DIASPORIC DISSONANCE: BLACK WOMEN’S LITERATURE, U.S. IMPERIALISM AND THE BLACK DIASPORA

By

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To my family
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“Diasporic Dissonance: Black Women’s Literature, U.S. Imperialism and the Black Diaspora” investigates how U.S. imperial exploits in the Caribbean shape the relationships between U.S. based Black women and Afro-Caribbeans in U.S. based Black women’s twentieth century travel literature by Katherine Dunham, Zora Neale Hurston, Paule Marshall, Audre Lorde and June Jordan. Each text in this study was produced before, during and/or in the aftermath of U.S. imperial exploits such as the U.S. Occupation of Haiti, the invasion of Grenada and the Caribbean Basin Initiative project. Combining analytics from Black Diaspora Studies, Black Feminist literary criticism and U.S. Empire studies, this project close reads precarious encounters between U.S. Blacks and Afro-Caribbeans in these works and argues that these precarious encounters produce new vocabularies, tropes and silences that constitute a literary trope I term diasporic dissonance. Diasporic dissonance describes the various gendered and intraracial tensions that arise between individuals who might constitute a Black, transnational community yet have varying relationships to the same imperial power. In highlighting diasporic dissonance in its varied iterations, this study illustrates that diasporic bonds between U.S. based Blacks and Afro-Caribbeans are not inevitable
or permanent. Instead, they are constantly being made and unmade. Moreover, in focusing on Black women’s literary production, this project foregrounds Black women writers as integral to understanding the gendered and racialized contours of U.S. Empire and the African diaspora.
CHAPTER 1
DIASPORIC DISSONANCE: BLACK WOMEN, TRAVEL AND U.S. EMPIRE

Sisterhood and Survival demands that I ask myself as an African American, what does it mean to be a citizen of the most powerful country on earth? And we are that. What does it mean to be a citizen of a country that stands upon the wrong side of every liberation struggle on this earth? Let that sink in for a moment.

--Audre Lorde
Sisterhood and Survival

As the keynote speaker at the 1986 Black Women Writers in the Diaspora Conference, Audre Lorde posed the questions that frame this chapter and serve as the catalysts for this dissertation. Posed as queries with political and intellectual implications, Lorde’s questions reveal perhaps an uncomfortable truth: One cannot think through diasporic solidarities—gendered female here through sisterhood—between U.S. based Blacks and non-U.S. based Blacks without acknowledging and interrogating the former’s positionality in and relationship to U.S. empire. In the spirit of the African American call-and-response tradition, this project responds to Lorde’s call to “let that sink in” through a deep meditation on and interrogation of Black women’s reckoning with these questions in 20th century travel narratives and travel literature. The Black women in these texts do not offer any easy answers nor do they provide any comfortable conclusions to Lorde’s questions. On the contrary, they reveal that diasporic bonds are not automatic despite shared racial and/or gender identities. Black women’s texts in this dissertation reveal a series of gendered and intraracial tensions and conflicts between U.S. based Black women and non-U.S. Blacks rooted in their often contradictory relationship to the same imperial power: The United States. The tensions in these texts, which appear as new vocabularies, silences and tropes, constitute a literary trope that I call “diasporic dissonance.” Diasporic dissonance forces
us to confront the explicit and implicit ways that U.S. empire structures, creates and frustrates relationships between U.S. based Blacks and non-U.S. Blacks. Before I delve further into the contours of diasporic dissonance and its theoretical underpinnings, I want to begin with two contemporary figures that emblematize the tension produced at the convergence of U.S. Empire, Black diaspora and African American citizenship: Barack Obama and Condoleezza Rice.

“Empire in Blackface”

In the opening of his 2009 speech to the Ghanaian Parliament, President Obama stressed the influence that he foresees Accra will have on the international community in the twentieth first century. “And I have come here, to Ghana, for one simple reason,” he asserts, “the 21st century will be shaped by what happens not just in Rome or Moscow or Washington, but by what happens in Accra as well” (Remarks to Ghanaian Parliament). Heaping praise on the Ghanaian Parliament for its prosperity, health, security and strength of democracy, Obama prophesizes, in a manner of speaking, that Ghana could not only be an enriching partner for America but a leader in advancing human rights globally. This future partnership between Ghana and America that Obama narrativizes is based on what he describes as a “simple premise”: “Africa’s future is up to Africans.” This “simple premise,” ironically, marks a discursive shift in Obama’s speech where he began to mark his own complicated relationship to Ghana.

Invoking both his ancestry—“I have the blood of Africa in me”—and his familial history—“my family’s own story encompasses both the tragedies and triumphs of the larger African story”—President Obama attempts to empathize with histories of slavery and imperialism that effectively denied Africans the right to determine their own futures. But shortly thereafter, Obama diminishes the impact of those histories to point to
another issue obstructing Ghanaians, and African writ large, from controlling their futures:

It is easy to point fingers, and to pin the blame for these problems on others. Yes, a colonial map that made little sense bred conflict, and the West has often approached Africa as a patron, rather than a partner. But the West is not responsible for the destruction of the Zimbabwean economy over the last decade, or wars in which children are enlisted as combatants. In my father’s life, it was partly tribalism and patronage in an independent Kenya that for a long stretch derailed his career, and we know that this kind of corruption is a daily fact of life for far too many. ("Remarks to Ghanaian Parliament")

Obama simultaneously acknowledges and dismisses the impact of imperialism on Africa. His comments that colonial maps "made little sense" and "bred conflict" reduce the history of imperialism down to European, cartographic blunders that produced "spats" on the continent—obscuring the discursive and material violence of imperialism that enacted and produced genocidal violence on the continent. Moreover, in characterizing the relationship between “the West” and African as one of patronage as opposed to partnership, Obama obscures the theft of land, the theft of bodies and the theft of resources that is hallmark of Western engagement with the African continent in favor of a revisionist metaphor of the West and Africa engaged in a sour business transaction. These reductions and revisions shore up Obama’s main point: African countries—not the West—are to blame for military conflicts, political corruption and economic failure of their respective countries. Invoking his father again, Obama points to “tribalism” and “patronage in an independent Kenya”—not histories of colonialism and ongoing neocolonial conditions—that derailed his father’s career. Obama’s father’s story—serving a synecdoche for all of Africa in his speech—allows Obama to appear as both an insider and an authority on the “real problems” impeding progress in Africa—not as the leader of U.S. empire who has a vested interest in minimizing histories and
contemporary conditions of colonialism and neocolonialism in Africa. Ironically, then, Obama invokes the blood and familial history of tragedies and triumphs that he shares with Ghana, and Africa writ large, not to speak to a diasporic condition of colonial oppression for Black folks but to efface the legacy and contemporary effects of Western imperialism in Africa. It is commentary like this, alongside Obama’s immigration policies, position on Israel and excessive use of drones that have left some to characterize him as “the black face of empire.”

While Obama is perhaps the most obvious Black, political figure representing contemporary U.S. imperial interests, he is not the only one. Before Obama’s presidency, scholars investigated the ways in which Condoleezza Rice furthered U.S. empire in her role as Secretary of State during George W. Bush’s presidency from 2005-2009. Moreover, considering my project’s investment in Black women, Rice is perhaps an even more pertinent example. Citing her participation in the right wing, foreign policy group Vulcan, her influence on Bush’s nuclear policy and her foundational role in “spinning and selling” the Iraq War, Carol Boyce Davies describes Rice as participating in a “process of black ventriloquizing of imperialism” (4). Davies argues that such a process warrants its own language, which she calls “condification” (70). “Condification,” she explains, “offers a language to identify the process of intellectuals from oppressed groups, who enter the seats of power and then use their knowledge with calmness for the benefit of oppression—in this case American imperialism” (70). According to Davies, these intellectuals, along with various “moneyed folk, entertainers and a range of other political figures,” constitute a neocolonial elite class within the United States, similar to neocolonial elites in other parts of the world” (82). Erica
Edwards also contributes to the scholarship on Rice through a close examination of what Rice’s proximity to and participation in U.S. empire signals for theorizations of normativity regarding Black sexuality, specifically. Edwards situates Rice in a larger formulation that she calls the “black normal” which references “the constellation of narratives, images and state discourses that tie black freedom to the nation-to-empire building project through images and imaginaries of everyday black empowerment within state institutions…secured through both sanitizing and pathologizing representations of black sex and sexuality” (143). For both Davies and Edwards, Rice is not an anomaly; instead, she both marks and can direct us to the process whereby African Americans represent and perpetuate U.S. imperial interests.

Though both President Obama and Condoleezza Rice represent U.S. imperial interests, they do not use the same rhetorical strategies to do so. Obama invokes his Kenyan heritage to present himself as an insider and uses that as a springboard from which to deny the impact of imperialism in Africa—and by extension the ongoing impact U.S. empire is having on Africa. Rice, on the other hand, mobilizes U.S. based Black freedom struggles to justify U.S. imperial exploits. Or in other instances, she denies the history and influence of diasporic, Black freedom struggles in other countries, discursively constructing those countries as anti-democratic, backwards and in need of U.S. intervention. For example, regarding the former strategy, in response to criticism of the Iraq War, Rice explains “I’m sure there are people who though it was a mistake to fight the Civil War to its end and to resist that the emancipation of slaves would hold” (qtd.in Edwards 154). Both Edwards and Davies rightfully highlight the insidiousness of the analogy wherein the struggle for Black liberation is “righteous justification” for
imperialist invasion (Edwards 154, Davies 84). In her 2005 address to the General Assembly of the Organization of American States (OAS), Rice uses the latter strategy of denying diasporic connections to advance an U.S. imperialist agenda. In her remarks, Rice credits Latin American and the Caribbean for their “desire to live in liberty,” which has transformed the hemisphere, but she calls on the OAS to strengthen democracy in Bolivia, Ecuador and Haiti as “the institutions of democracy have brittle roots” there (Remarks to OAS Foreign Ministers). When one recalls that Haitians fought in the American Revolutionary War and threw off the slavery and colonialism in the Haitian Revolution, Rice’s comment that democracy has brittle roots in Haiti is at best grossly negligent or at worst, as my mama would say, a bald-faced lie. Rice intentionally ignores the Black liberation struggle in Haiti and its connections to and influence on the Black liberation struggle in the United States—and U.S. democracy writ large. In so doing, she constructs Haiti as a backwards, anti-democratic country out of sync with the rest of the hemisphere, thus in need of U.S. intervention.

I have expounded upon President Obama and Condoleezza Rice at length for a few reasons. First, they are perhaps the most prominent example of African Americans as agents of U.S. Empire in recent memory. Secondly, as agents of empire, they dispel the notion that simply having African Americans in the highest position of the state produces anticolonial and more liberatory conditions for Black people domestically and abroad or diasporic solidarity. Lastly, both Obama and Rice evince the ways in which African Americans’ proximity to and participation in U.S. empire creates and thwarts opportunities for diasporic connections between U.S. based and non-U.S. based Black people. Moreover, both figures index a series of questions that this dissertation seeks
to answer: Beyond service in state apparatuses, how do African Americans participate in U.S. empire? What are the differences between African Americans' relationship to U.S. empire and non-U.S. Blacks—for the purposes of this dissertation Afro-Caribbeans'—relationship to U.S. empire? And how might we name the gendered and intradiasporic tensions that arise between U.S. based Blacks and Afro-Caribbeans as a result of these often-contradictory relationships to U.S. empire?

This dissertation explores these questions through a close analysis of 20th century Black women's transnational travel literature. For the purposes of this project, I define transnational travel literature as fictional or nonfictional literary texts and cultural productions authored by Black women, or featured in publications that cater to Black women, readers that feature Black women traveling outside of U.S. context. Situated in various countries throughout the Caribbean and gesturing towards various imperial exploits, the travel narratives in this study feature U.S. based Black women in real and imaginary encounters with Afro-Caribbeans where attempts at diasporic bonds are questioned, frustrated and/or denied. I argue that contradictory relationships to U.S. empire wherein Black Americans can temporarily access imperial privileges via claims to American citizenship—however tenuous they maybe—and Afro-Caribbeans are subject to military invasion, occupation and exploitation prevent diasporic bonding and produce what I call diasporic dissonance. Diasporic dissonance as a literary trope identifies the gendered and intraracial tensions and conflicts between U.S. based and non-U.S. based Black who have contradictory relationship to the same imperial power. Diasporic dissonance in these texts, however, does not preclude a scholarly investigation of relationality within the Black diaspora; on the contrary, it fosters a more
nuanced analysis of the process by which diasporic bonds are made and unmade. The literary and cultural texts I investigate in this project are Zora Neale Hurston’s and Katherine Dunham’s ethnographic travelogues *Tell My Horse* (1938) and *Island Possessed* (1969), respectively; Audre Lorde and June Jordan’s travel based essays “Grenada Revisited” (1983) and “Report from the Bahamas,” (1982) respectively; Paule Marshall’s novel *Praisesong for the Widow* (1983) and “It’s Better in the Bahamas” tourism advertisements (1980s) in *Essence* magazine. These texts were written before, during and in the aftermath of various U.S. imperial exploits in the Caribbean including the U.S. Occupation of Haiti (1915-1934), the invasion of Grenada (1983) and the implementation of the Caribbean Basin Initiative (formally written into law in 1985).

While questions of U.S. empire’s influence on diasporic relationality are not exclusive to U.S. based Black women’s travel narratives or encounters between U.S. based Blacks and Afro-Caribbeans, I have selected texts written by U.S. based Black women, set in the Caribbean in the context of U.S. imperialism to illustrate my scholarly and methodological investments and the types of interventions I want this project to make. First, I am invested in highlighting Black women’s contributions to the study of Black diasporic formations and U.S. empire. Secondly, I have chosen texts that address this issue in the context of the Caribbean so that this project might contribute to ongoing conversations and reconceptualizations of American studies through transnational and hemispheric analytics. More specifically, the texts in this study disrupt what Belinda Edmondson, Donette Francis and Harvey Neptune call the “dubious scholarly discrimination between North America, on the one hand, and the Caribbean and Latin America, on the other” that undergirds American Studies where the
United States and Canada are considered “First World” countries and Latin America and the Caribbean are considered “Third World” (2-3)\(^6\). The texts in this study evince how Afro-Caribbeans and the Caribbean region are shaping our understandings of U.S. empire—and by extension American culture-- and influencing U.S. Black identity formation. In that way, this study is in dialogue with two important, contemporary projects in literary studies: Ifeoma Nwankwo’s *Black Cosmopolitanism: Racial Consciousness and Transnational Identity in the Nineteenth Century Americas* and Michelle Stephens’ *Black Empire: The Masculine Global Imaginary of Caribbean Intellectuals in the United States, 1914-1962*. Nwankwo contends that 19th century texts written by Placido, Frederick Douglass, Mary Prince and Juan Francisco Manzano “ponder complex meanings and methods of being Negro and American, broadly defined, and reveal the struggle to define self and community between multiple local and global affinities while confronting realities of slavery and White fear of continent wide rebellion” (8). Stephens explores the works of Anglophone Caribbean intellectuals Marcus Garvey, C.L.R. James and Claude McKay to illustrate how “in the service of creating a global vision of race that superseded and transcended black nationalist discourses in both the United States and the Caribbean, Caribbean male intellectuals drew from a less visible transatlantic maritime history of the black world, one that shadows histories of empire and colonization in the Americas” (7). While Nwankwo and Stephens consider issues of diasporic relationality and empire in the nineteenth and early to mid-twentieth century, respectively, through predominately Black, male figures, my study foregrounds Black women’s literary production as integral to consider those issues in late twentieth century. In so doing, this study brings more gendered and
racialized analyses of U.S. imperialism to bear on U.S. empire and Black diaspora studies and emphasizes issues of U.S. empire in the African American literary canon.

Methods and Interpretive Frameworks

While this study employs and engages frameworks from Black diaspora theory, postcolonial studies, U.S. empire studies and Black feminist literary criticism, it is difficult to narrativize how these fields converge in my study linearly. Ironically, the convergence of all these areas produces its own brand of dissonance as Black women and Black feminist theory are often ignored in or relegated to the margins of the first three disciplines. I will begin by detailing the frameworks within Black diaspora theory, postcolonial studies and U.S. empire studies that my project engages. I will then outline the Black feminist theorizations of Black female subjectivity—rooted in analyses of Black women’s travel narratives—that directly shape my conceptualization of diasporic dissonance.

Though the calls within the humanities to think beyond the nation-state are recent, questions of migration, mobility, and formations of political, cultural and racial belonging that exceed national boundaries have long been a consideration of Black cultural producers and Black cultural critics. Thus, in many ways, the resurgence of Black diaspora—in its varied iterations—as an analytic and a field of study presents a new opportunity to traverse the banal boundaries of academic disciplines. In “Unfinished Migrations: Reflections on the African Diaspora and the Makings of the Modern World,” historians Tiffany Ruby Patterson and Robin D.G. Kelley outline the history, potentials and limitations of diaspora in the current academic climate. While early conceptualizations of diaspora theorized that African and African-descended people shared a common culture through an emphasis on cultural survival and
retentions, Patterson and Kelley explain that “neither the fact of blackness…shared experiences…nor the historical process of their dispersal” comprise a community (19). Instead, they describe diaspora as both a condition and a process. As a condition, the African diaspora “exists within the context of global race and gender hierarchies which are formulated and reconstituted across nation boundaries” as well legal, cultural, economic social and imperial lines (20). As a process, the African diaspora is “constantly made and remade through movement, migration and travel” and “imagined through thought, cultural production and political struggle” (20). As such, diasporic linkages or bonds are always historically constituted (20), and discontinuities and tensions are inevitable.

