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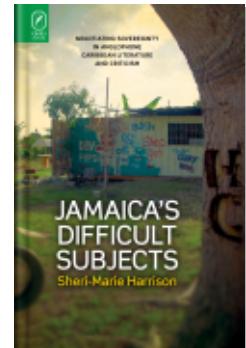
## Jamaica's Difficult Subjects

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NEGOTIATING SOVEREIGNTY  
IN ANGLOPHONE  
CARIBBEAN LITERATURE  
AND CRITICISM



# JAMAICA'S DIFFICULT SUBJECTS

Sheri-Marie Harrison

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NEGOTIATING SOVEREIGNTY IN  
ANGLOPHONE CARIBBEAN  
LITERATURE AND CRITICISM

**SHERI-MARIE HARRISON**



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*For my parents, Audley C. Harrison and Esmin Harrison*



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converse and who asked the clarifying questions about the earliest versions of this project. *Anthurium: A Caribbean Studies Journal* and *Modern Fiction Studies* published early versions of chapters one and four, and I am grateful for permission to include the revised versions here.

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# INTRODUCTION

## THE POLITICS OF SOVEREIGNTY IN POSTCOLONIAL WEST INDIAN LITERARY DISCOURSE

Two disparate moments of confusion bracket *Jamaica's Difficult Subjects'* inquiry into the problems of sovereignty in the postemancipation, preindependence, postindependence, and postindependence present contexts as they are portrayed in Jamaican novels, creative nonfiction, and films from the 1960s to the present. The first is my personal experience of reading *John Crow's Devil* (2005) by Marlon James for the first time, and the second is the combination of events between August 2009 and June 2010 that led up to Christopher "Dudus" Coke's extradition to the United States to answer charges of narcotics and weapons trafficking. On the surface, both events are united only in their late 2000s provenance. But nonetheless, each produced a multifaceted experience of confusion and dissonance that illuminated both the lingering problems of sovereignty in the Caribbean's postcolonial present and the limitations in our critical ability to fully interpret and understand these problems. Though Caribbean writing continues to actively engage with the problems of sovereignty in the postcolonial present, these limitations make it difficult to fully interpret the oppositional and subversive priorities of more recent Caribbean writing. Taken together, my experience of reading a novel and the events surrounding Coke's extradition inform this book's position at a crossroad between the contemporary shifts in Caribbean literary discourses and those within parallel critical paradigms like postcolonial, diasporic, and queer discourses.

This introduction is organized into five sections that cumulatively make the case for shifts in our literary practices, as occasioned by contemporary texts and events. The first section traces the development of Caribbean writing in four waves,<sup>1</sup> outlines how specific political impetuses during each wave facilitated consolidations and expansions in canon formation, and illustrates how the oppositional politics of each wave inadvertently elide some subjects and politics while validating and naturalizing others. The second section moves to a discussion of Coke's extradition to define the contemporary problems of sovereignty that, like contemporary writing, cannot be understood within the identitarian terms of cultural nationalism through which the Caribbean literary tradition has thus far developed. It also explains how a disruption in the conflation of sovereignty and identity that occurs in Caribbean literary discourses can offer a methodology for deciphering the oppositional politics of fourth-wave writing. The third section takes up the questions of how a single-nation approach is productive in thinking about the relationship between identity politics and postcolonial problems of sovereignty and why I select Jamaica as the nation/case for this approach. Following chapter summaries in the fourth section, the introduction concludes by outlining how *Jamaica's Difficult Subjects'* analysis of shifts in literary practices according to the demand of a contemporary wave of writing is relevant to discourses beyond Jamaica and the Caribbean.

## ***John Crow's Devil and Four Waves of Caribbean Writing***

The first time I read Marlon James's novel *John Crow's Devil*, I was so frustrated by the way it uncritically presented bestiality, pedophilia, and incest as norms of rural Caribbean life that I not only quarreled with the book out loud as I read but also threw it across the room when I finished it. I was confused by the novel's antagonist, Lucas York/the Apostle, who used Christian rhetoric to incite an entire community to horrific acts of violence against each other. Even more perplexing, the novel uses a literal bout of syphilis to symbolically pathologize homosexuality and cast it as a predatory disease. At the time, my bewilderment meant I let the book stay on the ground where it fell after I threw it for portraying a Caribbean community in such seemingly

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1. I model my framing of these waves on Donette Francis's outlining of the waves of Caribbean women's writing. See Donette Francis, "Uncovered Stories: Politicizing Sexual Histories in Third Wave Caribbean Women's Writing," *Black Renaissance/Renaissance Noire* 6.1 (2004): 61–81.

irresponsible ways. The novel simply did not make sense within my established framework for reading postcolonial Caribbean literature. I could not understand it as serving any of the oppositional impetuses that have come to characterize Caribbean writing—anticolonialism, antiracism, antisexism, and antiheterosexism, for example—so I decided there was nothing useful in it and dismissed it as a narrative not worthy of my critical attention.

The visceral nature of my reaction to the novel nonetheless prompted some introspection about the many provocations of *John Crow's Devil*, and I eventually concluded that what made me uncomfortable was that I could not easily approach James's novel as a comprehensible allegory of community. Reading James's novel heightened my consciousness of how my habits of reading West Indian literature are in keeping with Frederic Jameson's controversial notion that “third-world texts, even those which are seemingly private and invested with a properly libidinal dynamic—necessarily project a political dimension in the form of national allegory” (Jameson 69). Despite criticisms of Jameson's argument by postcolonial scholars such as Aijaz Ahmad, Caribbean fiction and, I would argue, the criticism produced in its wake evince what Roberto Strongman calls a “strong allegorical strain” that authors like James actively work against (Strongman). Since I could neither make allegorical sense of James's dystopic vision of community nor reconcile my vision of the responsibilities of Caribbean literature with its disturbing satire, *John Crow's Devil* must have gotten it wrong. Or not. Simply put, the novel forced me to reflect on the limitations in my critical practices. I had to acknowledge and begin to question my expectation that West Indian literature necessarily should serve the productive political purposes of fostering and edifying post-colonial Caribbean communities.

What follows thus proposes a seemingly simple but complicated set of questions: In the contemporary postcolonial context, should we as Caribbean literary critics still require literature (and its authors) to function in accordance with the political imperatives of cultural nationalism? What kind of reality and critical practices has this imperative purchased, and what kind of reality do we as critics and writers, today, now desire to purchase? The political milieu of the mid-twentieth century—when Caribbean literature and criticism is popularly understood as coalescing into a discrete field around anticolonial politics—demanded that literature be integral in establishing and fostering specific versions of community and politically sovereign identification. Writing at that historical conjuncture seemed necessarily concerned with creating the region's own positive cultural resources for politically sovereign nation building from within the constraints of a colonial system. Contemporary novels like *John Crow's Devil*, however, raise the question of what

happens to our ability to read critically if Caribbean narratives remain subject to the same interpretative paradigms installed by the political imperatives of the past. What have we missed in our adherence to the specific imaginative politics that define the developmental junctures in the history of West Indian writing?

In puzzling over these questions, I began to notice additional instances of thematic aberration or confusion in other novels published between the late 1990s and the present. Oonya Kempadoo's *Tide Running* (2004), for example, troubles the traditionally raced, gendered, and geopolitical parameters of exploitation in its portrayal of a wealthy couples' sexual affair with a poor black Tobagonian young man. That their ménage à trois is initiated by the wife (a mixed-race Trinidadian) who is indiscriminately indulged by her husband (a white Englishman) makes the novel difficult to interpret within the traditional terms of raced and gendered power, agency, and exploitation in Caribbean discourses. Likewise, Earl Lovelace's *Is Just a Movie* (2012) has been described as absurdist in its portrayal of a Trinidadian black-power activist who shifts from one political movement to the next looking desperately for the recognition as a revolutionary and nation builder that he believes he desires. What are we to make of the narrator/poet/calypsonian being struck dumb at the same time that the PM is restructuring Trinidad, using buildings ordered from an Internet catalogue, tilting the savannah to face the sea, and piping in vapors of sadness from urban slums in lieu of fog? Kei Miller's *The Last Warner Woman* (2012), meanwhile, literally takes the form of a struggle between the two protagonists, Adamine Bustamante and the mysterious Mr. Writer Man, to deliver the reader with the truth. Miller's representation of the warner woman's narrative as at odds with Mr. Writer Man's narrative (and vice versa) symbolizes a conflict between writer and subject, which in turn conveys a disruption in how contemporary Caribbean writers perceive the work of literature and its representational role in relation to Caribbean subjectivities. I argue that these patterns of illegibility, perplexity, and challenge in contemporary Caribbean literature mark the emergence of a new wave of writing that deploys confusion or dissonance in relation to the traditional politics of Caribbean literature as a key formal strategy.

Interestingly, the meta- or counterpolitics of fourth-wave writing became clearer to me once I began to read more carefully significant characters, relationships, and themes from several classic novels across the history of Caribbean writing that have remained un- or underread critically. Important elements of classic Caribbean narratives, I will argue, have remained invisible or illegible in our literary and critical historiographies, because of an inability to comprehend them within the preferred set of political imperatives circu-

lating at the time of their appearance. What strides have we made in coming to terms with Isaac, the rapist in Sylvia Wynter's *The Hills of Hebron* (1962)? Furthermore, why does Elsa—Ivan's domestic partner—in the film and novel versions of *The Harder They Come* (1972 and 1980, respectively) remain an underexplored figure, despite her instrumentality to the plot? Likewise, why does the critical treatment of the middle-class women's testimonies in Sistren's *Lionheart Gal* continue to reflect what Erna Brodber describes as "incomplete creolization," despite these women's cooperative work in the Sistren Theatre Collective (Brodber 73)? Is queer inclusion the only critical purchase of Patricia Powell's *The Pagoda* and *A Small Gathering of Bones*, and what on earth are we to make of the sordid and prurient violence in Marlon James's *John Crow's Devil*?

Through questions like these, *Jamaica's Difficult Subjects* grew in its preoccupation with moments of difficulty or incomprehensibility across the Caribbean literary landscape. The selection of difficulty in my choice of material for this study is also informed by Alison Donnell's selection of material from among the "awkward subjects" that were "deliberately difficult" in *Twentieth Century Caribbean Literature: Critical Moments in Anglophone Literary History* (10). Donnell's impetus in studying works that "were almost unknowable to the frameworks and pathways that had then been established for reading Caribbean literature" offers a reconfiguration of West Indian literature's canonical archive, with a goal of recovery (Donnell 11). The difficult subjects I cite above and examine in this study, however, are elided presences already *within* the Caribbean literary canon that Donnell's work comprehensively expands. Thus, my focus here is not expanding the archive of texts and Caribbean subjects, but rather examining the terms within which particular subjects remain at the margins and are rendered unknowable, even in their capacities as major agents in texts that are definitive of significant moments in the development of the region's literary tradition.

I begin by suggesting that we understand Caribbean literature since the mid-century as occurring in four identifiable waves. Methodologically, I describe Caribbean literary discourses as developing in waves not to suggest that these are mutually exclusive pockets of writing containing works that all do the same thing at the same time with no variation, but rather to highlight chronologically how various shifting political priorities throughout history are reflected in the priorities of literature and criticism and vice versa. Each wave is marked by distinct moments in the region's history (postemancipation, preindependence, postindependence, and postindependence present), when specific politics governing the race, gender, or sexuality of citizen-subjects are put in the service of solving the problems of sovereignty. These shift-

ing strategies facilitated productive shifts in the formation of the West Indian literary tradition at each of these junctures.

They nonetheless also (inadvertently) consolidated or naturalized specific subjects or sets of political priorities as the most authentic representations of West Indian subjectivity. These consolidations around preferred senses of identity politics consequently rendered what didn't fit at each of these moments as illegible or difficult to interpret. Kamau Brathwaite's assertion of the impossibility of even a childhood friendship between Antoinette and Tia in Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) is an iconic example of this kind of illegibility. He contends in 1974 that "no matter what Jean Rhys might have made Antoinette think, Tia was historically separated from her" by the racist ideological barriers embedded in colonialization (*Contradictory Omens* 36). This interpretation occludes how the girls' short and contentious friendship is nonetheless instrumental in the escape Antoinette imagines from her husband's English house. Though the novel remains a consistent touchstone over the decades for discourses of raced and gendered West Indian subjectivity (Look Lai and Ramchand) and imperialism (Spivak), the collaborative possibilities inherent in Tia and Antoinette's relationship remain obscure.<sup>2</sup> Throughout this book, I identify similar moments of obscurity and illegibility—declared or not in criticism—as a potential framework for a methodology that can decipher the oppositional politics at work in the fourth wave of Caribbean writing.

While my attention to the history of Caribbean writing as it progresses across these waves is heavily reliant on a specific historiographical framework, this reliance is central because of the methodological approach to Caribbean texts that it enables. In practice, this book's historiographical approach to West Indian literary studies enables us to revisit moments when specific figures emerge and are naturalized as legitimate representatives of Caribbean identity, to limn the oppositional politics that work to install them as such, and to make more visible the alternative politics that also occur simultaneously—though less obviously—in the same moments. The most iconic of these naturalized representatives of West Indian identity, whose oppositional politics take center stage at particular historical junctures, include the educated (male) middle-class black nationalist in the first wave, the oppressed

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2. See Wally Look Lai, "The Road to Thornfield Hall: An Analysis of Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*," *New Beacon Reviews: Collection One*, ed. John la Rose (Kingston: New Beacon Books, 1968), 38–52; Kenneth Ramchand, "The Place of Jean Rhys and *Wide Sargasso Sea*," *Wide Sargasso Sea* by Jean Rhys, ed. Judith L. Raiskin (New York: Norton, 1999), 181–187; and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism," *Critical Inquiry* 12.1 (1985): 243–61.

and disenfranchised black working-class rebel (predominantly male) in the second wave, and the displaced/dispossessed migrant (female and queer) of the third wave.

A merger between traditional and revisionist chronologies presents a comprehensive view of not only the constitution of the Caribbean literary canon but also the politics that have exerted influence on its formation and reformation over the last half century. In the 1960s, for example, anthologies such as Andrew Salkey's *West Indian Stories* (1965), Kenneth Ramchand's *West Indian Narrative: An Introduction* (1966), and Barbara Howe's *From The Green Antilles* (1966) describe West Indian writing as emerging in 1950s London, defined by anticolonial sentiments, and exemplified in the work of a now-elite cadre of writers in exile. The names Naipaul, Selvon, and Lamming, for example, are consistently associated with this 1950s literary boom, with McKay, James, and De Lissner receiving intermittent mention as preboom outliers. As Alison Donnell's and Belinda Edmondson's work in particular reveals, however, situating the genesis of the Caribbean literary tradition at the mid-century boom among male writers in exile reveals a number of problematic contingencies underlying the way the history of West Indian writing is popularly presented. My attention to the challenges posed by revisionist historiographies to traditional ones is not meant to create an additional chronology of canon formation—this work has been already been done by others and done well—but instead to highlight the pivotal moments of canon formation and development as they occur at three different points in the region's history, the ways specific identity politics are deployed within and around these moments, and the manner in which this process in turn conventionalizes specific subjects and paradigms while eliding others.

The first wave of West Indian writing, dated loosely between the 1930s and the 1960s, was in large part engrossed with agitating for and imagining political independence from British colonial rule. The ideals of the Victorian Man of Letters were central to early Caribbean writers' efforts to articulate sovereignty through intellectual pursuits, in particular the mastery of Victorian literary conventions.<sup>3</sup> First-wave Caribbean writers employed the formal elements of the Victorian literary tradition to explore the possibilities for sovereign subjectivity and nationhood within a colonized region. Though their visions of sovereign identity sometimes differed radically—Naipaul's work in particular marked a departure from that of others—first-wave writing laid the foundation for a sustained relationship between writing and the politics of

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3. For a more detailed discussion of the relationship between Caribbean writing and nineteenth-century English literature, see Belinda Edmondson, *Making Men: Gender, Literary Authority, and Women's Writing in Caribbean* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), 1–78.

nation building in Caribbean literature. In discussing this first wave, my concern is twofold: how the contemporary priorities of authentic sovereign subject formation and anticolonial politics led to a literary history that imagines a tandem relationship between anticolonial resistance and political independence as the foundational ethos of Caribbean writing, and how this imagined tandem relationship consequently delinks the Caribbean literary tradition from anything in its literary past that does not suit these priorities.

For first-wave Caribbean writers, their own experiences as colonial subjects provided the fodder of identifying and defining West Indian subjectivity. George Lamming describes his series of interconnected essays in *The Pleasures of Exile* (1960) as a “report on one man’s way of seeing.” His “subject” is “the migration of the West Indian writer, as colonial exile, from his native kingdom, once inhabited by Caliban, to the tempestuous island of Prospero’s and his language” (13). Lamming’s “report” exemplifies not only the prominence of “exilic” perspectives in narrating West Indian subjectivity but also the autobiographical dimensions of first-wave writing. As Sandra Pouchet Paquet notes, for writers like Lamming—she also includes C. L. R. James, V. S. Naipaul, and Derek Walcott among such writers—“self-inquiry is self-imaging and self-evaluation, but it is also cultural assessment” (Paquet 359). Thus, “the autobiographical self as subject is transformed into cultural archetype,” illustrating the blending of self and collective consciousness in first-wave Caribbean writing (Paquet 359). First-wave writing is therefore preoccupied with finding and articulating an authentic West Indian consciousness to negotiate the colonials’ relationship to their island homes and their spaces as colonial subjects. In its negotiations of an indigenous sense of sovereign West Indian subjectivity, the first wave of writing solidifies the relationship between articulating self and articulating nation that continues to characterize practices of writing and reading Caribbean literature. Given these priorities, and their consolidation around the image of the writer, it is unsurprising that Sylvia Wynter’s portrayal of Isaac in *The Hills of Hebron*, as a young black aspiring writer who is alienated from his origins by his colonial education and ultimately rapes another man’s wife before escaping the island for exile in London, doesn’t garner much critical attention.

In the second wave of writing, which spans the period from the late 1960s into the 1970s, canon formation shifts and is complicated by the politics of decolonization as they are informed by the black nationalist and American civil rights movements, as well as regional civil unrest associated with dissatisfaction with the realities of political independence.<sup>4</sup> The moment of

4. Among the defining moments that mark this shift are the Rodney riots in 1968 and the

canon formation in the second wave that I am concerned with is the push for more collaboration between writers and critics, in part to bridge the gap between the metropolitan writer in exile and his distant home/subject that was fostered in the first wave. In 1967, Mervyn Morris notes that conditions for Caribbean writers might be improved “by offering intelligent critical interest in his work, and by enlarging and improving, through education, the local audience for his work” (Morris 129). For Edward Baugh in 1968, “the most meaningful gesture of respect which a society can make towards its writers is to accord their work a careful and rigorous criticism” (Baugh 140). Despite this common call for critics, however, what the late 1960s and early 1970s works of Kamau Brathwaite (compiled later into *Contradictory Omens* and the three-part “Love Axe”), Sylvia Wynter (“Little Culture” in two parts and “Creole Culture”), and Derek Walcott (“What the Twilight Says”) all convey is that the aesthetic constitution of the West Indian literary voice, as a decolonizing force, is heavily contested along the lines of language and race in particular. The rebellious country-come-to-town singer, Ivan, from the film and novel versions of *The Harder They Come* is one of the second wave’s iconic representative subjects. Ivan’s tragically thwarted aspirations towards not just personhood but fame have captivated and continue to captivate our critical attention as a source for thinking about raced and gendered subjectivity in discourses of decolonization. Ivan’s common-law wife Elsa has received less attention; indeed, critics rarely discuss her, except dismissively as the stereotypically rendered agent of Ivan’s demise. Stereotyping aside, Elsa nonetheless is also a differently compelling representation of sovereign self-actualization.

The third wave spans the decades between the 1980s and the end of the twentieth century and extends the preoccupation with the relationship between literary studies and decolonization and nation building. The moment of paradigm formation in this wave that is significant for *Jamaica’s Difficult Subjects* is when Caribbean women’s writing arrives at and begins to articulate its own critical moment in West Indian literary history in the early 1990s. Carole Boyce Davies and Elaine Savory Fido’s *Out of the Kumbla: Caribbean Women and Literature* (1990) and Belinda Edmondson’s *Making Men: Gender, Literary Authority, and Women’s Writing in Caribbean Narrative* (1999) both exemplify how African diasporic aesthetic theories are positioned as interpretative frameworks for naturalizing specific tropes of Caribbean female subjectivity during the third wave of Caribbean writing.

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return in the mid-sixties of several important figures, like Kamau Brathwaite, Sylvia Wynter, and John Hearne, to the Caribbean to take up academic positions at the University College of the West Indies.

The introduction to *Out of the Kumbla* begins by invoking the now-familiar and much-deployed declaration of the historical absence and voicelessness of the Caribbean woman writer:

The concept of voicelessness necessarily informs any discussion of Caribbean women and literature . . . By voicelessness, we mean the historical absence of the woman writer's text: the absence of a specifically female position on major issues such as slavery, colonization, decolonization, women's rights and more direct social cultural issues. (1)

Edmondson develops more fully in *Making Men* the utility of black diasporic frameworks for expressing and interpreting the subjectivity of women writers who are believed to have no literary ancestors. She writes,

Many Caribbean female-authored texts and reading of those texts are inevitably refracted through the prism of African American feminist theory and narrative, which jointly have provided the only theoretical framework for the engenderment of the black female subject. (Edmondson, *Making Men* 102)

Thus, if the temporal linking of anticolonial movements to the 1950s boom in Caribbean writing established the sense that the region's literature is a metropolitan product of an elite cohort of writers in exile, Caribbean women's writing emerging from absence and silence in the 1970s saw the possibilities of engendering Caribbean female subjectivity as located elsewhere. Studies like *Searching for Safe Spaces: Afro-Caribbean Women Writers in Exile* acknowledge that the women's writing of the 1990s has a regional history of its own—as evidenced by the work of Jean Rhys and Una Marson, for example—but conclude “that history is still largely obscured and ignored” (Chancy xix).

Like Evelyn O'Callaghan's *Woman's Version: Theoretical Approaches to West Indian Fiction by Women*, Carolyn Cooper's *Noises in the Blood: Orality and the "Vulgar" Body of Jamaican Popular Culture* (1995) is among the studies that follow up on this insight by performing locally/regionally focused versions of the feminist theorization of Caribbean women's writing. These studies move beyond those that rely on African diasporic theoretical paradigms for Caribbean women's writing, expanding Caribbean feminist theorization to include regionally situated, creative vernacular, and nonblack voices. The third wave of writing is thus also marked by the revisionist work of critics like Alison Donnell who comprehensively challenge the specific politics of nationalism, resistance, oppression, and displacement that have gone into construct-

ing the Caribbean literary tradition since the early twentieth century. The archival and canonical expansions that are facilitated by critical studies like these, works which contest the conventionalization of preferred raced and geopolitical theoretical paradigms, are invaluable to *Jamaica's Difficult Subjects'* retrospective examination of the Caribbean literary canon in similarly revisionist ways.

But while my study is influenced by such work, I am less interested in expanding the subjectivities included under the umbrella of Caribbean writing than in considering how we can frame an understanding of sovereignty by focusing on the relationships *between* subjects. As both Brodber and O'Callaghan suggest, the undertheorized space between women of different races reflects "incomplete creolization" and presents an opportunity to think more comprehensively about how postcolonial sovereignty is imagined in Caribbean contexts (Brodber 73). The fraught yet cooperative relationships between women of different races and classes in Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* and Sistren's *Lionheart Gal* trouble the raced and classed priorities of both Caribbean nationalisms and the Caribbean feminist tradition and identify the limitations such prioritizations impose on our understanding of post-colonial citizenship and subjectivity.

What distinguishes fourth-wave writing is its skeptical approach to the identity politics cultivated in previous waves. Rather than dismissing existing oppositional strategies as defunct, however—as has become common in contemporary literary criticism—fourth-wave writing seeks to reinhabit and rewrite the oppositional strategies that preceded it. On the surface, it remains preoccupied with sovereign Caribbean subjectivity and hardly deviates from themes circulating around the politics of colonialism, postcolonialism, neocolonialism, and (raced and/or cultural) nationalism. The process of negotiating persistent problems of racial, gender, and sexual equality within Caribbean nations likewise continues to feature centrally in the fourth wave. I argue that by reinhabiting the oppositional strategies of preceding waves, fourth-wave Caribbean writing draws attention to how the prioritization of identity politics in particular leads to ossification in literary practices. Such prioritization locks the oppositional possibilities of contemporary work in a circular pattern that simply reproduces an official or preferred script, rather than charting new territory. The—I argue staged—incomprehensibility of fourth-wave writing through these lenses both highlights the circularity of existing strategies for negotiating sovereignty and forces the creation of new strategies.

Beginning with the first wave, each chapter in *Jamaica's Difficult Subjects* offers readings, and in some cases rereadings, that go against the popular

critical paradigm of a work's contemporary context, cumulatively building towards clarifying how deliberately complicating indices of identity becomes an oppositional strategy of fourth-wave writing. Again, this counterwork isn't meant to be dismissive of existing critical paradigms, but is an attempt at uncovering what their naturalization around specific political impetuses may have elided. As I have already mentioned, there are excavatory dimensions here that find company with the archival and recovery work that Evelyn O'Callaghan does in *Woman Version* as well as with the projects of Donnell's *Twentieth Century Caribbean Literature* (2006), Edmondson's *Caribbean Middlebrow* (2009), and Lee-Loy's *Searching for Mr. Chin* (2010).

Edmondson's *Caribbean Middlebrow: Leisure Culture and the Middle Class*, for example, combines retrospective glances with an examination of contemporary popular cultural trends in a study that disrupts a significant commonly held assumption regarding class in Caribbean culture. It is a long-standing critical conclusion that Caribbean culture is split between an elite European-rooted highbrow culture and an authentic working-class lowbrow culture, with no middle culture. Edmondson's historiographical analysis spans the nineteenth century into the twenty-first century to debunk this notion through an examination of popular magazines, periodicals, novels, beauty pageants, and musical festivals. *Caribbean Middlebrow* articulates a continuum of the creation, maintenance, and consumption of popular cultural commodities, marketed for middle-class consumption, providing a much-needed corrective to a longstanding assumption about Anglophone Caribbean class and culture: the middle-class, long believed to have no culture of its own imagining, has indeed been producing and consuming its own cultural products since the nineteenth century. Where Edmondson's study articulates the genealogy of a creative middle-class culture, Ann-Marie Lee-Loy's *Searching for Mr. Chin: Constructions of Nation and the Chinese in West Indian Literature* (2010) tackles another significant though marginally represented group in Caribbean discourse. Lee-Loy's study focuses on "Chineseness" in the Anglophone Caribbean and the ambiguous and unstable space offered to predominantly male Chinese shopkeepers in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. *Searching for Mr. Chin* joins the growing discourses on Asian experiences in the Caribbean, as the first book-length literary study of "Chineseness" in the West Indies. If Edmondson focuses specifically on middle-class leisure culture and Lee-Loy on the marginal representations of the Chinese man in Caribbean discourses, Alison Donnell's study, *Twentieth-Century Caribbean Literature: Critical Moments in Anglophone Literary History* (2006), offers a more comprehensive view of twentieth-century Caribbean literature in general. This study presents a supplement to the existing historicization of

Caribbean literature and criticism by suggesting new and excluded writers, texts, and critical moments that help to reconfigure the Caribbean literary tradition. *Twentieth Century Caribbean Literature* presents alternative critical approaches and alternative critical moments, which allow us to revise how we have read Caribbean writing as well as the history and criticism that surrounds it.

These studies identify and challenge a range of paradigmatic settlements in the Caribbean literary canon in favor of seeing the literary tradition as “moveable, divergent, and unruly” (Donnell 1) and promoting the “loosening up” of static confrontational models of representation” (O’Callaghan 12). Though *Jamaica’s Difficult Subjects* is also preoccupied with “unsettling the settled settlements” in our critical practices, as David Scott suggests in *Refashioning Futures: Criticism After Postcoloniality*, its recovery of characters like Elsa and Isaac doesn’t seek to recuperate them into a common heterogeneity but instead privileges their outlier statuses and the insights their recovery provides for understanding diverse subjectivities in the postcolonial present (Scott 204). I suggest that it is through understanding complex relationships between these difficult subjects and their respective communities—both their adherences and resistances—that we can open up a space for approaching, defining, and understanding the dissonance and confusion in fourth-wave texts’ representations of problems of sovereignty in the postcolonial present.

## Dudus and Competing Sovereignties

The incidents leading up to Coke’s arrest and extradition raise concerns about sovereign Jamaican citizenship in and out of Jamaica and the rights of politically sovereign Caribbean nations to protect the rights of their citizens in local and global arenas, providing yet another impetus to rethink our nation-based understanding of Caribbean sovereignty. On Monday, May 24, 2010, a joint military and constabulary security force launched an operation in Western Kingston to serve an arrest warrant on then-alleged drug kingpin Christopher “Dudus” Coke. Nine months prior, in August 2009, the United States had requested Coke’s extradition on charges of conspiracy to transport illegal narcotics into the United States and trafficking in illegal firearms. Coke’s indictment, issued by the U.S. Southern District of New York, alleged that since 1994, members of the notorious “Shower Posse” gang had trafficked illegal narcotics into the United States at Coke’s direction, shared proceeds of their sales with him, and also used these proceeds to provide economic support to depressed communities in Jamaica’s inner cities. These philanthropic gestures

had gained Coke his West Kingston community's loyalty and the moniker "the President." Despite the fact that Coke was ranked by the U.S. State Department among the most dangerous weapons and narcotics traffickers in the world, the Jamaican government for nine months resisted the United States' request for his extradition to answer these charges, contending "that certain aspects of the request breached Jamaican laws and treaties" (George).<sup>5</sup>

The sustained noncompliance with the United States' request was public knowledge, and over the course of nine months there was significant media comment on Coke's alleged leadership of the "Shower Posse" and his reputed affiliation with the then-ruling Jamaica Labor Party (JLP). Between 1962 and 1972, the JLP developed Western Kingston, with Tivoli Gardens, Jamaica's first government housing project, at its center. The JLP has always represented West Kingston in Jamaica's parliament, and Coke had controlled the volatile Tivoli Gardens community since the early 1990s. The longstanding relationship between the community and the then-ruling JLP, along with Coke's own standing as area leader or don (in popular Jamaican parlance) were coincidental enough to fuel widespread speculation and conspiracy theories that the Jamaican government was trying to protect Coke from extradition.<sup>6</sup> After mounting pressure from the opposition and civil society, however, on May 18, 2010, the government finally signed the extradition request and issued Coke's arrest warrant. Following the official announcement, thousands of Tivoli Gardens residents protested in Kingston, declaring: "He is next to God" and "Jesus died for us. We will die for Dudus."<sup>7</sup> Such sworn allegiance to Coke, and the violence that punctuated his arrest, indicates the power and control he wielded as a leader and caretaker in the Tivoli Gardens community, functioning oftentimes as a proxy government that controlled what appeared to be a sovereign state within a sovereign state. Once the Authority to Proceed with serving Coke's arrest warrant was signed, gunmen fortified Tivoli Gardens, launched fire-bomb attacks on police stations in West Kingston, and sustained an armed resistance to the security forces' attempt to arrest "the President." Despite this resistance, Coke was finally apprehended and extradited without contest almost a month later on June 22, 2010.<sup>8</sup>

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5. Emil George, Anthony Irons, and Donald Scharshmidt, *Report of the Commission of Enquiry into the Extradition Request for Christopher Coke*, COE (Kingston: n. p., 2011).

6. In September 2011, the then prime minister and leader of the JLP resigned as prime minister and party leader—a decision widely touted as being informed by the handling (some would say mismanagement) of the "Dudus" affair on the part of the Golding administration.

7. Gary Spaulding, "The Sacrifice: Souls Lost for the 'Cause,'" *The Jamaica Gleaner Online*, 30 May 2010, 18 October 2013 <<http://jamaica-gleaner.com/gleaner/20100530/news/news1.html>>.

8. For an additional account of the events surrounding Coke's extradition, see Mattathias

I recall this moment of intersecting local and international politics that resulted in the deaths of seventy-four Jamaican citizens, alongside my first reading of *John Crow's Devil*, as retrospective starting points for asking questions about how postcolonial sovereignty is imagined in contemporary Caribbean discourses. What does it mean for the nation when a community acts in contravention to national security as a whole in order to protect itself—essentially against national security forces? What circumstances create a situation in which one community disrupts national security in order to protect its own internal sovereignty? Given the established relationship between Caribbean literary discourses and regional politics, what do literary and cultural texts offer us for understanding this incident and the actions of all involved, locally and internationally?

Because the legacies of colonization, slavery, and indentureship persist in the region almost two centuries after the Emancipation Act of 1834, and fifty years since the granting of political independence, Caribbean nations continue to face internal challenges to their sovereign existence amidst the liberalizing currents of global capitalism. Since the inception of Caribbean literary studies as a discrete field in the decades between the 1930s and 1980s, versions of identity politics informed by race, gender, class, and sexuality have remained central to how Caribbean literary and cultural critics think about the possibilities for regional sovereignty. Over the course of half a century, the achievement of identity—usually a raced national identity—has become conflated with the achievement of sovereignty. The historical trajectory of Caribbean literary discourses demonstrates this conflation in the establishment of specific identity theories as orthodoxy across the first three waves of West Indian literary discourses.

## IDENTITY AS SOVEREIGNTY AND THE CRISIS OF THE POSTCOLONIAL PRESENT

My reading of difficult subjects across Caribbean literary history focuses on the politics which at each historical juncture render them difficult. Ultimately, I aim to construct a lineage between these difficult subjects and the more general dissonance and confusion of contemporary writing in order to help us begin to define the oppositional politics that informs this incomprehensibility. A key strategy in doing this is unsettling the traditional conflation of identity

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Schwartz, "A Massacre in Jamaica," *The New Yorker*, 12 December 2011, 18 October 2013 <<http://jamaica-gleaner.com/gleaner/20100530/news/news1.html>>.

and sovereignty in order to recover sovereignty as a concept that is separate from the politics of identity still predominant in Caribbean discourses. I see this disruption as a first step towards recognizing and interpreting the oppositional politics of not only fourth-wave writers like James but also the difficult subjects in the works preceding his.

Throughout this study, I use sovereignty in reference to both individual autonomy at a personal level and emancipation, enfranchisement, independence, and self-government at the political level. The term “sovereignty,” in this way, allows me to focus directly on individual subjects, agents, or acts of agency and to interpret them in relation to what is conventional. Theories of sovereignty as proffered by Sylvia Wynter and George Lamming in particular are pivotal to my use of sovereignty here, because they encompass understandings of both the challenges that continue to plague postcolonial Caribbean realities and the urgency of the disruption I attempt to make between identity and sovereignty in Caribbean discourses. This disruption is not intended to undermine or be dismissive of the gains in collective social and political consciousness that have been achieved by the work this project calls identitarian theory. Indeed, the body of work on black nationalist, cultural nationalist, and feminist theories that precede this book enables a project like mine that seeks to supplement these discourses. Throughout, however, I am interested in the ways that literary works might, intentionally or not, go beyond the bounds of “good” politics via the representation and exploration of difficult subjects.

Sylvia Wynter’s notion of ontological sovereignty is critical to this project because it associates the challenges of sovereignty faced in colonial and postcolonial contexts with how much we know about the challenges posed to our notions of being. The sovereignty of being has always been a central struggle for the Caribbean region, not the least because of colonization and the way it bolstered the sublimating capacity of European Enlightenment discourses. Ontological sovereignty requires direct confrontation with such compromising sublimations. Identities rooted in alternate cultural heritages (often African) are posited throughout Caribbean discourses as significant tools of such confrontation. Wynter tells David Scott in a 2000 interview, however, that ontological sovereignty remains a challenge for the region. She notes: “We know about economic sovereignty . . . We do not know about something called ontological sovereignty” (Scott, “The Re-Enchantment” 136). While the political and economic implications of self-governance are obvious and known to postcolonial subjects, knowledge, power, and control over our sense of being is still under negotiation. In order to “speak” ontological sovereignty, an admittedly complex concept, “we would have to move completely outside

our present conception of what it is to be human, and therefore outside the ground of the orthodox body of knowledge which institutes and reproduces such a conception" ("The Re-Enchantment" 136). In the context of this interview with Scott, the "orthodox body of knowledge which instituted such a conception" of what it is to be human is installed by the secular humanism of Enlightenment philosophy. Today, there is little over half a century's worth of Caribbean literary and cultural theory that I would argue now itself constitutes an "orthodox body of knowledge" of its own, one which contributes significantly to what it means at the current (postcolonial) historical juncture to be human and West Indian.<sup>9</sup>

For George Lamming, the business of sovereignty in the Caribbean also remains a fraught and highly contested undertaking internally (intra-regionally and within individual nation-states) and externally (intra-island and globally). The Caribbean region, Lamming writes in 2004,

has been staggering slowly and painfully to resolve the contradiction of being at once independent and neocolonial, struggling through new definitions of itself, to abandon the protection of being a frontier created by nature, a logistical basin serving some imperial necessity, struggling to move away from being a regional platform for alien enterprise to the status of being a region for itself, with sovereign right to define its own reality and define its own priorities. (*The Sovereignty of the Imagination* 9)

The region's specific blend of history, geography, economics, and politics makes sovereignty a significant challenge for its nations. The contradiction of being "at once independent and neocolonial" in the aftermath of centuries of colonial control and the present reality of neocolonial control is at the crux of many of the region's difficulties with "the sovereign right to define its own reality and define its own priorities." Continued growth and expansion in the body of work that is postcolonial discourse illustrates that the granting of political independence from colonial authority is only the beginning of decolonization and sovereign existence. My argument combines Wynter's notion of the sovereignty of being that is attainable by moving outside orthodox bodies of knowledge with Lamming's notion of sovereignty as the ability

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9. A parallel to this notion of disrupting orthodoxies might be found in Michelle Rowley's discussion of Caribbean feminists' engagement with the limitations imposed by the term "gender" on modern Caribbean politics—social justice in particular—because of the term's contradictory relationship to the liberal humanist tradition. See Michelle Rowley, "Whose Time Is It? Gender and Humanism in Contemporary Caribbean Feminist Advocacy," *Small Axe* 14.1 (2010): 1–15.

to “work toward an environment which could manage stability as a state of creative conflict” (Lamming, *The Sovereignty of the Imagination* 36).

In its embodiment of a combined acknowledgment of movement beyond orthodox bodies of knowledge, *Jamaica's Difficult Subjects* deploys sovereignty as an index for analysis that can broaden our existing critical frames into the relationships *between* the diverse raced, classed, and gendered subjects in Caribbean citizenries. Evelyn O’Callaghan employs a similar gesture in her approach to West Indian fiction by women in *Woman Version: Theoretical Approaches to West Indian Fiction by Women*. Her defense of “outsiders’ voices” is an instructive account of how West Indian literature’s perennial concern with specific kinds of identity inevitably excludes some, considers others as failures, and consequently frames readings of Caribbean subjectivity in narrow ways.

In her readings of Jean Rhys, Eliot Bliss, and Phyllis Shand Allfrey, O’Callaghan employs Dick Hebdige’s conception of versioning as a methodology for “attending to the dynamic of *interrelating* sources and influences” in conceiving the West Indian voice (O’Callaghan 13). O’Callaghan’s discussion of nineteenth-century white women writers points to the ways their writing mutually reflected the lives of black and white women. While I push back against gestures of inclusivity here, O’Callaghan’s impulse to read these women and their writing beyond their relegation to the fringes, for what they reveal about interrelationality as characteristically West Indian, opens up new methodologies for reading Caribbean writing generally and writing by women in particular. Nonetheless I’d like to shift the critical endgame away from inclusion. If our critical impulse isn’t to recoup or include, but rather to understand how agents interrelate, what new frameworks become available for understanding the oppositional politics of contemporary West Indian realities?

In a special issue of *Social Text* titled *Queer Transexions of Race, Nation, and Gender*, Phillip Brian Harper and colleagues suggest a similar course of action for contemporary social analysis and cultural criticism:

By considering the interrelations of sexuality, race, and gender in a trans-national context, [*Queer Transexions*] attempts to bring projects of queer, postcolonial, and critical race theories together with each other and with a feminist analytic that itself has been a key factor in the critique of social identity. (1)

Queer theoretical interpretive practices offer a useful model for resisting critical impulses to recover marginalized identities for the sake of inclusion, and for seeing how contemporary writing also resists this urge. The eschewing of

definition that is at the heart of queer studies in particular is instrumental to this project's shift from individual identitarian theoretical practices to peering in between subjects at their relationships and what these in turn reveal about their realities of sovereignty. Queer theory's "constituent characteristics" are its "definitional intermediacy," according to Annamarie Jagose, and as such it provides an apt model for thinking about the spaces between identity that are examined relationally in this book (Jagose 1). My impulse, like that of queer theorists, is to challenge the visions of subjectivity naturalized by various forms of identity politics and focus instead on the ways these visions provide unstable, contradictory, and incomplete renderings of sovereign subjectivity in the postcolonial present. The methodology that I outline in this book neither displaces nor forces notions of identity into redundancy, but instead queries the field of identity politics to challenge the fixity of such politics.

Present-day events like the Tivoli incursion and Christopher "Dudus" Coke's extradition convey how problems of sovereignty reside not only with citizens of a particular state but also in the state's ability to govern its populace according to a single vision of national citizenship. In Jamaica, decades of political predation and clientelism, along with structural adjustment programs imposed by multilateral lending agencies, have stimulated the economic neglect of impoverished communities by local government, leaving these communities vulnerable to those who offer to provide extra-governmental communal order, as is the case with Coke and Tivoli Gardens. But does this sufficiently explain a community's reliance on a weapons and narcotics kingpin and an armed incursion by the state's security forces, at the behest of the U.S., to remove him? My inquiry throughout this book suggests that interpreting contemporary literature necessarily involves engaging with present-day understandings of sovereignty, and that we can locate strategies for understanding current expressions of sovereignty, particularly in moments of crisis, by looking at similar unconventional responses to crises in the literary past.

## THE CRISIS OF THE POSTCOLONIAL PRESENT

In *Refashioning Futures*, David Scott insists that it is critical to understand the current moment as one of crisis and to adjust our practices of postcolonial theorizing accordingly. Scott identifies a

fundamental crisis in the Third World in which the very coherence of the secular-modern project—with its assurance of progressive social-economic development, with its dependence upon the organizational form of

the nation-state, with its sense of the privilege of representative democracy and competitive elections, and so on—can no longer be taken for granted.  
 (14–15)

Because the coherence of this specific imagining of postcolonial realities in Third World nation-states can no longer be taken for granted, “this crisis ushers in a new problem-space and produces a new demand on postcolonial criticism” (*Refashioning Futures* 15). As the “Dudus” affair shows, this “new problem space” reflects an internal depletion of the mid-twentieth-century vision of national subjectivity and the perceived threat posed by various constituencies of indifferent postcolonial subjects now affiliated with the global economy as much as or more than with cultural nationalism.

Foundational studies like Rex Nettleford’s *Mirror Mirror: Identity, Race and Protest in Jamaica* (1970) and *Caribbean Cultural Identity: The Case of Jamaica* (1980), as well as more recent works such as Deborah Thomas’s *Modern Blackness: Nationalism, Globalization, and the Politics of Culture in Jamaica* (2004) outline how the project of mid-twentieth-century Jamaican nationalism pursued the establishment of a common identity that signified consensus among the pluralities of the Jamaican population, organizing the country around a single vision of national citizenship designed to help usher in political independence. As these studies show, despite an ethos of egalitarianism and unification, middle-class values of Christian conservatism and heteronormative propriety heavily informed the official notion of Jamaican national citizenship. Official national designations of “citizen” inevitably carry with them a mark of belonging that can be inaccessible or even unattractive to some, particularly members of the working class and those who are nonheteronormatively identified. As such, the process involved in consolidating official national identities problematically reproduces hierarchies and exclusions reminiscent of the colonial period in politically independent contexts.

In Jamaica, the exclusionary politics of the official national identity also meant dire economic consequences for some citizens, particularly those of the working class. Advanced educational opportunities were limited, and where they existed, employment opportunities for the working poor were in large part menial. As such, throughout the late twentieth century, informal (and sometimes illegal) economic ventures flourished in impoverished communities. Participation in these informal economic ventures allowed those alienated from official notions of nationalism and neglected because of austere economic policies to insert themselves into legal and illegal markets beyond the control of the state. The viability of informal economies (particularly those

circulating around popular musical culture) created autonomy among members of the once dispossessed and alienated working class. Existing alongside values of Christian conservatism, sexual propriety, responsibility, and civic decency and decorum, there is the value of the dollar, which can render the excluded or neglected no longer alienated from official notions of national citizenship and subjectivity, but as David Scott suggests, “*indifferent to them*” (Scott, *Refashioning Futures* 194; Scott’s emphasis).

Deborah Thomas, though not on board with the wholesale pronouncement of this indifference as a crisis, coins the term “modern blackness” to describe it. According to Thomas, “Modern blackness is a subaltern aesthetic and politics from which to make claims upon the earlier forms of nationalism that gained state power in Jamaica . . . modern blackness and creole multiculturalism are always side by side, jockeying for a position” (13). Bearing this jockeying in mind, Thomas encourages us to be more precise in our thinking about for whom the “ascendance of modern blackness within the public sphere” constitutes a crisis (13). Indeed, “modern blackness itself constitutes a crisis only for the maintenance of a particular color, class, gender, and culture nexus that reproduces colonial relations of power and hierarchies of value” (13). The recognition of coincidence in the declining dominance of creole multiracial nationalism and the increasing economic mobility of modern blackness, however, is nonetheless a watershed moment in thinking about sovereignty in the Caribbean, regardless of who exactly experiences it as a crisis. The various responses to Coke’s arrest and extradition attest to the depletion of Jamaican cultural nationalism as an authoritative orthodoxy of communal identification and organization. It is also indicative of the necessity for a shift in how Caribbean discourses account for acts of sovereignty in the postcolonial present.

This tense context of internationally influenced economic and political crisis provides the occasion for this book’s analysis of postcolonial Jamaican literary and cultural discourses. Throughout, I reference this postcolonial moment of crisis, as it is defined by social scientists like David Scott and Brian Meeks, critiqued by Thomas’s theory of modern blackness, and illustrated by the incidents surrounding Coke’s extradition, to consider what has come to constitute a postcolonial orthodoxy for subjectivity and citizenship in Caribbean discourses. I argue, for example, that nationalism’s impulse to organize diverse citizenries into a homogeny structured by space, race, gender, class, and sexuality installs orthodoxies of privileged identities reminiscent of colonialism. I suggest that these orthodoxies also infiltrate our literary practices and complicate our ability to interpret what falls outside of them. Central here is the relationship between the crisis of the postcolonial present, sustained

problems of sovereignty, and the ability of contemporary literary discourses to make sense of this relationship.

I do not foreground this crisis to join the chorus that heralds the end or irrelevance of nationalism. Like Shalini Puri, Robert J. C. Young and others, I am hesitant to pronounce the death of any concept or paradigm that continues to make a variety of inequities between the First and Third Worlds or the enfranchised and disenfranchised more visible.<sup>10</sup> I concur with Puri's assertions that in the global village "space is not being collapsed; it is being reorganized," and that the term "global village" itself "projects a false notion of inclusive community and international equality . . . [and] represses the pivotal point of conjunction and mediation between the global and the local: the nation state" (Puri 9). To properly critique the functioning of nation—especially within the inequities produced by neo-liberally fueled globalization—the nation as an organizing entity must remain visible because it maintains the visibility of inequities between the First and Third Worlds, or developed and developing nations. Maintaining the visibility of nation as a concept for organizing sovereign subjectivity, I argue, isn't undone by internally critiquing how nations define themselves. I do, however, evoke the problems with our critical model to make a case for new politics that are fully conscious of the drawbacks of cultural nationalism as the primary strategy for achieving sovereignty.

The crisis of the postcolonial present, where cultural nationalisms are depleted and internally competing citizenries contest the stability of such imaginings of collectivity, heralds a temporal conjuncture where our models of criticism can either install another dominant identitarian orthodoxy or attempt to enact a different kind of shift. A number of recent studies have similarly responded to this conjuncture in ways that shift the discourses from identitarian orthodoxy and seek alternate terms for imagining West Indian subjectivity across the region. Among the most recent of these are Donette Francis's *Fictions of Feminine Citizenship: Sexuality and the Nation in Contemporary Caribbean Literature* (2010), Raphael Dalleo's *Caribbean Literature and the Public Sphere* (2011), and Faith Smith's edited collection *Sex and the Citizen: Interrogating the Caribbean* (2011). Francis's study charts an alternative history of racial and sexual formation in the Caribbean by exploring the forms of the anti-romance that appear in Caribbean women's writing. Dalleo combines anglophone, francophone, and hispanophone Caribbean studies to construct a literary archive that comprehensively presents a new set of

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10. See Shalini Puri, *The Caribbean Postcolonial: Social Equality, Post-Nationalism, and Cultural Hybridity* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004) and Robert J. C. Young, "Postcolonial Remains," *New Literary History* 43.1 (2012): 19–42.

possibilities for imagining writers' relationship to their public spheres. Dalleo's final chapters also "detail the sense of crisis over literature's public role" in our current postcolonial moment (17). Smith's multiauthored interdisciplinary volume simultaneously speaks from within and challenges the assumptions of feminism, literary and cultural studies, and queer studies; explores the contradictions inherent in conceiving of the Caribbean as a backward, homophobic, tourist paradise; and addresses the regional purchase of equating postcolonial sovereignty with heterosexual citizenship.

