

NORTHWESTERN UNIVERSITY

Geographies of Memory and Pleasure in African American and Caribbean Literatures

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By

Mohwanah Garyne Fetus

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**Abstract:**

My dissertation, *Geographies of Memory, Trauma, and Pleasure in African American and Caribbean-American Literature* examines the geographies of the cane fields, bodies of water, and the back porch to illustrate the speculative ways anti-black violence, intergenerational trauma, pleasure and Black memory co-exist in Black literature. Examining the aforementioned geographies as “co-protagonists” in literary texts such as Junot Díaz’s *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, Roxane Gay’s “In a Manner of Water and Light” from her short story collection *Ayiti*, Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes were Watching God* and Octavia Butler’s *Wild Seed*, I argue that these geographies that are shaped or embody slavery, colonialism, and sexual violence also co-exist with Black life and pleasure. This vexed relationship creates speculative moments in Black life that are deemed normal/ part of everyday Black life. I want to investigate the complicated nexus of terror and pleasure (which builds on Saidiya Hartman’s study in *Scenes of Subjection*) in Black geographies. Rather than see pleasure and terror as mutually exclusive and not influencing each other, my work seeks to put them in conversation with each other in Black literature: how they influence each other and how they create fantastical moments in Black life. This new relationship allows us to think through more fantastic ways of Black life: how it can seem otherworldly due to the severity of violence and trauma in everyday life.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS / YOU KNOW WHO YOU ARE

“Writing is like showing your butt! You have to show it to the world!”

Levy McGarden to Lucy Heartfilia in the anime *Fairy Tale*

“Write through it.”

Toni Morrison

“You have to show your writing to the world” Levy, the gutsy blue haired witch, exclaims to Lucy Heartfilia, the shy sorceress/protagonist who also writes her novel on her wild adventures in the anime *Fairy Tale*. Lucy’s panic of inviting the world into her art resounded with me as a graduate student at Northwestern University. For many years, I struggled to invite the world into my writing. Even as a child huddled in bed, writing fanfictions and eventually my own worlds, I refused to let anyone see the fruits of my written labor.

However, watching my research project grow into a project dedicated to illuminating how Black women suffer at the hands of sexual violence in specific geographies that house their traumas, intergenerational memory that ripples through space and time, and how intimacy and pleasure are closely tied to the terrors of gendered violence. It took a lot of deep reflection to even acknowledge that my research looks at how Black women survive sexual violence and how the earth and their children enact justice. I look at the heavy topic of sexual and domestic violence under the umbrella of white supremacy and misogyny. How can I write about literature that reflected so many stories of home that I have not recovered and processed yet? I wanted to make sure I finished a project that honored the trauma and refuse to minimize it under my new understanding of pleasure. Taking from Audre Lorde’s “the personal is the political,” the literature I engaged with for 4+ years reflected my own family’s remarkable histories and journey from Haiti

to the United States. For the secrets, ghosts, and burdens they carried and shielded away from their loved ones for the sake of survival. Yet seeing my families repeat past heart aches and let those same ghosts silence them, I knew my work was more than me. I knew I had to push through my traumas about writing and wake up at 5:30 before work to see my research finish. My research belongs to the shared energies of my community constantly dreaming, laughing, and praying. Yet most importantly, this project is dedicated to eager and bright eyed 23-year-old Mohwanah who wanted to discuss the opaque mysteries of the ocean, write romances, and read every piece of Black literature under the sun.

Firstly, this body of work is a product of the Black women in my life that inspire me with their strengths and vulnerabilities. To my loving mother Patricia Delice, who calmed me with loving phone calls from home, trying to hug me tight through the phone and whisper “trust in you, trust in God.” My Tatie Chantal, my fairy godmother who influenced so much of my literary heart desires and gifted me novels such as Octavia Butler’s *Kindred* and *Wild Seed*. She even constantly reminded me that Toni Morrison’s great literary career started in her late 30s while working as an editor: “If she can do it, so can you Nana.” To my Tatie Kettley who constantly quenched my spiritual and radical thirst, challenging academia’s desire for “theory over praxis” during our phone calls. These three women were my “educators” and loving examples of Black women collective love.

My siblings Gabrielle and Nathaniel Fetus kept me grounded yet also giving tough love when depression and anxiety overstayed their welcome. Our text message feed was my anchor for so many dark days: from our silly barbs over who is the best anime protagonist, teasing me for my nonsensical but made-very-much-sense love for Drake, to constantly reminding each other to turn

“that L into a lesson!” Their love and humor reminded me that I have the inner strength to continue, even when I felt like the chips were down. My father Gary Fetus who always has warm intentions during our phone calls late at night. Dad always believed that my dissertation was a collection of stories I wrote as a teenager and always asked about it, wondering if I can turn my “Japanese fighting stories” into a career or as a Communications director at Goldman Sachs.

Northwestern University is a toxic cesspool of violence, intimidation and traumas: where whiteness truly showed itself as an insidious viper lying in the grass and as an insatiable blood soaked three headed beast. Where Black faculty inflicted just as much harm as their white colleagues under the guise of #kinship and #freedom, and where I saw fellow comrades fall for trap to the same empty promises of academia. Housed in the English department, I was fortunate to battle academia with this close circle of maroons. Dr. Chad Infante and Dr. Corrine Collins both saved me from drowning in a sea of whiteness with their kindness, love, Sunday dinners, love for *Steven Universe*, Caribbean antics, trips to Jeni’s ice cream, vulnerabilities, dreams of alien invasions and anti-capitalist revolutions. They reminded me constantly that my love for creativity and writing stories mattered inside and outside academia, writing is a scam, but to keep on keeping on. Our current text feed and FaceTime calls cure my depression/anxiety daily. Words cannot describe the joy, tears, softness, and sense of home I feel for you two. I love you too so deeply and dearly. I am honored to be loved and known by you two. I cannot wait to see what the world has in store for us.

My bigger scholarly community inside and outside Northwestern University kept me sane as well. Shoulders to cry on, seminar survivors, fellow writers across the Atlantic Ocean, Mortal Kombat/Soul Calibur friendly rivals, writing buddies, thirst trapping partners, social media zami,

World Cup co-commentators, friends who did not mind my big belly laughter and encouraged it: Florence Adibu, Ashley Ngozi Agbasoga, Dr. Bimbola Akinbola, Uta Ayala, Fullamusu Bangura, Bobbie Benavidez, Ireashia Bennett, Beatrice Choi, Dr. Chelsea Frazier, Terrance Francois, Erin Glasco, Dr. Arachi Jung, Ayanna Legros, Leslie Nikole, Dr. Tyrone Palmer, Rianna Jade Parker, Dr. Kaneesha Parsard, Kaelin Rapport, Dr. Raashi Rastogi, Dr. Jared Richardson, Dr. Joy Sales, Elizabeth Sicard, Sarah Peko-Spicer, Peter Sterling, and Dr. Ester Trujillo.

My final lap towards finishing would not have happened without the tough critical love of my writing group L'Étudiant Noir: Le'ah Kaplan, Harrison Graves, Dr. Jésus Luzardo and Dr. Mlondolozzi Zondi. What started as a cheery Thanksgiving invite transformed into a weekly writing workshop before COVID-19 descended upon the world. Our space was for cultivating and challenging concepts and putting words on the page. Mlondi's words "we cannot be Wildcats anymore" was our mantra to getting things done. I would not be finishing in summer 2020 without their encouragement and our weekly check-ins.

Continued support from the Social Science Research Council Mellon Mays Graduate Initiative (SSRC-Mellon Mays) offered me tools to continue my graduate studies and dissertation career. From the Graduate Student Enhancement grants to the Proposal/Dissertation Writing retreats, Mellon has constantly been the backbone to my continuation in graduate school. While they scammed me into doing the PhD under the guise of doing creative writing through research — "Yes! You can be a creative writer! Just apply for PhD English programs and you can write as much as you want!" — I still found consolation in mentoring students at Northwestern, meeting Mellon colleagues across Chicago and in other institutions, and partaking in writing retreats/lecture series to stimulate my intellectual and social life. I offered transparency, honesty, and tough love

to my students as I told them the pitfalls of academia — love I wished someone would have given me when I was applying to PhD programs with so much naiveté. Students such as Hayeon Kim and Hazim Abdullah-Smith brought me joy whenever we met for TA hours or just running into each other on campus. I wanted to share my wisdom while I also giving them the encouragement to keep going as well.

To the Mellon faculty and institutional staff that pushed me to keep going even when I wanted to give up on myself daily: Dr. Rosamond King, Dr. Tamara Knopper (my editor) Dr. Shanna Benjamin, and Natasha Dennison. Our talks and retreats together were the soft-tough love I needed to shape my research the way I want to get the hell out of Northwestern. As much as I wanted to write a romance novel or my hidden thesis on how aliens are in the sea, I wanted to see this project completed.

With funding running low during the summer of 2018, I tried to turn to scant adjunct positions, agonized over fellowships I didn't apply to the previous fall cycle, and looked to my department for any monetary relief. I entertained hectic suicidal thoughts – I had come to graduate school under the guise of creative writing and securing a professorship in which I can talk about novels that filled me with joy. Yet here I was, beginning my 7<sup>th</sup> year, near homelessness in Chicago, no monetary support or jobs in sight, applying for ObamaCare and food stamps. To be honest, I wish I applied for public assistance during my first year. By no means does public assistance made me feel shameful. I am grateful for ObamaCare for saving me mostly from a \$4,000 insurance bill Northwestern forces on unfunded graduate students who wish to continue their studies. This “act of care” reveals how classist and elitist academia is: no unfunded graduate student living off a stipend while also coming from a working-class background has \$4,000 lying



around. It was that academia gave an ultimatum – us or nothing – and those fears exacerbated my anxiety more.

I was fortunate to have the little savings I had scrounged up as a graduate student, lived more modestly than ever, and will always be grateful for my mother and sister offering the little they had to help me to pay for rent for September and October. I also prayed to the gods – old and new – that I would find meaningful employment by the end of October before I signed my life away to loans. Loans are an option but the thought of dying under debt for a degree that gave me so much grief fired me up to find a job more than ever.

On the eve of my birthday in 2018, a small eyeglass shop called Warby Parker told me I was hired for their part time position as a Sales Advisor. Securing rent for two months meant exhausting my little savings. But for a month, I was able to get groceries on a part time salary by working overtime/asking for more hours. By November, I was notified that I secured a job as a Technical Support Specialist at Venmo where I was offered full benefits and a payable wage to support myself (better than a stipend for sure). I still want capitalism to rot and die by its own sword. However, it saved me from unnecessary debt for a degree I have grown resentful over was a grateful yet bitter pill to swallow. To my Venmo and Warby Parker coworkers who found offered laughter, support, and genuine words of encouragement as I grinded out my final two years as a Ph.D. candidate: Dominique Benson, Lori Goodar, Melanie Holmes, Patricia Humphrey, Gabe Courtnell-Washington, and Marcus Powell.

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Thank you to my committee for being a part of this journey: Dr. Alexander Weheliye, Dr. Shaundra Myers, and Dr. Nick Davis.

Lastly, to the man who greeted me after school every day at 3pm with a warm smile, new stories to tell, introducing a little Black girl to places all around the globe. A man who inspired literacy for my generation and taught us that Blackness is rooted through the speculative. Levar Burton, you are a cultural icon and I thank you for making a little Black girl from Brooklyn fall in love with storytelling.

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"sometimes  
 the whole world of women  
 seems a landscape of red blood things  
 that need healing,"  
 — Lucille Clifton, from *Next: New Poems*; "She is Dreaming."

Lucille Clifton's haunting poetry draws the audience into a dreamlike setting, illustrating the world transformed by violence and women being the survivors of it. "Red blood things" should not be read as just physical violence, but also psychic, mental, and spiritual violence. Red—vibrant, loud, and imperious—representing the continuous onslaught of antagonistic violence that Black women face thus changing the actual land. Clifton asks will the land's flesh continue to bleed, will it scar, or will it live for a man to either marry it or murder it. Altering land into flesh, we see the poem end on a ferocious note, seeing women's two only options: men's desire to kill or marry. Clifton does not call on men to be part of the healing, as they are the antagonists, but rather the land and women need to heal on their own. "she is dreaming" beckons the readers to think: how can violence and trauma transform space and what does healing look like? The stark reality of violence's lingering and acknowledgement of the necessity of healing drew me to Clifton's work as I read the poem as a break from my written qualifying exams. What does it look like to not escape the violence and trauma, but to confront and acknowledge them to begin healing? What ways can we form non-escapist methods of looking at trauma and healing in Black literature? The poem is about the coexistence of violence and healing in a bloody landscape that the former created.

Clifton's poem and the familial stories I grew up with heavily inspired my research in examining the intimate connection of memory, pleasure, and trauma in specific sites of trauma in the African and African diaspora in 20<sup>th</sup>/21<sup>st</sup> century African American and Caribbean American

literature. Drawn to the cane fields in the borderlands of Hispaniola, the swamplands of Florida, the familiar back porch, and the Atlantic Ocean, my study posits that pleasure and violence, body and memory, Black life all coexist in the aforementioned spaces of contention. Looking at these sites as secondary characters for each text, I argue that the entanglement of violence and pleasure, corporeal and psychic memory, cyclical intergenerational traumas, intimate relations all alter the space and the Black communities that inhabit them. Usually these alterations are of the surreal, the unreal, or the Black fantastic. They are phenomena that do not register in the white western world yet makes “sense” in continental and diasporic communities. Oscar experiencing the nostalgia of his mother’s assault in the cane fields 20 years later is seen as normal on the large shared island of Hispaniola. The inheritance of sensory and corporeal memory that affects the body of a daughter of a genocide survivor is not seen as out of the norm. Janie practicing haptic intimacy in the safety of the back porch with Pheoby resonates with Black women when discussing intimate relationships, romantic or not, with each other. Anyanwu alters her body into a dolphin in the Atlantic Ocean which is not too far gone when thinking about stories of shapeshifters/sirens of the deep Atlantic in Black diasporic tales. The comingling of the everyday violence Black folks face, the means of surviving these various acts of violence, the holding of trauma and seeking ways of survival and coping occurs through the confines of specific geographies in my research. My work illustrates how pleasure, trauma, the speculative coexist together and occur in everyday Black life in diasporic spaces. My research seeks highlight the “yes and” of Black life and posit the nexus of pleasure and terror animates in peculiar ways and spaces in Black communities.

Using literary theory, black feminist theory, aquatic analysis, close reading, and memory studies I focus on specific spaces as a means to examine the thematic thread of the comingling of

violence and Black life: intergenerational trauma and cyclical time, sexual violence and communal love (seen and unseen) coercion and brevity. My research is not a chronological endeavor. This project looks at specific sites that answered my research questions rooted in intergenerational trauma, anti-black violence, pleasure, and sexual violence experienced by Black women. I chose the cane fields, Massacre River, Floridian swamplands, the back porch, and the Atlantic Ocean because of their histories in African diasporic cultural production. In Hispaniola, the shared island of Haiti and the Dominican Republic, the cane fields and Massacre River are contested historical sites dating back to enslavement and histories of nation making. The cane fields, rooted in slavery, are still maintaining as present-day manual labor where a vast majority of Haitian descent. Massacre River is a 34-mile river that forms the northernmost part of the international border between the Dominican Republic and Haiti. Although its namesake for being site of the killing of thirty French buccaneers by Spanish settlers in 1728, it has become also a notorious memory of the Perejil Massacre of October 1937. The muck represents the vast overflowing swamp lands of the Everglades where Black Americana, the indigenous, and Caribbean diasporas meet. The front porch in Black American life serves as a “gathering place to witness and soak up history...a setting for storytelling.”<sup>1</sup> Lastly, the oceanography of the Atlantic Ocean. as a cultural, spiritual, historical, and political site critical inquiry for the African and African diaspora. The ocean functions as an archival site (ancestral honoring of lost ones from enslavement and Middle Passage), religious divination (fluid and queer spirits in African and diasporic religions) and freedom and waterway

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<sup>1</sup> Burch, Audra D. S “On the Front Porch, Black Life in Full View.” *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/04/us/porch-detroit-black-life.html> Accessed 16 May 2020.

connection between the two. Each space contributes various ideas for our views on memory, intergenerational trauma, pleasure and Black life.

My project depends on “pleasure” and “memory” (specifically intergenerational trauma) to think through my conceptualization of animated geographies. I look at pleasure, on a fundamental definition basis, as fulfillment and satisfaction. I was introduced to Audre Lorde’s “Use of the Erotic” during my undergraduate career where the poet introduces us to “use to the erotic.” Lorde states the erotic is a sense of deep satisfaction – beyond the sexual / jaws of pornography – and elevated by a profound feeling that lives in the joy and fulfillment of a woman's being: “The erotic is a measure between the beginnings of our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings. It is an internal sense of satisfaction to which, once we have experienced it, we know we can aspire. For having experienced the fullness of this depth of feeling and recognizing its power, in honor and self-respect we can require no less of ourselves” (Lorde 1).<sup>2</sup>

Lorde demonstrates in redefining and reclaiming the erotic, a profound feeling of knowing, an empowering knowledge, as “a lens through which we scrutinize all aspects of our existence” This new sight gears Black women and other women of color in continuing the fight against patriarchy and racism while illuminating their differences. Lorde’s insistence on the erotic as a means to combat institutional power points us to the role in pleasure in an anti-black world. The erotic is not a means of escape but a reservoir to be acknowledged and shared. “The erotic functions for me in in several ways, and the first is in providing the power which comes from sharing deeply

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<sup>2</sup> Lorde, Audre. “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power.” *Whole Earth Review*. <https://go-gale-com.turing.library.northwestern.edu/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CA7675165&v=2.1&u=northwestern&it=r&p=AONE&sw=w> Accessed 17 May 2020.

any pursuit with another person. The sharing of joy, whether physical, emotional, psychic, or intellectual, forms a bridge between the sharers which can be the basis for understanding much of what is not shared between them, and lessens the threat of their difference” (2). Pleasure, in Lorde’s conceptualization, is about the communal and outside the scope of sexuality/sex. While she says “another” I want readers to think of pleasure outside the realm of partnership/coupling but towards the communal. To seek the erotic/pleasure outside the individual but to look towards the communal as a spiritual reservoir for the necessity of survival.

While the erotic is rooted in fulfillment to be shared and to combat the ongoing presence of racism and patriarchy, scholars and writers have taken pleasure to another plane of existence. When it comes to Black women, pleasure becomes a vexed category. At times, the way pleasure is utilized is as a means to “transcend” or escape from gendered and racial violence, or an avoidance of the wound. Scholars such as Jennifer Nash in their text *The Black Body in Ecstasy: Reading Race, Reading Pornography* (Duke University Press, 2014) look to transform Black pleasure as a Black feminist project. Nash takes from Jose Muñoz’s use of “ecstasy” as an “invitation to step out of the here and now of straight time and to embrace the possibility of futurity” (3). “By ecstasy, I refer both to the possibilities of black female pleasures within a phallic economy and to the possibilities of black female pleasures within a white dominated representational economy. I am drawn to the term *jouissance*, to describe pleasures that exceed or transcend the self and to capture a bliss that exceeds language” (Nash 2, italics mine). This project of Black pleasure is couched in futurity and unlimited possibilities for the scholar, despite the subjugation of Black women in a white phallic society. To experience a transcending bliss beyond the boundaries of racial and gendered violence. Nash continues: “of organizing around the



*paradoxes of pleasure rather than woundedness or the elisions of shared injury, around possibilities rather than pain*” (3, italics mine). Highlighting the sexual subjectivity in Black pleasure, especially in pornography, Nash houses her project in a utopian endeavor for Black women: how and why would we transcend the wound of violence? I do read pleasure as a transgression which is in line with Lorde’s writing on the erotic. However, pleasure should not be seen as an escape from the white phallic society or the intra-mural violence Black women experience in their communities. To view pleasure as escapism to avoid the wound or histories of violence is a dangerous move which denies Black feminist histories and cultural productions. There is no need to transcend or escape the wound when you can tend to it and process and seek ways to honor the scarring and experience.

Joan Morgan’s article “Why We Get Off: Moving Towards a Black Feminist Politics of Pleasure” asserts that it wants to “new erotic possibilities for black women—from the enslaved to the pop star to the sex worker (Morgan 38). This pleasure manifesto aims to include more queer voices, highlight the restrictions of black respectability, cis-heteronormativity, and politics of silence. “Pleasure Politics” as a liberatory, black feminist project. It elevates the need for sexual autonomy and erotic agency without shame to the level of black feminist imperative. Black women’s erotic maps exist on an expansive spectrum, which could include non-heteronormative submissiveness, hypermasculinity, aggression, exhibitionism, and voyeurism. Finally, it acknowledges that the hegemonic narrative of black female sexuality which dominates black feminist thought in the United States not only erases queer and transgender subjects but also ignores black multi-ethnicity and the diverse cultural influences currently operating in the world US black women occupy” (39) Although Morgan states in the piece that pleasure is not tied to

JUST sex/fucking, the piece's major tenets still highlights sexual satisfaction/sexual autonomy, include voices that were never included in the Black feminist project, and illustrate the expansive maps of Black women's pleasure.

However, the article harps on the stagnancy on the Black feminist project. Critiquing the dogmatic institutionalization of the old guard of Black feminism, Morgan states that if we do not acknowledge U.S black women's ethnic heterogeneity, queer communities, and the advent of digital technologies/social media "*we will continue to inextricably link trauma and violence to black women's lived and historical experiences* and negate pleasure as frivolous, irrelevant, or "unfeminist." (38, italics mine). We again see some form of antagonism towards the acknowledgement of the wound and trauma in Black women's lives and the history of it. Or the "constant" ever-presentness of trauma in Black women's lives as a negation of pleasure. Liberation from the histories of inequality and violence is not freedom, it is shallow, lazy, and diverting from the real issues that women and other gender nonconforming communities.

We need new grammars surrounding pleasure for Black women. We must not see pleasure as a ploy to escape violence or suffering or to evade the histories of terror. We cannot extract pain from pleasure in Black life because so much of the latter informs the former. I turn to Saidiya Hartman's work on the convergence of pleasure and terror in her text *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery and Self Making in the Nineteenth Century America*. The scholar argues that we cannot separate Black suffering from Black pleasure since the captive Black body was coerced into "acts" of pleasure for white spectacle "The fashioning of blackness aroused pity and fear, desire and revulsion. and *terror and pleasure*" (27). While Hartman's project examines 19<sup>th</sup> century slave songs, dances, minstrel performances, and even "coupling" between Black enslaved women and

white men, the scholar reveals the insidious nature of these pleasure acts. Coercion, white supremacy, and enslavement problematizes these acts of enjoyment. To deny the nature of terror in pleasure would be an indifference. An indifference to suffering would only be “obscuring the violence and conflating it with pleasure” (Hartman 25). To not acknowledge these roots is an act of viciousness. To obscure the violence and trauma Black communities continue to face would also be egregious and a form of erasure.

Hartman’s text investigates “black enjoyment” through the terror of white spectatorship of antebellum United States. Yet her ability not extricate trauma from Black pleasure serves as a foundation for my new reading on pleasure and trauma in 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century Black literature. I posit that Black women experience both pleasure through the channel of white supremacy and misogyny. Pleasure should not be seen as a “freedom” from anti-Black violence or misogynistic violence. Rather, it should be experienced in tandem to the duress of living. Both feelings inform each other and are integral in Black life. Experiencing bliss in the specter of violence does not mean the despair and grief are gone. The Black women characters I examine in this project experience sexual and non-sexual pleasure acts (individually or with a community) yet are brought back to stark realities of sexual and racial violence. This is not to say that pleasure does not matter when because of white supremacy and patriarchy. These acts do matter but we need to think of them 1) a protection rather than an escape from those two institutions of violence 2) examine the root of our pleasures through trauma. Not stepping out of the wound but tending to the wound. I do not wish to extract the trauma and violence of the world because pleasure and terror go hand in hand. I wish for a reading of *yes and*. Yes to experiencing a pleasure and to facing and acknowledging the terror and traumas of this anti-black world.

While tending to the wound as being a part of experiencing pleasure, I turn to black memory to discuss the transmission of intergenerational trauma in Black literature. I work through “memory” as recollection, trauma as the haunting of those pained memories as Cathy Caruth states in *In Unclaimed Experience*, “trauma is not locatable in the simple violent and original event in an individual’s past, but rather in the way it’s very unassimilated nature – the way it was precisely not known in the first instance – returns to haunt the survivor later on (Caruth 4).

When it comes to Black memory and trauma, I synthesize the writings of Frantz Fanon, Michael Hanchard and Toni Morrison in my work. Frantz Fanon discusses the brutal effect of slavery and colonialism on the Black colonized body and psyche in *Black Skin, White Masks*. Discussing how colonialism creates a psychic occupation for the colonized, as if under the skin, to create “shame and self-contempt” (96), Fanon points to how Black colonized communities are thrust into a state of non-being after 1) consuming the stories of white domination as their own 2) coming into contact with whiteness/the West that reminds Black colonized communities that they are “racialized others.” This schism creates a violent annihilation. In Fanon’s words, “the black child subjectively adopts the white man’s attitude” and “this way of thinking and seeing that is basically white forms and crystallizes in him” (126). The paranoia that exists after this violent encounter highlights the psychic occupation of colonialism and how it and slavery is a mental trauma for Black communities.

This annihilation to the psyche and insidious nature of whiteness as trauma comes through in subtle moments in my work which I hope to expound more loudly in future iterations of my work. While my work does not look to the state of nonbeing for Black people explicitly, I still turn to the ever presentness of colonialism as a trauma for the Black characters I examine. How does

this trauma affect the Black characters, how they view the world, and each other? We see this when Beli disavows her African lineage, how Joe Stark replicates white colonial violence through the front porch. Tea Cake's neurosis of being a poor dark skin man and the violent domestic abuse Janie lives through because of this trauma. Lastly, despite his position as an African deity, Doro also suffers from trauma of murdering his family without knowing his powers while also participating in the institution of enslavement and rape for the sake of new psionic communities. This neurosis causes a trauma that inflicts the inhabitant and those around them.

While Fanon looks at colonialism as trauma, Michael Hancard examines Black memory as a collective action. In "Black Memory versus State Memory" he states: "If we consider black memory as the phenomena of a collectivity rather than the practice of an isolated and disparate array of individuals, then an ensemble of themes—rather than an ensemble of personal experiences—provide the broad parameters and contours of black memory. Racism, slavery, reparations, nationalism and anticolonial struggle, and migration could be identified as some of the constitutive themes of black memory" (47). The article looks at how trauma haunts survivors and how Black memory operates on collective and individual levels. How the histories of anticolonial struggle, marginalization, migration, and antiblackness shapes our collective and individual engagement with Black memory. The scholar also looks to the importance of telling and retelling these stories which is critical to collective memory: "The telling and retelling of stories is critical to the development of a collective memory, the ability to transmit information about the past and the dead to the realm of the living" (52).

Toni Morrison looks at the stories of slavery and its afterlife through recollection and imagination to flesh out interiority in her novels in her reflective essay "Site of Memory." The

writer charts how memory becomes the subsoil of her work while imagination allows her to flesh out the interior life in her works like *Beloved* and *Song of Solomon*. “I must trust my own recollections. I must also depend on the recollections of others” (91) the writer states when discussing her method of recreating Black life in her narratives. Morrison’s use of depending on recollection to recreate Black life is important to think through, as many of the Black characters I engage with have to depend on recollection of survivors (mothers and grandmothers) or their silence to piece the fragments of these broken memories. Morrison depends on “my reliance on the image - on the remains – in addition to recollection, to yield up a kind of a truth” (92). I look to the reliance of the remains, the fragments, the silence that surround Black women characters and their trauma. My contribution to our understanding recollecting/remembering to “unveil the terror” is through *how children of survivors remember and piece together the silence of violence*.

These pieces are the theoretical scaffolding to my research. I look at how sexual violence, white colonial violence, and intra-racial affect and haunt Black women and their descendants. Much of the first half of my project looks at the memory and trauma of enslavement, sexual violence and colonialism and how it affects the psyche and body of the Black women characters and their children. Most specifically, how intergenerational rape trauma passes down in Black communities and affects the how healing and pleasure is conveyed in geographies. Or as Avery Gordon states in their text *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* “Slavery has ended but something of it continues to live on in the social geography of where people reside...in the veins of the contradictory formation we call the New World modernity” (139). The second half examines the diffusion of pleasure and trauma in New world geographies such as the

Atlantic and the Florida swamplands. In addition, how this diffusion alters the space and offers Black women characters brief levity from intra-racial and colonial violence.

This vexed convergence of memory, pleasure, and trauma create occur in specific geographies throughout the diaspora in my work. My interest in this vexed intermingling draws from Édouard Glissant's reading of the madness of enslavement and colonialism in his text *Caribbean Discourse*. "Off the coast of Senegal, Gorée, the island before the open sea, the first step towards madness" (9). To the theorist, the trans-Atlantic slave trade created this lacuna of madness for Caribbean populations/islands. The slave ships' journey from Africa to the Caribbean is a story of brutality, cultural destruction, and exile. This act of violence and trauma left this newly minted Caribbean communities stranded in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean, no longer on the African continent and trapped on unknown lands. This physical and discursive violence creates what Glissant terms "loss of sense," an inability to make sense of the subject's position in the world, culminating in Glissant's specific application of the word "madness" within Afro-Caribbean and anticolonial contexts. I argue that physical spaces (geographies) embody this madness as well. This madness in geographies reveal the haunting legacy of the Middle Passage and colonialism while illuminating the "ever presentness of the past" in violent spaces. In other words, spaces like the cane fields, the ocean, and the rural south become traumatic spaces for the Black people because of the legacy of trans-Atlantic slave trade, gendered violence and colonialism. The past is never the past, it is cyclical for generations to experience.

I take this "loss of sense" to expand throughout the Americas. While Glissant discusses the Greater and Lesser Antilles in *Caribbean Discourse*, I include the United States in my understanding of "maddening" Black spaces because of the Middle Passage's legacy throughout

the Americas. This project is not comparative because these novels and my readings of them follow the trans-Atlantic slave route, which grounds the Black experience in the Americas in the violent eruptions of slavery. However, I understand the limitations of this project. The novels I examine are concentrated in Anglophone/ English speaking literature of the Americas. I use the term Caribbean-American literature to highlight my focus on fiction written by children of immigrants and 1.5 immigrants: people who migrated to the U.S during their teens. The Caribbean is a vast space of different languages, cultures, nationalities and not limited to just the Anglophone. My future goal is to look at Francophone, Dutch, Spanish, and other Creole speaking literatures to discuss this loss. Despite this project's Anglo limitations, my work still speaks to map out the geographies of colonial and gendered violence through the unreal throughout the Black world.

Other scholars that help me think through Black geographies are scholars such as Katherine McKittrick in her text *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle*. The scholar interrogates the relationship between Black women's geographies (i.e. space, place, and location in their physical materiality and imaginative configurations) and geographies of domination. McKittrick argues that these geographies of domination are rooted in the transatlantic slave trade and racial-sexual displacement. She excavates spaces that are "ungeographic" to "engage with a narrative that locates and draws on black histories and black subjects in order to make visible social lives which are often displaced, rendered ungeographic" because of white European masculine mappings, explorations, and conquests (x). McKittrick goes further in their conceptualization of Black geographies in their co-edited text with Clyde Woods called *Black Geographies and the Politics of Place* in which they discuss the lack of analysis of race and space in Black studies and the humanities overall: "how human geographies – both real and imagined –



are integral to black ways of life” (McKittrick and Woods 6-7). The two scholars discuss the erasure and lack of substantive analysis when it comes to Black geographies. Black geographies are boiled down to three very separate approaches: bodily, economic/historical materialist and metaphorical. “Consequently race, or blackness, is not understood as socially produced and shifting but it is instead conceptualized as transhistorical, essentially corporal, or allegorical or symbolic.” (7) Thus, black geographies are either determined by hegemonic spatial practices such as segregation/redlining and neglect. Their approach is to move away from singling out the black body, the culture of poverty, or the material “lack” implied by spatial metaphors. Instead, reimagining the subject and place of black geographies by suggesting there are many ways to produce and perceive space (7). While my work does not attempt to move away the spaces of “neglect or “ghettoization” of space (what is wrong at looking at the geographies of neglect/ungeographic? Why can’t we do both?), my work does look at ways that pleasure and violence transforms the place as well as the communities that work/live in them. The Atlantic Ocean is a highly discussed physical space but garners plenty of symbolic/allegorical readings in African and African diasporic cultural production. By no means do these readings should be left out in our conceptualization of Black geographies. Instead, our ideas should include the physical and the allegorical.

Woods and McKittrick’s desire to highlight the ongoing presence of diaspora place making stems from the “foundational” texts in cultural geography studies. Michel de Certeau’s *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984) argues that space is “a practiced place” that only comes into being through the people that inhabit it, “produced by the operations that orient it, situate it,

temporalize it, and make it function.”<sup>3</sup> Lefebvre’s *Production of Space* proposes that a destruction of a particular space and the construction of an alternative must also produce new social relationships.<sup>4</sup> While these two scholars do not examine or look at race, colonialism, or gendered violence, however their ideas of “space” mirror some of my takes on the different spaces in this project. We see the cane fields be a Certeau articulation of as the space continues to be a reminder of colonial enslavement and its “new life” as manual labor. The muck can be Lefebvre’s expression of “alternative space” – a Black and indigenous community that is occupied by mostly working class/poor individuals in the Florida Everglades. Black folks inhabit and “practice” in spaces like the cane fields, the muck, Eatonville, the slave ship, and the ocean, because of consenting and forced social relations while also *transforming and creating* new spaces. But additionally, how these spaces hold and animate in interstices of violence and pleasure.

The madness and ever presentness of the past (through Glissant) are seen through the unreal/fantastic which is my contribution to this work of black geographies. I interrogate how the pleasure and trauma animate these spaces or how these moments become the fantastic due to this vexed convergence of pleasure and trauma. How does land react to these moments of pleasure and violence? How do the inhabitants react to this animated space where violence and memory and pleasure coalesce? To think of the speculative, I turn to M. Jacqui Alexander’s *Pedagogies of Crossing*: “collapsing ultimately, the demarcation of the prescriptive past, present, and future of linear time” (292). Speculative allow us to not just look to the future but the collapsing of time to discuss the fantastic or unreal. In literary studies and analysis, scholars turn to genres such as

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<sup>3</sup> de Certeau P 117

<sup>4</sup> *The Production of Space*. Trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell. 1991. P 59.

magical realism, science fiction, fantasy, or Afrofuturism to discuss these moments. Because of my interest in the collapsing of time, black diasporic shimmers of magic that ripples throughout the rural Florida, and the shape shifting abilities of African deities, I turn to “speculative,” and even the “fantastic” or unreal to discuss the spectacular nature of Blackness on my work. Speculative offers us a larger ground to stand in: it addresses cyclical time, haunting, traces of the past, diasporic connections in magic/religiosity, and world building.

Chapter 1 examines the inheritance of intergenerational sexual trauma, the ongoing violence of race making in Dominican nation-state, and memory of genocide in Junot Díaz’s novel *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* and Roxane Gay’s short story “In the Manner of Water or Light” in her collection of stories *Ayiti*. I interrogate how their children remember these painful memories for them despite never being told. “Speculative Caribbean Traumas” demonstrates how Black women suffer at the hands of an anti-black dictatorship, carrying that sexual violence to a new country, and how their children *remember for them*, even without any prior conscious knowledge which manifests into these sentient archival spaces.

