

Intimate Crossings:
Literature and the Politics of Black Diasporic Affection

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INTRODUCTION

Beloved Communities

Rather than being a ‘linguistic event’ or a complex network of linguistic systems that embody the union of the signified and the signifier independent of phenomenal reality, Black creative art is an act of love which attempts to destroy estrangement and elitism by demonstrating a strong fondness or enthusiasm for freedom and an affectionate concern for the lives of people, especially Black people.
-Joyce A. Joyce

What’s love go to do with it, Joyce Joyce? Precisely this: it is an act of love of the tradition—by which I mean our tradition—to bring to bear upon it honesty, insight, and skepticism, as well as praise, enthusiasm, and dedication...
-Henry Louis Gates, Jr.

During a critical juncture in the field of African American literary studies, three critics took to the pages of *New Literary History* to debate the place of post-structuralism in the study of texts written by black Americans. For two of these critics, Joyce A. Joyce and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., the issue of love proved a central rupture in the ways they articulated the objectives of black literary studies.¹ Joyce’s argument against the post-structuralist turn in the field was based on her belief that African American literature “is an act of love” that black critics need to approach with adoring veneration and a desire to make it accessible to the black masses instead of being obscured by elites through Western theory. In his response to Joyce, Gates rebutted the value she placed on love as

¹ See Joyce A. Joyce’s essay “The Black Canon: Reconstruction Black American Literary Criticism,” Henry Louis Gates, Jr.’s response, “‘What’s Love Got to Do with It?: Critical Theory, Integrity, and the Black Idiom” in the Winter 1987 edition of *New Literary History*.

a valid analytic tool, demanding, “What’s love got to do with it, Joyce Joyce?” (347).

With this question, Gates at once he ridiculed the authority of love as if it were a maudlin conceit outmoded in serious scholarly work while also asserting that if critics do, in fact, love the literature they study, then only his version of love is acceptable. In the place of affection, Gates called for intellectual rigor that surrendered the high emotions of black nationalism, the strands of which still influence the field as evidenced in Joyce’s appeal to love black lives. To encounter black-authored texts through the “honesty, insight, and skepticism” that theory hones would, according to Gates, refine the field and make it suitable for the academy (347). Restating Joyce’s words, he suggested that his approach was sufficiently an “act of love” that proved one’s “dedication” to the literary tradition (347). I focus on this exchange as critical juncture because it exposes a commitment to love that black scholars continue to hold without explicitly stating the fact.

Just as love appeared as a crucial concept in Joyce and Gates’s discussion of one of the most prominent critical approaches of that moment, the affect² has been central to recent discussions about the stakes of black literary studies.³ As this project demonstrates, love emerges in some of the most influential currents in the field, including diaspora studies, black feminism, post-colonial theory, black queer studies, and performance studies. The idea that love bolsters community, especially the bonds of

² My use of this term is not grounded in affect theory’s use of it as distinct from emotions. Instead, I am following Siane Ngai here. Michael Hardt suggests that affects straddle two divides, that between mind and body, and between actions and passions (xi) in *The Affective Turn* (2007).

³ Critic Salamisha Tillet has also used love to vindicate the field in two distinct ways. The first speaks to the intellectual labor involved in scholarly production, “Love has always had a place in African American literary criticism. It is the feeling (the love for literature, the *love* of word play, the *love* for intellectual friendship) that gets most of us up in the morning [...]” (559). The second way is offered as a response to an assertion that scholarly work is not a form of activism that saves black lives, “It is a curious conundrum to have to explain doing what one loves to those we claim to deeply love” (560).

black kinship, is an important shared perspective between these distinct sub-fields, where it insists that black people have a distinct relationship to the affect. It is perhaps for these reasons that critics of African American literature and culture employ love to propose a means of survival for the black body and the black community as a whole. “Intimate Crossings” argues, by contrast, that we would be better served by probing the intellectual history of love in order to recognize how it exists in various historically and socially contingent iterations.

The notion of love as an affect that bolsters kinship and sustains the race has a long history in the critical tradition, as the affinity between Farah Jasmine Griffin’s and 1970s black nationalist era notions of erotic love reveals. In the essay “Textual Healing” (1993), Griffin argues that narratives of black women encountering sensual touch can offer a measure of healing against the negative feelings that slavery taught them to have towards their bodies. Bringing together contemporary cultural documents like women’s health manuals and self-help books with literary works by Shirley Anne Williams and Michelle Cliff, she examines the discourse of black women’s reception of sensual, affectionate touch to propose that it initiates a healing process for their bodies and psyches. The very idea of love is inextricable from the form of healing that Griffin asserts to be paramount to the ability to endure,

I am using the term healing to suggest the way in which the body, literally, and discursively scarred, ripped, and mutilated, has to learn to love itself, to function in the world with other bodies often in opposition to those persons and things that seek to destroy it. Of course, the body never returns to a prescarred state. It is not a matter of getting back to a “truer” self, but instead of claiming the body, scars and all—in a narrative of love and care. (524)

Given that the black woman's body, Griffin contends, cannot return to a "prescarred" state, the recovery for which she advocates is an affective one. Here, the restoration of love and the capacity to love the self despite corporal wounds is the remedy against oppression.

This view of love extends beyond the black feminist tradition that Griffin draws on, similarly invoking black nationalist affirmations of the importance of love in the lives of black women and men. Even as she alludes to Audre Lorde's concept of erotic love to develop her notion of the healing powers of sensual touch, Griffin makes no mention of the widespread discourse on eroticism and sexuality in the nationalist tradition. As I demonstrate in the first chapter of this project, many cultural and revolutionary nationalists viewed the lack of love that black men and women had for themselves and for each other as a particularly devastating symptoms of racism. In an array of literary, sociological, and political writings, nationalists argued that erotic love which originated within black romantic dyads could diffuse libidinal energy from the couple to the collective to establish psychologically healthy black subjects and sustained the black community. Griffin notices a similar "movement from individual bodies to psyches to communities" in a health guide introduction that Angela Y. Davis and June Jordan co-author; however, she views this as a strictly black feminist idea that initiates with Lorde instead of recognizing the resonances of nationalism in their suggestion that black people have a unique need for love (523).⁴ I mean to stress here that even when contemporary critics discuss love, they do not recognize the longevity of how love has been used in the service of politics and ideology. My project seeks to expound on the dissident

⁴ For Griffin to quote Davis, in particular, is to obscure Davis's connection to the erotic theories pervasive in black nationalism. These discourses predate the speech Lorde gave in 1978 speech at Mt. Holyoke that was publishes as "Uses of the Erotic."

relationship to love elaborated in literary writings that contest this critical investment in viewing love as a binding agent.

The widely held concern about the absence of love from the lives of blacks has flourished due, in part, to enslaved African Americans having been denied the ability to legally marry or to choose their mates based on love rather than their masters' demands. In contemporary criticism, some literary scholars undertake archival work to revise this account of antebellum history, thereby bolstering centrality of black love from the vantage point of the past. Frances Smith Foster positions her study of antebellum archives which demonstrate "that slave marriages were valued, that strong-self esteem was possible, and that love among slaves could and often did last despite distance and beyond death" against the scholarly and popular discourses that lament the crisis of black love, as in Griffin's essay (xvi).⁵ However, Foster's affirmation of love in the antebellum past is not free from ideological aspirations for the present. Such an idea is evident when she claims that "[r]ediscovering these stories of love in African America can create new versions of our common ancestral legacy in the United States" (29). The importance of this recovery work, she suggests, is that the "common ancestral legacy" of black Americans will no longer be known as one in which they have been historically starved of love. Instead Foster proposes that their legacy is the ability to cultivate love even in the bleakest of conditions. Her study seeks to prove that enslaved subjects' devotion to love was a tool of resistance against an institution that controlled the body but not the heart. In doing so, Foster attempts to dispel the myth of the "crisis of lovelessness" that serves as the occasion for works like bell hooks's love trilogy (hooks xviii-xix).⁶ While Foster

⁵ Foster, *Til Death Do Us Part: Love and Marriage in African America* (2010).

advises that African Americans' have inherited fidelity to love, hooks, by contrast, claims that they carry a legacy of affective deprivation into the future.⁷

Across three volumes published between 2000 and 2002, hooks explore the dire influence that black people's turning away from love has had on their lives; to this distrust of love, she attributes unstable interpersonal relationships as well as widespread societal issues. Thus, the trilogy aims to inspire and instruct black people to give themselves over to the redemptive and healing powers of the affect. *Salvation* (2001), the second book of these books, opens with the image of young black school children confessing that they do not believe that love exists (xvii). From this desperate scene, hooks moves into a series of others that all suggest that adult African Americans have never experienced authentic love. Utilizing her expertise as a cultural critic and scholar, she now writes to popular audiences to remind the black people of love's importance since it alone can deliver them into communities of belonging. Love, she maintains, overcomes fractured families and broken partnerships to provide a place for all blacks to belong, "That love lays the foundation for constructive building of community with strangers. The love we make in community stays with us wherever we go. With this knowledge as our guide, we make any place we go a place where we return to love" (144). According to hooks, love facilitates the creation of a safe, welcoming community that follows black people "wherever [they] go."

To a certain extent, this diverse group of scholarly accounts continue—whether

⁶ hooks, *Salvation* (2001). The love trilogy is composed of *All About Love: New Visions* (2000); *Salvation: Black People and Love* (2001); and *Communion: The Female Search for Love* (2002).

⁷ hooks's appeal to protect love in the modern day relies on this "conventional" history: "In particular it was in relation to matters of the heart, of care and love, that the colonizers drew examples to prove that black folk were dehumanized, that we lacked the range of emotions accepted as a norm among civilized folk" (xix).

affirming love in the past or the present—the project of black nationalist ideology in its use of love to sustain the black community. As we have seen, the recent African American intellectual tradition advances a view of the affect as a communal bonding agent. Furthermore, it does so in the service of stable categories of identity. For Joyce, Griffin, Foster, and hooks, their affirmations of love are also affirmations of the belonging of black subjects to the racial community. Even in writing about different time periods, their notions of love are ahistorical and ideologically static as if love does no other kind of work but bind black communities.

Even in black diaspora studies, the proposed corrective to the nationalism and ethnocentrism of black studies, some of the most decisive proponents of movement towards internationalist and cross-cultural paradigms exalt love and propose that diasporic belonging involves an affective condition. Paul Gilroy and Brent Hayes Edwards, who have both suggested that the non-discursive register of music transmits displaced black subjects' desire for racial kinship, best elucidate this position. In Gilroy's treatment of the affective dimensions of black expressive culture in *The Black Atlantic* (1993), musical "love stories" express black subjects' longing for kinship and the "pain" of dispersion (201-204). Edwards's work elaborates on this conception of love; he suggests that it can convey the desire for unity and also connect disparate fragments to create a harmonious, if impermanent, whole. In his examination of Claude McKay's narrative of diasporic transience and cultural difference, *Banjo* (1929), Edwards assigns an ecstatic, loving quality to the music that black diasporic subjects come together to play, ultimately interpreting it as "a desire to continue and even to perpetuate the state of collaboration and communion it orchestrates" (Edwards 221). Despite Gilroy's and

Edwards's investments in recognizing difference in diaspora, even they hail love as the foundation for racial cohesion.

In "Intimate Crossings" I analyze the overlooked ambiguities of love to demonstrate how its unevenness epitomizes the paradox of being in diaspora. My study explores how contemporary black diasporic literature is ambivalent about racial belonging and other communal constructs. As I have sought to illustrate, prominent black studies scholars have argued that the affect creates cohesion but have yet to recognize how it also generates division within collective groups. In doing so, they have elided how contemporary literary writers from the diaspora have explored the uneasiness of belonging by dramatizing the fragility of love bonds, and with them, the feeling of kinship that lies at the heart of racial politics. Beginning with the decline of the U.S. black nationalist movement in the 1970s, I trace the historical and theoretical uses of love in the contemporary period to provide an intellectual and cultural history of how writers refuse the stable categories of identity politics present in the critical tradition.

This examination of literary representations of love focuses on works about migration and travel by Angela Y. Davis, Jamaica Kincaid, Caryl Phillips, and Hilton Als to address the ways that black subjects use the affect to negotiate national boundaries and racial belonging. With this selection of writers, my project examines figures who are displaced from their natal origins and pursue distance from home rather than a return to it. For each of these writers, transnational movement allows them to push the boundaries of their belonging and the constraints of communal identity. This reveals anxiety about the porosity of national boundaries after the decline of nationalist movement in the U.S. and Caribbean. As Caribbean-British author, Caryl Phillips expresses the curious

experience of transnational movement and the feeling of unrootedness which ensues, “I recognise the place, I feel at home here, but I don’t belong. I am of, and not of, this place” (1).⁸

In this study I contend that these writers’ narratives propose alternative affective possibilities for the diasporic subject traditionally represented as longing for home and for kinship; instead, they resist love bonds and the fidelity towards home and frustrate stated aspirations to establish community. What I find are estranged subjects, such as those who seek to reconcile their ambivalence and endure their alienation from community, subjects who can only be accounted for by recognizing the significance of love as a means to manage their place in the diaspora.

This project exposes the different forms of love that have emerged in response to specific sociopolitical concerns about the increased volatility of racial and communal identity including erotic love, maternal love, and same-sex desire. These distinctive forms take on different political functions and consequently operate both positively and negatively. While both black studies and affect studies have largely viewed love as a positive force that imparts emotional pleasure and the joys of intimacy,⁹ my project demonstrates that love has long been an ideological tool that might be gratifying for those who want to sustain allegiances but is confining and restrictive for those individual subjects who want to exist outside of such bonds. It is in this light that the different forms of love that Davis, Kincaid, Phillips, and Als grapple with corresponds to certain post-nationalist investments. As I will soon discuss in the chapters, the erotic is a

⁸ Phillips, *A New World Order* (2001).

⁹ In affect studies, critics tend to think of some affects as positive (shame, disgust etc.) and others as positive (happiness, love etc). See for instance Sianne Ngai’s *Ugly Feelings* (2005) and *Our Aesthetic Categories* (2012).

gradation of love that serves as the language for U.S. black liberation movements like Black Power to propagate the race, creating an affective crisis for subjects committed to both national and international politics. Meanwhile, maternal love attends to the principal discourses for engaging anti-colonial nationalism that has been bolstered by motherhood imagery that articulates devotion to the Caribbean homeland. Usually excluded from such nationalist movements, other variations such as queer love and same-sex intimacy are already unstable within the terms of racial community, productively reflecting concerns about cultural and ethnic difference within the race caused by recent international migration.

In recognizing these different forms of love, “Intimate Crossings” also upends African American literary studies’ almost singular focus on romance and sex as the primary affective bonds that participate in black racial politics. While Claudie Tate’s *Domestic Allegories of Political Desire* (1992), Ann duCille’s *The Coupling Convention* (1993), and Candice Jenkins’s *Private Lives, Proper Relations* (2007), are instructive for developing reading models for how black women’s narratives of domesticity courtship, marriage, and sexuality were central to African American political discourse from Reconstruction and through the mid-20th century, my work expands the category of love beyond female-male romance to identify its other political manifestations. Furthermore, the range of authors I engage shows that love is not only an important topic for women-authored fiction, nor is it always relegated to the space of the domestic. For each of the two female and two male authors whose work I examine, gender as a critical point of their analysis and they all, to different extents, show concerns for negotiating various gendered spaces. For example, one of Davis’s explicit anxieties is about her participation

in a political movement that celebrates masculinity and demands women's genuflection. Along similar lines, the protagonists of Kincaid's novels are tasked with managing mother-daughter relationships that chafe under the pressures of the different expectations their mothers assign to male and female children. Gendered perspectives also inform the works of authors Phillips and Als, both of whom dramatize the complexity of male bonds, whether platonic or sexual. Phillips juxtaposes the intimacy of male friendship against the hollowness of a heterosexual marriage only to find that both unions are frustrated. Finally, Als's reflection of queer love between men struggles with the overwhelming influence of women who shaped his gay identity. This is all to say that these writers think critically about gender and use love to locate themselves in relation to social bodies, but there is no inherently gendered way that they write love.

In Chapter 1 I establish my examination with Angela Y. Davis's autobiography, which was written towards the end of the Black Power movement in 1974. My selection of a writer who is neither a literary figure nor a subject who describes herself as diasporic is an admittedly idiosyncratic way to inaugurate my study. However, Davis's discussion of the U.S.-based nationalist movement becomes crucial to my exploration of how the persistence of black nationalism complicates identity and belonging for the Caribbean migrants to the United States that come into focus in the subsequent chapters. In its stated intention to establish a community bound by black liberation politics, Davis's autobiography serves as an exemplary text of nationalist ideology and celebrates the kind of collectivity that Kincaid, Phillips, and Als contest. To be sure, I do not mean to suggest that Davis is conventional in her practice of nationalism. On the contrary, in this chapter I argue that the internationalist angle of her politics in combination with her

feminism makes her unique figure within during the Black Power movement. Here I explore a wide range of literary, political, and theoretical writings from the era that hailed erotic love as the tool for establishing the community in order to historicize Davis's distinctive use of the erotic to create a space for black women's equal participation in the heavily masculinist movement. This attention to love enables me to better recognize how Davis's politics appealed to masses as well as the varieties of the erotic that circulated in the Black Power era.

Chapter 2 relocates the project squarely within the diaspora and outside of the erotic with the work of Jamaica Kincaid, a canonical author of the Anglophone Caribbean. With Kincaid my project confronts prominent diasporic tropes including the transnational migration narrative and the ensuing intense feelings for the originary home and those left behind. Attending to Kincaid's novel *Lucy* (1990) and memoir *My Brother* (1997), I examine the full arc of such a narrative, from the day of arrival in the host country at the beginning of *Lucy* to the return to family and to Antigua in *My Brother*. My close reading of these works is informed by my excavation of an overlooked archive of Caribbean literary and sociological writing that routes the love for the nation through maternal love. I contend that Kincaid responds to this nationalist discourse of maternal love by disavowing it as a means for affectively managing her transnational condition; wholly absent of the utopianism and the pleasure of finding community that characterized Davis's work, Kincaid's protagonists long to exist outside of communal politics and ferociously reject maternal love to assert their desires. As I build on my historicization of love from the first chapter, here I reveal how love, especially the maternal, has held a privileged place in Caribbean intellectual thought as well as the field of black feminism

and postcolonial studies that draw on it when attempting to recuperate the image of the mother for collective politics. Given the prominence of Kincaid in the literary canon, my reassessment of her work warrants a reexamination of the relationship between Caribbean nationalism and love.

In Chapters 3 and 4 I extend my reach to a broader consideration of how the critical and theoretical fields have recently taken up love in diaspora studies. Changing course from the pervious chapters' interests in contextualizing within literary archives, these sections scrutinize critical and theoretical writing in order to place the Phillips and Als alongside recent discourses of racial cohesion from different vantages points within the academy. Chapter 3 explores articulations of intimacy to find that both diaspora studies and affect studies privilege ineffable communication as the height of love between subjects. Weighing these theoretical inclinations against Black Atlantic author Caryl Phillips's novel *Dancing in the Dark* (2005), I argue that the absence of communication reveals the instability of cross-cultural diasporic unions, thus challenging the idea of intimacy as a foundation of diaspora. To investigate the relationship between an African American and West Indian who perform as a duo in blackface, Phillips's novel takes advantage of the metonymic logic of minstrelsy where exaggerated features substitute for racialized subjects. While the narrative proposes that the love between these men is the truest form of love, it also frustrates this relationship at every turn, implying that this deep intimacy between cross-cultural subjects is impossible. Even as critics of performance studies theorize intra-racial masquerade as an achievement of the diasporic possibilities of self-negation, Phillips counters that this as unequivocal loss that erodes the black subject's sense of self both within and apart from community. This chapter's

engagement with concepts in performance studies and affect theory in addition diaspora studies exposes unexpected commitments to ideologies of cohesion in schools of thought that do not have expressed investments in such ideologies.

Chapter 4 offers both a return to familiar themes as well as a crossing into new intellectual territory. *The Women* (1993), a memoir by cultural critic Hilton Als, shares the previous chapters' interests in maternal love, same-sex desire, and eroticism while channeling these interests into a discussion about the sociality of love. Augmenting my examination of theoretical articulations of love, here I explore how a strand of mainstream queer theory offers a way to approach the anti-sociality of the Negress, the figure that serves as a model of queer black diasporic subjectivity in Als's text. I put this notion of anti-sociality in conversation with thoughts in black queer studies that utterly reject this negative posture, arguing that it fails to account for the particular needs of black queers to survive. In extensively close reading Als's text, I contend that he advances a notion of love that is not merely anti-social, but is also divests from survival. Refusing survival as an aspiration, Als refuses one of the qualities of love that scholars of black studies celebrate, its ability to propagate the race. Bringing together Als's literary text with theoretical writings reveals the value of a form of self-knowledge that is apolitical and gained only in intimacy with death and degradation.

"Intimate Crossings" concludes with a consideration of "Whose Song?" (2000) a short story by the prominent Jamaican writer and activist Thomas Glave. The narrative presents an opportunity to investigate the discrepancies between an intellectual figure's avowals of love and community and the contrary perspective taken in his literature. I contend that Glave subverts diaspora theory's hailing of music as the non-discursive

language of kinship, employing song to demonstrate the fractures and cleavages of communities in search of love.

CHAPTER 1

Angela Y. Davis and the Erotic

In the 1974 autobiography of the activist and intellectual, Angela Y. Davis, there are few personal and intensely emotional movements in what is largely a “*political* autobiography” that narrates the development of Davis’s radical consciousness (xvi emphasis in original). Aiming to incite revolutionary ideas in her readership, the autobiography largely subsumes the personal into the political. One moment that illustrates this tendency concerns the death of Davis’s lover, the revolutionary nationalist agent George Jackson. While Jackson’s death represents a devastating personal tragedy for Davis, the narrative utilizes their love to emphasize the depths of Davis’s commitment to political change and to posit revolutionary nationalism as a function of erotic love. The romantic relationship between Jackson and Davis represents one register of eroticism in Davis’s autobiography; my reading of the narrative suggests that Davis’s international travels present another. Therefore, to recognize these registers of the erotic illuminates the affective and transnational dimensions of Davis’s participation in the Black Power movement of the 1960s and 1970s.

To recognize Davis as an important revolutionary nationalist figure in the Black Power era is to understand how she traversed national boundaries and negotiated international discourse to acquire a unique dexterity at sifting through complex ideological

tensions. Building on studies that acknowledge the importance of Cuba to revolutionary black nationalists in the Black Power era, such as Cynthia Young's *Soul Power* (2006) and Mark Sawyer's *Racial Politics in the Post-Revolutionary Cuba* (2005), this chapter demonstrates that scholars have not fully appreciated how much Davis's politics turn on the erotic. Young is right about the role the international plays in the development of Davis's political praxis; I want to expand her reading of the autobiography to reposition Davis's experience in Cuba as a revision of the erotic economy that Herbert Marcuse theorizes in *Eros and Civilization* (1955). Where Young reads the trip to Cuba as a catalyst for Davis's criticism of the U.S. as an imperial power—a viable interpretation, consistent with Davis's political development—I consider how Davis's return to the U.S. commits her to working within the national framework to mobilize the masses.

Like Young, Sawyer examines the points of departure between Davis and her Black Power colleagues, explaining that Davis was unique because “unlike many others, she leaned toward orthodox Marxism before she became involved in various Black Nationalist groups” (95). In addition to her commitment to “orthodox” Marxism, the contradiction between Davis's gender politics and the male-centered gender economy of black nationalism would early on impede her full acceptance of black nationalism, “Her interactions with nationalists like George Jackson and Stokely Carmichael,” Sawyer acknowledges, “caused her to question both Black Nationalism's treatment of gender and its criticism of socialism. . . . The central idea for Davis was how to understand race in the context of other identities” (95). On this last point, Sawyer is especially insightful. I hope to show in this chapter that by embracing and retooling erotic love, Davis is able to make compatible what previously seemed incompatible: orthodox Marxism, black

revolutionary nationalism, and black women's revolutionary agency. In a letter to Jackson, read by the prosecution as evidence during her 1972 trial, Davis described the empowered women she saw in Cuba: "beautiful Vietnamese warriors—all female. . . . Algerian women [who participated in the national war for liberation] . . . women patrolling the streets with rifles on their backs—defending the revolution. But also young *compañeras* educating their husbands and lovers—demythologizing machismo" (371). By drawing on Cuba, Davis illustrates a post-revolutionary erotic economy that nurtures female activism and full participation in political movements, a form of agency she cannot access through black nationalism until after she returns from Cuba.

The first half of this chapter is invested in probing the commitment of black cultural and revolutionary nationalism to the erotic during the Black Power era, especially as it pertains to the development of a gender economy that limited women's agency. I examine visual, literary, and political texts produced by revolutionary and cultural nationalists in order to account for the masculinism of the movement. In the second half of the chapter, I demonstrate how Davis revises the accounts of the erotic theorized by such male nationalists as Calvin Hernton and George Jackson. Here I suggest that her trip to Cuba allows her to embrace the authority of feminine political agency to claim a space for her own brand of erotic activism.¹⁰

The Erotic Economy of Black Nationalism(s)

¹⁰Hernton and Marcuse suggest a rationale for why Davis negotiates these distinct ideologies to revise Marcuse's abstractionism and Hernton's materialist idealism: Sigmund Freud and Karl Marx appear as ideological bridges between the revolutionary nationalists and the New Left, encoding a theory of the relationship between eroticism and labor in her politics.

Alternating between activist groups, and eschewing cultural nationalist organizations and “pseudo-militant groups” after her arrival in Southern California in 1967, Davis navigated ideological pulls by following the “two rays of lucidity [that] shone through the confusion—James Forman of SNCC (Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee) and Franklin Alexander of the Communist Party” (Davis 159-60). Davis’s association with Alexander would lead her first to the Los Angeles-based Black Panther Political Party (BPPP), a group who saw its role “to develop theoretical analyses of the Black movement,” which Davis found “more sophisticated and satisfying than what she had discovered in San Diego,” revealing her preference for a theoretically astute approach to activism (160). Organizing an event with BPPP, Davis came in contact with Ron Karenga’s revolutionary nationalist group, US-Organization, an encounter that exemplified the black nationalist practice of female subordination: “The constant harangue by the US men was that I needed to redirect my energies and use them to give my man strength and inspiration so that he might more effectively contribute his talents to the struggle for Black Liberation” (161). Throughout this period, Davis confronted this argument against women’s leadership, noting that it often anticipated the organizations’ declining influence. To Davis this signified black nationalism’s instability and consequent inability to achieve revolutionary change. After SNCC absorbed BPPP, despite the violent threats issued by Huey Newton’s party over the rights to the Black Panther name, Davis was put off by Stokely Carmichael’s anti-socialist rhetoric, which proclaimed socialism to be the ““white man’s thing”” with no role to play in black liberation (167). She remarked that had Carmichael still been leader of SNCC, she

“would have left the organization on the spot” (168).

