies, but precisely by virtue of the economy within which he has been so deceptively imbricated. Indeed, the majority of extant letters sent though the Protector of Immigrants in this collection concern anxiety over a relative, and queries compress and reflect the bureaucratic structure of indentureship’s twinned concerns of ‘care’ and ‘property.’ Thus, while letters between government bodies are navigating dynamics of property, affect, and mortality, so too does this letter tread a similar, grieving economy.

That these two letters—one bureaucratic and motivated by the management of emotion, the other a startlingly lively, revivifying account of the injustice of indenture contracts—traffic in the same morbid economy, with such radically different interpretative implications, thus gave me the motivating impulse of this dissertation, “Forms of Rearrangement: Habit, Injury, and Mourning in African American and Caribbean Literature.” The vocabularies of similarity and difference available to me felt inadequate to this pairing of letters, as did the impulses of either historicist or purely formal readings: something is radically rearranged while sharing in its primary terms. This formal rearrangement, as this dissertation will show, has ethical, affective, and material implications.

III: Unevenness and Rearrangement

My project follows a path articulated by Aimé Césaire, and from him, Sylvia Wynter, and through her, Katherine McKittrick, and that is to think of “a humanism made to the measure of the world.”¹¹ This genealogy of thinkers has inspired interdisciplinary projects and multidisciplinary work that gets us closer to a *humanities* made to the measure of the world. These cross-disciplinary humanistic spaces have been crucial to the intellectual orientation of this dissertation. Through this breadth I have identified what I am proposing is an aesthetic property of rearrangement, which arises from and produces unevenness.

¹¹ See: Aimé Césaire. *Discourse on Colonialism*. Trans. Joan Pinkham. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1973; David Scott. “The Re-Enchantment of Humanism: An Interview with Sylvia Wynter,” *Small Axe*. 8. September 2000. 119-207; Katherine McKittrick. *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and Cartographies of Struggle*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006; Katherine McKittrick (ed.) *Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human As Praxis*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2015.

But what do I mean by ‘rearrangement’? Particularly, how is ‘rearrangement’ distinct from other mechanisms of resemblance, such as ‘mimicry’? Homi Bhabha tells us that mimicry is an “*ironic* compromise” that is a temporal bridge between the stasis of colonial constructions of superiority (an eternal, history-less moment) and the diachronic, a history contextualized within the history of colonization (122). Difference and excess are built into mimicry, threatening colonial discourse and its power through proximity. It is this proximity, and its excesses, that threaten the structure of colonialism even as it also consolidates them through desire. Bhabha calls this not so much a re-presentation as a repetition.¹² By contrast, I am more interested in thinking about *rearrangement*, which I suggest does not presuppose a necessary and *a priori* temporal relationship between subject and object, original and copy (even as these are disruptive, rather than docile aftermaths in Bhabha’s account). Rather, without falling into an eternal context-less stasis, I am interested in the synchronic diachronies that come from overlapping structures that resemble without *copying*. Thus, as we will see in chapter two, the conjure cosmologies’ preoccupation with ownership and object, while it can be diachronically contextualized within African-derived and Western conceptions of property, does not exist only/as copy, but rather coexists in messy, overlapping, and interruptive ways with plantation economies. Indeed, historically causal relationships undergird and structure—but by figuring this relationship as necessarily of original and mimetic, there is a lag in timeliness that plagues the mimic and institutes an ‘after’ to any moment of interruption (even as the interruption is fundamentally of the ‘now’). But what if interruption was not

¹² See especially Bhabha’s “Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse” chapter.

exclusively a response, but arose from an overlap that acknowledges the co-presence of multiple structures of, for instance, being?

I argue that this question of overlapping and shared terminology spans African American, Afro-Caribbean, and Indo-Caribbean texts. In pursuing this question, I am pushing against the sharp field designations of African American and Caribbean/Postcolonial Studies. I am not arguing that they are continuous or identical. Rather, in engaging global scope, local particularity, and a contested terrain of the human, this dissertation engages vast and discontinuous literary traditions as such. Yet histories of empire and resistance connect these fields with their attendant logics. In order to think through their dis/continuities, I have found useful and persuasive Stuart Hall's 1986 "On Postmodernism and Articulation," which offers 'articulation' not only as a description of a consummate linguistic act, but also as a vehicle whose attachment is as productive as it is contingent:

We also speak of an 'articulated' lorry...: a lorry where the front... and back... can, but need not necessarily, be connected one to another (Hall 142).

'Articulation' is taken up by Brent Edwards in *The Practice of Diaspora*, to which figure he adds the concept of 'décalage'—roughly translatable as wedge, gap, jet lag—as a way of formulating and foregrounding the unevenness of Black diasporic exchanges.

"Articulation is always a strange and ambivalent gesture, because finally, in the body it is only difference—the separation between bones or members—that allows for movement (15). Thus 'articulation' also enables the many-jointed dissertation, which seeks to think with comparative diasporas, literatures, and histories—already articulated by an

unevenness of power, imperialism, and racism—through a rubric of ‘habit,’ ‘injury,’ and ‘mourning.’

In pursuing this set of inquiries, this dissertation makes three broad interventions. First, it makes an argument about scope. Whereas African American and postcolonial studies have long been connected through the abstract analytics of colonizer/colonized, detailed comparative analyses of the Caribbean and North America typically occur primarily through the vector of the Black Diaspora. Yet, as I discuss in my second chapter, there are three iterations of the plantation economy that bring Indigenous, African, and South Asian histories into the same frame of analysis, not as self-identical, but as themselves evidence of the rearrangement that produces unevenness (in this instance, rearrangement of multiply racialized relationships amongst land, labour, and dispossession). This attention to an analytic or heuristic that attends to difference is one that, as Edwards’ work exemplifies, has been transnational within a Black Diasporic tradition. This dissertation seeks to build on that work to think about comparative diasporas by situating African American texts within a global frame of habit (as in chapter one); by analyzing realist fictions in a comparative frame with African American and South Asian diasporic contexts (as in chapter two); and by examining Afro-Caribbean diasporic texts’ engagement with indigeneity (as in chapter three).

The second intervention my dissertation makes is an argument about ethics. I structure the dissertation around three categories that resonate on affective and ethical registers. I observe how proximate ethical and affective concerns cohere around categories that themselves span European philosophical traditions and subaltern literary expressions. Thus, if my first intervention—scope—is grounded in material relations, this

second occupies more nebulous terrains. These terrains, which affect theory, after Raymond Williams, might call “structures of feelings,” or that ethics generally mistakenly represents as universalism, I combine in order to trace how empire organizes affect and ethics—and how subaltern literary expression rearranges them.

Thinking with Veena Das on ordinary ethics, I am interested in the traffic between disciplinary and nondisciplinary ethical formations. On this distinction Das writes:

Thus, the possibility of speaking of ordinary ethics allows us also to think of the unethical as growing within the forms of life that people inhabit—it is, thus, not a matter of eliciting opinions about what behaviour is considered ethical or unethical, or of cataloguing cultural practices on which we can bring judgement from an objective, distant position but rather seeing how forms of life grow particular dispositions (136).

I am following her in thinking about a reading practice that can attend to the forms of life that people inhabit—and what I am arguing is that they inhabit forms of life that are subject to and evidence of forms of rearrangement. There are of course ways in which the question of the literary displaces or complicates the question of the everyday/ordinary—the literary is not ordinary, there is already another order of representation—but, as the preceding reading of the letters indicates, texts include dynamics that make them available to readings across types of texts, documents, and contexts. By offering injury, mourning, and habit, which I treat individually in the following three chapters, as ethical-affective categories across contexts, I argue for a situated attentiveness to both oppressive and resistive iterations of affective thought and philosophical feeling.

Third, my dissertation makes an argument about how first, scope, and second, ethics, are connected through form. This is both a tool of identification, for instance the way that circuits of injury animate both V.S. Naipaul and Charles Chesnutt, and a reading practice that allows the principles of close reading to be applied across a variety of scales. I thus offer as a way of identifying and thinking through habit, the idea of form and formation itself; through injury, the circuit; and through mourning, incorporation. These formal aspects of both literary text and historical contexts ground my overarching analysis of how unevenness and rearrangement attend subaltern writing across North America and the Caribbean.

This project, therefore, has an immense scope, though the scope is leveraged to access moments for reading closely—moments that appear or meaningfully resonate with the aid of such a scope. In this I follow the work of Lowe, who says that she “focus[ses] on relation across difference rather than equivalence, on the convergence of asymmetries rather than the imperatives of identity” (Lowe 11). (This similar interest is distinguished by how I am thinking about how regimes of power produce and construct difference through a re-deployment of material and ethical constructions, as opposed to her primary frame of political economy).

In the contexts of Black Atlantic and postcolonial studies, a context in which ethics are closely imbricated with both oppressive and resistive forces, this means that expressions of proximate ethical and affective concerns cohere around categories that themselves span European and subaltern expression. This project is not a project of recovering ideal ethical subjects, but rather considers how the categories habit, injury, and mourning appear across subaltern texts, and considers the work that they do in

expressing and mediating histories of oppression. This is thus emphatically not a prescriptive project. Ethics, as represented by my three categories, and not ‘the ethical’ is its object. An account of ethics in this frame must consider oppressive, resistive, and complicit iterations of what are understood ordinarily and disciplinarily to be ethical concerns. This returns us to the question of scope and scale; it also gets to the question of form. Form is what affords (to use Caroline Levine’s term) a discussion of ethics in a comparative scope. I argue that literature and its contexts—historical, material, and philosophical—have an aesthetic of rearrangement. Structural commonalities, when rearranged, produce diasporic forms, including the circuit, repetition, and incorporation—which pattern, inflect, and inform my readings.

IV: Genres of Difference

There are two overriding concerns arising from this inquiry: one is the question of epistemological violence, and the second is what I am calling genres of difference.

First, epistemological violence: in its postcolonial iteration, this is Spivak’s question of “Can the Subaltern Speak.” This question asks whether subaltern women’s subjectivity is accessible. Desire, intent, and interiority, she argues, become caught in a differend between imperialist desires to save and nativist nostalgia, her prime example being the practice of *sati*. This differend is also widely applicable to contexts of oppression.

More recently, this question has been taken up by feminist epistemology, for example by Miranda Fricker who terms epistemic injustice those “wrong[s] done to someone specifically in their capacity as a knower” (1). She posits two forms of epistemic injustice: testimonial injustice, whereby the credibility of the speaker is

structurally undermined so that their capacity to testify/cause others to know is reduced, and hermeneutic injustice, whereby there is a dearth of resource to understand or communicate social experience.¹³

This question of epistemological violence is directly related to questions of categorization, pertaining to which topic I am following the work of Sylvia Wynter, Patrick Wolfe, and Denise Ferreira Da Silva in articulating how definitional uses of difference produce the worlds and ways in which violence occurs. My term ‘genres of difference’ deliberately echoes Sylvia Wynter’s formative work on genres of the human, where she argues that successive iterations of ‘Man’ as the overrepresented category of the human have shaped the conception of the human and how we know.¹⁴ In addition to this overrepresentation of the European descriptive statement, we *also* see the descriptive statements of subaltern groups as they relate not just to a single de-selected population, but to various subaltern groups whose formations can be variously described through an understanding that difference, too, has genres—for example, race, caste, and indigeneity, which I discuss in chapter two. Indeed, Patrick Wolfe has argued that “there are no grounds for assuming that... striking disparities can be reconciled under a single master category called ‘race.’ Rather... race is but one among various regimes of difference that have served to distinguish dominant groups whom they initially encountered in colonial contexts” (867). These constructions, as da Silva argues, are deeply imbricated with both ontological and epistemological concerns: she describes the “analytics of raciality as a productive symbolic regimen that institutes human difference as an effect of the play of universal reason” (Silva 4).

¹³ See Fricker, especially the introduction and chapter 7.

¹⁴ See Wynter, especially “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom”

V Habit, Injury, Mourning

This dissertation also represents a sustained interest in attempts and failures to taxonomize. There is categorization and excess; this is related not only to the knowledge question of categorizing ‘the other’ but also about how to live with inaccessible pasts, and how to know a non-diametric other.

My first chapter, “Habits of Feeling in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*,” argues that Harriet Jacobs’ text bridges material, economic histories to ethics, and ethics to the phenomenological experiences of the repetitious body. Yet, unlike philosophical traditions that centre formation and distinction as the goal of habitual practices, from labour to virtue, *Incidents* explores subaltern *indistinction*. Jacobs’ circumscribed existence in the garret paradoxically renders her all- and no-body: indeed, I argue that, prefiguring Bergson’s distinction between action and affection, Jacobs posits the garret as skin.

It is from this epidermal garret that the text’s consistent foregrounding of discourses of habit, identifiable formally as subaltern repetition, becomes a site for examining racial experience and for producing, within a virtue ethics tradition, a meditation on the good life and its barriers.¹⁵ From this position, Jacobs’ address to the “virtuous reader!” of her narrative then becomes not a moment of pandering or strategic appeal to white northerners, but rather the careful development of an ethics of realizing sense, one whose stakes can be mapped onto contemporary virtues, ordinary ethics, and

¹⁵ For example as discussed in the work of Lisa Tessman, especially *Moral Failure: On the Impossible Demands of Morality*.

the ‘impossible moral ought.’ *Incidents*, read as a virtue ethics text, posits a phenomenological ethics.

My second chapter, “Circuits through Injury: economy and form in Charles Chesnutt and V.S. Naipaul” takes as its ground for comparison the plantation economy, which I argue produces difference through rearrangements of labour, land, and dispossession. This pattern is evidenced by colonial practices as they relate to Indigenous, African-, and South Asian-descended groups in the Americas. I examine colonial land policies as an example of how divergent responses to post-slavery and post-indenture land rights show how similar circuits (land, labour, dispossession) are leveraged to differentiate and render uneven populations in part shaped by these policies. These circuits connect African and South Asian diasporas and provide formal structure through which to read disparate literary traditions.

My analysis of Chesnutt’s *The Conjure Tales* and Naipaul’s *A House for Mr Biswas* is founded on both texts’ deep concern with the continued effects of agrarian economic structures on post-slavery and post-indenture societies respectively. Yet a reading of this transnational history as purely material belies the fact that these economies are also imbued with affect and injury, demonstrating the mutability and persistence of harm through formal engagement with the ‘circuit.’ I argue that the preoccupation with multiple circuits—geographic, historical, inter-species and object—connect these two texts, and suggest that closely read engagements with proximate histories can productively reveal formal resonances across traditions. In pairing Chesnutt’s conjure cosmology with Naipaul’s realist novel, I push against their apparent generic incompatibility through a reading of the status of objects—how the rendering-

object of the slave/indentured labourer is translated fictively into a treatment of injured objects, and objects that injure.

The third chapter, “Mourning Diasporas: time and indigeneity in *Autobiography of My Mother*” moves from considering the ‘circuit’ to considering modes of incorporating unknowable entities as the manner through which to consider how tropes of loss and indigenous extinction in North American and Caribbean literature reproduce and contend with the figure of the ‘always already dead Indian.’ In the transition from colony to nation, the concept of ‘indigenization’ comes into direct conflict with pre-colonial definitions of indigeneity. Indigeneity, as either a necessarily extinct predicate of postmodernity or the process of producing belonging for the displaced, situates expressions of ‘nativeness’ as complex sites of disavowal and identification. While settler colonial critique in the North American context has begun to probe the complexities of uneven histories of dispossession, few studies—with the notable exception of Shona Jackson’s work—have considered how the Caribbean, and its diasporas within the US and Canada, intensify these questions. By examining attempts to metabolize and incorporate loss, I suggest that non-Indigenous writers of colour navigate liberatory struggles for self-determination in implicit conversation with Indigenous loss.

I read Antiguan-American Jamaica Kincaid’s *Autobiography of My Mother* to examine how mourning becomes a site for negotiating entwined histories, often with ambivalent effect, as with the motif of extinction/inheritance. This chapter examines how loss is not only perpetrated by but also constructed through colonial policies intent on discursive, as well as physical, erasure of indigeneity and the ways that twentieth-century ethnic literature contends with, repeats, or troubles those tropes. I argue that temporal and

categorical confusion and incommensurability gives rise to an unshared subjunctive mourning, which marks the text's treatment of loss.

The project as a whole, then, examines the unevenly entwined histories of the Americas by employing three 'ethical analytics' to examine together the overlapping histories of oppression of the African and South Asian diasporas and of Indigenous dispossession, which are more typically examined as separate phenomena with discrete circuits of movement and loss. These categories allow me to both identify the ways in which genres of difference were produced by colonial mechanisms, and they constitute a method of examining how transnational and local responses to empire intertwine. I thus situate texts of the Caribbean and North America in a genealogy that attends to how habit, injury, and mourning are staged, reimagined, and repeated through literature—or, the multiple rearrangements of subaltern literary expression.

CHAPTER ONE

Habits of Feeling in Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl

Slave narratives have long been situated as the formal blueprint for an African American literary tradition that continues to mine the relationship between personhood, objectification, and narration. As a genre, the slave narrative became particularly associated with the emergence of masculine voices whose texts partake in a progression towards individuated authorship. This is true most classically of Robert Stepto's account of the development of slave narratives, which underscores a process whereby writing the self is seen as a ritual confirmation of the self's autonomy. His account not only describes the trajectory of a literary formal tradition, it also indexes a gradual "sophistication," evidenced and produced by the act of writing or speaking one's narrative (11). In summary, there is an identifiably collective habituation of writing and thinking freedom in the context of oppression that emerges on the level of form. This formal register has been foundationally tied to assertions of humanity and personhood; as Henry Louis Gates notes, "What remained consistent was that black people could become speaking subjects only by inscribing their voices in the written word" (142).

This self's autonomy—so the argument goes—is then reproduced in critical readings of many slave narratives as occurring at the moment of the definitive break from slavery, most exemplified by Frederick Douglass's famous "you have seen how a man was made a slave, now you will see how a slave was made a man," a statement made at the moment when he strikes his master and from which moment he dates his emancipation (39). These accounts establish a clear enunciation and breach between

slavery and freedom that inaugurates an after of slavery that centres orality and literacy as a new set of habits of freedom.

That Harriet Jacobs' slave narrative, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, does not quite fit into these foundational accounts of the slave narrative has been accounted for because of her gender and the way that she employs tropes of the slave narrative with tropes from domestic and seduction fiction; it has been accounted for by the historical circumstances of its publication, its eventual obscurity and its mischaracterization as a work of fiction. Work from black feminist scholars who were at the forefront of her institution into the canon of life writing about slavery have established Jacobs as a foremother of black feminist thought, abolitionist writing, and narrative theory.¹⁶ These accounts have rested on what is true of the text, which is its distinctness as *the* singular woman's slave narrative of its length in a tradition dominated by male voices. Yet despite the text's remarkable singularity, what I wish to focus on in this chapter is how Jacobs herself thematizes repetition, the everyday, and the mundane. *Incidents* neither dramatizes the act of writing nor portrays a definitive break from slavery, since her escape takes the form of seven years' captivity in close proximity to the site of her enslavement. The habitual in both slave narratives and critical accounts of them is on view as a set of habits of literacy that yield as an authorially-endorsed personhood; by contrast, Jacobs' account of slavery, freedom, and their attendant habits is much more

¹⁶The framing of her true narrative in the genre of domestic fiction, as Hazel Carby, Ann duCille, and others have described, does much work to show how Jacobs inserts the experience and demands of enslaved black women into an understanding of slavery, and inflects the gendered norms of nineteenth-century America by highlighting the inaccessibility of certain modes of conduct and virtue to those enslaved. Other authors, more contemporaneous to Jacobs, including Anna Julia Cooper, Pauline Hopkins, and Frances Harper, are all similarly concerned in their multi-generic writings toward justice within a nineteenth- and turn-of-the-century context.

uneven and fraught. This in turn allows us to see the entanglement with injury of the emancipatory process itself.

