

GENDERED NATIONS:
BLACK SUBJECTIVITY IN LATE TWENTIETH-CENTURY AFRICAN AMERICAN
AND BLACK CARIBBEAN NARRATIVES

BY

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This dissertation by Jeannette M. E. Lee is accepted in its present form
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INTRODUCTION

The Nation's Disinherited

As I write my dissertation in the aftermath of Barack Obama's historic win in the 2008 United States Presidential elections, I cannot help but be struck by the tension between my dissertation and the euphoria of his win. It is interesting to me that the Anglophone black diasporic literary tradition takes a more critical stance than the outcome of the election suggests. Perhaps the joy of Obama's victory underscores the disappointments, failures, and unfinished nature of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements in the United States and decolonization in the Caribbean. His electoral success taps into the hope that a more acceptable future can be salvaged from the present and is finally possible for all persons. By more acceptable future, I mean a future where communal structures and their symbolic systems incorporate all persons regardless of the ways that a person's various identity categories intersect. This longing for a more acceptable future within the Anglophone black diaspora is portrayed in African American and black Caribbean narratives of the late twentieth-century and is the focus of my dissertation. As a black feminist intervention, my interrogation looks at literary representations of this concern from the perspective of the non-normative character and through the framework of nationalism/'the nation within the nation' and gender, sexuality, and sexual orientation to understand how communal structure informs subject formation.

Gendered Nations argues that contemporary black diasporic writers intervene in debates about black communal structure in the post-Civil Rights and post-Independent moment. Their representations of black communities explore the subject-location of the non-normative or other-ed figure in order to rethink racial community. These literary texts are attentive to how essentialist conceptions of black communities reproduce patriarchal norms in their production of black subjects who are reliant on black others to come into being. Other-ed or non-normative subjects are persons who are perceived as having departed from patriarchal scripts as a result of subjectivities defined by the interplay of race, gender, class, and other identity categories. As a result of their ‘identities-in-difference,’¹ the black community does not perceive them to be the subjects on whose behalf this community attempts to access the promises of modernity, which are, freedom and liberty. Although I use the term ‘the black community’ I do not mean to reinscribe an essentialist notion of black communities to which non-normative characters are in opposition. Instead, my use of ‘the black community’ recognizes that a particular subject position is privileged as the collective and its interests are projected as shared by the entirety.² It is this dynamic that I am interested in investigating through focusing on characters perceived as beyond the pale of what is acceptable.

These representations of black communities can be read as proxy nationalist communities in African American literature and nationalist communities in Caribbean literature because of the assertion of racial identity as the primary or sole axis of identification. The novelists that I am interested in are writing in what is known as the

¹ I borrow this term from José Muñoz. See Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*.

² Typically, the subject-position privileged by the black community is that of the heterosexual black male. See the essays collected in *All the Women Are White, All the Men Are Black, But Some of Us Are Brave*.

‘postnationalist moment,’ that is, black culture since the 1970s.³ Why then is ‘the national community’ an animating category for them? What all these novels have in common is the registering of concern over how what I call the ‘continued seduction of race,’ with nation as its proxy, reproduces structures of exclusion in intersubjective black social relations. Black writers imaginative intra-communal inquiry is possible because of the changes that black communities have undergone as a result of Civil Rights and Independence from the 1960s to the 1980s.⁴ By this I mean that nationalism in the Caribbean and black nationalism in the United States was built out of political necessity and was not organic; that is, black subjects formed a strategic and forced (by racial segregation) coherent unit to address political, economic, and social inequity. Nationalist movements were challenges by black communities to racial oppression, capitalist exploitation, and colonial conditions. These movements also papered over the difference that always existed within black communities. Despite the widely acknowledged failures of black nationalism, Civil Rights, and decolonization for not substantively altering the material conditions of many black persons, the social changes brought about by these movements did increase the socio-economic differentiation within black communities, national and racial. There has been a significant expansion of the black middle-class since the 1970s in both the Caribbean and African America, which has resulted in greater class diversity. Later movements, such as black feminism/womanism and gay rights, also afforded black subjects the space to live out their differences. Robert Reid-Pharr makes a similar point in *Once You Go Black: Choice, Desire, and the Black American*

³ See Dubey, “Postmodernism as Postnationalism? Racial Representation in U.S. Black Cultural Studies” for the history of this term.

⁴ Independence for the British West Indies ranged from as early as 1962 for Jamaica, and Trinidad and Tobago to as late as 1981 for Antigua and Barbuda, and Belize.

Intellectual. He contends that the twentieth-century witnessed a proliferation of both differences and the technologies to police those differences. The impulse to police these differences in African American and black communities is the result of privileging homogeneity and can be traced back to the strategies of nationalist movements of the 1960s (and earlier if anti-colonial movements are taken into consideration). Late twentieth-century black diasporic writers illuminate this continuity by focusing on how the non-normative character must negotiate his/her coherency against and within the privileging of an intact black communal structure.

Through the non-normative character, black diasporic literature explores difference and its complexity within black communities. The portrayals are reminiscent of Audre Lorde's argument in "Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference."⁵ Lorde explains that humans do not have any framework for relating across the differences produced by identity categories, such as age, race, gender, and class, for example. As a result, difference becomes distorted and misperceived as deviance, according to Lorde. She posits that it is not difference but the refusal to recognize difference that reproduces structures of exclusion. Other-ed or non-normative characters illuminate these distortions and their consequences on black communities, as the novels that comprise *Gendered Nations* portray. This dissertation focuses on the representation of the effects of structures of exclusion as they are reconstructed within coherent black communities.

The Structure of Exclusion: Modernity's Others

Black writers representation of exclusionary structures engages a curious history. One of my contentions in *Gendered Nations* is that black communal structures in the

⁵ This essay is included in Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*.

post-Independence and post-Civil Rights period repeat the foundational contradictions of emancipation: that is, black subjects pursue the ideologies and concepts that have historically subordinated them. Emancipation is an early example of the challenges black persons faced in accessing certain foundational North Atlantic narratives, such as freedom and liberty.⁶ Briefly, freedom and liberty are narratives that proceed from the Enlightenment who's imagined audience were primarily white men of property and white women to a much lesser degree. This reveals that the liberatory narratives of modernity are racialized, gendered, and classed. Several scholars note this contradiction, particularly when black subjects demand these narratives live out their promises for black persons. Sibylle Fischer explains in *Modernity Disavowed: Haiti and the Cultures of Slavery in the Age of Revolution* that: "Western emancipatory thought did not offer a way of thinking about issues of racial equality in political terms" (Fischer 262). In fact, as Laura Doyle traces in *Freedom's Empire: Race and the Rise of the Novel in Atlantic Modernity, 1640 – 1940*, the racist and racist history of freedom in Atlantic modernity meant that freedom was only imagined as accessible through racial groups. Race, therefore, operated as a centripetal force that structured community along racial sensibilities. Therefore, emancipation as a form of freedom becomes something it is not supposed to be in its interaction with black subjects. Thomas Holt shows in *The Problem of Freedom: Race, Labor, and Politics in Jamaica and Britain, 1832 – 1938* that racist ideologies embedded dependence in emancipation in 1838 and self-determination in 1938 in Jamaica. Freedom in Jamaica, as an example of the British West Indies, was "drained of

⁶ I borrow the term North Atlantic from Michel-Rolph Trouillot. Trouillot uses it in "The Otherwise Modern: Caribbean Losses from the Savage Slot." He argues that the term North Atlantic possesses more geographical precision than the West and unveils the cultural assumptions that underlie 'North Atlantic universals.'

the power of genuine self-determination: materially, a freedom stripped of control over basic material resources, and ideologically, a freedom that internalized its own antithesis” (xxv). In the context of African America, Ron Eyerman discusses the crushed expectations of emancipation and reconstruction in “Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity.” Although significant changes did occur during reconstruction such as in education and literacy, the material existence of many African Americans was still limited especially upon the dissolution of reconstruction. The work of these scholars reveal that only certain subjects were initially imagined as having legitimate access to freedom and that freedom was neither natural nor indigenous. This explains its fraught manifestation in the black Americas, Anglophone and Francophone. This history confirms that freedom and necessarily liberty are historically situated and politically and socially constructed concepts that are defined by a subject’s position in social relations. Freedom and liberty either did not include black subjects and the question of racial equality or marginally accommodated black subjects without addressing racial equality. What emancipation proves is that black ‘unfreedom’ can persist through structures that purport to enact universal freedom.⁷ Black liberation is again subverted either through the social, economic, and political dependency that persists into the post-independent moment in those Caribbean colonies that became independent nation-states and the revocation of the legal changes enacted as a result of Civil Rights in the United States.⁸

⁷ I borrow this term from Sara Clarke Kaplan who uses it in “Souls at the Crossroads, Africans on the Water: The Politics of Diaspora.”

⁸ Not all Caribbean islands are independent. A number of them are still dependent territories of the United Kingdom, France, and the Netherlands.

The writers that I consider recognize the persistence of black unfreedom even under putative political liberation. Earl Lovelace's *Salt* contains a bold portrayal of the foreclosures of emancipation and independence that continue into the contemporary moment in its epic narration of the history of Trinidad. The depiction in Jamaica Kincaid's *Autobiography of My Mother* implies the stasis of the psychological and material dispossession of black subjects from slavery to the mid-twentieth-century. This can be seen in the use of similar descriptors for the enslaved and twentieth-century figures like Lazarus. In Toni Morrison's *Sula*, the opening frame details the 'nigger joke' that is evidence of the manipulation of freedom by a white farmer so that freedom is attained by the enslaved but without its economic or ethical rewards. And in Randall Kenan's *A Visitation of Spirits*, Horace's vision of the history of African America depicts the material and psychological dispossession that accompanies black unfreedom and persists through emancipation and Civil Rights into the contemporary moment of the novel. These representations are congruent with David Scott's reading of the value of C. L. R. James' *The Black Jacobins*. In *Conscripts of Modernity: the Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment*. Scott explains that black subjects encounter an impossible conundrum when they access narratives and discourses that either selectively disfranchise them or aggressively disavow them. For both Scott and James, Toussaint L'Ouverture is the paradigmatic example of this enigma. The failure of Toussaint L'Ouverture, his capture and death, according to Scott, is that of the nature of colonial enlightenment: L'Ouverture must negotiate his freedom in a symbolic, political, and material economy presumed upon his enslavement and lack of humanity. L'Ouverture's life makes apparent that the

discourses of the enlightenment in their current manifestations are profoundly unreceptive to the freedom and liberty of black subjects.

This insight brings me to another contention that is foundational to *Gendered Nations*. I argue that modernity is global, heterogeneous, and uneven.⁹ The planetary sweep of modernity means that it is a plural endeavor and not a singular North Atlantic adventure. Due to its plurality, modernity is also discrepant in its unfolding in different (and at times in the same) locales and management of diverse peoples.¹⁰ An example of modernity's heterogeneity is slavery, which necessarily encompasses the slave routes and slave markets on both sides of the Atlantic. It also unmaskes one of modernity's occluded internal others, black subjects. Trouillot explains that modernity required othered persons and places in order to imagine itself as modern. In "The Otherwise Modern: Caribbean Lessons from the Savage Slot," Michel-Rolph Trouillot explains that when someone or some place is identified as modern it depends upon someone or some place that is perceived as not modern.¹¹ Consequently, the modern is a discourse on the other, "since the intelligibility of that position . . . requires relation to Otherness" (Trouillot 226). This production of knowledge does not mean that there were and are not verifiable persons and actual places that pre-existed and endure this classification. Modernity's creation of others is a discourse of power that is disassociated from the ontology of persons and

⁹ My reading departs from R. Radhakrishnan who posits that there are different modernities. He views these various modernities, including western modernity, as "alternate, alterior, heterogeneous, hybrid, and polycentric modernities" (Radhakrishnan 30). While I agree that North Atlantic modernity is heterogeneous, I am not convinced that other geographies and persons experience different modernities. I do, however, agree, that a subjects' experience of modernity is based on her social position within the discourses and structure of modernity.

¹⁰ In "The Otherwise Modern: Caribbean Lessons from the Savage Slot," Trouillot explains that modernity was both a 'geography of imagination' and a 'geography of management.' It developed and executed procedures and institutions of control home and abroad.

¹¹ Trouillot continues to explicate that modernity not only mandates an imagined other but also a projected geography and temporality. Such a discourse constructs a timeline of past, present, and future, and emplots actors along it. This discourse is premised on heterology and asymmetry.

places it has othered; in fact, it is a self-constituting discourse that reveals more about modernity than its proliferation of others. Black subjects are only one example of others created by modernity.¹² This quick excursion into modernity is relevant for my argument because it makes apparent that modernity requires others in order to constitute itself. Such a process of self-constitution informs its narratives, for instance, freedom and liberty, as well as the structures predicated on these narratives, the nation-state, for example.¹³ The nation was the primary site of struggle for liberation in the North Atlantic.¹⁴ This process of relying on others to come into being is a crucial formulation that black communities repeat in constructing their communities, national and racial.

Présence Noir

The national community as a number of scholars have noted is structured on the exclusionary trinity of patriarchy, racial homogeneity, and heterosexism.¹⁵ All of these discourses imagine legitimate subjects who inherit the nation as well as illegitimate subjects who define the boundary of the nation. When black communities pursue agency through these concepts and ideologies, they necessarily marginalize and other black subjects whom they perceive as departing from normative models of subjectivity, such as

¹² Many scholars of the Caribbean agree that enslaved blacks in the Caribbean and the United States lived modern lives, as is evidenced by the instrumental nature of life on the plantation. The sugar plantation, according to Sibylle Fischer, “was the first large-scale experiment in industrial agriculture and a laboratory for the exploitation of nature and human labor. The transatlantic slave trade brought about the first mass migration driven by capitalist development and the need for a workforce” (Fischer 12). Her insight also holds true for the cotton plantations of the United States south. Slavery in the Atlantic world is prime evidence of the asymmetry of modernity because it sought to dispossess psychologically and materially as well as dehumanize othered subjects even as its wealth was the economic basis of the French Revolution. According to C. L. R. James, the wealth created at Bordeaux and Nantes, for instance, by the slave trade gave the bourgeoisie “the pride which needed liberty and contributed to human emancipation” (James 47). See James, *Black Jacobins*; Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* for two well-known examples of this argument.

¹³ See Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* for a detailed explication of this position. Trouillot explains that those who were not free helped to define freedom.

¹⁴ See Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* and Goldberg, *The Racial State*.

¹⁵ See David Theo Goldberg, *The Racial State*; Michelle Wright, *Becoming Black: Creating Identity in the African Diaspora*; and Roderick A. Ferguson, *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer Color of Critique*.

the homosexual and the amoral woman. All of these discourses are premised on homogeneity, whether gender, class, sexuality, or racial. They are also antithetical to the creation of structures that are viable for heterogeneous black subjectivities. By pursuing homogeneity, black communities reject a fundamental fact of blackness: it is an inherently heterogeneous political and material category.

Blackness is a category that was created within Modernity. It is, therefore, a political and cultural construct with verifiable material consequences. The persons who came to be understood as black subjects were amalgamated from various ethnicities, cultures, and civilizations in western and central Africa; uprooted; and inserted into the plantation and symbolic economy of the North Atlantic. Their shared experience of slavery in the Caribbean and the United States, consequently, united them across their differences. Hence, this is a category that is internally diverse. It is constantly negotiating sameness and difference as a result of this history. Because the persons designated as black subjects were not co-creators of this classification they are, as David Scott asserts, conscripts of modernity. The conditions of this conscription are integral to understanding the formation and nature of black subjectivity. The experience of slavery is the condition of possibility for black subjectivity and also engendered the psychological fragmentation and material dispossession that has marked black subjects in the Atlantic world. This dissolution is the defining experience of blackness within Atlantic modernity.

In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Frantz Fanon explains how this fragmentation occurs. Fanon writes that blackness is an interdependent concept because blacks are constructed in relation to whites. This relation is structured on inferiority, that is, black subjects experience themselves through whites as inferior to the latter. Whiteness, according to

Fanon, constituted blackness from numerous ‘legends’ and ‘stories’: “my blackness, my ethnic characteristics; and I was battered down by tom-toms, cannibalism, intellectual deficiency, fetishism, racial defects, slave ships, and above all else, above all: “Sho good eatin’.” (112). When a black person interacts with the assemblage of myths, some of which Fanon lists, he, the black subject, experiences himself as other because he perceives the non-recognition of his self in the white person’s gaze and an Other in his stead.¹⁶ This dynamic displaces the black subject from himself because it is his self that has been profoundly expropriated. What is supplanted instead is the accumulation of stories, which essentializes all persons who are considered black, as Fanon explains: the black man is always expected to behave like a black man and be responsible for his race and his ancestors. This expropriation and already familiarity has very material and physical consequences as is evidenced by slavery, segregation, and colonization. This is why race as a North Atlantic kinship ideology is a political construct: it is used to dispossess and disinherit actual persons. Fanon’s theory makes explicit that blackness is at once fabricated, fragmentary (in that it is pieced together from different myths of the white imagination), and essentialist. His concept uncovers that blackness is a signifier constructed out of stories that affect a fixed essence. However, because blackness is woven out of stories and legends, its very piecemeal and narrative nature makes blackness a ‘sliding signifier’ (*Race: the Floating Signifier*), which allows black subjects to contest the myth of blackness.

Black subjects have historically disputed their marginalization, as the slave narratives attest. However, in opposing what blackness means, black subjects have privileged the category of race and either fixed or effaced other axes of identity, like

¹⁶ Since Fanon used the male gender to discuss his theory, I maintain its use in my discussion of his work.

gender, class, sexuality, age, political affiliation, and sexual orientation, for instance. To be fair, this focus is the result of a desire for coherency against their forced incoherency. As Toni Morrison famously asserts, black subjects had to deal with dissolution and the need to reconstruct stability due to the experience of slavery. And since slavery has structured the Americas this negotiation has been ongoing, as Ashraf Rushdy observes in *Remembering Generations: Race and Family in Contemporary African American Fiction*. The longing for coherency underpins black subjects' resistance to hegemonic notions of blackness. They critique and continue to challenge the placement of blackness as the object within a white aesthetic and cultural discourse. This political and cultural work attempted to rehabilitate the category black as an over-determined negative construct of pathology and inferiority in the United States and the Caribbean.¹⁷ It was a revolutionary and necessary act in the 60s and 70s, which produced an irreversible shift in the North Atlantic politics of knowledge. In contesting racial terms, however, as Goldberg astutely notes, fabricated nomenclature must be reproduced. In the 'That's not me!' the 'that' ironically reifies racial identification as Goldberg explains. Thus, his account uncovers that in wrestling over the meaning of blackness, the term black itself becomes fixed as ground zero. While what the designation means arguably alters, the signifier itself is retained.

Its maintenance is predicated upon the descriptor itself not being interrogated. Black, as Davies reveals, and its synonyms for the persons it refers to, such as African, African American, Afro-Caribbean, represents an original misnaming. It ambitiously

¹⁷ See Davies, Carole Boyce, *Black women, writing and identity: Migrations of the subject*; Hall, "Minimal Selves." *Black British Cultural Studies: A Reader*; Hall, "New Ethnicities." *Black British Cultural Studies: A Reader*; Baker, Baker, Houston, Jr., Manthia Diawara and Ruth H. Lindeborg. Introduction. *Black British Cultural Studies: A Reader*.

works to describe all dark skinned persons of sub-Saharan Africa and their descendants in the Americas as well as Australian Aborigines regardless of culture, ethnic, and or geographical differences. Although Davies' argument focuses on the designations black subjects use and appropriate to call themselves and the striving for full representation embodied by this exertion, her point of misnaming holds valid for European naming of the persons who are understood to be described by the category black or its now largely obscure precursor, Negro. Naming implicates the politics of domination and conquest and is a management of reality. According to Trouillot, negative connotations were assigned to this category when the persons it was meant to describe were being materially dispossessed. For black subjects, the management of reality incurred deploying the very same monolithic constructions of identity in resistance to European domination based on monolithic constructions of identity. Ideologies, however, according to Davies, even resistant ones, can become a totalizing discourse. And in black subjects' contesting of terms, a totalizing concept of blackness was conserved by collapsing gender and sexuality into race and obscuring class and sexual orientation as well as other cultural difference so that blackness is equated with black heteromascularity. Privileging race as the primary axis of critique within the Civil Rights and nationalist movements meant that black communities coalesced around heterosexist assumptions that reproduced the same structures of exclusion within their communities that sought to displace blackness as external to modernity. In this organization of persons, women and men who did not conform to the heterosexist ideal of active male and passive female were marginalized as other and positioned as external to the community. Mark Anthony Neal explains that during the Civil Rights and Black Power periods such actions were necessary because of

FBI infiltration. This recourse, according to Neal, was also perceived to better buttress black efforts at inclusion.¹⁸ Thus, this reveals that black subjects imagine legitimate subjects for themselves and marginalize subjects who did not conform to patriarchal norms. They reproduce a North Atlantic structure where black subjects are reliant on othered black subjects in order to come into being.

The nationalist myth predicated on homogeneity insists on a patriarchal structure. Because black communities adopted the model of the nation, ‘the nation within the nation’ in the African American context, black communities must reinscribe the pitfalls of the nationalist misadventure. In such a formation, the gender, sexuality, class, and sexual orientation of black subjects disrupt the assumption of a monolithic black identity because these different axes of identity interpellate subjects to be at variance to essentialized conceptions of blackness. A subject is perceived as non-normative due to his or her enacting an interpellation by a desire for an object deemed inappropriate by patriarchy; this would be: same sex desire for male and female queers, the desire to not marry and or have children for heterosexual women, the desire to be intimate with non-black men for heterosexual black women, the desire to not participate in aggressive heteromascularity for heterosexual men, among other yearnings deemed unsuitable. They represent the internal differences that must be obscured if the fiction of a collective essentialist identity is to be maintained. This internal heterogeneity recommends a reading of subjectivity along the lines of Jose Muñoz’s theory of disidentification. disidentification allows us consider how the minoritarian subject is simultaneously interpellated by interlocking identity positions that can be antagonistic towards each

¹⁸ A paradigmatic example of the exclusionary nature of the Civil Rights movement is key purveyors’ treatment of James Baldwin. See Kenan and Duberman, *James Baldwin*; and Neal, *Soul Babies: Black Popular Culture and the Post-Soul Aesthetic*.

other. Muñoz usefully submits that disidentification occurs when there are failed interpellations within the dominant sphere. Unsuccessful interpellations produce an identity-in-difference. The breakdown is the disruption of the ‘just-as-if’ relationship of identification caused by the ideological restrictions implicit in an identificatory site. In the case of the nationalist model, patriarchy would disrupt the queer or non-passive female subject from identifying with the nation. As a result, he or she disidentifies with the nation. It is particularly difficult for subjects who are hailed by more than one minority identity component because of the obstacles encountered in enacting identification. For instance, in my example above, to identify as both black and queer based on the national model adopted by black communities would prove to be a fraught misadventure for such a subject. Muñoz’s concept illuminates the subtle ways that unfriendly interpellations can prove to be difficult for multiply minoritarian subjects. This difficulty, I claim, is the incoherency that erupts from antagonistic identifications.

This disruption impacts the formation of what I call ‘a viable subjectivity,’ ‘self-possession,’ or ‘self-actualization.’ The novels that I consider are preoccupied with what and how meaning structures would have to change in order for non-normative black subjectivity to be accommodated and reproducible. In other words, they investigate what structural shifts would have to occur for heterogeneous subjectivities to be viable within their communities. They imagine what is necessary for what Lorde calls the flourishing of difference.

As I progress through the chapters of my dissertation I consider how the exterior, claims by black communities about appropriate desire and legitimate subject positions, inform the interior, the disorientation that non-normative black subjects experience

because their differences are construed as negative. Their pathologization projects non-normative black subjects as the boundaries of the black community. In being positioned as the outer limits, their marginalization creates ‘the real’ black community for whom black communities struggle for freedom and liberty. An authentic black community is produced on the basis of desiring appropriately. This concern for authenticity is based on notions of organic community. Within modernity, organic communities are racial communities, and my last contention is that race, as a political construct with real material consequences, may be an inherently flawed and fraught communal structure for the coherence of any or all subjects. The novels of *Gendered Nations* begin to gesture to this profound inadequacy. They suggest that one way out of the fatal seduction of race is to imagine communities that create spaces for all persons to be coherent regardless of their identity categories and differences but yet is attentive to the very material consequences of Western racism. And this of course would require the abandonment of the narratives of freedom and liberty and the nation form, which arrive at black subjects already compromised.

Gendered Nations

As a black diasporic dissertation, *Gendered Nations* necessarily takes the Anglophone diaspora as a unit of analysis for examining how literary texts think about identity. Tiffany Patterson and Robin D. G. Kelley contend in “Unfinished Migrations: Reflections on the African Diaspora and the Making of the Modern World” that diasporic identities are not natural. If it is true, according to Patterson and Kelley, that diasporic identities are constantly being reconstituted and reproduced and their continuities must be articulated, then it must also be articulated why one can read the literary works of the

Anglophone black diaspora as a unit of analysis. One reason I suggest for placing in conversation with each other Earl Lovelace's *Salt*, Randall Kenan's *A Visitation of Spirits*, Toni Morrison's *Sula*, and Jamaica Kincaid's *The Autobiography of My Mother* is that all of these novels represent different ways of thinking about non-exclusionary communities within black communal structures in the post-Civil Rights and post-independence period. They approach their various portrayals from the position of the non-normative character. Through the character who embodies a vexed social or political subjectivity, these different literary texts imagine possibilities for more expansive communal formation at a time when black studies is rethinking racial community.¹⁹

These novelists rewrite earlier depictions of racial community. For instance, Randall Kenan writes back to James Baldwin on their shared concern over the space of queer sexuality within a Christian African American community. If in the semi-autobiographical novel, *Go Tell It On The Mountain*, John Grimes relinquishes his queer desire in order to be welcomed into his religious community, for Horace, the protagonist of *A Visitation of Spirits*, this is not a viable option. Like Kenan, Jamaica Kincaid, departs from her literary predecessors. Although Kincaid has famously asserted that she did not grow up reading West Indian literature, I still view her work as contesting this tradition. In a 1996 interview with Frank Birbalsingh, she says: "[George] Lamming's writing is very closed and it's done in nineteenth century patriarchal language . . . It's great! But that language is one of the things I rebelled against" (142). Consequently, I read *The Autobiography of My Mother* as not only iconoclastic in theme but also a repudiation of the preoccupation with classic Caribbean literary concerns: nation and a

¹⁹ See Dubey, "Postmodernism as Postnationalism? Racial Representation in U.S. Black Cultural Studies" for a synopsis of this debate.

particular kind of relationship to the mother. Earl Lovelace also departs from the Caribbean masculinist literary tradition that is embodied by the writing of Edward Kamau Braithwaite, Samuel Selvon, and George Lamming, among others. Not only is Lovelace not appropriating William Shakespeare's Caliban, he also does not emulate the idea of being master of a literary tradition and evince anxiety over a folk culture sullied by colonization. Ground zero for Lovelace's writing, as portrayed in *Salt*, is working from this very sullied history. And Toni Morrison also articulates her difference from predecessors. *Sula* challenges black nationalist prescriptives on black femininity. Morrison's work can be read as participating in a black feminist discourse that seeks to complicate the unitary notion of blackness by bringing considerations of gender and sexuality into representation. Her work demands a more nuanced understanding of black subject formation.

Consequently, *Gendered Nations: Black Subjectivity in Late Twentieth-Century African American and Black Caribbean Narratives* explores trans-national black literary responses to the shifts in race discourse and communal structure and their impact on subject formation. This dissertation is divided into two sections. The first half, "Inheriting the Nation: The Patriarchal Imperative," addresses the social construction of black hetero-masculinity and whom this construction privileges and de-privileges. For the novels that I discuss in this part of the dissertation, the concern over what kind of black male figure will inherit and lead the nation, actual and racial, is preeminent. Sexuality and ideological orientation become powerful factors in determining the appropriate heir. The second part of my dissertation explores novels that critique this very construction of black community. "Against Patriarchy: Radical Black Female Subjectivity" focuses on

black feminist literary responses to and interrogations of the marginalization of black female subjects in the making of the community, national and racial. These female-authored novels go beyond critiques to imagine the conditions of possibility for self-possessed black female subjects within antagonistic social structures. Their representations suggest that a paradigm changing structural shift is necessary for accommodating such a figure. As a black diasporic feminist intervention, differentiating this dissertation along gender, male- and female-authored novels, instead of according to national literary traditions, African American and Caribbean, makes more apparent the very gendered ways in which racial and national communal formation is constituted.

In my first chapter, “*Salt: A New Humanism for Post-Independence Modernity*,” I analyze the portrayal of nationalism in light of classic European theories of nationalism as well as postcolonial critiques of them. Earl Lovelace examines the failures of nationalism and the post-independent nation-state of Trinidad to consider the after effects of the abuses of power within contemporary Trinidad: Amerindian genocide, slavery, colonization, the failures of emancipation and independence. He goes beyond this critique to offer a revised nationalism in its place that positions working-class black subjects at the centre and attempts to incorporate a multiracial and multicultural community. Lovelace uses this retooled nationalist endeavor as a site to develop a theory of humanism that is specific to the history of Trinidad and for all its citizens. However, his revision of nationalism is still subject to the same critiques of nationalism: it privileges a heterosexual bourgeois male subject above other subject-locations, even if his race is now black. This failing necessarily undermines the theory of humanism developed because some subjects’ humanity are privileged over others’. His revised

nationalism is also challenged by its twin commitments to the working-class black figure and a multicultural community. These two entities uneasily exist with and at times destabilize each other. The narrative's utopic depiction is constantly challenged and complicated by its own commitments.

My reading of *A Visitation of Spirits* also critiques how a coherent black community, which I read as a proxy-nationalist community, self-defines. If the national space depicted in *Salt* is hetero-normative, Randall Kenan's first novel uncovers that the assumption or privileging of heterosexuality occludes and abjects heterogeneous sexual identifications. The second chapter, "Feeling Immortal in a Mortal's Arms: Queer Black Male Subjectivity in *A Visitation of Spirits*" explores the place of queer sexuality against an African American community's commitment to a hetero-normative construction of black masculinity. Because queer sexuality is positioned as external to the community, it transforms into an abject force that disrupts the genealogy of black male leadership portrayed. This leadership is constituted on the model of a redemptive patriarchy. Due to the construction of racial commitments in opposition to sexual identification, I use interpellation (Althusserian and refinements of it) to consider how subject-positions are not fully sutured because persons are interpellated into heterogeneous identity locations simultaneously. The contested nature of interpellation induces abjection within the protagonist who feels he must commit suicide. Sexuality is not the only way that the anxiety over black masculinity is worked out. The portrayal of female characters who are perceived as powerful enough to disrupt the mythology of black male leadership occasions much concern.

The third and fourth chapters of my dissertation take up this anxiety over what to do with women characters who do not know their place. They explore black literary feminist responses to constructions of black communal formation that are predicated upon limiting notions of black female subjectivity. I read *Sula* as depicting a similar critique of an intact black community as *A Visitation of Spirit* in terms of the options this community forecloses. “Dangerous Endeavors: Fashioning the Black Female Subject,” investigates the intersections of race, gender, class, and sexuality to consider the conditions of possibility for the full self- and sexual expression of working-class black female subjectivity. I also read *Sula* along the figure of the blues woman to consider the opportunities that are available for her and how she departs from gendered and sexual norms. Her disavowal of conventional scripts of black female subjectivity instigates the black community’s censure of her. These two commitments, radical black female subjectivity and an intact black community, uneasily and contradictorily coexist within the narrative space of the novel. However, the portrayal of radical black female subjectivity completely unravels with the protagonist’s death. Her demise is a default privileging of a coherent black community.

The Autobiography of My Mother, similar to *Sula*, does not portray the protagonist’s unqualified triumph over structures that seek to subordinate her. *Sula* and *The Autobiography of My Mother* have congruent preoccupations: they are both interested in how radical or ‘demonic’ female subjectivity is possible given the multiple subordinations to which the black female figure is subject. Whereas *Sula*’s community abjects her for her life-choices, Xuela abjects herself from her community because she refuses to conform. In the fourth chapter, “Unsilencing the Demonic Ground:” The

Desiring Caribbean Female Subject,” I explore the conditions of possibility for a demonic Caribbean female subjectivity. The death of the mother and the refusal of the father to parent inform the daughter’s departure from gendered conventions, such as patriarchal and aesthetic norms, that marginalize black women. However, the mother’s death and the father’s disinterest also induce the melancholia that disrupts the depiction of a ‘demonic’ female subject. I utilize both Freud’s early and later conceptions of melancholia to understand the place of the father in constituting female subjectivity and the nature of the protagonist’s melancholic disposition. As a result of melancholia, the viability of the model that is compellingly portrayed is destabilized.

In various ways, the three chapters that succeed the first chapter on *Salt* investigate representations that critique the commitment to hetero-normativity. *Salt* is the only future-oriented novel in *Gendered Nations*; that is, it gestures towards hopeful possibilities even if they are improbable by the close of the narrative. The novel’s ending suggests a utopic politics of reconciliation and inclusion for all races within Trinidad. In contrast, in the other three novels, two of the protagonists die: one through suicide and the other through an unexplained illness, and the third survives in isolation by the close of these texts. Ironically, the one novel that can imagine recuperating a community is the one that does so on fraught grounds: it reinscribes the pitfalls of nationalism and patriarchy. Therefore, the representations in the four novels raise the question of the difficulty in even imagining more expansive and accommodating communal structures that can incorporate all subjects.

PART I

Inheriting the Nation: the Patriarchal Imperative

CHAPTER 1

Salt

A New Humanism for Post-Independence Modernity

How can you free people? he asked. When every move you make is to get them to accept conditions of unfreedom, when you use power to twist and corrupt what it is to be human, when you ask people to accept shame as triumph and indignity as progress? What is power if power is too weak to take responsibility to uphold what it is to be human?
-- Earl Lovelace, *Salt*

The tragedy of our time is . . . the inability of power to rise to its responsibility for human decency.
-- Earl Lovelace, *Salt*

I read about the history of the West Indies, all different books, because I keep thinking that someone will say it happened differently. I can never believe that the history of the West Indies happened the way it did . . . Well the wreck and the ruin and the greed. It's almost on a monumental scale.
--Jamaica Kincaid, "Jamaica Kincaid and the Modernist Project"

In *Salt* (1996), Earl Lovelace's national epic of the founding and unfolding of modern Trinidad, Lovelace imagines the conditions of possibility for working through the tragedy of the post-Independence present. This portrayal examines the relationship between power and what it means to be human within the context of contemporary Trinidad, a putative postcolony of British Empire. The concerns illustrated are both very narrow and yet range across the breadth of the history of modern Trinidad, which is only one-half of the twin island nation-state of Trinidad and Tobago. I demonstrate that although *Salt* depicts an interrogation of the subject-location of the working-class black citizen-subject of a nation-state founded on some of the worst abuses of modern power, slavery and colonization, its portrayal is hopeful by the close of the narrative. In its representation of the tragedy of the post-Independent present, the narration engages a

history that has been described as “a dark and bloody story of oppression and exploitation” (Higman 1) to understand how power has functioned to validate and invalidate diverse subjects’ humanity. In *Salt*, the representation of a bloody history articulates a theory of humanism and the conditions of possibility for everyone’s liberty in modern Trinidad. Thus, the novel presents a critique of the nation-state form, as *the* modern socio-economic apparatus through which power is deployed and concentrated, even as this rendering attempts to rehabilitate the nation-state for a more equitable future. This recuperation reinscribes the very foreclosures inherent to the nation-state in its privileging of a racialized heterosexual bourgeois male subject. As a result, the portrayal in *Salt* undercuts its own project.

Salt begins with an account of the enslaved black Trinidadian, Guinea John, who places two corncocks under his arms and flies home to Africa. His descendents, unable to follow him because they have eaten salt, are too heavy to fly and must remain in Trinidad. Lovelace employs the trope of the flying Africans to focus the narrative space of *Salt* on how black Trinidadians have lived in Trinidad from slavery to the post-Independence moment.¹ In *Salt*, there are two simultaneously unfolding but intertwined plots. One narrative thread can be read as a mini-bildungsroman in which the main character is Alford George. It begins by describing his socio-familial environment, rural working-class and predominantly black, and his delayed speech development as a child. This story traces Alford’s rise from a primary schoolteacher at a government school in a rural working-class village to become the Minister of Social and Environmental Rehabilitation in the Office of The Prime Minister to his eventual fall from political grace

¹ There are many folktales involving the ‘flight’ of enslaved blacks to Africa in both the United States and the Caribbean. These folktales have been a rich resource for the literary cultural products of black diasporic people. Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon* is a well-known example.

due to his insistence on reparations for blacks. His years as a teacher stretch from the end of formal socio-political and economic British colonization to the post-independence period, mid 1940s – 1980s.² One day Alford suddenly realizes that the college exhibition system, the exams that primary school children take to enter secondary school, is not designed to educate the children of the masses. Rather, its intentions are to accustom the children of the working-class to their limited opportunities because it only rewards scholarships to a negligible number of primary school candidates to attend secondary school. To combat its inherent unfairness, he leaves the village of Cascadu and travels to Port of Spain where he fasts, gains national attention, and eventually becomes a member of the self-serving National Party whose members are from the black middle-class. As a member of the National Party, Alford adopts the pretensions of the black political middle-class and becomes another ineffective government minister whose intent is to remain in power.

When Alford is a member of the government, Bango is brought to his attention as the Cascadu villager who organizes multiracial village parades every Independence Day in which only black Trinidadians participate. Bango's story, the other major plotline in the narrative, examines the historic plight of working class black Trinidadians from the era of slavery to the present post-Independence moment. The text maps a circular history, which reveals that Bango, living through the change from British colony to independent nation-state, experiences the same betrayals that his grandfather, JoJo, endures as a result of the way emancipation was constructed. For both generations of men, the white Creole land-owning class introduces an Indian peasantry to continue to dispossess working-class black Trinidadians despite their nominal freedom. Blame is not assigned to the East

² Alford's years as a Minister are less than ten years, 1980s – 1990s. The novel ends in the mid-1990s.

Indian community. Instead, this portrayal explores how nineteenth-century Indian indentureship and mid-twentieth-century land policy worked to disfranchise working-class black Trinidadians. Bango's sense of community, commitment to the plight of working-class black subjects, and heterodox value system, which theorizes about what it means to be human, position him as a mentor to Alford, who will lead a more equitable Trinidadian nation. Under his leadership, the Trinidadian nation will not only be truly multiracial and multicultural but also redress the longstanding socio-economic stasis and dispossession of working-class black subjects.

The Problem of History

In order to redress the marginalization of working-class black subjects, *Salt* engages with Trinidad's historical record. This engagement necessarily counters a prevailing assumption about West Indian history in general and Trinidadian history in particular: that slavery and colonization were less violent in Trinidad.³ The novel begins with a brief historical overview that is developed and returned to as the narrative unfolds. This recounting narrates the brutality that accompanies the arrival of Europeans, their desire to conquer people, land, and resources, and the dehumanizing effects of the systematic violence of genocide of the Caribs and slavery on both enslaved black men and women. For instance, the reader is told of the floggings that are necessary to keep enslaved blacks and Africans 'in line.' It details the mutilation of enslaved black bodies, such as the dismemberment of ears and feet "to get a man to follow your instructions" (6). Despite the ever-pervasive violence and threat of violence against male and female black bodies, enslaved blacks persistently mounted challenges. Within *Salt*, there are

³ I use the descriptors Caribbean and West Indies interchangeably to refer to Anglophone Caribbean island nation-states.

numerous references to one of the most famous failed rebellions by enslaved Creole blacks and Africans in Trinidad.⁴ The leaders, four men, were beheaded, and their heads were set on poles in front of the Royal Jail in Port of Spain while their headless bodies were hung throughout the island. Participants of this rebellion had an ear cut off or were flogged, sentenced to work in chains, or expelled from the island, as is later revealed in the novel. The portrayal of the violence endemic in Trinidadian history means to dislodge the well-known argument that slavery was somehow less brutal in Trinidad than in the rest of the Americas including the other Caribbean islands.⁵ By beginning with a representation of this brutality and violence, *Salt* returns to this past for what I call a future-oriented project. In fact, it is the only novel in *Gendered Nations* that contains a representation of how to transform the intractability of the present moment for a more liveable future.⁶ As a result of this investment, Lovelace's novel can be read as offering a

⁴ See Brereton. She details this rebellion and the punishments meted out to the enslaved. Although this unsuccessful insurrection is not considered one of the major insurrections by the enslaved in the Anglophone Caribbean, it is both the largest and best documented failed revolt of slavery-era colonial Trinidad.

⁵ Naipaul forwards this argument in *The Middle Passage*. He offers that the singular history of Trinidad as a late developing slave-plantation society and the fact that the Spanish slave codes were the least harsh among the various European slave codes as evidence. For counter-arguments, see Brereton, *A History of Modern Trinidad: 1783 – 1962*. (Although this text is not a response to Naipaul, it addresses the stance evinced by Naipaul, which is a popular misconception on the history of modern Trinidad.) Trinidad was a colony of Spain until 1802 when it was ceded to the British (Treaty of Amiens). However, Trinidad was an undeveloped “frontier outpost” until 1783 when the Spanish government passed the *Cedula of Population*. This proclamation granted free land to every settler, white, free colored and free black, who came to Trinidad with his slaves on the condition that he was Roman Catholic and the subject of a nation friendly to Spain. The vast majority of the settlers, white, black and free colored, came from the French speaking Caribbean. By 1784 Trinidad was culturally and linguistically a French colony because the French planters, free colored, free blacks, and their enslaved Creole and African slaves outnumbered the Spanish speaking population. Brereton reveals that eighteenth century historians believed slavery in the Spanish colonies, of which Trinidad was still nominally one, was less harsh than in the British and French West Indies. However, Brereton notes that the archives do not support that popular misconception. Although the Spanish codes were more liberal, they could not be enforced. The famous 1789 Slave Code was never enacted because planters in the Spanish colonies were against them. Instead leading planters in each colony proposed their own slave laws. In fact, when French planters migrated to Trinidad, they brought their harsh conventions and customs with them. It was well known that slavery was exceptionally brutal in the French West Indies, and this model now structured Trinidad. Enslaved black subjects in Trinidad were literally worked to death at this time.

⁶ See Introduction where I discuss this difference at greater length.

fictional response to the concern of how to write about this history without dismissing the Caribbean as negligible or expressing disbelief over its violence and loss, as one of the opening quotes by Jamaica Kincaid expresses.

