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**Guest Editors of Vol. 14.2:**

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# Rethinking Home in the Caribbean Diaspora and the Americas: Introduction

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The question of what, who, and/or where constitutes home is more urgent than ever. Global migration movements, new ideas and possibilities of living together, continually improving (telecommunication) technologies, growing inequality in population groups, overpriced housing and residential segregation, as well as racism and many other forms of exclusion are only a few points that serve to illustrate that definitions of home and belonging are not to be viewed as straightforward or static. Geographies, ideas, and imaginaries of being, experiencing, and longing for home shape and are shaped by current social and cultural discourses in the Americas and the world at large. International and transnational mobilities, in particular, (re-)navigate “processes of establishing home, as senses of belonging and identity move over space and are created in new places” (Blunt and Dowling 2).

Since the late twentieth century, “the political salience of migration has strongly increased” (Castles et al. 1). Global mass migration is by no means a new phenomenon. However, the visibility of the impact of such movements on societies, cultures, and economies has heightened and significantly influenced as well as propelled new cultural productions in and about experiences of migration and diaspora. [1] Narratives about voluntary and involuntary movement and displacement emphasize spatio-temporal processes of de- and reterritorialization—roots and routes (Clifford)—and provide valuable spaces for the unsettling of ideas about “home as a stable origin and ... the fixity and singularity of a place called home” (Blunt and Dowling 198). Home, in other words, is formed “by memories of past homes as well as dreams of future homes” and “by ideas and experiences of location and dislocation, place and displacement, as people migrate for a variety of reasons and feel both

at home and not at home in a wide range of circumstances” (ibid.). Therefore, in order to address ideas of ‘home’ in contexts that span geographical, temporal, and social spaces, it becomes necessary to critically assess and (re-)conceptualize ‘home’ as unstable, dynamic, and processual.

Literature, film, and other art forms represent important media that deal with ideas of ‘home’ creatively and critically. These cultural texts provide important sources for reflections on the complexity, volatility, and fluidity of home as a concept and experienced reality. For these reasons, this issue is dedicated to the multi-layered connections between diaspora and home within the shifting dynamics and conflicts of inter-American entanglements, particularly between the Caribbean and North America, which need to be read in a wider global context.

In order to grasp the complex representations of home in Caribbean diasporic cultural productions, this edition thus ventures beyond traditional definitions of ‘home,’ viewing the latter insufficient in regard to global international migration processes in which affiliation and home are always up for negotiation. To put it differently, home can no longer be conceived solely in terms of physical shelter, nation, family, or community, at least not in traditional or singular senses. [2] Instead, the editors and contributors depart from the assumption that the study of home must consider the importance of both material and symbolic spaces. [3] Thinking about home as inherently geographical sheds light on “relations between place, space, scale, identity and power” (Blunt and Dowling 2) and allows us not only to “study the material and imaginative geographies of home, and the ways in which home is politically, socially and culturally constructed, but [also] lived and experienced in personal ways” (Blunt and Dowling 32). [4] As

Vijay Agnew states, “the individual living in the diaspora experiences a dynamic tension every day between ... memories of places of origin and entanglements with places of residence, and between the metaphorical and the physical home” (4).

The contributions to this edition critically engage with narrative constructions of and reflections about home in the cultures and literatures of the Caribbean diaspora in the Americas, thereby uncovering various spatial, imaginary, mobile, and conflicted dimensions of being, experiencing, remembering, and belonging. In a dialogic fashion, the authors employ mobility and spatial frameworks to engage questions of home on multiple scales and from different perspectives. The inclusion of different narrative forms –ranging from the (children’s) novel to dub poetry and other art forms– further adds to the complexity of representations and explorations of home. Through its analysis of (Caribbean) diasporic (be-)longing, (collective) memory and trauma, as well as different forms of experiencing space and place materially and imaginatively, this edition emphasizes ways that cultural productions serve as important vehicles for social, historical, and political commentary. In these ways, the collected essays provide new itineraries for (re-)thinking and (re-)imagining home across different local and global scales that traverse the Caribbean, the Americas, and the world at large –including the body, household, nation, and (transnational) diaspora.

As Anne Brüske’s contribution shows, geopolitical global contexts influence the production of diaspora spaces through the lived experiences of subjects. More specifically, she explores Cuban diasporization and the geographies of Cuban homes in- and outside of Cuba in the novel *Days of Awe* (2001) by U.S. Cuban writer Achy Obejas. From a Cuban diaspora perspective, the novel discusses the tensions experienced between what Avtar Brah refers to as the “desire for a [remembered and imagined] homeland” and a “homing desire,” between the global currents of de- and reterritorialization, and the protagonist’s attempts to appropriate different spaces home. Brüske’s objective is to unravel how ‘home’ is performed as a spatiotemporal phenomenon in Obejas’

novel, on which scales ‘home’ is produced (global, national, local), and how the tension between remembered homes and the current locale of living is elaborated. The article proposes to define ‘home’ as a social space, a negotiation between homing practices, concepts of home, and lived experiences on different geographic and temporal scales with a particular focus on the practices of homing and remembering in the urban spaces of Havana and Chicago and the micro space of the family home/house as both a social and material space.

Cécile Accilien explores imaginaries about the absence, loss, and reconstruction of home in Haitian cinema. In her article, she considers different concepts of ‘home’ in connection to themes of im/migration, deportation and exile as presented in three selected Haitian popular films: *Diaspora \$100*, *Kidnapping*, and *Deported*. Through the analyses of these films, Accilien examines what meanings ‘home’ may take on in Haitian diasporic communities and how the economic impact of transnational migration shapes Haitian imaginaries and realities of home. The essay further explores how the films depict the ways in which Haitian immigrants maintain, negotiate, and build identities both individually and collectively. In particular, Accilien demonstrates the complexity of identity and belonging within inter-American entanglements particularly in regard to young people (men) who have been deported back to Haiti and often find themselves alienated while at ‘home’ in a space that is not welcoming and indeed foreign to them. She addresses the ways in which the selected films present ‘home’ as a fluid and complex space of (non-) belonging for Haitians, both in Haiti and in the Haitian diaspora.

Wilfried Raussert’s contribution looks at the poetic and performative use of call-and-response patterns and their role in creating a sense of home and belonging in the works of the African Canadian dub poets Lillian Allen and Afua Cooper. As the author argues, home can no longer be thought of solely in terms of house, nation, family, or community, at least not in their traditional sense. Historical experiences of black subjects and cultures have produced radically different perspectives on what constitutes individual and collective belonging and the



meaning(s) of 'home.' Therefore, as the article shows, in order to address ideas of home and affiliation in contexts of black cultural production, it is important to critically assess and (re-) conceptualize home as unstable, dynamic, and processual. The (dub) poetry by Lillian Allen and Afua Cooper provides dialogic examples of how to recreate and 'perform' home in the diaspora, addressing global and black audiences in Canada, the Caribbean, and beyond.

The female body –the womb, in particular– functions as a central metaphor for rethinking home and belonging in Paola Ravasio's analysis of Caribbean-Central American Queen Nzinga Maxwell's art work. Ravasio's contribution argues that historical imagination functions as a highly abstract metaphor for 'home' and sets out to analyze the representation of the womb and menstrual blood in 21st-century black diasporic writing as re-signifying the place and nature of historical imagination. The womban-trope, as found in spoken word poet and activist Queen Nzinga Maxwell's work constitutes the object of Ravasio's study as it is approached as an unconventional metaphor for thinking about home, belonging, and exile in the context of the African diaspora, then and now. Asserting that history functions as symbolic capital in the consolidation of belongingness, the author pursues the ensuing question: *how is the womban-trope like 'home'?* The text, then, is grounded upon the premise that menstrual blood taps into a rich metaphor for 'home' and thus discourses of body and home are explicitly linked.

Sigrid Thomsen explores home through the lenses of rhythmanalysis and mobility studies. Drawing upon theories by Henri Lefebvre and Antonio Benítez-Rojo, Thomsen analyzes the juxtaposition, change, and tension that ensues between motion and stasis in Edwidge Danticat's short story "New York Day Women." In the short story, a young woman spots her mother, who she had assumed never left Brooklyn, in Manhattan, and starts to clandestinely follow her. The plot of the daughter trailing behind her mother is juxtaposed with vignettes in which the daughter remembers things her mother has said about Haiti. This contribution analyzes how various types of mobilities clash and

intersect; the physical im/mobilities of walking and the imaginative mobility of remembering, in particular. Through this clash, the characters not only navigate their relationship to home, but position themselves in a 'home' which spans Haiti and the United States. This rhythmanalytical reading of the story achieves several things: it brings together Lefebvrian rhythmanalysis with Caribbean approaches to rhythm, and it makes visible ways in which physical and imaginative mobilities –the mobilities of walking and remembering– can come together in everyday life to continuously forge a 'home.'

Giselle Anatol's contribution explores how Kacen Callender's 2018 novel for adolescent readers, *Hurricane Child*, illustrates how literature for young people can be employed to leverage formidable critiques against European colonial ideologies and the neocolonial policies in the contemporary United States. As Anatol shows, while literature for children and young adults (YA) is not typically given center stage in theorizing postcolonial subjectivities, taking up this body of work gives adult readers crucial insights how young people are taught to absorb information about themselves and the world. In her analysis, she explores how Callender's work may be read as a re-visioning of Jamaica Kincaid's semiautobiographical *Annie John* (1985) and ways that the two novels push past easy definitions as bildungsromane and 'home' as haven for the nuclear family to comment on the tourist industry as a continuation of colonial systems of domination. 'Homes,' both island homes and smaller structures identified as homes for individuals, transmogrify into the unfamiliar and unsettling.

## Endnotes

[1] For a recent discussion of migration literature in the Americas, see, for example, Brandel and Kirschner 2020.

[2] For further examples, also see Al-Ali and Koser 2002, Mallett 2004, Ralph and Staeheli 2011, and Rapport and Dawson 1998.

[3] See also, for example, Blunt and Dowling 2006, and Urry 2001.

[4] For further elaboration on geographies of diaspora and home, see, for example, Brah 1996, and Blunt 2007.

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belonging, migration studies, life writing, and popular culture studies. Her latest publication is a co-authored entry on "Migration Literature" in *The Routledge Handbook to the Culture and Media of the Americas* (2020).

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## Authors' biographies

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Miriam Brandel is a PhD candidate and lecturer at Bielefeld University. Together with Prof. Dr. Wilfried Raussert, she is part of the DFG-funded research project "(Re-)Thinking 'Home': 21st-Century Caribbean Diaspora Writing and Geopolitical Imaginaries in North America". This project houses her doctoral thesis which explores (re-)presentations of 'home' in 21st-century Caribbean Diaspora writing in Canada and the US. Coming from the broad field of (Inter-)American studies, her fields of interest and publication include Caribbean diaspora literature, processes and ideas of



## Producing Home in Achy Obejas' *Days of Awe* (2001). Homing and Remembering as Diasporic Practices

ANNE BRÜSKE (UNIVERSITY OF REGENSBURG / UNIVERSITY OF HEIDELBERG, GERMANY)

### Abstract

*Cuban diasporization and the geographies of Cuban homes in- and outside Cuba are at the core of the novel Days of Awe (2001) by U.S. Cuban writer Achy Obejas. The novel discusses the tensions experienced from a Cuban diaspora perspective between the “desire for a [remembered and imagined] homeland” and a “homing desire” (Brah 1996), between the global currents of de- and reterritorialization, and the protagonist’s attempts to appropriate different spaces as home. The aim of my article is to explore how “home” is performed as a spatiotemporal phenomenon in Obejas’ novel, on which scales “home” is produced (global, national, local) and how the tension between remembered homes and the current locale of living is elaborated. Proposing to define home as a social space, a negotiation between homing practices, concepts of home, and lived experiences on different geographic and temporal scales, I particularly focus on the practices of homing and remembering in the urban spaces of Havana and Chicago and in the micro space of the family home/house as both a social and material space.*

**Keywords:** home, diaspora, space, deterritorialization, U.S. Cuban fiction, Achy Obejas

### Introduction

On the island’s coast, a few mangy dogs, bats, and a tempest or tow of wild bees came to rest on the columns of the boats. It swelled with frogs in its crevices, snails crawled the walls. Birds with feathers frazzled like uncombed hair perched and called. There were clear days and days of fog, nights when the stars flashed across the sky and others when they refused to shine.

That was usually when the boats would moan from the weight of the natives scaling the tower. (Obejas, *The Tower of the Antilles* 157–158)

In her short story collection *The Tower of the Antilles* (2017), Achy Obejas draws on the image of the Tower of Babel. In the eponymous short story, a tower made from shipwrecks and makeshift rafts stands for the linguistic, cultural, and political fragmentation of the Caribbean due to forced in- and outward migration, genocides, and colonialism, in general, as well as for the diasporization of the Cuban population, in particular. The Tower of the Antilles—and the

subsequent dispersal it suggests—symbolizes the crescent spatial, linguistic, and cultural disconnection amongst Cubans *dentro y fuera* in the aftermath of the Cuban Revolution (1959). The image of the Tower of the Antilles then epitomizes more a sense of loss, homelessness, and uprooting than solely referring to the proverbial human hubris condemned in *Genesis* 11, 1–9.

Cuban diasporization and the geographies of Cuban homes in- and outside Cuba are also at the core of Obejas’ second novel *Days of Awe*, already published in 2001, in which she uses the trope of the Tower of Babel for the first time:

According to the Bible, the universal language I’ve dreamt about existed once, in what was the nascent city of Babylon. Its people were the descendants of Noah, prosperous but much too ambitious. They thought they could build a stairway, a tower to heaven. The Bible doesn’t mention any discussion, not a single voice that questioned the wisdom of such a crazy notion. And so the Babylonians set about their impossible labor.

God, of course, was unimpressed.

The punishment inflicted on the early Babylonians for their presumptions was not merely to level the Tower of Babel but to create babble itself: Language was fractured into a confusion of tongues, chaos ripe for misunderstanding, hatred, and revolution. (93)

Going beyond Cuban-Cuban problematics, the novel takes an interdiasporic and a postmemorial stance constituting itself as a multidirectional “knot of memory” (Rothberg, Sanyal and Silverman). [1] The text places Cuban dispersal after 1959 in a larger historical and geopolitical context by referring also to Afro-Caribbean and Chinese Caribbean diasporic communities and by entangling it largely with the Jewish diaspora in the Caribbean, which started with the ‘discovery’ of the Americas and the expulsion of all Jews from Castile in 1492. [2] Focusing on the relation between second-generation Cubans in the United States and Cubans in Cuba on the one hand and on the history of Sephardi and Ashkenazi dispersal on the other hand, the novel reflects upon the tension between the proverbial imaginary (and remembered) homelands and actual locales of diaspora communities from a geopolitical macro perspective. By the same token, the homodiegetic narrator’s Ale memories and notes, which constitute the corpus of the novel, revolve incessantly around the nature of home as a place, a memory, a practice.

The aim of my article is therefore to explore how “home” is performed as a spatiotemporal phenomenon in Obejas’ novel, on which scales “home” is produced (global, national, local) and how the tension between “imaginary and remembered homelands” and the current locale of living is elaborated. Proposing to define home as a social space, a negotiation of homing practices, concepts of home, and lived experiences on different geographic and temporal scales, I particularly focus on the practices of homing and remembering in the urban spaces of Havana and Chicago – the protagonist’s hometowns – and the micro space of the family home/house as both a social and material space.

## 1. Re-Thinking Home and Space in Caribbean Diaspora Cultures

Diaspora spaces, i.e., the spaces of diasporic subjects, can be understood, as phenomena of spatio-temporal entanglement and of the simultaneous tension between different dimensions of social space. [3] Drawing on Henri Lefebvre’s triadic model of social space as a starting point, I conceptualize space as both a product and a perpetual process of negotiation between three dimensions: *espace perçu*, *espace conçu*, and *espace vécu* (Lefebvre 50–51) —perceived space, conceived space, and lived space—or the representation of space, spatial practices, and spaces of representation (42-43). [4] Whereas the ‘representation of space’ or ‘conceived space’ refers to spatial norms and spatial practices point to the actual everyday actions that ‘users’ of space carry out, ‘spaces of representation’ stand for the imagination of space and the symbolic meaning of spaces as they are, for instance, fleshed out in fiction. Diaspora spaces, as dialectical negotiations of social spatial practices, spatial concepts, and spaces of representation, are constituted by the individual spatial production of diasporic subjects through their body and mind. In line with the definition of diasporas as “transnational imagined communit[ies],” these subjective spaces are collectivized through shared diaspora discourses and consciousness as well as by transnational social practices (Sökefeld 267–268). Diaspora spaces are all but unpolitical. On the contrary, geopolitical global contexts influence the production of diaspora spaces through the lived experiences of the subjects, for instance in the face of the (im)possibility of returning to their imaginary, remembered or ‘real’ homeland, making the geopolitical tangible on a subjective and local level. Also, the political relevance of individual experience becomes visible when media, texts, and images engage the experience of migration and diaspora in the context of geopolitical processes and globalization, repand them, and contribute to the emergence of “imagined communities” (Anderson) or, on a larger scale, “imagined worlds” (Appadurai; Epple and Kramer). This is especially true for Caribbean

diaspora cultures and literatures for they negotiate the social and cultural consequences of larger-scale geopolitical and global processes, such as the first and second diasporization of Afro-Caribbean or Asian-Caribbean populations or the socioeconomic and political upheavals in the wake of colonization and decolonization. In the U.S. Caribbean context, *home* is then part of the diaspora spaces that diasporic transnational subjects produce.

In the context of Caribbean mobilities, it is hardly surprising that spatial figurations, such as the island, the archipelago, the water, the ship, the plantation, and, as Stanka Radović (2014) has shown, the city and the house, have become important tropes of reflection in Caribbean texts. As Radović elaborates, in many Caribbean texts the house stands as a symbol for the desire to establish oneself as an independent postcolonial nation in the sense of a spatial-material, conceptual, and symbolic “room of one’s own.” In the wake of its protective function, the figuration of the house is closely linked to the question of cultural identity. The house or homestead also takes on a central role in U.S. Caribbean diaspora fiction, which draws on regional Caribbean traditions as well as on U.S. authors such as William Faulkner and Toni Morrison. Unlike in regional Caribbean fiction, in U.S. Caribbean diaspora texts the (multiscalar) spatial figuration and reflection of “home” do not simply discuss the search for a postcolonial space of one’s own. Instead, these texts negotiate the tension that second-generation migrants experience between an imagined Caribbean homeland fading into distance and their actual locale of living. Home—specifically the homestead or house—may then represent both the Caribbean place of origin and the host country, the United States. The practices of remembering and homing depicted in the texts reflect upon the postmemory generation’s relationship to “home” regarding different scales of time and (material) space. Through the production of diaspora and home as space(s), the texts also negotiate tendencies of cultural belonging in U.S. Caribbean communities torn between the potentially antagonistic forces between de- and reterritorialization.

In U.S. Caribbean diaspora fiction, de- and

reterritorialization tendencies vary along lines of ethnic and national origins. Texts by mainland Puerto Ricans tend to emphasize the aspect of reterritorialization in the U.S. (although no longer necessarily in New York City); U.S. Dominican texts such as Junot Díaz’s *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007) often adopt a postmemory perspective while addressing issues of deterritorialization. U.S. Haitian texts, especially by Edwidge Danticat, also tend to emphasize deterritorialization and the aftermath of the Duvalier dictatorships – although recent publications have focused less on the question of remembrance than on the relationality of U.S. Haitian and Haitian spaces (Danticat; Gay). The texts published in the U.S. by Cuban or U.S. Cuban authors after 1959 occupy a special position with respect to the question of de- and reterritorialization and homing. While the earliest publications by Cubans in the U.S. looked back on Cuba and the Cuban Revolution with anger, the expression “life on the hyphen” coined by U.S. Cuban writer and scholar Gustavo Pérez Firmat aptly describes the literary production and cultural positioning of the second generation, i.e., that of U.S. Cuban writers. In this context, Cristina García’s novel *Dreaming in Cuban* (1992) represents the fusion of U.S. and Cuban cultures. More recent texts by U.S. Cuban women writers, such as Ana Menéndez’ *The Last War* (2009) no longer turn only to the Cuban community in the U.S. or on the island but open up their gaze to different topics and spaces. Finally, as Iraida López has shown in *Impossible Returns* (2015), U.S. Cuban texts from 2000 onward particularly focus on practices of return to Cuba. Obejas’ novel *Days of Awe* follows the patterns unveiled by López, linking the question of returning to Cuba to practices, concepts, and imaginations of home on different spatial and temporal scales.

## 2. Conceptualizing Caribbean Diaspora Space and Home

From a historical point of view, Christopher Columbus’ *Carta a Luis Santángel* (1493) can be considered the first European medial production of the Caribbean as a space, as an “act of worlding” (Spivak 211–213). Columbus

gives the islands he thinks to belong to India names (“representation of space”), declares them Spanish possessions by raising the royal Castilian flag (“spatial practice”), and describes them in a language of “imaginative geographies” (Saïd 49-73), laying the foundation for 500 years of colonization, exploitation, and eurocentrism in the Americas. From a conceptual angle, Frantz Fanon’s reflections in *Les Damnés de la Terre* (1961) on colonies as profoundly dichotomous spaces are helpful for understanding these spaces’ underlying ideology. [5] Fanon’s considerations, indeed, highlight the core features of colonialism in Caribbean slave holder societies and their importance for the racist structure of colonial space: the supposed unbridgeable ontological difference between a white subject and an afrodescendent ‘non-subject’ (Soazo Ahumada) which is reflected in the spatial organization of Caribbean plantations societies and their disciplinary apparatus designed to keep the colonizers’ and the colonized’s world physically separated. To be sure, despite these accurate spatial and ontological concepts and depending on the place and time, the historical ‘messiness’ of spatial practices and lived experience in the Caribbean allowed to a certain degree for more flexible social and spatial arrangements (for instance, in the case of the *gens de couleur*). Nevertheless, the vestiges of colonial social space are still visible in current Caribbean societies as well as in Caribbean diaspora spaces in North America where different variants and temporalities of colonial space, power relations, and coloniality—from the United States and from different Caribbean regions—intersect, entangle, and conflict.

In this light, I understand Caribbean “diaspora space” as a relational space of multidimensional entanglements produced by diasporic subjects. Diaspora space is both the process and the product of a constant negotiation between different localities (Africa, the Caribbean, the United States or Canada), temporalities (first and second migration, here and now), cultures, and idioms (Creole, Spanish, English, French, Dutch) —and their according spatial concepts, practices, and imaginations. Diaspora as a state of mind and a space in suspension between the poles of de- and reterritorialization is also

characterized by the tension between the “desire for a homeland” or a “homing desire,” as Avtar Brah writes in *Cartographies of Diaspora* (Brah 180). Brah refers to the tension between an imaginary homeland as a “mythic place of desire [... and] of no return” (192) one might never have visited and an everyday homeland as the “lived experience of a locality” (192) where one might feel “‘not-here’ to stay” (Clifford 311). The “desire for a [lost or inaccessible] homeland” and the “myth of return” as key elements of a diasporic conscience and their translation into cultural expression prove to be two sides of the same coin. They imply that the “originary homeland” lives on as a remembered, ideologized symbolic space which is, however, “transformed by the ravages of time, transfigured through the lenses of loss and nostalgia, [and] constructed in the process of the search” as Marianne Hirsch and Nancy K. Miller point out in *Rites of Return* (Hirsch and Miller 3). [6]

Considering “home” a multifaceted spatial phenomenon and the realization of what Brah called “homing desire,” we might draw on recent research in the context of transnational (forced) migration to define “home” and “homemaking”. Sociologists Anna Steigemann and Philipp Misselwitz (2020), for instance, argue that home should be conceptualized as the localized idea of “bringing some space under control,” even temporarily, and therefore they “operationalize home as a set of concrete spatial practices” (Steigemann and Misselwitz 630–631). In the same vein, they define home as a “permanent or temporary space where refugees achieve a sense of dignity, safety, [and] comfort through self-provisioning practices” (631). In a Lefebvrian perspective, they underline the conceptualization of three modalities of homemaking by Brun and Fábos (2015) as an apt framework for the analysis of concrete spatial practices. From this angle, one can differentiate between “home” as a set of everyday practices, “Home” as a set of values, traditions, memories, etc. and “HOME” as an institutionalized set of norms and regulations (Steigemann and Misselwitz 632). Within this framework, the connection between “values, traditions, memories” of a lost Home(land) and “home” as homemaking practices gains visibility: Not only is the idea of



the Homeland and former Homes transfigured through the lens of diaspora, but also inherited ideas of Home and Homemaking as along with contemporary concepts of HOME influence homemaking practices in second-or-more-generation diasporic subjects (both in the imagined Homeland and the locale of living).

What can we learn from these sociological considerations when approaching diaspora fiction? To be sure, fiction is not a mere copy, a simple reflection of what subjects tend to call reality, on the contrary, fictional texts are pieces of art which create their own spatial codes and aesthetic conventions. With Lefebvre, we can consider the spatio-poietic text itself a space of representation repeating (with an artistic and medial twist) spatial practices, representations of space and spaces of representation. Accordingly, we must keep in mind the aesthetic and narratological devices which allow a text to produce specific fictional spaces in the act of reading and differentiate between analytic categories such as space of narration / narrated space, spatial perspectives, and the semantics of space. [7] Reading diaspora or migrant fiction allows us to observe the practices of remembering former Home(land)s and homemaking in the near-to-referential spaces represented and reflected upon in the texts. Moreover, writing and reading can be seen as alternative homemaking practices with the help of which the writing subject tries to negotiate the tensions between de- and reterritorializing forces and ultimately to find alternative spaces to be called home.

### 3. The Production of Home(s) and the “Poetics of Return” to Cuba

In *Days of Awe*, Havana, the capital of Cuba, excels both as a mythical city resembling the biblical Tower of Babel, as an intimate space of homing, and as a *pars pro toto* for Cuban space – be it remembered or experienced in presence. Positioning itself as a diaspora text, Obejas’ novel produces home on two different geographical sites (Cuba / United States), on three spatial scales (national, the local, the intimate) and in various temporalities (the early 1960s, around 1987, around 1997, and the time

of narration). More precisely, the homodiegetic protagonist’s discourse presents Cuba, her city of birth Havana, and her family’s house in Havana as well as the United States, her city of residence Chicago, and her family’s house in Chicago as home.

The prologue of *Days of Awe*, a paratext framing the main text, puts its readership *in medias res*, directing its gaze and pre-conditioning its expectations concerning space and memory. In the prologue, the first-person narrator Alejandra portrays herself as a literal child of the Cuban revolution, born on January 1<sup>st</sup>, 1959, the day of Fidel’s triumphal victory in Havana. [8] Ale, however, stages herself not only as a child of the revolution, but even more as an offspring of the city of Havana, where on this day the bells ring incessantly, prayers fill the public space, and people make floral offerings to Yemayá, a Santería goddess of fertility, on the Malecón. [9] Although Ale describes public scenes and the Maternidad de Línea hospital without mentioning any eyewitness account other than hers, it is obvious that the memories of her struggle for survival as an anemic newborn and of Havana’s urban space cannot be her own. Rather, they are second-hand memories, memories inherited from her parents, which Ale is bound to reconstruct on her trips to Havana as an adult. [10] By creating this volatile discourse, the prologue pre-structures the readers’ perspective, expectations, and thus their production of Cuba as a fictional space. Cuba is presented as a space shaped by revolution and religion. The prologue also exhibits the mediated, constructivist, and collective character of individual memories while emphasizing the parallelism of Ale’s family history with Cuban history. In doing so, the prologue anticipates the confluence of memory, imagination, and *histoire* as a structural feature of the text as well its elaboration of space. Space, so the novel seems to claim, is produced through multiple layers of individual and collective memories as well as representations and imaginations of space.

In the following section, I will explore how home is produced in the novel as a negotiation between Ale’s homemaking practices, a set of traded values, and memories, as well as institutionalized concepts and representations

of home. I am particularly interested in the complex entanglements between spatial productions, (post)memory, and imagination the text unravels in three key moments, each of them corresponding to an imagined or factual return to the Cuban homeland: the narrator's depiction of her adolescent self's wanderings through an imaginary and remembered Havana, her almost thirty-year-old self's first material return to Havana, and her almost forty-year-old self's second return to a Havana ravaged by the economic crisis of the *período especial* in the 1990s. Ale's subsequent realizations of the diasporic myth of return are structured by a literary "poetics of return" (López), describing the patterns of action of Cubans *de fuera* visiting the island for the first time as well as their typical reactions when comparing the 'mythical homeland' with the Cuba they encounter. Ultimately, the novel unravels Ale's confrontation with her family's remembered-imagined-actualized houses and home(s) and emphasizes her homing strategies as both the protagonist and the narrator of the novel.

#### 4. Imaginary Walks through Havana: Making Space out of Memory and Imagination

Even though Ale leaves Cuba as a toddler, as a teenager she embarks on imaginary walks through Havana using an old city map that she has found in her parents' home in Chicago. [11] As her mature self, the narrator, explains, the 28-year-old Alejandra remembers this childhood habit on the occasion of her "first [real] return to the Land of Oz [she]'d conjured in [her] dreams", "where [she] should have emerged like Aphrodite from the foam" and which she describes as "the Zion where [she]'d be welcomed after all [her] endless, unplanned travels in the diaspora" (Obejas, *Days of Awe* 55). As a result, the narrator presents a doubly mediated memory entailing, in turn, a twofold temporal, spatial and cultural distance. The memory of her imaginary walks is initially triggered by Ale's first physical return to Cuba in 1987 and the question posed by the border guard, "¿Es tu primera vez en Cuba?", which Ale answers with a faint "sí" (52): "Standing in the airless airport in Havana [...], I realized I hadn't

been completely honest: It wasn't really my first trip to Cuba, but my first return to the Land of Oz I'd conjured in my dreams." (54) In the first place, those imaginary walks through Havana compensate for Ale's difficult process of linguistic and social assimilation to the United States: "my English still fractured, my soul yearning for a place of safety in the brutal playground of U.S. adolescence" (54). Accordingly, young Ale imagines Havana as "a secret hiding place" (55), a "refuge" (56), and ultimately, as an alternative home. The imaginary space of urban Havana serves as a magical emergency exit from Ale's immediate surroundings. By virtue of her imagination, the young Ale—as the mature Ale recalls—transforms Havana into an idealized and stereotypical social space in which her family does not stand out either culturally or physically, where they are 'at home':

As a child – my English still fractured, my soul yearning for a place of safety in the brutal playground of U.S. adolescence – I imagined a Havana in which everyone moved with my mother's sensual grace, talked like my father, and looked like me: I'm olive-skinned, with almond-shaped eyes the same blue-gray as Ytzak's, chestnut-haired and slender but with hips. [...] (54)

Ale's imaginary walks through an imaginary Cuban urban space can be viewed as a spatial practice of homemaking, insofar as she seeks to "bring [...] some space under control" (Steigemann and Misselwitz 630) where she can "achieve a sense of dignity, safety, comfort" (631). In Ale's self-depiction, both Cuban and U.S. spaces—the imaginary hometown and the locale of residence—become charged with ethnic and sexualized attributions. While in Havana, according to a set of inherited values and stereotypical 'Cuban' gender roles that Ale has internalized, the women move through the space with their curvy bodies full of "sensual grace" and the population speaks a distinguished Spanish, Chicago appears to be cold and rough. [12] However, as soon as adolescent Ale overcomes her personal crisis triggered by the dissonance between her Cuban appearance and her Anglo-



Saxon surroundings, the “imaginary metropolis” (Obeja, *Days of Awe* 55) of Havana loses its function as a refuge or an alternative home and falls into oblivion. Instead, Ale engages in the typical social activities of her U.S. peer group: “off to drama club, or swimming practice, to a meeting at the school newspaper, to smoke pot, to rock concerts in the Loop, to rendezvous with long-haired boys or willowy blonde girls” (56). At this point, the discursive elaboration of imaginary Havana’s fall into oblivion is striking. The narrator sketches the city of Chicago as a counterspace to Havana, comprising Ale’s childhood home in Chicago, which resembles a domesticated miniature of Havana transplanted to the North. This domesticated miniature, this Havana home in Chicago, is both separated and accessible from the outside by a “screen door,” which adolescent Ale is accustomed to “slamming [,,,] behind [her]” (56). This very screen door represents a metaphorical gateway to her *cubanidad*, it is transparent but impermeable, temporarily denying Ale access to her cultural heritage: “Havana faded and my Cuban self vanished, like clearwings in early morning mist.” (56)

As a child, Ale dreams of a Havana that reflects the characteristics of her nuclear family (sensuality, *latinidad*, Spanish eloquence); as a teenager, she uses conceptual spatial representations of Havana—the “weathered” map of Havana, and some “old and new” photographs (55)—as tools for her *rêverie*. [13] Reminiscent to Rousseau’s *promeneur solitaire*, her daydreams of walking through the urban landscape of her imagined hometown Havana have the purpose of offering her self-knowledge: “photographs old and new about a constant cadence, about doors too close together, about a strangely comforting and untidy intimacy” (Obejas, 55).

This dreamed Havana only exists in her imagination and, mediated by the narrator’s text, on paper. From the perspective of Lefebvre’s phenomenological model of space, the Havana of Ale’s childhood daydreams is constructed primarily through the dimensions of representation of space (city map and photographs) and, to a lesser extent, departing from a diffuse lived space in which Ale’s “faded

[childhood] memories,” second-hand memories, and imaginings triggered by the photographs of the historical center of the metropolis superpose one another. [14] Young Ale’s production of Havana as an urban space is not nourished by any material practices *in situ*, since material Cuba is absent, inaccessible due to geopolitical tensions. Consequently, Ale’s spatial production operates in the same way as the myth of return, associated with the experience of deterritorialization, for it visualizes and invents the absent social space of Havana—albeit in a highly altered fashion—based on spatial representations and the spatial imaginings emanating from these representations. Adolescent Ale’s spatial imaginings possess a particular function for her reterritorialization, for making herself at home be it in Chicago or in an imagined place. On the one hand, the imagined metropolis of Havana transforms into a heterotopia, a counterspace to Chicago that makes the “brutal [U.S.] playground” (54) bearable which Ale, an ethnically marked adolescent, perceives as a repressive “dominated space” (Lefebvre 49). [15] Ale actualizes this heterotopia by virtue of her imagination, as she longs for radical individual freedom (“wild and free”) from societal pressure to assimilate and from her parents’ counterpressure to remain Cuban. This is reflected in the absence of both parents and of the spaces associated with them in her imaginary walks through Havana. [16] Ale’s imaginary Havana is characterized by the sensual rhythm of the incessant “human parade,” (Obejas, 55) by a “strangely comforting and untidy intimacy,” (55) and by spatial confinement (“doors too close together,” (55) that counterbalance the text’s aseptic and bourgeois image of Chicago as a metropolis of the North. On the other hand, the image of the city that Ale produces is detached from the actual Cuba. Her knowledge of the city proves to be dysfunctional and fragmented as the adult narrator states:

I could, at the age of fourteen or fifteen, talk knowledgeably about how Compostela and Habana streets ran the full length of the district. I could place their intersections with Luz and Sol and inject just the right irony when mentioning Porvenir – a tiny,

block-long street whose name means “a hopeful future”.

