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SHARP BONES: (RE)IMAGINING THE HEROIC IN 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY BLACK FICTION

by

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A Dissertation submitted to the  
Graduate School-New Brunswick  
Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Graduate Program in English

written under the direction of

Cheryl A. Wall

and approved by

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New Brunswick, New Jersey

October 2009

## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Sharp Bones: (Re)Imagining the Heroic in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Black Fiction

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There has never been a successful revolution without “heroes.” This dissertation argues that despite the inherent racist implications of classical and modern formulations of the heroic, the hero remains a site of struggle and resistance for writers of and in the African Diaspora. This project considers a genealogy of writers beginning with Ralph Ellison whose novel, *Invisible Man* and short story, “Flying Home,” engage with classic and then contemporary forms of the heroic and seek to carve out a space for the African American heroic. I then consider novels and short stories produced by the next generation of writers, specifically the work of Charles Johnson and Toni Cade Bambara, who inherit Ellison’s legacy of engagement with aesthetic and political implications of social and popular cultural movements and history. These writers, I argue, come to very different conclusions as to the efficacy of the “hero.” I conclude the dissertation with the work of Michelle Cliff and Patricia Powell, whose work take us to the Anglo Caribbean and enables me to think through the movement of this figure through conduits of colonial and global capital and the resiliency of contemporary struggles, political and aesthetic, with this figure as a site of resistance and revolution.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I want to thank Cheryl A. Wall for not only functioning as the director of this dissertation, but for being a model of grace and professionalism, the dissertation readers: John McClure, Harriet Davidson and Brent Edwards, for their generosity, patience and guidance. This project is part of a longer and bigger conversation that could not have taken place without a host of interlocutors: Angela Shaw-Thornberg, Karin Gosselink, Margaret (Peggy) Dunn, Hilary Chute, Angela Florscheutz, Kelly Baker Josephs, Rick Lee and Edward J. Chang. I would also like to thank the staff of the Graduate English Department: Cheryl Robinson, Courtney Borack, and Nancy Miller, and the secretarial staffs of the English and Writing Departments for all of their support. Without their support, this project may have never seen the light of day.

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## INTRODUCTION

### SHARP BONES: (RE)IMAGINING THE HEROIC IN 20TH CENTURY BLACK FICTION

I want a hero: an uncommon want,  
 When every year and month sends forth a new one.  
 Till, after cloying the gazettes with cant,  
 The age discovers he is not the true one ...  
 From Don Juan, Canto the First 1-4

[A] people without myths is already dead.  
 Georges Dumézil

“She’s got sharp bones, that one there”; this is the way my grandmother described Miss Cora Lee Davis. I had been the recipient of more than one brittle look of disdain from this old, weathered and withered woman for talking out of turn or not being where I was supposed to be. Miss Cora had survived two husbands, segregation, integration and her own mother. She had unrepentantly held a twenty-year grudge against God and had only reconciled, and this is up for speculation, for her daughter’s sake. In her day “no one could tell her nuthin.” The term “sharp bones” was used to describe those who had seen it all, fought battles, real and imagined, survived and were, more or less, intact. They were strong, despite their advanced years, and retained much of their “menace.” They still had enough strength to “snatch us up” in the battle against what they called “foolishness.” These were my sacred and secular heroes whose scars I, in my naïveté, wanted to have. I wanted to emulate them, to survive like them, to be able to tell stories and keep listeners enrapt like them. I wanted their words to be my words, to take on their triumphs and their defeats. I had not the forethought nor depth of perception to know that to have these strengths meant experiencing the trauma and pain that went along with being a “survivor,” and being a survivor going through something dangerous, dangerous enough to make me “heroic.” Growing up in Boston during the 70s and 80s, but having roots in

the American south and Spanish and French Caribbean, stories of women and men like Miss Cora blended with biblical tales and secular heroes from family legend, community gossip and popular culture to create a rich field from which to glean inspiration. There were heroes cut out from magazines, old photographs of women and men dressed in their Sunday best, surrounded by small children that looked familiar, like me but not me. There were images of boys and men with dead things, their kills from hunting. More impressive were the images of the girls with their dead things, slung over their shoulders or held up with equal pride. Sports heroes, Richard Roundtree as Shaft, Pam Grier as Foxy Brown, Ali and Bruce Lee in their prime, their names<sup>1</sup> and likenesses recognizable signifiers of obvious strength, youth, vigor, “cool and sexy,” populated the walls of our rooms alongside pictures of ourselves striking like poses. We had tangible proof of our similarities and differences. There was no way I would ever be as “impressive” as Foxy Brown no matter how much toilet paper I stuffed into my bra or martial arts classes I took. There were also figures whose stories were told either to encourage or caution us along with an ossuary of heroes that graced our t-shirts; these heroes were simultaneously eternal and ephemeral. They served as symbols for “community,” timeless as images but marked by their relationship to time because they telegraphed the historical specificity of a moment.<sup>2</sup> The Muhammad Ali of the late sixties, early seventies, with his linguistic and physical flair, seems only a vague relation to the Ali of the early 90s.

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<sup>1</sup> The name of the hero, according to Anna Makolkin, gains currency and momentum through the production of folk tales, their contemporary incarnation in urban myth, songs, images, corresponding practices of looking and “looking like,” practices of naming: children, streets, and days. Makolkin asserts that groups acquire awareness, common cultural heritage and identities through producing and carrying the heroic narrative across and in cultural formations/conduits (21). To “know” and carry the hero’s name is to become a part of that hero.

<sup>2</sup> In the hero’s relationship to time, s/he is both worldly and otherworldly, a figure of cultural and temporal place as well as disjunction and displacement. S/he is, according to Victor Brombert “a

Heroes express the matrices, the elements, connections, balances and tensions in a given culture (Dumézil 3). S/he often represents the tension between the “will” of the individual subject and subjection to cultural policing and control. In the American context we have several formations of the heroic available. Some traditional American formulations of the heroic, recognizable in countless westerns, mirror paradoxical relationships to “community.” The hero can restore order to a world but not necessarily remain in it. Heroes can tame chaos through socially unacceptable violence, but because of their ability to use this violence they cannot integrate into the community’s that they have fought to protect and or restore.<sup>3</sup> The ability to use violence makes them necessary to a community; it ironically ensures the community’s rejection. Heroes illuminate inherent contradictions of a culture that celebrates “freedom” of individual choice and action, yet restricts these very figures because they operate autonomously. Heroic tales are both celebratory and cautionary; they idolize the paladin yet stress the importance of community.<sup>4</sup>

Frantz Fanon, a contemporary of Ralph Ellison, was interested in the work that the imagination can do for the psychological integrity of the individual. His discussion of

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unique exemplary figure whose fate places him or her at the outpost of human experience and virtually out of time” (3).

<sup>3</sup> The hero’s relationship to violence is obviously historically contingent. For example, the chivalric hero’s relationship to violence was one of proportion. A hero was measured by his ability to successfully enact indexical violence proportionate to the job. Warrior codes of civility, according to Michael Ignatieff, have never been unilaterally applied, as he observes the way that medieval chivalric codes only applied to conflicts between Christians, but “[t]oward infidels [and those defined as such by prevailing political powers], a warrior could behave without restraint” (117). In my chapter on Ellison’s struggle with the heroic, I discuss Americans’ ambivalence toward the black hero exercising violence.

<sup>4</sup> In Lord Raglan’s *The Hero: A Study in Tradition Myth and Drama*, the hero is a figure who engages in “self” sacrifice for the larger community/social order; Carl Jung’s “Symbols of Transformation” posits a hero who returns to his community of origin humbled, but with new wisdom to share, a wisdom that confirms the origin community’s “way of life,” and for Joseph Campbell, the hero returns from his quests to an “old world” but with “new eyes,” transformed and ready to take up an exalted space. For all of these paradigms the idealized hero is white and male.



power relations in the colonial moment in *Wretched of the Earth* helps us think through the ameliorative effects identification with a hero can produce. In the chapter entitled “Concerning Violence,” he claims that the dreams of the colonized native are “always of muscular process... of nation and of aggression” (52). These dreams of physical prowess enabled the black subject to have the fantasy of impenetrability, to militate against corporeal, intellectual and spiritual wounding. It is an imagining that can reach beyond the walls of fleshed corporeality and spread to the larger community.

the first thing which the native learns is to stay in his place, and not to go beyond certain limits. This is why the dreams of the native are always of muscular prowess; his dreams are of action and of aggression. I dream I am jumping, swimming, running, climbing; I dream that I burst out laughing that I span a river in one stide, or that I am followed by a flood of motorcars which never catch up with me. During the period of colonization, the native never stops achieving his freedom from nine in the evening until six in the morning. (52)

Fanon’s meditation shifts from “the native,” to first person, and then back to “the native.” This shift is a tacit declaration of the black self’s relationship to “otherness.” One is always simultaneously third and first person. It is “imagination” that provides space for the self, that is tied to escaping signifiers of the “past” and “progress,” motorcars and pastoral “rivers,” that can be eluded or crossed in a single leap much like Superman’s leap to the top of a building in a single bound. What is important is how imagining oneself as heroic or potentially heroic, enables one to exceed physical boundaries and allow an (re)invigoration of the political in a very real sense. According to Fanon, without the space to imagine an alternative, individuals experience an emotional stress that permeates the collective psychological fabric of a community. In order to escape oppression, the colonized seeks resources of resistance, recognizes the need to “get away from the white culture,” and often “seek[s] his culture elsewhere” (94). This elsewhere

can be in seemingly self-destructive discourses of the black inferiority propagated by the white dominant and perpetuated by the wounded and self loathing; this elsewhere can be in dangerous nostalgia for a pre-colonial “nation” or in other cultures, “anywhere at all” (94).<sup>5</sup> While Fanon’s discussion of imagination and the colonized subject is in a specific historical moment and colonial context, his analysis is useful because it links the desire for impenetrability to resistance. That the terms are masculinist are a given, that women are designed to be penetrated and therefore have a vexed relationship to these particular discourses of resistance is also a given. But the skill needed to resist penetration, literal and figurative, psychological if not physical, by destructive forces, is essential to the emergence of a language of resistance.<sup>6</sup> Miss Cora’s sharp bones were also sharp words.

Miss Cora’s bones were her armament against encroachment from the outside word. They allowed her to fortify a sense of interiority, yet the metaphor implicitly suggests that this “strength” does not preclude the possibility of destruction from outside forces nor does it vitiate against potentially self-destructive sharp edges that can destroy

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<sup>5</sup> Fanon also takes up the issue of the “style” of expression of the colonized which is read as “a harsh style, full of images, for the image is the drawbridge which allows unconscious energies to be scattered on the surrounding meadows. It is a vigorous style, alive with rhythms, struck through and through with bursting life; it is full of color, too, bronzed, sunbaked and violent. This style, which in its time astonished the peoples of the West, has nothing racial about it, in spite of frequent statements to the contrary; it expresses above all a hand-to-hand struggle and it reveals the need that man has to liberate himself from a part of his being which already contained the seeds of decay. Whether the fight is painful, quick, or inevitable, muscular action must substitute itself for concepts” (220). Several cultural theorists have discussed the disparities between dominant and subcultural audience understanding and reception of the “inherent violence” found in rap music lyrics, self and cultural representation of hip-hop artists, discussion of which is bracketed for this project but understood as in conversation with my discussion of the contemporary “hero.”

<sup>6</sup> James Miller defines “transfigurative art” as that which “satisfies the high fantasy of permanent remission from the plague of mortality itself. It is produced in periods of extreme personal suspense and violent cultural fragmentation. When artists find themselves daring not only the internal breakdown of their own physical and spiritual immunities against sickness or despair but also the external collapse of traditional systems of defense in the state or the church” (32). The processes of (dis)identification with the “hero,” across seemingly impermeable boundaries of corporeal instability, cultural categories of race and class, indeed constitutes the transfigurative as Miller defines it.

from within. Identifying with “heroes” can be a dangerous thing. Sharp bones can cut. Miss Cora’s “sharp bones” allow us to consider the implications of historically racist and masculine formations of the heroic and the complications of historically contingent social formations of nation.

The central argument of this dissertation is that in much of contemporary literature produced out of the African Diaspora, from mid to late 20<sup>th</sup> century, reflects a persistent, unwavering questioning of the efficacy of the heroic for individual and communal interests. In the time of a “great America,” where the American Dream, synonymous with upward mobility and economic success, was the dominant fantasy not just of black Americans but of a world sold on America as a land of opportunity, we see a growing popularization of blackness and at the same time a commodification of the heroic. This locates constructions of the black hero emerging in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century within resilient networks of consumption.<sup>7</sup> When media pundits and talking heads asked how Barack Obama was possible, they came up with endless theories of a “New ‘New Deal,’” of a fatigue with the status quo and of our living in a “Post-Race America.” A fascinating theory that emerged with the death of Michael Jackson in June 2009 included claims that Barack Obama’s presidency could have never been possible without the existence of Michael Jackson. This, more clearly than any other theorization of the rise of Barack Obama, highlights the conflation of the heroic with celebrity and the implications of that

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<sup>7</sup> In Fishwick’s discussion of the relationship of technology, and I extend the definition of technology to include the discursive, he sees John F. Kennedy’s ascension and assassination as turning points in the relationship of the American “public” to the “hero.” The airing of presidential debates and his death made him iconic, the embodiment of an “unbelievable historic episode – a happening” (2). Fishwick further argues that “[s]ince we have instant information, we expect instant action. Faced with instant problems, we look for leaders with instant solutions. In this sense, the hero...must be a performer” (6). In our contemporary moment, this is complicated by our sense that we “own” our heroes, that we have the right to all the intimate details of a hero’s life, and once we see the inner workings and subsequently the flaws of the hero, we hunger for his rise, fall and rise again.

collapse. That the black body can be packaged, sold, hated, adored and consumed by a predominantly white buying population is well within the traditions of representation and political/social realities.<sup>8</sup> That the black “hero” so easily conflates with the celebrity and thus squarely within our network of simultaneous “low”/high expectations of performance is also within standard operating procedures and parameters of “race” in commodity culture.

Even more telling is the growing and understandable hostility toward the heroic within academic communities and this hostility is warranted. It is a given that classical and modern frameworks of the hero are inherently problematic in their explicit racism, sexism and even fascism. Part of Ellison’s struggle with Lord Raglan’s tome lies in its thinly veiled eugenics discourse. A quick survey of college course offerings reveals that courses focusing on the hero, classical, modern and contemporary are considered passé, stale, politically retrograde, and yet we also have the proliferation of “superhero” in American popular commodity culture that makes it clear that while the “sacred” hallowed halls of academia have grown hostile to this figure, the hero thrives in secular spaces of popular print, film and internet culture. It is also no coincidence that the growing primacy of “blackness” in popular culture is coterminous with a growing hostility toward popular culture in high academic discourse of aesthetics.<sup>9</sup> Black culture and “blackness” have

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<sup>8</sup> In November 2009, I delivered a section of a paper, entitled “From the Beach to the Whitehouse: Barack Obama’s ‘Heroic’ Body” which was excerpted from a longer work, “A Not Uncommon Want: The Black Hero’s Body in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century,” as part of the Rutgers University Graduate forum on Race and Ethnicity: Disciplinary Conference. This paper considered the representation of Barack Obama’s body, particularly the proliferation of pictures of an “exoticized,” half nude, presidential candidate’s body that were disseminated widely on the internet and in “gossip rags” such as *The National Enquirer*, *Us*, and *People Magazine*.

<sup>9</sup> In “A Borderless World? From Colonialism to Transnationalism and the Decline of the Nation State” Masao Miyoshi makes the argument that as corporate orders quickly displace national borders, a university’s economic interests have pulled away the curtain, so to speak. Miyoshi laments “finally, academia, the institution that might play the principal in investigating transnational corporatism and its implications for humanity, seems all too ready to cooperate

become more visible in mainstream popular culture in the form of sports figures, music artists, television and pulp fiction and with that increased visibility comes resistance. I understand that by making this charge there will be the usual insistence that no, this is not an issue of race or gender but of rigor. It is precisely these voices that eschew the popular, that fight to retain conservative definitions of what counts as aesthetically and politically viable cultural production, and refuse to consider the potentially racist discourses undergirding “aesthetic theories.” The question that we are left with is why is this figure so resilient? What is it about the “heroic” that still engages cultural workers when they have witnessed its “failure” over and over again?

In terms of traditional engagements with the heroic, Thomas Carlyle and Lord Raglan defined heroes as figures who are, by definition, exceptional, honored, and revered. Their exploits record the building of nations; they document “history.” They may possess rigid codes that are unrelenting in the face of adversity. Often immoderate, their activities may be extralegal and as monstrous as the evil they conquer. We know the hero not only by his deeds, but also by his name, a repeatable sign that embodies a nation or culture’s ideals.<sup>10</sup> He can be a warrior, artist, the Byronic poet, king or god. The hero’s actions are marked by an obsessive need to follow a code as well as to act and preserve acts of free will; thus, the hero embodies freedom and absolute servitude. Heroes may possess and operate in a spiritual darkness that is their providence, a darkness the larger culture is suspicious of and must contain. They signify controlled and potentially uncontrollable chaos in an established social order. As an embodiment of a masculine

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rather than deliberate” (233). The intersection of corporate and philosophical/aesthetic values and what this means for the black subject in discursive and literal space is one of the questions this work explores.

<sup>10</sup> I am gendering the hero masculine as early “traditional” discourse on the hero, classical, modern and contemporary, consistently cast the hero as “masculine.”

ideal, this figure's strength is desirable but its power makes us uneasy. We need and are yet fearful of his extraordinary abilities, his ability to create, to act, to willfully rush into battle and sacrifice bodily integrity for an elusive concept of "honor" or for all too recognizable state interests.

In an interview for *The Paris Review*, Ralph Ellison revealed that he had begun *Invisible Man* while struggling with Lord Raglan's *The Hero* and his thoughts about "negro leadership" in the United States. How could the black subject, in the context of American culture, occupy the space of the heroic and how did that subject's "history" make this occupation possible or impossible? Ellison's struggle with the heroic is a struggle with history, who makes it and the place one has in it, and his struggle inspires generations of writers after him.

Ellison struggled with the heroic, not in solely "classic" terms or even American terms, but also in terms of his well documented fraught relationship to Richard Wright. Ellison, in turn, functioned as hero, the man to (dis)identify with for later generations of writers. This project considers the engagement of the heroic by Black writers in terms of a literary genealogy, one that is based on assent and not descent. This is a relation of choice, of affinity and interest, not "blood." This literary genealogy begins with Ralph Ellison and his struggle with the concepts of nation, body and his effort to define the heroic for the black subject. Although origins of this genealogy can be found in much earlier writings, I read Ellison's post World War II novel, *Invisible Man* as a literary progenitor that engages with the contemporary problems facing the black subject, a complex inheritance of Western cultural and literary traditions along with a search for a "usable past," even if that past, that history, is forged out of the imagination and the unstable territory of memory. With each generation of writers we see discursive

challenges to how the hero is defined by dominant culture and subsequent re-imaginings of the self's relationship to nation, the body, gender and sexuality. This project is thus framed by and through the concept of "genealogy," through connections to forebears that are based more on perceived possibilities than limits.

The search for heroes is not a peculiarly American cultural practice, but the problem this presents for the black subject is. Ellison's post World War II novel, *Invisible Man*, I argue, tests the possibilities of the heroic for the black subject. In his travels, the nameless narrator encounters several models of the heroic with whom he invariably identifies and disidentifies with in his quest for subjectivity: the Race/Representative Man, the athlete/boxer, the yokel/everyman, the soldier, the Christian soldier, the blues hero and the artist. With each trial and model of the heroic encountered, the dangers inherent in each guise are revealed. For example, we discover, along with Ellison's nameless narrator that the "Race man" and the black boxer/athlete are subject to the same fetishistic lens. The moment the black body takes up public space, can be seen, then s/he is subject to destructive racist discourses of fetishism. This text articulates frustration with available models of the heroic and anticipates later generations' difficulty with finding and maintaining heroes to identify with and emulate. Of course, Ellison privileges the artist in the forms of the writer, comic, and musician, but he also opens up the heroic at the end of the novel with trickster figures that embrace more fluid constructions of identity. Rinehart, pimp and preacher, can exist in multiple places and times. He, along with a group of Zootsuiters the narrator encounters on the train, embodies "multiple possibilities." In these figures, Ellison creates heroes that are uncontainable. The young Zootsuiters have the ability to "think transitional thoughts" and speak transitional language; they exceed the exegetical frameworks of dominant discourses of the body.

Along with Rinehart, they represent an alternative, men who are not invested in relation by race or blood or even “blackness” but something else and that is performance. The young Zootsuiters improvise linguistically; their performance does not suggest “south as origin” with its history of Reconstruction and mass migration of Blacks. Instead, it is “south as flavor.” These are young men who, along with Rinehart and the narrator, become walking Jazz riffs. Rinehart is a master of stepping out of reality and into chaos and imagination. The ambivalence with which Ellison describes the young Zootsuiters, as having value yet not knowing their value, is indicative of an inability to “make sense” of them and as such indicates an understandable hostility to the “popular.”

The “popular” was a dangerous realm for Ellison, whose central protagonist encounters seemingly inescapable networks of desire and violence along his route to selfhood. In *Black Skin, White Masks* he describes exactly how dangerous even walking into a movie theater can be:

The Negro is a toy in the white man’s hands; so, in order to shatter the hellish cycle, he explodes. I cannot go to a film without seeing myself. I wait for me. In the interval, just before the film starts, I wait for me. The people in the theater are watching me, examining me, waiting for me. A Negro groom is going to appear. My heart makes my head swim. (117)

The theater is a site of complex intersections of specularization. It is not only on the screen that the black spectator gets disciplined, but in the audience itself. In the dark of the theater, he is watched by those who use him, need him to confirm or affirm the stereotypes projected on the screen and their own power as spectators and creators of meaning. The black male spectator is in the unenviable position of waiting for himself, a version of himself, in the “interval,” the space between narratives. The idea that someone would locate the popular, where the black subject has historically been subjected to violent racist representation, as fertile for forging discourses of resistance is untenable to



Ellison. This may be why, as I suggest later, the Zootsuiters and their desires are unrecognizable to Ellison. It would be Charles Johnson, heir apparent to Ellison's literary and intellectual genealogy, who would explore seemingly "unreadable figures" or heroes produced in conversation with popular culture and question their relationship to black subjectivity, to nation, masculinity and the heroic.

At his acceptance speech for the National Book Award for his novel *Middle Passage*, Charles Johnson, speaking to an audience that included Ralph Ellison, discussed his first encounter with *Invisible Man*, and claimed his initial response was a negative one given his and his contemporaries' investments in black nationalism in the 60s. Johnson spoke more about Ellison and *Invisible Man* than his own work for which he was winning the award. In later essays and interviews Johnson reimagined his relationship to *Invisible Man* and Ralph Ellison and re-presented his encounter with the novel as transformative, epiphanic even, in terms of his own literary and intellectual growth. My second chapter focuses on the work of Charles Johnson, specifically his novel, *Middle Passage* and several of his short stories in which the mutable, plastic, trickster figure of Ellison's Rinehart, gets further complicated in the form of Johnson's central protagonist, Rutherford B. Calhoun. In Johnson's work, he takes the comic trickster figure and pushes similarly at the boundaries/limits of what constitutes blackness, nationalism and aesthetics through Western and Eastern philosophical traditions as well as cultural and literary traditions of African Americans. In this narrative, we see the problems inherent in claiming a forbearer. The central protagonist, a "free black," thief and hustler, ends up as a crewman on a slave ship adrift in a sea that becomes a natal nowhere, where all categories of identity are broken down. The ship itself is described as a process, a floating nation constantly falling apart and coming together. With Rutherford B. Calhoun, we

have a central protagonist who has a complex history of frustrated inheritance, movement along conduits of capital, intellectual and spiritual inquiry that take him to Eastern philosophy. With this turn to the east, the central protagonist embraces more fluid constructions of identity. Analysis of this novel and some of Johnson's short stories, produced in the 70s and 80s provide us with the opportunity to interrogate the processes of transculturation in popular culture, looking toward another cultural and/or philosophical tradition for usable models of the heroic. Having exhausted "Western" possibilities, Johnson's central protagonists consistently turn their eyes East and it is this very turn that concerns the latter half of this chapter where I read Johnson's appropriation of all things "Eastern." This turn to the east complicates and reveals the limits of both identitarian politics and the very notion of community, particularly a post Vietnam War generation that witnessed the horror and gradual desensitization and fetishization of acts of violence in popular culture. This generation had watched the horrific carried out domestically as well as abroad by and through their national heroes. Charles Johnson's work enables me to question what nexus of political, social and economic factors, emerging out of cold war attempts to reinvigorate and remasculinize nation, come together to make the "transcultural hero" a conduit for oral and literary culture as well as the transfigurative.<sup>11</sup>

Johnson's work is important, not because it is so clearly influenced by Ralph Ellison, but because it enables us to imagine the hero coming an "elsewhere," find

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<sup>11</sup> As such, the Johnson's heroes embody tensions between sacred and secular interests, which, according to Dumézil, is one of the functions of the "hero" (45, 105). I complicate this claim in my analysis of Johnson's heroes, which I read as expressing the tensions between sacred and secular interests *and* Western intellectual and popular culture while articulating a cultural, communal and more importantly, an individual, need to "pull together" in the face of what Joseph Campbell calls tendencies toward separation. Johnson's heroes combine all of these struggles to productive if not always satisfactory ends.

alternatives to traditional Western ideas of what constitutes transfigurative art. Groups that move, voluntarily or forced by oppressive economic, social, or political formations, trace their relationships to place, nation, and actively create models of the heroic in conversation with their experience(s). Heroes can reflect claims to possession, dispossession, memories and histories of homelands, memories that constitute an irredactable perceptual grid of Diaspora. The hero, temporally, may reflect a romantic and/or nostalgic image of past unity, processes of movement and subsequent fragmentation. Movement, Diaspora, creates new heroes, new ways to be. To define the Black hero is to locate a range of historically contingent desires and needs of individuals and communities. It is to also reconsider the “popular.”

In an attempt to open up a space for what has been historically constructed as the apolitical, irrational, and sometimes downright complicit with oppressive institutions and discourse, I take a cue from Wahneema Lubiano's 1992 essay, "To Take Dancing Seriously is to Redo Politics," which begins with a discussion of Western rationality and its inevitable epistemic violence to the cultural production of non-white and/or non-Western groups. She then looks at the performance of Black drill teams and their perceived complicity with nationalistic formations of identity. Lubiano begins by questioning the oppositional formulation of reason with its theoretical opposite, which gets “dismissed variously as the fantastic, supernatural, cultural, irrational, emotional - or even the feminine, depending upon the circumstances” and argues that:

[d]eployments of the grand narratives that construct universal truths which undergird our conventional sense of and strategies for politics have been inadequate to the task of delineating the messy overlap areas of things like group cultural practice, racial identity, gender re-imaginings, and play, as well as the relation of those things to historical circumstances and change.  
(20)

Thus, taking the primary element of "play," the use of false consciousness, and, as Lubiano suggests, "taking it seriously," can allow us to comprehend and analyze the complex -- and I argue efficacious -- sites of resistance present in "popular" formations of the heroic. For example, Charles Johnson's work posits the transcultural aspect of African Americans spectatorship of popular Martial Arts film genre as one of the messy overlap areas where "magic" and transformation can happen. In this space, an engaged participatory audience re-imagines itself through a hodge-podge of identifications with the screened Other - the Asian warrior/hero. Through the ability to imagine, the spectator can get beyond the frailty of the body. In Johnson's oeuvre, transfigurative imagining becomes a way to fortify the spirit in a specifically non-Judeo-Christian way.

From the work of Charles Johnson I go to a contemporary of his, Toni Cade Bambara, and what I read as her explicit feminist critique of both masculinist literary and heroic traditions present in both Ellison and Johnson, whose paradigms offer little for the female figure other than a supportive role. Bambara's explorations of the heroic take us to much different territories of the local and draws connections between sustaining the "black community" and the black female heroine's relationship with what is often read, problematically, as nihilistic discourses of Black Nationalism. Focusing primarily on her collection of short stories *Gorilla My Love*, specifically the "Hazel stories," in which several tales involving female protagonists, ranging in age, named "Hazel" appear, I read Bambara's construction of the female hero as more than turns to economic or political "power" or to particularly masculinized notions of "blackness." The visions of community Bambara presents signal a historically and culturally informed dissatisfaction with available models of the heroic for black women. Bambara's work resists, through her female protagonists, unrealistic and dangerous constructions of heroism or

warriorhood that hold “women” up as martyrs, mothers or handmaidens to masculinist constructions of the hero and self. Like her literary progenitor Ellison, Bambara believed art could save lives, but her approach differs from her male peers in its ability to telegraph the material consequences of living in a body that you cannot “discourse” your way out of. She achieves this end by drawing upon vernacular traditions, humorous storytelling, not unlike that of the Blues Hero found in the work of Ellison and Charles Johnson, as well as imagery and non-linear structure most commonly associated with the postmodern. The difference in Bambara’s focus on the individual’s relationship to community, self and history, is that the heroines’ choice of “self” is not choice over “community.” These heroines arrive at different destinations than the protagonists of her male counterparts. For example, the trajectories of Johnson’s Rutherford Calhoun of *Middle Passage* or better yet Andrew Hawkins of *Oxherding Tale*, who becomes a disaffected teacher of composition, are quite different from the framing narrator, the adult “Sylvia” of “The Lesson” who teaches by example, and brings her reader into a form of class and communal consciousness mirrored in her array of fictional characters. Both protagonists become teachers of a sort, but Bambara’s “Sylvia” is part of a complex community and the arc of the protagonist never lets us forget that she, and we, are a part of, not apart from. For Bambara, consciousness of “self” is consistent with consciousness of community and one’s relationship to it.

***Gender and the Heroic: Breaking Bones, Seeking Marrow***

And sometimes ladies hit exceeding hard,  
 And fans turn into falchions in fair hands,  
 And why and wherefore no one understands.  
 Byron “Don Juan” Canto 1:21, 166-168

When asked by Rozanne Zucchet during one of his final lecture tours whether or

not women needed to feel better about themselves or that society needed to “reevaluate some of its values,” Joseph Campbell suggested that women had to “stop looking at the boys and wondering whether they are in competition with them” and “realize what effect they are having on the [them]” (Campbell THJ 92). Campbell then relayed an anecdote in which one of his students returned to the classroom at the end of the final semester of his thirty year plus sojourn teaching at Sarah Lawrence College and asked about the possibilities of and for the woman warrior. The historical role of “woman” as mythic warrior, he informed her, had been that of mother, goal or reward for the male hero, protectress of kith and kin, etc., and he then asked what more could she want. The student exclaimed she wanted “to be the hero!” (Campbell THJ 92). To this demand, Campbell responded that he was glad that he retired that year. This response was met with laughter. Although Campbell claimed that his teaching experience had been instrumental in nuancing his own scholarship and theories on the heroic and the “goddess,” the possibility of a female warrior figure who could engage in the same trajectory of questing as her male counterpart was still unthinkable. There was a disconnect between the historical role of the feminine within this heroic taxonomy and what could be imagined in the contemporary moment or the future. Women were and are not “heroes”; they support heroes. They may be, according to Dixon Wecter, “among the most ardent hero-worshippers” and further, without sufficient explanation, he claims that “no woman is ever a heroine to any other woman” (476). Women can only become heroic by “imitation of the stronger sex” and there is an imminent danger that through this imitation they may become unnatural first by their taking up of the signs and signifiers of the masculine and second by their inability or refusal to function within gendered cultural norms as the perfect lady (477).

In the quotidian, Campbell claimed that women, ideally suited for creating life, could be “fulfilled” through acts of aesthetic creation. When pushed about those women who wanted to play with and against the boys, the ones who pursued careers in male dominated fields, Campbell saw the undesirable consequence of their “natures” being distorted.<sup>12</sup> However “liberal” in his time, Campbell was also a product of his time and much like the cultural theorists who came before, during and after, was deeply invested in the feminine as idealized goal; he had no idea what to do with the woman who wanted and could hit exceedingly hard, who chose fans that could turn into falchions, or worse yet just picked up the falchions and left the fans alone. These women, the ones whose hands are fair or bent with labor, who have the ability or access to magic that turns signifiers of femininity into weapons, who take up the symbols and signifiers of masculinity, are marked by ambivalence, they are “known” and yet remain an unknown quantity. In fact, it is better that they are not understood or better yet are willfully misunderstood,<sup>13</sup> that they appear as anomalous blips on screens of national, political and

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<sup>12</sup> The roles available for women are characterized and signify ambivalence and limitation. The female heroic figure supports the male hero. She can be the object fought for, mother, mistress, bride, a paragon of beauty, embodiment of the “promise,” the “comforting, the nourishing, the ‘good’ mother--young and beautiful—who was known to us, and her mobility is severely circumscribed by gender construction. and even tasted, in the remotest past.” In this form she is the object forever of an unrequited love of Freudian proportions. Similarly she is the equally desired bad mother who is marked by her absence and unattainability “against whom aggressive fantasies are directed, and from whom a counter-aggression is feared.” As the embodiment of castration, both castrated and potential castrator, the latter in the form of the hampering, forbidding, punishing, clinging dangerously desirable mother, she is unnatural in her simultaneous performance of the hyper-feminine and the masculine (Campbell HWTF 92, 101-2).

<sup>13</sup> In *Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Campbell describes “woman” within an epistemological framework of image creation. Woman, according to Campbell, “represents the totality of what can be known. The hero is the one who comes to know...she can never be greater than himself, though she can always promise more than he is yet capable of comprehending. She lures, she guides, she bids him burst his fetters. And if he can matches her import, the two, the knower and the known, will be released from every limitation. Woman is the guide to the sublime acme of sensuous adventure. By deficient eyes she is reduced to inferior states; by the evil eye of ignorance she is spellbound to banality and ugliness. But she is redeemed by the eyes of understanding. The hero who can take her as she is, without undue commotion but with the kindness and assurance she requires, is potentially the king, the incarnate god, of her created

economic interests, and viewed through distorting lenses of gender construction: distilled, reduced, made alien and unnatural so that dominant cultural logic remains unchallenged.<sup>14</sup>

In my turn to the work of Bambara, Cliff and Powell, I interrogate how these writers trouble the construction of women as victims or helpers in relation to the hero and challenge masculinist notions of “individual striving.” Once the female warrior’s corporeality is taken into account, she disrupts all that the female body symbolizes. The female warrior can represent, protect and sustain the communal as many of our heroines in the work of Bambara attest but she can also represent the collapse of and response to a debilitating order.<sup>15</sup> The female warrior signifies, at the corporeal level, the battle of the interior. Men, as warriors, are expected to extend their bodies into and to master exterior “spaces,” while women limit the space of and around which the body can move.

There are some bodies that are more acceptable in the position of national hero and others that are unthinkable. Bambara’s work, I argue rethinks the relationship between the female hero, what counts as revolutionary and the domestic.<sup>16</sup> Revolution

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world” (Campbell, HWTF 106). Lyrically expressed and somewhat compassionate in the understanding of the ways in which the feminine is “reduced to inferior states,” subjected to violence, and evacuated of “power,” Campbell’s work reveals the historical interpolation of the feminine into a visual economy where transformation may be possible but has to come from without not within. She can be “taken.” She is the creator of a world that “he,” the male hero, eventually will dominate, not a world that she will rule or share.

<sup>14</sup> To think of the female warrior as “exceptional individual” is not productive. It relegates her to anomaly and unlike her exceptional male counterpart, her “representativeness” or ability to (re)present, already in question and suspect by virtue of her sex, is made untenable.

<sup>15</sup> I argue later that the female characters in Bambara’s short fiction reveal fissures within debilitating Western empirical and reductive discourses of communal organization. This use of the female warrior/hero in this manner can also be seen in the work of Toni Morrison, specifically *Paradise*, and in Bessie Head’s *A Question of Power*.

<sup>16</sup> Poet Nikki Giovanni takes up the relationship between “home” and revolution in her discussion about writing with Claudia Tate and claims that “[i]n order to be a true revolutionary, you must understand love. Love, sacrifice, and death...in order to do battle, you must have a sense of place, a sense of well-being between two people or between an adult and a child or children” (Giovanni qtd. Tate xi). For Giovanni, it is the interpersonal, the relationship between members of



can be found in the expression of relationships within and through the local and provide the warrior with the grounding necessary for their quests of psychic and social interconnection. An example of this difference is the quest trajectories of Rutherford B. Calhoun of Charles Johnson's *Middle Passage* and Toni Cade Bambara's Velma Henry, the central protagonist of *The Salt Eaters*. While the former traverses the Atlantic on a slave ship and finds himself through reconciliation with the past through an encounter with a captive "African God," the latter sits in one place as she experiences healing through reestablishing emotional connections with the help of and through renown healer Minnie Ransom and confronts altogether murky histories of self and community.<sup>17</sup>

This cadre of stereotypes of black men and women as subject to and perpetrators of violence allows them, in very small measure, mobility or the ability to "act." Appropriation and assimilation of these stereotypes of strength by the black community have resulted in self-perpetuating and fulfilling prophecies, but as Paule Marshall's fictional character, Reena, makes clear -- black women have had to be, in point of fact, "frighteningly strong."<sup>18</sup> If the black woman is strong enough that all can depend on her,

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a community, and in this case the purchasing of three new windows for her mother's basement that can be revolutionary (Giovanni 61).

<sup>17</sup> In *Black Women Writers at Work* (hereafter BWWW) Toni Cade Bambara discusses her intent to think through ways to "organize various sectors of the community . . . I was struck by the fact that our activists or warriors and our adepts or medicine people don't even talk to each other. Those two camps have yet to learn . . . to appreciate each other's visions, each other's potential, each other's language" (Tate 16). Bambara's goal was to try to "bring our technicians of the sacred and our guerillas together" (Tate 31). One of the ways this is done in *The Salt Eaters* is connection to ancestors. The importance of these figures has been discussed by Toni Morrison in "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation," Luisah Teish in "Ancestor Reverence" and by several other writers/theorists. Bambara, in "Salvation Is the Issue" asserts that the underlying question of her oeuvre is whether or not it is "natural (sane, healthy, whole-some, in our interest) to violate the contracts/covenants we have with our ancestors, each other, our children, our selves, and God" (47). Her answer, gleaned thematically in her work, is that simultaneous communing with living, dead, selves and future is needed.

<sup>18</sup> Paule Marshall published the short story "Reena" in Bambara's *The Black Woman* and in this short story Reena gives voice to the precarious position black women have been put in: "They condemn us,' Reena said softly but with anger, 'without taking history into account. We are still,

there is no need to discuss what amounts to illusory oppression. Reading the ways these writers deploy the “heroic” in this minefield of gender and race, diachronically and in our contemporary moment, will enable us to think critically about how these systems of representation work. It is one thing to construct utopias and avatars, fantasmic images of what and who we could be, but we have to consider the cost of these processes of “imagining” to men and women living in the present.<sup>19</sup>

This quest to more actively engage with models of history is taken up by Michelle Cliff. After reading Bambara’s novel, *The Salt Eaters*, Jamaican-American writer, Michelle Cliff approached Bambara and asked her about the figure Mary Ellen Pleasant, which later, after much research, would become one of the protagonists of Cliff’s 2000 novel *Free Enterprise*. The connections between Bambara and Cliff are present in the way Cliff engages with the “local” and the individual’s relationship to local and nation with an explicit critique of masculinist constructions of nation. In my fourth chapter I explore the effects of Cliff’s inheritances, the way that she, in the tradition of Bambara re-imagines the heroine’s relationship to the local and her incorporation of the historical and mytho-historical in the form of culturally specific heroes and questioning what constitutes the heroic once we take in processes of Diaspora. In *No Telephone to Heaven*, we have a female central protagonist who chooses to make and remake home and self

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most of us, the Black woman who had to be almost frighteningly strong in order for us all to survive. For, after all, she was the one whom they left (and I don’t hold this against them; I understand) with the children to raise, who had to make it somehow or other. And we are still, so many of us, living that history” (TBW 35). The description of the delivery of these words reads “softly but with anger.”

<sup>19</sup> One contemporary novel that troubles this pre/post historical formation is Octavia Butler’s *Kindred* in which the central protagonist literally moves through time, becoming her own ancestor, her own reason for being, but in order to successfully negotiate the spatio-historical space, she has to literally leave part of herself behind. She, along with her white husband, have to “accept” a history of sexualized violence and how their “present,” constructions of race, gender and desire are impacted by that history.

through guerilla warfare. She comes to political consciousness with the aid of a transgendered nurse/warrior figure named Harry/Harriet, which at once allow us to question how this racially ambiguous figure has to renegotiate relationships with her white looking and black loathing father and her darker mother who left her with him in America while she and a darker daughter returned to Jamaica. Clare comes to political consciousness and makes a choice to participate in a campaign that ends with her death, a violent death. This chapter enables me to further my discussion of what it means to make a choice, to choose a genealogy, allegiances, nation, and to deal with the consequences for those choices.

Cliff's novel, in its attention to conventional "historical" documentation, intervenes into the dominant narrative of history. In this work we see the common thread of the search for "home" coterminous with a search for a usable past and model of the heroic. Clare's search takes her to popular culture, film and television and reveals the complex relationship between the hero, the image and violence. This is a novel that, like Ellison's *Invisible Man*, engages with historically and culturally specific formations of the heroic. In *Invisible Man* the bluesman/Louis Armstrong, Booker T. Washington, DuBois, Jack Johnson, Joe Louis, Marcus Garvey and inferentially, Richard Wright all make "appearances." In Cliff's novel, Jamaican "heroes" emerge in interspersed retellings of the Nanny and Cudjoe tales, and Clare's search in Academia takes her on a path to direct confrontation with the colonial "mater" and cultural imperial "pater" in the form of England and America respectfully. Her narrative elaborates and pushes further at the difficulties facing post Vietnam generations to "identify" with conventional and Judeo-Christian constructions of the heroic. This novel meditates on the female warrior's relationship to local and state violence and questions if and when violence is effective

given the black subject being historically defined by a set of violent socioeconomic relations as both victim and embodiment of, at the very least, potential violence. This novel, I argue, shows how imaginatively accessing symbols of power can lead to it. However problematic, incorporating “impossibility” into the quotidian successfully disrupts colonizer/settler/subject relations. This novel is about the choice to secure self to the ground, even if the consequence will be to get burned into it. Similar to the work of her predecessors, this novel expresses preoccupation with popular film, but there is a discernable growing distrust of the “popular” as a viable space for transfiguration. Where Bambara and Johnson sought to destabilize “grand narratives” by opening the “popular” as a site for the transformative, the writers of Cliff’s generation see popular culture, film at least, as a powerful tool of neo-colonial forces, as instruments of oppression,<sup>20</sup> while still reserving a small measure of transfigurative potential, revolution, under the guise of “play.”

The transformative potential of transcultural identification with the Chinese cinematic hero in Johnson’s work, and the resulting productive communication between cultures, cannot be dismissed as simplistic constructions of colonizer/colonized, exploitation, or appropriation. The processes of identification and the texts themselves have to be viewed as objects of analysis that frequently destabilize Western epistemological framing.<sup>21</sup> Destabilization in the nexus of pleasure, ritual history,

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<sup>20</sup> To trace this anxiety about the commodification of the hero through this genealogy, Gerald Early’s work on the black fighter gets at this figure’s relationship to “capital” was helpful to my analysis of the black fighter in *Invisible Man*, specifically his claim that the “black fighter is not only heroic for the black masses and the black intellectual when he is fighting a white fighter or someone who has been defined as representing white interests; this last popularized during the era of Muhammad Ali, seems a bit dubious as every black fighter, sooner or later, represents white interest of some sort” (30).

<sup>21</sup> In a conference paper prepared for International Conference on Hong Kong Cinema of the 1970s in August 2008 entitled “Lessons in Gendering Transformation: Charles Johnson and

collective experience, inside and outside circuits of exchange give these exchanges political significance. With a rethinking of the work “play” can do, the complexity of cultural transmission and exchange enables us to read productive exchanges between analogously oppressed groups. By the time we get to the next generation of writers, we see a palpable suspicion that the costs far outweigh the benefits to those who are in structurally inferior positions of power.

The last branch of this genealogy that I take up is Jamaican born writer, Patricia Powell, who has gone on record as locating Michelle Cliff as a literary progenitor. Her work reveals similar tensions between recorded historical constructions of identity and Diaspora and how lives were actually lived. As with Cliff’s novels, Patricia Powell’s *The Pagoda* questions the inability of colonialism to contain the subjects it has created. The central protagonist, Mr. Lowe, of this novel is a transgendered figure, born female in a Hakka region in China. Dressed as a boy as a child until she reached adolescence by her father, she escapes being sold into marriage to satisfy her father’s debts by dressing as male and cutting her hair in the imperial cue and stowing away on a ship bound for Jamaica. During her passage, she is found by the captain of the ship, is then beaten, bound and raped for the entire voyage to Jamaica. Prior to disembarking, Lau A-yin’s imperial cue is cut off by the captain in favor of a “look” more befitting the colonizer’s image of Chinese masculinity. Having given birth to a child that is at reminder of her

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Transcultural Spectatorship,” I close read the two films that Charles Johnson’s central protagonist, Rudolph, encounters in the movie theater, *Five Fingers of Death* (1972) and *Deep Thrust: The Hand of Death* (1973), the former the classic narrative of Chao Chi Hao who surpasses local villains and the limitations of his own body to restore proper to order and the latter a sensationalist film advertised with images of a half nude Angela Mao. I discussed the implications of sites of production, reception and the ideological fissures produced in the reception of these films by America’s darker classed communities.

middle passage, Lau A-yin assumes male drag and lives the majority of his life as Mr. Lowe on the island. With this text we see intersecting threads established in the work of Powell's forebears: Ellison, Johnson, Bambara, and Cliff. The text complicates constructions of the body, their relationship to nation and what it means to be part of diasporic community in which these relationships are vexed at best. Lowe is a figure that loses connections, to language and the land of his birth, but for Lowe return is not only impossible but also undesirable. This text complicates the hero's relationship to victimage and/or survivorship, as well as to history, especially when some histories are only present as absences. It takes up "popular" constructions of history that preclude Chinese participation in the history and economy of Jamaica and asks: What happens when nothing is recorded, officially or otherwise? This last chapter picks up on threads of the discussions of Cliff's shift from "local" to "national" and how the hero emerges in overlapping and often contentious ideas about movement, identity, and processes of Diaspora. In its illumination of a history not "known," that of the Chinese in the Caribbean, *The Pagoda*, with its multiple crossings of gender, race and desire, focuses our attention on the processual, how these subjects are "made" and what happens when the histories of colonialism cannot contain what they have made. My analysis reads the central protagonist Lowe/Lau A-yin as a transgendered figure who experiences both a loss of subjectivity and a reconstruction of a self, home and history which in and of itself stands as heroic. Lowe/Lau A-yin, in the creation and culling of a history for his/her daughter is a narrative of survivorship. To create history is to create a space for a new hero, a new world.

The value of the "heroic" lies in what we do with it, how we use this figure to achieve some form of self-efficacy. It is a matter of agency, the ability to imagine

ourselves as conscious beings, as “selves” with interiority, the ability to act. Thus, it is also a matter of choice. The viability of the heroic, for better or worse, lies in our choices. Our Western constructions of subjectivity rely on, albeit sometimes spurious, concepts of free will and choice. The act of engaging with the “heroic” opens up potential reframing and reimagining not only what the hero is and could be, but a reimagining of subjectivity itself. When we look for and create heroes, we tacitly acknowledge the limits of and desire to get beyond what is not supposed to be possible. To think of ourselves in a genealogy of choice enables us to lay the groundwork for an ethic of care for “self,” one that fortifies the individual, but also has a role within the community. The hero is nothing without it. To align oneself with the heroic according to the logic of the texts under consideration in this project, means more than self-indulgence. It can mean an ethic of care that extends from the self to “local,” community, and beyond. Each chapter in this project builds upon the challenges set forth by Ralph Waldo Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, challenges that lead each writer in this genealogy to reimage the work the “hero” does and the registers in which they speak. There is no struggle without heroes, no political project or action that does not, however problematically, make use of the hero. They speak to our desires to speak at that lower register and to reinvigorate the spirit.

## Chapter 1

### **Dreaming the Warrior: Wounded Fighters and Frustrated Heroics in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man***

Sometimes it is best not to awaken them; there are few things in the world as dangerous as sleepwalkers.

Ralph Ellison *Invisible Man*

We need great myths; we need to understand, translate, and interpret for ourselves the meaning of our experience.

Ralph Ellison, Black Perspectives Conference  
New York 1972

To define the black heroic in American culture we have to sift through a multitude of familiar incarnations: the soldier/war hero, the folk or cultural hero, “everyman” hero, sports hero, super hero, and anti-hero to name a few. All of these figures intersect with American constructions of masculinity, femininity, race, nation, narratives of success, upward mobility, rugged individualism, manifest destiny, and conceptions of the “self” inherited from Enlightenment discourse. I am interested in how these discourses shape the hero as we know it and allow some bodies to occupy the space of the heroic more easily than others, and more pointedly, how this figure can be used to ground political and social resistance to oppression. From Frederick Douglass’ slave narrative to the comic book character and film *Blade* (1998), the black hero has been a figure of contestation, of unrequited ambivalent desires for belonging and perpetual “outsider” identity, for a body that can unite a people through sacrifice as well as sustain and resist penetrative and often destructive discourses of “subjectivity” and nation. In an interview with Alfred Chester and Vilma Howard in 1954 for *The Paris Review*, which was later published under the title “The Art of Fiction” in Ralph Ellison’s collection, *Shadow and Act* (hereafter TAOF and *S & A*), Ellison is asked about the beginnings of his novel *Invisible Man*. In his response, Ellison reveals that he began the novel while struggling



with Lord Raglan's *The Hero* and his thoughts about "Negro leadership in the U.S." (12).<sup>22</sup> Ellison was very much concerned with the role of the hero, how this figure had been historically used to create a collective national and cultural identity. His novel, *Invisible Man*, I argue tests then contemporary models of the heroic available to the black subject.

In his introduction to *Shadow and Act*, Ellison speculates that "voracious" reading conducted by him and other young boys like him, was a search for heroes and was, at least in part, due to the absence of fathers. The search for heroes, "[f]ather and mother substitutes" was a search for self. Ellison describes the "identification and empathic adventuring" that young boys engaged in as they read.<sup>23</sup> He goes on to say that "we fabricated our own heroes and ideals catch-as-catch-can, and with an outrageous and irreverent sense of freedom..." and these figures ranged from

[g]amblers and scholars, jazz musicians and scientists, Negro cowboys and soldiers from the Spanish-American and first world wars, movie stars and stunt men, figures from the Italian Renaissance and literature, both classical and popular, were combined with the special virtues of some local bootlegger, the eloquence of some Negro preacher, and the strength and grace of some local athlete, the ruthlessness of some businessman-

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<sup>22</sup> Six years later in an interview entitled "The Seer and the Seen" with Richard G. Stern for the Winter 1961 issue of *December* magazine, Ellison was more specific about the struggles he had with Lord Raglan's "figures of history and myth to account for the features which make for the mythic hero, and... the ambiguity of Negro leadership...[he] kept trying to account for the fact that when the chips were down, Negro leaders did not represent the Negro community...Beyond their own special interests they represented white philanthropy, white politicians, business interests, and so on...they acknowledged no final responsibility to the Negro community for their acts, and implicit in their roles were constant acts of betrayal. This made for a sad, chronic division between their values and the values of those they were supposed to represent. And the fairest thing to say about it is that the predicament of Negroes in the United States rendered these leaders automatically impotent until they recognized their true source of power—which lies, as Martin Luther King perceived, in the Negro's ability to suffer even death for the attainment of our beliefs" (S & A 18-19). I will return to this passage later in this chapter to consider its implications for my reading of the text as one that anticipates the tension between the programs of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr.

<sup>23</sup> The question of how reading and identification, practices creating and relating to the heroic self, and how those practices change over time, is an implicit question underlying this project.

physician, the elegance in dress and manners of some headwaiter or hotel doorman. (*S & A* xv)

Ellison knew how pressing the “need” was for a people living under duress to have models of the heroic to identify with and how difficult it was to find such figures for the black subject within what was readily available. The particular history of the black subject makes it possible to consider Western, categorically “white Western” models, the cowboy, the classical artist, as well as the “negro preacher” alongside the “pimp” and “gambler.” For Ellison this was a question of leadership. From what meager origins could the Black hero emerge and what kind of work could he do? What is interesting about this interview, aside from Ellison’s discussion about Negro leadership, is the way the interviewers frame it. Chester and Howard describe the literary significance of the physical location in which the interview takes place:

the Café de la Mairie has a tradition of seriousness behind it, for here was written Djuna Barnes’s spectacular novel, *Nightwood*. There is a tradition, too, of speech and eloquence, for Miss Barnes’s hero, Dr. O’Connor, often drew a crowd of listeners to his mighty rhetoric. So here gravity is in the air, and rhetoric too. While Mr. Ellison speaks, he rarely pauses, and although the strain of organizing his thought is sometimes evident, his phraseology and the quiet, steady flow and development of ideas are overwhelming. To listen to him is rather like sitting in the back of a huge hall and feeling the lecturer’s faraway eyes staring directly into your own. The highly emphatic, almost professorial intonations, startle with their distance, self-confidence, and warm undertones of humor. (2)

What is telling in this contextualization is not the association of Ellison’s work with the groundbreaking “modernist” work of and in Djuna Barnes’ novel,<sup>24</sup> but how it explicitly

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<sup>24</sup> In T. S. Eliot’s introduction to the 1937 edition of Barnes’ novel, he claims that the novel is a “great achievement of a style, the beauty of phrasing, the brilliance of wit and characterization, and a quality of horror and doom very nearly related to that of Elizabethan tragedy” (xvi). William Burroughs considered it one of the great novels of the twentieth century and Dylan Thomas referred to it as one of the “three great prose books ever written by a woman.” *Nightwood’s* distinctly modernist prose and subject matter, lesbian women in Paris salons of the interwar period, is ground breaking. Its construction of the black body and (white) “lesbian” body, female sexuality, as being similarly “primitive” is not.

metaphorizes dangers facing the black artist. Within the first twenty pages of Djuna Barnes' "revolutionary" text, the master rhetorician Dr. O'Connor, exercises his "mighty rhetoric," his virtuosity as a narrator in the recollection of a circus performer, "Nikka the Nigger, who used to fight the bear in the *Cirque de Paris*." This figure is described as "crouching all over the arena without a stitch on, except an ill-concealed loin-cloth all abulge as if with a deep-sea catch, tattooed from head to heel with all the ameublement of depravity! Garlanded with rosebuds and hackwork of the devil—he was a sight to see!" (16). This body is excessively marked: literally and figuratively with the profane. It is indeed "spectacular"<sup>25</sup> and its function as "spectacle" illustrates the bulwarks of racist representations hampering the black artist and the demands made of his/her art by the dominant culture and "his people." This framing also speaks to the collective experience of black subjects who face representational practices that would reduce them to impotent circus performers. Ellison was painfully aware of his "location" as evidenced by his beginning the interview with a preemptive strike. The first line of the interview is a response to a question that is not asked. In an attempt to cordon off critics who would read his text as autobiography instead of a work of creative fiction, he distances himself from his central protagonist with the disclaimer: "Let me say right now that my book is not an autobiographical work" (2). Ellison knew that neither he nor his central

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<sup>25</sup> I have written extensively elsewhere on the representation of the character "Nikka the Nigger" ("nikka" is German for "nigger") and female, specifically lesbian, sexuality in the context of literary modernism and the deployment of the primitive. The following works have been helpful to me in thinking through the relationship of the "black primitive," modernism and this novel: Bonnie Kime Scott, "Barnes Being 'Beast Familiar': Representation on the Margin of Modernism," Dianne Chisholm's "Obscene Modernism: Eros Noir and the Profane Illumination of Djuna Barnes," Karen Kaviola's "The 'Beast Turning Human': Constructions of the Primitive in *Nightwood*," Meryl Altman's "A Book of Repulsive Jews? Rereading *Nightwood*," and more recent work by Dana Seitler, "Down on All Fours: Atavistic Perversions and the Science of Desire from Frank Norris to Djuna Barnes," and "The Bible Lies The One Way, But The Night-Gown The Other": Dr. Matthew O'Connor, Confession, and Gender in Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood*."

protagonist and novel would be read in the same context of “mighty rhetoric” as Barnes’ Dr. O’Connor.<sup>26</sup> Ellison also knew that none could escape constructions of “blackness,” but this knowledge did not preclude a kind of self-destructive idealism of the universal. Ellison wanted his novel to be read as a text concerned with “innocence and human error, a struggle through illusion to reality” not as a first person narrative, but a novel that could “speak” to and for an entire nation of men coming to consciousness and therefore move beyond pedestrian concerns of “race” (TAoF 13).

The ending of and period immediately after World War II is marked by what Willard A. Heaps calls a “serious discontent,” an “aggravated dissatisfaction.” The shift from militaristic to peacetime constructions of masculinity was a dangerous time for all men who had been seduced by dreams of inclusion. These dreams were a pastiche of memory and fantasy, of good and noble fathers and prodigal sons, fantastic imaginings of men who felt secure in their right to the American dream. By the end of WWII, we had generations of men who believed that by serving in the Great War machine they would inherit, if not confirm, their right to the American Dream experiencing a kind of cognitive dissonance. For Black American males, participation meant fighting to conquer a “blackness” darker than themselves, Hitler and fascism; it meant fighting toward political and social inclusion, potentially sacrificing life and limb to transcend their socio-historical inferiority and be accorded the full rights of citizenship. Clad in the armor of American nationalism, these “invisible men” sought to affirm their humanity and masculinity through what they hoped would be ennobling warriorhood. Black men dreamed of inclusion, but belief in the American Dream produced frustration for all. The

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<sup>26</sup> Barnes’ Dr. Matthew O’Connor is constructed as a cross dressing figure of perversity, and, had time and space allowed, I would push at the obvious “perversity” of constructions of blackness and how they inform the interviewers’ framing of their interview with Ellison.

image of young boys pretending to sleep, waiting for their fathers to return home, so that they might inherit a world, *the* world, is a powerful one. But, the father's promises would be broken. He would not claim his dark sons and he would lie to his white ones. At the end of WWII there would be no divine and/or miraculous inheritance, just disillusionment, a dangerous jarring from dreams of equanimity. For most men, these dreams were nightmares.<sup>27</sup>

Set in post World War II America, Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* signals the death of an era, specifically the death of many conventional and historical definitions of the American heroic and its usefulness to the marginalized. Soldiers had returned from "putting the world in order" and romantic images of the hero having vanquished the enemy dominated the popular cultural consciousness. This was a time of social and economic rebuilding and attempts by Black American males to claim "manhood" were often met with derision and violence. The novel explores a pantheon of heroic figures that includes: the sport hero/athlete, the political pundit or what we would call in our contemporary cultural and historical moment the public intellectual, the soldier, the antihero and trickster<sup>28</sup> and the "Christian soldier" and questions what happens to

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<sup>27</sup> In Susan Faludi's introduction to *Stiffed*, she explores the relationship between American men and the Second World War: "When I listen to the sons born after World War II, born to the fathers who won that war, I sometimes find myself in a reverie, conjured out of my own recollections and theirs. The more men I talk to the more detailed this imagined story becomes. It is the story of a boy in bed pretending to sleep, waiting for his father. Tonight the father has promised to reveal to the son a miraculous inheritance..." (Faludi 3). The description of Faludi as an active listener, entranced by the narratives produced by these men, and the combination of their memories with her own helpful for my thinking through how the hero works emblematically to embody processes of creation, imagination and identification. Further, the image of a son "pretending" to sleep, performing anticipation, of expectation, and a father engaging in a coeval performance of ritual return is also helpful for thinking through the relationship between symbolic constructions of a "white father" and his relationship to his "white" and "black" sons.

<sup>28</sup> Janet Parady and Margo White's *The Trickster in African American Folktales, Folk Poetics: A Sociosemiotic Study of Yoruba Trickster Tales* (Contributions In Afro-American and African Studies) by Ropo Sekoni and Jay Edwards' "Structural Analysis of the Afro-America Trickster

“dreams” of social and political inclusion when heroic deeds fail to achieve democratic civic ends. When we meet the central protagonist of Ellison’s novel in the “Prologue,” he has “awakened” in a historical moment where the hero has become a vexed site of identification for all Americans, but arguably this pain is more acutely felt by Black Americans. In his travels, the narrator encounters several models of the hero with whom he invariably identifies and disidentifies in his quest for subjectivity. He tries on several guises of the “heroic,” and reveals the dangers inherent in each “mask.” With each figure, Ellison’s novel reveals the tensions between dreams of power and realities of disenfranchisement, between desire and utility. As a result, we have a text that articulates a frustration with available models of the heroic and anticipates later generations’ difficulty with finding and maintaining heroes to identify with and emulate.<sup>29</sup>

***Battle Royal/Weary Boxers: Timing is Everything***

You’re a nervy little fighter, son...and the race needs good, smart,  
disillusioned fighters.

Ralph Ellison *Invisible Man*

It comes down, after all this unforgivable blackness...[Johnson’s  
outboxing of an Irishman created a]... thrill of national disgust.

“The Prize Fighter” *The Crisis* (August 1919)

One of the first figures that Ellison places under his critical lens is the “boxer.” In doing so, Ellison explores and complicates the kind of work the “athletic hero” and his “body” can do, as well as explore the relationship between consciousness and heroic acts. The boxer is a figure whose symbolic weight, for Black Americans, reaches back to

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Tale” were useful in terms of my thinking through incarnations of this figure in contemporary Black literature.

<sup>29</sup> In short stories like “Flying Home” and the essay “Little Man at Cheechaw Station,” which I will address later in this chapter, we see Ellison’s continued struggle with the problem of the “black hero.”

antebellum matches featuring ex-slaves like Bill Richmond and Tom Molineaux<sup>30</sup> who used their boxing skills to gain “freedom.” For Black Americans, these boxers were a source of communal pride, a site of resistance and revolution where pseudoscientific discourses of white male supremacy could be taken up, head on, in a spectacular scene of brutal combat between individual warriors that would leave little doubt as to who the victor was.

The boxing ring was an ideal venue, because in it men were pit against each other in one-on-one combat, and the man with superior skill, intelligence, strength and will, triumphed; thus operating in full accordance with American narratives of upward mobility and rugged individualism. According to Darlene Clark Hine and Maureen Jenkins, by the 19<sup>th</sup> century the boxing ring had become a symbol of Anglo Saxon purity and racial superiority. Efforts of black fighters to enter the ring metaphorized larger, more urgent, social conflicts between black and white men.<sup>31</sup> The ring was a site where individual and collective, literal and psychic, revenge fantasies could be enacted, where black men could do the impossible, make white men submit to their sheer superiority and admit – if only in their obvious defeat – the fallacy of white supremacy (Hine and Jenkins

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<sup>30</sup> Richmond migrated to England, became a boxer then trained Molineaux who left America for England in 1809. Molineaux became the first black man to have a shot at the heavyweight title when he fought Tom Crib, the British heavyweight champion. Molineaux lost in the 39<sup>th</sup> round.

<sup>31</sup> John L. Sullivan had refused to fight any black fighter on that grounds that any white fighter who deigned to enter the ring “with a nigger loses [his] respect” but Tommy Burns would accept Jack Johnson’s challenge in 1908 and after fourteen rounds Johnson became the first African American heavyweight champion of the world. After Burns’ defeat, Jack London put the call out for a “Great White Hope” to take back the title. In the December 27, 1908 edition of *The New York Herald*, London wrote that he was with “Burns all the way. He was a white man and so am I. Naturally I wanted to see the white man win. Put the case to Johnson and ask him if he were the spectator at a fight between a white man and a black man which he would like to see win. Johnson's black skin will dictate a desire parallel to the one dictated by my white skin.” Allegiances went strictly along racial lines. Earlier, in 1888, Peter Jackson’s defeat of Joe McAuliffe, the leading white contender for the championship, met with a response by Black Americans that was likened to the “jubilee” enacted when “Mr. Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation” (Wiggins 290).

8). The ring offered a mode of redress to aggressively racist and intolerant social and political institutions. Within these ropes as contestants and outside the ring as spectators, black men were able to see themselves in the tradition of John Henry<sup>32</sup> and be envisioned by others in the Black community as conquerors. The fighters' successes, failures and frustrated careers mirrored the experiences of black Americans as they tried literally and figuratively to use their bodies to address systems of oppression and in this way, these fighters were "representatives."<sup>33</sup> However, Ellison was not only conscious of how the sportsman, as a cultural figure, functions like a barometer of shifting social hierarchies and facilitate change but also the limitations of looking to this figure as a hero.<sup>34</sup>

From the very beginning of Ellison's novel, he troubles unquestioning identification with this type of hero. In the "Prologue" the narrator describes a sporting contest between a prizefighter and a "yokel" which the yokel invariably wins after being pummeled by the "swift and amazingly scientific" prizefighter. The yokel secures his win

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<sup>32</sup> John Henry, of course, would be a prototypic figure in this tradition. The narrative of him being a former slave whose brawn is pit against new steam powered machinery being used to displace Black labor and "wins" only to die of either a heart attack or stroke is consistent with the "sacrifice" of the black body for the "larger" point, particularly if we think of the appropriation of this tale by social critics invested in material analysis. In a larger project, I will trace, more fully the connection between this figure and Ellison's central protagonist. For more, see Brett Williams' "The Heroic Appeal of John Henry," *John Henry: A Folk-Lore Study* by Louis Chappell, *John Henry: Tracking Down a Negro Legend* by Guy Johnson and the more recent comprehensive study of the varied incarnations of this tale in Scott Nelson's 2006 *Steel Drivin' Man*.

<sup>33</sup> One example of these frustrated careers is Peter Jackson's history. After Molineaux, Peter Jackson's attempts to vie for the title were cordoned off throughout his career. He was never allowed to fight for the heavyweight championship. John L. Sullivan (the "Boston Strong Boy") and his successor "Gentleman Jim" Corbett, both notorious racists, refused to fight Jackson for the title. The one time Corbett came close to fighting Jackson, he demanded that the milieu had to be the South, which Jackson refused. According to lore the fighters stalemated and the fight never took place. For more see Lawrence Levine's *Black Culture and Black Consciousness* (1977).

<sup>34</sup> In "Remembering Richard Wright," one of the many essays in which Ellison tries to work through his vexed relationship to his literary progenitor and mentor Richard Wright, Ellison compares Wright to the idealized and demonized Jack Johnson, stating that Wright was "as randy, as courageous, and as irrepressible as Jack Johnson" (*The Collected Essays* 674). I take up this relationship in more detail later in this chapter. Richard Wright, himself, wrote several essays about boxing and its luminaries, and in his 1938 "High Tide in Harlem," he refers to both Joe Louis and Max Schmeling as "puppets," manipulated by national interest and used to manipulate the masses (Wright qtd. Early 111).



when he “simply [steps] inside of his opponent’s sense of time” and strikes an effective “lucky” blow “[knocking] science, speed and footwork as cold as a well-digger’s posterior” (8). Here we have the classic tale of an underdog, the everyman of cultural mythology, who wins against the scientifically superior body of the prizefighter. This scientific body, graced with preternatural speed and footwork, is representative of American nationalism’s apparatuses. If we consider this complex nexus of scientific racism and capitalist interest within American nationalism and the black subject’s relation to it, the yokel is not just everyman but every black man.

And yet, the hero of this anecdote does not win due to some essential, innate, supernatural strength or some mysterious font of masculine physical prowess he taps into. It is happy coincidence, a lucky blow among a “gale of boxing gloves” that enables him to step inside his opponent’s “scientific” framework and become victorious. Amid the flurry of jabs, unstructured and potentially self destructive, the yokel catches a break.<sup>35</sup> The question of athleticism and skill is put to the test. The yokel’s “victory” is one that complicates the relationship between “consciousness” and resistance; the yokel is not necessarily aware or knows what he is doing. Further, the anecdote is relayed by a narrator who is in a drug induced haze, the passage itself sometimes “reads” like stream of consciousness prose. The narrator, having become concerned about the degree to which he is aware, goes so far as to state that he is going to give up marijuana because “to see around corners is enough (that is not unusual when you are invisible.) But to hear around them is too much: it inhibits activity” (13). Altering one’s consciousness, reveling

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<sup>35</sup> In Gerald Early’s essay, “The Black Intellectual and the Sport of Prizefighting,” the boxer is associated with the trickster, and can be found in both the “slick accomplished boxer” and his “negation,” the yokel with his “complete absence of technique” (102). He reads the “white yokel” as a preserver of the “white public’s need to see Tricksters pay a price for their disorder” or rather threat to the dominant order (107).

in fantasies of corporeal, psychic or cultural superiority, to daydream of being the returning conquering hero on the crowd's shoulders may allow you to step out of restrictive dominant constructions of time and history and into potentially productive liminal spaces; but, this stay is, has to be, temporary. The danger here, most obviously, is that the "body" is not a boundless source of strength. Brute force can not win and corporeality is always problematic, especially when the bodies in question have historically been fetishized and commodified – literally and figuratively. Remaining in this liminal space/state is akin to self induced paralysis or suicide.

For Ellison, consciousness of participation and interpolation into social systems are necessary to begin forging a voice or position of resistance. You might land the occasional lucky blow, but it is more important to know where you are in the contemporary moment, how you got there, in terms of where you fit in the historical moment, so that you can strategize for change. In discussing his central protagonist in "The Art of Fiction," Ellison states: "the major flaw in the hero's character is his unquestioning willingness to do what is required of him by others as a way to success..." (14). Conscious subjects are those who can question, can make their own decisions, think for themselves, and use their creative energy. In the case of Ellison's central protagonist, liberation is achieved through creation; it is the "act of writing and thinking" that compels the narrator to change the material conditions of his life (15).

Ellison's text also suggests that being preoccupied with or obsessing over your "state" can hobble you, intellectually, spiritually, politically. There are many ways to step out of time and not all are productive. Some methods may leave you incapacitated and unable to resist or fight. Ellison's text cautions the reader that dwelling on the reason(s) for being thrown into a battle may be unproductive, especially when the underlying logos

may be counterintuitive. If you are thrown into the ring, or even volunteer to go into the ring, solely because of your “blackness,” a blackness that has been made abject by cultural forces, then obsessing over that abjection is self-destructive at best, and at its worst, it is a narcissism the warrior can not afford. “Racial consciousness” is a Catch-22 for the black subject. Knowing you are “raced” is integral to your survival but this knowledge can be debilitating if that is all you focus on.

The anecdote of the yokel and the prizefighter in the novel’s prologue foreshadows many battles and contests of will the narrator will be interpolated into until he becomes the proper disillusioned fighter. In this case, the “proper disillusioned fighter” is one that exhibits distinctly anti-heroic characteristics and uses all the resources at his/her fingertips, particularly the strategy of temporal/discursive displacement. Ellison’s novel charts the development of a hero, an arc full of nodal points at which the subject identifies and disidentifies with models of the heroic. The first narrative moment when the narrator begins to identify with or try to use the figure of the hero as a model is the Battle Royal.

Prior to the actual fight, the narrator is thrust into a specular scene in which he and his peers function as pornographic entertainment for the “most important men of the town,” a room that is a microcosm representative of larger social apparatuses: lawyers, bankers, judges, doctors, teachers, merchants and one or two “fashionable pastors” (18). Amid these men who represent juridical, mercantile, religious and educational institutions, the narrator, who had imagined himself a “potential Booker T. Washington,” finds himself in a field of desire and white national identity and masculinity. In a smoke filled room with a “clarinet...vibrating sensually” the leaders of the town watch a blonde dancer who is naked except for the small American flag on her tattooed on her belly.

This setting illustrates the dynamic operations in the intersection of race, spectator and spectacle. The young black men are brought to the front of the room and placed between the white “fathers” and the nude blonde. First, the narrator describes a voyeuristic scene where he “notice[s] a certain merchant who followed her hungrily, his lips loose and drooling” (20). He is watching the watcher. We follow his gaze as we would a camera pan shot. From this incitation of heterosexual desire between white male viewers and the white female spectacle, the gaze shifts to the young black men as the narrator, along with the other “fighters,” are forced to look at the dancer. This juxtaposition retains the heteronormative, to a degree, but is complicated by the triangulated spectator/spectacle relationship between the white men, the semi-nude black adolescents and the nude female dancer. The young black men, similar to contemporary Black athletes as entertainers, are put in a position where, like their white female counterpart, they are objects of a gaze that is equal parts desire and hatred.<sup>36</sup> Unlike the white male whose relationship to the white female, with him as spectator and her as object, affirms and confirms his superiority, the black male is unable to occupy the space of omniscient and omnipresent spectator for long because his position as spectator is complicated by his position as spectacle. He is being looked at, watched, just as intently as the white female object is being watched. Any illusion of “self” as whole, unitary,

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<sup>36</sup> Daniel Y. Kim’s “Invisible Desires: Homoerotic Racism and its Homophobic Critique in Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*” explores The Battle Royal, specifically the character Norton’s mapping of desire onto the narrative production of Trueblood and the narrator’s encounter with “Young Emerson” as moments in Ellison’s novel where the homoerotic emerges or is invoked to critique “white” power holders. My analysis differs from Kim’s on several points as I return to the Battle Royal and networks of desire illustrated in the visibility, rather specularly, of the young boxer with the red satin briefs and consider that body within the context of larger ontological questions of wounding and race. Additionally, I extend a critique of the dancer’s body to consider how it functions as a figure of symbolic castration for **both** black and white men. Kim’s essay is predictable in its reading of what the writer reads as Ellison’s “homophobia,” but productive in the way he locates a trajectory of eroticized power relations and mapping of desire in the Battle Royal. My own analysis of how Trueblood fits into my analysis of the “black heroic” has been bracketed for this chapter but will be addressed in a larger project.

impenetrable or as an “authority” of the gaze and having power with relation to what is being looked at is undone.