In *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, I look at the cane fields’ as a sentient archival space that houses Beli’s physical and possible sexual assault in its canes during Trujillo’s dictatorship and lets Oscar experience this nostalgia nearly 30 years later. “In the Manner of Water or Light” the Unnamed Narrator recounts her grandmother’s life as a survivor of the Parsley genocide, the silence surrounding assault in Massacre River during the genocide and her daughter Jacqueline’s body/existence being a constant reminder of that night. Jacqueline’s lineage in question and constantly smelling blood looks at how the body remembers. I argue that the cane fields and Massacre River are sentient archival memory spaces that haunt and hold generational

trauma for their diasporas. Through the speculative, the river and the cane fields “leak” and suffuse the past and present.

Chapter 2 illustrates the muck and back porch as Janie Stark’s sites of intimate Black kinship and love in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Looking at how Zora Neale Hurston deploys the floral language to illustrate the richness of the Everglades, I look several sites in Janie’s journey to reveal the complexity of Black life in the South. However, we take pleasure up to task by examining these acts, which have been deemed “revolutionary” in Black literary studies and examine how violence and trauma are at the heart of these pleasure acts. Janie’s orgasm by her granny’s pear tree should not be read as a “freedom” or reclaiming in Black womanhood but rather reveal the true sadness that Janie is a child and grandchild of rape. The orgasm should not transcend this fact. Additionally, as scholarship looks at Janie’s relationship with Tea Cake as groundbreaking, the relationship falls trap to the insidiousness of class and colorism. Tea Cake and Janie’s patch of heaven in the muck, a communal space where Black and indigenous communities co-exist, is destroyed by white supremacy. We look at how nature enacts revenge against this transgression as well. Lastly, I look at the back porch as an expression haptic intimate relationship between Janie and Pheoby which I argue is an understudied love story for the canonical text.

Lastly, Chapter 3 examines the replication of institutional violence (at the hands of Black men on Black women), fleeting feelings of bliss, and the transforming of Anyanwu’s body in the depths of the Atlantic Ocean in Octavia Butler’s *Wild Seed*. I argue that the Atlantic Ocean becomes a site of transitory bliss and escape for Anyanwu from Doro’s coercion and the slave ship. Suspended and in the middle of nowhere, Anywanu’s powers of changing into a dolphin

(morphing her body to become an animal) makes her indiscernible to Doro's panoptic all-seeing eye. In this moment, Anyanwu's powers rivals Doro's – a feeling that shakes Doro to his core. I want to emphasize that while I am examining Anyanwu's moments of escape as relief, this blissful action is brief in the nowhere-ness of the ocean. The transforming into the dolphin in the Atlantic Ocean displays the limited freedom Anyanwu experiences as Doro's wild seed. Pleasure that is experienced through the channel of intra-racial and gendered violence.

“This Land Screams in Ecstasy and Pain” supplies new dimensions in Black geography studies, Black pleasure, and Black memory through the speculative. This new relationship allows us to think through more fantastic ways of Black life: how it can seem otherworldly due to the severity of violence and trauma in everyday life. Black speculative literature has always been a presence in throughout the Caribbean and the U.S. Yet through the channel of geography and re-examining Black pleasure as co-existing with Black suffering and trauma, we can unearth new grammars of Black life.

A necessary addition: In May 2018, Junot Díaz was accused of sexual misconduct and harassment by women writers such as Zinzi Clemmons, Monica Byrne, Alisa Valdes and Carmen Maria Machado. While my chapter explores his Pulitzer winning novel *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2008), I do want to reiterate my support and admiration for these brave women for speaking up about their experiences. I do not condone any form of harassment or violence towards anyone.

### **Chapter 1: Speculative Caribbean Traumas:**

“You cannot know how well people’s bodies remember their ancestors”

Octavia Butler’s *Wild Seed*

“Of all the places, *why there?*” my mother asked as she continued braiding her hair at the edge of her bed. It was my first spring break home from graduate school and I was still buzzing from my first acceptance to an international conference in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic. Her arms framed her head while her fingers were heavy with shea butter as they grabbed and twisted hair without breaking rhythm. I knew what *there* meant but my excitement refused to hear her anxiety.

Despite her heavy sighs, I pressed on: “But it’ll be my first academic conference...”

“Do you know what they do to *us* there?” her anguish cut through my excitement, conjuring that anger and lament my family carried from Haiti to Brooklyn. As a child of Haitian immigrants, I grew up in a world where family members huddle in the kitchen to discuss heated homeland politics, run to the nearest Western Union to send cash back home to family still living in Haiti, and share stories of revolution, despotic depression, and post-earthquake horror to remind their American born children of “our legacy.” However, my naiveté and giddiness as a scholar triggered and disturbed the unspoken histories of cut limbs and murdered bodies in Dominican cane fields

throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. How my mother refuses to step inside a Dominican bodega.<sup>5</sup> *Us* conjured tales of lost loved ones, death, and ongoing current racial tensions in the borders of my mother's homeland.

The carrying and weaving of generational trauma, diasporic migration, and memory of Caribbean diasporas serves as the foundation of my first chapter. I argue that the cane fields and Massacre River are sentient archival memory spaces that haunt and hold generational trauma for their diasporas. These river and the cane fields were sites of the Parsley Massacre, a sanctioned genocide that took the lives of Haitians, Haitian-Dominicans, and Afro-Dominicans between October 2<sup>nd</sup> and October 8<sup>th</sup>, 1937 in the border towns of the Dominican Republic.<sup>6</sup> The northern river used as enforced fictional border for Haiti and the Dominican Republic. The cane fields, created during slavery, are the current crux for Dominican sugar industry with the constant presence of anti-black violence and exploitation: “the contested space of the cane field: a site of sexual violence and exploited labor, a Caribbean landscape that was never a natural topos but one constructed for colonial purposes” (Tinsley 3).<sup>7</sup> Together, Massacre River and the cane fields

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<sup>5</sup> The massacre is known as the Perejil Massacre in Spanish and Kout Kouto a in Haitian Kreyol. For the duration of my dissertation, I will be using “Parsley Massacre.”

<sup>6</sup> Between October 2<sup>nd</sup> and October 8<sup>th</sup> 1937, the Parsley Massacre—the genocide of Haitians, Haitian-Dominicans, and Afro-Dominicans by the order of Rafael Trujillo—took place in the border towns of Hispaniola. It is also known as the Perejil Massacre in Spanish and Kout Kouto a in Kreyol. For the duration of my dissertation, I will be using “Parsley Massacre.”

<sup>7</sup> Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley. *Thieving Sugar: Eroticism Between Women in Caribbean Literature*. Duke University Press, 2010.

embody memories of anti-black violence, nation-state building, psycho- and sexual gendered violence in Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* and Roxane Gay's short story "In the Manner of Water or Light" from her collection of short stories *Ayiti*.

Oscar's hardened mother Hypatia Belicia Cabral and the Narrator's grandmother are two dark skinned Afro-Caribbean women living during Rafael Trujillo's dictatorship, who physical and *possibly* sexual assault in the cane fields and river respectively.<sup>8910</sup> Yet the two women never tell their children about these brutalities, carrying the pain of anti-blackness and sexual violence to the United States. I italicize "possibly" because the main protagonists/narrators, Yunió and the

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<sup>8</sup> Although I am concentrating on fictional characters, my aim is not to minimize sexual violence that the Grandmother's or Beli's experience. Additionally, I also do not want to catastrophize the survivors as if this brutal event defines their entire lives. I want to illuminate that these violent acts may or may not have happened, that the women keep their survival hidden from their loved ones—whether it is for coping or just wanting to not remember—and how their families are affected by these acts of sexual and antiblack violence in the spaces of the cane fields and Massacre River.

<sup>9</sup> Rafael Leónidas Trujillo Molina (October 24, 1891 – May 30, 1961), was a Dominican politician and soldier, who ruled the Dominican Republic from February 1930 until his assassination in May 1961. He served as president from 1930 to 1938 and again from 1942 to 1952. His 31 years in power, to Dominicans known as the Trujillo Era (Spanish: *El Trujillato*), are considered one of the bloodiest eras ever in the Americas. It has been estimated that Trujillo was responsible for the deaths of more than 50,000 people, including possibly as many as 10,000 in the Parsley Massacre—the genocide of Haitian and Afro-Dominicans—in 1931.

<sup>10</sup> Gay does not name the narrator, a mixed Haitian and Jewish grandchild, or the grandmother. For the sake of this chapter, I will refer to her as the Narrator and Grandmother. She does name the mother, Jacqueline.



Narrator, believe that Beli and the Grandmother were sexually assaulted respectively. However, Beli and the Grandmother do not reveal to them or the audience if they were. We as the audience, Yunior, and the Narrator are not entirely sure because their mothers/mother figure have never spoken about it. I want to interrogate the “secrecy” or the looming absence of truth of these painful memories since it affects many of the characters in these two texts.

However, this “unspoken” silence of violence lingers and haunts their children. This violence manifests into a warped relationship between memory and the speculative: from the animated canes shrieking to the suffusing of blood and mud of the river into the skin. These unreal moments lead Oscar, the Narrator, and Jacqueline back to these sentient archival spaces. The ever-presentness of the past exists and animates the cane fields, the river, and even the human skin. I argue that these physical and corporeal traumatic geographies become sentient archival spaces of memory in the cyclical currents of colonial antiblackness, sexual violence, and trauma.

I want to emphasize how land holds generational memory, how this storage of generational trauma and memory manifests into the unreal, and how future generations inherit and return to the space of memory and trauma. This unique relationship to generational memory, geography and the speculative is important because these focal points are never discussed together when examining African American or Caribbean literature. Within literary studies, discussing memory studies through the vestibule of geography/space does not exist, especially when it comes to Black memory. Scholars and writers such as Michael Hanchard and Toni Morrison examine Black memory as an act of remembering/recollecting trauma, humiliation, disgrace, hardship, history, resistance and violence for African and African diasporic communities.

*Oscar Wao* and “Water or Light” follow in the footsteps of other dictatorship literatures hailing from the Caribbean and Latin America. While this literary canon is full of characters suffering at the hands of despotic violence, there has not been much discussion on how *geographies* remember these traumas, how they affect Black women specifically, and the transmission of those traumas to future generations. Gay and Díaz follow in the footsteps of fellow Caribbean and Latin American writers such as Julia Álvarez, Nelly Rosario, Kettly Mars, Mario Vargas Llosa and Frankétienne when it comes to unpacking despotism and its effects throughout different diasporas.

To understand generational memory and despotic trauma, my research delves into clinical trauma studies, colonial trauma, as well as steps to understand the effects of violence on survivors and their loved ones. Clinical trauma scholars such as Judith Herman and Dori Laub stress to recover, a survivor must create a narrative of the traumatic event. For Herman, this involves “taking fragmented components of frozen imagery and sensation” and “reassembling them into an organized, detailed, verbal account oriented in time and historical content” (*Trauma and Recovery* 177). While according to Laub, trauma does not exist in the absence of an empathetic witness (Laub 68) and the testimony always includes a listener. To sum up, trauma is the active repression of an event that must be remembered, narrated, and witnessed for it to lose its traumatizing power. Frantz Fanon, in *Black Skin, White Masks* discusses the neurosis of colonial violence on the Black colonized body. While Beli does not exhibit paranoia like Fanon, her disavowal of her dark skin and any semblance of African roots in the Dominican Republic exhibits a violent cognitive dissonance for herself which contributes to the text’s allegory of the fukú curse.

What makes Beli and the grandmother's experiences unique is that their children are never told about what happened with their brutal attacks, yet the children remember and narrate for them. Yunior, Oscar, Jacqueline, and the narrator are the empathetic listeners and the storytellers trying to understand the trauma to end the cyclical violence. I interrogate how their children remember these painful memories for them despite never being told. "Speculative Caribbean Traumas" demonstrates how Black women suffer at the hands of an anti-black dictatorship, carrying that sexual violence to a new country, and how their children *remember for them*, even without any prior conscious knowledge which manifests into these sentient archival spaces.

While examining the transmission and nostalgia of intergenerational trauma, I want to highlight the wielding of Haitianism in these two diasporic narratives. By Haitianism, I point to cultural, linguistic, and racial markers that are rooted in Haiti and her diaspora. My examination of Haitianism comes from its Spanish translation, Haitianismo, which is used as a pejorative (anti-Haitianismo) to discuss prejudice, discrimination, and hatred towards Haitians. *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* highlights Afro-Dominican identity despite the dominant narrative of antiblack mestizaje of the nation. "In the Manner of Water or Light" illuminates a cane workers life just before the genocide.

Yet I want to illustrate the prejudicial *and* sympathetic illustrations of Haitian Blackness in *Oscar Wao* and "In the Manner of Water or Light." While "Water or Light's" depiction of Haitianism is more realistic and sympathetic (such as the mundane lives of Haitian cane workers in the bateys, showing life outside the cane plantation, grandmother's trek to survive the massacre), *Oscar Wao's* depiction of Haitianism and Haitians inhabits as a dark shadowy backdrop to the de Leon's family history. Haitians are poor peanut sellers in the streets of Santo Domingo, wordless

cane workers in the dark of night, and mutilated bodies in the footnotes of the text. While *Oscar Wao* celebrates the established existence of Afro-Dominicans, the text unknowingly illustrates Haiti and her diaspora as shadowy figures in the background. The marginalization of one form of Blackness (Haitian) to uplift the other (Dominican) exposes the treacherous manifestation of ethnocentric antiblackness. I posit that *Oscar Wao* and “Water or Light” exemplify sympathetic and haunting images of Haitians and Haitianism.

While the treatment of Haitianism is illustrated differently between in the two texts, the narrators’ relationship to memory, diaspora, and homeland as an immigrant and a child of immigrants remains the same. Yunior, a young 1.5 generational immigrant who is born in the Dominican Republic but migrates to the U.S at a young age, and the Unnamed Narrator, as a child of a Haitian immigrant born in New York City, straddle the homeland and the society of adoption. Yet both positions operate as outsiders (too American for the homeland and too foreign for the West). We can think through this dual looking with W.E.B Du Bois’ “double consciousness” from his text *The Souls of Black Folks*. The sociologist creates the term “double consciousness” to depict the “looking at one’s self through others” and the contention of the true self when discussing African Americans.

This dual looking, between homeland and society of adoption, emphasize how diasporas access, carry, and process generational pain and trauma. Yunior and the Narrator recount the trauma of the women who lived through the horrors of Trujillo’s regime, the Parsley Massacre, and their aftermaths. This act of remembering for survivors *illustrates how the traumas of home haunt generations in the empire*. While Beli and the grandmother do not tell them of their brutal traumas, Yunior and the Narrator still carry those tales and remember for them. I posit that they

choose to remember for the women because the past is leaking into the present. By not remembering, history continues to haunt and be unspoken. As Michel-Rolph Trouillot states in *Silencing the Past*, the past is not the past. It is not fixed. “The boundary between what happened and that which is said to have happened is necessary” (13).

Additionally, both the survivors and children return to the geographies of trauma. By returning to the origin of trauma and horror, nostalgia/we-feeling takes a hold of each character with different results. Paul Connerton in his work *How Societies Remember*, distinguishes between “social memory” and “historical reconstruction” ultimately arguing that collective memories are sustained through a variety of performances, and as he claims, “to study the social formation of memory is to study those acts of transfer that make remembering in common possible” (39). Yunion and the Narrator recount the women’s journeys as an act of social memory to make sense of familial generational trauma and memory, especially since Beli and the grandmother never share their hardships with the narrators. Remembering and returning to the site of trauma reveals the speculative nature of Black memory along with the possibility of healing/moving on of intergenerational burden.

My contribution on Black memory, the storage of Black memory in the space of the canes and river is through their fantastic manifestations via nostalgia, shrieking, and suffusing. As McKittrick states in *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle*, “geography holds in it the possibility to speak for itself” (ix). I examine how the cane fields and the river shriek and suffuses as a way of voicing Beli and Grandmother’s psychic, mental and sexual pains. These two sites vocalize and remember for the two women survivors when they (Beli and the Grandmother) refuse to talk as well. The children and the geographies speak and remember

these violent moments. How do these speculative moments do the work of “speaking” and remembering for the two women survivors?

My reading of “shrieking” takes from Édouard Glissant’s articulation of the long cry in the plantation realm in *Poetics of Relation*. Glissant writes that “the cry of the Plantation, transfigured into the speech of the world” (73).<sup>11</sup> I read this cry as the wails and smells in Díaz’s and Gay’s works. The Cry of the Plantation is the shrieking of the canes, lost Haitian voices, the haunting smell of sweet canes and blood. This Cry, rooted in the death of indigenous communities and enslaved Africans, points us to what I call the leaking of past(s), present(s), and future(s) in the cane fields. Temporalities shift and the “ever presentness” of the past as “leaks” in the canes and river. The “leaking” of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, colonial conquest, death of indigenous communities, enslaved Black bodies, and intra-ethnic genocide existing in the space of the cane fields and the river. The cane fields and river “leak” and “speak” in Díaz’s and Gay’s work.

As descendants of Hispaniola, Junot Díaz’s and Roxane Gay’s depiction of diasporas contending with familial memories, despotic trauma, and anti-blackness mirrors my own relationship to Haiti. From my paternal grandfather escaping François “Papa Doc” Duvalier’s regime as a tailor to the United States to my maternal grandfather serving as the dictator’s driver, I inherit tales of upheaval, sorrow, ghosts, and longing that are tied to Haiti. Just like Yunió and the Narrator who press their mothers for answers, I question my own mother’s anxieties and the plethora of silenced histories that seem to haunt us; did we lose family members to dictatorships and manual labor? Why does my grandmother refuse to speak to the owner of the Yo-Yo Fritaille

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<sup>11</sup> I read this in conjunction with his other text *Caribbean Discourses* (1989) where he states, “but a scream is an act of excessiveness” (160).

restaurant on Nostrand and Clarendon? Was he the same tonton macoute she sold Cokes and condoms to in Port-au-Prince as a market woman? Was my grandfather a tonton macoute or just a civil servant driver?<sup>12</sup> My desire to learn more about my family and life in Haiti while also honoring unspoken histories of sorrow drives my hunger to conduct research on geographies and memory in Hispaniola. *What is left unsaid in geographies of sorrow? How do we carry and inherit these memories of sorrow?* So much of my desire to learn more, to put down the generational burden, and my tense relationship to the “homeland” is reflected in Yuniór and the Narrator’s longing to remember and break the cyclical violence against women. By discussing Hispaniola as a shared island in the Caribbean, Díaz and Gay capture the complexity of the island’s relationship to history, Blackness, memory, and (be)longing.

**“Haiti looms over us:” Mapping Haitianism in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar* and “In the Manner of Water or Light”**

In *Tears of Hispaniola: Haitian and Dominican Diaspora Memory*, Lucía Suárez positions Haiti and the Dominican Republic as *marassa*: “Marassa is defined as spirit twins, or child spirits, they are inseparable, conflicted, and in solidarity” (Suárez 6). The Marassa are the sacred twins

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<sup>12</sup> Tonton macoutes were a paramilitary organization that existed during François Duvalier and his son’s Jean-Claude “Baby Doc” regimes from 1959-1986. Fashioned after the mythical bogeyman tonton macoute, a figure that stole unruly children during the dark of night to consume them for breakfast, this brutal organization terrorized the Haitian public with human rights abuses, murders, rapes, and suppressing political opposition. Their unrestrained state terrorism was accompanied by corruption, extortion and personal aggrandizement among the leadership.

within Vodun religion. Served before any loa, the Marassa represent “the celebration of man’s twinned nature: half matter, half metaphysical; half mortal, half immortal; half human, half divine” (Deren 38).<sup>13</sup> Represented as ageless and androgynous children, the Marassa share one soul and two bodies. In addition, their love and power between them creates the potentiality of higher third power (Deren 40-41). When together, the Marassa represent the many impossibilities in the mortal world. One cannot exist without the other. By positioning the two countries as Marassa, Suarez reveals the fraught dualities of both nations and their experience with antiblack colonial violence.

Taking Suárez’s reading of Hispaniola as Marassa a step further, Marassa are also *obsessed with sugar* and are essentially born in the cane fields. When calling on the twins for a ceremony, their offerings are sugar, coffee and candy; candy is used to lure these child-like deities to begin ceremonies. While Vodun is a syncretic Afro-Caribbean religion created by retaining African spiritualities despite the violence of the Middle Passage, the Marassa are New World deities created by enslaved Africans and their creole descendants in the sugar plantations of Saint-Domingue.<sup>14</sup> Marassa were conceptualized in the cane fields and their offering is the crop generated by Black manual labor and the sugar industry. My reading of sugar and the Marassa sheds insight on Hispaniola as a space created through violence (sugar and enslavement) and as a speculative space (creating new gods in the cane fields). The bridging of violence and the unreal steers *Oscar Wao* and “Water or Light” which reflects the established Caribbean literary tradition.

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<sup>13</sup> Maya Deren’s *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti* (Kington: New York, 1983)

<sup>14</sup> This reading was inspired by my conversations with Dr. Ara Jung and Brian McLoughlin who is a PhD candidate in the French department (4/18/17 and 5/8/17), my aunt Marie Pierre-Louis who is the family griot and a practicing priestess, and Maya Deren’s *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti*.



While Hispaniola can be seen as marassa, *Oscar Wao* and “Water or Light” approach Blackness from different angles. Both texts display Blackness as constant current that flows through both Haiti and the Dominican Republic despite dominant narratives of anti-blackness: most of their characters identify and are treated as Black while dealing with anti-black marginalization in Hispaniola and in the United States. “Water or Light” deals with the trifecta of being Haitian in the Dominican Republic, being Black in Haiti and in the United States. “Water or Light” demonstrates the added layer of being a Haitian cane cutter in a Dominican cane plantation (for manual labor) during the days of the Parsley Massacre.

This marassa-esque reading of Blackness is double-edged, especially when examining *Oscar Wao*. The celebration of Black Dominicans in *Oscar Wao* highlights that Blackness does exist in the Dominican Republic which has positioned itself as a mestizo nation-state.<sup>1516</sup> Beli, as dark skinned Afro-Dominican, serves a constant reminder that Afro-Dominicans and dark skin Dominicans exist in the Dominican Republic. However, this celebration comes with a cost when

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<sup>15</sup> Racial and cultural mixture within Latin American and Caribbean nations. Although mestizaje romanticizes racial ambiguity and harmony, it upholds harmful notions of upward mobility, identity, and solidifies the marginalization of Black and indigenous communities. For more, please read Miriam Jiménez Román’s and Juan Flores’s *The Afro-Latin@ Reader: History and Culture in the United States* (Durham: Duke University, 2010).

<sup>16</sup> I avoid the word and project “Latinidad” in my chapter and stay more focused on “Afro/Black Dominicans.” The term does not discuss race, the violence of settler colonialism, sovereignty that many South American and Caribbean communities face. For more please read Miguel Salazar’s interview for the *Atlantic*: <https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/hispanic-heritage-month-latinidad/>

it casts Haitianism as a dark ghostly backdrop in comparison to Black Dominican visibility. *Oscar Wao* deploys Haitianism and Haitians as background characters that help Dominicans survive anti-black violence through divine intervention (Haitian Vodun). They serve to “guide” Dominican characters. The text also depicts Haitians as impoverished and mutilated shadowy figures working the cane fields and in the bustling streets of Santo Domingo.

Because “Water or Light” is a Haitian woman-centered narrative, the text’s depiction of the mundane life of cane cutters in the batey, the grandmother’s survival of the massacre and return to Haiti more sympathetically. From showing the mental and physical exhaustion of working the fields to enjoying a simple coke between lovers, “Water or Light” illustrates Haitian life in the bateys. This narrative difference portrays Haitianism portrays how Blackness takes different forms on the island

*Oscar Wao* plays on the “unrealness” of antiblackness and colonialism through the magic realist portrayal of the fukú curse. By blending myth, memory, and history, *Oscar Wao* introduces us to the fukú curse—a cyclical and violent pandemic rooted in colonialism and anti-blackness. While characters like Oscar and Beli leave the Dominican Republic, which is the focal point of the curse, they cannot escape it. Yunió states that the fukú’s origins were through Christopher Columbus, his discovery of Hispaniola, and the trans-Atlantic slave trade:

They say it came first from Africa, carried in the screams of enslaved; that it was the death bane of the Tainos, uttered just as one world perished and another began: that it was a demon drawn into Creation through the nightmare door that was cracked open in the Antilles. *Fukú americanus*, or more colloquial, fukú—generally a curse or a doom of some kind; specifically, the Curse and the Doom of the New World....No matter what its name

or provenance, it is believed that the arrival of Europeans on Hispaniola unleashed the fukú on the world, and we've all been in the shit ever since. *Santo Domingo might be fukú's Kilometer Zero, its port of entry, but we are all of us its children, whether we know it or not.*<sup>17</sup>

According to Yunió, Hispaniola is the cradle of the New World where the fukú is born. Hispaniola becomes the space where colonialism takes place in the New World through the importation of enslaved Africans and the genocide of Tainos. This narrative move also establishes Hispaniola (and the greater Caribbean world) as being birthed through the extermination of indigenous communities and the importation of Africans for colonial capital. While Santo Domingo is the port of entry, the fukú's reach spans throughout the diaspora.

The bloody birth of Hispaniola appears otherworldly through the lens of the speculative. *Oscar Wao* plays with science fiction and Caribbean speculative forms of magic to do this.<sup>18</sup> Yunió bridges the science fictive roots of "what could happen" through his usage of *Star Wars* and *Lord of the Rings* references with "what has happened" by incorporating the horrors of Trujillo's negrophobic regime: "At the end of The Return of the King, Sauron's evil was taken by "a great wind" and neatly "blown away," with no lasting consequences to our heroes;\* but [Rafael]

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<sup>17</sup> Díaz 1-2.

<sup>18</sup> Scholar Emily Maguire differentiates how science fiction and fantasy tells us "what could happen" while forms like magical realism/ marvelous realism tells us "what has happened" as a form of high intensity realism. This was from their talk "Zombies, Vampires, and Planets for Rent: The Science Fictional Turn in Caribbean Literature" in which they spoke about the film of *Juan de los muertos* (2011) and the book *El informe Cabrera* (2009) (Northwestern University, Feb 6, 2016).

Trujillo was too powerful, too toxic a radiation to be dispelled so easily. Even after death his evil lingered” (Díaz 111). The blending of these two genres underscores two points. First, it highlights Yunior’s and Oscar’s diasporic subjectivity as Black nerd children of Black immigrant parents living in the United States. In other words, Dominican folklore and U.S science fiction and fantasy co-exist in their world in Patterson, New Jersey. Secondly, the text highlights the fantastical and otherworldly violence of colonialism and despotic violence. The bloody birth of the New World, which creates the fukú curse, and Rafael Trujillo carrying out the curse with his despotic anti-black regime, appears like a plot straight out of a science fiction/fantasy novel. Yunior compares Trujillo to every notable literary and pop culture villain like Lord Sauron and Darth Vader. Colonial violence—through the extermination of indigeneity, the forced enslavement of Africans, and years of dictatorship—*appears* to come straight from a J. R. R. Tolkien epic. However, this “otherworldly fantasy” is real continues to affect the Dominican Republic and the diaspora.

In some ways, *Oscar Wao* counters the fukú curse and Trujillo’s dictatorship by placing Haitian Vodun tropes in conversation with Dominican Blackness. Vodun imagery is scattered throughout the text. Maritza, one Oscar’s first Dominican loves, embodies the fury of the Vodun god Ogún: “Maritza, with her chocolate skin and narrow eyes, already expressing the *Ogún* energy that she would chop at everybody with for the rest of her life” (Díaz 14). With dark skin and expressing the fury of a spirit known for war and metal work, *Oscar Wao* yokes these two very “non-Dominican” traits to a Dominican girl. By “non-Dominican” I mean the portrayal of dark skin and embodying a spirit from a Haitian cosmology. Being mestizo, which means mixed, means being lighter, closer to whiteness, and has nothing to do with identifying African roots and is definitely not about being Haitian. If the Dominican Republic is mixed, then Haiti is the African

nation that practices Vodun. Yunion uses Maritza as a channel of Dominican fears: dark skin and Vodun spirit that has deep ties to Haiti.

Another example of Vodun imagery in *Oscar Wao* is in the form of dreams. When La Inca worries about Beli's safety in the Dominican Republic after her assault in the cane fields, she is visited by her late husband who instructs La Inca to send Beli to New York: "and then he strutted proudly into the water; she tried to call him back, Please, come back, but he did not listen" (Díaz 158). Within Haitian Vodun, being visited by a loved one through dreams can be seen as good luck and as an omen. For La Inca, her husband's instructions prove to be vital for Beli's survival. Additionally, dreaming is the medium for dead loved ones and spirits to contact the living world. Lastly, water is the pathway to Guinea, the spirit world.<sup>19</sup> Haitian spiritual traces serve to help the Cabrals survive.<sup>20</sup>

Along with Vodun imagery and dark skin, Yunion plays on the "fears" of intra-ethnic relationships with Haitians through Lola's high school friend Leticia: "Leticia, just off the boat, half Haitian half Dominican, that special blend the Dominican government swears *no existe...*" (Díaz 26). Leticia is the living embodiment of Trujillo's fears of intra-ethnic mixing between Dominicans and Haitians. As if she were an embodiment of borders of Hispaniola, she is the living marassa that negrophobes swear "no existe." Even Trujillo, the dictator that pushes for a more mixed culture of European and Indigenous roots rather than acknowledge Africans, is a product of

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<sup>19</sup> Perry, Yvonne. "Haitian Vodoun Perspectives on Death and Dying." <http://ezinearticles.com/?Haitian-Vodoun-Perspectives-on-Death-and-Dying&id=3172822>

<sup>20</sup> For more on dreams and Vodoun, please read: Erika E. Bourguignon, "Dreams and Dream Interpretation in Haiti". *American Anthropologist* 56.2 (1954): 262–268.

Haitian and Dominican relations. Yuniors poke fun at this hypocrisy when Dr. Abelard, Oscar's tragic grandfather, faces a heavily powdered Trujillo at a party (Díaz 222). Establishing this as a historical fact, Michelle Wucker, in "The River Massacre: The Real and Imagined Borders of Hispaniola," states: "He [Trujillo] wore pancake make-up to lighten the traces of color his Haitian grandmother's blood had left in his skin."<sup>21</sup> Championing anti-blackness and anti-Haitianism, Trujillo's hypocrisy, denial, and suppressing of his Haitian lineage fuels the *fukù*. While feeding into Dominicans' fears of a "Haitian takeover," Trujillo hides his own Afro-Haitian heritage by powdering his face.<sup>22</sup> Trujillo is the living embodiment of the *fukù* curse—violent internalized anti-blackness to hide his Haitian heritage—while Leticia's existence proves that intra-ethnic relationships exist.

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<sup>21</sup> Michelle Wucker, "The River Massacre: The Real and Imagined Borders of Hispaniola," 1. <http://windowsonhaiti.com/windowsonhaiti/wucker1.shtml> Also, I have been educated by Black Dominicans that Trujillo's grandmother was a mulatto Haitian which is another case of light skinned / mixed race identity shenanigans within Haiti as well.

<sup>22</sup> When Rafael Trujillo takes power in 1930, he scapegoats Haitians as a menace to the Dominican "race" and culture, which he characterized as Hispanic rather than African, lighter-skinned rather than Black, and Christian rather than vodunesque. "He fed Dominicans' fears that armies of Haitians would Haitianize the republic, and he orchestrated campaigns to import Europeans to inter-marry with and lighten Dominicans' skin color. He devised a system of identity cards still used today, identifying Dominicans as 'Indio'— a fictional Taino-Spanish ancestry that ignores African roots— or 'white,' alongside a cursed minority 'black'" (Abbott 388).

While *Oscar Wao* highlights Haitian-Dominicans as real and utilizes Haitian Vodun as a fantastical maneuver, the text also reiterates dominant negative narratives of Haitians and Haitianism in the Dominican Republic. Although Yunior calls out Dominican hypocrisy, which is denial of African roots in the Dominican Republic, he also falls into the trap of portraying Haitians as silent and impoverished. Although characters such as Yunior, Oscar, La Inca and Lola do not participate in anti-Haitianism compared to Beli, Trujillo, or El Capitan, I am perplexed by the marginalization of Haitians as impoverished cane cutters and peanut sellers, in a text that is meant to discuss Afro-Dominicans and Blackness in the Dominican Republic. None of the Haitian characters are fleshed out. They are not robust characters. Instead, these characters serve as the backdrop of the narrative representing normative tropes of poor, disheveled, and silent figures. Additionally, I am not suggesting that *Oscar Wao* purposefully regurgitates anti-Haitianism. However, I am concerned with how Haitianism is depicted in a text that calls out Dominican racial hypocrisy. This distorted relationship of veneration and denigration speaks to how Blackness takes form on the island of Hispaniola; how Dominicans read Blackness as 1) not existing in their side of their island at all 2) if they do identify as Afro-Dominican (Yunior, Oscar, Lola), they are not like the “Africanesque” Haitians over the border.

To unpack years of antiblackness and Trujillo’s brutal regime, *Oscar Wao* utilizes footnotes to exemplify the victims and survivors. Monica Hanna argues:

Yunior includes footnotes that are a bit more traditionally historical. These notes relate the stories of dissenters whose voices were also drowned out by the regime. So, while Trujillo history is only concerned with the powerful, Yunior’s history includes the stories of those who resist despite their lack of power. Yunior’s history emphasizes outsiders and freaks,

but also intellectuals and writers, instead of the Trujillan cast of thugs. (Hanna 90)

The footnotes set Trujillo, his goons, and the monstrosity of the dictatorship to the peripheries of *Oscar Wao* while centering stories like Beli's, Oscar's, and Dr. Abelard's to illuminate despotic violence and the ramifications of the fukú curse. This literary move centralizes survivors and their descendants that continue to feel the wrath of the afterlife of Trujillo's Dominican Republic. However, despite the move to centralize survivors, the text leaves many victims of the Parsley Massacre in the footnotes. Although the text's central narrative is not the Parsley Massacre, I posit that the afterlife of the genocide resonates for the de Leon clan, especially for characters like Beli and Oscar, while Yunior states that Trujillo was "perejiling" everyone in his way:

But what was even more ironic was that Abelard had a reputation for being able to keep his head down during the worst of the *regime's madness*—for unseeing, as it were. In 1937, for example, while the Friends of the Dominican Republic were *perejiling* Haitians and Haitian-Dominicans and Haitian-looking Dominicans to death, while genocide was, in fact, in the making, Abelard kept his head, eyes, and nose safely tucked into his books (let his wife take care of hiding his servants, didn't ask her nothing about it) and when survivors staggered into his surgery with unspeakable machete wounds, he fixed them up as best as he could without making any comments as to the ghastliness of their wounds. Acted like it was any other day.

*Oscar Wao* 215, footnote 24

Dr. Abelard's aloof yet guilty denial of the genocide, mindlessly fixing machete wounds without asking questions while his wife protects Black servants illuminates *Oscar Wao's* complicated relationship to Haitianism. Yunior states the genocide as the "worst of the regime's madness"



however sets it aside in marginal footnotes. The madness of the genocide along with Abelard's denial and unseeing would carve a tumultuous life for the family for years, until Lola's own clairvoyant "feeling" of knowing would be a sign of the zafa towards the end of the novel. The massacre and its aftermath permeate throughout the text, haunting de Leon family and their diasporas. The borderlands and the cane fields are sites of anti-black violence during the massacre. Trujillo's dictatorship was built on demarcating the Dominican Republic from Haiti. The Parsley Massacre becomes this disparate ghostly figure resides in the footnotes but haunts throughout the latter half of the text, especially through the utilization and disposal of manual laborer's bodies and the cane fields being the site of Beli's assault.