Scholars of the Caribbean are acutely aware of the challenge of writing this history. Stuart Hall, like B.W. Higman, recognizes that the Caribbean's relationship to its past is "marked by the most horrendous, violent, abrupt, ruptural breaks" (5). Along with this violence and brutality, the Caribbean's perceived lack of achievement and creation also indicates that the writing of West Indian history does not promise to be a rewarding endeavor. The most famous advocate of this stance is V.S. Naipaul. Anthony Appiah calls this 'the Naipaul fallacy' that is the determination to misread the Caribbean through a Western perspective and not on its own grounds. Naipaul, however, is both right and wrong. Such pervasive and endemic violence complicates the writing of West Indian history as Hall perceptively recognizes. The land of Caribbean islands, according to Hall, cannot be sacred because it was 'emptied' of its original inhabitants and the modern Caribbean was created by an act of imperial will after the emptying. Thus, Hall argues, "our [Caribbean] modernity is marked by conquest, expropriation, genocide, slavery, the plantation system and the long tutelage of colonial dependency" (5). Yet as a result of this violent past, the modern Caribbean island nation-state is a unique creation. Caribbean island nation-states are truly modern nation-states in the sense that they are inaugurated within cultural modernity; the colonial powers did not have to *continuously* negotiate with any pre/non-modern social formations. The Caribbean is a *sui generis* manifestation of colonial/post-colonial modernity because, according to David Scott, it was, for the

most part, structured by the colonial experience.⁷ Even though Naipaul may not consider this an act of exceptional creation or achievement, especially on the part of contemporary black Trinidadians, the Caribbean has had to negotiate its peculiar modernity in relation to this particular complex past. This singular Caribbean complexity David Scott suggests in his reading of the revised edition of C.L.R. James' *The Black Jacobins* is the tragedy of colonial enlightenment. Scott explains that black West Indians are both objects of modern power and subjects of a modern life. He argues that the changes James makes in the revised edition shift the reading of the Haitian Revolution, 1791 – 1804 from the “reverential anti-colonial story of revolutionary heroism” (131) to a tragedy of colonial modernity. James' additions, according to Scott, describe the tragic choices available for black West Indians within modernity and present Toussaint Louverture's path as the paradigmatic story of black West Indian engagement with the enlightenment of colonial modernity:

Toussaint is a tragic subject of colonial modernity to which he was, by force, conscripted. His tragedy inheres in the fact that, inescapably modern as he is obliged by the modern conditions of his life to be, he must seek his freedom in the very technologies, conceptual languages, and institutional formations in which modernity's rationality has sought his enslavement. (168)

Scott's reading dissipates the anxiety of how Caribbean history has unfolded and needing to locate heroism and revolution within every insurrection/movement. Such a shift allows for a different interrogation of the place of black West Indians within cultural modernity; it focuses, instead, on the inherent contradictions of this subject-location. It enables a return to black West Indians' peculiar negotiation with modernity that can teach us something about modern power and the way it aggressively seeks to dehumanize modern

⁷ See Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity*; and James, *The Black Jacobins* for a more full exploration of this position.

people who attempt to negotiate their freedom within a framework premised on their dispossession. This is the significance of the Caribbean islands and their harsh history. Lovelace's novel articulates an analogous project to Scott's because it intervenes in debates on the writing of Caribbean history to suggest another way forward: it seeks to make the historic dispossession serviceable for working-class black subjects, the very subject-location that is historically marginalized and further dispossessed by standard renderings of Caribbean history.

Owing to this logic, the novel *Salt* opens with an account of the enslaved African subject, Guinea John, who, as I mentioned earlier, places two corncocks under his arms and flies home to Africa. His descendants, black Creole subjects, unable to follow him because they have eaten salt, are too heavy to fly and must remain in Trinidad. Later in the novel, upon the eve of emancipation, JoJo, one of Guinea John's descendants, realizes that unlike the recently enslaved Africans who remember from whence they come, Africa only registers as a loss to him, the black Creole subject. Given his dispossession, the new world of Trinidad is his home and future. These two claims of ownership are validated by JoJo "having endured here[, in Trinidad], out of having planted the land without reward, out of having built houses without occupying them, out of having sown without reaping. He could claim it out of having made it a battleground for freedom" (173). This reasoning validates the black Creole subject as a legitimate citizen-subject due to his labor, which enriches the island, and struggle for liberty, which gives the society its particular form. It also legitimates his struggle with power in Trinidad. In this construction, the black Creole subject is privileged because the lived experience of Trinidad is the project of *Salt*. Africa is not an option because it is no longer available to the Creole subject. Even though this

portrayal is faithful to this perspective, it still mourns the loss of “an Africa you do not know” (256). Consequently, the narrative space of the novel is dedicated to interrogating how black Creole Trinidadian subjects have lived, live, and will live in Trinidad from slavery through the post-Independence moment into the “limitless future” (Anderson 11). The novel, therefore, does not illustrate the ‘Naipaul fallacy;’ it represents Trinidad and Trinidadian history on its own terms. As a revisionist imaginative history, it suggests that shame and anxiety as a result of a history of violence and dispossession are not the only responses. Rather, the stance depicted is encapsulated by Alford’s nephew towards the closing of the novel: “the tragedy of our time is to have lost the ability to feel loss, the inability of power to rise to its responsibility for human decency . . . if what distinguishes us as humans is our stupidity, what might redeem us [is] our grace” (259). It is a retelling of the nation and its history that will allow black subjects to at once redeem themselves and the other citizens with whom they must build the nation. *Salt* is a hopeful narrative.

Imagining the Nation

Lovelace’s rendering of the working-class black subject is intertwined with his illustration of the socio-economic and political formation of Trinidad as a modern nation-state. Due to Lovelace’s explicit critique of post-Independence Trinidad and retooling of nationalism in *Salt*, I read the novel as an attempt to intervene in discourses of nation-formation in post-Independent nation-states, even though his argument is particular to Trinidad. This section explores the two histories of nation formation and aspects of the theories of Anderson, Blaut, and Chatterjee, which have been suggested by the manner in which the Trinidad is imagined. The intersection of their frameworks makes apparent post-Independence intelligentsia’s continued reliance on colonial socio-economic and

political apparatus as well as why full decolonization was not possible with the form that nationalism took in the colony. Focusing on the failure of decolonization enables a nuanced understanding of the stasis of the subject-location of the working-class black subject. Lovelace's recourse to nationalism is in service of recuperating this subject from his historic dispossession.

Lovelace's novel, published in 1996, is a paradigmatic instance of the continued contemporary seduction of the nation-state. The preoccupations of *Salt* are an example of Benedict Anderson's comment that the long prophesied end of nationalism is still far removed. Anderson's work from *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* is useful for my reading of *Salt* because he argues that national communities are distinguished by the style in which they are imagined. National communities, according to Anderson, are always conceived in terms of "deep, horizontal comradeship" (7) despite actual inequality and always emerge from a distant past and unfold into a 'limitless future.' This is true of both narrations of the Trinidad nation; they both begin with Columbus' landing on the island. In addition, Anderson connects the emergence of the modern nation formation in Europe and the continental Americas to the development of vernacular print capitalism and the rise of the national bourgeoisie.⁸ Anderson, however, recognizes that the national idea can be co-opted to mirror the economic interests of particular factions and may not in fact be related to any true idea of the nation and nation formation. The other aspect of Anderson's theory, which has utility for my argument is his understanding of the relationship between national models

⁸ For clarity, I use continental Americas to mean North and South America as a way to distinguish between them and the island Americas, which is the Caribbean. Anderson only refers to the nation-states that comprise North and South America when he uses the term America. Generally, Americas as a descriptor includes all of the physical landmasses west of the Atlantic Ocean on a typical world map.

developed within continental Americas, Europe, and Russia and the colonial world. The colonial intelligentsia, Anderson writes, were critical for the advancement of the national idea in their locales. The colonial intelligentsia, created by the colonial education system, was exposed to European languages of state and in general modern western culture, particularly their nineteenth-century models of nation formation and nationalism. Thus the colonial education system produces both a bilingual and literate colonial intelligentsia but also, inadvertently, promotes colonial nationalism. However, there is one significant difference between the colonial intelligentsia and the continental Americas/European bourgeoisie: the colonial intelligentsia is alienated, for the most part, from the workings of colonial capital whereas the continental Americas/European bourgeoisie's rise is intimately connected to the development of capital. This distinction means, Anderson explains, that the development of the colonial intelligentsia was apart from the workings of capital. Whereas vernacular print capitalism made possible the continental Americas/European imagined community, the imagined national communities of the colonial world were premised on colonial education and circumventing print to invite the illiterate masses into the national community.

James Blaut critiques theories of nationalism, like Anderson's, that view nationalism as having diffused outwards from Europe to its colonies. This formulation, according to Blaut, has little that is useful for understanding the national liberation struggles in the Third World. They do not comprehend that these are progressive struggles for social justice because national liberation movements are misread as having diffused outwards from Europe as part of modernization. Blaut explains that this misreads colonial apparatus as one that facilitated modernity and not one that enabled the

under-development and poverty of the colony. Blaut astutely theorizes that national struggle in the third world is an expansive class struggle that encompasses an exploiting class that is external to the colony. He reads these movements as a response by colonized people to colonial oppression and exploitation. Blaut's argument, however, is both astute and subject to its own misidentification. Anderson rightly conceives of nation formation in the colonies as a part of their modernization.⁹ He discerns that the colonial education and administrative systems *are* modern social structures. Blaut is mistaken in reading colonization as somehow unrelated to or outside of modernity. The under-development of colonization *is* the Third World experience of modernity. Third World modernity is not one of progress but oppression, servitude, and exploitation. This is the value of Scott's reading of *The Black Jacobins*. Scott realizes that the tragedy of the black West Indian subject is that s/he seeks his/her freedom within the very technologies that conspire against his/her sovereignty. There is *no* outside of modernity for a subject primarily (if not wholly) constituted within cultural modernity. However, reading Blaut against Anderson reveals that the subjects in Anderson's reading are the local elite because they were modernized by their exposure to North Atlantic thinking and ideas and therefore invite the colonial masses into modernity through the dissemination of national ideas. This position necessarily reads national liberation struggles in the colonies as a middle-class political struggle that is similar to the rise of the bourgeoisie and their political struggles in Europe. Anderson's account of Third World national movements is unable to appreciate the exploitation and oppression that were endemic to colonization and in fact fed the desire for autonomy, even if this aspiration is articulated in the language of

⁹ While I concur here with Anderson, this does not contradict my earlier stance that Caribbean modernity begins with the arrival of Columbus. Nationalism is a discourse that is engendered within modernity and is therefore one of its ideologies to which the modern Caribbean is subject.

nationalism (which is an important if overlooked difference). Turning to Blaut provides us with a framework that can better understand national struggle against the exploitation endemic to colonization, such as Amerindian genocide, Africans and Creole black enslavement, East Indian indenture, and neo-colonialism.

Despite the utility of various aspects of Anderson and Blaut's formulations, a European overdetermination eclipses a more nuanced reading of the forms of Third World nationalisms. Alternatively, I am asking: 'is it possible to think through various Third World nationalisms on their own terms, even as they reference European, American and Russian models?' Chatterjee gives us a reading of Third World nationalism that is both attentive to its agency and originality and accounts for the ways in which these nationalisms reference American/European models. In *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*, Chatterjee explains that the most stimulating nationalist movements in Asia and Africa consciously distinguished themselves from the national models birthed in the West. He delineates that Third World anti-colonial nationalism took the form of a binary. The socio-political world is discretely partitioned into material and the spiritual realms, which map onto an external and internal dichotomy. The material as the external domain comprises the economy, statecraft, science, and technology, which are modern fields in which the West has putatively proven to be superior. The West is to be scrutinized and mirrored in the material sphere. The spiritual domain, however, as the internal sphere, is distinguished by its singular cultural identity. It is necessary to retain the uniqueness of a nation's spiritual culture; the West is refused access to this domain. Thus, if the Third World is subject to the West in the domain of the material, it is already sovereign in the domain of the spiritual. In fact,

Chatterjee locates nationalism's force and creativity within the spiritual sphere and apportions to it Third World nationalism's articulation of a modern national culture that is not Western. It is within the spiritual domain that the Third World national community is birthed. Chatterjee explains that this bifurcation is invisible to conventional histories in which nationalism is solely understood in terms of political power.

This dyad concedes nationalism's material and ideological processes. It accounts for Third World nationalisms' modular forms *and* their differences from their referents. Analogous with Chatterjee, Deborah Thomas discloses that the most difficult anti-colonial nationalist struggles in fact occurred *within* the realm of culture.¹⁰ Thus, how the nation constructs its identity is what is most at stake. This is why Lovelace presents two narrations of the nation: he is contesting how the nation imagines itself. Chatterjee's theory creates space to interrogate this self-invention even though I suspect that his binary maps neatly onto a modern/pre-modern binate. The structuring modern/pre-modern paradigm may initially appear to be inappropriate for understanding Caribbean nationalism. This distinction is a red herring, however. Even though Caribbean island nation-states did not have unmediated access to a pre-modern culture, which is distinct from the creolized pre-modern African cultural retentions that culturally structure the Anglophone Caribbean. Lovelace makes this clear in JoJo's recognition of Africa as a loss to him, as I mentioned earlier, even as the novel privileges a black Creole culture, their nationalist movements still fashioned a cultural discourse out of their peculiar modernity. For instance, in the case of Trinidad and Tobago, Eric Williams, the first prime minister, states that

¹⁰ I suspect that both Chatterjee and Thomas are using different labels, spiritual and culture, respectively, to discuss the same process. Therefore, I read them as the same.

There can be no Mother India for those whose ancestors came from India
There can be no Mother Africa for those of African origin, and the Trinidad and Tobago society is living a lie and heading for trouble if it seeks to create the impression or to allow others to act under the delusion that Trinidad and Tobago is an African society. There can be no Mother England and no dual loyalties
There can be no Mother China . . . and there can be no Mother Syria or Mother Lebanon. A nation, like an individual, can have only one mother. The only Mother we recognise is Trinidad and Tobago, and Mother cannot discriminate between her children. (48)

Thus, what gets posited here in place of the pre-modern is a Creole multi-cultural hybridity. The form of nation formation that is privileged in the novel refashions Creole multiculturalism to make it serviceable for envisioning a more equitable multiracial multicultural Trinidad nation. However, this formulation has a troubled implementation in the Caribbean and in the novel. Shalini Puri perceptively argues that discourses of hybridity in the Caribbean posit a difference from the 'Mother Culture' in order to attain national legitimacy. According to Puri, they also displace discourses of equality in order to secure the political middle-class as the new state managers without engendering the transformation of colonial society.¹¹ This is one of the foreclosures that Lovelace's reimagined nation repeats. The cultural realm, therefore, in addition to being a contested space within anti-colonial nationalisms, also proves to be an ambiguous and fraught space for Third World nation formation. The portrayal of reparations in *Salt* is evidence of this complexity.

The combined work of these scholars equips us with conceptual tools for reading both the nation form that is stridently critiqued in *Salt* and the one that is offered as an alternative. They establish a number of critical points for us. First, that the national communities are distinguished by the style in which they are imagined. Second, post-

¹¹ Puri uses the phrase 'bourgeois nationalist hegemony,' which I read as the political middle-class. I distinguish between the bourgeoisie and the middle-class in the Caribbean, which I will explain later in the chapter.

colonial intelligentsia's appropriation of the nationalist movement reflects their own conservative agenda. Third, colonialism and its apparatus are problems of the project of modernity. And fourth, postcolonial countries retain colonial socio-political and economic apparatus.

The first history of the nation-state of Trinidad is Myrtle's, Bango's common-law wife, partial re-narration of the one given to her by the National Party; it is also the narration that is invalidated in the novel. However, its presence is crucial for the transformation of the nation-state that is desired. Through Myrtle's experience of this party's electioneering in the rural working-class village of Cascadu, we witness the black political-middle-class' mesmerizing seduction of the black working-class. The National Party's approach is to campaign for the first universal elections by informing black subjects of their history, which they do not know.¹² This ignorance is the result of the prejudices of the British colonial education system. It is a void the black political-middle-class pretends to address. Consequently, Myrtle describes them as a "school, a university that come to give us our history" (152). Before I continue, I will issue a caveat or rather a qualification: the history that the National Party 'teaches' and the history of JoJo and Bango are not substantively different; they, in fact, tell similar histories. The differences are in form, intent, and duration. It is on these grounds that Bango critiques the National Party.

The National Party, like the text, begins with Columbus' rediscovery of Trinidad, the quick decimation of the Amerindian population who welcomed him, and Fr. Las

¹² The first universal elections in Trinidad occurred in 1946 while it was still a British colony.

Casas' grief over their genocide.¹³ Their history only covers the salient milestones of black Trinidadian history (which is a significant difference between it and the history of JoJo and Bango. The latter includes the other two major racial/ethnic groups in Trinidad). The nation imagined here is a racially and culturally black Creole community. The National Party informs Myrtle and the other villagers of the Transatlantic Slave Trade and the routes of the Middle Passage. They significantly teach people about the global nature of racial-economic slavery and the international circulation of goods that was made possible by this socio-economic institution. Most powerfully, the brutality of slavery in Trinidad is depicted. Significantly, the National Party ends with the atrocity of racial-economic slavery. They perceptively conclude at this juncture to incite working-class black subjects. This political party deliberately overwhelms black subjects, and they are successful to this end: women cry and men curse. After narrating this history to rural working-class black Trinidadian subjects, this political party then attempts to make this history ancient:

These things were done in the dark ages of our past. These acts were done from a different vision of what is the world, of what is human, in a time when men and women did not have the right to vote, when there was no ideal of democracy by which to live. But today we have Democracy, Brotherhood, Unity. (154)

What is crucial here is the logic that locates racial-economic slavery in the distant past but still makes it serviceable for the first universal elections in the mid-twentieth-century. (This also proves that the horror and singularity of racial-economic slavery for black subjects does not make it inherently sacred to *all* of them. It can be appropriated and deployed for various purposes, even those that work to re-capture modern black subjects.)

¹³ *Salt* only discloses Frail Las Casas' grief over Amerindian genocide as a result of Spanish conquest. It does not inform us that Las Casas petitioned the Spanish King to introduce enslaved Africans since they might better tolerate the hard labour demanded by the Spaniards. The mention of his name is supposed to indicate this history.

The National Party manipulates the horror of new world black history for their own conservative agenda: to acquire political power. Their platform is that everyone will now have access to land, opportunity, and profit if they win the elections. But their caveat is that this can only be achieved through “[d]iscipline as members of society, productivity as workers and tolerance, one for the other, as citizens” (154). (These stipulations appear to be legitimate, but they are deployed against the socio-economic empowerment of working-class black subjects.) Significantly, their vision does not include a socio-economic transformation of the colonial society. The National Party dissipates their provocation by presenting themselves as the solution. Through this purely Machiavellian gesture, this political party wins the support of the rural working-class black subject.

Later Myrtle recounts this highly charged experience to Bango and repeats the National Party’s message that they, black subjects, now own the land of Trinidad because times have changed. In fact, Myrtle contributes a dollar when they solicit money. When Bango challenges both the parroted claim and the donation, Myrtle realizes the basis of her conversion. It was “not so much for any promise they made to [her]. It was because of the sense of relief that they bring. They had brought the sense of an end, that whatever they was waiting on had come and that it was now time for she and Bango to move on” (155). Myrtle’s response proves the self-interest of the National Party. They present a history wrought with passion and histrionics to induce feelings of release and arrival. Alford also witnesses this spectacle with a profound sense of loss. He notices the effect they have on his brothers, working-class men, as they believe the promises of the National Party. The facile satisfaction and taming of his brothers by the political party’s ‘small grandiose promises’ of Nation induces feelings of shame in Alford because he

suspects another 'secondclassness' is the actual object. This idea of the nation, the text explicitly illustrates, is divorced from a true commitment to the transformation of colonial culture into one that can address the socio-economic concerns of the black working-class. It is shaped by the National Party's intent to secure their political position.

In terms of a modern historiography of nation formation, the change from colony to post-colony would be the putative 'birth' of the post-colonial nation. In *Salt*, the National Party is able to position itself as the ruling party in the post-Independence era. The novel thus portrays an interrogation of the nature of the nation-state birthed through the National Party and the political party itself. According to the depiction, the National Party is comprised of doctors, dentists, Ph.D.s, theologians, attorneys, historians, and archaeologists; that is, a highly educated middle-class. They are also characterized as "a troupe of magicians, each one with a top hat, a black cape, and a silver-topped cane" (34). Alford, in fact, provides us with this description. His initial dismissive assessment does not bar Alford from eventually entering the party with the intention to overhaul the surviving colonial education system. As the ruling political party, the National Party initially ignores Alford's attempts to meet with them to discuss a radical restructuring of the colonial school system. However, the party is forced to appear to make concessions when the newspapers provide consistent coverage of Alford's fast until the college exhibition system is changed. After thirty-two days, the Leader of the ruling party claims that the ruling party has already constituted a one-man Commission of Inquiry for the College Exhibition Examination. This apparent concession, which Alford interprets as a step in the right direction, is itself the only manifestation of 'change' by the close of the narration. Through the College Exhibition subplot, the narrative illustrates that the

nation-state under the National Party is neither qualitatively nor substantively different from colonial Trinidad. The society is socio-economically unchanged. Alford only fully perceives this tragic constancy after listening to Bango's narration of the history of Trinidad through his, Bango's, grandfather's life experiences (to which I will return):

I had not failed to see that the Colonial government, Britain, the authorities, however we called them, had had opportunities to make restitution and apology that would restore value and dignity and respect to our community and people. Each time they had backed away, out of fear, out of arrogance. The sadness was that the National Party had done no better. (188)

Bango and his grandfather, JoJo, working-class black subjects, are treated the same by the different ruling regimes despite the change from colony to independent nation-state. Alford quickly discerns from Bango's history that the black middle-class' complicity in maintaining the same socio-economic structure that operated during racial-economic slavery and colonization secures "Blackpeople in their secondclassness" (188). The colonial education system, as one of the seemingly immutable colonial institutions, is one such example of how the children of the working-class are accustomed to their 'secondclassness' from very young. This education system, premised upon rewarding a few students with escape from Trinidad, habituates most students to the limited possibilities that are available to them. The society misinterprets lack of opportunity as the defeat and failure of working-class children. Once a minister, Alford abandons his initial plans to dismantle the colonial education system. After Alford is accused of being made a pappyshow,¹⁴ he reviews his tenure in office. Upon reflection, he realizes that as another self-interested minister, he, Alford, is "part of the tapestry of pretence at power. [He] who ought to have been the one to disturb this numbing peace [has] now become keeper of that peace. [He has] joined the gang of overseers that help to keep this place a

¹⁴ Pappyshow means to ridicule someone or make him/her appear foolish.

plantation” (130). Such a caustic assessment on the part of Alford may suggest a renunciation of the project of nation formation. Supriya Nair in “Diasporic Roots: Imagining a Nation in Earl Lovelace’s *Salt*” argues that these acerbic comments should not be seen as a disavowal on Lovelace’s part. Instead, Nair insists, this close analysis of the pitfalls of nation formation and party politics in Trinidad is evidence of the novel’s commitment to the intricacies of life in Trinidad. Lovelace’s depiction is attentive to the persistence of the colonial within the allegedly post-colonial space.

Such a commitment therefore necessitates a censure of the black middle-class and its conservative political agenda. Nair reads the negative exegesis on party politics in *Salt* as part of the general displeasure Lovelace’s oeuvre displays towards the bourgeois nationalist leaders of Trinidad party politics.¹⁵ She explains that the caricature of an Eric Williams type personality in the character of the Leader reveals that Lovelace’s hope for a “productive nationalist politics does not include heroic portraits of party leadership” (271). Instead, Lovelace portrays the political leadership as actively subverting the process of decolonization. This can be seen when Ethelbert Tannis says: “Blackpeople not free. But the mistake [Alford makes] is to believe that the chief [the Leader] want Blackpeople to be free. Because when he free Blackpeople it would follow that everybody will be free. And how he will control people when they free” (190). Lovelace’s criticism of the political landscape is reminiscent of Naipaul’s, as Nair astutely recognizes. In *The Middle Passage*, Naipaul writes of the squalor and

¹⁵ Nair attaches the descriptor bourgeois to the middle-class nationalist leadership, which I think is inaccurate due to the historic alienation of the black middle-class from capital. A more accurate term would be the colonial/post-colonial intelligentsia or post-colonial political ruling class. This is a distinction that Anderson implies but does not explicitly state by his use of the term intelligentsia to describe a highly educated middle-class whose development is outside of the productive forces of capital. Like Anderson, I maintain this distinction.

individualistic nature of local politics. Tannis' portrayal and comments are evidence that Lovelace shares a similar sentiment. The difference for Nair is that Lovelace manages to eschew Naipaul's 'enervating cynicism.' Lovelace himself has commented on the similarities and differences between Naipaul and himself. He uses the binary of inside/outside to situate their ideological differences of Trinidad: "There aren't many books written about the Caribbean from the inside, . . . [Naipaul's] *The Middle Passage* is the view from someone who lived outside, from a point of superiority. A lot of the things Naipaul said could be true, but they were said by someone who didn't live in the society and understand the difficulties" (Interview). Because of Lovelace's attentiveness to these difficulties, his fictional work attempts to understand and work through them. Ultimately, Lovelace's project is utopic in nature, as the ending of the novel attests. Therefore, he does not conclude with the critique; it is only the point at which his imaginative vision begins.

One of the difficulties presented by the socio-political landscape of Trinidad is the history of nationalism itself. Both C.L.R. James and Kenneth Ramchand comment upon the fact that there was not a struggle for independence in Trinidad, or the other Anglophone Caribbean islands for that matter. According to James, federation was the mid-twentieth-century political project of the Anglophone Caribbean.¹⁶ The islands, James explains, are given independence with the demise of the federal idea. In "West Indian Literary History: Literariness, Orality and Periodization," Ramchand is in agreement with James. In fact, independence was an anti-climax, asserts Ramchand. He

¹⁶ The West Indies Federation or the Federation of the West Indies briefly existed from 1957 to 1961. Ten Caribbean colonies of the British Empire participated in it. These islands, as a single political unit, would become independent of Britain under the Federal idea. However, Federation disintegrated under internal political discord.

posits that Anglophone Caribbeanist literary critics, misguided by Caribbeanist historians, have missed this crucial distinction and confused the “energy generated by the federal idea . . . with the energy of island nationalism” (98). They have misread classic Caribbean anti-colonial texts like *In The Castle of My Skin*, which Ramchand maintains possesses a bleak message that was eviscerated in the determination to “celebrate a West Indian childhood in the determinedly typical West Indian village” (99). This of course does not mean there was not a nationalist movement and persons concerned with the exploitation of colonizing nations. Anthony Bogues clarifies that for the Caribbean Creole nationalist, independence meant state substitution; that is, the black middle-class replaces the British colonial rulers but still largely maintains a colonial political and socio-economic structure. The Creole nationalist movement itself, therefore, Bogues continues, limited social transformation. This apparent conundrum is a result of British colonial policy. In the British Caribbean, the Victorian model of the civilized human male structured the discourse of independence. In order for the Creole middle-class to become the legitimate state managers they had to prove that they were no longer ‘savages’ but ‘civilized.’ Creole nationalist masculinity, therefore, had to establish it was capable of ruling by demonstrating it was the equal of Englishmen and distinct from the uncivilized working-class. This ‘reversal’ was ‘achieved’ through the black middle-class being socialized into British modes of governance, norms, and manners.¹⁷ It meant that they would be socialized to adopt English cultural norms and identify with them. Thus in

¹⁷ See Alexander, “Not Just (Any) Body Can Be a Citizen: the Politics of Law, Sexuality and Postcoloniality in Trinidad and Tobago and the Bahamas;” Bogues, “Politics, Nation and PostColony: Caribbean Inflections;” and Edmondson, *Making Men: Gender, Literary Authority, and Women’s Writing in Caribbean Narrative*.

the post-independence period, Black Nationalist men, now the new state managers, perpetuate colonial governmentality.

It is this continuity that the novel reproaches through its portrayal of party politics. West Indian literature, both anti-colonial and post-colonial, is replete with this criticism. For example, *In The Castle of My Skin*, a seminal anti-colonial Anglophone Caribbean text, published in 1953, almost a decade before the first West Indian islands gain independence, already contains a strident censure of the nascent black middle-class through its portrayal of Mr. Slime and his betrayal of the black working-class. The text is prescient in this regard. Ramchand, therefore, is right; the ending of this novel can only, at best, be described as ambiguous, if not a forewarning of the misadventures that will be the Caribbean post-colony managed by the black middle-class. Lovelace's text builds upon this Anglophone Caribbean literary tradition, which can be seen in the work of first-generation writers, such as Lamming, C. L. R. James, and Naipaul, among others, and other second-generation writers like Merle Hodge, Paule Marshall, and Jamaica Kincaid, among others, and Lovelace's other novels, such as *The Schoolmaster* (1968) and *The Wine of Astonishment* (1982). The perseverance of colonial social structures into the post-Independent moment is a testament to the stasis of island politics. The West Indian literary imagination is preoccupied with this continuity.

Part of the stasis is the racially polarizing political system that is also portrayed in the novel. This structure is unable to fashion an equitable nation out of the 'anarchic cosmopolitanism' that is Trinidad. Instead it pits the two larger races, black and East Indian,¹⁸ inheritors of the post-Independent state, against each other without either

¹⁸ Walton Look Lai uses this phrase to describe the multiracial and multiethnic composition of Trinidad. According to Look Lai, colonial Trinidadian society was an: "artificial, anarchic detribalized hodgepodge

envisioning a transformation of the surviving colonial political and socio-economic structure. This is part of the critique that is launched at the National Party by envisioning Trinidad as a black national imaginary. Through Alford and Sonan's misadventures within the National and Democratic parties, respectively, the two major races' struggle for power and hegemony over the post-colonial state is dramatized. The political competition to govern discloses a limitation of accepted theories of nationalism. In *Women, Labour & Politics in Trinidad and Tobago: A History*, Rhoda Reddock criticizes an immense international scholarship that addresses race, ethnicity, class and gender, which has centered on the experiences of women of color in western countries. "The experience of the Caribbean," according to Reddock, "or other post-colonial immigrant societies where two or more third world ethnic groups co-exist in antagonistic or non-antagonistic relation has received little attention" (9). Reddock's criticism of feminist scholarship is also relevant for theories of nationalism, which cannot account for 'anarchic cosmopolitanisms' where various races compete for state power after the putative end of formal colonization without either racial group evincing a commitment to full decolonization.

The new world black history portrayed reveals that full decolonization was not a goal of the nationalist movement, and it could not be given the construction of the middle-class, the economic dependency of the post-Independent nation, and the competition between the two dominant racial groups to be the post-Independence inheritors of the nation-state. Nonetheless, the novel still holds the black middle-class accountable for their self-interest because it does not disavow any subject's agency. In

of Africans, Asian Indians, and white Creoles of French, English, and Spanish descent (many of mixed blood themselves), with a few newly arrived immigrants from China, the Middle East, Portugal, and Venezuela thrown in for added confusion" (188).

response to their ethical abdication and its devastating socio-economic effect on the black working-class, *Salt* portrays another model of nationhood. This model considers the conditions under which the working-class black subject can be recuperated as central to an equitable nation. In *Black Subjects: Identity Formation in the Contemporary Narrative of Slavery*, Arlene Keizer examines the construction of black subjectivity in ‘contemporary narratives of slavery.’ Keizer contends that these fictional works themselves theorize on black subjectivity even as she reads them alongside established theories, which the literary works themselves suggest. I use her insight that fictional works themselves theorize in order to argue that *Salt* offers us a very local, very specific theory of nation formation *after* nominal political independence has been granted and *within* the tragedy of the post-colonial present.

The history of Bango’s family is central to this narration of the nation. The circular histories of dehumanization and betrayal of JoJo and Bango, two generations apart, reveal that the history of the modern Anglophone Caribbean island nation-state is neither progressive nor teleological. (It is important to point out that this will change into a progressive plot.) Bango imparts to us the history of JoJo. JoJo, Guinea John’s grandson and Bango’s grandfather, is an enslaved black subject. He describes slavery as “a waiting silence” (169). Earlier we mentioned the violent nature of racial-economic slavery. Now through JoJo, we are given a paradigmatic instance of slavery’s oppressive nature. According to JoJo, the singing of birds and the noise of trees are louder than the talking of enslaved black subjects. For JoJo to describe racial-economic slavery as silence conveys how its violence is not only physical but also mental and emotional for enslaved black Trinidadians. This scene is an example of what Saidiya Hartman phrases as “the

terror of the mundane and quotidian” (4). This terror is seen when JoJo appears before a magistrate for attempting to escape. Due to his ontological position as an enslaved black subject, JoJo can not defend himself; he has to remain silent, which makes him want to “shout but not daring to breathe, standing there with an outrage whose calmness the magistrate said was insolence, unable to make any other plea but silence” (171). If slavery is a period of silence, then the approach of freedom is described as a period when the formerly enslaved subject will gain his voice, as we witness through JoJo: “he just wanted to bawl out. He just wanted to shout and mash up the silence he had lived in” (169). Nevertheless, British emancipation circumvented emancipation’s inherent liberatory potential. The emancipation act, designed to mollify the planters over the loss of enslaved black labor, included monetary compensation for the planters and a six-year period of apprenticeship for enslaved black subjects.¹⁹ Thomas Holt describes British West Indian emancipation as a freedom “drained of the power of genuine self-determination” (xxv), that is, freedom defined by its antithesis, continued coercion. JoJo allows that such an entry into and construction of freedom is already fraught:

What it had done was to manoeuvre them into accepting not freedom but the promise of being set at liberty, with no more attention given to their years of degradation and captivity and abuse than if they had been dogs that had been chained and were now going to be loosened to fend for themselves. And he knew that if they accepted these terms as freedom they would be forfeiting their own future and the future of this island. He knew now that, far from being the whiteman’s burden, Blackpeople had to take responsibility for whatever new world was to be made. (177)

The coercive architecture of British emancipation meant, according to JoJo, “they had brought enslavement to an end, but they had no new policy, no real new vision of how the plantations were to run and how people were to live in freedom” (183). Therefore, the

¹⁹ In reality, apprenticeship collapsed by 1838 in the British West Indies. Not all of the British colonies enacted apprenticeship, for instance, Antigua abolished slavery without apprenticeship in 1834.

passage of the emancipation act did not trouble the socio-economic structure in even a cosmetic manner. What is critical to this novel's project is not only a denunciation of the form of emancipation, but also a recognition that black subjects must also negotiate their liberation. This is JoJo's position. Many enslaved black subjects, faced with the continuation of a coercive labor system, decide to illegally settle unoccupied available land. JoJo perceives that this daring action allows the disappointment and rage of enslaved black subjects to dissipate. Significantly, this behavior unwittingly validates an ill-conceived emancipation because enslaved black subjects do not challenge the status quo and demand collective redress for slavery. It is interesting that the novel gestures to moments in history when a possible option not taken is armed struggle, which is what JoJo advocates. (As a result, *Salt* argues that there are times when armed struggle is necessary.) JoJo's stance insists that enslaved black subjects have agency and are responsible for their collective future and the future of the island even as he acknowledges the limitations of that agency and their degradation. Enslaved black subjects, however, do not take responsibility as a community; instead, they compound their dehumanized position through an individual land grab. Enslaved black subjects, have, by JoJo's estimation, forfeited their liberty and future in the island.

As Bango continues to relate JoJo's history, he draws a relationship between Trinidad's historic land policy and its intransigent disfranchisement of black subjects. He reveals that Trinidad's early land policy is premised on the enslavement of black subjects: "the law require that for every forty acres a whiteman have he have to have at least one man in bondage, and for every man bondaged a free coloured was entitled to fifteen acres of land" (168). This faulty start is built upon over five centuries and can be

seen in an emancipation designed to continue the same kind of land and labor relationship. Not only are the formerly enslaved not compensated for the destruction of their lives but East Indian indentured immigrants are introduced with a contract that includes the offer of land.²⁰ The planters are unwilling to grant these concessions to the formerly enslaved black subjects. As a result, this unfairness forms the basis of JoJo's demand for reparations. It is not the introduction of an East Indian peasantry but the *intent* and *procedure* of their establishment by the British governing class and white Creole landowners that is reproached by Bango.²¹ Two generations later, we witness that the land Bango squats upon is sold to Moon by the white Creole landowner. Moon explains to Bango that the 'boss,' the white Creole landowner, sells Moon the land to persuade him, Moon, to continue to work on his estate. This is a betrayal of Bango's socio-economic position because he is informed the land will only be sold in forty-acre blocks. The white Creole landowner's concession to Moon reinscribes JoJo's betrayal. Such a repeated dynamic enables Bango to ask the question: "How you going to live in liberty with a people whose bondage you make the basis of your land settlement policy" (168)? This question is the project of *Salt*.

This concern translates into the political arena in the portrayal of a multiracial multicultural political party, The Group. Alford is initially a member of this political

²⁰ This was not the initial agreement. Planters were supposed to pay for the indentured laborers return passage to India. With decreasing profits from sugar, the sale of land to East Indian indentured laborers was a less expensive alternative.

²¹ In *Indentured Labour, Caribbean Sugar: Chinese and Indian Migrant to the British West Indies, 1838 – 1918*. Walton Look Lai explains that Indentured labor was introduced to both expand the small laboring populations of Trinidad and British Guiana and discipline and control newly freed blacks. The 1842 Stanley Committee made the intentions of indentured immigration explicit: introduction of another laboring population who will compete with the emancipated black labor force to depress wages to levels that planters find acceptable. Therefore, indentured immigration was designed to disfranchise emancipated blacks as well as produce a new estate labor force and not a pioneer farming class (to which I will return later).

party, which he leaves to join the National Party. The Group is the first concrete manifestation of Alford's new political celebrity as a result of the fasting, and it is the first casualty of his celebrity. It is a multiracial organization comprised of two East Indians, a white Creole, and two blacks, respectively: Sonan Lochan, Dr. Kennos, Adolphe Carabon, Angela Vialva, and Alford. They do not sustain beyond a few initial meetings because Alford abandons The Group for the National Party. The Group, nevertheless, is privileged by the narration because it encompasses the three major racial groups in Trinidad. Through Maya, Sonan's sister, the novel criticizes the race based party politics of the two major political parties: the National Party, which is chiefly black Trinidadian, and the Democratic Party, which is largely Indian Trinidadian. Maya advises Sonan not to join either of the major parties and to seek other options. Her logic is that if he becomes a member of the National or Democratic Party, then he is either a traitor to his race or an Indian. This is a political trap Maya explains to Sonan. Heeding her advice, Sonan forms a multiracial party with the above-mentioned persons. The Group's intention is to form a new beginning in an island nation-state where the different races are strangers to each other. Thus, its first initiative is to welcome all Trinidadian subjects to each other. Alford exits before they realize this goal engenders the political party's disintegration. (This is an interesting moment in the novel. Arguably, Alford's abandonment of the party does not have to precipitate its dissolution and/or the recuperation of working-class black humanity. However, this representation is bedeviled with its own race-based politics and cannot imagine a retooled national party that does not have a black male subject at its center.) The narrator discloses the betrayal that Sonan experiences as a result of Alford's defection: "Sonan had felt a sense of betrayal. What it

meant to him was that Alford had gone back to the original African fold; and what was suggested was that he, Sonan, should likewise go to the Indian party” (232). With Alford’s desertion, Sonan becomes a member of the Democratic Party. Unlike Alford who abandons the ideals of The Group when he changes party membership, Sonan is committed to The Group’s ideological agenda even within an unfriendly political environment:

What he[, Sonan,] had learned . . . was that he had to bat for something bigger no matter who he batting for. And that is why now, as he is called upon to bat for the Democratic Party, they mustn’t expect him to bat for some little idea, some Indian people alone. ‘If I am called upon to bat for the Democratic Party the best way I can do that is to bat for batting. Because,’ said he, quoting the poet John Donne: ‘No man is an island entire unto itself. Every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main. Any man’s death diminishes me. Because I am involved in mankind . . . (234)

However, Sonan soon realizes that his platform of recreating a new world is eclipsed by East Indian euphoria that “this is our time” (241) and his party’s recognition of their likely win in the next elections given the corruption and ineffectiveness of the predominantly black government. Sonan and Alford’s experiences demonstrate that they are unsuccessful within the traditional race-based party structure.

Within such a context, the re-creation of the nation-state is indeed a challenge, as is evidenced by the issue of reparations. Even though the novel privileges The Group, it portrays how this political party founders on the issue of reparations. In negotiating this issue, the narrative portrays that the form of the nation desired by this representation is difficult to construct. Lovelace depicts the minefield a multiracial post-Independent nation-state must navigate in order to come to terms with a history of Amerindian genocide, African enslavement, and East Indian indenture. As mentioned earlier, The Group concedes that all racial subjects must be welcomed into the nation of Trinidad.

The welcoming, therefore, necessitates identifying a subject to do the welcoming on behalf of their political party. For two reasons, the young party determines that Bango is the appropriate choice. As a black subject, Kennos reasons, Bango belongs to the people “who faced the brutality and the promise, who had the task of responding to the reality of the landscape new to them, who set the tone of the new language we would use and . . . whose struggle against enslavement set down the cornerstone of the new society” (102). Kennos’ argument thus situates black Trinidadian subjects and their Creole culture as what Nair terms the “nation’s primum mobile” (273). Although the text issues an invitation to all the races that comprise the ‘anarchic cosmopolitanism’ of Trinidad, the centre of this nation-state is working-class black Creole. The other party members accept this claim to primacy, which positions racial-economic slavery as the founding socio-economic structure of modern Trinidad. Privately Florence admonishes Alford for agreeing to ask Bango to welcome his political party and all of the races. She argues that Bango himself needs to be welcomed. What undergirds Florence’s contention is the recognition that it is the working-class black Creole who has been historically disfranchised in the island. In order to imagine an adequate welcome for the one to welcome, Alford returns to the historical record and realizes the historic land policy that sought to maintain black subjects in a compromised socio-economic position. Alford perceives that reparations are the ethically right way to redress this past. When Alford introduces reparations, Adolphe Carabon, the white Creole, questions whether it is possible to “make up for those years” (106). As the discussion continues, it degenerates into determining who has been a victim in the unfolding of modern Trinidad. And Kennos suggests that reparations should only be symbolic, that is, a house and plot of

land for one representative of the three main victims of modern Trinidad: Amerindian, black, and East Indian subjects. It is during these discussions that Alford joins the National Party, which leaves this issue unresolved for The Group. However, later in the novel, Alford renews his commitment to the issue of reparations for working-class black subjects upon listening to both JoJo's and Bango's history. Reparations for black subjects are meant to remedy a nation-state founded on the historic dehumanization of black subjects, which is the central claim of a more equitably imagined nation.

Although the novel recapitulates Trinidad's history, critiques and theorizes on nation formation, and begins with the brutality of slavery, the first chapter ends with this reflection: "But now they had another problem: it was not how to keep people in captivity. It was how to set people at liberty" (7). Due to this structure, I argue, that the novel is really a meditation on the conditions of possibility for liberty within cultural modernity. The three concerns listed above are encompassed by this literary reflection. As a result of this undertaking, the novel evinces an analogous stance to David Scott. In *Refashioning Futures: Criticism After Postcoloniality*, Scott contends that the tragedy of the postcolonial present requires that black post-colonial subjects no longer think in terms of whether they have/have not achieved full freedom yet, but recognize that "black freedom is a project" and "not a teleological movement in the direction of an already existing horizon" (89). The obdurate history of JoJo and Bango documents the fallacy of teleology in the context of Trinidad. Scott suggests that the contemporary contention is not the manner of liberationist defiance but how liberation is determined by the "normative assumptions of modernity" (89), that is, how liberation is structured by the options modernity itself offers. I read *Salt* as a literary exploration of just such an

exercise. It recognizes that the freedom of black subjects has to be worked on by black and other subjects from within the specifics of the political and socio-economic environment. Ergo, *Salt* depicts the returns to the 'dark and bloody history of oppression and exploitation' for a productive enterprise. It desires a profound understanding of the position of modern black subjects in Trinidad to imagine how their liberty is possible within modernity. And as part of this exercise, there is a necessary interrogation of nationalism within Trinidad with all its pitfalls. Although a criticism of the novel could be that Lovelace imagines enslaved black subjects, for instance, JoJo, with more agency than is historically possible, recourse to the historical record is not in service of historical verity, but to imagine what can be possible in the post-Independent present given a very specific history. The novel then illustrates the construction of a particular kind of past in order to make possible a particular kind of future. Thus what we have here is a narratological question rather than one of historical faithfulness: how is the past constructed in the present for the future? Again, this is a point of divergence between Naipaul and Lovelace. Naipaul gazes at Anglophone Caribbean history and his gaze is mired in its treachery, unimportance, and greed (which is how Naipaul describes the history of Trinidad). However, Lovelace engages this same history to work out a more liveable modern future, that is, to offer a theory of humanism, which undergirds the re-imagined nation.