In this and later moments, communism begins to figure as an alternative to the confining ideology of black nationalism, despite Davis’s earlier assessment that the communist parties were “too conservative and behind the times in their uncritical stance toward the working class,” and her initial decision to join BPPP instead of the Che-Lumumba cell of the Communist Party (163). But “when the work of the [SNCC chapter] slowed down, adversely affected by [the] internal struggle” over gender roles (182), Davis sought help from an official at the SNCC headquarters, forcing her to recognize the conservative stance of black nationalist groups. The official dismissed the importance of a “special discussion” on “male-female political relationships” but instead “personally criticized” Davis for including Marxist thought in the curriculum of the SNCC Liberation School (182-183). Intolerance of women’s leadership collided with the intolerance of Marxist thought, culminating in one of Davis’s close friends being forced out of SNCC for his communist affiliation. At this point Davis left SNCC and, after a period of research, joined the Che-Lumumba Club (188).¹¹ She explained, “I wanted an anchor, a base, a mooring. I needed comrades with whom I could share a common ideology. I was tired of the ephemeral *ad hoc* groups that fell apart when faced with the slightest difficulty; tired of men who measured their sexual height by women’s intellectual genuflection” (187). As the black cell of the Communist Party, Che-Lumumba promised to reconcile her interest in radical Marxism and black liberation. As an alternative to Marxist-influenced revolutionary black nationalism, it also promised an erotic economy more accommodating to women’s participation.

¹¹ Davis became affiliated with the Black Panther Party while still a member of the Che-Lumumba Club. After returning to Cuba, she resumed her work with the Panthers.

The black nationalist practice of subordinating women sparked a Black Feminist movement that flourished in the 1970s and 1980s, as black female scholars and activists, including Davis, pushed back against the male-centered politics of the movement.¹²

“Womanhood was not essential to the revolution. Or so everyone thought by the end of the 1960s,” wrote Michele Wallace in her critical 1979 account of black nationalism and black sexism, *Black Macho and the Myth of Superwoman* (13).¹³ While Davis’s experience echoes Wallace’s assessment, I would argue that it was not that womanhood was inessential to the revolution, but rather, that it was essential if one knew where to look. In this section I discuss the gender dynamics of Black Power as part of a refined erotic economy that joined individuals in the common goal of revolutionary change. In this economy the womanhood envisioned by male nationalists was integral to the construction of manhood because it was placed in opposition to masculine revolutionary agency. In such a gender economy, subordinated womanhood served to buttress the construction of black manhood.

Cultural critics of Black Power have keenly interrogated the categories of identity operative in the period, especially the discourses of black masculinity and black

¹² In addition to Wallace’s book, other important texts from this period include *Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female* (1969) by Frances Beale; the anthology *The Black Woman* (1970) edited by Toni Cade Bambara; “The Combahee River Collective Statement” (1974) written by the Combahee River Collective of scholars; the scholarly collection *All the Women are White, All the Men are Black, But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women’s Studies* (ed. Gloria T. Hull, 1982); and Alice Walker’s collection of essays, *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens: Womanist Prose* (1983).

¹³ Michele Wallace, *Black Macho & the Myth of Superwoman* (New York: Dial Press, 1979). In *Black Macho*, Wallace writes a scathing critique of Angela Davis, arguing that Davis was a “Do-it-for-your man” (167) kind of black nationalist woman, unfit to represent the movement. According to Wallace, as a “selfless, sacrificing ‘good woman’” committed to liberating her man, Davis “set a precedent for black female revolutionary action as action that could never be self-generated” (167-168). The idea that revolutionary action could be “self-generated” fails to recognize that to be a revolutionary was to love the people and act out of love for the people.

manhood, in order to examine the ways in which self definition involved the cultivation of a black male nationalist performance of masculinity.¹⁴ Thinking about masculinity as embedded in the black nationalist erotic economy raises questions about the construction of femininity by the nationalist men who were on the vanguard of the movement. If these male nationalists, as Douglas Field suggests, considered aggressive heterosexuality politically potent, then black women are implicated in that arrangement: we might think about Eldridge Cleaver asserting that white racism “divested [him] of [his] Balls” and asserting that he needs to black woman to love him and thus make public this discourse about sexual relationships within the black community (Cleaver 209).¹⁵

Before turning to the theoretical and literary accounts that portray the erotic as sexual relationships consummated between black men and black women, I want to address the visual economy operating in the black nationalist erotic economy, and the role of seduction as a way to think about the differences in how male and female political agency were cultivated during this period. In *Once You Go Black* (2007), critic Robert Reid-Pharr examines the seductive power of Huey Newton’s “pretty, redbone . . . savage” body to “arouse, to stimulate, to whet the appetite, and to bring one to radical self-awareness” (136-37). For Reid-Pharr, Newton’s unique refinement of the physicality of his own body was almost enough to power the movement, but I would suggest that part of Newton’s power lay in his ability to diffuse his seduction amongst the collective revolutionary body. This is to say, as founder and leader of the Black Panthers, Newton refined the bodies of his followers in cultivating the “lawless, macho image” (Van

¹⁴See Rolland Murray, *Our Living Manhood* (2007), for a comprehensive study of male black nationalist masculinity and manhood.

¹⁵Eldridge Cleaver, “To All Black Women From All Black Men,” *Soul on Ice* (1968).

Deburg 12) of the party. Elaine Brown's autobiography, later sections of Davis's autobiography, and the poetry of Nikki Giovanni often remark on the "beauty" of revolutionary nationalist men, but I contend that even in descriptions of the features of individual men, what seduced them was the image of revolutionary blackness.¹⁶ Looking at images of public Panther rallies from Stephen Shames's collection (the same one that Reid-Pharr consults in his reading of Newton's body), the connection between aggressive masculinity and seductive beauty becomes even more clear.¹⁷

In the first image, Panther men are organized in a double line and are wearing the traditional uniform of collared shirt, black leather jacket, and beret over natural afro hairstyle.¹⁸ If they are armed, their guns are concealed, and the phallic symbol is replaced by a collective macho bravado that appears to emanate from within their bodies. The beautiful faces and strong bodies that Davis, Brown, and Giovanni write about are dissolved in the collective forward gaze that bestows a striking vision of unity which would be beautiful, even seductive, to the revolutionary nationalist eye.

The second image appears to be another perspective of the same event, and carries much of the masculine power found in the first, but there is an intruding presence:

Kathleen Cleaver.¹⁹ A trio of Panther men assumes the stage, with one speaking passionately into a microphone and two others at his side, with Cleaver just outside the

¹⁶See, for instance, Giovanni's poem "Beautiful Black Men" from *Black Judgment* (1968), Brown's declaration of love for Newton's "narrow buttocks and his broad shoulders and his clean skin" (7), or Davis's description of the Soledad Brothers: George's "shoulders were broad and muscular, his tremendous arms sculpture of an ancient strength." John was "[d]ark, with handsome, well-wrought features," and Fleeta had a "beautiful, unrestrained smile" (Davis 263-64).

¹⁷ Stephen Shames, *The Black Panthers: Photographs* (Rome: Aperture, 2006).

¹⁸ See Appendix, Figure 1.

¹⁹ See Appendix, Figure 2. Much of Cleaver's body is missing in the reproduced image.

formation. Several Panthers appear in the foreground. Wearing the Panther uniform and ascending the stage, as an officer in the party, Cleaver appears at the center of the organization and yet also located at its periphery. As in the first image, the men look forward in unison, but here, Cleaver stares intently at them, as if engrossed in their power. As the lone woman in the image, she represents the possibility of black female leadership in the movement: female spectator enamored of masculine power. Cleaver also appears in an image of a group of Panther women, the only such photograph in the collection.²⁰ They too gaze forward intently, but stand in remarkable contrast to the photographs of the men. In their shortsleeved sweaters, imprinted with the party name and the likeness of a Panther, they look more like clubwomen than militant revolutionaries. It is important to keep in mind that Black Power was invested in the image that blacks saw of themselves, and therefore the messages these images sent to the black community were just as, if not more, important than the menacing images perceived by whites. In this visual economy, would-be Panthers and black female revolutionaries could be seduced by the heady, aggressive beauty of the Panther men, yet the women did not share the same capacity for seduction. This was a serious problem for Davis and other black women who wanted to be revolutionary agents on their own accord.

To consider how Davis revised nationalist eroticism, I would first like to address black nationalist erotic in its most idealized form: Black Eros, which the sociologist and poet Calvin C. Hernton theorizes in his 1971 study *Coming Together*. Here, Hernton grounds both the oppression and the liberation of the black subject in sexuality, asserting

²⁰ See Appendix, Figure 3.

that sexual behavior is indicative of human welfare. Writing with an urgency reflecting the vital nature of libidinal fulfillment, he contends that “the human male and female are ontologically propelled to make love to one another, and that making love is an imperative of being alive, without which life is meaningless and driven toward death,” arguing that sex is a fundamental human need (5). Hernton advances this point with language that reveals the influence of Freudian theory, where the failure to express the life drive, *Eros*, leads to the death drive, *Thanatos*: “or at any rate, without making love, the sexual life of the human animal is something twisted, perverted, and terribly less than that of a healthy human being” (5).²¹ I mention Freud and drive theory to emphasize two key concepts advanced in *Coming Together*. First, where sex produces and sustains life, black liberation is located libidinally, and thus entangles the psychological impetus within the body. Second, the libido is not abstract in Hernton’s formulation; rather, it is material enough to be managed for the social project of black liberation.

Black Eros, even as psychological longing or a drive for affection, is a means of comprising communities of black revolutionary bodies. In an attempt to define it, Hernton writes, “Black Eros is the longing for affection between black men and black women as human beings in dyad relations; it is the longing for affection between black men and women in the family, in the peer group, in the tribe and finally among blacks at large in America as well as in the entire Third World” (Hernton 180). Thus, Black Eros is both the libidinal drive toward life and the action taken to satisfy it. As an affirmation of black heteronormative relationships and the rejection of both interracial and homosexual relationships, *Coming Together* propels both black dyads and eventually

²¹See Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1929).

black communities *in* Black Eros. In advocating that black men and black women enter committed romantic relationships, Hernton imagines that the Black Eros achieved in dyadic relationships will generate commitments between individuals and the nationalist community. Ideally, the libidinal fulfillment of Black Eros in dyadic relationships will move from individual bodies to collective bodies constituting nationalist communities.

Maintaining a suppleness limited only by the requirement for black expression, Black Eros is endlessly transferable: “Black nationhood, black pride, black nationalism, black identity, black beauty, black survival, black power, black everything, call it what you will—call it Black Eros” (154). In this way it becomes crucial to its utility; if Black Eros can be realized in any of these forms, it may be endlessly dispersed through other forms. While Black Eros at its most fundamental is heteronormative erotic love within a dyad, its extrapolation within the political makes it possible for nearly anything to be retooled as erotic and thus political. Libidinal activity thus becomes crucial to fulfilling the “longing” that individuals feel, but, perhaps even more important, to consummate relationships between individuals in order to form a community of potentially global proportion. “Black Eros is . . . what Ferdinand Tönnies called *Gemeinschaft*; it is the desire for universal harmony resulting in Black Nationhood on this planet; it embraces womanhood, motherhood, manhood, fatherhood, and black love” (180). It is this concept of libidinal diffusion that Davis revises; expunging its call for sexual submission and the degradation of women apparent in Hernton’s and other male nationalists’ theories of the erotic, she uses the transferability of the eroticism to position herself as a revolutionary agent who can organize collectivities.

In much of the literature contemporaneous with *Coming Together*, the erotic

discourse centers on the experience of male libidinal pleasure. Black male nationalists theorized and advanced a gender economy that was rigidly maintained, although contradictory to and between their writings. Prominent cultural nationalists like the poet Amiri Baraka “discursive[ly] remov[ed] . . . women from public politics,” consigning them to the domestic space, where they would work in support of their men.²² It is in these domestic and private spaces that the erotic facilitates male public ambition.

Baraka’s 1969 play, *Madheart (A Morality Tale)* shows the kind of genuflection that black men expected of black women, one Davis deems physical and sexual as well as intellectual. Such erotic economy requires Black Man to define his masculinity through the violent submission of Black Woman. It might be tempting to assume that any violence within the aggressively black nationalist play is aimed at whites, but we can’t yield to such temptation. Rather, the violence against Black Woman is part of the process by which Black Man comes to manhood and Black Woman to womanhood.

BLACK WOMAN [:] (*Laughs*) You need to, baby . . . just look around you. You better get me back, if you know what’s good for you. . . you better.

BLACK MAN [:] (*Looking around at her squarely, he advances.*) I better? . . . (*A soft laugh*) Yes. Now is where we always are . . . that now . . . (*He wheels around and suddenly slaps her crosswise, back and forth across the face.*)

BLACK WOMAN [:] Wha . . . What . . . oh love . . . please . . . don’t hit me. (*He hits her, slaps her again*)

BLACK MAN [:] I want you, woman, as a woman. Go down. (*He slaps again.*) Go down, submit, submit . . . to love . . . and to man, now, forever. (81)

This moment suggests that while Black Woman is politically conscious, she is inadequate as a black revolutionary nationalist woman. An earlier moment where she explains that she belongs to him, “but [that] only as a man will you know that” (81), indicates that while he too is politically conscious, he is not yet a properly revolutionary man. In a

²²Rolland Murray, “How the Conjure-Man Gets Busy,” *Yale Journal of Criticism* (2005): 299-321. 304.

violent enacting of Black Eros, the final step to making Black Man and Black Woman proper revolutionary agents requires a gender economy in which the black man is unambiguously dominant over the black woman. With his command of “submit . . . to love . . . and to man,” and her response, “I submit. (*She goes down weeping.*) I submit . . . for love . . . please love” (82), Black Woman’s submission conflates Black Man with love. In this way, Baraka suggests that in order for the black woman to love the people and the revolution, she must first love the black man.

Haki Madhubuti’s poem like “BLACKWOMAN” is akin to the gender economy of *Madheart*. “BLACKWOMAN” conceives of black nationalist womanhood as a consequence of black nationalist masculinity, positing that the “blackwoman : / is an / in and out / rightsideup / action-image / of her man . . .” (lines 1–6). The prepositions “in,” “out,” and “rightsideup” locate the black woman in relation to the black man and thus determine her position only in respect to his. It would seem that the black woman can’t be found, unless one knows where to look for the black man. The second half of the poem reinforces this thought: “in other / (blacker) words; / she’s together / if / he / be” (lines 7–12). According to Cheryl Clarke, “Though her sense of who she is may depend upon her man’s state of readiness, according to the speaker in the Lee poem, ‘blackwoman’ must be capable of *acting*—like a man” (Clarke 49). I find Clarke’s reading generous even in its criticism of the poem; instead, I would argue that the poem does not suggest that a black woman needs to be capable of acting, and certainly does not imply she should be capable of acting like a man. Rather, the black woman is an “action-image”: her action is to reflect his action. The poem is an attempt to define what a “blackwoman” is; it conceives of femininity by its opposition to masculinity. Although

here womanhood is derivative of manhood, to “act like a man” would entail not acting like a woman.

As we have seen, cultural nationalists advanced an erotic economy that limited female revolutionary action to one of supporting black male revolutionary agents. Black women’s work in the revolution was different from male revolutionary work, giving them a different relationship to labor in the movement. In later sections of this chapter, I discuss how post-revolutionary Cuba allowed Angela Davis to deploy the erotic in order to develop a new relationship to revolution, one not previously open to women under black nationalism. What Davis comes to understand is that love between individuals has the power to amplify love of the people and love of the revolution. Her erotic love will serve as an extension of her agency. Before this discussion, however, I want to flesh out aspects of the erotic economy of black nationalism which Davis rejected by dealing explicitly with revolutionary nationalism.

The most prominent strand of revolutionary nationalism, the Black Panther Party, espoused a gender equality that they contradicted in practice. For instance, Party leader Huey Newton often appeared as champion of women’s rights: he publicly acknowledged women as an oppressed group and urged his party to participate in the women’s liberation and gay liberation movements, ridiculing the notion that women and gays threatened manhood.²³ However, when Newton selected Brown as his replacement to become chairman of the party in 1974, Brown did not replace his manhood with womanhood; rather, she was positioned as an extension of his manhood in his absence. “I won’t be back. You’re the only one who could do it. *You are mine*. I can’t trust anybody else

²³See Huey Newton, “The Women’s Liberation and Gay Liberation Movements,” *To Die for the People: The Writings of Huey P. Newton* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2009).

with the party,” Newton told Brown in a phone call, asking her to lead the party when he left for exile in Cuba (emphasis mine).²⁴ His assertion that “you are mine,” undermines any distinction between personal and political possession; Brown was a member of Newton’s party and thus politically his, and as his “woman,” was personally his as well.²⁵ Without undermining Brown’s capabilities or claiming that Newton would have handed the party over to any woman with whom he was involved, this language underscores the possessive nature of a relationship that rendered her representative of his erotic power.

To further elucidate this point, there is a moment she recounts that occurred early in her tenure as chairperson. A member of the party challenged Brown’s authority, insisting that he would only speak with Newton, to which Larry, Brown’s chief of staff, replied, ““You’re talking to him now, Brother. . . . When you talk to the Sister here, you’re talking to Huey Newton”” (15). Coming after Larry’s personal guarantee to Newton that Brown’s leadership would be accepted by the male members of the party, the invocation of Newton’s name illustrates the means by which that would occur: Brown would not represent the office of party chairman, but Newton himself. Brown recalled an earlier exchange when her gratitude was met with a slap across the face and the demand, “Don’t *ever* thank me. When you thank me, it means you are separate from me, not with me” (15). Newton wanted to recuperate Brown as an extension of himself in a way that reified his masculine power. While some in the party felt their masculinity threatened by Brown’s leadership, in Newton’s eyes, Brown’s love for him, coupled with her womanhood, would not compete with his masculinity, but could only reinforce it.

Between May and June 1970, George Jackson wrote letters to Angela Davis

²⁴Elaine Brown, *A Taste of Power* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1992), 15.

²⁵As opposed to another member being selected to lead.

which were published in his epistolary collection *Soledad Brother* a year before his death in August of 1971. To address Jackson is to think about the revolutionary nationalist erotic economy that Davis participated in and even helped structure. Such a discussion of Davis and Jackson's relationship is admittedly anachronistic, coming as it does after Davis's first trip to Cuba, an event which I argue enabled her to embrace revolutionary nationalism. What I hope to demonstrate is how the contradictions shown in Jackson's epistolary inquiry into the erotic speak to the presentation of eroticism in Davis's autobiography.

While the literary and popular discourse of the day valorized black women as African queens of great beauty and strength, with enough sex appeal to inspire a man to revolutionary action, Jackson envisioned a woman whose revolutionary commitment was not derivative of their relationship.²⁶ In a letter to a close friend written prior to meeting Davis, Jackson describes "the only woman he could ever accept" as one who was willing to go without material comforts, "not solely because she loved me, but because she loved the principle, the revolution, the people" (Jackson 227). He then asserts, "I don't think this rotten society has produced any such wonderful creatures," before fixating on the Cuban revolutionary objective of putting "women in the same role as men" (227–28). In this moment Jackson anticipates going outside the U.S to find a woman with the proper commitment to the revolution; in much the same way, Davis turned to the international to learn how to work within the revolution as a black American woman. Davis thus becomes the ideal—the same "wonderful creature not produced by this society" that

²⁶See the epigraph to this chapter. Unlike the men whom the speaker in Madhubuti's poem addresses in "The Revolutionary Screw," the woman Jackson imagines doesn't derive her revolutionary agency from him, but must possess it before he will enter into a relationship with her.

Jackson envisioned.

Jackson's letters to Davis advance a theory of erotic love which promotes Hernton's idealistic views of Black Eros as endlessly dispersible, while also challenging the primacy of heteronormative dyads and libidinal expression. In Hernton's attempt to bolster relationships between black men and black women, sex was a crucial means of circulating the erotic as a means of constituting black communities. However, as Jackson often referenced his imprisoned condition ("all my days are accounted for" 303), as action itself, erotic love became the means by which the erotic was dispersed. Love emboldened him; in a letter to Davis he called himself "one slave that knows how to love" (285), another declared that "no one, and much more meaningful no black, wherever the hurricane has washed up his broken body, no one at all, can love like I" (298). These boasts affirmed love as an agency granting force to a subject who was systematically oppressed and physically confined.

If Jackson envisioned women as revolutionary agents, his view of erotic love is not without the trace of ambivalent gender politics. In another letter to Davis, he invokes the unsettling language of brotherhood to imagine her participation in political action:

I want you to believe in me. I love you like a man, like a brother, and like a father. Every time I've opened my mouth, assumed by battle stance, I was trying in effect to say I love you, African-American woman. My protest has been a small one, something much more effective is hidden in my mind-believe in me Angela. (302)

The gendered pronouncement of loving Davis "like a man" is meant to establish parity, where the turn to filial love should make them equal partners. Suggesting that loving her like a woman makes that love politically insufficient, masculinizing it makes her love agential. Furthermore, the virtuous chasteness of filial love imparts erotic love with efficacy beyond heteronormative dyadic attachments. Like other nationalists, Jackson

found inspiration for his “battle stance,” or revolutionary action, in erotic love; however, here he claims that love is not just the inspiration for his action, it *is* his action, the very thing he is trying to achieve. Held in isolation from any form of community, Jackson’s capacity to love is a radical breach of political incarceration.

In an earlier letter Jackson offers a definition of love that is helpful in fleshing out this final point, where he asserts that a profession of love is beyond the rhetorical, because love is located in the depths of the body: “I love this brother, my father, and when I use the word ‘love’ I am not making an attempt at rhetoric. I am attempting to express a refulgent, unrestrained emanation from the deepest, most durable region of my soul, an unshakable thing that I have never questioned” (240). With these words Jackson attempts to make the feeling of love and the profession of love material. This idea of love as deeply entangled in soul and body driven toward libidinal expression of expansion beyond the individual body; it at once takes advantage of Hernton’s theory of the erotic while adapting it to his condition as a prisoner, his agency limited by his confinement. In the next section, I discuss how Davis similarly adapts and takes advantage of the erotic in various situations as a means of contributing to the movement.

Angela Davis and Erotic Internationalism

“Flames,” the fourth section of *Angela Davis: An Autobiography* (1974), opens with Davis recounting the “unlikely conglomeration of Marxist theoreticians, philosophers, sociologists and psychologists, radical political activists, hippies and Black Power advocates” (149) who assembled for the Dialectics of Liberation Conference held

in London in the summer of 1967. New Left philosopher Herbert Marcuse and Stokely Carmichael, leader of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), were among the main speakers addressing the diverse ideological camps radicalized by the conference. At this moment in the autobiography, the presence of Marcuse (Davis's intellectual mentor) and Carmichael, the influential organizer of the black American community, indicates the conflicting intellectual and political commitments that Davis navigated as she forged a space to participate in the liberation movements that were flourishing in the United States in the 1960s and 1970s. It reveals that Davis, later known for her unwavering solidarity with the Black Power revolutionary nationalist camp, participated in a complicated enterprise to accept and be accepted by the black revolutionary nationalist community.

As the autobiography reveals, one of the central crises of Davis's early career was the conflict between whether to nurture her intellectualism at home or abroad, when movements, especially international movements, were linked to intellectual pursuit and contended with activist work. For this reason, the Congress of Dialectics of Liberation remains a major turning point in Davis's early career. Routing questions of liberation through familiar theoretical paradigms, emphasizing individual and mass action, it modeled one approach for Davis, and provides a way to think about how the international is configured and reconfigured in the autobiography. Davis attended the conference on her way back to the United States from Frankfurt, Germany; it marked the end of her time as a student in Europe, during which she "felt more and more isolated," ultimately deciding to return home so that she could "feel part of the collective coming to consciousness of my people" (145).

Many previous parts of the autobiography converge on the conflicting impulses that required Davis to choose between leaving to pursue advanced intellectual study or remaining in Birmingham during the birth of the Civil Rights Movement. Davis employs the figure of the Janus head to emphasize these conflicting impulses and communicate the “unbearable tension” of concurrently “star[ing] disconsolately into the past—the fretful, violent, confining past . . . [while] gaz[ing] with longing and apprehension into the future” (106). In this way, the Janus head maintains its symbolic function of transition—that Davis had to resolve the tensions between her commitment to intellectual work and to activist work within the local community, in order to become the scholar-activist she would later be. But there was also the tension, more crucial and less readily resolved, between the national and the international—as Joy James says, “the past manifests in the violent repression of blacks in the United States, the future reflects the possibility of an internationalist movement for a socialist, feminist, nonracist democracy” (James 1).²⁷ The Janus head specifically marks those moments where Davis is pulled between the national and the international.²⁸

Prior to “Flames,” her commitment to the liberation of the black community was articulated as physical proximity to the community. The Janus head is noticeably absent from “Flames” and subsequent sections of the autobiography for this very reason: her decision to return to the U.S. reconciled the conflict between intellectual and activist, international and national, thus reducing the relevance of the Janus head in the narrative. This is not to say that the distinction between the national and international is emptied of

²⁷See Joy James (Ed.), *The Angela Davis Reader* (1998). “Introduction.” 1.

²⁸The first mention of the Janus head refers to Davis’s decision to attend the Elizabeth Irwin School in New York or historically black Fisk University to study medicine. After this, the Janus head exclusively cites Davis’s choice of studying in Europe or returning to the United States.

its function. In fact, as demonstrated in the previous section, the autobiography reveals that upon her return from Europe, impediments specific to black nationalism prohibited Davis from fully committing to the cultural and revolutionary nationalist movements. I would argue it was in this international space that Davis encountered the erotic economy that enabled her to return to a U.S.-based revolutionary nationalist framework; that the “unbearable tension” of the Janus head was replaced by ecstatic feelings cultivated during her international period which allowed her to finally commit fully to a national agenda.

Returning to Davis’s attendance at the Dialectics of Liberation Congress, I suggest that the narrative positions London as a space of transition between the autobiography and the international by introducing and foreshadowing the conflicts she would have with black nationalist groups in the United States. When Davis met Carmichael and the London-based black revolutionary activist Michael X, she was “struck by the degree to which West Indian communities in London were mirror images of Black communities at home” (150) in their propensity to “indiscriminately vie[w]” white people as “the enemy” and consequently to overlook the role of capitalism in black oppression. As she accompanied Carmichael and Michael X to meetings with the black British community, she found herself discouraged by the rhetorical intensity of black nationalism and doubted the efficacy of a movement whose “response to racism remained purely emotional” (150). She recognized the ability of black nationalist rhetoric to powerfully register the black community’s affective lives, even admitting that she too was moved by such condemnatory speech, however briefly. Nevertheless, she would ultimately denounce such rhetoric: “As I listened to Stokeley’s words, cutting like a switch blade, accusing the enemy as I had never heard him accused before, I admit I felt

the cathartic power of his speech. But I also wanted to know where to go from here” (150). In juxtaposing Carmichael’s speech with a desirable path of action, which for her was socialism, Davis rejected more than the political ideology behind his rhetoric—she rejected the very thing it appealed to, the affective.