Mindlessly and purposely, Yuniór and Oscar's family fall into the trap of anti-Haitianism. When a young Oscar returns from the Dominican Republic with darker skin, he is met with disgust: "Great, his tio said, looking askance at his complexion, now you look Haitian" (Díaz 11). Colorism and antiblackness riddles the text, especially when it comes to Beli, a dark skin Dominican woman: "Watch out, Mom, Lola said, they probably think you're Haitian—La única haitiana aquí eres tú, mi amor [The only Haitian here is you my love] , she [Beli] retorted)" (Díaz 219, translation mine). Here, dark skin is a label of African-ness and of Haitianism (that "other Black" on the western side of the shared island), both stains in the Dominican society. Beli's and Tio's vehement disgust reveals the push and pull of anti-blackness and anti-Haitianism. While Haiti is an African, vodunesque, black nation, the Dominican Republic was a Hispanic, fair skinned, and Christian nation state. This logic also spearheaded Dominican fears of a Haitian takeover as Elizabeth Abbott argues in *Sugar: A Bittersweet History*: "[Trujillo] fed Dominicans' fears that armies of Haitians would Haitianize the republic (Abbott 388). The illustration of Haiti as the dark opposite plotting

to take over the Dominican Republic is echoed through *Oscar Wao*. La Inca's loyal servant cries out "HAITIANS" in a state of delirium before passing way (Díaz 270). The haunting illustration of Haitians as dark invaders pervades in the Abelard/Cabral imagination and Dominican society.

Compounded by the family's flagrant anti-Haitianism and the dominant narrative of Haitian invaders, *Oscar Wao* also conflates impoverishment and decay with Haitian manual laborers and sellers. While Oscar, Lola, and Beli visit the Dominican Republic for the first time as a family, Yuniór's stream of consciousness floods the page:

The beat-you-down heat was the same, and so was the fecund tropical smell that he had never forgotten, that to him was more evocative than any madeleine, and likewise the air pollution and the thousands of motos and cars and dilapidated trucks on the roads and the clusters of peddlers at every traffic light (*so dark*, he noticed, and his mother said, dismissively, *Maldito haitianos*) and people walking languidly with nothing to shade them from the sun and the buses that charged past so overflowing with passengers that from the outside they looked like they were making a rush delivery of *spare limbs to some far off war* and the general ruination of so many of the buildings as if Santo Domingo was the place that crumbled crippled concrete shells came to die—and the hunger on some of the kids' faces, can't forget that

*The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* 200

Haitians are labeled as invaders and Beli's anti-Haitianist remarks mirrors La Inca's dying servant's own fear of a Haitian takeover. Haitians are exemplified as running Santo Domingo amok, causing ruin for Beli's beloved Santo Domingo. Yuniór's association of dilapidation, peddlers, overpopulation, limbs, and crippling, hunger contributes to Beli's anti-Haitianism as the narrator illustrates the city as 1) a typical bustling Caribbean city trying to survive in a post/neo-

colonial moment 2) yet also stark decline thanks to Haitians. This illustration of Haitians being impoverished invaders continues into the next scene:

the guaguas [bus], the cops, the *mind-boggling poverty*, the Dunkin' Donuts, the beggars, *the Haitians selling roasted peanuts at the intersections*, the *mind-boggling poverty*, the asshole tourists hogging up all the beaches, the Xica da Silva novelas where homegirl got naked every five seconds that Lola and his female cousins were cracked on, the afternoon walks on the Conde, the *mind-boggling poverty*, the snarl of streets and rusting zinc shacks that were the barrios populares, the masses of niggers he waded through every day who ran him over if he stood still. (Díaz 200)

Yunior's continual repetition of "mind boggling poverty" throughout the passage advances the mass negative illustration of the city being overrun with Haitian impoverished invaders, continuing the dominant pathologizing narrative of Haitians being *just* in poor positions. At the same time, this passage also critiques the sex tourism industry that pervades the Dominican Republic and the sexualization of Lola and her female cousins. The reference to Xica de Silva, an Afro-Brazilian female slave who rose to power as the "mistress" to a Portuguese slave master, illuminates the commodification and sexualization of Black women's bodies during slavery, its afterlife in the sexual industry, and the enforced beauty (sexual) standards on Lola and her cousins. This psychic sexual violence all takes place in the fecund space of Santo Domingo, where poverty and sex are intimately linked. These passages reveal Yunior's *hood awareness* of the sexualization of Dominican girls, the desperate need for white tourism for Dominican economy, and impoverished Haitian peanut sellers trying to survive in Santo Domingo.

As street peddlers, Haitians are poor people who swamp the fecund space of Santo Domingo. However, in the cane fields they are shadowy braceros and cane cutters who inhabit the bateys by the cane fields. After Oscar's first assault in the cane fields, his friend Clives recruits Haitians to help him carry Oscar's body: "Clives tried his best but he couldn't drag Oscar back to the car alone, so he left him where he was—Just hold on!—drove to a nearby batey, and recruited a couple of Haitian braceros to help him, which took a while because the braceros were afraid to leave the batey lest they get whapped as bad as Oscar by their overseers" (Díaz 465). Here, Clives bribes the Haitian cane cutters away from the batey, settlements around the sugar plantation, in the hope of saving Oscar from death. It is also this moment where Yuniór's hood awareness comes to light: Haitian workers are subjugated and marginalized because of the gruesome sugar industry and the overseers of the plantation.<sup>23</sup>

Despite the threat of being "whapped," the cane cutters and braceros help Clive in favor of a safe return to the batey. Yet Clives tricks them, driving off without them the minute Oscar is in the car: "the Haitians throwing rocks at him because he had promised to give them a ride back to their camp" (Díaz 466). This scene reveals that the Haitian cane cutters and braceros are

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<sup>23</sup> According to the documentary *The Price of Sugar*, Haitians cane cutters on plantations work 14 hours a day, seven days a week, and earn less than \$1 a day with minimal-to-nonexistent health care. Instead of cash, they are paid in vouchers that can be redeemed for overpriced food at company-owned stores. Since they can afford only one meal a day, most of the calories they consume come from chewing sugar cane. Since children born in the batey are not recognized as Dominican citizens, they grow up stateless (*The Price of Sugar*, dir. Bill Haney, 2007). Overseers, hired by the state officiated CEA (Dominican council of sugar), round up Haitians at the borders for work and to keep them in the sanctioned space of the plantations.

exploitable: they exploited through manual labor but also by a Dominican citizen for the sake of another Dominican. The manual laborers are used to ensure safety for one black man while the others are at the hands of the sugar industry. Yunior and *Oscar Wao* shows the hypocrisies of the Dominican Republic and the journey to unlearning anti-blackness that has been exacerbated by Trujillo's dictatorship. However, this critique comes with a price when Haitians are *always perpetuated* as impoverished marginalized communities that are running the country amok. While unlearning of antiblackness of Dominican mestizaje (celebrating Afro-Dominican visibility), the text still adheres to anti-Haitianism which is still antiblackness.

While *Oscar Wao* uses Haitianism as a double-edged sword, "In the Manner of Water or Light" depicts Haitian manual laborers in a softer light. The short story describes the survival of the Narrator's grandmother who lived a life as a cane cutter on a sugar cane plantation and her escape from the Parsley Massacre. Having conceived her daughter Jacqueline during the genocide, Jacqueline finds her way to New York City for "a better life" yet was tormented by the mystery about her true father: a fellow cane cutter who loved her mother or perhaps a soldier during the bloody days of the massacre. Jacqueline's neurosis comes in the form of smelling blood constantly and facing the uncertainty of being the offspring of rape. This mystery is all unraveled when the mother, grandmother, and grandchild return back to Massacre River years later, each trying to piece together the past.

The Narrator illustrates several private moments involving her grandmother and other cane cutters in the batey, both positive and negative, to show nuance during the troubled days leading up to the massacre. "She lived in a shanty with five other women, all strangers, and slept on a straw mat beneath which she kept her rosary, a locket holding a picture of her parents, and a picture

of Clark Gable” (Gay 57). This passage shows the isolation of the grandmother from the others and how manual labor forces strangers into a tense kinship in the bateys. While there was no community between the grandmother and the other women cane cutters, this scene indicates that this relationship is estranged because of institutional anti-Black racism against Haitians and manual labor in the Dominican Republic.<sup>24</sup> The grandmother keeps memories from home to

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<sup>24</sup> Sugar history scholarship such as Elizabeth Abbott’s *Sugar: A Bittersweet History* (New York: Duckworth Overlook, 2009), Martin Murphy’s *Dominican Sugar Plantations* (New York: Praeger Publishing, 1991). Ryan McKenzie’s “The Plight of Haitian Workers in the Dominican Sugar Industry” and Uwe Bott’s “Sugar in the Dominican Republic: How Sweet is it?” in *The Politics of the Caribbean Basin Sugar Trade* (New York: Praeger Publishing, 1991) historicizes the rise of the sugar industry throughout the Caribbean, specifically in the Dominican Republic. Prior to 1870, the Dominican Republic did not base its economy on sugar but rather on subsistence agriculture. Around 1870, though, when a series of wars affected world sugar production and when Dominican land and capital was available, the Dominican Republic suddenly entered the world sugar trade with the labor force predominately being Dominican peasants (Murphy 15). However, an 1884 slump in sugar prices resulted in a wage-freeze, causing a critical labor shortage. “Consequently, two trends emerged that have characterized the sugar industry since: first, immigrants replaced Dominican workers; second, the economic exploitation of the migrant labour force was essential for the success of the industry. The first immigrants were mainly Cocolos, (citizens of West Indies British colonies), preferred because they demanded less in working, housing and sanitary conditions than Dominicans” (McKenzie 1). By the beginning of the twentieth century, the deterioration of Haitian agricultural land and the availability of Dominican land had lured Haitians across the border for employment. The Americans, who also occupied Haiti from 1914-1934, saw that Haitians would be manual laborers than Cocolos in Dominican sugar plantations, because at the time,

comfort her during the long days in the cane fields. To counter the estranged kinship with the women, the narrator introduces us to Jacques Bertrand, her *possible* grandfather: “He was a tall, strong man...He wanted to be in the movies. He had a bright white smile that would have made him a star” (58). The narrator inserts romance and beauty in a space where it is not meant to exist. These two moments exemplify the Narrator creating private interior moments in the realm of the plantation space. The nuance and interiority of Jacques and the grandmother’s relationship, the tense estrangement of the other Haitian women, and the dynamics of the batey illuminate that Black Haitian life exists in the realm of manual labor.

The Narrator also depicts Haitians migrating to the Dominican Republic for more opportunities: “In a different time, she had been loved by two parents, had lived a good life but then they died and she was left with nothing and *like many Haitians*, she crossed over into the Dominican Republic *in the hope that there, her luck would change*” (Gay 58). Opportunities bring the grandmother and other countless Haitians to the Dominican Republic. By the beginning of the twentieth-century, the deterioration of Haitian agricultural land, American occupations on both sides (Dominican Republic lasts from 1916-1924 and Haiti lasts 1915-1934) and the availability

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"The use of Haitian laborers was not only easier - they were close at hand and already under United States control - but also gave the Americans a way to diffuse some of the tensions in the Haitian countryside which fed the campesino guerrilla efforts against the North American occupation" (National Coalition for Haitian Rights, “Beyond the Bateyes” quoted by McKenzie 1). Soon after, Haitian peasants were forced to the Dominican sugar plantations for employment.

of Dominican land had lured Haitians across the border for employment (Murphy 23).<sup>25</sup> Combatting *the dominant* invader myth championed by Trujillo, “Water or Light” demonstrates Haitians as migrating to the Dominican Republic because of lack of opportunities in Haiti and forced manual labor by the nation-state. However, this manual labor takes a toll on the grandmother’s psyche: “She would sleep a dreamless sleep, gathering *courage* she would need to wake up the next morning” (Gay 58). “Water and Light” illuminates how manual labor takes a toll on the grandmother and countless other manual laborers. However, the dark foreshadowing of the massacre begins to loom early in the text, proving that the opportunities for work in the Dominican Republic can turn into tragedy at any moment.

“In the Manner of Water or Light” does not depend on the stereotypical depictions of Haitians as poor, shadowy figures that haunt the bustling city of Santo Domingo or the cane fields like *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. But rather, the Narrator illustrates Haitians as migratory with layers of interiority. The text reveals that Haitians are not invaders but rather people trying to find opportunities in a new country because of neo-colonialism and manual labor. While their lives will soon face bloodshed and heartbreak, Jacques’ and the grandmother’s life in the batey reveals how Haitians and antiblackness exists in geographies of death.

### **“Too Black, Too Dark:”**

Because of antiblack racial and ethnic identifications, Beli and the Grandmother are [hyper]invisible and represent as a threat to Trujillo’s mestizo/Indigenous campaign during the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. Both women are read as non-Dominican because of their dark skin. In this

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<sup>25</sup> For more, please read: Martin F. Murphy. *Dominican Sugar Plantations*. New York: Praeger Publishers, 1991.



section, I flesh out the blatant anti-black colorism of Trujillo's racial/ethnic campaign by analyzing how Beli internalizes this psychic violence despite constantly being read as "non-Dominican" in *Oscar Wao*, and how the grandmother in "Water or Light" is punished and marginalized by other Haitians and Dominicans because of it.

The audience is introduced to Hypatia Belicia Cabral as Oscar's domineering Dominican mother during the first two sections of the novel. However, Yunior (the narrator) dedicates a full section to Beli, narrating her early years in Baní, "a city famed for its resistance to blackness, and it was here, alas, that the darkest character in our story resided:"

The family claims that the first sign was that Abelard's third and final daughter, given the light early on in her father's capuslization, was born black. And not just any kind of black. But *black* black--kongoblack, shangoblack, kaliblack, zapotecblack, rekhablack--and no amount of fancy Dominican racial legerdemain was going to obscure the fact. That's the kind of culture I belong to: *people took their child's black complexion as an ill omen.*<sup>26</sup>

Yunior evokes dark tropes throughout Global south communities —Shango, Kongo, Kali, Zapotec, and Rekha— that coats Beli's dark skin. Her dark skin harkens not just Hispaniola's notions of Blackness but also within other Global South communities. Family oral history claims that Beli's dark skin was the beginning of decline for the de Leons when it was really the violence of colonialism and anti-blackness that marked the end of them. Yunior's mocking tone on family gossip and Dominican society's obsession and marginalization of dark skin illuminates the nation's hypocrisies. Remember, *mestizaje*/ *mestizo* celebrates racial and cultural mixing but in

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<sup>26</sup> Díaz 248, emphasis mine.

this “mixing,” African and Indigenous roots/people are erased. However, indigeneity gets more flexibility in the construction of Dominican identity because it represents nonwhiteness and definitely non-Blackness. I argue that identifying as Black and/or having dark skin in *Oscar Wao* is akin to being Haitian—a nation that is constantly positioned as a “very Black, very Vodunesque and very African” nation. This identification is read as “too Black.”

While Beli’s dark skin challenges Trujillo’s Indio/mestizaje project in the Dominican Republic, Beli also regurgitates antiblackness throughout the text. As Frantz Fanon illustrates to us about the damaging neurosis colonized bodies go through when confronted by the whiteness and its violent disavowal of Black colonials, Beli embodies this neurosis through disavowal. Swarmed by the constant presence of whiteness and the violent project of mestizaje which denies Blackness, Beli internalizes anti-black psychic violence. An example is when she shouts “I’m not morena, I’m india” when her lover, The Gangster, comments on her dark skin. This dual portrayal of pro-blackness (Yunior) and anti-blackness (Beli) illustrates the fraught relationship to Blackness in *Oscar Wao*. I argue that while Beli acknowledges her dark skin she also vehemently refuses to be read as everything except Black. While she cannot escape her dark black skin, Beli believes her dark skin is *only* rooted through indigeneity. This is the same logic that Trujillo pushes in his Indio campaign per Silvio Torres-Saillant:

They recognized the historical identification of the Dominican population with the indigenous Taino inhabitants of Hispaniola, who had endured oppression and extermination at the hands of Spanish conquerors at the outset of the colonial experience. Ethnically, the Indians represented a category typified by nonwhiteness as well as nonblackness, which could easily accommodate the racial in-betweenness of the

Dominican mulatto. Thus, the regime gave currency to the term *indio* (Indian) to describe the complexion of people of mixed ancestry.<sup>27</sup>

Indigeneity becomes a safe boundary to occupy nonwhiteness and non-Blackness. Beli is aware of her dark skin but it is not because of Haitianism (the “dark other” in Dominican racial imaginary) or the import of enslaved Africans that arrived in the Dominican Republic. Beli is “indio”—a dark hue that is accepted because it is not rooted in African roots or Haitianism because the two latter ethnicities are considered “bad.” That way, she can exist as a Dominican subject without the baggage of Blackness.

But thanks to sheer irony, Beli is constantly racialized as Haitian and/or an African descendant belonging to another Latin American nation. Residents of Baní struggle with categorizing Beli as a Dominican citizen because of her Black skin. Beli becomes the “dark other” in Baní that cannot be placed: “Everybody mistook her for a *bailarina cubana* [Cuban dancer] from one of the shows and couldn’t believe she was *dominicana* like them. It can’t be, *no lo parece* [do not look], etc., etc” (Díaz 114). Beli’s Dominican identity is constantly in contention because of her dark Black skin. Dominican *mestizaje* nullifies and marginalizes Afro-Dominicans and Afro-Haitians. While she is read as Haitian, Beli is also viewed as hailing from Cuba, another former Spanish colony with an abundance of peoples of African descent. I posit that *Oscar Wao* critiques this racial hypocrisy; while the nation celebrates *mestizaje* and *Indio* lineage, this “celebratory” racial move also debunks and vilifies African roots/presence. By marking Beli as Haitian or Cuban, Dominican *mestizaje* posits that Blackness exists in other Latin American and Caribbean countries

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<sup>27</sup> Saillant 139.

but not the Dominican Republic. This cognitive dissonance perpetuates the lie that Black people do not exist in the Dominican Republic. Instead, the nation is created through Indigenous, mixed, and European roots. This type of violence creates Belis where they spew antiblackness. In the text, it mocks the how Dominicans view Blackness as existing everywhere but there.

While Beli's denial of Blackness as a dark skinned Black woman reveals the ethnic/racial hypocrisy of Trujillo's dictatorship, "Water or Light" exemplifies how the dictatorship exacerbates colorism and anti-Haitianism within the bateys. The grandmother is so dark that the other Haitian cane cutters stay clear of her: "Her days were long and beneath the bright sun, her skin burned ebony and her hair bleached white. [...] They were terrified by the absence of light around and within her. They thought she was a demon. They called her *"la demonia negra"* (Gay 57). In a way, manual labor transforms the grandmother into the "black demon" that petrifies the Haitian cane cutter community. The rampant colorism and antiblackness regurgitate the negative myths of Haitians being the "dark other" that haunts the Dominican Republic.<sup>28</sup> The narrator continues

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<sup>28</sup> During the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Haiti and the Dominican Republic were under U.S occupation. With both countries under U.S imperial power, the influx of Haitian cane cutter grew: both governments sought monetary gain from the increasing sugar industry. Haiti sends Haitian laborers across the border while Dominicans profit from it. As Christina Davison in her research "Visions of Haiti: Documentaries of the Dominicans Sugar Industry" states: "The situation changed, however, in 1916 when the U.S. Military occupied the Dominican Republic. The U.S. had already invaded Haiti (1915-1934) only the year before. Thus, in 1916, the country controlled the entire island of Hispaniola. This political situation allowed the sugar planters to regulate the industry across the entire island. They were thus able to facilitate cheap labor

“she (grandmother) *heard the way people stared and whispered*. They steered clear” (Gay 57), bringing into focus the auditory remembrance of her grandmother’s memory and marginalization. Her dark skin and “demoness” create an affective marginalization that is felt by the Haitian cane cutters which in turn mirrors the established anti-Haitianism of 1930s Dominican Republic. The grandmother’s dark skin highlights the demonization of Haitians in the Dominican nation-state yet also colorism of the Haitian batey community.

The Narrator mentions El Jefe only once throughout the story yet brings into focus his murderous politics and racial hypocrisy that will affect three generations of Haitian women: “It was General Rafael Trujillo who ordered all the Haitians out of his country, who had his soldiers interrogate anyone whose skin was too dark, who liked they belonged on the other side of the border. It was the general who took a page from the Book of Judges to exact his genocide and bring German industry to his island” (Gay 59). The Narrator brings religiosity and the Blanqueamiento, or whitening of the race, to the forefront: this reveals Trujillo’s plan to whiten the Dominican Republic by any means necessary. This illustrates the distorted ways how Trujillo will take to breed the Blackness out of the Dominican Republic.

Beli and the grandmother highlight and unsettle Trujillo’s Indio & mestizo racial politics due to their subjectivity of being dark skinned Caribbean women. With Belí, we see how Dominicans place her as a dark other despite being born in Bani. This ethno-racialization feeds into her anti-Haitianism and anti-blackness. The grandmother is demonized by the nation-state and

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from Haiti to sugarcane plantations in San Pedro de Macorís and other regions of the southeast” (Davison 1).

by other Haitian cane cutters, feeding into the dominant narrative of Haitians being “black presence taking over the borders.”

**“Geography of so much sorrow:” Cane fields and Massacre River as sites of sexual trauma:**

The lingering silence and the shrouding of sexual and physical assaults of Beli and the grandmother highlights the effects Trujillo’s brutal regime had on Black women in Haiti and the Dominican Republic. The cane fields and Massacre River hold these painful memories yet also they also *voice* the Beli and Grandmother’s anguish when they refuse to speak. I want to illuminate *how these memory spaces speak* through the speculative. By doing this, *Oscar Wao* and “Water or Light” reveals to the audience *what has happened*, especially when thinking of Haiti and the Dominican Republic as countries full of magic and mythos. Because magic coexists with the mundane in these two texts, acts such as the shrieking of canes, the suffusing of mud-blood water into the skin, and temporalities shifting are seen as normal occurrences in the Caribbean.

Because of her illegibility as a Dominican, Beli’s affair with the husband of La Fea — Trujillo’s sister—appears impossible. Pregnant and facing La Fea, Trujillo’s sister, Beli encounters Trujillo’s negrophobe legacy in the face. Calling her racial epithets such as “mi monita” [my monkey] and “Black cara de culo” [Black ass face], La Fea refuses to acknowledge Beli as her husband’s lover or his child because Beli is a dark skinned Afro-Dominican. Because Beli’s Blackness threatens Trujillo’s mestizaje and La Fea’s marriage, Beli is beaten and dragged to the cane fields, the site of enslavement, genocide, and the heart of sugar industry. Or as Edouard Glissant states in *Poetics of Relation*, “the belly of the world” (75).

Driving out east to the cane fields, while also simultaneously being beaten by the goons, temporalities shift while heading to the cane fields: “one second you were deep in the twentieth century (well the twentieth century of the Third World) and the next you’d find yourself plunged 180 years into rolling fields of cane” (Díaz 148). This “leaking of pasts and futures” and “ever-presentness of the past” I argue occurs in the cane fields, revealing the cyclical sentient nature of the fields. By placing slavery, dictatorship, and manual labor in conversation with each other, *Oscar Wao* reveals that the cane fields as a topographic cyclical archive, creating a rippling effect that reverberates through time for Black people. The melding of time-space is echoed in Katherine McKittrick’s “Plantation Futures” in which the scholar conceptualizes the “spatial continuity between the living and the dead [...] between past and present” (2). While McKittrick’s theorizes the “time-space that tracks the plantation toward the prison and the impoverished and destroyed city sectors” to examine how the “plantation” transforms into the urban city, she also brings into sharp focus “the ways the plantation is an ongoing locus of antiblack violence and death” (2-3). Because of the time-space of the cane fields, the canes subsume Beli in the cyclical anti-black violence that will reverberate for Oscar.

While the madness of the cane fields shifts temporalities, the canes also become sentient. The canes shriek and rustle as the goons drag Beli to the heart of the cane fields: “They walked until the cane was roaring so loud around them it sounded as if they were in the middle of a storm (Díaz 147). In addition to the sonic, the canes “didn’t want her to leave, of course; it slash at her palms, jabbed into her flank and clawed her thighs, and its sweet stench clogged her throat” (Díaz 150). The fukú curse—antiblack violence—animates the cane fields, swallowing Beli and not letting her go.

The cane fields voice and shroud the truth surrounding sexual violence. “They beat her like a slave... Was there time for a rape or two? I *suspect* there was, but we shall never know because it’s not something she talked about. *All that can be said is that it was the end of language, end of hope*. It was the sort of beating that breaks people, breaks them utterly” (Díaz 147, emphasis mine). Yunió’s suspicion, Beli’s reticence, and the looming secrecy of rape reveals the haunting legacy of colonial sexual subjugation of Black women. The absence of truth merges colonial conquest, enslavement, genocide, and despotic violence of the cane fields. Beli only cries out for her unborn child and never for herself. The canes roar and shriek for her. While the attack symbolizes the end of language and hope, the canes remember and speak for Beli. I assert that the sentience and archival power of the canes reveals the cyclical colonial subjugation of Black women. Cyclical in the sense that what happened to enslaved Black women, beaten and raped, was happening to Beli. These acts of physical violence echoes throughout time. While the goons attempt to break her, they regurgitate misogynist, antiblack and colonial language through the act of rape and physical assault (“end of language, end of hope”).

My reading of the canes’ sentience and shrieking/roaring harkens to Glissant’s “The Cry of the Plantation.” Glissant begins with the ship: “Within the ship’s space the cry of those deported was stifled, as it would be in the realm of the Plantations” (31). However, those stifled cries would soon be the language of the plantation space: “deferred or disguised speech, in which men and women who are gagged keep their words close” (99). Because Beli does not speak, I transpose the language of stifled screams and shrieks of the enslaved to the canes, shrieking and remembering for Beli. Crying out for her since she refuses to cry out for herself in front of the goons. Because of the cyclical violence of the *fuku*, the canes also roar and shriek because of the legacy of



colonialism and enslavement. The canes are the logos of Beli's pain and suffering while also remembering years of colonialism and slavery.

Despite the canes leaving her for dead, zafa saves Beli from the jaws of death. "So, as Beli was flitting in and out of life, there appeared at her side a creature that would have been an amiable mongoose if not for its golden lion eyes and absolute black of its pelt[...]" (149). During the 18th century, mongooses were imported to the Caribbean to control rat infestations in the sugar cane fields.<sup>29</sup> While the presence of the mongoose appears "strange" to Western audiences, Yunion reminds the readers "Dominicans are Caribbean and therefore have an extraordinary tolerance for extreme phenomena. How else could we have survived what we have survived?" (Diaz 148).<sup>30</sup> The Caribbean is a speculative space where violence and magic co-exist like rice and beans. This clairvoyant mongoose aids the broken Beli, leading her through the consuming canes, and comforting her with the promise of future children: Oscar and Lola. "But before Beli lost hope she heard the creature's voice. She (for it had a woman's lilt) was singing... Sueño, sueño, sueño, como tú te llamas [I dream and dream and dream of you calling my name]"[...] "Yo me llamo sueño de la madrugada [I call myself the dream of the dawn]" (150). The soft feminine voice of the mongoose, singing of dreams and promise leads Beli out of the canes: "She came to in the ferocious moonlight. A broken girl, atop broken stalks of cane. Pain everywhere but alive. Alive" (148). Zafa saves Beli from the jaws of death and ushers her into a new life with Oscar and Lola

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<sup>29</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Small\\_Asian\\_mongoose](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Small_Asian_mongoose)

<sup>30</sup> I also read the mongoose as a retroactive colonial subject because they are brought to Saint Domingue for slavery, just like enslaved Africans. So of course, Beli, a descendant of the slaves, would be greeted by the mongoose in the cane fields.

in the United States.

Secrecy of sexual violence also surrounds the three women character “In the Manner of Water or Light.” Just like Yunion remembering and recounting Beli’s story, so does the Narrator when it comes to her grandmother and mother. Throughout the text, the Narrator constantly reminds us that these three generations of Haitian women “We are the keepers of secrets. We are secrets ourselves. We try to protect each other from the geography of so much sorrow” (57). The Narrator, her mother Jacqueline, and grandmother are “keepers of secrets” for each other, each of them remembering for each other while also serving as the constant reminder of the massacre. The sharing of secrets and *being* the secret drives “In the Manner of Water or Light.” The embodiment of memory—which I read as their *actual* bodies being the constant reminder of the Massacre and human skin—and the fantastic nature of Massacre River as a suffusing geography illustrates the narrative’s multi-faceted relationship to memory, generational trauma, and despotic violence.

“Water or Light” uses scent, blood and sugar as motifs of memory for the grandmother and Jacqueline. The Narrator begins “Water or Light” with her mother’s conception in Massacre River: “My mother was conceived in what would ever after be known as the Massacre River. The sharp smell of blood followed her since” (Gay 57). Here, the text positions Jacqueline’s life beginning in the river, a topographic space that separates Hispaniola and the site of the genocide, which in turn is a site of memory. Blood from the slain Haitians haunt Jacqueline, even when she leaves Haiti for the United States. As a former cane cutter, the grandmother cannot stand the scent of anything sweet: “If she smells sweetness in the air, she purses her lip and sucks on her teeth, shaking her head” (58). It is a reminder of cutting canes and eating canes. A state of nausea engulfs the grandmother. Blood and sugar are fitting motifs of memory as they both are important in

thinking about manual labor. Blood and canes fuel the behemoth of the sugar industry. Additionally, blood and sugar tie Jacqueline and the grandmother together. Although the haunting of the genocide and Jacqueline's neurosis of the traumatic event strains their relationship over the years, the two women belong to each other, to the memory of manual labor, the massacre, and Haiti.

Following Trujillo's Book of Judges order to expel Haitians from Dominican land, the narrator begins an "unfinished account" about the massacre: "Soldiers came to the plantation where my grandmother worked. They had guns. They were cruel, spoke in loud, angry voices, took liberties. One of the women with whom my grandmother shared her shanty betrayed my grandmother's hiding place. *We never speak of what happened after that. The ugly details are trapped between the fragments of our family history. We are secrets ourselves*" (Gay 59). Just like Yuniors in *Oscar Wao*, the narrator in "Water or Light" never discloses the details of the sexual assault. The narrator is an intimate witness yet does not honor the audience with the details for that is *possibly omitted* from the grandmother's memory.<sup>31</sup> The narrator's insinuating tone leads us to believe that an assault could have happened. Because the women serve as secrets and secret keepers for each other, the brief passage alludes to the grandmother being a rape survivor and Jacqueline being a *possible* child of rape.

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<sup>31</sup> While my research does interrogate sexual violence and its relationship to geographies, I do not favor discussing the full details of a brutal rape assault. It is catastrophizing and invasive. Additionally, Saidiya Hartman's *Scenes of Subjection* is a fascinating read on the dangers of regurgitating details of sexual and physical subjugation of Black women for the sake of the audience.

It is Massacre River, the site of the genocide, that saves the grandmother's life from the soldiers:

My grandmother ended up in the river. She found a shallow place. She tried to hold her breath while she hid from the marauding soldiers on both of the muddy shores straddling the river. There was a moment when she laid on her back, and submerged herself until her entire body was covered in water, until her pores was suffused with it. [...] She smelled blood in the water. [...] When a bloated corpse slowly floated past her, then an arm, a leg, something she couldn't recognize, she covered her mouth with her hand. She screamed into her own skin instead of the emptiness around her.

“In the Manner of Water or Light” 60

This dense passage illuminates how the grandmother's skin soaks the memory of the genocide and how she attempts to scream out her own skin to survive the murky waters. This act is what I call suffusing memory: the body remembering the traumatic event through “soaking” or “inheriting” the memory, which is related to “leaking” while reading the Beli episode. This suffusing helps the grandmother remember the genocide while also escaping it. My conceptualization of suffusing memory is in part thanks to experimental poet Akilah Oliver's definition of “flesh memory.” Oliver, who constructs her own definition as if it were in Merriam-Webster, offers us: “3. the multiplicity of language and realities that the flesh holds. 4. the language activated in the body's memory” (Smith 110).<sup>32</sup> While Oliver is concerned with bodily memory, as am I but later in the

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<sup>32</sup> The full definition entry that Oliver creates: “flesh memory 1. a text, a language, a mythology, a truth, a reality, an invented as well as literal translation of everything that we've ever experienced or known, whether we know it directly or through some type of genetic memory, osmosis, or environment. 2. the

chapter, “Water Or Light” reveals the ways in which how *memory fills/coats the skin*. The text illuminates how flesh can transmute to let memory seep into the pores.

Like any child of Haitians and their tales of the homeland, the Narrator is not fazed by this suffusing of memory. She *understands* that suffusing of memory is “normal” in her grandmother’s early life as a cane cutter and survivor. The Narrator also comprehends that violence transforms the river and the human skin into magical spaces of sorrow and memory. “In the Manner of Water or Light” reveals several “living” geographies during the genocide. The river cloaks the grandmother’s body while her skin suffuses with the blood and mud of the dead. The river serves as a topographic site of memory while also as a murky refuge.

The otherworldly saves the lives of Beli and the grandmother from the geographies that attempt to kill them. Because Beli and the grandmother hail from an island where violence and magic co-exist in the mundane, the appearance of the mongoose and the river cloaking the grandmother’s body from angry soldiers exemplifies the intimate relationship between geography, magic, and violence of Hispaniola. Magic protects the women, yet it also heightens the physical assaults they have lived through. The mongoose and the river protect Beli and the grandmother. However, Beli and the grandmother are beaten to the edge of their lives. Lastly, secrecy of rape shrouds the women and haunts their children in the New World.

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body’s truths and realities. 3. the multiplicity of language and realities that the flesh holds. 4. the language activated in the body’s memory.” I wanted to concentrate on the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> definitions of flesh memory since it resonates more with the suffusing scene.

### **Return to the Wound: Nostalgia and Flesh Memory**

In *Unclaimed Experience*, Cathy Caruth remarks that “trauma is not locatable in the simple violent and original event in an individual’s past, but rather in the way it’s very unassimilated nature – the way it was precisely not known in the first instance – returns to haunt the survivor later on” (Caruth 4). Brutality of the original event overwhelms the survivor and sometimes the mind is unable to fully recognize the damage which leads to reliving the event through flashbacks, hallucinations, panic attacks, and nightmares. Additionally, because of the overwhelming effect of the event, survivors can also repress these experiences into the subconscious. Beli refuses to acknowledge her attack in the cane fields yet that does not stop her into succumbing into a vortex of rage when she thinks about the Trujillo goons: “How she hated these men. For her whole life she would hate them, never forgive, never forgive, and she would never be able to think of them without succumbing to a vortex of rage” (Díaz 146). For the grandmother, she exhibits the classic definition of psychological trauma—a blow to the tissues of the mind—in which she relives her traumas through her bodily responses when she sees the cane fields the nausea she feels when she smells sugar: “My grandmother is also haunted by smells. She cannot stand the smell of anything sweet. When she sees the cane fields, a sharp pain radiates across her shoulders and down her back” (Gay 59). Both these women experience rage, pain, and loss when they are reminded of the brutal event yet never disclose their experience to anyone. However, I want to push Caruth’s theorization of the event haunting the survivor to how their children inherit and experience that same trauma. Trauma unfolds between generations and its aftermath is experienced by the survivors and their loved ones. I want to push into thinking about how Oscar, Jacqueline, and the narrator inherit these traumas, how they navigate the woven stories of the homeland, and how

returning to the site of trauma holds the key to reconciling the trauma so that it does not hold too much power for them.