How to Set People at Liberty: Constructing A New Humanism

Lovelace develops a theory of humanism from this bloody history. This theory positions the experiences of the working-class black subject in the Caribbean at its center. Every race and class' humanity is premised on the recognition of working-class African

Trinidadian humanity and culture. This particular recasting of the humanism that originates with the *Studia Humanitatis* accounts for the historic and continued humiliation of working-class black subjects that was necessary for white self-fashioning, as Bango states:

For Whitepeople to feel themselves human they had to make Blackpeople appear to be beasts. And they would push Blackpeople on the defensive by an unending programme of propaganda that would reinvent Blackpeople as demons largely unacceptable as proper humans on account of their blackness. (184)

The text disparages a theory of humanism founded on the dehumanization of black subjects, or for that matter, any human subjects. This can be seen when Bango informs Alford and Ethelbert that he,

ain't come here to make the Whiteman the devil. I not here to make him into another creature inhabiting another world outside the human order. I grant him no licence to pursue wickedness and brutality. I come to call him to account, as a brother, to ask him to take responsibility for his humanness, just as I have to take responsibility for mine. And if you think it is easy for either one of us, then you making an error. This business of being human is tougher than being the devil, or being God for that matter. And it doesn't matter whether in the role of brutalized or brutalizer. (167/8)

It offers instead an inclusive collective humanity in which every subject is accountable for his/her behavior. Since the project of the novel is invested in the liberation of working-class black subjects, it disavows an entry into history that reinscribes the victimhood of the black subject. The question that undergirds the narrative is: 'how can black subjects in Trinidad be liberated given the history of brutality, enslavement, and 'secondclassness'?' This representation recognizes that even as it is necessary to know and understand modern black history, the gaze cannot become trapped in the past. Instead, this knowledge is used to fashion a more liveable future, which is why I describe *Salt* as a future-oriented narrative. This depiction demands that black subjects are now

accountable for negotiating their future in the island with persons of various races and cultures.

This theory of humanism is at the same time personal, interpersonal, and communal. We witness all three aspects in Bango and Myrtle's relationship. Myrtle tells us when she met Bango that "he had stumbled upon himself in her just so, with no preparation, no warning, very much as she had spied herself in him" (136). Their sense of self is affirmed in their meeting. This affirmation of herself that Myrtle sees in him is beautiful: "gazing out of the most startled and appealing eyes that had ever met her own, and [she] saw in the clear mirror of his face how really beautiful she was . . . this vision of her own beauty, and she kept staring into his face to make sure that it was really she who was there" (136). Her validation enables Myrtle to live with Bango and not return to Benny, her estranged husband. In her marriage, Myrtle is stifled by Benny's religious conservatism and she feels ugly and stupid. Thus her sense of self is disavowed in her short-lived marriage whereas her sense of self is affirmed in her relationship with Bango. Bango's validation of Myrtle continues throughout their common-law relationship and manifests itself in the queen figurines that he sculpts: all of them celebrate Myrtle's beauty. Beyond his adoration of her beauty, Myrtle soon adjusts to Bango's conception of a life partner: "already she realized that in taking her to live with him he was not taking a wife as something to put aside and adore as much as a mate, a pardner" (144).

The text, however, does not idealize their relationship; their partnership is not without its challenges. Myrtle acquiesces to Bango's unarticulated demand that she sanction and partner him in his community role. Bango's community position is a concrete manifestation of his ideological belief in humanism. Bango articulates a

carefully considered theory of humanism fashioned from Trinidad's history of racial-economic slavery and colonization. This theory of humanism demands that every person, especially black subjects, recognize his/her own humanity as well as the humanity of all other subjects and to treat each other accordingly. It is a worldview based on mutual recognition and engagement of the human in the other. Bango's beliefs enable him to attempt to recuperate working-class black subjects and implant his and Myrtle's relationship within this socio-economic group. In consequence, Myrtle quickly discerns that she will have to share Bango with Cascadu. In his position of authority, Bango is generous even with his meager material resources and gives to other persons whose financial situations are more modest.

Nevertheless, working-class black subjects neither understand nor appreciate Bango and take him for granted, which infuriates Myrtle, and she complains to Alford that Bango's sense of community

woulda been all right if people pull together and share the responsibility; but like the knowledge that he was there leave them free to do as they please. The only effect it had on him was that the weakness of others demanded from him greater strength. The extravagance of others required from him greater sacrifice. (147)

Myrtle's criticism here of rural working-class black subjects reflects their historic inability to operate as a community. It is a haunting recapitulation of the lack of collective organizing at the time of emancipation. Enslaved black subjects, instead, prefer to redress their frustrations singularly. For this reason, the text critiques the lack of communal spirit both in JoJo and Bango's generations rather than Bango's generosity on behalf of this socio-economic group. Myrtle conveys this denunciation when she recounts their (Bango and her) various failed business ventures on behalf of the community: a co-operative store, a land-buying and house building program, among others. All of them are

unsuccessful due to the lack of communal support in spite of the socio-economic benefits that will accrue to the larger community through these enterprises. Rural working-class black subjects' inability to recognize their own humanity enable their abandonment and betrayal of socio-economic structures designed to aid them. Bango fully comprehends their negative self-conception and is determined to continue to reflect their humanity to them. We witness his perseverance when he tells Myrtle that, "what keep people human is because they don't get the chance to be beast . . . Because what save us, what save the world is the one or two who hold on to the belief that we is more. More than beast" (149).

Since the text articulates a collective humanism, it issues invitations to all the racial and class groups in the island in two forms. One is through Bango's attempted but unsuccessful multiracial independence march. This portrayal references Trinidad carnival, which has been central to the cultural practices and politics in the island nation-state since the late eighteenth century. One of the constituent art forms of Carnival is masquerade, which has long been an arena of trenchant social and political critique. Masquerade involves the wearing of elaborate costumes and masks and sometimes an elaborate street performance.²² Lovelace is engaging this cultural tradition in his depiction of the independence march with adolescent boys wearing the 'traditional' wear of the main racial groups of Trinidad: an Indian boy in dhoti and turban,²³ a European boy in Scottish kilt, a Chinese boy with a big Cantonese hat and two long false plaits, and an African boy in a grass skirt with beads around his neck and a spear in his hand. Supriya Nair reads these planned multicultural parades in which each of the major racial

²² See Hill, *Trinidad Carnival: Mandate for a National Theatre* and Green and Scher, *Trinidad Carnival: The Cultural Politics of a Transnational Festival*.

²³ The dhoti is approximately 5 yards of rectangular unstitched cloth wrapped around the legs and waist and knotted at the latter.

groups are represented in Bango's idea of the appropriate ethnic wear as a parody of cultural hybridity in its emphasis on costuming. She also interprets Alford's proclivity for reproducing ethnic dress as another instance of the parodying of cultural hybridity. During his fasting, Alford wears an Orisha turban that he retains from a children's Christmas play,²⁴ the dhoti, the loose cotton gown of the Shouters,²⁵ and Nehru jackets.²⁶ Even though Nair's reading does not recognize a cultural referent that the novel engages, Bango and Alford's forays into ethnic costume operate on two different registers. The text parodies Alford's changing ethnic dress largely because of his naïveté and its ingenuity, as is suggested when fashion designers provide Alford with caps and headwraps after seeing how good he looks in his own ethnic costumes. In fact, the entire fasting is of tragic-comedic proportions. Alford performs an imitation of Mohandas Gandhi *and* spends the night in the homes of well-to-do 'solicitous women.' While this scene is humorous, its pathos lies in the diverse agendas that are projected onto him by various Trinidadian subjects; they read his fasting as a galvanizing response to their different disaffections with the post-Independence government. In this manner, the scene makes apparent the National Party's disassociation from the concerns of the subjects they are supposedly governing. Much of the humor in this scene is, in fact, at Alford's expense. The fasting does not accomplish his putative goal. Rather, it rewards him with national attention and eventually a ministerial portfolio with which he is easily satisfied (which is another instance of the facile satisfaction the National Party cultivates in black

²⁴ The Orisha spiritual lineage originates in the Yoruba spiritual system. A variety of Orisha worship is practised in Trinidad.

²⁵ The Shouter Baptist or Spiritual Baptist religion is a syncretic African Caribbean form of worship. Despite its combination of West African and Christian traditions, it considers itself a Christian denomination.

²⁶ The Nehru jacket has a stand up or mandarin collar and ends at the hips. It was worn by Jawaharlal Nehru, the Prime Minister of India, 1947 – 1964.

subjects). Nair is certainly astute when she writes that: “it is hard to take [Alford] George’s mission too seriously in this narrative of opportunism and the charade of protest” (272). However, I disagree with her assessment of Bango’s engagement of ethnic dress because she interprets his actions similarly to Alford’s costuming. In a novel that privileges Trinidad culture and discusses Carnival, it is more than plausible that his multiracial multicultural parades are to be read in this context. Furthermore, Bango does not benefit in any tangible manner by organizing these parades; rather, they confirm his pariah status in the village, as is seen when Pearl, Florence’s sister, describes Bango’s plan as ‘crazy.’ They are Bango’s attempts to create a national space that is available to everyone. Nair misreads the humor in this scene and misses his sincere agenda. Whereas much of the humor in the fasting scene is directed at Alford, the humor in the latter scene reveals black subjects’ general misapprehension of Bango’s intentions to welcome everyone into the nation. Bango’s theory of humanism and a re-imagined inclusive, equitable nation are intimately dependent upon each other.

The second invitation to form a multiracial multicultural community occurs in the political arena under the guise of the ‘The Group.’ The Group is a multiracial political entity that founders on the issue of reparations. Reparations for black Trinidadians is central to Bango’s theory of humanism because it would publicly redress the historic dispossession of black subjects. According to Bango, it would be enacting what is due. This issue does not have support within the black political class, which views reparations as a racially polarizing topic. This representation also imagines how reparations are engaged in predominantly white Creole and East Indian spaces. St. Hilarie, Adolphe’s brother, imparts to Adolphe that reparations cannot occur on an individual basis; it has to

be enacted upon by the nation. Given this logic, St. Hilaire decides that reparations will be impossible to actualize because of the lack of national will. When Sonan broaches it in an East Indian setting, Mr. Bissoon responds that, “if they give the [black] creole land, they have to give the Indian” (241). In consequence, these three responses announce the improbability if not impossibility of the actualization of reparations for blacks. Despite the irresolution of this issue, Lovelace is still committed to conceiving of a nation-state that is available for everyone and recognizes each subject’s humanity. This can be seen in the invitations Alford issues to Sonan and Adolphe to attend the independence march organized by Bango, which closes the narrative.

As a result of the ideological commitments developed within the novel, I suggest that *Salt* can be termed what Patrick Taylor calls a narrative of liberation. Taylor describes this type of narrative as one that “reveals the limits of struggle for a hallowed ancient past, the endurance of a wretched present, or the leap toward a utopian future; it engages the processes of historical transformation with a view to the possibility of creating a society based on human mutuality” (xii). For Taylor, the work of Walcott and Lamming are examples of narratives of liberation. Although there are limitations on the humanist impulse portrayed in *Salt*, ‘The Group’ disintegrates, and the issue of reparations are not resolved by the close of the novel, I still read this text as liberatory because it suggests a way that black subjects can recognize and assert their humanity in mutuality with other raced subjects. Therefore, it can be said that *Salt* participates in a tradition of liberation narratives from the Anglophone Caribbean. It, accordingly, is in conversation with first-generation anti-colonial literary texts, such as *In The Castle of My Skin* and *Season of Adventure*, which maintain an overt humanist commitment. However,

what distinguishes *Salt*, as a later post-colonial text, from this earlier writing is the question of authorship. The first generation of anti-colonial writers, largely male, as Edmondson and Ramchand maintain, were constructing themselves as masters of language, British English, and a literary tradition. They also displayed knowledge of local Creoles. I suggest that these endeavors can be read as a literary cultural manifestation of the type of legitimization black Creole masculinist nationalism had to perform to prove that it can and should inherit the British post-colonial nation-state. Ramchand also notes that London was the West Indian literary capital in the 1950s and 60s because anti-colonial writers migrated to the United Kingdom. The British reading public, then, is the anti-colonial writers' market. In order to be accessible to his foreign readership, Ramchand explicates, the anti-colonial writer made modifications to the language and content of his narrative that were external to an aesthetic economy. All of these constraints necessarily excised the black Caribbean female body from their texts. In consequence, the second-generation, mostly female authors, reveal the gender limitations of the earlier generation and write the black/mixed/Creole female presence into existence, according to Edmondson. Like the first-generation, these second-generation writers are located outside of the Caribbean. This time it is in the United States. This change in location, asserts Edmondson, does not mean that these women authors are any less committed to responding to the English literary canon and engaging the same colonial history as the prior generation. Thus, Edmondson declares, Anglophone Caribbean writing has the peculiar feature of defining itself in external locales, that is, outside of the material place itself. Lovelace straddles these two generations in the sense that his oeuvre begins before and spans the writing of second-generation female authors. This temporal situation means

that Lovelace's work, by circumstance, does not need to and does not engage the same questions of authorship. Different questions animate his writing. Lovelace is singular in that he is the only major Anglophone Caribbean author to write from within the Caribbean. In consequence, his writing grapples with the experience of the Caribbean from *within* the Caribbean. This space affords him distance from the English literary canon and to construct a different aesthetic economy. In addition, *Salt*, published after much writing by second-generation female authors, is a narrative of liberation that begins to account for the black female presence. However, the novel is still trapped by some of the problematic gender and class dynamics of anti-colonial writing. The limitations of *Salt*'s project of human mutuality are gender, sexuality, and class.

What of Her Humanity: the Persistence of Patriarchy

The humanity of male subjects is the primary concern of *Salt*; its space is largely male. Lovelace carefully considers what kind of male subject can be interpellated by the theory of humanism offered. This different male subject does not conform to the destructive hyper-hetero-masculine archetype privileged by West Indian patriarchy, as is seen in the satirical depictions of Dixon (Alford's father), Alford's brothers, and Ashton and Floyd. (Alford's neighbors engage in a series of casual sexual relations with women and embody the predatory male norm that objectifies and sexualizes women.) Alford, as the hero, displays a less dangerous form of masculinity than the type exhibited by the male subjects. Theirs is rough, boisterous, self-indulgent, and aggressive whereas Alford, as a child and adult, is tentative, awkward, and unsure. Growing up, Alford diverges from the hyper-hetero-masculine norm and is therefore not recognized and rejected by other males, including his father and brothers. Sonan Lochan and Adolphe Carabon also do not

embody the hyper-hetero-masculine prototype. They too occupy a liminal position within their racial/ethnic-class positions due to their nonconformity. Lovelace's vision privileges their outsider status because it seeks to disavow aspects of Caribbean patriarchy.

Despite the impulse to dismantle West Indian patriarchy, Lovelace is unsuccessful in this project. This failure is largely due to the author's depiction of heterosexual, sibling, and filial relationships, as well as class and sexuality. To be fair, *Salt* clearly portrays a commitment to various female subjects who are not mothers, which is noticeable through the amount of narrative space given to them. For instance, Florence's, the hero's partner, growth is developed throughout the novel. Her journey to self-possession begins when she braids and beads her hair (instead of straightening it) and plays a Nubian princess in Carnival. With her new hairstyle, Florence suddenly appreciates her physical features: she is a natural-haired, dark-skinned black female subject. After this personal revolution, Florence refuses to succumb to "an ordinariness" that Trinidadian men require from her as a black female subject. Her recognition of her self-worth enables her to become a self-possessed subject. (I read Florence's articulation of 'ordinariness' as another form of the 'secondclassness' that pervades Trinidad and informs all relations, personal, interpersonal, and communal.) Through Florence's metamorphosis, Lovelace makes more apparent that the re-imagined nation will have a different aesthetic economy: one that will esteem the "rich velvety darkness" (96) of Florence. (This different aesthetic economy is suggested earlier in the queen figurines Bango sculpts in Myrtle's likeness.) The novel's representation of Florence's transformation shows that its theory of humanism attempts to incorporate female subjects. Notwithstanding this inclusion, Lovelace's project unravels when female

subjects interact with male subjects. This is a critical distinction: the novel portrays arresting non-maternal female characters; however, it founders on imagining the nature of their relations with men. Florence and Alford's interaction is a paradigmatic instance of this failure.

Their relationship begins when Alford is a teacher and continues during his years as a minister. Alford takes nine years to realize that Florence is his ideal partner whereas she immediately assumes that Alford is the man of the prediction.²⁷ While Florence as a discrete character is compellingly portrayed, her relationship with Alford is problematic because it places her in a secondary position as the female. Although Florence thinks that Alford is her ideal partner, she is unable to negotiate more equitable conditions for herself in their relationship throughout most of the narrative. We witness that he takes her for granted:

His carelessness had set in almost from the beginning. All the tenderness was from her. He was busy. He had his politics to attend, the world to save, and he acted as if he was doing her a favour to make love to her, to hold her after lovemaking. And she put up with it, out of her own shame, out of her own hope, out of her fear that she would be seen as fickle, she waited, not knowing how to tell him that she was the woman he was looking for. (249)

Alford's shabby treatment of Florence coincides with his capitulation to the ethos of the National Party. In her relationship with Alford, this is the one site that Florence's self-possession is undermined, and she accepts his selfishness. Lovelace strives to fold Alford's shoddy treatment of Florence into his growth. Such a construction seeks to recuperate both Alford and the relationship as its ideals. In consequence, the relationship

²⁷ Florence visits Mother Mabel and Papa Cochon (a Shango Baptist 'priestess' and an Obeah practitioner, respectively) on two separate occasions. They both predict her future husband will see her on the veranda of her sister's house. (Shango is an eponymous African Caribbean religion. Shango is the Yoruba god of thunder and creativity. Obeah is a folk religion of West and Central African origins that comprise both benign and malign magic and mysticism.)

before Alford's metamorphosis is meant to be read as a reflection of him prior to his transformation. However, when Alford finally develops into a fully self-possessed individual, Florence thinks that:

To her Alford had arrived. He had found his way . . . There was no longer any need for her to protect and guard him . . . She was going to leave the man she had been looking for now when she had found him . . . she felt a thrill of release, a surprising and sober grandeur, as if in giving him himself she had begun to reclaim her own. (254)

This scene undermines Lovelace's intentions. The narrative portrays Florence accepting pre-metamorphosis Alford's ungenerous behavior because it is necessary for her to ensure she will facilitate his change. Thus, her *real* value in the text is relational; it is premised on her enabling him to be the hero of the novel. This dynamic marginalizes Florence's worth because it destabilizes her inherent value and undercuts the novel's theory of humanism, which presupposes individual and collective self-possession. Arguably, her self-possession should imply that she refuse to engage Alford until he becomes a fully self-possessed individual himself; this would be true mutuality. Instead, Florence allows Alford to mistreat her so that she can enable his self-possession. Consequently his self-possession precludes her self-possession. Only when he changes is she able to reclaim herself, which means that her growth is now limited by his growth. Even though Lovelace imagines loving, equitable relationships between men and women as central to the re-imagined nation, the form of the heterosexual relationships undercuts his project because women, as is evidenced by Florence, are still in a 'second-class' position. This deficiency informs all heterosexual relations in the novel.

This limitation is more overt in the narrative's depiction of secondary male and female characters. The novel's principal engagement of East Indians and white Creoles is

through male subjects. For instance, not unlike its development of Alford, the narrative tracks Sonan Lochan's evolution. As a young man, Sonan is acutely interested in Trinidad party politics and is chosen (by his family) to follow his grandfather, Moon, into the political arena, even though his family acknowledges that Maya, his younger sister, is "already smarter, more rigorous in her thinking . . . than any of her brothers" (227). This depiction discloses the sexism of East Indian patriarchal norms. Lovelace re-inscribes this sexism by privileging Sonan over Maya; he is the primary East Indian character in the novel. Maya's role is to advise Sonan to not capitulate to the narrow party politics of race but to seek another avenue into politics. She, like Bango, is a site of heterodox values, as is evidenced by her political advice to Sonan and her rejection of marriage to cohabit with a man. She is not the only female who enables Sonan's journey to self-possession. Reena Louten, another Indian female ideologically similar to Maya, does not conform to the stereotypes of Indian womanhood. Reena is a working journalist who lives on her own. In fact, Sonan meets Reena through Maya. When she meets Sonan, she is writing her thesis on how East Indian men seek to keep East Indian women out of power and politics. According to Reena, East Indian men's protection of East Indian women is a result of their insecurity generated by living in a country founded on racial-economic slavery and colonization. She argues that before Independence, white men engendered East Indian men's insecurity. After independence, Reena continues, East Indian men now feel insecure due to their perception of African political power as a threat. Like Maya, Reena's politics are meant to challenge Sonan to not blindly follow East Indian gender/race norms. Analogous with Florence's position, the paramount reason for their presence is to enable Sonan to develop into the type of East Indian man who can work

with Alford to achieve a more equitable nation-state. Despite their marginality, Maya and Reena are truly intriguing portrayals of East Indian womanhood that are abandoned too early within the narrative. They are further examples of Lovelace's desire for self-possessed women; that is, they are women who can be interpellated by the humanist project. However, Lovelace is not able to re-imagine the very foundations of heterosexual relationships.

Despite this failure of vision, one way that Lovelace's novel distinguishes itself from both anti-colonial and other male-authored post-colonial literature (for instance, those written by his contemporary, Derek Walcott) is the presence of apparently non-maternal female sexual partners. Male-authored Caribbean literature traditionally presents female subjects as racial types. Daryl Dance details the various stereotypical portrayals of them: black women are either absent or invincible matriarchs; Indian women are docile, insignificant shadows; and white women are sex-starved nymphomaniacs. Lovelace certainly disrupts this misogynistic tradition. There is a clearly identifiable female partner of the same race for each of the primary male characters (Myrtle and Bango, Florence and Alford, Reena and Sonan, Glenda and Adolphe). The novel, however, while progressive for a male-authored Caribbean novel, is still over-determined by gender and race asymmetries. For instance, Adolphe's estranged wife, Glenda, the only white female subject, is the only female character who does not participate in shaping her putative partner into the type of man appropriate for the re-imagined nation. Her husband's self-possession is not constructed to eclipse her self-possession. The other female subjects, black and Indian, are sexual partners, 'mother' their male partners, and subordinate in their relations with male subjects because it is the

men's self-possession that is critical for the re-imagined nation. Lovelace, consequently, is unable to fully dismantle what Keizer terms the "Caribbean masculinist tradition" (106).

Keizer explains that this tradition is structured by the Manichean social architecture of New World slavery and colonization. She further explicates that in black male-authored Caribbean texts, male subjects are the foci and black female subjects are absent. The latter's lacuna, Keizer contends, reveals imperialism's profound disruption of sexual relations (real and imaginary) among the colonized. A 'Eurocentric sexual-erotic model of desire' is installed instead and resistance to it is imagined and articulated in masculine terms.²⁸ Keizer builds upon Wynter's insight in the essay, "Beyond Miranda's Meaning: Un/silencing the 'Demonic Ground' of Caliban's Woman," that Shakespeare's play, *The Tempest*, records the emergence of the first permutation of a secular Western world system where racial/cultural difference replaces sexual difference as the structuring principle. Miranda, Prospero's daughter, according to Wynter, is the only cite of 'sexual-erotic desire' and she is "defined by the philogenically "idealized" features of straight hair and thin lips" which are "canonized as the "rational" objects of desire" (360). In this new world order, Caliban's desire is directed towards Miranda and his, Caliban's, mate as an alternative 'sexual-erotic model of desire' is ontologically absent, which serves to negate hers and Caliban's progeny/population group and legitimate Western European imperialism. Both Keizer and Edmondson astutely point out the limitations of the appropriation of Caliban by anti-colonial Caribbean authors who secured this literary construct to articulate their desire for independence and display their mastery of the

²⁸ This is Wynter's phrase. See Wynter, "Beyond Miranda's Meaning: Un/silencing the 'Demonic Ground' of Caliban's Woman."

English language, as I mentioned earlier. According to Keizer, Caliban's gaze is fixed outwards as opposed to directed inwards and as a model, he embodies European and not Caribbean/Creolized forms of revolt, favors written over oral sources, as well as men's forms of resistance over women's who are absent.

For Lovelace, black female subjects are no longer absent, which suggests that *The Tempest* is not the foundational narrative in the post-Independence period. This is evidenced by the different 'sexual-erotic model of desire' embodied by Florence's embrace of her physical features and Bango's figurines in Myrtle's likeness. Through these two women, the author shows black male subjects desiring black female subjects who are not captured by a Eurocentric aesthetic ideal. Alford and Bango's choice of partner validates a 'natural' black female aesthetic ideal. This transformation is only possible if the black female subject is present and within the field of the black male subject's gaze. It does not require Lovelace to deconstruct how gender is understood and the ways it makes available options of agency. In *Salt*, therefore, we witness a space carved out for the presence of black female subjects and non-insignificant Indian female subjects but not one that attempts to theorize how they can be actors in the re-imagined nation. In this way, female subjects are present but not forces of agency re-tooling the post-Independent nation.

Salt, therefore, recapitulates the gender biases of the nation form in its engagement of female subjects. To understand why this is possible, the nation form and its relationship to gender must be historically situated. George Mosse accounts for this relationship in *Nationalism and Sexuality: Respectability and Abnormal Sexuality in Modern Europe*. He demonstrates that modern European nationalism and ideals of

respectability that determine sexuality emerge at the same time in eighteenth century Europe. Respectability, according to Mosse, was initially a bourgeois movement. Mosse explains that the middle-class was only partially defined by its economic activity; central to their self-fashioning was their ideal of respectability, which they maintained against both the lower and upper classes. Bourgeois morality in the age of modern nationalism then forms an enduring alliance with the latter to control sexuality and ensure the former's survival. The national and middle-class norms are collapsed into each other and read as the same. As a result of this partnership, each subject has his/her place within the nation where manliness is defined as the norm, which then reconfigures the place of women and defines aberrant sexualities. Men and women are assigned distinct roles where he is active and she is passive. Consequently, Mosse reveals that gender is historically determined; sexuality is class assigned, and the nation form structures both.

M. Jacqui Alexander, informed by Mosse, discloses in “Not Just (Any) *Body* Can Be A Citizen: The Politics of Law, Sexuality and Postcoloniality in Trinidad and Tobago and the Bahamas” that the middle-class in the Caribbean post-/colonial state is a product of European imperialism and therefore subject to European discourses on class, the body, and sex. Alexander traces the heterosexual norms of post-colonial states to the sexual inheritances of colonialism. Like Mosse, she explains that heterosexuality and gender dynamics determine the very terms of citizenship. She explains that citizenship is premised on heterosexuality, particularly hetero-masculinity. Despite her recognition of this colonial legacy, Alexander acknowledges that post-colonial governments re-inscribe colonial gender asymmetries according to economic dictates. These continuities, according to Alexander, are a result of the origin of nationalist parties in post-colonial

states. Nationalist parties were established by the black middle-class who became the post-colonial ruling elite. As a result of their cultural socialization, they are captured by European bourgeois norms, which structure the post-colonial nation-state.

Violet Eudine Barriteau, similar to Alexander, explains that asymmetrical gender relations within the post-colonial state are a colonial legacy. Barriteau goes further and traces gender inequity to Enlightenment discourses of liberalism. Caribbean nation-states, Barriteau clarifies, do not realize that the project of modernity began with the Enlightenment²⁹ out of which colonialism and Western expansion emerge. Modernity does not, in fact, begin with the developmental policies they pursued in the post World War II period. These policies, in consequence, founded upon the same liberal discourse maintain the gender inequities of liberal ideologies with all of their inherent contradictions for women. Consequently, the Enlightenment legacy has remained unchallenged despite the political independence of Caribbean nation-states.

Through Mosse, Alexander, and Barriteau, we can see why female subjects *must* inhabit a 'secondclass' position in *Salt*, why its space is heterosexual, and why the male subjects who will lead the nation are of the middle-class. The nation form, as the modern socio-economic apparatus through which modern power is deployed, is interrogated and re-narrated but, significantly, not disavowed. The novel's desire to recuperate the nation form *can only* reinscribe the asymmetric gender, sexual and class inheritances of liberal discourse because these are inherent to the modern nation-state; consequently, the new nation imagined is liable to privilege and deprive similar subjects in a similar manner

²⁹ I distinguish between cultural modernity, which begins with Columbus' first transatlantic voyage in 1492 and philosophical modernity, which is the Enlightenment. The formal 'project of modernity,' as Barriteau explicates, is a product of the Enlightenment. Philosophical modernity, as I explain in the introduction, is only possible within cultural modernity.

to the current nation denounced. Therefore, female subjects are still passive and only men are active. Citizenship is premised on heterosexual masculinity, even if it does not conform to an aggressive patriarchal archetype. This is evidenced when Alford only issues a formal invitation to Sonan and Adolphe to attend Bango's independence march. Significantly, Alford does not issue invitations to any of the female characters, even Florence, to participate in the march. What we witness by the close of the narrative is the desire for a community of like-minded heterosexual men who will guide the re-imagined nation. These men are all of the middle-class. Even though the novel is anxious over the socio-economic position of the working-class black subject, its vision, limited by the exigencies of the nation itself, cannot imagine a working-class subject as the hero, which would be Bango. Instead, it can only conceive of a heterosexual middle-class black hero to lead a re-imagined post-Independent nation-state into 'a limitless future.' Bango, as the primary working-class subject, can only facilitate the hero's development but not be the hero himself. The novel is unable to dismantle the liberal social relations that constitute the nation because it is faithful to the nation as *the* imagined community of modernity. For these reasons, the new world imagined by Lovelace reinscribes gender, sexuality, and class asymmetries, which position women as 'second-class' and makes queer subjects invisible. This is my qualification on the theory of humanism that the novel offers. Ironically, its very desire to recuperate the nation form unravels its humanist project.

Salt's constraints therefore suggest that a theory of humanism still within the Western European intellectual tradition is unable to conceive of a truly equitable *community*. A concept of humanism unequivocally external to this discursive tradition would necessarily be independent of the ideology of nation. In "The Ceremony Must Be

Found: After Humanism,” Sylvia Wynter makes such an argument. She explains that the *Studia Humanitatis* is the founding heresy of our modern rational world. It ushered in the secularization of the human subject and offered an alternative knowledge system whose referential authority is not Christian theology. The new knowledge system produces (in its various permutations over time) the racism and sexism that has structured the world ever since its emergence. She argues that a similar kind of profound paradigm shift is needed in the contemporary world, as the case of black studies in the American academy makes apparent. Calls made in the 1960s and 70s for new areas/programs resulted in the creation of black studies and other ‘new’ disciplines. However, these disciplines were introduced as secondary and did not impact the form of canonical disciplines, for example, literary canons. Thus, what is needed is not an invitation to participate, as black studies departments soon realized was a self-defeating exercise, but an epistemological break similar to the kind enacted by the original *Studia Humanitatis*, that is, a re-ordering of knowledge. Such a radical break, Wynter posits, is necessary to account for the common environment that all of humanity shares for the first time in human history. This commonality requires a knowledge system that takes *the* human rather than any one of its variants as its subject. Wynter also suggests that the liminal groups of any social system are the ones, due to their very subjugation and marginality, most able to “free us” (38) from prevailing orthodoxies since they “existentially experience” (38) the inherent inequality of society. Thus Wynter demands of contemporary subjects, particularly the marginalized, not only a more inclusive concept of humanism, as *Salt* articulates, but also a new alternative vision of an imagined community, of which *Salt* stops short.

The Epic Caribbean: Rewriting the Epic Narrative

In re-imagining the nation, Lovelace re-invents the national epic narrative. The *Dictionary of Literary Terms* defines epic narrative as “a long narrative poem on a grand scale, about the deeds of warriors and heroes. It is a polygonal, heroic story incorporating myth, legend, folk tale and history. Epics are often of national significance in the sense that they embody the history and aspirations of a nation in a lofty or grandiose manner.” A definition like this that references heroes and their battles suggests that the history of the Anglophone Caribbean is not the material of the conventional national epic narrative. At least these are Derek Walcott’s sentiments. In “The Muse of History,” Derek Walcott writes of the challenges of writing the epic narrative given the ‘dark and bloody story of oppression and exploitation’ that is Caribbean history. He explicates that in the Caribbean, epic poetry can only “[celebrate] what little there is . . . all the paraphernalia of degradation and cruelty which we exhibit as history” (9). Such an endeavor, according to Walcott, must result in morbidity because it is based on shame and revenge. Undergirding Walcott’s renunciation of Caribbean epic narratives is his inability to re-envision the very terms of this literary genre. For instance, Walcott disavows epic as a label for his narrative poem, *Omeros*. He says in an interview that: “I do not think of it [Omeros] as an epic. Certainly not in the sense of epic design. Where are the battles? There are a few I suppose. But ‘epic’ makes people think of great wars and warriors” (Farrell 250). The limitation of his artistic vision here is surprising given that in the essay, “The Caribbean: Culture of Mimicry?” Walcott identifies Caribbean mass art forms’ ability to invent something new from imitating already existing artistic forms. He cites Carnival itself, the costumes, calypso, and the development of steel pans as examples of this facility to create out of nothing. I suggest that Walcott’s insight on Caribbean mass

art forms is relevant to how Lovelace re-writes the very grounds of the epic narrative and indigenizes it so that we don't get a history of shame and revenge.

Like *Omeros*, there may be a few battles, which necessarily depends on how battles are defined, and there are certainly no great wars and warriors in *Salt*. This assessment is only legitimate if we desire to read Lovelace's novel similarly to the *Illiad*. I suggest that while *Salt* is not peopled with the traditional characters and actions of the classic epic narrative, it is peopled with the types of subjects and activity that can be found within the modern Caribbean. In order to show the heroism inherent to the latter, heroism is re-defined from displaying strength and courage in battle to stumbling towards a humanistic self-possession and the various challenges the characters encounter on this psychological journey with tangible socio-economic and political consequences. Bango, JoJo, Alford, Sonan, and Adolphe are heroes within this context. They cannot be read as heroes otherwise. Their heroic deeds, like forming a multi-racial political party, can only be read as such given the particular difficulties of such a party's existence in the Trinidad described. They are ordinary, everyday men attempting to make Trinidad a more liveable place for themselves and others. This is the ultimate heroic deed in the novel, which is only intelligible within the past portrayed.

Thus, Lovelace's novel harbors the same desire that Faith Smith sees in Valerie Belgrave's *Ti-Marie*. According to Smith, Belgrave's novel, addressing the post-independence and post-Black Power moment, "shifts the more typical desire for revenge [in Caribbean literature] to a desire for reconciliation" (163). Lovelace, a contemporary of Belgrave, also addressing the same Trinidadian post-colonial readership, writes a novel that longs for reconciliation. For Lovelace, the intentional translocation in the

literary cultural sphere from revenge to reconciliation is necessary in order to deconstruct the old anti-colonial binaries of oppressor/oppressed, black/white. These binaries, according to Lovelace's stance in the novel, have only produced what Tannis' terms an 'equality of victim[hood]' (190). Through Ethelbert Tannis, the narrative critiques the discourse of victimhood that structures post-colonial contemporary Trinidad:

People have a vested interest in their fears. They have a vested interest in their victimhood. And I not talking only about Blackpeople. It is everybody. Blackpeople know they get a raw deal. They see doors that closed to them opening up for everybody else. So they grumble and complain. Whitepeople feel guilty. They have the land, they have the money. Still they want people to feel sorry for them. So they start to cry out that Blackpeople is their burden. They lazy, they spending money they don't have, they having a good time. Indians jump in the brew, crying that Blackpeople keeping them from getting power. Everybody bawling. Everybody is a victim and that is what make everybody equal. That is the equality we have here: the equality of victims. (189/90)

Salt, in consequence, portrays how approaching the history of Trinidad from the position of aggression, conquest, and violence can only produce a cult of victimhood for all racial/ethnic groups. Tannis' exposition above unveils that this paradigmatic position is enervating because it engages the world from the location of one's victimhood, instead of perceiving the world from the place of one's liberation. This is the singular value of Bango, as a working-class post-colonial black subject, in the novel: the history of Trinidad is not a source of shame and vengeance for him. Instead, Alford realizes that their history empowers Bango:

Bango had crossed that chasm into that past to link up with JoJo, to carry still his sense of violation after the granting of an 'Emancipation' that neither acknowledged his injury nor addressed his loss. And then he [Alford] had felt shame, at himself and his community that had left it to Bango alone to be outraged at the indignity its people continued to live under (257)

To be clear, this is not an outrage that demands revenge in response. This outrage can only be reconciled through redressing past injustices that continue to structure contemporary social systems. Lovelace is not emptying the violence and brutality from the history of Trinidad. This is explicitly portrayed through Bango's intimate knowledge of his own family's historic disfranchisement. It is instead offering a way to approach this history in the contemporary moment that will acknowledge all racial/ethnic groups' humanity as it redresses past injustices to achieve reconciliation. This is the battle waged within the novel.

The nature of such a battle means that the novel's imagined audience is the contemporary citizen-subject of Trinidad. The generational shift to a Trinidadian audience, as I discussed earlier, necessitates a different aesthetic economy. Ramchand explains that the anti-colonial writer modified the various Caribbean English-es and content of his narrative in order to be understood by a metropolitan readership. In this earlier generation of Caribbean writing, Ramchand elucidates, there is "the spectacle of the West Indian writer trying to invent an orthography for the dialect while paying service to the notion that he must somehow show that he knows what the 'correct' English would have looked like" (97). In *Salt*, we clearly do not witness any such pageantry. The novel subtly and faithfully avows the legitimacy of Trinidadian Creole English by its very pervasive presence. The rhythm, tone, and diction of its language are that of Trinidadian Creole English. Despite Lovelace's contradictory engagement of class, Trinidadian Creole English, as the language of the working-class, which is the socio-economic group that *Salt* anxiously longs to recuperate and affirm, is privileged in the text, as is seen in Alford's tragic-comedic attempt to learn to speak the Queen's

English. Language is one indicator that the imagined audience is Trinidadian subjects. Another indicator is the hyper-absence of explanations of historical events and Creole cultural forms. The text therefore assumes a shared knowledge. *Salt* is not singular in this presumption. Susan Meltzer writes in “Decolonising the Mind: Recent Grenadian Fiction,” that the prevalence of Grenadian Creole English in some contemporary Grenadian fiction presupposes a select audience of informed observers who are local people.

Salt, written for the putative post-colony, depicts the history of a New World nation-state. In so doing, Lovelace demonstrates to the subjects that populate this landscape that indeed their national history is of singular epic quality. Its representation counters the ‘defeat,’ ‘secondclassness,’ oppression, and violence that is typically ascribed to the Caribbean. Lovelace’s novel is a redemptive narrative of hope and possible psychological and material liberation for black and all Trinidadian subjects. Similarly, *A Visitation of Spirits* engages a narrative of redemption in its portrayal of the Cross family from slavery to the late twentieth-century. In Kenan’s first novel, this redemption is premised on patriarchy, which is congruent with the rendering in *Salt*. Kenan’s novel, however, explores how this is a fraught model for the coherency of all subjects. The portrayal in *A Visitation of Spirits* concludes somberly as a result of its attending to the inherent foreclosures of patriarchy unlike the representation in *Salt* which concludes with hope for a better future.

CHAPTER 2

A Visitation of Spirits

Feeling Immortal in a Mortal's Arms: Queer Black Male Subjectivity

He, just like me, had been created by this society. He was a son of the community, more than most. His reason for existing, it would seem was for the salvation of his people. But he was flawed as far as the community was concerned. First, he loved men, a simple, normal deviation, but a deviation this community would never accept. And second, he didn't quite know who he was. That I don't fully understand, for they had told him, taught him from the cradle on."

--Randall, Kenan, *A Visitation of Spirits*

In *A Visitation of Spirits* (1989), Randall Kenan disrupts a strain in late-twentieth-century African American fiction that returns to segregated rural southern black communities. Madhu Dubey notes that this tendency reads these racial communities as essentialized coherent wholes comprised of poor black folk. In his only novel thus far, Kenan reveals that the reconstruction of a homogeneous rural African American community is a quasi-nationalist mythology that erases difference and its discontents; therefore, *Visitation* can be read as a critique advanced through the axes of gender and sexuality of black cultural national communities. The novel portrays how a heteronormative construction of black masculinity, the marginalization of queer sexuality, and the policing of gender attempt to shore up and delimit *the* black community. Kenan explores how the discourses of prophetic Old Testament style black Southern Baptist religion and pre-Civil Rights American race imagine legitimate black subjects for themselves in their construction of heterosexuality. The community's singular fidelity to rigidly discrete race, gender, and sexuality categories engenders the narrative's tragic

proceedings, the suicide of the protagonist, Horace Cross. Horace's suicide discloses the vexed nature of interpellation for a queer black male subject in a religious rural Southern environment. Due to the contested character of interpellation, I examine how homosexuality becomes the abject and why a late twentieth-century black homosexual subject feels he must commit suicide in such an inhospitable environment.

A Visitation of Spirits is a retrospective braided narrative. One strand recounts the last night alive, April 29, 1984, of the teenage protagonist, Horace Cross. Horace recalls critical moments from his life that coincide with his visits to his elementary and high schools, The First Baptist Church of Tims Creek that he and his family attend, and the Crosstown theatre where he worked one summer. Horace's suicide concludes this narrative thread. This plot occurs almost two years before the second storyline, which is the present of the novel and unfolds on December 8, 1985. It follows the car trip to the Veteran's Hospital in Fayetteville taken by Ruth, Horace's great-aunt-in-law, Ezekiel, Horace's grandfather, and James, Horace's older cousin, to visit Asa Cross, a family cousin. On this trip, we are given access to Ruth and Ezekiel's thoughts as they recall the past and troubled family relationships. The third narrative is the first-person confessions of Reverend James Malachi Green, which is undated but is temporally placed some time after Horace's death. Much of James' confessions not only revolve around his brief marriage, ambiguous sexual orientation, and evolving ministry, but also, equally significantly, his contemplations of Horace and the reasons for his young nephew's death.

Disparate Interpellations: Boyhood Interrupted

In his attempts to understand why Horace commits suicide, James concludes that this tragic act is evidence of lack of self-knowledge. For James, Horace's self-knowledge

should have been based on who his community, that is, Horace's family, tells Horace he is, as the opening quote attests. I read the Cross family as a synecdoche for the black community because they were integral to the founding of the black part of Tims Creek and from this foundational moment, Cross family members have been its community leaders.¹ Because James states that the Cross family tells Horace who he is from birth, which I read as their aggressive hailing of Horace, I have chosen to analyze Kenan's novel in relation to one adaptation of Althusser's concept of ideology and interpellation. For the purposes of my argument, Althusser's now famous formulation in "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" that ISAs function by ensuring subjection to the ruling ideology is important. Due to the ideological work that Althusser identifies ISAs as performing, I will include American discourses on race, both pre-Civil Rights practices of segregation and post-Civil Rights desegregation. Along with this, I employ Olakunle George's reading of Laclau and Mouffe who critique Gramsci and Althusser's theories of hegemony and overdetermination, respectively, to develop what George posits as a refinement of ideology and interpellation. His reading discloses how individuals are interpellated into heterogeneous identity locations by class, gender, race, nationality, and I would like to add, generational specificity.² In his explication of Laclau and Mouffe, George reveals that not only are axes not necessarily commensurate with each other but also individuals cannot be hailed absolutely and inviolably. He explains that the simultaneous hailing by gender, race, sexuality, and class (and generational specificity)

¹ See Randall Kenan, *Let the Dead Bury Their Dead and Other Stories* for more early family history of the Cross family.