Not intellectually persuaded by the affective, Davis grappled with alternative ideas of the proper role for an activist in a mass movement and a means of effective mobilization. She sought to utilize her philosophical training and to apply it through direct engagement with the community. In moments where she writes of feeling anxious about getting outside the university and the colleagues who share her intellectual background, it is telling that she falls into a fetishization of her own intellect. For instance, she describes feeling like “an explorer who returns to his homeland after many years, with precious bounty and no one to give it to” and her “energy, . . . commitment [and] convictions” as a “treasure she had accumulated” (152) through her travels and study. “Her precious bounty” was the thing that initially stood between her and what she searched for—“my people” (152).²⁹ When she first arrived in California, and the life of a would-be activist, Davis already had reservations about black nationalist methods. As established black activist groups met her with distrust, Davis was left to search for alternative ways of knowing and connecting to the movement.³⁰

³⁰ The occasional cracks in the surface that Davis consistently tries to construct as a subject of steadfast intellect and rationality depict the process by which she came to recognize the validity of different ways of knowing, including the erotic. For instance, talking about her work with the Panther political education sessions, just prior to ending her affiliation with the party and leaving for Cuba, she mentions losing the “elitism” that might have been imparted during her education once she recognized that the people “understood Lenin on a far more *elemental* level than any professor of social science” (192, emphasis mine). I read this as Davis becoming increasingly aware of the limitations of academic study and its inability to connect to the urgency of the application of Lenin to one’s survival.

As Davis maneuvered through nationalists groups, the autobiography underscores her awareness of her outsider status as an intellectual.³¹ As Cynthia A. Young notes in *Soul Power* (2006), Davis “did not move through a nationalist project as others of her generation” (186). Young argues that an account of Davis’s “international consciousness” is requisite to understanding her political orientation, acknowledging that Davis physically and intellectually moved “from the local to the global and then back to the local,” studying theories of mass movement under Frankfurt School intellectuals, before returning to the United States to become a part of the local mass movement (186). While this internationalism placed her within a distinctly different intellectual and political tradition from the leaders and the people of the movement, it also connected her to the revolutionary movement by reconciling their ideological differences in order to craft her own erotic economy that would connect her to the masses.

In Young’s discussion of Davis’s intellectual formation, she is right to consider the influence of Herbert Marcuse, Davis’s mentor during her undergraduate years at Brandeis and the advisor on her doctoral work at the University of California, San Diego. The most important concepts Marcuse presented were about how to “transform the world through human praxis or practical activity” (194) and that “utopia was far from unattainable; it was simply a condition that was being ‘blocked from coming about by power of the established societies’” (197). Young points out two moments in the autobiography that demonstrate how Davis’s encounters in Cuba “focused Davis’s anti-

³¹ One such moment occurred when Davis first arrived in San Diego to pursue connections to the movement. She spent much time explaining her absence from the movement: “‘Hello, this is Angela Davis. I’ve just arrived in San Diego to study philosophy at the university. I’ve been abroad for the last two years, and I want to try to contribute whatever I can to the Black movement here. Someone gave me your name and number.’ . . . I did not realize then how I must have sounded—like an effervescent adolescent, or like an agent trying to worm her way to the inside” (152).

colonial consciousness” and “impress[ed] upon her the fact that [the United States] was an imperial power to be opposed” (201). While I agree with Young’s insight, I want to extend these readings to show how these occurrences were consequential in the formation of Davis’s politics inasmuch as the communist-informed erotic economy of Cuba helped Davis realize the radical possibility of revolutionary U.S. nationalism (201).

The first of these finds Davis as a Brandeis student attending the left wing World Festival for Youth and Students in Helsinki, Finland in 1962. Of the festival, she remarks that the “most exciting dimensions were the bilateral delegation meetings, because they were occasions for more intimate contact with the youth of other lands” (*Autobiography* 123). It is here that Davis becomes aware of the power of “intimate contact” to create attachments within a collective group. These meetings are contrasted with the “countless seminars of the struggle in Africa, Latin American, Asia, the Middle East” that occurred over the course of the festival (123).

Davis then explains she found the cultural presentation of the Cuban delegation “the most impressive event of the festival . . . because their performance conveyed a fiercely compelling spirit of revolution” (123). While allowing that the Cubans’ “strength and enthusiasm” could not be described with ease, one event did more than convey the spirit of revolution, it had “an impact” on her (123). After their cultural performance, “the Cubans did not simply let the curtain fall. Their ‘performance,’ after all, had been much more than a mere show. It had been life and reality. Had they drawn the curtain and bowed to applause, it would have been as if their commitment was simply ‘art’” (124). In this encounter with “life and reality,” that went beyond the ‘performance’ of ‘art,’ Davis came to understand, not just what it meant to be politically conscious, but

how to raise that consciousness.

As the passage continues, Davis offers an account of how the Cuban delegation moved the audience to action, dancing in a conga line from the stage to the audience, moving outside the boundaries of their delegation to intersperse among the crowd. Those compelled by their commitment were moved to join in: “Those of us openly enthralled by the Cubans, their revolution and the triumphant beat of the drums, rose spontaneously to join their conga line.” Even those more resistant to participation could not remain idly by: “And the rest—the timid ones, perhaps even the agents—were pulled bodily by the Cubans into the dance . . . a dance brought into Cuban culture by slaves dancing in a line of chains” (124). While the beat of the drums might “enthrall,” it was the Cuban people and their passion who executed the “bodily pulling” into dance. Witnessing and experiencing this libidinal pull into dance, into motion, into movement forged the creation of an erotic attachment between Davis and the Cubans. This was a scene of seduction, where the urgency of the political situation registered powerfully in the erotic.

The second scene that signifies the emergence of erotic attachment occurred years later, after Davis returned from studying in Germany and relocated to California, to immerse herself in the activist community. She traveled to Cuba as part of “a delegation of Communists invited by the Cubans to spend a month in the first free territory of America” (200). Young notes that over the course of the trip Davis eventually became aware she had been misinterpreting what she saw in Cuba, stating that “[it] was then that I began to realize the true meaning of underdevelopment: it is nothing to be Utopianized. Romanticizing the plight of oppressed people is dangerous and misleading” (Young 201). Young suggests that this statement is a certain admission of romanticizing Cuba (and

potentially the Cuban delegation in Helsinki), and that as the propensity to romanticize is a product of First World status, Davis's emergent "knowledge of her relative privilege" in the Third World became "an impetus for greater nuance and sophistication in crafting transnational political analysis" (201). While I cannot argue with the significance of Davis's admission that she romanticized Cuban society, in the development of her Third World praxis, I would caution against collapsing an experience of genuine erotic attachment that propels one into action with advancing an ideal of bucolic romance, in the way that Young reads Davis. As the autobiography makes clear, it was the Cubans' *relation to labor* that Davis admits to romanticizing; in fact, as the text emphasizes, it was a Cuban *compañero*³² who "subtly criticized me for having romanticized something which was really nothing more than terribly hard work" (Davis 209).

Thus, I would argue that Davis's encounters with Cuba entail a refutation of Marcuse's theoretical paradigm of the utopia, at least where Cuba was concerned, and a turn to erotic attachment with collective groups of people as the basis of communal engagement. She comes to revise this theory of libidinal diversion through libidinal engagement in Cuba, in a manner that draws on the materialism of Hernton's *Black Eros*. What occurs in these two moments is a revision of Marcuse's conception of Eros developed in *Eros and Civilization* (1955). Following Freud, Marcuse conceives of Eros as the life instinct, an expression of the pleasure principle that is being repressed by the reality principle. As a Marxist examination of the social ramifications of the psychological, the study understands *work* as "the chief social manifestation of the reality principle" (Marcuse 219). Work is thus directly involved in diverting instinctual

³²The Spanish term for comrade, in the sense of a Communist "comrade."

gratification and repressing society as a whole. According to Marcuse, when individuals work, the “libido is diverted for socially useful performances in which the individual works for himself only insofar as he works for the apparatus, engaged in activities that mostly do not coincide with his own faculties and desires” (45). As work is implicated in the suppression of the libido, to experience pleasure in work within an unrepressed society would “eroticiz[e] the body as a whole” (220).

Davis’s initial impression of work in Cuba misguidedly presented it as erotic. She imagined the Cuban body eroticized by its relation to work, only to find that it was eroticized by its relationship to the people. What Davis saw from the bus window appeared to be a socialist utopia: billboards that once advertised such markers of American capitalism as Coca-Cola now bore “posters about Campaña de los Diez Millones; posters of El Che; posters praising the people of Vietnam;” Havana University, once a bastion of the wealthy, now open to the children “of workers and peasants—Black and Brown as well as white;” the one-time Havana Hilton now called the Havana Libre, “freed from the veined fingers of decadent old capitalists” (203). The absence of capitalism and presence of equality seems to extend to the hotel workers, not just their working conditions but their attitude toward their work: “the *compañeros* who staffed the hotel—men and women with *none of the usual servility* usually associated with bellboys, chambermaids and waiters, people who would never accept the tip that natives of capitalist countries are accustomed to giving” (203, emphasis mine). Perceiving the workers as dignified even when performing menial tasks, Davis believed that post-revolution Cuban workers experienced the meaningfulness of work made possible in the Marcusean erotic economy of a liberated society.

When the Cubans “rush[ed] to the fields as though to a joyous carnival,” Davis and the United States delegation joined them (204). As the scene unfolds, it seems to illustrate *Eros and Civilization*: “On these faces reigned the serenity of meaningful work—the passion of commitment. They were finished with the politics of class and race, done with the acid bile of outdoing one’s neighbor for the sake of materially rising above him” (204). In a society no longer oppressed by capitalism, the people, “serenity” rising from their faces, experience a “passion” and “commitment” to their work, even when performing manual labor. Wanting to experience the libidinal pleasure of work, Davis works alongside them in the coffee fields, but it isn’t long before she notices her own deficiency: “I was in fairly good condition but the hoeing was difficult for me. The Cubans, on other hand, did it with ease” (204). Even when her body threatens her with a fainting spell, she is determined to “demonstrate my worth” (204). As a citizen of a society under the rule of capitalism, but an intellectual activist committed to communism, she feels an impetus to prove her political commitment to the revolution by tending the Cuban soil with the same “passion of commitment” as the Cuban *compañeros*. She tries to have an erotic relationship with work, but her body isn’t equal to the physical tasks because she has forged an erotic attachment to labor instead of to the people.

After a tour of Havana, during which she witnesses the conflicting markers of United States imperialism and the reverence of the people for their revolutionary leaders, she returns to fieldwork. When she remarks on the egalitarian post-revolutionary nature of cane cutting, the *compañero* gently rebukes her, that it was “work not fit for human beings” and he did it only because “he was working for a day when his sons and their children would not have to toil under the sweltering sun” (209). He then explains that the

speed of implementing mechanization, when they would no longer have to do the work with their own hands, “depended on the sacrifices they were all willing to make” (209). What Davis is actually witnessing is bodies breaking down in the fields, not eroticized by the pleasure of labor—performing backbreaking labor for their children and future generations. Davis is left with the impulse to stop “romantic[izing] the work and to stop utopiani[zing]” underdevelopment (209). While her commitment to communism does not wane—it is in fact reinforced, she learns that the proper erotic economy in a revolution grows out of a commitment to the people, not labor as a symbol of theoretical equality.

Leaving Cuba, Davis feels a connection to the people that recalls what she experienced in Helsinki. It is a feeling of connectedness, of having “taken root” amongst people who “accepted us like members of the family” (209). Davis utilizes a modified version of the erotic as Hernton envisioned it and, most crucially, she demonstrates that it can be dispersed through non-heteronormative attachments. Davis learns to take advantage of the erotic; I suggest that part of her success as an activist comes as a consequence of her ability to incite intense feelings for both her and the movement.

This instance of transnational travel also impresses upon Davis the possibilities of female political authority. When the officials in colonial Guadelope detain the activist and her group on their way from Cuba to Puerto Rico because of the communist leanings, the group is liberated by the efforts of a black woman lawyer. Davis’s description of this woman and her distinctly black female power is imbued with erotic imagery that resembles the same commanding presence that male revolutionary nationalist in the U.S. sought to inspire:

Maître Archimede was a big woman with very dark skin, penetrating eyes, and unassailable confidence. I will never forget the first meeting we had. I felt as if I were in the presence of a very great woman. As for our predicament, there was never any doubt in my mind she would rescue us. But I was so impressed by her personality, by the respect that she so clearly commanded as a Communist, even from the colonialists, that for a while our problem became a secondary concern for me. If I had surrendered to my desires, I would have remained on the island to learn from this woman. (215)

In this passage Davis articulates the feeling of being taken in by the sheer power that emanates from this woman. The largess of her presence is matched by her generous physicality and “unassailable confidence.” Davis is immediately drawn in by this confidence, leading her to describe her attraction as a form of “desire.” This “desire” to remain in Maître Archimede’s presence and “learn from her” suggests an erotic connection binding these women. As a black woman and as Communist, Maître Archimede’s offers Davis another model for diffusing eroticism to inspire others.

Davis would later state that “[t]he Cuban trip had been a great climax in my life. Politically I felt more mature, and it seemed that the Cubans’ revolutionary enthusiasm had left a permanent mark on my existence” (216). Sequentially, the autobiography moves from these words to a depiction of Davis returning to the U.S., only to learn she is being fired from her UCLA teaching post because of her communist affiliations. Her erotic attachments are exemplified by such moments, which then follow the narrative to the end of her trial. Her commitments to the people, to her politics, to struggle, never waver. But within the space of the autobiography, I would suggest they are compellingly rendered in the opening scenes that find Davis in jail and the closing image of Davis’s individual body dissolved by the collective ecstasy of finding community.

The narrative opens with Davis jailed in New York’s House of Detention, awaiting extradition to California for the trial that would make her infamous. When she

arrives in House D, she is already the prominent activist “Angela Davis,” renowned for Reagan’s campaign to bar her from teaching because of her communist ties; her two-month evasion of the FBI and placement on J. Edgar Hoover’s Most Wanted list have made her notorious. Outside of jail, communities around the world began campaigning for her freedom; inside, her fellow prisoners became aware of her special status. From the earliest scenes of the book, Davis denies she is any different from the general population of prisoners and looks for something to overcome their levels of education and conditions of incarceration. Repudiating the fact that no one else held in House D was the subject of a mass movement, she turns the chants of “Free Angela Davis” to ones of “Free Angela Davis! Free All Political Prisoners!” (23). Maintaining her beliefs about intellectually informed political consciousness, she answers the prisoners’ inquiries about communism and shares her reading material with them.

As part of the general prison population, Davis came to question the political fecundity of dyadic homosexuality that the prison system cultivated: like the board games and romance novels the jailers proffered, such relationships, while useful for “counteract[ing] some of the pain of jail life” also “prevented many of the women from developing their personal dissatisfaction with the conditions around them into a political dissatisfaction,” and hindered their developing a political consciousness (55). I would suggest that Davis offered the women prisoners an alternative form of erotic attachment. Concerned that Davis’s presence and radical politics would incite radical behavior among the prisoners, her jailers placed Davis in isolation. Separated from the people, she declared herself “on hunger strike as long as I was kept in isolation” (42). Here I find a resonance between Davis’s destruction of her body, by withholding food in order to

rejoin the people, and the Cuban *compañeros* destroying their bodies in the fields for the sake of future generations.

When they learned of Davis's hunger strike, other prisoners joined "in sympathy with me," as an action of political solidarity (44). Once Davis was permitted to reenter the general population, she continued raising political solidarity and political consciousness. Understanding the limitations of theoretical discourse, Davis turned to a dispersal of the erotic beyond a dyadic heteronormative structure in order to build stronger attachments: "A real togetherness was developing. I was anxious to strengthen this sense of community, and I knew it needed more than books and discussions to thrive. . . . In order to keep it alive, I invited the sisters to join me in exercising in the corridors. Exercising was an indispensable requirement of my own survival in jail" (63). By distributing the urgent fulfillment of the libidinal life drive through physical exercise, Davis forges erotic attachments with the female prisoners, designed to move them toward political action.

The autobiography closes on a similar note, where Davis's body takes on a limitless capacity to disperse the erotic. Having won her trial, acquitted of all charges, she is able to physically reunite with the community, signified by the crowds that continually materialize around her. As she triumphantly exits the courthouse, she thanks her supporters and reminds them to keep fighting for the freedom of all political prisoners. Davis walks through the crowd to a collection of people from diverse backgrounds, unified in their commitment to her freedom: "Family, lawyers, friends, comrades, Committee workers, and most of the jurors—we all sat in the sun in the grass in the backyard" (395). Natural imagery, of the warmth and glow of the sun and the

comfort of the grass, is met by an ecstasy nurtured in Davis's body: "I sank deep into the moment, husbanding this delight, hoarding it. For I knew it would be short-lived" (395). Despite the delight of being outdoors amongst her people, she is cognizant of the revolutionary work that lies ahead, but for the briefest moment she diverts it to let the ecstasy of togetherness wash over her: "Work. Struggle. Confrontation lay before us like a rock-strewn road. We would walk it. . . . But first the grass, the sun . . . and the people" (396). In this moment that belongs to "the people," there is no mention of Davis as an individual with unique needs or desires, there is only the intense pleasure of the unrepressed collective libido. In their erotic unity, the people will walk the "rock-strewn road" of revolutionary action.

CHAPTER 2

“Some almost unbreakable bonds:” Jamaica Kincaid’s Mother and the Burden of Her Love

Break a vase, and the love that reassembles the fragments is stronger than that love which took its symmetry for granted when it was whole. The glue that fits the pieces is the sealing of its original shape. It is such a love that reassembles our African and Asiatic fragments, the cracked heirlooms whose restoration shows its white scars. This gathering of broken pieces is the care and pain of the Antilles, and if the pieces are disparate, ill-fitting, they contain more pain than their original sculpture, those icons and sacred vessels taken for granted in their ancestral places. Antillean art is this restoration of our shattered histories, our shards of vocabulary, our archipelago becoming a synonym for pieces broken off from the original continent.

-Derek Walcott

The most recognizable image from poet Derek Walcott’s Nobel lecture, “The Antilles: Fragments of Epic Memory,” is arguably the image of the vase broken into fragments.³³ In this image, literary critics and theorists have aptly found metaphors for such concepts as the colonization and decolonization of the Caribbean, the linguistic and cultural diversity that gives rise to its literature, Walcott’s intertextuality and the poetic process.³⁴ In doing so, they have focused on the form of the vase, the difference between the vase’s “original shape” and the “restoration” made of “disparate, ill-fitting pieces” that makes “art” of “shattered histories, shards of vocabulary” (69). I want to suggest that

³³ See Walcott’s essay collection *What the Twilight Says: An Overture* (1998). This passage is so frequently cited by critics that Nicole Matos argues that it has become “a Rorschach test of [Walcott’s] readers—what meanings they want to see here, what meanings it seems possible to see here” (Matos 40). I would suggest that the hermeneutic stakes of the broken vase is not what readers have seen, it is what they have overlooked—the contradictory, yet affirmatory view of love that imagines Caribbean as a space born of this contradictory affect.

³⁴ See for example Homi Bhabha’s discussion of Walcott in *The Location of Culture* (1994) and Jahan Ramazani’s “The Wound of History.”

critics have celebrated this “glue[d]” together vase without scrutinizing the nature of the glue (69). In doing so, they have not adequately considered that the force that broke the vase is also its bonding agent: love. However, if we move beyond the form of the vase, we are confronted with the ambivalent nature of the very thing that determines its form.

I invoke the image of the vase to make two points about the critical status of love in Caribbean literary studies: first, it demonstrates that critics have not adequately probed or developed a critical vocabulary for discussing love, especially in its non-erotic iterations; second, the internal logic of the image—the assertion that love, even when it creates fissures, ultimately sustains community—may be the very reason that instead of scrutinizing the affect, critics instead emphasize its binding potential. In this chapter, I turn to another image that permeates the Caribbean intellectual tradition, and is widely recognized although insufficiently analyzed in the literary critical tradition, in order to argue for the development of a critical approach to the study of love and love bonds in Caribbean and black diasporic literature. However, I want to suggest that as with Walcott’s vase, critics have explored the metaphorical purchase of maternal and filial figures without probing the nature and function of the love bonds that constitute their relationships.

To be sure, the relationship between maternal and filial figures is privileged in studies of Kincaid’s work and also in those of other female literary writers of Caribbean and black diasporic ancestry.³⁵ Expanding on this literary discourse by uncovering a

³⁵ For more studies of the mother/daughter relationship in the works of Jamaica Kincaid and other female Caribbean writers, see Susheila Nasta’s edited collection *Motherlands* (1991), Simone A. James Alexander’s *Mother Imagery in the Novels of Afro-Caribbean Women* (2001), Antonia MacDonald-Smythe’s *Making Homes in the West/Indies* (2001), and Myriam J.A. Chancy’s *Searching for Safe Spaces* (1997).

neglected poetic and anthropological discourse of maternal love, I return to the vulnerable site of black maternity to which feminist criticism responds when it continually recuperates the mother. In doing so, I illuminate how Kincaid, who writes within and against this discourse, produces an account of maternal love that is both more complicated than it and also than the black feminist criticism that responds to it. For instance, studies like Carole Boyce Davies and Elaine Savory Fido's pioneering *Out of the Kumbla* (1990) and Caroline Rody's *The Daughter's Return* (2001), among others, examine black diasporic literary depictions of the maternal as a privileged, albeit, contested site. They appreciate the maternal trope in its symbolic function of representing Caribbean post-colonial history; consequently, they favor and largely celebrate such categories as origin, home, and legacy without adequately attending to the affective dimensions that fix subjects within national histories. To this end, I investigate Kincaid's vexed maternal love to demonstrate that what the writer does so powerfully is to show how an affect like love enlists the black subject into broader political commitments, often without her consent. Understanding how maternal love functions, we can better grasp the conceptual stakes of mother-daughter relationship as well as make available a new way of thinking about the role of love in diasporic belonging.

The affective quality of Jamaica Kincaid's work is often described as "bitter," vitriolic, and what some might consider absent of love.³⁶ It is in those moments where Kincaid produces highly resonant, ambivalent images of maternal love, that I focus my attention. While many of Kincaid's fictional and non-fictional works operate on these

³⁶ See Craig Seligman's review of *My Brother*, "The Bitterness of Jamaica Kincaid" in the *Threepenny Review*.

registers, here I focus on her novel *Lucy* (1990) and memoir *My Brother* (1998).³⁷ One of her best-known texts, *Lucy* is Kincaid's first work set outside the Caribbean, while the lesser-studied *My Brother* alternates between Antigua and the United States. Read together they produce a narrative of emigration and return where the fraught condition of self-imposed exile is worked out within the discourse of maternal love. The opening of *Lucy* finds the eponymous narrator on her first day in the U.S. where she has taken employment as an *au pair* in the home of a wealthy white Northeastern family. As the narrative unfolds between Lucy's nineteenth and twentieth years of life, the new persons and seasons she encounters summon intense feelings for her mother and the events she left behind in Antigua and by the end of the novel, these ambivalent feelings accumulate into a disavowal of her mother, whose love binds her to the very past Lucy desires to escape. Ambivalence reverberates also in *My Brother*, Kincaid's memoir recording the final years of her brother's life and his death from AIDS. Critic Ramón Soto-Crespo reads *My Brother* as a text mourning the loss of Kincaid's "home" and her brother, but I contend that if Kincaid is in mourning, then she mourns the relationship she shared with her mother prior to emigrating from Antigua. After all, as she states in this narrative recounting her brother's death, she "think[s] of [her] brothers as [her] mother's children," which I take as a subtle confession that her brother's death is primarily an occasion to meditate on what it means to live and die as a child of her mother (*My Brother* 21).³⁸

³⁷ Both of Kincaid's earliest works, *At the Bottom of the River* (1983) and *Annie John* (1985) present the maternal figure as ambivalent in her love for daughter and the mother/daughter relationship is a chief site of conflict. This continues in *Autobiography of My Mother* (1995) and to a degree in Kincaid's latest novel, *See Now Then* (2013), where the protagonist is a maternal figure.

³⁸ See Ramón Soto Crespo, "Death and the Diaspora Writer" in *Contemporary Literature*.

Within the affective echoes between these texts, maternal love is viewed as a force that encroaches upon the child. As a child, both in the family structure and also in the experiential sense of love, the terms of maternal love's imposition exist outside of her agency.

To demonstrate this, I want to briefly turn to parallel moments in *Lucy* and *My Brother*. The language of both scenes is written within a discourse of belonging where maternal love imposes itself at will. In the next section, I will demonstrate that this is also the language of nationalist discourse, but for now it is enough to say that maternal love both binds and severs. In the first of these moments, as Lucy watches her employer Mariah embrace her children, she considers the peculiarity of her own resistance to this display of maternal adoration and confronts the function of her mother's love: "I had come to feel that my mother's love was designed solely to make me an echo of her; and I didn't know why, but I felt I would rather be dead than become an echo of someone" (*Lucy* 36). A mother's love meant to replicate the self is a binding and stifling love capable of being so strong, so threatening to a child's individuality that Lucy must physically distance herself to sever its hold.

The second moment, which is from *My Brother*, maintains and underscores the language of the earlier one from *Lucy*. Here, Kincaid signals maternal love's unevenness, its benefits biased towards the mother rather than her child: "My mother loves her children, I want to say, in her way! And that is very true, she loves us in her way. It is *her* way. It never has occurred to her that her way of loving us might not be the best thing for us. It has never occurred to her that her way of loving us might have served her better than it served us" (*My Brother* 16). Departing from the almost universal view of a

mother's unconditional and self-sacrificing love, Kincaid teases out its selfish manner to show how its authority confers not maternal protection but manipulation and domination. Furthermore, she overturns a particular strand of Caribbean thought that imagines an emotionally fragile maternal figure embodying the violence the Caribbean islands endured under colonial rule.³⁹ Without relying on such platitudes as Caribbean maternal resilience, Kincaid's mother's love is as awesomely powerful as it is delicate, as dangerous as it is gentle. Exploiting these contradictions, maternal love creates a community and enforces its boundaries. How then do Kincaid's daughters manage their positions within these communities bound by love? Moreover, how can we understand the exertion of their will against their mothers' love as engaging questions of post-coloniality that are central to the author's work and cannot be ignored?

To answer these questions, it would be helpful to keep in mind the quotation from Walcott which begins this piece. Although he invokes the grandness of "epic" love while Kincaid invokes the intimacy of the maternal, what she reveals in *Lucy* and *My Brother* is that communities predicated on maternal love share the structural features of Walcott's "epic" love. Like Walcott, colonial and post-colonial discourse evokes communal structures on a grand scale: empire, colony, and nation; and when critics invoke the maternal, they tend to do so in sympathy with this logic: mother country, motherland, mother tongue. By contrast, Kincaid does not distinguish between the intimate and the grand; what she shows us is that the conditions of belonging to families and belonging to nations are affectively identical because the love inherent within both relations operates similarly. As with colonial and post-colonial discourses, the poetic and anthropological

³⁹ See Rody 109-116.

archive I offer in the next section demonstrates that intellectuals have long situated maternal love as actively engaged with large-scale questions of post-colonial belonging. The key difference between Kincaid and these discourses is her recognition that individual affect operates as a counterpart to large-scale politics, enabling her to discern that love of mother and the love of nation are affectively indistinguishable.⁴⁰ I want to be clear that in Kincaid's work, the connection between the mother and the nation is much more material than metaphor; what soon becomes clear in reading *Lucy* and *My Brother* is that maternal love conscripts the subject into political ideology. Again, loving and disavowing love are active ways of doing politics.