Patterson and Kelley’s theorizations build on both Stuart Hall’s and Paul Gilroy’s contributions to African diaspora theory. In his seminal essay, “Culture, Identity and Diaspora,” Hall emphasizes difference to move away from the “old, the imperializing, the hegemonizing form of ethnicity” that defines the diaspora as “those scattered tribes whose identity can only be secured in relation to some sacred homeland to which they must all return, even if it means pushing other people into the sea” (225). Instead diaspora requires “the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of ‘identity’ which lives with and through, not despite, difference; by hybridity” (235). Moreover, diasporic identities are “those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew through transformation and difference” (235). Hall’s influence is evident in Paul Gilroy’s landmark text The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness. Gilroy’s text has been influential in shaping cultural studies, literary studies and Black diaspora studies—sometimes, problematically, standing in for
the latter. Gilroy highlights that both Black scholars and White scholars produce cultural criticism that feature “a nationalistic focus” and a “lure of ethnic absolutism” that fails to address the “doubleness and cultural intermixture that distinguish the experience of Black Briton in contemporary Europe” (3-4). Gilroy is opposed to assumptions that “cultures always flow into patterns congruent with the borders of essentially homogenous nation states” (5). On the contrary, he suggests that cultural historians look to the Black Atlantic as “one, single complex unit of analysis in their discussions of the modern world and use it to produce an explicitly transnational and intercultural perspective” (15). Analyzing several Black cultural productions, including texts by Richard Wright, W.E.B. DuBois and Frederick Douglass, Gilroy foregrounds identity as a process achieved by routes as opposed to roots and rootedness.

While Gilroy’s influence on Black diaspora studies remains constant, more recent scholarship on Black internationalism and Black diaspora have both extended and critiqued Gilroy’s Black Atlantic in important ways. For the purposes of my study, I want to highlight Jacqueline Nassy Brown’s critique of Gilroy in “Black Liverpool, Black America”:

A jointly political and theoretical dilemma arises precisely here, for his analysis does not invite inquiry into the way American hegemony has determined the lopsided nature of transatlantic exchanges, forging as a result relations of antagonism among blacks transnationally. That is, these tensions have surfaced even though American hegemony may be credited with providing the very means for black identity to become such a formidable political force in other national contexts. It is worth resurrecting the term cultural imperialism to examine the dynamics and dilemmas of identity in black communities on the margins of “the African diaspora.” It is only in so doing that we can pose this question: when does the unrelenting presence of black America actually become oppressive, even as it inspires? (297)
In highlighting the ways in which American hegemony structures uneven exchanges between U.S. based Black people and other diasporic communities and the asymmetrical circulation Black cultural products, Brown asserts that diasporic exchanges are never separated from the geopolitical context in which they occur. Indeed, Brown’s invocation of cultural imperialism in this context suggests that the traversal of transnational boundaries sometimes reifies, rather than challenges, oppressive relationships. Ten years later, Tina Campt and Deborah Thomas would consider and extend Brown’s discussion the hegemonic force of Black culture in a special issue of *Feminist Review* entitled “Gendering Diaspora: Transnational Feminism, Diaspora and Hegemonies.” Thomas and Campt echo Brown’s concerns about the inequity in diasporic exchanges and dialogues and extend Brown’s observation by interrogating the “dominance of U.S.-based cultural and intellectual discourses on diasporic relation, origin stories and authenticity narratives” that distract from key differences within diasporic communities and privilege diasporic solidarity (4). Ironically, the way in which U.S. based cultural and intellectual discourses on diaspora “travel” can produce a homogenous understanding of Blackness—the antithesis of what Gilroy theorized.

The primacy of those discourses in other diasporic communities is directly connected to the cultural, economic and political primacy of the United States as an imperial power. Brown’s question of when Black America’s ubiquity becomes oppressive even as it inspires within diasporic communities, then, exposes the contradictory relationships Black diasporic communities have with the same imperial power—the very premise of diasporic dissonance. In this context, using Gilroy’s
chronotype of ship as a metaphor, U.S. empire is the ship that simultaneously brings U.S. based cultural and intellectual discourses of diaspora to the masses and overbears—to sail downward directly at another ship to steal wind from its sails—the ship carrying non-U.S. based cultural and intellectual discourses on diaspora. Gilroy, and Brown—as well as Thomas and Campt—therefore, provide one layer of the theoretical grounding for diasporic dissonance.

In theorizing diasporic dissonance as literary trope that engages U.S. imperialism, this study draws from theories of postcolonial studies and U.S. empire studies. In Culture and Imperialism, Edward Said analyzes of popular British and French novels from the 19th and 20th century and asserts “the literature itself makes constant references to itself as somehow participating in Europe’s overseas expansions, and therefore creates…structures of feeling that support, elaborate and consolidate the practice of empire” (14). A seminal text in postcolonial studies, Culture and Imperialism foregrounds a discursive relationship between literary production and the historical and material realities of U.S. empire, which informs my approach to this project. Mary Pratt’s study of the travel writing genre, specifically, theorizes how European travel books and writing “engaged metropolitan reading publics with expansionist enterprises” (4). These postcolonial texts, among others, influenced seminal collections in U.S. Empire Studies like U.S. Cultures of Imperialism, edited by Amy Kaplan and Donald Pease, Literary Cultures of Literary Culture and U.S Imperialism From the Revolution to World War II, by John Carlos Rowe. These collections establish empire and its attending tropes—expansion, frontiers, etc.—as integral to American studies and investigate how American literature participates in and challenges U.S. empire.
Analyses of Africa American literature with U.S. empire studies help answer one of the guiding questions of this study: Besides service in the state apparatuses, how do U.S. based Black participate in U.S. imperialism? To be clear, figures who serve in state apparatuses figure prominently in U.S. empire studies, specifically the Black, male soldier. For example, in *The Anarchy of Empire in the Making of U.S. Culture*, Amy Kaplan asserts that “the spectacle of imperial masculinity was challenged by the presence and writings of African American soldiers, who troubled the racial division between colonizer and colonized and the assumed identification between race and nationhood” (125). Both Gretchen Murphy and John Cullen Gruesser examine short stories by Frank Steward Jr., an African American captain who served in U.S. Volunteer Army during the Spanish American War, loosely based on his military experiences. Murphy’s analysis asserts that Steward’s stories challenge representations of black masculinity in plantation fiction and disrupt a series of colonial binaries (8). Outside of figures in service to the state, U. S. empire studies has considered the writing of African American intellectuals and literary figures including Pauline Hopkins, Sutton Griggs, W.E.B. DuBois. James Weldon Johnson and Langston Hughes. Texts analyzing these figures and their writings, generally, explicate whether the author supports, contest or has ambivalent feelings about U.S. imperialism. For example, in *Reconstructing the World: Southern Fictions and U.S. Imperialisms, 1898-1976*, Harry Stecopoulos characterizes Charles Chesnutt as looking for ways that the US expansionist agenda could benefit people of color all over the world. While white supremacists saw imperialism as taking up the “white man’s burden,” Chesnutt “worked assiduously to consider the various ways in which imperialism might undermine the prevailing racial
ideology and create the future possibility of new interracial connection” (39).

Stecopolous argues that Chesnutt’s the novel *The Marrow of Tradition* posits mixing races, a primary fear among white supremacists, could undermine the discourses of racial purity, which were driving forces of imperialism. Kevin Gaines investigates Pauline Hopkins’ ambivalence toward civilizationist ideology. He points out that although civilizationist ideology was used to justify the imperialism, Hopkins’ novel promoted a moral revision of racial uplift ideology that called for educated Blacks to “devote themselves to the service of their race” (438). Gaines points out that Hopkins both resists and replicates racist mythologies by incorporating “a male persona of scientific expertise for influence within the male dominate realm of imperial power” (434). These analyses highlight how African Americans relationships to various discourses of U.S. imperialism marks the instability of their own positionality within U.S. empire.

The overwhelming majority of the figures considered in discussions of African American literary production and its relationship to U.S. empire are men. Privileging Black male literary production and/or experiences in thinking through diaspora, empire and relationality reifies what Michelle Wright describes as “heteronormative narrations of diaspora” wherein “(heterosexual) male bodies are active agents who create history, and (heterosexual) female bodies are passive objects that simply live it” (7). In the examples, Black, male literary figures and Black male create history through literal travel throughout the U.S. empire or imagining links between themselves and transnational communities. By not including more of Black women’s literary production, U.S. empire studies ignore how Black women also travel throughout U.S. empire and
imagine transnational linkages—and the ways in which they undergo these processes differently. In the next section, I will highlight Black feminists’ analyses of Black women’s travel and theorizations of Black female subjectivity that shape my conceptualization of diasporic dissonance.

**Here and There; Speaking Tongues: Origins of Diasporic Dissonance**

Black feminist literary critics have made critical insights into Black female subjectivity through their analyses and approaches to Black women’s travel literature. In her exploration of free Black women’s travel in the Antebellum Americas, Cheryl Fish theorizes what she terms a mobile subjectivity. Fish defines the mobile subjectivity as “a fluid and provisional epistemology and subject position dependent on the narrator’s relationship to specific persons, locations and geographical spaces” (477). Carole Boyce Davies highlights the slippery quality of Black female subjectivity in 20th century Black women’s writing from myriad places in *Migrations of the Subject*. Migratory subjectivity, Davies’ term, suggests “that Black women’s writing cannot be located and framed in terms of one specific place but exist/s in myriad places and times, constantly eluding the terms of discussion” (26). Speaking from such a complex subjectivity, Mae G. Henderson argues that Black women’s writing illustrates a plurality of voices as well as intimate, private utterances that she calls “speaking in tongues” (353). “Black women speak/write,” per Henderson, “in multiple voices—not all simultaneously or with equal weight but with various and changing degrees of intensity” (363).

The fluidity and slipperiness of Black female subjectivity and Black women’s writing existence in multiple place means that Black women and their writing could be situated in the nation-state and the diaspora; the metropole and the colony; the United States and the Caribbean. Moreover, the multiple voices that Black women speak/write
Chapter Summaries

Each chapter of this dissertation illustrates a different iteration of diasporic dissonance in U.S. based Black women’s travel literature. Chapter 1 interrogates Zora Neale Hurston’s and Katherine Dunham’s anthropological travelogues *Tell My Horse* and *Island Possessed*, respectively. Both women traveled to Haiti shortly after the conclusion of the U.S. Occupation, and this chapter argues that their interactions with Haitians produced vocabularies of diasporic dissonance that demonstrate the “unplaceable” quality of U.S. based Black women in U.S. Empire and the African Diaspora after the Occupation. Chapter 2 interrogates June Jordan’s essay “A Report from the Bahamas.” The chapter attends to the imagined conversations and silences between U.S. Black Americans and Black Bahamian tourist industry workers in Jordan’s essay and argues that those conversations and silences constitute another form of diasporic dissonance. Using the insights from my analyses of Jordan, the chapter analyzes “It’s Better in the Bahamas” tourism advertisements from *Essence* magazine to illustrate how visual representations of U.S. Black tourist leisure reproduce neocolonial market logics of the Caribbean Basin Initiative. Chapter 3 analyzes Audre Lorde’s “Grenada Revisited” essay and Paule Marshall’s novel *Praisesong for the Widow*, both set in Grenada and published in 1983, the year of the U.S. invasion of Grenada. This chapter highlights a trope in both texts that I call the “troubling
homecoming,” which reveals the ways U.S. imperialism can produce anxieties about the diaspora as a space of homecoming and belonging. The fourth chapter concludes the dissertation and gestures towards future projects.

Notes

1 I use the term U.S. based Blacks here as opposed to African Americans to speak to where the Black women writers in my study are situated geopolitically, not necessarily their heritage. Indeed, Audre Lorde, June Jordan and Paule Marshall are first-generation Caribbean Americans with parents from Grenada, Jamaica and Barbados, respectively. Whereas Dunham and Hurston are African American. I attend to the specificity of Lorde’s, Jordan’s and Marshall’s background in their respective chapters.

2 Obama uses similar rhetorical strategies to minimize the ongoing effects of slavery, Jim Crow, neoliberalism and anti-black racism on African Americans in the United States. In these instances, however, Obama often codeswitches or invokes Black, pop culture references to demonstrate that he is in community with Black communities and shares their interests. This is usually followed by paternalizing and chastising discourse that urges African Americans to use racism as an excuse for issues in their community. For examples, see Obama’s 2011 address to the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation and Obama’s 2013 Morehouse Commencement Speech.

3 In Black Prophetic Fire, Cornel West declares that “Obama’s Black face of the American empire” has, in fact, made it more difficult for “Black courageous and radical voices to bring critique to bear on U.S. empire” (200). Mumia Abu-Jamal argues that U.S. empire needed a new way to seduce the American public after having its brutality exposed under Bush in Wages of Rebellion by Chris Hedges. “The empire desperately needed a new face, a black face to seduce the public,” he explains (112). He adds, “This is the role of Barack Obama. He is the black face of empire” (112).

4 For a discussion of how celebrities participate in imperial exploits, see Robin. D.G. Kelley’s article “Empire State of Mind”

5 For Black women’s travel writing that exceeds the Caribbean, see Stranger in the Village: Two Centuries of African American Travel Writing edited by Cheryl Fish and Farrah Jasmine Griffin.

6 Edmonson et. Al attribute this false demarcation to “tripartite Cold War imagination of the planet and the accompanying sociological rationale of modernization theory” (7).

7 Patterson and Kelley clarify that the emphasis on a shared common culture was a product of poor scholarship but a response to a “political imperative—one that led to the formation of political and cultural movements premised on international solidarity” (19).

8 Brent Hayes Edwards The Practice of Diaspora is a text that extends the Gilroy’s project geographically and methodologically. Edwards analyzes correspondences and exchanges between New York based publications and Black Francophone newspapers. Articulating diaspora as process rather than a condition, he foregrounds translation as integral to articulating Blackness in diasporic context.

9 Tina Campt echoes Brown in her study of Afro Germans and the Black diaspora in “The Crowded Space of Diaspora” Intercultural Address and Tensions of Diasporic Relation.”

10 The privileging of Black Diaspora theory from the United States is a serious concern within the field. In addition to the “Unfinished Migration” article, Kamari Clark and Debra Thomas address this issue in Globalization and Race: Transformations in the Cultural Production of Blackness. Also, see Rinaldo
Walcott’s “Beyond the ‘Nation Thing’: Black Studies, Cultural Studies and Diaspora Discourse (Or the Post-Black Studies Moment)."
CHAPTER 2
NOIR, TI BLANC, PARLAY CHEVAL OU: VOCABULARIES OF DIASPORIC
DISSONANCE IN TELL MY HORSE AND ISLAND POSSESSED

Those of us Black people carried from Africa to other parts of the world, especially to the United States, are known to be in total ignorance of many truths, including what we are really like [and] what we have been made into by slavery and/or colonialism…

--Katherine Dunham
Island Possessed

Shortly after the exodus of U.S. Marines from Haitian shores, Katherine Dunham and Zora Neale Hurston traveled to Haiti, and throughout the Caribbean, to observe and participate in Haitian dance and Vodou rituals in 1936 and 1937, respectively. From sacred ceremonies in the houngfor to face-to face encounters with “horses” mounted by Haitian loa, Dunham’s Island Possessed and Hurston’s Tell My Horse not only document the particularities of Vodou in Haiti, these texts attempt to locate African survivals in spiritual practices that would illustrate continuities between Black folks across the diaspora¹. Both texts also confront the harrowing consequence of histories of slavery and colonialism—the most recent example being the nineteen year U.S. Occupation of Haiti—had on Black Americans, Haitians, and the Black diaspora writ large as evidenced by Dunham’s query in the epigraph to this chapter.

The consequence, per Dunham, is a two-pronged ignorance: an unawareness of one’s true self and what one has become as result of slavery and colonialism. The quote suggests this ignorance is common throughout the diaspora—“black people carried from Africa to other parts of the world”—but is particularly prevalent among Black people in the United States. Although the quote is problematically rooted in the idea of authentic and essentialist “Black truths” that exist beyond the reach of U.S. Black Americans, I am less interested in the veracity of statement and more intrigued by
the diasporic dissonance that it marks. Dunham frames these truths as connective
tissues for the Black diaspora. Though she does not state it explicitly, one can surmise
that U.S. based Blacks are presumed to be more ignorant of these truths than other
diasporic Blacks because of their proximity to U.S. empire. Black Americans are living in
the belly of the beast and are at once subject to its wrath and summoned to do its
bidding. U.S. empire, then, hinders Black Americans' access to those “truths” — “what
we really are like and what we have been made into”— and, by extension, Black
Americans' ability to forge relationships with non-U.S. Black people throughout the
diaspora. If Black Americans do not know the truth of who they are and what
slavery/colonialism have turned them into, then a host of tensions, disagreements and
misrecognitions between Black Americans and non-U.S. Blacks are inevitable.

This chapter analyzes encounters between Dunham and Hurston and Haitians
and argues that the tensions and misrecognitions in those encounters produce new
vocabularies that mark diasporic dissonance. More specifically, these new terms—
“noir,” “L’Americane,” and “ti blanc”—index Hurston’s and Dunham’s tenuous
positionality between U.S. empire and the Black diaspora in the aftermath of the U.S.
Occupation. This chapter also analyzes Hurston’s and Dunham’s conflicting
representation of the Haitian loa Guede to illustrate the ways diasporic dissonance is
present even in the most intimate of diasporic spaces in both texts—the Vodou
ceremony.

The similarities between Katherine Dunham’s and Zora Neale Hurston’s career
trajectories, research routes and intellectual impacts in the field of anthropology are
undeniable and almost necessitate that they be read together. Both Dunham and
Hurston were mentored by the anthropological giants Melville Herskovits and Franz Boaz, respectively. Both women traveled similar routes through the Caribbean and investigated African survivals in Black diasporic dance and religions. Hurston even wrote a brief review of Dunham’s writing on her stay with the Maroons in Jamaica in Accompong. Each of them exceeded the genre conventions of ethnography by supplementing their research with memoir and political commentary and using their research to create dance and theatrical performances. Both women also defied genre conventions of ethnography by combing memoir like elements into their texts. Despite the overwhelming similarities between Hurston and Dunham, scholars’ treatment of each woman and their work has been substantially different.