² This insight is not particular to George. Although Teresa de Lauretis makes a similar argument on the subject as the intersection of diverse interpellations and heterogeneous identifications that are often contradictory, she does not consider how various coeval interpellations can prohibit the consolidation of a stable subject.

destabilizes a fully sutured subject position. The ‘always already’ not fully constituted subject is critical to my reading of Horace’s identity location. In the case of our protagonist, his family and sexual orientation concurrently interpellate him at cross-purposes. These two hailings consistently undermine each other and unhinge Horace psychologically. It is, therefore, not lack of self-knowledge as James diagnoses; rather, I argue, it is the tragic coupling of Horace’s profound awareness of himself and penetrating discernment of his family’s expectations that produce his suicide.

The Cross family’s hailing of Horace is in turn structured by particular (ISAs), such as Christianity, pre-Civil Rights race discourse, and patriarchal masculinity. What undergirds these discourses is a shared naturalizing logic that is temporally specific according to the representation in the novel. The demands of their subject position, consequently, disallow the Cross family elders from perceiving the validity of the identity location that Horace occupies as a queer African American male growing up in the era of *de jure* racial desegregation. Because of these intersecting factors as well as the family’s social position in the community I read the Cross family as a proxy-black nationalist community. They represent the impulse to make African American culture the embodiment of respectability, heterosexuality, normativity, and progress (which is made apparent in the genealogy of male progress narrated by Ezekiel). Premising African American communal formation and social relations on patriarchal homogeneity occludes the sexual and gender diversity inherent to black communities. Horace (of the post-Civil Rights generation), Lester (of the pre-Civil Rights generation), and to a lesser extent James (of the Civil Rights generation) disrupt this intent to reveal that gender and sexual difference have always variegated the African American community. (Of course female

characters also occasion anxiety under this model of communal structure, as is explained later in the chapter.) These male characters encompass three generations that have been structured by the Cross family social logic. While the Cross family has effectively disciplined James and Lester, as I will discuss later, their hailing of Horace is disrupted by the very different social landscape that Horace occupies as one two generations removed from the family elders.

We witness the inter-generational conflict occasioned by the temporally informed subject-locations of Horace and the elders of the Cross family, Ezekiel; Horace's great-aunt, Jonnie Mae; and his three aunts, Rachel, Ruthester, and Rose. As black subjects who came of age during segregation and conspicuous white racism, fixed racial separatism informs the elder Crosses' relationship to race. Due to their life experiences, they are suspicious and distrustful of all white persons. Their wariness does not subside after *de jure* segregation is dismantled in the post-Civil rights age, which is the temporal period of the novel. They teach Horace not to concede to racist white aggression. An early example is seen when (his three aunts) Rachel, Ruthester, and Rose advise an elementary-school-age Horace to return any physical aggression received from white children in school. According to their logic, to accept white aggression is more shameful than any punishment the principal metes out to Horace for fighting back. This scene announces his aunts' attempt to socialize Horace into their generation's understanding of race, that is, black subjects' wariness and bitterness in engaging whites, which helped to sustain the black community during segregation. Horace, therefore, grows up hearing their stories of black mistreatment at the hands of whites. The narrative, however, consistently questions how much Horace can identify with these older two generations'

experiences given that the desegregated schools he attends provide another organizing framework for him to encounter race. This is witnessed when the limited omniscient narrator informs us that their stories “sat murkily on [Horace’s] mind . . . Along with them he hated the majority for the injustices done, and he hated the injustices and the things denied him as a result. But he never really personalized their anger, remaining more curious than mad, more intrigued, than bitter” (90). While the narrator informs us of Horace’s awareness of the socio-economic limitations placed on black subjects and vague animus for its architects, it also indicates that Horace cannot reproduce his elders’ anger; that is, he cannot duplicate their emotional intensity for a particularly virulent manifestation of white racism, which he has never experienced. In fact, Horace is able to establish positive social ties with white students, which the elder Crosses view with great disapprobation. Thanksgiving dinner, a defining moment in Horace’s life, as recalled by James, manifests the discrepant entries into American race discourse induced by generational specificity. In a dramatic episode whose form resembles that of a script, Jonnie Mae and Ezekiel insist that Horace remove an earring from his recently pierced ear. They blame the influence of his white friends for this breach of appropriate behavior by the black male leader they are grooming Horace to be. In response to their accusations, Horace calls them bigots. As is seen in Jonnie Mae’s anxious exclamation part of the antagonism in this scene is clearly homophobic: “He just pierced his ear. Like some little girl. Like one of those perverts” (184). Here Jonnie Mae progresses seamlessly from a binaristic racial logic to criminality through homophobia as the natural evolution of Horace having white friends. The logic undergirding this argument is what Kobena Mercer describes as a black self-defense mechanism that mirrors racist white

stigmatization by reading everything undesirable as originating from white culture.

Jonnie Mae deftly makes homosexuality and criminality external to black culture and inherent to white culture racism in her diatribe on Horace. Her reasoning discloses that in a rigidly policed racial binary, it is too easy to displace negative associations from one side of the binary to the other. The narrative, however, does not so much condemn Ezekiel, Jonnie Mae, Rachel, Ruth, or Ruthester, but attempts to contextualize their behavior through generational particularity. The critique in the novel is not leveled at the elder Crosses understanding of themselves as racial subjects determined by their temporal location; instead, it focuses on a specific displacement, that is, how this elder generation's fixation on the past despite social changes becomes a destructive force in Horace's life. James, in his confessions, discerns this problem. This is seen when he thinks: "they [the adults] didn't reckon the world they were sending him into was different from the world they conquered, a world peopled with new and hateful monsters that exacted a different price" (188). What we witness, consequently, is the emotional disorientation that irrupts when Horace's family attempts to hail him against his generational identity location.

Ezekiel's and Jonnie Mae's, among others, insistent interpellation of Horace in this respect is one such example of what Lindsey Tucker perceives as the trauma of the past appearing to attenuate the prosperity of the present. In "Gay Identity, Conjure, and the Uses of Postmodern Ethnography in the Fiction of Randall Kenan," Tucker argues that the intimate community of Tims Creek traces its beginning to racial-economic slavery and attributes its longevity to the uncompromising continuance of a conservative and separatist world view of patriarchal family structure, coherent racial identity, and hetero-normative sexual desire. This control, according to Tucker, is unfeasible and only

emphasizes the permeability of all borders. Even though I agree with Tucker's opening premise, which, I assert, is a meta-narrative concern in the novel, the past undermining the present, I offer a refinement on her thesis. The community or more specifically, the Cross family's control, which Tucker acknowledges enables its duration, must be carefully parsed to understand how it has worked across generations and through the passage of time. The novel's obsession with the past reveals that neither the Cross family nor the black community at large produces stable racial identities in a vacuum; their lived experience of race is informed by the rigid dualistic racial logic that undergirded American racial-economic slavery and segregation. Under these hostile racial conditions, the Cross family takes recourse to patriarchy to advance their desire to succeed socio-economically, as is seen in the Old Testament-like genealogies narrated to us by James and Ezekiel. Thus, for the Crosses patriarchy is the vehicle through which they channel their emancipatory desires. Kenan's depiction foregrounds bell hooks' insight that during the period of American racial-economic slavery, black men who participated in racial uplift were most likely to conform to normative masculinity as defined by white culture. hooks explains that the representation of black masculinity contained within the narratives of enslaved African Americans is one of industrious men who long to fulfill the patriarchal imperative, which the portrayal of the Cross family depicts. In her dismissal of the Cross family's patriarchy, Tucker does not attend to this curious historical affiliation disclosed by hooks and engaged by Kenan. It is within this context that the Cross family's reliance on patriarchy should be read. The force of the novel's critique is spent on this family's continued dependency on patriarchal norms under changing socio-economic conditions. The unraveling of such a reliance is already seen in

Jonnie Mae and her powerful role in the Cross family (which is a point I will return to when I discuss the critique of patriarchy in the novel). At this point, however, it is sufficient to acknowledge that this portrayal interrogates patriarchy's and a binary racial logic's loss of viability in the present. This representation critiques the Cross family's determination to perpetuate social arrangements that are no longer beneficial for its own perpetuity.

Their blind adherence to the past proves to be destructive and is the source of much narrative tension. I suggest that this insight should inform the way the two recollections, "Advent" and "Requiem for Tobacco," of early-twentieth-century rural southern life that bookend *Visitation* should be read.³ Robert McRuer in *The Queer Renaissance: Contemporary American Literature and the Reinvention of Lesbian and Gay Identities* argues that Horace's suicide belies the mythical wholeness of the black community depicted in these two sections. He reads these sections as nostalgic, but he also insists that its nostalgia is undercut by the jeering tone of the second-person narrative and shattered by Horace's suicide. McRuer interprets both Horace's death and the hog killing as operating similarly, that is, the community can only exist within a "(heterosexual) pastoral wholeness . . . through disavowal or elimination of some of its members" (92). Horace and the hog, according to McRuer, are communal sacrifices performed for the good of the community and the community can now celebrate a mythical wholeness after both deaths. Even though McRuer astutely recognizes that Horace's suicide reveals the oppressive nature of his community, its effect does not act as a force of good. Instead of inducing communal wholeness, it shatters the Cross family, as

³ Suzanne W. Jones advances a similar reading in *Race Mixing: Southern Fiction Since the Sixties*. Our readings diverge when she interprets "Advent" and "Requiem" as 'nostalgic reveries.'

I detail later in this chapter. Horace's death like these two sections, "Advent" and "Requiem for Tobacco," situates the elder Crosses within a narrative of a disruptive past that seems unable to remain within its temporal designation. For instance, in the section entitled "Advent," which according to Christianity is the period preceding Christmas, is usually the time of expectant waiting and preparation for the Nativity of Jesus Christ. However, in *A Visitation of Spirits*, Advent is subtitled "or the Beginning of the End." In the narrative that follows, the direct address of the second person invites the reader's participation in remembering a communal hog killing. In this reminiscence, male and female roles are clearly demarcated: the men kill, scald, and disembowel the hog while the women clean and cook it. The narrative informs us that a young boy is socialized early into this gender binary when he is given a gun and instructed to aim straight at the hog. Advent then is transformed in this novel to mark not the coming or beginning of someone/something important but instead to remember a time past. It remembers a way of life that is no longer possible due to the introduction of butchers and groceries, and changing dietary predilections. This memory is not coded as nostalgic; instead, as is seen at the close of this section where the omniscient narrator says it has ominous overtones: "But the ghost of those times are stubborn; and though the hog stalls are empty, a herd can be heard, trampling the grasses and flowers and fancy bushes, trampling the foreign trees of the new families, living in their new homes. A ghostly herd waiting to be butchered" (10). Here the relationship of the past to the present is understood to be pernicious; it is figured as possessing destructive potential for the present in its insistence on perpetuity. However, this is not a sweeping disavowal of remembering the past. Kenan is careful to distinguish between remembering the past as the present changes and a

particular relationship of the past to the present where the former attempts to make the latter subservient to it. This distinction is further developed in the concluding section of the novel entitled 'Requiem for Tobacco.' Here the narrator recalls a communal tobacco picking, curing, and grading. Yet again it portrays gender as rigid naturalized political positions. This scene discloses the changes that technology and industrial farming have brought to tobacco farming, which is no longer monopolized by family farms. It ends with the inevitability of change and recognizes that some of these changes are positive. The omniscient narrator makes the point that, "It is good to remember, for too many forget" (257). Consequently, this portrayal suggests that remembering itself is necessary; in fact, it is even a commendable activity, as long as remembering does not demand a rigid adherence to the past. These two sections, therefore, operate as a meta-narrative critique of the way Horace's family attempts to hail him. Their constant invocation of the past not only distorts a more appropriate relationship to the past but also disallows them from appreciating the social changes that inform Horace. Ironically, in their inability to adjust to social changes, their actions engender Horace's suicide and destabilize the continuity of the family through male leadership. (Although given Horace's enacting his sexual orientation, it is not apparent that he will fulfill the type of patriarchal leadership his family expects.) In this way, they undercut their own project. While the dissolution of such an agenda may be read positively, the means through which its collapse occurs are destructive for Horace and are censured in the novel.

All the Black Male Leaders Are Hetero-masculine

Their disruptive hailing of Horace attempts to fashion him into the black male leader archetype they expect Horace to fulfill. Such a role has specific requirements and

non-negotiable parameters for masculinity. One foundational premise is specular heterosexuality, that is, Horace's family requires that he perform a model of masculinity that they can easily recognize as such. His performance illustrates that Horace, as a queer male subject, destabilizes apparently discrete categories of sexuality. Despite the implied challenge to conventional hetero-masculinity presented by Horace's performance of it, I read his sexual identification, and general portrayal, as part of a larger discourse on the social construction of black masculinity. Analogous with Kaja Silverman who writes that sexuality must be read within its social context, I examine how black masculinity is constituted to invalidate and distort queer sexuality. This focus is notably absent in the literary criticism on the novel. Most of the criticism on *Visitation* focuses on Horace as a queer black male subject. This preoccupation does not consider the discourse of black masculinity extant in the novel, which portrays visible, invisible, ambiguous, and hyper-, hetero-, and queer sexuality. Horace's queer sexuality is one critical strand of the anxious dialogue on the architecture of black masculinity and can only be fully comprehended once it is read in this context, especially given that he, Horace, has internalized his family's homophobia and disqualifies himself for the male leadership role for which he has been groomed as a result of his sexual orientation.

This male leadership role is constructed on a family dynastic hope originating with the patriarch of the black Crosses, Ezra, and Horace's great-great-grandfather. It is Ezra's wish that one of his progeny will become the minister for the church, The First Baptist Church of Tims Creek, built on land he donated to the town of Tims Creek for that purpose. This is the primary reason why James enters the ministry. Jonnie Mae, his grandmother, is determined that one of her descendants should fulfill this ministerial

mandate, and she places her “unflinching and stolid faith” (174) in James that he will be the one to “stand on the pulpit of her “Grandfather’s church”” (117). The burden of fulfilling this family imperative falls on James and Horace because the previous generation of men, Samuel, Ezekiel’s son and Horace’s father, and Lester, Jonnie Mae’s son, as well as James’ brother, Isador, do not express a commitment to the church. Samuel and Isador, we learn through James and Ezekiel, are profligate womanizers, and Lester, James informs us, “establishes that he is not preacher material,” (117) which is an ambiguous disqualification. In his conforming to the dictates of Jonnie Mae, I read James as having been successfully interpellated by the Cross elders because he fully capitulates to their hailing. He embodies Silverman’s explication of a successful interpellation, that is, James claims a discursive formation as ontological. He tells us that Isador, “like his uncles, loved women more than he loved the Lord. So I became the pious one, the holy one” (173). The construction of this reasoning reveals that James feels compelled to accommodate Jonnie Mae’s desires because Isador is interpellated by a hyper-hetero-masculine norm. (It is critical to note that even though compulsory heterosexuality is demanded, the Cross elders distinguish between an appropriate and invalid heterosexual orientation. By this I mean that heterosexuality should be channeled into monogamous socio-economic arrangements like marriage. In addition, the pressure to become a minister is never exercised over any of the women, including James and Isador’s sister, Franklin.) In acquiescing, James adheres to the appropriate heterosexual norm demanded of the ministerial position: he marries. His capitulation to hetero-masculinity is important because his confessions suggest that James may possess a more fluid sexual orientation. The first indicator we have is evidenced when James remembers a critical conversation

with Horace where the latter confides in the former that he, Horace, is homosexual. In order to assuage Horace that he, Horace, is ‘normal,’ that is, not queer, and his homosexual desire is merely fleeting, James reluctantly admits that he experimented sexually with men as an adolescent. Later in the novel when James reminisces about college, he recalls that in his first year he “slept with anything that was willing” (174) and he “recruit[ed] the first co-ed who gave [him] a willing glance” (174). “Anything” and “co-ed” are ambiguous descriptors: they can refer to both men and women or either gender. McRuer argues that James uses the term ‘co-ed,’ which is used traditionally to reference women, to gender the ambiguous ‘anything that was willing.’ I maintain, however, the absence of overt gender designations in this scene, which is similar to the ambiguous disqualification that James attaches to Lester (above), stands in contrast to the Cross family’s obsession with specular heterosexuality. In a socio-familial context, a conservative Christian southern family, that fixes subjects’ sexual orientation through ocular proof, indeterminate sexual orientation, opaque qualifications, and cryptic accusations are indicators that the subject under discussion may not be heterosexual. My argument is exemplified in the diner scene. Here Ruth angrily tells Ezekiel in the presence of James, the ‘evil’ the Cross family has ‘wrought’ is ‘on’ Jethro, her deceased husband, Lester, James, and Horace. Ruth’s accusation can be read as an outing of sorts through association. Without Ruth stating specifically what the ‘evil’ is, the reader’s knowledge of Horace’s queer sexuality allows the reader to recognize that Ruth is intimating the other three Cross men are also homosexual if not practicing queers. In one utterance, Ruth demystifies what James spends the entire narrative trying to make ambiguous. The seeming ambiguity in his confessions is produced by the evidence James

marshals to secure his heterosexuality but instead works to suggest a more complex sexual identity. His memories of Anne, his deceased wife, exemplify this point. This can be seen when he recollects both her asking him, in a crude manner, if he is gay when they first meet. Furthermore, the scene of sexual intimacy between Anne and James that James retells as an example of his intense physical attraction for her is undercut by an embedded series of three disembodied questions. Analogous with McRuer, I advance, that these questions: “Do you?” “Do you really want to, really?” and “Are you even capable?” could be James’ conscious as well as voiced by Anne; they register James’ sexual ambivalence. This extended explication on James’ sexuality reveals that James’ capitulation to his family’s ministerial mandate informs his sexual choices. He accepts who the Cross family tells him he is and, in like manner, expects Horace to concede; essentially, this is the advice that he gives his young cousin, albeit it is coded through Christianity and ‘normalcy.’ Thus, he can be read as an option that is available to Horace. Like James, Horace is quite cognizant of their elders’ point of address to him. This can be seen during his last night alive when Horace thinks: “As it was explained to him,[Horace,] his grandfather was the centre, the source of the church’s memory . . . His father and his father’s father before him were church leaders, and it had fallen upon him to lead, to guide, to counsel his people, their people. A chief, a great elder. His place was higher than the pastor’s” (72). This mini-genealogy narrated to us by Horace not only exhibits that the position of black male leader is passed from one generation of males to the next but also a commitment to a legacy conceived by a formerly enslaved African American male.

Such a genealogy returns us to a meta-narrative concern in the novel, the past's ability to transcend temporal boundaries. It is not only that Ezra's, a formerly enslaved African American, desire attempts to motivate his descendants four generations later, but this mandate has a clearly circumscribed model of manhood that continues to seek to interpellate the last two generations portrayed in the novel, (Samuel and Lester; James, Isador, and Horace) whose changed socio-temporal locations make different demands on them as male gendered subjects. The Cross family's inability to register and respond to these social changes is already apparent with their faltering hailings of Samuel and Lester. Ironically, Ezekiel relates Ezra's advice that, "things change . . . if a man can't get use to change, he can't get use to living" (57). It is this adjustment that apparently eludes Ezekiel and can be perceived when he details his relationships with his father, Thomas, his son, Samuel, and his grandson, Horace, as well as his self-perception of his masculinity. It is largely through Ezekiel's narration of these relationships that the discourse of black masculinity is constructed. Ezekiel's anxieties around his manhood ricochet throughout the novel and can be traced to his relationship with Thomas, which haunts the former even at an advanced age. For instance, in his comparison with his father, Ezekiel views himself as inadequate. He characterizes Thomas as: "a big, strong, hardworking, Christian man, who walked in the way of righteousness" (53), which Ezekiel attempts to emulate in his ministry and work life. Like Thomas when he was alive, Ezekiel is the Head Deacon of the First Baptist Church of Tims Creek, and one of the responsibilities of this position is to lead the congregation in singing. Ezekiel describes Thomas' songs as "harvest in October, sweat in August, a little sorrow, a little mild, well-tempered joy" (52). After his father dies, Ezekiel assumes the same position.

In a belittling contrast, Ezekiel considers his songs, “more fried fish, cornbread and . . . a bit of corn liquor” (52). In Ezekiel’s estimation, his father’s songs possess a far richer emotional range and profoundness than his. This reveals his anxiety that he does not measure up to the kind of man that is Thomas. He imagines that Thomas was as disappointed in him as he is in himself: “I reckon we was both disappointed that my voice didn’t come out to be deep like his” (51). I suggest that we read Ezekiel’s disappointment in the depth of his voice as evidence of his self-perceived larger failure to reproduce his father’s manhood. Although Ezekiel surmises he is ‘glad’ he did not mature into a mimetic replica of Thomas, he is still concerned that Thomas may not have noticed that he, Ezekiel, tried to emulate him, his way of standing, his walk, talk, deep booming voice. This estimation reveals that Thomas is Ezekiel’s model of ideal manhood, and it structures how he perceives Samuel and Horace.

In his relationship with Samuel, Ezekiel attempts to hail Samuel into this model; however, the religious, hard-working archetype has little appeal to his son, as is evidenced in Samuel’s disinclination for church and irreverent humor. In fact, Samuel’s humor discloses, at the very least, a wavering belief in God. For Samuel, there is not any spiritual remuneration in the wearisome labor of tobacco farming; instead, this grueling routine informs his disenchantment with Christianity, as is seen when he tells Ezekiel: “Papa, ain’t you heard, you don’t need to pray no more . . . No, Paw, this here is hell; aint’ nothing left to worry over; cause you ain’t gone die – can you figure anything more hell than a tobacco patch in August” (56). Samuel, witnessing the punishing and financially unrewarding work of tobacco farming for African Americans in the mid-twentieth-century, bitterly concludes after Ezekiel admonishes him for taking “the Lord’s

name in vain” that “Mr. Deacon. I’m sorry I took your precious massa’s name for granted. But it looks to me you the one taken for granted. You old fool” (56). Christianity and physical labor, for Samuel, are no longer viable means for measuring his manhood because they have been implicated in American racism. It is why he rejects them and takes refuge in womanizing, brawling, and drunkenness. Even though Samuel rejects the black male leader prototype, as understood through Christianity and hard work, it is for hetero-masculine excesses that are somewhat reminiscent of Ezekiel’s youthful indiscretions. This behavior disqualifies Samuel from the black male leader role. Despite his challenges with Samuel, who died young as a result of his imprudence, Ezekiel is confident about his familiarity with Samuel’s strengths and weaknesses because they worked together in the tobacco fields for some time. He says: “I made Sammy work. And I worked right there with him. Two men together. So I had a idea what was going on in his head” (63). Such a portrayal imparts that Samuel is largely knowable to his father because Ezekiel can read his son as a deviation from the model of manhood to which Ezekiel is faithful, which working like ‘two men together’ discloses. Ezekiel acknowledges, on the other hand, by the time Horace is old enough to pick tobacco, he has leased all his land and Horace is quiet and an avid reader. As a result Horace remains a mystery to him. Ezekiel needs another discursive paradigm for black masculinity to comprehend Horace, which is not simply an aberration of a familiar standard.

With his grandson, Ezekiel does not have access to the intimacy engendered by close physical labor. Horace, as a quiet queer bibliophile, enters the realm of the unknowable to his grandfather, and he aggressively attempts to make Horace readable to him. The summer after Horace’s first year of high school, Ezekiel asks him about

girlfriends and participation in sports; he also requests that Horace chauffeur him around the community and informs everyone that Horace resembles his father, Samuel. Although Ezekiel does not comprehend Horace's ambition to be a scientist he situates Horace's aspiration within a history of determined and successful Crosses. He says that Horace, will 'do fine' because "he's a Cross ain't he? We always do fine when we set our minds to it. Yes, we do. A fine boy. Right fine, indeed" (156). The placement of Horace within a family narrative of prosperity and the assertion that Horace physically resembles his father is supposed to make his grandson intelligible to Ezekiel. His actions solicit the performance of conventional manhood from Horace and therefore cast Horace as an unambiguous male subject, which validates him as a legitimate black male leader. Horace acquiesces to the demands Ezekiel places on him. He enters into a relationship with Gracie Mae Mayfield with whom he is physically intimate for a brief period. Even though he is not sexually attracted to her, it is Gracie Mae, rather than Horace, who ends their physical intimacy. He also joins the track team, which Horace thinks "would make a man out of him if nothing else would" (160). Horace's recourse to sports to leverage an obvious hetero-masculinity complies with what Brian Pronger delineates as North American culture's understanding of homosexuality and athletics as mutually distinct realms. Pronger argues that whereas the former is seen as a violation of masculinity, in contrast the latter is viewed as compliance to it because gay men are generally not perceived as athletes, since this would be a contradiction in terms. His critique of the social construction of gender and sexuality makes explicit one of its defining myths: a man can demonstrate his masculinity in the arena of sports. Horace, therefore, aware of

the social construction of masculinity uses a heterosexual relationship and sports to convincingly perform heterosexuality.

In his performance of a normative identity, Horace destabilizes the distinction between hetero- and queer masculinity; his shuttling back and forth exposes that these carefully policed boundaries can be easily transgressed. In *Inside/Out*, Diana Fuss discusses the very permeability of margins demarcating sexual identity. Fuss explains that borders are notoriously unstable and sexual identities rarely secure. Heterosexuality, according to Fuss, “secures its self-identity and shores up its ontological boundaries by protecting itself from what it sees as the continual predatory encroachments of its contaminated other, homosexuality” (2). It does this by identifying the homosexual as the excluded; it defines the limit of the heterosexual border. The threat of homosexuality, Fuss continues, is that its proximity to heterosexuality threatens “a collapse of boundaries” and “a radical confusion of identities” (6). Horace’s easy transgression of the boundary between hetero- and queer sexuality betrays that there may not in fact be any ontological difference between these two sexualities. It also imparts that in spite of the surveillance of boundaries within the sexual economy depicted these borders can be trespassed. Undergirding his encroachment is that Horace is not obviously queer. This is an important distinction in the novel because Gideon, an African American peer with whom Horace has his first homosexual encounter in ninth grade, is portrayed as ocularly queer.⁴ In elementary school Horace and his friends tease Gideon because they read him

⁴ Horace’s subject-location stands in contrast to Gideon’s as a young man from a socio-economically marginal family. Much of the work that Gideon’s character accomplishes is to underscore the multiple points of identification between the both of them: they are both academically gifted queer black male adolescents. What distinguishes them is their relationship to economic capital: Gideon’s family participates in the underground economy; that is, they sell illegal homemade liquor, and Horace’s family are large landowners.

as gay. However, these same students view Horace as ‘weird,’ as Emma Dobson explains to Horace: “You don’t play ball like the other guys. You’re just kind of . . . I don’t know . . . kind of like Gideon – I mean, you ain’t a sissy or nothing – and you’re kind of cute, really, but, but . . . shoot, Horace. I just can’t be your girlfriend! I don’t want a boyfriend everybody calls *weird*” (97) (emphasis from the novel)! In the social world of elementary school ‘weird’ describes an in-between space: Horace does not conform to a heterosexual norm but he also cannot be assimilated to a stereotypical homosexual identity, which Gideon embodies. Gideon is described as having “cultivated a dainty, feminine air, delicate and girllike. His hands formed flowery gestures in mid-air, and he had something of a mincing walk” (98). The school community acknowledges that both Horace and Gideon reside outside of normative masculinity, but their contemporaries distinguish between what makes these two young men exceptions. Unlike Gideon, Horace’s family and schoolmates interpret his divergence as generated by Horace’s academic accomplishments and not owed to his sexuality. Their difference, consequently, is that Horace’s queer sexuality is apparently invisible to the larger community. This invisibility, or mis-reading, enables Horace’s adeptness in destabilizing the heterosexual masculine signifier, as his performance of hetero-masculinity indicates. Nevertheless, I am in agreement with McRuer who argues that Horace is unable to harness the volatility of the signifier to his advantage. Instead, his transgression against heterosexuality seeks to confirm heterosexuality as the only legitimate sexual orientation for the black male leader. His transgressive movements within this rigid sexual economy concede only that he is not a specular queer subject and there is not an absolute border between

conventional masculinity and queer sexuality. A queer male subject can efficaciously perform hetero-masculinity.

Through the performance of hetero-masculinity, that is, answering his family's address, Horace has accessed a social space that is conducive to developing productive relationships with white peers. It is not only Horace's performance of conventional masculinity through sports and heterosexual relations that create an avenue for him into a marginally racially integrated social space. If this were true, then John Anthony, a black star-athlete, would not have warned Horace about socializing with white students. The former would also have productive social relations with white schoolmates. Rather, it is Horace's decision to position himself as a leader within high school that his family's discursive construction of him as a black male leader allows Horace to imagine he can and will ascend the socio-academic world of high school. From joining the track team, Horace becomes a member of the Spanish Club, vice-president of the National Honor Society, associate editor of the Newspaper, and president elect of the Science Club. As a student leader, that is, someone who performs well academically, athletically, and extracurricular, his peers are no longer determined by race but instead by accomplishments and interests. When Horace first 'conquers' the socio-academic world of high school in 10th grade he is offered "a special token place" (161) within a group of white students called the 'beautiful people.' These are white students who self-identify as wealthy, physically attractive, smart, driven, and ambitious. By his senior year Horace develops an intimate friendship with four young white men in particular, Nolan, Ian, Jay, and Ted. They are upper-middle class malcontent transplants from more northern and sophisticated cities. These disaffected youth display their distinction from the traditional

racial bias of the south by including a smart black boy in their group. They are similar to Horace because they are also groomed to be leaders, they perform well academically, and they share a range of eclectic intellectual and non-academic interests. Horace's friendship with Nolan, Ian, Jay, and Ted is undergirded by the feeling of freedom and possibility that his white friends possess, as the limited omniscient narrator informs us: "[Nolan, Ian, Jay, and Ted] fully expecting the world owed them everything for nothing, and even more in return for a little effort. And Horace, enchanted by their singular, infectious freedom, identified with their sense of entitlement, believing the world owed him what it owed them. Believing wholeheartedly he would receive it in the end" (237). I am not concerned with whether or not this is accurate, especially since the limited omniscient narrator proceeds to question the truth claims of Horace's perception. Instead, I suggest, the primary value of this bi-racial friendship for Horace resides in the escape from the pressure to be Horace Thomas Cross, 'the Great Black Hope,' 'the Straight-A Kid,' 'the Chosen Nigger' (13). The black male leader role designated by his family reinforces his friendship with the four white boys because the role's compulsory heterosexuality enables a greater need for Horace's psychological escape, which this friendship offers as the above quotation attests. At the start of the summer before his senior year, Horace has spent almost two years disavowing his queer sexuality. During this summer his resolve disintegrates, and he engages in queer sexual relations when he works at the Crosstown theatre (to which I will return when I discuss how and why queerness becomes abject in *Visitation*). This summer reveals that he is fully interpellated by his family's discourse on him as a black male leader, which his conversation with Antonio, a gay bi-racial actor, makes apparent. Horace informs Antonio that he is brilliant, intends to make his family

‘really’ proud, and is the next generation of black male leader. Yet Horace realizes that “his mind ha[s] lied to his heart” (216), that is, he is irrevocably gay and prayers will not change his sexual orientation. By the time Horace enters his senior year, therefore, he is racked with guilt and self-loathing, and the friendship he develops with this group is “a rare reprieve from the anxiety” (236) generated by his sexual orientation. However, to Horace’s detriment, his family’s capture by a segregation era American race discourse means that they disapprove of inter-racial social networks. This culminates during thanksgiving of his senior year. As punishment for following his white friends in piercing his ear, Ezekiel insists on the dissolution of this friendship, and he stipulates that everyday his grandson must come straight home from school. His grandfather blocks access to a necessary social space for Horace’s psychological wellbeing. Complying with Ezekiel’s demands, consequently, produce a situation rich in irony. By this I mean, the performance of hetero-masculinity enables Horace’s hailing by an early post-Civil Right’s integrationist discourse, as is seen in Horace’s incorporation into predominantly white social spaces. This circumstance makes apparent how the different axes of sexuality and generational specificity overlay an individual’s subject-position and hail him/her in conflicting manners concurrently. Even though Horace’s black contemporaries are contemptuous towards and distance themselves from him due to his violation of intransigent southern racial norms, I maintain that a *de jure* integrated school environment, which Horace’s elders did not experience, is particular to his generation. I therefore read his African American schoolmates’ approach to race and race relations as captured by the same fixed political positions of their elders. What Horace discovers is

that the black male leader role is not only premised on a compulsory heterosexuality but also the disavowal of integrated social networks.

Such recalcitrant norms, racial and sexual, which hail Horace against his temporal specificity, engender a psychological minefield within him. When we first encounter Horace in the novel, he is considering what animal he should transform into. Horace decides that the animal he becomes cannot be vulnerable, must be graceful and indigenous to Southeastern North Carolina (like Horace himself). He eventually settles upon the red-tailed hawk because it fits all of the criteria listed above, and this bird would allow Horace to be, “all unfettered, unbound and free” (13). Horace perceives that the transformation into a bird excuses him from the, “human laws and human rules that he had constantly tripped over and frowned at” (12). This transmogrification is an escape from being a ‘tortured human.’ Kenan’s portrayal of Horace’s desire to fly and imagining of flight as a way to elude the discordant interpellations of his family, generation, and sexual orientation can be read as participating in a rich black diasporic tradition of flight as a trope of escape. Typically, flight, in Anglophone black diasporic literary and folk culture, embodies black subjects’ desire for emancipatory politics and liberation from oppressive socio-economic conditions. For instance, in *Salt*, Guinea John flies back to Africa to escape punishment for assisting in organizing an insurrection of enslaved blacks in Trinidad. And in *Song of Solomon*, Robert Smith jumps from the top of a building to escape the harsh socio-economic conditions of American segregation.⁵ In the literary tradition of the black diaspora,⁶ the orthodoxies are that black subjects recourse to flight

⁵ Rolland Murray makes a similar argument in “The Long Strut: *Song of Solomon* and the Emancipatory Limit of Black Patriarchy.”

⁶ The black diaspora’s literary tradition constructs ‘flying’ metaphorically. In contrast, folk stories of the black diaspora depict enslaved Africans literally ascending into the sky and flapping their hands like wings

is an avenue out of racist white oppression and flight is not literalized, that is, it exists on a metaphoric plane; in fact, a non-figurative reading of flight's illustration in black literary culture reveals that it looks like abdication and/or suicide. In *Visitation*, by contrast, Horace's escape from the limitations placed on him, a late-twentieth century queer African American, by his black family involves the desire of a real physical alteration of his person from a human to a bird so he can literally fly. Kenan's queering of this trope both underscores the family pressure placed on Horace to conform socially and sexually and discloses intra-racial oppression. In appropriating a trope that has largely been understood through the lens of liberation from white oppression, Kenan emphasizes how community is not only defined to marginalize certain kinds of allegedly inappropriate subjects but also to determine what kind of racial subjects can legitimately represent the race. Lester, for instance, although a liminal character, both in the novel and the Cross family, is presumed to be queer. In the thanksgiving scene, Lester attempts to defend Horace's ear piercing, but is rudely interrupted three times, once each by Rachel, Ruthester, and Rebecca. They tell him to: "Shut up, Lester," "Nobody asked you, Lester," and "Hush, Lester," (184) respectively. Lester's alleged queer sexuality not only automatically disqualifies him from the male leader position but also makes it permissible for other family members to be overtly dismissive of him. We can, therefore, read Lester as another alternative for Horace, albeit a location in the family that is peripheral. In one sense, however, this is not a privilege available to Horace because his family has already determined him within its ideological configuration. This dynamic is reminiscent of Althusser's formulation that a child is always-already a subject in and by his/her

to 'fly' from slavery. For an example of the latter, see "People Who Could Fly" in *Black Folktales* by Julius Lester. Despite this difference in how 'flying' is illustrated, the desire of escape from racist white oppression is shared in both cultural spheres.

particular family and has to “find his/her place, that is, ‘become’ the sexual subject it already is in advance” (176). Horace’s pre-determined location, like that of James, is the black male leader. This is why Horace’s sexual orientation and choice of friends are causes of concern within his family. During his last night alive, Horace grapples with the choice before him: he recognizes from his family’s singular fidelity to their archetype, which cannot accommodate Horace’s white friends, that he cannot be queer and the black leader yet, he cannot disavow his queer sexuality. “He thought of his family, of what they wanted of him; of his friends and what they offered him; and of himself . . . what did he, Horace, truly want” (231)? In addressing this question, Horace reconsiders whether he can be a “savior” for his people because he is gay. As a result of his reassessment, our protagonist not only visits, literally and in memory, his elementary and high schools, the Crosstown theatre, and the First Baptist Church, but also larger African American history. Horace recalls pivotal moments in his brief life that occurred at the above locations. He also reviews the European misadventure in western Africa that resulted in trafficking in African human bodies; the internecine war among African ethnic groups that fuelled the slave trade; the Middle-Passage; racial-economic slavery in the United States; and endemic joblessness, poverty, and hunger among African Americans due to institutionalized racism. Horace’s return to the historical record reveals that he is profoundly aware of the historical significance of the role his family has configured for him. His recourse to African American history is presaged by a quote from the book of Joel: “*your young men shall see visions*” (232) (emphasis from novel). In this book, the prophet Joel prophesies that the Lord’s judgment will be harsh unless the people of Judah repent and God’s relationship will be restored with Judah in the future. Horace’s vision,

unlike Joel's, is retrospective. It is oriented by the demands of black male leader model, as indicated above. Horace's vision, therefore, indicates that the black male leader archetype supersedes his psychological and sexual needs. This is the question that animates the limited omniscient narrator's mapping of Horace's last night: 'Will and can Horace choose between his racial and sexual identity?'

The Abject Queer

This question reveals the dilemma that Horace faces. Such a quandary is what Kendall Thomas calls a false choice. In "Ain't Nothin' Like the Real Thing": Black Masculinity, Gay Sexuality, and the Jargon of Authenticity," Thomas explains that the hetero-normative logic of authentic black identity requires the repudiation of queer identity. According to Thomas, this is a "forced, false, and ultimately fatal choice" (61) imposed upon queer African Americans. To choose between their two sources of self, race and sexuality, Thomas explains, would engender psychic suicide because queer African Americans are importuned to identify with homophobia and hostile masculinism in order to be considered authentic black subjects. Horace's desire to transform into a red-tailed hawk is evidence of his psychic suicide; it is escapism from the fatal request to absolutely disidentify with his sexual orientation. Given the nature of 'psychic suicide,' I suggest another term for it is abjection. Kristeva's theory of abjection in *Power of Horror* is useful for comprehending the false choice, which situates Horace in a liminal psychological space. It also offers us one way to chart the effects of antagonistic interpellations upon Horace and how they reconstruct him as abject. Kristeva conceives of the abject as that which "disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous" (4). One way that Kristeva

explicates her theory is in corporeal terms; she suggests that bodily fluids and excrements are abject because they trouble the border between inside and outside even as they indicate the body's existence, that is, in order for them to be expelled, something has to be ingested. This process is rife with ambiguity because the very act that signifies the body's existence is that which disturbs its margins. The corpse, then, according to this logic, is the utmost site of the abject because what is expelled is the self; in death the borders are completely dismantled. Viewing a corpse can likewise induce abjection in the viewer because it both beckons and engulfs the spectator. The corpse is the rejected from which the observer cannot look away. The abjection of self can as well occur while one is yet alive. This happens when the subject experiences the abject at its most potent, that is, when the subject, both importuned and pulverized by the abject, enervated from attempts to identify with something external to the self, discovers that it is abject. In *Visitation*, the constituting lack is queer sexuality. It is the abject. Homosexuality and race are discretely constructed and mutually delimited by the black community, largely the Cross family, to produce and circumscribe an authentic hetero-normative black identity. Their foreclosure of a black gay identity codes queer sexuality as external/outside, and imbues it with the force to not only destabilize the very community whose liberation and prosperity they seek but more importantly destroy the next generation of black male leader. This articulation of homosexuality as external to the black community overdetermines Horace's relationship to his queer sexuality so that it becomes a site of abjection.

I would like to add that homosexuality as abjection within the black community is an argument first developed by Robert Reid-Pharr in "Tearing the Goat's Flesh: Homosexuality, Abjection and the Production of a Late Twentieth-Century Black

Masculinity.” Reid-Pharr argues that homosexuality as abjection produces African American hetero-masculinity. Homophobia in the black community, as portrayed in African American literature, constructs boundaries around normativity and produces homogeneity within the black community as well as imagines the authentic black subject. Projecting homosexuality as inauthentic, base, and perverse transforms it into an abject presence that haunts African American literature. Consequently, the figure of the homosexual is conflated with the figure of the ghost. However, Reid-Pharr concludes that the representation of the black homosexual reveals new modes of perception and experience that are already a part of the African American literary imagination. My reading both builds upon Reid-Pharr’s insight and departs from it. I show that Horace’s desire does change him into the abject, the ghost-like subjectivity, that haunts the novel, but the experience of abjection also possesses the potential to transform the community. Horace has already been constructed as a real and authentic black male figure, the leader of his generation. James’ belated acceptance of Horace’s queer sexuality seeks to embrace the homosexual subject as an authentic black subject. This change expands who can be understood as an authentic black subject. Whereas Reid-Pharr focuses on representations of persons that are already marginalized within the African American and Latino communities, convicts for instance, Kenan’s depiction approaches from the other end the figure that is already privileged. In the former, these characters’ disavowal of queer sexuality is one means through which they attain legitimacy within their communities. Horace is already a legitimate subject. In contesting the privileged subject-location of an individual like Horace, Kenan’s portrayal seeks to critique and expand

black communal structure. While the experience of abjection itself is never positive, this experience can serve as a force of good.