Herein lies the key to understanding the political weight of the daughter's ambivalence, which Kincaid illustrates as the daughter's turns of "love and not love" towards their mothers. While her closest readers tend to view her female protagonists' bitterness towards their mothers as "opposition" to colonialism and neo-colonialism (Ferguson 5-6), the author approaches the conceptual differences between the opposition and the disavowal with more nuance than readers have previously recognized.⁴¹ When

⁴⁰ My argument broaches a recent exchange between Michael Hardt and Lauren Berlant in *Cultural Anthropology*. While I am invested in understanding the relationship between love and political ideology, I am not attempting to arrive at a political definition of love, as Hardt endeavors to do in this essay and also in *Commonwealth*. In contrast, I contend that love is already political and has the inherent capacity to perform in the service of political ideology. Furthermore, I refute Hardt's differentiation of corrupt and uncorrupt love. Under this premise, we could argue that maternal love is corrupt because it is a form of narcissism, what he calls "love of the same." Here, I am in sympathy with Berlant, who resists such distinctions and also the tendency to view love as inherently ethical and as the solution to fractured community. When I speak of maternal love constituting community, I see this as neither "good" or "bad" in the terms of Hardt's argument. Kincaid's point, I would suggest, is that we must recognize the ambivalence always at work in maternal love.

⁴¹ In a way, it makes sense why post-colonial and feminist thought would welcome this characterization of an individual opposing colonialism. Meanwhile, it is also crucial to consider how such approaches go too far in reading Kincaid's critique of colonialism through the lens of

these daughters reinforce the geographic separation from their mothers and their national origins through the rejections of maternal love, *Lucy* and *My Brother* engage debates in post-colonial thought about the possibility for individual agency to confront the colonial system.

Post-colonial theorists continue to dispute the place of the individual subject in political movements, arguing in particular whether a subject can “oppose” colonialism. Among them, Neil Lazarus, has decried Patrick Taylor’s claim that “[o]ne has to define oneself in terms of the colonial system” (Taylor qtd. in Lazarus 76), arguing that it is “too much in the vocabulary of individual agency” (Lazarus 75). Indeed, for Lazarus, opposition involves a political maneuver that is not accessible to the individual subject within the system, although disavowal is available to the individual as a form of intellectual critique, as in the widespread critical disavowal of nationalism. While Lazarus speaks of disavowal primarily in terms of intellectual critique and opposition to nationalism, what Kincaid offers is a rethinking of the reliance on opposition as a mode of political engagement, and also of the binaristic opposition between the colonized and the colonizer. Her work reveals that disavowal, rather than opposition, is the most effective way for the individual post-colonial subject to do politics because it engages the affection dimensions of belonging to political bodies, the most fundamental register of the individual.

the oppositionary politics embedded within them. Ferguson’s repeated use “opposition” is emblematic of a critical tendency to read Kincaid’s daughter figures as *resisting* the colonial system and inhabiting a space outside of it. These fields need to believe in the existence of that space to believe that subjects are capable of confronting colonialism. As an extension of this logic, Ferguson claims that Kincaid’s protagonists attain a form of liberation that takes them outside of the colonial system. What Kincaid shows us is that it is impossible to exist outside of it; moreover, the idea of liberation is too absolute. Kincaid’s discussion of love is concerned with how the individual exists within the system and bonds that can’t be completely broken.

What Kincaid offers as a resolution amounts less to liberation from the postcolonial system than the assertion of agency within it in recognition that total cleavage from the mother and the nation is impossible. Disavowal is an imperative term for the black diasporic subject attempting to escape the affective confines of maternal love and national history. More subtle and dynamic than opposition, disavowal marks the difference between not loving at all and the conundrum of explicitly rejecting love and the loved one and yet continuing to love. Therefore, what looks like “not love” becomes decipherable as another side of the naturally fraught affect and evidence of the intensity of its ties. In this way, the diasporic condition is revealed to be an incoherent one full of incomplete breaks and “almost unbreakable bonds” (*Lucy* 71).

In this chapter, I contend that it is through reading Kincaid’s disavowal of maternal love that we most clearly see her negotiate the enticing and constraining features of national belonging. She explores and exploits the function of maternal love, as both a binding force and a severing one. This intervention is important because it recognizes that affect and nationalism have long been mutually sustaining, especially in the Caribbean literary tradition that Kincaid’s writing engages in and departs from. In fact, part of my goal here is to identify and propose an under-examined archive of nationalist poetry that engages in the exploration of affect as producing nationalist sentiment that is often routed through maternal love. *Lucy* and *My Brother* recuperate this affective relationship, one that aligns nationalism with positive affect to explore the unexpected negative bonds that forcibly tie the black subject to nationalism and communal history.

The Birth of a Nationalist Subject

In an often-cited passage of *Lucy*, the eponymous narrator describes her visceral reaction to seeing daffodils for the first time: “They looked like something to eat and something to wear at the same time; they looked simple, as if made to erase a complicated unnecessary idea. I did not know what these flowers were, and so, it was a mystery why I wanted to kill them. Just like that. I wanted to kill them” (*Lucy* 29). The first sight of a flower with which Lucy has had no prior personal encounter and cannot identify incites violence inexplicable to her, although it is clear to the reader that Lucy’s encounter is evidence of a colonial violation. It is because she is Antiguan, a product of English colonization of the Caribbean that the sight of daffodils instinctually evokes the Wordsworth poem Lucy was made to memorize and publically recite as a child.⁴² I argue that the colonial violence committed against Lucy is balanced by the national violence to which she is subjected and that it is a nationalist violation that grants her this moment of insight—the unconscious recognition of these daffodils—which should not be her moment of insight. *Lucy* imagines national history as so deeply internalized as to inform Lucy’s feelings and actions, even when she is ignorant of her motivation.⁴³

⁴² The poem Lucy had to recite is Wordsworth’s “I Wandered Lonely as Cloud.” This Wordsworth poem, and daffodils, more generally, are a familiar image within Caribbean discourse as evidence of colonization. See Stuart Hall’s “The Local and Global: Globalization and Ethnicity”; V.S. Naipaul’s *The Overcrowded Barracoon and Other Articles*; Samuel Selvon. “Finding West Indian Identity in London”; Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s *Writers in Politics*.

⁴³ By suggesting that Lucy’s response reveals the internalization of her racial identity, I am again quoting from Kincaid in an interview with Moira Ferguson. See Ferguson’s “A Lot of Memory” In this interview, Kincaid argues that the Caribbean does not have the same “kind” of black nationalism as the United States because U.S. black nationalism results from black people’s internalization of white people’s thoughts about them (164). This moment in *Lucy* argues that Caribbean nationalism involves the internationalization of resistance to colonialism.

In the mid-twentieth century, Caribbean novelists consciously wrote within an idea accepted by both British and West Indian societies: a national literature was crucial to the development of a national culture. These novelists participated in cultural movements that aimed to establish the political equality not achieved by self-government and to “complete the process of decolonization” (Rosenberg 4). Documented in works often credited with developing the emergence of the Caribbean literary tradition, including novels by George Lamming, V.S. Naipaul, and Samuel Selvon, literary representations of the peasant classes strongly asserted nationalism as anti-colonial national culture. In addition to the folk masses, writers employed other representational strategies to affirm nationalist perspectives.⁴⁴ I want to call attention to a body of poetry that possessed a noticeable affective dimension that was absent from the novels. It is this affirmative maternal love that Kincaid challenges in her writing in order to reveal the ambivalence of nationalist belonging.

In “Love for an Island,” Phyllis Shand Allfrey, the Dominican poet, politician, and proponent of the West Indies Federation who was most active in the 1950s expresses desire for legitimate citizenship through a depiction of fierce passion that transforms an island into a nation. With erotically evocative language of a passionate love that “pulses beyond the blood” and “overflows the boundaries of the bedroom,” (lines 2-3) Allfrey asserts that love for the island surpasses even carnal love as “the sternest passion” (line 1). This sentiment continues with the image of island lovers who bear “no mild

⁴⁴ In the introduction to Sylvia Wynter’s novel *Hills of Hebron*, Anthony Bogues prompts us to recognize that Caribbean writers like Wynter distinguished between anti-colonial literature, which sought to “end empire” and nationalist novels which “mimic the West.” He suggests that *Hills of Hebron* represents an anti-colonial novel, in part, because it “is preoccupied with the ways that the Jamaican ex-slave engages with the processes of rehumanisation. It is about what life forms are created through this process” (n.p., e-book edition).

attachment, but rapacious/ craving for a possession rude and whole” (9-10). The richness of the distinction between “mild attachment” and “rapacious craving” illuminates the nature of the bond sought by nationalists—they reject the weak bonds that see the nation as a formal structure and instead seek the affirmation of belonging that comes with “possession rude and whole.” The final image of the poem imagines the “blend[ing]” of the lovers’ “flesh with the beloved clay” of the land, (line 24) advancing a notion of nationalism whereby political aims are achieved through the desires, and when necessary, the sacrifices of individuals.

The erotic passion of Allfrey’s poem gives way to the more prevalent accounts of nationalism expressed as veneration of maternal love in poems by the Jamaican poets George Campbell and Lorna Goodison, and Tobagon poet Eric Roach.⁴⁵ While Allfrey’s poem works within the tradition of English love poetry, the turn to maternal love in Campbell, Goodison, and Roach’s poems work along two parallel tracks: first, it recuperates the maternal from the colonial anthropological discourse of illegitimate West Indian family structures; and second, it participates in the literary undoing the gendered logic of colonialism.

To take up the first of these accounts of the maternal in the Caribbean, we must look at the anthropological studies contemporaneous to the nationalist movements of the 1950s and 1960s, and which also coincide with the active period of publication of most of these poems. The implicit assumption of these studies is the imperative to understand familial organization, because for these marginalized masses the family is the dominant

⁴⁵ Derek Walcott’s epic, *Omeros* (1990) presents a contemporary erotic nationalist poem. In *Omeros*, the male characters are bound to each other and to the island through love of a woman, Helen, who also represents the island of St. Lucia.

mode of social structure and the only one they autonomously organize. Despite the relationship between colonial politics and the material conditions of Caribbean families, these studies demonstrate little interest in how political marginalization influence familial organization. In the 1950s, the British Colonial Science Research Council sponsored Jamaican anthropologist Edith Clarke's research on Caribbean families, which became the foundation of her well-known study *My Mother Who Fathered Me* (1957). For Clarke, the most important structural features of Caribbean families are the "mating practices" and "alternative conjugal forms" that complicate household organization (1). What is most striking about Clarke's study is how it characterizes the lower-class masses in terms of legitimacy and illegitimacy, employing terms like "concubinage" to describe relationships existing outside of the British legal paradigm. In this way, Clarke categorizes families by the relation of the children to the adults heading the household. Offering a contrasting perspective to *My Mother Who Fathered Me*, M.G. Smith's study *West Indian Family Structure* (1962) provides a more normative account of the structure of Caribbean families. However, even as Smith resists Clarke's account about the prevalence of deviant family structures and overburdened mothers, he reproduces Clarke's language of illegitimacy.⁴⁶

These anthropological accounts of maternity and familial organization in the Caribbean underscore how the British Colonial Office advances a conception of the family as a formal structure predicated on the kind of "mild attachment" aggressively rejected in Allfrey's poem. The discourse of illegitimacy argues that a family can be

⁴⁶ See M.G. Smith. 244. It must be mentioned that Smith was also an important poet and the conception of familial belonging in his anthropological work and his poetry deserves more attention.

considered a formal structure comprised of individuals with weak or ambivalent bonds to each other. While colonizing nations have an investment in portraying the bonds between post-colonial nations and their denizens in a similar manner, the literature, in contrast to this colonialist understanding of familial and national belonging depends on certain affective assumptions and relations. I want to suggest this is why Caribbean and black diasporic literature so often turns to the maternal, because while mothers, like nations could offer ambivalent bonds, to imagine them as offering strong affective attachments establishes legitimate belonging to the nation.

For example, poets George Campbell and Eric Roach revise anthropology's account of illegitimate maternity.⁴⁷ Campbell's "Mother" and Roach's "To My Mother" resolve the problems of family structure by signaling the maternal figure as uniquely present not because she has been abandoned but because she is singularly able to solve the nation's problems. What the anthropologist sees as a burden, the poet transforms into an esteemed role. "Mother" imagines its subject as the ultimate protector of her daughters, characterizing her not only by her resilience, but also by the ease with which she can offer her protection: "[t]he waters leapt around her in wild confusion...[but] she with easy motion/ [k]ept up her babe and self with slightest fear" (lines 14-17). In this way, the poem promotes a form of nationalism that involves faith in the nation to provide and protect its citizens. This sentiment is echoed in Roach's poem "To My Mother," which is even more explicit in its depiction of nation as provider. In this poem, the

⁴⁷ George Campbell was a Jamaican poet born in Panama. His poetry was discovered by Edna Manley while Campbell was still a teenager. Manley published Campbell's first collection, *First Poems* in 1945. Her husband, Norman Manley, a steward of Jamaican independence called him the "Poet of the Revolution." Tobagan poet, Eric Roach's earliest poems date from his time in the Trinidadian army around 1939. He remained active until his death in 1974.

speaker reflects upon his own development as a product of his mother's struggles and her, "love, grief, labour of birth and bone" (line 4). The repeated images of bone, blood, and hard rock are contrasted with images of the mother "kneading and thumping the thick dough for bread" (line 18), suggesting that the process of nurturing will not and cannot be a gentle one. Nevertheless, the speaker will thrive precisely because his mother toils; the poem goes so far as to position her eventual death as the vehicle for his achievement: "I see death broken at each seed's rebirth" (line 26). Marked by the death of the maternal figure, Roach's poem presents an extreme version of nationalism predicated on sacrifice, but instead of the sacrifice of the nation, it asserts that the sacrifices made in the resistance to colonialism, can provide the conditions for success. As a final point about Campbell and Roach's poems, these speakers are forceful in their assertion of belonging to the mother and to the nation, never casting into doubt their legitimacy, even if it is disputed by the colonial power.

Before continuing these readings of the poetry, we should also consider more generally how the literary associations of maternal love with the national belonging also contest the gender logic of colonialist discourses of belonging. The connection between nationalism and gendered language is well documented in post-colonial studies and feminist studies. Caroline Rody has acknowledged that women writers metaphorically associate the feminine body of maternal figure with "nationalist (and residually colonialist) privileging of the symbolically male order" (Rody 113). "Nationalist ideology relies heavily on gendered language to imagine itself," argues Susheila Nasta in a critique of the mutually supportive relationship between patriarchy and nationalism; this relationship, Nasta asserts, promotes "singleness—one identity, one growth pattern,

one birth and one blood for all” (6-7). Consulting her investigation of black feminist writing serves as a reminder that while my discussion of nationalism has largely been a positive one that characterizes it as an anti-colonialist movement, it is crucial to resist equating the female gendering of nationalist poetry as automatically anti-patriarchal or receptive of the diversity of experience. Moreover, Simone James’s desire to recuperate and to standardize the use of female-gendered terms in order to venerate the place of Africa for black diasporic communities as an act of anti-colonial and anti-patriarchal resistance reproduces the problematic “singleness” which Nasta identifies.⁴⁸ If these terms signify the nature of relationships between individuals and nations and communities and nations, we must consider the benefits of permitting slippage between the terms, and thus, flexibility between persons and nations. In moving beyond the mother-as-nation model to maternal love, Kincaid explores how migration contests the affective binary between “motherland” and “mother country” in order to interrogate the place of individuality among the residuals of colonial and nationalism.

Before turning to Kincaid, I would like to quickly gesture towards the work of her contemporary, Lorna Goodison, a prominent Jamaican poet. As in the poems previously discussed, her “Mother, the Great Stones Got to Move” also reveres the maternal and identifies it with the nation, looking to her for guidance and protection against political marginalization. I suggest that what has become a familiar narrative of positive identification between mother and nation is now confronted by a potentially dangerous implication. In the poem, the speaker repeatedly makes an intergenerational imploration

⁴⁸ See Simone James Alexander’s *Mother Imagery in the Novels of Afro-Caribbean Women*. James proposes that the Caribbean be theorized as the “mother(‘s)land” to recognize “its function as an extension” of the Motherland, Africa. The colonial and neo-colonial powers of England, France, and the United States are to be designated the “mother country.”

to the mother to move “the stones wedged across the hole in our history” (line 1) for the sake of future generations: “we think of our children and the stone upon their future/ and we want these stones to move” (lines 18-19). One of the implications of such logic is that reliance on the mother/nation to remove the obstacles placed by colonialism renders the child/citizen dependent on the mother/nation and its conception of history. This is to say, that one repercussion of identifying the mother with the nation is the suggestion that the child inherits the mother’s history and is subject to its influence, and consequently, all significant change must be routed through the maternal. This is what Kincaid finds most problematic about the mother figure and its association with nationalism: nationalism produces lasting bonds to the nation and to its conception of history.

“She Would Always Love Me”

At the beginning of *Lucy*, Kincaid represents the primary site of Lucy’s involvement with the nation as an affective entanglement. In Lucy’s own words, her reasons for leaving Antigua are a consequence of anything but the colonial legacy of the island. To that end, it is significant that Lucy thinks of the principle opportunity her migration provides not as one for education or career advancement, but the opportunity to leave behind her feelings for Antigua in Antigua: “Oh, I had imagined that my one swift act—leaving home and coming to this new place—I could leave behind me, as if it were an old garment never to be worn again, my sad thoughts, my sad feelings, and my discontent with life in general as it presented itself to me” (6-7). It is important to note that with this privileged representation of feelings, Kincaid does not trivialize the fraught

relationship between persons and nations; rather, she acknowledges that this relationship is predicated on the individual as much as, if not more than, it is on the social. In considering her emigration more as escape from Antigua than as arrival in the United States, Lucy seeks to establish emotional distance through the physical distance that migration is meant to achieve. Her intention to displace Antigua from her present is central to the novel's narrative logic, which presents Lucy's mother as physically displaced by Mariah, whose encounters with Lucy comprise the bulk of the plot. Although her mother is physically absent from Lucy's new life, memories of her mother permeate almost every event and experience she has in New York, suggesting that disavowed feelings cannot be permanently dissolved.

The novel grounds Lucy's anxiety over national belonging in the irreconcilable tensions between the desire for a personal history and the imposition of collective history. As critics have noted, the novel performs scathing critiques of North American perspectives of history through Lucy's interactions with her employers.⁴⁹ According to Moira Ferguson, "Lucy tells her own story while doubling as a representative of black Antiguan, a willing recorder of the island's oral narrative; she rescripts familiar thematics while recording new ones" (Ferguson 107). While Ferguson is correct that within the space of the novel Lucy represents black Antigua by confronting the imperialist attitudes of Lewis and Mariah, I challenge the idea that Lucy "is willing" or complicit in her embodiment of historical conflicts. I argue that any critiques Kincaid makes of Western hegemony are accompanied by an equally furious critique of nationalism's totalization of history through anti-colonial ideology. In restlessly

⁴⁹ See also Lizabeth Paravinsi-Gebert's book-length study on Kincaid, *Jamaica Kincaid: A Critical Companion* (1999).

switching between scenes of Lucy's interactions with Mariah and memories of her mother, the novel stages the entanglement of maternal love and nationalist conceptions of history that evokes Goodison's poem yet offers an indictment of it.

If we return to the discussion of daffodils that appears in the preceding section, we can see how maternal love manifests as a constant intrusion upon experiences that should be beyond its reach. In conversation, Mariah shares with Lucy her excitement for the beginning of spring and the inevitability of daffodils, a sight that makes Mariah feel "so glad be alive" (17). In stark contrast, the mention of daffodils evokes for Lucy the memory of being on display at the Queen Victoria Girls' school in Antigua as testament to the success of colonial education, an event she describes with such "an amount of anger" as to surprise both women (18-19). While daffodils affirm Mariah's individual existence, they pronounce Lucy as part of a collective. As Mariah's love of daffodils is a purely aesthetic appreciation divorced from collective history, she does not understand the violence they signify to Lucy. When Mariah protests "'How typical'" at the falling snow that delays springtime daffodils, Lucy interprets her sentiment as the wound of "a personal betrayal," leaving her to wonder how Mariah got "to be that way," "a person who is made miserable because...the weather doesn't live up to your expectations" (20). Critics have rightly suggested that this question implicates Mariah's first-world privilege, and while this is an apt interpretation, it overlooks how the scene also calls attention to the work of maternal love.

Kincaid frames the daffodil episodes with Lucy's contemplations about her mother or with letters from her to foreground the inextricability of maternal love from Lucy's experience of colonial history. Her reaction to Mariah and even to the daffodils is

an extension of her anxiety over the constraining features of her collective identity, especially the impossibility of having an experience that it does not determine. Alienated by Mariah's act of entitlement to fair weather, she carries letters from the family and friends she once loved "without reservation," literally close to her heart, inside her bra, "scorching [her] breasts" (20). In doing so, she makes palpable the psychological and emotion burdens the letters produce, the weight of that burden compelling her to distinguish between "feelings of love and longing" and those of "hatred" to bolster her attempt at separating herself from the letters' writers (20). Even as she avows hatred, she recognizes that "love and hatred exists side by side" as gradations of the same affect, and thus her feelings are the only tool capable of managing her mother's commanding love (20).

One of the letters Lucy carries with her is her mother's response to a "polite" letter she sent describing her first subway ride: her mother tells her about "an immigrant girl" "exactly" Lucy's age "who had had her throat cut while she was a passenger on perhaps the very same train [Lucy] was riding" (21). A cautionary letter, its true intention is to warn Lucy about the dangers of living away from her mother. And yet, it instills a familiar fear in Lucy, reminding her of an Antiguan schoolmate who was possessed and beaten by the Devil and eventually fled across the "sea where the Devil couldn't find her" (21). Now on the other side of the sea, the comparable perils of a girl who was "being beaten by a man she could not see" and "a girl getting her throat cut by a man she could see" give Lucy reason to wonder, "In this great big world, why should my life be reduced to these two possibilities" (21). It is not the fear of physical harm that concerns her in this moment; rather, it is the invisible, baneful, possessive force that

seeks to dictate the very possibilities of her life, her mother's love. As demonstrated by her mother's letter, this invisible bond asserts its entitlement to Lucy's life just as Mariah asserts her entitlement to the weather.

Through moments of frustration with Mariah, Lucy comes to realize that her feelings towards Mariah are in actuality displaced feeling for her mother, "The times that I loved Mariah it was because she reminded me of my mother. The times that I did not love Mariah it was because she reminded me of my mother" (58). Transferring her feelings for her mother to Mariah, who represents a Western colonialist presence, seems like an invitation to interpret the maternal figure and her love as another colonialist figure, as critics Derik Smith and Cliff Beumel argue: "Kincaid's mother figure also symbolically stands in for the power that alienates the self in this 'exemplary' model, colonialism" (Smith and Beumel 101). I will concede that Kincaid imagines maternal love as a colonizing force, but I maintain that it is not a colonialist love. Lucy's mother's love is a nationalist presence constantly extending the reach of Antigua beyond its borders. While Mariah functions as a medium to reveal to Lucy the weight she carries, her mother's love is the source of that weight. While scenes depicting Lucy's interactions with Mariah dominate the novel, the persistent framing of those scenes with the palpable, if not physical, presence of Lucy's mother underscores that scrutiny of maternal love is central to understanding the young woman's experience in the U.S. as a post-colonial narrative.

The novel's second appearance of daffodils signifies Lucy's escalating disavowal of love, one that first stems from the realization that her capacity to love is not entirely her own prerogative. When spring arrives, Mariah blindfolds Lucy, takes her to a garden

and tells her to look around, but Lucy cannot identify what she beholds until Mariah says, “These are daffodils. I’m sorry about the poem, but I’m hoping you’ll find them lovely all the same” (29). Mariah is unable to understand that Lucy cannot simply choose to “find them lovely,” for doing so would involve leaving her national history behind. In one of the most revealing passages of the scene, Lucy articulates what animates Mariah’s insistence on showing her the daffodils, “This woman who hardly knew me loved me, and she wanted me to love this thing—a grove brimming over with daffodils in bloom—that she loved also” (30). In wanting to share the thing she loves, Mariah desires to create a community between herself and Lucy that is bound by that love; however Lucy has already been conscripted into community that disseminates its ideology through affective ties. Consequently, she cannot love the daffodils as Mariah loves them because she can value neither their aesthetic appeal nor the joy she might personally derive from them over their place in her history; nor can she choose to love them in spite of what they represent: “a scene of conquered and conquests [,] a scene of brutes masquerading as angels and angels portrayed as brutes” (30). For Lucy, daffodils can only exist in her collective history as a West Indian subject. The flower symbolizes Lucy’s colonial indoctrination, and her affective reaction to the flower represents a kind of nationalist indoctrination. Remarking that she “felt sorry that [she] had cast [Mariah’s] beloved daffodils in a scene she had never considered” in her visceral evocation of colonialism, Lucy is remorseful, maybe even resentful that she cannot see or act beyond her fury against the West. “It wasn’t her fault. It wasn’t my fault,” surrenders Lucy, implying that like her history, her feelings are not entirely of her own choosing (30).

Like the one before it, this encounter with daffodils culminates with a letter from Lucy's mother. Upon reading this letter, Lucy disavows her mother:

The object of my life now was to put as much distance between myself and the events mentioned in her letter as I could manage. For I felt that if I could put enough miles between me and the place from which the letter came, and if I could put enough events between me and the events mentioned in the letter, would I not be free to take everything just as it came and not see hundreds of years in every gesture, every spoken word, every face? (31)

Despite the intense resentment the letter incites, Kincaid offers only one of its lines: "It had still not rained since you left" (31). Even though she makes it difficult to determine whether this line betrays or reveals the force of the letter's content, it soon becomes clear that its subtext conveys to Lucy something much more agonizing than the news of the drought back home (31). The letter is a reminder of Lucy's responsibility, and her mother's expectations of the kind of person she is to become. To "put distance" between herself and the events of the letter is also to put distance between herself and its writer and thus, the history she compels upon Lucy. In its most ideal form, this distance would open the way for her to achieve an individual subjectivity from the collective identity forced upon Lucy. It would permit her to "take everything just as it came," and even to feel things unsanctioned by West Indian nationalist ideology.

Reminiscent of the maternal bonds of the poetry discussed previously, Kincaid presents maternal love as the greatest obstacle preventing Lucy from severing the binding ties of her national history. In contrast to this poetry, Kincaid disavows nationalism rather than embracing it. The nationalism maternal love sustains is less a defense from colonialism than its affective double. It is the most powerful affective force and can be displaced but not wholly left behind in acts of emigration; instead, it crosses the distance

in recollections and letters received. A mother's love is an affect that possesses, consumes, and most importantly, binds, as Lucy discovers: "I would not come home now, I said. I would not come home ever. To all this the saint replied that she would always love me, she would always be my mother, my home would never be anywhere but with her" (128). Finding inadequate the physical distance between herself and her mother, Lucy attempts to create cultural distance by living in contradiction to her rearing and to her mother's values. Still, sexual promiscuity and vehement selfishness meant to assert an individual self cannot establish the freedom Lucy desires.