This relationship between literature, the wide-ranging constitution of Caribbean public spheres, and the conceptualization of citizenship via sexuality regionally and internationally is also central to *Jamaica's Difficult Subjects*, which in turn approaches this relationship through the lens of sovereignty in a specific nation space in ways that foreground illegibility in order to bypass the conventionalization of identity politics. Amidst this discussion of shifts, prompted by contemporary moments of crises, *Jamaica's Difficult Subjects* presents illegibility as an opportunity to ask by what means, practices, and modes our current reality of postcolonial subjectivity is shaped. It suggests that this shift could bring about a critical yield that isn't defined by (or confined within) quarrels about exclusions, but rather raises new questions about plural forms of community that already exist in Caribbean nation states. Rather than installing a new point of orthodox identification around which a collective plurality can or should organize itself, the goal of this study is to use the specificity offered by a single nation space to explore what David Scott calls "different ways of being-in-common" (*Refashioning Futures* 220).

## The Case of Jamaica

While the introduction has thus far engaged with the historiography of Caribbean literary discourses generally, it is not a coincidence that both framing moments center on Jamaica. That the texts studied here are predominantly preoccupied with Jamaica is instrumental in theorizing in specific and focused ways on the problems of sovereignty within a developing, politically independent, and increasingly globalized Caribbean region. It does this deliberately to suggest both that West Indian countries have a common history of colonization and share problems of sovereignty as a result and that they have developed as independent nations in distinct ways, and there are nuanced insights to be gained from individual consideration. In essence, what I present is a case study of sorts that queries what becomes available for thinking about how community is imagined, organized, and policed in the postcolonial

Caribbean. I argue that looking at a single country offers a usefully concrete but ultimately generalizable model for thinking about internally competing notions of subjectivity, community, and nation in the contemporary Caribbean. That said, many of my texts occasionally extend—in authorship, in setting, in theme—beyond Jamaica, and that too is part of the story they tell.

This singular focus also facilitates a locally anchored contribution to how we negotiate the fissures between local and metropolitan or settler and migrant that have characterized Caribbean discourse since its inception in the early twentieth century. “Locatedness,” as Alison Donnell argues—specifically in reference to Olive Senior’s work—“enables us to think about the diaspora paradigm in new and interesting ways” (Donnell 95). Furthermore, “the nation is not the opposite of transnational” (Donnell 95). The locatedness of a singular national frame of reference prioritizes an inward focus on the problems of sovereignty within a developing, politically independent, and increasingly globalized Caribbean state, but as I also insist, it does not stymie looking outward. For example, we may never see where Isaac in Wynter’s *The Hills of Hebron* ends up after he leaves Jamaica, but the fact of his leaving, the circumstances that lead up to it, and the consequences for the people he leaves behind all contribute to the complex vision of individual subjectivity, community, and self-sustainability that Wynter’s novel conveys. In this way, the self-exile of the rapist and symbol of middle-class, educated black nationalism presents a specific context for reflecting comprehensively on the politics surrounding how common community is imagined between those who feel compelled to leave and those who remain (and in the nonfictional cases of Sylvia Wynter and E. K. Brathwaite, those who eventually returned).

Moreover, Jamaica has long functioned as a metonymic trope for the Caribbean, and more generally, this makes it a well-suited iconic space for constructing theories of postcolonial sovereignty that privilege locatedness. In Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*, for example, that Bertha Mason is from Spanish Town doesn’t qualify her Jamaicanness per se (as a national construct this did not yet exist), but instead qualifies her West Indian otherness in relation to Jane. This otherness is signified by the popular recognizability of Spanish Town as a prosperous British colonial outpost. Indeed, it is Jean Rhys’s engagement with Brontë’s depictions of West Indian otherness via the West Indian heiress from “Spanish Town” that in part explains *Wide Sargasso Sea*’s inclusion in this study.

Jamaica maintains versions of this tropic iconicity across the history of colonization and postcolonization, as Patricia Saunders confirms: “Jamaica, in particular, has become a trope for the entire region, a signifier that is both loaded and empty” (Saunders, “Buyers Beware” 22). Like Saunders, I am not

concerned with disputing the accuracy of this kind of encompassing signification. Countless recent transnationally focused Caribbean studies have worked tirelessly to define the terms within which we can and cannot generalize about the region (Page, Francis, Smith, and Dalleo, for example). What I attempt here is to harness what becomes possible for investigating the internal and external dynamics that inform expressions of sovereignty within increasingly globalized, developing, and internally competitive Caribbean states through the specificity of Jamaica's tropic representations.

Finally, at each of the four historical junctures explored here (preindependence, independence, postcolonial, post-postcolonial), Jamaica maintains a prominent position among the discordant literary contexts out of which the shifts characteristic of each wave of writing occur. Civil and social unrest regionally run consistently parallel to canon-forming paradigm shifts in Caribbean literary discourses, from the 1930s labor riots to the 2010 Tivoli incursion. To be clear, my use of Jamaica as the context for this investigation is not an elevation of Jamaica above other Caribbean nations, nor is it an endorsement of nationalism as a framework for Caribbean citizenries to achieve and maintain sovereign senses of subjectivity. Instead, I take advantage of Jamaica's historically precedented iconicity as a tropic representation of the region and use it as a focused point of entry into critiquing the centrality of cultural nationalism to Caribbean states in general. Such an investigation, I propose, in turn makes more legible other expressions of sovereign subjectivity that are illegible within frameworks that privilege cultural nationalism.

### *Jamaica's Difficult Subjects by Chapters*

The demands that criticism in the postcolonial present must meet have changed because the realities we explore have changed. Our present is altered by additional historical events, which are not restricted to slavery, emancipation, and independence. We have seen the collapse of the democratic socialist experiments in the Third World and socialism in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, and we have also seen the resurgence of a more victorious sense of liberalism's claim as our only possible framework for a successfully sovereign future. Who we are as a region of independent nations at this current historical conjuncture is different from who we were at emancipation or independence, and therefore the adoption of new models of critical practice is necessary. *John Crow's Devil* is among a new cohort of novels written in the twenty-first century that challenge the ways we read West Indian litera-

ture and reflect how the demands criticism must meet have changed. What I outline in this book are examples of subjects that are difficult for our existing critical practices and that thus require similar shifts in our critical practices. Ultimately, I offer a model of critical practices that will enable us to make sense of narratives like James's within the context of the political imperatives of our present postcolonial reality and that will also reveal a prehistory of such narratives in the existing canon. To do this, each chapter peers into critical elisions to critique postcolonial discourses that equate sovereignty with identity. This book is preoccupied with the ways criticism in the contemporary postcolonial context often remains exclusively engaged with questions of emancipation, anticolonization, decolonization, and cultural nationalism through the vectors of race, gender, and/or sexuality. It questions whether the identitarian focus of these questions continues to yield answers that are useful in our contemporary context. If freedom was the demand of emancipation, political independence the demand of anticolonization, and inclusive cultural nationalism the demand of postcolonization, this book reads Jamaican texts to begin the work of defining the critical demands of the post-postcolonial Caribbean present.

The texts that *Jamaica's Difficult Subjects* examines portray characters and contexts that pose challenges to established traditions of literary criticism because they feature difficult subjects that disrupt essentialized notions of identity as automatically equivalent to sovereignty. I ask, for example, what can the products of sexual violence in Sylvia Wynter's only novel, *The Hills of Hebron*, tell us about the possibilities of a plural sovereign reality? What can Elsa from the film and novel versions of *The Harder They Come* tell us about unconventional forms of gendered self-actualization in postcolonial contexts? Likewise, what does the critical silence surrounding the testimonies authored by middle-class women in Sistren's *Lionheart Gal* and Jean Rhys's continued unsettled positioning in the West Indian literary canon tell us about the rhetorical capabilities of our existing critical discourses? How do Patricia Powell's *The Pagoda* and *A Small Gathering of Bones* and Marlon James's *John Crow's Devil* complicate queer politics of inclusion? What do these texts have to tell us about the possibilities of different kinds of sovereignty in post-colonial Caribbean communities, which are not defined solely by national identification? I structure my answers to these questions into four chapters, each of which tackles how texts are read according to the political imperatives of a particular historical juncture (colonization, independence, the post-colonial period, and the post-postcolonial period) and offers an analysis of their imagination of plural and sovereign citizenship that considers, butulti-

mately moves beyond the raced, gendered, or heteronormative constraints of national identification.

Chapter one analyzes Sylvia Wynter's novel *The Hills of Hebron* to seek a path beyond the impasse between nationalism and feminism that preoccupies much of the critical attention paid to Wynter's only novel. Despite being primarily read within the terms of this impasse for decades, Wynter's novel offers a potential means out of it. I argue that the novel's depiction of sexual relationships across racial and heteronormative lines challenges the raced and gendered priorities of existing postcolonial critical discourse and presents a more useful way of exploring the problems of sovereignty and the processes of creating sovereign selves and communities in postemancipation contexts. I thus foreground the relationship among the characters Obadiah, his wife Rose, and her rapist Isaac to propose a relational theory that exemplifies how a shift in critical focus from the politics of identity to the relationships between actors, without the goal of celebrating or recovering a single preferred identification, may bring us closer to addressing some of the problems of sovereignty that remain from colonial times, as well as new ones formed in postcolonial contexts.

Where chapter one articulates how a critical focus on identity as sovereignty elides *The Hills of Hebron*'s depiction of more plural possibilities for sovereignty through the characters' sexual interaction, chapters two and three both focus on the watershed decade of the 1970s and its impact on the ability to read and articulate postcolonial subaltern plurality. This pivotal decade saw the flowering of national identity built on popular cultural (black) nationalism, but it also paradoxically saw the deepening of fissures created by long-standing power imbalances, which ultimately undermined the project of a single sense of national unity and identification as the solution to problems of sovereignty. Chapter two considers Michael Thelwell's novelization of Perry Henzell and Trevor Rhone's film *The Harder They Come*, asking a question that is simple only on the surface: Why is the male protagonist's common law wife all but dismissed in accounts of both the film and the novel? The 1972 film *The Harder They Come* offers one of the more iconic representations of the dispossession, disenfranchisement, and disillusionment among Kingston's urban poor in the first decade beyond political independence. Its popularity led Grove Press's editors to commission Michael Thelwell to write a novel version of the film, a rare reversal in the relationships between novels and screenplays. Both texts' grappling with the sovereign reality of the urban poor continues to engage critics decades after the film's release and the novel's publication. Nonetheless, criticism for the most part is dismissive of Elsa, who is

instrumental to the plot of both narratives as the agent who betrays the hero to the authorities. By unsettling the critical practice of focusing solely on the narratives' exploration of postcolonial masculinity, I trouble the consistent and unvaried ways of reading modes of subaltern self-actualization almost fifty years beyond political independence. I argue that the critical sidelining of a central agent in the protagonist's demise reflects not only a gender bias but also a limited model of how subaltern self-actualization functions in postindependence Jamaica. I suggest that this treatment of Elsa is indicative of a desire to purchase a sovereign reality built around a specific kind of rebellious, resistant, and working-class black masculinity—one that endures in our current critical contexts—which nonetheless is exclusive and remains steeped in residual colonial ideology. Where David Scott focuses on the ruud bwai self-actualization in *Refashioning Futures*, this chapter turns its attention to a parallel mode: ruud gyal self-actualization. It incorporates a discussion of Donn Lett's film *Dancehall Queen* to present ruud gyal self-actualization as a parallel mode of sovereign subjectivity present within the Jamaican popular modern sphere. This enables the unsettling of both the nationalist modern vision of the postcolonial state and its reliance on a single conception of citizen/subject, as well as theories of subaltern resistance that install their own versions of singular raced and classed notions of ideal subjectivity.

If chapter two works to unsettle the nationalist modern vision of the post-colonial state, chapter three highlights the deficiencies in our critical languages' ability to articulate the relationships among pluralities delineated by race, class, or gender within postcolonial communities. Chapter three takes *Wide Sargasso Sea*'s early moment of the creole protagonist Antoinette, looking at her black playmate Tia as through "a looking glass," as a point of departure for exploring interracial relationships between women and how they reveal the nuanced complexities of representing Caribbean female subjectivity. By focusing on the fraught yet cooperative relationships between women of different races and classes in Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* and Sistren's *Lionheart Gal*, this chapter further troubles the raced and classed priorities in the establishment of both Caribbean nationalisms and the Caribbean feminist tradition and identifies the limitations such prioritizations impose on our understanding of postcolonial citizenship and subjectivity. Both Sistren's and Rhys's works belong to specific historical conjunctures that are characterized by radical social changes enacted by social movements engaged in fighting colonialism, racism, and sexism. Rhys began writing in the early twentieth century, with the first wave of Caribbean writers who sought to establish an authentic and indigenous literary tradition for the representation of sovereign West Indian subjectivity. Likewise, the 1970s context of Sistren was a period

of social change that informed the critical impulses behind Caribbean writing (creative and critical) and saw the development of what can be characterized as an indigenous literary tradition. Both these moments, this chapter argues, make it difficult to see the nonblack women central to *Wide Sargasso Sea* and *Lionheart Gal*. More than an argument for including the voices of nonblack middle-class women in literary and critical discourses, this chapter shows how the dual imperatives of black cultural nationalism and Afro-Caribbean feminism in postcolonial contexts leave few critical tools to talk about the ubiquitous yet unarticulated spaces of interaction *in between* race and class that appear within the Caribbean literary tradition. The successful *and* unsuccessful interaction between women in these texts is thus crucial to reimagining sovereignty as the ability “to manage stability as a state of creative conflict” (Lamming 36).

In chapter four, I bring together two authors with seemingly opposed relationships to the representation of queerness. Patricia Powell’s central consideration of themes of queerness through homosexual, transgender, and transsexual protagonists ranks her among the first authors to depict queer subjectivity as a lived part of Caribbean reality; Marlon James’s depictions of queer Caribbean subjectivity, on the other hand, are puzzling, grotesque, violent, and disruptive portrayals of pedophilia, incest, and bestiality. I bring them together in order to focus less on how representations of queerness in literature work to reveal ruling nationalisms’ reliance on heteronormative institutions and essentialized notions of gender and sexuality, than on how these novels replace nationalism’s emphasis on recovery and inclusion with a stress on mediating among competing accounts of gender and sexuality. Thus, while each text challenges the negation of queerness within Jamaican collective imaginations (including the official national imagination) by problematizing the epistemic grounding of categories like gender and sexuality, their queer thematics do not reflect so much a desire for inclusion within the national postcolonial reality as an outright rejection of the heteronormative nation. I argue that while the exclusion/inclusion impulse of postcolonial criticism shapes how queerness is read, it occludes otherwise clear calls made by these texts for dismantling and reforming problematic notions of gender and sexuality. I suggest further that representations of queerness in twenty-first-century Caribbean literature nonetheless provide one of our best sites for understanding how plural Caribbean subjects negotiate problems of sovereignty. Each text’s inability to represent a settled existence for the communities and protagonists it depicts parallels our own lack of critical languages that can articulate the ways pluralities exist alongside each other within and outside of the boundaries of national identification. The crisis of the postcolo-

nial present also reflects the crisis of being rendered critically speechless when encountering difficult subjects that do not adhere to the political imperatives of specific sovereign realities. I also present in this chapter the first extended analysis of twenty-first-century Caribbean literature as a discrete period of literary development, to suggest that James and Powell represent a new cohort of Caribbean authors—indeed, a distinct and fourth wave of Caribbean writing—whose work explores problems of sovereignty that go beyond anticolonial struggles and nation building. This chapter and *Jamaica's Difficult Subjects* overall contend that such writing compels Caribbean literary critics to redefine the priorities of critical practices in ways that also clarify the political imperatives of the postcolonial present.

## After the End of the End

As already suggested, through my consideration of the crisis of the postcolonial present, *Jamaica's Difficult Subjects*' analysis of shifts in literary practices according to the demand of a contemporary wave of writing is not a phenomenon isolated to Caribbean discourses. In 2007, for example, *PMLA* published *The End of Postcolonial Theory*, in which Sunil Agnani, Fernando Coronil, Gaurav Desai, Mamadou Diouf, Simon Gikandi, Susie Tharu, and Jennifer Wenzel jointly deduce that postcolonial theory had reached its limits. Later that same year, *Twentieth Century Literature* also weighed in, albeit in more measured ways, on the passing of theoretical paradigms with a special issue titled *After Postmodernism: Form and History in Contemporary American Fiction*. More recently, in 2012, Kenneth W. Warren asked what was African American literature—thereby positing it as a finished phenomenon in a book of the same name.

Critics like Robert J. C. Young caution us against the “aspiring mortician” elements of such declarations of ends and death. In the case of postcolonial theory, Young presents valid reasons for the maintenance of a suspicious stance to these declarations, especially for those theorists with continued investments in critiquing inequality:

The desire to pronounce postcolonial theory dead on both sides of the Atlantic suggests that its presence continues to disturb and provoke anxiety: the real problem lies in the fact that the postcolonial remains. Why does it continue to unsettle people so much? The aspiring morticians of the postcolonial concur in scarcely relating it to the world from which it comes and for which it claims to speak: that outside Europe and North America.

The desired dissolution of postcolonial theory does not mean that poverty, inequality, exploitation, and oppression in the world have come to an end, only that some people in the U. S. and French academies have decided they do not want to have to think about such things any longer and do not want to be reminded of those distant invisible contexts which continue to prompt the transformative energies of the postcolonial. (Young 19–20)

Moreover, in thinking about literature that no longer looks like what came before it—aesthetically and oppositionally—Andrew Hoberek’s introduction to *After Postmodernism* suggests that the essays in the issue do not inaugurate a sweeping new post-postmodern theory, but instead “begin to assemble the kinds of concrete evidence for its existence that may someday make such a theory possible” (241–42). His assertion that “periodization is a valuable goal” is as significant to my understanding of the progression of Caribbean literary discourses as is his caution that the properly pursued periodization is the one that “builds on rather than preempts such specifics” (242).

Kenneth Warren’s declaration of the end of African American literature presents a productive paradox for considering the necessity for paradigmatic shifts alongside the potential pitfalls Hoberek suggests are involved in periodization. Throughout this book, I imagine the exploration of difficult subjects across Caribbean literary history as an evidentiary compilation that can be used in theorizing the oppositional politics of fourth-wave writing. No one has yet ordered a postmortem for Caribbean literature, and my use of waves as a metaphor intentionally signifies a kind of fluidity antithetical to a jarring break. This sense of fluidity is important because contemporary oppositional writing by Oonya Kempadoo, Patricia Powell, Marlon James, and Kei Miller, for example, nonetheless attempts to make sense of their oppositional politics from within the context of the literary traditions that precede them.

I thus feel a sense of caution when Warren argues that “African American literature as a distinct entity would seem to be at an end, and that the turn to diasporic, transatlantic, global, and other frames, indicate a dim awareness that the boundary creating this distinctiveness has eroded” (Warren, *What Was* 8). While I do see the erosion of specific political impetuses across African diasporic discourses in particular, because of changes in the political realities of people living in diaspora (the end of Jim Crow and colonization, for example), I am not as convinced that this is tantamount to the end of the oppositional literatures that developed within them or that the presence of other frames occasion the dismissal of specificity.

Without necessarily accepting Warren’s claim that African American literature is “at an end,” however, we can acknowledge his point that it is not an

ahistorical entity—a point that would also apply to other literary traditions. More specifically, if a founding impetus of Caribbean writing is to articulate sovereign subjectivity for colonized regions, peoples, and cultures, it too “constitutes a representational and rhetorical strategy within a domain of literary practice responsive to conditions that, by and large, no longer obtain” (Warren, *What Was* 9). This need not mean, however, that the discourses preceding the current moment erode into irrelevance or nonexistence, and I do not suggest that in this book. While I too am convinced that the contemporary social, political, and economic circumstances—as determined by unequal neoliberal capitalist orders—require shifts in the ways we read and write about Caribbean literature, I am nonetheless more than a little skeptical about the practice and productive value of postmortem theorizing. Rather than declaring the end, then, I seek to analyze (and where necessary, properly historicize) the conditions that have shaped both the current moment and those that precede it.

I thus periodize Caribbean writing in waves to begin organizing difficult subjects across Caribbean literary history in a way that can illuminate incomprehensibilities in contemporary writing. I situate this work within contemporary discourses of paradigmatic mortality to suggest that though end declarations alert us to the presence of new things, such approaches offer no practical framework for grasping how contemporary writing actually works. Thus, though Warren provocatively outlines African American literature’s bracketing within the specific political temporality of Jim Crow segregation that no longer exists, this critical strategy takes us only so far in interpreting the satirical underpinnings of Mat Johnson’s *Pym* (2011) and other contemporary African American writing. Indeed, though Warren notes that “the late 20th and early 21st centuries have seen the publication of many very fine novels and poems by writers like Thomas, Colson Whitehead, Paul Beatty, Danzy Senna, Andrea Lee, and Carl Phillips, to name a few,” it is only to make the point that “by the criteria we use to determine matters of racial identity, all of these authors may indeed be African-American. The works they’ve written, however, are not” (Warren, “Does African-American Literature Exist?”). Perhaps Warren’s goal here is not to define what this contemporary literature by African Americans *is*, but instead to make clear what it *is not*. Rather than declaring an end on the basis of nontranshistoricity of a particular tradition and leaving it at that, however, I find more productive value in the metaphor of waves that allows for the mutually informing traffic of fluidity between the past and the present.

# 1

## **"WHO WORKED THIS EVIL, BROUGHT THIS DISTANCE BETWEEN US?"**

SEX AND SOVEREIGNTY IN SYLVIA WYNTER'S  
*THE HILLS OF HEBRON*<sup>1</sup>

For the first time in his life he created consciously, trying to embody in his carving his new awareness of himself and of Hebron . . . For, in carving the doll, Obadiah had stumbled on God.

—*The Hills of Hebron*<sup>2</sup>



To be aware of the unreality of the unauthenticity [sic] of the so-called real, is to *reinterpret* this reality. To *reinterpret* this reality is to commit oneself to a constant revolutionary assault against it. For me then, the play, the novel, the poem, the critical essay, are means to this end—not ends in themselves. Yet they are means, which are at one and the same time, self-contained cells, and part of a dynamic living process. This process marks the path for the West Indian from acquiescent bondage to the painful beginning of freedom.

—“We Must Learn to Sit Down Together and Talk a Little Culture”<sup>3</sup>



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1. An earlier version of this chapter appeared in *Modern Fiction Studies* 59.1 (2013): 156–74, as “Who worked this evil, brought distance between us?: The Politics of Sexual Interaction in Sylvia Wynter's *The Hills of Hebron*.”

2. Sylvia Wynter, *The Hills of Hebron: A Jamaican Novel* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1962), 288.

3. Sylvia Wynter, “We Must Learn to Sit Down Together and Talk a Little Culture: Reflections on West Indian Writing and Criticism Part One,” *Jamaica Journal* 2.4 (1968): 24. Hereafter referred to as “Little Culture I.”

The more urgent question for Caribbean man, a man at the cross-roads of almost all the world's cultures, is not to find a new identity, but to formulate, articulate that which he was, is, and is in the process of becoming.

—“Creole Criticism: A Critique”<sup>4</sup>

## Introduction

*The Hills of Hebron* was published in 1962, a watershed moment in West Indian history when nationalist struggles began to bear fruit with wide-scale independence celebrations across the region. In keeping with the shifts in regional politics, the 1960s also marked a prolific and definitive period in the development of postcolonial West Indian literary and critical traditions. We can also think about the literary boom in this period as constituting the first wave of canonical Caribbean literature. Wynter’s contemporaries included writers whose work we now consider as seminal texts in West Indian literature, such as George Lamming’s *The Season of Adventure* (1960), V. S. Naipaul’s *A House for Mr. Biswas* (1961), and C. L. R. James’s *Beyond A Boundary* (1963). Though Wynter’s critical theories garnered most of her acclaim, *The Hills of Hebron* appeared before any of the theory, as one of her first forays into the relationship between West Indian literature and the diverse societies it depicts. One could argue that it is the unfavorable critical reception of *The Hills of Hebron* and other novels like it, on the basis of a putatively undue sociopolitical focus to the detriment of “proper” aesthetic development, that in part motivated Wynter’s forays into literary criticism.<sup>5</sup> What is clear, however, is that Wynter’s novel emerged at a conflicted moment in canon formation, in which critics of Caribbean literature were theorizing on what the region’s literature should look like aesthetically in relation to its English progenitor and counterpart, and what its relationship to the sovereign societies and people it depicts should be.

The novel is set in Jamaica during the 1920s and 1930s amidst regional labor uprisings among the working poor. It is a roman à clef loosely based on the establishment of a utopian and isolationist religious community in the hills of Kingston by the charismatic early twentieth-century preacher and

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4. Sylvia Wynter, “Creole Criticism: A Critique,” *New World Quarterly* 5.4 (1972): 22–23.

5. Roger Mais’s *Brother Man* (Halley Court: Heinemann, 1974) and *The Hills Were Joyful Together* (Halley Court: Heinemann, 1953) are two of the more iconic examples of novels whose literary merit was hotly contested in the 1960s and 1970s, because of their representation of a narrative aesthetic that privileged sociopolitical and economic concerns.

prophet Alexander Bedward.<sup>6</sup> The narrative circulates around the mysterious pregnancy of the Elder Obadiah's wife, Rose, while her husband observed a vow of celibacy. It chronicles the founding of Hebron, the crucifixion of its eccentric founder Moses, and its struggles for survival in a depressed economic and politically disenfranchised environment, against the backdrop of Obadiah coming to terms with what he sees as his wife's betrayal.

Critics of Caribbean literature, for the most part, unfavorably received *The Hills of Hebron* in the 1960s. Atop the list of critiques is that all the themes and issues Wynter works with overburden the novel. According to Victor Chang, "it can be said that her concerns as a critic, a West Indian writer, and a female writer are all reflected in her novel" (500). Chang's delineation among the concerns of the West Indian critic, the West Indian writer, and the female writer is significant to this first-wave moment, in that it describes some of the early separatist priorities of postcolonial writing and criticism in the region. Chang's gendered distinction conveys the sense that at the time, the writer and the critic had a separate set of concerns and that critical and gendered concerns are too much to grapple with in a work of fiction. In comments that reflect similar generic concerns, Karl Sealy criticizes the novel for an "abundance of political, racial and other abstractions, sometimes provocative, sometimes ill sorted," and Wynter for being "first a thinker and then a story-teller" (292). Kenneth Ramchand, with whom Wynter engaged in one of the more spirited arguments over the function of race in literature and criticism, also comments on the novel's density negatively: "*The Hills of Hebron* is clogged-up by the author's wish to handle too many West Indian issues in the one work" (24).<sup>7</sup> Even Wynter sees Ramchand's criticism of her novel's handling of Caribbean cult religions as indicative of "the total failure of [her] one and only novel" (Wynter, "Creole Criticism" 31). She also makes negative remarks on the novel's structural integrity in her own criticism on numerous occasions, describing it as "inept," "confused," and "ill-made" ("Creole Criticism" 31 and "Little Culture II" 29).<sup>8</sup>

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6. For further information on Alexander Bedward and the Jamaica Native Baptist Free Church, see A. A. Brooks's *History of Bedwardism*; Marta Beckwith's "The Revivalists," in *Black Roadways: A Study of Jamaican Folk Life*; and Roscoe M. Pierson's "Alexander Bedward and the Jamaica Native Baptist Free Church," in *Black Apostles: Afro-American Clergy Confront the Twentieth Century*.

7. Kenneth Ramchand, *The West Indian Novel and Its Background* (London: Heinemann, 1983). See also Wynter's "Creole Criticism: A Critique" for her response to Ramchand and others.

8. Sylvia Wynter, "We Must Learn to Sit Down Together and Talk a Little Culture: Reflections on West Indian Writing and Criticism Part Two," *Jamaica Journal* 3.1 (1969): 27–42. Hereafter referred to as "Little Culture II."

The novel's thematic concentration is undoubtedly copious and may seem more concerned with presenting issues rather than aesthetically packaging them. Instead of a celebratory defense of the novel's structural integrity, though, I find it more productive to explore how critiques of Wynter's only novel inform the oppositional priorities in first- and third-wave literary discourses. I am interested in how the raced and gendered binaries reflected in the criticism of Wynter's novel define the priorities of canon formation during the 1960s, when black nationalist priorities were predominant, and in the 1990s, when Wynter's novel was recovered in efforts to inaugurate a Caribbean women's writing tradition. Black nationalist and feminist priorities at each of these junctures, I argue, facilitate practices of canon formation that impede the ability to properly analyze the visions of postcolonial sovereignty presented in Rose's and Obadiah's resolution and also problematically occlude figures like the rapist Isaac, despite his centrality to the narrative.

## Caribbean Criticism

### "THE ACQUIESCENT" AND "THE CHALLENGING"

Considering *The Hills of Hebron*'s critical reception at the historical and political conjunctures of the first and third waves of writing provides the opportunity to think about how specific subjects are naturalized in Caribbean discourses as ideal representatives of postcolonial Caribbean subjectivity and how this naturalization in turn renders other subjects as illegible or difficult to reconcile with contemporary politics. Wynter is among the cohort of first-wave writers and theorists that includes Kamau Brathwaite, Roger Mais, and Orlando Patterson, whose work promotes the development of indigenous literary aesthetics as a pivotal facet of decolonization processes. In her two-part essay, "Little Culture," Wynter critiques an early trend in West Indian criticism that unfavorably received representations of local culture and politics in West Indian writing, framing the resulting contemporary binary in Caribbean critical discourses in terms of "acquiescent" and "challenging" critics. We can begin to interpret the novel's symbolic critiques of postcolonial nation building in the middle to late twentieth century through this binary. For Wynter, acquiescent critics pretend objectivity regarding the overwhelmingly inequitable historical context that molded their critical points of view and urge West Indian writers and critics to hone their respective crafts from a perceived objective stance outside of this context. Challenging critics, on the other hand, exhibit an awareness of all the processes that inform their criti-

cal point of view, how those processes are under- or overlaid in the literature they critique, and how these processes positively shape literature and criticism. Within the symbolic framework of *The Hills of Hebron*, Isaac and other educated black men (the barristers at Moses's trial and Isaac's schoolmates) satirically resemble Wynter's acquiescent critics. Allegorically, Isaac and his schoolmates also symbolize future leaders of the soon-to-be-independent Jamaica.

In this way, Wynter's novel provides an allegory of cultural politics underlying first-wave writing. Isaac and his schoolmates' ignorance of their own intellectual emasculation by a larger colonial system is no more evident to them than it is to the barristers who appear in court for Moses's trial a few years earlier. Like their actual counterparts in Jamaican history, Isaac's colleagues see teaching as a "stepping stone to law and then politics" (Wynter, *Hebron* 260). Their political aspirations are in large part honorable, but in keeping with colonial indoctrination, their goals reflect extreme shortsightedness. Thus, these aspiring politicians "never discussed how they would grapple with the problems of the future. How they would feed the hungry, provide jobs for the jobless, wipe out three hundred years of malnutrition and mental atrophy that was the legacy of colonial rule" (260).

Their inattention to how they would address the problems of hunger, malnutrition, joblessness, and poverty also reflects a troubling lack of awareness of the ways colonial hierarchies set these problems in motion in the first place. Successfully grappling with the problems of the future is to tackle head-on the problems that have persisted for three hundred years among the majority of the population. Thus, the influence of a colonially organized education system that ultimately privileges an English cultural hegemony inevitably orients their visions of sovereign nationhood. As the novel suggests, this privileging undermines not only the work of critical theory in reading sovereign subjectivities but also the national identity that early nationalists attempted to build. This kind of cultural privileging produced and sustained these problems, offering no tools for sorting through them once political power shifted from colonized to independent governments. Through Isaac's classmates and the barristers at Moses's trial, Wynter illustrates the irony of emulating colonial frameworks in politically sovereign ventures. The national unity the first postcolonial generation sought was not sufficiently critical of their inherited cultural identity. Moreover, the confusion this emulation produces in Wynter's young men renders them threatening to the populace whose future they aspire to secure.

In Jamaica, nationalist struggles inaugurated under the labor and political leadership of Alexander Bustamante and Norman Manley ushered in a

two-party democracy in 1943, which privileged “selected Afro-Jamaican practices—those religious and secular rituals, speech patterns, food, musical forms, and dances associated with the rural peasantry,” which in turn “came to enjoy some measure of legitimacy by the state” (Thomas 4–5). This cultural policy of selected privilege conveyed a vision of progress, development, and respectability. Nevertheless, the attempt at selective inclusion combines with a reconstitution of British colonial values governing respectability. While pro-independence leaders sought to politically mobilize the mass of the Jamaican population, their vision of a Jamaican nation was preoccupied with the construction of a political community in the image of the mother country. African elements received selective cultural privilege, but Eurocentric values authorized through legislation, the Christian church, and the education system shaped how finances, governance, familial order, and gender relationships should be structured. The paradoxical reconstitution of imperialist values and priorities implied within the nationalist project reflects an epistemic ambivalence or even unawareness that is as evident in these future politicians, as it is in Moses’s court scene in the novel. The novel therefore depicts educated characters who aspire to economic and political sovereignty for themselves and their community, but who see themselves as separate from the masses and also ignore their internalization of alienating and emasculating perceptions of their selves that rely on the colonial construction of British/European superiority and dominance.

Moses’s court scene illustrates how crucial consideration of the crippling effect of colonial ideology on the construction of self is to the development of sovereignty, especially among the colonially educated. After his failed attempts to fly to heaven, Moses goes to court, where he faces

a white bewigged Judge, and a bevy of brown and black barristers with snowy wigs. The senior Council for the Prosecution and the Counsel for the Defense asked Moses questions loaded with an oblique contempt. When he refused to answer, they smiled first at each other, and after wittily at the judge. With their smiles they were pleading their own case, absolving themselves:

“Look, we are different. Don’t associate us with this savage, this lunatic. All we have in common with him is the color of our skins. We are civilized!”

The Judge’s eyes of Arctic ice looked with equal indifference at the barrister and the prisoner. They were all black clowns striking postures in a circus of civilization. And both barristers worked out their frustrations on the prisoner, attacking him for being black and stupid and not knowing the

white man's ways, not talking like him, not hiding his black madness under a wig and gown, as they had done. (Wynter, *Hebron* 140)

The judge does not see any difference between the black and brown barristers in snowy wigs who mimic his notions of civility (like the ability to reason as lawyers) and the black lunatic who jumped from a tree in an attempted invasion of heaven. In his eyes they are all clowns, on the one side for costuming themselves with the trappings of civility (the wigs and the law) and on the other side for believing in a black God. Moses's "madness," however, pales when one considers the barristers' desire to be recognized as humans in a system that defines humanity through designating them as native others. On trial here is lunacy—Moses's literal lunacy and the barristers' inability to recognize the lunacy in their own assimilationist endeavors.

Ironically, it is the lunatic on trial who appears more lucid. He exhibits an awareness of subordinating forces that perpetuate subjugation and attempts to revise the raced epistemologies that perpetuate the othering of himself, his congregation, and the barristers by creating a new religion. The black barristers' disparaging response to Moses, as well as their pleading with placating smiles to the judge, illustrates a pandering desire to separate themselves from Moses and betrays a conflicted understanding of themselves as men. This tactic exposes the colonially imposed dichotomy of civilized versus primitive and man versus native, which causes individuals to become detached from themselves and their racial community. Despite the barristers' masquerade of English notions of civility, the distinctions they wish to draw between themselves and the "savage" and "lunatic" remain unseen to the white judge. He looks coldly at what he imagines as the mimicry of civility by black men who are destined to primitivism, regardless of their educational status. The barristers betray their own mental colonization with their aspirations towards English notions of civility, dependent on a separation from the black uneducated masses—specifically, in this case, from an "insane" black preacher.

Much like a flashback to these barristers' pasts, however, Wynter depicts the students at Isaac's college as also "spiritually and emotionally emasculated" (Wynter, *Hebron* 260). Their education is described as the cause of this emasculation: "In exploring the symbols of power that their rulers had trapped in books, they had become enmeshed in their complexities" (260). Unlike the masses they wish to save, these men "had fallen victims to a servitude more absolute than the one imposed by guns, whips, chains, and hunger." For these young men, "politics was a game with a set of rules codified by their adversaries. They would play the game brilliantly without ever questioning the rules" (260). Isaac gains a deeper understanding of the flaws in

his father's religious subversion by watching his classmates' interactions with the symbols of power. They envisioned the headmaster's wife (a white English woman) as "the biggest symbol of all, the token that one day, too, they could have all the appanage of power that surrounded their rulers" (261). These young men covet the symbols of power of their colonial rulers: "their women, their cars, big houses and rituals of behavior, servants in starched and ironed uniforms" (261). Lasciviousness, materiality, rituality, subjugation of others—with the attendant symbolism of "starched and ironed uniforms"—are all elements of these future leaders' inherited ideas of the symbolic accouterment of power. Power is imagined as a series of symbols that also reflects maintenance of colonial values, dependent on stratification and subjugation, rather than real strategies for confronting issues like poverty, hunger, and unemployment and the ideologies of inequality that belie them. Moses's own predilections for religious symbols and women's bodies illustrate a similar neglect in the founding of Hebron, despite his powerful racial subversion of the concept of the Christian deity. His vision for Hebron fatally does not contain any practical plans for the community's economic sustainability and viability. Isaac realizes his classmates and his father "always . . . would exchange the substance for the shadow" (261).

In the case of the barristers, Isaac's classmates, and even Moses, apprehending the substance behind sovereignty would entail engaging directly with the ways colonial ideologies are reconstituted in their vision of sovereignty. Racing a Christian concept of God as black doesn't get at the specific ways Christian ideologies inform colonial domination. The blackness of God is merely a shadow in comparison to the substance of the relationship between religion and colonial subjugation, but Moses emphasizes the former. Conflating his father's understanding of power with his classmates' also invests one project with the perceived lunacy of the other. This investment presents a critique of how politically sovereign realities have yet to confront the ontological challenges to sovereignty that the barristers, Isaac's classmates, and even Moses fail to address. I would argue that ontological sovereignty is definitively "the substance" that gets replaced by "the shadow," that is, cultural nationalism, as it was deployed in postcolonial West Indian states.

Likewise, acquiescent critics' preference for an objective stance also hinders their ability to confront the challenges to sovereignty that remain in postcolonial contexts, and as such, their approach is limited in its capacity to negotiate and articulate what the West Indies "was, is, and is in the process of becoming" (Wynter, "Creole Criticism" 22–23). Wynter aggressively criticizes this "acquiescent criticism," and alongside her, critics like Kamau Brathwaite wrote favorably about the West Indian novel in English, articulating alternate

priorities for critical evaluation.<sup>9</sup> For example, in 1977, Brathwaite observes that Wynter fifteen years earlier “had also, as early as this first phase, already formulated a model of the ideal West Indian literary prose-form: a kind of picaresque prose-poem, rooted in the “physicality” of the West Indian dialect” (“The Love Axe/L Part Two” 100). Brathwaite sees *The Hills of Hebron* as demonstrating what the West Indian writer should be concerned with: “the anonymous mass of our people—those who have ‘absolutely no documented history at all’” (“The Love Axe/L Part Two” 100). For these challenging critics, the epistemological possibilities for articulating the emancipated West Indian subject made available through literary craft were invaluable to twentieth-century negotiations of self and sovereignty in West Indian discourse. Brathwaite especially looked for alternative aesthetic models beyond Eurocentric traditions to use as critical tools in evaluating the region’s literary output, which was emerging from a context that straddled colonial and postcolonial periods. Though at the time critics like Ramchand balked at the necessity, validity, and even utility of a theory of “aesthetic pluralism,” such plural approaches to literature laid the foundation for what we now have as a tradition of West Indian literary criticism (“Concern for Criticism” 54).

Wynter, Mais, and others were classified as prioritizing social, political, and historical concerns to the detriment of successful aesthetic development. In the mid-twentieth century, however, the West Indian writer’s intention in writing is not solely beholden to preexisting, aesthetic concerns, nor does it require translation into established models. A part of the writer’s work is inventing his or her own models from within systems of domination. For Wynter, “the dangers of acquiescent criticism spring not only from a lack of awareness” of the ways it confuses the intensions of West Indian writing, “but from the deliberate rejection of such an awareness” (“Little Culture I” 32).

## GENDER IN CARIBBEAN LITERARY CRITICISM

If a lack of adherence to Leavision aesthetic preferences in the 1960s explains in part why *The Hills of Hebron* is not ranked among early canonical West Indian fiction, the inauguration of a Caribbean feminist tradition in the 1990s—as marked by critical anthologies like *Out of the Kumbla Caribbean Women and Literature*—recognizes Wynter and the novel as progenitive.<sup>10</sup> The

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9. See Brathwaite’s articulation of jazz, a new-world aesthetic art form that is useful as a critical tool to evaluate Caribbean literature. Kamau Brathwaite, “Jazz and the West Indian Novel,” *Roots* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993): 28–54.

10. Donette Francis identifies Wynter as “the progenitor of a ‘gendered feminist’ critique”

critical reincarnation of this novel in particular reflects how across the historical landscape of Caribbean literary criticism, conversations about emancipation, empowerment, and sovereignty continue to circulate around terms of identity. If the 1960s and 1970s mark a moment when the more traditional critics of West Indian literature unfavorably received the novel, the inauguration during the late 1980s into the 1990s of Caribbean feminist discourse marked a new conflicted moment of critical reception for the novel, this time with gender at its center. Leota Lawrence's "Paradigm and Paradox in *The Hills of Hebron*" sees the novel as initiating a Caribbean feminist paradigm. Lawrence also observes that "when Wynter's novel was published, instead of being hailed as a literary milestone, as the significant achievement that it was, its alleged flaws instead of its strengths were highlighted" (Lawrence 88). She even suggests that this reception was too much for Wynter and caused her to "never publish another novel" (88). Nonetheless, in defense of Wynter's groundbreaking novel, Lawrence proposes "that this work serves as a literary paradigm by giving birth to an African Caribbean female literary tradition which gives voice to the voiceless" (88). Lawrence's observation that Wynter inaugurates a paradigm for representing Afro-Caribbean women carries much weight; however, the description of this paradigm as inaugurating Caribbean feminism is problematic. As we have learned from Evelyn O'Callaghan's *Woman Version* and Alison Donnell's *Twentieth-Century Caribbean Literature* in particular, wholly celebratory feminist perspectives, without careful attention to possible variations and nuances (in class, race, gender, or sexuality, for example), prove to be problematic. This is inherent in Lawrence's observation that "on the Caribbean literary landscape in the 1960's, the absence of women was blinding; their silence deafening" (Lawrence 88). Here, the conflation of women with African Caribbean feminism elides nonblack ethnicities and claims of voicelessness, silence, and absence and also problematically omits the possibility of a prehistory of Caribbean women's writing prior to the 1970s.

The foundational discourses of Caribbean feminism replicate racial and ethnic slippages that are reliant on constructing Caribbean women writers as lacking pre-1970s literary progenitors. Caribbean feminist historiographies almost requisitely begin with some pronouncement of Caribbean women's writing emerging in the 1970s and 1980s, spontaneously, from a silent void. Yet Mary Prince was able to publish a narrative of her life as a slave in 1831, and Una Marson, a Jamaican feminist, activist, and writer, produced poems,

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in Caribbean literary discourse. See Francis, "Uncovered Stories," 81. See also Ramchand's "Concern for Criticism" for a discussion of Caribbean literary aesthetics, framed by Leavision criticism's preference for craft over political content.

plays, and programs for the BBC in the 1930s. Likewise, Phyllis Shand Allfrey published *The Orchid House* in 1953, and Jean Rhys published three novels before Wynter published *The Hills of Hebron* and her fourth and most successful novel, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, in 1966. Both Shand and Rhys are white, but their work is nonetheless additional evidence of the existence of Caribbean women's voices on the literary landscape, in the region and beyond, before the 1970s. There may have been just a handful of Afro-Caribbean women writers in comparison to the male cohort, but women were nonetheless present and writing. There are inequities, but such discourses of voicelessness and absence do not give a full accounting of the presence of Caribbean women writers.

In contravention to their own egalitarian ethos, then, Caribbean feminist historiographies like *Out of the Kumbla* (1990), Chancy's *Searching for Safe Spaces* (1997), and Edmondson's *Making Men* (1999) tend to construct their own points of inclusion and replicate patterns of exclusions, particularly along the lines of race and gender. Alison Donnell's discussion of "double agents" in *Twentieth Century Caribbean Literature* offers an invaluable revisionist study of how black diasporic criticism has informed feminist scholarship on Caribbean women's writing in ways that eclipse other concerns, like more inclusive considerations of race, class, and sexuality (130).

Illustrative of this problem, Lawrence further suggests that in Wynter's novel, "the paradox is that what should have been a male-centered text turns back on itself and evolves into a work that features women who subvert their assigned roles and transform themselves into self-motivating individuals who ensure the survival of their community" (Lawrence 88). Both the impermeable gender binary and the manner in which the analysis of gender necessarily occludes other, nonfeminist issues are problematic here. In fairness, Lawrence is writing in response to the prioritization of racial above gendered concerns that accompanied the nationalizing and decolonization processes. Nonetheless, I concur here with the revisionist feminism that underlies both O'Callaghan's and Donnell's work, while also wanting to push us beyond this zero-sum approach to address the novel's concern with how women subvert their traditional roles in a way that does not require us to ignore other forms of domination. Wynter in fact depicts a world in which the lives and struggles of men and women, while partially separate and sometimes at odds with each other, ultimately are inextricably bound together.

This is not to say that Wynter sees herself or her writing as feminist, or even progenitive of Caribbean feminist discourses. According to Natasha Barnes, "Wynter's tradition of revisionist intellectualism qualifies her for two contradictory roles in feminist genealogy, in which she figures simultaneously as progenitor of a Caribbean feminist intellectual tradition and its most

fierce and recalcitrant opponent” (138). Undeniably, the prominent roles that women play throughout the novel do not translate into their empowerment. Nowhere is this more evident than in the pregnant bodies and silence of the two women whose rapes both secure new beginnings for the New Believers. Obadiah’s discovery of self, as with all the significant shifts in the novel, is also tied to sexual violation. After he loses the eldership of Hebron because of Rose’s clandestine pregnancy, Obadiah’s short stint of madness allows him to clarify the confusion of his life. Problematically, the narrative casts Obadiah here as the victim, displacing Rose’s body as a site of violation. Since Rose never speaks in the novel, we learn that she was raped from the omniscient narrator in a scene where only Obadiah speaks. In response to his question, ““What happened Rose? Who worked this evil, brought distance between us?”” the narrator provides her answer: “Speaking quietly, she told him how she had been raped” (Wynter, *Hebron* 82). The narrative seems to deliberately trap Rose in silence, displacing her trauma and making Obadiah’s self-righteous anger the central focus: “He heard her voice echoing inside his head, until it became the rushing hurricane wind. He felt himself felled with daemonic furies, wanted to sweep away Hebron and the hills that had witnessed the defilement of his love, this betrayal of his friendship” (82). His anger stems not from the violence Rose reveals she has suffered, but rather from what he sees as *his* defilement, a betrayal of *his* friendship. Nevertheless, so far from questioning this process, the narrative is complicit with it, placing the emphasis on Obadiah and marginalizing Rose’s suffering in the process. As Shirley Toland-Dix rightly suggests, Wynter seems to leave “the development of alternative counter-hegemonic womanist/feminist discourse to the next generation of native women intelligentsia” (Toland-Dix 76).

But while Obadiah’s struggles for ontological sovereignty seem to take narrative precedence, as Lawrence, among others, suggests, the novel also inarguably depicts formidable characters in the persons of Kate and Miss Gatha.<sup>11</sup> “The next generation of native women intelligentsia” tends to be in agreement that Wynter’s novel does inaugurate a feminist tradition, just by being present at this formidable moment and by presenting a narrative that also shows the prominent presence of women, despite the problems inherent in the narrative. This feminist designation is nonetheless a contested one. As Barnes suggests, Wynter’s revisionist intellectualism plays contradictory roles in the feminist genealogy of Caribbean discourse, but I would add that

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11. See Janice Lee Lidell, “The Narrow Enclosure of Motherdom/Martyrdom: A Study of Gatha Randall Barton in Sylvia Wynter’s *The Hills of Hebron*,” *Out of the Kumbla: Caribbean Women and Literature*, ed. Carole Boyce Davies and Elaine Savory Fido (Trenton: Africa World Press, 1990), 321–330.

what Wynter seems to resist is the shortsighted polarization of the kinds of discursive patterns outlined above, which prioritize exclusively gendered or nationalist critiques at the expense of other, equally prominent elements in communal order. She nonetheless does not pass up the opportunity to reinforce mid-century anticolonial prioritizations of raced as opposed to feminist terms. For her, secondary consideration does not suggest jettisoning gendered concerns entirely, but rather indicates a more reflective sense of how the subordination of specific elements functions in the maintenance of a particular brand of order. We see this most pointedly in her afterword to *Out of the Kumbla*.