Although Zora Neale Hurston is widely and often universally celebrated for her contributions to fields like Anthropology, Women’s Studies and African American Literary Criticism, scholars remain divided on their approaches to and interpretations of *Tell My Horse*. While Hurston’s disavowal of genre restrictions—Hurston combines elements of folklore, ethnography, travelogue and history—presents its own unique challenges, Hurston’s support of the U.S. Occupation has been a consistent conundrum for scholars writing exclusively about *Tell My Horse* and scholars who are attempting to situate it thematically within Hurston’s larger body of works. Historically, this conundrum has produced two, major camps of scholarship: 1) scholars who take Hurston’s pro-imperialist rhetoric at face value and condemn it and 2) scholars who argue that Hurston’s pro-imperialist rhetoric is an example of Hurston’s signifying strategies and allows her to levy criticism of white patrons, white audiences and the United States writ large without fear of retaliation.
In the first camp of scholarship, scholars not only critique Hurston’s pro-imperialist rhetoric, they also speculate its causes. For Robert Hemenway, author of *Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography*, the pro-imperialist rhetoric is a result of the overall poor form of text. Because Hurston is neither a political analyst nor traveloguist, the political analysis in *Tell My Horse*, according to Hemenway, is “of a naïve sort with superficial descriptions of West Indian curiosities” (249). Hemenway’s claim that *Tell My Horse* is Hurston’s “poorest book” implies that in some ways the text itself is an aberration compared to Hurston’s larger catalogue; however, Hazel Carby suggests that Hurston’s problematic political commentary in *Tell My Horse* was not exceptional. On the contrary, Carby posits that Hurston’s overtly political commentary was both “reactionary, blindly patriotic and, consequently, superficial” and central to her work at that particular, historic moment:

The dominant tendency in Hurston scholarship has been to ignore or dismiss as exceptional some of her more distasteful political opinions, but, as Marcus and Fisher have explained, the ethnology and travelogue share a romantic vision (and I would add a colonial or imperial vision), making *Tell My Horse* not an exception to Hurston’s work at this moment in her life but an integral part of it. (132)

Like Hemenway, the problematic character of Hurston’s political commentary, per Carby, is, in part, a result of genre. Yet, whereas Hemenway attributes Hurston’s problematic commentary to her being a novice at writing political analysis, Carby suggests that ethnologies and travelogues as genres are already invested in producing colonial and imperial visions. Beyond the genre limitations, however, Carby views Hurston’s “distasteful political opinions” about Haiti as evidence of a larger conflict present in several of Hurston’s texts at the time: Hurston’s struggles to represent herself as a writer and an intellectual and a member of the “folk” community (125).
While Hemenway and Carby assess Hurston’s political commentary against genre specifications and Hurston’s literary catalogue, J. Michael Dash measures Hurston’s discussions of the U.S. Occupation against the works of her Black, literary contemporaries. While the rubric is different, Dash’s conclusions about Hurston’s political opinions mirror Hemenway’s and Carby’s—the tell-tale sign being his chapter entitled “Dreaming the Same Dream: Harlem, Haiti and Racial Solidarity from Hughes’ Dream to Hurston’s Nightmare.” Dash reluctantly includes Hurston’s work explaining that “no account of the impact of Haiti on the Black Americans in the 1930s can be complete without some reference to Zora Neale Hurston” (58). Dash proclaims that Hurston is exceptional compared to her Black, literary contemporaries because she “has the dubious distinction of being the only black writer who actually approved of the American Occupation” (58). Furthermore, to add insult to injury, Dash points out that Hurston couples her Occupation support with “a number of alarming racist references to the weaknesses of the Haitian character” (59). For Dash, not only are Hurston’s comments antithetical to the project of building diasporic solidarity, they were unforgivable:

Haiti was for Hurston a nightmare world fit only to be probed anthropologically and to be rehabilitated militarily. Hurston’s comments on Haitian folk culture are consistent with her reactionary politics. Other black writers could be forgiven since their sensationalist fictions were often motivated by the urgent need to establish a common folk heritage. Hurston’s only motivation seems to have been unmitigated contempt.⁵ (60)

Dash unequivocally denies that Hurston’s support for the Occupation and accompanying racist references are attributable to genre specificities or tensions inherent in representing the intellectual and the folk. Instead, anthropology in Zora Neale Hurston’s hands, according to Dash, is a weapon of colonial violence. Hurston’s
writing is merely the means through which she exercises what Dash calls her “unmitigated contempt” for Haitians.

Dash’s passionate condemnation of Tell My Horse is only rivaled by other opposing scholars’ fierce assertions that analyses like Dash’s are misguided and unaware of the latent significance of the Hurston’s pro-Occupation discourse. Amy Fass Emery explicates that “critics have identified strategies of self-reflexive strategies of ironic distancing—of signifying—in works by Hurston;” nevertheless, “readers of Tell My Horse have been strangely literal-minded” (327). Instead, Emery encourages readers to attend to and recognize the “double-voiced’ nature of Tell My Horse as metaphor for Hurston reckoning with her own fear of losing control over her own voice to anthropology—or being “possessed”?. Annette Trefezer echoes Emery’s point and argues that Hurston engages in a “kind of double writing” that juxtaposes “public with private discourses and patriotic imperialism with black globalism” (302-303). Kevin Meehan extends the discussion of the double-voiced character of Tell My Horse and proposes that readers should completely dethrone Hurston as the authority in the text to resolve “the conflicting tendencies of Hurston’s problematic narrator…who inscribes both the liberation tradition of African American travel writing and the oppressive weight of imperialist culture in the Caribbean” (59). He writes:

In fact, there is a constant parade of informants who talk back to the roving narrator, criticizing her judgements and refusing—more and more frequently as the narrative unfolds—to cooperate with her fieldwork inquiries. As such, this ethnographizing narrator functions more as a persona, as a character in a larger ethnographic drama. Once we dethrone Hurston’s roving narrator, we can then look for clues to the narrative politics of this background drama, which, in my view, has a strong anti-imperialist message. (59)
Not only does Meehan argue that there is a strong anti-imperialist message in *Tell My Horse* specifically, dissimilar to Dash, Meehan believes that ethnography in Hurston’s hands becomes “possessed” and “speaks in a language of indigenous protest” (61).

Emery’s, Trefezer’s and Meehan’s anti-imperialist readings of *Tell My Horse* hinge upon Hurston’s invocation of the Haitian loa, Guede in the title. Hurston characterizes Guede as the Haitian loa of social protest and claims that when he possesses—or mounts—a person, the possessed individual announces that he/she is under Guede’s control by saying “tell my horse’ before anything he/she says. Hurston’s identification with Guede, then, per Meehan, serves as the crux of Hurston’s larger text building strategy: ‘tell my horse’ is a blind for Hurston’s self-expression, allowing her to criticize the U.S. presence, but also the locally compounded practices of race, class, caste and gender oppression that Caribbeans inflict on one another” (61). For Meehan, and many other scholars, spiritual possession becomes another means for Hurston, often read as the quintessential trickster figure, to mimic, mock and resist dominant power structures.

While scholars cite a latent anti-imperialist message in Hurston’s Haitian ethnography, Dunham scholars point to Dunham’s research methods and embodied performance explicitly as evidence of Dunham’s anti-imperial sensibilities. Halifu Osumare argues that Dunham never conformed to any individual theory or specific method. Moreover, Dunham’s immersion method and meticulous survey of each society’s social systems catalyzed a “probing of the motives of the fieldworker herself in relation to her entire agenda in the field” thus illustrating what he terms “an
anthropological postmodern sensibility” long before the discipline itself articulated one (620). Beyond her methodological innovations in anthropology, the mediums through which she shared her research made Dunham a prominent figure. Dunham incorporated her research on Afro-Caribbean dance into her own performances as well as her own dancing technique known as the Dunham Technique. “By choosing to act out, and thus embody the dances she hoped to observe,” Hannah Durkin argues, “Dunham gave clues to a fieldwork technique of physical participation that was to reconfigure observer subject hierarchies and lead to the creation of a pioneering cross cultural artistic practice (124). Not only did Dunham’s method and performance challenge hierarchies within the field of anthropology, scholars assert that combination of her research and performance challenged racists perceptions of the Black people during the 1930’s that characterized Black people across the diaspora as primitive and outside of modernity. In discussing Dunham’s dance pedagogy, Ojeya Banks Cruz describes Dunham as a “decolonizing dance pedagogue” and asserts that her methods “recovered important dance epistemologies relevant to people of the African diaspora” and articulated a critical postcolonial dance recovery that challenged racism in the United States (120).

Despite overwhelming praise of Dunham’s dance techniques and pedagogy, scholars have been critical of Dunham’s use of the primitive tropes in her performances and the imperial implications. For example, while Anthea Kraut argues that Dunham’s, along with Hurston’s and Josephine Baker’s, performances reveal a “transnational tradition of black cultural practices” (450), Stephanie Batiste highlights that Dunham enacts this transnational tradition through “an enactment of Western privilege as evidenced by her proximity to prominent anthropologists, prestigious grants and
fellowships and scholarly endeavors” (177). And considering anthropology’s history of producing and reifying trope of primitive blackness, Batiste adds that it is not surprising to see representations of exoticism and primitivism even in Black anthropologists’ work. Indeed, primitivism was integral to Dunham’s oeuvre (173).

Despite the various divergences in Hurston and Dunham scholarship historically, both bodies of scholarship have recently begun investigating the ways that both women and their work resist easy, binaristic classifications of identity. In “Horses Chomping at the Global Bit: Ideology, Systemic Injustice and Resistance in Zora Neale Hurston’s Tell My Horse,” Amy Schmidt argues that Hurston’s work “denaturalizes identity categories and demonstrates the insidiousness of them” (174). Regarding Dunham, though Batiste highlights the coloniality of Dunham’s methods and representations of the primitive in her work, she also asserts the colonial gaze, black performing body and ethnographic display merge uncomfortably in Dunham’s stage performance and her text. The result of this merging ultimately collapses distances between “primitive and civilized, savage and modern, center and periphery, self and other through the re-enactment of the categories themselves on the black body for multiple audiences” (177). In extending these arguments, I posit that the collapsing and uncomfortable merging of these identity categories create the conditions for diasporic dissonance, and that diasporic dissonance manifests as new terms and vocabularies. These vocabularies do not fix identity. Rather, they mark the instability of U.S. based Black women’s identity in a context where U.S. empire and the Black diaspora converge.

Can You Call Me Noir?

Though Hurston and Dunham set out to document African survivals in the diaspora to highlight early examples of diasporic connectivity, their texts reveal how
diasporic tension, conflict and misrecognition are just as prevalent. For Katherine Dunham, those misrecognitions surface in the form of conflicting identities and affiliations between the United States and Haiti in the opening chapters of Island Possessed. Dunham begins Island Possessed with an unsettling proclamation: “It was with letters from Melville Herskovits and Northwestern University that I invaded the Caribbean—Haiti, Jamaica, Martinique, Trinidad, passing lightly over the islands, then Haiti again for the final study” (2). This quote’s content and placement in the text is are particularly striking. Dunham’s decision to use the term invader at once gestures to a history of the French, British and American colonialism, via the U.S. Occupation which just ended two years before her arrival in the region, and how she situates herself in said history. By marking herself as an invader, Dunham denies any assumptions of an easy and inevitable diasporic affinity between herself as an American, Black woman and the Afro-Caribbeans in the various countries where she conducted her research. Instead, Katherine Dunham marks her own proximity to the intellectual project of anthropology—via the reference to Melville Herskovits—and American institutions like the university — via the Northwestern University reference—both of which violently and forcefully produce harmful representations of Black people as primitive via knowledge production in ways that both facilitate and reinforce the violent occupation and colonization of Black countries and people. Not solely limited to the anthropology as the sole evidence of the imperial quality or texture of her work. Dunham mentions that she is the first of her kind, meaning the first Black woman to make this type of trip, but her trip is immediately cast in the shadows of white men like Herskovits and Seabrook, literally, discursively and intellectually following the footsteps of Herskovits and
Seabrook. She must contend with the baggage they have left behind. Dunham is a participant in this project, endowed with intellectual, class, national and imperial privilege. On the other hand, the fact that having the letter from Herskovits and Northwestern is what makes her “invasion” possible highlights the instability of her own position and authority. Indeed, Herskovits and the University are facilitating her “invasion” of the Caribbean, but as an U.S. based Black woman, Dunham is not an easily welcomed figured in the field of anthropology or the university. Her own authority as an anthropologist is dependent on the approval of white, male anthropologists and white, academic institutions; she is both accountable them and under their metaphorical surveillance by the presence of the letters. Thus, her opening declaration simultaneously demonstrates Dunham’s access to imperial privilege and her discursive participation in colonial invasion as well as her own dubious status as a Black woman in imperial institutions.

Dunham’s ambivalent status in the University is mirrored in her ambivalent status in Haiti’s racial caste system. To be clear, Haitian racial categories account for a host of elements beyond phenotype and ancestry including class, social status, etc. Thus, the racial categories are not quite as fixed as those in the United States. Dunham explains this with an old Haitian proverb she picked up: “Mulatre pauvre—neg`; neg` riche-mulatre!” or “a poor mulatto becomes a black, a rich black a mulatto” (7). Though Dunham admits that this proverb does not prove true in the lived experience of Haitians, it demonstrates the inherent fluidity of racial categories in Haiti. In that matrix of fluidity, Dunham explains that in many instances, she is “a mulatto when times call for it, a griffon, or an in-between”(3). But she self identifies as noir: “not exactly the color black,
but the quality of being at ease with black people when in the hills or the plains or anywhere and scrambling through daily life along with them” (3). By self-identifying as noir, despite being more generally described as unplaceable, Dunham is expressing desire for a certain type of diasporic affiliation, particularly when she says people in the hills or the plains or wherever they may be, which is a gesture to working class, or working poor Haitians as opposed to Haitian elites that her letters from Herskovits would facilitate her meeting. Moreover, the hills and the plains were sites where Haitians practiced Vodou as they offered some semblance of privacy and relief from U.S. military and Haitian elite surveillance. Therefore, Dunham’s self-identification as noir is an attempt to distance herself from the Occupational forces that resided in the urban spaces of Haiti. Also, she is distancing herself from the lavish life of Haitian elites and citing the Haitian poor people at the core of Haitian identity.

Though she self-identifies as noir, this not the way Haitian people see her. Dunham makes this apparent in a vignette where she describes her first visit to a Vodou ceremony. When she arrives, the bocor, or the priest, addresses her by her first name although he has never met her. The bocor’s familiarity with her is shocking, but it is startles Dunham more because he does not call her what most people on the island do: “Also, my name had been used, not just ‘l’Americaine’ as I was known far and wide in Haiti by those not familiar enough to call me by their version of my first name” (30). That she is known by many Haitians as l’Americaine is ironic considering, by her own accounts, she describes herself as noir, “at ease with Black people.” Being known far and wide as L’Americaine troubles Dunham’s self-description as being at ease with Black people as the term American has multiple and shifting connotations post
Occupation. For example, Dunham and Hurston in their respective texts describe Doctor Reser, a white, former Marine and pharmacist who came to Haiti during the Occupation but never left, as “beloved by everyone.” Reser, however, is more of an exception than the rule. Dunham explains that after the Occupation, some Americans are “to be feared, some to be ridiculed, some to be tolerated as one tolerates rich retarded children, some are to be exploited and some to be loved” (73). While Dunham describes herself as the type of American who “fades into the Haitian landscape as fixtures or frameworks, or a color tone when the landscape becomes too monotonous” (73), it is quite possible that she represents the other types of Americans as well. Thus, the constellation of the terms invader, noir and l’Americaine represent vocabularies of diasporic dissonance that mark Dunham’s ambiguous relationship to both U.S. empire and Haitians.

**Two Ti Blancs Are Coming**

Like Katherine Dunham, Zora Neale Hurston travels routes in Haiti that white, male imperialists previously traveled. Hurston’s trip to the Isle de la Gonave is a prominent example. The Isle de la Gonave becomes a discursive site of struggle between Vodou narratives, imperial narratives, and Black resistance narratives. Zora Neale Hurston finds herself at the intersection of these narratives in *Tell My Horse*. Hurston explains the origins of the Isle de la Gonave in the opening of the chapter. Per Haitian Vodou and folklore, the Haitian people were praying to Haitian loa Damballah for peace in the island. Damballah, preoccupied with other tasks, sent his wife, Silla, on the back of a whale to tell the Haitian people how to achieve peace. Unfortunately, Silla fell asleep on the whale’s back. Fearful of waking her up, the whale let Silla sleep. During the day, the whale would visit with his friends in the sea, but he returns to the coast of
Haiti every night in the event that Silla wakes up to give the Haitian people the formula for peace. Silla sleeping on the whale’s back becomes the Isle de la Gonave, and Hurston claims to see the island of Gonave “float out of the harbor with the sun each day and return at sundown” (140). This Vodou narrative characterizes the Isle de Gonave as a space of peace, challenging the associations of voodoo—and by extension Haitians—with cruelty, backwardness and violence—associations that would later prompt American Marines and Haitian elites to outlaw and attempt to erase Voodoo culture from national narratives.

While the Vodou origin story of the Isle de la Gonave intrigues Hurston, she also proclaims “I want to see the island where a white man was crowned king” (140), referencing Faustin Wirkus. Faustin Wirkus was a U.S. Marine stationed in Haiti who was rumored to have been crowned the “King of Isle de la Gonave” by Haitians. William Seabrook recounts the Occupation legend in *The Magic Island*:

> To hold undisputed way on some remote tropical island set like a green jewel amid the coral reefs of summer seas—how many boys have dreamed it…. It is a dream for most of us which never comes true. But in Haiti, where the impossibility frequently happens, or on one of its island dependencies, there is a man, a white man who realized that dream on his own terms. Furthermore, he has literally been crowned a king by the natives of the land. This is not a fantasy. A number of years ago, at his own request, the American administration dropped from an airplane on this island a Pennsylvania farmer boy by the name of Wirkus, who had enlisted in the Marine Corps and risen to be a top sergeant…. Two or three months later a rumor spread around the capital that the ten thousand blacks of the island had convened and crowned Wirkus king of la Gonave. (171-172)

In contrast to the Isle de la Gonave being a site of peace and tranquility in Vodou, the arrival of Faustin Wirkus during the Occupation narrativizes the Isle de la Gonave as a site conquest and imperialism. This achievement is perhaps even more praiseworthy to Seabrook because he states that there are no French colonial ruins on
the island and that the island was often a place where runaway, enslaved Haitians would go (171). Thus, in Seabrook’s discussion on the isle, he exposes the colonial narrative and, inadvertently, the Black resistance narrative associated with Isle de la Gonave. Hurston inserts herself into this palimpsest of Vodou, imperial and Black resistance narratives about Gonave and, like Dunham, has ambivalent relationships to both the imperial histories and the Vodou histories of the island.

