

FROM SLAVE SHIP TO CITIZENSHIP: RE-IMAGINED COMMUNITIES AND THE  
COUNTERCULTURE OF MODERNITY IN THE HISTORICAL NOVEL OF SLAVERY

By

AGNEL BARRON

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To my mother

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Abstract of Dissertation Presented to the Graduate School  
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Agnel Barron

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This study makes the claim that novels of slavery written in the 1990s and 2000s have significantly refashioned the foundational generation of neoslave narratives published in the 1960s and 1970s by emphasizing community formation among the enslaved. Initially produced by African Americans who examined the Southern slave experience, these novels are now being produced by writers located in Canada, the Caribbean, London, and other regions of the African diaspora. Unlike traditional slave and neoslave narratives that place emphasis on the individual struggle for freedom, these newer additions to the genre contextualize the slave experience in relation to processes of nationhood, exile, migration, and diaspora. Texts such as Toni Morrison's *A Mercy*, Edward P. Jones' *The Known World*, James McBride's *Song Yet Sung*, and Lawrence Hill's *Someone Knows My Name* situate their localized portrayals of community formation within a broader discourse of American nationhood to demonstrate the problematic nature of early African American entry into processes of the nation that was characterized both by resistance to and accommodation of the hegemonic discourses of the larger society.

The Caribbean novels explore the way slavery shaped the phenomenon of exile, migration, and diaspora. Michelle Cliff's *Free Enterprise* and Dionne Brand's *At the Full and Change of the Moon* demonstrate the continuity between the contemporary migration experiences of Caribbean peoples and the historical experience of maroonage to position slavery squarely within the contexts of Empire and neo-imperialism. Nalo Hopkinson's *The Salt Roads* and Marlon James' *The Book of Night Women* explore individual and collective acts of rebellion among female slaves to demonstrate that women played an integral role in the counterculture of modernity articulated by slaves on the plantations of the New World. These texts connect the slave resistance that occurred on the plantations of the colonial Caribbean to metropolitan discourses of European modernity, demonstrate the way black female sexuality was denigrated in colonial constructions of femininity and re-constructed by black women to articulate a subjectivity of resistance to both slavery and male domination; and articulate a distinctly Caribbean aesthetic of modernity. In so doing, these novels gender the counterculture of modernity.

## CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

### From Slave Ship to Citizenship: Re-Imagined Communities and the Counterculture of Modernity in the Historical Novel of Slavery

Their progress from the status of slaves to the status of citizens led them [diasporic blacks] to enquire into what the best possible forms of social and political existence might be. The memory of slavery, actively preserved as a living intellectual resource in their expressive political culture, helped them to generate a new set of answers to this enquiry (39).

-Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*

In this study, I argue that novels of slavery produced in the 1990s and 2000s revise the neoslave genre by emphasizing processes of community formation among the enslaved. Initially produced by African Americans who examined the Southern slave experience, these novels are now being produced by writers located in Canada, the Caribbean, London, and other regions of the African diaspora. Unlike traditional slave and neoslave narratives that often rewrite history to emphasize the worldview of those written out of official narratives of history, oftentimes from an individualist perspective that stresses the subjectivity of the enslaved, newer additions to the genre expand this focus to include the community experience of slavery which they configure in relation to discourses of nationhood, Empire, diaspora, and citizenship. This expansion of the genre – both in terms of subject matter and authorship – constitutes a significant critical development in the neoslave narrative that is worthy of investigation. Accordingly, I engage in a comparative analysis of contemporary historical novels of slavery written by African American and Caribbean writers in order to highlight the shared yet distinct nature of this diasporic genre; demonstrate the concern with community, nation formation, and citizenship that features prominently in the newer additions to the neoslave narrative tradition; and elaborate and extend recent work on

the black Atlantic and the use of postcolonial theory in American studies. It is my contention that the narratives written by African American writers use the discourse of slavery to interrogate the imagined community of the US nation by showing that it is based on an individualistic ideology fuelled by self-interest to offer a counter-narrative of the nation that critiques domestic imperialism as it relates to African Americans. The Caribbean novels also interrogate the performance of national identity but do so by focusing on the way slavery shaped the phenomenon of exile, migration, and diaspora. In the process, they render in fictive form, what the postcolonial theorists Édouard Glissant and Paul Gilroy refer to as a counter-culture of modernity; a term they use to describe the discourses of resistance articulated by slaves on the plantations of the New World and by their descendants in the postslavery period and beyond.

Bernard Bell has been credited with coining the term neoslave narrative to describe these contemporary narratives that fictionalize the plantation experience. Crediting Margaret Walker's novel *Jubilee*, which was published in 1966, with initiating this genre, Bell defines the neoslave narrative as "residually oral, modern narratives of escape from bondage to freedom" (289). Ashraf Rushdy hyphenates Bell's term to offer his own description of neo-slave narratives as "contemporary novels that assume the form, adopt the conventions, and take on the first-person voice of the antebellum slave narrative" (3). I define the novels that comprise the focus of this study as historical novels of slavery in that they make the experiences of real or imagined personages central to their plots. I position both the neoslave narrative and the historical novel of slavery within a larger genre – novels about slavery that are written in the contemporary

present. Unless I am referring specifically to either one of these more narrowly focused traditions, I use the more general term “novel of slavery.”

The earlier narratives in this tradition that were produced during the 1970s and 1980s tend to thematically and rhetorically reproduce the conventions of the nineteenth century slave narrative in that they make use of the first person narrator; foreground the narrative present; emphasize the coming to “voice” of the subject (oftentimes through the acquisition of literacy); and detail the physical escape from slavery to freedom. In contrast, the neoslave narratives which are the focus of this study and which were all published within the last 20 years differ from earlier novels of slavery in a number of key aspects in terms of their formal techniques as well as subject matter. Many of these novels employ non-linear narrative techniques that include flashforwards and flashbacks that literally move the reader across time and space. Most of these novels also make use of multiple narrative points of view that often result in a polyphonic discourse that gives insight into both the individual and collective experience of slavery in ways that are atypical of the traditional neo-slave narrative and historical novel of slavery.

Thus these new neo-slave narratives articulate a new vision/version of the black counterculture of modernity that focuses on the community rather than the individual; on the international, the fluid, and the female, as opposed to the national, the fixed, and the masculine; on the continuity between the oppression of slavery and the oppression experienced by black citizens today. They articulate these philosophical and/or political visions through non-linear narrative techniques. I maintain that this shift in subject matter and narrative technique is indicative of a desire to explicitly demonstrate the continuities between US and Caribbean slavery and colonialism in the seventeenth to

nineteenth centuries and the forms of citizenship and nationhood available to African American and Caribbean peoples in the contemporary era. I examine these novels to investigate how these writers portray the relationship between slavery, Empire, nation, and diaspora with the aim of answering the following questions: How is the literary depiction of the transition from the condition of slavery to that of citizenship used to position the black new World community in relation to the discourse of modernity, the nation state, and the neo-imperial project? How do the gender, class, and geographical positionality of the subjects of the black new World diaspora inflect and complicate the portrayal of modernity, nationhood, and discourses of Empire? How might these novels extend traditional theoretical models that are applied to the analysis of African American, Caribbean, and black Atlantic literature? I argue that these novels develop the idea that the socio-economic relations that inform the plantation experience are repeated from one historical era to another and negate a conception of human history as a progressive movement ever forward through time. As a result, the descendants of slaves find their ongoing quest for full citizenship rights compromised and limited by the ongoing legacy of the historical experience of enslavement. More specifically, these novels develop the idea that the slave experience, although past, continues to have a profound impact on the types of citizenship available to descendants of slaves.

Kathleen Canning and Sonya O. Rose define citizenship “as a political status assigned to individuals by states, as a relation of belonging to specific communities, or as a set of social practices that define the relationships between peoples and states and among peoples within communities” (427). By examining the way blacks’ experiences of nationhood and diaspora are conditioned by the slave experience, these novels

indicate that for descendants of slaves, citizenship cannot be fully conceptualized without taking into account the historical conditions that inform their experiences of contemporary reality. David Scobey notes that intellectuals have felt compelled to question and redefine the concept of citizenship in the light of social changes that characterize the era of globalization. Many of these critics of contemporary exercises of citizenship argue that the concept is increasingly being linked to the acquisition of civil rights as opposed to actively engaging in civic acts that establish community and national identification and a sense of belonging (16-19). These texts enter into this debate by developing the idea that there is a historical component to citizenship that is often overlooked.

They interrogate the concept and practice of citizenship as it relates to blacks in the African diaspora by exploring the way the process of enslavement, characterized by the utter denial of citizenship rights – indeed the failure to even acknowledge the enslaved as human – affected and continues to affect slaves and their descendants. They develop the idea that while these individuals have gained citizenship rights, their experiences of civic citizenship continues to be compromised. In many instances, they emphasize the socio-political and economic marginalization that descendants of the slaves face in contemporary society and develop the idea that this form of liminality and exclusion is an ongoing legacy of the plantation system that bestowed privilege on the racially and socially privileged while creating an underclass comprised of the racially disadvantaged who were denied access to this privilege.

In focusing on the way the historical experience of slavery continues to compromise the forms of citizenship experienced by descendants of the slaves, these

novels also interrogate dominant conceptualizations of citizenship. Iris Marion Young notes that the concept of equality, that drives the contemporary quest by minorities for citizenship and full inclusion into the systems of civil society, stresses the commonalities between individuals and develops the idea that laws are applied to all in the same manner. In her opinion, this focus on equality ironically promotes continued inequality by obscuring the peculiarities of the experiences of those who have traditionally been denied citizenship. She states:

in a society where some groups are privileged while others are oppressed, insisting that as citizens persons should leave behind their particular affiliations and experiences to adopt a general point of view serves only to reinforce that privilege; for the perspectives and interests of the privileged will tend to dominate this unified public, marginalizing or silencing those of other groups. (257)

These novels, which emphasize the way the legacy of slavery continues to compromise the citizenship of descendants of the slaves in the contemporary present, lend support to this claim.

Since their emergence in the 1960s, neoslave narratives are located within a broader project of re-constructing subaltern historiography from the perspective of formerly subjugated groups. In the latter half of the twentieth century, historical studies that chronicle the experience of slavery from the perspective of the enslaved have flourished in all areas of the African Diasporas of the New World.<sup>1</sup> This historical

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<sup>1</sup> American research studies on slavery include David Brion Davis (*From Homicide to Slavery: Studies in American Culture and Challenging the Boundaries of Slavery*); Ira Berlin (*Many Thousands Gone: the First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America*); Elizabeth Fox-Genovese (*Within the Plantation household: Black and White women of the Old South*); Elizabeth Fox-Genovese and Eugene D. Genovese (*Fruits of Merchant Capital: Slavery and Bourgeois Property in the Rise and Expansion of Capitalism*). Caribbean scholarship on the historiography of slavery includes C. L. R. James' *The Black Jacobins* (1938), Elsa Goveia's *A Study on the Historiography of the British West Indies to the End of the Nineteenth Century* and *Slave Society in the British Leeward Islands at the End of the Eighteenth Century*, Hilary Beckles' *Centering Woman: Gender Discourses in Caribbean Slave Society*, Bridget Brereton's *Gendered Testimony: Autobiographies, Diaries, and Letters by Women As Sources for*

research has been complemented, on the literary front, by the re-discovery of a number of nineteenth century slave narratives and the birth and growth of the genre of the novel of slavery.<sup>2</sup> While the argument can be made that earlier novels within the tradition produced in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, also focus on the collective experience of slavery, I maintain that these newer novels do so in a more explicit manner at both the formal level and in terms of their subject matter. These novels de-emphasize the individual experience of slavery/ or position the individual slave experience within the context of community formation in ways that are atypical of earlier novels within the tradition. This shift in focus to the collective experience of slavery is reflected in the change in narrative techniques of these novels which manifest a move away from a central protagonist. Indeed many of them do not have a central protagonist (*The Known World* by Edward P. Jones, *Free Enterprise* by Michelle Cliff, *At the Full and Change of the Moon* by Dionne Brand, *The Salt Roads* by Nalo Hopkinson). Instead, the action is split between two or more central characters. The novels that do have a clear protagonist situate the individual experience of slavery within a community that is clearly

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*Caribbean History*, and *Engendering History: Caribbean Women in Historical Perspective* (edited by Verene Shepherd, Bridget Brereton, and Barbara Bailey).

<sup>2</sup> Re-discovered slave narratives include *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano*, *The History of Mary Prince*, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, and *Our Nig*. A number of fictional tales written in the nineteenth century and focusing on Caribbean plantation societies have also been unearthed. These include *Creoleana*, *Adolphus, a Tale (Anonymous) & the Slave Son* (edited by Lise Winer), *Warner Arundell* by E.L. Joseph, *Hamel the Obeah Man* by Cynric R. Williams, *Obi: or the Story of Three-fingered Jack* by William Earle, and *Marly; or, A Planter's Life in Jamaica* (edited by Karina Williamson). African American neoslave narratives include Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, Shirley Anne Williams' *Dessa Rose*, Gayle Jones' *Corregidora*, Charles Johnson's *Oxherding Tale* and *Middle Passage*, Octavia Butler's *Kindred*, J. California Cooper's *Family*, and Lorene Cary's *The Price of a Child*. Works of Caribbean literature that foreground the slave experience include Maryse Conde's *I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem*, Caryl Phillips' novels *Cambridge*, *Crossing the River*, and *Higher Ground*, Fred D'augier's *Feeding the Ghosts* and *The Longest Memory*, Nalo Hopkinson's *The Salt Roads*, Laura Fish's *Strange Music*, Marlon James' *The Book of Night Women* and Andrea Levy's *The Long Song*.

represented (*A Mercy* by Toni Morrison, *Someone Knows My Name* by Lawrence Hill, *Song Yet Sung* by James McBride, and *The Book of Night Women* by Marlon James). Moreover, while earlier neoslave narratives focus on the historical existence of a slave community, the newer novels underscore the relevance of these communities to contemporary and future expressions of community among descendants of the enslaved.

These novels also give less prominence to the act of escape from slavery. In some instances, characters remain enslaved; others make it to the freedom but in all instances, processes of community formation are emphasized. Together with this foregrounding of community consciousness, these novels use temporal and spatial movements to juxtapose the sites of plantation slavery with metropolitan centers of official discourse in both North America and Europe, (cities include London, Washington DC, New York, Amsterdam, Paris) to situate slavery and its legacy squarely within the contexts of nationalist, imperialist, and neo-imperialist discourses. In this way, they explicitly foreground the concern with nation formation and citizenship is often a latent sub-text in the earlier neoslave narratives.

These novels also gender the slave experience by focusing on the role that women played in community building and in anti-slavery resistance. Six of these novels feature female protagonists while the other two (*The Known World*, *At the Full and Change of the Moon*) contain no central protagonist but instead privilege a range of narrative perspectives that include that of the female slave. Female slaves, by virtue of their responsibilities as wives/partners, mothers, and caretakers, played a crucial role in the community building that occurred on plantations. Some of the major female

characters are healers who occupy a central role in their communities. The novels also foreground the female role in militant anti-slavery resistance by portraying women who plot and lead rebellions. Some novels (*The Salt Roads* and *The Book of Night Women*) also emphasize the way sexuality conditioned the female slave experience to develop the idea that any account of the lives of female slaves that ignores the sexual domination that slave women faced, from both white men and women, and black men, is incomplete. They also illustrate that while black female sexuality was degraded and maligned in colonial constructions of femininity, black women manipulated the conditions of their enslavement to re-construct a subjectivity of resistance to both slavery and male domination.

The earlier generation of neoslave narratives of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s together with the newer neoslave narratives of the 1990s and 2000s, along with the historiography from which this literary genre derives, are part of a process of re-constituting historical consciousness among black diasporic subjects. As a result, these works lend credence to Edouard Glissant's claim that in contexts where society is estranged from its "ancestral cultural heartland," the goal of the writer is to create a collective sense of historical memory (*Caribbean Discourse* 64). Glissant states, "the past, to which we were subjected, which has not yet emerged as history for us, is, however, obsessively present. The duty of the writer is to explore this obsession, to show its relevance in a continuous fashion to the immediate present" (64). Paul Gilroy similarly underscores the continued relevance of the slave experience to the black experience of modernity when he notes that neoslave narratives examine the tension between the legacy of African and Western modernity and indicate that the "system of

plantation slavery” was the “meeting ground” of these two worldviews. He further notes that “the relationship between master and slaves ... supplies the key to comprehending the position of blacks in the modern world” (219-20). Thus the contemporary experience of and quest for citizenship is indelibly influenced by the plantation experience. Other critics who echo Gilroy’s position on the foundational role of the slave experience to the black diasporic condition and to discourses of modernity are C.L.R. James, Antonio Benitez-Rojo, and Houston A. Baker.

This continued presence of the past in the present is explored in these novels to explicitly demonstrate the continuity between the slave experience and the contemporary discourses of citizenship articulated by the descendants of slaves. The writers of the novel of slavery – both African American and Caribbean – have opted to return, through their writing, to the primal scene of shock, painful dislocation and rupture that is embodied in the slave trade, the Middle Passage, and the New World plantation to create a collective memory for African diaspora peoples who exist in contexts where collective memory does not emerge naturally. In the process, they highlight the continued social, cultural, and economic marginalization engendered by the experience of enslavement and colonialism by illuminating the continuities between slavery and the contemporary reality of African diasporic subjects.

Thus far, themes of nation, Empire, diaspora, and citizenship have not been the focus of criticism on the novel of slavery. In addition to concentrating on the earlier novels within this tradition that do not lend themselves as readily to such analysis, critics have tended to interpret both the earlier and more recent texts not through the lens of Empire or nation but through critical perspectives that foreground the individual rather

than community such as identity and gender politics, cultural criticism, and trauma theory. For example, Elizabeth Ann Beaulieu in *Black Women Writers and the American Neo-Slave Narrative: Femininity Unfettered* and Angelyn Mitchell in *The Freedom to Remember: Narrative, Slavery, and Gender in Contemporary Black Women's Fiction* examine the neoslave narrative through the lens of feminist theoretical principles. Beaulieu focuses on the maternal narrative of slavery to argue that these texts interrogate the view that gender was erased among enslaved women by demonstrating that slave women, in seeking to be total mothers, were engaged in acts of rebellion (xv). Mitchell argues that neoslave narratives written by women enter into the conversation on black womanhood that was initiated by Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life in the Life of a Slave Girl* (18). She examines the thematic and structural postmodern elements of these narratives such as narrative innovation and intertextuality which takes the form of revising earlier texts in the tradition (11-12), to argue that these novels are "a site of memory" that "go beyond the events of slavery into the feelings and thoughts of the people who imaginatively had the experience" (17). Although this approach has the potential to examine women's role in community formation, Mitchell ultimately centers her analysis on individual subjectivity.

Ashraf Rushdy in his work *Neo-Slave Narratives: Studies in the Social Logic of a Literary Form* also examines both the "cultural" and "literary" politics of the neoslave narrative (3). His approach reflects the earlier focus among writers and critics of the genre whose major concern was contesting dominant historiography to make visible the subjectivity and experience of the enslaved from African American perspectives. He maintains that the neoslave narrative genre arose as a result of William Styron's

publication of *The Confessions of Nat Turner* which black critics saw as the appropriation and misuse of Turner's narrative to further a dominant ideology that was anathema to black interests. To contest Styron's representation of Nat Turner, black writers responded with their own literary representations of slavery. Rushdy positions the neoslave narrative in relation to Styron's "master" narrative to analyze the way black male writers responded to Styron's white male text and the way the black female writer in turn responded to the white and black male texts of the genre. His analysis thus follows the "social logic" of race and gender discourse in US society in that it conforms to the white/black, male/female binary oppositions upon which discussions of race and gender overwhelmingly rest and upon which criticisms of the neoslave narratives turn. While these theoretical frameworks provide invaluable insight into the nature of this tradition, they tend to focus critical analysis on themes of identity and subjectivity as opposed to that of nation formation and colonialism.

Moreover, analysis of these narratives is often confined to a US/ or national focus that precludes a focus on the diasporic and international representation of slavery with which the newer novels are increasingly concerned. A few comparative studies of the novel of slavery, that transcend national/or regional boundaries, have been published. These studies place great emphasis on the relationship between the novel of slavery and postmodernist discourse but tend to confine their analysis of the postmodernist elements of these novels to traditional topics that are often the focus of the critical on the novel of slavery. These include the coming to voice of the subject; the privileging of individual subjectivity over discourses of race and nation; and the rewriting of history.

For example, in his work *Postmodern Tales of Slavery in the Americas: From Alejo Carpentier to Charles Johnson*, Timothy Cox compares neoslave narratives of the US, Francophone Caribbean, and Spanish speaking countries of Cuba and Colombia. He argues that these novels take the discourse of slavery out of a EuroAmerican context (in contrast to their nineteenth century prototypes that were used to advance the abolitionist cause) and position it within a context of black experience (4). They also create a discourse of counter-memory that validates black resiliency and survival into “the larger discursive formation of the New World” (12). Cox focuses on the use of history in these texts, the portrayal of the Middle Passage and escapes from slavery, the use of postmodern irony, and the poetic and rhetorical strategies employed to tell these stories (xiii-xiv). This work is valuable in its diasporic focus and its inclusion of neoslave narratives from the non-English speaking Caribbean. However Cox does not include neoslave narratives from the Anglophone Caribbean in his analysis nor does he place emphasis on the way these novels interrogate the discourses of nation, colonialism, and imperialism.

In her dissertation, “Owning Up to the Silence: Slavery in the Caribbean Postmodern Historical Novel” Vivian Nun Halloran examines novels from the Anglophone, Francophone, and Hispanophone Caribbean to argue that they “present the development of a self-chosen cultural identity as the path to joining a global, or at least transnational community” (9). Halloran focuses on the elements of “parody, metafiction, anachronism, and breaks in the time-space continuum” to explore the novels’ depiction of Caribbean subjectivity which she argues is portrayed as fluid and fragmentary in keeping with the postmodern aesthetics of the works (9). This study is

comprehensive in its treatment of novels from the three main language speaking areas of the Caribbean. However, the focus on the narrative portrayal of identity and subjectivity and the postmodernist elements of the novels conforms to traditional theoretical approaches that have been applied to the novel of slavery.

In contrast, I demonstrate that the more recent novels in this tradition, while they also make use of postmodernist aesthetic and rhetorical elements, that include self-reflexivity achieved through meta-narrative devices such as flashbacks and flashforwards that creates temporal movement across space and time; multiple narrative points of view; and the use of parody and pastiche; produce a communal and counter-modern aesthetic that critiques imperialist exercises of power. Thus they position narrative portrayals of slavery beyond the discourses of identity politics, cultural criticism, and trauma theory. The shift in focus in the newer novels of slavery from themes of individual subjectivity to critiques of colonialist and imperialist structures of domination lends credence to Henry Louis Gates' theory of "repetition with a difference." In discussing the centrality of the nineteenth century slave narrative to the diasporic literary tradition, Gates notes that these narratives repeated and revised rhetorical tropes used in earlier slave narratives. In so doing, slave narratives point to "shared, if altered patterns of representation that serve to define a literary tradition" (169). This pattern of "repetition with a difference" that he labels "signifying" led to the creation of a unique African diasporic tradition (158). Subsequent generations of novels within this tradition engage with their predecessor texts in ways that are distinct to African American literature. In his discussion of the early slave narrative, which he credits with

initiating the black literary tradition in the West, Gates discusses the transnational and diasporic aspects of the early black Atlantic world.

I maintain that the contemporary novel of slavery is similarly engaged in this pattern of repetition with a difference not only with preceding texts within the same national tradition but also with texts of the same genre from other national traditions. Initially a uniquely African American tradition, whose origins have been located in the 1960s, this genre of the neoslave narrative has been embraced by writers across the African diaspora. It has thus crossed borders and needs to be positioned both within its individual national tradition and a diasporic framework of analysis. By focusing on the newer additions to the neoslave narrative tradition, that I interpret as yet another revision in the genre, my study extends the critical conversation on the African American neoslave narrative initiated by critics like Beaulieu, Mitchell, and Rushdy and demonstrates the continuing evolution that continues to take place in this literary tradition. Furthermore by demonstrating that the novels from the Anglophone Caribbean are also involved in this process of revision, my study demonstrates that the novel of slavery is constitutive of a diaspora-wide discourse. It extends criticism on the neoslave narrative in that the newer novels which I make the focus of my study illustrate that the neoslave narrative tradition has evolved from its inception in the mid-twentieth century to reflect concerns of the late twentieth and early twenty first century such as the imperialism and colonialism of the early US and the role of plantation society, slavery, and colonialism in the discourse of modernity.

In Chapter 2, I examine the novel *A Mercy*, written by the African American writer Toni Morrison's *A Mercy* and *Someone Knows My Name* written by the Canadian writer

Lawrence Hill. These novels focus on female slave narrators whose individual experiences of enslavement are embedded within a larger narrative of community formation. *A Mercy* examines slavery in relation to the process of settler colonialism to detail the methods through which hierarchical race relations were cemented and paved the way for the exclusion of the non-white other from discourses of early American nationhood. *Someone Knows My Name* demonstrates that this denial of national identity forced some blacks to leave the US and seek an alternative discourse of nationhood based in the larger diaspora. This novel develops the idea that the orientation towards diasporic citizenship was created by the slave experience and ironically denied by it in that the colonialist and imperialist practices that excluded blacks from the discourse of American nationhood also hampered their efforts to form autonomous communities in the larger diaspora. In situating the African American slave experience within the context of Empire and diaspora, these novels depart from the tendency of traditional African American neoslave narratives to depict slavery from a purely local or national perspective that often elides the international dimensions of the slave experience. They also embody “repetition with a difference” in that they explicitly signal their revisionist agenda by alluding to and rewriting older slave and neoslave narratives that focus on the localized experience of slavery in America and that portray the slave experience as an individualistic quest for freedom.

In Chapter 3, I argue that the African American neoslave narratives, *The Known World* written by Edward P. Jones’ and *Song Yet Sung* written by James McBride explore the African American slave experience in relation to discourses of American nationhood. These novels use spatial tropes to demonstrate the centrality of community

formation, in both the North and the South, to the counterculture of resistance articulated by the slaves. They contrast those blacks (individuals and communities) who enter into modernity by accepting the terms of the dominant group, with those who enter into the socio-political processes of the nation even as they interrogate systems associated with racial exploitation. They also use temporal tropes – specifically flashforwards and flashbacks – to highlight the continuity between the oppression of slavery and contemporary racial oppression. Moreover, both novels see that continuity as based in the founding U.S. ideology of individualism and “consumer citizenship”—an ideology that was consistent with the institution of slavery. Jones and McBride critique elite African Americans for assimilating this ideology and depict other approaches to community building and citizenship that can be read as alternative models that the authors see as leading toward full-citizenship. In so doing, these novels present a counter-narrative of the nation that critiques the exploitative individualism upon which so much of American national identity is predicated. They also interrogate the tendency of traditional slave and neoslave narratives to make implicit, rather than explicit connections between the experience of slavery, processes of nation formation, and the discourse of African American citizenship.

In Chapter 4, I analyze Michelle Cliff’s *Free Enterprise* and Dionne Brand’s *At the Full and Change of the Moon*. These authors are of Caribbean writers based in North America – Cliff in the US and Brand in Canada. I argue that these texts demonstrate the continuity between the contemporary migration experiences of Caribbean peoples and the historical experience of maroonage to position slavery squarely within the contexts of Empire and neo-imperialism. These novels show that the paradoxical

combination of resistance and accommodation that oftentimes informed the ancestral experience of maroonage is replicated in the complicated and compromised forms of resistance of the marginalized Caribbean migrant. In thus linking the peculiar features of the maroon communities they describe to the migration experiences of the contemporary Caribbean subject, these works demonstrate that elements of the maroon experience transcends the spatial and temporal boundaries of the plantation system and as such, is of ongoing relevance in writing about and theorizing on the nature of diasporic citizenship. Moreover, by presenting contemporary Caribbeans' experience of marginality and their complicated forms of resistance as modern maroonage, these novels contribute to a maroon discourse that extends both literary representations and theoretical studies of maroonage. In so doing, they demonstrate the concern with community; nation formation, and citizenship that feature so prominently in the newer additions to the novel of slavery genre. Moreover, by illustrating the ambiguous relationship between the maroon tradition and modernity, they contribute to and complicate the theoretical discourse on the counter-culture of modernity articulated by critics such as Edouard Glissant and Paul Gilroy.

In Chapter 5, I argue that the neoslave narratives *The Salt Roads* written by Nalo Hopkinson and *The Book of Night Women* written by Marlon James emphasize the importance of the private sphere and female sexuality to the colonial experience and the discourse of slavery. Like Cliff and Brand, these writers are from the Caribbean but are based in North America - Hopkinson is considered a Canadian writer although she is currently living in the US and James lives in the US. They explore individual and collective acts of rebellion among female slaves to demonstrate that women played an

integral role in the counterculture of modernity articulated by slaves on the plantations of the New World. These texts present this counterculture through subject matter and formal techniques that include: explicit representations of sexuality; the use of Caribbean dialect; alluding to and rewriting historical and archival documents as well as other fictional works; and non-linear narrative techniques that literally move the reader across time and space. These narrative devices connect the slave resistance that occurred on the plantations of the colonial Caribbean to metropolitan discourses of European modernity, demonstrate the way black female sexuality was denigrated in colonial constructions of femininity and re-constructed by black women to articulate a subjectivity of community and resistance to both slavery and male domination; and articulate a distinctly Caribbean aesthetic of modernity. In so doing, these novels revise the tendency among some postcolonial critics and writers to mirror the male-centered focus of Western modernity in their deconstruction and revision of this discourse.

CHAPTER 2  
SLAVERY, EMPIRE, AND DIASPORA IN TONI MORRISON'S *A MERCY* AND  
LAWRENCE HILL'S *SOMEONE KNOWS MY NAME*

In this chapter, I argue that Toni Morrison's *A Mercy* and Lawrence Hill's *Someone Knows My Name* explore the slave experience, and the processes of community formation that accompany it, in relation to discourses of colonialism, imperialism, and diaspora. In situating the American experience of slavery within the context of Empire and diaspora, these novels depart from the tendency of traditional neoslave narratives to depict slavery from a purely local or national perspective that often elides the international experience of slavery. This nation-centered focus is mirrored in the critical literature on these novels that tend to interpret them within a national perspective that ignores the fact that this genre of literature has become truly diasporan in scope.

Set in the North Eastern US in the 1680s and 1690s, *A Mercy* interrogates the tendency to position the process of European settlement of the American continent, and the experience of slavery that accompanied it, outside of the discourse of Empire. The novel examines slavery in relation to the process of settler colonialism to detail the methods through which hierarchical race relations were cemented and paved the way for the exclusion of the non-white other from the processes of the nation. In so doing, it demonstrates the intimate relationship between the experience of American slavery and the colonialist and imperialist practices that informed and shaped both the US and the black Atlantic.

While *A Mercy* explores the processes through which American national identity was dialectically created at the expense of non-whites in the New World, Hill's novel demonstrates that this exclusion from discourses of early American nationhood forced

some blacks to leave the US and seek an alternative discourse of nationhood that was based in the larger diaspora. Set in the latter half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, when the then British American colonies fought for and consolidated a national identity through the 1776 War of Independence with Britain, the novel details the search of its heroine for a nation, first in the British colony of Nova Scotia and then in Sierra Leone. In exploring the extensive problems these two colonies of free blacks experience as they try to become autonomous, the novel positions the quest for identity and full citizenship rights of the formerly enslaved as a truly diasporic undertaking. *Someone Knows My Name* shows how the orientation towards diasporic citizenship was created by the slave experience and ironically denied by it in that the colonialist and imperialist practices that excluded blacks from the discourse of American nationhood also hampered their efforts to achieve citizenship in the larger diaspora.

In revising the neoslave narrative genre that has typically presented American slavery from a purely nationalist perspective, both novels are examples of what Henry Louis Gates Jr. refers to as “repetition with a difference.” Gates uses this term in his theoretical work, *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism*, to describe the intertextuality that he sees at work in the earliest slave narratives produced by blacks in the West. He maintains that the writers of these novels made use of and revised rhetorical tropes used by earlier writers within this tradition to point to “shared, if altered patterns of representation that serve to define a literary tradition” (169). *A Mercy*, which revises Morrison’s earlier novel, *Paradise*, enters into this tradition of “repetition with a difference.” The theme of settler colonialism, which is implicitly invoked in the earlier work, is explicitly examined in *A Mercy* which focuses on

the European settlement of the American continent to situate the slave experience within the context of Empire and colonialism. *A Mercy* also revises *Beloved* in its focus on the young female slave, Florens, whose life is profoundly shaped by her relationship with her mother. *Beloved* also emphasizes the slave experience and the mother/daughter relationship. *A Mercy* revisits these themes but combines them with an exploration of the colonialism and imperialism that fuelled the establishment of race-based slavery in the New World. Hill also engages in this process of revision in *Someone Knows My Name* by drawing heavily on tropes that appear in one of the first and most famous slave narratives *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano*. Hill revises Equiano's text to develop the idea that Equiano's individualistic path to citizenship was not feasible for the majority of enslaved blacks.

### **Empire, Domesticity, and Race in Toni Morrison's *A Mercy***

Toni Morrison's 2008 novel *A Mercy* situates American slavery within the discourse of Empire. Set approximately a hundred years before the American colonies declared their independence from Britain, the story explores the dynamics of labor and property ownership that informed the process of settler colonialism, including slavery, and the processes by which citizenship, or lack thereof, was determined in the pre-revolutionary period of the nation's history. In so doing, the novel counters the tendency to view the United States as divorced from the colonialist and imperialist practices that informed European settlement of the New World. *A Mercy* depicts the creation and dissolution of a farming domicile headed by Jacob Vaark, a trader of mixed Dutch and English ancestry who inherits a patroonship from his Dutch uncle and settles in the early American colony with the aim of making his fortune. He accepts the young slave Florens as part payment for a debt that is owed to him by a Portuguese trader and

takes her to live on his farm. In its description of the Vaark household, which is in effect a microcosm of the larger socio-cultural milieu of the period, the novel develops the idea that hierarchical racial and social categories were “invented” to give one group dominance and control over resources, that included not only land, but also bodies marked as illegal and “Other.”

The narrative form of *A Mercy* reflects the novel’s emphasis on processes of community formation in early America. In commenting on the narrative technique of Toni Morrison’s novels, Philip Page notes that “the narration is frequently subdivided among multiple points of view so that each novel, while retaining its unity, also projects a collection of perspectives. Plots tend to be circular or spiral rather than linear, as meaning is accreted through repetition and layering ...” (4). Page also identifies call and response, one of the expressive forms of the African American oral tradition, in which “statements by the individual and the group alternate” (13), as another recurring motif in Morrison’s work. We see these techniques at work in *A Mercy* in which Florens’ first person narrative is interspersed with the third person narratives of the other characters. The effect is a polyvocal, almost conversational narrative that embeds the individual slave experience within a broader narrative of community formation that highlights the colonialism upon which the relations of dominations responsible for the Vaark household’s creation and subsequent demise are based. This layering of perspectives ensures that each character’s narrative complements and at times completes the others. The reader can appreciate these intertwined stories but the characters never articulate their viewpoints to each other with the result that although they are a community on one level, they remain profoundly isolated from each other on

another level. This isolation leads to and reflects the eventual dissolution of the community.

Morrison has stressed that one of her goals in writing the novel was to examine how race was constructed in early America and eventually tied to slavery.