In her afterword to the first anthology of Caribbean women's literary criticism, Wynter seems to repudiate gender as a conceptual category in the epistemological shifts that characterize European colonial enterprises. This is indeed a puzzling stance to offer as the final word, not the least because one of the premier goals of this anthology is the inauguration of a distinctively Caribbean feminist tradition. Through the characters of *The Tempest*, Wynter maps epistemological shifts in hierarchical arrangements instituted by colonization and global expansion to show how in colonial discourse and praxis, race replaced gender as the signal of primacy in marking human difference. Furthermore, gender did not exist as a factor in distinguishing between Europeans and Natives and/or Humans and Others. This denial of gender as a conceptual category in colonial discourse is not a rejection of its significance in these discourses, however, even as it clearly reflects Wynter's characteristic rejection of the Caribbean feminist mantle.<sup>12</sup> For Wynter, more than the inauguration of a Caribbean feminist tradition, *Out of the Kumbla*'s anthologizing of Caribbean feminist discourse is an occasion to ask Foucauldian questions about *the function* of the exclusion of gender in modern discourses. Wynter suggests that the importance of a gathering such as that in *Out of the Kumbla* rests in the opportunity it offers to question the larger systemic function of gendered absences, marginalizations, and silences. In noting the absence of Caliban's mate in *The Tempest*, she asks, "What is the systemic function of [the native woman's] own silencing, both as women and, more totally, as 'native' women? Of what mode of speech is that absence of speech both as women (masculinist discourse) and as 'native' women (feminist discourse) as imperative function?" (Wynter, "Afterword" 365). Such questions become

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12. For discussions of Wynter's reluctance in embracing the feminist label, see Natasha Barnes, "Reluctant Matriarch: Sylvia Wynter & the Woman Question," *Cultural Conundrums: Gender, Race, Nation, & the Making of Caribbean Cultural Politics* (Ann Arbor: Michigan UP, 2006), 135–173 and Jonathan Goldberg, "Caliban's Woman," *Tempest in the Caribbean* (Minneapolis: University Press of Minnesota, 2003), 39–114.

even more interesting when we consider that Rose, a central character in *The Hills of Hebron*, remains conspicuously silent for the entire book. Despite the primacy of race in her theorizing, Wynter nonetheless gives a nod to *Out of the Kumbla*'s organizing feminist ethos and poses questions surrounding the systemic function of the silencing of native women, as exemplified by the absence of Caliban's woman—both as woman and as “native.” These questions become crucial when thinking about what such silences set in motion and what effects they have on postcolonial discourses of sovereignty.

Thus, the novel's positioning of the marginalization and violent exploitation of oftentimes silent women as intricately enmeshed in problems of sovereignty suggests that issues associated with women provide a potential basis for a solution, if we resist the urge to consider these issues as somehow separate from negotiations of sovereignty. Problematically, a commitment to view this novel as a “male-centered text” that “turns back on itself” in the service of establishing a paradigm of Caribbean feminist critique elides the novel's poignant representation of the forms of violence and mixing that underlie the achievement of ontological sovereignty.<sup>13</sup> Lawrence observes that at the end of the novel, “the women remain. As the two old women cradle the newest life in Hebron, the drought ends”; however, the women who remain are cradling a baby whose gender remains noticeably undisclosed (93). This unmarked baby symbolizes the entire community, in a way similar to Obadiah's carving. In neither case, however, does this role require some ontologically pure representation of racial, gendered, or national identity. On the contrary, the child is the product of multiracial mixing created through rape and racial exploitation. The baby thus represents the reality of plurality that exists in Caribbean contexts.

Within Rose and Isaac's baby runs the blood of a black father, a white grandfather, and a Chinese great-grandfather. Though not representative of every ethnicity present in Jamaica, the three the baby does represent are significant when seen in light of the violence of rape enmeshed in its lineage. The baby cradled by Miss Gatha at the end of the novel is the product of the “monumental groaning and soldering of two great worlds,” in the sense that Derek Walcott describes it in “The Muse of History” (Walcott 64).<sup>14</sup> In

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13. Again, this is not meant to detract from the troubling fact that Obadiah's individual quest to redefine his being, thus restructuring Hebron, is foregrounded, while considerations of the trauma suffered by these women is backgrounded. What it is meant to point out is that one centralized concern does not preclude or stand in opposition to others.

14. Derek Walcott, “The Muse of History,” *What the Twilight Says* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1998). Walcott discusses the ways that differing approaches to the history of the West Indies affect the literature produced by new world poets. The purist poet is criticized for an obsession with a past of slavery and imperialism, which facilitates only an un-empowered

its embodiment of racial mixing, the baby also symbolizes the possibilities for new plural politics more in keeping with Caribbean realities. The baby and the rain that falls, ending the drought that persists throughout the novel, signify this shift for Hebron, which is also brought about by Obadiah's personal quest to redefine his being. Nonetheless, it would be irresponsible to lose sight of the fact that the violation of women problematically paves the way for Obadiah's individual quest. It is worth pausing here, however, to make explicit that Wynter's model for thinking through problems of sovereignty foregrounds relationships forged among a plurality of characters (antagonistic or cooperative, equitable or inequitable). Rose's baby offers a comprehensive symbol through which we can explore the possibilities of this kind of critical approach.

Wynter's creative and critical gestures—even in their polarizations—provide a point of entry for thinking about the connections between gendered, racial, and sexual concerns even within embattled contexts. Her introductory move at the beginning of “Little Culture I” directs us to the ways we might divert our glances from critical binaries to look at connections instead. She says, “My concern is not with labels—English or West Indian, writer or critic. My concern is with connections” (“Little Culture I” 24). My concern therefore also rests in how the novel's portrayal of the connections that secure power can in turn reflect a complex sense of how community and power are organized and sovereign conceptions of self are achieved.

## CREATING SELF AND CARIBBEAN BECOMING

As the epigraphs that open this chapter attest, Wynter sees creative ventures (including criticism) as part of a revolutionary project of reinterpreting colonized realities; such reinterpretations are pivotal to decolonization. In this view, creative endeavors are not simply the end of a process, nor do they exist only for their own sake. Rather, they are a means of interpreting and reinter-

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literature of blame and despair. The alternative proposed in the essay insists that poets who have mastered the language of former rulers regard this mastery as a victorious achievement rather than a sign of continued servitude. This approach privileges both the African and European traditions as those that give birth to the new world theorist, artist, writer, and poet. Walcott illustrates a sense of gratitude for this combination in the closing sentence of the essay when he gives “the strange and bitter and yet ennobling thanks for the monumental groaning and soldering of two great worlds” (Walcott 64). Acknowledged here is the painful yet beneficial paradox of a joint European and African heritage created by a history of colonialism. This heritage is seen as a gift, and the essay suggests that the ability to see the suffering as beneficial rather than a loss is a sign of victory over a history of servitude and exploitation.

preting reality via processes of liberation and becoming. Wynter sees creative endeavors, especially writing, as central to the “Caribbean man’s” processes of becoming. Thus, in the novel, woodworking is a crucial part of Obadiah’s becoming, his self-discovery, and ultimately his ability to lead Hebron into a more viable future. His “new awareness of himself and of Hebron” occurs after he comes to terms with another man’s rape and impregnation of his wife, Rose (Wynter, *Hebron* 288). His wife’s violation and his subsequent stint with madness force Obadiah to rethink his existence as the head of a struggling, self-exiled religious community. Once Rose’s pregnancy is revealed to the community and an unwitting Obadiah, the latter does not give Rose the opportunity to defend herself against accusations of adultery. For him, the pregnancy is the embodiment of betrayal, not simply by his wife, but by another man dispossessing him of what was meant only for him as Rose’s husband. In a subsequent bout of raving, he accuses the phantom adulterer as follows: “Man, what you did was to take away from me the one thing that was private to me . . . private from my neighbor, private like what was between the wood and me when I was shaping it in my hand” (Wynter, *Hebron* 80). Obadiah sees the husband’s relationship to the wife as akin to the woodworker’s private internal process of creativity.

It is tempting to read this metaphor solely as a problematic equation of the woman to a malleable object in male hands, but this lands too quickly on a critique of gender politics while ignoring larger complexities of intimacy, relationship, and creation. The relationship Obadiah imagines here between the exclusive intimacy of carving wood and sexual interaction with his wife offers us a key towards understanding Rose’s inextricability from Obadiah’s new “awareness of himself and Hebron” (Wynter, *Hebron* 288). Once Rose’s pregnancy is revealed, Obadiah, in accordance with Hebron’s Biblical bylaws, publicly excommunicates her and curses her with death. She flees to her mother’s abandoned hut, atop a hill away from the rest of the village, while his quest for the adulterer consumes him. However, what he finds instead is life changing for both himself and Hebron: “for in searching for the adulterer, he had stumbled on himself” (Wynter, *Hebron* 82). A retrospective and revelatory narrative unfolds over the course of two hundred pages between this moment and the moment of creation cited at the beginning of this chapter. What becomes clear is that Obadiah finding himself is contingent on his returning to Rose. His equation of marriage and woodworking was, it turns out, not so much descriptive as hopeful, for it is finally his tentative recognition of his complicity in a lineage of violence against women and his return to the pregnant wife he had cursed that allows him to attain in his carving the awareness he had sought.

Obadiah's discovery that Rose did not commit adultery, but was raped, shifts his quest from finding the adulterer to redefining himself, specifically within the context of a man who is betrayed by another man and as a man who is now responsible for the consequences of another's violence. He breaks away from Hebron and moves into Rose's isolated hut, where he seeks alternative methods of providing for his family. The creative processes he engages in while preparing for the baby provide the occasion for his first existential contemplations:

As he worked he sought for a reason for the grass that lived and died, for hurricanes and droughts that outraged the land, for the briefness of the life of a man, for Hebron, its meaning and purpose; for the long years of his blindness in which he had slept and eaten, and made gestures of belief, unthinking, unquestioning. (Wynter, *Hebron* 287)

He considers the life cycle of nature, man, and the community and ponders his own lack of introspection. While he does so, he also carves a doll for his wife's unborn child. Thus, Obadiah's new self-awareness intertwines with the experience of creating consciously for the first time. The carving not only comes to embody Obadiah's new conceptualization of himself and his community but also provides a source of economic viability. For Obadiah, "this object which had been dredged out of his anguish, his search for a sense of being, had become an extension, not only of his living body, but of Hebron" (Wynter, *Hebron* 303). Obadiah's process of "stumbling on God" through conscious carving thus comes to embody the ways artistic projects are akin to self-creation. The doll, as crafted consciously and from a new sense of self-awareness gained over the course of the novel, symbolizes Obadiah's new awareness of himself and his place in an individual and collective past and present.

Obadiah is not the only character invested in creating cultural products. Isaac also creates through writing (an avenue unavailable to the mostly illiterate Hebronites). His writing is insightful and sharply critical of the colonial establishment, but it is also a testament to his alienation from and disillusionment with himself and his own origins in Hebron. Isaac looks to Rose and Obadiah's relationship as the subject for his writing and a way beyond his alienation and disillusionment. His identification of the necessity of an indigenous experience for his own secure and grounded sense of self is similar to what George Lamming describes as the West Indian writer's relationship with the peasantry as the authentic subject: "The West Indian novelist did not look out across the sea to another source. He looked down at what had tradition-

ally been ignored. For the first time, the West Indian peasant became other than a cheap source of labour” (Lamming, *Pleasures* 39). Prior to the early twentieth-century fervor to represent and articulate discourses of individual and collective self-determination among colonized Caribbean people, the descendants of African slaves and Chinese, African, and Indian indentured laborers were viewed only as a cheap labor source. According to Lamming, the West Indian novel’s restoration of the peasant’s lived experiences recaptures a sense of personhood marginalized by the colonial system, but also conveys a sense of the “authentic” Caribbean subject. By making Hebron and its residents his subject matter, Isaac uses his writing in a similar way to work through his own senses of marginalized personhood. Through Isaac’s eventual violence against Rose, betrayal of Obadiah, and abandonment of Hebron, the novel calls for closer scrutiny of this now-standard romanticization of the rural peasantry not only in literary criticism but also in the construction of national imaginations of collectivity.

Such romanticization seems to be at the heart of the populace’s vulnerability to nationalist enterprise. With this in mind, Donette Francis’s use of antiromance as a template for reading Caribbean women’s writing between 1994 and 2002 is also instructive for thinking about the antiromance aspects of Wynter’s novel, primarily as we see them through Isaac’s characterization. Antiromance, as Francis asserts, is pivotal to unsettling the settled settlements in postcolonial discourses because of “its reluctance to offer a grand narrative closure, settlement, or any satisfaction derived from other genres” and because it “defies reconciliation” (Francis, *Fictions* 8). These characteristics of the antiromance are undeniably more visible and coherent in the contemporary fourth-wave writing that Francis studies. Furthermore, the ending of Wynter’s narrative, where Rose and Obadiah are reunited, Isaac the rapist is gone, a baby is born, the drought breaks, and Obadiah as elder of his community has a new vision for its economic viability, seems neat, happy, perhaps even romantic, and thus contradicts reading Wynter’s novel through Francis’s antiromance lens. But this is only if we accept Isaac’s departure from the narrative as also removing the effects of his actions from the novel. Indeed, the baby whose birth the novel ends with is the product of his violence against Rose. The dimensions of antiromance in Wynter’s novel dwell in Isaac’s characterization and Rose’s silence. Through these portrayals, Wynter’s novel “exposes the folly of believing that somehow the national, the diasporic, or the intimate sphere are privileged spaces for the reconciliation of otherwise impossible differences” (Francis, *Fictions* 8). Indeed, Rose and Obadiah, and even Obadiah and Hebron, do reconcile, but Rose has yet to actually speak, and there has yet to be any reconciliation with Isaac.

I share Francis's concern with "unraveling the politics of intimacy, how it is narrated, and what it can reveal about the social history of the Caribbean" and similarly look to this tripartite relationship to think about colonial and postcolonial subjectivity and citizenship (Francis, *Fictions* 2). But while Francis asserts (and I agree) that writing about the violence enacted upon the bodies of Caribbean women and girls "has become the grounds for an emergent Caribbean feminist poetics," I look to the relationships of intimacy and violence in *The Hills of Hebron* to think about how they complicate the oppositional strategies of the first and third wave and their respective raced and gendered politics (Francis, *Fictions* 3). The relationship between Rose, Obadiah, and Isaac forms a lynchpin for considering the creation of self not only as a phenomenon involving multiple sites of experience—race, gender, sexuality, and so on—often bracketed in the Caribbean critical tradition, but also as a process of becoming rather than the articulation of preexisting identity categories. Contrasting Isaac's forays into writing with Obadiah's woodworking illustrates how processes of becoming in postemancipation and postcolonial periods often hinge on identity recovery or formation and the best critical and/or creative processes for achieving this. Both Obadiah's and Isaac's journeys towards self-awareness illustrate that what is at issue is not simply the choice of an appropriate identity at a political crossroads, but rather the processes of becoming through which identity might in fact produce new politics. I argue that the reconciliation between Rose and Obadiah, and his assumption of responsibility for her child as his own, symbolize the possibilities of this new politics.

Juxtapositionally, Isaac's characterization as the rapist also offers an unsettling representation of the then-emerging politics of nationalism. In parsing these characters' processes of becoming, I read their tripartite relationship allegorically. Obadiah and Isaac represent two different possibilities for post-colonial leadership, and Rose represents the newly emerging nation. The self both men become and the ways their self-discovery affects their treatment of and relationship with Rose parallel postcolonial negotiations of sovereignty between leaders and populaces. That Rose remains silent and without recourse is a stark critique of national imaginings of sovereignty overall.

The novel also portrays through the relationship among these three characters the instrumentality of a preoccupation with past, present, and future identity formation to postcolonial discourses. Such preoccupation is an integral liberation strategy in contexts where ongoing problems of sovereignty accompany formal political independence. The political and economic implications of self-governance are obvious and known to postcolonial subjects, but knowledge, power, and control over a sense of being is still under

negotiation and invention in Caribbean discourse. For Wynter, ontological sovereignty requires an understanding of how epistemic constructions of being Human and being Human Other served the colonial system of dominance in the new world and continue to act as blocks to sovereignty in contemporary contexts. Reinterpreting colonial realities necessarily involves reconceptualizing interaction with the past. Wynter's understanding of ontological sovereignty is useful in understanding what belies the motivations behind Isaac's sexual violence and what Obadiah is able to achieve by grappling and coming to terms with his wife's pregnancy, her rape, and his own complicity in the violence that Rose suffers. The novel is in large part retrospective, and it is through looking back into the past that Obadiah and Hebron can reinvent themselves as economically viable and ontologically sovereign.

Thinking about both Obadiah's and Isaac's struggles for ontological sovereignty ultimately provides the opportunity to diversify discourses of sovereignty. In a little over fifty years, black nationalist and feminist readings of this text have proliferated, but none have offered a complete picture of what transpires in Hebron, particularly among these three characters. Discussion of the novel fall into some of the very inclusion/exclusion patterns it seeks to combat and reproduce what now begins to feel like an interminable and questionably useful uncovering of exclusions and marginalizations. As Caribbean literary critics, we need to ask if there are other ways of considering sovereignty beyond excavating and constructing identities in terms of race or gender. We need to ask this especially because of characters like Isaac, who implicitly challenges the unimpeachable heroics of the black nationalist and his revered position as revolutionary in Caribbean spaces. I would suggest that the critical silence surrounding this character in particular rests in the challenges he poses to foundational black nationalist discourses. Along with Obadiah's process of consciously creating for the first time and finding himself in the process, it is important to also look at Isaac as a symbolic representation of the educated black nationalist, who takes the nation into political independence. How can we make sense of his violence against his stepsister Rose, his betrayal of Obadiah, and his abandonment of Hebron? If we read Wynter's novel as an allegory of the establishment of an independent nation within a space that still bears the dispossessing vestiges of slavery, what kind of vision of a postcolonial reality does it offer? I explore thus the triangular relationship among Obadiah, Rose, and Isaac to illustrate an alternative mode of critical inquiry, applicable to negotiations of sovereignty in the West Indies that *The Hills of Hebron* itself proposes.

## Reading Sex in *The Hills of Hebron*

Thus far, I have suggested that *The Hills of Hebron* allegorizes epistemological negotiations of sovereignty in newly independent nations and offers a narrative context for how contemporary reality is organized, through Obadiah's and Rose's handling of the fallout from sexual violence and victimization. Sexual interaction acts as a dually functioning lynchpin in both the narrative itself and in its relation to the prioritizations of race or gender in decolonization discourses. In the novel, sexual interaction serves as the cornerstone for various significant events not exclusive to individual and collective identity formations, but also including the establishment of community and the maintenance of patriarchal lines. Sexual interaction links all the central male characters in the novel to each other across racial and temporal distinctions. Likewise, literal and implied sexual exchanges form the basis for the transference of power and the implements of the exchange of power (land, for example) between men. Hebron's lineage is traceable back to Miss Gatha's great-grandfather, Cato Randall, and his English master. The homosocial dimension of this lineage is symbolic of the ways power is structured and exchanged through male hands throughout the course of the novel.

Cato's closeness to his master as a loyal house slave is what gives the name "Randall" legitimacy and respectability, in Miss Gatha's eyes, despite the implied homosexual relationship between the slave and his master. Respectability and legitimacy here ironically flow from Cato's simultaneous betrayal of his master and the field slaves: "his master thought him loyal, especially when he revealed details of a rebellious plot that, unknown to Randall, Cato himself had fomented amongst the field slaves" (Wynter, *Hebron* 90). Cato gains his freedom in exchange for details of the rebellion. This revelation gives Randall a false notion of Cato's loyalty that proves fatal when Cato "lure[s] Randall into an ambush" where "the other slaves slashed red ribbons from Randall's curling white flesh" (90). Cato's treachery does not end here, however. Once Randall is dead, he tells a neighboring white planter of the rebellion "and of his vain efforts to defend his generous master who had only that day granted him his freedom" (90). This leads to the capture and execution of the revolt's leaders and Cato's reward of a substantial gift of money. With this money, Cato buys land and builds a shop on it; the land and the shop become Gatha's inheritance. According to the narrative, Cato Randall "was determined to found a dynasty," but he had no sons to pass this legacy on to as an inheritance. Thus, he "left all his possessions to his son-in-law on the condition that he adopted the name Randall and passed it on to his children"

(88). Miss Gatha therefore inherits her grandfather's "dynasty" matrilinearily through her mother, and by extension, her instrumentality in the founding of Hebron also designates this community as matrilinearily founded, even if grounded in patriarchally brokered homosocial contracts. This first homosocial brokering—between Cato, his master, and other plantation owners—also occurs with a homoerotic dimension, and in turn introduces us to the centrality of violence and sexuality in similar contracts throughout the narrative.

Wynter foregrounds the power relations inherent in such exchanges and the kinds of community that they inaugurate. Moses's connections with women in the early stages of his ministry provide the seed for the establishment of Hebron. Gatha's money purchases the symbolic accouterments of his ministry:

She had exchanged her shop and plot of land in Cockpit Centre for that very shirt and trousers, for the swallow-tailed coat of fine broadcloth, the expensive boots. A quarter of the money that she received from the sale of her property had gone to purchase these vestments of the office for her husband Moses. After his death, they passed on to Aloysius and after him to Obadiah. (87–88)

These "vestments of the office" signify Miss Gatha's place in a lineage that stretches back to the cunning Cato, whose desire in founding a dynasty is to have "an identity of his own, a line of ancestors that he could trace" (88). Hebron is this ex-slave's lineage. Likewise, if Gatha's inheritance paves the road to Hebron, Rose's mother Gloria's body secures the community's literal establishment. It is worth noting that like her daughter Rose, Gloria never utters a word in the novel.

Rose's grandmother Martha gives birth to Rose's mother, Gloria, in her union with her Chinese "husband," who "night after night . . . crushed her flesh" (193). After his death, Gloria, who up until this point is raised as Chinese, becomes a maid for Reverend Brooks and his wife. It is in this capacity of servitude that her "docility filled [the Reverend] with a sense of power and mastery that he had never before experienced" (195). Predictably, his experience with power is ultimately corrupting for the reverend, but Gloria's easy acquiescence to his commands to "take off [her] clothes" and "lie down" problematically seem to provoke the rape that produces Rose. Gloria dies while giving birth to Rose. In a traumatic repetition of the cycle, Moses's son, Rose's stepbrother Isaac, rapes Rose. The baby at the end of the novel thus results from a sequence of rapes.

To grasp completely the symbolism of her baby, however, we must return yet again to Rose and how her characterization presents an opportunity to think about the different modalities through which collective identity are voiced and practiced in West Indian discourses. Rose's silence, though problematic, forces us to explore the relationships that surround her and her pregnancy rather than rely on what she says and conveys to us a more complex sense of how community and power are organized. For Natasha Barnes, "that Rose, who is one-quarter Chinese, and we find out later, half white, is not racially marked in the all-black Hebron community is testimony not only to the success of Moses' radical nationalism but to its progressive possibilities" (Barnes 149). Rose's inclusion in this all-black community is a testimony to the progressive possibilities of Moses's heavily raced vision, but her body *is* racially marked as different from the other Hebronites. Obadiah notes that it is Rose's "brown body" that links him to the adulterer who impregnates Rose (Wynter, *Hebron* 80). Admittedly, Rose is described as "brown" only once in the novel, but she is the only Hebronite not described as black. Thus, while Rose's lack of racial marking does indeed testify to the success of "Moses' radical nationalism" and its "progressive possibilities," it is precisely her diverse racial marking that figures the progressive possibilities of Hebron. That the novel only once describes Rose as brown illustrates the ways blackness sublimates other races and ethnicities within Caribbean nationalist discourses. But in a heavily black-conscious narrative, Rose is never described as black, and as Barnes herself suggests, "the materiality of her mixed-race and gendered body and the colonial meaning ascribed to it . . . make possible the founding of Hebron in the first place" (Barnes 150). Thus, "a gendered cartography emerges nonetheless from the book's thematic and ideological concerns in which women are center stage" (Barnes 146). Where Barnes "show[s] how the institutional success of Moses' vision of Hebron—the creation of a 'black heaven on earth'—appears to depend on a gender hierarchy for its implementation, its organization, and its very survival," I would argue Wynter also makes the plurality produced by sexual violation and victimization explicit within this matrix (Barnes 148).

Sexual interaction among characters is a significant mode of literal and figurative connection that helps to convey the systemic function of various gendered silences and raced marginalizations in the construction of community in the immediate postemancipation period. Isaac, Obadiah, and Rose are joined in a homosocial triangle of their own, where Rose is the literal and symbolic site of contestation for the ontological struggles of two very different men. The relations among these characters also symbolically depict the

ontological struggles of preindependent communities and the implications of these struggles for leaders and their populace. We might begin to parse the complexities of this homosocial triangle and the novel's representation of the role of sex in subject formation by focusing first on Obadiah.

## CALIBAN BECOMING MAN

**Obadiah.** Where his second carving embodies a complex and total apprehension of self and community, Obadiah's first carving introduces us to how sexuality figures into the apprehension of self. Unlike his conscious carving of a doll for the baby, Obadiah's first creation occurs while "he whittled idly with his knife at a piece of wood" (Wynter, *Hebron* 158). His friend Hugh alerts him to what he unconsciously produces by "nudging him and grinning shyly" (158). When he looks down at "what he had made" he "saw a roughly-hewn miniature of his mother as she danced at a Pocomania meeting, her eyes wide and lost in a cold ecstasy, her breasts taut like thorns, her legs strong and powerful, the muscles raised and trembling as if with a fever" (158). While Hugh relates his childhood to Obadiah for the first time, unconsciously Obadiah carves a memory of his own childhood into the wood he whittles. When a giggling Hugh alerts Obadiah to his unconsciously erotic creation, Obadiah smashes the carving because it "had reminded him too much of his mother, of those times when he had been remote, her spirit ugly and set against him." For the young Obadiah, "the spells during and after the frenzies of her dancing" and "the nights when men came to visit her one after the other and she pushed him out of the room and slapped him when he started to ask why" become fused together (158). As such, religious fervor and sexuality coalesce in an unpleasant mutual association.

It is unsurprising that the newly married Obadiah, on Hugh's advice, takes a vow of celibacy to mollify Miss Gatha's accusation that he brought down God's wrath in the form of a hurricane "by indulging [him]self too much in the pleasures of the flesh" (Wynter, *Hebron* 15). Excessive carnality, in Miss Gatha's estimation, links natural disasters to the community's falling out of favor with God. The religious service that opens the novel is supposed to be in celebration of the end of Obadiah's "one month and a year, until the next hurricane had passed its bitter cup," where he vowed not to "touch [his] wife, he wouldn't know her, or any woman else" (17). The reality of the vow's singularity is exposed with the revelation of Rose's pregnancy. Likewise, though the vow does coincide with an abatement of hurricanes, the community at the beginning of the novel suffers from the extreme of this abatement, drought.

This portion of the novel thus calls into question the ability of a representative individual to stand in for the community as a whole.

But Obadiah's vow also involves a complex convergence of unruly female sexuality, alienation, and impotence. Miss Gatha recommends abstinence, in part, we suspect, because of her own reaction to her deceased husband and Hebron's founding father, Moses, who is described as "a most lusty stallion" (38). Moses's near-constant meshing with the flesh of woman understandably informs his wife's response to sexuality (37). The misogyny and gynophobia evident in the sexuality of the novel's men, moreover, symbolically parallels those attendant in mid-twentieth-century national projects. As Natasha Barnes points out, early nationalists viewed feminist identity politics "as deeply threatening to their foundational aims and agendas" (Barnes 135). And in contemporary Caribbean societies where economic resources especially are scarce, feminist prioritization is "stigmatized as shrill, partisan, generating rhetoric and modes of analysis from suspicious foreign sources, and hence dangerous to what is conceptualized as local, autochthonous expressions of community" (Barnes 136). Thus, Gatha's assertion that Obadiah's sexual needs distract from his attention to the community: "the Elder Obadiah who is now so wrapped up with his wife that after he preach Thy Word a few hours a day, he lay down the tools of his trade, whilst the whole of Hebron fall to rack and ruin" (Wynter, *Hebron* 23).

Yet Gatha's response in turn problematically conflates women and sexuality with degradation and depravity. The method behind Obadiah's vow is clear when we consider that the source of his and the community's degradation (by way of hurricane) is believed to be his enjoyment of sexual coupling with his wife. But Obadiah's abstention from such coupling does not, as we have seen, correct anything. The polarized swing from a disastrous abundance of rain to the austerity of drought nonetheless reveals a flaw in Gatha's and Obadiah's thinking about the destructive nature of female sexuality. Their initial misrecognition of Isaac as the adulterer/rapist also illustrates this flaw. Though we discover that Rose is raped in the first of four books in the novel, we can only speculate who the culprit is for most of the narrative. It takes us almost the entire book to fully understand this moment of violence committed by a man whose mother assumed he "never once looked at a woman to lust after her unseemly" (21). According to the narrative's symbolic investment in the resolution between spouses, however, Isaac's seeming asexuality is itself suspicious.

**Isaac.** Isaac's colonial education accounts in large part not only for his misrecognition as the rapist but also for his alienation from and disillusionment

with himself and Hebron. If “in searching for the adulterer [Obadiah] had stumbled upon himself,” Isaac, the adulterer, emerges as if from the shadows of the narrative in its eighteenth chapter directly after his father Moses dies via crucifixion (Wynter, *Hebron* 82). This first foray into Isaac’s interiority begins with a child’s sense of alienation and disillusionment: “when his mother sent Isaac away to school in Cockpit Centre, he saw Hebron for the first time, through the mocking eyes of unbelievers” (248). After only two days at his school, he “was gripped by two boys, made to stand in the playground and watch whilst the others re-enacted his father’s attempt to fly to heaven, his failure, his trial, his exodus, his crucifixion” (248). The shock of seeing his father’s exploits through the eyes of mocking outsiders for the first time deeply scars Isaac. Coupled with this, however, is the time when he is “forced . . . to join in the choruses of the bawdy songs that they sang about the Prophet, and when at first he refused, twisted his lame foot and rubbed his face in the dust” (Wynter, *Hebron* 248–49). His contact with communities outside of Hebron works to destroy any faith the young man might have had in his father and Hebron. On his first weekend return home, he questions Aunt Kate in the hope “that she would give back to him the illusions he had been robbed of” (Wynter, *Hebron* 249). His difficult first week at school, however, is sufficiently traumatic to make him realize “that Hebron was small . . . Aunt Kate could not help him. No one in Hebron could. They were all dreamers” (249). He tries to avoid returning to school, but his mother, the only one in Hebron he recognized as not a dreamer, “forced him to go back to school,” and in turn “he began to regard all the New Believers with contemptuous indifference” (249).

Not only does his education alienate Isaac from the community of his birth; predictably, it also contributes to feelings of superiority. Isaac begins to see Hebron in relation to himself, in diminutive ways: “a giant amongst pygmies, an adult amongst children” (249). Not even his faith in Hebron’s God remains untouched by this onslaught of disillusionment: “On Sundays in the church it was all he could do to keep himself from laughing aloud at the stupidity of their belief . . . He knew that his father was a fool and God a lie” (249). Obadiah is also singled out as an element once central to Isaac’s life that no longer holds the meaning and security it once did: “In Obadiah, Isaac could see all the farce of his father’s mad aspiration. In his mind he trampled on all the memories of tenderness which the big man with his great strength had shown towards him” (249). Isaac’s contempt for Obadiah’s emulation of Moses is evident in his smashing of “the wooden horse, which Obadiah had made for him, which had helped him take his first uncertain steps. He did not need it now” (249).

Without the ensconced and isolated security of Hebron, Isaac's first journey into the world beyond his home makes him cold, cruel, and distant towards everything and everyone once important to him. As he grows into a young man, these feelings of isolation, alienation, and disillusionment only become more intense, but he excels academically nonetheless. It is as though such detachment is necessary for his academic success. Within the symbolic framework of the novel, the violence of the rape that Isaac eventually commits against Rose and his subsequent abscondence with money earmarked for the community's survival reflects the nation's vulnerability to the possible violence of the educated though alienated black nationalist. Isaac's characterization as the most unlikely of threats parallels those at the foundations of political sovereignty. The novel's critique of the early nationalists entrusted with ushering the new nation into political independence depicts a project freighted with alienation, ignorance, insecurity, disappointment, and threat. Here we can see why it received a cold reception during the first wave of canon formation.

Though Isaac can identify the façade behind his father's and classmates' vision of power—particularly its dependence on possession of the female body—he nonetheless is unable to resist participating in this kind of power. In fact, where Obadiah is able to see his own complicity in a lineage of patriarchal domination and successfully extricate himself from it through a return to Rose, Isaac achieves no such success, despite his sophisticated understanding of the working of colonial power. This understanding manifests itself in his midcourse examination, where he writes papers that harshly criticize British imperialism. Isaac explains in "The Rise of the British Empire" that "the true greatness of the English lay in their ability to enslave themselves, consciously, in order to enslave others; on their carefully constructed and chauvinistic vision of the past which enabled them to conceive of a civilization which could flower like an orchid, on the bent backs of subject races" (262). Isaac's use of the flowering of orchids lends a sense of irony to the English's true greatness. In his estimation, it is not a greatness that is without consequence for the British, especially since it occurs because of a conscious enslavement of themselves, in order to justifiably build an empire through the enslavement of others. At a glance, this seems to be a metaphor of parasitism, but the relationship between empire and subjects related here is more complex and perhaps better encapsulated in the commensally symbiotic image of an epiphytic plant. The irony that Isaac begins his essay with a notion of the "true greatness of the British empire" is extended in comparing the empire to a plant that grows commensally to its host, offering neither benefit nor detriment while taking support. It is barely plausible to say that the rise of the British Empire

on the “bent backs of subject races” did not mean any detriment for the subjugated host. Nonetheless, the novel’s engagement with the negotiations of sovereignty among a once-enslaved race indicates that this particular host also participated in the commensality of the relationship—particularly where the establishment of privileged cultural identities is concerned.

We might begin to understand this notion of “enslav[ing] themselves, consciously, in order to enslave others” by again revisiting an earlier moment in the novel where the narrator tells us how the English themselves reacted to colonization: “When they found themselves absolute rulers over vast numbers of alien peoples they felt compelled to rationalize their overlordship. The most satisfying assumption was that the natives peoples were an inferior race” (Wynter, *Hebron* 179). Additional behaviors emerge from this rationalization of colonial domination in order to satisfy this assumption of inferiority: “They lived their lives shut away from any real contact with the people whom they ruled. They transported a mannered ritual of behavior from the home country, and wore dinner jackets in the heart of the jungle” (175). It is this rationalization of overlordship that Isaac sees as a dual sense of enslavement. Global expansion facilitated the growth of expatriate populations, who also are exiled to colonial outposts in the service of the empire’s growth. In the context of the novel, this dual sense of enslavement adds an additional layer of lunacy to Isaac’s schoolmates’, the barristers’, and the early nationalists’ emulation of expatriate British culture and values. This is especially ironic since the inherited culture that developed under colonization depends on the inferiority of natives along with a ritualized expression and conveyance of culture.<sup>15</sup> As the novel suggests, the assumption of this culture by early nationalists as a means of consolidating a unified populace and their own political power also perpetuates colonial inequities. Thus, Isaac’s essay illustrates the young man’s awareness of what Wynter describes as the “unreality of unauthenticity [sic] of the so called real” (Wynter, “Little Culture I” 24). It also reflects his attempts through writing to reinterpret this reality—his writing can be seen as a commitment to a revolutionary assault against the unreality, a process

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15. An additional irony that is made all the more apparent through Deborah Thomas’s study, *Modern Blackness*, is early nationalists’ reliance on select elements of folk blackness as definitive components in the construction of an authentic national culture, while at the same time they rejected more presentist modes of blackness (manifested in popular culture, for example) as tools for political mobilization. As Thomas suggests, this duality enabled the framing of blackness within national imaginations as a revered thing of the past or an aspirational ideal. Thus, “this was a utopianist vision of what blackness could do, could be, if it were to get with the creole program, a vision of ‘tamed’ blackness that mirrored the values that have come to be associated with the creole professional middle classes” (13). As we see with the barristers and Isaac’s classmates in *The Hills of Hebron*, blackness as a racial marker of the subjugated and derided masses is simultaneously instrumental in and rejected by the text’s educated middle-class nationalists.

that, in Wynter's theoretical terms, "marks the path for the West Indian from acquiescent bondage to the painful becoming of freedom" (Wynter "Little Culture I" 24).

Though Isaac's essays are clearly superior to those of his colleagues, however, the examiners give him second place, so as not to encourage excessive hubris on Isaac's part. Once the others in his dormitory resume their "talk about women" on the evening Isaac gets his exam results, he deduces that "they were shadow-men" whose emphasis on the façadal and lack of insight into the more concrete and practical realities of their ambitions make them seem without substance. Nonetheless, Isaac finds that he "envi[es] them" because despite this lack of substance, "their confident virility made them secure" (Wynter, *Hebron* 265). In the novel, masculine virility is a part of the shadow that prevails in place of substance. Second place undermines Isaac's major source of confidence—intellectual pursuits—and his envy of his classmates' "confident virility" and its association with his father's own confidence and power drives Isaac down to Kingston in search of a "confident virility" of his own (265).

This is not the first time Isaac stumbles on what seems to be the norm of finding security within a woman's flesh. His intellect, like his literacy, is what he feels separates him from the community of his birth, Hebron. After just a short time in school, he recognizes the "smallness" of Hebron's isolation and its belief, loses his own faith in these beliefs, and in turn belittles them with contempt. Consequently, Isaac, in the context of his school life, becomes ashamed of the elements of himself that belong to Hebron. At the monthly musical meeting, he is mortified when outside "a wave of drumming broke in on the recorded sound of the piano," signaling a "group of Pocomania revivalist worshippers passing in procession," and Mrs. Holland, the headmaster's wife, looks at him, "her eyes pinning him down" (255–56). Isaac resists her gaze, recognizing its connection to his father's notoriety as the insane leader of a faith similar to the passing band that disrupts the appreciation of classical music. The invocation of disruptive rival cultural aesthetics is critical here, in particular because of Isaac's response to his association with the revivalists. "The other students stared at Isaac," also in recognition of a similarity, and "Isaac felt suddenly as if he were caged" (256). In a manner that recalls the barristers' resistance to being associated with Moses, Isaac flees the mortification inherent in his association with the passing band and his father's legacy by abruptly leaving the party. He flees to the sea, the same place his father had spoken with God years earlier; for Isaac, "only the sea could wipe out the memory of the room that he had left behind and the puppets that sought to imprison him with their importunity" (256). Isaac develops this complex relation to the sea while in school in Cockpit Centre. He learns that "the sea was

so big that Cockpit Centre would be lost inside it” (250). Moreover, “he knew about the sea from *Moby Dick* and there it was even vaster and more powerful than he had imagined it” (256). Here we see Isaac coming to an understanding of the scope of the world beyond Hebron and Cockpit Centre, in literary terms, through a relation to the sea.

If Moses experiences a God made in his own image, “the God of black men,” at the seaside, Isaac experiences a similar moment of all-encompassing psychic transformation the first time he goes to the seaside in Kingston (Wynter, *Hebron* 152). On this first occasion, in his escape from an uncomfortable room and its importunate occupants, he does not wander through the alleys and lanes of Kingston to find a prostitute, but one finds him. This encounter makes more obvious the complexity and difficulty of the relationship between alienation, sexuality, power, and the sea that characterizes Isaac. He is aroused when the prostitute rubs herself against him, but the realization that she doesn’t desire him but the money he will pay her evaporates his desire for her. When she asks him, “How much can you pay?” Isaac “turned and walked away rapidly” (258). In his mind, this prostitute’s “spirit would have been too small to encompass the sea inside him” (258). He likens the turmoil at being associated with the Pocomania band to the expansiveness of the sea. As a boy, “when his tongue got tied up he would open his arms and his eyes as if to embrace the sea, to contain it within the breadth of his arms, the length of his reaching, quivering body” (250). The novel contrasts the shaking of his body with something as expansive as the sea and the world beyond it. As such, when words and understanding fail him, Isaac’s attempts at grasping the sea between his arms and with his entire body are also an attempt at quelling his own internal confusions with the sea’s expansiveness. On his first encounter with a prostitute, Isaac knows her spirit is not vast enough to bring stillness to his troubled ego.

A tense relationship thus develops between Isaac’s sense of sea-like internal expansiveness and the security to be found in a more confident virility than he currently possesses. The second time around, when he is awarded second place in the half-year exams, he returns to Kingston, “this time [making] sure to take money with him” (265). Yet again, however, his best efforts at self-preservation are thwarted by outside imperial factors—most of the better prostitutes are engaged by American sailors from the naval ships docked at the port, leaving “only the aged and the worn-out available. And even they shrank from the ugly young man with his staring eyes and dragging foot” (265). Without the security of a “confident virility” of his own, Isaac throws himself into his work with a new sense of fury and early in his second year at college falls ill with pneumonia and needs to “return home for a few weeks

to convalesce" (265). The young man who returns to Hebron "find[s] himself even more of a stranger than before" (265).

Despite his repulsion, Isaac's distance from Hebron, over the course of fifteen months, nonetheless enables him to romanticize the community in a way that is similar to the manner in which cultural nationalism romanticizes folk culture. While on the train home, he begins to see his return as a "return to the sound of a living language, its rhythms sprung from the earth" (266). The irrelevant and repressive stagnancy of an "education [which] had no relation to [his] daily life" makes Isaac welcome what he romanticizes as a more relevant way of life in Hebron, one that is nurturing because it is organic (251). He sees himself as

return[ing] to a real people, his people, in whose eyes he could see what he had become, just as they saw themselves mirrored in their land and its seasons: and seeing himself, would see them, and be set free to write without having to share experience vicariously through books written by other peoples, in their language, holding up their images, informed with their rhythms, their words. (266)

Articulated here is the freedom inherent in writing one's experience of seeing self through seeing others as mirrored in the landscape, rather than through the vicarious experience of books written by others foreign to him and Hebron. The people of Hebron, for Isaac, reflect a sense of the real in a mediatory way. Isaac needs to see himself reflected in the land-based stability of their lives. Nevertheless, his rape of Rose highlights the exploitative capacity of such modes of seeing self and thus problematizes the necessity for this particular kind of mediation. Furthermore, his reception once back in Hebron illustrates the limits of Isaac's ability to imagine himself through his community in the mediatory manner he wishes.

The novel portrays the peasant farmers of Hebron as having no frame of reference for Isaac's complex negotiations of writing and its role in his own ontological formation. After all, their ontological formation resides in a relation to the land. His education enlightens him to the impossibilities of his difference. The history he read, wrote sharp critiques of, and earned second place for writing about binds with his alienation (from his education, his self, and his community) and his community's alienation from him. The New Believers have their own expectations of what Isaac will be like when he returns. However façadal these are, the people are disappointed when they do not materialize. In his fifteen months away, to them, Isaac has not changed: Isaac is the same. He has not grown any taller than his five feet seven inches; his clubfoot

has not straightened. Education is supposed to improve individuals in visible ways; they have no frame of reference for Isaac's psychic turmoil and focus only on the exterior things about Isaac that have not changed. They would have preferred even pomposity: "This would have given them some tangible proof of his wisdom and learning. But his awkward attempts to be one of them only caused them to dismiss him as before" (266).

Even at home then, Isaac remains isolated and an outcast. What makes this even more pronounced for him, however, is the absence of his stepsister and childhood playmate from his mother's home. Thus, after dinner, "when they left, Obadiah with Rose, he became more conscious than ever of his isolation" (267). Growing up, Rose acted as a conduit between Gatha and Isaac and by extension became "for him, the center of Hebron" (268). Without Rose, mother and son "were unsure of each other" (268). Isaac feels even more isolated and imprisoned in Hebron and in himself. Furthermore, his response to women in Hebron bears a telling understanding of their relationship to the impotence he experiences. For him, "the woman-laugh was shrillest of all, annihilating his timorous manhood" (269). Like Obadiah, who shrank from what he perceived to be an overpowering sense of female sexuality, Isaac too feels that women's laughter threatens his unstable sense of himself.

The recurring nightmare he suffers during his time of convalescence in Hebron perhaps best reveals Isaac's tumultuous and inchoate sense of self. In the dream, he is trapped in Hebron and cannot escape to the sea, as hard as he tries. This desire for the sea's ability to contain his internal turmoil remains elusive to Isaac in the dream: "each time he thought he was free, an opened book, enormous and shaped like iron bars, blocked his way, and printed on the pages was a musical score of the sound of laughter that echoed round him" (269). Here it is not only the isolation and alienation of Hebron that traps him but also the repressive nature of his colonial education—as symbolized by the book—which will guarantee him success only if he accepts the intellectual enslavement espoused in the pages of history. The laughter he hears and the musical score printed on the pages evoke the attitude of his cohort and the headmaster's wife to indigenous religious expression and their problematic association of it with Isaac, endowing him with a similar sense of perceived primitivity and inferiority. In this nightmare, Isaac can be freed only if he "translate[s] the score of laughter into exact words before morning" (269). Translating the score of laughter into exact words equates to an understanding of the prejudice, marginalization, and scorn behind the laughter, and behind Isaac's discomfort in being identified with a Pocomania revivalist group. It can also equate to apprehending the substance behind the shadow his classmates see as power.

Such an undertaking is complicated, and though he does manage to finish his translation, “when he looked at what he had written it was all gibberish” (269). Gibberish is not the only thing reflected on Isaac’s nightmare page: “in the left-hand corner at the bottom of the page was a drawing of the woman who had approached him in Kingston, her low curved buttocks and high breast drawing profile, but her face was the face of Rose” (269). In a symbolic foreshadowing of sorts, Isaac’s inability to make anything but gibberish of the score of laughter leaves the prostitute with Rose’s face as the only other possible mode of release from his imprisonment. Rose’s amalgamation with the prostitute coalesces in Isaac’s mind her status as a source for his “confident virility.” Isaac’s internal confusion, produced by alienation, disillusionment, and isolation from Hebron and *from* his colonial education, *by* his colonial education, prevents him from making sense of the score of laughter. Thus, we can understand (though definitely not justify) Isaac raping Rose, as an attempt to find a spirit “large enough to encompass the sea inside him.” Isaac imagines writing an epic—“another *Moby Dick*”—on the train ride home, when he still has romantic fantasies (269). Rose remains a central fixation; in his epic, he imagines Rose as “the fixed star of his return” (270). If Rose is a fixed symbol of home, security, and identity for Isaac, Obadiah disrupts this when he marries her. We can also see the rape, then, as Isaac’s violent exertion of a sense of virile masculinity meant to usurp the object of Obadiah’s virile masculinity.

The inability to make sense of himself and his experiences ultimately leads Isaac to look elsewhere for his self. Once he rapes Rose, he walks “away from the land and the people whose reflected image of him had shaped his dreams, fashioned the self that he would go in search of, to be swept away into the wide indifference of the sea” (279). Much like Naipaul’s Ralph Singh in *Mimic Men*, who prefers to be shipwrecked in London rather than bear the contradictions of his island home Isabella, Isaac heads overseas for some other self.<sup>16</sup>

## CALIBAN AND HIS WOMAN

For both Obadiah and Isaac, then, Rose becomes a fetish of sorts, upon which their senses of themselves as men can be exercised. For Obadiah, finding himself means returning to Rose and her child. It is also not accidental that the

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16. As my anonymous reader observed, and I agree, Isaac’s *Moby Dick* fantasy and the land versus sea dichotomy belying his characterization can viewed as Wynter’s tongue-in-cheek critique of overly celebratory readings of the ocean, such as James’s *Mariners, Renegades, and Castaways*, and which thus anticipates critiques of more recent marine celebrations such as Rediker and Linebaugh’s *Many-Headed Hydra* and Gilroy’s *Black Atlantic*.

description of how Isaac draws the prostitute with Rose's face is similar to the description of how Obadiah unconsciously carves his mother's sexualized visage into wood. I would argue that in their un-negotiated homosocial contract, Isaac is aware that violating Rose would disrupt her husband's sense of himself as a man—a masculinity that also resides in his sexual relationship with his wife. Isaac's desire to commit this violence against both Rose and Obadiah rests in his own need to grasp a sense of virility, in this instance, by possessing the source of another's. One of the stories that Isaac does manage to write while in Hebron illustrates not only this desire to usurp what belongs to Obadiah in the economy of the narrative but also a nascent, potentially more redemptive longing for community. In one sense, it is a conflicted jealousy, but in another, it stems from his discovery that he can dissolve into the couple while in their presence. Isaac eventually finds commonality in the couple's isolation from the rest of Hebron, but their isolated togetherness negates his individual existence: "Their closeness isolated them from the rest of Hebron, as Isaac himself was isolated. At times he felt non-existent, diffused into these two people, who were his only friends" (271). He continues to visit them and use them as subjects for his writing. In his first story, written in the first person, "his identification with the young boy was complete. The young boy was amalgam, in appearance, of himself and Obadiah. And the young boy's mother looked like Rose" (271). In a way that is similar to the amalgamation of Rose's visage with the prostitute's body, Isaac coalesces his sense of self with Obadiah and imagines for himself a more intimate relation to Rose. Thus, "his obsession was not only with Rose, but with Rose and Obadiah together" (272). It is not just Rose who becomes the fixed point of home for Isaac, but both Rose and Obadiah, and the power of this togetherness to make him dissolve into them, in a way that is similar to his relation to the sea. After he rapes Rose and she runs away, "he wanted to stand up and call out his name to her, to reassure himself as to who he was. For, impersonal like the sea, she had taken him, then left him a castaway, without purpose, without being" (275). On one level, the desire to call out his name to her is a kind of vengeance for her marriage to Obadiah and her keeping from Isaac what he considered as a possible source of virility. Though at one point a comfort, the couple's ability to dissolve him needs to be countered by reclaiming his own sense of individual self; Rose again becomes the conduit for this reclamation. In this moment, Isaac subscribes to the narrative's pervasive patriarchal contract of domination and exchanging power through the violation of female bodies, finding himself a man as men are defined in this novel. But on another level, Isaac here experiences a longing for community that, we might argue, remains illegible because it falls outside of the heteronormative form

of the couple. The tragedy is that he can enact his desire only through an act of sexual violence figured as an Oedipal struggle with Obadiah.

