(RE)PRODUCING CULTURAL IDENTITY IN THE SPACE OF DEATH: JAMAICAN NINE NIGHT IN DENNIS SCOTT’S AN ECHO IN THE BONE

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Abstract of Thesis Presented to the Graduate School of the University of Florida in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Master of Arts

(Re)producing Cultural Identity in the Space of Death: Jamaican Nine Night in Dennis Scott’s An Echo in the Bone

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Nine Night is a wake ritual that thrives among the Jamaican folk. It derives from wake rituals that were developed by enslaved Jamaicans. Jamaicans (re)produce cultural identity through Nine Night. The first part of this thesis investigates the development of Nine Night from slave wake rituals and demonstrates how the cultural (re)production of this ceremony has allowed enslaved, postemancipation, and postcolonial Jamaican blacks to negotiate subjectivity and resist Eurocentric historical and cultural hegemony. Sharon Patricia Holland’s theoretical concept of the space of death will be used to demonstrate how Jamaican folk are linked through their disenfranchisement and social and economic marginalization. As a space of resistance and communal celebration, Nine Night empowers these poor blacks, allows them to pay homage to deceased kin and connect with their ancestors. The concept of Nine Night is based on an imagined magical superstructure that includes Christian and African elements and participants in the ceremony endeavor to satisfy the spirit of the departed. Nine Night enables poor Jamaicans to negotiate subjectivity by re-membering a fractured past, resisting cultural hegemony, and engaging in communal healing.
The second part of this thesis features a close reading of Scott’s play *An Echo in the Bone* through which I aim to explore the (re)production of Nine Night in the postemancipation and postcolonial contexts. Emphasizing how the space of death is inhabited by blacks from different time periods is integral to the understanding of Scott’s play where Nine Night enables the black subjects to (re)produce a cultural identity. Scott’s use of Nine Night in his innovative theatrical production demonstrates how the ceremony is emblematic of a Jamaican national culture. While many scholars have demonstrated the cultural significance of Scott’s play, I intend to explore the important historical, economic and political critiques provided by the play.
CHAPTER 1
RESISTANCE AND DEATH IN NINE NIGHT

Introduction

“Don’t call me tonight, child. I have business. If you want me, find me. Tonight I belong to the dead.” - Dennis Scott

In Jamaica, wake rituals were created by the black slaves and this cultural practice continues to thrive in the country¹. Revivalist cults that developed during the postemancipation incorporated wake rituals as part of their organized belief systems and the rituals became known as Nine Night ceremonies. After someone died, ceremonies were held for nine days and the Nine Night ceremony marked the ninth day when it was believed that the spirit would transcend the world of the living. Today, the ceremonies are now commonly referred to as dead yard, set-up, or singing night. In December 2006, I attended two ceremonies in a small, rural community of Gimme-Bit which is located in the parish of Clarendon, Jamaica. The two ceremonies I attended were held for my grandmother and the family planned two ceremonies in order to pay homage to both the black and Indian heritages of Jamaica. Clarendon has a small Indo-Jamaican population many of whom reappropriate the Nine Night ceremony to include Indian cultural elements. Both ceremonies featured live bands, libations, games, dancing, storytelling, and general socializing. In other rural villages, the ceremony is performed as traditional Revivalist ceremonies that include Kumina or Pocomania rituals. Despite the differences in how the ceremony is conducted, as noted in the epigraph from Dennis Scott’s An Echo in the Bone, “belong[ing] to the dead” in the space of Nine Night is serious “business” for Jamaicans.

¹ Ethnographer Huon Wardle who conducted extensive studies of contemporary Nine Night ceremonies argues that “night celebration of death has existed since at least the eighteenth century in Jamaica” (159) and today, in some Jamaican communities, residents regularly attend ceremonies (173).
The first aim of this project is to investigate the development of Nine Night from slave wake rituals and demonstrate how the cultural (re)production of this ceremony has allowed enslaved, postemancipation, and postcolonial Jamaican blacks to negotiate subjectivity and resist Eurocentric historical and cultural hegemony\(^2\). Jamaica’s economic and sociopolitical conditions are (in)formed by colonialism and, as a result, peasant black laborers continue to be socially marginalized and economically disenfranchised. As a space of resistance and communal celebration, Nine Night empowers these poor blacks, allows them to pay homage to deceased kin and connect with their ancestors. In order to demonstrate how there is a close relationship between death and black subjectivity in the United States, Sharon Patricia Holland conceptualizes the “space of death.” The concept of the “space of death” explains how peasants, who are marginalized by society and denied equal access to resources of the nation, develop an intimacy with death and form close relationship with ancestors and these bonds function as a means of healing and establishing agency. This theoretical device provides a way to understand how the material condition of disenfranchised Jamaicans, who inhabit the “space of death,” is linked to wake rituals such as Nine Night. Through ancestral worship, the disenfranchised blacks re-member a fragmented past and (re)produce cultural identity.

The second part of this thesis features a close reading of Scott’s play *An Echo in the Bone* through which I aim to explore the (re)production of Nine Night in the postemancipation and postcolonial contexts. Produced in 1974, Scott’s play belongs to a tradition of Jamaican literature that features indigenous folk practices such as Nine Night.

\(^2\) For this project, I use the term postcolonial to refer to the time period after political independence.
Night and attempts to write subaltern colonial and postcolonial experiences in Jamaica³.

By presenting a serious representation of religious cultural practices, Scott’s play “ushered in a new development in Caribbean theatre” (Balme 45). Scott’s play exemplifies Frantz Fanon’s conceptualization of national culture as a dynamic phenomenon that is vital to the existence of a group of people:

National culture is no folklore...[it] is the collective thought process of a people to describe, justify, and extol the actions whereby they have joined forces and remained strong. National culture in the underdeveloped country, therefore, must lie at the very heart of the liberation struggle these countries are waging. (168)

By defining culture as a “liberation struggle”, Fanon shifts focus from the abstract cultural analytics of native intellectuals who are engaged with anticolonial projects. Through his engagement with class critiques, Fanon calls for an evaluation of the colonial and postcolonial nation that takes into account the material condition of the people. In the play, Scott demonstrates that Nine Night was an important practice for the postemancipated and postcolonial disenfranchised blacks who continue to inhabit the space of death through economic marginalization. As emblematic of Jamaica’s national culture, Nine Night allows the working poor to “extol the actions whereby they have joined forces and remained strong.” In moving towards liberation, poor Jamaicans engage in communal healing and resist cultural hegemony.

Nine Night and the Space of Death

The practice of the Nine Night ceremony demonstrates that black subjects have retained an intimacy with death. The conception of the space of death is not only

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³ Among the most preeminent authors to use folk rituals is Erna Brodber whose novels *Louisiana* and *Myal* provide extensive insight into the sacral practices of Jamaican folk culture.
relevant because the Nine Night is a wake ritual, but is also useful in describing the ontological and material condition of the postemancipated and postcolonial peasants. Using Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities*\(^4\) and his concepts of nation formation as a theoretical basis, Holland’s thesis is that “[black subjects] presence in society is, like the subject of death, almost unspeakable, so black subjects share the space the dead inhabit – a full embrace of the concept of death” (4). She argues that the slavery ‘imaginings’ are still present in American society resulting in the marginalization of blacks into the “space of death” (6). She questions: “If black subjects are held in such isolation – first by a system of slavery and second by its imaginative replacement – then is not their relationship with the dead, those lodged in terms like ancestors or heritage, more intimate than historians and critics have heretofore articulated?” (15). Holland’s theoretical palimpsest can be used to describe the subjectivity of disenfranchised blacks in Jamaica. The Nine Night ceremony is one way in which Jamaican folk reconnect with their ancestors and the performance of this ritual is representative of a heritage of celebratory death rituals created by their enslaved ancestors. The wake ritual indicates the intimacy with death for black peasants in Jamaica.