Acknowledging that she felt it was important to first immerse herself in the history of early America before she crafted her novel, she comments on the universality of slavery by noting that all empires were founded on the servitude of labor but notes that America was unique in that it was the first empire to implement a system of race-based slavery (Neary). In spite of the novel's obvious concern with exploring the relationship between race, slavery, and Empire much of the extant critical literature on *A Mercy* tends to reinforce the nationalist lens through which much of American literature is read.

Michael Warner comments on the tendency among American historians to interpret American history from a national framework and asserts that this focus has been mirrored in the work of literary critics who tend to read early Anglo- American texts from a nation-centered perspective to consolidate a sense of American national identity. Warner argues that this focus elides the colonial and imperial nature of the early US.

Thus far, this nationalist interpretation of *A Mercy*, which revisits the period of colonial America, has predominated in the critical literature. Many critics read the text as an origins narrative with the result that they elide the novel's critique of the imperialism of the early US. Valerie Babb, for example, asserts that Morrison uses her novel to re-insert the voices that have been lost in the construction of a homogeneous narrative of American origins. Babb examines the racial, gender, and class dynamics of the story and argues that Morrison uses these voices to challenge the discursive

construction of this origins narrative as it manifested itself in the religious, legal, and personal literature of early America. Cathy Covell Waegner also reinforces this focus on nation formation and identity politics in her critique of the novel. She argues that by highlighting “the ruthless exploitation based on ethnicity, gender, and class” upon which European conquest of the New World was predicated, *A Mercy* interrogates the unexamined celebration of American nationhood (91). While there can be no doubt that the novel foregrounds an analysis of the discourse of nation in relation to the categories of race, gender, and class, I maintain that it also positions this portrayal of identity politics and nation formation in early America in relation to imperialist practices.

Andy Doolen underscores the imperialism of the early US when he notes that both the imperial court and Founding Fathers produced and protected a white national identity while converting blackness into a foreign threat to the republic” (xiii). He further notes that the institution of slavery was built into the founding principles of the nation and the American constitution- “not ... against an imperial logic of racial domination, but within that very logic” (xvi).<sup>3</sup> Morrison similarly comments on the colonialism of the US which resulted in the exclusion of blacks from entry into the processes of the nation when she notes, in her critical treatise *Playing in the Dark*, that the African American population in the US “has always had a curiously intimate and unhingingly *separate* existence within the dominant one” (12 italics mine). These comments, that highlight the exclusion of African Americans from the discourses of American nationhood, position them as victims of internal colonization and suggest the relevance of a

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<sup>3</sup> Doolen’s ideas on the use of blackness to construct a white national identity resonate with Toni Morrison’s ideas on the function of the Africanist presence in American literature. In her theoretical treatise, *Playing in the Dark*, Toni Morrison argues that blacks were discursively constructed as an “Other” in the fiction of white Anglo-American writers of the nineteenth century who were engaged in the process of creating a sense of American national identity.

postcolonial approach to an analysis of this literature. Although slavery was a form of internal colonialism, it is not examined in relation to discourses of American nationhood and colonialism in any sustained and overt manner in critical analyzes of the African American novel of slavery. Instead, many of these discussions continue to revolve around the nexus of race and gender within a national framework.

Morrison's novel demonstrates that slavery played a vital role in shaping early American nationhood and, by extension, the forms of citizenship available to African Americans in the contemporary present. Set in the 1680s and 1690s, her novel demonstrates that the imperialism that informed the process of nation formation in the early US was co-terminous with the settlement of the North American colony. Moreover the novel demonstrates the crucial role that racial and gender hierarchies played in determining who was entitled to status in the newly emerging nation. Examined from the vantage point of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Morrison's portrayal of identity politics in the fledgling nation resonates with the view of citizenship as an exclusionary, as opposed to inclusionary practice. The connection between imperialism and citizenship is underscored by Isin and Wood. Citing T.H. Marshall's definition of the term "exclusionary citizenship," they highlight the interdependence of nation formation and imperialism in Western societies where "class," "gender," and "ethnic and religious" differences were used to determine who was entitled to citizenship. The result is that unpropertied males, women, and racial and religious "Others" were denied franchise rights and status. They note that this:

exclusionary legislation ... is a reflection of an imperialist practice that found its strongest expression in citizenship to mark out the Other. Such a practice includes the categorization of land as "territory" and people as "races." Both presuppose ownership and control. At the core of this

practice is an invented hierarchy of peoples and nations that attempt to justify the claiming of land and the subjugation of peoples previously foreign to the conqueror.... Nations were established and governed by similar groups and classes that had launched empires. (55)

I maintain that the novel uses the micro-community of the Vaark household to demonstrate the way this process of “exclusionary citizenship” took hold in the early US. The novel details the settler colonialism, that saw the white, propertied male establishing “ownership and control” of “land” and “people.” It also explores the racial and gender hierarchies that created an ideological and legal discourse that effectively limited or denied citizenship rights to non-whites and women while consolidating the power of the white, male propertied elite.

Vaark symbolizes the European adventurers, merchants, and traders who viewed the territories of the New World as places where wealth could be accumulated. Vaark’s materialism is elaborated in his proprietorial view of the land and its resources that is metaphorically invoked in the description of the environment when he is first introduced in the novel. On his way to visit the Portuguese plantation owner, D’Ortega, he is deposited along the shoreline of the eastern seaboard of the US and as he wades through the surf to the shore, he notes that “unlike the English fogs he had known since he could walk, or those way north where he lived now, this one was sun fired, turning the world into thick, hot gold” (9). The word “gold” is repeated numerous times in the description of Vaark’s perception of the landscape. Later we are informed that Vaark trades in “goods and gold” (25); an association that conflates Vaark’s perception of the land with his pursuit of wealth. The imperial context in which this economic activity is situated is further invoked in the references to European processes of colonization: he rides a horse named Regina, the Latin word for queen (10), makes the observation that

the colony of Maryland now “belonged to the King, entirely” (13), and reflects on the multiple European powers – including the Swedes, the Dutch, and the English – currently engaged in a power struggle for possession of the land on the newly discovered continent.

Vaark describes the colony of Maryland, including the palatial estate of D’Ortega, as “wilderness” and observes that although the territory is under the control of the British monarchy, then comprised of Catholic kings, ownership of the land is fluid and constantly changing. This situation contributes to the chaotic, disorganized, and lawless nature of the territory which he describes as “ad hoc.” Vaark’s own participation in this appropriation of land is made explicit when he thinks of his own patroonship that he inherits from an uncle and his tacit admission to himself that the land belongs to the Indians. Vaark’s complete entry into the economic systems of Empire is later underscored when, as he realizes “his shortcomings as a farmer” and his facility with commerce, he is seduced by the profitability of the sugar and slave trade, his entrance into which he justifies with the thought that the remoteness of the slave labor on which his enterprise rests absolves him from any complicity in the exploitation of the enslaved. Hence in spite of his best intentions – Vaark is initially determined to become wealthy without trading in human flesh, is considerate of the natural environment and its creatures, and abhors cruelty to both man and animal – he becomes increasingly complicit in the exploitation of racial “Others” upon which the imperial project is founded.

Although Vaark and his wife, Rebekka, are determined to rid themselves of vestiges of the Old World associated with oppression, they bring with them the seeds of imperialism. This idea is developed in the description of the sea voyage undertaken by

Rebekka. She shares her cramped quarters below deck with a group of “exiled, thrown-away women” (82), who “imitate what they thought were the manners of queens” over tea (85). While this parodic portrayal of lower class mimicry of the upper class highlights the class oppression that is responsible for their journey to the New World, it also suggests that they have internalized the hierarchical class relations of British society. This idea is reinforced in that Rebekka conceives of God “as a larger kind of king” (74); an association that links Empire with religion and foreshadows her later use of religion as a weapon of domination. Moreover, by positioning marriage within a system of economic exchange – Vaark acquires Rebekka through trade and commerce in the same manner he acquires his female servants – this episode indicates that from the outset, Vaark’s conceptualization of family is intertwined with ownership, possession, and property. To escape the class and gender oppression that she is subjected to in England, Rebekka accepts Vaark’s proposal of marriage. Her mother considers this arrangement a “‘sale’ ...because the prospective groom had stressed ‘reimbursement’ for clothing, expenses and a few supplies” (74).

*A Mercy*’s exploration of themes of empire and colonialism can more readily be appreciated when it is compared to Morrison’s earlier novel *Paradise*. In an article entitled “Toni Morrison's Paradise: Black Cultural Citizenship in the American Empire,” Holly Flint examines the theme of settler colonialism in *Paradise*. She reads the novel in relation to discourses of American Empire and the concept of cultural citizenship and concludes that the novel “retells the story of American settler colonialism from a black perspective” (586). Flint interprets the term “homesteading” as “a euphemism for settler colonialism” and notes that “like many other instances of colonialism throughout the

nineteenth and twentieth centuries, American settler colonialism was shaped by both federal imperial policies (at home and abroad) and by race, class, and gender ideologies generated within domestic culture” (585-86). I maintain that Morrison continues this examination of American Empire and its effects on the domestic sphere in her latest novel. However, Morrison revises her earlier focus from the imperialism inherent in Westward expansion, to the imperialism that informed the initial settling of the Eastern seaboard of the continent in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Moreover while the theme of settler colonialism is implicitly explored in *Paradise* through the novel’s exploration of the process of American national identity that took place in the aftermath of the Civil War among a group of black homesteaders, *A Mercy* explores the imperialism and settler colonialism in the late 1600s and the impact that this had on the formation of American national identity.

Unlike *Paradise* that depicts a racially homogeneous black community, the community depicted in *A Mercy* is racially and socially heterogeneous. This community can be viewed as a microcosm of the larger socio-cultural milieu that existed in the American colony at the time in terms of its racial composition. In addition to Florens, Vaark buys Lina, a Native American woman to help with the labor on the farm and accepts Sorrow, a young orphan girl of murky origins from a lawyer and his wife who wish to be rid of her after she is impregnated by one of their sons. Two male indentured laborers, Scully and Willard, owned by a neighboring farmer but leased to Vaark in exchange for a loan, complete this makeshift community. Held together by their tenuous co-dependence on each other, this mini-community that exists on the outskirts of an Anabaptist town, dissolves after Vaark succumbs several years later to small pox.

Although not related by blood ties, these individuals initially form bonds of kinship with each other that resemble a family. When the household first takes shape, the characters form pairings based on their shared experiences. In addition to the Vaarks who become united in their marital union to the point where they felt “they needed only themselves,” (an observation made by Lina as she later ponders the disintegration of the household), Lina and Florens bond over their shared traumatic separation from their families with Lina performing the role of a surrogate mother to Florens. Although initially wary of each other, Lina and Rebekka also form a fast friendship over shared domestic chores and the challenge of learning to run the farm in the wilderness while the two indentured servants, Willard and Scully, become friends over the labor they perform and their sexual attraction to each other.

This community disintegrates after Vaark’s death when the domestic relations in the household begin to mirror the power relations in the wider society. Rebekka converts to the Anabaptist religion that exercises the same religious bigotry and intolerance from which she had fled. Her conversion is motivated by the trauma she experiences at the unexpected demise of her husband and the grief of her childless condition (her children all die in their infancy). After she is cured of the small pox that kills her husband and becomes fully immersed in the Anabaptist religion, she physically abuses Sorrow; and places Florens up for sale. A formerly pliant and reliable servant, Florens undergoes a personality change, becoming intractable and uncontrollable, after she is rejected by her lover; a blacksmith who had worked on the ornamental decoration of the fence to Sir’s house. Florens allows the rage and bitterness that she feels at this rejection to fester, emotionally withdraws from Lina, and becomes surly and

unapproachable to others. Florens' personality change is associated with images of the wilderness, wildness, and untamed sexuality and essentially serves as a contrast with the world of domesticity that Rebekka strives to embody after she adopts the Puritan religious ethos. The blacksmith tells Florens: "you are nothing but wilderness. No constraint. No mind" (141) before he ends their relationship. Following this rejection and the disaffection that her recalcitrant behavior fosters in Rebekka, Florens is literally and symbolically expelled from the private, domestic sphere.

Florens' association with the uncivilized, savage "Other" conflates the discourses of domesticity and imperialism. The intricate relationship between the private sphere of the family and home and the public world of commerce and politics in early America is discussed by Amy Kaplan in her essay, *Manifest Domesticity*. Kaplan argues that discourses of domesticity and empire complemented each other and were used to solidify the Anglo-American process of nation-building in the antebellum US. She surmises that although the public and domestic spheres were seen as separate, they were in reality united as men and women became national allies in their opposition to the foreign "other" where race, as opposed to gender, were the factors of separation. Thus the discourse of domesticity, that guarded the border between the savage and the civilized and policed the civilized sphere for traces of the savage, became an important ideological and practical element of imperialism. She terms this phenomenon "imperial domesticity" (586). In "Left Alone with America," Kaplan also discusses the role that the ideological construction of the wilderness played in the discourse of colonialism. She states, "The Frontier [is] a major conceptual site in American studies – in earlier

discourses it was constructed as an empty wilderness in need of taming and conquering ... (16).

Rebekka becomes an agent of imperial domesticity after she converts to the Anabaptist religion which sets up a barrier between Puritan domesticity and the world of the untamed and savage that she comes to associate with the racial "Other." She forces Lina to give up her cultural practices, such as sleeping in a hammock which she had previously tolerated but which she comes to view as uncivilized and savage. Her perception of the land also changes and literally reflects the change in perspective that she undergoes after her religious conversion. Initially, Rebekka embraces the untamed land. Pleasantly surprised by the contrast between the oppressive life that she leaves in England and the personal freedom that she experiences in the US, she relishes the vast, sparsely inhabited land and is tolerant of difference as it is embodied in Lina and Florens. However, under the influence of the Anabaptists, she adopts the view that the wilderness is untamed and savage.

Ironically, women, regardless of race, are associated with the wilderness due to their lack of an independent status in the society. During Rebekka's illness, Lina reflects on the fact that she, Florens, and Sorrow lack the security and protection that comes with legal rights and social affiliation: "three unmastered women ... belonging to no one, became wild game for anyone. None of them could inherit; none was attached to a church or recorded in its books. Female and illegal, they would be interlopers, squatters, if they stayed on after Mistress died, subject to purchase, hire, assault, abduction, exile" (58). Rebekka also reflects on her lack of status after her husband's death noting that "without the status or shoulder of a man, without the support of family

or well-wishers, a widow was in practice illegal” (98). This observation shows that Rebekka vicariously derives her status and position through Vaark. When he dies, her sense of stability is shattered and she is left defenseless and traumatized. Although she may have taken solace in the company of the other women, their powerlessness in the community forestalls this, and she sees little alternative but to join the close-minded and intolerant religious sect to garner recognition in the community and regain a sense of stability. Thus, females, regardless of race are constructed in civil society as outlaws, lacking legal recognition unless they have the protection of a male with status.

The dependence of the women of Vaark’s household on their master is blatantly made clear in the aftermath of his death and is summed up in Scully’s shrewd observation:

Such were the ravages of Vaark’s death. And the consequences of women in thrall to men or pointedly without them .... based on his own experience he was certain betrayal was the poison of the day. Sad. They once thought they were a kind of family because together they had carved companionship out of isolation. But the family they imagined they had become was false. Whatever each one loved, sought or escaped, their futures were separate and anyone’s guess. (155-56)

The reference to the idea of family is ironic for Vaark and Rebekka define family, and the identifications that derive from it, in narrow and exclusive terms: as male-centered, patriarchal, racially homogeneous, and based on blood inheritance. Scully comments on this with the thought that, “minus bloodlines, he saw nothing yet on the horizon to unite them” (156). The Vaarks’ investment in “bloodlines” is illustrated in their desire for a male heir and in their naming of their daughter Patrician to signal their investment in patriarchal ideals and in the existing social order. Because of their over-investment in the idea of a narrowly defined family, the Vaarks devalue the community that forms around them. In the end, Rebekka betrays the women and destabilizes the integrity of

the unit they had built through hard work by embracing the very religious bigotry which had caused her to flee England.

The exclusionary nature of the Vaark's narrow conception of family is mirrored in the socio-political order with the imposition of exclusionary legislation that privileges the white male at the expense of all others. In the opening pages of the novel, Vaark reflects on the state of the fledgling British colony. The voice of the omniscient narrator notes:

Half a dozen years ago an army of blacks, natives, whites, mulattoes – freedmen, slaves and indentured – had waged war against local gentry led by members of that very class. When that “people’s war” lost its hopes to the hangman, the work it had done ... spawned a thicket of new laws authorizing chaos in defense of order. By eliminating manumission, gatherings, travel and bearing arms for black people only; by granting license to any white to kill any black for any reason; by compensating owners for a slave’s maiming or death, they separated and protected all whites from all others forever. (10-11)

These new laws, that establish the propertied white male as the normative citizen while all others were constructed as subjects, reference an actual historical event, Bacon’s Rebellion that occurred in 1675-1676.<sup>4</sup> Viewed against the background of these laws that are cast as legislating “chaos” and perpetuating social dis-ease by creating a social hierarchy based on race that protected the economic interests of the wealthy male, the story that is developed in the remainder of the novel is effectively an exploration of the social impact of this legal separation of the races. Thus the degeneration of relations in

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<sup>4</sup> These laws, that curtailed the freedom of blacks, include the Virginia Slave Laws of 1662-1669 that clearly demarcated the difference in status between white indentured servants and black slaves. These laws forbid miscegenation, prohibited blacks from owning property and bearing arms, restricted their mobility, decriminalized the act of killing a slave in the process of disciplining him/her, and stipulated that any slave who was freed by his master had to leave the colony. This legislation, that instituted a system of race-based slavery designed to systematically strip blacks of any rights and cement their status as slaves, were reinforced with additional legislation in the remaining decades of the seventeenth century. (“Virginia Slave Laws.” *Digital History*. <[www.digitalhistory.uh.edu](http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu)> 2012.)

the Vaark household is emblematic of the larger socio-political processes at work in the young colony and become co-terminous with laws instituted in the aftermath of Bacon's Rebellion. These laws also demonstrate that even while early America was still a colony of Britain, a process of internal colonization that manifested itself in denying citizenship rights to blacks and other non-white groups was already in place.

These laws were constructed to privilege the propertied white male. The novel underscores this fact through its portrayal of Sully, one of the male indentured laborers who work for Vaark. Scully shrewdly recognizes the changes that are taking place around him – both in the Vaark household and the wider society – and is determined to use them to advance his status in the emerging society. He resolves to save enough money to purchase his freedom and buy a horse after he observes that “anyone limited to walking everywhere never seemed to get anywhere” (154). Owning a horse will grant him greater mobility and increase his earning potential. After Rebekka begins paying him for the odd jobs that he performs around the farm, he is careful not to offend her. Thus while he disapproves of her treatment of the women, he keeps his thoughts to himself and quietly helps them in whatever way he can without their mistress' knowledge. He helps to deliver Sorrow's baby and takes down notices that Rebekka places in the town advertising the sale of Florens.

Scully's shrewdness and perceptiveness is reminiscent of Vaark's behavior. Indeed there are several parallels between the men that position Scully as Vaark's double – both were orphaned at a young age and both are fixated on acquiring money. The first image of Vaark in the novel sees him astride a horse. In addition to demonstrating his mobility in the public sphere, this image connotes power and aligns

him with the conquerors of the continent. Scully's desire to own a horse also symbolically positions him as following in Vaark's footsteps and develops the idea that he will eventually join the propertied class who consolidate power at the expense of the raced and gendered other. Thus we can assume that Scully will gradually rise in the social and class hierarchy and like Vaark, gradually secure greater wealth and influence after he throws off the shackles of his indentured servitude.

Thus Scully positions himself to gain entry into citizenship in contrast to Florens who is associated with rebellion that foreshadows the counter-discourse of nationhood that minority groups would later articulate to contest their exclusion from the imagined community of the American nation. After Florens is violently rejected by the blacksmith, she begins to write her life story on the walls of Vaark's second home which his widow refuses to occupy after he dies. In spite of its lack of impact on those around her, Florens' writing on the wall is her way of working towards a viable conception of self. She ends her story with the words "Slave. free. I last" which indicate her determination to survive and preserve her selfhood whether she remains a slave or not. While critics tend to read Florens' narrative negatively, it is in fact an affirming statement in that it develops the idea that even as she is written out of the discourse of the emerging nation, she writes herself into being. Her story can thus be considered a sort of testimony in which she privately articulates her subjectivity. Her final words, that are reminiscent of Martin Luther King's assertion "free at last" in his "I Have a Dream" speech given at the height of the Civil Rights Movement, gesture to a seminal moment in the struggle of black Americans for full citizenship rights and entry into the processes of the nation.

The act of writing her story on the walls of Vaark's newly built mansion also symbolically invokes the counterdiscourses that would be articulated by minority groups who would seek to contest their marginalization within American society. Vaark builds this house, which is patterned after the mansion of the Portuguese trader whom Vaark visits at the beginning of the story, to publically display his wealth and standing in the society. Although very critical of D'Ortega's arrogance and ostentation, Vaark nonetheless envies and admires some of the material trappings of his wealth, one of which is the ornate ironwork that adorns the gate to the estate. Vaark patterns his own gate after this work; a mimicry that suggests his complete adoption of the worldview represented by D'Ortega. Thus although Vaark has no need for the house – his current house being more than adequate for his needs – he insists on building this property. If read as a symbol of the developing discourse of American nationhood that was initiated by laws such as those passed in response to Bacon's Rebellion, the ruin that the house falls into can be interpreted as symbolic of the corruption of Vaark's home, his family, and his dream; all of which are allegorical of the larger process of nation formation which were occurring in the fledgling colony. Florens' private act of defacing the wall while writing herself into being thus interrogates Vaark's path to the pursuit of wealth. Florens also contemplates setting fire to the house with Lina's help as a way to publicly express the rage that she privately expresses through her writing.

Thus this group of racially and socially marginalized individuals, who had initially manage to “[carve] companionship out of isolation” (155), are torn apart by their individual desires and weaknesses and the hierarchical social and racial differences that they had initially managed to negotiate but ultimately are unable to overcome. The

demise of this fledgling farming community, that comprised an early contact zone with the potential to forge meaningful cross-cultural contact, is an allegory of the early US that prefigures the individualism, race and class based oppression that would later undergird the foundations of the newly independent US more than a hundred years later. By alternating between Florens' story and the narratives of the other characters, Morrison embeds a slave narrative within a broader discourse of nation formation in early America. In so doing, she revises the novel of slavery genre by situating the slave experience within the context of colonialism and Empire building. The last chapter of the novel that details the Middle Passage experience and positions slavery within the Atlantic world by highlighting the three points of the triangular trade – Africa, England/Europe, and America and the Caribbean, specifically Barbados – underscores the international dimensions of slavery that is largely overlooked in most traditional African American neoslave narratives. In so doing, it illustrates that American slavery is not divorced from but forms part a continuum of oppression that pervaded the Atlantic world.

### **Nationhood and the Counterculture of Diaspora in Lawrence Hill's *Someone Knows My Name***

While *A Mercy* details the way whites dialectically created an identity at the expense of blacks and other non-white others to exclude these groups from the processes of nationhood in the early American colony, *Someone Knows My Name* demonstrates that as a result of their exclusion from discourses of citizenship in the newly independent nation, blacks were forced to create identity out of diaspora. Written by a Canadian author of African American ancestry, the novel positions the American

slave experience within the context of the black Atlantic.<sup>5</sup> Like *A Mercy*, Hill's text marries the individual experience of slavery with the process of community formation. The protagonist, Aminata Diallo, whose life is defined by her search for a nation, exposes the effects of imperialism on the formerly enslaved who are forced to live in a perpetual form of statelessness and disenfranchisement. The story is presented as a memoir written by Aminata, who spends her final days living in London and working as an anti-slavery advocate. She writes her life story to highlight the devastating impact of slavery on the enslaved and to provide evidence to support the anti-slavery lobby's call for an end to slavery. The first "two books" of the novel focus on Aminata's personal experiences of enslavement, from her kidnapping in Africa at the age of 12, to her life on an indigo plantation on St. Helena Island in South Carolina and later as a domestic slave who works as a book keeper and a midwife for a Jewish indigo inspector in Charleston. The next "two books" are centered on her experiences after she escapes from her master in 1775 and lives among various communities of blacks, all of whom are marginalized and lack autonomy.

After gaining her freedom, she first lives in the black ghetto of Canvas Town in New York, that consists of both legally free and escaped blacks whose tenuous freedom is made all the more perilous by the American Revolutionary War that is occurring around them. During the War, Aminata works for the British who promise freedom to those blacks who enlist with them. In 1783, with 1000 other blacks, she relocates to a free black settlement in the British colony of Nova Scotia. After nine years of an

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<sup>5</sup> Hill's parents migrated from the United States to Canada in the post-World War 2 period. (Hill, Lawrence. *Someone Knows My Name*. New York: Norton, 2007.)

unsuccessful attempt to form a colony, Aminata departs with a number of these colonists for another free colony, Sierra Leone in Africa. The repeated failure of the attempts of the free black communities to which she belongs to form viable states – first in Birchtown, Nova Scotia and then in Sierra Leone – speaks to the ongoing challenge they face in achieving both nation-state and diasporic citizenship. In demonstrating that the colonialism and imperialism that facilitated slavery also hampered the efforts of blacks to create independent nation-states, the novel shows that this quest for diasporic citizenship was compromised from its very inception due to the ongoing relationships of domination that governed the fledging colonies.

In the process, the novel revises the neoslave narrative genre. This revisionist agenda is explicitly signaled by the novel's intertextuality with the seminal slave narrative written by Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano*. Published in 1789, Equiano's narrative is often touted as having initiated the slave narrative genre. Equiano, whose work as a sailor saw him traveling extensively all over the New World, is also viewed as the prototype of the black diasporan subject. The novel's intertextuality with Equiano's narrative is signaled by the similarities between the two stories – both narrators are children when they are taken from Africa in 1745; both quickly acquire literacy and numeracy and are valued as slaves because of their intelligence and proficiency with language; both travel extensively; and both finally settle in England where they lend their voices and stories to the abolitionist cause by penning their memoirs with the hope that their experiences as slaves will make a compelling argument in favor of abolishing the slave trade and slavery. In invoking Equiano's novel and detailing the extensive travels of its heroine in her quest to gain a

homeland, Hill's text underscores the diasporic nature of the quest for statehood of ex-slaves and descendants of slaves. Hill comments on his focus on diaspora in the novel with the following claim:

I am trying to unite the experiences, the travels, and the voyages of the African peoples in the eighteenth century.... They are moving from Africa to the Carolinas, to New York City, to Nova-Scotia, and back to Africa, and some are going literally, not just in the novel, back to Sierra Leone, or to England. This is a trans-Atlantic migration of phenomenal proportions.... I am looking to bring these trans-Atlantic migrations of people together, and show that they are connected and united, and that they are living similar experiences in all of these places. (Siemerling16)

The novel demonstrates that these shared experiences of diaspora were driven by the quest for identity, on both a personal and national level.

Claire Alexander defines diaspora as being “inseparable from forced movement, exile, loss and longing, on the one hand, and the forging of new identities in the places of arrival, on the other.” She further notes that, “the recognition of the unequal and often traumatic circumstances of migration and dispersal, along with the minorization, marginalization and exclusion of diaspora peoples in the ‘host’ societies, and the power of the ‘myth of return,’ are defining features...” (Safran 1991) (113). These elements of diaspora – displacement, systemic exploitation, repeated attempts by the oppressed to challenge their ongoing persecution, and the desire to return to a homeland – are embodied in Aminata's individual quest for freedom which is intermingled with the quest for autonomy of the various communities of which she is a member. She becomes an integral part of these communities where her literacy and skill as a midwife are highly prized and realizes an identity based on the recognition and respect that she gains yet she experiences a continuous sense of loss and exile and never truly feels a sense of belonging in the New World.

From the moment of her capture, Aminata is determined to preserve her identity and cultural heritage. Some of the captives aboard the slave ship repeat their names to each other in order to retain a sense of self. As someone who moves relatively freely around the ship – a privilege she gains through her facility with language which leads the crew to use her as a translator – Aminata plays a crucial role in this exercise at identity-preservation. She becomes acquainted with most of the other slaves who entreat her to remember their names. When she arrives on St. Helena's island, her name is abbreviated to Meena, and she learns to speak Gullah and English but as opposed to resigning herself to her new life, she is determined to use the knowledge that she gains about her new world to “discover the route back to my homeland” (164). Thus, she notes that, Georgia, an older woman who acts a surrogate mother to her when she first arrives on the island “was teaching me how to survive in the land of the buckra,” but the mulatto overseer Mamed, who educates her “could teach me how to get out” (152). Hence while she successfully acculturates to life in the New World, she is determined to use the knowledge that she gains about her new world to “discover the route back to my homeland” (164).

She continues to investigate the possibilities of returning to Africa. While living in Charleston, she convinces her master to take her to the local library to see a map of Africa but is disappointed to see that most of the continent remains unknown to cartographers. She remarks “this ‘mapp of Africa’ was not my homeland. It was a white man's fantasy” (212). This desire to physically locate her village on a map is indicative of her search for identity which is, in part, rooted in a sense of geography and place. Her disappointment at not seeing her village on the map results from her conflation of

place with identity: “But the map told me nothing of where I came from” (211). Her inability to find her village on the map suggests not only the ignorance of cartographers but also demonstrates that such specific entities do not exist in the eyes of the imperialist. Thus her subjectivity, which is rooted in a sense of place, is erased in imperialist discourse. The emptiness of the map also suggests the inability of return which is literally made clear when Aminata leaves the Sierra Leone settlement in 1800 and journeys inland to find her village. She is forced to abandon the trip upon discovering that her guides plan to sell her back into slavery. Her failure to physically locate her village, while precluded by practical reasons, also develops the idea that she cannot recapture a past identity but must embrace her hybridity and fight for freedom in the African diaspora. To confirm this point, Aminata returns to the settlement and subsequently journeys to England where she lends her voice to the abolitionist cause by testifying before parliament and by writing about her experiences of enslavement and the search for a nation.

She also constructs her subjectivity around her family and her actions are guided by her desire to preserve the integrity of this unit. At the age of 15, she marries her childhood sweetheart, Chekura, who makes the transatlantic journey with her and gives birth to a son who is sold by her master. In protest, she refuses to work and is sold to Solomon Lindo, a Jewish indigo inspector for whom she works as a book keeper and a midwife. She is twice briefly reunited with her husband – first in Charleston where she learns that their son died in his infancy and then in New York just before she relocates to the free settlement in the British colony of Nova Scotia. The couple are forced to take different ships to Nova Scotia. Chekura travels on an earlier ship and then Aminata

follows several days later only to learn that her husband's ship never arrived. She subsequently gives birth to a second child who is kidnapped by the white couple for whom she works. Thus when the Sierra Leone project is proposed, Aminata is torn between her desire to return to Africa and her reluctance to leave without her husband and child: "The dream of my lifetime was finally within reach, and yet it didn't seem right to take it" (359). Only after learning that her husband's ship had sunk on its way to Nova Scotia and after her efforts to trace her daughter's whereabouts fail does she decide to go to Sierra Leone. Thus her return to Africa is a bittersweet journey, informed by her intense desire to return to her native land and her profound sadness at the loss of her family.

The destruction of her family, together with her preoccupation with return to her ancestral village also causes Aminata to never completely experience a sense of belonging to the various communities in which she lives. These communities are formed in response to the denial of freedom to blacks in the newly independent US. Commenting on the fate of blacks involved in the "tortuous process of negotiating their freedom during the Revolution," Cassandra Pybus notes that many were forced to "leave America and forge a problematic new life in far-flung corners of the British Empire. In so doing, these blacks constituted a diaspora within a diaspora, with widespread distribution throughout the Atlantic world and beyond" (xvii). By detailing Aminata's life in the British colonies of Nova Scotia and Sierra Leone, and in the metropolitan center of London, the novel provides an intimate and problematic portrait of attempts at nation formation experienced by those blacks who left the US in the aftermath of the war of Independence. The settlements in Nova Scotia and Sierra

Leone demonstrate that African diaspora nation-states were formed out of the British imperial project and lend credence to Carole Boyce Davies' observations on the importance of diasporic identity for blacks who were denied citizenship rights within individual nation states. Boyce Davies notes that the statelessness of blacks caused an alienation from the nation state and led them to seek identity within the diaspora. She identifies Sierra Leone and Liberia, countries that were created to provide an alternative for those blacks who did not want to remain in the US and fight for emancipation and citizenship rights, as diaspora nation-states and asserts that "African diaspora citizenship was symbolically embedded in the dynamic of the creation of [these nation-states]" (26). Hill's text indicates that due to the colonialist and imperialist practices that were "embedded" in the creation of these nation states, the diasporic citizenship of the communities of blacks who bought into these projects was compromised from their very inception.

Thus while these communities are constitutive of what James Clifford refers to as a counterculture of diaspora in that they resist slavery in the US through migration, ongoing forms of racial exploitation hamper the resettlement efforts of the black colonists. Drawing on Homi Bhabha's ideas, Clifford notes that diaspora functions as a counterculture when: "experiences of unsettlement, loss, and recurring terror produce discrepant temporalities – broken histories that trouble the linear, progressivist narratives of nation-states and global modernization" (263). He further observes that "for black Atlantic diaspora consciousness .... enslavement and its aftermaths – displaced, repeated structures of racialization and exploitation – constitute a pattern of black experiences inextricably woven in the fabric of hegemonic modernity" (264).

While the blacks who form these free colonies hope that the move away from the continental US will result in greater freedom, their political and economic dependency on the British, frustrates their attempts to gain political and social autonomy. Hence while they cast their lot with the British to escape the tyranny of US rule, they in effect trade one master for another with the result that the movement away from the US does little to create the genuine freedom that they seek. Thus while the diasporas that they form is a counterculture of resistance – they interrogate hegemonic oppression by fleeing the continental US – they are nonetheless inscribed by imperialist practices that undermine their efficacy.

Both of the communities in Nova Scotia and Sierra Leone fail because the colonists lack social, political, and economic autonomy. While the British ship captain, who oversees the resettlement of the blacks from New York to Nova Scotia describes the territory that is allotted to the blacks as “your promised land,” (286) colonial and imperial practices persist. Slavery is not outlawed, and some of the whites travel to Nova Scotia with their slaves; an irony that is not lost on Aminata who is given the task of registering free blacks, along with those who are enslaved or indentured, in “The Book of Negroes.” Racial prejudice and discrimination impede the efforts of the free blacks to form a successful settlement. British promises of land and other resources fail to materialize and the black colonists find that their needs are invariably neglected in favor of the white loyalists. Racial tension is exacerbated by the poor economic performance of the nearby white town of Shelburne which fails to generate much business. Many of the business owners leave, and a race riot, that is instigated by unemployed whites angry that blacks are being hired at lower wages, erupts. The mob

attack and kill black workers in the town and then descend on the black town of Birchtown where they destroy houses and attack those who resist them. The harsh conditions of life in the settlement are summed in Aminata's observation: "I had less food and fewer comforts than at any other time in my life. But I was in Nova Scotia and I was free" (321).

To escape this life, most of the black colonists opt to leave the area and relocate to another free colony, Sierra Leone, located in Africa, in the hopes of improving their lot. One resident, Thomas Peters, grows frustrated at the failed promises, raises money, and travels to England "to speak to members of the British Parliament about the landless Black Loyalists and the perpetuation of slavery in Nova Scotia" (353). The British offer to resettle the colonists in Sierra Leone and send John Clarkson, the brother of the celebrated abolitionist, Thomas Clarkson, to oversee the repatriation. Again, Aminata works as a note taker to help record information about those going to Sierra Leone and in 1792 relocates to the fledgling colony with a group of the town's inhabitants.