Originally published in 1861, *Incidents* recounts the lived experiences of Linda Brent—which is Harriet Jacobs’ pseudonym—under, through, and out of slavery. In an effort to escape the sexual persecution of her master, Dr. Flint, Linda Brent runs away, but because of the difficulty in leaving the vicinity, ends up hiding in the garret of the shed of her grandmother’s house. The garret measured nine feet long, seven feet wide, and three feet tall at its highest point. There, she will wait seven years for her freedom to take the form of a fugitivity that moves, that stretches its legs, that flies; what she calls her ‘Loophole of Retreat’ offers what we might call bare freedom. It is a freedom that bears none of the marks of liberation’s capacity to move.

Jacobs introduces her escape within an understanding of the variegated experiences of slavery, and establishes a continuum of activity as the rubric of her choice to flee into this confined frame:

It seemed horrible to sit or lie in the cramped position day after day, without one gleam of light. Yet I would have chosen this, rather than my lot as a slave, though white people considered it an easy one, and it was so compared with the fate of others. I was never cruelly overworked... (97).

Her framing of her experience of slavery as *not* being overworked draws attention to the state of enslavement and not just its specific conditions. The value of her escape is not for a comparative ease of circumstance: she instead chooses a repeated stillness—day after day, sitting or lying in a cramped position—in a total shift from labouring slave to still

fugitive. She must thus establish her freedom on a metric other than that of ease or activity.

This new metric of freedom severs her relationship of bondage with her master in an immediate sense and reorients her relationship with her children and family. New practices of the self emerge in her life, new practices of care and attentiveness; a new ethic. In place of all the cares for the bodies of her children is substituted listening, as she can hear her children playing and interacting with friends and even Dr. Flint, their master. She figures these new interactions as “consolation,” in a re-spatialization of this relationship of care: “But I had my consolations. Through my peephole I could watch the children, and when they were near enough, I could hear them talk” (176). Her escape substitutes proximity for flight, and any direct contact with her children is mediated. It is only when she briefly sees her son Benny on the eve of her departure to the North that she realizes that this mediated form of care of her children has been reciprocal: Benny, having heard a sneeze from the garret when no one was nearby, deduced his mother’s hiding place, and for years carefully guided others away from hearing-range. It is this deferred relationship that yet preserves family life that sustains her in hiding.

Linda Brent’s listening relationship to her family expands once she finds a gimlet with which she bores a hole in the roof, so that she has partial sight of her children. Previous to this discovery, Linda has been in all-consuming darkness. When she finds the means with which to cut into the roof, she “was as rejoiced as Robinson Crusoe could have been at finding such a treasure” (81). Her invocation of Defoe’s novel, which is so meticulously attuned to the processes by which habit becomes settlement, opens a global, imperial frame for what I argue is a meditation on the relationship between habit and

environment. Crusoe's attempts to produce ownership of land, property, and person functions through a structure of habituation that moves from small accrued actions to ownership, and also to an entire worldview maintained by daily practices of writing in a diary and an enumeration of activities. It is precisely this daily scaffolding that allows Crusoe to name Friday, Friday—that we later learn that his meticulous count was *inaccurate*, that Friday was not found on a Friday at all, shows how a habitually maintained false predicate can still build a whole universe of knowing and naming (Crusoe 95-96).¹⁷ But if this imperial economy is at minimum nominally maintained through labour as a habituating route to an autonomous self, Linda Brent troubles these pathways via routinized labour. If to be a fugitive was to withhold labour from master and market, Linda Brent's garret emphasizes the extent to which her flight (stationery as it is) is a removal of her labour from the access of the master. While in the garret, she is not practicing an industrious skill, is not a 'good' (i.e. productive) free Black. After seven years in the garret, she is instead largely inactive, largely unproductive, and largely outside the mechanisms of regular labour towards freedom, mastery, or citizenship.

All this is essentially getting at the question: what are the relationships between person, environment, and object? Questions about these relationships have long histories in African American literary criticism, not least in Fred Moten's extension of Saidiya Hartman's "resistance of the object"—that tension that arises when the commodity that is

¹⁷ The full passage reads: "... I fell into a sound Sleep, and wak'd no more, 'till by the Sun it must necessarily be near Three a-Clock in the Afternoon the next Day; nay, to this Hour I'm partly of the Opinion, that I slept all the next Day and Night, and till almost three that Day after; for otherwise I knew not how I should lose a Day out of my Reckoning in the Days of the Week, as it appear'd some Years after I had done; For if I had lost it by crossing and recrossing the Line, I should have lost more than one Day: But certainly I lost a Day in my Accompt, and never knew which Way."

not meant to be able to speak, speaks.¹⁸ Yet what Jacobs' text does, I will show, is twofold: by being unseen in the garret, she displaces the centrality of visual representation to accounts of black objectification; by her sustained stillness, she reorients our understanding of the ethical potential for considering the relationship between person and environment. The rest of my chapter will be structured around six parts, each of which arises from this question of how Linda Brent's captive freedom in the garret sits within the context of a history of oppression that is intent on harnessing human activity.

This entanglement is reflected in the text's theoretical life in criticism, which has largely hinged on several chapters in the middle of the book that mark the transition between, on the one hand, her girlhood, sexual persecution, motherhood, and decision to run away, and, on the other, her eventual arrival in the North. This time in the garret has been strongly associated with her narrative voice in Valerie Smith's work on "garreting" where she posits that Black women's writing operates from a margin exemplified by *Incidents*, and Katherine McKittrick's work on black feminist geographies, where she calls Harriet Jacobs' time in the garret a "disembodied master eye" (McKittrick 43). Where I depart from these accounts is first by outlining a trajectory from her captive freedom via a type of fugitive indistinction, and second, by privileging, over the tropes of

¹⁸ Moten, Fred. *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003. This is an extension of Saidiya Hartman's work, which seeks a practice of critical fabulation, where "to describe 'the resistance of the object' if only by first imagining it, and to listen for the mutters and oaths and cries of the commodity. By flattening the levels of narrative discourse and confusing narrator and speakers, I hoped to illuminate the contested character of history, narrative, event, and fact, to topple the hierarchy of discourse, and to engulf authorized speech in the clash of voices. The outcome of this method is a 'recombinant narrative', which 'loops the strands' of incommensurate accounts and which weaves present, past, and future in retelling the girl's story and in narrating the time of slavery as our present" (Hartman 12).

the visual, the trope of listening, which importantly disrupts the subject/object relation. This disruption, while displacing subjecthood, is not dehumanizing; it models dynamics of subject/object indistinction I see operating throughout the text. This disruption is noted in C. Riley Snorton's work on trans capability, which argues that "one can identify fugitive moments in the hollow of fungibility's embrace... to focus on modes of escape, of wander, of flight that exist within violent conditions of exchange" (57). Snorton sees an intersection between the fugitive and the fungible in the recurrence of the swamp across fugitive texts, and reads *Incident's* swamp scene (in which Linda hides in a swamp before entering into the garret) as a "site of temporary refuge" that "amplifies her narrative's elucidation of freedom in terms of the vexed spaces of ongoing fugitivity that emerge... from within more general conditions of unfreedom and restraint" (69).

The question of form itself in Jacobs' text has received sustained attention, and her combination of slave narrative, domestic fiction, and seduction drama tropes have, since Jean Fagan Yellin's definitive work¹⁹ establishing *Incidents* as a true narrative (rather than a fiction) written by Harriet Jacobs herself, been the primary way that scholars have indexed her formal contribution to gendered first person accounts of enslavement. Prior to this corrective, the text was widely considered to be a work of domestic fiction; since its reintroduction to its generic status, it has been widely and varyingly read. What I want to do is spend some time thinking about Jacobs' emergence as a major figure in literary studies—a canonically uncanonical figure, if you will—in conversation with Raymond Williams' categories of the residual and the emergent.

¹⁹ See her edition: Jacobs, Harriet A, Lydia Maria Child, and Jean Fagan Yellin. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: Written by Herself*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987.

Harriet Jacobs struggled to find a publisher for her text, after refusing her story's inclusion in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Key To Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and when she was eventually published in 1861, the Civil War soon distracted audiences from what had been up to this point a vibrant and sustained interest in the slave narrative as a form. I would argue that this publishing history, as well as her employment of other narrative conventions, can mark the text as "residual," which according to Williams "has been effectively formed in the past, but is still active in the cultural process, not only and often not at all as an element of the past, but as an effective element of the present" ("Dominant, Residual and Emergent" 8). While still having significant readership, residual form has a quality of being slightly belated; the delay in publishing, and the coincidence of the Civil War certainly has the capacity to imbue Jacobs' narrative with these qualities.

And yet, on the exact other side of the spectrum, the emergent, we also see that Jacobs' text fulfills its characterization: "what matters, finally, is understanding emergent culture, as distinct from both the dominant and the residual, is that it is never only a matter of immediate practice; indeed it depends crucially on finding new forms or adaptations of forms" (8). Precisely the same reading of Jacobs' use of multiple generic tropes to articulate a new and emergent form as the only extant longform female authored slave narrative, falls precisely under this category of the emergent.

So why am I outlining a distinction when I am simultaneously asserting that Jacobs can occupy either term? I think that questions of morality and narration in the scholarship fall on either side of this residual / emergent divide, and that it is in part because of this tension and possibility between the two that her text becomes peculiarly

available to many disciplinary frames, and why we are never quite finished reading her. This is particularly true of arguments about her moralizing statements: scholars read Jacobs, and her address, as either residually or emergently formal. In the camp of the residual, we have dismissals of her narrative voice / appeal as merely to please or appease white women,²⁰ as mere demonstrations of her family's ability to uphold white patriarchal social mores,²¹ or as conventions that "subvert Jacobs's ability adequately to discuss the subjects of sexuality and miscegenation that inform the narrative" (Bland 125). Hortense Spillers—whose 1987 "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book" is published around the same time as Yellin's authenticating work—argues that *Incidents* is a melodramatic psychodrama, and is "one of the richest displays of the psychoanalytic dimensions of culture before the science of European psychoanalysis takes hold" (77). This places her reading in the camp of the emergent; we also have Jacobs' address read as incitement to action which eventually forms part of "an assault that provided the language of possibility for a post-emancipation United States" (M. Bennett 148); and "resistant orality" that renders blackness visible (Mullen 245). We have morality appearing either as a strategy of access to ideals of womanhood, for example as represented in Jacobs' editor Lydia Maria Child's guidebook *The American Frugal Housewife*, which founds the success of the nation on women's characters, habits, and principles uninterrupted through girlhood, or as strategies of exploding its category, as with work that emphasizes Jacobs' exercise of sexual agency. In this way the ambivalence mirrors the ambivalence of habit itself and appears as incommensurate.

²⁰ See Yvonne Johnson *The Voices of African American Women: The Use of Narrative and Authorial Voice in the Work of Harriet Jacobs, Zora Neale Hurston, and Alice Walker* 1998, especially page 24.

²¹ See Bussey, Susan. "'Something Akin to Freedom': Harriet Jacobs and the Feminist Tradition" in Bruce & Smith *Reading Feminist Texts*, 2016.

This divide indicates something interesting in how Jacobs' form is read, and I would argue that it is in fact *both*, which accounts for both the split in responses to her moral frame, and the persistent interest in her work. This bothness functions on the level of what I want to call formal indistinction, which will take several forms in this piece, but in this first instance, registers an ambiguity between the residual and the emergent that plays out in critical conversations of the text as it pertains to its ethics. As I will argue, it is precisely indistinction—variously defined and mediated—from which her ethics emerge.

The chapter proceeds as follows. First, I will situate my reading of Jacobs by tracing a broad genealogy of 'habit.' I do this to demonstrate the idea that the habitual has a particular capacity to make and to unmake—which I am calling the question of formation.

Second, I extend this idea of formation to think about the relationship between form and what I am identifying as a theme of indistinction. I see this question animating debates in literary study broadly, from new materialism—which asks about the relationships amongst different forms and modes of being—to new formalism, which extends reading practices developed for literary texts to new objects.

Third, I will return to Jacobs' narrative to argue that she identifies modes of being that are still intentionally oriented towards an ethic which, on the one hand, resists the subsumption of humanity into objecthood, and, on the other, may find in the limited confines of slavery, forms of fugitivity that rely on remaining hidden through recourse to environments—including environments from which one becomes *indistinct*; she thereby furthers a conception of human life that does not centre work—enslaved or free—as the

condition for humanity. I will develop my argument in six subsections “But first why Habit,” “Form and Indistinction,” “The Epidermal Garret,” “Realizing Sense,” “Virtue Ethics, Rearranged,” and my conclusion, “Contagious Fugitivities.”

I: But First, Why ‘Habit’?

As someone who thinks about the relationship between ethics and form in multiethnic North American and Caribbean literature, and therefore necessarily literature that arises out of contexts of oppression, I am accustomed to how the thought of the world entire was and is marshalled to produce regimes of power; that very scope, then, also belongs to our study as a resource for framing and pursuing questions.

Habit is foundational to our disciplinary understanding of ethics. As the body repeats, says Aristotle, ethics form, and the aim of that ethic—the good—both attains and identifies the good life. Through Aristotle, this *eudaimonistic* ethic—having the object of happiness or flourishing—gives rise to the field of virtue ethics, which in turn enshrines habit as the pathway to self-making. Moderate, habituating behaviours, repeated and well-reasoned actions, give rise to a self whose habits create character virtues, just as dedicated study develops intellectual virtues: both, though Aristotle conceived of them as arising from “habituation” (character) and “experience and time” (intellectual) respectively, fulfill that which “nature gives us the capacity to acquire...”, which “completion comes through habituation” (23). The commonplace “habit makes the man,” is, in this way, an observation simultaneously banal and revelatory. This ostensibly originary function of habit—that will go on to range from Aristotle’s moderation to Kant’s disinterest—forms an arc from the Greeks to the Enlightenment, creating the

conditions for the rise of identifiably Western ethical formations (i.e. virtue ethics), economic modalities (i.e. the protestant work ethic) and psycho-scientific research (i.e. cognitive behavioural therapy). These disparate concerns are each invested in what is a specifically phenomenological form of ethics: all three, via their different disciplinary and disciplined paths, centre on processes of *formation*.

Thus, the experiencing body finds itself—and its habits—at the centre of phenomenology. In summarizing philosopher Félix Ravaisson's thought, Leandro Gaitán and Javier Castrena write that habit is “an idea that gradually naturalizes, an action that, as a result of repetition, imperceptibly moves from the understanding, to the will, to nature” (Gaitán 1). Ravaisson also sought to resolve—and dismiss—the tension between habit as freedom and habit as necessity that separated Aristotelian and Kantian schools of thought by arguing that habit is not purely mechanistic, and that it further breaks down philosophical barriers, including that between idealism and empiricism (Carlisle 154). Via his inheritors Henri Bergson and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Ravaisson thus enshrines habit at the centre of a discipline attuned to perception and its naturalization. For example, tethering mind and memory to the perceiving body, the habitual comes to achieve a status of “generalizability” through gestures in the body as a “matrix of habitual action” in the work of Merleau-Ponty (Casey 217). If in virtue ethics the good is that which is formed through repeated strivings, in phenomenology the body is its site of formation.

Yet habit's scale is not exclusively large: indeed, it is habit's capacity to access the *small*, to observe the ordinariness of a life built of repeated actions, that lends itself to the globalization of its analytic potential. In asking about habit's usability—and

mutability—in a Black Atlantic context, this chapter must not only attend to habit’s capacity to reach across scales, but also to the mechanisms by which it traverses and connects a whole range of ostensibly oppositional terms. If we can think of habit spanning a historiographical scale—from, for example, Ann Laura Stoler’s account of epistemic habits of empire,²² to Camp’s reading of everyday resistance²³ found in private practices of enslaved women—we can also consider how habit bridges different abstracted concepts, such as ‘will’ and ‘nature,’ capable of moving from conscious thought to unconscious action, from mind to body, from activity to passivity, from choice to involuntariness. This capacity to bridge hinges material, economic histories to ethics and ethics to the phenomenological experiences of the repetitious body.

So it is within these contexts that we can see habit’s potent combination of action and potential, its small actions’ capacity to form, taken up as both a site of coercion and liberation. Its ability to hinge those two capacities gives it an uneasy place in the histories of oppression based on racial slavery, where the slide between voluntary and involuntary action take on alarming qualities in contexts of disenfranchisement, and it is a slide that we will see literalized over time in Linda Brent’s prolonged tenure in the garret. Within a virtue ethics frame that Sara Ahmed describes as based upon habitually-produced orientations to objects, our affective relationships can make “certain forms of personhood valuable” (37). Good objects—objects that hold the promise of happiness or reward—

22 In *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense*, Stoler locates the key contribution of her project as “less on taxonomy than on the unsure and hesitant sorts of documentation and sensibilities that gathered around them” (1). Stoler, invested in tracing “epistemic habits” as they are productive of a whole range of ambivalent categories— subject, family, rights-bearing subject.

23 See especially chapter 3 of Camp’s *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South*.

inspire and punish habitually-produced orientations to objects, or to particular forms. But what is the possibility of a ‘good object’ under slavery? In this account, a bleak Aristotelian ethics spans form and phenomenology through habits of feeling.

So goes the story. As I build an alternative account, I take one cue from Leela Gandhi’s history of an askesis of de-realization, of “self-ruination,” both within the colonies and in self-de-selecting non-agents of empire (82). In reading practices of M.K. Gandhi’s *swaraj* in conversation with Western models of self-work, she argues that these discourses are neither exclusively nor imperviously possessed by the West, not even in its formal discipline of moral philosophy; not even its Western progenitors are isolated from unorthodox canons. Habit’s canon, in my leading claim, can make *and* unmake the man, all while weaving through adjacent and interwoven histories of self-work. This dual movement of making and unmaking frames the question of how disparate ethical traditions share terms and practices gathered under the heading ‘habit’ towards or as a critique of something like ‘the good life.’