I didn't know the landmarks, I couldn't say where something as grand and imposing as the cathedral was outside of its postal moorings; nor could I say what kind of landmark rested on any corner if it didn't bump up against the Malecón. But I could do the math in my head and declare exactly when Tejadillo became Trocadero (right after the intersection with Prado Boulevard, with all its decrepit luster) I could talk about how the Malecón stretched all the way from Old Havana past the glamorous Hotel Nacional, how it curved and hugged the city of my birth. (55)

Adolescent Ale's irrefutable mathematical precision (“the math in my head”) regarding the geography of Havana contrasts with her linguistic, cultural, and personal destabilization in Chicago. Her Havana project also proves to be fragile and artificial, for ultimately her walks follow the principle of the map (“carte”) giving a comprehensive overview rather than the immersive principle of the subjective tour (“parcours”). [17] In addition, the abstractness of Ale's calculated spatial practices implies affective distance. Her clinging to the map and to the knowledge inscribed in it has a compensatory quality, given that Ale seeks to substitute her lacking spatial and sensual practice of Havana with conceptual knowledge. Due to this fixation on the rigid conceptual dimension of Havana, adolescent Ale's spatial productions are in tension with her need for freedom. This tension is expressed in the “strangely comforting and untidy intimacy” (Obejas, *Days of Awe* 55) of Havana as a space, an imagined hometown, that she has (re)appropriated via imagination, and in her marked disengagement from the “brutal playground” of her U.S. adolescence.

How to grasp the relationship between the practice of imaginary walks, decoupled from physical-material space, and memory? The practice of imaginary walks is primarily based on the substitution of the missing dimension of spatial practices by spatial representations and on remembered, imagined spaces from a (post-) memory, i.e., multi-temporal, perspective. [18] The city map and the photographs – emblematic

representations of a physically absent space – are transformed into a surface of projection for Ale where an alternative to everyday life in the United States emerges. As a result, adolescent Ale produces an idealized and escapist space—a mental heterotopia that heavily resorts to a rhetoric of deterritorialization resembling that of Israelite Zion. In analogy with Zion as the Promised Land of the Jews, the narrator posits Havana as her lost and promised land. [19] Young Ale's imagination comes to predominate over her memories, selecting some second-hand recollections and relegating others to oblivion. Ultimately, within the novel, the narrator's text fragments constitute a space of representation produced through multiply mediated memories and imaginations, revealing the complex structure of diaspora space. From a diaspora perspective, space is characterized by spatiotemporal absences and their compensation through memories or imagination. This is true for Ale as a child and adolescent, as a young adult, and as a matured person, and finally as the narrator of the novel, each version of Ale drawing on a different technique of compensation and alternative homemaking. While in childhood the experience of absence proves to be extreme, and Havana as a space of refuge and the original home is intensely imagined and finally repressed, upon her first return to Cuba, Ale, now in her mid-twenties, is forced to confront her spatial imaginations and Cuba or Havana as a contemporary rapidly changing place.

## 5. The First Return. Finding the Parents' House

Ale's imaginary wanderings through Havana serve as a substitute for a geographically and politically inaccessible reality. They produce a space that is deformed in comparison to the past and the present. Following the same dynamics as the diasporic myth of return, they constitute an example of how deterritorialized Cubans produce space, Cuban diaspora space, from a geographical and temporal distance. When returning to Cuba as visitors, they are confronted with a material and contemporary Cuba that has not frozen in time as their oftentimes distorted and re-invented recollection might

have. Another, contemporary layer is added to their productions of Cuban space, due to their spatial practices in material Cuba, such as those of walking on familiar paths or visiting familiar places. These practices typical of returnees are strongly anchored in the dimension of material-perceived space and in the temporal dimensions of space. [20] Ultimately, walking along familiar paths and visiting familiar places unfold a mnemonic effect. While classic diaspora discourses foster the idea of an impossible return to the lost and therefore mythical homeland, the moment of first return to Cuba has become a typical element of Cuban diaspora literature, reflecting disillusion and potential conciliation with one's roots: Ale's account of her "first return" follows the lines of a more general "poetics of [first] return" (López 2) to Havana that López describes in *Impossible Returns*. The emotional charge of this first return is reflected in the Ale's repeatedly aborted attempts to narrate her first return to Havana. She resumes her account of her arrival four times, as if the fragmented memories were eluding her and recomposing themselves into ever new versions of the same event. [21] The text's fragmentation also serves a reflective and a didactic purpose aimed at a U.S. or international readership. Each fragment of memory situates Ale's account in a given historical, political, and cultural context. The first attempt opens with a description of the political and economic situation in Cuba in 1987: "[T]wo years before the crumbling of the Berlin Wall, and eventually, the vast wasteland of the Special Period and Zero Option, the economic disaster that came to the island after the fall of the Soviet Union." (Obejas, *Days of Awe* 50) The second focuses on the transit of the U.S. delegation Ale travels with from the airport to Havana, the challenging attitude of the island's population toward the "gusanos," i.e., worms, the exiles now transformed into rich butterflies, and on the dramatic performance of gender relations in Havana's public space (57–62, here 57). At the same time, through its use of metaphors and its isotopies of the dark, the dirty, and the devilish, the text anticipates the historical catastrophe that will strike the island with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of communism in the Soviet Union, leading to dramatic food

shortages in the 1990s. [22] Her third attempt takes the transnational practices of U.S. Cuban returnees as its point of departure, emphasizing Ale's otherness. [23] In contrast to her fellow U.S. Cuban travelers' collective hysteria upon reaching the promised land, Ale – probably to overcome budding melancholy – claims to feel inner emptiness and a sense of invulnerability as the plane lurches: "What could be more dramatic than returning to the place of your birth and feeling nothing, absolutely nothing, but the slightest shiver of an echo from a bottomless pit" (Obejas, *Days of Awe* 75)?

It is this ostensible indifference—"my being Cuban [...] an accident of timing and geography" (67) —that the mature narrator exposes as self-deception. Two specific recollections expose this: one memory is linguistic while the other pertains to the realm of diasporic spatial practices. First, Ale-narrator depicts how she violates her professional ethics in Cuba as a biased, manipulative interpreter by correctly rendering what is meant, but using her body language to show her loyalty to the United States. Thus, she pretends to be a mere linguistic mediator, a machine for "convert[ing] one language into another" (76), who, "invisible" (76), has no position of her own: "I had no opinion or judgment" (76). [24] Nevertheless, she takes a clear stand against Cuba and the Spanish speakers by means of the material aspect of communication: "I'd indicate this with my body, by leaning or standing closer to the American, by deferring or simply gazing at him or her more intimately than the Spanish speaker" (75). By manipulating this situation of communication, by refusing to act as a pure and invisible materialization of a linguistic sign, Ale violates her very principle of interpreting as an approximation of a 'pure language'—"reine Sprache" (Benjamin 142) — in a Benjaminian sense. By this manipulation, by this corporeal performance, Ale not only reveals the discrepancies in the process of understanding and the general deficiency of human language (in the sense of Benjamin and *différance*), but also highlights the existence of an extra-linguistic non-discursive materiality. [25] However, Ale's manipulations also generate inequalities in communication, exposing the embittered front lines between the Cuban population *dentro* and

*fuera*, and illustrating the danger inherent in the transmission of the foremost political conflict to subsequent generations.

On her last day in Cuba, Ale's ostensible neutrality and need to distance herself from Cuba tips, and again Ale turns to walking the city as practice of appropriating a space as her home. Against her conscious will, Ale follows a common spatial practice of exiles or migrants who temporarily return to Cuba: [26] She ventures out in search of her former childhood home and strolls through Havana's urban neighborhood of Vedado. Doing so, she launches the process of reappropriating her past, as she meets Moisés, her father's childhood friend who will help her to discover contemporary Cuban reality. This at first unconscious act is, indeed, possible thanks to the imaginary walks in her childhood, making her familiar with Havana's layout, with the conceptual dimension of the Cuban capital. However, she does not know which specific everyday practices and what type of experienced spaces accompany this purely conceptual level:

Stepping out of the Habana Libre, I was instantly situated. The exercise of years ago, of trying to memorize the street map of Havana, had come in handy throughout my stay. I found myself anticipating streets and intersections. I knew the order of things, even if I didn't always know where I was going. (Obejas, *Days of Awe* 69)

During her walk, whose original destination is the "Sephardic Center" (69), the non-fictional "Centro Sefardí," to deliver a letter from her father to Moisés, she drifts off towards the modern and formerly prosperous neighborhood of Vedado. This act leads her "as if by magic" to the house where she had lived with her parents as a child. The palace of her memories and imagination turns out to be less tall and less majestic than recollected ("square and barren"), the front door—an anticipated image of decaying Havana in the 1990s—is off its hinges, moldy and rusted:

At some point, as if by magic, I looked up and saw my old apartment building sitting ashen on a residential street in the Vedado. I had remembered it palatial, but here it was, only three stories high, square

and barren. There were no Greek columns to hold up the balconies, though I could have sworn I'd run around them as a small child. The windows were boarded up, the terrace from which my father and I had watched the panic during the bombings was chipped and lifeless. The front gate to the building, now slightly unhinged, bore the green and red traces of mold and rust that would paint all of Havana just a few years later. (69–70)

As she takes pictures of the house for her mother from different angles, Ale recalls scenes from her childhood and tries to re-imagine the place as it was 26 years ago, comparing her mental representation of the neighborhood to how she encounters it now. Again, the mnemotechnic function of the spatial practice of walking becomes evident, evoking memories that Ale compares with the present situation, updating and partially falsifying them. Moreover, the text underlines the fragility and the volatility of these memories: "But I remembered them, I was sure of it. [...] Or were all of these memories like those of the Greek columns invented" (70)? It is precisely because of this volatility that older layers of memory and space are reactivated and updated, i.e., compared with the present space.

The house as the material shell for a home, a private space – especially the two houses of Ale's family in Havana and Chicago with their entrance doors – has a particular semantic function in Ale's discourse: As a microcosm of *cubanidad*, it reflects Ale's social as well as her personal identity. Just as the screen door of her Chicago home symbolizes her temporary disengagement with Cuba, the damaged front door to her childhood home in Havana serves as a metaphor for Ale's return to a hitherto repressed and forgotten Cuban space. For only moments after discovering her old Havana home, the 28-year-old Ale will cross the threshold of the house of family friend Moisés Menach, a convinced supporter of the Cuban Revolution and a devout Sephardic Jew. This step into the Menachs' house proves decisive for the rest of Ale's life as it marks Ale's entry into the Cuba of the island population. It is through this symbolic outer and inner border crossing that will she



gain insight into (but not be part of) everyday life in Havana instead of dwelling in (second-hand) memories and imaginations. [27] Ale's first return triggers a more conscious search for her origins and is the starting point of her inner 'cubanization', allegorized in her amorous relationship with the *habanero* Orlando. Like the plane of Ale's first return delving into the dark Cuban night of the sparsely lit island, when searching for her childhood home, Ale delves into in an opaque mixture of memory, "olvido" (Obejas, *Days of Awe* 103) as a limbo between active forgetting and involuntary remembrance, and absence of memory. [28] The Menachs' house, however, which Ale describes as a space of familial and social cohesion, becomes Ale's virtual and material point of anchorage in Cuba. Following the subjective gaze of 28-year-old Ale and Ale-narrator, the text opts for a perspectival description according to Stanzel and to de Certeau's principle of the *parcours*, guiding the readers through the entire house and presenting selected objects and family members, thereby orienting the readers' gaze and their production of fictional space. [29]

As the preceding observations have shown, the novel depicts how everyday places become media of memory, city maps or photographs complement linguistically mediated memories of a past Cuban space. The space imagined according to first- and second-hand memories is then, as the novel postulates, superimposed, compared, and corrected with present Cuban space upon return. In other words, by revisiting remembered places, one's own childhood memories or the memories of previous generations are activated, validated, or subjected to critical revision. Accordingly, the text, the narrator's discourse and the plot, construct Havana as a multi-temporal and multi-spatial "Cuban palimpsest" (Quiroga, *Cuban Palimpsests* 21). [30]

## 6. The Second Return. Retrieving Lost Material Space, or: Matter over Mind

Homemaking practices and the house both as a point of emotional attachment and a metaphor for both the global and the local also play an

important role in Ale's account of her second trip to Cuba, when she stays at the Menachs' house. Their family home reflects the continuing geopolitical tensions between Cuba representing socialism and the United States representing capitalist imperialism, the subsequent economic crisis in Cuba, and the decomposition of Cuban society on all scales. In 1997, the Menachs' home is hopelessly overcrowded; a second ceiling, a "barbacoa," (Obejas, *Days of Awe* 254) has been added to increase the habitable space. The promiscuity Ale had imagined as a child has now become a bitter reality. It no longer carries positive connotations, but rather is to be contextualized as a typical social problem during the *período especial*. [31] During her second visit to Cuba, Ale continues her homeseeeking and homemaking practices by visiting the houses of friends and relatives, such as the home of her cousin Barbarita in the "underbelly of Varadero," (240) the dazzling tourist city, as well as the modest home of her parents in the neighborhood of Centro Habana. [32] Doing so, she not only reactivates a network of kinship but also seeks to approach, to internalize Cuba from a broader scale. While the narrator describes the glossy capitalist Varadero as a heterotopia that does not really belong to Cuba, as a "hysterical and hallucinatory" "neo-futuristic Cuba" (240) that is part of another dimension of reality, she perceives its counterspace, the stinking and dilapidated Varadero of the island population, as a space of intellectual and human prosperity. [33] Again, the narrator insists on the motif of the door when describing Ale's visit to Barbarita, whose house has been partially destroyed by a hurricane. In her account of the visit, Ale-narrator heavily aesthesizes the ruins and downplays the poor condition of Barbarita's "large home" (242), an attitude that can be explained by the symbolic value Ale both as the narrator and the character who 'lives' this moment ascribes to this episode:

When we arrive at Barbarita's we know it's her house because there is nothing else, only brambles and bush. It is a large home, long like a train; we see it disappear back into the wilderness. The last hurricane not only tore the roof but the walls, too, opening the front room completely to the skies and

the elements. Amazingly, the front door is intact – its frame a hard mahogany, with roses carved into its face, a knocker, and a doorbell with tricolor wires like the Cuban flag that leak out and down, along the exposed and weathered blue-and-white living room tiles. The door and the frame hang as if suspended in the air. (242)

Despite the dilapidated walls and the missing roof, the front doors of the ruin are intact; Ale crosses their thresholds with awed hesitation, performing a symbolic act of entry into an additional realm of her family history and of life in Cuba, which she idealizes as “not so bad” in terms of a counterprogram to U.S. individualism (242–244). Again, the readers’ gaze closely follows the perception of space and perspective as seen through the eyes of Ale and Orlando, who gradually explore the interior of the devastated house.

By actively delving into current Cuban spaces and Cuban spatial practices, Ale seeks to appropriate a Cuban past inaccessible to her, to undo her deterritorialization, and to ‘reterritorialize’ herself in Cuba by replacing her imagined Cuba by material experience. This project of homemaking must fail, however, because being brought up in the United States Ale has missed the opportunity of internalizing the spatial practices and social spaces in Cuba. As a result, this absence of material knowledge irrevocably exhibits Ale as *desde fuera*, as an outsider from the diaspora. Cuba as a space eludes Ale because of its historical depth, since Ale has not experienced Cuban living conditions in the 1990s by herself—promiscuity, confinement, endless queues, black markets—neither physically nor somatically. At best, she can approach them discursively, cut off from their materiality. In other words: Ale as a bodily subject is not shaped by this material experience, nor by its social practices; she must resign to imagining them through the distorting lens of nostalgia and diaspora. Hence, she is denied participation in the collective spatial production of ‘Cuba’ by the island population. This becomes evident in the arguments with her Cuban lover Orlando, who exhibits Ale’s idealization of Havana and her romanticization of the economic crisis as projections of belonging that have nothing in

common with the *Nada cotidiana* (1995) of everyday life on the island as described by Zoé Valdés: [34]

“Don’t romanticize this, Alejandra – you’d never live here,” he says [...]. “Not like us, not ever. If your parents hadn’t taken you, you’d have left on your own. [...] The problem [...] is that you think you’ve missed something.” “I did” I say. “I know I did”. (Obejas, *Days of Awe* 244–245)

Far from being anecdotic, Orlando’s personal critique also bears a metafictional dimension pointing at a more general critique of the romanticization, marketing, and consumption of an aesthetic of ruins and misery in Cuban films, works of art, and literature, which, by the way, Obejas follows in her third novel *Ruins* (2009). [35] One of the novel’s fundamental insights fully crystallizes here: the materiality of a spatial experience triumphs over its discursive, or linguistic, appropriation, matter over mind.

## 7. Conclusion

Achy Obejas’ *Days of Awe* proposes to its readership a polysemic Caribbean version of the Tower of Babel, portraying the Cuban revolution as a sort of hubris responsible for the dispersion of the Cuban ‘people’, for them speaking in different tongues, and ultimately for their sense of deterritorialization and homelessness. [36] Narrating the protagonist’s quest for her own cultural identity and her efforts of reterritorialization in Cuba—of making herself at home in Havana albeit being brought up in Chicago—the novel reflects on the complex productions of home as a phenomenon of spatiotemporal entanglements—a “Cuban palimpsest” (Quiroga) —by second-generation immigrants. Through its narrative architecture as a set of non-chronological fragments and its plot, Obejas’ novel both reveals and unravels how, for diasporic subjects, home is the result of a constant negotiation of different strands of homemaking practices; traditions, memories, and values of Home; and concepts of HOME (Steigemann and Misselwitz 632) that involve



different temporal levels and geographical sites.

For the diasporic narrator Ale and her younger narrated selves, home is situated on different geographical scales. Depending on context and time, she considers Cuba or the United States her homeland, this conceptual and political identification with a nation corresponding mostly to ‘official’ situations as a border-crossing or international professional contexts. The local scale of remembered-imagined or present urban landscapes, however, proves to be far more important for her productions of home that include a series of homemaking practices, especially imaginary or ‘real’ material walks through the city. Here, the text refers to common homing practices and second-generation “rites of return” (Hirsch and Miller): not only in the novel, but also in extra-fictional life, diaspora subjects frequently resort to specific practices of homemaking, relying on memory and imagination to compensate for the (geographical and temporal) absence of a lost homeland, and associating home with different affective regimes and cultures. In the context of the novel and in a certain (U.S.) Cuban literary tradition, Havana, experienced first in imagination and then in material space, plays a specific role, for it represents first an emotional emergency exit, a sheltering imaginary home, before turning into both a material reality and a challenge due to the permanent confrontation of hand-me-down memories and ‘reality.’ Ultimately, it is the intimate spaces represented by Ale’s family’s current and former houses which prove to represent the most important scales of home. Ale tries to recover these houses by visiting them *in situ* and by framing her account of return with childhood memories. As the example of the Chicago family home, as an idealized and slightly altered miniature version of Havana, or that of the family house in Havana show, the trope of the house represents a point of emotional attachment and a point of material attachment. It is a material vestige which may, however, act as an empty shell “transformed by the ravages of time” (Hirsch and Miller 3). To be sure, it is the actualization of the myth of an allegedly impossible return which brings a different dynamic to the diasporic tension between the “desire for a [remembered and imagined] homeland” and a “homing

desire” in the locale of living. For at least in the Cuban case, this material return not only risks demystifying the imaginative homeland, but also renders tangible and negotiable glocal tensions between Cubans inside and outside Cuba.

Finally, if we think of the novel’s space of narration in contrast to its narrated spaces, it is difficult to localize the narrator’s geographical and cultural vantage point seesawing somewhere in suspension between the United States and Cuba, between de- and reterritorialization, between a sense of homelessness and the joy of homemaking on different sites. From this angle, the writing of the personal notes, recollections, and historical accounts as well as the assembling of those fragments into a text constitute themselves homemaking and spatio-poietic practices. “[B]ringing some space under control” (Steigemann and Misselwitz 630) and appropriating it, writing as homemaking puts a deterritorialized world into order and reterritorializes it, however torn and fragmented its representation may be. From a diaspora perspective, home turns out to be not one simple social space with a simple geography and unidimensional time, but a multi-spatial, multi-temporal phenomenon nourished by the practices of remembering and, for postmemory generations, of imagining and renegotiating.

## Endnotes

[1] For “knot of memory”, French: “nœud de mémoire,” as a synonym for “multidirectional memories” see Rothberg, Sanyal and Silverman 2010.

[2] In this sense, *Days of Awe*, can be read as a “jewban novel”, following the currents of sephardistic discourses in the late 1990s. See Kandiyoti 2012, 235, and Casteel 2016, esp. 6–7. See also Bettinger-López 2006, 113: “Jewban, a single word, dehyphenated the ‘Cuban-Jewish’ identity, thus loosening the community’s explicit ties to both Cubans and Jews. ‘Jewban’ represented a separate, emancipated, and confident group identity that was historically linked to Cuba but rooted in Miami.”

[3] On diaspora space see also Brah 1998.

[4] See Lefebvre 2000 [1974], 39–40, 46–57, 161–62.

[5] See Fanon (1961), 49-50: “Le monde colonial est un monde manichéiste.” See also Kipfer 2007: 718.

[6] “In the language of diaspora, originary homelands are not simply there to be recovered: already multiply interconnected with other places, they are further

transformed by the ravages of time, transfigured through the lenses of loss and nostalgia, constructed in the process of the search. 'Root-seekers,' Alondra Nelson argues, 'also become root-makers'" (Hirsch and Miller 2011, 3).

[7] See Brüske 2018 on that.

[8] She defines this revolution by invoking the myth of Eve's fall from grace, as a primordial human ("*desire for something else*") as a striving for a "*greater world*": "*Revolutions, however, are as human as the instinct to breathe. [...] Constant insurrection is in our system, in our programming, our cranial codes*" (Obejas, *Days of Awe* 1). In terms of content, Ale's birth and the genesis of revolutionary Cuba are thus conflated, while the novel's discourse prepares a semantic connection between the Fall and the Cuban Revolution, re-evoked in the discussion of the Tower of Babel (chapter X). See *ibid.* For Ale's self-presentation as a literal child of the revolution goes so far that she states the obstetrician emphatically had called her the "*first life of this new day*" (*ibid.*).

[9] This description already hints at the topic of confluence and competition between religions in pre-revolutionary Cuba, which is embodied in Alejandra as the child of a (Euro)Cuban devotee of Santería and Catholic, as well as a Jewish Cuban. The significance of religion, and particularly, the Jewish religion is anticipated by the life-saving blood transfusions Ale receives from her Jewish father. The topic of religion is framed by another paratext, the quotation from Martí's *La Edad de Oro* (1889) on the human resemblance of gods and religions that precedes the prologue and deconstructs faith and religion as human made.

[10] The account of the family's flight to Miami by boat in 1961 emphasizes the role Ale's father plays a keeper of memory and unravels how Ale-narrator's discourse superposes different recollections of that day. See 20–31.

[11] See *ibid.* In an interview with Jorjet Harper, Obejas mentions the fact that as a teenager she herself had memorized the street map of Havana: "In fact, I'd obsessed about Havana to the point that some years ago I'd even memorized the map of the city and all the bus routes. So when I got there I knew where I was going all the time. And in some ways I belonged right away, but I realized I didn't belong there attitudinally." (Harper 2, quoted by Wolfenzon 116)

[12] See, e.g., Obejas 154, 168.

[13] The concept of "reverie" (*ibid.*) alludes to Jean-Jacques Rousseau's archetype of the "promeneur solitaire," who wanders through rural landscapes and whose modern equivalent is Baudelaire's "flâneur" and his elaboration by Walter Benjamin in *Passagen-Werk* (1928–29, 1934–40). Whereas Rousseau's solitary hiker 'reads' nature in *Rêveries du promeneur solitaire* (1782) and, thereby, finds self-knowledge, Baudelaire's, and Benjamin's "flâneur" pose a critical gaze upon the urban landscapes of modernity. See Poppenberg 34–35.

[14] See Obejas 54–56.

[15] For Lefebvre a heterotopia is a differential space, excluded from spaces of everyday life and linked to magic,

but also to social inequality. See Lefebvre 189–190: "lieux de sorcellerie, de folie, de puissances démoniaques, lieux fascinants mais conjures," "les périphéries, les bidonvilles, les espaces des jeux interdits, ceux de la guerrilla et des guerres." See also Foucault and Miskowiec 27.

[16] See Obejas 55: "Curiously, I never imagined my parents there, our apartment or the floral shop. I pictured only me, wild and free."

[17] See de Certeau 347–352.

[18] For a definition of "postmemory" see Hirsch: "Postmemory's connection to the past is thus actually mediated not by recall but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation. To grow up with overwhelming inherited memories, to be dominated by narratives that preceded one's birth or one's consciousness, is to risk having one's own life stories displaced, even evacuated, by our ancestors. It is to be shaped, however indirectly, by traumatic fragments of events that still defy narrative reconstruction and exceed comprehension. These events happened in the past, but their effects continue into the present."

[19] The text alludes to the Israelite myth of the Promised Land as well as to a related literary tradition that includes the works of the "Hebrew poet from Al-Andalus" Yehuda Halevi, Ale's father's favorite poet. By the same token, the intertextual network also includes texts which are both geographically and culturally closer, such as Lyman Frank Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (1900). On Yehuda Halevi see: Sáenz-Badillos and Targarona Borrás (2003).

[20] On the interplay of space and time and the spatial conception of time as materialized in spatial layers see Lefebvre 57, 60, 104, 190–95.

[21] See Obejas 50, 57, 63, 74.

[22] Numerous allusions in the text refer to the future political and economic catastrophe of the *período especial* and reflect Ale's fear of santería ("discarded animal parts") and of the devil possibly haunting Havana ("breathing something like burning sulfur in the air" (see *ibid.*). These allusions serve the purpose of presenting Havana as a decaying city: "[...] there was a somber undercurrent in Havana even then, as if it knew what was coming [...]", *ibid.*

[23] See *ibid.*

[24] See *ibid.*: "That I was invisible, that I had no opinion or judgement, that I was there simply to convert one language into another and that they should never address me as an individual but always focus their pronouncements on the other person. 'These are not my words,' I explained. 'I have no words of my own here.'"

[25] On the topic of linguistic deficiency and translation in the novel see Socolovsky 229–230, 232.

[26] The text mentions delivering mail, bringing in material goods illegally, and visiting one's former house as typical practices upon return. See Obejas 63–73.

[27] These fictional experiences coincide with the structured

dramaturgy of the return and memories of exiles to the island, as described, for example, by José Quiroga in *Cuban Palimpsests* (2005). See Quiroga, *Cuban Palimpsests* vii–xviii as well as Quiroga’s (2011) essay “Bitter Daiquiris,” in which he sketches out different experiences of returning to Havana. Quiroga emphasizes that a chronological narrative account cannot do justice to the actual experience of returning in its superimposing layers of recollections and impressions (see Quiroga, *Cuban Palimpsests* vii). Cuban architect Cecilia Bobes underlines how the exiled’s visits to Havana have changed the idea of Havana as an urban space since the 1970s, redefining the borders between inside and outside. See Bobes 24.

[28] See Obejas 74. On the question of “olvido” see Socolovsky 234.

[29] See Stanzel 156.

[30] Quiroga uses the expression of “Cuban palimpsest” in the following sense: “Cuban Palimpsests is a book that migrates—from semiotics to history, from history to fiction, from the personal to the political, from the particular to the collective, from past to present, and from the archive to its dispersion. I think the only way to understand Cuba at this point is by migrating in this fashion, considering different aspects of a reality that is more than simply a palimpsest of past and present. Stated more clearly, and in a more imagistic fashion, I want to underscore the fact that Cuba has produced exiles, and migrants, but that Cuba itself is also migrating.” Quiroga, *Cuban Palimpsest* 21.

[31] See Obejas 55 compared to 310–311.

[32] See *ibid.*

[33] See *ibid.*

[34] See *ibid.* See Valdés 1995.

[35] For an analysis of the representation of the *período especial* and the aesthetics of filth: see Ebenhoch, or Exner 237–271.

[36] See Obejas 93.

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## Searching for Home: Im/migration, Deportation, and Exile in Haitian Popular Cinema

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### Abstract

*This chapter analyzes concepts of home while considering themes of im/migration, deportation, and exile in three Haitian popular films: *Diaspora \$100*, *Kidnappings*, and *Deported*. Through analysis of these films, I examine what “home” may mean for Haitian diasporic communities. As I show, the economic impact of transnational migration is a critical factor here. The films depict the ways in which Haitian immigrants maintain, negotiate, and build identities both individually and collectively. The chapter demonstrates the complexity of identity and belonging particularly for young people who have been deported to Haiti, often finding themselves alienated while at “home” in a space that is not welcoming. Throughout, I explore some of the ways in which home is a fluid and complex space for Haitians in Haiti and the Haitian diaspora.*

**Keywords:** home, belonging, identity, immigration, transnationalism

### ***Lakay se lakay. Home sweet home. There’s no place like home.***

As I write, Haiti has once more been thrown into a period of turmoil. The past few weeks have been filled with anti-government protests demanding that Jovenel Moïse, the current president, leaves the country. The protesters have accused Moïse of corruption and of mishandling funds from the Venezuela Petro-Caribe oil discount program, which was supposed to help Haiti through various social programs and infrastructure building for health and education after the 2010 earthquake that devastated the country. [1]

*Lakay se lakay.* Despite Haiti’s ongoing political, social, economic, geopolitical, and historical unrest, many Haitian immigrants dream of returning home. Many Haitians living in the diaspora—whether in the United States, Canada, the Bahamas, or other islands in the Caribbean—wearily follow the instability in the country, feeling saddened and angry because they believe in the possibility of attaining a less tumultuous alternative for the country. The fact that Haiti was able to do so much at *Bwa Kayiman*—the place where slaves gathered to make a pact in 1791 to free themselves from the grasp of the French empire’s greed or die in

the attempt is an indelible part of their collective historical memory. Yet, over two centuries later, Haiti’s history too often reflects displacement, disorder, and disaster—a trajectory that has pushed many of its citizens to try their chances elsewhere. During and after the 2010 earthquake, over a decade ago, communities rallied together in a *rasanbleman* [gathering], and for a short time, there was a fire within many to re-build Haiti from the ashes of the earthquake. Yet today, ongoing violence and instability threaten to destroy the country’s limited and weak infrastructure along with its important cultural patrimony.

Social, political, and economic instability in Haiti is directly linked to migration. For instance, during almost three decades of dictatorship under the François and Jean-Claude Duvalier regime, hundreds of thousands of Haitians fled the country. All told, over the course of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, there have been four main waves of immigration: first, under François Duvalier’s regime (1960s); second, under Jean-Claude Duvalier’s regime (1980s); third, during Jean-Bertrand Aristide’s term as president (1990s); and fourth, after the earthquake (2010). [2]

In the short documentary film *Exil* (2016), director Richard Sénécal captures Haitian actress Gessica Génés’s powerful testimony of

the 2010 earthquake. In a tearful voice, Généus proclaims: “*Haïti c’est un pays où il n’y a pas de juste milieu, soit tu aimes ou tu haïs ...*” [Haiti is a country with no middle ground, either you like it or you hate it] (Sénécal 00:3:00-00:3:08). Généus further notes: “*Je voulais être au coeur de tout cela, je voulais comprendre, je voulais savoir comment on allait s’en sortir...*” [I wanted to be in the heart of it all, I wanted to understand, I wanted to know how we were going to get out...] (Sénécal 00:9:02-00:9:09). In regard to her forced exile in Paris after the earthquake, Généus explains: “*Je ne pense pas vivre ici éternellement mais j’aime bien Paris... Je ne suis pas triste d’avoir quitté Haïti je suis triste de ne pas pouvoir rester...*” [I do not want to live here forever, but I like Paris. I am not sad that I had to leave Haiti, I am sad that I am unable to stay (in Haiti)] (Sénécal 00:10:11-00:10:42). Généus’ recollection of her experience and very intimate testimony of the earthquake suggest the complex reality of leaving Haiti. For many diasporic Haitians, regardless of the reasons they were compelled to leave Haiti, they are still in search of tangible ways to remain connected to it. There is an urge to feel the place *with* and *in* you, to consciously and unconsciously consume it, to return there, whether virtually or physically—yet this impulse is not simple, not unitary. Even as they may crave returning to it, Haitians are fully aware of the challenges that living in Haiti involves. At the same time, they are cognizant on a daily basis of the challenges of living in the diaspora, even as large Haitian communities in cities like Miami, Orlando, Fort Lauderdale, or Brooklyn provide a sense of community and some continuity. Even in contexts where Haitian migration has been extensive, Haitian immigrants still face social, political, economic, and racial marginalization.

The link to Haiti provided by popular movies is therefore a vital aspect of daily life, a means of communication comparable to Facebook, WhatsApp, and other social media forums that today help Haitian (and other) immigrants remain connected to their homelands. At the same time, as they tell stories that these immigrants can relate to, these media also enable immigrants to reconceptualize and re-create “home.” As Haitians in exile comment on Haitian popular

films on Facebook and via YouTube, they take ownership of these narratives, adding layers of text that enfold the stories within their lived realities. [3]

The films I analyze here—*Diaspora \$100* by Godnel Latus, *Kidnappings* by Mecca AKA Grimo, and *Deported* by Rachèle Magloire and Chantal Regnault—highlight the problematic relationships to the meaning of home that arise in the context of Haitian migration and return. Home becomes a site of complex negotiations and immigrants must manage hostile, unwelcoming, and racist interactions. Edwidge Danticat notes that sometimes Haitians in Haiti use the term *diaspora* to denote the rift between those who have remained in Haiti and those who have emigrated and to exclude those living outside of Haiti, letting them know that they do not belong. [4] Depending on the linguistic context, *diaspora* in Creole can be synonymous with *outsider* or *other*. Here, I use the term to refer to Haitians or people of Haitian descent living outside of Haiti, preserving the complex resonances it carries as a signifier of difference that may be impossible to overcome, the ambivalence of living in two cultures, and perhaps not fully belonging in either one. Sometimes, as we will see in the documentary *Deported* (2013), it becomes impossible to reconcile the two cultures. Thus, the concept of *diaspora* is always in flux, its meaning never fully stable and determined.