As the novel progresses, what Lucy cannot resolve through action she resolves through an affective posture, which I have designated as disavowal. In its most basic sense, Lucy's disavowal of her mother's love is the assertion of her individual subjectivity *within* the national and affective community to which they belong. In contrast to opposition, it understands that the bonds of community cannot be severed completely. Accordingly, by resolution, I mean to suggest that what Kincaid offers Lucy is the means of enduring her ambivalent condition, not the transcendence of it. That much is clear when Lucy, looking at the nineteen unopened letters from her mother, admits to herself, "I knew that if I read only one, I would die from longing for her" (91). In her refusal to face her mother's words and, moreover, to allow herself to feel love and longing for her mother, Lucy finds a way to continue the life she has created for herself in the U.S. and the freedom to contemplate what comes next. This is disavowal.

The novel ends on a wish, where Lucy, knowing she can never return home, writes the name her mother gave her, before erasing it with her tears, "'I wish I could love someone so much I would die from it'" (163). With these words, an earlier juvenile

wish for the mother's death and a permanent separation from her is replaced by this affective disavowal that while made from love is a promise not to love. "I wish I could" does not suggest that she is unable to love, but rather, that she cannot risk loving her mother so much, because to love her mother would make life away from her impossible to live. The freedom Lucy gains from disavowal is not liberatory in a conventional sense. The affective conditions of migration are distilled in this moment that reveals how the contestation of ties between Lucy and the person and place she has forsaken generates grief rather than a feeling of triumph. A contradictory state, this is the freedom of perpetual belonging, the constancy of affective negotiation that grants the subject the individual self she's been in search of. Autonomy comes to signify not a radical breach, but the exercise of agency to contest familial and national belonging.

"No Love Now and Much Love Now"

Where the previous sections of this chapter sought to establish the binding function of maternal love this concluding section aims to look more closely at love itself as a force of disavowal. More specifically, I want to examine more closely the implications of Kincaid's disavowal of maternal love by using her memoir, *My Brother*. Where *Lucy* presented the story of a young woman beginning her separation from home, *My Brother* narrates the returns of an established writer to the country of her birth, a place she has publically disparaged.⁵⁰ The memoir was written well after the novels and interviews that established Kincaid as a writer famous, in part due to her strained

⁵⁰ See for example Jamaica Kincaid's *A Small Place* (1998), a critique of the Western tourist and the tourist industry in Antigua.

relationship with her mother.⁵¹ In *My Brother*, she returns to assist the fatally ill younger brother that her mother preferred to her, and also to his fierce caretaker, her mother. If Lucy resolves never to return home, then the Kincaid of *My Brother* realizes that returns are inevitable.

In this work of experimental prose, Kincaid manipulates the text's formal qualities to make the reader feel her sense of alienation from her mother. "I only now understand...why someone would want to feel as if he or she belongs to nothing, comes from no one, just fell out of the sky, whole," she writes placing the remark between two anecdotes that demonstrate her mother's capacity to cut down living things (12-13). Implying her own "feel[ings]" of anxiety in being related to such power and how she might be harmed by it, Kincaid gestures towards the disavowal of this relationship and of all others established by birth. Throughout *My Brother*, she manipulates the appearance of the text on the page to replicate the distances she "feels," or desires to "feel." For instance, she repeatedly qualifies the relationships of members of her birth family to make them seem distant to the reader who might expect to feel intimately acquainted with a memoirist's family:

my mother (the woman who later also became his mother) and my father (the man who really was his father and really not mine)...the two other boys (my brothers and his brothers)... (111)

⁵¹ See for example, Selwyn Cudjoe's interview with Kincaid, "Jamaica Kincaid and the Modernist Project: An Interview" in *Callaloo* (Spring 1989) and Moira Ferguson's "A Lot of Memory: An Interview with Jamaica Kincaid" in *The Kenyon Review* (Winter 1994).

The constant pause of the parenthesis to clarify relationships emphasizes her unwillingness to consider herself as belonging naturally to the family that her mother created through marriage and childbirth.

In *Lucy*, maternal love is depicted as a binding affect that is dangerous to the object of that love; in *My Brother*, Kincaid describes mother's love as even more negative and more active. It appears not as instinct but as action, "[m]y mother loves her children, I want to say, in her way" (13). Moreover, she thinks of her mother's love as an affect intended to produce an effect, one performing a service: "It never has occurred to her that her way of loving us might not be the best thing for us. It has never occurred to her that her way of loving us might have served her better than it served us. And why should it? Perhaps all love is self-serving" (13). If, as Kincaid wonders, love is "self-serving" and operates for the primary benefit of the lover, we might consider whether a refusal to receive that love is possible. And if so, is that the disavowal of love that Lucy and Kincaid pursue as a means of achieving the distance necessary to nurture an individual subjectivity?

Among the most poignant echoes between *Lucy* and *My Brother* is Kincaid's initial exploration of hate to do the work she will later accomplish through disavowal. She finds that disavowal, like hate, is ultimately an affirmation of the profundity of that love bond. Echoing a previously mentioned moment in *Lucy* that distinguishes between feelings of longing and those of hatred, she recounts, "I once did not see my mother for twenty years, even though I thought of her first thing in the morning and last thing at night, and almost all my thoughts of her were full of intense hatred" (154). As she continues, she reveals that her hatred towards her mother is how she confronts her

mother's love: "but she was alive and not in my sight and I could so well remember her hatred towards me—I will not add a qualifier to that, her hatred towards me, or modify it, this was just so: my mother hates her children" (154). Having already proclaimed that her mother loves her children, in this moment Kincaid further attests to the intensity of the bond between her mother and herself. And while pursuing another affective mode out of frustration, she flirts with a feeling that she can never truly feel for her mother. Actual hatred, like opposition, would require a weaker bond than the one she feels for the woman "who meant much to [her]," a bond that is dissolvable (154). Alternatively, the hate she expresses enables Kincaid to perceive that when maternal love appears to be absent it is, in fact, most present.

Even still, she remains outwardly resistant to belonging to her family of birth, opting instead to see her strongest affective bonds as those with her "chosen" family. Relating time spent with her husband's relatives whom she hardly knows, yet incite in her great love, Kincaid writes, "it is so easy to love people you do not really know and only have the strong feeling that you should love them because they perhaps remind you of the people you love best in world, the people you have chosen" (157). While it is striking how closely these words mirror Lucy's realization that her feelings for Mariah were displaced feeling for her mother, I must also note the exclusion of the mother from this paradigm that discerns between families of choice and families not "chosen" but inherited. This distinction produces interesting problems for the relationship between belonging and love and generates equally interesting ways for Kincaid to solve it. Here, she claims it is possible to manage love by establishing a family through choice then choosing to love them. In this way, she assumes agency akin to maternal love. And yet,

she makes uncertain the relationship between belonging and love for the family that has not been chosen—those whom you do not profess to “love best in the world”—especially when they offer the bonds you cannot seem to escape (157). Ultimately, the contradiction between familial belonging and maternal love is resolved by turning to disavowal:

I love the people I am from and do not love the people I am from, and I do not really know what this means to say so, only that such a thing as no love now and much love now, these feelings are not permanent, or possibly not permanent. One day something may happen and I will understand that all the things I now feel, which do not at all seem like love (the word I would use to describe my feelings about my family, the people I have made my own: my husband, my children...), are in fact love; that I loved my brother and the other people I am from, my mother, my older brothers, and Mr. Drew (the father of my brothers, who was a father to me, though at the same time not my father at all)... (149)

In this moment, Kincaid performs the strongest disavowal of love in both *Lucy* and *My Brother*. It is here that she recognizes that the disavowal of love is a function of love that only operates in the presence of profound love bonds. Disavowal collapses the divisions of “no love now” and “much love now” and also between “love” and the feelings “that do not all seem like love.” This reveals that all of these concepts are formulations of love, some termed positively and other negatively, but are not turns to other kinds of feelings like opposition or indifference. I want to suggest that when Kincaid says, “these feelings are not permanent,” she reveals the paradox of bonds like maternal love. These feeling are both permanent and “not permanent” because they are the same; they fold into each other as different sides of the same feeling. While it is easier to commit to loving the “chosen” family than the birth family, this is only because it requires the weaker affective bond. For Kincaid, the disavowal of the birth family solidifies the bonds that establish it

while also creating the conditions for the strongest possible assertion of her individuality within communal belonging.

In this deeply affective language, Kincaid responds to black feminist criticism and Caribbean nationalism, intellectual traditions inclined to recuperate mothers and homelands. The celebratory posture with respect to the legacy of motherhood has made us inattentive to texts with more antagonistic relationships to maternal love. Kincaid's writing prompts us to consider how the more negative relation to maternal love and national belonging warrants our attention as well. Moreover, her understanding of the connection between maternal love and political ideology offers a different account of the individual subject's relationship to politics grounded in opposition that post-colonial and feminist thought rely on. The power of *Lucy* and *My Brother* is that they show us that the most potent politics are subtler than opposition precisely because the feelings that produce national belonging do not exist in its "all or nothing" binary logic. Rather, they exist in gradations, yielding to changing circumstances. It is in these gradations that there is room for agency and for the individual subject to exist within the community.

CHAPTER 3

Strange Love: Diasporic Intimacy and the Sublime in Caryl Phillips's *Dancing in the Dark*

When critics call Caryl Phillips a Black Atlantic writer they do so with reference to the Kittian-born, Leeds-reared, Manhattan-dweller's personal history of transnational migration and his writings that narrate hundreds of years of movement of black peoples across the Western hemisphere.⁵² As Rebecca Walkowitz argues, the inclusion of Phillips's biography at the beginning of his work is meant to suggest that his writing "has been shaped...by the interplay among several literary cultures" (535).⁵³ We are to comprehend this "interplay" as evidence of the sort of transcultural exchange that Paul Gilroy advances in the notion of the Black Atlantic. Hence, we are encouraged to read Phillips's work as "transcend[ing] both the structures of the nation state and the constraints of ethnicity and national particularity" (Gilroy 19). Noting the similarities between Phillips's embrace of transnationalism and Gilroy's theorization of the same, literary critic Yogita Goyal suggests another basis for comparing their portrayals of black diaspora. Reading Phillips's neo-slave narrative *Cambridge* (1991) and historic novel

⁵² For another example, see Tim Bewes's "Shame, Ventriloquy, and the Problem of Cliché in Caryl Phillips," in which he assess the extent to which Phillip's autobiography is operating as a Black Atlantic cliché. He suggests that Phillips "seems like a gift for readers and critics interested in the theme of the black 'diaspora' in contemporary literature, or the closely associated concept of the 'black Atlantic,' deriving from the work of the cultural critic and theoretician Paul Gilroy" (33).

⁵³ See Rebecca Walkowitz, "The Location of Literature: The Transnational Book and the Migrant Writer." *Contemporary Literature* 47. 4 (2006): 527-545.

Crossing the River (1993), she contends that Phillips's depiction of a timeless Africa that "collapses time and space" operates commensurately with Gilroy's theory of the "slave sublime," an aesthetic that attempts to "present the unrepresentable" experience of slavery (228). Goyal critiques Phillips along the same lines that other scholars, including Neil Lazarus, Simon Gikandi, and Laura Chrisman have taken Gilroy's Black Atlantic theory to task: the slave sublime carries the risk of an abstract and ahistorical sense of diaspora that "retur[ns] to the discursive sign of Africa as a space of lack" existing outside of history and time (Goyal 227).⁵⁴

When Goyal uses Phillips as a literary example of the dangers of the sublime as an abstract and ahistorical concept she misses an opportunity to recognize one of the most crucial ways in which Phillips engages and ultimately rejects the sublime. Central to Gilroy's definition of the slave sublime as the counter culture to European conceptions of modernity is the recognition of the sublime as affect, or what Jean-Francois Lyotard calls "the sublime sentiment," "a strong and equivocal emotion [that] carries with it both pleasure and pain" (Lyotard 43).⁵⁵ Drawing on this idea, Gilroy contends that through the sublime black artistic production presents slavery, which is so atrocious that the event cannot be fully conceived or represented in language, yet the literature can communicate

⁵⁴ See Neil Lazarus's *Nationalism and Cultural Practice in the Postcolonial World*. Oxford UP, 2009; Laura Chrisman, *Postcolonial Contraventions: Cultural Readings of Race, Imperialism and Transnationalism*. Manchester UP, 2003; Simon Gikandi, "Introduction: Africa, Diaspora, and the Discourse of Modernity." *Research in African Literatures* 27.4 (1996): 1-6 for similarly pointed critiques of Gilroy's dehistoricization of Africa.

⁵⁵ Following Kant, Lyotard suggests that pleasure and pain are not mutually exclusive, rather "pleasure derives from pain." This simultaneous and contradictory feeling is the sublime.

the pleasure and the pain of not being able to fully represent slavery's horrors.⁵⁶ While Gilroy cites a number of diasporic literary works as exemplifying the slave sublime, most notably Toni Morrison's 1987 novel *Beloved*, he also posits that music's ability to communicate outside of language most faithfully captures the sublime sentiment.

For instance, in a sub-section of Gilroy's text entitled "Love Wars and Sexual Healing," singer and songwriter Percy Mayfield emerges as the exemplar of the entanglement of sacred and profane desires of black diasporic figures. Intertwined, the differences of the sacred and the profane "dissolve into the sublime and the ineffable" (Gilroy 203). They reside simultaneously in vernacular expressive forms and give rise to communal associations. The church and the family are communities of the sacred, whereas the profane establishes community based on the "priority of the personal, intimate" (203). Mayfield's song, "Please Send Me Someone to Love," sounds like an appeal for the romance and sex (the profane) but it is actually a "prayer for peace" (the sacred) (204). His melodic profane longing for "an estranged lover" makes audible the sacred yearning for "a home among the tide" of diasporic waters (204). Here, the utopian quality of Gilroy's sublime translates the non-verbal longing for connection with the diaspora into the ecstatic feelings of belonging that stabilizes diasporic communities.

Goyal's argument that both Gilroy and Phillips turn to the sublime in their depictions of the black diaspora is inattentive to the ambiguities of Phillips's relationship to the sublime. In this chapter, I use Phillips's novel *Dancing in the Dark* to show how he rejects the utopianism of the sublime. In reading Phillip's fictional account of the life and career of black minstrel performer, Bert Williams, I argue that longing for intimate

⁵⁶ Lyotard helpfully and concisely summarizes this contradiction: The sublime develops in "conflict between the faculties of a subject, the faculty to conceive of something and the faculty to 'present' something" (43).

connection between subjects fails to stabilize diasporic communities.⁵⁷ Phillips imagines blackface minstrelsy as an embodiment of racial intimacy through which subjects negotiate their place in the diaspora. The novel proposes that cross-cultural intimacy among black diasporic subjects remains too unstable to sustain the community.

Dancing in the Dark illuminates the conflict between blackface minstrelsy and the intimacy of diasporic belonging. It problematizes the fact that not only was Williams a West Indian performer masquerading as a “Real Coon,” he did so in partnership with an African American entertainer, George Walker, and while married to an African American woman, Lottie Williams. In the novel, diaspora takes its shape from these intimate unions. It appears as the relationship between African American and West Indian minstrels who recognize each other’s suffering but are unable to bring comfort to each other. It also manifests in a marriage between a distant husband and his wife who naively believes she knows the “true self” beyond his degrading performance. By illustrating how these partnerships consistently produce failed forms of intimacy through miscommunication and abjection, Phillips exposes the limitations of diasporic intimacy.

⁵⁷ Though I use the phrase “diasporic intimacy,” I am not referring to Svetlana Boym’s concept, although I am tacitly engaged with what she calls a “paradox” “not opposed to uprootedness and defamiliarization but constituted by it” (Boym 227). Rather, in reading *Dancing in the Dark*, I want use intimacy to rethink the comforts of uprootedness that Boym (and Gilroy) describe:

Diasporic intimacy does not promise a comforting recovery of identity through shared nostalgia for the lost home and homeland. In fact, it’s the opposite. It might be seen as the mutual enchantment of two immigrants from different parts of the world or as the sense of the fragile coziness of a foreign home. Just as one learns to live with alienation and reconciles oneself to the uncanniness of the world around and to the strangeness of the human touch, there comes a surprise, a pang of intimate recognition, a hope that sneaks in through the back door, punctuating the habitual estrangement of everyday life abroad (229).

While echoes of Phillips’s declaration that he is “of this place and not of this place” can be heard in Boym’s definition of diasporic intimacy, his writing on Williams shows that he is far more critical about the “mutual enchantment” and “pang of intimate recognition” between displaced subjects (*A New World Order* 2).

This line of argument has relevance for how recent scholarship has discussed intimacy in the black diaspora. To critique the legitimacy of intimacy as a foundation for diaspora, Phillips recognizes the ties between diasporic allegiance and abject subjectivity, and thus refuses the utopian coherence of Gilroy's sublime. Far from the romance that Goyal maintained was central to Phillip's work, *Dancing in the Dark* is deeply pessimistic in its representation of diaspora, ultimately contesting the idealized image of stable diasporic unions. Furthermore, the novel also challenges the cultural politics which motivate recent recuperations of minstrelsy by scholars of black studies, such as Louis Chude-Sokei and Michelle Ann Stephens. For Phillips, minstrelsy, like intimacy, lacks the power to reliably sustain cross-cultural allegiance.

Deep Love: Tenuous Ties in *Dancing in the Dark*

Challenging the ecstatic ineffability of the sublime, *Dancing in the Dark* reveals incommunicability to be destructive to intimacy. The inability to express experience in language emphasizes the alienation involved in diasporic cross-cultural relationships. In a scene that distills this logic, the stage partnership between the West Indian Bert Williams and African American George Walker disintegrates with the failure of language. His body paralyzed by disease, George's mind follows. When Bert goes to visit his old partner, he finds George now "incapable of speech for his tongue is flapping but to no purpose" (151). One way to appreciate the "indignity" of George's silent flapping tongue is to remember that for decades these partners commanded audiences with their voices, George's city slick lingo complementing Bert's "darky" drawl (157).

However, the repercussions of George's muteness are felt beyond the incapacitation of one-half of a great act. His physical ineffability signals the longstanding reticence that characterized even the better days of Bert and George's partnership. Stating, "For more than an hour I have listened to George talking, but I have little understanding of what George is attempting to communicate," Bert describes not only George's presently mute tongue, but also years riddled with miscommunication (150). This is a familiar pattern of theirs: one speaks without "communicat[ing]" while the other listens without "understanding."

This scene of incommunicability between Bert and George unsettles the great affection between them. Lottie, Bert's wife, watches her husband react to George's decline and perceives that he has a "deep love" for his partner that exceeds his feelings for her (155). The novel builds towards this admission of love. At times, the narrative pushes a seductive view of their mutual love as a tool to overcome cultural and political differences, beckoning us to recognize this as true intimacy, for [intimacy] "proceed[s] by way of what goes without saying" (Berlant 686).⁵⁸ It matters, it would seem, that one *perceives* the other's suffering even when it goes verbally unarticulated between them. Nevertheless, the novel is also careful to dispel this wisdom.

Evacuating the idealism of Bert and George's love, the novel places feelings of lack and absence at the foundation of their relationship. Until George's illness and death, their "deep love" sustained their act and kept it on the stage but it could neither stabilize nor protect their partnership from internal divisions. A sense of rupture takes hold as soon as the partnership is introduced at the beginning of the novel. While in the middle of a performance Bert begins to reflect on their non-verbal conversation occurring beyond a

⁵⁸ Lauren Berlant, "A Properly Political Concept of Love." *Cultural Anthropology*.

register perceptible to the white audience. In their movements, Bert and George disclose to each other their differing ideas about the political purchase of their work: wanting the audience to see beyond his performance and respect his artistry, Bert “go[es] gently with them” and “seduce[s]” them on-stage while George “like[s] to heat up the white man’s blood by being flash in his face” (10-11). In Bert’s terms, George’s confrontational style—“always pushing and demanding more”—jeopardizes the partnership. Feeling “sorrow...the more George agitates,” these feelings are symptomatic of the divide that only widens when Bert remains silent about his partner’s behavior: “[h]e thinks, No need to be like that [...] but Bert never says anything to dandy George in his colorful vests” (11). And so this very silence that maintains the peace in their partnership slowly destroys it from inside: “Some days, Bert feels that their act, although seamless and coherent on the outside, is beginning to fracture internally” (11). In the language of internal fracture which appears in the opening moments of the narrative lies the revelation that the “deep love” that smoothes over and “make[s] coherent” their differences and disparate politics is as artificial as Bert’s cork-painted face.

Phillips implies that this “deep” and deeply unstable “love” exemplifies the feelings of diasporic belonging that emerge from the desire to recognize other black ethnic groups as kinsfolk with a shared history. Using the words of cultural theorist Stuart Hall, this intimate feeling of recognition is the “‘oneness’” that “reflect[s] the common historical experiences and shared cultural codes which provide us, as ‘one people’, with stable, unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning, beneath the shifting divisions and vicissitudes of our actual history” (223).⁵⁹ The propensity black diaspora studies at large, to seek out “oneness” “beneath” admittedly significant historical

⁵⁹ Stuart Hall, “Cultural Identity and Diaspora” (1990).

differences and political “divisions” is a target for a novel like *Dancing in the Dark*, which invests in puncturing feelings of diasporic unity by showing that subjects in diaspora can neither fulfill each other’s desires for unity, nor at times, even perceive those desires.

Even moments in which the men offer each other consolation, Phillips exposes these outward displays of intimacy to be acts that promote abjection. One such moment finds George in bed with a white woman after a show. He pursues this as an alternative to the degradation of his stagecraft but before he can be satisfied that he has “humiliated” the husband of his “blond conquest,” he realizes that he is once again made fodder for white amusement (56). Fleeing through the fire escape as the cuckolded man shoots at him, he observes that his bedmate has covered herself “with melodramatic haste” and “[f]or a moment it occurred to George that she had actually been enjoying this drama” (56). He finally reaches Bert’s door “prostrate[d]...trying to smile but the pain cutting him like a knife” (56). His smile fails to mask the injury of his awareness that he is not the victor of sexual vengeance as he had assumed, but the perpetual victim.

Although George’s turn to Bert looks like a statement of their closeness in a time when he needs comfort, Phillips underscores that the men share abjection instead of reassurance. That George must have his partner witness his humiliation implies that the bond between them is built, to a great extent, on dispersing their individual degradation within the partnership. Just as this happens on stage during their humbling minstrel performances, it also happens in private settings. Likewise, the inability for successful communication between them reinforces their abject status. We see this again when Bert, looking down at George queries, “That white woman’s husband catch up with

you?” and George simply “look[s] up at his partner” as “Bert already knew the answer to the question” (57). Consistent with the novel’s version of intimacy as marked by silence, George does not try to explain his injuries to a partner who already assumes what has transpired. He goes to Bert because he wants from him something he cannot have—an instance of actual communication, yet their encounter is incapable of generating empathy between them. Such moments of thwarted expression serves as occasions to view how the futility of their communication supports reciprocal abjection.

In another moment that captures both the peril of their inadequate verbal exchanges and the fallacy in representing the minstrels as an ideal intimate union, George arranges an encounter between Bert and prostitute as a way of “do[ing] something special” for his friend (59). Though noticing that Bert “is struggling with his ‘new character,’” George is unable to “think of anything [...] that might help him out of his depression” (59-60). In this instance, he can understand why his partner is becoming increasingly miserable but he cannot provide what Bert needs. In the few moments the woman spends with Bert she discerns something that his friend of many years remains oblivious to: Bert needs someone to talk to, not someone to share his bed for a night. By getting Bert “a gift, a present,” George has misrecognized Bert’s desire for cross-cultural intimacy for a desire for sexual intimacy (60). Observing that between Bert and George exists unconsummated yearning, the woman charges, “the two of you all deserve each other” (59). She continues, assessing that the mastery of their stage performance belies the limitations of their off-stage masquerade: “Coming into my town like you all is big and mighty but you ain’t nothing but a pair of broke-down little boys masquerading as men” (59). The demotion from “men” to “boys” implies the impotence of their attempts

to gratify each other's desires for intimacy. Repeatedly, they fail to acknowledge that the limitations of their bond exceed their desire for it. The united front they try so hard to show on and off stage, to the public and especially to themselves, is a merely a façade.

For example, when one of their business associates, the African American composer Bob Cole, inquires if "[e]verything [is] alright with Bert?" George sharply retorts, "Ain't no way to talk about Bert" (53). And before Bob can defend his intentions, George "holds up his hand" and curtly states, "Bert got pressures on him that you and me don't fully understand" (53). Coming to his friend's defense with the admission that Bert's burdens are beyond his comprehension, George captures the contradiction inherent in the desire for unity between diasporic subjects. His understanding of his other half is both adequate and inadequate, narrow and capacious: he "understands" Bert well enough to recognize that he does not "fully understand" him. And Bert, a figure who should not be "talk[ed] about" because he cannot be talked to, will remain an enigma to George, Bob, and all other African American performers.

In addition to the abjection cultivated within their personal and professional partnerships, self-effacement and erasure emerge as corrosive agents of the stage and creep into the minstrels' concepts of unmasked self. The novel insists that these categories of negation are consequences, even requirements, of minstrel performance that expand beyond the endeavors of public performance to wear away at the partners' concepts of themselves and each other. For instance, when alone in his dressing room, Bert gazes at the cork-painted face peering back from a mirror, he "knew that he had disappeared, and he understood that every night he would have to rediscover himself before he left the theater" (57). Forcing Bert into a nightly cycle of "disappearance" and

“rediscovery,” the novel anxiously represents the effacement and self negation at the heart of minstrelsy.

The narrative disquiet surrounding Bert’s effacement lies in contrast to recent scholarship that celebrates the minstrel’s self-negation as mastery rather than tragedy. A prime example of this recuperative project is Louis Chude-Sokei’s *The Last “Darky”* (2006), a study of Williams’s written and theatrical works alongside late-nineteenth and twentieth century black nationalist and pan-African discourses. Although he recognizes Williams as “having been trapped by his own strategic self-erasure,” Chude-Sokei focuses on what he perceives to be the generative outcomes of the minstrel’s performance of self negation, including the “possibilities of camouflage theorized...within a Caribbean theoretical lineage” and a critique of the binary logic that dominates U.S. conceptions of race, gender, and class (36, 40). While both Phillips and Chude-Sokei recognize erasure as significant modes of being for the minstrel performer, their disparate treatment of it is animated by their divergent ideas about the value of minstrelsy; Chude-Sokei seeks to recuperate Williams’s blackface masquerade as a forerunner of American and transatlantic modernism, whereas Phillips condemns such cultural politics which seek positive recourse through minstrelsy.

One of the most significant points of departure between Phillips’s novel and Chude-Sokei’s study involves their conflicting ideas about the nature of the minstrel mask as either an affliction the performer endures or as tool of subversion he wields. Taking the latter position, Chude-Sokei insists, “Williams’s camouflage would be so successful, his diversion so like complicity that it would mutate over time into a new kind of skin” (Chude-Sokei 36). The striking optimism of the notion of “new kind of skin”

generated from a career of masking black skin with black cork seeks to make self negation a positive practice as well as a productive one. In this line of thinking, instances of erasure—the “hyperbolic absence” of his black body playing the white fiction of a Negro darky and the erasure of his West Indian accent and with it, his ethnic culture—ironically produces a more visible subject whose presence in the social imagination invites us question the very categories of identity upon which institutions like racial masquerade have been built (35). For Chude-Sokei, this “new kind of skin” is a radical authenticity that explodes the black and white binary to speak to inter-racial difference within the black diaspora (38-39).