Habit, then, is formation and deformation: it has the capacity to both do and undo on the scale of the individual person. But again, we arrive at this question of scale: for example, the relationship between habit and processes of racialization, particularly as it intersects in the nineteenth century with ideas of labour. I argue that the permutations of habit I am outlining—which may first appear as purely abstract and unrooted from any context—in fact become material *precisely* in their vast geographic and historical scales. For example: in a comparative framework of British and American empires, the search for habits that are both racialized—rendered particular and fixed—and yet hold the promise of substitution—are malleable and changeable—gripped these major imperial

powers anticipating and preparing for the aftermath of emancipations. The archives of slavery and indenture speak explicitly to the need to replace and maintain workforces through ideas of ‘racial habits.’²⁴ Lisa Lowe gives us this example of the British Colonial office seeking to prevent mass scale slave revolt:

“... no measure would so effectively tend to provide a security against this danger [of mass scale revolt], as that of introducing a free race of cultivators into our islands, who, from *habits and feelings* could be kept distinct from the Negroes, and who from interest would be inseparably attached to European proprietors... The Chinese people...” (quoted in Lisa Lowe *Intimacy of Four Continents*, 23 emphasis added).

Fixed racialization and its interplay with substitutability became increasingly attached to racialized aptitudes, which I argue demonstrates the centrality of habit to the history of race and racialization.

In the United States, this union between habit and racialization meant the continuation of slavery by other names and the figuration of the formerly enslaved as indolent, irresponsible, and lazy racial ‘types’ who proved their own unreadiness for freedom. It is against this backdrop, for example, that Booker T Washington embraces the habits of industry inculcated in slavery as a backbone of his uplift.

The context of routinized forced labour therefore complicates a straightforward reading of habit and ethics, even as it exists alongside its capacity to make and unmake at the level of the individual. Yet if ‘racial habits’ are mechanisms of substitution and subordination, of constraint and of formation, these are open to what I am calling

²⁴ For more on the relationship between habit and the biologized understanding of race, see Kyla Schuller’s *The Biopolitics of Feeling: Race, Sex, and Science in the Nineteenth Century*.

‘rearrangement,’ on both material and ethical registers. Rearrangement happens when the material circumstances produce a variety of ways of being in relation to them. Habit is then also a form of relation—between people, between people and object, between people and place. And so, even as the site of embodied habit is also the site of racial violence, the experiential body centres the possibility of an ethical relation.

II: Form and Indistinction

It is my claim that embodied habit is both a site of violence and the possibility of ethical relation. Consider Jacobs’ description of her second winter in the garret, when her “loophole of retreat” becomes “still in prison:”

I suffered much more during the second winter than I did during the first. My limbs were benumbed by inaction, and the cold filled them with cramp. I had very painful sensation of coldness in my head; even my face and tongue stiffened, and I lost the power of speech (185).

Her body is acted upon by her environment in increasingly disabling ways: inaction benumbs her limbs, cold fills her limbs with cramp, she becomes increasingly incapable of even those small bodily movements afforded by the garret space. Her face and tongue and voice lose capacity. What this long exposure results in is a shift of her tenure in the garret from one centred on choice, escape, and narration, towards a routinized stillness that begins to trigger a process by which Jacobs becomes increasingly inseparable from her environment of the garret. So here we get again to environment, object, person; not in the context of chattel-slave-as-object-and-person but to fugitive/freewoman as garret.

The category of “habit” I have described is a crux of embodiment and regulation. As such, it veers between what we might call formation (in its strictly ethical sense) and what we might call indistinction, when the habitual aligns bodies, objects, and environments. What Frantz Fanon described as a lived experience as an “object among other objects” posits a situated relationship of desire: Fanon’s soul is “desirous to be at the origin of the world” (89). He describes desires that are forcibly rendered appropriate, straight, surface; the formative potential of these desires, as well as the formative potential of the denial of those desires, both position disenfranchised people in direct relation to racialized and objectifying violence through what I have identified as embodied habit. In other words, there is the potential for a relationality that objectifies through routinized contact.

In that light, this objectifying relationality, however perversely, seems to answer the new materialist thesis of a commons across species, life-forms, and objects. As critics have long noted, the relationship between people and objects has been critiqued in freedom and anti-colonial struggles, from the figure of the eloquent commodity-slave,²⁵ to Aimé Césaire’s thingification (*Discourse on colonialism* 42). The field of this objectification is vast, and includes, in a Black Atlantic context, the trope of non-differentiation from the environment itself. That slavery and objecthood so long existed in violent proximity precludes the easy acceptance of the vein of scholarship that triumphs the possibility of becoming-environment as itself constituting a critique of human mastery over the nonhuman world in the context of racial slavery. Most paradigmatically, Jane Bennett writes, “I believe that encounters with lively matter can

²⁵ i.e. “listening for the cries of the commodity” in Saidiya Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts” *small axe: a journal of criticism*. Vol. 26. June 2008. 12.

chasten my fantasies of agency, highlight the common materiality of all that is, expand a wider distribution of agency, and reshape the self and its interests” (122). Here, the ‘fantasies’ of human mastery are to be chastened and are to be renounced through an attentiveness that can give rise to the voluntary taking-up of the responsibility toward nonhuman, non-sentient entities.

Yet the archives of racialized slavery—and here I am making a deliberate distinction between regimes of racialized slavery and Indigenous cosmologies, which have of course a distinct critique of this field—do not admit to an iteration of becoming-environment by giving up ones mastery; indeed, it is rather a second strand of thought around becoming-environment that directly and anxiously opposes indistinction, that has long accompanied the institution of slavery. This second strand registers anxieties about blackness and (in)activity.

Where do we find this anxiety? I identify it in Hegel, Booker T. Washington, and Hannah Arendt who, vastly disparate thinkers on many topics, share an animosity towards the capacity (or threat) of “becoming-environment.” Each thinker posits an iteration of the work ethic as a capacity to produce objects in order to distinguish between matter which one’s labour shapes, and the body that performs the labour. In Hegel, The Bondsman’s capacity to mix labour with earth is a foundation for mutual recognition and differentiation-as-hierarchy, becoming ossified and racialized in contexts of colonialism and slavery. An association with ‘base’ labour preserves these institutions and their violence; yet, at the heart of the Master/Slave dialectic’s account of enforced labour remains the assertion of labour’s capacity to mark differences amongst matter and man. In this account, by extension, to *not* labour, to be idle, is to refuse that which even a slave

might access, which is to be distinguishable from matter, to stand above it. Thus, even the becoming-property of enslavement, in Hegel's account—and its widespread uptake in theorizations of slavery²⁶—is thus still not-to-be-environment.

For Washington in *Up From Slavery* (1901), the imperative to not-be-environment is paramount. Indeed, he asserts that slavery taught the dignity of labour and inculcated a capacity to work through which emancipated Black people would enter into a (second-class) citizenry. His explicit celebration of a capacity for physical labour saw post-Emancipation futures as the extension of the “habits of industry” acquired during slavery and linked “moral earnestness” to drudgery (Anderson 42, 59). Washington's incorporation of industrious virtue frames work itself as the refutation of racist perceptions of—equally—idleness and dirt. He insists on the correspondence between wearing pyjamas, sleeping between two sheets, owning one's own toothbrush, and shaking off the shackles of slavery (Washington 85). That these habits most prominently register in scholarship broadly as capitulating to respectability and subservience obscures the more interesting interpretation that it is, at core, a struggle for mastery over and differentiation from environment. This occurs precisely through an assertion of the capacity for habits—of manual labour, of self-work—to physically and psychically create a community, beginning, appropriately, with the turning of the very earth of Tuskegee's grounds into clay bricks.

Earth and idleness also find anxious articulation in Hannah Arendt's account of blackness in her 1948 book *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, where she characterizes black

²⁶ This uptake includes mapping Caliban onto the Lordsman/Bondage dynamic, as in Aimé Césaire's *Une Têmpete*. Paul Gilroy pushes against the Bondsman characterization, however, saying that it does not account for repeated instances of enslaved people choosing death over bondage (64).

Africans as undifferentiated from nature until they ‘discover’ their humanity through labour. The shift she narrates, whereby “black workers... are becoming more and more aware of their humanity under the impact of regular labour [in mines] and urban life,” suggests an adherence to an animosity towards becoming-environment that overrides other concerns—such as working conditions and labour rights, colonial domination and capitalist imperialism—and expresses an inability to think blackness beyond environment and labour (194). Indeed, as her later work will go on to delineate, for her, the codification of types of human activity *is* the human condition; a condition of humanity. That slavery does not meaningfully feature in these later accounts furthers this point.²⁷

In other words, the two strands of the question of form and indistinction—the utopian new materialist promise, and the labour-as-human-hierarchy-above nature—ask what happens when mastery is not available to be renounced and labour is not there to differentiate (and thereby ‘humanize’). I am arguing that Harriet Jacobs’ work intervenes in this problem and gives an account of ‘becoming environment’ that reproduces neither strand of the becoming-environment question, nor participates in a celebratory evasion of the violence that marks the forced proximity to environment under slavery.

III: The Epidermal Garret

Morning came. I knew it only by the noises I heard, for in my small den day and night were all the same. I suffered for air even more than for light. But I was not comfortless. I heard the voices of my children. There was joy and there was sadness in the sound (96).

²⁷ For an extensive study on antiblack racism in Arendt’s work, see Kathryn Gines’ *Hannah Arendt and the Negro Question*. Bloomington: Indiana Press, 2014.

Underlying *Incidents*' fugitive space is an assertion of the relationship between ethics and sensory perception. The critical scenes of captive freedom in the text recount Linda's experiences of sensory deprivation, and begin a confusion, or substitution, of the senses with which Linda tries to initially reorient her life. Indeed, a gap between experience and perception will mark her time in the garret, as the garret will mediate her encounters with the outside world, and where her capacity to perceive and to experience will reach their limit. The limit of perception and experience will come to be figured as skin in Henri Bergson (1896) and Frantz Fanon (1952). Indeed, the relationship between experience and perception in the lived body is the crux of phenomenological thought as it develops in the time period immediately after Jacobs' writing, and at the start of which tradition I propose reading her. For Bergson, skin, as the body's surface and limit, is the only portion of space that is both perceived and felt.²⁸ Linda's limited physical movement in the garret and her eventual use of the aperture to extend the range of her perception, figures her captive freedom through prostheses of eye, but also of skin. Both function to extend her senses and form the limit between her interior life and external life.

²⁸ Bergson argues that bodies have an "absorptive capacity" that affects the ways in which objects can act on you depending on their proximity to you. The nearer an object is, the closer it gets from changing from a 'potential' action to a 'real' action. Quite literally, then, the garret extends the limit of Linda's perception and capacity for action to its outer limit instead of her own. Further, it can "absorb" those potential actions outside of the garret (i.e. her hypothetical discovery) and prevent them from becoming 'real.' Bergson's account of absorption usefully posits the relationship between bodies and objects, and between action and potential. According to him, perception consists in the actions performed upon a living body but that body struggles to absorb part of the action. That absorption is what is the activity of, and marks, the internal, because that internal affection is what can absorb, through struggle, part of the action that threatens to 'disintegrate' it. It struggles against that disintegration. Mapped onto Linda's garret, this makes her plane of freedom a site of absorption (because it is that which is internal to the perception that exists in and of the garret-as-skin) and a site of struggle. This site of struggle suggests that the garret can be read as a racialized space. And, though it protects her against the human agents who would harm her, it is not protection against the elements or its own limited space, which progressively disables her. Thus, even within a Bergsonian reading of the room as protective, the garret is still a site of harm, even as the garret absorbs the action (i.e. shields from perception) of the outside world. Even as the garret functions as skin, it is a harmful one in which another entity—Linda Brent, Harriet Jacobs—continues to exist.

If we think of Linda Brent's garret—what Alexander Weheliye calls “a protracted process of enfleshment that also functions as a space of freedom”—in relation to Fanon's epidermal racial schema, the garret cannot be hailed, “Look, a Negro!” (Weheliye 116-117).²⁹ If any such exclamation were possible, it would be “Look! There is no negro!”; “Look! There is no body!” If we encounter in the epidermal garret a collapse between human body and inanimate environment, we see its total resistance of a celebratory fugitivity; rather, it is a relation to place produced through disabling embodied habit which routinizes a physical division from other people and imposes an immediacy of context that shapes Linda's capacity to perceive, know, and feel.

Her body begins to lose its capacities and as her small world further encroaches on her, experience and its absence become definitive in this part of the narrative, for she is “still in prison.” Precisely that which enables her to hide radically isolates and interiorizes her in solitary confinement.³⁰

²⁹ Rather than marking the passage from girlhood to young womanhood, which is the case in Linda Brent's account of her coming to consciousness of her enslaved and racialized status through the sexual persecution of her master, Fanon's moment of racialized aggression comes when he is an adult man, and *from* a child. His previous, harmonious schema (“I came into this world anxious to uncover the meaning of things, my soul desirous to be at the origin of the world”) shatters and gives way to the racial epidermal schema (163). He writes, “In the white world, the man of color encounters difficulties in elaborating his body schema. The image of one's body is solely negating. It's an image in the third person. All around the body reigns an atmosphere of certain uncertainty” (165-166). On the one hand, then, we have a pre-racialized-aggression version of a schema (though it has to be marked as more tentative than a certain knowledge of what a schema might be like) in which a body slowly constructs itself as a body in a spatial and temporal world, and on the other, the very difficulty of achieving such a thing, because of the ways in which it is filtered through “an image in the third person”. Lewis R. Gordon summarizes the scene of Fanon's interpellation as “pure exteriority” (48). One distinction to draw here between Jacobs' epidermal garret and Fanon's epidermal racial schema is one of externality and internality. Although similarly sparked by external acts of racialized aggression, Fanon emphasizes—pathologizes—the experience of being stuck in *outsideness*. By contrast, Linda's life in the garret is *pure* interiority. The garret, by absorbing perception as a skin (as opposed to Fanon's skin's exposure to the perception of the child) renders her in a space of interiority that posits a very different beginning for an account of race and phenomenology that is not premised on over-exposure and visibility, but rather on a fugitivity that cannot (yet) flee the scene of slavery.

³⁰ Lisa Guenther writes a Fanonian analysis of solitary confinement. She writes about the erosion of sense and ability to distinguish between self and other, “even the fundamental capacity to feel pain and to distinguish their own pain from that of others” (xi). What Guenther identifies as the fundamental capacity to feel pain is linked to what she calls elsewhere in her book, “intracorporeality”—the connection and

Understanding the garret as epidermal not only connects Jacobs to the later accounts of race and phenomenology that more typically commence with Fanon,³¹ but it also allows us access to the space of ethics in a version of indistinction from environment that accounts for the violence of the objectifying power of slavery; that accounts for the fugitive potential to navigate through geographies of enslavement without ignoring attendant forms of harm and racialization; and figures the radical isolation and deprivation of Linda's field of freedom without rendering her as always already voiceless.

Fanon's account of being fictively rendered "by the other, the white man, who had woven me out of a thousand details, anecdotes, stories" (95, and quoting Fanon) marks an important departure from my reading of Jacobs. In fact, it is here that we see a *narrative* distinction emerging. Whereas Fanon is made of "a thousand details, anecdotes, and stories," in *Incidents* we have a narratological distinction in that the history of Harriet Jacobs, even and especially as it is told through the pseudonym of Linda Brent, occurs in the first person (91). We then have specific patterns of address emanating from that first person, but they are emanating from what I have been arguing is a different kind of bodily formation; namely, the epidermal garret.

It is not that there are no first persons in the other phenomenological texts:

Bergson begins his explorations by invoking his own body: "I pass now to the study, in

access to other, physical bodies—and its deprivation has desperate effects on the perception of self and other, environment and person. I do not discount that Linda has consistent access to the voices of loved ones, either to overhear or to speak with in hurried exchanges while she remains above in the garret, but the scene of imprisonment still resonates. The intracorporeality that Guenther describes as denied to people in solitary confinement, is replaced with two other things according to both Guenther and Fanon: first, an indistinction from environment, whereby the self is not supported in a network and cannot make sense of the world, and second, a fictive rendering of the self by another.

³¹ For example, the work of Lewis Gordon.

bodies similar to my own, of the structures of that particular image which I call my body” (18). Fanon will go on to ask, “Oh my body, make of me a man who always questions” (142). Bergson posits a particular visuality to this body which he calls as such, and Fanon, addressing his own body, posits a self-addressing subject. Both are able to, and do, address their own corporeality: ‘I will call my body’ and ‘Oh my body.’ For both, the body is then the possibility of a site of individuation. In *Incidents*, the body works very differently: McKittrick’s “disembodied master eye” of the aperture arises from an indistinction between Linda Brent (pseudonym) and Harriet Jacobs (author) (43). Unlike Bergson and Fanon, this address is not uncomplicatedly embodied. Instead, we see Jacobs in an environment of indistinction and a circumscribed terrain in which neither perception nor interiority are clearly distinguished, but that yet produces a form of address arising from the ethics of fugitive habits.

IV: Realizing Sense

Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl produces a form of address that posits a relationship to ethics that emerges between thinking and feeling at the site of the epidermal garret. Yet, any easy application of the formal relationship between sentiment and genre sets up the problem that is persistent, as Saidiya Hartman argues, in literature treating slavery. This is the effect of the (over)representation of feeling in narratives of suffering. For this reason, Hartman seeks to “illuminate the terror of the mundane and quotidian rather than exploit the shocking spectacle” (4). Indeed, as the preceding discussion of the epidermal garret has shown, the mundane for Harriet Jacobs is a shocking spectacle that exists outside the regime of sight: the repetitious mundanity of

nothing happening to one threatens to disintegrate the self. Linda's sensory capacities are extended by and merge with the garret, and Jacobs as narrator must craft a voice from that scene of indistinction, without reconsolidating the self as an object of pity. She does this through what I call an ethic of realizing sense. Let me explain.

Jacobs' repeated address to the reader hinges, in both the text and its critical reception, on sympathy and sense. Jacobs denies that she seeks to induce sympathy in her readers: "Neither do I care to excite sympathy for my own suffering," rather asserting the following:

But I do earnestly desire to arouse the women of the North to a realizing sense of the condition of two millions of women at the South, still in bondage, suffering what I suffered... (2).

This term 'realizing sense' posits an alternative to the bind of sympathy. Hartman problematizes the status of empathy in a textual tradition aimed at abolitionist audiences who desired to be moved and at times titillated by stirring accounts of slavery (21). This question of accessing the suffering of others, and the capacity of that access to instill change and action, is jeopardized by the return to the self.

If to empathize—to feel another's pain—is in this frame to gratify an imaginative connection in which one can feel for oneself, and from which one can retreat to the safety of one's own privilege, Jacobs' 'realizing sense' posits a different reaction through its pairing of emotion and thought. Further, she offers *herself*, rather than the reader, as the immediate, but short-circuited, empathetic conduit: what I suffered, others have suffered, have no sympathy for *me*. This move offers as available to the reader a deferred and incomplete empathetic connection that demands both thought and feeling to complete its

gesture. By establishing herself—Harriet Jacobs, Linda Brent—as a location of suffering, and as an imaginative bridge to the sufferings of ‘two millions of women in the South,’ Jacobs compels the reader to both feel and to engage in the multiplication of her experiences. Yet, she does not “care to excite sympathy for my own sufferings” (3). By invoking this ‘realizing sense,’ Jacobs subverts the more dangerous iterations of empathy that Hartman identifies, while yet employing reason (realizing) and feeling (sense) in the cause of her narrative.