### ***Diaspora san dola/Diaspora \$100***

*Diaspora san dola/Diaspora \$100* (dir. Godnel Latus, 2012) illustrates this complicated concept as it shows the double life that many Haitians in the diaspora negotiate in order to create the illusion for members of their community living in Haiti that life in the United States is easy. A *YouTube* search reveals that the two titles, *Diaspora san dola/Diaspora \$100*, are used interchangeably. Indeed, there is an ironic play on words here, as *san* means both “without,” and “one hundred” in Creole; therefore the film’s title can be translated as “diaspora without any dollar” or “one-hundred-dollar diaspora.” The title thus embodies the simultaneous hope and despair that tend to characterize the Haitian immigrant experience—the hope that people must cling to



despite all the odds that may be stacked against them, and the despair that shadows life in which the realities of poverty cannot be overlooked.

The main character in the film is Dous Raymond, a hustler who has been living in Miami for about 15 years. He is involved with several women, including one who lives in Haiti and with whom he spends a lot of time talking on the phone, making false promises. In preparation for traveling to Haiti to see her, he borrows jewelry from a friend, planning to try to impress her – an indication that women in Haiti do not actually know that those in the diaspora are not wealthy. Yet, he also suggests that these women *expect* the *dyaspora* to go to Haiti to flaunt their money and that not performing wealth in this way would actually be a problem—it is the social role and even the duty of the *dyaspora* to provide this (likely false) spectacle of easily-won wealth and well-being. The women in Haiti that he is referring to *suspect* that the *dyaspora* are not wealthy, even though everyone seems to take that wealth at face value. In other words, the (male) *dyaspora* come back to Haiti and perform wealth, and the women apparently believe their performance—but in fact, the women’s trust in this performance is yet another performance that is meant to help them get as much money from the man as possible while he is in Haiti.

In fact, people living in Haiti understand more and more the hardships faced by those who live in the *dyaspora*, in part thanks to the ways life in a global and transactional world has been shaped by ongoing exchanges facilitated by technology. While many people in Haiti still dream of migrating to the U.S. (or elsewhere), they understand better (in part through films like *Dyaspora \$100*) that life is not that easy in the U.S. and that many people who return to Haiti are lying about their economic status. Thus, many levels of performance take place here simultaneously. In the end, after flaunting his wealth in Haiti, Dous returns to the United States broke and up to his neck in debt.

This film also highlights the complex realities that feed into the common expectation that those who have been living in the diasporic community will help the newly arrived get settled and find jobs. The notion of *mache ansanm*, which means “walking together,” conveys the expectation that

people are part of a community and not stranded individuals. The idea of *walking together* underscores the need for Haitian immigrant communities to provide mutual support. We further find it echoed such in Creole-language proverbs as *Vwazinaj se fanmi* [Neighbors are family] and *Anpil men chay pa lou* [With many hands the load is lighter]. We also find it in the concept of *rasanblaj*—a way of being, a way of understanding one’s community.[5] *Rasanblaj* is manifested by one individual toward another, as a family welcomes other members’ siblings, cousins, and family or friends and helps them settle down in the new country. It is also visible through the countless benevolent associations and churches of various denominations that support newcomers and help them with housing, jobs, and decent living. [6] When Haitians leave Haiti to become part of a new community, they leave behind (physically, emotionally, mentally) their family, community, and comfort zone. As they integrate into their new community, they form a new kind of *rasanblaj*. In many Haitian diasporic communities, it is a way of life, a survival strategy, a mechanism by which individuals help others obtain agency and survive in the new culture. When *dyaspora* travel to Haiti, however, most only tell a partial story of the complexity of the *rasanblaj* that enables them to survive in the United States. Indeed, they fabricate narratives that make it appear as if they achieved success on their own and as a result of their individual efforts. In a sense, they absorb and perform the ideology—indeed, the mythology—associated with the “American Dream,” which rests on the (false) foundation that the U.S. society offers a level playing field in which all can achieve success regardless of their origins.

The reality of this exchange economy in which appearances are crucial is complex. When someone who lives in a foreign country such as the United States, Canada, or France returns to Haiti, the assumption made in Haiti is that the person has money and power. As a result, they are put on a pedestal, since living abroad is a status marker. For example, in the house of some Haitian friends in Chicago last spring, I heard a Haitian woman in her early 30s explaining to her former mother-in-law how, when she returns to Haiti with her white American husband, people

who used to humiliate her and her mother now want to befriend them, and treat them like princesses. Similarly, in *Diaspora \$100*, we see the ways in which Haitians in the diaspora misrepresent their lives in the U.S. to family and friends living in Haiti. The film challenges the idea of the U.S. as an Eldorado where everyone has unlimited access to material objects as well as economic and political freedom.

Dous Raymond represents Haitians from the diaspora who go to Haiti to participate in this exchange of affective transactions. *Diaspora se ATM* [diasporas as ATMs] is a common expression that describes Haitians from the diaspora who go to Haiti and flaunt their U.S.-earned money. The phrase also refers to the fact that while they are in the U.S., people in Haiti call them to send money, as if they could simply go to an ATM to withdraw it. For example, in the film, Dous Raymond constantly gets these requests from the women with whom he is involved in Haiti. We see him on the phone sweet-talking the women, promising them money. For many people, returning to Haiti to show off and live “*la belle vie*” [the good life] if only for a week or two and spend money they don’t have is a way to escape the harsh realities of racism and anti-immigrant sentiment and their feelings of non-belonging in the U.S. When they return to Haiti, they embody (consciously and unconsciously) a sense of pride in having made it, even if they are struggling. Others put them on a pedestal, hoping to get something from them (in terms of money or material goods), and this in itself is an affirmation of their success. Returning home with the trappings of wealth (even if these are founded in debt), they enjoy comforts they cannot afford in the diaspora. For example, the film depicts Dous Raymond being pampered by his girlfriend, as she does his nails, feeds him, etc. He does not have the time or the means to enjoy such luxuries in the U.S. because he has to work to make ends meet. Thus, Dous has two distinct identities, in a diasporic form of double consciousness. He must struggle to maintain the lies that he uses to maintain both these selves, including the wealthy façade he projects in Haiti.

Still, for Dous, traveling to Haiti offers a way to affirm, “I am here, I belong, I exist,” and my money can go far. For many returnees, it is a way to

forget, albeit temporarily, the micro-aggressions, racism, and humiliation they face as immigrants, both from white people and sometimes from members of other minority groups. It is a way to rehumanize themselves. Although the fact that these “*diaspora san dola*” represent or misrepresent themselves is problematic—they are helping to create an idyllic image of *lòt bò* [the other side]), making those who live in Haiti imagine, and even dream of, a false reality—to a certain extent it is understandable.

### ***Kidnappings***

While some *diaspora* return to Haiti by choice, others are forced to return. Some Haitians are deported to Haiti after having lived in the United States and Canada for most or all of their lives. For them, Haiti is not home, and they are in fact strangers in a strange land. The issue of deportation has had important social resonances in Haiti, as we see in the film *Kidnappings* (2008). Since 2004, following Bertrand Aristide’s alleged kidnapping, kidnapping has become prevalent in both Haiti and the Haitian diaspora. In October and November 2012, the issue of kidnapping in Haiti took a twisted turn when Clifford Brandt, the son of one of Haiti’s elites, was arrested for kidnapping the son and daughter of a business rival. Up to that point, kidnapping in Haiti had been considered a crime committed by gangs known as *chimè* who generally reside in slums like Cité Soleil, a neighborhood west of the airport in Port-au-Prince. Ever since, kidnapping has become a commonly represented topic in Haitian popular culture, and *Kidnappings*, directed by Mecca AKA Grimo, shows that the business of abduction is indeed complex, and cannot be dismissed as simply the province of those, such as gang members, who tend to operate outside the law. Indeed, the economy of valuable bodies in Haiti cannot help but echo the economic origins of the nation as part of an island referred to as the *Perle des Antilles* for the vast wealth that flowed to France from its cane fields, where enslaved Africans and their descendants were forced to work. There is a certain terrible logic to this re-inscription of bodies as valuable commodities even within the context of the First Black Republic, for Haiti has

never been allowed to escape the debt it was deemed to owe to the European enslavers and colonizers in the aftermath of the revolution. We may wonder, why are whites not kidnapped? If this were the case, the kidnapping trade would have stopped. But whites have never suffered the cruelties that people of color (no matter their status) have suffered *en masse* within the African diaspora in the “New World.” Moreover, the trade is profitable for those in power, and they do not really want it to stop. The joke among Haitians in Haiti and in the diaspora is that if NGOs and international workers from the United Nations and USAID had been kidnapped, there would have been real intervention that would have put an end to this trade long ago.

Set against the backdrop of Port-au-Prince, Haiti’s overpopulated capital, *Kidnappings* tells the story of Mario and Jacques, two ex-convicts who used to live in Miami. The language used in the film is a mix of English and Creole, and the Creole is subtitled in English, so it is clear that it is meant for a Haitian American audience. There is very little French, except when reporting background news and between the government and the elites. While the story is fictional, it is based on a reality that many Haitians and Haitian Americans recognize.

In the film, Mario is arrested and deported to Haiti by the U.S. government after beating his wife severely in a fit of jealousy. Meanwhile, Jacques leaves Miami on his own to avoid returning to jail. When Mario initially arrives in Haiti, he tries to look for work, initially working on a wharf. He soon realizes that Haiti is not home: “I was 4 years old the last time I left this country,” he says. “It’s like I am a stranger in my own home... I had no family to take me in....” (Mecca AKA Grimo, 00:03:57-04:31). Mario does not speak French and his Creole is rather poor. Like many Haitians who grew up in the U.S., he can understand but he cannot not speak it. Especially if they live in Haitian communities such as Miami, Haitian immigrants might understand enough Creole to merely get by. Mario is also dark skinned. In contrast with Jacques, who is light skinned and speaks French as well as Creole, Mario doesn’t understand the way colorism and class function in Haiti. In effect, he doesn’t fully understand Haitian cultural codes.

This unfortunate combination of factors makes it hard for him to understand, negotiate, and navigate Haiti. Not long after arriving, he runs into Jacques, whom he knew back in Miami. The latter convinces Mario to become his right-hand man in his kidnapping business. The two thus join forces in the large-scale kidnapping industry in Haiti, the main goal of which is profit at all costs.

The structure and political economy of kidnapping is complex. Because of the weak political and police infrastructure in Haiti, it is never quite clear what parties are involved in the kidnapping business, nor who is truly in charge. *Kidnappings* opens with the following text: “Canada and the U.S. have deported 1,019,848 aliens back to the Caribbean and Central America for fiscal year 2003—individuals who were born there but, in many cases raised in North America. Whose problem are they?” (00:00:24-00:39). Thus from the outset, the filmmaker links the kidnappings in Haiti to the deportation policies pursued by the United States and Canada.

As a light-skinned man who can easily pass as a Haitian bourgeois, Jacques fares better than Mario. He speaks Creole, French, and English, and he knows that “you’re either part of the elite or you’re poor...there’s no middle class... in Haiti.” Being light-skinned and assumed to be a member of the bourgeoisie, Jacques enjoys a level of social mobility and agency that gives him easy access to certain places and opportunities that would otherwise be off limits. Moreover, he is connected to people from all walks of life, from flight attendants to the chief of police, as well as other kidnapers. Like in this movie, the kidnapping business in Haiti is facilitated by a network of people. The flight attendant traveling between Haiti and Miami gives Jacques the names of potential victims whose families have money; the chief of police, Guy Baptiste, also works with Jacques, and indeed, in their relationship, it often appears that Jacques is the one calling the shots. There are a great number of individuals involved in this kidnapping operation, but it is Jacques who is the leader. Meanwhile Mario is not quite sure what he’s doing, and his work for Jacques challenges the preconceptions of Haiti he had developed while living in the United States, as we see in the

following exchange:

*Jacques:* Haiti is a small country with a lot of money ... Why do you think people would be doing what they're doing if it weren't profitable?" (0037:13-0037:24)

*Mario:* Jacques, I don't know if you realize this or not, but Haiti is the poorest country in the Western hemisphere right now.

*Jacques:* And probably the smallest where 2% of the population own the wealth of the whole country ... (0037:13-0037:38)

The exchange continues thus:

*Jacques:* Haiti is a land of two extremes. Two social classes far removed from each other. So I guess it was that distance between the impoverished majority and the 6% of affluent population that would compel me to intervene and join the kidnapping industry ... 1% of the population own the wealth... They don't put money back in this island. (0043:13-043:48)

Jacques uses the extreme disconnect between the rich and the poor to make his operation lucrative. Yet he also considers himself a benefactor, a sort of philanthropist who gives jobs to people and plans to reinvest his kidnapping profits back into the country. On the one hand, the film depicts Jacques as a kind of Robin Hood hero or even a trickster figure who wants to help the poor by taking from the rich. On the other, he is contributing to the stereotypical image of a violent, lawless Haiti where many NGOs are taking advantage of the lack of infrastructure and profiting from people's poverty. Thus, the business of kidnapping is profitable for many NGOs as well because it helps them to continue the discourse of the instability in Haiti, giving them the opportunity to play the role of the savior. [7]

In another scene, when the kidnapper is attempting to rape and torture a young woman whom he has kidnapped, the woman screams at Jacques, "Pa manyen m...Ou fout [pral] nan lanfè!" [Don't touch me. You're going to hell!] His matter-of-fact response is, "Lanfè se jwèt

monchè. Se nou k lanfè a wi. Se nou k Lisifè a wi. Ou panse ke moun lakay ou, paran ou se kondui bèl Leksis, papa ou se vwayaje tout lajounen avèk lajan peyi a. Epi nou menm nou nan kaka sou beton an. Se naje pou n naje pou n sòti" [Hell is a game. We are hell. We are Lucifer. You think [your family], your parents [should be] driving around in a Lexus and your dad is using the country's money to travel. [Meanwhile] we (are) starving on the pavement. We gotta find our way out] (00:33:25-00:33:59). [8]

This conversation takes place in Creole with English subtitles, highlighting issues of class difference within Haiti. The young kidnapper is angry, and his vicious attack on the woman he has kidnapped and is guarding is an attack on the Haitian upper class, which is exploiting the masses. It is generally the people with money and power who have the ability and resources to manufacture kidnappings. Thus, the wealthy arrange for the kidnapping of other wealthy people. Many of the people who can actually afford to pay the ransom are directly or indirectly connected to the kidnapping mafia. As the young lady who is being kidnapped fights off her attacker, she angrily asks why he cannot go and get a job. In response, he asks if she really thinks it's so easy for them [the kidnappers] to find work.

The idea of *naje pou nou sòti* [swim to get out] illustrates the survival mindset that is such an integral aspect of daily life for the majority of Haitians. According to *Forum Haiti*, this phrase was used in 1999 by then President Préval during his speech. It has been debated what exactly he meant in the context, but in popular parlance this expression generally means that one must find one's way out without waiting for others (the government, Haiti's ruling class, or the international community) to help. [9] In this context, the kidnapper is justifying his act by saying that since the young lady's father is part of the elite, which is stealing the country's money, he must do whatever he needs to survive. There is a song of the same title by the Haitian group Djakout Mizik (2000), [10] which encourages people to figure out how to get out of every situation: "Alò m pa kòn naje...yo vle fòse m janbe...Pa gen kannòt, pa gen sovta pou m sòti]...Yo di lanmè move, naje pou n sòti" [I



do not know how to swim but they want to force me to cross [the sea]...There is no sailing boat, no life vest but you ask me to get out...They say the sea is dangerous but you have to swim to get out] (00:58-00:3:09). This song illustrates the way in which, on the one hand, the Haitian society has a deeply communal spirit and that Haitians depend upon one another for survival, while, on the other, at a certain point it is up to each individual to find their own way out of crisis.

The film comments on the fact that kidnapping in Haiti is supported by the Haitian government itself, along with the upper class and the international community that is supposedly “protecting” Haitians. Many Haitians and Haitian-Americans commonly believe that the booming business of kidnapping is a direct result of the U.S.’s policy of deporting people with criminal records back to Haiti without any clear coordination with the Haitian government. Watching the film, we are struck by the nonchalant, even mundane way in which the kidnappings takes place—as if such events are not only commonplace but also permissible. Every now and then, in an almost sarcastic way, the film includes several scenes in which a television newscasts in French reports on how the UN, the Haitian National Police, and MINUSTAH (United Nations Stabilization Mission in Haiti) pretend to be working together to stop the kidnappings and assure more security in Haiti. In one striking scene, the chief of police finishes a report on the government’s desire to secure the country and a few seconds later he’s discussing a particular kidnapping case with Jacques.

Although Jacques and the chief of police always speak in English when they communicate with each other about kidnapping deals, at the end, when the chief arrests Jacques, he speaks to him in Creole, telling him, “*Ou wè Ayiti, ou pa konnè Ayiti. Se yon tè glise*” [You see Haiti, you don’t know Haiti. It’s a slippery land]. Here, he is referring to a very common Haitian proverb, “*Ayiti se tè glise*,” which has a number of possible translations, such as “Don’t believe what you see or hear” and “Haiti is unpredictable.”

*Kidnappings* shows the kidnappers to be in possession of more resources and power than the police, a fact which makes it easy for the police to become corrupted. Deeper than this,

however, it shows how economic instability is connected to violence at all levels: emotional, physical, verbal, and psychological. Many of the kidnappers are searching for a way out of the cycle of poverty. Some are on the lowest rung of the social hierarchy and do anything to survive. On the other hand, however, the people who are orchestrating the kidnapping, like Jacques and the chief of police, have power and money. Although Jacques claims to have certain altruistic motives, other kidnappers portrayed in the film view this as nothing more than a get-rich-quick business.

*Kidnappings* perpetuates the stigma of deportees as inherently dangerous, but at the same time it depicts a reality that Haitians in diasporic communities discuss among themselves. In fact, when some people travel to Haiti, they do not tell others when they are arriving, even family members, for the fear of putting themselves in danger of being kidnapped. Most Haitians know someone who knows someone who has been kidnapped, and whose families had to negotiate a ransom. People often referred to this exchange as *règleman de kont*, or a payback. Since Haiti is a small country where it sometimes seems as if everyone knows each other, it is easy to facilitate kidnappings. Oftentimes, kidnapping is done by someone who holds a grudge against an individual or their family and who sets up a way to kidnap that person. Sometimes, kidnappers are people who think that those living *lòt bò dlo* [on the other side] in the diaspora have money and should pay a ransom for it. Thus, quite a few of the people involved in the business of kidnapping, whether directly or indirectly, not only perceive those living in the diaspora as having money, but also feel that they should pay their dues to those who stayed behind.

### **Deported**

Like *Kidnappings*, the documentary film *Deported*, directed by Rachèle Magloire and Chantal Regnault (2012), portrays diasporic Haitians who have been rejected by both the U.S. government and the Haitian society. Both films start with an unattributed quote that highlights the film’s overall views toward

immigration, deportation and their connection to kidnapping. *Deported* (2013) begins with the voice of a man in the background: “1,895 days I did my name was 87740, that’s my name...” [11] And then immediately we see the close-up of a man with tears in his eyes. He repeats, “87740.” Immediately afterward, the following quote appears on the screen:

Since 1996, under a new Antiterrorism Act, every immigrant living in the United States with a criminal record is eligible for deportation. The crime ranges from driving while intoxicated and domestic violence to homicide. After serving their sentence these individuals are sent back to their homeland. (*Deported*)

Since 1988, U.S. Immigrations and Customs Enforcement (ICE) has deported thousands of immigrants for “aggravated felonies.”[12] At first, this included offenses like murder and drug trafficking. However, since 1996, that list has extended to perjury, counterfeit, obstruction of justice, and other nonviolent crimes. In spite of the Haitian Refugee Immigration Fairness Act (HRIFA) of 1998, which allowed Haitians who filed for asylum before December 31, 1995, to be granted permanent residence in the United States, the deportation of Haitians has continued. [13] According to a 2009 Human Rights Watch report titled “Forced Apart,” 20 percent of the people deported were legal residents who had committed minor nonviolent offenses. [14] There is not much known about these immigrants because no official data has been published.

There is not a clear mechanism in place between the United States and Haiti to help these individuals. In fact, once they are sent back to Haiti, there are no social reintegration and rehabilitation programs to ensure their immediate or eventual re-entry into the community. Sometimes, families will pay the law enforcement in Haiti just to allow them to enter the country without any legal formality. In *Detain and Punish: Haitian Refugees and the Rise of the World’s Largest Immigration Detention System*, Carl Lindskoog traces the history of immigration in the United States in the late twentieth century through the story of Haitian refugees. He writes:

“The United States incarcerates more than 400,000 people every day for immigration-related violations. It has the largest immigration detention system in the world... More than half of these detention facilities are privately operated with virtually no regulation or oversight” (1). Who gets deported from the U.S. is directly correlated to a racialized ideology of criminality.

The United States’ policy of mass deportation over the past decade has targeted communities of color from Latin America and the Caribbean. Former ICE director James M. Chaparro, in an internal memo made public in 2010, discussed the “goals” that were set in place for ICE field office directors, including that of deporting 150,000 immigrants per year. For the average person who does not understand the complex immigration industrial machine, this creates the illusion that the United States is protecting Americans (meaning mainly whites) from immigrants who are mainly black and brown. [15] This legal discrimination was exacerbated after 9/11. In a memorandum published by ICE in 2011, its director John Morton noted: “The removal of aliens who pose a danger to national security or a risk to public safety shall be ICE’s highest immigration enforcement priority.” [16] Hiding behind the idea of “national security,” new laws enable discrimination against and criminalization of immigrants via the Criminal Alien Program, [17] whereby people are deported even after they served their sentences. There is also a program known as Secure Communities, through which individuals can be deported even before they are convicted of minor offenses, such as traffic violations. The reality is that these programs target people who appear to be undocumented, and they work with state and local law enforcement to collaborate with immigration authorities to increase their arrest quota by deporting people to “make America safer.” In actuality, these targeted “criminals” and “alien fugitives” are for the most part people who have settled in the United States for a long time and who have families who are U.S. citizens or permanent residents. But the deportation policy deployed by ICE has effectively criminalized them by presenting them as threatening “others” who have come to take the jobs of good, upright American (mainly white) citizens.

*Deported* is a documentary, and, in this sense, it is different from the other films I discuss here. Part of my point, however, is that all of the films I analyzed have a distinct “documentary” quality to them. A key feature of all these stories is that they present readily available reflections of real life that enable people within the Haitian diaspora to see themselves and their lives and thereby understand their experiences more fully. *Deported*, for example, paints a grim picture of daily life for a group of young Haitian-born American and Canadian men, mostly in their early 20s to 40s, who have been deported to Haiti from the United States and Canada after completing their sentences. The film is in English, but the men profiled are referred to as *depòte* in Creole, which is the Creole pronunciation of the English word “deported.” Oftentimes, these men do not speak Creole or French, though some are able to understand some Creole. When the men who are deported arrived in Haiti, they are taken to the Haitian Police Headquarters where their fingerprints are taken. We see many of them carrying a plastic or paper bag or a box. As they are registering, many of them are not able to respond when they are asked for their names.

Culturally American or Canadian, these men face stigmatization and isolation in the country in which they were born but that they no longer know. Culturally speaking, then, they are completely alienated from their country of origin. And even when they still have family members in Haiti, these come across to them as total strangers. As one man says, “I left here in 1979, summer ... I was taken directly to the airport... I met my mom for the first time when I was 6 and a half years old.” They go from being the “other” in the United States to being the “other” in Haiti. The men interviewed say that they are blamed for every crime that takes place in Haitian society, especially kidnapping and stealing.

One man, Frantz, has the number 2,190 written on the wall in the one room that he calls home. That number serves as a reminder of the number of days he spent in jail in the U.S. He describes the harsh conditions he faced there. Even in jail he was alienated, for he could not identify with the gangs, and so he used to get beaten up. He says in a tearful voice, “Each human being is somebody’s child. And I am tired

of being judged by anybody.” He is a community activist and works with kids. He is trying to teach the younger Haitian kids not to judge any deportee, trying to help them understand that they need to learn to get to know people first before judging them. Frantz also openly discusses his life as a deportee so that children can learn from his mistakes and understand that a deportee is someone like them.

Some of the men who appear in the film state that they are trying to build support groups so that they can help each other survive in Haiti. A man named Joel, for example, has founded an organization for deportees. Manno, another deportee, has founded *Koze Kreyol*, an organization that seeks to help deportees create sustainable livelihoods by making music, selling CDs, and creating radio programs. These men assert that they, and others like them, have names and individual identities—they are not just “*depòte*.” For people like Manno, staying busy and finding solace in music are also ways to craft an identity and sense of belonging in a society that does not welcome them. The songs they create highlight their daily struggles to exist in a hostile environment and the ways they are marginalized and judged as criminals simply because, for example, they wear earrings. In Haiti in general and even in some Haitian communities in the U.S. and Canada, men who wear earrings are seen as “bums” or people who are not “good” enough, who are Americanized (in the negative sense of the word). Wearing earrings is viewed as not proper for people of certain class, religion, etc. (although it is more accepted in artistic circles, among musicians and artists). They also describe their plight living in the U.S., even though they may have lived there most of their lives. They talk about being in prison and the exclusion they felt there. They refer to the U.S. as “Babylon,” [18] a term they draw from their prison experience, suggesting cross-cultural exchanges with the Anglophone Caribbean and even the possibility that, in certain ways, some may identify more closely with Anglophone Caribbean cultures or African American culture(s), rather than with the Haitian culture.

Like Manno, Etzer, another deportee who has been living in Haiti for 8 years, finds strength through music. He writes songs for his children who are living in the United States about his life as a “DP,” the experience of being deported, and what his life is like now. He writes about trying to make amends to his family, and especially his children. He links his deportation to cultural differences in child rearing in the United States and Haiti. He says, “If you love your kids too much in America, they take your kids away from you if you discipline them, put them in foster care and then they become part of the system of crime.” This comment points to the ways in which the U.S. legal system polices black men, black parents, and immigrants in general — themselves the subjects of state surveillance— in terms of how they raise their children. In addition, Etzer’s observation highlights complex cultural issues, including the fact that what is considered abuse in one culture may not be viewed as such in another. He further recounts that the reason he was sent to jail was because he spanked his son and then he was accused of abusing him. As a result, the son went to several foster care homes and got caught up in the circle of crime and is currently serving time in a jail in the United States. Etzer’s children are shown in the documentary, and this seems to be the first time that they are hearing a complete version of the story from their father’s perspective. They seem happy to see their father and to hear his account of events, but the film does not go into detail about their relationship with him.

Verlaine, a 39-year-old man who was recently deported, left Haiti when he was three years old; while living in the U.S., he was arrested on a burglary charge. “Being in Haiti is like being in hell,” He observes. He laments that people automatically judge him without knowing who he is. Later in the documentary, we find him working as a volunteer. As he contends, “I keep myself busy to not get in trouble, I volunteer at the General Hospital.” The film shows him slowly acculturating to life in Haiti, though it is very challenging for him. His family in the U.S. also told him that they cannot afford to keep sending him money. They viewed him as a burden. So, it seems as though he is resigned to figuring out how to handle this situation on his own.

Another man, Richard, a deportee who has been in Haiti for almost 20 years, talks about grappling with the nature of national/racial belonging. He had to accept that, even though he had lived in the U.S. for a long time, he still was a Haitian. As we learn in the film, he was repeatedly reminded that he is just a black kid from Haiti who was going to be deported even after he believed he paid his debt to the U.S. society. His story summarizes the complexity of trying to survive in Haiti after he was forced to leave the United States and return to a country that you do not know, that is not ready for you and is not welcoming towards you because it is dealing with its own issues of survival. Richard notes, “I don’t feel like the Haitian society is responsible or should have to deal with the result of a product of the American society or American environment.” He goes on to say,

I consider myself to be a survivor... I mean I’ve been here 20 years. A lot of the DPs that I meet are in shock when I tell them that I’ve been here 20 years. They’re like “20 years! How did you do it?” I mean you’re really [a] hard guy because they’ve been here 2-3 years and they feel like they’re losing their mind. I mean I’m not an angel and I’ve never claimed to be an angel. I just find that the consequences of my actions surpass my actions. The punishment that I received from the United States of America by sending me here I think are exaggerated. I mean ... [one] should not be subjected to cruel and unusual punishment. For me this is cruel and unusual punishment. To be sent somewhere where you have nobody and you don’t have a job, you don’t have family, they just send you there and said live ... 20 years is a life sentence in the United States ... I’ve done my life sentence ... I’ve learned my lessons. What more do you want from me? Do I have to die here? This is jail for me. This place is a mess.

Richard seems to identify more with the United States, but even there he was marginalized. He was a Haitian in the United States, while in Haiti, he is neither American nor Haitian. This is the other side of the diasporic experience, in



which *diaspora* means *not belonging*. And the importance of this film, as well as the others I discuss in this essay lies in part in the way it helps to create another space of belonging that actively makes room for and allows for the ongoing co-creation of diasporic culture—itsself a possible homeland.

The film ends on the following note: “On January 12, 2010, a 7.2 magnitude earthquake devastated Port-au-Prince. 300,000 people died or are missing. One year later deportations to Haiti resumed.” Two of the deportees featured in the film have died, while others are still trying to find a place and create a life for themselves.

By labeling Haitian immigrants as only *economic* immigrants, U.S. policymakers and the general public alike fail to comprehend the links between immigration, criminality, and political and economic instability. Those who are deported to Haiti have the potential to become transnational criminals in a country with no infrastructure, which further contributes to the country’s problem with kidnapping, as the character of Mario dramatizes in *Kidnappings*. [19] As they return to a Haiti that is not home, these men’s sense of belonging, identity, and hope, and any vision for the future they may have had are shattered. In such a situation, what remains is helpless efforts to survive, and if their own survival must be achieved to the detriment of others, then so be it.

## Conclusion

*Diaspora \$100* demonstrates the complexity of life for a marginalized immigrant who is doing his best to survive. In this film, as in *Kidnappings* and *Deported*, we come face to face with the immense complexity with which immigrants grapple as they try to create a sense of home. This is in part because home is a fluid entity that is constantly changing. Both *Kidnappings* and *Deported* function in part as cautionary tales in an environment in which parents are fully aware of the dangers their children face in a society that views them as *de facto* criminals only because of the color of their skin. [20] Many parents in Haitian diasporic communities try to prevent this fate by attempting to instill religious values in their children and encouraging them to

be active in religious communities so that they will stay in school and not engage in the criminal behavior that could get them deported. For many immigrant Haitian parents (especially those who have to support family members back in Haiti as well) who have to work day and night to make the ends meet, , child-friendly community activities are among the factors that help them maintain a sense of identity that keeps them in school and fosters positive role models. The religious institutions and religious leaders who are active in those communities sometimes help parents raise their children. They continue the Haitian tradition of “*Anpil men chay pa lou*” [with many hands the load is not heavy] and support each other in creating spaces for their children to grow and thrive in these new environments.

Religion, and more specifically faith, helps Haitians in these diasporic spaces to not feel alienated, to maintain their sense of self-worth, and to educate their children to have a better life economically, socially, and politically. At the same time, diasporic cultural sites help families maintain affiliations to their homeland, preserve their tradition and culture, understand their history, and hold on to collective memories while creating new ones. Being in a space where their culture is valued and affirmed can also help Haitian youths who are living in a state of double consciousness as they try to come to terms with who they are as young people, to understand what it means to be both Haitian and American, and to navigate life at the intersection of race, class, religion, and language. While the United States may offer opportunities for material prosperity, the very process of migration imposes a certain fluidity of identity. Haitian youths have to negotiate when to act “American” and when to act “Haitian.” Sometimes the lines are blurry as they perform these different identities in terms of language and culture.

Thus the transnational experience for Haitian immigrants is complex not only culturally, but also politically, economically, and socially. They must find strategies that allow them to adapt and adjust socially while honoring and maintaining their culture. At the same time, they must come up with strategies for survival in the United States because they face dislocation, loneliness, and humiliation as people from a country considered

by many as nothing more than “the poorest country in the Western hemisphere,” and more recently a “shithole country.” The young people (mainly men) shown in these three films have become “the immigrant other” both in the United States and in Haiti. They are dehumanized in order to justify their oppression. This in and of itself is a logical next step in the horrific history of colonization. These are victims of a structural violence and therefore they may no longer care or think about their own humanity, let alone that of others. At times, they internalize the role of their own oppressor and become oppressors themselves, continuing a cycle of violence. Yet these films privilege their voices and foreground ways with which they handle transnational challenges as they try to create hybrid communities that they may never get to call home.

## Endnotes

[1] For more information about what originally triggered the protests and to get an overview of the larger socio-historical, economic, and political context behind the latest round of unrest in the country, listen to the rapper K-Lib Mapou’s song “Petrospective (Petro-Education)” at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_8fSmMutGyA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_8fSmMutGyA). Accessed 10/9/2019. Also check the following online sources: <https://www.irinnews.org/news/2019/02/19/briefing-haiti-s-new-crisis-and-humanitarian-risks> (accessed 9 Oct. 2019), <https://haitiantimes.com/2019/02/07/haitian-times-news-roundup-feb-7/> (accessed 9 Oct. 2019), and <https://www.tikkun.org/newsite/haitis-unfinished-revolution-is-still-in-effect> (accessed 9 Oct. 2019).

[2] In “Engaging the Haitian Diaspora: Emigrant Skills and Resources Are Needed for Serious Growth and Development, Not Just Charity,” Tatiana Wah writes, “Haitian American organizations estimate that there are well over one million persons of Haitian descent in the U.S.A, which constitutes roughly 15 percent of the current population of Haiti... Roughly 43 percent of the Haitian diaspora resides in the United States” (59). According to the Migration Policy Institute, since 2010 there has also been a large influx of Haitian immigrants to Brazil, too, since which time the Brazilian government has granted humanitarian visas and permanent residency to about 98,000 Haitians. Chile has also seen a large increase in the number of Haitian immigrants post-earthquake. According to the 2010 US Census there are about 907,790 Haitians (foreign and native born) living in the United States, with Miami having the largest concentration of Haitians followed by New York and Boston.

[3] A large number of radio and television programs in Creole are also broadcast on local Haitian radio stations in e.g. Miami, Brooklyn, and Boston. These programs help enable Haitian diasporic communities to regularly engage

in long-distance home-making and remain connected to current events in both Haiti and the Haitian diaspora.

[4] See Chapter 3, *Create Dangerously: The Immigrant Artist at Work*.

[5] Gina Athena Ulysse explores this concept fully in a special issue of *e-misférica* that she edited.

[6] For more information about how Haitians support each other in the diaspora and in Haiti, see *Georges Woke Up Laughing: Long Distance Nationalism and the Search for Home* by Nina Glick Schiller and Georges Eugene Fouron, especially Chapter 5: “The Blood Remains Haitian: Race, Nation and Belonging in the Transmigrant Experience.”