While his mother survives the assault in the cane fields, her son Oscar would soon find himself there too, for his true love Ybón. After years of being the “fat Dominicano” that could not a girlfriend to save his life, Oscar finally finds a woman who loves him back. However, Ybón’s boyfriend Capitán, a former Trujillo officer, wants to end Oscar’s life. Ordering his goons—whom Yuniór names Grundy and Grod—to kidnap Oscar, Yuniór remarks: “Where did they take him? *Where else?* The cane fields. How’s that for eternal return?”<sup>33</sup> Due to cane fields being a constant site of terror and trauma in *Oscar Wao*, Oscar’s “first time” to the cane fields is more of a return.

As Grundy and Grod walk Oscar through the canes, the titular character feels as if he has been to the canes before despite walking through an “alien” space:

Their flashlight newly activated, they walked him into the cane—never had he heard anything so loud and alien, the susurrations, the crackling, the flashes of motion underfoot (snake? mongoose?), overheard even the stars, all of them gathered in vainglorious congress. *And yet this world seemed strangely familiar to him, he had the overwhelming feeling that he’d been in this very place, a long time ago.*<sup>34</sup>

Without sharing her experiences with her son, Beli’s episode in the cane fields becomes familiar to Oscar. While this is his first time being in the fields, Oscar’s outer body experience is a normal because he is Caribbean: “What more fantasy than the Antilles?” (Díaz 22). The fukú leads Beli and Oscar to the cane fields while the latter accesses his mother’s memory. While Beli experiences

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<sup>33</sup> Díaz 296.

<sup>34</sup> Díaz 298 (emphasis mine)

the violence of the negrophobic regime of Trujillo, so does Oscar 20 years later. This generational baggage allows for Oscar to feel remnants of his mother's trauma.<sup>35</sup> The inheritance of earlier generations gives way to inheriting collective memory which is the ability for future generations to remember certain events from the past. Oscar, involuntarily, inherits his mother's memories of the cane fields although she does not share her memories with him.

How Oscar remembers his mother's experience in the cane fields is through embodied memory. As Barbara Miztal posits in her article "Theories of Social Remembering," "*Embodiedness* alerts us to the ways in which feelings and bodily sensations, generated in the past, help to interpret the past."<sup>36</sup> The overwhelmingly familiar feeling that Oscar experiences when he walks into the cane fields is his mother's embodied memory during the 1950s. While he does not fully understand the memories he is experiencing during his first trip to the cane fields, Oscar's second and final trip to the cane fields allow him to fully understand the terrifying legacy of Trujillo's regime.

What makes collective memory and embodied memory unique in Oscar's episode in the cane fields is that Beli never tells her son about her experience in the cane fields. Just like how the mongoose saves Beli, Oscar's familiarity in the cane fields is through Caribbean magic.<sup>37</sup> Magic

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<sup>35</sup> Reulecke explores "generational baggage" or generativity in his article. Generativity "refers primarily to the—unconscious or conscious—examination, especially within particularly distinctive generationalities, of their ties to the diachronic sequence of 'generations' in the genealogical sense of the word" (122).

<sup>36</sup> Barbara Misztal. "The Remembering Process." *Theories of Social Remembering*. New York: McGraw Hill, 2003. eBook. 77.

<sup>37</sup> In my conceptualization of speculative geographies, I lose sight of Lola in all this. Because my work



and cyclical time allow Oscar to experience collective memory without his mother sharing her experiences with him. The cane fields are archival spaces, or memory spaces, that houses the two characters' experiences in the tall stalks of cane. This memory space also recreates bodily nostalgia that allow Oscar to feel as if it was a return to Beli's trauma. Additionally, the two characters also share the magical encounters within the fields. Unlike his mother, Oscar is not visited by the mongoose however he is saved from the jaws of death. The zafa saves Oscar in the fields, which allows him to leave the Dominican Republic. However, after dreaming and listening to the canes while he is in Patterson, NJ, Oscar decides to return to the Dominican Republic (Díaz 307).

In contrast to his first violent encounter in the cane fields, during the second and final time in the cane fields, Oscar no longer fears for his life. Additionally, Oscar is greeted by Haitian voices in the fields, bringing his narrative in conversation with the Parsley massacre and current

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looks at how geography affects Oscar and Beli, Lola falls to the margins which is an oversight on my end. However, she should not: Lola had her own chapter, was resourceful, did not tolerate Yuniór's philandering, and rebelled against her mother's misogyny and antiblackness. Perhaps one of the most touching, vulnerable, but tragic scenes between Lola and Beli happens in the bathroom of their Patterson, New Jersey home. This space is intimate, yet Lola reveals to the audience her own bruja (witch) clairvoyance as she feels her mother's breast, revealing a knot. "A knot just beneath her skin, tight and secretive as a plot. And at that moment, *for reasons you will never quite understand, you are overcome by the feeling, the premonition, that something in your life is about to change*" (53, italics mine). Lola herself is a witch and knew of her mother's cancer in the intimate space of the bathroom. We should also think about Beli's treatment of Lola as a way of projecting her traumas of the Dominican Republic and a possible reason why she was so strict with her own daughter.

Haitian manual labor: “This time Oscar didn’t cry when they drove him back to the cane fields. Zafa would be here soon, and the cane had grown well and thick and in places you could hear the stalks clack-clack-clacking against each other like triffids and you hear kriyol voices lost in the night. The smell of the ripening cane was unforgettable...” (Díaz 320). Just like Beli’s experience, the cane fields become animated just before Oscar’s death. The intermingling of different otherworldly elements highlights Yunió’s hybrid storytelling of syncretizing the fantastical nature of science fiction to the fantastical nature of Blackness in the Dominican Republic. The otherworldly—triffids, mongooses, clairvoyant dreams—becomes the norm within the Dominican Republic while also creating a stark contrast to the horrors of slavery and Trujillo’s regime. Additionally, embodied memory allows for Oscar to feel nostalgia and understand the horrifying legacy of the cane fields. While Beli’s experiences are unknown to him, the rustling of Haitian voices and the magical nature of the fields allows Oscar to fully understand the haunting of the Parsley massacre and Trujillo’s regime. Generational memory transmission In *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* exemplifies that we carry the memories of our former loved ones and experience the lasting effects of untold traumas. The text reveals that “you can never run away. away. Not ever. The only way out is in” (Díaz 348).

The transmission of generational trauma also exists in “In the Manner of Water or Light” yet through fungible memory, orality and flesh memory. Unlike Beli, the grandmother constantly revisits Massacre River to honor and remember Jacques, her lover who sacrificed his life so that the grandmother could escape the soldiers in Ouanaminthe (Gay 61). Just as he whispered in the river so many years ago during the massacre, “I want to be remembered,” the grandmother continues to visit the river, consuming water and mud to remember him and their love: “She drank

the memories in that water...She took river mud into her hands, eating it, enduring the thick, bitter taste” (62) The fungible memory, as I call it, is a process of remembering through consumption. The grandmother ritually consumes the mud of the river to remember Jacques and be tied to his memory and the river. The grandmother *suffuses and consumes the memory of the massacre and Jacques*. While Beli refuses to utter a word to her children about her ordeal in the cane fields, the grandmother always brought Jacqueline back to the river to honor her “father.”

Another way the grandmother honors Jacques is through sharing their story with the Narrator. Once the Narrator turned 5, she visited her grandparents (the grandmother married a headmaster after surviving the genocide) every summer to fulfill her duty as a child of immigrants. Every summer, the grandmother “kept her promise to Jacques Bertrand. Each time she saw me, she offered new fragments of their story or, if my mother’s fears were correct, her story. I looked like him, had his eyes and chin” (66). The grandmother honors his memory and her story as a massacre survivor through orality. The grandmother maps Jacques’ lineage to the Narrator, establishing the Narrator and Jacqueline as his family. While the grandmother does not share *what really happened* with the soldiers once they found her—the lingering absence of truth that haunts Jacqueline—she does narrate her trauma as a genocide survivor with her beloved Jacques. Narrating the traumatic event (the massacre and Jacques sacrifice) to an empathetic listener (the narrator) is necessary for the healing process of survivors per Laub and Herman. The grandmother sharing with the narrator of survival and establishing a familial lineage with Jacques illuminates her way of coping with the trauma of the genocide, grounding a sense of identity and for her and her granddaughter.

While the grandmother and Narrator honor the trauma of the genocide with the latter attempting to piece together these silenced generational stories, Jacqueline suffers from the paranoia of this inherited trauma, refusing to face it. “I would try to ask my mother questions, to better piece things together but she would only shut herself in her room, rub perfume across her upper lip, lie on her back, her eyes covered with a cool washcloth” (Gay 66). With Jacqueline, she cannot escape the smell of blood which I argue is her “family heirloom.” The roots of this heirloom are the possibility of being a child of rape. “My mother has never been able to accept she will never know her real father. She worries her mother has woven the story of her conception into an elaborate fable to hide a darker truth. She knows too much about what angry, wild soldiers will do to frightened, fleeing young women” (62). While the Narrator embraces and honors the massacre, Jacqueline’s anxieties of an unknown father and the possibility of rape manifest into leaving Haiti for good, blood haunting her senses, and “unspeakableness” of the genocide to her own daughter. This “unspeakableness,” which Judith Herman lays out as a symptom for PTSD, renders Jacqueline silent: she avoids any mention of her mother’s life as a cane cutter, Haiti, or her unknown father. The possibility of being a child of sexual assault throws Jacqueline into a constant state of identity crisis. While she is not the “actual” survivor of the trauma, Jacqueline is the “living embodiment” of the genocide (conceived during the massacre) and still feels the rippling aftermath of the event through the scent of blood and silence, inhabiting a state of constant neurosis.

While anxiety and blood alienate Jacqueline from Haiti, the Narrator understands the country as a complex yet anguished country of memory. Just like any good Caribbean child, the Narrator visits her doting grandparents in Haiti, fulfilling Jacqueline’s role as a dutiful daughter (Gay 65). Yet the gleaming Haiti that the Narrator loved as a child, and hoped that her mother

would return to and love, was also a country of heartache and anguish. We see this when the Narrator faces beggars on the streets in Haiti, understanding “the land of my mother’s birth as a place run through with pain” (67). This dual ontology, which Ashcroft argues in *The Empire Writes Back*, shapes the Narrator’s relationship to the homeland and U.S. Haiti is not a place of nostalgia and return but rather a failed post-colonial dream and sorrow. When the Narrator stays in the Berkshires for the summer, she is alienated by the other white Jewish girls comprehending that she “could have been at a real beach in the Caribbean with people who loved me and looked like me” (Gay 68). While Jacqueline refuses to return to the country of no paternity and the grandmother refuses to leave Haiti to honor Jacques, the Narrator acts as a mediator, understanding that Haiti is a geography of sorrow and the United States is a space of constant alienation.

Yet tragedy strikes the three women. Suddenly, the headmaster dies and the grandmother is ready to join her beloved Jacques. At the Narrator’s insistence, both Jacqueline and the Narrator finally return to the grandmother in Haiti. Pumped with Valium and carrying perfumed handkerchiefs to ease the intensifying smell of blood, Jacqueline finally reunites with her mother after thirty years of separation (Gay 70). Yet it is the return to Massacre River, that brings the text into an emotional denouement for all three women. The river the Narrator imagined as a beastly river that claimed lives was just a weakly flowing border: “I had pictured the river as a wide yawning and bloody beast, but where we stood, the river flowed weakly. The waters did not run deep. It was just a border between two geographies of grief.” (71). Here, I read this as the Narrator’s seeing Hispaniola as a shared island with different tales of despair, violence, and sorrow.

However, Jacqueline experiences flesh memory the moment they reach the river, finally

facing the site of trauma and memory. As Oliver expounds, flesh memory is a memory of historical violence that can be felt among historically distant bodies.<sup>38</sup> While I do argue that Jacqueline's body is a reminder of the massacre (her conception during the height and site of the genocide), she does however feel the intense traumatic aftermaths of the brutal event. And finally revisiting the site of her mother's trauma causes her body to react: "My mother's shoulders shook but she made no sound. 'I cannot breathe,' she said. Then she dropped to her knees, curled into herself. She said, 'I must know the truth'" (71). It is at this moment Jacqueline's cry for the truth merges several traumatic experiences of the grandmother: the massacre, the *possibility* of the rape, and the death of Jacques. Jacqueline's exhaustion and neurosis finally peaks, her body reliving the grandmother's brutal life. The river, holding the painful memories of the genocide, elicits Jacqueline's body to respond and allow her to finally honor the grandmother's trauma.

With the three women finally revisiting the river together, remembrance, death, and renewal ends "In a Manner of Water or Light:"

We knelt for a long while. My grandmother stood, whispering the story of how she came to know and remember Jacques Bertrand until her words dried her lips. I stroked my mother's hair gently, waited for her breathing to slow, her back rising into my chest with a melancholy cadence. We mourned till morning. The sun rose high. Bright beams of light spread over and through us. The sun burned so hot it dried the river itself, turning the water

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<sup>38</sup> Laura Trantham Smith. "From Rupture to Remembering: Flesh Memory and the Embodied Experimentalism of Akilah Oliver." P. 111.

into light. We were left kneeling in a bed of sand and bones, I started to cry. I could not stop. I cried to wash us all clean.

Roxane Gay “In a Manner of Water and Light” 72

The Narrator’s melancholic yet promising tone performs a great deal of work. The grandmother’s tale is finally heard by Jacqueline on her dying breath and the Narrator also witnesses her Jacqueline grieve the massacre, the grandmother’s death, and Jacques. This generational act of witnessing and listening performs what trauma scholar Dori Laub posits as essential for survivors: making sense of the brutal event so that it loses its traumatizing power over survivors.<sup>39</sup> However, I want to take it a step further and posit that in this moment, it also loses power over Jacqueline. Haunted her entire life by the massacre, the absence of her father (which strained her relationship with the grandmother), and refusing to face the grandmother’s trauma, Jacqueline’s mourning was essential for her to diminish the trauma to function. By no means does the trauma ever go away but by confronting and vocalizing the suffering, the brutal event is normalized in hopes that it will never be repeated.

In addition to the mourning of the Narrator and Jacqueline, the river transforms into a light filled burial ground. As if breaking through the haunting and trauma, the sun fills the river and the two women with light, illuminating a bed of sand and bones. While not as heavy handed with the speculative, I argue that the sun transforms the river into a light filled burial ground, a “geography full of sorrow” that fills the women with a melancholic hope. The Narrator, who entered the world

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<sup>39</sup> Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History* (New York and London, Routledge, 1992).

“crying lustily,” cries to honor the dead, her loving grandmother, and the mother who is hopefully free of ghosts.

Yunior also ends the *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* on a somber but hopeful note as well. Beli, heartbroken over Oscar’s death, no longer fights breast cancer which had returned and stayed. After tumultuous years of infidelity and separation, Yunior and Lola reunite with Lola’s new daughter in tow. Yunior, seeing Lola’s daughter Isis wear a string of azabaches to keep the evil eye off (three beads for Oscar, Lola, and Beli) her. Yet Yunior dreams/foresees Isis visiting him when she’s old enough to have her own dreams, old enough to experience clairvoyance (the same as Lola did), and old enough to ask about Oscar so she can finally “end the Circle” (330). I read the Circle as cyclical intergenerational trauma and the fukú. The text insinuates Isis learning about her family and their traumas might end the fukú and its vicious cycle. The story begins with the fukú and ends with the zafa. Although Yunior ponders “Even now as I write these words I wonder if this book ain't a zafa of sorts. My very own counterspell” (Díaz 7).

By re-visiting the site of trauma and empathizing with the survivors by witnessing, Oscar, Yunior, Jacqueline and the Narrator exemplify how generational memory transmits to future generations and by normalizing the event between loved ones ensures some form of “breaking the cycle.” Oscar and Jacqueline experience mostly an embodied flesh memory when they re-visit the cane fields and the river—sites of their mothers’ traumas—while Yunior and the Narrator serve as the empathizing witnesses and storytellers who seek to break the traumatic cycle. *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* and “In The Manner of Water or Light” illuminates that land rooted in violence holds painful memories, silenced traumas affect the survivors and their descendants, and the hopeful possibilities of breaking cyclical traumas.



**Chapter 2: Reinvestigating Pleasure and Black Life in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes***

***Were Watching God:***

No one else can make me feel

The colors that you bring

Stay with me while we grow old

*And we will live each day in springtime*

*'Cause lovin' you has made my life so beautiful*

And every day of my life is filled with lovin' you

Minnie Riperton – *Lovin' you*

While discussing Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, literary scholar Mary Helen Washington stated: "One of the few miracles in this world is the survival of love and loyalty among Black people in America, despite the inhuman definitions of manhood and womanhood that have been forced upon us. That miracle of Black love is recorded in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*."<sup>40</sup> Despite white supremacy's reducing Black people to a thing or "otherness," the bildungsroman portrays Southern Black life and love through the eyes of Janie Stark. We experience several love stories take place in the novel: Janie's love for nature, love for her husbands, and love for Floridian folk. Narrating her life's to Pheoby Watson, Janie shares her tumultuous journey to self-fulfillment and love.

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<sup>40</sup> Mary Helen Washington, "The Black Women's Search for Identity: Zora Neale Hurston's Work," *Black World* (August 1972), pp. 68-75.

We follow Janie through her young life in the wilderness with Granny, her loving and overly protective caretaker. Experiencing her first orgasm under the pear tree, Janie has always been a romantic. Yet Granny wanted to give her the porch life, a symbol of white success and security, and matches her daughter with farmer Logan Killicks. We watch Janie toil in stifling marriage to Logan Killicks and then promised to the charmed life on the front porch with Jody Starks, creator and mayor of Eatonville. Yet it is Janie's relationship with the younger Tea Cake that pulls on our heart strings. Caring and affectionate, the young drifter puts Janie's needs first. Black literary studies discuss this relationship and her orgasm by the pear tree as freedom or reclamation. Yet we lose sight of suffering that traces those moments. How can we engage the orgasm scene when Janie and her mother are both products of rape, Granny being an enslaved woman raped by her master? While Tea Cake seeks and gives Janie care during their first days of romance, it slowly crumbles into domestic violence, triggered by colorism.

These joyous and pleasurable acts are always connected to experiences of trauma and the afterlife of slavery and intra-mural violence. I use intra-mural violence rather than terms like "Black patriarchy" because Black men, although they can be antagonistic to Black women (we see this throughout the text and my research), they do not have access to the same institutional powers that white men have. This is not to say Black male characters in any of the texts I examine are without fault or should not be punished because of this marginalization from patriarchy, which, in its true form, can only be read as white. Acts of violence against Black women are how Black men, barred from the institution of (white) patriarchy, attempt to consolidate the "masculine" power *they think they lost due to a history of enslavement and white supremacist violence*. Their lack of "access" is not an excuse, but it does show how Black men replicate power that is not theirs and

the violent repercussions this has on Black women. To quote my colleague Dr. Mlondolozzi Zondi, patriarchy cannot be Black since Black men do not have access to the traditional concept of the phallus. While Black Men are imagined as their phallus by white supremacy, they cannot be said to own it or themselves since their penis and being become subject to the white conceptions of gender and sexual practice. For the rest of this chapter (and the dissertation) I will use words such as ‘intramural violence’ or ‘misogynoir’ to discuss the violent antagonism Black men enact on Black women.

Examining the muck and back porch as sites of intimate Black kinship and love, I argue that *Their Eyes Were Watching God* portrays the complexity of pleasure and trauma in Black rural life. Additionally, how nature protects, interacts and enacts vengeance on behalf of Janie. We see this interaction clearly in the floral language / prose of the text, Janie’s engagement with the flora and fauna of Florida, and how it responds to Janie’s heartbreak. This prose is what I link to floral romanticism. From her teenaged romanticism of love through the pollination of her grandmother’s pear tree to experiencing jealousy as a festering seed, *Their Eyes* roots Janie and the muck through nature. This Black immersion into nature opens discussions of nature.<sup>4142</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Black ecoliterary scholars such as Kimberly Ruffin, Kimberly Smith, and Ann R. Smith have been pivotal in my exploration on ecocriticism in literature. Although my dissertation looks more at the cultural relationship to land and not the semantics of ecology, this chapter looks at the physical land specifically especially with the dominant language of the flora and fauna of South Florida.

<sup>42</sup> My readings on the use of “ecology” vs “environmentalism” has been eye opening, especially since I have spent years thinking that they are the same terms. I also was pleased to see who African American eco-literary traditions have participated in both conversations for years. Basically, ecology is the scientific

There are several geographies that operate in Hurston's text. From Granny's yard to Jody's Eatonville, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* traverses the large space of Florida to discuss Black life in the South. Yet my main interventions are the muck, which are situated in the Everglades and the back porch of Janie's house. The muck is where Tea Cake takes Janie during their short-lived relationship. The muck opens Janie's eyes to Black folks outside the "empty middle class" dream, to the Seminole community, diasporic folk dances, and her egalitarian love with Tea Cake. Yet it is not perfect: it is a space where we see how where nature *responds* to threadbare masculinity, colorism, and the abuse of Janie. The muck exemplifies the warped relationship between pleasure and trauma.

The back porch is where our story begins and ends, with Janie and Phoeby. While Janie and other women are excluded from Joe's cisgender men dominated front porch, Janie takes up

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analysis and study of interactions among organisms and their environment. Ecology as a science plays an important role in our understanding of various ecosystems. Environmentalism focuses on the interactions between the physical, chemical, and biological components of the environment, including their effects on all types of organisms. The key difference to remember is that environmental science is a broader field that incorporates many elements of earth and life sciences, whereas ecology is usually more focused on how organisms interact with each other and their surroundings, and often on a very specific population of living things. That being said, I will use words like "floral," "rustic," "flora and fauna" to discuss the use of earth imagery/language to discuss Janie's relationship to earth. Ecology and environmentalism do not quite do the work I want to do, especially since I look more so at geography as a practiced cultural space rather than the eco-systems, its interactions, and scientific findings of them.

the back porch as her own which I read as a liminal space for her to unfold.<sup>43</sup> Janie establishes Black folk[lore] in the transformative space of the back porch. “Porches also enable this kind of valuable discursive activity. Lacking secure sites for subversive exchange, many African Americans, particularly those in communities resistant to cultural transformation, have appropriated sites such as the barbershop or the porch in order to subtly and tactically challenge the dominant order” (Pattison 13). Because of the porch’s function as a public yet intimate space tied to house, it is where Black cultural production, gossip, and town life take place. Yet I delve deeper into this loving friendship between two Black women—a constant doting trope in African American literature—and examine their loving relationship in the *back porch*, which is tucked away from the public and just for them. We see Janie and Pheoby practice what I call haptic intimacy, which I posit is a deep devotional love between Black women through the sensory and platonic.

My reading of pleasure and trauma is still through the lens of the speculative in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. The text uses traces/imagery of Haitian Vodun cosmology to narrate Janie’s story to make diasporic connections between Florida and Haiti. *Their Eyes Were Watching God* exemplifies my larger argument which threads throughout my dissertation: the link between pleasure and Black pain creates fantastical moments in certain geographies. Hurston’s utilizes folklore from different diasporas to illustrate how wilderness and Black life are constantly intertwined: from her use of similes to illustrating nature’s response to Janie’s struggles, *folk is the*

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<sup>43</sup> This reading was guided by Dale Pattison’s scholarly article “Sites of Resistance: The Subversive Spaces of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*” MELUS, Volume 38, Issue 4, 1 December 2013, Pages 9-31, <https://doi.org/10.1093/melus/mlt050>

*fantastical element that animates land in Their Eyes Were Watching God.* First, Hurston uses folklore from Vodun and hoodoo narratives to create her characters. Many scholars such as La Vinia Delois Jennings, Derek Collins, and Pamela Glenn Menke remark on Zora infusing her anthropological work on Haitian Vodun and New Orleans Hoodoo into her creative work. Janie Crawford stands in as an avatar for Ezrúlie Freda, the Haitian Vodun spirit of love and sex in who constantly gives eternal love to all her male lovers. Tea Cake serves as the magical teacher trope seen in many African and African diasporic folklore. Yet I build on this established Hurston scholarship by examining how the land responds to Janie's domestic abuse and heartbreak. The land responds in wrath and vengeance. Eye for an eye, blood for blood. *Their Eyes* may not be overt in the fantastic but the use of folk animating the characters and Floridian swamp land says otherwise.

Through the speculative, we see Janie explore self-fulfillment and different forms of Black love. However, we have to look deeper into the source of those acts. We have to read Black pleasure as co-existing with suffering. As I stated in the beginning of the project, pleasure needs to be seen as protection and as intertwined to Black trauma/suffering, not as a pure escape. Thus, Janie's pleasure is not a project of "running away from Black trauma and pain." Janie comes from a matrilineal line of sexual assault survivors. So much of Nanny's imagined expectations for Janie's life are based on her own life as a former enslaved woman. Nanny was raped by her master and witnessed her own daughter's survival of assault by a white teacher. This intergenerational trauma shaped by sexual violence influences my readings of Janie: her first orgasm by the pear tree, experiencing vulnerability with Tea Cake, and lastly her devotional love with Pheoby are all ways of recuperating her mother's and grandmother's survival of sexual violence. Examining

pleasure and Black pain *together* is hugely influenced by Saidiya Hartman's *Scenes of Subjection* in which the scholar looks to see "the fashioning of blackness aroused pity and fear, desire and revulsion, and *terror and pleasure*" (27). Black life is yes and: terror and trauma. The text opens with this dichotomy: "Janie saw her life like a great tree I leaf with things suffered, things enjoyed, things undone and done. Dawn and doom was in the branches" (8)

We cannot divorce the intergenerational trauma away from pleasure but rather see how the two influence each other. By no means do I seek to "run away" from the muck of trauma when examining pleasure but to observe how the two are inseparable in Black life, how Janie's family was denied pleasure, and how Janie was able to experience some form of love and kinship with others.<sup>44</sup> I do not seek to invalidate the work of many scholars who have brought Hurston's work to the forefront of African American literature and criticism. Hurston creates a text that reveals her own love for Florida, Black women, and self-fulfillment. Rather, I wish to expand our understanding of why Janie experiences pleasure in these scenes, how these moments are vexed in our comprehension of Black pleasure.

### **What's Looooooooooooove? Springtime Awakening of Janie Crawford:**

A Black American bildungsroman, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* centers on Janie Starks' life in rural South Florida. Narrating her life's to Pheoby Watson, Janie shares her tumultuous

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<sup>44</sup> I am super thankful for my conversation with Dr. Chad Infante and Dr. Mlondolozzi Zondi (7/21/18) in which we discussed current scholarly climate of Black pleasure being a way to "deny, run away" from violence and trauma. In other words, scholars want to examine Black life without the trauma and violence as a way of "living, existing, and thriving." I realized that I did not want to contribute to this problem. Instead, I want to interrogate how trauma and pleasure co-exist in certain geographies.

journey to self-fulfillment and love. Conceived by sexual assault and raised by her enslaved grandmother, Janie's lineage full of sexual violence. Before she marries Janie off to Logan, Nanny tells Janie of their origins: Nanny had been an enslaved woman on a plantation near Savannah. Just as the war began, her master came to visit Nanny and her newborn child, who bears a similar resemblance to him: "he run into mah cabin and made me let down mah hair for de last time. He sorta wropped his hand in it, pulled mah big toe, lak he always done" (17). These acts are for his own pleasure and coupling between Black enslaved women and white slave masters were not consensual, it was rape. As Hartman points out in *Scenes of Subjection*, the Black captive woman is not a subject under common law, was seen as reservoir of lasciviousness where white masters had open access to (79-80). Additionally, as Hortense Spillers states in "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," "the captive body becomes the sources of an irresistible, destructive sensuality" (67). Thus, Nanny and her child, through rape, are property to be sold. We see this come to blows when Nanny recounts the white mistress' jealousy, hitting her as Nanny protected her new born child, revealing the insidious violence perpetrated by white women (17).

Nanny continues to narrate their lineage. After noticing that her daughter did not come home during the usual hour, she had come to find that the schoolteacher hid her in the woods all night long and leaving before the day (19). Heartbroken, we see Nanny reflecting that she knows her daughter is not dead but wishes she can find rest after such a turbulent event (that leads to alcoholism). Nanny revealing their dark history adds context to her choice to marry Janie off to Logan. For Nanny, "De nigger woman is de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see" (Hurstons 15). Sexual violence colors their history. Nanny is a survivor and a former slave and Janie is a product of rape. Rape as a markedness, a violation of the body and mind as Hortense Spillers states in



“Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book.” Life as a Black woman was hard already as it is but according to Nanny, post-slavery life offered Janie “life on the porch:” if married to a man with land and money, Janie would never have to work and toil as Nanny had to. Janie would live for white notions of success.

Nanny arranges Janie’s first marriage to Logan Killicks, a farmer with acres of land and in need of companionship. With his flat sided long head and distaste for sweet things, Janie “knew now that marriage did not make love. Janie’s first dream was dead, so she became a woman” (25). Marriage to Killicks was not what she imagined, and his true colors were revealed when he orders Janie to plow and work the farm alongside him. So, when citified Joe Starks comes with charming promises of treating her like a queen, and tired of Logan’s continual demands, Janie leaves with Joe to create a new Black town called Eatonville.

Yet self-made mayor Joe Starks, just like her previous marriage, fell from his promise of treating Janie well too. Joe’s promise of spoiling and taking good care of Janie becomes a coffin on a pedestal. “The wife of the Mayor was not just another woman as she had supposed. She slept with authority and so she was part of it in the town mind. She couldn’t get so close to most of them in spirit” (46). As wife to a power figure, Janie was set as a pedestal above Eatonville and alienated from everyone (except Pheoby Watson). Between Joe’s possessiveness, greed for obedience, and the “look but don’t touch” aspect of their marriage sours their relationship till his death.

After Joe’s death, and a short mourning period, 40-year-old Janie meets a young Tea Cake, a charismatic roving migrant worker who sweeps Janie off her feet. “Son of the Evening Sun,” Tea Cake reignites Janie’s teenaged dreams of love and passion. Janie felt a “self-crushing love” when she was with Tea Cake (128). Moving to the muck with Tea Cake, Janie refuses to adhere to the

institutional violence of marriage she encountered in her previous relationships. “Mine” was emblematic of Logan and Joe: Janie was a mule for Logan and then a shiny ornament in Joe’s Eatonville. But with Tea Cake, the relationship is focused on “we” and “ours:” they share, they care for each other, and have open lines of communication as we see when Tea Cake learns his gambling errors when he takes Janie’s money without asking (122-124). Most importantly, Tea Cake addresses her needs and desires.

The four pivotal stages of Janie’s road to self-fulfillment are littered with earth imagery and symbolism. “*Janie saw her life like a great tree in leaf* with the things suffered, things enjoyed, things done and undone. Dawn and doom was in the branches” (8, italics mine). The pairing of Janie with the natural world sets up *Their Eyes* as a Black flora bildungsroman. The language surrounding nature and Janie explicitly linked. I argue that tying Janie’s emotions, yearnings of love, and journey into self-fulfillment to the poetics of earth illustrates Black rootedness in nature and land.

We see the first instance of Janie’s earth and sexual awakening when she imagines love under her Nanny’s pear tree in West Florida. “She saw a dust bearing bee sink into the sanctum of a bloom; the thousand sister-calyxes arch to meet the love embrace and the ecstatic shiver of the tree from root to tiniest branch *creaming in every blossom and frothing with delight*. So this was a marriage! [...] Then Janie felt a pain remorseless sweet that left her limp and languid” (11). Janie’s first meeting with nature is brimming with sex and orgasm. The text places the woman’s orgasm at the forefront. Using words like “creaming” and “frothing,” *this* image demystifies the woman’s orgasm and explores pleasure without the veil of respectability. The scene elicits arousal and orgasm (for Janie and the readers) by using words like *creaming* and *frothing* to the delight of

seeing pollination. Women's arousal has always been associated with "creaming" due to vaginal lubrication. To then proceed to frothing with delight and Janie's limp remorseless languid body, the scene builds up to an orgasm and post-coital bliss.

Janie's ideas of romance also bloom as well. Watching the dusted pollen bee pollinate the calyxes elicits reveals Janie's fascination with nature while bridging her fantasy of love and marriage. Pollen's role in flora reproduction is important. Pollen is a very fine powder produced by trees, flowers, grasses, and weeds to fertilize other plants of the same species. So, the tie between pollen's role in reproduction and Janie's erotic romanticism is critical. We see this pollen imagery when she kisses lean Johnny Taylor, in which Janie's eyes and Johnny's clothes are covered with pollen (12). It's as if pollen is a veil of love, just like a veil for a wedding dress. *Pollen* is constantly associated with love and romance for Janie. We see this imagery later in the text with Tea Cake.

However, we need to read this orgasm scene with the trace of Black suffering and trauma. Because of her lineage, Janie's orgasm is haunted by trauma and violence. I read her experience with the pear tree as "protection" or moment of levity that is her own. By no means does her family's story with sexual violence invalidate this moment. It casts a shadow and it is hard to ignore. Rather we should read the orgasm coinciding with her family's history and her foreshadowed fate with her three husbands. The orgasm does not erase the history or traces of suffering surrounding Janie. Rather, it alleviates and protects her, for the moment.

While this dreamlike orgasmic scene establishes Janie's romance and sexuality, we crash down into Janie's nightmare when Nanny forces marriage and rushed womanhood. "The vision of Logan Killicks was desecrating the pear tree" (14). Logan was nothing like the calyxes and pollen

dusted dreams. “Cause Ah hates de way his head is so long one way and so flat on sides and date pone uh fat back uh his neck. Ah don’t like de job. His belly is too big too, now, and his toe-nails look lak mule foots” (24). His appearance, his lack of love for sweet things like Janie, and grueling work kills Janie’s dreams of love and marriage: “She knew now that marriage did not make love, Janie’s first dream was dead so she became a woman” (25). While financial security and land appeases Nanny, the two “forms of success” conflict with Janie’s flora being.<sup>4546</sup> As Edwidge Danticat illuminates in her foreword for *Their Eyes*, “Nanny has craved small comforts, like sitting idly on a porch, and wants her granddaughter to have them, along with money and status, *no matter what the emotional cost*” (Danticat xx, italics mine). Nanny was denied these pleasures as a slave yet craves them for Janie: for success Janie has to sacrifice pollen dusted dreams for the porch.

Logan’s acres clashes with Janie’s freeing relationship with calyxes and pear trees. The rigid, masculine, and efficient existence of farm acres is starkly different from Janie’s free flowery feminine nature. Janie’s pear tree ontology does not fit into Logan’s overworked land. This especially rings true when Logan switches up on Janie when Nanny dies and tells our protagonist

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<sup>45</sup> Rieger’s argument in his text *Clear Cutting Eden: Ecology and the Pastoral in Southern Literature* discusses how his sixty acres represents the lifelessness of their marriage. “Although Logan Killicks’ “often-mentioned sixty acres” constitute “protection” in Nanny’s eyes, they seem to Janie “like a stump in the middle of the woods where nobody had ever been” (20). This stunted, lifeless image of her marriage is an obvious counterpoint to Janie’s earlier vibrant bee-and-blossom image of marriage.