Rather than her own body (by contrast to the ‘Oh my body’ of Fanon), Jacobs addresses the reader:

O virtuous reader! You never knew what it is to be a slave, to be entirely unprotected by law or custom; to have the laws reduce you to the condition of a chattel, entirely subject to the will of another... Still, looking back, calmly, on the events of my life, I feel that the slave woman ought not to be judged by the same standards as others (62).

Any description of this moment as pandering or strategic appeal to white northerners, and (potential) abolitionists relies on the very problematic gesture of sympathy that Jacobs carefully navigates in her invocation of ‘realizing sense,’ and ignores the careful development, over the course of the narrative, of an ethics that centres on *listening*, and thus displaces the centrality of both subject and object.³² Through the ethic of realizing sense, Jacobs seeks to cultivate a habit of listening that theorizes the speech acts of the oppressed, and whose sphere of speech, from her subaltern position in/as garret, asks

³² Jennifer Stoeber writes of Jacobs and Frederick Douglass that they “... introduced a key trope of African American Literature, “the listener” and argues that listening when represented “as the dominant sense” “symbolically disintegrates audio and visual experience, demonstrating how sound communicated truths about slavery and resistance that the eye already distorted” (35).

neither ‘can the subaltern speak,’ nor even ‘can the subaltern be *heard*’ but rather employs direct address: O reader.

Harriet Jacobs’ use of realizing sense is predicated on a diffusion of subject and object that revisits the queries about instrumentality we have been rehearsing thus far. Realizing sense is therefore relational—it connects addressee and addressor—and yet also indistinct, because of Jacobs’ necessary layering of name and pseudonym, thought and feeling, and its deliberately diffuse empathetic force. In fact, many of the structural forms—that disallowed particularity without activity and humanity without labour—that we have seen in my preceding accounts appear again otherwise here, with Linda, despite her position of garreted indistinction, producing a non-instrumentalized ethic of speech and of listening. By giving this reading centered on and emanating from the epidermal garret, she produces an account of ethics distinctly positioned to refute those strands of becoming-environment and labouring-humanity that persist long after the period in which she writes.

V: Virtue Ethics, Rearranged

Despite her life in print, Harriet Jacobs is subaltern. The social, or asocial, experience of the garret is the problem that Jacobs poses to us. The communication of that experience is the heart of her narrative and the basis for her philosophic intervention, which is to find modes of narration and speech that arise from and can recount extreme violence and suppression. Like Harriet Jacobs, Fricker is attuned to the capacity of listening. In response to the problem of epistemic injustice, she proposes a new virtue, that of ‘virtuous hearing.’ It gives a name to what Jacobs, in her address to the reader,

was already seeking to construct: virtuous hearers. The concept of virtuous hearers—those who develop “empirically well-grounded habits of epistemically charged social perception” that allow them to self-correct and understand utterances in the contextual knowledge of epistemic violence—describes what Jacobs was already doing through address in the narrative to fully engage a wider ethical project by seeking to instill a similar virtue (Fricker 5). Thus, Jacobs’ realizing sense uses address to construct virtuous hearers—not exclusively sympathetic ones. If Jacobs wants us to be virtuous hearers, she might also caution us against being “evasive listeners,” a concept virtue ethicist Lisa Tessman takes from Lawrence Langer (*Burdened Virtues* 154). Evasive listeners “do not want to acknowledge how fragile and inadequate morality can be, nor that there are losses for which no moral practices can substitute or compensate and from which nothing of value comes” (155). Realizing sense can do the work of virtuous hearing by taking the epistemological claims of the oppressed seriously, by listening to and understanding lacunae in our capacity to name certain forms of oppression, and by countering the ways in which credibility is discounted because of epistemic disadvantage.

In *Incidents*, Jacobs also presents a sustained reflection on the reduced capacity to make promises under slavery. We can expand this reflection to include what J.L. Austin calls performative utterances: promises, vows, bequeathals, and marriage. In Jacobs’ careful narrative, these are infelicitous acts, emptied of moral and legal significance. Yet even within this frame of foreclosure, we see glimpses of an otherwise. In reflecting on her mother, and her wedding vows, Jacobs recollects that “the vows had at least been sacred to her, and she had never violated them,” maintaining a space of agency even as the racial, economic, and legal structures of slavery appear to have no outside within

reach (120). Thus in this text that, through strategic leveraging of realizing sense—superadded to the sentimental genre of domestic fiction—seeks to insert the experience of enslaved black women into the male-dominated genre of the slave narrative, we find a sustained engagement with what Tessman describes as living under conditions of disempowerment, where virtues are “burdened” and “disjoined from the bearer’s flourishing” (*Burdened Virtues* 4).

According to Tessman, moral failure argues against both constructivist (that which one ought to do ceases to be a moral requirement if one cannot) and idealists (where ought logically implies can) to say that there are situations in which one is a sufficient moral actant to act, but not sufficiently able to make one’s moral choice. Slavery is one of those conditions in which people with moral capacity cannot make choices in line with their own morality: the choices they do make, constrained by the impossible moral ought, may thus carry moral remainder (*Moral Failure* 14).³³ In these lights, we can consider the garret as a dramatization of this: perhaps we can think that Linda spends time in the damaging environs of the incapacity to make a moral choice in line with her values.

It is precisely from this place of constraint that Jacobs’ narrative situates her choices and ethical desires within the frame of her family, not within the frame that the more common version of this argument, that reads Linda Brent assiduously challenging bourgeois virtues of womanhood, might consider. For, while Jacobs has moments where she does not feel enslaved women ought to be judged by the same standards as free women, her narrative meditates more complexly on the damage done by slavery to

³³ For more on moral remainder, see Bernard Williams.

women in their capacity as knowers and as moral actants—these claims predicated on a robust insistence on the full moral capacity of women whose situations challenge the foundations of ‘ought’ implies ‘can.’

That this is dramatized spatially in the garret reorients our readings of the text’s moralizing power—that instead of an appeal to forgiveness or understanding, Jacobs is asserting the particular form of harm that is being unable to live one’s own ethic. Thus, when she says, “Still, looking back, calmly, on the events of my life, I feel that the slave woman ought not to be judged by the same standards as others,” it is not to reject any kind of moral frame under slavery, but rather to situate it within her own, matriarchal virtue ethics tradition (62). It is in the context of *this* tradition, in which she bears moral remainder. Jacobs, then, through realizing sense, produces a moral philosophy based not only on constructing virtuous hearers, but also demanding that we not be evasive listeners who refuse to think of the many modalities of the violence of slavery. By making argumentative claims we can now identify as in line with discourses of moral failure and epistemic injustice, she demands our unflinching, virtuous, non-evasive listening. This is what it means, then, to have a ‘realizing sense.’

VI: Contagious Fugitivities

I have framed this argument about address as being particularly afforded by the epidermal garret. And perhaps the reader may wonder at the juxtaposition of disparate canons and philosophies. This chapter has been concerned with how Jacobs figures an ethics that is shared with others, but this ethic is constructed through a refusal to capitulate to the moral claims of work and productivity; by giving this reading centered

on and emanating from the epidermal garret, she produces an account distinctly positioned to refute those strands of becoming-environment and labouring-humanity that persist long after the period in which she writes.

Throughout this reading of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, I have been pursuing a query about ethics and indistinction. Harriet Jacobs' narrative departs from those accounts with which I began, as it is neither based on the establishment of differentiation from soil through labour and towards sovereignty, nor the giving up of sovereignty, an unavailable category in the text. Rather, the form of indistinction that emerges in the garret is one of radical interiority, where the skin of the garret protects from perception, and yet becomes a site of violence. Yet Linda Brent acts on the room also, just as it acts on her: because of her hiding, the garret becomes a fugitive room. Linda's freedom status is catching, and she imbues the space around her with fugitivity.

The passages to which I have most closely attended are not the entirety of Jacobs' narration, however. Once she effects a physical escape to the north, Linda, now a different kind of fugitive, still vulnerable to recapture because of the newly passed Fugitive Slave Law, has both employment and movement. In order that the book could be published, the prominent abolitionist Lydia Maria Child wrote prefatory authenticating remarks, in which she emphasizes her knowledge of Jacobs' employment, and the esteem in which those who employ her hold her. Her account of that employment—"This fact is sufficient, without further credentials of her character"—is a curious combination of fact and reticence that goes against the grain of how I have read Jacobs' account (5). Indeed, we can see that the narrative itself functions as 'further credentials,' but I want to pause to think of the ways in which Harriet Jacobs' text functions as a refutation of the link

between virtue and employment. Indeed, the most prolonged account of her employment is one in which the status of fugitivity is again contagious—contagious to that very antithesis of racialized slavery, the white child.

Towards the end of the narrative, once Linda Brent has escaped to the North, we have a scene that resembles conventional accounts of flight more closely. Once in New York, Linda Brent works for a white family looking after their infant. When she hears that her fugitive status is endangered by the presence of Dr. Flint, she realizes she must hide:

My place as a nurse could not be supplied immediately, and this generous, sympathizing lady proposed that I should carry the baby away... But few mothers would have consented to have their own babies become a fugitive, for the sake of a poor hunted nurse, on whom the legislators of the country had let loose the bloodhounds! (216).

By using the white child as her alibi, Linda calls that child fugitive also. Her mistress—however reliant on her labour—allows her infant to temporarily traverse the boundaries of free and slave, fugitive and citizen. This is of course not a racialized fugitivity and the white child's whiteness functions to aid Linda precisely because of the protection of whiteness inherent in American society. Yet if we have been thinking about how activity and nonactivity produce the worlds in which racialization is constructed, this fugitive child hints towards the refutation of fixed racialized relationships predicated on labour; it ironically uses the very semblance of that fixity—the supreme legitimacy of a Black woman serving a white child—to hide. Thus again, as with the garret, we see Jacobs entering impossibly into a racialized structure, and rearranging it.

CHAPTER TWO

Circuits through Injury:Plantation Economies and Diasporic Forms in Charles Chesnutt and V.S. Naipaul

In both V.S. Naipaul's *A House for Mr Biswas* and Charles Chesnutt's *Conjure Stories*, meditations on injury occur at sites in which racialized bodies exist in anxious and dynamic proximity to objects. Both authors write in the aftermath of the legal dissolution of plantation economies built on racialized, colonial, and enforced labour. Both texts revisit agrarian labour while maintaining narrative distance—in Chesnutt through his postbellum frame, and in Naipaul with his post-indentureship setting. Yet Chesnutt's narrative frame works assiduously to demonstrate the persistence of plantation economy logics in the postbellum period, for instance in how Uncle Julius' stories have a moral lesson that directly affects material considerations in the life of the narrative frame. Meanwhile, Naipaul foregrounds the continuities of indentured labour through his representation, for example, of the Tulsi family economic structure.³⁴ Both texts employ injury as circuits that are transhistorical—as they consider and trouble the 'post' of legal structures of enforced labour—and, in the conversation I stage between them, transnational. I therefore extend what Brinda J. Mehta terms "a common heritage of *kala pani* crossings on the 'black' Atlantic" and connect the Indo-Caribbean with the American South, to consider the long life of injury arising from plantation economies (Mehta 15).

The relationship between geography and difference, and between geography and literary form, has been analyzed extensively within a Black Diasporic context. For

³⁴ As argued by Vijay Mishra in "(B)ordering Naipaul: Indenture History and Diasporic Poetics" *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies*. Vol 5, no 2, Fall 1996. 189-237. Especially page 217.

example, Katherine McKittrick's *Demonic Grounds* argues that "... racial domination and human injustices are spatially propped up by racial-sexual codes" and that "racism and sexism produce attendant geographies that are bound up in human disempowerment and dispossession" (3). McKittrick's use of space builds on Edouard Glissant's use of landscape and is sympathetic with his argument that a spatial structure gives rise to (literary) form. Glissant connects everyday repetition—how the "same organization would create a rhythm of economic production and form the basis of a style of life"—to expressive culture (63). From these spatially constituted—but geographically vast—conditions, arises the "cry of the Plantation, transfigured into the speech of the world"—a transnational literary form (73).

Yet, even as we have form as space, form as economy, and form as literary expression with their sometimes separate critical lives in the region, there has been less critical attention to extend these analyses to consider the entwined histories that mark the Americas and, I will argue, that can influence how transnational diasporic literary form informs our readings of canonical texts. Beginning in this chapter with the Caribbean context, whose diasporas are typically treated as separate phenomena, I argue that these nuances across difference deepen our understanding of the relationship between economic structures and literary form. And it is here that the persistence of the trope of injury—particularly injury that is potentially transfigurative and either animates objects or does violence to them—becomes evident. What then, can injury tell us about form? If Caroline Levine's influential *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* seeks to extend formal analysis beyond aesthetics to the realm of the 'social' with her definition of form as "an arrangement of elements—an ordering, patterning, or shaping..." (Levine 3), I

argue that in literatures of both the South Asian and Black diasporas, injury dramatizes not a static arrangement but a circuit as dynamic *rearrangement* that brings together histories of Indigenous dispossession, African enslavement, Indian indenture, and their aftermaths. Diasporic forms *move*, just as they stage injury's capacity to transfigure. In both Naipaul's *A House for Mr Biswas* and Chesnutt's *Conjure Stories*, injured/injuring objects alert us to temporal and ontological dynamism as historical and literary form.

I: The Liveliness of Injury

When Mr Biswas' powerful in-laws, the Tulsis, consign him to move into barracks on their Trinidadian sugar estate, Biswas is placed in a false position of authority over the workers, whose conditions vary little from the generation of indentured labourers from whom they are descended. These "dispossessed labourers, though they saw Mr Biswas every day, contented themselves with sending messages by other labourers" (Naipaul 219). Mr Biswas, powerless despite his privileged position as a driver, must respond, "Is not me... Is not my land. I just doing a job and drawing a salary" (219). The labourers, who had at first accepted him hopefully as someone who might help improve their lives, become resigned and eventually hostile towards him. It is within this context—one in which fleeting power is proved illusory, and the promises of salaried labour are rendered small—that Mr Biswas experiences a mental breakdown that figures injury as an agential capacity of objects.

In his barracks room, Mr Biswas makes exaggerated movements to "destroy the stillness" and to "challenge the alertness of the room and the objects in it" (219). Despite his attempt to assert a monopoly on action and on consciousness in that room, he

eventually succumbs to the fear of the space's own agencies: "he thought of the power of the rockers to grind and crush and inflict pain, on his hands and toes and the tenderer parts of his body" (219). Only when the chair's rocking "fell silent" could he "look away from it" (219). Yet this shift from audible movement to vision invites new horrors: "On the wall he saw a nail that could puncture his eyes. The window could trap and mangle. So could the door. Every leg of the green table could press and crush" (219). Thus, the room and its contents become potentially injuring agents: they can crush, maim, and fix Mr Biswas in his place.

By contrast, in Charles Chesnutt's 1899 short story "Po' Sandy," Sandy, a slave who is continuously lent out to neighbouring plantations at great profit to his master, *longs* for fixity through objecthood: "I wisht I wuz a tree, er a stump, er a rock, er sump'n w'at could stay on de planation fer a w'ile" (17). Tenie, his wife, is a conjure woman, proficient in spiritual and medicinal practices derived from syncretic African religious practices. She grants Sandy's wish for a rooted stability that, while it does not escape the terrain of the plantation itself, does allow him to live in it otherwise, by turning him into a tree. Yet his transformation into a tall pine tree does not render him immune to injury: the harm he endures as a living tree threatens his bodily integrity, as the injurious actions of wildlife and humans mark both his pine and human bodies. What begins with the exploitation of his body for labour continues through assaults on the pine tree by both natural and human actors, culminating in his brutal felling and milling. The violence racial slavery commits on the enslaved body, its autonomy and integrity, continues across Sandy's changed life forms. Even as dismembered lumber he is reincorporated into the working of the plantation when his planks are used to construct a kitchen. The enslaved

body is for labour as the milled tree is for construction and as the kitchen is for producing food to fuel the working of the plantation: it is only when Sandy's ghost (the ghost of a man/slave/pile of wood) haunts the building that his being is eventually rendered *useless*. His ghost, which deters those who would use the kitchen, is the only form of life that offers a serious disruption to the discourses of productivity predicated on the stable, healthy, immutable body of the slave. Sandy's story illustrates how structures—racial violence, labour exploitation—persist through forms: a pertinent observation for the postbellum narrative frame of the story, and the post-Reconstruction moment of the text's publication.

In the case of Mr Biswas' barracks room, objects threaten injury by their animated potential to render Mr Biswas inert. For Sandy, the liberatory potential of becoming-object proves destructive, and it is as an object that he is ultimately murdered and reincorporated into the plantation. If, for Mr Biswas, the architectural structure of the barracks room and its furnishings are those objects that have persisted through changing regimes of enforced labour, it is the inheritance of the previous occupant's literary engagement—the newspaper-papered room—that provides an alternative trajectory from the occupation of his youth as sign painter to his eventual career as a journalist. The barracks room, then, as intersection between text and structure, imbued with histories of enforced labour, demonstrates how the traffic of 'objects' become intrinsic to diasporic forms. This allows for a reading of Naipaul's text against its own realist commitments—imagining that, like in Chesnutt's conjure tales, objects might animate, and animate beings might become objects. Literature, then, arising from non-identical plantation economies, through non-identical genres, and non-identical national traditions, shares a

preoccupation with how injury moves through/as form: Biswas' threatening rocking chair and Po' Sandy's haunting tree-corpse therefore posit the liveliness of injury.

II: Injury from Objects

It is in the aftermath of the creation of a multiply racialized geography that Mr Biswas longs for his titular house. Indian indentured labour from South Asia was introduced in 1845 to Trinidad, a colony already marked by mass land expropriation from Indigenous peoples, with a majority Afro-descended, recently emancipated population. The continuities between slavery and indenture are stark: not only did the *kala pani* ('black water' crossing, the journey indentured South Asians made from Indian ports to colonies around the British Empire) resonate with the Middle Passage, but conditions and accommodation upon arrival were often unchanged.³⁵ Especially initially, 'Immigrants' moved into barracks on the same sugar plantations run by the same class of plantation owners that the emancipated slaves had just vacated after a brief, and eventually aborted, period of 'Apprenticeship.' As Hershini Bhana Young discusses in the South African context, the distinctions between free and unfree labour in the post-slavery moment were by no means always clear for any subjugated group.³⁶ This has wider implications outside of South Africa: for example, after the abolition of the slave trade in the British Empire, if slavers were caught, the captured Africans—legally classified as cargo and therefore as

³⁵ As argued most classically in Tinker. Additionally, Lowe writes about the alliance of antislavery and anticolonial thinkers on this point, and quotes Frederick Douglass: "the rights of the coolie in California, in Peru, in Jamaica, in Trinidad, and on board the vessels bearing them to these countries are scarcely more guarded than were those of the Negro slaves brought to our shores a century ago" (Douglass, quoted in Lowe 35).

³⁶ For more on the ways that African indenture seriously disrupts divisions between slavery and indentureship, see Rupprecht.

contraband property—would be confiscated by the British and impressed into military service for up to fourteen years (Rupprecht 85). If unfit for military service, these contraband persons were forced into indentureship contracts that brought them to the very plantations to which they might otherwise have been, illegally, sold. Stricter rules existed about the types of labour that indentured Africans—as opposed to enslaved Africans—could perform, particularly after the abolition of slavery, which did not put an end to indentured African servitude. There was a ban on field work in favour of domestic or skilled labour being enforced by inspectors who could demand annual reports, and who could, if the bound servant was not available for inspection, fine the master for double the market worth of a slave (85-86).