[7] See “NGOs and the Business of Poverty in Haiti” by Kevin Edmonds: <https://nacla.org/news/ngos-and-business-poverty-haiti>; for instance when a Czech and Belgian humanitarian aid worker were kidnapped in 2010, it made the news, but when Haitians are kidnapped it rarely make the news outside of Haiti. For more information, see <https://www.radio.cz/en/section/news/kidnapped-humanitarian-aid-worker-in-haiti-released>. Accessed 10/9/2019.

[8] The translation is not accurate. The word “kaka” [shit] is not translated.

[9] For more information on this subject, see <http://www.forumhaiti.com/t1439-naje-pou-nou-soti-le-vrai-sens>, accessed 9 Oct. 2019.

[10] For the lyrics, see <https://www.musixmatch.com/lyrics/Djakout-Mizik/Nage-Pou-Soti>, accessed 9 Oct. 2019.

[11] Due to problems with accessing this film, I am unable to provide times for the clips.

[12] For an overview of the various executive orders and the rules that govern the ICE, visit the following sites: American Immigration Council (<https://www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/research/immigration-enforcement-priorities-under-trump-administration>); Immigrations and Customs Enforcement (<https://www.ice.gov/removal-statistics/2017>);

and the Federal Register (<https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2017/01/30/2017-02102/enhancing-public-safety-in-the-interior-of-the-united-states>). All accessed 9 Oct. 2019.

[13] For more information on HRIFA and an overview of U.S. Immigration Policy on Haitian Immigrants, see <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/RS21349.pdf>, accessed 9 Oct. 2019.

[14] For more information, see <https://www.hrw.org/report/2009/04/15/forced-apart-numbers/non-citizens-deported-mostly-nonviolent-offenses>, accessed 9 Oct. 2019.

[15] For more information, see “National Insecurities: The Apprehension of Criminal and Fugitive Aliens” by Tanya Golash-Boza, in *The Immigrant Other: Lived Experiences in a Transnational World*, edited by Rich Furman, Greg Lamphear, and Douglas Epps, p. 24. See also <https://www.aclu.org/news/controversial-memo-immigration-detention-quotas-raises-doubts-about-ice-leadership>, accessed 9

Oct. 2019.

[16] For more information, see <https://www.ice.gov/doclib/news/releases/2011/110302washingtondc.pdf>, accessed 30 Aug. 2021.

[17] For more information see “Criminal Alien Program” at <https://www.ice.gov/criminal-alien-program>, accessed 30 Oct. 2019.

[18] The term “Babylon” has been used by Jamaicans to compare their experience of being brought to the American continent with that of the Jews who were brought to Babylon.

[19] It is hard to find exact statistics on the number of Haitians who have been deported to Haiti since the 2010 earthquake. In my interview with Rachèle Magloire, co-director of *Deported*, she stated that the lack of statistics is due to the fact that the U.S government does not provide numbers to the Haitian government and the latter does not have the necessary infrastructure to keep record of the number of deported. For a better understanding of the complex detention industrial complex, see *Detain and Punish: Haitian Refugees and the Rise of the World’s Largest Immigration Detention System* by Carl Lindskoog (University of Florida Press, 2018). For more information, see various statements about deportation of Haitian immigrants to Haiti including “Statement by Secretary Johnson Concerning His Directive to Resume Regular Removals to Haiti” in September 2016 at <https://www.dhs.gov/news/2016/09/22/statement-secretary-johnson-concerning-his-directive-resume-regular-removals-haiti>, accessed 13 July 2019; and “Statement by Secretary Johnson on Haiti,” <https://www.dhs.gov/news/2016/10/12/statement-secretary-johnson-haiti>, accessed 13 July 2019. According to the July 14, 2016 press release “Written Testimony of ICE Deputy Director Daniel Ragsdale for a House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform Hearing Titled Recalcitrant Countries Denying Visas to Countries That Refuse to Take Back Their Deported Nationals” for the fiscal year 2015, “the leading countries of origins for removal were Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras and EL Salvador.” The full report is available at <https://www.dhs.gov/news/2016/10/12/statement-secretary-johnson-haiti>, accessed 31 Aug. 2021.

[20] In her study of the role of religion in the lives of Haitian immigrants, Margarita A. Mooney analyzes how religion can help support families and create a space of belonging for first-generation immigrant children. She notes, “... [In] Miami, some evidence indicates that religious participation has reduced the number of second-generation Haitians experiencing downward assimilation.” She further states, “The strength of cultural and institutional mediation increases the chances of upward mobility among second-generation immigrants. As first-generation Haitians and their leaders in Miami were more successful at establishing various forms of mediation, such as religious communities and social services centers with a broad range of activities, stronger relationships with state and civic leaders, and greater sources of funding for their social programs, Haitians in Miami will likely achieve more upward social mobility than Haitians in Montreal or Paris” (Mooney 201).

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# “We – the audience with me – are ‘breaking bread together’”: Black Canadian Dub Poets’ Call-and-Response Practices and (Re)Creating Home in the Diaspora

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## Abstract

*This essay looks at the poetic use of call-and response patterns and their role in creating a sense of home and belonging in the works of the African Canadian dub poets Lillian Allen and Afua Cooper. As the author argues, ‘home’ can no longer be thought of solely in terms of house, nation, family, or community, at least not in their traditional sense. Historical experiences of black subjects and cultures have produced radically different perspectives on what constitutes individual and collective belonging, and the meaning(s) of ‘home’. Therefore, in order to address ideas of ‘home’ and affiliation in contexts of black cultural production, it is important to critically assess and (re-)conceptualize ‘home’ as unstable, dynamic, and processual. The poetry by Lillian Allen and Afua Cooper provides dialogic examples of how to recreate home in the diaspora and address black audiences in Canada, in the Caribbean, and beyond.*

**Keywords:** dub poetry, diaspora, Black Canada, call-and-response, home

Uncles have been travelling and toiling for  
a long time  
They often think of home  
Of their mothers making them chocolate tea  
And fry fish and bammie  
Of teaching their nieces to ride bicycles  
Sitting on verandahs with their wives  
eating popsicles  
(Cooper, *Black Matters* 32)

What could be harder than creating a home when you were not even master of your own body, “when even the body was not legally one’s own” (Alexander 190)? What could be harder than creating a sense of belonging when your body is moved regularly? What could be more difficult than establishing relationships when your environment is trying to isolate and displace you? It takes a strong will to endure and an immense gift of creation to overcome these adverse circumstances and succeed. The starting point described above captures the historical situation of African American cultures throughout the Americas. Enslaved, expropriated, dispossessed

and exploited, these people were responsible for their survival, endurance, and liberation; for cultural and social creativity against all odds, for social resistance and establishing an aesthetic vanguard in situations of control, surveillance, and oppression. [1] What forms the basis of this seemingly inexhaustible gift of creation? What are the cultural practices used to turn hope and vision into social relations? How do black writers imagine home when displacement, nomadic life experience, and segregation have marked their existence?

The (dis)location—the in-betweenness—of the im/migrant (especially as depicted in literature) has been widely explored in scholarly work. [2] There have been many arguments for a conception of identity which transcends national and ethnic boundaries as well as comments on the persisting alienation or homelessness that may accompany this kind of existence. This essay departs from the notion of a ‘contrapuntal awareness’ (Said 137) as a critical point of analysis for the investigation of ‘home’ and affiliation; in addition, it follows the assumption that it is the (im)migrant writer, who is suited best to offer knowledge about home related to a

life in-between cultures (Brandel and Raussert). Poetic texts by the African Canadian Dub poets Afua Cooper and Lillian Allen, both born in Jamaica, serve as examples for analysis and as contemporary expressions of a long tradition of black writing in Canada. [3]

As Said puts it, "[m]ost people are principally aware of one culture, one setting, one home; exiles are aware of at least two, and this plurality of vision gives rise to an awareness of simultaneous dimensions, an awareness that — to borrow a phrase from music— is contrapuntal" (Said 148). Hence, for Said the dynamic, polyphonic, and resistant subject position of the exile or im/migrant is located between different geographies, cultures, traditions, and languages, as well as a in a persisting sense of estrangement. Thinkers such as Fanon and Glissant function as contrapuntal neighbors from the Caribbean in that their works precede and interconnect with Said's, as well as in their treatment of the social and political function of the (de/colonized) poet, questions of otherness, and relational and non-hierarchical forms of humanism. [4]

In order to grasp the creative constructs of and self-reflexive approaches toward 'home' in Afrodescendant cultures this essay ventures beyond traditional definitions of 'home'. Dictionary definitions of 'home' as "one's place of residence," "the social unit formed by a family living together," "a familiar or usual setting: congenial environment," "a place of origin" and "one's own country" ("home") do not suffice in regard to black diasporic subjects, migratory experiences, and the suffering of displacement. These black experiences contradict the utopian imaginaries that are at the very foundations of 'America' in the Northern and the Southern hemispheres. Instead of inserting themselves into the discourse of the geopolitical imaginaries of a nation of immigration, as in the case of the USA, or a multi-ethnic paradise in the case of Canada, these experiences record fluctuations between utopian and dystopian attitudes, hope and disappointment, perseverance and resistance.

Under the above circumstances, affiliation and home are always up for reflection and negotiation. 'Home' can also no longer be thought of as solely

in terms of house, nation, family, or community, at least not in their traditional sense (Bammer). Historical experiences of black subjects and cultures have produced radically different perspectives on what constitutes individual and collective belonging, and the meaning(s) of 'home'. Therefore, in order to address ideas of 'home' and affiliation in contexts of black cultural production, it is important to critically assess and (re-)conceptualize 'home' as unstable, dynamic, and processual concept.

Alison Blunt and Robyn Dowling are certainly right when they maintain that thinking about 'home' is inherently geographic: a matter of "highlighting relations between place, scale, identity and power" (Blunt and Dowling 2). They stress two key elements of 'home', namely 'home' as "place" and 'home' as "spatial imaginary." With a nod to established scholarship, explorations of 'home' need to address meanings of physical place as well as symbolic space. [5] While this also rings true for Afrodescendant cultures, it is important to stress that —because of frequent dispossession, displacement, dislocation and at times the absence of an original place or 'home'—memory and imagination take on a key role in black processes of creating and transforming relations and forging a sense of belonging. Frequently only a metaphorical 'home' is capable of substituting for a physical home. When we think about the creations of relations and a sense of belonging it becomes evident that meanings include and exceed 'home' as physical place and 'home' as "metaphor for intimacy" (Urry 11).

For the black subject in exile and the black im/migrant the act of remembering as an act of creation is essential. For the black poet, writing involves the rewriting of history, the creation of voice, and the creation of audience—or if you like community beyond place and nation. In *Memory, History, Forgetting*, Paul Ricoeur exalts poetry for preserving memory while the instances of power often silence it for political interests: "only poetry preserves the force of unforgetting" (501). Similarly, Édouard Glissant stresses that the writer alone holds the power to create expressions of memory capable of transcending "nonhistory" (xvi). Literature is conceived by these thinkers as a relational force

that connects people, places, and times. Literary expression thus becomes a privileged medium to unfold the writers' ability to project the future of their communities in a reassessment of the past. Or, as Toni Morrison puts it so eloquently, "a silence broken, a void filled, an unspeakable thing spoken at last" (149).

In their poetry, Cooper and Allen create imagined homes from the perspective of women poets in the diaspora. For them, poetry represents cultural expression with potential for social change. This change, according to them, can only be realized in dialogic structures. In this sense it seems natural that the call-and-response model with its roots in Afro-descendant music and oral culture occupies a central place in their poetic and performative practice. The audience they address is primarily the black population in the diaspora, although the desires for belonging and being heard that find expression in their lyrics are universal components for the search of home and identity. At the same time, the poetic work on a home for black subjects in Canada is a dialogue with a multiethnic society and a still prevailing white hegemonic structure. The call-and-response model represents a temporal and spatial component in the process of creating a diasporic home. On the one hand, it offers a way to relate the voices of the past to the voices of the present, on the other hand, it allows us to think together distant places metaphorically and symbolically. And it represents a cultural practice that directly connects the poet with her audience, since it involves an unmistakable address and invitation to exchange. This also means that in the act of performance, a temporary sense of community, shared experience, and togetherness is already conveyed. At the same time, the use of call-and-response signifies the poet's assumed readiness to respond to and communicate directly with her audience. Thus, many of Allen's and Cooper's dub poems appear as responses to a call already instigated by black diasporic audiences and black historical experience.

### **Call-and-response and diasporic historiographies: the poetic vision of Afua Cooper**

Dub poetry's beginnings date back to the 1970s in Jamaica, where it rapidly became a powerful expression of popular culture and political resistance. Within the Americas and beyond it quickly spread; in particular, to the Jamaican diaspora in Toronto and London. Artists like Oku Onuora, Mutaburuka, and Michael Smith established dub poetry in Kingston, Jamaica. In London, poetically speaking to a continuing anti-colonial struggle, Linton Kwesi Johnson and Jean Binta Breeze wrote and performed dub poetry, creating an artistic scene that reached out to other Jamaican communities in England and beyond. Lillian Allen, Afua Cooper, and Clifton Joseph, among others, created a diasporic dub poetry scene in Canada, with Toronto as its center (Carr 10–12). Dub poetry represents an Afro-Caribbean rhythmic mode of telling diasporic histories. Through musical and rhythmical elements, dub poetry performs envisioned and lived bridges between uneven temporalities, postulating distant, yet entangled, hemispheres on various continents. Allen's and Cooper's poetry resorts to music as a rhythmic structure, content, and performance in order to mediate temporalities from the colonial past with the promised land of a better future. Both poets express historical transculturations (Rausser and Isensee) in terms of language through a mix of Standard English and Jamaican Creole/Patois, and through a mix of oral and printed poetry. The blending of distinct linguistic rhythms of Jamaican Creole/Patois with musical beats from reggae creates a strong rhythmical expression of lived and remembered temporality. [6] In sum, dub poetry in the style of Cooper and Allen is oral history. And its memory work is self-reflexive, including mnemonic patterns that support memorization in contemporary cultural work.

Born in Jamaica, Cooper moved to Canada in 1980. She literally makes history tangible and audible in her writing and performances. She embeds her writing within a conception of the social as changeable. History does not remain an abstract thing. History is felt, lived,

expressed, and reflected in the work of this poet, who at the same time is a historian. As a founder of Toronto's Dub Poets Collective and a vibrant performer, with several recordings to her credit including *Love and Revolution* (2009), Cooper makes history come alive through a voice whose rhythm and accentuation is shaped by the soundings of reggae and other musical expressions. As Lisa Tomlinson puts it, Cooper's dub poetry and her literary historical work "reposition the path of the Black Atlantic" to include "the unique feature of cultural exchange between Canada, her native Jamaica, and the wider Caribbean" (107). Indeed, Cooper puts black history and black literature on the cultural map of Canada. "Canada is the place where Black literature is happening," she insists, referring to contemporary writers such as Dionne Brand, Olive Senior, and Esi Edugyan (Cooper, qtd. in Tomlinson 110).

Strongly influenced by Oku Onouora's dub poems from Jamaica, Cooper locates in reggae and its rhythms major possibilities for shaping "sound, rhythm, voice, and music in her poetry" (Tomlinson 112). In her diasporic historiographies she synthesizes the oral and the "page poet" (Tomlinson 113). As with dub poetry overall, Cooper's poetry is frequently chanted and performed to reggae rhythms. It also borrows from and mixes together American rhythm & blues, calypso, jazz, Afro-Latin rhythms, and rap, and draws on African and Caribbean oral traditions while adding diasporic variations dependent on the performance setting. Her poetic historiographies spiritually resort to the Rastafarian movement (Knopf 84), and reveal that her vision of the social and home embraces the rational as well as the spiritual. Her work fuses the factual with the affectionate, and archival memory with imagination. In her most recent poetry collection, *Black Matters* (2020), home is memory work and imaginary flight at the same time. In the poem "A World greener than Eden" Cooper is remembering her father and grandfather as planter, gardener, and cultivator. She creates a multi-generational tapestry of black men as rooted and connected to land and community:

My father planted a provision ground  
with yam of all sorts  
yellow  
Negro  
afu....  
My father always praised the soil  
Decades before my grandfather planted  
citrus groves ...  
and grapefruit trees that bore so much that  
neighbours  
friends, and passersby  
invited themselves into our yard to partake  
...  
These men built a well,  
with a spout pointing in each of the four  
directions,  
that carried water to irrigate the crops they  
planted. (Cooper, *Black Matters* 67-71)

While the above poem expresses the poet's act of remembering, in the poem "Live with you in a house by the river," of the same collection, Cooper envisions a pastoral scene of fulfilled domestic life in the future:

You will grow lilies and morning glory  
at the bottom of the steps that lead to the  
verandah  
You will line the footpath with red and white  
roses  
You will colour our cottage  
with blue and gold from a Haitian painting  
(*Black Matters* 59).

Both poems express a deep desire for home and belonging that is cloaked in images of black Caribbean culture and yet universal in its appeal. And they were written in response to and dialogue with photography illustrating Cooper's embrace of multi-media expression.

Cooper's work is emblematic of a dub poetry scene in Canada characterized by dynamic compositions and performances, as well as mixed media borrowings from theatre, video art, and electronics. Thematically, she addresses a wide range of issues such as colonialism, slavery, diasporic displacement, racism, sexism, police violence, immigration, homelessness, and class divides. In Cooper's poetry, history is written large and juxtaposed and fused with personal life stories. Dub poetry, accordingly, represents an individual and collective way of



telling history(ies). Similar to African American poets in the U.S. and dub poets in Jamaica, Cooper employs call-and-response patterns with a recurrent chorus that also rhythmically structures the poems and invites a dialogue between poet and community. In an interview with Emily Allen Williams she insists, “I am in communion with the audience. I am creating a dialogue—a discursive space” (323). Performing poetry becomes a sacred act: “We—the audience with me—are ‘breaking bread together’” (323).

Cooper has made her mark in African Canadian culture and politics as a poet, historian, activist, and cultural worker. She has challenged the Canadian myth of the “Two Solitudes” — the French and the English and their conflicted relationship (Knopf 105). In her work, she unearths silenced black Canadian history and draws attention to the lot of First Nations people in Canada as well as the Caribbean. According to her, “slavery in Canada has been Canada’s best-kept secret” (304), and she makes it her objective to recover and discover the history of black people in Canada and their transatlantic and inter-American diasporic links from colonial times to the present. From the very beginning of her career as poet music has played a central role. Hand-clapping and singing from church services and roadside preaching practices in Jamaica formed her first musical influences. In an interview with H. Nigel Thomas (2006), Cooper remembers: “We were discovering who we were as Africans and making it central to our identity (qtd. in Thomas, 74). To her, heritage and music became a firm bond: “Popular music — reggae music especially, dub poetry with drums in the background— and theatre with a focus on African style and issues of African identity were all ways we used to reclaim that heritage” (ibid.).

For her early poems from *Breaking Chains* she worked with an African percussion group in the style of spoken word (Williams 317). Having grown up in the 1970s, she belongs to a generation with a new consciousness of black historiography. Rastafari was prominent, reggae music blossomed in Jamaica, Black history and Black power ideas circulated among the younger generation, and Walter Rodney became a source of inspiration for black struggle. Already before Cooper’s move from Jamaica to Canada,

the ideas of anti-apartheid and Black Power crisscrossed the Americas. The Toronto dub community emerged out of the Black political struggles of the 1970s and 1980s. In Cooper’s memories, demonstrations and marches would end in public places and parks where people would talk, dance, sing, perform, and make music. An artistic movement accompanied the political movement, and “the arts were central in every way” in the black struggles against discrimination and apartheid (Williams 319).

Cooper’s poems in many ways pay homage to black musical expression, celebrating the musical achievements of Bob Marley and Mahalia Jackson, among others. Music to Cooper represents a rhythmic and spiritual force. The content, structure, and performance of her poetry have musical roots. Politically she is anti-colonial and a black feminist. Her poems let female bodies in particular move, dance, and transcend. Bodies give birth, die, and rise up again. Music and movement are conceived as fundamental to the liberation of spirit, body, and society at large. Jamaican Creole/Patois adds a rhythmic tonality to her voice in “She Dance,” when she molds the social poetically:

She dance wid di wind  
fi di wind  
against di wind  
har hands held high in  
supplication to God  
she dance and dance  
now is like Damballah possess har.  
(Cooper, *Memories Have Tongue*, 99)

The female dancer’s moves are multidirectional. She goes with and against the wind. Cooper suggests both affirmation and resistance in the short poetic lines. The woman’s dance expresses a Pan-African consciousness. Music, rhythm, and dance from the African west coast join with black diasporic moves. Music is celebrated as a life force. Many of the poems in *Memories Have Tongue* like “Stepping To Da Muse/Sic” and “The Upper Room” are expressions of transcendence. Black music and rhythms pave the way to uplift and ascent. Inspired by the voice of Mahalia Jackson, icon of African American gospel music, the poetic voice

in "The Upper Room" declares:

You crown me with your chants  
 And I spin, yes  
 I stumble and then  
 I rise ...  
 As you take me to the Upper Room.  
 (Cooper, *Memories Have Tongue*, 101)

Cooper's poetic women are women in the whirlwind of history. As Keith B. Mitchell puts it, "Cooper is especially interested in recuperating and revising forgotten and submerged histories of African-Canadian women" (38). For her, it is essential to address different generations, from the very young to the very old, to remind them of the bonds and ties of past and present African diaspora. In her historic imagination she resurrects Marie Joseph Angélique, a slave woman who set fire to her master's house and burned down most of Montreal as a consequence, and she does so in different types of texts, for different age groups and audiences. Cooper starts off with a children's poem, "Marie Joseph Angélique." A longer, more elaborate version occurs in "Confessions of a Woman Who Burnt Down a Town" and the best-selling and award-winning historical biography *The Hanging of Angélique: Canada, Slavery, and the Burning of Montréal* (2006b).

Cooper wants to make unheard voices heard. She is especially interested in filling the gaps in Canadian history; pointing to slavery and racism in colonial and contemporary Canada, enables her to create a new sense of history and belonging. Remembering for her is an act of knowledge production; at the same time, it is an important step toward raising consciousness and fueling social action. In all three texts by Cooper about Marie Joseph Angélique, she humanizes her protagonist beyond questions of class, citizenship, gender, and race. She firmly establishes her as a model freedom fighter, as a feminist abolitionist of time past, and an inspiration for black immigrant women in Canada today. By resurrecting a freedom-seeking woman from colonial times, she lifts the veil from race and colorblindness in Canadian history writing and conscience. Her rhetoric reveals her to be the

poet-as-historiographer and the historiographer-as-poet. She writes history with sounds and rhythms that are intricately connected to content, creating a holistic historiography, one that embraces the oral and written discourse through the performative. Her texts appear "oraliterary" (Mitchell 40). Her prose and poetry have a chant-like quality that turns her scholarship into a public text to be shared, spread, and appreciated far beyond the academic discourse – another side of her creativity which shows that she envisions a more inclusive vision of the social. She extends African griot traditions and brings old African ways of storytelling and history-making into the discourse of African Canadian historiography.

Through the fusion of contemporary rhythm (reggae in particular) with the unearthing of unnoticed historical data of African Canadian history, she adds new pieces of knowledge to the tapestry of African diaspora history. One such example is her poem about Richard Pierpoint, "Revolutionary Soldier (a poem in three voices)" (Cooper, *Copper Woman* 56-59). In this poem, Richard Pierpoint, who was born in Africa, enslaved, and brought to the Americas, and who served in the Revolutionary War and the War of 1812 "in a corps of colour raised on the frontier of Niagara" (*Copper Woman* 57), writes the King's Governor a letter requesting permission to return to his homeland. In her poetic rendering of the letter, Cooper retells Pierpoint's entanglement in the history of the slave trade, the independence movements in the Americas, and the establishment of early settlements. One of the voices in the poem is the migratory subject Pierpoint himself, writing, "at the age of sixteen I was made prisoner/sold as slave/conveyed to America in the year 1760 ... I wish to see again the Senegal waters flow" (*Copper Woman* 56, 58). A second voice belongs to Cooper's envisioned public, voicing support for Pierpoint's plea: "So please your Majestic/ Listen to the petitioner's plea/He yearns to return/To the land of his family" (*Copper Woman* 58). The third voice is that of Cooper herself, the dub poet, chanting "Revolutionary soldier" to reggae rhythms with reference to Bob Marley's song "Buffalo Soldier." Marley's song laments the conscription of freed slaves by the government to fight Native American tribes. Cooper transfers

the historical setting to Upper Canada:

Revolutionary soldier  
 revolutionary soldier  
 stolen from Africa  
     brought to Upper Canada  
 revolutionary soldier  
     Revolution (*Copper Woman*, 59)

Cooper discovers historical sources and chants history so that black diasporas in the Americas get entangled with the African homeland. Thus, she establishes a model for black historiography as an alternative knowledge to the established historical discourse. Cooper's objective is "to revise English and French Canadian historiographies" (Knopf 105). Just like the actors in her poem "Negro Cemeteries" in *Copper Woman*, Cooper unearths the silenced (his)stories and songs of black people in Canadian society:

"Negro" cemeteries are surfacing all over  
 Ontario  
 Ancestors rolling over  
 Bones creaking  
 Skeletons dusting themselves off  
 Dry bones shaking in fields of corn.  
 (*Copper Woman*, 25)

In the poem, black history awakens and infuses her vision of the social. Dead black bodies turn into agents who expose the cracks in Canadian myth-making and the silences in Canadian history writing. In "500 Years of Discovery," Cooper admits that she, a "Black African Jamaican woman whose ancestry sprang from another continent, another hemisphere," is "still trying to understand her "place in these Americas" (*Copper Woman* 29). To unearth uneven temporalities and their connectedness, to connect body, history and place lies at the core of Cooper's poetic vision. And it is through musical voice and rhythm that she performs the act of bringing silenced and forgotten history to social consciousness, so that a better Canada and 'Canada as home' can emerge.

### Lillian Allen: (Re-)Rooting dub poetry in the Canadian diaspora

Born in Jamaica, Lillian Allen has crisscrossed the Americas with stays in the U.S., the Caribbean, and Canada. She emigrated from Jamaica to Canada in 1969 and first got into a vital dub poetry scene in New York City in the 70s. Arguably Canada's most prominent dub poet, she performs verses on cultural, social, and political topics. Her performances include a distinct rhythmic and declamatory vocal style that is in dialogue with a reggae and calypso accompaniment. Allen has consistently published in both sound and print, as is common in dub poetry. Since the 1980s she has performed at cultural, literary, music, and political festivals and events in Canada, the U.S., the Caribbean, England, and Europe. She published her first book of poems, *Rhythm an' Hardtimes*, in 1982, and as a performance artist she recorded *Dub Poet: The Poetry of Lillian Allen* (1983) and *De Dub Poets* (1984), the latter including the voices of Toronto poets Clifton Joseph and Devon Haughton. Collaborating with various musicians, she later recorded *Revolutionary Tea Party* (1986) and *Conditions Critical* (1987), the former including songs like "I Fight Back" and "Riddim an' Hardtimes," which reached a broader public in Canada and Jamaica. Both records were released and distributed by Allen's label, Verse to Vinyl, and they received Juno Awards for best reggae/calypso album in 1986 and 1989 respectively (Roberts 7).

As poet and recording artist she has shown that "dub poetry has continued to inspire and sustain struggle in the many locales where it has been rerouted/rerooted in the Caribbean diaspora" (Gingell 220). Allen resorts to reggae to fuse rhythm, body, and voice as political media. "Though Allen asserts the transformative pleasure of the body through reggae and dance-hall rhythms," Carr explains, "she does so without inversions of male-originated strategies of sexual boasting" (24). Instead, she replaces these strategies by adopting a "griot-inspired, broad-based social commentary central to the African-Jamaican national liberation struggle" (24). Inspired by a trans-American expansion of Black Power, the "Black is Beautiful" cultural

movement, and Rastafarian spirituality, Allen's dub poetry gives voice to women's experiences in the Caribbean diaspora. Using the musical framing of her political messages, she reaches both subaltern and dominant groups "through the backdoor of mainstream cultural establishment" (Knopf 91). Carolyn Cooper observes that "reggae business is also a magical enterprise in which poor ghetto youths, identifying with the heroes of Hollywood fantasy, can rise to international fame and fortune" (153). At the same time, dub poetry has continued to sustain struggle in the many locations "where it has been rerouted/rerouted in the Caribbean diaspora" (Gingell 220).

Allen addresses the physical pleasures of rhythm and dance in her performances, yet she channels body politics away from eroticism to express a collective movement the aim of which is social change. She links the imaginaries of the Black Power and other African American movements with Rastafarianism, thus creating a black diasporic matrix for affirmation and resistance.

Her reflections on black experience are often embedded in immigration settings that loom large in her poetry. Color as metaphor is omnipresent in *Women Do This Every Day*. Black as color and marker of identity is important in the aesthetic and communicative intent of poems like "Jazz You." The poem begins,

Molten shimmer red  
charcoal roasting  
like hot, burn  
burn black, burn sax  
burn blue  
burn into my flesh  
brewing a potpourri of a storm  
ablowing waves of hues. (Allen, *Women*  
120)

But in the refrain of this dub, *black* has a different significance, tied to oppression:

what the people have to do today mi say  
just a juggle fi get a little peace. (*Women*  
120)

As the dub poem expresses in diasporic

Jamaican, transculturation is complex, presented as conflicted, contested, and promising. Rethinking 'home', she reflects immigrant experiences in multiple perspectives. In the poem "In these Canadian Bones" (*Psychic Unrest*, 1999), Allen performs a more positive view of transformative processes. In the course of the poem, the Caribbean immigrant becomes a cultural and political agent who shapes the social within a multigenerational diasporic experience. Music, in its reggae and calypso expressions, represents the matrix for shaping new cultural landscapes in Canada. Poetic body politics unfold, as collective imagination, musical rhythm, and personal voice fuse in the poetic voice of the immigrant persona: the lines "In these Canadian bones/where Africa landed" (Allen, *Psychic* 65) mark the beginning of a multilayered and multitemporal diasporic agency. The words "and Jamaica bubble inna reggae redstripe and calypso proddings of culture" (Allen, *Psychic* 65) expose the musical flows within the Americas that led to new cultural production. The immigrant persona is equipped with power and is perceived as mobile and productive: "We are creating this very landscape we walk on" (Allen, *Psychic* 65). Allen's vision shows that the black diaspora subject is equipped with agency to create home in a metaphorical as well as material way.

In Allen's vision of the social, it is the act of musical and cultural creation that facilitates the immigrant's immersion into Canadian society. Evidently, the immigrant's voice is full of diasporic history and a global black cultural consciousness that empowers the immigrant to take a creative role in shaping Canadian culture and society. The poem unfolds a generational narrative that highlights different temporalities within migration and immigration. Where the immigrant persona stands for arrival, first contact, and orientation in the opening of the poem, the second stanza celebrates a positive second-generation transculturation in the presence of the immigrant persona's daughter. Again, it is through musical tropes that Allen lets the immigrant persona reflect immersion and integration: "My daughter sings opera/speaks perfect Canadian" (*Psychic* 65). The immigrant persona herself is aware of difference and tension: "And I dream in dialect/grown malleable by my Canadian tongue"



(Allen, *Psychic* 65). Yet, music also remains a consolation and inspiration for a future vision: “I dream ... of a world where all that matters is the colour of love/compassion/heart and music that grooves you” (Allen, *Psychic* 65). The immigrant persona “dreams in dialect,” seeking to make the utopia of a true Canadian transnationality and transethnicity a reality. The power to achieve utopia is located in music, be it opera, reggae, or calypso. For her, transculturation is in process, never to be completed, and is full of ruptures. While the daughter’s experience provides hope, the poem does not negate her continuous marginalization in Canadian society.

Allen is conscious of the conflicted temporalities involved in an imaginary nation-building. Her poems traverse several space and time zones to capture the diasporic sentiment of her own Canadian experience. Being in diaspora often challenges linear modes of time that are connected with homogeneous progression; alternative expressions of temporality frequently shape the cultural and social rituals and practices in diasporic communities. A co-existence of different real and imagined worlds emerges; ancestors, homeland, and diasporic location —with its historical roots and routes— inhabit an imagined spatiotemporal world in motion. Similar to Walter Benjamin’s “messianic time,” these “ancestral chronotopes” suspend clear-cut temporal differences and priorities (Eisenlohr 167). “We are Hurons, and visitors and traders/ Adventurers and underground railroaders,” Allen’s poetic voice announces in “Toronto/pOetic gEsture” from a series of Toronto poems (*Anxiety*). First Nations people, colonial traders, and fleeing slaves merge in a diasporic conception of time and space.

The line “We are the Iroquois’s promise of unity” (“pOetic gEsture”) signals that this conception of the social can be reached only through an embrace of difference and change. The diasporic self continues in a process of becoming: “Making us larger than we are becoming.” Transcendence is found in social and artistic creativity: “Dub Poetry, Hip Hop, Opera, Visual smarts and Community Arts” (“pOetic gEsture”).

Allen sees poets, artists, and cultural workers as crucial players in the making of a diasporic

world and a historically multilayered Canada. For her, specificity of sound, expression, and rhythm is part of Jamaican speech and lends a particular sonic quality to her poetic vision in which every syllable and word matters. “The rhythms of Jamaican speech, sustained by and reflected in the musical beat, constitute the dub experience,” as Habekost emphasizes (92).

The intimate connection between voice, speech, and beat enhances poetry as a medium for both reflecting and promoting activism. “I Fight Back” is in the style of “signifyin’” and the “cuss poem” (Carr 10, 25), and one of Allen’s poems from *Women Do This Every Day* that shows precisely this empowering synthesis. Allen reflects the in-between-experience through diasporic motherhood. Her poem links generations and invokes motherly ties that are both threatened by and challenge the experience of displacement and political exclusion in Canada. The lines “My children scream/ My grandmother is dying” set the emotional tone before the lyrical I as mother reflects her migration experience: “I came to Canada/ found the doors of opportunities/ well guarded” (*Women* 139). Space and time are multiplied in the exploitative working system. “I scrub floors / serve backra’s meals on time / spend two days working in one/ twelve days in a Week” (*Women* 139). Allen intensifies the time-space compression of diasporic experience by relating it to a work load that makes lived time more intense than real time. In addition, motherhood takes on dual bonding and care: “Here I am in Canada/ bringing up someone else’s child/ while someone else and me in absentee/ bring up my own” (*Women* 139). The mother figure stands for a double agency that keeps ties strong between homeland and Canada and within (extended) family circuits. The chorus in capital letters that repeats the poem’s title, “AND I FIGHT BACK” (*Women* 139) expresses the endurance, resistance, and, here, triple agency of the female poetic person: working, caring, taking political action. The poem provides a critical reflection on Canadian immigration myths and takes a critical stance against neocolonial practices in the Canadian labor system. In performed and recorded versions of “I Fight Back,” the speech-beat dialogue underscores the urgency of Allen’s

plea to revise immigration policies.