Guided by Haitian natives and accompanied by Frank Crumbie Jr., a white male customs inspector during the Occupation, Hurston arrives on isle de la Gonave. Her arrival is in many ways a parody of Seabrook’s arrival on Gonave. Though Wirkus arrives by airplane and Hurston and Crumbie arrive by boat, Hurston and Crumbie arrive at the Ansa-a-galets landing that Wirkus built. Moreover, though neither Hurston nor Crumbie are military officials like Wirkus, they do have “army cots and other paraphernalia” with them on the boat. Even the pairing of Hurston and Crumbie together mimics Wirkus relationship with Ti Meminne, the Black queen of Isle de la Gonave. The parody of Seabrook’s arrival is most salient in how Hurston and Crumbie are received by the Haitians on the island. Whereas Wirkus was “crowned” king shortly after his arrival, Hurston’s and Crumbie’s guides announce their presence by exclaiming, “Tell them two ti blancs are coming” (142). The literal translation for the term “ti blanc” would be “small white person;” however, in the text, Hurston translates it two “unimportant whites or mulattoes” (142). Hurston does not respond or refute the description.

Rather than take Hurston’s classification as a ti blanc in literal terms, I read this moniker as an approximation of her imperial authority, similar to Dunham’s classification as l’Americaine, and as a vocabulary of diasporic dissonance. Like the letters from
Herskovits that Dunham carries with her, Crumbie facilitates Hurston’s “invasion” of the island. Crumbie secures the boat they travel to the island in, and Hurston even admits that she invited Crumbie because he knew Creole and knew “people”—many of whom were military and police officials. However, neither she nor Crumbie are Marines or military figures, like Wirkus, that might command a certain reaction from the people on the Isle de la Gonave. So the “unimportant” qualifier serves a critique of both Hurston and Crumbie. The phrase marks the tenuousness or instability of her own power in Haiti, and by extension the power she has in U.S. imperial projects, much like Katherine Dunham. Nevertheless, the phrase denies easy assumption of diasporic bonding between Hurston and the Haitians.

**Parlay Cheval Ou**

Despite the various misrecognitions that Hurston and Dunham experience because of their proximity to the Occupation and U.S. imperial figures, both women cite Vodou and Vodou ceremonies as source diasporic bonding. In describing a close relationship she had with a Haitian woman, Hurston indexes their closeness by mentioning that they “never lied to [one] another about their respective countries,” and she and the woman “acknowledged Vodou” and did not apologize for it in their private conversations (150). Dunham refers to her fellow initiates in the lavé-tête⁹ ceremony as her “blood brothers” (96). These examples suggest that Vodou allows for more transparent and intimate relationships between Hurston, Dunham and Haitians that far exceed the parameters of an anthropologist/informant relationship.

While Hurston and Dunham share a respect and reverence for Vodou writ large, their representations of the Haitian loa Guede, specifically, diverged significantly. Known as Papa Guede, Hurston and Dunham describe him as the god of the dead with
an affinity for smoking cigars, drinking white rum and making vulgar and coarse
gestures. Titling her ethnography of Haiti “tell my horse” is the biggest indicator of
Hurston’s celebratory attitude of Guede, but her admiration extends beyond the title.
Hurston characterizes Guede as a “hilarious divinity and full of the stuff of burlesque”
(190). “This manifestation,” Hurston explains, “comes as near a social criticism of the
classes by the masses as anything in all Haiti” (190). When Guede mounts a horse—
possesses a person—he announces his presence with the phrase “parlay cheval ou,” or
“tell my horse.” Under Guede’s control, the horse is likely to say “the most caustic and
belittling statements concerning a pompous person who is present” (191). Thus, it is not
surprising, according to Hurston, that many Haitian feign possession by Guede to
critique, challenge and/or embarrass their employers and Haitian elites whom they
might not have the courage to address otherwise. Dunham’s characterization of Guede
is completely void of any references to social critique or resistant potential. Instead,
using Doc Reser as an example, Dunham suggests people feign possession by Papa
Guede to “to indulge in certain extravagances of behavior and obscenities which most
of the gods of the pantheon would not tolerate in their mounts” (18). Moreover, Dunham
personally finds Guede’s presence intolerable, labeling his antics as “repulsive and at
best pathetic” (92). With these conflicting characterizations and reactions to Guede in
mind, both Guede and the phrase “parlay cheval ou” blur the boundaries between
authenticity and performance and social critique and self-indulgence. Using these
insights, I will conclude this chapter with a close reading of an exchange between
Katherine Dunham and a Haitian woman named Teoline, mounted by Guede, to reveal
how “parlay cheval ou” is another vocabulary of diasporic dissonance that indexes U.S.
Blacks and Haitians contradictory and conflicting relationship to U.S. empire.

Teoline was a Vodou mambo, or priest, and Dunham spent many months attending Vodou ceremonies at her houngfor, or temple. Dunham describes Teoline as “fat, black with shiny skin” and having opaque eyes. Dunham recalls spending hours exchanging stories with Teoline and describes her as “warm, solid [and] outgoing” (98).

Invoking the familial diction, Dunham proclaims that “Teoline was a mother to us all as well as a mambo” (99). However, Teoline, mounted by Guede, complicates Dunham’s fantasy of diasporic bonding:

I had only once seen her [Teoline] in bad humor. On second thought it wasn’t even Teoline because Guede was in her head and Guede and I had never gotten along. After the usual obscenities and vulgar hip-grinding movements Guede had grabbed my navy-blue corduroy skirt…which was my uniform for night excursions in the bush. Guede had spat at me, and speaking in the characteristic nasal tone, asked that I remove the skirt and give it to him. Why should I have something better than the others? If I thought myself blanc I shouldn’t be here…I was in the early stages of this sort of thing and felt myself humiliated and betrayed until Doc assured me that Teoline had no control whatsoever over her actions and wouldn’t remember in a few hours what had happened. In the back of my mind, however, there was a cobweb of doubt which refused to be swept aside. Now I remembered Teoline fingering my skirt, asking about the material and if such a thing could be found in Haiti. Had she not been twice my size I might have given it to her. (99)

Guede indeed lives up to his burlesque reputation in this scene. However,

Dunham is uncertain as to whether this is another one of Guede’s obscene performances or Teoline’s veiled attempt to ridicule her. In recalling that Teoline had inquired about the skirt previously and reiterating Teoline’s weight—“had she not been twice my size”—Dunham suggests that Teoline is secretly jealous of her. Yet attributing the exchange to Guede’s antics or Teoline’s jealousy obscures the social critique that Hurston suggests “parlay cheval ou” allows the Haitian poor to articulate, whether they
are truly possessed or not. More specifically, it obscures the ways that Dunham is an invader to the Vodou ceremony space, despite her affinity for other Haitians and Teoline's hospitality. Indeed, because Dunham never features Teoline speaking outside of her mambo duties, it is very possible that Teoline could resent Dunham, l'Americaine who benefits from imperial letters and Haitian elites—neither of which benefit Teoline. And because of Dunham’s popularity in Haiti, Guede presents the only opportunity for Teoline to confront Dunham publicly. Moreover, considering Dunham’s self-description as noir in the beginning of the ethnography, Teoline calling Dunham blanc is especially intriguing. Much like the term *ti blanc* in Hurston’s text, I do not read the term blanc literally. Instead, I interpret it as the antithesis of Dunham’s conceptualization of noir. To be blanc, then, is not necessarily the color white, but the state of not being at ease with Black people. Teoline uses blanc to mark the diasporic dissonance between she and Dunham. Thus, while Teoline does not invoke *parlay cheval ou* explicitly in the scene, the phrase still constitutes as a vocabulary of diasporic dissonance as it creates the conditions for intra-diasporic call-out.

**Conclusion**

Dunham and Hurston’s travels force us to reconsider several identity categories as assumptions about when, where and in what circumstances diasporic binds are forged. While their travel routes followed paths forged by white, male imperial figures, their interactions with Haitian produced new terms that evince their ambiguous positions in U.S. empire and the Black diaspora. While this chapter focused on new vocabularies produced in diasporic encounters, the next chapter analyzes silences and imagined conversations as another iteration of diasporic dissonance.
Notes

1 A houngfor, as defined by Katherine Dunham, is “the voodoo temple, structure dedicated to the Haitian loa, or gods for permanent housing and ceremonial offerings” (277). Also, within Voodoo, the metaphor of a horse being mounted is used to describe a person being possessed by a Haitian loa.

2 Anthea Kraut has discussed the connections between dancers like Josephine Baker, Katherine Dunham and Zora Neale Hurston in her article. She also has a forthcoming book about Zora Neale Hurston’s dance choreography.

3 Works that highlight Hurston’s contributions to these fields include Gwendolyn Mikell’s “When Horses Talk: Reflections on Zora Neale Hurston’s Haitian Anthropology;” Deborah Gordon’s “The Politics of Ethnographic Authority: Race and Writing in the Ethnography of Margaret Mead and Zora Neale Hurston;” Barbara Ladd’s Resisting History: Gender, Modernity and Authorship in William Faulkner, Zora Neale Hurston and Eudora Welty and Cheryl Wall’s Women of the Harlem Renaissance.

4 Carby is referencing George E. Marcus and Michael E. Fisher’s Anthropology as Cultural Critique: An Experimental Moment in the Human Sciences.

5 Dash’s claim that Hurston’s representations are unforgivable compared to other Black writers is particularly problematic and ironic. Dash creates a binary opposition between Hughes and Hurston and characterizes Hughes’ literary representation of Haiti as “one of the more enduring and moving tributes to the Haitian people by a Black American” (60). Dash even goes so far as to assert that Hughes was unmatched in his “dispassionate and perceptive view of the alienated black masses in Haitian society” (60). While Hughes may not have expressed support for the Occupation, Hughes did not always invite and/or reciprocate attempts at forging diasporic solidarities. Kenneth Warren discusses the instances where Hughes rebuffed attempts at diasporic solidarity in “Appeal for (Mis)recognition: Theorizing the Diaspora.”

6 Scholars most often cite Hurston’s Mules and Men as evidence of the signifying quality of Hurston’s works. In the introduction, Hurston proclaims, “The white man is always trying to know into somebody else’s business. All right, I’ll set something outside the door of my mind for him to play with and handle. He can read my writing but he sho’ can’t read my mind” (3). This statement gesture towards Hurston’s strategies for acquiescing to her white patrons demands on her writing and presenting dynamic, non-stereotypical representations of Black people.

7 Hurston was not only fearful of having her voice ventriloquized by anthropologists. Dorothea Fischer-Hornung speculates that Hurston motivations for her pro-Occupation rhetoric include “pressures based on mentorship and financial and financial considerations, such as those of the Guggenheim Foundation, patrons, editors or potential buyers of her book….and her general resistance to being classified according to her race rather than as an individual and to race men in particular” (157).

8 Herskovits did indeed write Dunham letters and advised her not to participate in the Vodou ceremony and encourages her to merely watch instead.

9 The lavè-tête is the first initiation ceremony in Voodoo.
CHAPTER 3
“I WONDER WHAT OLIVE WOULD SAY”: SILENCE AS DIASPORIC DISSONANCE IN “REPORT FROM THE BAHAMAS” AND “IT’S BETTER IN THE BAHAMAS” ADVERTISEMENTS

The Big House belongs to me and you. The fields beyond belong to the Vietnamese, the Black peoples of Southern Africa, the Palestinians of northern Africa, and the Brown and Black peoples of Nicaragua—our victim cousins making their way to freedom. And whether they speak Spanish or Xhosa or Arabic, these new field niggers expect the rest of us here in the Big House to watch de Massa and take appropriate care of de Massa’s soup!

--June Jordan
Black People and Foreign Policy

In the June 1983 issue of Essence, June Jordan published “Black People and Foreign Policy” in the “Speak!” section of the magazine¹. Mobilizing metaphors of the “big house” and “massa” and employing the famous “house niggers/field niggers” binary, Jordan conceptualizes the world as one, expansive plantation wherein U.S. based Black folks, non-U.S. based Black folks and non-black people of color writ large share the same, oppressive “massa”: The United States government. Jordan calls on Black Americans, or “house niggers,” to join the “field niggers” of South Africa, Palestine, Vietnam and Nicaragua in their pursuit of liberation by mounting resistance—“taking appropriate care of de soup”—from within the United States, or the “big house.”²

The stakes, to Jordan, are life and death: “Will we let ourselves and our family in the fields just grovel down and die, domesticated by de Massa? Or will we join our cousins in the field—and clean it up” (162). The piece closes with these questions and an editor’s note to refer to the “Internationalize Your Power” feature in the magazine which lists the names and numbers of Congressmen and women that readers could contact to voice their concerns about the United States’ foreign policies.

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Highlighting African Americans, Palestinians, South Africans, Nicaraguans and Vietnamese folks’ shared vulnerability to the United States’ insatiable appetite for imperialism and domination with imagery and metaphors of slavery at once unites Essence’s Black readers with an international community fighting oppression and highlights the tensions inherent to building and mobilizing an anti-colonial, international, multi-racial collective. More specifically, by invoking the “house negro/field negro” as an analog to the relationship between U.S. based Blacks and non-U.S. Blacks and NBPOCs, Jordan gestures towards a host of potential antagonisms between the two groups, the most damning perhaps being the former’s “complicity” in the latter’s subjugation and oppression. That Jordan’s essay appears only a few pages after various Caribbean tourism advertisements concretizes this potential antagonism. Advertisements featuring Black and White American tourists that characterize “every bit of Bermuda” as a resort and the Bahamas as a site of endless possibilities for leisure for “so very few dollars” not only appear in the same issue as Jordan’s “Black People and Foreign Policy” piece but consistently appeared in various issues of Essence throughout the 1980s. The language in these advertisements mirrored the language in Reagan’s 1982 Caribbean Basin Initiative (CBI), a comprehensive aid package for several countries in the Caribbean Basin Region which included foreign aid, duty-free exports for some Caribbean products and incentives—tax breaks being one—for American businesses that invested in the region. Because Reagan uses the United States’ economic resources to exert political control over the countries in the Caribbean Basin Region, the CBI constitutes a form of neocolonial exploitation. Both the advertisements and the CBI discursively construct the Caribbean as a space where American
consumers—Black and White—and businesses, respectively, can invest very little capital and gain significant returns in profits and pleasure. Returning to Jordan’s piece then, perhaps the question is not if “we will join our cousins” but rather how can the “field negro” and “house negro” join one another when the “field” is the site of unrestricted exploitation for the former and potentially unlimited pleasure for the latter? What are the implications for diasporic relationships between U.S based Black people and Afro Caribbeans in the convergence of empire, diaspora and leisure? Jordan reckons with these implications in her autobiographical essay “Report from the Bahamas,” published one year prior to “Black People and Foreign Policy.” This chapter argues that June Jordan’s imagined conversations with Olive, the Bahamian hotel industry worker, in her essay “Report from the Bahamas” constitute diasporic dissonance and provide insight into how the market logics of Reagan’s 1982 Caribbean Basin Initiative frustrated opportunities for diasporic bonding between U.S. based Black and Afro- Caribbeans. Moreover, using the insights from my reading of “Report,” I re-read the silences between Black American tourists and Bahamian tourist industry workers in “It’s Better in the Bahamas” tourism advertisements to render visible the diasporic dissonance in the advertisements that might otherwise be obscured.

June Jordan on Diaspora and Empire

Essayist, poet and author of 27 book and recipient of numerous awards, June Jordan unflinchingly critiqued domestic, state violence—discursive and material—with rhetorical force and laser-like focus on the intersections of race, gender, sexuality. For example, in her 1969 poem “Memo to Daniel Pretty Moynihan,” published in Things That I Do in the Dark, Jordan’s speaker claims the pathology that Moynihan ascribes to Black women in the Moynihan Report and urges him not to “liberate me from my female
black pathology.” Instead, the speaker uses her position as a “marked woman” to highlight the contradictory nature of Moynihan’s Report:

But you been screwing me so long
I got a idea something’s wrong
With you
I got a simple proposition
You takeover my position
Clean your own house, babyface. (117)

Here, the speaker does not contest the pathology by espousing a respectability politics; the speaker posits both Moynihan’s—and by extension America’s—own pathology and his dependence on the” female black pathology” for his own conceptualization of normativity. Other poems like “Letter to the Local Police” and “A Poem About Police Violence,” from the Passion poetry collection, directly challenge police brutality in African American communities. In the latter poem, Jordan proposes a radical solution to police brutality that provides even more insight into Jordan’s thematic content and poetic style with the follow question:

Tell me something
What you think would happen if
everytime they kill a black boy
then we kill a cop
everytime they kill a black man
then we kill a cop
you think the accident rate would lower subsequently? (Jordan 84)

Beyond its provocative and jarring quality, the question that Jordan’s speaker poses queries whether the police violence against Black men and boys is even accidental. Moreover, the question functions as what Jewelle Gomez describes as a “intellectual hypothesis demanding we follow the corollaries to the edge of the page” (716).
A steadfast opponent of imperialism and apartheid, Jordan’s critiques of state violence and oppression were not limited to the United States, as evidenced by her “Black People and Foreign Policy” piece. Jordan’s poetry and essays celebrated resistance to state violence and oppression abroad and drew parallels between domestic and international oppressive structures as well. In “Poem for South African Women,” for example, Jordan commemorated the 40,000 South African women and children who protested pass laws of apartheid. She describes the force of the protest as “a moving force/irreversible as light years/ traveling to the open/ eye” (90). Moreover, she likens the dust from the women and children’s marching to “a marvelous pollen” that “will be fertile” (89). By pointing to the force and fertile quality of the protests in South Africa, Jordan highlights the generative possibilities of Black women’s protest. Jordan also draws parallels between apartheid in South Africa and white supremacist structures in the United States in her 1981 essay “South Africa: Bringing it All Black Home. “South Africa used to seem so far away. Then it came home to me,” Jordan explains. Jordan asserts that South African was Birmingham, Brooklyn and Reagan, citing specifically that Regan’s African policy in the 1980s “supports the murder of hundreds and hundreds of Angolan civilians in the name of ‘our’ interests” 7(18). Perhaps Jordan’s clearest articulation of the confluence of white supremacist structures in the United States and South African apartheid appears in her poem “Poem About My Rights.” In the poem, Jordan asserts that she is raped because she has been “the wrong sex the wrong age/ the wrong skin the wrong nose the wrong hair/ the wrong need the wrong dream the wrong geographic…” (102). Jordan then likens her own rape to South Africa’s invasion of Namibia and Angola:
Which is exactly like South Africa
Penetrating Namibia penetrating into
Angola and does that mean I mean how do you know if
Pretoria ejaculates what will the evidence look like the
Proof of the monster jackboot ejaculation on Blackland
And if
After Namibia and if after Angola and if after Zimbabwe
And if after all of kinsmen and women resist even to
Self-immolation of the villages and if after that
We lose nevertheless what will the big boys say will they
Claim my consent:
Do You Follow Me: We are the wrong people of
The wrong skin on the wrong continent… (103)

While scholars of postcolonial theory have historically highlighted metaphors of
colonial rape and/or sexual violence as a trope in colonial literature and drawn parallels between
the violence of rape and the violence of imperial invasion, June Jordan's attention to
Black women's racialized experience of sexual violence and colonialism makes this
excerpt particularly telling. Earlier in the poem, June Jordan explains a law in France
that states if a man forcibly penetrates a woman but does not ejaculate, then it is not
considered rape—even if she resists the advances. This point gestures to the “unrape-
ability” attached to black womanhood historically. On the one hand, Black women are
incapable of being raped because they are legally written outside of the category of
woman—and by extension human. Additionally, they are unrapeable due to narratives
of Black women’s pathological sexuality. In other words, it is impossible for Black
women to not consent as Black women were characterized as hypersexual and always,
always available and willing to participate in a sexual encounter. Jordan extends this
problem of consent to the nations of Namibia, Angola and Zimbabwe who are subject to
violent expansion of apartheid from South Africa via invasion and the Border Wars of
the 1980s. Black countries like Zimbabwe, Angola and Namibia, then, are constructed
by the “big boys” as always already consenting to invasion and colonialism despite both
the violence of the process and their resistance to it. Jordan solidifies the connection between the rape of Black women and imperial rape of Black countries with a clear shift in pronouns—she moves from “I am the wrong sex the wrong age” to “we are the people of the wrong skin” (113). Thus, “Poem About My Rights’ charts a global structure of anti-black violence that renders all Black people vulnerable.