The slave-like conditions that Holland claims are present in America are also present in Jamaica. In Jamaica, the “imaginative replacement[s]” of slavery can include the imperial oppression of black subjects who, for the most part, remain economically

\(^4\) Anderson critiques the idea of nationalism as the author wonders why people are willing to die for what he considers a “limited imagining” such as “the nation” (7). Of particular interest is his assessment of the tomb of the unknown soldier. Anderson concludes that “the cultural roots of nationalism [is associated] with death” and that, as the worship of the tomb reveals, nationalism shares an “affinity with religious imaginings” (10). Despite the politics of Anderson’s critiques, his revelations about how the concepts of death and religion aid in the construction of imagined communities prove important for Holland’s project and mine as well.
impoverished and entrapped in peasant labor systems. Postemancipated and postcolonial Jamaican black subjects were/are disenfranchised because of their isolation from the material resources of the nation. Additionally, neo-colonial and imperialist sociopolitical structures that continue to promote Eurocentrism contribute to the social marginalization of black subjects. For Holland, the paradigm of marginalization of black subjects does not account for their “day-to-day living” which include their material disenfranchisement (17). She contends that the concept of “marginalization” developed by academics may “empower” black subjects “on paper” but does not adequately explain their “literal existence” (16-17).

As a result, Holland embraces the concept of the “space of death” which serves as the space where a theoretical ‘living-dead’ black community form and negotiate subjectivity despite their lack of material wealth. She develops her concept of the space of death from anthropologist Michael Taussig who writes: “The space of death is important in the creation of meaning and consciousness, nowhere more so than in societies where torture is endemic and where has the culture of terror flourished” (qtd Holland 4). Thus, despite being regulated to the “space of death”, individuals can exhibit ontological agency by creating subjective “meaning and consciousness.” Like their enslaved ancestors, postemancipated and postcolonial Jamaican blacks occupy the space of death where “meaning and consciousness” is created in the formation of their cultural identity through rituals such as Nine Night. This formation of cultural identity is liberatory and empowering for the socially marginalized Jamaicans.

**Slave Wake Rituals in Jamaica**

Slaves and peasant laborers in Jamaica formed ‘imagined communities’ through expression of a distinct vernacular culture which was created with African and European
religious, linguistic and musical elements and is represented in the Nine Night ceremony\textsuperscript{5}. These communities were imagined through formed kinship with other slaves and ancestors and the creation of an indigenous folk culture. From the perspective of the colonizer, the black slaves were commodity objects which, in many respects, rendered them dead. Exploring the concept of death within the institution of slavery, Orlando Patterson asserts that since they were powerless and alienated from social laws and customs, slaves suffered “social death” (5). Patterson’s concept of “social death” is important in demonstrating how since slaves were pushed to the margins of society, they experienced a type of death.

In occupying this space of death, the black slaves of Jamaica developed an intimacy with death and this intimacy facilitated resistance\textsuperscript{6}. Vincent Brown argues that in response to the colonial authority’s effort to instill discipline on slaves and suppress rebellion through “terrifying spectacles” that included public display of mutilated bodies, “the enslaved [Jamaicans] established [counter] discourses of authority by invoking spirits of the dead” as the spectacles became routine (24). The slaves resisted complete objectification by performing sacral practices, involving the dead, which included ancestral worship, spirit possession and wake rituals. Historian Mary Turner

\textsuperscript{5}Olive Lewin’s \textit{Rock It Come Over: The Folk Music of Jamaica} provides extensive research into the folk music of Jamaica from the work songs of the slaves, secular and spiritual music. She provides primary sources such as anecdotes and lyrics to traditional folk music accompanied by an explanation of their historical basis and cultural significance. Lewin makes the claim that the climate of Jamaica might have helped the African slaves “re-establish vital links with [their African forebears] and give succeeding generations the opportunity to experience a measure of cultural continuity” (24). This “cultural continuity” was also made possible through the greed of slaveholders who, for example, allowed slaves to sing songs in order to foster a ‘productive’ work environment. Chants and songs in Jamaican folk language enabled the slaves to communicate, codify their communication, and even mock the overseers (Lewin 56).

\textsuperscript{6}In his performance theories, Fred Moten argues that resistance is integral to black performance. According to Moten: “The history of blackness is testament to the fact that objects can and do resist” (1).
also argues that ancestral worship empowered Jamaican slaves and allowed some degree of resistance against the brutalization of colonial slavery:

Access to supernatural powers, however, was crucial to the slaves’ survival amid the terrors generated by forced migration and the barbarities of plantation discipline. The beliefs they formulated, utilizing concepts embedded in their consciousness formed in their African homelands, reordered their universe, regulated their village communities, and empowered their overt and covert resistance to slave labor systems. (28)

Turner also notes that the “burial places” were designated as “family shrines and they became a “source of spiritual power” for the slaves (28). Slaves performed wake rituals and conducted elaborate burial ceremonies at the graveside of their deceased ancestors. The intimacy with death is evidenced through these rituals.

Thus, wake rituals were important cultural practices that were essential to slave ontology. Therefore, even though the slaves were socially dead as Patterson contends, they were able to resist complete ontological death and negotiate subjectivity through kinship formation. Patterson asserts that the slaves did have “informal social relations…among themselves” despite the fact that their “relationships were never recognized as legitimate or binding” by the colonial authority (6). Under the sociopolitical system of the colonial authority, slaves only existed through their masters. However, slaves subverted this master/slave dialectic by establishing kinship relationships and performing wake rituals.

Patterson explicitly cites wake rituals as helping to facilitate and maintain the “informal social relations” that took place among the slaves in Jamaica (198). Even within Patterson’s concept of social death, he notes that funerary ceremonies conducted by slaves were based on the West African belief that they would be reunited with dead ancestors (198). The Jamaican folk culture of the slaves included the wake rituals
derived from West African belief systems. The development of an indigenous folk culture that resisted European dominant culture enabled the slaves to resist “spiritual thievery” which June Roberts defines as “colonial domination through the subtle erosion of native interiority by cultural imperialism” (160). The wake rituals were emblematic of the “native interiority” of black slaves in Jamaica who sought to form and preserve an African ancestral lineage. The dislocated slaves negotiated subjectivity through these wake rituals by re-membering the African ancestry that the colonial project attempted to eradicate. In death, slaves imagined that they would return “home” to be with their African ancestors.

 Magical Superstructure and Moral Order: The Cosmology of Jamaican Folk

The re-membered spiritual ancestors became part of an imagined universal cosmology: “The religions of West Africa brought a cosmology in which a multiplicity of spiritual forces, including the ancestral living-dead, pervaded and defined the world” (Austin-Broos). In Jamaica, this cosmology which was constituted of spirits and duppies is an example of folk cultural mythmaking and is related to Fanon’s concept of the “magical superstructure.” Fanon indicates that “the colonized subject draws on terrifying myths that are so prolific in underdeveloped societies as inhibitions for his aggressiveness [such as] malevolent spirits who emerge every time you put one foot wrong” (18). The magical and supernatural can be observed in dance and possession rituals (Fanon). The black Jamaican slaves communicated and interacted with the spirits and duppies during spirit possession, which were integral components of wake rituals.

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7 June Roberts notes that spirit thievery is thwarted through the “elevating [of] African spiritism”. This is the theoretical basis for her analysis of the sacral aspects of Jamaican folk culture used in Erna Borderer’s novels.
For Fanon, folk rituals allowed the colonized a space where they could let out the pent up violence instigated by colonial brutality. Even though Fanon doubts these rituals can be effective in the struggle for liberation (19), he acknowledges that creating these folk myths were important to coping with the brutality of colonialism and that these ‘imagined’ myths, for the colonized, become “terrifying[ly]” real:

In scaring me, the atmosphere of myths and magic operates like an undeniable reality. In terrifying me, it incorporates me into the traditions and history of my land and ethnic group, but at the same time I am reassured and granted a civil status, an identification. The secret sphere in underdeveloped countries is a collective sphere that falls exclusively within the realm of magic. (18) 

The creation of a “magical superstructure” that includes the “myths and magic” enables the formation of a cultural identity and in-form subjective negotiation by the disenfranchised people. According to Fanon’s psychoanalytic, the magical superstructure developed by the colonized in the colonial setting is characteristic of a “colonized affectivity” which was a neurotic dis-ease diagnosed by Fanon (18). By allowing the slaves to express their ‘affectivity’, cultural resistance was cultivated through these rituals. For the slaves, cultural practices such as wake rituals created community, negotiated subjectivity, and healed the physic violence inflicted on them by the brutal colonial slave system.