The colony in Sierra Leone is similarly plagued by British imperialism which results in the disenfranchisement and marginalization of the black settlers. Upon their arrival in Sierra Leone, the colonists are appalled to discover that slave trading occurs in the vicinity of their settlement, although they were told that they would not be settled anywhere near such activity. They meet a slave ship even before they disembark their own ship and are forced to rely on the help of oarsmen who transport captured Africans to the slave ships to take them to land; an irony that is not lost on Aminata who reflects, "and so it happened that the same men who rowed slaves ... carried us over the waters

...onto the shores of Sierra Leone” (382). The colonists are also chagrined to discover that all decisions about the colony are made by the Company and they have little to no input in matters that directly affect them. Thomas Peters complains about this lack of political agency when the colonists first arrive at Sierra Leone: “What are all those ships from London doing here? This was supposed to be our colony. Our new life. And all the decisions in our hands. But what are we doing? Waiting while Lieutenant Clarkson discusses our faith with other white men” (377).

In response to Clarkson’s claim that the colonists “will thrive with farming, industry and trade, and find our own ways to serve the British Empire,” Peters responds, “We didn’t leave our homes in Nova Scotia to serve the British .... We came to Africa to be free” (378). The colonists are again marginalized and forced to witness the needs of whites being placed ahead of their own. They are required to work for the Company in exchange for food and supplies and are told to construct their “temporary shelters far back from the water, because prime land was reserved for wharves, stores, warehouses and company residences and offices” (383). The Company charges “exorbitant rates” for food staples and this ensures that they remain in a perpetual state of indebtedness to the British. Thus the colonists are made to serve the economic interests of the British. Because they lack resources and are dependent on the Company for basic supplies, they possess little economic and political leverage, and are barred from attending Company meetings. They also face hostility from the surrounding African villagers who do not recognize the legitimacy of the land that the colonists receive. Their relationship with the Company continues to sour over the years and six years later, a new batch of repatriated colonists, “hundreds of Jamaican maroons” are used

“to put down an armed rebellion by disgruntled Nova Scotians who still had no land and little to say in the affairs of the colony” (430).

The novel's illustration of the failure of diasporic citizenship due to the colonialist practices that undermine the Sierra Leone colony is furthered underscored through the novel's intertextuality with Equiano's slave narrative. This intertextuality, which is initially signaled by the parallels between Equiano and Aminata's experiences of capture and their acculturation, is made explicit in the description of the Aminata's life in Sierra Leone and London. In 1800, Aminata makes an ill-fated journey back to her childhood village in 1800. She takes “Olaudah Equiano's account of his own life” (434) with her with the intention of showing her people the life that those Africans who were taken to the New World lived. Aminata also patterns her own autobiography after Equiano's text. Upon her arrival in London, she is disappointed to learn that Equiano had died a few years earlier, and makes the observation that, “Equiano was one man I would have liked to meet. I felt I already knew him after reading his story, and had hoped to ask how he had gone about writing the account of his life” (454).

Thus Hill self-reflexively draws attention to the fact that his contemporary neoslave narrative draws upon and revises the slave narrative genre, and Equiano's narrative in particular. This revisionist agenda is signaled by the fact that Aminata is adamant that she will not have the abolitionists authenticate her autobiography and refuses their “guidance” claiming “if I give my account, you will have all of it. But it will be on my terms and my terms only” (456). This is a reference to the problems of authentication that plagued Equiano's narrative. Moreover, after her memoirs are published, Aminata achieves public notoriety, testifies at the parliamentary hearings on

the slave trade, and is invited by the King for a royal visit. This stands in contrast to Equiano who had offered to testify at the hearings but was turned down and was not recognized with a royal visit; a fact that John Clarkson observes, “The King would never meet Olaudah Equiano” (461).

Although Equiano and the heroine of Hill’s text share many characteristics that indicate that Hill deliberately patterns his heroine after Equiano, the important differences between these two works indicate that Hill also revises Equiano’s narrative by firmly situating the individual quest for freedom within the context of community formation and nation-building among the ex-slaves. Equiano’s narrative provides a very singular, individualistic description of the protagonist’s achievement of freedom. He uses his entrepreneurial skills to first buy himself out of slavery and then makes enough money through commercial activities that he is able to achieve a degree of personal autonomy. Thus he constructs a British identity by embracing commerce and trade, which he sometimes enters into at the expense of the enslaved – at one point he works as an overseer and a buyer of slaves – and by converting to Christianity. In contrast, Hill situates his heroine’s pursuit of freedom within a community of ex-slaves who are collectively searching for a homeland. She constructs her identity around familial and community bonds and unlike Equiano, who seeks to acquire full citizenship through commercial activity, Aminata seeks to acquire citizenship through community building. As if to underscore the fact that her experiences are meant to be representative of the experiences of many other blacks in the diaspora, after interviewing the blacks seeking to go to Nova Scotia, Aminata observes that her story is not unique: “I had imagined somehow, that my life was unique in its unexpected migrations. I wasn’t different at all,

I learned. Each person who stood before me had a story every bit as unbelievable as mine” (291).

In contrast to Equiano who constructs an identity based on his financial success and his ability to integrate into British society, Aminata constructs her identity around community building and familial bonds. Unlike Equiano who buys his freedom, Aminata escapes from her master and takes refuge in Canvas Town, a community of escaped and free blacks. Moreover, in contrast to Equiano who fully accepts the identity that results from his capture and sale into slavery, Aminata never fully embraces her New World subjectivity and is bent on returning to her homeland. It is also important to note that Equiano supported and actively participated in the Sierra Leone project. The colony is governed by the Sierra Leone Company that finances the repatriation. Equiano works for the Company in that he was appointed Commissary for the settlement. He subsequently resigns this post after he was accused of financial impropriety which he vigorously denied. Equiano was also a friend of Thomas Clarkson, the noted abolitionist, while Aminata is a friend of his brother, John Clarkson, the British lieutenant, who oversees the relocation of the blacks to Sierra Leone. Thus, both characters are part of the same historical milieu with the important difference being that Equiano, who is based in England and works for the Sierra Leone Company is complicit with the imperial project, while Aminata is among the expatriated colonists who experience the devastating impact of the Company’s policy.

Both works explore contrasting experiences of diaspora and illustrate James Clifford’s observations on the ambivalence of diaspora. Clifford states, “As counterdiscourses of modernity, diaspora cultures cannot claim an oppositional or

primary purity. Fundamentally ambivalent, they grapple with the entanglement of subversion and the law, of invention and constraint – the complicity of dystopia and utopia” (265). In some ways, Equiano’s narrative supports a utopian view of diaspora. Although the story is filled with a description of the hardships of Equiano’s life and is by no means a purely celebratory portrayal of his movement from slavery to British citizenship, Equiano’s personal and financial success and his unconditional acceptance of a British identity stands in stark contrast to Aminata’s and her community’s marginalization and lack of full citizenship rights. Thus while Equiano presents an ultimately positive view of diaspora based on his experiences of inclusion within the British nation, Aminata’s story explores the negative aspects of diaspora. While Equiano successfully enters into commerce through entrepreneurial activity and demonstrates the positive aspects of “invention,” Aminata and her community suffer “constraint” and remain largely disenfranchised.

In addition to demonstrating the dire consequences of Company policy on the colonists, Aminata illustrates that Equiano’s own means of achieving economic agency lacks feasibility for the majority of settlers. She achieves this by describing the business acumen of one of the black settlers, Cummins Shackspear, and contrasts this with the plight of the others colonists and herself. Shackspear brings supplies and a large quantity of rum with him from Nova Scotia and opens a tavern that is patronized by white and blacks alike. He soon makes enough money to free himself of any dependency on company goods, trades with passing ships to replenish his supply of rum, and is so successful he “[divorces] himself from the politics of the struggles between the settlers and the Company.” Her description of Shackspear’s

entrepreneurial skill is reminiscent of Equiano's own description of his business success in that both use their facility with trade to gain economic independence. Aminata contrasts Shackspear's approach to economic independence with the majority of the other colonists noting that "few, however, could afford such a luxury." She places herself in this category noting that "I never had a mind for business, and the services that I offered – reading and writing lessons ... medical care for the sick ... never brought many rewards, but kept me from depending totally on the British" (392-93). This situation demonstrates that, as a result of the colonists' economic dependence on the British, Equiano's model of achieving autonomy, what might be called economic citizenship, is not a viable option for the majority of blacks.

Robert J. Allison makes the point that for Equiano, economic independence was crucial to achieving freedom and citizenship. He states:

Equiano presented two strong arguments against slavery. Though the moral arguments is on virtually every page .... he also made an economic case for ending the slave trade ....Equiano argued that freedom for slaves in the West Indies and end to the African slave trade would actually speed up the transition to an industrial economy....Equiano thus appealed both to the British soul and the British purse. (394)

Hill's text exposes the flaws in Equiano's argument by showing that while freedom may have resulted from such a proposal, this arrangement also promotes economic dependency and ongoing British imperialism. Aminata's narrative shows that although the colonists have been granted freedom, economic imperial practices preclude them from entering fully into the discourse of citizenship. They are literally subjected to British rule and treated as second class citizens who lack political and economic control of their territories. Thus for the majority, freedom does not lead to economic independence but rather to continued exploitation that results in political and social

abjection. Interestingly, Equiano embraces the Sierra Leone Project after he becomes disillusioned with trade. In spite of his success in entrepreneurship and his advocacy of economic citizenship, he is continually discriminated against and encounters numerous individuals who attempt to cheat him out of his profits. Thus his embrace of the resettlement plan can be interpreted as a tacit realization on his part that business was not the way for the vast majority of blacks to achieve greater freedom for, based on his own personal experiences, the social degradation to which blacks were subjected invariably limits their attempts to use trade and economic activity to improve their status.

Moreover, the gendered nature of the freedom that Equiano and Shackspear acquire is underscored by the contrast between their enterprise and Aminata's "feminine" skills of literacy and health care which are not similarly rewarded. Their commercial activities succeed in part, because it is rooted in a model of entrepreneurship based on a masculine model of individualism and agency that women lack. This incident develops James Clifford's claim that "diasporic experiences are always gendered. But there is a tendency for theoretical accounts of diasporas and diaspora cultures to hide this fact, to talk of travel and displacement in unmarked ways, thus normalizing male experiences" (258). Aminata's skill as a midwife and her literacy establish her as central figure in all of the communities that she lives in. In Canvas Town, she is much sought after, by both the black inhabitants and the British soldiers to help deliver babies. As one of the few literate blacks in the communities, she relays vital information about the war and British policy towards blacks to the communities. She also teaches literacy and functions as a scribe, recording names in *The Book of Negroes* that details information about the blacks relocating to Nova Scotia. She again

performs this function when the colonists relocate once more to Sierra Leone. Thus Hill deliberately and explicitly genders the quest for citizenship by demonstrating that Aminata's femininity conditions the way she responds to her experiences of travel and migration.

In demonstrating the efforts of blacks who seek to form independent communities, first in North America and then in Africa, in the hopes of gaining the benefits of full citizenship while simultaneously resisting slavery and the exploitation of the plantation economy, the novel encompasses the main elements of African diaspora theory. Dwayne E. Williams notes that scholarship on the African diaspora has tended to focus on anti-slavery resistance and "the plantation economy" that are essential constituents of the formation of the African diaspora; the quest of African descended peoples for full citizenship rights; and black nationalist movements that sought to establish separate homelands and nations for blacks both in the New World and in Africa (108). The novel explores these strands of the intellectual tradition of diaspora in fictive form. In fleeing the US, the black colonists attempt to escape enslavement and resist the plantation economy. They embark on a quest for citizenship by forming separate nations outside of the US. Yet the novel shows that the counterculture of resistance that these communities articulate is undermined and fundamentally compromised by their ongoing links to systems of imperialism. Thus the novel demonstrates the way the search for diasporic citizenship grew out of anti-slavery resistance but was also compromised by the ongoing exploitation of the capitalist economy.

In positioning the American slave experience within the context of diaspora, Hill's text supports the view advocated by historian Robin D.G. Kelly that a diasporic conceptualization of American history can help historians to move beyond the "nation-centered" approach that has dominated the study of American literature and that precludes an understanding of "the international dimensions of American history" (123-24). Cultural theorist bell hooks echoes these sentiments when she notes that the overly national focus that characterizes much of the theorizing on African American cultural products provincializes the black American experience. She asserts that "the lack of a whole critical theory and practice around colonization and decolonization" in African American discourse makes it difficult for blacks to move beyond the parameters of identity politics and discourses centered on victimhood and prevents an analysis of the "more complex renderings of the black experience globally" that other black diaspora cultures that engage with the politics of colonization and decolonization have been producing (217; 226). Both of these novels enter into this critical discourse on colonialism and diaspora by positioning the African American experience of slavery within the context of Empire and diaspora. *A Mercy* weds the individual experience of slavery and discourses of identity politics to an exploration of community formation and dissolution in the pre-independence period of American history to demonstrate that blacks and other non-white groups were subjected to imperialism from the earliest periods of American history. *Someone Knows My Name* shows that some blacks, in an effort to escape the internal colonization that became rooted in the aftermath of the war of Independence, sought freedom in the wider diaspora of the Atlantic world.

CHAPTER 3  
TIME, SPACE, SLAVERY: COMMUNITY FORMATION AND THE  
COUNTERNARRATIVE OF THE NATION IN EDWARD P. JONES' *THE KNOWN  
WORLD* AND JAMES MCBRIDE'S *SONG YET SUNG*

In Chapter 1, I examine the slave experience in relation to discourses of Empire and diaspora. In this chapter, I examine two contemporary African American neoslave narratives – Edward P. Jones' *The Known World* and James McBride's *Song Yet Sung* – that position the African American slave experience in relation to discourses of American nationhood. Set in the 1850s, in the decade and a half preceding the Civil War, these novels configure resistance to slavery, not only in terms of escape, but also in terms of community building. Unlike traditional slave and neoslave narratives that place emphasis on the individual struggle for freedom, these novels situate localized portrayals of community formation, which occurred among slaves on the plantations of the South and among free blacks in the North, within a broader discourse of American nationhood to demonstrate the importance of slavery to the discourse of African American citizenship.<sup>1</sup>

These novels make use of temporal tropes in the form of flashforwards to the postslavery period and the latter decades of the twentieth century to demonstrate that the relations of domination that undergirded slavery continues to impact African Americans' experiences of citizenship in the contemporary present. In *The Known World*, the flashforwards are presented as metanarrative devices in which the

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<sup>1</sup> Striking examples of slave narratives that focus on the individual experience of slavery include *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* and Douglass' fictitious account of a slave revolt *The Heroic Slave*. Harriet Jacob's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* genders the experience of slavery but again the focus is on a central individual, a single consciousness. Although contemporary neoslave narratives such as *Dessa Rose* and *Beloved* challenge this linearity and present more complex narrative perspectives that give more insight into the community experience of slavery, the stories still remain focused on a central protagonist, whose consciousness is the focal point around which events in the novel turn.

omniscient narrator informs the reader of future events. This novel contrasts a group of black slaveowners who articulate an entry into citizenship by accepting the terms of the dominant group with the communities that form among their slaves that enter into the socio-political processes of the nation even as they interrogate systems associated with racial exploitation. Through a series of flashforwards to the lives of their descendants, the novel emphasizes the heritage of these slaves whose legacy becomes a part of living history in contrast to the slaveholders, whose descendants are never mentioned in the world of the novel and who remain, for all intents and purposes, consigned to the historical archives.

In *Song Yet Sung*, the flashforwards are made through dreams and visions experienced by the novel's central character. Some of these visions are of the march on Washington and Martin Luther King's famous "I have a Dream" speech. Others foreground the negative effects of consumerism on blacks. They include visions of blinged out rappers singing songs that denigrate women; music videos of black women gyrating to these songs; and images of overweight black children eating fast food but still crying out in hunger. In addition to demonstrating the continuity between the slave experience, the Civil Rights Movement, and contemporary issues of African American citizenship, these visions draw attention to the relationship between the contemporary capitalist economy and the practice of citizenship. Thus McBride effectively criticizes what Nira Yural-Davis terms consumer citizenship, a term she uses to describe the "construction of citizenship which closely adheres to the 'free market' model of neo-liberal globalization, that of the 'citizen consumer'" (*Politics* 61). She maintains that this definition of citizenship depoliticizes the concept of citizenship in that it constructs

citizens as individuals “whose prime rights are to have freedom to make well-informed choices of high quality commodities and services .... this construction of citizenship ... [promotes] the individual persona and autonomy rather than the relationship between the individual and the community” (*Gender* 85). In juxtaposing the Civil Rights Movement, which is a quintessential expression of community power, with contemporary forms of consumerism among African Americans that limit and erode citizenship, McBride develops the idea that the collectivist sensibility that informed the struggle for equality is being undermined by individualistic practices linked to consumer citizenship. He thus uses his narrative to make political and philosophical statements about the black experience in contemporary American slavery.

In using the slave experience to emphasize the importance of community formation among slaves and ex-slaves which they connect to the continued denial of full citizenship to African Americans, these writers situate their novels squarely within the neoslave narrative genre which, from its inception, has been imbued with political significance. The neoslave narrative was born out of the renewed interest in African American historiography which was stimulated by the Civil Rights Movement. These novels, which fictively recreate the period of plantation slavery, became an important aesthetic element of this historiography. Ashraf Rushdy observes that during the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, groups such as the Black Power Movements and the New Left stimulated an interest in slavery, and the neoslave narrative was one of the cultural products that resulted from this renewed concern with the slave experience (3-4). The Civil Rights Movement also privileged the concept and practice of community; a fact that Elizabeth Kella underscores. She notes that the Civil Rights Movement

transformed and politicized the concept of community which, prior to the World War 2 and Civil Rights era, was viewed as a site that was conceptually and socially opposed to the concept of the nation. She maintains that, “in politicizing black collective subjectivity,” the Civil Rights Movement “[extended] the realm of the political to the social construction and experience of everyday life” (15).

In spite of the fact that the first generation of neoslave narratives was inspired by the Civil Rights Movement, which is arguably the most overt and successful display of community power ever articulated by African Americans, themes of collective and communal exercises of power are muted in the narratives produced in the 1970s and 1980s which tend to focus on the individual movement to the North to freedom and on rewriting history, as it pertains to the slave experience from the perspective of the enslaved. In contrast, the most recent neoslave narratives produced in the 2000s use the slave experience to provide explicit commentary on the African American condition in the contemporary present. In so doing, they are more closely akin to slave narratives published in the postslavery period that tend to privilege the community experience of slavery. William L. Andrews notes that in contrast to antebellum narratives, many of the narrators of these postbellum slave narratives de-emphasize individual struggle opting instead to portray freedom as a community endeavor. As a result, they emphasize their role, usually as leaders, in helping the group achieve freedom and “portray themselves as dedicated less to their own fulfillment in freedom than to their calling and duty as stewards of the welfare of a larger group, identified usually with a church or a school, though occasionally with a community or socioeconomic class” (xv). He further notes that some of these writers produced “externally directed memoirs of what they

accomplished for others rather than internally focused confessions of how they developed as individuals” (xvi). Yet others demonstrated that their quest for “individual self-improvement” was intertwined with that of “community advancement” (xviii). Andrews also observes that many of these narrators explored “whether or to what extent the cause of freedom had actually been won” (xxvii).<sup>2</sup>

I maintain that, like these early narratives of freedom that shifted focus from the individual to the community, in many instances to examine the difficulties that blacks faced in achieving the full rights of citizens in the postbellum period, *The Known World* and *Song Yet Sung* make a similar shift away from the individual to the community experience of slavery to demonstrate that the slave experience intersects with the discourse of nation formation and contemporary issues of African American citizenship. Moreover, unlike earlier neoslave narratives that tend to make implicit as opposed to explicit connections between the slave experience and political discourses of the nation,<sup>3</sup> the two contemporary neoslave narratives that are the focus of this chapter, explicitly politicize “black collective subjectivity” by situating processes of community development among ex/slaves within the broader discourses of nation formation and the African American entry into citizenship.

African American theorist Houston A. Baker underscores the relationship between discourses of nationhood and the quest of African Americans for citizenship

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<sup>2</sup> Some examples of these postbellum slave narratives that Andrews cites include Elizabeth Keckley’s *Behind the Scenes, or Thirty Years a Slave and Four Years in the White House*, Peter Randolph’s *From Slave Cabin to the Pulpit*, James Williams’ *Life and Adventures of James Williams, a Fugitive Slave, with a Full Description of the Underground Railroad*, James Lindsay Smith’s *Autobiography of James L. Smith*, and Thomas James’ *Life of Rev. Thomas James, by Himself*.

<sup>3</sup> Here I am thinking of novels such as Gayle Jones’ *Corregidora*, Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, Charles Johnson’s *Middle Passage* and Ishmael Reed’s *Flight to Canada*.

rights in his discussion of the black entry into modernity. In his book *Turning South Again: Re-Thinking Modernism/Re-Reading Booker T*, Baker defines the black entry into modernity, what he terms “black modernism” as:

the achievement of a life-enhancing and empowering public sphere mobility and the economic solvency of the black majority.... black modernism is coextensive with a black citizenship that entails documented mobility (driver’s license, passport, green card, social security card) and access to a decent job at a decent rate of pay. A central right and incumbency of black modernism, as well, is the vote. (33)

Crucial to Baker’s conception of modernity, is the notion of movement in the public sphere – physical movement as well as social class mobility. He also views the movement North as integral to black entry into modernity and highlights the mass migration of blacks from the South to the North in the latter decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the early 20<sup>th</sup> century as indicative of this trend.

These texts both support and complicate Baker’s theory in that while they associate the movement of blacks to the North with an entry into discourses of modernity, they also portray the community building that took place among slaves in the South as crucial to the African American discourse of modernity. Thus they complicate the tendency to equate the North with modernity and the South with plantation slavery. *The Known World* demonstrates the way slaves both accommodated and resisted the discourse of slavery by contrasting slaves who acquiesced to their enslavement with those who resisted their oppression. Spatial tropes figure prominently in the portrayal of the black slaveholders, who conceive of power and progress in empirical terms – as ownership of land, house, and possessions – objects that can be physically located in space.

This worldview is contrasted with the community building that takes place among their slaves. Some of these slaves, while physically confined to the plantation world, succeed in combatting the dehumanization of slavery by creating a communal “space” that affirms the institutions of family and marriage. Others escape the plantation and flee North where they create communities that challenge the exploitation of plantation slavery that essentially amounts to a counter-narrative of the nation that critiques the exploitative individualism upon which so much of American national identity is predicated. In *Song Yet Sung*, the movement of blacks away from the plantation South to the North is implicitly evoked through the Underground Railroad, which prefigures the mass migration of blacks to the North in the postslavery era, and a secret system of communication, known as The Code, that is used by the slaves to convey information among themselves and to circumvent the heavy surveillance of the white power structure. In addition to illustrating the methods by which the slaves articulate a counterculture of resistance to slavery, these covert methods of resistance demonstrate that opposition to slavery was configured not only in terms of escape but also in terms of community building.

### **Conformity and Resistance: Community-Formation in the Plantation South**

*The Known World*, which contains no central protagonist but instead uses several characters to explore varied responses to enslavement, examines three approaches to entry into discourses of American nationhood. The first approach is represented by African American slaveholders who uncritically mimic the behavior of the ruling white elite and can be interpreted as a critique of the consumer citizen who uncritically assimilates American citizenship without altering it. These slaveholders are contrasted with their slaves, led by Elias and Stamford, who place self-interest aside to

form an empowered community even in the space of plantation slavery. Flashforwards to the contemporary present indicate that this community would later form the foundation for the legal and civic exercises of citizenship articulated by their descendants in later years. Another group of slaves, who escape to the North, enter into modernity and processes of nationhood even as they critique the exploitative individualism associated with race-based capitalism. Led by a female slave by the name of Alice, these slaves escape to Washington, imagine a utopian world through art and approximate a utopian community even within the segregated capital of the US. In using art, representation, and cultural production to articulate an alternative vision of community that challenges the hegemony of official discourse, this community lends credence to Paul Gilroy's claim that blacks used the slave experience to create a philosophical, cultural, and political discourse that would help them chart a course towards citizenship.

Thus the novel contrasts the practice of black slaveholding with the community building that occurs among their slaves to demonstrate the problematic nature of early African American entry into processes of the nation that was characterized both by resistance to and accommodation of the hegemonic discourses of the larger society. Moreover, persistent references to European immigrants of varying nationalities that permeate the narrative allude to the process of Anglo-American citizenship that was fuelled in the mid-nineteenth century by successive waves of European migration to the country and situate slavery, and the resistance to it articulated by the communities of ex/slaves, within the larger discourse of American nationhood.

Thus far, critics have tended to examine the novel's interrogation of history but have not engaged in any sustained analysis of the novel's interrogation of the discourse of American nationhood. Susan V. Donaldson, for example, argues that the novel interrogates both official narratives of history/slavery and the discourse of mastery itself "by exposing the daily operations and limits of power and domination, excavating the counternarratives blocked by those operations, and ultimately revising both the content and the form of the historical record" (268). Katherine Clay Bassard similarly argues that the portrayal of the practice of black slave owning unsettles traditional perceptions of race and gender relations under slavery and in the process, demonstrates the limitations of officially recorded history by questioning its authenticity and accuracy ("Imagining Other Worlds" 408). While I concur with these interpretations, I maintain that the novel also juxtaposes the individualism upon which the blackslaveholders' economic enterprise is based with the successes of community collaboration among their slaves to critique not only the system of Southern slavery but also the practices of the nation that facilitated this form of oppression. Thus in addition to articulating a counternarrative of history, the novel also provides a counternarrative of the nation.

The black slaveholders are an example of those blacks who sought to gain social status by mimicking the behavior of the ruling white elite. They function as a comprador bourgeoisie who accommodate and participate in the slave system at the expense of other blacks, and in the process, internalize notions of black inferiority and white superiority that results in their alienation from self and community. Tolerated and oftentimes patronized by the white slaveholders, they are afforded a degree of privilege as a result of their free status and property holding yet they do not possess full

citizenship rights. Nonetheless, they think it only a matter of time before they are accepted into the white world of privilege and view their slaveholding, through which they replicate the social and class hierarchies of the plantation South, as a means of achieving this new status: “They were all members of a free Negro class that, while not having the power of some whites, had been brought up to believe that they were rulers waiting in the wings” (287).

Henry Townsend epitomizes the rejection of community identification to which these black slaveholders subscribe. Henry is legally owned by his father, Augustus, who buys him out of slavery after purchasing his own freedom in 1834 and later, that of his wife.<sup>4</sup> In the years it takes his parents to amass the money needed to secure his freedom, Henry increasingly identifies with his master, William Robbins, the largest slaveholder in Manchester County. Robbins sells Henry land adjacent to his plantation and Henry subsequently establishes a small scale plantation patterned after that of his master. He continues to purchase more land so that by the time of his death, “there was nothing separating what they owned” (122); a physical closing of the gap between their property that symbolizes his complete interpellation into Robbins’ worldview.

Henry’s individualism and single minded pursuit of wealth contrast sharply with the behavior of his father who identifies with the slaves. Not only does Augustus smuggle Rita, Henry’s surrogate mother to the North, he participates in the Underground Railroad by hiding runaways in secret compartments in his house. Thus

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<sup>4</sup> 1843 is also the year when the slaves in the British West Indies were emancipated. This is a subtle reference to the end of slavery in another area of the Atlantic world that creates the sense that the end of slavery in the US is inevitable and that it is only a matter of time before the Southern US follows suit. In so doing, Jones shows the relationship and interconnections between various parts of the black Atlantic.

while he overtly accommodates the slave system by purchasing his wife and son, he covertly undermines it. Augustus misguidedly assumes that Henry's time in captivity has helped him to imbibe his parents' aversion to slavery without the need for the sentiment to be openly expressed, and is mortified when Henry becomes a slaveowner. Their relationship never fully recovers from the conflict that ensues between father and son and to emphasize their disapproval of Henry's decision, his parents refuse to enter the house that he constructs for himself on his newly bought property and opt instead to stay in the slave quarters.

Henry's individualism also differs markedly from the familial and community identification manifested by two of his slaves, Elias and Stamford, who lend support to Bassard's claim that the intimacy and family life that took place in the slave quarters of plantations functioned "as a counterculture to the dehumanization of the chattel system, [and] was a structure of community resistance" (*Spiritual Interrogations* 131-32). Like Henry, these slaves are initially intensely egocentric and driven by personal desires but undergo personal transformations that lead them to place the needs of fellow slaves above their own. Elias runs away immediately after Henry purchases him. Although part of his ear is cut off as punishment, he is determined to make another escape attempt but curtails this plan after he falls in love with, and marries Celeste, a lame slave, whose physical deformity precludes another escape attempt. Elias' willingness to sacrifice his single-minded focus on escape to pursue a relationship with Celeste is evoked in the description of a dream that he has: "he had run away to freedom .... then he remembered that there was something back in slavery that he had forgotten and so he ran back into slavery, passing millions who were running toward freedom. He

searched the empty slave quarters for what he had forgotten and in the last cabin out of the hundreds he had searched, he had come upon Celeste” (101).

Henry shrewdly encourages the marriage knowing that this union is a more effective method of curbing Elias’ rebellion than any method of punishment he could devise: “He had them together, bound one strong man to a woman with a twisted leg, and there was not a chain in sight” (102).<sup>5</sup> Henry’s reflection is ironic for, in letting go of the intense egocentricity that the system of slavery fosters in him and embracing the institutions of marriage and family that were habitually debased under slavery, Elias’ resistance shifts from physical escape and becomes centered on family and community building. To be sure, Elias continues to be self-interested, but as opposed to a narrow focus on self, he devotes himself to the needs and well-being of his family. Although he briefly assumes the role of plantation overseer with the aim of furthering his family’s interests, he never adopts the master’s worldview after he realizes that the position of black overseer does not exempt him from his slave status in the eyes of the white world.

Stamford’s transformation similarly develops the idea that resistance to slavery entailed not only physical escape but was also a mental process that saw slaves asserting their subjectivity and resisting attempts to dehumanize them. Like Elias, Stamford’s initial egocentricity stems from his desire for self-preservation. At a very young age, he internalizes the advice of an older man who tells him that young female companionship will protect him from the vagaries of slavery. After he is rejected by a

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<sup>5</sup> This struggle between master and slave invokes Paul Gilroy’s interpretation of Hegel’s master/slave dialectic. Gilroy interprets Frederick Douglass’ slave narrative through Hegel’s philosophy, particularly his master/slave dialectic, to highlight how slavery can be used to interrogate the discourse of modernity. He argues that Douglass’ narrative inverts Hegel’s allegory of the master/slave to invest the slave with agency while discrediting the master’s view of reality in that Douglass’ choice of death over enslavement runs counter to the rationality of “modern western thinking” (68). However, as opposed to choosing death, Elias chooses family.

series of young lovers, and then by an older slave woman to whom he proposes marriage, Stamford experiences a personal crisis. He attempts to commit suicide by incinerating himself in the lightning that accompanies a thunderstorm but is thwarted by his desire to preserve blueberries that he gathers for Celeste and Elias' children. He runs towards a patch of lightening, but then runs away from it to place the bucket of blueberries closer to the children's hut. As he attempts to run back to the lightening, it moves away from him and shatters a tree burning itself out in the process. Stamford views two crows that die in the lightning strike as sacrifices that take his place in death and undergoes an epiphany that leads to his rebirth.<sup>6</sup> He subsequently renames himself Stamford Crow Blueberry and devotes himself to caring for the young.

These two slaves illustrate Bassard's claim that blacks in the pre-Emancipation period performed community in that they "[engaged] in and [(re)produced] cultural forms and practices whose central function is community building and the production of the terms by which African Americans come to identify themselves as 'a people'" (*Spiritual Interrogations* 128). Thus community was "an act of collective self-definition" and culture in this period served "not to accommodate Africans to slavery but to help them to be more than slavery demanded" (*Spiritual Interrogations* 131). Through a series of flashforwards, the novel develops the idea that the practices and communal identification that these slaves fostered on the plantation lays the foundation for the community's articulation of freedom in the postbellum years. The first flashforward

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<sup>6</sup> This incident is reminiscent of an episode in Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* where Stamp Paid gathers blueberries for Sethe's baby shortly after he transports mother and child across the Ohio River to freedom. The gift inspires Sethe's mother-in-law to hold a feast for the neighbors whose goodwill changes to envy of her good fortune with the result that they refuse to warn Sethe that her master is coming to re-capture her. She is caught unawares, and kills her toddler, Beloved, rather than return her to slavery. In contrast to Stamp Paid's act that produces the unintended result of community betrayal, Stamford's act fosters community-building among the slaves on Townsend plantation.

centers on Stamford and occurs in 1875, twenty years after his epiphany. Now running an orphanage in Richmond, Virginia with his wife, Delphie, Stamford reflects on the passage of time, his personal transformation, and the progress that the community has made in the aftermath of slavery:

Stamford that day would realize for the first time just how far they had come. He would have cried as he had that day after the ground opened up and took the dead crows, but he had in his arms a baby new to being an orphan .... It mattered not how long ... they had kept him in chains .... It mattered only that those kinds of chains were gone and that he had crawled out into the clearing and was able to stand up on his hind legs and look around and appreciate the difference between then and now.... (353-54)

Another flashforward, this time to the late twentieth century demonstrates the continuity between the community that forms on the plantation in the antebellum period and the articulation of citizenship that occurs in the contemporary era: “behind him [Stamford], as he walked back, was the very corner where more than a hundred years later they would put that first street sign – STAMFORD AND DELPHIE CROW BLUEBERRY STREET” (354). Celeste and Elias also gain official recognition after a historian writes a book, published by the University of Virginia Press, “documenting that every ninety-seventh person in the Commonwealth of Virginia was kin, by blood or marriage, to the line that started with Celeste and Elias Freeman” (352). Thus the nuclear family that begins on the Townsend plantation would later have a state-wide impact by virtue of the sheer numbers of this couple’s descendants.

These acts of recognition enable the community to symbolically claim ownership of the area and articulate an entry into the civic discourses of the nation. Yet the difficulty that they face in achieving recognition in these discourses reflects what Salamishah Tillet refers to as a “crisis of citizenship.” In her book *Sites of Slavery: Citizenship and Racial Democracy in the Post-Civil Rights Imagination*, Tillet observes

that in spite of legislation passed during the Civil Rights movement that was designed to give minorities access to the full rights of citizens, African Americans continue to be marginalized and excluded from the civic discourses of the nation; a situation that she refers to as “civic estrangement.” Thus while they acquired the right to vote and politically participate in the processes of government, African Americans “have been marginalized or underrepresented in the civic myths, monuments, narratives, icons, creeds, and images of the past that constitute, reproduce, and promote an American national identity” (3). Hence they continue to fight for civic citizenship or “the right to recognition” (6).

The process through which the name of the street is made official demonstrates both the community’s desire for recognition in the ritualistic discourses of the nation that help to promote a sense of national belonging as well as the ongoing challenges that they face in achieving full inclusion in these discourses. In spite of repeated petitions by the community’s inhabitants, the street name is only officially recognized in 1987, more than a hundred years after the orphanage is founded, and more than eight decades after the street is unofficially named by the community. Thus the flashforward illustrates the continuity between contemporary civic discourses of African American citizenship and the slave experience, and lends credence to Homi Bhabha’s claim that slavery introduces a “time lag” or “temporal disjunction” into discourses of modernity that disrupts the teleological notion of progress as well as the binary logic of past/present, inside/outside, that is associated with modernity.<sup>7</sup> Here the time lag or temporal

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<sup>7</sup> Bhabha maintains that theorists of modernity tend to view the experience of slavery as an anomaly and not as an integral component of modernity. According to Bhabha, theorists such as Michel Foucault and Benedict Anderson do not account for racism in their theories and thus overlook the temporal disjunction that the experience of slavery introduces into modernity (242). Foucault dismisses racism as a “historical

disjuncture that informs the expression of African American citizenship is demonstrated in the dissonance between the de facto citizenship, civic and otherwise, that the community had been articulating since the postslavery years and the official recognition that is only granted to them over a hundred years later. These flashforwards also indicate that while the ex-slaves physically remain in the south, their descendants are firmly situated within the discourse of modernity.