As a spectator, the narrator relays both the desire to destroy and “love” the dancer. This ambivalence is expressed in his desire to “spit upon her as [his] eyes brushed slowly over her body” and more explicitly when he wants to:

...at one and the same time to run from the room, to sing through the floor, or go to her and cover her from my eyes and the eyes of the others with my body; to feel the soft thighs, to caress her and destroy her, to love and murder her, to hide from her, and yet to stroke her below the small American flag tattooed upon her belly her thighs formed a capital V. I had a notion that of all in the room she saw only me with her impersonal eyes. (19-20)

In this passage he wants to flee, to protect the woman from the eyes of others and from him, his own desire all at once. The white female figure, literally writ with the “national,” stands in for what is truly desired—subjectivity in a nation which is at best apathetic and at worst openly hostile to the efforts of black men to gain parity.<sup>37</sup> The urge to love and annihilate the white female dancer mirrors the ambivalent relationship of black men to America. The “America” she embodies returns to him a look of indifference. Her “impersonal eyes” compromise the narrator’s fantasy of being the “only” one that she looks at and connects with. Her connection is, however, undeniable. The young black men also occupy a position of spectacle that confirms, to all parties present, white male patriarchal power and their gaze that is absolutely self interested and self affirming.

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<sup>37</sup> I can not help but be reminded of ambivalent relationship between a personified “America” and the Black man found in Claude McKay’s 1921 poem “America” which casts America as a “bad mother” who “feeds [him] bread of bitterness,/And sinks into [his] throat her tiger’s tooth” (lls 1-2) and the Black male as a putative suitor. The America of this poem is an unnatural feminine figure whose “vigor flows like tides” in the speaker’s veins. She has the ability to penetrate. Yet it is also her “vigor” that enables the speaker to have “strength erect against her hate” (l.6). Further, the Black male speaker courageously “stand[s] within her walls with not a shred/Of terror, malice, not a word of jeer” (l.9) all the while loving her (l.4).

Black soldiers sought victory against fascism abroad and racism domestically, and here the American flag just above the apex of the dancer's thighs alludes symbolically to the domestic battle.<sup>38</sup> The presence of this white woman, as the narrator theorizes later in the text, confuses the "class struggle with the ass struggle" (41). She is an instrument, alternately objectified, glorified and vilified, alternately protected and assaulted by the white men of industry and society. Stroking the "v" would mean more than usurping the white patriarch. By having sex with the white man's woman, a kind of liberation from a virulently racist iconography inherent in psychosexual melodrama of race relations in this country could be achieved, but by participating in this sexual drama, Black men confirm their position within hetero-patriarchy at a cost. They affirm white men and white supremacist discourse as superior, white women as idealized objects of desire and implicitly render black women invisible.

The dangers inherent in this (cl)ass struggle to the Black male subject is literalized with the description of one young man, pleading to go home, "wearing dark red fighting trunks much too small to conceal the erection which projected from him as though in answer to the insinuating low-registered moaning of the clarinet. He tried to hide himself with his boxing gloves" (20).<sup>39</sup> Even as these young men are goaded into "looking," they know that the expression of desire for the white woman, synonymous with expression of desire for equality, would be answered with violence, exile and

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<sup>38</sup> This image of the white female with a flag over her vagina is reminiscent of advertising posters for the film, *Birth of a Nation* (1915), which were decorated with nude white female forms in each corner, with American flags, diaphanous folds billowing around the female bodies, covering the pubis and protecting the "v" from viewers. The proximity of the dancer's flag to her pubis places her within a complex network of representations of the female body and nation.

<sup>39</sup> This scene can be read alongside the public demand that Jack Johnson "wear baggy shorts instead of the skintight trunks then in vogue" (Bak 72). The visibility of the threat, literally his penis, was too much for the viewing public who would watch him fight a white man, but imagine him tugging a white ewe.

possibly death. Desire expressed for the America dream, victory between white thighs, is tantamount to a death wish. In this field of desire, the taboo of sex with white women, the obvious signifier of that desire, a black male's erection, are both present and absent; the erection is made more visible by the boxing gloves used to conceal it. The dark red satin shorts signify the symbolic castration of black males, a deep ontological wound, recalling images of literal castration: nude or nearly nude lynched black bodies, draped in stained fabrics or pants haphazardly put on the body to "cover" what has been taken. In this transference of sexual energy from the "hidden" erect penis to the boxing gloves, and by extension the boxing match, the focus of eroticized violence becomes the Black male "performers" in the ring.

Once these circuits of desire have been cordoned off for the Black subject by these dynamic operations of power, his "desire" is then deflected into horizontal violence. The narrator arrives to this gathering of community leaders expecting to "speak," to be received as a potential future Black leader, but is forced into the ring as a "boxer," and subsequently into a system of representation that he has no control over and cannot escape. This "scholarship boy"<sup>40</sup> is reduced to his body. He cannot interrupt the fantasy of white male supremacy, resist representational apparatuses, without becoming subject to violence. During the fight the narrator tries to escape and Mr. Colcord, a man in the

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<sup>40</sup> Richard Hoggart coined the term "scholarship boy" in his 1957 *The Uses of Literacy: Aspects of Working Class Life* to describe the student who comes from an underprivileged background and the kind of processes of identification and disidentification that the student engages in as they pursue their "education." Part of this education is to experience alienation in both places: school and home. The student is "marked" as a social/class outsider and that outsider status molds how the student then perceives him/herself and "home," with school and the culture it sustains and upholds invariably taking the place of home as a primary site of community and affinity. This term is notably taken up in Richard Rodriguez's autobiographical essay "The Achievement of Desire" from *Hunger for Memory* in which he charts his "progress," from a lower middle class brown/Mexican family to the halls of Academia and reveals the complex and negotiations between "home," loss and reconciliation of the "assimilating" subject and an ineluctable "whiteness" that masks as intellectual progress.

business of disseminating “images” and the selling of bodies, literally and figuratively – a movie and “entertainment”/whore house owner, blocks him with a kick to the chest, keeping him where he belongs.<sup>41</sup> As a “body” fit only to entertain, the narrator is made immediately aware of his limitations. His body, his mouth and the blood that fills it, prevents him from “speaking” properly. When the narrator “mistakenly replaces” the oft heard “social equality” in place of “social responsibility,” the men in the room remind him of his position in relation to their power and with that reminder a not so subtle threat of violence.

The manipulators of the image, the white founding fathers create a “scene” that enables them to “have it both ways.” The terrifying specular scene they manufacture disciplines potentially transgressive black male bodies. Here, desire vacillates between the white woman, the appropriate heteronormative “love” object, and the half naked black male “performers” within the ring. Thus, the dancer and the young black men are aligned in that they are both subjected to the “gaze” and terrorized. The young black men are allowed, told, to look, but their looking may result in literal annihilation. To look at and desire the white man’s woman is suicidal. Yet the very fetishization, construction and

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<sup>41</sup> Ellison’s interest in film as a purveyor of discourse pervades his work. In “The Shadow and The Act” he analyzes the film, *Intruder in the Dust* (1949), based on William Faulkner’s novel of same title, in terms of its ability to reflect the role of African American representation in film as “keeper of [white people’s] consciences” (303). Film, according to Ellison, “as with every other technical advance since the oceanic sailing ship... became a further instrument in the dehumanization of the Negro” (304). Ellison clarifies that in order to understand the importance of *Intruder*, you have to read it in context of Griffith’s *BON*. He acknowledges it as the film that established the stock stereotypes of Blacks present in contemporary film. In another essay in *Shadow and Act*, “Twentieth-Century Fiction and the Black Mask of Humanity,” Ellison reads these stereotypes as a reflection of the fear, guilt and fantasies of white America (84). Ellison does not leave all the responsibility at the door of Hollywood, stating that it was “not the creator, but the manipulator” of negative representation of Black Americans. This entire scene recalls and complicates Laura Mulvey’s analysis of spectator/spectacle relations in “Visual Pleasure in Narrative Cinema” where she claims that as object being looked at, the female body is “not so much a representation of (hetero) sexual desire, but a form of objectification which articulates masculine hegemony and dominance over the very apparatus of representation itself.” It is not just that the “woman” is proof, it is that we have a way of looking at her that is “proof.”



manipulation of these bodies by the dominant opens up the possibility for critique and challenge. The black male and white female “performers” are made objects and abject, yet both figures threaten to disrupt power relations.

Most obviously, these young black men are also objects of desire which signals a potential death knell for the dominant that would not and could never acknowledge the full homoerotic implications of this triangulation. Further, in their frenzy to articulate and retain power through creating and acting on “bodies,” the white men produce a body that evokes their own fear of castration. After subjecting the dancer to their and the young black boys’ gaze, the white men throw her up in the air and her breasts temporarily flatten. She loses, albeit temporarily, markers of femininity, and with this removal a space is opened and the narrator identifies with her. He sees “the terror and disgust in her eyes, almost like [his] own terror and that which [he] saw in some of the other boys” (20). No longer apathetic, she experiences terror and loathing for the men that have previously gazed longingly after her. With breasts flattened and devoid of a penis, the dancer momentarily occupies a site of anxiety for both white and black men. Sans breasts or penis in the presence of black men, the “sexless” body simultaneously invokes the specter of cuckolded – symbolically castrated – white men whose power is usurped by “black rapists.” For the black male spectator, the “castrated body” – hyper-feminized and reflecting helplessness to her black spectators, evokes images of dismembered black bodies produced by American lynching practices.

This complex displacement of desire and castration anxiety for males is repeated in the novel when the narrator narrowly escapes a sexual tryst with Sybil, a wife of a Brotherhood member, who wants the narrator to participate in her rape fantasy. Inebriated, Sybil withdraws into baby talk and refers to him as “boo-ful.” Again

ambivalent desire for the white female is expressed. He wants to “smash’ and “stay with her...[but knows that he should] do neither” (415). The narrator astutely assesses that Sybil’s desire to be raped by a black man comes from a sustained systemic racialized fantasy that allows the “victim” to momentarily escape the complicity and consequences of desire asks, “What’s happening here...a new birth of a nation?” (522). Within the lexicon of cultural constructions of race, desire, stereotypes available to her, Sybil’s understanding of black male sexuality is encoded with and by the D.W. Griffith’s film *Birth of a Nation*,<sup>42</sup> but in this not-so-new version, Sybil becomes both aggressor and victim.<sup>43</sup> After the narrator rebuffs Sybil’s attempts to cast him “in little dramas which she had dreamed up around the figures of Joe Louis and Paul Robeson” in which he is “Brother Taboo-with-whom-all-things-are-possible,” he puts her in a cab to send her home – twice (516-7).<sup>44</sup> The social construction of white womanhood, which like that of the dancer is barely containable for all she signifies, seduces the narrator into a circuit where the question of Sybil’s welfare incites the fear of literal and/or metaphorical lynching, particularly after hearing that a riot may have been ensued because a white

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<sup>42</sup> Opening at Clune’s Auditorium in Los Angeles February 8, 1915 and running for an unprecedented seven months, D.W. Griffith’s *Birth of a Nation* was the first blockbuster. It visually coalesced American identity predicated on race and gender. Deemed a product of cinematic genius, the vitriolic attack on African Americans, based on Thomas Dixon’s novel *The Clansman* was an unprecedented twelve reels in length and had running time of over three hours. This film altered the entire course and concept of American movie making, not just with its technological advances but in the film’s simultaneous aesthetic and social aims; its “magnitude and epic grandeur swept audiences off their feet” (Bogle 18).

<sup>43</sup> A revisionist reading of the Reconstruction in which a disenfranchised Southern plantocracy and enfeebled northern industrialism reconcile through a marriage of a northern and southern family and the rise of the KKK to avenge the rape/death of a female, “Lil’ Sister,” by an errant black union soldier, *Birth of a Nation* spurns any attempt at political or economic parity with the threat of violence. The final image the viewer sees at the end of the film is that of Klan members, clad in spectral white, blocking potential black voters from leaving their homes to go to the polls. This “image” of assertion of white supremacy sums it all up neatly.

<sup>44</sup> The appeal of Joe Louis as the “good nigger” are taken up in the later in this chapter and as for Paul Robeson, who I read as the “good nigger gone bad,” my plans for a revised project involve fleshing out a discussion of Paul Robeson where I look at photographs of Louis and Robeson taken by Carl Van Vechten and several others and discuss these images in the context of shaping a nationalist lens.

woman tried to take a black woman's man. Fantasy and fetish collapse; the narrator comes across a sight that makes him fear for Sybil's life and ultimately his own. He comes across dummies, "[h]airless, bald and sterilely feminine...But are they unreal, I thought, are they? What if one, even one is real – is ... Sybil? I hugged my brief case, backing away, and ran" (556). The description of the mannequins as "unreal," "horribly feminine," hanging from a lamppost and before a gutted storefront allows the "what if" and entrenches these images in discourses of the visible and the fantastic. The fear that one of the mannequins might be Sybil has a dual pronged source.<sup>45</sup> First, the horror of "sterilely feminine" hanging bodies resonates with the symbolically castrated white male and images of real lynched black male bodies. The images and bodies of lynching victims were entertainment in often festive and ecstatic atmospheres, the events sponsored under the auspices of prominent citizens of the community and rationalized as reprisals for inappropriate sexual advances toward white women.<sup>46</sup> Second, if even one of these "fake bodies" is "real," it signifies an unleashing of or failure to contain the violence affecting every black man in Harlem and potentially across the United States. This scene's proximity to and invocation of *Birth of a Nation* reminds the reader of the relationship

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<sup>45</sup> Photographic images published in the wake of the Harlem riots of 1938 show storefronts, specifically Lerner shops and the Orkins department store, where stripped mannequins and glass are strewn across the sidewalk. Some of the mannequins seem to be floating in the shops, while others, armless, legless torsos, resembling dismembered bodies, seem to look directly into the camera [Orbis].

<sup>46</sup> Not limited to hanging by the neck until dead, the bodies of victims were often dismembered, allowing attendees to obtain a keepsake to commemorate their attendance to the event with a finger, toe, ear, hair and/or genitals that could be kept along with other souvenirs. As Ida B. Wells, Pauline Hopkins and more contemporary scholars, Trudier Harris and Robyn Weigman note, lynching was a routine response to black male and female attempts at education, self and communal government, suffrage and other indicators of cultural inclusion and equality. They were staged, family events, advertised and marketed in available media. And white mob violence literally and psychically encoded violent systems of surveillance and control over the social space using the visible, the spectacle of the lynched, "feminized" black male body. Lynching was not a practice that was isolated to use on the "black male body," but to any "bodies" that transgressed what accepted boundaries established by the dominant.

between reel/real violence that erupted post both World Wars and the release and re-release of Griffith's film which corresponded with post war anxieties around black economic sovereignty and potential disenfranchisement of the white and "rightful inheritors" of the land.

The symbolic force of lynching is its relation to the visible. It is a public performance of power, of disciplining the black body. The symbolic that attends the torture aggressively denies black men the patriarchal sign and symbol of the masculine through literal castration. Castration interrupts the privilege of the phallus and "[reclaims] through the perversity of dismemberment, the black male's (masculine) potential for citizenship" (Weigman 83). The hanging limp bodies of dead, castrated black males, the image of which is first conjured up by the young black boy with red satin shorts that are too tight and second by the hanging mannequins, serve to discipline black spectators and reassure white spectators that these black men are not a threat and are incapable of returning violence onto the perpetrators. The "What if?" of Sybil's potential dismemberment or "rape" invokes the threat of white male reprisal and cordons off the black male's ability to own property, claim family, or masculine privilege over black or white women. Hierarchical constructions of race and gender make obscenely visible by the lynched body set limits on the sexuality of both black men and white women. The narrator's response to these hanging lifeless, (un)gendered mannequins, bodies, is to run.

As with the fictional white tragic heroine Lil' Sister of *Birth of a Nation*, the white dancer and Sybil function emblematically as symbols of racial purity used by white males to adjudicate social power relations with other men and cast themselves as

protectors, heroes of civilization and reaffirm their role and social and familial heads.<sup>47</sup>

The dancer and Sybil's bodies are written on, one with explicit links to the nation, the American flag over her pubis and the other implicitly mapped on and within cultural representations of raced and gendered identity.<sup>48</sup> The hysteria produced prior to the fight in the Battle Royal is only a prelude. It is only after the white males have incited their own libidinous desires and specularized the black male that the match is started. The young men are blindfolded and once robbed of their ability to see, these spectacles cannot return a look of indifference; they occupy the position of subjugated spectacle and desire that has been transferred from the white dancer to the combatants in the ring. Ultimately, power is retained by the white male spectator who authors and authorizes the spectacles and symbolism of both white femininity and black male warriorhood.

The boxing ring, in Ellison's *Battle Royal*, is not a site where the fighters are ennobled by their attempts to claim agency. This is not a duel between two "equal" contestants. In this battle, the young black participants are feminized by the white male viewing audience who do not identify with the warrior figures but construct themselves as consummate spectators. The Black men in the ring are relegated to the corporeal, simultaneously desired, loved, caressed and ultimately destroyed. All that comes within the purview of those in power is subject of and to their gaze, desire and power.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> For a close reading of the "rape" scene in *Birth of a Nation* (1915) see Russell Merritt's "Going After Little Sister" in *Close Viewings: An Anthology of New Film Criticism*.

<sup>48</sup> One direction to consider is how the narrator's "joke" of Sybil having been raped by the "gentle," venerable, figure of Santa Claus speaks to yet another configuration of violent illicit and repressed sexuality but for this project will be set aside. One recent essay that does work through this particular "scene" with emphasis on the "Santa" clause, is Douglas Steward's "The Illusions of Phallic Agency: *Invisible Man*, *Totem and Taboo*, and the Santa Claus Surprise."

<sup>49</sup> In *Welcome to the Jungle*, Kobena Mercer claims that it is the field of sport that "is a key site of white male ambivalence, fear and fantasy," a site where the black body can be reduced to the bodily and "idolized to the point of envy" (182). To think through the interlocking ambivalence, fear and fantasy underlying black and white "relations" is integral to my discussion of evolving models of the black hero.

Through the Battle Royal, the novel demonstrates the danger of taking up the “heroic” in a field of capitalist interest. One of the effects produced by this field is interracial and interclass conflict. During the Battle Royal, the narrator discovers that his preoccupation with his own “technique” has prevented him from realizing that he has been set up, targeted by the other boys in the ring, who resent his ginger colored skin and his usurpation of another teen’s place in the ring for the evening. In this ring, striving for individual success, the “self made” hero comes under scrutiny. There is a direct confrontation between figures who embody individual striving and self interest, the athletes, the “professional” fighters who entertain these men on a regular basis and the scholarship/“self made man/boy.” These opponents square off but are unable to “see” each other’s position, their similarities or understand them. The narrator initially believes his success is due to his having replicated a technique similar to the yokel’s of the “Prologue,” that he has stepped out of his opponents’ time, avoided and slipped in blows. To the narrator’s horror, he eventually figures out that the other boys have colluded to leave him at the mercy of the biggest and best fighter who he cannot and does not beat despite his best efforts to physically best him and bribe him. Those in power, the engineers of interracial conflict, succeed in keeping the boys distracted with an ethic of “individualism,” American rugged individualism to be specific, and prevent them from realizing that all the combatants in the ring have been set up.

Their strength has been used against each other. They are bound by the same ropes and are similarly wounded. They have been put in a position where they engage in horizontal violence to prove to the white father their worth, and are “blinded” by the desire for his approval and inclusion. Reinforcing this critique is a scene where an electrically charged rug and fake gold coins used to lure and electrocute the young men.

As they reach for the “fool’s gold” they are punished, superficially for pursuing the white female, but more precisely for coveting and reaching for the fruits of capitalist democracy. All of the boys who have entered the ring, willfully or not, have failed to work through or understand how they have been brought into this field of proliferating power relations and desire, and this lack of consciousness is dangerous. The wounds sustained can be permanent. The boxer is subject to literal wounding and violence. In the “ring,” their vision becomes tunneled and the only thing they see is the acquisition of capital; they do not care about the destruction of other black men. The red shorts function as a signifier of this deep ontological wounding experienced by all black men whose desire for inclusion become obscenely visible. Once the “match” is over and the narrator has lost, he is required to take up the position as “representative,” as scholarship boy/intellectual black leader, and speak – though his mouth is full of blood. This would-be Booker T. Washington is unable to “speak” and be heard without being (a) “scene.”<sup>50</sup> The narrator’s broken corporeal integrity soon mirrors the problems of maintaining rhetorical integrity. He cannot be the body and evidence of intellectual prowess at the same time he is the idealized “body.” His voice cannot be heard without the complications of the body. This moment in the text anticipates the difficult position the black political hero, where leaders like Malcolm X and Martin Luther King experience specularization and negative representation within American media.

The efficacy of this figure, the boxer/pugilist, to provide the Black American with the fantasy of power is complicated most vividly during the riot scene at the end of the

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<sup>50</sup> As Early astutely points out, our narrator becomes a conflation of Booker T. Washington, as he gives Washington’s “Atlanta Cotton Exposition Speech of 1894” as his own, as the tenth boy in the battle royal and deemed “talented” by his community and as channeling the stories of Jack Johnson’s childhood in which he participated in many battle royals which were used to train young black fighters (Early 112).

novel where a “huge woman in a gingham pinafore sat drinking beer from a barrel which sat before her” on top of a milk wagon. This hyperbolic black mammy figure, inebriated, spilling milk, sings in a “full-throated voice of blues singer’s timber: *If it hadn’t been for the referee,/Joe Louis woulda killed/Jim Jefferie/Free beer!!*” (IM 544). The riot scene is an accretion of images some critics have read as absurdist.<sup>51</sup> These images, albeit not equally, challenge the iconicity of stereotypical figures such as the mammy, blues singer and the boxer/warrior. First, we have the gingham clad mammy figure who engages in unacceptable, but always suspected, unmammy-like behavior. The Hollywood image of the self-effacing comical mammy who supports the domestic economy of white homes, and provides her mother’s milk to the Missus’ white children is undercut by the blueswoman, the errant sexualized figure who is literally “spilling” milk on the ground.<sup>52</sup> The conflation of the blues singer with the mammy reveals the “reel” mammy as incongruous with the real mammy who was firmly interpolated into a sexual economy of the white home. The mammified blues singer is not where she is supposed to be. She is matter out of place.

This displacement is reinforced in the lyrics in which we have the removal of Jack Johnson and insertion of Joe Louis into the “wrong” historical moment.<sup>53</sup> The puzzling

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<sup>51</sup> I am thinking specifically here of Horace A. Porter’s *A Jazz Country: Ralph Ellison in America* in which he describes the riot scene as an accretion of absurdist imagery, and reads Ellison’s “orchestration” of images as reflections of the central protagonist’s introspection; it is “chaos of living to form” (Ellison qtd. Porter 90). Further Porter claims that “[a]s an artist, he seems dedicated more to the discovery and presentation of the absurdity of the riot than to its social causes or destructive consequences” (Porter 91). I will discuss this scene in the novel later in this chapter.

<sup>52</sup> This black mammy/blues woman becomes significant if we recall that on the Monday following the 1943 Harlem riots, New York’s market commissioner sent “three large truckloads of milk to Harlem” in an attempt to provide foodstuffs for those Harlemites who had not engaged in looting of food stores and restaurants. As black Harlem was cordoned off, many residents were forced to go hungry (Brandt 183-206).

<sup>53</sup> Thomas R. Hietala’s *The Fight of the Century: Jack Johnson, Joe Louis and the Struggle for Racial Equality* does a commendable survey of the controversies and debates around nation,



slippage contributing to the absurdity of images found throughout the riot scene is that Joe Louis never fought Jim Jeffries, a fact that Ellison was quite cognizant of as evidenced in the “scientific” discussion of the Johnson/Jeffries fight by two Golden Day veterans. It was Jack Johnson that defeated Jeffries July 4, 1910 in the thirteenth round and Joe Louis, the “Brown Bomber” was better known for his battles with Primo Carnera and Max Schmeling. Both Johnson and Louis became incredibly important figures of resistance and redemption in a Black pantheon of the heroic, and as such the text pushes at our limits of thinking through the relationship of “truth” to the heroic. The usefulness of these figures -- how they can be used in the quotidian -- may depend on their having been unmoored from “history” rather than being bound by history’s limits. History has often been the enemy of the black subject. The ideal hero may have to be one that is outside of or at least has the ability to step in and out of history.

When Jack Johnson became the first black heavyweight world champion he lived out the collective fantasy of overcoming oppression, excelling at the white man’s game and making him “pay” for those injustices - bodily. From that fateful day in 1910 “the sports world has awaited for a ‘great white hope’ to appear on the horizon” (Hietala 8). The impact of Johnson’s victory was immediate, violent and legislative. The “thrill of national disgust,” noted in *The Crisis*, spurred riots in almost every major city. In Johnson winning the title, and so decisively, there was an unfathomable return of the repressed, a rude awakening that inspired swift reprisals. Eighteen Black men were hung in direct response to the victory. Acknowledging their harmful potential to discourses of white supremacy and their incitation of violence, the U. S. Congress passed the Sims Act

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politic and scientific racism that swirled around these two figures who carried the weight of an “entire race on their shoulders” (49).

of 1912 forbidding interstate transportation of the Johnson/Jeffries boxing films.<sup>54</sup> To understand the political value of the boxer as a symbol of resistance, one needs only consider how the Johnson/Jeffries fight films were used as a response to D. W. Griffith's polemical film, *Birth of a Nation* (1915). To protest Griffith's film and its virulent representation of black Americans, Black communities in Chicago responded by holding tent viewings of the boxing films.<sup>55</sup>

With Jack Johnson we also have some of the kernels of what characterizes the majority of latter 20<sup>th</sup> century black heroes, that of the "anti-hero" and how s/he functions for Black Americans. Johnson was both reviled and revered for his exploits in and out of the ring. He was the embodiment of brute force; he "symbolized unbridled aggression for the black man in American society . . . [fighting] with a kind of fury that let blacks vicariously share uninhibited masculine drives" (Wiggins 290). Johnson, like his predecessor Peter Jackson, was not a tentative or defensive fighter but stark in his aggression toward his white opponents. He trounced social conventions and literally stroked and caressed below that flag, reveled in drink, flamboyantly dressed and married not one, not two, but three white women. He was Staggo Lee incarnate, the bad ass

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<sup>54</sup> For more see "Fighting Films: Race, Morality, and the Governing of Cinema 1912-1915" where author, Lee Grieveson, discusses this act, along with the White Slave Trafficking Act and Jack Johnson's "mobility," as a filmed image and as a black man married to a white woman accused of trafficking in 1913.

<sup>55</sup> For more on the Chicago response to the release of *Birth of a Nation* (1915) and the Johnson/Jeffries fight films see Gerald R. Butler's *Black Manhood on The Silent Screen* and Dan Streible's "Race and the reception of Jack Johnson Fight Films." We may also want to consider how the desire on the part of the dominant to control the content of these images was commensurate with the anxiety undergirding white supremacy. In the films of the Johnson/Burns fight, the end of the fight remained on the cutting room floor. It was unthinkable to allow a film to be seen by either Black or White audiences that showed Johnson knocking out a white fighter. What the editors did not consider was the imaginative work that could take place without the ending. The blank screen, the act of inserting blank frames or cutting off the ending/text, did not affect a control. I argue that it is the very absence of the visual, the chaotic space created between the unrepresented image and the representative text, that allows "spectators" to see what cannot be seen, imagine and access the transformative.

nigger, whose “values [were] unique to himself, defiant, sassy, and hostile to authority,” who was supported and criticized by his Black Americans (Welsh and Asante, 392). Jack Johnson was a figure the black populace could identify with and/or against, but he was larger than life on all counts.

By contrast, Joe Louis combined the power of the symbol of the pugilist with that of the soldier. He and his handlers were very conscious of how image worked in the cultural milieu. Louis refused to be photographed with white women or in any other indecorous light, and did his best to cultivate a non-threatening image. During wartime, he served with the “entertainment division” of the military and appeared in several Hollywood musicals, always among a crowd of other Black soldiers looking on to whatever performance was being given, particularly when there was a Black performer. He toured all-black training camps to raise the morale of Black troops, and his experiences in the military and ring made him aware of his role as icon and how being an “icon” operated at a national level. He fought and defeated “Mussolini’s protégé” Primo Carnera in 1935 and after a painful loss in 1936, defeated “Hitler’s favorite son,” Max Schmeling, in 1938. Despite some recent attempts to diminish the racism of white Americans at that time, they did not fully embrace Louis, as shouts of “Kill him, Max” from American spectators littered ringside and beyond at both of their matches attests (Farrell qtd. Wynter 66).<sup>56</sup> To a large degree, the Louis/Schmeling fights tested the limits of white American national identity, which could not withstand the integration of the races or prolonged scrutiny of the racist ideologies undergirding both Nazism and

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<sup>56</sup> Early also tracks connective tissues between Richard Wright and Joe Louis: the former wrote pieces on the latter and articulate what Early qualifies as an “essential ambivalence,” the Joe Louis as “product of American popular culture” and the Joe Louis who was a hero “of the lack masses” and “potential source of political mobilization because he can so deeply excite so many blacks” (112). Wright’s analysis, according to Early, revolves around Louis’ effects on the Harlem community, not on Louis “the man.”

American racism. The ring revealed the weakness of one and the hypocrisy of the other.

One way to read the slippage made in the “Mammy’s” song is to read it as a substitution of the bad man, Jack Johnson, with the idealized, more palatable “hero” in Joe Louis, along with his handlers were meticulous in their cultivation of an acceptable, “untouchable” public persona. Yet a more complex reading would have to think through what makes an anti-hero like Stagger/Staggo-lee so attractive.<sup>57</sup> As a trickster figure, the bad man’s polymorphous quality is compelling. He can be anything, anywhere, but more importantly, “[t]he reason a man like the legendary Stagger Lee is bad is because Stagger Lee is never in the place where anyone would like to assign him” (Long, 35). The bad nigger is an inconvenience and affirmation. He defies rigid strictures of blackness and masculinity, and at the same time confirms the suspicion that all black men are inherently and irrevocably “bad men.” In occupying the same narrative and symbolic space, they are good and bad nigger wrapped into one. This figure that is both good and bad, saint and sinner, and prefigures the fluidity of identity that is embraced at the end of the novel and anticipates the appeal of the black anti-hero that would be embraced on a large scale in the seventies in the form of the Blaxploitation hero and later popular culture images of the black (anti) hero 80s, 90s and beyond.

For Ellison, the boxer was a figure through which he could think through political subjectivity and resistance based on essentialist discourses of the “body,” and by extension “race.” The boxer stood as representative of physical strength and prowess in opposition to larger social and cultural forces of oppression, but he was, arguably, too

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<sup>57</sup> The Stagolee “mythoform,” according to Asante and Welsh, “allows the African American to rail against evil with violence--to shoot, cut, maim and kill, if that is necessary to restore a sense of human dignity,” all responses that were otherwise impossible for the Black male (Welsh and Asante 393).

singular, too exceptional, too alone.<sup>58</sup> With the soldier, Ellison critiques discourses that would give one “specialness” based on family and group affinity, specifically the notion of “brotherhood,” thus reinforcing his critique of “family” and the “filial.” With the soldier Ellison complicates and extends his critique of the problematic mortality of the heroic body, constructions of interiority and corporeality.

### **Golden Day/soldiers**

Psychiatry is not, I’m afraid, the answer. The soldier suffers from concrete acts, not hallucinations.

Ralph Ellison “The Shadow and The Act”

The privileges of being an American belong to those brave enough to fight for them.

General Benjamin O. Davis Jr.<sup>59</sup>

In Hortense Spiller’s essay “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book” she argues persuasively that the historical processes of colonialism and imperialism produced an “unrelieved” crisis in socio-sexual formations in America. During the passage from Africa to their respective destinations, Spillers argues that African men and women were ungendered, their bodies “became a territory of cultural and political maneuver” that was neither gender related nor gender specific (Spillers 67). The Middle Passage, for Spillers, is a process of social, cultural and psychic undoing. From the literal spaces the slaves occupied on the ship and the figurative natal “nowhere,” slaves were “born into” the conditions of paradoxical kinlessness and propertyless-ness. In an environment where the ability to claim ownership of one’s family was to claim a “self” -- humanity, slaves could not perceive themselves as having

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<sup>58</sup> Note that reportage on Louis bouts was equally marked by references to atavistic qualities of the fighter as had marked those describing Jack Johnson.

<sup>59</sup> General Benjamin Oliver Davis Jr. was the first U.S. military general who had commanded Tuskegee Airmen. He documents his experiences in the Air Force in his autobiography entitled *American: An Autobiography by Benjamin O. Davis*.

material or parental rights. This ‘propertied gender’ construction, along with the concepts of “fatherhood,” “motherhood,” masculinity and femininity became constitutive elements of a process of enunciation and renunciation. Ties of kinship across racial lines often were not acknowledged as kinship, but as property/capital relations. This was a source of an “unrelieved crisis” (Spillers 76). While I take issue with Spiller’s construction of the Middle Passage as a “natal nowhere” because it creates a hermeneutic, one that does not account for potential residuals, her assessment of consequences to family and culture are sound. During the rise of colonialism, the “family,” as a social construct, began to conflate with concepts of personhood, self, ownership, property and humanity and concretize along lines of national identity, and as such was hinged upon the denial of these rights to colonized and enslaved peoples.

The tension between promises of filial structural unity and comradeship – what “family” is “supposed to be” and emphases on competition, individualism and exceptionalism – permeates America’s mythic national character. Ellison engages with these tensions and the consequences, the “concrete acts” the Black subject experiences, throughout his work. Unlike the boxer, who is marked by his singularity, the “soldier” takes us to a form of masculinity that speaks to both singular and collective constructions of warrior identity. With the soldier, many Black men saw an opportunity to enter into the American family. By the end of WWII, Black Americans had seen the “soldier” fail as a usable model of the heroic, not once, not twice, but in every “national” conflict the “Black” subject participated in.<sup>60</sup> In his 1969 address to students at West Point, Ellison

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<sup>60</sup> From Crispus Attucks, the 54<sup>th</sup> regiment from Massachusetts that served under Colonel Robert Gould Shaw during the Civil War and the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> Calvaries that were dubbed “Buffalo Soldiers” by Plains Indians who fought to keep domestic order and served with distinction in the Spanish American War to the 38<sup>th</sup> through 41<sup>st</sup> all-Black units, the Black soldier has a long history of taking up arms in service of the “nation.” In order to get a sense of more recent scholarship on

discussed the untenable position Black Americans were placed during wartime.<sup>61</sup> They could not participate as full combat personnel, nor could they work domestically in war industries as equals. Further exacerbating these difficulties was, according to Ellison, a failure of “Negro leadership to ‘enforce its will’” (“On Initiation Rites and Power: A Lecture at West Point” 525). Ellison’s exploration of the soldier as hero in his short stories, essays and novel, *Invisible Man*, illustrates the failure of military service to relieve this “crisis.” The Black subject found that being a soldier, fighting and dying for a place within the American family would not necessarily make him part of the American “family.”

In Ellison’s novel, one of the signifiers of this “unrelieved crisis” is the leit motif of the failure of paternal and fraternal structures to sustain and support the narrator and the emotional wounding this “failure” causes the hero. Errant fathers appear throughout: the grandfather, whose obscure advice to “[l]ive with [his] head in the lion’s mouth . . . to overcome ‘em with yeses, undermine ‘em with grins, agree ‘em to death and destruction” and then to “[l]earn it to the younguns” leaves following generations confused at best (16). The grandfather reveals that he has been a trickster, engaged in a necessary

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the Black soldier in America see Christopher Paul Moore’s *Fighting for America: Black Soldiers, the Unsung Heroes of World War II*. New York: One World, 2005. *On the Trail of the Buffalo Soldier II: new and revised biographies of African Americans in the U.S. Army, 1866-1917*, Ed. Irene and Frank N. Schubert. Lanham, Md.: Scarecrow Press, 2004, *We Were There: Voices of African American Veterans, from World War II to the War in Iraq*, Ed. Yvonne Latty. New York: Amistad, 2004, Catherine Reef’s *African Americans in the Military*. New York: Facts On File, 2004, Jonathan D. Sutherland’s *African Americans at War: an Encyclopedia*. Santa Barbara, Calif.: ABC-CLIO, 2004, Bill Harris’s *The Hellfighters of Harlem: African-American Soldiers who Fought for the Right to Fight for Their Country*. New York: Carroll & Graf Pub., 2002, and Robert B. Edgerton’s *Hidden Heroism: Black Soldiers in America’s Wars*. Boulder, Colo.; Oxford: Westview Press, 2001.

<sup>61</sup> See also Ellison’s “The Negro and the Second World War” published in the *Negro Quarterly* (1943). Rpt. *Cultural Contexts for Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man*. Ed. Eric J. Sundquist. Boston: Bedford, 1995. 233–40, Mary Penick Motley, ed., *The Invisible Soldier: The Experience of the Black Soldier, World War II*, Neil A. Wynn’s *The Afro-American and the Second World War*, and C.L.R. James *Fighting Racism in World War II*.

duplicity, has been one person in the face of the “white man” and another at home, but he has ultimately failed to convey this “inside knowledge,” the ability to read the performance of the mask to the next generation and they have read the “mask” as “real.” There are fathers who rape (or want to) their daughters in the forms of Trueblood and Norton; fathers and brothers who set the narrator up for failure: Brockaway and Bledsoe, Wrestrum and Brother Jack. There are symbolic and historical patriarchs embodied in institutions like the statue of the founder who the narrator recognizes as “the cold Father symbol,” who may or may not be lifting the veil or blinding the crouching figure below him. At the beginning of the novel the narrator is unable to discern how these figures affect the material conditions of his life and the lives of other Black American men (36). The complex legacy handed down to Black men by their Black and White forbears, a muddled genealogy of slavery, oppression, and survivorship is symbolized in a link of chain given to the narrator by Brother Tarp. The narrator accepts the gift, knowing that it was:

[s]omething, perhaps, like a man passing on to his son his own father’s watch, which the son accepted not because he wanted the old-fashioned timepiece for itself, but because of the overtones of unstated seriousness and solemnity of the paternal gesture which at once joined him with his ancestors, marked a high point of his present, and promised a concreteness to his nebulous and chaotic future. (389-390)

This is a past and inheritance the narrator does not want; and more importantly, it may not be useful. The romanticism attached to the “old-fashioned timepiece” is proven as anachronistic as the desire to be anchored in the present or to a fantasy of and in the future. The narrator does not receive a “gift” that suggests a relationship of power; he does not inherit a link to a tradition of men who have the means to and responsibility of “keeping time” but his link is to a “slave history” and a “slave body.” And while the



actual “gift” is said to be less important than the symbolic work it does, the narrator’s problematic relationship to it, along with his desire for and willing acceptance of this “gift” is based on the complex relationship of the Black subject to history. He does not have a father that will give him the means to mark time. He has a paternal inheritance of being a victim of “time” or victim to the men and their interests, the ones who have made history and defined its terms. Similar to the “gift” of the grandfather’s last words and the “link” from Brother Tarp, these gifts would have to be appropriated, reimagined and put to different uses. The narrator discovers that he has to negotiate a different relationship to the paternal and is told by one of the “insane inmates” of the Golden Day to be his own father (156).

The search for the heroic is an effort to ameliorate the “unrelieved crisis” created by the “gift” of history. It is an effort to internalize a sense of security, for the Black subject to feel that he has a degree of corporeal and psychological integrity, that he has a “self” to protect and that this “self” can be accepted into the larger cultural fabric. The Black experience within the “national family” is one of alienation, an unraveling of the filial. The family had been the “excuse,” the precious signifier of a man’s wealth that had to be supported and protected, to commit all sorts of sins. Men and women, white and black, had a limited range of gendered positions available to them and as a result precluded the possibility of Black American’s full entrance into this national family. Any attempt on the part of the black subject to enter into the American family romance is cordoned off in the interest of preserving America’s imagined purity of race and political ideology.<sup>62</sup> Membership, full membership, was untenable and is perhaps most clearly

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<sup>62</sup> This is not to say that as public policy has enabled and acknowledged the mixing of ethnic and racial groups, local definitions of “family” have had to embrace their actual lived complexity, and

framed by the dilemma of black soldiers during and post wartime.<sup>63</sup>

Fraternity in the military was perceived as a way to establish social connection beyond the biological, a way to forge a “race-free” based identity, a way to claim affinity, comradeship through organized activities of military training and violence. It opened up multiple military masculinities.<sup>64</sup> With the soldier as hero, we have a questing figure that staves off cultural alienation through (potential) self-sacrifice and warrior acts, the promise of a prodigal return, a son made legitimate by his participation in the protection of democracy. The transformative potential of “deep horizontal comradeship” lies in romantic constructions of “brother vs. brother” and “brother saving brother” conflicts and resolution. For African Americans “[a]fter helping to defeat the ‘racist’ regime of Adolf Hitler, the Black veteran returned to find the racist regime of the United States unvanquished” (Mullen 60). Black American soldiers experienced derision and contempt from their white peers and superiors, “allies” and “enemies” encountered during wartime, and when they returned home they did not find their “place” reserved, dusted off and ready for occupation at the table. They returned to find a world that wanted to remind

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so too does the nation’s definitions necessarily have to change, but we are not living in a “post-racism” era.

<sup>63</sup> On September 16, 1940, the *Selective Service and Training Act* went into law. It contained two anti discrimination clauses which prohibited discrimination based on race and color, that all men 18 to 36 were eligible to volunteer for land and naval service, but a third clause gave the war department final authority, and subsequently impinged upon the full weight of the law. The American military was not integrated until Harry S. Truman signed executive order 9981 in 1948 legally integrating the American military, and while there may have been a juridical push, actual, full, integration was not enacted.

<sup>64</sup> In *Military Masculinities*, Paul R. Higate suggests there are multiple military masculinities and at the juncture of military and masculinity “are matters of politics and social organization, gender and sexuality, violence and violation, rather than biology” (Higate xii). Although I am not clear how notions of biological difference, specifically race and ethnicity, are divested from violence and violation, what is interesting are several writers’ discussion of servicemen’s response to Hollywood heroics as decidedly negative. In live combat scenarios/situations, heroics were equivalent to sabotage, suicide and stupidity. For a more detailed study, in the same volume see John Hockey’s “No More Heroes: Masculinity in the Infantry.”

them of their “place.”<sup>65</sup>

*Invisible Man* was initially conceived as a war novel focused on the experiences of a Black prisoner of war who, although superior in rank to the other soldiers in the camp, falls prey to American racial politics when his German captors exploit the tenets of American racism to divide the American men in the camp. In Ellison’s 1981 introduction to the novel, he argues that the dilemma of the black soldier was one that perfectly crystallized the particular but universal problem of Black American men who had not been allowed full citizenship. Each national conflict was a “war-within-a-war.” Having facilitated the building of national economies, Black men had to fight to prove that they were both human and disposable enough to be sacrificed in service of the nation state. Ellison saw the question of “[how you could] treat a Negro as equal in the war and then deny him equality during times of peace” as central to the “archetypal American dilemma” (xiii). These were returning but unwanted sons who demanded their inheritance, fulfillment of promises made by the founding fathers. They expected and demanded better treatment, but the violent response to these demands threw into crisis

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<sup>65</sup> One need only look at the statistical data of violence enacted on Black citizens after national conflicts, where soldiers “returned” and their efforts to achieve parity were met with discrimination and violence. Claude McKay’s poem, “If We Must Die” (1919) was written in direct response to the violence enacted on black communities and bodies by white Americans hostile to the efforts of Black World War I veterans’ demand for economic and political equality. Not isolated to the 23 American cities in which there was conflict, there were race riots in Britain and Jamaica the same summer. In London “one thousand negroes, all British subjects, [were] locked up in the Bridewell at Liverpool to protect them from the fury of white mobs which for several days have been attacking the quarter in which the black population is concentrated.” The writer attributes the “cause” of the riots to “familiarity with white women, and also the fact that the negroes are holding jobs which, demobilized service men contend, belong to them.” The solution, according to the *New York Times* article was an agreement between the Ministry of Labor, the Lord Mayor and Chief of Police “to intern negroes brought from Africa and other countries, to serve as labor battalions, pending their repatriation.” According to Jacqueline Jenkinson, the Glasgow harbor riot of January 1919 was the first of the year in which competition for jobs brought tensions between white British and darker “British Citizens” to a head (1). Henry M Hyde’s “Unwritten Law Rules England” which was recycled under several titles and published in Chicago, New York and Los Angeles, smugly notes the hypocrisy of English peoples “indictments” of American racism as they deal with their own “problems.”

American delusions of democratic grandeur. It was a test of faith and family, faith in American discourses of inclusion and upward mobility and family as microcosm of nation. We were a dysfunctional family at best.

The inability of the black subject to fully participate in the American family preoccupied Ellison who searched for “images of black and white fraternity.” He claimed that “(black protagonists) were caught up in the most intense forms of social struggle, subject to the most extreme forms of the human predicament but yet seldom able to articulate the issues which tortured them” (xix). Further, it was through images, but more specifically Ellison felt that it would be through art, that “war could . . . be transformed into something deeper and more meaningful than its surface violence” (xvii). This deeper, more meaningful something, is the possibility of fraternity, but we soon see it as untenable for the Black American subject. Thus, Ellison’s anti-hero is able, through his own “innocent” stumbling and ineffectuality, to stand in opposition or apposition to traditional models of the heroic and question the ideological ground that American nationalism is based.

At the Golden Day, the narrator meets veterans who had fought on two fronts: the theaters of war in Western Europe and the Pacific Rim as well as on the battlefield of American domestic class structures. These men had been “doctors, lawyers, teachers, Civil Service Workers; there were several cooks, a preacher, a politician, and an artist,” the “craziest” of which was a former psychiatrist (74); for the most part all were from middle class professions and all were deemed “mad.”<sup>66</sup> Having achieved a small measure of economic success and obtained the cultural capital of “white” jobs and seeming

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<sup>66</sup> The narrator describes his discomfort with seeing them because they “were supposed to be members of the professions toward which at various times [he] vaguely aspired [himself]” (*IM* 74). Not surprisingly these are also men who discuss the Johnson Jeffries fight in “scientific” detail (75).

economic inclusion, this foot soldier believed that entrance into the middle class would mean entrance to the American romance and that military service, just like with the white males, would secure their positions and rights, but “Doc’s” story shows this promise of class inclusion a fallacy, because when Doc forgets his place, steps out of “American time” by participating in the war only to return “home” to the United States and attempt to practice medicine, he is punished. Doc, like many of his brethren, tasted more freedom on foreign shores, returned to the United States to find exclusion, penury and violence. These “soldiers” and their subsequent alienation allow us to see how self destructive being a hero can be in a country where civic and economic inclusion cannot be achieved.<sup>67</sup> The fantasy of fraternity fell flat for these men who fought the good fight, engaged in a program of “self” development as defined by the dominant white supremacist society. These men, unlike the narrator’s grandfather, had “kept to their guns” and “pulled themselves up by their own bootstraps.” After embracing the rhetoric of individual striving, which was to enable the dominant to “see them” without their color, or even more disturbing as a darker version of a white citizen, they become quintessentially “individual.” They are deemed individuals in terms of pathology but then are made to stand in metonymically for all “wounded” and “broken” Black Americans. Once the victim has been isolated, individuated and labeled insane, the system that produced this psychological wounding is off the hook.<sup>68</sup> In Ellison’s 1948 Essay “Harlem is Nowhere” he tackles this problem of what superficially looks like insanity in terms of

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<sup>67</sup> The ambivalent inheritance associated with the soldier is metaphorized in a street vendor selling Carolina yams that the narrator encounters in New York. The narrator purchases two and one is good, sweet and delicious and the other is frostbitten and rotten (*IM* 263).

<sup>68</sup> I explore these questions of “sanity” in a later chapter that deals with the work of Michelle Cliff, specifically the novel *No Telephone to Heaven* which has a subplot involving a “classed” and “raced” figure who is simultaneously constructed within the Jamaican community ambivalently as both hero and mentally unhinged pariah.

the pathology of the Black subject and argues that

[w]hen Negroes are barred from participating in the main institutional life of society they lose far more than economic privileges or the satisfaction of saluting the flag with unmixed emotions. They lose one of the bulwarks which men place between themselves and the constant threat of chaos. For whatever the assigned function of social institutions, their psychological function is to protect the citizen against the irrational, incalculable forces that hover about the edges of human life like cosmic destruction lurking within an atomic stockpile... (*S & A* 299)

Here Ellison explicitly lays the “responsibility” for what looks Black and “crazy,” the visible sign of the psychological fractiousness within the Black American subject, at the foot of the door of white America. This is a wounding that is peculiarly American, a disease all our own. He further argues that the Black subject does not have the same avenues for a cure, modes of redress that white Americans do. Black Americans are left to their own devices and “denied” support

through segregation and discrimination that leaves the most balanced Negro open to anxiety...he cannot participate fully in the therapy which the white American achieves through patriotic ceremonies and by identifying himself with American wealth and power. Instead, he is thrown back upon his own ‘slum-shocked’ institutions. (*S & A* 299)

America is given far too much credit and power; it can and does have the ability obliterate black consciousness and completely evacuate the possibility of agency or cure.<sup>69</sup> Ellison’s play on the term “shell shocked” is poignant. This term was used explicitly during and immediately after World War I to describe the psychological wounding and behaviors exhibited by returning soldiers now referred to as “post traumatic stress disorder,” and Ellison uses this term to describe the Harlem community at large. Harlem is “shell-shocked.” It is a battle zone and all the social, political and

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<sup>69</sup> In troubling this notion of monolithic power and its impossibility, I return to Raymond Williams’ claim that domination is “never either total or exclusive. At any time, forms of alternative or directly oppositional politics and culture exist as significant [and operative] elements in the society” (Williams 113).

economic relationships therein are deleterious to the psychological integrity of the Black subject. Ellison takes as his example a former Black soldier who experiences a psychological break; the “most surreal fantasies are acted out upon the streets of Harlem; a man ducks in and out of traffic shouting and throwing imaginary grenades that actually exploded during World War I” (*S & A* 297). This wounded soldier mirrors the everyday (every Black) man who is subjected to American racist nationalism. He embodies the wounding of a community that cannot be confined, can not be contained, behind the white washed walls of a sanitarium. It proliferates, slipping below, over and around the radar and makes itself manifest in the streets of Harlem. For Ellison, the mad returned soldier is a visible signifier of the larger cultural wounding; he is proof the black subject has a psyche that can break.

The vexed position of the black soldier is tautly illustrated in Ellison’s 1947 short story “Flying Home.” In this short story Todd, a Black flyer reminiscent of the Tuskegee airmen, on a practice flight gets distracted by a kite in the air, flies too fast, too high, is hit by a buzzard and crashes his plane. He is found by an older Black man, Jefferson, and a young boy, Teddy, who literally usher him off of a racist’s land and into a new consciousness.<sup>70</sup> The narrative opens with Todd floating in and out of consciousness which is described as “[j]agged scenes swiftly unfolding as in a movie trailer, reeled

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<sup>70</sup> The names of the primary characters of this short story are overloaded with symbolic meaning. In terms of etymology, “todd” can be a noun or verb. A “tod(d)” is a fox, or person who is crafty like a fox which references folklore tropes; it can also be a weight or measure used in trade which could allude to the figure of the flyer/hero as a commodity. To be on one’s todd is to also be alone. “Todd” is also German for death, and the character’s symbolic death and rebirth in this short story resonates. Todd’s plane is felled by a buzzard, a bird that only goes after the dead (2158). I read this “Todd” as an analogue and predecessor to “Tod Clifton.” The name Jefferson speaks directly to the historical construction of race through and by the founding fathers. Finally, the name Teddy or Ted can allude to a historical figure who was “larger than life” in the form of Theodore Roosevelt, but it also can refer to a German soldier. Two verb forms of “ted” mean to spread out or scatter which would suggest a diasporic future generation or rather the movement of the future generation and finally the word “ted” can also mean to sharpen or give a serrated edge to.

through his mind” (2154). Prior to Todd’s accident, like many of his real world contemporaries, he had believed that service in the military could offer an antidote to or ameliorate his “condition,” that he would find happiness in flight, but he adds tentatively that “any real appreciation [of him as a man and his skill as a flyer] lay with his white officers and with them he could never be sure” (2156). What is telling in Ellison’s representation of Todd is that this figure knows that “he can never be sure,” but is still more concerned with the opinions and pleasure of his white superiors than he is with his extensive injuries (2154). He is torn between the structural demand of the white father for paternal love and fealty and the knowledge that this “father” has not necessarily been a good one.

Todd is an embodiment of the black artist caught between “black” and “white” worlds. Flying for him is the most important thing in the world; it is an act of creation; in the sky he is an artist. In the air, he has a temporary reprieve from the world on the ground; however, he knows that while in the air he is suspended “[b]etween ignorant black men and condescending whites, his course of flight seemed mapped by the nature of things away from all needed and natural landmarks” (2156). Through Todd’s desire to be recognized for his “art,” his “skill,” we see the link between cultural representations of blackness and the political disenfranchisement in the “real” world. Todd desires approval from his white superiors, but believes his individual expertise, artistry and skill can only be appreciated by the enemy. Flying is “the most meaningful act in the world,” but not because it articulates a relationship to or love of “nation,” his white American brothers or fathers. Being a pilot, fighting an enemy that does not masquerade as “family,” gives him another source of identification. It would be “the enemy [who] would appreciate his skill and he would assume his deepest meaning... would recognized his manhood and skill in



terms of hate” (2156). Todd will be embraced, recognized within a pantheon of the heroic, but not in terms of the fraternal love he desires from his white brothers or paternal love from white fathers. Todd knows that the “world” of the quotidian is not one of equanimity and that the “closer [he] spin[s] toward the earth the blacker [he] become[s]” (2164). No matter how much he wants to be the hero, the flyer, the “prize-fighter . . . Not a monkey doing tricks, but a man,” he can never escape the material effects, the “concrete acts,” of racism. Ideologically, rhetorically, he cannot escape the system of representation that will not allow him to be a “prize fighter” without being a commodity; he can not be “a man” without the historical imposition of racialized discourses that would render him a monkey.

As Todd dreams himself back to reality, he is afforded the opportunity to reevaluate and reinterpret two formative moments in his childhood that parallel larger collective desires for equality, individuation and freedom along with larger social limitations set on Black Americans.<sup>71</sup> In the first recollection, he sees a model air plane at a state fair and asks his mother for one and she refuses, telling him that planes are the toys of little white boys not black boys, then threatens to discipline him when he tries to press the issue.<sup>72</sup> He then remembers hearing a plane for the first time and likens it to the

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<sup>71</sup> Bessie Coleman was the first Black American to be licensed as a pilot in 1922. The absence of any recognition of Black women operating in these spheres in Ellison’s text is telling.

<sup>72</sup> This memory is reminiscent of Richard Wright’s “The Ethics of Living Jim Crow, an Autobiographical Sketch” from *Uncle Tom’s Children*, in which Wright relays his “first lesson in how to live as a Negro” in which his mother “grabbed a barrel stave, dragged me home, stripped me naked, and beat me till I had a fever of one hundred and two. She would smack my rump with the stave, and, while the skin was still smarting, impart to me the gems of Jim Crow wisdom...I was never, never, under any conditions, to fight white folks again” (1411-12). This beating can be read in several ways. On the one hand, this could be evidence of the internalized structure of white supremacy manifesting itself in the Mother’s “disciplining” of the black male which suggests a complicity of the “black woman” in the sustaining white supremacy. On the other hand, this could also be read as an act of violence that is the result of internalization of the fear of reprisal of black male-authored violence against white bodies. Given the historical and social context, the mother’s actions could easily be read as an effort to keep her son “safe.”

sound of a father's watch hidden in a father's room that he has to search for.<sup>73</sup> He is unable to distinguish the real from a toy plane and his mother consults a physician believing him to be mentally unstable. His psychological integrity would be questioned a second time by Dabney Graves, the racist owner of the land that he has crash landed on, who regurgitates eugenic racist discourse used to label Blacks physiologically unfit to fly in defense or support of America. They supposedly go crazy with high altitudes. As with the veterans and black males throughout *IM*, we have a Black male who reaches for things placed beyond his reach, material objects linked to promises of inclusion in the system of democratic capitalism and access to the founding fathers' legacy.

The second recollection takes our protagonist back to election day when young Todd is still searching for planes in the sky as he walk through the streets with his mother who is given a flyer that cautions "Niggers Stay From the Polls." Young Todd sees the "eyeless sockets of a white hood staring at him from the card and above he saw the plane spiraling gracefully, agleam in the sun like fiery sword. And seeing it soar he was caught, transfixed between a terrible horror and a horrible fascination" (2165). This combination of images has a dual pronged effect. First, it depicts white southern males reasserting their superiority under white hoods through the political emasculation of Black Americans by preventing them from exercising their right to vote. Second, the desire to participate in American democracy and the dreams of flight are synonymous; both can produce consequences that are horrible and terrible.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> If space would allow, I would draw the connection to this father's "watch" and the link of chain that is given to the narrator in the text, the symbol of his particular raced history. This link metaphorizes the biological "chain" of race that links all black subjects together under the categories of "black" and "men"; this chain also signifies, obviously, the black subject's experience under oppression and their relationship to "disciplinary" arms of the State.

<sup>74</sup> Two images recall D.W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* which concludes with a "comic" image of southern blacks attempting to leave their homes to vote on election day only to come face to face

To heal from these wounds of exclusion, Todd has to embrace the two figures that “save” him – Jefferson and Teddy – the former a representation of the “folk,” history and culture connected to a slave past and the latter a hope for a new kind of being that is in the process of becoming, one who will have a different relationship to both history and acts of creation. While waiting for Teddy to return with Mr. Graves, the older man tells him a “lie,” a version of the folktale “Flying Fool,” in which a black angel gets kicked out of heaven by St. Peter for flying recklessly.<sup>75</sup> Jefferson is expert at “swap[ping] lies” and begins by telling Todd that he is going to tell him about the time he died and what his experiences were like in heaven (2158). In Jefferson’s version of the folktale, upon arriving in heaven he sees other black angels, but they are all forced to wear harnesses (2159). Like the “angel” in the original tale, Jefferson tells him that he refused to accommodate the powers that be and was also kicked out of heaven for flying too high and too fast. Todd mistakes the story as ridiculing him and his position with the air force. Specifically, he reads it as a derisive attack on his state of helplessness, his failure during a practice flight and his being prevented from proving himself against the “enemy.” It is only after he verbally attacks Jefferson that he realizes that “[p]erhaps he had imagined it

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with an army of ethereal white hooded clansmen on horseback. After seeing the spectral white figures, the “black” actors’ eyes bug out and they run back into their homes. The description of plane “aglow in the sun like a fiery sword” resonates with the now famous response of Woodrow Wilson to viewing the film. At the conclusion of a special viewing of the film on February 15, 1915 in the East Room of the White House, at which the President, cabinet and the wives and daughters of the cabinet ministers were present, Wilson stood and made the now historic claim that the film was history writ in lightning, and that through the medium of film, the “sword became a flashing vision.”

<sup>75</sup> The folktale “A Flying Fool” was more recently published in Roger D. Abrahams’ edited collection *Afro-American Folktales* but appears in several Black writers’ works. Noted in the *Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, Richard Wright’s *Lawd Today* and Sterling Brown’s “Slim in Hell” are two works, along with Ellison’s short story that incorporate and/or rework the folktale. In several versions of this tale St. Peter reminds the new angel of the need to wear his harness and the angel responds by flying “the hell out of” one wing. Two versions of the tale have St. Peter’s acknowledgement that yes, the newly minted black angel was indeed the “flyngest sonofabitch,” even with one wing, but is still punished by being sent out of heaven and down into Georgia.

all” (2161). Initially, Todd expresses contempt for older black men who he feels are a combination of ignorance and duplicity. Both Todd and Jefferson reach an understanding; both men realize that meaning and intention are often obscured and misread. Todd has to rethink his relationship to the “past” and the cultural inheritance that Jefferson embodies and learn to see and hear Jefferson without the pejorative lens of the dominant.<sup>76</sup> Todd’s trajectory is one from deprecating “blackness” to an embrace of the cultural heritage that Jefferson embodies. When attendants from a mental institution try to take him, Todd resists and appears hysterical to the white men who are trying to straightjacket him. To bring himself “back” he “center[s] his eyes desperately upon [Jefferson’s] face, as though somehow he had become his sole salvation in an insane world of outrage and humiliation. It brought a certain relief. He was suddenly aware that although his body was still contorted, it was an echo that no longer rang in his ears. He heard Jefferson’s voice with gratitude” (2166). While Todd’s ambivalence is not entirely gone; he knows how his fate is linked to all of the men that surround him. He is also released from the “problems” created by his body. Although mangled by dominant discourses of what it means to be “raced,” gendered and a citizen – the confluence of which has wounded him beyond “recognition,” he comes to terms with the limits of his body, describing it as an “echo that no longer rang in his ears.” He is no longer preoccupied by the iteration of discourses

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<sup>76</sup> In Toni Morrison’s “Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation,” she explores the figure of the ancestor as one that is “timeless...whose relationships to the characters are benevolent, instructive, and protective, and they provide a certain kind of wisdom” and would add that this “instruction” does not always take the form of “benevolence” or generosity as her example of the grandfather in Ellison’s *Invisible Man* is brought in as an example of an “ancestor” who instructs. I would complicate this inclusion with the addendum that the “lessons” are often obscured and never received by the next generation and that these lessons often fall victim to the impossibility of translation and transmission. Morrison also discusses Richard Wright and James Baldwin as writers who had “great difficulty” with the figure of the ancestor in their work. Morrison’s ancestor figures often fail to communicate or when they do are misread and misunderstood. I would also add that the relationships between Baldwin and Wright and Ellison and Wright add an additional layer of complexity as both “sons,” Ellison and Baldwin, felt compelled to distinguish themselves from the father in their work.

that are grounded in biological constructions of race and it is Jefferson's "voice" that provides him with another way to "hear" and "see."

Teddy represents future possibilities. He shares Todd's love of flight, yet he also has the virtuosity of language demonstrated by Jefferson but with Teddy that mastery is expressed in song. It is Teddy who describes the buzzards as "jimcrows" and astutely notes that buzzards do not go after anything that is alive. Prior to Todd's accident, he is not completely "alive." Todd's accident facilitates a rebirth.<sup>77</sup> He transforms from a tabula rasa, unable to use his senses to discern who and what is around him,<sup>78</sup> to a place where he reworks the way he "knows" the world. He can not rely on "sight," and becomes more dependent on aural. At the beginning of the story, he hears a Negro sound which calls him back to life; he then listens to a "Negro" voice that conveys meaning through a folktale to metaphorically and metonymically speak to the conditions of Black Americans and their mobility or lack thereof. Further, it is Teddy's blues song that comforts him at the end of the narrative as he is carried off Dabney Graves' land and back to the airfield.

The concluding image is a trinity, with Jefferson, Todd and Teddy. Todd is reborn

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<sup>77</sup> This motif of the man who "comes to consciousness" is used in *Invisible Man* when the narrator has an "accident" at the Liberty Paint manufacturer. He is described as having a "blank" mind, "as though [he] had just begun to live" (233). He is asked several questions but the questions he is asked circulate around the notion of specifically American Black male identity. A large card with the question "What is your name" is thrust before him. This question is repeated along with two inquiries that asked what his mother's name was and then directly who he is. He is then asked who "Buckeye the Rabbit" and "Brer Rabbit" are. The answer to these questions, one that points to a patronymic inheritance of a name, immediately shifts to the maternal, thus alluding to a specifically American and arguably pathological construction of family according to the Moynihan Report. To question the narrator's relationship or rather knowledge of folktale figures is to locate a specifically Black cultural identity in "tales" that both "entertain and "teach." After this accident he is described as coming to terms with having "[talked] beyond [himself]" and that he "had used words and expressed attitudes not [his] own, that [he] was in the grip of some alien personality lodged deep within [him]" (IM 249). One thing the narrator does note is that as of this moment he "was no longer afraid" (IM 249).

<sup>78</sup> Due to the anomalousness of black pilots, Jefferson and Teddy initially do not know what Todd is, more specifically, they do not know that Todd is "black."

into the world of “men,” and the triumvirate represents the cultural inheritances of past, the present difficulties of negotiating contemporary discourses of race, nation and manhood while struggling with the past, and the future of Black men. They represent the south and the north, “uneducated,” educated and re-educated. The “blackness” he embraces in these men no longer signifies his “wounding,” but becomes a source of strength, not abjection. This world of men that he is born into also includes white men. Mr. Graves, similar to Mr. Norton,<sup>79</sup> represents the capriciousness of American interest in its Black citizens. Mr. Graves could and would either help or kill Black men depending on his mood. He regurgitates eugenicist racist rhetoric with regard to the capacities of the “Negro” mind and has Todd placed in a strait jacket. That this strait jacket is actually intended for his brother speaks to the complexity of what is “sane.” Mr. Rudolph, Mr. Graves’ brother, has a madness or insanity that is marked by his ability to kill indiscriminately, regardless of race (2165). This democratization of violence, without consideration of race, is considered illogical by the dominant culture and must be confined. That a black male would attempt to “fly” given the cultural logic of his inferiority is considered just as insane. The efforts of both subjects, Mr. Rudolph and Todd, challenge the sanity of the larger cultural ideologies of white supremacy and black inferiority. When Jefferson and Teddy carry him “out of his isolation, back into the world of men” there is what the narrator describes as “a new current of communication flow[ing] between the men and boy and himself” (2166). He returns from suspension in a kind of “natal nowhere” and is reborn with a new perspective on the folkways embodied by Jefferson, Mr. Graves, and lastly, but most importantly, it is a “Negro sound,” Teddy’s

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<sup>79</sup> The narrator ends up driving Mr. Norton, a founding father of the college the narrator attends in *IM*, metonymically dubbed “white folks” by a prostitute at the Golden Day and in this fateful drive, they come upon Trueblood’s home and Norton hears Trueblood’s tale of incest with interest. After this “ride,” the narrator is sent on a ride himself, and “kept running” by Bledsoe.

blues song that fills his head and becomes the soundtrack for his leaving a spiritual death, literally Graves' land and coming back to life. He is reborn in and from this shining, gleaming womb/tomb, and learns to seek identification not with his white officers or "naïve" blacks who function as arbiters of his cultural production, but he learns to see himself from within the cultural production indigenous to this country. The folktale and song, peculiarly "black" cultural aesthetic constructions allow Todd to become a like a phoenix, "like a song within his head he heard the boy's soft humming and saw the dark bird glide into the sun and glow like a bird of flaming gold" (2166). Todd is able to reimagine his relationship to the heroic; he rises out of the ashes of fantasies that individual pursuits of flight constitute freedom or that military fraternity will establish filial or national acceptance and returns from a liminal space to reintegrate into an idealized space of consciousness and connection.<sup>80</sup>

The central protagonist of *Invisible Man* does not have access to the fraternal structure that is afforded Todd of "Flying Home" in the form of Jefferson and Teddy, nor does he have access to the "soldier" as a form of the heroic because he is coming to "manhood" in a post war climate when definitions of the "heroic" in America are in flux, becoming concretized in some ways but fluid and conflated with definitions of "celebrity" in others. Without access to the "soldier" the central protagonist encounters and is seduced by the possibility of "fraternity" in the form of the Brotherhood, a political party similar to the American Communist Party.<sup>81</sup> The central protagonist of *IM*, much

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<sup>80</sup> I am using the term "liminal" here with what I see as consistent with Victor Turner's usage in *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* where he discusses rites of passage and the temporary stepping outside of normative structures and all categories are temporarily marked by indeterminacy.

<sup>81</sup> Richard Wright's "I Tried To Be A Communist" documents his experiences with the American Communist Party and in *Invisible Man* we have a narrator who explores, with similar disappointment, the possibilities of community and fraternity in and through the American CP and the

like Todd of “Flying Home” wants to perform as best he can, wants recognition for his rhetorical skills and sees the Brotherhood as a community in which that would be possible. In his first speech, he tells the mostly white male audience: “With your eyes upon me I feel that I have found my true family! My true people! My true country! I am a new citizen of the country of your vision, a native of your fraternal land. I feel that here tonight, in this old arena, the new is being born and the vital old revived. In each of you, in me in us all” (346). He has been seduced to a degree by the “all-embracing idea of Brotherhood” (382) and believes that by being a Brotherhood spokesman, by being a “representative,” he will protect himself from “disintegration” (353). But functioning in the capacity of public intellectual, of representative, opens up the subject, specifically the body of the “speaker” to symbolic and literal violence. The “race man” is open to a particular wounding, one whose consequences are far reaching, extending beyond the “body” of the speaker him/herself.<sup>82</sup> The narrator, from the beginning of the novel, wants a place of importance, a distinctive voice that is his alone. As a self-made “scholarship boy,” he is interpolated into the “ring” of representation where he is left barely able to

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socialist rhetoric they espoused. One image that clearly aligns the “Brotherhood” with a militaristic fraternity is the image of the party members “falling into columns of four, and [the narrator] was alone in the rear, like the pivot of a drill team” which at once distinguishes the narrator as individual and yet in an interdependent relationship with the “team” (*IM* 338). In describing how he feels up on stage as a representative of the Brotherhood, the narrator claims that on that stage, a space of performance, he is “more human. [He feels] strong... able to get things done!... [that he can] see sharp and clear and far down the dim corridor of history and in it [he] can hear the footsteps of militant fraternity...” (346).

<sup>82</sup> Hazel Carby’s *Race Men* is important in my thinking through the pantheon of the black heroic, specifically that of the black intellectual hero and work that the “race man’s” body actually does. Of particular use were her chapters “The Souls of Black Men,” “Body Lines and Color Lines,” and “Playin’ the Changes.” Her discussion of DuBois and the way that he locates himself within a genealogy of the black intellectual with Alexander Crummell was particularly useful. The autobiographical chapter on Crummell in *The Souls of Black Folk* is buttressed against the chapter that documents the death of DuBois’ son. Here we see a trinity formation that resonates with the characters Jefferson, Todd and Teddy of Ellison’s “Flying Home.” DuBois connects himself to the past in the form of Alexander Crummell and to a future in the form of his son – in this case a tragic interruption of an intellectual and biological genealogy.



“speak,” the wounds he received filling his throat with blood. And when he becomes part of the “Brotherhood,” he is made aware that being a spokesman makes him subject to the ideas the institution claims to represent and as a result he is prevented from “speaking” in ways that would undermine or challenge the doctrine of the Brotherhood. The narrator discovers that he is no more than a “new instrument of the committee’s authority . . .” with the “responsibility” of being a conduit of their program, ideas and interests but the political foot soldier is not necessarily allowed to have his own interests (363). Brother Jack asks the narrator if he wants to be the “new Booker T. Washington,” and while this was the first “heroic” figure that he wanted to emulate, the narrator decides that he “would be no one except [himself] whoever [he] was” (*IM* 305, 311). The tenacious hold of this type of “power” is illustrated in the narrator’s inability to escape desire for it: he immediately considers patterning his life after the “Founder” (311). He is still caught up in thinking of himself as being part of a genealogy – the Founder’s rhetoric of individual striving and upward mobility and the Brotherhood’s political genus. “Brother” Wrestrum informs the narrator exactly what his position is and its relationship to the heroic: “No, sir; you’re the man and you owe it to our youth to allow us to tell them your story . . . We felt that they should be encouraged to keep fighting toward success. After all, you’re one of the latest to fight his way to the top. We need all the heroes we can get” (396-7). The narrator’s response is to refute any claim that he is a hero. He states that he is “no hero” but instead “a cog in a machine. We here in the Brotherhood work as a unit” (396-7). In this moment we see the ability of the narrator to tow the party line. He has the “language” down and understands it as performance, but this passage also reveals the fissures of this “race blind” rhetoric. First, the narrator is pulled into the circuits of ideological production by being told that he “owes” something to the youth, along with an obvious

appeal to constructions of masculinity tied into representation, and at the same time suggests that the narrator can “allow” the larger machine to tell “them” “his” story. He is given a false sense of power over his narrative and it is immediately taken away from him and placed into a context that will benefit the party. The vacillation between the “you” and “we” here is remarkable, shifting from discourses of upward mobility, individual striving and the heroic to collective “works” and anonymity in a machine where the individual is merely a cog aiding in the production and sustaining of the “party.” This refusal to allow individuals their singularity results in exactly what the narrator fears, disintegration, a destruction and alienation of the subject from the community and “self.”