Clearly, then, as a dub poet, Allen relies on the spoken Jamaican word for many of her effects. When she writes her poems down, she uses alliterations, repetitions, and elliptical phrasing to translate the sound effects on the page. Next to the speech-beat dialogue, performativity of words plays a crucial role in her poetic work. Many of her poems put to music such as "For Billie Holiday" show a complex dialogical relationship between music and text through which Allen reflects the social and proposes betterment. These performances ask the listener for an intense and concentrated engagement with the play between words, sound, and music. However, Allen also uses her chants and slogans in performances in political demonstrations to create a common voice among participants; music and poetic chant become a tool to channel protest in the diaspora communities. In Allen's poetic practice, sound as power is a concrete physical and social force.

One example of Allen's participatory poetic approach is her poem "Colors" (from *Nothing But A Hero*, 1991) that is also included in the recording titled *Family Folk Festival: A Multicultural Sing Along* (1993). Questions like "Who thinned the colors for the atmosphere" (Allen, "Colors") address the audience directly. The rhetorical strategies in the poem thus support Allen's poetic performance, which in a call-and-response mode traverses the promises and fractures of a Canadian multicultural mosaic. Caribbean oral tradition and a slow-paced reggae rhythm form the basis for a musical-poetic progression that culminates in the chorus sung by children and Allen together. Her performance is an invitation for the children to join, a projection of a better future Canada. "Colors" illustrates that Allen resorts to a broad spectrum of resistance practices. While "I Fight Back," with its "cuss style," is straightforward in its argumentation and accusation, "Colors" uses modes of indirection through which Allen addresses the shortcomings of Canadian foundation myths. "Is anyone listening here?" she asks in the poem, highlighting the necessity of sounding protest and critique. She creates a metaphorical tapestry of colors that recalls Canadian ideals: "Blue tights/green overcoat/

polka dot underwear/Yellow ribbon/brown bobby pin/hanging from her hair/Black belt/purple shoes/mauve hat/striped socks/Red and white Crinoline top" (Allen, "Colors"). A series of rhetorical questions – "Who made the sky blue/Who made the pink hot" (Allen, "Colors") – expresses discomfort without accusing anyone directly. The poem circles back to the opening line of colors – "Blue tights/green overcoat/polka dot underwear" (Allen, "Colors") – but finishes on a note of welcome and inclusion: "Yellow ribbon/brown bobby pin/ glad you are here." Individual and collective voices carry the message when she alternates with a children's choir that chants the chorus lines to a slow reggae rhythm. Like the slow groove underlying the poem's performance, the critical commentary of the poem cautiously takes shape. Allen's poem challenges Canada's self-acclaimed status as a multi-ethnic and multicultural paradise, asking "Who took day and night/ Joined them back to back?" She shifts between lost utopia and utopia reimaged when she contrasts Canadian immigrant realities with high flying Canadian ideals. As a coda, the poetic voice recites the multiple colors existing side by side. Sound in Allen's poetry is persistent, expressing endurance as well as insisting on the recuperation of lost dreams and ideals. Sound for Allen and for Cooper is a popular and profound way to shape the social and ideas of home and express them anew.

In Cooper's and Allen's poems and performances, home is a metaphorical and temporary entity that emerges holistically as a dialogue between past and present and transforms situationally. As the location of the performance and the audience change, a new community is always created. But the core message of a shared black history of oppression suffered and an irrepressible will to survive, as well as an unbroken spirituality that transcends material existence, remains. Thus, the call-and-response pattern creates a metaphorical, spiritual, and lived experience of home in the Canadian diaspora. At the same time Cooper and Allen speak to the co-imagined black diasporas outside Canada and their related audiences around the world.

## Endnotes

- [1] See Butler and Athanasiou 2013.
- [2] See Birkle 2004, 2014; Chancy 1997, Page 2011, Brandel and Kirschner 2020.
- [3] See Siemerling 2015.
- [4] See Fanon 1967, Glissant 1997.
- [5] See Duyvendak 2011, George 1999, Papastergiadis 1998 and Rapport and Dawson 1998.
- [6] See Habekost 1993.

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# Home is Where the Womb Is: Towards a New Consideration of Home in Diaspora

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## Abstract

The ensuing discussion argues that historical imagination functions as a highly abstract metaphor for *home* and sets out to analyze the representation of the womb and menstrual blood in 21<sup>st</sup>-century black diasporic writing as re-signifying the place and nature of historical imagination. The womban-trope found in spoken word poet and activist Queen Nzinga Maxwell constitutes the object of study here, which is approached as an unconventional metaphor for thinking about home, belonging, and exile in the context of the African diaspora, then and now. Asserting that history functions as symbolic capital in the consolidation of belongingness, I shall attempt to answer the ensuing question: *how is the womban-trope like 'home'?*

Keywords: diaspora, belonging, exile, home, Queen Nzinga Maxwell

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*History, taught as action, is art.*  
Derek Walcott

## 1. Introduction

In *At Home in Diaspora*, Wendy Walters analyzes diasporic narratives by approaching how black authors living abroad write about home, community, and exile (viii-ix). Though the subject of the homeland has been traditionally approached in diaspora studies as a fundamental element in the conformation of diasporic communities, meaning that “one cannot be at home and in diaspora at the same time” (x), Walters asserts that these concepts no longer constitute a dichotomy. Instead, black writers who have written outside their place of origin perform, she argues, a home in diaspora because “the diaspora itself ... represents a home” (xvi). Home, in this sense, is also a rhetoric, a place of refuge created through literary acts. In the ensuing discussion, I expand on this idea by affirming that historical imagination functions as a highly abstract metaphor for *home* and analyze the representation of the womb and menstrual blood in 21<sup>st</sup>-century black diasporic writing as

re-signifying the place and nature of historical imagination. Asserting that historical narratives function as symbolic capital in the consolidation of belongingness, I shall attempt to answer the ensuing question: *how is the womban-trope like 'home'?*

## 2. Herstory: Engendering History

Historical narratives and their literary, artistic, and/or discursive imaginations are central in crafting a sense of cohesion among members of an imagined community. [1] An official story of the past, crafted upon amnesias and selected memories, lays the foundation for a common heritage, which becomes a crucial marker of group identity since it connects various generations of a collectivity across time. In other words, stories of the past provide a place of origin from which an imagined community progresses towards a shared horizon as a collectivity whose members, although they have never met, share the feeling of belonging to a ‘people’. Historical imagination thus articulates a shared heritage in the form of ‘invented traditions’ regarding specific glories, wo/men, heroes, places, memories, and things performed as a homogeneous collectivity. [2] Narratives of the past, therefore, craft a

subjectivity of belonging through the illusion of historical continuity (Ravasio, *Black Costa Rica* 52-55).

Like nations, states Khachig Tölölyan, diasporas are also imagined communities. Like national stories of the past, diasporic historical imagination is constructed as well through discourse, tropes, and ideology that are bound together to create a subjectivity of belonging to a distant homeland (Tölölyan 23). However, since diasporas are defined by the rift between the location of residence and the location of origin (Gilroy, "Diaspora" 207), diasporic historical imagination elaborates on an imaginary homeland that is re-created endlessly through language, literature, art, performance, and music. [3] The case of the African victim diaspora is paradigmatic. [4] As assessed by Stuart Hall, for the descendants of the transatlantic slave trade, Africa "has acquired an imaginative or figurative value we can name and feel. Our belongingness to it constitutes what Benedict Anderson calls 'an imagined community'" (Hall 232). Afro-descendant writers, musicians, and intellectuals outside the continent shape a poetics of the imaginary African homeland in which diasporic historical imagination is essential to the articulation of belongingness.

The fundamental narrative that crafts cohesion among Afro-descendants outside the African continent is not, however, the illusion of historical continuity. Instead, rupture, violence, and uprooting, so eloquently condensed in the imagery of the sea trope and the middle passage in "The Sea is History" (Walcott, *The Star-Apple Kingdom* 25-28), represent the black beginning of Afro-descendant historical imagination. By traversing it, colonial relationships of power and the violent transatlantic experience gradually submerged African collective memories into oblivion. In the 1970s, Derek Walcott referred to this as "the loss of history, the amnesia of the races" ("The Caribbean" 6), while Wilson Harris defined it as a void that haunts Afro-descendants who, because of it, experience a condition of "historylessness" (17). Along the same lines, Édouard Glissant discussed the erasure of collective memories as the consolidation of an Afro-descendant "non-history" (*Caribbean Discourse* 62). This apparent void or amnesia

corresponds figuratively to a loss of home because it makes it impossible to access a true knowledge of the past, or in other words, to remember. This absolute unknown (Glissant, *Poetics* 8), hence, functions as the foundational element defining the experience of 'afroexile', that is, the impossibility of going back to the original place of origin, both physically and memorially. 'Afroexile' stands as a rhetorical figure for the experience of homelessness in Afro-descendant historical imaginations. [5]

Beyond this black beginning and the impossibility of accessing the original homeland memorially, the difficult task of reconstructing history at the Caribbean has also been compromised by the homogenization of the diversity of experiences that characterize and compose the diffracted Afro-descendant collectivities. In the forging of ethnic, national or diasporic identities, states Patricia Mohammed, "women are frequently ascribed an adjunctive and less valued role" ("Introduction" xv), remaining unheard. As a result, feminist and womanist movements have led the way in shifting the theoretical approach to history in the Caribbean, which has dealt, in the last five decades, with the "tremendous invisibility problem which needed to be addressed" (Brereton 131) regarding the centrality of black women's historical experiences, or *herstories*, in the reconstruction of the past.

The same year that Walcott exposed his ideas on "history as exile" ("The Muse" 21), the first comprehensive study on Caribbean women's historical experiences was completed by Lucille Marthurin Mair under the title *A Historical Study of Women in Jamaica, 1655-1844*. Mair's doctoral thesis inaugurated a new theoretical approach to Caribbean stories of the past that made evident the need to approach women's lives in order to write, study, and reconstruct Caribbean history in a more inclusive and wide-ranging manner that incorporated female voices in the discussion. This approach to women's history has become stronger in Caribbean historiography ever since Mair's pioneering study, especially since the 1980s, developing the field of gender history as well (Brereton 129). Bridget Brereton refers to the work done by scholars such as Erna Brodber, Rhoda Reddock, and Patricia Mohammed as

fundamental to the consolidation of such fields, who began inserting gender and gender relations into the study of the past and whose work has been essential in the process of successfully *engendering history* in the Caribbean. [6] It must, however, not go without saying that the insular and continental Caribbean represents a transhistorical space of multiple diasporas from diverse areas like Africa, Europe, China, and India, which is why it is necessary to take into consideration differences based not only on gender, but also on color, class, race, nationality, and occupation when reconstructing the region's complex and kaleidoscopic history (Sheperd et al. xii). The ensuing pages of this article focus specifically on the intersection between race and gender.

The editors of *Engendering History* consider the concept of gender as an analytical tool, which alters traditional historical epistemologies and is hence useful in rewriting history in a manner that may “restore a balance in the history of men and women” (xii). Focusing on herstory in order to incorporate the particular life experiences of women into the narratives of the past, this approach has led the way in overturning black female voicelessness. [7] The intersection of race and gender is fundamental in the construction of knowledge and in developing ‘women’s history’ and ‘gender history’ away from a universalist and homogenizing perspective. Instead, experiences as lived by men and women in specific societies and at a given historical period are approached by studying, fundamentally, their differences. With regards to the reconstruction of history in the Caribbean, these new fields have taken on the task of evaluating critically not only the influence of sociohistorical processes on the lives of black women, but also the influence that historical contexts have had on the ideological construction of black women and womanhood (Sheperd et al. xi). While memoirs, diaries, testimonies, and oral histories have served this purpose for scholars of women’s and gender history, Brereton also refers to Elizabeth Fox-Genovese’s proposition in the 1990s to use creative writing as a viable gateway for thinking about the past and thus ‘placing women’s history in history’ (131).

The ensuing discussion follows this suggestion and sets out to rethink the discourse of ‘home’ in 21<sup>st</sup>-century Caribbean diaspora literacy from the perspective of the womb as found in spoken word poet and activist Queen Nzinga Maxwell. By drawing on the considerations of ‘amnesia’, ‘historylessness’, and ‘non-history’ on the one hand, the womban-trope found in Queen Nzinga’s multidimensional edition *Afrokon* is approached, on the other, as an unconventional metaphor for thinking about home, belonging, and exile in the context of the African diaspora, then and now, from a gendered perspective. The paper is grounded upon the premise that menstrual blood taps into a rich metaphor for the homeland. Though the discussion departs from the notion of ‘home’ as a rhetoric crafting a subjectivity of belonging that is determined above all by identification with a diasporic story of the past, ‘home’ is also approached here as a place of refuge. Together, these ideas articulate herstorical consciousness, by which it is possible to feel at home in diaspora.

### 3. On Diasporic Origins

Born Wendy Patricia Maxwell Edwards in San José, Costa Rica, Queen Nzinga Maxwell (hereafter referred to as “Queen”) constitutes a fourth generation Afro-Costa Rican whose familiar roots branch out to the Caribbean archipelago, specifically to Jamaica, while her herstorical consciousness as an Afro-descendant draws routes from the Central American Caribbean all the way back to Africa. [8] In fact, the African victim diaspora constitutes the foundation of Queen’s diasporic historical imagination. Her life-story has been moreover sketched out from one location to the next: from the capital of San José to the Costa Rican Caribbean province of Limón; from Costa Rica to Canada; and, after a decade abroad, back from Toronto to San José, where she currently resides; recurrent trips to Cuba also define her routes and roots of artistic creation. Re-settled in Costa Rica, Queen self-published her opera prima, a transmedial edition entitled *Afrokon: WombVoliushan Poetry* (2012). This edition represents the outcome of her enriching experience in the community of performance artists in Toronto, while *Ibèrè: My*

*Origin. Mi Origen* constitutes her second book project. [9]

In *Afrokon*, Queen constructs a multidimension discourse interlocking organic art, spoken word poetry, and womanist thought around the figure of the ‘womban.’ The publication is a very rich object of study because it deploys an intratextuality whose artistic foundation is, as I refer to it from here on, *the womb-an-trope*, which represents the leitmotiv of *Afrokon* and the object of study of the ensuing analysis. The edition is a multilingual compilation with spoken word poems in English, Spanish, Spanglish, and Costa Rican Patois. [10] Furthermore, it contains a CD with recordings of Queen performing seven of the twenty-six multilingual texts. Together with the demo album *WombVoliushan* (2013), which contains other texts apart from the seven recordings included in *Afrokon*, these constitute the oral archives of Queen Nzinga’s womb-an-trope. [11] Its representation is accompanied moreover with pictures of her art collection entitled “Art from my Womb,” which she elaborated with her menstrual blood. This, in turn, adds an organic and pictorial dimension to the scribal and oral ones.

Precisely because of its orality, multilingualism, and its organic drawings, *Afrokon*’s significance in literary and cultural studies expands beyond Costa Rican borders, surpasses regional genres, and oversteps transnational approaches. As elaborated upon by Afua Cooper in the Prologue to *Afrokon*, Queen’s poetics “complicate[s] the discourses of Latin American studies or Hispanic studies” (xxxviii), begging thus for another kind of reading. One that searches unknown sites of meaning and that requires a strategy that necessarily interprets these unforeseen sites by revealing its connectedness with other genres, languages, and metaphors beyond the location of residence. It is not gratuitous that Queen inaugurates *Afrokon* with “I Am: Declaration of a Black Womban”:

I  
I am  
I am a Womban  
I am a Black Womban  
I am an Afrikan Black Womban  
I am an Afrikan, Caribbean, Black Womban

Afrikan  
Caribbean  
Womban  
Black  
I am  
I (21)

The first text is programmatic in the sense that it declares her pluricentric belonging to various origins, cultures, locations, and stories of the past on account of diasporic mobility, colonial as well as neocolonial (Ravasio, *Black Costa Rica* 37-48). She elaborates further on the subject in “Babylon Chant,” where she introduces the reader/hearer to the poem by echoing Bob Marley’s “*come mek we chant down Babylon one more time*” (“Babylong Chant” 121). In it, Queen poetizes her herstorical consciousness as a daughter of the diaspora:

then I  
a diasporic child  
my nomadic soul made to trot  
back and forth  
without a place to call my home

I take my home wherever I go (123)

This deterritorialized feeling of diasporic origin is poetized constantly across *Afrokon* in and through aural, literary, and organic art. As a result, Queen participates in the consolidation of a diaspora literacy as an Afra-Costa Rican whose cultural production is revolutionizing national cultural memory, while contributing to an emerging literary tradition across Latin America. [12] Her multidimensional work thus networks the multi-layered cultural expressions of black diaspora/s around the world from the gendered perspective of an Afrikan, Caribbean, Black, Womban. Queen’s activism holds, in this respect, an important place in black women’s intellectual tradition insofar, as Patricia Hill Collins assesses it (*Black Feminist Thought* 16-17), black musicians, poets, writers, and activists constitute a distinct group of intellectuals who contribute to the tradition of black women’s thought and consciousness in the world from a place located outside institutions and beyond academic circles.



Being the only Costa Rican carrying out spoken word poetry in Costa Rican Patois, Queen's orality is best understood in relation to performance artists like Jamaicans Miss Lou or Jean Binta Breeze (Ravasio, "The Routes" 123-125), on the one hand, while her womban-trope, on the other, is traceable to performer d'bi.young anitafrika and the effervescent artistic community of the Caribbean diaspora in Toronto.

#### 4. From *blood.claat* to *Afrokon*

In 2005, "one of North America's most celebrated storytellers" (Luhling 10), d'bi.young anitafrika, a Jamaican-born "dub poet, theatre interventionist & decolonial scholar" – first based in Toronto and since 2018 in London as a PhD candidate at London South Bank University (young, "Biography" par. 1) – presented a play entitled *blood.claat*.

*blood.claat* is the first piece in young's *sankofa trilogy* – followed by *benu* (2010) and *word!sound!powah!* (2010) – which is elaborated upon the transgenerational herstories of mudgu, her daughter sekesu, and granddaughter benu, sekesu's daughter. The title of the first play is a Jamaican Patois word indicating 'blood cloth,' which refers to the sanitary towel used to retain a women's period; it is moreover used as a cuss word, being "as common in Patois as the word fuck is in English" (Gleiberman 33). young's play re-claims the curse word by reenacting the story of fifteen-year-old mudgu in a poor neighborhood in Kingston, Jamaica: her coming-of-age; of her womanhood; of her menstruation; of her pregnancy at fifteen. The play's central focus is childhood sexual assault (young, "Artist Statement" par. 7). The story deploys mudgu's life-story by incorporating her mother's and grandmother's, for *blood.claat* is, in young's words, "the story of the women in my family" ("notes" 7). And yet, the playwright simultaneously goes beyond her personal life-story by incorporating Queen Nanny the Maroon into the script. In so doing, narrative and historical frames intersect and tie into a broader historical perspective which "depicts the idea that there is a cultural bloodline" linking these women, and herstories of liberation, across time (K. Walker

4). "Bloodline" is here the key word.

As elaborated upon by Klive Walters in "The Dialectics of Blood," d'bi.young's play tells us "that blood shed through violence is death blood, while a woman's period is life blood." (3) On the subject, the playwright herself affirms in an interview with Holly Luhling that "i'm really interested in these ideas of cycles and the womb and birth and blood, ... and really interested in getting to a place in terms of planting, growing, and healing" (Luhning 6). *Blood* acts as the background of the play's development, sketching out the story from violence, to life, to past ancestors. Above all, *blood.claat* inverts the pejorative value ascribed to female bleeding by celebrating menstrual flow as a woman's robust power to give life. In 2006, the Toronto Alliance for the Performing Arts (TAPA) nominated *blood.claat* for five Dora Mavor Moore Awards, including Outstanding Design, Outstanding Direction, and Outstanding Production, Outstanding New Play and Outstanding Performance by a Womxn. It won in the last two of these categories. (TAPA; young, "The Sankofa Trilogy").

In 2012, Ric Knowles defined d'bi.young as one of the most influential women to have developed performance aesthetic in Toronto, transforming the city's theatrical scene together with Rhoma Spence and ahdri and zhina mandiola, the latter a mentor of young and a Toronto theatre festival coordinator (Knowles; K. Walker). Almost a decade before Knowles, Walker too had described young as a gifted artist who had "redefine[d] the dub aesthetic in poetry and theatre" (4), representing a different generation that was committed to exploring new ways of making theatre as transformative action. young is in fact a versatile artist who has been and still continues to be very productive. A visit to her website (dbiyounganitafrika.com) introduces the curious spectator to her work as a multidisciplinary artist. In her "Artist Statement," young defines herself as a "[d]ub poet, monodramatist, playwright, director, dramaturge, educator and emerging scholar," intellectual author furthermore of the Anitafrika and *sorplusi* Method. [13] Using a performance technique developed by young across the years, it is her intention to contribute to the field of Black Feminist Performance with her anti-oppressive,

anti-colonial, and intersectional performance praxis (young, “Artist Statement”).

For Knowles, d’bi.young – together with Spence and mandiela – is one of three Afro-Caribbean artists who have revolutionized theatrical practices in Toronto through woman-centered perspectives that “celebrate Black women’s bodies in a transnational Canadian-Caribbean diaspora.” (78) young carries this out through an artistic practice that she has called “biomyth monodrama”. Drawing on Audre Lorde’s 1982 *Zami*, young re-interprets the author’s idea of biomyth in order to ground her own artistic process as a bringing together of her personal biography with mythology, creating a “mythologized auto-biographical play told by the story’s creator/performer, using the eight sorplusi elements as the foundation of the creative process in order to weave the story together.” (young, “r/evolution” 29) *blood.claa*t is young’s first published biomyth monodrama, a one-woman show in which numerous characters are all performed by herself. Moreover, as the title and the content of the storyline make evident, *blood.claa*t is womban-centered.

It is in fact not preposterous to infer that Queen’s artistic use of the womban-trope has a direct relation to d’bi.young’s work. On the one hand, Queen’s “Art from my Womb” website (artfrommywomb.com) used to play young’s dub poem “blood” in the background. [14] young wrote it in Havana in 2002 as a response to Kwesi Johnson’s “5 nights of bleeding” and “dread beat and blood”. The poem engages “womben[,] our relationship to menstrual blood. and society’s relationship to us” (young, “notes”) and was recorded as part of young’s first album *Wombanifesto* (2010). [15] On the other hand, though, the 2005 edition of *blood.claa*t is bilingual and includes *sangre*, the Spanish translation of the play performed by none other than Queen Nzinga Maxwell. Queen reveals—and shares in her “translation notes” to *blood.claa*t—the mesmerizing moment in 2001 when she met young at the live filming of “Lord Have Mercy!,” a Canadian multi-ethnic sitcom (Luhling 10), a full three years after having arrived herself in Toronto (Queen, “translation notes” 11). After seeing young perform once more, this time in a “one womban show” in the pre-launching of

“blood,” Queen states, a bond was installed. “I felt at home,” she writes (idem), given the cultural and linguistic similarities that the diasporic community of Toronto had with her own cultural homeland, referring to the Jamaican origins of her Afro-Costa Rican background. ‘Home,’ hence, is here not a geographical location nor a national discourse, but a place of refuge consolidated through a feeling of cohesion and of belongingness to a supranational collectivity as an Afro-descendent through diasporic colonial and neocolonial mobility. From here on, artistic cooperation developed: Queen translated “blood” for a music video and documentary (idem). This opened a world of artistic opportunities for her. In *Sicultura*, Costa Rica’s website for national Cultural Information, Queen states how support from various theatre and spoken word performers in Toronto, like d’bi.young and Rhoma Spencer, helped her move her poetry to the city’s cultural scene (“Queen Nzinga Maxwell” par. 3).

The cooperation that developed between Queen Nzinga and d’bi.young in Toronto represents the dynamic routes~roots quintessence that characterizes Black circum-Atlantic mobility, as well as its vital cultural production. Though Queen is a Central American of Caribbean origin, her activism, specifically *Afrokon*, is traversed principally by the cultural scene of the Caribbean diasporic community of Toronto, as she herself experienced it and participated in it. As children of the diaspora, and mothers of the diaspora themselves, Queen’s and d’bi.young’s stories of mobility, past and present, have defined their talent, creating an artistic and cultural network that goes beyond the place of residence, of origin, and of national belonging. Originating in North America within a creatively vibrant artistic community and later materializing in Costa Rica in the form of *Afrokon*, the multidimensional womban-trope escapes confinement and instead conceives geopolitical imaginaries of ‘home’ from the deterritorialized perspective of the womb/an.

## 5. Home is Where the Womb is

*Womban.* The word is transparent, straightforward, literal. Clearly, ‘womban’ is a blend of ‘womb’ and ‘woman’. Nonetheless, despite the graphical literality, its semantic does not reduce the woman to a womb. As it will be argued, the womb-trope represents a highly charged symbol of historical meaning because, as I argue, it provides a revised sense of ‘home’ for the children of the African diaspora. The blood of her menstrual flow is its most eloquent materialization, for even if a blood clot may seem opaque in its color and texture, its meaningfulness in her historical consciousness, that is, in the narratives of the past told from a womanist point of view (A. Walker), is not.

As mentioned previously, the conditions of historylessness, non-history, and history as exile represent the particular tropes across which Afro-descendant historical imagination has been conceived from the perspective of uprooting and slavery. Queen’s “Maafa: un mensaje a la diaspora,” also present in the anthology in its translated version to Costa Rican Patois, engages this origin by referring to how African people were “scattered like dust” (“Maafa” 157) due to Modernity’s slave economy. This represents not only the beginning of the afroexile condition but also, as stated in “By di Sea, Anda di Sun,” the “post traumatic slave syndrome / an di pien dat nevah ends...” (133). Queen refers to Maafa, the transatlantic travesty, as “di Afrikan Halacasst” (“Maafa” 156) and describes how it destroyed communities by separating families and kidnapping people from their homeland (157), hindering furthermore their return back home, thus exiling them physically and memorially:

exiled ...  
 enslaved ...,  
 raped ...,  
 dehumanized, ...  
 (158)

She confronts this historical imagination directly through the poem’s content and next complements visually the Spanish version of it with her painting “Trapped” (*Afrokon* 84).

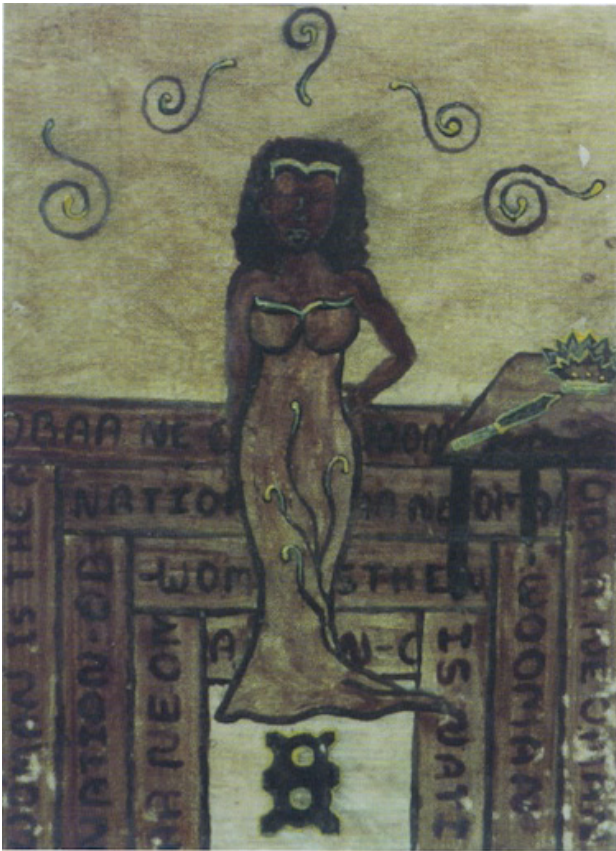
As implied by the title, the canvas displays chained, literally *bloody* hands scratching away an entrapping wall in the search of release and freedom, both physical and ideological.

An existential torment for the children of the African diaspora, the desire to access the absolute unknown determines, in turn, a neurotic obsession that Glissant called the “longing of history,” which manifests itself in the writer’s obsession to delineate “the primordial source” (*Caribbean Discourse* 79). In Queen’s poetics, this is triggered with menstrual blood, named by the womb-trope, and heard through her diasporic tongues. Like Walcott’s *the sea is history*, Queen’s womb-trope recreates a diasporic historical imagination where the *past* constitutes its walls, the *longing* of it its roof, and *memory of uprooting* its foundation. Queen, like Walcott, also resorts to an ‘aquatic’ metaphor so as to cure the torment of the absolute unknown. Yet she “*wombanizes*” (Queen, *Afrokon* x) such ideas by focusing on the Afrikan, Caribbean, Black Womban as the place of collective memory, whose menstrual blood provides an unpredicted sense of home in the form of organic origins. Consequently, if for Walcott Afro-Caribbean people are “mocked as a people without history” by Western thought (Walcott, “The Caribbean” 13), then Queen’s womb-trope provides in turn liquid traces of people with history. For it drafts a subjectivity of belonging from the location of the womb, by which menstrual blood withholds the historical imagination of an organic homeland. ‘Home’ is thus represented in the form of animate primordial origins: “deep inna di womb / down inna Afrika” (Queen, “Wombanifesto” 2). Queen’s menstrual blood fortifies the lost origins in a biological fashion and provides a concrete, tangible link to a her historical memory that helps cope with the experience of afroexile by placing the mothers of the diaspora at the center of his- and herstory. Menstrual blood constitutes therefore the foundation of Queen’s home rhetoric, by which the historical imagination of afroexile is intertwined with her subjectivity of belonging to the African diaspora.

Though Anderson stated that imagined communities are crafted through language rather than in *blood* (145), Queen’s multidimensional use of her menstruation re-signifies the nature



of the imagined community on a conceptual level, and likewise of historical imagination, by affirming that “Womban is the Nation” (*Afrokon* 140).



Obaa Ne Oman

This paratextual element (i.e. the title), coupled with the design of the womban dressed with an elegant long gown, elevated against what seems to be a pedestal, disrupts and supplements nation-based discourses by providing the womban as the homeland. The interrelationship between womb, woman, and home is made explicit by the use of the word ‘nation’ as well as by her menstrual blood. By coupling ‘womb’ and ‘woman’ graphically, semantically, and pictorially with the organic element used to paint on the canvas, “Womban is the Nation” correlates feelings of belonging and of afroexile through womb blood as indivisible from one another. The organic element thus “worlds” Afro-descendants as children of the diaspora by comprising both the roots and routes of their past, present, and future, placing, furthermore, the black menstruating woman as the entity articulating both correlates. In this manner, the nation as

the space to which a subjectivity of belonging is articulated is here called into question. This corresponds to a statement that resonates across *Afrokon*. Queen’s verses in “Self Love” override, for example, the idea of “imaginary boundaries / imaginary countries / imaginary rules” (56), while “Happy to be Nappy” affirms that the lyrical-I is “moving forward to redeem / the nation in my womb” (“Happy to by Nappy” 45). Furthermore, in the opening poem “I Am,” the lyrical-I underlines the fact that

the root of all nations  
the cradle of all civilizations  
lays within me  
that is me (21)

In this unexpected frame of thought, then, the womb is the *putative, original home* from where history and its imagination expand in the form of blood. A Janus-faced element, its red image parallels death and violence, and yet holds, in its organic essence, the key to survival as well.

In other words, historical continuity is provided by the womban-trope. On the one hand, it underscores the womb as the site *par excellence*, tangible in blood, from where black people outside of the African continent come. On the other hand, womb blood expands these dispersed seeds as future generations of Afro-descendants, underlining an indestructible nature:

this ancestral love  
honours our foremothers  
who have endowed me with  
the cradle of future Afrikan Nations  
 (“Soulful Love” 39)

Because of its embodied knowledge, which is actualized in regenerative menstrual blood, diverse *lieux de mémoire* (Nora) like monuments, grandiose architecture, or a written history of great deeds are not in place. Instead, Queen uses the womban-trope to re-signify black diasporic historylessness with a monthly bleeding that corrects uprooting and traces the primordial lost origins to the Afrikan, Caribbean, Black, Womban, projecting her additionally as the promise of a future. Because



of this, and contrary to V.S. Naipaul's affirmation that "[h]istory is built around achievement and creation, and nothing was created in the West Indies" (29), the womban-trope proves that the 'achievements' and 'creations' of the Caribbean are in fact held by the womban. It is through her, in her womb and through her periodical blood, that the past can be rescued from oblivion, going beyond the claims of non-history, amnesia, and exile by performing a home in diaspora through menstruation.

## 6. The Womban Speaks in Tongues but also in Blood

Queen's trope can be rescued, moreover, as a concept of home itself because the womb provides an artistic bloodline that reverts the damaging images of black womanhood. Her womb and blood, thus, craft not only a subjectivity of belongingness as an Afro-descendant but also complement the former as a place of shelter.

In the opening pages of *Afrokon*, Queen introduces the reader to her "Wombanifesto" (1), another hint of Queen's connection to d'bi. young. The first verses introduce her readers to her "WombVoliushan" poetry in Spanish, English, and Patois, which is moreover anticipated by a picture of red fallopian tubes from which menstrual blood drips. The same image is used for the cover picture of her demo album *WombVoliushan*, in which, unlike *Afrokon*, her performance is played back against dubbed out songs.

As defined in her introduction, "Afrokon WombVoliushan Poetry" (5) corresponds to an artistic concept composed by Queen so as to reflect literally the fusion of afrocentric revolution/revelation in art, emerging specifically from the power of the womb. A philosophical play of words enunciating revolution, will, evolution, and revelation (5-7), its meaning is fundamental to Queen's artistic performance and most importantly, to the womb as the site of her activism. The performer asserts that the womb stands as the "most important organ of the Universe" the power of which "is wrongly feared" (5), which is why *Afrokon* encourages a reconnection with this regenerative power so as to cure the trauma and long-lasting effects of slavery and of racial

and gender oppression of black womanhood. This with the purpose of consolidating the womban's place in Afro-descendant historical imagination as foundational. In her introduction to *Afrokon*, Queen elaborates on the fact that she approaches the womb and its healing power "from an afrocentric wombanist viewpoint" (8). This afrocentric perspective views, as defined by Rosalyn Terborg Penn, Caribbean women's historical experience as part of a broader diaspora in which gender ideologies are derived essentially from African origins (Brereton 130; see Terborg). The wombanist perspective, on the other hand, makes evident the relation with African American writer Alice Walker, a connection which is not only literal, but also conceptual.