Homosexuality as abjection is witnessed in Horace's articulation of his queerness: he comprehends his homosexuality as a sin that profoundly corrupts him and will only cease through prayers and vigilance. Expressing his sexuality through the language of sin illustrates that Horace is interpellated by the southern Baptist religious discourse of his community and merely mirrors its homophobic logic. Both Reverend Barden, who is the minister of the First Baptist Church of Tims Creek when Horace is an adolescent, and James, who succeeds the former as minister advise persistent prayer as a way to change an apparently aberrant sexuality. Along with prayer, James cautions Horace that his, Horace's, sexual orientation is a serious matter; however, according to James, Horace is normal, and his apparent abnormal sexuality is only a phase which is part of maturation. James' counsel is inherently contradictory because he tells Horace that his homosexuality is both far-reaching and ephemeral, yet it is a less condemning response. The sermon preached by Reverend Barden, when Horace is an adolescent and which continues to haunt our protagonist until his violent death, evinces a more rebuking and strident homophobia. In it, Barden quotes from Romans where one of the sins Paul denounces is homosexuality. Reverend Barden continues that society is wrong to accept homosexuality. And people who are "on the path to righteousness slip into these here ways" (79) that are 'evil,' according to Reverend Barden, is a result of "the spirit is willing" but "the flesh is weak" (79). In order to guard against the temptation born from lust, which "bringeth forth death" (79), each person has to be vigilant and consistently in prayer. Barden continues that if a person should let his "guard down," the devil is

“waiting right there. . . to set [him] on the way to hell” (80). Such a worldview can only legitimate heterosexuality. It must be oppressive towards a black queer subject, and Horace socialized within a homophobic Christian environment deploys these same prejudices against himself. His use of homophobic Christian language to articulate his sexuality pervades his narrative. Horace describes his homosexual encounters as “sinful promiscuity” (221) and his brief affair with Antonio as falling “into sin” with him. His language discloses that Horace does not have access to a linguistic paradigm that can apprehend homosexuality benignly. Rather, the virulent homophobia of his socio-religious environment produces an inherently ironic bifurcation, that is, Horace is both sure about his sexual orientation and that it is innately wrong. This can be seen when he counters James’ dismissal of his sexuality as impermanent: “It’s not experimenting. I like men. I don’t like women. There’s something wrong with me” (113). Such a portrayal discloses an affirmative gay identity that is the source of deficiency. (I use affirmative to convey Horace’s unwavering assertion of his queer sexuality in the speech act: “I like men”.) Robert McRuer reads this apparent discordant logic as a result of Horace’s discrepant socialization. He argues that Horace’s desire arises in opposition to as well as emerges from within the community. In fact, his first-person confession, according to McRuer, underscores Horace’s attempts to appropriate and re-signify the language of the Church. This is seen when Horace describes his queer sexual encounters as “feeling immortal in a mortal’s arms” (250) and “taking a chance with my immortal soul” (250). Because Horace understands his queer sexuality according to the logic of his conservative Christian community, he is unable to construct a positive queer subjectivity, which is necessary for challenging the construction of queer sexuality as innately sinful and

degenerate. Instead, his biblically coded pronouncements of his sexuality display that he has internalized his community's censure of his sexuality, as is seen when Horace says: "I remember watching men, even as a little boy. I remember feeling strange and good and nasty. I remember doing it anyway . . . I remember not being able to stop . . ." (248). What is significant is his use of 'strange' and 'nasty' to characterize his sexual arousal. Horace always chooses detractive descriptors to illustrate queer sexuality. This culminates in the particularly insidious coupling of pejorative adjectives and a homophobic Christian discourse to narrate his relationship to his queer sexuality: "I remember worrying that I was unworthy of taking Communion because I was unclean, no matter how much I prayed and asked for forgiveness" (251). From this association, it is unveiled that queer sexuality is abject for the black community of Tim's Creek because it is not biblically sanctioned. Homosexuality, then, for Horace, is both the unforgivable sin and the sin that he cannot stop committing. Thus, I contend, Horace's relationship to his queer sexuality, distorted by his interpellation by a Southern Baptist religious discourse, perverts homosexuality and locates him in an in-between space where he cannot repudiate his desire and yet he cannot embrace it. He is simultaneously compelled and disgusted, which is perfectly captured in his memory of the opening night's orgy, which he recalls with disquiet and fascination. This ambivalence resituates Horace as the abject and illustrates Kristeva's notion of how the abject both seduces and overwhelms the subject to the point where the subject itself becomes abject.

We can map Horace's devolution into abjection through his relationship with a Southern black Baptist understanding of God. Towards the end of the novel in a section entitled, "Horace Thomas Cross: Confessions," Horace, in the first person, which is the

only instance in *Visitation*, directly discloses his long contentious history with his queer sexual orientation. We learn that “even as a little boy,” looking at the male body sexually arouses Horace. Equally as early is his guilt and shame over his queer desire: “I remember the first picture I saw of a naked man. I remember feeling ashamed. It made me hard” (248). Horace’s use of descriptors such as ‘shame,’ as well as ‘guilt’ and ‘self-loathing’ to describe his relationship to his queer sexuality disclose that he is an imperfectly hailed subject. He shares his community’s censure towards homosexuality, yet he continues to live out his homosexuality, albeit surreptitiously, as is seen after Ezekiel insists that Horace end his association with Nolan, Ian, Jay, and Ted. With the prescribed dissolution of his only friendships, our protagonist is lonely, and “his loneliness [leads] him into careless liaisons with men . . . and . . . he worrie[s] more and more for his soul” (240). Because he approaches his sexuality through a homophobic Christian paradigm, Horace believes that his sexuality, his sin, affects his soul. And he is anxious about how this consequence reconfigures his relationship with God:

I remember worrying that I was not worthy of taking Communion because I was unclean, no matter how much I prayed and asked forgiveness. I remember wondering what God looks like and I remember after a time stopping wondering what he looked like and wondering more who he was, thinking it was surely possible that he did not like some people so much . . . I remember what he would tell me if he ever did want to break his centuries of silence. I remember deciding that I would find out if I lived right and finally went home to heaven. Then I remember the day I realized that I was probably not going to go home to heaven. (251)

I quote this passage at length because it clearly conveys the extended nature of Horace’s battle with his sexual orientation and succinctly portrays his changing relationship to a Christian God. Due to the permanence of his queer sexuality, which withstands consistent prayers and entreaties to God, God becomes distant and inaccessible to Horace and he

perceives that heaven is no longer the probable destination of his soul. According to his logic, with Heaven understood as home, then Horace will live in permanent exile acting out his queer desire. It also divulges the inefficaciousness of prayers for Horace. All of this converges to overwhelm him on his last night alive: “Where will it end? Will it end” (231)? These questions convey Horace’s fatigue over the unrelenting nature of his battle, and it is this psychological exhaustion that I read as Horace having transformed into the abject itself. In mis-identifying his sexuality as a sin, this leads him to mis-perceive himself as inadequate because he is unable to extirpate his queer desire. His confessions delineate this progression: “Then I remember the day I realized that I was probably not going to go home to heaven, cause the rules were too hard for me to keep. That I was too weak” (251). His abjection leads Horace to pursue sorcery as a passage to liberation. Only in such a psychological state can Horace imagine changing species as a legitimate escape. In a moment of lucidity, he admits the impossibility of his endeavor once the spell does not work and acknowledges its ludicrousness. With this concession, Horace becomes depressed because he surmises that his future will be a continuation of this interminable struggle with his sexual desire. Closely following his desolation, Horace imagines that “aberrations like himself” (28) visit him and guide him through his past. Sharon Patricia Holland argues that these grotesque companions are given to him by his religion: they are the appropriate friends for a gay subject because they are all evil. In agreement with Holland, I also assert that their appearance is further evidence of both Horace’s incorporation of homosexuality as abjection. Towards the end of his last night alive, Horace cannot envision himself as anything but abject, and this resolution is disclosed when he utters: “no more, no more ghosts, no more sin, no more . . .” (231)

and shortly thereafter commits suicide with a gunshot to his head. His suicide communicates that Christianity is no longer a redemptive or liberationist force for all black subjects; instead, it has transformed into an instrument of oppression for some black subjects.

Horace's suicide also confirms that the black male leader role for which he is being groomed is disrupted by abjection. He rejects it on his last night alive. To meet its demands requires his acquiescing to a sexual orientation that does not interpellate him. On his part, it is a fully cognizant refusal that enables his suicide. After Horace's death, James, in his confessions, mis-characterizes his young cousin's death as a manifestation of Horace's lack of self-knowledge despite his being aggressively hailed by the community from birth. James admits that as a "son of the community, more than most" (188), Horace, like himself, exists for its salvation. This social construction of Horace and himself necessarily disavows their needs and desires. James' acceptance of his subject-position, as configured by his family, enables him to repudiate Horace's desire and to not comprehend why Horace commits suicide, even though James recognizes the different socio-temporalities that inform his cousin. Horace's confessions belie James' misapprehension and deduction. His confessions are structured by the phrase 'I remember.' In it he details a wide range of memories: from watching his Grandfather kill a chicken to eating Ruthester's chocolate chip cookies to both expressing and trying to suppress his sexual desire, among others. His confessions end with the simple emphatic sentence: "I remember me" (251). Its unwavering self-awareness also disproves Ezekiel's conclusion that Horace's death is a result of him trying to be like his white peers. Rather, his death is made possible by of the narrow social construction of black male leadership.

In trying to comprehend its foreclosures, Horace returns to aspects of this role that are incontestable to him and enable him and his family to conclude that this is his status within their socio-familial milieu.

Leading up to his death Horace rereads the literature in which he previously found avenues to a different and more expansive world than his religious-familial environment provides. His re-entry into books, however, proves to be a futile exercise. So too does his recourse to writing his autobiography, as the limited omniscient narrator informs us: “So strong was his belief in words – perhaps they would lead him out of this strange world in which he suddenly found himself. . . after reams of paper and thousands of lines of scribble, he had found no answers” (239). Because this is an unsuccessful venture for Horace, he burns his autobiography. Thus, by the end of the novel, Horace’s portrayal discloses a radical skepticism of the value of the modern technology of print-literacy for a gay black male subject in the rural south at the close of the twentieth-century. In its place is Horace’s first-person narration of his memories. Although this modern impiety and reversal is mediated through print, which subtly destabilizes the former as a truly radical disclosure, its appearance must still be addressed. Part of what allows Horace to be interpellated by his family’s address is his academic excellence. Much of his self-identity is based on his belief in books, sentences, and words as escape from the very role that he is committed to performing. The inherent irony is that the requirements, which make Horace a valid individual to be hailed also enable him to continue assuming the position because it is his escape from it. Horace’s abjection disrupts and eventually annihilates this fragile self-construction. Print-literacy, as an essential component of the black male leader role, can no longer sustain Horace when confronted with Horace the abject. This

nihilism participates in orienting Horace towards suicide. In digesting Horace's suicide, James laments that once "this beautiful, strong, defiant group could wrestle the world down . . . what happened? . . . all the sons and daughters groomed to lead seem to have fled" (188). He articulates his despair over Horace's death through black leadership and biblical language. These two concerns, Horace and the black leader archetype, haunt James' confessions.

Horace's death diffuses his abjection throughout his family, so that he operates as a specter of abjection in the other two narrative threads. It is important to remember that the limited omniscient narration of Horace's death is not the present of the novel. In fact, it is almost two years in the past, and James, Ezekiel, and Ruth's trip to visit Asa, a cousin, is the present of the novel. That James and Ezekiel are still trying to comprehend Horace's suicide two years later reveals how much Horace continues to haunt his family. Although I assert that both Ezekiel and James experience abjection, neither of them develops into an abject figure, and I differentiate between their preoccupations. For Ezekiel, Horace's death is coupled with his suspicion that his dead wife, Aretha, was unhappy in their marriage; these two concerns seamlessly bleed into one another. Ezekiel's anxiety over Aretha's happiness discloses that she is as much a mystery to him as is Horace, which is witnessed in his various conjectures on Horace's death. Ezekiel initially speculates that Aretha's death must have played a role in Horace's decision to commit suicide before abandoning this reason. Instead, Ezekiel surmises that his grandson's death is a result of Horace "trying to be like them white folks is what it was" (64). Ezekiel's reasoning stages Horace's absolute inaccessibility to his grandfather. To be fair, Ezekiel does preface the above presumption by acknowledging that Horace is

‘foreign’ to him. Therefore, I suggest that his perplexity over his dead wife’s happiness’ and Horace’s suicide manifest itself in the recurring dream of his funeral in the old Church building. Ezekiel can both see himself and is himself at his funeral. In attendance, during the dream, are persons who died before he was born, persons who were elderly when he was a child, persons he has not seen since he was a boy, and persons who died during his lifetime. Among the dead who are present at his funeral are Aretha, Samuel, and Horace, all of whom are dead. What is significant about this dream is that Ezekiel pleads to Aretha, who neither smiles nor cries, to stop the funeral because he is alive in the casket. He also imagines that his dead son and grandson lower the lid on the coffin as he begs them to stop. His family does not hear him as he pleads with them. Because of the dream’s nightmarish quality and how it disturbs Ezekiel, I read it as his experience of abjection. It portrays how much the past and its unresolved issues haunt Ezekiel’s mental landscape. That he dreams of dead family members burying him alive not only reveals his anxiety over death, for which he is not prepared, but more importantly how his fraught relationships with these family members overwhelm him years after their deaths. What enables this dream and its abject nature are Ezekiel’s self-acknowledged ignorance of Aretha’s mental state and the reasons for his grandson’s untimely death. This dynamic captures the meta-narrative concern of the novel, that is, the past’s ability to disrupt temporal boundaries. In this instance, Ezekiel cannot reorient himself into a more appropriate relationship with the past because he does not know or understand what has occurred. Thus Ezekiel’s ignorance devolves into abjection, which induces an emotional stasis where he is psychologically displaced into a perpetual psychic inhabitation of the past. Unlike Ezekiel, I posit that the effect of his cousin’s death, which may at times be

abject, enables a transformation in James because he has access to the truth. It is significant that James' mourning of Horace is partly articulated through his concern over the continued viability of the black leader role. Instead of questioning the archetype itself, he worries over its perpetuity. James' fidelity to this social construct I read as another example of the past's desire to reproduce itself in spite of probable destructive consequences. However, James' position is nuanced and Horace's death does impact him as a minister. This transformation is witnessed in his visit to Margurette Honeyblue. Here James chides neither Margurette nor Viola for drinking beer during his visit, even though the latter expects him. Instead, James' thinks that he does not want to be the kind of condemning pastor with which they are familiar but he wants to reorient Christianity to a way of caring for people and not as "a watchdog of sin" (110). However, James never articulates his more generous approach and allows them to think that they are inviting him to rebuke them. His silence is a limitation on his change because it is not immediately perceptible to community members, as the above scene makes apparent. While I agree with McRuer that James' change has implications for the larger Tims Creek community given that James is the head of two community institutions, the church and elementary school, its real impact is psychological and ideological. James' transformation is also a result of his acute self-awareness of his having failed Horace. Horace revealed to him the limits of his ministry, and this is why he recalibrates his religious ideological stance. Despite this adjustment, James still operates within the basic tenets of Southern Baptist religious doctrine, as is seen in his modified position on Horace's sexuality. As I mentioned previously, James warns Horace about the seriousness of his gay sexual orientation. After Horace's death, on the other hand, James

describes his cousin's queer sexuality as "a simple, normal deviation" (188). James' use of descriptors such as simple and normal, in particular, normalizes queer sexuality as part of the heterogeneity that exists within the black community. His revised position is an important change because it displays the imprint of Horace's death upon him. His realignment is owed to James having witnessed Horace's suicide. It is fitting that James is the only observer because he is the one family member whom Horace has confided in, and in killing himself in front of James, Horace dramatizes the inefficacy of James' earlier advice. Thus what enables James' experience of abjection and consequent revision is that, unlike Ezekiel to whom Horace is unfamiliar, Horace, according to Lindsey Tucker, is not foreign enough to James. His experience of abjection is the result of intimate familiarity with Horace's struggles with his sexuality. Due to Horace's dominance of the other narrative threads, I suggest that as an abject presence, his specter troubles a trenchant Western principle that the dead do not come back alive. I read him as a revenant that can be understood similarly to Holland's reading of *Beloved*. Holland posits that Morrison's novel is about an infanticide that will not remain in the past. Its haunting of the present is so pronounced that "memory is jolted from its moorings in forgetfulness" (1). Although, Horace is dead, I suggest that the interweaving triptych narrative invites a collapsing of temporal boundaries so that Horace's last night can easily be read as simultaneously unfolding with the other two threads. The disclosure of Horace's death at the end when it, in fact, chronologically precedes the present of the novel also encourages a temporally displaced reading because it invites the reader to presume that Horace is still alive when the reader initially enters the novel. Thus, similar to *Beloved*, *Visitation's* narrative structure itself depicts the inability to forget due to a

profound haunting. The narrative portrays how the past can be maintained in the present through abjection.

Patriarchy Reconsidered

One of the myths from the past that pervades the present of *Visitation* is that of a redemptive patriarchy. If the manner by which this black community constitutes itself perverts homosexuality into abjection, it also polices gender in its maintenance of a patriarchal social structure. The novel both contains Ezekiel's investment in patriarchy as a tool for economic emancipation and illustrates a critique of the limitations of patriarchy, which are the inability to inaugurate truly emancipatory social arrangements within an intact black community. Patriarchy in the novel is not only necessarily homophobic and sexist but it demands the occlusion of some female characters and generates an anxious resentment towards others.

Much of the apparent sexism is witnessed in how the female Crosses are mediated through the male Crosses and an un-gendered limited omniscient narrator whom I read as male. For instance, Ezekiel claims to know that Aretha is happy when they receive Horace from Samuel because "it had been so long since she had a child to touch, to hold, to feed and diaper" (63). The unproblematic assumption that child-rearing is an integral component of female subjectivity is again witnessed in the omniscient narrator's account of Horace's three aunts immediate filling of the void left by his grandmother's death and James' comment that Jonnie Mae's possession of her grandchildren soothed her anger towards their mother, Rose, her daughter. I do not mean to suggest that a non-sexist female subjectivity necessitates a disavowal of motherhood, but instead to emphasize that the various male narrators of the novel can only imagine women's embrace of this

socially sanctioned role. They cannot legitimate other kinds of female subjectivity, as is seen in James' ambivalence towards his mother. Rose's relinquishing of this role disrupts the narrative that all women are happy to be mothers, and she is, therefore, invalidated. The attachment of women to motherhood is a means of control over female subjects and their choices. For instance, Rose's flouting of gendered social norms discloses that she is not successfully interpellated by her family and thereby beyond their constraints. This rigid gender economy undergirds the patriarchal privilege that both Ezekiel and James, to a lesser extent, are invested. One of the many ironies in this novel is that James' and Ezekiel's portrayal of women undermines the intents of their narration. Their rendering of the female Crosses discloses more about their anxieties towards women than it reveals about the female characters themselves. This is particularly apparent in Ezekiel's mythologizing of a redemptive patriarchy. It is significant that Ezekiel plots an unbroken male genealogy, which begins with his grandfather, Ezra; through his father, Thomas; himself; to his son, Samuel; and ends with his grandson, Horace. This is a family line where one generation of men begets the next generation of men; women are conspicuously absent. According to Tucker, this is not the only critical absence: the Crosses who allegedly bequeath land to Ezra, and therefore initiate the black Cross' socio-economic dominance in Tims Creek, are white. In order for Ezekiel to maintain the illusion of discrete racial categories and a black male Horatio Alger-like prosperity, he has to perform a contradiction in logic. He dismisses the above inheritance as an unsubstantiated rumor and also claims that the present Cross family prosperity is due to the black Cross men's tenacious productivity after the family lost most of the inherited land in the thirties. Even as he constructs this racial-gendered narrative, his anxiety over

Aretha's emotional state undercuts this sexist account of economic wellbeing. Ezekiel largely suspects that Aretha was not happy because of the amount of house- and fieldwork she performed as his 'helpmeet.' In his anxiety, therefore, Ezekiel unconsciously reveals that the Cross family prosperity is also owed to the hidden labor of their women.

The irony in this situation is that one anxiety destabilizes another to belie a positivist patriarchal reconstruction of the past. Such is also witnessed in Ezekiel's perception of his sister, Jonnie Mae, who is also dead in the present of the novel. From James' confessions, we are informed that Jonnie Mae, his grandmother, is a powerful authority figure in the Cross family. James admits that due to her determined spirit she kept the family together during the great migration north when other African American families splintered across the United States geographical landscape. In the novel, consequently, we have two spheres of influence, Ezekiel and Jonnie Mae, one alive and one dead. Her position disrupts the narrative of male power and influence that Ezekiel consciously constructs, even though he neither acknowledges nor discredits her authority. It is a pointed absence in his narration. The omissions in his narrative operate similarly to Ruth's accusation that Jethro, her husband and Ezekiel and Jonnie Mae's brother, is queer. It reveals that social relations are more variegated and nuanced than the patriarchal imperative will admit. Jonnie Mae's position questions whether patriarchal masculinity was ever as dominant as Ezekiel asserts and concedes a more complex and diverse socio-economic power structure within the Cross family. However, Ezekiel's capture by the discourse of patriarchal masculinity shapes his understanding of appropriate male-female interaction. As a result of his investment in patriarchal masculinity, Ezekiel is critical of

James' interaction with Ruth. He dislikes that James, by his perception, behaves similarly to a child towards Ruth. In contrast, according to Ezekiel, Samuel did not "cower to nobody" (55). What Ezekiel abhors here is his observation that James fails to fulfill the patriarchal masculine ideal, even to an older family member. Despite Ezekiel's dismissive assessment of James here, the latter also shares his uncle's patriarchal definition of masculinity although the nephew's ideological commitments are not as overt. James' anxiety over female subjects' authority is articulated through his misogynistic depictions of female family members. This is evident in his description of Jonnie Mae, which collapses her into the black matriarch myth, and he characterizes his grandmother as stolid three times throughout his confessions. Although one can argue that James' portrayal of Jonnie Mae as a matriarch acknowledges her dominion in the family, it also empties her of complexity and lacks emotional intimacy. The latter is a curious omission given that she raises James. It is a slighting assessment of his grandmother that is structured by his commitment to the patriarchal ideal and anxious about her influence even after her death. His ambiguous sexual orientation and depreciatory descriptions of the women in his family, Jonnie Mae, Rose, and Anne, are engendered by his commitment to a patriarchal black masculinity. Ultimately James and Ezekiel's ideological commitments cede bell hooks insight that patriarchal masculinity is premised on both sexism and homophobia. According to hooks, it is a destructive force in black life. This can be seen in Ezekiel's early infidelity in his marriage, which haunts him long after his wife's death, and James' sexual ambivalence. Patriarchal masculinity not only forecloses certain options for black subjects, but it also circumvents the creation and

sustenance of diverse and inclusive communities that enable productive inter-gender relations.

The Question of Periodization

Because *Visitation* critiques how the black community, principally the Cross family, delimits itself, Kenan's seminal novel might be read as possessing a radical suspicion of racially defined community. Given this preoccupation and the publication date of the novel, 1989, which is after the putative beginning of the postmodern period and at a time when African American fiction is perceived as no longer bearing the burden of racial representation, *A Visitation of Spirits* has been read by literary critics as postmodernist fiction.⁷ Furthermore, the inclusion of other literary genres within the novel, and the ambiguity concerning "reality and fantasy, . . . memory and hallucination" (Byerman 195), sanity and psychosis invite the reader to presume that this is not modernist literary fiction. However, the disregard for 'traditional' aesthetic, realist, and genre boundaries is not an indication that this novel should not be periodized as modernist.⁸ Disruptive aesthetic strategies are not necessarily or only the hallmark of postmodernism. Such strategies are really only indicative of formal complexity. Horace's use of sorcery and imagining of grotesque companions is a surrealistic manifestation of his tragic circumstances and the psychosis it engenders. The limited omniscient narrator resorts to the fantastic to a mode of mediation. This retreat from the real and rationality is not an avowal of aesthetic antirealism. It operates similarly to the scientific-realism language that the limited omniscient narrator suddenly shifts into to describe Horace's actual suicide: "This is a fact. The bullet did break the skin of his forehead, pierce the

⁷ The postmodern period is periodized as having begun by the beginning of the 1970s at the very latest.

⁸ I use 'traditional' here to mean the modernist conventions that postmodernism allegedly shatters.

cranium, slice through the cortex and cerebellum, irreparably bruising the cerebrum and medulla oblongata, and emerge from the back of the skull, all with a wet and lightning crack” (253). Recourse to both opposing aesthetic forms attempt to contain the shock of Horace’s circumstances and cause the reader to ask: ‘Is this real?’ ‘Is this occurring?’ This ambiguity is balanced against the apparent immediate access provided in the script-like portions of the narrative. McRuer reads these instances as evidence of James’ desire for emotional distance from psychologically charged memories because they all appear in his strand of the narrative. They also convey immediacy and lucidity to the reader in a manner that obfuscates Horace’s pain. These aesthetic devices enable the readability of the novel. Kenan’s recourse into ambiguity and genre iconoclasm as a narrative strategy seeks to mediate what is a difficult story to tell: a queer adolescent boy’s search for legitimacy and coherency within a hostile socio-familial environment. The communal structure of a singular black community is interrogated not so much as part of a retreat from blackness and disavowal of racial representation but to understand the constitution of black national communities when internal heterogeneity in the form of sexuality is made apparent. Conversely, this depiction does not so much make claims for racial representation as it is attuned to understanding how claims for racial representation project homogeneity and occlude the very diversity of black communities in ways that are destructive for individual black subjects. Consequently, the narrative space is anxious about the coherence of queer male subjectivity since queer sexuality would be coded as deviant in such an environment. This anxiety over coherency is a truly modernist preoccupation.

Due to this concern, *A Visitation of Spirits* attends to universal claims on what constitutes an authentic black subject and broad presumptions on how a community self-identifies as it both adapts to and resists socio-economic changes that are engendered by advanced capitalism. The return to the south as it experiences the transformations brought about by the Civil Rights Movement and the loss of regional specificity with increased capitalist penetration dramatizes the increased stakes of maintaining an intact black community. This in turn exerts greater pressure on the figures the community identifies as its leaders to conform to social convention, even if these normative prescriptives are outmoded. It is in such an environment that Horace finds himself. It is also in such an environment that Horace's sexuality is pathologized and made invisible. The obfuscation of queer sexuality reveals how the black community polices and determines intra-group behavior, as *A Visitation of Spirits* portrays. Such a construction goes beyond occluding queer sexuality to making invisible the queer subject, which Lester exemplifies. This dynamic, according to Holland, means that the queer subject can only speak when s/he is dead and, consequently, always inhabits the imaginary space of death. Holland further explains that the black queer subject speaking from the site of death forces the black community to reconsider how the community self-defines. In some ways, Kenan's novel dramatizes Holland's conclusion. The reader only has access to Horace after he is dead because the temporality of *A Visitation of Spirits* is almost two years after his suicide and his destruction of his autobiography complicates this limited admittance. And James, as a community leader, as mentioned earlier, recalibrates his religious-ideological stance on normalized compulsory heterosexuality, which has implications for the larger black community of Tims Creek. However, Holland's reading depends upon the

disempowerment, silencing, and marginalization of queer characters for the transformation of their communities, which reinscribes their invalidation. The portrayal in Kenan's novel discloses that this is a tenuous way to affect change. If James is a critical sign of change, then Ezekiel is an equally significant arbiter of stasis.⁹ Perhaps what Holland overlooks is that the queer character does not participate in reforming his/her community if its reformation is dependent on his/her death. Thus, we do not get a positive politics for transforming oppressive communal structures and one that is truly hospitable for queer subjectivity. Instead, we are left with the anxiety over the subject-location of the queer black male figure in late-twentieth-century United States.

The representation of a radical black female subject in *Sula* also portrays anxiety over another other-ed subject-location. Similar to the depiction in *A Visitation of Spirits*, this illustration is acutely aware of how communal coherence and integrity is dependent upon the exclusion of certain othered subjects.

⁹ In "Let the Dead Bury Their Dead," Ezekiel outlives James. This short-story is found in *Let the Dead Bury Their Dead and Other Stories*.

PART II

Against Patriarchy: Radical Black Female Subjectivity

CHAPTER 3

Sula

Dangerous Endeavors: Fashioning the Black Female Subject in Contemporary America

“I don’t want to make somebody else. I want to make myself.”
-- Toni Morrison, *Sula*

Sula (1973), Toni Morrison’s conceptually experimental second novel, explores the conditions of possibility for full self- and sexual expression for working-class black female subjects in the post-Civil Rights moment. My reading is informed by the framework of intersectionality and approaches the portrayal of Sula, the protagonist, as advancing a multidimensional interrogation along the axes of race, gender, class, and sexuality. I argue that her depiction critiques both a coherent black community and an entrenched racist socio-economic structure that only legitimates particular scripts for black female subjectivity – overworked, married/un-married with children, and cheated on and/abandoned by husband/romantic partner. It explores how these normative codes place strictures upon working-class black female subjects and foreclose their development. Sula disaffiliates from these narratives of racialized gender norms in her quest for self-integrity and self-expression. Her stance positions her outside of the gendered conventions of her community as a radical character. Given her unorthodoxy, I interpret Sula as an un-actualized female blues singer of the classic blues era due to her choices and the resonances in the novel. Reading her as such a figure accounts for how race, class, gender, and sexuality inform each other as well as Sula’s disavowal of their multiple circumscriptions. Despite this project the narrative contains a desire for an intact

black community. This contradiction manifests itself in the reversal of a commitment to the negotiation of working-class black female self-integrity and the collapse of this project, as is seen in the unfolding of Sula and Ajax's relationship and Sula's death by the close of the narrative. The more conservative impulse, the longing for a coherent community, trumps the radical new black femininity portrayed. Thus, my argument builds upon and departs from understanding *Sula* as a novel that largely focuses on the gendered and sexual as opposed to the racial foreclosures that accrue to working-class black female subjects as well as Madhu Dubey's insightful reading of *Sula* as a refusal to resolve the oppositional encounter between black feminism and black nationalism. Morrison's second novel forwards an encompassing intersecting examination of race, gender, sexuality, and class that interrogates the location of working-class black female subjects in the post-Civil Rights and -Black Power period as is seen in its portrayal of a non-normative individual. It is a literary experiment, though necessary, that is not fully actualized by the close of the narrative.

Sula, the Blues Woman

Sula's divorce from communal orthodoxy is apparent in her uncompromising exercise of personal and sexual freedom, which is reminiscent of early twentieth-century female blues singers who sang openly about their sexuality and sexual relations. Like them, Sula generates her unconventional identity from difficult socio-economic conditions that are overdetermined by racism and sexism yet premised upon autonomous sexual desire. Artists, such as Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, Ida Cox, and Billie Holiday engage in their music the reality of the working-class black lived experience. They sang about women who are self-sufficient, creative, exert their sexuality in non-

exploitative ways, spurn the sexual exclusivity of marriage, and challenge received presumptions of women's subordination to men. Thus, the female persona summoned in their music is independent and divorced from prevailing orthodoxy. The women singers themselves, like the subjects of their music, also defied gendered norms, for instance, they traveled freely in an era when women's mobility was restricted. Their lives were at variance with the established criterion for femininity including middle-class black female sexuality, which displaced female desire with female duty to uplift the race.¹ Blues women provide early examples of black female independence that originate within the working-class.² This attitude is similar to Sula's self-creation, as is seen in her mobility and assertion of herself as a desiring subject. The latter manifests itself in Sula's disregard for the socially sanctioned gendered sexual position of passive female sexuality. Deborah McDowell correctly observes in "Boundaries: Distant Relations or Close Kin" that Sula "assumes responsibility for her own pleasure" (63). This stance is witnessed in her first sexual encounter with Ajax: "she stood wide-legged against the wall and pulled from his track-lean hips all the pleasure her thighs could hold" (125). This scene reveals Sula's agency and enjoyment of physical intimacy and, as McDowell remarks, that her pleasure is untethered from normative conceptions of appropriate female sexuality. In other words, her sexuality is not harnessed to a man or acted out within institutions that seek to authorize sexuality for women. Perhaps what is most startling for readers about this unmooring is the solipsistic nature of sexual intimacy for Sula. It does not engender emotional closeness with the male participant; rather, sexual intimacy is an avenue through which Sula becomes more familiar with herself. Her self-

¹ See Carby, "It Jus Be's Day Way Sometime: The Sexual Politics of Women's Blues."

² See Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday and Harrison, Black Pearls: Blues Queens of the 1920s*.

absorbed behavior recalls Paul Garon's observation that, "the blues is a self-centered music [and] highly personalized" (Garon 30). Despite the veracity of Garon's assessment, I suggest that Sula's individuality is better understood as emblematic of the classic blues tradition where "the [working-class] black woman [emerges] as a free standing person who articulates the intent and desire to break away from sexual and racial oppression" (Harrison 100). Reading Sula through this lens allows us to focus on her striving for independence from North Atlantic patriarchal scripts and its strictures for working-class black female subjects. This orientation understands Sula as a representation that attends to how race, gender, class, and sexuality overlap and compound each other to subordinate working-class black female subjects. My reading applies an intersectional framework, as developed by Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, which accounts for the intersecting positioning of women of color that leaves them vulnerable to "overlapping structures of subordination" (Crenshaw 114). It traces how various identity categories (such as, race and gender, which are the two axes that Crenshaw focuses on) intersect and uncovers that black women are made invisible when such categories are regarded as mutually exclusive. Her theory also addresses how the divergences of identity categories converge to create specific narratives for women of color. This conceptual apparatus enables a reading of Sula that is attentive to her divorce from scripts of black female subjectivity that are engendered by the interaction and compounding of multiple hierarchies, as can be seen from her assertion of herself as a desiring and sexual subject.

It is not only in the arena of sexuality that Sula is similar to classic female blues singers. The protagonist, like them, is an artist, even though Sula does not develop her potential. The narrator describes Sula as not participating in any formal artistic tradition

that can absorb and harness her ‘tremendous curiosity’ and ‘gift for metaphor.’ Sula prefers to channel her talent onto herself. Her self-creation, determined by whim and fancy, circumscribes her artistic promise. Spillers explains that this foreclosure is the consequence of Sula’s “ill-formed and ill-informed” (Spillers 296) choices. According to Spillers, Sula’s limitations are not owed to sexism and/or racism. While Spillers is historically accurate, her assessment partially understands Sula’s depiction. During the early twentieth-century, Collins and Davis explain that the prejudices of the nascent recording industry gave priority to women over men and the former were the first to record blues music. Morrison herself states in an interview: “if Sula had any sense she’d go somewhere and sing or get into show business” (McDowell 67). Sula, however, admits she does not possess any desire to work. She tells Nel that work “don’t’ do nothing for [her]” (142) and she would never work. Sula’s refusal to work also encompasses not employing her college education. It must be stated that a college degree for a working-class black female person does not necessarily promise socio-economic advancement due to racial segregation and its accompanying economic disfranchisement at this time in the United States. The narrative is also not concerned with Sula’s disuse of her education. It is more preoccupied with her underutilized artistic promise. Sula’s universal dismissal of work necessarily includes opportunities that allow her to live outside of the Bottom in more accepting communities, as Morrison’s comment intimates. To be accurate, Sula has lived in various large cities, Nashville, Detroit, New Orleans, among others. She claims that the homogeneity of the persons inhabiting these cities as well as the similar failings of romantic love led her to return home to rekindle her friendship with Nel. Because she thinks about locations in terms of her dissatisfaction

with “the clichés of other people’s lives” (127) Sula does not or rather cannot consider the opportunities for a more expansive life that a bigger city with an established artistic culture provides for someone like her. Consequently, Spillers is astute in recognizing that what curtails Sula here is her own imaginative failings. Nevertheless, I suggest that in addition to Spillers’ reading that the abandonment of employment can also be read as Sula’s repudiation of “de nigger woman is de mule uh de world” archetype (Hurston 16). One reading of Sula’s decision is to see it as her disinclination to be exploited and perceived as what Patricia Hill Collins terms a dehumanized object, given that exploitation of women in her racial-class bracket is typical.³ (Although I recognize that Sula’s class position is more nuanced because her education places her in a different socio-economic bracket than the other women of the Bottom and the choice to not work is only available as a result of Eva’s finances, Sula is initially working-class and identifies with this class bracket. This is why I read her as a working-class subject.) My reading insists upon addressing race, gender, sexuality, and class at once to understand how they inform working-class black female subjects. This contextualizes Sula’s choices within a larger narrative of early-twentieth-century race, class, and gender codes. Ergo, I disagree with Spillers who argues that the novel focuses on the sexual as opposed to the racial foreclosures that accrue to working-class black female subjectivity.⁴ *Sula* offers an intersecting critique of race, class, gender, and sexuality that is better unveiled once Sula is situated historically, as my recourse to a blues narrative accomplishes. Her lack of gainful employment, therefore, can be interpreted as an act of resistance to prevailing scripts, even if it wastes Sula’s artistry.

³ See Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*. Collins explains that working-class black women’s work patterns have been historically exploitative.

⁴ This is true of much criticism on the novel.

The Bottom had been a real place

To fully appreciate the kind of choices or lack thereof available to Sula, an examination of the environment in which such a subject is located is necessitated. In the final chapter of *Sula*, Nel nostalgically concludes that the Bottom was a place during her youth. From her reminiscence, it is apparent that the Bottom's value for Nel lies in its racial, cultural, and economic homogeneity, which is only possible when working-class black subjects live exclusively on the hill. She informs us of the socio-economic transformations that take place from 1941 – 1965, which result in the migration of young African Americans from the Bottom to the valley and white subjects' counter migration from Medallion to the hills.⁵ These opposing movements not only disperse the working-class black community but also incur the destruction of the Bottom to make room for the Medallion City Golf Course. Such a metamorphosis Nel codes as negative because now "there aren't any places left, just separate houses with separate televisions and separate telephones and less and less dropping by" (166). Nel mourns the disintegration of the black community as a discrete racial entity with distinct cultural mores, which can be distinguished from the white community's. Thus, the Bottom, as we ascertain through Nel, functions as a repository of African American culture as a number of critics have noted.⁶ For instance, according to Nel, "white people didn't fret about putting their old ones away. It took a lot for black people to let them go, and even if somebody was old and alone, others did the dropping by, the floor washing, the cooking" (164). The distinguishing aspects of black culture for Nel are its communal spirit and the

⁵ Both Lawrence Hogue and Maureen T. Reddy argue that from 1941 – 1965 black communities made significant socio-economic gains. The choice of these dates as titles for the final two chapters aims to bring this development into focus.

⁶ See Houston Baker, Elliot Butler-Evans, Robert Grant, and Susan Willis.

accompanying intimacy, which the above makes apparent. Her reaction records the dissolution of such a tight-knit environment. This loss Nel reads as part of a generational change where according to her, black people with ‘a new look,’ that is, young African Americans, have abandoned ‘the poor, the old, and the stubborn,’ who still live in the Bottom despite encroaching gentrification.

Thus, Nel also documents the socio-economic ‘advancement’ that the next generation achieves. This can be seen when she mentions that now, in 1965, young people work behind the counters in the stores downtown and some even wear cash register keys around their necks.⁷ Despite this apparent socio-economic advancement, Nel compares young African American subjects to the Deweys: “The young people had a look about them that everybody said was new but which reminded Nel of the deweys” (163).⁸ It is important to remember that earlier in *Sula*, the narrator informs us that the Deweys remain “boys in mind. Mischievous, cunning, private and completely unhousebroken, their games and interests had not changed since Hannah had them all put into the first grade together” (85). The Deweys, as this description intimates, are suspended developmentally. Nel’s connotatively negative analogy, therefore, suggests she views these mid-twentieth-century socio-economic changes as not benign. Despite her disparagement of these material shifts, Nel’s analogy implies that some continuity exists, albeit unintentionally. The narrator describes the Deweys as difficult to differentiate among, even though they are all physically distinct and a “trinity with a

⁷ In “A ‘Headless Display’: *Sula*, Soldiers, and Lynching,” Chuck Jackson reads the cash register keys around the necks of black workers as a lynching metaphor of the postmodern moment. It symbolises access to capital, exchange, and public space. But it also warns that those who wear the key are still under the weight of white terror.

⁸ The socio-economic advancement that Nel notes is the result of the Civil Rights movement and desegregation.

plural name . . . loving nothing and no one but themselves” (38). Their characterization reveals their collective nature and self-absorption. This description is arresting in light of Nel’s analogy. It connotes that African Americans are still perceived in the plural. My reading differs from Dubey’s who writes it would be over-reading to read this “brief, incidental,” and “puzzling” (*Black Women Novelists* 61) comparison as suggesting the ‘new’ generation of African Americans, similar to the Deweys, are committed to a plural, collective identity. In response, I reference two aspects of *Sula* commented upon by Hortense Spillers: it is a spare novel and Morrison’s “prose glides over the surface of events” (Spillers 313). The economy of words that these two characteristics produce prove that ‘brief,’ ‘incidental,’ and ‘puzzling’ comments perform considerable work and should be paused over because their full intent is not immediately apparent. Nel’s analogy introduces both a correspondence and divergence that intimates the manner in which the ‘new’ generation of African Americans function as opposed to previous generations. African Americans still are not individuated but the difference now is a lack of community and a novel concern for the self. These changes, which accompany the modified socio-economic status of African Americans, cause Nel to question this putative advancement. Along with her reservation, 1965, the concluding chapter title, is the year of both Malcolm X’s assassination and the Watts Riots in Southern California (Reddy 43). Thus, Nel’s parallelism and the final chapter title reveal what Lawrence Hogue, in his reading of *Sula*, describes as the suspended social status of African Americans. According to Hogue, this liminal position is due to the nominal freedom engendered by the socio-economic changes that accompany the Civil Rights Movement. Consequently, the narrative appears to accord some weight to Nel’s ambivalent determination that

“Things were so much better in 1965. Or so it seemed” (163). Undergirding her stance is a preference for the racial-cultural consistency of the Bottom of her youth. Her partiality returns us to the frame story at the opening of the narrative where this singularity is first established.

Sula opens with a frame that is, as Sara Blackburn notes, stylized in form. The novel begins: “In that place, where they tore the nightshade and blackberry patches . . . there once was a neighborhood” (3). Such a depiction not only portrays the past as remote, but also creates distance to contain the racial displacement with which the novel opens. It mediates the deception the Bottom is founded on, which the narrator tells us is referred to as a ‘nigger joke.’ Pin-Chia Feng perceptively notes that this joke transforms the conventional Western fairytale formula in which the hero wins a just reward for executing an impossible task because the enslaved African American is cheated of his rightful compensation. Dubey persuasively explains that the joke locates the Bottom in a distant and inaccessible past in its identifying the founding of this neighborhood during the era of United States racial-economic slavery. In mapping such a long history, I argue that the narrative also situates the current socio-economic dispossession of contemporary working-class black subjects within a larger context of historic racial and economic inequality. Through this frame, the novel introduces us to the entrenched racism that not only engenders the Bottom during racial-economic slavery, but also continues to delimit the community into the contemporary moment until it eventually seeks to dismantle the neighborhood. This is seen in the generous economic resources channeled towards the hills to oversee the gentrification of the Bottom, accommodate the Medallion golf course, and the necessary accompanying infrastructure, such as roads, which are not accorded to

the initial working-class black residents of the Bottom during their tenure on the hills. The frame overtly situates the residents of the Bottom as demographically historically working-poor. In so doing, *Sula* participates in what Hazel Carby identifies as fictional representations that are dominated by southern folk “emerging from and still influenced by the slave condition” (Carby 126). Although the novel is based in Medallion, Ohio, the Midwest, in agreement with Susan Willis, I read the physical landscape of the Bottom as rural: it is land that is originally used for farming by the black residents and described as initially populated with blackberry patches, shady beeches, oaks, and maples. This description collapses the distinction between the urban north and the rural south to emphasize the past-ness and provincial nature of the Bottom. To further underscore the Bottom’s static arcadian character, the narrator discloses both the increasing urbanization of Medallion and that contemporary white hunters negatively compare urbanized Medallion to the wonderful views and heavy shade of the rustic poverty of the Bottom. Such a portrayal, thereby, deploys the southern folk aesthetic, which Madhu Dubey defines as a literary trope within late twentieth-century African American fiction that posits an organic racially segregated rural poor southern folk community that operates as a residual temporal space, that is, “an imaginary elsewhere to postmodern urban existence” (*Signs and Cities* 144). This affiliation is clearly advanced in the opening, as can be seen in the description of residents of the Bottom:

[A] *dark woman* . . . her bare feet would raise the saffron dust that floated down on the coveralls and bunion-split shoes of the man breathing music in and out of his harmonica. *The black people* watching her would laugh and rub their knees, and it would be easy for the valley man to hear the laughter and not notice the adult pain that rested somewhere under the eyelids, somewhere under their head rags and soft felt hats, somewhere in the palm of the hand, somewhere behind the frayed lapels . . . (Emphasis mine). (4)

Such an account conveys the poverty of the working-class black population under segregated conditions and the cultural survival mechanisms they have constructed in the Bottom to endure racial and economic dispossession. This depiction, similar to the functioning of the opening of the frame, tempers the harshness of such entrenched indigence by disclosing it through the eyes of a generic white valley man on business in the Bottom, who observes black subjects during a moment of necessary respite. These mediating techniques allow the displacement of black subjects and the collapse of the Bottom to initially appear less traumatic upon black subjects. It also discloses that black subjects are not individuated (even though the primary characters of *Sula* are distinctive). Of course, the portrayal of homogeneity is dependent on reading the community as not having any intra-racial class differences.