## Conclusion

Where Isaac fails at grasping a secure and unselfish sense of ontological sovereignty, Obadiah's introspection brings him to a level of consciousness that Isaac's colonial education especially seems to preclude him from—one that positions Obadiah as the more successful candidate for leadership at the end of the novel. We can understand, further, the significance of creative processes—woodworking, in this case—in grasping subjectivity when Obadiah tries to imbue his first conscious creation with a sense of the self-awareness he garners from Rose's rape. The carved doll is a representation of an assumption of the totality of the past; that it was "dredged out of [Obadiah's] anguish" mirrors a sense of living imaginatively through the furnace of the past (Wynter, *Hebron* 303). This creative manifestation of anguish produces an object that both embodies Obadiah's consciousness of himself and, according to the stranger, bears resonances of an African heritage of which Obadiah himself is unaware. Its value and symbolism to him makes Obadiah reluctant to show the carving to the stranger modeled after Janheinz Jahn who asks to see it.<sup>17</sup> The stranger urges Obadiah to "tell [him] what legend did [he] carve this doll from" and eventually explains, when Obadiah responds in confusion, that the "carving looks like one that [he] saw in Africa" (304). The foreigner gives Obadiah a five-pound note for the doll, linking the discovery of self in the creation of wooden crafts to self-sustainability and economic viability. Here Wynter clearly links Afrocentricity to the formation of sovereign black Caribbean identity.<sup>18</sup> But this is no less important than Obadiah's realization that the stranger's five-pound note "would mean food and water for Rose and the child" (305), a realization that—crucially—does not depend upon Obadiah sharing the stranger's Afrocentric vision of the carving's meaning. When Obadiah returns to Hebron, he tells the community the following:

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17. See Ramchand, *The West Indian Novel*. The resemblance to Janheinz Jahn is noted first by Ramchand. Jahn's interest in literatures from Africa and the African diaspora increased after meeting the Senegalese poet Leopold Sedar Senghor. As a collector, editor, translator, critic, and historian of literature, he strove to mediate what he termed "neo-African literature." Wynter's inclusion of him in the novel as the individual who reveals to Obadiah the economic potential of his carvings indicates her own position on the arts, namely, Africa's place of prominence in new world creative imagination.

18. A move that she is taken to task for by Ramchand in the first edition of *The West Indian Novel*.

The first thing we are going to do, starting tomorrow, is build a good road, a broad road out into the world! . . . And up and down this road we will walk carrying the work of our hands to exchange for a man who will teach us how to read. (312)

In this respect, the carving embodies not so much the stranger's vision of the carving's Afrocentric lineage as a reconceptualization of self and a means of survival for both Obadiah and Hebron, one that involves new economic possibilities produced by abandoning their isolationist position.

By the end of the novel, Obadiah comes to a more complete awareness of himself and his position in relation to his and his community's past, present, and future. The novel presents indigenous art as not only a source for negotiating ontological sovereignty on a personal level but also a vehicle for self-sustainability on the communal level. Obadiah's confrontation with what belies Rose's silence sets his journey towards ontological sovereignty in motion. If we look at this couple through the paradigm of *The Tempest* in Caribbean discourse, we can begin to see the possibilities for sovereignty inherent in a meeting between Caliban and his mate. Caliban/Obadiah's ontological sovereignty is contingent on his reconciliation with the violence his mate/Rose historically suffers in the service of securing a variety of sovereign realities. This reconciliation between spouses forces us to rethink how we understand the function of silence and absence in not only the establishment of sovereign communities, but the establishment of critical orthodoxies in postcolonial literary discourses.

If abandoning their isolation brings the possibility for a more economically viable and, by extension, more sovereign reality for Obadiah and his community of New Believers, perhaps shifting our own focus to the relationships between subjects also brings us to more precise understandings of the possibilities for ontological sovereignty. Despite Wynter's own prioritization of black nationalist concerns above gendered ones, her only novel represents a complex network of relationships that provides an opportunity to work in between the impasses of West Indian literary criticism and raises new questions of prospective and plural forms of community. Twenty-first-century problems of sovereignty are perhaps best served not by new epistemological conceptualizations, but rather by a shift in our critical point of focus to facilitate the cultivation of "an ethos of antagonistic respect for pluralizations of subaltern difference, which constitutes our present reality" (Scott, *Refashioning* 224). In practice, what I have outlined here illustrates that rather than establishing encampments of identity reflecting critical orthodoxy, our realization of sovereign realities rests in considerations of the relationships forged between camps—whether they are cooperative, antagonistic, or otherwise.

# 2

## "WHAT YOU SAY, ELSA?"

### POSTCOLONIAL SOVEREIGNTY AND GENDERED SELF-ACTUALIZATION

You a go live. No you nah dead. Nor live ina no suffering eider. Ah swear dat to God—a sell me soul an' body firs.

—*The Harder They Come*<sup>1</sup>



We need to cultivate a historical intelligence, which is sensitive to the fragility of personality, and the constrained options which exist in given episodes. The carnival masks of the Hero, the Coward, the Villain, the Victim are only briefly worn by individuals whose complex agency deserves our attention. We are incompetent to give it if we confuse the masks, which amount to styles of perception, for the individuals.

—Richard Drayton<sup>2</sup>

### Introduction: "Every game I play, I lose"

Perry Henzell and Trevor Rhone's *The Harder They Come* (1972) was inspired by the much-publicized exploits of Vincent "Ivanhoe" Martin ("Rhyging") and was Jamaica's first feature-length film. The film dramatizes a few of the events from his criminal career, including his execution by police on the morning

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1. Michael Thelwell, *The Harder They Come* (New York, Grove Press: 1980, 383–84).

2. Richard Drayton, "The Problem of the Hero(ine) in Caribbean History" *Small Axe* 15.1 (2011), 45.

of October 9, 1948. *The Sunday Gleaner* describes the event with excitement and flourish: “THE GREATEST and longest man-hunt in the modern annals of Jamaica ended at 8:00 yesterday morning when bullets from Police rifles and revolvers brought to an end the crime filled career of Ivanhoe Martin for whom they had been searching night and day for the past six weeks” (“‘Rhyging’ Killed by Police”).<sup>3</sup> Henzell and Rhone’s script,<sup>4</sup> focusing on the transformation of a “good country boy” into a ruud bwai,<sup>5</sup> is built around the circumstances that lead a “good country boy” into a life of crime, notoriety, and eventual death amidst a barrage of bullets on the white sands of Lime Caye.<sup>6</sup>

Following the film’s local and international success, in 1978 Grove Press approached Michael Thelwell to write a “novelization” of it.<sup>7</sup> Thelwell was a prominent Black Power activist and intellectual during the 1960s, and this approach by Grove Press can be seen as a part of the larger intellectual and institutional shifts stimulated by the civil rights and Black Power movements in the United States. Publishers like Grove Press saw this intellectual moment as a lucrative one and in turn commissioned new books, series, and anthologies about the post–Civil War and Black Power transformations in African American life. *The Harder They Come* is thus situated amidst shifting paradigms of the postcolonial and post-civil rights eras. The centrality of black identity to these moments also situates the film and the novel in the second wave of Caribbean writing, which imagined black nationalism as a central facet of decolonization processes.

*The Harder They Come* depicts the exploits of one of Kingston’s urban “sufferahs” in a way that is representative of the plight of the entire black working class and its struggles for survival in an alienating national context. This was

3. “‘Rhyging’ Killed by Police,” *The Sunday Gleaner*, 10 October 1948: 1.

4. There is some contention surrounding who actually wrote the script for the film, made all the more interesting by the fact that no one has seen an actual completed script from which the finished product of the film is derived. See Loretta Collins’s “*The Harder They Come: Rougher Version*” for a more detailed discussion of Henzell and Rhone’s creative relationship in the production of this film.

5. In Standard English, *ruud bwai* translates literally to “rude boy.” I use F. G. Cassidy’s orthography to represent Jamaican English throughout this project for consistency.

6. His death on a white sand beach is an additional commentary on what gains privilege in the Jamaican political and economic landscape. Ivan’s death in this setting symbolizes the tourist-haven vision of Jamaica as the one that prevails over the bad man and the anomie he represents, which is viewed as the threat to the pristine, sunny image of the white sand beach—the source of tourist dollars that bolster the Jamaican economy.

7. Thelwell discusses Grove Press’s approach and the process of writing the novel in Michael Thelwell, “*The Harder They Come: From Film to Novel*” in *Ex-iles: Essays on Caribbean Cinema*, ed. Mbye B. Cham (Trenton: Africa World Press, 1992), 176.

a context that still bore the vestiges of centuries of colonial domination and slavery. Both narratives condense historical events that transpired over the course of thirty years into about four to seven years in the life of the main character, Ivan. This condensation of three pivotal periods in Jamaica's history (a century beyond emancipation to pre- through postindependence, that is, the 1940s to the 1970s) into a few years from the life of one man reflects that the film and novel are not simply about singular personal struggles.<sup>8</sup> They use a single journey to link events separated by time into one vision or point of knowledge that lends a collective sense not just to Ivan and his struggle, but also to the newly independent Jamaica and its own struggles for sovereignty from slavery to beyond independence. Thus, Ivan can be (and is) read as a representative figure of resistance within the country's historical struggle for sovereignty. Also depicted in Ivan's story are many of the historical, religious, social, political, economic, and ideological shifts in the contemplations and formulations of competing ideologies of collective imaginations. Ivan's negotiation with various -isms (classism, racism, and religious fundamentalism, for example) parallels Jamaica's own negotiations, as it seeks to define itself as a sovereign nation.

We might trace the problems faced by Ivan and other members of the urban poor back to the immediate nineteenth-century postemancipation context when colonial managers and their backers sought to establish among the former slaves a laboring class shaped by the epistemology, psychology, and culture of enslavement. The denial of reparations for enslavement as well as prohibitive land-ownership policies (artificial inflation of land prices up to sixty times the market rate for Afro-Jamaicans) combined to strategically regulate and effectively curtail Afro-Jamaicans' access to land ownership and proprietorship. In the postemancipation context, the class of ex-slaves had few options for survival that weren't tied to laboring or antisocial means. Local and international factors such as labor unrests, agricultural crises, rapid urbanization, and world wars worsened the social, political, and economic plight of the working class in Jamaica, plaguing it with low wages and deplorable living and working conditions. Narratives like *The Harder They Come* reflect both the disenchantment with the processes of national independence and the ways the cultural landscape became a testing ground for new personas that also sought to resist a growing sense of the power of the state, middle-class entitlement and values, and finally, the institutional exploitation of poor

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8. See Prakash Younger, "Historical Experience in *The Harder They Come*," *Social Text* 23.1 (2005): 43–63. Younger considers the postmodern implications of uniting in the film specific historical points in Jamaica's history that seem isolated only by time.

working people in Jamaica. The ruud bwai figure at the center of both the film and novel is perhaps the most iconic of these personas.

In 1967, Garth White in “Rudie, Oh Rudie” describes the “rude bwoy” as

that person, native, who is totally disenchanted with the ruling system; who generally is descended from the “African” elements in the lower class and who is now armed with ratchets (German made knives) and other cutting instruments and with increasing frequency nowadays . . . In addition rude bwoys are largely centered in those urban areas that suffer from chronic depression and to which migration from rural areas was largely directed in the 50s and 60s. (White 39)

Disenchantment with and ambivalence towards the government and cultural values, along with violent tendencies and dispossession, all characterize this group of mostly black working-class men, ranging between fourteen and twenty-five years of age. Clinton Hutton traces the factors that gave rise to the ruud bwai’s expressions of rudeness and badness, which in turn inspired Jamaican popular musicians to create songs about them. As Hutton suggests, the popularization of this figure through music especially contributed to the mapping of postcolonial resistance, predominantly among lower-class men, in the first decade beyond independence in 1962.<sup>9</sup>

Bearing this popularization in mind, the star bwai adds an additional dimension to the ruud bwai persona that is relevant here. The ruud bwai’s performance of rudeness or badness by way of civil or criminal disobedience and a particular attitude, way of dressing, and speaking is heavily informed by the characters played by Hollywood film stars in spaghetti westerns and gangster movies. Identification with the characters played by particular film stars (Clint Eastwood, James Raft, and Humphrey Bogart, for example) informed the ruud bwai persona, posture, and desire for a similar sense of celebrity and fame.<sup>10</sup> When Ivan moves to the city, his ambition is to become a famous singer, and the ruud bwai posture is pivotal to his transformation into a star bwai. As we see through the news media’s obsession with Rhyging in the 1940s and his immortalization in film and novel, infamy also comes to characterize a star bwai.

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9. See Clinton Hutton, “Oh Rudie: Jamaican Popular Music and the Narrative of Urban Badness in the Making of Postcolonial Society,” *Caribbean Quarterly* 56.4 (2010): 22–64.

10. For a discussion of the ruud bwai’s relationship to the filmic cowboy in the decades beyond independence—as it is portrayed in literature—see “Cinema and Caribbean Consciousness: Believing Make Believe” in Keith Warner, *On Location: Cinema and Film in the Anglophone Caribbean* (London: MacMillan, 2000).

In all three versions of Rhyging's narratives across Jamaica's historical and cultural landscapes (news media, film, and novel), it goes without saying that the exploits of this iconic male figure are central. As such, the critical discourse surrounding the film and the novel, beginning in the 1970s, centers in large part on the social and political significance of Ivan's negotiations with various versions of masculinity as mediums for expressing postcolonial sovereignty.<sup>11</sup> This is true even of critiques that address limitations in the ruud bwai persona. Rhonda Frederick's discussion of the "Panamá man" or "Colón man" foregrounds the ex-Panamá canal worker's relationship to nationalism and the possibilities he offers for an empowered black masculinity. The Panamá man in Thelwell's novel is Maas Nattie, who is also one of Ivan's earliest and most stable (financially and spiritually) models of man-ness and whose version of masculinity seems in some ways superior to the ruud bwai model. As Frederick suggests, "Rhygin's death at the end of *The Harder They Come* and Thelwell's depiction of women as left behind (Mirriam, Ivan's country girlfriend), sexually available (Delores), or treacherous (Elsa) [also] stands as signs of the limits of this masculine characterization" (Frederick 120). Both the film's and novel's portrayals of male protagonists in principally male environments problematize the ability to think about the other modes of gendered subject formation they also present. Thus, Frederick rightly points to the ways *The Harder They Come* is about negotiating postcolonial masculinity, and how the women present seem stock in their roles as spiritual transmitter (Miss 'Mando), left behind, provocateur, and traitor.

Frederick here identifies the terms in which Elsa and the other women in the narratives have entered critical conversations. Because of the narratives' essentially masculinist milieu, women in them serve as part of the mise-en-scène, appearing in ways that are conventional when examined against other contemporary work. Frederick compares Miss 'Mando to Ma in George Lamming's *In the Castle of My Skin*, for example, and concludes that they "both . . . [act] as transmitters of peasant and spiritual cultures." In this "guise," she writes, "'Mando and Ma are startlingly familiar representations of the Caribbean female subject, particularly when read against the innovative characterizations of their respective protagonists'" (Frederick 117).

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11. Examples of studies that focus on Ivan's character and his role in the postcolonial political and cultural landscape include Ifeona Fulani's "Representations of the Body of the New Nation in "*The Harder They Come* and *Rockers*," *Anthurium: A Caribbean Studies Journal* 3.1 (2005); Ruben A. Gaztambide-Fernandez's "Reggae, Ganja, and Black Bodies: Power, Meaning, and the Markings of Postcolonial Jamaica in Perry Henzell's *The Harder They Come*," *The Review of Education, Pedagogy & Cultural Studies* 24.2 (2002): 353–376; and Younger's "Historical Experience."

I would like to suggest, however, that this startling familiarity is complicated when it comes to Elsa. In this chapter, I argue that the means by which she is able to secure health care, education, and a future for her ward Man-I—even in her treacherous portrayal—are comparable to Ivan’s, both as innovative characterizations of Jamaican negotiations of sovereignty in the early postcolonial period. Here I am not interested in recovering Elsa as an unambiguously positive model of female identity. The focus on the ruud bwai—and other such masculine postures—as the predominant vessel of postcolonial resistance and rebellion undoubtedly naturalizes masculinity as the embodiment of postcolonial resistance and rebellion and limits the ability to read other modes of resistance and rebellion that are also present. Nonetheless, feminist critiques of the marginalization of women in national narratives also inadvertently serve to reinforce a devaluation of the versions of womanhood depicted in the predominantly masculine narratives of the first and second waves of writing. The dual goals of empowering the dispossessed and marginalized postcolonial subject through resistant forms of masculinity and of recovering female subjectivity from the margins of the nation work together to obscure the expressions of female self-actualization in narratives like *The Harder They Come*.

While I do not deny the value of discussions of rebellious black masculinities or of feminist critiques of the stereotypical representations of women, I focus on Elsa to highlight what continues to be elided due to the ongoing power of these oppositional strategies, formed at particular historical junctures, and ask how reading differently can expand our understanding of the problems of sovereignty—both personal and national—in the postindependence period. Though this chapter performs a recovery of the film’s and novel’s vision of female self-actualization, this reclamation remains contingent on the relationship between Ivan and Elsa and reads this relationship as pivotal to both Elsa’s choices for self-actualization and autonomy and Ivan’s fate.

The title of this chapter is a question that is posed in the film to Elsa, whose resolute response reflects frustration with the dire economic circumstances that leave her powerless to help her ailing adopted son, Rupert/Man-I. The scene begins with Rupert screaming in pain as Elsa and his father Ras Pedro try to dress him. She asks Pedro when the illicit though sanctioned ganja trade will resume, and he replies when Ivan is captured. When asked, “What you say, Elsa?” She replies: “You know what I say, Pedro; every game I play, I lose.” The scene then cuts to another that focuses on Elsa going to see the preacher, her childhood guardian, suggesting that she is about to try her hand at a new game and that this time, hopefully, she will not lose. In both the film and the novel, it is Elsa who tells the preacher where the fugitive Ivan

is hiding, awaiting a boat to escape to Cuba, and the preacher gives this information to the authorities. As a pivotal agent in the progression of the plot, Elsa's visions of sovereignty and self-actualization are entwined with her ability to provide economically for the sick child, both in the present and in the future.

I suggest, then, that in the film's and the novel's 1970s and 1980s milieus, the varied demands of decolonization and gendered empowerment overshadow the ability to read what does not meet either demand. In particular, this chapter illustrates how Caribbean criticism's continued reliance on resistance, rebellion, and revolution, geared towards establishing specific kinds of cultural nationalism, inadvertently replicates within postcolonial contexts exclusionary practices reminiscent of colonialism. Patricia Saunders cautions that "we need to consider the ways in which discourses of resistance also work to reinscribe hegemonic practices, particularly where women are concerned." Moreover, "the cultural, economic, and discursive linking of gender and sexual politics needs to be considered in relation to nationalist politics and nationalist constructions of sexuality" (Saunders, "Is Not Everything" 112). Examining Elsa enables the consideration both of how discourses of resistance in the first wave of writing inscribed a gendered hierarchy and of how gender and sexual politics are themselves linked to nationalist politics.

As my citing of Frederick's and Saunders's work suggests, this chapter's analysis of Elsa relies on strategies of feminist critique facilitated by the third wave that carry on as much as they challenge considerations of nationalist constructions of gender and sexuality. Today, the ruud bwai remains as an iconic and perpetually evolving figure in the Jamaican culture, and as such, through the hindsight of a twenty-first-century vantage point, the cause that Ivan seems to marshal appears more complicated than resisting or being alienated from ruling middle-class nationalistic values. Likewise, Elsa's actions are also more complicated than the predictable gendered assumptions that enabled the critical dismissal of her. The crisis of the postcolonial present requires a revisit of critical assumptions concerning these texts, their hero, and the hero's undoer.

This revisit might begin by considering the role working-class characters like Elsa and Ivan played in the founding of a politically sovereign Jamaican national identity. The reformist goal of Jamaica's independent political machinery was the consolidation of the nation around a plural consensus informed in large part by middle-class cultural values and interspersed strategically with select elements of Afro-Jamaican culture.<sup>12</sup> As David Scott, among

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12. See Rex Nettleford's *Caribbean Cultural Identity* and *Mirror Mirror*.

others, suggests, however, in our contemporary moment this pluralist consensus is in crisis because particular constituencies of lower-class citizens especially have little to no investment in it. A shift has taken place between the 1960s and the present in the relationship between the moral-political spaces occupied by the popular modern and the reforming nationalist middle-class modern who ushered the country into political independence. Today, the former poses a threat to the historical hegemony of the latter, not because it is alienated from it, but because, as Scott suggests, it is indifferent to it (Scott, *Refashioning* 194). In Jamaica, the exclusionary politics of the official national identity replicated colonial hegemonic values and often meant dire economic consequences for some citizens. Participation in various modes of cultural production and informal economic ventures allowed those alienated from official notions of nationalism to insert themselves into markets beyond the stringent control of the state. As such, cultural modalities of self-fashioning and actualization became intricately linked to economic viability.

In *The Harder They Come*, the exploitative though nonetheless potentially lucrative music industry and ganja trade are examples of viable (and sometimes illegal) informal economic ventures. The viability of informal economies (particularly those circulating around popular musical culture) creates autonomy among the once dispossessed and alienated poorer class. Existing alongside values of Christian conservatism, sexual propriety, responsibility, civic decency, and decorum we find the value of the dollar, which can render members of the poorer class no longer alienated from official notions of national citizenship and subjectivity, but instead no longer dependent on and thus indifferent to them.

## Fashioning Self

### RUUD BWAI AND BAD GYAL

How does Elsa's character help to revise/refine/expand critical approaches within this contemporary moment of crisis for cultural nationalism, though? Because it is central to my own understanding of gendered postcolonial modes of self-fashioning and actualization, permit me to outline at minimal length the portions of David Scott's discussion of ruud bwai self-fashioning that are relevant to my analysis of what I call bad gyal self-fashioning and actualization.<sup>13</sup> This includes his sense of what reading Fanon "through" Fou-

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13. This phrase is used to refer to a particular kind of empowered female identity in Jamaican parlance and popularized by/within musical culture.

cult can enable in our understanding of postcolonial subaltern self-fashioning and how the concept of “docile bodies” informs such expressions of self-fashioning. Here and admittedly throughout this book, I take as my own and expand upon the following of Scott’s aims in *Refashioning Futures*: to formulate “a form of reflection that historicizes the present conjuncture as a way of creating politico-conceptual space for transgressing its limits” (Scott 194). Recognizing the critical limits of the present historical conjuncture and creating a conceptual space for transgressing its limits is central to this project. I position bad gyal self-fashioning and actualization as a complementary converse of Scott’s notion of actualization via ruud bwai self-fashioning. To do this, I discuss *The Harder They Come* comparatively with Sistren’s collection of autobiographical testimonies *Lionheart Gal* and Donn Lett’s film *Dancehall Queen*. My discussion of these texts maps the terrain of postcolonial working-class female self-actualization into and beyond the contexts of resistance and rebellion. What I hope to offer in this comparison is a more developed sense of what I refer to here as bad gyal self-fashioning and its relationship to economic viability and sovereign postcolonial subjectivity.

According to David Scott, the ruud bwai is the “paradigmatic Fanonian figure” of the 1960s in his “embodiment of an internalized colonial violence and [as] the practitioner of alienated rituals of resistance that could be read (and was read) into the vision of total anticolonial overcoming” (Scott, *Refashioning* 195). The independent nation, constituted as it was in part by British colonial values, alienated some, who in turn resisted the cultural values of the newly formed nations. Scott, however, sees the ruud bwai as enacting more than resistance and envisions other politico-conceptual possibilities in the current context for this figure that go beyond “total anticolonial overcoming.”<sup>14</sup> Scott centers on the ruud bwai and this figure’s paradigmatic embodiment of Fanonian anticolonial discourse to do the work of revising postcolonial criticism’s oppositional questions into ones that unsettle the settled settlements of postcolonial sovereignty. This work becomes possible by reading the ruud bwai “out of the alienation/realization paradigm . . . and [folding it] into another” (Scott 194). Foucauldian discourse is where Scott suggests Fanonian interpretations of the ruud bwai might be folded. He imagines such theoretical maneuvering as “enabl[ing] us to keep alive a productive tension between (simplifying somewhat here) a demand for the closure of politics and a demand for the deferral that makes space for a genealogical ethics” (Scott 195). Scott’s impulse in reading Foucault with Fanon is to unsettle

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14. While there is some divergence on for whom the indifference of an ascendant working class constitutes a crisis, Deborah Thomas’s theories of modern blackness complements in productive ways Scott’s discussion of the popular modern’s indifference to the national hegemony.

the yearning for collective realization and consensual harmony inherent in processes of decolonization and nation building. For Scott, it is important to “keep alive a productive tension between on the one hand, a politics that aims to find a ground for consensus, and on the other, an ethics that is suspicious of any normative foreclosing of the assertion of difference” (Scott 201). Deferring resolution and consensus buys time for the work of ethicality that resists the impulse to foreclose on difference. Ultimately what is at stake here is the troubling of a brand of liberation purchased by cultural nationalist projects that are contingent on the construction of an essential native subject.

The necessity for Foucault, according to Scott, therefore comes at the place in the Fanonian story that is heavily dependent on a single normalized and central (often) national identity. As critics tend to agree, “the story of the postcolonial state in the Caribbean, [...] is normalized as the story of the empowerment of peoples of African descent, as peoples whose ‘authentic suffering’ has guaranteed them a special and permanent dispensation” (Scott 204). Nonetheless, as Scott suggests, this “licenses too unreflexive an idea of an essential native subject” (Scott 205). This brand of liberation often presupposes the metaphysical idea of an essential nature that is prior to the imposition of historical oppression, such as slavery and colonization. Historical oppression denies the expression of the “Real Self,” represses it within an oppressed self; liberation therefore occurs when repression is removed and the “Real Self” is freed. Scott sees Foucault as encouraging us to be suspicious of “this whole metaphysics of self and power” that sees the liberation of self as a terminus of power (Scott 206). Foucault, in Scott’s estimation, encourages us to ask whether or not the break with colonization produced by political independence is “adequate to the task of constructing the ethical practices of freedom through which the *postcolonial* community is fashioned” (Scott 206).

In colonial and postcolonial contexts, the body is a crucial site for practices of liberty. In my own thinking about female self-actualization among the lower classes, I follow what Scott does in “sketching an indication of some of the coordinates through which a reading of one postcolonial practice of freedom on the site of the body might be pursued” (Scott 209). The body at the center of Scott’s discussion is a male body of the ruud bwai, but I place the female body centrally here in order to illustrate other possibilities of the conceptual-political space that Scott inaugurates. There is value in Scott’s calls to resist normative foreclosing of the assertion of difference and “unsettl[e] the settled settlement of postcolonial sovereignty itself” in order to be more reflexive about this entire business of sovereign postcolonial subjectivity (Scott 204).

Before moving to Elsa, understanding the ruud bwai's body's centrality as a paradigmatic model of alienation/realization in the decades just beyond independence, and the shifting of this centrality in the decades since the 1980s, is pivotal to understanding discourses of postcolonial self-actualization and sovereignty more generally. According to Scott,

The *ruud bwai* is at once a figure of intense fascination and mortal dread, of urban folk-heroization and draconian police operations, at once an emblematic Fanonian figure of internalized violence and rituals of embodied resistance, and the incarnation of a desperate, even pathological, criminality and lawlessness. (Scott 209)

In the late 1960s, the ruud bwai becomes fixed in the new nation's popular imagination through music and comes to embody the prolonged movement of unrest and protest among urban popular forces, particularly among the poorer classes in West Kingston. Thus, "among the more visible of these social forces threatening the order of the nationalist-modern were the *ruud bwais* who struck up an attitude of defiance toward the authority of the state, its police, and its judicial system" (Scott 209). When the revolutionary imagination of resistance during this period is hinged as it was on this figure, the critical ostracizing of another figure that undermines his resistance and betrays him to the authorities becomes a little more understandable. Scott's desire to read the rude bwai in ways other than through discourses of alienation/realization nonetheless also opens up a few additional discursive possibilities for Elsa.

#### DOCILE BODIES: RUUD BWAI VERSUS BAD GYAL

What Scott does is "to rework this idea of the relation between the body of the colonized/postcolonized and power" (*Refashioning* 212). He reads "those contracted muscles, that contorted face, and the deliberate movements" of the ruud bwai "not as the repressed internalization of colonial violence but as the positive signs of a certain practice of self-formation" (212). The practice of self-formation as a practice of freedom is what interests me here. As Scott tries to "understand *ruud bwai* self-fashioning . . . as an ethical practice of freedom," I focus on Elsa to try to understand the gendered limits of self-fashioning as an ethical practice of postcolonial freedom. Scott asks, "How is it possible to practice freedom within the prevailing relationships of power, within the prevailing hierarchies of civility and citizenship?" (214). He asks

these questions to “think *ruud bwai* self-fashioning as a concrete practice of the self that produces a transgressive interruption of the circulation of normalized consensual identities in urban postcolonial Jamaica—those identities that are taken to define *who* belongs (as well as *how* one belongs) to the body politic” (214). Elsa’s attempts at self-fashioning are implicitly detrimental to the impulses of *ruud bwai* self-fashioning and the degree to which her actions can constitute “a transgressive interruption of the circulation of normalized consensual identities in urban postcolonial Jamaica” remains highly disputable, insofar as her actions tangibly effect the *ruud bwai*’s exclusion from the official national body politic (214). Nonetheless, I would argue that the centrality of her body to her own self-fashioning compels us to consider the possibilities she does offer for a “a transgressive interruption of the circulation of normalized consensual identities.” What practices of self and freedom does Elsa represent? Is she simply an agent of the status quo?

According to Scott, “*ruud bwai* self-fashioning constitutes a practice of the self by means of which the (typically) young, working-class male refuses the disciplined body of postcolonial order, refuses to be a ‘docile body’” (214). In a provocative divergence, it is strategically rendering her body as docile that gives Elsa access to a mode of self-fashioning and actualization. This notion of female strategic sexualization is not a new one. It is informed by Carolyn Cooper’s and Donna Hope’s explorations of how women capitalize on their sexual objectification within the milieu of dancehall culture. According to Hope, “for the woman in the dancehall . . . the knowledge of her power and value to the male as a woman becomes a route to her ascendancy. If male heterosexuality is a valuable route to masculine identity, then her role as chief facilitator in this process can be used to ensure her access to resources” (Hope 62). As Cooper suggests further, dancehall’s “affirmation of the pleasures of the body, which is often misunderstood as a devaluation of female sexuality, also can be theorized as an act of self-conscious female assertion of control over the representation of her person” (Cooper, *Sound Clash* 125–125). Though both Cooper and Hope speak specifically about gender and sexuality within the milieu of dancehall culture, their consideration of the sexualized female body as a material resource is relevant to thinking about Elsa’s self-actualization as a similarly disenfranchised working-class woman.

My departure from Scott thus necessarily occurs around the practice of self that resists being a “‘docile body’ available to be worked over by capital, to be worked over by the police, or to be counted by the statistical ideologues of representative democracy” (Scott *Refashioning* 214). While we can read Elsa as “set[ting] out to take hold of the body’s energies [her]self and to impose upon it a new regularity, a new order, a new set of rules and values, a

new patterns of pleasures,” to do this reading, we have to be aware of its gendered parameters. Where the male body is concerned, “central to this new order of the body is precisely the cultivation of an agonism, a decidedly truculent rhythm, and a menacing surface that tears at the edges of the governing classed/raced cohesion” (Scott 214). As *The Harder They Come* illustrates, agonism, truculence, and menace to cohesion are not necessarily hallmarks of female self-fashioning. I would ask here, though, does this then preclude women from the possibilities offered by this approach? Within the Jamaican cultural landscape, is the ruud bwai the only twentieth-century embodiment of the disruption of the project of postcolonial nationalist modern? I suggest that he is not, and propose Elsa’s representation of a yet uncharacterized female subjectivity as an additional embodiment of disruption that exists alongside the ruud bwai.

In the novel, if Ivan is able to conjure up an alternate and empowered reality through cowboy films and star bwai aspirations—which are embodied by Rhygin—Elsa’s recognition of the two (Ivan and Rhygin) as distinctly different personas enables her to use this split to her benefit. The sickly boy Rupert or Man-I provides the motivations for her decisions in the latter half of the narratives. His parents are a part of the police-sanctioned ganja trade, but when his mother is killed by the army in a raid that is a politically motivated show of force against narcotics trafficking, Man-I’s father is left to raise him alone. Providentially, his mother’s death also means his father Ras Pedro needs a new trading partner, and this is where Ras Pedro’s and Man-I’s lives converge with Ivan’s and Elsa’s. Ivan and Ras Pedro trade together, while effortlessly, Elsa assumes responsibility over Man-I’s care. The deterioration of the boy’s health coincides with the halt in the protected ganja trade that is sparked by Ivan’s insubordination, crime spree, and status as fugitive. Because their income stream has dried up, Elsa and Ras Pedro are unable to afford much-needed medical care for Man-I, and as such, Elsa is faced with difficult decisions. When Pedro tells her that the traders don’t want to give Ivan up so that the trade can resume, she concludes “Ivan dead,” . . . “Is Rhygin time now” (Thelwell, *The Harder They Come* 382). Her pronouncement of Ivan’s death acknowledges Ivan’s transformation into a city-worn ruud bwai and seemingly absolves her of responsibility over the fugitive Rhygin. It is Man-I’s health and welfare that is central to her actions from here until the end of the novel. In the wreckage of their home after the police have ransacked it in search of Ivan, she rocks the frightened and sick child

until he was calm and promised him, “You nah dead Man-I. I swear you nah go dead so . . . you, you a go live. I don’t care what I have fe do. You a

go live. No you nah dead. Nor live ina no suffering eider. Ah swear dat to God—a sell me soul an' body firs.” (383–384; my emphasis)

Where the male body’s movements have come to engender the resistance to docility and, by extension for Scott, an expression of self-fashioning, Elsa’s resolve here reflects how women recognize and are able to exploit postcolonial orders’ dependence on disciplined and docile bodies.

In the last two decades, there has been an upsurge in critical attention given to the commodification of sexuality within the Caribbean public sphere, particularly as it relates to the ways global industries like tourism capitalize on the eroticization and oversexualization of Caribbean bodies, and Caribbean female bodies in particular. Kamala Kempadoo’s edited collection *Sun, Sex, and Gold: Tourism and Sex Work in the Caribbean* (1999) and *Sexing the Caribbean: Gender, Race, and Sexual Labor* (2004) are among the first extended analyses of the complex intersections of international capitalism, sexuality, work, and identity in the Caribbean from slavery into the twentieth century. Faith Smith’s more recent edited collection, *Sex and the Citizen: Interrogating the Caribbean* (2011), also draws on the region’s history of sexual exploitation from colonization to the present. Smith’s collection is a multiauthored and interdisciplinary approach to sexuality in the Caribbean, which is situated in yet challenging of the assumptions of feminism, literary and cultural studies, and queer studies. As Sandra C. Duvivier points out, however, while these interventions into the discourses of international capitalist exploitation of the Caribbean region and its bodies are significant, “more critical attention could also be given to ‘private’ representations of the sex industries in these locales, as many sex workers’ activities occur outside of the public sphere with Caribbean counterparts as their main clientele” (Duvivier 1104). Elsa’s decision making in *The Harder They Come* provides an opportunity for thinking about these private representations within a more specific and localized context. For the life and well-being of the child, Elsa is prepared to do what she considers a last resort of sorts—selling her soul and even possibly her body.

The final barrier between her and this decision comes down when the driver refuses to let her ride in the ambulance with the sick boy, saying, “Sorry sister, rules is rules. Tek a taxi nuh” (384). Though she “had open her mouth to scream” she closes it instead and does the following:

She smiled and walked over to the driver. “Den honey . . .” She grinned, fondling his sleeve and trying not to smell his rummy breath. “Den is what time you get off duty. Nobody have to know, y’know—an later . . .” She stroked his arm and rode to the hospital with the boy. (384)

As if the memory of previous barely veiled sexual solicitations were still fresh, Elsa commands the resources she literally has at hand to secure a ride in the ambulance with Man-I by hinting at a future sexual liaison with the driver once he is off duty.

### **"Me tek Radcliff just fi eat food": Elsa through Sistren**

Elsa's actions here can be understood within the larger context of the experiences of working-class women in the two decades immediately following political independence. Her experiences find company with the experiences of real women in the Sistren Collective, for example, whose testimonies are documented in *Lionheart Gal*. I will address in more detail this theater collective, its work, and its literary project *Lionheart Gal* in the next chapter, but a few words briefly for the immediate context. *Lionheart Gal* relates testimonies of Jamaican women, including litanies of rape pregnancy and sexual activity without the most basic of sex education during the formative years of sexual and reproductive development. It also portrays warning parents, grandparents, and guardians, who more often than not turn young women out of their homes, humiliated, once their growing bellies betray pregnancy. In repeated instances throughout the collection, unprotected sexual activity and consequent pregnancy features most prominently among the occasions when young women "first become aware of the fact that [they] were oppressed as [women]" (Sistren 15). It also positions the immediate demands of mothering—material care and welfare for children—as a central priority for women. The decisions they make are determined in large part by the needs of their children. Pregnancy often occasions the end of formal schooling, and the additional financial burden that comes as a result of pregnancy—a new mouth to feed and body to clothe—positions the female body, in *Lionheart Gal*, as an element in her oppression.

Conversely, however, the narratives also assert that prior to finding legitimate gainful employment, more often than not, women exchanged sexual favors for their and their children's livelihood. The narrator of "Ole Massa and Me," for example, confesses entering into a relationship for financial support for herself and her children:

A better me couldn't do mek me go de wid Radcliff . . . Me tek Radcliff just fi get likkle help fi Allan and Rachel. After him go way, Dennis never even come look pon him pickney come see if dem dead or alive. So me tek Rad-

cliff just fi eat food. Me never love him nor notten, but me did a just try fi cope till me come back pon me foot. (Sistren 228–229)

She is uneducated and unemployed, with no means of supporting her children outside of their father's financial support. She runs away from home as a young girl because of a violently abusive brother and begins a relationship with another man, Radcliff, "fi get food" (Sistren 228). "Better" in this case is the ability to financially support herself and her children after their father, Dennis, abandons them. As with Elsa, her children's reliance on her for food and shelter form the basis of her actions. These comments appear as a defensive disclaimer for "tekking" Radcliff. The necessity for providing for her children justifies this sexual relationship.

Empowerment and agency are paradoxically enmeshed in these narratives of oppression by women who "haffi do sometings whe [dem] no really waa fi do, just fi survive," using their bodies to procure the resources necessary for their and their children's survival (Sistren 221). Where Scott sees indifference in ruud bwai self-fashioning, I see complex ways women negotiate the terrain of the popular modern in order to guarantee material benefits for their children, which are often expressed in terms of middle-class values and aspirations for ascendancy and mobility.

If we are tempted to dismiss Elsa's actions on behalf of her adoptive child as clichéd and stereotypical, we are able to resist this temptation by connecting her to the lineage of body-based, maternal, and reproductive resistance that Lucille Mathurin Mair outlines in her study, "Recollections of a Journey into a Rebel Past." Mathurin Mair notes that in her quest to examine women of all races and classes in the region's slave past, "the black slave woman emerged as the most aggressive of women: she took center stage as rebel" and confounded "customary perceptions of the passive sex, whose physical mobility is constrained by motherhood" (Mathurin Mair 55). Accordingly, she describes female slaves as industrial saboteurs both in terms of physical labor and reproductive power:

They aborted regularly . . . When they did give birth, slave women exercised their maternal prerogatives to the maximum: few female acts provoked more frustration and rage in estate managers than women's insistence on nursing their infants for as long as they could and too often for the estate's liking, often for as long as two years. It was an effective strategy because slave laws provided nursing mothers with time off and special allowances, all charged to the estate's accounts. (Mathurin Mair 56)

Though Man-I is not her biological child, Elsa's awareness of her body as a resource is part of this history of maternal resourcefulness. She thus echoes a history of female slave rebellion that occurs within the only terms a slave woman has available to her, her body.

The "eternal Ni" that *Lionheart Gal*'s editor Honor Ford-Smith suggests lurks "behind the familiar image of the domesticated nanny" is also pivotal to our discussion of Elsa in the postindependence context (Sistren 2).<sup>15</sup> In *Lionheart Gal*, the testimonies of women outline how their bodies become both the center of their suffering and the means by which they can exercise power and agency. This claiming of power and agency through the body echoes elements of Ni's legend that situates her locus of resistance within her physical body. According to the Ni legend, "they say . . . [s]he bounced bullets off her bottom or she caught them and threw them back" (Sistren 3). Using her body as a weapon against assault in order to procure survival for herself and the maroons she led resonates with the way Elsa decides to use her body on Man-I's and her own behalf.

Ultimately, understanding female sexual exploitation within a context of resourcefulness, rebellion, agency, and resistance requires an alteration of pre-conceived terms of resistance and agency. As Ford-Smith suggests, to even recognize the Ni characteristics present in women's lives and, by extension, their testimonies of marginalization and sexual victimization, one may need to reconsider power and agency:

It may be necessary to readjust one's sense of the rules of resistance and the limits of power . . . It may mean coming to terms with the ways in which ordinary women have determined their own struggles for themselves and the ways in which they have assessed their own victories and defeats. (Sistren 2–3)

The women portrayed in the collection recognize the potential of their bodies as a tradable commodity that can procure the resources necessary for survival in the absence of other employment and resource-procurement possibilities. Envisioning what can be seen as prostitution as empowerment and agency requires a readjustment of our concept of power, but that readjustment is necessary to understand these women's struggles with their own sovereignty, survival, and self-actualization. These narratives, like Elsa's, portray women who assess their circumstances and decide on particular avenues of action.

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15. Ni refers to Jamaica's only female national hero, Nanny of the Maroons, who was an eighteenth-century maroon leader at the forefront of that group's pre-emancipation resistance to enslavement.

Orphaned and entrusted to the preacher's guardianship, Elsa exists in a predatory space with very few options for protection or escape. Nowhere is this more obvious than when Longah tells Ivan the following in reference to Elsa:

"Is long time Preacha tend dah little cherry tree, y'know. An' when fruit ripe is Preacha to pick it. An' if him doan pick it I figure say I will pick it meself—an' it look like it soon ripe too," he finished with a suggestive chuckle. (225)

Preacha's own struggle with erotic feelings for his ward are narrated earlier in the same chapter, but what is interesting here is Longah's metaphorical suggestion that it is known and accepted that the preacher has groomed Elsa to be a sexual partner once she is of age. If this does not seem sufficiently predatory, Longah's warning to Ivan that he is next in line for Elsa's body gives a sense of the sexualized way in which she is viewed. Elsa seemingly has neither choice nor agency in who takes her virginity, but her actions at the end of the novel show her recognition of the value of her sexuality. This recognition offers problematic yet empowering possibilities for her own command of her sexuality.<sup>16</sup>

Once Elsa leaves the preacher's guardianship, she encounters sexual predation at every turn; when she goes to see about a room, her exchange with the leering landlord is as follows:

"Is you one a go stay ya?" he had asked, running his eyes over her bosom, when she had first inquired about the room.

"Me bother coming from country soon."

"Aho, you breddah? Ah see." He named a figure just about double what she had expected.

"But, dat soun' high, sah?"

"Well, me dear, it *might* could go down y'know," he said, his eyes gleaming with a moist good will. "Is up to you." (277)

Under Preacha's strict guardianship, Elsa is protected to some degree physically and economically from predatory men outside his home. Here Elsa first

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16. Sandra Duvivier cites the Haitian sociologist Carole Charles, who invokes the Kreyol phrase "Kom se kawo tèm" (my body is my piece of land) to describe the ways poor Haitian women with extremely limited economic resources define their body as a form of capital that can reap profits if strategically invested. In pointing this out, I'd like to make clear that viewing the body as capital or marketable commodity isn't unique to these texts or Jamaican culture, but occurs across the region.

becomes exposed to the economic value of her sexuality, but at this stage she responds only with discomfort rather than opportunism.

Until Ivan becomes a ganja trader, Elsa's life is a scuffling one of walking day after day through middle-class neighborhoods looking for work. We get a sense of the futility and humiliation inherent in this activity from Ivan's own early attempts to find work. Within his first few months in town, Ivan is quickly and harshly apprised of the reality of his situation as a new, non-skilled, nonpartisan addition to the "sufferahs" of Kingston. He is scornfully denied legitimate employment that he finds himself begging for, only to be rewarded with scathing words of humiliation that lump him into a sea of other dispossessed youth just like him. In one early encounter, he resorts to begging only after the lady of the house refuses him the work of tending her garden or washing her car, and even rejects the desperate "ah can do anyt'ing, anyt'ing, mam" (172). Her response is indicative of how the ruling class viewed the group of dispossessed young men of which Ivan has unwittingly become a part: "I don't believe in young healthy boys begging—that's what ruining this country. Beg, Beg, Beg. You should be ashamed—go try to make something of yourself. And lock the gate behind you, too. Go on." (172) Her words, laced with class prejudice, deny the reality of few and mostly exploitative employment opportunities, discrimination, and consequent violence endured by the urban working class that is portrayed in the narratives.

This middle-class black wife in the novel espouses an additional dimension of the prejudice that sees the sufferahs as the cause of the country's decline and as a threat to the nation more generally. She ironically does not see her own complicity in the country's failure by denying Ivan legitimate work and then blaming him for not finding work—indeed, chastising him for not being too ashamed to beg. Neither does she see the nonsense inherent in admonishing him to go make something of himself while simultaneously refusing him an opportunity to do just this. This interaction illustrates for the reader the scapegoating, hardship, and prejudice meted out to those like Ivan, who are denied work but criticized severely for resorting to begging and consequently blamed for the nation's problems. Petty criminals—like the handcart boy who robs Ivan within minutes of his arrival in Kingston; Jose, who inducts Ivan into the ganja trade; and eventually Ivan himself—are examples of those who resist this humiliating and debilitating cycle altogether, choosing instead to eke out their living on their own terms through predation and other illegal means.

Elsa's resolute practicality, which is focused on nothing other than legitimate means of survival, initially, nonetheless, contrasts Ivan's approach. What she is prepared to do daily in order to secure work so they can buy food is no longer an option for Ivan. He says, "You want me fe go beg rich people yard-

bwai work fe ten dollars a week fi di *res' a my life?* Well understan' dis—Ah dead firs" (292). To his further outrage, she calls him a "dreamah" when he tells her he is going to make it to be more than a "yard-bwai." Ivan exhibits here that he has higher ambitions for himself than begging or menial work. Elsa seems at this stage incapable of dreaming about anything beyond finding work and buying food. Ivan's involvement in the ganja trade, though, offers her the possibility to imagine contentment beyond survival, within established and inequitable means.

With a steady income from the ganja trade, Elsa is able to rent with Ivan, Ras Pedro, Man-I a "little house," which "she presided over with such satisfaction" (303). Outside of Preacha Ramsey's house, Elsa becomes obviously more mature, not because of the implied sexuality of living as a common-law wife, but rather through presiding over her own domain, and especially taking care of Man-I. Though she expresses her reservations about living with Rastafarians, which are in keeping with the prejudices of the time, she is immediately taken with the child, because the child takes to her: "Look how the solemn-faced little bwai Prince Man-I tek to her—it touch her heartstring dem, the way 'im perk up an' seem to recover strength since she started looking after him" (302). Elsa's fulfillment and self-actualization seems to spring from a maternal instinct: "Little Man-I needed her . . . She felt something in herself open up before that need, blossom and flourish . . . Now she had for the first time in her life what she could call a family and rich contentment in a life she could never have imagined" (302).

While Ivan dreams of being a star bwai, Elsa finds contentment in their unconventional family. This contentment is juxtaposed with the bad memory of the "cramped tenement room . . . the hot eyes and moist looks of the fat landlord, the rummy voices of the girl next door an' her visitors; the hot futile pilgrimages looking for a day's work, door to door." In her new situation she concludes "all that was behind her" (302). Of course, it is problematic that her sense of self-actualization is bound up in domesticity rather than any actual concern for her own self-fulfillment, but it seems shortsighted to be dismissive of the decisions Elsa makes to secure the lifestyle of contentment that she finds, even if it is through illegal means, and even if her desires do not seamlessly fit into established categories of resistance, rebellion, and empowerment.

Upon closer reading, it is unsurprising that Elsa betrays Ivan. The stability and security of a domestic milieu motivates her actions in both texts. In order to protect the contentment and stability of her home and family, she does everything she possibly can to nurse Ivan back to himself both after he receives corporal punishment and after Hilton buys his record from him for

a meager amount with no promise of royalties. As Ivan says, she “is a lion gal” (290). Elsa demonstrates practicality in decision making throughout the novel, particularly as it relates to protecting what she comes to see as her family.

## **“She can cork any session”: Elsa through *Dancehall Queen***

Nonetheless, if Ivan at the end of the narratives self-actualizes as a star bwai through his achievement of infamy and notoriety even in death, where does this leave Elsa? What possibilities are offered within critical practices for her self-fashioning and actualization? In the film, after Ivan’s body falls dead on the beach, the credits roll up against the dancing torso of a woman’s body, offering an interesting commentary on who will be left standing at the end of such struggles with authority. Much like the end of *The Harder They Come*, at the end of *Dancehall Queen*, the power available to the male working-class citizen and the female working-class citizen is oppositionally juxtaposed. It is not in the least unproblematic that both texts seem to pit lower-class men and woman against each other in a fierce battle of survival over very scarce benefits. But the desire for a less exploitative, more cooperative communal reality should not hinder our ability to read and articulate the terms of self-fashioning and actualization that these narratives outline. I position this image of the dancing female body as a bridge from the narratives of *The Harder They Come* to the more contemporary narrative of dancehall culture as it is represented in the film *Dancehall Queen*.