Despite describing an international Black community linked together through its shared racial identity and vulnerability to anti-Black, imperialist violence in a variety of forms, Jordan avoids assuming that all members of that community experience and mobilize against said violence the same way. More specifically, she refuses to assume that all members are in solidarity in resisting the various forms of anti-black imperialist violence. For example, despite explaining that Black Americans and Black South Africans share a similar racial “wrongness” in “Poem About My Rights” and linking South Africa, Birmingham and Brooklyn together as geographic coordinates of anti-black violence in the “South Africa: Bringing it All Back Home” essay, the latter piece, similar to “Black People and Foreign Policy,” questions whether people in the United States are resisting South African apartheid. “Who is fighting South Africa here, in my house?” Jordan asks (17). She continues to inquire as to where the protestors against apartheid in America are, if Congressmen and women are being blitzed with “telegrams of outrage” from their constituents and whether students are contesting their teachers’ ignorance on the matter in the classroom (18). After querying whether any of this resistance is occurring, Jordan answers her own question: “No and no and no....” (18). Yet even in the face of a lack of resistance and protest, Jordan espouses hope that American will ultimately enact an “effective, defiant response: “I refuse to believe that, in
so short a time Americans have accepted the status of pawns complicit in the crimes of a powerful few” (18). Moreover, she declares that if America is to remain a nation of “truly righteous people,” then, accordingly, they can “no longer strive to bear witness” (18). In invoking the lack of protest and potential for complicity in crimes like apartheid, Jordan demonstrates a shift in her perspective that nuances some of the previous points that she made in the essay. Even though the anti-blackness undergirding apartheid in South Africa is visible in Brooklyn and Birmingham, this does not make American complicity in crimes likes apartheid an impossibility. On the contrary, the conditional tense of Jordan’s statement makes it unclear as to whether the complicity has already occurred or not. Jordan cannot unequivocally say that Americans have not accepted a status of complicit pawns—indeed the lack of protest and resistance prevent her from doing so. But beyond the lack of evidence of protest, Jordan states definitively that she refuses to believe that fact despite what she has seen, or the lack thereof. Her hope that America will provide a defiant response is contingent on the hope that American have not accepted roles of pawn and as such will not simply bear witness to these actions without any action. The conditionality of the phrase and its uncertainty gesture towards an uncertainty around building bonds and mobilizing internationally against imperial, anti-black violence. Though Jordan speaks generally about Americans being complicit pawns in the crimes against Black South Africans, I cite these pieces to highlight that Jordan seems to have been consistently ruminating on America’s relationship to oppressive structures and systems and its duty to assist in dismantling said structures. Jordan would interrogate this issue more specifically with respect to Black Americans’ relationships to other diasporic Blacks and people of color in “Black
People and Foreign Policy” and other publications, perhaps her clearest and most powerful rumination on these issues being “Report from the Bahamas.”

June Jordan documents her Easter Weekend vacation as a tourist at the Sheraton British Colonial Hotel in the Bahamas “Report from the Bahamas.” Over the course of the essay, Jordan contemplates the limits and possibilities of a relationship with Olive, the Black, Bahamian woman who cleans her hotel room, and other Black, Bahamian women in the context of tourism where the women “risk not eating” if she doesn’t buy their hand-made items and she risks “going broke on [her] first vacation afternoon” if she does (7). This contemplation prompts Jordan to consider a series other relationships she has. For example, Jordan recalls how she bonded with a Jewish, white, male student based on a shared interest in the novel *The Bread Givers*; however, that bond dissipated when the student revealed he was not concerned about Reagan potentially jeopardizing Federal Student Loan Programs because it “does not affect him”—a sentiment that Jordan and her son cannot share as she depends on such programs to pay for his schooling. Jordan also recollects her attempts to assist Sokutu, a Black, South African, woman, navigate her domestic situation with her abusive husband who suffers from alcoholism. Jordan asks Cathy, an Irish, white woman student, to assist her in providing resources for Sokutu. To Jordan’s surprise, despite sharing the same racial identity as Sokutu, Sokutu gravitated more towards Cathy as Cathy discloses that her father suffered from alcoholism and abused her mother. Reflecting on all the limits and possibilities of these relationships, Jordan concludes that while identity categories like race, class and gender may indicate “commonly felt conflict,” the instability of these categories and “what they must mean about the contact
between two people” is as unreliable and unpredictable as the weather (14). “It is not only who you are, in other words,” Jordan asserts, “but what we can do for each other that will determine the connection” (Jordan 14).

June Jordan originally presented “Report on the Bahamas” as the keynote address at the New England Women’s Studies Conference in Salem, Massachusetts in 1982. Subsequently, the essay appeared in two of June Jordan’s essays collections: On Call: Political Essays, published in 1985, and Some of Us Did Not Die: New and Selected Essays by June Jordan published in 2002, posthumously. Moreover, the essay has been republished in a host of feminist studies and women’s studies readers, travel literature anthologies as well as special issues of journals and online feminist blogs.9 The editors of these readers often share similar reasons for including the essays in their readers. For example, Carole R. McCann and Seung Kyung-Kim, editors of the Feminist Theory Reader: Local and Global Perspectives, include “Report” in the Boundaries and Belonging section of their reader and explain that the essay “considers the shifting historical nexus of race, nation, colonialism and global capitalism” (15). Susan Archer Mann and Ashly Suzanne Patterson, editors of Reading Feminist Theory: From Modernity to Postmodernity, echo McCann and Kim as they celebrate Jordan’s “ever-conscious awareness of race, class gender and neocolonialism” in the essay. (432).

In addition to its attention to the nuances of race, gender, class and colonialism, feminist scholars laud the essay for its critical insights into theorizations of relationality. Susan Stanford Friedman asserts that “Report from the Bahamas” concretizes what she terms “scripts of relational positionality”. She explains:

- Produced by women and men of different racial and ethnic standpoints, these scripts regard identity as situationally constructed and defined at the
crossroads of different systems of alterity and stratification. They rest upon significant advances in feminist discourse...namely the analysis of multiple oppression and interlocking systems of oppression that has been pioneered especially women of color and the new discourses of location, positionality and standpoint. (17)

Jordan avoids and writes against what Friedman calls “fundamentalist identity politics.” By highlighting the fluidity of identities and how identities are situationally constructed, Friedman argues that Jordan advances a “new multicultural feminist discourse” (20). These scripts of relational positionality, according to Friedman, “supplement binary categories of race with a more complicated discourse” and move “beyond the binary of black and white” (3).

Friedman’s characterization of scripts of relationality surpassing and exceeding the black/white binary and offering a more complicated discourse is particularly troubling. It implicitly defines blackness and whiteness as fixed points that one must move away from to do more nuanced work. I contend, however, that Jordan’s essay highlights the fluidity and complexity of the blackness within the diaspora. Jordan’s imagined exchanges with Olive, specifically, elucidate the ways in which empire—not simply geography and class as Friedman states in her essay—structure diasporic relationality. While the previous chapter unpacked the new vocabularies produced in verbal disputes between U.S. Blacks and Haitians as evidence of diasporic dissonance, I cite Jordan’s imagined conversation with Olive as another example of diasporic dissonance wherein market logics of the neocolonial CBI implicitly structured Jordan’s and Olive’s relationship.

“I am Wondering what ‘Olive’ Would Say”

From the outset of “Report from the Bahamas,” Jordan confronts the imperial history of the Bahamas—in many ways she can’t avoid it. Jordan is staying at the
Sheraton British Colonial Hotel when the essay opens. In her room, she finds a written “welcome” message from the Ministry of Tourism followed by “a page of history” that recollects Bahamian national history. The document cites Columbus’ arrival as both the beginning of modern Bahamian history and New World History and lists a host of other foreign arrivals that constitute Bahamian history: British settlers, American Loyalists and Confederate blockader runners (6). By conflating “New World” history and “modern Bahamian history” together so insidiously, this “historiography discursively constructs European—more specifically British—colonial forces as always already a part of Bahamian history—there was no Bahamian history before them—and obscures the violence of associated with European and American colonial presence in the Caribbean. Jordan immediately denounces this historiography for its denial of Black people’s presence in the Bahamas and their contributions. “Neither this hotel not the British nor the long ago Italians nor the white Delta airline pilots belong here, of course” she asserts (7). Jordan’s assertion not only critiques the whitewashing of Bahamian history in the welcome message but it also exemplifies the continuity between colonial invasion and the multinational tourism industry by grouping historic foreign intruders like the British and the Italians with seemingly non-intrusive pilots. Including the Delta airline pilots among the Bahamas’ history of intruders also alludes to another fact that is insidiously obscured within this iteration of Bahamian historiography: the Bahamas is still subject to and operating under neocolonial control as a result of multinational tourist companies. In fact, although the history message comes from the Bahamian Ministry of Tourism, the Sheraton British Colonial Hotel is an American owned hotel. The historiography conceals the existing neocolonial relationship between the United States
Ronald Reagan announced the CBI to the Organization of American States in 1982, and it officially became law in 1984. Described as an economic program “that represents a long-term commitment to the countries of the Caribbean and Central America” (qtd. in Zorn), the CBI’s stated objectives included foreign assistance, stimulating foreign investment in the region, promoting competition in the private sector and eliminating the U.S. custom duties on exports produced and/or manufactured in the region (Campbell 39). Moreover, the program provided tax incentives for U.S. investors and allowed U.S. investors and companies to make tax deductions for costs associated with business meetings and conventions hosted in countries with CBI beneficiary status (Campbell 40). However, in reality, the objectives of the CBI were threefold: 1) to render the Caribbean and Central America open to foreign and domestic private investments, especially United States businesses and 2) to deter CBI beneficiaries from colluding with Communist countries in the region and 3) to establish the United States’ political and economic dominance throughout the hemisphere (40).

The Bahamas was an integral site to the CBI. Prior to becoming a CBI beneficiary, Nassau, Bahamas was the site of a series of meetings between U.S., Canadian and Caribbean officials where they outline the CBI in its entirety in 1981 (Campbell 40). In July of 1981, foreign ministers from Canada, Mexico and Venezuela joined the officials and agreed to support a multilateral action program for the entire Caribbean Basin (Campbell 40). Once the Bahamas achieved CBI beneficiary status, many U.S. based investors funneled their money to hotel construction and development
on the islands (Dypski 118). To be clear, the CBI privileged manufactured goods and exports from the Caribbean and did not provide any assistance or aid to tourist industries based in the Caribbean. As such, multinational tourist companies continued to disproportionately profit off of the tourism. These American investors exacerbated histories of neocolonial exploitation by pouring funds into the tourism industry, which yielded substantial profits for foreign and multinational investors but very little for the Caribbean countries themselves. Moreover, I argue that objectives of the CBI and the rhetoric of its architects—including Ronald Reagan and Thomas Ender—render the Bahamas, and the Caribbean more generally, as readily available for consumption by U.S. businesses and U.S. based consumers under the guise of America’s exceptional, benevolent concern for the hemisphere.\textsuperscript{10} Freedom to buy effectively equates to freedom itself, and Bahamians and Caribbeans across the region are at a supreme disadvantage in such a distorted equation. The CBI was a continuation of the United States’ centuries-long, imperial march into the Caribbean to enact a hemispheric manifest destiny.

It is not until Jordan visits the straw market—a Bahamian marketplace for local vendors to sell homemade items—that she realizes her role in the present neocolonial relationship between the United States and the Bahamas. In the straw market, Jordan explains that she and other Black American tourists learn the “ruthless rules of negotiating” with local vendors, mostly women who Jordan describes as toothless and humbly dressed, from white tourists. “And so it continues, this weird succession of crude intruders,” Jordan laments, “that now includes [her] and [her] brothers and [her] sisters from the North” (27). Jordan recognizes the exploitative market relationship between the
Black Bahamian women and her wherein if no sale is made, “they risk not eating” while Jordan risks “going broker on her first vacation afternoon” (7). Subject to the exploitation from Black and White tourists alike, Black Bahamian women also are subject to exploitation from the tourism industry as well in the straw market. M. Jacqui Alexander explains that the Ministry of Tourism imposed several standards for cleanliness and behavior in the straw market: “The stall and its immediate surroundings must be kept clean and tidy at all times; Goods must be displayed on or around the said stall only and in no other authorized location…. Loud and boisterous behavior, as well as the use of obscene language will not be tolerated” (57). The Ministry of Tourism and state managers mandated that Black Bahamian women do the labor of making the straw market a clean, neat and respectable space amenable for potential tourists. However, the Ministry of Tourism does not compensate them for that labor; instead, they must depend on fickle, bargaining American tourists for income. Thus, neoliberal logics like the ones espoused in the CBI that suggest that the freedom to buy is freedom in its totality fail to account for the hyper-exploitation and gross underpayment of non-U.S. Black women. And as a member of the “weird succession of crude intruders” to the island with capital, Jordan imagines how she would reckon with resulting diasporic dissonance between herself and Olive.

Jordan doesn’t reveal much information about Olive in the essay besides the fact that she works at the Sheraton British Colonial Hotel as a maid and that Olive is older than her. Jordan and Olive never have an actual conversation; their only exchange is one that Jordan imagines. Jordan wonders what Olive would say if Jordan explained why she chose to stay in this hotel. Jordan lists several reasons including her desire to
swim and sleep and a smaller probability that she would be harassed or raped—by a white or Black man—at the Sheraton. In imagining her explanations, Jordan underscores the irony of her statement: “A Black woman seeking refuge in a multinational corporation may seem like a contradiction to some, but there you are. In this case, it’s a coincidence of entirely different self-interests: Sheraton/cash=June Jordan’s short run safety” (8).

This imagined exchanged between Olive and Jordan demonstrates diasporic dissonance. Both Jordan and Olive have varying and contradictory relationships to the neocolonial, multinational hotel corporation which produces this uncomfortable moment. For Olive, the Sheraton offers little to no economic gain or stability for her service labor. Instead, to quote Alexander, the state “tends to erase the work that women do to make it [the Bahamas] better for the tourists and worse for themselves” (59). Olive’s myriad vulnerabilities—economic, health, psychic—as a hotel maid make Jordan’s tenuous safety—Jordan herself describes the safety as “short run”—even a possibility. Olive’s labor—for which she is grossly underpaid—and vulnerability as a Black Bahamian tourist industry worker creates the conditions for Jordan’s—a Black American woman—leisure. Nevertheless, Jordan has “calculated that [her] safety as a Black woman alone would be best assured by a multinational corporation” (8). What is missing from this conversation of safety in the Bahamans is the work of several Bahamian women’s groups—church affiliated women’s groups, professional women’s organization, the Women’s Crisis Center and the Women’s Desk—who were indeed mobilizing and organizing against sexual violence against women in the Bahamas in the 1980s. The Women’s Desk hosted workshops and seminars to help the community identify violent
crimes against women while the Women’s Crisis Center began documenting the increase of crimes of rape and incest against women, organizing marches and critiquing the media’s silence on sexual violence against women on a series of television and radio broadcast (29-30). With this in mind, Jordan’s construction of the multinational corporation as a stabilizing force within the Bahamas that neutralizes the threat of sexual violence obscures the political and organizing labor of Black Bahamian women against sexual violence, which Jordan is an indirect beneficiary of and provides Jordan with some semblance of safety.