The portrayal of homogeneity is significant and persists throughout the novel. In the frame it is significant that the narrator does not distinguish among black subjects within the community for which the term, ‘the black people’ and ‘a dark woman’ (above) are shorthand. This lack of differentiation, except the specific naming of Sula and Shadrack (the only two characters accorded proper nouns), suggests that working-class black subjects be read as a collective category (and Sula and Shadrack, as their being named implies, are positioned outside this aggregate). My reading departs from what Toni Morrison asserts in an interview with Robert Stepto. During this conversation, Morrison explains she wanted to make the community as strong a character as possible without it becoming “The Town, they” (Stepto 378) because of the diversity of persons and behavior that exist within the black community. Instead, I advance that the generic descriptors unravel her stated intention and collapse working-class black subjects into

one another. The community does function as ‘The Town, they.’ This is apparent, as early as the frame, which can be seen in the shared/collective thinking attributed to the working-class African American community:

The black people would have disagreed, but *they* had no time to think about it. *They* were mightily preoccupied with earthly things – and each other, wondering even as early as 1920 what Shadrack was all about, what that little girl Sula who grew into a woman in their town was all about, and what *they themselves* were all about, tucked up there in the Bottom (emphasis mine). (6)

This discloses the insularity of life on the hills and that the residents of the Bottom are subject to the homogenizing impulses of living within a uniform racial and class community. As a result, I suggest that the black community of the Bottom is the first character the novel introduces to the reader and this primary placement already intimates how the working-class black community in *Sula* functions: as a single regulating force. (Butler-Evans argues that the ‘nigger joke’ gives the town a personal history, which is a metaphor for entrenched black and white relations. His reading is in line with my argument.) Its equiform character materializes further throughout *Sula*, as can be seen at Chicken Little’s funeral. In this scene, the narrator informs us that,

The hands of *the women* unfolded like pairs of raven wing’s and flew high above their hats in the air. *They* did not hear all of what he said; *they* heard the one word, or praise, or inflection that was for *them* the connection between the event and *themselves*. For some it was the term “Sweet Jesus.” And *they* saw the Lamb’s eye and the truly innocent victim: *themselves*. *They* acknowledged the innocent child hiding in the corner of *their* hearts . . . Or *they* thought of *their son* newly killed and remembered his legs in short pants . . . Or *they* remembered how dirty the room looked when *their father* left home . . . and feel the oldest and most devastating pain there is: not the pain of childhood but the remembrance of it. (Emphasis mine) (65)

I quote this passage at length to unveil what undergirds the homogenetic impulse of the Bottom: black subjects’ synonymous experience of racism with its attendant poverty and emotional agony. Their lives, according to the excerpt above, unfold analogously, which

allows working-class black subjects to identify with one another and in a like manner. In contrast, Philip Novak reads the women's response to Chicken Little's death in "Circles and Circles of Sorrow" as an over-identification with Little's passing. The young boy's pre-mature death, Novak explicates, is appropriated and the women instead mourn their own demise. However, I maintain, black subjects' commensurate lived experiences enable this 'over-identification' with one another and makes possible the appropriation of which Novak is critical. These women have suffered their fathers' abandonment, the pre-mature death of a son, and the too early limitations of living within a racist country. Their shared experiences license their closeness. And this is what begins to change from 1941 to 1965. I do not mean to obfuscate the differentiations, class, color, and religion that prevail among the black residents before the 1940s. For instance, the narrative describes the color variations within the black community: Nel as the color of wet sandpaper and Sula as a heavy brown are two cases in point. The reader is subtly informed of the nascent class stratification within the Bottom, which is evidenced by Sula's family possessing the financial wherewithal to pay for Sula to attend college as opposed to the other residents of the Bottom who cannot afford this expense. And the religious heterogeneity of which Ajax's mother as an occult practitioner among a largely Christian community is further indication. However, these differences are largely viewed as anomalies because most of the inhabitants of the Bottom are darker skinned, poor, and Christian, which allows their intra-group differences to be ignored by Nel and other residents of the Bottom. Through Nel's closing observations, the narrative uncovers that the economic differentiation mentioned above that preexisted the Civil Rights era become more pronounced afterwards, as can be seen when she reveals that "everybody who had

made money during the war moved as close as they could to the valley” (165). Increasing socio-economic diversity attenuate both the assumed racial and cultural homogeneity of working-class black subjects and their community, a solidarity that the narrative traces to racial-economic slavery, as I mentioned previously. In privileging such a mapping of history, as the opening frame introduces and is advanced throughout the novel, racial and cultural unity, as Dubey perspicaciously remarks, is founded on the foreclosure of material opportunities for African Americans. It also, I assert, implicitly delegitimizes heterogeneity to validate a coherent African American community.

Due to its construction as a unified racial and cultural body politic, I read the Bottom as a black cultural national community. Madhu Dubey advances a similar reading in *Black Women Novelists and the Nationalist Aesthetic*. Dubey argues that *Sula* contains both black nationalist and feminist discourses, which serve to critique each other.⁹ Black nationalist discourse, Dubey asserts, consolidates around the sign of race and offers a unitary conception of the lived experience of black subjects under such prescriptives as the black experience. The feminist implications, in contrast, disrupt the gendered and sexual constraints of black nationalism to produce a profound ambivalence in the novel

⁹ The 1970s black cultural nationalist discourse, according to Dubey, was both an enabling and limiting paradigm for black women’s fiction of the time period. Liberating in the sense that blackness is no longer defined as absence; instead, it is now fully present due to the cogent sense of cultural unity and independence promoted. However, this address is limiting in its construction of black female subjectivity: in its anxiety over the alleged black matriarch and black femininity in general, black cultural nationalist discourse subscribed to the gendered economy of white middle-class familial ideology. Black cultural nationalism, consequently, both recuperated and repudiated American social norms, that is, even though it privileged community over American individualism, its articulations of community are founded on the patriarchal imperative. Thus, black women’s fiction, written by Morrison, Gayl Jones, and Alice Walker, among others, of the 1970s, of which *Sula* is an example, challenge this monolithic construction of racial community and critique black cultural nationalist discourse along the axes of gender and sexuality to destabilize absolutist constructions of blackness and femininity. In a more recent critical engagement of the Black Power period, Rolland Murray in *Our Living Manhood* suggests a more nuanced understanding of how masculinity was deployed at that time. He insists that Black Power ideology should no longer be understood as a coherent totality against which black feminism defined itself because masculinity itself was simultaneously employed and contested by key actors within the movement, such as Clarence Major and John Oliver Killens, for instance.

that at once unbalances and reproduces black nationalist hierarchical gender norms. For instance, she interprets Sula's rejection of motherhood as a radical disavowal of her mother, which repeats black nationalist construction of a new identity in opposition to the mother and is a feminist assertion of self outside the parameters of reproduction. She reads these two competing impulses as unresolved contradictions that can be traced on the level of content and form.¹⁰ While I forward an analogous reading to Dubey's, I part ways with her argument because I interpret the evolution of Sula's relationship with Ajax, her premature death, and the novel closing with Nel's nostalgia for the Bottom as the *default* trumping of a black national community over the black feminist critique. I do agree that these two preoccupations are not resolved at the end of Morrison's text. However, Sula's death, unlike Horace's in *A Visitation of Spirits*, which serves as an indictment of a similar communal formation, acts to privilege the very conservatism and presumed homogeneity of the black community.

Sula challenges the monolithic construction of community through its portrayal of a non-conformist female protagonist and her relationship to such an entity. This interrogation, as Robert Grant perceives, suggests that a homogenous black community is not always an unconditional good for all black subjects, which he explains is a radical feminist proposal that is a departure from the African American literary tradition at the time of *Sula*'s publication. Barbara Christian further advances that the critique of community focuses on the subversion and rare actualization of the desires of black women. Christian situates her insight within Morrison's early work to contend that Morrison's corpus inquires into the deadly limitations levied on black women by their

¹⁰ Dubey reads the circular construction of the novel as a dialectic of absences and presences where information about an earlier event is disclosed later in the novel and by different narrators.

society. In agreement with these critics, I argue that *Sula* harbors a critique of the manner in which such a community polices female subjects within its boundaries and its homogenizing influences seek to foreclose transgressive black female sexuality. Given this preoccupation, a number of critics have commented that *Sula* focuses on the sexual rather than the racial strictures imposed on black female subjects. Feng reads these strictures as the community's imperative for racial survival, which Sula rejects. C. Lynn Munro describes Sula's disavowal as Morrison's protagonist's assumption of the right to structure her life independent of her culture's moral constraints and to engage in sexual liaisons with whomever she selects. The allegation that Sula is sexually intimate with white men can be viewed as the Bottom's perception of Munro's insight. Sula's community's reaction to this accusation prove their unwillingness to allow a female subject to assert control over her sexuality:

But it was the men who gave her the final label, who fingerprinted her for all time. They were the ones who found her guilty of the unforgiveable thing . . . they said that Sula slept with white men. . . . Everyone of them imagined the scene . . . Sula underneath some white man – and it filled them with choking disgust. There was nothing lower she could do, nothing filthier. The fact that their own skin color was proof it had happened in their own families was no deterrent to their bile. Nor was the willingness of black men to lie in the beds of white women a consideration that might lead them toward tolerance. They insisted that all unions between white men and black women be rape; for a black woman to be willing was literally unthinkable. (113)

Significantly, black male subjects possess the power to determine Sula's pariah status, which suggests their relative position of superiority over black female subjects, even as both are disfranchised subjects within the larger society. Their disparagement of Sula turns on her alleged sexual relations with white men and not her promiscuity. This censure implies that black male subjects of the Bottom do not universally denigrate sexually profligate women, as their protection of Hannah from their wives and female

partners reveals. Equally significant, it is a moral code that black female subjects validate; that is, once black male subjects ignobly anoint Sula, the entire community, in deference, proceeds to vilify her. And this is when Sula attains the status of an evil woman the community must protect itself against: neighbors lay broomsticks across their doors at night and sprinkle salt on their porch steps. According to Christian in “Community and Nature: the Novels of Toni Morrison,” her being coded as evil is a result of Sula not conforming to any of the available legitimate roles for women, mother, loose woman, or lady-wife. In *Black Women Novelists*, Christian further explains that the Bottom’s apparent forbearance of these different types of women, as is seen in their acceptance of Eva, Hannah, and Helene, is both generous and restrictive. The community, Christian posits, can absorb Eva, Hannah, and Helene’s behavior into its collective unconscious because it is within the prevailing norm. In contrast, the Bottom cannot assimilate Sula’s behavior because it exists outside of conventional customs. Like Christian, I interpret Sula acquiring an unnatural status as the community’s punishment for her expressed difference. The narrator acknowledges as much when it states: “their evidence against Sula was contrived, but their conclusions about her were not. Sula was distinctly different” (118). This ‘difference’ is not the allegation that Sula is sexually intimate with white men, which is code for her determination to “have it all” (142) and “do everything” (143), even though she is “a woman and colored” (142). It is her refusal to admit to the Bottom’s definition of woman that is undergirded by her indomitable will.

As a result of her tenacious unfettered will, Sula is perceived as transgressing a constituting social prohibition, miscegenation, which unleashes the neighborhood’s full reproach and wrath towards her as the narrator informs us: “they[, black men,] regarded

integration with precisely the same venom that white people did” (113). Their response, shaped by the history of American racial-economic slavery, aggressively polices black women’s sexual and relational options. To appreciate the full import of Sula’s infraction for them, her conduct must be contextualized with their reactions to her previous socially transgressive behavior. When Sula places Eva in Sunnydale and has an affair with Jude (her best friend’s husband), which results in his abandonment of his wife and young children, these actions only warrant her being labeled a ‘roach’ and a ‘bitch,’ respectively, by the wider community. This conduct may be disliked, as black subjects’ responses indicate, but it does not mark the boundary for what is socially permissible behavior for a black female subject, as is a black woman being sexually intimate with a white man. However, this social interdiction, black-white sexual intimacy, is gendered and does not apply to black men engaging in sexual relations with white women. The Bottom possesses a gendered racial double standard, and its sexism polices women’s behavior as well as limits their sexual options, even as it does not impose similar restrictions on its black male subjects. Sula’s actions, consequently, as Feng correctly states, are offensive both racially and sexually. This is not the only gendered sexual standard that Sula disregards. In continued defiance of the Bottom’s gendered sexual norms, Sula engagement of black men in brief sexual liaisons overturns received gender roles:

And the fury she created in the women of the town was incredible – for she would lay with their husbands once and then no more. Hannah had been a nuisance, but she was complimenting the women, in a way, by wanting their husbands. Sula was trying them out and discarding them without any excuse the men could swallow. (115)

Sula does not inhabit the socially sanctioned gendered sexual position as a black female subject. Morrison's titular character, bell hooks astutely observes, dismisses traditional conceptions of passive female sexuality and affirms herself as a desiring subject. Her ready discard of men, hooks explains, uncovers Sula's disinclination to participate in the conventional patriarchal protocols of the exchange of female bodies; instead, Sula initiates the interchange of male bodies in defiance of the law of the Phallus.¹¹ The protagonist is fully cognizant of subverting the orthodox transaction of bodies, as can be seen in her response to Nel's accusation that their friendship should have precluded Sula from 'taking him[, Jude, Nel's husband,] away' (145): "What do you mean take him away? I didn't kill him, I just fucked him. If we were such good friends, how come you couldn't get over it" (145)? Sula's query not only poses a challenge to female allegiance to heterosexuality over female homosocial bonds but also, equally substantial, seeks to unseat patriarchy's control over women's bodies and socialization. This is a truly radical question that bespeaks an utterly distinct gender economy, one that is premised on the horizontal exchange of male bodies. Her attitude is a departure from the typical gender arrangements, which, as Cedric Bryant states, restrict female autonomy, of which the adult Nel is the archetype. This can be seen when Nel acknowledges that since the dissolution of her marriage, she, Nel, has "pinned herself into a tiny life" (165) premised upon emptiness between her thighs and love like a hard sludge-like syrup. Such a 'tiny life' Sula refuses even though it will allow her to be embraced by the community. Both the Bottom's antagonistic relationship with Sula and its validation of Nel disclose its oppressive nature for all black female subjects and particularly those who do not

¹¹ Baker, Houston, Jr. *Workings of the Spirit*. Baker, grounded in Freud and Lacan, defines the Phallus as a signifier that establishes "male-dominant cultural discourse and mandates a division of physiologically differentiated children into two, unequal sexes" (146).

conform. In her heterodoxy, Sula exhibits a radical sexuality for an early twentieth-century working-class black female subject. By refusing to acquiesce to prescribed racialised gendered sexual roles, Sula evinces a commitment to her sexuality that unveils the challenge a coherent black nationalist community has in acknowledging, accommodating, and affirming working-class black female sexual desire in its heterogeneity. Her unorthodox sexuality is only indicative of a larger radical female subjectivity, which is first witnessed when Sula is still a child.

Woman-for-Self

Her unorthodoxy already manifests itself during adolescence. When we first encounter Sula at twelve years old she already possesses a budding radical consciousness, as can be seen from her role in the dream Sula shares with Nel: “[Sula] gallop[s] through her own mind on a grey and white horse tasting sugar and smelling roses” (52). Unlike Nel who attempts to occupy a normative female space in this fairytale-like dream, passive and waiting for a ‘fiery prince’ to arrive, Sula is an active agent. Barbara Smith reads Nel and Sula as performing complementary aspects within the same erotic-romantic fairytale and their relationship. Madhu Dubey, similarly to Smith, observes that this fairy tale is each girl’s first rendezvous with the other, and this imagined get-together is structured like the classic heterosexual, romantic encounter. Further, Dubey asserts that Nel and Sula’s occupation of the conventional female and male roles, respectively, expose their concealed desire for a feminine rather than a masculine lover. Both scholars posit that this fairytale reveals the subversive potential of Nel and Sula’s relationship, that is, their intense friendship. While I extend their critiques to examine how the fairytale itself is indicative of Sula’s burgeoning radical consciousness and the subversive nature of their

friendship (which I will return to later), I disagree that Nel and Sula's relationship is suffused with erotic-romantic tension, of which their imagined fairy tale is one example. For instance, Sula fantasizes that someone tastes the sugar along with her and Nel envisions that there is another person who watches along with her and is as interested in 'the flow of her hair.' Their fantasies reveal that while Nel desires both a lover and a friend, Sula specifically yearns for a friend who accommodates her unorthodox inclinations and conduct. This dream, therefore, discloses that, even at a young age, Sula does not act in a gender proper manner: even though she is not the male prince that Nel awaits, she appropriates behavior characteristically read as masculine in the typical Western romantic fairy tale setting: she is adventurous, that is, Sula gallops on a horse. Sula's behavior disrupts the gendered conventions of the 18th and 19th Century Western fairy tale. According to Jack Zipes, this particular type of literary genre's gendered norms are the males tend to be dashing, adventurous, and courageous, and the females are usually beautiful, passive, and industrious. Both genders, Zipes explains, know how to "take advantage of the rules of their society and the conventions of the fairy tale to profit. Very few of the Grimms' fairy tales end on an unhappy note, and they all comply with the phallocratic impulses and forces of the emerging middle-class societies of Western culture" (Zipes xxvi). Based on these literary protocols, it is obvious that neither Nel nor Sula truly inhabit the traditional female role. Sula's rejection of the representative female locus evinces an early awareness of the site's inapplicability for her as a working-class black female subject.

In contrast to Sula's perspicuity, what Nel does not recognize, but is already present in the latter's dream, is the impossibility in performing the princess posture for

someone of her class and race demographic. Her passivity will not be rewarded because the classic parameters of the Western fairytale cannot accommodate her subject position, as is seen in the fact that Nel's prince approaches but never arrives. This perpetual deferral suggests the more complicated nature of the ideal heterosexual union for working-class black female subjects who are interpellated by white middle-class gender and sexual norms. To attain companionship, therefore, these two working-class black female subjects have to imagine one another existent within the fantasy, which re-write the very terms of the traditional Western fairytale. Here, I agree with Dubey's assessment that the heterosexual union of prince and princess defers to an emphatic friendship where the delight of the fantasy can be shared. This is a truly radical gesture that suggests the nonconformist nature of their friendship. Nel, therefore, subconsciously displays a latent awareness that Sula embodies in the latter's un-categorical rejection of the female role in the Western romance. This is only one such example from Sula's childhood that indicates her nascent radical feminist consciousness. Another illustration of her unconventional nature is witnessed when she challenges four white boys who amuse themselves by harassing black children. To combat their aggression, Sula threatens these sons of Irish immigrants by slicing the tip of her left forefinger as well as menacingly announcing: "If I can do that to myself, what you suppose I'll do to you?" (55). In cutting the tip of her forefinger, she unwittingly introduces the threat of castration, the bleeding phallic-like finger on the slate, which is why the boys scatter. By tackling these boys, Sula temporarily erases both gender and race asymmetries that make it permissible for these white male teenagers to act aggressively towards her race, gender, and class position with full impunity. Sula's absolute disregard for her putative racial and gendered physical

disadvantage as one pre-teen black female opposed to four teenaged white males positions her as their equal. And her method of confrontation further collapses her gender difference because it identifies her with the male subject but does not evince any value for this identification: she shatters it by cutting off the tip of her finger, and the shock is unbearable for the boys.¹² While this effectively scares the boys away, as an adult, fifteen years later, Nel remembers Sula's behavior and describes it as excessive.¹³ I am not interested in the ethics and appropriateness of Sula's behavior; rather, my argument turns on her audacious and heretical predisposition and choice of action, as the above makes apparent. Even as an adolescent, Sula is not seduced by social norms and propriety. Thus, I am in agreement with Hortense Spillers and Robert Grant who argue that it is too deterministic to interpret Sula's defiance of orthodoxy as the result of overhearing Hannah, her mother, explain to friends: "I love Sula. I just don't like her" (57). Some of her childhood deeds, which precede Sula overhearing her mother, demonstrate that Sula already transgresses social norms and is not captured by a conventional moral compass.¹⁴ Morrison, therefore, has delineated a character who from adolescence already evinces a particularly renegade consciousness.

My recourse to Sula's childhood is to uncover and map what are the enabling conditions for Sula's disavowal of orthodoxy and cultural narratives of gender, especially since her heretical nature is displayed at such a young age. It does not seek to diminish

¹² Susan Willis has an analogous reading of this scene. In "Eruptions of Funk: Historicising Toni Morrison," Willis similarly argues that Sula's self-mutilation symbolizes castration and opposes white male domination of black women regardless of the price. In contrast Gillespie and Kubitschek contend that Sula's response is disproportionate to the threat. Her unbalanced reaction, according to Gillespie and Kubitschek, is due to her not having exposure to care-taking skills from her mother and grandmother.

¹³ My reading is similar to but more developed than the one Susan Willis advances in "Eruptions of Funk: Historicizing Toni Morrison."

¹⁴ Similar to my argument, Robert Grant contends that the effect of Hannah's comment clarifies Sula's independent nature, that is, it instructs her that, "there [is] no other that you could count on" (118).

the trauma of Sula overhearing Hannah. Instead, I suggest that the power of Hannah's expressed dislike of her daughter lies elsewhere, which departs from standard readings of *Sula*. The narrative informs us that upon hearing her mother, Sula becomes bewildered and has dark thoughts. Much criticism on the novel has drawn a transparent one-to-one correlation between Sula's apparently accidental drowning of Chicken Little and the former, as evidence of the impact of Hannah's comment on Sula's psyche.¹⁵ As further support for this reading, critics reference the narrator telling us that overhearing Hannah's remarks teaches Sula that she cannot rely on anyone and her alleged accidental drowning of Chicken Little instructs her there is no self on which she could depend. The narrative only fleetingly registers Sula's response to Chicken Little's drowning. The reader is solely privy to Sula and Nel's initial surprise that Chicken Little does not resurface laughing and Sula's fear that Shadrack witnesses the accident. Towards the close of the novel, Nel reveals her own pleasure at having viewed the occurrence after Eva accuses her of watching Sula throw Chicken Little into the river. In fact, as Samuels and Hudson-Weems observe, it is Nel who advises Sula to suppress the incident because they 'can't bring him back.' This early incident, like the dream she shares with Sula, betrays that Nel's girlhood consciousness is not as conventional as her later adult orientation.¹⁶ However, unlike Hannah's burning, which Sula informs us she was thrilled to watch and wanted Hannah to keep on jerking, the narrative does not return to Sula's reaction to the child's drowning other than to disclose Sula's supposed loss of faith in her self. Eva's

¹⁵ For instance, see Dubey, Feng, Fultz, Gillespie & Kubitschek, Reddy, and Samuels & Weems

¹⁶ In "Who Cares? Woman Centered Psychology in *Sula*," Diane Gillespie and Missy Dehn Kubitschek interpret Nel's response to Eva's accusation as a rupture of her self-image as the good woman. They argue that the conventional role does not nurture truthfulness. Remembering her participation in Chicken Little's death, according to Gillespie and Kubitschek, provides the psychic impetus necessary for Nel's self-recognition and acceptance.

imputation of both Nel and Sula towards the close of the novel imparts what neither Sula nor the narrative divulges: it connotes something more than a lack of premeditation but not quite it either. It suggests that as she spun Chicken Little around, Sula deliberately releases her hold of him. Eva's implication of Sula also remembers her observation of Sula watching Hannah burn: "Eva . . . remained convinced that Sula had watched Hannah burn not because she was paralyzed, but because she was interested" (78). This interested curiosity resurfaces again in her relationship with Ajax, as can be seen in her fascination with whether loam lies under the alabaster that is underneath the gold, which is beneath his black skin. After the dissolution of their relationship, Sula contemplates that "It's just as well he left. Soon I would have torn the flesh from his face just to see if I was right about the gold and nobody would have understood that kind of curiosity. They would have believed that I wanted to hurt him" (136). Sula's admission here of a proscribed curiosity supports Eva's previous assessment of her by casting a shadow back upon Chicken Little's death. Considering these occurrences together and how they illuminate her character, Sula's alleged loss of faith in her self is less her wonder over her having drowned a young boy and more as her recognition that she is capable of unintentional manslaughter out of curious interest. All of the above acts unmask a similar trait in her character: a consuming unorthodox curious interest, which the narrator terms Sula's 'tremendous curiosity.' And according to the narrator, her 'tremendous curiosity' and its lack of artistic engagement enables Sula's heretical inclinations. Consequently, I read Hannah's expressed dislike of her daughter not as a determining axis in Sula's life but more similar to Spillers' reading of it as a crucial disclosure that informs Sula's response to future events. It primarily serves to ensure her daughter's departure from the

moral/ethical constraints of the Bottom, a course that Sula has already embarked upon.

Her voiced dislike of Sula can be seen as an early response to what is already unorthodox in Sula and makes probable what already is possible given Sula's disposition.

Despite the significance of her personality, it is still important to account for Sula's familial environment in enabling her consciousness. Sula's family background is composed of women who have developed in non-traditional ways. Both Eva and Hannah initially marry and have children. Eva's husband, BoyBoy, deserts her after inflicting five years of infidelity, alcoholism, and abuse upon her, and Hannah's husband, Rekus, dies young. After BoyBoy abandons Eva with three young children during a particularly harsh winter, Eva leaves her children for eighteen months with Mrs. Suggs. When she returns, Eva is missing a leg, rewards Mrs. Suggs with ten dollars, and commences to build a house on Carpenter Road to her idiosyncratic whims. Eva, according to the narrator, is an uncompromising sovereign presence when she returns: she informally adopts three young boys of different ages and names them all Dewey, she is the only person who introduces the topic of her missing leg, and her demeanor is such that everyone imagines that s/he looks up to her despite Eva being shorter than everyone else when sitting in her wagon-wheelchair. Eva's most unconventional behavior when she reappears is her rejection of gender norms for herself. According to Dubey, she meets men on her own terms and does not harbor any inclination to endorse her male visitors' self-perceptions, which is witnessed in her repartee with them. But she makes men feel good in sparring with them. Though her 'manlove' is not physical, men feel it nonetheless. Hannah, in contrast, Dubey explicates, "challenges the possessive ethic of heterosexuality in her disregard for marital ties" (*Black Women Novelists* 53); that is, she flirts unaffectedly, is emotionally

undemanding, and is sexually promiscuous with the married men of the Bottom. Observing Hannah teaches Sula that “sex was pleasant and frequent, but otherwise unremarkable” (44), which is a departure from the conservative norms of the Bottom, where other children giggle about underwear. This household, therefore, is highly extraordinary in its gender and sexual protocols. Along with this unorthodoxy is the general functioning of Eva Peace’s home where the turnover of borders, dirty dishes in the sink, newspapers amassing in the hallway, and Eva offering to read a person’s dream create a space where Sula’s imagination can develop at will. As the narrator informs us, “Sula . . . wedged into a household of throbbing disorder constantly awry with things, people, voices and the slamming of doors, spent hours in the attic behind a roll of linoleum galloping through her own mind” (52). The narrative delineates a transparent causal relationship between the chaos of the Peace residence and the mental freedom it accords Sula. However, it is the Peace household’s defiance of sexual conventions that is Helene’s initial concern during Sula’s maiden visit to the Wright home. Helene is at first scornful of Sula and assesses whether she possesses any of her mother’s, Hannah, ‘slackness’ to determine if she is an appropriate friend for Nel. Her home is the antithesis of the pandemonium of Eva’s household and its accompanying freedom for Sula. Helene’s “oppressively neat” (29) abode, where her control and subservience to propriety “rub[ed] down to a dull glow any sparkle or splutter [Nel] had” (83), is regarded with dread by her daughter. Helene, though, is unable to discern Eva and Hannah’s effect on a young Sula who enjoys the neatness of her friend’s domicile. Sula’s appreciation of the dissimilarity in the residences does not mean the women of her family have not shaped her, which is a distinction that Helene does not recognize. The narrator, however,

acknowledges their impact upon Sula, even as it differentiates between Eva and Hannah and her: “Sula was distinctly different. Eva’s arrogance and Hannah’s self-indulgence merged in her, and with a twist that was all her own imagination” (118). Thus, Sula’s radical behavior is at least in part owed to her family background, in part a result of her imagination, and in part the freedom such an unconventional family dynamic allows Sula’s imagination.

What releases and enables Sula’s imagination and, therefore, undergirds her friendship with Nel is Hannah’s indifference to mothering, as the narrative discloses: “their[, Nel and Sula,] meeting was fortunate, for it let them use each other to grow on. Daughter’s of distant mothers . . . they found in each other’s eyes the intimacy they were looking for” (52). Hannah’s emotional distance from Sula mirrors Eva’s emotional detachment from her daughters. Eva’s ambivalence to her daughters is witnessed when the narrator informs us, “Under Eva’s distant eye, and prey to her idiosyncrasies, her own children grew up stealthily” (41). After such an opening, the narrator proceeds to discuss Pearl and Hannah; Plum is not introduced until four pages later when the narrator reveals that Plum “floated in a constant swaddle of love and affection, until 1917 when he went to war” (45). These two disclosures on Eva convey that two of her possible idiosyncrasies are her obvious affection for her last child and only son and her emotional dispassion for her daughters. Eva’s circuitous narration about ensuring her children’s survival of poverty and adverse weather uncloaks the duty of working-class black motherhood and advances the indelicate inquiry of whether it is possible for working-class black women to fulfill the “qualities of the fictional white mother despite the real oppressions of racism, sexism, and classism” (Schramm 170) accorded to them. These very same

subjects' ability to mother, as Western patriarchy demands, Margaret Schramm explains, is affected by the pain of their mothers' emotional withdrawal and their fathers' physical absence. Schramm, in fact, reads Hannah's question as demanding a type of mothering that someone of Eva's subject position is unable to offer and, therefore, an unfair request.¹⁷ While Schramm interprets the conflicted mother-daughter relations in *Sula* as the impossible quest for the perfect mother, Fultz similarly contends that material conditions subvert "maternal expression of love in affective ways" (235). Fultz explicates that Eva's reply emphasizes the psychological toll poverty exacts upon mothers and children who are abandoned by husbands and fathers. In contrast, Madhu Dubey's reads the novel as offering a larger critique of reproductive ideology through its portraits of various black female subjects who are emotionally distant mothers. She argues that Eva, who is the stereotypical strong black mother before she leaves her children, realizes the extreme manner of her maternal love and preserves a watchful reticence from her children once she returns. Given Eva's emotionally removed mothering, Dubey construes Eva's killing of Plum as her determination to not nurture him into the foreseeable future. While I am partial to their respective arguments, I am more interested in the effects of this psychologically aloof mothering (which is different from Sula overhearing her

¹⁷ In "To Make Herself: Mother-Daughter Conflict in Toni Morrison's *Sula* and *Tar Baby*," Fultz argues similarly that African American daughters "discover" early that they "must frequently settle" (Fultz 229) for physical care and protection in place of tenderness and demonstrative affection. Love is understood as sacrificial acts against sickness and death. Fultz references Patricia Hill Collins who argues in *Black Feminist Thought* that the quandary of black mothers and daughters is a result of physical survival in and substantive challenges to systems of oppression. However, in response, I assert, Hannah's question challenges and undoes the presumption that black daughters will accept the limitations on and contradictions inherent to a motherhood that cannot embody the ideal they are also socialized to expect and desire. Her query yearns for something more than sacrificial motherhood, which Eva insists is enough. Thus, I submit, the portrayal of sacrificial motherhood in the novel incorporates an awareness of the inherent limitations of this type of mothering for daughters.

mother's expressed dislike of her) because it participates in creating the necessary conditions for Sula's burgeoning atypicality.

An early manifestation of Sula's unconventionality is her friendship with Nel, who is also the beneficiary of emotionally reserved mothering. That their friendship is initiated in their imagination and precedes Sula and Nel's actual first encounter on the Garfield Primary School playground suggests Nel and Sula's chronic alienation from Hannah and Helene, respectively. This distance is so profound that Nel and Sula dream of each other to access sympathy and affection. In conjuring up one other within their solitary and lonely condition, it allows them to recreate the very terms of the Western fairy tale because what they envision is intended to speak to their emotional needs. Consequently, their friendship addresses their psychological negotiation of Nel and Sula's early recognition of the limitations imposed on their gender and race demographic, as can be seen when the narrator states: "So when they met . . . they felt the ease and comfort of old friends. Because each had discovered years before that they were neither white nor male, and that all freedom and triumph was forbidden to them, they had set about creating something else to be" (52). And this 'something else to be' is an 'adventuresomeness,' "a mean determination to explore everything that interested them . . . and they had no priorities" (55). Sula and Nel's friendship, therefore, is a space that places them and their interests first. Due to this construction, it is a socially revolutionary existence, since it not only refuses to acknowledge the socio-economic foreclosures that accrue to their demographic, but also asserts possibility against limitation. In so doing, they develop what bell hooks labels an oppositional gaze, that is, "critical black female spectatorship that emerges as a site of resistance" from "the imposition of dominant ways

of knowing and looking” (hooks 128), where visual delight is in the pleasure of interrogation. And one of the things they interrogate is the ‘possessive ethic of heterosexuality.’ Nel and Sula perceive that much of what women say and feel about relationships is, in fact, undergirded by fear of loss of their jobs and apprehension that “their husbands would discover that no uniqueness lay between their legs” (119). They recognize a desire for economic security and monogamy underlie women’s anxiety. The formation of this gaze, therefore, allows them to critique the impact of Western patriarchy upon working-class black heterosexual unions. With this posture, Nel and Sula are able to watch “each day as though it were a movie arranged for their amusement” (55); in short, they are the subjects of their lives and they do not identify with any disabling images of themselves. Their synchronous perspicuity, affinity, and admiration allow Nel and Sula to collapse the psychic boundaries between themselves, so that even they have difficulty distinguishing between the emotional desires of one other.¹⁸ This detail is crucial because it discloses that as an adolescent Nel is not so dissimilar to Sula, which is why Eva’s accusation places co-responsibility on Nel for Chicken Little’s death.¹⁹ It is, accordingly, apparent that their imaginations construct what their

¹⁸ The scene where Nel and Sula dig a hole together and fill it in without discussing what they are doing is a commonly cited example of their symbiosis.

¹⁹ Essentially, I am advancing that Nel and Sula’s childhood friendship implies that their characters are more nuanced than the former being typecast as stereotypically good and the latter as conventionally evil. This is a departure from standard readings of these two characters as a Manichean dichotomy (see for example, Fultz, Terry Otten, among others). Instead, I suggest we utilize McDowell’s claim that the novel rejects the ‘character as static essence’ model, which is a cardinal supposition of Western metaphysics, for a ‘character as process’ paradigm. Even though McDowell uses this framework to discuss Sula, it is equally compelling for understanding Nel’s development, although thwarted, within the narrative. Applying this theoretical lens uncovers their childhood closeness, which collapses the psychic boundaries between the two. It further enables an examination of their different developmental paths into adulthood, as informed by diverging psychological processes, so that Nel ends up belonging to the community and Sula is positioned outside of it as a force of evil. My contention also lends itself to Robert Grant’s argument that Nel and Sula are better understood as occupying relatively distant locations on a moral continuum instead of as the two halves of a mutually constituting dichotomy. The value of his reading is that a continuum indicates movement as well as possible overlap and divergence.

community and the larger American culture deem impossible for working-class black female subjects: spaces of agency, real and imagined. Their shared sense of such a possible space is lost with the disintegration of Nel and Sula's friendship, which Sula acknowledges when she reminisces: "Nel was the first person who had been real to her, whose name she knew, who had seen as she had the slant of life that made it possible to stretch it to its limits" (120).²⁰ 'The stretch to its limits' is the potential that is possible once it is imagined through an oppositional gaze. And Sula, unlike Nel, does not relinquish this approach to life as she matures. Therefore, another enabling condition for Sula is her development of and fidelity to an oppositional gaze.

This gaze also distinguishes Sula from her mother and grandmother. Sula is distinct from the women in her family in a number of ways. Crucially, Sula, as Spillers notes, is financially secure for her class position unlike Nel, Sula's female peers in the Bottom, and even Eva and Hannah when they were Sula's age. The insurance money from Hannah and Plum's deaths as well as from Eva's 'accident' allow her to attend college and, more importantly, enable her divorce from orthodoxy. It permits Sula to confidently assert to Nel she would never work and finances her freedom to explore her 'idle imagination' and 'tremendous curiosity.' Because of this enabling condition, I suggest that economic security is one necessary prerequisite for full self- and sexual expression for a working-class black female subject. It allows Sula as she matures into womanhood to continue to refuse to genuflect at the altar of convention. When Sula returns to the Bottom after a ten-year absence, Eva advises her granddaughter to marry

²⁰ Their divergence begins with Nel's marriage and Sula's immediate departure afterwards from the Bottom. Sula's traveling is remarkable for a young, single female in the early-twentieth-century. It is an indicator of her bold unconventionality. See Angela Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday*. Davis reveals that while it was not customary for women of that era to travel as freely as men, female blues singers were an exception to this gendered norm.

and procreate because it will 'settle' her. In response, Sula replies: "I don't want to make somebody else. I want to make myself" (92). For all of Eva and Hannah's socially transgressive behavior, they conform to the working-class black female archetype, single mother, and Sula voices her rejection of this prototype when she counters Eva.

Analogous to my reading, Fultz interprets Sula's position as the daughter's eschewal of the mother's choices and a vital disavowal of marriage and childbirth to engender and save her self. Fultz continues that Sula's rejection posits an alternative role for her self and a "radically different desire" (232). This divergent desire, 'to make herself,' is, as Spillers aptly terms, 'woman-for-self.' This stands in contradistinction to the orthodox socialization of black female subject as 'woman-for-other,' that is, "the myth of the black woman . . . [who] protects her children and forgives her man" (Spillers 294). Sula's repudiation of this legendary model is owed to her observations of the profound psychological and physical destruction such an ideal exacts upon working-class black women. This can be seen when she notes: the bronze of the women's skin is now a muted ash, the obverse correlation between their narrow lives and weight gain, the constricting propriety of those who married, the empty bitterness of those who remained single, and the ironic pain of their children which keeps them from harming themselves. From her position, there are no benefits that accrue to women who conform to the established gender norms. And Sula would know, she has been the recipient of such devastating protocols. These foreclosures are what Sula renounces. Due to her granddaughter's rejection of conventional gender arrangements, Eva tells Sula that she is, "selfish" and "ain't no woman got no business floatin' around with no man" (92). However, it is not that Sula is selfish, but, according to Bryant, she appropriates privileges only reserved for

men, which are “rootlessness and disdain for signifiers of stability, such as motherhood and marriage” (4). These are signifiers to which the women within her family conform.

With her titular character and the other female characters, Morrison captures the ideological battles over the prescribed place of working-class black female subjectivity. Particularly through Eva’s portrayal, the author delineates the very ambiguity of the site of working-class black female subjectivity, the black matriarch within a patriarchal economy, a putative position of power that not only the larger society does not validate but also is constituted through lack, that is, the absence of the male, either through death, abandonment, or employment schedule. Power, consequently, is not matrilineal.²¹ The black matriarch is a posture thrust upon working-class black female subjects, as is evidenced in Eva’s assumption of the role after BoyBoy leaves. And in her accession, one has to wonder when does Eva’s arrogance evolve, and if her dictatorial manner not only existed before but also manifested itself during her brief stormy marriage. I raise these queries since Eva initially plans to bequeath all of her material possessions to Plum, her only son, which suggests her own sexism. Thus, Eva’s intentions unravel the potential promised by her atypical behavior. She does not or, rather, cannot offer a critique of the very socio-economic and -familial structure that make it possible for BoyBoy to abandon her and their children because she still believes in its legitimacy. Despite not being a beneficiary of a racist classist patriarchal economy, she is complicit in its continuity, as is seen in her counsel to Sula, original plans for inheritance, and advice to her female borders to prepare supper on time, launder and press shirts properly. Her rejoinder to Sula’s defiant answer that it is neither Hannah’s nor her choice to be without a male

²¹ See Gloria Naylor, “The Black Matriarch” and Hortense Spillers, *Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book* for a more detailed exposition of this point.

partner, it is selfish for a woman to not fulfill her reproductive potential, and a woman should not elect to be single all confirm Eva's conservative orientation. Fultz astutely notes that Eva's insistence on marriage and children posits a female identity limited to a traditional familial role, motherhood, and a fixed space, the home. But Eva's portrayal invites the reader to identify her as a more unorthodox figure than she is. It desires to fold her capitulation to patriarchy into 'manlove' and the reason for Eva's filicide into her aloof mothering of her daughters, or at the very least it allows Eva to explain herself. However, Eva's explanation of why she kills Plum can be read against her, even though much criticism on the novel takes Eva at her word.²² (Spillers' querying of Eva's right to murder her child is a notable difference.) According to Eva, it is Plum's regression into childhood and its accompanying requirement for continued mothering that occasion his immolation. Her exegesis also discloses her perception of his failure "to live and be a man" (72) upon his return, so she conceives, as she readily admits, of a manner that Plum can "die like a man" (72). Therefore, Plum's inability to inhabit a specific masculine role undergirds Eva's killing of him. While this does not contradict her disinclination to mother an adult, it reveals Eva's investment in patriarchy and its shoring up of particular types of legitimate masculinity.²³ Such a worldview is premised upon the disinheritance of female subjects, as Eva's plans for inheritance confirm. We must remember it is growing up in Eva's household where Sula comes to the realization she does not possess the advantages that accrue to men and whiteness in society. What Sula rejects along with the

²² For example, see Fultz, Gillespie and Kubitschek, Reddy, Samuels & Hudson-Weems. Although Reddy does not challenge the reasons for Eva's filicide Reddy argues that Eva's action is reminiscent of infanticide during slavery and explains that Plum's death is a consequence of the psychological devastation of World War I upon soldiers.

²³ Jackson offers a corresponding reading. He interprets Eva's killing of her son as a way to circumvent Plum dying like an effeminate addict. This would forever register him as non-man. Eva's explanation, according to Jackson, shows Plum's departure from a militarized black manhood.

imperative to reproduce and attach her self to a male subject is her own marginalization as a female subject. This is what she means when Sula tells Nel that “my lonely is mine. Now your lonely is somebody else’s. Made by somebody else and handed to you. Ain’t that something? A secondhand lonely” (143). Sula, consequently, abandons received scripts with their inherent limitations for her demographic, and she is committed to her own self-possession, as is seen when she asserts to and warns Eva: “Whatever’s burning in me is mine . . . And I’ll split this town in two and everything in it before I’ll let you put it out” (93). Such a conviction marks Sula’s departure from her female forebears and the other women in the Bottom. Sula fashions herself out of hostile socio-economic conditions, and this self-making is entirely dependent on her daring imagination. In response, her community and the narrator read Sula as dangerous. They view her behavior as a challenge to the Bottom’s racialized and sexualized gender constructs since Sula’s self-invention declines to recognize any restrictions on her autonomy.