The evolution of dancehall occurs in the historical and political context of the 1980s, and it provides an additional space where women are able to garner (sometimes very lucrative) economic benefits by using their sexuality as currency. Originating among the predominantly black youth of Kingston’s ghettos, dancehall is at once a musical form of recreation and a dynamic commercial space of cultural production that generates capital locally and internationally. Described as reggae’s rebellious younger sibling, the music and culture surrounding it celebrates explicit sexuality, violence, profanity, and consumerism in ways that often conflict with Jamaican society’s more conservative values.<sup>17</sup> Donn Lett’s 1997 film *Dancehall Queen* depicts various

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17. For more extended study of dancehall, see Norman C. Stolzoff’s *Wake the Town and Tell the People: Dancehall Culture in Jamaica* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), Carolyn Cooper’s *Sound Clash: Jamaican Dancehall Culture from Lady Saw to Dancehall Queen* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), and Donna Hope’s *Inna di Dancehall: Popular Culture and the*

sites within dancehall culture that include both performance and production components.

At the center of the film is a depiction of a working-class single mother of two daughters struggling to provide for herself and her family—a narrative we are already familiar with. The local don, Larry, supports Marcia and her two daughters in exchange for sexual access to the older daughter, Tanya, once he believes she is of age. Fifteen-year-old Tanya rejects his sexual advances, and Larry responds by refusing to provide any additional support, leaving Marcia and her children in the lurch. Marcia's income from selling small items (sodas, candy, cigarettes, and beers) from a handcart is insufficient to cover the expenses of Tanya's private schooling, much less the other family expenses. After seeing the reigning dancehall queen Olivine in her everyday clothing and driving a BMW, Marcia begins to entertain the notion of entering the dancehall space, also as a dancer. She invents an anonymous alter ego persona, the Mystery Lady, by enlisting the help of two other women in her community, a generous neighbor and a dressmaker. These cooperative efforts among women on Marcia's behalf echo the collective possibilities for empowerment that we see in the work of Sistren.

Through her Mystery Lady performances, Marcia is able to trade her daughter's sexual objectification for her own by packaging herself as a commodity for consumption within the dancehall economy. Donna Hope's work offers a useful overview of the avenues of production and consumption within dancehall culture through her discussion of the different typologies of "affectors" and "affectees" (Hope 33). The "affectors" are the creators of dancehall culture and include individuals who write the lyrics to be performed by the singers and DJs; operators of the sound systems who provide the music for dancehall events; the economic backers who produce and promote dancehall music, events, and artists for local, regional, and international markets; models and dancers who create the hype within the dancehall through dances, slang, fashion, and styles that will be imitated by dancehall consumers; photographers and videographers who create and disseminate still and moving visual images of dancehall culture within and beyond the boundaries of the actual dancehall; and the DJs who are engaged in the oral performance of dancehall music. The "affectees" are those who consume the dancehall commodities produced by the "affectors."<sup>18</sup> Within the context of these categories, Marcia's entrance into the dancehall economy as a dancer is also as a "dynamic hype creator" in the affector category. As a dancehall dancer, she "engages in

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*Politics of Identity in Jamaica* (Mona: University of the West Indies Press, 2006).

18. For a more detailed breakdown of the typologies existing within each of these categories, see Hope 32–35.

dynamic creation/re-creation and display of dancehall dance styles that are inevitably imitated by dancehall consumers" (Hope 29). Female dancers usually engage in erotic and sexual displays as part of their dance styles. In the privacy of her bedroom, Marcia imitates the style of dress and movement of the other dancers before she makes her debut in the African Star dancehall. The movements are sexually explicit, and the elaborate yet revealing costumes function to erotically display her body at dancehall events.

Marcia's decision to commodify her body within the milieu of the dancehall's culture and economy is juxtaposed with the way her daughter Tanya's body is commodified by Larry and her mother for the family's survival. Instead of continuing to facilitate her daughter's unwilling sexual exploitation, Marcia packages herself for the dancehall to earn the money it will take to sustain her family without Larry's help. Marcia's actions are in keeping with the reinvention "of the terms of struggle and the strategy itself" as Ford-Smith asserts (*Sistren* 3). As Donna Hope argues, within the dancehall, "women are . . . placed in a position where they can and do reap significant economic benefits by using sexuality" (Hope 46). As the Mystery Lady, Marcia performs a sexualized role that also places her in an entrepreneurial position of commodifying her own body for economic advancement. In Hope's words, "the knowledge of her power and value to the male as woman becomes a route to her ascendancy" (Hope 62). Marcia recognizes the value and potential that her body offers for material ascendancy. Recognizing Olivine's ordinariness as similar to her own, she sees no reason why she can't also perform as a dancer, and in turn becomes able to manipulate a system of female sexual objectification for her own benefit.

Narratives like *The Harder They Come*, *Dancehall Queen*, and *Lionheart Gal* complicate notions of female disempowerment postulated by traditional feminist criticism. Such complications suggest that our critical lenses need to be adjusted to accommodate not only modes of unconventional resistance but also the ways these modes of resistance come to constitute a means of actualizing a nontraditional, more empowered and autonomous sense of self that is able to exist within a community in ways the ruud bwai, for example, is not, or perhaps more accurately refuses to do. In her seminal essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," Laura Mulvey does the very important and groundbreaking work of critiquing the male gaze and its effects on female agency:

The split between spectacle and narrative supports the man's role as the active one in advancing the story, making things happen. The man controls the film fantasy and also emerges as the representative of power in a further sense: as bearer of the look of the spectator. (Mulvey 1449)

While Mulvey's argument may seem to leave no room for the empowerment of the spectator's subject, characters like Marcia and Elsa give critics pause to rethink the power dynamics inherent in masculine heterosexual fantasy, particularly within postcolonial and developing spaces. The latter's choice of dress in the novel and the former's Mystery Lady performances capitalize on a male sense of control of the fantasy. Both their seductive performances occur with an awareness that within these inequitably structured communities, it is the men who have the financial means and resources that they need. In *Dancehall Queen*, Marcia uses her sexual objectification to manipulate Larry and Priest, who both receive titillating visual pleasure from her performances as the Mystery Lady, in the dancehall and privately.

Likewise, Elsa, in the novel *The Harder They Come*, resolved in her decision to do whatever it takes to ensure Man-I's health and well-being and emboldened by the enjoyment she experiences in overt flirtation, writes the document that seals Ivan's fate. She "dressed herself carefully in the red satin blouse and miniskirt about which she and Ivan argued. She had never worn them before. The buttons had been ripped from the tight blouse so she knotted the ends and went into the street" (387). Dressed in the skirt she refused to wear for Ivan for reasons of modesty, she proceeds to the preacher's house, and their exchange is imbued with Elsa's sense of confident assurance in the cleric's desire for her body and the ways she can manipulate this desire. She says: "I've brought what you always wanted." Though he seems to resist with "You're not welcome here, dressed like that," she counters confidently, "'Cho Preacha, admit say you like it, nuh' she teased, and spun provocatively" (387). We do not get a full account of what she tells the preacher to copy and sign, but what we do get refers only to the elements Elsa wishes to use her sexuality to exchange: "received this information from . . . for the care . . . an' education of said Man-I" (388). It is worthwhile to point out here that the film and the novel have very different representations of Elsa's attire when she makes this visit to Preacha. The novel presents a more sexually objectified Elsa, dressed in red, and the film presents a penitent-looking Elsa, dressed in white, with her hair covered. Though the appeal of both outfits might be different, the motivation behind them is the same. Whether penitence or seduction, her selected attire is meant to placate her spectator so that he can more easily be manipulated for her benefit.

Both women make "things happen" through female spectacle, designed for male sexual gratification, in the interest of advancing their narratives, their own upward social mobility, and the financial ability to take care of their children. While the pleasures of the body articulated here are located within the context of the dancehall, I would suggest that affirming notions of

the pleasures of the body are transportable into other areas of women's lives. Dancehall can be understood as an "erogenous zone," as Carolyn Cooper suggests, a "liberatory space in which working class women and their more timid middle-class sisters play out eroticized roles that may not ordinarily be available to them in the rigid social conventions of the everyday" (Cooper, *Sound Clash* 103). Despite the propensity to understand sexual capitalization solely as a devaluation of female sexuality, closer attention to women like Elsa and Marcia allows us a more complex idea of female sexual performance as a mode of self-fashioning and actualization in ways that also potentially transcend class. Both films illustrate complicated active/masculine and passive/feminine binaries, adding an additional layer of reluctance to thinking about Elsa as an active agent in the orchestration of her own future at the expense of Ivan's. While their manipulation by men is undeniable, relegating either of these women to passive objects of pleasure is not a necessary conclusion.

Marcia's awareness of the male control of the fantasy allows her through performance to manipulate her position as object of that fantasy to secure upward economic mobility for herself and her daughters. Spliced into the sequence of her dance performance for the dancehall queen competition are scenes of the fight between Priest and Larry, which ends fatally for Priest. Her performance gets more frenetic, her gyrations more provocative as the violence between the two men escalates. The two-scene sequence is united by the same song "What's the Move." At the end of the song, Marcia wins the contest and \$100,000 in prize money, Priest the murderer is dead, Larry is humiliated that he was tricked by a woman he had previously rejected in favor of her teenage daughter, and more importantly, the community is overjoyed that one of their own, "a normal street vendor," has risen to the ranks of dancehall stardom. She leaves the African Star lawn in her everyday clothes as Marcia, amidst a throng of adoring fans, pushing her cart down the street.

Her return to Marcia suggests that she consciously separates the two—the Mystery Lady is an alter ego who is performed by Marcia, who is the real person. The performance of the fantasy ensures the livelihood of the reality. The confidence and empowerment she gains in performance mode, however, is undeniable; on and off stage, her performing body secures the financial means of not only supporting her family but also avenging her murdered friend, the loss of her brother's sanity, and the rape of her daughter. The film ends with Marcia smiling directly into the camera, a woman more self-assured and confident from her victories, as well as \$100,000 richer.<sup>19</sup>

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19. Before my discussion of a filmic depiction of the dancehall becomes construed as a wholesale pronouncement that the film and the culture of the dancehall it depicts are unproblematised sites of empowerment and agency for women, it is important to point out that

*The Harder They Come* offers us a glimpse of something similar for Elsa. In the final pages of the novel, Elsa uses Ivan's notoriety to rebuff the advances of the ambulance driver, who she ultimately does not sleep with, in an exchange that she enjoys: "she smiled at him flirtatiously, genuinely beginning to enjoy herself" (385). We can surmise that what Elsa enjoys here is not only the flirtation but the ability to control and manipulate the resources she has at hand. The seductive self is one she ultimately embodies to manipulate oppressive circumstances for her own benefit. The inability to separate two personas, as Elsa and Marcia can, is perhaps the ruud bwai's fatal flaw. Authenticity has its limits.

### "Dese is you fuchah"<sup>20</sup>

Ivan is lured from the safe confines of his mountain home by his aspirations to become a famous singer, which is ultimately a desire to live a life worthy of note. Naming his acts of criminality as "history to raas" suggests an understanding of the monumentality ascribed to recorded events and a consciousness about these events within his community (349). What he does affects the lives of others, and he expresses pride and excitement in participating in an event named, recognized, and lived as "history." In the novel, Ivan manages to achieve historical notoriety, worthy of his own folk song, just like the policeman from his favorite ballad as a child, but he achieves this through

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female performance within the dancehall does not neutralize or negate male domination. For example, leading up to the big show that would feature the dancehall queen competition between the Mystery Lady and the reigning queen, Olivine, is a musical montage of the various precompetition preparations, all of which involved some level of profit generation. Flyers are printed and posted en masse throughout the city to advertise the dance, vendors stock up to prepare for the event's crowd, and Marcia prepares herself by participating in a publicity photo shoot and fits costumes for the competition. The depiction of the dancehall economy at work presents the problems inherent in an uncritical and wholesale pronouncement of dancehall culture as empowering for women. This culture is far too complexly textured for any hasty either/or pronouncement. Instead, what is ascertainable is that the dancehall space is one that generates money, and as such, it allows women to capitalize on their own exploitability through particular kinds of performance. The purse for the contest is \$100,000, but what does the actual dance pull in at the gate and in bar proceeds? The overall wherewithal and power here lies with Beenie Man, who declares the contest and announces it to frenzied dancehall fans. As the promoter, he stands to benefit far more from the proceeds of the dance than the winner will benefit from the actual prize money. The women, who are the main attraction, have no claim on this larger source of money. In the film, then, Marcia's (and Olivine's) bodies become the literal background of a financial machinery that circulates more capital around the dancehall than the grand prize and dancehall queen trophy.

20. Thelwell, *The Harder They Come* 326.

criminality. Throughout the narrative, this sense of personhood remains legitimately unattainable to him as a lower-class “sufferah,” and he finds personhood, notoriety, and fame only through crime. Ironically, though he dies, he has achieved all the goals he set for himself. His infamy leads to the popularity of his reggae song, while his time as a fugitive has the country in fear yet enthralled for months leading up to his death. At the end of the novel, the ruud bwai’s endurance in the popular imagination is conveyed through the game played by the two boys after his death. Child’s play evokes and resurrects Rhygin, who continues to be versioned beyond the grave. Thus, while ruud bwai self-representation is by no means dead in our contemporary cultural landscape, the ruud bwai’s fatal indifference to established order can be juxtaposed with the bad gyal’s manipulation of order from within the confines of an oppressive system.

In the novel, many of the poor city dwellers share a similar reality of migration and dispossession; this shared experience is given some prominence in the novel through the delineation of its own narrative perspective in sections headed by the title “Tribal Vershann.” These sections convey the urban community’s collective consciousness. The first time in the novel that this narrative perspective appears is when Ivan returns from his trip back to his mountaintop home to find that he literally had nothing left there. Ras Pedro’s instincts when he says “Ah feel me breddah get a blow” are correct in their characterization of the impact of Ivan’s loss of his idealized conceptualization of his mountain origins (324). For Ivan, “far, far back in his mind, lying dormant and unused but nevertheless very present and comforting, had been the notion that the mountains and river would always be there, unchanged and waiting” (325). When he returns, he realizes that everything about the mountains and rivers was changed; furthermore, nothing from Blue Bay to his mountaintop was waiting for him. He acknowledges not having any plans to go back except showing off his success, but he also acknowledges a desire to “feel the presence of his generations. To renew himself with the splendors of his childhood.” He saw it as a place that he could retreat to, when “broken like Mad Izaac he could creep back and lose himself in the warm untroubled waters of his beginnings and await the end.” His certainty that his childhood home would always be waiting for him whenever he needed to return “walked with him, an invisible anchor, a silent comfort” (325).

When he does return, though, Blue Bay’s fisherman’s beach is now the site of the Sunset Cove Condominiums, prohibitively guarded by a “Private Property” sign, no longer freely accessible to the fishermen, but only to “members,” who are predominantly tourists (314). Perhaps even worse, when he tries to find his family’s land, he “missed the turnoff on his way in; it seemed no more

than a stony track steep and rutted, running up the gut of the mountain” (320). He searches the landscape “in vain” for his “people’s graves.” Unable to recognize any of the vestiges of his youth or the lives of his ancestors who lived on this land for generations, Ivan laments, “Whe’ de kitchen? The pig sty? De coffee patch? The goat pen? *Lawd Jesas, a whe’ me deh?*” (320). His shock and grief stems from the absence of any indication of his family’s presence in this landscape: “All signs of human presence, industry, organization, order, were gone without visible trace . . . There was no evidence of the passage of generations, the ancestors whose intelligence, industry and skill had created a self sufficient homestead here. None—at all” (320). With resignation he concludes, “*Nuttens no de ya now, me can’ even get down deh.*” This inability to even access his relatives’ graves is tantamount to losing his ancestors; he cries repeatedly, “*Lawd Jesas, me people*” (321). The novel’s omniscient narrative voice tells us that finally Ivan “realized just how important this sense of place was to his most fundamental sense of himself” (321). The certainty of access to this place and its ancestral grounding is the essence of Ivan’s sense of self and dignity up until this point in the novel—a connection he makes, unfortunately, when it is too late.

Ivan is not alone in this need for a rural anchor, but as the novel suggests, this anchor is more an object of his imagination than it is material. Indeed, modernity creates the imagined country past as its point of origin, just as nationalism creates the folk. As the novel tells us, “the same certainty [in a rural past] was a part of the psyche of all the city’s dispossessed” (325). The imagined reality of “back a me bush” becomes a source of dignity among the denigrated and dispossessed:

One heard it often . . .

“Bwai, me no have fe take dis shit, y’know—me can jus’ go back a me bush.”

“Not because you see me so, y’know—me come from somewhere, y’know.”

“No bother t’ink say me have fe stay yah, y’know—fe me people land de a country await.” (325)

Ivan’s mother, Miss Daisy, expresses similar sentiments after a particularly grueling and humiliating day as a domestic worker. “Me ‘bush’ offers those subject to the city’s oppressive inequalities a sense of land ownership that gives dignity and hope through an ever-present possibility of escape (135). It also imbues a sense of origin, lineage, and ownership that counterbalances the squalor of their urban lives. Nonetheless, the novel’s depiction of the rapid modernization of Ivan’s “bush,” through the tourist and bauxite industries,

undermines the remembered rural past's capacity to counteract the displacement and disenfranchisement of urban working poor. Ivan's loss of his folk origins marks his descent into violent criminality and presages the full emergence of Rhygin. The novel describes this break first as a psychic one, where Ivan becomes suspicious of the concreteness of his idealized memories of his childhood. He wonders if "he too was the victim of false history, memories of realities that had seemed so solid and permanent but were really ephemeral things, shared by no one" (326). Despite the ironic fact that the "tribe" of the city's dispossessed shares this sense of anchoring, what seems to demarcate Ivan is what happens to him when he loses his certainty in it. Thus his transformation to Rhygin is characterized by the following: "All that was real was what he had now. The past had deserted him and the future . . . raas, what name so?" (326).

Ivan is unable to imagine a future without his tangible sense of his history, yet a moment of ironic foreshadowing occurs when a fellow ganja trader named Midnight Cowboy casts the guns—destructive instruments of violence—as his future. Ivan's loss of his ancestral grounding is also a loss of himself and a surrender of sorts to Rhygin. The guns he purchases from Midnight Cowboy directly after he returns from the mountains replace his ancestral grounding. As Midnight Cowboy says, "Dese is you fuchah" (326). After spending some time "acquainting himself" with the guns in a cane field, Ivan "was exhausted but felt as though something had been replaced. Not restored, for what was gone could not be restored, but there was something in its place" (326). As the narrative continues, "is desso it begin" (326). As we see through Ivan, ruud bwai subjectivity embodies a sense of loss, replacement, and a clear split between differing modes of self-fashioning, which is not the case in portrayals of bad gyal subjectivity under consideration.

The tensions inherent among various avenues of self-fashioning and actuation in this cultural milieu provoke for the ruud bwai a psychic split, which is also characterized by a break with reality. The film version of *The Harder They Come* visualizes this split with flashbacks to films and the experience of watching films; the novel presents Ivan's muddled stream of consciousness through the memory of films and the film-going experience. Thus, when the security forces storm the beach where he is hiding, he says, "So what dem a wait for—is *Sands of Iwo Jima* dis to raas? Is mus' Iwo Jima dem t'ink dem deh" (389). Ivan reads the scene as he has read others, through the ethos of a particular film—this time through a 1949 depiction of a World War II battle.<sup>21</sup> This invocation of the theme of neo-imperialism as represented through

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21. Ivan's first act of violent criminality also occurs under distorted vision, where the lines between reality and film are blurred. Amidst the altercation with Longah,

the various military campaigns of World War II imbues the scene of Ivan's execution with similar resonances of freedom and self-determination.

For Ivan, the context for these global concerns comes from what he sees on the big screen. It is through these imaginative tropes that Ivan can imagine an empowered sense of self in his postcolonial Jamaican environment, and it is unsurprising that the lines between his actual reality and film realities become blurred in this final showdown. His question, "Were they real—or another scene from a movie," reflects a sense of confusion. According to the hero model, if this is a film and he is its hero, he can't die, at least not until the end of the movie. For Ivan, "show doan over a raas! Star-bwai can' dead after all . . ." In the film's script and in history, it is the invading forces that prevail, however, and for Ivan, this last scene is on the last reel. In a misreading that proves fatal, Ivan erroneously envisions his own victory through a two-gun showdown: "Sen out you fastes' gun—de bes' man uno have. Sen' him out" (390). Ivan's execution doesn't occur in a two-gun showdown, but the security forces gun him down en masse. The sands of Lime Caye are not the sands of Iwo Jima, nor are they a town in the wild American west. Unlike his female counterpart, at the end of this narrative the ruud bwai seems tragically unable to effect a successful convergence between an oppressive postcolonial reality and an actualized self.

## Conclusion: What Elsa Says

Both *The Harder They Come* and *Dancehall Queen* juxtapose the bad gyal's manipulation of order with the ruud bwai's fatal indifference to established order. Though the ruud bwai is cast as a villain in the latter film and a hero

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suddenly a strange thing happened. His head cleared and he was there but not there. In one way he seemed detached and floating above it all, seeing himself on the ground with a burly figure crouched above him. He saw himself rolling quickly out of Longah's reach, jumping to his feet and whipping out his *okapi*. He saw Longah stop, look alarmed and break off a bottle. It was like watching the scene in *From Here to Eternity* where Lancaster and Borgnine are in the bar. He heard himself say, "If it's a killing you want Fatso, it's a killing you get." (256–257)

Ivan goes through an out-of-body experience that separates him from reality and transports him into an alternate filmic reality in which he is the star bwai, so his victory in this battle is guaranteed. Omniscient narration conveys a scene in which the reader can see Ivan cognitively transforming his reality. His disconnect from actual reality is illustrated by his repetition of lines from the film *From Here to Eternity* in the midst of the fight. Ivan, though victorious over Longah in this battle, is subject to a humiliating round of bare-bottomed corporal punishment that makes him urinate like a child on the impact of the tamarind switch.

in the former, both are violent criminals, fatally slain at the end of the films. Priest's death suggests the community will no longer be terrorized by the violence that he carries out at the behest of the humiliated area leader Larry. Marcia's Mystery Lady performance also restores peace and autonomy to the community. Thus, the celebration that accompanies her exit from the dancehall after she wins the competition is imbued with a sense of her role in returning the community to a peaceful and unterrorized existence. Elsa, however, experiences no parallel congratulation for the implied resumption of the ganja trade—a lifeline of sorts of the impoverished West Kingston community. Through to the end of the film and novel, the community rallied to protect their hero, Rhygin, and even though Elsa's actions, like Marcia's, effect a similar restoration of order in a significantly flawed system, there is obvious resistance to seeing Elsa in triumph.

I should pause briefly to point out that in both cases, the order that is restored remains unproblematised. In neither case is institutional change depicted as a significant part of the solution to extreme poverty, dispossession, sexual exploitation, and disenfranchisement within urban working-class communities. Theorizing about the processes that could effect more significant and meaningful institutional change is beyond the scope of this project, but my point nonetheless is that in the presence of minimal institutional change, citizens invent creative and plural means of self-actualization, which we need to be critically savvy in addressing. In looking at these texts together, three things stand out. First is the progression of a particular sense of self-fashioning and actualization among working-class women, second is the near-lack of institutional and infrastructural change contributing to this progression, and third is the question of how critics can begin to speak to the inventiveness of these modes of self-actualization in the absence of institutional change.

Ivan's inability to imagine a future without his ancestral grounding offers an opportunity to think about this sense of evolution. At first glance, one might be tempted to say that there is no future for the violent and disruptive ruud bwai in the Jamaican cultural landscape. His iconic presence as an influential and powerful fixture in cultural reality nonetheless forces a revision of this conclusion: there is no future for the ruud bwai within the existing version of official middle-class Jamaican nationalism, and as such, his investment is in formulating an alternate reality within the space of the contemporary popular modern. That Ivan cannot imagine a possible future in the city beyond the loss of his ancestral anchoring is indicative of the lack of legitimate modes of self-fashioning and actualization among youths like Ivan. The novel offers Rastafari and Christianity as other possible options,

but it portrays the adherents of the former as enduring sufferers with delusions of grandeur and the adherents of the latter as repressed and oppressively legalistic. In absence, then, there is invention, and ruud bwai self-fashioning ultimately is an exercise in inventing alternate avenues of self-actualization beyond the confines of rigid and inaccessible legitimized avenues.

If we can draw genealogical linkages between Ivan and the late twentieth-century ruud bwai as David Scott does, we can draw similar linkages between Elsa, the women of Sistren, and Marcia. What these linkages tell us about is the future possibilities of both ruud bwai and bad gyal self-fashioning and their varying proximity to and relationship with a ruling though waning cultural nationalism. The female subject appears in some ways more invested in gaining access to the established status quo, even if the means are not legitimate ones. *The Harder They Come* offers us the opportunity to parse the gendered nuances of alienation and indifference. Elsa's lack of familial lineage is also not insignificant when we consider how heavy the loss of his own lineage is to Ivan. In the end, Elsa's ability to flexibly negotiate her self-actualization through motherhood, in a manner that unselfishly incorporates the interests of others, starkly contrasts with Ivan's sense of all-or-nothing anomie. Nonetheless, like ruud bwai self-actualization, bad gyal self-actualization is also indicative of a multiplicity of relational identities present within the Jamaican popular modern, which enables the unsettling of the nationalist modern vision of the postcolonial state and its reliance on a singular conception of citizen-subject.

David Scott's discussion of the ascendance of the popular modern and ruud bwai self-actualization, along with Deborah Thomas's discussion of modern blackness, both make significant inroads in framing how critics can begin to view the ranges of inventiveness to be found within the popular modern. Thomas's modern blackness, for example,

is a part of and itself embodies the cultural plurality that frames the range of ideological and political possibilities for contemporary Jamaicans, [and] it is less a stable and coherent ideological framework for action than a way of seeing, organizing, and imagining that can negotiate and incorporate other ways of seeing, organizing, and imagining (Thomas 261).

Though Thomas and Scott, among others, provide vigorous rereadings of class and sovereignty, with an eye towards a more plural politics, however, these rereadings more often than not end up celebrating the working class as the sole proprietors of subaltern difference.<sup>22</sup> In its analysis of Jean Rhys's

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22. I am grateful to one of my anonymous readers, who helped me develop my discussion

*Wide Sargasso Sea* and of the testimonies of the middle-class sistren in *Lion-heart Gal*, the next chapter explores the limitations of the default criticism of the middle class that middle-class Caribbean commentators have tended to engage in, where the middle-class wrings its hands for not being working class and gets to speak for the working class as well.<sup>23</sup>

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of the role of class in issues of authorship, collaboration, and narration and this role's relationship to matters of sovereignty throughout this book.

23. A noteworthy exception to this default criticism of the middle class is Belinda Edmondson's *Caribbean Middlebrow*. This study of middle-class cultural production that spans the nineteenth and twentieth centuries also informs my discussion of class and sovereignty.

# 3

## "NO, MY GIRL, TRY BERTHA"

### RACE, GENDER, NATION, AND CRITICISM IN *WIDE SARGASSO SEA* AND *LIONHEART GAL*

We stared at each other, blood on my face, tears on hers. It was as if I saw myself. Like in a looking-glass.

—*Wide Sargasso Sea*<sup>1</sup>



The tales and the process of making them suggest the possibility of a unity between the aesthetic imagination and the social and political process.

—“Introduction,” *Lionheart Gal*<sup>2</sup>

## Introduction

Early in Jean Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea*, a child hits her playmate in the face with a “jagged stone” (41). This depiction of acrimony between two girls of different races—one black, the other white or creole—in the immediate post-emancipation context of the novel is understandable. Already high tensions between the ruling white planter class and ex-slave black working class during this period were further exacerbated by the impending importation of Indian and Chinese indentured laborers to augment the existing but increasingly unreliable ex-slave work force.<sup>3</sup> The responses of both girls in this moment of

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1. Jean Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea* (New York: Norton, 1992), 41.

2. Sistren, *Lionheart Gal*, 3.

3. For more in-depth information on the nineteenth-century importation of Chinese and East Indian indentured laborers into the West Indies, see Walton Look Lai, *Indentured Labor*,

violence suggest conflicts that go beyond racial hostility, however. When Tia hurls the stone at Antoinette, the latter is running towards her playmate, with whom she "had eaten the same food, slept side by side, bathed in the same river" (41). Disgruntled ex-slaves razed Antoinette's home and her family is forced to flee the burning Coulibri estate out of fear for their lives. When Antoinette sees Tia in the crowd of angry ex-slaves, she runs to her, because for Antoinette, Tia represents home, friendship, stability, and freedom. Antoinette says,

I ran to her, for she was all that was left of my life as it had been . . . As I ran, I thought, I will live with Tia and *I will be like her*. Not leave Coulibri. Not to go. Not. When I was close I saw the jagged stone in her hand but I did not see her throw it. I did not feel it either, only something wet, running down my face. (41, my emphasis)

In the moments of this crisis, Antoinette sees Tia as a safe space of freedom and refuge, away from the turmoil of being creole in this postemancipation society. She even desires to be "like" Tia. This is an odd sentiment because by virtue of race and wealth, it is Antoinette who at first seems to be in a desirable position. Nonetheless, the act of violence between playmates, and Tia's subsequent tears, suggest that a friendship between these two girls of different race and class statuses, while briefly possible, is not uncomplicated. Antoinette continues, "We stared at each other, blood on my face, tears on hers. It was as if I saw myself. Like in a looking-glass" (41).

Antoinette seeing a reflection of herself in her black playmate's face, and her desire to be like Tia, raise questions about the troubled alliance between them. What do Tia's tears mean? What does it mean for Antoinette to see herself in a black child's face? The only variance between the two girls that Antoinette notes in this reflection is the blood on her face and the tears on Tia's. The near-mirror image and difference between blood and tears allow us to think about both the elements that separate these girls and the ones that link them. The interracial camaraderie implied here is disrupted by Tia's place among the mob of ex-slaves who raze Antoinette's home and force her family to flee their estate in fear for their lives.

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*Caribbean Sugar: Chinese and Indian Migrants to the British West Indies, 1838–1918* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993) and *The Chinese in the West Indies 1806–1995: A Documentary History* (Kingston: The Press University of the West Indies, 1998); Andrew Wilson, *The Chinese in the Caribbean* (Princeton: Markus Wiener, 2004); Ann-Marie Lee-Loy, *Searching for Mr. Chin: Constructions of Nation and the Chinese in West Indian Literature* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2010); and Aisha Khan, *Callaloo Nation: Metaphors of Race and Religious Identity among South Asians in Trinidad* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).

In this chapter, I take this distorted “looking glass” image of two girls, different in race and social status but similar in gender and country of birth, as a narrative point of entry to reflect on how our practices of reading and writing have engaged with interracial relationships between Caribbean women and what such relationships reveal about the nuanced complexities of representing sovereign Caribbean female subjectivity. Though separated by race and class, Tia and Antoinette are playmates, and the moments of friction and violence between them are symbolic of racial tensions in the novel’s larger postemancipation context. They are also more specifically symbolic of the tensions within representations of Caribbean female subjectivity. This is not to say that the friendship between these girls is unproblematic. There is an additional moment of friction between the two when Tia cheats Antoinette out of her pennies and steals her dress, and the two exchange derogatory racial epithets (22). This fight notwithstanding, Rhys portrays not only a context in which the two girls existed together and played together but also one in which Antoinette could imagine Tia’s existence as one that is far less constrained and restrictive than her own. The blood on Antoinette’s face is indicative of the vulnerability of a racially empowered subject. Tia’s tears reflects her own confusion about the violence that surrounds her, her place as an agent in it, and the placement of a playmate in the position of enemy. Nonetheless, both are native to this colonial space and Tia’s tears bear out this confusion of enemy and ally. This conflicted moment of mirroring and violence that we see through Antoinette’s eyes also reflects the difficulties we continue to face as Caribbean literary critics in reading and writing about the relationship between women of different races and classes. This is a sustained difficulty that continues to affect our ability to imagine sovereignty in postcolonial contexts.

I characterize these sustained difficulties by discussing, alongside *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the work of the Sistren Theatre Collective—the two testimonies by mixed-race middle-class women in its collection of written testimonies, *Lionheart Gal*, in particular. I do this to highlight a literary and critical continuum that helps demonstrate the outer limits of the possibilities for critically assessing relationships among diverse Caribbean women. Evelyn O’Callaghan, Alison Donnell, Tracy Robinson, and Michelle A. Rowley are among the revisionist feminist critics whose work remains central to my thinking about some of the persistent limits in theorizing nonblack female subjectivity across the history of Caribbean writing.<sup>4</sup> For O’Callaghan, the

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4. I cite these scholars specifically here because their work on race, class, and gender is of immediate relevance in discussing the tensions between working-class black women and mixed-race middle-class women in Rhys’s and Sistren’s texts. Work on broader ethnic plural-

late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century white creole woman “problematises” West Indian literature’s perennial concern with identity (O’Callaghan 17). O’Callaghan’s exploration of “outsiders’ voices” via readings of Rhys, Bliss, and Shand advocates for “attending to the dynamics of interrelating sources of influences,” which in turn lends more complexity to West Indian literature’s identity quests (O’Callaghan 13). For O’Callaghan, white female writers’ portrayals of “interrelating sources of influence,” which are produced by the mutual (but not necessarily equal) dependency of black and white women within domestic spaces, for example, offer possibilities for reading “these early narratives as partially deconstructing the concept of the black woman as powerless and inferior” (O’Callaghan 26). Portrayals of “acts of resistance, of subversion, as innocuous as a deliberate refusal to invest energy (‘laziness’) or as desperate as infanticide necessarily mitigate against the depiction of black women as powerless and passive.” Moreover, “in these early narratives, ‘silenced’ black and mulatto women are a formidable presence” (O’Callaghan 27). Thus, “the strategies of white women writers for inserting themselves into the history of colonization in the region, and thus into ‘the popular imagination,’ are therefore all the more important to any study of the ‘emergence’ of West Indian literature by women” (O’Callaghan 22).

O’Callaghan shifts attention to writing by white women, however, in part to mark the formidable though “silenced” presence of black or mulatto women in this writing, long before their appearance in standard histories of Caribbean literature. O’Callaghan’s recovery of white female writers is premised on what they reveal about these “silenced” black presences. This sense of interrelationality among women of different races is instrumental for what it reveals about black and mulatto subjects, but it nonetheless seems to be a critical gesture that consigns the visibility of black female subjectivity to white women and also subordinates white women in their own narratives. Inclusion here seems to be premised on what texts written by others can illuminate about the lives of black West Indian women.

My examination of Rhys’s and Sistren’s treatment of nonblack Caribbean female subjectivity will show that this peculiar subordination creates critical paradoxes that continue to inform spaces of difficulty in addressing nonblack subjectivity in West Indian discourses. As Donnell suggests, these paradoxes occur because of the contingencies upon which Caribbeanness rests:

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ity in Caribbean discourse has gained momentum in the last decade, as is exemplified by studies like Brinda Mehta’s *Diasporic Dis(locations): Indo-Caribbean Women Writers Negotiate the Kala Pani* (Kingston: University of the West Indies Press, 2004) and Puri’s *The Caribbean Postcolonial*.

At certain critical moments the “nationalist,” the “resistant,” the “oppressed” and the “displaced” have been constructed as bona fide figures of Caribbeanness and [ . . . ] in these moments, only they have been allowed to occupy the place of ethical or the redemptive subject (Donnell 6).

My goal is not to identify or recover a nonblack female subjectivity that can occupy a position among these “ethical or redemptive subject[s],” but instead, to highlight how the reification of “bona-fide figures of Caribbeanness” occurs via the subordination of other subjectivities. As Michelle A. Rowley suggests, contemporary Caribbean feminism “requires that we question those rhetorical and political strategies that render a black female subaltern subjectivity as an *a priori* feminist constituency” (Rowley 13). Indeed, for Rowley, “gender’s viability in Caribbean feminist theorizing operates primarily through the invocation of a *very specific*, often unstated woman thing: the black, female, heteronormative maternal subaltern imaginary in whose name gender is both constituted and deployed” (Rowley 14). Alongside Donnell, Rowley provides a potential site of resistance to unitary, rational, heteronormative, and always-agentive lenses for Caribbean subjectivity, one that functions through a brand of relationality that can access Scott’s notion of “different ways of being in common.” Thus, as Rowley suggests,

Rather than grant primacy to race, gender, or nationality as prediscursive—or, more popularly designated “contradictory”—phenomena, we are better served by observing what becomes salient through the field of play in which power reveals itself. This is an approach that foregrounds the context in which identities are discursively produced as what matters (be it for the naming of oppression or its corollary, justice). In this way, it is not that gender or race as examples no longer matter. It is that the field of play allows for gender or any other identity marker to *matter differently and specifically*, based on the various discourses at work in the question of what constitutes justice at any given historical marker. (Rowley 15)

As the work of Rhys and the Sistren Collective attest, an *a priori* granting of primacy to specific constituencies based on race, gender, and/or class is complicit with the development of an empowered black female subjectivity through willful denials of other subjectivities. Read comparatively, both texts allow us to see how across the development of the West Indian literary tradition in the twentieth century, an empowered subjectivity for the black subject often occludes or perhaps overlays similar possibilities for the creole or white

subject.<sup>5</sup> My focus on interrelationality among West Indian women, within the terms of O'Callaghan's usage, is not so much aimed at understanding racial subject formation as at examining the limitations of thinking about relations among women only in terms of racial identity.

Rhys's novel encapsulates the various difficult and often insufficiently articulated relations surrounding race, gender, and perceptions of self that are central to this discussion. It provides an opportunity to consider the priorities of first-wave Caribbean writing and the ways they are mediated by specific raced, classed, and gendered subjectivities. *Wide Sargasso Sea* also debunks the third-wave notion of the voiceless and absent ancestor on whom the genesis of Caribbean feminist discourse depended, and ultimately it provides a context for historicizing the treatment of interracial and interclass relationships among women in West Indian discourses. Where O'Callaghan and Donnell follow archival and revisionist impulses, I add to this conversation a more developed sense of the contemporary consequences of eliding certain periods, authors, texts, and subjects in the service of tradition making. I suggest in this chapter that we focus not on Tia and Antoinette's subjectivities but on their relationship as a different kind of difficult subject—one that points the way towards addressing the problems of gender, race, class, language, and power that Honor Ford Smith identifies in the work of the Sistren Collective, and that are central to the two understudied testimonies in *Lionheart Gal* by non-black sistren.

## The Absence of Language and the Crisis of Work

In "Ring Ding in a Tight Corner: Sistren, Collective Democracy, and the Organization of Cultural Production," Honor Ford-Smith, the longtime artistic director of the Sistren Theater Collective, discusses in detail the problems faced by the collective both internally and externally. She details these problems in order to confront the things "in [her]self and the organization that infected [her] with an overwhelming sense of failure, powerlessness, rage, or guilt" (Ford-Smith 216). This examination of her relationship to this collective leads her to identify the "absence of a language to get across the complexity of lived crises and often unspoken causes behind the conflicts" as a problem that

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5. One could argue that nonblack subjects do not face the same circumstances of oppression that black subjects do and are not in need of liberation. What this suggests, though, is a dangerously monolithic sense of oppression that facilitates the continued elision of other terms of oppression that remain in circulation in postcolonial contexts and a consequent ignorance of other possibilities for liberation.

plagued the work of the collective in the 1970s and 1980s (Ford-Smith 216). The absence of this kind of language meant the inability to convey the unspoken complexities that underlay the conflicts within the collective—conflicts that undermined the members' ability to work cooperatively. In sharing these experiences of conflict within the collective—the members' failure to articulate specific interracial and interclass conflicts in particular—Ford-Smith advocates for the development of such a language as a solution to underlying conflicts often rooted in issues of race and class. I suggest that developing a language that can convey the complexities that Ford-Smith identifies as compromising the work of the collective begins with an awareness of how particular trends in decolonization projects (trends replicated in West Indian literary and cultural discourses) prioritize/naturalize specific subjectivities at specific historical junctures and in turn limit our ability to talk about interracial and interclass conflicts.

Sistren is a grassroots theater collective that is typically described as a successful offshoot of Michael Manley's 1970s democratic socialist government.<sup>6</sup> A decade beyond independence, the 1970s marked a period when the work of decolonization was equated with indigenous cultural development. The disappointment with the gains (or lack thereof) produced by independence resulted in a reconfiguring of politics in the 1970s that saw culture—black culture more specifically—come to play a dominant role in Jamaica's social, cultural, and political landscape.<sup>7</sup> Manley's goal in his culture-based policy was to displace Eurocentrism's centrality in constructions of Jamaican national identity through the legitimization and promotion of the selected cultural practices of Afro-Jamaicans.

Social transformation was key for the Manley government, which envisioned such transformation occurring through a shift in focus from Jamaica's British colonial legacy to its African heritage. The former had created for the new nation an identity built on a multifaceted sense of dependence from which the latter offered the promise of release. In keeping with trends throughout the developing world, Manley saw the arts and cultural expression as playing a major role in this process of postcolonial self-transformation

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6. For further reading on Michael Manley's government, see David Panton and Rex Nettleford, *Jamaica's Michael Manley: The Great Transformation (1972–92)* (Kingston: LMH Publishing, 1993). For a more detailed account of the ways the group functioned as a part of Manley's democratic socialist platform, see also Robert Carr, *Black Nationalism in the New Worlds: Reading the African American and West Indian Experience* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 225–69.

7. For a more in-depth description of how indigenous cultural development is positioned in state-sponsored decolonization efforts, see Rex Nettleford's *Caribbean Cultural Identity* and *Mirror Mirror*. See also chapter two or Deborah Thomas's "The Political Economies of Culture" in *Modern Blackness*, 58–91.

tion.<sup>8</sup> One of the notable recommendations of his Exploratory Committee on Arts and Culture “was to place Jamaica’s cultural policy within the context of human resource development” (Thomas 77). This policy in turn linked “cultural development with social and economic development through education policy, adult education, and youth community programs, as well as through direct assistance to national cultural bodies and groups” (Thomas 77). The Sistren Theater Collective thus emerges as a product of such cultural policies in 1977, as a part of the response to a desire for wide-scale social transformation in the Jamaican national landscape, which could be enacted by privileging and fostering select Afro-Caribbean cultural practices. The group consisted mainly of working-class black women who were beneficiaries of Emergency Employment programs under Manley’s government in the late 1970s into the early 1980s, and their cultural work revolved around dramatic projects that incorporated elements of a retained African cultural heritage.<sup>9</sup>

The group’s founding goals were “to analyze and comment on the role of women in Jamaican society through theater, to organize [them]selves into a self-reliant co-operative enterprise, to take drama to working-class communities” (Sistren 10). The formation and composition of the group necessarily informed its demographic focus. But their stated goal of “comment[ing] on the role of women” and the involvement of mixed-race middle-class women (albeit in mostly administrative or supervisory capacities) begs closer scrutiny of these goals. Despite this commitment to “comment on the role of women,” there seems to be an unsaid and universalizing dictum that “women,” here, refers specifically to black working-class women. These goals don’t necessarily exclude nonblack woman but rather subordinate them.

This became an obstacle in their cooperative work, because the nonblack middle-class women in the group actively downplayed their differences in the service of its specifically raced and classed agenda. As Ford-Smith suggests,

By not problematizing our own situation, we middle class women were being “good girls” inadvertently playing into the old colonial image of middle class femininity. By “facilitating” working class women’s expression of their own oppression and not our own, we were engineering only a partial picture concerning Jamaican women. (Ford-Smith 248)

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8. For further reading on the role of cultural work—more specifically, the global development of the grassroots theater movement—in decolonization processes, see Augusto Boal, *Theater of the Oppressed* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1979).

9. *Lionheart Gal*’s introduction provides a history of the collective’s founding from within Manley’s Emergency Employment Program. Robert Carr’s “Struggles from the Periphery: Sistren and the Politics of Subaltern Autobiography” discusses the formation of Sistren, its political agenda, and the creation of *Lionheart Gal*.

Providing such a partial picture, while engaged in empowering cooperative work, constituted a missed opportunity for the group to reflect more deeply on the reality of its diversity and the diversity of the nation as a whole. This is not a fault of the collective, however, but symptomatic of larger lapses in the ideological formation of Caribbean nations. According to Rex Nettleford in *Caribbean Cultural Identity*, “in Jamaica and other parts of the Caribbean, cultural nationalism has indeed been an ‘ideological façade’ to cover up the social injustices of induced poverty among the black masses and the continuance of the entrenched privileges of a Eurocentric few” (Nettleford 5). Moreover, “national mottoes such as Jamaica’s ‘Out of Many, One People’ are said to be too ambiguous to be useful since it can mean anything to anyone and therefore nothing or little to a nation in search of unity” (Nettleford 5). As the benign, façadal, and ultimately monolithic mottos like “Out of Many, One People” suggest, the racial and ethnic diversity of Caribbean societies has yet to meaningfully factor into reflections on postcolonial sovereignty. The “oneness” that seeks to homogenize diverse populations around a single national identity can neither give full breadth to the nation’s plurality nor dismantle persistent colonially rooted inequality.

According to Ford-Smith, middle-class women’s silencing of themselves equated to a denial of their own differences and complexities. This denial undermined the collective’s decolonizing goals, because the silence also ironically allowed long-standing class-based hegemonies to remain undetected and uncritiqued. Thus,

We avoided naming our own experience, which might have created a real basis for transforming old class-based dynamics. By keeping our mouths shut, we allowed the construction of the “good woman” to remain intact. We missed an opportunity to envision and formulate new images of women’s identity and interclass relations. (Ford-Smith 248)

It is this missed opportunity—as characterized by the middle-class women’s self-effacing stance in the service of analyzing and commenting on the role of women—that I seize on here to formulate new understandings of Caribbean women organized around their relationships rather than identities. As we see throughout the historiographies of Caribbean women’s writing, black working-class women were the targets for social, political, and economic empowerment. An inadvertent consequence of this targeting was the sustained ignorance of the ways nonblack or non-working-class women were also oppressed, repressed, manipulated, and subordinated in colonial and postcolonial ordering, and also of the hierarchies that structured relation-

ships among women of various backgrounds. This ignorance held real consequences for Sistren's collective work of analyzing and commenting on the position of women in Jamaican society.

Ford-Smith thus attributes the group's failure neither to its declining relevance in local contexts during the 1980s because of the pressures of international touring schedules nor to the time-consuming efforts put into securing external funding, but rather to its inability to satisfy its individual members' needs. In part, this failure stemmed from the inability to address the internal contradictions in the collective's structure. Arguably, what Ford-Smith experienced as a crisis of the work of Sistren has its parallel in the work of critics of Caribbean literature and culture. Like Ford-Smith's, my focus on interrelationality in women's writing and criticism works to "deepen [our] understanding of the problems and potential of working across differences as well as [our] understanding of how power work[s] among us and outside of us" (Ford-Smith 215).

Sistren's collection of oral testimonies, *Lionheart Gal*, is central to this task of "deepen[ing] [our] understanding of the problems and potential of working across differences." The collection arises from the group's attempt to document its performance work over the years. *Lionheart Gal* has been praised as an example of a new wave of postcolonial literature that opens questions of sexually and gendered citizenship, of literature's relationship to the politics of the public and private in the formerly colonized world, and of how feminism might offer a counternarrative to the official versions of history that extend the boundaries of anticolonial nationalism.<sup>10</sup> Other critics have been more speculative than celebratory, raising questions about what they see as the collection's uncritical attempt to universalize the plight of Jamaican women; its elision of class distinctions; the unspoken inequities of the collaborative relationship between the mainly black working-class sistren and the white middle-class amanuensis, Ford-Smith; and the inevitable conflicts produced by forcing oral testimonies into the confines of a predetermined scribal narrative.<sup>11</sup> These critiques of *Lionheart Gal* more often than not hone in on what Carolyn Cooper calls Ford-Smith's "mediating consciousnesses" and question

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10. See Kanika Bantra, "'We Shouldn't Shame to Talk': Postcolonial Sexual Citizenship in Sistren Theater Collective's Bellywoman Bangarang and QPH," *Feminist Visions and Queer Futures in Postcolonial Drama: Community, Kinship, and Citizenship* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 47–68; Sharon Green, "Sistren Theater Collective: Struggling to Remain Radical in an Era of Globalisation," *Theatre Topics* 14.2 (2004): 473–495; and Sharon Green, "On Knife's Edge: Sistren Theater Collective: Grassroots Theater and Globalization," *Small Axe* 21 (2006): 111–24.

11. See Carolyn Cooper, "Writing Oral History: Sistren Theater Collective's *Lionheart Gal*," Carolyn Cooper, *Noises in the Blood: Orality, Gender, and the "Vulgar" Body of Jamaican Popular Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), 87–95.

how the text and, by extension, the work of the collective is complicated or even compromised by such interventions (Cooper, *Noises* 87). For Cooper, Ford-Smith's "mediating consciousness" is characterized by her gender, race, class, and educational status, all of which combine to exert problematic influence on the formation and functioning of the collection. The various critical complexities surrounding *Lionheart Gal* allow us a medium through which we can explore additional "mediating consciousnesses" inherited, perpetuated, and refined by West Indian discourse. I am curious, for instance, about the relationship between Cooper's sense of "mediating consciousnesses," the naturalization of specific "bona fide figures of Caribbeanness" (Donnell 6), and what Ford-Smith identifies as the absence of a language to talk about the complex relationship between diverse women working together on cooperative ventures. How does the prioritizing of race, gender, and class in the cultural work of decolonization affect our ability to discuss interclass and inter-raced cooperative efforts? As Ford-Smith suggests, it renders some conflicts inexplicable and ultimately undermines those efforts.