In contrast to the descendants of the slaves, whose lives in the postslavery future are referenced, and who seek to repossess, in actual and symbolic ways, the space that had been denied them during slavery, the slaveholders are temporally and spatially dispossessed. In spite of the fact that Henry owns land and property, at the moment of his premature death at the age of thirty, he is disappointed to find himself in “the tiniest of houses, knowing with each step that he did not own it, that he was only renting” (10-11). His wife Caldonia, who inherits his property, experiences a “dream ...of being in a house smaller than her own, a house she had to share with a thousand others” (284). Thus in spite of their material wealth, the couple experiences a spiritual emptiness that manifests itself metaphorically as the loss of their worldly possessions. This psychic dispossession is literalized in the spatial dissolution of their plantation enterprise after Manchester County is torn apart by the greed of the County’s two wealthiest men – William Robbins, Henry’s mentor, and Robert Colfax. Robbins buys land that Colfax

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retroversion” and views it as a leftover from an archaic past while “for Anderson, racism has its origins in antique ideologies of class that belong to the aristocratic ‘pre-history of the modern nation’” (248). In contrast, Bhabha views racism as central to modernity and takes the stance that it is “part of the historical traditions of civic and liberal humanism that create ideological matrices of national aspiration, together with their concepts of ‘a people’ and its imagined community” (248-50). He maintains that “the time-lag displaces Foucault’s spatial analytic of modernity and Anderson’s homogeneous temporality of the modern nation,” (249; 253).

covets, their friendship turns to enmity, and the county's inhabitants take sides in the ensuing feud which results in four deaths and becomes intergenerational:

Over time the bad blood helped to tear apart the county, so that by the fire of 1912, when all the judicial records of the county were destroyed, the town of Manchester was the county seat to nobody. Manchester became the only county in the history of the Commonwealth of Virginia to be divided and swallowed up by other counties .... torn asunder in what was the greatest disappearance of land in the Commonwealth .... (377)

Together with the "disappearance" of their land, the destruction of the judicial records that legally establish ownership rights ensures that the slaveholders are literally wiped off the map. This incident develops the idea that the lust for material possessions that drives the slaveholders, both black and white, is ultimately self-destructive.

As if to further develop situate the slaveholders' enterprise, and the worldview that accompanies it in the past, chapter four of the novel is narrated as a flashback. Set in 1881, this chapter is presented in the form of an interview that Fern, a former slaveholder and close family friend of Henry and his wife, gives to Anderson Frazier, a pamphleteer who would later write a short history about the phenomenon of black slave owing. The story switches between Fern's narration, which is presented in a series of flashbacks, and her conversation with Frazier, to explicitly situate the events that she describes in the past. The reader is also informed that a few copies of the pamphlets "survived until the late twentieth century" (106) to further self-reflexively position the slave experience that occurred on the Townsend plantation as history.

The slaveholders' experiences and worldview are further positioned as pre-modern and confined to the past when contrasted with the experiences of Alice, one of Henry's slaves who escapes to the North. Although she is an extremely productive worker in the fields by day, Alice escapes the routine of slave life by feigning madness

and wandering about at night. The slave patrollers eventually come to view her as harmless and she gains unprecedented mobility for a slave which enables her to map the surrounding territory. She eventually uses this knowledge to escape from the plantation along with two fellow slaves, the overseer's wife, Priscilla and her son. This incident draws attention to what historian Walter Johnson refers to as the "temporal politics of slavery." Johnson uses this term to describe both the rigid routine of daily discipline that slaveholders used to control their slaves and the role that resistance to these attempts at time control played in slave revolts. He maintains that "in addition to physical escape, the way slaves conceived of and utilized their time was also an integral component of slave resistance." He questions dominant interpretations of slave revolts that conform to the progressive "metanarrative of racial liberalism – the story of black freedom and racial acculturation, of how black slaves became American citizens" arguing that they "[overlook] the way that the slaves themselves imagined the history that they were making—the arguments and politics, the historical process, through which they imagined themselves into time" (155). In his own interpretation of these revolts, Johnson notes that slaves planned rebellion in the "interstices" of quotidian time and that they possessed myriad conceptualizations of events that were unfolding around them that resulted in "layered temporalities" (152-53).

Alice, who is conscious of how time is controlled in the life of the slave, successfully devises a method to manipulate the conditions of her enslavement which sees her planning her rebellion, which takes the form of escape, in the "interstices" of quotidian time. These slaves settle in Washington DC where they collectively own and operate a hotel with a number of other blacks, many of whom are also escapees from

slavery. In contrast to individuals like Stamford, Elias, and Celeste who remain in the South and fight for freedom by preserving the community, effectively creating a physical and symbolic communal space in which they articulate freedom, the runaways achieve freedom and an entry into modernity through spatial movement out of the zone of plantation slavery. However, like the community that the ex/slaves form in the South, the community that the runaways create in the North also model an alternative discourse of citizenship in that they claim an entry into the socio-political processes of nationhood, even as their economic enterprise challenges the exploitation of race based capitalism that is exemplified in the system of Southern slavery.

### **Maps, Alternative Worlds, and a Counter-Discourse of Nationhood.**

In situating the community that the runaways form in Washington D.C., the country's capital, the concrete and symbolic seat of American nationhood, the novel underscores the relationship between the expression of freedom articulated by the ex-slaves and the larger discourse of American nation building that was predicated in large measure, upon the exploitation of slavery. Their hotel caters to "senators and Congressmen," a physical proximity to the processes of government that juxtaposes the ex-slaves' enterprise with the official discourse of American nationhood that they simultaneously enter into even as they interrogate the exploitation with which it is associated. Moreover, the American Civil War is explicitly alluded to in a letter that Caldonia's brother, Calvin, writes to her after he migrates to the North and discovers the runaways living in Washington. This letter is dated April, 1861, the month when the war began; a subtle but explicit reference to the crisis of identity that the country was experiencing concerning the role of slavery in its future development, which would be decided by the outcome of the War.

The novel's portrayal of the community in Washington both supports and complicates Baker's theory of black modernism. Baker stresses the importance of mobility, a concept that refers both to the movement North away from the physical space of plantation slavery and to the importance of upward social mobility for blacks. This community embodies this concept in that their achievement of freedom is associated not only with their physical movement away from the South but also with upward social mobility that sees them acquiring status and property. However the ex-slaves interrogate the individualist model of freedom that Baker's theory, in its focus on the "right to vote" and other markers of legal citizenship seems to privilege, by embracing an ethic of community that contrasts with the exploitative individualism that characterizes the system of Southern slavery. This community also complicates Baker's emphasis on legal citizenship in that they also express a longing for civic citizenship (similar to that expressed by the community that forms in the South among the ex/slaves) which suggests that the de facto, if not de jure legal citizenship that they exercise, while crucial to their entry into nationhood, is not the only component of citizenship.

The community's articulation of civic citizenship is represented through their representation of the plantation world that they flee through two murals that are prominently displayed on the walls of the hotel's dining room. Created by Alice and inspired by her night wanderings, these works are ekphrastically described by Caldonia's brother, Calvin, in a letter that he writes to Caldonia: "a grand piece of artwork that is part tapestry, part painting, and part clay structure – all in one exquisite Creation, hanging silent and yet songful ... it is ... a kind of map of life of the County of

Manchester .... This Creation may well be even more miraculous than the one of the County .... It is your planation, and again, it is what God sees when he looks down” (384-85). Calvin’s repeated use of the word “creation,” to describe Alice’s “[maps] of life,” evokes the Biblical story of creation, and indicates both his reverence for Alice’s vision and his belief that her maps are an origins narrative, rendered visually.

The word is also a direct reference to the actual community that the ex-slaves create. Although the vision of utopia depicted in the maps is at odds with the actual past – Alice deliberately omits the horrific elements of slave life from which she flees choosing instead to re-envision the South in idyllic terms – the life that Alice and her fellow runaways live in Washington is in fact a kind of utopia that reifies the concept of community that the murals privilege. This community lends credence to Paul Gilroy’s observation that blacks in the Atlantic world combined aesthetic and political discourses in their quest for citizenship. He states: “their progress from the status of slaves to the status of citizens led them to enquire into what the best possible forms of social and political existence might be. The memory of slavery, actively preserved as a living intellectual resource in their expressive political culture, helped them to generate a new set of answers to this enquiry” (39). By blending an aesthetic display of culture with the articulation of their political vision, this community develops the idea that resistance entails not just a physical escape from the site of slavery but also requires a radical re-envisioning or re-imagining of the slave past.

By opting to recuperate and positivize the cultural memory and identity that is associated with the plantation past, this community also supports Philip Page’s claim that “only by connecting with and thereby redeeming the past can the immigrants [to the

North] envision a viable present and future” (7-9). Page makes this observation in the context of his discussion of the conflicted relationship between African Americans and the South. In his text *Reclaiming Community in Contemporary African-American Fiction*, he argues that African Americans simultaneously associated the South with a sense of identity arising out of a shared ancestral heritage and the degradation of the plantation system. The ex-slaves attempt to reconcile this conflict by using the murals to show that although compelled to flee the South to achieve freedom and selfhood, their subjectivity is still indelibly tied to their past.

Thus while the maps position the plantation world that they leave behind in the “past,” they also function as a “sign” that, to use Bhabha’s terms, articulates the subjectivity of the community that the ex-slaves form in Washington. They function as both a reminder and a critique of the past in that they “[stage]” the past in the present to highlight the “time lag” or “temporal break” between the world the ex-slaves leave behind and the new world they create for themselves that is characterized by their entry into modernity – as represented by their business enterprise. Yet in eschewing private ownership in favor of communal ownership, Alice and her cohorts reject elements of modernity associated with oppression, namely the economic exploitation and forced labor of slavery thereby illustrating Bhabha’s claim that African American entry into modernity is characterized by ambivalence, what he describes as “both the identification with, and the interrogation of, modernity” (247).

The murals reflect this ambivalence in that they interrogate modernity, even as they articulate the subjectivity of the community and their entry into modernity. They function as a visual and artistic form of knowledge production that in their accuracy,

contrasts with the scribal records sanctioned by official discourse, such as maps, census taking, and pamphlet writing that litter the novel which are presented as flawed, incomplete, and inaccurate. Alice's uses her intimate knowledge of the plantation and its inhabitants, as well as the county of Manchester, to meticulously depict the area's topography. Calvin comments on the precision of her murals as follows: "there is nothing missing, not a cabin, not a barn, not a chicken, not a horse. Not a single person is missing. I suspect that if I were to count the blades of grass, the number would be correct as it was once when the creator of this work knew that world" (385). In contrast, the maps and other records associated with official discourses are presented as these outdated and irrelevant. A map of America entitled "the known world" (from which the novel takes its title) that the sheriff of Manchester county keeps in his office is three hundred years out of date. In spite of its title, most of the territory that it depicts is in fact unknown to the cartographer who provides no details about the landmass. The map is a sketch of the outline of the North American continent, and even this is incomplete as Florida is missing. Although the word "America" is used for the first time on this map, it refers to South America while the North American continent remains unnamed.

The data collection methods used to compile information that becomes part of the historical archives of Manchester County are also depicted as flawed. The census taker records inaccurate data about the size and the racial composition of the county's inhabitants; most of the county's court records are destroyed by fire; and the bias of hegemonic official histories is parodied in a description of a contemporary historian who fetishizes history and judges the trivialities of the county's quotidian life worthy of inclusion in the official narrative that she gives of the area. Thus traditional maps,

history, the census, and other official records associated with empirical, scientific, supposedly objective methods of data collection, are invalidated. In their interrogation of official discourse, the maps are symbolic of the community's performance of an alternative citizenship that, in critiquing the exploitative individualism upon which so much of American national identity is predicated, articulates what Bhabha describes as "counter-narratives of the nation that continually evoke and erase its totalizing boundaries – both actual and conceptual – [and] disturb those ideological manoeuvres through which 'imagined communities' are given essentialist identities" (149).

The discourse of American nationhood is also signaled by persistent references to European immigrants of varying nationalities that permeate the narrative and that allude to the process of Euro-American citizenship that was ultimately consolidated, sometimes at the expense of the resident black population, by the waves of immigrants who were arriving from Europe in the 1800s.<sup>8</sup> One such immigrant is the Frenchman, Broussard, who is tried in Manchester County for killing his business partner and subsequently convicted and hanged. Broussard vociferously touts his American citizenship, which he gains three years before his death, to the sheriff and the jurors but is condemned because of his foreign accent. Another immigrant, the wife of the merchant to whom Augustus ships his walking sticks, blames America for her husband's death on the sea voyage from Ireland to the US. Consequently, she never comes to view America as her home: "she could not forgive America and saw it as the cause of all

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<sup>8</sup> David Roediger explores the way immigrant groups constructed themselves as white, and became "cultural insiders" within American society by entering into the narrative that cast blacks as the "Other." (Roediger, David R. *Working Toward Whiteness: How America's Immigrants Became White: the Strange Journey from Ellis Island to the Suburbs*. New York: Basic Books, 2005.)

her misery. Had America not called out to her first husband, not sung to him, they could have stayed home and managed somehow in that county in Ireland ....” (51-52).

This feeling of not belonging to America is reminiscent of the lack of civic citizenship that the two communities of free blacks experience. The bonds of sympathy between the ex/slaves and the newly arrived immigrants is underscored in the fact that Augustus smuggles Rita, Henry’s surrogate mother, to New York in a shipment of walking sticks that he sends to the Irish merchant. The fact that the merchant and his wife do not turn the escaped slave over to the authorities indicates their tacit collusion with the discourse of anti-slavery resistance. Interestingly, Rita hands the the woman one of Augustus’ walking sticks that is carved with images of Biblical figures, the king and queen of England, and George Washington: “Augustus had carved Adam at the base. Adam was holding up Eve who was holding up Cain who was holding up Abel and so on and so on. After fourteen or more other figures, including his idea of the king and queen of England, there was George Washington” (47). These figures, that symbolically merge the Biblical story of creation, the colonial past of America, and the American narrative of independence, invoke the American origins narrative. By articulating an entry into the civic discourses of the nation, the communities of free blacks, in the North and in the South, highlight their own creation story which is omitted from the Anglo-American narrative of origins.

In contrasting the individualism of the black slaveholders with the community building that their slaves participate in, *The Known World* indicates that blacks adopted various responses to slavery and charted various courses to freedom that involved both resistance to and accommodation of the hegemonic discourses of the larger society.

Augustus is representative of those slaves who resisted slavery yet did not challenge the principles upon which it was founded. In Henry, we see slaves who bought into the system and sought to perpetuate it while Celeste and Elias represent those slaves, who while physically trapped in the plantation South, possessed the mental and moral fortitude to conceive of a reality devoid of slavery. Alice is an example of those who cunningly bided their time until viable opportunities for escape from slavery presented themselves. By situating these various responses to slavery in relation to discourses of American nationhood, this novel draws attention to the way the movement from slavery to freedom conditioned African American citizenship.

### ***Song Yet Sung: Mobility, Modernity, and African American Citizenship***

Like Jones' neoslave, James McBride's 2008 novel *Song Yet Sung* makes use of temporal and spatial tropes to examine the slave experience in relation to discourses of community formation, nationhood, and modernity. Set in March 1850, in Dorchester County, which is situated on the eastern shore of Maryland, the novel centers on the experiences of Liz Spocott, an escaped slave who is assisted by fellow blacks in her attempt to elude slave catchers. In depicting Liz's efforts to escape recapture, the novel details the inner workings of the Underground Railroad and a secret system of communication, known as The Code, that is used by the slaves to convey information among each other and to circumvent the heavy surveillance of the white power structure. In addition to illustrating the methods by which the slaves articulate a counterculture of resistance to slavery, these covert methods of resistance demonstrate that opposition to slavery was configured not only in terms of escape but also in terms of community building. This idea is developed through the fact that none of the characters actually escape to the North. Rather emphasis is placed on the community

co-operation that is needed to ensure that the Underground Railroad remains a viable method of escape as opposed to the actual escape itself. This focus on the process of the Underground Railroad as opposed to its efficacy develops the idea that while the movement North was crucial to African American modernity, an equally important element of this process was community building.

Moreover, through repeated visions that Liz has of black life in the US in the latter half of the twentieth century, the novel explicitly links its portrayal of nineteenth century American slavery with the Civil Rights Movement and the ongoing struggle of blacks to fully actualize the citizenship rights that they legally gained in the course of this movement. The slave experience depicted in the novel is also explicitly connected to the Civil Rights era through the son of a maroon slave, known as the Woolman, who is presented as Martin Luther King's progenitor. This boy is taken to the North by Amber, a male slave who is legally freed by his mistress and raised as his own. Interesting, Liz, around whom the activities of the Underground Railroad are centered, never makes it to the North but instead succumbs to injuries sustained trying to avoid re-capture. Thus the males as the argument can be made that McBride genders the African American entry into modernity by constructing it as a masculinist discourse that marginalizes the role of the female.

The novel's focus on the Underground Railroad, which was a practical as well as symbolic component of the African American entry into modernity, and the covert activity of the slaves, much of which is centered on the movement away from the space of plantation slavery, lends credence to Houston A. Baker's claim that the entry into modernity is associated with the movement North and with the creation of a distinctly

African American form of nationhood that he links to the phenomenon of maroonage. In his analysis of Alain Locke's book, *The New Negro: An Interpretation*, Baker maintains that Locke articulates the concerns of the race, in the process of which he refers to blacks as a nation. In so doing, Locke was engaging in an act of radical marroonage by challenging the larger national polity responsible for the oppression of the race. Baker states:

the world of *The New Negro* represents a unified community of national interests set in direct opposition to the general economic, political, and teleological tenets of a racist land. The work is, in itself, a communal project, drawing on resources, talents, sounds, images, rhythms of a marooned society or nation existing on the frontiers or margins of *all* American promise, profit, and modes of production. It thus seeks its inspiration in the very flight, or marronage, to the urban North of millions of black folk (77).

Thus for Baker, black society of the postslavery era, like maroon communities that existed under slavery, was marginalized and forced to dialectically construct itself in opposition to the broader economic and political discourses of American society. In equating the maroon experience with the black migration to the North, Baker configures this mass migration as an act of resistance, by blacks, to the oppression they encountered in the post-slavery era. Moreover, in likening Locke's work to an act of radical marronage, Baker aligns the black "text," in all its manifestations, and black intellectual discourses that interrogate American national discourse, within the counterculture of resistance to slavery and oppression that was first articulated by the maroon, who fled the plantation system, and subsequently reinforced by those blacks who fled the South.

The Underground Railroad can be positioned as part of the system of maroonage in that it functions as a precursor to this mass migration of blacks to the North that

would take place in the post-slavery period. The Underground Railroad was made up of a vast, secret network of individuals who hid, guided, and transported runaway slaves to the North and mid-West. It was operated primarily by blacks, who funded and maintained the operation although they were aided by white abolitionists, quakers, and others sympathetic to the cause. The Underground Railroad was formed in response to the original Fugitive Slave Act of 1793 and was a way of combatting this law which stipulated that slaves who fled to the North remained slaves, gave masters the right to recapture runaways who had made it to the North, and return them to the South, and instituted harsh penalties for individuals who assisted runaways. In setting his story in 1850, when the second Fugitive Slave Law was passed, McBride draws attention to the relationship between the activities of the Underground Railroad, around which so much of the novel centers, and this piece of official legislation that was designed to support the system of slavery.

Not only did the Underground Railroad literally move blacks from slavery to freedom, it was also a powerful symbol of the desire for freedom held by many slaves and it counteracted proslavery arguments that blacks were content with their lot. Donald Yacovone notes that in addition to smuggling escaped slaves to freedom, the Underground Railroad also challenged the “racist ideology” propagated by proslavery advocates who argued that blacks were unfit for freedom and incapable of managing their own affairs (2224). The Underground Railroad was thus a counterculture, a way by which the slaves covertly resisted official discourses that supported the slave system. It also helped to metaphorically present the movement of blacks to the North as a movement into modernity. Carson and Bonk note that “the system [was] coded in

railroad terminology for secrecy [and] consisted of various routes (lines), hiding places (stations), and assistants (conductors) who helped to transport escapees along the way” (1034). In light of the fact that the railroad was a symbol of modernity in the wider culture, the appropriation of railroad metaphors to describe the process by which slaves were smuggled to freedom indicates that blacks conceived of their movement North as an entry into modernity.

The novel further invokes the Underground Railroad through its protagonist, Liz, who is patterned after Harriet Tubman. In his “author’s note” at the end of the novel, McBride freely acknowledges that his story was inspired by Harriet Tubman’s life. The character of Liz shares certain parallels with Tubman – like Tubman, she is struck in the head in early life and experiences sudden periods of sleep where she has visions of the future. Tubman also suffered similar episodes of sudden sleep during which she claimed that she had dreams that provided practical solutions to her problems; an ability that garnered her the reputation of being “a mystical woman” and added to her legend (356). Liz is similarly revered for her mystical abilities by her fellow slaves who refer to her as the “Dreamer.” McBride also discusses his fascination with the “web of relationships that existed” in the area of Maryland’s eastern shore. He notes that Tubman along with Frederick Douglass, two of the most well-known escapees from slavery who later became leading figures in the movement to abolish slavery, were from the area. He also observes that more than any other part of the state, “the eastern shore was a draw for runaways coming from all areas of the South” (357). The physical proximity of Maryland’s eastern shore to the North, together with the heavy concentration of runaways positions the area as a border-zone that connects the free

blacks in the North with the slaves in the South. Moreover, the novel's portrayal of the Underground Railroad that was instrumental in smuggling slaves into the North, underscores the pivotal role that the area played in articulating a counterculture of resistance to slavery that prefigures the discourse of black nationhood that would begin to take shape at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Thus in addition to its strategic physical location, the area can also be viewed symbolically as a transit point that marked the movement of blacks into modernity.

The novel presents the Code, a secret system of communication that the slaves use to circumvent the heavy surveillance of the white power structure, as being integral to the success of the Underground Railroad. Thus the Code can be viewed as part of the black "text" that Baker refers to that undermines the discourses of the wider society geared at perpetuating black oppression. It is an audio-visual means of communication used to convey messages and warnings designed to help runaways and their helpers avoid discovery. Messages are transmitted through various visual and verbal symbols including patterns stitched on quilts, knots on fishing lines, Biblical scriptures, songs, and the direction of sails on fishing boats. The Code is gradually divulged to Liz, and to the reader, in bits and pieces. Liz's surrogate father, Hewitt, passes on some of this knowledge to her. She is later taught some more of the code by an old slave woman while they are both imprisoned by the slave trader Patty Canon who monopolizes the slave catching business in four counties, and is notorious for her ruthlessness. In addition to hunting fugitive slaves, she steals slaves from other slave catchers as is the case with Liz whom she steals from two slave catchers who had been hired, by her master, to capture her. After Liz escapes from Patty Canon, she hides in the woods,

and is helped by the Woolman, a maroon, in return for helping his son escape from a muskrat trap. She then uses parts of the Code to communicate with Wiley and his uncle, Amber, two slaves, who also assist her in her escape attempt. Amber, who is himself planning escape, hides her in a deserted area of the woods and then takes her to the town's blacksmith who agrees to hide her with the intention that she be smuggled North.

The covert activity that surrounds the Code and the Underground Railroad demonstrate the community formation that took place among the slaves even in the face of hostility from the surrounding white community. While some whites are aware that the blacks have a hidden method of communication, they are unable to determine how it functions. The efficiency of the system is remarked upon by Amber's mistress, Kathleen Sullivan: "They had their own kind of telegraph, and often got news of the town's goings-on before she did" (108). Glenwood Long, the slave catcher hired by Liz's master to capture her, is also aware that the blacks possess a secret method of communication – he confronts the blacksmith, the "Captain" of the town's Underground Railroad, as he attempts to transmit a coded message in his presence, by tapping a specific rhythm on his anvil – but he does not possess full knowledge of it.

In addition to being a literal system of communication, the Code is also metaphorically constructed as a shared ideology and a way for blacks who resist slavery to identify each other. The old woman who is imprisoned with Liz tells her "it [the Code] can't be told. It got to be lived" (8). Clarence, a "conductor" in the Underground Railroad, who transports Liz from her hiding place in the blacksmith's workshop with the intention of starting her on her journey to the North, equates it with

the Bible, telling Liz “I live for the Code. Code’s like my Bible ....” (279). Clarence refuses to take his freedom, opting instead to remain enslaved in order to help smuggle others to freedom. He states: “This is a war, child, and I’m gonna die in it like the rest. I coulda got free long ago, but I’m sworn to Jesus to free His people” (278). The blacksmith, who is free, similarly chooses to remain in the South and act as a conduit to help smuggle other blacks to the North. Thus the worldview, the orientation to freedom, and the network that makes freedom possible is presented as being just as important as the attainment of freedom.

Others involved in the Underground Railroad include Ducky, an elderly slave who feigns imbecility to escape suspicion and transmit messages to other principals in the enterprise; Mary, Amber’s sister; and Sarah Hughes, a slave owned by a neighbor of Amber’s mistress. As an important leader in the Underground Railroad, the blacksmith possesses the entire code. The rest is told in pieces and given out as needed, in order to ensure that if members of the group are caught, they will not divulge the entire operation; a security measure that demonstrates that the community of slaves who work “against the Trade” function as interrelated parts of a connected network. The blacksmith tells Long that the entire village of Cambridge City is involved in the Underground Railroad: “The whole village is connected up” (142). Thus although not all blacks are familiar with the Code – it is known only to those blacks who are “working against the Trade” (146) – in demonstrating how a select group of blacks successfully uses this mode of communication to subvert the slave system, the novel demonstrates the importance of the community in articulating a counterculture of resistance.

In portraying the network that formed among slaves and free blacks to assist fugitive slaves on their journey to the North, the novel departs from the tendency of many slave narratives, and some neoslave narratives, to portray the pursuit of freedom as an individualistic endeavor. Many writers of slave narratives did not record their method of escape because they were still fugitives and needed to protect themselves from recapture. They may also have wanted to preserve the code of secrecy upon which those who aided runaways relied on to preserve the integrity of their activities. While the lack of detail on escape methods may have been due to practical concerns, the effect was to portray the entry into freedom as a single-minded pursuit largely, or solely achieved, through the individual agency of the escapee.<sup>9</sup> In contrast, McBride's narrative casts the process of escape as a collective endeavor that develops the idea that the pursuit of freedom is a community experience.

However like *The Known World*, *Song Yet Sung* also demonstrates that while some blacks willingly sacrificed their freedom to advance the interests of the larger community, engaging in acts of collective collaboration to articulate a counterculture of resistance to slavery, others individualistically pursued their own interests, oftentimes at the expense of the enslaved. This idea is developed through the character of Little George who works for the slave catcher Patty Canon who raises him from infancy. Like the black slaveholders in *The Known World* who collude with the plantation system, Little George exploits other blacks for personal gain. He shoots Liz in the head in the process of capturing her and imprisons her, along with eleven other captured slaves, in

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<sup>9</sup> Frederick Douglass deliberately omits the details of his escape from the South because he was technically a fugitive slave and did not want to provide information that could lead to his recapture. While this was done to protect his identity as a fugitive slave, as was his assumption of a new name, it also presents the movement into freedom as an individualistic pursuit.

the attic of Canon's house. He habitually rapes the female captives and attempts to sexually assault Liz after she partially recovers from her injury. In an effort to stymie this attack, Liz tries to appeal to him as a member of her race addressing him as "brother." When he rejects this mode of identification, she attacks him, by driving a nail into his neck. The other slaves join in the attack and beat him to death. Of these slaves, Linus, whom Little George had befriended and captured by using his fears against him, deals him the death blow in revenge for his betrayal. Thus the collective attack on Little George is motivated not only by the captives' desire to escape, but also by their need to avenge the betrayal and abuse that they suffer at his hands. Little George is subsequently replaced by Eb, a twelve year old slave groomed by Patty Canon as his replacement.

The exploitative individualism manifested by Little George is also critiqued through the novel's temporal movement which is evoked through the trope of dreaming. Throughout the novel, Liz experiences numerous visions of the contemporary present that develop the idea that oppression has been reinscribed in the contemporary era through consumerism. She describes one of these visions to Amber as follows: "I seen it already, seen the colored up there in their tomorrows....Colored men walking around free as birds. They don't love their women. They don't love their children. They love horseless carriages. And money.... And chains. Chains of gold. They cry for their chains. They even kill for them" (158). McBride acknowledges these dreams articulate a critique of consumerism in an interview with *Publishers Weekly*, where he notes that Liz's "Dreams of tomorrow" indicate that "we've become the people we've dreaded, a consumer society ....we're all slaves to something." While other slaves, such as Amber,

view freedom as the movement North, out of the plantation South, Liz repeatedly resists attempts to smuggle her North because her visions of the future indicate that space does not equate with freedom. She tells Amber, “You love the North.... You love a place. There ain’t nothing there to love. Not today. Not tomorrow” (158). She further notes that everyone has been sullied by slavery, and she has been defiled trying to escape slavery: “It don’t matter where I am.... I ain’t clean. I got hate in my heart. I can’t clean myself of it. I done the Devil’s work. I’m a murderer now. Hell’s what I deserve” (157-58). She also questions the nature of freedom when she tells Amber, “there ain’t no freedom up north. Not nowhere in this country. Ever.” (156).

In critiquing the preoccupation with material possessions upon which so much of modern American identity is predicated, McBride criticizes contemporary expressions of individualism that denigrate the concept of community. He develops the idea that consumerism that has become an integral component of the contemporary expression of American nationhood and citizenship, and posits that blacks have uncritically embraced the exploitative elements of modernity with the result that they have, in many ways, reinscribed their oppression.

The novel’s critique of individualism and materialism is further developed through the character of Denwood Long who is hired by Liz’s master, Captain Spocott, to recapture her. Long becomes a victim of his material ambitions after he takes up slave catching to escape a life of poverty as an oyster fisherman even though he views slavery as morally wrong. He attempts to reconcile the conflict between his beliefs and his desire for profit by hunting only specific slaves that he is hired to capture but ignores the network that aids fugitive slaves on their journey to the North. Hence while he is

aware that the blacksmith is an important leader in the Underground Railroad, he leaves him alone. Long gives up slave catching after the death of his son. In a drunken fit, he questions the morality of a preacher, his erstwhile healthy son sickens and dies a few days later. The superstitious Long, who believes that his son's death is divine retribution for the sin of trading in humans, returns to oyster fishing and he spends the remainder of his life blaming himself for his son's death.

Long's reflections on his own greed, the greed of the slave owners, and the nature of freedom mirror the critique of materialism that is developed through Liz's dreams. Long observes that the blacksmith "risked his neck every day on the possibility of freedom, though God knew if the man understood what that was. Freedom to die on the bay tonging oysters? Or farming yourself to death? While the fat cats like Captain Spocott dredged the oyster bars till they gave out ...working the slave trade till the colored gave out; felling trees and clearing land till there wasn't none left ... just for the thought of profiting more. This colored probably claimed himself a freedom fighter, yet he wouldn't know freedom from a bag of onions" (142). Here Long contextualizes the freedom that the slaves aspire to in relation to his class positionality as a lowly oyster man, to expose the social inequality that manifests itself in the exploitation of slaves and poor laborers who are subjected to the will of those, like Liz's master, who own the means of production. In a moment of candor, he also likens himself to the slaves that he hunts: "Denwood suddenly realized that it was he, not the coloreds, who was the real runaway. Running from himself, from what he was and what he should have been: a waterman like his father" (291). He then remarks on the negative

interdependence of masters and slaves who are all ensnared by the material relations of slavery: “slave owners and slaves, all of them [were] trapped by the Trade” (268).

The constant and ultimately futile movement, in which most of the characters engage, seems to reinforce this idea that the system of slavery is an exploitative endeavor that ultimately destroys both master and slave. A great deal of the plot centers on the movements of the characters in Dorchester County as they try to outwit each other. Amber shelters Liz by hiding her in the woods, then takes her to the blacksmith to be smuggled North. Both Patty Canon and her slave catchers as well as Long track her there. She narrowly escapes recapture and is taken to the river to be ferried North but instead she makes her way back to her hiding place in the woods. Kathleen Cannon also goes to the woods to rescue her son who is kidnapped by the Woolman who tries to use him as leverage to have his son, who is imprisoned in the town jail, returned to him. Ultimately, no one escapes to freedom, and in some instances, the characters end up right back where they started. In the novel’s climactic scene, the principal characters all meet in the woods with the result that Patty Canon’s slavecatchers are killed – two by the Woolman, one by Long, and one by Patty. Patty is herself killed by Kathleen while Liz kills the Woolman after he attacks Long who subsequently succumbs to his wounds. Liz also dies of her wounds without ever leaving the County while Amber is liberated by his mistress who purchases the Woolman’s son from the country. Amber adopts the boy and together, they go North. Thus in spite of the emphasis placed on the Underground Railroad, none of the characters actually go North via that method.

It is also significant that the characters who die are individualistic – the slavecatchers, Liz, to some extent, and the Woolman, and Long – while those who survive – Amber and Kathleen Sullivan – manifest an orientation towards family and community. Amber originally plans to go North through the Underground Railroad but is reluctant to make good his escape without his nephew, Wiley, to whom he acts as a surrogate father. Hence he delays his escape until his nephew is strong enough to bear the physical rigors of the journey. He also feels guilt at the thought of deserting his mistress whom he respects in spite of the master/slave dynamics of their relationship. Her husband dies and she lives with her three young boys. Amber and his sister-in-law, Mary, along with Wiley, are her slaves yet she views them more as family. After Kathleen's husband and Wiley's father disappear on an oystering expedition, Amber assumes the role of surrogate father to the young boys.

In contrast to the negative interdependence of the slave catcher/fugitive relationship, this household is portrayed as a positive affirmation of the interdependence of humans as reflected in Kathleen's reflections: "She'd known her four coloreds the better part of fifteen years – in fact, had helped Mary bring Wiley into the world. They were, she felt, part of her family, and hers, she felt was part of their. She could not imagine a life without them. She believed that they, like her, understood that their collective survival made them dependent on each other, and that made her feel safe" (103). This relationship of mutual dependence is positively affirmed when she grants Amber freedom at the end of the novel (Amber and Kathleen are however still bound to the economics of slavery in that Amber will work to repay her after he reaches the North) and buys the Woolman's son from the County in order to free him. Amber

subsequently departs for the North with the young boy who he intends to raise as his own.