Walker provides four definitions for "womanist" in *In Search of our Mothers' Gardens* (1983). The first one delimits the word as a "black feminist or feminist of color" (Alice Walker xi). Further on, in the second definition, Walker asserts that a womanist "[a]ppreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility ... and women's strength" (xi). Moreover, a womanist is "[c]ommitted to survival and wholeness of entire people, male *and* female" (Alice Walker xi). The third description refers to a womanist's love of music and of dance, which Walker connects to the womanist's love of struggle and of herself. "*Regardless*" (xii). With a final poetic stroke, Walker provides an analogy as definition number four: "Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender" (xii). [13] Queen's womban-trope is not at all estranged from Walker's frame of thought. In fact, there are several points of encounter between Walker's catalogue and Queen's multidimensional womban-trope that are worth addressing. The literal resemblance of the words, distinguished only by a single letter 'b,' makes this obvious, as well as Walker's choice of words for describing a womanist: *strength, struggle, love, survival* – all of which can be found in *Afrokon* in the literal, aural, and pictorial dimensions as elements of Queen's rhetoric of home.

Patricia Hill Collins asserts that Alice Walker's definitions of womanism are "rooted in black women's concrete history in racial and gendered oppression," which fosters a particular worldview

that pertains exclusively to black women of the African diaspora (“What’s in a Name” 10). She goes on to explain how the concept provides black women with a vocabulary that enables them to tackle the subject of white supremacy, defined by Queen as “the root of all forms of oppression” (*Afrokon* xxi), from a gendered perspective. d’bi.young’s coining of the term *womban* and Queen’s artistic use of it as a literary, aural, and pictorial trope acknowledge this, placing the womb not only as a highly abstract imaginary of the homeland, but as the site of struggle and of emancipation as well. This is fundamental to the rhetoric of home deployed by the *womban*-trope.

As maintained by the Walker, a womanist has a strong, passionate interest in ‘fighting’. This resonates across *Afrokon*’s use of the *womban*-trope and, specifically, in the portraits entitled “Warrior” (29), “Death of Oppression” (77), “Restoration” (78), and “Freedom” (83).



**Death of Oppression**  
(Muerte a la Opresión)

Menstrual blood and acrylic / Sangre menstrual y acrílico  
Canvas / Lienzo: 24" x 18"

2005

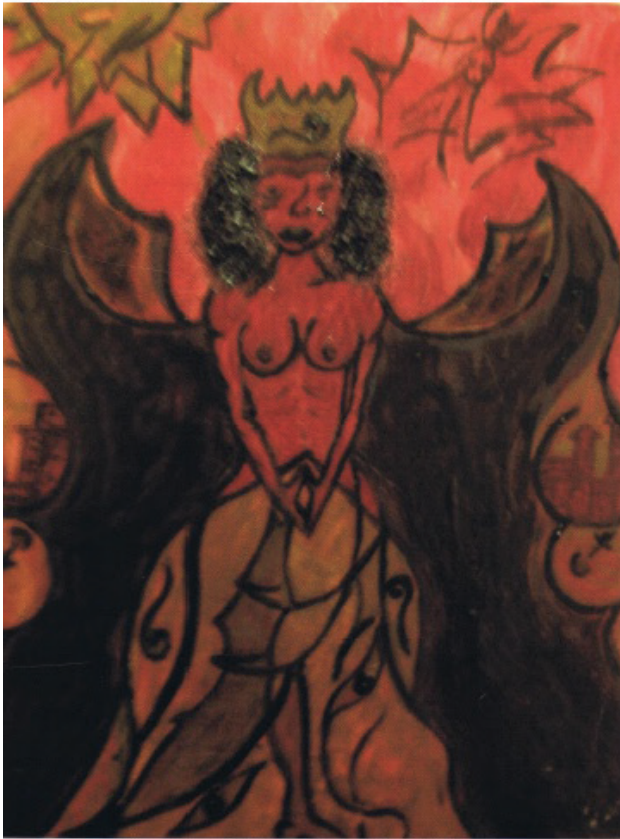
Here, Queen depicts the *womban* as a warrior-figure whose struggle is made evident in menstrual blood, and focuses primordially on the womb’s symbolic capital as the organic entity withholding an unlimited source of strength. With her paintings, Queen conveys material and emblematic authority to womb blood, underlining and affirming proudly its capability of baring life. In so doing, she drives subordination away from black women’s objectification and asserts instead the womb and menstruation as mighty sites of meaning from which a rehabilitated herstorical consciousness arises, both individual and collective, as the foundation of her Afro-descendant collectivity’s existence in time.

The womb is also portrayed here as the site of liberation precisely *because* it is where the interlocking of race, gender, and class are grounded. According to Collins (*Black Feminist Thought* 69-96), black women have been politically, economically, and ideologically oppressed since the time of slavery because of disenfranchisement, exploitation of their labor as domestic help, and the negative stereotypes regarding them. She goes on to name the “mammy” figure, the matriarch image, the breeder woman, and the sexually aggressive Jezebel character as controlling images thereof, where black women’s sexuality, fertility, and their roles in the political economy of the West came to be interlocked. The wounding effects and thus successful outcome of this ideological terrorism of patriarchal nature are poetized by Queen in “Poem to Ulsegun a.k.a. The Struggle Continues,” where she names the damaging consequences that slavery has meant for black women’s self-esteem. She poetizes how black women have

no self – respect  
or self – worth  
self – appreciation  
self – love  
real self – love at least (27)

The recording of Queen’s spoken word performance reflects this audibly by pronouncing the words from deep within, with low abysmal tones, and smooth, soft accents on the words, drawn out furthermore between patient breaths

of silence (*Afrokon*, track 5, 00:46-00:58). All these aural characteristics help consolidate the grim atmosphere that sounds the pain of these black oppressed bodies. The printed edition, moreover, places the painting entitled “Warrior” (29) as an eloquent closing statement to the poem.



Warrior

Menstrual blood, hair and acrylic / Sangre menstrual, cabello y acrílico  
Canvas / Lienzo: 12" x 9"

2004

Carried out with menstrual blood, acrylic, and hair, the portrait on canvas entitled “Warrior” makes an explicit statement by portraying a Black woman in an empowering stance in which the womb is portrayed as the battle site. The fundamental hint that underscores the warrior nature of the figure is the depiction of the woman’s hands, which are purposively positioned at the center so as to frame the vulva, and hence the womb, as the site of struggle. Queen crafts her activism around it with the purpose of unlocking the oppressive images of Black womanhood, portrayed in European writings as physically unappealing, lazy,

hypersexualized, or uncivilized (Shepherd et al. xiii). It is therefore through the multidimensional woman-trope that Queen crafts her activism so as to heal and rescue the “perforated womb of Black Women’s Americas” (Cooper xxvii).

In conjunction with the explicit framing of the vulva, the illustration of the Warrior-woman is elaborated upon with wings and a bare chest that potentialize the symbolic representation of the woman-warrior. This explains the title of the canvas, while the bare breasts and the open wings suggest deliverance and imply freedom. Like Sojourner Truth, who exposed her naked chest in an anti-slavery rally in Indiana in 1858 (Mabee 187-192), Queen’s womb-warrior bears her breasts, too, “without fear, without shame, proud of having been born Black and female” (hooks 159). Placed purposively as the closing image of “Poem to Ulsegun,” the framing of the Warrior’s vulva and of the wings upon which her magnanimous presence is lifted support together the struggle for self-healing and restoration through acceptance of the self:

but in the scheme you are in  
you are greater than you even think  
from your perspective  
I know it’s so hard to see

...

but i say fly,  
just fly,  
just fly away my love  
fly like the bird in the endless wind  
let it be the wind  
who gives you the path  
to find that Victory you seek  
that is greater than you  
that is within you  
 (“Poem to Ulsegun” 28)

Alice Walker also underlines the fact that a womanist *loves herself*, which, following d’bi. young’s interests, corresponds to Queen’s ulterior purpose in *Afrokon*. Expanding on d’bi. young’s *blood.claat*, where menstrual blood appears “as a transformed weapon of women’s liberation” (K. Walker 3), Queen too underscores the womb as a site of emancipation. Like young, Queen also wants to arrive at ‘a place of growing and healing.’ The title of one of her texts, “Wish no more!!! healing’s within,” refers explicitly



to the womb's potential in this respect, whose poetic content nourishes, furthermore, warm menstrual blood and celebrates "my womb.../ feisty an bwold" (167).

Following young's appreciation, Queen too aims to produce a place of healing, of curing, and of growing through art that allows women of color to become free of the colonial and patriarchal oppression of their womanhood. The use of menstrual blood by Queen in the symbolic, literal, and organic forms thus strongly engages the stereotypes that have meant subordination of black female bodies across time and place ever since colonial uprooting. *Afrokon*, explains Queen, "is a collection of poems and paintings that ... focuses on the reconnection with personal nature and self love, through the appreciation of the physiognomy of the Afrikan Womban" (*Afrokon* 8). Accordingly, the womban-trope deploys positive images of black female beauty that are traversed and defined by the womb, its body, her hair, her curves, and, above all, her menstrual blood. In "Soulful Love," for example, the lyrical-I is sure to affirm that the controlling image of black womanhood

makes me feel like  
there's something wrong with me  
cos' the beauty that they seek  
they can't find in me

or in my...  
honey dipped chocolate skin...  
my long arms and everlasting legs...  
the tight spiral in my wooly hair  
or my long, broad and smooth strong  
back(36)

The womban-trope acts as an artistic womanist strategy directed at inspiring black women's self-esteem and power to love herself – *regardless*, as emphasized by Alice Walker, of the meanings, despotic imageries, and experiences that have been imposed on her individual and collective self. "Soulful Love," "Happy to be Nappy," "Self Love," "Bendito tu Vientre," "Derecho de Ser," "Ain't I a Womban," "Blessed thy Womb," "Images of Beauty," and "Wish no More!!! healing's within" are spoken word texts by Queen whose titles (and content)

make this stance and struggle for self-love evident. The message is quite clear: "never feel ashamed / of where you came from / those lies where. . . weaved / just to forget" ("Happy to be Nappy" 41).

Other menstrual paintings also accompany the spoken word texts with the purpose of recomposing the profoundly damaged image of black womanhood on account of slavery and colonialism. Images like "Death of Oppression," "Restoration," and "Freedom," mentioned previously, are placed before and after the poem entitled "Derecho de Ser" in order to complement the textual content of the spoken word text, where she reclaims her womanhood: "reclamo mi poder de ser mujer / retomando mi derecho de ser mujer / reclamo mi poder mujer / retomo mi derecho de ser mujer" (Queen, "Dereche de Ser" 79-82) It is worth mentioning here that the spoken word poem, like young's *blood.claat*, focuses on child sexual assault, which in turn explains Queen's numerous repetition of the verses so as to liberate the womb from gender violence and, consequently, to transform it into a place of refuge. Drawing on Frantz Fanon, the womban-trope discovers a past that is branded with glory and dignity rather than with oppression and shame. It in fact "triggers a change of fundamental importance in the colonized psycho-affective equilibrium" (148) by which the oppressive images of black womanhood are restored through an organic origin. As a result, the womb becomes a symbolic safe space for *feeling* at home in diaspora.

The up-beat poem "Happy to be Nappy," on the other hand, also makes use of the rhetorical technique of repetition; yet its tone is lively and proud. It is introduced with the painting entitled "Afr-Disia" (*Afrokon* 40) in order to address the beauty of afro hair. In it, the naked woman's afro is represented in the form of a mushroom the size and umbrella-form of which expresses graciousness, grandness, and refuge. Likewise, the poem "Self Love" can also be read against the painting that accompanies it, "Transition", in which the afro is surrounded by the words "Natural hair is revolutionary and sexy" (54). The recorded version of "Self Love" (*WombVoliushan*, track 3, 00:50-01:02) complements the painting by underscoring aurally the confusing effect of



such controlling images. Vertiginous trumpets sound and an accelerated declamation of carefully chosen strophes define the tone of the lyrical-I's troubled state of mind:

raped then called a ho  
nappy head is unattractive  
body hair is not seductive  
melanin is bad  
being bold and strong is mad  
its manly  
hhmmm...  
("Self Love" 55)

In the closing verses, however, the lyrical-I affirms that she "rebelled against those rules / and in that achieved self-rule / and self-love" (56).

*Afrokon's* spoken words, paintings, and lyrics range on the one hand from positive re-appropriations of the black female body to, on the other, naming and claiming herstories. Womben leaders like Sojourner Truth, Queen Nanny of the Maroons, and even Nina Simone, are all present in *Afrokon* in the tonal, textual and organic dimensions as spokeswomben of herstories. Sartje Baartman as well. She is one of Queen's chosen womben to tell herstory, together with "Ain't I a Womban?". Queen translated Truth's discourse into Costa Rican Patois with the purpose of being performed as a play, which she varied by writing "womban" into the interrogative:

I donn breed  
thirteen pikni  
an a see muos a dem  
self aff inna slavery

an when me cry out  
wid mi mada pain,  
nobody but Jesus yier me!

And ain't I a wombun?  
(118)

Truth's query, "ain't I a wombun," is also quoted in the opening and closing lines of the spoken word poem "Images of Beauty" (1-4; 90-91), whereby the lyrical-I poses the question to Sojourner Truth and Nina Simone. Inspired by

Nina Simone's 1964 version of "No images" (Queen, *Afrokon* 141), Queen counteracts the images of beauty that have made the wombun not know her own beauty ("Images of Beauty" 4-7). Nina Simone is another figure constituting her manifold transnational connections with North American diaspora literacy. In "Soulful Love," Queen transforms Simone's "Four Women" (35-39) and sings her lyrics as part of her own apology for self-love. Furthermore, a bloody framed suede entitled "Nina Sojourns" (*Afrokon* 100) fuses both these wombun as the consolidation of Queen's herstorical consciousness.



**Nina Sojourns**  
a tribute to Nina Simone and Sojourner Truth  
un tributo a Nina Simone y Sojourner Truth  
Menstrual blood / Sangre menstrual  
Framed suede / Cuero gamuzado en marco: 51" x 39"  
2010

By representing these significantly important female figures, the wombun-trope is used consciously by Queen to help replace stereotypical images of black womanhood and in so doing grants black women a place in narratives of the past as agents of herstory, thus *engendering history*.

## 7. Conclusion

This paper has striven to demonstrate how womb blood provides a home in diaspora by performing herstorical consciousness from the perspective of the mothers of the diaspora. With the purpose of scrutinizing the place that menstrual blood holds in telling black herstories in performative ways, Queen's multidimensional womban-trope has been approached as a rhetoric articulating a subjectivity of belonging, and thus a rhetoric of 'home', through bloody cultural acts. It has been, moreover, argued that Queen promotes a distinctive organic-pictorial, aural, and discursive wombanist discourse in *Afrokon*, expanding black diaspora literacies from her location of residence in Central America through her connection with the diasporic community of artists in Toronto. Like d'bi.young, Queen celebrates black women's bodies in a transnational manner and in so doing, her womban-trope becomes a remarkable metaphor of the imaginary African homeland by which menstruation enacts a feeling of belongingness and of exile that places the womban as the past, present, and future entity articulating a feeling of cohesion among Afro-descendants.

With womb blood, Queen moves into the future without leaving the past. She, as Edward Baugh ascribes to Walcott, goes "to a point beyond history" (Baugh 71). Mainly because the womban-trope places the idea of home not within geographical coordinates, but rather within a cyclical and organic conception of time. Menstrual blood, in its liquid essence, thus implies historical continuation by establishing the womb as the place of beginnings and of indestructible ends, overturning the ideas of historylessness and amnesia. In response to Terborg's question *how did African women and their female descendants carry the African culture which enabled them to survive in the twentieth century* (4), *Afrokon* provides here an eloquent answer: *the womb*.

Like Alice Walker, who stated that the womanist is committed to survival and wholeness of an entire people, Queen's womban-trope elaborates on historical continuation precisely through this frame of thought. References to her womb as the entity comprising the roots

of the past and as the cradle of the future corroborates such a commitment. The renewing and re-forming aspect of menstruation blood, through the recurrent and monthly actualization of life and death, represents the concrete promise of future life when absent, as well as the simultaneous remembrance of the non-consecration of it when present. In this sense, the diaspora itself represents a home that is given organic form and crafted in artistic acts by the vitally eternal, periodical, and biological performance of menstruating. Menstrual blood acts as the absolute place of origin, but also stands as the symbolic gateway for curing the damaging effects that colonialism, racism, and patriarchy have had on the daughters of the African diaspora, becoming thus a safe place where the womban 'feels homebased.'

In conclusion, Queen's poetics of the womban-trope elaborate on the womb as a place of refuge in which its menstrual blood articulates a subjectivity of belonging as an Afra-descendant. Through her varied linguistic repertoire, her oral enactment, and by materializing paintings that emerge literally from her loins, Queen Nzinga Maxwell engenders history by performing the interrelation of subjects like history, diaspora, and the female black body through the womban-trope. The womban stands thus as a homeland of a completely different caliber, underscoring moreover black women's role in the postmemory of the African diaspora and thus delineating Afro-descendent historical imagination in herstorical key.

In its transmedial materiality, *Afrokon* becomes an exemplary edition actualizing what Derek Walcott stated in "The Caribbean: Culture or Mimicry?" Namely, "[h]istory, taught as action, is art" (13).

## Endnotes

[1] Scholars of nations and nationalism have pointed to the foundational relationship between narratives of a shared past, constructed from above (Hobsbawm 10), and the consolidation of a feeling of belongingness among the members of an imagined community (Anderson 5-7). See Gellner 1983, De Certeau 1988, Renan 1993, Hobsbawm 1994, and Hobsbawm and Ranger 1996.

[2] See Hobsbawm and Ranger 1996.

[3] Salman Rushdie elaborates on the concept of imaginary homelands as “fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands ... of the mind” (10). These are recreated by exile, emigrant, or expatriate authors as a figment of a fragmented memory that seeks to reclaim a homeland that has been lost due to the diasporic condition.

[4] Regarding the concept of “victim diaspora,” see Cohen 39-59.

[5] In *Chombo* (1981), Afro-Panamanian Carlos Wilson gives literary form to the sociohistorical process that meant the relocation of thousands of Afro-Caribbeans to Panama to build first ‘La Grande Tranchée’ under Lesseps, then the ‘Big Ditch’ under the U.S. government (Ravasio, *Este tren*, ch. 1). Across the novel, Cubena accords the epithet of “afroexiliados” to these black workers, tracing their condition of exiled beings back to the original victim diaspora. In so doing, he underscores the repetition of homelessness due to the experience of constant displacement, by which blacks have become the “racially subordinated migrant labourers” in their host lands (Gilroy 81).

[6] See Brereton 2002, Mohammed 2002, Sheperd et al 1995.

[7] Relevant to the process of engendering history is overcoming female voicelessness in the study of the Caribbean. Boyce Davies and Savory Fido discuss the condition of black female “voicelessness” in their introductory chapter to *Out of the Kumbia* as “the historical absence of a specifically female position on major issues like slavery, colonialism, decolonization ...”, as well as the absence of critical discussion in Academia concerning the work of Caribbean women writers (1).

[8] Representing the largest minority in Costa Rica, the term “Afro-Costa Rican” refers here specifically to the descendants of anglophone Afro-Caribbean laborers, mostly Jamaicans, who migrated from 1872 onwards to the Caribbean province of Limón with the purpose of building the railroad to the Atlantic in Costa Rica (Olien qtd in Herzfeld, “Vida o muerte”). Also emigrating to work at the Panama Canal and at the United Fruit Company during the first decades of the twentieth century, Afro-Caribbean waged workers slowly acquired citizenship across the Central American isthmus throughout the second half of the twentieth century. As a result, continental sites of moorings yielded new generations of “Afro-Central Americans” whose diasporic identity, though necessarily linked to the African diaspora, is best expressed as Central Americans of Caribbean origin (see Ravasio, *Black Costa Rica* 5).

[9] See “Support ‘Ìbèrè: My Origin. Mi origen’ book publication” at the GoGetFunding website.

[10] In *Afrokón*, Queen Nzinga inscribes Costa Rican Patois as “Mekatelyu” (xiii), which means “let me tell you something” in Standard English (Herzfeld, *Mekatelyuw* xvii). I discard this nomenclature, since I once heard Afro-Costa Rican writer Quince Duncan reject it during the international symposium “Convergencias Transculturales en el Caribe. Literatura, arte, cultura, historia, comunicación” (November 18-21, 2015 in San José/Limón, Costa Rica). Linguists and literary critics have referred to it as “Limon

Creole” (Herzfeld, “Second Language”; Ravasio, *Black Costa Rica*) or as “Limonese (Creole) English” (Winkler). Given that Afro-Costa Ricans refer to it as ‘patois’, I have chosen here to refer to it as Costa Rican Patois.

[11] See/hear the *WombVoliushan Demo CD* on the website [reverbNation.com](http://reverbNation.com).

[12] On the subject of Afro-Hispanic writers and the emergence of a new literary canon in Latin America, see De Costa-Willis 1993. “Diaspora literacy” has been defined by Vè Vè Clark as “the ability to read and comprehend the discourses of Africa, Afro-America and the Caribbean from an informed indigenous perspective” (42). For Clark, this is not an exercise of a purely intellectual nature. Instead, it is a skill that both the reader and narrator must articulate to recognize the historical, political, social, and cultural development of the African diasporas. I appropriate the term here with the purpose of making evident Queen’s literary expression of her diasporic origin, which begins in Africa and reaches Afro-America and the Caribbean as an entanglement of cultural and sociopolitical histories.

[13] young developed the *sorplusi* method by drawing on Anita Stewart, her mother, mainly from her life-teachings and unpublished thesis on “*dubbing theatre: dub poetry as a theatre form*.” young added to Stewart’s four main elements of dubpoetry (music, language, politics, and performance) four new ones. By reorganizing them, she created the *s.o.r.p.l.u.s.i.* method, an acronym which stands for Self-knowledge, Orality, Rhythm, Political content and context, Language, Urgency, Sacredness, and Integrity. (young, “r/ evolution” 27).

[14] I first accessed the webpage in 2015, after encountering Queen Nzinga’s work for the first time. The website is no longer in use.

[15] See/hear *wombanifesto* on the website [bandcamp.com](http://bandcamp.com).

[16] Patricia Hill Collins maintains that the closing analogy provided by Walker is designed to set up a comparison between feminists’ different histories with racism, dependent on if they are white or black. In her words, “black women are ‘womanist’ while white women remain merely ‘feminist’.” (“What’s in a Name?” 10)

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Paola Ravasio holds a Ph.D. in Romance Studies with an emphasis on the Central American Caribbean literary and cultural studies from the Julius-Maximilians-Universität Würzburg. For her doctoral project, *Black Costa Rica* (Würzburg University Press 2020), the German Society of Caribbean Research (SOCARE e.v.) awarded her the prize for best dissertation 2019/2020. As a research associate at the Center for InterAmerican Studies (Bielefeld University), she subsequently developed her postdoctoral research project on literary trainscapes in literature from the Americas. Her current research interests include poetic multilingualism (oral and written) in Afro-Central America and its relation to the insular Caribbean, the representation of the train as a trope of historical meaning, and the relationship between literature and historical imagination in the Black circum-Atlantic.

# Approaching Imaginative Mobilities through Rhythms of the City and the Body in Edwidge Danticat's "New York Day Women"

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## Abstract

*In Edwidge Danticat's short story "New York Day Women" from her collection Krik? Krak!, a young woman spots her mother, who she had assumed never left Brooklyn, in Manhattan, and starts to clandestinely follow her. This plot of the daughter trailing behind her mother is juxtaposed with vignettes in which the daughter remembers things her mother has said. Drawing on Lefebvrian rhythmanalysis, Caribbean theories of rhythms, and Mobility Studies, this paper analyzes how two types of mobility clash and intersect – the physical im/mobilities of walking and the imaginative mobility of remembering. Through this clash, the characters not only navigate their relationship to home, but position themselves in a home which spans Haiti and the United States. A rhythmanalytical reading of this story then achieves several things: It brings together Lefebvrian rhythmanalysis with Caribbean approaches to rhythm, it shows connections between a focus on rhythm and Mobility Studies; and it makes visible ways in which physical and imaginative mobilities, the mobilities of walking and remembering, can come together in everyday life to continuously forge a home.*

**Keywords:** imaginative mobility, commemorative mobilities, rhythmanalysis, diaspora, Edwidge Danticat

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## Introduction

Edwidge Danticat was born in Port-au-Prince, the capital of Haiti, in 1969, and migrated to the U.S. at the age of 12 to join her parents. Her literary output, for which she has won numerous awards, [2] spans novels, short stories, children's books, young adult literature, picture books, memoirs, and travel writing. Across these different genres, Danticat chronicles the diasporic Haitian experience in the U.S., writing about the attempt to become a member of the diaspora by getting from Haiti to the U.S., about the lives of Haitians and Haitian-Americans in the U.S., and about the way *dyasporas*, as diasporic Haitians are known in Haitian Kreyòl, are perceived back in their home country. [3] In Danticat's writing, the spatial im/mobilities of moving, migrating, and fleeing are interconnected with imaginative mobilities. Through all these mobilities, characters navigate their relationship to home, a home that may

be Haiti, the U.S., or an entangled web of the two. In much of Danticat's work, this reflection on home takes the form of imaginative mobilities which play out on the level of memory; according to Bharati Mukherjee, Danticat's work poses the question "how does a citizenry, even that portion of it now relocated far from the homeland, adapt to the reality of their past, and the nightmare of familial memory?" (691), while Justine Dymond summarizes that "Danticat grapples with the ethics of remembering and forgetting in her fiction" (144). Isabelle Penier sees Danticat's focus on memory as "a feminist corrective to the project of nation," as Danticat "recovers from obscurity the history of Haitian women who have remained only a token presence in Haitian historiography" (Penier 130).

This prominence of memory means that Danticat's characters may be highly mobile even when they are not in the process of migration, remigration, or other physical im/mobilities. Even in a situation which looks, from the outside, like

one of fixity, people may be mobile by moving within a certain radius or mentally engaging with other places; conversely, highly mobile processes such as migration are punctuated by moments of stillness and waiting. My objective is to make legible this entanglement of movement and stasis on a spatial and imaginative level in Danticat's writing. In one of the stories in her 1996 collection *Krik? Krak!*, "New York Day Women," a young woman is walking around Manhattan when she spots her mother, a Haitian immigrant who she had assumed never left Brooklyn, and starts to clandestinely follow her around. This narrative of the daughter secretly following her mother is interspersed with short vignettes [4] comprised of phrases the daughter remembers her mother saying. In this story, then, two types of mobility clash and intersect – the physical im/mobilities of walking and pausing converge, for the daughter, with the imaginative, commemorative mobility of remembering things her mother has said in the past. The field of Mobility Studies, which was shaped by Mimi Sheller and John Urry, studies both physically observable movements and "imaginative travel, virtual travel, and communicative travel" (Sheller, "New Mobilities Paradigm" 793); in this article, I will be analyzing imaginative mobilities, particularly as they relate to the concept of commemorative mobilities. Through this concept, I aim to grasp how characters continue to grapple with a place they either remember themselves or know via their families' memories, arguing that these acts of memory are not just a result of spatial mobilities such as migration but that they constitute mobility in themselves. I further aim to make sense of this overlap of mobilities by reading Mobility Studies literature alongside Henri Lefebvre's rhythmanalysis and Caribbean theorizations of rhythm. In bringing together these approaches, I see imaginative mobilities as prismatically visible in, and enacted through, the rhythms of everyday life and its interruptions. [1]

The rhythmanalyst "concerns himself with temporalities and their relations within wholes" (Lefebvre 24). [5] A rhythmanalytical reading of "New York Day Women," then, implies two rhythmanalysts. One of them is the reader, who analyzes the rhythms playing out in the

mother and the daughter each walking, and thinking and remembering, in the city. The other rhythmanalyst, however, is the narrator-daughter herself, who diligently observes, and aims to interpret, her mother's rhythms and movements. After thinking together scholarly work on rhythm with Mobility Studies, I will go on to analyze the role of rhythms regarding several aspects of Danticat's short story: the rhythms of walking and remembering within the story, the repetition of certain words, the rhythms of imagined dialogues, the rhythms of money, and, finally, the rhythmic mobilities of the reader. Reading them together serves to analyze specific moments in the text and to interrogate how it interacts with discourses around *flânerie*, diaspora, and memory. This approach also makes it possible to read remembering and imagining as embodied processes which, by simultaneously embedding the characters in New York City and in the Caribbean, placing them in an entangled, multi-sited home.

### Rhythms and/of Imaginative Mobilities

In his essays on *rhythmanalyse* (rhythmanalysis), Lefebvre analyzes the intersections of rhythms of the city with rhythms of the body. Lefebvre sees rhythm as that which is "most concrete" (3), by which he means that rhythms, be they vast or minute, are "lived, tested, touched in the sensible and the corporeal" (45). Lefebvre describes how, in a city, different rhythms come together –the rhythms of sound and noise [6], of the relentless churning out of news [7], of people walking and people stopping and pausing. Importantly, Lefebvre focuses on the way all these rhythms clash and interpenetrate. When a person is in a city, they inhabit not only their own bodily and mental rhythms, but also the rhythms surrounding them in their urban landscape. While the rhythmanalyst's "body serves him as a metronome" (Lefebvre 19), "objective rhythms *translate* themselves into our own rhythms" (Lefebvre 69; emphasis added). In this act of translation, new, additional rhythms may emerge. Through rhythmanalysis, it becomes possible to grasp the rhythms of the city and the rhythms of the city dweller together. One can then grasp the

im/mobilities of the city dweller, imaginative as well as physical, alongside the micromobilities of everything surrounding her –the many moving parts of the city, the im/mobilities of other people and those of vehicles. In this sense, Lefebvre’s approach bears resemblance to Georg Simmel’s conceptualization of city life. In Simmel’s 1903 essay “The Metropolis and Mental Life” (originally published in German as “Die Großstädte und das Geistesleben”), he writes that people are “stimulated by the difference between present impressions and those which have preceded.” Such a difference between past and present impressions is particularly acute in cities, where they take place with “every crossing of the street, with the tempo and multiplicity of economic, occupation and social life” (Simmel). While the person in a city, then, is entangled in a web of experience both pertaining to what is happening around her and what has happened in the past, the city itself is multiple and varied. Rhythmanalysis can thus link individual to collective, though manifold, experience.

Another aspect of rhythmanalysis which lends itself to a study of imaginative mobilities is that it is attuned to lacunae –to the tiny moments when a rhythm takes a break, or when it stops before it starts up again. Lefebvre writes that in rhythms there can appear “a lacuna, a hole in time, to be filled in by an invention, a creation” (44). A reading of im/mobilities informed by rhythmanalysis, then, sees im/mobilities not as progressing in a linear or neatly organized fashion, with different mobile and immobile strands running alongside one another, but as something which tends to happen in fits and starts. Lefebvre is particularly interested in the tension between being enveloped by a rhythm and having enough distance from it to perceive it in the first place. “In order to grasp and analyse rhythms, it is necessary to get outside them, but not completely” (Lefebvre 26). In such a reading, the mere fact that the narrator’s mother has left Brooklyn and can now be seen walking around Manhattan is a highly noticeable gap in the everyday rhythm which the mother and daughter had established together. It is this gap which creates room for everything which happens in the story: Both the daughter following her mother, which is an unprecedented, profoundly

new event in her life, and her reflections on things her mother has said and done, arise out of the lacuna left by the absence of their usual rhythm.

Rhythm as concept occupies a central role in Caribbean theory. The work of Martinican philosopher Édouard Glissant explores the unpredictable and “chaotic” (3) relations forming Caribbean cultures. Using the concept of “creolization,” Glissant describes “the encounter, the interference, the clash, the harmonies and the disharmonies between cultures, in the realized totality of the earth-world” (3), [8] thereby describing a clash which can be seen as rhythmic. Katherine McKittrick argues that, in the work of Jamaican theorist Sylvia Wynter, “[r]hythm does not privilege singular ways of being but rather insists, in advance, that collaborative engagement is necessary to who and what we are” (McKittrick et al. 870), and that rhythms are “central to the reconstitution of black life” (McKittrick 166).

The Caribbean theorist whose work on rhythm I want to focus on the most here, however, is Cuban theorist and writer Benítez-Rojo. He posits a certain rhythm as that which the different islands in the Caribbean have in common, arguing that “at least since the seventeenth century, there are rhythms common to the entire Caribbean, rhythms that follow kind of polyrhythmic and polymetric percussion very different from European percussive forms” (Benítez-Rojo 76). While he is here speaking of the very specific and literal rhythm of percussion drums, Benítez-Rojo finally has a very capacious idea of what rhythms are, describing

a polyrhythmic that is Cuban, Caribbean, African, and European at once, and even Asian and Indoamerican, where there has been a contrapuntal and intermingled meeting of the biblical Creator’s *logos*, of tobacco smoke, the dance of the *orishas* and *loas* ... Within this chaos of differences and repetitions, of combinations and permutations, there are regular dynamics that coexist (81)

In addition to this concept, and linked to it, Benítez-Rojo speaks of the “island that ‘repeats’



itself, unfolding and bifurcating until it reaches all the seas and lands of the earth” (3). Underlying this is an understanding of the Caribbean archipelago, the Caribbean “island,” as a place both mobile within itself and pulsating outward, in which nothing is fixed and static, but mobile and in a process of becoming. In addition to writing about the way shared Caribbean rhythms link different islands in the Caribbean to one another and positing the Caribbean as an island pulsating outward, Benítez-Rojo analyzes how the Caribbean is linked to the rest of the world through the totalizing historical social system of the Plantation. [9] Although these concepts are already linked in Benítez-Rojo’s work, I want to link them further, combining them to see New York City as a place embedded in a rhythmic Caribbean which is pulsating outward. Benítez-Rojo’s *repeating island* makes it possible to read the mother and daughter as not just walking around a city, but as inhabiting and navigating an entangled net of islands. In their Lefebvrian rhythms—their daily mobilities around New York, their quotidian rhythms—specific moments in their mobilities become visible. Taken together, these approaches to rhythm show how Danticat’s characters forge and navigate a home within the multi-directionality of memory and belonging.