I argue in this chapter that identitarian imperatives in our critical practices obstruct possibilities for exploring nonblack female subjectivity, a condition that persists from the early decades of Caribbean literature and literary criticism that Rhys's work emblematises into the postcolonial decades that characterize Sistren's work. What becomes clear, especially through the critical neglect of the two testimonies by nonblack sistren in *Lionheart Gal*, is that we have yet to attain the critical capacity for accommodating the looking-glass image of two Caribbean girls: one crying, the other bleeding. This lack of accommodation also affects our ability to recognize acts of sovereign subjectivity that do not fit the predetermined raced cultural nationalist mold. A practical example of such problems is the sustained illegibility of interclass and inter-raced relationships between women and how such relationships contribute to the work of fostering specific kinds of sovereign subjectivity.

*Wide Sargasso Sea* and *Lionheart Gal* together represent a complex nexus of what is at stake in this chapter's discussion of the politics of race, class, and gender in criticism. My critique of these texts continues to resist homogenizing impulses and respects the antagonism that prevents settling into any easy categories. My discussion shows how the successful and unsuccessful interactions between Antoinette and Tia, as well as among the working-class and middle-class women in Sistren, work together to provide a useful context for imagining sovereignty within the terms of dissensus. To reiterate, my work here should not be taken solely as an attempt to identify who is not accommodated and write them into the canons of political and literary legibility, but rather to illustrate that those imagined as excluded have never actually been

absent, have in fact always been inextricable parts of the process. Our existing modes of criticism have simply not provided sufficient avenues for reading and talking about them. The act of talking about them here begins the work of developing a language for interrelationality, whose absence Ford-Smith laments. Though identity politics inevitably play a role here, I suggest that an examination of the relationship between groups—cooperative or otherwise—may prove more useful to imagining “stability as a state of creative conflict” than does continuing to function in an inclusion/exclusion paradigm.

## **“That is not for Béqué”:<sup>12</sup> Race and West Indian Subjectivity**

Early twentieth-century West Indian writing carried a twofold political ethos: to offer correctives to the marginal and stereotypical representations of West Indian subjectivity in English literature, and to do so through the invention of more authentic versions of West Indian subjectivity. The intertextual relationship between Jean Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea* and Charlotte Bronte’s novel *Jane Eyre* demonstrates not only the racial tensions inherent in representing Caribbean subjectivity but also the concerns of early to mid-twentieth-century writers who undertook the task of representing the Caribbean through English literary forms like the novel, with its Victorian heritage in the Commonwealth context.<sup>13</sup> The phrase “West Indian” itself symbolizes one of the most significant challenges to this kind of corrective work. Christopher Columbus stumbled on the region in the fifteenth century as he sailed west to find a new trade route to Asia, or the East Indies. What he found was not supposed to be there and as such, was named in recognition of its position west of the Indies. The phrase “West Indies” resonates with a fifteenth-century maritime mistake, and the endowment of this space with a misnomer not only marks it with an imprint of this mistake but also announces its filiation to colonial endeavors. Belinda Edmondson in *Making Men* suggests that “the place did not concretely exist—indeed, *could not* exist—on its own terms: literally as well as figuratively” (Edmondson 20). Hence, early twentieth-century Caribbean writing seeks to counter these effects of filiation and immaterial existence by identifying and articulating an authentic West Indian

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12. Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea* 102.

13. See Kathleen Renk, *Caribbean Shadows & Victorian Ghosts: Women’s Writing and Decolonization* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1999) for a discussion of the ways Caribbean women writers subvert Victorian literary conventions. Of specific relevance to this discussion is her chapter titled “Emerging from the Shadow of Victorian Madness.”

subjectivity, one defined in relation to others but on (what it imagines) its own terms (to be).<sup>14</sup>

## WEST INDIAN LITERATURE AND AUTHENTICATING SUBJECTIVITY

Rhys's work appears in the period generally acknowledged as the boom in Caribbean writing. This is loosely historicized around the post–World War II period, when labor shortages in England created attractive migration incentives for British passport holders in the colonies. In the late 1940s, many of the writers whose work we now laud as canonical in the West Indian literary tradition were among those who made their way to England either on government scholarships as students or to work at the BBC's Empires Service.<sup>15</sup> Historiographies of West Indian writing mark this mid-century period as the beginning of a distinctly Caribbean literary aesthetic that concerned itself with defining an authentic West Indian subject through the relationship of the writer in exile to home and the colonizer. More than the beginnings of regional literary tradition, this period also marked the beginning of regional collective cultural identification. George Lamming says of the West Indians in his generation,

No Barbadian, no Trinidadian, no St Lucian, no islander from the West Indies sees himself as a West Indian until he encounters another islander in a foreign country . . . The category West Indian, formerly understood as a geographical term, now assumes cultural significance. (Lamming, *Pleasures* 214)

Finding themselves together in London, away from home, provided fertile ground for the development of a cultural consciousness identified with a term previously understood only in terms of geographical significance. It seems no coincidence that the reclusive Jean Rhys makes a literary comeback with *Wide Sargasso Sea* in the later stages of this period of cultural development through the literary arts.

14. Along with Edmondson's *Making Men*, historiographies of West Indian literature such as Ramchand's *The West Indian Novel* outline the ways Caribbean literature worked within English literary paradigms to identify and explore notions of authentic West Indian subjectivity.

15. See Lamming, *Pleasures* for an exploration of the relationship between exile, colonization, and decolonization. Bill Schwartz, *West Indian Intellectuals in Britain* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003) is an edited connection that also explores the ways West Indian intellectuals interacted with British imperial codes while in England.

Nonetheless, though West Indian herself, Rhys's gender and race posed problems for her easy accommodation into the community of boom writers. As Belinda Edmondson suggests,

Writing as a woman places Rhys into a more uncertain tradition of letters. There can be no invocation of the Victorian *gentleman* of letters to make her case as a West Indian; unlike the male writers, at the time of writing she was not presumed to be engaged in the project of writing the Caribbean into existence, "simply" writing as she did about women. Hence she cannot draw on the cultural power of exile status. (Edmondson, *Making Men* 154)

Among the first wave of West Indian writers were men and women in England who were preoccupied with finding and articulating an authentic West Indian consciousness to negotiate the colonials' relationship to their island homes and their place as colonial subjects in England. Though their racial politics were oppositional, they more often than not appropriated the forms and conventions of the Victorian novel as the ideal vehicle for conveying this collective consciousness that could eventually comprise independent Caribbean national identities. Furthermore, many of these mid-century novels are nationalist coming-of-age stories, in which a boy's struggles from childhood to manhood parallel a colony's struggles towards independent nationhood. Iconic narratives like Lamming's *In the Castle of My Skin* and the final story in Naipaul's collection *Miguel Street* end with the now-of-age protagonist embarking on a journey to the motherland to seek his fortune. These works cast the journey away from the island colony as pivotal for the development of a specifically West Indian consciousness.

In *The Pleasures of Exile*, Lamming's observation of the West Indian peasant's elevation from labor source to English literary subject reflects this desire for indigenous literary origins (38–39). But in spaces on the verge of political independence, opponents of the influences of the English literary canon saw the necessity for an indigenous subject around which an indigenous tradition could develop. This reconceptualization of the West Indian peasant from source of cheap labor to literary subject also saw the reification of the select African-based customs of peasant populations as the authentic culture of West Indians. Decolonization eventually came to mean being anti-Europe, and being anti-Europe came to mean being black. Much of what has become canonical West Indian literature is for this reason preoccupied with the representation of an authentic collective consciousness, which is prefigured as a return to the "real" Caribbean to be found in the African-based culture of the often rural folk of peasant societies in the region.

Given these racial political priorities and, moreover, their representation in specifically masculinist terms, it is easy to see how Rhys's narrative of a white heroine does not fit easily into the first-wave paradigm. While *Wide Sargasso Sea*, as Benita Parry discusses, does convey strong representations of an African-descended folk subjectivity through characters like Christophine, the narrative undeniably centers on the female creole protagonist. As Carine Mardorossian suggests, this focus on the creole protagonist is instrumental to Rhys's "insight into the workings of the ideological systems and its categories of representation (black/white, male/female, etc.)" (Mardorossian 88). Relationality is also central to Mardorossian's analysis of *Wide Sargasso Sea*'s binary constructions, which are made all the more explicit through its creole protagonist's eyes, once the reader recognizes how Rhys distances herself from her character, encouraging us to read against the grain of the latter's fragmented and often confused perspective. Mardorossian suggests, "The rigid and seemingly overlapping sets of binaries [oppressor/oppressed, colonizer/colonized, male/female, rational/emotional, etc.] that the novel flaunts so ostentatiously dissolve because the novel compels us to take into account the interrelation of axes of power (gender, race, class) that constitute and contextualize cultural identities" (Mardorossian 88).

Mardorossian's reading of the "interrelation of axes of power" in the novel, I would argue, are made possible by contemporary contexts that no longer carry decolonization as an urgent political imperative. Decolonization, as a political imperative of the mid-century, required a literary paradigm that reflected the "real" Caribbean. In this context Rhys's novel is rejected by some of her contemporaries because its interplay of raced and gendered binaries does not easily comply with prescribed racial and gendered priorities. Kamau Brathwaite, in *Contradictory Omens: Cultural Diversity and Integration in the Caribbean* (1974), for example, challenges the veracity of Rhys's representations of an interracial relationship and of a nonblack West Indian subjectivity. He says,

White creoles in the English and French West Indies have separated themselves by too wide a gulf and have contributed too little culturally, as a group, to give credence to the notion that they can, given the present structure, meaningfully identify or be identified with the spiritual world on this side of the Sargasso Sea. (38, emphasis in original)

Without hesitation, Brathwaite dismisses the possibilities of West Indian subjectivity for Antoinette (and Rhys, by extension); furthermore, he also dismisses the possibility of white creoles to even identify with the West Indies.

Of course, Rhys's work is not completely jettisoned from West Indian literary discourses. Kenneth Ramchand is among those who famously defends Rhys's place in the West Indian literary tradition in an essay that asks, "What makes a novel a West Indian novel?" Ramchand's reading praises the narratives' "lyric intensity," while at the same time chiding Walton Look Lai for his reading that privileges the narrative's sociocultural themes (Ramchand, *An Introduction* 100). Regardless of the echoes of the debates between "acquiescent" and "challenging" critics (see chapter one), however, the fact that Ramchand even has to defend Rhys illustrates her precarious position in the West Indian literary tradition.<sup>16</sup>

#### "THE FIRST MRS. ROCHESTER"

While Rhys's novel is not easily read into the anticolonial and black-nationalist paradigms of mid-twentieth-century Caribbean literature, *Wide Sargasso Sea* does address broader and very relevant concerns about empire generally and the West Indies specifically. In particular, it remains significant that *Wide Sargasso Sea*'s point of departure is one of the most enduring images of West Indian-ness in English literature—*Jane Eyre*'s Spanish Town heiress, Bertha Rochester. Rhys addresses the relationship between her novel and Brontë's in a 1958 letter to Frances Wyndham: "This is to tell you something about the novel I am trying to write—provisional title 'The First Mrs. Rochester.' I mean, of course the mad woman in 'Jane Eyre'" (Rhys, *Letters* 153). She continues, "It is that particular mad Creole I want to write about, not any other mad Creoles. There are quite a number it seems, and large dowries did not help them" (Rhys, *Letters* 153–154). In another letter to Wyndham in 1946, Rhys further notes,

I've brooded for years over "Jane Eyre."

The Brontë sisters have of course a touch of genius (or much more) especially Emily. So reading "Jane Eyre" one's swept along regardless. But I, reading it later, and often, was vexed at their portrait of the "paper tiger" lunatic, the all wrong Creole scenes, and above all by the cruelty of Mr. Rochester. (Rhys, *Letters* 262)

While Rhys acknowledges the genius of *Jane Eyre* and her pleasure in reading it multiple times, she also expresses vexation with the inaccuracies and even

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16. See Kenneth Ramchand, *An Introduction to the Study of West Indian Literature* (Middlesex: Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd., 1976) and Wally Look Lai, "The Road to Thornfield Hall."

one-dimensional treatment of the creole mad woman, as well as her husband's role in her demise.

In her letters, Rhys demonstrates a preoccupation with Brontë's creole character, in particular, as a poor representative for other West Indian women whose race and wealth offered no more protection from opportunistic husbands than it did from their unsavory portrayal in English literature. Rhys positions her novel as a corrective of sorts to what she sees as Brontë's depiction of "the 'paper tiger' lunatic," one designed to supplement Brontë's inadequate depictions of West Indian creole life and of West Indian women—including both those whose economically prosperous positions produced confinement rather than prosperity and those without the protection of either status or wealth. The juxtaposition between Amelie and Antoinette allows us to see the ways in which money does not necessarily mean mobility or autonomy for West Indian women. Amelie's blackness puts her outside of the British patriarchal laws of primogeniture that govern gender and wealth control. Furthermore, she can take the money Antoinette's husband gives her and move to Rio de Janeiro (Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea* 127–28). Because of the patriarchal laws governing property, from which Amelie is excluded, Antoinette's person is as subject to her husband's discretion as is her wealth.

In a letter to Selma Vaz Dias in 1958, Rhys says, "The Creole in Charlotte Brontë's novel is a lay figure—repulsive which does not matter, and not once alive which does" (*Letters* 156). What seems to bother Rhys is not so much Bertha's loathsome madness in *Jane Eyre*, but rather how this portrayal seems devoid of life. This lifelessness is perhaps related to Rhys's critique in the earlier letter of "the all wrong Creole scenes" (*Letters* 262). Bertha, as Brontë portrays her, does not ring true, even in her repugnant madness. Less important than Brontë's portrayal of Bertha as a repulsive and undesired subject is her portrayal of Bertha as a repulsive, undesirable subject who is one-dimensional. Thus, despite being necessary to *Jane Eyre*'s plot, "always she shrieks, howls, laughs horribly, attacks all and sundry—off stage" (*Letters* 156). *Jane Eyre*, moreover, gestures towards Bertha's West Indian background as the source of her madness, which in turn serves as a justification for Rochester's treatment of her in Brontë's novel. Yet for such an instrumental character, Bertha's presence in *Jane Eyre* seems far more spectral than it is material. Rhys notes further to Mrs. Dias,

For me (and for you I hope) she must be right *on stage*. She must be at least plausible with a past, the *reason* why Mr. Rochester treats her so abominably and feels justified, the *reason* why he thinks she is mad and why of course she goes mad, even the *reason* why she tries to set every thing on fire, and eventually succeeds. (*Letters* 156)

Though one response to such a portrayal might be to sanitize the madness and present as a corrective a comfortably sane West Indian subject, Rhys does not try to remove Bertha or the West Indies from the context of madness that characterizes its presence in Victorian literature. Rather, she is concerned with giving reasons for both Bertha's and her husband's actions by explaining Bertha's geographical and cultural origins, thus making her central role in *Jane Eyre* all the more real and, more importantly, fully human. *Wide Sargasso Sea* outlines historical and cultural circumstances that make the possibility of exploitation and madness for this particular kind of creole an inevitability.

Even more subversively, Rhys seeks to render madness as a victory of sorts for the creole West Indian subject and Caribbean literature by extension. Rhys frames *Wide Sargasso Sea* "as a story, a romance, but keeping the dream feeling and working up to the madness" (*Letters* 233). Her notion of the possibilities of triumph for Bertha lies in the perceived madness that leads Bertha to her fiery and destructive death in *Jane Eyre*. If Brontë's novel painted the destruction of Thornfield Hall and Bertha's role in it as menacing and tragic, Rhys emphasizes Bertha's madness to portray more triumph even in her demise: "she burns the house and kills herself (bravo!) . . ." (*Letters* 297). In its critique of the Victorian tradition, Rhys's version of "that particular mad Creole" allows the reader to see how the self-actualization of the English heroine, Jane, is contingent on the animalistic lunacy of her foil, the West Indian villain Antoinette/Bertha.

As Gayatri Spivak suggests, in Brontë's England, Bertha "must play out her role, act out the transformation of her 'self' into the fictive Other, set fire to the house and kill herself, so that Jane Eyre can become the feminist individualist heroine of British fiction" (Spivak 251).<sup>17</sup> I'd suggest further that *Wide Sargasso Sea* subverts this violence by giving life and dimension to the "self-immolating colonial subject" and having her visualize her role in the destruction of the symbol of the colonizer: the English house built by West Indian plantation-generated wealth (Spivak 251). Though framed as an act of madness, burning down her husband's house symbolizes an attack on patriarchy and the destruction of the literary conventions that bolster its subordinating power. In Brontë's novel the symbolic marriage between patriarchy and feminism that is exemplified by Rochester and Jane is a joint venture that complicates the representational possibilities for colonized subjectivity—gendered, raced, and in general.

Ironically, West Indian literary discourses also seem complicit in Bertha's spectral relegation to the margins in order to bolster a specific kind of critical power at varying historical junctures. Returning once more to Rhys's

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17. My emphasis.

metaphor of the looking glass, in *Wide Sargasso Sea* the parallel mirroring of Antoinette and Tia illustrates the complexity of perceiving self and Other among West Indian female subjects. Tia's racial subjectivity engenders that of the Other, and in seeing herself as Tia, Antoinette begins to see herself as Other. Susan Myer argues that in Jane Eyre's narrative, Bertha "become[s] black" through descriptions like "dark swelled lips," for example (Meyer 252–53). As Spivak suggests, in seeing herself in Tia's face, "Rhys makes Antoinette see her self as her Other, Bronte's Bertha" (Spivak 250). Likewise, towards the end of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Antoinette does not recognize herself as the ghost that haunts Thornfield Hall, but does register that the visage in the frame is familiar to her: "I went into the hall again with the tall candle in my hand. It was then that I saw her—the ghost. The woman with streaming hair. She was surrounded by a gilt frame but I knew her" (169). Tia's appearance at the very end of the third and final recurrence of Antoinette's dream completes the cycle of mirrored images in which Antoinette sees her own visage as something other than herself. The novel's final scenes convey how the creole woman's sense of herself and her freedom is inextricably tied to her stone-throwing black playmate.

In the third and most elaborate instance of the dream that recurs throughout the novel, Antoinette finds herself in another scene of inferno after she "dropped the candle [she] was carrying and it caught the end of the table cloth and [she] saw flames shoot up" (Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea* 169–70). Her dreamed experience of fiery escape is confused with the memories of her life as a girl in Coulibri, and she sees events from her life emblazoned in the sky: "I turned round and saw the sky. It was red and all my life was in it" (170). The memories of her home in the Caribbean also include Tia, whom she sees in the dream: "Tia was there. She beckoned me and when I hesitated she laughed. I heard her say, You frightened? . . . I called 'Tia' and jumped and woke" (170). Calling out to Tia is the final image of this recurring dream that illuminates for Antoinette how she might escape from her English prison. This is the first time Tia appears in the dream, and with her beckoning Antoinette back to her life in Coulibri, Antoinette realizes, "Now at last I know why I was brought here and what I have to do" (170). She returns to the hallway that she sees in her dream with the candle in her hand, and the novel ends with the suggestion that she will burn down "the man's" house, destroy her prison, and return to her Caribbean home. Antoinette's dream vision of home and escape not only includes a memory of Tia but also offers a vision of purpose and clarity as to why Antoinette is brought to England and, consequently, what she must do.

The dream presents a blueprint of sorts for destroying and escaping the literal and figurative prison of English patriarchal authority. The destruction of her husband and captor's house is key, but Tia's role in revealing the "how" is also significant. In the same way that the folk culture of the Afro-Caribbean peasantry becomes central to the West Indian writer's construction of an indigenous and authentic Caribbean subject in the first wave, Rhys's novel (unsurprisingly) positions black women as integral to the liberation of a repressed and differently subjugated nonblack subject.

Bertha's razing of Thornfield Hall can thus be read as an assertion of sovereignty, one that liberates her from her attic prison while destroying the material and symbolic trappings of her captivity in the process. Rhys's rewriting of this scene is imbued with the possibility of triumph. Antoinette's vision of Tia in her dream, along with vestiges from her life in Jamaica amidst flames, conveys to the reader Antoinette's sense of home and freedom. Recognizing that fire is the element of destruction for both Coulibri and Thornfield Hall is integral to the legibility of the triumphant dimension inherent in burning her husband's house. Emancipated yet nonetheless disgruntled ex-slaves set fire to Coulibri. The declining fortunes of some estate owners in the wake of Emancipation, as well as the deep-seated hostility between the enslaved and the planter class, create a tense context with a tone of impending danger for families like Antoinette's. A casual reference by Antoinette's new stepfather to replacing the existing ex-slave workforce with laborers imported from East India provides accelerant to smoldering fires. The ex-slaves raze Coulibri as a retaliatory measure, one that highlights their status as members of a freed yet still subordinate colonized population. The relativity of freedom becomes more obvious when we consider these actions, and even more so when we trace the similarities between the actions of these ex-slaves and those of a creole woman.

That both the ex-slaves and Antoinette rely on fire in their responses to subjugation and the threat of being replaced—the ex-slaves by indentured laborers, Antoinette by a new wife—makes the similarities clearer. Antoinette imagines/dreams retaliatory resistance similar to that which was formerly deployed against her family as plantation owners. In asserting this parallel, the novel situates Antoinette in a context of resistance that is characteristically Afro-Caribbean. The inability to recognize the continuities between two houses that West Indian plantation labor built, however, muddles our ability to recognize Antoinette's actions as a response to subjugating Otherness and an expression of liberation, and by extension, to see the possibilities her portrayal offers for understanding West Indian expressions of sovereignty overall.

In another sense, it also conveys limitations and restrictions in our ability to imagine and/or interpret subaltern resistance.

### **"No, my girl, try Bertha": *Wide Sargasso Sea* and Caribbean Feminism<sup>18</sup>**

Prescriptives surrounding black-nationalist concerns built on Afro-Caribbean folk culture stymie the development of more nuanced critiques of plural subjectivity in regional discourses of sovereignty offered by narratives like Rhys's. While it may be true that Antoinette and Tia are separated by the white supremacist inequities of colonialist discourse, as Brathwaite suggests in the 1970s, Rhys offers a depiction of their vexed relationship that complicates conceiving the solution to the problems imposed by colonial white supremacy as the prioritization of black subjectivity. This is important because, though voluminous analysis of Rhys's work has been conducted over the decades, I would argue that our modes of criticism still carry vestiges of Brathwaite's exclusionary dismissal of nonblack West Indian subjectivity, complicating our ability to read the relationships between black and nonblack subjects. Caribbean feminist discourses also seem complicit in the requirement of "self-immolating" nonblack subjects for the development of its own oppositional discourses of subjectivity. Rhys's intervention into Brontë's narrative razes the master's house in an attempt to build a new one that liberates Antoinette from confinement. In Sistren's *Lionheart Gal*, though the middle-class mixed-race sistren don't actually set themselves on fire, they do self-censor their own concerns for the empowerment of black working-class women. As I hope to show in my discussion of the testimonies of the middle-class sistren, the ghost of the creole mad woman is not a ghost at all, but very much still alive, though imprisoned in a critical attic of sorts.

Thus, despite the presence of Rhys's work, with few notable exceptions (O'Callaghan, Donnell, and Francis, for example), historiographies of Caribbean women's writing consistently suggest that Caribbean women writers need to look elsewhere, beyond the Caribbean, for a model for representing an empowered female subject, because of the inaccessibility of both the Victorian tradition that much of the first wave of (male) Caribbean writing subscribed to and the existing (white) feminist tradition. Carole Boyce Davies's *Black Women, Writing and Identity* (1994) offers one of the most explicit discussions of the mobilization of African diasporic criticism in the

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18. Michelle Cliff, *No Telephone to Heaven* (New York: Plume, 1996), 116.

service of consolidating a Caribbean feminist tradition. Davies, along with Elaine Savory-Fido, incorporates this epistemological consolidation into the organization of one of the first edited anthologies of Caribbean feminist criticism, *Out of the Kumbla: Caribbean Women and Literature* (1990). This trend of shifting epistemological remembering of Caribbean female subjectivity away from the specific geographical context of the Caribbean towards African diasporic critical interventions is reflected throughout the 1990s boom of Caribbean feminist writing and criticism.<sup>19</sup> Early historiographies of Caribbean women's writing pose the absence of a literary ancestor as the reason female-authored texts and authors must rely on Black Atlantic narratives and criticism in its pursuit of an empowered subjectivity for Caribbean women. Despite her elision in favor of an African diasporic framework, Donette Francis is an additional exception of note that locates Rhys's and Sylvia Wynter's novels within the first wave of Caribbean feminist writing.<sup>20</sup>

Nonetheless, one point on which there is critical consensus is that the implicit quest of Caribbean literature and criticism by women is to make imaginative possibilities available for the Caribbean woman to (re)cast herself as an emancipated and empowered subject. As with Rhys, unraveling Caribbean female subjectivity often began with disappointing encounters with Bertha in *Jane Eyre*. More often than not, these narrative encounters with Brontë's novel begin with an identification with Jane, but end up with an unsettling feeling of disappointment and/or betrayal once Bertha is introduced into the narrative. The title of this chapter is taken from Michelle Cliff's *No Telephone to Heaven*, when the protagonist Clare Savage encounters herself in *Jane Eyre*. Claire says,

The fiction had tricked her. Drawn her in so that she became Jane. Yes. The parallels were there. Was she not heroic Jane? . . . No, my girl, try Bertha. Wild-maned Bertha . . . Yes, Bertha was closer to the mark . . . All Bertha. All Clare. (Cliff 116)

While Clare identifies with Jane's solitude, motherlessness, and loneliness, she believes that the visions of the wild-haired woman bear a closer resemblance to her own not-quite-whiteness and not-quite-Englishness. A similar notion of being "tricked" by *Jane Eyre* is also recounted in *Lionheart Gal's* "Grandma's Estate:"

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19. See also Renu Juneja, *Caribbean Transactions: West Indian Culture in West Indian Literature* (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan Educational, 1996) and Chancy, *Searching for Safe Spaces*.

20. See Francis, "Uncovered Stories."

We liked the bits about school and then we came upon the mad heiress from Spanish Town locked up in the attic. At first we giggled knowing that it was Jane we were supposed to identify with and her quest for independence and dignity. (Sistren 205)

The mention of “Spanish Town” signals to these young readers that *Jane Eyre*’s “mad heiress” hails from their country. The description of Bertha Mason as “inferior, blue skinned . . . etc.” (read out loud) leads the whispers to crescendo into “an open revolt of loud choruses of ‘It’s not fair Miss!’” (Sistren 205). The students identify immediately with the character whose “quest for independence and dignity” is most visible, but the fact of Bertha’s West Indian-ness forces the recognition of themselves in her representation (Sistren 205). When the narrator goes home from school, she goes searching “anxiously looking for a chapter, a paragraph, or a sentence that might redeem the insane animal inferiority of the Caribbean” (Sistren 205). According to the narrator Ella, “It was a woman’s novel and I had liked so much the earlier part, but I couldn’t stomach the way I had been relegated to the attic. I felt betrayed” (Sistren 205). The “unfairness” that the students protest and the betrayal Ella describes are two-pronged: the representation of the Caribbean self as an insane animalistic aberration and the fact that this representation is proffered by an initially trusted woman writer.

I would suggest, however, that there is an additional layer of trickery and unfairness at play in these representations of women, by women. A critical practice that swaps local and regional specificity for diasporically defined subjectivity not only elides some in favor of others, as Donnell argues, but also replicates a similar sense of confusion surrounding the symbolic point of identification. We see this in Antoinette seeing herself in Tia’s face. She experiences her Otherness in England as a white yet creole woman through the terms of Otherness she had learned in the West Indies, blackness. Likewise, West Indian readers, for whom the desired point of identification was once Jane, uncomfortably recognize themselves in the undesirable Bertha, but can find recovery and empowerment in the black female subject, symbolized by Tia, or Christophine, or even Amelie. Nonetheless, in oppositional discourses (feminist and Afro-Caribbean feminist), it is only Jane’s or Tia’s liberation and dignity that are sought.

Rhys, however, provides something that is missed in these responses for which Bertha exists only in relation to Jane or Tia and liminal in the attic. Where Clare Savage in *No Telephone to Heaven* feels betrayed to discover that she is not the heroic Jane but the mad Bertha, Rhys works in her novel to

make Bertha triumphant, even in the moments of her fiery demise. The illegibility of Bertha's triumph is comparable to the absence of a language to talk about how racial politics affect the Sistren collective. The missed opportunity to explore varying images of Caribbean women on the basis of their relationships is an additional pitfall of specifically raced oppositional approaches. The sustained inability to read Bertha's place in relation to Tia also characterizes the tensions that haunt Sistren's work and continue to compromise fuller understandings of postcolonial sovereignty.

Rhys's work nonetheless sits as uneasily in the West Indian literary canon as it does in the West Indian women writer's tradition. Like the former, the latter is inaugurated around racial concerns that preclude the untroubled inclusion of Rhys's work. The Caribbean woman writer's task in locating a tradition for articulating Caribbean female subjectivity includes revising her inherited tradition's foundation on interpolated meanings of manhood and cultural authority. According to Edmondson, "The traditional writing structure in anglophone Caribbean narrative, predicated as it is on the authorial construction of the gentleman scholar, presents special problems for female authored narratives. Female subjectivity lies outside this paradigm" (Edmondson, *Making Men* 83). I question whether female subjectivity as such lies outside of the paradigm of the gentleman scholar, or if it is a specific and desired female subjectivity that does so. What do we do as critics with female writers and texts that do not fit neatly into the desired paradigm? Is gendered subjectivity always the purchase of Caribbean women's writing? Or, asked another, more specific way, if we are not looking exclusively for representations of an authentic black peasant/working-class female subjectivity, what else becomes apparent?<sup>21</sup>

Edmondson's observation that African American feminist theory is "the only theoretical framework for the engenderment of the black and female subject" is useful in understanding African diasporic female subjectivity (Edmondson, *Making Men* 143), but for Donnell, "the splicing of African American history and theory into the narratives of Caribbean women's writing has seemingly licensed the denial of a literary past and the invocation of the resonant trope of the invisible, voiceless ancestor" (Donnell 137). What is the critical purchase of the "invisible voiceless ancestor"? What kinds of sub-

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21. Recent and fairly recent studies have worked assiduously to offer less generalized and more nuanced understandings of the diverse West Indian subjectivities, contextualizing them in their specific geographical and regional contexts. Among them are Donnell, *Twentieth-Century Caribbean Literature*; Puri, *The Caribbean Postcolonial*; and Carolyn Cooper, *Noises in the Blood*.

jectivity does this enable or disable? What it has meant is a gap in the feminist historiography of Caribbean women's writing between slavery and the 1970s, when Merle Hodge published *Crick Crack Monkey*. I concur with Donnell's assessment that the trope of the invisible voicelessness that undergirds the Caribbean women's literary tradition allows for the easy overlay of African American feminist theory as the only framework that can engender black female subjectivity, and that the prioritizing of this specific raced subjectivity hinders our ability to read and talk about nonblack female subjectivity. Thus, writing that challenges this assumption-turned-orthodoxy seems necessarily excluded from the project of bolstering the raced literary tradition that is dependent on this construction. The lack of critical focus on the "Grandma's Estate" and "Red Ibo" chapters of *Lionheart Gal* reflects an inability to process the relationships between women and the impact of their collective work. Their neglect is especially pointed because they appear alongside the testimonies of women whose experiences do conform to this model.

In fairness, Carolyn Cooper does provide some engagement with these testimonies, but it occurs under the veil of suspicion and seems more concerned with the making of these testimonies than with what they tell. This raises interesting questions about class, language, and parity within the work of the collective in general. Such questions are relevant to the ability to render more legibly interracial relationships between women. Cooper questions, for example, the very deliberate and guided values that shape the testimonies' formulations. Accordingly, "the search for what Honor calls a 'through line for each story' (p. xxviii) superimposes on these misbehaving, idiosyncratic, oral accounts a decidedly scribal narrative necessity," which in turn presents a text that "somewhat ironically affirms the authority of the written word" (Cooper, *Noises* 89). According to Cooper, this superimposition troubles the line between the oral and scribal—a line that is hotly contested as a site of inequitable power relations between English- and African-descended cultures in West Indian discourse and also between the working and middle classes. Cooper's protestations about linguistic choices in *Lionheart Gal* are perhaps most explicitly exemplified by her own linguistic choices in her chapter "Writing Oral History." In explaining her decision to write her essay in patois, Cooper says the following: "I wish to engage in an experimental Jamaican subversion of the authority of English as our exclusive voice of scholarship" (Cooper, *Noises* 91). This particular exercise in subversion is an obvious critique of Ford-Smith's personal and editorial choices to render the testimonies in "Grandma's Estate" and "Red Ibo" in Standard English rather than in patois—the language used in all the other testimonies in the collection.

### "PARSN KRISN DEM PIKNI FOS"<sup>22</sup>

Where the majority of testimonies were composed through Ford-Smith's transcriptions of oral interviews with the participants,

With the two middle strata members of the group, the oral interviews did not work well. Accustomed to Standard English and the conventions of academic expression, their stories sounded stilted when spoken full of jargon, and hollow. Both "Red Ibo" and "Grandma's Estate" were written as responses to the interview questions. (Ford-Smith 16)

Cooper sees in this an opportunity to critique the politics of language in our critical discourses, particularly the ways it reflects class distinctions, and subverts Ford-Smith's language and formal choices by rendering her entire close reading of *Lionheart Gal* in Jamaican patois. She questions, "Supozn dem did gi wi a chaans fi hier wat dem did se?" She also suggests that "miebi notn neva rang wid it" (Cooper, *Noises* 94).<sup>23</sup> Like Cooper, I would be curious to *hear* the interviews with the middle-class women, and I am equally intrigued by what Ford-Smith saw as wrong and in turn described as "stilted" and "hollow" when these women spoke. What informs this desire to hear their speech via the page, and furthermore, what accounts for their speech sounding "stilted" and "hollow" in comparison to the other women's speech? What does the written account take away from/add to the testimonies? Despite this curiosity, and even though I would like to see/hear all the interviews as transcribed from the oral, Cooper's proverbial explanation that "parsn krisn dem pikni fos" is dissatisfying. She here implies that Ford-Smith and the middle-class mixed-race sistren reserve the more sophisticated storytelling method for themselves. This explanation is dissatisfying because of an assumption or perhaps presumption of sameness within such collective efforts and a refusal or perhaps inability to interrogate the race and class differences among the sistren. Indeed, the project of Sistren is specifically structured for disenfranchised working-class women, but the interactions between women of different classes within the collective nonetheless offers a compelling context for parsing female subjectivity in more nuanced ways.

The cultural politics of language in West Indian discourses is a fruitful place to begin to think through Cooper's and Ford-Smith's respective stances on the language used to represent the testimonies of middle-class sistren. As

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22. Cooper, *Noises* 91.

23. I leave Cooper's quotes untranslated to maintain the integrity of the subversion of languages that her critique enacts.

Edmondson tells us, “English . . . was used as a moral force in the colonization of the English middle (and lower) classes,” and this force is what Cooper identifies in these two testimonies and seeks to critically subvert with her use of patois in her chapter on *Lionheart Gal* (*Making Men* 43). Ford-Smith’s assessment of the power dynamics between the women of Sistren, in a section of “Ring Ding in a Tight Corner” aptly titled “Race, Middle-Class Women, and the Denial of Power Needs,” provides some insight into her linguistic choices:

When we spoke of middle class women and their actions, it was with such stringent and judgmental criticism that a visitor from another planet might never have suspected that we came from that class. The implied self-hatred was never interrogated. We painted ourselves out of the picture in theory, while we remained at the center of the organization’s work struggling to shape things in practice. (Ford-Smith 244)

The mediating consciousnesses that undergird default class-based privileging in our modes of criticism leave us with no critical apparatus for talking about these women—and thus leaves these women with no critical apparatus to talk about themselves. The implicit privileging of orality over the scribal within these testimonies—regardless of the specific and class-based experiences of each of the collective’s members—that Cooper seems to advocate and Ford-Smith feels compelled to explain are manifestations of this dilemma.

Cooper is nonetheless one of two critics (Olive Senior is the other) who challenge an otherwise wholesale purchase of Caribbean female subjectivity through the paradigm of Black Atlantic criticism (Donnell 125). Cooper’s work, though attentive to local nuances in the ways that others have ignored, also falls into patterns of exclusivity where Caribbean female subjectivity is concerned. It is here that issues of authenticity come into play—as was the case with the writers who inaugurated black working-class culture as the authentic culture of the Caribbean and prescribed this constituency as the “authentic” subject of Caribbean writing. The middle-class women of Sistren whose testimonies are also included in *Lionheart Gal* are excluded (or exclude themselves) from this language-based authenticity. This exclusion is made obvious in their speech that is “stilted” and “hollow” when compared to that of the working-class sistren and is the basis of criticism that takes them to task for offering their narratives in a manner that is markedly different from the rest of the group. What is authentic in *Lionheart Gal* are the testimonies that retain their orality.

## SAMENESS AS EQUALITY

What we have today as *Lionheart Gal* was not originally conceived as a literary project, but rather as an attempt to document the work of the theater collective. The testimonies of the women in the collective were to be used as illustrations of predetermined themes. But as Ford-Smith tells us,

Soon it was clear that the testimonies would not sit neatly into an introductory section. They refused to become supporting evidence for predetermined factors. They threatened to take over the entire project and they did not behave. (Sistren 15)

Even though Ford-Smith acknowledges their misbehaving refusal to become “supporting evidence for predetermined factors,” *Lionheart Gal* is ironically conceptualized in rigid ways; even her editorial guidance on how to read the collection in its introduction seems limited in its focus on resistance. In particular, she consistently prescribes what kinds of representations of which women’s daily lives fit into the work’s paradigms. The overriding goal is recovering the voiceless and invisible woman and representing how she articulated her way towards an empowered subjectivity despite the constraints of dispossession and powerlessness.

In this respect, Sistren constrains its own project of giving misbehaving testimonies a literary platform of their own. The testimonies are all guided by the following questions: “How did you first become aware of the fact that you were oppressed as a woman? How did that experience affect your life? How have you tried to change it?” (Sistren 15). As such, all the narratives begin with oppression, they continue with a reflection about this oppression’s quotidian effects, and they end with a standardized revolutionary statement about how recognizing this oppression changed the speaker’s daily life. Furthermore, the introduction tells us that “the stories chart the terms of resistance in women’s daily lives and illustrate ways in which women can move from the apparent powerlessness of exploitation to the creative power of rebel consciousness” (Sistren 1).

As introductions do, this one offers a preview of what we will (or should) see when we read these stories. First, they are about resistance in the daily lives of women who have a severely limited scope for resistance. The introduction designates “the creative power of rebel consciousness” as the terminus of the shift from “the apparent powerlessness of exploitation.” What we will (or should) see when we read the testimonies are narratives of resistance to pow-

erlessness and the achievement of empowerment inherent in an oppositional rebel consciousness. This is not to say that this frame did in fact produce cookie-cutter stories that we are forced to read only in one way. But although the women's narratives are each distinct in their own ways, they all follow the same narrative impulse guided by oppression, resistance, and empowerment. Of course, this impulse is in keeping with the group's organizational ethos, as well as the demands of a specific tradition of Caribbean women's writing.

What Ford-Smith urges us to see in these narratives are the acts of resistance to powerlessness to which we are typically blind, so that we can

[come] to terms with ways in which ordinary women have determined their own struggles for themselves and the ways in which they have assessed their own victories and defeats. In doing so, we may be able to identify the circumstances and consciousnesses which we need to draw on to build a basis from which we can win a greater share of power over our lives as women. (Sistren 2–3)

A few things are key here, beyond the implicit assumption that *Lionheart Gal*'s readers are women. First is what Ford-Smith describes as "the need to readjust one's sense of the rules of resistance and the limits of power." Ford-Smith asserts that the typical frame for understanding the rules of resistance and the limits of power do not work effectively for deciphering Caribbean women's resistance, and she offers the folkloric figure of Ni/Nanny as an alternative model. The collection is offered as an artifact of sorts that will help us to come to terms with the ways "ordinary women" negotiate their struggles and find empowerment in contexts where their dispossession and disenfranchisement is a daily struggle. As most Caribbean feminist historiographies suggest, and I agree, black women in the Caribbean were doubly colonized by gender and race, and as such, processes of decolonization necessarily involve cognizance and negotiation of this particular double bind. The ability to see this, in Ford-Smith's estimation, allows women to garner greater power in their own daily lives. But who are Sistren's "ordinary women"? At the time of the collection's publication, the group was majority working-class with two mixed-race middle-class women.

Though in the minority, the inclusion of testimonies by non-working-class sistren in the collection suggests that the stakes of the group's work extend beyond the working-class women. Indeed, the impulse that equality means sameness seems to underlie the resistance to exploring how these women's experiences of oppression, resistance, and empowerment differed from those of their working-class counterparts. Notions of freedom and liberation are

central in such juxtapositional portrayals of West Indian women—a convention that is obvious across the literary landscape and can be seen in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Michelle Cliff's *Abeng*, Elizabeth Nunez's *Bruised Hibiscus*, and in the testimonies of the middle-class sistren. Writers invested in this convention are also engaged in carving out a space in the West Indian literary landscape for representations of nonblack women and an increased understanding of the nuanced ways this space has been denied (or grudgingly surrendered) not only in the literary landscape but in the actual Caribbean landscape. In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, black women are able to exercise far more freedom than Antoinette is: Tia never wore any underwear (22); Christophe has her own house, a garden, and a son to help her; and Amelie not only seduces Antoinette's husband but is able to take the money she gets from him and run away to Rio (127)—an escape of sorts that Antoinette cannot enact for herself, regardless of her wealth and race.

The freedom of movement and sexuality along with the independence of black women in comparison to nonblack women is also explored in *Lionheart Gal's* "Grandma's Estate." The narrator Ella notes that only the household helper Carmen was allowed to walk up and down the hill to their home when the violence in Kingston escalated to alarming levels in the 1960s. Ella recounts that as teenagers, "our [hers and her cousin's] limited freedom of movement was even more tightly curtailed now, in an effort to prevent us from facing the scourge of rape or teenage pregnancy" (Sistren 207). Carmen's freedom to go on dates and express her sexuality is enviable: "She would tell me about her Saturday dates. She was fat and on Saturdays she always wore a wig and miniskirt and high heels to meet him . . . I envied her what I *thought* was her sexual freedom" (Sistren 108, my emphasis). What "Grandma's Estate" allows us to do is to conceptualize and critique what this sistren sees as freedom for working-class and middle-class women. Rightly, this narrator recognizes and acknowledges the complexities of wholesale attribution of comparative freedoms between women in each class: "her *apparent* freedom was undercut by her position as a domestic helper and her total responsibility for her children" (Sistren 188). The surrounding narratives more than attest to these complexities of agency among working-class women but should not constitute contexts for disregarding any experiences of freedom, regardless of its limits or the presence of privilege. What is at stake is the ability to hold all these things together and to resist the impulse to prioritize or universalize. As Rowley says, "We are better served by observing what becomes salient through the field of play in which power reveals itself" (15).

*Lionheart Gal* does portray the way in which members' cross-class relationships affect their cooperative efforts, but the criticism of the collection

and even Sistren's operations does not seem to take this into account as a central part of the group's work. This recognition of yet failure to negotiate these contexts of difference bears consequences for the collective's overall functioning. According to Ford-Smith,

The middle-class women were members and workers in the organization too, but we made little effort to analyze our specific situations as women.

We imposed on ourselves a virtual silence about our own experiences of class and becoming raced and sexed. (Ford-Smith 244)

This failure is compounded once changes in the local political climate mean the loss of government financial support.

When the government changed hands in 1982, the conservative platform of the ruling political party no longer supported democratic socialist initiatives like Sistren. Once the group no longer received government funding, it was forced to seek external international funding in order to continue its work. For Ford-Smith, it was the dictates of external funding agencies that brought the internal problems of Sistren to the fore. These were problems that circulated around the interpersonal relationships among the women and their individual abilities to do both the work the collective wished to do and the work it was forced to do because of the demands of external funders. Thus,

the dictates of international funding agencies exacerbated internal contradictions in the collective's structure around race and class, specifically on issues having to do with service and product delivery, education, decision-making, leadership, power, and authority. (Ford-Smith 214)

The need for external funding led to the group's restructuring in the decade between the late 1970s and late 1980s. NGOs required that the groups they funded generate income for themselves by producing something. This "something" for Sistren was a screen-printing textiles project. Despite capitulating to the pressure of funding agencies, however, Sistren's textile project never generated enough income for the collective to be able to support itself as an enterprise. Furthermore, the time and attention needed to run this project overextended an already stressed group: they "produced theater; were self-managed; documented [their] work; publicized [their] work; produced educational workshops for women in the local communities; did [their] internal education work; and now printed and marketed textiles" (Ford-Smith 231). As Ford-Smith continues, "Our structure, which had been overburdened from

the start, creaked, groaned, and expanded again, before it was ready to do so” (Ford-Smith 231).

An additional requirement for external funding was copious amounts of documentation and record keeping. Many of the group’s early external funders funded their projects only in the short-term, so the collective had to continuously document short-term projects that promised to deliver a specific product or outcome. Accountability to short-term funders hindered the group’s long-term planning by deferring attention from internal organizational problems to meeting the criteria of lending agencies: “creative workshops for personal development, group recreational activities, and sensitive forms of conflict resolution were luxuries we could hardly consider in the rush to establish one small project after another” (Ford-Smith 233).

Some sistren, particularly those with a variety of skills and the ability to switch quickly from one task to the next, were given more power over the administration of the group. Because these skills generally came with formal education, the women given more power were in large part the middle-class women. Internally, this meant a shift in the valuation of skills within the group. Working-class women’s lived reality of local popular cultural knowledge, which had been rendered invisible and inferior by centuries of colonization, was central to the group’s work in theater workshops and community outreach. Nonetheless, as funding demands grew more pressing, the more quantifiable and externally recognized educational qualifications of the middle-class women, who oversaw the group’s administrative processes, proved far more useful in meeting the demands of funders. The problems within the group were even further exacerbated by the egalitarian structure of the group itself, which problematically conflated equality with sameness.

In reality, the skills of the resource people were marketable and valued beyond the confines of the group, and the same could not be said of the working-class sistren—the skills they gained working within the collective were not accorded with the same kind of practical privilege outside of Sistren. Furthermore, the group did not clearly define any job descriptions, and as such, no one was clear about her specific area of work. Self-reliance—as pushed by external funders—was interpreted by the group as “everybody could and should do everything” (Ford-Smith 242). Thus, “this way of working assumed not only that [they] were equal but that equality meant sameness. The fact that [they] were not equal and that each person had a different talent or ability became incompatible with the ideal of the system” (Ford-Smith 242). The work of combating the legacies of colonial history seems to require this kind of attention to equality within the group, but conflating equality with same-

ness as the sole productive way to function within the group served only to intensify its internal contradictions and to limit the discussion of different experiences from which all members might have profited.

What would happen if, rather than insisting on sameness within such collective endeavors, we explored differences? What *Lionheart Gal* shows us is that though they were involved in the same grassroots organization and their lives are chronicled in the same collection, the experiences and backgrounds of these women were hardly the same. This presupposition of equality as sameness obscures the possibilities of understanding the complexities of how such differences played out in real encounters. The middle-class members subordinated their experiences to the supposedly more authentic ones of their working-class colleagues, in ways that later obscured the privileging of their backgrounds (with deleterious consequences for the group) by outside agencies. Furthermore, by sublimating difference with sameness, we as critics miss a crucial opportunity to develop a much-needed language that can address the contradictions in the emancipatory goals of postcolonial grassroots groups and communities. If the testimonies of the working-class sistren reveal the ways dysfunctional communication between young women and their maternal figures results in poor decision making, the testimonies by the middle-class women make the absence of a language to talk about the differences between female peers even more apparent. In “Grandma’s Estate,” the narrator seems sensitive to the differences between women, but her narrative’s evaluation of how she has tried to change the oppression women face interestingly does not take these differences into account. While this lapse exemplifies Ford-Smith’s identification of the absence of a language to talk about these issues, it is also symptomatic of the strategic structuring of the narratives in the collection around specific questions about the awareness of gendered oppression, its effects, and efforts at transforming these effects. These questions at the outset assume a foundational sense of sameness. Interestingly, though, the differences between women and the ways these differences are perpetuated within the same systems of oppression they seek to dismantle does not factor prominently in the narrator’s conclusions.

#### “GRANDMA’S ESTATE” AND “RED IBO”

This is ironic because the central focus of “Grandma’s Estate” is Ella’s reflection on her maternal heritage and the ways race and class come to bear on the matriarchs’ perceptions of themselves and their progeny. The word “estate” evokes a context of bequeathing and inheritance, and in this narrative, the

inheritance bequeathed to Ella by her grandmother is one of gendered, raced, and classed contradictions. In this narrative as in others throughout the collection, we see the importance of social ascendancy via the attainment of middle-class status, as well as the characteristics women need to assume to literally embody this status. The ways middle-class female identity is constructed across colonial history is crucial here. As many feminist historians have pointed out, the ideal image of woman in nineteenth-century European societies was that of a maternal, asexual housewife and charitable patroness, endowed with the responsibility of transmitting moral values and social virtues to her children and her society. She neither possessed nor expressed any needs beyond her role as mother, wife, and social patroness, and expressions of anger were antithetical to this ideal image. White middle-class women traditionally embodied this ideal image of womanhood. Within the context of twentieth-century nation building, the woman's ideal role as maternal caretaker extended into social work. In the postemancipation and eventual post-colonial contexts of the Caribbean, embodying this ideal image became the basis for social uplift among women and a significant facet of Afro-Caribbean nation building. The longevity of this ideal image of womanhood also meant its sustained oppositional relation with the unruly, recidivist, atavistic, and vulgar image of black womanhood far into the twentieth century.<sup>24</sup> In the decades beyond the nineteenth-century origins of this ideal, Caribbean womanhood and indeed nationhood remain subject to the imperative to embody or perform this ideal image. Thus, women are encouraged to cultivate this ideal, regardless of their complexion or economic position, and are lauded for their efforts as part of the project of building a civilized nation.