<sup>46</sup> Speaking of Floridian flora language to discuss Janie’s budding sexuality, the narrator even describes Nanny as an old tree: “Nanny’s head and face looked like the standing roots of some old tree that had been torn away by storm” (Hurst 12).

to work land when he's gone (31). Like Hades stealing away Persephone, Logan represents Janie's death of childhood but also he represents the overworked rigid masculine centered earth, devoid of "sweet things" compared to Janie's euphoric freeing pear tree.

Along with Janie's sexual awakening through nature, *Their Eyes* also illustrates Janie's relationship with God through the rustic as well.<sup>47</sup> Janie's emotional and spiritual being is tied to land. For Janie, nature and religiosity (more earth based non-institutionalized Judeo-Christian) are also overtly tied just like her notions of love, sex, and nature are connected. She remarks about God tearing down the old world every evening and building a new one by sun up. Janie converses with "the words of the trees and the wind" and honors the falling seeds and pray "Ah hope you fall

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<sup>47</sup> There is a vast number of literary scholars who work on Zora Neale Hurston's engagement with Haiti, Vodun, folklore, and their presence in her literary works. Scholars such as Derek Collins' "The Myth and Ritual of Ezili Freda in Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*" argues that Janie is Ezrulie Freda, the Haitian lwa (spirit) of love and sex who offers perfect love to the men who come to her but never receiving that same perfect love from them thus ending in tragedy. Ezrulie weeps during a ceremony because she is never properly loved. Janie's bigamy always ending with her three husbands failing to meet her needs. I agree wholeheartedly with this reading which I use towards the second half of this section. Another helpful resource is La Vinia Delois Jennings edited volume *Zora Neale Hurston, Haiti, and Their Eyes Were Watching God* which houses several critical pieces on Haiti's folklore dominating the text. I do want to honor all the work that has been done to make cross diasporic folkloric connections. Although I concentrate more so on the geography (the muck more specifically), nature/earth imagery to discuss Janie's emotional well-being, spiritual connection to God (God is the land), and euphoric relationship to land there is no denying the rich Black folkloric imagery of Haiti, hoodoo Black South, etc.

on soft ground” (25). This act of interiority reveals that *God is in the land and God is land*. Janie showcases constant hope in nature. Janie honors God through the land that she cultivates and while also constantly conversing with it.

Meeting Joe Starks did not “represent sun up and pollen and blooming trees, but he spoke for far horizon” (29). Joe represents a fresh start, citified Florida trekking into New Florida for new prospects, and an escape for Janie from Logan’s brute work on his 60 acres of land. Here, we see adult Janie accept that this new love may not be pollen dusted euphoria. However, starting anew with a man who refuses to see her do backbreaking work in the fields—a slight return to Nanny’s dream of Janie “living on the porch”—entices Janie. Additionally, Joe’s charisma and entrepreneurial spirit galvanizes everyone he meets which begins the new town of Eatonville. Joe represents a new chapter in Janie’s life and possible returns to her euphoric nature state.

At first, Joe assures Janie she would never have to *work on a farm* while married to him, but his promise is a catch 22. Joe expects submission, from Janie and Eatonville citizens, and sets Janie apart from the community as the “beautiful untouchable mayor’s wife.” Creating Eatonville was nothing more than to establish himself on top of the hierarchy after years of being treated unfairly by whiteness.<sup>48</sup> “Eatonville appeals to Jody not as a place to escape the inequities and

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<sup>48</sup> As Christopher Rieger argues in *Clear Cutting Eden: Ecology and the Pastoral in Southern Literature* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2009), “in her characterization of Jody, Hurston pointedly aligns him with white society and its emphasis on commodity, pitting him against the natural symbolism associated with Janie. Working for whites his entire life, Jody “had always wanted to be a big voice, but de white folks had all de say so where he come from and everywhere else, exceptin’ dis place dat colored folks was buildin’ theirselves” (27 Hurston, 101 Rieger).

stratification of white society, but as a place where he can finally occupy the top rung of the hierarchy himself. He swoops into town, and within six weeks he has purchased five hundred acres of adjoining land to sell in parcels, organized the men to “chop out two roads” in the forest, had himself proclaimed mayor, and built a store in the middle of town” (Rieger 101). Due to being barred by white supremacy, Joe subjugates others to be on top. He replicates white violence (re: patriarchy) and enacts intra-mural violence on the community because of his own trauma. Setting up this Black town was not just an entrepreneurial project but one for Joe to set himself up at the top.

We see Joe’s first act of oppressing Janie when the town congratulates the Starks. When Eatonville is established and the town congratulates the Starks, Joe chimes in: “Thank yuh fuh yo’ compliments, but mah wife don’t know nothin’ bout no speech-makin’. *Ah never married her for nothin’ lak dat. She’s uh woman and her place is in de home*” (43). Joe establishes Janie not as a partner in a marriage, but as an ornament who belongs only at home. Marriage was a respectable standard Joe silences her constantly, relegates her to the home and storefront, and robs her of any meaningful interaction with the citizens. As the text states, Joe wanted Janie but, on his terms, (73) revealing his possessiveness. As Claire Crabtree states in her article “The Confluence of Folklore, Feminism, and Black Self-Determination in Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*” “Essentially Janie exchanges one form of servitude for another, despite the broader range of experience and interactions with people that life in the town offers. As Killicks had planned to put Janie to work behind a mule, Starks insists that Janie work in his store and makes her cover her beautiful hair with a headscarf” (60). Joe’s terms are of possession, submission, and having a respectable light skin wife.

Years of his verbal abuse and submission destroys the last pillars of Janie's floral-filled romanticism. The text states "the bed was no longer *daisy-field* for her and Joe to play in...She wasn't *petal*-open anymore with him..." (72, italics mine). Once again, rustic imagery describes Janie's interiority while emphasizing on her current marital situation. Janie's relationship to nature has now transformed into her state of emotions in this stage of her life. No longer euphoric about love, nature now has looked at the reality of her relationship with Joe. The imagery of daisies and bloom exemplifies Janie's constant turn to flora to describe her emotions and eroticism: years into the marriage have foreclosed any intimacy with Joe once she sees that he just wants her to be an ornamental wife. Throughout the text, the 3<sup>rd</sup> person narrator and Janie never mention any acts of intimacy between Janie and Joe. Their love is not egalitarian or interdependent. This lack of dimension in their relationship continues to deteriorate when Joe punishes Janie for ruining dinner:

She stood there until something fell off the shelf inside her. Then she went inside there to see what it was. It was her image of Jody tumbled down and shattered. But looking at it she saw it never was the flesh and blood figure of her dreams. Just something she had grabbed up to drape her dreams over... *She had no more blossomy openings dusting pollen over her man, neither any glistening young fruit where the petals used to be.* She found a host of thoughts she had never expressed to him, and numerous emotions she had never let Jody know about. Things packed and put away in parts of her heart where he could never find them.

*Their Eyes Were Watching God* 72, italics mine

*Their Eyes* illustrates Janie entering herself to view the destroyed statue of love that was Joe, the earth she carved for him destroyed, the temple desecrated. In Janie's first marriage to Logan, there



is no flowery words associated with his love and there is no altar of his liking. Yet Joe is Janie's first love. Like the goddess of love, Janie offers Joe complete devotion and perfect love yet Joe never reciprocates it.<sup>49</sup> The theme of religiosity comes into play: Janie may embody unwavering love, devotion, and the romanticism of marriage, it is Joe's grasp that destroys that. He no longer is pollen dusted (idol) but rather just a false dream draped over her flora altar. Joe represents a faith broken as a series of unspoken thoughts and feelings Janie locks up. Once again, men clash with Janie's flora passion.

This constant clash highlights the lack of vulnerability between Janie and Joe. Throughout *Their Eyes*, we do not see Joe and Janie share intimacy, have moments of vulnerability, loving acts, or tenderness. Perhaps Joe's only act of love is offering Janie an escape from Logan. For their

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<sup>49</sup> To return back to Collin's articulation of Vodun imagery in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Janie is the avatar of Ezrúlie Freda. When Ezrúlie takes possession of an initiate, her ritual includes preening and pampering herself, greeting and flirting with men, being condescending to women, and exudes an air of luxury and generosity. However, as Maya Deren states in *Divine Horsemen*: "In the midst of the gaiety, she will inexplicably recall, as women sometimes do, some old minor disappointment....*she who has been loved by all major lwa* (and it is not they who were promiscuous) is convinced, by some curious inversion, *that they have betrayed her*" (Deren 138, italics mine). I also bridge Derek Collins: "According to Derek, Ezili Freda is thus intrinsically unable to be satisfied by, or truly able to satisfy, another in love. Although she may offer men the most bounteous and perfect love, it is fleeting, perhaps because such a full and overflowing love is beyond the capacity of men to keep" (Collins 148-149). Janie/Ezrúlie offers perfect love but is constantly betrayed by men. Janie loves her husbands so much, yet they offer her nothing in return.

entire marriage, it has been Joe wanting her submission “and he’d keep on fighting until he felt he had it” (71) till Janie finally strikes back when she destroys his vanity in front of Eatonville citizens in the store (78-79). Outside of their first meeting at Logan’s farm, Janie and Joe do not share things, thoughts, or feelings. Their marriage was not a partnership nor was it full of love and passion: it was just Joe expecting submission and putting Janie on a pedestal. I argue that Janie loved Joe for offering her “new horizons, new life” but as soon as he showed his violent ways, it closes her in the marriage. Janie’s interiority highlights the glaring omission of passion, partnership, emotional intimacy and intelligence in the Starks relationship.

Where we see Janie finally receive emotional intelligence and passion is with her third husband, Tea Cake. Just by their first meeting, floral romantic language surrounds him. His real name is Vergible Woods which already points to the floral, with its fusion of “vegetation” and wilderness. I choose wilderness to represent woods because Tea Cake is untamed and unknown to Janie, just like the muck and Everglades. Just by the utterance of his name, their meeting and romance was meant to be for the floral inclined Janie.<sup>50</sup> Everything Tea Cake does points to the

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<sup>50</sup> Valerie Levy’s “‘That Florida Flavor:’ Nature and Culture in Zora Neale Hurston’s Work for the Federal Writers’ Project” in the edited volume *Such News of the Land: U.S. Women nature writers* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 2001) goes more into detail about Tea Cake’s name: “In many of Hurston’s literary works, her characters’ names reflect their particular place in the natural world. Tea Cake of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), for example, is alternatively known as Vergible Woods, a name that echoes nature in its peculiar fusion of “vegetable” and “verdure” and that consequently reinforces his associations with nature and with the close relationship to the earth that he and Janie Crawford share” (90). While I go for the reading of vegetation and wilderness, Levy states “vegetable” and “verdure.” We both

floral: “He brings her strawberries, takes her fishing, and introduces her to the joys of planting and growing vegetables in the Everglades.”<sup>51</sup>

During their first meeting, Janie feels as though “she had known him all her life” (99). While Claire Crabtree argues that Hurston uses the magical wanderer character trope for Tea Cake,<sup>52</sup> I take it one step further by arguing Tea Cake is also Janie’s magical teacher who also embodies romance, spontaneity, and teaches Janie experience Black South Florida and Black southern traditions outside of respectability and white ideals of success. Janie’s initial meetings with him, she indulges in her floral romanticism: “He [Tea Cake] looked like the love thoughts of women. He could *be a bee to a blossom—a pear tree blossom in the spring*. [...] Crushing aromatic herbs with every step he took. Spices hung about him. *He was a glance from God*” (106, italics mine). We return back to Janie’s pear tree imagery, a constant living image seen throughout the text in which literary scholar Barbara Christian contends “[pear tree] is the image of Janie’s sensuality and of her/desire folk; completeness.”<sup>53</sup> (60). Tea Cake represents springtime renewal after a winter of Joe Stark (and his death). Yet the narrator takes a step further by describing Tea Cake as a glance from God. Once again, religiosity is tied to Janie’s love for earth and for the men in her life. The intimate connection between love, eroticism, and God creates Janie’s floral romanticism.

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still read the floral in Tea Cake’s name.

<sup>51</sup> “Flora and Fauna in Hurston’s Florida Novels” by Ann R. Morris and Margaret M. Dunn in *Zora in Florida* (Orlando: University of Central Florida Press, 1991). 8.

<sup>52</sup> Crabtree 13.

<sup>53</sup> Quoted in “Flora and Fauna in Hurston’s Florida Novels” by Ann R. Morris and Margaret M. Dunn in *Zora in Florida* (Orlando: University of Central Florida Press, 1991).

While Janie's early love for Joe represented new horizons which soon changes into a desecrated altar, ambrosial and celestial language surrounds Tea Cake: he is the divine— "son of the evening Sun"—and of the earth—Vergible Woods. Tea Cake is the vision of love teenaged Janie imagined in her pollen dusted dreams.

The floral / fauna prose of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* illustrates 1) Janie Crawford's sexuality/eroticism 2) emotional well-being 3) her constant sacrifice to please her husbands. Janie constantly sacrifices parts of herself for the men in her life. By layering Janie's emotions, sexuality, and adoration into the floral prose, Hurston exemplifies her own love for Florida and greenery. Additionally, this romantic prose adds another discussion of love within Black eco-literary tradition: the ability to discuss eroticism and being as a means to discuss the earth. In other words, the floral romanticism of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* illustrates the possibilities to discuss Black women's eroticism, love, and divine adoration for flora and fauna.

### **Jookin' in the Muck:**

From the Perennial Classics edition of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Mary Helen Washington states: "Here, finally, was a woman [Janie] on a quest of her own identity and, unlike so many other questing figures in black literature, her journey would take her, not away from, but deeper and deeper into blackness, the descent into the Everglades with its rich black soil, wild cane, communal life representing the immersion into black traditions" (xi). Janie's journey takes her deeper into Blackness and deeper into the wilderness of Florida which is rich with Black folk life. I bridge this illuminating gem to Rieger's assessment of the muck as well: "Janie discovers, however, that the high ground, as symbolized by Logan Killicks' sixty acres and Joe Starks's "big

house,” can be more threatening than wild nature and that the low ground of the Everglades which is potentially liberating and empowering.” The muck offers Janie freedom and empowerment, away from Killick’s brutish overworked land and Jody’s hierarchal store. I argue that Janie’s “descent” into the muck allows Janie to experience equitable love, experience various forms of Blackness outside respectability and encounter indigeneity. However, she also experiences heartbreak when Tea Cake pulls the

This portion of the chapter highlights how the muck serves as a space where Janie discovers Blackness outside “the front porch,” diverse minoritarian community, and experiences equitable love with Tea Cake. Additionally, this section links Hurston’s anthropological writings of the area to *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. The portrayal of cultures mixing, self-entrepreneurship, Blackness outside the periphery of respectability, and minoritarian communal (between Black diasporic communities, between Black folks and the indigenous) illustrates how vast and complex the muck is. How Janie stays true to her romantic being—she can be as wild and free as she wants to be.

While researching for her texts *The Florida Negro* and *The Florida Guide* for the Federal Writer’s Project, Hurston wrote “Florida is still a frontier with its varying elements still unassimilated (quoted in Levy, 86). The untamed wilderness of the Everglades comes through when we journey to the muck with Janie and Tea Cake. Once married, Tea Cake tells her about their trek to the muck as a married couple: “where dey raise all dat can and string-beans and tomatuhs. Folks don’t do nothin’ down dere but make money and fun and foolishness” (128). Illustrating the muck as a Black self-entrepreneurial agrarian space, the migrant workers are inspired by the wilderness of the muck. Workers cultivate the earth and take sustenance from it.

While doing this, they also create a small community that makes money together. This act creates some form of harmony. As Rieger states, “Wilderness for Hurston, like Rawlings, is a more authentic, more natural place in many ways, but it is not somewhere to seek total immersion. Rather, the ideal is a more traditional floral middle state, and trips to (relatively) wild nature help to restore that balance” (Rieger 92). In other words, the wilderness is not a space for complete immersion but as a space where one finds balance. I argue that Janie’s journey to the wild illuminates her floral romanticism and need to be around Floridian folk. Janie gets to be around folk and nature which are two of her favorite desires. Janie finds harmony in the edge of wilderness and Florida’s unassimilated terrain allows her to do so.

We see Janie’s immersion into the wild when the narrator illustrates the muck’s bigness:

To Janie’s *strange* eyes, everything in the Everglades was big and new. Big Lake Okeechobee, big beans, big cane, big weeds, big everything. Weeds that did well to grow waist high up the state were eight and often ten feet tall down there. Ground so rich that everything went wild. Volunteer cane just taking up the place. Dirt roads so rich and black that half mile of it would have fertilized a Kansas wheat field. Wild cane on either side of the road hiding the rest of the world. *People wild too.*

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Peppered throughout the scene, the narrator depicts the strangeness and bigness of the muck. The ecology of the area is surmounted by bigness. In the muck, community is in the wilderness. There is no marker of hierarchies here. The muck is about nature and growing from the land. There is no indication of clarity or paved roads. It is weeds and canes shrouding those who enter their stalks. The text constantly emphasizes how rich and dark the soil is in the muck compared to any other

geography: this relationship to the rich dark black earth of the muck shows the immersion Janie undergoes when she sees how poor-working class Black folks live and work together. The further away she is from Eatonville and her granny's house, the Blacker and wilder life becomes. The rich black earth represents Black life. To add, the scene points out the strangeness of Black life/folks as well. The wild people, coming from poor-working class backgrounds who live free of respectability, can only exist outside Joe's confining hierarchal town. Porch life in Eatonville means living to heteropatriarchal standards that Joe enforces. Yet the wilderness and the wild nature of the people of the muck expands Janie's small world and she welcomes the strange.

While the muck is at the edge of wilderness, and allow Janie to experience harmony, it is also where the complexities of Blackness play out. When examining the nightlife, the narrator states "All night now the jooks clanged and clamored. Pianos living three lifetimes in one. Blues made and used right on the spot. Dancing, fighting, singing, crying, laughing, winning and losing love every hour. Work all day for money, fight all night for love. The *rich black earth* clinging to bodies and *biting the skin like ants*" (155, italics mine).<sup>54</sup> We see the bridging of blues, earth, and

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<sup>54</sup> Morris and Dunn argue that Hurston's use of similes are a reflection of Black Southern vernacular, especially for folks who were not properly educated: "A southern child, Hurston says, is "raised on simile," and many of the figures of speech that they use come from the plants and animals they know. She comments, "It is an everyday affair to hear somebody called a mulletheaded, mule-cared, hognosed, gatorfaced, shadmouthered, goatbellied so-and-so." In other words, she continues, because Southerners are "not given to book reading, they take their comparisons right out of the barnyard and the woods" (Dust Tracks, 135-36). [...] When Hurston says that southerners "take their comparisons out of the barnyard and the woods," she is suggesting a 'major way in which her characters use their familiarity with plants and animals; they make

nightlife of the migrant community of the muck. Far from the safety of Eatonville, which is rooted in Joe's porch as the center of community while also steep in respectability, it's the muck where the Blues played all night while Black folks loved, drank and gambled. Janie experiences the less "respectable" Floridian Black community after a hard day's work in the fields which contrasts with Eatonville. While Joe's Eatonville is concerned about the porch life and doing things according to respectability and whiteness, the muck's concentration of mix gendered gatherings, blues blaring through the night, and illicit activities shows the other side of Black life.

Another gem of this scene reveals the sensuality that exists in the muck. I am drawn to the rich and sensual prose of this scene—black earth clings to the workers who work, live, and love together. The added layer of the blues, a distinct African American musical tradition created in the South, sets the musical tone of the vivacious community. The Blues belts out Black melancholia, heartbreak, and pain. Yet it also invigorates the working poor class community at night. This scene of Black skin coated with black earth in the juke joint after a hard day's work represents the immersion into the complex Black life of the muck which Janie has never experienced before in Eatonville.<sup>55</sup> The community's vivaciousness and sensuality reveals the Black racial wealth of the muck—black folks are living existing, loving, hating, joking together despite white supremacy.<sup>56</sup>

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similes" (5-6).

<sup>55</sup> Blues also illustrates how Black pain can be transformed into Black art/pleasure. The Blues showcase that Black pain and pleasure are intertwined and you cannot divorce them when discussing Black life.

<sup>56</sup> I take racial wealth from Alice Walker's reading of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*: "Alice Walker illuminates *Their Eyes* as a text of racial wealth where "her [Hurston] refusal to dwell on the depredation of racism and white prejudice and for focusing instead on viral and creative African American folk



In the heart of wilderness, complex Black folk life takes place.

*Their Eyes'* portrayal of the muck comes from Hurston's anthropological writings on her home state of Florida as a Black diasporic melting pot. From her Federal writing essays, Hurston notes the Caribbean being absorbed into Florida through the folk: "The drums throb: Africa by way of Cuba; African by way of the British West Indies; Africa by way of Haiti and Martinique; Africa by way of Central and South America.[...] Florida, the inner melting pot of the great melting pot America" (Hurston quoted in Levy 87).<sup>57</sup> Hurston acknowledges the growing Caribbean communities in the established in the established African American culture of Florida. Additionally, she honors these ties through the continent of Africa, how various similarities and differences of the diaspora come together in West Florida. In *Their Eyes*, we see Hurston bring her anthropological writing through prose when she introduces the Woods to the Bahamian Saws: "

*Since Tea Cake and Janie had friended with the Bahaman workers in the 'Glades, they, the "Saws," had been gradually drawn into the American crowd. They quit hiding out to*

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life"(quoted from Washington's preface). For Walker, Hurston's work presents a "sense of black people as complete, complex, undiminished human beings in a sense that's lacking so much in Black writing and literature."

<sup>57</sup> Levy goes in further: "In its natural landmarks, Lake Okeechobee and the Everglades. Much of South Florida's local color derives from myriad sources: from the Greeks of Tarpon Springs, the Latin colonies of Tampa, the Caribbean and South American cultures of Miami, and the Bahamian and Cuban cultures of the Keys and Palm Beach. This foreign culture, says Hurston, "has not yet [been] absorbed into the general pattern of the locality, or [is] just beginning to make its influence felt in American culture." (90). Hurston's reflection of different Black cultures intermingling illuminates Florida's changing culture landscape.

hold their dances when they found that their American friends didn't laugh at them as they feared. Many of the Americans learned to jump and liked it as much as the "Saws." So, they began to hold dances night after night in the quarters, usually behind Tea Cake's house. Often now, Tea Cake and Janie stayed up so late at the fire dances that Tea Cake would not let her go with him to the field. He wanted her to get her rest.<sup>58</sup>

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*Their Eyes* establishes community between the Woods and Saws and participating in communal fire dances together. Two folk diasporic traditions take place in the muck, more specifically behind Tea Cake and Janie's house. The two black traditions thrive without clashing. Or as Levy puts it "African-American traditions thrive without the constant threat of being diluted by other cultural influences" (90). Where art imitates life, Hurston introduces how nightly celebrations and dances took place in the Everglade around the bean fields and sugar mills in her FWP writing. "The Fire Dance, for instance, a West African New Year's celebration, conjoins singing, dance, and ritual and marks the cultural phenomena of man's intimate communion with nature..."<sup>59</sup> Hurston acknowledges the traditions that Afro diasporic communities bring to their new home of Florida and how those customs also enrich (and establish diasporic similarities) to the Black American communities. Hurston documents the native dances of Black Americans and other Black diasporic

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<sup>58</sup> In this scene as well, we see tea Cake still showing utmost care to Janie which I will flesh out more in the romance/passion half of this section.

<sup>59</sup> Hurston continues to document this dance tied to nature: "In one portion of the dance, the Crow Song signals the appearance of 'the Crow,' who dances in 'perfect rhythmic imitation of a flying buzzard seeking food.' Hurston continues, "He enters, finds food, takes some in his beak, and flies off?"

communities, how Africa ties them together but also how they reinvented these customs, how they do not overpower each other, and reveal Florida's unique union of the old and the new.

As Levy continues to note about Hurston's ruminations on Florida: "Because West Florida has such a rich mixture of peoples and natural resources, it is dubbed home of the "Spanish-French-English-Indian fighting tradition" Negro folk tales and Creole songs reflect the resultant struggles of four different groups of people trying to control the area. The effect of West Florida's various offerings is that the richness of the land has directly influenced the richness of the culture and vice versa" (89). Building on the old agrarian plantation system, new culture comes to be in West Florida. The different cultures that clash and coalesce, creating a new Floridian landscape. The muck's lively community mirrors real life Florida from Hurston's perspective and as a "state in the union with as much to record in musical, folklore, social-ethnic as Florida has" (88).

*Their Eyes* does not only establish communal ties among Black diasporic communities but also with the indigenous as well. This relationship between Janie, the muck, and the Seminole community comes to high relief once the hurricane makes its way to the muck. Janie notes her first-time seeing Seminoles as they are "living in the trackless ways of the 'Glades'" (Hurston 140). Yet it's the impending hurricane season that brings the Seminoles the forefront of the narrative: "So she was home by herself one afternoon when she saw a band of Seminoles passing by...they were headed towards the Palm Beach road and kept moving steadily..." (155). When Janie asks where the large party was heading, a Seminole man states "Going to high ground. Saw-grass bloom. Hurricane coming" (155). I argue that the Seminoles, because of their indigeneity, are the earth seers that subtly warn the Woods about the hurricane. By this, I posit that *Their Eyes* illustrates the Seminoles as the Native American seer archetype in which they are knowledgeable

of the earth because of their indigeneity. In other words, the Seminoles know the earth will react because “we are the land.”<sup>60</sup> Because indigeneity is rooted through the land, the Seminoles would know of the impending ecological chaos that swallows the muck. With their departure, the fauna and earth begin to react to the hurricane’s downfall:

Next day, no Indians passed at all. It was hot and sultry, and Janie left the field and went home. Morning came without motion. The winds, to the tiniest, lispings baby breath had left the earth. Even before the sun gave light, dead day was creeping from bush to bush watching man. Some rabbits scurried through the quarters going east. Some possums slunk by and their route was definite. One or two at a time, then more. By the time the people left the fields the procession was constant. Snakes, rattlesnakes began to cross the quarters.

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The earth, weather and fauna react to the Seminoles departure from the muck/hurricane arrival. Although the scene is brief, the effect of the hurricane making the indigenous and the fauna react to its chaos is palpable. The land becomes alive, the indigenous listens to it, and make their way away from the chaos.

Even the Bahamans listen to the earth’s warnings and follow the Seminoles trek east,

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<sup>60</sup> This reading was inspired by my constant conversations of Indigeneity, revolution, and Blackness with my fellow comrade in arms, Chad Infante. In addition, Annie L. Booth’s “We are the land: Native American Views of Nature” in *Nature across Cultures* Vol. 4. [https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-94-017-0149-5\\_17](https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-94-017-0149-5_17)

offering the Woods a ride with them. But Tea Cake laughs at their worries, stating “Dey (Seminoles) don’t always know [...] Else dey’d own dis country still” (156). Tea Cake’s ignorance shines through—his character flaw that brings the chaos of the hurricane in the first place—and refuses to take heed. Lias, head of the Bahaman family, says farewell, tying Africa, place, and belonging: “If A never see you no mo’ on earth, Ah’ll meet you in Africa” (156). Lias establishes “Africa” as their true home after death. Stating Africa as a homeland, especially in death, is a dominant diasporic proverbial saying. Lias establishes Africa as the home of the diaspora, through dance, drumming, and in death. Another tie between ethnicities we see is between the Bahamans and Seminoles. Their minoritarian link is through weather and nature. Both ethnicities heed the earth’s warning because of their relationship to land and weather. The Seminoles are indigenous to Floridian earth (“we are the land”) and the Bahamans are accustomed to hurricane destruction coming from a small island.

The muck is seen as a complex communal space that is at the edge of wilderness. We see black folks cultivate and sustain the land for economic sustenance. We see how the flattened Black poor-working class live and love outside the space of the respectable porch life of Eatonville. We see different Black communities across the diaspora come together to honor their different and similar rituals, customs, and folk. The Seminoles, as being one with the earth, gives Janie first glimpse of listening to the earth when she’s angry and how the Bahamans also take heed of the earth’s anger. Through these readings, we see Hurston take from life to create the changing and lush landscape of West Florida.

**“I never knew love like this before:” Loving and Ecological Chaos in the Muck**<sup>61</sup>

Before their love intensifies in the muck, Tea Cake and Janie’s romance began in Eatonville. Just before their nuptials in the muck, we see many instances where Tea Cake puts Janie’s needs before his own. When Janie fell asleep and woke to Tea Cake combing her hair for comfort, she was confused by his attention to her needs (103). “It’s *mah comfortable*, not yourn” she insists. Yet he softly responds, “It’s mine too” (103). This level of care and attentiveness is alien to Janie, who proceeds to be cautious of Tea Cake’s fondness for her. When he decides to treat her to Sunday picnic, he insists that “we’s se gointuh buy for *you*” (108). In both these scenes, Tea Cake centers Janie’s pleasures and comforts while also showing how her needs are his too. It is a “mine” that is attached to Janie’s desires, it is something to share or partake in. Soon their love goes to doing activities together: “Tea Cake and Janie gone hunting. Tea Cake and Janie gone fishing. Tea Cake and Janie gone to Orlando to the movies. Tea Cake and Janie gone to a dance. Tea Cake making flower beds in Janie’s yard and seeding the garden for her. [...] Tea Cake and Janie playing checkers (110). The text establishes “togetherness” with their relationship, an experience that is alien to Janie after two marriages where her husbands never centered her needs.<sup>62,63</sup> Janie’s new relationship with Tea Cake establishes love as an interdependent action.

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<sup>61</sup> Taken from Stephanie Mills’ Grammy award winning song “Never Knew Love Like This Before.”

<sup>62</sup> It should also be highly noted that during Janie’s previous marriage, never has the narrator used “us” or “together” when discussing Logan/Janie or Joe/Janie. This evacuation of interdependent love in her previous marriages illuminates that Janie’s life with Tea Cake is about “ours.”

<sup>63</sup> It should also be noted that Tea Cake also allows for Janie to rest: “Tea Cake almost kissing her breath away. Holding her and caressing her as if he feared she might escape his grasp and fly away. [...] He wanted

This new interdependency continues when they wed and make their way to the muck. At first, the muck represents freedom from restrictive gender roles (women working alongside men in the cane fields), class respectability, and does not adhere to the institution of marriage that Logan and Joe clung to. Janie wears overalls in the muck, refusing to wear a dress to adhere to gender dressing. We see Janie refuse to replicate the same institutional restrictions of her previous marriages when she insists on being a partner in their marriage. She wants to work alongside Tea Cake, not behind him or left in the house—the latter being her main issues with Logan and Joe. Worried about Janie leaving him because of his “commonness” and the working poor class of the muck residents, Janie affirms Tea Cake: “So you aims tuh partake with everything?” he asks, feeling the burden to support Janie lighten when she quickly responds “Yea Tea Cake, don’t keer what it is” (124). We see Janie refusing to adhere to respectability politics and show eagerness in living in the muck with Tea Cake.<sup>64</sup> Leaving room for Janie to make her *own decision, listening to her, and having open communication with each other* highlights 1) Janie’s growth as her own woman 2) love as an interdependent and patient action.

Setting their needs as interdependent continues in their day to day habits. Janie wears overalls and works alongside Tea Cake in the cane fields. Being in the heart of wilderness means also protecting yourself as well. Forever Janie’s Black magical teacher, Tea Cake teaches Janie

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her to get some rest” (107). This act of care and attention is drastically different from Logan, who wanted to work Janie like an actual mule, and Joe, who wanted her to work in the store but also just look as the pretty classed off mayor’s wife.

<sup>64</sup> Tea Cake’s anxieties of “commonness” mirrors Janie’s earlier anxieties of their age difference. However, his anxieties are stitched by colorism and class which would foreshadow the end of their marital bliss.

the usefulness of shooting.<sup>65</sup> “Every day they were practicing, Tea Cake made her shoot at little things just to give her good aim. Pistol and shot gun and rifle. It was the most exciting thing on the muck” (131). Learning the ways of the gun is another symbol of gender equality yet also partnership as Janie begins to hunt better with each passing day. Teaching her shooting allows them to hunt game and sell it to the muck residents (131). *Their Eyes* emphasizes partnership (that leads to also making money together), egalitarian love, how dismantling gender roles makes a relationship flourish, and listening to each other needs fosters growth.<sup>66</sup>

Yet their marital bliss does not last long. The muck, represented as a flattened predominantly Black poor/working class community, falls prey to colorism and misogynist violence. These two power structures fester in Janie and Tea Cake’s marriage. Let’s be clear: colorism and desirability of Eurocentric features appear heavily throughout *Their Eyes Were*

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<sup>65</sup> Crabtree’s argues that Tea Cake serves as a standard black wandering trope in Black folklore tales in her article “Confluence:” “depriving her life of the meaning she had finally found. But this is not the case; Tea Cake represents something more to Janie than the presence of a single man. He is represented as a wanderer who shows Janie who she is and can be and who magically remains present to her even after his death” (64).

<sup>66</sup> Crabtree fully fleshes how their dynamic relationship based on equity develops Janie as a person: “The sense of sexual equality and shared roles found in Janie’s relationship with Tea Cake is another aspect of Janie’s development as a person. It is in her life “on the muck” of the Everglades with Tea Cake that Janie achieves equality with men, where she is free to choose to work with Tea Cake in the fields rather than staying home and keeping house for him” (60).



*Watching God*, but it explodes violently in the muck. While scholars such as Washington and Crabtree argue that Janie is not a tragic mulatta, Janie's childhood does point to some intra-racial resentment from Black children that causes Granny to isolate her from the world.<sup>67</sup> Coming to the realization she is Black around the Washburn children, it is the Black children from school that pick on Janie for her rich looking clothes and her looks: "They'd push me 'way from de ring plays [...] den they'd tell not to be take' on over mah looks" (9). The vitriol Janie receives from the Black children is drastically different from the white Washburn children. It is the Black children, presumably darker than her, that isolate Janie and remind her that she's a mixed Black child. To add, their teasing is stitched to the dominant conception that dark skinned folks are jealous/spiteful over lighter skinned people which elides the insidious violence of colorism. It lays blame to just dark skinned people. Janie's proximity to whiteness eugenically and physically: her light skin, big hair, receiving hand-me-downs from Ms. Washburn, and living off the property of the Washburns are ammo used against Janie which forces Nanny to isolate themselves.<sup>68</sup> This scene is vicious:

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<sup>67</sup> While Janie does not use the school children's bullying as a mode of pulling the "I'm not Black I'm mixed/I was treated horribly because I was light skin girl" I want us to understand that having Black children remind Janie of her traumatic upbringing and her "bougie" behavior continues the narrative of "dark skin" Black folks, especially girls/women, being aggressive and jealous of lighter skin folks. While Janie isn't the typical mulatta crying colorism, it's the rest of the black community that has an issue with her. This is dangerous because it places blame on darker skinned folks doing the teasing/shunning when colorism is an institutional violence.

<sup>68</sup> Another example of desirability of Eurocentric features is when Eatonville townsfolk fawn over Daisy whose "hair is not what you call straight. It's negro hair, but its got a kind of white flavor" (80). Black hair

the dark skinned children are the antagonistic villains that push Janie away, which falls into the popularized myth that dark skinned folks are spiteful/jealous of lighter skinned people without realizing the root of this “jealousy.”