### Rhythms of Walking and Remembering

In “New York Day Women,” a particular kind of rhythm is created by switching between the daughter walking and the daughter remembering. At one point during their walk across Manhattan, the daughter observes first her mother and then two taxi drivers. “As my mother stands in front of Carnegie Hall, one taxi driver yells to another, ‘What do you think this is, a dance floor?’ My mother waits patiently for this dispute to be settled before crossing the street” (Danticat, “New York” 128). In this snippet, one of the taxi drivers, seemingly secure in his particular, vehicular kind of mobility, accuses another taxi driver of acting according to the wrong set of mobility guidelines: He is accusing him of acting as if he was on a dancefloor, and while dance is one kind of mobility, it is not the *right* kind of engagement with mobility for their current situation. What one taxi driver is accusing the other one of, then, is

following the wrong kind of rhythm. The mother, who is a part of these urban rhythms and who observes them, waits. According to Peter Adey et al., waiting, gaps, and moments of stillness are part and parcel of almost any mobility process: “When we are too focused on mobility as movement, we sometimes forget that it also may involve a great deal of waiting” (184), a claim shared by Peter Merriman when he writes that “[s]tillness, waiting, slowness and boredom may be just as important to many situations, practices and movements” (177). Lefebvre, too, sees moments of quiet not just as part of a rhythm, but argues that “the silences have a meaning” (96). [10] The paragraph ends with the mother having stopped her pause and continued to walk again, taking part in the rhythm in a way observable by her daughter. It is then that the paragraph stops and a vignette is inserted: “In Haiti, when you get hit by a car, the owner of the car gets out and kicks you for getting blood on his bumper” (Danticat, “New York” 128). On this page, the taxi drivers’ everyday spat about rhythms sets the stage for a much harsher rhythmic disruption. The present moment is punctured by a remembered statement; violence erupts onto the page. The anecdote is inserted once the mother is walking again, as this change in the rhythm makes another eruption of rhythm in the story possible. Furthermore, the daughter’s remembrance is linked to the paragraph that came before it in several ways: Firstly, on a superficial level, both the spat between the taxi drivers and the mother’s statement about blood on a bumper refer to cars. Secondly, both episodes point to conflict and the possibility of its resolution: While the short spat between the two taxi drivers seems to have dissipated, other conflicts, Danticat reminds us here, are more fraught. In both paragraphs, the issue at play is that two rhythms have clashed; in one case, those of two taxis, and in another case, those of a car and a pedestrian. While one situation can be solved by someone making a jokey, albeit aggressive statement, the other one ends with blood. Beyond these specific links between the two paragraphs, what stands out is the rhythm of the narrative thus created, the point at which one vignette switches for another. For Lefebvre, the rhythm analyst is someone who is at once

surrounded by the rhythms of their town or city, and who, through a crisis, disruption, or reflection, stands apart from the city's rhythms enough so as to be able to analyze them. It is not only the mother who is standing "outside" the rhythm at that moment, as she is patiently waiting to cross the road, but also her daughter, the narrator, who performs the switch between observing and remembering, thus stepping outside the rhythm. The disruption in the city's rhythm functions as an opportunity for reflection on the part of both the mother and daughter: while the mother is observing the spat, perhaps reflecting on how a similar situation would be handled in Haiti, the daughter is observing both the spat and the way it removes the mother from the rhythm, making her a rhythm analyst of the rhythm as a whole and of the pause in the rhythm in which her mother dwells. Lefebvre argues that "to grasp a rhythm it is necessary to have been *grasped* by it; one must *let oneself go*, give oneself over, abandon oneself to its duration" (27; emphases added). The daughter, who is grasped by her mother's rhythm to such an extent as to drop everything and follow her, is thus attuned to the gaps in her mother's rhythms. This rhythm analytical endeavor on the part of the daughter is matched by that of the reader, as the reader's task is to observe, and make sense of, the rhythms of the story. These at times rather jarring transitions are softened by the images of small flowers inserted between the two strands of the narrative.

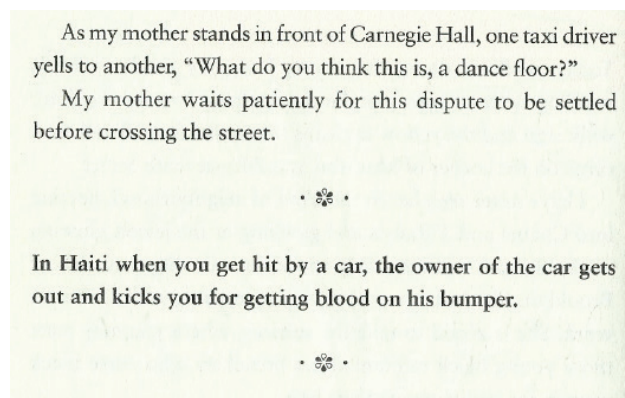


Fig. 1: Flowers on Danticat, "New York" 128.

While these flowers highlight the division, making visible the gap, they also fill it. Standing in both for rupture and for continuity, they highlight the clash between the two strands while time bridging the chasm thus created.

### Rhythms of Repetition: Dashing

Rhythm analysis is attuned not only to clashes and discontinuities, but also to connections. One way of doing that is to look at the verb "dash," which appears at several points in the story. The first time it appears is on the first page of the story, when the daughter narrates: "My mother, who accuses me of random offenses as I dash out of the house" (Danticat, "New York" 127). Later, the daughter uses the same word to describe walking behind her mother.

I follow my mother, mesmerized by the many possibilities of her journey. Even in a flowered dress, she is lost in a sea of pinstripes and gray suits, high heels and elegant short skirts, Reebok sneakers, dashing from building to building. My mother, who won't go out to dinner with anyone. (Danticat, "New York" 129)

Where, in the first instance, dashing is seen to be about the daughter escaping from her mother's gaze, and of being youthful and energetic in this dashing away from her, in this second instance, it is the mother who dashes, much to her daughter's surprise. In this moment, then, there is a kind of reversal, in which the daughter and the mother change places. The daughter performs the dual task of observing her mother's mobility—checking up on it; almost, at times, policing it—while remembering an instance where her mother did the same thing for her. The third time the word comes up, the daughter watches as "a bicycle messenger swings so close to her [the mother] that I want to dash forward and rescue her" (Danticat, "New York" 130). The daughter feels shaken from her observer's perch and instead wants to take an active part in what's happening by rescuing her mother, a wish which Kathleen Gyssels argues draws on "the vodou concept of the protecting

and caring ‘angel spirit’ (*ti bon ange*)” (9). However, the daughter decides to stay in the role of the rhythm analyst rather than intervene in her mother’s journey. The mother and daughter are nonetheless connected. In addition to rhythm, Benítez-Rojo identifies another key aspect of Caribbean life, something he calls “in a certain kind of way” (Benítez-Rojo 16). [11] He describes it as

something remote that reproduces itself and that carries the desire to sublimate apocalypse and violence; something obscure that comes from the performance and that one makes his own in a very special way; concretely, it takes away the space that separates the onlooker from the participant. (Benítez-Rojo 16)

Lefebvre sees the rhythm analyst as someone standing just outside a rhythm enough to observe it. While Lefebvre is focusing on the relationship of the rhythm analyst to the events and rhythms surrounding him, Benítez-Rojo is interested in the space between the onlooker and the participant. Like Lefebvre, he sees that space as fluid, amorphous, shifting. The thing which bridges it – the ineffable quality of being “in a certain kind of way” – is what he sees as warding off apocalypse and disaster; a drive to hope, to the future.

When the daughter says that “[e]ven in a flowered dress,” the mother is “lost in a sea of pinstripes and gray suits” (Danticat, “New York” 129), she is both clearly visible and enmeshed in a sea of others. The daughter juxtaposes the mother’s feminine outfit with the urban scene’s prevalent masculine style, and the mother’s casual dress with the business-like outfits of those around her. By doing so, the daughter is pointedly inscribing her mother into a city scene; she is also inscribing her mother, a diasporic Haitian subject, into diaspora. Both discourses have been often perceived as male. Although the flâneur is traditionally a male figure, scholarship has tried to make female flânerie, female ways of inhabiting and appropriating the city, visible. In *Routes*, James Clifford refers to “George Sand’s [...] dressing as a man in order to move freely in the city, to experience

the gendered freedom of the flâneur” (32). While Lefebvre always imagined a male rhythm analyst observing the city and chiming with its rhythms, flânerie, too, was imagined as male and only accessible through male codes. Clifford links this to Diaspora Studies, arguing that, despite “[d]iasporic experiences [being] always gendered” (258), this often remains unmarked. “When diasporic experience is viewed in terms of displacement rather than placement, traveling rather than dwelling, and disarticulation rather than rearticulation, then the experiences of men will tend to predominate” (Clifford 259). [12] “New York Day Women,” then, can be seen as not just a rewriting of the male flâneur, but also of the often-male diasporic subject. The mother dashing around Manhattan when the daughter was not expecting her to leave Brooklyn can be seen as a take both on flânerie and on a state of diasporicity. The concept of flânerie here reaches its limit, however, since the mother, as we find out later in the story, is not just enjoying the city, but on her way to work. While the mother does not fit in neatly with the concept of flânerie, she nonetheless points to a distinct way of inhabiting the city, as she walks “as though she owns the sidewalk under her feet” (Danticat, “New York” 130) while being a female, diasporic, laboring subject.

The term “dash,” moreover, has its own implications. In typography, a dash is a hyphen, a line between words, a kind of break. Much like the tiny flowers between the story’s plot and the interspersed vignettes, a dash is something which both connects and separates. Where a comma suggests a succession of events and a semicolon arguably points to a fuller rupture, a break almost as full as a full-stop, a dash does something else; quite literally, it dashes away from one part of the sentence and creates a line stretching to another part of the sentence. Dashes, then, most frequently frame an insertion into a sentence. They depart from the original sentence while keeping it intact, creating a space within an existing sentence. Of all the verbs one can use to describe mobilities of the body, it is significant that Danticat uses that word. While a typographical dash points to a departure, and a return, within the same sentence, Danticat frames the instances of dashing as scenes in which there

is both departure and a sense of circling back to the place departed from. Dashing, then, not only describes a physical movement through which the mother and daughter navigate their homes of New York and Haiti but becomes a shorthand for the way home is an entangled web of arrivals, departures, and the states in between. In the first sentence in which the word appears, when the narrator dashes out of her house while listening to her mother's reproaches, the "dash" suggests an energetic movement away from the mother while also suggesting a way back to her. In the second instance, when the mother is "dashing from building to building" (Danticat, "New York" 129), this is, firstly, an echo of the daughter's earlier dashing, thus connecting the two women, framing them as similar in their movements and bodily realities while reversing their relationship. Secondly, by adding "from building to building," Danticat suggests an ongoing movement in multiple directions, as each building is supplanted by another one. Here, the dashing away from one building can also be seen as the dashing to another building, all movement *away* therefore also being a movement *toward*. Where, in the first instance, the daughter dashes away from her mother's accusations and, in the second, the mother dashes by herself and the daughter is reduced to an observer, the third instance adds a further dimension, as the daughter wants to save her mother. We thus see three different aspects of their relationship play out here: One in which the mother is a figure of authority, one in which the mother is sole person observed, and one in which, once more, the roles are reversed and it is the daughter who seems to have the power to save the mother from hurt and harm. By focusing on the verb "dash," then, it becomes possible to read these three episodes together.

All three of these aspects of their relationship are open-ended, with departure and return possible in each one of them. The "dashing" resists a finality of departure or of arrival. Rather, it sees the points of arrival and departure as connected, as poles between which there is a dash, a typographical bridge. Not only is there a dashing, an element of movement and of change, in the relationship between the mother and daughter, but also in the movements of the bodies, and the movements of the city. While the

mother's and daughter's dashing is subject to the rhythms around it, the repetition of this verb also creates its own rhythms.

### Rhythms of Imagined Dialogues

Although the short story, at first glance, consists of two separate, juxtaposed strands—the bold vignettes and the non-bold plot—the actual relationship between the two strands is more complicated. One vignette says, "Fat, you know, and cholesterol. Fat and cholesterol killed your aunt Hermione" (Danticat, "New York" 130). But instead of narration switching from this vignette to the level of plot, what follows in normal font is the daughter's following recollection of her mother: "My mother, who makes jam with dried grapefruit peel and then puts in cinnamon bark that I always think is cockroaches in the jam," before the daughter switches back to the present moment and describes how she is "trail[ing] the red orchids in her dress and the heavy faux leather bag on her shoulders. Realizing the ferocious pace of my pursuit, I stop against a wall to rest. My mother keeps on walking as though she owns the sidewalk under her feet" (Danticat, "New York" 130). There are thus not just two, but three levels of narration: The vignettes, which consist of the mother's proclamations and adages, the daughter's thoughts about her mother, and the plot. While the mother's utterings are offset by the font and the flowers, the daughter's memories and actions are grouped together in normal font. This both strengthens and subverts the dialogical relationship that is being laid out between the mother and the daughter: The daughter is elaborating on her mother's adages in a freewheeling, associative way—the mother's rant about cholesterol leads to a memory of the mother making jam—which nonetheless speaks to the vignettes and puts them in relation to her own memories. In this way, the daughter is expanding on what she remembers her mother saying, making the latter's position more legible to the reader. At the same time, this structure is being subverted, since what we are confronted with is not just the mother on one side and the daughter on another, or plot on one level and memory on another, but a more complex



interweaving of these elements. Gyssels describes how “the mother speaks directly to the daughter expressing her fear, frustrations, disappointment, while the daughter speaks to us about her mother, and the uneasiness she feels when she observes her mother” (3). Gyssels argues that, “[d]uring the narrative, the two voices never reply to each other, so we have two monologues rather than a dialogue” (3); however, I would argue that the daughter is very much replying to her mother, leading to a dialogue on the page. The mother’s description of what happens in Haiti when you get hit by a car was itself, presumably, an instance of commemorative mobility, as she remembered those kinds of situations and relayed them to her daughter. By recalling this description, the daughter is, in a way, mimicking her mother’s commemorative mobility and entering into dialogue with it. Both in the dialogue between the mother and daughter, and in the dialogue between Haiti and New York, a home is being imagined: not in any of these poles, but in the interplay, gradations, and tugs between them.

The vignettes of the short story are assembled by the daughter, and the mother does not get a chance to participate in this act of assemblage or to directly answer her daughter’s thoughts. However, the vignettes consist of things the mother has said to her daughter; they are scraps of remembered conversations. The daughter is weaving a dialogue out of her own thoughts and what she remembers her mother saying, thus not only folding her mother’s absence into her own presence but turning her absence into presence. What is interesting is that this happens while the mother is, in fact, walking just a few feet in front of the daughter. [13] According to Nick Nesbitt, “[h]istory is the absent presence in Danticat’s writing” (210), “[t]his absence form[ing] the very material of Danticat’s prose” (205). The daughter’s and mother’s dialogue, then, is an example of the way Danticat complicates ideas of absence and presence in this short story, within the short story cycle, and arguably in her work at large, writing absence and presence as not only coexisting but entangled.

These entangled mobilities are not only playing out through the structure of Danticat’s short story, but also through what exactly is being

remembered and described. In the paragraph quoted above, commemorative mobility takes place through food; food is both what is being remembered and the means through which memory takes place, both the means of transport and the thing that is being transported. [14] It is from this memory of food that the daughter-narrator switches back to describing how she is trailing her mother again.

It is not just the dialogue, but also this act of walking the city, in which absence and presence are interwoven. According to Michel de Certeau, “To walk is to lack a place. It is the indefinite process of being absent and in search of a proper. The moving about that the city multiplies and concentrates makes the city itself an immense social experience of lacking a place” (103). He argues that the person walking the city is engaging with absence both because she is continually walking and seeking, and because to live in a city is to be reminded of what used to be there, making cities into “presences of diverse absences” (de Certeau 108). The short story enacts the presence of/in absence not only in its depiction of the city, but in its discussion of home. It is not just that neither Haiti nor New York are fully present or absent on any given page of the short story, as they instead jangle up against each other, sometime one getting closer and the other receding, sometimes with the roles switched. Instead, the very notion of home is one that is only graspable through an interplay of absence of presence; both walking around the city and switching between the memory and present are ways of making this simultaneity of absence and presence tangible and traversable. Similarly, de Certeau sees the absence, and not just the presence, as an affordance: “Far from expressing a void or describing a lack, it creates such. It makes room for a void. In that way, it opens up clearings; it ‘allows’ a play within a system of defined places” (106).

### Rhythms of Money

In the case of rhythms, the clearing de Certeau describes is being opened up within the context of money. The sharp dichotomy between Brooklyn and Manhattan in this short story needs to be placed in its historical context. In the 1990’s,

when this story is set, Brooklyn was still largely an immigrant, working-class borough. When the daughter thinks her mother never leaves Brooklyn, that is thus a statement both about the mother's class and about the mother's position as an immigrant –to the daughter, Manhattan is an environment both glitzier and more 'American' than she can comfortably picture her mother in. [15]

Money is also present both in the idea of rhythms and in their lived reality. For Lefebvre, behind every rhythm lurks money. He states this in no uncertain terms: "The essential? The determining factor? Money" (Lefebvre 34). While following her mother, the daughter sees her mother's journey as thoroughly enigmatic, a baffling mystery. The resolution, however, turns out to be quite banal: the mother is a caretaker for a young white boy, thus illuminating the story's title. "Day women," explains Kathleen Gyssels, are "'women who work during the day to make a living,' implying membership in the cheap labour force of (il)legal workers who fulfill difficult, badly paid jobs in global economies" (9). Gyssels' observation points us to the fact that money is "the determining factor" not just in the rhythms of the city, but in the rhythm pulsating outward from the Caribbean. The profound financial ways in which the Caribbean and New York are embedded in one another are rendered visible in the mere presence of the daughter and mother on the streets of New York, pointing to centuries of movement back and forth undergirded by money. They are also rendered visible by the mother's work as a caretaker. When the daughter is imagining her mother, she is imagining her mother as a flâneuse. But a flâneur is "[a]n aesthete who uniquely manages to engage with the realities of the modern city without fully surrendering to them" (Vermeulen 41), a luxury not afforded to the mother. In *Consuming the Caribbean: From Arawaks to Zombies*, Sheller analyzes ways in which the Global North has "consumed" the Caribbean, including through crops, art, human corpses, sex tourism, and labor. Consumption, too, can be seen as a way in which the Caribbean is pulsating outwards, embedding the mother in a flow of cash, labor, and consumption stretching from Haiti to the U.S. and back again. By making visible some

of the ways in which the mother is embedded in this process and yet letting the daughter view her mother through the lens of flânerie, Danticat is expanding the concept of flânerie, showing ways in which flânerie –taking in a city, owning the ground under one's feet– can be entwined with labor both on an individual level and in the context of vast historical processes.

### The Reader's Rhythms

Many critics have focused on the ways Danticat makes visible connections not only within, but between the short stories of *Krik? Krak!*. Connections between the stories, such as characters reappearing, lead Lisa Muir to conclude that "*Krik? Krak!* should more appropriately be labeled a novel" (112) than a short story collection, while Amanda Putnam speaks of a "short story montage" (2). Rocio G. Davis argues that "the genre [of the short story cycle], as with the oral narrative, intensifies the normally participatory act of reading by insisting that we 'fill in the blanks' as we go along; the discovery of connections is transformed into the reader's task" (70). Davis even links the genre of the short story cycle to mobilities, arguing that "recurrence and development [are] the integrated movements that effect final cohesion" (66). [16] It is the reader who assembles these different instances. In "New York Day Women," this can happen through reading together the two strands of the narrative, or through a focus such as on the verb "dashing." On the level of the short story collection, certain names, characters, and events appear in one story and later in another, asking the reader to integrate the weave of one story into that of the collection.

In his paper "Mobility of Form," Ian Davidson sees such a weaving together of fragments as one of the ways in which literary form can be mobile, taking *Some of the Dharma* as an example. In that book, Jack Kerouac intersperses handwritten observations with text from his own notebooks, bringing together "theological meditations, instructions, journal entries and poems" (Davidson 553) on pages which are, themselves, subdivided. This assembling of fragments is, according to Davidson, a marker of formal literary mobility. In

“New York Day Women,” the transitions between the main narrative and the memories, too, lead to a mobility of form, since they make the reader jump from one plane to another, keeping a flexibility between them rather than settling into one form. Danticat links this mobility of assembly on the part of the reader to the interweaving of physical and commemorative mobilities on the part of the daughter. Focusing on the rhythms of reading ties in with McKittrick’s work on rhythm in Wynter’s writing. McKittrick et al. write

Positing rhythm as reading praxis, we can perhaps merge new or different stories together – tracking continuities, seeking out flows, noticing pauses that occur across a range of texts and ideas – and thus challenge disciplinary silos that currently define normative and disciplined ways of knowing. [...] Rhythmic reading is thinking together, always, even when we do not realize that we are doing such. (871)

Here, McKittrick et al. are, first and foremost, referring to the rhythms that arise when one reads different texts and talks to people about them, “moments where someone asks, ‘What page or section was that idea on again?’,” saying that “it is precisely these lapses that initiate a discursive rhythm prompted by memory, return, and the sharing of ideas” (McKittrick et al. 871). They are not talking about the solitary experience of reading a single short story. However, “New York Day Women” functions like a collage in which different texts come together. The reader jumps from strand to strand, at times feeling compelled to jump back to an earlier part in order to see possible connections. Additionally, the conversational element McKittrick et al. mention – discussing something, and in so doing remembering a snippet, a snippet that may seem out of reach – is the very structuring element of Danticat’s short story. In a way, the daughter and the reader are reading together – the daughter is attempting to read and understand her present mother, the woman she is trailing behind, by trying to read and understand her past mother. The daughter, then, is “prompted by memory, return, and the sharing of ideas” as McKittrick

et al say (871); the reader is both observing this process and trying to make her own connections alongside the daughter.

This short story is less entangled with the rest of *Krik? Krak!* than other short stories from the collection. Even so, the fact that the reader of *Krik? Krak!* is attuned to connections across the collection means that she is reading “New York Day Women” with an eye to connection, thereby engendering the particular rhythm described by McKittrick, asking “‘What page or section was that idea on again?’,” moving backwards and forwards in the text. Moreover, “New York Day Women” does contain references to other short stories. One reference is arguably the name Hermione – “Fat, you know, and cholesterol. Fat and cholesterol killed your aunt Hermione” (Danticat, “New York” 130)–, which is almost mirrored in the short story “Between the Pool and the Gardenias.” In that story, the young protagonist remembers all the babies she has lost: “I called out all the names I wanted to give them: Eveline, Josephine, Jacqueline, Hermine, Marie Magdalène, Célianne” (Danticat, “Between” 80). This almost-sameness is not an accident, but part of the way in which Danticat “explores numerous techniques of re-connecting lost ancestry by braiding previous and current generations together” (Putnam 7).

A connection to other short stories in the collection is also created through the mention of the fictional Haitian town of Ville Rose. At first, the two poles between which “New York Day Women” moves are New York City – specifically, the boroughs of Manhattan and Brooklyn, in their respective specificity and difference – and Haiti. While other texts by Danticat, both in *Krik? Krak!* and elsewhere, have a more localized, specified sense of place, “Haiti” could here at first be seen to figure as a monolith. Comparing an entire country in the Global South to a set of boroughs in the Global North falls danger to creating an imbalance – while the city in the Global North is afforded complexity, the country in the Global South is flattened, and differences and diversity within that country rendered invisible. However, in the case of this short story, these two poles reflect the way the daughter sees and navigates them. Although Haiti and New York come together to create an imagined home, the

differences between the boroughs are part of the daughter's daily reality in a way that different places in Haiti presumably are not. Secondly, I would argue, "Haiti" has become a way for the mother and the daughter to name and carry a wide array of memories, people, practices, and feelings. "Haiti," then, is a capacious signifier, one that, for the daughter, points toward everything from advice her mother has given her to the clothes her mother is planning to send to relatives. The short story shows the extent to which these different aspects of the mother's and daughter's relationship to Haiti are both fragmented kernels –vignettes– and the extent to which they can be gathered together. While "New York Day Women" gathers the different parts of its assemblage into a narrative, and while *Krik? Krak!* as a whole weaves together stories from a variety of epochs and contexts, the term "Haiti" does similar work here. It is the signifier the mother uses to impart a wealth of experiences to her daughter, and it is the signifier the daughter takes hold of when remembering. Corinne Bigot underlines that home is always imagined, saying that it is "also a discourse, a discourse of locality: a place with which we remain intimate even in moments of intense alienation from it, and thus a spiritual, imagined location" (98). In "New York Day women," the daughter is imagining the capacious category of Haiti, with all its entanglements to New York, as home. There is, however, a paragraph in which the daughter names the specific, familial location of Ville Rose. She reflects, "My mother, who has now lost six of her seven sisters in Ville Rose and has never had the strength to return for their funerals" (Danticat, "New York" 133). By mentioning this particular locale, Danticat is tying this short story in with other work she has set in the town. [17]

## Conclusion

In "New York Day Women," Haiti and Manhattan become perceptible through one another. The mother and daughter of this story are dashing around Manhattan, but this dashing connects them to both Haiti *and* New York. As Lefebvre writes: "The recollection of other moments and of all the hours is indispensable, not as a simple

point of reference, but in order not to isolate this present and in order to *live* it in all its diversity, made up of *subjects* and *objects*" (36; emphases added). It is the daughter's recollection of her mother's dictums about Haiti that allows her to live fully in New York, and to inhabit this moment; but it is also the daughter's recollection of her mother's dictums that makes her feel connected to that part of her life and family history. In this way, it is not just that Haiti is a repeating island, repeating, reverberating, and echoing all the way to Manhattan, but that Manhattan, too, is part of a Caribbean archipelago. Manhattan, too, repeats and reverberates, changing how Haiti is seen, lived, remembered, and embodied, an embodiment that, according to Amber Lascelles, "in its multiple literary forms, is a central part of this resistance and becomes a crucial way of engaging with diaspora" (230). Danticat links the im/mobilities of walking to the imaginative, commemorative mobilities of remembered statements; she also links these mobilities on the part of the daughter-narrator to those of the reader, who assembles the two narrative strands into a story and makes sense of the rhythm between and within them. Lefebvrian rhythmanalysis enables us to zoom in on specific, minute moments –the mother waiting at the crosswalk, one taxi driver talking to another, a dash out the door– while Benítez-Rojo enables us to read Haiti as "an island that repeats itself until transforming into a meta-archipelago and reaching the most widely separated transhistorical frontiers of the globe" (Benítez-Rojo 24). It is in this repetition of the island, this entanglement of Haiti and New York, that the characters continually forge and mobilize ideas of home.

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2021 as well as everyone at the colloquium held by the research platform *Mobile Cultures and Societies* at the University of Vienna in June 2021.

## Endnotes

[1] This article is adapted from my dissertation on imaginative mobilities in Caribbean diaspora literature, which I am writing at the University of Vienna, and which is advised by Prof. Alexandra Ganser and Prof. Annegret Pelz.

[2] Including the MacArthur “Genius” grant in 2009.

[3] Amber Lascelles suggests reading Danticat’s fiction as belonging to “post-diaspora” rather than “diaspora,” arguing that “[m]oving away from defined origins and single distinct destinations, [the concept of post-diaspora] leaves room to push the fluidity of diaspora further” (228). While I agree that Danticat’s fiction moves away from single distinct destinations, I continue to find “diaspora” a fruitful concept.

[4] I call these insertions in bold “vignettes” to point to their short, fragmentary literary nature, and for the way they are distinguished from the surrounding text, as a vignette on a stamp is designed “as distinguished from the frame and lettering” (Merriam-Webster).

[5] Lefebvre exclusively uses the male pronoun.

[6] “He [the rhythm analyst] will listen to the world, and above all to what are disdainfully called noises” (Lefebvre 19).

[7] “[T]he media day unfolds polyrhythmically” (Lefebvre 48).

[8] Translation my own; the original states “la rencontre, l’interférence, le choc, les harmonies et les disharmonies entre les cultures, dans la totalité réalisée du monde-terre” (Glissant 3).

[9] Benítez-Rojo capitalizes the word Plantation “to indicate not just the presence of plantations but also the type of society that results from their use and abuse” (9).

[10] Benítez-Rojo, interestingly, uses both the terms “silences” and “plastic immobilities” to refer to rhythmic, physical, nonverbal acts “such as [women] ‘carrying their hands on their hips,’ or balancing baskets on their heads ‘with their arm rounded like a pitcher’s handle’” (Benítez-Rojo 79). I would, however, argue, that what he is describing is not so much silences or gaps the way I, drawing on Lefebvre, think of them here, but acts of physical, corporeal mobility beyond verbal language.

[11] Benítez-Rojo also identifies a third factor, performance (see Benítez-Rojo 16).

[12] It has long been the case that many diasporic subjects are women, however; see, for example, Avtar Brah on the “feminization of diaspora” (179).

[13] The field of Postmemory, shaped by Marianna Hirsch and others, studies how the second generation, or in some cases even third generation, relates to the trauma experienced by the parents (the first generation). Postmemory, then, offers a way to make sense of collective trauma. While “New York Day Women” is not immediately concerned with trauma, the daughter is one generation removed from Haiti and from her mother’s experiences and trying to make sense of them across that generational distance. For a thorough, wide-ranging analysis of the concept of a generation, also see Parnes et al.

[14] For an analysis of Haitian cooking in Danticat’s story “Caroline’s Wedding,” see Lascelles 231. Bigot writes about how diasporic writers “use small and mundane details such as labels on jars of food, stains on a glass, the smell of a dish, the touch of a scarf or the feel of snow on one’s skin to bring a revelation about their characters’ complex lives and sense of identity” (98).

[15] Since the 1990’s, the demographics of Brooklyn have drastically changed; if the story was set in the 2020’s, the mother would arguably be more likely to live in Queens or the Bronx than in Brooklyn.

[16] Writing about another book by Danticat, Mukherjee says: “*The Dew Breaker* is a collection of linked stories (which seems to be a favorite form of the immigrant writer)” (690).

[17] Work set in the town includes Danticat’s 2013 novel *Claire of the Sea Light*.

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### Author's Biography

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# Transmogrifying Home in Jamaica Kincaid's *Annie John* and Kacen Callender's *Hurricane Child*

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## Abstract

*Kacen Callender's 2018 novel for adolescent readers, Hurricane Child, illustrates how literature for young people can be employed to leverage formidable critiques against European colonial ideologies and the neocolonial policies in the contemporary United States. This paper explores Callender's re-visioning of Jamaica Kincaid's semiautobiographical Annie John (1985) and ways that the two novels push past easy definitions as bildungsromane and home as haven for the nuclear family to comment on the tourist industry as a continuation of colonial systems of domination.*

**Keywords:** children's/young adult literature, spirits, LGBTQ+, Caribbean, Virgin Islands, homespace

While literature for children and young adults (YA) is not typically given center stage in theorizing postcolonial subjectivities, taking up this body of work gives adult readers crucial insights—*not* into how ideas are actually interpreted by youthful audiences, but instead how young people are taught to absorb information about themselves and the world: beliefs about what it means to be a 'proper' child; cultural, gender, class, and sexual identities; the dynamics of (neo)colonialism; concepts of what makes a 'good' home. Kacen Callender's middle-grade (MG) novel, *Hurricane Child* (2018), awarded a Stonewall literary prize in 2019 for exceptional merit in the field of MG or YA literature, illuminates how a genre frequently considered superficial, or even vapid, by readers outside the field can be employed to deliver formidable anticolonial critiques. In previous scholarship, I have explored Callender's novel as a Gothic text, symbolically 'haunted' by Jamaica Kincaid's semiautobiographical *Annie John* (1985)—a foundational work of Caribbean literature. Here, I investigate how the two novels push past easy definitions as bildungsromane and home as haven for the nuclear family to comment on the tourist industry as a continuation of colonial systems of domination.

## Homespace in *Annie John*

Kincaid's *Annie John*, set in Antigua in the 1950s, portrays the rapidly changing dynamic between an African Caribbean mother and daughter: two women who significantly share the same name. Young Annie adores her mother when the novel begins and cannot bear to be apart from her; her mother, in turn, showers her with affection and lessons about how to be a 'proper' young woman: to care for herself, an imagined husband and children, and the domestic space. The family's home "on Dickenson Bay Street, [is] a house my father built with his own hands" (Kincaid 3), but it is Annie's mother who has made it 'home' with her cooking, sewing, gardening, cleaning, laundering, and shopping, as well as the frequent kisses and caresses she bestows on her daughter. Pre-pubescent Annie details "[h]ow important I felt to be with my mother" when she is on holiday from school and can "spen[d] the day following my mother around and observing the way she did everything" (Kincaid 15); however, as the narrative progresses, the narrator grows increasingly rebellious towards her mother and everything she represents—the colonial model of feminine propriety.

More crucial for my argument here is Annie Senior's centrality to the domestic space, both displacing the male patriarch, who hovers on

the margins of the protagonist's world, and as a Black woman, displacing notions of the African woman derived from the slave era. The dominant colonial class portrayed enslaved women as hypersexual temptresses, flighty lovers, and apathetic mothers. Positioned as the crux of the degenerate Black family, they bore no say in her children's lives, not only because they could not 'own' them; framed as more animalistic than human, they were alleged not to care about their children. [1] 'Home' was also largely inaccessible to women compelled to work for their owners from sunrise to long after sunset.

The homespace portrayed in *Annie John* challenges this history. But instead of being represented as a type of prison for the Victorian "Angel of the House," it is established as a type of fortress where the mother, not the father, and her female friends are the ones responsible for its protection, upending conventional Western gender hierarchies. When teenaged Annie falls seriously ill near the end of the narrative, Kincaid contrasts the female healer—Ma Jolie, brought in by Annie's mother—against the male physician—Dr. Stephens, formally trained in Western/European medicine, and favored by Annie's father. Dr. Stephens has prescribed "compounds of vitamins and purgatives" (Kincaid 117) to strengthen and cleanse the narrator's body, while Ma Jolie attempts to heal the narrator's body *and* soul in addition to fortifying the home with Caribbean folk practices. She employs "cross marks on the soles of my feet, on my knees, on my stomach, in my armpits, and on my head," incense, special candles, a gris-gris bag, and "little vials filled with fluids to rub on me at different times of the day" (Kincaid 116-117). The obeah woman asserts that danger will not enter the house from the yard, suggesting her belief in the power and cooperation of the natural world: "with all the rain," it was "impossible for anything meaning me harm to be living outside in the yard" (Kincaid 117). She does, however, labor to expunge from the home the energies of people who might wish to hurt young Annie: "most of them [were] women my father had loved a long time ago" (117). The line echoes an earlier scene, in which mother and daughter take special baths—baths infused with a variety of flowers, tree bark, and special oils, taken in a

darkened room with a peculiarly scented candle burning:

We took these baths after my mother had consulted with her obeah woman, ... her mother and a trusted friend, and all three of them had confirmed that from the look of things *around our house* ... one of the many women my father had loved, had never married, but with whom he had had children was trying to harm my mother and me by setting bad spirits on us. (Kincaid 14-15, emphasis added)

Home is not inviolable; romantically discontented women have the power to invade the space and ruin the family's domestic bliss by means of "bad spirits." A formidable collective defends the children and the home, however, and this community is also all-female. Annie's father is identified in the passage, but he has been rendered a commodity, subverting notions of women as objects of exchange in the sexual marketplace.