It is within this context of civility and nation building that we can begin to parse Ella's grandmother's complicated relation to her own mother, Mammee. Ella's grandmother keeps a picture of her mother, Mammee, in her Bible, and when it falls out, the reader begins to see the complex relation towards race, gender, and class that has confined generations of women in Ella's family, including her great-grandmother, her grandmother, and her mother. While she ends the narrative by focusing on this confinement as one of the vagaries of patriarchal oppression, she barely brushes the surface of analyzing the role of women in perpetuating the inequity and subjugation of other women. Interspersed with the narrative of Ella's coming of age and her development of political awareness is the story of how Mammee brings shame on her family by having a child with her employer—a white planter—after her husband

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24. For a more detailed analysis of the tensions between these two visions of women and their role in projects of nation building within early twentieth-century Caribbean society, see chapter four of Edmondson, *Caribbean Middlebrow*.

abandons her and their children. This illegitimate child is Ella's grandmother, who attributes her suffering to her mother's sexual impropriety. Thus, once her paternity is discovered by the headmaster, she is publicly humiliated and is subsequently too ashamed to return to school or even take her external exams and finish her schooling. She tells Ella,

“The headmaster was my father’s nephew, but I didn’t know. A was filling out the exam form . . . a put my father’s name [ . . . ] in front of the whole class . . . he said, ‘This can’t be your father!’ And I said ‘Yes it is.’ And he said ‘Are you saying that you’re a bastard? We don’t have bastards in this school.’” (Sistren 215)

This humiliation brought about by what she perceives as her *mother’s* indiscretion makes Ella's grandmother obsessed with patrician respectability. This in turn makes her all the more concerned when Ella's growing political and social awareness brings greater involvement in activities that traverse rigid class boundaries, like forms of social outreach that had this middle-class young woman “wandering through the country side with the peasantry and the working class” (Sistren 213). Indeed, the middle class as brokers of working-class social and political uplift existed in a schizophrenic position that decried the hierarchical structures that perpetuated social and political inequality while still maintaining (and sometimes experiencing guilt over) their own positions of privilege in that hierarchy.

Ella's involvement in politics worries her excessively class-conscious grandmother, who even dreams that Ella married a “Bongo man” (or Rastafarian). Rastafarians during this period epitomized, for the middle and upper classes, cultural dereliction and incivility, which helps to convey her grandmother's deep concern. She laments,

[A]h try my best to be a respectable person. A lady. Ah had ambition. A look up. Yuh doan know what I go through to reach where I am today . . . so nobody can’t say a not a respectable person. And now you come and yu just want to throw it away. I tell yuh I could hardly sleep last night when ah see the people yuh come in with. (Sistren 213)

Amidst her worry about the company her granddaughter keeps, however, Ella's grandmother feels lingering humiliation that her mother's sexual indiscretions caused her. “Ah never did a thing to make anybody say ah wasn’t a respectable woman,” she says. “But now yu come and yuh want to go right back . . . Ah doan know how Mamme could have done a thing like

that. Ah doan know . . ." (Sistren 215–16). She experiences the shame of her mother's indiscretion and sees her granddaughter's activism among the working class as regressive and similarly threatening to her middle-class respectability. Ella, meanwhile, is uncomfortably moved by her grandmother's self-loathing. She sees the ways her grandmother "had spent her life struggling for the approval of her father and that of his class" and is incensed by the ways she had allowed "an incident which had taken place over sixty years ago . . . to wither her." She curses her "grandmother's inability to question the assumptions on which the actions of her mother and father were based" (Sistren 216). Ella's own ability to question these things is as much symptomatic of the historical progression of decolonization as of her burgeoning awareness of the injustices and inequities that prevail in her society. Her grandmother's story also makes her "feel more keenly than a thousand books the vital role that the control of women played in the maintenance of power" (Sistren 216). Ella exhibits in this story the capacity to do the same kinds of questioning of societal order that she wishes her grandmother had, but she does not focus on women's complicity in the maintenance of power that controlling women secures. She never questions, for example, what it means for her grandmother to be an instrument in the maintenance of her own subordination.

The limitations of Ella's awareness become apparent in her relationship with their domestic helper Carmen. Though Ella envies what she thinks is Carmen's sexual freedom and can recognize that "her apparent sexual freedom was undercut by her position as a domestic helper and her total responsibility to her children," she engages in no similar analysis of her grandmother "inevitably" interrupting their conversations or questioning of Carmen's grumbled "she no believe we should a get no time at all" (Sistren 208). Ella recognizes that Carmen and her grandmother "quarreled plenty" and acknowledges that she is "on Carmen's side on this issue," but there is no closer examination of the interclass conflict surrounding the working conditions of domestic laborers in Carmen's "Don't hale at me Maa! Doctor say I supposed to get some time before dinner" retort (208). Ella's analysis of the inequities she notices is filtered instead through the traditional feminist lens of resistance to patriarchy and ignores the instrumentality of intragendered subordination along class lines to the functioning of patriarchy. Indeed, patriarchy is the larger institution that should be opposed in this context, but not considering the conflicts between women means missing an opportunity to grasp more fully what hinders not only the complete emancipation of women but also social and political equality among women. After hearing the story of her grandmother's life, Ella promises herself that she would "challenge every social convention in which her [grandmother's] world had tried to imprison [her]"

(217). The narrative couches this awareness as an encounter with nationalism, a teenaged political awakening to inequities in the society in general. But Ella's response focuses exclusively on tackling the inequities and conflicts between men and women, rather than also taking into account more concretely the immediate inequities among women.

Similarly, while the narrator in "Red Ibo" recognizes class as a condition separating Jamaican women, she also seems to retreat to the familiar gender-domination script without tackling more aggressively the very obvious conflicts between women. One could argue that guilt and even self-hatred play a role in this avoidance. Joan French, a middle-class member of the collective, notes, "Because we were guilt-ridden about our class power, we made ourselves into nonpersons in theory, but we remained individuals in reality" (Ford-Smith 248). The first part of French's sentiment is evident in "Red Ibo's" narrator noting with some derision the distinction between middle-class and working-class women who work together in cooperative efforts:

I remember how the middle class women who considered themselves highly conscious and versed in theory used to have these education sessions where they brought prepared documents that read like pages out of a Social Science textbook. They had to stop after every line to explain the terms. The women would fall asleep or just suffer in silence. They came alive when Dorothy, a working class sister, proposed a campaign around condensed milk which they couldn't get at the time. It was Dorothy who saw the link between the condensed milk factory and imperialism, but the middle class sisters were terribly concerned that she might not call it by the right name. I can laugh about it now but it was a very alienating experience. (Sistren 248)

There is some distancing of self here, with the narrator distancing herself from the sisters in the anecdote who are also middle class—particularly surrounding their ability to be relevant and offer practical solutions to the women who appear to be more "real," like Dorothy. Her response focuses not on better understanding the relationships among members of the group, but upon achieving the authentic identity embodied by some of them. The narrator's distancing from and even underlying ridicule of other middle-class women meets the latter half of French's observation that though middle-class women in theory tried to efface themselves when working cooperatively with other women, they were not actually able to accomplish this in practice. The problem, we might say, lies in the very notion of effacement rather than of self and mutual understanding.

The narrator in “Red Ibo” comes the closest to grappling with these contradictions between women who work together in social and political activism, but this grappling doesn’t seem directed more internally and productively into the actual functioning of the union organizations that she works in. Thus, she acknowledges that the Voluntary Organization of Women was “still the most egalitarian structure [she] had ever worked with. Everyone had a right to say what they felt and to have their opinions respected.” However, she also points out that “sometimes the ways things operated people didn’t feel like exercising the right. The working class sisters felt they didn’t know as much as the middle class ones and I felt that if I said what I felt I would be dismissed as being anti-revolutionary” (Sistren 248–49). More problematically, she emphasizes and lauds the intervention of “two brothers” in a conflict between herself and a working-class sister as a point of focus, rather than addressing the ways the conflicts between women affect the functioning of the group overall.

What interests me in this particular anecdote is not the “understanding [the two brothers] showed towards women” but the lack of understanding between the two women themselves. She notes: “I remember once a working class sister in the organization accused me of being middle-class and fair-skinned and therefore suspect in my relations with the working class and black people” (249). She defended her work with working-class and black people by invoking her black husband, black child, actually being black in England, and generations of black relatives all the way back to slavery. Not satisfied with this, her accuser, Noreen, said she “could have married her husband out of pretense” (249). The two women do not tackle this conflict by directly addressing the raced and classed contradictions that belie the suspicion, or even by interrogating the defensive necessity of invoking close-knit ties to blackness—to the extent that one would marry a black man to procure them. Moreover, what is addressed in the resolution of this conflict is not the suspicion of the efforts of middle-class women, but rather the advice the women solicited from one of the brothers, T. Focusing on the relationship between men and women elides an opportunity for closer analysis of the internal functioning between women.

T advises the working-class sister to provide evidence of her accusations against the middle-class narrator, to “say what actions of [hers] constituted evidence” (249). Failure to do this would result in the withdrawal of the charges and the reprimand of the working-class sister. The latter is unable to produce any evidence to support her charges, but one can’t help but wonder if the effort wasn’t better spent investigating what other issues underlie the suspicion working-class women had of middle-class women and the attendant tensions between them. T’s conclusion that “just being working class doesn’t

mean you are right and just being middle class isn't a crime" is poignant, but it hardly gets at the center of the "rightness" of the working class and the suspicion of the middle class (249). The narrator avoids the conflict between the women in favor of exemplifying "true working class brotherhood" and in turn exemplifies one of the many missed opportunities for exploring more meaningfully the nature of the conflicts between women who try to work together on cooperative projects. The seemingly unconscious reinscription of masculine authority is also strange because it seems to contradict the feminist ethos of *Lionheart Gal* and the work of the Sistren Collective more generally.

## Conclusion

The change of focus in this passage from working through the relationships between women to the development of equitable working relationships between men and women more generally is aimed towards a larger goal of nation building. *Lionheart Gal*, though produced through the collaborative efforts of a group of women, prioritizes the development of black feminism and cultural nationalism more than it does coming to terms with the internal race and class conflicts within the group. Yet these conflicts effectively undermine the group's ability to function successfully as a collective, especially in its ability to meet the unique needs of its members. Parsing these relationships between women provides the opportunity for becoming aware of and perhaps dismantling pernicious class-based conflicts that persist in and plague emancipatory processes—opportunities that are hindered by distinctive and predetermined raced and gendered priorities.

By focusing on the fraught yet cooperative relationships between women of different races and classes in Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* and Sistren's *Lionheart Gal*, I have tried to further trouble the raced and classed priorities in the establishment of both Caribbean nationalisms and the Caribbean literary traditions. I have done this to identify the limitations such prioritizations impose on our understanding of postcolonial citizenship and subjectivity. More than an argument for including the voices of nonblack middle-class women in literary and critical discourses, my discussion here works to show how the dual imperatives of black cultural nationalism and Afro-Caribbean feminism in postcolonial contexts leave few critical tools to talk about the ubiquitous yet unarticulated spaces of interaction among people of different races and classes that appear within the Caribbean literary tradition. Over the course of this chapter, I have attempted to illustrate how the failure to probe more deeply the relationships between women of different races and classes in

Jamaican literature results in a missed opportunity to develop a more nuanced account of the challenges to identitarian nationalisms that are represented in these works, sometimes in opposition to their own goals.

Tia's tears after she hits Antoinette in the face with a jagged stone reflect the limitations of unitary versions of subjectivity and the merits of a relational strategy that is uninterested in the celebration of a specific (underrepresented or disenfranchised) subjectivity. Her tears can also be read as symbolic of a sense of frustration and confusion embedded in the inability of discourses of Caribbean subjectivity to fully account for the space in between her and her frenemy, Antoinette. Michelle Rowley's claim that racial and gendered lenses are not enough in the achievement of twenty-first-century social justice projects in the Anglophone Caribbean is also one that encourages us to "question those rhetorical and political strategies that render a black female subaltern subjectivity as an *a priori* feminist constituency" (13). Moreover, with an overdetermined working-class subaltern trope at work, "how has the oppression of these categories been named as normative and necessary over time? How might gender or humanism be implicated in these processes? And how can we, as Caribbean feminist academics and activists, advocate in ways that render the abject desirable?" (15). In discourses where the default mode is for the middle class to chide itself for being middle class *and* get to speak for the working class as well, the celebrated working-class black subject seemingly also has no outlet for expressing the complex dynamics of her own relationship with her self-effacing middle-class counterpart who has long assumed the mantle of speaking for her. Understanding the relationships between these subjects unmasks the unitary prescriptions that continue to stifle our understandings of Caribbean subjectivity.

# 4

## BEYOND INCLUSION, BEYOND NATION QUEERING TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY CARIBBEAN LITERATURE<sup>1</sup>

Ask anybody, I been writing you this letter for years. But maybe the shop had to burn down first, maybe Cecil had to die first, maybe Dulcie had to leave and Miss Sylvie, maybe I had to lose every damn thing first and fall down so deep that I almost hit bottom before I could finish writing it finally.

—*The Pagoda*<sup>2</sup>



Him had to leave the church. It was impossible to continue on like this. His days heaped in hypocrisy. In lies.

—*A Small Gathering of Bones*<sup>3</sup>



Through the spaces between the leaves they saw the other side as well. They saw judgment and redemption, rescue and damnation, despair and hope.

—*John Crow's Devil*<sup>4</sup>

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1. A version of this chapter appeared in *Anthurium: A Caribbean Studies Journal* 7.1 (2010) as “‘Yes, ma’am, Mr. Lowe’: Lau A-Yin and the Politics of Gender and Sexuality in Patricia Powell’s *The Pagoda*.”

2. Patricia Powell, *The Pagoda* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1999), 245.

3. Patricia Powell, *A Small Gathering of Bones* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2003), 112.

4. Marlon James, *John Crow's Devil* (New York: Akashic Books, 2005), 230.

## Introduction

The above excerpts are defining moments that appear close to or at the end of novels occupied with the vexed issue of how to negotiate nonheteronormative sexuality in Jamaica. In *The Pagoda*, the process of letter writing shapes the novel's plot and provides the momentum for the protagonist's unraveling of himself, through tracing his gendered and sexualized history.<sup>5</sup> Losing all that secured his life as a Chinese male shopkeeper in Jamaica's immediate postemancipation period propels the protagonist Lowe to recover a version of himself long lost to him because of the gender and sexual roles he is for decades forced to assume and live just to survive in hostile environments. Likewise, *A Small Gathering of Bones* is constructed as a eulogy of sorts for Ian Kay-sen, a gay Jamaican man who suffers from an HIV/AIDS-like immune system virus. The novel takes the form of another gay Jamaican man, Dale Singleton's, memories of the period leading up to Ian's death, which does not occur as a consequence of the seemingly terminal disease he suffers, but rather at the hands of Ian's own mother. Remembering Ian's death and its causes leads Dale to not only recognize the hypocrisy within but also to ultimately abandon a defining element of his life, the church. *John Crow's Devil* also ends with a fundamental turning point for the community at its center. In naming the community Gibbeah, Marlon James satirizes the Biblical narrative of the Battle of Gibeah.<sup>6</sup> James's novel illustrates both the problems inherent in a community's reliance on particular kinds of institutionalized authority and the frightening consequence nonadherence carries. The novel portrays the deadly struggle between two religious leaders, the fire-and-brimstone "Apostle" Lucas York and the guilt-ridden alcoholic "Rum Preacher" Hector Bligh, for the collective soul of Gibbeah. Central to the Bible's narrative of the Battle of Gibeah are violent exercises of civic authority as mediated by religion among the tribes of Israel. James grafts this context of religiously sanctioned civil violence onto a remote Jamaican village in 1957. At the end of the novel,

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5. Lowe is biologically female but cross-dresses as male to escape China and continues to cross-dress as male in postemancipation Jamaica. The novel references Lowe consistently with male pronouns (he/him), and I replicate this in my critique, both to maintain the integrity of the novel and to register the dissonance and difficulty of attempting to gender this particular character.

6. The Battle of Gibeah and the circumstances that lead to it appear in Judges 19–20. The atrocities committed throughout this biblical episode by those who variously saw themselves as victims and avengers seem unfathomable, but they are also a near-perfect conceptual analogue for the atrocities committed in Marlon James's Gibbeah. I would suggest also that the additional letter *b*, a phonetic hard consonant, signals an amplified sense of atrocity in James's satirization of this battle.

the village as its inhabitants know it is destroyed, and they are left to rebuild and reckon with their roles in its destruction.

Central to all these depictions of loss, abandonment, and destruction, however, is a critique of institutions like religion, gender, and sexuality that undergirds a heteronormatively structured nation. I argue in this chapter that these novels' critiques of the heteronormative contingencies of the modern Caribbean nation can be illuminated by queer theory's "resistance to definition," "definitional indeterminacy" (Jagose 1), and for "traversing and creatively transforming conceptual boundaries" (Harper et al. 2). This chapter's discussion of Powell's and James's novels follows the editors of a special issue of *Social Text* titled *Queer Transexions of Race, Nation and Gender* whose introduction to the issue "posits queer as a point of departure for a broad critique that is calibrated to account for the social antagonisms of nationality, race, gender, and class *as well as* sexuality" (Harper et al. 3). In practice, queer theory's "definitional indeterminacy" becomes crucial to our contemporary critical practices because as Michelle A. Rowley points out,

While the legacy of humanism continues to shape the context in which access to rights is framed in the contemporary Caribbean, both humanism and the feminist alternative of gender are not adequate to the task of twenty-first-century social justice activism precisely because of the ways in which they are imbricated in each other. (3)<sup>7</sup>

I thus turn to queer theory for a general logic of social illegibility that can help us to understand a range of difficult subjects, sexual, gendered, and otherwise, in ways that can serve larger purposes in areas of citizenship and social justice.<sup>8</sup>

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7. See also Tracy Robinson, "Fictions of Citizenship, Bodies without Sex: The Production and Effacement of Gender in Law," *Small Axe* 7 (2000): 1–27. Robinson critiques the embrace of the term "gender" for its effacing of specific concerns related to women and its tacit role in maintaining the existing gendered status quo.

8. By way of definition, my use of "queer" refers to sexual practices that fall outside of the boundaries of heteronormativity. Like Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, I see heteronormativity as distinct from heterosexuality and use it to "mean the institutions, structures of understanding, and practical orientation that make heterosexuality seem not only coherent—that is organized as a sexuality—but also privileged" (Berlant and Warner 548). In this sense, not all heterosexual practices are heteronormative; rather, only those heterosexualities that guarantee the specific metaphor that mediates national existence—the heterosexual nuclear family. Thus, my understanding of queerness includes not only homosexual or lesbian practices but also nonreproductive heterosexual practices as well. Other sexual practices considered as deviant or criminalized also fall under my use of "queer" or "nonheteronormative"—though not without self-conscious problems. I consider incest, pedophilia, and bestiality, for example, as among queer practices in a manner that I hope does not lend a sense of criminality to queer-

My discussion of queerness in Powell's and James's novels is also informed by Donette Francis's use of "antiromance" in *Fictions of Feminine Citizenship*, as a "template for reading the novelistic output of contemporary Caribbean women writers," a template that complements queer theory's definitional elasticity and further informs the essentialized contingencies of gender and sexuality that belie the heteronormativity of Caribbean nations and citizenship (Francis 6). According to Francis, "antiromances refuse any integrity of wholeness, insisting that there is no properly realized nation to come-of-age to and no idealized domestic or 'home' space to reclaim," which thus "forces a more complex discussion of agency" (Francis 7) in postcolonial Caribbean contexts.

I ground this chapter in queer theory's resistance of definition and antiromance's "reluctance to offer grand narrative closure [and] settlement" to contend that these three twenty-first-century Jamaican novels problematize the concept of nation as the contemporary system of imagining and organizing politically sovereign existence for Caribbean nations and their people (Francis 8). They do this by disrupting the essentialized contingencies of gender and sexuality on which postcolonial Caribbean nationhood is imagined. I suggest that the books' authors are among a new cohort of writers who are challenging the continued prioritization of specific kinds of nationalist politics in Caribbean literary studies. This cohort of writers constitutes a fourth wave of Caribbean writing that deploys resistance to cathartic closure and the eschewal of definition among its key formal strategies. What is significant about these challenges to our contemporary understandings of sovereignty in postcolonial societies is that rather than seeking inclusion into exclusive national communities, these texts reject (sometimes tentatively, sometimes forcefully) the concept of nation as a primary avenue for imagining community and sovereignty in the region.

Significantly, despite this critique of the concept of nation, these novels do not depict any tangible sense of what "the other side"—that needed new beginning after loss, abandonment, and disruption of the heteronormative nationalist order—might look like. More perplexingly, despite the fraught nature of the Caribbean space for queer subjects, these novels root themselves in the Caribbean local rather than the diasporic elsewhere. Thus, *The Pagoda* leaves the reader without an image of an affirmative place where a Chinese woman who lived as a father and husband can exist after the necessity for these roles is removed, but who nonetheless insists on remaining in Jamaica.

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ness overall, but rather highlights practices that are strategically excluded to bolster heteronormativity's instrumentality to official constructions of nation.

Similarly, as his surname suggests, Dale Singleton is not offered a post-church community; he remains alone, and unlike the queer characters in Powell's first novel, *Me Dying Trial*, he doesn't migrate to a more tolerant community. *John Crow's Devil* ends with yet another image of a gendered and sexualized outcast, the Widow, still in Gibbeah, but on the other side of its fence. Arguably, the recovery implied by these depictions of queer isolation and detachment is as hopeful as the depictions are puzzling. Though each novel positions destruction/death, loss, abandonment, and a new beginning as central to the recovery of a sovereign self, personhood, and even civil order and liberty, the absence of a concrete picture of the next step is particularly telling of the incapacity of the contemporary postcolonial moment to envision or articulate a sovereign existence beyond the heteronormatively defined nation. This is one of the most sobering critiques that these novels collectively provide.

## Reading Queerness in Caribbean Literature

Representations of nonheteronormativity or queerness have appeared with varying degrees of prominence in West Indian literature for almost a century. While such representations oftentimes still serve to engage insider/outsider, normal/abnormal, or natural/unnatural binaries, over time and with historical and geopolitical shifts, these narratives take on a more nuanced complexity geared towards grappling with the formation of nation and problems of sovereignty in colonial and postcolonial contexts. As Harper et al. suggest in *Queer Transexions*, "queer" critiques can be "conceived as a means of traversing and creatively transforming conceptual boundaries, thereby harnessing the critical potential of queer theory while deploying it beyond the realms of sexuality and sexual identity" (Harper et al. 1) Claude McKay's *Banana Bottom* (1933) is a first-wave novel in which the possibilities of "deploying [queerness] beyond the realms of sexuality and sexual identity" inhere in the relationship between the novel's protagonist, Bita, and her English mentor, Squire Gensir. Though queerness is present in the narrative, as Timothy S. Chin suggests, as "an important subtextual issue," it is "one that is intimately and inextricably intertwined with other, more explicit narrative preoccupations" (Chin, "Bullers and Battymen" 129).

According to Rhonda Cobham, "The relationship between Bita and Gensir in *Banana Bottom* reproduces the relationship between McKay and [his white English patron Walter] Jekyll, down to the books they share and the conversations in which they engage" (Cobham 57). As Wayne Cooper concurs, Gensir is a "fictional prototype" of McKay's homosexual English

patron Walter Jekyll (Cooper 32). Gensir's muted sexuality is characteristic of an unspoken normativity that precludes the representation of homosexuality in a Jamaican setting. Nonetheless, casting the analogue of this relationship in chaste though undeniably heterosexual terms conveys the tensions attendant in the implied homoerotics and raced power dynamics of white patronage, which go beyond questions of sexual identity to limn the more general anxieties surrounding white/colonial patronage of black/colonized artists. Thus, despite his intellectual chemistry with Bita, Gensir as Jekyll's analogue "live[s] aloof from sexual contact, a happy old bachelor with . . . not the slightest blemish on his character" (McKay 92). Bita and Squire Gensir's heteronormative relationship not only mediates the queerness of McKay's relationship with Jekyll, but in rendering this relationship as a chaste one with an asexual patron, McKay creates a space of deferral in which the complex colonial relations of power between patron and protégé can be alluded to. As Cobham suggests, this space of deferral

speak[s] to the anxieties which belied McKay's proud posture of self-assurance in his own dealings with patrons, especially when confronted with the prurient sexual expectations and the constant need to reaffirm the patron's cultural superiority that defines the white response to black creativity in the early twentieth century. (Cobham 56)

Moreover, "McKay must constantly defer the moment of consummation in the relationship between mentor and protégé, or risk confronting the assumptions about power and powerlessness built into such opposing categories as active/passive, black/white, or natural/unnatural" (Cobham 73). Casting the mentor and protégé relationship in unconsummated heteronormative terms is thus also a deferral of the queer relations and dependencies belying this relationship that undermine McKay's own self-assuredness as an artist. Deferring consummation "allows [McKay] to maintain that his protagonist can transcend the hierarchies through which their respective societies construct meaning without challenging the ways in which such hierarchies situated whole cultures in relation to each other" (Cobham 73). Though deferred through heteronormative terms, however, the absence of consummation nonetheless makes sexuality all the more visible in its instrumentality for thwarting the politics of race through the hierarchies of gender.

We can think of McKay's "deferral" of queer matters through the inscription of a female protagonist as both emblematic of first-wave anticolonial priorities and as a subsequent purview of third-wave writing. Over the course of the last three decades, more recent writers have begun to directly engage

with the issues of queer sexuality deferred in earlier Caribbean discourses. This engagement loosely coincides with the early 1990s third-wave moment, when Caribbean women's writing is commonly described as coming into its own. Within this moment, issues of gender and sexuality were paramount, and as Timothy S. Chin suggests, "writers vigorously challenged the patriarchal and heterosexual ideologies that have resulted in the marginalization of women and gay men at the same time that they have continued to expose the social and political structures that serve to perpetuate the region's colonial legacy" (Chin, "Bullers and Battymen" 129). Among these writers are Powell and James, along with Shani Mootoo, Michelle Cliff, H. Nigel Harris, and Lawrence Scott, whose work liberates queerness from narrative subtext and portrays it as a lived part of Caribbean realities. As such, third-wave writing discards narrative sublimations to make more explicit critiques of the role of sexuality and sexualization in modern concepts of the nation, its foundations, and its tools for shaping sovereign citizenship.

Thus, from the third wave onward, Caribbean writing has grappled simultaneously with the sexist/homophobic and colonial/neocolonial structures that continue to pervade contemporary Caribbean societies. Critiques of these narratives can be characterized in two main ways. The first is the characterization of queer Caribbean subjectivity over time within the binary oppositions: heterosexuality/homosexuality, masculine/feminine, sex/gender, closeted/out, center/margin, conscious/unconscious/ natural/unnatural, and normal/pathological. The latter two of these binaries especially become definitive of the need and desire to recover queerness from the marginalizing binaries of Caribbean subjectivity. In his introduction to the edited collection *Our Caribbean: A Gathering of Lesbian and Gay Writing from the Antilles*, Thomas Glave describes this first anthology of Caribbean gay and lesbian writing as

born out of the most extreme longing: the desire to know finally, and with complete certainty, that a book such as this one actually existed and *could* exist. Could exist in spite of thundering condemnation from Christian fundamentalist ministers and, from those in churches, mosques, and other places . . . Could exist despite proscriptions, banishments, ostracisms, and in more than a few cases, extreme violence. (Glave 1)

If Glave's anthology can be representative of discourses that seek an "ending to the silences and invisibilities" that mark queer Caribbean citizenship—a silence that can be understood as analogous to McKay's deferral of sexuality—in recent years, the diasporic locations of writers outside of the Caribbean has installed diasporic perspectives as a strategy for breaking the silences

surrounding queer sexuality. In the latter stages of the third wave of writing, Caribbean writers like Powell and Shani Mootoo, for example, begin to harness the popularized shifts towards diasporic spaces for negotiating nonheteronormative Caribbean citizenship.

The turn to diasporic perspectives as sites for reworking and reimagining marginalized and embattled subjectivities is thus the second characteristic of Caribbean discourses of queerness that is relevant here. Chin defines the connection between the silences surrounding queer sexuality and national identity by pointing out that

if questions of sexuality—particularly “non-normative” sexualities—have either been absent from Caribbean discourses or else fraught with tensions and controversy, it is not only because questions of sexuality are inevitably tied to concerns about gender and morality but also because they are inextricably linked to concerns about national identity. (Chin, “The Novels” 533)

For Chin, “breaking the silence that surrounds issues of sexuality in Caribbean discourses necessitates a simultaneous interrogation of prevailing constructs of nation and national identity” (533). Accordingly, “diasporic perspectives . . . might be especially salient for the articulation of gay, lesbian, and other non-normative sexualities” (533). Though Chin’s observation of the necessity for interrogating the constructs that belie national identity are important here, the diasporic turn, as it became popularized by the proliferation of diasporic discourses in the metropolitan postcolonial theory in the 1990s, is one we should take with caution.

I take up Alison Donell’s impulse in resisting the wake of Black Atlantic criticism and its diasporic foci within Caribbean discourses because of its potential to elide the local and establish hierarchical relations between settler and migrant and local and global. Thus, “while Black Atlanticism has opened up new and enabling critical pathways . . . it has perhaps, albeit unwittingly, closed others down” (Donnell 83). Moreover,

Diasporic discourses, both theoretical and literary, have been important to the construction of postcolonial studies and in particular, to the attempts within this discipline to articulate the politics of identity which takes account of the mobility of peoples and cultures across a postcolonial world. However, the anti-foundationalist politics of postcolonialism appear to have generated a preference for dislocation over location, rupture over continuity and elsewherelessness over hereness. (Donnell 83)

The preferences for “dislocation over location, rupture over continuity and elsewherelessness over hereness” that Donnell observes here are relevant for Caribbean queer discourses as well. The overlay of outward glances for the establishment of Caribbean subjectivities is a familiar gesture—the mid-century (male) writer in exile, the late-century (female) migrant writer—but we are also familiar with how it can contribute to the invisibility of more localized critiques. While both James and Powell write novels about Caribbean sexual citizenship from diasporic positions in the United States, the diasporic turn that Chin advocates is complicated by Powell’s protagonists Lowe (*The Pagoda*) and Dale (*A Small Gathering of Bones*), for example, who stubbornly choose the fringes of their local spaces over migration.

Moreover, in an interview with Powell, Chin nonetheless notes that her identification as Jamaican “captures the deep ambivalence and contradictions that define her relationship to the Caribbean” (Chin, “The Novels” 536). She says,

Even though I am an American citizen and, as far as I know, don’t intend to go back to Jamaica to live, I still feel like a Jamaican. I haven’t lost that even though I have lived here longer than I’ve lived in Jamaica . . . Maybe it’s my grappling with identity that still lodges me as a Jamaican. And because I write about the Caribbean or because I set my work there that further tags me. But I feel my relationship with Jamaica is also antagonistic because I am at odds with so many things that happen there. (qtd. in Chin, “The Novels” 536)

From her position in the diaspora, Powell asserts the continued grappling with Jamaica in her writing in a manner that resonates with her protagonist Lowe’s insistence on remaining in Jamaica when the opportunity to leave for a less hostile place arises. The insistence on the local in both Powell’s words and her character informs my cautious approach to the diasporic turn. This hesitance is not a dismissal of diasporic perspectives, however, but rather a reconsideration of the relationship between the local and the global as well as the national and the diasporic that is firmly rooted in locatedness.

Patricia Powell’s *The Pagoda* and *A Small Gathering of Bones* as well as Marlon James’s *John Crow’s Devil* ruffle assumptions of collective existence, belonging, and home in ways that can be only partially illuminated by diasporic perspectives. While *The Pagoda* illustrates the protagonist’s desire for “a home that is not a comfortable place,” *A Small Gathering of Bones* portrays home as institutionally inhospitable (Chin, “The Novels” 537). *John Crow’s Devil*, meanwhile, offers a depiction of home and community that is violently

grotesque in ways that problematize the desire for home and belonging, while refusing even an uncomfortable settlement.

James lives and works in Minnesota. Perhaps because many of the writers and critics of queer texts reside and work in the United States, diasporic perspectives also readily lend themselves the “presence and affirmation” ethos of ethnic literary criticism in the United States. As David Eng instructively notes, the ethnic literary text “has often been said to function as a proxy for history. This has placed particular pressure and urgency on the literary form to perform what is ‘missing’ in history and to represent otherwise unrepresented communities” (1484). Thus, critics of Caribbean literature generally tend to read representations of queerness through lenses of historical reconstruction. Timothy Chin, for example, praises *The Pagoda* for opening up a Caribbean discursive space “to represent a gay/lesbian/non-heteronormative Caribbean subject” (“The Novels” 573). Likewise, Johanna X. K. Garvey sees *The Pagoda* as a quest to “initiate a healing from the traumas of colonial history” (114).

But while the work of creating discursive space and initiating healing, as Glave’s introduction to *Our Caribbean* concurs, is crucial to Caribbean discourse, it is only a partial account of the queer subject’s relation to home. According to Jason Frydman, “what Lowe’s circulation through nineteenth-century Jamaica unveils, however, is not merely the ‘presence and affirmation’ of individual queer subjects absent from colonial and nationalist historiography” (Frydman 103). *The Pagoda*, he says, “charts the thoroughly queer operations of colonial society. The novel appropriates this terrain [ . . . ] to ground the utopian possibilities of an anticolonial Jamaican nationalism” (103). While I agree with Frydman to a point, his argument retains the problematic focus on the nation as belonging’s endgame. While the novel does chart the “thoroughly queer operations of colonial society,” I argue that it does so to dismantle and reject the heteronormative bases of nationalism and illustrate the ways utopian anticolonial possibilities *cannot* be grounded either in nationalism or in diaspora (Frydman 103). Francis’s antiromance template for reading Caribbean women’s writing informs this unsettling of nation and diaspora, because “it exposes the folly of believing that somehow the national, the diasporic, or the intimate sphere are privileged spaces for the reconciliation of otherwise impossible differences” (Francis, *Fictions* 8). More than exposing and antagonizing national queer exclusions, or even advocating for a place in the community for queer subjects, twenty-first-century Caribbean fiction such as Powell’s and James’s thwarts nationalism and in the end rejects it for its reliance on a heteronormativity bolstered, for example, by religion couched as the mediator of belonging and citizenship. They ironically challenge the nation,

however, by insisting on it as setting. Their works' rootedness in the Jamaican context also forestalls diaspora to foreground the queer subjects' inability to "dwell comfortably or safely in any domicile whether at home or abroad" (Francis 6).

If Caribbean literary criticism remains preoccupied with carving out space within the nation or in the diaspora for the marginalized, underrepresented, and the outright excluded, then it neglects those representations that question or outright rebuff placement within either of these spaces. Thus, though Dale in *A Small Gathering of Bones* initially attempts, despite his homosexuality, to assimilate into the dominant heteronormative culture through the church, by the end of the novel he abandons traditional Christianity and the church and, by extension, the dominant heteronormative culture. Though a plausible representation of the possibilities of a plural nation, the isolation and gender in-between-ness of Lowe/Lau A-Yin at the end of *The Pagoda* also indicate the nation's inability to accommodate this figure at once produced by and at odds with global gender and sexual politics. More forcefully than either of Powell's novels, finally, *John Crow's Devil* overturns institutions of traditional order, not to establish more productive ones but rather to hyperbolically emphasize existing concepts of institutions and order as potentially monstrous. This is particularly true of the preindependence debacle that transpires in Gibbeah. In contrast to *The Pagoda*'s treatment of queerness as a model for negotiating the complex relations of race, gender, and sexuality as components of Jamaican citizenship and *A Small Gathering of Bones*'s indictment of Jamaica's silencing of queerness, the explorations of queerness in *John Crow's Devil* seem depraved and deliberately disruptive of even the most unsettled impulses of incorporation and inclusivity.

As early depictions or perhaps deferrals of queer subjectivity in Caribbean discourses suggest, silencing non-normative sexuality is instrumental to the construction of nation and national identity. Critical discourses thus far have worked to disrupt this silencing and expose the links between the construction of nation and the erasure of nonheteronormative sexuality through diasporic perspectives, as well as through the inclusive gestures of the "presence as affirmation" ethos. These approaches nonetheless seem to take national inclusivity and even settlement as a given in ways that cannot fully account for how nation as a concept of collectivity is being troubled in contemporary Caribbean writing. Francis's antiromance template is important here because it informs this chapter's attention to the moments of "instability, and even disintegration" as the unsettling spaces in these narratives that offer the most salient critiques of postcolonial sovereignty (Francis 8).

## Sexualization, Contamination, Religion, and Citizenship

### SEXUALIZATION

In order to enact this unsettling of nation and diaspora, each narrative returns to pivotal moments of political transition and volatility in Jamaica's history. *The Pagoda* and *John Crow's Devil* are both set in the postemancipation period, the former in 1893 and the latter in the 1950s. Though set at different points in the years between emancipation and political independence, social, political, and economic reformation is significant to both. Each novel registers the decline of the sugar plantations in the wake of emancipation and the subsequent contentions over the value of labor and property accumulation and distribution. They do so, moreover, in order to present a sense of the complexities involved in the social and political transition of a country and its newly freed population. *A Small Gathering of Bones* is set in the embattled 1970s, when politically motivated civil disturbances violently fractured the independent Jamaican nation along partisan lines. In this novel, the violent separatism between rival political parties mirrors the tense distinction between the heteronormative and nonheteronormative in Jamaican society. In all three, the civil disturbances that accompanied the transition from slavery to emancipation or from colonialism to independence intersect with a central thematic of negotiating queerness in colonial and postcolonial settings. Drawing a parallel between queerness and political transition and upheaval shows how queer subjectivity, though present during the decolonization processes, is shut out of citizenship within sovereign nations and is forcefully privatized in order to cloak the sexualization of national membership.<sup>9</sup>

The sexualization of populations is central to the organization and regulation of the communal reality that each of these historical moments of political, economic, and social shifting attempts to institute. Pivotal to my work here is apprehending how the sexualization of populations figures in the construction of nation over the decades and the ways Powell's and James's works offer contexts for critiquing nationalism's dependency on heteronormativity. As Michel Foucault observes, sexuality is "one of those [elements of power relations] endowed with the greatest instrumentality: useful for the greatest

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9. Berlant and Warner's "Sex in Public," *Critical Inquiry* 24.2 (1998): 547–66, was very useful in thinking through how relegating sex to private spaces enables the cloaking of the ways national membership is sexualized. Also significantly useful in thinking through the sexualization of citizenship in the postcolonial Caribbean and its rooting in colonial history is M. Jacqui Alexander's "Not Just (Any) Body Can Be a Citizen: The Politics of Law, Sexuality and Postcoloniality in Trinidad and Tobago and the Bahamas," *Feminist Review* 48 (1994): 5–23.

number of maneuvers and capable of serving as a point of support, as a linchpin for the most varied strategies” (Foucault 103). Sexuality, along with race, gender, and religion, is an integral element of the support apparatus instrumental in the organization and perpetuation of a particular societal order. Sexuality, alongside its relation to the human body, is central in the eighteenth-century context of global expansion, colonization, and the industrial revolution. Productivity, profitability, consumerism, and stability are crucial motivators of the ways bodies become organized through sexualization. According to Foucault, sexuality “is linked to the economy through numerous subtle relays, the main one of which is the body—the body that produces and consumes” (Foucault 106–107). In this case, identities were overlaid on bodies that were raced *and* sexualized in the service of economic productivity and social stability.

Furthermore, as M. Jacqui Alexander’s work attests, sexuality’s contemporary mediation of legislation and discourses of citizenship—which criminalize selected sexualities and naturalize heteronormative sexuality—finds its roots in colonial history. Her analysis looks back to colonial rule, when “black bodies, the economic pivot of slave-plantation economy, were sexualized. Black women’s bodies evidence an unruly sexuality, untamed and wild. Black male sexuality was to be feared as the hyper sexualized stalker” (Alexander 12). The invention and maintenance of these now-stereotypical classifications enabled and regulated reproductive practices that were vital to the functioning of the plantation economy. The Foucauldian notion of sexuality as a linchpin or point of support for the most varied strategies of societal organization is illustrated in this organization of bodies to elicit control and productivity and to maintain hegemonic organization via the management of race, gender, and sexuality. Similar arrangements are applied to each racial population introduced into the society and are perpetuated throughout colonization and into the establishment of postcolonial nations.

Accordingly, the motivations and regulations that organized the migration of Chinese indentured laborers to the New World during the nineteenth century illustrate sexualization’s centrality to the formation of New World societies. As Donette Francis observes, in the British Caribbean

colonial administrators sanctioned the importation of Chinese women for a reproductive imperative: as a means of developing endogamous Chinese families who would serve as a buffer class, securing the racial boundaries between newly emancipated blacks and white settlers. (Francis, *Fictions* 28)<sup>10</sup>

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10. Conversely, Chinese migration to North America in the nineteenth century was gov-

*The Pagoda* portrays the local frictions that ensue from such colonial policy, geared towards installing a new racial class into the postemancipation milieu. Lowe's perspective, as a Chinese immigrant in nineteenth-century Jamaica, on the local hostilities directed at the newly arrived Chinese, reflects some of the local frictions generated by colonial policy on Chinese indentured servitude. He says, "He couldn't complain . . . the people hadn't cut his throat yet . . . His people, the few Chinese living on the island, had been meeting hell, at the hands of the Negro people and the few Europeans that controlled the country, ever since they had arrived" (Powell, *The Pagoda* 6). In this novel, the Chinese are regarded with violent hostility by all strata of Jamaican society because of the threat this growing "buffer class" posed to both the black peasantry and the white ruling class. The growth and increasing economic mobility of the Chinese population in relation to other racial groups are what inform this threat and consequent hostility.

Lowe observes that "there were opportunities to be had if they persevered, but only at the expense of other people. [The Chinese] had been brought there only to supply cheap labor and keep down wages. They had been brought there only to keep the Negro population in check" (Powell, *The Pagoda* 45). As this quote suggests, the ambivalence surrounding Chinese belonging in colonial discourses stems from their perceived sociopolitical position in relation to colonial order. According to Ann-Marie Lee-Loy, "the most important colonial image of the Chinese was as an in-between, 'middleman' community within the hierarchical social order of the colonies" (Lee-Loy 16). The reasons behind importing indentured labor from China, which included cheap labor and the creation of a "sociopolitical buffer zone . . . between the ex-slaves and estate management," ultimately set this ethnic community in opposition to the community of African descent whose labor they were brought in to replace (Lee-Loy 17). Though they performed some of the same work and lived under the same conditions as the black laboring classes, the visible acquisition of wealth by the Chinese, through shops and other merchant ventures, positions them even more precariously between the subjugated negro masses and the ruling white minority. Throughout the late nineteenth century, the latter's financial control of the country begins to wane because of the labor crisis and the decline of West Indian sugar on global markets that follows after emancipation.

Elizabeth's husband's response to Lowe's dream of a pagoda to house a Chinese school and benevolent society illustrates that the economic progress

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erned by the opposite of this reproductive imperative, and sought to restrict the reproductive growth of a Chinese population for fear of erosion or contamination of the "purely white" nuclear family and nation by extinction. Thus, the Page Law hindered the heterosexual reproduction of Chinese communities and structured Chinese bachelor societies as queer spaces.

of the Chinese is not well received and reflects general anxiety in Jamaican society regarding Chinese immigrants. He says,

At first is farming and such. Then next thing shop, and before you know, a little shop in every blasted corner you turn. Now is school and property. Soon you have my people working for you on the estates cleaning for you in the big house. Calling you massa and such. (73)

Elizabeth's husband marks the growth in power of the Chinese population through small ventures and property acquisition as a prelude to the reenslavement of the black population, which also reflects the fear of the potential of the Chinese to colonize and enslave. The anxiety surrounding increased Chinese prosperity is not restricted to the negro population. When Sylvie's white lover, Whitley, looks at Lowe, "thinking of what to order him to do, so he would disappear," Lowe notes with some triumph that

he was not dark-skinned, he was not of the African peoples, not mixed race, not Indian, not low class white, he was Chinese, different altogether, his people were immigrant merchants, were threatening the economic stability of her own alabaster people, so she said nothing at all. (92)

Thus the propagation and economic success of the Chinese population as encouraged by the colonial administration reflects the role played by sexualization in the restructuring of Caribbean society after emancipation. The importation of Chinese men and women was geared towards the endogamous growth of this population in the colonies. As a policy for propagating a buffer class of Chinese families, sexualizing the importation of Chinese indentured laborers through this kind of reproductive imperative succeeded in placing the Chinese (and Chinese-descended) population in a precarious position between the laboring African-descended population and the ruling European-descended population—a position implicitly complicated by their economic success.

## CONTAMINATION

The sexualization of colonial populations through reproductive imperatives bolsters racial hierarchies and casts miscegenation in terms of a contaminating threat to the status quo. James and Powell problematize this contaminating threat posed by sex outside the confines of heteronormativity in their

depictions of the spread of literal diseases. In *A Small Gathering of Bones* and *John Crow's Devil*, disease features prominently, seemingly as a consequence of engaging in nonheteronormative sex. Ian Kaysen suffers from an unnamed disease resembling AIDS, and Lucas York is syphilitic. In both instances, the narrative comments on the communicability of disease not from the perspective of a sense of deviant sexuality, but rather as a horrific consequence of the institutionalized exclusion and silencing of queer subjects. *A Small Gathering of Bones* opens with sickness: "when Ian Kaysen first come down with the offensive dry cough" (Powell, *A Small Gathering* 1). Ian's illness is never diagnosed or identified, and the air of the unknown that surrounds it also extends to the novel's other homosexual characters, who with the exception of Ian exist as men who secretly have sexual relationships with other men. Dale's lover Alexander gets married and has children to conceal his homosexuality. Ian points out the problems for male partners of married men to Dale, saying,

You know you don't have much right once wife's involved. Is them who get the property when him drop dead in you bed. Is them who get to take care of him when him fall down sick . . . Too scared to come out, them hide behind wife's frock tail. Breed up the place with plenty children, people think them is real man. While my tail out on the line, them still keep work. What a nice life. Nice and easy. And you add to it. (Powell, *A Small Gathering* 29)

Ian highlights the complexities of conjugal rights to property and health care that are available only to heterosexual spouses—wives, in this case—in addition to what constitutes “real” masculinity. When Ian can no longer ignore the illness ravaging his body, he faces the stark reality of living in a state that denies him access to a legitimate spouse who will care for him. The predication of closeted men’s masculinity upon statuses as heterosexual husband and prolific father is contrasted with Ian’s initial courageous refusal to be anything but out, even in the face of hostility, and is also revelatory of the ways heteronormativity is used to mask nonheteronormativity.

At the end of the novel it is not the disease that wreaks havoc on Ian’s body that finally kills him. As Dale imagines it, it is Ian’s mother who pushes him down the stairs. Before Ian’s death, Mrs. Kaysen refuses to acknowledge the existence of her son when he exposes to her in a letter “the state of his heart where men were concerned” (20). She cuts ties with him immediately, sending back his gift of a dress and accessories with his coming-out letter burned to ashes. A mother’s refusal to acknowledge her son because of sexual difference is thereby rendered complicit with the unchecked spread of disease. Not

naming the disease allows for the consideration of additional permutations of illness and infection, beyond the sexual transmission of disease. The transmission of heteronormativity through institutions like the church and family figures in this novel as a societal infection, which is as deadly as the unnamed disease. Secrecy is a problem that still plagues the gay community in Jamaica; the epidemic proportion reached by the HIV/AIDS virus in part rests with its beginnings in a community that exists in imposed secrecy. The strategic exclusion of queer sexuality from the nation also contributes to the spread of disease. The refusal to acknowledge and accept queerness as a part of the lived reality of some citizens, in the novel, has life-and-death consequences. As the disease seeps through Ian's body, it also spreads to other bodies. Dale mixes his lover, Loxley, the same castor oil and lime juice concoction that he prepares for Ian in the early stages of his illness, indicating its silent spread, even to Dale.

Likewise, in *John Crow's Devil*, secrecy, as compounded by conspicuous silence surrounding the sexual victimization of young boys, belies Lucas York's reasons for turning the town of Gibbeah on its head. The village knows the reality of the relationship between Gibbeah's founder, Aloysius Garvey, and his "nephews." The omniscient narrator, a voice that speaks as though also a part of the village, describes Garvey early in the novel as "a sodomite who was on his way to Hell" (27). Likewise, "there were some who wondered why a man as rich as Aloysius Garvey would hire someone as worthless as Pastor Bligh, but there were others who felt they already knew" (40). Bligh's adultery with his brother's wife leads his brother to commit suicide. Despite his role as a pastor and supposed religious authority in Gibbeah, the guilt he experiences because of his sexual transgressions and their consequences drives him to alcoholism and renders him incapable of indicting anyone in the community for their sins. The reality of Garvey's relationship with the boys remains protected by secrecy and unchallenged by the moral authority of the church.