Rather than consider systems of enforced labour as in stark opposition, or even in fluid continuum, I read three iterations of the plantation economy (Indigenous, African, South Asian) and consider their residual effects. Mr Biswas' barracks, then, invites a consideration of how the introduction of a new population in the novel's most recent past layers onto, and rearranges, plantation economies—or, colonially produced relationships to land, labour, and dispossession.

I make plural the more typically singular plantation “economies” to mark these arrangements of land, labour, and dispossession precisely because of their function as sites of the production of genres of difference. Though plantation economy, singular, is most often (and very productively) treated as a consolidation of biologized racialism and capitalism, my analysis instead broadens both ‘plantation’ and ‘economy’ in the Caribbean in order that the three figures of the other—‘native,’ ‘slave,’ and ‘coolie’—come into view, which allows for an inter-subaltern analysis. This analysis does *not*

suggest the sameness or even the similarity of difference-formation and dispossession across groups, but rather seeks to demonstrate how, through pliable rearrangement, structures (what Stoler would call an “imperial formation” with “vital reconfiguration[s]”) produce new forms (*Imperial Debris* 10).

In an early example of these iterations, under Spanish colonialism, groups of Indigenous people, gathered under the name ‘Carib,’ lived on cocoa plantations on designated Mission lands in Trinidad (Forte 175). As compared to sugar cane and cotton, which were primarily worked by enslaved Africans, cocoa cultivation was seen as less labour-intensive, and was typically excluded from designation as such. This view conflicted less starkly with the characterization of Indigenous people as ‘non-labouring,’ which, in a Lockean tradition, disqualified Indigenous people from producing a relationship to land as property through labour.³⁷ Nevertheless, we see functioning, through the trope of protection, the plantation as a site of work and of dispossession; though nominally free, occupants of Mission lands were restricted to living and working on these protected lands, at risk of losing recognition and rights if they refused (Forte 177). Free, but fixed; working, but excluded from labour, Indigenous Caribbeans, despite

³⁷ Shona Jackson discusses the ways in which labour as an ontoepistemic system is used in the postcolonial Caribbean as the foundation of citizenship, and how that functions to erase Indigenous people—long figured as non-labouring across South American and Caribbean contexts—from participation in the nation state. I discuss her work more in chapter three. Tiffany King’s work on fungibility takes issue with the primacy of labour as a category to assert/enter into humanity, and she argues instead for an understanding of how Black fungibility—and not just Black labour—found settler geographies. My discussion of labour and indigeneity finds resonances with both these arguments, particularly as I am not arguing for a recognition of labour where it has been unrecognized before *per se*, but rather tracking how labour—in its various relations to land and dispossession—finds radically different formulations across population groups. That there are other ways of being that do not centre on labour ought not to be precluded by this analysis. Additionally, Patrick Wolfe argues that “[t]here was nothing inherently unenslavable about Indians. Rather, there is an inherent tension between enslavement and indigeneity. Thus the problems attending the enslavement of Indians largely ceased to apply if they were exchanged for Africans from Caribbean plantations” (886).

their frequent exclusion from settler colonial and Caribbean scholarship, complicate the origin and function of plantations as a site of imported, racialized labour, even as their ‘extinction’ is always already inscribed.

A House for Mr Biswas ironically rehearses the erasure of presence through the erasure of work at another plantation site, Shorthills, where the entire Tulsi family moves in a failed experiment in self-sufficiency. They come across a road sign: “The letters were bleached and faint: Christopher Columbus Road. It was fitting. The land, though fruitful from former cultivation, felt new” (Naipaul 382). Cultivated land here functions as evidence of erasure; as in the novel, the former, Creole cultivation of the land enacts an imagined ‘newness’ that aligns the land around the plantation with pre-Columbian civilization. If in this analogy the Tulsi family is to the formerly enslaved as Columbus was to Indigenous original inhabitants, the gesture of distancing still allows for imaginative identification: Mr Biswas “found it easy to imagine the other race of Indians moving about this road before the world grew dark for them” (20). That world’s ‘darkening,’ the result of a combination of physical and discursive genocidal practices, occurs at the intersection of road and plantation and underscores the movement towards racialization and ‘extinction.’

It is not the first time that “the other race of Indians” appears in the text. As a child, Mr Biswas works as a conductor on his uncle’s bus, and in that capacity travels around the island:

He enjoyed the noisy rivalry, and endangered himself needlessly by hanging far out from the running-board to sing to people on the road, ‘Tunapuna, Naparima, Sangre Grande, Guayaguayare, Mahatma Gandhi

and back,” the glorious Amerindian names forming an imaginary route that took in the four corners of the Island and one place, Chacachacre, across the sea (Naipaul 75-76).

Of the five ‘Amerindian’ names on Biswas’ route, four reference indigenous history, and the fifth, ‘Mahatma Gandhi’, moves beyond the local history of Trinidad to the subcontinent in an ironic gesture rendering Gandhi as native to the island. The description is thus exceeded by its examples, a pattern that occurs again in the next sentence, when the imaginary route attempts to encompass the corners of the island—four—and *another one*—across the sea. This time, the overseas reference that exceeds the four corners is not so distant as Gandhi’s India, but rather indicates an island just off the coast of Trinidad (and therefore inaccessible by bus) that has an Indigenous name, was a cotton plantation, and became a leper colony.

Mr Biswas, however ironically, is able to align South Asian diasporic and indigenous history; by contrast, pre-indenture categories of difference strongly distinguished between Amerindian and African labourers. While we have Indigenous people inflected by ‘extinction,’ ‘protected,’ ‘non-labouring,’ ‘natural men,’ largely limited to cocoa cultivation, enslaved Africans worked plantations as legally enslaved ‘natural slaves.’ These categories were mutually exclusive: natural men, those even as they work, whose labour is rendered as non-productive of property; natural slaves, whose capacity for labour is rendered as non-productive of spiritual or legal personhood.³⁸ But this relationship would come to change when what little land allotted to Indigenous people by ‘right’ was revoked through the imposition of strict rules against

³⁸ See: Pagden, Jackson, Wolfe.

miscegenation. Thus, the imposition of *racial* logics not only disrupted a previously accepted relationship to territory, but also began to blur the categories of race and indigeneity with the express purpose of erasing the latter category (Forte 178). This ‘myth of extinction’ is powerfully trenchant, operating through a vector of ‘racial’ ‘purity’—if it allows Mr Biswas to imagine ‘the other race of Indian’ in transit through a darkening world, it also reflects the ways that complexion, admixture, and antiblack racism were leveraged in the service of rendering a population *as* extinct.

While racial logics imposed on indigeneity led to the rapid process of land dispossession, racist legal policies post-emancipation restricted the sale of land, which barred the African descendants so recently enslaved. In 1836, three years after the abolition of slavery in the British Empire, the Secretary of State for the colonies, Lord Glenelg, advised colonies to “fix such a price on all Crown lands as may place them out of reach of persons without capital” (Persad 42). This was achieved by mandating that crown land in Trinidad be sold in no smaller parcels than 640 acres, priced at a prohibitive minimum of £1 per acre (42). This legal practice, and its attendant prohibitions on property ownership, though it echoes the terms of Mr Biswas’ plaintive response to the labourers of “Is not me... Is not my land...”, should *not* be directly applied onto the later legal drama of land ownership among Indian Immigrants (Naipaul 219). For, after the first wave of labourers took their contractual passage back home, planters—whose anxieties about black ownership had, a mere decade before, led to the restructuring of land rights—again sought a governmental intervention, this time in the form of land grants of 5-10 acres per revoked passage home (Persad 42). They thereby encouraged the settlement—explicitly referred to as a desired settler colony—of

indentured labourers in hopes of forming a permanent, free workforce (Shepherd 5). South Asian communities began to form in rural South Trinidad while African workers gravitated towards the city for non-agricultural work; land and labour settled into new configurations. It is therefore within this residually-variegated landscape of labour commodification—a multiply iterative and uneven racial capitalism—that the salaried Mr Biswas, in his chronotopic barracks room, fears injury from objects.

In the barracks room, post-indenture, we can do a fairly uncomplicated reading of why objects might be threatening violence on the person of Mr Biswas in light of Karl Marx's writing on the commodity. In *The Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, Marx famously asserts that labour produces “not only commodities: it produces itself and the worker as *commodity*” (63). If Mr Biswas identifies the objects in the room with the labourers over whom he has ostensible control, the fear of objects injuring becomes a straight parable about his fears that the labourers will rise up against him. Yet if we look later in “Estranged Labour,” Marx argues that “the object which labour produces—labour's product—confronts it as *something alien*, as a *power independent* of the producer. *The product of labour is labour which has been congealed in an object, which becomes material: it is the objectification of labour*” (66, emphasis in last sentence added). This last sentence opens out to a less strictly material reading of how injury works in a novel I am reading as less strictly realist than it appears. If labour “congeals” into object, processes of labour produce a variety of kinds of dynamic objecthood. The verb “congeal” in this English translation brings labour and object together in a fleshly process, evoking the blood's processes of recovering from/stemming injury, but Marx's original German of *fixiert* suggests the very fixity that Mr Biswas fears will be inflicted

upon him by his barracks room.³⁹ The room, a physical structure that links Mr Biswas' labour to indenture and to slavery, is both object and objectifying, potentially injuring, and potentially transfigurative. Mr Biswas' fantasies of violence affect his personhood via an assault on his senses ('eye'), emasculation ('tenderer parts of his body'), freedom of movement ('crush') and bodily integrity ('grind'). The violence of the room, then, is the violence that also renders object: that threatens to reduce Mr Biswas to the state of objecthood that they themselves animate. The legal personhood of indentured labourers distinguished them from enslaved Africans, and the end of the indenture period separates Mr Biswas from the enforced labour of his parents' generation; nevertheless, the meditation on injured objects within the architectural structure of the barracks suggests a link between this scene and the furnishings of slavery as they relate to the form of the plantation economy. The sugar estate, its barracks, its very furniture is implicated in this injurious circuit.

Biswas' room, its walls papered with newspapers by a previous occupant, is, indeed, as the following description of the room supports, itself an architectural intersection of literary form and economy:

It was obviously the work of a literate. No sheet had been placed upside down, and Mr Biswas found himself continuously exposed to the journalism of his time, its bounce and excitement bottled and made quaint in these old newspapers (Naipaul 198).

³⁹ "Das Produkt der Arbeit ist die Arbeit, die sich in einem Gegenstand fixiert, sachlich gemacht hat, es ist die *Vergegenständlichung* der Arbeit" Marx, Karl. *Ökonomisch-philosophische Manuskripte aus dem Jahre 1844*. Berlin: Contumax GmbH & Co, 2017. 53.

The room, an enclosed, legible container, links the barracks room to the form of the novel itself, as the headline “AMAZING SCENES WERE WITNESSED YESTERDAY WHEN” is echoed in the chapter title of ‘Amazing Scenes,’ as well as going on to become one of Biswas’ own literary tropes, which he uses excessively in his later journalism. Indeed, the literary becomes an important intervention on this scene of injury. In direct response to the menace of objects, Mr Biswas “lay face down on the bed, not wanting to see and, to drive the shapes of objects from his head, he concentrated on the shapes of the letters, working out design after design of the letter R” (Naipaul 219-220). In an effort to dismiss the fearful thoughts of these violent objects, Mr Biswas turns to language—or, more specifically, to typography. It is through imagining different iterations of the same letter that he is able to regain control of his mind. Through the imposition of a designing intent, and his shift of the violence of objects into the imaginative control over letters, he literalizes a transition from the threat of objecthood to the potential of an articulating subject—both, significantly, occurring through a rubric of form.

III: Genres of Difference: Race and Caste

In an early scene in *A House for Mr Biswas*, Mr Biswas paints signs for the Tulsi family store and meets Shama, one of the family’s fourteen daughters. He writes her a note: “I love you and I want to talk to you” (81). Between the slipping of this note onto the counter and the resultant assessment of Biswas’ marital suitability, is a rare scene of interracial contact in the novel:

While he hesitated a fat Negro woman went to Shama's counter and asked for flesh-coloured stockings, which were then enjoying some vogue in rural Trinidad.

Shama, still smiling, took down a box and held up a pair of black stockings (80).

Within the transactional setting of the Tulsi store we see an economy of colour signifiers, though in this instance the transaction fails because of Shama's distracted inability to parse them. The woman, in search of 'flesh coloured' stockings, a shade that traffics in whiteness, is instead given black cotton stockings, translating 'flesh' to Black to black, and causing great offence. Shama fumbles the nexus of race and commodity signifiers at hand. That this explicitly *racialized* scene directly precedes and occasions the scene in which the Tulsi family assesses Mr Biswas' caste—"they had married Shama to him simply because he was of the proper caste, just as they had married the daughter called C to an illiterate coconut-seller" emphasizes the presence of two categories—race and caste—and their ambivalent relationships to labour and commodity (93). Race, caste, labour, and commodity are here shown to be prone to contradiction and confusion. It is a contradiction familiar to Mr Biswas. As a child, he would visit his wealthy aunt Tara's house whenever she held a religious ceremony and "needed Brahmins to feed," but once he left the house, "he became once more only a labourer's child... father's occupation: labourer was the entry on the birth certificate ... —living with a penniless mother in one room of a mud hut" (47-48). The disjuncture he experiences between status and possession marks the text's exploration of questions of property and labour, and how they recalibrate, even as they mark the persistence of discourses of caste. Naipaul's novel

stages the hierarchy of caste as in fact unmoored from property and occupation, and fraudtly co-present and incommensurate with race.

I have been arguing that our foundational categories of similarity and difference have been overdetermined. I am interested in thinking about the uneven and the rearranged to consider and account for not only vertical relationships of power but also to consider horizontal relations amongst groups who could each be termed ‘subaltern.’ This is not to get away from the work that postcolonial difference has achieved—rather, by looking at a particular site, in this instance the Caribbean, I want to think about how ‘difference’ is ordered, not only as colonizer/colonized, or bondsman/master, or even Afro and Indo or Black and Brown, but rather to consider how three genres of difference co-exist—namely race, caste, indigeneity—in the same location, and often using the same constitutive—though rearranged—parts to produce difference.

My term ‘genres of difference’ deliberately owes much, as discussed in the introduction, to Sylvia Wynter and her work on genres of the human. Wynter’s account exemplifies the verticality that leaves those outside of power as undifferentiated from each other because their descriptive statements, while they exist, are precluded by Man’s over-representation. However, the modernity inaugurated by and in the Caribbean includes the forced encounter of multiple modes of rendering and understanding difference and power, which each have their own and horizontal relationships and articulations. For this reason, I have been calling them genres of difference, echoing Wynter, but also in order to be attentive to the constructions of difference as form, of which race is one but not the sole formation.

This investigation, especially as it relates to caste in the Caribbean, is necessarily preliminary because of a gap in scholarship on this topic. Hira Singh attributes the absence of significant crossover between indentureship and caste studies to the centrality of access to land and the division of labour to the caste system. In the context of indentureship (which he examines in a South African context), he argues the caste system disappeared because of shared labour and eventually widespread access to land; the Trinidadian system of land grants is illustrative of this as a global phenomenon. Yet scenes in Naipaul's novel stage an understanding of the hierarchy of caste that is in fact unmoored from land and labour—recall Mr Biswas' confusion at returning from a religious ceremony conscious that he is the property-less son of a labourer. Further, in his antagonistic relationship to the Tulsi family, he frequently riffs on the idea that their employment does not align with the status on which they pride themselves. In a striking scene, Mr Biswas 'reassigns' the caste of each member of the family, employing the reformist idea that caste should be determined by actions:

“Road-sweeper? Little washer-boys? Barber? Yes, little barbers.... And what about your mother?... Sha-ma! It just hit me. Pankaj would say that your mother ain't a Hindu at all! I mean, look at the facts. Marrying off her favourite daughter in a registry office. Sending the two little barbers to a Roman Catholic college. As soon as Pankaj sees your mother he would start making the sign of the cross. Roman Catholic, that's what she is!”
(111-112).

By designating Mrs Tulsi's caste as 'Catholic,' Mr Biswas again plays with category definitions in a way that reflects the persistent and anxious instability of caste designations in a Trinidadian context.⁴⁰

Interracial relationships become a particular site of how race and caste are articulated, as caste approaches race through a transformation of caste endogamy into racial endogamy (Jayaram 175). This relationship between caste and race must be understood as occurring simultaneously and in concert with global shifts in forms of racial and ethnic classification. For example, nineteenth-century European race thinkers picked up caste and turned it into a racial category to substantiate the myth of Aryan supremacy (Gandhi 66). Thus it is within a complex interplay of categorization that caste in Trinidad begins to take on elements of race-thinking, even as race takes on elements of caste-thinking, for example the term 'dougla,' designating in Trinidad and Guyana a mixed Indian- and African- descended person, and originating from a term to describe the children of intercaste unions in North India (Bahadur 104).

In gathering these contexts and fields, I am arguing that looking at genres of difference helps us to understand the work that racialization—a process derived from and

⁴⁰ Seesaran provides a historical basis for this kind of confusion, as she discusses the persistence of caste status among Christian, particularly Presbyterian converts, remarking that "... although in Christianity caste was nonexistent, yet it was a positive factor in the opinion of the missionaries, who never failed to make special mention of a high caste person whom they encountered," and particularly valuing high caste converts (122). N Jayaram, through his ethnographic studies of caste in Trinidad, describes it as 'metamorphosed' (146). Under indenture, caste ceased to be a system of dividing labour because all labourers performed the same tasks, and Jayaram recounts that, to spite high caste workers, low caste drivers would be deliberately appointed (154). Post-indenture, however, he argues that village settlements reconstituted caste systems, though they followed a *varna* as opposed to a *jati* model; further, caste mostly constituted a polarization between Brahmans and Chamars (158). Jayaram suggests that practices rather than structures form the major part of caste's metamorphosis: "Pig-rearing and pork-eating became the criteria for the determination of caste respectability" (158). Relatedly, 'chamar' comes to have racial connotation of blackness, further complicating the ways in which race and caste categories persist and change through contact.

constitutive of one of these genres—does in the region. Dynamics of incommensurability and coalescence occur simultaneously with vastly differing effects. Just as caste is not reducible to race or class, Indigeneity is not a racial category. Yet Indigeneity has come under increasingly racialized terms, in this case with the express function to shrink the category and render it extinct. This relationship between ‘race’ and ‘categorization’ is in contrast to—as many commentators have noted—the instantiating racial category of Blackness, which allows for proliferation.

There are impasses, then, of how two or more genres of difference maintain a copresence. In Naipaul’s novel, a layered sense of population and identity do not emerge as a unified sense of coalition amongst subaltern others; however, the at times anxious and exploratory treatment of what constitutes difference gives us a window into a history that has never been as simple as a binary, which has had overlapping, at times competing, ways of understanding activities and possessions we might each call ‘labour’ and ‘land.’ By attending to these moments, we gain a sense of how the primacy of race as an analytic category in the Caribbean does multiple forms of work to erase, mask, or alter dynamics of power in multiple registers; by identifying and analyzing genres of difference, we come to an understanding of unique coalescence and incommensurability that mark cultural identities in the Caribbean.