This fear of disintegration, of being destroyed bodily and psychologically by violence and alienation, resonates throughout the history of cultural production of African Americans. The same year *Invisible Man* was published, Frantz Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks*<sup>83</sup> set out to analyze what he describes as the “massive psychoexistential complex,” the disalienation, and psychic disruption experienced by black subjects in colonialism, a cultural moment he characterizes as “juxtaposition of the white and black races.” Specifically, Fanon’s chapter entitled “The Fact of Blackness” describes an incident where a white male child looks at him and says to his mother “Look, mama a Nigger.” At that instant Fanon, for all of his education, his fluency in the colonizer’s language, is “hailed into” a violent system of representation, a racialized iconography,

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<sup>83</sup> First published as *Peau Noire, Masques Blancs* in 1952, Frantz Fanon’s text was translated in English and published in 1967. Fanon’s discussion of the “intellectual alienation” as a middle class creation and his claim that “[t]here are times when the black man is locked into his body” (224-5) have been particularly useful in my thinking through the effect on the psyche of racially based disenfranchisement. While I have been unable, as yet, to locate concrete connections between Ellison and Fanon, it is clear that they were both struggling with related questions on the psychology and consequences of “Blackness.”

that represents and presents him as inferior, savage, cannibal and hypersexualized.<sup>84</sup> The repetition of this hailing moment, signified in the writer using the phrase “Look, mama a nigger!” as a refrain throughout the chapter, does not constitute a praxis, a ritual practice of inciting pain to lead to mastery, but something akin to emerging oneself in a debilitating masochism. In Fanon’s narrative, the conclusion is not a rebirth into or a decision to reenter the world of men but a vision of dismemberment, an exploded incoherent self that cannot be described as a self.

The Negro is a toy in the white man’s hands; so, in order to shatter the hellish cycle, he explodes. . . I am a master and I am advised to adopt the humility of the cripple. Yesterday, awakening to the world, I saw the sky turn upon itself utterly and wholly. I wanted to rise, but the disemboweled silence fell back upon me. Its wings paralyzed. Without responsibility, straddling Nothingness and Infinity, I began to weep. (140)

Ultimately, we may question whether this is far too deterministic a rendering of the “fate” of blackness. Fanon describes his body “given back to [him] sprawled out, distorted, recolored, clad in mourning in that white winter day” which locks the black subject in an external and internally self negating gaze (110-111). Although Fanon’s work was generated out of specifically Antillean and a colonial Algerian contexts, we can draw comparisons between the psychosocial character of the black subject and the existential crisis created by colonialism explored in Fanon’s work and Ellison’s protagonist who describes an ever-present feeling of “being apart when the flag went by” (396). For Ellison and Fanon, the history of colonialism and racism prevents the black subject from being “a part of” the national family and thus is “apart” from those who can claim full

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<sup>84</sup> I am thinking specifically of Freud’s *Pleasure Principle* in which he, using his grandson’s play of hide and seek with a bobbin and thread, then with himself and a mirror, theorizes that children play these kinds of game, they repeat the “trauma” of loss in order to develop a kind of self defense in order to cope with the absence of the mother and/or her inability to address every material need. I am interested in how the repetition of trauma, more specifically the engagement with repeated traumas, emotional and physical, enable the “hero” to endure.

citizenship and is subsequently torn “apart”; the black subject is interpolated into a system that destroys,<sup>85</sup> a system that produces what Fanon sees as a psychological fragmentation peculiar to the colonized black subject; they suffer a crisis and wound that is never relieved.

All of this begs the question of the function of the warrior’s wounds for the warrior in terms of identity, the construction of a self that is marked by “wounding,” and the larger cultural use of the warrior’s wounds to legitimize projects of “nation” building at the expense of the “body.” Fanon’s work is based on his own case studies with psychologically wounded soldiers experiencing “shell shock” in a military hospital. For the warrior, wounding can have several functions. If literal, the wound can provide the warrior with honor, mark his entrance into a fraternity of those that have showed bravery, sacrificed in the name of a larger cause or entity; it is a corporeal medal of honor. Warrior wounds associated with emotional integrity are often read as signifiers of weakness, and symptomatic of failure. We see the work this wound does in the confrontation between the narrator and The Brotherhood. In a gesture that is meant to intimidate and terrorize the narrator, Brother Jack takes out his glass eye and puts it in a glass in front of the narrator and it paralyzes him. As the narrator focuses on the “eye” in the glass, Brother Jack tells him that he lost his eye “in the line of duty” (475). In this “scene” dismemberment, proof of it in the form of a glass eye, becomes “a medal of merit” (475). Brother Jack tells our narrator that in order to achieve an objective, he had to sacrifice the eye and did it; its use here is to establish Brother Jack’s authority and power. The

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<sup>85</sup> This is an obvious reference to the phenomenon of “hailing” outlined in Louis Althusser’s discussion of the ways ideology draws in and disciplines subjects in his “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses.” Fanon’s chapter “The Fact of Blackness,” in *Black Skin, White Masks*, has an explicit connection to this hailing process. The hailing of Fanon into a pejorative framework is repeated several times throughout the chapter thus illustrating the iterability, repetition and systematicity of racist discourses.

narrator, horrified at seeing the eye responds: “All right! It was a heroic act. It saved the world, now hide the bleeding wound!” (475). The wound is not literally “bleeding”; it did not save the world; and whether or not it was produced by “a heroic act” is never established, but the one thing the wound does successfully is establish and affirm a structural power relationship between the characters. Brother Jack’s “literal wound” meets the narrator’s psychological one and trumps it.<sup>86</sup> The continued bleeding is in the narrator’s imagination; the eye socket is a wound that does not heal; it is a permanent signifier of Brother Jack’s sacrifice to “nation” and as such is the basis of his authority to speak. Further, this wound reminds the narrator of his “lack.” Brother Jack recognizes a frailty in the narrator, the narrator’s desire to be a hero and uses the wound as a symbol while diminishing its value. Brother Jack tells the narrator that he is a sentimentalist who overvalues the “wound” and that “heroes are those who die. This was nothing--after it happened. A minor lesson in discipline. And do you know what discipline is, Brother Personal Responsibility? It’s sacrifice, *sacrifice*, SACRIFICE!” (475). The glass eye signifies the sacrifice of the political foot soldier, his medal of honor, *and* his blindness. The soldier who carries out orders without question for institutions “larger than themselves,” who acts as a cog within a “co-ordinated unit,” is part of rhetoric, a language of being that our narrator becomes increasingly hostile to over the course of the novel. This model of the heroic disappoints.

We see disenchantment with model of the heroic exponentially in the figure of

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<sup>86</sup> In Richard Wright’s “I Tried to Be a Communist,” that appeared in the August 1944 edition of *Atlantic Monthly*, he recounts being asked by party members if he had become acquainted with man named Evans, a “local militant Negro Community” whose distinguishing characteristic was that “[he] got that wound from the police in a demonstration...That’s proof of revolutionary loyalty” (49). Wright then asked if the sacrifice of his body was a necessary gesture to prove his “sincerity.” With the publication of this essay, which was obviously critical, *New Masses* and the *Daily Worker* denounced Wright.

Clifton, who like the narrator and other young men in the battle royal is an object of polymorphous desire, a pugilist, and political foot soldier all rolled into one. The initial description of Clifton is through the gaze of women. The first time our narrator sees him, “[he hears] the quick intake of a woman’s pleasurable sigh” and once framed by the audible sound of the “woman’s” pleasure, the narrator describes Clifton:

an easy Negro stride [coming] out of the shadow into the light, and I saw that he was very black and very handsome . . . he possessed the chiseled, black-marble features sometimes found on statues in northern museums and alive in southern towns in which the white offspring of house children and the black offspring of yard children bear names, features and character traits as identical as the rifling of bullets fired from a common barrel. And now close up . . . I saw the broad, taut span of his knuckles upon the dark grain of the wood, the muscular, sweated arms, the curving line of the chest rising to the easy pulsing of his throat to the square, smooth chin, and saw the small X-shaped patch of adhesive upon the subtly blended, velvet-over-stone, granite-over-bone, Afro-Anglo-Saxon contour of his cheek. (363)

The description of Clifton is incredibly detailed. He is marked by his corporeality.<sup>87</sup> It is in excess: he is a boxer and political foot soldier, both inside and outside of history, an archeological find, “dead,” dissected, stuffed and placed under glass within the hermetics of a museum, yet “alive” in the back yards of the south, the living progeny of black and white, house and yard, north and south. As an embodiment of black and white, north and south, he signifies the wounding of both black and white America: the rape of black women by white slave masters, the emasculation of black men, interdependency of

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<sup>87</sup> This sensuous description of Clifton is quickly followed by the narrator’s expression of anxiety that he has encountered a rival. The sexually objectifying gaze shifts to proper heterosexual male competitiveness. Later, we are given a Jack Londonesque commentary on Clifton’s ability to “use his dukes”: “Clifton close with [Ras the Exhorter] him, ducking down and working in close and grabbing the man’s wrists and twisting suddenly like a soldier executing an about-face” (369). Obviously, phrases like “ducking down,” “working in close,” are part of the language of sport but it is also a description of a soldier in close combat. These descriptions of Clifton as “object of the gaze” and as a “boxer” along with his role as “representative” and “seeker” of knowledge and community explicitly links him to the narrator’s experience in the Battle Royal as well as the narrator’s experience as a “talking head.”

agrarian and industrial economies, the injuries between Union and Confederacy, the mutual wounding of brothers. Clifton is hard and soft, good and bad nigger whose injuries by America and subsequently The Brotherhood compel him to plunge outside history and result in his literal and political death.

The rhetoric that is offered by The Brotherhood and Ras fails to salve Clifton's wounds and for all intents and purposes he plunges outside history and goes mad according to dominant cultural logic. Outside the political gambits, the historical wounds of the narrator and Clifton were invisible. Jack's good and glass eyes, similar to Ras' blinders, prevent them from seeing the men in front of them. Clifton's psychological wound manifests itself in the selling of the dolls, but as the narrator realizes, Clifton was "only the salesman, not the inventor" and Clifton's death provides fodder, a way to galvanize "lost members" and bring them "back into the ranks." After Clifton's "plunge" the narrator tells us "except for the picture it made in [his] mind's eye, only the plunge was recorded, and that was the only important thing" (447). Clifton's wounding and subsequent absence makes his death "important." Falling out of history is to fall into chaos and as such creates a "Clifton" who can occupy an alternative heroic. Just as Brother Tarp carries around his wound, the link of chain, connecting him to a specific history of oppression, Clifton becomes Christ-like, wearing a literal cross on his face, but he also becomes something else in his work with the "marionettes."<sup>88</sup> This is a figure whose actions may be complicit with self-annihilating hatred or a revelatory critique of "the brotherhood" that The Brotherhood and Ras are invested in. Where Brother Jack

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<sup>88</sup> My analysis of Clifton differs from Alan Nadel's chapter on Tod Clifton, entitled "Tod Clifton: Spiritual and Carnal" in that I consider this "Tod" as kith and kin to the Tod in his short story "Flying Home," a figure caught in the ineluctable space between a black earth and white sky, a figure marked by dichotomies, whose aesthetic "work" ultimately fails because he chooses to "resist" in a way that differs from the narrator.

carries and uses his wound like a weapon against others, Clifton becomes a wound. His absence leaves a gaping hole in the cultural fabric of the community that cannot be “mended” but this wound can be used by the heroic figure that Ellison privileges and that is of the writer/narrator. During the funeral service, Clifton’s complexity, his vexed relationship to the political programs of The Brotherhood and Black Nationalism in Ras, is reduced. He becomes a signifier of pathos and his death an occasion for the emergence of the privileged site of identification for Ellison, the object of the painterly articulations of his narrator. The narrator is able to use “Clifton” in much the way that he uses the “link” given to him by Brother Tarp. Ellison’s hero ultimately depends on the sacrifice of this body.

During the riot, the narrator is wounded, but also wounds Ras the Exhorter. Ras appears out of smoke and mirrors of cultural representations of whiteness and blackness, “upon a great black horse. A new Ras of a haughty, vulgar dignity, dressed in the costume of an Abyssinian chieftain; a fur cap upon his head, his arm bearing a shield, a cape made of skin of some wild animal around his shoulders” (556). Ras is described as “[a] figure more out of a dream than out of Harlem, than out of even this Harlem night, yet real, alive, alarming” (556). In this incarnation, Ras has all the trappings of a Hollywood ectoplasm. He is both the savage and the cowboy of the Hollywood machine: horse, saddle and “some big spurs,” brandishing a sword and spear “the kind you see them African guys carrying in the moving pictures . . .” (563). He charges like a would-be knight or Lone Ranger; this warrior is of Don Quixote proportions; he embodies the complex intersection of fantasies of race, masculinity, identity and their material effects.

Clifton and the narrator share an understanding of the attractive elements in both The Brotherhood and Ras’ rhetoric. Clifton is caught between the seductiveness of



becoming part of the “biological”/race-based family and a political family that pretends it can transcend socio-biological constructions of race. The Brotherhood proves to be disingenuous at best, seeing and deploying “race” and/or color blindness to its advantage, revealing the latter to be exploitive at best and dangerous at worse. I read Ellison’s representation of Clifton an extension and complication of his critique of the “athlete as hero” and that of the potential of “fraternity” grounded in “Flying Home.” As an embodiment of frustrated desires, Clifton is marked by his body and its potential. He, like young boxers in the Battle Royal, knows how to “use his dukes” and is more than willing to enter the fray, but this is also the man who voluntarily falls out of history, the “local celebrity” turn aesthetic object “used” by the Brotherhood in their interest. With Clifton’s choice to “drop out of history” the meaning of and in his last “performance” is lost on the spectators.<sup>89</sup> He has become a man apart from and not a part of. Clifton recognizes the potency, the appeal, of a figure like Marcus Garvey, suggesting that “he must have had something” and that something is biological fraternity dressed in the regalia of the military. Just as the Brotherhood offered rows of political soldiers walking neatly in rows through a great hall, the uniforms donned by Garveyites offered a symbol of conflated racial and military unification; there were two skins to secure one’s identity, the biological epidermis and the regalia purchased. One failure of the American CP drawn out in the novel is its failure to realize the weight of history and people’s need for a “representative” that speaks to the complexity of their relation to discourses of nation and race. The “local” reaches beyond geographic borders and has to be considered with any

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<sup>89</sup> Clifton is an embodiment of the “local hero,” one that our narrator has to engage with, embrace and be drawn to in order to lose him. Clifton functions as a foil off of which our narrator gets to identify and then disidentify with. Clifton’s political and literal death is necessary for the spiritual progress of the narrator who has to struggle with his desire to be a “hero” in the tradition of Booker T. Washington. This reflects the “struggle” Ellison was having with “Negro leadership” in his own historical moment and the moments represented in the text.

political program or project of resistance. When the narrator is “moved” downtown to speak on the “Woman Question,” he rightfully questions what makes a “hero,” and the “rightness” of a Harlem leader living outside the neighborhood (316). The narrator does not question what race the representative should be, but questions whether or not someone from outside the community can be effective as a leader. The inability of the “party”/Brotherhood to address the local is capitalized on by Ras, who makes the “local” the ground for his rhetoric, but his local is dependent on race and as this locks him into equally unassailable obstacles of racist representations. Amid the chaos, Ras calls for people to stop looting, go to the armory, get guns and engage in revolutionary violence against the white oppressor’s institutions, but much like the narrator who whips up the crowd in his speech at Clifton’s funeral, Ras is unable to anticipate or control the crowd’s energy, anger or direction of outlet. Violence spins out of control and is turned in on the community itself.<sup>90</sup>

It is also in the “riot” that the incommensurability of the rhetoric represented by both Ras’ Black nationalism and the socialism of Brother Jack and that of individual identity is illuminated. Facing Ras in the streets, the narrator has the epiphany that; “it

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<sup>90</sup> In Heaps’ text, he claims that a riot is defined by its motion and its being led by a “hated individual or symbol” (5). The use this argument has for my reading of *IM* is self-evident. The black body, en masse and individually, cannot appear or take up ideological space without being interpolated into a complex system of fetishism, desire and repulsion. He, the black male, cannot lead violent aggression or for peace without being taken up and consumed. In terms of the representation of the riot and the violence therein, Ralph Ellison responded to criticism that *IM* promotes anarchical violence, he describes “[rioting as] a negative alternative to more democratic political action” but more importantly that “[w]hen it is impossible to be heard within the democratic forum, people inevitably go to other extremes” (*The Collected Essays*, 817). Nat Brandt’s *Harlem at War: The Black Experience in WWII* defines the riots in Harlem of 1935 and ‘43 as unorganized responses to crowding resulting from the mass migration of southern blacks to northern metropolises. The history of displacement and dispossession, terror, nonexistent healthcare, quotidian police aggression, corruption, exploitive rents all contributed to the “spontaneous and incoherent protest by Harlem’s population” (47). I read these riots not so much as “unorganized responses,” but as part of the Jazz riff, a collective improvisational response to domestic terror.

was better to live out one's own absurdity than to die for that of others, whether for Ras's or Jack's" (559). The narrator is threatened with lynching by Ras and his henchmen and he responds by picking up one of Ras' props, his spear, and launches it back at him, spearing his mouth. The narrator in fact uses the spear, Brother Tarp's link, and the briefcase he carries, to fight off would be aggressors. He has decided that he will not invest in the ideology represented by any of those symbols; he refuses to be "guilty of [his] own murder, [his] own sacrifice" (558). While this act of resistance on the part of the narrator can be read as "heroic" in that this is one of the few times that the narrator "acts,"<sup>91</sup> Ras' wound is significant in that it closely mirrors the wounding the narrator experiences at the beginning of the text in the Battle Royal and as such speaks to the difficulty of being "representative," of being a public intellectual or "race man." The narrator watches the weapon "ripping through both cheeks, and saw the surprised pause of the crowd as Ras wrestled with the spear that locked his jaws" (559-60). This spear not only locks Ras' jaws, preventing him from speaking but the description of his "spitting blood" too closely mirrors the difficulties of the narrator, who is left swallowing his own blood after participating in the Battle Royal.<sup>92</sup> Ras also criticizes the narrator when he locates their struggle in relation to the larger black community and claims that he "Ras, he be here black and fighting for the liberty of the black people when the white folks

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<sup>91</sup> To return to "The Art of Fiction" interview, Ellison clarifies that "[t]he hero's invisibility is not a matter of being seen, but a refusal to run the risk of his own humanity, which involves guilt. This is not an attack upon white society! It is what the hero refuses to do in each section which leads to further action. He must assert and achieve his own humanity; he cannot run with the pack and do this—this is the reason for all the reversals. The epilogue is the most final reversal of all; therefore, it is a necessary statement" (16). This moment in the text is one of the first moments in which he is clearly making choices and acting upon those choices as a conscious subject.

<sup>92</sup> The imagery of the choking or choked subject can be found throughout Ellison's novel. In addition to the narrator choking on his own blood, there is the piece of "negrobilia," the black lawn jockey, that is "filled to the throat with coins" in Mary Rambo's home and Ras' accusation that the narrator, in filling his throat with the words of the Brotherhood, is choking on "white maggots" (IM 319, 375).

have got what they wahnt and done gone off laughing in your face and you stinking and choked up with white maggots” (375). For all of Ras’ bombast, he is not wrong.<sup>93</sup> In his condemnation of the narrator, he speaks of himself in the third person, an explicit acknowledgement that the work of representing the people means constructing a “self” that is public, that is or has a, sometimes, tenuous relationship to how the “hero” actually imagines him/herself. The Brotherhood, specifically in Brother Jack’s address to the narrator over the “eye” does reduce the narrator to incapacity and The Brotherhood does indeed silence him. Thus, the image of the narrator “choked up with maggots” speaks directly to the political death(s) experienced by the black subject with the silencing of his/her voice.

The precarious position of the public intellectual or race man is compounded by the specularly of the role, rather the position the speaker has to take up as a spectacle in addition to how that visibility contributes to the “performance.” Performance is something that the narrator absolutely understands. He has the ability to perform humility and prowess at the same time.<sup>94</sup> The narrator describes walking up to the microphone for his first Brotherhood speech as “strange and unnerving,” and claims that he “approached it incorrectly” (341). This false modesty is underscored by his insistence on making himself sound the “yokel”: “Sorry, folks Up to now they’ve kept me so far away from these shiny electric gadgets I haven’t learned the technique . . . and to tell you the truth, it looks to me like it might bite!” (341). After representing himself as naïve, a performance

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<sup>93</sup> The obvious connection here is Ras’ rhetoric to that of Marcus Garvey. Garvey’s “An Appeal to the Conscience of the Black Race to See Itself” issues a challenge and demand to Black Americans to recognize and see their exploitation and the internal strife and divisions created by the dominant “Anglo-American race” (32-3).

<sup>94</sup> This performance of prowess and humility is clearly demonstrated in Martin Luther King’s “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” where he deftly performs as rhetorician, master of trope, Judeo Christian and philosophical discourses in his “address” to white clergy who were criticizing King’s activities.

made redundant and complicated by his blackness, he then falls right into his “dispossession” speech, a now practiced and honed address informed by his position in and to the socialist rhetoric of The Brotherhood. He presents himself as the bumpkin who is unfamiliar with “these shiny electric gadgets” and further suggests that he hasn’t “learned the technique,” but it is clear that this gesture, in and of itself, is a rhetorical strategy that demonstrates beautifully his learned technique. He draws in his audience by invoking an image of himself as being one of the “them.” He describes being up on stage as confirming his humanity, his masculinity and that this position of power places him in a privileged relation to history and nation.<sup>95</sup> Up on stage he feels “more human,” “strong,” and goes on to state: “I feel able to get things done! I feel that I can see sharp and clear and far down the dim corridor of history and in it I can hear the footsteps of militant fraternity...I have come home. . . Home! With you eyes upon me I feel that I’ve found my true family! My true people! My true country! I am a new citizen of the country of your vision, a native of your fraternal land...” (346). But this is a nation, a family, that denies multiple belonging. Syntactically, the narrator positions himself as a prodigal son, but this prodigal son is still dependant upon being claimed by his white father and this will never happen. The narrator speaks of returning “home” to find his “true family,” “true people” and country, but the possessive pronouns shift when he claims subjectivity within the borders of nation. He then has to cast the nation as a product of “your” or rather “their,” the white leaders and members of the American CP,

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<sup>95</sup> To again return to this passage, the narrator describes himself on stage as “more human,” “strong... able to get things done” and further that he can now see, clearly, his relationship to history and his position within a genealogy of foot soldiers that make up that history. It is as spokesman in front of an audience that the narrator feels that he has found his “true family,” his “true people” and “true country,” but it is, interestingly enough a vision of himself that comes from without not within. He imagines himself as “a new citizen of the country of your vision, a native of your fraternal land...” (346), but not as a citizen of his vision and his fraternal land.

vision. What the narrator is unable to see clearly at this moment are the ways in which multiple belonging is denied in the rhetoric of both Ras' Black Nationalism and American Nationalism. You cannot serve two masters. The narrator cannot belong to both families, nor can he refuse to claim or be claimed by "blackness." The narrator has to awake from his dream of Brotherhood but then the question is if it is too late for him to be effective (422). The difficulty of speaking for one's "racial" brother is taken up when the narrator expresses his dislike for people who are like Mary Rambo, "For one thing, they seldom know where their personalities end and yours begins; they usually think in terms of 'we' while I have always tended to think in terms of 'me' – and that has caused some friction, even with my own family. Brother Jack and the others talked in terms of 'we,' but it was a different, bigger 'we'" (316). Being a race leader is just one of the ways that the narrator seeks ways to be an individual, at least to be an individual that is not defined and confined by race. Unfortunately, that bigger "we" was not capable of fully seeing the impact of race for and to the black American subject and artist. Brother Jack's wounded sight and limited vision of Marxist discourses allow us as readers to see their compatibility with seemingly antithetical upward mobility narratives and the appeal of individual success, along with this fantasy of "collectivity," of belonging to a family and the inescapable commodification that goes along with all.<sup>96</sup> In Ellison's *Invisible Man*,

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<sup>96</sup> Wright's "I Tried to Be a Communist" is rife with allusions to "sight" and seeing coterminous with political vision. In Wright's description of a "trial" of a brother or fellow communist, he describes the party's coercion, its having "talked to [the accused] until they had given him new eyes with which to see his own crime" (73). In the "trial" he is compelled to admit guilt to charges that begin with a recitation of the plight of the "worker" across the globe and culminate with charges by his "friends" at having betrayed the cause. He describes the trial as a "spectacle of glory; and yet, because it had condemned me, because it was blind and ignorant, I felt that it was a hor. The blindness of their limited lives—lives truncated and impoverished by the oppression they had suffered long before they had ever heard of Communism—made them think that I was with their enemies" (73). Wright gives us a narrative of disenchantment, where he comes to an "objectivity of vision" as he surveys a parade of black and white communists and is able to see

the desire to belong and its impossibility are made manifest.

### **The Trickster as Hero: the magic in improvisation and chaos**

Perhaps the sense of magic lay in the unexpected transformations.

Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*

We need great myths; we need to understand, translate, and interpret for ourselves the meaning of our experience.<sup>97</sup>

Ralph Ellison, Black Perspectives Conference, New York 1972

Heroes emerge out of chaos. I have argued to this point that Ellison's *Invisible Man* tests the possibilities of the heroic for the Black American subject in the time of rebuilding and re-imagining that was post World War II America. From the novel's "Prologue" on, the heroic emerges in the form of: the athlete/boxer, the hero of extraordinary strength juxtaposed to the figure of extraordinary fortune – the yokel or everyman who wins, the soldier whose sacrifice to the project of nation building is made doubly complex for the black subject whose subjectivity has already been sacrificed in the project of nation building, the race man/pundit whose project of re-representation is complicated by discourses of race and nation that silence the black subject before he even begins to speak. Each heroic incarnation and commensurate projects of "saving" and creating are cordoned off. Ultimately, the form of the heroic Ellison privileges is the artist, the writerly voice marked by anonymity but is ultimately not "unknown." The

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their "blindness" caused by oppression. The "trial" and its potential relationship to the scene in which the narrator of *Invisible Man* is given a vision of an "eye," in the form of the literal glass of Brother Jack is yet another way in which the work of Wright would seem to permeate this novel.

<sup>97</sup> In discussing the work of Roscoe Dunjee, reporter for the Oklahoma paper, *The Black Dispatch*, given at the Black Perspectives Conference in New York 1972, Ellison talked of Black heroes: Frederick Douglass, Nat Turner, Louis Armstrong, Bessie Smith and Sojourner Truth and how "Men change, die, suffer, and express themselves, but the patterns of society din and again and again repetition of that same heroism with a new body and new face -- even with a new hairstyle perhaps. Patterns repeat themselves as long as human circumstances endure" (*S & A* 459). In this list of heroes we have the "race man," the revolutionary, and the blues man/woman. These figures are the building blocks for "great myths" that are requisite to understanding Black American political and historical contexts and by extension essential to the construction of a "self."

narrator is the anti-hero, and according to Victor Brombert's *In Praise of Antiheroes*, the antiheroic text is "expressed in the first person, yet it speaks for us of the other" (Brombert 31).<sup>98</sup> Ellison transforms the self-proclaimed paradoxalist of Doestoevsky's *Notes from the Underground* to speak *simultaneous as and of* the other. This is the difference that historical and cultural specificity of being in black skin in America produces. The narrator cannot remain on the fringe, disappearing into nothingness that "whiteness" affords Doestoevsky's anti-hero, not with Frederic Douglass as a literary and literal progenitor.<sup>99</sup> The black male never could. He is too necessary, too writ on and within America's project of building a national identity and masculinity to disappear. He is essential to them both. Ellison, contemplating the writer/artist as hero, mused that the "possibilities for art have increased rather than lessened. Looking at the novelist a manipulator and depicter of moral problems, I ask myself how much of the achievement

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<sup>98</sup> Victor Brombert's *In Praise of Antiheroes: Figures and Themes in Modern European Literature 1830 - 1980*, constructs antiheroes as often "weak, ineffectual, pale, humiliated, self-doubting, inept, occasionally abject characters - often afflicted with self-conscious and paralyzing irony, yet at times capable of unexpected resilience and fortitude" and further that they do not conform but rather stand in opposition to traditional "heroic figures," thus implicitly and explicitly cast doubt on values previously taken for granted and assumed unshakable and natural (Brombert 2). Ellison's central protagonist does fit this criteria to a degree, but what makes him different is his explicit and inescapable blackness and the simultaneous hyper (in)visibility that blackness gives him.

<sup>99</sup> In Kimberly Benston's "I Yam What I Am: the Topos of Un(naming) in Afro-American Literature" he gives us an image of the black hero in Ellison's text as one who understandably is a decoder, as one who "must become a careful interpreter of the world's alluring signs if he is not to become their victim" and further argues that there are "[t]wo principal types of achieved black selfhood, one 'historical' yet also metaphorical, one symbolic yet also socio-political, erupt from beneath the hero's quest and provide him with succinctly contrasting strategies within the novel's mosaic of namings. On the one side lies Rinehart, the enigmatic key to a perception of invisibility. Against him stands Frederick Douglass, touchstone of responsible vision...His strategy proceeds from an improvisational refusal of final form which allows him to hustle beneath a 'history that educed human faces to metonymic catalogues of 'so many names' (160-1). These positions taken up by the figures of Douglass and Rinehart are not antithetical or oppositional but I would suggest appositional. Where Benston argues that Ellison's hero is "emphatically unnamed" and as such is beyond representation outside the archival language of history," I read the Douglass who gets taken up as symbol, site of play, the Douglass who engages in a two hour fight with Covey, the nigger breaker, as part of the same taxonomic construction as Rinehart. Rinehart is part Douglass, master of narration and mutability; Rinehart could not have existed without Douglass. Marjorie Pryse's "Ralph Ellison's Heroic Fugitive" helped me think through the relationship of the narrator to both Rinehart and Frederick Douglass.



of democratic ideals it he U.S. has been affected by the steady pressure of Negroes and those whites who were sensitive to the implications of our condition, and I know that without that pressure the position of our country before the world would be much more serious than it is even now..." (TAoF 19). Ultimately the writer/artist is the hero. The artist creates imaginatively.<sup>100</sup> They produce cultural artifacts, if not meaning. Ellison wants to be able to have it both ways: to be unbound or rather unfettered by American constructions of "race" and at the same time he wants to produce an "art" that is absolutely indebted to those constructions of and responses to the experience of being "raced" in America.

The search for heroes is not a peculiarly American cultural practice, but the problem this project presents for the black subject is. Ellison claims that in identifying with fictional heroes, he and others like him were "projecting archetypes, re-creating folk figures, legendary heroes, monsters even, most of which violated all ideas of social hierarchy and order and all accepted conceptions of the hero handed down by cultural, religious and racist tradition" and in the end, Ellison's novel presents us with forms of the heroic that not only violate the "social hierarchy" and then contemporary constructions of the heroic, but also exceed or rather can not be contained by the novel itself.

The figures that we see at the end of the novel, those that have the most potential or rather that anticipate and signify possibilities for the future are the Jazz musician/artist, Rinehart and a group of young "zootsuit" men the narrator encounters on a train.<sup>101</sup> The

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<sup>100</sup> The power of narrative lies in its ability to exceed the confines of service to the dominant order, it "continually generates rival meanings, alternative normative worlds, that threaten the state dominions... the very multiplicity of narratives encourages competing normative orders, rival communities of interpretation, each of which agitates for the creation of legal rules [and I would add ontological possibilities] to its vision" (Clayton 14).

<sup>101</sup> In discussing the invariable difficulties in reading Ellison's engagement with Black Nationalism Larry Neal, in "Politics as Ritual: Ellison's Zoot Suit," makes the claim that "[t]he Lindy-hop and

figures that are privileged by Ellison are improvisation personified. They are jazz riffs and originate in what Fred Moten has called the “break.”<sup>102</sup> Rinehart is archetypal angel and monster. He is in all places, sacred and secular, at once; he is good and bad man rolled into one. In Charles Long’s “The Archetypal Significance of the Bad Man,” he claims mythological characters, or what he calls “mythoforms” of the “bad man” like Staggerlee, Shine, Harriet Tubman, High John de Conqueror and John Henry, are driving forces of African American communities historiography; they are the “highest order of symbolic motifs,” entailing a sacred history and symbology based in the particularity of the Black American experience. The badman, embodied in Rinehart and echoing Jack Johnson, “violates conventions and spaces, virtually at will, and thereby represents not just black

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the zootsuit are...in this context not merely social artifacts, but they, in fact, mask deeper levels of symbolic and social energy”... and further suggests that it is from this deeper level of symbolic and social energy that Ellison’s vision of a new kind of “Negro leader” emerges, and cites Ellison’s claim that the this new hero would emerge from “new concepts, new techniques and new tends among people wand nations with an eye toward appropriating those which are valid and tested against the reality of Negro life. By the same test they must be just as alert to reject the faulty programs of their friends” (qtd Neal 41). I am extending Neal’s discussion to think through the chaos in which the hero emerges and/or creates with no obligation to bring order. This chaos, I argue, is the new “technique” which Ellison begins to embrace.

<sup>102</sup> Fred Moten’s discussion of “the break” resonates with what I argue in my chapter on Ellison’s work, the chaotic space from which improvisation emerges. According to Moten “[i]mprovisation is located at a seemingly unbridgeable chasm between feeling and reflection, disarmament and preparation, speech and writing. Improvisation...operates as a kind of foreshadowing, if not prophetic, description. So that the theoretical resources embedded in the cultural practice of improvisation reverse, even as they bear out the definition that etymology implies and the theoretical assumptions it grounds” (Moten 63). Where Moten focuses on the “Prologue” and “Epilogue” of Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, reading the former as “[setting] the specifically musical conditions for a possible redetermination of the ocular-ethical metaphysics of race and the materiality of the structure and æffects of that metaphysics” and the latter as a “frightened attempt to retreat into the etiolated metaphysics of America—where the ends of philosophy, history, and man converge; where the unworkable telos of one and many, the radical segregation of prophecy and description, is carried out,” I focus on the figures of Rinehart and the youths on the train as embodiments of chaos and as such embodiments of another alternative form of the heroic. What Moten defines as a tension in the “break” that he sees driving *Invisible Man* is between a “continuity between and the incommensurability of the intimation of the improvisational and affirmative agency of ensemble and its etiolated calculation as the synthesis of to one and many, individuality and collectivity, difference and universality” and this tension I read as produced by the chaotic formations of identity, nation and body and history at the core of *Invisible Man*’s critique through the central protagonist’s quest. A. Yemisi Jimoh’s “These (Blackness of Blackness) Blues” was also helpful in terms of helping me locate these embodiments of chaos within a genealogy.

disdain for American oppression . . . but the ability to face hardship and win” (O’Meally 44). Literary figures like Rinehart and historical figures like Jack Johnson reside beyond the pale of Western filial, moral or religious constructions; they have “tombstone disposition[s] and graveyard mind[s]. . . bad motherfucker[s] who didn’t mind dying in the place” and according to Bruce Jackson, they create a culture that refuses to be totalitarian (Jackson qtd. O’Meally 48). Rinehart is one of the uncontainable, unrestrainable “bad motherfuckers.” Ellison relays his thoughts on the construction of his character Rinehart and how he wanted to create a character who was “a master of disguise, of coincidence, the name with its suggestion of inner and outer came to mind.” For Ellison, this figure embraces interior/exterior constructions of identity and destabilizes them all. Rinehart is “the personification of chaos . . . He [represents] America and change. He has lived so long with chaos that he knows how to manipulate it . . . He is a figure in a country with no solid past or stable class lines; therefore he is able to move about easily from one to the other” (223). A doppelgänger of sorts, Rinehart is a master of light and shadow; he is part of the lumpenproletariate as a “pimp,” but is also part of the middle and upper classes as “politician” and “preacher.” Rinehart is a figure of multiple possibilities.<sup>103</sup>

On the fringe, the seductiveness of group identity does not diminish. In his zootsuit garb, the narrator recognizes the loss of individual identity to the group, a group that was not marked by race, but by uniform. Once he puts on the uniform, it begins to take over, not unlike the seductive power of a soldier’s “uniform.” He is unable to stop himself from nearly killing a former friend; he is “overcome with the madness of the

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<sup>103</sup> In Nathan A. Scott Jr.’s “Ellison’s Vision of Communitas” he discusses Ellison’s novel within the context of Victor Turner’s construction of liminality and communitas in Turner’s *Dramas Fields, and Metaphors* and *The Ritual Process*. He describes the narrator’s attraction to Rinehart, the changeling, as a black Proteus (315).

thing,” and he realizes that it is place and circumstance that determine the degree of insanity and violence an individual will delve into (489). It was not just the uniform, the external signifier of membership but a “gait” that determined belonging and this powerful kineticism gives “rise to another uncertainty” (489). The uncertainty, fluidity, of identity actuated in Rinehart throws notions of fixity into question and the narrator asks: “If dark glasses and a white hat could blot out my identity so quickly, who actually was who?” (493). Through Rinehart, the narrator can see that “this world was without boundaries . . . Perhaps *only* Rine the rascal was at home in it” (498) and it is “too vast and confusing to contemplate” (499). This plasticity gives Rinehart his power. With it, Rinehart is able to exploit “the white man’s psychological blind spot” and this is *the* revolutionary characteristic of his hero. Rinehart is an expert at masking.<sup>104</sup> For Ellison, masking is about possibilities and the potential for violence and love.<sup>105</sup> He, Rinehart, is a possibility never considered or admitted by discourses represented by the Emersons, Bledsoes, Rases or The Brotherhood.

Related to Rinehart are a group of boys the narrator encounters on a train. He describes them as speaking a “jived-up transitional language full of country glamour,”

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<sup>104</sup> M.K. Singleton argues in “Leadership Mirages as Antagonists in *Invisible Man*” that Rinehart is a protean, nihilistic figure, a “disturbing acquiescent Negro stereotype” void of political responsibility. Singleton then goes on to describe Clifton as a “lost leader,” a disillusioned “outstanding political activist” who turned to huckstering (18). He reads Clifton’s lack of “social responsibility” as deplorable yet sees Rinehart’s concurrent styles as a revelation of “the liberating aspects of role-playing” (20). Where Singleton identifies Rinehart’s relationship to networks of exploitation in one context, I read Rinehart’s relationship to commodity culture as recalling both Clifton and Trueblood, whose status as “cultural texts” enable them to become fodder local political interests, and whose self awareness of and in their respective performances is lost on their spectators.

<sup>105</sup> In “Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke” Ellison describes masking as a “play upon possibility and ours is a society in which possibilities are many. When American life is most American it is apt to be most theatrical” (108). He further argues that the mask is used for “purposes of aggression as well as for defense, where we are projecting the future and preserving the past. In short, the motives hidden behind the mask are as numerous as the ambiguities the mask conceals” (109).

and further that they

think transitional thoughts, though perhaps they dream the same old ancient dreams. They were men out of time—unless they found Brotherhood. Men out of time, who would soon be gone and forgotten . . . But who knew (and now I began to tremble so violently I had to lean against a refuse can)—who knew but that they were the saviors, the true leaders, the bearers of something precious? The stewards of something uncomfortable, burdensome, which they hated because, living outside the realm of history, there was no one to applaud their value and they themselves failed to understand it. (441)

These are figures that exceed the narrator's world-view and perhaps even Ellison's. They are perceived as simultaneously without value and as potentially bearing "something precious" and it is their unapologetic "all things at once" that discomfits those who encounter them. They have the ability to think "transitionally," to use language in a way that signifies process and multiple belonging and like Rinehart are subjected to insistent mapping of discourses by dominant white and black America. These boys improvise language. They are concerned with their own reflections and not necessarily with connecting to the narrator who he is preoccupied with the way he connects to them. The narrator, and here the line blurs between the narrator and Ellison, reads their self-perception as "failure."

I looked at the boys. They sat as formally as they walked. From time to time one of them would look at his reflection in the window and give his hat brim a snap, the others watching him silently, communicating ironically with their eyes, then looking straight ahead... What was I in relation to the boys, I wondered. Perhaps an accident, like Douglass. Perhaps each hundred years or so men like them, like me, appeared in society, drifting through; and yet by all historical logic we, I, should have disappeared around the first part of the nineteenth century, rationalized out of existence. Perhaps, like them, I was a throwback, a small distant meteorite that died several hundred years ago and now lived only by virtue of the light that speeds through space at too great a pace to realize that its source has become a piece of lead... (442)

Rinehart and the young boys on the train are unreadable. They are incidental relations,

defying historical constructions of time and space with a refusal or inability to carry “origin” the same way as their predecessors. These figures open up the possibility for something else, of being something else outside the reductive rhetoric of nation and biology. Rinehart is a master of stepping out of reality and into chaos into “imagination” (576). What is fascinating is that after the narrator has stared into the void that is Rinehart, he is able to more astutely perceive the failure of The Brotherhood to provide a sustaining relation.

[H]ere I had thought they accepted me because they felt that color made no difference, when in reality it made no difference because they didn't see color or men . . . we were so many names scribbled on fake ballots, to be used at their convenience and when not needed to be filed away . . . now I looked around a corner of my mind and saw Jack and Norton and Emerson merge into one single white figure. They were very much the same, each attempting to force his picture of reality upon me and neither giving a hoot in hell for how things looked to me. I was simply a material, a natural resource to be used. I had switched from the arrogant absurdity of Norton and Emerson to that of Jack and the Brotherhood, and it all came out the same—except now I recognized my invisibility. (508)

After being able to “see” these young men on the train, the narrator has begun looking round and seeing all of the bustling humanity that is in Harlem.<sup>106</sup> These figures signify belonging to America and Black America but these culturally hybrid “black” sons do not ask for acknowledgment or approval from either “father.” Having been denied membership it is unclear, at least to the narrator, whether they ever wanted or would want

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<sup>106</sup> This moment in the text harkens back to Wright's essay, “I Tried to Be a Communist,” in which he describes working at the South Side Boys' Club. He describes the boys, ages eight to twenty-five, as “a wild and homeless lot, culturally lost, spiritually disinherited, candidates for the clinics, morgues, prisons, reformatories, and the electric chair of the state's death house. For hours I listened to their talk of planes, women, guns, politics and crime. Their figures of speech were as forceful and colorful as any ever used by English-speaking people. I kept pencil and paper in my pocket to jot down their word-rhythms and reactions. These boys did not fear people to the extent that every man looked like a spy. The Communists who doubted my motives did not know these boys, their twisted dreams, their all too clear destinies; and I doubted if I should ever be able to convey to them the tragedy I saw here” (53-54). The similarities in these two passages are striking, and yet I read Ellison as opening up a space, more so than the objective “aesthetic” distance Wright has with his subjects. Where Wright saw tragedy, Ellison sees confusion, and he allows the confusion, the chaos to stand.

it and this lack of “recognizable” desire is unnerving for the narrator. The “problems” that created the narrator, Rinehart and the young men, are undeniably American. Further, they complicate the position of the artist that Ellison privileges. These artists are both inside and outside of national time. They have the illusion of distance, of objectivity through a position as observer but subjectivity through their response to the culture they channel through their aesthetic production. Rinehart and the Zootsuiters are living aesthetically revolutionary lives. They have mastered illusion and refuse to engage in or take control in socially acceptable ways. They are building their identity in relation to “history” but not in ways that are entirely indebted to it. Their reflections and connection created in their looking at and through those refracted images are what counts, no matter how unrecognizable the melody may seem to the viewer/reader.<sup>107</sup>

These Zootsuit clad young men are reminiscent of a figure that “materializes” in Ellison’s “The Little Man at Chehaw Station” from *Going To the Territory*. In this essay he describes “a light-skinned, blue-eyed, Afro-American-featured individual who could have been taken for anything from a sun-tinged white Anglo-Saxon, an Egyptian, or a mixed-breed American Indian to a strayed member of certain tribes of Jews...” (509). This man pushes Ellison to his critical limit. With this figure Ellison takes on the problem of the American Postmodern condition where, at least theoretically, “social categories are open, and the individual is not only considered capable of transforming himself, but is

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<sup>107</sup> Clifton, who is a problematic figure in his relationship to what Ellison reads as problematic fetishism, is described as having “Zootsuiter characteristics” (357); he is both hero, a “symbol of our hope” and a traitor (450 and 466 respectively). What links Clifton to Rinehart and the Zootsuiters is also something ineffable, chaotic, a chaos that emerges during his funeral where the music being played in the background signifies one of these “frequencies” that connects the black hero. It is in the song that is being sung in which the narrator perceives a shift in meaning, a space between the song, its words and historical context, performance and reception and described as a “change of emotion beneath the words” (441-2). The “change” is related to the phenomenon of identification in film spectatorship that I discuss in my chapter on Charles Johnson.

encouraged to do so..." (507). This spectre, conjured from Ellison's memory, is part aberration and part apparition. This "man of parts," is described as literally appearing one day, "emerging" from his Volkswagen in manner similar to the absurd multiplicity emerging from a circus clown car (510). Like Clifton, this figure disrupts normative gender constructs and like the Zootsuit clad boys on the train, he seems self-interested to a fault:

Then, with a ballet leap across the walk, he assumed a position beside his car. There he rested his elbow upon its top, smiled, and gave himself sharp movie director's commands as to desired poses, then began taking a series of self-portraits. This done, he placed the camera upon the hood of his Volkswagen and took another series of self-shots in which, manipulating a lengthy ebony cigarette holder, he posed himself in various fanciful attitudes against the not-too-distant background of the George Washington Bridge. All in all, he made a scene to haunt one's midnight dreams and one's noon repose. (510)

This "fanciful" self-absorbed apparition haunts Ellison. He embodies a chaotic hybridity and gender performance with which Ellison is uncomfortable. More specifically, the performance and appropriation of "signs" recalls the young men Ellison's narrator encounters on the train in *Invisible Man*. These men seem to be moving in circuits of desire and production, looking at themselves and each other in their reflections, that lock the narrator, and by extension, Ellison out. For Ellison, this is a question of ontology.

Now, I can only speculate about what was going on in the elegant gentleman's mind, who he was, or what visual statement he intended to communicate. I only know that his carefully stylized movements (especially his 'pimp-limp' walk) marked him as a native of the U.S.A., a home-boy bent upon projecting and recording with native verve something of his complex sense of cultural identity. Clearly he had his own style, but if—as has been repeatedly argued—the style is the man, who on earth was this fellow? (510-511)

Ellison's hostility to this man's appropriation of signifiers of "cultural blackness" and "performance" is tempered by the acknowledgment that this figure assaults "traditional



forms of the Western aesthetic.” This is a figure that inspires others to seek “order in an apparent cultural chaos.” Ellison’s attempts to locate order, coherence and structure through performance, specifically a “comic clashing of styles... improvised form...[and] the willful juxtaposition of modes,” but this “American joker,” whose “styles” enact an irreverent play “upon the symbolism of status, property and authority” suggests new “possibilities” and asks “Who am I? What about me?”(511). Ellison’s language consistently vacillates between admiration and contempt, and it is difficult to determine what irritates the writer more, the dashiki and Afro or the “ballet leap.” Ellison then juxtaposes this figure against four black “coal workers” who do “extra” work at the Metropolitan Opera that he encounters while collecting data and signatures for the Federal Writers Project.

In Ellison’s description of his travels he encounters four men, who like the aberration near the George Washington Bridge, “materialize” before him. He overhears an argument being waged behind closed doors about who is a better opera singer. The surreal nature of this scene lies in the setting, the projects and the participants in the argument, four black coal workers. Once he discovers that these men are regularly “stripped down” and given leopard skins, spears, palm leafs and ostrich-tail fans to perform in as extras in the opera, their knowledge and debate becomes rational and they become more palatable models of cultural syncretism for Ellison. It is the “both/and” that these “working-men *and* opera buffs” are a more readable form of performance. They embody less of a conflict, more comprehensibility as analogues to the “little man behind the stove,” for Ellison who concludes that “[w]here there’s a melting not there’s smoke,

and where there's smoke it is not simply optimistic to expect fire, it's imperative to watch for the phoenix's vernacular, but transcendent, rising" (523).<sup>108</sup>

This battle for intellectual and aesthetic sovereignty is one that Ellison, along with his contemporaries, inherited from previous generations of writers. Ellison's struggle with history and genealogy is articulated clearly in his relationship to Richard Wright that he explored in several articles and essays.<sup>109</sup> What is clear is that Ellison was trying to establish himself or rather distinguish himself from his literary progenitor, and yet there are clear intertextual allusions that indicate how much influence Wright had on Ellison.<sup>110</sup> The very infrastructure, and many of its anecdotal digressions speak to the sometimes contentious, sometimes collaborative, but always productive tensions between Ellison and Wright. The attempts of the narrator to carve out, in the darkness of his underground womb, a space from which he could emerge as something else, something new, with a new voice, a new register of sound and a new vision sight for a new generation of aesthetic workers can be read as a conflation of Ellison and Wright's struggle for

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<sup>108</sup> In "'The Little Man at Chehaw Station' Today," Hortense Spillers considers the "fabula of the costume and the gesture" which she reads as having "an element of hyperbolic staging perhaps even more than a hint of the grotesque" that exceeds, and I read as specifically signify Ellison's inability to locate the performance in the rational, and further that his "value" lies in improvisational modes (15).

<sup>109</sup> The question of how one escapes the shadow of a progenitor by attempting to cast a greater one is mirrored and well documented in, not only Ellison's relationship to Wright, but also James Baldwin's vexed relationship to Wright and explored in Baldwin's *Notes of a Native Son*, specifically his critique of Wright's *Native Son*, where he explicitly critiques the negative impact "political" aims on Wright's aesthetic vision. Baldwin takes issue with the lack of complexity in the central protagonist, Bigger Thomas, in "Everybody's Protest Novel" and "Many Thousands Gone." There is a more implicit and revealing critique in "Notes of a Native Son," which borrows its title from Wright's novel, but turns "inward" to explore Baldwin's relationship to his father. The transparency of Baldwin's difficulty with genealogical ties is evident throughout.

<sup>110</sup> Ellison claimed that Wright's greatest achievement was "[converting] the American Negro impulse toward self-annihilation and 'going-under-ground' into a will to confront the world, to evaluate his experience honestly and throw his findings unashamedly into the guilty conscience of America" ("Remembering Richard Wright" 144).

aesthetic autonomy.<sup>111</sup> Just as Wright appealed to the Negro writer in his “Blueprint for Negro Writing” to imagine a genealogy that embraces more than race, more than his black fathers and more than a materialist critique,<sup>112</sup> so too does Ellison, through his protagonist, carry on the battle for “self” and aesthetic independence.

The narrator is an embodiment of process, processes of coming to consciousness, of constructing a self, of alienation and disaffection, but he does “belong” and this belonging is produced out of racial debts of American genealogy. According to Ellison, the narrator is motivated by self-promotion and “spite” but inevitably we need to question if the hero’s quest always boils down to a desire to “revenge himself against the scheme of things.”<sup>113</sup> Ellison’s text, I argue, reflects post war hostility toward traditional models

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<sup>111</sup> In a 1976 interview with Ralph Ellison, Robert Stepto and Michael Harper, the subject of father/son constructions came up and Ellison interjected that “[he] lost [his] own father at the age of three, lost a step-father when [he] was about ten, and had another at the time [he] met Wright. [He] was quite touchy about those who’d inherited [his] father’s position as head of [his] family and [he] had no desire, or need, to cast Wright or anyone else, even symbolically, in such a role” and in another interview stated that he had “read Mark Twain and Hemingway, among others, long before [he] ever heard of Wright” (qtd Stephens 120-1). The contentious relationship between Ellison and Wright has been written about ad infinitum by a myriad of critics, a survey of which can be found in Gregory Stephens’ *On Racial Frontiers: The New Culture of Frederick Douglass, Ralph Ellison, and Bob Marley*. W. T. Lhamon’s *Deliberate Speed: The Origins of a Cultural Style in the American 1950s* and Michel Fabre’s “From *Native Son* to *Invisible Man*: Some Notes on Ralph Ellison’s Evolution in the 1950s” were helpful in enabling me to think through the father/son conflict in Ellison’s literal and literary relationships as a cultural signifier of an entire generation’s fatigue with what had come and gone before and burgeoning anxieties of how they would come to be.

<sup>112</sup> In “Blueprint for Negro Writing,” originally published in *New Challenge* 11 (1937): 53-67, Wright argues that the Negro writer has “Eliot, Stein, Joyce, Proust, Hemingway, and Anderson; Gorky, Barbusse, Nexo, and Jack London no less than the folklore of the Negro” in their “heritage” (Wright 50) and further that the “relationship between reality and the artistic image is not always direct and simple. The imaginative conception of a historical period will not be a carbon copy of reality. Image and emotion possess a logic of their own. A vulgarized simplicity constitutes the greatest danger in tracing the reciprocal interplay between the writer and his environment” (52). I read Ellison as actively taking up this challenge, reaching to branches of European and classic progenitors as well as liberally borrowing from cultural narratives, folklore, and Wright’s work. These borrowings reveal how much Wright “meant” to Ellison’s development of a writerly subjectivity.

<sup>113</sup> In “Working Notes for *Invisible Man*,” Ellison claims his hero’s “actions are motivated by spite and an effort to revenge himself against this scheme of things” (*The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison* 344). I would push at this reading of the author and suggest that the text he has written may actually work against this line of reasoning, that “revenge” is revealed in the text as part of

and modes of the “heroic” and proffers of another kind of hero. In the face of annihilation and the failure of the heroic to provide the domestic equanimity and peace that black soldiers fought for, this anti-hero, embodies Ellison’s “conscious attempt to confront, to peer into, the shadow of [his] past and to remind [himself] of the complex resources for imaginative creation which are [his] heritage” (*S & A* xxii-xxiii).<sup>114</sup>

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the motivation behind the hero’s quest, but is revealed, in the end as a deficient source of “inspiration.”

<sup>114</sup> Hortense Spillers’ “Ellison’s ‘Usable Past’” was an invaluable interlocutor to my discussion of what I read as the emergent black heroic as anti-heroic. In this essay, Spillers reads Ellison’s narrator as repeating, in some measure the cycle of heroic development described in Joseph Campbell’s *Hero of a Thousand Faces*, with the difference that Ellison’s “hero” “cuts loose from prevailing myth in a sequence of subversive moves that conjoin him with other myths of conscience—the countermythologies” and in doing so is aligned with a specifically “black disobedience” (77-80). This chapter considers what I read as Ellison’s search for a “usable” model of the heroic that leads him directly toward the “artist,” toward himself.

## Chapter 2

### To the East, my Brother, to the East: Charles Johnson's 'Heroic Process'

There can be no renaissance if it is not built on clearly defined historical ground, however sad it may be.

Aimable Twagilimana<sup>115</sup>

I think that every black writer since the nineteenth century has been expected to write a certain way. Those expectations can smother the possibilities of creative expression. If you are writing only about racial expression—and only about racial oppression in a particular way that, for example, white readers understand—you're missing something. Sartre said that if you're a black writer in America, you automatically know what your subject is: it has to be oppression...It is not true that if you are a black writer in America that you automatically know what you are going to focus on, but there has always been that trap that black writers can fall into.

Levasseur, Rabalais and Johnson<sup>116</sup>

At his acceptance speech for the National Book Award for his novel *Middle Passage*, Charles Johnson found himself facing one of the giants of African American literature, Ralph Ellison.<sup>117</sup> During his acceptance speech, Johnson discussed the impact of Ellison and his magnum opus, *Invisible Man*, on his and later generations of writers despite having an initially negative response to the text. He, with many of his

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<sup>115</sup> This is a passage from Aimable Twagilimana's discussion of the difficult relationship between African Americans and "history" in his *Race and Gender in the Making of an African American Literary Tradition*.

<sup>116</sup> This passage is exemplary of Johnson's critique of American constructions of race and their impact on the artist/writer. It also reveals Johnson's limitations. He follows up this meditation on Sartre with "Why is it that nobody paid attention to Zora Neale Hurston until the 1960s and '70s? I'll tell you why. Richard Wright's *Native Son* and *Black Boy* are works of genius in the naturalistic tradition, and they defined black writing. He is the father of black literature. Hurston did not write about racial oppression. She wrote about relationships and culture. Her work was trapped in the background for a long time because of the conception of what black writing should be." Johnson tries to account for a critical silence on Hurston's work but is unable to read her work beyond its apparent "domestic" concerns. Hurston's *Their Eyes were Watching God* cannot be read without considering the implications of its context of production. She wrote the bulk of the novel while collecting data in Jamaica and Haiti for her ethnographic text on Voodoo *Tell My Horse*. The complex representations of the ethnographer's relationship to gender and nation cannot help but complicate our reading of Hurston's novel.

<sup>117</sup> At the time, Charles Johnson was the first African American since Ellison to receive the National Book Award, who received it in 1952 for *Invisible Man*.

contemporaries under the sway of Black Nationalism, read Ellison as part of the old guard, one whose aesthetic investments signified a political and conservatism squarely in line with Western European thought.<sup>118</sup> A one-time challenger to Ellison's aesthetic vision, Johnson reworked and re-imagined his relationship to Ellison and *Invisible Man*.<sup>119</sup> Later, after Ellison's death, Johnson was prepared to "give Ralph Ellison credit for anything," and locate himself squarely as his aesthetic and intellectual inheritor. In an interview with Charles Rowell, Johnson recasts his first encounter with *Invisible Man* as epiphanic, and the novel as

very philosophically engaging, because of what he's doing partly with Freud, partly with Marx, but even more so with the exploration of questions of perception and the meaning of history in *Invisible Man*, which a lot of people seem to overlook. You know the whole Rinehart section is about perceptual experience, right, and that whole issue that comes up with Todd Clifton where he says he's going to fall out of history. What does that mean to fall out of history? What is history that you can fall out of? (Rowell and Johnson 536)

Ellison's novel, specifically the figures of Rinehart and Todd Clifton, becomes the standard and Ellison's heroic figures, the former with his uncontainable ambiguity, pimp and preacher, everywhere and nowhere at once and the latter with his relationship to history and liminality, telegraph Johnson's interests in questions of ontology, Western and Eastern philosophy, history, race and their effects on identity. Elsewhere I argue that

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<sup>118</sup> Black Nationalist and Marxist critiques of Ralph Ellison's work abound. A few overviews that I found helpful were Gregory Stephens' *On Racial Frontiers: the New Culture of Frederick Douglass, Ralph Ellison and Bob Marley*, Robert O'Meally's *The Craft of Ellison*, and *Ralph Ellison and the Raft of Hope* by Lucas E. Morel. Johnson quickly became a defender of Ellison. In his critique of Albert Murray's fiction "Keeping the Blues at Bay," a review in the *New York Times* of March 10, 1966, he lauds Murray's work as an essayist, but states that his fiction never meets the "magisterial performance" of Ellison's *Invisible Man*. Clearly, Ellison's novel is the benchmark, the standard to which all must be measured. He defends Ellison against what he reads as Jerry Gafio Watt's reading of Ellison's "political life," generously in one moment as a "lack of generosity" and as "argumentum ad hominem" and "character assassination" in another (C4).

<sup>119</sup> During his university years, Johnson wrote six novels that he claims did not succeed because of their imitative and reactive relationship to the writing of power-houses Wright and Ellison.

Ellison's "hep cats," Rinehart and Clifton offer alternative models of the heroic for the black subject and are grounded in the trickster/blues tradition. Further, Ellison's representation of a group of "Zootsuiters" his protagonist encounters on a train, and the "blackness" they perform, indicates a tentativeness, an inability or refusal to "make sense" of the young men. Their humor, grammar and syntax, *style*, are explicitly marked as being in dialogue with the "popular."<sup>120</sup> Rinehart disrupts rigid dichotomies of good and evil, time and space; Clifton, with his "Zootsuit flavor," challenges constructions of history and one's relationship to it. The Zootsuiters perform their identity in what appears to be a hermeneutic of narcissism. Their "style" is read as self-referential and self-indulgent. Charles Johnson takes up the "popular" as a space, the "unreadable" trickster figure, and "Self" indulgence and pushes them to their sardonic limits. For Ellison, impenetrability is unsettling; for Charles Johnson, heir apparent to Ellison's literary and intellectual genealogy,<sup>121</sup> this "unreadable figure" is the jump off point, the kind of "hero" full of ontological possibilities, that can push even further at the relationship of the black subject to constructions of self, nation, and the heroic.

Johnson is part of a generation of artists that had access to both the Western canon and an explicitly African American oral and written tradition. Johnson complements

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<sup>120</sup> In the bulk of writing Ellison does on "Jazz," he creates a distinct hierarchical relationship between what he deems the aesthetically valued "jazz" and jazzmen and those who he aligns with a popularization and/or bastardization of the form. In "The Golden Age, Time Past" and "Blues People" from *Shadow and Act* Ellison expresses a contempt for "bop" and those who would read the form as an aesthetic intervention – specifically Amiri Baraka (née Leroi Jones).

<sup>121</sup> In Jonathan Little's "Introduction" to *Charles Johnson's Spiritual Imagination*, he claims that "Johnson's closest African American literary and intellectual equivalent is the modernist Ralph Ellison. Ellison holds a similar integrationist position, though one less based on religion...[but] Like Ellison, Johnson does not let his fundamental belief in integration blind him to the devastating effects of white racism on African Americans. Johnson is no mere American patriot, romanticist, or utopian[ist]..." (7-8).

these resources by turning toward specifically Eastern philosophical traditions.<sup>122</sup>

Johnson, like his predecessors, vacillates between disrupting and embracing “order.” He does not have the intense ambivalence to mentors/mentorship within a black intellectual genealogy that characterizes the relationships of Ralph Ellison and James Baldwin to Richard Wright. Ellison was notoriously incapable of reconciling his relationship to the “father of black fiction.” In an interview with *Monsters and Critics* conducted in June of 2007, Johnson claims that his goal as a writer is to “deepen and expand works in the area of what is called American philosophical fiction in general, and black philosophical fiction in particular.” He “acknowledge[s] three predecessors---Jean Toomer whose book *Cane* begins the Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s (for his work that turns us toward Eastern philosophy, as in his book of aphorisms, *Essentials*),<sup>123</sup> Richard Wright (for the Marxism and existential that infuse his fiction), and Ralph Ellison (for his imaginative blending of existentialism and Freudian psychology in *Invisible Man*).”<sup>124</sup> To claim Jean Toomer is to locate a precedent of modernist aesthetic vision by a writer famous for rejecting “race” – or at the very least “blackness” – and a precedent in “turning” to

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<sup>122</sup> Johnson’s turn to the “East” is not necessarily an innovation per se, but read within a tradition of African American scholars and intellectuals who have looked to “Asia” for philosophical and political alternatives. Elsewhere I have written on W.E.B. DuBois’ *The Dark Princess*, along with several of his essays and articles, that meditate on the relationship of the Black subject to the “Asia” that establish precedents of intellectual engagement with the “East” by Black Americans and also reveal the problems inherent in turning eastward.

<sup>123</sup> Darwin Turner’s 1980 edited collection of previously out of print and unpublished writing by Jean Toomer entitled *The Wayward and Seeking: A Collection of Writing by Jean Toomer* and his novel *Cane* are taken up in J. L. Greene’s “The Subject(s) of a Diasporan Desire: Jean Toomer as Literary Ancestor” for their “psycho spiritual” aspects, specifically *Cane*’s portrayal of “representative selves who are in different stages of incompleteness and who suffer from different degrees of lack” and his aphorisms’ contemplation of “balance” and spirit (Greene 49). Greene, like Johnson, sees Toomer as an ancestor who muddies the water, so to speak, and allows for a more complex reading of his work as not just “African American” but as “diasporan.” By claiming Toomer, Johnson embraces a genealogy of philosophical inquiry that refused to be limited to race or discipline.

<sup>124</sup> This 2007 interview, “The M&C Interview 1: Charles Johnson, 6/07 - Monsters and Critics,” <[http://www.monstersandcritics.com/books/interviews/article\\_1308738.php#ixzz0HUBRvIL0&A](http://www.monstersandcritics.com/books/interviews/article_1308738.php#ixzz0HUBRvIL0&A)>.



Eastern philosophy. To claim Wright is to claim the ‘father of black fiction’ and a well documented history of engaging with and abandoning materialist based discourses and “nation.” To claim Ellison is to claim it “all” – inherently political struggles with aesthetics, race, philosophical, intellectual and literal genealogies. Johnson is comfortable casting himself in the role of young male novice coming to “age” and “terms” with a complex genealogy.<sup>125</sup> His aesthetic pursuits, interrogation of identity in philosophical terms and ability to decide whom he takes inspiration and guidance from resonate with the quests of Toomer, Ellison and Wright to locate usable models of the heroic.<sup>126</sup> Johnson’s “search” takes him to the spiritual territories of the East and muddies our understanding of the Black American experience. What is clear is that with each generation, what it means to be a writer, what it means to be black, to be a man, and what it means to be a hero changes.

### **Struggling with the Black Self: *Middle Passage* and *Oxherding Tale***

[B]lack fiction is about the troubled quest for identity and liberty, the agony of social alienation, the longing for a real and at times a mythical home...I found the problem of what is or is not the ‘black experience’ staring at me more steadily that I could stare at it.

Charles Johnson, *Being and Race*

*Oxherding Tale* takes its form from the seminal texts of black literature – slave narratives. As a genre, the slave narrative has been defined as a “written and/or dictated

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<sup>125</sup> Johnson also claims John Gardner as an additional literary progenitors, one whose guidance and mentorship began when he started the decade long process of writing *Oxherding Tale*. The difference between black male and female writers and their relationships to “ancestors” is integral to my discussion of the black heroic. Black male writers, unlike their female counterparts, seem to have more difficulty, a persistent deep ambivalence, with those who came before them. They at once want to inherit from and have the ability to reject the “fathers” blessings; they want the fathers’ gifts but do not want to be overshadowed by them.

<sup>126</sup> My first chapter considers Ellison’s claim in an interview, “The Art of Fiction,” published in *Shadow and Act*, that he was struggling with Lord Raglan’s *The Hero* when he started *Invisible Man* and reads that novel as a text that tests available models of the heroic and invariably privileges the trickster/blues/artist as hero.

testimon[y] of enslavement of black human beings”<sup>127</sup> by fugitive and former slaves as well as abolitionists. These Ur-texts of African American literary production sought to articulate the humanity of slaves and the inhumanity of slavery. In availing himself to the slave narrative, Johnson places, at center, struggles with individual and collective identity. These texts were tools for abolitionists to communicate the horrors of slavery and for the black writing subject to refute claims of black intellectual inferiority. As textual signs of reason, ante-bellum slave narratives were instruments to write one’s self into being. Post-bellum slave narratives had a different set of objectives; theirs was a role of re-presenting, renarrativization, of entering into subjectivity through literary critique. These narratives often present slavery as a “trial” or test that the black slave passes through to prove their worthiness of citizenship and ability to participate in post bellum social and economic orders. Many take the form of upward mobility or “bootstrap narratives.” Civil Rights Era and later neo slave narratives take up structural conventions of the Ur-text to speak metaphorically to contemporary concerns while conveying comprehensive depictions of slavery’s effects on the new and “old” worlds.<sup>128</sup> They assume a vital slave culture and thus vitiate against representations of Blacks as a culture

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<sup>127</sup> William L. Andrews’ *To Tell a Free Story: The First Century of Afro-American Autobiography, 1760-1865*, and “The First Fifty Years of the Slave Narrative, 1760-1810” and “The Representation of Slavery and the Rise of Afro-American Literary Realism, 1865-1920,” Andrews and Henry Louis Gates, Jr.’s *Slave Narratives*, Bernard Bell’s *The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition*, Charles T. Davis and Henry Louis Gates, Jr.’s *The Slave’s Narrative*, Frances Smith Foster’s *Witnessing Slavery: The Development of Ante-Bellum Slave Narratives*, Henry Louis Gates’ “Introduction” to *Classic Slave Narratives and The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African American Literary Criticism*, John Sekora’s edited collection of *The Art of Slave Narrative: Original Essays in Criticism and Theory*, and John Edgar Wideman’s “Charles Chesnutt and the WPA Narratives: The Oral and Literate Roots of Afro-American Literature,” were integral to my thinking through the relationship of the “slave narrative” to African American literary tradition and specifically Johnson’s interpretation of the neo-slave narrative.

<sup>128</sup> An example of contemporizing the slave narrative, according to Timothy Spaulding, are those produced during the Reagan Bush years that he sees as “strategic reclamation[s] and articulation[s] of a liberating identity for the postmodern age,” an age that Spaulding reads as one of sociopolitical regression (124).

and history-less people.<sup>129</sup> As postmodern texts they throw into question the narratological; they implicitly and explicitly complicate the project of writing oneself into “being.”

*Oxherding Tale* has two chapters: “On the Nature of Slave Narratives” and “Manumission of First-Person Viewpoint” that interrupt the narrative with interjections by the author and narrator as author. The former explicitly links the slave narrative with the “Puritan” or conversion narrative, tracing its lineage to “that hoary confession by the first philosophical black writer Saint Augustine” (118). This meta-critical move depends on a reader who accepts American taxonomies of race. Saint Augustine was not, in terms of historically contingent categories of identity, “black.” The “voice” that interrupts the narrative claims that Augustine’s “nearly Platonic movement from ignorance to wisdom, nonbeing to being” is followed up by the claim that “[n]o form, I should note, loses its ancestry, rather these meanings accumulate in layers of tissue as the form evolves” (119). The “I”/eye that determines meaning and value is a Western reader deeply entrenched in “Western” thought, and the textual manifestation of that reader is the central protagonist, Andrew Hawkins. Through his first person narration/ “commentary” we have a challenge

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<sup>129</sup> Hegel made the infamous claim that Africans were without history and “consciousness” in his *The Philosophy of History* where he claimed that “[i]n Negro life...consciousness has not yet attained to the realization of any substantial objective existence—as for example, God, or Law—in which the interest of man’s volition is involved and in which he realizes his own being. This distinction between himself as an individual and the universality of his essential being, the African in the uniform, undeveloped oneness of his existence has not yet attained; so that the Knowledge of an absolute Being, an Other and a Higher than his individual self, is entirely wanting. The Negro... exhibits the natural man in his completely wild and untamed state. We must lay aside all thought of reverence and morality—all that we call feeling—if we would rightly comprehend him; there is nothing harmonious with humanity to be found in this type of character” (93). He then goes on to dismiss the entire continent of Africa in order to “not...mention it again. For it is no historical part of the World; it has no movement or development to exhibit. Historical movements in it—that is in its northern part—belong to the Asiatic or European World” and any developments that are observable such as in Carthage and Egypt are mere geographical anomalies, and are part of the greater narrative of Western civilization (99). Hugh Trevor Roper echoes Hegel’s position a hundred years later in his *Rise of Christian Europe* where he claimed that there was no such thing as African history “only the history of Europeans in Africa. The rest is darkness, and darkness is not the subject of history” (9). Chinua Achebe took up this claim in his famous critique of Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, “An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*” (1973).

to what Johnson sees as a limited perspective on the philosophical work of the slave narrative. His narrator makes an explicit “apology” for “worrying” the “formal conventions –as we defined them—of the Negro Slave Narrative” (118). Specifically, he worries the Judeo-Christian basis of slave narratives. The “form” of the narrative, stemming from the conversion narrative, dictates its spiritual and philosophical content. This “we” is not just the narrator and central protagonist, Andrew Hawkins, but includes producers of cultural texts and criticism. Johnson’s neo-slave narrative changes the “spiritual” trajectories by deviating from an explicitly Judeo Christian model and in doing so, he “worries” the ideological bases of our understanding of subjectivity and by extension race.

The writer breaks into the narrative a second time in “Manumission of First-Person Viewpoint” to question the efficacy of “textual subjectivity.” To establish textual subjectivity, an “I,” does not necessarily challenge or liberate the subject from the limitations of that “I”/eye. In this “second (unfortunate) intermission” Johnson, as narrator, asserts that “[t]he Subject of the Slave Narrative, like all Subjects, is forever *outside* itself in others, objects; he is parasitic, if you like, drawing his life from everything he is not, and at precisely the instant he makes possible their appearance” (152). Johnson’s capitalization of the words “subject” and “slave narrative” plays with assignation of value and consciousness that invokes DuBois’ claim that the black subject in America experiences a double consciousness, a “self” outside of self, in the eyes of white others.<sup>130</sup> Johnson’s formulation differs from DuBois’ in his positing the possibility of the black subject as “parasitic.” To define the subject of the slave narrative as parasitic

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<sup>130</sup> DuBois’ *Souls of Black Folk* (1903) has been integral in my process of tracking a trajectory of the Black heroic in Black literature.

is, at the very least, not “traditional.” Defining the black subject’s identity through negation, lack, is in line with “tradition.” The “subject” of the slave narrative is an embodiment of contradiction; he has presence in absence and appears only when he has been erased. Unlike the first “intermission,” this second break does not begin with the central protagonist as narrator, but with third person omniscient perspective. The chapter ends with a challenge, that “[h]aving liberated first-person, it is now only fitting that in the following chapters we do as much for Andrew Hawkins” (153). This “first-person,” or rather the authorial “we” that aggregates I and we together, reveals the problems inherent in trying to write oneself into subjectivity. Only in the realm of fiction can the “I” liberate an equally fictional “Andrew Hawkins.”<sup>131</sup>

Further, by having a central protagonist who is “mixed race” and can “pass,” Johnson critiques the axiological binary of white and black at the core of American racial taxonomies.<sup>132</sup> As a less than “tragic” mulatto male, Andrew Hawkins is a product of a drunken “joke” between a white master, Jonathan Polkinghorne and his black slave butler, George Hawkins, who switch places for a night to avoid derision from their wives. Andrew is not a result of a “liaison” between a white master and black female slave. His origins disrupt conventions of slave narratives and “tragic mulatta” fiction. In the vein of James Weldon Johnson’s *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, a “black” male

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<sup>131</sup> This invocation of the genre of the slave narrative and its conventions troubles what Robert Stepto refers to as the “governing myth” of the African American Literary tradition which is the quest for freedom and literacy and by doing so, troubles other “governing myths” such as the ontological integrity of categories of “race” (Stepto ix-x).