As a foundational Jamaican (re)production of cultural identity, subjective negotiation became integrated into some of the earliest organized belief systems

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8 This concept of the “secret sphere” relates to Partha Chatterjee’s identification of an inner domain of ‘spirituality’ developed by native people that contrasts to the outer material domain dominated by the colonial authority. He develops this concept of inner/outer domain to describe the culture of anticolonial nationalisms.

9 Writing about the value of culture for resistance, Amilcar Cabral says: “The value of culture as an element of resistance to foreign domination lies in the fact that culture is the vigorous manifestation of the ideological plane of the physical and historical reality of the society that is dominated or to be dominated.” It was the creolized cultural practices of the slaves and the religious belief systems that developed which enabled resistance.
created by black Jamaican slaves: Myalism and Obeah. Myalism "was centered around community rituals including spirit possession and Myal dance, which honored the African-derived minor spirit deities…and the departed ancestors" (Besson & Chevannes 212). Myalism held that in death, the duppy or spirit left the body and "journey[ed] to join the ancestors" (Besson & Chevannes 212). An "elaborate mortuary ritual" took place to mark the transition of the duppy (Besson & Chevannes 212). Obeah was similar to Myalism, but was based on sorcery and was essentially an individualized process. After violent slave rebellions were instigated by spiritual practices such as Myalism and Obeah, slave codes or "obeah laws" were enacted that limited burial practices, banned informal gatherings, and required planters to teach slaves Christianity (Turner 27). This resulted in the spread of colonial missionary efforts which sought to civilize and Christianize the blacks, elements of this African belief system were combined with Christianity and this led to the development of Black Baptists and the revivalist cults that 'created' Nine Night. According to the *Encyclopedia of slave resistance and rebellion*, some social activities of these Africanized belief systems such as "oaths, dancing, spirit possession" became incorporated into Afro-Christian "folk religions" such as "Revival, Revival Zion, Pocomania, and Rastafari" (Rodriguez 356). Revivalist cults were 'creolized' indigenous religions that included Christian and African elements.

While Myalism was the foundation for funerary rituals, the revivalist cults such as Zion revival and Pocomania are credited with 'inventing' the tradition of Nine Night. Because of missionary efforts and the creation of creole religious systems, an intricate system of "moral politics" developed in Jamaica. The revival movements that included
Pocomania and Kumina spread mostly among peasant blacks and were repudiated by affluent, Christian Jamaicans who accepted Eurocentric values and saw “…Revivalists [as] merely an echo of the [colonizing] missionaries’ ‘African immoralist’” (Austin Broos 11). The missionary’s “practice of ethical rationalism…repudiated the world of play and its carnivalesque aesthetic, it also sought to stifle in Jamaica an intense eudemonic of freedom which both transformed and re-embodied an African sense of joy in the world” for the emancipated blacks (Austin Broos 42). The ‘eudemonic’ West-African and Jamaican practices that developed (such as Nine Night) combined Christian and African elements, but they would also conflict with the structure of the European religion (Austin Broos 42). Diane Austin Broos defines the eudemonic as a state of content autonomy and “an aesthetical experience that…echoes an ontology, West African-become-Jamaican, that is antipathetic to a Protestant Christian world” (249). Postemanicapted blacks were free to express their eudemonic sense of ‘being’ which included communal worshipping events such as Nine Night.

The spread of missionaries in Jamaica also resulted in a re-imagining of the magical superstructure. While Myalism featured African deity and ancestral worship, revivalist cults and black Christians retraditionalized the Christian and African belief systems\(^{10}\). The spiritual world imagined by the Jamaicans became inhabited by biblical figures. George Eaton Simpson indicates that, for Jamaicans, the spiritual world was inhabited not only by their African ancestors or deities, but by “Old Testament prophets,

\(^{10}\) Early scholars defined revival cults as syncretic mixtures between European (Christian) and African belief systems. However, Donaldson indicates that “retraditionalization offers a more productive framework than syncretism or postcolonial hybridity for thinking about the encounter of Natives and Christians” (40). While Donaldson developed this term to describe Native American practices, I want to reappropriate the term to describe Christian components included in Nine Night ceremonies.
New Testament saints, other Biblical figures, and the dead” (329). Integrating Christian spirits into their spiritual world is an attempt at ‘retraditionalization’ of the Christian religion by Jamaicans. While affluent Jamaicans tended to privilege European Christian traditions, the impoverished black “wretched of the earth” tended to resist the Eurocentric traditions of the dominant class and (re)produce the rituals created by their ancestors. As a result, Nine Night ceremonies are spaces where a retraditionalization of Christianity occurs. Austin Broos writes that: “Christianity becomes Jamaican while bearing as part of its Jamaicanness ranked folk renderings of its origins and its attendant meanings of power” (5).

Re-Traditionalizing Wake Rituals as Nine Night

The ceremonial aspect of the Nine Night correlates with the Christian “moral discipline” while the celebratory aspects which consists of singing songs, eating, drinking, socializing, and storytelling correlate to the “eudemonic present” or West African worldview (Austin Broos 7). In most ceremonies, bibles verses are recited, prayers are said, and ‘sankeys’ or hymns are sang. Nine Night represents a (re)production of Jamaican cultural identity and this makes it a compelling example of Stuart Hall’s concept of cultural identity. Building off Fanon’s dynamic concept of created national culture, Hall describes cultural identity as something produced in “a particular place and time, from a history and a culture which is specific” (392). It represents “points of identification… which are made within the discourses of history and culture” (395). Hall contends that cultural identity is not only a production, but a “re-telling’ of the past” (393). Homi Bhaba also recognizes the significance of retelling the past and demonstrates how re-membering in-forms the present cultural identity of people: “…re-membering is…a putting together of the dismembered past to make
sense of the trauma of the present. It is such a memory of history of race and racism, colonialism and the question of cultural identity” (90). Nine Night was such a form of “re-telling” and “re-membering” the past; it countered the essentializing Otherness of the colonial and neocolonial projects. In (re)producing cultural identity through Nine Night, the disenfranchised poor in Jamaica interact with ancestors in order to “make sense of the trauma of the present.”

The concept of Nine Night is based on the imagined magical superstructure because participants in the ceremony endeavor to satisfy the spirit of the departed. In her anthropological investigations on Jamaican Nine Night, Zora Neale Hurston identifies Nine Night as “the most universal ceremony in Jamaica” and argues that it follows the “West African tradition of appeasing the spirit of the dead lest they do the living a mischief” (39). By “appeasing the spirit of the dead”, the black subjects not only enact communal healing, but they try to bring balance to their world. Léopold Senghor declares that African ontology teaches that “each of the identifiable life forces of the universe – from the grain of sand to the ancestors – is…a network of [complementary] life forces” (31). By working towards making ‘contradictory’ life forces more ‘complementary’, Africans moved from “existing to being” (31). While this included forming a unified community, Senghor argues that African aesthetics was central to this ‘being’. Much as Senghor describes the effects of appeasing the spirits of the dead in West Africa, the Nine Night ceremony brings ‘balance’ to the world of the living and dead.

A central component of the Nine Night ceremony is spirit possession. Jamaicans believed that spirits had the power to impact the life of the living. The spirit
communicates with the living at the Nine Night and sometimes instructs them (Simpson 330). It was believed that the spirit of the deceased would transcend the world of the living nine days after death and the Nine Night was practiced to appease the spirit of the dead. George Eaton Simpson writes: “The spirit of a dead person returns to its home on the ninth night after death and, if it is financially possible, lower class Jamaicans arrange a service for that night” (Simpson 329). As demonstrated by the anthropological observations of Simpson and Hurston, poor, black Jamaicans were the ones who performed the Nine Night. Hurston observes that many of the participants were poor “barefoot people” who took great pride in this “ancient ceremony” which they considered part of their heritage (39). Despite their poverty, Hurston notes that the people treated the dead body with ceremonial importance: “The corpse might have been an African monarch on safari, the way he came borne in his hammock” (Hurston 41). They silently carried the body “and the dead man rode like a pharaoh – his rags and his wretchedness gilded in glory” (Hurston 41). Hurston observations demonstrate how, despite the revelry, the black peasants viewed Nine Night with ceremonial importance.