Even Janie’s previous marriages reveal the underlying desire for lightness/whiteness. Logan longed and touched Janie’s long black hair (26), Joe—fixated on being on top of the hierarchy—saw her long hair as treasure to be envied by the whole town and orders her tie it up in a scarf when in mixed company or in the store (47). Logan and Joe desired Janie for parts of her that were not explicitly “Black.” However, Janie’s ignorant of her features being desirable traits and does not use it as a means of being better/higher than anyone else/ being a typical light skin woman. Her love of community and the folk grounds her.<sup>69</sup>

Yet it is Mrs. Turner, the dining hall owner, that makes colorism *more apparent* to Janie. Mrs. Turner is shocked to find a woman like Janie married to such a dark and poor man like Tea

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politics dominates this scene as Daisy possesses straight hair, far from kinky/coily hair. Even when Janie is on trial for Tea Cake’s “murder,” the Black folks in the back of the courtroom remark “Aw you know dem white mens wuzn’t gointuh do nothin’ tuh no *woman dat look like her*” (189, italics mine). Resentment and judgement aside, the Black community knew that Janie’s light skin would play a huge part in her acquittal, garnering the sympathies of the all-white male jury and the white women who coddled her during the process. Janie may not play the tragic mulatta role, she does benefit from her looks.

<sup>69</sup> My reading of Janie loving her Blackness and Black folks stem from her love of folk life: “When the people sat around on the porch and passed around the pictures of their thoughts for the others to look at and see, it was nice. The fact that the thought pictures were always crayon enlargements of life made it even nicer to listen to” (100).

Cake, even suggesting that they lighten up the race: “Ah jus’ couldn’t see mahself married to no black man. It’s too many black folks already. We oughta lighten up de race (141). Colorism and whitening the race is laid bare and overt before Janie, who was once ignorant and blind to the insidiousness of colorism. Yet Mrs. Turner tries to drag Janie to the blood stained altar whiteness:

Anyone who looked more white folkish than herself [Mrs. Turner] was better than she was in her criteria, therefore it was right that they should be cruel to her at times, just as she was cruel to those more negroid than herself in direct ratio to their negroness. Like the pecking-order in a chicken yard. [...] It is the stones for altars and the beginning of wisdom. *Half gods are worshipped in wine and flowers. Real gods require blood.* Mrs. Turner, like all other believers had built an altar to the unattainable—Caucasian characteristics for all. Her god would smite her, would hurl her from pinnacles and lose her in deserts, but she would not forsake his altars. Behind her crude words was a belief that somehow, she and others through worship could attain her paradise—a heaven of straight haired, thin-lipped, high-nose boned white seraphs.

*Their Eyes Were Watching God* 145, italics mine

*Their Eyes* establishes religiosity as Janie’s relationship to the rustic/flora of Florida and as an act of devotion to her husbands (Joe desecrated the altar of her love while Tea Cake stands as the “Son of the Evening Sun”). Yet here we see whiteness be a voracious god that demands the blood of its worshippers.<sup>70</sup> Whiteness has propped itself as a god and claims the lives of its worshippers,

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<sup>70</sup> I also see Hurston’s poetic prose mirror her anthropological experience in Haiti in which she observed and wrote about Vodun and Haitian folklore. The rumors of human sacrifices have long plagued the

painting heaven as full and an unattainable paradise full of light/white skin angels, thin lips, pinched noses, straight hair and no asses. Mrs. Turner “offers” her brother to the married Janie—a sacrificial offering—as a way to enter this warped colonial utopia.

However, Mrs. Turner is not the only worshipper/victim in its grasp. Some of the muck residents see the glaring differences between Tea Cake and Janie. While I argue that Janie does not indulge in Mrs. Turner’s antiblack delusions, I do believe Janie’s light features reveal the violent underbelly of colorism that flows throughout the novel. Tea Cake does not objectify or desire Janie *because of her light skin and long hair*, although he does notice how muck’s residents treat her: “men made passes at her” and Mrs. Turner constantly reminding Janie that she should be with a light skin man of status and not a poor dark skin man like Tea Cake (142).

Yet it was Mrs. Turner bringing her brother to their house that sets off Tea Cake. To show Janie and the muck who was boss, Tea Cake “whipped Janie. Not because her behavior justified his jealousy, but it relieved that awful fear inside him. Being able to whip her reassured him in possession” (147). I am drawn to the awful fear within Tea Cake which I read is his own wounded insecurity of being poor and darker than Janie. Beating Janie satisfied that anxiety. Already insecure in his ability to take care of Janie monetarily, colorism festers his already wounded masculinity. As bell hooks argues in *The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity, and Love* masculinity infests the psyches of men who try to enact feminist equality in their life, relationships, and causes

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religion, which Hurston herself pointed out in *Mules and Men*. However, animal sacrifices are needed depending the case.

great personal anxiety.<sup>71</sup> Tea Cake ends their egalitarian love for the sake of power and possession. Colorism, as a warped altar, also is an episteme that goes beyond skin color, hair texture, or anything eugenic. Colorism is also entangled with class and other modes of knowing.

The muck witnesses Tea Cake's act of violence, which appears normal, and contributes to their color divide. Tea Cake's friends like Sop-de-Bottom characterize Janie as "tender," "beautiful" "doesn't holler when she cries" when Tea Cake abuses her (147-148). Janie is the beautiful light skin wife who takes Tea Cake's beatings like a real woman should compared to the "rusty black women of the muck" (147). The ideology of light skin women being more beautiful and submissive compared to the aggressive brown/dark skin women dominates the muck and also continues to be a dangerous stereotype in Black communities today. Due to skin color, class, and hair texture Janie outclasses Tea Cake and he could not turn a blind eye to whiteness' bloody grasp. To show possession and reinforce his manhood, Tea Cake beats Janie, not to "hurt" her but to show the color struck community that Janie is HIS WOMAN. Tea Cake participates in misogynist violence because of colorism: colorism makes him feel inferior thus he lashes out. By no means am I making excuses for Tea Cake's violence. Colorism is a psychic violence (via Frantz Fanon's reading of whiteness as illness) but I want to illustrate how colorism's "godly" grip on Tea Cake's masculinity destroys their egalitarian love. The nomenclature of "hurt people hurt people" damages Tea Cake and spills into his marriage with Janie.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> hooks, bell. *The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity, and Love*. New York: Atria Books, 2004. 25.

<sup>72</sup> It is very jarring/telling that the Hurston scholarship I have encountered does not state the obvious: colorism plays a HUGE part in Janie's desirability and incites Tea Cake's insecurity/wrath. Hurston even

Did Tea Cake's violent show of possession and power summon the hurricane? Writers and scholars such as Derek Collins, Edwidge Danticat, and Thomas Cassidy interrogate the hurricane's impact in *Their Eyes*. Cassidy reads the hurricane as "an eruption of Janie's unconscious turmoil and rage" stemming from her anger that her relationship with Tea Cake is not ideal.<sup>73</sup> Collins argues that Hurston fashions Janie after the Haitian goddess of love, Ezrúlie Freda—"an idealized vision of erotic and unchallengeable love that does not include children"—in which the two "may offer men the most bounteous and perfect love, it is fleeting, perhaps because such a full and overflowing love is beyond the capacity of men to keep."<sup>74</sup> In other words, Janie/Ezrúlie offer perfect love to men who are unable to match/compare to that love. Lastly Danticat tries to untangle Hurston's nuanced approach to characters while also wrestling with Tea Cake's flaws:

Why did Janie allow Tea Cake to beat her? Some of us thought that Hurston tried to envision characters who are neither too holy nor too evil. Her men and women are

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critiques colorism as a blood guzzling god that ensnares its worshippers, yet colorism is understudied in the novel's scholarship. Perhaps the only article that explicitly states colorism as the downfall of Janie's relationship with Tea Cake is Tracey Bealer's "'The Kiss of Memory': The Problem of Love in Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*," *African American Review* 43.2/3 (2009). The scholar examines how colorism provokes Tea Cake's domination through psychoanalysis. She also illustrates how *Their Eyes* to contain both a celebration of the possibilities of egalitarian love and how racism/sexism distorts the most satisfying heterosexual relationships.

<sup>73</sup> Thomas Cassidy, "Janie's Rage: The Dog and the Storm in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*," *CLA Journal* 36.3 (1993): 265.

<sup>74</sup> First quote, pg. 143, and the second quote, 148.

extremely nuanced, reflecting human strengths as well as frailties. If Tea Cake were too cruel, then Janie would not love him at all. If he were too uniformly pious, then rather than being her equal, as he was at work in the fields, he would be worshipped by her, and “all gods who receive homage are cruel. All gods dispense suffering without reasons . . . half gods are worshipped in wine and flowers. Real gods require blood.” In the end, Janie receives from Tea Cake the equivalent of all three—wine, flowers, and blood—and she becomes like a treasured relative whose love affair we could never wholeheartedly condone, but the source of which we could certainly understand. *Tea Cake gives his life for Janie, and this, if nothing else, serves as some atonement for many of his sins.*

*Their Eyes Were Watching God* (Harper Collins edition) xvii

By synthesizing their contributions to Hurston scholarship, I argue that the failure of the Black men characters—susceptible to the jaws of white supremacy because they are barred from the phallic—is what brought about the hurricane. Janie constantly offers her three husbands perfect love. Yet with Tea Cake, their love was based more so on passion, tenderness, equality and open communication. However, colorism aggravates Tea Cake’s threadbare masculinity, creating ecological havoc that disrupts the couple’s harmony in the heart of Floridian wilderness. “The lake got madder and madder” (159) and “the wind and water had given life to lots of things that folks think of as dead and given death to so much that had been living things. Water everywhere” (160). The earth responds in anger and death days later of Tea Cake’s act of possession. Because Janie’s entire being—mentally, emotionally, sexually—is rooted in Floridian flora, it makes sense for the earth to respond to Tea Cake’s aggression. The hurricane responds to the misogyny, Tea Cake’s internalized colorism, and that Janie has spent years enduring with men who hurt her. The earth

had enough with men hurting Janie. The earth saw the brevity / limits of heterosexual romance. To quote Janet Jackson from her song “Pleasure Principle,” “What I thought was happiness was only part-time bliss.”

So, when Janie is forced to use the rifle on him when Tea Cake is infected with rabies, it is not an act of violence but an act of love and compassion. Janie “saw the ferocious look in his eyes and went mad with fear as she had done in the water” (184) and yet she “held his tightly to her breast and wept and thanked him wordlessly for giving her the chance for loving service” (189). Releasing Tea Cake from his anguish was an act of love from Janie, not an act of violence. I argue that the rifle/pistol are symbols of their egalitarian love. Because they regarded each other as equals: they hunted and worked *beside each other*, Janie’s use of the rifle is twofold: to protect herself from Tea Cake’s madness and release him from it. To reiterate Danticat’s closing lines (and also the religiosity thread of this chapter), Tea Cake’s death is sacrifice to “atone for his sins.”

Despite his flaws, Tea Cake was and will always be Janie’s Black magical teacher: “Tea Cake represents something more to Janie than the presence of a single man. He is represented as a wanderer who shows Janie who she is and can be and who magically remains present to her even after his death” (Crabtree 64). Tea Cake introduces Janie to the bluesy, passionate, wild-like side of Blackness while also being passionate and caring with her. Tea Cake introduces Janie to the racial wealth of the wilderness. Because Tea Cake is Janie’s “great and self-less love” the muck no longer has its magic as it did when he was alive: “But the muck meant Tea Cake and Tea Cake wasn’t there. So, it was just a great expanse of black mud” (191). Love transforms the geography of the muck: from lively and bustling to just an expanse of mud after Tea Cake’s death. The story arc of Janie and Tea Cake's courtship and marriage illustrates that Tea Cake is Janie's "great and



selfless love" while also falling prey to colorism and insecure masculinity.

The muck is a complex yet nuanced space where love, passion, and violence colors Black life. While egalitarian love and Black folk life flourishes and is actualized in this space, colorism and intramural violence festers there too. While passion and open communication is the foundation of Janie's and Tea Cake's relationship, colorism and insecure masculinity disrupts their harmony. The vexed relationship between Black pleasure and Black suffering is seen through the eyes of nature which causes a disruption. This disruption angers the earth—which Janie has an intimate relationship with—and summons the hurricane which claims Tea Cake's life. Yet Janie continues to cherish and adore Tea Cake as she makes her odyssey return back to Eatonville.

### **Back porch Intimacies: or the constant failure of Men**

From the beginning of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Janie is the one retelling her entire life story to her dear friend Pheoby Watson. The text is a metanarrative, a story within a story, that takes place in the back porch. It is here we see Janie assert her voice—clear, authoritative, soft, full of similes, teeming with love for herself and lessons she learned while married to three men—while sharing the back porch with Pheoby. Kinship between Black women (romantic and nonromantic) has always been an important tradition in Black literature, continental and diaspora. Mary Helen Washington states that Black women bonding is a “common scene recurring in the fiction of black women writers” in which women “share intimacies that can be trusted only to a kindred female spirit.”<sup>75</sup> Women trusting women is the constant stitch in Black women centered

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<sup>75</sup> From Washington's article “‘The Darkened Eye Restored:’ Notes Toward a Literary History of Black Women” in Angelyn Mitchell's edited volume *Within the Circle: An Anthology of African American*

narratives when discussing kinship. Janie entrusts Pheoby with her narrative, which she retells on the back porch, a designated spot behind the house and behind Joe's "front porch" life. I argue that the back porch is Janie and Pheoby's sacred space of intimacy, care and interiority. It is here we see Janie be the "author" of her own life but also carving a space for herself in the aftermath of Joe's death and Joe's creation of Eatonville. Janie, excluded from the performativity of the masculine space of Joe's porch life, feels the most comfortable and free on the back porch. The subversive space of the back porch is where Janie's "voices" her life to Pheoby which is free of from Joe's hierarchies which are etched in white supremacy.

The geography of the front porch has always been a contested space for Janie. Since childhood, her grandmother wanted Janie to live the porch life. When reflecting back on her grandmother and her dreams, Janie states "She was borned in slavery time when folks, dat is black folks, didn't sit down anytime dey felt lak it. So sittin' on porches lak de white madam looked lak uh mighty fine thing tuh her" (114). Here, Janie acknowledges her grandmother's strife of living as an enslaved woman<sup>76</sup> but how whiteness has defined what "living good" means to Black folks.

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*Literary Criticism from the Harlem Renaissance to the Present* Durham: Duke University Press, 1994. 443.

<sup>76</sup> I want to highlight again how important it is to acknowledge Granny also survived of rape by her master, how her own daughter is a product of that rape and is also another survivor of rape from the white teacher. Granny's experiences on love, marriage, and men stem from her life as a former slave. She lived under the cruelty of a jealous white mistress and raped by the master. It seems like Granny did her best to protect Janie from that intergenerational violence, or at least make sure she does not have to live with that threat of it if she was married to a man with resources. Perhaps I am reading too much into it, but Granny's desire for Janie to marry for financial security and porch life living: Granny does not want Janie to end up like her

The front porch has become the symbol of success, materiality, and whiteness—all things denied to Granny but now she wants to secure it for Janie. Granny cannot fathom what Black life and love looks like without the specter of whiteness as success looks like. For that, Janie hated her for it: “Here, Nanny had taken the biggest thing God ever made, the horizon—for no matter how far a person can go the horizon is still way beyond you—and pinched it in so such a little bit of a thing that she could ties it about her granddaughter’s neck tight enough to choke her. She hated the old woman who had twisted her so in the name of love” (89). Because slavery and its residual colonial power shapes how Granny sees love and success, it also limits Janie and makes her lash out at Granny. Janie had always been hampered by Granny’s white expectations and the front porch was a representation of those expectations.

In addition to Granny’s limited internalized white expectations of success, Joe Stark also shared those sentiments as well. Joe’s treatment during their first meeting at her Logan’s farm reveals his own promise to make sure she will sit on a porch and not drive a plough: “A pretty doll-baby lak you is meant to sit on de front porch and rock and fan yo’self and eat p’taters dat other folks plant special just for you” (29). Like Granny, Joe’s dream of Janie is akin to the white mistress on the plantation eating and fanning herself while overlooking the acres of land. Granny’s views of the porch were that of an enslaved woman while Joe’s front porch fascination stems from always being in the bottom of white hierarchies. “Working for whites his entire life, Jody “had always wanted to be a big voice, but de white folks had all de say so where he come from and everywhere else, exceptin’ dis place dat colored folks was buildin’ theirselves” (27 Hurston, quoted in Rieger

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own daughter who is lost in the world. Her desires are rooted in “marriage as security” but also not losing the last of her kin to sexual violence of the world.

101) While Granny's expectations of success were shaped by her lived experience as an enslaved Black woman, Joe's expectations were shaped by his lived experience with racial marginalization: constantly working for whites but always being in the bottom of the barrel. Success, again, is shaped by whiteness, materiality and also placing yourself ahead of the pack: "He loves obedience out of everybody under the sound of his own voice" (49). Success was domination—taking up the position of the white folks who subjugated him and left him out—over his own folks.<sup>77</sup>

Because materiality and whiteness warps Joe's expectations of success, Joe transforms the front porch as a symbol of his dominance. With his possessions, Joe made it clear to distinguish his house—painted a "gloaty, sparkly white" (47)—from the other people, making it clear he was at the top of the hill. During their back-porch talks, Janie insists that "Jody classed me off. Ah didn't" (114) pushing back on the idea she had a choice in being the typical "light skin bourgeoisie mayor's wife" that Joe wanted her to be. As the town begins to coalesce as "Eatonville," we see the front porch become a space where townsfolk talk and the politics take place. In other words, the rocking chair is Joe's throne, making the front porch his royal court and where town life takes place.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Washington points out that the notion of Janie sitting on a porch in a rocking chair is a white dream, and Janie herself tells Pheoby that she recognizes the inadequacy of such a dream for herself.

<sup>78</sup> As Jennifer Jordan states in her article "Feminist Fantasies: Zora Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*" "Hurston's novel exposes the domestic bliss of middle-class America as an empty dream (108). *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (Spring 1988), pp. 105-117

<sup>79</sup> Pattison fleshes out the transformation of the porch in *Their Eyes* by using Michel Foucault's heterotopia

Because the porch is a staple in African American folk life, where public life takes place, it is here where we also see Black men's attempts at replicating patriarchy (which is white) expose itself. The porch has transformed from a white commodity (assuming the role of white plantation owners fanning themselves on the porch). It's not a generative subversive transformation since it excludes women constantly. It is never liberatory to transform the counter site of subjugation to subjugate another community. The characters engage in play, performance and, and creativity, yet it is dominated by Joe and the men. Janie is excluded, women are made fun of on this space. As Pattison argues: "the males of Eatonville claim the front porch as a discursive space in order to reinforce patriarchal privilege" (14). The space is misogynoiristic as it regurgitates white supremacy and excludes Black women.

Always surrounded by plenty of townsmen such as Coker, Lige, Walter and Sam, Joe is constantly at the heart of the space, never allowing women to speak or take up space on the porch. Joe uses women as jokes, as he teases Mrs. Robbins for the sake of their entertainment— "'Cause Ah'm hongry, Mist' Starks. 'Deed Ah is. Me and mah chillum is hongry. Tony don't fee-ceed me!'" she says to the choir of raucous laughter from Joe's brood of men (73). We see Joe use Mrs. Robbins dire situation of being mistreated by her husband as a joke, but this scene also illuminates domestic abuse as a norm in Eatonville.<sup>80</sup> Women are jokes and ornaments (Janie) to Joe. Joe has

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to discuss the porch as a source of Black masculine power: "Consistent with Foucault's concept of heterotopia as a space of resistance, the porch holds different kinds of meanings for different social groups who use it. For the Black men of Eatonville, it's a source of masculine power. For Janie, it is about voicing her narrative, voicing up her worth" (20).

<sup>80</sup> The normalization of abuse is also seen in the muck which disrupts Janie and Tea Cake's harmony in the

set himself up as king of the porch and of Eatonville.

Yet Janie does the unthinkable and finally inserts herself into the discussion with men by poking fun/highlighting their misogyny:

Sometimes God gits familiar wid us womenflocks too and talks His inside business. He told me how surprised He was ‘bout yall turning out so smart after Him makin’ yuh different; and how surprised y’all is goin’ tuh be if you ever find out you don’t know half as much ‘bout us as you think you do. Its so easy to mak yo self out God Almighty when you ain’t got nothin’ tuh strain against but women and chickens” (75).

*Their Eyes Were Watching God* 75

Janie disrupts the male dominant space with her wry sense of humor. She establishes that women are in constant conversation with God, not men, and their relationship is about ridiculing how egotistical men are. This humorous interiority places women as kin of God, who are in constant conversation about God creating men to be different not smart. Continuing the trend of religiosity which we see with Janie’s adoration (and desecration) of men and Mrs. Turner’s blood-stained altar of Eurocentrism, we see Janie use religiosity against men’s misogyny and intra-mural violence. This deludes men into thinking they are gods when all they do is strain chickens and women. Janie highlights that men think they are gods when all they have to do is subjugate fauna and women. Men’s positions in power can only be rooted through the subjugation of others.<sup>81</sup>

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wilderness which I discuss in the previous section.

<sup>81</sup> Conversations on Black women’s subjugation for the sake of Black hyper-masculinity and intramural violence have always been a critical intervention in Black women/queer writings. Black writers such as Barbara Smith, Michele Wallace, Patricia Hill Collins, bell hooks and Audre Lorde have constantly written

Because of the misogynoiristic nature of the front porch and its lofty white ideals that do not suit Janie, she finds solace in the back porch with her kissing friend of 20 years, Pheoby Watson. The back porch is counter-site of the front porch where Janie narrates her life to Pheoby. The back porch is where Janie narrates her story after years of being excluded from the front porch.<sup>82</sup> *Their Eyes* begins and ends in the back porch, a narrative home and established site of Janie's self-revelation: Janie returns back to Eatonville after burying Tea Cake, where she sees new horizons, where she continues living after his death. Refusing to hear any more tired gossip, Pheoby follows her friend to the back porch with a bowl full of mulatto rice (3-4).

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about the exclusion and sexism of the Civil Rights Movement, Black Power Movement, etc. Even thinking about how "forefathers" of African American literature (Alain Locke, Ralph Ellison, Richard Wright) denigrated Hurston's work as "lazy" and "vulgar" reveals how gender and color bias excluded women from these cultural productive spaces. I think constantly about the conversation with Audre Lorde and James Baldwin taken place at Hampshire College in Amherst, MA in 1984 (published in *ESSENCE* magazine) in which the two writers discuss the importance of recognizing that shared racial histories cannot overshadow the divergent gendered histories between Black men and women. I am particularly struck by Lorde's words: "We're finished being bridges. Don't you see? It's not Black women who are shedding Black men's blood on the street...I'm saying don't shed my blood." Lorde refusing to be casualty for Black men's fury, desire for power and recognition resonates with my reading on Black women being subjugated for the sake of Black men's humanity/masculinity. For the Baldwin/Lorde conversation, read at: <http://theculture.forharriet.com/2014/03/revolutionary-hope-conversation-between.html>

<sup>82</sup> As Pattison states, "Consistent with Foucault's concept of heterotopia as a space of resistance, the porch holds different kinds of meanings for different social groups who use it. For the Black men of Eatonville, it's a source of masculine power. For Janie, it is about voicing her narrative, voicing up her worth." (19).

After exchanging laughs and watching Janie eat, we see kinship, care and darkness meld into each other: “They sat there in the fresh young darkness close together. *Pheoby eager to feel and do through Janie* but hating to show her zest for fear it might be thought mere curiosity. Janie full of that oldest human longing—*self-revelation*” (7, italics mine). Pheoby has always been eager to listen to Janie, as we see this when Janie tells of her impending trek to the muck with Tea Cake (133). In folk culture, you need a sympathetic audience to listen to the stories. As Crabtree puts it, “Janie is the tale-teller and her telling of the story is a consciously artistic act, one in which she imposes order and meaning on the material of her life. The story Janie tells is an intimate communication between the two friends, with Janie depending on Pheoby “for a good thought,” that is, for a sympathetic hearing” (“Confluence” 55). As a storyteller and friend, Pheoby is Janie’s sympathetic audience to hear Janie’s journey through life. Pheoby’s emotional and cautionary care for Janie beams when they’re together. Pheoby warns “Janie, you’s e yo’ own woman” (113) a statement Granny and Tea Cake both offer to Janie throughout different stages of her life.

Yet in the warm darkness of this scene, Pheoby’s eagerness to feel and do through Janie illuminates a devoted dimension of their friendship. In the warm darkness of this scene, Pheoby’s eagerness to feel and do through Janie illuminates a sensual devoted dimension of their friendship, another thread of love in Janie’s epic journey through the South. In the intimate setting of the back porch — away from the respectability politics and whiteness—Pheoby expresses haptic intimacy, which I argue is the deep devotional love between Black women through the sensory and platonic



modes of relation.<sup>83</sup> While the scene does not call out explicit same sex desire/women loving women desire, the deep care and love Pheoby holds for Janie reveals a key component in Black women kinship/friendship. Intimacy can be found without the erotic.

I argue that Pheoby's eagerness to feel Janie reveals the depths of love and care she has for Janie, especially since this a new Janie is more aware of herself. Pheoby desires to feel through a more self-aware Janie, completely different from her years with Joe. I point out this subtle yet overlooked intimate moment because it is a loving interior moment that Black women have for each other. The scene illuminates deep companionate love that Pheoby holds for Janie.<sup>84</sup> Pheoby's

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<sup>83</sup> Understanding the haptic as encompassing "the physical and psychical aspects of touching/feeling" (Garrington 17). In physical terms, the haptic covers four branches of sensation: touch (skin contact), kinesthesia (the sensation of movement), proprioception (orientation in space), and vestibular sense (balance). This part of my argument looks at the psychical in which Pheoby does not actually physically touch Janie but her yearning to do so is so palpable on the page. By bridging interiority—the quiet composite of mental, spiritual, and psychological expression of one's self—I hope to offer a new reading on Black women's friendship and devotion. I just love the way Janie and Pheoby love each other, while its not explicit in same sex attraction, there is a level of dedication to hear and be there for Janie. Isn't that what love is? For more on the haptic in modernist literature and visual culture, see Abbie Garrington. *Haptic Modernism: Touch and the Tactile in Modernist Writing*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2013.

<sup>84</sup> I depend on Gloria Wekker's "mati work" from their text *The Politics of Passion: Women's Sexual Culture in the Afro-Surinamese Diaspora* (New York, Columbia University Press 2006) which refers to women's sexual, spiritual, and emotional bonds with other women, as well as to the mutual responsibility and obligation that characterize their intimate relationships with each other. I also depend on Robert

constant worry and empathy for Janie unveils a deep devotional love between Black women. Even Janie reciprocates Pheoby's love and empathy and favoring her opinion over others: "Ah depend on you for good thought" (7). Hurston conveys how much Black women mean to each other through the haptic interiority. This literary ploy reveals a hidden love story in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*: the love between Janie and Pheoby.

Pheoby's haptic interiority, Janie's storytelling, and their loving friendship creates the intimate kinship of space of the back porch. I argue that *Their Eyes* sets up the back porch as a space of Black women's kinship away from the front porch's white ideals of success and intra mural violence. While literary scholars concentrate on the back porch as a site of Janie's folk narrative (she recites her life for Pheoby), I want to add her dynamic relationship with Pheoby which feels understudied. I want to emphasize Black women kinship being *integral* to making the back porch Janie's haven free of Joe and Granny's ideals of success. My emphasis on Pheoby's haptic interiority and love for Janie arises from Natasha Tinsley's creation of "erotic geographies" in her work *Thieving Sugar*. The scholar "traces women's complex material and symbolic relationships with plots of land on which they live, work, play, garden, talk politics, and engage in

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Sternberg's triangular theory of love to reach this reading. Sternberg says that intimacy refers to "feelings of closeness, connectedness, and bondedness in loving relationships." From "Triangulating Love". In Oord, T. J. *The Altruism Reader: Selections from Writings on Love, Religion, and Science*. West Conshohocken, PA: Templeton Foundation. p. 332.

relationships with other women” (2).<sup>85</sup> <sup>86</sup> Janie’s relationship with Pheoby “works and reworks the intimacy” of the back porch. It is where we see two women share and care for each other. It is where the narrator reveals their interior thoughts, and where Janie begins her life. Janie and Pheoby’s companionate relationship transforms the back porch into a safe haven away from 1) public life 2) whiteness 3) Joe’s gaze. While the “young kissing darkness” envelopes Janie as she recounts her life as a *griot*, their intimacy remains.

*Their Eyes Were Watching God* novel illustrates the common thread of speculative geographies in the African diaspora through the relationship of trauma and pleasure in Black literature. Through its floral prose, we are able to see Janie grow and live in Florida as a Black woman infatuated with Floridian nature. From her first orgasm to nature showcasing her feelings, Janie’s being is tied to nature. Janie’s adoration and self-sacrificing for the sake of her husbands

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<sup>85</sup> While the scholar examines queer Black and Brown women characters from Caribbean literature, it is important to pair the intense companionate love in *Their Eyes* to a greater conversation on “Black women loving other Black women” in Black literature. Tinsley continues to argue about “working and reworking of intimate landscapes constitute black feminist imaginations that complicate, dismantle, and reconfigure the interlocking fictions of power that shadow the region” (2).

<sup>86</sup> Pattison also delves into the feminine energy of the back porch: “unlike the front porch, the back porch, while public to the extent that Janie uses it to entertain visitors, is a predominately private space that allows her [Janie] to exert her feminine agency and to control the discourse that operate within it” (20). Scholars like Pattison do not examine Pheoby’s role in Janie’s life, a glaring evacuation of Black women kinship in counter site scholarship. The concentration on Janie’s narrative ability overshadows the transformative relationship she has with Pheoby.

is similar to the vodou spirit of love and beauty Ezrulie Freda which highlights the magic / speculative that serves as the background of the novel. By examining the muck, we see Janie explore a different side of Black life and experience egalitarian heterosexual romantic love with Tea Cake.

Yet pleasure and suffering exist concurrently in Janie's life. Because of her family's lineage of sexual assault, the orgasm scene alleviates (not transcend) Janie in the storm of antiblack violence. Additionally, while the muck is about diasporic care and wilderness, it is also where we see colorism and masculinity trigger domestic abuse chaos in Janie's life. This violence then elicits nature's ferocious response by claiming Tea Cake's life. However, the understudied love story between Pheoby and Janie reveals the intimate kinship Black women share with each other, away from whiteness and Black men. That there is love and care in hearing your fellow friend in the intimate of the back porch. *Their Eyes Were Watching God* shows the audience that through the hardships of antiblackness and traumas of slavery and misogyny, love and pleasure anchors us.

### **Chapter 3: Submerged Power**

“Men do not love. They possess. They subjugate.”

Mama Yaya in Maryse Conde’s *I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem*

While my two previous chapters discussed physical Black geographies in 20<sup>th</sup>/21<sup>st</sup> century Black literature — we examined Massacre River and the cane fields as sentient archival memory spaces in the Haiti/Dominican Republic borderlands while interrogating Floridian swamplands and the back porch of Janie’s house as vexed spaces of intimacy and intra-racial violence— this final chapter jumps into the highly discussed oceanography in Black literature: the Atlantic Ocean. I examine the replication of institutional violence (at the hands of Black men on Black women), fleeting feelings of bliss, and the transforming of Anyanwu’s body in the depths of the Atlantic Ocean in Octavia Butler’s *Wild Seed*. I argue that the Atlantic Ocean becomes a site of transitory bliss and escape for Anyanwu from Doro’s coercion and the slave ship. Suspended and in the middle of nowhere, Anywanu’s powers of changing into a dolphin (morphing her body to become an animal) makes her indiscernible to Doro’s panoptic all-seeing eye. In this moment, Anyanwu’s powers rivals Doro’s – a feeling that shakes Doro to his core. I want to emphasize that while I am examining Anyanwu’s moments of escape as relief, this blissful action is brief in the nowhere-ness of the ocean. The transforming into the dolphin in the Atlantic Ocean displays the limited freedom Anyanwu experiences as Doro’s wild seed. Pleasure that is experienced through the channel of intra-racial and gendered violence.

*Wild Seed* explores eugenics, power dynamics, Old World religiosity and New World slavery in the dynamic text. *Wild Seed* "imagine[s] new ways of thinking about people and

power.”<sup>87</sup> Butler’s new conception of power and kinship reimagines the maintenance of support in a West African society, its survival during the Middle Passage and growth in the New World. Enamored and threatened by Anyanwu’s shape shifting and healing powers, Doro promises her invincible children with psionic power to survive the New World. With his body snatching abilities and Anyanwu’s body transformation powers, Doro begins to accelerate his plan to create “power seed villages” throughout the New World. However, Doro’s vampiric thirst for dominance and Anyanwu’s unwillingness to bend to his will puts the two gods at odds, causing an eternal rivalry that spans generations.

The novel’s use of West and Central African myths, a Genesis retelling of Africans, enslavement, colonialism, and breeding highlights the violence of whiteness while also envisioning the innumerable speculative ways Black folks continue to survive the New World. *Wild Seed* (and many other Octavia Butler’s works) is canonized, and recognized, as an Afro-futurist text. Writer Mark Dery states that Afrofuturism is a “speculative fiction that treats African-American themes and addresses African-American concerns in the context of twentieth-century technoculture—and, more generally, African American signification that appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future” (Dery 180). Dery points to the how Black people address the ongoing issues and concerns of racism through the channel of technology and future. Scholars such as Alondra Nelson discuss the “digital divide” in which Black people have been left out from conversations of technology and modernity. “Blackness gets constructed as always oppositional to technologically driven chronicles of progress” (Nelson 1). Because of this divide,

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<sup>87</sup> Quoted by Veronica Mixon in "Futurist Woman: Octavia Butler," *Essence*, 9 (Apr. 1979), 12.

it creates an alienation. This alienation inspires a calling for a better future which Afrofuturism allows: “They excavate and create original narratives of identity, technology, and the future and offer critiques of the promises of prevailing theories of technoculture” (Nelson 9).

Kodwo Eshun’s article “Further Considerations on Afrofuturism” for *CR: The New Centennial Review* also expounds on Afrofuturism as well. Eshun argues, along the lines of Toni Morrison, that African slaves as the first modern subjects, as well as “real world” subjects of science fiction scenarios. By this, that means “[Toni Morrison argued] the African subjects that experienced capture, theft, abduction, mutilation, and slavery were the first moderns. They underwent real conditions of existential homelessness, alienation, dislocation, and dehumanization that philosophers like Nietzsche would later define as quintessentially modern” (Eshun 288). Based on the definition of “modern” this would mean that Africans were the first moderns in history. That means that while white hegemony implicitly or explicitly excludes Black subjects from (post)modernity and the techno-cyber-scientific inventions, Afrofuturism highlights the Black diasporic subject’s fundamental role in initiating and producing modernity. In other words, Afrofuturism “reorient[s] history,” in part in order to offer counter or alternative futures.

Thanks to popular culture figures and productions such as Janelle Monae’s Cindy during the *Metropolis* music saga, *The Black Panther* (2018) and its comic for *Marvel*, Octavia Butler and Samuel Delany’s literary works, the extraterrestrial in Parliament Funkadelic’s music, the term Afrofuturism has become a broad nomenclature for everything Black, space, time, cyber and futuristic. However, while watching my research grow into looking at how pleasure and trauma co-exist in Black life, I see the limitations the genre that we know of today in mainstream culture.

I do agree that Blackness and technology go hand in hand as a self-professed hoodfuturist.<sup>88</sup> I want us to discuss time, space, future(s), planets, the cyber(punk) However, the dominant push for “Black folks in the future” narrative that we know of now, falls into a dangerous revisionist category. Because I also want to discuss the ever-presentness of the past, the haunting of slavery, the new faces of colonialism, and how creating new worlds and new futures should not negate the pressing concerns facing Black diasporic and continental people today nor seek to include themselves in new worlds where white supremacy continues to exist.