Jordan imagines that Olive would reply to all of this with an indignant query before leaving her room: “why in the first place you come down without your husband” (8)? Even in her imagination, the question leave Jordan speechless. Jordan can’t imagine how she would even initiate a response as both a divorcee and bisexual woman. The imagined “indignant query” also suggests that Olive believes safety is best achieved in a heteronormative marriage and assumes that Jordan is indeed a heterosexual woman and married. Jordan’s hesitation to answer is her assumption that Olive might not understand her divorce or her bisexuality. “My ‘rights’ and my ‘freedom’ and my ‘desire’ and a slew of other New World Values,” Jordan explains, “what would they sound like to this Black woman described on the card atop my hotel bureau as ‘Olive the Maid” (8)? By implicitly situating her bisexual “desire” as commensurate with “new world values,” Jordan creates a binary division between she and Olive. Jordan is the modern, sexual subject, and Olive is conservative, pre-modern sexual subject with no conceptualization of desire beyond a heteronormative framework, thus producing diasporic dissonance. Non-heteronormative desire is not foreign to the Bahamas or the
Caribbean writ large; the state eschews its presence by positioning the nation as heterosexual. M. Jacqui Alexander explains this process with respect to the Bahamas in the 1980s and 1990s in “Erotic Autonomy as a Politics of Decolonization: Feminism, Tourism and the State in the Bahamas.” Alexander highlights how “women’s sexual agency and erotic autonomy have always been troublesome for the state” as it poses a challenge to “the ideology of an originary, nuclear, heterosexual family” constituting the cornerstone of society (22). Historically, this “erotic danger” to the state was embedded in the figures of the “sodomite” and the “prostitute;” however, in the neocolonial moment of the 80s and 90s, the state included lesbians in this category as well through a series of discursive and ideological gestures. These discursive and ideological gestures that effectively rendered lesbians—as well as gay people and people infected with HIV—culminated into the 1991 Sexual Offences and Domestic Violence Act which made gay and lesbian sex criminal offenses “with a maximum penalty of 20 years imprisonment” (24), effectively positioning the lesbian as both non-citizen and criminal. Thus, when Jordan assumes that Olive will not understand her New World “desire,” she inadvertently reifies state narratives that suggests “there is not space for indigenous agency for lesbian and gay men” in the Bahamas (Alexander 48). Moreover, to suggest that Olive would assert a heteronormative marriage as site of safety is to ignore the discursive, material and juridical persecution of Bahamian lesbians face in Bahamas—an intersectional marginalization that both women are subject to despite Jordan’s implicit suggestion that America is the originary point of “New World desire” and thus somehow more accepting of her as a bisexual, Black woman.
With these insights into the imagined diasporic dissonance between Jordan and Olive, I would like to offer critical re-readings of the “It’s Better in the Bahamas” tourism advertisements that render visible the neocolonial market logics of the CBI and the Bahamian state’s heterosexualization of the Bahamas.

Is it Really Better?

Tourism advertisements for the Bahamas were a regular feature in *Essence* in the 1980s. Advertisement’s bearing the Bahamas Ministry of Tourism’s official slogan advertisements, “It’s Better in the Bahamas,” were nestled in between editorials ad fashion spreads in *Essence*, inviting readers to partake in a Caribbean tourist fantasy. Despite running various iterations of the “It’s Better in the Bahamas” advertisements, the overall layout of the advertisements was generally kept the same: two horizontal panels, one featuring an image of the ocean or the beach, the other panel depicting Black and white tourists at a social gathering and a few sentences explaining the varied possibilities for leisure and pleasure in the Bahamas. For example, all the advertisements repeat the following phrase: “You never run out of things to do in the Bahamas. Until you want to.”

For the Black American tourists, the possibilities for pleasure are infinite. Those possibilities include gambling, dancing, lobster dinners at 320-year old mansions, fishing, golfing or doing nothing at all. The advertisements in figures 1 and 2 incentivize potential tourists even further by claiming that tourists can do all these things “for so few dollars” and that getting to the Bahamas was relatively inexpensive as well from most places in the United States. Incentivizing potential tourists with unmitigated pleasure and/or profit for a small investment mirrors market logics of the Caribbean Basin Initiative. But whose labor makes the unmitigated profit and/or pleasure possible? After
reading the Jordan essay, the answer is most likely women like the women in the straw market and Olive—women who are grossly underpaid for labor that is both seen and unseen. The absence of the Black Bahamian women who make American leisure and pleasure possible reify the hyperexploitation of these women and obscures how neocolonial structures like the multinational hotel render Bahamian, Black women economically vulnerable while catalyzing U.S. based Black consumers.

Not only is Bahamian Black women’s labor absent from these tourism advertisements, Bahamian Black women’s presence is missing from the tourism advertisements as well. There are no Black Bahamian women featured in any of the beach scenes or hotel scenes in the “Its Better in the Bahamas” advertisements. Instead, the emphasis in these scenes is on the U.S. based Black, heterosexual, tourist couple. Whether the couple is lying on a deserted beach, gambling in the casino, or dancing with other white, tourist companies, the scenes convey the same message: the Bahamas invites and is safe for heterosexual couples who want to spend money in the Bahamas. Making the Bahamas safe for heterosexual couples in the ad is predicated on the discursive removal of gay and lesbian, Black Bahamians from the national landscape. Though a discursive gesture in the advertisement, the state’s material and juridical marginalization of Black, gay and lesbian Bahamians characterizes them as dangers to the state’s political body and to the state’s ability to acquire foreign investment and aid through neocolonial structures like the CBI. Thus, if it is indeed better in the Bahamas as the advertisement suggests, it is only better for the foreign tourists—Black and White—as their pleasure is contingent on the political and economic vulnerability of Bahamian Black women tourist industry workers.
Conclusion

As June Jordan is preparing to leave the Sheraton in the essay, she finds a card that reads, “I am your maid for the day. Please rate me: Excellent. Good. Average. Poor. Thank you” (13). The language on the card is telling. It doesn’t ask Jordan to rate Olive’s labor, her friendliness or her hospitality; it asks Jordan to rate Olive. Perhaps this minor scene is a microcosm for how the neocolonial formations like the multinational hotel and the Caribbean Basin Initiative structure diasporic relationality between U.S. based Blacks and Black Bahamians—it temporarily gives U.S. based Blacks the authority to assess the worth and value non-U.S. based Blacks. Jordan does not actually fill out the card. Instead she pockets it, as a “memento,” and inquires “How would Olive rate me? What would it mean for us to seem good to each other?” (13). In this instance, Jordan doesn’t imagine Olive’s response at all. Perhaps Olive would have rated Jordan as average or poor; or perhaps, under the pressure to be a loyal Bahamian citizen, she would have rated Jordan as “Excellent” and encouraged her to come again. We will never know. But considering what it would mean to be good to each other also means considering what it would mean to “be bad” to each other. It means considering and reckoning with the possibility of diasporic dissonance. In reckoning with diasporic dissonance, as this chapter has done, however, there is the opportunity to unmask the structures that make diasporic Black people both “maids” and “cruel intruders” to one another.” The next chapter consider the trope of the “troubling homecoming” as another valence of diasporic dissonance in the works of Audre Lorde and Paule Marshall.
Notes

1 Editors of the Speak! Column described it as “a chance to express yourself about the issues that concern you and other Essence readers” (162).

2 Earlier in the piece, Jordan implies that enslaved Black people who worked in the house threw “salt or arsenic in the [massa]soup” (162).

3 Traditionally, enslaved persons who lived and worked in the house were believed to be much more docile and submissive than enslaved persons who lived and worked in the field. “House negroes” were believed to receive preferential treatment over “field negroes” in the form of lighter workloads, less severe punishment and greater access to food and clothing that the master might otherwise discard. Moreover, enslaved persons who lived in the house were rumored to be intensely loyal to their masters, even to the detriment of their relationship with other enslaved people. Perhaps the most popular articulation of the distinctions between these the “house negro” and the “field negro” is Malcom X’s “Message to the Grassroots” speech which he delivered at the Northern Negro Grassroots Leadership Conference” on November 10, 1963.

4 Over the course of her career, Jordan received the following awards: Rockefeller Grant for Creative Writing, a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship, a Lila Wallace Readers Digest Writers Award and an Achievement Award for International Reporting from the National Association of Black Journalists (Gomez 717).

5 “Marked Woman” comes from Hortense Spillers’ essay “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book.” Spillers opens the essay with the following quote: “Let’s face it. I am a marked woman, but not everybody knows my name. ‘Peaches’ and ‘Brown Sugar,’ ’Sapphire... (65).

6 Also, known as ‘dompass,” or “dumb pass,” laws, pass laws were part of an internal passport system that the apartheid, South African government instituted to limit the mobility of Black South Africans and maintain segregation.

7 In the “South Africa: Bringing It All Back Home Essay,” Jordan argues that there are two emergencies that are engulfing Black life: 1) Reagan’s assault on domestic, social programs and 2) Reagan’s loyalty to and support of the Botha regime in South Africa (17).

8 Other pieces where June Jordan is thinking the Black diasporic relationality and Black Americans’ relationship to other POC in the context of U.S. empire include poems “Notes Toward Home” and “Calling All Silent Minorities” and essays “Black Folks on Nicaragua: Leave Those Folks Alone;” “Nicaragua: Why I Had to Go There” and “Life After Lebanon.”

9 “Report from the Bahamas” appears in Stranger in the Village: Two Centuries of African American Travel Writing, edited by Farrah J. Griffin and Cheryl J. Fish. The essay was republished in an issue of the interdisciplinary, feminist journal Meridians: Feminism, Race and Transnationalism in 2003. Myriam J. Chancy, editor of the issue, asserts that the goal of the issue is to “remember those who have cleared the path on which we walk presently as scholars, as poets, as artist” (6). With respect to Jordan specifically, Chancy describes “Report from the Bahamas” an illustration of Jordan’s “desire and will to confront borders of race, gender and class magnified by shifts in national identifications” (7). More recently, Mecca Jamilah Sullivan organized a special forum on June Jordan’s intellectual and activist work on the feminist blog, the Feminist Wire in 2016. In discussing the significance of “Report from the Bahamas” on her own intellectual growth, Sullivan explains that Jordan gave her the language to understand that “difference and power were fraught, contested spaces and that to understand those spaces [she] had to commit constantly to understanding [her]self-anew” (1).
Reagan makes this point very clear in his Organization of American States speech in 1981 where he declares “In the commitment to freedom and independence, the peoples of this hemisphere are one. In this profound sense, we are all Americans” (qtd. in Zorn 545).

These ideological and discursive gestures include the “organization of an internal homophobic discourse on homosexual ontology...which operated through a contradictory, quasi-scientific discourse to present itself as truth about character” and “invoking nostalgia for an idyllic Bahamas, free from Western decadent incursions—a Bahamas not peopled by lesbians and gay men” (46-47).

*Essence* also consistently ran tourism advertisements for Barbados during the 1980s.
Figure 3-1. “Good Luck and Pleasant Dreams” It’s Better in the Bahamas Tourism Ad
Essence 1985
Figure 3-2. “You Can Put the World on Hold and Dance Your Feet Off” It’s Better in the Bahamas Tourism Ad Essence 1985
CHAPTER 4
“TROUBLING HOMECOMINGS”: TROPES OF DIASPORIC DISSONANCE IN “GRENADA REVISITED” AND PRAISESONG FOR THE WIDOW

In the thirty-three years since the U.S. invasion of Grenada, the history of the events leading up to and following the “lovely, little war” has remained—for the most part—a story of “great men.” Ronald Reagan, Grenadian, New Jewel Movement leaders Maurice Bishop and Bernard Coard and Fidel Castro are characterized as iconic, political figures embroiled in a Cold War battle with hemispheric and global implications. While the men took center stage in the historical accounts, U.S. and Caribbean based, Black women writers such as June Jordan, Merle Collins, Paule Marshall and Audre Lorde produced complex representations of pre-and-post invasion Grenada in their poetry, novels and political essays from 1983—the year of the invasion—well into the 1990s. Beyond merely retelling a chronology of national and international events, their works nuanced the depictions of these events and “great men” by foregrounding Black women’s experiences and voices. In so doing, this corpus of literature evinces the invasion of Grenada as a critical moment for Black women to consider their own lives in the face of national politics, U.S. imperialism and Cold War tension.

In addition to considering the intersections of the Cold War, U.S. Empire and nationalist politics, the invasion of Grenada was an opportunity for Black women to ruminate on diasporic relationality. Both Paule Marshall and Audre Lorde published works in 1983 that considered this issue. Marshall’s novel, Praisesong for the Widow, chronicles Avey Johnson’s—a middle aged, middle class, widowed, African American woman—reluctant journey of renewal and self-discovery through her travels to Grenada and Carriacou before the invasion of Grenada while Lorde records her
personal journey to Grenada in invasion’s aftermath in her essay “Grenada Revisited: An Interim Report.” While most scholars have read these texts as declarations of diasporic solidarity and reconnection, I argue these texts are emblematic of a trope I term *troubling homecomings*. The troubling homecoming trope is when a U.S. based Black traveler seeks home or a sense of belonging in the diaspora, only to have that longing disrupted by U.S. empire and/or its effects. By revisiting these texts through the analytic of diasporic dissonance and the trope of the troubling homecoming, I argue that Lorde’s and Marshall’s works offer invaluable insights into the ways that U.S. empire produces the conditions for as well as thwarts efforts to enact diasporic solidarities between African Americans and Afro-Caribbeans.

**A Brief History of the “Lovely Little War”**

The U.S. invasion of Grenada on October 25, 1983 was the culmination of years of tension between the United States and Grenada. President Reagan traced the origins of the tension to 1979 when “trouble came to Grenada” in the form of Maurice Bishop, who Reagan characterized as “a protégé of Fidel Castro,” and the New Jewel—Joint Endeavor for Welfare, Education and Liberation—Movement’s bloodless coup of the then prime minister, Eric Gairy (“President Reagan’s Address on Events in Lebanon and Grenada”). Bishop, the charismatic leader of the New JEWEL Movement was an anti-colonial, Marxist-Leninist lawyer invested in Black Power. Bishop’s unwillingness to bend to the will of the United States—more specifically his refusal to dissolve Grenada’s relationship with Cuba—did indeed prove “troublesome” for Reagan, who sought political and economic control of the entire Caribbean region. As a result, Reagan used a series of tactics to both isolate and intimidate Bishop and Grenada. For example, the United States did not accredit an ambassador to Grenada, and when the
PRG nominated one, the United States rejected the nomination (Williams 134). Moreover, the United States also sought to buy the loyalty of Grenada’s neighboring islands and create discord between Grenada other Caribbean nations by the Caribbean Basin Initiative, a foreign policy plan that provided Caribbean nations with economic assistance and free trade arrangements. Grenada was left out of this policy initially and only included post-invasion. Moreover, the United States pressured organizations in the region like the Caribbean Development Bank to neglect Grenada in their programs. To intimidate Bishop and the Grenadian government militaristically, the United States resorted to using military simulations in the Caribbean to intimidate Grenada, the most explicit example being Operation Ocean Venture on the Puerto Rican island Vieques in 1981. In the script of the simulation, “US Rangers [would] invade an Eastern Caribbean island called ‘Amber and the Amberdines’ in order to free American hostages and establish a government that is friendly toward the US” (Weber 136). The fictional Eastern Caribbean Island of “Amber and the Amberdines” sounded eerily similar to Grenada and the Grenadines, Grenada’s two dependencies and the, threat of American citizens being taken as hostages in the simulation actually became one of the primary justifications for the invasion of Grenada.

Despite the palatable tension between Reagan and Bishop, Reagan capitalized on an internal conflict within the New Jewel Movement to launch the invasion in Grenada. Following growing ideological differences between Maurice Bishop and his deputy prime minister Bernard Coard, Coard placed Bishop on house arrest on October 12, 19832. Grenadians marched and protested Bishop’s imprisonment, forcing his release on October 19, 1983. Upon his release, Bishop, remaining loyal members of the
NJM and Grenadian civilians made their way to the army headquarters at Fort Rupert. Once they arrived, however, they were met by another military force. Several civilians were killed, and Bishop and seven of his cabinet members were executed by a firing squad. With Bishop dead, Hudson Austin, another member of the New Jewel Movement, established a military dictatorship and 4-day curfew prohibiting anyone from leaving their homes. The violent overthrow of Bishop and the formation of the military dictatorship, according to Reagan, put the 800 American students at St. George’s University Medical School and 200 other American citizens at risk of being harmed or taken as hostages. Six days later, U.S. troops invaded the island in what would become known as Operation Agent Fury and deposed Austin and the military dictatorship.

“I am Only Relative” Lorde’s Troubling Homecoming

Prompted by the desire to “see if Grenada had survived the onslaught of the most powerful nation in the world” Audre Lorde traveled to Grenada six weeks after the invasion and documented her observations and assessment in “Grenada Revisited: An Interim Report” (1). Using first-hand accounts from Grenadians and damning evidence from investigative reports, Lorde adopts what Michelle Stephens describes as the “literary persona of the outsider reporter” (277) and offers a scathing critique of the invasion and U.S. empire more generally. Lorde unequivocally contests the veracity of Reagan’s claims that the Grenadian government had been “stockpiling weapons” and that the American students at St. George’s Medical School were in danger. “The racism that coats the U.S. government lies about Grenada,” Lorde writes, “is the same racism that blinded American eyes to the Black faces of 131 Haitians washed up on the shore in Miami…the same racism that keeps American eyes turned aside from the corrosive
apartheid eating like acid into the face of White South Africa” (3). For Lorde, the invasion of Grenada served several purposes. Domestically, Lorde suggests that the invasion diverted attention away from the recession and growing unemployment rates under Reagan. The invasion also reestablished the United States military’s dominance after a series of international debacles.³ As for the invasion’s significance for the Caribbean and African Americans at home, Lorde was hauntingly clear:

In addition to being a demonstration to the Caribbean community of what will happen to any country that dares to assume responsibility for its own destiny, the invasion of Grenada serves also serves as a naked warning to thirty-million African-Americans. Watch your step. We did it them down there, and we will not hesitate to do it to you. (6)

For Lorde, then, the invasion marked U.S. Empire’s potential and propensity to enact anti-black violence against Black people across the hemisphere who resisted U.S. imperial rule.

Though Lorde articulates her desire for Grenada to attain national sovereignty and draws parallels between the precarious circumstances of both Grenadians and African Americans in the context of U.S. empire, Lorde is careful not to collapse the two groups’ problems into one or suggest they engage U.S. Empire in the same way to the same degree. On the contrary, Audre Lorde articulates the diasporic dissonance between Grenadians and African Americans. She first cites African Americans’ fear of socialism as an impediment to their support of Grenada’s sovereignty. “Even many Black Americans,” Lorde laments, “threatened by some specter of socialism that is mythic and undefined at best, have bought the government line of ‘them against us” (5). Lorde suggests that the prospect of a Black, sovereign nation is not enough to curb Back Americans’ fears of socialism or their investments in capitalism. Moreover, Lorde speaks to Black American soldiers’ participation in the invasion of Grenada, positing
that the invasion addressed the Pentagons concern as to “whether or not Black Americans could be gotten to fire upon other Black people” (5). Lorde’s discussion shifts from Black American’s lack of support of Grenada’s sovereignty to Black, American male’s participation in the imperial control of Grenada through military violence. Lorde’s observations dispel any assumptions of inherent solidarity between Grenadians and African Americans even as they suffer under a common, imperial enemy.