Nine Night is partly an aesthetic ritual that is practiced to mark the passing of a spirit from the world of the living. In accordance to the West African basis of the ritual, it is “an art of the subject and of the spirit” (Senghor 33). In Subjectivity and aesthetics in the Jamaican nine night, Huon Wardle argues “how subjective values come to be validated through the human relationships created in the nine night [and] out of this process, the soul of the dead person achieves a kind of rhythmic materiality within the ritual event, and…this performance of localisation can be traced to key existential
concerns in Jamaican life” ([Sub] 247). Even though it is a common, ‘local’ event, Nine Night enables subject formation within a universal cosmology: “in aesthetic and religious experience there arises the intuitive possibility that subjectivity may achieve [a] sought after universality or communicability” ([Sub] 247). The localization of the Nine Night ceremony is not only observed on a geographic level, but also on a subjective level. In terms of negotiating subjectivity, Nine Night participants develop an “acute...high metaphorical, social philosophy which uncovers within social experience powerful religious-aesthetic meanings for the self” (8).

Even though Nine Night is usually performed for a single dead relative, the ceremony is a celebration and joins together many people for the purpose of communal healing. In his ethnographic analysis of Nine Night, Wardle identifies the ‘theme of livity’ as central to all Nine Night performances and subjective ‘livity’ is (re)produced through performative rhythmization: “One major aesthetic and moral value of the wake for its participants lies in its capacity to incorporate [subjective narratives and evocations of personal experience] and to reframe [these] in reciprocal terms as a mutual celebration of ‘livity’ – of being alive” (Wardle 190). Individual performance is central to the Nine Night ritual and there is less of a reliance on structured ‘belief systems.’ Wardle argues that “more recent investigations into Jamaican religion do take greater account of both the individualistic, person-centered, character of Jamaican religious expression as well as the performative dynamics through which religious experience is generated” (169). According to Wardle, Jamaicans do not rely on religious leaders to instruct them about religion. He claims that there is no one organized belief system “influencing working
class Jamaican religiousness” and, as a result, Nine Night is a space where individuals from all religious backgrounds form community and celebrate life (169).

Even though religious expression may be individualistic, events portrayed in the ceremony serve as a historical re-membering of a communal black history: “On the one hand, the ‘echo in the bone’ is personal and familial memory kept alive by the oral tradition and ritual ceremonies; on the other it is deeply ingrained racial memory, transmitted by and located in the collective unconscious of race or culture” (Balme 102). For the slaves and their descendants, the wake rituals “…reordered their universe, regulated their village communities, and empowered their overt and covert resistance to slave labor systems” (Turner 28). Jamaican slaves were emancipated in 1834, but their descendants of continued to experience racism and economic disenfranchisement. Even though they were “free”, postemancipated blacks continued to be haunted by the past of colonial slavery. They were still under the control of colonial authority and suffered from a peasant labor system. These blacks continued the cultural practice of wake rituals in the form of Nine Night which enabled them to (re)connect with their enslaved ancestors and enact communal healing. Nine Night continues to occur in postcolonial Jamaica and is practiced by a majority of blacks who, to large extent, remain impoverished and disenfranchised. Contemporary Nine Night celebrations are still sites of communal gathering and healing and ancestral worship.
CHAPTER 2
(RE)PRODUCING JAMAICAN CULTURAL IDENTITY THROUGH NINE NIGHT IN DENNIS SCOTT’S AN ECHO IN THE BONE

An Echo in the Bone: Nine Night as Jamaican National Culture

Dennis Scott’s play *An Echo in the Bone* demonstrates how Nine Night serves as a foundation of national culture in Jamaica. Scott participates in the (re)production of this national culture by using the ritual as the basis for the play. The play takes place in the postemancipation context of 1937 in a rural Jamaican village near the Blue Mountains at a Nine Night ceremony organized by Crew’s wife, Rachel, nine days after his death. The ninth day marks the time when Crew’s spirit would transcend the world of the living. Crew is believed to have murdered Mr. Charles, who was a white plantation estate owner, and then drowned in a river. It is unclear whether Crew tried to escape or committed suicide. Using spirit possession, the play moves between key moments in Jamaican history from the Middle Passage, slavery in Jamaica, to different time periods in the 1930s. By recalling the past of their enslaved ancestors, the participants of the Nine Night give a voice to their ancestors who were denied participation in colonial slave society.

Through spirit possession, the ceremony becomes a space for enacting familial and communal healings for the participants: familial healing by settling the conflict between Sonson and Jacko and communal healing for the black peasant characters in the village who resolve the circumstances surrounding the murder of Mr. Charles by Crew. Both Sonson and Jacko were in love with Brigit and Sonson was agitated that Brigit choose Jacko. Through his wits, Jacko is able to convince Sonson (possessed by

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11 The phrase, the poverty of blackness, is borrowed from the Tsitsi Dangaremba’s novel *Nervous Conditions*. I (re)appropriate the phrase here to refer to the interlocking sociopolitical markers of race and class that in-form the subjectivity of characters in Scott’s play.
Crew) to come down from the roof and not jump. The two reconcile and the play concludes in ritual celebration. This celebration is characteristic of the 'eudemonic present' evinced by many black subjects who continue to resist European cultural configurations. The final scene reveals how characters navigate a politics of moral order in everyday life and, comparatively, the aesthetics of everyday life includes cultural practices such as Nine Night where these politics are debated, discussed and performed.

Scott implies that the sacral practices as part of the national culture of Jamaica like Nine Night can provide some physic healing to the nation of Jamaica. Like many postcolonial nations who received political independence in the 1960s, Jamaica was embroiled in a moment of postcolonial crisis that included political violence and economic hardships. Produced in postcolonial, postindependence Jamaica, the play reveals how black subjects continued to be 'chained' under economic oppression. The economic enslavement is physically represented in the set of the play by the central location of "a huge rusted chain that hangs from the roof and dominates the stage" (Hill 12). Errol Hill notes that: "An obvious reference to the shackles of slavery, the chain bears testimony to the continued economic enslavement of the black worker" (Hill 12). The chain indicates that the marginalization of the black subjects is directly linked to the institution of slavery, continues through the 1930s when the play is set (a period where national consciousness was being formed) and throughout the postcolonial period of the early 1970s in Jamaica where Scott is writing from.

Enacting Holland’s space of death, the peasants in Scott’s play have an intimacy with death. Brigit questions Rachel about the relevance of having a Nine Night for a
murderer: “Ma, what you doing this for? Why you don’t make the dead stay dead? Is best the village forget him now, and forget how he spill the blood of another man” (Scott 78). Rachel retorts that the ceremony is significant because it allows her to pay respect to her husband and evinces a re-membering of Crew: “Is my man, I going satisfy his ghost with whatever respect I have to give him. You think you can wipe out thirty years of him so? (Scott 79). In another scene, Rachel tells Mr. Charles not to “speak of ill of the dead” (118). Through Nine Night, the space of death becomes a site for black performance of life-in-death. Despite their material poverty, the characters maintain the cultural currency inherited from their enslaved ancestors who developed a creole cosmology constructed with African and Christian elements that in-formed their world view. In the epigraph, one of the main characters in the play, Rachel, proclaims that conducting the Nine Night ceremony is “business”. The black subjects find cultural value in this ceremony because it enables them to honor their departed ancestors and restore order to the world of the living. In the postemancipated society, the black subjects continue to rely on the 'sacral texts' to (re)produce their cultural identity.