<sup>132</sup> Werner Sollors’ *Neither Black nor White yet Both: Thematic Explorations of Interracial Literature*, *Passing and the Fictions of Identity* edited by Elaine Ginsberg and Donald E. Pease, *Passing: Identity and Interpretation in Sexuality, Race and Religion* edited by Maria Sanchez and Linda Schlossberg, *Crossing the Line: Racial Passing in Twentieth Century U.S. Literature and Culture* edited by Gayle Wald and Donald E. Pease, *To be Suddenly White: Literary Realism and Racial Passing* by Steven J. Belluscio, and *The Passing Figure: Racial Confusion in Modern American Literature* by Juda Bennett were all helpful to my thinking through how Andrew Hawkins functions in the text as a “passing figure.”

protagonist that can pass for white gets at the heart of anxieties of the dominant – that blacks, specifically black men, will penetrate white symbols of power and privilege – white women.<sup>133</sup>

George Hawkins is driven from the house and relegated to shepherding as punishment for his potency. Master Polkinghorne, in a seemingly uncharacteristically compassionate move, raises Andrew and has him educated by Ezekiel Sykes-Withers,<sup>134</sup> an anarchist transcendentalist Marxist mystic, who is addicted to laudanum, looks like Thomas Paine, knows as much about metaphysics as any man,” has traveled in India, but can not be left alone in the room with young girls. Andrew grows up and falls in love with another slave, Minty, and petitions his master for freedom for himself, Minty, his father George and George’s wife Mattie. Andrew is subsequently hired out to Flo Hatfield, sensualist, devotee of Jeremy Bentham<sup>135</sup> and mistress of Leviathan Plantation.<sup>136</sup> On the way to Leviathan, Andrew meets Reb, a coffin maker and father to one of Flo’s male concubines. Flo is Andrew’s second educator. He spends a contracted year in a heroin-induced haze, consuming and being consumed sexually until he

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<sup>133</sup> And in the vein of James Weldon Johnson’s novel, the central protagonist of *The Oxherding Tale* also finds himself teaching English composition to the “needy.”

<sup>134</sup> Polkinghorne is an obvious reference to cuckolding and as such reveals the inherent contradictions and “failures” of the “family” as an idealized model or rather anchor for colonial capitalism. One’s relationship to family defined one’s access to masculinity. To lay claim to one’s family, possessions and land was to possess the possibility of citizenship and manhood.

<sup>135</sup> Jeremy Bentham’s writings on the Panopticon, a “plan of management” of prison populations involved a structure of a prison in the shape of a circle in which each cell focused on a tower in the center that housed “authority” and disciplinarians. The cells allowed only one direction of sight and that was toward the tower where guards stood at the ready to punish any and all infractions (Bentham 29-95). This literal structure was subsequently taken up in Michel Foucault’s “Panopticism” where he applied it to the realm of discursive relations and operations of power.

<sup>136</sup> This is an obvious nod to Thomas Hobbes’ *Leviathan*, which was written in time of tremendous upheaval; England was about to enter a civil war as a result of a power struggle between the monarchy and the British Parliament. Hobbes argues that man’s “natural state” is that of conflict, specifically war between men. Hobbes seeks to ameliorate this condition of continuous conflict through proposing a social contract in which a sovereign with absolute power protects the commonwealth. Flo Hatfield’s name recalls the distinctly American conflict, the Hatfields vs. the McCoys, in which two West Virginia/Kentucky families, incited by political and territorial disputes (one involving a hog), fought bitterly from 1878 to 1891.

discovers that his biological mother, Anna Polkinghorne, has sold half the slaves from Cripple Gate, including his “parents” and Minty. In a drug and grief induced stupor he punches Flo and is sent to the mines and certain death. Reb tries to speak on his behalf and is sent with Andrew. On the way to the mines, Andrew starts passing for white and he and Reb escape to Spartanburg. There, withdrawing from heroin, Andrew meets Dr. Undercliff<sup>137</sup> and his daughter Peggy whom he eventually marries. He then enters a career of drudgery – teaching English composition. The novel ends with him being confronted by the “Soulcatcher”/slave catcher whose tattooed body is marked with all of the “souls” he has killed. Andrew is “let go” by the Soulcatcher once he, Andrew, has let go of the last vestiges of attachment to self.

For Johnson, the key is to not just stare into what Johnson reads as an ontological void, but to get beyond it. The “troubled” quest for Johnson’s hero is to conquer “blackness” and liberate himself from social alienation and any attachment to political ideology based on essentialist discourses of race or longing for real or mythical homes.<sup>138</sup> The “American homes,” his “father’s cabin” and the “family house,” are repositories for “the same crisis in the male spirit,” more specifically the rift between the heart, spirit, and cultural constructions of masculinity. This is a narrative of conversion. After Andrew escapes, he is told by Dr. Groll, a veterinarian treating his symptoms of heroin withdrawal, that he has developed an “extra sound” in his heart, a problem with his

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<sup>137</sup> Doctor Undercliff, who is cast by Johnson as an incarnation of Benjamin Franklin (122) is reminiscent of Dr. Underhill in Royall Tyler’s *Algerine Captive*. This fictional character facilitates and dialectically engages a conversation between Islam and Christianity and is an unusual eighteenth century American text in its sympathetic stance toward the “mohamadans.”

<sup>138</sup> In an interview with Jonathan Little, Johnson claims ownership of quite a few first editions of novels written during the rise of the Black Arts era that he aligns with a kind of death, literary obscurity. He claims that “[he] found them to be interesting when [he] read them, but, unfortunately, they do not meet the standards that Ralph Ellison set in 1952 with *Invisible Man*, or the standards set by Albert Murray in his remarkable essays in *The Hero and the Blues*” (Little and Johnson 168). Again, Ellison is the standard to which all “black” American writing is held.

diastolic downbeat, that cannot be ameliorated until he stops being a Negro (OT 69).

Once Andrew can let go of conceptions of identity based on biology or politics based on race,<sup>139</sup> he can transform. In his final confrontation with the “old,” Andrew faces his father’s image, the man who had needed to “keep the pain alive...needed to rekindle racial horror, revive old pains review disappointments like a sick man fingering his sores” (142). Andrew’s father, George, embodies the sickness of “race” in his Garveyesque claim that “Africa will rise again someday...with her own queens and kings and a court bigger’n anythin’ in Europe” and who is referred to by the narrator as “living proof of the futility of black pride” (102).<sup>140</sup> In order to overcome the “sickness” of attachment to blackness, Andrew has to embrace multiplicity and become “(his) father’s father” (176). Letting go of blackness is a letting go of pain, suffering and dependence upon victimage. The “slave narrative,” the genre that was supposed to function as a textual sign and proof of the black subject’s worthiness of citizenship, centers around a “joke,” a joke that undermines the primacy of biology, kinship and ennobled victimage. Through disrupting literary conventions Johnson challenges readers’ preconceived notions of Black textual subjectivity.

Johnson’s novel moves concepts of the self, particularized by race, to the center to dismantle them. Any attachment to “self” is tantamount to a death wish. Dr. Groll tells Andrew that the cause of death for black men is “the belief in personal identity, the notion that what we are is somehow distanced from other things when this unity, this lie, this ancient stupidity has no foundation in scientific fact” (58). In order to have a “self,”

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<sup>139</sup> The problem, according to the narrator, is that “men had epidermalized Being” and it is this very corporealization of spirit that has to be dismantled (Johnson 52).

<sup>140</sup> The obvious literary ancestor of George Hawkins would be Ras the Exhorter of Ellison’s *Invisible Man* with the difference being a discernible compassion, but this compassion seems to stop at pity.



Andrew has to let go of what were the bases of passing and slave narratives: family, race and nation. As readers, we are taken on an adventure in which the end the hero's spiritual quest is coterminous with passing into whiteness.<sup>141</sup> Historically, the racialized and intellectual self was integral to the black cultural worker's vision of uplift and revolution. Establishing textual subjectivity, an "I" that could represent a black individual self, refined and defined by Western philosophical epistemes, was seen as a weapon that could be deployed to gain equanimity. Johnson takes up the slave narrative, and the "self" that is created in it, to turn it upside down and marry it to Western and Eastern philosophical debates.<sup>142</sup>

Johnson's study of philosophy exposed him to Hindu, Buddhist, and Taoist classics, and was his antidote to the self-destructive anger he perceived in Black Nationalist movements (Rowell 543). Johnson perceived linkages between African American and Eastern culture and philosophy and saw them as viable spaces for African Americans to pursue alternative modes of understanding and constructing a "self." In his research Johnson came in contact with the Ten Oxherding pictures created by the 11<sup>th</sup> century Chinese artist Kaakuan Shien. These drawings illustrate an analogy between ox herding and the path to enlightenment. The ox, the Chinese symbol for the self, is pursued by the herder. Each of the ten illustrations presents a step towards enlightenment.

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<sup>141</sup> Again, the text's similarity to James Weldon Johnson's *Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man* is undeniable. *Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man* ends with the central protagonist contemplating the loss of his "birthright" that he has exchanged for a mess of pottage. Johnson's text is equal parts passing, slave and conversion narrative, with emphasis on conversion.

<sup>142</sup> As a participant in the formation of USI's Black Studies program, Johnson voraciously read slave narratives, a genre that informs the majority of his novels. Of the slave narrative, Johnson claims that the form is "one of the most indigenous native forms of literature that we have in this country," and that "[he] wanted to take the slave narrative and do something philosophical with it" (Norton 2508). I will not pretend to understand this statement – in terms of its arrogance and effacement of the inherent philosophical aspects of slave narratives in their engagement with and disruption of ontology that existed before Johnson put pen to paper, but will, for this moment, take him at his word that he wanted to explore "metaphysical, epistemological forms of bondage that enslave" (Rowell 539).

Beginning with confusion, the ox herder struggles with obstacles and false paths and ends with the herder realizing that he and the self are one. The ox gets progressively lighter and lighter until it disappears. The last picture shows a monk returning from the mountain to the market place with open hands and a gourd of wine. This final stage represents a reintegration of the monk/hero into the community in the role of helper. *Oxherding Tale*, for all its innovation, presents us with difficult questions about Johnson's "path to enlightenment." Is this really the model of conversion that Johnson wants us to seek? Or, is this the bait that we are supposed to avoid taking?

The hero of Johnson's *Middle Passage* is not a "passing figure" but a "free pure black." He is epidermally bound, unable to escape discursive processes of representation. Similar to *Oxherding Tale*, *Middle Passage* challenges the reader in its representation of one of the core tropes of African American experience – the Middle Passage. The Middle Passage has been described by Toni Morrison as "a place where we are all trying to leave our bodies behind" (Morrison 210), by Barbara Christian as "a four-hundred-year holocaust that wrenched tens of millions of Africans from their mother, their biological mothers as well as their mother land, in a disorganized and unimaginable monstrous fashion" (Christian 364), and Hortense Spillers describes it as an "oceanic" locus of suspended identity, where African peoples were divested of cultural and sexual identity, a site where they were "culturally 'unmade'" (Spillers 74). There are pleasant euphemisms: the "involuntary migration of Africans," graphic representations in the form of ship manifests, charts, bills of sale, statistics, cross-cut images of ships and cargo, disparate enumerations of African peoples stolen, sold and disseminated to "new" and "old worlds" (Manning 288). Johnson's *Oxherding Tale* refers to the Middle Passage as the "road to Spartanburg." *Middle Passage* does something different altogether. *Middle Passage*

constructs the voyage in reverse, from America to Africa and back again, and is described by the central protagonist as “one long hangover” (36). Johnson challenges the representation of this historical process of unmaking Africans and making black slaves and in doing so undercuts sentimentality. Johnson does not dismiss the gravity of that historical event or its affects on Black Americans, but he does offer an alternative trajectory of its cultural significance.

Looking back at the asceticism of the Middle Passage, I saw how the frame of mind I had adopted left me *unattached*, like the slaves who, not knowing what awaited them in the New World, put a high premium on living from moment to moment, and this, I realized, was why they did not commit suicide. The voyage has irreversibly changed my seeing, made of me a cultural mongrel, and transformed the world into a fleeting shadow play I felt no need to possess or dominate, only appreciate in the ever extended present. Colors had been more vivid at sea, water *wetter*, ice *colder*... (MP 187 *my emphasis*)

Here, the ineffable terror of the Middle Passage creates an opportunity to escape abjection. The difficulty of the heroic lies in the quest to transform. The narrator, Rutherford Calhoun, distinguishes his position as “unattached” rather than “detached,” suggesting a process of losing connection rather than never having had any. The unattached slaves came to an ideological place where “living” becomes important above all else, but Rutherford has to transcend this “unattachment.” He has to “detach” himself from all that would bind him to materialist forms of identity.

Rutherford Calhoun<sup>143</sup> is a trickster, profligate hustler, thief and sensualist. He is an embodiment of craving; he “literally [hungers] for life in all its shades and hues: [he] was hooked on sensation, you might say, a lecher for perception and the nerve-knocking thrill, like a shot of opium of new experiences” (MP 3). When we meet Calhoun, he is

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<sup>143</sup> The name of central protagonist conjures two very controversial historical figures: Rutherford B. Hayes (1822-93), 19<sup>th</sup> president of the United States who ended Reconstruction in 1876 and John Calhoun, one of the most ardent defenders of American slavery.

attempting to escape gambling debts and a marriage to the manipulative overweight Isadora Bailey by escaping on a slave ship, *The Republic*,<sup>144</sup> where he serves as assistant to the ship's cook under the leadership of the oddly compelling Napoleonic Captain Falcon. The *Republic*'s mission is to sail to West Africa where they will pick up a cargo of forty members of a mystical and mythic race, the Allmuseri, and amazingly their god. On the voyage home, the ship encounters a bizarre storm in which some of the crew and Allmuseri are lost. A mutiny, led by the first mate Mr. Cringle, is thwarted when the Allmuseri rebel and take control of the ship. After the Allmuseri take control, Captain Falcon commits suicide and the ship, without its captain or navigator, begins to drift aimlessly. Eventually the majority of the crew and Allmuseri succumb to disease, and the *Republic* is intercepted by another ship carrying Papa Zeringue, one of Rutherford's debtors, and Isadora Bailey, who are about to be married. When it is revealed that Papa Zeringue, self proclaimed "Race Man," holds a controlling interest in the Republic's venture, one of his henchmen, a descendant of the Allmuseri, vows to "whup [his] natural ass" (165). The text ends with Isadora and Rutherford united, sans the conjugal, but with the common goal of raising Baleka, a young Allmuseri girl orphaned during the voyage.

As with *Oxherding Tale*, the central protagonist of this narrative has to embrace an alternative way of thinking about the relationship between individual and national identity. The nation, in this text, is as much in flux as "individual" identity. Nothing is a given; nothing is sacred. Johnson's preoccupation with the negative impact of Black Nationalism appears in this text in the form of the figure Diamelo, once a man with little power in his community, who seizes the opportunity to attain power that had alluded him.

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<sup>144</sup> The name of the ship, the Republic, refers to both the early American republic and Plato's *Republic*. The ship is described as "a society...a commonwealth" (Johnson MP 175), slaver and salvager of the best of "their war shocked cultures (49), and as an insubstantial pawn in the larger exchange and shifting of property (150).

Once in power, Diamelo appropriates the look of Captain Falcon, wears his hat and clothing and then implements “colonial” rule.<sup>145</sup> The only language allowed to be spoken was Allmuseri; no “new world” medicine could be used, nor could anything but Allmuseri food/cooking be done. Additionally, “[The crew was] not, of course, to touch their women; in fact, we were to lower our eyes when they passed to show proper respect for a folk [they] did not understand, had abused because of that, and now must come to for a wisdom [they had] ignored” (154-155). The consequence for embracing these strategies, taking up the master’s tools of cultural and linguistic oppression, is death: literal and spiritual. The Allmuseri tribe, once monk-like and ascetic in their long robes, with their concepts of permeability between self and community, are arrested from their “timeless” and noble history and forever changed. Johnson gives us two narratives of spiritual progress; Rutherford moves toward enlightenment, and the Allmuseri’s inverse movement toward eternal damnation. Once incorporated into the flow of capital and nation, the Allmuseri tribe inflicts karmic destruction upon itself. To embrace nationalist rhetoric is to embrace death.

The *Republic*, as a signifier of nation, invariably becomes a ship of death, and for Rutherford this ship, with its inherent fluidity, is also a site of rebirth. Rutherford has to abandon his anger, grasping, and frustration with systems that lock him out of privileged forms of subjectivity: primogeniture, slavery and capitalism. He has to undergo an un-homing or dismantling of “self” and “home”:

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<sup>145</sup> This is similar to W. E. B. DuBois’ critique of Black Nationalism, or more specifically the caricature of Marcus Garvey in his novel *Dark Princess*, in which a West Indian “Mr. Perigua” a supposed black nationaist colludes with white supremacists, a clear reference to Garvey’s 1922 meeting with KKK imperial Edward Young Clarke, after which Garvey was charged by some with betrayal of the race. In the May 1924 issue of *The Crisis*, DuBois went so far as to claim that Garvey was “without doubt, the most dangerous enemy of the Negro race in America and in the world. He is either a lunatic or a traitor” (8-9).

I peered deep into memory and called forth all that have ever given me solace, scraps of rags and language too, for I myself I found nothing I could rightly call Rutherford Calhoun, only pieces and fragments of all the people who had touched me, all the places I had seen... That 'I' that I was, was a mosaic of many countries, a patchwork of others and objects stretching backward and perhaps to the beginning of time. (162)

Here the insistent "I" is tenuous, elastic; it is not localizable in a body or essence but in process much like the *Republic* itself: constantly changing, falling apart, and coming together. This nation, the early *Republic* that would eventually become America, emerges in cultural syncretism much in the same way that Rutherford and his shipmates become cultural mongrels. All the survivors become hybrids, willingly or not, in this process. The Middle Passage created irrevocable cultural and spiritual change. Caught between cultural dislocation and spiritual incapacitation, Rutherford's panacea lies in giving up concepts of the self that are based on bodies or borders, in the corporeal or tangible lands touched by the ships.

Rutherford Calhoun, like the reader, is put in the position of spectator. We, along with the central protagonist, watch the rise and fall of "black nationalism." And where the "Father of Black writing," Richard Wright, wanted black writers to embrace a "nationalist spirit,"<sup>146</sup> Johnson along with many of his generation, had seen how nationalism, even one "whose reason for being lies in the simple fact of self-possession," fails because of reliance on materiality. To evolve, Johnson's narrator and all on the ship have to lose any fantasy they had of corporeal integrity. Even the ship they travel on, the allegorical republic, "was physically unstable. She was perpetually flying apart and reforming during the voyage, falling to pieces beneath us" (35-36). The ship, the nation, are

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<sup>146</sup> In 1935 Richard Wright's "Blueprint for Negro Writing" posits a challenge to "Negro writers" to "accept the nationalist implications of their lives, not in order to encourage them, but in order to change and transcend them. They must accept the concept of nationalism because, in order to transcend it, they must possess and understand it" (48).

just as intangible as they are tangible. Similarly, the Allmuseri, once a seeming stable constant, an “original” people, are a people linked less by biology than “a clan held together by values” (MP 109). The body, the home, land and nation, are insufficient foundations for the self. Homes can be destroyed and taken. Bodies are vulnerable to harm and decay. The irrevocable fact of colonialism disrupts all categories of identity; everything becomes less “substantial” (150). No point of contact remains static, no people “pure.”

This “long hangover” is a process of unmooring in which Johnson’s protagonist loses particularity – at least in the ways that we are comfortable as Western readers. When Rutherford confronts the “African God” in the hull of the ship, he discovers that he can no longer isolate himself from the “We” and that the “black self was the greatest of all fictions” (171). There is, in this moment, no distinction between self and God, between the father he searches for and the man he finds mirrored back at him in this God. Rutherford Calhoun has to reconcile his relationship to the men with whom he has spiritual and biological connections, with his own anger and desire. The “grasping” Calhoun has to forgive his brother Jackson for his lack of desire, for his being “self emptied” and not self interested.”<sup>147</sup> This is the quest; he has to let go.

Johnson’s work, particularly *Middle Passage* and *Oxherding Tale*, explores what Victor Anderson defines as ontological blackness, a “covering term that connotes categorical, essentialist, and representational languages depicting black life and experience,” and like Anderson, Johnson’s objective is to move beyond this limiting

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<sup>147</sup> Calhoun’s brother distributed the slave master’s belongings among those who had worked for him servants and hired hands, “[presently and formerly employed...the fixed capital spread among bondsmen throughout the county...whatever remains donated to that college in Oberlin what helps Negroes on their way north” (117). Calhoun’s expression of resistance took the form of “childhood hatred for colonization in boyish foul-ups and ‘accidents’” (114) and later perceived only two options: “out right sedition or plodding reform” and so Rutherford chose escape.

sphere and gesture toward what Anderson calls post-modern blackness. Post-modern blackness recognizes the permanence of race as an affective category in the process of identity formation but also acknowledges its mutability and limitations. Using this key term, we see how ontological blackness, “its categories and its interest in racial solidarity, loyalty, and authenticity, conceals, subjugates and calls into question African Americans’ interest in fulfilled individuality” (Anderson 15). If we consider the constructedness that ontological blackness/post-modern blackness suggests, along with such terms like solidarity and spirituality, there can be redemption. Johnson’s work conveys an ethic of individualism in its focus on the redirection of “self-interest,” but the question remains: How can a social practice, an ethic of social care and responsibility, emerge from this elevation of individual spirit and loss of “self”? Rutherford Calhoun and Andrew Hawkins may not be immediately recognizable “heroes,” but their disruption of the ideological underpinnings of our cultural meanings of “self” is decidedly heroic.

Identifiable “heroes” are necessary for the rest of us to engage in revolutionary acts. Without them there can be no challenge to the dominant at either the individual or collective levels. Rutherford Calhoun and Andrew Hawkins engage in spiritual quests that are recognizable. Johnson’s work allows us to challenge our understanding of the hero and the “heroic act.” His engagement with film and spectatorship reveals the popular as a discursive realm capable of providing the opportunity for heroic identification and action. The popular can facilitate transformation, even with its ossuary of first name only heroes who have found their way to t-shirts.



## Conversion and Spectatorship: an opening made

American movie houses are...the new cathedrals, their stories better remembered than legends, totems, or mythologies, their directors more popular than novelists, more influential than saints...

Charles Johnson, "Moving Pictures"

"Moving Pictures," originally published in 1985, is one of two short stories by Charles Johnson in a collection entitled *The Sorcerer's Apprentice: Tales and Conjurations* that meditate on the "magic" created in the "new cathedrals" of America, specifically the magic that occurs in film spectatorship. Framed by ante and post bellum tales of conjuring and magic<sup>148</sup> are two short stories that allow the reader to question the politics and transformative potential of spectatorship.<sup>149</sup>

Set in the early eighties at a historical moment when collective social memory seemed to have evacuated all remembrance of the civil rights era and its struggles, the central protagonist of Johnson's "Moving Pictures" is able to temporarily "escape" the death of social memory while avoiding his own realities of being on the brink of divorce, engaging in "empty" affairs with younger

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<sup>148</sup> Reminiscent of Charles W. Chesnutt's 1899 *The Conjure Woman and Other Conjure Tales*, a text that negotiates what Richard H. Broadhead sees as a tricky balance between facilitating a kind of cultural tourism and delocalizing cultural order, Johnson's text is written in a vernacular that adheres to genre conventions while offering historically specific contestations of identity formation and affinity.

<sup>149</sup> One implication of this work that needs to be addressed but has been bracketed for this project is the question of genre, what it means to represent the complex processes of identification and engagement in film spectatorship through fiction, specifically the short story, which more than any other genre of writing, has been translated to film. In *World Spectators*, theorist Kaja Silverman claims that the difficulty of orienting oneself with respect to what is seen is analogous to the disorientation we feel reading Plato's *Republic*, where the disjunction between perceived reality and how we imagine our selves is not, due to the limitation of translation, the "semantic limitations of classical Greek." Silverman suggests that it is "the deformation to which Socrates subjects the look, to whose coordinates our sense of space is keyed" that disrupts our sense of vision, space and time (Silverman 5). The crux of the problem is of translating scopic processes and the disruptive effects produced by such (re)coding. This disruption, I argue, is rooted in *both* acts, representation of translation *and* reception, the broader complications of which will be pursued elsewhere.

women amid the burgeoning AIDS crisis, and struggling with having “prostituted” his “art” and PhD to churn out, albeit rather lucratively, screenplays that he feels are devoid of aesthetic merit. As our protagonist takes his seat in the audience an omniscient narrator meditates on the “illusions of film,” and introduces us to:

*a seeker groping in the darkness for light, hoping something magical will be beamed from above, and no matter how bad the matinee is, or silly, something deep, and probably even too dangerous to talk loudly about will indeed happen to you and the other [spectators], before this drama reels to its last transparent frame. (115-116 my emphasis)*

For Johnson, spectatorship is a process that does not depend on a mystical entity or a deified apparatus on high, beaming magic from above, but locates the quasi-supernatural force, the magic, in the seeker’s choice to engage in fantasy. This process, according to Johnson is independent of aesthetic virtues, and may occur firmly in the realm of the popular. Johnson makes the popular a potential site of transformation, in seeming contradiction to Johnson’s interest in philosophical discourses.<sup>150</sup> His work demonstrates an attempt to close the gap between intellectual and philosophical work of the mind and spirit with the popular.

A second story in the same collection, “China,” written in the early eighties and set in the mid seventies, addresses more directly the “dangerous” thing that occurs in the theater. The narrative follows a physically and emotionally run-down middle-aged black

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<sup>150</sup> In “Moving Pictures,” Johnson locates the “movie theater” outside the metropole, simultaneously distanced from and entrenched in Western signifiers of (post)modernity. “Outside, across town, you have put away for ninety minutes” such mundane as job, failed marriage, failed professional and aesthetic meanderings (116). It is not so much a locating of the space of fantasy “outside” of the metropole, as the films given the way they start with “frosty mountaintop[s] ringed by stars” (Paramount), “lion[s] roaring” (Metro Goldwyn Mayer) or “floodlights bathing the tips of buildings” (20th Century Fox) “all ensure that we, the spectator never forget that the “stable trademarks in a world of flux” are indeed the signifiers of proliferating corporatist interest (117).

postal worker, Rudolph Jackson, and his introduction and subsequent enmeshment in martial arts philosophy and culture. Rudolph is unfulfilled in his marriage, spiritual and social life until one evening, while at the movies, he and his wife Evelyn see previews for a martial arts film. Rudolph sees the superhuman leaps, elaborately choreographed fight sequences, and asks with the wonderment of a child "can people really do that . . . leap that high?" Evelyn responds cynically and points out the trampoline at the bottom of the frame. Although disappointed, the revelation of the "impossibility" of the Chinese warriors' ability to fly does not deter Rudolph from attending these films the first chance he gets. After seeing a karate demonstration and two films, one of which is the Seattle premier of the classic *Five Fingers of Death* (1972),<sup>151</sup> Rudolph begins a quest for renewal through martial arts.

As with the Platonic<sup>152</sup> seeker of "Moving Pictures," "China" is replete with references to sight and blindness. The narrative is framed by Evelyn's perspective and spectatorship: a woman whose eyes "were failing; her retinas were tearing like soft tissue"; whose sight is described filmically, "the sudden shock of an empty frame in a series of slides" (63). The narrative ends with Evelyn looking on as her reconditioned husband leaps magically through the air to defeat an opponent at a martial arts

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<sup>151</sup> The two films that Rudolph sees are *Five Fingers of Death* (1972) and *Deep Thrust: The Hand of Death* (1973). The former is a classic narrative whose central protagonist, Chao Chi Hao, battles local villains and the limitations of his own body to restore order. This film was shown at the Cannes Film Festival in 1972 and outgrossed all domestic productions for Warner Brothers that year. *Deep Thrust* is a sensationalist film advertised with images of a half nude Angela Mao, who plays a revenge driven woman who tries to get justice for the murder of her sister, but consistently gets in the way of the real hero, her sister's fiancé.

<sup>152</sup> The description of the "seeker" is a direct allusion to Plato's *Allegory of the Cave*, which makes sense given Johnson's intellectual trajectory. Johnson received a BA in Journalism from the University of Southern Illinois and a PhD in Philosophy from SUNY Stony Brook where his dissertation on phenomenology and race was published as *Being and Race* in 1988. For Johnson, Plato provides an ideal construction of a subject who struggles with forms and concepts of reality and unreality as metaphors for social constructions of identity in our contemporary moment.

tournament. Evelyn's sight is epistemic and repeated reference to it functions two-fold. First, Evelyn becomes the signifier of Western empirical constructions of knowledge and, most importantly for my analysis, throws into question the way Johnson genders spectatorship in a way that posits masculinized spectatorship as aggressive and potentially transformative, while female spectatorship is constructed as passive and derivative.<sup>153</sup> Johnson's representation of the process of identification forged in spectatorship, the "deep and "too dangerous" thing happening in the darkened theater, allows us to question the problematics and potential of "transcultural spectatorship," and what it means to search another culture for a usable model of the heroic.<sup>154</sup>

As the narrator of "Moving Pictures" contemplates the origins of the magical processes in spectatorship, we are told one possibility is empathetic response, the "grief and satisfaction" the spectator creates as they "watch" a film. The characters on the screen draw empathetic responses from the spectator, mirroring "the sense of ruin you felt at your own mother's funeral, the irreversible feeling of abandonment" thus engaging

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<sup>153</sup> Theorist Bill Brown locates Johnson's "China" at the intersection of "three theoretical axes: commodity culture, mass masculinity and spectatorship -- and alongside three different and differently narrated histories of 'world literature,' of the global reception of kung fu films, and of the war in Vietnam" (25). While providing a well drawn out connection to discourses of militarized masculinity post Vietnam, Brown does not address the actual processes that occur in spectatorship, nor does he read the actual commodity, the films themselves, that inspire Rudolph's transformation or the failure of emancipatory discourses of militaristic masculinity that predate Vietnam. These are discourses that Johnson, having negotiated his own ambivalent relationship with black radicalism and come to an integrationist sensibility, consistently concerns himself with in his writing. I want to place this paper in conversation with Brown's work, but focus on the convergence of emancipatory discourses, transcultural spectatorship, masculinity and bildung models of transformation.

<sup>154</sup> In A. Timothy Spaulding's "Re-forming Black Subjectivity: Symbolic Transculturation in Charles Johnson's *Oxherding Tale* and *Middle Passage*," he argues persuasively that Johnson's novels "undercut identity politics" by focusing on a transcultural aspect of black subjectivity and views identity not as unitary or fixed" but in change or transformation (78). Where Spaulding considers uses the term "transcultural" to discuss the "racial identity" of Andrew Hawkins, and also the cultural hybridity produced by the Middle passage. By narrowing his focus to the Atlantic and literal bodies in these spaces, Spaulding ignores other ideological, philosophical and spiritual cross currents that Johnson's work explores or the threats of appropriation inherent in such moves.

the spectator in a reproduction of a primal scene, “[locking the spectator] . . . in a cycle of emotion (yours), which [the screened] images have borrowed, intensified, then given back to you” (121). This reproduction of the primal scene can be directly linked to theories of spectatorship evolving from the 1970s “conceptualized under the Post-structuralist category of the subject (as elaborated by Lacan and Althusser) and corresponding notions of ideology” and as such, located in “textual relationships” through which one can be interpolated into a system of domination (Hansen 3, Berenstein 222). Early frameworks posit a spectator that “can do no other than identify with the camera . . . which has looked before him and what he is now looking at and whose stationing . . . determines the vanishing point” (Metz 49). In this paradigm, the act of viewing enacts an identification process similar to the “mirror stage” in Lacanian psychoanalytic discourse,<sup>155</sup> whereby the viewer looks at the images projected on the screen and assumes or is interpolated into a relationship with the characters. Identification with filmic characters is the most complicated issue in psychoanalytic theories of spectatorship as personality itself is constituted and specified by the relational (LaPlanche and Pontalis 205).

The narrator then considers the apparatus itself, specifically the “illusion of speed,” the semblance of linearity that is achieved through the juxtapositioning of images, the process of editing. The apparatus of film creates and relies on illusions of continuity and sequentiality to establish an alternate reality that exists out of time but is codified in such a way that the spectator perceives and is drawn into a narrative

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<sup>155</sup> See Lacan’s “The Mirror Stage as Formative Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience.”

momentum. The film's internalized logic moves irresistibly toward its own resolution.<sup>156</sup> Textual coherence is achieved, a diegesis is formed.<sup>157</sup> Just as literary narrative creates the illusion of coherence, so too does film narrative. The narrator of "Motion Pictures" is vitally invested in the production of narrative. It is his "business."

As an author of screenplays, the protagonist of "Motion Pictures" has a privileged relationship to film texts and by extension allows us to unpack the semantics of power associated with spectatorship. In addition to a literal masculinization of the gaze, the relationship of spectator to screen is based less on the projected images than the ideological positioning of power.<sup>158</sup> The process of empathetic identification seems to be only part of the "deep" and "dangerous" thing that concerns the narrator. Rather, the "danger" seems to be the voluntary subjection to or interpolation into a fantasy on the part of the viewer who knows how the illusion is put together.<sup>159</sup> Not only does the spectator have the ability to empathize, but s/he can empathize across multiple subject

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<sup>156</sup> Film theorist Noël Burch refers to this as narrative concatenation, or the "linearization of iconographic signifiers," the objective of which is to create a cause and effect chain predicated on creating a resolvable tension (Burch 147).

<sup>157</sup> Johnson and Toni Cade Bambara, a contemporary of Johnson whose work is the focus of my third chapter, were both interested in the kind of transformative potential that could be found in film spectatorship for the disenfranchised spectator. This generation of writers, I argue saw film, more specifically popular film and spectatorship of popular film as a viable site for political, intellectual and spiritual engagement. I would argue that a growing conservatism has become entrenched in academic circles that have become more and more dismissive of the hero in popular culture as this figure has grown exponentially more important to the "popular."

<sup>158</sup> For more on the ideological position of power, see Sandra Flitterman-Lewis' and LaPlanche and Pontalis discussions of primary and secondary identification. Primary identification is the spectator, a construction that allows the spectator the ability to occupy position of "power" and secondary identification allows for processes of identification with characters, narrative, apparatus (Flitterman-Lewis, et. al. 151).

<sup>159</sup> "Moving Pictures" ends with the central protagonist returning to his car after leaving the theater to discover that his car has been broken into and the reminders of his chaotic life have been strewn all over the car seat. The ephemerality of the fantasy is reinforced with the last image of the protagonist, emotionally distraught with his head on the wheel.

positions. This fluidity implicitly reflects the always already tenuousness and multiplicity embodied in the viewer.<sup>160</sup> This mutable identity is privileged in Johnson's work.

Early spectator theory gave us a way to look at the relationship between images, narrative, film and spectator, but did not acknowledge, create or allow for positions that were not male, heterosexual, white and Western or account for the complexity of cultural transmission. While this endless dialogic allows for a wide range of interplay, classic film cine-psychoanalysis does not necessarily account for the raced (or racialized) spectator or the problematics of transcultural spectatorship. Whereas "Moving Pictures" begins the questioning of the processes of spectatorship, Johnson's "China" helps us interrogate the implications of transcultural spectatorship and what it means to identify across cultural and racial lines.

### **"China" and Transcultural Identification**

I don't want to be Chinese . . . I only want to be what I can be, which isn't  
the greatest fighter in the world, only the best fighter I can be.

Charles Johnson's "China"

In trying to unpack the complex workings of cultural exchange in the moment Johnson's protagonist finds himself in that theater, we soon find construction of identity or personhood in traditional cine-psychoanalysis theory ill suited due to its collapse of

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<sup>160</sup> While primary identification creates an illusory subjectivity that threatens to create an "untroubled centrality and unity of the subject," the mis-recognition of an "I," according to Flitterman-Lewis, et. al., which is brought on by the apparatus itself, effaces contradiction and difference and allows a secondary level of cinematic identification possible (151). This multiplicity is what Lacan refers to as a "hodgepodge of identifications. As identification is formed through social, cultural and historical specificity and its reception, neither film text nor spectator is ever static. Spectatorship is a process of decoding: "audience experience cuts through socially and culturally constructed codes, fragments of knowledge and memory, and personal emotions" (Stokes and Hoover 307). Theorized as "relations of subjectivity," film exceeds its diegetical and apparatic construction (Heath 44). It is in this space of excess that we have processes of imaginatively accessing the heroic, where we have transculturation. The cinematic experience creates an endless dialogical process, one that I suggest, troubles reductive models of cultural exchange and allows for the transformative.

textual and spectator subjectivity. Such a collapse prohibits a mutually informing relationship between the spectator and text, leaving the particular knowledge and historical social specificity of the actual bodies doing the looking unarticulated. This failure inevitably leaves us with insufficient paradigms to account for the complexity of cultural exchange in transcultural spectatorship.

Critics such as bell hooks and Manthia Diawara have challenged cine-psychoanalytic theory for being rooted in what they see as an ahistorical framework that privileges sexual difference while actively suppressing the recognition of race and racialized sexual difference (hooks 295). hooks suggests that cine-psychoanalysis invariably places the non-white spectator in the undesirable position of what amounts to self annihilation through "looking" (hooks 289). To combat this idea of nihilistic viewing, both hooks and Manthia Diawara suggest that Blacks engage in a "resistant" form of spectatorship, actively and consciously resisting complete identification with the film's discourses, diegetic narrative and positions of identity presented on the screen (Diawara 211-212). A dangerous implication of both Diawara's and hook's work lies in the suggestion that Black spectators engage in a conscious, yet somehow "innate" resistance to the deification of whiteness. No one can deny the seductiveness of the declaration that "we" have "our own history our own gaze," as a potential claim for the viability of identitarian politics in an effort to gain collective strength, but we want to be careful not to totalize all Black experience and spectatorship to one collective subject position or cast



spectatorship in any way that capitulates to monological ideologies of difference or unidirectional constructions of exchange.<sup>161</sup>

Transcultural spectatorship involves multiple points of identification. According to theorist Sandra Flitterman-Lewis, what Rudolph experiences in the theater with the Chinese warrior(s) on screen is the product of an agglutinative process of cross-racial identification and an alliance imagining that is not only possible but offers a way out of "the impasse of unity implied by the monolithic identity of primary identification," whether in the multiply constituted subject positioning of spectators or in the "positions suggested by alternative cinema" (Roach and Felix 154). The Black viewing subject's identification with the Chinese hero/warrior constitutes a phenomenon that ruptures the illusion of fixity. This is the radical potential of film, but more specifically, of popular film (Roach and Felix 155). Identification with figures on the screen, according to Robert Stam and Ella Shohat, is based on analogical structures of feeling which are an inherent part of transcultural spectatorship, particularly for the non-white, and I would add, non-male spectator. In this case of spectatorship, they argue, a "member of a minoritarian group might look for him/herself on the screen, but failing that, might identify with the next closest category, much as one transfers allegiance to another sports team after one's own team has been eliminated from the competition."<sup>162</sup> Consequently, the viewing subject of martial arts films (as with any other type of film) has to enter into a series of negotiations with the figures represented on the screen, particularly when dealing with a

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<sup>161</sup> In the essay "Black Looks," Jacqui Roach and Petal Felix make the claim that "[As black women] we have our own reality, our own history our own gaze - one which sees the world rather differently from 'anyone else'" (142).

<sup>162</sup> This analogical construction of identification has to be pushed further and more fluid nodal points of identification considered, as it is entirely possible for a member of a minoritarian group to disidentify with the analogical subject position and identify with the dominant.

text that does not allow for a seemingly simple one to one correspondence of identification (or dis-identification).

Johnson represents “transcultural” spectatorship as a vehicle for not only wish fulfillment, but also, as suggested by Stephen Heath, as a reality-corrector, a process of re-narrativization and re-memory. Rudolph’s engagement with the “Asia” represented in martial arts action cinema can be read as the voluntary incorporation of “self” into an alternative “family romance,” specifically an alternative to the raced family. The family Johnson’s protagonist finds is a family of warriors. This desire and acting on this desire reproduces the fantasy of “an early form of imaginative activity whereby the child fantasizes ideal parents to replace the actual ones which are considered to be *inferior*” (Flitterman-Lewis 156 *my emphasis*). It is this construction of an “inferior” family that “agitates.” The African American family romance presents several complexities, or as Hortense Spillers argues in “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” an “unrelieved crisis” (Spillers 76). In the case of Johnson’s central protagonist, Rudolph finds an alternative to the “lack,” specifically the unrelieved crisis of masculinity for African American men resulting from the confluence of racism, white privilege and attendant deficiencies in traditional constructions of national, communitarian, local, and militarized masculinity.<sup>163</sup> The unresolved problem of potential veins of self-loathing run through the process of abandoning of “blackness,” read “inferior.”

Rudolph, unlike his brothers who played football and went into the navy, was a “pale, bookish spiritual child . . . [who] lived in Scripture, was labeled 4-F, and hoped to

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<sup>163</sup> The work of Jane Gaines, specifically “White Privilege and Looking Relations,” was particularly helpful in interrogating the “white gaze” and its particularized privileges and centrality as it relates to economies of visibility and the bodies of “others.”

attend Moody Bible Institute in Chicago, if he could ever find the money” (67). Rudolph is unable to find solace or comfort in his position as an usher in the African American Church, where the men “marched in almost military fashion down each aisle: Christian soldiers, [Evelyn saw them as] the cream of black manhood” (67). Here the African American church produces a hybridized, militarized, sacred and secularized form of masculinity that is tied to Black nationalism and radicalism, the viability of which by the mid 1970s was seriously in question.<sup>164</sup> First he is denied his “dream” because he lacks the economic strength. Then he is labeled 4-F because he does not meet physical, mental or moral standards of the military. Denied access to traditional avenues of masculine identity formation, the Kwoon offers Rudolph alternative articulations of masculinity and community.

Rudolph’s new community, the Kwoon, offers an alternative path for spiritual enlightenment and a critique of American Imperialism. Among the members of the Kwoon is “Truck,” a Vietnamese “go getter,” recent immigrant to America and reminder of the contemporary conflict in Vietnam. With the removal of U.S. troops from Vietnam in 1973 and their return, many black soldiers found themselves in a position much like their predecessors. They, like generations of soldiers before them, returned “home” to disappointment. Participation in military ventures did not lead to parity or acceptance.<sup>165</sup>

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<sup>164</sup> Gayraud S. Wilmore’s *Black Religion and Black Radicalism* charts what he sees as the deradicalization of the Black church and the dechristianization of radicalism in the late seventies, resulting from the strains of shifting national attention to capital relations versus social. While conservative in its analysis, the representation of syncretism in Black radicalism and religion, with its seemingly contrary foci on afrocentrism, Christian doctrine and radicalism is pertinent to my argument. In rejecting the quasi-militarized masculinity of the church, represented by the black suited men who remind the reader of members of the Nation of Islam (Malcolm X, et. al), Rudolph also rejects radicalism associated with Black Nationalism.

<sup>165</sup> Similarly, Black soldiers in WWII pledged to wage a war to achieve the double V – Victory against fascism abroad and racism at home (Gibson-Hudson 17).

Also present is a Puerto Rican named “Tuco,” a fighter since birth,<sup>166</sup> a representative of a culture under the yoke of American imperialism. Another member of the community is described as an effeminate white blue-eyed actor who is pursuing martial arts for aesthetic purposes. Under the tutelage of a young, delicate looking Asian male, Rudolph becomes part of a racially integrated community, a warrior community where the members “were separated by money, background, and religion, but [moved] like a single body” (82). The Kwoon is a questionable site of “unity” that can be attributed to the historical, social and political moments in which the texts are set and written, but ultimately we have to consider its reliance on racialized and stereotypical formations of identity.<sup>167</sup> The homosocial space of the Kwoon is able to fulfill the promises that military zeitgeist and emancipatory discourses of the 60’s could not. Set in the post Vietnam era, this text tries to reimagine masculinity, and the Kwoon represented in Johnson’s text provides an alternative integrationist structure, an irresistible cure to the unrelieved crisis, the spiritual deprivation, experienced by the Black male subject.

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<sup>166</sup> U.S. military rule of the island began in 1898 with the Treaty of Paris in which Spain forfeited Puerto Rico, Guam, Cuba and the Philippines to U.S. The Foraker Act of 1900 gave Puerto Rico the ability to elect a House of Representatives and in 1917, the same year the U.S. dissolved the Haitian legislature to “end [its] spirit of anarchy,” the *Jones-Shafroth Act* granted Puerto Ricans U.S. citizenship and the ability to elect a Senate and bicameral Legislative Assembly. Once granted U.S. citizenship, many Puerto Ricans were drafted into World War I and all subsequent wars. Internal governance changed during the Roosevelt–Truman administrations, culminating with the appointment of Puerto Rico’s first island born governor, Jesús T. Piñero in 1946. Two years later, Piñero, signed the “Ley de la Mordaza” (Gag Law) or Law 53 as it was officially known, which made it illegal to display the Puerto Rican Flag, sing patriotic songs, talk of independence or fight for it. In 1950, nationalists revolted which resulted in the United States declaring martial law. It was not until October 2006 that the State Department of Puerto Rico conferred specifically “Puerto Rican citizenship.” The U.S./Puerto Rico relationship is marked by economic and political exploitation.

<sup>167</sup> Johnson’s troubled relationship with constructions of blackness and the political are documented in his work. A supplemental interest that I will be pursuing is Charles Johnson’s political cartoons that lampooned Black Nationalism in the context of other contemporary political “comics” and graphic novels.

Rudolph's desire to be like the Chinese warriors/heroes on the screen enables him to transcend local morality and ethnic affiliation and interpolate himself into a fantastic familial structure of warriors. This transcultural identification has a multi-tiered ontology where warrior identification is psychically split between constructions of the fictive African and Chinese heroes as well as "urban warriors" who occupy, if not ambiguous racialized subject positions, distinctly classed and gendered ones.<sup>168</sup> It is the process of transculturation<sup>169</sup> instantiated in spectatorship that facilitates Rudolph's metamorphosis. Rudolph's identification with the fantastical screened "other" enables him to imagine himself outside of Judeo-Christian, American social/racial constructs as well as corporeal limitations of the physical world. The very process of identification and imagination Rudolph experiences in the theater leads him on his quest to discipline his body and subsequently psychic and spiritual renewal. When Rudolph meditates, he envisions himself at the bottom of a lake and imagines his feelings as 'bubbles' that he examines and lets float up to the surface: "after working out he felt as if there were no interval between himself and what he saw. . . In this after glow he said he saw without judging.

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<sup>168</sup> Along with Yvonne Tasker, Stefan Hammond notes that: "Nowhere in America was Kung-fu more warmly embraced than in the urban Black movie going community" (80). He further states that this was not, particularly in the 1970s, an American phenomenon, citing the exodus of working class audiences in London who flocked to the Scala theater near Kings Cross from the Black enclaves of Brixton to see films in which they felt "more kinship with the Chinese guys fighting on screen than they might with their fellow Brits at opening day at Ascot" (80).

<sup>169</sup> Mary Louise Pratt's *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* offers analysis of two terms, the contact zone and transculturation, of which the latter has been important to my thinking about transmission between cultures. She defines contact zones as "social spaces where disparate cultures meet, class and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination – like colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out across the globe today" (Pratt 4). The contact zone is literal and figurative. It is "the space of colonial encounters, the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict" (Pratt 6). Transculturation is defined as a phenomenon of the contact zone. To a degree, the zone is process, how subordinated or marginalized groups select and invent from materials transmitted to them by dominant and "fringe" cultures is the focus of this chapter.

Without judgment, there were no distinctions. Without distinctions, there was no desire. Without desire..." (87). Rudolph's communal fulfillment, physical, mental and spiritual transformation is possible at the Kwoon which is set against the African American Church, an institution with which Evelyn is deeply associated. Evelyn embodies Western empirical thought, unthinking female consumerism, and deterioration. She is childless, nearly blind, envies and fears Rudolph's seeming reversal of the aging process. In a poignant scene where Rudolph attempts to describe "Zazen"<sup>170</sup> to Evelyn, he conveys to her how he imagines himself at the bottom of Lake Washington, becoming the center of the universe and losing his "self." Evelyn's response to this erasure of self, a self particularized by material experience, is a "stifle[d] scream" (87). Evelyn is rendered inarticulate. In terms of the Black church, radicalism and nationalism, the idea of giving up the "self," after fighting for two centuries to have one, is untenable.

The reader is presented with three kingdoms. First is the Kingdom of illusion, comprised of the new cathedrals, movie houses where popular films serve as the sermons and spectatorship facilitate conversion. This space enables the Black viewer to empathetically imagine subjectivity for him/herself that is not based on powerlessness and abjection. Along with providing a foil off of which reflected societal and individual disruption, the fantastic elements of violence represented in Martial arts films provide an image of empowerment that allows the spectator the "pleasure" of safely, for two hours, enacting violence through identification with the heroic figure. As Frantz Fanon argues in *Wretched of the Earth*: "At the level of individuals, violence is a cleansing force. It frees

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<sup>170</sup> Zazen is a meditative discipline of Zen Buddhist practice performed to calm the body and mind to enable the individual to experience insight to the nature of existence and achieve "satori" or enlightenment. The posture involves sitting with folded legs and hands with an erect spine and rhythmic breathing.

the native from his inferiority complex and from his despair and inaction; it makes him fearless and restores his self-respect" (94). The individual has to have access to imagination, however impacted it is by outside forces, the fantasies that one can have in identifying with "heroes" can provide an outlet for the individual and figures through which communities can work to achieve civic ends.

Then we have the Kingdom of God, read Christian based African American Religious institutions and tradition, which is represented as morally degenerate and abject by its alignment with Evelyn. Evelyn resists Rudolph's transformation in the name of church and racial affinity. She is invested in a utopia that was to be her reward for being the long suffering female, black and old in America. This kingdom is abandoned at the end of the text in favor of the Seattle Kingdome, the setting of Rudolph's victory. It is in this final Kingdom[e] that Rudolph achieves the impossible, flies through the air like his filmic heroes and defeats his opponent.

At the center of martial arts films is the figure of the warrior, most often male, has multiple appeals for Western audiences.<sup>171</sup> Obviously, there is the construction of the warrior as unique, translated in the American context as rugged individualism, coterminous with identification with an (imagined) community of warriors with whom s/he shares a "deep, horizontal comradeship."<sup>172</sup> This community is often represented in images of "training" that establish the warrior's communal identity, his/her exemplarity along with disciplining the body and the world around that body. More importantly, for my analysis, these films represent the psycho-affective constitution of mental and

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<sup>171</sup> In another essay, "Old Man Your Kung Fu is Useless: African American Spectatorship and Hong Kong Action Film" I engage in a more in depth discussion of the appeal of the warrior through the work of John J. Donohue, *Warrior Dreams*.

<sup>172</sup> This "deep, horizontal comradeship," an obvious nod to Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities*, is often coupled with or embodied in a relationship to a father/sifu figure represented as (emotionally) impenetrable.

spiritual health. The symbolic recreation of danger, I argue, serves the psychic needs of spectators, channeling reactions to and managing emotional trauma, aggression and fear.<sup>173</sup> This process of psychically repeating trauma through transcultural spectatorship suggests a complex cultural system and psychological response that simultaneously involves physical efficacy, vehicles for the transmission of culture, and philosophy and ideology based on voluntary affinities.

Fanon's discussion of power and the colonized subject in *Wretched of the Earth* becomes useful here because it informs us that in the colonial moment, the dreams of the native "are always of muscular prowess . . . of action and of aggression" (50). These repeating "dreams" of physical prowess, I read as symbolic recreations of danger necessary to the warrior's development of skill, specifically the skill to militate against that which is endangering the corporeal/intellectual/spiritual integrity of him/herself and/or the community. These are dreams of muscularity and masculinity, but what is available to our "other" protagonist. What does Evelyn's spectatorship give her?

Acoustics in the Kingdome whirlpooled the noise of the crowd, a rivering of voices that affected her, suddenly, like the pitch and roll of voices during service. It affected the way she watched Rudolph. . . She leaned forward, gripping the huge purse on her lap when Rudolph recovered and retreated from the killing to the neutral zone, and then, in a wide stance, rethought strategy. This was not the man she'd slept with for twenty years. Not her hypochondriac Rudolph who had to rest and run cold water on his wrists after walking from the front stairs to the fence to pick up the Seattle Times. She did not know him, perhaps had never known him, and now she never would, for the man on the floor the man splashed with sweat, rising on the ball of his rear foot for a flying kick -- was he so foolish he still thought he could fly? -- would outlive her; he'd stand healthy and strong and think of her in a bubble, one hand on her headstone, and it was all right, she thought, weeping

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<sup>173</sup> In Toni Cade Bambara's "What it is I Think I'm Doing Anyhow" she discusses the adventures of her little heroine, Hazel, who is the center of the majority of the short stories in the collection, *Gorilla My Love* and claims that the narratives we readers are made privy to are "rehearsals that will hold [Hazel] in good stead in later encounters with more menacing and insidious people" (158). These fictional rehearsals I read as contiguous to the literal repetition that happens when the reader encounters the narrative.



uncontrollably, it was all right that Rudolph would return home after visiting her wet grave, clean out her bedroom, the pillboxes and paperback books and throw open her windows to let her sour, rotting smell escape, then move a younger woman's things onto the floor spaced darkened by her color television, her porcelain chamber pot, her antique sewing machine. And then Evelyn was on her feet, unsure why, but the crowd had stood suddenly to clap, and Evelyn clapped, too, though for an instance she pounded her gloved hands together instinctively until her vision cleared, the momentary flash of retinal blindness giving way to a frame of her husband, the postman, twenty feet off the ground in a perfect flying kick that floored his opponent and made a Japanese judge who looked like Oddjob shout 'ippon' -- one point -- and the fighting in the farthest ring, in herself, perhaps in all the world, was over. (94-5)

This third kingdom, the Seattle Kingdome is the site for the transformations of Rudolph and Evelyn. Evelyn's perspective, shaped by the black Christian experience, alters with the coming together of tributaries, the running flowing together of many voices. It is another way to imagine a sacred space. Bill Brown and Jonathan Little have read the final moment in the Seattle Kingdom as "provok[ing] Evelyn out of her complaisant sense of loss and decay" (Brown 39). Jonathan Little argues that

Rudolph's vision is enhanced, even cured, through his meditative and strenuous journey into the self, where he becomes one with the canvas and members of his Kwoon; Evelyn takes longer to regain and achieve full vision. Thus the story contains two accounts of individual liberation, one following and dependent upon the other. (119)

Little acknowledges that the text does not address the social significance of Evelyn's "transformation" and its supposed ability to produce "peace." He sees Johnson's objective as aesthetic and individual. He does not consider the implications of inscribing masculinist dichotomies and coterminous aesthetic and gender hierarchies, the problems inherent in "his" vision being "full vision." Bill Brown questions the representation of Evelyn, claiming that her "liberation depends on remaining lodged in the passive role of spectatorship," and yet, spectatorship is anything but passive. Relegating female spectatorship to passivity reinforces gendered dichotomies, and is further troubled by the

assumption that Evelyn is somehow “liberated” by the “newly appreciated vision of her husband flying through the air during the tournament” (Little 120).<sup>174</sup> Johnson’s text presents us with a more complicated picture.

This last scene can also be read, as Brown suggests, as Rudolph requiring the destruction of Evelyn’s positionality in order for him to fulfill his physical and spiritual ambitions. The defeat of Evelyn’s body is synonymous with defeating Western paradigmatic constructions of knowledge, space, spirit and time. As a witness to Rudolph’s miraculous change, Evelyn “sees” the fantastic in Rudolph. According to Rosemary Jackson, the fantastic is preoccupied with limits, limiting categories and their projected dissolution. It disrupts monological vision, the illusory coherence of subjectivity and “reality, and creates a dialectical space where the relationship of self to the world is foregrounded. In this space ideas and perception, mind and body, mind and matter merge and become indiscernible, thus drawing explicit attention to the process of representation (Jackson 84). Evelyn is no longer able to see Rudolph and he “is no longer subjected to Western epistemic framing of race.” Evelyn’s vision is only transformative as witness for Rudolph and not herself. This does not strike this reader as radical, nor does reducing a woman to the objects in her room or in the “huge purse” on her lap suggest profundity.

According to Bill Brown, Evelyn represents “unthinking conformity of the caricatured female consumer” and is marked as such by the proximity of commodities. She is the one who focuses on “the electric clock beside her water glass from McDonald’s, Preparation H suppositories, and Harlequin Romances” (71). Brown reads

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<sup>174</sup> This brings us back to the work of Laura Mulvey, Mary Ann Doane and many other feminist film critics who critically engage the processes of film spectatorship to interrogate and loosen it from its rigid gendered moorings.

this passage of name brand infiltration as a distinguishing moment between “Evelyn’s passive and palliative accumulation of American products” and “Rudolph’s active, critical, transnational, and transformative consumption” (29). However, the items on her bedside table do more than align her with commodity culture; they give her a gendered specificity that is reinforced time and time again in this text as passive and degenerative. Staring at the electric clock signifies her linkage to Western constructions of time that are disrupted at the end of the text when Rudolph seems to be living at another time. The Preparation H suppositories and “Hershey squirts” entrench Evelyn as the abject feminine and is very much reminiscent of Minty in *Oxherding Tale*. Rudolph is a character that “hungers for perfection” while Evelyn just hungers (78). By limiting her spectatorship, the narrative circumscribes the female body’s ability to desire. She is not merely a putative sexual partner, but the embodiment of the deteriorating effects of heterosexuality. For Evelyn, “the brutal fact of decay, which could only be blunted . . . by decaying *with* someone” (75). The heteronormative is cast in romantic, parasitic, and paranoiac terms: “Everything failed; it was the some sort of law. But at least there was laughter, and lovers clinging to one another against the cliff” (78). This is an image of heterosexual bonds sustained by fear, and as a danger to the development of a Black heroic.

As Rudolph transforms, he begins to reside beyond the pale of normative social structures. In this regard, he resembles established conventions of depicting the hero as migratory, shifting in and out of geographic and social boundaries, specifically outside hetero-normative structures. This outside or marginal space is signified by: intense same sex relationships that become primary and often have homoerotic under/overtones, chaste or “adolescent” coded sexuality, or the absence of sexuality in asceticism. Despite

“outstanding” erections, Rudolph has no interest in sex with his wife. His heterosexual peripherality corresponds to Albert Memmi's analysis of colonial violence where he argues that the family (as constructed by the colonizing body) secures and emasculates the colonized (99). The hero's failure, or rather refusal, to enter into heteronormative coded society places him/her not just at the fringe of sexuality, but in a potentially subversive marginality that evokes indomitable desires by/for and between insiders and outsiders in all directions. Johnson's central protagonist desired a monastic life from a young age and has no children. With Rudolph removed from the heterosexual economy, he can focus on spiritual and physical development. What is disturbing about this removal from the heterosexual economy is that it is founded on the representation of Evelyn's body as a site of repugnance. All it takes is a touch from Evelyn or the sight of her without her clothes on and Rudolph's penis shrinks to the size of a pencil eraser (69).

For Evelyn, the possibility of masculinity outside Western racialized constructs is a threat, and this anxiety gets articulated as homophobia and anxiety about the male body and aggression. First, when handed a magazine about martial arts, she swats it away, then when she finally takes a look, she sees “a man [standing] bowlegged, one hand cocked under his armpit, the other corkscrewing straight at Evelyn's nose” (71). And again, when Rudolph talks to Evelyn about his training regimen, she declares that she will not be a victim of male violence: “If you need a punching bag, don't look at me” (79). Rudolph does not acknowledge this fear and continues talking until Evelyn, who is racked with irrational insecurity, screams “I won't be your punching bag!” (80).

This narrative of spiritual enlightenment depends on Evelyn's spectatorship, a spectatorship marked by ambivalence.<sup>175</sup> It is through her eyes that we see of Rudolph's developing "monastic beauty," which she desires but also finds obscene. To look at Rudolph's transformed body is to experience the reflected nightmare of her own lack of desirability (83, 85).<sup>176</sup>

### **Johnson and Gender**

The struggle with the "heroic" is a struggle with historical processes of nation building and masculinity. To make a nation is to make men. What becomes problematic is the tacit practice of these writers to create spaces that do not necessarily change the definition of, or the inherent violence to the feminine. What seems to be at the core of what being a "man" means does not change, no matter how adept the writer at engaging with existential crises. When asked if there was a gender bias in his critique of Alice Walker and Toni Morrison, Charles Johnson's response is a telling one: "I have no gender biases. Two of the most important people in my life are my wife and daughter. And I feel black women are perfectly capable of speaking for themselves. They don't need me to speak for them" (Ghosh and Johnson 378). Johnson refutes "gender bias" in his work, but locates himself in relation to "his" wife and "his" daughter as patriarch in a

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<sup>175</sup> To the end Evelyn attempts to "see" or frame Rudolph within Western empirical structures and narratives. For example, when Rudolph begins experimenting with Chinese medicine, Evelyn looks on as Rudolph gets an "ancient potion" to heal his wounds. Watching Rudolph, the narrative tells us that "[s]he was tempted to sea if it healed brain damage by pouring it into Rudolph's ears," a clear reference to Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, with Evelyn in the role of King Claudius.

<sup>176</sup> This ambivalence reinforces it as a Western epistemic mode. In "The Other Question: difference, discrimination and the discourse of colonialism," Homi K. Bhabha argues that stereotype is necessarily ambivalent in nature. It is ambivalent in that the "raced" figure is always in "excess of what can be empirically proved or logically construed" and this ambivalence in turn "gives the colonial stereotype its currency; ensures its repeatability in changing discursive conjunctures; informs its strategies and individuation and marginalization . . ." (87-8). This "ambivalent" stereotype informs a discourse of stereotype, which informs the way in which discrimination is deployed.

heterosexual economy. That he claims ownership of their bodies does speak for them. To assert that he is not “sexist” because his wife and daughter are “important” to him does little to ameliorate what is obvious sexism.<sup>177</sup>

Johnson is also critical of his female peers and in one interview complains about what he reads as manipulative, emotionally charged, unrealistic images and reductive stereotypes in black women’s fiction. He claims that the characters black women writers create are more concepts than “real people,” which is astounding given Johnson’s consistent attribution of varied philosophical and political ideologies to his characters.<sup>178</sup> He takes particular issue with Toni Morrison and Alice Walker for their representation of men and lack of realism. Of Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, he states that the character Sethe is too extreme to be realistic (Robbins 560).<sup>179</sup> Of Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*, which

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<sup>177</sup> John Whalen-Bridge’s essay, “Johnson and Feminine Civility,” focuses primarily on Johnson’s *Dreamer* and tries to argue for a “kind of feminism” functioning as an undercurrent in Johnson’s work. His argument hinges on reading the central protagonists of Johnson’s oeuvre as needing to “integrate the ideals of masculinity with the ideals of femininity” (128). There is, in Whalen-Bridge’s critique, no questioning of what constitutes those gendered “ideals” but rather a reproduction of reductive binary oppositions. Similarly, in his rather thin critique of what he reads as Johnson’s “inconsistency,” or rather inability to extend “his transformative aesthetic vision to issues of gender,” William Nash’s critique begins with noting the “profoundly essentializing characterization of women” in Johnson’s *Faith and the Good Thing* then refers to Johnson’s critique of Clarence Major’s 1969 novel, *All Night Visitors*, in *Being and Race* as if in attempt to ameliorate Johnson’s sexism. In *Being and Race*, Johnson critiques Major’s “primitive vision” of women, and suggests that its vision will “horrify feminists, [he knows], falling as it does into a mystifying of women” (qtd Nash 70). Nash notes Johnson’s “somewhat dismissive response to feminist concerns” then concludes with his own “confusion” over the “reappearance” of sexist representation in *Oxherding Tale*. Whalen-Bridge and Nash’s inability to reconcile the essentialist discourses of gender in Johnson’s texts is symptomatic of critics’ refusal to think through the complex intersection of aesthetic and gender politics.

<sup>178</sup> One example would be in Johnson’s critique of Marxist discourse in *Oxherding Tale* in the character Sam Plunkett who has the responsibility of driving Andrew and Reb to the mines and certain death. While knowingly carrying the men to their graves, he spews rhetoric about the common relationship between the white proletariat and slaves but is tripped up by his own logic. He cannot let Andrew and Reb free because his own political identity is contingent upon the uninterrupted flow of capital. He cannot see Reb and Andrew as men, only as property.

<sup>179</sup> Johnson has a problem with what he sees as Morrison’s retention of residual Black Arts Movement ideology. He rejects Morrison’s assertion that literature can be used as a means of African American empowerment. His response is to sarcastically question: “What does she mean by that? What does that mean? African American empowerment through literature? How does a book do that? Does a book empower me to vote? I don’t get it. How do you interpret that?” (Little

was published the same year as Johnson's *Oxherding Tale*, Johnson wants to "leave it to readers to decide which book pushes harder at the boundaries of invention, and inhabits most confidently the space where fiction and philosophy meet" (OT xviii). The gendered and arguably sexist underpinnings of Johnson aesthetic position limits what an artist can be and undermines his own philosophical position. By obfuscating with "aesthetics," Johnson prevents himself from true ideological innovation. He is prepared to challenge essentialist discourses of race, but not the dichotomous constructions of gender that are inherent in American constructions of race.

At the end of his novel, *Middle Passage*, the hero, Rutherford Calhoun's transformation is made manifest through his confrontation with the holy trinity of "self," father and God and the deep wounds of the "sexual war" plaguing all men. The hero's quest ends with his assumption of a maternal role with a young Allmuseri girl and a loss of sexual desire, or at least the desire to "dominate." On the brink of coitus with a newly slender Isadora Bailey

memories of the Middle Passage kept coming back, reducing the velocity of my desire, its violence, and in place of my longing for feverish love-making left only a vast stillness that felt remarkably full, a feeling that, just now, I wanted our futures blended, nor our limbs, our histories perfectly twined for all time, not our flesh. Desire was too much of a wound, a rip of insufficiency and incompleteness that kept us, despite our proximity, constantly apart, like metals with an identical charge. (208)

A generous reading of this moment casts it as the philosophical and spiritual transformation of Rutherford Calhoun who, like Ulysses, returns to find the world upside

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and Johnson 169). When pushed to consider the inheritances of the black artist and whether or not those inheritances come with political imperatives, he questions whether or not Morrison has a political vision. This response is curious given his autobiographical tale of being an adolescent and experiencing an ecstatic response to literature on meditation. Additionally, his central protagonists' quests consistently lead them to "enlightenment" which I would read as a form of "empowerment" which leaves me at a bit of a loss.

down.<sup>180</sup> The one time hustler and thief is now concerned with the intertwining limbs of history, past, and future, rather than bodies. Rutherford has gotten beyond “sex,” desire, grasping and materialism. It is an idealized emptying of “self and interest,” but herein lies the rub. This is Rutherford’s transformation, not Isadora’s. Her transformation is limited to the loss of fifty pounds, and the assumption of a maternal role to both the Allmuseri child, Baleka, and Rutherford.

This representation of the feminine is symptomatic of a consistent failure on the part of Johnson to challenge heteronormative, masculinist formations of the heroic.<sup>181</sup> The roles of women, black and white, are to produce and confirm the heroic male heirs of the world. It is through their production of (male) bodies and of labor that black women function to support the political and spiritual strivings of men. *Oxherding Tale*’s Minty is a black woman of all work, whose fetid body is mangled beyond recognition. Her last act

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<sup>180</sup> The comparison to Ulysses is an apt one given Isadora’s negotiation with Papa Zeringue to marry him upon completion of sweaters for each of her maimed animals. This is an explicit reference to the *Illiad* and the *Odyssey*. Isadora mirrors Ulysses’ Penelope, who waits faithfully for the less than faithful hero twenty years and staves off community pressure to declare her husband dead and take a new husband. Like the “hero” of that classical narrative, Rutherford can be read in heroic and anti heroic traditions. Ulysses occupied a different space to the Greeks and Romans. The former view Ulysses, Homer’s Ulysses, as every bit the hero, but the Roman interpretation views this “hero” as a man given to dissimulation, deceit and cruelty. In Virgil’s *Aeneid*, Ulysses is “cruel” or the “deceitful Ulysses.” Another connection to this figure to be explored at a later date is the relationship between the fictional Isadora Bailey and the “real” Isadora Duncan whose “Heroic and Monumental Works” were inspired by Greek Mythology.

<sup>181</sup> At the center of Johnson’s *Faith and the Good Thing*, his one novel with a female heroine published in 1974, is a young coffee and cream colored Faith Cross from Rural Georgia whose father, Todd Cross, is murdered when she is young. The men of her life, indeed the foci of her life, are Todd Cross and Alpha Omega Jones, who is literally the beginning and ending of her “romantic” life. Faith cherishes Alpha Omega because he reminds her of her father. For Faith, Alpha proves to be the end of “love” when he leaves her after she tells him that she is pregnant. It is only after has been violently extricated from a heteronormative circuit of production of desire that Faith can begin to explore spiritual paths. In search of direction, Faith goes to the “Swamp Woman” for guidance and she tells her enigmatically to go in search of the “good thing.” Her quest leads her to Chicago where, upon arrival she gets robbed, raped and introduced to ‘prostitution,’ a profession that is deemed the province of her “sex.” In a drunken rage, one of Faith’s clients sets a fire in her room that kills her child and disfigures her. Faith then returns to the Swamp Woman, takes on her skin, while the Swamp woman experiments with the path of “ingénue.” After donning the Swamp Woman’s skin, Faith spontaneously remembers spells and incantations. Faith takes on Swamp Woman’s memory, knowledge and identity.



is to educate the white woman who has married Andrew in her stead. Other black women in this text are represented as strange, essential, mystical and in the possession of kinetic and preternatural powers that defy science. Mattie, George Hawkins's wife, and her women friends have powers that drive George from home. Women are outside the realm of definition and Western logic. Isadora Bailey of *Middle Passage* is not only ruthlessly insecure but also indecipherable. Theirs is a magic easily conflated with essentialist gender constructions.

The white female body in *Oxherding Tale* is conflated with land and nation. Anna Polkinghorne is "a whole landscape of flesh, white as the moon, with rolling hills bottomless gorges" (OT 6).<sup>182</sup> Women are the terrain men must travel through, plant seed in, and on which they build spiritual edifices, temples memorializing their greatness. This is not to say that there are not moments when Johnson does make some gesture to think through the impact of gender. In *Oxherding Tale* Reb tells Andrew that Flo is as much of a prisoner as they are due to gender discrimination. By the end of the novel Andrew tells his wife, Peggy, that there are no such things as "negroes or women" just social constructions, but this critique falls flat given the lack of space made for the possibility of spiritual growth for women.<sup>183</sup> Peggy is left with the unenviable and arguably

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<sup>182</sup> This representation of woman as "land," and by extension "nation," is reminiscent of the blonde dancer that appears in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* who is used by a group of white community leaders as "pre-fight" entertainment for the "battle royal." The narrator wants to protect and kill her at the same time. She too occupies an analogous relationship to the young half nude young black men as victim and the narrator's ambivalence toward her mirrors the black male subject's relationship to "America."

<sup>183</sup> In Jeffrey B. Leak's "A Crisis in the Male Spirit: Slavery, Masculinity, and the Myth of Black Inferiority in Charles Johnson's *Oxherding Tale* and Frederick Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*" he claims that Johnson overturns the myth of "white feminine virtue" in his representation of Flo. I respectfully disagree. Representing white woman as simultaneous victim and victimizer can be traced to the figure of "Mrs. Auld" in Douglass's narrative, a figure deployed to emphasize the deleterious effects of slavery on the white family which somehow goes unremarked in Leak's analysis. Leak notes the Johnson's failure to "render black female experience beyond its symbolic connection to black male disempowerment" (23) and does a

masochistic position of caretaker to Minty, her educator in the “ways of the domestic,” and first love of her husband. More significantly, Peggy loses her name at the end of the text. She is referred to repeatedly as “Wife” with a capital “w.”

Even as we try to clear a space to think of Rutherford as nurturing caretaker, we also have to consider how he comes to be a “parent.” The path to spiritual enlightenment requires an absence of women. Rutherford has to escape Isadora and become part of a masculine collective, the “we” of the ship’s all male crew, but any freedom the men have on the ship is disrupted by female slave presences which obligate him to participate in the social binding formation of capital – the family. Andrew Hawkins of *Oxherding Tale* has to escape the extravagantly manipulative Flo Hatfield and Minty, the last vestige of Andrew’s romantic slave past has to be done away with before Andrew can go and live his life as a white man. Rutherford’s evolution relies on the death and absence of Baleka’s mother so that he can transform into a male mother. Isadora’s only potential for transformation is the loss of fifty pounds so that she can become more sexually ideal and make Rutherford’s rejection of her sexual advances and his path of more meaningful and subsequently more heroic.

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commendable job of linking Minty to Anna Douglass, noting the common relationship to labor and lack of education, but I would push that further. Anna Douglass’s labor, her role in orchestrating Douglass flight, is invisible in all of his narratives. Elsewhere, I close read the opening of the film version and screenplay of Lorraine Hansberry’s *Raisin in the Sun*, where the camera pans over glistening surfaces, prepared foods, kitchen appliances, in the domestic space and rests on the image of a black woman’s hands buttoning up a young white girl’s coat. I argue that the “surface” order of the domestic, relative to larger relationships of black female labor to the nation, must necessarily be rendered invisible. To make the black woman and her “labor” visible in the American home would reveal underlying hypocrisies of American relationships of race and gender to capital and the masochism inherent in working to evacuate her presence.