Lorde’s reflections on her own relationship to Grenada further elaborates the diasporic dissonance between African Americans and Grenadians. Although she was born in New York City, both of Lorde’s parents were Grenadian immigrants. Lorde opens “Grenada Revisited” claiming during her first visit to Grenada—eleven months before the bloodless coup of Eric Gairy—she was “seeking home” as it was her “mother’s birthplace” (1). Yet at the end of the essay, although she describes herself as “a concerned Grenadian American,” she asserts that Grenada belongs to the Grenadians “on the street, [in]the shops, [on] the beaches, on porches in the solstice twilight” (8). She is “only a relative” (8). Lorde’s demarcation of herself as a relative bespeaks the tension inherent to her own identification as Grenadian- American. To be both Grenadian and American in the context of the invasion of Grenada is to both exist in the belly of the beast that is U.S. empire and attempt to defeat it. To be Grenadian and American means confronting a relative relationship to one’s own home and the home of one’s parents. Being both Grenadian and American means being perpetually susceptible to the clamor of diasporic dissonance.

“You Have No Nation”

Although Paule Marshall’s protagonist, Avey Johnson, in Praisesong for the Widow does not claim Grenadian American identity nor is the novel set in the aftermath
of the invasion, Marshall’s novel evinces diasporic dissonance through the troubling homecoming trope in encounters between African American tourists and Afro-Caribbeans. In *Praisesong for Widow*, Avey Johnson is a tourist aboard the Bianca Pride cruise ship when she begins to feel stomach pains following a dream about her great Aunt Cuney. Avey decides to leave the ship and hopes to return home to North White Plains, New York. But with no outgoing flights available, she must stay in a hotel in Grenada. During her stay in the hotel that evening, Avey is troubled by dreams again; however, this time those dreams are memories she and, her late husband, Jerome’s disavowal of Black cultural production to attain middle-class wealth and respectability. Troubled by these memories, Avey ventures out of the hotel and meets Lebert Joseph, a Carriacouan man who invites Avey to participate in the Big Drum ceremony in Carriacou. After traveling to Carriacou and participating in the Big Drum ceremony and the Beg Pardon dance, Avey reconcile both her severed relationship with her Aunt Cuney and her relationship to a broader, diasporic black culture.

Scholarship on *Praisesong for the Widow* has consistently highlighted how Marshall uses Avey’s journey of self-rediscovery in the novel, particularly her struggle to maintain her cultural identity and achieve middle class status, to reveal truths about the African American community in general. Barbara Christian is one of the first scholars to make this observation in her 1983 essay entitled “Ritualistic Process and the Structure of Paule Marshall’s Praisesong for the Widow.” “Like her first two novels”, Christian writes, “Marshall’s *Praisesong for the Widow* penetrates society’s structures through the illumination of a black woman’s experience while extending her protagonist’s discovered truths to an entire community” (75). “Marshall's entire opus,” according to Christian,
“focuses on the consciousness of black people as they remember, retain, develop their sense of spiritual/ sensual integrity and individual selves, against the materialism that characterizes American societies” (74). The alternative to succumbing to the materialism of American society, then, is what Christian calls “a visceral understanding of their history and rituals” (74). For Christian, the novel itself is a ritual—an actual praisesong—and each of the four sections of the novel is indicative of ritualistic process. The last section, The Beg Pardon, however, has the most diasporic significance according to Christian. The Big Drum Ceremony, which Avey dances in, “combines rituals from several black societies: the Ring Dances of Tatum, the Bojangles of New York, the voodoo drums of Haiti, the rhythms of various Africans brought to the New World” (82).

While Christian emphasizes diaspora in the last the section of the novel, Abena Busia foregrounds diaspora as a central theme throughout novel in “What is Your Nation?: Reconnecting Africa and Her Diaspora through Paule Marshall’s Praisesong for the Widow.” Busia defines the diaspora novel as a novel “by Black women throughout Africa and the African diaspora which tackle questions about women reclaiming their stories in a context in which storytelling becomes part of a larger project of self-validation” (196). Similar to Christian, Busia conceptualizes the novel as spiritual journey for both Avey and the reader. “The boldness of the Marshall’s project here,” Busia writes, “is to take us through a private history of material acquisition and cultural dispossession, which becomes a metaphor for the history of the group, the history of the African in the New World” (197-198). However, Busia contends that Avey and readers must acquire diaspora literacy to “read a variety of cultural signs of the lives
of Africa’s children at home and in the New World” (197). Reading and recognizing the cultural signs illuminates the novel as a “map with music, song, dance, dress and ritual as the cultural registers we need to decode to follow her across the terrain to journey’s end” (199). The journey’s end, Busia explains, “becomes Africa as represented by Carriacou” and “in meaning, reverses the location of the promised land” from American to Africa (207).

Courtney Thorsson extends Busia’s discussion of Praisesong as a diaspora novel by positing that the novel illustrates what she terms diasporic nationality. In “Dancing Up A Nation: Paule Marshall’s Praisesong for the Widow,” Thorsson argues that “Marshall’s map of Avey’s nation is a collection of islands: Martinique on the cruise, Grenada as the first site of her escape, Carriacou, Tatem and Manhattan, where she spends the first year of her marriage” (645). The collection of islands as nation “disassociates it [nation] from the state and marks the islands and waters of the African Diaspora as a nation unto themselves” (645). Thus, while Busia theorizes that Carriacou represents Africa in the novel, Thorsson views Carriacou and several islands in the novel as part of “a diasporic homeland built on individual and collective pasts” (645). The islands not only constitute a diasporic nation, but they also serve as a space to “get away from problematic, primitivizing, or essentializing uses of Africa” and to “dismantle stereotypes of Africa as a timeless monolith” (644-645). Nevertheless, in accordance with Christian and Busia, Thorsson theorizes diasporic space as an alternative to the materialist and dehumanizing nature of the United States for Avey and what Barbara Christian calls the “perennial Avey Johnsons in Afro-American history” (83).
Christian, Busia and Thorsson’s discussions of the novel create a host of binaries: Bourgeois American rituals/Diasporic rituals, American promise land/African promise land and American nation-state/ Diasporic nationality, respectively. While these binaries are useful for thinking through the various transformations that Avey undergoes and her actual journey in the novel, the binaries present the elements of each binary as mutually exclusive, with the latter element almost always representing the possibility of wholeness for Avey. For example, both Christian and Thorsson characterize Avey’s journey in the novel as a journey to wholeness. Thorsson explicitly describes Praisesong as a story about “a black woman achieving wholeness by seizing and using her individual and collective past in terms that redefine nation” (644). Moreover, Busia asserts that “through the healing of one of Africa’s lost daughters, a scattered people are made whole again” (199). And while each author acknowledges that this wholeness consists of unique, individual, cultural elements, depicting diaspora as the seat of wholeness obscures the ways in which diaspora is also a site of struggle, tension and dissonance—in part because the Black diaspora is, in many respects, both a result of Western imperialism and comprised of Black people with varying geopolitical positions. In other words, by primarily highlighting diaspora as a reconciliatory space, these authors obscure what Deborah A. Thomas and Kamari Clarke describe as the “misunderstandings, differences and arguments that arise” within diaspora because diasporic solidarities are “always contextualized within power relations that are locationally and temporally specific” (12). Shifting the focus from diasporic harmony to diasporic dissonance, my reading illuminates the imperial discourses informing Avey’s
encounters with Afro-Caribbeans, and Grenadians and Carriacouans and the ways such encounters trouble readings of *Praisesong for the Widow* as a successful homegoing.

Avey began going on cruises after her daughter, Annawilda, suggested that doing so would take her mind off her deceased husband, Jay. With all of her children out of the house and considering the regularity of her trips with her friends, Avery’s trips offer some semblance of home. But Avey’s youngest daughter, Marion, always opposed the idea. As she is packing to leave her current cruise in the beginning of *Praisesong*, Avey recalls the morning before her very first cruise when Marion came to drive her to the pier. Avey’s six suitcases full of summer suits, ensemble dresses, hats and evening gowns are a stark contrast to Marion’s appearance. Marion is clearly marked as an Afrocentric figure evidenced by her natural hair “massed like a raincloud” and her “noisy necklace of the cowrie shells and amber she brought back from Togo” (Marshall 13). Marion considered the “meaningless cruise with a bunch of white folks” (13) banal in comparison to the tours to Brazil or Ghana that she had suggested to her mother. Her suggestion of Ghana or Brazil as tourist destinations for her mother evinces her diasporic affinities —and suggests how significant heritage tourism is to her. However, Avey does not share the same sentiment or consciousness with her daughter. For Avey, traveling as a tourist is not about enriching herself through learning about her cultural heritage or people like her. Instead, these cruises are what Carol Boyce Davies calls “journeys into the heart of whiteness, alienation and separation that symbolize her middle class detachment and her immersion, achieved through her husband’s financial success, into Western capitalist values and ethics” (qtd. in Macpherson 36).
Avey’s first encounter with other diasporic Blacks takes the form of a memory. As Avey attempts to leave the Bianca Pride cruise ship, her two traveling companions, Clarice and Thomasina, confront her. Thomasina tries to convince Avey to stay by suggesting the water in Grenada would be undrinkable like it was in Cartagena, Colombia. Instead of recalling the water, Avey recalls something else:

It had been Cartagena, Colombia, where to Avey Johnson’s disgust, the woman had abandoned them to dance in a carnival parade they were watching with the other passengers from the Bianca Pride. Had gone off amid a throng of strangers swishing her bony hips to the drums. With the slight hump like an organ grinder’s monkey begging pennies from her shoulders. And with their fellow passengers watching. White faces laughing White hands applauding!! Avey Johnson had never been so mortified. (25)

Despite Avey’s negative reaction, Thomasina returns “laughing proudly, with...something of the high-stepping, high-kicking young chorus girl she had once been” (25-26). Paulette Brown-Hinds argues that Avey’s negative reaction to Thomasina dancing in the carnival parade echoes her husband’s sentiments that dance “gradually came to symbolize laziness, performed by those Blacks only interested in ‘having a good time’” (111). Ironically, before moving into White Plains, rituals like dancing and listening to jazz had “made the poverty and despair Halsey Street symbolized vanish, or at least disappear for an evening” for Avey and Jay (Brown-Hinds 111). But Jay changed his mind on the value of dance once he acquired middle-class status and respectability. Likewise, Avey views Thomasina’s dancing as embarrassing and damning, but she has no reaction to Colombian dancers in the carnival parade. That Avey has no reaction at all to the people dancing in the carnival may be just as, if not more, troubling than her reaction to Thomasina dancing with them. Avey is only disgusted when she sees the White passengers laughing and applauding Thomasina
dancing—a reaction motivated by a selfish desire to demonstrate her own respectability through policing Thomasina. But Avey does not seem interested at all in whether or not the White passengers’ reactions to or gazes on the Colombians in the carnival parade are objectifying or not. Granted, tourist culture does not facilitate nor encourage such critical interrogation as Black bodies are scripted as always and already available for tourist consumption; their availability is part of the allure of tourism. However, Avey’s uncritical consumption of non-U.S. Black bodies as an African American woman demonstrates that not all Black people are situated equally with regard to geopolitics in the diaspora. Furthermore, Black people throughout the diaspora are so unequally situated, in fact, that some Blacks—U.S. Blacks in this instance—can afford the “luxury” to travel as tourists and watch other Blacks perform for them. Nevertheless, in chastising Thomasina, Avey reveals her fear that at any moment she and her companions could be the Black bodies on display for White tourist consumption. While this scene does not create any tension within the novel, the imperial implications are evident. For Avey, consuming Black bodies via the tourist industry distinguishes her from the Black people who are objectified by the tourist industry. Paying for the cruise, then, is also a demonstration of the relative power that Lorde mentions; however, Avey uses it to enjoy the trappings of the tourist industry as opposed to challenging their imperial implications.

Upon arriving to Grenada, Avey has her second encounter with non-U.S. Blacks—Carriacouans. Avey expects to tap into tourist privilege immediately; however, that privilege is contingent on the Carriacouans recognizing Avey as a tourist. As a seasoned traveler, Avey assumes that they will recognize her and will subsequently
acquiesce to her every desire. She anticipates seeing the "nosy, sweating stevedores, the souvenir vendors peddling their cocoa bean necklaces and Zulu balancing dolls, the women hawkers with their trays of fruit, the droves of idlers and hangers-on you had to guard your pocket book against. And in some of the poorer places, the beggars who could be so persistent at times..." (Marshall 65). As a tourist, Avey doesn't see individual people; she merely sees stereotypical, tourist images of native Afro-Caribbeans. Ironically, while she lists specific cultural markers like cocoa bean necklaces and Zulu dolls, Avey considers these people the "types she was used to seeing in the wharves in other places she had been" (Marshall 65). Avey's expectation to see these figures everywhere she goes illustrates her ignorance of the historicity and cultural specificity of the people and the places she travels to throughout the diaspora. Only she, as the tourist, is allowed to have a complex, specific subjectivity. Furthermore, she is the only one with the power to purchase as all the other people she imagines are marked by their lack of money— "idlers and hangers-on you had to guard your pocket book against" and "beggars who could be so persistent at times"—or their attempts at attaining money— "souvenir vendors peddling their cocoa bean necklaces" and the "women hawkers with their trays of fruit" (65). The histories and the subjectivities of the Carriacouans are only relevant in as much as they can be commodified, consumed or converted to ensure Avey has a pleasurable experience.

The fantasy of meeting the primitive, docile native, or the subservient tourist-industry worker, is disrupted when Avey encounters a group of people that she assumes are "clearly from the more respectable element on the island" with "the men in sport shirts and even suits, some of them; the women in what looked like new outfits
they had made themselves" (Marshall 65). Additionally, their luggage indicates that they are traveling as well. The Carriacouans’ visual markers of respectability are eerily similar to Avey’s. Because of their similarities, Avey finds it difficult to create the distance between them that she is used to having with “less respectable” people and people of color native to the tourist destinations she visits. Her failure to assert her tourist privilege creates tension in the novel. “It is a problem," according to Avey, that "none of them seemed aware of the fact that she was a stranger, a visitor, a tourist…” (Marshall 69). Not only are they unwilling to acknowledge Avey's difference, they treat her with a "familiarity, almost an intimacy…which she began to find puzzling, and then even faintly irritating..." (69). Her taxi driver even goes so far as to tell her that she looks identical to a woman from the island:

Twins! The twin of some woman he knew named Ida! The indignation that swept her in a rush of heat felt most like the hot flashes she had suffered through at the change. What was the matter with these people? It was as if the moment they had caught sight of her standing there, their eyes had immediately stripped her of everything she had on and dressed her in one of those homemade cotton prints the women were wearing, whose West Indian colors as Thomasina Moore called them seemed to add heat. Their eyes also banished the six suitcases at her side, and placing a small overnight bag like the ones they were carrying in hand, they were all set to take her along wherever it was they were going. (72)

While Avey would like to “wrap her middle-class status about her like a cloak, fending off racial allegiances that disturb her carefully maintained distance” (Macpherson 196), according to the Carriacouan man, Avey is no different than a Carriacouan woman. Her indignation reveals that Avey believes there is a hierarchy of Black cultural expression, and U.S. Black, middle class expressions of Blackness are superior to Carriacouan expressions of blackness in that hierarchy. The expression of blackness that Avey
identifies with exudes sophistication and material wealth, not homemade clothing and an overnight bag, which signify a lower socio-economic status to Avey.

This is not the first instance that Avey has expressed an aversion to being associated with—or mistaken for—Blacks with a lower socioeconomic status. When she and Jerome lived on Halsey Street, one of their neighbors, a black woman, would emerge, nearly every Saturday, in “a housedresss thrown over her nightgown in the summer, a rag of a coat in the winter, the headtie she slept in still on, railing loudly to herself, waking the street…” (106) as she cursed out her husband for spending his entire paycheck on alcohol and other women. “The woman’s loud grievances are not singular,” Susana Morris argues, “but representative of many women in relationships marked by poverty, nihilism and misogyny on Halsey Street and other environs” (54). Instead of forming community with these women or her neighbor and offering them support, when Avey would encounter her neighbor, she would “hurry by her [the neighbor] with her nose in the air and her gaze trained straight ahead” (108). Avey’s disdain for the Halsey Street woman, and by extension many of the neighborhood women in similar circumstances, is heightened when Jerome suggest she looks like the Halsey Street woman in an argument where Avey accuses Jerome of infidelity and threatens to take the children. In that moment, Avey realized “she was suddenly the half-crazed woman, her children left alone in the apartment…and Jay was the derelict husband taking wild swings at her under the street lamps, the delinquent husband whom she would inevitably search the bars for in vain for one night and never see again” (Marshall 110). This moment is a turning point in Avey and Jerome’s relationship and propels them to pursue middle-class respectability even more fervently: Jay took a
job as a watchman and elevator operator, handed over his unopened check to Avey each week, and he even started taking a course in accounting and business management to escape Halsey Street. Susanna Morris argues that Avey and Jerome’s behavior toward the Halsey Street women illustrates “the ways in which respectability politics does not simply produce decency or accountability as its proponents claim; rather, it is a fundamentally divisive and individualistic ethic that erects rigid borders between people who are perhaps not all that different from one another” (55). While Susana Morris correctly points out the damaging effects that a strict adherence to respectability politics has on community formation in the Johnsons’ neighborhood in Close Kin and Distant Relatives: The Paradox of Respectability in Black Women’s Literature, Avey’s divisive and individualistic attitude extends beyond Halsey Street to Grenada. Her scornful attitude toward the Halsey Street woman is analogous to her disdain for the Carriacouans. Similar to her desire to ignore the Halsey Street woman, Avey desperately wants to disassociate herself from the Carriacouan woman, Ida, who the taxi driver claims she resembles. Thus, Avey’s condescending attitude, on the basis of class and socioeconomic markers, toward the Carriacouans as a tourist can be read as an extension of behavior on Halsey Street with comparable, negative effects for community formation, only this time the community is a diasporic one.