The play features a Jamaican folk culture that ‘echoes in the bone.’ This national culture is structured around the politics and moral order of peasant life. Central to the production of consciousness and (re)production of cultural identity by Jamaican folk is morality. In her study of Jamaican Pentecostalism entitled *Jamaica Genesis: Religion and the Politics of Moral Order*, Diane J. Austin-Broos examines how Jamaicans negotiate subjectivity based on the “politics of moral order”. The theoretical framework for her book is based on the Foucauldian notions about how “politics” and “ethics” impact the negotiation of subjectivity. In describing the oppressive power of politics,
Foucault notes that politics pervades everyday life. Thus, as a commonplace practice and a space of subjective negotiation, Nine Night can represent a politics of the people. Austin-Broos develops the concept of “the politics of moral order” that impact cultural identity production “not only in religious life, but in [everyday] Jamaican society at large” (Austin Broos 11). Austin Broos acknowledges the ‘production’ of subjectivity through “modes of representation or practice” governed by the politics of moral order (12).

Restoring Moral Order by Re-Membering Crew

The traditional cultural practice of Nine Night, which is not discussed in Austin Broos book, participates in this politics of moral order and Jamaicans use the ceremony to (re)produce their cultural identity. The rebellious ancestral slaves used the politics of moral order to determine that they should fight for freedom. Meanwhile, their descendants continue to resist colonial and imperialistic authorities by negotiating subjectivity through the politics of moral order. The “ethics” and “politics” of black subjectivity are integral to Scott’s play. The “intersubjective experience[s]” that in-form the subjective negotiation of the characters in the play are predominantly race, class and religiosity (Austin Broos 12). Using Nine Night as the conceptual framework for the play enables Scott to represent and remember a history of the black peasants that is a critical ‘re-vision’ of the colonial historical narrative.

Crew is a metonymic character and represents the common black Jamaican peasant: “He was a poor black man like all o’ we” (Scott 86). White landowners like Mr.

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12 Austin Broos writes that the “politics of moral order in which subjects sustain themselves through modes of representation or practice…can mediate, criticize, or reinforce the larger orders of governance. This focus on moral order as well as symbolic mediation carries with it the post-structuralist insight…that subjectivity is not merely inscribed or created at will but rather is the product of intersubjective experience that carries with it negotiations of values practice, and the authority of symbols” (12)
Charles are able to thrive in the rural areas because they have access to the needed resources. Crew claims to be prideful since he has the ‘freedom’ to provide for his family and own land. Land was important to the postemancipated black subjects because it gave them the independence to produce for themselves. Fanon writes: “For a colonized people, the most essential value, because it is the most meaningful, is first and foremost the land: the land which must provide bread, and naturally, dignity” (9). Owning land is “meaningful” for Crew and he expresses “dignity” in being able to use the land for the benefit of his family. He is angered when Rachel suggests he move to town to find work while she works as a domestic worker in Mr. Charles’s great house. Crew asserts: “Those that raise on the land must stay on the land! That is where we belong!” (Scott 125).

The land is tied to Crew’s ontology partly because his grandparents were raised on the same land he owns and it enables him to provide for his family: “If you take away the line from the ground I am nothing. I am nobody!...It is my birthright that says I am not a slave anymore. I don’t have to beg no man for bread to pass down to my children. And my woman don’t have to go slave in any white man house” (Scott 128). For Crew, his ‘freedom’ is tied to land since he is able to farm it and provide for his family. The central conflict of the play, the murder, occurs when Crew confronts Mr. Charles who diverted water which prevented Crew and other black farmers from yielding crops. By diverting the water, Mr. Charles was cutting off Crew from his lifeline, taking away Crew’s independence, and making Crew subservient. The events re-enacted by spirit possession suggests that Mr. Charles, who lysts after Rachel, did this purposely to
instigate Crew. This instigation results in Mr. Charles severing Crew’s ontological ties to the land, thus robbing him of an ancestral history.

By diverting the water and making Crew and his family destitute, Mr. Charles is effectively ‘dematerializing’ Crew. Crew’s body is physically absent in the play which affirms his dematerialization. Working within a Marxist discourse, Fred Moten demonstrates how black subjects, even in freedom, encounter “dematerialization”:

In the transition from slave labor to free labor...value is transferred from labor to labor power. That is to say that value is extracted from the ground of intrinsic work...and becomes the potential to produce value. This transference and transformation is also a dematerialization – again, a transition from the body, more fully the person, of the laborer to a potential that operates in excess of the body (Moten 251).

Crew’s friends and family are the only ones that value Crew since, like his poor compatriots, his ‘potential to produce’ is no longer economically viable in an increasingly modernized society. This ‘dematerialization’ can be translated as a type of death and is representative of the marginalization of the black subjects who were impoverished and disenfranchised. Thus, like their enslaved ancestors, the blacks in 1930s Jamaica were relegated to the space of death. Nevertheless, the Nine Night ceremony shows how Crew’s spirit was valued by the family because it was able to provide a sense of communal healing.

According to the politics of moral order evinced in this play during the Nine Night, the murder of Mr. Charles must be placed in context with a history of physic trauma inflicted on black subjects. “This final interpretation of history and remaking of individual stories reverses the annihilated consequences of murderous confrontation. The humiliated and mutilated past ceases to be ‘sticks and stones…breaking [their] bones” (qtd Bada 91). During the Nine Night ceremony, Crew possesses his son Sonson and
reveals how when he confronted Mr. Charles, a physical altercation ensued. Mr. Charles condemned Crew for having the audacity to come up to the front door of the Great House asking Mr. Charles for the favor of diverting water to the land. Mr. Charles tried to kick Crew and Crew retaliated by chopping Mr. Charles with the machete. To Crew, the murder of Mr. Charles was justified because “he was a bad man, and the earth was calling out for his blood for what he do to us…All of us…” (Scott 87). A national healing is expressed because the class conflict between the black peasantry and plantocracy in Jamaica becomes discernable through the ceremony.

The murder was not a random act of violence and the Nine Night ceremony enables historical contextualization. Crew remarks that his death was a killing and attributes it to ‘white man lies’: “I not the first one the white man kill with his lies. Nor the last one” (Scott 87). During the possession, Crew’s family is able to absolve the spirit from the crime of murder. Crew’s spirit is freed from the burden and is able to move on to the spiritual world. They provide him with a clean shirt and water to cleanse himself. While Crew warns that others will be killed by “white man…lies”, the cleansing of the blood is representative of an optimistic future not dominated by murderous violence. The ceremony also serves as communal healing and celebration not only though the gathering of friend and family in celebration, but through the easing of tensions between Crew’s sons.

**Revivals and Re-Traditionalization: Religious Elements in Scott’s Play**

The post-emancipation period which the play was set in “was the context in which Jamaica’s early Revival religion took root. Its animated universe of spirit and ghosts and its biblical pantheon of prophets were consistent with highly localized environment” (Austin Broos 23). Throughout the play, characters invoke the name of “God”, “Jesus”
and “Christ”. This is because after the spread of Christianity, the spiritual world imagined by the Jamaicans became inhabited by biblical figures. Rachel, invoking biblical “ethics”, proclaims that Crew was “tempted by devil in wilderness” (Scott 84). Through this remark, Rachel is likening Crew to Christ and he is considered a martyr.

Crew’s body was never found and the Nine Night ceremony served as the site of resurrection for his spirit. With limited access to institutions of the state, these Jamaicans had a “view of the world [that] was at once local, magical, and infused with a creole cosmology. Religious rite was a response to suffering and a means to a better life” (Austin Broos 27).

Rattler the drummer plays a central role in the play because the drumming signals possession scenes. Drumming is identified as a major component of most revivalist ceremonies. In another scene that includes retraditionalized Christian practices, Madam invokes the name of Christ and anoints the head of Dreamboat in the symbol of a cross when he was possessed by a violent spirit (82). After this event, Rachel enters the barn to start the Nine Night proceedings “dressed in white, with her head tied” (82). This scene demonstrates that the characters are perhaps part of a revivalist cult. Rachel operates as the ceremonial leader of the Nine Night ceremony and research into revivalists cults indicate that women often assumed leadership roles.