The Failure of Imagination

Her non-compliance with gender norms first attracts Ajax to Sula. Initially, Ajax approaches Sula because he thinks: “this [is] perhaps the only other woman he knew whose life was her own, who could deal with life efficiently, and who was not interested in nailing him” (127). Her indifference to convention reminds him of his mother who as “an evil conjure woman” (127) is a social outcast. Similar to Sula’s childhood in the Peace household, Ajax is granted much freedom as a child by his mother. The premature liberty, which accompanies emotionally unavailable and neglectful parenting for Sula and Ajax, respectively, is a shared influential force for the both of them. It, according to the narrator, informs their approach to heterosexual relationships. Their relationships with

their mothers are very different however. Whereas Sula watches Hannah burn, it is Ajax's love for his mother, which propels his interest in the protagonist, who resembles his mother in being vilified as evil. His other love, airplanes, the narrative discloses, is never realized as a result of structural racism, (which is reminiscent of Bigger in *Native Son*). Owing to this foreclosed opportunity, Ajax refuses to work and therefore possesses marginal financial means. His relationship with his mother and Ajax's economic constraints reveal that he is long accustomed to great license and cannot financially support a family. As a result of these 'limitations,' he is disinterested in constructing the typical heterosexual union, and this is why Sula intrigues him: Ajax perceives that a romantic interaction with her will be dissimilar to the norm. At the beginning of their association this is true. Their relationship does not conform to the conventions of romantic love. Ajax does not treat Sula as if he needs to protect her while she does not encroach upon his independence. What sustains their incipient fascination with each other is each party's ability to intellectually engage the other as equals and their non-capitulation to received gender constructs.²⁴ Their compatibility and openness is also witnessed in their sexual intimacy. They reverse the standard missionary position of man on top and woman beneath, as can be seen when Ajax informs us that, "he liked for her to mount him so he could see her towering above him" (129); instead of feeling threatened,

²⁴ In "Form Matters: Toni Morrison's *Sula* and the Ethics of Narrative," Axel Nissen points out that Ajax and Sula's relationship is a rare unreservedly exquisite interaction. It is portrayed as successful because they engage in conversation with each other, as Sula informs us. Although Morrison, Nissen continues, does not give us access to any of these dialogues she enlightens us about them from Sula's standpoint. For Sula, they are rewarding because these conversations bring her and Ajax into mutual understanding with each other. Nissen argues that it stands in contrast to Hannah and Eva's conversation on why Eva kills Plum and Sula and Nel's discussion when Sula is deathly ill. These discussions end without resolution and empathetic understanding, according to Nissen. His argument is significant because it uncovers that there is a broader and more systemic critique in the novel than the failure of heterosexuality. The narrative interrogates all interactions among black subjects as part of its exploration of how black subjects engage each other within and against oppressive systems.

he is sexually aroused when Sula is astride him. Their congruity is harmonious: “He [swallows] her mouth just as her thighs . . . [swallow] his genitals, and the house was very, very quiet” (131). Houston Baker interprets their sexual coupling, the swallowing of the penis, as producing a genuine and resounding ‘Peace.’ According to Baker in *Workings of the Spirit*, their complementarity is substantiated when Sula thinks that Ajax is the loam and she the water that keeps him rich and moist. Their relationship, as Baker correctly concludes, possesses a potentially redemptive heterosexuality because the male delights in sexual pleasure instead of gaining gratification through the aggressive assertion of the power of the ‘Phallus.’ This redemptive heterosexuality is premised upon the rejection of orthodox gender codes for both working-class black male and female subjects. This manner of engagement distinguishes Ajax and Sula’s brief alliance from their past relations.

This relationship is also a departure from other heterosexual unions in the Bottom. Even though the novel contains a sustained critique of heteronormativity *Sula* does not advance a blanket disavowal of heterosexuality; rather, the novel displays a scrupulous awareness of how racism and its attendant socio-economic dispossession inform working-class black heterosexual relations.²⁵ Ajax and Jude’s characterizations convey this complexity. I read their depiction as two responses by working-class black male subjects to their economic marginalization and its impact on their personal lives.²⁶ For instance, Ajax’s love of airplanes is confined to “leaning against the barbed wire of airports, or nosing around hangars just to hear the talk of the men who were fortunate

²⁵ Barbara Smith in “Toward A Black Feminist Criticism” situates the critique of heterosexual institutions in the novel within a lesbian and feminist reading.

²⁶ Arguably not one of the characters, male or female, is generative. As Houston Baker astutely argues, if Jude and BoyBoy are signs of the Father and Husband, then they are negative significations and if Eva, Hannah, Helene, and Nel are signs of the Wife and Mother, then there is an analogous absence.

enough to be in the trade” (127). Because he is not so fortuitous Ajax not only refuses to participate in the legitimate capitalist economy but also is disinterested in being ‘nailed’ and the socio-economic responsibilities that are inherent to his ‘capture.’ Jude, in comparison, responds to his unfavorable socio-economic prospects with a tenacious assertion to participate in patriarchy. This is witnessed in the evolution of his decision to marry Nel. We learn that Jude, like the other young black male subjects, applies to work on the New River Road, but due to white racism he is not hired. His reason for wanting the physically strenuous job of building the new road is not solely, “for the good money, [but] more for the work itself” (81). This rationale reveals that his primary distress is not owed to loss of economic gain when he is refused this employment. Rather, his paramount dissatisfaction is a result of him not being able to fulfill a hetero-masculine norm that he desires. Bryant perceptively identifies this as Jude’s inextricable binding of “manhood and self-worth” to “meaningful work and male bonding, which, as signifiers, have greater meaning than mere money” (Bryant 8). In agreement, I interpret Jude’s association as reflective of his belief that certain occupations automatically confer greater status and human worth.²⁷ Given his adherence to such a value system, Jude perceives that his job at the hotel is not masculine enough while constructing the road would enable him to reach and inhabit his archetype. His thwarted hope exposes the bitter irony that his imagination is captured by a racist white patriarchy that disallows him from assuming its hetero-masculine ideal. Jude decides to marry Nel in his frustration as an expression of his determination to execute a patriarchal imperative. He aggressively pursues her because she is “the girl . . . who made the whole venture seem like his idea, his conquest” (82/3). Jude, therefore, as Feng astutely interprets, marries Nel because of his feelings of

²⁷ Jude’s linking of work to self-worth is informed by patriarchy.

impotence, which are the result of his “narcissistic pursuit of a masculine ego” (Feng 94). His attitude discloses that their relationship, instigated by Jude, is designed to meet his emotional needs and Nel’s emotional needs are eclipsed in his desire to “take on a man’s role anyhow” (82).²⁸ His disregard is a result of Nel’s lack of self-possession, which is witnessed in her response to Jude’s complements: “[Nel] didn’t even know she had a neck until Jude remarked on it, or that her smile was anything but the spreading of her lips until he saw it as a small miracle” (84). Her depiction, according to McDowell, aligns Morrison with women writers who equate marriage with the loss of the female self. Her representation also reveals that absence of self-possession enables a working-class black female subject to participate in a patriarchal economy. Nel’s partaking is also observed when she comforts Jude after he informs her of the collapse of his dream to work on the New River Road. Her too ready performance of the stereotypical nurturing female role reminds the reader of her childhood desire to perform the typical princess posture in the classic fairytale. Both reveal Nel’s fidelity to conventional gender designations, which dictate not only the legitimate site for her but also the appropriate gendered responses. (Her orthodoxy allows Jude to easily read and control her whereas Sula’s heterodoxy disrupts his ability to perceive Sula accurately. When Sula refuses to comfort him, he assumes she wants to ‘burden’ a man with “a lot of lip and a lot of mouths” (103). His judgment of Sula announces he only possess a patriarchal gender framework with which to comprehend women.) Involvement in this socio-economic system does not reward Nel. Ten years into her marriage, Nel describes her love for Jude as, “a steady grey web around her heart” (95). Her description communicates the unsatisfactory nature of

²⁸ Nel’s depiction, McDowell notes, aligns Morrison with female writers who equate marriage with the loss of the female self.

heterosexual unions for working-class black female subjects who are captured by Western patriarchal gender norms. My point is not to condemn Nel's complicity in her own marginalization. Instead, I read her and Jude's relationship as an exemplary instance of how the pursuit of the patriarchal ideal for working-class black subjects is informed and deformed by structural racism.²⁹

In tandem with this stance, I suggest that Morrison's second novel explores the difficulty in reimagining another basis for relationships not determined by Western patriarchy. Ajax and Sula's brief liaison is a paradigmatic instance of this failure. Criticism on *Sula* that attends to the entirety of Sula and Ajax's union usually critiques Sula for succumbing to the 'possessive ethic of heterosexuality'.³⁰ Her capitulation occurs when Sula discovers she feels possessive towards Ajax, which precipitates the ending of their relationship. Once Sula is cognizant of these emotions, she enacts traditional female 'nailing' rites: she stares at her reflection in the mirror to determine if she is good-looking, ties a green silk ribbon to her hair, cleans the bathroom, makes the bed, and sets the table for two. Furthermore, when Ajax arrives, she tells him: "Come on. Lean on me." (133). These words convey that she will now perform the role of black woman as nurturer, which she earlier rejects through a deliberate misreading of Jude's narrative, as Dubey points out. Ajax, in response, changes their sexual position: "he [drags] her under him and [makes] love to her with the steadiness and the intensity of a man about to leave for Dayton" (134). Their association has the typical end: Ajax leaves.

²⁹ I am also not arguing for patriarchy. Instead, my point is to underscore the difficulty in attaining the patriarchal ideal and the very real psychological consequences of such an endeavor within a working-class black context.

³⁰ For instance, see Christian, *Black Women Novelists*; Dubey *Black Women Novelists*; Feng; and Samuels & Weems. Fultz offers a markedly different reading that is more generous to Sula. She argues that Sula is almost seduced by normative gender constructs after she meets Ajax. However, Fultz posits, Sula "emerges as an imaginative, independent, self-assured creature who does not feel compelled to please anybody else" (Fultz 232).

The devolution of this relationship, as Robert Sargent asserts, shows that the conventions of romantic love are deadly. This is particularly true in the arena of black heterosexual relations because of the socio-economic pressure that black subjects are under, as I have argued above. In contrast, Dubey reads the relationship's delineation as an inconsistent limit on Sula's radical subjectivity. However, while I agree with Dubey's larger assessment that Sula's behavior constrains her radical potential, I depart from Dubey's reading to suggest the relationship's dissolution originates from Sula's failure to reimagine prevailing sexual politics, which demand the domestication of the female subject. In so doing, Sula's representation, which operated as a black feminist critique, unravels to leave firmly in place typical gendered sexualized norms. However, the disintegration of their relationship is already prefigured in the metaphor of water and soil that also conveys their compatibility, as can be seen in Sula's musings: "I will water your soil, keep it rich and moist. But how much? How much water to keep the loam moist? And how much loam will I need to keep my water still? And when do the two make mud" (131)? The closing query, 'when do the two make mud,' might be read as Sula's subconscious desire for Ajax and herself to become 'one,' the typical monogamous heterosexual union. Although Baker is insightful in reading this analogy as disclosing their complementarity it also connotes the relationship's very orthodoxy, at least on Sula's part, since her perception is the only access we are granted. Through the employment of the water and loam analogy where water stands in place of the woman and loam as the man where the former nourishes the latter, it concedes an age-old dynamic where the female nurtures the male.³¹ (Even though women are often figured as

³¹ In "Community and Nature: The Novels of Toni Morrison," Christian states that Sula is consistently identified with water throughout the novel. According to Christian's reading, water is a "primal force which

earth and Sula reading Ajax as earth can be seen as part of her heterodoxy, it is how she eventually imagines their relationship that undoes this initial departure from convention.) This betrays that always underlying their complementarity is Sula's inability to envision another way to sustain heterosexual relationships: the female, even for Sula, is always in the position of nurturing.

It is not only in the arena of relationships that Sula's ingenuity founders. As I mentioned at the beginning of the chapter Sula does not actualize her artistic potential. A disturbing consequence of this limitation is that her subverted artistic potential fosters menacing possibilities, as can be seen in her relationship with Ajax. Sula wonders if using a chamois, a nail file, and a chisel with a small tap hammer will wear away the bone, scrape away the gold, and crack the alabaster to reveal the loam underneath that gives Ajax his distinctive smell. Her musing discloses that Sula's tremendous curiosity is unconstrained and accordingly can be unpredictably unleashed (and more likely for a questionable venture once it is utilized). One last condition of possibility, therefore, the narrative suggests, for realizing full self- and sexual coherence for working-class black female subjectivity in the early twentieth-century, is the development of black female artistic potential. The few black women who were able to attain some measure of independence despite racial, gender, sexual, and class constraints in the early twentieth-century are the female singers of classic blues.

The shortcomings of Sula's imagination are a result of a poverty of intention. Similar to my argument, hooks perceives this failure as an absent meaningful agenda external to Sula and what Spillers describes as a missing "discursive/imaginative project"

has [the] power of fluidity but must be creatively contained within a form, or it will become destructive" (Christian 75).

(Spillers 296). According to hooks, Sula's awareness of what it means to be a radical subject never engages her wider community; it is a privatized adventure of self-creation. This can be seen when the narrator says: "There was only her own mood and whim, and if that was all there was, she decided to turn the naked hand toward it, discover it and let others become as intimate with their own selves as she was" (121). Such an undertaking is initiated in the mind, bounded by the self, and individualized. The narrator does not permit Sula to proffer an explanation of why she is solipsistic in the manner that Eva is granted narrative space to attempt to vindicate herself of filicide. It is the omniscient narrator who tenders a rationale for Sula's transgressive behavior, which it posits as dangerous. According to the narrator, Sula is dangerous because she turns her idle imagination onto herself. But, I argue, in agreement with hooks, what neutralizes this perceived menace is the very same tendency, Sula turning her idle imagination onto herself. Sula does not engage her 'tremendous curiosity' or 'gift for metaphor' with "the collective plight of black women" (hooks 48) in the novel. Instead, she contemptuously distances herself from her gender and race demographic, as is seen when she tells Nel that every colored woman is dying, "just like me. But the difference is they dying like a stump. Me, I'm going down like one of those redwoods. I sure did live in this world" (143). This is not a nostalgic attempt on my part to recuperate community or vilify individualism. My proposition is that it is easier for a coherent community to police and alienate a solitary unconventional female subject, which the Bottom's response to Sula exemplifies. Furthermore, even though Sula's community recodes her into a malevolent force, it is a space that is already existent for women who do not conform, as Ajax's mother inhabiting a similar site reveals. (What distinguishes his mother from Sula is that

the community can benefit from her difference whereas it perceives Sula's departure as dangerous for them.) Its ready availability also attests to its easy contain-ability. Consequently, Sula's apparent initial disavowal of her community's gendered racial and sexual norms does not in fact unseat them. And it is not discernible if that is her intention. The unraveling of her and Ajax's liaison suggests that Sula's commitment is to being able to embark upon any whim of hers and not reworking the very grounds of a racist American patriarchal gender economy. Therefore, Sula, with full self-awareness, is accurate when she tells Nel that she, Sula, "never loved no man because he was worth it" (143/4); in its place, Sula 'tries out' men as it suits her whims. Such a capricious approach is the consequence of Sula not having a "centre, [a] speck around which to grow" (119). Her radical subjectivity cannot harbor a radical agenda due to her absent moral centre. This missing ethical axis will allow her to not only map her journey to radical subjectivity but also be a reproductive model for other working-class black female characters in the novel. She would present a substantive challenge to a racist patriarchy. Ultimately, Sula does not reject the value system; she rejects the controls that this structure places upon her, and this is the extent of her radical subjectivity. This partial disavowal is a limitation and the undoing of the black feminist critique launched in the novel.

In place of a more robust project, the narrative portrays Sula's death. Her unidentified sickness and death is an unexpected development. There is not any narrative preparation for either. Her early demise, Maureen Reddy describes as a "mysterious wasting disease similar to those that punished unconventional nineteenth century heroines" (43). hooks similarly argues that Sula's untimely decease is indicative of her

containment and annihilation by a society that is uninterested in radical black female subjectivity.³² For hooks, consequently, Sula is not a triumphant figure. Even as I agree with hooks and Reddy, I set forth instead that Sula's failure of imagination is part of a larger imaginative collapse in the novel of which her death is indicative. Essentially, I am arguing that the form of the narrative mirrors Sula's personal imaginative failure. Without going as far as Butler-Evans who interprets the representation of Sula's death as a possible rejection of the independent woman by the text itself, I suggest that the narrative portrays a scrupulous awareness of the constraints imposed on working-class black female subjects. It illustrates the challenges in attempting to sustain such an unorthodox figure, even one whose imagination is still seduced by North Atlantic patriarchy. Sula's depiction is contained within the novel: she is not introduced until the third chapter and dies two-thirds of the way through. The novel also closes with Nel's nostalgia for the pre-Civil Rights era Bottom. Nel's yearning works to dissipate the challenge that Sula presented to a coherent black community and privileges the latter in its stead. Even though critics read Nel's mourning for Sula as a reconciliation of the two, I suggest instead that Nel's recognition of her loss emphasizes Sula's absence and recalls the reason for the disintegration of their friendship: Sula's unconventionality and Nel's orthodoxy. Nel's outliving Sula unveils the rewards of conforming and the risk of what Christian phrases as Sula's seeking her "own individuality as a means to self-fulfillment" (Christian 70). The narrative does not contain a structure that can engender and sustain

³² An alternative reading that I disagree with in part is Christian's contention that Sula dies from self-absorption. She argues that Sula's departure from motherhood, union, and compromise for focus on her self cannot be accommodated by 'the world.' Her premature passing, therefore, is a corrective that re-establishes the prevailing order. While I quibble with the self-absorption thesis for Sula's death, Christian's further explanation that Sula's death enables a return to the prevailing balance, I admit, is similar to my reading of Sula's death.

radical black female subjectivity. Part of the reason why Sula's process is idiosyncratically individualized and not imagined as part of a black feminist politics is that such a model is too radical. Sula is shrewdly conscious of her limited options. This can be seen when she details to Nel the fundamentally transformed society that can appreciate someone like herself, a black female subject who seeks full coherence and self-integrity. It also makes apparent Sula's awareness that her subordination exceeds the gender and sexuality restrictions imposed upon her by her community and is determined by the very structure of contemporary American society. In other words, race and class also inform her foreclosures. The novel's trajectory exemplifies this concern at the level of plot. Sula's sudden and unforeseen death indicates the impossibility of her survival furthermore triumph in contemporary American society as it is portrayed in the novel. It also demonstrates that the larger socio-economic structure needs to be fundamentally reimagined for a non-normative working-class black female subject like Sula to be fully accommodated. Otherwise, what triumphs are the very structures that are critiqued: a coherent racial community within a larger racist social structure.

Morrison's second novel portrays both the desire for and the disbelief that such a radical subject can be fully actualized. However, it is a productive experiment because the exercise encourages readers and critics to consider the character, community, and society wide transformations that are integral for such an endeavor to be a reproductive probability if not possibility.

The Autobiography of My Mother also portrays a similar consideration, a radical black female subject. In this novel, however, the socio-environment is that of the colonial Anglophone Caribbean. The depiction of Xuela is congruent with that of Sula. Xuela is a

‘demonic’ female subject that rejects normative scripts. Reading *Sula* and *The Autobiography of My Mother* together reveals how both the African American and black Caribbean female literary imagination respond to and address similar structures of exclusion. It uncovers some of the continuities between black diasporic communities in their interaction with female figures.

CHAPTER 4

The Autobiography of My Mother

“Unsilencing the Demonic Ground:” The Desiring Caribbean Female Subject

I refused to belong to a race, I refused to accept a nation. I wanted only, and still do want, to observe the people who do so. The crime of these identities, which I know now more than ever, I do not have the courage to bear. Am I nothing, then? I do not believe so, but if nothing is a condemnation, then I would love to be condemned.

--Jamaica Kincaid, *The Autobiography of My Mother*

We had defended ourselves since memory against everything and everybody, considered all speech a code to be broken by us, and gestures subject to careful analysis; we had become headstrong, devious and arrogant. Nobody paid us any attention, so we paid very good attention to ourselves. Our limitations were not known to us – not then.

--Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*

The Autobiography of My Mother (1997) explores the conditions of possibility for the recuperation of the Caribbean female subject from her historical overdeterminations, which have invented her as a silent object.¹ I read the protagonist, Xuela, as rejecting the symbolic order inherited from the North Atlantic's *Studia Humanitatis*, which has overdetermined her subject-position.² In this system of representation, a figure like Xuela is invisible and therefore silent. *The Autobiography of My Mother* portrays the conditions of possibility for locating and voicing this subject. The novel depicts a space-clearing gesture that of necessity posits an absolute rejection of the value system whose logic is premised on this subject's negation. This disavowal is the very ground of Xuela's

¹ I use the word invention not to deny that there are verifiable humans but to emphasize the creation of this category and how it describes the persons who were included as part of this category.

² I previously reference Sylvia Wynter's reading of the *Studia Humanitatis* in the chapter on *Salt*. To briefly recap: Wynter argues that the *Studia Humanitatis* is the apparently rational symbolic structure engendered by the change from a Christian worldview premised on a gender binary to a secular order where race is now the primary code of difference and gender is demoted to a secondary position.

recovery. My reading departs from criticism of Kincaid's novel, which focuses on the troubled mother-daughter relationship and rejection of motherhood described in the novel. Instead, the portrayal of the mother figure, mothering, and the mother-daughter relationship are only part of the radical departure from the symbolic structure initiated by the *Studia Humanitatis*. This rejection occasions Xuela's departure from the moral economy of a Victorian and plantation socio-economy, divorce from all relational claims, and development into a desiring and desired Caribbean female subject. However, this rendering is more complicated. Her mother's death and her father's retreat from parenting, which are the constituting conditions for Xuela's disavowal of the moral economy, are also the foundational losses that open, preoccupy, and conclude the narrative space of the novel. Because Xuela is engrossed with these losses, I read her fixation on them through Freud's theory of mourning and melancholia to demonstrate how Xuela's experience of both mourning and melancholia disrupts the articulation of a radical Caribbean feminist subjectivity.³ As a result of the dissolution of this project, I examine why Xuela's portrayal is not a viable and reproducible model of self-possessed Caribbean female subjectivity by the close of the narrative and yet is not a fruitless exercise in 'unsilencing the demonic ground' of a Caribbean female subject.⁴

Although published in 1997 the time-period of *The Autobiography of My Mother* spans the turn of the nineteenth-century to the mid-twentieth century when Dominica was still a British colony.⁵ Jamaica Kincaid's third novel, which is a retrospective circular narrative, begins with the protagonist, Xuela, lamenting the death of her mother, a Carib,

³ Throughout this chapter I use black, creole, and multiracial interchangeably to describe Xuela.

⁴ I borrow this phrase from Sylvia Wynter. See "Beyond Miranda's Meanings: Un/silencing the 'Demonic Ground' of Caliban's Woman'."

⁵ Dominica gained its independence from Britain in 1978.

one of the indigenous persons of Dominica. As a result of her mother's death after childbirth, Xuela's father, Alfred, gives her, Xuela, as a newly born baby to the lady he pays to wash his clothes. After she starts primary school, Alfred takes her to live with him and his second wife in Mahaut. Because of her stepmother's jealousy, Alfred arranges for Xuela, now fifteen years old, to live with a business partner and his wife, Monsieur and Mme LaBatte, in Roseau where she attends a girls' religious high school. Over time, Xuela has a sexual affair with Monsieur LaBatte and becomes pregnant. Due to her pregnancy, she unofficially withdraws from school, runs away from the LaBatte's, and aborts the fetus. Xuela eventually goes back to live with her father at his request and returns to witness her half-brother's, Alfred, death and assist her half-sister, Elizabeth, with an abortion. As a young adult, Xuela works as a nursing assistant for and has a sexual affair with Philip Bailey, an Anglo-British expatriate doctor and her father's friend. She later marries him upon his wife's death although Xuela does not love Philip. After their wedding Xuela and Philip move to the mountains of Dominica where the Caribs live. By the close of the narrative Xuela is seventy-years old and her husband and other family members have died. In this novel, we are not given access to any perspective outside of Xuela's; its narrative space is her psychological interiority.

'Unsilencing the Demonic Ground'

In *The Autobiography of My Mother*, the reader only has access to Xuela. As a result of this structure, the novel's form reflects the intent of the portrayal: determining and giving voice to the subject-location of the Caribbean female. This representation is premised upon Xuela's defiance of her society's norms and deconstruction of its symbolic structure. Her portrayal articulates another way of understanding the world. She

describes Dominica as a 'false paradise' where the landscape is both beautiful and ugly. The idea that the Caribbean may be a false or lost paradise is a continuing preoccupation in the work of Jamaica Kincaid. Diane Simmons reads this concern in Kincaid's fiction as connected to the mother's betrayal of the daughter on an interpersonal level and the treachery of British colonial power in Antigua on a socio-political plane. In *The Autobiography of My Mother*, Kincaid develops and shifts this paradigm to explore how the culture of colonial Dominica, that is the very way of life introduced by white colonizers and continued by black subjects, betrays other black and Carib subjects, particularly those who are female. This portrayal is a more direct and nuanced interrogation of the various ways that power is deployed within the Caribbean space than in her previous two novels, *Annie John* and *Lucy*. In this exploration, Kincaid not only demonstrates how power is racialized in its structuring of the relationship between the colonizer and colonized, but also depicts how power is gendered and classed as it pervades relations among the colonized. This representation also holds accountable those who are complicit in the oppression of persons like themselves, as is most obviously evidenced in the depiction of compromised Caribbean motherhood and a predatory black middle-class.⁶ For instance, this stance is witnessed in Xuela's assessment of her father, who is part of the black middle-class: "he was part of a whole way of life on the island that perpetuated pain" (39). The pain that Alfred perpetuates is a result of his identification with the 'ease of the victor' (186) and rejection of 'the complications of the vanquished' (186). In Alfred's identification with the victors who are white, in particular

⁶ The portrayal of Alfred (who is a mulatto) and the LaBattes references Dominica's historic powerful black political middle-class. According to Baker, Dominica was the only British colony to have a black controlled legislature after the abolition of slavery. They were known as 'The Mulatto Ascendency.' This racial-class has had a powerful role in politics and culture even into the twentieth-century. See Baker, *Centring the Periphery: Chaos, Order, and the Ethnohistory of Dominica*.

white males, he embodies a North Atlantic symbolic structure as described by Michel-Rolph Trouillot that marginalizes those who are black, especially black females. These are the social relations that Xuela rejects.

Through her disavowal, the novel contains a robust critique of a gendered, racialized, and classed socio-economy premised upon the equation of whiteness with superiority. It seeks to fracture whiteness as an ideology that impinges upon other subject-positions. This project is launched from the missing position of the fourth participant, the black female subject-position, in the entangled race/gender triad of black men, white men, and white women as Sabine Broeck notes.⁷ As part of this endeavor, *The Autobiography of My Mother* illustrates how the historical forces that have shaped Dominican society constitute both white and black/Carib Caribbean female subjectivity such that the former's subject position is dependent on the marginalization of the latter. In tandem, the representation in the novel considers how to upend this female economy especially given that it structures an aesthetic economy. In so doing, it asks what the conditions of possibility are for a local Caribbean female subject to achieve psychological coherency and maintain self-integrity within and against this society's Victorian and plantation symbolic structure. This portrayal wants to understand the subject-location of Caribbean female subject and how to recuperate her from her historic overdeterminations. Owing to this imaginative recuperation, this representation attends to what Xuela calls 'defeat.' It addresses not only colonial exploitation but also interrogates how Caribbean subjects, male and female, participate in the defeat of themselves and other black and Carib subjects. Xuela's use of the word defeat describes a similar phenomenon that

⁷ Broeck makes this argument about Kincaid's corpus. It is also appropriate for my reading of *The Autobiography of My Mother*.

Alford calls secondclassness. Her criticism and language are reminiscent of Alford's caustic assessment of the National Party in *Salt*. It is suspicious of those, like Alfred and Monsieur LaBatte, who are part of the black middle-class in Dominica. In an interview with Frank Birbalsingh, Jamaica Kincaid states that Caribbean writers are political but they are preoccupied with past injustices. They do not, according to Kincaid, hold the contemporary political elite responsible for the disappointments and devastation that has followed political independence. Because Kincaid is explicitly concerned with how this class has mis-managed the Caribbean, it is appropriate to read her critique of black subjects' predatory behavior toward one another during the colonial-era as a representation of what will be more apparent upon Independence. In advancing a post-Independence critique within a colonial socio-environment, Kincaid deconstructs Dominican society to understand the continuities between both political eras and how these continuities work to defeat Caribbean subjects, especially women.

A North Atlantic symbolic structure determines social relations and permeates all aspects of life in Dominica. Xuela's awareness of this can be seen when she observes black persons going to and coming from Church on Sunday. For her this act signifies their defeat. She wonders: "what would the outcome have been of all the lives of the conquered if they had not come to believe in the gods of the people who had conquered them" (133)? Xuela's query uncovers that in subscribing to European religious systems, such as the type of Christianity referenced above, black Caribbean subjects must of necessity also endorse the value system inherent to this social system. Such a value system is premised on their marginalization, humiliation, and dispossession. This representation draws a distinction between North Atlantic and local religious systems, as

can be seen when Xuela thinks that “our God was not the correct one, our understanding of heaven and hell was not a respectable one” (37). The colonial education is also symptomatic of this meaning structure. Xuela informs us that by the age of fourteen she knew the history of Romans, Gauls, Saxons, Britons; that is, people she would not ever meet. She reads such an approach as malicious and intended to make her and people like her feel small, humiliated, humbled. The reality of black subjects is held in doubt because it is not studied and therefore perceived as illegitimate within this culture. One such example in the novel of the illegitimacy ascribed to black subjects’ experience is the subsequent disbelief of the school children who witness their male schoolmate drown. This adolescent boy drowns when he swims to the apparition of the beautiful female surrounded with mangoes at the river’s mouth. Xuela recalls her schoolmates’ doubt over what they witnessed and views this as emblematic of their repudiation of their reality. Her father berates her for telling him of the incident as if it occurred. Thus, the responses of the school children and their parents to this incident, according to Rhonda Cobham, reveal that there is not any legitimate code for articulating a Caribbean system of belief and knowledge. Xuela, in defiance, despite her father’s dismissive demeanor, chooses to believe that what she witnessed is real. Her belief, Cobham astutely suggests in “Mwen na rien, Msieu”: Jamaica Kincaid and the Problem of Creole Gnosis,” lays the foundation for a Caribbean knowledge-system whereas the society’s disbelief is evidence of its inability to speak itself. Xuela’s response to this incident indicates her disavowal of North Atlantic orthodoxy, which undergirds Christianity, the education system, and black Caribbean subjects’ discredit in themselves and their reality. Their relationship to

themselves and their lived experience reveals Dominican subjects' acceptance of their defeat.

Xuela perceives that black subjects having "been reduced to shadows [and] . . . lost any connection to wholeness, to an inner life of [their] own invention" (132) results in their acceptance of their defeat. She resists this absolute defeat by constructing an inner life of her own invention. This invention enables Xuela to critique her culture and to depart from its norms and underlying logic. She is emblematic of what Wynter terms a 'demonic model'. I referenced Wynter's theoretical model in "Beyond Miranda's Meanings: Un/silencing the Demonic Ground of Caliban's Woman" in the chapter on *Salt* to show why and how black female characters are absent as a sexual-erotic model in Caribbean male-authored literary texts. In this chapter, I use this very same conceptual framework to consider how the representation of Xuela disrupts a model that is premised on her absence. According to Wynter, when the first phase of modernity shifted the principal marker of difference changed from gender to race, this different symbolic structure is premised on a triangular relation of black men, white men, and white women who are the ideal sexual-erotic model of desire. Significantly, it erases or makes invisible the presence of the black female subject. Wynter reads the black Caribbean female's absence as ontological; that is, it is a necessary absence for the logic and functioning of the new secularizing schema. Furthermore, Wynter explains that this subject's absence also signifies the absence of endogenous heterosexual male desire for her. Her non-presence is crucial because this subject does not appear as "an alternative sexual-erotic model of desire and therefore an alternative source for an alternative system of meaning" (360). Wynter concludes that this absence not only invalidates the black Caribbean

female subject but also implicates her entire population group. Thus, her absence makes illegitimate all of her progeny. Wynter writes this afterword for a groundbreaking anthology comprised of literary critical work by female scholars on Caribbean women's writing. She recognizes the challenge these female scholars encounter in producing an interpretive framework that can voice the silenced native Caribbean woman. Wynter argues that a theoretical paradigm that can account for and give voice to the Caribbean female subject would be a demonic model because it necessitates a departure from the orthodoxies that are premised upon her absence and silence. Xuela's portrayal begins to articulate this kind of radical departure. (In the context of the United States, Sula is also another manifestation of a radical disavowal of a meaning structure that can only recognize a subjugated black female figure.) It not only locates and makes audible the voice of the Caribbean female subject but also Xuela's ideological stance in the novel is a self-conscious critique of the symbolic structure engendered by the various permutations of North Atlantic modernity as it informs social relations in Dominica.

One mode through which Xuela exemplifies this 'demonic model' is in the critique of the ideology of the family, which encompasses her absolute refusal of the reproductive imperative. Like Sula, Xuela's disavowal of mothering is owed to an insightful understanding of the nature of mothering within her socio-environment. Unlike Sula, Xuela's relationship with her father informs her rejection of social norms, which is a crucial dynamic that much of the criticism overlooks. Xuela informs us that after her mother's death her father places her in the care of Eunice, an unrelated woman who washes his clothes. She tells us that Alfred is unknowable to her because he never touches or looks at her when he picks up his clean laundry every two weeks. Alfred still

remains unknowable to Xuela even when she lives with him as a teenager and as a young adult. However, it is not that Alfred is not knowable to Xuela but unknowable stands in place of the emotional distance between the both of them, the non-relationship between father and daughter, especially given that Xuela spends much of the narrative analyzing and critiquing her father's predatory behavior and placing it within the context of an exploitative colonial socio-culture. Consequently, she does know him and the kind of colonial black male subject he is. As a result, Xuela tells us that "my mother and father then were a mystery to me: one through death, the other through the maze of living" (41). Under these circumstances, the patriarchal family structure, which is fundamental to the maintenance of gender inequity and central to North Atlantic narratives of subjectivity, has disintegrated for Xuela. Her subjectivity, therefore, is not consolidated within but external to or rather against this socio-economic system. The collapsing of the patriarchal norm for Xuela informs her disavowal of the nation, as is seen in the opening epigraph where Xuela tells us that she refuses to accept a nation. This is possible because, as Alexandra Schulteis argues, the patriarchal family has been integral to the creation and sanctioning of national hierarchies and identities.

The premature death of Xuela's mother and interactions with other women influence her refusal of national scripts. The foundational loss of her mother locates Xuela external to normative familial claims and her succeeding interactions with and observations of other women do not seduce her into developing a proxy mother-daughter relation with anyone. Given that the modern Caribbean is engendered within the plantation socio-economy, there is another socio-organizing principle that is equally critical to understanding Xuela's critique of motherhood. Hortense Spillers explains that

Atlantic racial-economic slavery plotted racial descent through the female line. According to Spillers, acknowledgement of female descent is not and different from matriarchal social production because the enslaved black female is both ungendered and legally cut off from her offspring. Spillers explains that in such a symbolic system what is produced is the reproduction of birthing. Viewing black communities as matrifocal/matrilineal/matriarchal misnames and misunderstands the historic absence of the father and the equally longstanding dispossession and disempowerment of the mother. This fraught history of motherhood preoccupies much of Caribbean literature. If marginalization is inherited from the mother, then the mother's position is already compromised and so is her relation with her children, particularly the daughters. Much women-authored Caribbean fiction, Caroline Rody explains, focuses on the violated mother-daughter relation; that is, the separation of the mother and child first engendered within Atlantic slavery. Literary historical recovery, according to Rody, imagines the mother-child reunion. Given this literary and historical specificity, the failed patriarchal relation is only part of the crucial familial dissolution in the novel: the tragic failure of motherhood through the impossibility of reunion with the mother or a mother-like figure is equally critical. Both of these are part of the ideology of family critiqued in the novel.

Because of this compromised history, there is usually an 'other mother' who may be a grandmother, historical or mythological heroine, or another older woman in Caribbean fiction.⁸ Patricia Hill Collins uses the term 'othermother' to describe a similar figure in African American fiction. According to Rody, the 'other mother' in Caribbean women's fiction nurtures the female protagonist and typically stands in place of the

⁸ See Caroline Rody, *The Daughter's Return: African American and Caribbean Women's Fictions of History*; Maryse Condé, *La Parole des femmes: Essai Sur des romancières des Antilles de langue française*.

unsatisfactory or compromised mother. *The Autobiography of My Mother* portrays a departure from this script because it does not offer any viable alternative mothers as it foregrounds the impossibility of adequate mothering within a plantation social structure. It delineates a history of abandonment by mothers, either through death or desertion, as well as mothers so corrupted by any combination of patriarchy, colonization, poverty, or dispossession that they are incapable of competent mothering of their daughters, genetic or otherwise. For instance, Xuela's grandmother abandons Xuela's mother, Xuela Claudette, as a newly born baby outside of a French convent. The French nuns reared Xuela Claudette for whom Xuela is named. This situates Xuela within a lineage of maternal abandonment. Eunice, a woman of limited means and Xuela's caretaker as a child, is a pitiful figure who is incapable of kindness, not because she is particularly cruel but in a post-plantation society "brutality is the only real inheritance and cruelty is sometimes the only thing freely given" (5). Thus, she merely perpetuates the ever-pervasive cruelty in her interactions with her children and Xuela. This is seen when she punishes Xuela for breaking her only bone china plate: she makes Xuela kneel on a stone heap in a spot that receives direct sunlight throughout the day with her arms raised above her head and a large stone in each hand. While Eunice's cruelty is a result of colonial poverty and its attendant dispossession, Xuela's stepmother enforces the gender inequity of patriarchy in her favoring of her son, Alfred, over her daughter, Elizabeth. Xuela perceives her stepmother's discriminatory practices as normative of black subjects within a colonial post-plantation society: "That she did not think very much of the person who was most like her, a daughter, a female, was so normal that it would have been noticed only if it had been otherwise: to people like us, despising anything that was most like

ourselves was almost a law of nature” (52). Elizabeth’s parents proceed to ignore her when her brother, Alfred, dies. In noticing this devaluation of Elizabeth’s personhood because of her gender, Xuela surmises that Elizabeth experiences the greater tragedy between the two of them because her mother is alive and refuses to love her whereas Xuela’s mother is dead and cannot love her. Whereas Elizabeth’s mother maintains patriarchy’s gender inequity, Mme LaBatte, according to Guillermina De Ferrari, operates as an agent of patriarchy by privileging the reproductive imperative and exercising it through the appropriation of a younger, less educated, and less rich female subject’s body. Although Xuela describes her interaction with Mme LaBatte as the only emotionally intimate relationship she has ever experienced, Mme LaBatte’s request of a teenaged Xuela (to give birth to a child that she can mother) can only be viewed as predatory. These older female characters disclose the treacherous nature of mothering within the Caribbean colonial space. Given this context, Xuela’s mother’s death is the condition of possibility that allows Xuela to escape this troubled dynamic.

Xuela Claudette’s death also makes possible Xuela’s divorce from the script of Caribbean mothering and critical stance towards her society. As she says: “I did not want to belong to anyone, that since the person I would have consented to own me had never lived to do so, I did not want to belong to anyone. I did not want anyone to belong to me” (104). Her absolute rejection of motherhood is premised on the abandonment that Xuela feels due to her mother’s death. It opens, permeates, and closes the narrative. Rody argues that this refusal of motherhood is pervasive within the fiction of Caribbean women authors. This renunciation of reproduction, Rody reads as a way to revise mothering so that the female characters can claim a new relationship with history by choosing an

adoptive heir to nurture. Xuela, for Rody, is a dramatic departure from this fictional norm. She not only declines to become a mother, but also does not choose a younger woman to nurture. (Of course, there are not any younger women to encourage within the narrative. All of the women are either of her generation or older and they do not reproduce.) Maryse Condé, in contrast, interprets the refusal of motherhood in Caribbean women's fiction as a nuanced form of feminist protest against the identification of women with their reproductive potential and a failure to imagine a better future for Caribbean female subjects. I would categorize Rody's criticism as future-oriented and Condé's as past-oriented. Xuela's portrayal is past-oriented. She does not imagine a better or different future for Caribbean female subjects because she is consumed with despair over her mother's death (which is an argument to which I will return later in the chapter) and is too cognizant of how the symbolic structure of Dominica is dependent on the marginalization of her subject-location. She recognizes that as a poor Caribbean female subject the position she is meant to occupy is one of lack. This can be seen when she learns to write letters in primary school: "It was well known that a person in the position that I was expected to occupy – the position of a woman and a poor one – would have no need whatsoever to write a letter" (18). The fact that her education requires her to learn something that is expected to have little use value for her makes Xuela want to write letters in which to express her feelings. Xuela's response to the marginalization of her position is to challenge it. This awareness is produced by an intimate awareness of the history of Dominica. She says that:

For to me history was not a large stage filled with commemoration, bands, cheers, ribbons, medals, the sound of fine glass clinking and raised high in the air; in other words, the sounds of victory. For me victory was not only the past: it was the past and it was also the present. I did not mind defeat, I only minded that it

had to last so long; I did not see the future, and that is perhaps as it should be. Why should anyone see such a thing? And yet . . . and yet, it made me sad to know that I did not look straight ahead of me, I always looked back, sometimes I looked to the side, but mostly I looked back. (138)

Xuela's backward gazing informs her sense of history. And this understanding of history enables her to critique her society. Children, in contrast, require a future orientation. Consequently, what allows Xuela to deconstruct Caribbean society is the same characteristic that informs her disinterest in motherhood – her orientation to, or fixation, on the past.

Her preoccupation with the past also enables Xuela to speak herself because she is able to perceive, critique, and respond to the scripts that overdetermine black female subjectivity within the Caribbean. She is aware that persons of her subject position are the silenced, the shadows, and the margins because they are not regarded as people. This silence is not only racialized but it is also gendered. Giving voice to one's thoughts, oral or written, Xuela discloses, is the primary domain of men, as can be seen when she surmises that only a man who is proud of the pale hue of his skin would need the answer to the question 'what makes the world turn?' and have the luxury of volumes in which to respond to that question. In contrast, when Xuela, a multi-racial Caribbean female subject, asks that question her voice is overcome with despair. This consideration induces despondency in Xuela because from her position it appears as if it is the dispossession of persons like her that enables the turning of the world. Xuela's father, however, has some access to the aggressive assertion of identity and exploitative victory of which colonial white male masculinity is the model. Because a male gender is privileged in a patriarchal social structure, Alfred can pursue power and money. Xuela, on the other hand, recognizes that as a female, she is already excluded from such a possibility. As a black

Caribbean female subject, she is not only disallowed access to money and power but also is located in the space of invisibility. A number of female characters in the novel are cloaked in invisibility: Xuela's mother, Xuela Claudette Richardson, and the paternal grandmother, Mary. Xuela tells us that Mary is without clear features to her son, Alfred, Xuela's father. This is important because Alfred narrates as much as he knows about his father, a white Scots-man, to Xuela. The family history that is remembered is of the white and male progenitor. The unevenness of family knowledge silences the black and female subject's history and life experiences. Xuela Claudette's name also reflects this silencing. Xuela is the Carib name given to her by her mother. Claudette Desvarieux is the name of the nun who raised Xuela Claudette. Xuela considers how naming participates in engendering the humiliation experienced by black subjects as those who have been defeated:

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? My own name is her name . . . but who are these people Claudette, Desvarieux, and Richardson? To look into it, to look at it, could only fill you with despair; the humiliation could only make you intoxicated with self-hatred. For the name of any one person is at once her history recapitulated and abbreviated, and on declaring it, that person holds herself high or low, and the person hearing it holds the declarer high or low. (79)

Naming, as the above reveals, carries with it a value system. And this meaning structure, like the Christianity of the colonized and the colonial education system mentioned earlier, are premised on the defeat of figures like Xuela. In such a symbolic structure, Xuela would have to speak herself in order to dismantle the invisibility on which her subject-position is constructed, as Xuela does. For Xuela to speak herself requires as much an act of self-assertion that is reminiscent of her father's determination to possess power and money, which is a similarity I will return to later in the chapter. Early in the narrative she

asserts: “I spoke to myself because I grew to like the sound of my own voice. It had a sweetness to me, it made my loneliness less, for I was lonely and wished to see people in whose faces I could recognize something of myself” (16). Xuela’s speaking of herself is in defiance of her culture. It is an act rife with self-assertion and self-possession that she likens to the colonial adventure: “The impulse to possess is alive in every heart, and some people choose vast plains, some people choose high mountains, some people choose wide seas, and some people choose husbands; I chose to possess myself” (173/4). This moment is reminiscent of Sula who takes a similar stance. In being a self-possessed figure Xuela rejects given scripts and voices herself.