IV: Racialization through Rearrangement

If in *A House for Mr Biswas* we see successive overlapping economies that animate the afterlives of multiple iterations of land, labour, and dispossession, multiplicity in Charles Chesnutt’s conjure tales is instead represented by co-occurrence of

African-derived understandings of matter as interconnected and interchangeable alongside the ostensibly rigid taxonomical hierarchy of a plantation in the American South. In other words, Chesnutt's stories are representations of the proximity of, on the one hand, matter as animate and proximate to human life, and on the other, racial slavery's investment in rendering certain kinds of human, object. As I have shown in my reading of the barracks room, Mr Biswas' fear of objects injuring him occurs in a formal setting, signalled by its architecture, which stages structural continuities of enforced labour as threatening bodily integrity. These fears of injury, significantly, do not come to fruition. The imaginative control over letters within the container of a word-lined room—literary creativity and form—serve as an immediate focus and an eventual exit. Mr Biswas will go on to escape that particular scene of labour exploitation and eventually achieve the privilege of dying in his own (heavily mortgaged) house. Of course, these moments of animate objects run against the grain of the novel's otherwise heavily realist mode. Though the rocking chair's terrible power has real critical and generic consequences for the novel as a whole, its capacity to disintegrate the person, to render him object, is re-contained by the formal metaphor of form 'itself:' just as the room has a representational trans-historicity, it is its literal construction as a word-lined container that links Biswas' desperate imaginings of 'R' back to the realist novel, on a formal level, and to the profession of writing, on the level of the plot.

This is not the case in Chesnutt, though not because the fluid circuits of life that populate the stories do not register on formal levels. Indeed, they influence and interrupt the comfort of the postbellum frame, which—through use of standard English, through John's narration instead of Uncle Julius's embedded one, and through John's editorial

comments about the quaint whimsy of the tales— signals an attempt to contain the tales as regional flavour within a realist form. These attempts cannot mask how the animacy of objects and the blurring of categories takes centre stage in stories where the threat of objecthood is much starker than in Naipaul’s text.

Plantation plurality thus takes a different form in Chesnutt. As opposed to this temporal plurality of successive rearrangements of land, labour, and dispossession, we have an ontological plurality, where the “conjure cosmology”⁴¹ of African-derived spiritualism is robustly co-present with the plantation economy of dominant Western hierarchies. The stories thus present human, animal, vegetal, and mineral life forms as fluid forms of life. These conceptions variously reinforce and interrupt the logics of the plantation economy, on one hand, and conjure cosmology, on the other, as they trope upon and trouble notions of stability and hierarchy.

In the language of new materialisms, quite simply, if we consider the three-fifths clause of 1787 that designated slaves as part person and part property within American jurisprudence, we can extend Jane Bennett’s conception of “human-nonhuman assemblages” to the very body of the individual slave (xvii). By extension, the plantation itself becomes an enormous assemblage: of part-persons, part-properties, livestock, crops, masters, and landscape—what Stephen Best calls the “everyday animism” of person-as-property (2). Within an understanding of circuits—in this case, circuits through which life forms alter—these are unstable from either cosmological perspective, whether animated by the imperative of racial slavery or by that of African-derived spiritualism. Yet, like the temporal multiplicity of the plantation economies in Trinidad, the ontological plurality of

⁴¹ This is Taylor’s term. For more on his reading of conjure see his chapter “Hoodoo You Think You Are? Self-Conjuration in Chesnutt’s *The Conjure Woman*.”

the plantation economy portrays enforced labour as in lively relation to land and racialization.

In the story “Lonesome Ben,” the injury of racial slavery dramatizes this relationship between land and liveliness. From the outset of the story, clay appears as a racial classifier. The editors of the collection, Robert B. Stepto and Jennifer Rae Greeson, point out in their textual notes that “John’s description of the clay resonates with contemporary descriptions of impoverished white people in the southern states” (footnote 41). In the narrative frame, John’s description of clay signals whiteness, albeit in its most abject form: “probably deficient in iron. It was a yellow-ish white tint and had a sort of greasy look” (51). Thus, clay and proximity to clay in this initial instance suggests a racial classification and class designation—white poverty—through the mineral and vitamin-deficient matter consumed and expressed by those bodies.

When Ben, a dark-skinned slave, runs away and begins to subsist on the clay, *his* complexion becomes increasingly aligned with the colour and tint of the banks as well. As a stable, naturally occurring and geological feature, this clay might suggest a constancy to the racialized signifier—white skin—it recalls. Yet even here, the relationship between clay and skin suggests unstable dynamics of ingestion and transformation. For Ben, ingestion initiates a process of first racial transformation and later material transformation, as his flesh begins to approach the matter of clay. When his own wife, son, and master do not recognize him, the extent of Ben’s transformation becomes clear: “Ben wuz ez black ez coal an’ straight ez an’ arrer. Youer yaller ez dat clay-bank, an crooked ez a bair’l hoop” (57). He has become a “mos’ mis’able lookin’ merlatter” (56). Thus, the point of reference—the clay bank—remains the same, but the

extrapolated racial signifier changes from white to mulatto. While Ben's newly twisted body resonates with the malnourished bodies of the poor whites, their proximity yet achieves vastly different racial, and thereby legal, properties. The dynamic between living, raced body, and inert, inanimate matter itself cannot uphold a stable pattern of transfiguration.

Ben's status as a mulatto is not the endpoint of his change, however. If his approach to whiteness via the category of the mulatto might appear to be an ascent of the dominant understanding of a hierarchy of being, his approach to the matter of clay reverses this trajectory and the logic that places blackness and earthly, animal matter as necessarily more proximate to each other than whiteness. As Ben moves further away from the human, he begins to confuse his own status as 'living' or 'dead' by identifying with the inert matter of clay: "He had hearn 'bout folks turnin' ter clay w'en dey wuz dead, an he 'lowed maybe he wuz dead an' didn't knowed it... He laid there 'til he died" (58). Note the relation between thought, self-identification, and matter here: he, from a position of consciousness, believes he may be dead because his body increasingly resembles what he understands as the process of dying. He lies there, inert, until his death unifies the two kinds of inertia he faces: mortality, and transformation into clay. His spirit lingers at the clay bank, reminding us of Sandy haunting the schoolhouse of his wooden corpse, until he, too, dissolves into the minute when the bank is smashed. The particles that scatter confound the strict hierarchy of being under which Ben was born and from which he seeks escape. That this escape is accomplished through an eventual loss of the individual to the particular is made interesting by the route it takes via racial classifications which, even in this instance, shows itself to be an unstable signifier that

indicates but cannot predict the relationship between race, matter, and land. Whereas scholars have read this story variously as a fatal “emotional attachment” to the plantation, and to a “diasporic regionalism” that prevents Ben from leaving the landscape,⁴² it is the capacity of the earth to enter into a circuitous and transfigurative relationship with human bodies and racial codes that most clearly connects this ostensibly regional tale with global histories of harnessing land to racialization through rearrangement.

V: Meat and Emancipation

Racial and material classification are not the only aspects of rearrangement in the stories; circuits amongst meat, animals, and emancipation pattern throughout *The Conjure Stories*. Perhaps the most salient example of this dynamic is the tale of Tobe who, in his quest for freedom, cycles through various animal forms (a bear, who hibernates, and a fox obsessed with the meat Tobe could not access as a human slave, meaning that both life forms fail to make their way to the North and to freedom). Aunt Peggy ultimately changes Tobe into a frog, and he is trapped in this form because he neither returns to Aunt Peggy nor, when she comes to the marshes where he has made his home, does she recognize him. He remains a bullfrog at the moment of emancipation, and therefore cannot, because of his changed life form, enter into the full, legal personhood newly recognized by the American legal apparatus. His attempts to liberate himself are therefore foiled, and Julius remarks that “co’s e ef he had waited lak de res’ un us he’d a be’n free long ago; but he didn’ know dat, en he doan know it yet” (119). Here, Tobe’s appetite for freedom in fact *prevents* his access to legal emancipation.

⁴² See, respectively, Edward Clough, 100, and Jennifer Fleissner, 320.

This story of Tobe therefore raises important questions about the relationship between the animal and liberation in *The Conjure Stories*, as well as wider discourses around race operative in the nineteenth century. The Biblical Curse of Ham, as Jennifer Riddle Harding suggests, constitutes the elaborate pun explored in “Dave’s Neckliss,” the second story in the collection without a conjure figure (436). Rather, the cruelty of racial slavery itself causes a psychological transfiguration akin to conjuration. In this story, the cruel and unusual punishment of having a ham chained to his neck leaves Dave with the belief that he has become a ham, and to hang and ‘kyo’ himself in the smokehouse. Here, death and healing are perversely united as his body becomes even to his own mind the consumable matter of meat; the injury of racialized slavery is not only endlessly transfigurative, therefore, and rather works to reduce potential as Dave’s mutability narrows until death. Indeed, the smokehouse becomes a nexus of meat and entrapment as several characters across the tales are imprisoned within it, further demonstrating a relation between meat, the animal, and emancipation in the body of the slave.

Livestock and animality are concerns, according to Karol Weaver, of the plantation economy widely. Chattel slaves were often charged with the responsibility of valuable livestock and were also considered to be similarly valuable pieces of property. Even free Blacks are not free from the association with the animal, as Weaver points out that “[t]he term used to describe runaway slaves, ‘maroon,’ derived from the Spanish term, ‘cimarron,’ a domesticated animal that had reverted back to a wild state” (82). In addition to slavery being justified in part by the belief in the animalistic nature of Black people, the working relationship of the enslaved and the animals they cared for indicates forms of knowledge and access to modes of resistance that complicate any simple

characterization of the human/animal divide. Veterinary knowledge, much like herbal knowledge, became an important point of revolutionary power in St. Domingue, for example, where dehumanizing discourses of animality existed simultaneously to the power on the part of *guardiens des bêtes* to deal a severe blow to the plantation economy by virtue of their knowledge and position (Weaver 86).

In “The Conjuror’s Revenge,” a story in which animals and humans are proximate and interchangeable, the conjure man initially describes himself as a cow-doctor, bringing these discourses of the veterinary into the centre of the tale. The opening frame of the story poses the problem of a labour shortage and the need to “buy ernudder creature,” a need immediately recalling the purchase and exchange of slaves (23). Although John seeks to buy a mule rather than a man, Uncle Julius immediately troubles the distinction between the two forms of life:

I doan lack ter dribe a mule. I’s alluz affeared I mought be imposin’ on some human creetur; eve’y time I cuts a mule wid a hick’ry. ‘pears ter me mos’ lackly I’s cuttin’ some er my own relations, er somebody e’sse w’at can’t he’p deyse’ves’ (24).

In collapsing the human/animal boundary by identifying the mule as a stand-in for the slave, he also brings whiteness and blackness into a proximate, familial relationship: if he, as the master of the mule, fears that he does injury to a relation, the analogous relation between master and slave must give rise to similar fears. The resonances between ‘mule’ and ‘mulatto’ further this point. There is an emphatic attempt to reestablish taxonomy through mapping relations and equivalences.

The story Uncle Julius tells of Primus continues the blurring of lines between the human and the animal. Primus, an enslaved man, unknowingly steals a pig from the Guinean conjure man. This conjuror, whose presentation as a cow doctor might at first seem like an act of dissimulation, actively manipulates the boundaries between the human and the animal by turning Primus into a mule as revenge. His veterinary pursuits are therefore not misrepresented, as his dissimulation is reconciled when he turns humans, the primary object of his conjuration, into animals.

By changing Primus into a mule for stealing his pig, the conjure man suggests an equivalence between the loss of his pig and the loss of Primus' human status. When Primus-the-mule is repurchased by his master, he reenters the plantation economy as a beast of burden. Yet, despite his animal body and animal status, his *behaviour* still marks him as human: he is consumed by jealousy and attempts revenge on a romantic rival, he eats tobacco, he drinks wine. On becoming intoxicated from drinking so much of the latter, he is unable to carry out his task of transporting freshly slaughtered beef. Rather, his human handler (or, the man who is leading the mule-man) himself must act the mule, and carry the meat himself: "Dolphus could had ter take de beef home on his back, en leabe de mule dere, 'tel he slep off 'is spree" (27). The beef, consumable flesh in much the same way that slaves were commoditised meat, exists in relation to the enchanted mule-man and the enslaved man, whose own flesh can be owned, transported, slaughtered.

When the conjure man becomes ill and knows he is about to die, he repents his action and attempts to turn Primus back into a man. The transfiguration is only partially successful, as his power is drained before Primus' last hoof is changed back to a foot: the

result, a clubfooted, hoof-footed slave, becomes a composite of not only the human and the animal, but constitutes a reference to devilry as well. This resultant human-animal-demon body translates into the economy of the plantation as one that is disabled, and that therefore interrupts the ruling pressures of productivity in which black bodies and animal bodies exist only for labour. This interruption causes an affective and financial response on the level of the narrative frame: rather than buy the mule he had intended, John purchases a horse—to Uncle Julius’s financial advantage and to the disadvantage of the ‘healthy’ economy of the plantation. The horse is sickly, and dies in a fit of colic, to be replaced itself by the mule of Uncle Julius’s objection. In keeping with the narrative of economy and health running throughout the tales, John prescribes himself Uncle Julius’s advice as though it were medicine: “only in small doses and with great discrimination” (32).

VI: Form and Injury

I have called these transhistoric and inter-subaltern circuits arising in diverse plantation sites, ‘injury.’ It has been a flexible term throughout this analysis. Wendy Brown, whose conception of “wounded attachments” haunts the word’s employment in literatures of dispossession, might say that such a focus on injury enshrines the ‘I’ of identity to the detriment of envisioning a shared future. Certainly, Biswas is desirous of his own subjecthood and guards against its obliteration. Certainly, neither Sandy nor Ben’s disintegration into ash and dust respectively is a celebratory abdication of the subject, even as the tales destabilize how we can track the subject on the level of

character. Yet neither Biswas' turn to typology nor Ben or Sandy's bids for freedom are a return to the immediacy of the selfsame subject, or the creation of a stable entity.

Consider Sandy the tree, slaughtered; or Ben the clay bank, exploded. The injuries of slavery mark the body, transfigure the body, un-body the body. Within the plantation economies, injury's vitality performs circuits that connect Western conceptions of life and property with African diasporic syncretism. Taken seriously, this connects the conjure cosmology with narrative economies and extends the ontological claims of the conjure into the realist frame, refusing the text's own attempts to quarantine conjure to comforting tales. Similarly, Naipaul's realism is infected with the transfigurative potential of successive iterations of dehumanizing labour regimes. I have read the barracks room scene against the novel's realist commitments, and yet it is by the same token a recommitment to them: if the 'R' offers any consolation, it is not one that can render the threat of objects merely magical.

That sites of post-slavery and post-indenture plantations have vast disparities—that the containers of room and of frame hold such different accounts of injury and objecthood—show how vital attending to the configurations of form across difference is to building an analysis capacious enough to contain inter-subaltern experiences. I have done this by attending to how people and objects change *through* injury, and to how structural commonalities, when rearranged, produce their own, internal, uneven, and diasporic forms.

CHAPTER THREE

Mourning Diasporas: Time and Indigeneity in Autobiography of My Mother

“Do Indians live the ordinary life in the contemporary now? Are Indians part of the present tense? And finally, do Indians live grievable lives?” (Jodi Byrd 37)

For the descendants of enslaved people, for those who have survived displacements and outlived knowledge of their own indigenous heritages in new lands, the question of indigeneity has long been fraught. The figure of the ‘Indian’ and the figure of the ‘Carib’ have distinct, though related, lives in ethnic North American literature, and the post-1960s Caribbean diaspora to Canada and the United States has further entwined these figurations. The contexts of North America and the Caribbean are anything but separate. Not only is the constant movement amongst American and Caribbean sites of African and Indigenous enslavement well-documented,⁴³ but migration from the Caribbean and to the United States and Canada has produced a double diaspora, whereby Caribbean figures contribute to, and inflect, pre-existing understandings of the relationship between race and indigeneity, two separate (but possibly co-present) genres of difference. Indigeneity, far from static, is as a concept portable and diasporic,⁴⁴ and can re-encounter its own figuration in different contexts, thus showing encounters between displacements and identifications across unevenness.

There are profoundly political ramifications to how indigeneity triangulates with other categories in the Caribbean, including complicating the binaries of colonizer/colonized and master/slave. Genres of difference mark distinct grammars by

⁴³ For example, Narragansett were captured and sold in the Caribbean by early Rhode Island settlers, as discussed in Geake, especially 58.

⁴⁴ This portability stems back, as Domenici argues, to the term “indios” in the early modern period.

which difference is produced and mediated. In this context, difference is routed not through these diadic structures alone, but through triangulation.⁴⁵ This means that no ‘other’ is ever diametrically opposed. This does not mean that there are only ever three actors, however—the dynamics of triangulation I am tracing navigate complexity without always being able to account for completeness of context, and there are other figures, as this dissertation has shown, that are at times left out, and at other times re-enter—and rearrange—these structures.

These grammars, as they come into contact with each other, are “a dialogue,” as Jodi Byrd and Michael Rothberg argue, “within and about incommensurability” (4). This incommensurability is a problem, as they term it, of “translation and relationality” (4). The subaltern/indigenous question marks a multiplicity of historical circumstance and field designation, exemplified in Maria Josefina Saldaña-Portillo’s extension of Dipesh Chakrabarty’s “heterotemporality” to describe a South Western United States “in which [multiple] positionalities—indigenous and settler, imperialist and subjugated, dominant and subaltern—are in constant motion” (8). These multiple positionalities are themselves the product of complex diasporas and displacements.

What Byrd and Rothberg term subaltern/indigenous dialogue has particular relevance in the Caribbean. I say ‘particular’ for several reasons. First, the Caribbean’s history of plantation slavery and anticolonialism make it an obvious intersection of Black Studies and Postcolonial Studies, whose separate critical lives are an effect of differences more apparent than real. Second, the practices of European colonial powers, beginning

⁴⁵ Much work on triangulation, such as Claire Jean Kim’s work, has focused on white-Black-and-Asian triangulation in the American context.

but not ending with the Spanish, produced a narrative of indigenous extinction in the Caribbean that, allied with rapid biologization of indigeneity, presents an accelerated process of biologically justified land dispossession within generations as Indigenous people lost access to mission lands throughout the region. Third, in many (though not all) Caribbean islands, indentured labour was looked to to produce a settler colony of comparatively ‘docile’ workers to replace and restrain black populations (Shepherd 5). And finally, discourses of nation-building rested on a particular narrative of a relationship to land that either occludes those considered to be non-labouring *or* valorizes indigenous heritage as a past predicate of the nation in order to disavow histories of slavery, which is a project of antiblackness.⁴⁶

The Caribbean thus presents challenges to an exclusively settler colonial-based understanding of the relationships amongst stolen land and stolen labour. Shona Jackson accounts for this thus: the displacement (both “real” and “figurative”) of Indigenous people and the introduction of labour as the “more socially viable” foundation of the postcolonial state working in concert produced a “disarticulation of aboriginal and Creole identities” that “reflects the way in which Creole material and metaphysical belonging (indigeneity) evolved” (3). The metaphysical belonging to the land, which she glosses as indigeneity, provides a further valence to the material dimensions of these questions. These are, then, a set of particularities that pose the question of how to acknowledge painful nuances of enforced displacement, of colonial histories, and of slavery, that at times position people of colour as aligned with the settler colonial state invested in the denial of Indigenous people.