## Johnson and Transculturation

What may be just as troubling as Johnson's treatment of gender is the possibility that the "Transcultural" exchange in Johnson's oeuvre is unidirectional, privileging Western linguistic and social structures. In the moment of translation, cultural objects and texts become subjected to Western assumptions of authority, authenticity and transparency. Similar to the construction of Africa as the Dark Continent, a template for the unconscious, primitive and retrograde, fantastic "Asia" is cast as simultaneously pre modern, modern and post-modern. The proliferation of "Asia" and all things "Asian" in American popular culture has been predicated on the movement of capital (Miyoshi 223). For the Western spectator, "Asia" is part of a fantasy that substantiates the West's claim to primacy; yet, this "fantasy," conveyed through conduits of popular culture, forms a polyphonic matrix extending from the diegetic space of the film universe; it facilitates a reciprocal (but not necessarily equal) exchange; it also creates an opportunity to merge cultures. The exchanges between signified interlocutors (African American and Chinese) are highly mediated -- on the screen and in the audience. The space created by these interlocutors foments possibilities for spiritual and political transformation.<sup>184</sup>

In film, cultures meet across vernacular idioms and enable audience members to resist mapping subjectivities organized by the characters on the screen. A mutually informing exchange occurs. I read these vernaculars as constructions of spiritual, ethnic, racial, gendered and sexual identity, and their articulation in popular culture. The potential for transformation is coterminous with exploitation facilitated by the movement of images, bodies and goods. The Western viewer has the privilege of being able to create

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<sup>184</sup> As Stam and Shohat astutely argue "[c]ross cultural spectatorship, in other words, is not simply a utopian exchange between communities, but a dialog deeply embedded in the asymmetries of power" (Shohat and Stam 355)

a fictive elsewhere in the bodies and texts of "Other" cultures. Cinematic space, the paradigmatic fictive elsewhere, is a site where competing discourses of race, gender, sexuality and nation vie for primacy. The bodies we see represented on screen inhabit a set of narratological operations governed by the film's diegesis. It is in cinematic space we see the most fluid collapse of bodies into systems of metaphor and metonymy. Here phenotype signifies in excess and stereotype is standard fare.<sup>185</sup> The theater and films create possibility where transculturation can take place.

In an attempt to open up a space for what has been historically constructed as the apolitical, irrational (and sometimes downright complicit), Wahneema Lubiano's 1992 essay, "To Take Dancing Seriously is to Redo Politics," begins with a discussion of Western rationality and its inevitable epistemic violence to the cultural production of non-white and/or non-Western groups which she then looks at the performance of Black drill teams and their perceived complicity with nationalistic formations of identity. Lubiano begins by questioning the oppositional formulation of reason, rationale with its theoretical opposite, which she claims gets "dismissed variously as the fantastic, supernatural, cultural, irrational, emotional - or even the feminine, depending upon the circumstances" and argues that:

[d]eployments of the grand narratives that construct universal truths which undergird our conventional sense of and strategies for politics have been inadequate to the task of delineating the messy overlap areas of things like

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<sup>185</sup> In the case of Western reception of "Asian" film, often what we consume on the big screen is an "Asia" that has become a continent of contiguous fantastic constructions for the American audience. Cross-cultural exchange, Rey Chow notes, has historically been "deadlocked" in an anthropological/ ethnographic frame that makes "appropriation" inescapable. When Western spectators take in a cultural text from "somewhere else, (this I contend also includes the aliens within the borders of the nation), the process of 'cultural translation' is inevitably enmeshed in conditions of power -- [professional, national, international]. And among these conditions is the authority of ethnographers to uncover the implicit meanings of subordinate societies" (Asad qtd. Chow 117 my emphasis). The American audience is convinced of its own authority, just as the spectator of "Moving Pictures" has authority in relation to film in that he is a script writer.

group cultural practice, racial identity, gender re-imaginings, and play, as well as the relation of those things to historical circumstances and change. (20)

Thus, taking the primary element of "play," the use of false consciousness, and, as Lubiano suggests, taking it seriously, can allow us to comprehend and analyze the complicated and efficacious politics present in transcultural spectatorship of African American Spectators of the Martial Arts film genre. One of these messy overlap areas is the space in which a participatory audience, very much a group cultural practice for 'urban' audiences, articulates insistent re-imaginings, a hodge-podge of identifications, with the screened Other - the Asian warrior/hero.

And yet, even as we are allowed to destabilize "grand narratives," we must consider how conduits of pop culture facilitate simultaneous avenues of resistance as well as Neocolonial capitalism and oppression under the guise of "play." The transformative potential of transcultural identification with the Chinese cinematic hero and communication between cultures cannot be relegated to simplistic constructions of colonizer/colonized, exploitation, or appropriation. These films have to be viewed as objects of analysis that frequently destabilize Western epistemological framing. This destabilization is in the nexus of pleasure, ritual history, collective experience, inside the theater and out that gives it political significance. This is the complex work play can do.

Johnson inherits the problem of movement of culture, cultural objects and ideas in and through conduits of cultural exchange. How do we begin to describe exchanges between what is now being termed "emergent cultures" or the relationships, transmissions between colonized and post colonial subject? In considering these transmissions and the conduits through which they flow, I want to avoid thinking in terms of simplistic models of cultural exchange between colonizer and colonized. To do so

would obscure the complexity of the transmissions themselves and reduce it to a crude cultural relativism, obfuscate the materiality of the processes of exchange and their articulation. Johnson's exploration of how the popular can facilitate a more nuanced discussion of these exchanges that do not diminish their potentially transformative aspects, particularly when the obvious nexus is comprised of Western imperialism, identitarian politics, capitalism and colonialism. The term "appropriation" becomes hopelessly deficient when we consider the confluence of ideological exchanges in Johnson's work. Is Johnson's "turn to the East," as anything but appropriation, a privilege inherited from a Western philosophical tradition that Johnson is just as indebted and invested in as his "Eastern" leanings?<sup>186</sup>

Transmission, of which translation is a part, is a meeting of, at the very least, multiple (de/en)coding systems, and can not be fully explained with contemporary reductive exegetical frameworks. The forms of exchange occurring in transcultural spectatorship lets us see exchange not as a "bridge," an analogy that only allows us to focus on the polarized points of departure and arrival. We have to consider the gathering, the accumulative and disseminative aspects of transcultural exchange, the undercurrents and rip tides that come along with this process. Focusing on the bridge, the obviousness

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<sup>186</sup> Implicit in this rhetorical question is my thinking through Edward W. Said's *Orientalism*, he describes the "orient" as "a European invention, and had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic being, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences" (Said 1). This construct, the efficacy of which can only be found in the linguistic, is of and for the West. It is an illusory, stable, and resilient fantasy that functions a foil off of which the West imagines reflected racial and intellectual superiority. This fantasy locates the East/Orient in a feminized and racialized oppositional relationship to the West, whose position of privilege, power and superiority is hinged on an axis of racialized and gendered subjectivities. This fantasy of the "east" has created what Said refers to as "orientalist techniques," the mechanism of the "ism": lexicography, grammar, translation, and cultural decoding. *Orientalism* organizes itself systematically and syntactically through the acquisition of oriental material, an instance of simultaneous translation and appropriation, strategic production and dissemination of "images" and spectators of those images (Said 165).

of power differentials, oppression and all of the “isms” obfuscates the other subtle, and not so subtle processes taking place and blinds us to the multitude of points of departure and arrival that are also being created. In this in-between space that translation and transculturation occur, an ongoing negotiation between bodies, ideas, culture, language and objects particulates cultural hybridities. If we take this cue from Bhabha, we can avoid being reduced to polarized constructions of cultural and spiritual deprivation and excess, reproducing arguments around “authentic” and authenticating processes and voices and provides a way to envision insurgent modes of translation, transmission and transculturation. According to James Clifford transculturation is “not merely a matter of transferring one belief system intact into another language but rather involves reciprocity between cultures – a two way street of sorts – in which the ethnographer, cultural norms, practices, and dogmas are challenged to the limits of their ability to accommodate difference” (Clifford 627).

It is this “challenge” that Johnson’s takes in his narratives of conversion. His engagements with the sacred reveal potential for “liberation” and “revivification.” All of Johnson’s heroes experience “spiritual/religious conversion,” but these conversions are not without their complications. Having exhausted the “Western” possibilities, Johnson’s central protagonists consistently turn their eyes eastward and it is this very turn that concerns this chapter. What does it mean to search in someone else’s history, culture, nation for a viable form of the heroic? In Johnson’s texts, specters of appropriation and consumption, which are facilitated through the historically contingent conduits of colonialism and popular culture. These quests for self interrogate the constitutive elements of blackness, nationalism and aesthetics, the problems inherent in claiming ancestors and forbearers. In their turns toward the “East,” his central protagonists

embrace more fluid constructions of identity and allow us to think through the processes of transculturation and questions of appropriation.

Ellison troubled constructions of identity in a post-WWII America, and Johnson challenges the limits set in and by identitarian politics and definitions of community for a generation that had seen a turn to the East, American Imperialist “interventions” in the Pacific Rim in the form of the Korean and Vietnam Wars. His generation witnessed the gradual desensitization to and fetishization of acts of violence in popular culture, first in black and white and then in color. Through the immediacy of television, Americans witnessed the horror of domestic policies in the form of violent reprisals on Black American attempts to gain parity during the Civil Rights Movement as well as seeing horrific national policies executed abroad by and through “national heroes.” Unlike the soldiers that inhabit the “insane asylum” in Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, who had rushed into “service” to prove their manhood and “Americanness,” the soldiers of Johnson’s generation were confronting an “enemy” in the Pacific Rim that was being rhetorically constructed along similar racial lines that as black Americans.<sup>187</sup> With new national conflicts in new territories, old resilient territories of race, body and nation and the inherent contradictions at the core of each became new grounds, however unstable, on which to build resistance.

The black experience, according to Johnson, should reflect the variety of cultural, ethnic, class and particularities of the individual. Johnson has historically been resistant to critical models – psychoanalysis, feminism, deconstruction, etc, believing that those discourses enact violence on the text. He claims that “[as] a phenomenologist might say,

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<sup>187</sup> One need merely consider the high profile public prosecution of Muhammad Ali’s 1967 decision to refuse to fight in the Vietnam War. His initial status as a conscientious objector was revoked when Ali claimed that he would indeed fight for the Jihad. He was imprisoned, stripped of his title and forbidden to fight for what some thought were his prime years.



we must ‘suspend’ or ‘bracket’ our own pettiness and bias so these people can come to life on the page” (Rowell and Johnson 542-3). I am uncomfortable with an “aesthetic” argument that brackets such “pettiness” as a gendered or psychoanalytically informed perspective and/or critique, that neutralizes analysis of the ideological underpinnings of “aesthetics,” and how the (un)conscious informs cultural production.<sup>188</sup> The problematic bracketing of ideology and elevating aesthetic virtuosity as the defining criterion results in these aesthetics elevations trying to “pass” themselves off as being ideologically neutral, ahistorical and apolitical.<sup>189</sup> Johnson argues persuasively that Black writers are incapable of being disinterested in racialized ideologies due to an overdetermination of race in American society (B & R 20).

Johnson, like many of his contemporaries, were not merely under the spell of popular culture. That is not what his texts are about. The heroic is a figure that can facilitate and model “conversion,” the heroic quest is a viable path of philosophical and intellectual transformation. For Johnson, the heroic is about seeking the power, will, and ability to transform into something new. The question remains whether or not the ideological stances privileged in his writing threaten to bind him to unproductive and reductive ideas about the self, specifically that of gender. Johnson’s work does push beyond the limits of his predecessors. One need only consider the palpable absence of the

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<sup>188</sup> This is not to argue that a discourse would not necessarily have to be modified. An excellent inquiry to the usefulness of “psychoanalysis” can be found in Claudia Tate’s *Psychoanalysis and the Black Novel* and Hortense Spillers, *Subjects in Black and White*.

<sup>189</sup> Johnson, as noted in his comments regarding the psychoanalytic and Marxist implications of Ellison, seems quite capable of bracketing his hostility toward these discourses when it suits him. It is more interesting for me, as a reader to think about the moments in his fiction and prose where he is working through his critique in a more balance and less invective way.

“feminine” in Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, except as background figures to attest to the disenfranchisement of black men and by extension all of black culture.<sup>190</sup>

Struggles with identity that plagued Ellison’s nameless hero, the struggles with “blackness” and a “sad” history are taken up in Johnson’s oeuvre, but with a difference. The quests take familiar shape, but the processes, the trials and transformations that his protagonists experience change the parameters of the black heroic. The quests of Johnson’s “blues heroes” take them in and out of black culture, in and out of history. Their objectives, of re-imagining and reforming the “self,” and in doing so challenge our most persistent ideas about identity. Their “job” is not to quell the chaos, but to become a part of it.

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<sup>190</sup> It is clear from the very first paragraph of the novel that the “I” that the novel is concerned with constructing against American discourses of race and representational practices is a distinctly male “I.” This eye/I guides the logic of the narrative forward as the “I” distinguishes it self against “spooks” of American literary classics, against “Hollywood-movie ectoplasms,” against representations of black men lacking “substance,” lacking intellectual capacity, lacking sight, vision and self (Ellison 3). A short survey of the female characters in this novel reveals a startling number of “ectoplasms”: the white nude dancer, object of distraction and desire at the “Battle Royal,” Kate and Matty Lou Trueblood, prostitutes at the Golden Day, Mary Rambo, who was “always helping somebody” (253), the grandmother being evicted, and Sybil, the white wife who wanted to have her fantasy of ravishment at the hand of a black rapist. It goes without saying that Ellison is clearly not interested in the possibility of the female heroic, only in the “feminine figure’s” support of masculinist versions of the heroic.

### Chapter 3

#### Working the Marrow “out of an impatience”: Toni Cade Bambara’s Warrior Women

. . . seeking a now that can breed  
futures  
like bread in our children’s mouths  
so their dreams will not reflect  
the death of ours . . .  
So it is better to speak  
remembering  
we were never meant to survive

Audre Lorde from “A Litany for Survival”

“Where are the evolved poised-for-light adepts who will assume the task of administering power in a human interest, of redefining power a being not the privilege or class right to define, deform, and dominate, but as the human responsibility to define, transform, and develop?”

Toni Cade Bambara, “What it is I think I’m Doing Anyhow”

When Toni Cade Bambara asks where the “evolved poised-for-light adepts” are, she is asking: Where are the heroes? In the above referenced essay, she describes a dinner among friends at which Charles Johnson’s “wonderful book *Faith and the Good Thing*” was being debated and of particular interest was the “author’s burning up of a baby on page such and such...[as] metaphorical infanticide” (162). After describing her friend Eleanor’s passionate response, she “hik[ed] up her gown to climb[ed] onto the table to make her point,” Bambara considered the response and concluded that she is “thoroughly in Eleanor’s camp” and that “[w]ords are to be taken seriously... Words set things in motion... Words conjure” (163). Bambara sees writing as a political act (154), and as such requires the writer to be “careful,” to avoid carelessness because the writer has to be held accountable to their “community.” Bambara, like Charles Johnson, had ascribed to Black Nationalist politics at a point in her career, but the difference between what Johnson and Bambara did with the tenets of Black Nationalism could not be more

pronounced. Charles Johnson rejected Black Nationalism as a dangerous and degenerative cleaving to the bases of identitarian politics, race and corporeality. Bambara, on the other hand, worked within and through these discourses, to “[re]define, transform and develop” an ethic of care with and for the community, her community. The poignant question Bambara asks of all writers is: “Does this author here genuinely love his/her community” (156). Unlike many of her male contemporaries, Bambara perceived a dangerous split in the “spiritual, psychic, and political forces in [her] community” and felt it her obligation to “identify bridges” and “understand how the energies” of one period would manifest themselves in decades to come. She understands the importance and value of the “conversation” with seemingly destructive discourses and does not abandon the energies that fuel them. Bambara’s work challenges the notion of “individual striving” through her heroic figures and in doing so enables us, as readers to see how her work challenges dominant constructions of the heroic, and takes the female warrior’s corporeality into account in ways that disrupt all that the female body symbolizes. The female warrior can represent, protect and sustain the communal, as many of our heroines in the work of Bambara attest, but she can also represent the collapse of and response to a debilitating order.<sup>191</sup> The female warrior signifies, at the corporeal level, the battle of the interior. Men, as warriors, are expected to extend their bodies into and to master exterior “spaces,” while women limit the space of and around which the body can move. According to Claudia Tate the female seldom chooses to be the outsider or lone adventurer. It is the black woman’s gendered position, her biological and social ties to

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<sup>191</sup> I am thinking specifically of the female characters in Bambara’s short fiction whose “work” is to reveal fissures within debilitating Western empirical and reductive discourses of communal organization I discuss later in this chapter. This use of the female warrior/hero in this manner can also be seen in the work of Toni Morrison, specifically *Paradise* and Bessie Head’s *A Question of Power*.

“home,” that prevent her from becoming the warrior adventurer. Where the classic male hero is free of such obligations, the female hero is tethered to the local or domestic; she “must conduct her quest within close boundaries, often within a room . . . or within the borders of two nearby towns . . . Even when she does actually cover a lot of territory, . . . it is not her physical movement that demands our attention since this is not of primary importance” (Tate xxx). Thus the destination, the male hero’s “external projection of his growing awareness” is supplanted by the female heroine’s participation in complex and potentially exploitive relationships. This condition of her heroism does not, according to Tate, negate the heroine’s quest for identity. It is not ancillary to her support or relation to others, self-awareness and destiny are controlled by or subordinated as the black heroine explores the terrain of the social psyche, complex social relations that are often made further complex by her “quest.”<sup>192</sup>

With the female warrior’s quest confined to domestic landscapes, the heroine becomes an ancillary, a “figure” easily conflated with the terrain fought over. The female body is subjected to “conceptual abstractions,” rendered symbolically in images of “home” and “land.” Once made “image,” the female body becomes a seemingly “natural” site of racial and ethnic national purity (Tate xxi). Women, in traditional models, do not have the same access to the “quest” as men; they can be the bridge or supply the bridge for the hero but can not traverse it on their own adventures.<sup>193</sup> Women can symbolize the

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<sup>192</sup> According to Joseph Campbell in *Myth of The Gods*, women function within myth and ritual to “engage the individual, both emotionally and intellectually in the local organization” (462-7). There is nothing more local than the domestic sphere women symbolize. Subjected to dichotomous constructions of gender that limit mobility, the female warrior figure’s quest is often limited to “home,” confined to battles within and with interiors and interiority.

<sup>193</sup> In Joseph Campbell’s *The Mythic Image*, he references the compassionate and benevolent role of Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara in the form of Kuan-yin ch (China) Kwannon (Japan) to illustrate the one of the roles that the female figure can take up (327-8) which will be explored in more detail in the final chapter of this dissertation that deals with the work of Patricia Powell. See

nation, their bodies used to express national identity to produce the nation's citizenry but they can not fight for it.<sup>194</sup> Their bodies can symbolize the land to be fought for, preserved; they provide the materiality, the sense of place for the male warrior/citizen. The gendering of bodies is specific to the cultural logic of a nation, to culturally specific concepts and representations of space, time and place. This process of gendering not only forms the sexed, sexual identity but the ethnic and racial identification of a nation and the modes through which citizens may construct themselves. Thus a national hero must meet established criteria that are based on idealized notions of identity and place. For the black body, place or the lack thereof, determines the way in which racial, class, gendered and sexual identity are mediated, negotiated and attributed simultaneously within and through borders of nation.<sup>195</sup> There are some bodies that are more acceptable in the position of national hero and others that are unthinkable.

In Claudia Tate's collection *Black Women Writers at Work* (hereafter BWWW) she claims that one of the hallmarks of the writing by African American women is the

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Goethe's "A Fairy Tale" (1795) from *Romantic Fairy Tales* where the snake, a female character, after achieving illumination, sacrifices herself to bridge the divide fantasy and reality so that the hero can reach his appointed destination.

<sup>194</sup> In Radhika Mohanram's *Black Body: Women, Colonialism, and Space*, she claims that "[t]he slippage of meaning from landscape to nation functions within an economy of conscious and unconscious systems, primarily through metaphoric substitution. The landscape which initially unites bodies and creates an identity through place becomes repressed in the formation of the nation. Landscape features or geographical contours always underpin the meaning of a nation and the formation of national boundaries" which is particularly useful to my understanding of the post World War II gendered subject's relationship to nation and nationalism, albeit through a specifically urban landscape. Further, Mohanram claims that "the discourses of nationalism subscribe to a different form of embodiment (as in race/ethnicity) which requires the foregoing of an embodiment mediated through nature: our bodily relationship to our landscape is repressed so that we may come into coherency via the nation" (Mohanram 7). Thus for the gendered subject, the metaphorization of body as nation displaces the construction of body as "nature."

<sup>195</sup> For example, Mohanram argues that the "category of the 'black body' can come into being only when the body is perceived as being out of place, either from its natural environment or its national boundaries. A black body in apartheid South Africa or in Uganda would not be understood as black in quite the same way as it would be in Western countries. Yet the different meanings of blackness are also metonymically linked with each other" (Mohanram xiii).

particular mode of questing undertaken by black female protagonists, and that this quest unlike the quests of male heroes in that theirs is a “personal search for a meaningful identity and for self-sustaining dignity in a world of growing isolation, meaninglessness, and moral decay” (Tate xix). With impending doom looming on the horizon, apocalyptic visions of the future, rules can be broken, roles can be modified, reversed, expanded or abandoned altogether. In the everyday, workaday American culture, there are often dire consequences for accessing one own “strength” and this is particularly relevant for the female warrior who must often be sent down or reminded of her proper place(s) that are well within conventional paradigms, but an apocalyptic space provides women and men more mobility; men can take up positions of nurturer or caretaker and women can respond to threats to her bodily, emotional or psychic integrity. She can answer violence with violence.

One way to positively construct what could be read as the limitations of mobility for the female warrior is to rethink ways to value the domestic, develop visions that reach beyond circumspect polarities of public/private, male/female, dichotomous constructions of identity and space. In order to rethink the black woman warrior in her introduction to *BWW*, Claudia Tate turns to Nikki Giovanni’s meditation on the relationship between the revolutionary and the domestic: “In order to be a true revolutionary, you must understand love. Love, sacrifice, and death . . . in order to do battle, you must have a sense of place, a sense of well-being between two people or between an adult and a child or children” (xi). For Giovanni, it is the interpersonal, the purchasing of three new windows for her mother’s basement that can be revolutionary (61). Revolution can be found in the expression of relationships within and through the local and provide the warrior with the grounding necessary for their quest. Tate then adds that the black female

heroine particularly “must be determined to understand the conditions of her life, first by means of intense introspection, before she can move on to establish meaningful relationships with other people” (xxi). The quest is both psychic and social, interior and interconnection. An example of this difference is in the comparative quest trajectories of Rutherford B. Calhoun of Charles Johnson’s *Middle Passage* vs. that of Toni Cade Bambara’s Velma Henry, the central protagonist of *The Salt Eaters*. While the former traverses the Atlantic on a slave ship and finds himself through reconciliation with the past through an encounter with a captive “African God,” the latter experiences healing through reestablishing emotional connections with the help of and through renowned healer Minnie Ransom and confrontation with altogether murky histories of self and community.<sup>196</sup>

As discussed in the earlier chapters on Ellison’s *Invisible Man* and several works in Charles Johnson’s oeuvre, three attractive characteristics of warriors are: their strength, their ability to provide a release for the larger community, and more importantly, their ability to enact socially unacceptable violent behavior. However, the female figure that is strong, capable of and enacts violence is perceived, at the very least, to be extremely dangerous. Kirk-Duggan in her work *The Refiner’s Fire* embraces the use of “rage,” even

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<sup>196</sup> In BWWW Toni Cade Bambara discusses her intent to think through ways to “organize various sectors of the community . . . I was struck by the fact that our activists or warriors and our adepts or medicine people don’t even talk to each other. Those two camps have yet to learn . . . to appreciate each other’s visions, each other’s potential, each other’s language” (Tate 16). Bambara’s goal was to try to “bring our technicians of the sacred and our guerillas together” (Tate 31). One of the ways this is done in *The Salt Eaters* is through the connection to ancestors. The importance of these figures has been discussed by Toni Morrison in “Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation,” Luisah Teish in “Ancestor Reverence” and several other writers/theorists. Bambara, in “Salvation Is the Issue,” asserts that the underlying question of her oeuvre is whether or not it is “natural (sane, healthy, whole-some, in our interest) to violate the contracts/covenants we have with our ancestors, each other, our children, our selves, and God” (47). Her answer, gleaned thematically in her work, is that simultaneous communing with living, dead, selves and future is needed.



the possibility of a “killing rage,”<sup>197</sup> and the problems women encounter when they express rage. Specifically, and utilizing biblical narrative as her support, Kirk Duggan cautions that:

[w]hen women do violence, their acts may or may not be read in the same manner as when men do. Society tends to be surprised that women are capable of murder. Women as refiners engage the fire, the violence of murder; some women kill in the name of God, desire, passion, revenge, and self-defense. Women abuse, women batter; women kill others; women kill themselves. Violence is no respecter of gender, class, race, time, or beauty and how dangerous it is to take lightly biblical texts, dubbed the Word of God, that at once require humans to ‘do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your god,’ (Micah 6:8) but allow a divine service through evil, murder, and sacrifice. (Kirk-Duggan 34)

The problem according to Kirk-Duggan, is a refusal to look beyond the local or through the tensions or contradictions often inherent in creating the local, which sometimes implies the tacit sanctioning of what amounts to genocide along with other exigencies of nation building. There is, within the cultural logic of the West, no contradiction between loving thy neighbor and killing him dead if his conceptual map of nation is incommensurate with your own or if their economic, political or social interests do not mesh with your own. At the same time, men do not want to think of women as capable of murderous rage, even if it is in name of “righteousness.” Acceptance of this rage, that women have the ability and commitment to act out violently at the expense of self, other and nation, facilitates a negative projection of the male personae onto the female body which signifies, in excess, the failure of both nation and masculinity.<sup>198</sup> If women can

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<sup>197</sup> Kirk-Duggan goes to bell hooks’ notion of “killing rage” that allows the enraged person to transform, move specifically from denial to resistance. She sees this rage as “the fury and anger that bubble up amid an experience of violation and without an outlet for what is ultimately an appropriate response to violation and cruelty, one could devolve into intense grief and destruction” (14). This rage, I argue, is more “visible” when the body expressing rage is already a spectacle and more “visible” by definition.

<sup>198</sup> Specific figures Kirk-Duggan addresses in “Take No Prisoners: Biblical Women Engaged in Violence” are: Jezebel (1 & 2 Kings), Deborah and Jael A(of the book of Judges), Jael and Judith

murder, men can be murdered; if women can slaughter, men can be slaughtered, penetrated with symbols and symbolic instruments of their own design. The very anxiety over the woman who can enact violence is in direct proportion to the anxiety about the presumed relationship between the penis and the phallus. The more she has it, the less sure he is that he ever did.

Woman's relationship to violence has historically been that of victim, but we also see fissures throughout of what constitutes allowable violence. In heteropatriarchal societies there are explicit and implicit stamping of imprimaturs on violent practices from discrimination to public execution but we also have incidents where the marginalized, here women, as anomalous warriors get to exert or indulge in an "allowable violence," albeit often narratively rationalized or cordoned off with that individual heroine who gets marked as "special." Racial construction further complicates what is considered allowable violence. Stereotypes of blackness and their intersection with that of masculinity and femininity dictate what types of aggression or violence is "expected and accepted" from white women versus women of color. Toni Morrison observes that one of the differences between the writing of black and white women is that violence or rather "aggression" can be accessed by black women more so than their white counterparts:

Aggression is not as new to black women as it is to white women. Black women seem able to combine the nest and the adventure. They don't see conflicts in certain areas as do white women. They are both safe harbor and ship; they are both inn and trail. We, black women, do both. We don't find these places, these roles, mutually exclusive. (Morrison qtd. Tate 122)

This reading takes up, however tangentially, the particularities of stereotyping of black female strength and their currency within black communities. The images that Tate takes

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(Book of Judith), Herodias and Salome (Mark and Luke). In her analysis, she considers the individual and collective acts of violence by these women and how they are read within and through contemporary historical and latter day (and arguably ahistorical) readings of their acts of violence within modern gender construction.

up are significant in that they have the potential to further reinforce dominant stereotypes of the gender divide as opposed to deconstructing them. To be the harbor, where the ships moor, and to be the vessel or way that the hero finds his adventure, to be the inn, the surrogate domestic sphere along with the trail is to function as sites of recuperation and modi of movement for the warrior, consistent with conservative representations of women as bridges for heroes but not heroes themselves. What is missing explicitly from the majority of early work of representing the black woman's experience is a consideration of how the American taxonomy of race genders black women in such a way that they have been and still are perceived and subsequently perceive themselves as "stronger" than their white counterparts. This "myth" is subsequently socially reinforced through stereotypes of white feminine delicacy and black female strength. The masculinist rendering of the warrior as masculine ideal produces obvious ironies. This cadre of stereotypes of black women as subject to and perpetrators of violent behavior allows them, in very small measure mobility or the ability to "act." At the same time, according to Dorothy West, these images of strength prevent them from receiving communal empathy leaving black women open and subject to violence at the individual and communal levels.<sup>199</sup>

**But**, strength for the black female subject has always been a Catch 22. Essentialist notions of the physical and emotional prowess historically attributed to black females have consistently proven detrimental to the well-being of women and the community at large. According to Trudier Harris in *Saints Sinners and Saviors: Strong Black Women in*

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<sup>199</sup> In Toni Cade Bambara's short story "Talkin' bout Sonny" the narrator relays the tale of Sonny who has gone "crazy" and slit his wife's throat, but more importantly the reader is made privy to escalating fear and anxiety in the narrator as we read how her "man" empathizes with Sonny. This undercurrent of fear reveals that undercurrent of wounding of both men and women in the black community.

*African American Literature*, this quality of strength becomes, for many black women, “its own reason for being . . . and frequently for the characters around them as well” (Harris 10). In her sustained analysis of “this thing called strength” Harris interrogates representations of black matriarchal figures and traces the constitutive elements of girth, strength, asexuality to mammydom, and explores how these figures have functioned historically and culturally to comfort, excuse, protect and ensure white heteropatriarchy. As Mammy, the black woman could be relegated to hard labor, because she was more masculine than her white counterparts, reproductive labor because of her assumed atavism and fecundity, and still not be perceived as a threat to the domestic economy of the “big house” because of her taxonomic “ugliness.” The black female slave was no more than an animal to be bred and bred specifically to increase their owner’s capital with no attention to or admitting of desire for this presumably repugnant body. Further, as strong black women aligned with Judeo-Christian ethos, they were instrumental in keeping the family, most specifically black men under their, the “white god’s” and subsequently the white man’s, control (Harris 11).

Thinking more critically about the ways appropriation and assimilation of these stereotypes of strength by the black community have resulted in self perpetuating and fulfilling prophecies does not negate, as Paule Marshall’s fictional character, Reena, makes clear -- that black women have had to be, in point of fact, “frighteningly strong.”<sup>200</sup> The historical realities of survivorship are imbricated with fantasies, but we

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<sup>200</sup> Paule Marshall published the short story “Reena” in Bambara’s *The Black Woman* and in this short story Reena gives voice to the precarious position black women have been put in: “‘They condemn us,’ Reena said softly but with anger, ‘without taking history into account. We are still, most of us, the Black woman who had to be almost frighteningly strong in order for us all to survive. For, after all, she was the one whom they left (and I don’t hold this against them; I understand) with the children to raise, who had to make it somehow or other. And we are still, so many of us, living that history’” (TBW 35). The description of the delivery of these words, “softly

need to think through the problems that emerge when a people, with a history of abjection and marginalization, culls a past of oppression to generate and access a usable past.<sup>201</sup>

This strong black female warrior figure fits too well into a dominant rendering of pathological blackness, where black men are the purveyors of hyperbolic atavistic masculinity, and black women are also masculinized, seen as being “too strong for their own good,” made strange by their inability to perform proper “white” femininity. Yet, she still serves as a recuperative narrative corrector. We want her story of survivorship, her having seen and done it all; because this symbol of strength can be used, much like the fantasies of physical prowess Frantz Fanon discusses in *The Wretched of the Earth*, to psychologically benefit the individual, but the impact or potential positive impact on the larger black community is questionable. Granted Fanon was writing in a particular historical moment and cultural/colonial context, but his analysis of the psychological effects of colonial racism speaks to contemporary figures of “strength,” their tenacity and ability to pacify. If the black woman is strong enough that all can depend on her, there is no need to discuss what amounts to illusory oppression.

It is through reading the ways in which these figures are deployed and to what end, diachronically and in our contemporary moment, that will enable us to unpack and

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but with anger.”

<sup>201</sup> For Harris it is the “cultural immunity granted to the traditional strong black woman” that has proven problematic because as long as the goals and results were “honorable,” excessive and pathological violence has been allowed, accepted and perpetuated. This is a construction where “violence, coercion, disrespect, and violation can occur” and Harris sees “strong black women characters as sinning against their families and their communities when their motives are more self-absorbed and selfishly *individual-istic*, in spite of claims to the contrary...[and further that] the moral base of the strength that defines the women in the saints category is submerged or warped with women in the sinners category” (19). Harris suggests that we have to question the attraction of these figures, how they work to preserve or enforce dominant constructions of gender, race, class and sexuality “against the impact their strength has upon their families, their communities, our imaginations” (20). We have to think not only of the currency of the stereotype but the cost, the price paid, of dreaming power in these ways. At the same time, Harris’ work could be read as precluding the possibility of and for the black female heroic. We need to consider if Harris’ work positions the black woman and black female hero as antithetical constructions.

change how these systems of representation work. It is one thing to construct utopian images of what could have been and what will be, and indulge in fantasies of who we be can and are, but we have to consider the cost to literal, living women in the present? According to Trudier Harris' analysis, the appeal of the strong black matriarch lies in the historical fact of her "survival," and that as a historical figure of strength she can mythically "lead and guide us from where we happen to be to some unimagined but probable other space and place," but at the same time this figure enforces the cultural logic of the dominant where the God fearing black Christian domestic despot entrenches, supports and facilitates the castration of black males and reinforces the sexual pathologizing of black women (Harris 17).<sup>202</sup>

Historically, the domestic in the American colonial context has been a battlefield and "love" one of the deadliest weapons. A discussion of the "domestic warrior" requires a revisiting of the local. Claudia Tate distinguishes "love" in the "west" as "full of possession, distortion, and corruption. It's a slaughter without the blood" (Tate 123). In the work of writers like Toni Cade Bambara we have a clear disruption of what has counted as "love" or social connection, complications to that which has been historically bound up within and through discourses of kinship and property relations.<sup>203</sup> In the work of later writers like Michelle Cliff or even later Patricia Powell, we have what Tate alludes to as a guerilla sensibility of female warriorhood and arguably a guerilla

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<sup>202</sup> One contemporary novel that troubles this pre/post historical formation is Octavia Butler's *Kindred* in which the central protagonist literally moves through time, potentially becoming her own ancestor, her own reason for being, but in order to successfully negotiate the spatio-historical space, she has to, literally, leave part of herself behind. She, with her white husband, have to "accept" a history of sexualized violence and how their "present" constructions of race, gender and desire are impacted by that history.

<sup>203</sup> This question leads me once again to the critical work of Hortense Spillers "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," alongside Gayl Jones disturbingly beautiful novel *Corregidora* which poses the question of how one could ever talk about love between master and slave.

sensibility of love. What marks the writing of Bambara, Morrison and Walker “is the manner in which specific textual strategies construct a Black female subject torn by allegiances to race and gender politics and engaged in acts of self-assertion and affirmation” (Butler-Evans 15). Because black women are bound by their corporeality, they fight a multi pronged oppression that makes every gesture of resistance: from a hand on the hip, a rolling of the eye, a sucking of air through the teeth, the killing of a child, the refusal to speak, the speaking too loudly all battle cries, acts of guerilla warfare. These acts represented in the work of these writers also represent, according to Tate, “real life strategies.” These figures become, in their negotiation of terrain of the inviolable, “usable.”

### **Toni Cade Bambara’s *Gorilla, My Love***

In Toni Cade Bambara’s “A Sort of Preface” to her collection of short fiction entitled *Gorilla, My Love*, she cautions creative writers and readers, with biting humor, against the use of “real” relationships, experiences and people in writing and claims that she produces “straight up fiction.” Through an anecdote where she is accused by one of her friends as walking off with a piece of her black female flesh and then told the least she could do was compensate the woman for taking that flesh. Bambara makes it clear that she is not incorporating “real events” in her work but that the fiction she produces will resonate with or reflect a life. This need to claim the space of “fictionalized truth” has to be read in the political and social nexus of black civil rights and nationalistic discourse,<sup>204</sup> identitarian politics and the historical moment in which the text is

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<sup>204</sup> The Black Nationalist program required the ascendancy of a particular type of black masculinity. Black women were thought of as (re)producers of the warriors not necessarily warriors themselves. As the terrain over and on which nations are built, women are reduced to

produced. Her preface reflects the problematic position black female writers have historically found themselves in; their writing, their texts, their flesh, all interchangeable and commodifiable, had to and needed to be read as reflecting an over/under represented reality. In this trap of needing to re-present, these writers occupy an untenable position where the “personal is always political,” where to write is to voice, intervene into phallogocentric constructions of knowledge and the sociopolitical, expand limited and limiting modes of representing black female subjectivities. It was unthinkable, in the historical moment this text was produced that a black woman would produce anything but a life narrative.<sup>205</sup> Her literary and cultural responsibility was to speak the body, her body.

In speaking her body, she would tell and save all. Bambara’s work, however, albeit not autobiographical in the traditional sense, resides in the paradoxical place of creation and relation that emerges throughout her work, especially the collection of short stories, *Gorilla My Love*. These acts of creation work with and through the marrow of cultural myths similar to those found in Maxine Hong Kingston’s *Warrior Woman*, where coexisting essentialist and anti-essentialist narratives, folklore, autobiography and mythohistorical fiction vie to redefine and delimit the mobility of the gendered and raced subject.

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essential ethno-biological definitions of the feminine, i.e. mother of the nation, mothers of soldiers, literal producers of citizens. Her body is used to legitimize and police representation and citizenship. Peripheral citizenship is often granted her through her biological obligation, but she must adhere to and support patronymic structures of inheritance. Otherwise, she fails as “woman.”

<sup>205</sup> Upon being asked by Claudia Tate in BWWW whether she orders or records human experience, Bambara responds that she is often asked whether or not her work is autobiographical, with the “assumption being that it has to be.” Bambara speculates that this line of questioning comes from a variety of ideological positions: sometimes racist and/or classist in the assumption that only white and/or privileged writers have the ability or luxury of time to “create,” or lastly just a “dull” perspective.



It is in her fiction, but I argue more specifically her short fiction that Bambara expresses and defines an impatience with the limitations of gendered language and discourses, specifically the masculinist project of black nationalism, binary constructions of male/female, interior and exterior through her strong female figures. These are warriors that bind, preserve and mourn the loss of community. Bambara's female warrior, whether a precocious child or older woman "past her prime," provides both the glue for and a compelling critique of the way community is forged and preserved at her, the female warrior's, expense. They are the pearls, fragile, delicate, beautiful, extraordinarily self possessed and possessors of selves.

These diminutive and "grown" women warriors are created out of the same impatience with patriarchal structures and white racism that she, and the other contributors to *The Black Woman*, respond to. The very repetition of the phrase "out of an impatience" in Bambara's introduction in this groundbreaking text is a tacit illustration of the tedium, the frustration, experienced by the everyday, work a day black woman and the black cultural worker alike. Despite what seems an impossible task to intervene in the destructive discourses swirling about black subjectivity, Bambara's texts ultimately express a "hope" that is not so much tenuous as it is complex and never fully free of external pressures. The end result, I argue, is what Bambara defines as "[t]he natural response to stress and crisis is not breakdown and capitulation, but transformation and renewal . . ." (qtd. Muther 2), and in her collection of short stories we see not capitulation, but the transformation of oppressive spaces into ones of potential renewal of individual and communal spirit.<sup>206</sup>

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<sup>206</sup> In Elizabeth Muther's "Bambara's Feisty Girls: Resistance Narratives in *Gorilla, My Love*" she argues that "Bambara works from within a black nationalist aesthetic of affirmation and solidarity,

“I’ve been through my purgatory and I can’t be overwhelmed again”

Paule Marshall - “Reena”

The first short story in *Gorilla, My Love*, “My Man Bovanne” is a set piece that narrates the struggles of a middle aged woman, Miss Hazel, with her black nationalist children who harangue her over her “dirty dancing” with a blind man, Bovanne. More specifically, we see Miss Hazel’s battle with exigent discourses of black female sexuality and corporeality and her resistance to being cast as the social and political terrain over which black nationalism and community are being built and defined.<sup>207</sup> The short story begins with the line “[b]lind people got a hummin jones if you notice” and further that once you “become acquainted” with a blind person, you will understand “what no eyes will force you into to see people” (3).<sup>208</sup> The space occupied by Hazel and Bovanne defies parameters of what can be seen or heard; the senses are pushed to their limits and, by extension, readers are compelled to generate more complex ways of thinking and seeing. The connection between these two characters, Miss Hazel and Bovanne metaphorizes a mode of producing meaning that does not depend on Western empiricism or privileged Western notions of “understandability”; rather, it is about connection and what exists in the spaces between sound. Humming, sounds strung together as melody, is sometimes recognizable but ultimately lacks and alludes to linguistic structure. Humming

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even as her stories resist the masculinizing coercions of the cultural nationalism of that period” (Muther 2). Bambara is constantly working within and between discourses of masculinity and nation.

<sup>207</sup> The historical backdrop for Toni Cade Bambara’s early writing is the Black Nationalist movement. Black women in revolutionary camps were constructed as guardians of the hearth. They had the responsibility of keeping it real and more importantly keeping it black, and often found themselves in the position of witnessing their black kings and brothers pass them over for the chance to engage in a bit insurrectionary sex with white girls. Antifeminist subterfuge was used to place black women in a tactically disenfranchised position where the rhetoric of sexual revolution gave men unlimited access to black females who were supposed to be always ready. According to Van DeBurg, “the revolutionary black woman was one part activist, two parts loyal and responsive bed mate (Van DeBurg 161).

<sup>208</sup> Unless indicated otherwise, all following citations will come from *Gorilla, My Love*.

is open to and relies on the connection between melody and improvisation, and in this case we have the erotic connection between two older folks who are part of a genealogy, part of a burgeoning community that sees them both as resource and embarrassment, history and hindrance.

The communication between Miss Hazel and Bovanne is, as the narrator describes it, “touch talkin with the hum” (6). This touch talking is a sensuality that neither black nationalist politics nor identitarian politics can reconcile. Miss Hazel’s children are unable to imagine her, or any other older black woman for that matter, as a sexual being without being complicit with pathological dominant constructions of black male and female sexuality despite their desire to liberate the black body, specifically their own. In order to adhere to a Black nationalist program Miss Hazel is left with the unattractive position of midwife or mammy to the new generation.

Miss Hazel knows that she is “grass roots.” She also knows that she is the terrain over which the next generation’s political battles are waged. She is caught in a maelstrom of the contemporary political and social milieu that will not let her be grass roots, a sexual being, woman and mother at the same time. The only place for the older black woman, who is forbidden from making and controlling the specularization of her own sexuality, is that of a signifier of the movement’s efforts to “liberate” the real “victim” of white male hegemony, the black male. The black woman, in this context, now finds herself under the censorious view of her children, but she refuses this gaze and in her refusal she challenges the dominant. She resists the strategic deployment of visual representations of stereotype by either dominant discourses of gender, race and sexuality or the naive politics her children espouse.

The reader is carried along Miss Hazel’s mental traversal of the sexual territory

she and Bovanne will inevitably cross. This landscape is full of scenarios where the two “care” for each other -- Bovanne changing the lock on her door to keep out the condescension and judgment of her children who are unable to read their own conservatism, as they “pull [her] coat,” along with the images of her messaging the worry lines out of Bovanne’s brow, preparing his bath - all gestures of care. This care is mirrored in Miss Hazel’s meditation on the care and role of older folks in the community: “Cause you gots to take care of the older folks. And let them know they still needed to run the mimeo machine and keep the spark plugs clean and fix the mailboxes for folks who might help us get the breakfast program goin, and the school for the little kids and the campaign and all. Cause old folks is the nation” (9-10). Miss Hazel knows what the “old folks” have contributed and will continue to contribute. She also knows that it is her generation that is the infrastructure of the black community and it was her generation and the ones who came before who had to negotiate minefields of power relations to get those who “might help” to help. Not only are they needed, but this generation has to be affirmed, told that they are needed, that they have a place in the political and social landscape of their children and their children’s children. And it is within the concluding dialogue between Miss Hazel and Bovanne that a new mode of creating knowledge is imagined, one that is liberatory and revolutionary.

The concluding exchange between our two elder statesmen is not the language of “seduction.” Miss Hazel reveals the ritual nature of gendered discourse. She tells her reader that she knows “[y]ou got to let men play out they little show, blind or not” and that this ritualized language is the beginning but has to go somewhere else. Bovanne addresses Miss Hazel: “I imagine you are a very pretty woman, Miss Hazel,” and her response is “I surely am,” I say just like the hussy my daughter always say I was” (10).

Bovanne has to “imagine” because he can not see in the literal sense, and in his imagining is a reimagining, a disruption of the “gaze” which historically controlled the representation of black women with authority and surety. This “I” that is engaged in the reimagining disrupts the dominant “eye” that would reduce Miss Hazel to “mammy,” “mama,” “victim,” “whore” or “savior.” It is through necessity that Bovanne conjures up an image of “Miss Hazel” but this image has to be confirmed by Miss Hazel’s projected perception of self. With Miss Hazel as interlocutor, a counter narrative to dominant discourses of black female sexuality and femininity is offered. Miss Hazel’s rejoinder claims her “prettiness,” but within the realm of performance. She concedes but it is in the manner of a “hussy,” specifically it is a “prettiness” performed “*like the hussy [her] daughter always say [she] was*” (10 *my emphasis*).

Unlike the public sphere where Miss Hazel has no control over how she is represented, Bovanne’s gaze takes her out of a dominant visible economy and into a figurative one. His gaze does not define or confine Miss Hazel’s mobility and sexuality, but responds to these discourses with a process of creation in conversation with conventional ideas about black female sexuality but not dominated by them. Miss Hazel has erotic autonomy in her power to confirm the “gaze” which is at once implicated and implicates structures of the visible. This agency is further expressed in Miss Hazel being prepared to “lock out” the social microcosm that was, in terms of Black Nationalist rhetoric, supposed to provide black women, all women for that matter, the basis of their identity -- the family. Instead, she is ready to embrace the appellation of “hussy.”<sup>209</sup>

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<sup>209</sup> In Elizabeth Ruth Burks’ limited reading of “My Man Bovanne” she claims that Miss Hazel chooses to be with Bovanne because she has been caught up in the generation gap and rendered useless by her children. With Bovanne, Burks argues, Miss Hazel opts for the “safe” heteronormative solution to the problem of communicating with her Black Nationalist children. I counter that there is nothing “safe” about Miss Hazel’s choice. She does not just to “forsake,” but

In the next short story in the collection we move from Miss Hazel in her sixties to a young prepubescent girl with the same name who is the central protagonist of “Gorilla, My Love.”<sup>210</sup> In this tale, young Hazel learns the treachery of adults as her infatuation with “Hunca Bubba” is challenged with the reality that he not only is getting married but changing his name to or rather back to Jefferson Winston Vale, a name that our young narrator claims can be found in an almanac (13). When young Hazel looks at the picture of Hunca Bubba’s love, her attention and the narrative shifts from what she reads as a coquettish skinny smiling woman to the movie house in the background. The movie house is a site where young Hazel often finds pleasure both in spectatorship in terms of the fantasies projected on screen and the resistance that Hazel engages in both at the level of spectatorship and social structures within and represented by the theater itself. This site of pleasure and her ownership of that pleasure enables young Hazel to militate against the intrusive influence of dominant structures of gender, race and class. Reading back, from the first short story of the elder “Hazel” to the younger,” we have narratives that deal specifically with the ownership of pleasure. This second story allows us to see formative contexts, events, and frustrations that shape an elder Hazel, giving us an idea of how this strong sense of self possession is possible in this social milieu. Young Hazel internalizes, makes marrow, her pleasure, anger and resistance and subsequently forges and sustains internal resources that enable her and other Hazels to push back at discourses mobilizing to define and confine black women.

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locks out the children who would confer on her the status of “victim” of white heteropatriarchal social, economic and political violence. She makes this choice fully conscious of the consequences, the least of which is to be labeled a “hussy.”

<sup>210</sup> In *BWWW*, Bambara discusses the choice to use the name “Hazel,” specifically as it relates to an experience she had with her mother as a child. The first thing Bambara responded to was the sound of the words “witch hazel,” and an image of a “groovy kind” of witch. She imagined the name as a powerful one and this power she carried into her construction of her fictional Hazels.

Hazel, her friends and younger brother go to a movie house in Uptown Harlem, on Amsterdam, and after having paid to see a film entitled *Gorilla, My Love* are disappointed when what begins playing on the screen is a “religious film,” what our narrator describes as a movie about Jesus. For Hazel the disappointment in and disjunction between what was supposed to happen and what ends up happening is more than just about the “wrong” movie ending up on the screen. Just as her older namesake in “My Man Bovanne” engages in a necessary “touch talkin” because the suturing of the auditory to the visual or what can be seen does not necessarily mean that there is a production of “truth,” Hazel recognizes the disjunction between narrative(s) and image, narrative and performance; she can identify false advertising. It is one thing, our narrator feels to deal with Jesus but she is “ready to kill” because when “you fixed to watch a gorilla picture you don’t wanna get messed around with Sunday School stuff” (15). Similarly, it is one thing for a nationalist politic to espouse a liberatory rhetoric for black women, in terms of removing the shackles of dominant constructions of gender and sexuality, but if what really happens is the relegation of the black woman to the “supine” then what recourses are there? Young Hazel’s response, like her elder namesakes’, is one that allows her to not only contest processes of image making but role making within and articulated through the sexual politics of her community.

The theater which is in the heart of Harlem is run by a “pasty” white man who has hired black women as matrons to keep order. In the context of the theater setting, black women are presented as authority figures, especially one woman “Thunderbuns,” who does not “play” or “smile.” Thunderbuns is the disciplining and disciplined body in this house of images and image making that presents fantastic and phantasmagorical images of the black female body in popular culture. In Hazel’s theater experience is a tacit

admission of black woman's illusory power within image making and social and political power outside the theater. In this tale there is a caution against relying on destructive fictions of black female super strength; we see how they enforce dominant discourses of race and gender. Thunderbuns, as aggressive black mammy can only bully children.<sup>211</sup> She can not bully the boss - the man - she can only confirm his "power." The relationship between Thunderbuns and the owner, if she were to stand as the only strong black female presence, would confirm artificial, tenuous scientific and class bases of power relations.<sup>212</sup> Instead we have young Hazel and her mother who stand as a counter balance to the "power" of Thunderbuns.

Hazel's disappointment in the disjunction between what is "supposed to be" and what is is not only about individual "displeasure," but it is displeasure expressed in a cultural site of pleasure making that mirrors what happens when the black subject, in this case a young black female seeks pleasure, identification and affirmation in these cultural spaces and what is encountered are repositories of ambivalent and often destructive discourses.<sup>213</sup> Hazel is resistant to the supposedly all powerful figure of the large black mamma(y). Hazel, much like her counterpart in the often anthologized "The Lesson,"

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<sup>211</sup> Trudier Harris reads the tyranny of Mama/Lena Younger of Lorraine Hansberry's *Raisin in the Sun* in her *Saints, Sinners, and Saviors* along with other figures like Ishmael Reed's "Mammy Barracuda," "Baby Suggs" of Morrison's *Beloved*, Bambara's "Minnie Ransom" of *The Salt Eaters* and other figures representative of this strong black female figure.

<sup>212</sup> In this instance we can read what Spillers refers to as a "fatal misunderstanding" in the construction of black female subjectivity; it is a deliberate misunderstanding that is a "misnaming" of the relationship of mother and child in the context of "procedure[s] of cultural inheritance" (Spillers 277) where there is the refusal to acknowledge the complexity of the historical impact of the social economic and political system of slavery on processes and representations of black motherhood and community.

<sup>213</sup> Pearl Bowser's *In Color: Sixty Years of Images of Minority Women in the Media: 1921-1981*, Donald Bogle's *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films* along with work by Stuart Hall, Thomas Cripps, Jacqueline Bobo, bell hooks, Manthia Diawara and a host of other black cultural/film critics have explored the representation of the black body.



appears to buck against everything and it is this “resistance” in the face of futility that marks her as a potential leader. “Like when when the big boys come up on us talkin bout Lemme a nickel. *It’s me* that hide the money. Or when the bad boys in the park take Big Brood’ Spaudeen way from him. *It’s me* that jump on they back and fight awhile. And *It’s me* that turns out the show if the matron get too salty” (14-15 *my emphasis*). In this passage young Hazel resists masculinist oppression within her community that mirrors or metaphorizes at the micro level larger socioeconomic restraints made law through institutional practices. In the repetition of “it’s me” there is a taking up of a fighting posture even if it proves only temporarily effective.<sup>214</sup> It is also this insistent female “I” that bears the burden of “turning out the show,” of being the most “visible” in her resistance because of what she is and is not supposed to be.<sup>215</sup>

Similarly, in the next short story, “Raymond’s Run,” the central protagonist is another young girl, this one a sprinter named Squeaky who does not “play the dozens or believe in standing around with somebody in [her] face doing a lot of talking. [She] much rather just knock you down and take [her] chances even if [she is] a little girl with skinny arms and a squeaky voice . . . and if things get too rough, [she’ll] run” (23). These two

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<sup>214</sup> In “What it is I think I’m Doing Anyhow” Bambara claims that the trials and tribulations that her “Hazels” go through are “rehearsals that will hold her in good stead in later encounters with more menacing and insidious people” (158). This “rehearsal” of painful experiences is consistent with my reading of what some read as masochistic engagement with popular cultural media/ images that offer little for the black female viewing subject. We have “Hazels” that clearly have developed a form of “watching” that is nothing like masochism, but is empowering. They have figured out what to take and what to leave behind.

<sup>215</sup> Bambara notes her own burgeoning resistant reading of dominant cinema as a child in “How She Came By Her Name” in which she recalls spending a large part of her childhood in the “movie house” where she was dissatisfied by the conventional Hollywood narrative and would “sit there and rewrite them” (225). The bulk of her dissatisfaction came from the representation of the solitary marginalized female subject who is without recourse to a supportive community. Bambara observes that “[m]ost of the time the stories were stupid because none of the women ever had girlfriends. I used to think Well, no wonder. No wonder Barbara Stanwyck is getting thrown off the cliff, or Lana Turner is getting shot, or Betty Davis is having hysterics. They don’t have any girlfriends” (225).

young female warriors are part of a genealogy of women that includes their textual antecedent in “Miss Hazel” of “My Man Bovanne.” All of these “women,” or womanish girls take up resistance in the face of inevitable negative consequences, of “chances” that they might not win against the big or bad boys, that they may be hurt themselves, at literal and figurative levels or ostracized from their “own.”

When negative forces exert their pressure, specifically a cankerous masculinist presence within the black community itself, it is little Hazel that pushes back and fights, albeit only or “awhile.” In the face of the impressive and imposing Thunderbuns, and the institution she represents, little Hazel confronts the “lies,” false representations, that are the business of grown-ups. She insists on seeing the manager when the film *Gorilla, My Love* does not appear on the screen; in fact, she breaks into his office and demands her money back. More importantly, when she does not get her money back, she lights a garbage can on fire and her action results in the closing down of the theater for a short time.

This is a young girl whose resistance extends from the microcosm of her neighborhood to institutions represented in and through the theater. With her critical posture she takes on Judeo-Christian religious discourse and determines that “just about anybody in [her] family is better than the god they always talkin about” (15). This explicit challenge is made possible by her viewing/reading practices formed at home and honed in her communal spectatorship in the theater. For Hazel, the diegetical space in film is not compatible with material reality even as it provides an escape from that reality. The film’s “churchiness” produces, in this diminutive reader an counter epistemological frame, a concatenation of memory and interpolation of her real world into the “reel” world of the film. Hazel consciously takes her “real” family and recasts the “drama” of

the crucifixion. In her comic version her aunts beat up Romans with their pocketbooks and Big Brood, as Jesus, ends up “playin handball or skully or somethin” (16). This agglutination of images of her family and local community are mapped onto the high toned seriousness of the crucifixion and ends with our narrator yelling from another room while trying to study “Shut if off” (16). The imagining of her family participating in the crucifixion and the biblical rendering of the crucifixion are part and parcel of the same thing. Both narratives serve the interests of the warrior who needs to create a ground from which to fight battles and little Hazel is one who stands her ground and has the authority and ability to call a halt to chaos.

Little Hazel demands something from the images and narratives that appear before her. In Frantz Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks* he describes the Negro as a toy in “the white man’s hands; so, in order to shatter the hellish cycle, he explodes” (140). Fanon directly addresses spectatorship and the potential for psychic harm when he describes a yearning present in the black subject who goes to see a film that gets answered in the negative: “I cannot go to a film without seeing myself. I wait for me. In the interval, just before the film starts, I wait for me. The people in the theatre are watching me, examining me, waiting for me. A Negro groom is going to appear. My heart makes my head swim” (140). In this scene that Fanon describes, spectatorship is not confined to the viewer/spectator seated and the images that appear on the screen but the field of spectator/spectacle relations is expanded to encompass the entire theater. The moment before the film starts the black viewing subject becomes the object looked at and interpolated into a system of representation. The black subject is watched for his response to the images created on the screen for him by the dominant. The image the black spectator is expected to identify with and accept is subservient and abject - a groom. The

black spectator is left with the unattractive option of identifying with the abject or with the white hero which is tantamount to self annihilation. Fanon's spectator and spectacle is gendered male, but in the work of Bambara we have an added complexity and potential for resistance in the form of a young female narrator who demands the ability to engage with these fanciful creations in the way she wants, to be the one who determines how she is to read them. Hazel's spectatorship do not produce a sober reflection on the sacrifice of God or his son, but segues into framing a relationship between the "reel" and her "real," giving her the ability to turn her gaze back on structures of oppression in her community that impact her ability to "speak." When she sees the theatre in the background of the picture of Unca Bubba's love, she sees a location where she has been an active agent with the ability to oppose.

It is not Jesus Little Hazel has a problem with but the disjunction between what is supposed to be and what is: the title of the film on the marquee and what you really get shown: the promise of capitalist democracy: the expectations of a public infantilized and sated with fantasies of what could and would be if the "citizen" only worked hard enough: the words and images used to seduce the spectator; desire is set up and fulfillment denied; Hazel is denied the pleasure she wants. It is one thing to willfully engage in a potentially economically and psychically exploitive set of relations and quite another to not be given the choice. According to Hazel's logic, there is a concrete relationship between words spoken and acts committed. When answering the charges of arson to her father, the two are inseparable for her; "if you say Gorilla, My Love, you supposed to mean it. Just like when you say goin to give me a party on my birthday, you gotta mean it. And if you say . . . gricified business. I mean even gangsters in the movies say My word is my bond" (17-18). Young Hazel, within the scope of her world and

experiences in that world, privileges the use of language to communicate “truth”; promises have to be kept; language and deed have to be consistent.

Hazel’s naiveté may “make her” susceptible to disillusionment but this is a figure who has the knowledge of how cultural products are commodified and operate to confirm cultural logics. She identifies racism in her school instructors, refuses to sing “southern songs” and does not back off when her questions make teachers uncomfortable. What makes her resistance possible is not some innate “strong black woman” ethos that can be located at the genetic level but it is through the community, the family that she is part of and the support she has from both her mother and father who support their “Badbird” when she “acts out” that this warrior’s marrow is formed. Her mother, who Hazel describes as being bad all by herself, serves as a model for confronting and correcting racism within educational institutions. When the manager refuses to refund young Hazel’s money, her response is nothing short of anarchy. Her burning of the garbage can shuts down the theater for a week, hurting the theatre however minimally. But what is most compelling about this sequence of events is the father’s response to the child’s act. He does not punish her but confirms that yes, when you say “*Gorilla, My Love*,” you better mean it. His tacit imprimatur on Hazel’s act of resistance in the context of the “image” world allows her actively to resist in her “real” world.

Young Hazel is then able to confront “dear Uncle Jefferson,” and in the process reclaims her name as Hazel, rejecting his affectionate nickname “peaches.” In doing so, she demonstrates a transgression of gender, age and sexual politics of filial sexuality. When the grandfather tries to claim that each name that a person takes up signifies a new person, that Hunca Bubba is the one who betrayed her trust not the new Winston Vale, Hazel calls Unca Bubba a “lyin dawg.” When she takes back her name it is not to

“deceive” but to reveal a violence that has been done to her. She issues a direct confrontation to patriarchal narrative; she will not allow the deception of changing the name of the oppression. In an interesting turn, this is also a moment when language fails her, when she uncharacteristically can not “get hold of the word” she wants to use which is “treacherous.”<sup>216</sup> Unable to conjure up the word, she also loses her ability to function as “navigator”; her sense of direction has been destabilized, but the one thing that does ground her over the din of betrayal are her baby brother’s sympathetic tears. Baby Jason, a figure for whom language is just beginning to have shape, “understands that we must stick together or be forever lost, what with grown-ups playing change-up and turnin you round every which way so bad. And don’t even say they sorry” (20).

Through this short story we see the flexibility of power structures to change the name of oppression but not necessarily the game - the oppression itself. More disturbingly is the way a sexual politic of the filial enables Vale to sexually charge young Hazel’s environment; but this is not without consequence. Little Hazel thus stands to represent the collective “we” within the community. And while it may be the providence of “grown-ups” to make and change the rules, to decide what has value and what does not, the “grown-ups” are little more than naive. The grown ups are surprised when their strategies and technologies are made evident, when the processes of rendering and masking are revealed. When Hazel expresses her anger at having been “teased,” she metonymically articulates a profound rage for her literal and literary ancestors at the system of democratic capitalism that historically reduced black women and men to

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<sup>216</sup> In “Toward a Genealogy of Black Female Sexuality: The Problematic of Silence” Evelyn Hammonds argues that “Black women’s sexuality is often described in metaphors of speechlessness, space or vision; as a ‘void’ or empty space that is simultaneously ever-visible (exposed) and invisible, where black women’s bodies are already colonized” (Hammonds 176). I think this text pushes at that “space” which Bambara constructs as not necessarily empty but has the possibility of fomenting resistance and capitulation.

chattel and made “family” an instrument of persecution and abjection.<sup>217</sup> She becomes a little warrior, however inarticulate in the moment of redress, who may not have access to all the “right” language or actions, but has an awareness of the constraints and debilitating effects of being language-less.

The role of the young girl as link between and signifier of “community” can also be found in the next short story “Raymond’s Run” in which young Hazel Elizabeth Deborah Parker, nicknamed “Squeak,” is “no strawberry dancin on her toes” but is deadly “serious about [her] running” (23, 24). She self authorizes as “the fastest thing on two feet” in the face of her parents who encourage the dancing on ones toes kind of foolishness (28). Her “success” is marked not so much by the races she wins, but by the preparation, knowing where and when to run and as protectress of her developmentally delayed brother Raymond who is “not quite right” (23). This is a fighter moves beyond her own competitive behavior and envisions another role, that of “coach” for her brother or academic (32).

There is a moment when our narrator likens Raymond to a gorilla rattling a cage until she sees the gracefulness with which he climbs over the fence and runs. This monstrous misreading of his ability and inherent grace reflects dominant constructions of blackness and gender. To read Raymond only as the “gorilla” is to retain a gaze of the dominant; it is to read him as the social and intellectually hobbled creature created by discourses of raced masculinity.<sup>218</sup> Similarly, Squeak is, according to dominant

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<sup>217</sup> I am thinking specifically of Hortense Spillers’ deployment of the term “pornotroping” to describe the kind of fetishistic practices that the black body, the captive female black body in particular, is subjected to. Spillers’ analysis of the historical displacement of kinship relations with property relations during slavery and work by critics who extend and complicate Frederic Engels’ discussion of “family” in *Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* have been particularly useful.

<sup>218</sup> Bambara discusses the choice to use the image of the gorilla in *BWWW*: “People got on [her]

discourses of gender, just as monstrous for her rejection of all things “foolish”/feminine. In order for Squeak to reach a point where she can have a different perspective on her brother, she has to complete her own warrior quest. By participating in her race, garnering and demonstrating respect for her female peer/competitor, she works through the tangle of complex social relationships between girls who “never really smile at each other because they don’t know how and don’t want to know how and there’s probably no one to teach us how, cause grown-up girls don’t know either” (27). This short story ends with a smile of “respect” between two competing girls. It suggests the possibility that as young women, these characters who are representative of a generation of women of color who inherit access to “voice” from both their matrilineal and patrilineal progenitors who have come through the Civil Rights Movement and experienced its successes and failures, will be able to construct relationships with other women and themselves that are not based on sexual acceptance by men but through their identification as “runners,” which is not necessarily gender neutral but is also not grounded in destructive objectification and self loathing.

We can not reduce any of these narratives to simple coming of age stories or heroic yarns where competitors gain respect for each other. This short is not entitled “Squeak’s Run,” even though the primary focus would seem to be the central protagonist’s race against her nemesis. The title redirects our narrative focus onto Raymond. In the process of running her race, Squeak is made to rethink the way she

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case about it -- ‘What kind of thing is that to say about a young blood?’ -- shades of King Kong and the nigger-as-ape and all. What kind of thing, indeed? They’re right. I was wrong. I’ve some nerve expecting my personal idiolects to cancel out, supersede, or override the whole network of racist name-calling triggered by that term” (Tate 33). The choice to use this image was deliberate as she relays her anxiety about this choice. I obviously read something more complex in the writer’s choices and impact those choices have and contend that the entire short story has to be taken into consideration along with the other themes carried throughout the collection.



looks at her brother. Once the tethers of conventional or traditional ways of thinking about the role of women are dropped she is able to reinterpret all the givens. She can then see her brother moving gracefully, even beautifully, despite his initial appearance of monstrosity. As a metaphor of social scientific constructions of race, the cage is finally surmounted by Raymond, but with this triumphant gesture comes the question “What has Raymond got to call his own?” that we are left with.

Invisibility was intolerable to men. What complaint would a female Job dare to put forth? And if having done so, and He deigned to remind her of how weak and ignorant she was, where was the news in that?

Toni Morrison, from *Mercy*

Just as “My Man Bovanne” provides us with a critique of the limitations of Black Nationalist discourse, Bambara also includes in her collection a critique of white liberal humanism and material analysis, American socialist movements and well-meaning white political worker. In “Playin with Punjab” we have Miss Ruby, a white grassroots organizer, who does not think through the way she manipulates agents within the black community and is subsequently punished for her failure to see beyond her own interests and structural power. Too invested in dominant social constructions of whiteness, respectability and femininity, and unaware of exactly how the “hero” functions within the black community she is operating, Miss Ruby finds herself purged, illustrating the social and political consequences of not learning how to “speak negro” when organizing in a black community. This short story, along with “My Man Bovanne” and “The Lesson,” illuminates the failure of socialist-based politics to address the specific concerns of the black community and more specifically the black woman due to their masculinist

interests.<sup>219</sup>

In order to facilitate her “grass roots” projects, Miss Ruby depends on the narrator, Violet to be her “translator,” and more dangerously Punjab,<sup>220</sup> a underworld powerbroker within the community. Specifically, Miss Ruby exploits Punjab’s desire for her, a desire that our narrator explains as a historical response to the system of slavery and its her theory that “the Black man got jammed up by the White man’s nightmare” (72). This nightmare of sexual, political and economic usurpation and cuckolding at the hands of the black man renders fetishistically every relation as a sexual one, where power between black and white men is mediated over and through the bodies of women. In this text, we have Punjab’s dogged pursuit of Miss Ruby which explicitly links the sexual to the political, a link made crystal clear by what one peripheral character cites as the primary obstacle to political organizing - the American psychosexual drama - “ass standing [perpetually] in the way of progress” (75).

Similar to the communal sentiment regarding Rinehart in Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, the community at large is prepared to accept and formally recognize Punjab’s role as a leader in the economic and social matrices in the black community and have him function as representative, but Miss Ruby misreads the role of Punjab, who has the power to “call

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<sup>219</sup> Critiques of American CP and socialist projects by black writers in urban metropolises begin during the interwar period when many black intellectuals found themselves initially enamored with then disenchan- ted by what had been seductive political rhetoric that offered a challenge to American capitalism. One scathing critique by Richard Wright, entitled “I Tried to be a Communist,” resonates with and mirrors eerily Ellison’s nameless protagonist’s experiences with the “Brotherhood” in Ellison’s *Invisible Man*. Bambara puts a spin on the “locus” of socialist politics that had been taken up by her male forbears. In her version, we get the voice that was eradicated in Wright and Ellison’s work, that of the young black female participant/observer.

<sup>220</sup> The name “Punjab” is more than a South Asian ethnic or geographical designation. Originally coined by British colonists during the interwar period, the racial/ethnic marker “Punjab head” was used derisively to describe someone who was of limited intellectual ability. Punjab, the character within this short story is far from “stupid,” despite his momentary loss of sense over Miss Ruby. As communal hero, he can be read squarely within the same tradition of trickster hero that Ellison’s Rinehart figure.

cool” to an entire block and funnel cash and goods into the community. She also misreads the power she has in her relationship to Punjab and the community at large. Instead of honoring Punjab with a place on the “board,” she dictates that a “cornball preacher,” who the community sees as an undesirable, is the more appropriate choice. With her inability to speak or read “Negro,” Miss Ruby has no conception of the community’s definition of right, wrong or what constitutes a leader. The preacher is unacceptable due to his aping the ways of “whitefolks,” and subsequently loss of what many deem the marrow of a church - the choir.

Miss Ruby is absolutely unprepared for the consequences of her expression of power which subverts an idealized socialist democratic structure. When she decides that her word is “law,” she leaves herself open to derision from the black community who know all too well the hypocrisy of American democracy and those who place themselves in the position of arbiters of right and wrong. The community sees “election” time as the opportunity for Punjab “to get his cut, him being the only kind of leader [they] could even think of. Matter of fact, most people didn’t even bother to come down and cram that yellow card into the milk box” (73). The community expects Miss Ruby to do right by Punjab, but she fails, as the character Sneaker claims that “Miss Ruby was full of shit with her foolishness about power and equality and responsibility and sacrifice, and then cop right out when the chips were down . . .” (75). Her investment in a crude socialist project blinds her to the possibility that a black hero or leader could come from the lumpenproletariat just as easily as from the proletariat. This narcissistic refusal to do her own translating has dire consequences for Miss Ruby as she finds herself at the brunt of Punjab’s ire.

Miss Ruby’s “knowledge” and strategies are placed in contest with Violet, the

narrator's, knowledge. Violet is not a native informant who makes Miss Ruby-like mistakes with people like Punjab because unlike Miss Ruby, she can read what lies at the heart of the kind of "power" Miss Ruby has exercised on Punjab and speculates adeptly the historical matrices of desire and racial violence that are at the core of Punjab's "thing" for white women. This knowledge is likened to in-vitro nutrients passed down to her through her mother who knew "a whole lotta Punjabs in her day and passed this [knowledge] onto me along with the vitamins and the dextrose and all them other nutrients that comes tubing in when you're huddled up there in the dark waiting to get born" (71). This is knowledge that fortifies Violet against both the Punjabs and the Miss Rubys of the world.

She can run if she want to and even run faster. But ain't nobody gonna beat me at nuthin.

Toni Cade Bambara, from "The Lesson"

In "The Lesson," Bambara's most anthologized piece of fiction, we have what would seem to be the ideal leader or educator in the character of Miss Moore, an organic intellectual who "returns" to her community as an antagonistic but supportive force armed with Marxist readings of modes of production, value and consumption, to take over the summer education of some children in Harlem. This short story is narrated by Sylvia who describes Miss Moore as the "only woman on the block with no first name" who had been to college and "said it was only right that she should take responsibility for the young ones' education" and most importantly "she not even related by marriage or blood" (88). Sylvia is automatically resistant to Miss Moore and her teachings and likens her to winos in the neighborhood who are obstacles to her having an enjoyable summer.

One of the lessons Miss Moore teaches is that of the relationship of the paradox of

value and the need to think critically of structures and processes of consumption. To that end she takes her students to F.A.O. Schwartz where they see toys that cost the equivalent of a year's supply of food for a family. Albeit described as "a glued together jigsaw puzzle done all wrong" the group of children, individually and collectively, represent responses to being marginalized in relation to American capitalism.

It is Sylvia's quality of resistance, albeit misdirected, that proves to be what Miss Moore identifies in our young protagonist. She is the next potential leader. In the relationships between these characters we see an extension and complication of Nikki Giovanni's claim that one has to be prepared for another kind of revolution of consciousness one compatible with the domestic (Tate 61). It is not enough to memorize and regurgitate information but to be able to think critically about what is in front of you. Sylvia's best friend Sugar can regurgitate what Miss Moore "wants to hear," but then what? Sylvia knows the words that make up a Marxist critique of American Capitalism but has not necessarily comprehended their implications for her life; these are not things that Sylvia immediately "features." Yet, this is also a little girl that knows the importance of timing, that there is a time to "speak on" a particular issue which is suggestive of an alternative nonlinear models of learning.<sup>221</sup> Sylvia does not get it all at once, but she eventually gets it. Some degree of consciousness is necessary but not always attainable.