In voicing herself, Xuela does not allow room for any other voice, even if it is female. In fact, Xuela does not even name her stepmother, which can be read as part of Xuela’s struggle with her father’s second wife and Xuela’s participation in the marginalization of another black Caribbean female subject. It can also be understood as part of Xuela’s fierce claiming of the self; in this assertion of self, she does not admit any other voice. The narrative space is Xuela’s interiority, as mentioned earlier. Therefore, the space-clearing gesture enacted by Xuela within the novel is also mirrored in its form, fictionalized autobiography. Autobiography has a long history of being utilized by women authors to speak themselves and ‘break their chains of invisibility’ (Donnell 128), as Alison Donnell notes. Autobiography, according to Donnell, allow women writers to assert an identity that is different from the one bequeathed by liberal humanism to the white western male. *The Autobiography of My Mother* is no exception to these literary prescripts, even though it is in the realm of fiction. In making herself visible, Xuela asserts a different kind of identity, a ‘demonic’ Caribbean female subjectivity, than the

one available to her as a mixed-race Caribbean female subject. This ‘demonic’ identity allows Xuela to claim the entire island as her birthright and inheritance as she rejects motherhood: “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” (89). This bold act of self-assertion is similar to a stance Jamaica Kincaid evinces in an interview with Moira Ferguson. Kincaid says that when colonizers take things that are not native to or cannot grow in their climates like cocoa or tea for instance, it does not threaten their identity. In fact, according to Kincaid, it enhances their identity, as is seen in terms like ‘Dutch tulips’ for instance. In contrast, the colonized or persons in a weaker position, Kincaid remarks, feel threatened by claiming things that do not belong to them and retain narrow definitions of themselves. She suggests that the colonized “take back. Not just reclaim. Take – period” (Ferguson 168). To ‘take’ in the manner that Kincaid suggests requires incredible self-possession. I read Xuela’s claiming of the island as exemplifying Kincaid’s position and part of her ‘demonic’ potential.

Such behavior distinguishes Xuela from the other women in her family. As stated earlier, her mother and both grandmothers are largely unknowable to Xuela. In fact, Xuela admits that she does not know what language Xuela Claudette spoke.⁹ In spite of

⁹ The question of language is very critical in Dominica. Dominica is the only English-speaking island in the eastern Caribbean that retains a significant presence of indigenous people. The Kalinagos (Caribs) live on the east coast of Dominica on land set aside by the British in 1903 and increased by the Dominican government in 1996. This reservation is known as The Carib Territory. Only a few Kalinago still speak the indigenous language. This is probably not the language that Xuela Claudette speaks since Catholic nuns raised Xuela Claudette in a convent. Throughout Dominican history, the French and British exchanged ownership of Dominica twice. Although English is the official language since the British were the last colonizers, French culture is more dominant because the British were absentee landowners whereas the French settled. French cultural dominance manifests itself in language. Most Dominicans speak a French based Kwéyòl (Creole) although in the north eastern parts of the island people speak an English based Creole called Cocoy. Given this history, it is quite possible that Xuela Claudette may have spoken French

her limited knowledge of her mother, Xuela relates what others have told her of Xuela Claudette:

Her hair was black, her fingers were long, her legs were long, her feet were long and narrow with a high instep, her face was thin and bony, her chin was narrow, her cheekbones high and wide, her lips were thin and wide, her body was thin and long; she had a natural graceful gait; she did not speak much. She perhaps never said anything that was very important, no one has ever told me; I do not know what language she spoke. (198)

A similar ignorance is enacted in Xuela's recurring dream in which Xuela can only see Xuela Claudette's shoes and the hem of her dress. Xuela never sees her mother's face.

Her ignorance of Xuela Claudette is symptomatic of a colonial plantation society where certain subject positions are viewed as marginal. This relationship between the title, *The Autobiography of My Mother*, and the novel itself even reflects this ignorance. It

emphasizes both Xuela's ignorance and the impossibility of writing the story of her mother's life. Her relationship to her mother can be described similarly to the father's to Mary: "His mother remained to him without clear features" (183). The difference

between her father's relationship with Mary and her relationship with Xuela Claudette is that Alfred chooses to privilege his white male father over his mother whereas Xuela is denied Xuela Claudette because of the latter's young death. Even though her mother is dead and Xuela knows very little about her, Xuela Claudette's death is figured as a very present absence (which I develop when I discuss Xuela's mourning and melancholia).

Besides her mother, Xuela also wonders about Mary and her maternal grandmother. Their invisibility fuels Xuela's assertion of self, as is seen when she states that she is like her

and English (because she was raised by French catholic nuns), Kwéyòl (because it is most widely spoken in Dominica), or Cocoy (because she is from the eastern part of the island). See Baker, *Centring the Periphery: Chaos, Order, and the Ethnohistory of Dominica* and Knight and Palmer, *The Modern Caribbean* for more information. Kincaid is definitely referencing this rich linguistic history through Xuela raising the question of what language Xuela Claudette spoke.

father and unlike her mother because she is alive. Her refusal to allow other voices into her narrative results from her awareness of a gendered family history of women made invisible, as is seen when she says: “I was not physically robust, my voice was weak, I was female” (195). Although Xuela does not have the luxury of volumes to respond to what makes the world turn, she is not in the same position as the women in her family. Their invisibility means that they cannot be represented, which is the impossibility Xuela encounters in trying to reconstruct her mother’s life. How Xuela depicts herself is a more accurate assessment of them given what is known of her mother and both grandmothers: “I, Xuela, am not in a position to make my feelings have any meaning” (137). Unlike her female forebears, Xuela’s control of the narrative not only shows her feelings have meaning but also only privileges her feelings and their meanings.

Privileging her feelings and their meanings suggests an alternative meaning structure that reverses the owner of the gaze within colonial Caribbean culture. Xuela dismantles both the raced and gendered gaze by not giving access to a male or white perspective within the narrative. Her ownership of the gaze is seen in her relationship with Roland. Xuela states that: “I could see him better than he could see himself” (167). In this dynamic, the black male Caribbean subject is subject to her gaze. Thus, Xuela disrupts conventional gender protocols. This ‘demonic’ assertion of self also enables her fracturing of whiteness, as is seen in her relationship with Philip, particularly in Xuela’s description of his skin. De Ferrarri and J. Brooks Bouson interpret Xuela as deliberately misquoting a knowledge system that perceives brown skin as indicative of human immaturity: “his skin was thin and pink and transparent, as if it were on its way to being skin but had not yet reached the state that real skin is” (152). In this reversal, whiteness is

no longer the dominant or superior half of the black/white binary. This subversion characterizes their marriage. This is seen in the colors that they wear. Xuela dresses herself in black and clothes him in “the colors of the newly born, the innocent, the weak, youth” (218). Because she reverses the gaze, she is able to control and manipulate Philip. Although Elizabeth interprets Xuela’s relationship with Philip as superior to hers because Xuela married a British expatriate, this is not a space where Xuela repeats conventional raced and gendered conventions. Thus, Xuela departs from normative models of black femininity to offer a truly demonic figure.

The Desiring Subject: an Alternative Sexual-Erotic Model

This new model is premised on the Caribbean female subject as a desiring and desired subject, and this model is inherently transgressive because it departs from the Victorian moral-economy of Dominica. Xuela recognizes that the moral-sexual strictures that target her subject-position intend to regulate her relationship to her and other persons’ bodies. This is witnessed when she observes that her teachers thought her quiet, studious, and modest. Modesty, she apprehends, marks a presumed disinterest in her or anyone else’s body, which is a demand that is only made on her because she is female. Later, as a teenager at the religious high school Xuela attends, she recalls that the other young women were already anxious and ashamed of their bodies. Only children who were born within marriage attend this school. In a post-plantation Caribbean society, this requirement limits the number of children who enroll because most children are born outside the confines of marriage, as Xuela informs the reader. She notes that the education curriculum was designed to engender humiliation within her and those of her subject position, which the requirement about children being born within a marriage

encourages. Her awareness of the humiliation that attends her subject-position even informs how Xuela imagines her mother. She speculates that Xuela Claudette who was raised by French Catholic nuns was: “shy, quiet, long-suffering, unquestioning, modest, wishing-to-die-soon person” (199). Thus, from Xuela’s perspective what we can observe is a social structure premised upon the policing of Caribbean women’s bodies and sexuality in order to dominate them. Xuela discloses a system where women are disempowered by their bodies. This is a very gendered narrative. No similar demand is made on the men, who father children for different women of which her father and paternal grandfather are examples. Her awareness enables Xuela to perform modesty, but this apparent demureness is in fact untrue of her lived relationship to her body. Xuela masturbates at night in bed. She tells the reader that: “my hands had travelled up and down and all over my own body in a loving caress, finally coming to the soft, moist spot between my legs, and a gasp of pleasure had escaped my lips which I would allow no one to hear” (43). Here we witness that Xuela gains pleasure from touching herself and becoming familiar with her body. Xuela’s actions, although occurring within a private space, are in defiance of the Victorian moral-economy that induces shame in Caribbean women. I read this defiance as part of her ‘demonic’ potential, and it is in this demonism that Xuela presents an alternative model for a desiring and desired Caribbean female subject.

This other model is premised upon an embrace of herself. Xuela tells us that: “whatever I was told to hate I loved and loved the most . . . whatever was native to me, whatever I could not help and was not a moral failing – those things about me I loved with the fervor of the devoted” (32/3). Xuela’s love of herself is constituted on an

acceptance of herself that is engendered in opposition. This self-love forms the alternative sexual-erotic model in the novel. Xuela first articulates this other aesthetic model in the scene where the school children encounter the female apparition at the mouth of the river. Xuela describes the specter as: “beautiful in a way that made sense to us, not a European way; she was dark brown in skin, her hair was black and shiny and twisted into small coils around her head” (35). This illustration captures that beauty is in fact subjective and carries with it a value system and way of understanding the world. She makes sense to them because the apparition looks like the children. It stands in contrast to Xuela’s description of her stepmother who is biracial (black and white) but is physically similar to her white ancestry: “her lips were shaped like those of people from a cold climate: thin and ungenerous. . . Her nose was long and sharp, like an arrow; her cheekbones were also sharp” (29). In this rendering, Xuela ascribes to features that are traditionally perceived as Anglo-European lack of beauty; she divests them of the attractiveness that is normally attached to them by reading these features as of her stepmother’s character, so that it is a doubled move where one signifies the other. Xuela has appropriated the method of the white gaze that attaches negative meanings to the black physiognomy. The novel therefore contains an economy of beauty where one aesthetic is displaced and replaced with something else, something local. The aesthetic ideal as articulated by Xuela is based upon women who look like and possess the kind of physical features that Caribbean women have; that is, women who look like Xuela, black and Carib. This is why I do not distinguish among black, Carib, and mixed-race. Based on the grounds developed in the novel, women of color, regardless of their race are positioned in opposition to white womanhood.

While these incidents from her childhood referenced above already suggest Xuela's eventual absolute disavowal of the given Anglo-European sexual-erotic model, it is only as a teenager that Xuela consciously fully develops another paradigm. How this happens is significant. It occurs after Xuela's first and only abortion described in the narrative space of the novel. In a fantastical-monstrous version of the experience of motherhood for enslaved black women, Xuela imagines bearing numerous children but not being a mother to them. She would bear them from different body parts, destroy them, eat them whole, infect them with diseases, and condemn them to 'the same posture in which they had been born.' She ends this dark dream imagining burying these children and forgetting where she buries them. I suggest that this is a hyperbolic version of motherhood under Atlantic slavery.¹⁰ It is as an absolute rejection of motherhood within a post-plantation, former slave society. These narratives of Caribbean female subjectivity will be rejected in the creation of 'the demonic' model. In fact, I view the progression of this scene as Xuela birthing herself into a different kind of female subject. The fantastical rejection is the first stage of the metamorphosis. This moment occurs after she abandons the LaBatte household and lives alone under humble circumstances. It continues when Xuela cuts off her hair and wears the clothes of a dead man. She deliberately un-genders herself as she consciously abandons the scripts that are given to her. My reading is similar to De Ferrari's who also sees Xuela as becoming empowered when she recovers her body from colonial scripts through the process of un-gendering. Once Xuela rejects these scripts, she comes to know herself. This process suggests that there is a true, knowable self underneath the images given to her by the North Atlantic. Knowing herself

¹⁰ Kathryn E. Morris offers a similar but slightly different interpretation: she argues that this is a nightmarish rewriting of the myth of the native woman's fertility and cruelty as a mother.

and knowing what she is capable of produces within her a fear that seeing herself assuages. This is a critical detail: in a moment reminiscent of Eve from *Paradise Lost*, seeing her reflection in the river comforts Xuela. Seeing herself also comforts her against the knowledge of who she is: a hard person who is incapable of love and equally capable of self-destruction. But what is most important about this self-knowledge is that she learns to love what she sees:

It was seeing my own face that comforted me. I began to worship myself. My black eyes, the shape of half-moons, were alluring to me; my nose, half flat, half not, as if painstakingly made that way, I found so beautiful that I saw in it a standard which the noses of the people I did not like failed to meet. I loved my mouth; my lips were thick and wide . . . It was this picture of myself – my eyes, my nose, my mouth set in the seamless, unwrinkled, unblemished skin that which was my face – that I willed before me. (100)

The journey to self-love, as exemplified by Xuela, is intimately involved with the acceptance of her physical features. One necessarily bears the other. Alexandra Schulteis reads this process as an example of Xuela's self-production.¹¹ According to Schulteis, Xuela builds subjectivity out of lack and historical trauma. In embracing herself, Xuela's body is no longer a source of humiliation for herself. In fact, she embraces its various smells as her body changes: "I never doubted that I would like completely whatever stared back at me. And so too, the smell of my underarms and between my legs changed, and the change pleased me" (58). Once she has affirmed herself, she can exert ownership over her desire.

Xuela's ownership over her desire can be seen in her ruminations on masturbation and relationships with Philip and Roland. Xuela is an unqualified desiring subject; even though she is the object of both Philip and Roland's desire, the novel privileges her

¹¹ Morris also reads Xuela as attempting to birth herself. She reads this self-birthing process as an intention to distance herself from her mother's fate as the vanquished subject. I disagree.

desire. Normative notions of propriety do not constrain her. Xuela does not repeat the power dynamics of slavery and colonization. The interaction with Philip that the novel depicts subverts normative placement of power and control in a black female and white male relationship within the colonial Caribbean social space. Xuela is the one in control. The first scene of sexual intimacy between the two begins with Xuela being unsure as to whether or not Philip knocks and waits for her to invite him into her room. Her uncertainty is due to the fact that Xuela was masturbating when he arrives. There is not enough textual evidence to indicate whether he waits for her to invite him in after he knocks or enters upon knocking. Xuela even asks: “Did he knock at the door? Did I say, Come in? Did he open the door quickly and come in with a mistaken look of being wanted on his feet? . . . Perhaps, perhaps” (149). However, I suggest that it does not matter because he cannot dominate her. In fact, Xuela informs us that Philip was not himself in her room: “He called my name and it was as if he were imprisoned in the sound of my name; his voice was muffled, raspy, like someone not getting enough air, he was in despair, he was in tears, although no water came out of his eyes, he was not himself, he never would be in this room” (153). Although the room that Xuela lives in is the nurse’s room, her presence is in control. She asserts control even when Xuela is in a position that would normally be viewed as vulnerable for a woman. She tells us that her head gets stuck in her nightgown while she is removing it, which leaves her standing naked before him with her arms above her head. Instead, Xuela is fascinated with how she feels and by the anticipation of sexual intimacy. These series of occurrences, therefore, have the opposite effect and increase her desire, which she asserts. In this sexual experience, Xuela directs Philip.

Kathryn E. Morris interprets Xuela's projection of her self as a renunciation of the power of the phallus. This can be seen when Xuela subverts where power would normally lie in a scene reminiscent of sadomasochism. Even though Xuela closes her eyes and ties Philip's belt around her wrists with her hands in the air, these are all actions she chooses. With her body apparently constrained and available to him, she instructs him: Xuela tells Philip to stand behind her, to lie on top of her, to place his hand in her mouth, and to kiss her entire body starting with her feet and ending with the top of her head. She never relinquishes control in this scene. This portrayal also discloses that Xuela's depiction focuses on how she feels and what she wants; for her it is about the experience of pleasure. Thus, Morris explains that Xuela's childhood socialization, a process centered on the self, is the model for her self-fashioning as a woman. Gary and Kimberly Holcomb argue that this scene is confusing because it conflates the stereotypical sadistic mistress with the bound and masochistic object. They continue that: "logic dictates that a mistress gains pleasure by controlling and punishing another, and would refuse to become the object of another's pleasure" (Holcomb 970). What the Holcomb's miss is that Xuela plays with and subverts received roles in the scene. Xuela's sexuality focuses on her pleasure and enjoyment. Thus, she is both the subject and her pleasure is the object, as can be seen when Xuela narrates: "In the moments when Philip was inside me, in those moments when the pleasure of his thrusts and withdrawals waned and I was not a prisoner of the most primitive and most essential of emotions, that thing silently, secretly, shamefully called sex" (163). This reasoning makes apparent that Philip is not the object. Philip, as the displaced phallus, is only a means through which her

pleasure is gained, which is Xuela's intent. This is what Xuela means when she says that she chooses to possess herself.

However, this is not particular to her interaction with Philip. It is also true of her engagement of Roland, even though Xuela claims to love him. Her acting upon her desire for him when she first sees Roland initiates contact between the two. When Xuela notices him in the gallery of the dry goods store, she calls out her name until he notices her and her "name was like a chain around him" (166). She discloses that she feels much pleasure when he lies on top of her. In the section of the novel where Xuela discusses her relationship with him, she focuses on his mouth. In her interaction with Roland, Xuela is a desiring subject. Whereas when she imagines her father and her mother being sexually intimate, she can only picture her father being the agent of desire. She says that: "when my father first ran his hand over my mother's skin . . . he would not have likened its texture to satin or silk, for no great beauty had been assigned her" (197). In this quote, Xuela imagines her father as the desiring subject because he is the one touching and thinking. Therefore, Xuela and her father occupy similar roles. For instance, Xuela mentions her ability to see Roland better than he can see himself. My argument does not preclude either Roland or Philip from being desiring subjects; their desire, which is implicated in their sexual intimacy but not explored, is only important insofar as it can be used by Xuela in living out her sexuality. Instead, I am interested in Xuela's desire, her commitment to it, and exertion of it in her interpersonal relations with men. Because pleasure is the object, she does not have any desire to possess a man. She only wants to possess herself. Sexual intimacy is one way in which she possesses herself.

In her self-possession, Xuela describes herself as a woman. The claiming of this category is part of her departure from the Victorian moral-economy of Dominica. Earlier in the chapter, I showed that Xuela challenges a white aesthetic model. Now, I expand that argument to posit that Xuela deconstructs how female subjectivity is constituted within a colonial plantation society premised upon a Victorian moral-economy. This is seen in her observations of Moira, Philip's first wife.¹² She says that Moira "was a lady, I was a woman, and this distinction for her[, Moira,] was important" (158). This distinction is important because it carries with it a value system that produces a structure of exclusion where a female subject is reliant on other female subjects in order to come into being. Xuela critiques such a conception of identity formation through her understanding of Moira (and also Philip). This can be seen when she observes that Moira is very pleased to be 'of the English people,' and this pleasure "is among the first tools you need to transgress against another human being – to be pleased with who you are" (156). Her dismantling of this standard of subject formation addresses how black and white womanhood are constructed on a mutually defining binary where the former is deprived and the latter is privileged. She analyses the binary of lady/woman to uncover that it maps on to white/black and rich/poor. Instead of allowing such an ideological system to humiliate her, as it humiliates the other black female subjects in the novel of which Eunice is the paradigmatic example, Xuela rejects its presumptions and embraces the status of being a woman, even though this label is meant to be derogatory:

For it is true that a lady is a combination of elaborate fabrications, a collection of externals, facial arrangements, and body parts, distortions, lies, and empty effort. I was a woman and as that I had a brief definition: two breasts, a small opening between my legs, one womb; it never varies and they are always in the same place

¹² Xuela is his second wife.

. . . such a description has at its core the act of self-possession and at that moment my self was the only thing I had that was my own. (159)

In the above quote, Xuela deconstructs the myth of being a lady. Her observations of Moira allow Xuela to critique how whiteness and femininity are intertwined and deployed simultaneously. She muses that Moira would presume that Xuela would not associate with her ‘the ordinary, the everyday,’ that is, a bowel movement or a cry of ecstasy. Xuela recognizes that in a symbolic economy that privileges a white female as a lady, ordinary things would not usually be associated with Moira. Xuela’s critique makes apparent and dismantles the ideological work that the distinction between woman and lady is meant to accomplish, that is, to distinguish between different raced, classed, and national female bodies. In this symbolic structure, poor (Xuela’s descriptor) black female subjects would not be imagined as ladies. Xuela’s critique is a doubled move because the other part is to recover the category woman from its marginalization, as the above quote reveals. It also places the category woman in a ‘natural,’ embodied state against the mythical narrative of the lady. Embracing the category woman is part of her political project because a poor black/Carib female stands in the space of woman in the colonial space. Rather than deny her placement, she decides to accept it because it is true of her: she is a woman. (This is possible because of her self-knowledge.) This ownership of her self enables her divorce from the need to be married. Her sense of self is not dependent on someone-else. Xuela’s self-possession enables her to assess the desire of women to possess men. She wonders why the state of marriage is ‘so desirable’ that women are afraid to be caught outside of it. She notes Roland’s wife’s defense of “the noble idea, if not noble ideal, that was her husband” (171/2). This defense is part of what Xuela would read as part of black female subjects’ defeat; that is, the defense accepts the gendered

narratives of propriety that police women's desire and sexuality. And in these narratives, women's sense of self is dependent on a man, and women are not desiring subjects.

Xuela rejects not only the grounds on which black female subjectivity is constituted but she rejects the very construction of female identity formation within the Caribbean. This is her 'demonic' potential: a woman whose sense of self disavows all narratives of North Atlantic female subjectivity. Instead, what she offers us is a narrative of self-love.

The Black Room of the World: the Melancholic Subject

This intra-subjective love narrative has its limitations. So far I have been arguing that Xuela depicts a 'demonic' Caribbean female subjectivity. However, this project, similar to Sula's radical subjectivity, unravels. Xuela says in the novel that she refuses to belong to or have anyone belong to her because the person to whom she would have consented to belong to, her mother, has died. Based on this logic, this apparent inaugural loss engenders all of Xuela's decisions and actions in the novel. *The Autobiography of My Mother* both begins and closes with Xuela's grief over her mother's death. It is a pervasive preoccupation for Xuela throughout the narrative. Much of the literary criticism on the novel focuses on Xuela's apparent fixation over her mother's death. The nature of grief and loss are only considered in relation to Xuela Claudette's absence. A more nuanced exploration of Xuela's psychological condition reveals that grief, loss, mourning, or any one of the synonyms used by literary critics, is more complexly rendered in the novel.¹³ Given this oversight in the literary critical discourse on the

¹³ For melancholia specifically: see Schulteis, *Regenerative Fictions: Postcolonialism, Psychoanalysis, and the Nation as Family*. For grief and trauma more generally: see Rody, *The Daughter's Return: African American and Caribbean Women's Fictions of History*; Donnell, "When Writing the Other is Being True to the Self: Jamaica Kincaid's *The Autobiography of My Mother*," Morris, "Jamaica Kincaid's Voracious Bodies: Engendering a Carib(bean) Woman." All of these critics view the mother's death as the foundational loss that informs Xuela's psychological condition and her actions in the novel.

novel, in this section I use Freud's theory on "Mourning and Melancholia" to consider the nature of Xuela's loss and to posit that her experience of mourning and melancholia disrupts the demonic Caribbean female subjectivity portrayed.

In "Mourning and Melancholia" (1917), Freud explains that both mourning and melancholia are two mutually exclusive responses to the loss of the loved object. The difference between them is that in mourning the subject experiences a loss of the loved object whereas in melancholia the subject experiences a loss in self-esteem due to her identification with the loved object. Otherwise the features of mourning and melancholia are alike: painful dejection, disinterest in the outside world, inability to love, and inhibition of all activity. The diverging responses of mourning and melancholia are owed to the nature of the loss. In mourning, it is discernable what has been lost; however, in melancholia, the patient cannot perceive clearly what he has lost. This obfuscation is a result of the patient knowing "whom he has lost but not what he has lost in him" (Freud 245). This difference informs their inhibitions: whereas the work of mourning is apparent, it is not always clear what is absorbing the melancholic subject so completely. The diminution in self-regard that the melancholic subject experiences is reflective of the subject having identified with a disappointing loved object. In other words, this loss takes the form of the failure of the object to satisfy the person's needs. The melancholic subject is unlikely to experience shame and is excessively communicative. He fixates on the disappointing loved object. Despite the strong fixation, Freud also explains that the object-choice must have little power of resistance and this is owed to the narcissistic nature of the love; that is, the melancholic's love of the object is really a love of her self. This loss in self-esteem that the melancholia subject experiences, Freud explains, is

unrelated to an accurate self-assessment or a change in self-perception. Mourning does not produce a similar reduction in self-regard because the subject is able to identify other sources of satisfaction. The ego is free when the work of mourning is completed. In melancholia, in contrast, the relation to the love object is rife with ambivalence and fear of losing the loved object. This is why melancholia can be instigated by a wider range of factors beyond death of the loved object. Melancholia, like mourning, must eventually recede with time although Freud cannot account for how melancholia resolves itself. For him, mourning is a normal condition whereas melancholia is pathological. However, Freud retreats from this divergence by stating that mourning only appears normal because it is better understood.

The Autobiography of My Mother can be read as an illustration of Freudian melancholia that does not recede with time. Xuela's despair is equally profound and powerful at the beginning, during, and at the close of the narrative. If we take Xuela at her word, then her mother, Xuela Claudette, would be the loved object whose loss induces painful feelings of dejection in Xuela. However, Xuela's melancholia is engendered by two sources: the absolute lack of a parental relationship with both her mother and father. While I agree that her mother's death during childbirth instigates Xuela's grief, I suggest that her non-relationship with her father is equally critical for understanding the economy of grief and loss represented in the novel. Her father's emotional and physical distance exacerbates Xuela's mourning of Xuela Claudette's death so that mourning transforms into melancholia: his emotional abandonment of her enables Xuela's preoccupation with her mother's death that in turn engenders her fixation on his refusal to develop a relationship with Xuela. Both of these factors contribute to her

despair. The portrayal of mourning and melancholia excavates a significant if elided aspect of Caribbean female subjectivity: the importance of the father-child bond in constituting female identity-formation. This identification is occluded by the dominance of the mother-child bond in the Caribbean social structure, which is based on a plantation economy. In this environment, black family social relations that have been engendered by slavery where descent is plotted through the female line and premised on the excision of the father enables the privileging of the mother-child identification, particularly when the daughter stands in place of the child.¹⁴ However, my reading uncovers that the absent father, emotionally or physically, still has an integral part to play in the constitution of female subjectivity.

Xuela describes Xuela Claudette's death as placing her, Xuela, in a vulnerable position. This vulnerability engenders feelings of shame as a result of her helplessness, as is seen when Xuela thinks: "my loss had made me vulnerable, hard, and helpless; on knowing this I became overwhelmed with sadness and shame and pity for myself" (3). Xuela's position is similar to her mother's who is a Carib. She recognizes that it is not only that her mother was not able to protect her, Xuela Claudette was probably unable to protect herself: "My mother had died when I was born, unable to protect herself in a world cruel beyond ordinary imagining, unable to protect me" (210). Her thinking discloses that Xuela understands herself as within a lineage of female vulnerability produced by the structures of subordination. Despite this longstanding powerlessness,

¹⁴ My argument does not mean to imply that there were not any West African family structure retentions, freed persons and their progeny did not attempt to create a nuclear family modeled on North Atlantic patriarchy, or the mother-child bond is indicative of a matriarchal social structure. Instead, I am interested in how the mother-child relationship makes invisible or less important the father-child bond. And I suspect that this displacement or secondary position in the Caribbean at least is partly possible because of the way slavery acknowledged descent. See Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book."

however, Xuela still blames her mother for leaving Xuela defenseless through Xuela Claudette's death. And Xuela is right, at least based on what she narrates. Xuela Claudette's death structures the trajectory of Xuela's life until Xuela leaves the LaBatte household as an advanced teenager. Given this logic, Xuela views her mother's death as abandonment:

The attachment, spiritual and physical, that a mother is said to have for her child, that confusion of who is who, flesh and flesh, that inseparableness which is said to exist between mother and child – all this was absent between my mother and her own mother. How to explain this abandonment, what child can understand it? That attachment, physical and spiritual, that confusion of who is who, flesh and flesh, which was absent between my mother and her mother was also absent between my mother and myself, for she died at the moment I was born, and though I can sensibly say to myself such a thing cannot be helped – for who can help dying – again how can any child understand such a thing, so profound an abandonment? I have refused to bear any children. (199)

The above passage reveals that Xuela is acutely aware that her mother's death disrupts the physical and emotional intimacy of the mother-child bond. It succinctly captures Xuela's thinking: it is not only that her mother died, but also, more importantly, that Xuela cannot understand why this event has occurred. Her incomprehension over her mother's death recodes it as abandonment. Once it is understood as abandonment, Xuela Claudette's death gains a powerfully negative valence that encourages Xuela to seek her father's attention to assuage the loss of mother. Furthermore, Xuela situates her mother's death within a history of maternal abandonment, which is why she does not have a grandmother to act as a surrogate mother. She is acutely aware of this compounded loss, and she claims that her decision to not become a mother is informed by this history of loss. Her refusal of the reproductive imperative is profoundly aware of history and is an indictment of mothering within her immediate family. It is also an absolute disavowal of mothering within the colonial social system. Her stance reveals that Xuela cannot

imagine another model of mothering. She also cannot imagine how her position can change, as is seen when she says that she did not mind being of the defeated.

However, this is only part of the story. To accept Xuela's reading of herself is to disregard her critique of West Indian fathering through her relationship with her father. If her mother's death leaves Xuela in a vulnerable position, her father's disinterest exacerbates Xuela's defenselessness when she is a young child. He leaves her with Eunice when she is a baby. As a result of his vanity, Xuela does not know which bundle, the child (herself) or his clothes, that he would have given careful instructions about to Eunice. It is not that Alfred has completely abandoned Xuela in the sense that he does not acknowledge that she is his daughter; it is that he is not invested in his female children, as can be seen in his equal disinterest in Elizabeth, as Xuela says: "her father had never really looked at her; seeing her after his son died was not so different from seeing her before he had died . . . Her father continued never speaking to her at all" (114). Patriarchal sexism underlies Alfred's behavior: he is only interested in his son. Even though Alfred speaks to Xuela when he picks up and drops off his clothes every two weeks, he does not touch or make eye contact with her. His manner embodies inattention and disregard. Xuela, then, is lonely when she lives with Eunice because she cannot become emotionally intimate with either her father or her mother. Furthermore, she does not develop friendships with any of Eunice's children. This environment underscores her grief over her mother's death. Her loneliness is further compounded when Alfred no longer drops off clothes to be washed after his second marriage; it results in Xuela no longer seeing him. It is significant that Xuela asks why she does not see her father anymore the first time she speaks at four years of age. As a little girl Xuela longs to be in

a relationship with her father. Despite his emotional and physical distance, Xuela admits that she desires to see her father and be in his company. Xuela therefore converses with herself as a result of her loneliness while living with Eunice: "I spoke to myself . . . it made my loneliness less, for I was lonely and wished to see people in whose faces I could recognize something of myself. Because who was I? My mother was dead; I had not seen my father for a long time" (16). However, this dynamic does not change when Xuela moves in with her father at seven years of age. This continuity is witnessed when Xuela thinks: "And so my mother and father then were a mystery to me: one through death, the other through the maze of living; one I had never seen, the other I saw constantly" (41). Ironically, living in close physical proximity to her father does not assuage the loneliness Xuela experiences. It has the opposite effect: Xuela becomes despairing at her continued isolation. In response to her desolation, she attempts to meet her emotional needs by recognizing her self: "No one observed and beheld me, I observed and beheld myself; the invisible current went out and it came back to me. I came to love myself in defiance, out of despair, because there was nothing else" (56). Thus, Xuela's self-love is premised on Alford's retreat from participating in his daughter's life.

Alfred's disregard of his daughters places Xuela in compromising situations. The stepmother is jealous of her and treats Xuela badly when Xuela changes residence to live with them. Elizabeth's mother attempts to kill her by giving Xuela a locally made necklace that kills the stepmother's dog when Xuela puts it around his neck. Her father, aware of the danger Xuela is in, negotiates for her to live with his friends, the Labattes. This move continues to endanger Xuela: she is susceptible to their, the Labattes,' predatory intentions, sexual and reproductive. As a result of the affair Xuela has with

Monsieur LaBatte, she becomes pregnant and withdraws from school. Towards the end of the novel, Xuela acknowledges that her mother was unable to shield her from harm because Xuela Claudette died during childbirth while her father refuses to safeguard her because of his disinterest in his daughters. Xuela, therefore, claims to love her mother and not love her father: "I had never known my mother and yet my love for her followed her into eternity . . . My father was able to protect me; but he did not. I believe instead that at an early age he placed me in the jaws of death. How I escaped I cannot fathom to answer myself. I did not love my father" (211). Even though Xuela criticizes her father, Xuela perceives that her mother's death initiates her vulnerability because it leaves her subject to her father and therefore without any parental love and protection. Alfred's retreat from fathering accentuates Xuela Claudette's death. Therefore, Alfred's relationship to Xuela is similar to Xuela's assessment of her stepmother's relationship to Elizabeth. As I noted earlier, Xuela surmises that Elizabeth is in a worse position than Xuela because Elizabeth's mother is alive. I suggest that Alfred's treatment of Xuela is worse than the mother's death because he is alive. Xuela is aware of this difference, as is seen in her thinking that her mother was unable to protect her whereas her father refused. Therefore, the consuming loss that drives the narrative energy of the novel is as much Alfred's abandonment as it is Xuela Claudette's death.

Xuela cannot consciously acknowledge the role that her father has in this loss. There are moments throughout the novel that disclose the despair she feels as a result of Alfred's refusal to father her. Importantly, Xuela consciously attempts to reinterpret their significance. The letters that she addresses to Alfred when she is a young child are one example. For instance, in one of them, Xuela writes: "My dear Papa, you are the only

person I have left in the world, no one loves me, only you can, I am beaten with words, I am beaten with sticks, I am beaten with stones, I love you more than anything, only you can save me” (19). In recalling this memory, Xuela makes two claims about these letters: they are the cry of a “small wounded animal” (19) and these letters are meant for her mother. While I agree with the first assertion, I disagree with the second. These letters are written when she is still living with Eunice. Xuela admits during this period that she longs to see Alfred and “be in his presence constantly” (18). It is important to remember that *The Autobiography of My Mother* is a retrospective narrative, and this structure allows Xuela to reinterpret and recast events and memories from her past. As stated earlier, Xuela’s voice and gaze are the only voice and gaze portrayed. Because of her singular status, Xuela alone mediates and assigns meaning to what she discloses. The narrative that she constructs about herself and her life informs Xuela’s re-interpretation. She even acknowledges that: “a memory cannot be trusted, for so much of the experience of the past is determined by the experience of the present” (214). If the closest moment there is to a present in the novel is the end of the last section, then her claims of not loving Alfred permits a retroactive obfuscation of the more complex and ambivalent feelings she has for him, especially as a child. It seeks to obscure the pain of his treatment of her while he was alive. Her childhood assertion of the right of the daughter for the love of the father is an audacious request based on the depiction of the Caribbean social system in *The Autobiography of My Mother*. The novel portrays men who have children but do not parent them and in the case of their daughters, they do not even acknowledge them. For instance, Alfred’s father, John Richardson, had many children with different women even though he was married. Monsieur LaBatte also has many children with

different women and only gives his name to the male children. Women, for example Eunice, are illustrated raising children in female-headed social arrangements. Given the depiction of a pervasive refusal of parenting by the fathers coupled with sexism, Xuela's despair over her father is a loss that is in defiance of this logic; it asserts an emotional need and right that her society does not acknowledge. Her grief over her mother's death is an acceptable, available, and legitimate emotion for her as a female subject. Her grief over her father's abandonment is not validated by the Dominican symbolic structure. Therefore, she cannot consciously acknowledge the effect of this loss on her.

Alfred, therefore, is the disappointing loved object for Xuela. With her mother's death, Xuela attempts, as a child, to identify with her father as an alternative source of satisfaction. However, his retreat from fathering places Xuela Claudette's death in relief. Their non-presence in her life enforces her feelings of abandonment by both. This is seen very early in the narrative when Xuela first attends school. She is the only girl in a class of seven boys and the only mixed-race person in an all-black school environment. Her gendered and raced difference only matter because the teacher and students use these identity categories to distinguish her from them. Already displaying the bravado that will be more marked later, Xuela says that she is not afraid of this new situation because her mother is dead and the mother's death is the only fear a child has. Her courage is also premised upon Xuela not knowing when she would see her father again. Her lack of a relationship with both parents engenders Xuela's apparent boldness. The underlying logic of this scene is that her actions are possible because of her mother's death and her father's distance. This is the structure of her reasoning throughout the novel. This logic is also seen when Xuela realizes that she misses her father upon his death. She wishes that

she did not miss him because he refused to parent her after her mother died. These two reasons are intertwined in Xuela's psyche: they ricochet off of each other. Therefore, Alfred must be accounted for to truly understand the nature of melancholia in the novel.

And like the melancholic subject, she identifies with the disappointing loved object. This is seen when Xuela ponders over intra-subjective love as a poor substitute for inter-subjective love. She thinks that: "Such a love will do, but it will only do, it is not the best kind; it has the taste of something left out on a shelf too long that has turned rancid, and when eaten makes the stomach turn. It will do, it will do, but only because there is nothing else to take its place; it is not to be recommended" (56). She arrives at this conclusion as a teenager living in her father's house. This formulation mirrors what she perceives he feels about her. Xuela conjectures that her father's desire for her to be educated may be indicative of his love for her although he never voices his feelings, places her in perilous situations, and prefers his son over his daughters. Therefore, whether he loves her is pretty ambiguous. Because Xuela suspects that Alfred may not love her, she cannot conceive of self-love as the same as or better than the kind of love a father may possess for his daughter. Her logic cannot fully divorce itself from a symbolic structure that invalidates her subject-position. She cannot imagine a form of intra-subjective love that can fully mitigate the dispossession she has experienced. The self-love she imagines is engendered from an acute awareness of negation: a marginalization of self engenders the assertion of self. The ego is constituted upon inter-subjective disregard. This is also why Xuela remains melancholic throughout the novel: her awareness of her marginalization disrupts her ability to imagine a completely other symbolic structure that can allow her to unqualifiedly love her subject-location. This is

witnessed in the closing paragraph when she thinks: “Since I do not matter, I do not long to matter, but I matter anyway” (228). Melancholia then irrupts the model of ‘demonic’ female subjectivity articulated in the novel.

Freud’s initial formulations on mourning and melancholia illuminate the pivotal role of the father in constituting Caribbean female subjectivity. His revisions in *The Ego and the Id* (1923) and a few key scholarly engagements with brings into the foreground the limitation on the ‘demonic’ model embodied by Xuela. In *The Ego and the Id*, Freud abandons the stark differentiation between mourning and melancholia to explain that melancholia is an integral part of mourning. In this new conception of mourning, ‘working through’ no longer means abandonment and substitution of the loved object. Instead, the loss becomes incorporated into the structure of the subject’s identity such that it is the fundamental process of identification. Therefore, grief is now an interminable process because the loved object cannot be substituted. This revising incorporates melancholia into mourning.

Critics who work at the intersection of race and melancholia take up this latter Freud to insightfully consider how melancholia is integral to identity formation for subjects who have been historically subordinated as a result of their racial identifications. For instance, José Muñoz offers a corrective on Freud’s theory that attempts to depathologize melancholia. Muñoz retools Freud’s revision by suggesting that melancholia can be understood as positive; that is, it is a “structure of feeling” that is necessary and can enable activist projects. He considers how mourning for minoritarian subjects is not only for the self but also for one’s community and history. It is a response to oppressive structures. Mourning under these conditions is endless but not teleological.

According to Muñoz, minoritarian subjects can use melancholia to reconstruct identity. Muñoz is not alone in rethinking melancholia for a politics of change and a communal agenda. Sara Kaplan also suggests that melancholia can be expanded from an individual, past-oriented paralyzing conflict to a practice that can transform grief to grievance that is attentive to the way that black unfreedom and its accompanying losses are continually reproduced. With this transformation, diasporic melancholia “can provide a historically and geographically specific militant articulation of present and future political desires” (Kaplan 9). Eng and Kazanjian also argue that melancholia’s refusal to forget the past engenders a continuous engagement with ‘loss and its remains’ (Eng and Kazanjian 4), which possesses the potential for both rewriting the past and reimagining the future. These critical interventions read the unending grief of melancholia as a site for the production of a praxis where the subject is located within a larger community or social/cultural realm. The intent of this praxis is to dismantle the structures and ideologies that have engendered melancholia in particular raced subjects and communities as well as articulate better conditions of possibilities for minoritarian and/or exploited subjects. While these critics’ readings gesture towards hopeful possibilities if not a utopic politics, the narrative space of *The Autobiography of My Mother* suggests that melancholia is a difficult psychological geography from which to articulate such an agenda. As Xuela’s characterization conveys, the inability to forget the past does uncover obscured or elided relations or histories but it also may only reproduce itself, an unending remembering. Even though her representation does account for how meaning structures engender melancholia in marginalized subjectivities, it does not imagine how these same minoritarian subjects can systematically dismantle socio-political structures as part of a

larger political, social, or cultural practice. In other words, the translocation of loss from informing the individual psyche to informing a collective politics of transformation requires negotiating the very reciprocal inter-subjective relations that melancholia disrupts. This is seen in Xuela's rejection of familial, racial, and national identity, as the opening epigraph attests. Of course her disavowal is premised on the collapse of the father-child identification but so is her melancholia. Ultimately, her characterization, congruent with Sula's, is iconoclastic and idiosyncratic. This is also a limitation on the 'demonic' model portrayed because it is not apparent that she is a reproducible model. Xuela is not interested in reproducing her model, either biologically or intellectually, or its challenge to structures that subordinate persons like herself. One of the challenges illustrated in all of the novels that I have explored in *Gendered Nations* is that the very structure of society has to be rearticulated for non-normative subjectivity to be reproducible and accommodated. And *The Autobiography of My Mother* stops short of such an endeavor.

If the Caribbean is usually imagined as a space of extraordinary female characters who mentor female protagonists into challenging raced and gendered colonial scripts or compromised mothers who attempt to contain their daughters in these very same scripts, then the death of Xuela Claudette and her mother not only releases Xuela to her own self-fashioning but also creates a space to consider the role of the father in constituting female subjectivity. The depiction in the novel suggests that the father-figure may be as equally compromised as the mother-figure in the Caribbean social space, which is established on the intersection of Victorian patriarchal structure and the Atlantic plantation socio-economy. Alfred's relationship to both Xuela and Elizabeth disclose that it is not only

female characters who have to transgress and dismantle the dominant symbolic structure inherited from the *Studia Humanitatis* but also, equally as important, the male characters who are the fathers, husbands/partners, and sons. A ‘demonic’ female model cannot do it alone.

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