The reader learns towards the end of the novel that Lucas York, or the Apostle, is one of Garvey's "nephews," who returns to Gibbeah to exact vengeance on the village for ignoring the sexual abuse he suffered and the syphilis he contracted from this abuse. The novel consistently incorporates compound allusions to the Bible, which are often contradictory and thus designed to complicate whether or not a character or situation is good or evil, right or wrong. For example, the Apostle "came like a thief on a night colored silver . . . As his motorcycle coursed up Brillo Road it left a serpentine trail of dust. There were no witnesses to his coming, save for an owl, the moon, and the Devil" (22). Implicit here are references both to the second coming of Christ

as likened to a thief coming at night and to the devil who appeared in the Garden of Eden as a serpent. In the Bible, the second coming of Christ is described as follows: “for you know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night” (*Zondervan NIV Study Bible*, 1 Thess. 5.2). Conversely, in the Gospel of John, Jesus describes the devil also as a “thief” who “comes only to steal and kill and destroy” (*Zondervan NIV Study Bible*, John 10.10). If both the day of the Lord and the Devil arrive like thieves, and one of the manifestations of the Devil is as a serpent, with which should the reader align the Apostle? York, then, is shrouded in conflicting notions of messiah and enemy, which subsequently complicate how he is seen by the village of Gibbeah. Furthermore, the novel’s characterization of York highlights the Bible’s ambiguity on these subjects and casts significant doubt on the absolute use of them as universal truths with which to govern and order human life.

Nevertheless, for the careful reader, there are more than a few clues along the way that help decipher whether York is friend or foe. Among these clues is the narrative’s subtle handling of his disease. The first indication of his illness comes in a reflection from York’s perspective:

The beard hid the healed sore below his lip, but there were others above and below his belt. They reminded him of what had come and gone and what had not yet come to pass. He knew worse would happen soon, but this was not a morning to dwell on what crept beneath his skin. (84)

The suggestion that York is infected with a hidden, progressive sexually transmitted illness, coupled with numerous descriptions of him as aligned with darkness through black or blood-red clothing, for example, helps to suggest the sinister nature of his actions throughout the novel. Nonetheless, the reader has to wait until close to the end of the novel to know conclusively what York suffers from and the vengeful motivation behind his manipulation of God and faith. In much the same way that notions of the Lord and the Enemy seem deliberately compounded in York’s person, the novel also compounds venereal disease with notions of faith and God. York’s impact on Gibbeah as a religious authority takes on certain characteristics of the progression of syphilis.

The conflation in *John Crow’s Devil* of a Christian conceptualization of God and the disease syphilis suggests the ways both are responsible for the infectious spread of corrupting destruction to both physical bodies and the community. The novel dubs syphilis “the great imitator,” and in his ability to imitate religious rhetoric in order to install himself as God, York symbolically embodies a figurative bout of syphilis that infects Gibbeah (225). Thus, syphilis, “like religion, . . . has no being in itself, but lives in the lives it touches.

Like a God or a Devil" (225–26). Likening the disease to religion, or even to concepts of the forces of good and evil, illustrates the duality and pernicious capacity of an institution deemed as fixed in its goodness and licensed to uphold righteousness. York uses perverse religious logic that infects and destroys the village in a series of movements, which also parallel the four phases in the progression of syphilis:

Syphilis, the great imitator, is a symphony in four movements . . . The first exists mostly in darkness, hiding more than showing. A spot on the anus, a lesion on the vagina, a corpuscle in the mouth that vanishes as quickly as a miracle. The third movement hides deeper than the first, waiting low in the flesh until time to rise again. The fourth movement comes with madness and blindness, consumption and illness of the breath. This is the trinity. One with soul and body after mind has been rotted. But the second movement is the one that leaves a trail. (225–26)

The novel's structure and Gibbeah's undoing unfold much like this. Like the disease, when York first arrives in Gibbeah, he is characterized as having a kind of duplicity similar to the first stage of syphilis. Thus, while his eager acolyte Lucinda at first "feared the working of another spirit, the one whom preachers called in a hushed voice *The Enemy*," within a week, she "proclaimed his appearance the work of Jesus" (33). The second movement of his vengeful ministry, like that of syphilis, is "the one that leaves a trail" (226). The "trail of blood and slime that oozed from the puss-filled sores on Clarence's legs and feet" at the end of novel, resonates earlier in the novel when the community watches Mrs. Johnson's blood and Clarence's blood mix together on the ground of the cemetery after they are whipped for committing adultery (228). Once Bligh is beaten and ousted from the church, the Apostle manipulates the community into a number of extreme and violent acts of religious vengeance and cleansing. There is the slavery-style whipping of Mrs. Johnson and Clarence for adultery (perhaps the only incident of communally exacted punishment where those punished were actually guilty of the presumed offence), the beating of Maas Fergie to death for seeming to have intercourse with a cow, the near-stoning of a truck driver to death for fear of the contaminating effect of evil outsiders, and finally the execution by stoning of Hector Bligh. This trail of public bloodletting, then, parallels the second movement of syphilis. In the third movement of the disease, as the narrative describes, the evidence of corruption and infection, though present, is deeply hidden in the body and is reflected in York's insistence on the village's isolation to protect their righteousness and wage war against the Devil

and the village complying with troubling edict after troubling edict. The final stage that “comes with madness and blindness, consumption and illness of breath” is reflected in the normalizing of life in Gibbeah around a fenced-in compound where men sexually victimize children. As the novel suggests, this combination of symptoms reflects not only divine completeness akin to the Holy Trinity but a perverse oneness between “soul and body after mind has been rotted.” If Bligh can be seen as the conscience of Gibbeah, his removal from the novel is akin to the mind rotting away from a bout of syphilis. This perversion of the Holy Trinity, by conflating it with a sexually transmitted disease with which the Apostle infects Gibbeah, reflects the malleability and corruptibility of conceptualizations of God. By portraying religion and the church in this way, the novel criticizes disturbingly a communal reliance on ideologies that are susceptible to malicious manipulation. Furthermore, the image of infection, which spreads throughout the body and mind, renders religion as one of society’s ills—a disease like syphilis that hides deep in the body and destroys it. Portraying religion in this way troubles its placement as a mechanism for privileging heteronormativity. In another sense, religion here also symbolically problematizes unquestioning adherence to and reverence for orthodoxy in the organization of communities.

## RELIGION

York’s extreme disillusionment with the church stems from the community’s willful blindness, which allowed the continued sexual abuse he and others suffered at the hands of Garvey and Bligh’s predecessor, Pastor Palmer. As York tells Bligh, “This syphilis came from God. From the man of God who preceded you. Aloysius Garvey’s good friend and rape-mate” (212). The founder and owner of the village, alongside the man in charge of the community’s souls, predicated acts of unthinkable violence for decades on young boys, York among them, whose relationship with Garvey is sanitized by the familial relation implied by the word “nephews.” York contracts syphilis while under Garvey’s guardianship, and as a consequence of his trauma and sexual victimization at the hands of men who control and structure his community, he abandons any notion of authority that Garvey and Pastor Palmer may represent. This abandonment is symbolized by his perverse creation of an authority of his own, through the construction of God in his own image. He says, “By the time they found out what I was suffering from, I was as good as fucked. But I don’t need no physician, I am the great physician. God. You see God? God is a figment. A level. A process, I followed the same process and I became

God" (211). Representatives of God like Pastor Palmer exploit their perceived moral authority in the service of victimizing the vulnerable. In inventing God in his own image, York follows the pattern of exploitation laid out by Garvey and his "rape mate." He makes his quest for vengeance and its motivations clear to Bligh: "I belong with all these fuckers who suspected or even knew what my uncle was, but let their nigger ways allow it. And those same nigger ways now allowing me. I belong here" (213).

York's violent testing of the community and its people provides an unsettling critique of the ideologies that underlie the construction and functioning of a community—in this case, religion. Once the Apostle triggers incomprehensible mayhem in Gibbeah, the Widow looks to Mr. Garvey: "Surely he could drive the Apostle out of the village and put Gibbeah back where it used to be" (183). Her reliance on the "sodomite" who created Gibbeah out of his own imaginings leads her to reflect on exactly what Gibbeah used to be: "She thought for a minute about what that meant. Hypocrisy was as much a shield for her as anybody else. Pretense was protection" (183). According to the widow, hypocrisy used to characterize Gibbeah, particularly with regard to sexual transgressions. Hypocritical protection via pretense was rampant in Gibbeah under Garvey's detached though nonetheless present governance. Beyond Garvey's dark house with the black curtains that block out prying eyes is a village that before the Apostle's arrival quietly accepts (or ignores) incest, adultery, and even bestiality. Sexuality—heterosexuality included—in Gibbeah is consistently prefigured as perverse and violent.

Early in the novel, "everybody see Lillamae, outside her gate looking like them obeah her, with one hand holding the knife and the other holding the bloody cocky. She eat green pawpaw and kill out the baby" (20). The combination of the severed penis Lillamae holds (which belonged to her father) and the suggestion of an abortion (in Jamaican folklore ingesting green pawpaw is believed to induce abortion) implies an incestuous relationship between the two. That the community's response is not outrage is telling. The focus of this incident is not on the incest, but rather on the subsequent spectacle of demon possession and the Rum Preacher's inability to cast out Lillamae's demons. Instead of outrage, Gibbeah only reflects bemusement. Thus, the moral authority of the church becomes entangled in the hypocritical protection of the status quo through impotence, secrecy, and willful blindness.

*A Small Gathering of Bones*, by contrast, presents a tension between institutional religion and a more liberatory personal form less concerned with enforcing social norms. The protagonist Dale's initial adherence to Christian values and beliefs seems ironic considering his closeted homosexuality

and clandestine trysts with closeted husbands. True to the motif of carrying his own cross, however, Dale resigns to suffer persecution because of his sexuality:

Him'd resolve to bear it majestically, to turn the other cheek when the sharp edge of the stone clapped against his head, when the steel-toed tips of police shoes elbow him in the sides, when his friends pile ridicule upon ridicule on his curved shoulders. (10)

Here the police entrusted with upholding the law do so through violence and are equated with mocking friends, within the same antihomosexual sphere. Despite persecution by the law and ridicule from his friends, Dale resolves to bear the antihomosexual violence because of advice he receives from an English pastor whom he comes out to. The pastor says:

Son, . . . it is not for us to question the doings of the Almighty. . . . It is for us to accept, son, to accept and bear persecution. To accept and bear humility, the stonings, the insults, the loneliness. Not to question, for it is the will of the Almighty. (10)

These words displace the burden of homosexuality from Dale and onto God, whose almighty will decides Dale's sexuality. Ironically, here God is joined with popular, civil, and legislative persecution of homosexuals, effecting a questioning of the concept of God, his views on homosexuality, and the ways these views undergird heteronormativity. Nonetheless, Dale cultivates a personal brand of Christianity that is the opposite of one that riddles the transgressor with shame, guilt, or fear. It is not a faith that forces him to try to negate a part of himself and exorcise inescapable homosexual urges through compliance with heterosexual norms like marriage. It does not support homosexuality as a righteous path, but it does cover it as a divinely imposed cross one simply must bear. The Apostle ironically calling syphilis "God's gift," adding "God gave syphilis to me," likewise questions Christian interpretations of sexuality and manipulations of deity. Dale's fervent and borderline obsessive work in the church community appears to be penance for this sinful part of himself that he knows and accepts as something that cannot be negated but must simply be borne. He is able to achieve temporary comfort and acceptance with himself and with his religion through his ability to bear it as one of life's travails. Much like York, Dale also liberally constructs faith in light of what he perceives to be his own God-given cross, albeit in far more conciliatory and earnest ways.

Nevertheless, the innate contradictions between Dale's sexual orientation and his Christian faith eventually cause conflict. He experiences a religious crisis when Ian, the individual he found to be most comfortable and accepting of his own sexual orientation and identity, is coerced into believing that his lifestyle is sinful and exorcisable. Bill, though Ian's lover, is also a crusader for suppressing and expelling homosexual desire through the acceptance of God. When Ian's illness worsens, Bill installs Miss Dimple, a Christian woman, as Ian's nurse. Eventually their plan is successful: Ian is convinced that his disease is "God punishing him, making him poorly" and that "him need to give up this nonsense, this man-loving shit" (106). Dale is not disturbed by Ian's desire for religion during his later days; what is disturbing to Dale is the brand of religion that Ian chooses. He questions why Ian had not turned to him:

Dale who'd been leading Sunday school for six straight years. Dale who'd been saved since he was sixteen by Pastor Booker. Dale who'd been leading little children to the fold for the ten past years. Dale who's been administering christenings and baptisms. Now all of a sudden Miss Dimple's religion was better than his. (105–06)

He questions why Ian would choose Miss Dimple's repressive fundamentalism rather than his more liberated brand of religion. Ian's renunciation of his homosexuality through his religious conversion leaves Dale conflicted:

Ten years ago, when him accepted Christ as his Personal Savior, his Holy Redeemer, him did ask God to accept him too, with all his faults, all his failures. Him did make a covenant between himself and God. But now the devil was rearing its ugly head in the shape of Ian's illness, in the form of Miss Dimple's religion, in the image of Bill; it was testing his faith, demanding that Dale choose between Salvation and the love between men. (107)

In Dale's covenant with God, his known transgressions are covered by Christ, but Ian's illness and his conversion by Miss Dimple's religion challenge the notion that Christ is even capable of covering Dale's sin of sins. Dale recognizes the hypocrisy in this demonization of homosexuality among all other sins in the novel and ultimately refuses to make fundamentalism destroy the faith he subscribes to. He does not make the choice that Ian does: "Him had to leave the church. It was impossible to continue on like this. His days

heaped in hypocrisy. In lies" (112). Despite his own brand of "carry your cross" Christianity, Dale is nonetheless subject to the prevailing view, as sanctioned by fundamentalist religious doctrine, that homosexuality is the abomination of all abominations. Dale's retreat from Christian salvation paradoxically signals an alternative salvation, one that enables him to cease the self-persecution that religiosity prescribes and simply embrace himself as a man who loves men.

The novel similarly problematizes mothering in its capacity to assist in the maintenance of a heteronormative status quo alongside religion. As Aparajita Sagar suggests, "Ian does not die from AIDS-related complexes, but at the hand of his implacable, hating mother" (Sagar 34). Mrs. Morgan's and Miss Kaysen's characterizations are indictments against heteronormative mothering, rendering them also complicit in the abuse suffered by their children and the subsequent disorder within the heterosexual family which is the privileged metaphoric representation of the nation. Both mothers appear tyrannical in the extents to which they will go to do what they envision as acts of protecting the sanctity of the heteronormative family; crucially, they value the institution above their own loved ones.<sup>11</sup> Though Mrs. Morgan appears understanding and accepting of Dale's relationship with Nevin, she still works as an agent for maintaining a class-based status quo. Her responses to her daughter Rose's relationship with the Rastaman illustrates the commonly held disdain for Rastafarians, another marginalized group residing on the fringes of society.<sup>12</sup> The extremes to which she will go to protect her family from being contaminated by "this Haile Selassie shit" illustrates a gruesome investment in keeping marginalized communities on the outside, even at the cost of her daughter's own family (109). The portrayal of Mrs. Morgan raises the concern for maintaining heteronormative boundaries to violent levels when it is considered that "she kill all of Rose's children. Three in all. What wouldn't she do? And Rose her own daughter, even. Her own flesh and blood" (109).

Despite this, Dale is afraid to confront Mrs. Morgan for clandestinely inducing the abortions of three of her grandchildren because of his concern

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11. For further reading on the nuclear family as the ideal metaphor of nation, see Anne McClintock, "No Longer in a Future Heaven: Gender, Race, and Nationalism," *Dangerous Liaisons: Gender Nation and Postcolonial Perspectives*, ed. Anne McClintock, Aamir Mufti, and Ella Shohat (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 89–112.

12. For further reading on Rastafari theology and its perception throughout the twentieth century, see Barry Chevannes, *Rastafari: Roots and Ideology* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1994). See also the edited collection by Nathan Samuel Murrell, William David Spencer, and Adrian Anthony McFarlane, *Chanting Down Babylon: The Rastafari Reader* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998), and the second chapter of Nettleford, *Mirror Mirror*.

that she also sees his sin of lying “with mankind, as with womankind” as far worse (*Leviticus* 18:22). He imagines presenting her with a solid line of reasoning that questions why, as a mother, she assumes the right to adjudicate so powerfully in Rose’s life, in decisions such as whether or not Rose should have children and with whom she should have them. Mrs. Morgan’s decision to deny her daughter the right to choose to be the mother to his children is not swayed by the fact that Rose’s Rastafarian suitor shows attention and dedication over the course of five years. Dale’s reasoning against this callousness seems solid enough, but he also imagines her less-than-favorable response with trepidation:

You want to talk about right from wrong, Dale Singleton? . . . Suppose I was to tell them down at the church about the careless nasty life you lead over there? . . . Suppose I was to tell them about the sin and shame you living in the worse form of sin ever . . . ? (111)

The vivid details with which he imagines his excommunication subsequent to Mrs. Morgan’s exposing his lifestyle to the church illustrates that it is a scenario that he envisions and mentally experiences with some intensity:

Deacon Roach’s eyes would first pass over John Brown who committed adultery with one of the girls in the choir last year, and his eyes would pass over Eric Tom who beat his wife constantly, Elma Tubs who was excommunicated by Ebenezer Open Bible for stealing church money and many others before finally coming to rest on Dale. No other sin was greater than Dale’s . . . (112)

The answer to which is worse, as Dale imagines it, among the catalogue of sins is easily discernible. Dale is cautious in his dealings with Mrs. Morgan because he fears that she will expose his own greater sin.

This elevation of one sin above all others suggests the selectivity in Christian fundamentalist doctrine and further illuminates this institution’s role in the sexualization of the nation. Elevating homosexuality above all sins works in the service of protecting heteronormativity, or, as Berlant and Warner suggest, “national heterosexuality.” The latter “is the mechanism by which a core national culture can be imagined as a sanitized space of sentimental feeling and immaculate behavior, a space of pure citizenship” (Berlant 549). The heterosexual familial model enforced by fundamentalist Christianity is integral to this notion of citizenship. Nonetheless, as Cecil

Gutzmore questions, if in fact homosexuality is the sin of all sins, why is it not listed biblically among the Ten Commandments, with more emphasis on its seriousness? Leviticus 18:22 does not state that homosexuality is *the* abomination, but rather *an* abomination among others. Those “guilty” of this great sin, however, are subject to the wrath of those who subscribe to a fundamentalist antihomosexual ideology, which in turn seeks to punish offenders with terminal violence, a fate meted out by the faithful as God’s agents on earth.

Thus, Miss Kaysen cuts ties with Ian immediately after he comes out to her by letter. He tries to speak to her about disowning him, but her response is cold and final:

I never did like you from the beginning. Miss Iris couldn’t get you out. Twist up yourself inside me womb like you plan was to stay. Them did have to force cow itch tea down me throat to get you to budge. Even then you were no damn good. Should’ve followed my heart and put a blasted end to you, then. (Powell, *A Small Gathering* 22)

The callousness of her final statement dismally foreshadows what Dale imagines is the way Ian meets his demise. Her menacing approach towards Dale at the end of the novel after Ian dies is an ominous threat that the values she represents will continue to move against him and other homosexuals in a murderously expulsive way. In rejecting the church, Dale also rejects the murderous familial order policed by these mothers and conveys a desire not so much to be included in the way they imagine family and community as to expose the bankruptcy of heteronormative visions of nation and the institutions that inform and protect them. Dale’s retreat from Christian salvation paradoxically signals an alternate salvation, one that enables him to cease the self-persecution that religiosity prescribes and embrace himself as a man who sexually desires men. The Apostle in *John Crow’s Devil* ruthlessly exploits a similar sense of righteous violence. But while Dale leaves the church altogether, the Apostle decides to occupy it and shake its foundation. Portraying religion in these ways troubles its placement as a mechanism for privileging heteronormativity. But while the narrative associates Dale’s embrace of his queer self with his rejection of organized religion, it does not, as I suggested earlier, portray an affirmative space within or outside of the Jamaican nation where Dale can be his queer self. Characteristic of the fourth wave, Powell’s novels, like James’s, undermine old notions of community without necessarily replacing them with new ones.

## "Yes, Ma'am, Mr. Lowe":<sup>13</sup> Evading Certainties and Queering Sovereignty

Essentialized notions of gender and sexuality join religion as "fixed" elements in the maintenance of heteronormativity, which fourth-wave novels challenge, but not in the interest of valorizing a positive gay identity. Ian's critique of gay men who hide their sexuality behind fatherhood and heterosexual marriage exposes the contingent nature of elements and institutions entrusted with the maintenance of the status quo. In *The Pagoda*, Lowe's cross-dressing and bisexuality serves to further complicate the role of institutions like religion and marriage in maintaining existing societal order. Sexuality in the novel is two-sided, not in terms of a homo/hetero dichotomy, but in its dual capacity to both perpetuate trauma and to aid in the protagonist's recovery of a sovereign sense of self. The novel complicates positive/negative, natural/unnatural, and normative/non-normative distinctions by portraying a positive and a negative manifestation of both heterosexual and homosexual intimacy. This portrayal confounds easy assignments of one sexuality as good and another as bad, one as acceptable and another as unacceptable. It offers an additional complicating variable to the determination of belonging based on race, gender, or sexuality. Lowe experiences positive homosexual and heterosexual intimacy with Joyce and Omar, respectively. The identifying factor of positive or negative, natural or unnatural is not in the partner's gender or sexual preference (Lowe's androgyny implicitly complicates this) but in the partner's approach to his or her desire for Lowe's body and in his or her racial designation. The novel thereby actively evades certainties where the relationship between gender and sexuality is concerned.

Interestingly, intimacy with Sylvie evokes for Lowe memories of Cecil's raping him throughout the voyage from China to Jamaica. Lowe describes the experience of sex with Sylvie as follows: "a pointed tip of European nose, a taste, finger by finger, then the whole fist crammed in. A ship. A square canvas edge of sail. A checkered oilcloth and the strange curve of flesh. Haggard breathing. Cecil's!" (113). While Sylvie inserts her fingers and eventually her fist into Lowe's vagina, he is transported back to the ship and ultimately to the rapes he suffers there at Cecil's hands. Furthermore, this experience of intimacy with Sylvie, and its evocation of memories of Cecil, creates psychic confusion for Lowe, who "could not retain the sequence from the chaos" (113). Sylvie's "whole fist crammed in" resonates not with sexual pleasure but with the violence inherent in Lowe's sexual interaction with characters of European

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13. Powell, *The Pagoda* 141.

ancestry. These interactions are also conflated in their tendency to consume Lowe and deny him personal agency in determining his own place in the Jamaican community, in a way that mirrors colonization's potential to perpetuate the hegemonic superiority of one group over another, limiting the power and autonomy available to the latter.

Thus, Cecil does not give Lowe the choice of being wife, mother, or even female when they arrive in Jamaica and Lowe is pregnant with Elizabeth. Lowe asks: “Did you once ask me what I wanted when you bring me here?” . . . ‘Did you ask me if I wanted shop life?’ . . . ‘Did you ask me if I wanted married life, wanted to have a daughter?’” (97–99). To which Cecil retorts:

What you wanted, Lowe, to marry like a real woman and settle down. Is that it? . . . You, the only Chinese woman on the island. Is that? What you think they would have done to you? . . . You know what them do with Chinese women in British Guiana? In Cuba. In Trinidad? Bring them to whorehouse. Is that what you wanted? (99)

At the time of Lowe's arrival in Jamaica, only Chinese men were legally allowed to emigrate to the New World, and as Lau A-Yin, a lone Chinese woman, Lowe would be susceptible to predictable harm and even more violence.<sup>14</sup> Cecil's decision that Lowe maintain the masculine masquerade he assumed to escape China is also the decision that determines Lowe's placement in a preexisting postemancipation social order as a Chinese male shopkeeper.<sup>15</sup>

In contrast, Lowe's sexual interactions with black Jamaicans are not racially based power struggles. Instead, they are mutual exchanges between individuals of equal status. This notion of equality may seem contradictory when considering Lowe's status as Chinese, and therefore doubly othered in a cultural hegemony and hierarchy determined by British colonial rule. This conflict dissipates, however, when one considers that his encounters with both Joyce and Omar occur after he loses his shop; the field is leveled, and he is embraced as equally “less” than whites because he possesses nothing of material value. After Omar threatens to expose him, Lowe finds solace among the men at Miss Cora's shop and marvels at how easily he is embraced. He wonders about their ease of interaction with him and their inclusion of him in their discussion of the political and social news of the country:

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14. For further study on the migration of the Chinese to the West Indies for indentured labor, see Walton Look Lai, *Indentured Labor*; Walton Look Lai, *The Chinese in the West Indies*; and Wilson, *The Chinese in the Caribbean*.

15. See Lee-Loy, *Searching for Mr. Chin* for a more detailed account of the symbolic position of the Chinese shop space in national imaginations within Caribbean landscapes.

Here they were! As if it was essential that there be no barrier between him and them. No shop counters. For all of a sudden they were openly discussing their political plans in front of him, as if without the shop he had become one of them. (136)

Despite racial distinctions, the loss of his shop situates Lowe among the ranks of the disenfranchised black peasantry. The counter that divides the commercial space while he still manages the shop implies a physical separation among them not determined entirely by race in this novel, but also by proprietorship and proximity to the colonial power symbolized by Cecil and Miss Sylvie. Ann-Marie Lee Loy identifies the Chinese shop space in West Indian fiction as a “repository of nation.” As such, she writes, “The burning of the Chinese shop in *The Pagoda* is not so much an act against Lowe the person as it is against his relationship with the representatives of white colonial power in the community” (Lee Loy “The Chinese Shop”).

The destruction of the shop, then, is not an attack against Lowe, but against his associations with Cecil and Sylvie. As Sylvie tells Lowe, “[Omar] been threatening me with blackmail for years. I never think he’d take it out on you” (159). The association pairs Lowe not just with proprietorship but also with oppressive colonial power that is “identified as outside of the nation” (Lee Loy, *Searching for Mr Chin* 5). Setting fire to the shop marks it as “enemy territory”; without the shop and its attendant associations with white colonial power, there is no counter, and no separation between Lowe and black Jamaicans. It is on the basis of this newfound social equity that sexual contacts between Lowe and Joyce, or Lowe and Omar, become mutual exchanges with empowering potential, rather than unequal encounters in which one partner undermines the agency of the other. With Joyce, Lowe discovers the more nurturing and considerate aspects of intimacy, and with Omar, he achieves comfort with heterosexuality between two abandoned individuals and an acceptance of some sense of his femaleness.

The novel’s postmodernist investment in an evasion of certainties where Lowe’s gender and sexuality are concerned serves to problematize both as elements central to the dissemination and maintenance of heteronormative order. Lowe’s performance of masculinity shows its contingency, exemplifying Judith Butler’s sense that “gender ought not to be construed as a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow; rather, gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a *stylized repetition of acts*” (Butler 179).<sup>16</sup> In *The Pagoda*, Lowe’s mas-

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16. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York:

culinity is described as “costumes” (17). His life as a man, father to Elizabeth, and husband of thirty years is described as a “fabulous masquerade” in which decades of repeated acts produce a generally convincing performance of the “illusion of an abiding gendered self” (Butler 179). The ability to perform gender through masquerades, costumes, or drag conveys instability and dissonance, which in turn betrays the imitative structure of gender. Lowe’s ability to masquerade as male, husband, and father for over thirty years—even to his own daughter—constitutes gender as imitative. Moreover, it compromises gender’s deployment as a stable element in the categorical ordering of society. If gender is not a stable identity but a series of repeated actions, the stability of essentialized sexuality is also compromised. Furthermore, if “gender is a performance with clearly putative consequences” and “discrete genders are a part of what ‘humanizes’ individuals within contemporary culture,” then performing gender correctly for Lowe in this historical context means hiding Lau A-Yin, the only Chinese woman on the island, under men’s clothing, in order to protect her from a society that is not yet able to categorize her into one of society’s “safe,” heteronormatively defined spaces (Butler 178).

In this way, *The Pagoda*’s postemancipation context relies on discrete and nameable raced, gendered, and sexualized categorizations to organize a diverse population of citizens and ensure some sense of stability and productivity within the colony. Situating a queer Chinese woman at the center of this milieu disrupts and undermines this reliance. Likewise, centering the novel on a subject that historically should not be there inverts the typical narrative of this period, which more often than not focuses on the frictions between the white ruling class and the newly freed black peasantry. Furthermore, Lowe’s body as an outlet for forced or consensual sexual activity figures in this novel as a volatile crossroads in which the gamut of identity politics is enacted literally and symbolically in many instances through sexuality. His body becomes a threshing ground for complex themes of belonging, as they are mediated through race, gender, and sexuality. Through Lowe’s traumatic memories of racial turmoil, sexual trauma, and gender-based conflicts, the novel presents an analogue for Jamaica’s own travails through slavery into the volatile postemancipation period of the novel’s setting. It revisits the history of indentureship to explore experiences of violence, subjugation, and symbolic erasure that are shared not only by Africans and their descendants but also by the Chinese and East Indians contracted for indentured labor. Through the efforts of critics like Walton Look Lai and Ann-Marie Lee-Loy, this history has only just begun to make its way substantially into the country’s national account.

More than making a case for inclusion, however, these novels offer a critique of the reality that heteronormativity is in fact bolstered by certain seemingly resistant ways of portraying homosexuality. They work towards a model of community that depends on neither discrete gendered or sexual identities nor on diasporic dislocation. The image of Lowe at the end of the novel shows him ironically costuming himself as a woman, just as he had previously costumed himself as a man. In his letter to Elizabeth, Lowe writes:

Loneliness is a hell of a thing . . . I stay here with my hair grown way down to my waist, . . . with Miss Sylvie's dresses on my back, with her colors on my nails, with her rouge on my cheeks, her jewelry on my fingers and throat. I don't go out much, health is too shakey [sic], plus how to go out like this. The people would put me in asylum. *Though am only just being me for the first time in my whole entire life.* People don't like surprises. They don't like the truth . . . I don't know which is worst, those years wanting so badly to forget the past so I could fit in, or now, forgetting so completely and still not fitting in. (239–41, my emphasis)

This image of Lowe that ends the novel is perplexing. Although he acknowledges being himself for the first time in his entire life, the self that he is does not fit. None of the selves Lowe embodies throughout the novel grants him a comfortable fit. In much the same way that there is no place for Lowe as a Chinese woman when he arrives in Jamaica, despite his attempts to fit in, no place exists for the subject he becomes through his experiences living as a Chinese man during this period. Like the pagoda he tries to build, Lowe at the end of this novel remains under construction (241). Nonetheless, though the desire for a place where he can fit is perhaps Lowe's goal, this might not offer a complete enough picture of the narrative's take on the politics of inclusion and belonging.

Rather than gendering the "me" Lowe is being for the first time, one might instead focus on the agency Lowe now possesses to make choices about the "me" he elects to be, along with the processes and experiences he goes through that enable him to exercise this agency. These include the destruction of the shop and Cecil's death in the blaze, which free him from his male shopkeeper identity. They also include Miss Sylvie's exit from the novel, which liberates him from his role as husband. More positively, the experiences that contribute to Lowe's agency at the end of the novel also include the intimacy he willfully engages in with Joyce and Omar. Nonetheless, in portraying Lowe's desire to fit in, the novel makes clear that there is no space in Lowe's contemporary reality for him to fit; furthermore, such a space cannot be cre-

ated from within the existing heteronormative order. Thus, what is sought here is not so much gender recovery or accommodation, but rather reformation of the whole stable system of gender and sexuality.

Both the letter and Lowe's desire to build a pagoda suggest that there is more at stake in this narrative than gender recovery and queer inclusion. There is a more significant investment in the radical illegibility of queer subjects and the inability to even represent them as a smoothly integrated part of free societies. Arguably, self-sovereignty belies what is often shortsightedly read as Lowe's desire for inclusion as a queer subject in Jamaican society. As in *A Small Gathering of Bones*, remembering is central to the unraveling of the plot and Lowe's persona. The loss of the shop destabilizes his decades-long masquerade because of the inordinate amount of free time it gives him with nothing to occupy him but memories. For months before the morning the shop is destroyed, Lowe is plagued by phantoms from his past that besiege him in his dreams and through voices in his head (5). The act of composing the letter that exposes him to his daughter is recuperative for Lowe. It forces him to come to terms with the events of his life, which compel him to assume and maintain a forty-year gender and sexual masquerade, and with the consequences that accrue to him, his daughter, and her family. The letter is a testimony that unfolds in physically and emotionally transformative ways for Lowe over the course of the novel. In confronting past traumas and their evident consequences in his current life, he also confronts Lau A-Yin.

If *The Pagoda* can be said to make any gesture towards an essential sense of self, one could argue that Lau A-Yin would be Lowe's essential self. Nonetheless, though both are significant in Lowe's recovery of this version of himself, a discrete notion of gender and sexuality is not definitive of A-Yin. Gendering and sexualization occur simultaneously and traumatically for A-Yin. Early in his life, the only mark of difference between him and his brothers is that A-Yin is not sent to school, but spends an inordinate amount of time as companion to his father, who teaches him how to write and inspires in him the desire for freedom of movement through meticulous mapping of sea voyages. After calligraphy lessons, "his father brought out the decaying sheets that were the maps, and Lowe . . . trundled along the stubby route of his father's forefinger, listening to the faltering voice outline expeditions by sea" (25). Together, they imagined voyages: "the route too was always the same; the goal was America, not to work but to explore" (25). His father's imagination never took them beyond the coast of Mauritius, where wind and sea spray "lashed the boat, which lurched and pitched as it climbed crest after crest of foaming rollers . . . They would continue like this, with waves as tall as eleven houses rolling up, crashing against the ship, all day, all

night” (26). His father’s inability to imagine a voyage for both of them that takes them beyond the rough seas off the coast of Mauritius foreshadows the impracticality of his father’s inculcating in a daughter fantasies of freedom and exploration. The book his father works on for twenty-three years parallels the way he raises Lowe: “it was to be a collection of nine short stories, all of which had already been titled, all pages numbered, some with illustrations; only the stories were left to be written” (25). Having worked out the structure of the book, after twenty-three years he had yet to discern the substance. He attends only to the façade of the book as he attends only to the façade of his child, whom he inculcates with dreams and fantasies untenable to a Chinese female at this time.

The onset of puberty ends this idyll and requires Lowe to identify as female. The break in the relationship between Lowe and his father comes about when Lowe’s body begins to change: “They had been bench and bottom, eye and socket, but that was when Lowe was still wide-eyed and before his limbs suddenly shot up and his body started turning against him” (24). Lowe’s separation from his father is so traumatic he begins to mark his maturing body with revulsion:

One morning Lowe awoke to the riveting stench of puberty . . . One day Lowe turned thirteen and realized that over the years he had acquired no playmates at all, his only companion had been his father, and now all of a sudden his body had changed and his father disappeared neatly into himself and there was no one now, nothing at all but a head full up of stories, his head full up of dreams. (26–27)

Lowe’s dreams are of freedom and travel, without the encumbrances of work or the limitations imposed by gender. The book associates puberty with an offensive smell that brings not only physical change but loneliness, isolation, and most importantly, additional gendered restrictions. Time spent with his father prevents Lowe from making friends his own age, and once his body begins to mature sexually, with “wisps of hair that lodged themselves underneath his arms and between his legs,” his father’s disposition towards him also changes (27). Lowe’s father compounds this rejection by selling him into marriage to repay a debt, a betrayal that conflates femaleness with imprisonment for A-Yin. Lowe explains to his grandson that the girl A-Yin “must leave. There is no future. And she wants to live” (187). Living for Lowe means leaving China and ultimately A-Yin behind.

Prior to the fire that destroys his shop, however, the last decision Lowe

makes with regard to his own life is to run away from his husband, dress as a boy, and stow away on Cecil's ship bound for the New World. In Jamaica, Cecil insists that Lowe continue to pass as a man, arranges to have Elizabeth born secretly, sets Lowe up in a shop, and eventually procures the wealthy Sylvie as Lowe's wife so he can continue to pass as male, husband, and father. Cecil essentially creates the man whom "a girl who used to be a wife" becomes (187). Where rejection by his father and marriage to the old man in China gender Lowe as female, in Jamaica, Cecil's invention of Lowe the Chinese shopkeeper genders him as male. Repeated rapes by Cecil and subsequent pregnancy further compound the gender confusion that surrounds Lowe's character, consolidating his rejection of A-Yin. Recovering A-Yin as an essential self thus entails confronting past traumas as suffered by a sexualized and gendered self, but it does not mean the restoration of a sexualized and gendered self as they are heteronormatively imagined.

If the letter forces Lowe to confront A-Yin, the pagoda is a recuperative space for the queer outsider—a distinct and physical manifestation of who he is amidst the masquerade that he is forced to assume in order to survive in a hostile foreign place. The alienness of this kind of structure in the Jamaican landscape at this time parallels Lowe's queerness. Establishing it also symbolically creates a space where someone like Lowe can fit in. In this way, the pagoda also suggests how significant home, rather than gender or sexuality, is for Lowe's sense of self. Importantly, he imagines this home for others and not himself. He explains to Mr. Heysong, a newly arrived Chinese immigrant, that the pagoda is not so much for them, but rather for the Heysongs' baby. He tells Mr. Heysong, "We can't let them forget" (174). Lowe "had willed himself to forget just so his heart wouldn't break with the memories," but he questions, "Where had it gotten him?" As a consequence of this forgetting, he finds himself "a complete stranger to himself and there was his daughter, a stranger to him and here they all were strangers in this place" (174).

Hence his desire is to not only recover but also pass on his past. In the same moments that he realizes he knows nothing about his daughter, he also realizes she knows nothing about his life as A-Yin:

He had never told her stories of his life in that river town on the Kwang-tung border . . . He had never celebrated her birthdays or lunar new years and the other festivals of his birthplace. He had never instilled in her filial piety or ancestral worship, never acknowledged the elaborate rites and celebrations concerned with marriage and death, with her very birth, her existence in the world. (75)

Lowe imagines the pagoda as a place where these unshared aspects of his Chinese heritage can be fostered, taught, and thereby preserved in a foreign place. Likewise, the pagoda is a physical space in the Jamaican landscape where A-Yin's culture can be preserved. It may seem paradoxical that Lowe seeks to create an insular Chinese space within an inhospitable landscape, but these efforts simultaneously parallel the desire for queer inclusion and a more ethnically plural way of life in Jamaica.

The shop and Cecil's death in the fire that consumes it free Lowe from the life that Cecil creates for him and leave him open to exploring and deciding who he is and what place he might find in the foreign land he refuses to leave. In response to Sylvie's desire to flee with Lowe when Omar threatens to expose their life together, Lowe thinks that "he didn't know what to tell her. He didn't want to go anywhere isolated. He wanted to have the Pagoda right here on the island for the Chinese with whom he had grown close" (145). His investment in Jamaica, though curious, shows how what is at stake here goes beyond inclusion. Though the space they occupy is marginal, Lowe and his family are already a part of the Jamaican society. What Lowe sees as the construction of an ethnically defined space within Jamaica, the reader can begin to see as the desire for choice, freedom, and sovereignty.

For Lowe, then, there is no single gendered center established and concretized during childhood for him to recover. Rather, he seeks the ability to live freely, however and wherever he decides. Above everything else, Lowe desires freedom throughout the novel. This freedom does not lie in inclusion, or even in the establishment of an ethnically specific pagoda, but in the ability to be and share the sovereign self he chooses with his family and others. At the end of the novel, the pagoda remains suggestively unfinished, and Lowe remains isolated, now with Miss Sylvie's accouterments. Gendered identification is only a subtext of Lowe's struggle rather than its terminus. Lowe's goal in writing the letter reveals both personal and ethnic motivations. Personally, he desires to reveal himself to Elizabeth as A-Yin and provide his family with a sense of their Chinese heritage. Ethnically, writing the letter leads him into a recovery process in which he struggles with the fragmented memories of his masculine masquerade and aspects of the Chinese culture that he wants to integrate into his daughter's and his grandchildren's understanding of how they came to be Jamaicans of Chinese descent. The process of building the pagoda further consolidates the fragments of Lowe's past recovered through the writing process. At the end of the novel, the reader is not left with an individual easily categorized as male or female, but rather one who is finally able to complete his testimony to his daughter, signing it at the end with his birth name, Lau A-Yin. Whether he is (or identifies as) male or female is beside

the point. Instead, what is central is his ability to reveal himself and his history to his daughter. The Chinese name is the novel's last word and signifies not, I would argue, the recovery of a gendered and/or ethnic sense of self, but rather the exercise of a sovereign right to make choices for and about one's self. It is in isolation from all the imposed trappings of heteronormativity that seek to define sexuality as such that Lowe is able to choose A-Yin.

## Beginning with the End

Lowe's assumption of a sovereign right to choose nonconformity in self-expression finds company with the Widow's choice to leave Gibbeah after she recognizes the Apostle in pictures of Garvey's nephews and when Bligh is being stoned to death. Like Lowe, she is an outsider identified throughout the novel by her gendered and sexualized status, in this instance as a woman without a husband. This liminal position works to the Widow's benefit in its capacity to make it easier for her to leave Gibbeah when the violence escalates and supernatural forces make their appearance. Nonetheless, as with Lowe, the widow's isolationist position does not take her very far. She remains just beyond the walls of Gibbeah. At the end of the novel, the final image that the villagers see through the fence is the Widow (230). Reckoning with the transgressions of the past is central to the replacement of one leader by another in *John Crow's Devil*. The parting image of the Widow in *John Crow's Devil* is thus revelatory of this novel's vision of sovereign existence.

To fully grasp this puzzling vision of the Widow on the other side of the fence, it is useful to also explore the structural function of timing in James's novel. The book inverts linear temporality by beginning with a chapter titled "The End" and ending with a chapter titled "The Beginning." Directly preceding "The Beginning" is also a chapter titled "The Reckoning." Through this discontinuous framework, the reader experiences the story in hindsight, which also parallels the current postcolonial moment's oscillating perspective on colonial and postcolonial history. Extending this symbolic scheme further into discourses of transition between colonial, postcolonial, and post-postcolonial moments, "The End" can be read as the end of the colonization as symbolized by Garvey's overlordship of Gibbeah and the beginning of a sovereign regime with the Apostle at its head; "The Reckoning" can be seen as an interstitial moment between the end of colonization and a point I refer to throughout this book as the current twenty-first-century postcolonial moment; and "The Beginning" indicates the post-postcolonial moment or a period just beyond the contemporary postcolonial moment—a period that follows one

characterized by a postcolonial society built on norms and values mediated by sexualizing citizens. “The Beginning,” then, symbolizes a breaking away from existing postcolonial orthodoxy and the possibility of inaugurating something different.

The novel ends with “The Beginning” that comes after Clarence, the Apostle’s right hand man and sexual partner, drowns the Apostle and apocalyptically commits suicide. The village notes the Apostle’s absence and gathers at the gate of his house, awaiting answers. The dove that lands on the gate is reminiscent of the dove that returns to Noah after the flood with an olive branch after the Great Flood in the Bible.<sup>17</sup> In the same way that the biblical dove marks the end of a period of reckoning in which God destroys the earth with a great flood, the dove in the novel marks the end of a period of reckoning in which those responsible for evil and sinfulness are destroyed. In the novel and the Bible the dove signals a brand-new beginning for those who survived divine reckoning and likewise leads them towards the safe and dry ground where they might begin that new life: “The bird flew over to the other side [of the fence]. Through the spaces between the leaves, they saw the other side as well. They saw judgment and redemption, rescue and damnation, despair and hope” (230). The duality implicit in these contradictory verb pairings, “judgment and redemption, rescue and damnation, despair and hope,” suggests that this period of beginning will also inevitably carry with it the burdens of what preceded it.

As the Apostle’s career exemplifies, there exists a tendency for communities to uncritically accept the replacement of one order with another, in the process ironically marginalizing and victimizing certain subjects—albeit different ones—just as its predecessors did. The contemporary postcolonial moment in the Caribbean, a situation allegorized in the novel, is similarly one of reckoning with the ways a heteronormatively defined nation perpetuates the transgressions of its colonial predecessor. Twenty-first-century Caribbean literary depictions of queerness offer complex portrayals of nationalism’s reliance on a framework that is governed by essentialized notions of national citizenship. *John Crow’s Devil’s* retrospective look into the early to mid-twentieth-century colonial period, from the vantage point of the twenty-first century, offers a representative account of the way communities were formed in the significant historical interstices between emancipation and political independence. It also conveys how significant this interstice is in politically sovereign contexts. The novel in this way calls into question the establishment of community, the elements that organize community, and the ways justice is

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17. Zondervan NIV Study Bible Gen. 8.11.

enacted according to the institutionalization of particular elements of communal organization such as religion.

The novel also complicates and in fact defies any easy assessment of right or wrong by portraying flawed characters like Pastor Bligh and foundationally flawed institutions; ultimately, it challenges the notions of community, good, and evil through a representation of violence that escalates into the establishment of a grotesque and victimizing collective. Collectives, James suggests, create violence, which in turn create collectives, and so on. Though much in the novel seems understandably hyperbolized, the exaggeration and spectacular nature of the violence committed serve to expose and undermine trusted elements of communal order. “The Beginning,” which comes at the end of the novel, after the symbolic nation inaugurated by the Apostle is destroyed, signals an opportunity to shift the way we think about sovereignty in the present. It does this after order is destroyed, conveying the need for a dismantling of the existing politics and the opportunity to create a brand-new politics. These new politics carry the burden of the past hopefully, as a lesson in what to avoid when moving forward. What novels like *John Crow’s Devil* show us is that the establishment of sovereignty is no longer as simple—indeed, never was as simple—as thinking about who is included or excluded and then trying to incorporate everyone into some equitable sense of an already existing community. They also convey the need to be more suspicious of what we seek inclusion in. We need to scrutinize more closely the values and institutions that support politically independent realities—particularly in citizenries as diverse as Caribbean nations. While the novel explicitly uses religious ideology as the underlying institution of communal identification, religion is a symbol here for any and all institutions that have come to undergird monolithic national identities.

## Conclusion

Where Caribbean writers in the first half of the twentieth century assumed the political imperative of articulating visions of politically independent citizens and nations, this imperative does not necessarily continue to hold for writing in the twenty-first century. Thus, reading a twenty-first century narrative that is preoccupied with the postemancipation/preindependence moment raises the question of which, if any, political imperative it means to convey. Political independence was granted to Jamaica and to most Caribbean nations in the 1960s. What *A Small Gathering of Bones*, *The Pagoda*, and *John Crow’s Devil* offer, in returning to the colonial period, is a critique of the foundations and

ultimately the establishment of a nation on the basis of heteronormativity and other exclusive, institutionally based social norms. As twenty-first-century Caribbean literary critics, our approach to these foundations should reflect an understanding of the political imperatives of our postcolonial present. Rather than seeking to fit these novels into old frameworks (and then criticizing them for refusing to comply), we must continue to ask what gains have been made, what remains to be done, and what is obscured by narrowly locating sovereign subjectivity within the confines of certain sanctioned identities.

This chapter not only describes how representations of queerness in literature work to reveal ruling nationalisms' reliance on heteronormative institutions and essentialized notions of gender and sexuality but also conveys how these novels mediate between competing accounts of gender and sexuality—and ultimately, of all forms of social difference. I argue that while the excavatory and diasporic impulses of postcolonial criticism shape how queerness is read, occluding otherwise clear calls made by these texts for dismantling and reforming problematic notions of gender and sexuality, representations of queerness in twenty-first-century Caribbean literature nonetheless provide one of our best sites for understanding how plural Caribbean subjects might negotiate problems of sovereignty. James and Powell represent a new cohort of Caribbean authors whose work explores problems of sovereignty that go beyond anticolonial struggles and nation building. One of the priorities of fourth-wave Caribbean literature is an evaluation not only of the last half century of political sovereignty but also of the mechanisms put in place to achieve that sovereignty. This requires a shift in our attention as critics, from who gets to be a part of a sovereign society to how sovereign societies are made. Representations of queerness in these twenty-first-century novels provide rich contexts for adapting our critical lenses towards the possibilities of articulating the demands of sovereign subjectivity half a century beyond political independence. Though they offer powerful critiques of old forms of order, the absence of possibilities for new, more plural orders should lead us to question how we think about order and sovereignty in the postcolonial present. This chapter and this book overall contend that such writing compels Caribbean literary critics to redefine the priorities of critical practices in ways that are more consistent with the political imperatives of the postcolonial present.

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"Sheri-Marie Harrison has written an impressive book that will have a major impact in Caribbean literary studies. She critiques postcolonial criticism in general, and postindependence Jamaican criticism in particular, for excavating heretofore excluded raced, gendered, and sexual identities and adding them to a growing list of sovereign subjectivities. The problem with such a critical practice, she argues, is that our critical questions remain static—about recovery, additive, identitarian politics—regardless of the answers we derive or even whom we add to the equation." —Donette Francis, University of Miami

**R**ecognizing that in the contemporary postcolonial moment, national identity and cultural nationalism are no longer the primary modes of imagining sovereignty, Sheri-Marie Harrison argues that postcolonial critics must move beyond an identity-based orthodoxy as they examine problems of sovereignty. In *Jamaica's Difficult Subjects: Negotiating Sovereignty in Anglophone Caribbean Literature and Criticism*, Harrison describes what she calls "difficult subjects"—subjects that disrupt essentialized notions of identity as equivalent to sovereignty. She argues that these subjects function as a call for postcolonial critics to broaden their critical horizons beyond the usual questions of national identity and exclusion/inclusion.

Harrison turns to Jamaican novels, creative nonfiction, and films from the 1960s to the present and demonstrates how they complicate standard notions of the relationship between national identity and sovereignty. She constructs a lineage between the difficult subjects in classic Caribbean texts like *Wide Sargasso Sea* by Jean Rhys and *The Harder they Come* by Perry Henzell and contemporary writing by Marlon James and Patricia Powell. What results is a sweeping new history of Caribbean literature and criticism that reconfigures how we understand both past and present writing. *Jamaica's Difficult Subjects* rethinks how sovereignty is imagined, organized, and policed in the postcolonial Caribbean, opening new possibilities for reading multiple generations of Caribbean writing.



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