In the beginning of the play, Rachel sings what appears to be a gospel refrain about being in the wilderness: “Me alone, Me alone, in de wilderness…forty days and forty nights in the wilderness” (Scott 76). Christopher Balme argues that the scene where Dreamboat becomes possessed and is revitalized by being anointed with oil in
the “sign of a cross” (Scott 81) is also a signifier of Christian symbols used by syncretic or revivalists cults:

This scene demonstrates how Christian symbols are reinterpreted in a way typical of syncretic cults. The candles, the sign of the cross, and the anointment are signifiers of the Christian belief system... In the context of possession such traditional symbols are redefined and used as directly efficacious and not just as symbolic devices against the dangers of the spiritual world. (103)

The ‘reinterpretation’ and ‘redefining’ of these Christian symbols signify a ‘retraditionalization’ of Christian practices into Nine Night rituals. Balme claims that within the Christian belief system, these symbols have “symbolic or metaphorical significance”, but within the creole cosmology they are “efficacious” as weapons that fend off unruly spirits such as the one that was ‘riding’ Dreamboat. This reveals that although they were denied access to material resources of the colonial society, the peasants used symbolic tools available to them as a means of empowerment. Nine Night is a space of spiritual empowerment where spirits of dead ancestors are imagined to be part of a magical superstructure that includes Christian spirits. The Nine Night while evolved from African belief systems, includes retraditionalized Christian elements which provides characters with a space to express a distinct religiosity in a colonial society dominated by Christianity.

The ‘Poverty of Blackness’: (Im)Material Ontology and Black Subjectivity

While many scholars have demonstrated the cultural significance of Scott’s play, I intend to explore the important historical, economic and political critiques provided by the play. The murder of Mr. Charles is not just an act of racial violence that re-calls a history of violent colonial encounters between blacks and whites, but it was also illustrative of postemancipation and postcolonial economic violence. In the play, the
white planter class, like the slave masters before them, continued to control the fate of the black subjects despite emancipation. This is evidenced by Mr. Charles who is able to divert water from the river which made Crew destitute. The rural peasants, portrayed in Scott’s play, like their postcolonial descendants, were disenfranchised and forgotten by the national authorities. Through the Nine Night, the black farmers attempt to (re)produce a cultural identity that in-forms their present and is based on the colonial past.

Emphasizing how the space of death is inhabited by blacks from different time periods is integral to the understanding of Scott’s play. It is also useful in describing the ontological and (im)material condition of the peasants. Each scene from the re-membered historical past portrays some form of economic enslavement. Scott’s play demonstrates how in “freedom” the descendants of the slaves were influenced by the indigenous folk culture inherited from ancestral slaves and continue to (re)produce subjectivity in relation to continued oppression and hardships. These descendants now perform the subjectivity of blackness and through this performance express a shared ‘material heritage’: “laborers who were commodities before…continue to pass this material heritage across the divide that separates slavery and ‘freedom’” (Moten 6). The cultural identity of the black peasants is intersected with the racial marker of blackness and class marker of poverty. The old character P observes: “all of we poor, all of we black” (96). The fictional characters in the play, like their counterparts - the black Jamaicans in the 1930s - see themselves as poor black subjects.

The emancipated black Jamaicans were still colonized and many would be subjected to a perpetual state of peasantry. Austin-Broos gives a historical account of
Jamaica after emancipation and argues that the post emancipation period in Jamaica was affected by “a rapid withdrawal of British economic interest”, “a decline in external trade”, and “a localization of rural life” (qtd. Austin Broos 23). Emancipated blacks “connected positions of servitude to their Africaness which they viewed as a curse derived from colonial experience. To be black, poor and landless, or cultivated at a near subsistence level, became historically marked” (Austin Broos 25). In an exchange where they discuss the economic shortcomings of their postemancipation life, the older character P says that being free is “a big change” despite their impoverishment and lack of economic opportunity. However, one of the younger characters Brigit retorts: “You feel so? You skin white, then Mass P? To them you is still dirt, nothing you can say will change the way they look at you. No respect, you know that” (Scott 109). Brigit notices that the lack of “respect” results in a lack of economic opportunity for the black peasants. Economic well being is equated with whiteness. Historian Walter Rodney identifies the “relationships between color [sic] and power in the imperialist world” as a product of the continued colonial project and argues that the “association of wealth with whites and poverty with blacks is not accidental” (19).

Even though Scott’s play is set during a Nine Night ceremony in rural Jamaica during the 1930s, the act of spirit possession characters travel through various temporal periods. As the characters search for an answers and attempt to grieve and reconcile the murder of Mr. Charles and the disappearance of Crew, the play imparts an important pedagogical lesson. In order to fully comprehend the trauma of the present in the postcolonial and postemancipation period:

Verbal explanations will not suffice. Because the answers lie deep in racial memory, because they ‘echo in the bone’, it will be necessary to relive the
past, not just the immediate past but the history of an oppressed people in order to find meaning in the madness. To make this journey back into the communal psyche, author Scott has summoned a traditional death ritual, the Nine Night ceremony, in whose observance is compressed the actual and supernatural, the past and present, the living and dead. (Hill 10)

Characters are transported through various historical periods and settings including:
“the present, a ship moored off Africa in 1792, Madam’s shop two days ago, an auctioneer’s office in 1820, woods near an estate in 1833, Crew’s house four years ago…” (Scott 75). Through spiritual possession, which was commonplace in early Nine Night ceremonies, characters transform into people from the past. Spirit possession enables the characters to assume different roles\(^\text{13}\). Additionally, “the act of spirit possession [can] be seen as a means of unlocking the racial memory of a cultural group” (Blame 102). Therefore, Scott’s use of Nine Night is not only a theatrically “economic” decision, but it enables Scott to present a “panoramic view of history” from the perspective of the black subjects (Hill 11).

The play takes place about 100 years after the emancipation from slavery, however the black subjects continue to be ‘haunted’ by the past and oppressed in the present by the colonial authority. Arguably, this time period is when blacks in Jamaica started to develop a national consciousness. In the context of the play, Scott seems to suggest that as the nation moved towards independence, the colonial history needed to be ‘re-membered’ as it informed the present. In 1930s Jamaicans started to evoke Black Nationalism spurred by Garveyites and Rastafarians. The characters in the play repeatedly refer to themselves as ‘black’ and have a sense of ‘pride’ in being free.

Additionally, in 1938, a year after the setting of this play, there were nationwide labor

\[^{13}\text{Balme develops a theatrical concept of “possession paradigm”. He writes: “The act of possession becomes a kind of paradigm, a ritual equivalent, for the modern convention of role-playing on the stage where one actor can assume a multiplicity of roles.” (101)\]
movements and violent protests that featured class and racial struggles. These protests resulted in “political concessions” that “ended with the granting of political independence in 1962” (Campbell 84).

Even though it was a localized ritual, the cultural practice of Nine Night enabled the black subjects to form a cultural identity that resisted colonial authority. Emphasizing the political edge of cultural rituals, in *Anti-Imperialist Theatrical Forms in the Anglophone Caribbean*, theatre critic Elaine Savory argues that “[African forms of expression] are most developed in postcolonial societies in… creolized cults [that are] inherently theatrical and inherently political, moving towards liberating a community from the fear which would assume their acquiescence to a brutal and hostile governing power” (244). As a cultural practice of the revivalist cult, Nine Night operates not only as a site of resistance, but as a site where black subjectivity is negotiated and communal healing occurs. Thus, the Nine Night is part of a national culture of Jamaica because it is a ritual that is practiced by the majority poor blacks and the (re)production of the ceremony serves as a liberating practice. In his exploration of black subjectivity, Scott demonstrates the existence of a spiritual “inner domain” and suggests that there was a collective, national consciousness developing among the peasantry in Jamaica before the country gained its political independence.