Amber's movement North is associated with an entry into modernity and the discourse of African American nationhood through his relationship with the Woolman's son, who is depicted as a direct ancestor of Martin Luther King. At the end of the story, Liz reveals that the Woolman's son is Martin Luther King's ancestor: "a colored boy, many years from now, descended from the Woolman's son, ... would one day dream as the Dreamer did, but with even greater power, with a power to change the world" (353). These visions connect the events of the novel to the Civil Rights Movement. Moreover, in positioning Martin Luther King's ancestor as a maroon, the novel connects the political resistance of the Civil Rights Movement to the maroon tradition of resistance to slavery. While the Underground Railroad is one form of resistance, the Woolman, a maroon, represents another, more extreme form of resistance. He opts to live outside of society and engages in violence to recover his son, whom he leaves in the village to receive medical treatment for his injured leg. In spite of the contrasting methods that they use – the Woolman fights for his freedom through violence, Martin Luther King advocated non-violent resistance; the former's struggle is individualistic while the other is very much centered on group identity – they are nonetheless positioned within the same discourse of resistance. Thus the novel develops the idea that the maroon tradition of resistance to slavery is integrated with the African American political tradition. Hence the maroon, who formally occupied the margins of plantation society and unsettled it from this position as an outsider, becomes the center of the political struggle for equality and full citizenship rights.

Amber's movement out of the space of plantation slavery is also indicative of the mobility that, according to Baker, informs the quest of African Americans for citizenship in that it evokes the movement and flight to the North of blacks that would occur in the postslavery era. Amber goes to Philadelphia to start his new life but has no intention of living there permanently. Kathleen is aware of this and reflects on the mobility that will characterize his life in the North thus: "He only wanted to begin there; to stay there until he knew where to move next. She could not imagine living in that fashion, moving about from place to place without calling one of them home" (353). Given the negative connotations and futility that is attached to constant movement in the novel, Amber's peripatetic existence in the North suggests that he fails to find a sustainable community. His lack of a "home" is evocative of the placelessness, resulting from the lack of full citizenship rights that would characterize black life within the larger American body politic in the one hundred years following the abolition of slavery and prior to the attainment of Civil Rights in the 1960s. This situation foreshadows the problematic nature of African American citizenship in that it develops the idea that while the movement North is essential to the black entry into modernity, without a stable community, the black experience of modernity is compromised.

Thus McBride uses the slave experience to interrogate and problematize the African American entry into nationhood and to critique the degeneration of citizenship in contemporary American society. However, in emphasizing the biological lineage that connects the Woolman's son to Martin Luther King Jr., and in associating two male characters with the movement North and with an entry into modernity, the text constructs the black discourse of nationhood, what Baker calls the "black text," as a

masculine discourse. Through gendering the discourse of African American nationhood, McBride may unwittingly be reinforcing the gender disparity that has come to be associated with all discourses of the nation. This gendering of the black quest for nationhood reflects Michelle Wright's claim that "in both (white) Western discourses of the nation and the subject and Black counterdiscourses, men are the only active agents; women are either passive or invisible" (138). She further notes that: "biological exigencies become impossible in the "adventure time" chronotope; men 'beget' other men instead of women birthing children of both sexes" (139).

Thus in contrast to *The Known World* that questions traditional gender assumptions by depicting women as mobile agents who escape North while the men, who remain confined to the plantation space, engage in familial and community building, *Song Yet Sung* reinforces traditional gender dynamics. Although Liz is a primary character and the focal point around which the narrative turns, her exclusion from the entry into modernity can be read symbolically as a recreation of the patriarchal discourse of nationhood. The novel's privileging of masculinity is first alluded to by Amber whose longing for freedom is due, in large part, to his exclusion from the discourse of manhood. Reflecting on his father who "lived to another man's reckoning of himself" (160) and who judged his worth by the recognition that he gained from white men, Amber concludes that he was not "a full man" and would not have been able to teach him how to be one. He then observes that the slave's identity or sense of self is based on how the white man perceives him: "When you're born as another man's property, you're raised to that. And whatever you think of yourself, you always come back to how the white man sees you" (197). These reflections invoke male-centered

discussions of the black condition articulated by theorists such as W.E.B DuBois and Franz Fanon. Indeed, they are reminiscent of DuBois' discussion of the double consciousness that he views as a characteristic of the African American experience. Thus Amber's movement North is connected not only with the male entry into modernity but also with a quest for manhood which causes him to view familial connections as a hindrance. Hence, he refuses to marry because he's seen the effects that a family has on black men who have to watch their loved ones sold away: "He'd long ago decided that no part of nature's calling would deter him from freedom; he'd resolved to take his own life before he let love make him weak" (125).

The novel's concern with the discourse of masculinity is also evident in the emphasis that it places on father/son relationships. After his son is imprisoned in the town, the Woolman kidnaps Kathleen Sullivan's son with the intention of trading the one boy for the other. Thus great emphasis is placed on the male heir; a situation that is made all the more obvious by the exclusion of females from these father/son relationships. The Woolman's female companion dies and he is left to raise his son alone; a situation that constructs the discourse of maroonage as male. Long's wife blames him for the death of their son and leaves him, while Liz, who potentially could have become a surrogate mother to the Woolman's son, never makes it to the North and dies in Maryland as a result of the physical injury that she sustains at the hands of the slave catchers. Thus the female is symbolically excluded from the discourse of African American nationhood in contrast to the male as symbolized by Amber, who as the surrogate father to the Woolman's son, Martin Luther King's ancestor, is positioned

as part of a male lineage that would be instrumental in the contemporary movement for African American citizenship.

Both *The Known World* and *Song Yet Sung* develop the idea that in the contemporary era, oppression has been reinscribed in different forms, most notably through consumerist and materialist impulses that leads to both inter and intra-racial exploitation. Jones does this implicitly by using the practice of black slaveholding to allude to contemporary forms of exploitation within the black community. In an interview, when asked to identify contemporary African Americans who could be likened to the black slaveholders that he describes, Jones identifies "rap stars, certain politicians, movie stars who have no consciousness or awareness."

Interestingly, McBride also identifies rappers and certain entertainers as being complicit in the oppression of African Americans but does so by explicitly incorporating this critique of African Americans who take freedom for granted and pursue materialistic and consumeristic behaviors in the pages of his novel through his heroine's "visions" of the future. Thus these writers use the slave experience to demonstrate the way the contemporary experience of African American citizenship is compromised and to develop the idea that for African Americans, the quest for full citizenship is ongoing and can only be fully realized through collective acts of community building.

CHAPTER 4  
THE PLANTATION MATRIX: MAROONAGE, AND THE IMPERIAL CRITIQUE IN  
DIONNE BRAND'S AT THE FULL AND CHANGE OF THE MOON AND MICHELLE  
CLIFF'S FREE ENTERPRISE

Just how were our memory and our time buffeted by the Plantation? Within the space apart that it comprised, the always multilingual and frequently multiracial tangle created inextricable knots within the web of filiations, thereby breaking the clear, linear order to which Western thought had imparted such brilliance.

The Plantation region, having joined with the endless terrain of haciendas or latifundio, spread thin to end up in mazes of sheet metal and concrete in which our common future takes its chances. This second Plantation matrix, after that of the slave ship, is where we must return to track our difficult and opaque sources.

Edouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*

**Maroon Theory, Migrancy, and Citizenship in the Diaspora**

In his philosophical treatise *Poetics of Relation*, Edouard Glissant comments on the continuity between the experience of slavery and the contemporary reality of African diasporic subjects when he observes that the “plantation space” has spread outward in the aftermath of the dissolution of the traditional plantation to create a “plantation matrix” that, in its linguistic and racial cosmopolitanism, disrupts the linearity of “Western thought” (71). According to this claim, the localized experience of slavery and oppression that occurred on the plantations and haciendas of the New World serves as a template for the modern diasporic experience of the descendants of the slaves. The dispersal of these individuals from the original “plantation region” into “mazes of sheet metal and concrete” – an image that conjures up visions of modern day cities and the gross disparities in material wealth responsible for their slums and ghettos – highlights the spatial and temporal interconnections between the New World diaspora and the era of plantation slavery.

One of the major aims of my project is to explore the rendering of this “plantation matrix” in the novels of contemporary Caribbean writers. Accordingly, I examine the narrative portrayal of the continuities between US and Caribbean slavery and colonialism in the nineteenth century and the forms of citizenship and nationhood available to African American and Caribbean peoples in the contemporary era. In this chapter, I maintain that Michelle Cliff’s *Free Enterprise* and Dionne Brand’s novel *At the Full and Change of the Moon* demonstrate the continuity between the contemporary experience of migration of the Caribbean subject and the historical experience of maroonage<sup>10</sup> to position slavery squarely within the contexts of Empire and neo-imperialism. Moreover, by presenting contemporary Caribbeans experience of marginality and their complicated forms of resistance as modern maroonage, these novels contribute to a maroon discourse that extends both literary representations and theoretical studies of maroonage. In contrast to traditional literary depictions of maroonage that remain rooted in the physical landscape of the Caribbean, these novels transplant the experience of maroonage from the geopolitical space of the Caribbean to the metropolises of the contemporary US. These novels also resist the tendency to mythologize the colonial resistance in which maroons engaged (a celebratory gesture that Glissant himself advocates). Instead, they demonstrate that the paradox of resistance and accommodation that oftentimes informed the ancestral experience of

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<sup>10</sup> Throughout this document, I use the anglicized spelling of the word “maroonage.” However, when quoting, I retain the original spelling used by the author of the quote which may differ from the anglicized version of this word. The French spelling of the word is marronage. Other spellings include maronage and marronnage.

maroonage is replicated in the complicated and compromised forms of resistance of the marginalized Caribbean migrant.<sup>11</sup>

These novels use the maroon experience to foreground the process of community and nation formation among the descendants of slaves. In so doing, they extend the novel of slavery genre. While earlier novels within this tradition tend to focus predominantly on the plantation era, these newer novels cover a vast historical period that encompasses both the nineteenth and twentieth century, to demonstrate that the dynamics of slavery and maroonage continue to affect the forms of citizenship and nationhood available to black diasporic peoples in the contemporary era. These novels critique imperialist exercises of power by juxtaposing the various sites of slavery and maroonage with metropolitan centers of official discourse to demonstrate that the systems of oppression that occurred during the plantation era have been transmuted into contemporary socio-cultural systems that perpetuate the ongoing marginalization of the descendants of slaves. Specifically, they show that maroons were resistance fighters who also participated in the economic systems of the colonial state. This legacy of resistance and participation is replicated in the relationship of their descendants to the postcolonial nation state. In presenting maroonage as an ongoing process that evolved with modernity and that continues to inform the experiences of black diasporic subjects, these works contest the view, among historians and theorists of the phenomenon, that maroonage was an experience peculiar to the plantation past. Both novels also highlight the contribution of women to the maroon tradition of resistance to

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<sup>11</sup> Here I am thinking of writers such as Michelle Cliff (*Abeng*); Nalo Hopkinson (*The Salt Roads*); and in a more complex way, Maryse Conde's *I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem*.

interrogate the tendency, among historians of slavery, to masculinize the practice of maroonage and the theoretical discourse with which it is affiliated.

Maroons were runaway slaves who escaped the plantation system and established independent settlements of their own. Very often they engaged in a type of guerilla warfare against the slave system which often saw them raiding, vandalizing, and stealing from the plantations. They also incited slaves to join them yet sometimes colluded with the planters by entering into arrangements with them to return runaway slaves to the plantations. Maroon communities formed soon after European powers began to settle in the territories of the Caribbean and the Americas and remained in existence throughout the entire era of plantation slavery. As an example, historian and poet Edward Braithwaite cites the Jamaican maroon community that formed in 1655 and waged a constant battle against British forces until 1739 when a treaty that granted the maroons their independence was signed. In Braithwaite's view, if the British had not accommodated the maroons in this way, the plantation system would not have been able to take root and flourish as it did. Referring to the maroon experience as an "alternative tradition" to the experience of the plantation, he notes that it nonetheless exerted a strong influence on the forms of resistance that occurred on the plantations themselves (55). The maroons also preserved their freedom by aiding the plantation system; a fact that historian Mavis C. Campbell notes in her discussion of the 1739 treaties, which included clauses that stipulated that the maroons were to return escaped slaves to the plantations and assist the planters in putting down rebellions (133;138-139).

Maroonage is both a phenomenon that was peculiar to the areas where it occurred – no maroon communities were totally alike, they were all forced to adapt to the peculiar condition of the territory in which they were situated – in terms of the physical terrain, and the character and propensities of the plantocracy – yet it was also a diaspora-wide phenomenon that occurred wherever there was slavery. These novels link the peculiar features of the maroon communities they describe – in Cliff’s case, settlements in the Southern US and in Brand’s case, settlements in Trinidad – to the migration experiences and fortunes of the contemporary Caribbean subject. In so doing, they highlight the specificity of the maroon experience to the Caribbean and certain areas of the American South yet demonstrate that elements of this experience transcends the spatial and temporal boundaries of the plantation system and as such, is of ongoing relevance in writing about and theorizing on the nature of diasporic citizenship.

I maintain that these novels use the maroon experience to explore the nature of citizenship in the post-emancipation and postcolonial periods of Caribbean history; to probe its possibilities and explore its limitations. It is fitting that an exploration of the nature of citizenship should be tied to the maroon experience for as Mavis C. Campbell has observed, the maroons, as the progenitors of resistance to colonial authority, were the first peoples to arrive in the New World in the aftermath of European colonization who could legitimately claim the status of citizen. She states: “the Maroons in this hemisphere were the first to strike a blow for freedom – as far as recorded history goes. And it is in this sense that they can be seen as the first Americans” (2). This view, which posits that by establishing communities outside of the authority of the plantation

system, maroons unequivocally staked their claim to citizenship in the New World, lends credence to my position that the maroon experience, in its local, national, and diasporic manifestations, provides a lens through which to interpret and analyze later forms of citizenship available to the descendants of slaves in the post-slavery and post-independence periods.

In addition to offering a way to conceive of and think about citizenship, these novels, also demonstrate that maroonage provides a useful way to theorize on the uniqueness of the Caribbean experience of migrancy and the communities that result. Joy Mahibir contends that maroonage offers a way to highlight the specificity of anti-imperialist resistance in the Caribbean in that it avoids the homogenizing tendency of discourses centered on resistance and migrancy as they relate to postcolonial peoples.

She notes that maroonage:

specifies and historicizes one type of 'resistance.' Taking it out of the amorphous arena post-colonial theory has often placed it in .... Certainly Caribbeans who have negotiated migrancy in the New World for five centuries, are very differently situated from other migrant communities newly formed in the twentieth century, and a reassessment of the concept of marronage is needed for a more accurate understanding of Caribbean migration patterns. (35-36)

Cynthia James, in her book *The Maroon Narrative: Caribbean Literature in English Across Boundaries, Ethnicities, and Centuries*, also comments on the importance of maroonage in theorizing about migration by noting that to read Caribbean literature from the perspective of maroon theory, "is to understand the literature of a region psychically reflecting the siege of continuous migration, writing out narratives of ambiguous relationships with a three-centuries-old home" (15-16). These novels encompass elements of this theory. They foreground the historical phenomenon of maroonage and connect it to the contemporary experience of diasporic migration by descendants of the

slaves, whose travels to the metropolises of the former imperial powers emphasizes the connection between present day neo-imperialistic practices and the era of the plantation slavery.

Maroon communities are of theoretical significance in that their practical resistance to slavery is associated, in the postcolonial political and cultural discourses of the Caribbean, with an ideological resistance to the hegemony of colonial and imperial relations of domination. The use of maroon theory as a vehicle to interrogate hegemonic discourse is exemplified in the work of cultural theorist and literary critic Antonio Benitez-Rojo. Like Braithwaite, Benitez-Rojo views the maroon or runaway slave as emblematic of an alternative history, what he terms “the Caribbean’s ‘other’ history,” that is in opposition to the received history told from the perspective of the dominant group. He further notes that many of the behaviors associated with the flight away from the plantation and the defensive mechanisms that were put in place to avoid re-capture, such as the way maroon communities disguised and hid themselves, continue to inform the Caribbean sensibility.

He also underscores the diasporic reach of the maroon phenomenon when he observes that maroons, or fugitive slaves from the Caribbean, have traversed large sections of the globe in their flight from the oppressive regime of the plantation (254).<sup>12</sup> These comments isolate the salient features of the maroon experience which include disguise, movement, travel, and a transcendence of localized geography and

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<sup>12</sup> An example of the global spread of the maroons can be seen in the case of the Jamaican maroons. In the aftermath of the Trelawny Town War (1795-1796) between the planters and a community of maroons in Trelawny Town, some maroons were deported to Nova Scotia where they became part of a colony of free blacks and former slaves. Eventually this settlement was relocated to Sierra Leone. (Campbell, Mavis C. *The Maroons of Jamaica, 1655-1796: A History of Resistance, Collaboration & Betrayal*. Granby, Mass: Bergin & Garvey, 1988. 241-42, 257)

demonstrate that maroons were among the first travelers within the New World. As such, they were integral to the formation of the Caribbean diaspora. Thus any consideration of this diaspora and the processes of migration responsible for its formation would be incomplete without an examination of the condition of maroonage.

The maroon experience is also associated with a conceptualization of time that contests a linear, teleological interpretation of history. In discussing the ongoing effects of the legacy of the plantation era on subsequent epochs of Caribbean history, Benitez-Rojo notes that although the territories of the region were often owned by different colonial powers at various stages of their history, these powers were all invested in the plantation economy which remained a perpetual constant in the region. Thus the exploitation that characterized this system and the social hierarchies to which it gave birth were replicated from one colonial era to the next. He states:

Both Enrique Bernardo Nunez and Alejo Carpentier have said that in the Caribbean orbit one historical stage does not cancel the earlier one as happens in the Western world. Such a peculiarity, that of living history synchronically .... is a circularity imposed by isolation and, above all by the implacable repetition of the economic and social dynamics inherent in the plantation system .... there was no substituting of the new for the old, but rather there was a coexistence, relatively critical or not, within the same historical space. (203-04)

This view of Caribbean history as a palimpsest of layered experiences informed by the plantation system further underscores the centrality of the maroon and plantation experiences to an understanding of the continuing effects of plantation slavery on the descendants of the slaves.

Both Cliff's *Free Enterprise* and Brand's *At the Full and Change of the Moon* develop the idea that the socio-economic relations that inform the plantation experience are repeated from one historical era to another and negate a conception of human

history as a progressive movement ever forward through time. In *Free Enterprise*, the descendants of maroons embrace the free market system of the capitalist economy but reject the exploitation of labor upon which it is predicated. In *At the Full and Change of the Moon*, the maroons' rejection of modernity is inherited by their descendants and compromises their participation in the socio-economic processes of modernity. Hence while these novels demonstrate the oppositional relationship between the plantation and the alternative to this system that the maroon communities created, they also show that the maroon was nonetheless influenced by and at times participated in processes of modernity that were associated with the plantation system. This indicates that the maroon tradition is associated not only with escape from the plantation and armed resistance to slavery but also with a complicated relationship to the processes of modernity with which the plantation system was associated.

Moreover, in demonstrating that maroonage was integral to processes of modernity, these novels contest the tendency, among some historians of maroonage, to view the phenomenon as confined to the historical past. Juan Antonio Hernández cites Eugene Genovese's claim that early maroon societies existed "on the margins of political modernity" until they were politicized by the spread of ideas associated with the Haitian Revolution as an example of this line of thinking. Hernández maintains that "Genovese's paradigm subsumes *marronage* within the *telos* of a modernity aspiring to be homogeneous, or subordinated to the logic of a Hegelian-Marxist historicism" (570-72). In demonstrating the reciprocal relationship between maroonage and modernity – they show that maroonage challenged modernity even as it was transformed by it –

these novels take maroonage out of this telos and instead present it as non-linear and cyclical.

The ambiguous relationship between the maroon tradition and modernity also contributes to and complicates the theoretical discourse on the counter-culture of modernity articulated by critics such as Glissant and Paul Gilroy. Glissant defines the counter-culture of modernity as the systems of subversion or culture of the slave that was used to challenge the dominant discourse of the master. In his opinion, the plantation was a contradictory place that was characterized by outmoded and archaic practices yet initiated modernity, which is connected to the systems of colonial and imperial rule, into the New World (*Poetics of Relation* 63-67). Paul Gilroy similarly conceives of the counter-culture of modernity as a discourse of resistance against systems of domination. In his seminal work *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, Gilroy uses the term “counterculture of modernity” (which he borrows from Zygmunt Bauman) to describe the “struggle,” by the inhabitants of the black Atlantic, “for emancipation, autonomy, and citizenship” (16).

Through the narrative portrayal of rebellion and maroonage, these novels depict the contested discourse between master and slave that is central to this counter-culture of modernity. They also demonstrate that the relationship between maroonage and modernity is not solely oppositional. Rather, like the ancestral experience of maroonage, that was characterized by both resistance to and accommodation of the plantation system, the maroon tradition, in its practical and ideological manifestations, is marked by the paradox of opposition to and participation in the systems of modernity. These novels also demonstrate that the outright rejection of modernity that informed the

experience of maroonage manifests itself, among the descendants of the slave/maroon, as an ambivalence to the systems of modernity under which they must function in contemporary society. Thus while they seek to participate in the socio-economic systems of the island nation and the broader diaspora, their ongoing marginality results in a complicated form of accommodation and resistance to these structures that mirrors the accommodation and resistance to the plantation system that was so integral to the historical experience of maroonage.

### **Free Enterprise, Exile, and the Resistance to Racial Capitalism**

Published in 1993, Michelle Cliff's novel *Free Enterprise* examines the phenomenon of maroonage in relation to the diasporic migrations of the Caribbean subject. Cliff aligns the anti-slavery activities of the novel's two protagonists with maroon communities, in the process associating these communities with the exile of the diasporic subject, who is permanently separated from her place of origin, and with resistance to capitalist enterprise based on the exploitation of labor. While the novel portrays maroonage as an alternative to the plantation system, it eschews a simple dichotomy between this phenomenon and the system of free enterprise. Instead Cliff sets up her maroon communities as alternative spaces that opposed plantation slavery even as she shows their participation in the economy of free trade. Thus even as these communities embrace the economic elements of modernity, they critique the racial capitalism that it promotes by rejecting the exploitation of the labor of ethnic minorities that accompanies this system. The novel's exploration of the economic systems of modernity is signaled by the text's title, *Free Enterprise*, which explicitly refers to capitalist economic activity, but also gestures towards the view, advocated by the novel's two female protagonists, that the enslaved should not only be granted liberty but

should also be free to participate fully in economic activity. In the process, the novel underscores the culture of resistance to imperialism that is epitomized by the maroon tradition and demonstrates the diasporic reach of this tradition showing that maroons comprised a vast network, stretching from the coasts of South America through the Caribbean to the North American mainland.

Thus far, the critical discussion on *Free Enterprise* has focused predominately on the counter-narrative of history that Cliff's use of historical personages renders. For example, Myriam Chancy asserts that the novel contests the official received version of history and at the same time explores the complicated relationship between those occupying diverse race, class, national, and gender positionalities, to demonstrate the multiple forms of identity that characterize the New World diaspora. Erica Johnson also centers her analysis on Cliff's use of history in the novel. She uses the term "ghostwriting" to describe the process through which Cliff re-creates the stories of these silenced historical subjects who exist in official narratives of history as mere traces; a phenomenon that Johnson terms a haunting. She maintains that Cliff combines historiographical and biographical information with her own imaginative interpretation to re-place these subjects from the past in history. I concur that a central goal of the novel is to explore the subaltern histories that have been silenced under the hegemony of official discourses and maintain that the narrative depiction of maroonage, which has not received any sustained critical attention, constitutes an integral component of this revisionist agenda.

Cliff's portrayal of maroonage in the novel *Free Enterprise* can better be appreciated through a consideration of her earlier novels *Abeng* and *No Telephone to*

*Heaven*. Examined collectively, these three novels demonstrate that the maroon experience and its integral connection to a tradition of resistance against oppression is a recurring motif in Cliff's work. In *Abeng*, the omniscient narrator emphasizes the significant presence of maroon communities and the destabilizing effect that their subversive activities exerted on the system of slavery with the observation that after the island of Jamaica was captured, "in 1655, over the next 180 years, until freedom was obtained in 1834, there was armed, sustained guerilla warfare against the forces of enslavement. A complex intelligence network between the rebels and the plantation slaves. A network of towns and farms and camps independent from the white planters. An army of thousands – literally thousands – called the Marrons" (20).

This novel also details the exploits of Nanny, the female leader of the Windward maroons of Jamaica, who fought against British forces from 1655 to 1740. This story positions Nanny as the true revolutionary hero who refused to capitulate to British demands by contrasting her actions with that of her male counterpart, Cudjoe, the leader of the Leeward maroon community. Nanny attempts to join forces with the Leeward maroons with the aim of wresting control of the island from the British but Cudjoe refuses Nanny's offer of alliance and eventually enters into a peace treaty with the British that grants him freedom from British attacks in exchange for hunting and returning escaped slaves to the plantations; a choice that demonstrates his accommodation of and collusion with the British. In addition to illustrating Cliff's concern with giving voice to the often suppressed female version of history, this story also makes it clear that the female has not only been marginalized in the official history of the region but also in the region's unofficial or alternative history. Cliff therefore

privileges Nanny to highlight the female contribution to what theorists on the maroon experience such as Edward Brathwaite and Antonio Benitez-Rojo deem the Caribbean's "Other" history.

Moreover, in titling her novel *Abeng*, Cliff overtly alludes to the tradition of resistance to slavery and colonial authority for which the maroons have become emblematic. The abeng, a cow horn, used by the maroons to communicate with each other during times of war and celebration, has become a prominent symbol of the maroon resistance to oppression in Jamaica. In her book, *The Mother of Us All: A History of Queen Nanny, Leader of the Windward Jamaican Maroons*, Karla Gottlieb remarks that under Nanny's guidance, the maroons used the abeng to relay vital military information over long distances during their wars with the British and counter surprise attacks with ambushes of their own. This instrument, which was also used within the maroon community to call meetings and relay emergency messages, gave the maroons a strategic advantage over the British who had no means of long distance communication. As a vestige of African culture, the abeng was also of great spiritual relevance. Because of its practical and symbolic function in Jamaica's maroon communities, the abeng is considered "a powerful metaphor for self-determination" (Gottlieb 44-46).<sup>13</sup> In contemporary Jamaica, the abeng continues to be a symbol of resistance to domination. In *No Telephone to Heaven*, the sequel to *Abeng*, the armed

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<sup>13</sup> Jamaica's literary culture continues to associate the abeng with a counter-discourse of resistance to oppressive forces. As examples, Gottlieb cites a novel that renders maroon history in fictive form that was published in the 1970s and a newspaper that was associated with Jamaica's 1960s Black Power Movement. Both of these texts are entitled *Abeng* (46). (Gottlieb, Karla. *The Mother of Us All: A History of Queen Nanny, Leader of the Windward Jamaican Maroons*. Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1998.) More recently, the *Abeng News Magazine*, an online publication that features news of Jamaica and the wider Caribbean, has made use of this word in its title. <<http://www.abengnews.com/about/>>.

resistance to neo-imperialism that is undertaken by the story's heroine, Clare Savage, is launched from land that she inherits from her grandmother. This land is located near to Accompong town, one of the historical strongholds of the maroons. The proximity of the two sites of resistance aligns the resistance to slavery that is mounted by the maroons of Jamaica with Clare's contemporary fight against the forces of neo-imperialism.

The story of the maroon functions symbolically in Cliff's earlier works. It is associated with the growing awareness of the heroine to her African ancestry and with her later resistance to imperialism. In *Free Enterprise*, the heroines are similarly positioned within the anti-colonial and anti-imperial tradition of resistance that the experience of maroonage epitomizes. Maroon communities also figure prominently within the plot of the narrative and play a significant role in the organized resistance to slavery undertaken by the novel's two female protagonists, an African-American, Mary Ellen Pleasant, and a Jamaican, Annie Christmas. Cliff bases the character of Pleasant on the historical Mary Ellen Pleasant, an African American entrepreneur who fought for an end to slavery and equality for blacks and was thought to have aided John Brown's 1859 raid on Harper's Ferry. Pleasant, who was subject to scandal and plots designed to undermine her reputation during her eventful life, was, until recently, completely written out of historical accounts of this raid (Johnson 119-22). The character of Annie, while not ostensibly based on any historical personage, assumes the moniker Annie Christmas, on Pleasant's urging. Annie Christmas is a larger than life figure of Southern folklore, who was said to have operated a riverboat on the Mississippi River and engaged in exploits that made her the stuff of legends. Pleasant recounts Annie's

lifestory and connects her story to Nanny of the Maroons.<sup>14</sup> In the process of assuming this new name, Annie symbolically discards the colonized status that was hers on the island of Jamaica that is evoked in her birth name Regina, the Latin word for “queen.”

By emphasizing Pleasant’s revolutionary activities, together with her ancestral lineage, which positions her as a descendant of the maroons, Cliff revises history to not only demonstrate the female contribution to the struggle to end slavery, but also to underscore the profound but often ignored role that maroon communities played in bringing about the abolition of slavery. Pleasant’s ancestral lineage intimately affiliates her with maroon communities. Her mother, Quasheba, who exerts significant influence on her daughter’s revolutionary activities, is herself a maroon. Born on the Gullah islands off the coast of South Carolina, Quasheba migrates to Martha’s Vineyard where she is schooled by Ogun in the art of weapon making and meets a ship captain who fathers Pleasant. Quasheba takes her infant daughter to a maroon settlement hidden in a forest that overlooks the Appalachian Trail where the maroons hold a nine-night ceremony for the baby.<sup>15</sup> In exchange, Quasheba imparts her knowledge of weaponry to the maroons. Quasheba is subsequently killed in a raid on the maroon settlement known as the Great Dismal Swamp in 1825 and bequeaths “her hand-wrought revolver” to Pleasant who carries it with her for the rest of her life (131). The revolver is a symbol of her mother’s resistance to slavery that Pleasant inherits and continues in her own activities designed to subvert the slave system.

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<sup>14</sup> In Pleasant’s version of the story, Annie is black but other cultures, such as the Irish, have their own versions of this legendary character.

<sup>15</sup> This ceremony is traditionally performed at the death of a member of the community and involves a communal meeting to celebrate the life of the deceased. It is a cultural practice in Jamaica and features very prominently in Jamaican literature.

Pleasant's father is also intimately associated with maroon communities. In a vessel that is disguised as a slaving ship, he smuggles escaped Africans "along the coastline from as far away as Surinam" to Martha's Vineyard where "they joined colonies of other runagate, scattered across the continental mass, on the islands strung along the coast, or, deciding enough is enough, some decided to piece their way back home" (108). The guerilla tactics used by communities to combat slavery is underscored in the omniscient narrator's observation that these "runagate settlements welcomed those willing to stay, for it was from those places that the war of the flea was being waged. Long before the costumed tragedy of the Civil War, rebellion was a fact. These rebels concealed themselves in caves, swamps, hidden places called forts" (109). This description points to the extensive range and movement of the maroons whose communities and activities were felt all over the New World wherever slavery existed and underscores the diasporic origins of the resistance to slavery in which Pleasant engages.

Moreover, Pleasant's embrace of economic enterprise is positioned within a maroon tradition of economic agency. The participation of maroon communities in the capitalist system is highlighted in the story of Ultima Thule, a maroon settlement that existed in a vast network of underground caves in the hills of Kentucky.<sup>16</sup> This community mines the caves for lead and zinc, and engages in a lucrative trade with the whites of the area until their settlement is raided and destroyed by the local militia. Pleasant's highly successful hotel and restaurant business that caters to the needs of the nouveau riche who make their fortunes in the California Gold Rush and the soldiers,

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<sup>16</sup> The name Ultima Thule, the Latin phrase for a distant or remote location, alludes to the far-flung range of the maroon communities and the vast span of the underground network of which they were a part.

miners, bankers, and railway builders who are all part of “the greatest enterprise the country had ever witnessed” (105) is positioned within this tradition of maroon economic enterprise. She employs only escaped slaves, who are described as “runagate, fugitive chattel” (103) and uses the money she earns to support the abolitionist enterprise.

She also uses disguise, one of the tropes of maroonage, to deflect attention away from her economic enterprise. Although she chafes against the image of the mammy stereotype, she initially conforms to it to secure her footing in the business world. The omniscient narrator notes that, “she began her empire by embodying Mammydom, as much as she grated against the word, the notion, taking care of the guests in her hotels.” To allay fears that she is rising above her station, she “dressed as a dignified, unobtrusive houseservant....So she could move among them easily, in and out of any station they required. Disguised.” (105). Commenting on the way the real life Mary Ellen Pleasant was affected by the mammy image, Wendy Walters asserts that “the historical Pleasant has often been referred to as Mammy Pleasant, a name that diminishes and contains Pleasant’s economic and political power in San Francisco in the mid-nineteenth century ....” (502).

In contrast, Cliff’s portrayal of the fictional Pleasant indicates that she appropriates the stereotype and uses it as a strategy of disguise to empower herself and advance her revolutionary activities. By adopting the persona of the black woman as a caregiver, she successfully deflects attention away from her subversive abolitionist activities which include cashing in \$30000 in shares, converting the money to gold and using it to finance John Brown’s 1859 raid on Harper’s Ferry. One of the principal planners of the raid, and its chief financier, Pleasant strategizes battle tactics with John

Brown, Harriet Tubman, and Annie, at a meeting of the group in Canada. She is on her way to reinforce John Brown's forces by supplying them with additional ammunition and weapons, when she discovers that the raid has failed and Brown has been captured. Forced to abort her plans, Pleasant disguises herself as a man and succeeds in making her way back to California by way of New York.

Cliff's novel thus interrogates the implied dichotomy between the culture of the plantation and that of the maroons by demonstrating that maroon communities resisted imperial exploitation yet willingly engaged in capitalist economic activity. This position complicates the view, advocated by some theorists, that maroons embraced a communal way of life that was diametrically opposed to the individualism and capitalism upon which the slave economy rested. Mahibir is one such theorist. She defines maroonage as "a cultural and ideological process of anti-imperialism through a nexus of recurring tropes central to the practice of marronage itself: space, flight and confrontation, alternative culture, and communal unity" (38). In referring to the "communal unity" that was a salient feature of maroon life, this statement implies that these communities were fundamentally opposed, on a practical and ideological level, to the individualism upon which capitalist economic practices rest. Through her heroine, who incorporates capitalist business practices within a maroon tradition of resistance, Cliff demonstrates that the anti-imperialist critique articulated by maroonage was not fundamentally opposed to the economic systems of modernity.

Maroon communities also figure prominently in Annie's activities. Annie leaves her island home of Jamaica in 1858, at the age of twenty, to escape a fate in which she is expected to trade sexual favors for financial gain; a destiny for which she is

foreordained by her virtue of her light-skin and her mother's desire to preserve the family's social privilege by aligning her daughter with the local planter class elite. Repulsed at the prospects of achieving class and social privilege in this manner and desirous of helping the black and the poor but recognizing that she lacks the will to resist the dictates of her position if she remains in Jamaica, Annie flees to North America where she meets Pleasant. The two women form a life-defining friendship based on their desire to actively fight against the oppression of blacks and their shared opposition to social class stratification within the black community.

Annie joins the abolitionist movement, known as the "Cause" and enters into a scheme that would result in John Brown's Raid. Like Pleasant, Annie assumes an active role in the rebellion. She is given the task of travelling through the South with the aim of arming the slaves, and encouraging them to join the rebellion. She too uses disguise, blackening her face to look like a dark-skinned man, and poses as a cooper, as she drives a wagon in which guns are concealed. She aborts her mission when she learns that the raid on Harper's Ferry has failed and takes refuge in a maroon camp that is raided several days later by Confederate soldiers. The women and children are shot and the men, including Annie in her disguise, are captured, made into a chain gang, and put to work. Her disguise is subsequently discovered and she and the men on the gang are forced to engage in acts of sexual intercourse for the amusement of their white captors. The gang is freed several years later by Yankee soldiers and a broken Annie heads South, finally establishing a home on the banks of the Mississippi. She remains there for the remainder of her life in a state of self-imposed exile.