When Miss Moore asks her students to consider class inequity and how there are some that can spend enough money to feed a family of six or seven on a toy, it is Sugar who responds: "'I think,' say Sugar pushing me off her feet like she never done before,

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<sup>221</sup> I am thinking specifically of the moment when Sylvia claims to be "ready to speak on" Miss Moore's representation of the community as impoverished and run down but she recognizes when the window of opportunity for her participation in the discussion has passed. Sylvia, much like Badbird who comes before her, does not always have the language but understands where she fits in the social matrices of sex, gender, race and class.

cause I whip her as in a minute, 'that this is not much of a democracy if you ask me. Equal chance to pursue happiness means an equal crack at the dough, don't it?'" (95). This aptly named character folds under the pressure of both Miss Moore and Sylvia. One of the few times that she resists Sylvia is not indicative of the ability to challenge an established order but it does show the ability to recognize power in context and the survival tactic of conforming to whoever is structurally on top. It is Sugar who asks if the children can steal in the F.A.O. Schwarz store. She is the character who "[gets] the ground rules squared away before she plays" (89-90). Sugar learns how to play the game in each context but does not necessarily want to change the game itself. A generous reading of this would be one in which Sugar's affect is of Machiavellian proportions, but at the end of the text, Sugar seems bent on still engaging in a race to a candy store to consume sweets. Like her name, without the ability to absorb the nutrients of the experience at F.A.O. Schwarz, she can not sustain or experience transformation. Her critical abilities can only get her so far without their absorption and incorporation in everyday use.

Similar to the disruption of the visible or Western empiricist construction of knowledge central to "My Man Bovanne," this short story has a protagonist who has to rethink the production of "meaning" and value created in the objects that come into her purview. For Sylvia it is a \$480 paperweight that jars her perception of the relationship between what you can see and the "truth": "My eyes tell me it's a chunk of glass cracked with something heavy, and different-color inks dripped into the splits, then the whole thing put into a oven or something. But for \$480 it don't make sense" (90). For Sylvia, the paradox of value is what becomes visible, not the spurious logic of economic disparity. Despite the explanation of what the paperweight is made of, the "value" of the

object still alludes Sylvia. It does not compute.

There is one child, Mercedes, who walks into F.A.O. Schwarz as if she belongs there. She is at once part of the group and in antagonistic relation to the other children. Mercedes, unlike the others, has a desk and stationery. Her relationship to capital, versus that of the other children becomes evident when she makes the claim that her father would buy the expensive paperweight for her and Rosie Giraffe interjects “your father my ass.” Her economic superiority is illusory. Mercedes seems rich in name only; her signifiers of privilege come from outside. The desk and stationery come from a godmother. When she claims that she will come back with her “birthday money . . . [the other children] shove her out of the pack so she has to lean on the mailbox by herself” (95). Her assumption of structural superiority based on patrilineal relation to capital pushes her out of the group. It is not an identification that the other children relate to. It is not that the other children do not have fathers or family, but they do not actively claim privilege based on that relation.<sup>222</sup>

Sylvia represents burgeoning class consciousness. She resists from the beginning; she can not only understand the rhetoric, the ways in which rhetoric acquires and maintains its “currency,” but she also has the ability to recognize that she has internalized ideas that make her feel shame even if the emotion is amorphous and she can not tell where it comes from or why (93). As readers we see the seeds of critical vision sprouting when our narrator identifies a strategy of indoctrination in the ritualized dialogue and responses that students are expected to give in the “classroom” to Miss Moore’s prompts:

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<sup>222</sup> This structuring of identity based on patrimony brings me back again to Spillers’ essay “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book” where she discusses the historical practice of slave owners claiming their “black” offspring as capital goods not kin. If a man did not have the ability to own himself, his wife or children, as was the case of black men, then they were not “men” (Spillers 86).

“Where we are is who we are, Miss Moore always pointin out. But it don’t necessarily have to be that way, *she always adds then waits* for somebody to say that poor people have to wake up and demand their share of the pie an don’t nobody know what pie she talkin about in the first damn place” (94-5 *my emphasis*). Here we see Sylvia’s knowledge of a performative mode, rather the ritualized dialogue associated with learning a new discourse. She knows that there are appropriate responses but she also that there is “performance” in Miss Moore’s prompts and in her waiting for the right and/or wrong response.

One of the problems posed in this narrative is Sylvia’s seemingly innate resistance. From the beginning we have a “salty” little girl who is prone to mischief. The narrator relays the tale of she and Sugar crashing a Catholic church service on a dare but they fail to go through with her plan of running up to the altar and doing a tap dance while Sugar “messes with the holy water” (93). It is Sylvia who realizes that she can not go through with her plan because she understands the context in which she finds herself, and with “everything so hushed and holy and the candles and the bowing and the handkerchiefs on the drooping heads,” Sylvia is unable to follow through with a plan that would desecrate a holy place (93). When Sugar teases her about not going through with the plan, Sylvia literally tortures her friend, tying her up in a shower and leaving the water on.

Sylvia resists Miss Moore to the end and refuses to give her confirmation that she has indeed learned anything from their experience at F.A.O. Schwartz. She opts to think the day through as opposed to Sugar who wants to consume candy and sweets with the money pilfered from Miss Moore. “We start down the block and she gets ahead which is O.K. by me cause I’m goin to the West End and then over to the Drive to think this day



through. She can run if she want to and even run faster. But ain't nobody gonna beat me at nothin" (96). Sylvia does not torture Sugar this time, nor does she move to coerce her to conform to what she wants to do. Instead, Sylvia pursues a solitary and intellectual endeavor. This contemplative "child" brings us full circle to the adult voice that begins the narrative. It is the adult Sylvia who looks back, who becomes the ideal pedagogue and hero and narrates her heroic quest to class consciousness by channeling her young self.

### **Bambara, Trauma and the Image**

The spectator needs a moment to assemble the history: chains, branding irons, whips, rape, mental depressors on the tongue, bits in the mouth, iron gates on the face in the cane brakes that prevent one from eating the sweetness and prevent one from breathing in the sweltering blaze that scalds the mask that chars the flesh.

*From Toni Cade Bambara's "Reading the Signs, Empowering the Eye"*

All of us hold knowledge in our bodies and memory in our senses.

*From Laura U. Marks' Skin of the Film*

Art, for Toni Cade Bambara, has a purpose; it can save lives.<sup>223</sup> As a "chronicler" of human history, art suggests linearity, but as "reflector" of a spiritual dimension, linearity is destabilized.<sup>224</sup> We do not feel in the linear; we feel pain, guilt, shame, grief,

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<sup>223</sup> Bambara contemplates the "use" of art in "Salvation is the Issue" published in *Black Women Writers (1950-1980)* edited by Mari Evans. In this essay she describes her beginnings as an observer and writer "lingering recklessly in doorways, hallways, basements, soaking up overheards to convert to radio scripts [she'd] one day send out" and claims to "work to produce stories that save our lives" (41, 47).

<sup>224</sup> According to Selwyn R. Cudjoe, "[a]rt can be perceived as the chronicler of human history, the reflector of the spiritual dimension of human experience and the camera eye (the capturer) of social transformations, manifesting human history in all its rich and variegated hues" (61). I would push his use of the camera eye further. The camera eye is not just a "capturer" of social transformation. To think of the camera this way relegates the cinematic to a capturer of "truth" or realism that does not acknowledge the constructedness of the filmic/documentary text and ignores the organic connection between the apparatuses of the visible, the mechanical,

love and hate simultaneously with very little, if any, distinction of where one emotion ends and another begins. Similarly, we do not respond to art in a linear fashion; our responses are subjective, endlessly referential and mediated through historically and culturally specific discourses of aesthetics and politics. According to Bambara, when the “black subject” appears in film, the spectator translates black experience; s/he psychically “assembles” a violent American history and negotiates conception(s) of “self” as s/he watches, and this assemblage is constant and never static.<sup>225</sup> With *Gorilla, My Love*, we have a collection of short stories that engage with the effects of representational systems and practices on individuals and communities. Two short stories in particular “The Survivor” and “Blues Ain’t No Mockinbird” focus explicitly on the technological apparatuses used to create, manipulate and disseminate the “image.” Bambara’s interest in film, specifically the documentary genre, increased toward the end of her career. She knew the power of the image, the persuasiveness of the medium when used for political ends and Bambara was also very much aware of the danger that comes with crafting filmic narratives as histories; she knew that there were too many folks “playing with people’s blood and bones” (Tate 16).<sup>226</sup>

In “From Baptism to Resurrection: Toni Cade Bambara and the Incongruity of Language,” Ruth Elizabeth Burks claims that the short story “The Survivor” is

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spectators, history and their material effects.

<sup>225</sup> In Trinh T. Minh-Ha’s *Cinema Interval*, she argues that “marginalized people are always socialized to understand things from more than their own point of view, to see both sides of the matter, and to say *at least* two things at the same time[;] they can never really afford to speak in the singular” (39). Although threatening to devolve into a reductive construction of “oppositional” gazes in the allusion to “both sides,” Trinh’s work suggests a tactile double consciousness present in spectatorship. This tactile gaze is explored in Laura Marks’ *Skin of the Film* in her conceptualization of what she calls “haptic vision” which I touch upon later in this chapter as she references the work of Toni Cade Bambara to discuss the processes and possibilities of alternative non-Western forms of spectatorship and filmmaking.

<sup>226</sup> Bambara is particularly critical of *Roots* (1977) and *King* (1978), both miniseries that functioned as cultural events, the former of course more well known.

unsuccessful, or rather “the least successful” in the collection because of “its stream-of-consciousness” and “flashback structure” which she reads as obfuscatory and subsequently the story’s “images appear contrived” (Burks 52). Specifically, Burks takes issue with

[t]he sophisticated, metaphoric language used to describe Jewel’s thoughts—a language that will reappear in *The Salt Eaters*—seems schizophrenic and masks the events that alienated the women from their mates and left them survivors. While I sense that Bambara wishes to depict strong, courageous, resolute women who are, at the very least, the equal of the male, the male’s presence in each of these stories, and the female’s failure to spiritually connect with the male in most of the stories, renders the female ambiguous at best, unless Bambara wants us to see all males as gorillas, which the incongruousness of this volume’s title does suggest. (Burks 52)

Contrary to Burks’ assertion that the language deployed in the short story “The Survivor” is schizophrenic and functions to obscure female agency and potentially cast all black men as gorillas, which is an interesting collapse of the structure of “The Survivor” and the “gorilla” which appears as trope in “Raymond’s Run” and “Gorilla, My Love,” I argue that this short story, as well as “Blues ain’t no mockin bird” demonstrate the complex, vexed position of the black subject in these networks of visibility and image making; and far from obscurantist, Bambara’s work anticipates what film/cultural theorists like Trinh T. Minh-ha and Laura Marks refer to as “interculturality,” a model of exchange that complicates conservative traditional models of spectatorship that privileged “individual” experience and located it in the realm of the communal.<sup>227</sup> These

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<sup>227</sup> “Intercultural cinema” gets its “meaning” not just in the hybridity of the text or the blurring of generic form and/or conventions, but also with its emphasis on hybrid audiences. With an intercultural text, the variegated character of the audience is taken into account and the kind of meaning and extra-diegetical meanings that can be produced in the contiguity of spectators themselves, where the audiences meet and touch the text and each other (Marks xii). With a stress on the social character of spectatorship, the “spectator” becomes the site of individual and cultural memory, with neither taking precedence. In “Gorilla, My Love” we have our narrator/protagonist whose connection to another spectator, her baby brother, provides her with

short stories make it clear that connection of any kind, between individuals, individuals and community, or between individuals and images/conceptualizations of “self” are difficult, sometimes incredibly painful, but necessary for survival. “Survivor” is a short story that clues the reader in on just how seriously words are to be taken. Bambara blurs the lines between generic forms using narrative strategies aligned with the dominant, while deploying a countercultural telos that never lets us forget “whose” world we are in or the figures at the center of narrative.

The only proper mask to wear in life is your own damn face.

Toni Cade Bambara, from “The Johnson Girls”

Where the short story “Gorilla, My Love” uses the theatre as the primary site of image making and resistance, “The Survivor” is more cinematically referential in its content and structure than any other in the collection. The narrative opens with “JEWEL AWOKES,” a gesture that locates but does not fix the subject in its allusion to consciousness and temporal displacement. The central protagonist awakens remembering a past moment in which she was in the process of waking. She remembers having trouble trying to place herself, because of drugs used to sedate her for a surgical procedure. She is not sure what kind of surgical procedure she is remembering; it may not have been either a tonsillectomy or abortion, “[b]ut that was years ago. Today she was waking up on a speeding bus” (99). As readers, we are left trying to figure out the temporal frame of the narrative and the only spatial temporal locations we are “sure of” is a vehicle that is in the process of moving and the “end” of the ride.

The bus is the mechanical device propelling the character from one literal

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the support she needs, in his sympathetic expression of pain. She has an identity with her peers on the playground and in the theatre and is able to resist power holders in all of these contexts. In the presence of Hunca Bubba and the family patriarch, it is with her baby brother, a figure that has yet to acquire language, that she finds connection, comfort and commiseration

destination to another, and according to the narrative “a bus ride is a dangerous thing. The mind off guard, an easy mark for all the one-part dreams three-fourths forgot that sprocket themselves and urge the cameras to run amok” (99). The mechanism takes over and the passenger finds herself in a process of creation, of trying to find meaning in chaos, being carried from one point of psychological departure to another. This “fuzziness” reflects the problem of retaining or establishing psychic integrity when encountering the world of images. Following the temporal disjunction we are given a series of fragments of memory and snatches of the diegetic present that merge to form something akin to montage.<sup>228</sup> The narrator describes the content of the central protagonist’s dreaming/waking as representative of “irretrievable loss”: the first loss remembered are her tonsils that then become amorphous bits of ruby quartz “hunks of her, the best of her,” bits of flesh aborted by a “coal miner with the cyclops eye,” her feet up in stirrups; then we have the death of the father of her child in a car accident, the inability to stop a blindfolded leap, the witnessing of a building superintendent dying on a stretcher as apathetic EMT attendants smoke, the loss of her virginity, concluding with the choice to subject her Great-granddaddy Spencer to electroshock therapy despite his protests. All of these images suggest an inability or lack of agency or power to change a

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<sup>228</sup> I am specifically thinking of montage, not in the Bergson and Eisenstein paradigms where montage is a “determination of the whole . . . by means of continuities, cutting and false continuities” or “the whole of the film, the Idea,” because those definitions suggest a closed system of signification, but more, albeit tentatively, along the lines of Giles Deleuze’s claim that montage is the “operation which bears on the movement-images to release the whole from them, that is, the image of time. It is a necessarily indirect image, since it is deduced from movement-images and their relationships” (Deleuze’s 29). If we think more about relation and “indirectness,” or more specifically fragmentation and dialecticism, then the possibility of already existing fragmentation in images and processes of image collection prior to collection or “recording” emerges. According to Deleuze, “montage itself constantly adapts the transformations of movements in the material universe to the interval of movement in the eye of the camera: rhythm” (Deleuze 40). Narrative cohesion is illusory and depends on the fantasy of wholeness which is important to our unpacking the discourses of nationalism and subjectivity, alternative rhythms, that Bambara explores throughout her work: visual, theoretical and literary.

given reality. She could not intervene in the choices of others or take back the choices she has made (99-100). Following this introductory paragraph that plays with time and memory is an italicized section that is not a formal paragraph or sentence but a collapsing between:

*the vans coming in the night to haul away everything in liquor boxes marked 'this side up' when everything else was upside down now that the man with the rolled-up sleeves was the man conducting the orchestra of cameras was the man bent over the editing bin was the man leaning over her breasts and rolling away to become just a very dead mister. (100)*

The passage, like the short story itself, begins with vehicles in motion and darkness, not unlike a projector in a movie theatre. There are no breaks, no commas, no punctuation to give the reader grammatical demarcation; the distance between reader/viewer and text is collapsed. We do not know if the boxes being moved are joining or separating, and the temporal markers do not indicate how past this past is. The “now” that separates the vans in motion, the disruption of “everything else” and descriptions of “the man,” mark a tentative temporal link to the representation of emotional to structural loss at the sentence level.

This loss of coherent structure is also signified by the image of a man who becomes a “dead mister.” Once intimately connected to Jewel, this “man” is given the formal designation of “mister” and described as rolling away from her. Whether a literal or emotional death, an end is signified and the ambiguity of the image segues to a passage that explicitly engages with stereotypic constructions of male/female relationships in the highly stylized genre of film noir.<sup>229</sup> With a lexicon dominated by the

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<sup>229</sup> Film noir is a highly stylized film genre, noted for using chiaroscuro, or a method where you have a black and white grey scale, but the palette is incredibly dark, where the “blacks” are “crashed” to give the visual text an overall somber and hyperbolic tone. Film noir is also usually based on tales of social degradation, the “dark side” of life and usually involves a male central protagonist at odds with a malevolent female victim.

language of image making and viewing, Jewel has learned about “love” in the “dark,” presumably the dark of the movie theatre. In this cinematic world, relationships between men and women constitute and subject men and women to violence; mostly she learns that women are desirable, duplicitous and disposable (100).<sup>230</sup> The writer’s choice to leave sentences fragmented, incomplete, particularly at the end of paragraphs suggests a porousness of the cinematic represented in and the diegetic world of the short story. The revelation that Jewel has learned how “husbands” and “wives” treat each other through watching film noir adheres to a conventional notion of the contract between spectator and film text.<sup>231</sup> In terms of the “marriage” or partnership, we see this “contract” most clearly when Jewel tries to tell Miss Candy about the “madness” in her home between she and her partner and she is told that “there is nothing to win” (107). Jewel stays in the “unhappy” home because she had a “script” that she could not junk and “it was a good film” (108). Jewel is then subject to paying an emotional penance; she is punished by a partner who withholds sexually and emotionally; she is at the mercy of his “forgiveness,” which is coming piece by piece (104). The effect produced by the proximity of representations of the cinematic and textual is an emphasis on relation, the bleeding together of “reel” and “real” worlds.

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<sup>230</sup> In Slavoj Žižek’s “Looking Awry” he argues that “what is menacing about the *femme fatale* is not that she is fatal for *men* but that she presents a case of a ‘pure,’ non-pathological subject fully assuming *her own fate*” and further notes that “[w]hen the woman reaches this point, there are only two attitudes left to the man. Either he ‘cedes his desire,’ rejects her, and regains his imaginary, narcissistic identity . . . or he *identifies* with the woman qua his symptom and meets his fate in a suicidal gesture” (Žižek 536). The “danger” in film noir is that it presents, all too conveniently the figure of woman and is idolized and unstable desirable object too easily relegated to the abject. What Žižek does not do is talk about the casts of most film noir which is, according to Michelle Wallace, “lily white” (Wallace 262).

<sup>231</sup> This notion of a contractual agreement between men and women is reinforced throughout the text and is first foreshadowed in the beginning paragraph when the narrator describes Jewel’s discomfort at seeing her Great Granddaddy Spencer receiving shock treatments but remembering that “she had signed and he had begged but she had signed...” (99). This passage is immediately followed by the image of her feet up in stirrups. Thus a biological “contract,” at least in terms of the way we think of the relationship between mother and child is broken.

This “bleeding” of generic form troubles the figure of the coherent subject. It allows us to read the complex subject positions that our central protagonist takes up in relation to others within the text and the processes of subject formation in image making. Jewel is part recorder/ receiver, part transmitter, translating, making sense and nonsense out of the images she receives. She is “sometimes” passive receiver, consumer of images and direction. She is also part projection and projector in her role as actress, a tool subject to the caprice of dominant ideologies that create and manipulate the “scripts” she has to, that we all have to follow. As an object, she is a visible signifier of subjectivity, with limited ability to “direct” herself. In small measure Jewel has the ability to direct, to be the crafter of narrative, but just as she is limited by the options of roles available to her, she is also compelled to follow a visual language that does not allow her complete creative control; she is limited by the conventions of representation. Your performance can only be as nuanced, as complex, as the roles made available to you. More vexing is the possibility of taking “control,” because the position of director also has its consequences and it is not always productive for the black subject.

Paul, Jewel’s partner, as director and editor, deals with the literal, tactile material that makes up the texts we “see” in the movie theater. As an editor, he is in a position of power. It is the editor who cobbles together images, sutures sound and image together to create “coherence” using the raw materials of the visual, performance, light and sound. To take this position is to have “power,” the power to create the narrative, the document, the text, the history. In this character, we see the appropriation of the “master’s tools” as a strategy of resistance questioned. Paul is rewarded with his efforts to “organize” with a slit throat. The material consequence of image making is repeated when Paul and Jewel fight. As he ponders her uncharacteristic “silence” from another room, Jewel impales his



picture with a safety pin.<sup>232</sup> He responds by knocking the caps off two of her teeth. The relationship between Jewel and Paul is “traditional” in that Paul has authority as director, as conductor of an orchestra of cameras, and Jewel is the female object, actress, to be directed. After his throat is cut he decides never again to train his camera on anything but actors, and Jewel in particular. Paul falls back on traditional dominant patriarchal gender construction and exercises power, however limited, over her: the actress, the black female, the one body that he thinks he has sole providence over. When Jewel impales his image, she does the unthinkable. She takes up a phallic position in relation to that image, and resists conforming to the image world that Paul would create. She is in clear violation of her contract.

Jewel, an film/stage actress by trade, is a professional emotional representative, an object manipulated for spectators to identify with and against in the realm of the visible.<sup>233</sup> As visible objects to be consumed, she claims that “[we] were made for celluloid -- beautifully chiseled are we, not to mention well-buffed” (128). The “we” I read as black bodies or rather subjectivity purveyed in culture that is not just created *for* celluloid but *by* celluloid. In terms of sentence structure, the cadence here differs from the rest of the dialogue in the story. The modifying phrase before the comma “beautifully

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<sup>232</sup> The generic blurring between text and film is further complicated at the textual level with the introduction of the still photographic image which functions as what Giles Deleuze calls the “recollection image.” The interpolation of the still photograph suggests “artifact,” one that may or may not confirm a specific narrative or history. Photographic evidence, in this context, is part archive, part imagined history, but as archive it, the photograph, does not and can not fully excavate “truth,” and thus in the reference to the photograph, the text creates a multiple registers text that speak to fabulation, creation, myth and history making. As potentially spurious evidence, the objectivity of the visible/visual text is questioned.

<sup>233</sup> Jewel describes herself as “some other mother’s rambling polar bear” which I can not help liken to the scene in James Weldon Johnson’s *Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man* where, in the crossing from the states to Europe, our nameless narrator who has the ability to “pass” sees an iceberg and expects a polar bear to be on display as they had appeared in his school books. The iceberg, I read as representative of seemingly monolithic constructions of racial identity and their simultaneous mutability. With each approach, each move in relation to it, the iceberg changes shape.

chiseled are we” places emphasis on the process of making and representation. “We” are not chiseled beautifully but beautifully chiseled. The “we” is also “well buffed.” As emotional representative, the “actress” is buffed or polished to a mirror shine, allowing spectators to “see” themselves, however distorted, in the surface of her performance. As black female figure in a larger social context, the “black woman” is the foil off of which, the mirror that enables Americans, black and white, male and female, negotiate their identity. The black actress is at the mercy of social scripts and the writers who can change the words, the definitions used to evaluate “performance,” to suit their own interests. Jewel is also conscious of the explicit contempt for “actors”<sup>234</sup> that the writers, those who control what roles we are allowed, have. The business of “writers” is not complexity or diversity. It is to create the most reductive models possible. The actress, a representative living object, is necessarily empty, fragmented, plastic enough for all in the audience to “identify” with.<sup>235</sup>

In a “performance scene” Jewel can not get to where she wants to emotionally for a “birth scene.” The narrator describes her as feeling “bound and gagged” while her partner Paul “directs” her. At the end of her performance, she is told that she has failed her performance, that her pacing was off. Jewel, performing a birth scene while pregnant, attributes her “pacing” to an internal clock that has the dominant rhythm. She turns the critique back on her “director,” telling him that the onus is on the director and editor to

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<sup>234</sup> Jewel expresses her frustration that the “stuff” she was supposed to perform “was not in the script. Matter of fact, none of this was in the script they gave me. They do that to you sometimes to show contempt. So you can’t keep up” (114).

<sup>235</sup> In “Empowering the Eye...” Bambara discusses the television show, *All in the Family*, and claims that its audiences were comprised of bigots confirming their racism, liberals affirming their vision of “bigots” and blacks laughing, and most importantly all these groups had access to the narrative (132).

take the raw material she provides and create the performance in the editing room.<sup>236</sup> The ability to “perform” what is supposed to be “natural” and have it read as such is subject to the controls of the director, editor and I would add the audience.<sup>237</sup> Historically, a black woman had to perform “birth” because she was a literal producer of assets, made a and imagined as a symbol of fecundity in excess, a “natural breeder,” but Jewel, who is literally pregnant, can not perform what is expected of her. This “failure” signifies the ambivalences in discourses of black femininity, motherhood, and also speaks to the dangers of performing resistance.

To perform with intent does not guarantee reception of the intended “message” nor that it will be recorded in a manner that would allow subversive reading, as all performances are subject to the interests and caprice of those in power. The question is whether or not a performance of resistance, an acts of insurrection, has to be visible? Historically, many acts of resistance remained absent, with only the most incendiary making it to public purview.<sup>238</sup> Actors (historical and otherwise) have only a small

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<sup>236</sup> In addition to teaching script writing, Bambara took a film editing course with Randy Abbott and Ngaio Killingworth; “[e]verybody else wanted to go out in the street with equipment. [She] knew that a film is made in the editing room, and [she] wanted to be in there” (“How She Came By Her Name” 226).

<sup>237</sup> Laura Marks considers the intercultural “resistance” with the help of Bambara’s “Reading the Signs, Empowering the Eye: *Daughters of the Dust* and the Black Independent Cinema Movement,” which charts the connections between Julie Dash’s landmark film and a tradition of black resistance cinema beginning with Melvin Van Peebles’ “impolite” *Sweet Sweetback’s Baasdaassss Song* (1971). Bambara charts the impact of the LA rebellion and UCLA film school out of which black independent film makers, including Dash arose. These were artists committed to “[altering] previous significations as they relate to Black people... to developing a film language to respectfully express cultural particularity and Black thought” (119). In this essay she also tracks the use of actors and actresses, their involvement with independent cinema and film in varied capacities. For example Barbara O, who plays Yellow Mary in *Daughters of the Dust* worked as performer, technician and filmmaker much like our central protagonist, Jewel. By consistently coming back to these instances of cross fertilization, we not only see what Bambara calls an “Afrafemcentric” focus but also a decentering of the privileging of text and auteur. Each work signifies intertextuality and collaboration not the “pure” form of artistic vision/product of an individual genius that sprung fully formed from the head of Zeus.

<sup>238</sup> Eugene Genovese’s *Roll, Jordan Roll* and Richard Price’s *Maroon Societies: Rebel Slave*

measure of power or control, and their “performance” is always in danger of being edited right out of the narrative. This is a danger that is imminent for the black actress. Ruby Dee describes self representation of the black female actress as necessarily dominated by “a lament” (Dee 61). The question is then how this lament is ready by the audience. In this scene Jewel does not “get it right,” the “it” is the performance of experiencing labor that has to be, according to her director/partner visible from a distance. When she fails, and is told that her pacing is off she yells about the tyranny of cloth because she does not have access to language that would enable her to describe to Paul how her own emotional responses competes with the ones she is expected to perform for him and his recording apparatuses. The response of Paul and those around her, because they do not have the ability to read her performance as one impacted by limitation is to laugh at her, humiliate her.

Jewel also fails in her performance of the stereotype of the strong black woman. Less than maternal, she utters a death wish rather than love for the unborn child in her womb. “She shifted her weight, not so much to balance the baby, as to juggle the mind’s dangers, to ease the shouting in the head less it become a banging on the wall--let me go mad, Grandmother. Let me bleed and be forever lost and no one” (101). She does not move to comfort herself physically and “balance” the child that she likens to a malarial parasite and upon giving birth from her “thigh” to a metallic monster and sea urchin that can be best addressed with a dynamite (109, 117). She moves to ease the chaos in her mind, the plethora of images, sights, memories and histories that she can not control. This is not the maternal, self sacrificing strong mythic black mother with indomitable strength.

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*Communities in the Americas*, are two texts that archive and allude to a “missing” history of resistance. Obviously, it would not work in the interest of the dominant to record resistance by a slave population as it would undercut eugenic arguments of the inherent fitness of the African subject for slavery and their supposed docility and acceptance of the condition of enslavement.

She is an unnatural mother experiencing an unnatural birth to an unnatural child.<sup>239</sup>

Further, she faints when Paul returns home with his throat cut, is held accountable for her “lack,” and stands accused of almost killing him (102). This is a character that clearly does not adhere to her “role.”

Jewel is not the only figure that does not perform her appointed role. Miss Candy, similar to Janie of Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, does not adhere to her appointed role of M’Dear, the desexualized older black mother of the community. Instead, she “manages the farm” more than once, takes on Willie Dupree, runs around with “love flowers” on her neck and is eventually disappointed, but she is far from tragic (103). It is clear that Miss Candy is different. She is not static nor can she be confined within the gaze. The narrator describes their meeting as a “medium shot with hot light” and Jewel complains that “she couldn’t quite keep her focus [on Miss Candy]. She kept changing age or something, and color too, like a revolving filter was attached to the camera eye” (107). The possibility of Miss Candy literally changing as a chameleon is not as important as her resistance to being captured by the representational frameworks and power relationships signified by the “camera.” The image of a revolving filter, a shift from color to color, references space, literal, figurative and symbolic between frames and calls attention to the very mechanism of film in terms of recording and representational practices.

Jewel expresses the desire to uncover “landing by landing,” “layer by layer,” evidence of her own madness (108), and literally likens her brain to “an instrument to detect, record, snatch and reflect the energies that that” (110). Much like the italicized

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<sup>239</sup> That the birth of her child is, in her mind, coming from her “thigh” and not her vaginal canal speaks to Authorian constructions of the thigh “wound” as castration.

passage that “records” the moving of boxes by vans, this passage does not close grammatically. The “landings” and “layers” visually allude to film editing processes, with the “landings” resembling actual frames of film and “layers” suggesting the editing of the visual, the shot, counter shot, the suturing of the aural to the visual. More specifically, “landings” have geographical and historical meanings. A landing may be a geographical or topographical visible step, a literal and for this text figurative point of arrival or departure. It may be the start, end or point along a journey, and as such opens up possibilities of a more fluid construction of movement.<sup>240</sup>

Jewel is not only the object in front of the camera, but she is described as the camera itself. When Jewel seeks healing from Miss Candy, this old woman who “looks like” so many things, she sees her “through a fish-eye lens of a new order” (107). I read this new order as a destabilization of monolithic Western ideologies of gender and race. Miss Candy can not be captured by the camera and when the instrument tries its focus on her; the result is distortion. When Jewel becomes the camera, the instrument that is supposed to record some kind of “truth,” there are no concrete definites, no mandate to adhere to the rational: “Radio waves were unperceived but for a suitable instrument to catch the up and transform them to some thing sensible. She got hold of ‘sensible’ and decided it meant something else and what a pity. She searched her brain again, like an instrument to detect, record, snatch and reflect energies that that” (110). In the process of trying to find a literal and psychic space for language, the “room to lay the words to talk about,” she records and reorders the world around her, decentralizing the traditional locus

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<sup>240</sup> Bambara discusses the importance of the “landing,” specifically the Ibo landing in Julie Dash’s film *Daughters of the Dust* in her essay on Black independent cinema “Empowering the Eye, Reading the Signs...” which I intend to address more fully as I move this dissertation chapter to a book chapter.

of authority as she pans her camera. The narrator calls attention to Jewel's one serious problem, the possible source of her pain which can be attributed to trying to make "sense" of the world with languages or lenses that she did not participate in creating.

In fact, neither Jewel nor Paul could pick up the cinematic apparatus or the position of representative, resistance fighter or warrior without cost. Paul is supposed to be the maestro, the conductor and master of image production, but he can not control the (textual) performance/pro-duction of and in Jewel's body. When Paul confronts Jewel about her "performance" as a woman giving birth, first he tells he tells her that "if she could get the body to make the statement they could cut the lines out all together" (108) which would render her language-less. Then, he tells her that "her pacing was off, erratic, lousy," but Jewel challenges both his authority as "master" creator and as "man" when she answers his charge with her own criticism and reminder that "pacing was a director's duty and the editor's craft" (109). Paul can not fully control the "performance" on the set or in Jewel's body when she decides to carry their child to full term.

Conventional cinema, according to Bambara, stresses hierarchy and seduces by technique (133-5). The role of the hero is specific with regard to cinematic and cultural space: "Space is dominated by the hero, and shifts in the picture plane are most often occasioned by a blur, directing the spectator eye, controlling what we may and may not see, a practice that reinscribes the relationships of domination ideology" (135). In Western filmic texts the centrality of the hero establishes processes of identification that prevent us from asking or interrogating "what's being filmed and in whose interest, and by failing to remain critical, [we] become implicated in the reconstruction/reinforcement of an hierarchical ideology" (133). Bambara's writing does something different. Bambara's narratives do not isolate their heroines. They are rarely, if ever, left alone to

complete their quests. Instead, these “heroes” end up in a community, specifically the company of other men *and* women that they will have to rely upon.<sup>241</sup> In the case of our heroine of “The Survivor,” Jewel finds herself in the company of two women: Miss Candy, the midwife and Cathy, a niece who idolizes Jewel and her partner Paul. Cathy’s devotion does not prevent her from criticizing her “hero.” She is no idolator, so smitten with “image” that she gives up her power. Cathy has a different relationship to the “spectacle.” As a resistant “spectator”/ interlocutor, she refuses to give up the story she wants to tell when Jewel is intent on self destruction and derailing Cathy’s attempt to help her (115).<sup>242</sup> With these women Jewel has an alternative way to make connection other than the nuclear family.

At the end of “The Survivor” we have the image of Jewel setting sail in a boat with cameras “cocked” and “steadied” on the seat beside her. When Jewel picks up the camera in her “dream” which is also her going into labor, it is to record the tragedy of a nude pregnant woman willfully drowning herself *à la* Desiree.<sup>243</sup> This surrealistic sequence has Jewel engaged in two forms of labor: one form of labor is the literal giving birth to a child, but the second is her work against the limitations of the mechanism of the

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<sup>241</sup> The importance of the communal is obvious in most of her short fiction. “The Johnson Girls” and “Raymond’s Run” in particular emphasize the importance of creating, maintaining and cultivating relationships between women but even with a figure like Sylvia who at the end of “The Lesson” seems to be left to engage in a solitary project of “thinking” through her experience with Miss Moore at F.A.O. Schwartz, we have to consider the overall structure of the text as it is the adult Sylvia who has become Miss Moore-like and has used this anecdote to educate the reader thereby interpolating the reader into the community of children who will learn.

<sup>242</sup> The story that Cathy tells is of a group of “cooks” that ruin a stew and they have to call in an expert to fix it. When the expert comes, her first step is to not to add to what is in the pot, which has become this noisome mixture, but throw out the mixture and begin again with a fresh pot of water.

<sup>243</sup> This is a reference to Kate Chopin’s short story “Desiree’s Baby” in which a young bride, orphaned as a child, is driven to her death into the swamps by the suspicion that she has “black blood” because her child has begun to exhibit “blackness.” The short story ends with her husband, a cruel slave master, reviewing a letter in which it is revealed that it is he who has the “tainted” blood.



camera and time that can not record the unexpected “unamenable things” like the metallic monster she gives birth to, another “mechanism” that may record her actions and hand them back to her. When Jewel first looks through the camera, it is with the authority of imagination and the traditional directorial authority, the “eye”/“I” of the auteur: “She faced around again and took up one of the cameras. The dunes were snow castles. She shot it” (115-6). In her auteur mode, she can use the declarative mode and call one thing another, which speaks to traditional notions of auteur and subject, spectator and viewed subject. “I”/eye look at, locate and define what ever “I”/eye see. But then problems of self representation emerge when she tries to locate herself in the cinematic frame. Jewel proceeds to “[shoot] the boat seat, the spot she’d just relinquished when she stood up.” As director of the camera Jewel photographs and can record her absence. Further complicating the inability to capture presence are the limitations of the devices/mechanisms themselves. With the aid of a timer, Jewel is able to “capture” herself but it is the image of her nude, pregnant black female body disappearing into the water, and the last sight is her three fingers slipping beneath the surface of the water.

The camera’s eye, the aperture, does not see, record or have the ability to capture the “that that” which happens next. The narrative does not end with the “wink” of the aperture or the “whizz” of the timer, or the melodramatic inevitable death scene. What greets Jewel as she slips below are “unamendable things at the bottom tear her and make her bleed. And there’ll never be blood enough to make her clean” (116). This is a wounded warrior, emotionally unstable, pregnant, the physical and emotional effects all compounded by the loss of her “lover.”<sup>244</sup> She can not “fix” the past or the pain that

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<sup>244</sup> I read Jewel as the predecessor to the wounded warrior that would then appear in *The Salt Eaters* later as Velma. Jewel, as I discuss later, is in the process of choosing to be well and it is

comes along with that past. Jewel takes up the weapons of representation, despite her “condition” and seeming lack of mental acuity and works the weapons/cameras herself, but as limited tools, they can only capture a particular melodramatic end. The danger for Jewel is the conflation of survivorship and warriorhood.

That black women have survived a violent and painful history is a “truth” as inescapable as the difficulty of trying to narrate the pain resulting from living this history. Their bodies and the wounds they have sustained have become signifiers of the ability to absorb even more pain and take on the pain of others. These bodies are repositories for knowledge carried through diasporic routes, created by conduits of capitalism and punctuated by torture, dismemberment and misremembering, and are particularized in the local communities they support. These wounds make them sympathetic and formidable all at once. They are the proof of having lived and walking proof of the difficulty in narrating that pain. In Elaine Scarry’s discussion of the relationship between the structure of torture and narrative she claims that when an individual is in pain there is, however

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her bus ride to these women that is the first step to becoming well again. It will be Miss Candy who will be both midwife and healer, the Minnie Ramson in this narrative. In Gay Wilentz’s introduction to *Healing Narratives: Women Writers Curing Cultural Dis-Ease* she builds on the work of Terry Eagleton, privileges the novel as a form of “consolation” which unlike the short story creates a sustained counterhegemonic narratives of communal and individual constructions of subjectivity “recovering what has been lost... [and it is even the nonlinear novel like Bambara’s *The Salt Eaters*] is primarily representational and develops “oral medicines of storytelling rituals to include the power of the word as well as the context of the story itself” (Wilentz 16). While a compelling argument that the novel, as a genre provides the writer with the freedom to “reconstruct reality as a counterhegemonic tool through magical realism and other stylistic innovations and language appropriations, not available” in other genres, I argue the short stories in Bambara’s collections, both *Gorilla, My Love* and *The Sea Birds are Alive* do this work in a much more condensed form and that their generic conventions centralizes the debates of “voice” and community health and healing even more acutely by its demands of the immediate rendering of the metaphoric, the symbolic in condensed form. This also resonates with the title of Bambara’s *The Salt Eaters*, which refers to those Africans who, in consuming “salt” to prevent dehydration and inevitable death in the fields, bound themselves to this “new land” and were subsequently unable to return to Africa. This choice to “live,” understanding the consequences, however difficult in binding them to this land and exploitive relationships to white plantocracies, is thematically carried throughout Bambara’s work. Her fiction consistently presents us with characters who have to make difficult choices “to live,” “to be healed,” in order to set the foundations of the next structure of resistance, even if it is a decision that results in annihilation.

illusory, a feeling of agency produced by the feeling of being acted upon and the experience of pain (in other words we do not feel the actual implement of torture invading our bodies but the sensation that produced by the invasion and because it is happening to a “physical self,” an “interior,” we then give that “interior” precedence). More importantly, for my analysis, she claims that in this collapse of the outside “source” and inside “response” there is “an almost obscene conflation of private and public. It brings with it all the solitude of absolute privacy with none of its safety, all the self-exposure of the utterly public with none of its possibility for camaraderie or shared experience” (Scarry 53).<sup>245</sup> No one narrative can capture all the pain, all the tragedy, the narratives of displacement, dispersal, and destruction. Further, the language that we have available focuses our energies of creation on the hero.<sup>246</sup> The black woman is left with two possibilities, the victim and superhero with little between except pathological conflations of both. The “survivor” is made heroic by virtue of having endured but then the expectations are that all have to “survive” in the same way, with the same strength, with the same voice.<sup>247</sup> In Bambara’s text, Miss Candy is unable to understand Jewel’s

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<sup>245</sup> Scarry’s *The Body in Pain* also claims that “What makes the experience of pain unsharable is the kind of deliberate misunderstandings that occur when the “victim” tries to give voice to that pain. Pain is, according to Scarry, “resistant to objectification” and as such produces voicelessness. Pain is just as unreal to the listener/viewer/reader/spectator as it is real to the individual or group who experiences that pain (Scarry 56).

<sup>246</sup> Annie Dillard on the representation of the mass trauma and the mind’s inability to grasp it. We can “identify” with the individual’s struggle but not that of millions, the death of one child but not the death of hundreds. We can see a cinematic example of this with Stephen Spielberg’s *Schindler’s List* in terms of the way in which the director and cinematographer, filming in black and white film but used a strategy of adding “red” when isolating an “object” or individual for the spectator to latch onto. One obvious example would be the coloring of a little girl’s coat to make the loss of her more tangible.

<sup>247</sup> In the short story “Meditations on History” and the later novel *Dessa Rose* by Sherley Anne Williams, the central protagonist Dessa undergoes torture and the whip and branding marks are referred to as adding to her “value” by her lover after she expresses insecurity about the attractiveness of her body in relation to that of a white woman. The idea of the black body being scarred already by “blackness” is not a new idea. That this wounding creates “beauty” is interesting, that it is supposed to create or be a source of strength is troubling.

unhappiness or how she reads herself in an insane relationship nor can Cathy recognize how “broken” Jewel is. Both women expect her to shake off her pain, but the persistent subjection to “unamendable things” that have torn at Jewel are hard to shake off.

Dialogue is conspicuously absent in the visual narrative that the narrator, Jewel, creates with the cameras at the end of the text, an implicit acknowledgement that language is often deficient or can be “self” defeating when being used to give voice to pain. Jewel is in the presence of two women; they are to help her, support her in the birth of her child and along with that help come communal expectations, the same expectations that produce an unamendable fragmentation of the subject that prevails to the end of the text.<sup>248</sup>

Participating in representational practices are not always effective. The instruments can fail and they can be used against us. Like the soup maker in Cathy’s anecdote to Jewel, “the survivor” has to sometimes throw out everything that came before and start anew. Jewel has to survive pregnancy, labor and loss of a lover, alienation from Miss Candy and Cathy as well as reconcile the parts of her that are “actress” and “director,” the parts of her that are complicit with systems of representation that limit, confine, define and destroy her. In this “survival” she *does* become heroic, but not without complication. To the very end of the narrative she remains “fragmented” and

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<sup>248</sup> In Avery Gordon’s “Something More Powerful Than Skepticism” she talks about Bambara’s work in the context of the utopian, specifically arguing that there are utopian elements in her writing and that “utopia” becomes, not an unproblematic paradise but a temporally contingent locus of resistance, a strength derived from, not a fantastical future or a nostalgically tinged past, but a contemporary that is engaged with possibility. Further, Gordon argues that “Bambara focuses her creative energy--her power--on showing the damage caused by alienation from creative labor, alienation from economic and political power, alienation from history, alienation from truthful knowledge, and alienation from ourselves. And on showing the intimate, sensual, and embodied process which heals that damage, from the bottom up” (199). It is my contention that “The Survivor” is exemplary in this demonstration of the pain and hurt that comes from internal and external alienation and that what we have is a figure that is in process, not healed, perhaps not even knowing that she is being healed but healing nonetheless through her reworking and reimagining her relationships to others.

lacks compassion for the child she gives birth to. Instead of a clichéd romantic photographic ending where mother embraces child, we have the “metallic monster”/sea urchin, a simultaneously organic and inorganic creature, that Jewel immediately contemplates blowing up with dynamite. The pain is not gone; it has merely subsided.

Where “The Survivor” had a heroine who is “wounded,” she was also an “artist,” an aesthetic cultural worker who, not always successfully, created “narrative” alternatives to the dominant. Similarly, the short story entitled “Blues ain’t no mockin Bird,” narrated like so many other short stories in this collection by a young child, focuses on the lives of a poor rural black community who are besieged by white men “filming for the county.” Their objective is to produce a narrative of “black self sufficiency” that would then be used by local government to sanction the withdrawal of aid to the poor black communities (130). Here, we see the material “consequences” of representation. In the middle of their discourse with the “family,” a hawk interrupts in an attempt to claim his mate that Granddaddy Cain has killed to stem the killing of the family’s chickens. The white men’s filming is interrupted by the “hawk drama” and after the hawk’s mate is killed by “Granddaddy,” the venerable old black man then “kills” the white men’s camera. They leave with only potential fragments of film with which to return to their “office” to create their narrative. Similarly, the narrator and other children are left trying to piece together the import of what has transpired.

In the same vein as “The Survivor,” authority of the narrator is destabilized. Here it is not so much a matter of narrative coherence but we have a limited omniscient first person narrator whose gender is unmarked. This narrator has a “good eye” that accurately gives the reader a picture of the complexity of power relations. The narrator describes the two white men, “Camera” and “Smilin,” “movin up on tiptoe like they was invisible or

we were blind, one” (134), who are approaching their “subjects” as if naturalists stumbling upon some newly discovered “tribe.” Smilin, the talker of the two, comments on the “things” the family has: “’Nice things... the man, buzzin his camera over the yard. The pecan barrels, the sled, me and Cathy, the flowers, the printed stones along the driveway, the trees, the twins, the toolshed” (130). They survey the land, like buzzards, recording what they think has value, the objects that can be identified as commodities, including the children. This family, like many African American families post World War II, is an extended one.<sup>249</sup> The narrator describes Camera, temporarily divested of his appendage, as a “tall man with no machine on his shoulder, but still keepin it high like the camera was still there or needed to be” (136). In order for the men and the power they represent to have authority that camera “needs” to be there, if not literally then symbolically. These men, by virtue of their structural positions of power over the family vis a vis race, class and possessors of the “instruments” of representation/the camera can produce a text that will define the family with or without their consent. Without technologies of racism and representation, the white man/patriarch would not have any way to locate himself, even if the burdens of that identification and these processes result in their own deformation.

“Granny,” the matriarch of the house, knows the power of representation and how

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<sup>249</sup> Valerie Smith argues in “Discourses of Family in Black Documentary Film” that many black documentarians have worked toward challenging the model of the black family as pathological by “defamiliar[izing] conventional notions of the family” in order to deconstruct myths of the white heteronormative ideal nuclear family as well as the black pathological family (Smith 258). In this way, Granny and Granddaddy Cain become an alternative to the illusory heteronormative white nuclear family. Further, in *The Black Woman* Bambara specifically addresses heteronormative constructions of “family” when she claims that “left to [her] own devices -- and [she is] neither a man nor a woman who wishes to be a man --[she] tend[s] to find no particularly rigid work assignments based on sex. The pre-capitalist, nonwhite lifestyle seems to be worth checking out. For it sheds some light on the madness of ‘masculinity’ and ‘femininity,’ even though it may not offer us any model at this time in history” (124).

it can be used to alienate and make “others” abject. She is a woman who, much like our other female heroes in the text, “teaches steady” (131). Her response to seeing the men walking through her yard with camera in tow is to instruct the children to go and tell the men that “we ain’t a bunch of trees” (129). The power of the documentarian’s camera lies in its ability to take miles of footage and cobble together a narrative/truth of a people. When her “things” are complimented by one of the film makers her response speaks directly to both the desire to control the mode and manner of representation by the strangers: “I don’t know about the thing, the it, and the stuff... Just people here is what I tend to consider” (130). She refuses to confirm the narrative that the men want to create, to be placed alongside inanimate objects lacking interiority or be one of their “aunties”; instead she chooses to emphasize people and relation, relations of her choosing, rather than relationships to material goods.

This is our grass roots heroine who educates through silences. When asked by the men to “make a comment” on their self sufficiency, Granny says nothing. She, like Jewel at the end of “The Survivor” knows that language may not always work in her or her community’s best interest. After the men “back out,” she tries to explain the power behind the manipulation of the “image” with an anecdote about seeing a man on a bridge about to jump. Present are a minister who talks of “god” to the man and a woman, the man’s woman. Also present on this bridge is a man taking an entire roll of film “[b]ut savin a few of course” for the “end” (132). Granny, in fact, does not finish the story and the narrator and twins express frustration at not knowing the conclusion. Cathy dreamer, sounding like “Granny teacher,” begins to translate to the narrator and twins the story using a modified version of the Goldilocks fairy tale, where Goldilocks is revealed as an intruder and like Granny teacher, her tale is interrupted and left unfinished. The end of

the story, whether or not the man actually jumped is not as important as what kind of violence is actually happening to his “story,” a story that he will ultimately have no control over. Both the woman and the minister are desperate to be the “choice” as their notions of selfhood are based on discursive relations to him (secular/romantic and sacred respectively), but it will be the man with the camera, the apparatus, who will get to spin the story any way he wants once the image has been produced and reproduced ad infinitum.

This short story ends with an emerging organic artist. Cathy has decided that it will be her who will write, who will be the purveyor of counter narratives that members of their community will choose to “act in” if they want. They will have the choice to contest or confirm through participation as witnesses. Cathy is an interpreter of images. The first “visual” image we are given as readers is a frozen over puddle cracked that Cathy claims looks like a plastic spider web created by a spider with “many mental problems” (129). She translates for the narrator and the twins, despite being initially taken with the men and their moving picture making apparatus, she immediately understand the gravity of Granny’s lesson and decides that she wants to be the one to be one of the teachers/creators.

Storytelling is a power distributed among the characters in this short story.<sup>250</sup> Granny “teaches steady”; Cathy will take the events and make stories and histories out of them; Granddaddy is the quiet hero who supports and protects his family from the prying lens of the white dominant. Granddaddy Cain does not talk much, but his body does. He,

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<sup>250</sup> This distribution of authority goes along with Bambara’s discussion with Claudia Tate on writing as political act: “I do not think that literature is the primary instrument for social transformation, but I do think it has potency” (Tate 18). Here the “writer” has potency but it is alongside folklore, orature and the production of the visual image.



like Cain is marked and is read by that mark. For Granddaddy it is his mark of a masculine regal bearing that places him at risk. The white men can not help but address or accord him with respect, especially after he kills the hawk with his hammer. This is the story that “Cathy dreamer” will tell, “the proper use of the hammer” (136). Granddaddy Cain is placed in a heroic trajectory that reaches back to John Henry, but Granddaddy Cain does not compete with a “machine.” He destroys the machine, the tool that would lead to oppression. As an artist/dreamer, she inherits from both Granddaddy Cain and Granny. She will take the “raw material,” and rework it to give it back to her own community, creating a counternarrative to the official documents. Tyrone, one of the twins, asks if he can be in the story that she will write, and Cathy dreamer responds “If you are there and ready”. Ultimately this is the question that Bambara’s text posits through her heroines. Are we ready to unthink and rethink the “proper use of a hammer”?

### **Toward a Conclusion**

A writer, like any other cultural worker, like any other member of the community, ought to try to put her/his skills in the service of the community.

Toni Cade Bambara, from “What it is I think I’m Doing Anyhow”

In Elliott Butler-Evans’ analysis of Toni Cade Bambara’s short fiction he claims that her short fiction has a “primary aim at truth speaking, particularly as *truth* is related to the semiotic mediation of Black existential modalities. Of primary importance are the construction and representation of an organic black community and the articulation of Black Nationalist ideology” and the interjection of her female central protagonists, according to Butler-Evans, disrupts what the writer sees as the ‘stories’ primary focus on classic realism and nationalism” but I would push this further and suggest that the “primary focus” is not so much related to genre or emergent nationalism within generic

conventions but the disruption of these modes. Butler-Evans reads Bambara's use of orality, or rather the performativity of black vernacular and practices to argue that what emerges in Bambara's writing is a "female appropriation of the signifying practice in order to allow feminine consciousness to assert itself... within a traditionally male cultural practice. The myth of the autonomous woman is produced here and is strengthened by the use of chant and response and signifying practices" (Butler-Evans 97). Granted I do not know when "signifyin'" become an all male affair nor do I see that the characteristics most found in the Hazels, the primary central protagonist(s) in this collection of short stories as "rebelliousness, assertiveness, and at times, physical aggressiveness" (Butler-Evans 98). Butler-Evans does not push at the complex intersection of cultural mythology and consequence. These short stories are about more than black woman or black girl as superwoman.

The Hazels do not always "control" the narrative nor does Bambara's work shrink away from representing the consequences of becoming a soldier. These are not masculinized female heroes, girls in the drag of heroism, as their "femininity" and heroism are contingent upon the communal that often takes precedence at the end of the narratives. Further, the male figures in the text are not "demythologized and ultimately displaced by an alternative mythical construct: a questioning and assertive Black female, who signifies and emergent feminine-feminist conscious-ness" (Butler-Evans 107),<sup>251</sup> or reduced to gorillas, but come to occupy more complicated positions in relation to the

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<sup>251</sup> What happens in Bambara's work is not merely a displacement of the black male with a masculinized black female. What I find useful in Butler-Evans' analysis is his claim that "[w]hat occurs in *Gorilla* is subversion of the paradigms of representation that generally characterize the fiction produced by Black males committed to the discourse and ideology of cultural nationalism. Their works usually construct a Black male figure who embodies self-sufficiency and heroism; in Bambara's stories, these traits are subjected to a radical deconstruction," but I am arguing that this has to be pushed further.

girls/women in the texts themselves. Granted, as Stuart Hall argues in “New Ethnicities” that “black radical politics has frequently been stabilized around particular conceptions of black masculinity” (168), Bambara’s work clearly engages the “radical” in a way that decentralizes masculinity but not in a way that dismisses or abjects the masculine. Her work reveals the messy work that it is to be thinking, feeling men or women in the contemporary context.

In our Western context, vision is privileged in terms of how we create meaning and ways of knowing. It is the mechanism we use to define and categorize, the process that places the “unknown” in relation to things that we do “know.” Thus, the production of knowledge and meaning is helplessly relational and referential. Similarly, the production and reproduction of economies of visibility produce networks of meaning that are attached to bodies. These networks, with their complementary iconographies of race, sex, gender and national identity are political, hierarchical and subjective. This is particularly relevant in American society where a powerful racial taxonomy exists in which phenotypic presentation alone can secure the rights of an individual to claim to be an “I.” For Bambara, the question of who has the authority or right to create, dictate the image is a matter of survival which is why an act of artistic creation has the possibility to lives. There are material consequences to being at the behest of someone else’s idea of what is the proper role to play. This project of making self is at once a communal project as it is an individual quest. The two are inseparable. With revolution you start with the ideas and the idealists, the cultural workers and foot soldiers. In the midst of battle the only “truth” available may be that which is inflicting the most pain, a pain which is never quite as communicable or commensurate with the hatred which inspires nations to destroy. Bambara recognizes the constant need for and of struggle with “truth” and

truthtelling. And it is in her “truthtelling,” her uncompromising vision of the community as viable that makes her “irresistible,” because “[s]he made revolution irresistible.”<sup>252</sup>

The heroine can not exist without the community and the community can not exist without its heroines. When asked by Tate what determined her responsibility to herself and her audience, Bambara responded:

I start with the recognition that we are at war, and that war is not simply a hot debate between the capitalist camp and the socialist camp over which economic/ political/social arrangement will have hegemony in the world. It's not just the battle over turf and who has the right to utilize resources for whomsoever's benefit. The war is also being fought over the truth: what is the truth about human nature, about the human potential? My responsibility to myself, my neighbors, my family and the human family is to try to tell the truth. That ain't easy. (Bambara qtd. Tate 17)

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<sup>252</sup> In the preface to *Deep Sightings and Rescue Missions* Toni Morrison cites this, Louis Massiah's opinion, of Toni Cade Bambara.

## Chapter 4

### **“Screenplayed to death”: Heroics of choice in Michelle Cliff’s *No Telephone to Heaven* and *Free Enterprise***

How is it possible that suffering that is neither my own nor of my concern should immediately affect me although it were my own, and with such force that it moves me to action?

Schopenhauer<sup>253</sup>

*Résistez*. What else was there? --

Michelle Cliff, *No Telephone to Heaven*

“But you were in someone else’s fight and stood fast”

“There is no ‘someone else’s fight... you know that”

Michelle Cliff, *Free Enterprise*

The question of how suffering, whether our own or that of others, moves us to act, is paramount to thinking through the role of the heroic in forging and abandoning allegiances in the wake of first colonial and imperial then global economic interests. Is it perceived allegiance? Empathy? Or is it some baser need born out of narcissistic tendencies of “Westerners” that does not signify profundity or compassion? What compels us to “abandon” our own national “interests,” take up instruments of warfare, literal and figurative, in defense of ourselves or more significantly others? What gets established in the work of Toni Cade Bambara and carried through the works of the next generation of black female writers are images of desperate people cleaving to destructive forms of nationalism along with sites of individual and collective mourning and emergent forms of resistance. I have argued that in the work of Bambara female warriors rise out of

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<sup>253</sup> Excerpted from Arthur Schoopenhauer’s late notebooks and quoted in Joseph Campbell’s *The Inner Reach is of Outer Space*. New York: Harper & Row 1985 (112). Influenced by the Upanishads, Plato and Kant, Schoopenhauer’s ideas on “suffering” and the necessity of the “State” and state violence provides interesting intersections to the cultural logic surrounding the hero’s role to suffer for others, “in the name of” the local and nation. Schopenhauer argued that man had to become “less individuated” to experience less objectification and pain; and further, the violence a person experiences is directly proportionate to the degree to which that person is isolated, deluded by fantasies of separateness and singularity. The more alone you are, the more pain you experience.

the margins to support, challenge, change and ultimately define community. In the face of certain despair there is hope and even joy, but in Michelle Cliff's *No Telephone to Heaven* (hereafter *NTtH*) we have a heroine whose journey toward "wholeness" and community is a journey toward death.<sup>254</sup> Clare's participation, with the closing image of our heroine and her comrades dying in the bush at the hand of a Jamaican military protecting an American film production company, can be read as a failure. The heroine's quest to right a "wrong," to stage an attack on the "enemy" on the "stage" that is Jamaica, becomes tragic as Sasabonsam/Christ/ Christopher/Madman helplessly looks on. There is little "joy," but there may be hope. This journey to "completion" can also be read as a successful reintegration into community/nation of origin. When the heroine, Clare, participates in an attack on an Anglo film production company, she fights against the exploitation of "her" people, history and heroes, specifically the figures of Nanny and Cudjoe.<sup>255</sup>

How can one wage a war on representations themselves? What kind of weapons can you use and where do you get them? Can they be borrowed or do they have to be "home grown"? In Michelle Cliff's novels, specifically *NTtH* and later in *Free Enterprise* (hereafter *FE*), we see the limitations and necessity of appropriating the signs and signifiers of the "heroic," however problematic, for the survival of the (post) colonized

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<sup>254</sup> In an interview with Opal Adisa, Michelle Cliff describes her central protagonist, Clare, as "inching toward wholeness" and further that the "warriors" on the truck "cannot depend on anybody to free them from their situation... They have to get out of it themselves" (Adisa 276). This wholeness can be read as self-destructive, a form of nihilism in which the warrior's relationship to a "State" is not so much counter productive as it is destructive.

<sup>255</sup> Nanny, or Queen Nanny, was the leader of the Windward Maroons in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and was famous for her successful battles against the British. Born in Ghana and a member of the Ashanti tribe, Nanny and her five brothers: Cudjoe, Accompong, Cuffy Johnny and Quao, escaped slavery and became leaders of resistance tribes shortly after arriving in Jamaica. In addition to documented successful campaigns against the British in which Nanny was seen being able to stop a bullet with her buttocks, Nanny was famous for being able to use the terrain to her advantage, often trapping British soldiers in the "cockpits."

subject. To consider the logic behind the “fight” we need to think of location, localizable identities and work through the possibility that the heroic may be found on the unstable territory of memory and imagination rather proscribed definitions of national territory and bodies. In Cliff’s *NTtH* we have three primary figures in search of and embodying the problems of appropriating the heroic that allow us to consider the viability of this figure in a decidedly “post” context: Christopher, who favors “prophet” and “madman,” Clare, our racially ambiguous central protagonist questing for “self,” and finally Harry/Harriet, a transgendered warrior who mentors our central protagonist.

The novel’s central protagonist, Clare, is the light-skinned daughter of Boy and Kitty Savage, who immigrates to the States with her parents and darker sister Jennie from Jamaica. After finding herself unhappy and unable to assimilate, Kitty returns to Jamaica with the darker daughter, leaving Clare who is light enough to “pass” to be raised by her father, who is also racially ambiguous and privileges dominant discourses of white superiority. Clare leaves the U.S. and travels to the “mother country,” England, for graduate school and ultimately returns to Jamaica to take over the family estate of her grandmother Mattie where she supports and participates in a guerilla attack on an Anglo-American film production site.

The novel’s subplot charts the “quest” of Christopher: poor, black and working for a “brown” family who goes “mad” at his “master”/employer’s refusal to help him find and bury the body of his grandmother. In response to this rejection he goes on a “Chrismus spree” and butchers the master’s entire household. This figure, who has fraught encounters with church and community, ends up wandering the streets, becoming a fixture, an object of “speculation,” a “hero” in a reggae song and finally ends up “in costume” on the film set that Clare and her comrades attack. By analyzing the quests of

these heroes, we see the difficulty of having to choose between equally inviolable strategies. That the “choices” they are left with are limited and that “violence” is necessary to mobilize and disrupt “order” are givens; that the ideological ground each character stands on gives way and the fire of violence capricious and uncontrollable are also inevitable.

I read Cliff's *No Telephone to Heaven* as a meditation on the female warrior's relationship to local and state violence. Specifically, these texts pose the question of whether answering violence with violence is effective given that the black subject has been historically defined by a set of violent socioeconomic relations as both victim and embodiment of (at the very least potential) violence. There is also the threat that violence and desire will consume the common ground of affinity leaving no place to stand collectively in opposition to oppression. In *The Fire Next Time*, James Baldwin considers the concepts of violence and heroism in the programs of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King. Albeit of a specifically American context during the Civil Rights era, Baldwin observes that in the United States violence and heroism are “made synonymous except when it comes to blacks,” in whom non-violence is considered a virtue which serves the interests of “white men [who] do not want their lives, their self-image, or their property threatened” (58-9). In order to build and sustain alliances across racial lines, the “negotiating” and conceding body was the black body, not the larger body politic. These concessions were engineered by the “native intellectual,” for whom Fanon argues, strategies of non violence and non-violent protest are part and parcel of the complex manipulation and retention of power by the dominant (WotE 61-2). To be “heard”/seen, the black body had to first prove that it was not dangerous, that it could be “civilized” and not return the violence that had been enacted upon it. Heroism and acts of violence are



thus the rightful province of the dominant. Any expression of “muscularity” on the part of the black body is a direct threat to the nation. The paradox is, as both Fanon and later Baldwin observe, that no one who experiences “nation” within the scope of “production,” however abject, can “dream of power in any other terms than in the symbols of power” specific to the culture(s) that they are part of (80). The black subject is always at odds with images of its own corporeality, of imagining itself as a vessel for a “heroic self” and perpetually the embodiment of lack.

The hero’s intimacy with “violence,” also presents a problem for the postmodern/post colonial subject. That our central protagonist is dead at the end of *NTtH* raises the question of whether or not the struggle against oppressive regimes of representation is worth it. If, as Fanon asserts, counter-violence can never reach the point of equivalence, then we need to ask when can the use of violence can be efficacious,<sup>256</sup> and how do you make that choice when you have no chance of winning? How do you choose to sacrifice a “self,” that you do not think you ever had, in a fight against malevolent agents and discourses that actively seek your annihilation?<sup>257</sup> To be

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<sup>256</sup> In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Frantz Fanon states that the “violence of the colonial regime and the counter-violence of the native balance each other and respond to each other in an extraordinary reciprocal homogeneity... However, the results are not equivalent, for machine-gunning from airplanes and bombardments from the fleet go far beyond in horror and magnitude any answer the natives can make” (88-9). This brings us to the issue of proportion, measured response to violence, institutional and individual. How do you measure what is a suitable response to murder, torture and maiming of one’s children and dreams?

<sup>257</sup> In Harold Cruse’s *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual*, the chapter entitled “The Intellectuals and Force and Violence,” discusses the failure of “violence,” or “organized chaos” to materially “change property relations” and so failed. He states that: “If people must die because force and violence is an inseparable factor of the methods of social change, then one must be more than certain that the ends justify the means” (397) and he cautioned that part of the problem with violence as a strategy for the colonized or oppressed subject to achieve parity, is that first – more of them will die and second, there are differences in “racial situations” in the Caribbean, U.S., etc. and that those differences, the different apparatuses and their processes made cohesive collective action nigh to impossible. Cliff’s writing, both in the moment *NTtH* is written and those represented in the text, illustrate effects produced by conduits of global capitalism, the nexus of exploitation and political subjugation, and the common grounds for disenfranchised people,

screenplayed is to be deep in the realm of metaphorization, subject to representational practices gone wild, and having to live or die with the symbolic work these representations do. To state that it is possible to be “screenplayed to death” is to acknowledge and not exaggerate the violence of representational practices and processes. There is no equivalent exchange for the suffering of the colonized. An “eye for an eye,” however pleasureable in terms of immediate gratification, can never logically suffice; the pounds of flesh needed for redress would amount to tons. There can be no redress. Michelle Cliff’s novels foreground a reimagining of the heroic and processes of resistance to nihilistic discourses of nationalism and demonstrate that imaginatively accessing the “symbols” of power can actually lead to it, however problematic the gendered subject’s appropriation of what Fanon describes as dreams of “muscular prowess... action and of aggression” (Fanon 52). The process of accessing, creating and recreating these figures represent a collective struggle to reach beyond proscribed “limits” and incorporate “impossibility” into the quotidian to successfully disrupt colonizer/settler/subject relations, and it is in the quotidian that it matters. Here, there is hope.

**Christopher – “him favor mad. Him favor prophet”**

...the basic error seemed to be a relegation of all things holy to some unseen Being in the sky. Since man was not holy to man, he could be tortured for his complexion, he could be misused, degraded and killed.

Bessie Head, *A Question of Power*

The success of the dominant to convince itself of its “holiness” and engineer the degradation of the “other,” is measured in the en masse acceptance of what Aimé Césaire

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however tenuous, and that the shows these figures in the process of figuring out that this ground is not “race,” but something else more universal.

describes as process of thingification (Césaire 42).<sup>258</sup> It is the refusal to see the God in man, specifically the God in the Black man. Césaire is particularly critical of the role of Christianity in colonialism, citing it as the source of a dichotomous logic that underpinned virulent racist discourse: christianity = civilization, paganism = savagery, and subsequently colonization = thingification, a process by which pigmented “others” are subject to violent consequences of racialist discourse (42). To be considered “civilized,” the colonial subject had to abandon any system of belief they previously held and embrace Christianity, but with colonialism, as Césaire’s linear equation suggests, colonialization was a process of turning those subject to colonialism into “things” and deferring, indefinitely their ability to achieve both “civilization” and Christian subjectivity. *NTtH* begins with a dramatic critique of Judeo Christian ethos, an exploration of the vexed relationship of the colonized subject to the Judeo-Christian hero. This novel represents an ambivalent relationship between the local or “folk” and the “hero.” Through its characters’ search for the heroic, we see the need of a community to engage in collective processes of imagining and reimagining a hero, a “body,” that can resist seemingly overpowering agents of colonialism, imperialism and racism. This search for such a model of the heroic by the novel’s characters is mediated by each character’s relationship to categories of identity. The diegesis of the novel gives us a sense of “process”; we see the rendering and commodification of the “local hero” by dominant economic and political interests. The fate of each character illustrates the violence inherent in the processes of identification and appropriation by the individual, the local/community and the dominant.

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<sup>258</sup> Césaire borrows the term “thingification” from the German theologian Paul Tillich (b. 1886) who found himself at odds with the Third Reich and left Germany.

Christopher is without family, a forgotten and haunted son. Denied by virtue of race and class, he cannot assume the position of “patriarch” and protect the “spirit” of his grandmother.<sup>259</sup> He is an embodiment of abject black masculinity in crisis – a troubling stereotypical combination of victim and victimizer, mourning the loss of a maternal figure.<sup>260</sup> Christopher stands in for a nation of men grappling with the impact of colonial constructions of gender, specifically masculinity in the context of a history of violence and limited access to power:

Guns were not strangers to them. Tivoli Gardens and Red Hills had run with their blood. Staining the cement block walls some of them had set in place, some of them had washed white or painted mango yellow or tropic green. Spilling into cesspools some of them had dug. Poor t’ings. They hadn’t been prepared to be used so. They had been called gardenboys houseboys countryboys. They had called themselves cowboys spreeboys rudeboys. Let de gal mind de pickney, me is free. Is gal job dat. God nuh say so? God again. (17-18)

These men live in chaos; all constants are disrupted.<sup>261</sup> Like the Christ figure that

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<sup>259</sup> This “crisis” appears in the “prequel” to *NTtH*, Cliff’s 1984 novel, *Abeng*, which has Clare’s childhood in Jamaica as its narrative focus. In this text, Miss Hannah, an obeah woman, whose son, Clinton, returns to Jamaica from America is marked as “outsider” by his clothing - a red satin cowboy shirt, cowboy boots and hat, signifying “Americanness” and effeminacy at the same time. He is taunted and killed for being a “battyman” and left to die in a swimming hole (63). After Clifton’s death, all the rites of passage to the next world are not adhered to, because the men who are handling the burial empty rum that is intended to honor the spirits/dead into themselves. Her son’s spirit begins to roam and she goes “mad.”

<sup>260</sup> In Albert Memmi’s *The Colonizer and Colonized* he argues that what smothers the colonized is the “impossibility of enjoying a complete social life” (101). It is the upholding of patriarchy as idealized structure and then denying the black subject access and right to that filial structure and all of the benefits that would go along with white heteropatriarchy that, in effect, injures the black male subject. Originally published in 1957, under the title *Portrait du Colinisé précédé du Portrait du Colinisateur*, Memmi’s depiction of colonialism and its victims is decidedly male. For example, in describing the patrimony denied the colonized, he states that he does “not consider himself a citizen, the colonized likewise loses all hope of seeing his son achieve citizenship” (97).

<sup>261</sup> Tivoli Gardens, a housing complex built on ground that had once been a dump in Kingston West, was the brainchild of Edward Seaga, who from 1962 to 1972 exchanged housing for as little as a broken down car, established a loyal community to back his JLP (Jamaican Labour Party). The area, along with Trench Town, which buttresses Tivoli and is home to another “garrison constituency” the PNP (People’s National Party founded by Norman Manley) has been, since its inception, a site of mythic and real violent political gang activity. In July of 2001, following political unrest, there were four days of gun conflict in which over 25 people died. News reports generated out of the connective tissue of immigrant/emigrant communities, reveal extant anxieties

Christopher is likened to as a child, these men have built their crosses, participated in constructing a vision of Jamaica that can be distilled into industrial paint colors of “mango yellow” and “tropic green,” and have had to carry them. The one sure thing that these men have is sexual difference and identity based on that difference, because whether “po-lic-ti-cal men” or yardboys, de “gal job” is “de gal job.” These men have been “boys” for so long that their attempts to “call themselves” something in opposition to the feminized position are never able break free from the subjugated mold of “boy.” The roles allowed these “boys” parallel those of the domestic laborer/nanny/ mammy but do not afford them the possibility of resisting in the same way “de gals” can. They can not stop or interrupt processes of creation in the same way, and unlike the men who are not “prepared to be used so,” black women are expected to take “hinsult” from all: white men and women, exercising their power based on ideologies of racial supremacy and black men attempting to reclaim the territory that their masculinity was *supposed to be* based on – the body of the black woman (19). To be deemed a “house,” “yard” or “countryboy” is to constantly be reminded of where you are in relation to simultaneously “domestic” and larger power structures; to be gendered in this “post”colonial context is to be relegated to daily negotiations of power that leave little or no room for corporeal and emotional interiority or integrity.

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of national belonging and contamination. Carey Kerr, reporting for the *Toronto Star*, paints a narrative with North America cast as a site of degeneracy and corruption, with the tale of 40 “deportees” being returned after having been tainted by North American diseases of drug addiction and carrying this disease with them “back” to Jamaica. In “Yardies at war on our doorsteps,” Justin Davenport’s coverage of the event expresses British anxiety over increases in violent and drug related crimes that he attributes to Anglo-Jamaican population. Mark Wilson, writing from Port of Spain Trinidad and Tobago documents the shift from 70s gang violence in Jamaica which had been primarily political to predominately drug related violence in the 80s, a trend that he sees as being directly related to “tourist” populations. It is in this historical moment of shifting economic and political interests, extralegal and otherwise, that Cliff writes and sets *NTtH*.