⁴⁶ This is particularly true in Latin American and Spanish-speaking Caribbean national imaginaries. For more on the intersection of race and nation-making see, for example, Andrews, Howard, and Helg.

I: Triangulation

One stark example of the political implications of this non-binary context is the increased theoretical traction that indigeneity and its lexical siblings, indigenous and indigenize, have gained within Caribbean Studies. Sylvia Wynter first uses the term in her 1970 essay “Jonkonnu in Jamaica: Towards the Interpretation of Folk Dance as a Cultural Process.” There, she identifies folkdance as both “*agent*” and “*product*” of a cultural process through which enslaved people become indigenous to the Caribbean (34). This is what Jackson refers to as creating “metaphysical belonging” (3). The predicate for this cultural production is the position of the enslaved African within the plantation economy triad of land-labour-capital. Construed as both labour and capital, the enslaved person relates to the land in vastly different ways than the absentee European. In this position, Wynter argues:

the African presence... ‘*rehumanized Nature*,’ and helped to save his own humanity against the constant onslaught of the plantation system by the creation of a folklore and folk culture (“Jonkonnu” 36).

Wynter thus figures indigenization as a resistive practice of inhabiting and mythologizing a landscape, from which one's distinction, as discussed in chapter one, is threatened. The personhood of the enslaved is in this account leveraged through existence as labour and capital in relation to land, which then becomes the site of cultural and mythic, rather than exclusively material, production. In chapter two, I discussed how land, labour, and dispossession produce genres of difference; in Wynter's context, ‘indigenization’ offers a

lens through which to think of a deeply embedded development of culture that ties ritual and people to land.

Thus, ritual and myth contribute to what Wynter will elsewhere call “autopoiesis”—the self- and re-generating discursive creation of subjecthood.⁴⁷ Ritual and cultural reproduction are thus linked in this account. Yet the use of the term ‘indigenization’ does more in this context than describe a resistive practice of inhabiting and mythologizing a landscape—for, far from an unpeopled landscape, racialized plantation slavery occurs in the same space as indigenous dispossession—a dispossession that is fueled precisely on the logic of a nonreproductive culture and physical extinction. Further, ‘indigenization’ has been taken up at the same historical moment that ‘indigenous’ develops as a globally recognized term to name those dispossessed of territory, whose relationship to that land preceded European colonialism and what Byrd calls “arrivant colonialism.”⁴⁸

In arguing for the salience of the term ‘indigenization,’ Wynter finds insufficient the language of classical anthropology, which terms interaction amongst groups either creolization (interactions by her definition between white and Black) and acculturation; she cites Robert Redfield’s definition of “the modifications of the indigenous life under influences from the white man’s world” (“Jonkonnu” 6). Alongside creolization, Wynter describes the failed acculturation between the European and the Indigenous. When she comes to discuss the relation between Black and Indigenous people, she says only this:

⁴⁷ For more on autopoiesis, see Wynter “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument.”

⁴⁸ For more on the simultaneous development of the language of indigenization and the proliferation of Indigeneity as a global term, see Newton. For more on how these questions affect global discourses of indigenization and island studies, see an account of Caribbean studies’ influence on Pacific Island contexts in Diaz.

Indians, too, ran away to avoid forced labour, and there, in the mountainous interior as the two people mingled in a common resistance, it is more than possible that the process that Herskovitz defines as *acculturation* took place, ie, where two people of different cultures find future contact points at which fusion and transformation of the one by the other is achieved (36).

What I first found remarkable about this passage was the way it enacted a slippage in her argument, whereby the focus on African antecedents as indigenizing and European as creolizing aspects of cultural practice function to repeat the erasure of the humanity/presence of indigenous people. Thus ‘indigenization’ becomes another way of rendering *terra nullius*, making odd bedfellows of Caribbean discourse and the myth of extinction. What I took to be little more than a throwaway comment about the possibility of acculturation between Black and Indigenous people, in fact also points to a dynamic I will explore in this chapter as a whole: the dynamic of “it is more than possible that”—statements that infuse the hypothetical with probability; that posit worlds that might have been—whose existence can be imagined if not proven, known if not remembered—that proceed as if something were the case and could be proven as such. This is figured through the future anterior—an accounting for a historical process that imagines the “future contact points” that result in a (possible) state of having taken place. In other words, what these singular lines open to is a meditation on the simultaneity and irreconcilability of subjunctive and historical time.

This simultaneity does not get us away from the controversy of ‘indigenization.’ Indeed, this temporal dimension—which I argue is specific to the intersubaltern or

subaltern/indigenous context—can be figured problematically as prehistorical and can be rendered as extinction. Indigeneity as a predicate for history/modernity/nation has a storied history, noted by Byrd, who describes it thus:

The teleological and eschatological narrative of postcolonial theory includes indigenous people as the ultimate deferral—that of wilderness as metonymy for indigenous presence on the one hand and that of past perfect completion and death on the other (7).

We can thus think of the ‘past perfect’ discourses of indigenous presence as the necessary predicate for the verbal construction ‘to indigenize.’

This chapter examines the use of ‘indigeneity’ as a concept from the perspective of a speaker who understands herself to have inherited only that which is extinct; it examines the use of the subjunctive to navigate the scene of epistemological violence. This violence produces a knowledge confusion caused by a state of living with pasts rendered as between ‘more than possible that’ and extinction. There is a triangulated relationship between settler colonial logics, the violent displacement of people of colour, and Indigenous people whose habitation on the land is prior to settlement and colonization. These three ‘actors’—the settler colonial state, people of colour, and Indigenous people—and their triangulated relationship do not foreclose connection amongst these groups. Yet these relationships are mediated by temporality. This is profoundly about time—mixed and co-present timelines, a mix of subjunctive and historical time that ranges from the past to the future and back again.

In a multiethnic Caribbean context, this question—of the relationships between time and knowledge in the context of violence—plays out particularly around the figure

of indigeneity. These variegated timelines involve fraught identifications. This question becomes a prolonged meditation in Jamaica Kincaid's *Autobiography of My Mother*, which recounts the story of Xuela, whose Carib mother dies at the moment of her birth. The novel navigates the violence of being left out of discourse by exploring 1) an evasion of capture of categories, such that organizing communal structures like the nation, people, and family, are rendered unstable; 2) how this outsideness of categories navigates the question of how to access inaccessible pasts through a contention with, repetition, and troubling of the tropes of indigeneity, which results in 3) a confusion that indexes a temporal rearrangement, whereby that which is rendered as extinct is simultaneously rendered as present, while that which is present is rendered prehistoric.

Much like in chapter two, where I argued that Naipaul's sugar estate collapses time between pre- and post- systems of enforced labour, in Kincaid's novel—signally represented by the generic confusion as an autobiography of a fictional character's mother—the temporality of genres of difference disrupt and rearrange categories. Unlike in the case of Naipaul and Chesnutt, this rearrangement is less about labour than it is about language—or how to enact cultural enunciations and practices to and with others. Xuela—practically orphaned, a delayed and then multilingual speaker, uses language to express relations, and figures language as a vessel for a dynamic expression and change without (the possibility of) a fixed point of origin. This apparent substitution of language for labour—that difference in the novel comes primarily under a linguistic and, as I will argue, grammatical sign—builds on the discussion of epistemological violence that has run through the dissertation thus far. This turn to the grammatical makes explicit what has been implicit in, for instance, chapter two's treatment of time—that temporalities are

not constructed solely on chronology and, in their overlapping and/or non-consecutive timelines, come to represent a site of intersubaltern negotiation, and not merely comparison. The category, as the primary unit of this project as a whole, thus comes under new pressure, as the figure of inaccessible loss opens up a new series of categories produced in conditions of incommensurable timelines, speech acts, and knowledges. If the project of ordinary ethics seeks to account for how “forms of life grow particular dispositions” this intersection of concerns, which I am gathering under the sign ‘mourning,’ must consider the dispositions grown in contexts of forms of loss (Das 136).

The translation into English of Aimé Césaire’s *Cahier d’un retour au pays natal* as *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land* or *My Native Land*, marks a moment of conflation of natality and nativism through the linguistic slippage between ‘natal’ and ‘native.’ This slippage, which highlights the discursive tension surrounding the concept of indigeneity, continues to be a site for theoretical and literary investigation in the Caribbean. Xuela identifies herself as the daughter of a deceased Carib woman, and so “of the vanquished,” and of a Creole man, hence “of the defeated” (216). The distinction is one she repeats throughout the novel, where the vanquished are extinct and the defeated live on. Both the vanquished and the defeated are grounded in a nonsynchronous past moment that Xuela understands as contemporized by her own existence; it is an existence overdetermined by extinction yet continues to exist. From the extinction/existence paradox she immediately shifts the temporality of extinction towards a present-future moment, which re-orientes her towards this past of which she is a living example:

The past is a fixed point, the future is open-ended; for me the future must remain capable of casting a light on the past such that in my defeat lies the seed of my great victory, in my defeat lies the beginning of my great revenge (216).

The dynamic between future and past is an open one in which the fixed point of the past is available to the interpretative light of the future. Yet there is more going on here. Her access to the past is her access to the seed (beginning) of victory (triumphant end)—but the content of that victory is revenge, which is historically oriented. Revenge is then in tension with the idea of the ‘open-ended’ because revenge is, at least in aspiration, a form of closure. Further, the construction of her past as a fixed, knowable, and usable entity conflicts sharply with how the past is figured throughout the novel as inaccessible. But for the future to be capable of casting light on the past, light must be constructed as a perspectival force—we must therefore also understand the future to be fixed. This poses the question of how temporal confusion can be both inaccessible and open to use.

The above passage shows temporal and historical confusion, in which the formal properties of the passage of time (‘fixed point,’ ‘open-ended,’ ‘victory,’ ‘revenge’) indexes a category confusion. Once Xuela maps out future-oriented fixity, she defines her ethics. She says:

My impulse is to the good, my good is to serve myself. I am not a people.

I am not a nation. I only wish from time to time to make my actions be the actions of a people, to make my actions be the actions of a nation (216).

She expresses an uneasy relationship to the notion of a people and of a nation, though her disavowal is not complete; rather, she expresses a contingency of categorization that is

subject to both *desire* and *confusion*. Xuela is here interrupting discourses of communal life that scale from the individual to the people (the realm of culture) or from the individual to the nation (the realm of politics). When Xuela says she is not a people or a nation, but sometimes wants her actions to be the actions of a people and her actions to be the actions of a nation, she is positing a subjunctive future that refuses communality and seeks to access it in equal measure.

This ‘subjunctive future’ indexes a profound temporal confusion. If temporality and identity are intended to align within, say, the nation state, Kincaid’s use of simultaneous subjunctive and historical time is an instance of category confusion. Category confusion, I am arguing, is a way to index loss and incommensurability that is ‘incommensurate’ because of the disjuncture between time and definition. The sites of this loss/incommensurability are the impasses of 1) ‘race,’ and 2) ‘language.’

II: Race

The first impasse of Kincaid’s text is thus how two genres of difference—in this case race and indigeneity—maintain a copresence of incommensurate (yet simultaneous) timelines. Xuela evidences a complicated loyalty to a concept of racial purity in the face of Indigenous identification, demonstrated by Xuela’s own presentation of her Carib identity as inherited and extinct:

My mother was a Carib woman, and when she looked at me this is what she saw: The Carib people had been defeated and then exterminated, thrown away like the weeds in the garden; the African people had been

defeated but had survived. When they looked at me they saw only the Carib people (16).

Here, the exterminated Carib is that which is living and visible in the phenotype of a young child, and the surviving African that which goes unrecognized in her features. In looking at the child's face, her classmates and teachers see a historic dynamic between the Carib (Xuela) and the Africans (themselves). Despite her mixed heritage, only the Carib is visible to them, and in looking at her with this historic perspective they render her artefact. However, this moment simultaneously reiterates and troubles the myth of extinction, which relies, in part, on a notion of racial purity allied with the colonial project. That which should not, according to this logic, be visible or extant after racial mixture (Carib identity) is visible over Blackness. While 'purity' in this logic would ordinarily dictate that any admixture results in a loss of indigeneity and a subsumption into blackness, in this instance Carib identity remains visible, if ossified as a historic artefact. This destabilizes the status of the 'evidence' leveraged to determine extinction and survival.

Xuela struggles with identifying with her mother because of her early death, and her people because of their ostensible 'extinction.' She stages the ways in which Caribs are rendered obsolete and reified as historical artefact, and she troubles the common narration of contact and conquest between European and Carib peoples. She sets up the interaction between her father, of African descent, and her mother, Carib, as an "untroubled fact" in the same gesture that she demonstrates the lack of vocabulary to talk about such a far from untroubled fact:

When my father first ran his hand over my mother's skin... was not the result of a fateful meeting between conqueror and vanquished, sorrow and despair, vanity and humiliation; it was only itself, an untroubled fact: she was of the Carib people. He would not have asked, Who are the Carib people? or, more accurately, Who *were* the Carib people? for they were no more, they were extinct, a few hundred of them still living, my mother had been one of them, they were the last survivors. They were like living fossils, they belonged in a museum, on a shelf, enclosed in a glass case. That these people, my mother's people, were balanced precariously on the ledge of eternity, waiting to be swallowed up in the great yawn of nothingness, was without doubt, but the most bitter part was that it was through no fault of their own that they had lost, and lost in the most extreme way; they had lost themselves (198).

Here, Xuela introduces the idea of extinction at the very moment of intimacy, reproduction, and survival; significantly, the hinge between the 'untroubled fact' and 'extinction' is her shift in grammatical register from 'who are the Carib people' to 'who *were* the Carib people.' This shift immediately alters the course of the passage, which sets out to demonstrate what her father *would not* have said, rather becoming overwhelmed by a narrative of loss that the use of the present tense 'are' seems to provoke and instigate. This dynamic between loss and generation bears thinking about: the living fossils she describes as existing behind museum cases are also reproducing human bodies, and this dynamism, even in ostensible extinction, importantly points to the incompleteness of a narrative of extinction, which cannot account for those bodies and

narratives that exist in excess of it. Xuela is one instance of this excess, whose own narration of life overflows into an identification with the mother, and the mother's people who she simultaneously renders alive and dead in this passage and, indeed, in her own, living body. The marriage between Xuela's parents, and her birth, can be read as such a moment of interruption to the dialectics of genocide. Outside of modernity, the figure of indigeneity in the Caribbean functions to never-quite recede, maintaining a steady temporal distance just outside of the contemporary moment.

III: Language

Language emerges as a point of disidentification in the novel, most poignantly articulated when Xuela states, "I do not know what language she spoke; if she ever told my father that she loved him, I do not know in what language she would have said such a thing" (198). The breakdown of grammatical tenses is instructive: 'I do not know' (present); 'if she told' (past); 'I do not know what language she would have said' (perfect conditional). Yet what continuously interrupts the progression from present to past is not only the conditional—if that, then this—it is also the radical instability of the event: twice, "I do not know" further destabilizes the narration. This underlines not only the speculative—it is not known if she said such a thing, but it could be imagined that she did—but the core of the unknown within even the speculative. What remains profoundly inaccessible is the language of relationality, which is not only narratively but grammatically expressed.

The uneasy alignments of domesticity, race, class, and relation poses the problem of reciprocal language sharing across difference when intimate knowledge is missing;

here, the proposed structure for resolving the incommensurable—family—fails to reach resolution. Indeed, knowledge becomes not only inaccessible but *unnecessary* to the acquisition of the capacity to communicate. Consider Xuela's first words: late to speak, her first words were in English even though she had never heard the language spoken. She asks, "Where is my father" (7). In doing so, she indexes a relation and an absence all at once. She "said it in English—not French patois or English patois, but plain English—and that should have been the surprise: not that I spoke, but that I spoke English, a language I had never heard anyone speak" (7). Linguistic—and to an extent cultural—transmission is untraceable and origin-less. Indeed:

That the first words I said were in the language of a people I would never like or love is not now a mystery to me; everything in my life, good or bad, to which I am inextricably bound is a source of pain (7).

The family with whom she is being raised are surprised at her act of speech, rather than its language. Her father, who had his clothing laundered by Ma Eunice, and who, when Xuela's mother died in childbirth, brought his daughter to be raised by his laundress, continues to come once a week to perform the transaction of dropping off his dirty clothes and picking up his clean ones. The interruption in the frequent and consistent appearance of her father prompts Xuela's words. This act of speech is one of layered failed intimacies: the domestic/transactional routine is interrupted without explanation. This prompts Xuela's need to question an absence—the only absence, of many, that she articulates thus—but not in the language in which she has been addressed thus far in her life, including *by* her father:

Ma Eunice and her children spoke the language of Dominica, which is French patois, and my father when he spoke to me spoke that language also, not because he disrespected me, but because he thought I understood nothing else (7).

That Xuela *does* understand ‘anything else’ remains a mystery, yet the intimate link between disrespect and patois continues. When she is eventually brought to live at the house of her father and his new wife, her stepmother demarcates her relationship to Xuela through language:

...[she] spoke to me then in French patois; in his presence she had spoken to me in English. She would do this to me through all the time we knew each other, but that first time, in the sanctuary of my room, at seven years old, I recognized this to be an attempt on her part to make an illegitimate of me, to associate me with the made-up language of people regarded as not real—the shadow people, the forever humiliated, the forever low... (30-31).

This is a scene of multilingual, mutual understanding. But it is also a site of unevenness. It shows that address has the capacity to render illegitimate. Language is thus a site of injury. The pain that she says is inextricably bound to everything in her life is expressed through language, both oral and literate. Xuela gains fluency in her ability to articulate harm and loss, but language *itself* is a site of loss.

In loneliness, Xuela comes to know self-love through the sound of her own voice, forming a linguistic community defined, at this point in the novel, not by any particular language. Yet she also has a fantasy of becoming voiceless, expressed in a scene enacted

through recourse to an image of consumption that renders impossible any overly celebratory reading of her relationship to her own acts of speech:

... the juice from their fruit would cause blisters to form on my lips and make my tongue feel as if it were caught in a bundle of twine, temporarily making speech difficult, and I found this, the difficulty of speaking, the possibility that it might be a struggle for me ever to speak again, delicious (51).

The mouth, reterritorialized⁴⁹ from languaging back to eating, registers in her fantasy as the pain and difficulty of any act of articulation in her circumstances. The difficulty of speech yet coexists with a proliferation of speaking, and languagelessness is expressed precisely through language.

At the end of the novel, and for the first time, we see a different dynamic emerging: the language of interiority. She says of her husband that he

...spoke to me, I spoke to him; he spoke to me in English, I spoke to him in patois. We understood each other much better that way, speaking to each other in the language of our thoughts (219).