I would like to note here that the majority of scholars have approached *Annie John* with an eye to mother-daughter relationships, gender roles, and rebellions against colonial and patriarchal authority, neglecting the protagonist's descriptions of a world filled with ghostly presences. Young Annie states:

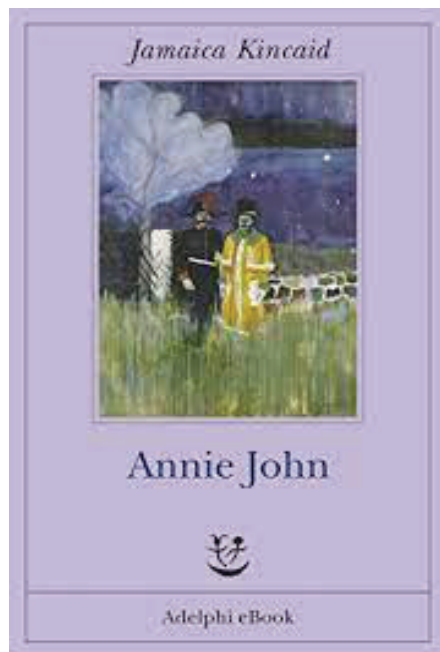
I was afraid of the dead, as was everyone I knew. We were afraid of the dead because we never could tell when they might show up again. ... [S]ometimes they would show up standing under a tree just as you were passing by. Then they might follow you home, and even though they might not be able to come into your house, they might wait for you and follow you wherever you went; in that case, they would never give up until you joined them. (Kincaid 4)

Kincaid reinforces the notion that the ideal Caribbean homespace must be kept safe from incursions by spirits—perhaps even more so than living, tangible beings.

Notably, only the Italian publication of the novel alludes to specters from beyond the grave

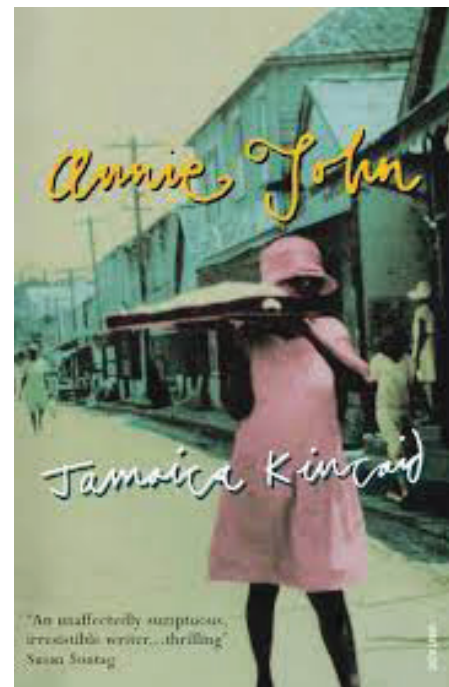


in its cover art: two skeletons in formal wear stand in tall grass near a stone fence:



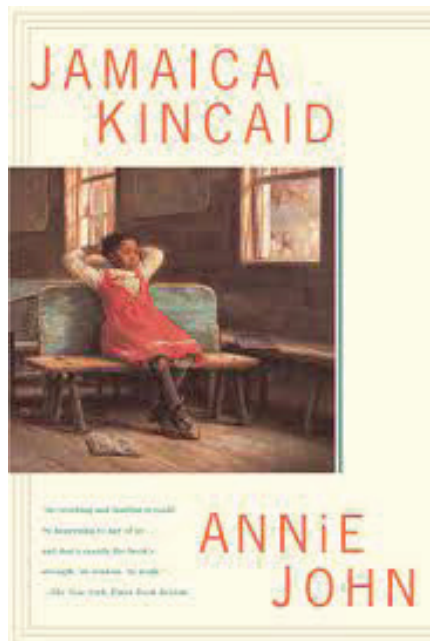
In striking contrast, most covers use images of brown-skinned girls of a variety of ages, but lack any other reference to the otherworldly. A website advertising lesson plans and interactive notebooks for high school educators preparing to teach *Annie John*, for example, features a close-up of an adolescent girl's face. [2] This marketing choice suggests the novel's relevance to contemporary readers from around the world, in that any sign of location is cropped out of the shot. This lack of specificity also signifies the erasure of a culturally and geographically Caribbean homespace, rendering the region a type of nowhere.

The cover of the 1997 Vintage paperback suggests the strict gender norms of Annie's world in the colorized pink hat and dress of the woman on the cover, but the everydayness encapsulated by the image of a street-vendor fails to capture any sense of the spectral or the cultural belief systems that Kincaid illustrates in the novel.



Furthermore, the vocation represented on the cover lacks recognition of the distinct socio-economic status of Annie's family. Besides challenging gender norms, Kincaid carefully dispenses stereotypes of the African Caribbean home as the site of poverty and deprivation. She identifies the Johns as distinctly middle-class: Annie Senior stays home to care for house and child while her husband goes into the public sphere to work as a carpenter. The family can afford to rent other accommodations while the roof on the Dickenson Bay Street house is being repaired (Kincaid 3); the items stored in young Annie's trunk include an abundance of "special" outfits (Kincaid 20) made from expensive fabrics such as linen, wool, and lace, and a christening dress worn only once. The trunk also holds a pair of Annie's old gold earrings, a gold necklace, and gold bracelets—all imported—and luxury items like straw hats and baskets (Kincaid 20-21). Additionally, Annie is sent for etiquette classes and piano lessons when she reaches adolescence (Kincaid 27-28)—all markers of relative affluence. These signs of prosperity make one of the most popular cover illustrations for Kincaid's novel a strikingly odd choice: a girl of African descent sits on a worn wooden bench, staring wistfully out of a classroom window. She

wears torn stockings, a patched white shirt, and a red jumper-dress; her hair is as unkempt as her clothing:



The image aligns more with descriptions of the Red Girl, who climbs trees and hates soap, than Kincaid's narrator, whose mother is deeply invested in teaching her child to master the skills need to establish and run an immaculate home and operate as a respected—and respectable—member of her community. The work of art selected for this cover was painted by U.S. artist Edward Lamson Henry in 1888. It was meant to address U.S. racial tensions circa the U.S. Civil War, not Antiguan society of the 1950s. Again, the repeated lack of Caribbean connections indicates a U.S. publishing industry disinterested in catering to Caribbean readers' sense of home—whether that be in terms an architectural structure or individualized islands/territories/nations or a more generalized Caribbean landscape and culture. Instead, the frontpiece gratifies those who view the region in terms of stereotypical Black poverty and deficiency, perpetuating notions of the Caribbean as a site needing aid-relief: incursions from outside businesses, tourist dollars, missionary work, and the like.

### Annie John as Bildungsroman

Kincaid adheres to the model of development and structure of the conventional coming-of-age novel in which the protagonist matures physically and emotionally, eventually leaving home to strike out independently. She subtly undermines Western trajectories of 'progress' and 'order,' however, by allowing the adolescent Annie to return home even after she has emotionally separated herself from her mother. Adoration turns to disgust across the course of the narrative, and the two women become absorbed in a battle of wills and wits. A poignant scene of distrust and attempted manipulation occurs when Annie Senior attempts to discover where the narrator has hidden her stash of marbles after being forbidden to engage in this activity 'for boys.' Adolescent Annie rebels against her mother's authority and mid-twentieth-century gender norms not only by playing a game in which she must squat in a dress, in the dirt, with members of the opposite sex, but by secreting her prized marbles in the crawlspace under her home. "I had stored them in old cans, though my most valued ones were in an old red leather handbag of [my mother's]" (Kincaid 66-67). She has turned ordinary domestic items and objects associated with conventional femininity into shells for an ostensibly masculine endeavor, and she has done so in the literal shadow of her home—her mother's dominion.

The last paragraph of the chapter in which this story is found begins "Soon after, I started to menstruate, and I stopped playing marbles" (Kincaid 70). Although the character's physical development is progressing as expected, readers might notice that the narrative is being rendered as non-linear: Annie described "the first day I started to menstruate ... the first step in coming of age" (Kincaid 51), in the previous chapter—about twenty pages prior. The author's choice to disrupt the linearity of the timeline reinforces her destabilization of the traditional bildungsroman form.

Similarly, later in the novel, Annie communicates an occasion in which she ran into a childhood friend, Mineu, with a group of his school friends—also all male. She thinks:

*I had better get home quickly*, for I began to feel alternately too big and too small. First, I grew so big that I took up the whole street; then I grew so small that nobody could see me—not even if I cried out. (Kincaid 101)

Her adult self has started to emerge, both physically (breasts, menstruation, acne, etc.) and socially, but Kincaid suggests that the process is not undeviating. Like Alice wandering through Wonderland—eating a bite of cake here, nibbling on a piece of mushroom there, and sipping from the bottle labelled “Drink me”—Annie feels as if she is growing and shrinking out of control. Instead of growing from ‘little’ to ‘medium’ and then remaining permanently ‘big,’ she shifts back and forth between “too big and too small” (Kincaid 101). And despite the antagonisms with her mother, home remains a place of respite for her—one to which she can escape in times of distress. It is a complicated space, not easily definable, according to Western constructions, as the source of peace, happiness, nurturing.

### Homespace in *Hurricane Child*

Twelve-year-old narrator Caroline Murphy lives in the present-day US Virgin Islands (USVI), traveling back and forth between tiny Water Island and the more densely populated St. Thomas for school, church, and social interactions. Contrary to the nuclear family unit portrayed in *Annie John*, Caroline resides on Water Island only with her father; her mother has disappeared about a year before the book opens, and readers bear witness to the protagonist’s feelings of physical and emotional abandonment.

Caroline is born during a hurricane and, near the end of the novel, almost dies during another one. At one point, she casually remarks that “most houses in the Virgin Islands are made of concrete so they won’t be blown away by the hurricanes” (Callender 54), signaling to young readers that the islands’ residents are far from incompetent. After the final storm, Caroline notes that her “house is still standing, the same way it always has been. Maybe the storm couldn’t see us here on Water Island either. We go inside, and absolutely nothing has changed,

which is disappointing and thrilling all at the same time” (Callender 194). One can read the storm as emblematic of the neo/colonial powers that have blown through the region, decimating Indigenous people, enslaving millions, and destroying natural landscapes with oil rigs, commercial fishing, deforestation, and other industry. Just as Annie’s home was vulnerable to malicious spirits in Kincaid’s novel, so too, is the larger homespace of the archipelago vulnerable to violations from external forces.

*Hurricane Child* occupies uncharted space as an LGBTQ+ novel for adolescents set in the USVI—an area not as well known in the Caribbean for literary production as islands like Martinique (Aimé Césaire, Frantz Fanon, Édouard Glissant, Patrick Chamoiseau), Jamaica (Claude McKay, Marlon James), Trinidad & Tobago (V.S. Naipaul), St. Lucia (Derek Walcott), Antigua (Jamaica Kincaid), or Cuba (Alejo Carpentier, Reinaldo Arenas). The archipelago was purchased by the United States from Denmark near the end of World War I, after being owned by Great Britain, France, Spain, the Netherlands, and the Knights of Malta. Since then, the islands have not been made independent, but rather held as an unincorporated, organized territory: residents are classified as US citizens but do not have the right to vote in federal elections. As has been argued of Great Britain in Kincaid’s colonial Antigua landscape, the imperial nation plays the role of a (geographically) distant parent in colonial propaganda: ostensibly loving and protective, a disciplinary force that governs the colonized territory until the colonized society matures ‘properly.’ Through this lens, young Annie’s psychological struggles against the mother she once adored mirror Antigua’s struggle for independence from its so-called Mother Country.

Although the role of the United States as twenty-first-century colonial power is frequently eclipsed in everyday discourse, [3] the spectral presence of the US as “Mother Country” in Callender’s novel not only strongly resembles the roles of Britain and France during the height of their colonial endeavors in the Caribbean, Africa, and Asia during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but it is also embodied in the lurking presence of Caroline’s mother in *Hurricane Child*.

Doreen Hendricks Murphy no longer lives in the protagonist's domestic homespace, but she haunts the girl's thoughts and daily existence. Thus, when Caroline befriends Kalinda Francis, the new girl at school, and Kalinda asks, "Does it feel like your heart is split between two homes? Between Saint Thomas and Water Island, I mean?" (Callender 71), Caroline must pause: "I have to stop to think about this one, because I realize then that I don't think of either Saint Thomas or Water Island as home. How can I? My mother isn't on either island" (Callender 71). On the surface, the narrator's anxiety stems from feelings of maternal abandonment: "[H]ow do I begin to explain ... Having a mother that's left me behind? Would Kalinda begin to accuse my mother of being a bad woman ...? Would Kalinda think I'd done something to deserve being deserted?" (Callender 72) Caroline's narrow conceptions of 'home' and rigid gender norms do not allow her father—or any caregiver besides a biological mother—to define the homespace.

Significantly, Loretta Joseph, or "Miss Joe"—the principal of Caroline's school—tries to steer the narrator away from her maternal preoccupation and the simplistic equation of home = mother: "[S]ometimes ... life can't afford us everything we want or need, so while you might not have a mother, you have a father who loves you very much, and a home and food and clothes" (Callender 59). Her attempts are unsuccessful, but it is no coincidence that Callender constructs her as a woman who loves women—including, in her school days, Caroline's own mother. Miss Joe lives in a home that is not envisaged as lacking a man/husband, but rather as part of her maternal inheritance: "This house you sit in now was my mother's house" (Callender 57); it is the house she had planned to reside in with Caroline's mother during their youthful romance. Women stand at the center of this homespace, much like in Kincaid's *Annie John*.

Initially, Caroline is too overwhelmed by loss to be able to embrace Miss Joe's message. Symbolically, she is the colonized territory longing for the love, attention, and approval of the colonial power. Her yearning for mother[land] is subtly juxtaposed against a growing awareness of herself as both a racialized subject and a

'less than' American citizen living outside of the continental United States. Readers perceive how colonial ideas of white superiority—fomented during the occupation of the Virgin Islands by European powers and continuing into the present moment, with economic survival dependent on the US dollar—permeate her experiences. Of the apparitions that Caroline frequently sees during her day-to-day routines, she is particularly disturbed by visions of "the woman in black" (Callender 4). The protagonist's description of this specter conveys her awareness of the significance of her own dark complexion: "[The woman in black] was black, blacker than black, blacker than *even me*" (Callender 4, emphasis added). The phrasing gestures towards the trauma of being a girl with dark skin—even in communities that are predominantly Black. Just a few pages later, Caroline's description of one of her teachers demonstrates how colonial aesthetics trickle down into educational spaces: "Missus Wilhelmina" constantly speaks about her "white great-great-great-grandpa from Saint Martin ... because he made her clear-skinned" (Callender 9) and she dislikes Caroline, who is "the darkest student in the school with the thickest hair" (Callender 10). Believing that the Caribbean is "no good, seeing that [it's] filled with so many black people" and "almost as bad as Africa itself" (Callender 10), this teacher indoctrinates students like Caroline, even though the narrator has also seen "paintings of African queens hanging in tourist shops [... with skin] painted with black and purple and blue, ... remind[ing] me of the night sky, or of black stones on the side of the beach, rubbed smooth by the waves" (Callender 10). Caroline believes "the women in those paintings are beautiful," but she must keep these thoughts secret. Meantime, Mrs. Wilhelmina tells her that she must behave especially well since "it'll be hard for me to get married with skin as dark as mine" (Callender 10). Callender identifies the gendered dynamic of colorism, as well as the power of words stated out loud, in public venues. These prejudicial messages are not just a part of adolescent taunting in the schoolyard, but lent credibility through Mrs. Wilhelmina's authority as an educator and adult.



Library books provide even greater weight to notions of African Caribbean inferiority. At one point Caroline reads: “the Caribbean is a place where spirits and ghosts exist *more than anywhere else in the world*” (Callender 96). She begins to envision that “that the air is so full of spirits that I’m breathing them in ... as I read” (Callender 96). The language of contamination, bodily invasion, and pollution frightens the narrator instead of giving her the necessary tools for processing her situation, as a young woman who has the power to see ghosts. Caroline’s schoolbooks also provide her with information that causes her to doubt her own experiences, culture, and sanity; she reads that supernatural beings “are made up completely in one’s own mind, and especially in the minds of those who are delusional and have been through emotional traumas to help them cope, which makes me fear that the woman in black isn’t real at all” (Callender 96). This knowledge ‘possesses’ her, in a sense, and her community’s knowledge is “ghosted,” a process Avery Gordon links to Michel Foucault’s work on repressed or subjugated knowledge: “‘disqualified,’ marginalized, fugitive knowledge from below and outside the institutions of official knowledge production” (Gordon xviii). [4]

### Ghostly Traces of Violence—Tourism

In her analysis of gothic texts from the US South that “refuse monstrous hauntology”—narratives that delve into the effects of repressing centuries of racial strife—Patricia Yaeger interrogates the way that the exhilaration of Gothic spectatorship can be displaced by a sense of a “humdrum world”—one filled with remnants, scraps, disturbances, and ghostly traces of the “racial violence, unjust labor laws, and a habitus founded on the hard facts of discrimination” (99). In other words, it is not just “what haunts [people] in the aftermath” of the traumatic event, “but the almost invisible force of *everyday haunting*, the trauma of living neither in the epic nor the extraordinary but in the everyday [environment]” (Yaeger 97). The enduring presence of colonial exploitation is addressed in *Hurricane Child* through its gestures towards tourist involvement in the culture and economy of the USVI, and by extension, the rest of the Caribbean.

When Caroline asks Kalinda who she thinks the spectral white woman in the schoolyard is, Kalinda responds, “I don’t know, but she must have me mistaken for someone else. Someone she knew when she was alive. *Or maybe she knows my ancestors*” (Callender 109, emphasis added). The obvious points of contact would be slavery and the European colonial presence in the region, but another interpretation lies in a critique of the tourist industry. Tourism and related activities are the primary economic endeavors of the USVI and make up a large chunk of its gross domestic product (GDP), as is true of most Caribbean states. For comparison, 2012 World Travel & Tourism Council statistics indicated that tourist dollars constituted 27% of Jamaica’s GDP and close to 50% of the GDP of the Bahamas. [5] According to the US Department of Commerce Bureau of Economic Analysis, the net export services (primarily tourism) in the USVI made up 24% of the GDP in 2007, and 32% in 2016. And while the estimated 2019 per capita income in the continental US was just over \$65,000, it was only \$36,350 in the USVI.

On more than one occasion, Caroline comments on the psychologically damaging presence of tourists in St. Thomas and the ways the trade is structured to make islanders feel inferior in their own homespace. Her first remark illustrates visitors’ carelessness and potential for destruction: “We had to be careful in that [small] boat ... because sometimes bigger boats carrying tourists would zoom by and almost hit us like a speedboat hitting a manatee” (Callender 5-6). This reference to the harm caused by relatively small boats can easily be extended to the devastation caused by cruise ships in the region. In the year 2000, 2.7 million cruise ship visitors landed in the Bahamas alone and dumped an average of 210,000 gallons of untreated sewage per week in open waters. One million gallons of gray water (from laundries, showers, sinks, etc.) were released into the ocean each week in addition to unknown quantities of exhaust from diesel ship engines, oily bilge, and other hazardous waste.

Caroline expresses distaste for the “[t]ourists [on Main St] smelling like sweat and sunscreen” who “swarm the street” (Callender

73). Callender does not simply invert the stereotypical animalization of people of African descent; she portrays the visitors as insects—perhaps bees, with their painful stings, flies as carriers of disease, or plagues of locusts. The narrator continues: “Usually, I hate this walk more than anything else. Too many tourists to dodge and too many blaring horns and too much heat beating down from the blazing sun with absolutely no shade” (Callender 73). The tourists are one in a long line of oppressive elements that make her home less of a paradise, and more a site of sensory overload.

Furthermore, on her way to school, Caroline notes that the local transportation economy caters to foreigners and ignores island residents: “Safari taxis don’t like to stop for locals, and the ones that stop for locals don’t like to stop for children” (Callender 7). The psychological damage is repeated when, later in the novel, at Havensight, a popular cruise ship landing, Caroline expresses consciousness of the irritated stares of local merchants who “don’t like too many locals in their stores when they are trying to sell to tourists” (Callender 157). In other words, the island’s residents are both hyper-visible *and* rendered socially invisible; they are ‘ghosted’ by foreign travellers and by their own people in favor of visitors with more money and cultural cache. As she and Kalinda walk through the shops, they must “ignor[e] the angry eye the shopkeepers give us,” especially as “children still in their school uniforms who aren’t going to buy anything at all” (Callender 157). Rather than being embraced as youth who need to be nurtured, or might be valuable future customers or employees, being welcomed as community members who add a vibrant presence to the locale, the adolescents are subjected to feelings that make them interpret their physical welfare as at stake. Thus, ethereal ghosts, demons, and ghouls are not the true sources of terror in this novel; instead, Caribbean subjects become the phantoms who are threatened with erasure and who are victimized by an exploitative tourist trade that lingers in the atmosphere even when actual tourists are not physically present.

The tourist souvenirs the girls see in one shop include “T-shirts reading I CAME, I SAW, I TOOK PICTURES! ST. THOMAS, USVI and photos

of naked women on beaches and postcards with men with long locks” (Callender 157). The imperial conquest is endlessly repeated, with the sex trade replacing the slave trade in the objectification of black bodies. Rather than blending horror and tourism in a narrative that “illustrat[es] fantasies of perilous danger in the foreign land” (Ibarra 120-121)—a discourse found in conventional Gothic fiction like Charlotte Smith’s “The Story of Henrietta” (1800), Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* (1847), contemporary films such as *The Ruins* (2008), and even video games, as Johan Höglund asserts of *Dead Island*—Callender reverses notions of ghosts as the source of terror and renders Caribbean subjects as the apparitions who vanish (or are made to vanish), threatened with erasure and persecuted by a system that privileges outsiders.

Interestingly, the reference to cruise ships at Havensight conjures an important scene from *Annie John*: when the Red Girl departs Antigua suddenly, Annie dreams of their reunion in conjunction with cruise ships:

I never saw the Red Girl again. . . . I dreamed that the boat on which she had been traveling suddenly splintered in the middle of the sea, causing all the passengers to drown except for her, whom I rescued in a small boat. I took her to an island, where we lived together forever, I suppose, and fed on wild pigs and sea grapes. At night, we would sit on the sand and watch ships filled with people on a cruise steam by. We sent confusing signals to the ships, causing them to crash on some nearby rocks. How we laughed as their cries of joy turned to cries of sorrow. (Kincaid 70-71)

This passage, coupled with Annie’s allusion to the Anglican church bell that serves as her alarm clock each day (significantly, the Anglican Church is the official Church of England), speaks to the British hegemony in Antigua, and the protagonist’s resentment of that corrupting foreign presence in her homeland. Correspondingly, in *Hurricane Child*, Caroline notes that “Cruise ships pass by Water Island every morning. Their horns are my alarm clocks” (Callender 156). This is the colonialism that is not named as such. When the ships depart

at night, “It’s peaceful, watching them, until the horns go off like sirens, so loud they hurt my teeth” (Callender 164). Their presence is clearly associated with pain, not the pleasure experienced by the invading tourists.

Caroline also explains that new condominiums have been built near the dock and tourist shops, and “no one but celebrities from the States are rich enough to use [them].” She continues: “Right across the street are the housing projects, repainted to match the dull beige of the condos, with beautiful murals that were added to every single wall ... so when tourists and celebrities passed by the housing projects, they wouldn’t know what they were seeing” (Callender 158). Money is invested in superficial beautification projects rather than the people who need aid, and readers observe another case in which USVI residents are ‘ghosted,’ or made to disappear.

Although Caroline is rendered invisible, or ghost-like, at several points in the text, she holds some semblance of power and control in that she figuratively ‘ghosts’ herself in a scene near the novel’s conclusion. As the aforementioned hurricane starts brewing, she goes to her father’s boat and lies in it, “rest[ing] my hands over my chest like so, and [I] close my eyes, to listen to the water and the wind, and I think maybe this is really where I belong after all” (Callender 187-188). It as if she has placed herself in a coffin, embracing her death and what comes afterward, and then, revived after the storm, she returns from the land of the dead. She eventually decides, “There’s much more in this life to fear than just spirits, and if I let fear rule my every move, I will become nothing more than a little ghost child myself. I want to be brave. I want to live the life I was given. So what if the spirits hear us call their names. Let them hear it” (Callender 203). The narrative symbolically maps her progression to and back from a spectral identity.

In an early scene, when Caroline angrily runs out of the house barefoot, she “cut[s] my toes on stones, ... sweating in the evening heat, and mosquitoes get tangled in my hair” (Callender 27). It as if the natural world is her antagonist, but not in the Gothic style of lurking danger. Instead, Callender subverts the notion of the Caribbean ‘native’ as closer to nature than the ‘civilized’ metropolitan visitor, and undermines ideas

of the Caribbean landscape as a welcoming ‘home’ to everyone who arrives from abroad. This is not simply a matter of racial opposition; the African diasporic tourist holds just as much responsibility for participating in the hegemonic power structure and the erasure, or ‘ghosting,’ of the Caribbean subject, as the white traveller.

Kincaid’s novel concludes with Annie outgrowing her bed, her parents, and her island home as she departs for England; Callender’s novel, in contrast, allows the reunion of mother and daughter, and attempts to explain a mother’s absence as a result of clinical depression—itsself a kind of ‘possession’ and a type of ‘ghosting’ of the unaffected self. Kathleen Brogan astutely notes that the turn to the “supernatural” is key for our turn-of-the-millennial cultural moment, in that ghosts highlight “the difficulty of gaining access to a lost or denied past, as well as the degree to which any such historical reconstruction is essentially an imaginative act” (6). *Hurricane Child* allows readers of all ages to access a story that should be able to be dug up from the archives—one including the lost and forgotten histories of queer Caribbean women that can help steer the way for the youth generation. In *Ghostly Matters*, Gordon describes “haunting” in the contemporary moment as “one way in which abusive systems of power make themselves known and their impacts felt in everyday life, especially when they are supposedly over and done with (slavery, for instance)” (xvi). Tourism and homophobia operate in similar ways to slavery: even once the offending individuals have departed, and the psychological violence of particular exchanges, or specific acts of physical damage to the landscape, seascape, Caribbean or queer or enslaved subject’s body have been enacted, the abusive systems of power continue to make themselves known in the lives of those who remain. A crucial element of Gordon’s conceptualization of haunting is its repetitive nature, when homes transmogrify into the unfamiliar and unsettling and subjects lose their bearings in the world. Island homes are no less prone to this process than the smaller structures identified as ‘homes’ for individuals and families.

Kincaid’s and Callender’s anticolonial projects involve placing their protagonists in Caribbean

spaces, which have long existed on the periphery of Eurocentric mapmaking and cultural productions; however, both authors reconfigure these island homes in their work as focal while portraying the experiences of their narrators as unerringly 'real.' By bringing the 'margins' to the center, the texts promote alternate ways of knowing and seeing the world.

## Endnotes

[1] Numerous historians and Black Studies scholars (e.g. Roger Abrahams and John Szwed, Hilary McD Beckles, Donald Bogle, Angela Davis, Terri Doerkson, bell hooks, Gerda Lerner, Dorothy Roberts, etc.) have detailed the racial stereotypes that have haunted Black women from the early slave trade and into the present.

[2] See the cover of the book at the website *Teachers Pay Teachers* under "Novel Study Distance Learning World Literature / Annie John by Jamaica Kincaid." (<https://www.teacherspayteachers.com/Product/Novel-Study-Distance-Learning-World-Literature-Annie-John-by-Jamaica-Kincaid-5862048>)

[3] See Anne McClintock's "Imperial Ghosting" essay for further discussion. As she posits, "The founding tenet of American empire is that it is no empire at all. The United States has an unbroken history as an imperial power in Mexico, Latin America, Puerto Rico, Hawai'i, the Philippines, Southeast Asia, the Middle East, and elsewhere [i.e. the Caribbean], but it has largely been a covert empire, operating through client states, proxy armies, and subordinate allies: an empire in camouflage and denial" (826).

[4] Because Caroline is afraid of being labelled mentally ill, she hesitates to tell anyone about her visions and suffers in isolation. The revelation that Kalinda also sees spirits convinces not only the narrator but the reader that the apparitions are not symptoms of mental illness or individual trauma; they are part of an objective reality. The fact that this reality is denigrated in the settings of the school library and schoolyard evokes Elizabeth Marshall's study of depictions of girlhood and violence. Marshall posits that formal education is tied "to a larger cultural pedagogy in which learning and learning to be a girl means [sic] being subjected to violence" (2). The violence can be physical, but Marshall contends that it must be viewed in conjunction with the ways legal and educational policies "bar, segregate, and criminalize black, brown, and queer youth" (6). *Hurricane Child* speaks powerfully to the need for decolonizing knowledge by rewriting those literal and cultural texts that reiterate colonial viewpoints and relegate beliefs from outside Judeo-Christian traditions and the European educational system to the realm of superstition, ignorance, backwardness, and wickedness.

[5] St. Lucia – 39% of GDP; Bahamas – 48% of GDP; Antigua & Barbuda – 77% of GDP.

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## Author's Biography

Giselle Liza Anatol is a Professor of English at the University of Kansas. She specializes in literature of the African diaspora (Caribbean women's writing and speculative fiction in particular), and images of race, ethnicity, and gender in works for children and young adults. Her books include edited volumes on J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series, Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight*, and a monograph entitled *The Things That Fly in the Night: Female Vampires in Literature of the Circum-Caribbean and African Diaspora* (Rutgers UP, 2015).



# **Book Review**

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## ***Right-Wing Populism and Gender. European Perspectives and Beyond***, edited by Gabriele Dietze and Julia Roth, transcript, 2020. (Book Review)

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In the edited volume *Right-Wing Populism and Gender. European Perspectives and Beyond*, Gabriele Dietze and Julia Roth bring together a wide array of contributions adding a much-needed gender perspective to the ever-growing research into right-wing populism (RWP) and its progressive counter-movements. In fourteen chapters, political scientists, sociologists, anthropologists, cultural, media, and (Inter-)American studies scholars disentangle some of the hostile discourses and concrete political measures implemented or envisioned by right-wing actors across Europe and, to a much lesser extent, in the Americas, mainly the United States. A few chapters also consider or explicitly highlight the role of social movements in countering what the editors call a “right-wing populist complex.” As explained in the introductory chapter by Dietze and Roth, this term is intended to capture media discourses, narratives, and forms of action beyond (yet often related to) the more formal RWP structures of political parties, movements, and organizations.

The plea for systematically looking at this complex through a social constructivist and intersectional gender lens is convincingly made in light of “a common feature [which] can be observed in all current versions of right-wing populism: an ‘obsession with gender’ and sexuality in different arenas” (7). As the variety of actors, discourses, and countries covered in the edited volume illustrates, this “anti-genderism” is indeed a characteristic that unites right-wing populisms in excluding other(ed) individuals and groups: besides the “usual suspects” of RWP, such as Muslims and immigrants mentioned throughout the book, these include proponents of progressive sex education curricula in Germany (Schmincke) and same-sex marriage in France (Möser), an alleged homosexual and leftist elite in Slovenia (Kuhar and Pajnik), and

emancipated women refusing to (be) define(d) in terms of care work and motherhood in German society (Dietze). Other chapters focus on the ways in which strong RWP parties in Hungary and Austria argue that “traditional” (i.e. patriarchal and heteronormative) family models and values are under threat (Kováts; Mayer, Ajanović and Sauer). Yet another group of chapters look at how (predominantly white, heterosexual, and working class) masculinist identity politics are mobilized in different right-wing populisms in Europe and the U.S. (Sauer; Schleusener; Strick).

The reader also learns that some RWP actors, mainly in Germany, Scandinavia, and the Netherlands, claim to accept or even be in favor of women’s and LGB (less TQI+) rights as long as these “minorities” do not trouble the (self-)images and entitlements of “the common people” (Spierings; Wielowiejski). In the midst of texts focusing on theoretical considerations and RWP discourse and action, Wielowiejski’s chapter stands out for being the only truly ethnographic chapter daring to engage (and brilliantly so!) with RWP actors on the ground: his participant observation among parliamentarians and the youth organization of the German AfD reveals more about the complexly situated positionings and worldviews of its members than merely looking at ads, speeches, and mission statements. Wielowiejski skillfully shows that for some right-wing actors, “homosexuals and binary trans\* people can very well be accepted as respectable representatives of a static gender binary. As such, they fit into a far right that is fixated on identity” (144).

The book ends with two chapters changing perspectives: while Graff deals with the so-called Black Protests in Poland (originating from fights for reproductive rights, hence, not to be conflated with the Black Lives Matter protests),

Roth writes about emerging transnational and intersectional feminisms in the Americas. Her chapter is the second highpoint of the collection: the only author going beyond Europe and the U.S., Roth astonishingly maps intersectional, post- and decolonial feminisms from places, movements, and actors that are themselves interconnected. In the midst of Inter-American and global RWP alliances mentioned by the author (e.g. Bolsonaro-Trump), feminist contestations –e.g. the Women’s Marches in the U.S., the *NiUnaMenos/NiUnaMás* protests across Latin America, as well as collective and transnational groups memorializing the legacies of Alanna Lockward and Marielle Franco– signal the utter necessity for RWP research to consider these (counter-)movements from a global and historical perspective. As Roth rightfully argues, women’s strikes and other initiatives from, across, and beyond the Americas “tie gender and racial claims back to the underlying economic and colonial structures of inequality” (262).

Overall, amidst growing societal and academic debates, this edited volume should become a major reference for anyone working at the crossroads of right-wing populisms and intersectional feminisms. Dietze and Roth have done a marvelous job in bringing together the contributions with different disciplinary and geographical foci. Given that RWP is a global and complex phenomenon, the eclecticism of the chapters is a strength rather than a weakness of the book. Still, structuring the chapters into broader sections would have helped the reader navigate through the rich volume. The only serious disappointment is that the “beyond” in the book title makes a promise not kept. Only three chapters include non-European contexts, and two of these are focused on the U.S. While the cases presented in the book certainly address pressing issues across Europe (including its oftentimes neglected East), the book would have benefitted from a more thorough inclusion of perspectives on and from the Global South (see, for example, Costa 2020 for the Brazilian case). Since some of the authors of the edited volume are currently working from and toward that direction (see the research group “Global Contestations of Women’s and Gender Rights,” Bielefeld University), we can be assured that it is

only a question of time until we learn more about the “beyond” postulated in the book title.

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### Author’s Biography

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