Conversely, if there is a one point that *Dancing in the Dark* makes clear it is that the increasing volatility of the performer’s subjectivity undercuts any political successes of his masquerade. Throughout the novel, the language of erasure amplifies instability and loss. The moment of Bert’s first application of blackface is described as an absolute obliteration of the man behind the mask: “He erased himself. Wiped himself clean off the face of the earth so that he found himself staring back a stranger” (Phillips 58). When Bert assures himself that he “can, at any time, reclaim [himself] with soap and water, “ he naively assumes that he commands his mask and can use it to entice the white audience into respecting a black performer; ultimately, both assumptions are proven erroneous (57). As he walks out to the stage he grows uncertain of the identity of that “stranger,” wondering, “just who was this new man and what was his name?” (57). Phillips suggests that the authority to give the figure an identity rests with the spectator not the performer: “the audience never failed to recognize this creature. That’s him! That’s the nigger! [...] I know him! I know him!” (57-58). The white audience’s cries of recognition displace

the radical authenticity Chude-Sokei envisioned; to them, Bert is merely breathing life into stereotype that validates their racist predilections. No matter how complex his masquerade, Bert executes “somebody else’s fantasy,” and maintains rather than subverts categories of identity (58).

Another scholar of Williams’s work, Michelle Ann Stephens suggests that the white audience’s belief in the authenticity of the minstrel’s masquerade derives from their “inability to appreciate the degrees of self-consciousness and awareness that went into his minstrel routine” (Stephens 129). To call black self-consciousness a central feature of minstrelsy endeavors to defend the masquerade from criticisms that would suggest that it upheld demeaning representations of black people. The novel challenges this reasoning. For instance, Bert’s pronouncement that “[t]he dressing room is where I dress, but it is also the place where I can set my true self to one side and put on the clothes and mind of another...But this is not me” reflects the intentionality and awareness that Stephens considers the performer’s self-consciousness (Phillips 123). Likewise, Bert imagines that he and the audience are in on the joke together: “Surely the audience understands this. This is simply a person that I have discovered, a person the audience claims to recognize,” however, Phillips shows him to be the one deceived by his own expectations of allegiance between himself and his spectators (123). While Stephens is right to say that the white audience fails to recognize the carefully crafted act, she has not accounted for how their gleeful obliviousness erodes both Bert’s self-consciousness and his awareness of himself as distinct from the performance.

To rebuke any claims to minstrelsy’s politically subversive power, the line between the performer and his performance is increasingly distorted as the narrative

progresses. Bert's partner George starts to notice that "[s]ometimes Bert behaves as though his makeup is an extra layer of skin that he cannot rub away" (110). Recalling Chude-Sokei's celebration of a new skin and radical subjectivity, *Dancing in the Dark* casts this transformation in a negative light to imply that this is less a radical "new" skin than a stifling "extra layer" that threatens his authentic subjectivity. The descent of Bert's self-awareness into "confusion" threatens the integrity of his individual subjectivity as well as that of his partnership with George, who "worries that perhaps Bert's unfortunate blackface performance and his disturbingly accommodating personality are becoming somewhat confused in his partner's mind" (110). This criticism of Bert's "accommodating personality," which is cultivated through minstrelsy, suggests that the partners' incongruous politics is one of the primary causes for the vulnerability of their partnership

While both minstrels want their partnership to present the image of a cohesive allegiance between African American and West Indian blacks, the negative disposition of the *Dancing in the Dark* will not bear out such cultural politics. One of the few instances of conversation between Bert and George concern their divergent ideas regarding the political achievements of their act. George chides Bert, "White people are laughing at you, and colored folks in the audience are only laughing to keep from crying" (123). With these words George denounces Bert's ambitions to gain racial equality by appealing to the white audience's humor in hopes that they will appreciate his skill. Evoking New Negro uplift discourse, George further insists that Bert abandon the blackface "darky" image for a figure more representative of racial advancement, demanding, "Not in the twentieth-century. You gotta leave that man behind where he belongs, and it doesn't

matter a damn how much you want to talk about what you do as art, I'm telling you, please cut that colored fool loose" (123). Yet, George's plans to stage more progressive productions to install the Williams and Walker Company at the head of the uplift movement ultimately prove futile when critics pan their new production, *Abyssinia* because it "contains far too little of the colored coon Mr. Bert Williams presenting his celebrated corkface routines" (125). With their contradictory politics standing between them, feelings of resentment soon overcome the love and admiration that has reinforced the partnership.

Although minstrelsy remains their primary, and often only, mode of expression and social participation, it cannot rely upon the intimacy between the men to prevail over their differences. Unrelenting and uncompromising they "no longer share the same ease" and their stage act becomes incoherent because "George's desire for swell and grace makes no sense when set against Bert's old-fashioned imitation of a nigger coon" (136). In this way, the novel sweepingly rejects any and all attempts to redeem minstrelsy, from arguments that hail its status as political work that establishes a radical black subjectivity to those claiming its form fosters an idealized cross-cultural allegiance within the black diaspora. It will not even entertain the most rudimentary reason for suspending criticism: appreciation for high level of talent minstrelsy requires. Bert remains proud of his "comic timing, his wide range of facial expressions, his much admired technical skills—he knows that his partner respects these well-honed talents" (100). However, talent and technical skill are simply not enough to compensate for such a humiliating act, so Bert "knows that his partner longs to say, 'Bert, you look and act like a nigger and we colored Americans no longer recognize you for we are trying to move on'" (100).

Because George never actually says this to his partner, they never actually “move on;” For the remainder of their partnership they are stuck in place striving to cancel each other out on the stage until George’s aphasia makes even that impossible.

The final scene of the novel illustrates the consequence of a life dedicated to this unviable path and denigrates efforts to recuperate minstrelsy. It returns to the theme of erasure and self negation that Williams scholars like Chude-Sokei theorize as evidence of the performer’s achievement. Only here, there is no resistance, no power in erasure, only a languishing subject wishing for isolation and invisibility. His masquerade has completed its caustic work and leaves him obscured even to himself: “As I look around I realize that I can see nothing. In fact, I can no longer even see myself [...]” (208).

Delivering a blow to those who claim that intra-racial masquerade is a feasible method of negotiating black diasporic subjectivity, Bert identifies his migration as the first instance of his tragic erasure, confessing, “I truly lost sight of myself many years ago when my tightly shod young feet touched the shore of the powerful country to the north” (208).

His career was a form of conscription into diasporic politics, he implies, and now his only chance of emancipation from them is equally bleak. Admonishing his fans, “It is unfair to ask a man to travel his one precious life bearing this burden,” he demands to perform one last act of erasure, “I am tired, so please leave me alone in the darkness and let me search for my father, who is also lost” (208). Bert’s search for his lost father is an attempt to return home to the West Indies and give up on diasporic relations with African Americans. This is a scene of pure unequivocal loss, not triumphant erasure.

“Two husbands straying, one in mind, one in body”

I would like to return to the issue of frustrated desire in *Dancing in the Dark* by examining a second cross-cultural relationship, that between Bert and his wife Lottie. Through the lens of this other emotionally fraught union, the narrative names love as the affect that bonds Bert and George, thereby juxtaposing these two partnerships before ultimately tearing down those claim to difference it formerly established. While one bond has an excess of love and the other an absence of it, they are merely echoes of the same unspoken and unanswered yearning for unity between black Americans and black West Indians.

My focus on Bert and Lottie's marriage departs from critical readings of the novel that are inclined to examine romance in the Williams and Walker Company's stage productions. For example, Michelle Stephens has claimed that the public performance of the cakewalk in the production *In Dahomey* stands as an "organizing metaphor for both the Williams' and Walkers' relationships—black heterosexuality as a social performance constantly aware of itself in the face of a white audience" (143). I contend that while the emphasis on public performance is crucial to the understanding how uplift politics inform the Walker marriage, we need to attend to the atmosphere of privacy in the Williams marriage which first bolsters then defeats diasporic belonging. In both of these marriages love is linked to ideologies of racial allegiance.

In *Dancing in the Dark*, the tragic marriage between African American performers elucidates the racial uplift vision of romantic love. Scholars such as Claudia Tate and Ann duCille have elaborated on turn-of-the-century domestic fiction as the primary literary vehicle of racial uplift to demonstrate how these novels advanced notions

that love, and ultimately the virtuous bonds of marriage between black elites translated into love of the race and the commitment to racial progress.⁶⁰ Furthermore, as historian Kevin Gaines has examined, these intimate relations were meant to forward “a vision of progress that stressed respectability from deliverance from sexual degradation of slavery,” in addition to a second area necessary to the race’s advancement, reproduction as a means of securing the perpetuity of the black community (Gaines 122). The Walkers’ marriage reflects this concern for the race, but as they continue to put racial advancement ahead of their personal desires the novel calls into question the value of these political unions that masquerade as personal ones.

In one of the key moments of the narrative, Aida (Ada) calls for black “love stor[ies],” to be presented to white audiences so that black actors would no longer “pretend like [they] have no such emotions” (117-118). Even as she speaks these words Aida is aware that her husband’s long string of affairs, especially his current liaison with a white performer for whom he declares his “love” undermines her idealization of black romance (117). She then proclaims that her own marriage is the model elite black partnership committed to uplift work and credits husband with being at vanguard of “trying to change the situation” while positioning herself “right behind him in his efforts”

⁶⁰ See Ann duCille’s *The Coupling Convention* (1993). For more analyses of black female-authored domestic fiction, see also Hazel Carby’s pioneering *Reconstructing Womanhood* (1989) and Claudia Tate’s *Domestic Allegories of Political Desire* (1996) and *Psychoanalysis and Black Novels* (1998).

For instance, the most striking aspect of Frances E.W. Harper’s *Iola Leroy* (1892) is that the eponymous pro-slavery heroine who learns of her black ancestry only after being sold into slavery chooses to continue living as a black woman upon her emancipation. She solidifies her commitment to the race by rebuffing her white suitor in favor of a black one, alongside whom she will dedicate her life to the project of racial uplift.

(117-118).⁶¹ Yet, only when Aida can no longer endure the humiliation of her husband's indiscretions and attempts suicide does George show any concern for her, telling Bert, "I got to start looking out for my Aida, and I guess I don't have much choice in the matter. Anything happens to her on account of me, then it's just going to bring disgrace on all of us" (130). Citing a lack of choice, it is clear that George returns to his marriage out of obligation to the racial community rather than love for Aida. He ruminates on his affective captivity while lying beside her at night, "Ada. Dark Star by which he set a false course" (117). With these words, the novel exposes the uplift version of love to be a "false course" that can neither fulfill personal desires nor effectively maintain political bodies.

While the Williams marriage is less bound by such public pressures, it does bear out the contradictions of diasporic politics. To illustrate this point, the early days of the Williams's courtship presents what seems to be a drastically different portrait of Bert than the sullen, reticent figure of most of the novel. This Bert is forthcoming, chatty even. Intercut with the scenes of Bert's inability to communicate with George are scenes of him relating to Lottie the most pivotal moments of his life: his immigration from the Bahamas, the origins of his partnership with George, and his adoption of blackface. The story he bestows upon her is his history; it is an attempt to translate his Caribbean background into something legible to her. The novel calls this his "wooing narrative," implying that the act of telling is his attempt to foster love between them (34).

⁶¹ In essays and interviews, as Nancy Bentley discusses in *Frantic Panoramas* (2009), the historical Aida Walker "present[ed] her career as the sort of 'uplift' work that dominated the middle-class agenda" (207). Based on Bentley's citations Phillips's paraphrase seems to closely match the wording of Walker's original interviews.

This instance of communication cannot be understood simply as an emergent stable bond, however. What is established is not sustained. For example, Lottie, who regularly fantasizes about their future as Bert reveals his past, finds his tale of vagabondage especially alluring and imagines being a grounding force for him: “This new man had traveled a long way from his Caribbean birthplace and twice crossed America, first to the west and then back to the east. This was a man whose brow she might soothe, a man she could encourage to relax and stay focused as he journeyed toward his destiny” (14). Retracing Bert’s tumultuous journey in her mind to envision herself as a “sooth[ing]” presence in his life, Lottie fetishizes his history. She considers herself to be as an anchor for this West Indian wanderer, his partner on his journey to belonging somewhere and to someone. Her fantasy is not entirely different from the desire for kinship that put Bert and George together. In both Bert and Lottie’s minds, their blossoming love presents an ideal diasporic union.

Such idealism turns nearly euphoric when the couple agrees to formally recognize their feelings in marriage. Bert’s proposal is a “confess[ion]” that Lottie’s “quiet dignity has captured his heart” and so with cultivated modesty “she smiles coyly” (17).

Similarly, the novel follows her in answering without words. Instead of telling, the narrative asserts the strength of their union to resist racism:

As they reach the junction at Fifty-first Street and Broadway they both hear the word ‘niggers’ fly from a horse-drawn carriage, but neither looks up to investigate what foul mouth has unleashed this missile. The word ricochets off a wall and crosses in front of them, creating a low obstacle over which they could both step. (17)

The implication is that their love is able to reduce a racist slur into a poorly aimed bullet that “ricochets” around its target. So engrossed in each other, the paramours barely even register this threat and casually step it as if it were merely a “low obstacle.”

Given the novel’s apparent confidence in Bert and Lottie’s union it is justifiable that she comes to believe herself to be the one person who can discern his authentic self from his performance. When Bert is onstage Lottie reads his movements with the same adoring curiosity with which she views his private gestures. Seated “high up in the balcony with the colored folks” she takes in the same show and shares in their amusement, but only her emotions are heightened by the actions of the stage for “her’s is a private passion” (18). And only Lottie’s laughter is animated by the right feelings. The “white folks” lack Lottie’s intimate awareness that “this is not the dignified man that she knows” and laugh out of pity, “feel[ing] sorry for” Bert bumbling about (18). In contrast, Lottie laughs because she has had access to the story no one else has heard.

In *Dancing in the Dark*, ultimately such intimate bonds are not rewarded. The progression of the narrative reveals this story, Bert’s “wooing narrative,” to be a perversion of love. It may be animated by an honest desire for connection but is corrupted by that same desire. When the romance culminates in marriage, the talking ends. To demonstrate this, the depiction of the wedding ceremony is a stylistic rupture from the overwrought language of the courtship. There are no words exchanged, no professions of love, only subtle gestures and peculiar thoughts, like Bert’s musing on cherries: “He is kissing his wife, and on this special day she tastes like cherries and he is happy for he loves cherries” (40). This is an inconsequential thought at first glance. However, another look shows it to be a rhetorical bridge that marks the emergence of the

marriage as an instrument of Bert's cravings at the cost of Lottie's. Here, she approximates an object he "loves," in this case cherries. And from the wedding forward, in Bert's eyes, Lottie's contribution to the union is her ability to resemble other things he values, namely the African American community.

Immediately after the wedding scene, we are moved to Marshall's Lounge where up-and-coming African American composers and performers gather to "spend their days writing songs and sketches and their nights speculating about the future" of racial advancement and their role leading such a movement (41). Though usually reticent in such discussions, Bert is emboldened by his newly earned status as a "kinsman" through his marriage to Lottie and he "discovers how to make his own contribution to the proceedings, adding an erudite point here or a powerful suggestion there..." (40-41). This suggests that while Bert's cross-cultural marriage can facilitate his belonging in an African American community, the business of marriage is incompatible with the political work of being a black performer. With Lottie "upstairs" waiting for her husband and Bert "downstairs" communing with his fellow performers, "it is clear that his world is dividing into two and at some point a decision will have to be made"(41). Despite the cross-cultural allegiance fostered in their relationship, Phillips places their marriage in dialectical tension with minstrelsy.

Faced with a deteriorating marriage, Lottie is also making decisions about the future. As Bert spends more time in the company of fellow performers it becomes apparent even to them that he is "avoiding something" upstairs (41). "Avoidance" precisely captures his behavior towards Lottie, where he begins to abstain from any form of intimacy with her whether physical or verbal. At night he "shambles upstairs" to their

bedroom and into their shared bed only to “recoil from her touch” (42). This drastic change in their relationship from excessive to absent affection can only be understood in the context of the novel’s suspicion of cross-cultural relationships. To this point, as Lottie’s interest in her husband’s West Indian background grows, the feelings she expresses as love also resemble scrutiny:

She is married to a performer, albeit a special kind of performer for her new husband appears to be pained by his profession, but she attributes this anxiety to his having come from the islands. They are a different people, that much she now appreciates, and for them the problem of being colored in America appears to engender a special kind of hurt (42).

The passage elucidates the fine line between “appreciation” of cultural difference and fixation on those differences. When Lottie thinks of Bert as a “special kind of performer” and attributes his “anxiety” to his West Indian origins, she undoubtedly does so with reference to the story he has confided in her. And while this demonstrates some understanding of the unique conditions of being a non-American black minstrel performer, her statement of his belonging to “a different people” for whom being black in the U.S. is a “special kind of hurt” is a tacit admission differences that cannot be overcome even by her love for him.

As an unconsummated domestic arrangement, their marriage is unable to close the gaps that stand between them as partners in a diasporic relationship. With her husband no longer talking to her nor touching her, Lottie decides that “for her marriage to survive they will have to find a place of their own, far from this hotel” (42). While the desire to establish a heteronormative marital home away from the site of homosocial community signifies the tension between a masculine political space and the traditionally feminine domestic domain, it is crucial to note here that domesticity also operates as the space for

non-performers and for those removed from the stage. This becomes clear when we consider that despite the similarities between Bert's fraught relationships with both his stage partner George and his romantic partner Lottie, Bert's love for George remains constant as his affection for Lottie turns to resentment. To be sure, neither relationship prevails in the end, but the homosocial professional relationship is privileged over the heterosexual domestic attachment.

To emphasize this distinction, Phillips writes Lottie out of Bert's professional life and out of the legacy of her real-life counterpart. As Camille Forbes's biography of Williams elucidates, the figure of Lottie in *Dancing in the Dark* is striking differently from the lively and confident woman who often graced the stage with her husband as a singer.⁶² Conversely, Phillips depicts a woman deferential to her husband's "wish[es]" that she "retire from the stage" and from his "professional circle" into domestic isolation (Phillips 124). With this denial of Lottie's participation in Bert's work, the novel effectively rejects the entanglement of domestic bonds with professional performance, thus resisting the coherent guise of black political and professional couplings. Daphne Brooks' work on black theatre illuminates how "postbellum black musical theatre was populated by a unique class of African American heterosexual couples with similar professional, political, and social aspirations" that recall Aida and George Walker (219). These "professional couplings," Brooks argues, "to some extent mirrored the visions of postbellum black women's club visionaries [...] who, in their turn-of-the-century fiction, imagined and theorized the exigencies of lively and creative cross-gender partnership as central to uplift" (219-220). To remove Lottie from the stage is to declare that Bert

⁶² In her portrait of Lottie Williams, Forbes writes that she "carried herself demurely, yet was extroverted enough to enjoy and desire a life in theater" (80). Unlike her fictional counterpart, "as she traveled with the company to perform, she learned to become one of the group" (82).

cannot be in one of these romantic-professional partnerships which are unified by their commitment to racial uplift because his fractured and displaced state removes him from such a coherent set of politics. Not only is the novel rejecting the intimate bonds that fuel African American uplift politics, it also rejects those that would foster belonging in diasporic communities.

Unconsummated Desire & The Sublime

When *Dancing in the Dark* contests that intimate love fosters cross-cultural allegiance at the heart of diasporic politics, it does so by repudiating Paul Gilroy's theory of the sublime and instead insists upon the impossibility of fulfilling desires for communal belonging. While this is most frequently seen in the failure of verbal communication between Bert and his cross-cultural partners who either stay silent though wanting to speak, or in speech that establishes abjection, there is also a second register for perceiving the failures of intimacy and love to stabilize diasporic communities. Profane and sacred longings come together in two moments where both Lottie and George experience feelings so heightened by both ecstasy and despair that the novel can only them represent in language as rhythmic utterances. As these moments of pure connection unfold it becomes clear that the erotic thrill of yearning for another's body is inextricable from more chaste desires for kinship. Just as the novel is unrelenting that neither of these yearnings can be fully consummated, it undermines the wisdom of the sublime.

Shifting from isolation to connection before settling on abandonment, the feelings Lottie endures make palpable the caustic quality of intimacy. As she “cherish[es]” her time in the bathtub, the language of this passage attentively describes her most ordinary actions: “She eases out of her robe and hangs it on the wooden hook inside the door and dips first one foot, and then the other, into the bathtub until she feels safe enough to slide herself down and under the surface of the water.” (115). The plain but overabundant prose dedicated to Lottie’s removal of her robe and the way she hangs it on a hook before dipping one foot and then the other into the tub is not meant to further the plot; rather, the point of this passage is to show that it can be described and narrated coherently in language. In this way, we are witnessing the narrative celebrating its own ability to make an event legible to the reader through description. It is important to note the success of language here, because it is soon upended to illustrate language’s limitations to convey simultaneous feelings of ecstasy and anguish.

As Lottie steps out of the bathtub serenity gives way to overwhelming isolation. Calling to mind Gilroy’s discussion of longing for “home among the tide” present in Percy Mayfield’s music, Phillips unsettles the unifying subtext of the water imagery by revealing Lottie to be “exiled from the water...like a fish incapable of breathing,” signaling the miserable state of being alienated from any semblance of community (Gilroy 204; Phillips 115). As in Gilroy’s description of Mayfield’s melodic longing for a lover, Phillips also imagines Lottie yearning to be touched by a paramour. It is the intensity of this longing that breaks the narrative coherency of the prose:

slowly, slowly, fly-flicking tongue working as one joyful unit, hollow of her neck don’t stop don’t yes breathe on me face down on me deeper and down hoping that she might wake up damp and exhausted and on the very edge of civilization bearing the gift of another person’s body. (115)

Here, the words create meaning by creating rhythm—the repetition of “slowly, slowly” and alliteration of “fly-flicking” quickly rises to the erotic thrill of “don’t stop don’t stop yes breathe on me” and finally meets its “damp and exhausted” climax. This is the sublime. The differences between the sacred and the profane have dissolve in a singular moment of ecstasy that exists removed from any immediate action outside of its own urgency.

Her husband’s entrance to the scene serves as a promise that Lottie’s intimate desires will never be satisfied. Bert offers, instead, “a counterfeit smile” and the “insult” of retreating to the bathroom to change into his bedclothes beyond the sightline of her gaze (116). His presence is the origin of her agony as their “marriage [has] collapse[d] into something that is more demeaning than mere boredom” (166). At every turn, the narrative shows their marriage to be one of “deni[al] rather than fulfillment, suggesting that there is no ecstasy of belonging, only unconsummated longing (116).

A parallel passage devoted to an erotic encounter between George and a white mistress further resists the ecstasy of connection by describing the presence of a diasporic subject as an intrusion into a space reserved for another kind of love. Following its detailed description of Lottie’s bathroom respite the novel painstakingly notes every amorous glance, sensual caress, and eager breath between George and Eva as they approach sexual gratification. This is a one of the novel’s rare instances of satiated pleasure and its only other declaration of love aside from Bert’s “deep love” of George. The pleasure rises and then breaks down when Bert enters his thoughts:

...in his mind Ada is nowhere to be found only Eva and he races faster she begins now to moan at first softly George yes George more George, and a

guilty George sees himself as Bert must see him but he can't stop and why should he stop for he loves Eva and Eva loves him...(117)

The evocation of Bert in the middle of this encounter underscores the confines of diasporic intimacy. Here, profane sexual desires meld into the appeal for kinship only to give way to another shade of abjection, "guilt." The admonishment to "stop" surrendering himself to this romantic, reciprocal love emanates from the false promise of racial unity that would use his love to invent communal belonging. Through these volatile intimate bonds of black partnerships, Phillips strives to articulate the limitations of diasporic politics whose best version of unity is expressed through frustrated desires.

CHAPTER 4

“Forever Diminished by Her Love:” The Negress as Black Queer Diaspora in Hilton Als’s *The Women*

In the first section of his memoir *The Women* (1996), the cultural critic Hilton Als recounts how his juvenile fixation with his mother’s “way of being” established a model for his queer black subjectivity, a figure he called the Negress (1). His mother’s capacity for suffering, her attraction to love, and her mask of congeniality amplified her angst as a West Indian transplant to the United States who rejected her belongingness to the black American community. Coveting his mother’s rich affective life, Als comes to take the identity of the Negress as his own and in doing so, he positions his queerness as an extension of his mother’s emotional history. Drawing parallels between the love that lead his mother to follow his father from the West Indies to the United States and those that lead him on a more local quest of sexual exploration, Als reveals the he “had been motivated to sit in parked cars with one man and then another by the same desire and romantic greed that had propelled her to move from Barbados to Manhattan” (59). While Als sees his mother’s “greed” for love “motiv[at]ing” the experiences that provide him with a narrative commensurate to her migration, I suggest that this is distinct from an instance of identification between mother and son. Much more complex than identification, his relationship with the woman he regarded to be the exemplary Negress, that is “a kind of living literature,” is a heady mixture of admiration and resentment that fuels his desire to investigate her nature (19).

These incessantly warring affects, admiration and resentment, come to a head in the very production of *The Women*, which is structured as a series of contemplations about Negresses whom Als knew by reputation if not personally. His mother, Marie, remains the model for how Als analyzes other Negresses and also how he comes to understand his gender and sexual identity. Marie's refusal to identify within the boundaries of her gender or race serves as one of the most important sources of conflict in his examinations of Negresses like his sisters and the socialite Dorothy Dean. Just as *The Women* explores what it means for these women break from affinities determined by strict social categories, I contend that the inclusion of Als as one of the titular "women" in the final section of the memoir underscores the dangers of associating across those lines.

Love, which this project has probed as an affect that binds and severs, emerges in this chapter as the mechanism for negotiating the space between alienation and identification. For Als, the pursuit of love that he shares with his mother simultaneously bonds and distances them. It serves as a commonality, as evidence of their shared nature even as it stands between them,

I still envy her ability to love—and to allow that love to consume her, or literally, parts of herself. I stand back from the model of her courage, just as I stand back from my desire to be taken in by love, even as I fear its power. I avoid all of this even though I consider myself a Negress in the tradition of my mother. (19)

With these words, Als articulates the central crisis of *The Women*: when a Negress succumbs to romantic love, she is unable to access other forms of love. Marie, a mother who loves her children, will never feel for them with the intensity she feels for their father. And when that impulse inspires her to die rather than live, she becomes

inaccessible to her children. Als might live in the “tradition” of his mother, emulating her way of being and rivaling her narrative, but he “stand[s] back” from the purest essence of her being, love.