The language of her thoughts towards the end of her life is patois (this despite her first words being in English and her unusually lengthy education, also in English), using language as an act of identification and as a vessel for dynamic expression and change without (the possibility of) a fixed point of origin.

It is clear that we are again at the site of epistemological violence. Thus far I have been pursuing an inquiry into the relationship between category confusion and temporal

⁴⁹ For an account of 'deterritorialization,' see Deleuze et al.

incommensurability as a way of indexing and accessing loss. These questions permeate the novel. For example, Xuela's introduction of herself: "My name is Xuela Claudette Desvarieux. This was my mother's name, but I cannot say it was her real name, for in a life like hers, as in mine, what is a real name?" (79). To have a name, but to not have a real name, reveals the problem of linguistic identification. This passage, first, is an example of categorization (naming) in the absence of generational knowledge, an absence that is itself generational, and, second, performs a doubling in this context, where "Xuela Claudette Desvarieux" indexes two identities, daughter and mother, neither of whom can be captured by the act of naming—which is in this instance a historical designation (ascription of generations) and a(n immediately undermined) knowledge claim. It is similarity without communality.

IV: Epistemological Violence

Naming in the context of violence exists in uneasy tension with the capacity to claim knowledge. This is a question of epistemology—not only the epistemology of difference, but also the epistemology of similarity in the aftermath of the encounter, conquest, and slavery. These two questions are so foundational that Sylvia Wynter terms 1492 an epochal shift.⁵⁰

I turn to the question of epistemology now not only because of my interest in thinking about category/confusion and temporal/incommensurability, but also because the

⁵⁰ For her full accounts, see Wynter "1492: A New World View" and "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument," especially page 304.

questions of difference and similarity that have interested me throughout this dissertation came to the fore.

For Xuela, ‘to know’ has been linked with ‘to have lost’; I am arguing that this conceit in the novel is reflective of wider discourses about the link between knowledge and loss. Indeed, as Wynter teaches us, systems of knowledge categorization were crucial to the colonial project, which established collectivities in relation to the ‘Universal.’ Her argument goes like this: in the Late Medieval Period, a theological absolutism meant that ‘Christian’ was the epistemological unit of the human. All known peoples outside of that category were accounted for as infidels (those who have access to but refuse belief)—order/chaos was a battle, largely, between monotheisms, with pagans left outside moral order (“Unsettling” 298).

The effect of 1492, Wynter argues, was not only to expand what was possible to know, but it also radically shifted the way in which we know: these shifts led to humanists searching for a model of humanity less welded to the figure ‘Christian,’ and did so by reconstructing classical models of education (“Unsettling” 313). The Renaissance is thereby the rebirth of Man-in-general; rather than competing versions of universality (i.e. monotheisms), there is the potential for a universality that cannot be exclusively determined by monotheistic allegiance. Thus, encountering the Indigenous peoples of the Americas challenged categories of the human constructed through Christian doctrine and led to vigorous debates about the status of Amerindians within a humanist world.

These debates welded theology and philosophy to economic imperialism under the designation of reason. Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda and Bartolomé de Las Casas are the

emblematic interlocutors of a debate that rested on whether religious practices—especially sacrifice—were evidence for or against a capacity for reason. As I have discussed in the preceding chapter, if incapable of reason, and therefore excluded from humanity, Indigenous peoples of the Americas could be classed as natural slaves and have capacity for rights to neither land nor freedom. If incapable of reason, it would be incumbent on the European to ‘save’ and convert the Native populations. Sépulveda took the view that reported practices of human sacrifice were a “diabolical category mistake, a substitution of a living organism, the heart, for a metaphysical entity, “the pious and sane minds of men” (Pagden 143). This category mistake served as evidence of a difference in kind between Europeans and Amerindians. Las Casas disagreed with the assessment of human sacrifice as a category mistake, but rather believed sacrifice was evidence of a less metaphysically evolved relationship between people and divinity (144). Human sacrifice was not undevout, but reason *misapplied*.

In this debate, then, there was reason and its other, which provides an ordering and taxonomy consistent with Wynter’s account of Man. Yet in Las Casas’ characterization, there is no other to reason, just reason and *evidence* of reason. The taxonomies of reason become entangled with something much more like similarity, where modes of human group behaviour are evidentiary to shared characteristics of humanity. Rather than diametric opposition, we have *gradation*—which we can think through by reference to what Foucault would term a particularly pre-Enlightenment form of knowing: resemblance. He writes the following: “Resemblances impose adjacencies that in their turn guarantee further resemblances,” and that one of the forms of similitude, ‘convenienta’ “is a resemblance connected with space in the form of a graduated

proximity” (18). In this context, this graduated scale of proximity will develop, as Pagden argues, into comparative ethnology, as similarity develops into the history he traces, of “how it became possible to think in the terms of dissimilarity which makes relativism and categorization an acceptable register”—similarity and difference, over time, are linked and conscripted to disciplinary development (2). This returns us to the questions of temporality and categorization which frame this chapter.

The dynamic between sacrifice—which we could also gloss as ritual—and reason in this context becomes a site for the navigation of epistemological violence. Key to this schema is its uneven grain, where both distance and power—understood spatially and temporally—play out on a gradation of proximity to European likeness and through communal practices. This assessment of evidence of likeness, crucially, is that which was unavailable to Africans, who were already incorporated as natural slaves into theological understandings of humanity. This is made stark by the fact that Las Casas came to advocate for the importation of African slave labour to spare the Amerindian populations (Pagden 32). We thus have a scene where encounters with a diametric other is actually absent; taxonomic binaries give way to taxonomic gradations.

What has this to do with *Autobiography of My Mother*? These identifications, especially when they include political claims to sovereignty, often come into conflict with the experiences of those for whom the answer to “but to where am I Indigenous?” must be “I cannot know.” This lack of access to knowledge has significance that goes beyond the epistemological. If humanity and reason in this account is based on ritual community, how does one who understands herself to be alone navigate claims to personhood through accounts of loss?

V: Mourning Subjunctive

I have been arguing that there is a tension between Indigenous and African-descended histories, which has ramifications for knowledge, personhood, and timelines. Xuela, caught between these two constructions of identity, navigates a scene where knowledge claims cannot—neither through language nor categorization—make commensurate her experience of being inherited-extinction. I have suggested that there is a temporal component to this, and that that temporal component is evident across the scales of sentence-level grammatical instability through to stagings of the apparent incommensurability of categorization of genres of difference, where different groups are constructed as not only different in kind but different in time. I am suggesting that this state of affairs teaches us something about intersubaltern contact. The next question is whether the novel offers any sort of resolution to this apparent incommensurability. I will suggest yes, it does, and this resolution takes the form of subjunctive mourning. Let me explain.

In making a distinction between ritual and sincerity, Seligman et al write the following:

We are often too concerned with exploring the different forms of self-expression and of individual authenticity to appreciate the rhythmic structure of the shared subjunctive that is the deepest work of ritual (10).

For them, ritual is “...formalism, reiteration, and externally dictated obligations...” (9). They propose an understanding of ritual “as subjunctive—the creation of an order *as if* it were truly the case. Or, putting it in slightly different words, the subjunctive creates an

order that is self-consciously distinct from other possible social worlds” (20). Pertaining to a reading of *Autobiography*, I am suggesting two things based on this definition: 1) the idea of an *unshared* subjunctive, an ‘as if’ that arises precisely from the context of loss; and 2) that this unshared subjunctive is actually mourning, and that mourning as the ‘past imperfect’ is the strategy the novel undertakes to navigate the temporal and epistemological alterity I have examined above.

As signalled by its title, *Autobiography of My Mother*’s concern with generational narration is situated at an impossible impasse. But this does not go in only one direction, as Xuela meditates on both generational inheritance she did not receive and those she refuses to bestow. An example: Xuela has a dream vision in the immediate aftermath of an abortion she has at age fifteen. She has been lodging at the house of a friend of her father’s, whose wife has long desired a baby and hopes Xuela will bear her husband’s child. Refusing this surrogacy, Xuela seeks out an abortion. During her illness afterwards, she has a vision of an agouti—a rodent important in many Carib rituals—which she follows on a route through a mixture of historic landscapes and personal biography. The first key landmark is a place called Massacre:

It was at Massacre that Indian Warner, the illegitimate son of a Carib woman and a European man, was murdered by his half brother, an Englishman named Philip Warner, because Philip Warner did not like having such a close relative whose mother was a Carib woman. I passed through Mahaut crawling on my stomach, for I was afraid I would be recognized (87).

‘Indian’ or ‘Carib’ Warner (c. 1630-1674) was both a leader amongst the Caribs and, in 1664, the Governor of Dominica. Popularly remembered as having successfully held off European colonialism, he was allegedly killed by his own brother, the then Governor of Antigua.⁵¹ In this passage, Indian Warner, identified in the novel as both mixed and indigenous, intersects history with personal narrative. For after Massacre, Xuela begins “crawling on my stomach,” “afraid I would be recognized” (87). Historic mortality and present danger combine as she proceeds: “somewhere between Marigot and Castle Bruce lived my mother’s people, on a reserve, as if in commemoration of something no one could bring to mention” (88). This lack of commemoration is figured through a lack of desire to speak it, and it haunts the novel. What is absent belongs to the terrain of ritual and not sincerity. This echoes how Kincaid turns a genre that is arguably steeped in the sincere away from that through its disjuncture between subject and object.

Yet it is in this moment of rejecting physical reproduction that Xuela claims her birthright, interrupting the temporality and biologization of inheritance:

And that is how I claimed my birthright, East and West, Above and Below, Water and Land: In a dream. I walked through my inheritance, an island of villages and rivers and mountains and people who began and ended with murder and theft and not very much love. I claimed it in a dream. Exhausted from the agony of expelling from my body a child I could not love and so did not want, I dreamed of all the things that were mine (89).

The time/location of this vision is significant: on the one hand, located in Xuela’s personal narration of sexual maturation and choice, and on the other, a dream space

⁵¹ For more on Indian Warner, see Hulme.

occupied by a creature with mythic properties that traces a path through Carib history, collapsing time and distance. This is how she claims her birthright. I am suggesting we can read this scene via ideas of mourning and melancholia.

Mourning is profoundly about time. In Freud's classic account of responses to loss, he delineates a distinction between mourning and melancholia as the normative or 'healthy' response to death and the pathological, respectively. Mourning as 'healthy' means that grief is not interminably static, and the griever can accept substitution for the lost object. This not only has psychological effects, but also temporal ones: mourning allows for the griever to continue a present- and future- oriented idea of the self. In melancholia, by contrast, the griever incorporates the loss into their psychic formation, internalizing the object into the melancholic subject's conception of self. This internalization, in turn, becomes an ambivalence between love and hatred.

Critical race theory, notably Anne Anlin Cheng's work, has taken up the melancholic as a heuristic for reading psychic relations amongst racialized groups. Cheng's *The Melancholy of Race* posits a relationship between the United States as melancholic subject and racialized minority populations as melancholic objects. Drawing on Hortense Spillers, Cheng "considers the Freudian Oedipal drama of the nuclear family to be an insufficient model for addressing those 'occupied or captive persons and communities in which the rites of gender function have been exploded historically'" (Cheng 28). Cheng's articulation of these theories, in an American context, is that the melancholic object is the necessary and reviled populations of colour that help constitute the nation, and without whom the nation would founder. So, according to her account, African Americans are simultaneously crucial and reviled parts of the United States.

Cheng says African American populations are the melancholic subject of the US, with Asian Americans as elided and spectral to this melancholic structure that vacillates between integration and disavowal.

There are several questions in connecting these two frameworks, of the subjunctive in the context of epistemological violence and the work on mourning and melancholia. The work done in literary critical race studies has been generative in thinking about the state as an affective subject. The context of Cheng's work is of course a settler colonial nation, traditionally defined. The melancholic incorporation of African Americans and the elision of Asian Americans is embedded in a settler colonial nation. In the Caribbean, even as there are similarities in terms of treatment of Indigenous people by imperial power and the myth of extinction, the structure of the nation is radically different: the Caribbean understands itself to be postcolonial and is not white. This simple difference reiterates the importance of understanding intersubaltern experiences that happen on horizontal axes.

Xuela rejects the nation and only wishes what I am calling a *subjunctive* relation with it. We are therefore back at the question of the unshared subjunctive—which is distinct from Cheng's framework, as it is from something like Fanon's sociogeny. For what is lost for Xuela is access to a concept of Indigeneity whose connection has been disrupted by death and discourse. There is also therefore an asymmetry to loss, where an individual (Xuela) has lost a communality. Though I suggest that Xuela's relationship to indigeneity resonates with the figuration of nation and literature more generally, I also suggest that the air of solitariness—of the *unshared*—is a mark of her living with loss. It cannot be melancholic because the 'lost object' was never so accessibly demarcated to be

understood as such. Rather, mourning accompanies Xuela's meditations on past and future, nation and people, never defined enough to reject substitutions, but always inhabiting a subjunctive space between 'might have been' and 'as if.'

For Xuela, her choice "never to bring forth a child" is one her body responded to by "mimicking the state of maternity, longing to conceive, mourning the heart's and mind's decision" (226). This choice to not have children is one that toggles between the very scales of group and individual related above: "I refused to belong to a race, I refused to accept a nation" (226). Her very body, entering into private reproductive capacity, suddenly is difficult to distinguish from her body's forced conscription to broader discourses: her body as a reproductive body for producing labour, her body as a hypersexualized body for pleasure, her body as a native body for extinction.

Yet just when it seems as though the matter of reproduction is settled, Xuela describes her own generativity. At the scene of rejecting procreation, she says, "I would never become a mother, but that would not be the same as never bearing children" (97). This opening distinction between being and bearing at first does not disrupt too much. Likewise, "I would bear children but I would never be a mother to them"—this description, for instance, could describe Xuela's own mother, whose death prohibited her being/mothering. But then: "I would bear them in abundance; they would emerge from my head, from my armpits, from between my legs"—her overwhelmingly and impossibly fecund body disrupts biological processes—and "I would bear children, they would hang from me like fruit from a vine, but I would destroy them with the carelessness of a god" (97). Here, her human reproductive capacity rather approaches the botanical and the divine. Ultimately, this impossible reproduction becomes incorporated into a cycle of

continuing solitude, marked, importantly, as/by the passage of time, becoming a temporality of its own: “I would bear children in the morning, I would bathe them at noon in a water that came from myself, and I would eat them at night, swallowing them whole, all at once” (970).

This violent scene of reproductive capacity perhaps captures some of the conflicts of motherhood in a colonial context, where to bear children is to do violence to them; Xuela’s consumption of these children is also, as Kathryn Morris argues, reference to the trope of the cannibalistic Carib. Morris goes on to suggest that this trope, in Caribbean literature as a whole, “might speak to a performance of the trope of cannibalism in which metamorphosed the physical ingesting flesh into a flesh as a nostalgic incorporation of the lost body into the present body” (956). This description, redolent with Freudian melancholia, posits one possible stance the narrative might take in relation to loss. The loss of the mother, the loss of her “children”—metaphorical and metaphorically ingested—appears as melancholic retention. Yet what I have been tracking in this chapter is precisely the absence of access to that which could be retained—that, epistemologically, linguistically, and categorically, the unknowability of the lost object fundamentally changes its relation to the subject of loss, Xuela, who must navigate both inaccessibility and loss itself. In that sense, this spectacle of reproduction, loss, and consumption exists, not as magical realism or fantasy, but rather through the subjunctive. The formal element of this is formal-temporal dynamic as incompatible timelines become the imaginative point from which to gain perspective at the scene of extraordinary loss. In this way, Xuela occupies an unshared subjunctive mourning: contingent, capacious, as she navigates a life lived in the face of myths about death.

CODA

Reprisal in New Categories

This dissertation set out to trace patterns arising from habit, injury, and mourning, that were evidence of and subject to rearrangement and that produce and were the effect of unevenness. In the course of that work, which paid close attention to both category and categorization, new confluences emerged, which I will review briefly in closing. These are: Time, Environment, Sensorium, and Subject/Object relation.

This inquiry began by defining rearrangement as distinct from mimicry because of time: I suggested that the rhythm of mimicry instantiates a necessary before/after dynamic that was not always borne out in my readings of texts. In chapter one, what might seem straightforwardly linear in habit's progression and accrual over time actually, because of its potential to both form and un-form, rendered such dynamics too unstable. In chapter two, which was precisely concerned with the 'post-', I argued that the dynamics between injury, objecthood, and categorization remain present in literary treatment of post-slavery and post-indenture systems respectively. Finally, in my final chapter, I attended to how the constructions of difference produce incommensurate timelines, which must be mediated in intersubaltern contact, and that produce things like subjunctive mourning in its wake.

Patterning through the dissertation (particularly its nodes of scope, ethics, and form) is the presence of 'environment.' In chapter one, Jacobs became indistinct from a built environment—this architectural environment became bodily. Naipaul and Chesnutt's revisitations of the violence of plantation economies through injured objects/objects that injure was also concerned with buildings and rooms—Mr Biswas'

barracks room threatened violent animacy, and Sandy's desire for transfigured freedom as a tree was curtailed when he is milled and constructed as an outbuilding on the plantation. Kincaid's constant negotiation between extinction and inheritance sees her veering between the enclosures of a museum specimen case and lively landscape. Notably, each of these is concerned with an environment that is distinctly non-natural and that navigates built environments in landscapes of historic and ongoing injury. Each of my categories of habit, injury, and mourning index forms of harm in relation to environment *and* ways of navigating the scenes of those harms. The spatial/environmental dimension to each of these categories mediates the relationships between environment and action (or inaction).

While I began concerned with a relationship between ethics and affect, what continuously emerged was the importance of the senses. In chapter one, sensory deprivation saw a confusion and substitution of the senses, which included new practices of care for the family, and lead to an indistinction from environment that ultimately yielded what I argued was a phenomenological ethics. In chapter two, sensation such as (anticipatory) pain induced transformations, and sensation across life forms indexed humanity in duress. In chapter three, Xuela asserts her self-knowledge and assurance through the physicality of pleasure.

Finally, across the dissertation there has been a persistence in melding subject/object relations. In chapter one this was what I called indistinction, and it became a seat of Jacobs' ethics through her use of listening as a trope (which links sensorium with subject/object dissolution). In chapter two the disintegration of the subject (often by animating/transfiguring objects and structures) could only be solved by returning to a

realist frame. In the third chapter, the very title of *Autobiography of My Mother* disrupted the subject/object relation, even as inaccessible lost objects disrupt access to ‘melancholic’ relations and produce subjunctive mourning.

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The emergence of these new categories across my dissertation suggests new avenues for study across fields in the interdisciplinary humanities. Thus, just as this project has broadly considered—and questioned—constructions of ‘difference’ and ‘similarity’ in transnational, comparative frames, these categories, pursued further, would deepen our concern and curiosity for interrogating those dynamics—unevenness and rearrangement—across a variety of under-studied contexts. These categories gather disparate contexts into a frame of analysis that allows for the elucidation, in critical race theory, ethics, and diaspora studies, of how groups—racialized or otherwise marked by difference—interact, not only with a dominant, unmarked group, but horizontally, across differences, both within immediate and global contexts.

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