Annie's interactions with a community of lepers who live in close proximity to her home conflate the conditions of exile, illness, and maroonage, to reveal that even though slavery has ended, the US still practices a form of internal colonialism against non-white racial others who are denied citizenship and entry into the processes of the nation. Although she has spent the majority of her life in the US, Annie views herself as an exile who has "never settled" into her life on the continent yet she does not relocate to Jamaica because a physical return to her island home will not rid her of "the placelessness which had always been hers" (19). This inability to truly experience a sense of belonging surfaces even in her resistance to slavery in that although she participates in the abolitionist movement, she does not fully identify with it and views it as "someone else's fight" (199).

The lepers also live in exile. They are ethnic minorities, who, like the historical maroons, exist as an alternate culture on the fringes of the larger society from which they are excluded. Their alterity is underscored through their disease, which is presented as a "plague" that was introduced into the U.S. by a fugitive slave as a form of "retribution" for the crime of slavery, and by their physical confinement to the camp. The story of Rachel DeSouza, the descendant of Spanish Jews, who are forced to flee Spain in the face of the Inquisition, further underscores that the conditions of maroonage and exile are conflated. Rachel's ancestors travel to the New World shortly after Columbus' voyage of discovery. They settle in Surinam where they face continued persecution and are forced to hide their place of worship in the jungle. Rachel discusses her people's "exile in the desert" and her eventual flight into the hills of

Surinam that aligns her with the maroon community of this country.<sup>17</sup> After she is diagnosed with leprosy, Rachel is placed in the leper colony where she continues to live in a state of exile.

In contrast to Annie's self-imposed exile; the confinement experienced by the lepers is enforced by the state. Nonetheless, confinement, in both instances, is triggered by illness. In the case of the lepers, illness is physical; in Annie's case, it is psychological and manifests itself as post-traumatic stress. Unable to speak of the atrocities inflicted on her during the war, she can neither let go of the past nor is she fully able to live in the present; a state of being that traps her in time and space. Annie's inability to reconcile with her past is an example of what Cynthia James refers to as psychological maroonage; a state of being that "explores the psyche of the migrant, in particular, the psyche of the migrant whose entire existence has been destabilized by debasing and enforced ancestral voyages" (72-3). Her condition is similar to the silencing of the lepers who are forbidden from contacting their relatives; a state of being that is likened to the secrecy associated with maroon communities that are described as being "in the silence" (62).

The idea of time repeating itself is also associated with the experience of maroonage. Like Annie, the leper colony is suspended in time; caught between the past and the present. Established in the nineteenth century, this colony is first run by nuns and then by the U.S. government. The continuity between the nineteenth century

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<sup>17</sup> The reference to the Surinamese maroons is no doubt meant to draw attention to the substantial presence of this particular maroon community. Anthropologists, Sally and Richard Price, who have done extensive research into these communities note that the Surinamese maroons comprised one of the largest maroon settlements in the New World. They are comprised of six groups whose descendants account for over one-tenth of the population of Surinam. (Price, Richard, and Sally Price. *Two Evenings in Saramaka*. Chicago: University of Chicago P, 1991.)

world in which the lepers lived the seminal moments of their lives and the realities of the early twentieth century are reflected in the omniscient narrator's comment: "But the world most of them had known was of another century. The colony became a pastiche of the twentieth under the auspices of the U.S.P.H.S" (40). The colony is firmly associated with slavery and the plantation system of the U.S. in that the land upon which it is established was originally a plantation. Although the facilities are modernized, many of the original plantation structures remain, including "gardens dating back to antebellum days, like the original architecture, providing continuity" (42).

Whereas maroonage in the past is associated with armed resistance to slavery, in the leper colony it is associated with ideological resistance to oppression that is expressed through the colonists' leisure activities that include watching movies and telling stories. Annie and her cohorts undermine the hegemony of colonial discourse from within the space of the colony. They protest the film *Birth of a Nation* by silently walking out of the theatre and the authorities in charge of them respond by showing the films of the black filmmaker, Oscar Micheaux. In substituting the white supremacist film that perpetuated negative images of blacks to justify denying blacks their rightful place in American society with one designed to promote positive images of the black experience, the colonists succeed in challenging the racist representations of blacks in mainstream discourse. They also use the oral tradition and storytelling to contest official received history associated with the colonization process, preserve their individual histories and in the process present an alternative or "Other" history that has been silenced by official discourses. The common element in these stories is the past

oppression that diverse communities experienced at the hands of the European colonizing mission.

The storytelling that the colonists engage in reflects Glissant's views on the uses of the oral tradition on the colonial plantations. He asserts that the oral texts of the slaves functioned as a survival mechanism; they were non-linear and characterized by discontinuity – “snatches and fragments” – that manifested itself as “a symbolic evocation of situations. As if these texts were striving for disguise beneath the symbol....” He likens the discontinuity of these texts to “the same discontinuity the Maroons create through that other detour called *marronnage*” (68-69). Thus Glissant interprets these stories as part of the counterculture of modernity that the slaves used to interrogate the discourse of the master. The colonists use their tales in a similar manner. They contest their silencing by the official discourse through their stories which they use to assert their individual and collective subjectivity, and to conceal or “disguise” their ongoing resistance to oppression.

One of the stories that Annie tells demonstrates the “symbolic evocation of situations” that Glissant identifies as central to the storytelling tradition of the plantations. Annie's story that centers on the activities and fortunes of the Jamaican Revivalist preacher, Alexander Bedward, positions contemporary forms of resistance to imperialism within the maroon tradition of resistance to slavery. Born in 1859, Bedward was the protégé of an African American named H. E. Shakespeare Wood who inducted Bedward into the Baptist faith in 1889. Bedward became a religious leader and combined Christian doctrine with a call for social justice. His preaching and social activism on behalf of the poor garnered him the attention of the island's elite, who had

him arrested in 1895 and charged with inciting rebellion. He was confined to a mental asylum but subsequently released. He continued his ministry which grew to include numerous congregations in Jamaica, neighboring Cuba, and Central America. While some of his followers were poor laborers, some were successful small entrepreneurs. Bedward acted as a mediator who settled labor disputes among his followers thereby facilitating their commercial activities.

Bedward was arrested a second time in 1921 after contravening a ban on marching and leading a group of his followers into Kingston. He was again placed in an insane asylum where he spent the remainder of his life. A year before his arrest, Bedward identified Marcus Garvey, who had come to prominence by this time, as the Moses of his people, and cast himself in the role of Aaron, Moses' prophet (Schuler). This story casts Bedward as a forerunner to the black nationalism of Marcus Garvey, the Rastafarian movement begun in the 1930s in Jamaica, and subsequent nationalist movements. It thus places him within a tradition of resistance that begins with maroonage and continues into the nationalist and post-independence phases of Jamaican history.

The novel also equates Bedward's resistance to imperialism with the Caliban/Prospero story, which has been used by Caribbean postcolonial theorists to articulate an anti-imperialist discourse. In this way, the novel further aligns Bedward, and the tradition of black liberation that he helped to initiate, within a maroon tradition of resistance to oppression. Annie stresses that Bedward's mentor, who is nicknamed Shakespeare II, has a young Bedward play the role of Ariel, and that as he matures, Bedward grew "into the role of Caliban" (52). She states, "Alexander grew into a

strapping man, and into the role of Caliban, which Shakespeare II cast in the role of Toussaint, for audiences who had never heard of Toussaint but had been taught about Caliban in school” (52). These allusions invoke George Lamming’s postcolonial analysis of Shakespeare’s play *The Tempest* in his seminal theoretical work *The Pleasures of Exile*. In this work, Lamming interprets the Prospero/Caliban relationship as a metaphor for the master/slave dialectic that was established on the plantations of the New World as a consequence of the imperial project. In a chapter entitled “Caliban Orders History,” he interprets the Haitian Revolution from this perspective likening Toussaint L’Ouverture’s ousting of the French from Haiti to Caliban’s attempts to overthrow Prospero with the crucial difference being that L’Ouverture succeeds where Caliban fails. By portraying Bedward as a Calibanesque figure to self-reflexively reference Lamming’s analysis and the ideological discourse with which it is affiliated, Cliff aligns Bedward’s story with the colonized who have been dominated and the silenced by the master narrative of history as symbolized by Prospero.

Cliff’s reference to the male postcolonial text as articulated by Caliban’s story and Lamming’s *The Pleasures of Exile* also self-reflexively positions her novel in relation to this tradition even as it alludes to the exclusion of the female from this maroon tradition of resistance. The maroon has been associated with the ideological discourse of resistance for which Caliban has become a symbol. Moreover, the Prospero/Caliban, master/ slave relationship has been depicted as a masculinized discourse by the earlier generation of male post-colonial writers. Patricia Krus underscores this idea in an article entitled “Claiming Masculinity as her Own: Maroon Revolution in Michelle Cliff’s *No Telephone to Heaven*.” Krus stresses that male postcolonial critics such as James

Arnold, view the maroon as “Caliban’s son.” Krus examines the intertextuality of the novels *No Telephone to Heaven* and *Abeng* with the work of male Caribbean writers, such as Aime Cesaire and Edouard Glissant, to argue that Cliff appropriates and genders the trope of the maroon that has been traditionally portrayed as “an essentially masculine icon of resistance” (40; 42).

Cliff’s concern with the female contribution to the tradition of resistance with which the maroon is associated is illustrated in her article entitled “Caliban’s Daughter: The Tempest and the Teapot,” where Cliff refers to Nanny of the Maroons as “the Jamaican Sycorax” (47). These references to Caliban’s daughter and Sycorax, Caliban’s mother, who, in Shakespeare’s play is banished from the island by Prospero, and becomes the absent female figure of resistance who is written out of the male text, indicates that Cliff views her female heroines as Sycorax figures. In *Free Enterprise*, Cliff continues the gendering of the maroon experience begun in her earlier novels and critical writings by positioning her two female characters, Pleasant and Annie, within a female maroon tradition of resistance. This is in keeping with her agenda to self-consciously rewrite history to highlight the contribution of the Sycorax figures whose resistance, both on and off the plantations, has been silenced and marginalized in official versions of history. Moreover, through its portrayal of maroonage, the novel connects anti-slavery resistance to the discourse of diasporic citizenship. In many ways, Pleasant who embraces modernity and uses her economic agency to fight for the rights of blacks to full entry into the processes of the nation, represents the possibilities of citizenship. Although initially part of this fight, Annie who retreats into illness and exile, comes to symbolize its limitations.

## Maroon Communities and the Counter-culture of Modernity

Published in 1997, four years after Cliff's novel, Dionne Brand's novel *At the Full and Change of the Moon*, also explores the psychological and economic legacy of slavery on the descendants of slaves. As happens in Cliff's novel, Brand's text interrogates both colonial and imperial discourses, as well as the male-centered focus of the counter-hegemonic discourse in which an older generation of Caribbean postcolonial writers such as V.S. Naipaul and George Lamming engaged. This constitutes a gendering of the counter-culture of modernity. Moreover, Brand's novel conflates the experience of migration with maroonage to illustrate that the marginality that was so central to the maroon condition continues to inform the experiences of their descendants whose citizenship is severely circumscribed by the neo-colonial and neo-imperial relations of domination under which they are forced to exist. In so doing, the novel demonstrates that maroonage and its associated tropes, is crucial to an analysis of the complexities, challenges, and limitations of diasporic citizenship.

The initial chapters of this novel detail the experiences of Marie Ursule, a Trinidadian slave, who is hanged for staging an act of rebellion against her master in 1823 by orchestrating a mass suicide of the slaves on his plantation.<sup>18</sup> Marie Ursule is survived by her young daughter, Bola, who is smuggled off the plantation by Marie Ursule's lover, Kamena, an escaped slave in search of a maroon colony. Unable to find

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<sup>18</sup> 1823 is also the year of the Demerara Revolt that occurred in the then British colony of British Guiana, what is now present day Guyana. The allusion to this year, which is made even more pertinent in that Kamena, Marie Ursule's co-conspirator, has a name that echoes that of one of the black planners of the Demerara Revolt, who was named Quamina, indicates that rebellion was a constant feature of life on the plantations of the Caribbean. Although not on the scale of the Demerara Revolt, which involved some 10,000 to 12,000 slaves, Marie Ursule's act of mass poisoning is nonetheless positioned within a tradition of anti-slavery resistance. (*Crowns of Glory, Tears of Blood: The Demerara Slave Rebellion of 1823*. New York: Oxford UP, 1994).

this colony, Kamena takes Bola to an abandoned plantation, Culebra Bay, once owned by Ursuline nuns, Marie Ursule's former owners. Here Bola grows into adulthood. The story of Marie Ursule's rebellion and Bola's life on the abandoned Culebra plantation with which the novel begins is followed by descriptions of the experiences of Bola's grandson, Sones, and her granddaughter, Cordelia Rojas, whose lives encompass the two World Wars and the pre-independence and nationalist phases of Trinidadian history. Chapters that describe the migrations of Bola's great grandchildren – Carlyle, Adrian, Maya, and Eula – to the metropolises of North America and Europe in the last three decades of the twentieth century, follow. These multiple narrative perspectives, together with the broad historical range that they span, illustrates the continuity between the plantation experience and the contemporary issues of citizenship experienced by the descendants of slaves/maroons and the communities that they form in the aftermath of colonization.

As happens in *Free Enterprise*, Brand's novel self-reflexively mirrors this layering of the past on the present by appropriating and revising the work of an older generation of male Caribbean writers to highlight the female contribution to the maroon tradition of resistance to oppression. The most obvious connection of Brand's work to the earlier generation of writers is seen in the fact that the character of the slave ancestor, Marie Ursule, is inspired by the work of her fellow Trinidadian writer, V.S. Naipaul, who in some ways is Brand's literary ancestor. In an afterword to her novel, Brand notes that V.S. Naipaul's history of Trinidad, *The Loss of Eldorado: A History*, contains an account of the experiences of a slave woman in Trinidad named "Thisbe who in 1802 was hanged, mutilated and burnt, her head spiked on a pole, for the mass deaths of

poisoning on an estate” (301). Brand bases the character of Marie Ursule around the facts of this incident. Published in 1969, Naipaul’s work that is based on research gleaned from the colonial archives indicates his reliance on the official interpretation of history and the progressivist, linear view of history that it propagates. In contrast, Brand fictionalizes Thisbe’s story to privilege an imaginative, intuitive, and non-linear interpretation of history that illustrates that elements of the slave and maroon experience continue to haunt subsequent generations. In the process, she engages in a feminist revision of the male colonial and postcolonial text by highlighting the rebellious, revolutionary actions of women, both on and off the plantations.

While critics such as Marlene Goldman, Johanna Garvey, and Alexis Pauline Gumbs have focused attention on Brand’s portrayal of diaspora in her work, and others such as Maureen Moynagh and Julia Grandison have read the novel from the vantage point of trauma theory, thus far no sustained critical attention has been placed on the narrative portrayal of maroonage. After taking Bola to the abandoned Culebra plantation where they constitute “a Marronage of two” (51), Kamena attempts to relocate the maroon colony of Terre Bouillante that he had found by accident and subsequently left in order to fulfill his promise to Marie Ursule that he would take the young Bola to safety. In spite of constant trips from Culebra into the interior of the island in search of this colony which takes on mythic proportions in his fevered mind, he is never able to find the maroon settlement and dies in a state of unfulfilled maroonage. Kamena’s experience of maroonage, and the displacement and disorientation with which it is associated, functions as a prototype that is repeated in subsequent generations of Bola’s descendants.

Through this portrayal of maroonage as an ongoing process, the novel evokes the phenomenon of grand maroonage. Historian Leslie Manigat notes that slaves who engaged in grand maroonage deserted the plantation for lengthy periods of time and in some cases, remained permanent fugitives; went as far away as possible from the plantation, preferring to inhabit remote and difficult to access locations; strengthened their position by joining with other escapees and forming bands or communities of maroons; and engaged in guerrilla warfare against the plantations. In contrast, petit maroonage refers to individual acts of maroonage that ended quickly when the escaped slave returned to the plantation (423). The definition of grand maroonage stresses the importance of the temporal component to indicate that this type of maroonage is measured not only by the numbers of escapees but also by the length of time that they remain in a state of maroonage. Thus Kamena and Bola's maroonage, while "petit", in that they are only two individuals, becomes "grand" in that they remain permanent fugitives from the plantation and are eventually joined by slaves fleeing the plantation system.

The novel examines the connection between the ancestral experiences of Kamena and Bola and the personal fortunes of their descendants and more generally, the larger colonial and imperial relations of domination upon which slave society, the emancipated colony, and the contemporary experience of migration are founded. The tropes of the maroon experience – displacement, disguise, movement, travel, a transcendence of localized geography, and a non-linear conceptualization of time – feature prominently in the communities that evolve from the original maroon settlements and inform the migration experiences of their inhabitants. Although these communities

are inevitably shaped by the society of which they are a part, they reject processes of modernity associated with the terror and oppression of the plantation system, in effect expressing a counter-culture of modernity that would continue to manifest itself in the post-emancipation and post-independence periods of the nation's history.

Culebra Bay develops into a settlement when a number of slaves, in order to escape the indentureship period, that occurred from 1834-1838, begin making their way to the area. They join Bola who had been living there alone for years and by the mid-1800s, a small and remote village forms on the outskirts of the bay yet the area's reputation as a former leper colony ensures its ongoing marginality with the result that it remains closed to the outside world until the latter part of the nineteenth century (64). The area is also marginalized by the official discourse of the island. In 1833, the Lieutenant-Governor of the island, Sir George Fitzgerald Hill, pores over a map of Trinidad as he writes a notice informing the slave population of their manumission and apprenticeship and makes the highly ironic observation that the Culebra Bay is "safely abandoned" (53). The map represents the attempt, by the official discourse, to impose borders to control the slave population and their descendants while Culebra Bay symbolizes the inability of official discourse to contain and account for resistance to it that is epitomized in the figure of the Maroon or runaway slave for which the area becomes an emblem.

This idea is developed in the omniscient narrator's observation that "a map does not contain the dispositions and reflections that collect at a harbour, or what those people will do on arrival, which is to work out the way to Maroonage, the way to rebellion, or for that matter the ways to docility" (52). Located at the Southern tip of the

island, that faces the South American mainland – a physical marginality that mirrors its ostracism in the official discourse of the island – the area functions as a transit point that facilitates the oftentimes unsanctioned movement of peoples among Trinidad, the nearby Dutch islands, and the Northern territories of South America. The name of the area, Culebra, Spanish for snake or serpent, speaks to the alterity of the community in that the image of the snake evokes the covert border crossing and slippage that the area facilitates and further establishes its oppositional relationship to official discourse. Moreover, the snake is associated with feminine sexuality and a subversive discourse that destabilizes male-centered official discourses.<sup>19</sup> The fact that the community of Culebra forms around Bola – “the outskirts settled into a village around Bola by the sea” (64) – whose own sexuality would be viewed as transgressive by the official discourse – she takes multiple lovers and her children each have different fathers – further emphasizes the challenge that the area poses to the ruling powers.

While Culebra Bay and the community that it gives birth to is marginalized by the official discourse of the island, the marginalization that Terre Bouillante experiences stems from a self-imposed desire on the part of its inhabitants to protect themselves from the oppressive systems of modernity. The contemporary inhabitants of this community remain fiercely loyal to their traditional way of life, protective of their privacy and resistant to incursions of modernity into the area. The townspeople’s distrust of

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<sup>19</sup> Here I am thinking of Gloria Anzaldúa’s essay “Entering the Serpent” where she notes that the female diety, Coatloapeuh, the Mesoamerican counterpart of the Earth and fertility Goddess, was divided into light and dark elements by patriarchal Azteca-Mexica culture - the Serpent Goddess, Coatlicue and “the good mother,” Tonantsi/Guadalupe. This split gave rise to the virgin/whore dichotomy that would be used to control female sexuality in the Catholic dominated society that was established in the wake of the Spanish conquest. Anzaldúa notes that among the Mexican poor, Guadalupe, is more powerful than male deities and is a symbol of rebellion against economic oppression. (Anzaldúa, Gloria. “Entering into the Serpent.” *Borderlands/ La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. San Francisco, California: Spinsters/ Aunt Lute, 1987. 25-39).

modernity derives from their ancestors' rejection of the plantation space where modernity was inextricably bound up with exploitation. In describing the town, the omniscient narrator states: "It was a quiet place, a place where strangers remained strangers for decades until the last person who knew them as strangers died. The building of a store or the coming of electricity made Terre Bouillante nervous.... Its past as a refuge for runaway slaves left Terre Bouillante with a dislike for modernity..." (140-41).

The area's original inhabitants seek to create a permanent home but the inherent insecurity of maroonage, characterized by constant vigilance and movement, for fear of being discovered and re-captured, ensures that they never completely experience the belonging and rootedness that they crave; an idea that is captured in the name of the area. French for "boiling land," the name Terre Bouillante literally describes the topography of the settlement that is located in the forested interior of the island where waterfalls and fissures abound. The water sources give the mud a bubbling quality so that it appears to be boiling. Symbolically, the name evokes images of movement, fluidity, and instability that call to mind the insecurity that is a salient feature of maroon life. This ancestral memory is preserved in the psyche of the area and re-enacted in the behavior of the town's inhabitants. The villagers' yearning for secrecy and privacy demonstrates that they are inscribed by the behaviors associated with maroonage that enabled their ancestors to survive but which now function as an impediment to their progress in contemporary society: "What had taught Terre Bouillante to survive kept it from living ...." (141).

The resistance to official discourse that Culebra Bay and Terre Bouillante represent, coupled with their marginality within the nation-space, positions them as an original “transnation” – a term coined by Bill Ashcroft to describe “the fluid, migrating *outside* of the state that begins *within* the state.” Ashcroft notes that the subjects of the transnation “live in between the categories by which subjectivity is normally constituted;” a state of being that disrupts the center-periphery binary, physical and imaginative boundaries, and notions of a “national self and other” (73). The nation thus becomes “an open *cultural site*” (73) where subjects travel “within as well as between nations” (79). The inhabitants of Culebra Bay – who transgress the official borders of the state by moving between the islands and the South American mainland – and those of Terre Bouillante who inhabit a space of self-imposed exile within plantation society and the post-colony to which it gives rise – embody this transgressive and interstitial subjectivity.

This state of being, that is experienced by both the original maroons and the modern-day inhabitants of these areas, demonstrates the continuity between the slave/maroon experience and the contemporary reality of their descendants. Although Kamena and Bola flee the oppression of the plantation system, the memory of its terror continues to haunt their descendants and the modern towns into which the original maroon communities of Terre Bouillante and Culebra Bay eventually transform demonstrating that elements of the maroon experience remain ongoing and conditions the responses of the communities to which it gives rise to processes of modernity. This situation reflects Benítez-Rojo’s views on the perpetuation of the exploitation that characterized the plantation era in subsequent stages of Caribbean history. Thus in opposition to the tendency to view maroonage as a relic of the past that ended with the

plantation era – a view propagated by the Francophone writers Patrick Chamoiseau, Raphael Confiant, and Jean Bernabe – the novel presents maroonage as an integral component of modernity.

The novel's portrayal of migration also connects the historical phenomenon of maroonage to processes of modernity. The character Carlyle, the grandson of Sayman, one of Bola's children who runs away and "[finds] Terre Bouillante without even looking" (140) illustrates that contemporary issues of diasporic migration and citizenship are intimately related to the ancestral experience of maroonage. Carlyle feels trapped and stifled by the secrecy and reserve of Terre Bouillante and an inexplicable sense of shame that pervades the town. The omniscient narrator states:

An enveloping sense of shame wrapped around them all ... and he didn't understand it and he didn't want it. It was the tightness of Terre Bouillante, the pervading secrecy that seemed to wrap itself around the small town high in the hills, still obscure to plain sight more than a hundred years since it was last a Maroon camp. The town where everything was viewed with suspicion. Beginning with the road that sinewed its way up the rise during the time of Bola's son, his grandfather Sayman, ... (139-40).

In what proves to be a defining moment of his life, Carlyle, at the age of sixteen robs the town's gas station. This act of rebellion makes him aware that he can use the sense of shame and fear that his rebellious behavior induces in his family to manipulate them. He subsequently drops out of school and embarks on a life of crime that establishes him as the town's resident "badjohn."

Carlyle embraces the modernity that the townspeople view with suspicion yet his rebellion against authority also aligns him with the counter-culture of modernity expressed by his maroon ancestors. Exhilarated by the discovery that he possesses the ability to manipulate others, Carlyle feels "something like electricity running through him, something like water too, electricity and water, and he was burning in the middle of

it, bright like something so hot it was white” (139). Carlyle’s transformation, rendered in terms of “electricity” and “water,” modern conveniences to which the area remains resistant because of its maroon past, symbolizes his embrace of modernity. The element of water that destabilizes the physical topography of the area also emphasizes the disruption that he introduces into the town and underscores the way his refusal to conform to the area’s inheritance unsettles the community. After a police inflicted beating, Carlyle undergoes a religious conversion and becomes a travelling evangelist on the Revival circuit (which earns him the nickname “Priest”) yet sees “no contradiction” in returning to his criminal behavior when the evangelists’ promise of taking him to America does not materialize. In addition to his rebellion, Carlyle oscillates between “rage” and “piety” (149), and “[slips] from one personality to another” (161). The name Carlyle may also be an allusion to Thomas Carlyle, the Victorian intellectual/historian, a proponent of English imperialism who is known for discoursing on modernity and criticizing the religious and political ideas of his contemporaries on the grounds that they could not address the demands of the modern age (51).<sup>20</sup>

Carlyle’s opposition to official discourse and his ability to assume different identities is further illustrated after he migrates to the United States. Precipitated by his

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<sup>20</sup> Thomas Carlyle’s influence on the philosophical discourse of the age was first felt in the 1820s, the decade in which the Demerara Revolt occurred. In his famous essay, “Occasional Discourse on the Nigger/Negro Question,” (1849) Carlyle argues that emancipation had resulted in the indolence of blacks which he viewed as an intrinsic moral defect. Therefore whites, whom he viewed as morally superior, were justified in coercing them to work (125-26). A younger generation of British historians, J.A. Froude and Charles Kingsley, were greatly influenced by Carlyle’s ideas. (Morrow, John. *Thomas Carlyle*. London: Hambledon Continuum, 2006.) Considered together, the allusions to Thomas Carlyle and the revolt highlight the conflict between the discourses of the slave and master that dominated public consciousness at the time. The name also associates Priest with the discourse of the master and points to the character ambiguities that he displays that result from his inheritance of the traits of both master and slave.

incarceration for severing the ear of a rival criminal (ironically a form of punishment Marie Ursule's last owner had used in an attempt to curb her rebellious spirit), Carlye's migration positions the experience of maroonage within the context of diaspora. Upon his release, his family secures his entry into a farm labor program and he leaves the island to work on the orange farms of Florida. A few weeks later, he escapes from the program after stealing his boss' green card which he uses to assume an official identity. He thus confers himself an automatic and fake citizenship into American society. Carlye subsequently reunites with a Trinidadian friend in New York. Together they engage in small scale drug running and other illegal activities that see them traveling back and forth along the Eastern seaboard of the US from New York to Florida. Carlye's escape from the farm mirrors Kamena's and Bola's escape from the plantation and demonstrates that the material relations of domination of the plantation era are replicated in the neo-imperial structures of contemporary society. Moreover his economic activity situates him on the fringes of the global economy and emphasizes his marginal subjectivity that is constructed in opposition to official discourse. In this way, he is associated with a counter-culture of modernity.

Paradoxically, Carlye is also situated within the tradition of exploitation associated with the imperial project. His nickname, "Priest," together with his economic activity, symbolically links him to the nuns of the Culebra plantation, and more broadly speaking the priest and nuns who helped to perpetuate imperialism. The nuns who own Culebra are presented as agents and symbols of Empire who combine religious ethic with mercantile and capitalist activity to subjugate the original inhabitants of the region and the transported Africans whose labor sustains their economic activity. They are

likened to “man-o’-war birds, the great frigates that follow ships and whales,” who “[made] passage to the New World, since 1691,” where they learned “how to multiply ground and ton loads of sugar and cocoa and whale oil and anything they turned their hand and someone else’s labour to” and “how to multiply their own years also. They had moved, skittering down the archipelago (as they had skittered down the centuries also) .... Multiplying on the last Caribbean island – La Trinidad – before islands exhaust themselves in coral and rock and cactus” (37-38). Arriving in the region in the wake of adventurers and merchants, the nuns acquire land, labor – in the form of slaves – and material commodities to continue the profiteering and exploitation of the region and its peoples initiated by the first conquerors. Their ability to “multiply” signals their heavy investment in material accumulation while the image of them “skittering down the archipelago” and the “centuries” invokes the European territorialization of the islands of the Caribbean.

Like these nuns, Carlyle’s relationships are predicated upon a sense of ownership and material accumulation that enables him to objectify and control others through the use of fear and violence. His ability to manipulate others is manifested in his escape from an INS detention center for illegal immigrants located between Gainesville and Jacksonville, Florida. At this camp, Carlyle meets his cousin, Adrian, who is described as his “doppelganger” because of their uncanny resemblance – further evidence of Carlyle’s ability to “double and divide with ease” (174?) which is also a characteristic possessed by the nuns. He engineers his and Adrian’s escape by blackmailing his sister, Eula, whose passport he had used to illegally re-enter the US after visiting his girlfriend in Canada. During this initial incident, Carlyle utilizes his

dexterity at assuming different personalities, disguises himself as a woman and succeeds in passing himself off as his sister to the unsuspecting border agents. To prevent him from revealing her complicity in the original fraud, Eula drives from Canada to Florida and transport Adrian and Carlyle away from the area after they effect their escape from the detention facility. Carlyle subsequently puts Adrian to work as a drug mule but after their relationship sours and Carlyle turns on him and attempts to kill him, Adrian flees to Amsterdam.

In addition to possessing the predatory traits associated with the slaveowners, Carlyle also possesses the traits of his maroon ancestors. Hence in spite of his desire to rebel against the history of his birthplace by embracing the modernity to which the area remains resistant – ostensibly through his economic activity – he finds himself, against his better judgment, engaging in behavior that undermines his economic endeavors. At the end of each cycle of material accumulation designed to procure him a level of material comfort that he describes as “the good life,” he invariably loses his self-control and self-sabotages by engaging in behavior that results in the loss of his money leading him to conclude that “he wasn’t made for it [the good life], he was made to trawl the bottom of life” (136). Carlyle thus finds himself engaged in a Sisyphean quest arising from the contradiction between his conscious embrace of modernity and his repeated self-sabotage that reflects an unconscious rejection of the materialist worldview that his money-making activities ostensibly support. This quest in search of “the good life” is reminiscent of Kamena’s futile search for the maroon colony of Terre Bouillante. Together with his escape from the detention center, which resonates with his earlier escape from the farm laborer program, (both facilities are located in Florida),

Carlyle's activities demonstrate the cyclical nature of his life and illustrate a central theme of the novel – the constant repetition of the past in the present.

This idea is crystallized through the conflation of the historical experience of maroonage with the contemporary migration experiences of the Caribbean subject that is explicitly evoked in the description of the detention center as: "... a camp for *gusanos* and boat people and runaways, a place like all places like this, as far back as any blood between Adrian and Priest would go. It was both the place Kamena wanted to find and the place he was running from all mixed up in one catastrophe of high fences and guards. Refugees and prisoners .... Prisoners who were begging their jailers for refuge" (197). Here the maroon camp – "the place Kamena wanted to find," that would offer refuge – and the plantation, "the place he was running from," that had imprisoned him are conflated in the paradoxical space of the detention camp for illegal immigrants. This paradox is further emphasized in that these contemporary refugees/maroons are seeking refuge in the country in which they are marooned.

Carlyle and Adrian's constant travel and manipulation of internal and international borders establishes them as the people of the transnation, who illegally cross borders and infringe official discourse. They have freedom in the sense that they traverse all sorts of metropolitan locations –New York, Atlanta, Miami, Amsterdam – yet remain marooned on the margins of society. In describing Carlyle's activities in the US, the omniscient narrator states, "There were always men and women who could make borders invisible. He was one of them.... There were always people like him who lived on the corners and in the seams of towns and cities" (167). Like Kamena and Bola, whose occupancy of the Culebra plantation positions them as maroons within the

symbolic space of Empire, Carlyle's activities in the US situates him within the context of modern day manifestations of Empire. Like his maroon ancestors, his position is marginal, liminal and outside of the official discourse which he challenges by manipulating the documents associated with it – such as a stolen green card and his sister's passport – in order to cross borders and gain a transgressive and interstitial agency that is not unlike that experienced by the original inhabitants of Culebra Bay and Terre Bouillante. However, unlike them, his resistance is compromised in that while his illegal activities places him in opposition to official discourse, he embraces an economic ethos based on predatory practices that underscores his complicity in the exploitation associated with the imperialist and neo-imperialist practices responsible for his ancestors enslavement and his own ongoing marginality.

The novel's portrayal of maroonage as an ongoing process interrogates a progressivist, linear conceptualization of history and points to a recurring trope of Brand's writing – the idea that the era of conquest, colonization, and slavery that initiated modernity into the region has not been exorcized in the collective unconscious of its people who remain haunted by this history.<sup>21</sup> In describing this phenomenon, whereby the past continues to be imprinted on the present, the voice of the omniscient narrator states: "There is time that is always happening. The time that is lost or forgotten or deliberately misplaced....There is time in this archipelago that returns and returns ..." (36). These words are used to describe the haunting of the Culebra Estate

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<sup>21</sup> For example, Brand's short story, *St. Mary's Estate*, details the legacy of the plantation system and slavery on subsequent generations of the descendants of slaves. The main character returns to the ruins of the estate where she grew up, that was formerly a plantation and reflects on the legacy of the system with the comment: "This estate has been here for hundreds of years....It is the end of the twentieth century and the slave barracks are still standing; one, with people living in it ...." (49-50). (Brand, Dionne. "St. Mary's Estate." *Sans Souci and Other Stories*. New York: Firebrand Books, 1989.)

by its former owners, the Ursuline nuns; a phenomenon that Bola, who possesses extra-sensory perception, is able to perceive. Although “dead by any empirical sign,” the spirit of the nuns continues to occupy the crumbling ruins of their former estate which becomes a palimpsest of their experiences and subsequent generations of Bola’s descendants.

This idea of time repeating itself calls to mind both Glissant’s concept of the plantation matrix and Benitez-Rojo’s claims about the synchronicity of Caribbean history. Ian Baucom adequately sums up Glissant’s non-linear conceptualization of history through the term “temporal accumulation.” Baucom maintains that Glissant and other writers who are “invested in the task of elaborating a black-Atlantic genealogy and counterculture of modernity,” posit the idea that the past is not past but accretes upon itself into the present (311-12). They eschew a progressivist Hegelian view of history and instead offer a counterhistory and counterculture of modernity that view transatlantic slavery as not “terminal but originary, or rather, a middle-passage into an experience of global modernity ....” (313). The novel’s description of the space of plantation time that “returns and returns,” achieved through its portrayal of maroonage and its modern manifestations, reflects these views.

Cliff and Brand’s novels demonstrate that maroonage is worthy of study because not only is it a historical phenomenon, it has also served as the basis for an ideological discourse that contributes to a maroon theory of Caribbean literature. These novels contribute to this “maroon theory” by positioning contemporary issues of migration and citizenship in relation to the historical experience of slavery and maroonage. In the process, they extend, challenge, and complicate historical interpretations of the function

of maroon communities put forth by theorists of maroonage. Moreover, they gender the maroon experience and the counter-culture of modernity with which it is associated by highlighting the role that women played in actively resisting the culture of the plantation.