Analyzing the means by which Als comes into knowledge of his subjectivity through the examination of his mother’s love is integral to understanding his resistance to giving himself over to the affect. Early in the narrative he reveals that the love between his mother and father, the very love that produced him also “diminished” him, as he explains, “She was silent about the mysterious bond she and my father shared, a bond so deep and volatile that their children felt forever diminished by their love...” (4). Here he describes the condition of having been created and negated by his mother’s love: first by the “deep and volatile” affection that “diminished him,” making him pale in comparison to his father, and then by his mother’s silent withholding and refusal to acknowledge what her love did to her children. In effect, Als suggests that this “diminish[ing]” love would inform Als’s subjectivity and his own approach to relationships, remarking that he and his siblings were “...forever compelled to disrupt, disapprove, avoid, or try to become a part of the love shared between any couple (specifically men and women)....” (4). What I find striking about the denunciation of romance, especially heteronormative romance is how it frames Als’s queerness as an affective disposition; that is to say that his queerness is a particular relationship to love itself, rather than simply his sexual identity. My claim thus answers a question that goes unanswered in Rinaldo Walcott’s reading of the text, “Is Negressity a form and expression of love?” while challenging his assertion that Als presents his queer identity as a given (80).⁶³

⁶³ See Walcott’s “Against the Rules of Blackness” where the critic argues that Als representation of his homosexuality attempts to “‘normalize’ queer sexualities within blackness” (76). By

Therefore, I contend that when Als employs the Negress as the model for his queer subjectivity, he articulates a queer politics that is fundamentally affective and diasporic. Affect, specifically love, is the language of the Negress and the language for negotiating one's relationship to community. Als suggests this when he remarks, "'Negress' was one of the few words [Marie] took with her when she emigrated from Barbados to Manhattan" (10). Marie's use of the word "Negress" enables her to define herself and the world she inhabits wherever she may be geographically. Appropriating it, this same word allows Als to conceptualize his queerness as a sort of inheritance of his mother's affective and diasporic impulses.

Recent developments in queer of color critiques have provided fertile ground for examining the intersections of queer and diasporic subjectivities. For critics, these inquiries are often motivated by the limitations of current conceptions of diasporic theory to capture the lives of queers of color. Gayatri Gopinath, for instance, has suggested that diaspora and queerness "need" each other in order to better fulfill diaspora theory's potential as a corrective of nationalism and to make queer theory more attentive to "questions of race, colonialism, migration, and globalization" (Gopinath 11). One way to destabilize the prevalence of heteronormative categories in diasporic discourse, Gopinath argues, is to produce a model of diaspora that places queer female subjectivity at its center. A main thesis of her book *Impossible Desires* (2005) is that the centrality of

contrast, I would argue that Als's queerness is never depicted as "normalized" even within the queer community, nor does Als aspire intervene within racial politics to advocate for the inclusion of queer subjectivity.

queer female desire disrupts the reproductive notion of home that remains entrenched in the diasporic imagination.⁶⁴

While Gopinath argues that the primacy of female subjectivity can save diasporic theory from reinscribing normative categories and to better account for queers of color, some black studies scholars contest the encroachment of anti-reproductive and antisocial rhetorical from queer theory into conversations about the futures of queer folk. From black studies, such critics as Dwight McBride have explicitly called for black queer inclusion into racial politics separate from the narrative of “down low” black men who threaten the perpetuity of the race. His proposed corrective is a gendered space that runs counter to the one Gopinath proposes; he advances a notion of a gay male utopia where they can commune together in beautiful surroundings like an exotic diasporic locale (McBride 28-30). For him, the diaspora is a space for gay male sociality. Other black studies scholars have been even more pointed in their repudiation of queer theory in the study of black diaspora. For instance, Jafari S. Allen challenges the debates between Lee Edelman and Judith (Jack) Halberstam about anti-sociality in queer theory.⁶⁵

Synthesizing the tenants of Edelman’s argument Tavia Nyong’o helpfully explains, “The critique of reproductive futurity connects compulsory heterosexuality and parenthood

⁶⁴ Although Gopinath’s archive in *Impossible Desire* is a South Asian one that includes Indo-Trinidadian writers V.S. Naipaul and Shani Mootoo., this is a conceptual apparatus that can be extended to other diasporic locations, certainly the Caribbean. According to Gopinath, “[t]he resignification of ‘home’ within a queer diasporic imaginary makes three crucial interventions: first, it forcefully repudiates the elision of queer subjects from national and diasporic memory; second, it denies their function as threat to family/community/nation; and third; it refuses to position queer subjects as alien, inauthentic, and perennially outside the confines of these entities” (15).

⁶⁵ See Lee Edelman, *No Future* (2004) and Judith (Jack) Halberstam, “The Antisocial Turn in Queer Studies” (2008). While Edelman argues for queer resignation from the politics that benefit heterosexual institutions, Halberstam calls instead for a queer politics of negativity rooted in an archive that includes non-white authors, like Jamaica Kincaid, who have marshaled the power of negativity to support her (anti-colonial) politics.

with a future-oriented, progressive politics. If one rejects the former, antirelational theory suggests, one must reject the other” (106). For Allen, this is not true; already on the margins of society, blacks do not have the luxury to reject the latter. On the contrary, sociality in the form of love is vital to cohering the diaspora and to the survival of black subjects.

This chapter examines *The Women* for the ways Als positions love in opposition to black survival, instead casting it as a force for the destruction of individual and communal bodies. The memoir contests the valorization of sociality at the center of black studies, especially black queer studies. While the Negress in her function as Als’s model of queerness, at times, appears to fulfill Gopinath’s and Allen’s visions of queer diaspora, the writer never lets up from his derision of communal politics. Rather, negativity and anti-sociality are the valuable categories for achieving the apolitical knowledge the Negress desires.

The Politeness of Death: Antisociality at the Limits of Community

In *The Women*, survival and death are identical practices of queer life. Als first encounters this notion from the example of his mother, who lived her life slowly dying. In describing Marie’s demise to be as much an act of will as a consequence of illness, Als reveals her death to be a form of negotiating anguish that is not about surviving it in any conventional sense. To emphasize this idea, he insists upon Marie’s death as a choice, reasoning, “Perhaps she chose to destroy her body out of profound sadness at the eventual dissolution of her thirty-year romantic relationship with my father. Perhaps she

chose to disappear her body out of her interest in the discipline inherent in self-abnegation. Perhaps it was both” (12). The double assertion of “chose” emphasizes the degree of resolve that Marie expressed in dying; death served as a means for her to make palpable the anguish she incurred at the end of a romance that once produced new life, Als and his siblings.

Eschewing the generative possibilities of a romantic relationship, the destruction of her body offers the Negress the possibility to withdraw from other social bonds. The experience of physical pain and the suffering of her impending mortality are experiences that Marie ferociously embraced as unique to her even as her friends and children stood witness to her protracted death. For twenty-years she died, her body slowly deteriorating while she remained “polite” to those who watched (13-14). However, this is an unconventional form of “politeness,” one which abstains from social considerations and exists to soothe the self at the cost of others’ comfort,

When diabetes cost her one of her legs, she said, politely: Oh, I’m dying now. When they removed a gland in her neck as a test for whatever, she said politely: Oh, I’m really dying now [...] her blood pressure was abnormally high, her teeth were bad, she could not urinate or take sugar in her tea or eat pork or remember a conversation but she remember these two things: that she was polite and dying. (13-14)

A politely uttered statement is inherently a social act that reinforces civility between individuals, yet Marie’s polite words, “Oh, I’m dying now” are spoken only as a courtesy to herself. It is at once an expression of mourning for the organs and systems of her body that are shutting down and an expression of awe at the triumph of her power to will this into being. “Oh, I’m dying now,” just barely conceals the pleasure of dying from close acquaintances looking on with horror and dread at the sight of her decay. It is

a pronouncement of her turn inwards to the seclusion of her body, where no one else can follow.

Marie chose isolation out of the desire to make herself distinct and to negate the reproduction of her identity in another woman. In addition to the children produced during her relationship with Als's father, the end of the union produces a something akin to her doubling in the form of the woman who took her place. Meeting this woman "on the street," Marie noted a likeness she found threatening, as Als explains, "My mother saw a certain resemblance between my father's new girlfriend and herself: they were both homely but spirited, like Doris Day" (13). Sharing with this woman a personality, an appearance, and a lover, Marie found out that she belonged to a community of two. Als elucidates just how devastating this finding was for a Negress who by definition identifies with no one, "the resemblance shattered any claim to originality my mother had" (13). If "originality" is vital for the Negress, then Marie's death was a way of extracting herself from the community to reclaim it. Even though she rejected belonging to community, she wanted those around her to witness her suffering as if to witness her difference from them. Als speculates that she achieves this in the protracted and "public" nature of her dying, "In the end, I think my mother's long and public illness was the only thing she ever felt she experienced as an accomplishment separate from other people. And it was" (13). To call a fatal affliction an "accomplishment" emphasizes how much Marie craved the feelings of isolation and singular suffering because the uniqueness of her experience meant much more to her than thriving in a community.

The Negress's resolve to die in isolation challenges how some scholars have characterized the role of community as an essential resource to the survival of black

queers. For example, black diasporic scholar Lyndon Gill expands Audre Lorde's notion of eroticism to what he calls erotic subjectivity, love that fuels "political attentiveness and a spiritual consciousness" and is a "way of *being* in the world" (279 italics original).⁶⁶ The affirmation of "being" echoes throughout Gill's study of how gay Afro-Trinidadian men survive the HIV/AIDS epidemic by establishing an in-person discussion group (Community Chatroom Experience) to disperse erotic subjectivity through conversation and community. In Gill's account, the transfer of love between these men amounts to a "necessary, life-saving praxis" (278). What is striking about this portrayal of a community of Afro-Caribbean gay men bound by the same illness is the idealism with which Gill portrays the power of community to supersede the fatality of the ailment they face. Certainly, Gill demonstrates that by allowing them to converse openly about their sexual practices, ask questions, and meet potential partners, the communal space is a crucial form of support in a region hostile to queer men; yet, it remains unclear how exactly this alone amounts to "life-saving" with regards to an epidemic (is it a complement to medical intervention? has it been proven to lower the rate of HIV transmission?). I would contend that such a propensity to imbue what is certainly invaluable activist work with rhetoric of black queer survival reflects the longstanding affinity for love and community in black studies and offers an example of the avowal of sociality in black queer studies (290).

Framing Gill's essay, Jafari S. Allen beckons readers to view the piece as a repudiation of the anti-sociality strand of queer theory.⁶⁷ He maintains that, "[w]hile the

⁶⁶ Lyndon K. Gill, "Chatting Back and Epidemic: Caribbean Gay Men, HIV/AIDS, and the Uses of Erotic Subjectivity" *GLQ* (2012).

⁶⁷ Here, I am engaging with the introduction to a special edition of *GLQ* that Allen edited.

current trend in queer studies seems to be characterized by a turning away from sociality and politics, for black and other subjects of color, sociality in the form of love, friendship, and sexual relationships is an indispensable survival tool...” (Allen 232).⁶⁸ The commitment to affirming black queer lives animates Allen’s investment in recovering sociality and rejecting the anti-futurity politics of queer theory (232). That much becomes clear when Allen asserts that, “For black queers, survival has always been about finding ways to connect some of what is disconnected, to embody and re-member. This is the social erotics of love at work. This intersubjectivity evidence by black queer love is ‘that conjure medicine that helps heal the psychic wounds of enslavement’” (217). In his hailing of sociality and classification of it as a curative vernacular tool for alleviating racial trauma, Allen bends queer theory to meet the needs of black subjects. This adherence to identity politics situates work like Gill’s as a record of the triumph of black queers to secure their futurity over fatal propositions. Yet, the idealism, even utopianism, of such an image of community neglects to see the confining elements of a life focused on communal belonging.

Opposing the promise of easing anguish through collectivity, Als’s *Negress* chooses death over life in order to break free from an outlook colored by communal identity. As Als discloses, insisting on the distinctiveness of her suffering enabled Marie to craft a way of being in the world that belonged to her alone, “For my mother, experiencing physical pain became a perspective she could own” (14). Contesting Gill’s and Allen’s visions of queer community that defies death through togetherness, Marie’s freedom from the bonds of social relationships conferred a “perspective” she deemed

⁶⁸ Allen, “Black/Queer/Diaspora at the Current Conjuncture.” *GLQ* (2012).

more valuable than a life cluttered by them. The agony of a dying body enabled Marie to experience herself outside of her social relationships, “In pain, she wasn’t anything but ill—not a Negress, not a mother of six, nor a lover, or a patient. Pain has its own meaning” (14). To derive her “meaning” from the sensations emanating from the depths of her body rather than through her promises to the children she raised, the men she loved, or the doctors she consulted exposes a degree of self-indulgence that is corrosive to those attachments. Such acute pain demanded that Marie’s mind stay focused on the present moment while her loved ones remained anxious about a future without her.

As one of those loved ones, Als witnessed Marie’s protracted death; as her child, her resolve to die eclipsed his need for her to remain alive. Writing *The Women* from the vantage point of adulthood he now understands that his upbringing was in the service of her anti-social disposition. If, according to Edelman, the child emerges as the symbol of reproductive futurism, then Marie’s focus on the finality of her life at the cost of consideration of her children’s future displaces such future-oriented reproductive politics. With no regard for her posterity the Negress is fixated with her own present condition. It is her children who bear the burden of reconciling their hopes with their mother’s fatal resolve, as Als explains, “Being children, we could only see her imminent death in terms of our imminent loss; we failed to understand what her dying meant to her” (12). The blunt tone of the words “being children” and “failed” reveals the abuse of being asked to comprehend a matter far beyond the grasp of Als and his siblings’ juvenile perspectives. Just as the structure of the sentence subverts the children’s perspectives with their mother’s intention, the value Marie places on dying overshadows her children’s call for

her to live. Neither communal politics, nor a sense of maternal duty can quell her fatal resolve.

To speak of the defeat of the children's needs illuminates how the mention of "being children" locates *The Women* amidst conversations about the applicability of reproductive futurity for black and other queers of color. While Edelman argues that the appropriate posture for queers is one of antisociality and famously calls on them to, "Fuck the social order and the Child in whose name we're collectively terrorized..." critics of color have questioned whether they should be so eager to abandon the black and brown child (29).⁶⁹ After all, as Juana Mariá Rodríguez reminds us, "[f]uturity has never been given to queers of color, children of color, or other marginalized communities that live under the violence of the state and social erasure..." (333).⁷⁰ Rodríguez and other scholars contend that Edelman's critique of reproductive futurity relies on the assumption that all queers belong to other normative categories, namely white and economically privileged. In another essay aptly titled, "For 'the Children' Dancing in the Beloved Community" (2009), Jafari S. Allen makes a similar claim and disputes Edelman's characterization of "the Child" to put forth a new symbol of innocence and futurity for whom queers of color must rally,

I do not mean, here, the constructed white, middle-class child in whose name the symbolic orders itself and for whom legislatures craft law, which Lee Edelman strategically poses as opposite queer...By 'the children,' I mean of course, Dorothy's. Or, in more recent Black gay parlance, *same-gender-loving*—gay, bisexual, lesbian, trans, queer people of color. (Allen 313, emphasis in original)

⁶⁹ Edelman, *No Future* (2004).

⁷⁰ Rodríguez, "Queer Sociality and Other Sexual Fantasies." *GLQ* (2011).

For queer black Als, the child of a black female subject who models queer diasporic subjectivity, implicating himself in the phrase “being children” should fulfill Allen’s vision for children of color whose right to futurity must be secured. Given Allen’s logic, it should be impossible for Als to be an emblem of anti-sociality, yet he is. While Allen declares that he is “writing for the children of color,” Als makes no such statement of solidarity between himself and other queers of color (313). To be sure, the lives and futures of children of color are routinely neglected in the politics that Edelman critiques; even still, Als beckons us not to be so quick to replace Edelman’s universal view of queerness with Allen’s utopian view. I contend that *The Women* resists this move to position kin groups, whether blood-related or constructed through friendship, in such ideal terms.

Allen’s idealism about communities extends to female-centered groups as well, leading him, like Gopinath, to hail black female subjectivity as instrumental for making queer theory “supplier” for people of color (Gopinath 11). Through the invocation of black feminism he argues that black scholars have already recognized “the *real* radical potential of refusal, negativity, and ruthless questioning of futurity,” thus making Edelman’s call to anti-futurity and anti-sociality negligible in the context of black studies and queer of color critiques (313 emphasis in original). Soon, however, it becomes clear that his vision of negativity is still far too optimistic to account for a narrative like *The Women*. Allen’s essay situates children and family as a shorthand for black queers who find “ecstasy” in collectivities, whether in physical space of the dance club or in the

conceptual space of Barbara Christian's black feminism which avows the inherent theoretical possibilities of black bodies (318).⁷¹

Tellingly, Allen's example of a black feminist articulation of antisociality reads like the purest instance of a collective united by the shared goal of improving the future: "Edelman writes as if Black feminist theorists, artists, and activists had not already elaborated a politics of negativity or refusal, which included, for example working with Black men on racism and 'against' us on sexism..." (322). In this statement, as in much of Allen's writing, it is difficult to look past the sense of intellectual and creative unity of black feminist women to see their work, even their critique of masculinism as anything but hopeful and optimistic, even as Allen beckons us to see it as evidence of negative "refusal."⁷² Routing his critique of the anti-sociality strands in mainstream queer theory through the political efforts of black women, Allen relies on an image of black queer sociality that Als's narrative subverts.

In contrast to black feminists who united around their shared gender, race, and sexuality, the Negress is dismissive about collective politics and approaches them with the same degree of self-interest that lead her to embrace dying. Als remembers of his mother, "She was capable of giving a nod toward the history of injustice, but only if it suited her mood" (10). As always, her "mood," the expression of her individuality and her personal feelings take priority over communal identity, whether for family or race. It then becomes crucial to recognize that the example of growing into one's identity that

⁷¹ See Barbara Christian, "The Race for Theory," which Allen uses to challenge Edelman to suggest that black politics does not need queer theory.

⁷² Given Halberstam's argument that queer antisociality needs to expand its key texts to include queers of color who write negativity into their politics, the critic might be persuaded by Allen's identification of black feminist as an antisocial intellectual sphere.

Marie provided for her son was not really about identification at all; what she taught him was willful alienation.

The Negress's antisocial disposition decouples racial politics from identity. It was the example of Marie's "Negressity" that lead Als and his sister to meet black nationalists' "xenophob[ic]" rejection of West Indians by deriding their "focu[s] on hopes and dreams" for the future (37). In their sweeping repudiation of politics motivated by racial identity, Als and his sisters show that the Negress operates as a failed version of female subjectivity on which critics have sought to establish black queer and queer of color critiques. When Als refers to himself as his mother's child, he aligns his perspective with her predilection for viewing social relations as mere distractions from the more important work of attending to one's self. Defiantly he proclaims, "Being our mother's children, we had no interest in the world at large, especially if its events did not reflect our individual internal worlds" (38). Here Als argues that he is not a child of "the world"—neither a "child of Dorothy" nor of the black community—he is only the child of the Negress, thus beyond the reach of the racial and queer communities.

At the same time, Als's place as his mother's child lacks the comforts of identifying with her or belonging to her. It bears repeating that while Als understands his identity to be inextricable from his mother's narrative, her protracted dying interferes with the formation of an intimate bond between mother and child. In each other Als and his mother find resemblance without actual closeness. After all, withdrawing from the community into the solitude of one's own body makes it impossible to either know someone else or to be known by them. Without this intimate knowledge, Als views his mother as a model of a particular kind of subjectivity and as the protagonist of a curious,

tragic narrative he hopes to rival. In this way, *The Women* is neither a story of closeness nor of mother whose love and support of a queer son forever made her the crux of his identity; rather the text presents the impressions of a man trying to make sense of what little he did know about his mother to understand the impact of her dying on his sense of self:

From my mother, I learned the only way the Negress can own herself is through her protracted suicide; suffering from imminent death keeps people at a distance. I was so lonely knowing her; she was so busy getting to know herself through dying. When my mother became ill with one thing or another, I was eight; by the time my mother died, I was twenty-eight. When she died, I barely knew anything about her at all (11).

Here Als identifies a form of self-ownership that is radical in its absence of survival. This dark, antisocial form of self-possession means that Marie comes to “know herself” through a process that leaves her children “so lonely knowing her.” Therefore, her assertion of agency requires that she does not belong to them, nor they to her. Als’s reconstruction of his mother’s life and death through *The Women* is an avenue for reconciling his relationship to a subject he could never wholly know, yet is an intimate part of his queer subjectivity. Negressity creates self-knowledge by negating the self, thereby alienating others.

“Children Swollen with Need:” Loving Debasement

If part of the work of *The Women* is to express suspicion about the critical employment of female subjectivity as a model of queerness in the service of racially charged sociality and futurity politics, then it becomes necessary to examine how the Negress’s negative disposition shapes Als’s articulation of his identity. The queer black

male subjectivity that he crafts draws on his mother's acquisition of a form of self-knowledge that is gained through the process of dying. Failing to initiate his own literal or figurative demise through his connection to women, Als avails himself to the diminishing power of love to be near the debased, decaying bodies of other queer black men. In the tradition of the Negress, he rejects survival for self-knowledge.

Tracing the arc of the development of his queer subjectivity, Als reveals that he appropriated his mother's language of death to facilitate the process of being "conditioned" into Negressity as a male child raised by women (6). "Those women 'killed' me," he admits while likening their influence on him to "the power a comedian has over his audience" (9). With this statement, he suggests that unlike his mother's isolation through death, his juvenile impulse to be "killed" was an attempt to foster a connection to the women of his family. More specifically, he imagined it as the means by which he could transcend their gender difference, which he found "too much for [him] to take" (9). To accomplish this he first tried outfitting himself in the trappings of their womanhood, "I buried myself in their clothes, their secrets, their desires, to find myself through them" (9). In the macabre connotation of "buried" Als implies that if he could "find [him]self" through the lives of these women, he could get closer to the self-knowledge granted through a Negresses' death. When he articulates his desire, stating, "I wanted them to kill me further by fully exploiting the attention I afforded them," he underscores how much his affective ambitions are mired in the women's ability to recognize him as one of them.

However, disappointment and resentment soon become the most palpable emotions in Als's telling of this experience. With words sharpened by frustration, Als

declares that his mother and sister failed to fulfill his desire to be included in their affective lives, “But they couldn’t being women” (9). Their “being women” is both a condemnation of the centrality of womanhood in Negressity and a concession that the gender difference between them was greater than he anticipated. In his failed quest to participate in the crafting of a narrative of Negressity through wearing it like a costume and in appropriating its common tongue, Als comes to realize that he has to “find himself” through a narrative of his own creation and telling. This knowledge culminates in one of the clearest distinctions he makes between himself and the women in his family in the memoir, the assertion that he was an “auntie man enamored with Negressity” and that “is all [he] has ever known how to be” (9). What is significant about such a statement is the affirmation of himself as a queer man (by way of the West Indian derogatory term *auntie man*) utilizes an affective stance as the point of relation between his maleness and their femaleness. Being “enamored,” a feeling of fascination grounded in love so strong that it holds him captive, Als remains confounded and frustrated for so much of the *The Women*. During the moments he proclaims to be a Negress or implies that his mother made him one, he admits to the strength of his love, this state of being so enamored with a narrative that he longs for it to be his own (16). Still, one of the dangers of the inward turn of Negressity is that the women are unable to recognize or reciprocate his love for them.

Unable to adapt his mother’s language of death into an experience that brings him into the community of Negresses, a young Als learns to mimic her self-possession through negative versions of love. In a curious recounting of an event that most would consider rape, Als describes a childhood sexual assault as irrevocably agential. “Perhaps

the man I fucked when I was ten..." he writes with careful nonchalance to emphasize the magnitude of his self-composure during the episode and once more during its retelling (17). Erasing all traces of victimhood, Als makes himself the active agent of a story deemed noteworthy only because it helped him express his emotional ambitions and allowed him to "c[o]me into [his] inheritance as a Negress" (17). That becomes clear when Als reduces the man's predacious actions to simple ones in order to make his own emotional complexity more prominent, stating, for instance, "He pushed his trousers down around his ankles. He said: You're pretty. He said: Sit on this, and I did. He held me" (18). From here, Als advances a striking image of a child fully in control of the situation, wielding his sexual agency to debase and "disempower" another man's "maleness,"

He thought I was frightened but I wasn't. I performed vulnerability in the hope that it would elicit his maleness. He does not know that I exist still, that I grew up forever in the moment I seduced him into taking that nasty turn with me. Seducing men into performing acts defined as male but in circumstances they would describe as illicit (two scenarios men consider illicit: they have a girlfriend or live with someone else), disempowers their maleness. (18)

It is crucial to note the difference between the instance of rape and Als's interpretation of it as a child's seduction of an adult, because it is in this disjuncture that he turns his own debasement into an assertion of self-possession. Denying the inherent vulnerability of a child, the writer claims that he only "performed vulnerability" to induce it in another male subject.

This narrative distortion emphasizes the obsessive heights of Als's aspirations for his mother's self-possession in the willful dissolution of her body. Suggesting that he, too, has intentionally degraded his body to command another's attention, he lays claim to

the power of Negressity. Yet, he is not entirely in control of his emotions. The feelings of disappointment and resentment that he experienced as a child in wanting to be “killed” by the women of his family resurface in his retelling of this event; what’s more, he reveals that those same feelings continue to determine his actions years later, “That’s what this is like. This desire can be developed in childhood and follow you into adulthood, or whatever” (18). As he admits, the childhood desire to emulate his mother informs his very sense of himself as an adult, as a black queer man, and as a writer, “That’s what your life becomes; it becomes governed by emotional patterns that distort your reason, or become your reason” (18). The idea that these “emotional patterns” have become the motivating ideas of his life reveals that he remains captive to his love for his mother, which he expresses through a desire to emulate her negative stance towards love in the hopes that he may capture its possibilities of self-knowledge and self-possession.

Als is so overpowered by his desire for self-possession that he allows it to mold him, yet, at times, he retreats emotionally from the knowledge it grants him as if that, too, is overwhelming. He recounts years when he “could not face [him]self” in his full awareness of his “complicity” in the violence done to his body. If only for a moment, Als admits that even though he covets his mother’s capacity for self-negation, he cannot give himself over to in the same way she did. What he expresses is the frustration that comes from being so enamored with his mother and all that she was that he tries to experience feelings that he is not yet equipped to manage,

I could not face the way in which I had wanted him to make me a Negresses, or the fact that I wanted to be consumed by him so that I could be part of a narrative as compelling to me as my mother’s was, a narrative in which I too would be involved with a bad man, resulting in heartache that would eventually lead to depression, an endless suicide, and the attention that can be garnered from all of that. I was dwarfed by my

mother's spectacular sense of narrative and disaster; she could have been a great writer. (17-18)

The deep longing Als conveys here echoes his earlier statements about feeling dwarfed by his mother's love. That he explains this feeling by suggesting that his mother would have mastered his vocation, stating, "she could have been a great writer," speaks to her superior ability to determine her own narrative, whereas, he cannot even articulate his desires without shying away from them, demurring, "I could not face the way in which I wanted..." This signals that for all the claims of sexual agency in his encounter with the janitor, he does not yet possess himself.