My pull away from the genre rests on the following: 1) term may have been broadened by Black artists, writers, scholars but at the end of the day it was created by a white man 2) in public conversations of the genre, it constantly boils down to “Black people are doing this scientific thing too” or “we belong in space too!” I do not want us to be lazy in wanting to be integrated into white supremacist institutions 3) grappling with the term “futurism” is inherently fascist and masculinist.

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<sup>88</sup> I did not come up with the term “hoodfuturist,” it is a Tumblr dedicated to the aesthetics, fashion, literature, and music that dedicate to Afrofuturism but with more emphasis on the city/urban landscape. Or as their header states “Afrofuturism from a hood prospective.” To enjoy more, please visit <https://hoodfuturism.tumblr.com/> As writer Najma Sharif once tweeted, “people continue to talk about Janelle Monae’s Afrofuturism but what about Bobby Shmurda and Rowdy Rebel’s ‘Computers’?” While the tweet was in jest, it does highlight who gets to be considered Afrofuturist or at least, does it always need to be the cyborg on Venus’ 8<sup>th</sup> moon? Can it also be two rappers spitting bars such as “All these social networks and these computers” thus calling to arms the cyber through the urban landscape? Additionally, “Computers” was a call of arms for all New York Afrofuturists throughout the city in 2014.



There is no “reclaiming” that even if we put “Black/Afro” in front of it.<sup>89</sup> 4) push for more readings of Afrofuturism that does not boil down to “Nicki Minaj wearing a space suit #Afrofuturism.” Can we move beyond our obsession with the future? Do we really want to create new worlds/escape to space if we continually reimagine the same oppressive structures that tie us to earth? Additionally, do we need to reimagine ourselves with white folks as well? Are we reimaging the same violent institutions that bar us from the modernity we crave?

My reservations on Afrofuturism has turned me towards using the word “speculative” more. Speculative does the work I want to do. Speculative address/is concerned with the past and not interested ONLY in the gleam of futurity. To think of the speculative, I turn to M. Jacqui Alexander’s *Pedagogies of Crossing*: “collapsing ultimately, the demarcation of the prescriptive past, present, and future of linear time” (292). Speculative allow us to not just look to the future but the collapsing of time to discuss the fantastic or unreal. With my first chapter, I illustrated how the body remembers genocide and sexual violence in Hispaniola through intergenerational trauma. The second chapter examines the undercurrent of Southern folk and Caribbean magic while discussing floral and orgasms in the muck. Let us discuss ghosts and cyborgs. Let us discuss the

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<sup>89</sup> Artists Arthur Jafa and Martine Syms have been adamant in their distancing from the early formation of Afrofuturism as well. Syms wrote the highly sarcastic yet valid “The Mundane Afrofuturist Manifesto” for *Rhizome* (2013) in which she calls for Black diasporic artists to create art/culture that focuses on a more realistic future on earth rather than look to revise Blackness through space. Both Jafa and Syms look to artistic projects that investigate emancipatory futures of justice opposed to historical and contemporary racism, socioeconomic inequality, and state violence. This new wave they are calling is “Afrofuturism 2.0.”

zombie and haunting of slavery. Let us look at the past that NEVER REMAINS IN THE PAST and to not rely on the future as a means for a revisionist escape.<sup>90</sup>

*Wild Seed's* setting is Earth and our tempestuous history with colonialism and enslavement. However, the novel introduces African deities and psychic beings with unlimited powers. While exploring Earth from the perspective of divine beings, it asks about the effects of the institutions that oppress Black communities as well. Doro's breeding program and lust for creating new powerful beings closely resembles antebellum breeding of slaves for profit: "He [Doro] was not finished with her [Anyanwu] yet. There was a potentially valuable child in her womb" (*Wild Seed* 158). Doro's desire to destroy and overpower Anyanwu is an example of "borrowed institutionality," which is where Black men, barred from the institution of patriarchy because of white supremacy, attempt to replicate the same misogynistic violence towards Black women as a means of cultivating power. This is not to excuse Black intramural violence at the hands of Black men against women and non-binary Black people. Despite the lack of "true" masculinity, there must be something said about how Black men replicate power that is not theirs and the violent repercussions this has on Black women. For when it comes to dominating, hurting, and using Anyanwu, it is because Doro *knows she has too much power* to rival his own abilities. A power, I argue, he has no access to. "Anyanwu had too much power. [...] His [Doro] first inclination was

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<sup>90</sup> This was inspired by my 2/23/2020 writing date/break discussion with Dr. Mlondolozzi Zondi who always remind me to be clearer and challenge terms/genres that I do not align with for the work I want to do. Their exact words: "What does it mean for the speculative to not look towards a future? What does it mean for the past to not remain the past?"

to kill her” (*Wild Seed* 83).<sup>9192</sup> To quote Dr. Chad Infante during a personal conversation we shared when discussing Caribbean masculinity: “Black men are trying to attain the masculinity they think they lost to colonialism and slavery.”

With Doro’s constant need to exert power over Anyanwu, the Atlantic Ocean serves as a transient space of bliss and reflection for Anyanwu. It will also be the site where her powers, unbeknownst to her, grow and challenge Doro’s unbridled dream of being the creator of a new world order full of psionic beings. I argue that the oceanography of the Atlantic shatters Doro’s

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<sup>92</sup> Really thankful for the writing group “L’Étudiant Noir” which comprised of Harrison Graves, Le’ah Kaplan, Dr. Jesús Luzardo, Dr. Mlondolozzi Zondi, and myself during my final push out of Northwestern for the winter and spring quarters. They introduced me to the term “borrowed institutionality” when we were discussing my first early draft of this chapter. It was because of my overuse of the term “Black patriarchy.” To quote Mlondi, patriarchy cannot be Black since Black men do not have access to the phallic. Also, Patriarchy (rule by fathers) is a social system in which men are the primary authority figures central to social organization and the central roles of political leadership, moral authority, and control of property, and where fathers hold authority over women and children. It implies an institution of ‘male’ rule and privilege, and entails ‘female’ subordination. Many patriarchal societies are also patrilineal, meaning that property and title are inherited by the male lineage. Yet since this project revisits and is a bit influenced by Hortense Spiller’s “Mama’s Baby: Papa’s Maybe” article, Black men cannot possess the family (Spillers 66). You cannot possess something that was never your own. Along with personal discussions with friends, I also was astounded by Frank B. Wilderson’s breakdown of the term and breaking down what Afro-Pessimism truly is for the podcast *Vitamin D* (for more please listen here: [https://www.mixcloud.com/Vitamin\\_D/fade-to-black-final-vitamin-d-episode/](https://www.mixcloud.com/Vitamin_D/fade-to-black-final-vitamin-d-episode/)).

delusions of power as Anyanwu's transforming body makes her invisible to his panoptic eye. The oceanography of the Atlantic Ocean and the scene of seeing Anyanwu's transient happiness shatters Doro's ice thin power. Perhaps the most recognizable geography in African and African diasporic cultural production, the ocean serves as a cultural, spiritual, historical, and political site critical inquiry. The ocean functions as an archival site (ancestral honoring of lost ones from enslavement and Middle Passage), religious divination (fluid and queer spirits in African and diasporic religions) and freedom/linkage throughout the diaspora. As Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley in her article "Black Atlantic, Queer Atlantic: Queer Imaginings of the Middle Passage" "the ocean as space that churns with physical remnants, dis(re)membered bodies of the Middle Passage, and they plumb it metaphorically, as opaque space to convey the drowned, disremembered, ebbing and flowing histories of violence and healing in the African diaspora" (194).<sup>93</sup> The opacity of the cerulean blue / emerald green shimmering waves that enthrall, that shimmer of emerald that draw us in, the tranquility that begs us forward, those waves that swallow and haunt us, peaceful, storming, subsuming, calling, alleviating. The ocean — a geographic staple for the diaspora that embodies home, loss, life, and death—becomes Anyanwu's temporary haven and growth in powers from Doro.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Tinsley is writing about a "new geography of sexual, gendered, transnational, and racial identities that emerge through reading for black queer history and theory in the traumatic dislocation of the Middle Passage" (193).

<sup>94</sup> I also think of Anissa Janine Wardi's work *Water and African American Memory: An Ecocritical Perspective*. (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2011) in which she writes: "The African American expressive tradition construes bodies of water as haunted by the bodies of those who lost their lives in their

The readings of the queered crosscurrents of the Atlantic Ocean pairs off with Sigmund Freud's unpacking of the oceanic. The oceanic—which Freud argues as “a sensation of ‘eternity,’ a feeling as of something limitless, unbounded”—becomes a space that lacks designation and where all directions become possible.<sup>95</sup> The suspension into a limitless, unbounded, everywhere and nowhere nature of the ocean is what drew me to the work I want to do albeit Freudian. The ocean a space that lacks designation and where all directions become possible. Yet through my mining for scholarship on the ocean, it was Hortense Spiller's “Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” which made the Freudian quote hit harder. She writes: “[Africans were] literally suspended in the ‘oceanic,’ if we think of the latter in its Freudian orientation as an analogy for undifferentiated identity: removed from the indigenous land and culture, and not-yet ‘American’ either, these captive persons, without names that their captors would recognize, were in movement across the Atlantic, but they were also nowhere at all.”<sup>96</sup> Spillers posits the oceanic as a suspended and dismembered space due to the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Removed from its indigenous space and making its way to New World slavery, the Black body is mutilated ontologically and physically. Anyanwu's first trepidation from leaving the shores of West Africa was muddled with thoughts of fear, alienation, and suicide. She was without home into the uncharted waters that would unmake her.

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currents. Water, then, the course of travel, marks severed paths to home, family, landscape, and even life” (Wardi 4).

<sup>95</sup> Freud, Sigmund. *Civilizations and its Discontents*. New York: W.W Norton, 1962. P. 12

<sup>96</sup> Spillers, Hortense. “Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book.” *Diacritics*, Vol. 17, No. 2, Culture and Countermemory: The “American” Connection (Summer, 1987), p 72

My contribution to this study is that as much as we discuss the ocean as a cartography we never discuss pleasure through the channel of trauma in this highly discussed space. Coming to terms that I wrote a dissertation on sexual violence and Black women has aged me by years and also made me realize I need to do more careful work. To not look at easy readings/ways to think through pleasure as not just #BlackJoy to escape white supremacy. Anyanwu's brief moments of peace and clarity comes to the hands of feeling suffocated by Doro and also the coercive telepathy of Doro's scaly son, Lale Sachs. The ocean becomes a lasting refuge from sexual violence and also a space where Anyanwu, unbeknownst to her, becomes Doro's rival in power. Her transformative body in the space of the ocean allows her to be indiscernible to Doro, away from the microcosm of the slave ship and beyond his reach. Anyanwu experiences isolation, fear, thoughts of suicide, and the threat of sexual violence. By no means does her escape with the dolphins "erase" the traumas, but what does it mean to examine pleasure through the channel of trauma? What if pleasure is not an escape from violence but they go hand in hand? I am not interested in escapist views of pleasure but interested in how it informs our thinking on gendered and sexual violence for Black women in literature. The oceanography offers us a new way of thinking of pleasure as intertwined with violence and trauma. The murky crystal blue/emerald green waves conceal the possibilities of mining the limitless possibilities of unearthing new hybrid languages Black pleasure and trauma. I am interested in conversations with "yes and," not a grammar "black pleasure to not acknowledge the despair and grief."<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> My "yes and" came from my conversation with Dr. Corrine Collins on 4/11/2020 when discussing our engagement/interest in pessimism and pursuit in discovering new languages in love and intimacy.

**Powers that Be: Meeting Doro and Anyanwu**

Doro and Anyanwu's first meeting can be described as tense — fueled by years of loneliness yet punctuated by strangeness. Doro first meets Anyanwu after failing to protect one of his seed villages in West Africa. Losing one of his seed villages, Doro was drawn to a “kind of mental undertow pulling at him...the feeling became sharper and finer” the more he drew closer to Anyanwu's power (6). Both picked up on each other's godly powers, pulled by a magnetism from feeling as though they were the only “ones” of their kind. Strangeness and uneasiness colors Anyanwu's and Doro's relationship from start to finish. My interest in strangeness in the novel is important because we learn that Anyanwu comes from a line of people known for strangeness, Doro feels more at ease with “strange/mad” communities, Doro creating uncomfortable strangeness for others due to his vicious abilities, and the irony of two demi gods – with unknown powers to mortals – feeling strangeness overall.

Doro learns that Anyanwu comes from a line of Onitsha, known of their magical abilities, prophetic dreams and healing abilities. “It was her mother in whom she found strangeness, closeness, empathy that went beyond what could be expected between mother and daughter” (12). Anyanwu learns strangeness and empathy through her mother. It is her mother that pairs empathy and strangeness as part of Anyanwu's power. For years, Anyanwu believes she is alone until Doro shares that he is the same as her: “He was clearly proclaiming himself like her—long lived and powerful. In all her years, she had not known even one other person like herself. She had long ago given up, accepted her solitude” (9). Meeting Doro and promises of being with him seemingly put an end to her solitude.

Doro's beginnings were comforted by loving parents, yet his birth shunned him away from the other Ogbanje people. The only child that survived childbirth, Doro was protected by his parents despite people seeing him as "scrawny, tiny, and strange." Yet it was his transition – in which psionic people begin to grow into their powers through suffering – that marked his birth into feeding off bodies. At 13, he transitioned and took both his parents' bodies before decimating his Nile River village (162- 163). It took him 50 years to feel like "himself" after being taken in by the Egyptian empire. Doro was drawn to "his spiritual kin—people possessed or mad or just a little *strange*" (163). While Anyanwu thought she was alone, Doro fed on other people – through snatching their bodies, gathering them, protecting them, breeding them, and finally feeding of their worship of him. Doro felt at ease with the company of the mad and the strange but *with the added touch of their fear/lust/worship of him*. He feeds off of their love and need for him. Yet – a soul crushing void: he always felt "utterly alone, forever alone, longing to die and be finished" (164).

Doro and Anyanwu both come from loving parents, however, while Anyanwu's mother cultivated her power, Doro's was flushed with sorrow. The two people who protected him from the community were killed by him by accident. While Anyanwu was nurtured by her mother – who helps cultivate powers through empathy and strangeness – Doro was not nurtured by anyone to help him comprehend his ability or comfort him. This isolation brought him to the comforts of the mad/peculiar. By no means am I trying to humanize him or make excuses for his violence. Doro is trash for what he will do to Anyanwu and many people. However, his isolation and despair drive him to the mad/strange while also wanting to create others like himself so that he will never be alone.



Yet the end of isolation also brought uneasiness as well. While Doro lusted for Anyanwu's wild seed power, Anyanwu felt apprehension with Doro. "Everything about him made her uneasy" (8). I read this as Anyanwu sensing Doro's body snatching power yet not having a word for it. She sensed his "inhumanness" and he confirms it with her: "I kill Anyanwu. That is how I keep my youth, my strength. I can do only one thing to show you what I am, and that is kill a man and wear his body like a cloth" (13). Doro reveals his power to her, unsettling Anyanwu even more. Because of his body snatching power, the verbiage of "strangeness" and "uneasiness" surrounds Doro. We see this when they reach the "slave ship" in which Anyanwu's grandchildren are wary of him yet cower in fear. From Anyanwu to his own children, Doro's existence creates discomfort because he existed for so long on the bodies of others. The feeling of discomfort adds to Doro's incomprehensibility and inhumanity as an immortal.

Refusing to lose Anyanwu's wild seed power, Doro offers something she (and he ultimately) long for – partnership and children that would never die: "We would be right together, Anyanwu. Have you never wanted a husband who was worthy of you? [...] A mother should not have to watch her children grow old and die, he continued. 'If you live they should live. It is the fault of their fathers that they die. Let me give you children who will live.'" (23) Doro exposes and digs into Anyanwu's weak points — her desire for motherhood and the end of living alone as a demi-god. We will see this take a turn for the worst once they leave for the New World.

While Anyanwu thought about a partnership with a man she uneasily trusts, Doro was simply appraising her:

"[...] noticed instead that she had automatically assumed that he wanted her as a wife. That was natural assumption for to make, perhaps a correct assumption. He had been asking

himself which of his people she should be mated with first, but now he knew he would take her himself—for a while at least. He often kept the most powerful of his people with him for a few months, perhaps a year. *If they were children, they learned to accept him as a father. If they were men, they learned to obey him as master. If they were men, they learned to obey him as master. If they were women, they accepted him best lover or husband.* Anyanwu was one of the handsomest women he had ever seen. He had intended to take her to bed this night, and many more nights until he got her to the seed village he was assembling in the British-ruled Colony of New York. But why should that be enough? The woman was a rare find.”

*Wild Seed 2*, italics mine

Doro is not interested in partnership but creating a new line of beings who will never die. It is unclear if he wants their bodies as well. Throughout the text, he snatches the bodies of his own kin (which we will see with Thomas in Chapter 18). But his enforced heterosexual pairing of his psychic people means that his clan, his people, his creations live long lives. Meeting Anyanwu, he knows that he must have her to secure that future. The last quote shows more of Doro’s insidious interior thoughts: he does not want a partnership with Anyanwu (like she does as if they are husband and wife) but more so about ensuring a lineage, securing power, and exerting power over people. Doro’s lust for power reflects his core values: he wants subjugation, deference, fear.

It is also worth noting that Doro treats Anyanwu in a strange place between lover and daughter during their initial days together. It becomes very apparent during their first few days in New York. “He would have to treat her not as ordinary recalcitrant wild seed, but as one of his daughters—difficult, but worth taking time with. Worth molding and coercing with more gentleness and patience...” (*Wild Seed* 101). The scene foreshadows that Doro does not adhere to

the social mores of incest by sleeping with descendants. As long as the union can bring powerful beings into fruition, “incest” does not exist. Yet it is not consenting either. The passage uses words such as “molding” and “coercing” to illustrate the violence of rape in creating his new world. We will see as the novel unfolds the lengths Doro will go for it. He infantilizes and controls Anyanwu like a child, wants her as a lover, and views her a rival when she is not controlled. Doro dresses his need for Anyanwu as companionship when it is the opposite of what she dreams of.

The forced breeding of Anyanwu would lead us to readings/scholarships of Black women’s bodies being reduced to sexual objectification in the warped relationship to gender. Scholars such as Dorothy Roberts, Nicole Rousseau, Jennifer Morgan have discussed Black women as “bodies” for commerce/production during antebellum slavery. Hortense Spillers gives us “pornotroping” from “Mama’s Baby” to discuss how the captive African body becomes as a source of irresistible destructive sensuality (67). As Le’ah Kaplan pointed out during our reading session together of the text on 4/12/2020, “the body is reduced to a sexual object, where the paradox comes from being both ungendered and gendered to mutilate and to sexually violate all at once.” Anyanwu is able to transform her body at will but her body is now designated to just producing because of her raw power. Her womb is to create, nothing more. By no means am I arguing that Doro occupies the position of white colonial institutionality. Even in this world where immortals roam, no immortal can take the place of whiteness. It continues to be an evil that has no substitute. Yet Doro *attempts* to occupy the space of the “master” as he “marks” Anyanwu’s body as his own to do with what he wishes. He *replicates* that violence placed on Black women: Anyanwu occupies the space of being sexually available to Doro (and to anyone one HE chooses) for the sake of production. Lastly, ungendering (primary form of dispossession resulting from slavery was “the loss of gender”) is

not synonymous with Anyanwu's shape shifting abilities. Ungendering is a specific process of violence. While Anyanwu's transformation is out of survival yet always with consent.<sup>98</sup>

While Doro does not force Anyanwu to produce beings for profit, he does want new beings in his likeness. Beings that will be superior to humans yet still submit to him. Through the lens of borrowed institutionality and Black men's attempt to exert power through antagonism because they are barred from patriarchy (which is white), Doro places himself on top of this psychic pyramid. Doro represents intramural violence against Black women the sake of consolidating Black cis power for his own gains. I pair this reading with Wilderson's term "borrowed institutionality" Dr. Infante's reading of faux reclamation of masculinity with Nikki Giovanni's and Audre Lorde's separate engagements with James Baldwin.<sup>99</sup><sup>100</sup> Giovanni and Lorde call out the antagonistic violence that occurs at the hands of Black men on Black women. Intramural violence that hurts and kills. Currently, Moya Bailey's creation of the term "misogynoir" helps solidify discussions

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<sup>98</sup> I understand how cisgendered this reading is. I do not want to center black woman solely on genitalia or the womb as it leaves out other black women's experience in reproduction. Yet I do want to highlight how Anyanwu's body is boiled down to just creating for the sake of Doro's lust for power and world building.

<sup>99</sup> Nikki Giovanni's conversation with James Baldwin was for the PBS production *SOUL!* Which aired November 1971. For the full conversation, please see it here <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eZmBy7C9gHQ>

<sup>100</sup> "Revolutionary Hope: A Conversation Between James Baldwin and Audre Lorde." *Essence Magazine*. 1984. <https://mocada-museum.tumblr.com/post/73421979421/revolutionary-hope-a-conversation-between-james>

of anti-black racism and misogyny towards Black women.<sup>101</sup> However, by re-examining misogynoir colors Doro and Anyanwu's relationship from the beginning. I argue that Doro wants Anyanwu's body for the sake of his own agenda. Anyanwu pairs with him because she was lonely and wanted children that would never die. Doro exposes and exploits that need.

Doro exploits Anyanwu's need to mother and care so that he can create a line of beings that are mirror images of him but also beings who would submit to him as well. Doro sees Anyanwu as a wild seed that bears children worthy of his image but also willing to submit. He never saw her as an equal (128). He sees Anyanwu as a means to an end: power. Now he seduces the women around him and pairs off heterosexual couples for the sake of creating a superhuman lineage. Doro does not really complicate our understanding of "black women are the mules of the world" metaphor as Hurston taught us. Intramural violence as a means of claiming power they do not have access to, Black men tend to also be figures of oppression when it comes to Black women.

The meeting of Doro and Anyanwu illuminates that they are meant to be a balance of polar opposites. Pointing to the Genesis/Creation story aspect of *Wild Seed*, Doro and Anyanwu represent polar opposites that need each other to create. We begin to see their roles become more concrete throughout the novel. Both want to end their isolation but through different means. Doro does it through violence while Anyanwu does it through mothering/care. "Doro looked at people, healthy and ill, and wondered what kind of young they produce. Anyanwu looked at the sick—

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<sup>101</sup> Misogynoir is misogyny is misogyny directed towards black women where race and gender both play roles in bias. The term was coined by queer black feminist Moya Bailey, who created the term to address misogyny directed toward black women in American visual and popular culture in her "New Terms Of Resistance."

especially those with problems she had not seen before—and wondered whether she could defeat their disease” (147). Doro is rooted in cold violence, stern discipline, body snatching while Anyanwu is rooted through mothering, healing, and shapeshifting. They are Mother/Father, matriarchy/patriarchy, heal/destroy, empathy/indifference, etc. *Wild Seed* makes their meeting necessary for the new world they plan for their descendants. While this reading does add to the ongoing problem of rigid heteronormativity and gender essentialism, it does flesh out their actions in the narrative. It reveals to us that these two strange uneasy demigods are drawn to each other out of their fear of loneliness and longevity.

Living lives without each other, *Wild Seed* makes Doro and Anyanwu’s meeting feel like destiny, two immortals bound to meet. Two immortal souls that need each other. They feel as though they have known each other for their whole lives but also surrounded in strangeness. Anyanwu’s witchy beginnings is rooted in maternal taught magic/immortality/empathy while Doro’s strange beginnings was birthed through violence. Their end to isolation is punctuated with uneasiness with each other: Doro’s casual tone and charisma startles Anyanwu yet Doro will soon realize that Anyanwu’s new power in the ocean will startle him for generations.

### **Obscured Power: The Ocean**

“Doro, this is an evil place” Anyanwu utters to Doro as they make their way through the slave port for his ship heading to the New World. Since meeting Doro, Anyanwu made it clear to him and the readers that she hates slavery: husbands have attempted to domesticate her (12). Yet seeing the beginnings of chattel slavery brought by European colonialism, it makes Anyanwu sick to her stomach. Yet Anyanwu’s disgust with slavery reverberates throughout the text beyond

chattel slavery. Anyanwu unknowingly seals herself away to Doro's psychic new world project, she is tethered to the sacrificial sadness of motherhood, and to the New World's race caste system as well. Anyanwu's freedom is sealed away by her choice to be with Doro.<sup>102</sup>

Anyanwu's first experience with the ocean is full of fright, disgust, and isolation. Her experience of seeing the ocean is marked by chattel slavery thanks to white people. I argue that these feelings she experiences makes her more human than Doro, as the sight and smell of burning flesh intermingles with the salt of the ocean. "He [Doro] did not know the word in her language for sea. He had described to her the wide, seemingly endless water that they had to cross, but in spite of his description, she stared at it in silent awe. The sound of the surf seemed to frighten her as it mixed with the screaming of slaves being branded. For the first time, she looked as though the many strange new things around her would overwhelm her" (37). Again, we see the word *strange* illustrate Anyanwu's feelings towards Doro and all the mayhem he brings. Strange is viewing the cosmic silver shimmering void before her. Yet the scent of burning flesh (Spillers) interrupts this moment for her. It is a celestial and corporeal strangeness. The ocean and enslavement create a bigger sense of estrangement for Anyanwu. Because of Anyanwu's empathy, her freedom as an immortal woman living more inland (where chattel slavery has not affected her kinsmen yet in the text), these feelings are expected: Anyanwu is witnessing a violent mode of slavery (since slavery predates what we historically know as capitalism through mercantilism as scholar Le'ah Kaplan argues) in which Africans are facing death, fear, torture, and enslavement, at the slaver's ports.

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<sup>102</sup> I wish Anyanwu had Megan thee Stallion to remind her: "I don't chase liquor / why would I chase a nigga?" so that Anyanwu would live in unbothered bliss without a man ruining her life for a millennia.

While she watches her old life drift away from her, with a mixture of longing and fear (56) another feeling begins to swallow Anyanwu. Leaning to the ship's rail, she yearns for the sea to escape her unknown future li(f)e with Doro, because the unknown terrifies her: "She would leap into the sea. Its waters would take her home, or they would swallow her. *Either way, she would find peace.* Her loneliness hurt like some sickness of the body, some pain that her special ability could not find and heal. The sea..." (58, italics mine). The passage demonstrates Anyanwu's aching feelings that swallow her as she watches the shoreline drift away. Anyanwu feels the throbbing feeling of isolation and death swallow her. She *knows* this voyage to the Americas is a departure from her old life. It is also a voyage filled with death and violence. As if the port was a blood-stained curtain, the sea was the infinite unfamiliarity of death.<sup>103</sup> Anyanwu saw her drift away. Yet it is the sea that highlights these feelings of isolation, death, and suicide. She finds comfort in the lapping waves that may carry her back home or in death's embrace. As the sea intermingles with the sight and smell of flesh, the sea also loss and suicide. This marks the first scene where the ocean incites transient bliss in the eye of death and violence for Anyanwu. While it is peace through death, it is Anyanwu's desire to be free from the ship and Doro's plans. Freedom

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<sup>103</sup> I think of Frederick Douglass' passage when reading Anyanwu leave her old life: "It was the blood-stained gate, the entrance to the hell of slavery, through which I was about to pass. It was a most terrible spectacle. I wish I could commit to paper the feelings with which I beheld it." From *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*. <https://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/douglass/douglass.html> Accessed on 4/18/2020.



through death. Doro sees Anyanwu succumbing to the call of death and saves her. But he does not save her because he wants to but he needs to, for the sake of the seed village.<sup>104</sup>

Seeing Anyanwu's unease, Doro attempts to illustrate how his ship is drastically different from other slave companies' ships. Yet we know that Doro's ship has its own horrors as Doro's plots to pair Anyanwu with any men he sees fit while also forming new couples on the ship. coercive violence, especially for Anyanwu. Doro's ship full of Africans with breeding potential does not have the same *exact* stain of slavery but it still maintains a thinly veiled violence and coercion which is enforced by Doro. Doro – the gentle yet cold father that expects loyalty and submission – maintains a ship that has enough for his seeds. “There was enough food – too much, since the slaves were so few. There were no chains. There were blankets to warm them and the sea

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<sup>104</sup> With my reading of Saidiya Hartman's *Lose your Mother* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux: New York, 2008), “slavery made the past a mystery, unknown and unspeakable” (16). Perhaps it is my own imagining of what enslaved Africans would feel at this moment – facing the sea or facing unspeakable violence at the hands of chattel slavery — yet Anyanwu's feelings of wanting for death or home rather than a new coercive seems accurate. We will never know how Africans felt on a slave ship outside of texts such as Olaudah Equiano's *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano Or Gustavus Vassa, The African: Written by Himself* which illustrate first-hand accounts of the hold. History books do not account for the feelings leading up to the port, to the ship, after the ship. This is a hard piece of the chapter to write out because the New World was carved by bloodshed – rape and near extermination of indigenous populations and the forced enslavement of Africans. I struggle with this emotional component as I think about all the lost stories, feelings, and lives of enslaved Africans. We will never know them, except through history books and historical literature that fleshes them out through some re-imagination and through archival work.

air on deck to cool them. There were no whips, no guns. No woman was raped.” (64).

Doro soon explains the what a REAL slave ship looks like to a shaken and naive Anyanwu: “People packed together so that they could hardly move and chained in place so that they had to lie in their own filth, beatings, the women routinely raped, torture...large numbers of slave dying. All suffering. ‘Waste!’ Doro finished with disgust. ‘But those ships carry slaves for sale. *My people are for my own use.*’” (64-65, italics mine). Doro’s disgust does not come from the evils of slavery but for the wasted opportunity for reproduction. To reiterate, Doro seats himself at the head of the pyramid to consolidate power and create a new world through coercive violence. The Africans he brings to the New World are to create HIS new world. His scheme forces coupling for the sake of creating powerful beings. Men and women are tortured, branded, raped, and packed in the belly of the ship. Yet HIS clans, they are not brought to the world for profit or labor. More so, for world building. Doro says that the microcosm of his ship is not the same as any other ship during the Middle Passage. To Doro, the Trans-Atlantic slave trade is a waste of reproductive potential.

I argue that Doro’s ship is an atypical copy of a slave ship.<sup>105</sup> The ship already is an architecture of violence with or without the blankets and kindness. By atypical, I mean while the people on the ship are not used for profit, which Doro sees as wasted potential, they are being used to create a new race of immortals. Doro may not believe in enslavement but yet he replicates the same sexual violence of that institution. Doro’s project is about creating beings that do not belong to this world system’s infrastructures/institutions/racial formations. Doro does not care about racial

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<sup>105</sup> I use the word “atypical” from my unpacking of *Scenes of Subjection* from my conversation with Mlondi Zondi on 4/19/2020 during our viral accountability text feed to finish out our chapters during the COVID-19 crisis.

formations but what can be produced from his careful pairings.<sup>106</sup> We see Doro neglect race when he presents Isaac to Anyanwu, explaining about his mixed-race heritage despite his white skin (98). It might not be using enslaved Africans to cut canes or pick cotton. But it's the coercive producing especially when incest is not taboo for Doro or the wild seeds. He enforces heterosexual pairings to create new beings so that he can have a lineage of psionic immortals that supersede humans. Is this to create new bodies for him to body snatch into? It is unclear about Doro's interest in creating new beings so that he can inhabit their own body. We see him take the bodies of his own children such as Thomas (which we will discuss in the following section). They might not produce for profit but for creating a new race of people. *His people*.

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<sup>106</sup> Doro's line of thinking can be seen as mixed race as futurity/immortality. Presses and texts such as the *National Geographic's* 2013 article "The Future is Mixed race" and José Vasconcelos' *La raza cósmica* (1925) point to the concept of an agglomeration of all the races in the world with no respect to color or number to erect a new civilization or even nullify the ongoing racial tensions/formations of the Americas. I noticed Butler's fascination with "relationship of differences" in her journals at the Huntington Library. She believed in pairing of polar opposites to create conversations on liberation with differences. An example would be interracial relationships (mostly white/black) which we see in texts such as *Kindred*, *Wild Seed*, old/young in *Fledgling*, and non-human/human in the short story "Bloodchild." I have not grappled with this part of Butler's work, as it points to bigger issues such as sex, consent, age, etc. but it still needs to be highlighted in Butler scholarship. However, I turn to Dr. Corrine Collins' dissertation research where the scholar discusses the violence of interracial relationships and how the rise of bi/multiracialism is actually antiblack. Since you are here, you can also read Jared Sexton's *Amalgamations Schemes: Antiblackness and the Critique of Multiracialism* (University of Minnesota Press: 2008) to read more on how multiracialism is actually inherently anti-Black.

*Wild Seed* does not discuss any other sexual liaisons Doro has besides Anyanwu and Nweke. Yet there is a veiled silence of coercion and submission when it comes to his lovers. Creating a new world means coercive heterosexual sex. We will see that Doro is not against using different bodies. He chooses women based on his body, but they must do his bidding. We see this force highlighted in the latter half of the novel when we discuss Nweke and Thomas. Yet we know that Doro plans to use Anyanwu's children against her for his plans. Anyanwu hates slavery but signed herself away into being a breeder for Doro's new world project. The use of gendered violence to get what he wants from her: children that never die. Doro replicates the breeding aspect of slavery yet not for profits but to create. Anyanwu chooses Doro under the guise of partnership and children. She thought she would be choosing a new life. I posit that Doro use of borrowed institutionality also replicates the sexual violence of slavery under the guise of eugenics/promised of new children. He will weaponize Anyanwu's children/womb against her for the sake of his new race of immortals.

Doro does not inhabit the position of the white slave master/colonizer, yet he uses the same techniques to dominate and create. The "missing" overt/legible signs of enslavement does not negate the violence of Doro's project or the ship: while there are no chains, whips, close quarters in the belly of the ship or rape, Doro's forced pairing of people and the geography of the ship is already violence. Doro's ship is atypical slave ship. Do the couples WANT to be together? Okoye, Anyanwu's grandchild, is the only character that shows outright distrust and fear. He is "uneasy" with Doro's kindness. However, Doro pairs Okoye with a woman which shows promise of an offspring. The pairings are not of the Africans' choosing but of Doro's. It is all of Doro's

machinations. It is not free will to be with another person but forced free will. Akin to free will on the ship deck.

I use “akin to...” from Saidiya Hartman’s unpacking of Linda Brents’ “choice” in selecting Mr. Sands as a lover in Harriet Jacobs’ *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Hartman, in her own text *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self Making in Nineteenth Century America*, troubles Brents’ “seduction” of a white man as an enslaved Black woman in 19<sup>th</sup> century antebellum U.S. To ensure freedom for herself and children, Brents views her seduction / saying “yes” to Mr. Sands as an act of liberation when the scholar analyzes the act as “nonconsent.” “Akin to freedom expresses the limited possibilities, constraint, despair, and duress that condition in the giving of the self, not unlimited options, freedom, encumbered choice.” (104) Hartman’s definition does not mean escapism but speaks to a limited freedom or castigated agency (Hartman 6). Akin is not total freedom as it is haunted by domination. Domination has not left Black people. Anyanwu and the other Africans experience limited freedom which are truly just Doro’s plans for a new world. Doro’s ship, already violent, is an atypical slave ship. There may be kindness, blankets, and Africans walking around freely but to what about the destination? What about the “choice” in coupling? The ship is Doro’s experiment and he sees all. What is freedom when under the watchful eye of Doro, an immortal that can snatch a body with a touch?