Christopher and Paul's families are linked by a set of domestic labor relations that metaphorizes brown/black relations in Jamaica. Paul and Christopher grew up together after Christopher<sup>262</sup> was brought from the Dungle by Paul's father, Mas' Charles who had gone to "familiar stock" to employ another housmaid for his sister. Not able to "hire" Christopher's Grandmother, because she is dead, he gains a "yardbwai" for his sister and himself instead. There is no sense of courtesy, honor or respect on the part of Mas' Charles for this family. He does not go to the Dungle to advise Christopher's grandmother of her sister's death, as someone connected by "relation," but ventures into this area because he has a labor need to satisfy. Mas' Paul, like other masters before him, does not recognize the "humanity" in the people he uses. As children, Christopher and Paul play together, but Christopher is reminded of his structural inferiority; he cannot get "facey" with the young "Mas'" Paul; he can never question or challenge Paul's privileges or the ideologies they are based on.<sup>263</sup>

When Paul, the prodigal, returns home after a pool party, he encounters a gory

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<sup>262</sup> Cliff is consistent in her deployment of this trope of the "two childhood friends" of unequal class/caste to critique the effect of colonialism on the inter/intra personal, domestic, local and nation. In this text we have the pairing of Paul and Christopher, Kitty and Dorothy, and in Cliff's novel *Abeng*, which documents Clare Savage's childhood, Clare is paired with Zoe. Cliff's *Abeng* and *NTtH* are in a tradition of texts that pair sisters, siblings, or friends of "unequal hue," one being able to "pass for white" and the other not, to critique discourses of race, the filial and nation. In *NTtH*, we have Clare and her sister Jennie, which can be read alongside the sisters of Angela and Virginia (Jinny) Murray of Jessie Redmon Fauset's *Plum Bun*, the "friends" Clare Kendry and Irene Redfield of Nella Larsen's *Passing* and carried through more contemporary novels such as Danzy Senna's *Caucasia*. These texts consistently mark the "darker sister" as more emotionally stable, due to her immediate access to blackness and by extension black community. However, *NTtH* refuses this essentialist version of blackness as stabilizing by having the character Jennie who, after the death of her mother, is forced to move to the U.S. to live with "familiar strangers" of her sister Clare and father, and disappears into the streets and drug addiction.

<sup>263</sup> Cliff also uses the figure of Kitty similarly to further critique "domestic race relations." As readers we become sympathetic to her "alienation" when she goes to America, but when her mother dies, she does not recognize the discomfort that she and her husband inflict on Dorothy, her housemaid. As one of Mattie's adoptions, Dorothy and Kitty "had wet the same bed when they were small." Yet Kitty can only think of her own pain with the same carelessness that Boy imposes his "nakedness" on Dorothy (70).

scene, but does not adequately or accurately “read” Christopher’s pain or other “evidence” before him. This inability to “read” is part of his inheritance. Like many in his class, this man “has never been concerned about a mess in his life. He and his surroundings have been tidied by darker people” (22). Albert Memmi has argued that the relationship between colonizer and colonized is both destructive and creative in that “[o]ne is disfigured into an oppressor, a partial, unpatriotic and trecherous being worrying only about his privilege and their ‘defense’; the other into an oppressed creature whose development is broken and who compromises by his defeat” (Memmi 89). Taking this cue from Memmi, we can consider how both characters, Paul and Christopher engage with the literal and symbolic “phallus” of Paul’s father and each “engagement” signifies their respective wounding. Paul’s “disfigurement” is marked by its lack of sensitivity, his seeming callousness. When Paul H. sees his father’s severed yet still dangling penis, he asks angrily “How could he not defend himself? His wife?” (26). Prior to seeing what has been done to his father, he fantasizes about the absolute authority of the patriarch protecting kith, kin and property and imagines his father killing whatever “intruder” dare breach the sanctity of his home. But when he sees his father, the deformation of the phallus, he reads this “castration” as a failure to “man up” and is wrought with anger, shame, guilt and disgust.

Christopher reads the master’s body, which is surrounded by floral sheets, as already feminized when he goes to ask the “Mas” for help finding his grandmother’s body and a piece of land to bury her in. When he returns to the bodies to “finish” the job, mutilate them, he sees “[t]he master’s penis was almost comical. Straight up from the crotch it stood until it met with the rum bottle and its jagged edge...He intended to end them absolutely” (49). The Mas’ erect penis is rendered ridiculous, a symbol of

impotence, erect in death. Without or rather in the absence of sexual arousal, it “meets with” the jagged edge of a rum bottle for a second death. More significantly, Christopher is taken out of the sentence as active agent. He does not “end them absolutely.” Ending this family does not end the family created by this specific colonial context nor does their murder end the family’s, the nation’s, dysfunction. The jagged broken rum bottle, the empty container of the “imperialist drink,” meets with the equally “empty” phallus and not unsurprisingly relieves the “Mas” of power he never truly had. Both Christopher and Paul depend and crave phallic power that does not exist for either the black or brown (post) colonial subject.

Paul does not consider that the patriarchal colonial privilege he stands on, but does not inherit, is part of a constellation of factors that are the source of violence that occurs in his “home,” community, and nation. It is easier for Paul and members of the middle and upper classes to imagine Christopher’s “act” as one of individual pathology, an example of individual madness rather than symptomatic of cultural and political madness. His is a narcissistic response. He can only think that it must have been “some wuthless bastard...some damn beas’ kill hall a dem” (29) and what he does not realize, as cuffy-pretend-backra patriarchs before him, that he has participated in maintaining a system that makes *all* black and brown men “wuthless bastards” and “beasts.”<sup>264</sup> That this

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<sup>264</sup> In this vein, Christopher can only be “apprehended”/understood in terms of what Foucault refers to as “animality,” which I venture to call atavism. In Foucault’s discussion of the “human being who has become a beast of burden,” he claims that in this condition of lack of subjectivity, “the absence of reason follows wisdom and its order; madness is then cured, since it is alienated in something which is no less than its truth” (76). If we peel back this layer of solipsism that privileges what gets read felicitously as post modern psychic fragmentation. Madness, I argue, is not “cured” because this subject, the black subject, has never been attributed with the status of “human” and therefore does not have the ability to be read as “mad.” The black subject’s psychological “stability” has consistently been read with language of the “lower” classification of beings and thus his/her “madness” would be read within the madness of a dog or animal,



“individual act” is then made to metonymically confirm the bestiality of all black men is a function of the solipsistic logic of colonialism and its beneficiaries. Paul retains his perspective as an “inheritor” who, like his father, would not “leave his island to them,” the black underclass to whom all manner of violence is attributed (23).

Paul’s illiteracy, his inability to “read the contexts” through any other lens than his “borrowed privilege,” is reinforced by one of the novel’s anecdotal figures – the houseservant Joshua.<sup>265</sup> This “houseboy” hears his employer’s family critique Michael Manley<sup>266</sup> for “spreading” his political net and embracing the black poor, whom the Mas’ and Mistress of the home call ruffians, “never realizing a ruffian is serving them dinner, or realizing it all the while but wanting to let the ruffian know that his is to be kept in this dining room come hell or high water” (20). Joshua prophetically warns the family about their tenuous position on the island and the possibility that their lives, as “whites,” are in danger. The “Mas” and matriarch, who is particularly flattered by what she reads as his mistaking her for white, do not fully understand that the “privilege” they have historically garnered is a direct result of the repudiation of the black subject and currency of white colonial privilege. This class, of which Paul’s family is part, does not “understand [Joshua’s] use of metaphor” (20).<sup>267</sup>

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attributed to physiological inferiority, a response to outside contagion and not a split within a “self,” because the black subject had no “self” to split.

<sup>265</sup> This is a clear allusion to the Biblical figure, Joshua, Moses’ military general and inheritor of the leadership of the Israelites after Moses’ death. The book of Joshua narrates a rapid series of successful attacks on Canaan and the apportioning of land to the twelve tribes. It is a narrative of national expansion, with the blessing of God and a great deal of sanctioned smiting in the process. There is, significantly, a cautionary tale in the book of Joshua, of Achan, who pockets loot from the conquering of Jericho and causes the tribe to fail in the campaign against Ai. After the purging of Achan by stoning him, his wife, children and livestock, the Israelites succeed in conquering Ai.

<sup>266</sup> Micheal Norman Manley served as Jamaica’s Prime Minister between the years of 1972-8 and 1989-1992 and led the PNP, his father’s party.

<sup>267</sup> According to Scott Lewis when Manley came into power, he appealed to both upper and lower

Both Paul and Christopher, by virtue of their investments in dominant discourses and their signs and symbols of power and inclusion, colonial capital and Judeo Christian religion respectively, suffer what Memmi refers to as “the most serious blow,” alienation from forms of cultural knowledge that challenge the dominant; they are “removed from history and from community” (Memmi 91). Just as Christopher is denied the “divine” and subjectivity as “human,” Paul is alienated by his investments in the ideology of a “domestic” social order, the prevailing logic that the “father” will be the savior, the hero, that he will preserve and hand down that heteropatriarchal privilege and order. This “domestic order,” linked as it is to processes of commodification and colonial capitalism, is what Christopher disrupts when he lays bare the “mess” of the pantry: “[s]alt, thyme, coffeee...all the ingredients of Jamaica were mixed together in this mess” (25). This is a mess that can not be cleaned up by any specific class, nor is it solely the creation of Christopher, Paul or the classes they represent. The text is, however particularly critical of the heteropatriarchal landed “gentry” class that Paul represents. If Christopher stands in for the black Jamaicans who spend the bulk of their time “waiting around for cuffy-pretend-backra or backra-fe-true” to acknowledge and change the inequities of the “post”/colonial system, then Paul stands in for that class of Jamaicans, who despite their condemnation of rum as “imperialist” drink and global capitalism, pass around, “language” informed by Marxism and Socialism as they consider a “Cuban solution,”

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classes through his access to two forms of symbolic capital: first as a “hero” of the poor, one who was to bring economic and political parity and at the same time he was considered an “intellectual,” one who produced ideas and texts. He was, in effect, Moses and Joshua together and “came into power on a crest, and one cynical way of looking at it is that he brought in a deeper popular movement—putting himself at the head of it, adopting its symbols, Joshua and the rod and so on” (135). Scott Lewis notes Manley’s appeal as a “hero of all the social classes” but this is a fleeting moment of one year, from 1972-3 (Scott Lewis 135).

with the same seriousness that they pass around a gun and compare penis size (21-3).<sup>268</sup>

Christopher's torture and murder of Paul's family can be read as horrific evidence of madness, a result of individual pathology, or we can read the intertwined fate of Christopher's and Paul's families as symptomatic of larger social problems in Jamaica.<sup>269</sup> Indeed, Christopher makes the entire "house" bear the burden of historical sins of colonialism and more specifically their complicity in benefiting from and maintaining a caste system based on ideologies established by white British colonial administrators. Christopher's "act" then is an abomination and a heroic strike against oppression at once. Having been an object of derision, perceived and represented as less than human, Christopher strikes out at "the family," and in doing so strikes out at a system that devalues, negates the epistemological frame that would enable his desire to secure his grandmother's duppy and land to bury her as appropriately "manly." He becomes a folk hero, representing the abject black underclass and his violence a direct response to a history of objectification, cruelty and violence, but this leads us to the "problem" of his brutalization of Mavis. He slashes her "in a way none of his family had been slashed. The

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<sup>268</sup> In terms of historical context, Cliff's text is set in several moments. The early part of the novel details the emigration of the Savage family at a time when they would have been exposed to both aggressive attempts to re-constrict the colonial space by dominant and an increasingly "white" multinational economic and political interests, and the birth and death of local movements based on a specifically "Fanonian liberationism, Black nationalism, Marxism, Rastafarianism and Catholicism..." which accordingly "inspired a range of oppositional groups, movements and parties (new World, the Caribbean Artists movement, Abeng, NJAC, the New Jewel Movement, the Workers Party of Jamaica and the Working People's Alliance), which sought to reconstruct the Caribbean in their own image" (Scott 86). Paul represents a generation and class of what I am calling "brown" Jamaican citizens who critique the dominant but fail to interrogate their own relationships to the dominant.

<sup>269</sup> In Michel Foucault's *Madness and Civilization*, he touches on "murder" and claims that "[t]here is nothing that the madness of men invests which is not either nature made manifest or nature restored" (283). Although uncomfortable with this idea of "nature" being restored through madness, this passage helps me consider how murder can be "rational" when exercised as a strategy of the state to establish, maintain or reclaim power along with intersecting constructions of the black subject being unable or precluded from participating in rational discourse. Reduced to the corporeal, their "representation" repeatedly undermines the reductive logic that would be attached to these bodies and therefore undermines the "rationale" of the diegetic world of the text.

machete had been dug into her in so many ways, so many times, that Mavis' body became more red than brown. She had no more eyes" (28). His torture of Mavis is the torture of a traitor, of a faithful servant who did not think him worthy of fresh food. He punishes her, "exact[ing] not just silence but obliteration, and *he could not have said why*. He cut her like an animal, torturing her body in a way he had not tortured theirs" (48 *my emphasis*). This violent expression of mourning, frustration and madness is an explicit critique of the self loathing, internalized racism, and classism Mavis represents. In her care "of them," she denies what is holy in Christopher as well as what is holy in herself. At the same time, she is structurally in an even more untenable position than Christopher is. She pays for "her sins" as well as that of every other "betray[er]" of black patriarchal authority, of every woman back to Eve. She is the first sacrifice.

Mavis' abjection is reified when Paul finds her body. Rather than mourning this woman who was also part of the intimate space that is "home," her body is deemed an "inconvenience," and he speculates whether or not she is the true culprit who brought danger into his father's house.<sup>270</sup> He does not know her surname, where she comes from, or put it together that his "privilege" has kept them "familiar strangers." He looks for "evidence" of "relation" in her room and does not find documentation. Instead of challenging dominant cultural logic, Paul resolves to keep her unknown and subsequently his privilege preserved. By refusing to "know," he can then claim that "[i]t was not his fault; it was hopeless" and further rationalize that he would "just have to burn her body along with the sheets and nightclothes and pillows stained with blood. He had no sadness

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<sup>270</sup> This representation of black Jamaican sexuality as being deviant and/or bestial is first given to the reader in Paul's description of the pool party and his suggestion that Harry/Harriet's sexual deviance is directly related to "class," and projects that H/H will end up "in some back-o'-wall alley in Raetown, fucked to death" then draws upon the cultural logic that members of this class are not only aberrant in terms of sexual voracity but are to be used thus, "[h]im cyaan help himself, him mother nuh maid?" (21).

left for anyone but himself” (28). Paul, and those like him, can not be the “hope” of Jamaica nor can Christopher be read as “folk hero” without acknowledgement that their respective investments in power mirrors the dominant’s and that horizontal violence often kills the “folk.”<sup>271</sup> Further, the “folk” cannot have Nanny and Cudjoe as cultural heroes without Quashee, the traitor, or the history of marroons as enforcers for the crown, nor can they have Christ without the history of his name used to wage all sorts of “Chrismus sprees.”<sup>272</sup>

As a hero of the “folk,” he is both pariah and symbol of power that can be incorporated into cultural expressions of resistance. Herein lies the problem. Once made abstract, once made symbol, Christopher is easily commodified. Just as Maroons became cultural symbols to middle class university based black power movements in the sixties and seventies, reggae music, the music of the “outlaws” was used during the 70s and 80s by the Jamaican Nationalist Party (JNP) as a tool to gain underclass support and win elections.<sup>273</sup> The song that immortalizes Christopher, characterizes him as madman and prophet, mirrors the manner in which artists like Peter Tosh and Bob Marley glorified Maroon culture in their music, giving voice to the quotidian experiences of the oppressed, but their cultural texts could not escape appropriation by dominant bourgeois political

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<sup>271</sup> Here, I found thinking about Christopher in conversation with Foucault’s claim that “[m]adness...radiates both toward the body and toward the soul, is at the same time the suspension of passion, breach of causality, dissolution of the elements of unity” and further that “[m]adness participates both in the necessity of passion and in the anarchy of what, released by this very passion, transcends it and all that it implies” particularly useful especially when thinking of what may constitute a “mad” act in one historical moment can be read as revolutionary in another in its disruption of implied or explicit “orders” (*Madness and Civilisation* 91).

<sup>272</sup> When Paul tells Christopher that his girlfriend is “vex” with him, Christopher responds that he was just having a little “Chrismus spree”; he does not tell Paul that this spree also involved the murder of Paul’s family and will soon “end” him.

<sup>273</sup> The abeng, a conch shell, was used by maroons to warn of British onslaught and the name “abeng” was used as a title of a daily newspaper started by middle and upper class college students who had embraced materialist critiques of colonial capitalism in the [get exact date].

interests (Mackie 53).

Christopher's song is one of disillusionment. When women die in a factory fire he runs to and fro yelling that "Dis not de fiah bawn of mi powah! Dis not de fiah bawn of mi powah!" (179), and he is right. The fire that kills these women is not the fire born of his power. It is the negligence and exploitation of a neo-colonial economic system, the same system that turns Christopher into an impotent version of Sasabonsam, the forest god, with "[h]is human body covered in a suit of long red hair, fiery, thick... Sweat making the costume stick to his naked skin" (207) that burns up the bodies of these women. Christopher, once unmoored to family, denied by the patriarch, becomes the embodiment of insanity *and* bloody retribution and directs his fire on the "family," the microcosm created by colonial capitalism. But is this fire, this violent act, effective? Is this act and is he useful to and for the community? Can this madman be a hero?

In order for him to become a hero that is "useful," he has to be turned into a narrative that the people can collectively access; he has to be "turn inna myth," as had been done with "Bob" (Marley). He can "favor mad" and "favor prophet," become both "neger Jesus/Christ and "shadow-catcher/dupy conqueror" along with both the 'bright and morning star'; he is both God and Devil, Lucifer and Jesus (179). As god and devil, having embraced and internalized the dichotomous logic of the dominant, he is left with no room for self, no room to be "human"; he is something else. He is "turn inna myth." As "myth" he can be "de watchman" who may prophesize but is not believed, at least not until it is time for the people to collectively "bu'n it down." His narrative makes explicit the inability of the oppressed subject to access the dominant's Judeo Christian pantheon of the heroic. Like Jesus, Christopher can be a powerful unifying symbol, expressing anger, frustration, and disappointment with those that uphold religious, political and

economic “order.” As abstraction Christopher, like the nameless narrator of *Invisible Man*, embodies the threat of reprisal, fear of the return of the repressed, and escapes time and punishment for his “crimes” because he is a perpetual enigma. Like Mavis, Christopher remains “unknown,” captured symbolically so privileged classes can measure their “normativity” and subsequently “superiority”<sup>274</sup> against the yardboys and nameless abject female figures picking through garbage to find food for themselves and their “families.”

As a child, Christopher fails in his role as “foil.” His failure at panhandling is attributed to his inability to “[come] back at them with a Jamaican turn of phrase, something lilting, something in the mouth of a trickster, but he did not smile his eyes at the visitors; he hung his head, and they thought him stupid, or sullen. So he was not much of a success as a begger” (41). Christopher, whose body is bent, thin and swollen with the symptoms of malnutrition, either explicitly refuses or is incapable of indulging the “consumers” with an “image” of the happy, carefree, poor black Jamaican bwai. He cannot return from the bottom of the ocean with a smile on his face and coins between his teeth nor subvert the dominant order as “trickster.” Christopher’s pain is palpable; he is denied childhood and manhood. After being given work by Mas’ Charles unmarried sister, he is summarily turned out of the house when he reaches adolescence and she deems him a sexual threat (even though it is she that enters his room in the middle of the night with little on). He is ordered out of “the Mas’ house” again when he tries to reclaim his grandmother’s body and asks for a little piece of land to bury her in. By the end of the

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<sup>274</sup> This is not unlike Paul’s observation that Harry/Harriet is necessary for others to measure their normalcy, rather their heteronormativity against his “strangeness,” that is at once both natural and unnatural – coterminous with the supposed naturalness of gender and sex performance that is constantly undercut by the “lived” reality of gender performance and its intersection with class and racial construction.

text Christopher, devoid of discernable humanity, has become trickster, but he is an ineffectual one. When asked by the Anglo American film producers if he can howl, he responds that “if [he] should howl, den every dog in kingston gwan come” and smiles at the men “toothless” (205). This is the turn of phrase, the “Jamaican flavor,” he could not muster as a child to “sell” himself and be a proper beggar. This is a trickster who can only look on from the vantage point of being up in a tree and witnesses both the corruption of the local historical figures of resistance, Nanny and Cudjoe, and the slaughter of Clare and the other guerilla fighters in the bush. He is inside history as object of derision and outside history, able to observe but not impact it.

The text makes its critique of institutional religion and its historical role in colonial capitalism and imperialism clear in the very beginning when our narrator, in the voice of the colonized subject, asks:

But how could Massa God be their enemy? The seawater which hid their history was not at fault. The moon which lit the sea. The sun which warmed the swallowtail to flight. The flicker of the click beetle. The charge of the mad ant. The breath of the coral reef. They gray shark. The blue mountains. The black widow. The brown widow. The thick stands of Black Mangrove.

None of these were the enemy.

They were tired of praying for those that persecuted them. (17)

The juxtaposition of “Massa” and “God,” alludes to the institutions of slavery, colonialism and Judeo-Christianity. The syntactic proximity of the two terms allows the speaker to challenge the rhetoric of deferred paradise for the oppressed, to abandon what seems an interminable “wait on Jah” (19). It is a given that Massa would be an “enemy,” but asking how “God” can be the enemy is another matter all together. There can be no “God” in this cultural context that is not implicated by circuits of capital; there can be no “massa” without the heteropatriarchal order at the core of Judeo Christian constructions



of community.

Between the question of how could God and/or Massa be the enemy is an expression of a fatigue with New Testament edicts to pray for one's enemy and "turn the other cheek." There is another paradigm offered: knowledge held by the old women, knowledge that could have "saved" Paul and Christopher. It is a paradigm represented by images of a natural world, represented using language and syntax that violates the dominant's order, their grammar. Between "proper" sentences is a representation of a blameless natural world; sea water, the modus for transatlantic movement of goods and people, embraced the dead, dying and murdered Africans during the middle passage is not "at fault." The sun and moon, equally life giving, are alternative "natural" markers of time invoked and incorporated into a perspective that does not necessarily make "sense" to the Western reader. One can not see coral breathe, and to "flicker," with its alliterative connotation, may mean to sound or look indeterminately and indeterminacy is incompatible with Western empiricism. All has to make sense. Additionally, we have a challenge to Western narratives with the reference to black and brown widows, which may allude to both the spider anansi, a culturally specific folk reference and resonance from Africa<sup>275</sup> and the loss of "male" presences or potentially problematic precolonial forms masculinity in the domestic space created by colonial imperialism.<sup>276</sup> These are "peoples" mourning the loss of former and forgotten Gods, mourning an eternally deferred communion with the Christian "God," but not necessarily the "god" within themselves. Clare learns from Harry/Harriet (H/H) that she has lost her way and that

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<sup>275</sup> The allusion to Anansi, the spider, becomes clearer when we remember that the Jamaican audience in Cliff's text consumes Anglo film productions and narratives, but incorporates the screened images, grammar of representation with the "local" images, symbols and folk narratives.

<sup>276</sup> One classic representation of the problematic aspects of precolonial African masculinity is in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* in the central protagonist, Okonkwo's effort to define his masculinity in particular ways leads invariably to his own destruction.

there is a way to return, to address that “loss.” From H/H Clare begins to understand that there is a possibility that she can integrate multiple and alternative ways of understanding the world, to have it both ways as her grandmother Mattie had.

The text questions the viability of different forms of local knowledge and asks the reader to consider what both Paul and Christopher’s fate would have been had they learned the “naïve science, bunga nonsense” held in the minds and memories of old women (69). This “false” knowledge is considered the work of false prophets. When the character Paul returns home, he misses an opportunity to alter his own trajectory, and subsequently that of all Jamaica. Unlike his Biblical namesake, Paul is unable to “convert” when he encounters a Christopher who has “risen” and become “light bearing.”<sup>277</sup> Faced with the corpses of his family, he senses a “stirring” in the room and questions the presence of Duppies but immediately dismisses it as one “who believed and would not yet trustly believe” (26). He, like his upper-class university-educated contemporaries, militate against the world in which duppies exist.<sup>278</sup> He is split; part of him *knows* but loses to the part of him that has gained privilege by embracing Western forms of knowledge. As for Christopher, the chapter entitled “De Watchman” begins with the explicit question of what Christopher would have turned into if he had been given the

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<sup>277</sup> The book of Acts narrates the spiritual awakening of Saul of Tarsus, born to a family of Pharisees, who becomes the “Apostle Paul,” converting to Christianity after encountering a risen Christ. The Pauline letters establish and codify the Christian church, community, and domestic relations. In Cliff’s novel, Christopher is described as becoming a “force,” an instrument without a past or future, “phosphorous. Light-bearing. He was light igniting the air round him. The source of all danger. He was the carrier of fire. He was the black light that rises from bone ash” (47). It does not seem a stretch to read Christopher as a rendering of a more “Shiva”-like Christ who is both a source of spritual life and death especially given “Brother Josephus” having given Christopher an image of a little black Jesus and telling him that his name “mean the bearer of Christ” and that “him favor” Christopher (36, 39).

<sup>278</sup> This classed perspective is again reiterated in *Abeng* in which African retentions, like Voudun are believed to lead the people, specifically country/poor people to “all manner of foolishness” (87).

old knowledge, if he had “suspected the power of Ogun in him,” but because Christopher has appropriated Christian ethos, and looked to that discourse a “self”/savior, he becomes “convinced of his evil. That his act came from nowhere but his rhyging soul” (177).

Christopher, lost and fragmented, knows that his grandmother’s duppy has not been secured, and yearns for the spiritual succor that the “lickle black Jesus” was to give him. The knowledge that would have enabled Paul to “convert,” and Christopher to “be,” is also knowledge denied the central protagonist, Clare. Both Kitty, Clare’s mother, and Mattie, her grandmother, are unable to convey to her the knowledge that can not be “neutralized” by “psalms and gospels” or turned “into artifact, anthropological detail” (69). More importantly, this is knowledge that “heals” or at least helps heal bifurcated souls, and enables subjects in the community to move toward a more integrative approach to these epistemologies.<sup>279</sup>

The mere mapping of race, in this instance “whiteness” and/or “blackness,” over such figures of the heroic, the community and nation or religion does not work. When

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<sup>279</sup> In *Abeng*, Kitty has knowledge that links her materially to the land and to a history that is primarily matrilineal and of healers: “Kitty knew the uses of Madame Fate, a weed that could kill and that could cure. She knew about sleep-and-Wake. Marjo Bitter. Dumb cane. Bissy, which was the antidote to the poison of dumb cane...she knew...she knew...she knew...” (53). This is also knowledge that she does not give her daughter despite the possibility of it being able to “save” her. Mattie’s knowledge can not be “neutralized” but integrates multiple frames: “The old women would say de Bible possess magic too. It all magic. The Bible only proved the ancient wisdom to be true. Her mother believed that. Her mother who kept church and read the Bible and considered the meanings embedded in one verse over the course of one week. Her mother intent on symbol. Her mother believed in other old women, just as she believed in the events of Gethsemane. Just as she believed in planting when the zodiac was favorable, and knew which sign responded to which sign responded to which vegetable or fruit” (69-70). This knowledge is more than agricultural. It is teaching “her children to fear Sasabonsam. To honor the Merry maids in the river, for they brought eloquence to women” along with the “eye of God. His merciful hand. His wrathful hand. His face moving across all creation” (70). It is an alternative pantheon of the heroic. Just as social and literal death makes it impossible for Christopher and Paul to inherit that which would make them “men” in the eyes of the dominant, so too are Kitty and Mattie unable to hand down to their daughter/granddaughter the ability to integrate worlds, to see magic in the Bible and the dungle at the same time. The figure who actively seeks out and inherits this knowledge is Harry/Harriet.

Brother Josephus<sup>280</sup> brings a new image of the Savior to the Dungle, he brings a new africanized image of “lickle Jesus” and Mary to people who have already internalized the “backra” Jesus and all the power that his whiteness entails. Those who internalized the image of Jesus, of “power” as white, deem Josephus and his “lickle black Jesus” not a prophet or representative of the community itself, but as “heresy” itself. Harry/Harriet tells our central protagonist that one “cyaan live split,” that a choice has to be made. It is a choice to occupy a space from which to resist. Clare chooses “blackness” not so much as a racial category but a political one just as Harry/Harriet chooses a gender because the world, even the one s/he is trying to save, will not tolerate in betweenness.

Clare can not be both “black” and “white,” even though categories like “white chocolate” and “white nigger” exist. Christopher can not be both “black” and “Jesus”; Paul can not be colonizer and colonized at the same time. The historical moments these figures find themselves require choice. There is little else to organize resistance around but these limited categories. What our characters discover is that these locations are not *lived* as mutually exclusive, but are organized as such in political life. This is a people denied the Savior’s “likeness,” told to remember that they “not human,” instructed through “images” what they should be to be considered “real.” If they do not perform this “real,” they do not exist.

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<sup>280</sup> I read the figure of “Brother Josephus” as an allusion to Josephus (Yosef ben Matityahu), or Flavius Josephus, Jewish Historian who survived and recorded the destruction of Jerusalem in *The Jewish War* and Jewish culture and history in *Antiquities of the Jews*. This is a figure on whom great debate has been waged in terms of his role as an “apologist” and traitor of his people. His survival during the war is considered by many to be a direct betrayal, because he did not commit suicide and instead chose to surrender to the Romans. Yet, he is also credited with the documentation and preservation of Jewish culture. He is considered both a hero and villain of history.

**Clare “the cousin from overseas, pale from compusive marriage” (20)**

Unlike Paul and Christopher who look to heteropatriarchal constructions of social order to provide them with “the heroic,” Clare tries to access a different but not entirely dissimilar cultural lineage. Both men look to the “father” for confirmation of their position as males within the social order and both are denied. Clare seeks models of resistance in American popular culture and then academic culture, specifically the “Motherland’s” academic culture. Eventually, she forges an identity in contention with dominant understandings of what it means to be a subject and more importantly, what it means to be “black,” and what it means to resist.

Clare’s search for “home” is also a search for a usable past, a model of the heroic. Her initial search leads her to popular culture, specifically film and television. Clare’s indoctrination into subjectivity through popular culture comes with the predominance of Black American cultural forms of expression. As “America” takes economic and cultural precedence on the world stage, so too do constructions of American blackness – which then come to stand for the authentic representation of what being “black” means. But as Kitty eloquently puts it “the Blacks here not from us. The whites here not from us” (citation). Where Clare’s father, with his homemade coat of arms on commemorative plates, slips easily into a American constructions of ethnicity, Kitty and Virginia are unable and return home to Jamaica. Clare chooses not to, but not before attempting to map her Black American Vietnam veteran boyfriend’s pain over hers. It is in this “romantic” relationship between Bobby and Clare that we see both the connection between diasporic peoples and their differences. More to the point, we see the failure of a

common “skin” to provide the ground of affinity needed for resistance.<sup>281</sup> Bobby knows, if Clare does not, that shared “skin” is not enough to base individual identity much less a political movement. There has to be something “more” than racial identification.

Bobby is a representation of Black America as the walking wounded, functioning but contaminated by “exposure.” Bobby signifies the failure of post civil rights era America to honor its promises, to deal with its disillusioned “sons” and their inheritance of continued structural oppression. This undeclared war created undeclared and declarable heroes; its “bitter controversies surrounding the Vietnam War” discredited the “old American ideal of the masculine warrior hero for much of the public” (Gibson 5). Bobby, as a black soldier, embodies a crisis in the formation of American masculinity, specifically disenchantment with fantasies of inclusion that taking up the warrior’s armorment was supposed to bring the Black American male subject. By the end of the Vietnam war, there is no illusion that the soldier is a disposable tool of the state or that military service is a questionable rite of passage. The boy could no longer, by becoming a soldier, become a “man.” Bobby conforms to but is not comforted by his role as solitary hero; he is diminished, made tragic by it, and unable to use his wounds as medals of honor. Bobby’s experience in the “theatre” of war leaves him permanently wounded, not because his dream and real worlds conflate due to exposure to violence, abuse of the innocent, and agent orange, but because the actual stakes for the warrior are less

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<sup>281</sup> In *Abeng*, we have an illustration of the “problem” Clare’s in between-ness causes when she kills the hog Cudjoe and Kitty thinks that it is her “whiteness” at fault, inherent “arrogance which usually accompanied that state—which had finally showed through her daughter’s soul. But should she save her daughter from this—or give in to it?” Her father, Boy, thinks that it is Clare’s “blackness” that is the “the cause of his daughters actions—and the irresponsibility he felt imbued *those* people—and now had to be expunged once and for all. On this little island so far removed from the mother country, a white girl could so easily become trash” (148-9). Clare has to get beyond the emotional attachment, both positive and negative, that goes along with states of black and whiteness. She has to get beyond configuring of her mother/black and father/white.

recognizable with the proliferation of global capital. The relationship between the violence needed and experienced is not commensurate with the psychological or material rewards supposedly awaiting the returning hero. War and participation in “war games” was supposed to bring honor, acceptance and love, but in this historical moment the terrain and goals of military campaigns and government/political and economic interests blur.

The theatre of war that Bobby fights in mirrors the literal stage set that Clare finds herself on at the end of the text. Bobby has fought in the modern war theatre where models of warriorhood entrenched in Western European Judeo Christian ideology confronted “guerrilla warfare,” where free for alls, no limits on “targets,” and all forms of violence became legitimate. In looking to a “Cuban solution,” Clare and compatriots seek a model driven by socialist politics, a viable response to the codification of war by, for, and in the interest of the West. The story that Bobby tells Clare, his confession of complicity in murder and rape, all stamped with the imprimatur of American nationalism, “costs him too much” and he leaves her (170). It is a confession solicited by a figure searching for an identity of her own. Clare’s tries to take on his fight, because in caring for him “[s]he felt her petty, private misery recede, faced with the concreteness of his broken skin” (145). But just as Harry/Harriet refuses to allow his “rape” to define him or his sexuality, so too does Bobby refuse Clare’s desire to uncritically map his pain onto hers. He tells Clare that “[his] war cannot serve [her] purpose, whatever that might be” (151). She cannot assimilate Bobby’s disease, because he will not let her. Bobby can not emotionally or physically assimilate the pathogens of American nationalism. When he is sent to Stuttgart for “treatment” and asks for a “Black chaplain” he is sent to a white psychiatrist who tells him that his real “wound” is his love-hate relationship with and

envy of white men (151). The near spiritual death Bobby experiences, due to the insidiousness disease of American racism, is metaphorized in a wound in his leg that never heals. His wound is not his alone but all of America's. His rebellious act of leaving "treatment," mirrors Harry/Harriet's refusal to allow his "rape" to be interpreted as metonymic "symbol." Bobby leaves the "center" when he is told that his illness is his jealousy, coveting of white masculinity. Bobby identifies his illness as a spiritual one. He knows what the poison is, and how it got into his system, but not how to cure it.

Clare's attempt to take on Bobby's "poison" costs her; it leaves her barren, unable to reproduce but more importantly it leaves her without the choice. Clare, like Bambara's Velma of *The Salt Eaters* and Jewel of *Gorilla, My Love* before her, is "wounded," specifically made unnatural in her inability or refusal to be a mother. Clare can not be healed by either the salt water or semen that enters her. Without knowledge and connection to "home," a reconciliation between blackness/mother and whiteness/father can not happen, neither can engaging in a traditional role of "mother" to either Bobby or his "children" heal her or save her from "history." Clare's (in)visible blackness and whiteness is the scar and her inability to disrupt the constant mapping of race, her wound.<sup>282</sup> It is not her blackness but her understating of the role of race that has to be "cured." Bobby tells her that she has to "get to the place where [she is] apart from [her] mother, [her] father, while still being a part of them" (153). She can not be a soldier without Boy, who "counsels his daughter on invisibility and secrets. Self-effacement.

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<sup>282</sup> In "Retracing the African Part of Ourselves': Blackness as Revolutionary Consciousness and Identity in the Work of Michelle Cliff" Anuradha Dingwaney Needham argues that Clare is a figure for whom blackness "is an identification she works at and earns the right to via a series of choices she makes, and by purposefully affiliating herself with certain positions, peoples, and modes of being in the world... [including] those that she perceives as having an unmediated access to revolutionary consciousness and identity that for her Blackness represents" and further that this process of cobbling together an identity is possible through a culling of forgotten history that is equal parts imagination and participating in a collective struggle by choice (92-3).



Blending in. The uses of camouflage” (100)<sup>283</sup> and helps her recognize the uses and benefits of “camouflage” later when she joins the insurgents. Further, she can not fulfill her role as soldier without Kitty, who writes to her daughter that she can not, like her father, “forget who [her] people are. [Her] responsibilities lie beyond [her mother], beyond [herself]. There is a space between who [Clare is] and who [she] will become,” and then most importantly she is ordered to “[f]ill it” (103). In this moment Kitty claims her daughter and gives her the possibility of forging an identity through reimagining blackness as a political category.<sup>284</sup> Clare has to get to a place where she can recognize “skin” as deficient terrain on which to build a collective resistance. Clare and the other guerilla fighters turn to a different, more useful, epidermis, one that gives them flexibility and sutures them together to the earth.

Clare and the other warriors need something more flexible and durable than skin. “Race” and its accompanying cultural logics cannot be the common ground or provide the grammar, the underlying structure for a common collective narrative. These guerilla soldiers are engaged in acts of re-creation; they use what is available to them. In the uniforms they find a tacit agreement, in “similar clothes,” they gain “purpose,” an

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<sup>283</sup> Needham notes the “double edged” relationship of the colonial subject to “camouflage” in her analysis “Camouflage, too, is double edged—one the one hand used for presumably revolutionary ends to protect the guerillas, on the other used for presumably reactionary ends by Boy who advises Clare of its uses for blending into dominant American Culture when they migrate to the mainland” (Needham 100). Boy Savage is rendered a one dimensional figure, an enthusiastic “convert” to American culture and its racist/racial taxonomy, but he is also the same figure that “teaches” her about the value of camouflage – a necessary evil when “blending” in the hallowed halls of the academy, and one that she uses to her advantage.

<sup>284</sup> Cliff’s own relationship to black and whiteness and sexuality have been hotly debated and for the purposes of this chapter will be set aside. I am more interested in the way that her fictional characters negotiate this terrain. In Caroline Rody’s *The Daughter’s Return: African-American and Caribbean Women’s Fictions of History* she explores Clare’s acquisition of “language” as an acquisition of history, and further that *NTtH* as a text that gives us “revolutionaries, breaking out of colonial schizophrenia into self determination” (Rody 163) not an image of the abject colonized. Most specific to my analysis, she argues that “[c]asting her lot with black Jamaica, the heroine also seems to fuse her purpose with that of Cliff’s radical narrating voice, healing Abeng’s schizophrenic narration the ‘colonized child’ and signaling her own coming-of-age” (Rody 169).

“alikeness...

they needed, which could be important, even vital to them-the shades of their skin, places traveled to and from, events experienced, things understood, food taken into their bodies, acts of violence committed, books read, music heard, languages recognized, ones they loved, living family, varied widely came between them. That was all to be expected, of course-that on this island, as part of this small nation, many of them would have been separated at birth. Automatically... (4)

With common ground created by this second skin, they combat discourses like that of “race,” that prevent shared understanding and subsequently political consciousness from proliferating across categories of identity. The desire to claim a non assimilated cultural heritage consistently finds itself up against the practical need to seek, create and maintain common ground on which resistance and community can be established. With this common skin, they establish an affinity that does not preclude differences between diasporic groups.

Previously divided by the colors of their skin, indicators of social positioning and possibility, their newfound epidermis provides a way to establish a new relationship with the land and “was never only a matter of appearance. They were also dressed-practical matter, a matter of survival...They were dressed to blend with the country around them-this dripping brown and green terrain” (5). Being closer to the earth, the soil, creation, life and “ruination” of Jamaica takes precedence over the presumed allegiances that the literal skin underneath the uniforms suggest. These warriors have a greater need, one that according to the work of Goldberg and Krausz in *Jewish Identity* disrupts ethnicity.<sup>285</sup> For Clare and the other insurgents, it is no longer about descent but assent, not who their

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<sup>285</sup> Goldberg and Krausz argue that “the concept of ethnicity... has changed in the post modern era, and therefore is a linking of “descent” (who my ancestors are) and “assent” (what I choose to call myself), within the context of my historical circumstances (my physical attributes and familial identification, linked to how I am perceived by the society around me)” (qtd. Wilentz 6).

ancestors were but who they choose to align themselves with, and their acceptance of the consequences that go along with that choice. The uniforms allow them to transgress some, but not all, categories of naming and nation. This new skin is revolutionary and nationalist.

The possibility of revolution enables former colonial subjects the ability to reclaim signifiers of their abject colonial status and give them new uses. These guerillas wear garments produced and circulated through nationalist and capitalists conduits: a combination of khaki fabric that “had been spun out to outfit the empire” marking service to the state as soldier and/or schoolboy, and fatigues stolen from American kids “high on dope” and/or cast off “...surplus from that other place, another soldier’s name still taped to the breast pocket.” This “other place” is both literal and fantastic: literal in terms of America and the Pacific Rim as theatres of wars, and fantastic in terms of popular culture and fantasies of national inclusion produced therein. The uniforms are left over “excess” from American cold war violence, inconvenient, “heavy,” and unlike the soldiers of the Vietnam, whose fatigues signified “loss,” the uniforms have now been recontextualized, made “talismans” with the hope that those who wear them in this new venture will have protection the soldiers in Vietnam did not have. These guerilla fighters seek safety specific to their location, a redemption that the American soldier did not have. These soldiers are and will unite with the earth. They will blend into the land as a lizard does a croton leaf.

However, their sameness is predicated on abstraction, the need to feel “authentic” through simulation. What they have seen, how they have imagined themselves, has been in concert with what has been purveyed through the conduits of popular culture. Screened warrior subjectivity has become more real or at least as real as the heroes of their own

local and national histories.

The camouflage jackets, names and all, added a further awareness, a touch of realism, cinematic verité, that anyone who eyed them would believe they were faced with *real* soldiers. True soldiers-though no government had ordered them into battle-far from it. But this is how the camouflage made them feel. As the gold and green and black knitted caps some wore-a danger because the bright gold would sing out in the bush-made them feel like real freedom fighters, like their comrades in the ANC-a cliché, almost screenplayed to death, *Viva Zapata!* and all that-but that *is* what they were, what they *felt* they were, what they *were* in fact. Their reason emblazoned in the colors of their skulls. *Burn! (7)*<sup>286</sup>

The camouflage is successful in that they feel “real,” but these warriors also wear bright gold caps on their heads which makes them easy targets in the bush. Part of being a warrior is to be visible as such, to “sing out in the bush.” But once visible, there is a threat of being screenplayed to death, and “warrior” failing to recognize the difference between the reality created by the socio-political in the quotidian and the reality created in the realm of representation. The warrior, who mistakes the “rationale” of the diegetic worlds of fiction and fantasy as “rational,” may experience both symbolic and literal death.

Part of this simulation’s success depends on the fantasies of national inclusion embedded in the names which are taped onto the uniforms, names that the narrator speculates as coming from “a B-picture-RKO-Radio or columbia or Republic-like the ones they used to see in triple features at the open-air Rialto before it was torn down” that depict “GIs fortified with Camels talking about baseball while stalking the silent,

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<sup>286</sup> *Viva Zapata* (1952) and *Queimada (Burn!)* 1969 were both starring vehicles for Marlon Brando. In the former, Brando plays Emiliano Zapata who in 1909 along with Poncho Villa, led an insurrection against Spanish colonial administrators in Mexico that were exploiting the populous and land. In the later, *Burn!*, Brando plays Sir William Walker who incites a slave revolt on the Portuguese held island of Queimada in order to benefit British sugar trade. Ten years after the original rebellion takes place, Brando’s character has to return to the island to deal with the upstart rebel who Brando convinced to rebel in the first place, because he had led or rather is in the process of staging a rebellion against the British colonial forces.

treacherous Jap” (6-7). The uniforms exploit the agglutinative process that is spectatorship and identification with the hero. The uniforms are interchangeable; the soldier/spectator can access, in each name, a “self” made possible by the national/immigrant identities signified by the racially ambiguous “Johnson,” the historically significant “Washington” and the inherently “brought to,” “came to,” “left for,” “escaped to” America narratives suggested in the names of Skrobski, Diaz and also Morrissey. “Johnson” and Washington” can be either black or white and localizable in “raced” pantheons of the heroic (James Weldon and/or Lyndon B. Johnson, Booker T. or George Washington). The names “Skrobski” and “Morrissey” signify former historical minorities in relation to larger British and American imperial interests along with “Diaz” – the catch-all “Spanish” name proliferating through Central, South America and the Caribbean. These “names” may come from a literal theatrical film production site or from the pacific rim theatre of war; both are sites of national contest, conquest and fiction. Once recontextualized by these warriors, their identity as soldier, unlike the soldiers/“actors” in the B-pictures, are not dependent upon the abject Asian “other” to secure their rightful place as national heroes. These names suggest multiple but unifying national histories that can be incorporated into usable narratives of resistance. And unlike the soldier who needed a raced abject other to secure his national identity to his “skin,” the external covering remains in a disjunctive relationship with the skin underneath.

This new covering, this common skin, is not sutured to individual bodies, but sutures the warriors together. It can be shed and traded, function as a testament to their ability to appropriate signifiers of warriorhood from dominant cultural narratives. Similarly, these warriors appropriate other objects, names, costumes of war, instruments, blades, once used to cut cane on sugar plantations are now used to clear bush to enable

the guerrilla fighters to plant food for themselves and ganja for sale to support their efforts - their “true properties [are in this context] recognized” (Cliff 12). But it is not just the blades that have been handed down from one generation to another. The cutting of the bush is accompanied by remembered songs of a slave past (10).<sup>287</sup> Cultural material produced by “simulated worlds” in popular culture can be a source of usable cultural artifacts as well as what many conservative readers of popular culture have historically read as anesthetizing delusions of inclusion.<sup>288</sup> Access to cultural objects and forms of the heroic from multiple national pasts create more complex sites of identification, more ways to imagine a “self” that can then be appropriated by the larger community.<sup>289</sup> The warriors cut through the brush with tools inherited from a violent slave history and sing songs that invoke a history of abjection. Christopher uses one of these “tools” to cut down Paul’s and his family in the beginning of the novel. The machete, like the uniform, is a tool that turns into a weapon in the hands of these self stylized insurrectionists, and like the machete the uniform becomes an extension of the marginalized subject’s body and signifies collective and individual rebellion.<sup>290</sup>

As neo-maroons the guerillas are part of everything and use everything at their

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<sup>287</sup> Similarly, Clare reclaims a “cotta, bought years ago in Knightsbridge, a gallery specializing in African art, carried as a talisman. Now being put to use, its true properties recognized. It had not been comfortable on a glass shelf; it belongs on a woman’s head. She spoke to the shopkeeper in the name of her grandmother” (12).

<sup>288</sup> Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno coined the term “Culture industry” in their “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception” where they argued that the “popular” creates false needs, holds ups and creates false ideals that are tied to Capitalism (120-124).

<sup>289</sup> I explore this idea of being able to access multiple pantheons of the heroic across cultures previously in my chapter on the work of Charles Johnson as well as in the last chapter of this dissertation.

<sup>290</sup> This use of “tools” as “weapons” is consistent with Elaine Scarry’s argument in *The Body in Pain*, a text that I explore in further detail later, that “What we call a ‘weapon’ when it acts on a sentient surface we call a ‘tool’ when it acts on a nonsentient surface. The hand that pounds a human face is a weapon and the hand that pounds the dough for bread or the clay for a bowl is a tool” (Scarry 173). These possibilities of “usage” are important to the contemporary black female warrior’s use of what has come before her in her quests to heal the communities that she becomes part of and herself.

disposal: all the images, discourses, rhetoric of warriorhood, the cloth, garments, skin and organs of history. Clare, as a subject that is within and without, outsider and insider, has to use all that is available to choose. She is mobile, a figure whose passport marks her nomadism, a characteristic that makes her the embodiment of an idealized much put upon postmodern post colonial subjectivity, racially and culturally “hybrid,” “indecidable.” To avoid the dangerous conflation of “coherence with mobility,” power with movement,<sup>291</sup> Clare’s position of privileged post colonial “intellectual” signals mobility and eloquently marks its limits at the same time.

Earlier, Clare has looked to the academy, to history, for a usable model of the heroic, and this takes her to the figures of Jean D’Arc and Pocohontas, one potentially a madwoman and the other a traitor, much in the same way that her mother, Kitty, searches for connection after her arrival to America and finds the grave of Marcus, a F A I T H F U L S E R V A N T, “man born in Jamaica, a slave to some family, who had been frozen to death crossing the water during the perilous winter of 1702” (63). Kitty passes her hand over the slate tombstone, as Clare does over tomes in British libraries, to establish a tactile relationship to place, but this touch, her touch, is one of unanswered longing, mourning and sadness. To cull history is a vexed project, often revealing pasts that have

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<sup>291</sup> In *The Black Female Body* Mohanram takes on Rosi Braidotti’s privileging of postmodern feminists, specifically the mobility, ease with which postmodern feminists themselves, as producers of discourse, move easily across borders, and thus defamiliarize static definitions of self. What Mohanram suggests is that it is because of the strength of their “passports,” which implicitly accesses discourses of nation in relation that give these Western “feminists” their legitimacy. To support her argument she close reads an anecdote in Braidotti’s work where the narratorial “I,” this Western feminist voice, is rendered powerful and flexible in opposition to a crowd of black bodies experiencing difficulty at customs/immigration desks with their “weak passports” (Braidotti qt. Mohanram 81). These black bodies will always have “weak” passports, tenuous relationships to “nation” unlike the feminist nomad - coded white.

been manipulated to serve the interests of doctrine.<sup>292</sup> What is more productive for Kitty, and also Clare, is again abstraction. Kitty's search brings her to the care of La Morenita in a bodega (81-2), a symbol that is and is not hers. Not needing "authentic" connection to La Morenita, that would come from genealogy and land, La Morenita gives Kitty comfort because the processes of diaspora; the leaving and coming, has given her different needs, different ground, different skin. She has had to make something new in this new place. Kitty's search is successful precisely because her "longing for tribe" is answered in a different "relation." With this Latina woman, who helps with her blood stained dress, Kitty has to let go of shame and singularity. She accepts an act of care that makes her part of not apart from. Clare's search in/through history leads her to figures with which she can only have an ambivalent and arguably masochistic relationship.

Clare's relationship to this history is fractured. She is in search of cohesion, a path that would lead her to a reintegration with the histories of Jamaica, its land, culture, and people. Clare has been in league with the dominant; she had "once witnessed for Babylon" (87) and unlike the historical figure of Nanny, Clare is complicit. She does not always act as one with her own sense of "agency." For example, when Clare hears of the death of Paul and his family, her reaction is "not think of his sperm congregating in her, so that his line might not have ended" but gladness when she "bleeds," enabling her to imagine herself "free of him. Free as a free-martin" (89). With this man, as well as with Bobby later, choice is taken away from her. She has neither the burden nor freedom of choice. In the first case, she waits for her body to tell her and in the latter, she assumes

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<sup>292</sup> Several theorists have been helpful for me to think of Cliff's text as a reworking and reimagining of history and its processes: Belinda Edmonson's "Race, Privilege, and the Politics of (Re)Writing History: An Analysis of the Novels of Michelle Cliff," Ramchandran Sethuraman's 'Evidence-cum-Witness: Subaltern History, Violence, and the (De)formation of Nation in Michelle Cliff's *No Telephone to Heaven* and Caroline Rody's *The Daughter's Return: African-American and Caribbean Women's Fictions of History*. NY: Oxford UP, 2001



she has received “[a]nother reprieve from womanhood” but then questions if it is indeed an answered prayer (160). This ambivalent relationship of the heroine to “family” is a response to the pressure to take a side, to pick between father and mother, to choose between being a warrior and being a woman. Being a woman means being a daughter, wife and mother – and while there are warrior mothers – Clare wants something different.

As a “witness” for Babylon, Clare affirmed the superiority of mother land vs. the island nation of her origin. A complex consequence in her witnessing for Babylon, she becomes the endangered and myth laden albino gorilla/white guerrilla, subject to dissection and “use” by poachers, who will “[m]ake ashtrays of her hands, and a trophy of her head” (91). Yet it is also in this context that she becomes a ghost, roaming the fast narrowing halls of academia, the

longing for tribe surfaces--unmistakable. To create if not to find. She cannot shake it off. She remembers the jungle. The contours of wildness. The skills are deep within her. Buried so long, she fears they may have atrophied. Distant treks emerge but she must also give herself to the struggle. She belongs in these hills. And she knows this choice is irrevocable and she will never be the same... She is white. Black. Female. Lover. Beloved. Daughter. Traveler. Friend. Scholar. Terrorist. Farmer. (91)

Clare has to work through what “tribe” is, learn that tribe is “created,” and not necessarily by blood or other incidents of birth. Affinity is in memory, land, and knowledge almost forgotten. She needs this knowledge to wage war on rhetoric of isolating discourses of race, gender, sexuality, movement, affinity, knowledge, and politics respectively. Clare Savage and her allies/comrades try to attack a hydra-like enemy, a confluence of mythmaking systems, fetishistic colonial and imperial interests that commodify and cannibalize subjugated people’s heroes and history. To attack the film production site is

to participate in a struggle “over the historical and cultural record” (Harlow 7).<sup>293</sup> The battle over the image is an intervention of knowledge making systems. In Barbara Harlow’s *Resistance Literature* she defines resistance novels by their historical demands on the reader and the compulsion of a historical moment to “narrate” its own particularities (79-81). Of course, this assumes the reader will be not be lazy, that they will be vigilant in their reading of texts and contexts. Harlow argues that visual media like photographs may work to

preserve the memories and genealogical existence of a culture and a heritage [they] nonetheless stop short of disclosing the context within which they are implicated... images require their historicizing dimension in order to expose fully the parameters of the resistance struggle. Without that dimension, the symbols themselves are endangered by a fetishizing appropriation of nostalgia and lament seeking to recover a past rather than to prepare a future... (Harlow 83).

Not only do these texts fail to accurately represent “resistance,” but she sees visual texts as too easily commodified and objectified. I respectfully disagree with Harlow’s privileging of written narrative’s ability to expose, realign dominant interests and challenge fetishism, to function as a mode of redress. Written narratives that “display” individual and collective pain can also become subject to fetishistic practices of cooption and coercion by dominant oppressive interests.<sup>294</sup> If disconnected from processes of

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<sup>293</sup> In Barbara Harlow’s *Resistance Literature* she argues that the struggle waged on the page is just as important and vital as armed resistance as an effective mode of redress to the “violent interference of colonial and imperial history” (7). To support her argument, she goes to the work of Fanon and Cabral, specifically their warnings against romantic “return[s] to the source” which mirror dominant practices of fetishizing “local” or “traditional cultures” which “transform” the local and traditional into “museum pieces and archaeological artefacts” (Harlow 19).

<sup>294</sup> Elaine Scarry’s discussion of the “confession” in *The Body in Pain* is particularly useful in this regard. Narratives produced by the apparatus of “torture” are, by definition, expressions of a constructed interiority that do not articulate individual interiority as much as they give voice to concepts of subjectivity in relation to State apparatuses. I argue that with the Western “reader” these “confessions” and the process of reading them, secure the reading subject’s citizenship, which is not in question. The processes of (dis)identification that go along with reading these narratives defer the possibility of their conveying anything but a textual “being looked at-ness.” Scarry claims that in the confession, there is a “dissolution of the boundary between inside and

power, “history” or “homeland,” imaginatively representing the painful experience of literal, cultural and historical displacement at the hands of state, national and/or colonial interests may serve to further compromise the “subject.”

The search for a narrative to “comfort” disappoints. Clare begins her “search” as a child “taken by the magic of the television, and of their ability to conjure images” and the illusion of choice to “change the images as she wished with the changing of the channel” (93). Clare is not without critical ability even as she is seduced by the “image.” After watching *Little Colonel* her father explains that Bill Robinson was a “hero” due to the difficulty of his “task,” tapdancing from Harlem to Broadway. Clare asks about Shirley Temple, the figure who brought “smiles to all of America” during wartime economic hardship and “(n)othing was said about the little girl being as thick as two thieves with a butler. This was another country. This was make-believe” (94). She is just told that “she was Shirley Temple, America’s favorite child--no more, no less.” Just as American filmic representations of black women affect a denial of black female interiority, so too does Clare’s spectatorship deny her own mother, and by extension her own blackness. Black people in the films with America’s sweetheart, when they appear, are relegated to objects of derision, a servile background, portly mammies, or in this case the neutered image of an “aged” dedicated servant in the body of Bill Robinson. Jamaica does not have the same “magic,” the illusion of choice; “all man-made images were channeled into the cinemas, whose programs changed once a week, and over these selections there was no

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outside” which produces what she claims is an “almost obscene conflation of private and public. It brings with it all the solitude of absolute privacy with none of its safety, all of the self-exposure of the utterly public with none of its possibility for camaraderie or shared experience” (Scarry 53). The subject that is tortured into “confession” can not escape that identification as “victim.” With Jamaica as the “stage,” the geography provides a “setting” where definitions coming out of contact, and more often than not violent contact, work and work against each other (Scarry 37). I am thinking specifically of Harry/Harriet’s disclosure of his “history” and his refusal to allow his “confession” to “make” or define him. I will discuss this “history” in more detail later in this chapter.

control” (93). The seductiveness of the “pictures” is in their ability to provide a world beyond the apartment the savages lived in, a “glimpse of the world beyond the island” and to this fantastic space of displaced reality they “came in droves” to watch. There is, however a difference in the way that the spectators “watch,” the

picturegoers carried the images away with them, transforming them, eager always for more. In the streets and in the yards, Brer Anansi, about whom their grandparents taught them, Rhyging, about whom their mothers warned them, Sasabonsam, whose familiar image terrorized them, mixed with their games with Wyatt Earp, Legs Diamond, Tarzan the Apeman, and King Kong. (93)

Images of the heroic familiar to American children are all implicated in racist constructions of nation that, once purveyed to a waiting colonial audience, coexist with culturally specific symbols in quotidian local culture. The process of the audience “transforming” what they see on the screen becomes a way to reshape their reality. This is another form of recontextualization. All stage sets are war zones; they stress the mutability of time, place and narrative; they create history.

In the space of fantasy, figures of the heroic do more than secure reductive categories of identity like “race” and gender or fantasies of untainted cultural icons, nations, blood and people. The very process of identification challenges these categories’ ability to retain their currency. At the end of the novel, the Anglo American production company, with its African American actors, instruct the entire company to “make it real” and in one sense they do. They create a new history, without concern for little details like historical accuracy or inclusion, and this new reality is both generative and degenerative – destroying a history that has not been allowed or accounted for and generating possibilities for alternative histories to be mined and created. Constance Richards reads the attack on the film site as unsuccessful because the rebels “limit their concern with

national culture to the misappropriation of the Maroon/Grandy Nanny myth by Western popular culture” (Richards 27). Richards argues that meaningful resistance is not possible because while nationalism may serve as a site of awakening “it does not rescue these characters from their liminal spaces; for Fanon, nationalism is itself liminal—a necessary phase” (Richards 30). The novel’s success, to Richards, is its ability to “[reveal] not only the ways global capitalism exploits the cultural production and labor of the people in the tourist and film industries, but also the material resources of the land...” and how they are exploited. Nationalistic resistance is then, according to Richards given two outlets; one is “symbolic action against capitalist co-optation of a resistance myth” which is ultimately unsuccessful and the other is a “struggle around the real material conditions of real, living people” (Richards 29). Instead of trying to battle the dichotomous logic undergirding stereotype, Richards suggests that the “land” itself, with its exploited natural resources “prove[s] to be more salient grounds for social mobilization and bring the nationalist forces in Jamaica into Fanon’s fighting phase,” but this second mode, the writer leaves unclear and remains unclear unless we take seriously the role of myth and fiction writing as useful, even revolutionary, in the quotidian.

The persistent intractable discourses of race and gender make flesh a “problem.” The “Magnanimous Warrior!” is female, mother, earth mother, ethereal magical and spiritual Obeah-woman, healer who accesses what is in her surroundings to heal and punish accordingly. At the same time she is dead, dying, forgotten, impoverished and wounded (163-4). When Clare returns home she is feverish and sick with “woman trouble” not unlike her slave ancestors (168). With the hero we have a cognitive mapping of the corporeal, a psychological struggle with limitations of the body. This interplay between psyche and physicality metaphorizes and concretizes struggles of the

community. Without a healthy body, the question of what constitutes health is debatable. But a cracked pot, in this instance, can still cook. Traumas, past and present, must be survived. The scars, reminders of battles won and lost, become reminders, emblems and symbols. Without a healthy soul, the body deteriorates. These female figures give us bodies that, by their very existence, constitute heroic survivorship. These cracked pots cook. Throughout Caribbean and Afro American literature we see representations of the “practitioner” of healing arts as possessor of knowledge of the natural world who heals, but also as wounded healer. The body, literally marked by sustained and brutal trauma, speaks to her ability to absorb the both physical and mental trauma of others. Obeah practitioners preserve both regional and historical knowledges originating in African diasporic identity and spirituality; they are repositories for knowledge which, albeit carried through the diasporic routes created by the conduits of colonial capitalism, are particularized by the local environments, local communities that they support. These figures militate against the destruction of collective consciousness. Their wounds make them at once sympathetic and formidable –their scars are proof of having lived. Nanny is the prototype,<sup>295</sup> and her successors are, Mattie, to a lesser degree Kitty, and to a different degree Clare.

The text is explicit in its intervening processes of making history. When Clare is interviewed for the job of “guerilla” by another woman, she is asked if she considers herself a fighter and she responds that she is part of a new history. Further, she locates herself “in it,” specifically a history of resistance, where new guerilla strategies can

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<sup>295</sup> According to Loretta Collins, Cliff’s use of “Nanny” as a “prototypical mother” is consistent with other Caribbean writers like Jean Rhys and Elizabeth Nunez-Harrell who use the figure as a “powerful model for resistance against” colonial oppression (Collins 160). Nanny uses divination and Obeah practice and transmits this knowledge to younger generations of women (Collins 160).

inform and be read along with the “ambush tactic of Cudjoe... cruelty... resistance... grace” and these are strategies, that have to be reaffirmed (194). Even as Clare is not able to make the same direct claims due to her having been “outside,” she does know “that the loss, the forgetting... of resistance... of tenderness... is a terrible thing” (196). It is through Harry/Harriet (hereafter H/H) that Clare regains connection to Jamaica, that she remembers, learns history, resistance, how to re-collect self in history.

**Harry/Harriet “[The] *only one, afterall, one that nature did not claim*” (21)**

Throughout the text, Harry/Harriet functions as a model of the heroic for Clare.<sup>296</sup> H/H educates Clare, gives her alternative texts; Césaire takes the place of Plato. H/H advises her to read CLR James’ *Black Jacobins* and keeps her abreast of contemporary political scene in Jamaica. Through H/H’s letters, Clare acquires history, a new lexicon, one that allows her negotiate a relationship to self and nation that is not wholly predicated on the supposed givens of race and gender.

With H/H we have a reimagining of wounding and what it means to be a wounded warrior and healer. H/H embodies the symbolic castration of colonised subject, the literal and figurative rape of “native” and black women, and the metaphoric rape of land and resources by colonial forces, but s/he refuses let that incident become her/his “history,” become the defining event of his life or identity (128). This “fairy guerilla” insists that it

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<sup>296</sup> In the interview with Adisa, Cliff claims that with H/H she “wanted to portray a character who would be the most despised character in Jamaica, and show how heroic he is. The homophobia in Jamaica has always appalled me; I have often wondered what the source is. Why it is such a homophobic place? Does it go back to slavery? Is it something that has its roots in slavery? Were the slaves used in that way? Anyway, he really loves his people. He is there helping yet if they knew what he really as, they would kill him. I also wanted him to have endured what a woman in the culture endures, especially a woman like his mother, who has been a maid. When he talks about his rape, and then his mother’s rape... he is the most complete character in the book” (Adisa 276). The collapse of rape, victimage, with the heroic feminine, is problematic but this figure does reinforce the idea that a choice has to be made and that that choice has to use what is available to the subject.

was not the penetration of his body as a child that made him one thing or another, just as the violation of his mother did not make her (130). H/H refuses to think of this rape as “symbol,” refuses to follow the west’s logic of rape as the ontological site of origin of the black experience and allow the west to make him complicit by using his body as part of the metaphor of enterprise. S/he works against fetishization of rape, its reduction of the subject to the wound and subsequent privileging of what penetrates that wound. This is a direct challenge to the colonizer’s attempt to repeatedly “maim” the black male body with each retelling of conquest. H/H refuses to “serve” the purposes of the west. S/he does not allow that “gesture” of power to define him/her or his/her sexuality.

H/H makes entering into battle or warriorhood less a matter of choice and more of a necessity, stating “we are neither one thing or the other” and further that “the time will come for both of us to choose. For we will have to make the choice. Cast our lot. Cyaan live split. Not in this world” (131). H/H is forced to make cast her/his lot in terms of his/her own performance of gender because “this world’s,” the world of post colonial Jamaica, homophobia is proportionate to its anxiety about masculinity. It is not safe for any body that violates the givens of heteropatriarchal order. The reprisals for those that challenge this order are swift and often deadly. Even those that H/H works to “save” can not deal with his/her “strangeness,” and as a result, camouflage becomes a shield against external narratives of emasculated black colonial subjects and internal condemnations by the community on what is constructed as “the enemy within”: “They wore the jackets in a strict rotation, with only the medical officer, formerly a nurse at Kingston Hospital, owning one to herself. Her name was Harriet; in the jacket she became Thorpe” (6-7). The colonial paradigm places emphasis on “masculinity,” thus emphasizing its fragility. Masculinity is in constant danger of being undermined. It has to constantly be proven.



H/H is tolerated only because he is a foil that the dominant can “[measure] their normalness against his strangeness. He is *only* one, afterall, one that nature did not claim” (21). By keeping H/H strange and “split,” the upper class boys who compare penis size in the pool and pass around a gun between them do not have to think about the underlying homoeroticism of these acts. They can merely point to H/H as a reminder of their “wholeness,” and comfort themselves with his eventual annihilation: “he will end up in some back-o’-wall alley in Raetown fucked to death. Him cyaan help himself mother nuh maid?” (21). Paul H’s fantasy of obliterating H/H is based on a rationale that is culturally and class specific. H/H’s status as “servant” his synonymous with that of sexual deviant and supplicant. H/H has to choose a gender because he would not live otherwise. Clare has to “choose” a side because she can not live otherwise.

H/H is not merely a walking signifier of a blurring of gender, he embodies the possibility found in the healers in Bambara’s *The Salt Eaters*. S/he combines Western and local knowledge. H/H, unlike any other figure in the text, is able to integrate the knowledge of the past, that of Kitty and Mattie with knowledge and practices learned “[a]t the university and with old women in the country, women who knew the properties of roots and how to apply spells effectively” (171). H/H becomes part of a genealogy of feminine warrior figures who hand down strategies and knowledge to the next generation to ensure their survival.

This emphasis on disruption of heteropatrilineal history and inheritances is found within the diegesis of the novel and the intertextual relationships therein. Cliff’s texts articulate, through their intertextuality with a pantheon of revolutionary thinkers, connection across diaspora and temporal geographies. Her novel, *Abeng*, makes such a connection to the work of Toni Cade Bambara with the inclusion of the fable of the salt

eaters:

Before the slaves came to Jamaica, the old women and men believed, before they had to eat salt during their sweated labor in the canefields, Africans could fly. They were the only people on this earth to whom God had given this power. Those who refused to become slaves and did not eat salt flew back to Africa; those who did these things, who were slaves and ate salt to replenish their sweat, had lost the power, because the salt made them heavy, weighted down. The salt sprinkled in the casket would keep the duppy in the ground, so he could not fly out, bring heat to the homes of the living, seizures to their children—he could not make their heads swell like a green coconut (*Abeng* 64).

The uses of “salt” metaphorize the ambivalent use of “tools” for the colonized subject.

The choice to consume the salt has to be read in the context of the desire and will to survive, not necessarily as merely forfeiting the ability to fly. To secure the body to the ground is not wholly negative. A loose spirit can wreak havoc on the world of the living. Securing the spiritual body to the ground, in this context is a desired effect. The loss of flight is the consequence. The choice to live has consequences; the choice to “live” under duress has consequences; the choice to fight that which causes duress has consequences. The “sickness” that Clare inherits from Bobby literally enters her with salt sea water.

While reading Bambara’s *The Salt Eaters*, Cliff encountered the historical figure of Mary Ellen Pleasant (Mammy Pleasant) who would become one of the central figures in her *Free Enterprise*, a novel that continues Cliff’s reworking of history and disruption of reductive gender and race categories. Cliff sustains her focus on the work of “history” and its intersection with memory and myth by taking up the enigmatic Mary Ellen (Mammy) Pleasant who once uttered that she “would rather be a corpse than a coward”<sup>297</sup> and pairs her with Regina/Annie Christmas, an equally problematic figure, the stuff of

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<sup>297</sup> Mary Ellen Pleasant, *San Francisco Call* (1901)

folklore.<sup>298</sup> What Cliff does is work with and through a complex genealogy of women fighters who are grounded just as much on “fable” and fiction as they are in reality. At the end of *Free Enterprise*, the historical past blends with the present and the concluding image is of a classroom in which young girls memorizing and giving “voice” to a woman warrior’s tale, thus becoming part of an ongoing community of story tellers, preservers of history and rebels.

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<sup>298</sup> Regina is given the name “Annie Christmas” from M. Pleasant. The name originally comes from American folklore in which she is represented either as a 7 foot tall Irish woman with a moustache as wide as the Mississippi who can and does battle men and kills a putative suitor or a 7 foot tall black as coal woman with a necklace of thumbs around her neck from the men she has killed. In either case, “Annie Christmas” is a figure who violates the “laws” of gender while codifying them at the same time.

## Chapter 5

### '[W]here the rooster lays an egg': Transgendered Heroism in Patricia Powell's *The Pagoda*

Jamaica is 'the land where the rooster lays an egg.'<sup>299</sup>

Zora Neale Hurston, from *Tell My Horse*

The coolies' story has been called 'la historia de la gente sin historia'

Juan Pérez de la Riva qtd. Yun and Laremont

There isn't a record of any of this. Of what I am in truth. No certificates. No registration. Everything had to be quick and hush-hush. Nothing was written down.

Patricia Powell, *The Pagoda*

The study of any warrior tradition leads to problems of historical imagination and the figures through which we imagine "history."<sup>300</sup> Patricia Powell's novel, *The Pagoda*, opens up in the year 1893, a time of European colonial authorities' deterritorializing of land and labor, when colonial masters and administrators, desirous of stabilizing sugar production and labor costs, had been importing indentured Chinese labor to the Caribbean for nearly a

<sup>299</sup> In her 1938 *Tell My Horse*, Zora Neale Hurston explores the cultural and religious practices of Haiti and Jamaica and describes Jamaica as a place where "subjects" have the "will to make life [and all that it entails] beautiful" not unlike her claim that what makes African American culture unique is the "will to adorn" (Hurston "Characteristics of Negro Expression"). The question of Hurston's role as racial insider/Western anthropologist with these cultures have been critiqued by Carby, Knwankwo, Duck just to name a few, but I am not interested in those moments where the "American"/imperialist gaze emerges, but where her text works against that gaze. For example, during this trip Hurston wrote *Their Eyes Were Watching God* in which she makes the oft quoted claim that the "black woman is de mule of the world," but in the chapter "Hunting the Wild Hog," she relays an anecdote about visiting the Maroons' Accompong and beginning her travel on a potbellied wall eyed mule that nearly kills her. Hurston speculates whether the mule's hostility can be traced to her clothing, then comments that she would "hate to think it was [her] face..." She laments that "[she - Hurston] was the one who felt we might be sisters under the skin [but the mule] corrected all of that about a half mile down the trail and so [Hurston] had to climb that mountain into Accompong on [her] own two legs" (293). This moment that works against totalizing essentialist constructions of blackness and refuses to elide cultural/ethnic differences between diasporic subjects. One group's experience under oppression cannot be reductively compared to another's and phenotypic similarity cannot provide a grammar to construct a language or counter narrative to dominant historical forms of oppression.

<sup>300</sup> For Thomas Carlyle history is the story of "great men" and in *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History*, the hero is the embodiment of masculinity; he is looked up, admired, emulated and awed: "Worship of a Hero is transcendent admiration of a Great Man. I say great men are still admirable; I say there is, at bottom, nothing else admirable! No nobler feeling than this of admiration for one higher than himself dwells in the breast of men (Carlyle 11). Masculinity, and whiteness is, by extension, idealized.

hundred years (Hu-Dehart 431).<sup>301</sup> The central protagonist of Powell's novel, Mr. Lowe, is a Chinese woman who has lived as a man for over forty years in Jamaica. Born to a lower class family in China and named Lau A-yin,<sup>302</sup> she was dressed as a boy as a child by her father and treated as a "son," but was denied full patronymic inheritance. When Lau A-yin reaches puberty, she is betrayed – first by her body and second by her father who sells her off to satisfy a debt to an old man who has gone through many young wives. In order to escape "marriage" and the heteropatriarchal system that would have her disappear into bondage, she assumes the guise of a male, cuts her hair into the imperial queue,<sup>303</sup> and stows away on a ship heading to the Caribbean convinced she will participate in adventures like those her father told her as a "boy." During her voyage, she is found by the captain of the ship, Cecil, beaten unconscious, taken to his cabin, tied to a bed and repeatedly raped. Just before the ship arrives to Jamaica, Cecil dresses Lau A-yin as a male, and forces her to become "Mr.