These black subjects who are often en-grave-d in written colonial history as objects are able to give an oral account and actually perform their collective his-story. The characters are rural black Jamaican peasants whose cultural identity was in-formed by the magical superstructure. Due to the religious worldview of black peasants, it is no coincidence that the focal point of the play is the Nine Night ceremony. They try to re-
member past events in order to reconcile a violent act of the present. In (re)producing cultural identity, the play re-tells the colonial past from the perspective of the black peasants. Renu Juneja argues that by ‘recalling’ history, the characters gain agency so that they become “actors in their own history” rather than “passive subjects of history” (97-98). Juneja contends that the Nine Night ceremony setting for the play which includes “the phenomenon of spirit possession” is “the most appropriate choice in terms of the history Scott is making or remaking because it signals at the outset that this history is a possession of the black people and very different from the sanctioned colonial accounts” (98). The Nine Night becomes a space where the blacks repossess their history and tell their own narrative. One example of a “sanctioned” colonial history used in the play was the reference to a “volume by Mr Bryan Edwards” that describes the African slaves in Jamaica (Scott 92). The book was referenced by a white woman who came to observe slaves being transported by ship in a scene from the Middle Passage.

There are not only direct violent acts, but symbolic violence inflicted on the slaves in the form of the written account. According to Notes and Records of the Royal Society of London, “Bryan Edwards was a Jamaican planter and politician who published a well-respected History of the West Indies in 1793. He articulated the planter view concerning the value of the West Indian colonies to Great Britain, and opposed the abolition of the slave trade” (Blouet 215). Through the Nine Night ceremony and spirit possession, the characters tell the history of their enslaved ancestors. Thus, Scott’s play becomes the space where the “objects” of Edwards’s historical written record are given a voice and combat the symbolic violence of the colonial historical record.
In the play, the spiritually possessed characters were transformed to this scene from the past. After the woman reads a passage from the book regarding the docility of a certain African tribe which makes them "best-disposed slave", a scuffle ensues between slaves (Scott 92). A white man tries to stop them, but the slaves do not understand him. The white man cuts out the tongue of one of the slaves. The mute drummer Rattler was possessed by the slave whose tongue was violently chopped. This scene reveals how the traumatic silencing of the slave from the past is directly embodied by Rattler. Rattler can only communicate through his drumming. Through spirit possession, the characters discover that the violence of the past was a precursor to the violence of the present. The character of Rattler represents the continued silence of the black peasants, however the Nine Night gives them a space to speak and express themselves. Rattler's drumming is a form of communication and it is central to the ceremony because it initiates spirit possessions.

Later in the play, a Maroon proclaims to a white man: “A black day for you when you taught us your tongue Busha. All the tribes coming together under one language. The word is freedom, and one day the whole country going to stand up and shout it out” (Scott 106). Scott is able to use the “tongue” of peasant Jamaicans in order to tell a collective history. The play is written in dialect and the Jamaicans become active agents who give their own version of history as opposed to being “passive subjects”, thereby resisting the colonial narrative and forming a cultural identity of their own. Nine Night is a distinct cultural space where Jamaicans can communicate with departed ancestors through spirit possession.
Regarding the economic condition of the peasant blacks, the play exposes how the black laborers in the 1930s were still disenfranchised much like their enslaved ancestors were. In lamenting the condition of peasant colonial farmers in respect to Crew's death, the older character of P laments:

You cut down the cane for a lifetime, every year you drag the sweetness out of the ground with you bare hands and pray the next season will be easy. Three hundred years crying into the white man's ground, to make the cane green, and nothing to show...Nothing to show!... And then they plough you back into the canes, and nobody remember how strong you was. And when they squeeze the canes nobody knows how much blood it takes to make the rum hot and sweet (Scott 86).

The “three hundred years of crying into the white man's ground” refer to the colonial system financed by slave labor. Postemancipation peasant black farmers were still tied to the land, much of which was owned by white planters. According to Austin Broos, “the small farmers who stayed on the land still had only limited representation. These Jamaicans faced events that involved the emergence of nation-state structures but structures to which they had limited access” (27). The “unseen” scenic setting of the play includes “miles of sugar cane, a few small peasant holdings, and the old Great House of the estate owner” (Scott 75). The colonial Manichean divide as described by Fanon can be observed in the play’s setting with the peasant holdings of black farmers juxtaposed to the “old Great House” of Mr. Charles. The “miles of sugar cane” represent the main crop harvested during slavery.

Under the colonial system, there was a disparity between the rural areas and the metropolis in the colonies. As noted, many peasants did not have “access” to the “nation-state structures” and, as a result, were subjected to a state of poverty. Colonial “geopolitics” enabled urban areas to develop while rural areas were often left underdevelopment and in a state of peasantry. Fanon writes:
We know that colonial domination gave preferential treatment to certain regions. The colony’s economy was not integrated into that of the nation as a whole...Colonialism almost never exploits the entire country. It is content with extracting natural resources and exporting them to the metropolitan industries thereby enabling a specific sector to grow relatively wealthy, while the rest of the colony continues, or rather sinks, into underdevelopment and poverty (106).

In Jamaica, ‘town’ is the urban metropolis, but the characters in the play live in a rural village in the mountains. They are essentially ‘marooned’ from the state structures in the town\(^{14}\). This is characteristic of how during this period, these black subjects were increasingly ‘localized’. Some characters want to move to town for jobs, while others, like Crew, express discontentment about leaving the rural land for the violent town.

In a society that was becoming increasingly modernized, rural farming was no longer economically viable. Juxtaposed to Crew’s farming instrument, the machete, white land owners were starting to use machines. After the murder of Mr. Charles, P observes that: “New times coming. The next owner going to put in machines all over, and what will happen to you and me then?” (Scott 86). Some of the young characters like Stone respond saying that they will travel to town to find work since rural farming was not enough to provide a living. Dreamboat complains that: “The white ladies, all of them go into the town to buy their goods, nobody in the market to take the provisions off your hands except poor people like you, hungry same way, poor same way” (Scott 108). The characters have difficulty buying goods and sometimes try to barter ground provisions.

Throughout the play, the currency of the whites is juxtaposed to that of the blacks. On one level, the ‘business’ of Nine Night is a form of cultural currency for the peasant

\(^{14}\) As I will argue later, the characters in the play can be considered descendants of the Maroons who were free slaves that fought the British.
blacks, however whites controlled the material wealth in the colonial society so the black peasants often had to rely on other forms of material currency. In Madam’s shop, Rachel tries to exchange ground provisions for a bill she owes while Madam reminds Dreamboat to give her some of his hunted game to repay her for feeding him (Scott 96-98). At the end of this scene, in the street, cries are heard promoting produce such as fruits and fish (Scott 98). The play then shifts into a scene from the past in an “auctioneers office in town” (Scott 98) where the “business” (Scott 99) is being conducted of negotiating the sale of a slave girl. The sale of the fresh, virgin bodies valued by the white slavemasters is juxtaposed to the sale of fresh produce by black market vendors which are valued by the white planter class. Interestingly, the sale is being conducted by a black slave who speaks standard English. This slave represents a colonial mimic who is culpable in the exploitation of the women.

Arguably, Scott implicates both blacks and whites in the brutal colonial history. In fact, the central act of the play is a black man, Crew, murdering the white landowner Mr. Charles. By shifting to scenes from the past which enables historical contextualization, Scott reveals how both blacks and whites are both victims and perpetrators of violence: “The device of possession…assists in [providing] a coherent explanation of how Crew came to murder Mr. Charles and what this means: instead of seeing the act as a single criminal brutality, we see black and white locked into a violent history, one killing the other in different ways” (Savory 247). The complex history of trauma and violence results in an equally complex renegotiation of black subjectivity. Through spirit possession, the traumas of slavery and the colonial past are brought to the forefront.
Thus, in the play, Nine Night is a space where a healing of this past occurs for all individuals involved in the brutalities of colonialism.

Another scene shift occurs into the woods where two Maroons encounter an injured white man, whom they refer to as “Busha”\(^\text{15}\). Busha curses them and tries to offer them money to lead him home. The Maroons say they “have no use for the money”, and Busha angrily retorts, “What the hell do you mean, money is money!” (Scott 103). During the exchange, it is revealed that money can only be spent in the town and there was a bounty out for Maroons that ventured out of the hills, thus the money was of no use to the Maroons. They wanted weapons instead, knives or guns, from the white man which was useful for them in their fight for freedom.