By taking maroonage, which is viewed as a localized experience peculiar to the era of plantation slavery, and placing it within the modern-day context of diaspora to indicate that this phenomenon in effect transcends the spatial and temporal boundaries to which it had been confined, these novels show that the underlying relations of domination that gave rise to the plantation and maroon experience continue into the present. In thus conflating the experiences of exile, migration, and maroonage, they illustrate the problematic nature of diasporic citizenship. While they portray maroonage as a diaspora-wide phenomenon that resists the culture of the plantation, as opposed to constructing a simple dichotomy between the two cultures, these texts show that even as maroons actively resisted slavery, their complicated entry into modernity has very strong implications for the forms of citizenship available to them and their descendants. The novels demonstrate that, like the ancestral maroon, who found an alternative to the plantation system but who was nonetheless ultimately circumscribed by it and sometimes compelled to collude with it, the contemporary Caribbean migrant is also caught in the paradox of resistance and complicity with the imperial and neo-imperial systems that order economic relations and their associated social and political discourses. This is a complicated legacy, characterized by resistance to and accommodation of the system of exploitation within which the marginalized must

function even as they resist it. These novels suggest that until these competing tendencies are reconciled, citizens of the diaspora will continue to be compromised.

CHAPTER 5  
GENDERING THE COUNTER-CULTURE OF MODERNITY:THE FEMALE SLAVE  
EXPERIENCE IN THE SALT ROADS AND THE BOOK OF NIGHT WOMEN

**Slavery, Modernity, and Gender**

In this chapter, I argue that the neoslave narratives *The Salt Roads* and *The Book of Night Women* emphasize the importance of the private sphere and female sexuality to discourses of resistance articulated by the slaves. They explore individual and collective acts of rebellion among female slaves to demonstrate that women played an integral role in the counterculture of modernity articulated by slaves on the plantations of the colonial Caribbean. These texts present this counterculture through subject matter and formal techniques that include: explicit representations of sexuality; the use of Caribbean dialect; alluding to and rewriting historical and archival documents as well as other fictional works; and non-linear narrative techniques that literally move the reader across time and space. These narrative devices connect the slave resistance that occurred on the plantations of the colonial Caribbean to metropolitan discourses of European modernity, demonstrate the way black female sexuality was denigrated in colonial constructions of femininity and re-constructed by black women to articulate a subjectivity of resistance to both slavery and male domination; and articulate a distinctly Caribbean aesthetic of modernity. In so doing, these novels revise the tendency among some postcolonial critics and writers to mirror the male-centered focus of Western modernity in their deconstruction and revision of this discourse.

Slave rebellions are of ideological significance in Caribbean postcolonial discourse in that they are viewed as the most concrete and visible way that blacks articulated an entry into Enlightenment discourse and the project of modernity. However, there has been a tendency, among postcolonial critics who examine the

importance of these rebellions to the counter-culture of modernity articulated by slaves and their descendants, to mirror the male-centered focus of Western modernity by privileging the experiences of the male subject who is established as normative. I maintain that in revisiting the period of plantation slavery, which is viewed as seminal to the creation of the modern New World subject, to emphasize the female role in slave rebellions, these novels construct the female subject as integral to the discourse of modernity and its counter-culture. In so doing, these novels revise the tendency among some postcolonial critics and writers to mirror the male-centered focus of Western modernity in their deconstruction and revision of this discourse.

Published in 2003, Nalo Hopkinson's *The Salt Roads* is set in Haiti and underscores the role that women played in the resistance to enslavement that was articulated by the slaves on the plantations of the colonial Caribbean through its exploration of the conflict between a female slave by the name of Mer and the maroon slave turned rebel, Francois Makandal. The novel also explores the impact of the Caribbean to the discourse of modernity through its fictive portrayal of the relationship between the French poet and cultural critic, Charles Baudelaire and his mulatto mistress Jeanne Duval. The female role in slave rebellion is similarly the focus of Marlon James' *The Book of Night Women*. Set in 1803, the plot of this novel centers on a slave rebellion that is planned and executed by women on the Montpelier plantation in eastern Jamaica. By focusing on the two main characters, Lilith and Homer, who combine their resistance to slavery with resistance to male domination, the novel demonstrates the way female sexuality conditioned the slave experience and the types of resistance that women articulated. These novels highlight the female contribution to the counterculture

of resistance to plantation slavery engaged in by the slaves and to the discourse of modernity. In the process, they interrogate the masculinist bias of modernity and its counterculture.

The term modernity is used as an umbrella term to describe the epochal transformation that Europe experienced beginning in the nineteenth century. Cultural studies theorist, Stuart Hall, notes that the term refers to the political, economic, social, and cultural processes, and the distinctive features associated with them, that transformed traditional societies into modern ones (7-8).<sup>1</sup> Rita Felski layers this definition of modernity by making the point that the term refers not only to the major societal processes of transformation but also encompasses a conscious attempt on the part of intellectuals of the time to theorize about the changes that were taking place around them. In her view, the modern era was “profoundly shaped by the logics of periodization, by the attempt to situate individual lives and experiences in relation to broader historical patterns and overarching narratives of innovation and decline. ‘Modernity’ thus refers not simply to a substantive range of sociohistorical phenomena – capitalism, bureaucracy, technological development, and so on – but above all to

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<sup>1</sup> Some of the main characteristics of modern societies include the formation of the modern nation-state that is defined by clearly demarcated boundaries, the secularization of political power, large scale production and consumption of goods, extensive ownership of private property and capital accumulation, dynamic new class formations that replaced a static and rigid social hierarchy, the sexual division of labor, and the displacement of a religious worldview in favor of an emphasis on secular, materialist culture that privileged “individualistic, rationalist, and instrumental impulses.” The modern era was also characterized by a revolution in knowledge production fueled by movements such as “the Reformation, the Renaissance, the scientific revolution of the nineteenth century, and the Enlightenment of the eighteenth” (7-8).

particular (though often contradictory) experiences of temporality and historical consciousness” (9).<sup>2</sup>

While the Caribbean, and the New World in general, has traditionally been excluded from Eurocentric discussions of modernity, engaged in by such theorists as Marshall Berman and Jurgen Habermas, postcolonial critics interrogate the tendency to construct modernity as an exclusively European discourse. Commenting on the dynamic relationship between the modernity that took place in Europe and the territories of the New World, Hall et. al. note that modernity was shaped both by “‘internal’ and ‘external’ forces. The West forged its identity and interests in relation to endogenous developments in Europe and America, and through relations of unequal exchange (material and cultural) with ‘the Rest’ – the frequently excluded, conquered, colonized, and exploited ‘other’” (426).

Historian and literary critic, C.L.R. James, in his groundbreaking work *The Black Jacobins*, was the first theorist to comprehensively establish the Caribbean as foundational to modernity by emphasizing the integral role that New World slavery played in the societal transformations that took place in Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. James notes that the large scale mode of production of the plantation which saw the crop being exported and the food, clothing, and other material

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<sup>2</sup> Felski further notes that “modernity is often used as an overarching periodizing term to denote a historical era which may encompass any or all of the” characteristics encompassed by the more specific phenomena defined by the terms modernization, modernism, and modernite. Modernization refers to the “socioeconomic phenomena” that accompany “Western development” such as industrialization, technological advances, capitalism, and the development of the nation-state. Modernism refers to an artistic movement that originated in Europe and the US in the late nineteenth century that explored and interrogated the impact of modernization on human life. Modernite is a French term that situates the “the dislocation and ambiguity” engendered by the shift from traditional to modern societies “in the more general aestheticization of everyday life, as exemplified in the ephemeral and transitory qualities of an urban culture shaped by the imperatives of fashion, consumerism, and constant innovation ” (13).

items needed to support the slaves being imported, was a fundamental characteristic of modernity. Other features of modern life that arose in plantation society include the quick and easy communication between the town and the outlying areas facilitated by the small sizes of the islands, the opulent lifestyle of the planters, and the slave labor force that “lived together in a social relation far closer than any proletariat of the time.” James concludes that, “the Negroes, therefore, from the very start lived a life that was in its essence a modern life” (391-92). Brett St. Louis maintains that in thus highlighting the way the experience of forced migration and enslavement created a modern subject on the plantations of the New world, James interrogates the tendency of Western modernity to locate the modern subject within the confines of the European nation state. Historian Hillary Beckles also underscores the centrality of James’ theory to discourses of the black Atlantic with the observation that one of James’ major contributions “was to locate the politics of black liberation within the philosophies of Enlightenment discourse” (777). Drawing on James’ ideas, Beckles notes that “the colonial mission then, was a missile that launched the Caribbean, its European commanders, and African cargo on the path to modernity on board the plantation enterprise that rose on the site of native ruins” (778).

Eduoard Glissant also discusses the centrality of the plantation to the discourse of modernity when he notes that, “the plantation is one of the focal points for the development of present-day modes of Relation .... in this outmoded spot, on the margins of every dynamic, the tendencies of our modernity begin to be detectable” (*Poetics* 65). Glissant maintains that the plantation facilitated “the melting of cultures” that met, clashed, and influenced each other in spite of the rigid social and racial

hierarchies of the plantation. In his opinion, this confluence of cultures is one of the defining features of the modern subject; a point that he captures with the observation that the plantation gave rise to “the formational laws of the cultural metissage that concerns us all” (*Poetics* 74). Paul Gilroy echoes these views with the claim that the mixture of African and European philosophical cultural systems is one of the by-products of modernity.

These theorists establish the ideological significance of slavery and the central role that it played in the counterculture of modernity articulated in the region but replicate the masculinist bias of Eurocentric modernity in that they elide or ignore the impact of gender in the modernity that was articulated on the slave plantations of the Caribbean. This masculinist bias is reproduced in James’ discussion of the black Jacobins, which in focusing on the male leaders of the Haitian Revolution, elides the contribution that women made to this revolution and the discourses associated with it. James himself seems to be aware of this bias when, in his preface to the revised edition, he asserts that if he were to rewrite his text, he would place more emphasis on the role of the “chorus” – and de-emphasize the role of the hero, Toussaint L’Overture. This comment implies that he would emphasize the collectivist nature of the revolution to present a more nuanced rendering of the slaves’ fight against oppression that would highlight factors, such as gender, that are elided in his portrayal of the revolution as a masculine, individualistic battle of wills between the hero, Toussaint and the French forces that sought to recapture the island. Gilroy also centers his analysis of the black Atlantic on male figures; a fact that Natasha Barnes comments upon with the observation that Gilroy does not explore the way women’s experiences “could create a

black Atlantic with different contours from that of the male figures that inform Gilroy's theories" (106). Thus in interrogating Western constructs of modernity, these postcolonial theorists nonetheless reinscribe the male-centered focus of discourses on modernity.

This elision of gender under a normative masculine experience is replicated in discourses of modernity. According to Felski, an example of this can be seen in the way women's role in the French Revolution has been obscured. She notes that while the French revolution is seen as a watershed moment in the history of modernity in that it gave currency to the "distinctively modern notions of autonomy and equality" the "ideal of equality [was] grounded in fraternity that effectively excluded women from many forms of political life." Thus, "the discourse of modern rights and republican virtues effectively served to silence women through a recurring identification of the human with the masculine" (14).

### **The Transoceanic Imaginary and Feminine Modernity in Nalo Hopkinson's *The Salt Roads***

*The Salt Roads* focuses on the female slave experience through its portrayal of the life of its three protagonists: the slave Mer, a field slave who lives on a plantation in Haiti in the mid-eighteenth century; Jeanne Duval, a mulatto of Haitian descent, who lives in nineteenth century Paris, and has a lifelong relationship with Charles Baudelaire; and Thais, a prostitute who lives in Alexandria, Egypt in the year 345 C.E. and who becomes the inspiration for the Christian saint, Mary. These worlds are symbolically linked through the deity and sea Goddess, Ezili, who travels back and forth across time and space as she inhabits the bodies of these women and guides their actions. The narrative, which alternates between Mer and Duval's story, reflects this

movement. Hopkinson uses the character of Mer to highlight the female role in the counterculture of resistance to slavery that was articulated on the plantations of the colonial Caribbean. In the process, she revises the male centered focus of postcolonial discourses on this counterculture. Through the character of Duval, Hopkinson connects the resistance that is articulated on the plantations of the colonial Caribbean in the mid-1700s to the discourse of modernity that reached full expression in the metropolitan cities of Europe a hundred years later.

Through the character of Mer, Hopkinson alludes to the work of an older generation of Caribbean writers and privileges the often marginalized female element in these works. The character of Mer appears in Derek Walcott's epic poem, *Omeros* when the omniscient narrator notes that: "A man who cursed the sea had cursed his own mother/ *Mer* was both mother and sea" (231). These words are spoken in relation to Hector, the fisherman turned taxi driver who is continually haunted by his desire to return to the sea. The etymology of the word Mer is also explicitly delineated in the second chapter of the poem: "I said, 'Omeros' / and O was the conch-shell's invocation, *mer* was / both mother and sea in our Antillean patois, / os, a grey bone, and the white surf as it crashes / and spread its sibilant collar on a lace shore" (14). Although it draws attention to this female element, the poem focuses primarily on the masculinist perspectives and experiences of its male characters, Hector and Achille. In contrast, Mer's perspective is privileged in Hopkinson's text where she is presented as a female field slave who lives on a plantation in mid-eighteenth century Haiti. In addition to her work in the fields, Mer uses her knowledge of herbal medicine to doctor to the other slaves. She shares a special relationship with the sea Goddess, Ezili, who is born after

Mer and two other slaves, Tipingee and Georgine, bury a still born baby on the banks of a river that runs through the plantation.

Shortly after she is born, Ezili, who is also known as Lasiren appears to Mer in the form of a mermaid. The two characters are depicted as having a mother/daughter relationship with Mer referring to the deity as her “water mother” while the Goddess tells Mer “you have my name” and calls her “daughter” (64-65). The Goddess also refers to the enslaved blacks (the Ginen) as her children and gives Mer the task of clearing the salt roads so that she can re-establish contact with them. Literally, the salt roads are the sea routes that Ezili/Lasiren travels. She notes that these passages are blocked, she becomes trapped, and this manifests itself in the human world in the enslavement of her children. Thus she tasks Mer with repairing the damage that has been done to “the sea in the minds of my Ginen. The sea roads, the salt roads. And the sweet ones, too; the rivers” which are “drying up” (65). In equating the figure of the mother with the sea through the character of Ezili, the sea is positioned as originary as it is in *Omeros*. However, whereas this element performs a latent function in Walcott’s poem (and is positioned as a backdrop against which the male characters perform), Hopkinson personifies and privileges this female element, who together with her human agent, play a crucial role in the events that unfold on the plantation.

In centering the marginalized female element, Hopkinson not only revises the male text, she also associates this element with what Elizabeth DeLoughrey refers to as “the transoceanic imaginary.” DeLoughrey uses this term to describe postcolonial theories that use the sea space/ seascape as a metaphor to underscore the centrality of processes of diaspora, migration, and creolization to the historical development of

island regions in the Atlantic and the Pacific (25). According to DeLoughrey, these theories emphasize the interrelatedness of land and sea to interrogate the tendency to view islands and their inhabitants as bounded, static, terrestrial entities with little or no relation to the sea; foreground the interconnectedness of supposedly isolated islands; and posit a cyclical view of history that interrogates Western teleological views of time. She maintains that the transoceanic imaginary is constitutive of anti-colonial and anti-imperialist discourses in that “the sea is conceptually linked to human origins and exploring these fluid histories offers an alternative to the rigid ethnic genealogies of colonialism and nationalism” (21).

Paul Gilroy’s theory of the black Atlantic can be positioned within this discourse of the transoceanic imaginary in that he uses the trope of the ship, that is associated with motion, travel, and the middle passage, as a metaphor for the transnational and transcultural elements that he deems a salient feature of the black Atlantic and Western society. He notes that ships traverse “the spaces between Europe, America, Africa, and the Caribbean” and help to “[circulate] ...ideas and activists ... [and] key cultural and political artefacts” (4). Other Caribbean theorists who have contributed to this discourse of the transoceanic imaginary include Edoard Glissant, and Antonio Benitez-Rojo who both view the sea as foundational and originary to Caribbean history and culture.<sup>3</sup> In Glissant’s view, the Caribbean Sea acts as a conduit for the meeting places of the cultures of the two Americas; a view that he articulates with the comment: “the Caribbean sea is not an American lake. It is the estuary of the Americas” (139).

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<sup>3</sup> Edward Brathwaite and Derek Walcott are two writers who also contribute to the discourse of the transoceanic imaginary by emphasizing the importance of the sea in their creative works.

Benitez-Rojo similarly uses the sea as a metaphor to articulate his views on cultural formation in the Caribbean culture. He states:

the culture of the Caribbean ... is not terrestrial but aquatic, a sinuous culture where time unfolds irregularly and resists being captured by the cycles of the clock and calendar. The Caribbean is the natural and indispensable realm of marine currents, of waves, of folds and double-folds, of fluidity and sinuosity. It is, in the final analysis, a culture of the meta-archipelago: a chaos that returns, a detour without a purpose, a continual flow of paradoxes .... water is the beginning of all things" (11).

In spite of the centrality of the transoceanic imaginary to the theory produced by these critics, their literary and critical analyzes tends to be centered overwhelmingly on the bounded and rooted space of the land, the plantation, and the male experience. Part of this emphasis is due to the ideological significance that they place on slavery and slave resistance to the formation of the Caribbean and to modernity; discourses which have traditionally been constructed as male-centered.

I maintain that in using the characters of Mer and Ezili to construct the sea space as a feminine, originary space that exerts tremendous impact on human behavior, Hopkinson renders this transoceanic imaginary in fictive form to highlight the importance of the female element to the counter-culture of modernity. She emphasizes the interrelatedness of the sea and the land that is an essential element of the transoceanic imaginary through her portrayal of the conflict between Mer and another plantation slave Makandal. This conflict is presented as battle between the masculine space of the land and the feminine space of the sea. Makandal is a fictional rendering of the real life Francois Makandal who organized and led a slave rebellion in Haiti from 1752 to 1758. Mackandal united the various maroon groups that lived in the mountainous regions of the island and liaised with slaves on the plantations, with the intention of poisoning the

whites, and taking control of the island (*Brief History of the Caribbean*). This plan failed after he was betrayed and subsequently put to death in 1758.

Hopkinson portrays Makandal as emblematic of the male leader who would come to embody the counterculture of the slaves that would reach its fullest expression with the Haitian Revolution forty years later. He derives power from his oratory, charisma, and showmanship, frequently engaging in mock debates with his friend Patrice, who returns from his grand maroonage to assist in Makandal's rebellion. The two pretend to have fallen out and Patrice publically plays devil's advocate to Makandal in order for the latter to rhetorically dramatize his ideas in an effort to convince the slaves of the viability of his plans. Thus the rebellion is literally and symbolically constructed as a male discourse. Like Makandal, Mer also longs for freedom – she observes that: “Makandal wanted to clear us a path to freedom too, just like I wanted to do” (314) – but finds his methods of rebellion untenable. She believes that his plan, which involves an island-wide poisoning of the water supply of the white plantation owners, followed by armed rebellion, will result in the death of large numbers of domestic slaves and will ultimately fail. She also disapproves of Makandal's habit of quelling opposition by murdering those slaves whom he thinks will betray him to the whites.

The conflict between Mer and Makandal eventually takes on cosmic proportions and becomes a battle between the sea Goddess, Ezili, and Ogun, the God of fire and war. During a meeting among the slaves, the two Gods battle for possession of Makandal's body but Ezili is beaten back by Ogun. After Makandal sets fire to the Great House, Ezili, attempts to save the lives of the slaves who work there by taking possession of Mer's body to warn them. On her way to the Great House, Mer is

intercepted and overpowered by Ogun/Makandal who cuts Ezili/Mer's tongue out of her mouth. In addition to demonstrating that the female element is literally and symbolically silenced by the male element, this incident also constructs the plantation as a masculine space that is estranged from the feminine space of the river and the sea. Unlike Mer, Makandal is unable to speak to Ezili because he refuses to eat salted food. This choice gives him the ability to transform his human shape into animal forms but is viewed as arrogance by the Goddess who thinks he is usurping the powers of the Gods. Thus he is estranged from the Goddess or female element. Ironically, his death results from the fact that, after his capture, he is fed salted food which impairs his ability to transform and he is subsequently burnt to death. Thus, Makandal's downfall is attributed to his neglect of the female deity. Through this conflict, Hopkinson genders resistance to slavery by highlighting the female role in resistance and the way it was marginalized. Moreover, Hopkinson merges her focus on the bounded space of the slave plantation with an exploration of what DeLoughrey refers to as "a fluid oceanic imaginary" (51), literally personified through the character of Ezili, to underscore the female contribution to slave rebellion.

Although Mer does not participate in Makandal's rebellion, she is nonetheless connected to the revolutionary tradition through her role as a healer. At the novel's end, she delivers a child who is named Dedee Bazile. Also known as Defilee the Madwoman, Bazile is one of the most prominent women associated with Haiti's revolutionary discourses. She worked as a sutler in the army of Jean-Jacques Dessalines, one of the Generals in the Haitian Revolution and the father of Haiti's independence. After Dessalines was killed in October, 1806, Bazile is credited with gathering the pieces of

his mutilated body and taking them to their final resting place. She has been mythologized and incorporated into Haitian folklore and nationalist discourse where, according to Jana Evans Baziell, she is viewed as “a national heroine whose meanings are suffused with political resistance, anti-imperialism, and patriotic reclamation” (60). Mer is thus positioned within a female tradition of resistance.

Hopkinson also connects the resistance that is articulated on the plantation in the mid-1700s to the discourse of modernity that reached full expression in the metropolitan cities of Europe a hundred years later. She achieves this through the character of Jeanne Duval in whose body Ezili becomes trapped. The novel delineates Duval’s relationship with the French poet, essayist, and cultural critic Charles Baudelaire, to draw attention to the way European modernity was shaped by colonial relations and to also highlight the female contribution to the discourse of modernity. Baudelaire is canonized as one of the major luminaries associated with the phenomenon of modernity. Marshall Berman, a major contemporary theorist of modernity, argues that Baudelaire “did more than anyone in the nineteenth century to make the men and women of his century aware of themselves as moderns” (132). Baudelaire is best known for his essays “Heroism of Modern Life” and “Painter of Modern Life,” in which he philosophized on the transformations that he observed taking place around him. In the latter essay, he is credited with coining the term “modernity” in 1859 when he states: “By ‘modernity’ I mean the ephemeral, the contingent, the half of art whose other half is eternal and immutable” (133). Duval worked as an actress and dancer in Paris. The couple began their volatile, twenty year relationship, which was characterized by several break ups and reunions, in 1842. Baudelaire considered Duval his Muse and used her

as the inspiration for some of his poetry. In spite of the importance of this relationship to Baudelaire's life, Duval has largely been excluded from the scholarly corpus on Baudelaire's life and work; an exclusion that can be read as a metaphor for the way the Caribbean has been excluded from Eurocentric discussions of modernity.

Art historian, Griselda Pollack notes that Duval's ancestry is not clear as there is very little archival evidence on her. However, it is believed that her mother was most likely from Nantes, a slave trading port, and that her ancestry would have included mixed race parentage at some point (262). In writings about Baudelaire, Duval has been described as "negresse, mulatresse, creole" (267). These terms all associate her with foreignness, otherness, and position her as part of the colonial project. Pollack argues that while Duval was not literally black, but due to her history and origins, she would have been inscribed as such in the European imaginary in which the appellation black "is a heavily encoded historical representation;" a way of viewing the Other whereby "racist stereotypes are thus projected through a beam of blackening light directed at the colonialized subject" (256). She further observes that in the literature produced on Baudelaire by his contemporaries, Duval has been maligned and vilified. She is negatively associated with images of darkness and presented as someone who preyed upon and tormented the poet (269).

Through the figure of Duval, Hopkinson not only highlights the impact that the 'other' exerted on European modernity but also interrogates the tendency to gender this discourse as male. An examination of how Duval functions in the art work of Baudelaire's contemporaries, Eduard Manet and Gustave Courbet, indicates the impact that she had on the emerging discourse of modernity as well as the way this

impact was obscured, both at the time when this discourse of the modern was unfolding and in the subsequent scholarship on modernity. Manet is a canonical figure in art history whose paintings are thought to interact with and represent the “poetry and aesthetic” (261) of Baudelaire who was his patron and mentor. Pollock analyzes Manet’s painting of Duval, “*Baudelaire’s Mistress Reclining (Jeanne)*.” She compares this painting with similar portraits of other women that Manet painted and concludes that Manet attempted to transcend the black versus white; erotic versus respectable divide that dominated the European imaginary by presenting Duval “as a figure of contemporary feminine *modernite/modernity*” (258). This was achieved through her “costume, pose, and attitude” (276) which are evocative of the sensibilities of the period. However, Manet invariably casts her back into the role of the “dark lady” by later presenting a white model in the same pose but with a nuanced rendering of her subjectivity in contrast to the painting of Duval “which is so bereft of all these complex evocations of subjectivity and affective modernity” (276). Pollack notes that the dark lady/white lady trope was used to construct white, European femininity in positive terms at the expense of the dark cultural other who was invariably linked to Europe’s overseas territories. She states: “The dark lady is one face of a cultural polarization of femininity that sets up a domesticated, either virginal or maternal, femininity – the white lady – in opposition to a dangerous, sexually dominating or alluring figure that is always elsewhere, connected with the spaces of alterity and exoticism, and hence of unregulated sexuality” (249).<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Pollack notes that this painting was made in 1862 after Baudelaire and Jeanne’s relationship had ended (272-73). This fact, together with the fact that the painting is uncharacteristic of Manet’s style, causes Pollack to conclude that Duval never posed for him and that the painting was most likely made from a small photograph of Duval that Baudelaire had given him (276).

Duval is similarly presented as symbolic of a larger sociohistorical phenomenon of the period in the portrait "*The Painter's Studio: A Real Allegory Summing Up Seven Years of My Artistic Life*, produced by Baudelaire's associate, Gustave Courbet. In this instance, she is depicted as an allegory of slavery and colonialism. Christina Maria Fumagalli analyzes the painting which is meant to depict Courbet's life from 1848 to 1855. Along with the artist himself, who is centrally positioned, the painting includes other figures such as Napoleon III, Baudelaire, various European figures associated with counter-cultural movements, and an Irish woman and child who represent the harsh impact of industrialization on the Irish. Fumagalli notes that Courbet appears to privilege Duval by placing her in a central position in the painting and by depicting her as "self-conscious and (self-) reflexive."

The artist himself is the only other figure who has a similar awareness while the other characters are presented as passive and unmindful of their surroundings and their relationship to each other (9). Given the fact that all the characters are presented as allegories of important events that were taking place in the sociopolitical milieu of Paris and Europe, Fumagalli surmises that Duval represents the abolition of slavery in the French West Indies on 27<sup>th</sup> April, 1848. Duval was subsequently erased from the painting (her presence was only detected after the paint used to cover her up began to erode). In Fumagalli's opinion, this erasure "signposts the anxieties that the inclusion of her portrait might have generated at the time" (6-7). She views this as emblematic of Duval's erasure from the critical literature on Baudelaire's life noting that evidence suggests that Duval exerted a tremendous influence on Baudelaire, both personally and

professionally and thus played a central, though indirect role, in the emerging discourse of modernity of which Baudelaire was one of the major luminaries.<sup>5</sup>

Both of these artworks that centralize Duval and depict her as representative of major cultural transformations that were occurring in metropolitan France indicate that as opposed to the marginalized and maligned figure that much of Baudelaire scholarship interprets her to be, she is in fact of great cultural and historical significance. Both paintings associate her with discourses of the other: one with a discourse of feminine modernity; the other with slavery and colonialism. One attempts to establish her subjectivity but fails; the other succeeds in establishing her subjectivity but this is undermined after she is literally erased from the painting. Thus she symbolically and literally becomes a palimpsest that is written/painted over with other discourses.

Hopkinson addresses these erasures by constructing a fictional history for Duval that fills in the gaps in the historical records and gives her a complex subjectivity that is missing in the archival literature. She places great emphasis on Duval's sexuality to show that the circumstances of her life were determined to a great degree by the historical relations of domination between the "West" and the "Rest" that placed her in a position of exploitation. She stresses Duval's status as a "dark lady" who is racially other by presenting her as a direct descendant of an African slave. Duval's grandmother is described as an African from Dahomey who is enslaved and brought to the Caribbean where she is forced to work as a sex slave. Duval and her mother, who

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<sup>5</sup> She also notes that the influence that Duval exerted on his philosophy of cosmopolitanism has been ignored by writers.

are both fathered by white men, are born in Nantes, France's slave trading capital. Duval is described as "ginger coloured" (56) and as having "pale brown skin" (50).

The intergenerational exploitation that she is heir to is underscored through the fact, that like her grandmother and her mother before her, she is forced to work as a prostitute. To escape this life, she becomes a dancer and showgirl but her limited means compels her to enter into sexual relations with rich men to improve her material status and provide for her mother and grandmother. She leaves the theater after Charles sets her up in an apartment, where she lives with her mother, but after he loses control of his estate, she is forced to return to the stage. Her family background signals her lowly class positionality which is also indicated in the "improper" French that she speaks that is infused with the dialect of her grandmother. Baudelaire belittles her for this and corrects her grammar. In addition to her racial and ancestral heritage, the novel equates Duval with the colonized through Ezili's observations about Duval's status in Baudelaire's eyes. Commenting on a jar of honey powder that Baudelaire presents to Duval, Ezili states, "You told her that it is brought in ships from the perfumed hives of India, as her grandmother was brought from Africa's belly and sold as a creature for the pleasure of gentlemen, .... I understand from her that her and her kin are your spices, your honey scent; she knows that you and your class have made them so" (58). Thus Duval's sexuality is likened to an exotic commodity that originates in Europe's overseas possessions and that is used to feed the aesthetic sensibilities of upper class Europeans.

In comparing Duval's sexuality to concrete commodities – spices and honey scented powder – the novel also underscores the commodification of eros that was a

major feature of modernity and situates Duval squarely within this discourse. Felski notes that the prostitute and the actress were thought to embody a “paradoxical combination of eros and artifice [that] has frequently been seen as the quintessential manifestation of a feminized modernity” (4). In commenting upon the “significance of the prostitute in the nineteenth-century social imaginary and her emblematic status in the literature and art of the period,” she notes that as “both seller and commodity, the prostitute was the ultimate symbol of the commodification of eros, a disturbing example of the ambiguous boundaries separating economics and sexuality, the rational and the irrational, the instrumental and the aesthetic...” She further notes that actresses were viewed in a similar vein for “like the prostitute, the actress could also be seen as a ‘figure of public pleasure,’ whose deployment of cosmetics and costume bore witness to the artificial and commodified forms of contemporary female sexuality. The lesbian was also a significant figure in the work of male cultural critics of the era who viewed her unorthodox sexuality as “exemplifying the mobility and ambiguity of modern forms of desire” (19-20).

Duval’s profession as an actress together with the depiction of her sexuality as transgressive and fluid, positions her within this discourse of modernity. In addition to her affair with Baudelaire, which is viewed as taboo because of her African ancestry, she is shown in a sexual relationship with another female actress, Lisette, who is described as her true love and with whom she would live were it not for her need for material support. Duval’s sexuality is also linked to discourses of slavery and colonialism. Along with her racial heritage which situates her firmly within a colonialist historiography, the way she is used by Baudelaire equates her with the colonial Other.

Baudelaire uses Duval as inspiration for his work; a fact that Duval resentfully comments upon after he sees her dancing under the possession of Ezili and is inspired to write the poem “The Serpent of the Dance.” She notes: “He strolled through the Paris streets, always looking, looking. Eating up what he saw. We were all just food for his eyes, for his pen. Fodder for making stories with” (182).

These words are a direct reference to the figure of the flaneur, literally translated as an idler or loafer, that Baudelaire embodied and viewed as central to Parisian modernity. The discourse of the flaneur was constructed as masculine and fraternal; a fact that Katie Urch comments upon when she notes that women were excluded from being flaneurs because they were a vital part of the urban scene/spectacle that the flaneur observed (23). This description also conflates the flaneur, as exemplified by Baudelaire, with the consumption of the Other, in that it is evocative of the colonial gaze whereby Baudelaire is depicted as the masculine modern, the observer/colonizer in contrast to Duval who is presented as the feminine modern, the observed/colonized. Thus Duval and Baudelaire’s relationship is positioned within the broader socio-cultural phenomenon of modernity, and the colonial exploitation that accompanied it.

The conflation of the discourse of European modernity, colonialism, and slavery is reinforced through Ezili’s observations about the dehumanization of slavery that she and her various hosts experience and attempt to combat. In words that are evocative of Duval’s comments about Baudelaire’s aesthetic consumption of her body, Ezili states: “They, we, are the ones healing the Ginen story, fighting to destroy that cancerous trade in shiploads of African bodies that ever demands to be fed more sugar, more rum, more Nubian gold” (305). The references to sugar, rum, and Nubian gold locates the

exploitation that Mer endures on the Haitian plantation in the mid-1700s, that Duval is subjected to in Paris a hundred years later, and that Thais (into whose body Ezili is thrown after Duval dies) faces in the ancient Alexandrian capital, within a shared context of exploitation and marginalization.

These women are all commodified and associated with transgressive sexuality. Like Mer, Thais is enslaved and like Duval, her body is erotically commodified in that she is made to work as a prostitute and dancer. Like Duval, Mer engages in a lesbian affair with her best friend and fellow slave, Tipingee. Thais is also symbolically connected to Mer through the shared etymology of their names. Thais' is also known as Meritet; a longer version of Mer. Moreover, her experience of a pilgrimage to Jerusalem reinforces the novel's concern with establishing the importance of the often subverted female element; this time in the discourse of religion. After she leaves Jerusalem, she has a spiritual experience in the desert where she communicates with Ezili. She meets a monk who revers her for being under the influence of the Christian Saint Mary and subsequently canonizes her as the dusky saint of Egypt. The conversation between Thais/Ezili and the monk indicates that Ezili is concerned with establishing the influence of the female element in male discourses of religion. Thus in spite of their separation in time and space, these women are positioned within a common nexus of commodification and consumption that is played out on their bodies. By focusing on these women who are associated with transgressive sexuality, Hopkinson uses them to show the impact that women exerted on the discourse of European modernity, associated with such seminal figures as Baudelaire, and on the counterculture of modernity associated with figures like Makandal.

## **The Cult of True Womanness: Rebellion and the Sexual Politics of Slavery in *The Book of Night Women***

Like *The Salt Roads*, Marlon James' 2009 novel, *The Book of Night Women*, demonstrates the importance of the private sphere and women's role in the counter-culture of modernity articulated by slaves on the plantations of the New World. This novel explicitly details the physical and sexual abuse that slave women face at the hands of white men and slave men to underscore the role sexuality played in the domination of women as well as the integral role that it played in their resistance to enslavement. The novel imaginatively fills in the silences of seminal slave narratives and other historical accounts of slavery from the colonial archives to develop the idea that the female slave experience cannot be totally understood without fully exploring the sexual and physical abuse that these slaves were forced to endure. In contrast to female slave narratives, whose authors were required to defer to the discourse of womanhood, James' narrative overtly flouts the conventions of sentimentality to interrogate the discourse of true womanhood which, in propagating notions of European femininity, denigrated black female sexuality. As part of their resistance to slavery, James' protagonists self-consciously construct themselves in opposition to the European notions of femininity to articulate an alternative discourse of womanhood. In linking resistance to the sexual politics of slavery, the novel makes the point that enslaved women's experiences of sexuality and the private, domestic space is crucial to an understanding of their experiences of slavery.