However, the “peace” of the ship is soon disrupted by Anyanwu’s encounter with Lale Sachs, one of Doro’s less desirable sons. Doro had warned Anyanwu to stay clear of the green-eyed thin man. Just as she was about to care for a sick Isaac, Lale’s thoughts creep into her mind: “She saw the image (Doro) giving Isaac to her—placing the half-conscious boy into her arms. Then abruptly, wrenchingly, she saw herself engaged in wild frantic sexual intercourse, first with

Isaac, then with the ugly green-eyed man whose name was Lale. Lale Sachs” (69). We see this scene as an unfortunate foreshadowing: Doro is giving his Isaac to Anyanwu not just to care for him but also to be with him to produce children for his new world. I argue that Lale knew of Doro’s insidious plans for Anyanwu: to produce powerful children with men Doro saw fit. Yet Lale desired Anyanwu as well, despite his less than desirable looks or powers.

The scene is full of coercion and threats of sexual violence. Lale invades Anyanwu’s mind without her consent along with highlighting the Doro’s plans with Anyanwu (unknown to her, well known to us as readers) as a wild seed. Even when thrashing Lale away from her, “the terrible link she had with him was not broken” (69). Lale *stays* with Anyanwu, against her wishes. It is Anyanwu’s encounter with Lale Sachs that puts Doro’s world building and coercion into high relief. Lale, one of Doro’s “less than desirable” sons had done a misdeed: “No one had the right to go tampering with the very thoughts in her mind” (69). In retaliation, Anyanwu pushes Lale away hard enough he reveals his true monstrous form: a horn faced lizard. As he held her by her throat, tail whipping around and jaws that can rip through her flesh, Anyanwu quickly transforms into a jaguar, eating him before Doro kicks her away.

Anyanwu rationalizes her decision to eat Lale: “He was a vicious deadly being. Best to kill him now before he could come to and control her thoughts again” (70). With telepathic beings in *Wild Seed*, their connection remains with their intended until their line of vision is broken. We saw this when Anyanwu pushed Lale away from the first time, how that connection was not broken through their fight. I argue that Lale would not only just control Anyanwu’s thoughts but also attempt to rape her as well. He would have shaped Anyanwu’s thoughts into her thinking she would be lying with Doro rather than Lale. Anyanwu’s fight with Lale also reveals the

insidiousness of Doro's plan but also the lie of the ship. Doro assures her that his ship is not like the other slave ships fronted by slave trading companies. Doro's ship was a haven for his people to start anew in the New World. In actuality, sexual violence and coercion was right next to Doro. In the next few years, it will be Doro forcing Anyanwu into sexual acts with him and other men. Doro's slave ship is not a haven, it is a symbol of limited freedom yet Lale's coercion and power shows that Doro's slave ship is an atypical copy of an institution that shapes the transatlantic world.

To escape the ship and Doro, Anyanwu decides to jump into the ocean.<sup>107</sup> Before, we see Anyanwu cower to Doro. Even her own grandchild Okoye asks her why she shrinks herself for him. Yet at this moment, we see Anyanwu finally do what she wants in the geography of the ship, in the nowhere-ness of the ocean. However, not as a woman but as an animal. This is the first time Doro sees her shift into an animal: "Anyanwu tore off her cloth and dived into the sea before her *confidence deserted entirely*. There, she transformed herself quickly as was comfortable. She became the dolphin whose flesh she had eaten....*She reveled in the strength and speed of her new body...No slavers with brands and chains here. No Doro with gentle terrible threats to her children to her* (78-79). Through consuming the dolphin, Anyanwu is able to alter her body to a new animal form. Through eating dolphin flesh, Anyanwu's brief freedom is laced with morbidity.

We finally see Anyanwu revert back to the independence she had before Doro. The transformation of her body allows her to be free from the demands of motherhood and Doro. She thinks of only her new found body and the freedom within the ocean – something she saw as alien and isolating. This moment is pivotal as Anyanwu feels pleasure and limited freedom within this

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<sup>107</sup> Anyanwu definitely was channeling her inner Sheree Whitfield "Who gon' check me boo" when she jumped into the ocean in spite of Doro's gentle threats (77).

oceanography in addition to the anxiety it for her. Once a vast place that intermingled the sight and smell of flesh and as a reminder of her life as an independent woman drift way has now become a safe haven. It was a safe haven from Doro, the lies of the ship, and the murderous encounter with Lale. The newness, suspension, and nowhere-ness of the ocean offers Anyanwu a brief respite from Doro's grasp.

While experiencing this piece of freedom as a dolphin, Anyanwu thinks about all the violence of men, she notices the difference between human men (and Doro) and male animals: "She could remember being bullied as a female animal, being pursued by persistent males, *but only in her true woman-shape could she remember being seriously hurt by males — men.*" (79, italics mine). The ocean provides her space to reflect on the hardships brought to her by human men and Doro. Anyanwu feels relief as a dolphin, because she's away from the violence of men where she experiences the most hurt from them. It is also here when she sees the gentle honorable nature of male dolphins. This pivotal interior moment reveals two things: 1) human men – shaped by the patriarchal demand of society – hurt human women 2) to escape coerced sexual relations Anyanwu has to (ironically) transform into an animal to escape that violence.<sup>108</sup> The irony displays

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<sup>108</sup> This reading was most inspired by Madhu Dubey's article "Becoming Animal in Black Women's Science Fiction" in *Afro-Future Females*. The scholar's examines dichotomy of women science fiction writers using nature/animal metamorphosis to discuss otherness. The quote which inspired my reading on the major difference between human men and biologically male animals: "Passage after passage describing her experience among the dolphins emphasizes the sexual violence and reproductive exploitation that is uniquely human, adding up to a powerful indictment of the human male [...] The barbaric sexual behavior of human males is thereby shown to be a product of patriarchal and racist culture rather than intrinsic to



Doro sees her as a breeding stock that needs to breed for the sake of creating something new, while Anyanwu's transformation into an animal allows her to escape that destiny, even if that moment is brief. Lastly, later, the transformation into an animal becomes her escape tactic.

Through Isaac, Doro summons Anyanwu back to the ship. The thrill of freedom and possible (abominable) courting by a dolphin immediately flees her body as she returns back to the limited freedom of Doro's ship. Looking indiscernible as he held her from the wetness of the ocean, Doro knew that "Anyanwu had too much power. In spite of Doro's fascination with her, his first inclination was to kill her" (83). Doro, drawn to Anyanwu's magnetism back in Central Africa, who can seek out every mad or peculiar being who is useful for his eugenics paradise (with him on top), could not sense Anyanwu at all as a dolphin in the dark blue waters of the ocean. At this pivotal moment, we see the cool and calculated Doro begin to feel the limits of his power as Anyanwu's shapeshifting abilities rivals his own abilities. Anyanwu is not some wild seed that is beneath him, but possibly one that can rival him and supersede him. At this moment, Anyanwu is a threat to his master plan and to his own being – Doro was the only one of his kind for so many years. Yet here was Anyanwu, a possible offspring of his kin, but more so more likely her own immortal being separate from his own genetic line. As an animal she was beyond Doro's power and that terrifies/enrages him. Doro hates not having control and he needs to consolidate power. Doro needs Anyanwu. He needs her more alive than dead. It is here where we see that Anyanwu's power is latent, unbeknownst to her but known to us; that her power predates the oceanic moment but the water exacerbates it: "She had power and her power had made her independent, accustomed to being her own person" (*Wild Seed* 99).

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nature. (39). So pretty much, men are trash.

I am drawn to the power dynamic shifts and irony that converge in the ocean scene as well. We cannot discuss this moment in the Atlantic without examining the irony of becoming powerful as an animal. Anyanwu is out of Doro's sight as an animal. Doro also cannot read her mind in this state. Anyanwu's animal shifting powers is a weapon in her arsenal to rival Doro however she does not know it yet. However, this power reveals the irony of Doro and breeding plan. Doro intends to breed Anyanwu to any partner with power potential to create something new – like an animal. Yet Anyanwu is powerful without him as an animal. Additionally, as the narrative continues, we learn about Doro becoming the less human he becomes before the reader's eyes. Years of wearing flesh has made him colder and hungrier. He feeds off of the subjugation of others, their reverence, their lust for them, and their bodies (85). *Doro* is more animal than god with his incessant need for respect, lust, fear, and bodies from his seed villages. He brings Anyanwu and the other Africans to the New World to be breed like animals when it is truly Doro that has become more animal because of his immortality. His inhumanity consumes everyone, even Anyanwu. While Anyanwu's power of changing into animals makes her a powerful being that rivals Doro, it is Doro who exhibits more "animalistic" behavior. She maybe an animal but he has an insatiable hunger that swallows any form of humanity/compassion that might be found in him. Doro the body snatcher that wears flesh of his own kin to ensure power (120).

Anyanwu's wandering freedom from Doro's slave ship also allows her to be free from Doro, even if that moment is brief. This moment of wandering in the ocean as a dolphin offers Anyanwu reflection and the freedom to wander. Through transforming and swimming, Anyanwu escapes Doro, experiences a new community, and achieves clarity with swimming. This moment of interiority and clarity allows her to 1) experience freedom away from Doro's line of sight/grasp

2) understand the cruelty of human vs. the gentle nature of male animals (one is conditioned by society) 3) even explore near abominable feelings of disgust about possibly mating with another animal which she refuses to do of course. Anyanwu's body becomes queered (transformed) in the already dark unknown space of the ocean. The ocean is an unknown lost deadly space which once provoke feelings of despair and death for Anyanwu. Yet we see it become a space of queered quiet freedom. She is an animal swimming in a space of suspension in a space she once feared but now welcomes as a geography of freedom.

Yet once they leave the Atlantic and reach New York, Doro makes it clear to Anyanwu that she is to wed Isaac and bear children to multiply Doro's stock. Anyanwu was to bear children with men Doro saw fit to match her wild seed power. Doro breaks Anyanwu's heart by pushing her towards Isaac, which in turn desecrates her moral compass about having sexual relations with the father and the son, which is frowned upon in West African tradition (119). Ordering her to be with Isaac – which disgusts her as she had shared Doro's bed the first night of meeting—Doro finally carves out her weakness in front of her. *“I'll get what I want from them* (her children/descendants), and their children be as much mine as the people here” (117, italics mine). Doro knew that Anyanwu would do anything he threatens her children and their descendants. Being the embodiment of motherhood and nurturing, Anyanwu's “flaw” is sacrificing herself for the sake of her children.

At that moment, Anyanwu saw Doro's darkness clearly. She saw it when he snatched the body of the African leader. She saw how the slavers cower to him. She saw the command of fear and respect from the other Africans. Even she found herself feeling fearful of Doro's enigmatic charismatic violence. Breadcrumbs of his inhumanity were in front of Anyanwu (46-47) yet she

stayed for the “promise of children.” Her independence would vanish without a struggle to keep her children safe. Where Anyanwu saw repulsion in marrying Isaac, Doro saw a wunderkind creation between the two. Doro sees products/new beings for his new universe. Anyanwu secures his genetic line and to ensure that, he demands submission. The best way is through childbearing with Anyanwu.

Seeing her internal strife, Isaac pleads with Anyanwu, just as his father Doro had back in Africa but with sincerity: “Submit to him now, Anyanwu, and later, you can keep him from ever making animals of us” (122). Where Anyanwu saw a monster, Isaac a man who became more hardened as he cannot die. The novel pushes for us to empathize with Doro’s “plight” of being an immortal losing his humanity with each new body he inhabits. It is at this moment we see Isaac show more love for Doro but also a pathway of freedom for Anyanwu: freedom through submission. Seeing her life chained in America, Anyanwu makes a gory comparison between motherhood and enslavement: “She knew now how the slaves had felt as they lay chained on the bench, the slaver’s hot iron burning into their flesh. In her pride, she had denied that she was a slave. She could no longer deny it. Doro’s mark had been on her from the day they met. She could break free of him only by dying and sacrificing her children and leaving him loose upon the world to become even more of an animal” (122). Diving back to the connection between animals and Anyanwu, while Anyanwu transforms into an animal as a source of power (which she will become cognizant of towards the second half of the novel), it is Doro that displays more animal than god due to his body snatching abilities and desires for a new world. However, it is through the analogy of slavery, Anyanwu sees that she is nothing but stock chattel in Doro’s Hudson Valley village. Although Anyanwu does not experience the exact same violence of the Middle Passage or early

stage antebellum slavery, she is aware enough to see that her body is no longer hers. It is what Doro wants from it. It was a violent relationship all along.

The transformation abilities of Anyanwu, the shifting of power dynamics between her and Doro, and the limited freedom of the ocean is a brief scene however it shapes in the second half of the novel. Anyanwu may not know the power she has when it comes to transforming into an animal but it still resonates with the readers of what is to come. Reading Doro's ship being just as violent as any other slave ship illuminates that having overt symbols of slavery does not negate the insidiousness of Doro's plans. The slave ship is a geography/architecture/technology of domination and violence even if no is getting beaten. The enslavement of people is violent enough, even if you give them blankets or allow them to walk freely. Lastly, the ocean embodies Anyanwu's shifting feelings of death and isolation to bliss and refuge. The ocean, a blood stained yet infinite curtain, is where Anyanwu learns so the violent nature of Doro and his plans.

### **"Free as a Bird:" Remembering the Bliss of the Atlantic**

After sealing her life away in the Hudson with Isaac, Anyanwu becomes the seed village's healer and mother figure. However, she hardens herself against Doro. Her fear and disgust of Doro led her to the Judeo-Christian God (141).<sup>109</sup> Years into the late 17<sup>th</sup> century of America have

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<sup>109</sup> I read this moment of Anyanwu running to Christian God in reaction to hating Doro as a counter reading of Janie and the love of men in her life in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Janie adores and worships the men in her life while Anyanwu hates Doro with every fiber in her being, turning her back to him for the Judeo-Christian God. Another thematic thread of my dissertation is how women continue to serve and love

hardened their relationship into a brutal cold war. Throughout the years, Doro forces Anyanwu to sleep with other men throughout his other villages to procreate. As stated before, Doro sees only production while Anyanwu notices how to heal. Doro will do anything to create new beings. Their “ritual” was for Doro to come to Anyanwu in a new body, court her, pay attention to her, “treat her as something more than a breeding animal” (145). It would work for a time but Anyanwu would still continue to hate him for forcing her into the New World under the guise of love/partnership. Additionally, the continuous threat to her children kept her there.

While Doro’s first act of abomination was forcing Anyanwu to “mate” Isaac, his second act was swapping genders with her to procreate just to see what they can create as the opposite gender. Anyanwu, back in Africa, stated her disgust at the possibility of swapping genders to have children. To Anyanwu, this is an act of defilement. Ironically, bestiality and swapping of gender are abominable to Anyanwu yet Doro’s coercive breeding projects with the power villages, forcing Anyanwu into pairings, and killing people for the sake of power are acts of horror. Or rather, they do not illicit such disgust for Anyanwu compared to sleeping with Doro as a man.

However, Doro merely sees swapping genders as a means to an end. If they are immortal beings who are not tethered to the gender binary so that they can create a new race of beings, why not? While this binary is still centered on man/woman, their abilities to change bodies can be read as queered via Eve Sedgwick’s definition of queer: “the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or *can't be* made) to signify monolithically.”<sup>110</sup>

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men who constantly disappoint them. You cannot spell disappointment without men.

<sup>110</sup> Sedgwick, Eve. *Tendencies*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1993. 8.

Anyanwu transforms her body as an animal. Doro can snatch any human he wants, despite gender. Both Doro and Anyanwu's bodies can create and be infinite possibilities. The queering of their bodies also highlights another irony: Anyanwu believes in the rigid gender roles (Doro is "man" and I am "woman") and feels disgusted at the thought of having sex with Doro's womanly body. However, she felt comfortable as a female dolphin who was at the edge of mating with another. While the thought of mating with the male dolphin was interrupted by Doro's insecurity of losing her in the ocean, the fact remains she *entertained it* despite her feelings of abjection. This coincides with my argument about the ocean melting away Anyanwu's anxieties into forms of bliss due to the freedoms that the ocean birthed her.<sup>111</sup>

By no means is this a queer relationship: the two are very centered in the heterosexual matrix while also procreating as "man" and "woman." They do not destroy the binary; they simply destabilize by swapping throughout the spectrum. Additionally, this moment is underpinned by Doro's coercion. By no means is Doro a queer revolutionary hero for breaking gender binaries. He sees production. Additionally, Anyanwu adheres to the strict gender binary due to "nature" while Doro just sees it as a spectrum to get his product made – to ensure a line of psychics and super beings. Gender means nothing to him as long as something worthy is created from it. *By any means necessary*. It is not so much that they are breaking the binary or even queering it for the sake of love. It was more about Doro seeing countless possibilities for new beings, regardless of whether

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<sup>111</sup> Anyanwu is no radical femme icon. Her entire disposition is shaken to the core at the thought of being a man for the sake of procreating. However, this thought process changes during the last act of the novel. Or at least, she is willing to change her body for someone else other than Doro. Albeit white but no one is perfect.

it is a woman or a man. Essentially, they are still in a heterosexual pairing, they are just simply shifting their bodies to see what can be created. While Doro found the moment pleasurable and laughable in the expense of Anyanwu, it was Anyanwu who could not perform under such duress.

When Doro returns to the Hudson in 1741 to continue their ritual, we see an elderly Anyanwu and Isaac with their daughter Nweke. Yet Isaac is not Nweke's father but another man. Years of their "ritual" have turned Anyanwu bitter and cold towards Doro.<sup>112</sup> He threatens her children against her, sleeps with Anyanwu whenever he wanted, and also pushes other men to her for the sake of production. Yet most importantly, Doro expects submission from everyone. Still, Anyanwu refuses to please him in that way. Anyanwu refuses to bow her head to him. "He wanted Anyanwu to be like his many other women and treat him like a god in human form, competing for his attention no matter how repugnant his latest body nor even whether he might be looking for a new body" (146).

To punish Anyanwu for her ingratitude, for their bitter cold war feud, and for not "loving Doro" by submitting to him like a god, Doro pushes Anyanwu to Thomas. Thomas is wild seed Native American living in solitude in the wilderness.<sup>113</sup> Disheveled, sickly with sores and brimming with the sensitive power of reading minds, Thomas objects to sleeping with Anyanwu due to his violent misogynoir. Thomas calls her "nigger" "black bitch" and believes she was a witch. Doro wanted to see if Anyanwu would share vermin infested bed to spite him or kill a "grotesque ruin of a man" since Anyanwu refuses Doro. "He is not my god. He brought me to you as a punishment for my sacrilege" Anyanwu tells Thomas as he constantly berates her about her

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<sup>112</sup> It is not a ritual, it is full on sexual violence. The text calls it ritual.

<sup>113</sup> The text does not specify which Indigenous nation Thomas comes from.



powers. I argue that Anyanwu despises Doro so much that she refuses him and turns to the Judeo-Christian god to make sense of his injustice and also to spite Doro. However, I also believe that she really does not need the Judeo-Christian God to rise up against Doro. Anyanwu just needs to realize her own potential as a standalone immortal entity *without Doro*. Why need God when you are the Sun Woman?

Yet Anyanwu heals people in spite of their flaws. Slowly, she begins to soothe Thomas' fears, listen to his life story and tend to his wounds. When Thomas asks Anyanwu about her body shifting abilities, he is confused by her refusal to shapeshift into a white person. This is a moment of tension between Thomas and Anyanwu. We see Thomas' antiblackness and love for whiteness (since he loves his blonde-haired wife) clash with Anyanwu's confidence in her body and Blackness. This highlights how Thomas views their powers as a way of escaping and changing into beings that they are not, to escape suffering or for the sake of nostalgia. We see this when Thomas asks Anyanwu to change into his blonde-haired wife (151). Anyanwu, older than many of the Wheatley villagers and raised by West African witches, sees her changing abilities as a part of her identity and only as an act of survival (change into a man when traveling west, transforming into a dolphin to escape Doro to experience freedom), not to escape the core part of herself.<sup>114</sup>

Anyanwu explains her abilities as a means to *survival*, not as a magic trick to appease Thomas or to escape Blackness: "I'm content [...] If I have to be white someday to survive, I will

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<sup>114</sup> *Wild Seed* makes a strong argument about how Africans and Native Americans possess unbridled power. I believe that the novel wants to tie two indigenous groups through power and the unreal/fantastic. While the text avoids the "shaman Native" archetype that we see in popular culture and literature, I could not ignore the comparative reading of Anyanwu's and Thomas' unrestraint of power.

be white. [...] If I have to cross the sea, I'll become a fish.' she smiled a little. 'A dolphin, perhaps.'" (150). This moment of recollection is where my work is highlighted despite the brevity of this moment: pleasure and terror are intertwined for Anyanwu. Anyanwu's beloved memory of the water is because of her running away from Doro's grasp. To run away from the limited freedom of the ship and her dark destiny as a breeder, the ocean has become a sweet moment. M. Jacqui Alexander's work *Pedagogies of Crossing* unpacks the role of oceanic memory in this moment: "Water overflows with memory. Emotional memory. Bodily memory. Sacred memory." (Alexander 290). For Anyanwu, the ocean is a site of bodily and emotional memory, in which she transforms into a dolphin and carries feelings of bliss during her brief moments away from Doro. Even when facing Doro's wrath, it is the ocean that Anyanwu turns to for moments of relief and bliss. Yet here she was, defending her Blackness and existence to Thomas: as a wild seed she is forced to procreate with him because of Doro. Anyanwu's blissful nostalgia for the ocean, a space of freedom and exploration, is connected with Doro, the violence of antiblackness, and misogyny. The ocean is where she was able to be far from Doro's telepathy and blind to his sight: where we (the readers) are able to know that Anyanwu's own powers rival Doro's (although she does not know it yet). It is also where she learned the ways of men are radically different from the way of male species, where she entertained curiosity and play, and where Anyanwu was able to escape the dread of the slave ship. The ocean is underpinned by so much violence yet Anyanwu still holds on to pleasure aspects of her brief freedom. The ocean was pivotal in her survival and for her growth as a demigod.

Thomas and Anyanwu's new found appreciation for each other unsettles Doro. As readers, we know what this disquieting feeling is: jealousy. The words are never used but Doro's actions

reveal his spite. Here was a wild seed with sores all over his body, spewing antiblackness, and cringing at the thought of sleeping with Anyanwu. While Doro, in any body he occupies, receives love, reverence, lust, and submission from everyone. Yet here was Anyanwu willing to share a bed with Thomas rather than Doro. “He brought me to you as punishment for my sacrilege. But he does not understand that I would rather lie with you than with him” (153). Doro saw how gleeful Anyanwu was in her sacrilege, enjoying Thomas rather than him. So, because Doro is a man with too much pride and too much power, he snatched Thomas’ body before Anyanwu’s eyes. To remind her of his threats and violence, he even coerced her into sex while wearing Thomas’ body to make sure Anyanwu was pregnant with child, and therefore adding to his breeding stock of superhumans. Again, Doro’s violent coercion permeates and kills everything Anyanwu seeks to grow. Doro has an unending hunger for Anyanwu with the summation of the bitterness of a jaded lover, a cold distant father, and as a neglected child all in one.

Out of their days together, Anyanwu conceived Thomas’ child Nweke: a promising teenager who was nearing her transition. Returning from his villages, Doro meets Nweke alone. Doro saw the young girl as a *replacement* for Anyanwu (138). Doro even went so far to sleep with the young girl, even in a less desirable body. He *knew* it would anger Anyanwu: that is her daughter. Yet I also argue that the underlying issue is also this *maybe Doro’s own daughter* while he wore Thomas’s body to punish Anyanwu. Incest, like the swapping of genders, is not taboo to Doro: as long it creates new beings for his new world.

Yet tragedy strikes again. Everything Doro touches dies. Nweke begins her transition without proper care or preparation. In Nweke’s turbulent transition, she claims Isaac’s life along with her own. Once again, it is Doro and Anyanwu alone in the world after years of submission

and bitterness. While Anyanwu is dazed by their deaths, Doro begins to hunger for something *more than food*: “Stress, physical or emotional took its toll, made him hunger when he should not have, made him long for the comfort of another change. *He did not have to change*” (178, italics mine). We see Doro’s hunger become insatiable again. While Anyanwu uses her abilities for survival, Doro uses it for power and to feel. This hunger he experiences after Isaac and Nweke’s deaths is Doro’s *only* way of feeling. Because consuming lives for power becomes his default. I argue his hunger is a symptom of control and yearning for submission. While he orchestrates his new world full of psionic beings who bow down to him, Doro loses his humanity. His craving for power ultimately consumes his humanity. Though Anyanwu is the demigod with the animal shapeshifting abilities, it is Doro who has become more animal-like with each body he possesses and inhabits.

Anyanwu insists on Nweke’s and Isaac’s funerals as a proper way to say goodbye to them. Isaac was the last remaining link between Anyanwu and Doro. He was the peacekeeper, constantly reminding Anyanwu that her longevity and powers were necessary to help Doro “not make animals of us (his children).” Isaac had always reminded Anyanwu to “Submit to him now” (122). Anyanwu that she was the key to saving Doro from his own inhumanity by submitting to him. Yet on the day of the funeral, “Anyanwu was nowhere to be found. To Doro’s tracking sense, it was as though she had ceased to exist” (179). We have been here before: the day in the ocean when Anyanwu transformed into a dolphin to escape the brutality of the ship and Doro while he loses “sight” of her. Despite the brevity of this moment, we see Anyanwu be indiscernible to Doro thus unsettling their power dynamics (unknownst to Anyanwu). Yet, on the day of Nweke’s and Isaac’s funerals, Anyanwu had changed into a large bird to finally escape Doro, once and for all.

Then finally, going out to sea to embrace her long-remembered dolphin form to join a school of dolphins, away from Doro's consuming gaze and power. "Doro had reshaped her. She had submitted and submitted and submitted to keep him from killing her [...] He [Doro] was already an animal..." (179). Anyanwu, heeding Isaac's advice, saw how submitting never changed Doro but elongated her sentence as his wild seed.

In the quiet waters of the ocean, we see Anyanwu's inner thoughts play out. Once again, pleasure and interior thoughts co-mingle for survival: "She was a dolphin. If Doro had not found her as an adequate mate, he would find her an adequate adversary. He would not enslave her again. *And she would never be his prey.*" (181, italics mine). For most of the narrative, it was the readers that knew Anyanwu was not just a mate, but a worthy rival in Doro's machinations. Yet here, we see our protagonist finally become cognizant of her own power in the ocean: a space of refuge in a world of trauma from the man who promised her children "who would not die" while at the same time promising to hurt them when Anyanwu would not submit. The ocean offers Anyanwu time, exploration, and *brief* freedom from the man who ripped apart old world under the promise of legacy and progeny to the New World where Doro saw Anyanwu as just a production.

Unfortunately, our co-protagonist Anyanwu cannot keep running from Doro. The second half of the novel jumps to 1840 Louisiana when Doro finally finds Anyanwu. Nevertheless, she has created a reputation of herself: as old man Warrick, a white slaver with a sprawling plantation who also transforms into a loup garou at night to protect the land. For her early years of being free from Doro and creating a life for herself, Anyanwu depended on her form as a white man and as a dolphin to finance her life. She would use her form of a dolphin to find treasures and the form of a white man to maneuver through the world of the antebellum U.S (198). She even weds a white

woman named Denice who sees ghosts. Just as Doro was attracted/attracts the peculiar and the mad, so does Anyanwu in her life as Warrick. Please note: Anyanwu's use of whiteness is to survive not to escape her core identity and Blackness, as Thomas expected of her.

However, Anyanwu's disgust of swapping gender melts away with Denice (198). We also learn that while she was hiding from Doro, she was able to produce young as a dolphin. Hiding from Doro allows Anyanwu to explore the idea of mating with animals. It is no longer an abomination but a pivotal learning experience. Anyanwu learns more about her abilities during her free time in the ocean: she can copy and change cells to make sure offspring do not come out as hybrid monstrosities (dolphin/human) or even be white (to protect Denice from "violent" rumors of sleeping with Black men). Anyanwu's queer interracial relationship illuminates her own attraction to a woman because of her peculiarity. These two moments show that Anyanwu is cognizant of her growing abilities and she is open with swapping genders for a woman she adores. She just refuses to do so with Doro.

Seeing how perfect her village ran, Doro proposes he bring in his own descendants to diversify the village. The proposal was still a threat: Doro had found Anyanwu and could easily take her clan and land for his gain. Doro was threatening her once again. However, everything Doro touches, it dies. Doro's descendant Joseph attempts to rape a young girl named Margaret and kills Anyanwu's beloved son Stephen. With a vengeance, Anyanwu kills Joseph in her loup garou form, leaving his body to rot in the woods. As the elderly Luisa comforts Anyanwu, she states: "Go to the sea [...] The sea cleanses you. I have seen it. Go and be a fish for a while" (224). Anyanwu's descendants understand that the sea now calms her. The ocean no longer is the isolating

void but rather a safe refuge from Doro's violence. It harbors emotional and bodily memory in its obscured aquamarine depths.

No longer the naïve African immortal who swam with dolphins to wash away the violence of the ship, Anyanwu now knows her full power's extent and experiments with her body in the deep sea. However, Anyanwu concedes to Doro's inhumanity: she finally decides to "die" after witnessing Doro's humanity being dead for so long (250-251). Confronted with living alone in the world, fear slivers into Doro's heart as he weeps: "Sun Woman, please don't leave me." It is here where we see Doro, weak and vulnerable, regain his humanity at the thought of losing Anyanwu, his equal.

The ocean illustrates the entanglement of limited freedom and pleasure in *Wild Seed*. The Atlantic Ocean in the second half of *Wild Seed* becomes Anyanwu's learning space, her laboratory, and safe haven from Doro. As she learns about her powers, she is cognizant of her capabilities rivaling Doro's. Anyanwu becomes aware of the full trans-mutative abilities of her body and uses them for her survival as an independent immortal in Louisiana. While her shape shifting abilities make her indiscernible to Doro's senses, it also becomes a sacred memory for her as she faces Doro's violence and inhumanity. When she is with Thomas, the ocean becomes blissful nostalgia to fog out the memory of Doro's violence. The conflation of these concepts illuminates the ocean's role in *Wild Seed*: a vexed obscured abyss that holds the sacred, violence, and trauma of the New World.

### **Conclusion:**

My research project explores new ways of conceptualizing Black geographies through the speculative. I engage with how Black literature unveils certain spaces in the diaspora that hold modes of antiblack violence such as colonialism and misogyny while also maintaining trauma, memory and pleasure. This bond heightens its effect on Black women through the fantastic. Additionally, we see how this relationship animates the land and the Black women who inhabit it.

In Chapter 1, we see how Trujillo's regime affects a Dominican family in the homeland and in the United States in *The Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* and the silence of the Parsley genocide in "In a Manner of Water or Light." Both texts examine how Blackness and Haitianism haunts the characters. Additionally, how Beli and the Grandmother are depicted by others due to their dark skin, a taboo in the Dominican Republic. Both Beli and the grandmother experience assault in the cane fields and Massacre River respectively. Their silence / refusal to share of what happened to them haunts their children in speculative ways. As Beli experienced physical and possibly sexual assault in the cane fields, so does Oscar decades later. He experiences nostalgia despite 1) Beli never telling him about her survival 2) being in the cane fields for the first time. The cane fields are a space I call sentient archival spaces in which time becomes cyclical.

The Grandmother flees the genocide, into the murky bloody waters of Massacre River. It is the river that hides her from the soldiers and blood, mud, and memory suffuses into her skin. The skin becomes a memory for both the Grandmother and Jacqueline. While the Grandmother visits the river yearly to eat the mud and coat her skin, it is Jacqueline who experiences the constant smell of blood and her own body as a reminder of that night. Jacqueline, experiencing a paranoia of whether she is a child of rape or of consent, constantly smells blood. She believes her body is a



constant reminder of the blood days of the genocide, refusing to hear or believe her mother's "woven" tale of Jacques. The Narrator learns and remembers with the grandmother, showing their close relationship and the importance of sharing intergenerational stories to break intergenerational trauma.

I wish to build on with the next iteration of this project by looking at Lola and Oscar concurrently. In my examination of mother-child relationships and memory in *The Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, I lose sight of Lola when she experiences clairvoyance. The geography of the bathroom is where we see the "calmer side" of her relationship with her mother, where they understand each other and where they are the most vulnerable. Beli opens up about her battle with breast cancer and Lola begins to see the world anew, even in the Dominican Republic. I want to explore more of their relationship and Lola in a continued extension of this project.

In Chapter 2, we examine Zora Neale Hurston's use of the speculative and Black rural Florida life in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Janie's love of earth shows in the prose of the text which displays her budding eroticism of youth, her devotion to her three husbands, and her emotional well-being. As a descendant of rape, Janie's orgasm scene is vexed: it is not a transcendence or a reclamation. Rather I see this pleasurable act as a grounding moment or a protection in an antiblack world. Reflecting her love for Black people and nature, Janie moves to the muck with her third husband Tea Cake, the only heterosexual romance where there is a sense of egalitarian love. However, misogyny and colorism destroy that: Tea Cake, insecure in his "capabilities" as her husband, falls victim to colorism and town gossip. Janie is not a tragic mulatta character but there is no denying how Desirability is tied to her skin color and hair. Colorism and

Desirability looms in the text. Tired of the failure of men and seeing the promise of love ruined by violence, the land responds by claiming Tea Cake's life. I see this act of vengeance.

Yet Janie finds solace in her reciprocal love with Pheoby, her loyal friend of 20 years, in the safety of the back porch. With Joe transforming the front porch to represent white success ideals where he was at the top of the hierarchy, it is the back porch where we see Janie be the griot of her own story. Additionally, we see a deep dimension of her friendship with Pheoby which I call haptic intimacy: the deep devotional love between Black women through the sensory and platonic modes of relation. It is the intimate space of the back porch where we see this love story grow in soft darkness.

Finally, Anywanu's brief moment of clarity and power in the depths of the Atlantic in Octavia Butler's *Wild Seed*. Under the guise of children that will never die, Doro takes Anyanwu from Central Africa to the New World to "produce" descendants. However, this producing is not just with him but any man Doro deems as with high wild seed potential. Doro replicates rape and breeding of enslavement for the sake of creating new beings. Feeling the violence of Doro's gaze, the slave ship and recovering from an attempted assault, Anyanwu jumps into the Atlantic and transforms into a dolphin. I argue that the Atlantic Ocean becomes a site of transitory bliss and escape for Anyanwu from Doro's coercion and the slave ship. Suspended and in the middle of nowhere, Anywanu's powers of changing into a dolphin (morphing her body to become an animal) makes her indiscernible to Doro's panoptic all-seeing eye. In this moment, Anyanwu's powers rivals Doro's – a feeling that shakes Doro to his core and changes their relationship into a power struggle. Transforming into the dolphin in the Atlantic Ocean displays the limited freedom and

this memory registers as bliss during her time as Doro's wild seed. This limited freedom of feeling pleasure is experienced through the channel of sexual violence.

My goal for this project is to illuminate how Black geographies can also store the speculative because of the relationship between memory, trauma, and violence. The land animates because of the shifting and storing of memories, reacts to the turmoil Black women characters face due to misogyny, or even obscures Black women characters for their safety. Additionally, I want us to think through pleasure as intimately tied to terror/violence. It is important to see them as in tandem rather than a transcendence from antiblack violence. Because Black pleasure is a project of protecting ourselves in antiblackness. "Geographies of Memory and Pleasure in 20<sup>th</sup>/21<sup>st</sup> Century Black Literatures" articulates the vexed relationship of space, pleasure, violence, and Black life.

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