This scene takes place in 1833, about a year before the British emancipated slaves in the colonies. The characters in Scott’s play are perhaps part of this Maroon lineage and they want the freedom to grow and sell their crops. In the scene described above, the Maroon remarks to Busha: “True you don’t need money. You rich eh? Not like me. If you ever know how hard I have to work to find food” (Scott 103). It appears the white planter class represented by Mr. Charles inherited wealth from the “rich” white Bushas, while the black subjects continue to work “hard” off the land to survive like their Maroon predecessors.

It is important to note that in this scene, the Maroons do not kill Busha. At the end of the scene, one Maroon reveals to Busha that he spared his life because:

> My father was a white man…I white too…And so when the day come to count up the rich and poor, that is why I give you a chance. Maybe you will

\(^{15}\)Maroons were runaway slaves who formed “free” communities in the hills of Jamaica. They fought wars with British troops and gained the right to form independent communities. According to the Dictionary of Jamaican English, “Busha” can be a “term of address” or refer to “an overseer of any kind of estate.”
know more then and not talk about black and white so loud. And if you don’t know better than that then, the gun and the knife will decide who is right. (106)

This scene closes out the first act of the play and the Maroons spare the man’s life. It is an important scene that demonstrates the impending severity of economic inequality. This is an important transcendent theme because the postcolonial period where Scott was writing from was marred by poverty and violence like the postemancipation period was. The Maroon implies that when the country is free, violent class warfare will take precedence over racial differences.

Set a year before the “official” historical start of widespread labor riots in Jamaica, the play refers back to the growing discontentment and frustration experienced by rural peasants. Crew who owned land was opposed going to town, where many went to seek jobs, because he saw it as a violent place. Conversely, Stone, who says Crew encouraged him to buy land and “raise a crop” reveals that the rural black farmers stood no chance against the white landowners who owned large quantities of land. Not only were the rich white patrons going to town to buy their crop, but the rural farmers could not compete with the white landowners. Stone says:

I watch how the big land-owners they corner up with their own and sell the sugar back to us for four times what it cost us to raise. I know. I see inside of the office sometimes, and the big house that they build from two hundred years ago, when all of us worked the land for nothing, like animals. You think things change any? (Scott 109)

Stone’s revelations demonstrate that although the black subjects were “free” they now lived in an imperialist economy where their labor was not valued. As Stone suggest, not much has changed since the days of slavery since the black subjects were still disenfranchised and shackled in “economic enslavement” which is symbolized by the hanging chain used as a stage prop.
Dennis Scott’s (Re)Production of Postcolonial Jamaican Theatre

While the characters in Scott’s play try to negotiate subjectivity in 1930s Jamaica, Scott is also endeavoring to negotiate a Jamaican theatrical subjectivity in the 1970s. Scott sought to develop a distinct theater tradition in Jamaica that privileged folk rituals over European forms of performance. The play was first produced in 1974 at the University Drama Society in Jamaica (Hill 14). Joseph Roach, who borrows the title of Scott’s play in a chapter of his book where he discusses performance in relation to death, explains that the play is part of a tradition of Caribbean theatrical performance. Referring to the work of theater critic Errol Hill, Roach writes:

In the epilogue to his path-breaking *Jamaican Stage, 1655-1900: Profile of a Colonial Theatre* (1992) [Errol Hill] places *An Echo in the Bone* in the complex historical context of Caribbean performance traditions, including amateur and professional productions of Shakespeare in colonial Kingston and Afrocentric spirit-world rituals such as Nine Night. Like *Hamlet…An Echo in the Bone* dramatizes the cultural politics of memory, particularly as they are realized through communications between the living and the dead. (34)

Scott’s play transforms the Western aesthetics that “dramatizes the cultural politics of memory” because of its use of the Nine Night ceremony. Roach recognizes that unlike traditional Western plays like *Hamlet* which ends in the death of most characters, Scott’s play ends is more celebratory or optimistic: “In contrast to the linear narrative of catastrophe so powerfully present in the Western drama, however, spirit-world ceremonies, celebrations of the cycle of death and life, tend to place catastrophe in the past, as a grief to be expiated” (35).

The Nine Night ceremony allowed the black subjects to ‘expiate’ past sins thereby enabling them to determine a future of possibility. The characters in Scott’s play encounter a great deal of suffering, but are able to reconcile the violent past
through the Nine Night ritual. In regards to the ethical universal, the play suggests that racial retribution is not a viable solution and that a “communal healing” is required (Savory 241). The suffering not only includes a present state of peasantry for the black subjects, but a violent colonial past. A peaceful future requires an honest telling of the violent past: “No matter what is past, you can’t stop the blood from drumming, and you can’t stop the heart from hoping” (Scott 98).

Combating the cultural imperialism of the West, Scott recalls the significance of indigenous rituals such as Nine Night and envisions a type of cultural theatre that utilizes these rituals\textsuperscript{16}. According to Crow and Banfeild who theorize about post-colonial theater, post-colonial dramatists revert to traditional, indigenous rituals in order to challenge conventional Western theatrical practices and reawaken a cultural past through “cultural recuperation” (12-14). Even though theatrical plays are often considered to be a Western cultural practice, Crow and Banefield assert that post-colonial playwrights are not just mimic men, but, through the use of distinct cultural performances, they create and transform: “The stage of ritual drama...is not a place of mimetic representation, but the dangerous arena of spiritual confrontation and transformation” (14). They argue that Western realism which is predominant in Western theater is not adequate to represent the post-colonial experience, so “the rediscovery (or, sometimes, discovery) of indigenous performance traditions has often served to emphasize the limitations of Western realism” (12-13). As a post-colonial dramatist, Scott enacts a ‘decolonizing’ of the stage by using Nine Night as the basis for his play and resisting traditional Western aesthetics.

\textsuperscript{16} See Edward Said’s \textit{Cultural Imperialism}
Scott’s play deviates from the realistic aesthetic and also presents a postcolonial artistic production that does not privilege the “colonial order” (Dawes 28). Scott’s play is part of this tradition of Caribbean theatre that used Africanized ‘rituals’ in a serious manner and it was produced at a time when the postcolonial bourgeoisie was conducting extensive study into African based practices such as revivalism and obeah: “During the politically charged 1960s and 1970s, obeah was venerated by politicians, historians, and students of folklore as slave culture and a seminal part of an emergent but undervalued African or “black” contribution to the “brown” and “white” influence on the formation of colonial and postcolonial society (Rodriguez 357).

Scott sets his play in a rural setting which features peasant farmers, who are often left out of the national narrative. Scott is partly presenting a critique of the country’s economic inequality which perhaps implicates the postcolonial national bourgeoisie. He seems to be trying to re-member a violent colonial history and a postemancipation period paralyzed by poverty in order to make sense of a moment of crisis in 1970s Jamaica that suffered from political turmoil and economic hardships. The play relies on the ‘sacral’ ritual of Nine Night. In the midst of the nation’s progression into modernization, Scott recalls the ‘sacral texts’ represented by the Nine Night ritual that in-formed and continued to (re)produce black subjectivity.

**Conclusion**

As demonstrated in this project, religion is central to the (re)production of Jamaican cultural identity and the (re)production of Nine Night continues to demonstrate the importance of the sacral in the politics of everyday life. As evidenced by Scott’s play, Nine Night is an important element of Jamaican national culture. Living in a society haunted by a brutal past of slavery and colonialism, a majority of the
postcolonial blacks in Jamaica continue to be socially marginalized and excluded from access to the wealth and power of the state. They are relegated to the space of death like their ancestors and their intimacy with death continues to thrive through Jamaican practices such as Nine Night. Revivalism and African derived belief systems that enable black subjectivity and resistivity. Thus, spirituality and death continue to be important ‘sacral texts’ that in-form indigenous Jamaican imagined communities.
LIST OF REFERENCES


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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Zahir Small was born on the island of Jamaica, but grew up in Long Island, New York. He conducted undergraduate studies at Stony Brook University in New York where he majored in biology and English. During his undergraduate tenure, he worked as a Resident Assistant and a writing tutor. After obtaining his bachelor's degree in 2007, Zahir relocated to Florida. He is currently a master's candidate in the English Department at the University of Florida. Along with his graduate studies, he also works as a teaching assistant for the University Writing Program.