In her text *Fictions of Feminine Citizenship: Sexuality and the Nation in Contemporary Caribbean Literature*, Donette Francis notes that the private sphere played an integral role in the articulation of colonial and nationalist projects. Speaking

specifically about the Caribbean region, she observes that historically, Caribbean female sexuality has been constructed to further imperial and national agendas. Operating from the premise that sexuality is a vital but underexplored component of female citizenship, Francis examines contemporary female authored Caribbean novels that imaginatively interpret the archival silences surrounding both the intimate and public spheres of women's experiences to narrate social and sexual acts of violence against women that occurred at pivotal moments of Caribbean history, ranging from the postemancipation period to the present. She concludes that these novels indicate that women's bodies were regulated in the colonial period and continue to be regulated in the postcolonial present to construct a politics of citizenship that results in an erosion, as opposed to an expansion, of women's sexual rights (20). James' novel, which demonstrates that any account of the slave experience that does not take into consideration the way sexuality conditions the female slave experience is limited, enters into this conversation. James' text, that details the way constructions of respectable womanhood excluded slave women from citizenship, makes a similar point. However while Francis focuses on the construction of female sexuality in the postemancipation and nationalist phases of Caribbean history, James revisits the period of slavery, to rewrite the Caribbean canon of slave narratives and other accounts of slavery, to highlight the important role that sexuality played in the counterculture of resistance to slavery in which female slaves engaged.

The story is narrated from the perspective of Lilit, a 15 year old slave girl, who is recruited by a group of six women who are planning a rebellion on the Montpelier estate located in eastern Jamaica. Similar groups form on neighboring plantations and they

collectively co-ordinate their attack through those slaves granted permission to transport goods and messages among the plantations. The Montpelier group is led by the plantation's head house servant, Homer, an enigmatic and authoritarian leader, who carefully recruits these women for their "spiritedness." With the exception of Homer, who is brought from Africa as a slave, the women share a common patriarchy. They are all fathered by Jack Wilkins, the plantation's original overseer. The women are inspired by Tacky's Rebellion of 1760. Although his rebellion fails, Homer intends for the slaves to go east to the Cockpit country after they are done attacking the plantation, and follow Tacky's idea of establishing "village states all over the county like what be in the Africa" (402). Homer is also inspired by the Haitian Revolution and believes that if the slaves there can successfully rebel, the slaves in Jamaica can do the same. When Lilith expresses doubt about her plans, Homer states, "Saint-Domingue nigger can do it and they be the same nigger we be, that even you be. All it take is some smart thinking. That be why womens do the thinking and plotting ...." (337). In her insistence that the rebellion be planned and executed by women, Homer makes it patently clear that she conceives of slave resistance not only in terms of race, but also in terms of gender. Hence, she recruits only women who she views as strong-willed and is reluctant to involve men in the planning of the rebellion. When she learns that the women on a neighboring plantation are forced to include a few men in their plans, she states, "me can't abide manfolk .... You can't trust a man" (166).

Homer's animosity towards men is rooted in her personal experiences of physical and sexual violence at the hands of slave men which cause her to view female resistance to slavery as inseparable from resistance to male domination. The violence

to which she is subjected is precipitated by her attempt to escape slavery. Upon hearing that Jack Wilkins plans to sell her baby after she gives birth, Homer and her partner, Benjy, escape Montpelier and flee to the maroons in the hopes that they would be given refuge. The maroons are escaped slaves who form independent communities and live outside the strictures of plantation society. Although the maroons have signed a treaty that obligates them to return runaways to the plantation, Homer knows that they sometimes accept escaped slaves, especially strong, healthy men. This proves true in that they take Benjy but reject Homer after concluding that she is of little use to them sexually. Before returning her to the plantation in exchange for a reward, they flog her until she miscarries. This incident, which illustrates the premium that the maroons place on the strong, healthy male body, indicates that for many female slaves, the maroons are not a viable alternative to plantation slavery. Homer underscores the masculinist nature of the freedom that the maroons have when she states, “me did think a woman not a woman unless she be free and they take that from me. Take ’way me womanness ... them Maroons make me feel like no nigger deserve freedom. No nigger must be man or woman” (216). These comments also indicate the value that Homer places on womanhood and femininity which she equates with freedom.

In demonstrating the threat to freedom posed by the Maroons, this incident demythologizes and genders the phenomenon of maroonage, which is often celebrated in postcolonial discourses as an alternative to the plantation system. The omniscient narrator details the maroons’ resistance against the whites and the strategies that ensured their success but notes that after Cudjoe, the leader of the Leeward maroons, signs a peace treaty in 1738, which grants the maroons freedom on the condition that

they return escaped slaves to the plantation, the maroons become the accomplice of the planters. Thus where formerly fugitive slaves could find safe haven with them: “after the treaty, the Maroon, the slave sworn friend, become him sworn enemy .... A nigger who choose to run away now face a new enemy who breathe like he breathe and look like him look” (77).<sup>6</sup> The maroons also return Lilit’s surrogate father, Tantulus, to the plantation after he escapes, most likely because he is deranged, and in the aftermath of the rebellion, they round up almost a hundred slaves who escape the plantations. These actions indicate that the maroons are driven by their desire for profit, lack sympathy for those who are enslaved, and have no broader concept of freedom; a fact that Homer sums up with the observation, “They think they free but they base and wicked ...” (216).

The maroons’ collective betrayal is replicated, on an individual level by Benjy, who refuses to defend Homer because he values his freedom more than he values their relationship. She sums up his betrayal which results in the devaluation and ultimate loss of their relationship with the comment: “...what nigger love be compare to free?” (216) Thus maroonage is constructed as a masculine enterprise of resistance that in its denigration of the female, motherhood, and the family, replicates the gender disparities of the plantation system. These gender disparities are brought sharply into focus through the treatment that is meted out to Homer upon her return to the plantation. Upon the mistress’ orders, she is repeatedly flogged and then raped by six men which results in the birth of two children who are sold in their infancy and die shortly after.

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<sup>6</sup> Historian Mavis C. Campbell notes that the 1739 treaties signed by these maroons included clauses that stipulated that the maroons were to return escaped slaves to the plantations and assist the planters in putting down rebellions (133;138-139).

Although the children are the products of rape, she values them and her role as their mother. When news of their deaths reaches her, Homer begins to plan her rebellion which is predicated on her desire to avenge their deaths and the sexual violation that she is made to endure.

In addition to being used as a weapon to punish rebellious female slaves, sexual violence against women is also used as a weapon of war in the struggle between enslaved men and their white masters. This idea is developed in the description of the circumstances surrounding Lilith's birth. Lilith's mother is raped by the white overseer, Jack Wilkins, in retaliation for her brother's rebellion. Wilkins narrowly escapes her brother's murder attempt, and after killing him and another male slave involved in the plot, he rapes the fourteen year old girl in a fit of vengeance. Eight months later, she dies giving birth to Lilith, the product of this rape. Lilith's own sexual violation further demonstrates the way sexuality conditioned the female slave experience. At the age of fifteen Lilith is attacked by a Johnny-jumper, one of the black assistants to the white overseer. She successfully fights him off, killing him in the effort, and is recruited into the "league of women" by Homer who is impressed by her will to resist male domination. Homer covers up the murder and takes Lilith to live with her in the Great House.

Lilith nonetheless experiences sexual violation after she is raped by a group of overseers as punishment for her crime of accidentally spilling hot soup on one of the guests at a ball hosted by her master, Humphrey. Isobel, Humphrey's female suitor, also retaliates against Lilith for sexually pursuing the master by having her repeatedly flogged twice a week by the Johnny-jumpers. Eventually, these floggings are stopped by Jack Wilkins who intercedes on her behalf, but not before she comes to be known

among the other slaves as “the woman with the quilt on her back” (167). In spite of this abuse, Lilith refuses to be cowed. After she is verbally harassed by a Johnny-jumper, she tells him, “scar only make the skin stronger but there be no whip, in hand or in a pants, that goin’ knock her down again” (168). Here, Lilith conflates physical and sexual violence to demonstrate that far from weakening her resolve, the abuse that she suffers strengthens her determination to resist male domination. This incident underscores the centrality of female sexuality to slave women’s experience of slavery and to the types of resistance that they articulate.

Lilith’s relationship to Isobel further emphasizes the sexual politics of slavery and lends credence to Anne McClintock’s observation that “colonized women had to negotiate not only the imbalances of their relations with their own men but also the baroque and violent array of hierarchical rules and restrictions that structured their new relations with imperial men and women” (6). After the whippings are stopped, to further punish Lilith for attempting to compete with her for the sexual attention of the master, Isobel takes Lilith to live with her at her parent’s estate, Coulibre, in order to personally degrade Lilith even further. She flaunts her own privileged status as a woman whose sexuality is respected. She tells Lilith, “I shall make a little lady of you....you failed, and it will be my task to remind you of that failure. And of your place” (176-77). Here the word “lady” functions as an ironic reminder of Lilith’s exclusion from the sentimental discourse of womanhood. These words also allude to Harriet Jacobs’ slave narrative *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, in which the slave woman’s exclusion from the discourse of respectable womanhood is discussed at length. In this work, Jacobs states that her master wanted “to make a lady” of her to describe an arrangement whereby he

would set her up as his concubine (384-85); an ironic use of the term that signals the degradation that black womanhood was subjected to under slavery.

In demonstrating the way sexuality impacted the power dynamics between slave mistresses and their female slaves, the novel also draws attention to the way slave women were devalued by the construction of white womanhood. Barbara Welter uses the term “the cult of true womanhood” to describe the discourses that prevailed in nineteenth century America that promoted an ideal of domesticity based on a concept of bourgeois respectability. This ideology, which was disseminated through religious and popular literature geared towards women, promoted the idea that the characteristics most desirable in “true” women were “piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity” (152). These traits were deemed essential to developing the virtue that was needed to achieve and maintain both spiritual and material success and promote the highest forms of civilization in the burgeoning nation. McClintock comments on the importance of this ideology to the colonial and imperial projects with the observation that, “the cult of domesticity was a crucial, if concealed, dimension of male as well as female identities – shifting and unstable as these were – and an indispensable element both of the industrial market and the imperial enterprise” (5).

Lilith is interpellated into this sentimental ideal of womanhood after Tantulus shows her a picture of prince charming kissing sleeping beauty. Lilith is captivated by, and begins to identify with this image that represents the European ideal of romantic relationships. During childhood games, she refers to herself as a “princess” and, after she is taken to live and work in the Great House, she begins to associate the master, Humphrey, with this romantic ideal. She tries to win his favor with the hope that he will

elevate her social status: ““she looking at a man who might be a prince or a king, not just a massa....There be two things that a white man can do at once. A white man can save her from the Johnny-jumpers and put her above other negro-womens. A white man like Massa Humphrey can also take her and hold her with the gentle hand that niggerman don't got....” (80). Lilith is nonetheless aware that she can never fully achieve this ideal: “she know what being the massa favourite mean in real speak” (81). Yet she aspires to be the master's mistress in the hopes that she can attain a semblance of this ideal. Only after Lilith is violently attacked by Humphrey and subsequently sexually and physically violated, does she disabuse herself of the thought that she can enter into or approximate the sentimental ideal.

The novel exposes the negative effect of this ideological discourse of womanhood on black women who were implicitly constructed in opposition to this ideal of white femininity with the result that the institutions of marriage, motherhood and the family, that were highly prized in white genteel society were devalued in the life of the slave woman. Hazel Carby notes that black women were viewed as governed by baser, animalistic instincts that excluded them entirely from any “virtuous possibilities.” They were also deemed threats to the institution of marriage in that white males were viewed as powerless to fend off their overt sexuality. Thus this construction of black women effectively absolved white men from any responsibility for sexual relations with slave women by placing the blame for these illicit liaisons solely on the women (27).

Caribbean historian, Barbara Bush, echoes these observations with the claim that the construction of the purity of white womanhood was achieved “through contrasts with black women” (761). In this way, the cult of true womanhood is a form of the “dark

lady/white lady” discourse that is alluded to in *The Salt Roads* through the character of Jeanne Duval.

This discourse is explicitly rendered in *The Book of Night Women*. The women who plan the rebellion are aware of the ways in which they are denigrated under the slave system and interrogate the discourse of sentimental womanhood by self-consciously constructing themselves in opposition to European ideals of femininity. They define womanhood as resistance to enslavement and the ability to endure hardship without becoming cowed and submissiveness. Along with planning the practical details of the rebellion, the women use their meetings to build self-esteem and empower themselves. During her first meeting, Lilith is struck by the women’s assertive body language: “Nobody look like no slave. Nobody slouch, nobody looking down at the ground, nobody wrapping her arms up to make themselves smaller, and nobody hiding .... Lilith feel herself straightening up” (67). Homer also teaches the women how to read noting that “as long as you can’t read this white man will have all sort of power over you” (55). The women help Lilith to recover from the wounds that she suffers during the multiple rapes and whippings that she is subjected to as punishment for her infraction at the ball. As opposed to meeting in their secret cave, they meet in Homer’s hut where Lilith is kept during her recovery and combine caring for her with planning the rebellion. They give her herbal remedies to ensure that she will not have an unwanted pregnancy and apply healing ointments to her back. They secretly worship African Gods and perform religious rituals designed to help Lilith heal as well as fortify their resolve in carrying out their plans: “Lilith will hear the song and feel the drum click on

they tongue and heal her back” (165). Thus her physical healing becomes a communal act that also advances the cause of the rebellion.

These women are unapologetic for failing to conform to the cult of true womanhood. Instead, they take pride in their strength and their rebelliousness and are intent on proving their “womanness” to each other, which in their worldview, means showing that they have the mental fortitude to withstand abuse and carry through with the rebellion. They use the word “woman,” which they associate with remaining defiant in the face of abuse, as a term of respect among themselves. This is evident in the respect that Lilith gains for Homer who explains to Lilith that after she is punished for escaping, she learns to hide her defiance in the presence of whites. Lilith is profoundly impressed by Homer’s revelation that she uses her skill with herbs to slip dementia-inducing drugs into the mistress’ teas: “Lilith shock again and look at Homer for a long time. She look again at the hair and the dress and wonder how it take her so long to see that is woman she looking at” (217). Liltih herself learns this lesson of quiet defiance at Coulibre where, like Homer, she is outwardly submissive in the presence of her owners but inwardly defiant: “Lilith did still have spiritedness ’bout her, but this time she keep quiet and make the spirit work secret-like” (200). Homer recognizes and approves of this quality telling her, “You different, Lilith. You have more darkness ’bout you now. You turning into woman ...” (217).

Lilith’s full entry into this alternative discourse of womanhood that the women practice occurs at the Coulibre estate where she successfully resists the physical and sexual abuse to which she is subjected. This episode incorporates elements of the plot of the slave narrative *The History of Mary Prince: A West Indian Slave*, which was first

published in 1831, and is the only known extant slave narrative written by a Caribbean woman. Like Harriet Jacobs who was forced to apologize for her failure to conform to the discourse of womanhood, and who used the sentimental genre to elicit the sympathy of her white, middle class, female audience, Prince's narrative indicates that black women were ironically constrained by the sentimental ideal even as they were excluded from it. Critics note that Prince needed to avoid offending the sensibilities of her white bourgeois audience whose investment in the discourse of sentimentality would have precluded her from explicitly detailing any sexual abuse that she may have experienced at the hands of her master. Thus she hints at possible sexual abuse but makes no explicit assertion to this effect. Francis Smith states, "nineteenth century enslaved narrators like Prince understood that this sort of testimony risked confirming to their white middle-class abolitionist readers that they were indeed the promiscuous wenches that slave societies accused them of being, rather than the victim of sexual violence" (403).

Helena Woodard similarly comments on the limitations under which Prince wrote her narrative. She concludes that Prince had to seek "sympathy for her inability to participate in the cult of true womanhood" because "as a slave woman, [her] compromised abilities to maintain sexual and reproductive control disqualified her for moral consideration" (16). Yet Woodard notes that Prince still conforms to this code as much as possible by using language that is "poetic, demonstrative and sentimental" (18).<sup>7</sup> Given the central role that female sexuality played in women's experiences of

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<sup>7</sup> Other female writers of slave narratives were similarly constrained by the cult of true womanhood ideology. This is clearly seen in Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* where the main character Linda Brent, Jacobs' fictive name, was forced to apologize for her inability to conform to the standards of respectability set for white women in the nineteenth century.

slavery, Prince's inability to openly discuss her sexual abuse restricts her ability to fully articulate her subjectivity. Jenny Sharpe views Prince's quandary as emblematic of "the paradoxical position of the slave woman ... who existed outside the strictures of domesticity but had to uphold its ideals." She writes, "while having no self-autonomy as a slave, [Prince] was expected to exercise a sexual autonomy over her body" (121). She also notes that Prince's narrative authority was compromised by the various authenticating materials that were included in the preface, which were meant to prove the veracity of her story, but serve to distract the reader from Prince's own narration. Moreover, her dialect would have been translated into Standard English to ensure that she would be understood by her audience, and this would have further diluted the force of her story (129).

In contrast to these female slave narratives, whose authors were required to defer to the discourse of womanhood, James' narrative overtly flouts the conventions of sentimentality. The language of the novel is replete with expletives and sexually explicit terminology that reflects the verbal, physical, and sexual violence that are everyday occurrences of plantation life. Lilith's perspective is privileged so that only at the narrative's end does the reader become aware that the story is in fact told by her daughter who Lilith teaches to read and write "for when the time come to write her song she have somebody true to be her witness" (416). This voice produces a narrative authority that is lacking in Prince's narrative. Moreover, unlike Prince who was forced to elide any sexual abuse that she may have endured at the hands of her master in order

not to offend the sensibilities of her audience, James' novel explicitly details the sexual abuse experienced by the female slaves of the Coulibre household.<sup>8</sup>

This household is patterned after the family of Capt. I\_\_\_\_\_ that Prince describes in her narrative. Prince is purchased by the Captain and his wife. Soon after she enters their household, she describes the abuse inflicted on Hetty, a fellow slave, who is owned by the family. One night Hetty forgets to stake out the cow and is brutally beaten by the master. She goes into premature labor and gives birth to a stillborn child. Although she resumes her duties, she is subjected to continued beatings, and soon falls ill. Her body and limbs swell, and she dies soon after. Prince assumes Hetty's labors after she dies. She states, "After Hetty died all her labors fell upon me, in addition to my own (17). Prince also describes being forced to bathe her naked master and the discomfort that it caused her but refrains from explicitly stating that she was sexually abused.<sup>9</sup> In James' narrative, Dulcimena performs chores similar to Hetty's and experiences similar types of abuse. Her sexual and physical abuse by the master is graphically described as it witnessed by Lilith and she tells Lilith about twins that she gives birth that are fathered by the master and subsequently sold. Like Hetty, Dulcimena is eventually flogged to death. One evening, she forgets to put the goats in the pen, they eat all of the mistress' flowers, and in a fit of rage, the mistress flogs Dulcimena 166 times. Her body swells up and she dies shortly after. Lilith is made to

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<sup>8</sup> Jenny Sharpe notes that, after Prince works for ten years in the Salt Ponds, her master takes her to live with him in Bermuda and concludes that his motivation "was most likely sexual in nature" (129). Thus, Prince's revulsion at having to bathe him was most likely her way of intimating this.

<sup>9</sup> Prince describes this incident as follows: "He had an ugly fashion of stripping himself quite naked, and ordering me then to wash him in a tub of water. This was worse to me than all the licks. Sometimes when he called me to wash him I could not come, my eyes were so full of shame.... he was a very indecent man - very spiteful, and too indecent; with no shame for his servants, no shame for his own flesh" (25).

assume Dulcimina's chores after she dies. The omniscient narrator echoes Prince's language, "As soon as Dulcey dead, all her duty fall on Lilith" (200).

The sexual abuse that Lilith experiences is also explicitly described and is presented as the catalyst that leads to her rebellion. Like Prince, she is forced to bathe her master. During one of these sessions, she inadvertently voices her displeasure at being forced to manually stimulate her master's phallus with her hand. He attempts to strike her but suffers a heart seizure. In a fit of rage, Lilith drowns him. After the mistress enters the room and discovers her crime, Lilith chases her and pushes her over the second floor balcony. She then sets fire to the house to cover up the murders killing the couple's two young children and two slaves in the process. The local whites blame three other slaves who are part of the household for the killings, torture and lynch them, and Lilith returns to the Montpelier plantation.<sup>10</sup> This incident illustrates that female resistance to slavery is inextricably bound up with their resistance to sexual exploitation. Like her first act of violence, that saw her killing a Johnny-jumper to avoid being raped by him, this second act of violence is also motivated by Lilith's desire to resist sexual abuse. Thus James re-writes the silences of Prince's narrative to develop the idea that the female slave experience cannot be totally understood without fully exploring the sexual and physical abuse that these slaves were forced to endure.

Lilith's violence is also associated with a total rejection of the sentimental ideal which is invoked and undermined through an explicit allusion to Henry Fielding's comic

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<sup>10</sup> The name of the estate, Coulibre, also signals the novel's intertextuality with Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Lilith's burning of the house parallels the burning of the Coulibre estate by disgruntled ex-slaves. In this novel, the Creole women warn Mason, the estate owner, about the real possibility of black rebellion but he dismisses their fears as unfounded. Later in *The Book of Night Women*, Isobel similarly warns Humphrey about slave rebellion but he ignores her warning.

epic/comic romance novel *Joseph Andrews*. Homer uses this book to teach Lilith and the other women to read. While attracted to the humor of the story, Lilith is profoundly disturbed by the fact that honorable men like Joseph Andrews do not exist in her world. She finds a copy of this book at Coulibre (significantly the entire section of the novel that details Lilith's time at the Coulibre estate is entitled "Joseph Andrews") that she reads from to amuse herself and temporarily take her mind off the hardships of life but becomes angry and "perplexed" at Joseph's honorable behavior. She is convinced that no men with Joseph's integrity live on the island and even if they did, their chivalry towards women would not be extended to her: "This not England. And there be no man in the colony like Joseph Andrews or him very dear friend Mr. Abraham Adams. And even if there be white mens of such quality, they only be so for white people. There be no love for the nigger" (220). Her frustration with the novel is resolved after she reads about the character, Tow-Wouse. Lilith identifies with this character, especially the lines that describe this character as having a heart made of flint: "that Piece of Flint which that good Woman wore in her Bosom by way of heart" (220). Immediately following this interrogation and ultimate rejection of the sentimental ideal, Lilith drowns her master.

By juxtaposing Lilith's dismissal of the romantic tradition with the description of her sexual abuse, and her successful rebellion, the novel illustrates that sexuality conditioned the female slave experience together with the forms of resistance that female slaves articulated. The repeated use of the phrase "true womanness" which is used to describe the spirit of vengeance that motivates Lilith's rebellion and the sense of power that she experiences after she successfully defends herself against her master develops the idea that, for female slaves, the state of being women is the single most

defining characteristic of life. As she is in the process of killing Isobel's family at Coulibre and burning the house to conceal their murders, her emotions are described as follows: "True darkness and true womanness make her want to live, make her think that goddamn, this nigger goin' live longer than what white man say" (224). This phrase that sums up Lilith's desire for self-preservation and the defiance that compels her to resist abuse is also used to express her feelings after she murders the Johnny-jumper who attempts to rape her: "That was the first time that she feel the darkness. True darkness and true womanness that make man scream. She shudder and she feel 'fraid and proud and wicked and she feel good" (16). Lilith's successful defense of her "womanness" grants her status in the eyes of the women. Upon her return to Montpelier, they view her with awe and Homer goes as far as to make Lilith describe the killings in detail so that she can vicariously partake of the experience.

In addition to the symbolic interrogation of the romance tradition, that is signaled by the allusion to Joseph Andrews, this tradition is also evoked through Lilith's relationship with the overseer, Robert Quinn, who takes her as his mistress after she returns to Montpelier. In spite of herself, Lilith begins to develop an emotional attachment to Quinn and finds herself torn between remaining loyal to the women and her increasing concern for Quinn's well-being. The women question Lilith's fidelity to their alternative discourse of womanhood and, to ensure that she remains true to their cause, remind her of the whippings that she received under Quinn's direction and the violent abuse to which he subjects the slaves in his position as overseer. Homer also reveals that he kills a woman in Italy to cover up a crime that Humphrey commits. Homer conceives of the relationship between Quinn and Lilith as a power struggle and

is determined that Lilith should win telling her that in order to be a true woman, she must use her sexuality to gain as much control over Quinn as she can, and in the process, avoid becoming emotionally attached to him. As a result, Lilith finds herself unable to acquiesce to Quinn's request that they abandon the roles of master and slave when they are in private and call each other by their names to signal that their relationship is based on genuine affection: "what he want she could never give him .... for he white and he be the overseer and he control the whip .... for a man can make a woman know her true self and what she be is nothing that belong to Quinn" (309-10). Thus she cannot ignore the racial domination that defines plantation life and, although she is able to conceal her true feelings from him, never relates to him in the way he desires.

Thus Quinn offers her an entry into the sentimental discourse of womanhood that she had hoped to gain from the master but she cannot accept this: "She not no fool, Lilith tell herself. She not no sleeping princess and Robert Quinn is not no king or prince" (335). In resisting Quinn's attempt to effect a separation between the public and private spheres, Lilith demonstrates that in her worldview, the two domains are inseparable. Thus for the slave woman, intimate relations between master and slave are inextricably bound to and conditioned by the material relations of racial and social oppression that dominate the public sphere of plantation life. Hence, the narrative of sentimentality is twice undermined – first through the interrogation of the romance tradition associated with Joseph Andrews and then through the actual "romance" between Lilith and Quinn.

The merging of the intimate and public spheres becomes evident during the rebellion. The women supply the slaves with weapons, direct and assist them in setting

fire to the fields and plantation buildings, and help them to coordinate their attacks on whites and those blacks who are viewed as traitors. Yet they also take time to settle personal vendettas and private scores. Homer delays escape to personally exact revenge on the mistress for selling her children and having her flogged. She vents her rage by torturing the mistress after which she kills her and tosses her body out a window. Another one of the plotters, Pallas, decides to spare Isobel's life after she is raped by two slaves so that she will live with the shame of her sexual degradation.

At the novel's end, both whites and blacks become victims of the colonial relations that inform slavery and plantation society. This tragic outcome of the story can be read as yet another interrogation of the romance tradition and seems to lend credence to David Scott's claim that tragedy and not romance is the lens through which colonial relations should be read. Scott states: "tragedy sets before us the image of a man or woman obliged to act in a world in which values are unstable and unambiguous. And consequently, for tragedy the relation between past, present, and future is never a Romantic one in which history rides a triumphant and seamlessly progressivist rhythm, but a broken series of paradoxes and reversals" (13). These "paradoxes and reversals" are demonstrated in Isobel's fate. This rape that she suffers at the hands of the rebelling slaves is the culmination of a series of sexual humiliations that she suffers. She seduces the master and has premarital sex with him; a fact that delights Homer and Lilith for it deconstructs the ideal of purity associated with white womanhood that Isobel is expected to embody. This impropriety is compounded after Isobel is forced to live at the Montpelier estate in the wake of her parents' death although she is not married to Humphrey. Homer compounds the trauma that Isobel experiences after the

death of her parents by giving her teas that induce bouts of dementia. She begins making frequently trips to Kingston where she prostitutes herself in fits of drunken stupor. After Humphrey discovers Isobel's activities, he refuses to marry her. He subsequently departs for England after placing the plantation under the care of a lawyer and Isobel, who is pregnant, finds herself abandoned. She essentially suffers the same fate as Lilith who is also pregnant, is symbolically blackened, and becomes a victim of the cult of true womanhood.

As if in tacit acknowledgement of their shared plight, Lilith cares for Isobel in the aftermath of the rebellion. Of the women involved in rebellion, only Lilith who is haunted by the murders that she commits is devoid of vengeance. She refuses to betray the women but attempts to protect Quinn from harm by drugging him in the hopes that he will sleep through the rebellion. He wakes as the fighting is at its peak, goes out into the fields to defend the plantation, and is killed by the rebelling slaves. Lilith also protects the overseer Jack Wilkins, shooting and killing her sister, Hippolyta, who is also one of the plotters, in the process. In spite of herself, she is unable to kill him because he saves her from field work and he stops the whippings instigated by Isobel. She moves into Jack Wilkins' home where she cares for him until his death. She subsequently gives birth to a daughter and, although she is not technically free, she lives as though she is on the plantation. With the exception of Homer and Lilith, none of the women survive the rebellion. They are either killed or rounded up in the aftermath and put to death with scores of other slaves who participate in the uprising. Thus master and slave are both destroyed and/or damaged by the experience of slavery and rebellion.



Figure 5-1: Edouard Manet's portrait of Berthe Morisot entitled *Repose*. 1870. (Pollock, Griselda. *Differencing the Canon: Feminist Desire and the Writing of Art's Histories*. London: Routledge, 1999.)



Figure 5-2: Charles Baudelaire's sketch of Jeanne Duval. 1865. (Pollock, Griselda. *Differencing the Canon: Feminist Desire and the Writing of Art's Histories*. London: Routledge, 1999.)



Figure 5-3: A section of Gustave Courbet's painting entitled *The Artist's Studio* showing Baudelaire in the foreground and Duval's "erased" presence in the background. 1855. (Pollock, Griselda. *Differencing the Canon: Feminist Desire and the Writing of Art's Histories*. London: Routledge, 1999.)



Figure 5-4: Edouard Manet's *Baudelaire's Mistress Reclining* (*Differencing the Canon: Feminist Desire and the Writing of Art's Histories*. London: Routledge, 1999.)



Figure 5-5: Edouard Manet's *Baudelaire's Mistress Reclining*. (*Differencing the Canon: Feminist Desire and the Writing of Art's Histories*. London: Routledge, 1999.)

## CHAPTER 6 CONCLUSION

On April 27<sup>th</sup> 2011, the president of the US, Barack Obama, released a copy of his birth certificate to provide proof that he is a natural born American citizen in order to silence a small but virulent minority of political opponents who seized upon his “otherness” to cast doubt on his “Americanness” and legitimacy to hold the nation’s highest office. These ongoing challenges to the citizenship of the nation’s first African American president are indicative of the ongoing struggle that African Americans face over their citizenship or sense of belonging in the US.

This study indicates that the genre of the slave narrative, which arose out of the Civil Rights Movement and the fight of African Americans to have their citizenship rights recognized, is transforming itself to reflect changes in the contemporary experiences of black diasporic subjects whose experiences of citizenship continue to be compromised by the legacy of slavery. While the first generation of neoslave narratives focused on re-writing history to foreground the selfhood of the often silenced black subject obliquely gesturing to discourses of nation formation and citizenship in the process, these newer neoslave narratives explicitly address the ongoing limitations, and in some instances, the outright failure of citizenship for the black subject, not only in the US but throughout the African diaspora. Produced by writers across the African diaspora (the Caribbean, the US, England, and Canada) these novels use a range of innovative narrative devices to juxtapose the fictional portrayal of slavery with metropolitan centers of official discourse, the past with the present. They explicitly contextualize slavery in relation to the contemporary quest of black diasporic subjects for full citizenship, in some instances by invoking central figures associated with the Civil Rights Movement – Martin Luther

King, Malcolm X, and Rosa Parks. They also use a variety of narrative techniques that include temporal movement, most commonly flashforwards to the present, to explicitly signal the connection between the slave experiences that they portray and the contemporary era.

In *Song Yet Sung*, the heroine has visions of Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream Speech" and the march on Washington and foretells that the son of a fugitive slave is the ancestor of King. Malcolm X appears as a hologram to the one of the heroines in *Free Enterprise*, to position her within a tradition of militant resistance to oppression. In *The Salt Roads*, the deity Ezili, who travels across space and time, sits beside Rosa Parks and witnesses her act of refusing to yield her seat and sit at the back of the bus. *At the Full and Change of the Moon* describes a detention center on the outskirts of Gainesville, Florida in which blacks and other minorities seek illegal entry into the US to escape the systemic oppression that they face in their home countries. These individuals lack official recognition and exist on the margins of societies in a manner similar to that of the enslaved. Brand describes the detention center as "a camp for *gusanos* and boat people and runaways" (197) and likens it to a maroon camp to develop the idea that there is an alternative and marginalized community of individuals who have been historically displaced by slavery and that this displacement continues into the present and contributes to their ongoing liminality. These non-linear, innovative narrative techniques highlight the parallels between the experience of slavery and contemporary forms of oppression to position the descendants of slaves within a tradition of oppression and resistance that begins with anti-slavery resistance on the plantations and continues into the present.

These novels also gender the slave experience to develop the idea that resistance to the (neo)-colonial and (neo)-imperial discourses responsible for the perpetuation of slavery cannot be fully addressed without interrogating the patriarchy that accompanies these systems of domination. They wed the female slave experience to their portrayal of community formation to highlight the fact that under slavery, women faced both racist and sexist forms of oppression. The impact of sexuality on the experiences of female slaves is particularly pronounced in *The Salt Roads* and *The Book of Night Women*. These novels emphasize the importance of the private sphere and female sexuality to the colonial experience and the discourse of slavery by exploring individual and collective acts of rebellion among female slaves to demonstrate that women played an integral role in both traditional and non-traditional forms of community building and resistance. Other contemporary neoslave narratives not examined in this study but which also revise the genre by foregrounding the female slave experience to demonstrate the centrality of women to the counterculture of modernity articulated by slaves on the plantations of the New World include *Strange Music* by Laura Fish, *Stigmata* by Phyllis Alesia Perry, *The Long Song* by Andrea Levy, *Wench* by Dolen Perkins-Valdez, *Feeding the Ghosts* by Fred D'augier, and J. California Cooper's *Family*. The overwhelming focus on the female slave experience in these newer novels of slavery develops the idea that colonialism and imperialism cannot be fully interrogated without considering the fact that these are patriarchal systems of oppression. Thus they revise the male-centered focus of many of the earlier novels of slavery to render a more complete view of the slave experience. By highlighting the fact that women's contribution in the private sphere is central to the

project of community and nation building, these novels interrogate the tendency to associate nation formation with the public, political sphere which is oftentimes conceived as a masculine domain. In so doing, they develop the idea that without deconstructing traditional paradigms associated with gender, patriarchy, and the family, full citizenship will continue to elude blacks, at the level of the nation-state and in the wider diaspora.

In addition to revising the neoslave genre, the newer novels of slavery provide an important intervention in the critical discussion on the neoslave narrative. They situate the slave experience within the context of Empire, diaspora, migration, and nation formation to highlight the problematic and conflicted entry of blacks in the diaspora into modernity. They develop the idea that black diasporic subjects possess an ambivalent and paradoxical relationship to modernity stemming from the underlying relations of domination that gave rise to the plantation experience and that these relations of domination continue into the present and force blacks in the diaspora to simultaneously resist and accommodate hegemonic discourses responsible for their historical oppression. Thus an exploration of the slave experience is vital to understanding and theorizing about the nature of the citizenship experienced by contemporary subjects of the African diaspora.

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## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Agnel Barron gained her Bachelor of Arts degree in English from the University of the West Indies, Cave Hill Campus, Barbados in 1996. She then worked as a high school English teacher while pursuing a Master of Education degree on a part time basis which she completed in January, 2000. From 2005 to 2007, she worked as a full time instructor in the Foundation Language Program at the University of the West Indies in Barbados. In August 2007, she began a Master of Arts degree in English at Georgia State University. After completing this degree in 2009, she enrolled in the Ph.D. program in English at the University of Florida, specializing in African American and Caribbean literatures and postcolonial studies. She graduated in August, 2013.