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<sup>301</sup> The Haitian revolution took place between 1791-1805 and European countries, with understandable anxiety around protecting economic and ideological interests, imposed trade embargos on Haitian sugar - the first of many punitive measures against the colony. The exportation of Chinese labor to the West Indies began in Trinidad in 1806 (a failed experiment of the British Government/East India Trading Company to secure a nodal point along the empire's trading routes. All of the 192 Chinese laborers returned home). The anti-slave trading treaty between Spain and England of 1817, initially intended to curb slavery, had little effect on Atlantic slave trade. Instead, prices escalated for black African slave labor and major colonial powers, like Britain, merely shifted their gaze east for labor resources. After freeing its slaves in the late 1830s, Jamaica's plantocratic interests found black labor too expensive, and Chinese labor was cheaper and easier to get. Chinese laborers who voluntarily left, were "stolen"/sold into labor and/or those who emigrated due to economic conditions in China, were bound to exploitive contracts that were often tantamount to slavery (Look Lai "Images" 57, Yun and Laremont 113-4).

<sup>302</sup> In Hakka dialect the verb "lau" means "to give" and unlike a similar term "bun," the verb "lau" denotes an act of giving in which the transmission of object to receiver is not or does not have to be successfully concluded or fulfilled (Lai 90). According to linguist Huei-ling Lai, "lau" is a "chameleon morpheme" that "picks up its grammatical and semantic functions from those of the components of the construction" (Lai 87). "Ayin" stands for a female or feminized third person/party; therefore "lau Ayin" "signifies a beneficiary participant" in a given event frame but in the context of a sentence, suggests an unsuccessful or ambiguous transfer of an object between agents. Thus our central protagonist's name connotes mutability, transmission, but without certainty of transfer.

<sup>303</sup> By the early 17<sup>th</sup> Century, the queue was a signifier of submission to Manchu rule and was imposed on the Han Chinese who refused to cut their hair as a gesture of filial piety. With the Manchu takeover of the empire, the queue became an instrument of discipline; any man who refused to cut their hair into or cut the queue off committed an act tantamount to treason. For this reason, when an ordinance was passed in San Francisco in 1873 dictating that all Chinese men had to cut off the queue, those men found it neigh impossible to return to China.

Lowe.” Cecil rationalizes this forced drag as a necessity due to laws prohibiting Chinese female immigration to the West Indies.<sup>304</sup> Lowe soon discovers that s/he has been impregnated and subsequently gives birth to a girl that looks more like Cecil than herself. In order to secure Lowe’s identity, his masculinity, Cecil engineers a “marriage” to Miss Sylvie, an octoroon he blackmails after she kills her white husband who threatened her life after discovering her “blackness” and their children who had been given away because they were unable to pass for white. The “household,” for most of the novel, is comprised of Lowe, Miss Sylvie, Dulcie (Dulcemeena), Miss Sylvie’s black maid and former dissident who had been nearly beat to death after protesting unfair labor practices and her son Omar, who is an overseer of sorts. After Cecil is murdered by Omar, the entire household, but Lowe most dramatically, find themselves renegotiating relationships between each other and the community at large that had initially been established to confine all to colonial discourses of race, heteropatriarchy and history.

With Lowe and his “transgendered self” we have a figure that holds a particular place in the colonial and post colonial imagination that I align with what Hortense Spillers would identify as a “pornotrope,” a hypersexualized figure “discovered,” most often with anthropological lenses bared and trained on the indigenous/other, in an effort to confirm its deviance and pathology.<sup>305</sup> The non-white, non-Western transgendered body has functioned

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<sup>304</sup> One example of legislation that specifically targeted Chinese women was the *Immigration Act* passed in 1924 forbidding “Chinese women, wives, and prostitutes” from entry. In this act, any American man or woman who married a Chinese person would lose their citizenship. Twenty eight years passed before this was fully repealed to allow Chinese women to immigrate (Hong Kingston 152-9). Several European powers established similar legislation to curb vice and the potential of a “yellow flood” of people, disease and disruption to the dichotomy of black and white undergirding British colonial discourse.

<sup>305</sup> In *Subjects of Desire*, Judith Butler concludes that processes of colonizing reproductive technology, pathologizing and medicalizing women’s bodies and homosexuality have all been part of larger structural deployments of dominance (330). The plethora of “between sex” scholarship is formidable. Harriet Whitehead’s “The Bow and the Burden Strap: A New Look at Institutionalized Homosexuality in Native North America” attempts to unpack ethnocentric Western scholarship that tries to map its internal differences onto Others and “Hijras as Neither

for gay, lesbian and an entire transgeneration as evidence of the complexity of human sexuality, a way to “naturalize” Western articulations of sexualities deemed “unnatural” and legitimate political movements. This figure has also historically been the ultimate “other,” racially, ethnically and sexually marginalized. In Lowe’s survival and transformation, there is a renegotiation of gender and embrace of a type of heroism based on the complexity of sexuality and not on binary categories of masculinity and femininity. Lowe’s in-betweenness and the community’s tolerance, I argue, may only be possible in the novel’s historical moment when colonial relationships are being reimagined. Additionally, this tolerance may also be attributed to Lowe being Chinese and not “black.” Between the historical moment and the body in question, we see “process,” a disruption of colonial heteropatriarchy and history.<sup>306</sup>

When we are introduced to the central protagonist, Lau A-yin has been “Mr. Lowe” for over forty years and Lowe is in the process of trying to write his estranged daughter.<sup>307</sup> Similar to Michelle Cliff’s *Abeng* and *No Telephone to Heaven*, *The Pagoda* depicts “crisis,” specifically the crisis of gender in the colonial moment and how that colonial heteropatriarchy informs “history” and community.<sup>308</sup> With Powell’s central protagonist, we

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Man nor Woman” appearing in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader* are just two examples of this look to the “other” which, despite good intentions, may fall into the trap of locating racial others as emblematic of sexual diversity, but threatens to fall into conventional fetishistic representations consistent with dominant discourses of race.

<sup>306</sup> I read Powell’s representation of gender complexity in diaspora in the tradition of Michelle Cliff, whom Powell claims as a literary progenitor. We can thus read her “Lowe” in the tradition of Cliff’s characters: Harry/Harriet from *No Telephone to Heaven* and Annie Christmas of *Free Enterprise*. Additional connections to Cliff can be mapped in Powell’s incorporation of conventional “historical narrative” into her fictional narratives, the juxtaposition of which renders a more complex Jamaican history (Smith 326).

<sup>307</sup> For the bulk of the novel, the central protagonist is referred to and refers to himself with the masculine pronoun and it is not until the end of the novel that there is a complete disruption of pronoun signification. For this reason, I will be using the masculine pronoun except in those moments where it would be inappropriate to do so or where both signifiers are essential to my analysis.

<sup>308</sup> The following texts were helpful in thinking through Lowe/Lau A-yin as a subject of and in the Chinese Diaspora: Lisa Yun and Ricardo René Laremont’s “Chinese Coolies and African Slaves in Cuba (1847-74)” detailing economic/labor interests and practices resulting from the shift from

have a subject who falls in and out of history at the same time. This is a subject who is unaccounted for, undocumented, one who is and is not part of the local and larger communities, local and larger histories.

As part of the population of “imported” Chinese labor, Lowe occupies an “in between” position between former black/brown labor and former colonial administrators and the plantocracy. While there are and have been somewhat beneficial aspects to occupying this tertiary position, as many Chinese immigrants, voluntary and otherwise, were seduced by the possibility of more stable national economies away from China, the novel clearly shows both the growing economic advantages for groups outside the dichotomy of black and white in the Caribbean and the difficulty of being perpetually “outside.” Their history is one of absences, aporias and mourning. Participation in colonial capitalism is inherently ideological; the acquisition of goods is an acquisition of ideology, but the way that these groups participate in “acquiring” may indicate a transgression or unsettling of the dominant discourse of capital accumulation. At the same time, engagement with any form of economic resistance does not necessarily mean a disruption of racist thinking or ideology. Interrupting capital does not go hand in hand with disrupting the logic of race. To assume a relationship relative to the white colonial patriarch is also to assume a relationship to an abject black body that functions as both fetish and scapegoat. Chinese laborers and small venture capitalists were and are often in contention with former slaves, their descendants, and other “in-between” and

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Black slave labor to Chinese “indentured”/slave labor, Lawrence Ma’s *The Chinese Diaspora: Space, Place, Mobility, and Identity* (2003) which notes varying “degrees of intensity and directionality” of the networks operating in the Chinese diaspora (Lawrence qtd Sun 70), Brent Edwards’ *The Practices of Diaspora* where he argues that we need to think of diaspora “as a frame of cultural identity determined not through ‘return’ but through difference” (Edwards 12), Stuart Hall’s “Cultural Identity and Diaspora, Rey Chow’s *Writing Diaspora: Tactics of Intervention in Contemporary Cultural Studies*, Lisa Lowe’s “Heterogeneity, Hybridity, Multiplicity: Marking Asian-American Differences,” and Aihwa Ong’s *Flexible Citizenship: the Cultural Logics of Transnationality*.



“colored” folk, thus preventing a huge wellspring of alliances across racial lines.<sup>309</sup>

For many members of the “local,” the “Chinee” were money driven mimics of colonial power holders, adopting the dominant’s values, biases and prejudices. In the novel’s central protagonist, we see a figure whose relationships with other characters metaphorize larger social interactions. For example, Lowe’s relationship to his “wife,” Miss Sylvie, illustrates how shifting economic and political interests compel the immigrant to emulate the dominant and the inevitable obstacles to successful mimicry. Lowe envies Miss Sylvie’s virtuosity with power; he admires “how commands steamed effortlessly from Miss Sylvie’s velvet lips,” but Lowe is also aware that this “authority” was only possible with “near-alabaster porcelain skin...,” and that “with him it was a different story. He was the outsider. The foreigner. The newcomer. He had the burned-down shop there to show, to remind him of his place there on the island” (33). Miss Sylvie, unlike Lowe who is often “bereft of speech,” is a master of the language of command. To identify with Miss Sylvie is to identify with power and whiteness. Miss Sylvie has the “currency” of whiteness, and yet she is “unnatural” by her relationship to that power. Her “power” is an extension of white male heteropatriarchal/colonial authority, but is cordoned off and/or complicated by her failure to function as proper “female.” She does not fully or seamlessly perform her appropriate gender role as “white woman.” She is a woman who drinks beer from the bottle, not the glass, is unapologetically engaged in a “lesbian” affair and is incapable of producing proper “white” babies. For Lowe to identify with Miss Sylvie is self-annihilating. Miss Sylvie is a kind of death; she has a “sweet sickening smell” that reminds Lowe of “funerals” (5). Like Cecil,

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<sup>309</sup> The Chinese in Jamaica have historically represented less than one percent of the population, and always existed on the “periphery of economic life and colonial consciousness for most of the early period...” but have, over the last fifty years according to Walton Look Lai, “been evolving still further into higher and more complex levels of economic and social influence” and some of their new found privilege has enabled them to function as petite bourgeoisie (Look Lai “Images” 56). This essay and his larger work, *Indentured Labor, Caribbean Sugar*, were helpful to me in my thinking through the dynamics of relationships between groups in the Caribbean, specifically in Jamaica.

Miss Sylvie consumes, takes from and uses Lowe. Lovemaking for Miss Sylvie and Cecil is masturbatory. Lowe is “desired” but only in the ways s/he fulfills the needs of the other. In both relationships Lowe is passive and invariably takes on Miss Sylvie’s aspect of “death.”

At the same time, Miss Sylvie’s body, specifically its ability to “pass” and her murder of her husband, disrupts the dominant orders of race and gender. She is white phenotypically, but not in terms of discourses of blood. She is an instrument Cecil uses to bind Lowe to the heteronormative, but she refuses to be injured victim and/or mother Lowe imagines her to be. When Lowe finds one of Sylvie’s dark sons and arranges a reunion, the meeting is a failure, and the son is rendered equal parts cruel and ridiculous. Lowe can not imagine Sylvie not wanting a relationship with her own children because of his own fraught relationship with his daughter Elizabeth. The son’s resentments, the disruption of “family,” and the inability of Miss Sylvie to protect anything but her self and “whiteness” precludes any possibility of mother and son connecting. For Sylvie, the masks of whiteness and motherhood do not “fit,” just as Lowe’s mask of masculinity does not fit or give him power. Miss Sylvie can not be the caring motherly figure that Lowe would project on her, at least not with her own children who phenotypically look “black,” just as Lowe could not be “motherly” to the child who looked like his white rapist.

Cecil’s death affords Lowe the liberty to “dream” of other possibilities, and the “first dream” he has is consistent with concepts of patriarchal inheritances. He wants to establish a Chinese cultural center for his daughter, but more specifically his grandson to inherit. This “Pagoda,” named after one of his father’s short stories that was never completed, can not be realized without financial support from Sylvie. Lowe knows that he will have to convince or Miss Sylvie to help him, but his plan to aggressively “seduce” his “wife,” to overpower her sexually as he had been by both Miss Sylvie and Cecil, goes awry and he is rendered a putative suitor in his own house. Upon Lowe’s return home, he finds Miss Sylvie with her

white female lover, Whitley (81). Lowe is summarily cuckolded, made literally and figuratively devoid of the phallus.

As part of a group of people brought by colonial powers to “keep the Negro population in check,” Lowe experiences some measure of power through Cecil as shopkeeper and as such is integrated into the community and occupies a position of symbolic power (45). As a member of the community, Lowe “knew every child by name. He knew who was carrying belly for who. He knew who had money in the bank and who was working obeah for who... Yes, he’d come to catch his hand, to make something of his life. But he was no poor-show-great. He didn’t see himself better than them. Above them” (13). The contagiousness of colonial racism makes it difficult to imagine a Chinese man who did not see himself “better than them,” and Lowe does preserve his difference from “them” in his violent response to his daughter’s marriage to a black man, a response that can be attributed in part to his son-in-law’s blackness, but may have to do more with the son-in-law’s resemblance to Cecil that transcends the color of his skin. Further complicating his relationship to community, are all the histories he does not know but is related to. He knew “who carried belly for who” but did not know the histories of the two women living in closest proximity to him: his wife and Dulcie. The intimacy of the domestic space does not produce “intimacy,” and his connection to “home” and the black community is mediated by colonialism. Even though Lowe thinks of Jamaica as “home” he had “always known he was there on sufferance. They told him to his face” (11). To be “on sufferance” is to be tolerated by virtue of tacit assent but without express permission; it is passive acquiescence to a condition. He is misread by the community as an exploiter, yet not “thief” enough to satisfy the dominant’s definition of manhood – Cecil criticizes Lowe for not cheating his customers more. Lowe, in turn, misreads the community, believing that blacks burned down the shop, the same blacks who question his manhood and “heterosexuality,” that speculate about the “nasty life” he, Cecil,

and Sylvie live “up there” and their potential “ungodliness” (15). Jamaica is a hostile home but return to China with its debilitating constructions of Manchurian heteropatriarchy and gender is untenable.

The complexity of Lowe’s relationship history is metaphorized in his relationship to the women in “home” and their relationships to dominant constructions of history. Lowe experiments with “identity”; he uses Miss Sylvie’s “colors,” painting pictures and his own body with her “second skins” of clothing and makeup, but ultimately he fails or refuses to perform “power” the same way she does. When the maid, Dulcie, leaves, Lowe takes up residence in her room and begins performing her chores. Once in this role, there is no communication between him and Miss Sylvie, only the unidirectional flow of Miss Sylvie’s desires, reprimands and disapproval meeting the “silence” of Lowe’s labor. This incarnation of their domestic relationship mirrors larger colonial dramas being played out on national and global stages. Lowe’s understanding of Dulcie is gleaned from discovered newspaper clippings and rumor. Dulcie fascinates because she, like Lowe, does not “look like” what she has been in the past. Dulcie had been instrumental in a strike against post-colonial labor practices and was brutally punished and disfigured by colonial authorities. In this vein, Dulcemeena can be read in the tradition of Jamaican heroic folk figures like Nanny and Cudjoe and placed in the literary genealogy of figures like Michelle Cliff’s characters, Clare Savage of *No Telephone to Heaven*, Annie Christmas and Mary Ellen Pleasant of *Free Enterprise*. Dulcie is a revolutionary from outside, not outside the West Indies, but definitely outside of Jamaica. As a Trinidadian, she has a particular history with the histories of labor resistance and slavery that is unlike that of the Jamaican black proletariat she chooses to work with.<sup>310</sup> Whether or not her outsider status made it easier for her to be betrayed is less

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<sup>310</sup> Trinidad was the first colony, due to agrarian developments, to dismantle slavery and institute a neocolonial system that was very much deemed and “experiment.” This was a colony where

important than the way this narrative mirrors familiar historical narratives of betrayals of Nanny of Jamaica, Mary Ellen Pleasant of San Francisco and countless others real and imagined (127). It is this betrayed warrior Lowe identifies with. Through her he questions master narratives, specifically dominant constructions of history.

Was this her history here tied up in the carton box with ribbons, was this how things got set down, by people misreading and misinterpreting? All that was left now were the villagers' speculations. Was that to be the history now, the stories they would tell their children and their children's children about Dulcie? Was that how they made history? He would have no history for his daughter; he had told her nothing, taught her nothing. What would linger then on villagers' lips but the story of the Chinese man and his burning shop? There'd be nothing there of his river town, and nothing there of the ship journey, and nothing of the conditions on the plantations. Nothing! She had been silenced by her experiences, Dulcie, the protesters had been murdered in cold blood. (213)

Here Lowe questions how history is constructed, what artifacts are used to document a life, and the possibility of always being “misread” and read with “interest.” We also have the dominant's and the community's readings of events cobbled together to create a history, a “truth.” Most important is how the fragmented history of Dulcemeena collapses with Lowe's in his mind. There is a shift from the feminine pronoun to a collective or at the very least sharable, definitive, one. “Her” history becomes “the” history. The “pieces” Lowe finds in a box are synonymous with the pieces or snatches of collective memory handed down and the aporias – what gets left out – specifically the history of British colonialism's facilitation of the Chinese diaspora, how that history was recorded, read and/or misread. At the close of the passage, we have a syntactic conflation of Lowe and Dulcie's experiences that does not get rescued by the deployment of a gendered pronoun. Dulce's history amounts to forgotten clippings entombed in a box with ribbon and murmurs from generation to generation. Lowe's history has no “clippings,” no documentation; he will be a murmured memory of a failed

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African slave labor was only in place for fifty years and subjectivity based on indentured labor took precedence (Khan 169 and Matthews 292).

Chinese commercial venture. Unlike Dulcie, whose history indicates a potential for resistance, he will be misremembered and lost along with the histories of other Chinese Caribbean immigrants. The silenced “she” at the end of this passage made mute by her experiences syntactically points to “Dulcie” as the subject, but the “she” that begins the sentence could easily have referred to Lowe. The burning ship of Lowe’s “individual” memory collapses with the burning shop of the collective communal memory. The grammars of these separate histories coexist in Lowe. He becomes an articulation of the experiences of African and Chinese diasporic subjects. The owner of the shop was the owner of the ship, and neither repository can contain all it signifies. Dulcie is a warrior who steps out of line and sabotages “shops,” sites of production and sale and for her efforts she is betrayed and punished with disfigurement. Lau A-yin steps out of line and into male drag to escape a prison of traditional Chinese female gender roles and is “disfigured” the moment she is “made” into Lowe.

Lowe embodies more than one “trans” identity. He straddles cultural, racial and gender constructs and is outside colonial dichotomous discourses of white/black, master/slave, male/female relations. As a figure of “transculturation,” he embodies complex processes of cultural, literary, linguistic and personal adjustments that, according to Sylvia Spitta, “allow for new, vital, and viable configurations to arise out of the clash of cultures and the violence of colonial and neocolonial appropriations” (Spitta 2). In the context of this novel, the new culture is a set of relations produced by the violence of the colonial space. These are generative movements across, between and in cultures represented by microcosms of “family” and “community.” Yet Lowe’s new culture is always deferred, inevitably due to its always being “in the making.”<sup>311</sup>

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<sup>311</sup> Sylvia Spitta uses the term “transculturation” instead of “acculturation,” a term coined and elaborated on by Fernando Ortiz in *Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar*, due to what she

These processes of making and remaking are critiqued in the novel's depiction of the transgendered transcultural subject's relationship to language and history. Language, for these subjects, is unreliable. It cannot provide common ground for affinity. The narrator describes monthly meetings of Chinese male immigrants Lowe attends but Lowe no longer has the ability to speak the Hakka dialect that had been his language, and the variety of dialects present in the room make communication difficult.<sup>312</sup> He is unable to rely on traditional communication and he does not have to because "[b]y the end of of the evening, [he] could recite all the stories by heart, not because he understood all of what they had said—for the dialects were lost on him now—but because he'd been hearing the same atrocities over and over, all those years he'd been coming" (44). These men mourn collectively; they lament their positions as outsiders, of being disciplined by institutional violence. Their narratives are repeated *ad infinitum*; their stories take on, not so much linguistic comprehensibility but tonal, rhythmic and kinetic communicability. Lowe's understanding of these narratives is based on their delivery, iteration, and systematicity. He recognizes his common ground with these Chinese men, but also feels affinity with Black Jamaicans, which is signified by his acknowledgement that the outward appearance of his domestic relations "bore stark resemblance to a history and a way of life he did not live

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suggests are connotations of cultural "acquisition" as a unidirectional process and the possibility of "deculturation" and "neoculturation" that transculturation implies. Spitta describes the transcultural subject and culture as "always deferred, inevitably due to its always being in the making" and states that comparative structures of the filial and gender have to be redefined through dynamics of cultural contact. In other words, the subjects produced by and in this space are always "changing" because they are produced by mechanisms and discourses that are always changing, redefining and reinterpreting their own processes. Spitta's definition presumes that cultures, identities and definitions of subjectivity are processual, that they create and are created anew, and in terms of the literary, they create hybrid writers, listeners and texts (Spitta 42). According to Spitta, novels of transculturation have multiple cosmologies, systems of logic and in the narration are resistant to positing a unifying consciousness with characters (Spitta 68).

<sup>312</sup> The relationship Miss Sylvie and Lowe have to language complicates Fanon's assertion that the man who has a language is in possession of the world that is implied by and through that language (get proper citation). Miss Sylvie has power because she has mastered a particular form of language. Lowe is disempowered because of his supposed "lack" of language.

through but had heard as a story unfolding so many times at the shop he felt close to it...”  
(108). Their histories are his.

This (post)colonial space is characterized by masculine violence and production of narrative. He identifies with the the stories they share, but also knows there are limits. These are narratives told in language brimming with violence and the threat of it, and among these Chinese men Lowe has to be a “reader” of another kind of language, the language of gendered/gender violence:

Their voices grew loud and aggressive and rose up above the click of chopsticks and the snuffling of food from bowls. They became obsessed with their games and concentrated on their dice with attentive eyes. Their conversations grew heated, they drank heavily, they sweated, they groped at each other’s groins and at their own, they exchanged soft laughs and knowing glances, they rained insults on one another in seven different dialects and in the next breath recited impotent love verses. They played Chinese instruments and sang pieces of opera in untrained and tuneless voices, and though Lowe danced among them, drunk with the fervor of their concealed anguish, *he knew he was not of them*, that his life had taken a stranger path than theirs...  
(46 *my emphasis*)

In the absence of rights and access to normative structures of power, these men, moved and moving through conduits of colonial capital, form another nation within a nation, but their internal differences require connection forged in their experience as *diasporic Chinese*, not as Hakka or just Chinese. These men, bereft of childhood dreams of adventure and thwarted in adult dreams of economic stability and upward mobility, “share” a sensibility whose tempo has been established by the colonizer. In this space, they express, with and to each other linguistic and physical violence or at least the threat of it, a polymorphous sexuality that defies the cultural logic of both their homeland’s and host nation’s dominant constructions of gender, or at least there is a threat of it. In this passage the body constitutes ambiguous territory. Lowe is at once a part of and apart from the other “men,” and *all* have a tenuous grasp on masculine subjectivity in this context. Lowe’s anxiety and tentative relationship to masculinity and heteronormative structures are coeval with biological males’ attenuated



access to power and its symbols. He has to be cautious; he has to be able to “detect the precise moment at which innocent conversations verged on violence, when a demure innuendo could leap out of hand, when boundaries were crossed, and at that point he knew to remove himself as neatly as possible from the situation” (118). To define masculinity, the effort to concretize the way the “masculine” can exist, creates a minefield of both literal and symbolic violence that *all* members of a community have to negotiate.

In this space without Chinese women, other possibilities emerge. Men’s performance of heteropatriarchal privilege is predicated on the existence of “women” who are not present.<sup>313</sup> Masculinity is unmoored, unhinged from “woman,” and as a result these men search for a new language, one not commensurate with that of their “homeland.” Lowe finds himself asking “what was the use of his dialect there, and the stories of his family, and the songs of his people, when there was no war to fight, no family to inculcate with values, no power to preserve, it had been just the two of them, the two of them alone there among the Negro villagers” (52). The specificity of ethnocultural place, history, and genealogy are disrupted by processes of removal and arrival. The “local” of the homeland is no longer viable or desirable.<sup>314</sup> Lowe and his daughter, as the “only ones,” are part of a larger forging

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<sup>313</sup> Examples of the juridical maneuverings local and national interests took to keep the colonial space “white” are abundant. In 1878 the State of California held a Constitutional Convention to settle “the Chinese problem” which resulted in state law prohibiting Chinese from entering the state. A barrage of legislation followed at both state and national levels. *The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882* was the first to deny entry of a specific ethnic group to this country and in 1898, the United States Supreme Court case *U.S. v. Wong Kim Ark* (169 U.S. 649, 731) dissenting Chief Justice Melville Fuller argued, using the 1893 decision of *Yue Ting v. The United States*, that Chinese laborers were both incapable and refused to become citizens, preferring to “[remain] strangers in the land, residing apart by themselves, tenaciously adhering to the customs and usages of their own country” and were “apparently incapable of assimilating with our people” and subsequently perceived as a danger to “good order” and potentially “injurious to the public interest.” The Immigration Act passed by Congress in 1924 specifically targeted Chinese women, forbidding “Chinese women, wives, and prostitutes” to enter the states.

<sup>314</sup> This may not be so much a “flatter” or reductive definition or model of what “Chinese” is but arguably more complex because in these local contexts of being an “away Chinese” a local national consciousness coexists with their affinity for “home.” Homeland China and homeland local are not necessarily in an unproductive tension. In Lok Siu’s “Queen of the Chinese Colony” the writer describes a beauty pageant in which the Chinese diasporic subject demonstrates

of new identities, sexualities, and subjectivities in (post)colonial Jamaica. In this new space, men can take Black or South Asian women; men can take other men. And the colonial space is irrefutably and dangerously a “male” space:

There were men everywhere, some white, but mostly men of a million assortments of brown, no two ever the same shade, dressed in white shoes, some with string ties and felt hats and bow ties and bowler hats and brightly colored short-sleeve shirts. There were men who had faces broken up with laughter and men with chattering mouths full of solid-gold as of teeth and men with smirking smiles and men with eyes that crouched with anger. They stood in the entrances of bank and school and post office and clinic and police station; in the entrances of the towering and Gothic government buildings. They stood in the entrances of bars holding glasses full of rum and bottles of beer and sticks of cigarette and rolls of tobacco. They talked and laughed and slammed dominoes on upturned crates. They stood with their legs wide apart, hugged their balls, and thought of their frustrated longings. They stood with their legs wide apart, a row of them, backs to the street, pissing and waving their blue cocks... (54-5)

Men and their bodies are ubiquitous. They are variegated in shade but similar in acts and position. In doorways and entrances, they assume postures that are both threatening and vulnerable. Whether “guarding” the entrance or waiting - patiently or angrily - outside to be let in, the effect is the same. Standing in attendance signifies appeal to and protection of the power symbolized by those buildings, and these institutions and the ideologies of male and white supremacy they are built on require the consent of all to be “real.”<sup>315</sup> The ideological

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affinity with the host nation as well as mainland China, and the bodies of female contestants become sites of contention between discourses of nation and aesthetics in ways that reify a homogenizing conservative definition of what it means to be Chinese, as well as opening it up to include the valence of the “local.” For more see the collection *Media and the Chinese Diaspora* edited by Wanning Sun which has several essays that grapple with this phenomenon.

<sup>315</sup> This is an obvious reference to Antonio Gramsci’s discussion of “hegemony” and the role of consent he explores in *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. Therein he argues that the ideological dominance of a society or culture is “agreed” upon, that subordinate classes are persuaded to hold views and values consistent with the economic and social dominance of the ruling class. This consent is achieved through the forging of alliances by the dominant across class lines and social forces, thus creating far more complex relations than clearly defined master/slave, dominant/subordinate dichotomies suggest. Gramsci further pushes at this top/down model of thinking about power by using the term ‘active consent’ to demonstrate active and not passive relationships between the individual or group is in the creation and maintenance of hegemony. The alliances require a “national-popular” aspect of the hegemony of the dominant class, and this aspect appeals to “the widest common denominator.” Gramsci argues that through this appeal and acquisition of “active consent,” a class can gain ascendancy.

“hold” is just as precarious as the masculinity these men, waving their “blue cocks,” perform. There is always a threat that these testaments to the works of men will collapse or fail. The power and representatives of colonial imperialism keep these barbarians at the gate and outside, transforming them with each contact, with each promise of shared privilege. Lowe, as a “man” outside, undergoes several metamorphoses. His assumption of male drag to “pass” is never executed without the threat of “exposure” and censure by the dominant. First, Lowe is “made” a boy by a father in a culture that would shun a girl’s willful blurring of gender lines.<sup>316</sup> He is made an outcast in “Old China” by his inability to remain prepubescent or fulfill the role of prodigal son. His transgression of constructions of masculinity and nation, neither of which is initiated by Lowe himself, relegates him forever outside.

Transformation is made possible by the precedent set by his father, but the gift of imagining himself outside normative gender roles is a double-edged sword. A shoemaker and coffinmaker, his father was a frustrated actor who lined his shop with parchment maps of places that he would never see (24). Lowe’s father’s tales are relayed with the same ritualistic repetition as the narratives of the plantation workers. The route “was always the same; the goal was America, not to work but to explore, by way of the Malay Archipelago, then down the Indian Ocean and up and around the lip of the Atlantic” (25). There is comfort in the repeated relaying details of the voyage, pleasure in constructing the narrative of the voyage, but the tales Lowe’s father told did not include the exploitation and slaughter of Chinese laborers or the violent sexual assault that Lowe experiences during his own “middle passage.” Unlike Lowe’s father, who had written “a collection of nine short stories, all of

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<sup>316</sup> In writing this chapter, I found myself returning to Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Warrior Woman: Memoirs of a Girlhood Amongst Ghosts* in which she recounts several “histories” of Chinese female warrior figures that challenge dominant contemporary stereotypes of gender. All national histories, Chinese, American, Caribbean, etc. have tales of “exceptions,” figures that blur cultural, historical and sexual boundaries to meet civic and national desires/ends. It is more interesting for this reader to think of the relationship between Kingston’s text that is part autobiography, history, ethnography, mytho-historiography and the kind of work that Powell’s novel can and can not do to intervene into these formations.

which had already been titled, all the pages numbered, some with illustrations; only the stories were left to be written,” Lowe does not impart “textlessness” to his “progeny” (25). Initially, Lowe’s desires are consistent with a mimicry of patriarchy; he wants to preserve “culture,” to eke out a territory within a territory, and hand down a “legacy,” but this dream, with its origins in his father’s empty stories can not exist in this new home. Just as Lowe tries on Sylvie and Dulcie’s garb, he tries on his father’s dreams to preserve “Old China,” but it is quickly apparent that “Old China” can not exist in a concrete metaverse but an abstract one. The Pagoda does not survive the “ruination” that comes (231). The land and its people take over and break apart the “dream,” literally taking and incorporating pieces of it into their own existences. The legacy then shifts from a literal site - “pagoda” - to narrative. Lowe gives his grandson a story, his story, “The Last Good-bye” with a central protagonist named “Lau A-yin,” and the entire novel functions as a letter to his daughter (187).<sup>317</sup>

Armed with the ability to imagine, Lowe’s second donning of male garb is an act of resistance, a way to escape the unappealing fate of being a “wife” to an old man who has gone through many young wives. But it is also “his father had [who] betrayed him under the guise of tradition, though his one gift had been the dreams which which he infected Lowe so he could fly. But still!” (99). “Lowe” traces his ability to imaginatively engage to his father, but because of his “sex,” he is denied the pleasure of fully participating in the community’s rituals of masculinity. Similarly as “Lau A-yin,” s/he is denied the “pleasure” that can be experienced in the ritual performance of the feminine: “There had been no ceremonial hats, no decoration of costumes. No go-between, no rituals with sweetmeats, no ride in an ornamented sedan, no accompaniment of musicians, no firecrackers, no pretense of loud

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<sup>317</sup> Throughout the novel there are several “starts” to Lowe’s letter to his daughter, with the bulk of it appearing on the last six pages of the novel, beginning *in media res* with “and I miss Miss Sylvie so bad” and ends with “[m]aybe it was just time to reach out to you in just this sort of way. Not last week, not next year, but now. And exactly with the words put just so” and more significantly he signs the letter “Lau A-yin,” with no explicit allusion to maternal or paternal relation, only that he is writing to “[his] daughter” (245).

weeping. Nothing but an arrangement and the one suit of clothes on her back” (187). Lau A-yin finds herself as an explicit object of exchange, “pretty, pretty like money” with no access to any of the “subtrefuge” that cultural practices/rituals of gender would provide (123). Lau A-yin opts for escape, but he *escapes into* the “traps” of first imperial then colonial Chinese masculinity. When Lau A-yin dons male drag as a young woman, she can not take up the queue without signifying allegiance to the nation that she is running away from. When Lau A-yin goes to see her father for the last time dressed like a male, there is first a moment of recognition where Lau A-yin’s father acknowledges him publically as a “son,” then appeals to his “son” not to “forget about Old China”:

The old man’s voice is wistful. The old man speaks as if he has forsaken China, he has turned his back on her children, on his daughter. The narrow eyes glazed by time are filled. The old man searches the pocket of his gown. He comes up with just the coppers for his wine. He has nothing to give her. Still he presses the empty fist into her palm, then pulls his fingers away quickly as if scorched by the soft wet warm fleshiness of the palm. (189)

The father has escaped unsuccessfully into fantasy. It is “unsuccessful” because being “full up of fantasies” does not enable him to escape the limitations of the world he inhabits. Lau A-yin’s femininity, her “softness,” poses a threat to the father’s fanciful imaginings of travel, history and adventure, and by extension male superiority. There is nothing the father can give. The gesture is literally and figuratively an empty one. Adding complexity is Lowe’s realization that his father’s and Cecil’s ambitions are similar. Lowe’s dream of the cultural center soon reminds him of “his father and all his bottled-up fantasies. He thought of Cecil and of the mangled bodies in his dreams. He thought of all those years he has so successfully and piece by piece erased himself” (40). This collapse in Lowe’s memory of his father and Cecil precedes Lowe’s lament that he does not have language, thus linking British colonialism and Chinese traditional constructions of gender and their obfuscation of the “feminine” in processes of nation building. These are not aporias where feminine presences

are erased. These are processes of abstraction; the female body is made the terrain on which nations and national histories are built. Lowe's mission becomes first, to reconcile his relationship to "Old China," and second to that of British colonialism. Lowe has to "return," if only to recognize the ambivalence of the gifts given to him by his father, particularly in a culture where filial piety precludes selfhood, where the desire to speak from a "self" as woman is impossible. Lowe was born the daughter of

[a] man with too many visions. A man full up of fantasies. A man who infused fantasy into a girl. A girl full up of filial piety. A girl wanting to remove the screen of shame from a father's face. Screen of hopelessness. A girl wanting her father's affection forever. A girl full up of her father's fantasy. A girl pregnant with her father's dreams. A girl with a bloated head full of dreams. A restless girl thinking of expeditions. (139)

When Lau A-yin meets her father for the last time, he seeks love and approval that is not Lau A-yin's to ask for. As "a girl wanting," Lau A-yin would remain wanting, and conceive her father's emptiness. As male, Lau A-yin can be part of the fantasies of mobility, to pursue adventure in "foreign lands," but her father's desires and romantic fantasies of travel are complicated by the reality of the "crossings."

The third transformation is coterminous with Lowe's "crossing," and this crossing is not just lines of nation but also that of gender. After Cecil finds the stowaway, Lau A-yin, he beats, repeatedly rapes her, and then "tenderly" takes care of her wounds:

One day he opened his eyes and found his queue chopped off and lying flat on the floor...a deep part in the middle of his forehead. He saw too that his clothes, the padded jacket and half trousers, had been replaced with Cecil's khaki trousers, his striped shirt and white merino and woolen cardigan, his leather belt with a gleaming silver buckle, his cotton drawers and woolen socks and a sturdy pair of boots that shimmered...Lowe didn't recognize himself, this melody of pain gushing through his limbs. He didn't recognize the clothes that rubbed roughly against his skin, he felt naked without the coil of hair, and in the mirror hung there on the wall he saw the stranger peering back at him, with weary eyes, and in front of him was Cecil with the cords of thread in his fire hair, and lurking in the corners of Cecil's eyes a huge well of tenderness, which did not calm Lowe. He remembered a sharp curve of disappointment in his father's back when he turned thirteen and puberty struck...he swung his head, which felt light without the cord of hair, and he

knew he had crossed over again, that he had come to that place of uncertainty before and here he was again. But this time he wasn't sure of the outcome, he wasn't sure if he would make it to the island alive. (98)

What had been a transgression of local sociopolitical gender norms of China is now codified within the sexual drama of colonialism. Foreclosed older and untried possibilities give way to new ones created in this "crossing," but they are masked insidiously with the dominant's good intentions. Lau A-yin is "turned" into Lowe, a colonized castrated supine Chinese male, fetishized and fantasized by Cecil. What had been the marker of Chinese maleness, his queue, an already spurious phallus in its signification of subjection, is cut off and he is made a British colonial subject. In Lowe's reflection, he is faced with the demand he recognize himself, or rather a "self" as abject subject in relation to Cecil. Second, he is forced to face the emptiness of the phallus. His recently acquired maleness has not given him power but rendered him victim. That Cecil was already in the process of undressing Lowe and "discovers" Lowe's femaleness is indicative of the symbolic castration and rape of the Chinese male by colonial power that, in this moment prior to the discovery of "female flesh," was to be made literal. Having conquered the terrain of this body, he lights matches to survey it.<sup>318</sup> For Cecil the discovery of "woman's flesh" is serendipitous. He lights match after match, allowing him to look at, again and again, the bound object that confirms his power over both Chinese men and women. Cecil colonizes Lau A-yin's body, impregnating it, and "gives" Lowe a store to manage, thus binding Lowe to two figures of colonial capitalism – the heteronormative family and the "store." Lowe has a wife and daughter but is unable access patriarchal power. He can not control his "wife," and his relationship to his daughter is fraught at best. Lowe is given "keys to the shop and a bag of money" to manage *but not own*

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<sup>318</sup> The text describes Cecil's discovery of "a banded chest and beneath that a ruffle of smooth lambskin and the dense weighty mounds of woman's flesh. Woman's flesh! The match went out. The man lit another and another and another" (49). This iteration of "discovery" would then be indulged over and over again by Cecil in his repeated returns to uncover Lowe's female flesh under his male drag.

and told to protect and work for Cecil's interests (12-13). Cecil "dictates" Lowe's life and displaces him in the imagination of his daughter (13, 185-6). Instead of having "ownership," Lowe is "used" as Cecil sees fit for sexual and other labor, then placed in the untenable position of having to answer for his "incompetence" as a Chinese male shopkeeper.<sup>319</sup>

Lau A-yin/Lowe does not and can not recognize him/herself in these two scenes of rape and reformation and this loss is signified by his lack of voice. He loses language when he sees his transformed self in the mirror. Unable to give voice to his own experience, he eventually tries to write that story. When Lowe attempts to speak and be "recognized" as something outside fetishistic representations of "China Dolls" or "Chinamen," no one wants to listen. The depiction of the silenced female subject is, according to Rey Chow, "the most important clue to her displacement" (Chow 38).<sup>320</sup> When Lau A-yin is transformed by his father into a "boy," the only other "woman" present is one who is remembered as the sound of shuffling slippers across a floor, Lau A-yin's mother, another Chinese woman with no "voice." When Lau A-yin is exchanged to satisfy her father's debts and her husband grabs her to take her away, Lau A-yin screams. It is her mother who disciplines her, who functions as an enforcer, and issues a stinging slap that silences Lau A-yin (187). Similarly, when Lau A-yin is transformed on the ship into "Lowe," he has no voice to "speak" back to the colonial power who later informs him that he has operated in Lowe's best interest, that passing as male prevents him from being subject to sexual violence. Lowe confronts Cecil about his

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<sup>319</sup> Carole-Anne Tyler's "Passing: Narcissism, Identity, and Difference" was particularly useful here, specifically her discussion of "desire" and how "psychoanalytic critique of interests in the name of desire may well reinscribe the law however, incidentally affirming the narcissism and interests of those whose fetishes pass as the real thing" (Tyler 242). The notion that there are those for whom their position of privilege in relation to the phallus enables their "fetishes to pass as the real thing" is a compelling way to think about passing and choosing to pass and the signification of power in those choices.

<sup>320</sup> Chow goes on to say that the "silence is at once evidence of imperialist oppression (her naked [or prostituted] body, the defiled image) and what, in the absence of the original witness to that oppression, must act in its place by performing or feigning as with the pre-imperialist gaze" (Chow 38). Chow's analysis of the "gaze" here is integral to my thinking through several moments of subject formation in this novel.



taking Lowe's choices away and Cecil uses the threat of sexualized violence and promises to "protect" to bind Lowe to him.

Lowe is forced to perform colonial Chinese maleness and is only able to reimagine himself and the world on his own terms after his removal from the colonial domestic economy; Cecil is dispatched; Sylvie, Dulcie and his daughter have to leave. Lowe's choices were limited but he does know how to access traditional gender conventions when it is convenient to do so. He convinces himself that the choice to live with Miss Sylvie was for the good of his daughter, "wouldn't any mother want the same for her child if she could?" and not because he found this strange woman desirable (108). In order for Lowe's final transformation to be realized, he has to get to a point where he can imagine his options as more than merely in relation to the colonial. He has to be extricated from the demands of heteropatriarchy.

As "Lau A-yin" and "Lowe" s/he has been the subject of repeated mapping of discourses and identities. In order to reimagine self and space, he has to rethink his relationship to space, rethink the map and its borders. Lowe's identity according Rey Chow "cannot simply be imagined in terms of resistance against the image—that is, *after* the image has been formed—nor in terms of a subjectivity that existed *before*, beneath, inside, or outside the image. It needs to be re-thought as that which bears witness to its own demolition—in a form which is at once image and gaze, but a gaze that exceeds the moment of colonization" (Chow 51). Lowe, in cobbling together his own history to write and rewrite a history for his daughter, can not turn to, as Chow suggests "a subjectivity that existed" prior to the moment of cultural displacement. Lowe has to confront the thing that kept him out of the dominant patriarchal order, his "core" or "essence," the biological reality of being born female; it is the thing "about you you father hate. For how could you, when it was you, the

core of you, the essence of you? You” (221).<sup>321</sup> Even as this novel plays with “essences,” it reveals Lowe’s identity as relational. Lowe can not construct an identity that is not in conversation with his own “crossings.” He can not have a relationship with Sylvie, despite her being similarly victimized by colonial discourses, that is not complicated by her role as extension of Cecil’s power. In Lowe’s mind the two figures, Sylvie and Cecil, conflate when Sylvie and Lowe have sex. Further, Lowe can not have a relationship with his daughter that is not complicated by her being a literal product and reminder of Lowe’s rape and continued exploitation. Even though Cecil has given Lowe his “phallus,” he does not let him keep it. Cecil returns “every time... for more of [Lowe], wanting to humiliate [him], remind [him]...” (227). Cecil, as with the repeated lighting of matches, repeatedly “takes” Lowe any way and any time he wants. Lowe’s relationship to the power of masculinity is tentative at best.

Lowe’s success and failure at performing masculinity mirrors the problematical relationship his biological male counterparts have to what it means to be a “man” in this colonial context. He believes that there is nothing that “could betray him,” but the text suggests otherwise. First, there are those in the community who conject that Lowe is participating in a “nasty” life, that he is engaged in an illicit “homosexual” affair with Cecil.<sup>322</sup> The assumption is that if Lowe is a man, his “Chineseness” and economic relationship to Cecil precludes the possibility of him being a “real man.” The precarious state of Colonial Chinese masculinity is reflected in the assertion by Kywing, Lowe’s good friend,

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<sup>321</sup> I am reminded here of a critique by Kadiatu Kanneh who critiques African American writers who avail themselves to “pre-fall” versions of “African” identity based on a fantastic and ahistorical version of Africa in his 1998 *African Identities: Race, Nation and Culture in Ethnography, Pan Africanism and Black Literature*.

<sup>322</sup> What gets read as Lowe’s new performance of gender becomes a source of anxiety for those in the community who have a similarly tentative relationship to masculinity: “an effeminate one they called Pretty, who had a penchant for impregnating young girls, then always crying that they just wanted to saddle him with bastards, for none of them was his, even went as far as to say that Lowe looked like a woman he used to know” (172). I take this figure up again later on in this chapter.

that after the shop is burned down, he “[has] to just open up another shop, quick. You have to pretend things not so bad. You can’t show them we weak. You have to just accept it as bad luck Man, you can’t stop to think. They going to murder we in this place” (38). The mandate is to preserve stereotypes of Asian stoicism, to perform strength and resist any appearance of “weakness.” Lowe is told that he as to “accept” and not respond emotionally to violence. If he does, there is the danger of annihilation by an amorphous black threat. Interestingly, Kywing’s slide into Jamaican dialect, this shared culturally inflected language marks them as men and part of the nation. At the same time, they are on “sufferance,” kept perpetually outside, and under the threat that “they” will “murder we.” This “they” could be the whiter/lighter dominant classes or the darker underclass. One thing is clear. One’s relationship to colonial capital is how masculinity is measured “in this place.”

The performance of masculinity has to be convincing, but it rarely ever is. Lowe’s one time lover “Joyce Fabulous Joyce,” a black woman married to a local constable “knows” that Lowe is a biological female, not so much by outward signifiers, but by Lowe’s laughter, a laugh that she reads as “a beautiful shy undercover laugh...[as if Lowe was] holding something back” (153). Joyce’s defines femininity as concealment. She is not the only one who sees beyond the brush bristles, who can read the “flaws” in performance. Sharmilla, the South Asian wife of Kywing, seems equally capable of reading Lowe’s femaleness. Early in the text, Lowe speculates that Sharmilla

knew exactly what lay behind the costume, though it was nothing she said, nothing she intimated, it was only in the rhythm of her eyelids, tugging at the brush of false hair that trembled above his lips, bursting the buttons of his striped short-sleeve shirt, stripping down his shorts, and so he could never linger long in the snugness of her embrace, never engage her for any length of time. (35)

Lowe’s performance leaves his corporeal integrity perpetually at risk. Sharmilla’s gaze does not just penetrate; it ravages. Later in the novel Sharmilla asks if Lowe had any indication

that Miss Sylvie going to leave him, and when pushed by her husband as to exactly how Lowe was supposed to know, Sharmilla claims that “a woman knows” and, more importantly, that this knowledge is essential for a woman’s survival (235). The believability and acceptance of Lowe’s performance depends on communal consent and this consent is required for all sorts of atrocities. Through literal or symbolic violence, the community decides and polices what “strangeness” it will allow, what strangeness it needs to create the normative.

### **The Rooster’s Egg**

Jamaica is a place where a rooster can lay an egg, where boundaries and constructions of gender can be reworked. Lowe interrupts the structure of patriarchal oppression embodied by his father. Denied patriarchal privilege, he does not hand down the empty fantasies his father gave him. Lowe refuses to give his daughter:

stories of legendary heroes who had fought gallantly in wars and of foolish men who had married ghosts thinking them beautiful women and those soliloquies from dramatic romances his father would act out, his face powdered and painted, his shifting image adorned with costumes made from bundled cloth and strips of bark to fit the numerous characters and their intricate plots. (173)

Lowe’s father desired the flexibility and mobility that “costume” provided and changed his daughter to a son to suit his own selfish desires. He gave Lowe ambivalent gifts of imagination and fancy which Lowe later uses to relieve his isolation and re-create family. Lowe refuses to give his daughter any cultural artifacts from “Old China,” arguably because of their gendered vernacular. Lowe’s father’s language of “Old China,” does not fit “in this place full of brown people, and the melody was all wrong here against the jolting clangor of his new speech with its crushed-bottle sounds, this new terrain and this rhythm of life loaded up with hostilities and opportunities” (173). Survival requires new relationships to language and imagination. In Lowe’s process of trying to find language and fill the holes in his history

and in the histories of those around him,<sup>323</sup> he assumes the “drag” of others, finds their costumes ill fitting, and in doing so Lowe embodies what Wanning Sun refers to as the social and political aspect of the imagination as “social process” (Sun 74).<sup>324</sup> Lowe learns from his mistakes. It is only when Lowe discovers how much he does not know that he can rework the economies of the house and the sexual relationships therein.<sup>325</sup>

Yet, this reworking and renegotiation is not without its complications. Lowe can give his grandson his story, Lau A-yin’s story, because as a “grandfather” he is out of the heterosexual reproductive economy. Once outside the “colonial family,” Lowe can focus on what he has to tell his daughter and “[t]here was so much to tell her, so much to write, and it seemed almost impossible to set everything down all at once. Almost impossible to reveal all of who he was. There was so much” (9). Lowe’s story is a long one, “full up of a lot of deception, a lot of disguises” and inexorably linked to the official story of Hakka displacement that comes from dominant sources which Powell incorporates and frames in one of the first drafts of his letter to Elizabeth:

This then is the terrain: mountainous coastlines brimming with butterflies, an

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<sup>323</sup> Considering the work of K. Scott Wong, we can think of Lowe as an embodiment of the way cultural identity becomes “more fluid and decentered.” Instead of thinking about place as what fixes identity, Wong urges us to think of identity being anchored to “a strategy of ensuring the accumulation of needed social, economic, cultural, educational, and political capital” and borrows from Stuart Hall’s discussion of identity as a matter of “becoming” as well as of “being.” Combining future and past, identity is not ahistorical or essentially fixed, but “subject to the continuous ‘play’ of history, culture and power” (Wong 49).

<sup>324</sup> Sun borrows from and builds upon Arjun Appadurai’s discussion of imagination, which, in a collective form, he argues, can and does “[create] ideas of neighbourhood and nationhood, of moral economics and unjust rule, of higher wages and foreign labor prospects. The imagination is today a staging ground for action, and not only for escape” (Appadurai qtd Sun 7). Sun discusses contemporary diasporic cultural (dis)continuities facilitated through the Chinese media which contributes to what the writer reads as a reification of traditional notions of “Chineseness,” but also sees a concomitant reimagining of what it means to be Chinese at each point of image/program reception. At each point along these routes there is also an embrace of the local space, an articulation of hybridity produced by the group’s embrace of the host nation, a hybridity that refuses to be suppressed, even with the attendant pressures to claim a “space” separate and beyond that of the host nation.

<sup>325</sup> Lowe has sex with both Omar and Joyce in quick succession but when Omar returns to Lowe for a second time, Lowe is non-responsive and the two end up renegotiating the space in the house, with Omar occasionally taking care of Lowe and vice versa.

arid countryside assaulted by famine, a town swarming with clans and secret societies, an anti Manchu resistance, a coastal town full of fishermen, and junks bobbing on a shimmery glassy sea, an ancestral temple bristling with spirit tablets, a thin grove of trees, a muddy climb from the town, a village full of hunger and destitution, a poor and overcrowded village, a village full of Hakka speakers, traveling gypsies, a China war with Britain, a great war over territory, a war of opium, a South China Sea clogged with foreign vessels, a shimmering sunlit sea loaded with emigrant ships, North America, Australia, Singapore, a credit ticket system, the hordes of Chinese leaving, villages bereft of young men, the empire ravaged too by a Hakka sect, a revolution at Taiping, a backdrop of death and destruction, and hunger and debts, a faltering of authority, people leaving in batches, streams of refugees leaving in droves. To Malay, Panama, Africa, to the deserted West Indian plantations... (130-131)

This passage plays with the cartographic impulse of empire builders to “map” territory, but locates specific histories, nodal points, contiguous events, moments, places and ideas.

Timothy Chin’s “The Novels of Patricia Powell: Negotiating Gender and Sexuality Across the Disjunctures of the Caribbean Diaspora,” reads Powell’s novel as “a metaphor for another diasporic moment—that is, the present one—and the questions of place that are highlighted in and by this moment, especially as such questions relate to differences constructed around gender sexuality, race, ethnicity and language” (Chin 540). Further, he studies Lowe as figure of displacement, “profound and utter homelessness” (Chin 540). I challenge the representation of Lowe/Lau A-yin’s “subjectivity” beginning and ending with loss. As “grandfather” and “story teller” Lowe has the ability to “choose.” He is no longer subject to Cecil’s or Miss Sylvie’s fetishistic mapping. When Lowe stays in Jamaica; he chooses a home. More poignantly, he chooses to write a letter that may never get to its intended recipient.<sup>326</sup>

Yet the ability to choose does not signify agency. Lowe’s transgression of gender categories makes it impossible for him to leave the house. He fears rejection and potential

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<sup>326</sup> Please refer back to my fourth note where I analyze the etymological significance of the name “Lau A-Yin.”

violence of the community, which may not be able to accept the challenge he embodies.<sup>327</sup> It is Powell's representation of the "community's" response to Lowe that has to be complicated. Remarkably, we never see violence come to Lowe. In fact, Jake – a contractor helping build the pagoda, refers and defers to Lowe as both male and female in his address to "Mr. Lowe, ma'am" (241). It is troubling, but perhaps "hopeful," that the one figure in the novel who "accepts" Lowe is visibly a hybrid, a phenotypic amalgamation of indigenous and black characteristics signifying the diversity produced by colonial capitalism on the island. It is in this small localizable space that Lowe constructs a self, a home, and better yet, a history to his own tempo and rhythm.

The novel begins with the sound of "the clock's iron music [buckling] out its final tone" and an image of Lowe lying in bed anxiously listening to Miss Sylvie breath. Lowe is plagued by fears of abandonment emerging as a preoccupation with Sylvie's death and weariness produced by "torrid dreams, the visions of hurricane and wreckage, though neither deluge nor drought had struck the island in some time" (3). In the end Miss Sylvie leaves, and Lowe does not wither up and die. He does not stop living; he stops living *for and as* others imagine her/him to be. Unable or unwilling "secure" his identity in relation to Miss Sylvie, Omar (Dulcie's son) or Joyce, Lowe resists the imposition of other's images, but this resistance is not always successful. Omar refuses to acknowledge Lowe as a "woman," and is unable to keep his hands off of Lowe. Lowe demands his femaleness be recognized by Omar and Omar refuses, literally leaving the room, unable to reconcile the part of Lowe that is woman with his desire for Lowe as a "man." Lowe can not be the in-between, the simultaneous male and female that would legitimate Cecil and Omar's desire for the male

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<sup>327</sup> In an interview for *Callaloo*, Patricia Powell discusses her choice of Lowe as a central protagonist and claims that Lowe is ideal, because "she has a foot in both a masculine and feminine world. She is privy to both spheres and must take on the complications of each. She cannot be one thing or another, but at all times must wear myriad costumes and masks. Myriad selves" (Smith 326)

body. It is only after Miss Sylvie leaves that Lowe can intervene in dominant constructions of time and history. No longer bound to Western constructions of knowledge, he breaks with practice, “no longer [winding] the clock that ticked in the shadowy hallway” (216). This figure defies rules and plays with time, narrative and subjectivity and remains, to the end of the novel, in process. In contemplating the relationship of Caribbean identity to post modernism Adlai H. Murdoch suggests that instead of postmodern “fragmentation” we should look at “Caribbean identity within longstanding regional patterns of erasure and (re)invention” (Murdoch 578). I want to push this suggestion further to trouble the very concept of “erasure” because what remains are not merely aporias, blank space on a map, but expressions of yearning, which are not “absences” but articulations of desire for connections “between” and “to.” The transgendered, transcultural hero/ine’s experience of diaspora, if we take a cue from Stuart Hall in “Cultural Identity,” involves a constant “producing and reproducing” a remaking of self “anew, through transformation and difference” (Hall 235). Lowe remakes and reworks his “self” with every false start, with each inability to successfully pass for or into the oblivion that dominant discourses of race, sex and gender offer. Lowe’s performance of masculinity is far from seamless. With Cecil’s departure, Lowe is free to “forget” his poor excuse of a mustache, free to forget to bind his breasts, to don a ribbon on his hat, create new adventures and a new self using the paints found in Miss Sylvie’s abandoned box. The question remains whether or not this freedom to “be” is sustainable and I would suggest that it is not.

In Opal J. Moore’s introduction to an issue of *Callaloo*, she claims that Patricia Powell “dismantles the traditional territories of sex, sex roles, place and time, and the possibility of safety in distancing by proposing as the novel’s protagonist a Chinese immigrant woman who lives as a man in Jamaica in the late 19th century. Powell seems to be pulling out all the stops” and further that Powell’s central protagonist “take[s] up her



masquerade not in response to political/social conditions of black Jamaica, and certainly not in service of the imperialist games of nations, but to evade the masculinist power structure of her own country” (Moore 346). I argue that Lowe’s “taking up” of a “masquerade” of masculinity is absolutely a response to the gendered social politics in Jamaica *as well as* China. Lau A-yin is “turned into” Lowe to avoid the brutal prostitution that a “Chinee” woman would be relegated to in the Caribbean. In this place, Lau A-yin would have become a “China Doll” to service any/all men. Instead s/he is simultaneously neutered and made a private concubine to Cecil.

Lowe is readable within constructions of Chinese diaspora, not just because of his yearning, but in his name, both names. Lau A-yin is made “low” by the system he is born into and then made even lower once he enters the conduits of colonial capitalism. Lowe has to engage in processes of translation with each movement, with each crossing, not just of culture but also of gender. He has to translate the romantic fantasies originating out of “Old China,” recombine them in a confluence of ebbing filial piety, growing economic and political disappointment, along with the need of and for the diasporic subject to remake and reimagine him/herself in the new space/territory where his/her histories will exist in contiguous relation to other histories.<sup>328</sup> Lowe’s relationship to nation, from the moment of disconnection, from the break of filial connection and the violence of his “crossing” and previously held ties to notions of culture, self and nation are severed and made new.<sup>329</sup>

The local regional instability represented in the hostility Lowe experiences as Lau A-yin in China lends to the concretizing of romantic visions of homeland. Lowe’s unrequited

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<sup>328</sup> In “The Question of Cultural Identity” Stuart Hall argues that diasporic subjects have to translate between and for. To be a subject of and in diaspora, for Hall, is to be “irrevocably the product of several interlocking histories and cultures, belong at one and the same time to several ‘homes’ (and to no one particular ‘home’)” (310).

<sup>329</sup> According to Bammer the diasporic subject participates in a “vital double move between marking and recording the absence and lost and inscribing presence” (Bammer qtd Anderson and Lee 12). Absences, holes are not filled and made whole, wounds are not healed to become invisible. The scars remain.

love for father is synonymous with his love for home, but just as we witness Lowe reach a point where he can be and express anger toward the father who betrayed him, we never witness Lowe expressing a desire to return to his “homeland,” nor does he leave with Sylvie to “start over.” Miss Sylvie’s pours over maps much the same way her father poured over maps and adventures not taken. This is a text that, I argue, clearly illustrates Paul Gilroy’s claim that “gender is the modality through which race is lived” (Gilroy 85) and confirms the postulation that the diasporic subject’s relationship to host nation is marked by “cross-connections, not roots” (Bammer qtd Anderson and Lee 11). Lau A-yin’s relationship to nation, his ability to take on allegiance to another “land” has everything to do with the body he inhabits. As a “woman” his relationship to land is that of symbolic referent.<sup>330</sup> “She” is the land, territory fought for, over, and through. To desire a homeland in which you will, at best occupy a place of secondary citizenship, is self destructive. Home – China – for Lowe is demystified yet there is still articulated the desire for his daughter and grandson to see and experience an idealized “Old China” that never existed. This idealized construction, nostalgia for the “motherland” Ien Ang claims is debilitating for it “confines and constrains the nomadism of the diasporic subject” (Ang 1, 25). The diasporic Chinese figure becomes a trope to track and ground a critique of decolonialization and the neocolonial economic and political realities of the postcolonial nation state. Ien Ang notes specifically the paradox of “relative economic advantage of the Chinese...matched by their political powerlessness in the wake of decolonization and the advent of the postcolonial nation-state” (Ang 2, 63). This population, like Lowe with Miss Sylvie, is kept outside as a putative suitor waiting for an audience with the dominant, and because the local, Lowe’s relationship to his new home of Jamaica has taken precedence over that of China, he will wait, despite being “on

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<sup>330</sup> Ien Ang “diasporas are transnational, spatially and temporally sprawling sociocultural formations of people, creating imagined communities whose blurred and fluctuating boundaries are sustained by real and/or symbolic ties to some original ‘homeland’” (Ang 25).

sufferance.”<sup>331</sup>

### **Battyman, Chinaman, and a pocket full of...**

This novel deploys a troubling but productive conflation of sexualities and colonial bodies. The Chinese male and black homosexual stand in relation to each other and as interchangeable pariahs to the larger structural subordinates. The black homosexual/sodomite<sup>332</sup> are read within the cultural context of Jamaica as emblematic of the historical emasculation of the the black male. This figure functions as a lightening rod for real and imagined historical political, literal and symbolic castration. The history of the emasculated black male gets conflated with the signifier of what is perceived as self loathing – the black homosexual, who is unnatural and read as serving the white master, horrifyingly complicit in his subjection and receipt of penetration. Whether or not there was a history of “real” black men actually experiencing the same sexual violence and exploitation as their female counterparts is, like Lowe’s history, absent from the history books.<sup>333</sup> To include that narrative would implicate the dominant, writers of history and its victims in a circuit of homo/hetero violence that leaves purpertrators and victims silent. The history of sexualized

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<sup>331</sup> I find Ien Ang’s discussion of the resilience and “sturdy intransigence” of the “local” emerging in “everyday life” important to my thinking of Lowe’s relationship to nation and my attempts to theorize that relationship. Ang’s “Local/Global Negotiations: Doing Cultural Studies at the Crossroads” distinguishes the “local” that is “under erasure” in theory as a discursive construct from the local that “operates as a social and cultural reality” (Ang 2, 175).

<sup>332</sup> The term “sodomite” along with “buller/bulla” are terms that have been used by many Jamaican media outlets to stand for what we would call “lesbian,” but more specifically in terms of violence and homophobia “dyke.”

<sup>333</sup> In Decca Aitkenhead’s “Their Homophobia is Our Fault” published in *The Guardian* in January 2005, lays the responsibility of homophobic violence in Jamaica at Britain’s door: “Every ingredient of Jamaica’s homophobia implicates Britain, whose role has maintained the conditions conducive to homophobia, from slavery through to the debt that makes education unaffordable. For us to vilify Jamaicans for an attitude of which we were the architects is shameful. To do so in the name of liberal values is meaningless.” The writer then claims that unconditional freedom to function will enable this former colony to eradicate homophobia and that no amount of critique levied by former colonial administrators will rid the colony of behavior learned from the “architects” of homophobia – Britain. While this argument has its weight, the potential narcissism of it makes me nervous as other former colonies have not exhibited the same “symptoms” and therefore we need to make sure not to vest overarching power to the British colonial machine.

violence against women in the drive for territory and capital: the rape, impregnating of women and interruption of genealogical structures of the enemy is inextricable from processes of nation building. This disturbing elision or slide where the body of the black homosexual is signifier of all oppression is directly related to late 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century constructions of nationalist masculinities. To be the penetrated body is to be the feminized body. Conservative juridical movements, the codification of homosexuality as illegal, are a direct result contemporary critiques of Jamaica as the “most homophobic place in the world.”<sup>334</sup> The cultural and juridical hyperheterosexualization of Jamaica is a direct response to neocolonial efforts to control policy and infringe upon the economic and political sovereignty of Jamaica by British, American and Western European capitalist interests. In our contemporary historical moment, the one that Powell is writing in and not the one in which the novel is set, homophobia can be read, however problematic, as an articulation of nationalism and gay bashing a kind of patriotism.<sup>335</sup> The explicit homophobia expressed in popular culture by reggae dancehall artists is an expression of the anxiety about the terrain on which colonial male privilege is built and the actions necessary to reinvigorate and

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<sup>334</sup> Since the 2004 Human Rights Watch publication of “Hated to Death: Homophobia, Violence, and Jamaica’s HIV/Aids Epidemic,” a seventy nine page report detailing the sanctioned cultural violence and abuse experienced by homosexuals at local and institutional levels, there has been a plethora of articles detailing horrific anecdotes of Jamaican homophobia. The most prevalent are: Jamaican Dancehall artist, Buju Banton’s participation in a home invasion and brutal attack on six gay men, lyrics from him and other avowed homophobic artists, Bounty Killer, Elephant Man and Beenie Man just to name a few, a father who sanctioned and incited the “lynching” of his teenaged son by other students at his son’s school after discovering a picture of a nude man in the boy’s schoolbag. These narratives circulated and appeared in no less than fifty articles post the publication by the HRW and vacillate between condemning all of Jamaica as a site of unbridled homophobia and demanding neocolonial withdrawal of involvement.

<sup>335</sup> Kelly Cogswell’s “Jamaica’s Queer Obsession: Is it all that’s holding the country together?” argues that gay bashing in essence, is an “act in defense of the nation.” This has unfortunately been born out in the participation of policemen in anti gay/homosexual attacks. Suzanne LaFont’s “Very Straight Sex: The Development of Sexual Mores in Jamaica” details Jamaica’s prohibitive laws on sexuality, specifically the “The Offences Against the Persons Act” which prohibits “acts of gross indecency,” which is generally interpreted as any kind of physical intimacy between men in public or private. This act exemplifies the attempt to establish and preserve a heterosexual Jamaica. The offence of “buggery” specified in section 76 is defined as anal intercourse between men and women or two men. The most rigorous penalties are preserved for men engaging in consensual anal sex (IGLHRC 2000).

remasculinize the black body.<sup>336</sup> The setting of the novel is ideal because it is prior to the rise of neo and post-colonial nationalisms that were constructed in direct response to colonialism. These nationalisms attempt to formulate new relationships to categories of identity, to what it means to have sovereignty and does so in conversation with reductive essentialist constructions of sex and sexuality. With the advent of decolonization and neocolonialism, we can ask if a figure like Lowe could exist in the moment that Powell is writing without suffering the violence that remains a threat in the novel, but nowhere near the severity faced by “real” gay, lesbian and transgendered people living in contemporary Jamaica.<sup>337</sup> Lowe’s “passing” is made possible by racial discourse of Chinese maleness that is retained and reimagined and deployed.<sup>338</sup> Thus, we have the unfortunate possibility that “Lowe’s” heroic “being” as a “trans” figure remains at the level of “skin” because his “being” is wholly dependent on Lowe’s Chineseness, his already overdetermined in-betweenness.

With each failed identification and ill-fitting drag he tries on, Lowe becomes more

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<sup>336</sup> Sandesh Sivakumaran’s “Male/Male Rape and the ‘Taint’ of Homosexuality” was integral to my thinking through the anxieties articulated around the black Jamaican male homosexual’s body.

<sup>337</sup> Powell’s exploration of black homosexuality in Jamaica does not begin in this, her third, novel. Her first novel, *Me Dying Trial* (1993), although focusing on one woman’s experience of domestic violence, associates the condition of black gay men to abused women that begs complication. Powell’s second novel, *A Small Gathering of Bones* (1994) is set in the 1970s when the HIV/AIDS crisis is about to hit the island of Jamaica hard. Of this novel, Opal Palmer Adisa has offered that its “ending offers no promise of fundamental change within the community; in fact, the story seems to turn in on itself as Ian’s [one of the central protagonists] death at the end fulfills Dale’s warning at the beginning of the novel” (Adisa 324). The novel has been commended for its bravery and understandable pessimism (Glave x), but this is a novel that relies too heavily on a particularly limited construction of “homosexuality.” I refer here to the implicit attribution of male homosexuality to pathological mothers who are either overindulgent and smothering figures and her son or a complete cold viragos. What interests me is ultimately the trajectory of Powell’s representation of sexuality.

<sup>338</sup> In the longer version of this chapter, this is the moment where I expand my analysis of the tentativeness of Powell’s prose. Any representation of sexuality that falls out of the “norm” for women has an alibi. Miss Sylvie has escaped a tyrant that would have “exposed” her blackness and Joyce is in an unhappy marriage. Representations of “male” transgressions of these boundaries are vexed by their relation to “capital.” Omar has passively killed his colonial “pater,” Cecil, by setting the store on fire as Cecil lays there drunk and has “conquered” the next in line to the property by sleeping with Lowe. He refuses to acknowledge Lowe’s “femaleness” in a gesture that seeks to secure his cuckolding of the master. The one mention of a black male who would “qualify” as homosexual is “pretty” who engages in sex with as many women as possible and projects “femininity” onto Lowe in order to keep his “prettiness” out of the community’s “mouth.”

alien. Much like the Chinese women who emigrated in the late 1860s and “voluntarily” subjected themselves to footbinding to demonstrate filial piety, Lowe is bound by location specific formations of gender, nation, and their intersection(s). But each character performs on this stage that is Jamaica and with each performance, with each cultural text created, “read” and possibly misunderstood, comes a disruption of the dominant order.

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## CURRICULUM VITAE

**TZARINA T. PRATER**

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### EDUCATION:

- Ph.D. English with a certificate in Gender Studies, Rutgers University, September 2009
- M.A. English, *summa cum laude*, Rutgers University
- B.S. English and Gender Studies, *summa cum laude*, University of Southern Maine
- A.S. Business Administration, *magna cum laude*, Bay State College

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### PUBLICATIONS:

#### Articles:

“‘[W]here the rooster lays an egg’: Transgendered Heroism in Patricia Powell’s *The Pagoda*” – under consideration with *Small Axe*

“‘Old Man Your Kung Fu is Useless’: Africa American Spectatorship and Hong Kong Cinema” *Post Road* (2004) 2:185-215.

#### Short Fiction:

“A Few Tails” *The MacGuffin*, Livonia Michigan, November (1997)

#### Poetry:

- “Yellow” (2000) *Not Child’s Play: An Anthology*. Risa Shaw Ed., Lunchbox Press, Inc.,
- “Miserere” Golden Apple Press, Champaign, Illinois, November (1996)  
*El Loco Foco*, Eagle Pass, Texas, July (1996)
- “Pentheus” *El Loco Foco*, Eagle Pass, Texas, June (1995)  
Golden Apple Press, Champaign, Illinois, 2<sup>nd</sup> Place Award (1996)
- “Untitled” *Survivors: An Anthology*, Amityville, NY (1995)
- “Bowl” Suburban Wilderness Press, Deluth, Minnesota (1995)

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### TEACHING EXPERIENCE:

#### Rutgers University:

##### Literature:

##### Introductory level/surveys:

- American Literature: Colonial to 1860 (Summer 2006, Spring 2009)
- Black Literature Colonial Period to the Harlem Renaissance (Fall 2001, Fall 2008)
- Black Literature 1930-Present (Spring 2007, Spring 2008)
- Principles of Literary Study (Summer 2009)

##### Genre specific:

- The Short Story (Summer 2004, Fall 2008)
- Black Narrative: Slave Narrative/Neo Slave Narrative (Spring 2002, Fall 2007)
- Black Novel (Summer 2003, Fall 2004 and 2007)
- Introduction to Prose (Summer 2009)

##### Historical time period:

- The Harlem Renaissance (Spring 2004, Spring 2009)
- Black Writers and the 1960s (Spring 2006, Fall 2007)

**Anglophone:**

Literature of the Black World (Spring 2004, Fall 2008)  
 Twentieth Century Literature in a Global Context (Spring 2007)  
 Popular Culture (Summer 2005)

**Gender Specific Literature courses:**

Issues & Problems: The Black Hero (Spring 2008, Spring 2009)  
 Black Women Writers (Spring 2008, Fall 2008)  
 Black Women Writers (Spring 2007 – Blum Teaching Assistant)

**Women's & Gender Studies:**

Women, Culture and Society, (Fall 2002, Summer 2003)  
 Dynamics of Race, Sex and Class, (Summer 2001, Summer 2002)  
 Gender and Spirituality (Winter 2003, Winter 2004)

**Cooper Union:****Humanities:**

The Modern Context: Figures and Topics – Ralph Ellison (Spring 2009). This course is an intensive single author/figure study from the modern period whose influence extends into contemporary culture. Students are required to produce a guided independent research writing project based on historical, cultural and critical research and give a formal presentation.

Literary Forms and Expression: “Going to Hell Backwards” – introductory composition/writing course with primary texts: Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, Marlowe’s *Doctor Faustus* and Dante’s *Inferno* (Fall 2008)

African American Literature: Introduction to the Tradition – upper level survey course (Fall 2007)

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**RESEARCH ASSISTANTSHIP:**

2004      Assisted Professor Wesley Brown in the editing of *Visions of America: Personal Narratives from the Promised Land*, a diachronic collection of autobiographical essays focused specifically on immigrant experiences in the United States.