The peak of diasporic tension in the novel is Avey’s conversation with Lebert Joseph. Unable to sleep because of memories of Jerome, Avey ventures out of the hotel in Grenada and meets Lebert Joseph, a Carriacouan man, at a rum shop. In the middle of their conversation, Lebert asks Avey what is her nation (Marshall 167). After Lebert list several possibilities, Avey simply replies "I'm afraid you've mistaken me for
someone from around here or from one of the other islands... I'm a visitor, a tourist, just someone here for the day.... I'm from the States. New York..." (168). Once again, Avey is trying to establish her difference and distance from the Carriacouans. Since the visual markers of luggage and expensive clothing failed to distinguish her from the Carriacouans previously, she attempts claims to American citizenship—and implicitly whiteness—as the ultimate distinguisher. Completely resistant to forming diasporic connections at this point in the novel, Avey believes claiming American citizenship will detach her from any potential cultural bonds with the people of Carriacou and demonstrate her superiority to them as well. But Lebert's reaction is not deferential. He examines "her face, her chemically straightened hair, the expensive linen shirt dress, the cobalt brilliance of the rings on her left hand" and then looks away from her completely (168). Whereas Avey believed that the Carriacouans she met on arrival refused to see her markers of wealth, Lebert not only sees them, but interrogates them and scrutinizes them. Lebert refuses to privilege any of Avey's capitalist makers or American citizenship. Lebert's gaze and his reaction suggest a critique of Avey's assimilationist and materialistic appearance. Her expensive clothes and chemically straightened hair distinguish her from the Carriacouans, but Lebert does not allow Avey to take pride in that distinctions. Not only does Lebert stop looking at her after seeing her difference, he stops interacting with her completely. Lebert acknowledges her assimilationist look, but his refusal to look at her and his silence shame her for it. Avey is puzzled by Lebert's silence so much that she felt she was "unable to leave without some sign from him" (Marshall 169). This is one of the more powerful moments in the novel in that Avey's “leverage” as tourist and an U.S. Black with spending power is
rejected. Once Avey is stripped of that leverage, she begins to create diasporic bonds
with the people of Carriacou, culminating with her participation in the Big Drum
Ceremony.

In addition to including these often neglected moments in the novel in scholarly
discussions, my aim in highlighting these moments of diasporic tension is to suggest
how these moments of diasporic dissonance gesture toward an alternative reading of
the conclusion of the novel and the Big Drum Ceremony. Historically, scholars have
described the Big Drum Ceremony and the events leading up to it—Avey’s vomiting and
diarrhea aboard the Emanuel C. to Carriacou and Rosalie, Lebert’s daughter, bathing
and massaging Avey—as moments that transcend Avey’s experience as a tourist and
render Avey anew. For example, Paulette Brown-Hinds writes that Rosalie bathing Avey
serves “a cathartic bath—a type of baptism which marks the rebirth of her renewed spirit
and function as a step in her movement towards reconnection” (112). “The ring-shout,
as well as other spiritual rituals depicted in Praisesong for the Widow,” Carissa Turner
Smith adds,” also serves as a way of collapsing time and space” (722). The novel itself
warrants such readings in many ways. For example, after arriving on Carriacou, Avey’s
body is described as “flat, numb, emptied-out, it had been the same as her mind when
she awoke yesterday morning, unable to recognize anything and with the sense of a
yawning hole where her life had been” (Marshall 214). Moreover, the novel suggests
Avey’s dancing in the Big Drum Ceremony is both self-edifying and reconciliatory for
Avey as it endears her to her Aunt Cuney and Thomasina. Avey thinks of both women
as she dances. She imagines that if Thomasina had been there, she would have been
in the center of the circle dancing. That was the first time Avey “found herself thinking of
her [Thomasina] with something akin to affection” (246). Avey also recalls memories of “standing beside her great-aunt on the dark road across from the church” in Tatem “performing the dance that wasn’t supposed to be dancing,” the Ring Shout, as she dances in the Big Drum Ceremony (Marshall 248). This is a stark contrast to Avey’s earlier dreams in the novel where she physically fights her Aunt Cuney to avoid going with her. But whether or not Avey has reconciled her tensions with the Carriacouans, I argue, remains ambivalent in the novel.

As Avey continues to dance the Ring Shout in the Big Drum Ceremony, which the Carriacouans recognize as the Carriacou Tramp, Avey recalls a feeling she had not felt since her childhood:

And for the first time since she was a girl, she felt the threads, that myriad of shiny, silken, brightly colored threads (like the kind used in embroidery), which were thin to the point of invisibility yet strong as the ropes of Coney Island…. Now suddenly as if she were that girl again, with her entire life yet to live, she felt the threads streaming out from the old people around her in Lebert Joseph’s yard. From their seared eyes. From their navels and their cast-iron hearts. And their brightness as they entered her spoke of possibilities and becoming even in the face of the bare bones and the burnt out ends. (249)

Avey is referring to the feeling of connectedness she felt with other Black people when she traveled on the Robert Fulton boat up the Hudson River as a child on family trips. This memory surfaces right before Avey boards the Emanuel C. with Lebert. Avey recalled feeling “hundreds of slender threads streaming out of her navel” connecting her to both people she knew from her neighborhood and strangers “such as the roomers just up from the South and the small group of West Indians whose odd accent called to mind Gullah talk” (Marshall 190). The image of threads connecting Blacks of various nationalities within a single “web” evokes diasporic bonding and a black diasporic community. “This was not a sensation of bondage or restriction,” as Rogers explains,
“but of energy, connection, and support” (90). That Avey feels this sensation again at the Big Drum Ceremony suggests that the Big Drum Ceremony is indeed another instance of diasporic bonding that enriches and edifies Avey and allows her to forge community with Blacks outside the boundaries of national citizenship and socioeconomic status. Yet Avey’s attitude as she is flying back to the United disrupts any easy reading of reconciliation and reconnection.

Avey vows to tell everyone she meets about her excursion to Carriacou and to sell her home in White Plains, as her daughter Marion had urged her to, and retouch/rebuild her great-aunt Cuney’s home in Tatem. But she makes no commitment with regard to the Carriacouans. In fact, as she gazes out of the airplane window at Carriacou, the island appeared “more a mirage than an actual place. Something conjured up perhaps to satisfy a longing and need. She was leaving Carriacou without having really seen it” (254). Likening Carriacou to a mirage, Avey hints at an underlying, fleetingness to her experiences in Carriacou10. Moreover, her idea that Carriacou was something “conjured up” renders figures like Lebert and Rosalie as figments of Avey’s imagination or subconscious as opposed to the “real” West Indians on the Robert Fulton who had specific accents and national identities. If after all of Avey’s experiences—the journey on the Emanuel C., her physical purging, her relationships with Rosalie and Lebert, and the Big Drum Ceremony—she believes she only had a surface level experience with Carriacou, as evidenced by her claim she had not “really seen” Carriacou, did her Carriacouan excursion transcend the tourist experience as scholars suggest? Or is more of a testament to the limits of considering journeys to the diaspora as homecoming without a deeper, more sustained engagement? I do not ask this
question to nullify the transformative power of Avey’s experiences; that is undeniable. I do, however, ask this question to call attention to the way the novel does not lend itself to a neat and tidy reading of diaspora. Instead, by highlighting the rope of the troubling homecoming alongside moments of diasporic bonding and intimacy in the context of tourism, the novel reveals how U.S. Blacks’ geopolitical position, and its attending confluences with empire, shape and influence their encounters with non-U.S. Blacks throughout the diaspora.

Conclusion

For Audre Lorde, the invasion of Grenada was a watershed moment that forced her to ask herself “what does it mean to be a citizen on the wrong side of liberation?”11(257). Both Lorde’s and Marshall’s work explore this question through tropes of travel and complicated “homecomings” that do not yield any neat or definitive answers to Lorde’s lingering question. Instead, what these texts effectively do, to echo Robin D.G. Kelley and Tiffany Ruby Patterson, is demonstrate that diaspora is ongoing process constantly making and unmaking itself as it responds to the fluctuating conditions of Black life across the diaspora under U.S. imperialism.

Notes

1 “Lovely, little war” is an oft-cited euphemism a journalist used to describe the invasion of Grenada in a 1983 correspondence.

2 Many scholars and historians attribute the tension between Bishop and Coard to ideological differences between the two leaders. Brian Meeks summarizes these ideological differences: “Bishop was seen by them [NJM] as too moderate, or moderating his position, bringing him into conflict with their ultra-leftist ‘Leninist’ perspective. This, then, was essentially a conflict between ‘Marxist humanism’ and ‘Leninism.’ (166). Scholars also cite each leader’s personality and Communist, geographic alliances as sources of tension between them—Bishop being the popular, charismatic and pro-Cuban leader and Coard being the ambitious, manipulative and pro-Moscow leader. Meeks contest these ideas and asserts that “there was no substantial ideological or tactical differences and, although personality differences did, of necessity, intercede, the overarching issue was the growing disconnection of the leadership tout court from the people, which coupled with the depth of the crisis and the physical strain of
According to Lorde, “The Pentagon has been spoiling for a fight it could win for a long time; the last one was the battle for Inchon in the 1950s. How better to wipeout the bitter memories of Vietnam defeats by Yellow people than with a restoration of power in the eyes of the American republic—the image of American marines splashing through a little Black blood?” (3).

Christian defines it specifically as “an African ritual that shows the relationship between the individual and the community by recounting the essence of a life so that future generations may flourish” (Christian 83).

It is important to qualify that Christian was specifically speaking to bourgeois American rituals as opposed to American rituals in general in her discussion of Praisesong. Christian celebrates Marshall’s ability to maintain “a tension between black people’s need to survive and develop in America, and their even more important need to sustain themselves” in the novel (Christian 78).

Later in the novel, Avey recalls Jerome—Jay began going by his legal name, Jerome, once he and Avey moved to White Plains—complaining that “The trouble with half these Negroes out here is that they spend all their time blaming the white man for everything. He won’t give ‘em a job. Won’t let ‘em in his schools. Won’t have ‘em in his neighborhood. Just won’t give ‘em a break…. If they’d just cut out all the good-timing and get down to some hard work, put their minds to something, they’d get somewhere” (Marshall 134).

Halsey Street is where the Johnson’s lived before they ascended into the middle-class.

The novel does not explicitly state that the people dancing the Colombians dancing in the carnival parade are of African descent, I am making that assumption because carnival is tradition with roots in Africa.

Susan Roger’s essay “Embodying Cultural Memory in Paule Marshall’s Praisesong for the Widow” asserts that this rhetoric in the novel suggests that “it is possible to return to an unmediated state of being, to a tabula rosa of mind and body,” which she argues is problematic.

Derek Walcott speaks to this idea in Nobel lecture when he explains, “So many people say they ‘love the Caribbean’ meaning someday they plan to return for a visit but could never live there, the usual benign insult of the traveler or tourist.”

Lorde poses this question in her keynote address at the 1985 “The Black Woman Writer and the Diaspora” Conference.
CHAPTER 5
FINAL THOUGHTS ON DIASPORIC DISSONANCE

This project began with a question: What does it mean to be the citizen of a country on the wrong side of liberation? This study has produced multiple answers. While it requires a constant making and unmaking of diasporic bonds with non-U.S. Blacks, each one of these texts suggests it means constantly making and unmaking one’s identity as well. It means reckoning with noise of misrecognition and translation as well the deafening silence of refusal. It means existing in a multitude of locations where comfort and discomfort are constantly shifting.

And while this question was posed in 20th century, as a nod to future explorations of diasporic dissonance, I would like to consider how this question surfaces in nineteenth century debates on emigration. As debates amongst Black intellectuals and writers on emigration, emancipation and colonization converged, their imaginings of diaspora diverged, resulting in varying rhetorical mappings of the Black diaspora. While these debates are extensive and include many voices, I will focus on the rhetorical, diasporic imaginings of Martin Delaney, Mary A. Shadd and Mary Prince. While Delany and Shadd’s rhetorical mappings of diaspora are different, they each share similar characteristics such as the exclusion of Liberia and aspirations for a political alliance with Britain.

In Remapping Citizenship and the Nation in African American Literature, Stephen Knadler argues that quote 19th century African Americans found themselves physically and imaginatively crossing borders to find work, to seek refuge serve as soldiers and missionaries, accompanying employees and forming anti-colonial ties” (5) in multiracial and multinational contact zones. Because of these border crossings, U.S. Blacks had
what Knadler describes as a “shifting and ambivalent citizenship that pointed out fault lines in nation’s political language” (5). Debates on the merits of the American Colonization Society’s colonization of Liberia illustrate ambivalent citizenship as well conflicting imaginings of the Black diaspora.

Formed in 1817, the American Colonization Society sought to send free African American to Liberia. Five years after its formation, the ACS established a colony on the west coast of Africa that would become Liberia in 1847. From 1817 to 1867, per Michelle Mitchell, the ACS removed approximately 11,200 people of African descent from the United States (100). In the mid-nineteenth century, Martin Delany and Mary Ann Shadd were two of the harshest critics of emigration to Liberia, so much so, that they both emphatically excluded it from their diasporic imaginings in The Condition, Elevation, Emigration, and Destiny of the Colored People of the United States: Politically Considered and A Plea for Emigration; or Notes of Canada West.

For Martin Delany, the ACS was “one of the most arrant enemies of the colored man, ever seeking to discomfit him, and envying him of every privilege that he may enjoy” (Ch. 3). He adds that the organization is both anti-Christian and misanthropic in its pretended sympathies. Delany, and several other members of the Anti-Colonization Meeting of Freedmen, saw emigration to Liberia as a scheme to remove all the free Blacks from the United States, suppress opposition to the slave trade and thereby maintain slavery in the United States. Delany deploys several monster metaphors to describe the ACS. He writes:

But the animal itself is the same "hydra-headed monster," let whomsoever may fancy to pet it. A serpent is a serpent, and none the less a viper, because nestled in the bosom of an honest hearted man. This the colored people must bear in mind, and keep clear of the hideous thing, lest its
venom may be test upon them. But why deem any argument necessary to show the unrighteousness of colonization? Its very origin as before shown--the source from whence it sprung, being the offspring of slavery-- is in itself, sufficient to blast it in the estimation of every colored person in the United States, who has sufficient intelligence to comprehend it. (Ch. 3)

Delany's metaphors are insightful for several reasons. On the one hand, by describing the ACS first as hydra-headed monster, Delany suggests that the white supremacist oppression of Black Americans is constituted by both slavery and colonialism. This is important to note as many conversations about 19th century Black literature focus exclusively on slavery and emancipation. Moreover, Delany does not assume that U.S. Blacks are inherently anti-colonialist or anti-imperialist. On the contrary, he used the image of the viper's venom being tested upon them to speak to both the explicit and implicit processes by which U.S. colonialism procures U.S. Blacks' participation in colonialism to the detriment of the race as a whole. Delany's fear of venom is also ironic as threats of disease and health risks were often catalysts for quote unquote sanitizing, imperial projects. But for Delany, Liberia is unhealthy geographically and politically for U.S. Blacks; therefore; he objects to Liberia being a potential emigration location for Black. Delany's first objection to Liberia as a potential emigration site is based on the fact that it is "located in the sixth degree of latitude North of the equator, in a district signally unhealthy, rendering it objectionable as a place of destination for the colored people of the United States" (Ch. 18). Here, Delany proclaims Liberia's geographic location is not conducive to the health of U.S. Blacks, a fact he doesn't consider a coincidence but rather an intentional choice by the ACS. Delany also objects to Liberia because it is not an independent republic. In fact, it is not an independent nation at all he writes but a “poor miserable mockery a Burlesque on a government--a pitiful dependency on the American Colonizationists” (Ch. 18). Delany
considers Liberia a farce of an independent nation and thus politically poisonous for U.S. Black because it “does not endeavor to be freemen instead of voluntary slaves” (Ch 18). Unequivocally rejecting Liberia from his rhetorical mapping of potential emigration sites, and by extension his imagined diaspora, Delany opts instead for Central and South America and the West Indies as optimal locations for emigration with regard to their geographies, racial demographics and potential alliances with Great Britain.

Though Mary A. Shadd cites Canada the West Indies and Vancouver's Island as the optimal locations for Black emigration from the United States, like Delany, Shad is against emigration to Africa. In her explanation of why, Shadd writes:

Let us seize upon Africa or some other unappropriated territory while we may, says others and establish our own governments. Africa has already been seized upon; the English, French, Portuguese, Spanish and Turks have long since shared her out amongst themselves. And little Liberia might yet revert to some heir-a-law who has purposely been unmindful of her. End quote.

Shadd adds that in Africa there would be hostile tribes to annoy the settler or destroy at will towns and villages with their inhabitants. Whereas Delany characterizes Liberia as “unhealthy” geographically and politically, Shadd depicts African in general a barren land. In stating that Africa has already seized upon by, Shadd suggests there is nothing there for U.S. Blacks to seize. Additionally, Liberia is simultaneously susceptible to both neglect and seizure from a more powerful entity. Shadd rhetorically maps he Black diaspora onto the West Indies, Canada and Vancouver’s Island because of their relationship with the British army. In those spaces, Shad asserts “the strong arm of the British power would summarily punish depredations made of whatever character and the emigrants would naturally assume the responsibility of British freeman”
Shadd and Delany both dispel the notion that diasporic linkages are inevitable and racial solidarity is inherent. Instead, their works constitute another form of diasporic dissonance. Both of their rhetorical mappings of diaspora rely on essentialist notions of Liberia. Their diasporic imaginings of Liberia reproduce stereotypical, colonial depictions of Africa, ironically, despite each of them deploring the Liberia's colonial ties to the United States. Delany’s characterization of Liberia makes it a health hazard for U.S. Blacks and depicts the Liberians as incapable of political self-rule. Shadd’s characterization simultaneously suggests that there are no resources left in Africa and that native Africans are dangerous, savage and liable to attack settlers. Ironically, while contesting the colonial thirst of the ACS, they reveal their own colonial fantasies as well. Thus, in future projects, I would investigate the 19th century imagining of transnational Black sovereignty and the diasporic dissonance in those texts.

In a piece entitled “Risk, Blackness, and Postcolonial Studies,” Shona Jackson posits “to untangle the imbrication of blackness and postcoloniality in the early-twenty-first century” is to take a multitude of risks (5). My project has considered the risks in attempting and refusing diasporic bonds— the risk of being misunderstood, or called out, or inadvertently reifying oppressive structures. Moreover, and perhaps more importantly, my project demonstrates the scholarly and intellectual risks we must all take to not only bring issues of diaspora and empire into sharper relief but to imagine alternative and potentially more liberatory ways of being.
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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

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