Away from his mother's home in Brooklyn, in the all-male space of the "piers on the West Side Highway," he meets other subjects with whom he can identify and a community to which he can bind himself (59). Through Als's expression of his queer sexuality as an affective and diasporic condition, he finds a communal practice of debasement that is familiar to him. As sons of Negresses, these other queer black men share Als's relationship to the power of Negressivity and the emptiness it creates in sons who can never replicate their mother's affective capacity, "the boy children of women who had emigrated to New York from islands like Jamaica, Cuba, Antigua, Barbados, Barbuda, to find themselves in New York with bad men and children swollen with need" (59). Even as grown men, they are still the "children swollen with need," frustrated with desire and longing for kinship. Through sexual play with strangers, they establish a community of their own that turns on willful degradation. They perform acts of sexual subordination and find pleasure in expelling their bodily fluids as if they were too infirm to control themselves.

Als describes the proclivities of two such men, the first being “M. [who] spent much of his time gagging on the cocks he took down his throat until he vomited, which was his fetish” (59). What M. displays is a drive toward death as much as a sexual “fetish.” In making himself gag on another man’s penis, M. restricts his airflow, fighting the instinct to breath until his throat spasms and regurgitates the sustenance it needs to survive. In this erotic moment he flirts with death. Similarly, another man is enticed by the lifeless gaze of drunken lovers, as Als explains, “K. went to one bar where men with dull eyes pissed on him” (59-60). Craving to be used like a receptacle for another’s waste, K. finds gratification in his degradation. This paradox distills the contradictory nature of their sexual play. It is only in the company of random strangers that they can fulfill their desire for connection and find communal love. Only through self-effacement can they experience life as themselves and not like imitations of their West Indian mothers. What they experience down by the docks is form of degraded sociality that establishes a community to which he can belong.

Although Als never converses with his mother about the time he spends by the piers, or with his lovers about her, she remains present in his mind as if he is communicating with her through his debased sexual activities. He admits, “I avoided explaining that when I sat in parked cars with one man then another, I felt closer to my mother’s experience of the world than I ever did in my mother’s actual presence” (59). For so long he has been captivated by her affective ambitions and enamored with a mother who could not fully recognize him as a kindred subject worthy of her attention; only now can he imagine displacing her to access these emotions on his own terms (59).

Through this perverse sexuality and the negative sociality of the queer male West Indian community, he comes to possess himself,

I sometimes thought: If she knew that I was performing this act, this gesture, she would perhaps die, releasing me to live fully in the moment. Removing my mouth, I sometimes thought: This is my life; I am a Negress and I will suffer because of my pleasure. I will live a narrative of my own devising—one that competes with my mother's. I avoided recounting how, when one man or another would hold me, I would remember how my mother was about to be ill and how my father might have cared for me if I were ill. (60)

In this passage the degree of Als's self-possession is evident in his ability to command his own thoughts and to assert himself through them. Thinking as his mother's death as being in his service rather than hers, here he imagines that it would "release" him so that he could "live fully in the moment" unencumbered by her tremendous affective life. Yet, there is always a part of him that knows that his mother wields a greater drive for self-possession and an ability to draw in those around her, like his father. Therefore Als must "avoid recounting" those moments to himself to believe in his own assertion of self.

"A Pedant and His Student Consumed with Ambition"

In the final section of *The Women*, Als reflects on the romantic relationship that brought him fully into his Negressity during his adolescence. As a mentee and lover of the aged poet Owen Dodson, the young writer learned to embrace the power of his own emotional ambitions and to see himself distinct from his mother and sisters, the Negresses of his life. Falling in love with the elderly, decaying Dodson and intimately

connecting with his disintegrating body allows Als to access a homoerotic love can grant him knowledge outside of the community of Negresses.

Dodson's memories of the mid-century African American artists made him a kind of narrative-incarnate to Als, exposing him to the black American culture and history he had previously forsaken while subscribing to his mother's disinterest in racial affiliation. This difference between his mother and his lover is further reflected in their public personas: Marie relied on her singular experience of suffering in order to assert her individuality from the community, whereas, Dodson's poetry conveyed that he "was not an individual but part of a group," subsuming his "individual experience" for the "feel[ing] of group oppression," a state in which Marie did not believe (129). Yet, there was great resemblance in their "way[s] of being" (1). Of Dodson, Als reveals, "He was older than my mother but just as committed to the experience of pain as she was, just as resolute in his commitment to the internal visions the experience of pain affords" (129).

For all of Dodson's similarities to Marie, it would be a mistake to claim that Als was attracted to the aged poet because he reminded him of his mother. On the contrary, the appeal of Dodson for Als is that he represents a mature version of himself, fully developed and in control of the power of self-negation. Their relationship presents an intimate bond that brings Als into knowledge of himself and what he could be. Because of their strong "resemblance," even in moments when Dodson appears to lack such interior knowledge of himself, Als's ability to read the older man is a like a lesson in self discovery, he suggests, "Through these photographs, I was able to see how much I resembled him. We also resembled one another in our ability to charm, and in what we falsely projected: relatively easy access to our internal selves... We were in love at first

sight” (122). This implies that their “love” is bound up in a kind of self-recognition that Als could never receive from his mother. Even in sharing “false projections” of “easy access to [their] internal selves,” it is the acquisition of access and knowledge of those selves that stimulates the intimacy in their relationship.

Driven by this quest for self-knowledge Als characterizes their union as an instructive experience; ever mindful of the roles he takes on in groups, he describes himself and Dodson as pupil and teacher, respectively, “For as long as I knew him (I left when I was nineteen) our relationship was that of a pedant and his student consumed with ambition” (134). While Dodson’s stories about the black literati during the first half of the twentieth century can make the past come to life for an admittedly captivated Als, a budding writer, he seeks a more interior education,

What the pedant knows: his ambitious student will stop at nothing in order to learn how to be himself; he will stop at nothing, not even at inhaling his teacher’s vomit-smeared breath, as penance for the guilt he feels in wanting this more than anything else: to become a self without the burden of the pendant’s influence. (134)

Only through this experience of queer love with an elderly man with “vomit-smeared breath” can Als “learn to be himself” well enough to eventually leave his teacher behind. He could never achieve this with a mother who would always leave him first because of the selfishness of her dying. With Dodson, he becomes intimately connected to the experience of death and gets close enough to the self-knowledge it grants that can take from the relationship and eventually leave it in the past: “Like most great teachers, he opened up the world for me. Like most people, he resented it when I left him to find what I could in it” (131). “The world,” in this sense, Als’s queer subjectivity.

This queer love between Dodson and Als shares the fetishistic degradation found within the encounters between the cruising men and augments it with actual corporeal decay. Of course, here Dodson is actually dying and his body “slowly turning into a dust mote” who cannot keep down his food (124). Als’s frequent mentions of Dodson’s vomiting at the dinner table, at times in the company of cultural luminaries, establishes an atmosphere of shame and embarrassment that calls attention to his arousal at the constant retching. As he recounts of his lover, “Vomiting into his soup plate, he sputtered and chocked while his guests pretended not to notice...” (125). Such scenes usually lead into sexual encounters between the two men,

...throwing up in his plate and making his way back to the bed and reaching for my face and kissing my mouth, whispering, ‘Do what you want,’ in my ear, just as I started unbuttoning his shirt. The bedroom door was slightly ajar. I closed it and bent over him and put my tongue in his mouth, as happy for this moment of displeasure as I was happy for every moment of pleasure. His teeth clenched as I clenched his arms. (128)

This passage emphasizes the state of their lovemaking, which is as feeble as Dodson yet as motivated as Als. The older man’s enthusiastic come-ons quickly give way to a resigned statement of consent that his partner “do want you want” with his languishing body. Als, putting his tongue into a mouth fresh with vomit, tastes a “displeasur[able]” flavor but keeps going. Finally in the moment of penetration, the two men “clench,” Als with control and Dodson with pain. Only now does he reveal the “pleasure” in the encounter: he has gained access to an old man’s body as it rots in his arms.

Only in embracing this queer love and Dodson’s decay at the same time can Als embrace queer knowledge. This love pulls him into the negative, anti-futurity affective life that his mother possesses and he has sought to emulate. This becomes evident when Dodson confesses his love for the younger man and Als comes into awareness of the

particular interests he has in reciprocating this love. “When I went to visit Owen the second or third or eighth time, he said, he said, ‘I love you,’ a statement filled with thought or nonthought,” so Als describes the first time love entered the lexicon of their relationship. However, it is less Dodson’s feelings that interest Als than the way he reacts to this confession of love, “which moments later, made me want to throw myself in front of the subway train, an interestingly extreme response to his relatively innocuous declaration, a response which made me more interested in him” (134). What Als reveals here is that his inclination to reciprocate Dodson’s love is based on his interest in his own “extreme response,” such as how it encouraged his fatal resolve. This love enables him to fulfill his emotional ambitions and to come into self-knowledge. This relationship with Dodson, like his association with the men by the docks, is a distinct form of sociality that while negative and death-driven is not entirely anti-social.

In this light, it makes sense that Als’s Negressity thrives in the period of his relationship with Dodson. It is during this time that Negressity, in its function for uniting his queerness and his affective disposition solidifies. Als comes to see this during a quiet moment with his lover when he realizes, “what I could give to Owen in moments like these that I would never live long enough to use in support of my mother: my monstrous ambition, which she had no interest in...” (129). Yet, his pursuit of his “ambition,” the appropriation of his mother’s volatile affective life and his desire for a narrative of his own, will eventually reveal just how hostile Negressity is to his black queer masculinity.

The cross-gender association involved in Als’s identity as a Negress begins to crumble under the weight of his censure of femininity. Though he could never make a claim to the aspects of Negressity bound to womanhood, he could claim to perform better

than the women in his family, as he often did, declaring here for instance, “with Owen, I was farther into the world than my mother and sisters had ever been” (129). At the same time, the combination of Dodson’s feeble, deteriorating body and Als’s ambition cast the latter into a novel role, it “made [Als] a man,” and a “large” man at that (131). This statement is fascinating in the direct way it stresses Als’s gender as if to remind us that beneath the carefully cultivated identity of Negressity is also a man. This assertion of himself as a man is one of the most important forms of knowledge to come out of his relationship with Dodson because it enables him to see himself as a queer man, which he was blinded when looking in the mirror and only observing a Negress “in the tradition of [his] mother” (19).

What this means is that Negressity cannot fully capture Als’s experience, nor can the women in his family wholly understand him. The issue is not that the gender difference is insurmountable, rather Negressity does not want to understand him nearly as much as he wants to understand it. So interested in their internal worlds, the women in Als’s family refused to see him as a queer man. Therein, lies the failure of Negressity to sustain queer community; it refuses to accept that which exceeds itself. When one of the Negresses of his family demanded that Als stop seeing Owen because he was “turning” her brother “into a faggot,” she layed bare the fact that she did not see him for the queer man he was. The painful truth is that Als’s identification as Negress obstructed their view of him. What they saw instead was a “teenage girl—as their younger girl selves in effect” (142). From the women’s perspectives, were Als to insist upon his queer manhood, it would place in opposition to them and make him “part of a world they hated,” a “man,

replete with a narrative they could not access” (142). Here, the centrality of female subjectivity threatens to erase black queer masculine subjectivity.

In this examination of Als’s memoir *The Women*, this chapter has explored the anti-social and anti-futurity orientations of black diasporic queer subjectivity, thus gesturing towards a conceptual space between Lee Edelman’s absolute rejection of sociality and Jafari Allen’s affirmation of it as a necessary life-saving tool for black queers. Through the Negress’s constant pursuit of a form of knowledge of the self that is not political, *The Women* articulates a kind of love that is able to grant that knowledge. Diminishing others and eventually disappearing the self to break free from communal bonds, this love is negatively, even exploitatively engaged in the social. Contrary to both Allen’s and Edelman’s notions of queer politics, Als illustrates that both love and death have crucial roles to play in the formation of subjectivity even if the love is not positive nor the acquisition of his self-knowledge triumphant.

CONCLUSION:

Ambivalent Love and the Dissonant Notes of a Diasporic Melody

From frustrated desires for belonging to disavowals of intimate bonds, the fraught representations of love in black diasporic literature reveals how subjects wield the affect to negotiate their place in collective groups. In examining how love functions as both a binding agent and as a force for communal rupture, I have argued that black studies must interrogate love's multiple functions and iterations in order to understand the volatility of the diasporic condition. Even as the critical tradition of black studies regards love as an affect that establishes cohesion and unity, "Intimate Crossings" resists this tendency to idealize either love or the representations of black communal wholeness for which critics advocate.

To attend to love's ambivalence, I have brought into focus a group of literary writers who dissent from the conventional critical wisdom. Against the backdrop of the Black Power movement, Angela Y. Davis drew on international paradigms to appropriate and revise the eroticism of black nationalism. As a black woman in the movement, the masculinism of the nationalist model provided few opportunities for her to exercise political authority. Instead of allowing eroticism to degrade her or to demand her submission, Davis crafted an alternative model for dispersing erotic love. The works of Caribbean author Jamaica Kincaid similarly imagine love as linked to ideologies that restrain the individual subject. Rather than revising a model of love, Kincaid's

protagonists endeavor to disavow the affect. Across two narratives telling of migration and return, they renounce maternal love to attempt to extricate themselves from the overpowering hold of their birth nation and family. Whereas Kincaid's protagonists attempt to eschew belonging, Caryl Phillips imagines Bert Williams as desiring to feel belonging in an intra-racial diasporic community. The frailty of the intimate connections Williams does foster prompts us to reconsider the promise of diasporic connections. In making visible a black queer diasporic subjectivity that embraces degraded forms of love over survival, Als extends the need for such reflection.

This scrutiny of the affective dimension of diasporic politics challenges the notion of being in diaspora as a condition of longing for unity with other subjects; the dissident writers I have examine here call out for us to recognize the existance of subjects who either cannot or will not join their individual bodies into the collective body. These subjects do not love the places from which they have come nor do they want to make it back to those they have left behind. Even their diasporic *detours*, to use the term Brent Hayes Edwards borrows from Édouard Glissant to describe the turning away from the focus on originary roots to establish sites of black internationalism, are filled with instances of defeat. To recognize the political resonances of love and intimate bonds in diasporic literature means to consider individual responses and the limitations of collectivity in our quest to represent black subjectivity. As critics, we have to attend to those aspect of black subjectivity, both the individual and the collective representations, that do not seem to be triumphant or to cohere. We must recognize these alternative, even unseemly, ways of being if we are going to account for the nature of blackness. This

means that we need to theorize diaspora in a way that includes estranged subjects and vexed representations of love.

In addition to literature, other aspects of diasporic culture that can be productively mined for examinations of the affective and political resonances of diasporic love, including visual culture and music. As I have demonstrated in my work on Davis, photographs are useful for theorizing black subjects' erotic representations of themselves. This sort of analysis can extend work being done by scholars like Tina Campt, who has used family photographs of Afro-Europeans to offer new narratives in diasporic history to reveal that black diasporic subjects have found belonging outside the racial community and even among groups opposed to the diaspora's existence.⁷³ As this project has previously raised, theorists have hailed music as the non-discursive register for communicating the longing for diasporic intimacy. While the sonic is outside of the focus of "Intimate Crossings," I would like to end this project by exploring how literary depictions of love exposes music as an expression of a threatening desire for connection. To this end, I would like to consider a short story by Thomas Glave, an author whose literature dissents from his critical and activist commitments to love and to unity.⁷⁴

⁷³ See Tina Campt, *Image Matters* (2012).

⁷⁴ In his introduction to *Our Caribbean* (2008), an anthology of literature authored by gay and lesbian West Indian authors, Thomas Glave establishes "gathering" as the conceptual framework for his thinking about diaspora and queerness in the project; the term's celebratory undertone conveys the fellowship of like minds. He advances this image when describing the "motivation for the gathering" as twinned affects of "the most extreme longing" and "the most painful, inexpressible loneliness," which unite queer subjects from across the Caribbean and its diaspora (1). In promoting community and the fulfillment of the "desire" to collect and disseminate queer stories, Glave's aims as editor of *Our Caribbean* align him with black studies critics who believe in the power of love to confront virulent hatred and potentially fatal violence in the region. *Our Caribbean*, as a critical endeavor, is unequivocally in the language of affirming the queer black diaspora and confronting "People's summary dismissal of Caribbean lesbian and gay lives," sentiments which Glave encountered among heteronormative West Indian societies and U.S.

A prose narrative that invokes song without music, Glave's "Whose Song?" (2000) commands a silent chorus to, "Sing this tale, then, of a Sound Hill rape. Sing it, low and mournful, soft..." (236). The story evokes the diasporic tradition, which conceives of music as a non-discursive way to channel love and the ecstasy of belonging.⁷⁵ This supplication to song is an appeal for a community to bear witness, and even responsibility, for the violation of a young sister. Blinded by the idyllic comfort of their surroundings, "where the sun hangs low over the sound and water meets the sky; where the departed walk along Shore Road and the joggers run; where morning rabbits leap away from the pounding jogger's step," the community remains deaf to the song of young Cassandra's rape (236). "How could we know?" they respond to the narrator's plea to sing "All together," denying that they know the lyrics to the song of violence inscribed on Cassandra's body because her attackers, Robbie, Dee, and Bernard do not belong to them (237). In refusing to sing, they deny that this song is theirs, calling attention to the question of the title, "whose song?" as a song that no one wants to claim.

Glave's emphasis on the deceptive allure of nature converges with his sustained metaphor of song to suggest the absence of harmony that the community quietly disregards in order to further the image of unity as if it offered protection from this kind of violence. In spite of that, it is discord rather than harmony that takes root although they want to believe that Robbie, Dee, and Bernard were dissonant notes,

How could we know? Three boys in a car, we heard, but couldn't be neighbors of ours. Had to be from some other part of the world, we thought; the projects or the Valley. Not from here. In this place every face

academic presses alike (4). The text as a gathering offers the most potent remedy against threats of queer erasure.

⁷⁵ See Paul Gilroy *The Black Atlantic* (1993) and Brent Hayes Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora* (2003).

knows every eye, we thought, what's up here in the heart is always clear.
(237)

This passage reveals the significant disconnect between the assumptions of the collective and the threats of reality. The imagined insularity of their “world” has been penetrated by “three boys in a car,” a description that suggests movement and that perhaps, they may or may not be “from here,” or the immediate vicinity. Still, Glave suggests that the boy’s specific origins do not matter because their actions have occurred in this community, the same that has rejected them and denied their belonging. Yet, it is from the community’s willingness to renounce them that they have learned to violate Cassandra, and in this way, they are not outsiders but the most faithful of homegrown sons.

To pursue this point further, even as the community asks, “How could we know?” the narrator repeatedly asks a related question of the boys motivation to rape, “How do they know?” (235-236). This query seeks to understand how the boys chose their victim, how they know to value her light skin over other black girls’ dark skin, and to resent the pleasure she finds in the arms of another young woman. In its answer to this question, the narrative implies that they boys have acquired their knowledge from the community, specifically from its treatment of blacks and black queers, “They have been taught, have learned well and well” (235). From “been taught” and “learned well,” Glave emphasizes that the boy’s relationship to society has been an instructional one; what they have done to Cassandra is an extension of the suffering they have incurred through their own emotional and sexual abuse. A subtle but important repetition of this line occurs in a subsequent section of the story when the boys aggressively taunt Cassandra as she walks by before abducting her; this, Glave, asserts is a consequence of them having been “[t]aught and taut” (239). A dark play on words, the condition of being “taught” has

made the boys “taut,” or so tightly wound they snap and commit a gross crime against a neighbor. In raping Cassandra, they “sing” the song the community pretends not to know, one distinguished by its “[f]ierce melody. Taught low and harsh, that rhythm. Melodylessness in mixture, loveless in joy” (239). A “melodylessness” song is unsatisfying to the ear, just like their action born from repression is “loveless in [its] joy,” full of vengeance but inadequate in soothing their souls.

Acknowledging their assault of Cassandra as an extension of their own degradation, critic Eva Tettenborn expands the category of victimhood in “Whose Song?” to account for Robbie, Dee, and Bernard, whom, she contends, are “victimized by a white and black hetero-patriarchal society that has crushed their black gay selves” (856).⁷⁶ This argument is useful for examining the confining images of black masculinity imposed on them, “...what they can be, they think, are told by that outer chorus they can be — black boys, pretty boys, big dicks, tight asses, pretty boys, black scum, or funky homie trash—and cannot” (240). The possibilities between “what they can be” and “cannot” be as “black boys” are restricted to two types, those desired by the “outer chorus” of society, namely straight, hypermasculine “pretty boys, big dicks” or the gay “tight asses, pretty boys, black scum” to be used for someone else’s pleasure then discarded as “funky homie trash.” While Tettenborn focuses on the consequences of larger society’s homophobia and racism, I contend that examining Glave’s shift in perspective serves as a rebuttal to the celebration of queer community. To elaborate on the violence the boys were “taught,” the writer shifts from the misperceptions of the society to the perceptions of Robbie, Dee, and Bernard, first as a group then as individuals. Suggesting that the boys belong to their

⁷⁶ See Eva Tettenborn, “Will the Big Boys Finally Love You?” *Callaloo* 26.3 (2003): 855-866.

own community, their thoughts form a collective consciousness that establishes them as three parts of a single subjectivity molded by abuse and abjection.

With its critique of heteronormative society as prejudiced and complicit in the face of brutal violence, “Whose Song?” is poised to offer a view of a queer community coming together for self-empowerment and resistance; yet, the narrative is unable to do this. The boy’s collective consciousness, through which they express desires for vengeance born of out shared sexual repression, is just one of the strategies employed to present the boys as community unified by their spirit and aims. In another claim to their unity, on a subsequent line their names appear as one, “Robbie Dee Bernard,” like the first, middle, and last names of an individual man rather than three separate people. That same dark and perverse kinship comes with its own ethical code to foster justice and “fair[ness]” within the group, “They all want some, want to be fair. Fair is fair, three dicks one cunt” (241). Their group identity is so strong that this rule need not be spoken aloud or verbally enforced. It is simply intuited as they begin their assault of Cassandra.

Only during the act of rape does the collective consciousness break down and each boy’s distinct voice gain prominence within the narrative. For Tettenborn, the boys’s violation of an openly lesbian young black woman is a response to societal pressures for them to conceal their queerness and “compartmentalize” “their black, male, *and gay*” selves (856 *italics original*). The critic’s argument places pressure on the dangerous ways that fractured black queer individual identities obstruct “solidarity” between gay men and lesbians, whereby the act of rape is evidence of the failure to “forge a bond of black homosexual activism across the genders” (856). While such attention to how “Whose Song?” laments the deep cross-gender divides within the black queer

community, Tettenborn's analysis neglects to adequately account for how gang rape, a group endeavor, reveals the ruptures in the boys' communal perspectives as well as Glave's anxiety about queer solidarity and the shared desire to be loved.

In a car parked under a rusty bridge in the dark of night, Robbie, Dee, and Bernard take their turn with Cassandra. Aloud, they speak only brutal words to their victim, "Quit crying bitch. Goddamn," one commands; they require her silence to do what they have come to do (242). And as each one finds his way into an opening of her body, his mind slips far away from her until it eventually settles on a memory of another man. Every brutal thrust is a word meant for male ears. For Robbie, those words start off "hard," full of masculine bravado to prove that he is indeed a real man and not a "faggot" like his friends have "heard" (243). While adherence to hyper masculine ideology encourages his violation of Cassandra, it is the affective bonds of friendship and belonging that are at the forefront of Robbie's mind. His inner voice taunts him, exposing his vulnerability, "Will they like you better, Robbie, then, if you be hard? Will the big boys finally love you, take you in Robbie if you be hard?" (242). It is the longing for his peers to "like [him]," love [him]," and "take [him] in," the desire to belong that leads him to not only rape Cassandra to prove his masculinity, but to commit rape as part of a group. This last point is crucial: for the rape to have meaning, other men must witness it so that through this destructive, violent act, they can communicate with each other.

Which is to say that the crisis of "Whose Song?" is not simply the impossibility of cross-gender identification amongst queer folk as Tettenborn argues, but the denial of queer solidarity within the black male peer group. When she claims that the

“compartmentalization of Robbie, Bernard, and Dee eradicates any potential for solidarity that transcends the confines of their own group,” she overlooks the critical point that there is neither actual nor sincere solidarity within their group (866) The closest thing the narrative can offer as a black male community is one in which the rape of an openly queer female subject appears to bolster camaraderie among closeted queer men but in reality, it also divides them. Therefore, each boy’s desire to conceal his sexuality to fit into the norms of heteronormative society thwarts the group from sharing their experiences and unifying around their queerness. That said, one of the most striking details of the revelation of Robbie’s sexuality is how the language of black male love, a “homie’s song,” articulates his queer desire,

Where has memory gone? Back then, straddling hips, homiekisses and the nightbird’s song. But can’t go back there, can you? To feel and feel. Gots to be hard. Can’t ever touch him again, undress him, kiss his thing...feel it pressing against the teeth and the slow-hipped song. Black skin on skin and (243)

In this passage, rhapsodic “homiekisses” between male lovers must be relegated to the time of “back then” and the place of “back there.” All of the pleasures Robbie can make Darryl J. “feel” and tender parts of Robbie he, in turn, can “touch,” need to be forgotten by these boys who must instead “be hard,” or risk death at the hands of society. The demand to sever the unity of their bodies is so loud and so urgent that Robbie dares not complete the image in his mind, allowing himself to think only of “black skin on skin and” (243). Robbie interrupts the intimacy of “black skin,” ultimately forsaking it so that he can belong to another male community, one that requires him to deny “lovelove and all of that,” and trade a reciprocal amorous bond for an oppressive communal one (242).

In “Whose Song?” in place of authentic solidarity within the black male and black queer communities, only the infliction of brutality binds them together. One of the

story's most significant departures from Glave's critical position in *Our Caribbean* or even from his other works of fiction like "The Final Inning" is that "Whose Story?" divulges an unseemly matter about black queer alliances: that the threat of erasure that queer subjects face comes from internal as well as external sources. Committing acts that contradict their true identifies in the name of black masculine politics, Robbie, Dee, and Bernard commit violence against themselves, each other, and especially against Cassandra. The formation of a new chorus to sing the song of a Sound Hill rape is the only cohesive element to grow out of these horrific events, "The three of them and Cassandra know the words. Lying beneath them now and blind, she knows the words. Tasting turpentine and fire, she knows the words" (245). In sexually violating Cassandra they strip from her the song of, "Peace and freedom, seasmell and free. A dark girl's scent riding on her thighs," and replace it with the song of her own rape, words which burn in her throat like "fire" (239, 245). The striking differences between these songs connote the altered experience of her queerness, transforming it from ecstatic pleasure to pain. With heavy emphasis on the non-discursive communal knowledge of this song, Glave locates Cassandra and her attackers in an abject community founded on a common identity of queer debasement without the possibility of resistance. Absent of positive affirmations of queer subjectivity and the curative power of collectivity, "Whose Song?" argues that the community can be a force for taking life instead of saving it.

Throughout this project I have argued for a critical practice that recognizes love's ambivalent nature in order to move the field beyond the assumption that communal belonging is an ecstatic condition. I hope this dissertation will contribute to a reexamination of the affective dimensions of being in diaspora.

APPENDIX



Figure 1. Untitled. Stephen Shames. *The Black Panthers* (2006).



Figure 2. Untitled. Stephen Shames. *The Black Panthers* (2006).



Figure 3. Untitled. Stephen Shames. *The Black Panthers* (2006).

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